

MEANING OF HISTORY

Is there meaning for or in History?

Is it discernable in the mere march of events or facts or is it something that a mind prone to generalisations like science sees in this march of events: A science of History would perhaps help to reveal the meaning of History. The meaning of science for most lies in its discoveries of laws which help prediction about the future. There are many who deny this scientific determinism in History. Science in physical life is possible-perhaps with the help of statistical probabilities even other natural sciences could progress; in the field where matter is like money and power (*artha sastra*) the sciences could progress very well. But it is very doubtful whether in the fields of psychology that deal with spiritual activities, of ends that transcend the terrestrial scheme even though operating in the context of this terrestrial scheme there can be any science in the sense of physical and natural sciences.

Let us note that Aristotle in the West classically stated the types of causes which operate on the events of every day. He listed four types of causes: the material, the formal, the efficient and the final. Science most often deals with the first and is content to observe and deal with the uniformity of causes and effects, their identities

and similarities. The second, formal cause is of the form of ideas, patterns of making which are not in matter but are introduced into it and this is done in a mechanical conception by an agent in whose mind the forms are in clear form. The potter knows what form of pot he wants and gives this form to matter (silver or brass or clay). The form is the idea which is introduced into the scheme. In our own conceptions a plan is the idea which has to be executed in the material of the people. Thus an intellectual being capable of having ideas introduces or works this form into matter very much like a jeweller. But in organic life where the idea is unconsciously held it is seen to manifest itself in terms of adaptation of the environment to man's needs or life's needs, even if this need be just survival. The inner movement towards having a different form in order to survive is the life. This same formal force operates through the efficient causality of life in the lives of social groups leading up to the concept of mobility (social and cultural). Natural mobility is the efficient causality operating in and through diverse instrumentations, organic and inorganic, and this is the third kind of causality that Aristotle mentioned. In Nyaya we call this causality *nimitta karana*. But *nimitta* is also an ambiguous word; it suggests also the reason for occasion for causality or causal activity. This brings us to the final causes or goals for which the idea is devised, matter shaped and

modified continuously and new tools improvised to bring about the desired forms suitable to fulfilling the ends or goals of man.

The proper understanding of these four causes which in fact are all necessary for any explanation or meaning of any emergence or result is a basic necessity. If we can show that History, that is the march of humanity through the ages starting with its emergence from a lower level being to the present day, has a goal, that goal would throw light on the progress of movement down the ages: if we cannot see this or discern this goal in and through the process we can hardly speak of any progress at all for progress is a relative term, meaningful in terms of its approach towards the *realization* of the *goal*. In fact the word evolution itself is a relative concept dependent upon the goal of life--quite arbitrarily it is held that evolution is a process by which homogeneity leads up to heterogeneity--the unicellular organism becomes a multi-cellular organism--diversity leads to the fullness of unity whilst yet maintaining the unity in a different form than oneness, is said to be a fair enough description. So too the Monolithic society of the family with unity and identities of blood gets diversified so much as to attain the goal of a pluralistic democratic society. Every attempt at paternalistic government by Dictatorship is a regressive feature which is rejected by the evolutionary nisis, Thus we can find that history to be meaningful

must have a glimpse of the human destiny or else it can be but a serious catalogue of events which have nothing to link them up except chronology, or time. But even time begins with us with an event: a group of planets in a particular house (e.g. *astagrahakuta*) or the Birth or Death of a great individual (Krsna or Rama or Buddha or Christ or Mohammed or any other) or a great catastrophe like the Flood. Thus its impact on humanity in the shaping of man's terrestrial activities is a notable date. But by itself either one should trace history as an unfolding of that idea through time and give an appraisal or historical judgment about its realisation or progress or it should discover how that idea finds its impediments and halts and diversions and collapse.

A philosopher of history could proceed to see in the large canvas of centuries how the Idea however conceived at the beginning by humanity as a whole or in a segment of it flows out inevitably and is determined by a suprahuman elan towards its realization in the *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*. But what is less realized is that this process or movement is motivated towards a goal that is incapable of being discerned in the process according to some, and capable of being discerned by others. Those who discern it are those who see life as a whole and steadily, *sub specie eterni*-- they can be called the *Rsis* (*tri-kalajnas*) and Platonists or Utopians if you please. The others are those who see little purpose and

their realizations but cannot see a goal of History as a whole.

The two kinds of philosophers of History can be called the Platonic and the Bergsonian. The former holds the goal to be the Realisation of the Ultimate Idea - Harmony and all Beatitude and Society (Sangha), but the latter holds that the future is open, unpredictable, immense novelty deriving its new shapes by that ever present inexhaustible spiritual mobility. The future is for ever bringing forth novelty (*navo navo bhavati*). Bergson in fact contends that the impulse towards unity that philosophers discern in history, as the goal of mankind, is not at the end but at the beginning itself. One unitary force or *elan* winds its way up and down creating matter, life and mind and urging itself on towards the shaping of the gods or supermen. Thus a philosophy of history based on the theory of a *sub specie eterni* vision (*kranta darsana*) is not correct and leads to such pessimistic views of history as that of Spengler and others. But this Bergsonian theory lacks the spirit of Real idea which in fact dimly, unconsciously, subconsciously urges the life itself towards its enhancement and transformation even up to the point of its own decease (death). That the infinite versatility and creative inventiveness and planning of Spirit is available for it in freedom shows that freedom itself exhibits itself in and through all the self-determinations that it makes.

It was Van Hartmann who held that for our human mentality the process of history is irrational and works through much violent dissipation of energies and absolutely ceaseless bunglings. It is part of chance play and adaptation vigilant towards new situations. There is obviously nothing uniform in nature, a success in one sphere is no guarantee it would help success elsewhere or else whence. History being an irrational endeavour to seek scientific law or philosophic meaning in it is meaningless. The irrational qua irrational is meaningless. George Trevalyn therefore refused to think that history is meaningful. In fact a scientist of history would refuse to consider final causes and devote himself to discovering just those uniformities which recur again and again. Such a view that might emerge if one were partially scientific in so far as the final causes are ruled out as in the consideration of natural sciences - might lead to a statement of a theory of eternal recurrence. In fact the survey by Professor Toynbee of the rise and fall of civilizations would give the first impression that there is continuous recurrence in history as fact: indeed one seems to recall Caesar in Napoleon, and Alexander in others. History repeats itself. There is the large cycle of the order of birth, growth and decline and death; and another civilization is born elsewhere not always on the ashes of the former repeating the same curve of evolution and decline – and committing the same

mistakes. There were always the ages of growth and enthusiasm and decline of morals and increase of cupidity and hedonism. Though many might have forgotten the historian Freud. He almost in the same terms as Hayek (the author of *Roads to Serfdom*) enumerated the parallels between the ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire (vide his *Life of Caesar Julius*). One seems to be seeing the same phenomenon over again even in one's own lifetime, and a sense of reminiscence seems to grasp our thought and makes us deeply moved by pessimism. Even the graphic histories of Gibbon and Carlyle are just deep penetrative insights into this truth of eternal recurrence. In fact Ouspensky claimed that this recurrence is a fact that makes it rather pessimistic. But he himself pointed out that there are certain circumstances that lead to the breaking up of this cycle of eternal recurrence at each level of being.

I think that the element of transcendence over this cycle of existence, *punar-janma-jara-marana*, has been the most important concept of Indian thought. They found that in the Itihasas and Puranas this eternal cycle is prevalent at all levels. No one transcends his level of being, as a materialist, or hedonist or politician unless he is able to get a new force introduced into his consciousness by way of a spiritual initiation that leads to his abandonment of the old goals. This theory of eternal recurrence is also known in Buddhism as the law

of dependent causation, *pratitya samutpada* - this being that arises in a chain. We can well discern the principle of Rake's progress in this chain. This is the general law of life at each level. This chain is available even in respect of cosmic events like rain as the Vedas have enunciated. Even the gods are not free from the deterministic chain, but they have the capacity to pass from one chain to another. Conceive of a spiral and a circle concentric and the transition from one to the other by a leap, but it is leap secured by an upward pull rather than a push from below. Ouspensky showed by a diagram that in the ordinary circle that goes round – the going in one direction results in finding oneself moving in the opposite direction – though subjectively yet moving in the same direction. Thus when man thinks that he is progressing, others would find him moving in the opposite direction. It is doubtless true that this is the law of degeneration or regression or retrograde movement in all circular orbits. Seizing this principle Professor Toynbee assumed that the uplift of several civilizations is by a shift of the orbit from one to another higher up spiralling above the lower and in one sense apparently reflecting the stages of the lower. The March of Civilizations has been achieved along with the recurrence but developing a new meaning because of the introduction of new values however subtle. But as most people can grasp the lower rather than the higher, there

happens the fact of considering that one is higher when in fact one is lower, and vice versa - that one is yet in the lower cycle or circle or orbit when actually one is in the higher level.

The new world has always the characteristic of being new because of the introduction of a higher consciousness. In our Indian tradition, this introduction of a higher level consciousness takes place by the descent of the Divine Consciousness to that level and lifting up creatures from their lower circular orbit and giving them or placing them in a higher evolutionary orbit. This shift of orbit is not automatic movement but a conscious or super-conscious function which may be called the Deity. Professor Alexander almost suggested this emergence of the Deity in his magnum opus *Space, Time and Deity*. The higher elevation of the evolutionary species has been rendered possible by the descent of the *avatars* of different level consciousnesses, such as, the matsya, kurma, varaha, narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama; Kakutsa, Rama and Krsna (*Bala-Rama*) and so on. This shift of levels is a phenomenon of utmost historical evolution not only of animals and other life but of humanity as well. The four ages of humanity, the four asramas, the four castes and the quadruples of Indian thought really must be interpreted in terms of the orbits and key points of orbits where a passage could open up to the higher or would open up then. The secret of this

ascending ladder to terrains higher is a closed one to those who have not arrived at the fitness for the evolutionary ascent as well: wherever men have refused to see beyond or become aware of the terrible determinism that stalks all cyclic movements depending upon repetitive adaptive behaviour (*pratitya-samutpada*). Nature is a field of freedom as well as necessity. Human history is a series of attempts to develop and integrate its freedom and as such it moves forwards through all martyrdom towards the realization of freedom. History in fact seen from one point of view and that is the legitimate and spiritual point of view is the great and glorious revelation and assertion of freedom in all facets of existence, in society, culture, art and music and it reveals itself as the creativity at the back of spirituality. There can hardly be any spirituality or spirit without this manifest creativity of freedom; a freedom that uses destruction itself for a new creation when it cannot break through recalcitrant nature. One shapes a bangle by melting gold since the nugget cannot itself be turned into a bangle and so also man himself will be broken and moulded into, a higher type by the Visvakarma if he refuses to move. It is stated in a *Pauranika* story that when some gods refused to incarnate they were made to take birth at a lower level and assist a higher evolution in those with whom their lots were cast. Nobody can resist the call of freedom and a freedom for all and it is an

eternal process and therefore just as every rose at every dawn and its blossoming is beautiful the inward surge for real in the intensity of that hour, so too freedom in each individual heart demands the making of history of the eternal which freedom alone can envisage if it can. Since our freedom is only an expression not of our creativity but an ecstasy of getting our of the wheel of becoming, the orbit of the lower order values and existence, it does not fully comprehend that this freedom is but a possibility for creative being though it may turn out in lesser men a curse leading one into deeper darkneses than the previous. Spiritual History as Berdyeav averred is basically internal, and so does Sri Aurobindo hold it: it is that which grows in freedom and is nourished by it: it not only tries to keep up its freedom by creative activity but proceeds to expand the frontiers of freedom for all because of the oneness of Reality. All histories are parts of one Universal history as man understands it and comprehends it. In fact spiritual history might be asserted to be trans-historical or ahistorical. But it is not so. There is no antithesis between the historical and the transcendental spiritual. The historical in a sense may be said to be the external expression of the internal spiritual. The quality of the spiritual is not entirely absent from the historical: in fact there are moments in history when the quality of spirit, as seen in the efflorescent periods of creative art and inventiveness and appearance of

geniuses or heroes, is present in all its parts. The degradation of historical significance arises from the weakening of the spiritual through the mechanisation and materialisation of spirit. This weakening process has to be constantly or vigilantly arrested and reversed: but it is a fact that this has been done in previous epochs only by heroes and geniuses, *avatars* and *rsis* seized with cosmic purpose and spirituality. In our own time the birth of the great men (*mahatmas*) of global perceptions, and insights and urges of penetrating spirituality, e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Svami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and others less known but not less significant to human evolution has signaled the advent of a new age, opening up new dimensions of spirituality. But it would be foolish to think that all this is inevitable. Inevitability or decreedness of Historical future is a logical postulate of Marxian dialectical materialism: provided there is no incidence of a new Potentiality--which may well happen through the radio-active fallouts--not spiritual indeed in the ordinary sense but biologically significant and psychologically pregnant. The world of inventions fortunately makes it impossible to be certain of the determinateness or predictability of life-movements and human movements.

Earlier epochs have perhaps witnessed the glorious manifestation of religious and mythical structures and sculptures and brought out what goes by the name of

spiritual architecture and culture But it is well known that round the world we can perceive the derelict remnants of religious art and culture from Maya and Aztecs to Bali and Angkor vat not to speak of the demise of culture in the most civilized belts of humanity in Asia and Europe. A peep into the past may provide a depressing sensation albeit not meaningless. Mankind unconscious and conscious has seized this failure and today has brought into being an atomic age or Nuclear age and with its global pervasion and industry has provided a new environment that challenges the laws of the past cycles and recurrences. Today nothing is just recurrence of the past. The masks are different indeed. But even here one may see how freedom has forged the weapons of freedom for freedom of the spirit bringing out the need for real creative peace and a new consciousness which is unlike the frog-in-the well consciousness with its limited sovereign domains.

It is to this new possibility of consciousness working on cosmic scale and power that Sri Aurobindo calls attention. Instead of this age being called a nuclear one it is also psychically a supramental one. The supermind is not represented in any one single *avatara* as in the past but in each and every one striving for real concrete freedom of the world and oneself.

There have been undoubtedly some who have felt that history is meaningless and man must learn to get out of

this meaninglessness. Some apophatic theologians think so, and Berdyaev includes Indian philosophers with their entire lack of interest in history among them. They consider that this is a *maya* (an illusion). Berdyaev himself considers that history has meaning as a tragedy of humanity except for the Supreme historical event of the Crucifixion of Jesus which alone can make man transcend the historical. But these are perhaps to peg spiritual form to a single event which because of its significance beyond all space and time, has meaning to such as feel the triumph of the spirit over time or history. However all these attempts reveal the fact that whether the Spirit pushes humanity towards to itself in all its significance or pulls humanity towards itself in order to grant it significance in its struggle and satisfaction in the attainment, it is to a factor beyond and in history that they call attention. Whether it occurs only once or many times depends very much on the weakening of the spiritual force and the necessity to lift up the movement out of its routine orbit to one that lists a higher value for the sake of which the lower is willing to die and die once for all.

A study of history from an integral point of view has been developed in another place¹. The meaning of progress has also been developed by me in another series of lectures². Here I am showing or rather attempt to show how we can look at history both as significant and

spiritual and show also how the spiritual and the material-biological work in unison for the constant production or creative result of unending experienced of *saccidananda*: Existence – Reality, intelligence – Idea and Bliss-fulfilment in freedom for each and for all.

¹ *A Critique of the Philosophies of History*

² *Human Progress*