



## SRI AUROBINDO : PHILOSOPHER AND TRANSCENDENTALIST

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Sri Aurobindo was a great philosopher and seer, almost in the line of vedic and upanishadic poet-seers. His philosophy deals with ceaseless striving, from time immemorial, of mankind towards the achievement of divinity. It is 'not the result of his seeking, but a result of his finding and discovery'.<sup>1</sup> *The Life Divine*, his greatest work, is a monumental work in which he made an original contribution in the field of philosophical thought of the modern world. In nature it is at once visionary and revelatory. It is both vast in range and massive in bulk. This metaphysical treatise is divided into three sections : Vol. I 'Omnipresent Reality and the Universe'; Vol. II, Part I, 'The Infinite Consciousness and the Ignorance'; and Vol. II, Part II, 'The Knowledge and the Spiritual Evolution'. The book explains the different processes of Sri Aurobindo's conception of the spiritual evolution. Dr. Karan Singh writes :

*According to this theory, creation began when a part of the supreme, Unconditioned and Absolute Reality plunged into the grossest and densest matter. From the dawn of creation the spirit that was involved in matter began its slow but sure evolution on the path which leads back to its source of origin. After aeons life began to make its appearance in primitive forms which gradually evolved upwards. Then, after another tremendous gap, mind first appeared among living creatures. The next step upwards was the advent of the human race when intellect began to assume the dominating role. This, however, is by no means the final phase of evolution. In fact it is an intermediate stage, and mankind is now poised on the threshold of the next leap forward in the evolutionary process. This step is the evolution of the mind to Supermind, the luminous realm of - Truth-Consciousness. The instruments of this Supermind will be intuition and direct cognition rather than the imperfect reasoning intellect which our race possesses at present.*<sup>2</sup>

According to Sri Aurobindo, this process of evolution as manifested in the vegetable and animal kingdom is a blind though spontaneous process. But man with the help of the Superconscient that will descend to his help may become blissful and gradually progressive one. If he so wills and endeavour, he can directly participate in this process and hasten it to a quick and perfect culmination. In the chapter on 'Ascent and Integration' Sri Aurobindo explains the nature of the process of evolution :



*The principle of the process of evolution is a foundation, from that foundation an ascent, in that ascent a reversal of consciousness and, from the greater height and wideness gained an action of change and new integration of the whole nature.<sup>3</sup>*

*The different stages of the ascent are described by Sri Aurobindo in these words :*

*These gradations may be summarily described as. a series of sublimations of the consciousness through Higher Mind, Illumined Mind and Intuition into Over mind and beyond it; there is a succession of Self-Transmutation at the summit of which lies the Supermind or Divine Gnosis .....*

*Each stage of this ascent is therefore a general, if not a total, conversion of the being into a new light and power of greater existence.<sup>4</sup>*

Aurobindo, thus, presented a vision of the future course of humanity. It is -the vision of a gradual but definite and constant transformation of the life-pattern on this earth into the Divine Life, i.e. into the 'Satchidananda' (Existence : Conscious Force : Bliss) stage. It is the vision of a supramental principle : 'A supramental principle and its cosmic operation once established permanently on its own basis, the intervening powers of Overmind and Spiritual Mind could be found securely upon it and reach their own perfection; they would become in the earth existence a hierarchy of states of consciousness rising out of Mind and physical life to the supreme spiritual level',<sup>5</sup> This process of gradual transformation from the limited mental consciousness to the stage of complete oneness with 'Satchidananda' implies a positive effect on the part of man.

Sri Aurobindo developed his own methods of making this effort and these are yogic methods. A brief discussion of these yogic methods is necessary for it will throw light on Sri Aurobindo as a transcendentalist. Sri Aurobindo believed that through the process of Integral (**Puma**) yoga man can actively and effectively contribute to the evolutionary process and thereby quicken its finalisation. This Integral Yoga achieves a perfect synthesis of Karma, Jnana and Bhakti Yogas and leads to what Sri Aurobindo himself called "The Sun-lit Path". After a devoted practice (**Sadhana**) of this integral yoga a yogi can rise to that supramental plane where the supermind keeps shining bright with all its glory, light and power. Having risen to that plane the yogi will draw that light and power in his own consciousness. He will then come back or descend to that material plane from where he had risen, and will make himself the instrument through which the supramental or the light and the power that he has drawn within himself will act towards the spiritual evolution of the earth-consciousness. This was what Sri Aurobindo is said to have performed. Through his intense endeavour he could succeed in raising himself to that supramental plane.



Two features of Sri Aurobindo's yoga are particularly remarkable. They are that Sri Aurobindo's yoga is not individualistic but humanistic and that it strikes a final and satisfactory synthesis between Spirit and Matter. Salvation for the whole race or for the entire humanity and not only for an individual, is the goal that Sri Aurobindo's yoga aspires for. It asserts that Matter is not the opposite of Spirit. Matter and Spirit are in fact two things at different stages in the same evolutionary process. Matter stands at the primary stage and evolves in the final stage into Spirit. Thus, indirectly, Sri Aurobindo's yoga also strikes at a perfect synthesis between the western materialistic culture and spiritualistic culture of India. Thus D. L. Murray rightly comments 'Sri Aurobindo is not an armchair philosopher but a new type of thinker, one who combined in his vision the alacrity of the west with the illumination of the East.'<sup>6</sup>

Apart from politics, philosophy and yoga, Sri Aurobindo's creative genius flowered simultaneously in literary fields such as poetry, literary criticism and drama. His writings reflect his political, philosophical and religious views. His patriotism served as a major influence on his writings. "We know that the letters of his father, particularly those in which he complained of the maltreatment and insults heaped upon the Indians by the Englishmen and denounced British Government as a heartless government, were the first to stir the hidden embers of nationalism in his heart. They drew him towards the Indian Majlis and the Lotus and Dagger Society, which was a secret party working for the liberation of India. The Irish patriotic movement too greatly influenced him. The life of the great Irish nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, was a great source of inspiration to him. These early formative influences besides shaping his future career moved him emotionally and on many occasions found expression in his early poems. One such occasion was provided by the death of Parnell in 1891. The poem that he wrote on his death 'Charles Stewart Parnell' and the one entitled 'Hie Jacet (Glasnevin Cemetery)' amply demonstrate the patriotic bent of his mind and the inspiration drawn from the Irish patriotic movement. It is true that in England he was brought up strictly in a purely European environment and had intensively and extensively studied Greek and Latin classics. His early poems, quite naturally, reveal deep influences of his Greek and Latin scholarship. They are replete with names, allusions and images drawn from Greek and Latin classics. The very title, **Songs to Myrtilla**, of the collection of his early poems written in England, is an example of this. But immediately after his return to India he plunged himself into a study of Indian languages and classics. At Baroda he learned Sanskrit and read the **Vedas** and the **Upanishadas** in the original. He also learned some modern Indian languages, specially, Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali. He was thus able to assimilate the spirit of Indian culture and civilization in a very short period. His later poems are replete with allusions from the **Vedas**, the **Upanishadas** and the **Puranas** and are thus a true expression of the genius of India.

His poetic creations with their 'vividly worded vision' and 'expressively rhythmical emotion'<sup>7</sup> have ushered in our world 'a new vedic and upanishadic age of poetry'.<sup>8</sup> They are the creations of a mystically and spiritually inspired consciousness, and they



present a subtle and rhythmic elucidation of the relationship, both existing and what should be, between the Mind and the Supermind. They are prophetic illustrations of the processes through which the Divinity shall be manifesting itself in the earth-body. In them we find a vision of the past, a knowledge of the present and a peep into the future. A single dominant motive, namely, man's aspiration for the higher and more divinely fulfilled life here and now, seems to run in all the works of Sri Aurobindo. In **Irvasio** and **Love and Death** he speaks of the love that defeats death. **Baji Prabhu** presents that unconsiderable pressure. Poems like **Who, The Bishi** and **The Birth of Sin**, etc., are unique poetical expression of the mystical Sin', etc., are unique poetical expressions of the mystical experiences of a great yogi. The rapidly growing poetical career of Sri Aurobindo reaches its culmination in **Suvitri**. It is his magnum opus. It is cosmic in character and can be placed among the great epics of the world. K. D. Sethna says that it 'brings out living symbols from the mystical planes—a concrete contact with the Divine's presence. Even when realities that are not openly divine are viewed, the style is of a direct knowledge, direct feeling, direct rhythm from an inner or upper poise.....' <sup>9</sup> It is great also because it presents a vision which is interpretative and inspiring.

Sri Aurobindo is also a great prose writer. **The Future Poetry, The Synthesis of Yoga, The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity** are some of his important prose works. **The Future Poetry** is a significant work of literary criticism. In it Sri Aurobindo gives new directions and dimensions to the norms of literary criticism. New literary theories are propounded and illustrated in this book. About the methods of understanding and appreciating poetry Sri Aurobindo writes :

*In poetry as in everything else that aims at perfection, there are always two elements, the eternal and the time element. The first is what really and always matters, it is that which must determine our definite appreciation, our absolute verdict or rather our essential response to poetry."*<sup>10</sup>

About Elizabethan poetry he writes :

Elizabethan poetry is an expression of this energy, passion and wonder of life, and it is much more powerful, disorderly and unrestrained than the corresponding poetry in other countries, having neither a past traditional culture nor an innate taste to restrain its extravagances.<sup>11</sup>

Explaining his conception of the dramatic poetry, he writes :

*Dramatic poetry cannot live by the mere presentation of life and action and the passions, however truly they may be portrayed or however vigorously and abundantly. . It must have, to begin with, as the fount of its creation or in its heart an interpretative vision and 'in that vision an explicit or implicit idea of life; and the vital presentation which is its outward instrument, must arise out of that harmoniously, whether by spontaneous creation, as in Shakespeare, or by the compulsion of- an intuitive artistic*



*will, as with the Greek*<sup>12</sup>

His letters and speeches touch upon a surprisingly large number of topics such as nationalism, politics, philosophy, sociology, world unity, the ancient scriptures like the Vedas, the Upanishadas, the Gita. Indian Art, literature and general culture, poetry, plays, literary criticism, etc. Of his letters to his wife only three survive. The first letter gives us a knowledge of the aspirations, dreams and desires of Sri Aurobindo, the second records his doubts and anxieties and the third enunciates the final resolve, the absolute surrender of the self to the service of humanity and in the hands of the Omnipotent.<sup>13</sup> Wit and humour too characterise Sri Aurobindo's prose. In a letter Sri Aurobindo writes 'sense of humour? It is the salt of existence. Without it the world would have gone utterly out of balance-it is unbalanced enough already-and rushed to blazes long ago'.<sup>14</sup> Yet these letters reflect Sri Aurobindo's lofty thoughts. Commenting upon these letters Dr. Iyengar writes :

*They are written in somewhat less lofty and difficult style than his other more metaphysical works and yet they bear the stamp of luminous authenticity and are charged with that High Wisdom which comes from the complete living in the spirit's complete truth*<sup>15</sup>

Even the minor sequences of **The Arya**, such as **Commentaries on Isha and Kena Upanishadas**, **The Hymns of the Artris**, **The Renaissance in India**, **A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture, Ideal and Progress**, **The Superman** and **Evolution**, etc. deal with a multitude of diverse themes in a varied and attractive manner.

Over and above these, there are his plays which illustrate his versatile genius all the more. **Perseus the Deliverer**, **Vasavadutta**, **Rodogune**, **The Viziers of Bassora**, **Eric** and the incomplete **Prince of Edur**, are all embodiments of the dramatist's vision of man labouring continuously to achieve an almost absolute freedom, freedom from ignorance, from disease, incapacity and death, and to establish a blissful state of divine living. All these Sire poetic dramas. **Rodogune** is a tragedy. **The Viziers of Bassora** is a dramatic romance. **Perseus the Deliverer** is a serious drama. **Vasavadutta** and **Eric** are romantic comedies.

Sri Aurobindo thus created his own literary world which has both wealth and variety. He wrote philosophical

(**The Life Divine**), psychological (**Synthesis of Yoga**), sociological (**The Human Cycle**), political (**Ideal of Human Unity**), critical (**The Future Poetry**), poetical (Two volumes of **Collected Poems** and **Savitri**), and dramatic (five complete plays and one incomplete play) works. Apart from these he left a huge stock of letters, speeches, messages, essays, translations of and commentaries on some of the



Upanishadas such as **Isha, Kena, Katha Mundaka**, etc., exhaustive commentaries on **the Gita in the form of Essays on Gita** and an English rendering of Kalidasa's drama **Vikramorvasi** under the title **The Hero and the Nymph**. Whatever he wrote bore the imprint of his profound and versatile genius. In all of them we find the high watermark of Aurobindonian perfection. They all seem to point to us that even in this 'Age of despair' there is nothing to feel frustrated and very high level of perfection and poise within the reach of humanity .

Sri Aurobindo was indeed an intellectual prodigy and a versatile genius.

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