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Aurobindo's Views on Individual, Society, State, Laissez Faire, Socialism and Freedom

Abstract

Aurobindo was a prolific writer as well as a distinguished met physicist. He dedicated his entire life for the betterment of humanity and mankind through the practice of yoga in his own life and also proclaimed that the mankind is progressing towards the goal of perfect unity with the Infinite. Hence, the complex problems of the relationship between individual and society of the state does not bother him as it did in case of western thought and philosophy since the times of Plato; and philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and political scientists there in have failed so far to give any coherent view upon the subject.

Keywords: Individual, Society, State, Laissez Faire, Socialism, Freedom.

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Introduction

According to some, individual is more important than the society and that liberty should be given to him even at the cost of the society. On the other hand, some opine that society as an organized unit is more important, and all considerations con-corning the individual are only subservient to social welfare. But it does not mean that Aurobindo ignores the problem of synthesizing the relationship between the individual and society, and the individual and the state, or the fundamental problem of the dynamics of power and liberty. Like a large number of other Hindu seers, Aurobindo being a true and faithful Vedantin, always advocates the synthesis of outer and inner freedom because the two, I.e., the individual and society both are oriented towards the same end-the realization of the great objects of human Endeavour. The entire spirit of Hindu social thought, culture and structure, originating from the most ancient times of the Vedas up to the present time, has accorded due regard to individuals as individuals, and all efforts of Hindu social theorists have been directed, not only towards the betterment of the individual, but also towards providing every individual ultimately and finally with an opportunity to attain his social destination. The Hindu mind traditionally does not bother about ideologies or isms as such like the west. According to Aurobindo "we are not yet individual; we are struggling towards individuality; and that is the infinite, our real nature."[1]

Individual and Society

This Vedantic conception of individual and society leads him to reject both the materialistic and the sociological explanations of the individual self. Materialists regard the individual as only a developed manifestation of matter or energy, although qualitatively different form the material source of his origin. Whereas organ cists, sociologists and social psychologists think of the individual as a 'cell'[2] of society. But Aurobindo rejects these explanations and holds the view that they, have got hold only of the 'obscurer side'.[3]

However, this organic conception of society put forward by him is different from the western thinking represented by Plato, St. Paul and Spencer etc. Being a metaphysician Aurobindo accepts the supra-material importance of the individual and does not pursue the organic conception too far. He uses it with great reserve and only to illustrate that society is non-mechanical. Its fundamental aim is to make possible the progressive spiritualization of man. In his own world nature's aim is "the perfection of the individual in a perfected society or eventually in a perfected humanity."[4]

Thus to Aurobindo both the individual and the society are manifestation of the divine reality and so there is not any antagonism in their aims and practice. He condemns any exaggerated notion of a self-assertive, vital, egoistic, self-fulfilling individual as one-sided as the equally

exaggerated conception of the all-encompassing totalitarian claims of the society. To him a harmonious synthesis and not a mechanical one is to be arrived at. and the ideal law of social development is the rule of perfect individual and perfect society. In his opinion, "self-realization is the sense, secret or overt, of individual and of social development."[5]

From the above discussion it becomes clear that, according to Aurobindo, individual and society are the warp and woof of the same fabric. Individual and family, family and society, society and nation, nation and humanity, and all human groupings from the lowest to the highest formed only different steps of the same spiral process. [6]

Evolution of the State

In the west a number of theories regarding the origin and evolution of the state viz., the theory of Divine origin, the Force theory, the social contract, the Patriarch cal and the Matriarch cal and the Evolutionary theories have been propagated so far out of which the Evolutionary Theory is accepted by the modern political scientists. But Aurobindo's analysis of the modern state system is linked with his concept of integral progress of mankind. Hence, it is more sound and logical than all the above theories. In Aurobindo's view inner spirit in man resulted in a slow evolution of the outer forms of social- political life in response to an inner need. The earliest collective forms of human-beings in family and clan needed to organize themselves in a village or a city-state or a tribal kingdom for the purpose of defense and integral progress. To quote Aurobindo; "In its first forms, the state almost everywhere coincided with the clan or tribal system, perhaps migratory in the early stages but later setting sown within fixed geographical limits, very of ten with the village as the basic unit." [7] As the variant there arose the city states which helped to cut across the clan or tribal groupings in some of the more advanced areas of the world. He further explains that "Greece, Italy, Gaul, Egypt, China, Medo-Persia, India, Arabia, Israel, all began with a loose cultural and geographical aggregation which made them separate and distinct culture-units before they could become nation-units. Within that loose unity the tribe, clan or city or regional states formed in the vague mass so many points of distinct vigorous and compact unity."[8]

King's position as hereditary ruler came afterwards with the assent of the people. What made the state a necessity was primarily the danger, almost constantly present, of disruption from within and attack from without. Of these the second was more important. War and the threat of war led to the concentration of energies; and this creates a tendency towards a strong political and military centralization. Thus, the history of the state, is simply a record of this self-conscious, a process which was aided more and more by a centralized agency mainly in the form of monarchy. [9]

From the above discussion it may be concluded that Aurobindo's theory of the evolution of the state is related to his theory of the role of reason in the socio-political evolution of man. The state represents the great instrument of transition from the infra-rational organic stage to the rational society. The rational and mechanically organized state marks the growth of the organized legal order represented through the structure of an impersonal bureaucratic mechanism. Aurobindo opines that, "the intelligent will of the whole society expressed in a carefully thought out law and ordered regulation replaces its natural organic will expressed in a mass of customs and institutions which have grown up as the result of its nature and temperament."[10]

Commenting upon Aurobindo's views upon the evolution of the state it is observed that his "evolutionary theory the advent of the state symbolized the replacement of infra-rational instincts, institutions and natural experimentations as social agencies by social reason, yet he thinks of the state only in mechanical terms and points out that the attempt of the state to grow into an intellectual and moral being is a very interesting phenomenon of the modern world."[11]

However, it must be noted that Aurobindo repudiates the organic conception of state although he makes the organic analogy with reference to the society. In his own words, "the state is bound to act crudely and intelligently or instinctively varied action which is proper to organic growth. For the state is not an organism. It is a machinery, and it works like a machine, without tact, taste, delicacy or instruction. It tries to manufacture, but what a humanity is here to do is to grow and create." [12]

State's Importance

From the above discussion, it can be safely observed that according to Aurobindo state is a social compulsion on the infra-rational man that he could be helped towards a better status. It is there for the individual's need for survival, growth, efficiency and self-assertion. It is man's first defense against a hostile world of men and beasts and adverse nature, the sole condition under which the undeveloped individual may hope to progress. As a result, the individual is also required to submit to the organized coercive power of the state. But as the individual and the state have both an innate tendency to assert themselves against each other, there is a constant tendency towards a conflict between them irrespective of the form of government whether it is a monarchical system, or a democratic majority or a dictatorial one.

The state exists for an end which it has not created and which by its very nature it can never create. Therefore, Aurobindo neither absolves the state from the higher principles of morality like Machiavelli nor supports the Hegelian doctrine of considering 'the state as the march of God on earth.' According to ancient Vedic view, the political authority or the state is essential for the maintenance of peace and order, for the protection of life and property, and without it, it is not possible for the individuals even to live their daily life, yet peace and order, security and justice, property and right are viewed not primarily as the creation of the political authority. but as the objectives for the sake of which the state exists. Aurobindo clearly opines that "the business of the

state, so long as it continues to be a necessary element in human life and growth, it is to provide all possible facilities for cooperative action, to remove obstacles, to prevent all really harmful waste and friction ------removing avoidable injustice, to secure for every individual a just and equal chance of self-development and satisfaction to the extent of his powers and in the line of his nature-------without individual growth there can be no real permanent good of all." [13]

From the above analysis it may appear that Aurobindo while treating the state as a means to an end is propagating the Green's doctrine of 'hindering the hindrances' regarding the nature of the state. But it is not so. The reason being that Green stood simply for the material and moral development of individual and society whereas Aurobindo, being a true Vedantin, always stands for the metaphysical or spiritual development of the individual, and like Vivekananda advocates the realization of one's Self, or the Being, or the Brahman, who is the cause of this entire universe. Hence, the two cannot be equated together. [14]

Laissez Faire and Socialism

In the west from earliest times a continuous debate regarding the importance of the individual and of the state is going on. But India no such problem ever arose because Vedic principles always advocated the good of all. Moreover, in them the element of spiritualism of the spirit has always been not only the dominant one but the basic one. Aurobindo, being a true Vedantin, like Ramkrishna Paramhamsa, Vivekananda, Ramatirtha, Tilak and several others, always propagates the doctrine of Sarvabhutahita of the Gita or the good of all creatures and not the good of the greatest number. This led him to severely criticize the prevalent doctrines of laissez-faire on the one hand and the totalitarian and socialistic principles on the other. In his early writings he, like Dadabhai Naoroji, denounces modern capitalism in the form of an imperialistic 'drain' on Indian financial resources. But later on he criticizes and condemns it on other grounds also. He clearly states that whatever contribution might have been made by capitalism under the theory of laissez-faire regarding the economic development of mankind ultimately it proved disastrous to the humanity. Its social cost outweighed its economic gains. Long hours of labour, inadequate wages, overcrowded factories and insanitary arrangements–these were the lot to which workers and laborers had to submit. Hence, the idea of a police state under laissez faire theory proved totally inadequate and it enlarged the area of misery of unbounded limits."[15]

While rejecting the doctrine of laissez-faire Aurobindo never supports the Fascist theory of state action which preached state control to every act and every interest of every individual or group in the name of the good of the nation and authorizing the state to be its sole judge. Thus this totalitarian concept of state advocated the dictum "Nothing beyond the state, nothing against the state, everything within the state." Aurobindo, being a spiritualist and met physicist, rejects it on the ground that this doctrine it altogether inimical to liberty whereas he, throughout his life, exhorts the mankind to attain perfect liberty. Moreover, the state is always governed by a few whether it is democratic, socialistic or totalitarian.

Socialism state control would cover the entire gambit of society encompassing under it the economic, social, political, educational, industrial, intellectual and every walk of human activity. In other words it means the thorough extension of the administrative activities of the state and in the words of Max Weber it "signifies not dictatorship of the proletariat but the dictatorship of the officials." [16] The full development of socialism resulting in total control in every walk of life and resulting in the obliteration of the individual as simply a means in the hands of a few officials is an anathema to the spiritual and liberal outlook of Aurobindo. Hence, he writes that "nothing great or small escapes its purview. Birth and marriage, labour and amusement and rust, education, culture, training of physique and character, the socialist sense leaves nothing outside its scope and its busy intolerant control."[17] It signifies the full proliferation of the omnipotent state leviathan.

Aurobindo is very apprehensive of the extension of state power to such unbounded limits. He is a severe critic of socialist centralization and authoritarianism. To him, totalitarianism, whether it be practiced by fascism or communism, spells repression, savagery and tyranny which he vigorously opposes. Instead having profound faith in spiritualism and analyzing the human development on the psychological basis he advocates that the power of the state as a function has to be diffused in society at various levels. The legal framework alone cannot cope with the diverse problems of modern society. Aurobindo's opposition to the idea that the state is an organic conception, and his view of the state as only a mechanical convenience, follows his views of the limitation of the functions of the state. To him the business of the state is "to remove obstacles, to remove all really harmful waste and friction ---- and removing avoidable injustice, to secure for every individual a just and equal chance of self-development and satisfaction of the extent of his powers and in the line of his nature---- But all unnecessary interference with the freedom of man's growth is or can be harmful."

Freedom

The whole career of Aurobindo was an incessant fight for freedom. His active involvement in the political struggle for Indian Independence from British rule during 1905-1910 and his retirement to a more contemplative life style at Pondicherry offer both a political and a spiritual perspective on the meaning of human life. His political ands spiritual writings exhibit a concern for the meaning and value of liberation. He considers political freedom as the "life-breath of a nation" and asserts that "to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is the very height of ignorance and futility."[18]

Political freedom, to Aurobindo means radical independence from not only Britain in government but also from things European as well as also in consciousness and life style. The Indian people are to rediscover and to tape resources of their own rich heritage as they regain their self-dependence, saying no to domination from without, no to dependence on process form without. The means of saying no include openness to insurrection and armed revolt, yet in effect, emphasize procedures of passive resistance through economic, educational, judicial boycott and self help through positive programmed for developing indigenous economic, educational and judicial structures.

However, Aurobindo views political freedom not as end but as a condition ands starting point. His perspective always enlarges to a freedom beyond that of political freedom, a freedom he names inner freedom. As pointed out earlier the political freedom of India is a necessary step in the total process and he never forgets that it is precisely that a step. Unity among nations and unity of all people with the supreme spirit is the final goal on which his hopes and his vision are fixed.

Commenting upon Aurobindo's views on freedom, June O'Conner observes that "His participation in the political arena jjbase of concretely lived moments and events. These experiences precipitated his position with respect to the meaning and value of political and personal (inner, spiritual) freedom---. These interpretations and valuations in turn have prompted Aurobindo to recommend strategies for action: self-help and resistance for the achievement of political freedom; yogic discipline and concentration for the achievement of inner freedom (both in dividually and collectively)."

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study is this paper

1. Political contribution of Aurobindo to the field of political philosophy is his theory of a world man.
2. To analysis the relations between Individual, Society and State.
3. To examine Aurobindo views Laissez-faire, Socialism and Freedom.

Finding This Paper

Aurbindo was a political philosopher in three senses. First, on the basis of idealistic and spiritual metaphysics he had attempted the construction of a system of political thought. He had taken as a starting point those metaphysical proposition of spiritual idealism, evolution and super mental transformation.

Secondly, even when Aurvindo was a political leader his action and political speeches were permeated with philosophical principles.

Thirdly, even in his metaphysical and esoteric treatises, Aurbindo never loses sight of the world and its problems and the techniques of their solution.

Suggestion

Aurbindo to the field of political philosophy is his theory of a world union. But in the case of the formation of a world union the transition will not be so easy because many diverse countries and cultures are concerned and they will very grudgingly accept the renunciation of even a part of sovereignty. But the amendment of sovereign egoism is essential if humanity has to escape the devastations of nuclear annihilations. The uncontrolled ambitions of nation-states have to be tamed so that the ideal of human unity can be made a political reality. The transformation of nationalism into some of a bigger and comprehensive world organization is the imperative need of the hour. It is also in the divine dialectic and efforts have to be made for the realization of this great aim.

Conclusion

The above account makes it clear that Aurobindo, like Vivekananda and several others, is a true Vedantin and, therefore, his views regarding the individual, society and state are altogether at variance of the political thinkers and theorists of the west. For him the individual is the basic unit but at the same time the organized society is not antagonistic to the former. Whereas the institution of state extends a helping hand to him for the development's inner self. Hence, he advocates that man must be made the measure of all things and also the instrument of realizing his highest end. It is the man, marching from savagery to civilization, may reach his highest political goal, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

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