

POSITIONING RELIGION IN THE CHANGING TIMES

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'Time' is an all-encompassing phenomenon of life. Could it be defined? I do not think so. Could it be described? Even if the answer is in the affirmative, I am afraid no fair deal can be done with the job. The 'water in the river' is an uninterrupted flow. Time is an incessant current, too. The 'breeze in the air' cannot be divided, resisted or suppressed. So is time. Time is the 'wheel' of life. It moves on and on. It budes only 'clockwise' and never anti-clockwise. It has a rhythm, which it cannot glide away from. It is self-governed and it knows its direction. Time is a 'dynamic' reality and it is future-oriented. In other words, time is that factor which, moment by moment, changes. Change is the sign of life and time is the 'benchmark of change'. Perspectives and modules of life mark the 'changing times', as well.

Language is composed of grammar, which classifies time into three tenses -- past, present and future. 'Yesterday' represents the past, 'today' stands for the present and 'tomorrow' symbolizes the future. In the general sense, past refers to the origin of a certain tradition and its heritage. Present highlights the real existence of something, here and now. The future points the finger towards what is in store for us ahead or the destination or the destiny of something. In other words, past is the foundation of life, present is life in the real sense of the word and future is the hope or the way forward.

Balkrishna Sharma Naveen, a well-acclaimed poet of Hindi Literature, has a condensed perspective about time. The English version of the same goes thus: 'With a sense of discernment, know and understand the past, observe the present and live in it and strengthen the hope of the future'. This statement suggests the most dynamic and effective way of establishing 'co-ordination' between the different components of time. The components of time are neither contradictory to each other nor cut off from each other. They are 'complementary' to each other. Together, they define or describe what time really is. As a matter of fact, life is to be understood in terms of time in its entirety.

Assessing the religious sector from this standpoint, it is too blatant that a large majority of the functionaries and followers of religions are 'victims of the past'. They are enslaved to their respective tradition. They surrender blindly to their founder or master. They follow the scriptures by letter and apply to today the interpretations of yesterday. Often, they also fall a prey to the clever and self-centred designs and stipulations of the self-appointed 'mini gods and goddesses', who claim or pretend to be the modern incarnations of God. The so called proponents and devotees get addicted to certain rituals and practices that seem to produce hardly any ethical fruit in life. They cease to think for themselves and so do not live in the present. Their 'obsession with the past' make them live in the past. In reality, they are already dead in the past; only that they are not buried yet. They could very well be compared to the Egyptian mummies, which are mere icons of the past.

The religious sector has, though a minority, some followers who see the present in an enlarged form. Neither the past nor the future is of any major significance to them. 'Fixed in the present', they are realists to the core and so are too honest with themselves. They believe only in the present and get 'indulged' in all dimensions and degrees of enjoying life. They could be compared to 'epicureans' in the west or 'chaarvaak' in the east. No wonder, most of them end up in a big 'vacuum' that leads to utter as well as tragic pessimism. A 'hope-less' life cannot be but a hopeless life.

There is also a considerable portion of religionists who live in the future. Overpowered by a 'mania for the future', they seem to be too much anxious about the future. Their misplaced pre-occupation is that which is awaiting them for tomorrow. They are in fact too 'nervous' about the future or are afraid of death. The inordinate fear of the future makes them too cautious or scrupulous. They are too much

concerned or are disturbed about life after death. In addition to the scrupulous and fickle-minded among them, many of such people must be victims of a prick of conscience with regard to their moral failures, if not crimes. Anyway, they could be compared to ‘day-dreamers’ whose regular abode is in the air.

Those who are excessively glued to the past in matters of religion, miss both present and future. Those who are used to seeing only as far as their naked eyes can see and take their present too seriously, run the risk of losing both past and future. Those who are too much possessed by the future, miss both the past and the present. Obviously, all the three positions are ‘aberrations of perceptions’ of God, faith and life and they are indeed out of the track. Taste in cooking is the ‘right quotient’ of ingredients. Musical effect is the outcome of correct mixing. So is religion in terms of the three tenses of time. True religion or faith can be only that which mixes the best of the three components of time with a ‘spiritual sense of proportion’. Living in the present, with the strength of the best from the past and with face inclined to the future is the right sense of life as well as ‘sense of time’.

Further, extreme advocates of the past are ‘conformists and conservatives’ of religious stipulations. No contribution has ever come from them for the betterment of the world. They are blocks on the way of social progress. Excessive realists turn up highly ‘self-centred’ and their span of life is worth only a few moments. Lopsided futurists live up in the air and are ‘off their feet’. All the three are ‘pathological instances’ in matters of faith. At the hands of people who are affected by such ‘misguided mindsets’, religion becomes ‘opium of the people’, as Karl Marx rightly put it, or a heap of superstitions and empty rituals. Such a faith, undoubtedly, is a ‘liability’ to the human society as well as religion. It becomes an agent of enslaving people, in the name of liberating them. If one’s friend turns an enemy, he or she will prove to be the worst of the enemies in life. This is what happens to religion also, since it is very dear to life. To get drowned in one’s religious system or faith is suicidal.

At this juncture, it is good to recall to one’s mind what Jesus said, ‘Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath’ (Mk 2.27). Sabbath was the day dedicated to the Lord in the Jewish tradition. But, unfortunately the Jews overestimated it and became almost a slave to it. Jesus emphasized that the intended purpose of Sabbath was serving human beings, even more than other days. The above statement could be re-phrased as ‘religion is made for human beings and not human beings for religion’. The humans, in no way, ought to be victims of religion. Most of the religious heads are accustomed to exploit the followers by making them scrupulous with regard to heavy religious stipulations. No wonder, a high content of religion in human history has been a burden to the humans. Most of the religious heads are yet to become spiritual leaders, by way ‘leading people on’ and ahead in the passage of life. The wisdom of the travel dictum ‘less luggage, more comfort’ applies well to the human evolution and spiritual elevation during the entire process of life, in terms of time.

Those at the helm of religious systems have to do a thorough ‘home work’. At an honest introspection, isn’t the chunk of the religious fervour, especially in India, blind, self-appeasing and socially fruitless? Isn’t that a considerable portion of them, may they belong to any tradition, victims of the past and blindfolded pseudo-guides of the innocent masses? Are they not perpetuating, to a great extent, outdated requisites and habituating people in a ‘sheep-like following’ (bhedchaal)? Are they not conveniently creating an un-reflective crowd (bheedchaal) around them to survive on and to boost themselves up through a cult of personality? Have they not created the ‘core realists’ in the form of ‘epicurians’ or ‘chaarvaaks’? Are they not responsible for those who distance themselves from religion and declare as atheists and humanists? Are they not obsessing people towards too much fear-complex through their undue pre-occupation with the future and the life after life? A vast majority of the so-called religious heads seem to have lost their head as well as heart. Critical thinking coupled with personal experience is the most basic requisite for guiding a flock towards something worthwhile in life.

Those who claim to have a religion or faith have to read the 'signs of the times'. They have to listen to the times, understand its promptings and respond to the times. What is not relevant to the times is forced to die out. Theories that have crossed expiry date, beliefs that are dead, habits that are life-less and practices that are fruitless are bound to get snuffed out. Only a religious system that undergoes constant updating and refreshes its faith every now and then is worth the while. Only a faith that is 'live' always can nourish life with its sap. Faith has to become the 'lifeline' of the humans. The only way to ensure that is to edit the religious system and its core faith, by co-ordinating the genius of the past, challenges of the present and the signboards of the future.

Religious leaders require being much more educated and 'enlightened'. They need to be people who can inspire and motivate others. They have to be capable of leading people. Their perception of life has to be broad-based and up-to-date regarding the various aspects and realities of life. They have to be 'spiritually tuned', in the real sense of the term. They have to be people who are empowered to think critically and help people do the same. They have to possess a 'balanced sense of time' with which they are able to take the finest elements of the past and interpret the content of religion in terms of the milieu of the present, with a clear orientation towards the future.

Religion has been a major reality in the human history and it will continue to remain significant for human culturing, though in a more or less mode. But, it needs to be saved from getting fossilized. It needs to be liberated from the deadly grip of 'commercial and political overtones'. People who claim to have faith as well as are at responsible positions have to learn to 'think anew'. They have to awaken a 'sense of discernment' on what is useful and what is useless. Throwing away the unnecessary baggage will make the journey of life lighter and updating content of faith will make it 'relevant for the times'. Religion has to 'position itself responsibly' in terms of the 'changing times'. That calls for a sense of 'being guided by the promptings of the spirit'. It takes 'courage to hold the head above the water level' and 'swim along the current' of the times.

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