Spirituality is the other side of the coin of Indian culture – A study in the light of Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo, an Indian philosopher had his own ideal of rishi-hood. The spiritual element in the social structure can save civilization from death. According to Sri Aurobindo a true happiness in this world is the right terrestrial aim of man. The essential intention of Indian culture is extraordinarily high, ambitious, and noble. He does not simply reveal the essence of Indian religion and spirituality. He has explained the fundamental spiritual basis of Indian
culture. Spiritual evolution is the philosophical idea that centers around human culture and the evolution of human beings spiritually. Indian culture is considered the greatest for its spirituality. Spirituality is the other side of the coin of Indian culture. According to Sri Aurobindo, culture comprises various activities of the cultivated aesthetic being, mind and body—the harmony of the inner and outer man. So, Spirituality is the essence of Indian culture.

**Key words:** Indian culture, Civilization, Spirituality, Renaissance, Divine and Evolution.

Sri Aurobindo, an Indian philosopher had his own ideal of rishi-hood such as inner freedom, high morality, heroic attitude, social intuition, being a seer, thinker, prophet, poet, having leadership quality, seeing a deep and harmonizing reality, relation between politics and religion, and oneness of everything. He was interested in revolutionary movements and liberation of his motherland. According to him a man would be able to claim his rights when he had inner freedom. To claim such rights he should also surrender himself to the Divine in nature, in the family, in the society, and also in the nation and in the world-order. The true aim of real religion was realization of inner freedom and outer freedom. Thus a religion with self-realization of a man in his environment was related to politics. Liberation for his ‘Mother India’ was Sri Aurobindo’s religious duty. Politics as religion, religion as politics was his theme.

Sri Aurobindo received his entire education in England and totally alienated from Indian cultural heritage when he arrived in India in 1891 at the age of 23. Later when he returned to his native land he felt the need to identify himself with Indian culture and ethos. Soon he acquainted himself with the Indian metaphysics and started to write poems based on Indian myths and took part in nationalistic politics, started thinking about Indian art, literature, and languages.
Civilization is not the end. There may well be a state beyond civilization, a history beyond history. When the man rejuvenates the next higher development, there a spiritual motive comes in. In most religions the idea of salvation has show to be individual and ‘otherworldly’. But, in Sri Aurobindo’s view, the man’s ascent in to spirit and the descent of the spirit into his normal humanity and also the transformation of the earthly nature is more important than the ascent of man into heaven.

The spiritual element in the social structure can save civilization from death. This is the first necessity. One should know the soul’s novel power and should allow it to take over and remake man society in its own image. Then this society will have the territory of souls instead of a conflict of egos. The healthy body, a strong vitality, and an active mind alone will not carry man far. It will be only for particular distance. For, the farther aim he should struggle or else he will fall back. This happens as he does not use the ultimate values of his mind, life, and body.

The religious society is a thing of the past and the spiritual society belongs to future. Every religion carries its own load of offence and contradictions. The spiritual society depends on rediscovering a higher science of man. Hence it will provide a new relationship of science, society, and spirituality. A spiritual society will be formed with the individuals’ construction in the spirit not in the ego. It is not in the collective ego but in the collective soul. The Age of Religion has passed and the future of religion lies in spirituality. The spiritualization of the race as Sri Aurobindo calls it the Life Divine is man’s date with destiny.

According to Sri Aurobindo a true happiness in this world is the right terrestrial aim of man. This true happiness lies in the finding and maintenance of a natural harmony of spirit and body. A culture is to be valued in its discovery of this harmony. Also, a civilization must be
judged by the manner in which all its principles, ideas, forms, ways of living work to bring that
harmony. India’s central conception is that of the Eternal, the Spirit incased in matter and
evolving on the material plane by rebirth of the individual. India’s social system is built upon
this conception. Her religion wants to get the spiritual consciousness and its fruits. Her art and
literature have the same upward look.

The essential intention of Indian culture is extraordinarily high, ambitious, and noble. A
culture conceives of life as a movement of the Eternal in time, of the infinite in the finite, and of
the Divine in man. It holds that man can not only become conscious of the eternal and the
infinite but also live in its power and universalize, spiritualise, and divinize himself by self-
knowledge. The whole aim of a great culture is to lift man. Man actually lives in unfathomable
ignorance. He is full of evil and conflicts and his actual life is a disgusting chaos of ugliness and
jarring barbarisms. At present he is egoistic, materialistic, unspiritual, and occupied by the needs
and desires of his physical being. So, the culture teaches him and gives him knowledge. It
teaches reason, the law of good and unity, high law of his spirit. If a civilization has not any of
these aims, it is not a great culture. As ancient India has all these aims, it is the highest of all
because it surpasses all the others.

In The Renaissance in India and other Essays on Culture, Sri Aurobindo examines the
nature of Indian civilization and culture. It is an expression of India’s religion and spirituality, its
art, literature, and politics. The first section of the book provides a general defence of Indian
culture from criticism and its possible destruction due to the aggressive expansion of Western
culture. The central aim of the book is to reveal the greatness of India’s civilization. It explains
that India has been one of the greatest civilizations of the world. India stands apart from all
others in its central emphasis. It is based on spirituality and its survival depends on the future of the human race.

Sri Aurobindo does not simply reveal the essence of Indian religion and spirituality. He has explained the fundamental spiritual basis of Indian culture. He has given introductions to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the great epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana, philosophical writings of the Middle Ages and religious poetry. Also, he has examined the Indian polity, the development of India’s administrative structure. The governing structures developed organically from the extended family to the clan and villages and to larger grouping within kingdoms. People of India have to admit the truth that the political system failed in India as it was unable to achieve a unity of the Indian subcontinent. Also, it could not sufficiently protect its people from foreign military invasion and subjugation. The inner basis of India’s unity is reflected most directly in her spirituality and religion. But, in other fields of culture it has remained undamaged throughout the millennia despite India’s frequent and enduring foreign occupations.

Sri Aurobindo insists on the importance of Renaissance saying that the new birth-the Renaissance in India is the most important thing both to India and the world. He means the recovery or the change of India’s old spirit and national ideals. Spirituality is the master key of the Indian mind. India faced different crises but she never lost the insight. She knew the importance of the physical sciences and also knew how to organize the arts of the ordinary life she never failed to realize that the physical science does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical.

The past of India is marked by her stupendous vitality, her inexhaustible power and joy of life, and her abundant creativeness. For three thousand years she has been creating
abundantly, incessantly, and lavishly many kingdoms and empires, philosophies and theories about universe and sciences and creeds, arts and all kind of monuments, palaces, temples, public works, communities, societies, and religious orders, laws and codes and rituals, physical sciences, psychic sciences, systems of yoga, systems of politics and administration, spiritual trades, industries, fire crafts, and poems. This list is endless. She creates and creates and is not satisfied and tired.

India’s fame and skills is spread all over the world. Sri Aurobindo describes her expansion in all fields in the sands of Judaea, Egypt, Roma, Archipelago, Mesopotamia, china, and Japan. India’s spirituality seems to be confusing for the eyes of the unaccustomed. But, Indian spirit was strong, austere, rich, healthy, and powerful.

There were three movements of returning to earlier and worst stage on the decline of India. The first one is sinking of superabundant vital energy and fading of the joy of life and joy of creation. Secondly, there is a stop of free intellectual activity, a slumber of the scientific and creative intuition. And finally there is a lack of energetic continuation in spirituality. Though the beginnings were superlative and had great developments the old civilization stopped and lost partly its way. It was this moment that the European wave swept over India. This entry of a new and quite apposite civilization created destruction. There arose a crude and confused imitation of the foreign culture. Fortunately, the energy of life was there. Sri Aurobindo describes the needed urge given by the European life and culture. European culture had its impact on Indian culture. There was a temporary rotting and destruction. But, it gave three needed urges. They were the revival of the dormant intellectual impulse, rehabilitation of life, and awakening of the desire of
new creation. As a result, the national mind turned a new eye on its past culture and even look at it in relation to modern knowledge and ideas.

Sri Aurobindo feels proud of India’s earliest generation of intellectuals. Though they were few in number they were powerful by their talent which was the result of western education in India. They sought for a bare simplified rationalized religion and created a literature with European form which revolutionized Indian society. He praises Swami Vivekanda for preserving and reconstructing India’s values. But, Sri Aurobindo worries about Indian’s unsteady minds who were wearing half Indian dress and half European dress upon their bodies. He wants India to get back to the native power of her spirit. He was certain that the spiritual motive would form the future of India. He did not mean spirituality only as metaphysical mind. He was sure that metaphysical thinking was a strong element and India would never lose her great powers.

Sri Aurobindo compares the philosophies of European thinkers Nietzsche, Bergson and James with Indian philosophy. Their philosophies are practical and they have not evolved out of spiritual experience as the real Indian philosophy. Now in India more original intellects turned their literature towards modern ideas. He portrays poetry, literature, art, and science of India. Especially, he praises Bengal for her great body of art full of delicate beauty and vision. The art of Bengal painters is very important than the prose of Bankim or the poetry of Tagore. He praises the literary period of Bengal. Its copious creation, poets, and poetesses were great. The work of Bankim Chandra enters the new minds of Bengal and the work of Rabindranath Tagore holds the present and opened ways for the future.

Sri Aurobindo strongly declines India’s fall. For him, fall does not matter but India lies in sacredness. The fall, the failure, or lie in the dust is not a position for man or nation. People
might have fallen due to their ego, self-seeking, and matters aplitic attitude. Ancient India created her own fence to protect the outer growth of the spiritual ideal. But, that fence itself had become her barrier. But, she can breakdown the fence and give a new and strong turn to the problems over with her ancient knowledge. The rise of her height in the renaissance lies only in the hand of destiny. According to Sri Aurobindo this is the Renaissance in India.

It is anxious that India’s creative capacity in religion and philosophy came to an end with the Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhwa, and Chaitanya. Her civilization has been the expression of a culture as great as any of the historic civilizations of mankind. She is great in religion, philosophy, science, thought, literature, art, and poetry, organization of society and politics, craft and trade. India’s ancient civilization was high-reaching, subtle, many-sided, curious, and profound than the Greek, more noble and humane than the Roman, more large and spiritual than the old Egyptian, more vast and original than any other Asiatic civilization, more intellectual than the European prior to the eighteenth century. It was the most powerful, self-possessed, stimulating and wide of all past human cultures. Inspite of all drawbacks and downfall the spirit of Indian culture, its ideas, and its best ideals have still their message for humanity and not for India alone. Even in the worst period of decline and failure, the spirit was not dead in India but only passive, concealed and shackled. The greatness of the ideals of the past is a promise of greater ideals for the future.

In India during the eighteenth century Hinduism suffered a lot due to the arrival of the English. Many started questioning the religious teachings. On the other hand several Europeans translated major works of Hinduism into English which gave more exposure to it outside India.
Sir William Jones, Sir Charles Wilkins, Colebrooke, Monier-Williams and Max Muller revealed the treasures of the ancient Indian wisdom.

Spiritual evolution is the philosophical idea that centers around human culture and the evolution of human beings spiritually. Spiritualism is also defined as the science of the soul, the higher knowledge which helps man to rise above the worldly agonies. Spiritualism in India is a complete philosophy of human life, the correct way of living and right way of thinking. Sri Aurobindo’s vision was the evolution of human life into a life divine. He strongly believed in spiritual realization not only liberated man but also transformed his nature so that he could have a divine life on earth.

Indian culture is considered the greatest for its spirituality. Spirituality is the other side of the coin of Indian culture. The foundation of India’s cultural heritage is spirituality. Spiritual life is the true genius of India. India had the holy sages, the Rishis who embody spirituality at its finest and purest. India’s pride is that in almost every generation and in every part of the country, from the time of her recorded history, she has produced these holy men who embody for her all that the country holds most dear and sacred. Though they generally remain away from the main stream of life, public leaders, rulers and commoners, they pay reverent homage to them and take their advice in the problems of their personal lives as well as public affairs. By their lives they teach men that pride and power, wealth and glory are nothing in comparison with the power of spirituality. Without any discrimination the sense of spirituality finds expression in art and culture in the form of painting, sculpture, music, song, dance, drama, speech, and literature in Indian life.
Men have different concepts of God, Religion, and Nature. Everyone on this earth wants to have his life more delightful and perfect than that of others. He wants to prove his individual existence and identity to the world. The pathetic fact is that he never realises the proper channel to achieve his goal. Hence, he faces different problems and whirls around the chaotic situation he himself created. But the philosophers insist that man must make his life fruitful and peaceful only by realising the presence of Light and God in himself.

The world today is full of controversies like war and peace, love and enmity, loyalty and betrayal, religious and non-religious, violent atrocities and search for God through yoga, and so on. Philosophers right from the Vedic period till this scientific and modern period have been insisting the importance of inner calm and Divine Life. Inspite of the technological hazards and tremendous changes in the minds of people, world is moving towards the path of spirituality which seeks inner peace and God. People of today live in an age of Information Technology. People have all-encompassing knowledge. It helps in the development of powerful technology. It is to be realised that the modern life of present day has its foundation from its ancestors in the prehistoric age. The history of humans is closely related to the history of earth. The earth contains geological, archaeological, and biological records of historical times. The earth’s history is divided into eras, periods, and epochs by the geologists. Humans are the only species on earth concerned with understanding the world and the universe. Due to evolution humans have become conscious and knowledgeable. They think and ask questions curiously about everything. In the beginning they considered Nature as God and worshipped Sun, Moon, and all the natural forces. Gradually the amazing scientific inventions became stronger and now it has become the strongest and dominant force. Also, people started to approach everything rationally and scientifically. At the same time they have realised the dangerous path the world goes and started
thinking about the other of life. They want to have a peaceful and delightful life as people had earlier. So, nowadays, practising yoga and meditation, trying to live amicably and searching the path of Divine life have become more important.

Culture is the discipline by which man’s moral and intellectual nature is elevated. According to Sri Aurobindo, culture comprises various activities of the cultivated aesthetic being, mind and body-the harmony of the inner and outer man. So, Spirituality is the essence of Indian culture.

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