Editorial
Category : December 1994
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1994

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History as Hoax

the Editor

This issue of Hinduism Today is like none other. We set aside some usual features to publish our seven-page Hindu Timeline, a rich collection of the major events and people that have shaped India. We hope you will keep it, use it as a resource, refer to it when someone asks a question or when writing an article for your local paper. As complete as it is, our Timeline does not tell the whole story.

What it fails to mention is that history, as it happens, never happened. History is a hoax. "What?" you say, "Who licensed you to belittle so proud a profession, so indispensible a discipline as human history? What do we have of the past except the cherished chronicle of what, not to mention who, went before us?" Okay, okay. History is important, but historians know of what I speak. Listen to the preeminent Will Durant who spent a lifetime studying the record of civilizations: "History is mostly guessing; the rest is prejudice."

It is certainly formidable to ponder the whole of human history (said to be somewhere between 500,000 and two million years) and to assess just how much we really know of the past, how well a few bone fragments and distilled lines in a book reflect the truly awesome complexity of billions of human beings interacting with each other, with other tribes, with their environment and geography. To humanize it, consider your own life. Take all you did, all you endured and attempted, all you said, learned and forgot. What is the bottom line? "Anjali Patel, 1938-2022. Beloved wife and mother. Rest in peace." Less than a dozen words. It's easy to see that history is but a frail record of reality. Multiply this individual example by the ten billion souls that have lived in India during the past 10,000 years (an interesting number a local mathematician helped us find), divide that by

the 14,339 words in our (fairly thorough) history, and you get one word for every 697,398.7 people who made that history happen. Hmmm! It's getting easier to see why historian Richard Cobb concluded that "The frontiers between history and imagination are very little more than Chinese screens, removable at will."

History may be a mental monument to human achievement and progress, but it is equally a repository of our prejudices, a museum of our mistakes. It keeps feuds alive beyond their time, it impedes progress more than it impels, and it restrains many of us from living in the here and now, so consumed are we with what happened there and then. History is millstone as much as milestone.

The bad news, then, is that history is always inaccurate and often injurious. The good news is that India and Hinduism live beyond history. Other nations know exactly who they are, when they began, who their first president was. Their history is compact, unambiguous. Not India. She has too much history to be pithy, too complex a career to avoid ambiguity. Nowhere else do people live in so many centuries at the same time. Where else do past and present exist side by side-Sun worship with atomic research, astrology with space exploration? Where else does the old add itself to the new rather than relinquishing its hold and departing?

This issue's timeline chronicles exciting discoveries about the Indus Valley/Saraswati River civilization and the present effort of historians to wrest India's self-understanding away from Europeans who long ago left behind a false biography of Bharat. Whereas the past provides others with the all-important basis of identity and self-importance, India enjoys a leisurely, even careless, relationship with history. British historian Christopher Dawson explains: "Happy is the people that is without a history, and thrice happy is a people without a sociology, for as long as we possess a living culture we are unconscious of it, and it is only when we are in danger of losing it or when it is already dead that we begin to realize and study it scientifically."

Hinduism also lies beyond history. Other faiths, excluding some tribal and pagan paths, are rooted in events. They began on such and such a day, born with the birth of a prophet or the pronouncements of a founder. Thus they are defined, circumscribed, by history. Not Hinduism. She has no founder, no birthday to celebrate. Like Truth, she is eternal and unhistorical. Even if we compel Hinduism to admit of some immanence in history, she merely smiles and brushes aside the few thousand years that most of humanity takes as the crucial narrative. To the Hindu

those few years are a pittance, and they too perish. While all known human history lies within a few hundred millennia, Hinduism speaks of unspeakably vast epochs, of earthly yugas that last millions of years, of days and nights of Brahma that span billions, of a universe that lives and dies and lives again. Such is India's expansive reading of history. Ultimately, history is contemporaneous with the present, in the form of karmas by which all actions of the past live in the now. That is a living history, much more precious than any dead one.