

Culture, Civilization, and the Roots: A Postcolonial View of Sri Aurobindo's Thought

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Abstract

One of the major impacts of the colonizing project upon the subject nation is the paradigmatic shifts created in the culture and civilization of the natives in terms of social values and relations.

This paper attempts to elucidate Aurobindo's ideas of culture and civilization and the transformation he envisages by breaking free from the impact of colonialism. Aurobindo attempts to go to the roots of Indian culture and claims that it is spiritual in nature as opposed to the materiality of the West. Thus the native culture becomes a domain inaccessible to colonial definitions since it is beyond the reach of colonial invasion. There may be contradictions inherent in such a search for roots, but it would still be a useful exercise.

As Aurobindo proclaims that the roots of Indian culture are basically spiritual, he also puts it in apposition to the materiality of the West. As Aurobindo was not generally given to an inversion of Orientalism and its binaries, the problematic nature of such black-and-white demarcations is also discussed in this paper. When existential questions come up in various discourses, where reason fails to explicate, spirituality is summoned to provide insights. However, Aurobindo emphasised that this is not to ignore the material aspects of existence and he depicted the manner in which this is exemplified in Indian society.

Introduction

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This paper attempts to elucidate Aurobindo's ideas of culture and civilization and the transformation he envisages by breaking free from the impact of colonialism. Aurobindo attempts to go to the roots of Indian culture and claims that it is spiritual in nature as opposed to the materiality of the West. Thus the native culture becomes a domain inaccessible to colonial definitions since it is beyond the reach of colonial invasion. There may be contradictions inherent in such a search for roots, but it would still be a useful exercise.

Aurobindo's Views on Culture

Aurobindo defines culture as "the expression of a consciousness of life which formulates itself in three aspects." He reckons that "[t]here is a side of thought, of ideal, of upward will and the soul's aspiration; there is a side of creative self-expression and appreciative aesthesis, intelligence and imagination; and there is a side of practical and outward formulation" (*Renaissance* 106). Of the three elements, first he speaks of the spiritual aspect

as he considers it to be the most important aspect of culture. The second aspect includes all types of creativity including art and literature and the third aspect includes all features of social existence. There have always been attempts to find uniform "expressions of consciousness" and to group people as belonging to different cultures and civilizations. Stuart Hall describes two different ways in which cultural identities are thought about:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (110-11)

While such a definition is fixative and positioning in nature, there is also another approach which sees cultural identity as dynamic. In this second approach, the individual is given the freedom to build upon the already inherited structure of the past. Thus, it becomes dynamic, making the individual move from the past to the present and then

to the future. Hall continues with the description of the second approach to cultural identity:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities are from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (112)

Aurobindo can be seen to subscribe to this second approach to culture which does not remain immutably attached to the past. He says that "[t]he past has to be used and spent as mobile and current capital for some larger profit, acquisition and development of the future. . . ." However, he adds that "to gain we must release, we must part with something in order to grow and live more richly, — that is the universal law of existence" (*Renaissance* 75). Although he writes in ornate terms about the Indian cultural past, Aurobindo does not want to be thought of as advocating an absolute return to the past:

Our sense of the greatness of our past must not be made a fatally hypnotising lure to inertia; it should be rather an inspiration to renewed and greater achievement. But in our criticism of the present we must not be one-sided or condemn with a foolish impartiality all that we are or have done. Neither flattering or glossing over our downfall nor fouling our nest to win the applause of the stranger, we have to note our actual weakness and its roots, but to fix too our eyes with a still firmer attention on our elements of strength, our abiding potentialities, our dynamic impulses of self-renewal. (*Renaissance* 87-88)

Here, Aurobindo stresses the importance of "becoming" in addition to the sense of "being" acquired from the past, as stated by Stuart Hall. Such a sense of "becoming" needed to be stressed in the context of

colonialism which was slowly trying to appropriate the Indian past, after it had successfully established its dominion over the land and the people. Frantz Fanon also stated the need to be cautious when understanding one's cultural identity in terms of the past:

We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. We must work and fight with the same rhythm as the people to construct the future and to prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already springing up. A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (*Wretched* 233)

Such a struggle for the future by emphasising the national culture assumes significance in the backdrop of colonialism. The site of colonialism is constantly assailed by the threat of destructions; not just of loss of lives or break down of physical structures and natural habitat but of identities, cultures and civilizations. Colonialism, in most of its manifestations in different parts of the world, endeavoured to classify the cultures and civilizations of the colonized as inferior to that of themselves. As Fanon observed, "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his 'nation' . . ." (*Wretched* 236). If the colonized are successfully persuaded to "admit" their inferior status, it becomes easy for the colonizers to establish their hegemony upon them. The effort of nationalists like Aurobindo was to foreground the richness of the cultural and civilizational foundations of India and to "re-present" India to counter its representations in colonial discourses.

The Cultural Foundations of India

What Aurobindo attempted to do was to bring out the unique aspects of Indian culture and civilization and posit

them vis-à-vis the Western to demonstrate that the claims of superiority of the West are baseless. Though, in some instances Aurobindo does insist that the Indian culture and civilization is superior, in most arguments he emphasised on the essential differences of the East and the West which cannot and should not be judged on such arbitrary terms. He suggested that “a one-sided world would have been the poorer for its uniformity” (*Renaissance* 138-39). In some other instances, he even opined that none of the extant civilizations can be reckoned as sufficiently advanced to be considered “civilized”: “There is here no real question between barbarism and civilisation, for all masses of men are barbarians labouring to civilise themselves.” What actually exist are only “differences necessary for the completeness of the growing orb of human culture” (*Renaissance* 139). It is pertinent to note that he considered differences to be necessary for human progress.

Aurobindo opined that spirituality was the basis of Indian civilization, and that materiality assumed significance only in light of the spiritual:

Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it. India saw from the beginning, — and, even in her ages of reason and her age of increasing ignorance, she never lost hold of the insight, — that life cannot be rightly seen in the sole light, cannot be perfectly lived in the sole power of its externalities. She was alive to the greatness of material laws and forces; she had a keen eye for the importance of the physical sciences; she knew how to organise the arts of ordinary life. But she saw that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical. . . . (*Renaissance* 6)

The relevance of spirituality in culture is that life cannot be comprehended just by the “sole power of its externalities.” Spirituality is the wellspring from which Indian culture draws its sustenance. When existential questions come up in various discourses, where reason fails to explicate, spirituality is summoned to provide insights.

Striking a Material and Spiritual Balance

However, Aurobindo emphasised that this is not to ignore the material aspects of existence and he depicted the manner in which this is exemplified in Indian society:

The Rishi in ancient India was the outstanding figure with the hero just behind, while in later times the most striking feature is the long uninterrupted chain from Buddha and Mahavira to Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Nanak, Ramdas and Tukaram and beyond them to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and Dayananda. But there have been also the remarkable achievements of statesmen and rulers, from the first dawn of ascertainable history which comes in with the striking figures of Chandragupta, Chanakya, Asoka, the Gupta emperors and goes down through the multitude of famous Hindu and Mahomedan figures of the middle age to quite modern times. (*Renaissance* 246)

Such a celebration of Indian social life may not stand exacting questions of historical validation, but the burden of nationalists like Aurobindo was to impress upon the natives the need to recognize their cultural heritage and more importantly, the need for a consequent creation of the nation. As Fanon observed:

[I]t was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. (*Wretched* 210)

When Aurobindo speaks of the unbroken line of religious leaders, diplomats and rulers, he stresses the versatility of Indian culture. He also sets it as different from the West because the Indian culture is lead by spirituality, represented by the *Rishi*. The West also has its spirituality, but Aurobindo maintains that it is different from that in the East where spirituality is the very base of existence:

The dignity given to human existence by the Vedantic thought and by the thought of the classical ages of Indian culture exceeded anything conceived by the Western idea of humanity. Man in the West has always been only an ephemeral creature of Nature or a soul manufactured at birth by an arbitrary breath of

the whimsical Creator and set under impossible conditions to get salvation, but far more likely to be thrown away into the burning refuse-heap of Hell as a hopeless failure. At best he is exalted by a reasoning mind and will and an effort to be better than God or Nature made him. Far more ennobling, inspiring, filled with the motive-force of a great idea is the conception placed before us by Indian culture. Man in the Indian idea is a spirit veiled in the works of energy, moving to self-discovery, capable of Godhead. He is a soul that is growing through Nature to conscious self-hood; he is a divinity and an eternal existence; he is an ever-flowing wave of the God-ocean, an inextinguishable spark of the supreme Fire. (*Renaissance* 156)

The Indian spiritual concept is affirmed by Aurobindo to be more humanistic in approach since man is conceived as "divinity" and as "an eternal existence." He sees the Western concept as theocentric, and the human being is considered as "created" to achieve salvation. Hence, the spiritual element is really kept with God, and humans are just left with reason for assistance in leading his life. There is no need of a self-discovery, for the self has already been stated to be a product of the Creator. This view of Aurobindo cannot, however, be seen as a fair assessment of Western spirituality which is not limited to institutionalized Christianity. Aurobindo does not take into consideration here the pre-Christian spirituality of the West and parallel spiritual streams or the evils of the caste system of India. The 'outcastes' of India are equally "thrown away into the burning refuse-heap of Hell as a hopeless failure." But it could be conceded that the focus of the Western society remained on the material aspect and its development. As Partha Chatterjee observed:

The superiority of the West was in the materiality of its culture. The West had achieved progress, prosperity and freedom because it had placed Reason at the heart of its culture. The distinctive culture of the West was its science, its technology and its love of progress. But culture did not consist only of the material aspect of life. There was the spiritual aspect too, and here the European Enlightenment had little to contribute. In the spiritual aspect of culture, the East was superior – and hence, undominated. (*Nationalist* 66)

Even where the West dealt with the spiritual, it was inadequate in that there was no attempt to blend the material to the spiritual. Aurobindo alleged that the West has for long depended on reason for what it considered to be spiritual realization, whereas Indian thought considered spirituality to be outside the purview of reason:

. . . Indian metaphysics are as far removed from the brilliant or the profound idea-spinning of the French or the German mind as from the broad intellectual generalising on the basis of the facts of physical science which for some time did duty for philosophy in modern Europe. It has always been in its essential parts an intellectual approach to spiritual realisation. (*Renaissance* 23)

Europe, fascinated by the achievements of modern science, looked towards it for a philosophical understanding of life, though it is beyond the purview of science. Philosophy or reason becomes less important than science. In another instance, Aurobindo portrayed the dangers of overdependence on science:

For this reason modern Science insists on all the premises being thoroughly proved before the *vichar* commences, and its method of proof is experiment. Modern European progress is an application of this principle of experiment to politics, society and every human belief and institution. This is a rather dangerous business. In the process of experiment you may get an explosion which will blow society out of existence and bring a premature end to the experiment. Moreover, you may easily think a premise proved when it is not. Science has had to abandon notion after notion which it thought based on unshakably proven premises. (501)

The method of experiment, though useful in science, may not be applicable in all fields of knowledge. For instance, the proof of history is evidence while that of philosophy is argument and its logic. Therefore, Aurobindo saw the application of the principle of science to other disciplines as dangerous. Even in its own domain, science permits *vichar*, 'reason,' only after obtaining proof on the premises. Aurobindo objected to the predominance of science not because he was against science *per se*, but because he did not approve of taking science to realms where it had no concern or ability to negotiate.

Conclusion

As Aurobindo proclaims that the roots of Indian culture are basically spiritual, he also puts it in apposition to the materiality of the West. As Aurobindo was not generally given to an inversion of Orientalism and its binaries, the problematic nature of such black-and-white demarcations is also discussed in this paper. When existential questions come up in various discourses, where reason fails to explicate, spirituality is summoned to provide insights. However, Aurobindo emphasised that this is not to ignore the material aspects of existence and he depicted the manner in which this is exemplified in Indian society.

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