

The Invisible Enemy: Fighting Colonial Power through Colonial Episteme

Gautam Sharma, *MA History (2005-2006), School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London*

INTRODUCTION

Born on 15 August 1872 in Calcutta, Aurobindo ‘Ackroyd’¹ Ghose turned to be one of the most influential thinkers of twentieth century and laid out what some term as ‘the last serious attempt to revive the premodern Hindu traditions. Not only he is amongst the finest political-philosophical ideologues of Colonial South Asia, but is also among the few thinkers whose ideological imprint affected the trajectory of postcolonial South Asia (even if its not widely recognized). Through this essay, I will try to critically analyze the first three chapters of Sri Aurobindo’s ‘The Human Cycle’ (New York: 1950) in order to explain the theoretical canons that formed the undercurrent of them, which I argue were deeply connected with the racial/civilizational lens of history. I will use the theoretical framework of Edward Said’s Orientalism² to do so and will demonstrate that how colonial narrative of history shaped his understanding of Indian past.

COLONIAL DIVISION AND EVOLUTION OF HISTORY

The first three chapters of The Human cycle deals with Aurobindo’s model of socio-psychological evolution of history. This was perhaps the first attempt by a thinker in Modern South Asian history to present an alternative view of historical evolution—other than that of the dominant material interpretation given by European scholars—that concerned with how the society (primarily Indian society). This was indeed an important landmark in intellectual history of Modern South Asia. Aurobindo, who started out as a revolutionary activist and a poet, was convinced after a short sentence of prison, that there is a need to generate a ‘spirit revolution’³ among the masses and the only way to achieve that was through spiritual practice of Yoga. Since the seers of ancient Hindu scriptures were ‘unlike the early writers of other “races”, were incapable of coherent and natural expression or of connected thought’⁴, the only method to recover the Hindu tradition was through the spiritual enterprise that he was the strong and lifelong proponent of.

The political and economic project of colonialism was accompanied by the attempt to understand and interact with the native South Asian traditions. Warren Hastings’ policy of orientalism⁵ primarily guided the initial effort but at simultaneously there was a great emphasis on not intervening in the traditions of local communities⁶.

1. The Middle name given to him by his father after Annette Akroyd, a British friend of his father.

2. Said, Edward., *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003)

3. Peter Heehs., *The Essential Writings of Sri Aurobindo* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), pg. 3.

4. Paranjape, Makarand., *Sri Aurobindo: Reader* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999), pg. 57.

5. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition* (New Delhi, Orient Longman Private Limited, 2004), pg. 139.

6. Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion: 1cS8-1858* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2012) pg. 152.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay summarises the way in which factors influencing local European politics had an effect on this policy and gradually there was the beginning of an intervention through the introduction of English education in India⁷.

The native response was varied and came from variety of quarters. Iqbal Singh Sevea captures the Muslim responses in nineteenth century—far from homogenous—and demonstrates how these laid the pathways for future developments in Islamic philosophy and Muslim politics in India⁸.

The similar response from Hindu community was being prepared by variety of people and this was visible in projects like Brahmo Samaj and others. The central canon among all the individuals and projects remained in the colonial episteme of historical writing. Edward Said's Oriental theory captures the nuances in which these problems of theory are manufactured. Colonial India saw the emergence of various nationalist historians (R.C. Majumdar, Jadunath Sarkar, K.P. Jaiswal, etc.) as its defenders against the intellectual assaults of imperial scholars. In order to counter the narrative of imperial historians and to provide the people of subcontinent some grand visions of its future through its glorious past, they painted a picture of the subcontinent in different terms from that of imperialists but never abandoned the colonial episteme. Much has been said on James Mills' *The History of British India* (1817) and its hegemonic impact on the foundational episteme of Indian historiography and the flawed periodization it proposed. The most severe impact of which we see while dealing with the questions related to religious conflicts in pre-colonial South Asia.

Aurobindo tried to challenge the fundamental ground of enquiry into Indian past but even in his radical method of enquiry, we see the central influence of the colonial episteme. In the very first chapter, he announces: Modern science, obsessed with the greatness of its physical discoveries and the idea of sole existence of matter, has long attempted to base upon physical data even in its study of Soul and Mind and of those working of Nature in man and animal in which a knowledge of psychology is as important as any of the physical sciences⁹.

After this innovative intervention one would expect a shift in the theoretical as well as in the conclusion. In the case of Aurobindo, this simply does not materialize. This provides us with a useful insight about the process in which even the most radical thinkers under the hegemonic conditions created by colonialism fell prey to the fundamental framework of colonial tradition. Let us examine the work and the foundational ideas in detail:

The Human Cycle and Indian Past

Aurobindo concerned himself with examining the reasons for India's cultural decline. As ambitious and urgent this objective was, it was equally crucial to form a new method of enquiry as the material or scientific explanations of past failed in giving a concrete analysis of this process and therefore couldn't help him in determining the right path ahead for the rethinking and reimagination of that tradition to form a political community, other than that of Modern democratic state. In his model of historical evolution (which he based on the German theorist Lamprecht's idea) we see that the five stages; symbolic, typal, conventional, individualist and subjective. These stages are marked by the kind of social-psychological personality it gives rise to.

7 Bandyopadhyay (2004), pg. 139.

8 Iqbal Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), Introduction.

9 Sri Aurobindo., *The Human Cycle* (New York City, The Sri Aurobindo Library, 1950), pg. 1.

The first stage, the age of Vedas or symbolic age. This stage is marked by the idea that almost all social structures are symbolic manifestations of the Divine Cosmos. Aurobindo stresses that one cannot interpret the Vedic rituals or society by the modern tools of enquiry such as reason. This state is the fusion 'self and symbol'¹⁰ and 'The religious institution of sacrifice governs the whole society'¹¹. The second stage, Tupal, arrives when there is a split between those very institutions and the psychological needs, we find ourselves under. The ritual becomes convention and remains as a tradition rather than an objective reality. The tupal age transforms into the conventional age, which is marked by complete separation of individual attachment to ethics of the symbolic age. 'The tendency of the conventional age is to fix, to arrange firmly, to formalize, to erect a system of rigid grades and hierarchies'¹². It is the conventional age that Aurobindo attributes the concretization of caste into the series of injunctions.

The Individualist age is the one in which a new rigid social system is created which rather than being the moment of total liberation, begins to form a social order which is rational but creates a restricted environment for individual freedom. The two main achievements of this age is the democratic conception of right and that the individual gets establishment as focus unit of consciousness with its own distinct truth, being and identity.

There are a number of assumptions that run through this model of history and they are in fact, the subtle indicators of the framework of the colonial view of periodization that formed the basis of James Mills's three period division of history that laid the basic and foundational idea for various historiographical models to come. In Aurobindo's model there are three parallels to this view:

The symbolic age of Aurobindo is indeed the Vedic or classical age of Indian history. The whole period, although complex and highly difficult to interpret through the scarce sources, becomes the emblem of the Golden period of Indian history. Aurobindo's symbolic age assumes its existence to an infinite time in the past and discounts the changes on the global scale. The intellectual history is required to have the imperative feature of the substructure that marks the conditions in which the world of ideas is produced and reproduced through variety of means and metaphors. Aurobindo's symbolic age is indeed an ideal world for him in which he finds no issue of suffering. This is strikingly similar to Mill's ancient India which claims its glory by the virtue of being organized from the theological principal and Hindu rule alone.

Aurobindo explains the changes in the cosmic worldview and subsequently the change in social ethics borrowing from European chronology. His reading of various western philosophers strangely convinces him of the validity of their ideas of non-material social change through the changes in the intellectual traditions and metaphysical worldviews in Europe somehow provides him with an alternative theory of change for India.

The Final stage is the subjective age in which 'there will be a transition from this rational and utilitarian world to a world of individuality and subjectivity'. The old intellectual standards, the materialism of nineteenth century would give way to a moral and profound vitalism.

The theory of change for Aurobindo, although remains purely psychological, the moments of their transformation into their successive stages is not explained in any form of causation. Profound changes in the material world and other historical events, such as the arrival of Buddhism on the stage as the biggest threat to monopoly of Vedic Brahmins, remains non-transformatory for him. The indicators of

10 Aurobindo, Sri., *The Human Cycle* (New York City, THE SRI AUROBINDO LIBRARY, 1950). Pg. 3.

11 Aurobindo (1950), pg.3.

12 Aurobindo (1950), pg. 8

a society rather than changes caused by various forces of causation in history becomes the markers of differentiation for him.

Moreover, his idea of rigidification of the caste system in the conventional age finds no explanation of the process, but more importantly, Aurobindo ignores the imperative need to ask that from whose vantage point does this system is justified in the first place of its conception.

One crucial difference between the revivalists and reformers in colonial India was their approach to the question of social organization that the people of India would have to answer for themselves. The cultural anxiety produced by the conditions created by colonialism were responsible for the arrival of the revivalists on mainstream, but the reformers in Indian national movement chose to model themselves to the institutions and ideas that their colonial masters preached. A similar kind of two parallel streams of intellectual revolt is witnessed in colonial India. The newly anglicized liberal class of intellectuals sought themselves to create a national chronology of the past in which India as a unitary geographical entity existed since time immemorial.

The second stream of thinkers, such as Aurobindo and Muhammad Iqbal, chose to form an idea of past which may not be purely deterministic, but was guided by the very political objectives that they were setting for independent India. Both of the streams become the contestation of civilizations. Aurobindo's frequent use of the term 'uncivilized' finds its roots in the ideals of European thinkers. To sum up the argument, one can say that the very objective of reclamation of identity from the clutches of imperial scholarship, motivates a thinker like Aurobindo to present a cycle of 'stages' from which the material experience of the subcontinent was entirely divorced.

CONCLUSION

In order to read the problematics and nuances of the historiographical models that influence the larger discourses related to history, one must look simultaneously in the times in which these ideas are conceived and also a comparative analysis of the different epistemes that have preceded them. The continuation in the epistemic models indeed suggest the disproportionate hegemony of a single framework that unsurprisingly happens to come out of the most materially powerful section of the classes of society. This hegemonic tendency of a singular model should be dissected while presenting a different method/model of interpretation of past.

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