
Psychology of Social Development

Sri Aurobindo's spiritual vision extends beyond the perfection and transformation of the individual; it includes in its scope the evolution and transformation of human society. In both the individual and in the society, the soul and spirit is at first hidden and occult, influencing the direction and course of development from behind, but allowing nature to follow its gradual, zigzagging, and conflict-ridden course. Afterwards, as mind develops and becomes more and more dominant over the obscure impulses and ego-centered drives of the vital nature, a clearer, more objective and enlightened perception and approach towards human existence and development become possible. At some highest stage of mental development, there comes into view a greater possibility and principle that is spiritual and supramental in nature, and it is at this point that a true solution to humanity's persistent problems become visible in the context of a greater and more radical transformation of human life into a divine living.

In *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo describes the stages of development of human society, illustrating with a perceptive analysis of historical and political developments and trends, and outlining a future ideal society towards which he says it is moving. Starting from Lamprecht's theory that societies pass through several distinct psychological stages of development—symbolic, typical and conventional, individualist, and subjective—Sri Aurobindo expresses his view of historical and sociological development in the light of his own theory of spiritual evolution. After taking a passing glance at the symbolic, typical, and conventional stages in Indian and European history, Sri Aurobindo focuses on the individualistic and the beginning subjective stages of modern societies. He then presents a more detailed picture of a future spiritual stage in which he indicates all the others will find their meaning and towards which they unconsciously move.

The symbolic stage is illustrated by the ancient Vedic age, in which “the religious institution of sacrifice governs the whole society and all its hours and moments, and the ritual of the sacrifice is at every turn and in every detail, as even a cursory study of the Brahmanas and Upanishads ought to show us, mystically symbolic.” The typical stage is characterized by a dominance of psychological and ethical concerns and motives; all else, including spiritual and religious concerns, are

subordinate to these. In Indian society, it was best expressed in the ideal and concept of Dharma, the upholding of tradition and the fulfillment of one's social position and responsibility. In the conventional stage, the outward expressions of the ideal overshadow the ideal itself, such that customs, outward signs and symbols become ends in themselves, and their inner spirit and significance becomes eclipsed. In its early phase, the spirit and inner significance of the social institutions still live and thrive within well-developed structures, but afterwards the institutions become more and more formalized and artificial, and their inner purpose and significance become obscured. In Indian society, this is illustrated with the growing rigidity of the caste system in which the society was organized, with its increasing emphasis on custom, heredity, and ritual.

Sri Aurobindo explains that “the individualistic age of human society comes as a result of the corruption and failure of the conventional, as a revolt against the reign of the petrified typical figure.” He illustrates the occurrence of this stage in Europe beginning with its revolt of reason against the Church and fixed authority and its continuation and blossoming with the growth of scientific inquiry. Through science, a new basis of principles and laws could be discovered and established that were open to scrutiny and logical analysis and reasoning. There were also established the democratic ideals that all individuals had the right to develop to the full stature of their capabilities, and that the individual was not simply a social unit with a social function, but also had unique individual needs, possibilities, and tendencies which should be allowed freedom and opportunity for development. As a part of the revolt against traditional authority, there developed in some regions another intellectual philosophy and political movement, apparently in contradiction to individualism, of the supremacy of the society as a whole over the individual. Sri Aurobindo also analyses the strengths and limitations of this viewpoint, and its relations and opposition to the democratic ideal.

The subjective age comes as an outgrowth of the individualistic and rational questioning of the conventional institutions and structures of society. The individualistic age culminates in a new intellectual foundation and development in all the spheres of life, but this rational view of the world and the self can only go so far, it cannot reach into the depths of the being. Nevertheless, its questioning spirit, its search for truth leads it beyond its own capabilities, leads it to search for a deeper foundation and a more complete understanding of the mysteries and subtleties of self and world. The subjective age begins when society begins to search for the deeper truths of its existence below the surfaces which the reason has explored and explained in an ordered, but limited sense.

He explains that examples of this tendency are already apparent. In education, there is the trend to understand the psychology of the growing child and to base systems of teaching upon this basis. In criminal justice, there is an effort to understand the psychology of the criminal, and to strive to educate and rehabilitate rather than simply punish or isolate. In societies and groupings of people, there is a growing tendency to regard them as living and growing organisms with their own soul and inner tendencies, which must be fostered, developed, and perfected.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the present subjective age, with its inward turn towards the essential truth of the self and of things, opens the possibility of a true spiritual age. He explains that the subjective age could conceivably stop short of becoming spiritual. He says that a true spiritual age will come only if the idea becomes strong in the intellectual life of humanity that the Spirit is the true Reality standing behind our physical existence, and that to realise the Spirit and express it outwardly in mental, vital, and physical terms is the real meaning and aim of human existence. Sri Aurobindo argues that there is a deeper spiritual Reality that is the true Self of both the individual and the society, and it is only by identifying ourselves with it, rather than the limited and superficial individual or social ego, that the individual and the society find their true center and their proper relation with one another. In a spiritual age, therefore, he says that society would “make the revealing and finding of the divine Self in man the whole first aim of all its activities, its education, its knowledge, its science, its ethics, its art, its economical and political structure.”