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COMMENTARY

The Lessons of Five Millennia

Let us end the cycles of violence, the neglect of the poor and the exploitation of the ignorant

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Irrespective of one's religious faith, the start of the new millennium affects all of us, because our daily life is measured and in many ways dictated by the Christian Gregorian calendar. And those of us who work with computers know about it very well.

You may wonder what significance this event has for Hindus, who form one-sixth of the world population. The start of anything new is always exciting. Particularly a new millennium has to be exciting. We say it from experience. In April, 1999, we celebrated the start of our 52nd century. Yes, according to the Hindu religious calendar, we are already in year 5102. Hindus have seen and recorded in their almanacs the history of over 5,000 years. We are all too willing to share our experience and joy of welcoming a new era.

First of all, we recognize that time is always moving forward.

To have any sense of achievement, we need to measure time. Various civilizations around the world started to measure time from a particular event. Most of these events are historical, related to lives of kings, religious leaders or prophets. Hindus, too, have many calendars, but the most amazing fact is that they have attempted to measure time from the beginning of the universe. Let us put time in perspective here. Scientists tell us that our universe is somewhere between 15 to 20 billion years old. In Hindu cosmology, there is a concept of a divine day and night--a day and a night of Brahma. In this cycle of creation and destruction, a divine day represents the period of creation, and the divine night the period of dissolution. Based on the calculations given in our scriptures, about 20 billion years have passed since the creation of the present universe. In the famous TV program, "Cosmos," astrophysicist Carl Sagan, whilst talking about Hindu cosmology, said that it is the only ancient religious tradition which talks about the right timescale. In the West, the time sense of people goes back only a few thousand years. The Hindu idea of billions of years is mind-reeling, but it is consistent with modern science.

At a certain stage in time, say at the turn of a century, it is natural for us to reflect on our achievements and look at where we did well and where we went wrong. As humanity is marching forward in time, its scientists are discovering more and more about the physical world we all live in. Many discoveries have been made. Our view of the world has changed. Many branches of science have developed. Out of all the branches, undoubtedly, this century will be known as the century of physics. Perhaps the next century will be the century of genetics. Who knows? As we solve old problems, we create new ones. Can we look ahead into the future and say when this quest for discovery will end? Thousands of years

ago, philosophers in India pondered over this question. In ancient books of the Upanishads, one disciple asks, "What is it by knowing which everything is known?" Surely if we know that key, we don't have to research any more. The great seers replied, "Know thy Self." According to Hindu belief, man's personality consists of body, mind and soul. Whilst the body and mind have limitations, they go through birth and death, the soul is immortal, divine and beyond birth and death. The soul is the real Self. Everything else is superficial. If everyone knew his or her real nature, there would be no problems at all in the world; every one would be happy forever.

Perhaps the future lies in all humanity searching for a common ground of common spirituality. In the Sanskrit language there is a word for this, it is called dharma. It is a kind of global ethical system based on natural laws. The basis of it is not the survival of the fittest but sarve bhavantu sukhina--"let all living beings be happy."

Twenty centuries ago, Jesus came into the world to preach a doctrine of gentleness and love. We are pleased to see that his message has survived 2,000 years. As a Hindu, we wish that Christians spread his message only through gentleness and love. Unfortunately, in some parts of the world, evangelical organizations are known to convert sections of local communities through incentives and indirect forms of coercion. This is a kind of exploitation of the poor. Let all people of the world, rich or poor, be free to choose and develop their religious faith without any political or financial exploitation. Let every life be of equal value.

During the Kosovo crisis, over ^{us}\$4,950 per refugee was spent but no more than \$0.50 per head is being spent on the victims of the recent super cyclone in Orissa in India. The pain felt by a poor child in Orissa was no less than what was experienced by children in Kosovo or other parts of the world. Then why is the help so disproportionate? We hope that in the new millennium we will not see such imbalance.

Nearer to home, we are pleased to see in London the Millennium Dome project in which Hindu businesses have also participated. In year 2000, Hindu organizations in the UK will be organizing one of their festivals at the Dome. It has been decided to celebrate Raksha Bandhan, the festival which carries the message of universal brotherhood. Let the barriers come down. Let us launch into the next millennium to declare that the days of crusades are over, the days of jihads are over. Let there be peace, happiness and freedom for every living being on our mother Earth.

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his spare time working as a volunteer with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the VHP(UK) and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (Manchester) to educate people about Hindu dharma.