Philosophy and Cross Cultural Interaction

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Abstract—Culture *refers to t*he cultivation of human mind in terms of values and virtues, language and literature, art and architecture, music and dance, customs and traditions, and above all, *an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour. Culture depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning, the set of shared attitudes, goals and practices that characterize a community. Hence human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organize their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance. Culture could be understood in the operative terms like affinity and diversity. Culture gives rise to affinity in the spheres of language, history, geography, people, art, architecture, etc. People of a particular culture have either consciously adopted or uncritically accepted the cultural values or reflectively revised its cognitive, connotive and evaluative dimensions in rare cases. By virtue of affinity, culture creates diversity with other cultures. This has given rise to philosophical debates on culture.*
Sri Aurobindo in 1950 vindicated Sādhanā, Vidyā and Kalā as three interrelated aspects of Indian culture. In 1952, A.L. Kroeber and Klyde Kluchohn have given 164 definitions of cultural aspects of human beings comprising of the content and the intent of culture, its universalistic character, the hierarchical status and the pluralistic features. Raymond Williams in 1961 has enumerated three features of culture; namely, culture as a way of life, culture consisting of norms and principles and finally the documentary aspects of culture such as oral/written aspects, museums, archaeology, symbols/meanings, etc. In view of different forms of life-world, one may take up Wittgensteinian approach of different 'language games', or Ryle's 'logical geography of concepts'. But I'll take up the philosophical dimensions of culture in Sri Aurobindo along with what Gadamer says of 'fusion of horizons', a kind of bildung to show the perpetual development of culture through cross cultural interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I'll take up the philosophical dimensions of culture in Sri Aurobindo along with what Gadamer says of 'fusion of horizons', a kind of *bildung* to show the perpetual development of culture through cross cultural interaction. Sri Aurobindo in 1950 vindicated *Sādhanā, Vidyā* and *Kalā* as three interrelated aspects of Indian culture. In 1952, A.L. Kroeber and Klyde Kluchohn have given 164 definitions of cultural aspects of human beings comprising of the content and the intent of culture, its universalistic character, the hierarchical status and the pluralistic features. Raymond Williams in 1961 has enumerated three features of culture; namely, culture as a way of life, culture consisting of norms

and principles and finally the documentary aspects of culture such as oral/written aspects, museums, archaeology, symbols/meanings, etc. In view of different forms of life-world, one may take up Wittgensteinian approach of different 'language games', or Ryle's 'logical geography of concepts'.

As a matter of fact, *culture* refers to *the cultivation of human mind in terms of values and virtues, language and literature, art and architecture, music and dance, customs and traditions, and above all,* an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour. Culture depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning, the set of shared attitudes, goals and practices that characterize a community. Hence human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organize their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance. Culture could be understood in the operative terms like affinity and diversity. Culture gives rise to affinity in the spheres of language, history, geography, people, art, architecture, etc. People of a particular culture have either consciously adopted or uncritically accepted the cultural values or reflectively revised its cognitive, connotive and evaluative dimensions in rare cases. By virtue of affinity, culture creates diversity with other cultures. This has given rise to philosophical debates on culture.

The cultural issues can easily be identified in Sri Aurobindo's composition of *The Foundations of Indian Culture*.[i] The book has been divided into three parts. In Part One, he raises a question 'Is India Civilized?' and tries to answer it in terms of the *Vedas, Upanishads* and the *Gita.* In Part Two, entitled 'A Rationalistic Critic of Indian Culture' and Part Three 'A Defence of Indian Culture' under the subheading – Religion and Spirituality, Indian Art, Literature and Polity, he has taken into account the charges levelled by William Archer. In what follows, I'll furnish certain quotations, annotations and summations to put forth those charges and the repudiation of them one and all.

William Archer has levelled the charges like 'India must be proved altogether barbarous in order to destroy or damage her case for self-government.' There are no doctrines of morality or ethical theories in Hinduism. (Ch.2.) Archer has attacked

the concept of spirituality and relation by the practical reason considering India as backward. Archer has criticised India regarding the relation between religion and philosophy. (Ch.3.). In Indian culture, there is no hope but total irrationality. (Ch.4). Western impression of Hinduism is being described as an entirely metaphysical and other-worldly system dreaming of things beyond. But, if that is so, India would have not been able to have done anything great. (Ch.5) . William Archer says, 'India must be proved altogether barbarous in order to destroy or damage her case for self-government.'[ii]

Sri Aurobindo replies, 'an ill-informed misrepresentation of facts, a light-hearted temerity of judgement of things, he (Archer) has not cared to study what constitutes this critic's title to write on Indian culture and dismiss it authoritatively as a mass of barbarism.'[iii] But what could be the criterion for calling a country barbarous? Those people can be called barbarous who does not have a language to communicate. But India has Sanskrit language from the very beginning, from or before the time when *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* were written. In India it was during the high Vedic beginning, the grand spiritual stir of the *Upaniṣads*, the wide flood of Buddhism, Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, the Puranic and tantric religions, the flowering of Vaishnavism and Shaivism that intellect, thought, poetry, the arts, the material life flowered into splendour.[iv] In Indian culture, we come across many schools of philosophy which have tried to emphasise on the cognitive part in their own way. Vedas have been called the storehouse of knowledge. To call India as barbarous is unreasonable. Archer's view about India is just a collection of some unfavourable comments made by others. He himself is not able to provide a strong ground for his arguments. His only motive behind criticising India is to serve a material interest.

The next charge levelled against Indian culture is that it is not a hope culture. Sri Aurobindo denies this charge and says:

Pessimism is not peculiar to the Indian mind: it has been an element in the thought of all developed civilizations. It is the sign of a culture already old, the fruit of a mind which has lived much, experienced much, sounded life and found it full of suffering, sounded joy and achievement and found that all is vanity and vexation of spirit and there is nothing new under the sun or, if there is, its novelty is but of a day.[v]

Pessimism is a part of all developed civilizations. According to Buddha, life is full of suffering. And for emphasising on suffering Buddha has been sometimes called as a pessimist. A system is called pessimist if it stifles at hope and declares that this world is a weary place to live in and there is no bliss in the world or beyond. Buddha has never said this, so he cannot be considered as a pessimist. Buddha pointed to a way for getting rid of the suffering and that extinction of suffering is *nirvāna.* Buddhist *nirvāna* is open to all.

Indian culture does not give immense importance to the material progress of man or the race but has a keen towards

the spiritual progress. And this pessimism with regard to life is not the sole note of the Indian religious mind; its most popular forms accept life as a game of God and see beyond our present conditions for every human being the eternal nearness to the Divine.[vi] There is less emphasis on the materialistic aspect in Indian culture than the spiritual aspect. In Indian culture, reaching the nearness to the Divine was thought within man's grasp. Thus, such a description can hardly be called a depressing or pessimistic theory of existence.

In the Fourth Chapter, the total irrationality of Hinduism is the main theme of the attack. The charge of irrationality which is imposed on Hinduism is not justifiable in Sri Aurobindo's view. He provides an argument for showing that the charge is not reasonable – The pervading irrational character of Hindu religion is explained by the allegation that the Indian people have always moved towards the form rather than the substance. But this kind of movement has to be supposed as a universal feature of the human mind, not only in religion, but in society, politics, art, literature, even in science. In every conceivable human activity there is a worship of the form and forgetfulness of the spirit and Europe is no exception to it. In Europe, killing etc. was done for spirituality and religion. So, it has hardly a record which would entitle it to cast this reproach in the face of the East.[vii]

The claim of calling or considering India as irrational is either false or invalid in its nature. Many turmoil situations have been created in the name of spirituality and religion in the West. Movement towards form is a universal feature of human mind and Europe is no exception to it, so, just on this basis it (Europe) cannot impose the charge of being irrational on India.

In the Fifth Chapter, the Western impression of Hinduism is being described as an entirely metaphysical and other-worldly system dreaming of things beyond. But, if that is so, India would have not been able to have done anything great. Man in the West has always been a living creature of Nature and is set under impossible situation to get salvation. Aurobindo tries to show that man occupies a very important place in India and can attain salvation whereas in the West, it becomes impossible for man to attain salvation. According to Sri Aurobindo:

Man in the Indian idea is a spirit veiled in the works of energy, moving to self-discovery, capable of Godhead. He has the spiritual capacity to pass to a supreme and extraordinary pitch of manhood and that is the first aim which is proposed to him by Indian culture.[viii]

Thus, in Indian culture man is supposed to have the power to become one with the Absolute. Man acquires more important position in Indian culture as compared to that in the West.

But this conception of man becoming one with God gives rise to another issue in front of us. The positivist Western mind finds it difficult to give the conception of the rank of a living and intelligible idea. The status of *mukta* appears to it as a

baseless chimera. Indian notion of Oneness with God went against the Christian notion of God, before whom man is only a grovelling worm.

The great aim of spiritual liberation and perfection, *mukti, mokṣa*, was infused into the life of human being in Indian culture. The entire life of the individual was guided towards the realm of the supreme reality. Sri Aurobindo elaborates this point more clearly in his words:

Spiritual freedom, spiritual perfection were not figured as a far off intangible ideal, but presented as the highest human aim towards which all grow in the end and were made near and possible to his endeavour from a first practicable basis of life and the Dharma. The spiritual idea governed, enlightened and gathered towards itself all the other life-motives of a great civilized people[ix]

The whole ordering of society was cast into a scale of graduated ascension towards the supreme submit.

In the last chapter, issue emerges for having a firm outward basis on which the practical development of India's spirit and its idea in life can be found. How the natural life of man is to be taken, while allowing it with sufficient scope and variety and freedom, yet to subject it to a common *dharma*. Indian culture has provided the double system of the four *varnas* and the four *āśramas* for its own guidance which it throws into a basic system of the individual life in the social frame.

Aurobindo presents a notion of culture imbedded in spirituality whereas Gadamer presents the humanist concept of culture (*Bildung*).[x] Gadamer is not interested in studying humanity as it is, through empirical methods adopted from the physical sciences; he wanted to discover what humanity could be. *Bildung* entails the proper cultivation of one's own innate capabilities in order to move progressively towards universal consciousness. Humboldt says that when in our language we say *bildung*, we mean something both higher and inward, namely the disposition of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavour, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character. In this context Gadamer argues that the rise of the word *bildung* evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, (God created man in His own image) after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself.[xi]This can be pursued in the process of education and culture. It has three fundamental models[xii] which are as follows:

1. In the first place, Gadamer conceives of culture as a game. *Bildung*, he says, has not any purpose outside itself, evoking thus the Kantian definition of game as "purposiveness without purpose". This conception of culture as a game reflects the radically non-teleological nature of the educative process; human edification (as Rorty would say) does not aim either at the accomplishment of objective norms or at the interiorization of some well-definite model, but rather at an endless fight against the limitations of our prejudices or, in equivalent terms, it consists only in an absolute openness to new hermeneutic experiences and fusion of horizons. Actually, we could add that the game works also as an excellent model for the fusion of horizons, as we can see in the pages that Gadamer dedicates in *Truth and Method* to the analysis of art: in the same way that a player has to submit himself or herself to the rules of a particular game, an interpreter must also integrate and recognize the validity of the perspectives offered by a particular cultural expression; and in the same way that a game exists only if it is played, the meaning of any work is not made of objective data, but is performed by and depends on the creativity of an interpreter. As Gadamer likes to say, understanding is understanding differently.

2. In the second place, culture is based on the model of translation. According to Gadamer, "being that can be understood is language". Since all understanding has a linguistic character, the key concept of fusion of horizons is also a linguistic process or, more precisely, a translation process. Understanding consists in translating something said in another horizon or language game into our own horizon or language game. If all meaning is context-dependent, then translating, as a recontextualization process, involves inevitably a production of new meaning. For this reason, Gadamer declares that the situation of the translator and the interpreter is fundamentally same. So, in spite of being always limited by a particular horizon or context, our language can attenuate indefinitely its particularity and partiality by submitting itself to an interminable process of fusion of languages.

3. The third model of Gadamer's theory of culture is the metaphor. In *Wahrheit und Methode,* Gadamer says that transference (*Übertragung*) from one sphere to another corresponds to the fundamental metaphoricity of language. This assertion is quite significant. The Gadamerian thesis that metaphoricity is a fundamental feature of language and it should not surprise us. Since Aristotle, the European culture defines metaphor as transference (*epiphora*) of a name from his usual context to a strange one, within which it acquires new expressive possibilities. This operation of recontextualization, characteristic of metaphor, constitutes the essence of translation and understanding. Therefore, we may easily conclude that both language and understanding have a metaphorical character. And given that the educative process, *Bildung,* consists in understanding the other, i.e., in fusions of languages and horizons, the consequence is obvious: the *Bildung* itself is a metaphorical process. From a Gadamerian perspective, we could compare each individual to a literal word locked in a particular context and define the cultivated (in the sense of *gebildet*) person as someone who makes a permanent effort to recontextualize itself through an indefinite process of fusions of horizons, which it expands and broadens its

existential possibilities. To be a metaphor of oneself — here is the essence of *Bildung.*

Understanding consists in a process of fusion of horizons. "Fusion of horizons" is a dialectical process which results from the negation of two alternatives: objectivism, whereby the objectification of the other is premised on the forgetting of oneself; and absolute knowledge, according to which universal history can be articulated within a single horizon. We exist neither in a closed horizon, nor within a horizon that is unique.[xiii]

The two terms – familiarity and strangeness, describe how we situate ourselves in relation to the events that occur. The familiar is defined existentially as that which brings us the feeling of comfort and security. The strange, as on the other hand, is that which brings us the feeling of loss and disorientation. The task of hermeneutics is to encounter and deal with the unfamiliar, and the rupture that it (the strange) brings. Nevertheless, it is out of the familiar that comprehension takes place. Only through the support of familiar and common understanding, there is possibility to venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening of our own experience of the world.

Thus it can be said that through the system of *varnas, āśrams* and *puruṣārthas*, Sri Aurobindo has explained the intra cultural hierarchies present in Indian culture. By criticizing those writers who are targeting India by calling it a barbarous country, he is also taking up the notion of inter cultural hierarchies. Gadamer is explicating the notion of 'fusion of horizons' through which he is trying to create an atmosphere where the voice of the other will be heard and one will develop the attitude to accept and give full recognition to the other.

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