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Cover Illustration: Kamala Alister

The Dynamics of History

by Sohail Inayatullah

There is a pattern to human events, marked by the cyclic rise and fall of social classes each having a distinctive world-view.

Among Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar's many contributions to the knowledge base of humanity², one of the most notable is his theory of history and alternative reading of historiography. Sarkar is unique in that he articulates a structural-epistemic theory of history that is inclusive of the attractive role of the transcendental.

In Sarkar's theory of history there are four classes: workers (*shudras*), warriors (*ksatriyas*), intellectuals (*vipras*), and accumulators of capital (*vaeshyas*). Each class can be perceived not merely as a power configuration, but as a way of knowing the world, as a paradigm, episteme or deep structure, if you will. In Sarkar's language this is "collective psychology" or *varna*. Each *varna* comes into power bringing in positive necessary changes, but over time exploits and then dialectically creates the conditions for the next *varna*.

While the parallel to caste is there (*shudra*, *ksatriya*, *brahmin* and *vaeshya*), Sarkar redefines them locating the four as broader social categories that have historically evolved through interaction with the environment. Caste, on the other hand, developed with the conquest of the local Indians by the Aryans and was later reinscribed by the Vedic priestly classes.³

Sarkar believes that while the history must always move through these four classes, through spiritually-oriented moral leadership it is possible to accelerate the stages of history and remove the periods of exploitation. Thus Sarkar would place the *sadvipra*, the compassionate and courageous servant leader, at the centre of the cycle, at the centre of society (not necessarily at the centre of government).

Sarkar's theory allows for a future that while patterned can still dramatically change. For Sarkar, there are long periods of rest and then periods of dramatic social and biological revolution. Sarkar's theoretical framework is not only spiritual or only concerned with the material world, rather his perspective argues that reality is physical, mental and spiritual. Concomitantly, the motives for historical change are **struggle with the environment** (the move from the worker- era to the warrior- era), **struggle with and between ideas** (the move from the warrior to the intellectual), **struggle with the environment and/between ideas** (the move from the intellectual era to the capitalist eras) and **the spiritual attraction of the Great**, the call of the infinite. **Thus physical, mental and spiritual challenges create change.**

Significantly--and this is important

in terms of developing a rich theory of macrohistory--Sarkar does not resort to external variables to explain the transition into the next era. For example, it is not new technologies that create a new wealthy elite that can control the *vipras*, rather it is a fault within the *vipras* themselves. Moreover, it is not that they did not meet a new challenge, or respond appropriately, as Toynbee would argue. Rather, Sarkar's reasoning is closer to Ibn Khaldun's and other classical philosophers. They create a privileged ideological world or conquer a material world, use this expansion to take care of their needs, but when changes come, they are unprepared for they themselves have degenerated. While changes are often technological (new inventions and discoveries of new resources) it is not the significant variable, rather it is the mindset of the social class, individually and as a class, that leads to their downfall.

Sarkar however develops individual and social ways out of the cycle. In contrast Orientalist interpreters like Mircea Eliade believe that the theory of eternal cycles is "invigorating and consoling for man under the terror of history,"⁴ as now man knows under which eras he must suffer and he knows that the only escape is spiritual salvation. Sarkar finds this view repugnant, for people suffer differently and differentially in each era, those at the centre of power do better than those at the outskirts, labourers always do poorly. Indeed throughout history different classes do better than other classes, but the elite manage quite well.

Often, some people have lagged behind, exhausted and collapsed on the ground, their hands and knees bruised and their clothes stained with mud. Such

Stages of History

Worker	Dominated by Environment
Warrior	Struggles with and dominates Environment
Intellectual	Struggles with and dominates Ideas
Capitalist	Struggles with and dominates Environment/Ideas

people have been thrown aside with hatred and have become the outcasts of society. They have been forced to remain isolated from the mainstream of social life. This is the kind of treatment they have received. Few have cared enough to lift up those who lagged behind, to help them forward.⁵

The hope is not resignation but transformation of the cycle--it is here that Sarkar moves away from the classic Hindu model reality--of caste, fatalism, and mentalism--most likely influenced by fraternal Islamic concepts, liberal notions of individual will, and by Marxist notions of class struggle.

For Sarkar there are different types of time. There is cosmic time, the degeneration and regeneration of *dharma*. There is individual liberation from time itself through entrance into infinite time, and there is the social level of time wherein the periods of exploitation are reduced through social transformation thus creating a time of dynamic balance--a balance between the physical, social and spiritual.

Theories of world history

This differs significantly from other views of Indian and World history. In the *Idealistic* view, history is but the play or sport of Consciousness, the divine drama.⁶ In this view the individual has no agency and suffering is an illusion. In the *dynastic* view history is but the succeeding rise and falls of dynasties and kings and queens; it is only the powerful that have will, agency. In contrast is Sri Aurobindo's interpretation, influenced by Hegel, in which instrumentality is assigned to historical world leaders and to nations.⁷ Successful nations are so because they express the will of the spirit, the *geist*. But for Sarkar, making nationalism into a spiritual necessity is an unnecessary reading. God does not prefer any particular structure over another.

Following Aurobindo, Buddha Prakash has taken the classic Hindu stages of gold, silver, copper and iron and applied it concretely to modern history. India, for Prakash, with nationhood and industrialism has now awakened to a golden age that "reveals the jazz and buzz of a new age of activity."⁸ But for Sarkar, the present is not an age of awakening, but an age



"where on the basis of various arguments a handful of parasites have gorged themselves on the blood of millions of people, while countless people have been reduced to living skeletons."⁹

Sarkar also rejects the modern *linear* view of history in which history is divided into ancient (Hindu), medieval (Muslim), and modern (British-Nationalistic). In this view, England is modern and India is backward. If only India can adopt rational, secular and capitalist or socialist perspectives and institutions, that is, modern policies it too can join the western world. India then has to move from prehistorical society--people lost in spiritual fantasy and caste but without state--to modern society.¹⁰ Sarkar's views are closer to Jawaharlal Nehru in which history is about how humans have overcome challenges and struggled against the elements and inequity.¹¹ It is the history of the "heart" of humanity. Sarkar's views are also similar to the recent "Subaltern" project in which the aim is to write history from the view of the dominated classes not the elite or the colonial.¹² However, unlike the Subaltern project which eschews metanarratives, Sarkar's social cycle provides a new grand theory. Finally, even while Sarkar's exalts human-

ity, he does not forget the role of animals and plants, indeed, he calls for a neo-humanism, a deep ecology which includes the role of Gaia in human evolution.

Historiography

Sarkar's social stages can be used to contextualize Indian and world history.¹³ Just as there are four types of mentalities, structures or types, we can construct four types of history. There is the worker history, the project of the Subaltern group. However, their history is not written by the workers themselves but clearly by intellectuals. There is then warrior history; the history of kings and empires, of nations and conquests, of politics and economics. This is the history of the State. This is the history of great men and women.

Most history is Intellectual history, for most history is written and told by intellectuals, whatever their claims for the groups they represent. Intellectual or Vipran history is also the philosophy of history: the development of typologies, of categories of thought, of the recital of genealogies, of the search for evidence, of the development of the field of history itself. This is the attempt to undo the

***With moral leadership, it is possible
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intellectual constructions of others and create one's own, of asking is their one theory of history or can there be many theories?

Finally, there is merchant or vaeshyan history. This is the history of wealth, of economic cycles, of the development of the world capitalist system, of the rise of Europe and the fall of India. Marxist history is unique in that it is written by intellectuals for workers but used by warriors to gain power over merchants. Sarkar attempts to write a history that includes all four types of power: people's, military, intellectual and economic.

For Sarkar, most history is written to validate a particular mentality. Each *varna* writes a history to glorify its conquests, its philosophical realizations, or its technological breakthroughs, but rarely is history written around the common woman or man. For Sarkar, history should be written about how humans solved challenges. How prosperity was gained. "History .. should maintain special records of the trials and tribulations which confronted human beings, how those trials and tribulations were overcome, how human beings tackled the numerous obstacles to effect great social development."¹⁴ History then needs to aid in mobilizing people, personally and collectively toward internal exploration and external transformation. Thus history should be a "resplendent reflection of collective life whose study will be of immense inspiration for future generations."¹⁵ History then is an interpretive asset rather than a simplistic factual account. Here Sarkar moves to a poststructural understanding of the true. Truth is interpretive, not *rta* (the facts) but *satya* (that truth which leads to human welfare).

Sarkar's own history is meant to show the challenges humans faced: the defeats and the victories. His history shows how humans were dominated by particular eras, how they struggled and developed new technologies, ideas, and how they realized the *atman*, the self, how they gained enlightenment. It is an attempt to write a history that is true to the victims but does not oppress them again by providing no escape from history, no vision of the future. His history then is clearly ideological, but not in the sense of supporting a particular class,

but rather a history that gives weight to all classes yet attempts to move them outside of class, outside of ego and toward neo-humanism.

History then is the natural evolutionary flow of this cycle. At every point there are a range of choices, once made the choice becomes a habit, a structure of the collective or group mind. Each mentality with an associated leadership class comes into power, makes changes, and administers government but eventually pursues its own class ends and exploits the other groups. This has continued throughout history. Sarkar's unit of analysis begins with all of humanity, it is a history of humanity, but he often refers to countries and nations. The relationship to the previous era is a dialectical one; an era emerges out of the old era. History moves not because of external reasons, although the environment certainly is a factor, but because of internal organic reasons. Each era gains power—military, normative, economic or chaotic—and then accumulates power until the next group dislodges the previous elite. The metaphysics behind this movement is for Sarkar the wave motion. There is a rise and then a fall. In addition, this wave motion is pulsative, that is, the speed of change, fluctuates over time.

NOTES

¹This essay is a much abridged version of a chapter of a forthcoming book by Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah titled, *Macro History and Macrohistorians* (New York, Praeger, 1997)

²See Sohail Inayatullah and Jennifer Fitzgerald, eds., *Transcending the Knowledge Base of Humanity: Prabhat Rainjan Theories of Individual and Social Transformation*. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1996.

³For various interpretations of caste in Indian history and politics, see Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; Rajni Kothari, *Caste in Indian Politics*. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1970; Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1979; and, Romila Thapar, *A History of India*. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1966.

⁴Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1971, 118.

⁵P. R. Sarkar, *The Liberation of Intellect—Neo Humanism*. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1983.

⁶Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "History: An Idealist's View." K. Satchidananda Murti, ed. *Readings in Indian History, Philosophy and Politics*. London, George Allen and Unwin,

The driving force for this change is first the dialectical interaction with the environment, second the dialectical interaction in the mind and in ideologies, and third the dialectical interaction between both, ideas and the environment. But there is also another motivation: this is the attraction toward the Great. The individual attraction toward the Supreme. This is the ultimate desire that frees humans of all desires.

While clash, conflict and cohesion with the natural and social environment drive the cycle, it is the attraction to the Great, the infinite, that is the solution or the answer to the problem of history. It results in progress. For Sarkar, the cycle must continue for it is a basic structure in mind but exploitation is not a necessity. Through the *sadvipra*, the virtuous leader, exploitation can be minimized.

Sarkar's theory uses the metaphor of the human life cycle and the ancient wheel, that is, technology. There is the natural and there is human intervention. There is a structure and there is choice. It is Sarkar's theory and movements that intends to provide this intervention; an intervention that for Sarkar will lead to humanity as a whole finally taking its first deep breath of fresh air.

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⁷Sri Aurobindo, "The Spirituality and Symmetric Character of Indian Culture," and "The Triune Reality," K. Satchidananda Murti, ed. *Readings in Indian History, Philosophy and Politics*, 361.

⁸See Buddha Prakash, "The Hindu Philosophy of History." *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Vol. 16, No. 4, 1958).

⁹Shrii Shrii Anandamurti (P.R. Sarkar), *Namah Shivaya Shantaya*. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1982, 165.

¹⁰See Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India." *Modern Asian Studies* (Vol. 20, No. 3, 1986).

¹¹Jawaharlal Nehru, "History: A Scientific Humanist's View." K. Satchidananda Murti, ed. *Readings*.

¹²Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹³See also Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, eds. *Situating Indian History*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1986.

¹⁴P. R. Sarkar. *A Few Problems Solved*. Vol. 4. trans. Vijayananda Avadhuta. Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1987, 64.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 66.

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to create new futures