

REWRITING HISTORY: A CRITIQUE

History and historiography, whether scientific or non-scientific, deal with the known events and personalities of the past, and the developments that have been shaping the destiny of humanity for a period of time. Although history seems to provide an explanation of various events in terms of a cause-effect relationship, that, too, with an apparent sense of objectivity, what was (and is) being handed down to us as history is not completely objective. Of course, history, as a branch of knowledge, is not merely a chronological listing of all events from the past.

History necessarily involves an interpretation, which is certainly influenced by the existential situations and needs of the persons who are instrumental in recording those events. This introduces a limitation on the value of history or historiography as an objective science. However, by a persistent effort on the part of historians they will be able to overcome this limitation by being critical as well as objective, i.e., without in any way manipulating the central historical *datum*. As every *datum* has to pass through different persons and generations, it is unavoidable that a series of interpretation take place at different places and periods, as a result of which the original event gets distanced (and, sometimes, distorted!) from the persons who approach it today. Such a situation, therefore, calls for minimizing the distance between the historical *datum* and the historian (e.g., a historical document and the present historian as an interpreter) by acquiring knowledge of the style, language, existential situation, etc., of the extant historical text or source (all these being identified as textual criticism). This, too, has its own limitation, as our ability to go back to the historical times and historical existential situations is very much limited; so also every historian – as an interpreter – necessarily attempts to interpret the events from his or her (natural or assumed) perspective. Although subjectivity will remain a constituent in any historical narration, introducing and maintaining an element of neutrality and objectivity in recording and interpreting various events from the past will certainly be foundational to the veracity of history and historiography.

Private perspectives (at the conscious and conspicuous exclusion of certain vital factual elements that pertain to the common interest, or an inclusion of *only* that which is interesting and important to serve a vested interest) and hidden agendas in the writing or rewriting of history certainly overlooks and scrupulously avoids an element of neutrality and objectivity that is a basic requirement in history or historiography. Although such an approach would be a welcome one to those who are affiliated to the same (or similar) causes, it challenges the truthfulness of history. The clause that history necessarily involves an interpretation does not mean that the historian is permitted to spitefully manoeuvre or manipulate the factuality of the historical events and persons. Any attempt from such a malignant perspective only distorts history; any historian of the sort ceases to be an instrument of bridging various generations of humanity in handing down the lore of human affairs and achievements, as history is an exclusive perspective and domain of human beings. Thus, when a historian acts out of certain vested interests and vitiates the factuality of historical events, he or she turns out to be a traitor, because he or she betrays the whole humanity to serve his or her own clandestine interests and hidden agendas, but at the cost of factuality which is the right of everyone.

Given the possibilities of history being understood as an interpretation of the past events by the historian, and the natural consequence of having a plurality of interpretations as so many are the historians' perspectives, a continuous rewriting of history is a must. This should certainly be preceded by an incessant and thorough critiquing of the past historical documents, in order to separate the historically factual nucleus from its interpretation(s) offered by different individual or corporate historians. History being an attempt to view and review the events that have been taking place over a period of time, the perspective of the historian is definitely vital and important. In fact, it is the existential needs and situations of any and every historian that sets the focus. Although, strictly speaking, history is not (and cannot be) an impersonal and abstract look at the persons and events of the past in order to articulate 'truth' in its *true* colours and in its totality, the historian must bear in mind that he or she cannot certainly *undo* those personalities who really existed and the events that took place at one time or the other in the past.

Moreover, it is equally impossible to adamantly insist on a single reading of history, as the perspectives differ from historian to historian,

from society to society, or from time to time. The inbuilt limitation of any history, which is obvious from our analysis, calls for the rewriting of history from different perspectives, so that more and more dimensions of any single event can be brought to the notice of everyone. History cannot be understood from any single source or by the attempt of a single individual, but requires a continuous, and an impassionate and objective analysis of many historical sources, made available to us through the interpretative eyes of the historians of the past and present.

These are some of the concerns that prompted the *Journal of Dharma* to address the issues related to the rewriting of history from a critical perspective. All contributors in this number have tried to articulate the issue of rewriting history from their cherished and specific perspectives, but certainly without losing sight of the holistic dimension of the whole humanity whose *history* it is, and thus contributing their might in understanding our past from a critical and creative perspective. A. Mathias Mundadan, in his article "Rewriting History: Orientations," tries to set the tone of the critiquing that is needed in our present attempts to rewrite history. Of course, he being a veteran Church historian, Mundadan evolves the fundamental principles from the context of the history of Indian Church, and holds that historians "are called upon to take a more critical and corrective approach in their utilization of the dominant Hindu religious resources, especially in the face of the traditional discrimination and social segregation of some one hundred and fifty million oppressed people (the *dalits*) of India. The authenticity of future Christian histories of India will depend upon how comprehensive (not selective) their approach is, since India is a mosaic of religions and traditions, a wide variety of languages, cultures, and ethnic groups that few countries in the world have." Joseph Pathrapankal, an established Indian biblical theologian from Dharmaram, unveils the emerging Christian perspectives in our understanding of history. From the angle of a critical and creative analysis of the biblical and historical foundations of Christianity, he highlights the need for the Church as a whole, and every Christian in particular, to be open to the Spirit active in the historical processes of humanity. He contents that "there is only one history and in it the sacred and the secular, the religious and political, the spiritual and material have their respective roles to play."

Given the place accorded to the needs and perspectives of a historian in narrating events from the past, it is to be admitted that a change of our gaze, or a shift in the perspective, would naturally lead, at least, towards a new reading and a novel narration of the events, most of the time leading to alternate conclusions. The subaltern movements' attempts to rewrite history from their perspective is a corrective to most of the extant histories and historiographies prepared from the viewpoint of the dominant groups. Against this background, George Oomen and Ambrose Pinto make a clarion call to understand and accept the necessity of rewriting the history of Indian society – both secular as well as ecclesiastical – to remedy an insufficient and deviant turn historical recordings have taken in the past. While Pinto contents that "... it is the masses that make history," approaching historiography from an objective perspective, Oomen holds that "Our objectivity should come out of our ability to establish the image of self or the subjectivity of a person or a movement under investigation. Still one can only strive to be as objective as possible and subjectivities at various levels will remain as a reality in all discourses." V. S. Elizabeth, a jurist by training and profession, and a feminist thinker, pointedly argues for the need of the hour to rewrite history from the perspectives of women – whether we call it a feminist movement or not – so that historical records would become more authentic and holistic, and we would set the stage for the future generations of women to realize the identity and uniqueness of their historical counterparts from the past. For, she holds: "If we want a future in which women and men will be equals despite their differing roles and functions, if we want a future where every individual will be valued for whatever he/she contributes to society without some kind of functions being prioritised over others, then it is important that we take control of the history that is being written."

Identifying a trilemma in Indian state's "claims to be a secular state, although it is regarded as anything but both by the minorities [non-Hindus] and the majority [Hindus] community," Arvind Sharma exhorts all Hindus to consciously initiate a historical process of forward movement through which the Hindus should strive after "the creation of a single all-India body which could credibly speak for all Hindus, or, at least, a majority of them." Sharma's call is to initiate a re-reading of the whole history of India from the perspective of a united Hindu consciousness, although it

may be challenged whether such a consciousness has ever existed at all, or is a latest invention of the new *avatars* of Hindu renaissance.

In an attempt to understand the dynamics of history and historiography, Ignatius Jesudasan reflects upon the role myth and faith play in the historical evolution of Christianity, or any religion for that matter. He tries to distinguish myth and historiography from a dynamic-static polarity-perspective and holds that "Myth, by itself, is an emotive psychic record corresponding, volatile and variable with the changing external situation, while historiography is, by and large, an externally objective and verifiable fixed record of a stable state attained by a person, group, practice or institution at any given time."

The multi-dimensional approach that all these authors have adopted in articulating their hopes and concerns for the future of history and historiography in itself is vital in maintaining truthful and responsible attitudes towards the past, the present and the future of humanity as a whole. Hereby, therefore, we make an impassionate call to all historians not to *invent* or *artificially create* events, although such things have already taken place in the historical past. Historians are also called to bear in mind that they are not entitled to *doctor* any event or personality to serve their *private* purposes. They have to codify and interpret the events from the past not from a single perspective alone, but from a variety of perspectives, which alone can lead us towards a truthful understanding of the past. Although history and historiography require the admission of different perspectives in unveiling the (multi-faceted) true nature of the past, it does not in any way mean that any one can manipulate the historical nucleus, event or personality. History, from a holistic perspective, is not (and cannot be) the private domain of any individual person or organization; it is the common patrimony of the whole humanity. Although we live in a world of privatisation that is being globalized, purportedly to serve the interests of all, let us not lose sight of the communitarian dimension of history, that makes it the history of all of us, instilling meaning and purpose in human life as a whole.

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