

# Sri Aurobindo's Views on Heraclitus' Philosophy: A Synthesis

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**Abstract**—This paper appreciates the stimulating and thought-provoking synthesis of Heraclitus' philosophy offered by Sri Aurobindo. The deep philosophical insights of Heraclitus expressed in aphoristic and cryptic form inspired him and supported his system of Integral Yoga. An attempt is made to reconstruct and synthesize Eastern and Western philosophical insights through hermeneutical treatment of many concepts. Aurobindo points out the sameness and kinship between Heraclitus' thought and concepts from Vedic and upanishadic texts with illustrations and thus undertakes the task of synthesizing them. This fruitful synthesis also brings out the scientific perspective of Heraclitus' thought and showcases it as a rare flowering of philosophy. It also enables the thinkers to reflect, reinterpret and synthesize such philosophies to bring out their significance in post-modern philosophy and science.

**Keywords**—One, All, Fire, Change.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo was a yogi, mystic, philosopher poet and as a visionary had extraordinary ideas. His education in England proved to be a great asset not only in terms of his linguistic capabilities but also contributed towards his reflection on many thinkers and issues. The more we are impressed by the creative, novel and original ideas, the more we become interested in knowing the interpretative style of Sri Aurobindo, on literature—whether Indian or Western; whether ancient or modern. The fact that his constructive interpretation is relevant for today's post-modern academic research is undeniable.

The theme of this paper is Sri Aurobindo's synthesis and hermeneutical treatment of Heraclitus' philosophy which is published in Arya bulletin. In 1914, four years after he had settled in Pondicherry, to devote himself to yoga, a proposal was taken to publish a philosophical review with the view to make a synthesis of Eastern and Western knowledge. This review called Arya continued for seven years. He authored the monograph on Heraclitus, the only major article on single western philosopher as a response to Prof. R.D.Ranade's small treatise on Heraclitus' philosophy.

## II. INTERPRETATION OF HERACLITUS' PHILOSOPHY

According to Sri Aurobindo, "The ancient Greek mind had... a kind of fluid precision, a flexibly inquiring logic; acuteness and the wide-open eye of the intellect were its

leading characteristics and by this power in it, it determined the whole character and field of subsequent European thinking." [1] He finds the philosophical insights of Heraclitus, the Greek aphoristic philosopher, as the most stimulating among the other philosophers. One of the reason why Aurobindo considered Heraclitus as most influential was that, the philosophical insights of the later added to the more modern intellectual stimulation something of the 'antique psychic and intuitive vision and word of the older mystics'. Sri Aurobindo disagreed with Prof. Ranade on the issue of whether Heraclitus was a mystic. Prof. Ranade had positively rejected Pfeleiderer's view of Heraclitus as a mystic. [2] Aurobindo states that Prof. Ranade's rejection is due to some misconceptions about Heraclitus' views. This is also true of the many interpreters of Heraclitus' thought, since Heraclitus expressed his thoughts in cryptic aphorisms, which of course are packed with condensed thoughts, which are enigmatic, but are aimed at transforming philosophy. Heraclitus was thoroughly dissatisfied with the accepted accountings of his time. He was born about 540 BC and died about 480 BC.

According to some thinkers it is due to self-willed obscurity or, Heraclitus though not deliberately concealing the meaning, used a pungent oracular style--- partly because he admired it, partly because he could not do otherwise. He was one of the most penetrating souls. Since it is difficult to understand his thoughts, he is termed as the most obscure philosopher. All those who have known or experienced the 'Ultimate' always talk in paradoxes. Life for them is full of paradoxes and therefore their thoughts are expressed in the form of riddles. Aristotle's theories are very clean and neat and so he looks like a man-managed garden; Heraclitus is full of riddles and so looks like a wild forest. To mention some of his famous aphorisms: "ever living fire"; "Gods are mortals, men immortals"; "the way up and the way down are the same"; "one out of all and all out of one", "nature loves to hide", "unless you expect the unexpected, you will never find the truth", "all things come in due season". [3]

Sri Aurobindo's hermeneutical treatment of Heraclitus' aphorisms is encouraging, reconstructive as well as thought-provoking, because it is detailed, penetrating account of the thought-process of Heraclitus on the one hand, and it involves an interesting comparison with the Indian philosophical conceptions on the other. The fact that is of capital importance here is that, this insightful hermeneutics, in association with many other influences, helped Sri Aurobindo develop his philosophy of evolution- involution, which is the

backbone of his Integral Yoga System.

Heraclitus' significant contributions in the realms of cosmology and metaphysics supported Aurobindo's philosophical assertions. Although, Aurobindo accepted vedantic 'Brahman' as the ultimate reality, like Shankaracharya's Advaita philosophy, but rejected Shankaracharya's view of the empirical world as unreal. Aurobindo influenced by the evolution theory of Darwin could not deny the reality to the physical world. Thus, his aim was to connect the One and the Many. Heraclitus' philosophy provided him the foundation for his Integral Yoga, where the one is connected with many.

Heraclitus' philosophy flowed logically from his fundamental views on existence and their constant justification. Sri Aurobindo finds an interrelation between his aphorisms and also notes a 'trend of rationalism' in his philosophy. Heraclitus was concerned with resolving the major ontological issue regarding the relation between the one and the many. The human mind tries to seek the answer for questions like: what is the status of the world of multiplicity of things and beings\_ is it real or only phenomenal?; If both the One and the Many are real, what are the relations between these two eternal principles, or are they reconciled in Absolute beyond them? Heraclitus believed unity and multiplicity to be both of them real and coexistent. Sri Aurobindo explains that, the source of Heraclitus views is his strong, concrete intuition of things, his acute sense of universal realities, since in our experience of the cosmos, we always find this eternal coexistence\_\_ One Matter but many atoms, plasms and bodies; one Energy but many Forces; one Mind or mind-stuff but many mental beings; one Spirit but many souls. Founded on the truth of eternal oneness and eternal multiplicity, Heraclitus accepts it, not reasoning it away but accepting it in all its consequences, from here the rest of his philosophy flows.

The One for him is the 'ever- living Fire'. He maintained that, "No man or God has created the universe, but ever there was and is and will be the ever-living Fire"[4] To probe further into the nature of Heraclitus' concept of 'ever-living-fire' Sri Aurobindo asks, "What for instance is the "ever-living-Fire" in which he finds the primary and imperishable substance of the universe and identifies it in succession with Zeus and with eternity?"[5] Aurobindo observes that, to interpret this fire as merely a material force of heat and flame, or to take it as simply a metaphor for being which is eternal becoming, is to miss the character of Heraclitus' utterances. He brings in the Vedic language and thought, to synthesize the notion of 'mystic Fire' and reminds us that Vedic Fire (Agni) is also understood as having played the role of the builder of the worlds, and of the secret Immortal in humans and other things.

According to Mr. Ranade, Greek philosopher Anaximander, like Mayavadins of the East denied the true reality to the Many and Empedocles considered the All to be alternately, one and many. Unlike them, Heraclitus treated unity and multiplicity as real and coexistent. Sri Aurobindo elaborates this through the parallel conception of the Vedic Mystics, that

according to them a close connection existed between psychical and physical activities, between the action of Light, for instance and the phenomena of mental illumination; so "fire was to them at once the luminous divine energy, the Seer-Will of the universal Godhead active and creative of the substantial forms of the universe, burning secretly in all life." [6] Similarly Heraclitus has an idea of something more than a physical substance or energy in his concept of Being, the One, Ever living Fire. Thus he treats fire as a physical aspect, of a great burning creative, formative and destructive force, the sum total of all whose processes is a constant and unceasing change, therefore all is flux. Although the Buddhists of the Nihilistic school and Heraclitus agreed that nothing in the world remains same even for two moments but there is a distinction between the two. For Buddhists the flame maintains itself unchanged in appearance, but every moment it is another and not the same fire. For Buddhists the apparent becoming is all that we can call existence and behind it there is eternal Nothing or absolute Void. Whereas for Heraclitus, his cosmos has eternal basis, a unique original principle, 'Fire' which he raises to the status of 'Logos', which is not far away from vedantic 'Atman'.

Both Prof. Ranade as well as Sri Aurobindo, accept the fact that, Nietzsche, whose philosophy is most vivid, concrete and suggestive of modern thinkers founded his philosophy on the conception of existence as a vast Will- to-become and of the world as a play of the Force, for whom the creative Word was the divine Power, the beginning of all things and to which life aspires. But Nietzsche affirmed only Becoming and excluded Being from his view of things, it became unsatisfactory, insufficient and lopsided.[7] Since Heraclitus conceived of existence of reality as at once one and many, "he is bound to accept these two aspects of his ever-living Fire as simultaneously true, true in each other; Being is an eternal Becoming and yet the Becoming resolves itself into eternal Being." [8] In other words, the waters into which we step are and are not the same; our existence then is an eternity as well as an inconstant transience\_\_ these contradictions are not solved by Heraclitus, however he gives a sort of account of its process. His aphorism, "war which is the father and king of all things", accounts for such a process. He wanted to emphasize that reality is in a constant change and it changes back, and exchanges and there is an interchange in a constant whole, there is a clash of forces, and here Sri Aurobindo is reminded of the Indian idea of 'pravrtti' and 'nivrtti', the double movement of soul and Nature\_\_ pravrtti-- moving out and forward; nivrtti-- the moving back and in. Sri Aurobindo considers Heraclitean account of cosmos as of great consequence and regarded this as 'evolution-involution'. He states: "so the All by upward change may resort completely to the One and yet essentially exist, since it can again return into various beings by the repetition of the downward movement. All difficulty disappears if we remember that what is implied is a process of evolution and involution,\_\_ so too the Indian word for creation, 'srsti', means a release or bringing forth of what is held in, latent,\_\_ and that the conflagration destroys existing forms, but not the principle of multiplicity." [9]

### III. HERACLITUS AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENCE

Law of conservation of energy, relativity, concept of evolution— all three can be interpreted from Heraclitus' philosophy. It is the law of change which determines the evolution and involution of the 'one' downward and upward way, the law prevails all along the path, through all its steps. When things are fluid, the transformation is easy, which expresses the dynamic aspect of reality. The unity and the multiplicity have at every moment the active relation through this law of exchange and interchange. The 'One' in Heraclitus' philosophy is constantly exchanging itself for the 'many' and vice versa. Science demonstrates that this is true of all things, for example, the human body is always the same, because its apparent identity is preserved by constant change. Science tells us that every seven years our body comes to a point where the old goes and the new settles. Accordingly we become a new person after every seven years, however our identity is preserved. It is a paradox then, there is constant destruction, yet there is no destruction— there may be transformation of the matter from one state to the other. In other words the energy distributes itself, but never dissipates itself— change and the unalterable conservation of energy in the change are the laws and not destruction; ultimately everything is exchanged for Fire. But the question remains as to, "why in this constant cosmic flux should everything after all remain the same?" Sri Aurobindo comments that, an idealistic philosophy of Indian type would have answered that, the Force or Shakti is consciousness which preserves by its energy its original scheme of ideas and corresponding forms of things. Heraclitus also tries to account for the same, but Sri Aurobindo finds that unsatisfactory— however, it is suggestive of truth. Heraclitus puts forth another aphorism to explain this: "War is the father of all and king of all", "all thing becoming according to strife", "to know that strife is justice". The interchange of energy is neither peaceful nor willing, because between all beings there is a constant trial of strength— by that warfare they come into being and by that their measures are maintained. The different laws meet and compete and by their tension the balance of the world is maintained.

Law of relativity: Sri Aurobindo considers Heraclitus as the first and the most consistent teacher of the law of relativity, since all is one in its being and many in its becoming, and so everything must be one in its essence, good and evil then may be different aspects of the same absolute reality. Reason in all things, what Heraclitus calls 'Logos' is one and "men only by their relateness of their mentality turn it each into his personal thought and way of looking at things and live according to this variable relativity." [10] Although, Heraclitus admits relative standards, his philosophy, 'One out of all and all out of One', urges him to go beyond this relative standards.

### IV. EVALUATION OF HERACLITUS' PHILOSOPHY

Buddha and Heraclitus share in common the philosophy of 'constant flux', but we find the compassion in Buddhist philosophy is absent in Heraclitus' thought. He was

regarded as a pessimistic thinker in ancient times and so may be one of the reason as to why he could not offer a 'triumphant' philosophy as Vedic seers have done. Sri Aurobindo appreciates Heraclitus for his intuitive, mystical directedness in anticipating the largest and profoundest generalizations of life and philosophy. But he also observes that, Heraclitus had the vision of Universal reason and universal force, but could not think of Universal delight active in love and joy. This universal delight along with the other two, could have established something higher than justice, better than harmony and truer than reason in his philosophy.

In his constructive hermeneutics of Heraclitus' aphorisms and paradoxes, Sri Aurobindo interprets the One, the Fire as the source of many, which is in line with vedantic thought. The One however cannot be described, but has to be experienced. The difficulty in description expresses the 'fuzzy' nature of the concept. Can one experience the Reality in 'totality', such that nothing has been left out? Even though we answer in the affirmative, the next step is the difficulty in understanding the 'experienced Reality' by the 'other'. It is essential to note that Sri Aurobindo is referring to fuzzy logic here, when he says that early Greeks employed 'a flexibly inquiring logic'. This 'fuzziness' itself rather forced Heraclitus to adopt the cryptic aphorisms and paradoxes to express his thoughts, which earned him the label as the most obscure philosopher, whose philosophy is in reality a 'rare flowering' and a source of inspiration for many.

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