

Aurobindo Ghosh's philosophy of culture: From barbarism, civilization and culture to the spiritual transformation of man

Pavel Chelyshev*

Abstract: The main purpose of the article is to reconstruct the theory of culture of the most famous Indian thinker of the 20th century, Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), whose work in recent years has again aroused increased interest among philosophers from different countries. Modern authors consider different aspects of Aurobindo's work, but the philosophy of the thinker's culture remains a little-explored problem. Aurobindo Ghosh in the «Human Cycle» offers his original personal-psychological concept of culture as a transitional stage from the lowest state of the ordinary human mind to the highest levels of the mind. Thus, everyday consciousness goes through several phases of development: barbarism, civilization, culture and spiritual transformation of man. The whole problem is what a person identifies himself with, what he considers his true Self, because in reality he is a multi-complex being. A person can absolutize his body and achievements in the sphere of material life or identify himself with vital power and pleasures, or he can recognize pure reason as the supreme force. The essence of barbarism is reduced to the identification of consciousness with the body, the material world and well-being. At the second stage, civilization, we are already talking about the intellectual structuring of society, about achieving some kind of harmony for comfort and general prosperity. In the third phase, culture, pure reason becomes the ideal. However, the question boils down to moving on to the fourth stage of development – the spiritual transformation of a person. If the spiritual principle is brought to the fore by a person, becoming the only sovereign «master» of his nature, then a person will fill his life with divine meaning and harmony. Humanity will turn into a Gnostic society.

Keywords: barbarism, civilization, culture, ordinary consciousness, supermind

* Pavel Chelyshev

National Research Technological University “MISIS”, Moscow, Russia

Introduction

The words «barbarism», «civilization», «culture» are the most fashionable and widely used in everyday and scientific vocabulary today. However, the polysemy of their use is obvious. Back in the 60 th years of the XX century, American scientists counted over two hundred definitions of the word «culture» (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952). There are a lot more of them now. Today it is customary to single out the classical idealistic concepts of culture by I. Kant and G. Hegel, the materialistic understanding of culture by K. Marx, and positivist theories of culture. The teachings about culture as a system of values or meanings, psychological theories of culture and many others are also popular (The History of Cultural studies 2006). Such a multiplicity of meanings, of course, makes it difficult to study the problem. Constructive conversation is possible here only if the substance of culture and civilization is isolated. Aurobindo Ghosh's approach can be defined as *personal-psychological*: «barbarism», «civilization» and «culture» are forms and, at the same time, levels of manifestation of constantly developing human self-consciousness. Man evolves from ordinary consciousness, which is at the lowest stage, to the Supermind – the highest point of his development.

The article uses the method of textual analysis of the problem, the historical method, the Hegelian method of ascent from abstract to concrete knowledge, the dialectical method of unity and struggle of opposites.

Ordinary consciousness

By ordinary consciousness (Chelyshev 2007, 258-262) Aurobindo understands that consciousness, which, firstly, is directly connected with the subconscious, being a buffer between the plant, animal part of a person and his mind, and secondly, is focused on human life in all its mundane manifestations, considers this life as a self-sufficient phenomenon. «Life for life's sake» is the slogan and emblem of this consciousness, its strength and weakness. At this level of development, a person is limited by his physical existence, perceives all things and events only through the prism of his struggle for a place «under the sun».

Nevertheless, we can talk about the development and dynamics of everyday consciousness. In this ordinary consciousness there are lower and higher levels, more or less involved in consciousness. But even the most perfect human intellect is not and cannot be a «pure mind», since

an ordinary person is an integral being constantly under pressure from vital impulses and passions.

What is this ideal law of human development and consciousness? According to Aurobindo, self-realization and self-disclosure of personality constitute the secret meaning of individual and social development. The problem lies only in what the individual and society (as a collective personality) identify themselves with, what they consider their true self, because in fact they are a multi-complex being, where each element claims its absolute importance in the system of the whole. However, coming to the fore, one or another element, despite its own limitations, claims to embody the whole nature of man in the form of his true self. This dominance of different elements in the structure of the psyche leads to the penetration of different stages of the development of society.

Aurobindo sees the reason for this tendency in a person's lack of knowledge of his true nature and inner forces. A person, not possessing this secret about himself, consistently identifies himself with the material body, vital force (vitality) and mind, passing through three phases of the development of the ordinary consciousness of barbarism, civilization and culture, respectively. Aurobindo emphasizes that all forms of human existence can simultaneously coexist with each other, be present in the life of society at any historical stage of its development. Within each historical epoch we can discover the features inherent in barbarism, civilization and culture, three forms of manifestation of the ordinary everyday human mind. But at the same time, some element begins to dominate over others, creating a unique look of the era.

Barbarism

Barbarism is the first stage of development, from which the evolution of everyday consciousness begins on the individual and social levels. Here, the everyday consciousness of a person is completely absorbed by his body and things of the external physical world, burdened with the desire for economic well-being. A person at this level takes the physical body for his true self, forcing his vital, emotional, intellectual forces to serve him. «To consider the body and physical life as the only important ones, to judge a person's maturity by his physical strength, physical development and courage, to be at the mercy of instincts that rise from the physical unconscious, to despise knowledge as a sign of

weakness and inferiority ... all this is characteristic of the barbarian mentality» (Sri Aurobindo 1999, 84-85).

The thinker speaks about the possibility of the existence of physical and vital barbarism. In the first case, the emphasis is on improving the body and strengthening health. In the second case, we are talking about the pursuit of success in life, about the accumulation of all kinds of benefits, about the comfort of everyday life in the name of comfort. Such a barbarian man lives only to eat and drink, identifying himself with the vital desires and pleasures that lie under the corporeal shell. At these two levels of consciousness development, a person lives a plant and animal life, is subject to herd instincts, and is open to subconscious temptations.

Often the cult of the body became the main principle of the organization of the whole community, as it was in ancient Sparta. There are barbarians in modern society. The main current ideals of Western European culture are physical health and well-being, comfort, wealth and bodily entertainment. An example here can also be the well-known «excesses» of big sports, when the beauty of the body and the build-up of physical strength are subordinated, practically, to the whole life of an athlete. Therefore, both in ancient times and in modern society, there are barbarians whose nature does not change, but only a shell.

However, neither the body nor life exist for their own sake, but are only tools for achieving and expressing higher ideals. We are talking about the mind, which can and should become the highest authority and the main guide of all human life at the current stage of its evolution.

Civilization

Civilization is the second, higher stage of the evolution of man and society. It arises with the intensification of human intellectual activity in connection with the organization, management, protection and improvement of civil society. Naturally, many remnants of barbarism can persist in a civilized society. In this sense, we can talk about a semi-civilized society as the norm. Therefore, on the one hand, civilization is a transitional stage from barbarism to culture. It bears all the birthmarks of barbarism. But, on the other hand, there is a significant activation of human intellectual life in all spheres of social existence, which makes it part of culture. Therefore, according to Aurobindo, the main characteristics of a society that we call civilized

is the high mental activity of people, whose intellectual searches should be developed and constant, and the management and improvement of life through reason should become a clearly realized doctrine.

Culture

Culture is the third phase of development. It is the field of activity of the «pure» human mind in all its variety of manifestations. «The desire for mental life for its own sake is what we usually understand by the word culture» (Sri Aurobindo 1999, 93). Aurobindo's philosophical concept of mental life encompasses all aspects of a person's life: his ethical, aesthetic, practical principles guided by the intellect. Here, the ideal is not a physically strong, economically prosperous and comfortable person living without problems, but a morally-artistically-religiously thinking and acting subject.

At the stage of culture, everyday consciousness reaches the peak of its development. Reason destroys all the previous foundations of life and enables a person to discover the Truth as if anew, not covered by the «veil» of prejudices and conventions of the previous life. However, it is here that the cultural dead ends of civilization arise, urgently demanding progress towards more powerful, but still hidden forces in man and the cosmos. Aurobindo analyzes all the «possibilities and limits» of the ordinary human mind and demonstrates the inconsistency of its claims to the role of the final «monarch» of human life.

He concludes that the mind can be anyone, a wonderful «servant», even a «minister» and «manager», but not a sovereign «master», because its power over human nature, society and the cosmos is limited, its knowledge is not complete and final. The human mind, by its very nature, is not capable of perceiving the whole truth without first dividing it into many component parts. The mind is unable to immediately interact with the fullness of life in all the complexity of its manifestations. The mind is forced to split it into parts, create more or less artificial classifications, build systems based on limited data that are disputed, refuted or constantly being redone based on new facts (Sri Aurobindo 1999, 130-131).

In order to express this new information about the world and man in terms and categories of science, it is necessary to increase the number of special terms themselves, constantly clarifying their meaning. Therefore, it is impossible to be sure that with each new step of

analysis (and subsequent synthesis), something essential will not escape us, violating the completeness and integrity of knowledge reflecting reality. According to the philosopher, two worlds arise: the world of ideas related to the intellect, and the world of life, which constantly eludes the control of reason (Aurobindo Sri 1999, 130). Connecting these two worlds into a single whole is an impossible task even for modern science. A scientist can only approach the ideal forever, creating new abstractions, concepts, theories, without reaching the absolute truth.

For clarity, let's draw an analogy with a polygon inscribed in a circle. An unlimited increase in the number of sides of a polygon inscribed in a circle does not mean, as mathematicians claim, it will turn into a circle, although it allows it to be determined with almost any given accuracy. The process of splitting the sides of a polygon, on the one hand, never allows you to step outside this circle, but on the other hand, it practically allows you to solve various theoretical problems.

In order to step beyond the circle, it is necessary to introduce the concept of a described polygon, which will allow you to act outside this conventionally drawn line, called a circle. But, nevertheless, the circle itself remains unattainable even now, after this secondary mathematical operation. This problem, formulated in antiquity (though in a slightly different guise), received the symbolic name of the quadrature of the circle – a problem that has no rational solution.

So, science strives to adequately understand the object of knowledge and reproduce it as it exists by itself in its natural state, outside and independently of consciousness. Nevertheless, it reproduces the dialectic of absolute and relative truth, and shows how knowledge arises from ignorance. It turns out that knowledge is not a fixed dogma, but a process, an endless striving for an ever more complete and perfect selection of the world.

The problem boils down to the fact that modern science and technology have made man the king of nature and, at the same time, the slave of their power. A person faces questions that he cannot answer. Science opens up prospects for human development, but reason does not give an answer to how make all discoveries to be used for the benefit of man. Moreover, science is not even able to formulate and scientifically substantiate the very concept of «good» strictly enough.

For example, now people are praying for cybernetics in the hope of getting rid of many routine duties. But gradually and imperceptibly, it turns us into I. P. Pavlov's trained dogs, accustomed to pressing certain pedals to receive some kind of reward. When it captures most of our life manifestations, in which we previously managed without its help, it will begin to dictate its rules and conditions of the game, turning them into a merciless ultimatum.

With all this criticism, Aurobindo considers science as a natural and necessary stage of evolution, the meaning of which was the final liberation of man from physical and vital determinants, from barbarism and civilization, and the transition to culture. Science has made many magnificent discoveries, technical achievements, freed humanity from a mass of ignorant superstitions, prejudices, common misconceptions, routine duties, and established the dominance of man on earth. Nevertheless, how all these achievements can be made to work to solve the problems of modern life and the future fate of mankind, science is powerless to answer. According to Aurobindo, it is possible to answer all these questions only from the standpoint of human spiritual development. Today, the Mind must clearly and sincerely say: «There is a Soul, an "I", a God present in the world and in man, who acts covertly... I was his servant» (Sri Aurobindo 1999, 133).

The ultimate goal of culture is a gnostic society

The ultimate meaning and purpose of culture is to prepare a person to ascend into these higher levels of the mind and its comprehensive spiritual transformation. In other words, the culture of the current model must commit an act of «suicide» and move to a new stage of evolution. Aurobindo was not a «cracker» philosopher, reflecting, like I. Kant, in the silence of his office, but was developing a way of practical transformation of a person, his spiritualization, which he called Synthetic, Integral Yoga. Here he follows K. Marx, who called not only to explain the world, but also to change it. However, his practice is a spiritual change of the world by the power of God, by the power of the Supermind.

Spiritual development, according to Aurobindo, should not be confused with the development of a moral, aesthetic and intellectual being. It is also not the development of those abilities and capabilities of the mind that are so valued in modern society: the possession of a logical apparatus, memory, and the ability to abstract thinking. Spiritual development does not reject the usefulness and necessity of

all these qualities, but does not make them an end in themselves. For no matter how well the faculties of the mind are developed, they will not allow a person to surpass the limitations of our present existence. They only create the illusion of omniscience and power and thereby prevent us from seeing higher levels of Reason that surpass all the ideas about it that modern man has. The ultimate meaning and purpose of culture is to prepare a person to ascend into these higher levels of the mind and its comprehensive spiritual transformation.

Conclusion

So, Modern philosophers analyze different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's philosophical legacy (Kabulniazova 2021; Korneenkov 2024; Malakar 2023; Nikitin 2022; Skorokhodova 2024; Shankar 2024; Shin 2023). But the study of his concept of the cycles of development of society is practically ignored. We have tried to fill this gap. Aurobindo offers a model of society's development based on the evolution of everyday consciousness. According to Aurobindo, evolution ordinary consciousness starts from the stage of barbarism, when the life of the body and instincts comes first. Then the mind gradually begins to dominate, occupying its dominant position, and generates first a civilized, and then a cultural society. However, behind all this progress is the need to enter the spheres of spiritual existence, the sphere of gnosis. The only destiny reserved for man, according to the philosopher, is the divine life. All stages must be considered in the unity and struggle of opposites as a whole historical development of man, his consciousness, where one stage complements the other, pointing to the highest goal of human existence. It is no coincidence that Aurobindo titled his main philosophical work «The Life Divine».

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Aurobindo Ghosh's philosophy of culture

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