

Sri Aurobindo's Perspective on Modern Age Cultural Crises

*Rajendra. K. Sharma**

Cultural crises in modern society is evident from the increasing religious fundamentalism, racism, naked nationalism, and the emergence of power-seeking materialistic culture. In the context of Indian society cultural crises is exhibited in communalism, regionalism, casteism, linguistic chauvinism, economic inequality, aggressive commercialism, valueless politics, increasing violence and corruption in every walk of life. The gravity of the cultural crises is so alarming that one may count an endless list of its indicators. It is not just the Indian society; rather it is the entire human society, which needs immediate attention towards this problem. Many scholars have analyzed the issue of modern-day crisis; however, Sri Aurobindo is the only scholar who has made predictions about the future evolution of human civilization. In the present endeavor, an attempt has been made to understand the several explanations of the modern cultural crisis with specific focus on the views of Sri Aurobindo.

[**Keywords** : Cultural crisis, Nationalism, Commercialization, Industrialization, Human unity]

* Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, N. A. S (PG) College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh (India) E-mail: <drksharmameerut@gmail.com>

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 30, No. 3 (July-September), 2021
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal

1. Explanations of Cultural Crisis by Social Scientists and Scholars

Some of the notable explanations of the modern age cultural crisis are as follows :

1.1 Failure of the Reason in Guiding the Human Life

The present crisis is more radical in character and more pernicious in its influence. It was believed that human reason can discover and know the truth. Reason is the highest faculty of man, and it has enabled man to master himself as well as the nature. However, reason has failed when applied to human life and actions. Russell (1935) has argued that "human reason is incompetent to find any answer to the questions relating to value problems. It is true that science cannot decide the questions of values; that is because they cannot be intellectually decided at all" (Russell, 1935 : 243). The present crisis is due to the failure of reason in guiding man's life.

1.2 Commercialization, Industrialization and Nationalism

Arnold Toynbee (1934) condemned the commercial civilization based on industrialization. In his opinion commercialization and rapid industrialization are the main causes of the present social crisis. In his views, the western society is worshipping 'state' and extreme nationalism is a cause of worry. Human society is divided among groups of nations who are fighting with each other. The United Nations Organization (UNO) can play a crucial role in curtailing this naked power politics. Elaborating further, Toynbee (1948) provided the solutions to this crisis by recommending 'constitutional co-operative system of world government' in politics and by evolving a 'working compromise between free enterprises and socialism' in economic system (Toynbee, 1948 : 39). In his opinion nationalism has created a gulf in human society and therefore, internationalism must be propagated.

1.3 Urbanization, Mechanization and Dictatorship of Money

Oswald Spengler (1926) has delineated several indicators of the present crisis evident in the civilization. He argues that the decline of the western civilization is inevitable and declares the doom of the western culture. He has identified the following indicators of declining civilization :

1. The development of cities where human life has become artificial, shallow and fast due to the increased mechanization.
2. Man becomes slave of the machinery and industry.
3. Workers are devoid of property and the middle class is devoid of culture.
4. Dictatorship of money prevails in the society and accumulation of wealth is the goal. Money destroys both, the intellect, and the democracy. The propagation of ignorance and the decay of intelligence starts.
5. The growth of imperialism and absolute government can be seen.
6. Many people in the cities become sterile and childless and rate of suicide goes up.
7. "Skepticism develops, and religion, philosophy, and science tend to crystallize into fixed forms in an effect to suggest security" (Spengler, 1926 : 304).

Long established moral values and old socio-political structures are losing their hold. In his opinion the decline of the western culture is inevitable.

1-4 Psychological Explanation of the Crises

Sigmund Freud (1954) argues that a civilized society and the idea of a cultured man put restrictions on human being for subjugation of the libido (Ego) and Thanatos (destructive instinct). In his opinion, "Society cannot permit full freedom of action for each individual because absolute freedom for one may mean slavery for others. Some curtailing of individual freedom and inhibition of instinctual wishes is necessary for the survival of society. Social norms grow out of this necessity" (Freud, 1954 : 85). Necessity of controlled and powerful ego for social equilibrium is antagonistic to civilization. Early repression of instinctual demands prepares individual for accepting social norms, necessary for cultural growth. He points out that, "One may conclude that much of our most highly valued cultural heritage has been acquired at the cost of sexuality and by the restriction of sexual motive forces" (Freud, 1954 : 114).

In his opinion, there is always a conflict between the human desire of pleasure that seeks gratification of instinctual impulses and

the demands of culture which enforce control on human instincts. For him, this neurosis is the cause of modern crisis.

1.5 Historical and Ethical Explanation of the Crisis

Erich Fromm (1941) has presented a historical and ethical explanation of the cultural crisis. In his views human behavior is a product of cultural influences at a given time. Man's nature, his passions and anxieties are a cultural product. Actions of an individual are determined by his value judgement. He contends that Freud advocated the "traditional doctrine of the evilness of human nature, that man is fundamentally antisocial. Society must domesticate him, must allow some direct satisfaction of biological and hence ineradicable-drives; but for most part society must refine and adroitly check man's basic impulses" (Fromm, 1941 : 10).

In the opinion of Eric Fromm, "The failure of modern culture lies not in the fact that people are too much concerned with their self-interest but that they are not concerned enough with the interest of their real self; not in the fact that they are too selfish, but that they do not love themselves" (Fromm, 1947 : 139). People develop 'escape mechanisms' to escape from self-realization. Fromm advocated for a society in which human problems can be solved. He perceives such a sane society in the future, where 'man relates to man lovingly'. A sane society which gives human beings "the possibility of transcending nature by creating rather than by conformity, in which a system of orientation and devotion exists without man's needing to distort reality and to worship idols" (Fromm, 1955 : 362).

1.6 Socio-religious Explanation of the Crisis

In Nehru's opinion, "Nothing is so remarkable as the progressive conquest or understanding of the physical world by the mind of man today, and this process is continuing at a terrific pace. Man need no longer be a victim of external circumstances, at any rate, to a very large extent. While there has been this conquest of external conditions, there is at the same time the strange spectacle of lack of moral fiber and of self-control in man as a whole conquering the physical world, he fails to conquer himself" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1964 : 115). In his views, therefore, in the quest to control the external world, man has sacrificed the social and inner self-control, which are necessary conditions to maintain the social equilibrium.

He further argues, "Religion comes into conflict with rationalism. The disciplines of religion and social usage fade away without giving place to other disciplines, moral or spiritual" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1964 : 115). "In a changing world, living should be a continuous adjustment to these changes and happenings. It is the lack of this adjustment that creates conflicts" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1964 : 116). Therefore, the lack of adjustment in human life has been created by the neglect of religion, more stress on worldly things and pleasure.

Nehru submits that the ancient period was simpler and very closer to the nature. However, with the passage of time, the present society has become more and more complex. With advanced scientific developments and increasing industrialization, human being is confused about the answer to the eternal question: What is the meaning of life? Rationalism deals with the surface of the things, neglecting the inner core and basic questions of the human existence. "The old civilizations, with the many virtues that they possess have obviously proved inadequate. The new Western civilization, with all its triumphs and achievements and also with its atomic bombs, also appears inadequate, and therefore, the feeling grows that there is something wrong with our civilization" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1964 : 116).

In Nehru's opinion, the world is lacking a philosophy of life, which gives directions to human life. In his words, "In our efforts to ensure the material prosperity of the country, we have not paid any attention to the spiritual element in human nature. Therefore, in order to give the individual and the nation a sense of purpose, something to live for and, if necessary, to die for, we have to revive some philosophy of life and give, in the wider sense of the world, a spiritual background to our thinking" (Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1964 : 119).

1.7 Sri Aurobindo's Explanation of the Cultural Crisis

Sri Aurobindo, the great philosopher, has very systematically analyzed the various aspects of cultural crises in Indian society. A review of his writings reveals his sincere and serious concern to the issue. His perspective of cultural analysis is evolutionary. He argues that a perfect harmony between unity and diversity is undoubtedly a distance reality. He has made specific predictions of the future

progression of the human society and culture. His vision of the future is abstracted from the social reality.

Sri Aurobindo's explanation of the present cultural crisis is wider and more integral than the explanations provided by the social scientists. His philosophy of culture is spiritual philosophy. The spirituality transforms the man and governs his mind, body and life. In his opinion, the creative power of mankind is being gradually lost under the pressure of technological advancement. Man's energy is directed outward. His life is full of contradictions. He is so overworked in his routine life, that he finds no time to look into himself. In his views, "Man has created a system of civilization which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual capacity to utilize and manage, a too dangerous servant of his blundering ego and its appetites" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951D : 933). Sri Aurobindo further claims that economic barbarism can be seen in the contemporary society, whose only ideal is the successful man. The aim and goal of the modern man is satisfaction of materialistic desires and wants. A materialistic view of life and the universe cannot satisfy the pursuance of such goals of human life as are infinitely meaningful and valuable. Man is working for accumulation of wealth and materialist goods.

Warning the mankind, Sri Aurobindo writes, "That renounced, he must either replace and begin all over again or disappear like other forms of life as an evolutionary failure, through incapacity to maintain or to serve the evolutionary urge" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951D : 933). In his views, the present times are full of dangers as well as possibilities.

In the opinion of Sri Aurobindo "reason has an inherent tendency towards uniformity or to mechanize the parts in a whole. The integral truth of things is truth not of the reason but of spirit" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971 : 266).

2. Origin of the Cultural Crisis

The sense/situation of the crises denotes two related mental conditions, firstly, the intellectual confusion and secondly, the feeling of insecurity. In the initial stages, the crisis is not visible to the common man, and it can be experienced only by creative, sensitive, intelligent, and imaginative human being, who suffer from the

feeling of the crisis. Sri Aurobindo experienced this crisis early. The modern crisis influences the lives of the individuals and consists in the inability of human beings in visualizing the goals of their lives. The crisis exists when the humanity is in a state of uncertainty and confusion about the values and ideals, governing the human life. The human life tends to lose direction in the absence of nobler models of worthy existence. In the absence of a clarity of goals, human being feels insecure not only for his present but for the future also. This crisis may be defined as the situation of 'arrested creativity'. The situation of the loss of faith in life's values and possibilities. Therefore, in the views of Sri Aurobindo, the present crisis can be seen in the failure of man's sense of values to attain true fulfilment of human life.

3. Nationalism as a Cause of the Crisis

According to Sri Aurobindo nation is essentially spiritual in its origin and character. When national unity is described as psychological in nature, the term psychological is to be understood as synonym of spiritual. It is not correct to assume political unity as national unity. He has rejected the idea of observing state as a nation. Sri Aurobindo has distinguished between the national ego and the national soul. In his views, "National egoism then tends to degenerate into a form of aggressive imperialism" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971 : 53). The aggressive nation may achieve spectacular success within a short time, but quickly exhausting its vital powers, and therefore, is likely to die an early and natural death.

In the theories, advocated by Hegel and Hitler, nationalism develops two important characteristics, firstly, the cult of the state and secondly, the cult of international egoism. Sri Aurobindo has altogether rejected this theory of egoistic nationalism. He advocated a model of nationalism based on peace and spiritual unity. He has rejected aggressive and perverse form of nationalism because this type of nationalism crushes individual liberty and the autonomy of the weak nations.

In Sri Aurobindo's views, we cannot overcome this crisis created by egoistic nationalism unless we identify the spiritual origin and unity of the nation. He submits, "The theory of inferior and decadent races was loudly proclaimed by other than German thinkers and has governed, with whatever assuaging scruples, the

general practice of military domination and commercial exploitation of the weak by the strong" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971 : 61-62). It was against this background, that the second world war for Aurobindo was "a battle waged in just self-defense and in defense of the nations threatened with the world domination of Germany and the Nazi system of life, but a defense of civilization and its highest attained social, cultural and spiritual values and the whole future of humanity" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951D : 39).

National egoism demands a total self-satisfaction, intensive and extensive or expansive. "Every national ego wants its own cultural enrichment, more political and economic power, and the right to self-determination. But some national egos are interested in something more than this intensive self-satisfaction; they want other nations to accept their culture, to come under their rule or at least under their influence, political or economic. This national egoism tends to develop into imperialism unless this evil trend is resisted by the egoism of other nations. And that leads to war. War is the institutional expression of the psychological conflict between two national egos. The last two World Wars may quite possibly be explained in terms of a conflict between some very powerful egoistic nations" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971 : 53).

Sri Aurobindo was aware of the dangers of nationalism and the sufferings public face during the early stages of nation building. In his views, the existing form of nationalism is incompatible with the idea of international unification. In his opinion, "Undoubtedly, nationalism is a more powerful obstacle to further unification than was the separateness of the old petty and less firmly self-conscious groupings which preceded the developed nation-state" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971A : 275). In his views the relationship between the true form of nationalism and internationalism is not of conflict, therefore, internationalism will emerge from the fulfilment of nationalism.

4. Model of Cultural Synthesis

In his treatise 'The Life Divine', Sri Aurobindo has presented the model of cultural synthesis from ancient Indian culture. The spiritual mentality is the foundation of Indian culture and civilization. This model projects the synthesis of two extreme cultures i.e., the materialistic culture and the spiritualistic culture. In

his views the materialist denial of 'the beyond' and the spiritual rejection of 'the transient' are the two extremes, which have been reconciled in Indian culture. Spirituality does not flourish in the void, and it is based on the materialistic conditions of life. Spiritual mind conquers the prolific creativity and material abundance. The synthesis affirms both, the joy of life and the exploration of the reason. He submits, "It is a great error to suppose that spirituality flourishes best in an impoverished soil with the life half killed and the intellect discouraged and intimidated" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951A : 401). In his work entitled, 'Foundations of Indian Culture' he has given many examples where vitality and intellectuality have been harmonized in Indian culture, art and literature.

4.1 Human Unity

Sri Aurobindo was a strong supporter of the idea of human unity. The whole process of evolution is oriented towards human unity. He argues that the unity of mankind is a part of Nature's eventual scheme and must be a reality. In his views the unity of human race cannot be achieved either by uniformity or by domination and subjection. In his opinion a synthetic organization of all nations, in which every nation will occupy its right place, can bring about a comprehensive and enduring unification. In his work, 'The Ideal of Human Unity', he mentions that the evolution of national culture and the growth of human culture are based on identical principals. While analyzing the evolution of human culture, he submits that the principles which have been working behind the formation of national culture, will lead to human cultural unity also.

4.2 Unity in Diversity

In Sri Aurobindo's opinion the secret of Indian unity lies in its diversity. Diversity of culture, religion, traditions and language. This diversity adds to the richness of the Indian culture. He submits that, "India has always been the home of a peculiar people with characteristics of its own. It has absorbed all that entered into it, put upon all the Indian stamp and welded the most diverse elements into its fundamental unity. India's history throughout has been marked by a tendency, a constant effort to unite all this diversity of elements into a single cultural whole so that India might be politically as well as culturally one" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951D : 407).

Sri Aurobindo appreciating the uniqueness and richness of Indian culture writes that, "More high reaching, subtle, many-sided, curious and profound than the Greek, more noble and humane than the Roman, more large and spiritual than the ancient Egyptian, more vast and original than any other Asiatic civilization, more intellectual than the European prior to the eighteenth century, possessing all these and more, it was the most powerful, self-possessed, stimulating and wide in influence of all past human cultures" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951A : 25). He expressed great pride in Indian culture.

4.3 Assimilation not Imitation

Sri Aurobindo advocates for cultural assimilation and not imitation of other cultures. He argued, "That we must not take it crudely in the European forms, but must go back to whatever corresponds to it, illumines its sense, justifies its highest purport in our own spiritual conception of life and existence, and in that light workout its extent, degree, form, relation to other ideas application" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951A : 25). He was in favor of assimilative appropriation, which is the ultimate truth of life. It is a myth that India is a multi-religious and multi-lingual society and therefore, in the presence of this diversity, unity cannot be achieved. Sri Aurobindo advocated the need for unity, not in the abstract sense of oneness but for unity in diversity. Diversity of language and religion etc. does not indicate the absence of basic unity. In his views every nationality has been formed despite the diversities of religion, race or language.

He acknowledged the coexistence of diversities. He writes, "There are certain essential conditions, and essential elements of nationality viz., geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain favorable political conditions which enable the impulse to realize itself in an organized government expressing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence. A common enthusiasm coalescing with a common interest is the most powerful fosterer of nationality" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951 : 507). In his opinion the regional, religious and lingual differences cannot be blotted out, yet they can be organized into a unity.

Forecasting the future of Indian society, Sri Aurobindo claims that the life in the society will be founded on unity in diversity. He

writes, "Many in one would place her on the sure foundation of her Swabhava and Swadharma" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951: 140).

At present the common masses of India have not been adequately prepared for spirituality. However, as a rule the change from rational to spiritual age must first be realized in few individuals before it will be circulated to the masses. He submits, "the mass of humanity has not risen beyond the bodily needs, the vital desires, the emotions and the current of thought-sensations created by these lower strata" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951C : 231).

The masses have no fascination for culture. In ancient times the great philosopher Plato, therefore, observed that the masses are incapable of profiting from higher education. In the opinion of Sigmund Freud (1961), 'the common man has no respect for culture' (Freud, 1961 : 60).

Sri Aurobindo submits that the spiritual development of the masses is a pre-condition for cultural progression. For spiritual development, the first requirement is that few pioneer individuals initially adopt spiritual life and then the masses follow them. He argues that. "It is the unpreparedness, the unfitness of the society or the common mind of man which is always the chief stumbling block. It is the readiness of this common mind which is of the first importance" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971 : 307-308). At present we find cultural degradation among the leadership as well among the masses. For cultural progression, therefore, the rich spiritual cultural traditions of the Indian society are to be maintained and transferred to the masses.

4.4 Liberty of Nations v/s International order

In the opinion of Sri Aurobindo to develop a living international unity, a workable and rational relationship between the nations is the most important requirement. A balance between the liberty of individual nations and an order at the world level, must be maintained. He suggests that "the first principle of human unity, groupings being necessary, should be a system of free and natural groupings which would leave no room for internal discards, incompatibilities and repression and revolt as between race and race and between people and people" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951B : 406). Sri Aurobindo advanced the idea of world-union as the basis of human unity.

4.5 Uniformity v/s Unity

Sri Aurobindo has very elaborately distinguished between the concept of uniformity and unity. In his views, unity is the basis of human existence. But to achieve unity it will be a mistake to enforce uniformity. We should understand that uniformity is not the law of nature and human life. He observes that, "Life exists by diversity; it insists that every group, every being shall be, even while one with all the rest in its universality, yet by some principle or ordered detail of variation unique" (Sri Aurobindo, 1951B : 490-491). He borrowed the idea of unity in diversity from the nature. In his views unity in diversity is the law of nature and it holds true for human society as well. In his book 'Ideal of Human Unity', he has devoted one chapter on 'Diversity in Oneness'. He submits that with the evolution of nature, more and more complex will be the formation of oneness. The evolution in nature is marked by the interplay of the forces of diversity and unity.

In the opinion of Sri Aurobindo, the real unity is the unity in diversity. Group culture can be developed without eliminating the individual culture, and similarly national culture can be developed without discarding the group culture. The development of national culture, similarly, is no obstacle to the development of global human cultural unity. In the development of cultural unity, the diversities add richness and variety, and contribute to make the cultural unity long lasting. In his views, "uniformity is not the law of life, and that life exists by diversity" (Sri Aurobindo, 1971A : 490). In the world union every nation will preserve its uniqueness. The principle of humanity unites all cultures of the world. In their spiritual essence all cultures are one. Therefore, the cultural unity will not destroy the distinctiveness of national cultures.

4.6 State as a Soulless Machine

Sri Aurobindo calls the State as 'soulless machine'. In his views, the rise of State is extremely dangerous because it evolves at the cost of human liberty. State strives to organize the whole social, political, and economic human life. The purposiveness and self-consciousness of human beings is not acknowledged by the State. Therefore, the idea of nation is better than the idea of State. For him, the nation is immortal. State is just an administrative apparatus. Every nation will develop its own political structure and will discover its own soul. He

argues that “there is a nation-soul but nothing like a state-soul” (Sri Aurobindo, 1971A : 39). In view of this, it may be submitted that Sri Aurobindo is not in favor of a dominant role of state in the socio-political and economic life of human being. Authority in any form will destroy human freedom and will create obstacles in human progress. The ideal society will provide an opportunity to human being for self-realization. State creates a monstrous machinery to crush the freedom and growth of human being.

5. Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo has predicted a bright future ahead for the human society when he described ‘gnostic culture’ as the culture of the future. He described that gnostic culture is a rich humanitarian values-based culture. He has predicted a divine future of mankind. He opined that unity, mutuality and harmony must be the inseparable law of the of common or collective life. In his opinion, the future of humanity is not dark. The idea of social uniformity, which is against the law of nature, should be rejected. The beginning of new human order will start with appreciation of cultural differences and will later lead to the formation of the world government. The future age will be the age of complete freedom with spiritual unity.

It may be concluded that in Sri Aurobindo’s opinion materialistic growth is the root cause of modern age cultural crises. The solution to this problem lies only in the evolution of spiritualism and humanism. Education and religion will play the most significant role in attaining spiritualism and humanism.

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