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WESTERN INFLUENCE ON SRI AUROBINDO

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Abstract:

His schooling and consequently his stay in England had imbued Sri Aurobindo with western ideas and thoughts. He proved to be a brilliant student both in St. Paul's School, London, and in King's College, Cambridge, and was very much interested in ancient Classics. It was through the ancient Classics that he became familiar with Greek philosophy. The nineteenth-century England had shown a great interest in Scientific Evolution and Idealism. It was also a period of the wonderful growth of Psychology especially that of Freud, Jung and William James. Apart from deriving ideas from all these developments, the contact with Mr. Drewett, and with Mr. Paul Richard and his wife Mirra helped him to grow into western thought. The idea of Evolution is one of the prominent concerns of Western Philosophy. Greek philosophy is full of it. It was continued through Neo-Platonic thinking, and finally came to the climax in the Evolutionary Philosophy. It is from this evolutionary tradition of the west, Aurobindo accepted the cosmic view of evolution but rejected its mechanical character and replaced it with a spiritual evolution. In this regard, he had also the influence of the rationalistic tradition of the West, which had its culmination in Nietzsche, who proposed the utopian idea of a perfect man (Superman). Thus, from the West, Aurobindo accepted the cosmic and over-personal outlook, which transformed the very traditional conceptions of Indian Philosophy.

Ancient Greek Philosophy

Greek philosophy had many things common with Indian philosophy. Greek Philosophy was close to the heart of Sri Aurobindo. The idea of Evolution plays a key role in Greek philosophy. The great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, along with Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Plotinus have developed the theme of evolution in philosophical circle. Aurobindo nurtured from the very beginning of his school days a keen interest in the idealistic thinkers. In England, he read Plato's Symposium and Republic. For him, these Greek philosophers

have something common with Indian philosophy, especially with regard to the development of evolution and mysticism. He had a preferential love for Heraclitus among the Greek thinkers, and he even dedicated a small treatise to him. He wished that Heraclitus' idea of One and Many be presented dynamically. The problem of One and Many and their mutual relationship form the corner stone of Sri Aurobindo's thought.

Heraclitus lays emphasis on 'becoming' but does not exclude the importance of 'being'. Yet he does not

solve the problem between the two. Sri Aurobindo, instead, tries to solve it by his understanding of the Absolute as indeterminable from the finite point of view, but in itself capable of free determination. If the absolute is infinite, its manifestations cannot be limited. Therefore, both 'being' and 'becoming' should belong to the One. To explain the relationship between the One and the Many, Sri Aurobindo makes use of the category of 'Involution-Evolution'.

Plato is considered to be the complete Greek since he united in him the main tendencies of all the previous Greek thinkers. One of the main problems of Plato was to find a solution to the problem of Creation. In his Work *Timaeus*, Plato presents God or the Creator to explain the notion of Creation. But in order to save God from the Problem of Evil, Plato assigned the creative work of God only to the immortal beings; and the creation of the mortal beings being delegated by God to inferior powers. Thus, Plato gives only an inferior position to man in the schema of God's creation. In his philosophical developments, Plato does not grant space for the theory of Evolution, and there is no goal or destination towards which the world may be said to be moving. With the theory of Evolution, Sri Aurobindo reinstalls a superior position to man in answer to Platonic presentation of the problem of Evil, and the consequent separation of the Creator from the created.

Neo-Platonism was an attempt to revitalize Plato with later thinking. The most significant contribution of Neo-Platonism was the theory of Emanation. The theory

had made a close relatedness of everything to one another, in the sense that one shares the same likeness of the other. It is the answer to the problem of the One and the Many. According to this theory, creation is an overflow or an outpouring of the One, and there is the gradation of the order of created beings: from the One comes the Spirit, from the Spirit emanates the Soul, and from the Soul proceeds all existence in the lower world. Sri Aurobindo agrees with Plotinus regarding creation as the emergence from God. But his whole concept of creation and the relation of the created world to God differs from that of Plotinus. Sri Aurobindo's theory of emanation is a theory of descent and not one of emergence. 'Emergence' is a neutral term, whereas 'descent' is charged with positive significance. There is also the difference of the conception of the One or the Absolute both in Plotinus and in Aurobindo. Plotinus presents a negative picture of the Absolute, the Unity or the One: "... it cannot be a being, for a being has what we may call the shape of its reality but the Unity is without shape even shape Intellectual. Generative of all, The Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quantity nor quality nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time." (Plotinus, *Ennead*, 673) The Absolute to Sri Aurobindo is an Absolute in richness and not in emptiness. In the scale of being the higher is always the richer, the fuller and the more concrete. The march of evolution for him is from the abstract to the concrete, from the individual to the

collective, from the unharmonized to the harmonized

Greek philosophy had also presented the idea of 'mysticism'. Though there were strong traces of mystical elements in Heraclitus, Pythagoras and Plato, it was in Neo-Platonism that we find a developed version of Mysticism. Plotinus had a unique place, in the sense that he had set the standard for Western mysticism. He presented a quietistic and individualistic mysticism. In this mystical flight, the individual abandons everything of himself, even his consciousness, and becomes completely passive. Against such isolationism of Plotinus, Aurobindo presents a mysticism which is full of world and activities. According to him it is by the fullest development of the body, mind and consciousness, and by carrying the world with him, that an individual reaches the highest state. It is a life-affirming mysticism. Even the object of mysticism undergoes a substantial change in Aurobindo. For him, God, as conceived by Plotinus as "to be in itself alone", is only a limited view of God. He also disagrees with the Plotinus' view of personal salvation. For Plotinus, the world remains the same, as weak and evil, whereas Aurobindo presents the cosmic salvation, where the whole world is transformed with man. The emergence of Gnostic Being is possible only when Nature itself has been divinized. Thus, we find in Aurobindo the much-developed concepts of Evolution and Mysticism which present together a synthetic understanding of Reality.

Modern Idealistic Philosophy

Modern philosophy has made a re-discovery of man, who had been forgotten during the Middle Ages. One finds a shift from the theological to humanistic and empirical interests. It was a period of the development of various Sciences such as Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics, and many were interested in the creation of a science of man. Not only were philosophers more and *more* interested in the science of man, but this Science itself was conditioned by the general scientific movement of the time. Scientists like Galileo and Newton viewed the physical world as a vast mechanical system, and man was placed in the mechanical universe. So, man was studied from various perspectives by the different currents of thought.

One of the leading systems of the period was Rationalism, which followed an idealistic trend. Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum*" was man's discovery of his lost soul. The restoration to man of his lost consciousness of his self was a landmark in the cultural history of mankind. But the Cartesian dualism of mind and body destroyed the integrity of man, and the controversy was continued by his successors like Spinoza, Malebranche and Leibniz. A strong protest against such rationalistic thinking was made by John Locke who brought Empiricism into philosophical thinking, which finally ended up in the skepticism of David Hume. Thereafter, Western Philosophy became the history of the conflict between two currents of thought. i.e., Rationalism and Empiricism.

There was an attempt by Kant to bridge the gap between Rationalism and Empiricism. His critical philosophy was an attempt to synthesize both currents. Criticizing Hume, Kant made it clear that experience is not possible without an extra-experiential element contributed by the mind, working in it, to which he gave the name *a priori*. From the standpoint of pure experience, the world would be that of an eternal flux, without any stability. He also criticized Rationalism which relied only on ideas without relying much on experience. For Kant, such a system would be a “rotten dogmatism”. He also raised his voice against the metaphysicians who claimed to have all knowledge. Kant, instead, proclaimed that knowledge can be had only of the phenomenal world, and he excluded the possibility of having knowledge of the higher realms, i.e., and the noumenal world. Kant thus reduced the extent of knowledge, and man was denied his ability to know the higher realms.

Idealism reached its climax in Hegel. He tried to remedy the Kantian inability to know everything, and granted unlimited possibilities of knowledge to man. In his dialectical method, he presented the possibility of attaining knowledge by successive steps from the lowest knowledge (the knowledge of the being) to the highest (the knowledge of the Absolute). He thus built a ladder of perfect continuity between the highest and the lowest principles, and it was the most perfect picture of continuity that the human intellect has ever conceived.

Aurobindo had been influenced by Idealism even when he was in England. He had initiated himself into this system by reading Kant, Hegel, Hume and Berkeley. He employs Kantian ‘phenomenon’ to indicate the manifest reality which is present to the consciousness “under the condition of sense perception and sense relation and not directly to the consciousness itself in its pure and unconditioned embracing and totally comprehending knowledge.” (LD 516)

As against ‘phenomenon’ it is ‘essence’ which is the source and foundation of manifestation. Aurobindo shares with Hegel the fundamental thesis: the dependence in evolutionary process of matter from the Spirit and the explanation of the lower in terms of the higher. But he refused to identify Reality with any of the principles evolved so far; the Ultimate Reality transcends its manifestation. As against Hegel’s absolutization of the State, he upholds the importance of the individual and his selfhood.

Western Idealistic philosophy took a new turn with Nietzsche. Nietzsche made a severe criticism of the traditional Christian and Western ethics, making the distinction between ‘master morality’ and ‘slave morality’. He asserted the importance of man, dreaming the advent of the Superman who would be the guide and measure of a new morality. Aurobindo shows familiarity with the three key concepts of Nietzsche: the idea of Superman, Will-to-power, and the criticism against Christian religion and morality. As it is evident, he shares with Nietzsche the vision of a future humanity,

but far from arriving at the moral Nihilism based on an individualistic and egoistic domination of an elite, Aurobindo anchors his vision of the liberation of man on the spiritual evolution of the individual and of the collectivity.

The concept of Superman of Aurobindo is not identical with that of Nietzsche. This is clear in his small book *The Superman*. Aurobindo accuses Nietzsche for ambiguity: “Nietzsche was an apostle who never entirely understood his own message. His prophetic style was that of the Delphic oracles who spoke constantly the word of Truth, but turned it into untruth in the mind of the hearer.” (SM 275) For Nietzsche, the Superman is a privileged person who is totally different from others; he would grant this privilege only to a few who can “ascend to heights of which the many are not capable,” and “concentrate moral and spiritual privileges and enjoy a domination, powers and immunities hurtful to a diffused dignity and freedom in mankind.” (SM 275) Instead, for Sri Aurobindo, “the gospel of true supermanhood gives us a generous ideal for the progressive human race and should not be turned into an arrogant claim for a class or individuals.” (SM 275) It is a call for a superior conscious evolution, attainable to all by dint of Integral Yoga.

Nietzsche’s idea is linked with will-to-power, while Sri Aurobindo presents will-to-love. The Will-to-Power should not be understood as the domination of an aristocracy over the masses by the “negation

of the wills and lives of others,” (SM 278) and unification is to be achieved not by devouring, but by harmonizing. The Superman should be guided by love and sympathy, and not by domination. Nietzsche presents an egoistic superman, while Aurobindo’s superman is one who is guided by love, and “whose whole personality has been offered up into the being, nature and consciousness of the one transcendent and universal Divinity and by loss of the smaller self has found its greater self, has been divinized.” Nietzsche’s Philosophy presents the tragic character of life and its meaninglessness. In the ultimate analysis, his philosophy is Nihilism. Aurobindo criticizes precisely what he calls Nihilism and Illusionism in the Indian tradition as represented by Buddha and Sankara, and affirms the meaning of human existence which is destined to rise into higher levels of existence. It is in the background of man’s capacity to rise into higher levels of existence that Sri Aurobindo presents the next evolutionary existence, i.e., the Superman. It is a divine call for everyone, and the destiny of man is to attain such a higher state. Rejecting Nietzsche’s privileged existence of Superman, and with Nietzsche accepting that Superman is a liberator, Sri Aurobindo works out human liberation as the goal of his philosophical thinking.

Evolutionary Philosophy

As seen earlier, the period of Renaissance had effected a renewed growth of philosophy and Science. Scientific developments had indeed affected the

philosophical world-views, and even proposed a new scientific philosophy. There developed a close relation between Idealistic Philosophy and Science. With this new approach, the predominantly intellectual and logical thinking has assumed an existential or factual characteristic. An important feature of scientific philosophy of the nineteenth century was the doctrine of Evolution, and philosophy became dynamic and pragmatic in nature.

The theory of Evolution developed into two directions: Naturalistic and Dialectic. The former was biological and scientific, and the latter, philosophical. The Naturalistic Evolution was the contribution of Darwin, and Spencer, who applied much of science into a theory, whereas Hegel represented the Dialectical Evolution. The essential difference between these points of view was with regard to the Spirit. Scientific Evolution does not talk about the spiritual growth, whereas Hegelian philosophy is full of Spirit. Scientific evolution presents a materialistic or mechanical Evolution, but in Hegelian category, the whole reality is nothing but an Evolution of the Spirit.

Aurobindo takes into consideration the spiritualistic Evolution of Hegel. Accordingly, evolution must be the return of the Spirit to itself after its self-projection into the world. Evolution must be a movement towards a goal, and he criticizes the mechanical nature of the Naturalistic Evolution, for which Evolution is merely the adaptation of the organism to a rigid physical universe. Aurobindo's spiritual Evolution transcends the Hegelian

considerations too. Evolution cannot be based on pure logic or reason as held by Hegel, rather, it should be spiritual, that transcends the domain of logic. Evolution is an ascent of physical nature, life and mind, to the Ultimate Reality. There is an urge for completion and perfection. Like Hegel, Aurobindo looks at Evolution from the standpoint of the end or purpose. But the end is not purely rational, as conceived by Hegel, and there are various grades of reality above Reason or Thought. The end for Sri Aurobindo is the Absolute.

Henri Bergson represents the combination of both naturalistic and dialectical evolution, and had developed the theory of evolution as the main principle of his philosophy. For him, "evolution is a creation unceasingly renewed," and he thus presented the idea of a 'Creative Evolution'. In his Creative Evolution, not only the forms of life, but also the ideas of it undergo changes. He takes his stand on the ultimate reality of change, change which is conceived as total and perpetual, pure and undiluted. The fundamental stuff of the universe is *elan vital* ("life force) which is both biological and higher life (intellectual and spiritual). Life-force or *elan vital* is the self-created and supreme Reality, and the cause of all manifestations. What is lacking in Bergson's analysis is the absence of teleology. He does not indicate any transformation of the lower principles by the higher. But Aurobindo introduces the new idea of integration, by which a transformation takes place because of the constant 'descent-ascent process'. The descent of the higher principle causes

transformation in the lower, and the lower emerges as a new principle. evolution, therefore, does not mean the isolated raising of any principle to a higher level, but an uplift and transformation of all the principles.

Following Bergson, Samuel Alexander too presented the theory of Emergent Evolution. He goes beyond the naturalistic theories of evolution by stating that mind is not the apex of the evolutionary process, and that there are higher stages beyond mind. In Alexander's scheme of Emergent Evolution there is no change of the old principle on the emergence of a new one. The old principles remain as they were before, and the new ones are only joined to them. But for Sri Aurobindo, evolution does not mean merely addition of some new principles to those which are already existent. It means that the old principles, by reason of the emergence of the new ones, change their character. Accordingly, by the emergence of the Supermind, the physical universe and the existent principles such as Matter, Life, Mind and Soul undergo a radical change.

Alexander lacks optimism in his philosophy. Even in the emergence of the higher consciousness, the fate of man is sealed. He has nothing to hope for from the emergence of the next higher consciousness. In answer to such pessimism, Aurobindo lights the flame of hope by transforming man into the Divine Man. The advent of the Higher consciousness is an event of unspeakable joy not only for him but also for the whole creation. He puts the spiritual

principle along with the Western Evolutionary theory. Western Evolution, for Sri Aurobindo, was inadequate. The naturalistic evolutionary theories were mechanical, and the Idealistic philosophy had only the appearance of the spiritual. They identified Spirit with Reason, but Reason does not represent the highest type of spirituality, and a truly spiritual should transcend reason.

Despite these defects, Western Evolutionary theory did influence the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. He agrees with the Evolutionary Scientists that the progress of Nature is "from Matter to life, from life to Mind." (LD 829) According to Sri Aurobindo evolution is a scientific hypothesis valid in its field, but not constituting a firm ground for the construction of a metaphysical doctrine. He interprets the formula of the survival but also "a struggle for possession and perfection, since only by taking hold of the environment... can survival be secured, and equally it is true that only a greater and greater perfection can assure a continuous permanence, a lasting survival." (LD 199) He also criticizes the Darwinian formula for it extends "too largely the aggressive principle of life, the vital selfishness of the individual, the instinct and process of self-preservation, self-assertion and aggressive living."

Western Science has discovered evolution as the secret of life, and has stressed much on the growth of form and species. It was more of biological and mechanical evolution, and the growth of

consciousness was not given its due. Consciousness was regarded as “an incident and not the whole secret of the meaning of evolution.” (OH 415) For Aurobindo, all evolution is evolution of consciousness as Force. Hence evolution necessarily presupposes a previous involution. His argument is that all that evolves already existed involved, passive or active. “The Spirit which manifests itself here in a body, must be involved from the beginning in the whole of matter and in every knot, formation and particle of matter.” (SM 235) Thus he considers evolution-involution as philosophical categories and not merely as the progressive development of species and form.

Process Philosophy was an attempt to combine the ideals of Evolutionary Philosophy and Metaphysics. It refers to all worldviews holding that process or becoming is more fundamental than unchanging being. the movement was inaugurated by A. N. Whitehead. According to Process Philosophy, the central task of philosophy is to develop a metaphysical cosmology that is self-consistent and is adequate to all experienced facts. Its main concern is to give a synthesis of natural sciences with aesthetic, ethical and religious intuitions with a rational scheme of thought. Whitehead calls his philosophy the Philosophy of Organism. According to him, the whole world is an organism and everything is related to everything.

Whitehead’s theory of Evolution is naturalistic. He speaks of *prehension*, a kind of feeling which is the inner spring or

motive force of the entire world of process. It is the one great unifying factor which, starting from the lowest forms of it in electrons and molecules, reaches out to the highly developed aesthetic emotions and sentiments and moves on further to the uncharted entities so closely knit together so as to form one organic whole. The higher processes are interpreted in terms of the lower. Aurobindo, instead does not admit a naturalistic evolution, rather he speaks of a spiritualistic evolution. For him, the higher processes are the measuring-rod for the lower ones, and not the lower for the higher. According to S. K. Maitra, the difference between these two standpoints is that while Whitehead’s theory of Evolution is from the standpoint of the beginning, Aurobindo’s theory of evolution is from the standpoint of the end. The key to the principle of evolution is derived not from the processes of nature, but from the higher principle, the ultimate Reality. It is then a march towards a goal, a goal which goes beyond the limits of the finite, i.e., towards the Infinite.

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