

Untold Potentialities: India and the World in the Third Millennium

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If India responds creatively to the conditions of the global age, neither succumbing to Westernization nor reverting to traditionalism, it could begin to play a major role in the world--and not only as an economic superpower.

1 From Third World to Superpower?

Among the great events of the twentieth century, none promised to have more lasting consequences for vast numbers of people than India's attainment of independence on 15 August 1947. The lifting of the yoke of foreign rule from hundreds of millions in the subcontinent was followed by the rapid decolonization of the rest of Asia and Africa. Meanwhile the United Nations had been founded at the end of World War II. An era of freer, closer and more equal relations among the earth's peoples seemed to have dawned.

Freedom for countries such as India did not translate at once, however, into a role in world affairs commensurate with the size of their populations or the greatness of their cultures. The Cold War intervened and the important players were divided into two camps. Most of the newly liberated former colonies found themselves relegated to the "Third World". But the Cold War came to an end and gradually things began to change. By the 1980s, there was speculation that the twenty-first century might turn out to be the Asian Century. Today it is common to speak not only of China, but also of India, as a potential superpower.

Such speculations are based largely on economic trends. Despite formidable problems, there are heartening forecasts of prosperity for a region that has known so much misery in the last few centuries. But if prosperity is achieved by the single-minded pursuit of wealth for its own sake, one wonders whether the future South Asian superpower will be anything more than an exotic imitation of American consumer society.

One can imagine India becoming a rich and powerful Westernized country in a thoroughly Westernized world. The distinctive values it has represented through the ages would be forgotten. Decades after winning political freedom, India would have lost the crucial struggle for intellectual and spiritual freedom. The twenty-first century might come to be called the Asian Century, or even (as some have suggested) the Indian Century; but if this is based purely on economic success and the triumph of materialism, it would be Asian — or Indian — only in name. The loss would be not only Asia's and India's, but humanity's.

2 An Alternative Vision

Some who worked for India's freedom cherished a more exalted image of their country's future. One such person was Sri Aurobindo. He had entered the freedom struggle in its early days when, as he later wrote,

the ideal of independence ... was regarded ... by the vast majority of Indians as unpractical and impossible, an almost insane chimera. It was thought that the British Empire was too powerful and India too weak, effectively disarmed and impotent even to dream of the success of such an endeavour.¹

During a year in prison he had a series of profound spiritual experiences. In 1910, the year after his release, he withdrew from political activity to concentrate on spiritual work, shifting his focus from national liberation — which he saw to be inevitable — to the still more challenging question of what India would do with her freedom once it was achieved.

In August 1947, Sri Aurobindo was asked to give a message to be broadcast on the eve of India's independence, which coincided with his own seventy-fifth birthday. According to his original message (shortened for the actual broadcast), the birth of free India signified

the entry into the comity of nations of a new power with untold potentialities which has a great part to play in determining the political, social, cultural and spiritual future of humanity.²

This was a bold statement at the time, when India was just coming into existence as a modern nation. Sixty years later, as the global balance of power begins to tilt toward Asia, it is easier to envisage India as playing a major role in shaping the future. But what kind of role in what kind of future?

Sri Aurobindo maintained that India was arising, “not to serve her own material interests only, to achieve expansion, greatness, power and prosperity,— though these too she must not neglect,” but to contribute to a more harmonious and enlightened life for mankind. He believed the time to be not far off when a “new spirit of oneness will take hold of the human race.” India could help to bring about human unity by recovering and extending her ancient spiritual knowledge and, politically, by developing “that larger statesmanship which is not limited by the present facts and immediate possibilities but looks into the future and brings it nearer”.³

3 Conquest, Assimilation and Progress

The changes that have swept the world in the last century have been partly a reversal and partly a continuation of the process that brought Europe and its offshoots to a position of global dominance. Any attempt to look into the future has to take this paradox into account. The dismantling of colonial empires and the rise of aspiring Asian superpowers are part of a transformation in political and economic relations with possible cultural implications. But many of the results of the age of Western expansionism remain and can hardly be reversed. The shrinking of the earth by technology is one of these. Globalization in one form or another is evidently here to

stay and the only practical question is what to do with it. Modernization seems unstoppable and is hard to distinguish from Westernization. The potential role of India has to be considered in this context.

Let us glance briefly, then, at the last half millennium and consider where it has brought us. There are two starkly contrasting views of this period. Some regard it uncritically as an era of spectacular progress. For others, especially in the East, it was an upsurge of barbarism that overwhelmed societies more refined but less well-armed than that of Europe.

Perhaps it was both these things. Some reported remarks of Swami Vivekananda suggest a way to reconcile the contradiction by showing how civilization can progress despite a contrary appearance of the most disconcerting setbacks. The Swami described a pattern that can be observed in various forms throughout history:

A certain race becomes civilized. Then comes a nomad race. Nomads are always ready to fight. They come and conquer a race. They bring better blood, stronger physiques. They take up the mind of the conquered race and add that to their body and push civilization still further.⁴

Vivekananda was restating the essence of a theory put forward in the fourteenth century by the Arab historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun. The theory can be formulated more generally; the conquerors need not be nomads, strictly speaking, nor is it always physical strength that gives them their main advantage — Ibn Khaldun emphasized the cohesion of tribes in contrast to urban societies, while in more recent times the decisive factor has been technology. But whatever the details in a particular case, the general pattern is common enough: the conquest of the more civilized by the less civilized, who then proceed to absorb elements of the culture they have overpowered.

The warlike Romans conquered much of the ancient world, but took their culture largely from the Greeks. Eventually, they adopted a religion that had originated in a corner of their empire among a gifted but unfortunate Near Eastern people known as the Jews. The Roman empire, in turn, succumbed to Germanic tribes who converted to Christianity. Centuries later the descendants of these barbarians began to assimilate the legacy of classical antiquity transmitted to them by the Arabs. They also made their own improvements on technological innovations, including gunpowder, that came to them from as far away as China.

Soon these and other developments propelled them to an unprecedented expansion that brought most of the earth under their sway. The aggressive energy of the young civilization of Europe drove it to subjugate older civilizations such as that of India which had already reached an advanced stage and begun to decline in vitality.

But Asian civilizations have shown extraordinary resilience, surviving into an age of intense global interchange whose outcome is difficult to foresee. At a time of increasing interaction and cultural fusion, two possibilities stand out. If the present direction of influence continues, Westernization may prevail, swallow up what remains of other types of civilization and produce a global monoculture with few meaningful variations. On the other hand, it now seems increasingly likely that non-Western cultures will

successfully reassert themselves, retain their own distinctive identities — hopefully not by a reactionary clinging to the past, but by a creative evolution in response to new conditions — and make significant contributions to whatever world-civilization may emerge.

Surprisingly, the cycle of catastrophes described by Ibn Khaldun need not lead to a pessimistic view of history. In Vivekananda's version of the theory, the net result at each stage is to "push civilization still further."⁵ However much we may deplore the injustices of imperialism, it is possible to see progress of a certain kind as the overall outcome of the last few centuries, providing a starting-point for a new leap forward.

4 Liberty and Her Sisters

It is on its idealistic side that the Western mind comes closest to the Eastern spirit. Whatever good may have come out of the colonial era is largely due to this mitigating factor derived from a blend of the Greek and Christian heritage of Europe. It is here that mutual comprehension and cultural synthesis might be most fruitful for the future.

Among the most positive effects of the worldwide influence of Western culture must be counted the spread of three kindred ideals. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* was the motto of the French revolution, inspired by the thinking of the European Age of Enlightenment. Since the late 1700s, the spirit of that revolution has made a strong impact on the collective life of humanity — not least by stimulating revolts against Western imperialism.

The modern attempt to create a society animated by the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity has met with remarkable successes in some directions and equally striking failures in others. Unfortunately, there was from the beginning a contradiction between these humanistic ideals and the violent methods sometimes adopted to achieve and spread them. To make things worse, the three ideals soon came into conflict with each other. The political and economic freedom offered by democracy and capitalism did not turn out to be a guarantee of equality. Communism therefore tried to enforce equality by sacrificing liberty. The impulse of fraternity has been limited in its inclusiveness and most vigorous in communitarian movements which, again, have little use for individual liberty.

Non-Western peoples were ironically introduced to modern conceptions of freedom and equality by white men who robbed them of their independence and treated them as inferior races. This contradiction did not escape the notice of the subject peoples. Nevertheless, their best minds often appreciated the value of the ideals themselves, apart from the hypocrisy of those who professed them.

In India, for example, Vivekananda realized it was India's social stagnation and decadence that had allowed foreigners to take over the country. He saw an opportunity to recreate India. The people were not to confront their alien masters, but to ignore them and take the regeneration of their society into their own hands. Vivekananda's stirring utterances remind us of the revolutionary mood in which the cry for liberty, equality

and fraternity was first raised:

Bread! Bread! I do not believe in a God, who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven! Pooh! India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread.... More bread, more opportunity for everybody!⁶

Vivekananda was especially perceptive on the subject of liberty. He regarded the Western and Indian conceptions of it as complementary and wanted to unify them:

The Greek sought political liberty. The Hindu has always sought spiritual liberty. Both are one-sided.... To care only for spiritual liberty and not for social liberty is a defect, but the opposite is a still greater defect. Liberty of both soul and body is to be striven for.⁷

This contrast between the Greek and the Hindu is a simplification, no doubt, but suggests the main trends in the West and the East. The distinction between political and spiritual liberty may be compared with the distinction between “negative” and “positive” liberty made by certain Western thinkers. For Isaiah Berlin, negative liberty means “not being interfered with by others”. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is the freedom of self-mastery or “rational self-direction”. It includes “the traditional self-emancipation of ascetics and quietists, of stoics or Buddhist sages”. It is to the first ideal, that of freedom from external compulsion, that Berlin gave his unconditional approval. He was uncomfortable with positive liberty, as he defined it, because he saw in it an affinity with despotism:

The reason within me, if it is to triumph, must eliminate and suppress my ‘lower’ instincts, my passions and desires, which render me a slave; similarly (the fatal transition from individual to social concepts is almost imperceptible) the higher elements in society ... may exercise compulsion to rationalise the irrational section of society.⁸

But Vivekananda’s conception of spiritual liberty is not open to this objection. He explicitly rejects the error of justifying any kind of compulsion — what Berlin would see as the abrogation of negative liberty in the name of positive liberty:

India has always had this magnificent idea of religious freedom, and you must remember that freedom is the first condition of growth. What you do not make free, will never grow. The idea that you can make others grow and help their growth, that you can direct and guide them, always retaining for yourself the freedom of the teacher, is nonsense, a dangerous lie which has retarded the growth of millions and millions of human beings in this world. Let men have the light of liberty. That is the only condition of growth.⁹

5 Democracy and Spirituality

After the passing of Swami Vivekananda, we find Sri Aurobindo taking up some of the same themes and shedding new light on them. Shortly before his imprisonment in Alipore Jail he wrote in *Bande Mataram* of “the mighty opportunity which the impact of Europe gave” to India. Instead of merely rejecting European influence, Indians were to learn all they could and draw on their own spiritual resources to find the deeper truth behind Western ideals. India’s mission in the modern world is, in effect, to complete and fulfil the work begun by the French revolution. India is to lead humanity

to the true source of human liberty, human equality, human brotherhood. When man is free in spirit, all other freedom is at his command... When he is liberated from delusion, he perceives the divine equality of the world which fulfils itself through love and justice.... When he has perceived this divine equality, he is brother to the whole world, and in whatever position he is placed he serves all men as his brothers by the law of love, by the law of justice.

This perception of the real significance of liberty, equality and brotherhood and their innate harmony is the basis of what Sri Aurobindo saw as “the Asiatic reading of democracy which India must rediscover for herself before she can give it to the world.”¹⁰

A few years later, when he wrote *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he explored further the spiritual dimension of the revolutionary *mantra*. He ascribed its formulation in the eighteenth century to “a sort of primal intuition.”¹¹ But for that reason, its full implications were beyond the grasp of a rationalistic and materialistic age preoccupied with the external machinery of society and politics.

Liberty, equality and fraternity have become conflicting values because their inner meaning has been missed. A selfish liberty leads to competitive individualism and an exaggeration of inequalities. Therefore an acceptable degree of equality can only be achieved, it would seem, by restraining those who are inclined to use their freedom at the expense of others. This restraint, if carried too far, may undermine the vigour of a free society. A sense of fraternity might be expected to act as a natural deterrent to the misuse of freedom. But the passion for fraternity or collective identity tends to do more than that. It may unduly limit the liberty of individuals by imposing conformity within the group. It also commonly degenerates into tribalism in relation to other groups.

Sri Aurobindo found the solution to this dilemma in a reinterpretation of all three terms, but especially in a new understanding of the last of them, which he saw to be the key. The function of fraternity should be to counteract the egoism that brings liberty into collision with equality. But if it does this by subordinating the individual ego to the collective ego, the result can be an intolerable restriction on the legitimate demand for freedom. Besides, the brotherhood of any narrow community becomes a cause of strife with other communities, creating an explosive situation in today’s global village.

What is needed, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a sense of human brotherhood that “is not a matter either of physical kinship or of vital association or of intellectual agreement.”¹² Belonging to something deeper in us which may be called the soul, this can create “a psychological oneness not dependent upon any intellectual or outward uniformity”.¹³ On this basis, adopting the most positive meaning of freedom and a spiritual interpretation of equality, the terms become complementary and inseparable:

When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its self-development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being. When it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the same soul, the same godhead in all human beings. When it strives for brotherhood, it is founding that equal

freedom of self-development on a common aim, a common life, a unity of mind and feeling founded upon the recognition of this inner spiritual unity. These three things are in fact the nature of the soul; for freedom, equality, unity are the eternal attributes of the Spirit.¹⁴

6 Oneness in Diversity

In an age marked by the clash of divisive identities, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, “It makes a difference how we choose to see ourselves.”¹⁵ The choice of how one sees oneself — one’s identity — is the most basic exercise of freedom. I may see myself first and foremost as a human being, not allowing any lesser identity to narrow my self-perception. But included in this primary identity I also have a number of other identities as a member of various large or small subdivisions of the human race. The endless possible variety of these gives human life much of its richness. But the hardening of the boundaries of limited identities to the detriment of the sense of our common humanity causes antagonism among communities. Individually also, a too rigid identity fixed from birth and imposed by society can become a prison from which the inborn urge for liberty compels us to seek escape.

In India it has been held, from time immemorial, that all are embodiments of the one Self (Atman). *Ekatva*, the oneness of existence, is central to the teaching of the ancient scriptures. Linked with it are the companion ideas of *mukti* or inner freedom and *samatā*, the equality of all as manifestations of one infinite Reality. If we choose to see ourselves in such terms, this vision of oneness will give spiritual depth and intensity to the growing idea and feeling of human unity. The sense of global identity which is emerging on this increasingly interconnected planet will become more living and effective.

If India’s resurgence is to have a genuinely transformative impact on the world, that impact is likely to be connected with the spread of this kind of self-perception, which may be summed up in the word spirituality. Spirituality is by no means unique to India, but it has been cultivated there for millennia with unparalleled persistence, passion and insight.

Needless to say, the influence of Indian spirituality on the world would depend on the fate of spirituality in modern India itself. It might be argued that spirituality is the last thing India needs today, that it will take the country back to the past rather than forward to the future, that it will be confused with religion, that religions quarrel and that Indians would do better after all to stick to secular ideas borrowed from the West. But perhaps India and the world are Westernized enough already and could benefit from some Easternizing to set right the balance. In any case, the failure to distinguish divisive religious conservatism from the liberating and unifying force of spirituality is an error that ought to be corrected rather than unthinkingly indulged.

It might seem unrealistic to expect spirituality to have a practical effect on the world we live in. No doubt, masses of people are not going to rise very soon to the heights attained by the ancient Rishis or a Sri Ramakrishna or Sri Aurobindo. But if it is true that freedom, equality and unity are the nature of the soul, it is reasonable to suppose

that these inner realities can come to the surface and reshape the collective life, as has happened often enough in the case of individuals. The question then is whether the time has come when such a collective change is feasible. This question can be answered only by making the attempt.

Sri Aurobindo hoped to see a renaissance in India “governed by the principle of spirituality”. At the same time he clarified that by spirituality he did not mean “the moulding of the whole type of the national being to suit the limited dogmas, forms, tenets of a particular religion”. He added that “clearly such an attempt would be impossible, even if it were desirable, in a country full of the most diverse religious opinions”.

Spirituality, he went on to say, “is much wider than any particular religion”.¹⁶ At the time when he was writing, the neologism “Hindutva” (Hinduness) was not yet in circulation. The notion of Hindu nationalism was in the air, however. Sri Aurobindo unequivocally distanced himself from this idea and stated explicitly that he did “not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions”.¹⁷ Not Hindutva, but Ekatva — oneness — should be the ideal.

For many centuries the characteristically Indian recognition of the unifying factor of spirituality as the essence of religion permitted the extraordinary religious variety of the subcontinent to flourish with remarkably little friction. India’s irrepressible spiritual tendency may yet reassert itself in an even more dynamic way than before and play a decisive role in overcoming the many challenges the country still faces. It would be short-sighted to limit our expectations from this vast people who are the heirs to such a splendid past and possess an incalculable potential for the future.

References and Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006), p. 47.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 474.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 475–77.
4. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), vol. 9, p. 272.
5. The same idea underlies Sri Aurobindo’s unfinished epic *Ilion*. In “The Book of the Gods” (*Ilion* [Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1989], p. 103), Zeus foretells the course of events as he addresses the other gods on the eve of the fall of Troy:

Troy that displaced with her force and her arms the luminous ancients,
Sinks in her turn by the ruder strength of the half-savage Achaians.
They to the Hellene shall yield and the Hellene fall by the Roman.
Rome too shall not endure, but by strengths ill-shaped shall be broken,
Nations formed in the ice and mist, confused and crude-hearted.
So shall the darker and ruder always prevail o’er the brilliant
Till in its turn to a ruder and darker it falls and is shattered....
So shall it last till the fallen ages return to their greatness.
For if the twilight be helped not, night o’er the world cannot darken;
Night forbidden how shall a greater dawn be effected?
6. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 4, p. 368.
7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 6, p. 86.

8. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 170, 191, 182, 196.
9. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, p. 115.
10. Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram: Political Writings and Speeches, 1890-1908, II*, vol. 7 of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2002), pp. 931–32.
11. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998), p. 298.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
15. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 148.
16. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2004), p. 33.
17. Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin: Political Writings and Speeches, 1909–1910*, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), p. 304.