

Is India Civilized ?

Debate between Imperialist and Nationalist Historians

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The imperialist/colonial view was permeated by the desire for domination and justification of the colonial rule. Therefore, in most such historical works there was criticism of Indian society and culture. On the other hand, there was praise for western culture and values. In imperialist accounts, India was depicted as a stagnant society, as a backward civilisation and as culturally inferior while Britain was praised as a dynamic country possessing superior civilisation and advanced in science and technology.

The present Research Paper wishes to examine this misconception about Indian culture and civilisation by analysing the views of William Archer in the book "India and the Future", published in 1918 and its rebuttal by Sir John Woodroffe in "Is India Civilized? Essays on Indian Culture (1922)" and Sri Aurobindo's attempt to push aside all concealing veils and reveal the soul of India in his essay "A Defense of Indian Culture" published in the book "The Foundations of Indian Culture (1953)".

Mr. William Archer, a literary and dramatic critic, of note, in his book "India and the Future" finds India in the state of "Barbarism". His book "India and the Future" is written from a "Rationalist" standpoint. It is a typical instance of the cultural attack on the fundamental principles of Indian civilization and every form of its culture, religious, intellectual, artistic and social.

"Archer believed that Indian emphasis on the Self, the eternal,... the infinite, discouraged life and action and led to a false and life-killing asceticism. According to Archer, India achieved nothing of importance, produced no great personalities, was impotent in will and endeavour, her literature and art are a barbaric and monstrous nullity not equal even to the third-rate work of Europe, her life story a long and dismal record of incompetence and failure."

– Sri Aurobindo, *A Defense of Indian Culture*

I. India as a backward, primitive culture

Man in his uncultured and innocent state used to feel every object infused with life and imagined spirits behind the forces of Nature. Therefore he prayed to Indra and Varuna for rain, to the Sun for its rays of light. Frightened by the hurricane and storm he would implore the Maruts for safety, and charmed by the soothing beauty of Dawn he would sing her eulogy."

– Nolini Kanta Gupta, *An Introduction to the Vedas*

Sri Aurobindo, in stark contrast to this, sees the Vedic texts as presenting, in a symbolic manner, profound psychological and spiritual truths.

What is the fundamental dynamics underlying this persistent interpretation of ancient Indian texts as "naïve" and "primitive" on the part of contemporary scholars and western thinkers in general? Sri Aurobindo

here identifies several of the attitudes which underlie the difficulties of Western scholars in attempting to understand Indian texts.

He refers to the "inwardness of the difference between the West and India". It is an inner, psychological difficulty having its roots in the disparity between intellectual and intuitive ways of knowing. For one attached to the rigid boundaries of the intellect, the experiences of the yogi might well seem indicative of a loss of sanity.

"The Indian standpoint... is first to contact the truth by a direct realization – through meditation, concentration, an uplifting and a deepening of the consciousness, through yoga, spiritual discipline, and then endeavor to express the truth thus realized, directly intuited or revealed, through mental terms, to make it familiar and communicable to the normal intelligence.... Philosophy here is fundamentally a recording of one's vision and a translation or presentation of it in mental terms. The procedure of European philosophy is different. There the reason or the mental light is the starting-point. That light is cast about: one collects facts, one observes things and happenings and then proceeds to find out a general truth – a law, a hypothesis – justified by such observations." – **Darshana and Philosophy, Nolini Kanta Gupta**

One of the defining characteristics of modernity is a belief in the supremacy of rationality. Truth is sought – by philosophers and scientists alike – by means of the intellect. All other ways of knowing – intuition, imagination, inspiration, revelation – are lumped together and seen as essentially inferior.

II. The Pessimistic, World-Negating Spirituality of India

Equally is it a misrepresentation to say that Indian culture denies all value to life, detaches from terrestrial interests and insists on the unimportance of the life of the moment.

The ancient civilisation of India founded itself very expressly upon four human interests; first, desire and enjoyment, next, material, economic and other aims and needs of the mind and body, thirdly, ethical conduct and the right law of individual and social life, and, lastly spiritual liberation; dharma, artha, kama, moksa. The business of culture and social organisation was to lead, to satisfy, to support these things in man and to build some harmony of their forms and motives. Except in very rare cases the satisfaction of the three mundane objects must run before the other; fullness of life must precede the surpassing of life. The debt to the family, the community and the gods could not be escaped; earth must have her due and the relative its play, even if beyond it there was the glory of heaven or the peace of the Absolute. There was no preaching of a general rush to the cave and the hermitage." – **Sri Aurobindo, A Defense of Indian Culture**

"William Archer grudgingly acknowledges that India has at least some forms of literature, art, philosophy, etc to its credit. But these things are, it may be said, the things of the mind, and the intellect, imagination and aesthetic mind of India may have been creatively active, but yet her outward life depressed, dull, poor, gloomy with the hues of asceticism, void of will-power and personality, ineffective, null. That would be a hard proposition to swallow; for literature, art and science do not flourish in a void of life. But India has not only had the long roll of her great saints, sages, thinkers, religious founders, poets, creators, scientists, scholars, legists; she has had her great rulers, administrators, soldiers, conquerors, heroes, men with the strong active will, the mind that plans and the seeing force that builds. She has warred and ruled, traded and colonised and spread her civilisation, built polities and organized communities and societies, done all that makes the outward activity of great peoples."

– **Sri Aurobindo, A Defense of Indian Culture**

Among the many possible reasons why critics of Indian philosophy persist in this characterization, once is the inability of the reasoning mind to grasp the outlook of the intuitive mind. To the modern mind, which takes reason applied to action as the foundation of a healthy life, religion is a thing best confined to Sunday mornings visit to Church. Religion is understood to have no practical bearing on the way life is conducted on the other days of the week. But "religion," in the European sense of an organized set of beliefs to which adherents must subscribe, never really existed in India. Sri Aurobindo, makes clear the distinction between this conventional notion of "religion" and true spirituality – a spirituality which he says offers the most practical means of attaining the goals of world peace, economic justice and international unity, deemed worthwhile in the modern era.

III. The "Pallid Universalism" of Indian Spirituality

Religion has been a central preoccupation of the Indian mind. It is also said that too much religion has ruined India.

"The initial difficulty that militates against an understanding of Hinduism is that it seems to be many things to many people. Has it a single scripture like the Bible or the Koran? A single founder like the Buddha, Christ or Mahomet?... No wonder someone once said, stung by exasperation, that Hinduism is not a religion, but a contagious disease!"

– K.R.S. Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and History*

Looking at this apparent diversity, many scholars have difficulty understanding how all its elements could possibly be reconciled. However, the vision of a unifying Absolute reality has existed in India for millennia.

"That which is known by Shaivas as Shiva, as Brahman by the Vedantins, as Buddha by the Buddhists, as Arhat by the Jainas, and as all-ruling Karma by the Mimamsakas. May that Hari, Lord of the Triple – world grant us the Fruit we desire". Commenting on this verse, Sri Krishna Prem writes, "Such expressions as this can be found throughout the Indian tradition, which from the far away Vedic times, has ever proclaimed that 'the Real is One; [though] the learned call It by many names". – **Sri Krishna Prem, The Yoga of the Kathopanisad**

What are the consequences of being able to hold such a transcendent view? Perhaps the most important one from a social perspective is that it allows for an embrace of differences, because one's being is rooted in a larger Unity.

The Indian spiritual tradition is... catholic and synthetic, a cosmos of creeds and experiences... the Indian view and way of life are responsible for the utter lack of religious intolerance.

The universalism of the Indian tradition does not, in fact, ignore differences. It is an all-embracing, comprehensive view based not on reason but on a direct perception of Unity – a Unity that cannot be conceived by the intellect, but can be seen by the intuition. The universalist view which has prevailed in India for thousands of years is a vibrant and dynamic one, embracing distinctions within an infinite unity.

There were certain characteristics common to most of the works of British historical writings. An 'Orientalist' representation of India was common, promoting the idea of the superiority of modern Western civilisation. The idea that India had no unity until the British unified the country was commonly given

prominence in historical narratives; along with this thesis there was a representation of the eighteenth century India as a 'dark century' full of chaos and barbarity until the British came to the rescue.

Many late nineteenth century British historians adopted Social Darwinist notions about India; this implied that if history is a struggle between various peoples and cultures, akin to the struggle among the species, Britain having come to the top could be ipso facto legitimately considered to be superior and as the fittest to rule. India was, in the opinion of many British observers, a stagnant society, arrested at a stage of development; it followed that British rule would show the path of progress to a higher level; hence the idea that India needed Pax Britannica.

The basic idea embedded in the tradition of Colonial Historiography was the paradigm of a backward society's progression towards the pattern of modern European civil and political society under the tutelage of imperial power. The guiding hand of the British 10 administrators, education combined with 'filtration' to the lower orders of society, implantation of such institutions and laws as the British thought Indians were fit for, and protection of Pax Britannica from the threat of disorder nationalism posed among the subject people – these were the ingredients needed for a slow progress India must make. Sometimes this agenda was presented as 'the civilizing mission of Britain'.

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