



Consciousness: According To Indian Philosophy-1

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Abstract

This paper is the beginning of a series of small reviews on consciousness. It starts with a discussion of consciousness according to Hindu philosophy, specifically that related to cosmology and evolution. The views of three Indian stalwarts, namely, Sir Sarvepaali Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo have been taken up. Radhakrishnan found the creation of the world an accident, but it was real, and the formation had four stages through matter, life, mind and spirit, the last two were linked to consciousness. Vivekananda opined that the creation of the universe was part of a continuous cyclic process, but no personal God was needed for that, rather, nature (prakriti) was good enough for that, yet, consciousness exists in all matter as part of the cosmic intelligence. Finally, Sri Aurobindo's integral cosmology, with an eleven-tier consciousness structure, and provision of a theoretical framework that can unite science and spirituality through synthesis of knowledge between Western materialistic and Eastern metaphysical cosmologies, is discussed.

Key Words: *Creation of the world, Samkhya cosmology, Integral cosmology, Science and spirituality, Western materialistic cosmology, Eastern metaphysical cosmology. Self-consciousness, Super consciousness.*

Introduction

Since the day when the human being appeared in the universe, along with his whole lot of gross and fine belongings such as the body, mind, soul etc., consciousness has been a very special possession. It is so special that scores of scholars belonging to various subject-fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, biology, neuroscience, and many others throughout the world are studying consciousness till that time. In recent times the studies have been growing in depth, width and intensity. While, on one side, wide range of philosophical concepts such as: panpsychism – that views consciousness as a fundamental feature of the physical universe [Seager 2020], cosmopsychism – that proposes the universe itself to possess a fundamental consciousness [Shani 2015], panspiritism – that supposes a fundamental consciousness, or, spirit that acts as the primary building block of the universe [Taylor 2020], are doing rounds; at the other side, scientists are trying to relate consciousness to brain mechanisms and their neural correlates [Koch 2018].



At this stage, mention may be made about Dr. S. K. Saksena of Department of Philosophy at Hindu College, Delhi, who, submitted a Ph.D. Thesis on the subject '*Nature of consciousness in Hindu philosophy*' to the School of Oriental Studies, London, which was examined by none other than Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the then Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at the University of Oxford, and got approved. Though it happened in 1938, the thesis was published as a book with the same title in 1944. However, the main reason of this mention here is that Saksena has made the bold statement for the 'need of a systematic study of the problem of consciousness in Hindu philosophy' because, bold and vigorous thinking has gone in India for a long period of time starting from the Upanishad times extending to the end of the seventeenth century A. D.; the Hindu thinkers have thrashed out almost all possible concepts which they could have possibly evolved; they were daring enough to have carried their reasoning to the farthest logical conclusions [1944, 4].

The subject of consciousness is considered relevant for our journal, and hence, a series of short review articles by this author is planned. Following the idea of Saksena, Hindu philosophy has been chosen to be the starting point, and, since consciousness started with mankind, the issue of evolving cosmology is considered suitable to begin with. Thus, the present article aims to discuss the cosmology and evolution aspects related to consciousness, mostly by three Indian authors, namely, Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.

Radhakrishnan On Evolution of The Universe

Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), an eminent philosopher, scholar, and statesman, the first Vice-President (1952-62) and the second President (1962-67) of independent India, has earned world-wide reputation for his scholarship, specifically in bridging the gap between Eastern and Western philosophies. Saradhi and Kotari have written a paper exactly fitting to the present need [2018]. The first citation of Radhakrishnan's statements by them reads 'the World's creation is an accident and is not necessary for God.' [7941]. This statement is followed by another that 'it is real, not illusory'. His argument for such a combination of 'accident' and 'real' stand on the facts that, the first one accounts for why 'this particular possibility has been realized,' not any other, which is only possible by an accident; and the other that the creation is 'real' stands for the reason that, it occurred by an accident of the Absolute. 'According to him the entire universe holds an expression of divine plan'. [7943].

Radhakrishnan perceives four stages, such as matter, life, mind (consciousness) and spirit (self-consciousness) in the evolution of the world. Matter is the first stage of a world where only physical events exist mostly in their own right without any relation to the perceiving mind, because mind has not been evolved then. Materials are mostly changed



due to the varying combinations of the so-called atoms or the indivisible particles, and the conception of matter was bound up with such types of materialism and the conception of sensation. Matter was regarded as the cause and effect of sensation, though sensation is considered as passive through which mind receives impressions from the external world. Life is the next stage of evolution that occurred from matter. Yet, the living organism as a whole does such things that atomic system can never do. They register the results of their experience, and in a sense form habit. The changes which they present in response to outward circumstances are retained and built into the organism. An atom can neither mend itself nor reproduce itself. [7946].

Mind is the next stage in the evolution of the matter–life continuum. According to Radhakrishnan the mind is real to the extent that it is the reflection of the divine; and he identifies mind with consciousness. According to him consciousness is of two varieties – animal consciousness and human consciousness; the former is of a lower level and the later is of higher level which can attain self-consciousness-state. He explains that the presence of consciousness makes a real distinction to the behavior. The activities directed by a conscious mind possess a unity and coordination. Radhakrishnan finds consciousness to be ‘something unique, new and distinctive, uniquely creative.’ [7947].

To a question whether this evolution of the universe is naturalistic or, mechanistic - Radhakrishnan does not choose either, rather, he chooses spiritual. According to him, the world is full of an infinite series of interdependent conditioned events; and each existence finds its source and support in a supreme reality whose nature is spiritual. Further, it is the reflection of a spiritual universe which gives to it its life and significance. [7942].

The next stage of evolution is Self-Consciousness which results due to presence of ‘spirit’ or, a ‘self’ in a human being. Radhakrishnan views this ‘spirit’ within a reflective human mind with intelligence and capacity of producing free inventions through which man has conquered nature. He also foresees that the human being should surpass the level of self-consciousness and reach to the heights of spiritual consciousness. Radhakrishnan perceives that the world is dynamic, not static; and he visualizes the play of ‘spirit’ in the world, it is this ‘spirit’ that progresses from matter to self-consciousness. To him, the world is a *samsara* that is a perpetual procession of events, so much so, that ‘Indian thinkers, Hindu and Buddhists, viewed the world as a stream of happenings, a perpetual flow of events. Change is the essence of existence.’ ‘The different stages are not opposed as good and evil; it is an evolution from one stage to another. Then different stages are distinguished only within a unity. Body, mind and spirit constitute one whole man. The highest product of cosmic evolution namely spirit, is the hidden principle at work



and slowly discloses itself.' Radhakrishnan observes that the goal of evolution is *ananda*, the spirit [7944-45].

Vivekananda's Sankhya Cosmology

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the chief disciple of the Indian mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was a commanding spiritual leader, philosopher, author and modern thinker of India who made Hinduism dynamic and practical, and urged modern humanity to combine Western science and materialism with India's spiritual culture for building a sustainable civilization. He became super-famous for his epoch-making address 'My dear sisters and brothers of America' at The Parliament of Religions, Art Institute of Chicago, on 11th September 1893, to a thunderous standing ovation of the audience. After his strong and appealing speech at the religious parliament, he stayed back in USA till the end of 1896 to explain the American people the essence of *Vedantic* philosophy. During his discourses, he covered systematically the *Samkhya* philosophy developed by *rishi Kapila*; then he narrated the way the creation was manifested from *Prakriti* according to the *Samkhya* theory, he terms it '*Samkhya cosmology*,' and finally ends with the *Advaita* philosophy of *Brahman*. These discourses, specifically the '*Samkhya cosmology*,' although in a different context, have been covered in minute detail in an earlier article in this journal [Paramguru 2024]; therefore, in the present article the same will not be repeated, only the specific issues pertaining to *consciousness* will be discussed. The readers are requested to refer to the said article for the purpose of getting detail ideas about *cosmology*.

Unlike Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda does not say that the creation of the universe was an accident; rather, he says that according to *Samkhya* philosophy, the processes of evolution and involution of the universe is a continuous cyclic process. We know from modern astronomy, may be just for the present evolution, that this earth and sun of ours are undergoing similar transitions (Vivekananda 2015, 16). Regarding existence of God, Swamiji says that the father of all psychologists, *Kapila*, denies the existence of God as Creator. His idea is that a personal God is quite unnecessary; *Prakriti* is sufficient to work out all that is good' (22). Here, a question arises, in absence of God, what is the cause of these gross as well as finer materials? Here, Swamiji says, 'A very startling and curious answer is given by our psychologists, - self-consciousness' (19). The *Samkhyas* believe that each existing material in the universe has some portion of consciousness as its material. Rather, it will be prudent to say that the first essential manifestation of *prakriti* in the cosmos is *Mahat*, we may call it universal intelligence; and consciousness (including all the grounds of consciousness, sub-consciousness, and super-consciousness) is only a part of this intelligence, which is universal.



Although we may not discuss about *Samkhya Cosmology* in detail, we may site a couple of major points. The first point is that according to Swamiji, the human mind is ‘our little universe,’ (2); and ‘the whole of the universe is built upon the same plan as one single man, or one little being’ (24). This narration implies that both the human ‘body’ and ‘mind’ undergo similar manifestations like the gross bodies of our universe (25). The second point is that, according to the philosophers and metaphysicians of India, mind is but matter in a finer form, so also is the intellect that comes from the same Nature which is called *Avyaktam*, the undifferentiated (11). Also, behind the *indriyas* present the *manas*, the *chitta* in *vriti*, what might be called the vibratory state of the mind. Another thing also accompanies all the acts of the mind – called egoism, the *ahamkara*, which is termed as the self-consciousness, and behind that is what is called *Mahat*, the intelligence, the highest form of Nature’s existence. Behind the intellect is the true Self of man, the *Purusha*, the pure, the perfect. It may also be called the *soul*, or the *Atman*. Further, according to *Samkhya* philosophy, everything in nature, including mind, intelligence, and will, all its products, *Prakriti* itself, are *jada* (insentient). But the very basis of sentiency lies in the *Purusha*, and ‘in this world of insentiency *Purusha* alone is sentient’ (44). That is to say, this *Purusha*, taking him in the universal sense, is the impersonal God of the universe; and taking him in the human sense, is the small God of the human being. Actually, this *Purusha*, in *Samkhya* philosophy, is perceived as the so-called God, or just the ‘consciousness.’

The Integral Cosmology of Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo, the full name Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), was famously known for his dual activities, the first as an Indian nationalist fighting against the British colonial rule, and then as a profound spiritual philosopher, poet and yogi who created ‘integral yoga’. In fact, his term ‘integral yoga’ has been visualized as ‘integral cosmology,’ as used in the above heading, and also as ‘integral Vedanta’ by the Italian born physicist, with interests in foundations of physics, metaphysics and philosophy of mind, Marco Masi (1965-) [2023]. In Masi’s view, Aurobindo’s ‘notion of evolutionary progress, from the Absolute to the universal, or cosmic consciousness and the planes and parts of being’ which are ‘the different levels of consciousness in its individuated and cosmic dimension’ ‘transcends beyond a simple mind, body, and soul ontology.’ Further, he visualizes presence of ‘a ‘concentric system’ of inner, outer and inmost identities’ along with ‘the ‘psychic being’ – the notion of an evolutionary soul’ - and ‘the diverse levels of cognition beyond mind, such as over-mind, cosmic-mind and super-mind’ in Aurobindo’s integral vision, all of which have ‘vast implications leading to an extended concept of evolution’ [515].



Aurobindo's evolutionary spiritual vision is a concept of existence of a spiritual evolution and progress in Nature. He conceives an integral structure of Being, then through 'cellular yoga' he brings in the transmutation of the material body into the image of the Spirit. He uses the traditional Indian Upanishad-based yoga philosophy which describes the being as 'vehicles', 'bodies', or, 'sheets of consciousness', called 'koshas' that covers the soul layer by layer like the layers in an onion. Aurobindo named these 'koshas' as *Anandamaya kosha* (Satchitananda), *Vijnanamaya kosha* (Supermind), *Manomaya kosha* (Mental), *Pranamaya kosha* (Vital), and *Annamaya kosha* (Physical). He calls the first two as 'higher hemisphere' and the lower three as 'lower hemisphere'. He also says that there are still lower ranges of consciousness, such as: subconsciousness, inconscience, and nescience to which we are insensible; and there is also a higher range such as superconsciousness which is unseizable to us. He has developed his integral yoga system around this five-kosha-structure of classical yoga with further refinement [518].

Aurobindo's concept of the 'concentric system' of Being, Soul and Nature consists of 'the outer being', which is dominated by the partially controlled mental and emotional impulses and reactive patterns, may be said as the gross physical body; 'the inner being', termed by him as 'subliminal being', or simply 'subliminal', which is the inner spiritual consciousness and considered closer to the divine; and 'the inmost being', which is our true being and personality in us, where our true evolutionary soul (he terms it 'psychic being' and Indian Upanishad terms it 'Chaitya purusha') resides. Like in Samkhya philosophy, Aurobindo's integral yoga also distinguishes between Soul (Purusha) and Nature (Prakriti, or the cosmic universal nature). This triple system of the outer, inner and inmost beings is called the 'concentric system of being' and it represents the metaphysical structure of the individuated being inside the larger cosmic context which is nicely summarized by Masi in a table which is reproduced here [2023, 522-523].

In this hierarchy of metaphysical structure of integral yoga, as described in Table 1, the psychological existence of any ordinary human being is a mixture, an interdependent cross-interaction of all these beings [523].

Finally, Masi presents a diagram which is complementary to Table 1, yet displays the full spectrum of the vertical system of consciousness in Aurobindo's cosmology [2023, 531]. The same diagram is also placed below. It may be noted that it is not just a structure of consciousness of an individual human being, but it is a cosmology of consciousness applicable to the universal planes [531]. Here, another point is also to be



Table 1. The concentric system of being according to Sri Aurobindo [Masi 2023, 523].

Prakriti	Purusha	
Outer being	Inner (Subliminal) being	Inmost being
Outer mental (Sense – and physical mind + emotional or vital mind)	Inner mental (reason, intellect)	Psychic being (Chaitya Purusha)

Outer vital (lower vital)	Inner vital (higher vital)	

Outer physical (gross body)	Inner physical (subtle physical)	

Diagram 1. The vertical system of the planes and parts of being [Masi 2023, 531].

Consciousness (Impersonal)		(Personal)
Satcitananda	(Top Six):	(Top two): Jibatman/ Cosmic mind
Supermind		

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Overmind	Higher Hemisphere	
Intuition		
Illumined mind		
Hogher mind		

Mind	(Bottom Five):	
Vital		
Subscient	Lower Hemisphere	
Inconscient		
Nescient/Material		

noted that each of the mind, overmind, Supermind, the vital plane do not evolve, each is ever-present realities on their own, each of them only emerge in time on the physical plane; and it is their progressive emergence in and through matter that we call 'evolution' [533].

Aurobindo has integrated all the previous forms of ontologies such as 'material monism', 'rationalistic and materialistic reductionist naturalism', 'Vedantic non-dual tradition', 'Vedic cosmology' etc., but extends it to an integral multidimensional cosmology



articulated by the universal planes and parts and augmented by an evolutionary vision [538]. At the end, Masi's concluding remark may be stated: 'Even though one requires a fair amount of effort to get acquainted with the richness and complexity of Aurobindo's cosmology, I believe it to be the most promising theoretical framework that can accommodate science and spirituality, in a unique synthesis of knowledge between Western and Eastern materialistic and metaphysical cosmologies [550].

Conclusions

This paper described consciousness according to Hindu philosophy, specifically that related to cosmology and evolution through the views of three Indian scholars, namely, Sir Sarvepaali Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. Though Radhakrishnan viewed the creation of the world as an accident, yet, he found it to be real, and its formation was in four stages of matter, life, mind and spirit. The last two stages that are mind and spirit were concerned with consciousness. Vivekananda said that the creation of the world was part of a continuous cyclic process, but no personal God was needed for that, rather, nature (prakriti) is good enough for the purpose. Existence of consciousness in all matter as part of the cosmic intelligence was universal. Finally, Sri Aurobindo's integral cosmology having an eleven-tier consciousness structure was discussed. This provides a theoretical framework that can unite science and spirituality through synthesis of knowledge between Western materialistic and Eastern metaphysical cosmologies.

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