

Indian Civilisation from the Perspective of Oswald Spengler

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Abstract

On 20 October 2022, the author gave a talk at Blankenheim, German Eiffel, during the Spengler Conference 2022, on 'Relevance of Moral Philosophy of Oswald Spengler to Indian Civilisation and His Remembrance in the Indian Academic Landscape'. This article, based on the above talk, is an outcome of the research carried out by the author into the writings of the famous German historian Oswald Spengler and covers the essence of his thoughts on world history, major civilisations, and his prophecies. The article gives an insight in to his outlook on many aspects of Indian civilisation, including the imperial nature of few Indian dynasties, Buddhism, and Indian philosophy. Various works of Spengler and his historical concepts and prophecies are also be discussed here. An endeavour has been made to present the history of the Indian civilisation, from the perspective of Oswald Spengler, to help the Indian strategic and academic community to have a better understanding of their civilisation.

Introduction

In recent times, the existing historiography concerning Indian history is under scrutiny and there is much emphasis on re-writing the Indian history from new perspectives or using fresh sources. As such, looking at Indian history with plural perspectives around the world, rather than from a single narrow viewpoint, will facilitate the Indian strategic community to imbibe a holistic understanding of our past. There exists a popular perception in India that the westerners have largely considered the Indian

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civilisation as some what inferior when compared to their own civilisation.

Contrary to this popular perception, the strengths of the Indian civilisation and the wisdom of ancient Indians, were acknowledged a century ago by none other than the renowned German historian and philosopher, Oswald Spengler (29 May 1880- 08 May 1936). Spengler is known for his book '*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*' originally published in German (subsequently translated in English as 'The Decline of the West'), in which he has highlighted the uniqueness and spiritual nature of the Indian culture, along with the detailed study of seven other cultures, i.e., Egyptian, Chinese, Classical Antiquity, Mexican, Babylonian, Islamic and Western (Faustian).

Spengler: An unorthodox Historian and Philosopher

Eighty-six years after his death, Oswald Spengler remains one of the most controversial yet, a fascinating historian and philosopher of twentieth century. He stands out as a brilliant historian who challenged the traditional idea of endless linear progress of civilisations, and propounded that civilisations follow a cyclic pattern.¹ Spengler advocated, with a kind of fatalism,² that every civilisation, just like an organism, goes through phases of youth, maturity, and eventual decline.³ As per him, the period of about 900 years of dominance of the west was over and its decline commenced sometime in 1800.⁴ He further substantiated his argument about the end of civilisation by stating that Patliputra, the capital city of many empires in the ancient India as also the largest city in the world during the Mauryan Empire, was found abandoned amidst a vast mass of empty houses as seen by Hsuan Tsang in the year 635 AD. Spengler further added that every civilisation, confined in a given geographical area exists like a closed system free from interference from external factors. His cyclic theory as well as the comment about the decline of the western civilisation invoked strong criticism from many historians and academicians.⁵

Spengler was inspired by the writings of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and the latter's views on European thought. Spengler's ideas were also greatly influenced by Johann Wolfgang Goethe and had much similarity with those of the Greek philosopher, Plato.⁶ He commenced work on 'The Decline

of the West' in 1911 and the first volume of the book was published in 1918. The book, which proclaimed that the first World War was a predestined event as part of the larger world-historical rhythm and manifestation of the historical phase of the preceding centuries, provided much-needed philosophical succour to the German public and academic community who were still smarting under the humiliating defeat at the hands of Allied Forces.⁷ The book was a resounding success and was read widely within and outside Germany.⁸ It was soon translated into many other languages. His second book 'Prussianism and Socialism' was published in 1919. This is another thought-provoking book which gives out a comparative analysis of the political ideologies of Britain and Germany.

The third book by Spengler, 'Man and Technics' published in 1931, highlighted the pitfalls of technology and industrialisation. The book mentioned the likelihood of the proliferation of the western technology to other regions of the world. The fourth and the last book by Spengler 'The Hour of Decision' was published in 1934. The book, critical of the racial theories propagated by the Nazis, also became immensely popular, however, it was banned subsequently by the Nazi regime. As Spengler found the approach of the Nazis towards Jews, as also their biological ideology, unacceptable, he fell out with Hitler sometime in 1934, a year after the latter assumed the Chancellorship of Germany.

Spengler's views on world history were criticised by some of his contemporaries. However, his writings inspired millions of people and also influenced many leading personalities. Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State of USA, discussed in great detail about Spengler's ideas in his thesis 'The Meaning of History: Reflections on Spengler, Toynbee and Kant', submitted to Harvard University in 1950. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the famous Austrian philosopher, had stated that Spengler was one of his main inspirations. Spengler's thoughts also influenced the writings of Joseph Campbell, Martin Heidegger, and many other philosophers.

Spengler's views on concept of History Writing

Spengler, in 'The Decline of the West' dismissed the traditional way of looking at the world history on the ground that it is too narrow and flawed. He added that there is a need to view world history from new perspectives. He also remarked that the world

history cannot be holistically comprehended by the existing periodisation of history in terms of ancient, medieval, and modern. Spengler remarked that the notion held by most western writers that world history should be focused around west; the highest civilisation, similar to the Ptolemaic theory, is faulty. He also observed that as per the perception of the West, the history of the cities such as Athens, Florence, and Paris are accorded greater relevance than Loyang or Patliputra. Spengler enunciated his own Copernican model by which history should not be the life story of only one civilisation, but that of many civilisations.

Spengler writes that cities are the essence of a civilisation, which facilitate the understanding of the political and economic history of that civilisation. In addition to the mention of the other world-cities such as Paris, Rome, Thebes, and Baghdad, Spengler has highlighted that the large cities of Ujjain, Kanauj and Patliputra were equally evolved and known even in China and Java.⁹

Major Predictions made by Spengler

In addition to his brilliant book, 'The Decline of the West', Spengler is admired for his various prophecies some of which eventually came true. In 1936, months before he died, he wrote in a letter to his friend, Hans Frank, that the 'thousand-year Reich' of Hitler would not last beyond 1946. At that time, no one believed him as the Nazis seemed all powerful then. He was much condemned for saying so and faded into oblivion thereafter. However, when in 1945 his statement was proven right, his writings were re-discovered in a big way.

In 1933, Spengler foretold that just like the Hague Conference of 1907 paved the way for the First World War, similarly the Washington Naval Treaty of 1921 will also result in another World War. These predictions came true. In his 'Man and Technics', he correctly predicted, in 1931 that in the future the labour force of Europe would be replaced with the labour force from third world countries.

Spengler also stated that after 2000 AD, cities will grow to mega-cities of 10-20 million inhabitants that will be spread over huge areas and will surpass the biggest cities existing in his era. This prediction can be validated by the fact that as per UN 2018 population estimate, 33 cities around the world have a population

of more than 10 million people. Lastly, Spengler in 1917 had also predicted the collapse of communism in the erstwhile USSR, a prophecy that came true in 1990.

Spengler's views on Indian Civilisation

Spengler has written about multiple aspects of Indian history in 'The Decline of the West'. He writes that as per his analysis, the culture of India including the cultures of Babylon, China, Egypt, the Arabs, and Mexico are as significant as the western cultures and, in fact, over shadowed the latter in terms of spirituality. He further adds that unlike the western civilisation, which possesses high level of historical sense, the Indian mind was spiritually inclined, and inwardly focused, and, therefore, did not concern much about recording the physical world¹⁰ around it. As a result, the chronological recording of various historical events is inadequate and less accurate.¹¹

Spengler laid lot of emphasis on Buddhism and stated that 'Buddhism is not a religion at all in the sense of Vedas'. This is because, as per him, Buddhism did not impose any restrictions or code of conduct on its followers. He further added that the Indian philosophical thought of soul attaining its ultimate aim and release from the cycle of life was also influenced by Buddhism towards new thoughts.¹²

Spengler also brought out the imperialistic nature of Mauryan and Sunga dynasties in India during the period 321 BC to 185 BC, during which the Mauryan Empire had expanded its reach to the whole of northwestern empire. He adds that during that era came a rare occasion in history when the Indian Buddhist culture could have come in contact with the Chinese Confucian and the classical Stoic cultures. However, Spengler also qualifies further by stating that owing to the Indian nature, these endeavours did not succeed beyond a point.¹³

Apart from the ancient Indian imperialist efforts, Spengler also talks about the French imperialistic efforts and explains how providence prevented Napoleon from establishing a French colonial empire in India in the early nineteenth century. He refers to the incident of 14 February 1804, when the fleet led by Charles-Alexandre-Leon Durand Linois was defeated by the naval force of British East India Company in the Indian Ocean. Spengler opines

that this small naval action led to a rethink of strategy and the French Government cancelled their plans to invest more forces against the British in India. Spengler states further that Tsar Alexander's denial of support to Napoleon was another reason for this decision. Incidentally, similar opportunity came to France in 1754, when efforts by Dupleix, the then Governor of Pondicherry made significant progress in colonising India. However, these efforts were disregarded and Dupleix was recalled to France by the Versailles Court under Louis XV.

Spengler as viewed by Indian Philosophers

Many Indian philosophers and historians have commented upon the works of Spengler. PC Chatterji has referred to Spengler while writing about the birth and death of civilisations, as explained by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats. Yashdev Shalya, on the other hand, has classified Spengler, along with Hegel, Marx, Puranas, and the Christian philosophy as historicists those who view history as a goal-oriented process.¹⁴

Interestingly, Devadoss has done a comparative analysis between the ideologies of Schopenhauer, Mahatma Gandhi and Oswald Spengler.¹⁵ Schopenhauer regarded Buddha and Christ as ideal personalities for their self-sacrifice and renunciation of the world whereas, Spengler viewed fact and power as more important. However, Gandhi's ideology combined both the facets: moral idealism and political success.

Another Indian philosopher, Raghuramaraju has highlighted that many Indian philosophers have not correctly understood the Western philosophy, referring to the 'Decline of the West'. MN Roy has drawn a comparison of the cyclic theory of civilisations by Spengler to a similar theory conceived by the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ BK Jha speaks of Spengler's thoughts while describing the concept of trans-humanism. He refers to the Spengler's dream of the formation of a world community as the final stage of evolution of major civilisations of the world.¹⁷ Oroon Kumar Ghosh was also influenced by Spengler's writings as is evident from 'Convergence of Civilisation', written by the former. Lastly, the famous Indian philosopher, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, while talking about the history of mankind and cosmos, refers to the cyclic theory of Spengler to fully explain the historical concept.¹⁸

Relevance of Moral Philosophy of Spengler to the Indian Civilisation

India has recently completed the seventy-fifth year of its independence. As a nation known for its spirituality and ancient wisdom, and striving for overall growth, what can we learn from Spengler's historical concepts? Should we, like some other civilisations in the past, fall in the trap of adopting the Ptolemaic model and describe own culture as the centre of gravity and the most dynamic in the hierarchy of civilisations? Such a standpoint has often led nations to a destruction path. Or should we follow the Copernican model as advocated by Spengler and take a rational view of other civilisations based on factual position and critical analysis, with the aim to imbibe their strengths and shun their weaknesses for refinement of our civilisation? Does the greatness of our nation not consist in working towards the goal of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*', as enunciated in Maha Upanishad, and contribute towards overcoming the larger goal of numerous challenges that the world community faces today?

The study of 'The Decline of the West' clearly reveals that the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian civilisations had an advanced system of recording history. The Egyptians preserved their history through stone memorials and hieroglyphic script, which can be read today, even after a passage of 4000 years. However, the ancient India apparently did not give requisite focus towards this aspect, as stated by many historians. As such, a significant period of Indian ancient history has not been recorded at all. Moreover, a large part of Indian history is reconstruction of events by western writers/academicians from various texts and monuments or travel accounts by foreigners. This aspect of incorporating a well-structured system of history writing needs to be imbibed by Indian culture.

Conclusion

The article has made an attempt to provide a glimpse in to the works of Oswald Spengler, a controversial yet revered German historian. Spengler has given an in-depth analysis about various aspects of the eight major civilisations of the world, including the Indian civilisation, whose uniqueness and strengths have been brought out in a manner very few western historians have done so far. Spengler's writings and his great insight into world history has much relevance to the Indian academicians even after passage

of a century. An endeavour has also been made to bring out the relevance of Spengler's thoughts to India; in its current journey towards growth and accomplishment of the goal of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Van Doren, *The Idea of Progress*, Frederick A Praeger Publishers, New York, 1967, pp 117-118.

² DP Chattopadhyay, *Knowledge Freedom and Language*, Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, Delhi, 1989, p 141.

³ Theodor Oizerman, *Problems of the History of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, p 380.

⁴ CEM Joad, *Counter Attack from the East: The Philosophy of Radhakrishnan*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1933, p 10.

⁵ Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1949, p 158.

⁶ Lily Abegg, *The Mind of East Asia*, Thames and Hudson, London, p 320.

⁷ John Edward Sullivan, *Prophets of the West*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc, New York, 1970, pp 165-169.

⁸ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, Pocket Books, New York, 1953, p 344.

⁹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vintage Books, New York, pp 246-247.

¹⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vintage Books, New York, pp 11-12.

¹¹ William S Haas, *The Destiny of the Mind, East and West*, Faber and Faber, London, pp 46-47.

¹² Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vintage Books, New York, p 244.

¹³ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vintage Books, New York, p 237.

¹⁴ Yashdev Shalya, *Perspectives in Philosophy, Indo-Bulgarian Philosophical Studies*, Ajanta Books International, New Delhi, 1995, p 265.

¹⁵ Anand Amaladass, Sebasti L Raj, Jose Elampassery, *Philosophy and Human Development*, Satya Nilayam Publications, Madras, 1986, p 140.

¹⁶ MN Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*, Renaissance Publishers Ltd, Calcutta, 1952, p 216.

¹⁷ P George Victor, *Teaching Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century*, DK Printworld (P) Ltd, New Delhi, 2002, p 75.

¹⁸ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "An Idealist View of Life", George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, pp 20, 64.