

## Man, Religion And Society In Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss the concepts of Man, Religion and Society mainly from the standpoint of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy. In this connection I have chosen two works of Sri Aurobindo, (1) one of his very early incomplete writings, "The Harmony of Virtue" because of its analytic approach and (2) the other more renowned, "The Human Cycle" for us descriptive attempt to understand these key concepts. Harmony, the bringing together of dissimilar elements in a manner that coordinates these as parts of an organic whole, is central to different aspects of human existence. A basic psychological harmony as well as harmony between the body and the mind are necessary for people's ability to live a flourishing life. Harmony is accordingly considered to be an important virtue. As a personal, social or environmental accomplishment, harmony has a place in every day conversation, political discourse, as well as academic scholarship. In most western society, however, it has no such presence. That does not mean that harmony play no role in people's lives and world views. The unstoppable advance of mindfulness, meditation and Yoga only goes to show that it does.

Sri Aurobindo developed a unique socio political approach through his extensive writings and teachings. His works, particularly "The Human Cycle" and "The Ideal of Human Unity", present a comprehensive vision for the transformation of society and the evolution formality at the core of Sri Aurobindo's socio – political philosophy is the idea that human society is a dynamic and evolving entity, constantly progressing towards higher stages of development. He believed that the ultimate aim of society should be the realization of the full potential of the individual

and the establishment of a harmonious and progressive collective life.

**Key Words** Harmony, Virtue, Human Cycle, Society, Religious, Evolution, Liberation, Bloom, Culture Nirshkam Karma.

### Introduction

Starting from any human society in its primitive stages, it is obvious that a strong symbolic attitude governs its customs and institutions. This social stage of symbolism makes everything in society a sacrament, religious and sacrosanct. Considering this stage in the time of the early Vedas and in challenging the possibility of an easy solution that the Vedas are primitive mythology only expressing vague, confused conceptions of primitive men about the different godheads and nature, Sri Aurobindo asserts that the contents of the Vedas have a dual significance, one esoteric, to be understood only by persons of higher intellect and the other exoteric, understood by common men.

An example will make it clear. The Vedic institution of Caturvana is misrepresented by many as the system of four castes; while caste is a conventional institution, Varna is a symbolic one. It is usually believed that the different orders of society came out of an economic plus political evolution. The according to Sri Aurobindo, men of that age looked always for the- symbolic significance underlying this social order. The symbolic idea of the four orders will be rather expressing (a) the Divine as knowledge, (B) the Divine as Power (c) the Divine as Production and (d) the Divine as Service and hence

“Human society was for them an attempt to express in life the cosmic Purusha who expressed himself otherwise in the material and the superphysical universe”.<sup>1</sup>

Radhakrishnan also believes in the same way by stating.....

“The gods themselves are not mere image but projections of the experience of significance, of forces directly perceived in man, nature and beyond”<sup>2</sup>

Items of this esoteric stage of religion in human society are unamenable to rational interpretation. This form of religion is significant only for those who have some idea of

transcendence that goes beyond the best benefits obtainable even in Heaven, Heaven being to them no more than an extension of our physical universe, though beyond its normal limits. The transcendence of these esoteric religion is even beyond that. But at the same time the important point in this connection in esoteric or symbolic stage lies in negotiating directly with the essential humanity and this is distinct from social religion. In addition, this symbolic stage stresses on man an amount of enlightenment.

“Man and the Cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden reality”<sup>3</sup>

In the course of social evolution, Sri Aurobindo places, next, the typical stage as the conventional one with the dominance of the external expressions of spirit like the dominance of the clothes on the person itself. And

“Religion becomes then a mystic sanction for the ethical motive and discipline, Dharma”<sup>4</sup>

Tied up with the ethical notions of rights and duties, the concepts of morality come in the forefront and try to replace what is commonly known as religion. Meticulous performance of social duties are considered to form a way of religion. Intelligible social practices, in other words, social duties are of course what we need for our life. This is the field as where reason can play its very best. This dharma as Abhyudeya is distinct from the dharma as Moksha which is understood in the sense of transcendence.

But in the next subjective period, the age of individualism to question the typical stage. In a series of questions, Sri Aurobindo depicts the revolt of the subjective period in search for more individual freedom from society.

- (i) Should we do what the society expects us to do?
- (ii) Is there over such universal expectation basing on which ‘duty’ can be clarified?
- (iii) Should we accept individual guidance as the criterion of morality?

Sri Aurobindo rightly remarks:

:It is in Europe that the age of individualism has taken birth and exercised its full sway”<sup>5</sup>

And consequently,

“.....in the West atheism and secularism were its inevitable and predestined goal”<sup>6</sup>

But soon, in seeking the law of his being, the human individual gradually discovers a law which is not his own, but of the collectivity and the mass. And in the attempt to find out the “greatest good of the greatest number”, morality is defined to be an

“.....arithmetical solution of balancing the good and the evil of an action and if the scale of the evil rises, we stamp it as good, in the scale of the good rises, we brand it as evil.”<sup>7</sup>

Vivekananda also question whether this individualistic approach can really uphold any universal standard at all

“.....when the quarrel is between prophet and prophet, whether it has power of understating whatsoever of religion..... and it will mean that all religions are mere lies, hopelessly contradictory without any consistent idea of ethics”<sup>8</sup>

Failure of reason to supply the universal criterion of any bond that could hold man in the society in a close togetherness is also felt very strongly in the west. So utters Bloom,

“No search for the cause of values, either in the rational quest for knowledge of good and evil or in, for example, their economic determinants, can result in an accurate account of them. Only an openness to the psychological phenomenon of creativity can bring any clarity”.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore a recent trend is going on in the west where man is tried to be defined not any more in the terms of reason which is considered to be only a tool for his survival but in terms of his art. In the words of Bloom,

“Art is not imitation of nature but liberation form nature”.<sup>10</sup>

It is art now that is making the human type admirable. As long as rationality or reason is understood to be the essence of man, science is taken to be the perfection of what mankind wants to attain. The way of enlightenment is, up to a certain point, to

establish the centrality of science. During this epoch, philosophy or religion is distinctly despised and ignored by the positive sciences. The situation has changed. The present age of creativity is partially taking the revenge and intimidating the rigid scientific approach of man in the society.

The outcome of this rush is to distinguish oneself and in this context creativity and personality are the very terms of distinction. Consequently the terms 'culture', 'cross-cultural' are coming to replace the words 'morality' and 'religion'. Sociologists, Journalists, Philosophers now start to talk about 'Culture'

As Bloom goes on to say ironically,

"..... the drug culture, the rock culture, the street gang culture and so on endlessly and without discrimination. Failure of culture is now culture".<sup>11</sup>

Therefore a trend is slowly setting up particularly in American again to find the dignity of man within the context of modern science. Everyone wants to be 'scientific' and at the same time tries to restore human values by a universal criterion. Restoration of values according to Sri Aurobindo, is man's seeking after beauty in the great creative arts, poetry, painting etc., and defining 'religion' in terms of 'beauty' is to find out freely and naturally our harmony with our environments.

Two aspects of religion are clarified by Sri Aurobindo in this context – religionism and true religion, the former laying stress,

".... on intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code on some religio-political or religion-social system".<sup>12</sup>

On the other side, true religion is:

"A complete and universal appreciation of beauty.."<sup>13</sup>

and this is the search for a universal beauty in its revelations

"In any slightest or greatest thing, the beauty of a flower, a form, the beauty and power of a character an action, an event, a human life...."<sup>14</sup> and so on

Beauty with the aspects of variety and symmetry in the comes serves as the keynote of the final harmony of individual and society in their greatest perfection. Let us analyse these

aspects from the standpoint of Sri Aurobindo, Applying the principal of harmony to be the aim of our life, we find at the very outset diversity and variation. The diversity and variation must be of free variation in the inborn qualities and native powers traditionally defend in terms animality and rationality. The aspect of animality in our nature is accepted by Sri Aurobindo as a virtue instead of a vice. To possess a virtue is to be with one's true nature. This no doubt contains some primitiveness but that is not the last word of us. Sri Aurobindo's concept of dynamic spiritual evolution will maintain this primitiveness along with the more developed rationality and many there refined qualities and neither will reject the other. No quality is eliminated but rather perfected in the gradual unfoldment of the spiritual being. Evolution fits very gracefully each element in effect and in proportion in society.

The concrete application of the principal of harmony is metaphorically explained by Sri Aurobindo by the aspects of form, colour and perfume of beauty. To have form means to express a quality in action. Thus Sri Aurobindo advocates the principle of action in understanding this concept. The formless abstract quality of a warrior is understood and expressed only in a war.

Thus we have to act according to our true nature and this is Svadharma.

This activity implies variation and distinctiveness which is the second dimension of beauty, i.e., colour or character of the action. Revelation of the individual soul is metaphorically the colour of beauty. No imposition of external law but self-govern freedom marks this dimension.

In the third place, there must be total involvement in the action of ours. Sri Aurobindo rejects the idea of 'disinterestedness' in the principle of action. On the contrary the action must be guided by a whole-hearted interest on the part of the individual. The central teaching of the Gita, thus, according to Sri Aurobindo, is not 'Nishkame Karma' but rather lies (in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gita) surrendering everything to the Divine. This involvement in action brings forth again metaphorically the 'perfume' of 'fragrance' of beauty.

Thus to be beautiful is to act, to reveal and to be involved in harmony: there is harmony in discord, harmony in diversity and

harmony in progress. It is gradually the terrestrial harmony of matter and spirit that is the final note of this universe. And to be in this principle of harmony is to be religious.

“To make all life religion....would seem to be right way to the development of the ideal individual and ideal society and the lifting of the whole life of man into the Divine”.<sup>15</sup>

Thus we conclude with Sri Aurobindo,

“To find highest beauty is to find God; to reveal, to embody, to create, as we say, highest beauty is to bring out of our souls the living image and power of God”.<sup>16</sup>

#### **NOTES & REFERENCE**

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