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Culture, Religion and Spirituality: Synergy in Sri Aurobindo's Thought

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Abstract *The impact of colonialism on native cultures has been heterogeneous and difficult to summarize in monolithic terms. However, the effects were a two-way process rather than the colonized being always on the receiving end. Sri Aurobindo was a philosopher and an activist of the nationalist movement in the Indian struggle for independence. Though a person who was educated largely under the Western system, Aurobindo was deeply ingrained in the values of Indian culture and spirituality. This paper attempts to analyse the manner in which Aurobindo mused at these differences of the East and the West. It could be seen that at times he tried to reconcile them, resigned himself to them at some other times, and ultimately tried at a synergy of these seemingly divergent thought patterns.*

Key Words: colonialism, decolonization, nationalism, spirituality, modernity, assimilation

British colonialism which began its liaison with India with trade interests transformed itself into domination of the Indian subcontinent, and in between, it passed through various steps. While the forces of the Empire fought with several kingdoms, it also maintained friendly and ambivalent relations with several others. It was only with the ascent of the

nationalist movement that a cultural revival was heralded under the guidance of leaders like Aurobindo. Jasbir Jain notes:

... [T]hen came a phase of nationalist upsurge which was an expression of disillusionment with western imperialism as well as positing of a cultural model. The leading figures of this phase are Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), Vivekanand (1863-1903) and Aurobindo (1872-1950). . . . (26-27)

The impact of the colonial culture was so strong that it was able to confuse the natives about their identity. It was true that by the effect of colonialism and its definition of the Indian society, Indians did try to live the description of them given by the colonial masters. The colonizers described India as “[a]n abstract, metaphysical, religious mind overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and action as Maya. . . .” Because of the influence of such a view held by the colonizers, “for a time Indians in this as in other matters submissively echoed their new Western teachers and masters” (Aurobindo, *Renaissance* 6). On the other hand, there were also attempts to mimic the colonizers as theirs was taken to be the superior culture. Aurobindo gives examples of some of the intellectuals of his time, who, because of their Western education started imitating the British:

They sought for a bare, simplified and rationalised religion, created a literature which imported very eagerly the forms, ideas and whole spirit of their English models, — the value of the other arts was almost entirely ignored, — put their political faith and hope in a wholesale assimilation or rather

an exact imitation of the middle-class pseudo-democracy of nineteenth-century England. . . . (*Renaissance* 19)

In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, “[t]he ambivalence of mimicry - almost but not quite - suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal” (*Location* 91). However, it needs to be noted that the “imitation” mentioned by Aurobindo is not the same as the “mimicry” of Bhabha since there is no ambivalence involved. Aurobindo narrates the self-defeating nature of such an imitation of the colonizers:

A new activity came in, but this was at first crudely and confusedly imitative of the foreign culture. It was a crucial moment and an ordeal of perilous severity; a less vigorous energy of life might well have foundered and perished under the double weight of the deadening of its old innate motives and a servile imitation of alien ideas and habits. (*Renaissance* 15)

The native culture was too strong to be easily swept away by the “insurgent counter-appeal” of the colonial culture. Yet, there was an attempt by the natives educated in the Western culture to imitate the colonizers. Since such a mimicry of the colonial culture verges on mockery, “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’, that which it disavows.” Even worse, this mockery turns into a “*menace* - a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha *Location* 91). Then, the venture of the colonist is made to appear like a farce by the colonial native.

Aurobindo argues that when the colonized realize the futility of mimicking the colonizer and stops fetishizing the

colonial culture, they will turn to the native culture which constitutes the essence of their being:

The national mind turned a new eye on its past culture, reawoke to its sense and import, but also at the same time saw it in relation to modern knowledge and ideas. Out of this awakening vision and impulse the Indian renaissance is arising, and that must determine its future tendency. The recovery of the old spiritual knowledge and experience in all its splendour, depth and fullness is its first, most essential work; the flowing of this spirituality into new forms of philosophy, literature, art, science and critical knowledge is the second; an original dealing with modern problems in the light of the Indian spirit and the endeavour to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritualised society is the third and most difficult. Its success on these three lines will be the measure of its help to the future of humanity. (*Renaissance* 15)

Aurobindo does not suggest an unconditional return to the past, but to bring the past to the present and connect it with “modern knowledge and ideas.” As suggested by Debjani Ganguly, “A critique of the pervasiveness of colonial knowledge formations and political practice in the postcolonial world does not imply a wholesale rejection of all that is western” (60). Obviously, Aurobindo’s intent is to create a modernity parallel to that imposed upon by the British. As he wrote in another instance, “After all we live in the twentieth century and cannot revive the India of Chandragupta or Akbar. . . .” He added that it was required to “keep abreast with the march of truth and knowledge, fit ourselves for existence under actual circumstances, and our education must be therefore up to date in form and substance and modern in life and spirit” (*Early* 420). It would be unique

since it is a plan to blend spirituality with the varied expressions of culture like philosophy, literature, art and science. The introduction of science is significant here because science is considered to be the typical vanguard of European modernity which bases itself on reason. As Partha Chatterjee, remarked, "Rationality becomes the normative principle of a certain way of life which is said to promote a certain way of thinking, namely, science" (*Nationalist* 16). Such an appropriation of a major signpost of Western culture was a seminal step in the direction of decolonization. Further, the renaissance of the nation had to reconcile in steps the culture shocks engendered by the assault of the colonizers on the cultural landscape of the people.

Designing an Indian Culture

The mission of Aurobindo and other nationalists like him was to revive the characteristic morale of India, which is chiefly spiritual, and remove the mask worn in the form of the "foreign character" and regain its own identity and freedom from foreign rule. Yet, Aurobindo did not subscribe to a revival of the past as presently attempted by the fundamentalist right-wing forces. He clearly stated that "all attempts to revive the past must fail, in spite of the spiritual impetus and the democratic forces that assisted its inception" (*Renaissance* 443-44). Aurobindo's references to the past or an ancient culture are meant only as a means to fight for decolonizing the Indian land. As Fanon said, "To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle" (*Wretched* 233). For Aurobindo, in the return of "the Shakti"

after winning freedom, she should nevertheless wield the sword of modernity or “the modern influence,” because it is before this weapon that the natives surrendered in the first place:

Nationalist texts were addressed both to ‘the people’ who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned. To both, nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernize’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based. (Chatterjee *Nationalist* 30)

Aurobindo’s rhetoric of possessing the modern influence without getting “possessed or overcome by it” is an urge to such a progressive change without sacrificing one’s unique cultural identity. He exhorted that “it is not by abolishing ourselves, our own special temperament and power, that we can get at the living oneness, but by following it out and raising it to its highest possibilities of freedom and action” (*Renaissance* 44). The attempt to ‘modernize,’ as suggested by Chatterjee, is an effort to get rid of the ‘backward’ conditions which prohibit the native people from moving forward. For Aurobindo, retaining one’s identity did not mean opposing everything that comes from the West:

India can best develop herself and serve humanity by being herself and following the law of her own nature. This

does not mean, as some narrowly and blindly suppose, the rejection of everything new that comes to us in the stream of Time or happens to have been first developed or powerfully expressed by the West. Such an attitude would be intellectually absurd, physically impossible, and above all unspiritual; true spirituality rejects no new light, no added means or materials of our human self-development. (*Renaissance* 38)

It can be seen that the spirituality espoused by Aurobindo gives the highest regard for the well-being of the human individual and hence is a humanist spirituality, not a theocentric one. At the same time, he also warns that adopting some idea from the West should not be reduced to blind imitation:

We have, for instance, taken over in literature the form of the novel, the short story, the critical essay among a number of other adoptions, in science not only the discoveries and inventions, but the method and instrumentation of inductive research, in politics the press, the platform, the forms and habits of agitation, the public association. I do not suppose that anyone seriously thinks of renouncing or exiling these modern additions to our life, — though they are not all of them by any means unmixed blessings, — on the ground that they are foreign importations. But the question is what we do with them and whether we can bring them to be instruments and by some characteristic modification moulds of our own spirit. If so, there has been an acceptance and an assimilation; if not there has been merely a helpless imitation. (*Renaissance* 45-46)

Aurobindo does not have any issue with modernity so long as it doesn't remain an imported modernity, but has been

assimilated into becoming our modernity. He explains it as “*ātmāsātkarana*, an assimilative appropriation, a making the thing settle into oneself and turn into characteristic form of our self-being” (*Renaissance* 48). He was aware that it was neither necessary nor possible to return to a pristine civilization in the past unaffected by the incursions of modernity:

Any attempt to remain exactly what we were before the European invasion or to ignore in future the claims of a modern environment and necessity is foredoomed to an obvious failure. However much we may deplore some of the characteristics of that intervening period in which we were dominated by the Western standpoint or move away from the standpoint back to our own characteristic way of seeing existence, we cannot get rid of a certain element of inevitable change it has produced upon us, any more than a man can go back in life to what he was some years ago and recover entire and unaffected a past mentality. (*Renaissance* 51)

During the time of colonialist activity, there were some writers who feared this inability to return and they advocated that any kind of acceptance from the West would “bring pouring in the rest of the occidental deluge” (43). However, Aurobindo did not subscribe to such a view and said that “[t]he undesirability of total rejection, even if it were entirely possible, arises from the fact that interchange with the environment is necessary to a healthy persistence and growth. . . .” The problem that he saw with such a resistance to change was that “the living organism which rejects all such interchange, would speedily languish and die of lethargy and inanition” (48).

Bringing together the past and the present

What could be done was to correct “the undue preponderance” of the European mind and Western civilization and to bring about a balance where the Asiatic and other ignored civilizations can also assert themselves (51-52). Aurobindo did not consider an absolute return to the past as either necessary or possible. As pointed out by Aijaz Ahmed:

History is not really open to correction through a return passage to an imaginary point centuries ago, before the colonial deformation set in, or before the insertion of Islam before that, or, earlier still, before the invasion of what are generally called the 'Aryan' tribes. Indian civilizational ethos, if there is one, is in any case deeply marked by the processes of Indianization of idioms and instruments — even peoples, who were initially strangers, sometimes predators, in this land. (77)

Aurobindo too averred that Indian civilization has been a civilization developed by assimilation, long before the ingress of European colonization. While discussing Indo-Muslim architecture, Aurobindo points out how Indian architecture has freely borrowed elements from various cultures: “It seems to me that here the Indian mind has taken in much from the Arab and Persian imagination and in certain mosques and tombs I seem to find an impress of the robust and bold Afghan and Mogul temperament . . .” (*Renaissance* 282). Indian civilization took no effort to retain anything as characteristically unique and welcomed foreign influences. It assimilated elements of different cultures which came into interaction with it:

But at no time did Indian culture exclude altogether external influences; on the contrary a very great power of selective assimilation, subordination and transformation of external elements was a characteristic of its processes; it protected itself from any considerable or overwhelming invasion, but laid hands on and included whatever struck or impressed it and in the act of inclusion subjected it to a characteristic change which harmonised the new element with the spirit of its own culture. But nowadays any such strong separative aloofness as distinguished the ancient civilisations, is no longer possible; the races of mankind have come too close to each other, are being thrown together in a certain unavoidable life unity. We are confronted with the more difficult problem of living in the full stress of this greater interaction and imposing on its impacts the law of our being. (*Renaissance* 50)

Aurobindo acknowledges that even without the impact of colonialism, it is not possible for civilizations to maintain an “aloofness” given the increasing interactions of human societies in the light of modernity. When he accepts ideas that are typically Western, the basis for his consideration is not their Western origin, but their humanist orientations:

If I accept any of these ideas it is not because they are modern or European, which is in itself no recommendation, but because they are human, because they present fruitful view-points to the spirit, because they are things of the greatest importance in the future development of the life of man. What I mean by acceptance of the effective idea of democracy, — the thing itself, never fully

worked out, was present as an element in ancient Indian as in ancient European polity and society, — is that I find its inclusion in our future way of living, in some shape, to be a necessity of our growth. (*Renaissance* 47)

According to Aurobindo, the renaissance of Indian culture should not attempt to exclude the present needs of human evolution while at the same time be unhesitating to abandon ideas irrelevant to the spirit of the age:

And the riper form of the return has taken as its principle a synthetical restatement; it has sought to arrive at the spirit of the ancient culture and, while respecting its forms and often preserving them to revivify, has yet not hesitated also to remould, to reject the outworn and to admit whatever new motive seemed assimilable to the old spirituality or apt to widen the channel of its larger evolution. Of this freer dealing with past and present, this preservation by reconstruction Vivekananda was in his life-time the leading exemplar and the most powerful exponent. (*Renaissance* 21-22)

The synthesis that Aurobindo calls for is one of progression though he calls it a “return” as it is an effort to admit “new motives” and to “widen the channel” of evolution by linking the past and the present. He makes it clear that it is not a narrowing of perspective or reversal of ideas, but to retrieve the spirit of ancient Indian culture which never yielded to the aspirations of colonialism. As Ranajit Guha said: “There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It

was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past” (1). Regarding the efforts of social reform initiated by Vivekananda, it is worth remembering his critique of the Indian “fanaticism, which has driven religion entirely to the kitchen . . .” indicative of the revolutionary fervour required for such a renaissance (Vivekananda 66). Aurobindo appreciated Vivekananda for the audacious discourses that he provided on lands of the West though there were attempts by many others for the dissemination of Indian spiritual ideals. He wrote that the two major influences on the West were “. . . the Theosophical movement and the appearance of Swami Vivekananda at Chicago. For these two things showed the spiritual ideas for which India stands no longer on their defence but aggressive and invading the materialised mentality of the Occident” (*Renaissance* 63). Aurobindo saw a lot of significance in these events because India no longer needed to defend her culture, but soon turned to a mode of aggression, a sign of the people becoming a nation.

The Cultural Evolution

Aurobindo sees the European cultural invasion upon India as a historical accident which could not be avoided since the native people “were in a state of ebb and weakness” (*Renaissance* 37). Here, he is trying to suggest that colonialism was successful not because of any cultural merit of the Europeans, but because of a temporary weakness of the Indian people. As Partha Chatterjee comments:

There is nothing organic or essential in European civilization which has made it dynamic and powerful: it is just that at a certain point in history it suddenly found a new spirit, new sources of energy and creativity.

And similarly, there is nothing organic or essential in Asian civilizations which has made them static and powerless: after a long period of magnificent growth, the old springs of vitality and innovation had gradually dried up. It was at this historical conjuncture that the clash had occurred between West and East: the West conquered, the East submitted. (*Nationalist* 137)

The moment of loss of vitality in the Indian civilization was capitalized upon by the colonialists to further their imperialist designs. Therefore, the critical strategy would be to regain the lost vitality in the native population so as to drive colonialism out of the land. To bring about a renaissance in India, Aurobindo suggests adopting the religious ideas for political struggle and national emancipation:

All that is as yet clear is that the first period of a superficial assimilation and aping of European political ideas and methods is over. Another political spirit has awakened in the people under the shock of the movement of the last decade which, vehemently national in its motive, proclaimed a religion of Indian patriotism, applied the notions of the ancient religion and philosophy to politics, expressed the cult of the country as mother and Shakti and attempted to base the idea of democracy firmly on the spiritual thought and impulses native to the Indian mind. Crude often and uncertain in its self-expression, organising its effort for revolt against past and present

conditions but not immediately successful in carrying forward its methods of constructive development, it still effectively aroused the people and gave a definite turn to its political thought and life, the outcome of which can only appear when the nation has found completely the will and gained sufficiently the power to determine its own evolution. (*Renaissance* 30)

Here, Aurobindo's endeavour does not seem to be to spiritualize politics like Mahatma Gandhi did, but to use the language of religion which is familiar to the Indian mind and is capable of arousing the people to action. Gandhi saw the daily religious practices of the individual "as essentially continuous with the remarkable political actions . . ." (Bilgrami 95). Whereas, what Aurobindo attempted to do was to create a religion out of nationalism. Aurobindo's idea of spirituality was heterogeneous and different from being a homogeneous exclusivist religion. He did not consider it proper or plausible to prescribe the principles of a specific religion for a land comprising people from multiple faiths:

Nor does spirituality mean the moulding of the whole type of the national being to suit the limited dogmas, forms, tenets of a particular religion, as was often enough attempted by the old societies, an idea which still persists in many minds by the power of old mental habit and association; clearly such an attempt would be impossible, even if it were desirable, in a country full of the most diverse religious opinions and harbouring too three

such distinct general forms as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, to say nothing of the numerous special forms to which each of these has given birth. (*Renaissance* 33)

Aurobindo's purpose for bringing in religious epistemology into his nationalist discourse begins and ends with communicating with his fellow beings his idea of political action and cultural renaissance and for fomenting in them a nationalist spirit akin to that of religion. That said, it has to be emphasised that Aurobindo considered spirituality to be the source of all external manifestations of the human mind and the body:

Religions, creeds and forms are only a characteristic outward sign of the spiritual impulsion and religion itself is the intensive action by which it tries to find its inward force. Its expansive movement comes in the thought which it throws out on life, the ideals which open up new horizons and which the intellect accepts and life labours to assimilate. (*Renaissance* 26)

Aurobindo propounds the idea that religion is an inward force which can propel the outward forces of physical and mental activity, but religion itself cannot be made into an external activity. Here, he again differs from Gandhi who "could never make sense of the notion of keeping religion sequestered from politics" (Bilgrami 95).

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