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The Significance of the Historical in Contemporary Hinduism

S. J. SAMARTHA

The sense of history is one of the fundamental ways in which man seeks to understand what is happening around him. The quest for the meaning of history becomes acute at a time when old structures of society are rapidly disintegrating, when traditional values are being seriously questioned and when people everywhere demand a better life in the expectation of personal and social fulfilment. People are impatient with the widening gap between the promise of national planning and its actual fulfilment in daily life. What they are interested in is not salvation in a distant future, but 'the good things of life' here and now. The demand is for deeds, not just words, and deeds constitute the stuff of history. The emphasis today is not so much on tradition and stability as on change and progress. This insistent demand for 'goal-oriented change' raises fundamental questions about human freedom, social purposes and the meaning of historical destiny in the life of the nation. At deeper levels traditional religions and the various forms of secularism are profoundly concerned with these questions. There is no doubt that 'the sense of history' is a significant characteristic of contemporary life in India expressing itself in various ways. The faith of the Church is founded on God's involvement in history through Jesus Christ. Therefore the Church must be concerned with the theological implications of what is happening in the contemporary history of India.

I

What constitutes the sense of history is not an easy question to answer. No attempt is made here to give precise definitions of history or to elaborate its constituents. Man's conception of individual freedom in society, his attitude towards nature, his faith in certain values of life and his ability to recognize that he is, at the same time, both a participant in and spectator of the temporal process—all these are involved in man's historical

consciousness. It has been rightly remarked that the key to a distinctive sense of history 'is the search for a group purpose and individual fulfilment in the expectation of historical destiny'.¹ Individual fulfilment depends on man's freedom to choose and to face the consequences. The quest for a group purpose inevitably has to take into account the social context where decisions are made. The understanding of the historical destiny of a nation involves man's relation to nature on the one hand and his conception of time on the other.

Nature, on which man's physical life depends, is not always friendly to man. Where nature is regarded as 'a holy terror' man is completely at the mercy of natural forces. Helplessness before the elemental powers of nature gives rise to a feeling of hopelessness. Such a mood is not conducive to the growth of historical sense. Huston Smith remarks:

This fearsome side of nature is intractable enough to deflect man's hopes; and so, in India, it did. There are times and places in every land where nature captivates, and Kalidasa and Tagore witness to the fact that India is no exception. But on the whole nature did not look to India as if it were a promising frontier; it did not appear to her as if the human condition was likely to be much improved by trying to engage herself with it more effectively. Matter appeared to India as a barbarian, spoiling to some extent everything it touched. The road to freedom lay through progressively transcending it.²

In many ways, this mood still persists in India. Bondage to nature and the desire for freedom from it seem to co-exist in our national consciousness. While there is some confidence in steel mills, atomic energy establishments and family planning clinics, at the same time there is a feeling that their promises may not be fulfilled because of the inability to organize nature for human purposes. The farmer who does not want to pay a few rupees to get water from an irrigation canal close by but waits for the 'free' monsoon water is not particularly touched by a sense of historical destiny. Also, where floods are taken for granted as regular annual occurrences, no sense of historic freedom can exist.

However, one must also recognize that man is not completely the lord of nature nor can he control it absolutely. To forget that man is subject to the laws of nature, of birth and growth and decay, is to ignore the obvious, particularly the fact of death. It is man's recognition that he is subject to the laws of nature and, that at the same time, he is able to rise above its

¹ *Contemporary India*, Edited by Baidya Nath Varma, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1964, p. 1.

² *Philosophy, Religion and the Coming World Civilization*, Edited by Leroy S. Rouner, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1966, p. 355.

process, that adds the historical dimension to his life. Reinhold Niebuhr remarks :

(History) is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom. Man's freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby knowing history. It also enables him to change, reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby *make* history.³

A strong sense of history depends also on one's understanding of time. Memory and tradition represent man's ability to rise above the passing flux of time. As an individual treasures personal memories so do human groups build up traditions to be passed on to posterity thereby maintaining historic continuity. 'Memory is the principle which conducts a constant battle against the mortal principle of time. It battles in the name of eternity against the mortal dominion of time.'⁴ An excessive preoccupation with the past is no indication of a strong sense of history. When people are more concerned with celebrating the death anniversaries of dead heroes than with following their teaching, when municipalities show greater interest in renaming streets after bygone personalities than in providing an adequate drainage system, one can hardly feel a sense of historical destiny. An interest in the past, coupled with a concern for the future, is essential for the understanding of history as a meaningful process of becoming. The significance of past events, the meaning of present happenings and the possibilities of future occurrences should be seen within a structure of meaning. The necessity of a frame of reference in relation to which decisions and consequences should be understood becomes obvious. Therefore a sense of history needs not only an emphasis on human activity in pursuit of tangible goals, but also 'the teleological and Messianic sense of historic progress and the search for transcendence within the framework of future historic events'.⁵

It is by no means easy to define the boundaries and describe the characteristics of what is generally described as 'contemporary Hinduism'. One has to be content to pick out certain trends almost at random to indicate a discernible shift of interest from contemplation to action, from metaphysical values to social virtues, from a fatalistic acceptance of circumstances to a defiant challenge to obstacles. Nevertheless, one must also recognize that there are areas of Hindu life which are almost untouched by these more articulate tendencies which take an affirmative attitude towards history.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Scribners, New York, 1949, Vol. II, p. 1.

⁴ Nicholas Berdyaev, *Meaning of History*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1936, p. 73.

⁵ *Contemporary India*, p. 2.

That classical Hinduism did not give sufficient importance to the historical dimension of human life is generally conceded. It is possible to argue that human action was not ignored, but was considered within the larger context of cosmic action. In the *Rgveda* for example, according to one interpretation, war is regarded as another form of sacrifice and is connected with the important conception of *rita*. 'The inclusion of earthly activity in the sphere of the cosmic, thus making it an aspect of Universal Activity (*rita*) is a conspicuous style of the Rgvedic narration.'⁶ But one should not fail to notice that there was always in Hinduism the tendency for the historic to be swallowed up in the cosmic. Further, there did exist an activist social and political tradition in India. Chanakya (Kautilya) the Brahmin counsellor of Chandragupta did undoubtedly take an active part in political life. But having succeeded in placing the young prince on the throne he went away to the forest to seek *moksha*. In other words, *moksha* is understood in individualistic terms and is to be sought not in the dust and heat of life, but in the lonely seclusion of the forest. Hindu thought has always emphasized that aspect of human freedom which enables man to rise above the flux of time. Individuality was something to be transcended, not something to be asserted in the social context. What was necessary for salvation was not self-assertion, but self-realization. Deeds were links that bind man to the wheel of *samsāra*. Therefore the primary requirement for salvation was detachment from history, not involvement in its conflicts and tragedies. The classical Hindu attitude has been 'a complex mixture of mysticism and worldliness'. To see the world 'in its historic dimension was not a basic concern of a civilization more attuned to the values of a transcendent immateriality'.⁷

Today there are many indications that history is taken much more seriously than before. These indications are to be seen not only in the attitude of the people towards the conditions of the time, but also in the reinterpretations of classical Hindu doctrines calling for drastic restatements. The interpretations of India's past which, during the days of the freedom struggle, gave a certain inspiration for revolutionary action are being criticized. Cherished doctrines of Hinduism like *nishkāma karma* which provided the philosophic basis for political and social action are being questioned. There is no doubt that the Western thought continues to make a strong impact on the life of India although the attitude towards many things Western is

⁶ *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XLIV, Part I, April 1966, Serial No. 130. Article by Dr. Sadashiv Ambdas Dange, 'Aspects of War from the *Rgveda*', p. 137.

⁷ *Contemporary India*, p. 11. For a fuller treatment of the classical Hindu View of History, see S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu View of History*, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, 1959, pp. 1-16.

still confused and ambiguous. As someone recently remarked: 'People hoped for the rapid Americanization of industry, but what they are getting is the slow Hinduization of machinery.' While it is not easy to analyse a highly complex situation attention should be drawn to certain trends which contribute to the making of a new awareness of history in contemporary India.

The attitude towards the past events in the nation's history is usually a clue to its sense of history. Very often, a particular interpretation of the past which provides inspiration for action in the present also serves as an ideal for the future. In the pre-1947 years a particular type of interpretation of India's past history was meant to provide an inspiration for revolutionary action. This is best represented by Nehru's *Discovery of India* and K. M. Panikkar's books, particularly *A Survey of Indian History* and *The Determining Periods in Indian History*.⁸ The object was to emphasize a sense of continuity of the present with the past by drawing attention to certain values in India's cultural tradition and by pointing out that these values were in danger of being destroyed by Western political dominance. But after 1947 when the Western political dominance is no more there, but the ills of India still persist, there is a good deal of rethinking about this kind of 'romantic' interpretation of India's past. It is pointed out that the 'Nehru-Panikkar school' of history, while providing a certain inspiration for political action during the pre-1947 days, has failed to provide a basis for reforming static Indian society. Moreover, this has resulted in a curiously ambiguous attitude towards Western influence. This is best expressed in the following quotation from a recent article:

It is most evident that to the present day there lingers on in the Indian mind an unresolved conflict. There is on the one side the desire for independence and nationalism. This desire feeds upon an awareness of the Indian past and upon the determination to preserve a Hindu way of life and value. And, there is, on the other side, an anxious desire to become westernized, to promote industries, towns and egalitarian society, with a centralized and democratic government. This desire feeds upon British education, the English language, western dress, and the *New Statesman*, the *Economist*, *Encounter*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and English hymns and songs. The people who promote the first desire adopt an unrealistic attitude to the Indian village and to Indian culture all around. They see it as something static and complete; and they are apt to measure their own efforts and lives in terms of the success with

⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, Signet Press, Calcutta, 1945. K. M. Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1954, *The Determining Periods in Indian History*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1962.

which they imitate the ancient patterns. The people who promote the second desire are agonizingly aware of their rootlessness. They imitate the English and yet recoil when they see themselves so un-Indian . . . The real trouble is that usually one finds both desires in the same person. Thus the result is a great ambivalence and ambiguous attitude which saps initiative and drive.⁹

What is significant today is that many people are aware of this tension. Nehru is reported to have said that he had become a curious mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere.¹⁰ It is possible to argue that out of the 'Indo-Western synthesis' something creative might emerge. But the real issue is whether the new India that is emerging can draw its inspiration from the kind of attitude towards history which classical Hinduism represents.

A further point which is important is the reinterpretation of certain Hindu ideals which provided the religious and philosophic basis for political and social action in the pre-1947 days. One such doctrine is the ideal of *nishkāma karma* advocated in the *Bhagavadgītā* and interpreted by men like Gandhi, Tilak, Bhave, Radhakrishnan and many others. The meaning of human action, *karma*, its motivation, methods and goals, has always been an important question in Hindu religious and ethical thought. If deeds bind man to the wheel of *samsāra* and, if *moksha* is deliverance from the cyclical process of *samsāra*, then the way out is obviously to cut out the root of all action. However, that would be too much of an oversimplification because there has been an emphasis in Hinduism on ethical activity also. Nevertheless, the ideal of *moksha* is individualistic and is often understood as freedom *from* history, rather than *in* and *through* it.

But in the days of India's struggle for independence the need for responsible action was keenly felt and there was a search for a basis for it both on the secular and the religious levels. There were people who argued that it was wrong to lead a life of meditation when there was work to be done. Subhas Chandra Bose, strongly criticizing Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal to Pondicherry, wrote that 'spiritual progress under the present conditions is possible only by ceaseless and unselfish action, that the best way to conquer nature is to fight her, and that it is weakness to seek refuge in contemplation when we are hemmed in on all sides by dangers and difficulties'.¹¹ It may be pointed out that during the days of Chinese aggression there

⁹ *Journal of Indian History, op. cit.* Article: 'Revolution and Tradition in Modern History', by Peter Munz and Brijen Gupta, pp. 157-58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See footnotes 36 and 37, p. 158.

¹¹ From *Netaji Speaks to the Nation*, pp. 44-47, quoted in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Ed. William Theodore de Bary, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960.

was an obvious shift in the selection of religious broadcasts over the All-India Radio. There were far more selections from the *Gītā*, where Krishna exhorts Arjuna to fight, than from the Quran or from the Sermon on the Mount. The *Gītā* can obviously become a handbook for historic action whenever the need arises.

At present, however, there seems to be a striking change at least in certain quarters. Both the classical and the modern interpretations of the doctrine of *nishkāma karma* are being challenged because people *are* interested in the fruits of their actions. *Karma* without *phalāsa* seems to be utterly irrelevant at a time when people desperately need social and economic justice. They are no longer ready to wait for the fruits of national planning to be plucked in a distant future. The mood is one of impatient longing to taste the fruits of one's labour *now*. As Butterfield remarks in another context, the main job of each generation is to 'see what it can make of the mess left by its predecessors' and to acknowledge its main task as one of redeeming the errors of the past. The demand is for 'the good life to be obtained now, no matter at what date in history you place the "now"'.¹² It is not 'non-attachment', but involvement in history that is necessary if work has to be done and results achieved.

The traditional ideal of *nishkāma karma* is therefore being criticized. D. C. Mathur calls for an alternative interpretation of this doctrine and makes certain points of criticism. First, it is pointed out that this doctrine does not take into account the social dimension of human action. It is too individualistic to be socially significant at a time when rapid, revolutionary change is called for. Anyone who has lived in a place where strikes, *bundhs*, *hartals* and other forms of mass agitation are commonplace, and who notes the successful gaining of objectives through such mass action, will see how out of place such a doctrine as *nishkāma karma* is in such a context. Secondly, it is observed that disinterest in the fruits of one's actions removes the very need for responsible moral action. Unless there is a definite interest in the results of one's actions and, unless there is conscious *commitment* to certain goals, there can be no progress at all. What is necessary today is a 'goal-oriented', not a 'self-oriented' attitude where participation in history is necessary for social progress. D. C. Mathur rightly points out that the tension between immediate objectives and an ultimate concern, between 'lip service to the transcendental self' and 'the opportunistic pursuit of individual goals', is detrimental to effective social change so necessary in India today.¹³ Such criticisms, coming from responsible people deeply concerned with the social

¹² H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, G. Bell and Sons, London, 1950, p. 105.

¹³ Article by D. C. Mathur: 'Doctrine of *Nishkāma Karma*—An Alternative Interpretation' in *Quest*, Bombay, July/September, 1964, p. 25.

progress of India, raise the question whether it is a call for re-interpretation of old doctrines or a questioning of the very adequacy of Hindu resources to undergird the need for responsible participation in history.

A further feature in the making of a contemporary Hindu view of history is the attempt to reinterpret the classical Hindu understanding of Time. The classical Hindu conception of Time is cyclical. *Kāla* is one of the four original forms of reality. It is something that *exists* or *is*. Cosmic time is governed by repetitive cycles and the historical cycle is only a part of the cosmic cycle. The *yuga theory* in Hinduism also envisages a deteriorating process where the end is only a return to the beginning. A major criticism of the cyclical view of history is that it does not make room for the emergence of the new nor for any fulfilment of values or the consummation of history. Karl Loweth remarks:

On the basis of an everlasting revolution of definite cycles, we could expect only a blind rotation of misery and happiness, that is, of deceitful bliss and real misery, but no eternal blessedness—only an endless repetition of the same but nothing new, nothing redemptive, and final.¹⁴

There are attempts being made now in Hinduism to make room for 'progress' so that within the larger pattern of the cosmic process some recognition is given to historic movement. In his Miller lectures, delivered at Madras, Devasenapathi argues that a cyclical interpretation of history need not mean the rejection of fulfilment nor of the gathering up of values towards a goal. He argues that in spite of the process of *laya* and *pralaya* which follow each other, the end of history is not just a return to the beginning. For, according to him, the *pralayas* are only 'rest periods for the soul in their long spiritual journey': Indian culture, he remarks, 'will conquer time by continuing to be bearer of the values of life'.¹⁵ Further, there is also a significant attempt to reinterpret the *yuga theory* in such a way that cyclical movement is transformed into spiral growth. Mahadevan, for example, argues that the cyclical theory is not actually cyclical because the four ages coexist all the time' in a given span of history. But, in spite of these attempts, the very title of Devasenapathi's lectures: 'Towards the Conquest of Time' indicates his attitude towards history. 'When our interests shift from our self to God, we cease to be creatures of time because, practising the presence of God, we live in the eternal and become time binders'.¹⁶ On the basis of such a statement one fails to see how the historical dimension of human life can

¹⁴ Karl Loweth, *The Meaning of History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1949, p. 163.

¹⁵ V. A. Devasenapathi, 'Towards the Conquest of Time', Miller lectures, *Madras University Journal*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, 1962.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

be recognized as meaningful. And yet, the very fact that there is a serious concern to combine 'process' with 'purpose' however precarious the attempt might be is an indication of an affirmative attitude towards history today. Unless metaphysical truths are transformed into social virtues they are of little value to human life.

This is an area where one can expect greater possibilities of a fruitful dialogue between the Hindu and the Christian. As human beings we are all involved in the ambiguities, conflicts and tragedies of history. Impatience with the slow realization of values in history, and hopes for a speedy, revolutionary fulfilment, at least in partial measure, are to be seen everywhere. One of the fundamental questions would be the adequacy of spiritual resources to undergird one's hopes for the future and the way in which ultimate concerns and immediate objectives are related. In the last analysis this would be a question of faith, for without presuppositions there can be no interpretations of history. Without an ultimate horizon of meaning as a frame of reference one cannot interpret immediate happenings. Occurrences become historic events only when invested with meaning. The Christian claim is that through Christ the transcendent meaning of history is disclosed and fulfilled.

Perhaps at no other time in the life of this country is it more necessary than now to emphasize the Biblical faith in God as the Lord of history. What is important in the present context is not so much the theories about the nature of Christ as the social consequences of the Incarnation and the power of Christ to renew man and to remake society. The problem of man in history is not so much one of finiteness as of sin, and sin is directly related to man's freedom. Because of the corruptions of freedom history is under the judgement of God. The expectations of history can only be fulfilled by God and not by man. The Christian belief is that in Christ these expectations have been fulfilled, that in him there is 'a disclosure of divine purpose governing history within history'. This faith cannot be logically established although the fact that Biblical faith is 'committed understanding' can be explained. In the last analysis therefore one can only point to Christ as Redeemer and Lord. 'It is not possible to interpret cultures according to their expectations or want of expectations of a Christ without drawing upon the faith that *the* Christ has been revealed; for there can be no interpretation of the meaning of life and history without implicitly or explicitly drawing into the interpretation the faith which claims to have found the end of these expectations.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.