A Cyclical Theory of Evolution

[.....] Driven from all other fields by a perception of the slow and aeonic processes of Nature, the mushroom theory of existence took refuge in this ill-explored corner of scientific theory. Thence, although later discoveries have had an enlarging effect, it still hampers the growth of more thoughtful generalisations. The time-limit allowed for the growth of civilisation is still impossibly short and in consequence an air of unreality hangs over the application of the evolutionary idea to our human development. Nor is this essential objection cured by any evidence of the modernity of human civilisation. Its great antiquity is denied merely on the absence of affirmative data; there are no positive indications to support the denial; but where data are scanty, such a negative basis is in the last degree unsound and precarious. We can no longer argue that no ancient civilisations can have existed of which the traces have entirely perished and that prehistoric means, necessarily, savage and undeveloped. History on the contrary abounds with instances of great societies which were within an ace of disappearing without leaving any visible memorial behind them and recent excavations have shown that such disappearances in ancient times have been even not uncommon. We cannot have exhausted all that the earth contains. There should be the remains of other civilisations yet undiscovered & there may well have been yet others which because of the manner of their disappearance or for other causes have left no traces at all whether upon the surface of the earth or under it. Indeed with regard to no object or previous existence, no silent or imperfectly documented [scene], is it safe to argue that because there are no traces or sufficient evidence of it, therefore it never existed. Yet in many fields of generalisation modern scholarship has used substantially this argument with a prodigal freedom. It is at least possible that mighty cities and noble civilisations filled with their
rumour the now silent spaces of Time for countless millenniums before Egypt and Assyria rose into their historic greatness.

Brief lapse of time is not indeed the cardinal point of the savage theory and even if larger time-spaces are allowed, the theory itself need not fall. But I have urged the question of time as of primary moment not for the overthrow of the modern explanation but for the readmission of another and more ancient synthesis. For if once we allow the existence of prehistoric civilisations older, it would seem, than the Egyptian, — such as may be argued from the deep-buried cities of Asia, — and the presence in an unknown antiquity of great national cultures where now the savage or the semi-savage swarm uncreative and unreflecting, — such as may be argued from the ruins of Mashonaland or the state of medieval Barbary after the ravages of Moor and Vandal or even the fate which overtook for almost a millennium the magnificent structure of Graeco-Roman culture and threatened even to blot out its remnants and ruins, — the question then arises, what was the nature of these forgotten civilisations and how was the relapse to barbarism often of an extreme form, so completely effected. These gigantic spaces of time, this worldwide rise and fall of human society, this swaying to and fro from darkness to light and light to darkness leave the ground open for another explanation which is in some respects the reverse of the savage theory, — for the Hindu explanation.

For the Hindu mind has never admitted the principle in Nature of progress in a straight line. Progress in a straight line only appears to occur and so appears only because we concentrate our scrutiny on limited sections of the curve that Nature is following. But if we stand away from this too near and detailed scrutiny and look at the world in its large masses, we perceive that its journeying forward has no straightness in it of any kind but is rather effected in a series of cycles of which the net result is progress. The image of this apparent straight line is that of the ship which seems to its crew to be journeying on the even plain of the waters but is really describing the curve of the earth in a way perceptible only to a more distant and instructed vision. Moreover even the small section of the curve which we are
examining & which to our limited vision seems to be a straight line is the result of a series of zigzags and is caused by the conflict of forces arriving by a continual struggle at a continual compromise or working out by their prolonged discord a temporary harmony. The image of the actual progress in cycles is the voyaging in Space of the planets which describe always the same curve round their flaming & luminous sun, image of the perfect strength, joy, beauty, beneficence and knowledge towards which our evolution yearns. The cycle is always the same ellipse, yet by the simultaneous movement of the whole system the completed round finds the planet at a more advanced station in Space than its preceding journey. It is in this way, by an ever-swaying battle, a prodigal destruction and construction, a labouring forward in ever-progressing curves and ellipses that Nature advances to her secret consummation.

These are the conceptions we find expressed in the Puranic symbols familiar to our imagination. There is the Kalpa of a thousand ages with its term of fourteen Manwantaras dividing a sub-cycle of a hundred chaturyugas; there is the dharma, the well-harmonised law of being, perfect in the golden period of the Satya, impaired progressively in bronze Treta and copper Dwapara, collapsing in the iron Kali only to open the way by its disintegration to the manifestation in the next Satya of the old law, truth or natural principle of existence arranged in a new harmony. There is throughout this zigzag, this rhythm of rise and fall and rise again brought about by the struggle of upward, downward and stationary forces. There are the alternate triumphs of deva and daitya, helping god and opposing or too violently forward-striving Titan; — the dhamamsa glani and abhyutthanam adharmasya, when harmony is denied and discord or wrong harmony established, and then the Avatar and the dharma sansthapanam, eternal Light and Force descending, restoring, effecting a new temporary adjustment of the world’s ways to the truth of things and of man.

Translating into more modern but not necessarily more accurate language these symbols point us to a world history not full of the continual, ideal, straightforward victory of good and
truth, not progress conceived as the Europeans conceive it, a continual joyous gallop through new & ever new changes to an increasing perfection, but rather of the alternately triumphant forces of progress and regression, a toiling forward and a sliding backward,—the continual revolution of human nature upon itself which yet undoubtedly has but conceals & seems not to have its secret of definite aim and ultimate exultant victory. In certain respects the old Vedantic thinkers anticipate us; they agree with all that is essential in our modern ideas of evolution. From one side all forms of creatures are developed; some kind of physical evolution from the animal to the human body is admitted in the Aitareya. The Taittiriya suggests the psychological progress of man, and the psychological progress of race cannot be different in principle from the evolution of the individual—a proceeding from the material, the emotionally and mentally inert man upwards [through] the mental to [our] spiritual fulfilment. The Puranas admit the creation of animal forms before the appearance of man and in the symbol of the Ten Avatars trace the growth of our evolution from the fish through the animal, the man-animal and the developed human being to the different stages of our present incomplete evolution. But the ancient Hindu, it is clear, envisaged this progression as an enormous secular movement covering more ages than we can easily count. He believed that Nature has repeated it over & over again, as indeed it is probable that she has done, resuming briefly & in sum at each start what she had previously accomplished in detail, slowly & with labour. It is this great secular movement in cycles, perpetually self-repeating, yet perpetually progressing, which is imaged and set forth for us in the symbols of the Puranas. It is for this reason that he assigned to his civilisation those immense eras and those ancient and far backward beginnings which strike the modern as so incredible. He may have erred; recent discoveries & indications are increasingly tending to convince us that nineteenth century scholarship has erred equally in the opposite direction.

Translated again into modern language the Hindu idea of the chaturyuga, four Ages, with all the attendant Puranic
circumstances persists as the tradition of a period just such as has been postulated, a period of natural and perfect poise in his knowledge, action and temper between man and his environment. The ideas, the knowledge, the temper, the spirit of this great epoch of civilisation, — but not its institutions or practices — is preserved for us in the Veda and Vedanta, and all existing human societies, civilised or barbarous, go back for the origins of their thought, character & effort to the general type of humanity that was then formed.