

OSWALD SPENGLER ON INDIAN CULTURE

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The prime characteristic of modern western thought is the perception of the fact that Western Culture has been tried and found wanting. Mingled with this sense of disappointment can also be found a wistful longing for some great new inspiration to enliven the life of to-day and hold forth a hope for the morrow. This wave of pessimism passed all over Europe as a result of the inability of the conventional standards of spirituality to cope successfully with the new order of things after a most disastrous world-war. Oswald Spengler with characteristic thoroughness and erudition has propounded a new theory of Culture-history and predicts the downfall of Western civilization as we know it at present. What distinguishes his work from the usual cry that ours is a degenerate age is the fact that he attempts to formulate certain general laws of cultural history based on what he conceives to be the ultimate basic realities that underlie every phase of cultural development. For this purpose he passes in rapid review all the important cultures of the world,-Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Indian, Magian and arrives at an organic theory of culture-origins and decays. We are at present concerned not with his general theory but with his views of Indian Cultural development.

His assertion that the Classical and Indian Man had no memory-no constant impression that the individual life is an element in a far wider life course-is not true, at least as far as the Indian soul is concerned. The doctrine of Karma which forms the basis of all forms of Hinduism is but the assertion of the persistence of Memory of previous acts in the Present and the present actions in the Future. As contrasted with the Egyptian, the Indian Man, he asserts, forgot everything as symbolised by burning of the dead and the absence of an art of Portraiture. But it must not be forgotten that ancestor-worship which is enjoined on every Hindu is a more subtle form of expressing the transcendental nature of Consciousness

than the crude Egyptian method of mummification and of resorting to granite or basalt for the preservation of mere flesh. The elaborate administrative system and the net of irrigation works which according to Spengler shows not only a care for the past but also a victory over mortality and the mere present, were not exclusively Egyptian. A little knowledge of the history of Ancient India would reveal the extra-ordinary complexity of the administrative system ranging from pure anarchy and democracy to Imperialism. Kautilya and the Jatkas give numerous accounts of irrigation system and provision against famines, refuting the assertion that the life of the Indian was a mere hand-to-mouth existence.

In Indian culture, we are told, we have the perfectly historic soul—its decisive expression being the Brahman Nirvana. There is no pure Indian astronomy, no calendar and therefore no History—so far as History is the track of conscious spiritual evolution. Evidently Spengler confuses the idea of Buddhist Nirvana which according to him is the final expression of Indian Culture with that of Brahman. Brahman is certainly not a mere negative concept, an obliteration of all spiritual consciousness. It is doubtful if Buddha himself conceived Nirvana as the grand symbol of a zero (sunya). It is also not true that Indians lacked time-consciousness. The Vedanga Jyotisha and the Taittiriya-aranyaka expound principles of Astronomy which are certainly indigenous so far as we can say that any living nation can produce a new art or science which is purely indigenous. Kala or Time was merely phenomenal—being understood in terms of Nama and Rupa. It is a cause as it does not exist in eternal substances (nityeshabhat). Spengler, however, denies the reality of Time even in this phenomenal world and asserts the “Causality has nothing whatever to do with Time”. Infinite space is the ideal which the “Western mind has sought and it is alone that underlies all ideas of Number, Notion, Object and causality”. Time is a conception arising out of space and has no existence independently of it. Therefore he argues that the conception of World-history as a picture of World-in-progress is the peculiar product of the Western Soul.

Spengler has fallen into the usual error of the superficial observer of the Indian soul that it passes through a dreamy existence with no awareness of the world around. What is impossible for the western man to understand is that there can be an intense individual existence, which, however rigidly it might appear to the outward eye, conform to the system

of the World-as-Nature, might at the same time be independent of it. Personalities are as landmarks in Western History even in this age of socialism and democracy in all their forms, directing and controlling the trend of events so far as is possible within the limits set by Destiny. This indicates an inequality in the nature of the world where the ordinary individual is but an ineffectual atom of the group. In India on the other hand, there was a complete divorce between the concept of the phenomenal life of the world and the real inner life of the individual. The World-as-Nature is an illusion and not a distinct reality by itself. The Advaita doctrine thus places before the world a conception of real democracy in a World of truth. The singularism of Samkara admits of no weakness and is the most logical and rational conclusion that can be arrived at from the facts of consciousness as apprehended by the Indian soul. Thus it is not true to say that Indian culture in the spiritual field attained its culmination with Buddha and the conception of Nirvana, but rather with Samkara and his Advaita doctrine in the 9th century “contemporaneous” with the Imperialism of the Guptas, Chalukyas and the Cholas in the political sphere—shortly before the full impact of the Magian culture of the Arabs made itself felt in India not by self-aggrandisement but by self-effacement. Society is but a means to an end—the end being the development of the real self. The universal (Jati) is not different from the Particular, the Class from the Individual according to Kumarila. The social group has no distinct individuality of its own apart from each individual unit. Therefore the history of India from the Vedic to the Buddhist period, which Spengler compares to the “stirring of a sleeper” and where “life actually was a dream”, may be barren in the sense that there were no personalities who left nothing behind them except their contribution to human spiritual advancement. It is not correct to say that speculations like that of Janaka, Yajnavalkya, Pippalada, Bhrgu, Kapila etc., had no individualities of their own. They emphatically assert the feeling for Time, Consciousness and Fate. Buddhism was not the perfect and final expression of the Indian soul as Spengler believes. It found no permanent place in the land of its birth as such, though when modified by Tantraism, Vaishnavism etc., it necessarily influenced the spiritual life of the country. It is but an early landmark in the spiritual evolution of the Indian soul, the culmination of which was the Advaita doctrine. It is nearer to the truth to say that the Non-dualism of Samkara with its relentless logic formed the crown and the summit of Indian thought. It left no scope for human weaknesses (nayatma balahinena labhyo), for Bhakti, for prayer on the assumption that Avidya is the

prime cause for all such misapprehensions. From this inexorable high standard, the later doctrines of Vishishtadvaitism and Dvaitism may be said to be a falling off. Therefore we can say that by the tenth century Indian cultural development entered upon its final phase after which civilisation sets in.

The history of Indian Cultural development is thus one of spiritual growth primarily and acquires profound significance only when viewed from the point of India's distinctive contribution to the world. Of the pre-cultural period of Indian History we have little that is certain. The recent excavations in Sindh and Panjab take us back to an epoch when India exercised a considerable influence on the pre-Sumerian cultures of the Mesopotamian region. How far more ancient than Rigvedic period it is difficult to ascertain. But it is no longer possible to doubt the fact that the pictographs and the relics of buildings found at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro point conclusively to a period far anterior to the Sumerian. Hence the pre-culture period must be marked off from the age in which Harappa civilisations flourished. The culture-period begins somewhere about 3000 B.C. when the Destiny-idea of the Indian soul acquired a form-language of mystic symbolism and not about 1500 B.C., as Spengler believes. The early period characterised by a new rousing of the feelings of curiosity and the World-Fear leading to beautiful literary creations expressive of a great longing to solve the problems of Life and Destiny, extends upto 1500 B.C. The later period, when metaphysical speculations acquired a strong scholastic flavour and a purely philosophic outlook of life and feeling come to indicate a ripening critical consciousness, as in the period of the Aranyakas and Upanishads, may be said to extend upto 1000 B.C. This period can be said to have been succeeded by the early period of the Autumn of Culture – when a puritanic ritualism, and mathematical conceptions of Form and Feeling as in the Brahmanas and the Sutra literature predominate.

The latter half of this period witnesses the highest point that can be reached by the genius of the nation. The numerous philosophical schools laying stress on rationalism intellectualism such as Buddhism in all its phases, Samkhya, Vaiseshika, Nyaya, Yoga, Jainism, Pancharatra, Pasupata etc., finally and logically lead up to Samkara's Non-dualism. The symbolical significance of Advaita is interesting from the view-point of the Morphological development of culture history. It represents the final period of culture growth just before

the dawn of civilisation. Samkara himself does not recognise the Intellect as the sole guide but feels how inadequate it is after a soul hath attained a certain spiritual grade. From that level there must be “a leap of the Spirit” through intuition. He thus reconciles what appears at first to be a fundamental duality in this World-as-Nature.

The period of Indian civilisation can be said to commence from about the 10th century A.D., when the spiritual creative force dwindles, peaks and pines. Ethical and ritualistic dogmas loom large; the caste-system acquires rigidity ; disproportionate attention is bestowed on dry philosophical discussions – often degenerating into mere quibbling; the memory for Feeling becomes a memory for Forms; and finally a pessimistic notion of Karma spreads over the whole continent, destroying all feelings of hope and strength, killing all ideas of Beauty, Truth and Freedom.

Thus was the initial Destiny-idea of Indian Culture worked out. Naturally it was spread over a long period of time, but it is apparent that it followed the same organic laws of growth and decay as other cultures of the world, though its *significance* is quite different.

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