



Universalizing the Concept of Avatarhood: Sri Aurobindo's Discourse in Comparing Krishna, Christ, and Buddha



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Article history:

Received: 25 November 2016

Revised: 20 December 2016

Approved: 26 December 2016

Published: 1 March 2017

Keywords:

Christhood;

Avatarhood;

Buddhahood;

Krishna hood;

Universalising;

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring how and why Sri Aurobindo compares the three Avatars namely Krishna, Christ, and Buddha in his Essays on the Gita, which is one of his major works. It is a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Aurobindo expounds his philosophy of Integral Yoga in these essays by applying it to interpret the Gita. Sri Aurobindo highlights the higher purpose of an Avatar which is the manifestation of Divine nature in human nature. This conception is beyond the generally perceived cause of preserving Dharma or fighting evil in humanity. Sri Aurobindo focuses on the two aspects of an Avatar: the descent of the Divine into human form and the divine consciousness within the human form. In describing both these aspects Sri Aurobindo draws a comparison among Krishna, Christ, and Buddha.

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1. Introduction

Sri Aurobindo was a great scholar, poet, dramatist, and a nationalist. As a dramatist, he reveals significant aspects of his creative writing. S. K. Prasad observes, "Sri Aurobindo's dramatic genius can be favorably compared with the Shakespearian as well as Kalidasian" (Jaiswal 'Introduction' Sri Aurobindo's Plays: A Thematic Study 6). Among the nineteenth century writers, Sri Aurobindo is the first playwright, who wrote his plays directly in English. He has been recognized as the first major Indian English Dramatist with a variety of literary aspects. Sri Aurobindo has written five full length plays on the Elizabethan model. For these five completed plays, Sri Aurobindo used different ancient tales of different nations and different cultures on the basis of his imaginary power and skills. Sri Aurobindo follows Shakespearian vintage and makes them a living experience for the readers and the viewers. He studied the sources of his plays and selected different stories from different cultures.

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2. Research Methods

Sri Aurobindo defines an Avatar in universal terms. He describes the nature and purpose of Avatarhood in spiritual terms and not in religious terms. Sri Aurobindo defines the term Avatar thus: “An Avatar, roughly speaking is one who is conscious of the presence and power of the Divine born in him or descended into him and governing from within his will and life and action; he feels identified inwardly with this divine power and presence.” (Sri Aurobindo, SABCL 406).

He says that there are two aspects for an Avatar: the descent of the Divine into human form and the divine consciousness within the human form. In describing both these aspects Sri Aurobindo draws a comparison among Krishna, Christ, and Buddha. Sri Aurobindo states that the Avatars of Krishna, Christ, and Buddha are similar in the after effects of their Avatarhood. He says that each of the Avatars “leads after he has finished his earthly manifestation, to a profound and powerful change not only in the ethical but in the social and outward life and ideals of the race.” (201) Besides establishing the similarities between the three Avatars and universalizing the concept of Avatarhood, Sri Aurobindo draws similarities among the religions that were born out of each of the Avatars and their teachings.

3. Results and Analysis

Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* is a commentary on the Gita which includes two series of twenty-four essays each. It was originally published in a monthly magazine called *Arya* between 1914 and 1918. The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the major spiritual works of the world. It forms an integral part of the epic *Mahabharata*. It is the message given by Sri Krishna (the Avatar of Lord Vishnu) to Arjuna (Friend of Krishna and a Vibhuti), when he faced a crisis of confidence, and doubted his own duty and purpose of life on seeing his own kith and kin standing in front of him to battle with him. The Gita consists of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters. Sri Aurobindo has given his interpretation of the Gita, in the light of his experience, in the *Essays on the Gita*. It is not a verse by verse commentary on the Gita. “Sri Aurobindo approaches the Gita in a large catholic and non-sectarian spirit and brings out the essential teachings in a clear, lucid and harmonious manner and in terms of language addressed to the modern intellectual man.” (Puri)

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In describing the human aspect of the Avatarhood of Krishna such as Him being the son of Devaki and Vasudeva, brought up by Yashoda, etc, Sri Aurobindo says that the Indian thought does not give importance to extraneous factors such as the historical records on Krishna. Sri Aurobindo says that western thought process insists on rational aspects such as historical facts considered over the spiritual or religious facts. While the birthplace of Christ is disputed and discussed with the strongest of emotions and the greatest of importance, historical facts on Krishna are generally overlooked by Indians who consider the Avatar only as a spiritual manifestation.

Sri Aurobindo says that upholding Dharma is not the only purpose of the Avatarhood of Krishna. In justifying this assertion, he includes Christ and Buddha in order to universalize the discourse. “The upholding of the Dharma is not an all-sufficient object in itself, not the supreme possible aim for the manifestation of a Christ, a Krishna, a Buddha, but is only the general condition of a higher aim and a more supreme and divine utility.” (Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* 149)

Sri Aurobindo says that there is no necessity for an incarnation to be born on the earth to establish justice. It can be taken care of by kings, sages, and Vibhutis who are men with special divine powers. He says, “The Avatar comes as the manifestation of the divine nature in the human nature, the apocalypse of its Christhood, Krishnahood, Buddhahood, in order that the human nature may by molding its principle, thought, feeling, action, being on the lines of that Christhood, Krishnahood, Buddhahood transfigure itself into the divine.” (149) He says that upholding Dharma is also the purpose of the Avatarhood in the case of Krishna but it is not the only purpose.

The higher purpose that is often overlooked by scholars and commentators on the Gita is the supreme and divine purpose of guiding man towards attaining divinity.

Sri Aurobindo says that the Avatars serve as gates for the mankind to pass into the divine. In this regard, he looks at Krishna, Christ, and Buddha all as having the same purpose and same nature. “The Christ, Krishna, Buddha stands in its center as the gate, he makes through himself the way men shall follow. That is why each Incarnation holds before men his own example and declares of himself that he is the way and the gate”. (Essays on the Gita)

Sri Aurobindo’s concept of Avatarhood includes the presence of the divine power in every being which he calls the Eternal Avatar. In drawing the comparison between the inner truth and the Eternal Avatar he says that all the three Avatars and their inner truth i.e. the divine consciousness is similar to that of the Eternal Avatar that is present in every being. The difference is that the Avatars are conscious of the divine presence and the ordinary being is unconscious of the presence. Therefore, Sri Aurobindo opines that the purpose of an Avatar is to show a man that there is the presence of the divine power in every individual that it is through yoga that man can first realize and then become one with the divine consciousness. “The divine manifestation of a Christ, Krishna, and Buddha in external humanity has for its inner truth the same manifestation of the eternal Avatar within in our own inner humanity.” (161)

In discussing the doctrine of the trinity in Christianity, Sri Aurobindo draws similarities among the Avatarhood of Krishna, Christ, and Buddha. The concept of father, son, and the Holy Spirit can be equated to the God in heaven, the supreme universal divine consciousness, the Avatar, the divine power in human form which is similar to the Eternal Avatar and the union of both the supreme divine power and the eternal Avatar. Sri Aurobindo draws similarities in the fact that the Avatars undergo sufferings like human beings in their Avatarhood. In this, Krishna, Christ, and Buddha all suffer like human beings on earth in order to show mankind the path to salvation. Sri Aurobindo says that Krishna showed that suffering or comfort all comes from the divine source, Christ showed that suffering is a means for redemption, and Buddha showed how to overcome suffering.

Sri Aurobindo once again mentions Christ and Buddha in relation to Krishna while justifying that establishing Dharma is not the only purpose of an Avatar. He says that if destroying the evil and establishing righteousness is the purpose of an Avatar, then Christ and Buddha should not be Avatars for they did not arrive on earth to establish the balance between the right and the wrong. “Buddha and Christ whose mission was not at all to destroy evil-doers and deliver the good, but to bring to all men a new spiritual message and a new law of divine growth and spiritual realization.” (172)

Sri Aurobindo states that the Avatars of Krishna, Christ, and Buddha are similar in the after effects of their Avatarhood. He says that each of the Avatars “leads after he has finished his earthly manifestation, to a profound and powerful change not only in the ethical but in the social and outward life and ideals of the race.” (201) Besides establishing the similarities between the three Avatars and universalizing the concept of Avatarhood, Sri Aurobindo draws similarities among the religions that were born out of each of the Avatars and their teachings.

In Buddhism man in order to undergo the process of attaining the super mental stage takes refuge in three powers - the dharma, the Sanigha, the Buddha. In Christianity, there is the law of Christian living, the Church, and the Christ. In Vaishnavism there is the same trio, bhagavata, bhakta, bhagavan, -- the bhagavata, which is the law of the Vaishnava dispensation of adoration and love, the bhakta representing the fellowship of those in whom that law is manifest, bhagavan, the divine Lover and Beloved in whose being and nature the divine law of love is founded and fulfils itself. Thus, Sri Aurobindo universalizes the concept of Avatarhood and calls all the Avatars to be the same in leaving behind their legacy to the future generation. An Avatar gives three things to mankind. “He gives a dharma, a law of self-discipline by which to grow out of the lower into the higher life and which necessarily includes a rule of action and of relations with our fellowmen and other beings” (213)

Sri Aurobindo further draws comparisons on the various rituals and customs followed in the three religions and establish that the Avatarhood and his teachings are universal and the same. Sri Aurobindo says that the aspects of heroic endurance, sage indifference, and pious resignation are found in all the major religions including Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Sri Aurobindo compares the three Avatars throughout the collection of essays. He tries to establish the fact that the nature and purpose of all Avatarhood are the same. Thus, he tries to universalize his concept of Avatarhood and the philosophy of Integral Yoga as a universal path to becoming one with the supreme divine being.

4. Conclusion

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Acknowledgements

The exploration about your thanks to other, from top to down / highest position to lowest position, contributor, supporter that was involved in completing the article.

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