

Sri Aurobindo's Views On Individual And Society

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Abstract: Society is an important institution since the history of humanity. It may not have an independent existence apart from the humans. But humans depend on society for existence. Since man is a social animal, humans are equipped to live in society. Institutions like family, school, community, state etc. are all part of human development. It is a general notion that society is to serve humans. Men need to conform to the norms of the society. But there are conflicts happen between men and society. Few men rebel against the prevailing norms of the society and in the process transform the society. Others continue to suppress their own desires and motives to remain an active part of the society. It is an important issue to be addressed in today's life. How should a man live in society while balancing the personal as well as the group interests? In the paper, we shall see how Sri Aurobindo views the relationship between Individual and Society.

Keywords: Collective, Collectivism, Individualism, Society, Social Law, Sri Aurobindo.

I. SOCIETY

Society is a group of people who persistently interact with one another. It can be a group of people sharing under the same political authority or sharing same cultural expectations. The individuals may have distinct relationships with others in a society. There are various institutions within a society that helps men to interact with one another. Society is an umbrella term for all these institutions. These include family, school, nation etc. It is definitely formed by men hence should not have independent existence apart from men. But sociologists have given different theories to explain society and its interaction with men.

Emile Durkheim was the first sociologist who explained that social things exist external to humans. One cannot neglect the existence of social phenomena. Social institutions and social forms outlive the particular individuals hence they must have their own existence. He explained the solidarity among individuals in a social group with mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. In Mechanical solidarity, individualism is minimized and individuals are subsumed within the collective group. In Organic Solidarity, the social cohesion is achieved with increasing economic interdependence. However, critics argued that Durkheim's approach to the society lacked the explanation of differences and conflicts. As per him, there is no antagonism between individual and society. Some critics argue that the theory does not have enough room for individual creativity. It also states that the social institutions and forms have needs and purposes just like individual persons.

It is to be explained how a society exists when all the individuals are trying to pursue their own paths and through selfish motives at the expense of the society or others? Thomas Hobbes answered this saying the social institution like state provided security to individuals from external aggression and from other individuals. In return, individual allowed the state to exercise power over them. Talcott Parson rejected this thesis saying that the individuals are connected in the society through positive motives and not through fear. According to him the rules of the society are not something external, but are governed by moral laws and are internalized by the individuals. However, Parson did not explain the roots of conflicts and social change within the society. Post that Robert Marton and later Jeffery Alexander tried to explain but none of them could satisfactorily explain the reason for conflicts within society.

It is a fact that there are conflicts between individuals and groups or social institutions. It can be extended even to individual vs state conflicts as the state is also one of the social institutions. The present information age has created this conflict all more important and critical.

Earlier the society was limited to physical interactions with others. With the advent of social media, there are virtual societies. In physical society, individuals have limited options of filtering the content they get from society. They cannot control much of what they want to see or hear in the actual society. But in the virtual world of social media, each individual has created their own virtual world. They can choose the people with whom they want to interact. They can filter out the content which they don't believe in. This has limited individual's exposure to the opposite or alternate views on any subjective fields. This increases individualistic trends within society. Good or bad, most of the social media users do not want to conform to the traditional societal rules. Rather they want to follow the rules defined within the virtual society i.e. social media. Those rules may be detrimental for their individual life, but to remain in the trend or to conform to the rules of virtual society, individuals sacrifice their own life to some extent. Even though it looks like virtual society makes an individual too individualistic, the constant urge to follow the virtual norms also make them collectivist. It is not different from the existing society where people would move between individualism and collectivism.

II. INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

In individualism, an individual self needs to survive with the help of others and many times at the expense of others. Every living organism exists by struggling with the surrounding environment. The opposite is collectivism. In collectivism, the individual self is to be sacrificed for the good of the group. This is due to the modern development of scientific knowledge that has gone in the root of all things.

Science also says that individual life is best secured by association with others. Nature seeks to preserve not the individual but a group of individuals. Aggressive self-affirmation is not helping the growth of individuals.

Individualism and collectivism rooted in subjectivism and objectivism respectively. Both subjectivism and objectivism start from the same data. Objectivism takes the external and mechanical view of the whole problem. Based on the reason, laws or rules are formulated. These laws or rules are made separate entities, independent of the individual. This entity has authority to rule over the individuals. For example the state is taken up as a real entity. It has its own practical utility. Even Though these laws or rules are identified and formulated by individuals, these are considered as an outside entity. This is objectivism where group takes precedence over the individuals. Certain laws or rules are coercively applied to members of society. Over time these laws or rules need modification with the changing need of humans according to the age. In earlier times, there were no rules or laws regarding the usage of social or internet media. But in the last decade or two, most governments have formulated rules regarding privacy of individuals and security of personal data over social media. The rules and laws of the collective need to be dynamic.

Subjectivism proceeds from within. Everything is from the point of view of a containing and developing self-consciousness. All the laws are within and not outside. Reason and will are for self-recognition and self-affirmation. Reason and will are the means for the self by which we recognise and realise ourselves. Whole impulse of subjectivism is to live by the self, to see the self, to live out the truth of the self. This leads to overly selfish persons. It is detrimental to the social institutions many times. It can lead to destroying the very social fabric that supported the individual to grow. It has been observed that people in power often exploit the individuals within a social institution for their own selfish motives. They often call for forfeiting individual rights for the good of the society. While such people achieve their own motives at the expense of the society or social institution. The current issue of corruption in many government or non government departments is rooted in this.

There has to be a balance between subjectivism and objectivism or collectivism. Subjectivism should move beyond and look for the true higher Self that is greater than mind. "The ideal human existence, personal and social, would be its progressive transformation into a conscious out-flowering of the joy, power, love, light, beauty of the transcendent and universal spirit". Subjective periods of human development to be the most fruitful and creative. Here man looks inwards and finds his destiny. Sri Aurobindo moves subjectivism from materialistic dimension to spiritual dimension.

Life is infinite and contains innumerable possibilities. With the Matter, the available variations are limited. There will be some variations but those are within a given type or species. It follows the general laws of development or variations. But

as life develops, the mind will have innumerable variations. All of them will follow a general law but also follows individual law of his being[2].

Individual man is distinguished from the other creatures due to his greater power of individuality. It enables him to know more and more of himself, his individual law of being. It enables the man to free up his will to understand the law of the Universal Will. Man can understand the various laws of nature through this. He can control the elements and uses them for his own purpose. It also enables the man to go beyond the mentality to open the mind for the Absolute from which his mind, life and body proceed. The goal for the man is to become one with the Spirit which expresses itself in Nature. It is the destiny for man and the world. It is an object of his individual and social existence.

Individual man works primarily to achieve this end. But he cannot do this alone. He needs help from the above, the help from Divine. He also needs help from his fellow beings. All the events happening around the man help him to achieve this end. These events can be strife also. Man can use these events to use or misuse his freedom. The Universal Will can overrule this however. The fellow beings around can help him to achieve this by association and union or by strife and opposition. He doesn't achieve this destiny for the individual human being but for all the fellow beings. Individual destiny is not the goal for development. This can be compared to what Buddha said that even though he has achieved enlightenment, he will strive to work until each of the human achieves enlightenment.

All society then must be providing each individual the condition of life and growth so that each of them can travel towards the Divine according to his/her individual capacity. The same Divine expression should be expressed in normal life. Freedom and harmony are the two most important principles to reach this destination. Freedom implies freedom of the individual, group or race. Harmony of these individuals, groups or races are required for a healthy progression. These two principles however are difficult to apply as we have seen in the history of mankind. There has always been strife between individuals and groups. Last few centuries saw the colonization of American, African and Asian countries by European nations. And if a nation is free by itself, the powerful groups within a nation exploit weaker sections.

Man is the foremost expression of the Divine on the earth. All men are equal despite the differences of intellectual development or mental capabilities. Nothing of human development is of any meaning if this development is not helping the entire human kind for the march towards the Divine. Sri Aurobindo refers to the concept of Loksangraha which eventually described this only. All human actions should be done to help achieve this target.

Each individual human however needs to follow common aims. These aims should be according to his own nature. The group cannot dictate the terms and condition of these aims. We have seen that Churches, religious sects, Shastras provide certain rules regarding spiritual salvation. Each human must understand that these rules can help him initially. But he has to move forward with his own laws. Man needs to exceed these rules. This doesn't imply that rules are not important. These are required but as a servant to mankind. Often these rules are applied forcefully or mechanically. Rules can be used to make the man obey as a subject to certain individuals. These rules are instruments for human development. It can be broken or rejected once their use is over for the individual. The rules must not be a burden to be carried by individuals[3]. However man also needs to take cooperation from the other fellow beings. Social norms are important initially but in the end each human must formulate their own rules and norms. The rules should be formulated for spiritual development.

Sri Aurobindo points to an important matter still very relevant in present times. Any religion or spiritual order prescribes certain rules and rituals to be followed by adherents. There are certain sections of people who wholeheartedly reject rituals. They reject them as they think it blocks or will block the spiritual progress. Other sections support these rituals without any concern for spiritual realization. They follow these rituals blindly. Both these sections go to the extreme often. Sri Aurobindo gives a good middle ground. The rituals are useful for any person new to the higher life. But individuals are not limited within the rituals and rules. Once an individual attains higher life, rules and rituals are of no use for them and they may be rejected.

But that doesn't mean the rules are to be thrown away. Just like in formal education, we pass and progress to the higher grades from lower grades. While on higher grades, we do not reject the lower grades as they contributed to our progress. The lower grades will still be useful for the others. Similar case is with the religious rituals and rules. Outright rejections of such rules are not warranted for. Different individuals may have different uses of the rituals. But let the spiritual

progress be not limited to the rituals. The two extremes of completely rejecting and blindly accepting the rituals and rules are not required.

III. SOCIAL INSTITUTION AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN HUMAN AND HUMANITY

Individual human beings also belong to a specific type of groups like race, nationality or of specific mental, vital, physical or spiritual type. But man also belongs to the large humanity. Man cannot be limited to the specific group type. Normal animals identify themselves with the group at large, it remains to be the subjection to the entire group. Man has a similar tendency however he also has the tendency to expand and to transcend the groupings and environment. The community or grouping is an intermediary between man and the larger humanity. Humanity is too large for man to keep in himself. Humanity and man have to live with each other. This is difficult for all the men hence the community or group needs to be an intermediary between man and humanity. This is at the cost of standing between man and humanity. If a group or society makes the claim that their sole aim is the growth of the men and thus takes control of his various possessions, takes precedence over the individual of the group, then it is not correct. It is also not correct for individual humans to live an egoistic life as it is an aberration and the deformation of truth.

The community is an aggregate of individual human lives. The rules are the general rules expressing the Self. A group or community cannot assert its idea forcefully on an individual man. Man has the right to defend himself against any such attempt, any such homogenization or regimentation of individuals for other nations or groups or communities. The right is not only for the sake of his own individuality but for the sake of the whole humanity. It is for the development of the world and the fulfillment of the destiny of mankind[4].

This right does not mean that an individual or nation should not interact with other individuals or nations. A nation or group cannot grow without interacting with the other groups or nations. The ideas, principles, materials should be exchanged with others. However these ideas should be changed according to one's own nature. Those should be assimilated according to his own free will and consciousness. Individual's development should be done from within as it is the best condition for growth. If any rules or principles are thrust upon him from outside he will not grow. On the contrary, thrusting the principles from outside is a menace or threat to his individual existence.

Individual's own laws are perfect for him but he should respect other individuals' laws and growth. One should aid and be aided by others for growth. Similarly all the nations or groups should grow from within according to its own nature, rules and laws. But those should also respect, aid and be aided by other nations and groups. They should also respect the individual and be aided by them also.

The law of humanity is to grow towards the Divine by taking advantage of its constituent individual's growth. It should work towards the goal when the whole of humanity becomes one divine family in real and not just in an ideal. Even if it may not become a divine family but it should succeed in unifying itself, respect, aid and be aided by the free growth and activities of its individuals and constituent aggregates.

This is the ideal law that humanity has never yet achieved. It will take a long time before it achieves. Man has not yet become perfect to follow this rule naturally. He is still compelled by group rules or principles. He lacks the flexibility of knowledge or purity of temperament to follow this. Sri Aurobindo hopes that in present time knowledge is spreading rapidly. People need to know others, even through compulsion. There is a chaotic unity right now. This law will help to balance between subjectivism and objectivism, individualism and collectivism.

IV. CONCLUSION

As per Sri Aurobindo, society is a means for the individual's development. Hence it is the responsibility of the society or social institutions to provide a necessary environment through rules and regulations. In the present times however, so called social institutions often have become roadblock for human upliftment and spiritual development. Rather than clearing the people's mind, social institutions are creating more of them and thus taking away the individual far from the intellectual clarity. The religious institutions are taking away the freedom originally provided to individuals by religions themselves. Political class has become the exploiting agents under the guise of individual welfare.

The formation of social institutions should be revisited after a certain duration. Whether it is helping to achieve the original aim of social institutions or not? Society was formed to provide security and cooperative benefits to the

individuals. If those aims are not fulfilled then we may need to revisit the rules. It is not possible to remove society altogether as man is a social animal. But its norms must be changed according to circumstances and new scientific discoveries. Otherwise society can easily become stagnant without any new set of thoughts.

Since society is made of individuals, it is the responsibility of individuals to hold the social norms collectively. If individuals themselves are not ready to adhere to the rules it is impossible for social institutions to realize their aim. For. e.g. traffic rules are defined so that the movement on the road becomes smooth and safe for all, however some individuals are not following the rules and it is impossible to have a proper traffic flow. It is of the utmost importance that all follow the rules and norms regularly but without impacting the individual freedom. Sri Aurobindo clearly defines importance to individuals over society when society is hindering individual freedom to realize the Divine in life.

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