Philosophy: Time, Our Hindu View
Category : January/February/March 2013
Published by senthil on Nov. 29, 2012

PHILOSOPHY

Time: Our Hindu View

Musings on the perennial value and profound implications of our vast cycles of yugas and kalpas spanning trillions of years

BY DR. ARVIND SHARMA

THE HINDU VIEW OF TIME HAS OFTEN BEEN described as cyclical, and often contrasted with the Western view of time, which is characterized as linear. That is to say, the Abrahamic religions believe that there was a point before which the universe did not exist, and God then brought it into existence â□□out of nothing.â□□ It will continue in existence until God similarly brings it to an end. A straight line connects, as it were, these two dots, of its coming to be and its ceasing to be. This Western view of time is said to be conducive to progress, as one marches forward in linear time. Hinduism, however, does not admit those two dotsâ□□the one indicating the beginning of the universe, and the other indicating its end. In mainstream Hindu, as well as Buddhist and Jain thought, the universe is without a beginning and an end. But, although without a beginning and an end, the universe does not stay the sameâ□□it undergoes phases of manifestation and occultation. Each phase of such manifestation has its beginning and end, followed by an equally long period when it remains dormantâ□□until the cycle starts again. Within this large cycle there is another cycle during the period of its manifestation, as one Age succeeds another. This cycle consists of the four yugas: Sat (or Krta), Treta, Dvapara and Kali repeating themselves endlessly. This explains the description of the Hindu view of time as cyclical. In fact it could even be called bi-cyclical.

The duration of one cycle, called a mahayuga, is said to be 432 million years. A thousand of these cycles constituted a kalpa. The kalpa therefore is a period of immense duration. The Buddha replied with the following simile when asked how long a kalpa was. Imagine a mountain of solid rock, four leagues (perhaps 6 miles) in its dimensions. Imagine further that someone would come at the end of every century and wipe it with a piece of cloth made of the finest silk of Banaras. That mountain would wear away sooner than the kalpa would come to its end. And yet this kalpa is but a day in the life of Brahma, whose life consists of a hundred years!

When Western Indologists first came in touch with temporal vistas of such duration, they were inclined to dismiss them as merely fantastic. Moreover, as we were supposed to be living in the Kali Yuga, which commenced in 3102 bce, an age in which things were supposed to go from bad to worse, this scheme was considered pessimistic as well, apart from being fantastic.

The time has come, however, to reassess both these appraisals. The early Western Indologists were accustomed to the view that the universe was created in 4004 bce, as calculated by Bishop James Ussher. According to modern cosmologists, however, the universe is approximately 13 billion years old since the Big Bang. So these vast conceptions of time can no longer be dismissed as fantastic. In fact, it could even be argued that it was when the West became aware of the possibility of such vast expanses of time, after being exposed to them in Indian culture, that its own mind was liberated from the confines of earlier biblical calculations and could begin to entertain the possibility of vast geological time spans, and subsequently vaster astronomical time spans.

But what about the historical pessimism implied by the doctrine of the four yugas? The standard explanation offered by many Indologists is that while decline is built into the cosmic structure of the system and cannot be averted, Hindu metaphysics allows the individual to save himself or herself from within the process, because in this evil Kali Yuga even a little virtue goes a long way and salvation is achieved with less spiritual effort than in previous ages. The dark cloud of Kali Yuga came with this silver liningâ□□that one can save oneself and become liberated, if one cannot save the world. This is soteriologically true as far as it goes, but is ultimately misleading if it leaves one with the impression that human beings are at the mercy of the Kali Yuga socially and politically. The fact of the matter is that the Hindu view of time may be cyclical, but it is not fatalistic. It is true that Kali Yuga is described as characterized by bad rulers but this raises the critical question: are the rulers going to be evil because the Kali Yuga as a period is said to be evil, or is the period evil because the rulers are evil? Or, in other words, is the king the maker of the Age, or

is the Age the maker of the king?

In the Mahabharata, this question is posed by Yudhishthira to Bhisma, and Bhismaâ□□s reply is worth remembering: â□□O Yudhisthira, this is a question regarding which you should not entertain any doubtâ□□the king is the maker of the Age.â□□ Even the Manusmrti, which in its earlier sections describes the four Yugas, in the usual way, says in a section dealing with kingship: â□□The king is the maker of the Age. When the king sleeps it is Kali Yuga or the Iron Age; when he wakes, it is Dvapara Yuga or the Brazen Age; when he is ready to act, it is Treta Yuga, or the Silver Age; and when he actively moves, it is Sat Yuga, or the Golden Age.â□□ Small wonder then, that many kings in Ancient India epigraphically claimed that within their rule the golden age (Krta Yuga) had commenced, despite the fact that the one was supposed to be formally going through the Iron Age. Hindu political thought thus imparts to the Hindu concept of time a dynamism which overcomes its cyclical inertia.

The Hindu concept of time thus turns out to be neither fantastic nor pessimistic.

ARVIND SHARMA is a Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University. He focuses on comparative religion, Hinduism and the role of women in religion.