

# Historical inevitability



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## historical explorations



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The British historian Isaiah Berlin defended human choice against determinism or historical inevitability as developed by Karl Marx. Closer at home, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who was not a trained historian, but a pragmatic politician, and also an admirer of Karl Marx, wrote two volumes of history which I always recommended to our teachers of history.

Many of our history teachers are full of erudition, but fail to transmit it to their charges in an appealing manner. Students end up looking askance at history as a sack-full of dates they need to memorise.

In his *Glimpses of World History* and the *Discovery of India*, Pandit J Nehru recounts the human history and the Indian history adopting a methodology that we could name as History in *Reverse Gear*.

A driver resorts to reverse gear when he or she loses the direction and goes backwards in order to go forward in the right

direction. Hence, the linkage with the present is essential for the usefulness or necessity of history.

Pandit J Nehru tells us clearly that if god wishes that we should look always backwards, he would have given us eyes at the back of our heads.

What interests me more here is the so-called Historical Inevitability. It is a concept intimately linked with Human Choice and Freedom.

There is a long history of debate around it among the western thinkers. The protestant thinkers, and particularly its Calvinist brand laid much emphasis upon predestination.

The modern thinkers, freed from the theological trappings, questioned the church imposed limitations to the capacity of human reasoning.

The progress of science and technologies supported by it through the Industrial Revolution and thereafter seemed to endorse this new self-confidence.

However, the miseries brought upon mankind by regional and world wars fuelled by the same technologies have made mankind wary of its faith upon scientific progress.

The promises of modernisation have left the greater part of mankind without its benefits, and even the rest of mankind is unsure of living in a safe and uncontaminated environment.

Pandit J Nehru has his explanation of the Indian belief in karma. The west has viewed it as Hindu fatalism.

It continues to be a stigma upon the Hindu view of life that excludes large sections of Indians from the benefits of progress. For Pandit J Nehru we all play with cards that are distributed to us by our life-conditions of birth.

It places the burden upon the player to make the best of his cards. It is the player and not necessarily the cards that will determine the end of the game.

The best cards do not ensure a victory, while unpromising

cards can be played with masterly skill to turn the tables.

Pandit J Nehru was certainly not unaware of the injustice of the Hindu social structure based on caste, just as did Ambedkar who inherited the injustice. Arun Shouries' *Worshipping False Gods* (1997) can be a good help to understand how the karma game play unfolds in the historical scenario.

I would recommend the readers of this column to read S Radhakrishnan, who published a booklet entitled the *Hindu View of Life* (1923) wherein he presents the origin of caste system as a Hindu alternative to ethnic cleansing.

Faced with constant waves of immigrants, the Hindu caste system welcomed the new skills of the immigrants, but isolated them as a mark of respect for their laws of marriage and commensality.

These restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining are now viewed as social discriminations.