Chapter 1

From Individualism to Subjectivism

Section 1.1: The Turning point

To understand properly the present evolutionary and existential crisis of human kind, first of all one has to get a clear and distinct idea of the development and evolution of human civilization. If one is trying to grasp the crisis of today’s world in isolation, one will be in utter despair. Since any crucial problem or crisis, though it seems to be presented in a discrete way, is not at all any ‘Single’, isolated problem. What we are facing today—in whatever form it may be, social, political, economical, emotional, ecological so on and so forth – is a manifestation of systemic problems. They have inter-connection and interdependence. Actually these problems apparently rest in the complex web of socio-political economic relations. But the deepest root of these problems lies at the core of our innermost world. Any kind of worldly crisis fundamentally originates from our thoughts, mentality and attitudes. Actually there can never be any worldly crisis unless and until ‘We’ the human beings are in crisis. ‘We’ the people are vitiating the balance and harmony of external world and nature since we in practice are passing through breathtaking disharmony and discord. Till now we have been unable to reach any meeting point where all these problems of disharmony and discord not only get solved but dissolved in its true sense.

In order to probe the deepest root of this crisis, we need to abandon first of all prefixed ideas and adopt an extremely wide and deep vision to conceive properly the situatedness of the individual being in the context of human civilisation. In this chapter we shall try to encompass the journey of human civilisation from the notion of static social order and structure to the drastic, dramatic and dynamic patterns of change. Fritjof Capra in The Turning Point addresses this issue in this manner,
The Chinese, who have always had a thoroughly dynamic world view and a keen sense of history, seem to have been well aware of this profound connection between crisis and change. The term they use for 'crisis' – Wei-ji – is composed of the characters for 'danger' and 'opportunity'.

Capra also firmly holds the view that this ancient world view has a great impact on social change and transformation, since every transformation is obviously preceded by a variety of social indicators. One finds that many of these social indicators are especially representative of our present evolutionary crisis. Some of these are mental illness, violent crime, social disruption or disorder, increasing religious cultism – all of which have been witnessed in very recent times especially in the past decade.

Thus cultural transformation are essential steps for development of civilisations. Capra here indicates a vital point which is to be discussed in this chapter as we proceed.

The forces underlying this development are complex, and historians are far from having a comprehensive theory of cultural dynamics, but it seems that all civilisations go through similar cyclical processes of genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration.

In this context, we will discuss very briefly the views of two major thinkers, Arnold Toynbee and Pitirim Sorokin to conceive the cultural dynamics of a civilization along with its growth and decline.

Arnold Toynbee

Arnold Toynbee holds that a civilisation is nothing but a transition from a static condition to a dynamic activity. This transition may take place sometimes spontaneously, being influenced by some already existing civilisation or through the mutilation of one or more civilisations of older times. In his path-breaking work A Study of History, Toynbee calls the basic pattern of

---

2 cf. ibid, 7
every civilisation as “Challenge-and-response”. It is nothing but a mode of interaction. What he calls “challenge”, is generated from the natural or social environment. It ignites a creative response within a society or a social group to make a new venture in the process of civilisation. This civilisation after its successful growth gains a cultural momentum which carries the society beyond a state of equilibrium into an overbalance. Again this state of overbalance represents a fresh and new challenge with time. Toynbee has shown that the initial pattern of challenge-and-response repeats itself in each successive phase of growth. Any stage of successful response precedes a new disequilibrium which requires another new creative adjustment. Toynbee admits that whenever a culture lost its flexibility and started to become rigid in its social, cultural, moral, religious codes, actions and way of life in such a way that it could no longer be ready to cope with the changing situation, it would inevitably disintegrate.

However, the creative force of any civilisation has never been completely lost during the process of its decline. Capra here notices a significant point,

*Although the cultural mainstream has become petrified by clinging to fixed ideas and rigid patterns of behaviour, creative minorities will appear on the scene and carry on the process of challenge-and-response. The dominant social institutions will refuse to hand over their leading roles to these new cultural forces, but they will inevitably go on to decline and disintegrate, and the creative minorities may be able to transform some of the old elements into a new configuration. The process of cultural evolution will then continue, but in new circumstances and with new protagonists.*

Human Civilisation is nothing but a process. It is a process of growth or becoming of human psyche. Since it is a process, it always involves a distinct periodicity and each phase inevitably involves a period of transition before passing to a new phase. Fritjof Capra in the same book presents three consecutive transitions of civilisation, the first one is the decline of

---

3 ibid, 10
Patriarchy, the second transition is the decline of the fossil-fuel age and the third one is deeply connected with cultural values. It is now known as ‘Paradigm Shift’ – a profound change in the thoughts, perceptions and values that form a particular vision of reality. This new value system in practice comprises various thought-currents of Western Culture. In West the Scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution have left their striking contribution in this ‘Paradigm Shift’. One cannot be in a position to pass a value judgement regarding this current shift in values but has to accept the profound changes in the approaches towards life, morality, religion etc. Gradually it has also carved its own place in the cultural evolution of human civilisation. It is an undeniable fact of our time irrespective of Eastern and Western society, that there has occurred a massive fluctuation of value systems. These fluctuating value-systems in all dimensions, especially in the West, are described by the Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in his monumental work *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, written between 1937 and 1941.

**Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin**

Pitirim Sorokin admits three fundamental value-systems which prevail in the entire human civilisation. They are the Sensate, the Ideational and the Idealistic.

**Sensate Value System** – it holds that matter alone is real and the spiritual phenomena are nothing but another expression of matter. It also propounds that morality is not something Absolute, but relative and the sense-organ is the ultimate generating source of knowledge and truth.

**Ideational Value System** – It professes a completely different view of reality. It maintains that true reality always lies at a transcendental level. Since it is not within the scope of material level, the knowledge of that realm can never be obtained by sense-experience. It can always be achieved through inner experience. Sorokin points out that this type of culture as well as
value system can be traced in the East though in different forms and expressions in Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist culture.

**Idealistic Value System** – There is also an intermediate stage or value system between the value systems mentioned above. This stage can be called a synthetic stage. This stage of value system unhesitatingly admits that true reality always embraces the sensory and meta-sensory or super-sensory world of existence. The true reality is an all-embracing unity which admits the contributory participation of all aspects of life. The Greek flowering of the 5th and 4th Centuries B.C. and the European Renaissance are the perfect representatives of this value-system.

Sorokin analyses the present crisis we are facing today as the natural outcome of current sensate culture. The slow degeneration of an idealistic stage paves the way for the subsequent sensate stage. It was the slow decline of this ideational and idealistic epoch, in the 15th and 16th centuries that caused the rise of a new sensate period in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The value system of the Enlightenment, the scientific views of Descartes and Newton and the upheaval caused by the advent of technology in Industrial revolution had predominance in this sensate culture. Sorokin holds the view that since in the 20th Century these sensate cultures or value systems are facing the pressure of mutilation, we are witnessing the twilight of sensate culture. As a result of this we are going through an entire social upheaval of modern times. Sorokin admits this crisis as a great transitional phase which does not take place very often.

The present transitional phase has an extensive effect on entire human civilisation and involves the entire human world. As we just discussed, the transitional phases have a contributory effect on human life, existence and on the global process. It not only affects the
individual or societal life, it also contributes to change in our entire dimension of global life and livelihood. Thus Capra very aptly concluded,

As individuals, as a society, as a civilisation, and as a planetary ecosystem, we are reaching the turning point. 4

Section 1.2: Cycles of Human Society: Karl Lamprecht and Sri Aurobindo

The crisis of our time is due to a critical transition in the history of human civilisation. This transition is causing a greater change in human psychology, behavioural pattern as well as in man’s social life and existence. But is it a mechanical or material transition that civilisation passes through one epoch after another? Or is there any other cause responsible for this transition? Can this transitional phase be called an evolutionary step of history of mankind? The rise of modern science lays excessive stress on the physical discoveries and material aspects of life. Accordingly the history and social development of human kind have been sought to be explained by mere economic necessity and motive. Any sort of historical or sociological phenomena may appear to be explained by mere analysis of material data, laws, institutions, customs, economic factors and developments.

But at a certain point of time the all-sufficiency of matter to explain every non-material feature has begun to be questioned. Entire civilisation has been looking for a ‘factor’ which emancipates the whole perception of the material world from the obsession with physical science. So what is the nature of this factor that civilisation is in search for? Sri Aurobindo, in The Human Cycle, has sought to find out the essential factor of human civilisation as well as the journey of mankind.

4 ibid, p.15
In the monthly Philosophical review ‘Arya’ (1914) there appeared a series of essays entitled ‘The Psychology of Social Development’ in monthly instalments from August 1916 to July 1918. These instalments were revised slightly before *The Human Cycle* was brought out as a book in 1949. It will be entirely misleading for anybody to conceive this book as a separate and independent work. Rather this book also forms an inseparable part of his integral and unified scheme of thought.

Before probing into his main text it will be helpful for us to have a clear idea of its exact place in his scheme of Integral Philosophy in his own words at the close of the fourth year of the Arya’s publication (July 1918) and published under the title *The “Arya’s” Fourth Year*.

> Our original intention was to approach the synthesis from the starting point of the two lines of culture which divide human thought and are now meeting at its apex, the knowledge of the West and the knowledge of the East. ...... All philosophy is concerned with the relations between two things, the fundamental truth of existence and the forms in which existence presents itself to our experience. ...... Here the West and the East have followed divergent lines. The West has laid most emphasis on truth of life and for a time come to stake its whole existence upon truth of life alone, to deny the existence of Spirit or to relegate it to the domain of the unknown and unknowable; from that exaggeration it is now beginning to return. The East has laid most emphasis on truth of the spirit and for a time came, at least in India, to stake its whole existence upon that truth alone, to neglect the possibilities of life or to limit it to a narrow development...... ; the East too is beginning to return from its exaggeration. ...... Our view is that the antinomy created between them is an unreal one. Spirit being the fundamental truth of existence, life can only be its manifestation; Spirit must be not only the origin of life but its basis, its pervading reality and its highest and total result. But the forms of life as they appear to us at once its disguises and its instruments of self-manifestation.  

Sri Aurobindo primarily intends to show that the governing principle of individual life and existence can equally be applicable to the collective life and existence since both of them have a parallel curve of evolution to reach an identical aim.

---

In illustrating and explaining his social philosophy he was initially motivated by the writings of a German historian, Karl Lamprecht to whom he refers at the very beginning of his book.\(^6\)

Kishor Gandhi, one of the major commentators on Sri Aurobindo discusses this issue in his Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo And The New Age by showing the limitedness of Lamprecht’s thought in this way,

\[
\text{Lamprecht’s theory seems to have struck him as making a radical departure from the economic-materialistic view of history and social development, which had firmly entrenched itself in modern mind under the powerful influence of modern science, by putting forward a psychological and subjective view of history and social development. The theory itself, as elaborated by Lamprecht, was very inadequate, yet it marked a significant breakthrough in the stronghold of social and historical materialism.}^{7}\]

One should remember that after mentioning Lamprecht’s name and the social stages mentioned by him once at the beginning of The Human Cycle, there is no more any mention of him nor any further discussion on him. Sri Aurobindo develops his own theory independently and his theory and treatment of social development runs on its own lines. Sri Aurobindo has referred to Karl Lamprecht (1856 – 1915) as “an original intelligence” by whom in pre-war Germany the psychological theory of history began to emerge. Lamprecht was once a very powerful influence on European historians and social thinkers but now he seems to have sunk into absolute oblivion.

In the Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences there was an article written by Kust Breysig in which one can find the outline of Lamprecht’s main thesis as propounded in his most important work Deutche Geschichte (German History). Breysig further explains,

\[
\text{Lamprecht adapted to history the idea of evolution and used it to greatest advantage in his treatment of the great collective phenomenon of history. In this connection he developed the idea of a collective physical}\]

\(^6\) Sri Aurobindo read about Lamprecht’s idea of the social stages of society in an article by Guglielmo Salvadori published in the May/June 1916 issue of “The Hindustan Review”.

\(^7\) ibid.,20
condition for every age which like a diapason penetrates into every phase of human activity. In his *Deutsche Geschichte* he characterises the primitive period as the symbolic, the early Middle Ages as the typical, the latter Middle Ages as the conventional, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as the period of individualism, the age of romanticism and the industrial revolution as one of subjectivism and the most recent period as one of nervous tension (Reizbarkeit) \(^8\)

Sri Aurobindo in his *The Human Cycle* has accepted only the names of five stages of social cycle as propounded by Lamprecht. These cycles according to Sri Aurobindo are loaded with a very significant psychological interpretation and connotation. But Sri Aurobindo’s own interpretation and evaluation are altogether different from that of Lamprecht. In *The Human Cycle* he makes it more clear in unambiguous language by pointing out the shortcomings of Lamprecht’s own distinct psychological stages:

> Obviously, such classifications are likely to err by rigidity and to substitute a mental straight line for the coils and zigzags of Nature. The psychology of man and his societies is too complex, too synthetical of many-sided and intermixed tendencies to satisfy any such rigorous and formal analysis. Nor does this theory of a psychological cycle tell us what is the inner meaning of its successive phases or the necessity of their succession or the term and end towards which they are driving. ....... I will leave aside the Western thinker’s own dealings with his idea. The suggestive names he has offered us, if we examine their intrinsic sense and value, may yet throw some light on the thickly veiled secret of our historic evolution and this is the line on which it would be most useful to investigate. \(^9\)

**Section 1.3: Symbolic, Typal and Conventional Stage**

Sri Aurobindo, though he appreciated Lamprecht as an original mind, did not use his theory for his own philosophy. He only retained the suggestive names of the stages coined by Lamprecht. Sri Aurobindo developed a psychological interpretation of human society with its

---

\(^8\) *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* as quoted by Kishor Gandhi *in Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo And The New Age*, (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1991), 23

different stages (in the first six chapters of *The Human Cycle*) according to his own integral metaphysical view, which is quite different from Lamprecht’s interpretation.

**SYMBOLIC STAGE:** According to Sri Aurobindo, whenever we probe the primitive society irrespective of its culture, thought, customs, institutions, economic conditions we always find that there prevails a symbolic mentality which governs their thought, social customs and institutions. The question may be raised: ‘symbol’ of what? Sri Aurobindo maintains that the primitive society is always religious. Thus in general way the ordinary psyche has always been overwhelmed by the widespread imagination and intimate religious thought and feeling. The symbol represents ‘something’ which man feels to be present behind himself, his life and action, everything. This ‘something’ is so deep and vast that it can never be named or pinned down; it is a mystery brooding behind every sensible object and behaviour of the material world. All his religious and social institutions, every moment and each phase of his life are to him symbols through which he seeks to express what he knows or guesses of the mystic influences that lie behind his life and govern or at least intervene in its movements. The word “religious” in this context clearly does not have the common meaning connected with a dogmatic, institutional religion, but rather means what now we would call ‘spiritual’. To illustrate this truth more elaborately Sri Aurobindo refers to the Vedic age and its tradition in India, though it is not so easy to understand the far-off Vedic age because we no longer belong to that age and much has come in between. The religious institution of ‘sacrifice’ governs the entire society, and the ritual of the ‘sacrifice’ is at every turn and every detail mystically symbolic. As mentioned by Sri Aurobindo, the theory that there was nothing in the sacrifice except propitiation of Nature-gods for the gaining of material prosperity and paradise is a misunderstanding by a later humanity which had already become profoundly affected by an intellectual and practical bent of mind. Thus it is not possible for the later humanity to conceive the inner truth of this mysticism and symbolism. Sri Aurobindo further illustrates,
From this symbolic attitude came the tendency to make everything in society a sacrament, religious and sacrosanct, but as yet with a large and vigorous freedom in all its forms..... The spiritual idea governs all; the symbolic religious forms which support it are fixed in principle; the social forms are lax, free and capable of infinite development. 10

TYPAL STAGE: From the age of symbolism, human society passes into the typal stage. This stage is strongly determined by the psychological and ethical principles. Even the religious and spiritual ideals are subordinated to the psychological and ethical principles. Religion becomes “a mystic sanction” for the ethical conduct, motive and principle in human society. Thus Religion, Dharma – all of these has been changed into other-worldly form. In the early Vedic period Religion has been the direct expression of the cosmic principle and played the part of a guiding principle of society. But gradually it has receded in the background and finally disappears from the practice and in the end from the theory of life. 11

This typal stage creates the great social ideals which remain impressed upon the human mind even when the stage itself has passed. The principal active contribution it leaves behind when it is dead is the idea of social honour. The honour of the Brahmin resides in purity, in piety, in a high reverence for the things of mind and spirit and a disinterested possession and exclusive pursuit of knowledge. The honour of the Kshatriya lies in courage, chivalry, strength, self-mastery, nobility of character and the obligations of that nobility. The honour of the Vaishya has been maintained by righteousness of dealing, mercantile trustworthiness, sound production, order, liberality and generosity. And the honour of the Shudra can be found in obedience, subordination, faithful service and in a disinterested attachment. Sri Aurobindo here aptly points out

...we have first the symbolic idea of the four orders, expressing – to employ an abstractly figurative language which the Vedic thinkers would not have used nor perhaps understood, but which helps best our modern

10 ibid, 10
11 ibid, 11
understanding—the Divine as knowledge in man, the Divine as power, the Divine as production, enjoyment, and mutuality, the Divine as service, obedience and work.  

Actually these divisions correspond to four cosmic principles. The wisdom conceives the order and principles of things. The power sanctions, upholds and enforces it. The harmony creates the arrangements of its different parts. And the work carries out the rest direct. (ibid, p.10) But in the later age, out of this idea there developed a firm but not yet rigid social order based primarily upon temperament and psychic type (guna) with a corresponding ethical discipline and secondarily upon the social and economic function (karma).

CONVENTIONAL STAGE: Naturally the typal stage passes into the conventional stage. The conventional stage in society is born, according to Sri Aurobindo, .... when the external supports, the outward expressions of the spirit or the ideal become more important than the ideal, the body or even the clothes more important than the person. Thus in the evolution of caste, the outward supports of the ethical fourfold order, – birth, economic function, religious ritual and sacrament, family custom, – each began to exaggerate enormously its proportions and its importance in the scheme.  

At first, birth does not seem to have been of the first importance in the social order, because the prevailing factor was faculty and capacity. Afterwards, as the type fixed itself, its maintenance by education and tradition became necessary and education and tradition naturally fixed themselves in a conventional rut. Thus the son of Brahmin came always to be looked upon conventionally as a Brahmin; birth and profession were together the double bond of the hereditary convention at the time when it was most firm and faithful to its own character. According to Sri Aurobindo, this rigid order once established, the maintenance of the ethical type passed from the first place to a tertiary place.  

Sri Aurobindo further highlights the character of this age as,

---

12 ibid, 10  
13 ibid, 11-12  
14 cf. ibid, 12
The tendency of the conventional age of society is to fix, to arrange firmly, to formalise, to erect a system of rigid grades and hierarchies, to stereotype religion, to bind education and training to a traditional and unchangeable form, to subject thought to infallible authorities, to cast a stamp of finality on what seems to it the finished life of man. The conventional period of society has its golden age when the spirit and thought that inspired its forms are confined but yet living, not yet altogether walled in, not yet stifled to death and petrified by the growing hardness of the structure in which they are cased.15

Thus, in the conventional age, the form prevails and the spirit recedes and diminishes. Then there arrives a period when the gulf between the convention and the truth becomes intolerable and there arise men of intellectual power, who rejecting either fiercely or with the calm light of reason strike at the walls of the prison-house of the conventional, typal world. According to Sri Aurobindo, it is then that the individualistic age of religion and thought is created; the Age of Protestantism has begun, i.e. the Age of Reason, the Age of Revolt, Progress and Freedom. It is a partial and external freedom, still betrayed by the conventional age that preceded it into the idea that the Truth can be found in outsides, and dreaming vainly that perfection can be determined by machinery. This is still a necessary passage to the subjective period of humanity through which man has to circle back towards the recovery of his deeper self and a new upward line or a new revolving cycle of civilisation.16

Section 1.4: Age of Individualism and Reason

Every civilisation carries within itself a gap between ideology and practice, but in the middle age or in the conventional age the gap was too wide to be bridged. In western world the idea of “Christian Commonwealth” was preached but actually there was a narrow provincialism and a constant struggle between church and state. The church though failing to resist its human failures, errors, internal conflicts, offered a unified and comprehensive conception of

15 ibid, 13
16 cf. ibid, 14
man and the universe. There was a single social structure, comprising clergy, nobility and common people. Each had been assigned with a specific function and social status. Moreover, education from the elementary level through the professional curriculum of the universities also followed a set pattern. Now in modern terms this age also had strengths and weaknesses of its own. First, there was psychological security for a large number of people. They never felt any reason to feel isolated or rejected since their religious (Christian) faith told them their role was divinely ordained. What was required from them was to live their own lives according to established custom. Secondly, most of the people belonged to a village, a guild, a town or a religious order absolutely based on sharing. Thirdly, though there existed a hierarchy of privilege and power in this world, but all souls were considered equal before God since there was a belief that whatever was was the will of God.

It is noteworthy that in Western Civilisation the medieval pattern had begun to dissolve by 1400, and by 1650 a change had come into being. Thomas H. Greer in his A Brief History of Western Man portrays this change with his brief but illuminating exposition. Unlike the Roman World, medieval civilisation did not ‘fall’. There were no waves of invading barbarians, no collapse of civic order and commerce. On the contrary, Western Europe at the ‘close’ of the Middle Ages displayed a remarkable vitality and an expansive zeal. It moved without a perceptible break, across the threshold of ‘modern’ times. So we cannot point to any historical event or series of events and say, “Here ended the Middle Ages.” Clearly, though, the pattern of Western life changed profoundly. And the beginnings of this change were present as early as 13th Century.  

17 cf. Thomas H. Greer, A Brief history of Western Man (USA : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 233
The seeds of each new age had been sown in the past or old age. Will Durant discusses an interesting but significant incident to point to the passing of the medieval age to the age of Renaissance in his *Heroes of History*:

...... There, in 1348, the great Plague of the Black Death came, and killed half the 100,000 population. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* begins with a frightful description of the mortality: almost every family in Florence was doomed to see member after member dying, watching the infected one leaving home to go and die nameless in the street. Boccaccio made his *Decameron* take its plan from the plague: seven young ladies, related or neighbours, meet in a church and agree to leave Florence together, with their servants, and to stay at some country villa till the plague should wear itself out. As a pleasant way to mitigate boredom, they invite three of their male friends to accompany them. They settle in a spacious country chateau, and plan to while away the hours by having each tell a story on each day. As they remained together ten days, they told a hundred tales. Hence, Boccaccio entitled his collection *Decameron*, which was Greek for ‘ten days’. Some of these novelle are crudely sensual, like that of the virile Masetto, who took care of an entire nunnery; some are stories of virtuous love, like that of the patient Griselda; some have a philosophical import, like the legend of the three equally precious rings, symbolising the Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan creeds. We gather that Boccaccio represented a middle class which was losing faith in a literal Christianity, even in the Christian moral code. 18

So, in its very infancy, the Renaissance was voting for delights and challenges of this earthly world instead of the hypothetical pleasures of a post-mortem paradise. The Renaissance restored not only the literature of classic antiquity, but equally its pursuit of a hedonistic freedom. It was in part a Pagan liberation of the senses after a thousand years of moral discipline resting on supernatural beliefs.

It is clear that for the medieval man, the world was a static, finite and well-ordered place. Everything within this world had a fixed function. Man had a contained life within which he was born. But this complacent picture was vehemently shattered by the Renaissance. Two opposing trends of thought gradually emerged. On the one hand, there is great confidence in

the potency and ingenuity of man who now evolves to take the centre of the stage. But in another way, man’s position in the universe becomes less commanding since the infinity of space started to play its role in the imagination of Philosophers. These views are briefly outlined in the writings of the German Cardinal Nicolas Casunus (1401-1464), and in the following century become incorporated in the Copernican system. Similarly, there is a return to the old view of Pythagoras and Plato that the world is built on a mathematical pattern. All the speculations according to Russell,

...... upset the existing order of things and undermined the old established authorities both in the clerical and secular sphere. 19

According to Sri Aurobindo,

An 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 typal figure. 20

Men of that conservative age at a certain point of time are compelled to admit that all the old general standards have lost their inner worth and are no longer able to give any inner help. So it is the Individual who has to rise against all such conventions, customs, beliefs and practices to get the Truth which must be real and tangible for their earthly living and also makes him/her help to find out his/her own truth of being. From the very beginning of the chapter titled as ‘The Age of Individualism and Reason’ in The Human Cycle, Sri Aurobindo very pertinently mentions that it is in Europe where the age of individualism first flourishes. Though the East has entered into it by contemporary influence, it is very important to remember that the East did not enter the age of individualism by any kind of original impulse. We shall discuss this issue very shortly. In the individualistic age Europe discovered the truths of physical and outward facts of life through analytical reasoning for the pursuit of practical utility in human life.

20 op. cit., Sri Aurobindo, 15
The individualistic age of Europe was from its very beginning a strong revolt of reason. It was always a questioning, a denial of last dark hours of the conventional age. Sri Aurobindo puts it as ‘historically inevitable.’ Let us probe the different spheres of human worldly existence where this age finds the stamp of the ‘cramping bonds of a mechanical conventionalism.’

Religion

In religion, in the conventional age the individual always finds an imposition of religious beliefs, customs etc. without having any practical utility or verification. All religious truths are solely based on the ancient books, the infallible dictum of Pope or priest, the tradition of church etc. The learned casuistry of schoolmen and Pundits, Conclaves of ecclesiastics, Heads of monastic orders – all of them have attained the station of unquestionable tribunals. They are there just to judge and pronounce a verdict against any sort of single individual violation of religious scripture, but none of them seems to think or allow others to think, to search, test, prove or inquire.

Science and Knowledge

The excessive reliance on fixed authorities in the conventional age also makes progressive scientific knowledge either banned, punished, persecuted or stamped as obsolete. Whatever is true in the prescriptions of old authorities no longer has any real value because its words are learnedly or ignorantly repeated but, according to Sri Aurobindo, is longer practised or lived in its real sense except by a few.

Politics

An individual in politics also finds everywhere the reign of divine rights, established privileges, ‘sanctified tyrannies’ which are naturally associated with an oppressive power which too has been justified by long standing prescription of established authority.

Social Order
In the social order he finds an equally stereotyped reign of convention. Here also rule the same fixed disabilities, fixed privileges, the self-regarding arrogance of the high and ‘the blind prostration of the low’, while these old functions which might have been justified at one time are either not performed at all or badly performed without any sense of obligation and meaning.

Behind all these discrete attitudes towards life the one individual quest was always there. The individual has raised his voice in revolt against all sorts of authoritarian claims or the command of God or the immortal order of human life. He has to judge all the immemorial order of which the conventional age speaks and verify whether they are really compatible with the facts of the world, with his/her sense of right, judgement of truth and his/her experience of reality. He/she stands there to destroy the older, perilous social security, political order and religious tradition because

"...to destroy is his mission, to destroy falsehood and lay bare a new foundation of truth." 21

Again in society and politics an individual started with a perception originated from the ‘exasperation of suffering or from an awakened sense of general oppression, wrong, injustice and the indefensibility of the existing order’. It is noteworthy that it was the religious motive which led mostly as a first social upheaval, then came the social and political movement. The movement of religious freedom in Europe took its stance firstly on a limited, then on an absolute right of the individual experience and illumined reason to ascertain, if possible, the true meaning of the inspired scripture and true Christian ritual and order of the church whereas in the East a movement occurred through a series of religious reformers, illumined saints and also through a new wave of belief with their appropriate social and cultural

21 ibid, 17
practice. Atheism and secularism – both these attitudes were the inevitable and predestined goal of the West. According to Sri Aurobindo,

At first questioning the conventional forms of religion, the mediation of the priesthood between God and the soul and the substitution of Papal authority for the authority of the Scripture, it could not fail to go forward and question the Scripture itself and then all supernaturalism, religious belief or suprarational truth no less than outward creed and institute. 22

Renaissance and the Individual Development

There is first the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. The Renaissance regenerates on the one hand the free curiosity of the Greek mind, its eagerness for rational laws and intellectual scrutiny of the external facts by individual reasoning and on the other the practical sense of the Romans with their ordering of life in harmony with the utility and principle of things.

With the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 the vast world of art and learning of ancient Greek culture which had been preserved in Eastern Europe was made available to the Christian West. Access to these classical treasures marked the end of the medieval synthesis and the emergence of the Renaissance, a period of rebirth of classical learning and the emergence of a new mode of consciousness which extended into the Sixteenth Century.

With the recovery of classical languages, literature, art, history and philosophic and scientific texts, there came a revival of the spirit of Greek humanism, in opposition to the prevailing Christian religiosity of the Middle Ages. Classical Greek humanism, which had been man-centred and nature-centred, now inspired many of the artists and intellectuals of the Renaissance to glorify man and celebrate the works of human genius, and to repudiate

22 ibid, 19
strenuously the prevailing Christian themes of the worthlessness of man and the insignificance of nature in relation to the supernatural world.

The humanist concept of the dignity of man is central to the Renaissance mode of consciousness, which appeared first in Italy, later in northern Europe and England. With the coming of the Renaissance there emerges an expression of humanistic faith in man, in his power to direct his life and the life of his society toward freedom and justice, together with the sense that this power, which had been a possession of the individual in the ancient Greek world, had been lost in the world of medieval Christendom.

The Renaissance was marked not only by the revival of classical learning and humanism but also by many other developments. From a philosophic standpoint, the most significant development in the Renaissance and its discoveries is a new, revolutionary view of truth. In opposition to the scholastic view that human truth is subordinate to a divine, supernatural and transcendent reality which is forever inaccessible to human reason, the shift is to the new view that human reason has the power to know the truth of reality and that reality is neither divine nor transcendent. Especially did this new view influence astronomy which was reborn in the fifteenth century.

The ferment of Renaissance humanism is reflected in its wide range in art, literature, paintings etc. Artists discovered the human body again and began to study the physiology, the muscles and bones, of the human body in motion. It produced very great men, such as Leonardo, Michelangelo and Machiavelli. Michelangelo’s ‘David’ and Leonardo’s ‘Last Supper’ are examples of the highly developed Renaissance portraiture of the natural human body in action. Renaissance reconfirmed the dignity of man as a rational and sentient being, rightfully claiming to know and to enjoy the world independently. Bertrand Russell in *The
History of Western Philosophy expresses his own assessment regarding this movement in a very straightforward and distinct manner.

It liberated educated men from the narrowness of medieval culture, and, even while still a slave to the worship of antiquity, it made scholars aware that a variety of opinions had been held by reputable authorities on almost every subject. By reviving the knowledge of the Greek world, it created a mental atmosphere in which it was again possible to rival Hellenic achievements, and in which individual genius could flourish with a freedom unknown since the time of Alexander. 23

The Renaissance developed basically three major traits in the development of human learning: (i) it discovered a new world of the past, and interpreted it in a different way from that of the scholastics as furnishing an ideal of life chiefly in its non-intellectual and aesthetic aspects, (ii) it revealed nature and (iii) Neo-Platonism was replaced by Aristotle’s logic and metaphysics. Thus, one can find from these traits that Renaissance laid immense emphasis on the individual than on a supposed unity of knowledge. Moreover, the individual was no longer divided as the laity and the clergy and he was no longer to be determined by the church. Education was liberalised, as physical and aesthetic culture was considered as important as a study of the manuscripts. The new morality was based on freedom as opposed to religious austerity and asceticism. The new study of nature, of Aristotle’s Physics independent of his metaphysics, developed a taste for the concrete and the real, and produced the realistic renaissance in Art. Thus was laid the foundation of individualism in education in modern Europe. 24

23 Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (Great Britain : George and Allen Unwin Ltd., 1965), 490
24 cf. Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee, Personality and the Social Sciences (New Delhi : Rupa & Co., 2004), 130
Sri Aurobindo here points out an alarming aspect of individualism after admitting its positive impetus in European Civilisation. He says,

Manifestly, the unrestrained use of individual illumination or judgement without either any outer standard or any generally recognisable source of truth is a perilous experiment for our imperfect race. It is likely to lead rather to a continual fluctuation and disorder of opinion than to a progressive unfolding of the truth of things. No less, the pursuit of social justice through the stark assertion of individual rights or class interests and desires must be a source of continual struggle and revolution and may end in an exaggerated assertion of the will in each to live his own life and to satisfy his own ideas and desires which will produce a serious malaise or a radical trouble in the social body.  

So, the question obviously arises: what is the way out to get rid of the trouble originating from the excessive assertion of individual desires and freedom in society? Sri Aurobindo mentions two mostly needed solutions of this problem. First, every individualistic age has to find out a general standard of Truth to which the individual judgement deliberately or unhesitatingly subscribes without facing any physical constraint or any kind of irrational impositions from outside. Second, this age must be founded on a universally admissible truth and order. Thus Sri Aurobindo in The Human Cycle strongly defends the upsurge of speculative and scientific reason in European civilisation for their attempt to find out a standard social law for the pursuit of a practicable social order. Moreover, this scientific truth was independent of any doubtful scripture or fallible human authority. The attempt to govern and organise human life by verifiable science, by a law, a truth of things, an order and principles which all can observe and verify in their ground and fact to which therefore all may freely and must rationally subscribe, is the culminating movement of European civilisation. But Sri Aurobindo also throws some light on another side of the issue which has immense importance in determining the fate of individualism. The fulfilment and success of the individualistic age lies in its scientific attempt and discovery of universal laws, which

---

25 op. cit., Sri Aurobindo, 19-20
ultimately governs human social life. But it is not so easy and simple to make this statement blindly. In its success, there awaits the cause of its end also. But why? According to Sri Aurobindo,

*For this discovery by individual free-thought of universal laws of which the individual is almost a by-product and by which he must necessarily be governed, this attempt actually to govern the social life of humanity in conscious accordance with the mechanism of these laws seems to lead logically to the suppression of that very individual freedom which made the discovery and the attempt at all possible. In seeking the truth and law of his own being the individual seems to have discovered a truth and law which is not of his own individual being at all, but of the collectivity, the pack, the hive, the mass.*

As a result of this one finds that there prevails an irresistible urge for a new order of society based on rigid economic or governmental socialism. In such society the individual is deprived of his own freedom for the sake of the mass and has to accept unquestionably the well-ordered mechanism of the state throughout his/her life. For further illustration Sri Aurobindo makes us notice in this regard another vital point in *The Human Cycle*,

*We already see a violent though incomplete beginning of this line of social evolution in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Communist Russia. The trend is for more and more nations to accept the beginning of a new order, and the resistance of the old order is more passive than active—it lacks the fire, enthusiasm and self-confidence which animates the innovating idea.*

The great impact of the individualistic age must be universally admitted in two ways, first, the democratic conception of the well-being and right of every individual as members of the society for the fulfilment of their potentials and the development of which they are individually capable. Secondly, there is a deeper truth which individualism has discovered: the individual is not merely a social unit. He is not merely a building block of the collective

---

26 ibid, Sri Aurobindo, 21
27 ibid, Sri Aurobindo, 21
human pack. His right and claim to live and grow is not entirely founded on his social work and function. He is something in himself, an independent or autonomous being, who has to fulfil his/her own individual truth and law as well as his/her assigned part in the truth and law of the collective existence. In the past ages the demand of individual freedom for thought, will and conscience for which society had an immense distrust and disregard, was either suppressed or was relegated to the purely ascetic, spiritual field. Thus individualistic age of mankind is an inevitably intermediate stage of mankind, for rediscovering the substantial truths and thoughts of life which have been overshadowed by the falsehood of the conventional age.

Section 1.5: Towards the Subjective Age

Bertrand Russell in *History of Western Philosophy* identifies a significant problem of Renaissance which points to the necessity for the coming of another age, i.e. the Subjective age.

*The political conditions of the Renaissance favoured individual development, but were unstable; the instability and the individualism were closely connected, as in ancient Greece. A stable social system is necessary, but every stable system hitherto devised has hampered the development of exceptional artistic or intellectual merit.*

So what we need is a stable social system which will provide enough space and freedom to the individual to make progress. But why did Renaissance fail to provide such a stable social system in spite of having so many upswings in literary, artistic or aesthetic field? According to Russell, the Renaissance was never a popular movement. It was the movement of a very small number of scholars, artists who were encouraged by liberal patrons, especially the

---

28 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Great Britain : George and Allen Unwin Ltd., 1965), 490
Medici and the humanist Popes. So for these patrons this movement had a little success. However, we find a disastrous effect in the field of religion and morality which has been discussed by many Western philosophers, historians like Bertrand Russell, Jacob Burckhardt etc. The first effect of the Renaissance can be noticed in the field of morality. As Russell points out, the old moral rules had lost their own relevance; moreover, majority of the rulers of states had maintained their positions by treachery and also by ruthless cruelty. Jacob Burckhardt illustrates it in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. People were really very afraid of each other at that time. So when cardinals were invited to dine at the coronation of the Pope, they brought their own wine and their own cup-beaver, for fear of poison. The evils of papal corruption were also there, but nothing was done about them. 29

At the beginning of the 16th Century, when the civilization of the Italian Renaissance had arrived at its highest pitch, a political destruction of the nation also became inevitable. There was a close connection between this political ruin and prevalent immorality. Jacob Burckhardt in his book tries to explain the situation by quoting another man without mentioning his name in the same book to illustrate further the scenario and also to make us understand the impact of the socio-political condition.

*We are individually highly developed; we have outgrown the limits of morality and religion which were natural to us in our underdeveloped state, and we despise outward law, because our rulers are illegitimate, and their judges and officers wicked men.* 30

We will not concentrate on a detailed analysis of the shortcomings or causes behind the failures of the Renaissance. This chapter is primarily focussing on the cycle of the human

---


30 ibid, 300
society, from the symbolic age to the subjective age. Burckhardt’s short but illuminating explanation helps us understand the necessity of the subjective age.

If we now attempt to sum up the principal features in the Italian character of that time, as we knew it from a study of the life of the upper classes, we shall obtain something like the following result. The fundamental vice of this character was at the same time a condition of its greatness, namely, excessive individualism. The individual first inwardly casts off the authority of a State which, as a fact, is in most cases tyrannical and illegitimate, and what he thinks and does is, rightly or wrongly, now called treason. The sight of victorious egotism in others drives him to defend his own right by his own arm. And while thinking to restore his inward equilibrium, he falls, through the vengeance which he executes, into the hands of the powers of darkness. .......

If therefore egotism in its wider as well as narrower sense is the root and foundation of all evil, the more highly developed Italian was for this reason more inclined to wickedness than the members of other nations of that time. 31

Section 1.6 : The coming of the Subjective Age

We can find several theories in the history of social philosophy for the explanation of the pattern and character of social change in various ways. These theories can be broadly classified in four groups.

1. The first group holds the view that social change is a ceaseless flux without any regular movement or any determinable pattern. Or it can be considered a haphazard movement without any discernible design in it.

2. The second group considers the social change as a constant cyclic rhythm without any upward or downward direction.

31 ibid, 318 – 319
3. The third group pictures social change not as a mere repetitive recurrence but a downward regressive movement of constant deterioration and downfall.

4. The fourth group considers social change as a constant upward movement of progress, either linear or cyclic.

Sri Aurobindo holds a quite different view. He maintains that the social change or development can never follow a continuous straight line, rather a series of cycles or spirals in which periods of progress alternate with shorter or longer periods of decline. Moreover, the periods of decline are not altogether periods of deterioration or loss but fruitful periods in which some necessary elements of perfection lacking in the earlier stages are worked out and in the new curve of progress are combined with the previous gains, temporarily kept in the background but not lost, - to realise a higher perfection. So to him,

*Human progress is very much an adventure through the unknown, an unknown full of surprises and baffling obstacles; it stumbles often, it misses its way at many points, it cedes here in order to gain there, it retraces its steps frequently in order to get more widely forward. The present does not always compare favourably with the past; even when it is more advanced in the mass, it may still be inferior in certain directions important to our inner or outer welfare. ...... Even in failure there is a preparation for success: our nights carry in them the secret of a greater dawn. This is a frequent experience in our individual progress, but the human collectivity also moves in much the same manner.*

Hence the inherent aim, effort and justification of the development of an individualistic age lies in its need to rediscover the essential truths of life which have been petrified by the false conventional standards, devoid of the substantial truth from which the conventions once started. Sri Aurobindo mentions very clearly in the chapter ‘The coming of the subjective Age’ in *The Human Cycle* that the inmost need of humanity is to progress. Its need is not to

---

return always to its old ideas, systems and beliefs. It seeks a larger fulfilment in which the old can be taken up but not as it is; it must be surpassed and transformed. What is really very important to remember is that the truth which underlies the superficial or physical structure of things is eternal and constant. But when it expresses itself through different mental figures, life forms etc. it always involves the possibility of constant growth and change. Hence according to Sri Aurobindo,

*It is this principle and necessity that justify an age of individualism and rationalism and make it, however short it may be, an inevitable period in the cycle. A temporary reign of the critical reason largely destructive in its action is an imperative need for human progress.*

But there was a reason for which the age of individualism had to be over passed. In this age the individual cannot securely discover the law and the truth of his own being without discovering some universal law and truth with which he can relate comfortably. He has to keep in his mind one fundamental truth that he is a part of the universe, in all but his deepest spirit he is its subject, a small cell in that tremendous organic mass: his substance is drawn from its substance and by the law of its life the law of his life is determined and governed.

From this view another new kind of knowledge and life view emerges. The individual now starts to realise his own power and limitations as well as his own individual and social destiny. This new life-view and age is called by Sri Aurobindo the subjective age.

---

33 ibid, 26-27