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**SRI AUROBINDO'S DEFENCE OF INDIAN CULTURE: A CASE STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research article is to give an account of Sri Aurobindo's sense of culture as revealed in his criticism of the Western Civilization in non-fictional prose-writings. It also focuses on his defence of the values of Indian culture against the malignant attacks of the Western critics.

Key words: achievements, defence, culture, westernization, civilization,

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Sri Aurobindo is a complete Indian who never had, though he spent the whole of his formative years from the age of seven to twenty one in England as much attachment to England as a country as he had to English and European thought and literature. He is a very great exponent of the Indian culture and carried on a life-long struggle against the various attacks made on it by the westerners but nowhere does his defence of the Indian Civilization or his criticism of the Western Civilization tend to become biased, for he is one of the very few Indians who could boast of an inward sense of the achievements of both the civilizations.

As Aurobindo's magnificent defence of Indian culture matters very much to us in another, much more important respect also – it is the cornerstone of his criticism of the Western Civilization. It could even be asserted that it is his incomparable mastery of India's great cultural, philosophical and religious achievements – Vedas, Upanishads, religion, poetry, philosophy, painting, sculpture, Ramayana and Mahabharata, all of which Archer rejects as a repulsive mass of unspeakable barbarism in one wholesale condemnation, that

enabled him to see the West for what it is – aggressive, material, utilitarian, predatory, inhumanly selfish and unspiritual. One could not agree more with Peter Heehs when he states, "this return to the religion of his forefathers was connected with his rejection of Western cultural values" (34). It should also be remembered here that his maternal grandfather Rajnarain Bose had earlier, with his mastery of English and Sanskrit, defended the Indian tradition against the Christian polemic of missionaries such as Alexander Duff and Krishna Mohan Banerjee.

It is for this reason that his book *The Foundations of Indian Culture* deserves the most serious study and must be considered his masterpiece. Pandit calls it "a monumental work which has unfortunately not received adequate attention" (The Concept of Man 350). Sri Aurobindo's *The Foundations of Indian Culture* is what the modern educated, de-Indianised and westernized Indian mind needs very badly now, for it is the most effective anti-dote to the corrupt forces of Westernism. There cannot be a more passionate and more intelligent defence of the

values of the Indian civilization, establishing at the same time how the destruction of these values would be calamitous not only to India but to the whole world. If Sir John Woodroffe's book *Is India Civilized?* deals with, while answering Archer's rationalistic attack, the whole question of the survival of Indian civilization and the inevitability of a war of cultures, Sri Aurobindo, in his book, goes one step further and shows that the real question is not whether India is civilized or not, "but whether the motive which has shaped her civilization or the old-European intellectual or the new-European materialistic motive is to lead human culture" (FIC 11).

The very purpose of the book thus inevitably leads him to make a detailed study of the West, its values, its successes and failures, its chosen directions, its ruling passions and self-destructive interests and impulses. His thorough study of the West, which involves understanding, mastering and value-judging with high and rigorous standards, makes him question its very foundations – science and reason, the so-called solid foundations.

Sri Aurobindo shows how Archer, being a rationalist through and through, identifies civilization with the cult and practice of the materialistic reason because of which he denies India to be civilized, and declares her greatest past achievements – the Upanishads, the Vedanta, Buddhism, Hinduism, ancient Indian art and poetry a mass of barbarism, the vain production of a persistently barbaric mind. He also explains how incomprehension of deeper things, along with distaste for them, is a rule with Archer, but nevertheless takes pains to answer him, because, he finds in him a typical Westerner who, taking advantage of the present material downfall of India and her prostrate condition, tries to persuade the world that she had never any strength and virtue in her.

Sri Aurobindo's *The Foundations of Indian Culture* would be exceedingly rewarding because it would certainly help an Indian rid himself of all the dirt and falsifying ideas that he is fed with subtly from his schooldays; would help him form a refined sensibility and a cultured mind, with which he could

see the value of the great Indian past. Realizing its value would, in return, help him understand the true causes of India's present degradation, show him the ways and means of uplifting this fallen nation; in short, it would serve as an inspiration to renewed and greater achievements. Again, an inward sense of the great past achievements of India would provide him with nerves of steel not only to resist the onslaught of the whole lot of journalists like Archer and Naipaul but also to see through their ulterior motives. Of course, no one could deny the existence of problems like poverty, illiteracy, overcrowding, corruption etc. in India, for they are there for everyone to see. And it must also be admitted that the post-independent rulers, policy makers and the opportunistic politicians of India are much more responsible for their continuance than the British rulers, though the seeds were sown during their colonial rule. It is also true that no Indian can, with these problems besetting India, hold his head high. So he must strain every nerve to acquire an intelligent perception of them, and to strike at their roots. There can hardly be a difference of opinion over all this.

But what is inadmissible is the menace of journalism which finds in serious problems like poverty also a thriving business. Curiously enough, these journalists offer remedies also at times. Without having a serious concern for any of the problems of India, they deal with all of them in terms of worthless ideas borrowed from the West, and come out with the astonishing discovery that unless India gives up all her past and copy the West in toto, she is bound to suffer. The burden of all their song is, Sri Aurobindo points out, if India does not materialize, rationalize and westernize her whole being, "she will stand out as a living denial, a hideous 'blot' upon this fair, luminous, rationalistic world", and no one can save her from being wiped off the face of the earth. Her culture is good only for those who do not want progress of any sort. (FIC 6).

This is what is bandied about everywhere in India, of course with endless variations which do not differ in the essentials. But an eye that looks deeper than the surface can see that there are at least two false misleading assumptions here. One is holding India's ancient culture responsible for her present

degraded condition. In what way it is responsible, nobody explains, and nobody bothers to as also, but it is simply taken for granted. That evangelical influence has much to do with the denigration of Indian culture cannot be denied.

It is really ironic in the extreme that the nation which produced great minds like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo to proclaim the value of the Indian civilization and to show how its survival is important not only to India, but to the whole of mankind, has now only “progressive” thinkers who feel ashamed of their own heritage and hold it responsible for all her present problems – has now only ultra-modern men and women who consider it demeaning to have even a vestige of the Indian past and culture in them. No wonder, they hardly pay any heed to the warning of Sri Aurobindo. The culture which gives up its living separateness, the civilization which neglects an active self-defence will be swallowed up and the nation which lived by it will lose its soul and perish. (FIC 3).

The tragedy is that modern Indian mind has now lost all its power of comprehension, with the natural and inevitable consequence of hating what it does not understand. In fact, sound thoughts, such as we find in Sri Aurobindo, are anathema to it. Danino, in one of his lectures, deals with this vexed question and argues along the lines of Sri Aurobindo that India’s present state of degradation has nothing to do with her culture. He shows how it is not, as is too often assumed and asserted, actually the result of serious flaws in her culture, but rather the result of neglecting this very culture, failing to rejuvenate it and allowing it to become marginalized in its own land.

This is what then distinguishes Sri Aurobindo’s criticism of the West from westerners’ – that it is related to his defence of the values of Indian culture against the malignant attacks of the western critics. In fact, it was born of this urgent need for defence, but then Sri Aurobindo did not, as most others would have done in similar circumstances, take a partisan attitude and distort or sacrifice the truth for that purpose. This becomes obvious from the very fact that his predictions about the West have turned out to be too true.

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