
UNIT 1 PERSONALITY, VISION AND WORK OF AUROBINDO

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To lead the students to the world and vision of Aurobindo.
- To familiarize them with the history of Sri Aurobindo.
- To give them a sense of the literary and political background of Sri Aurobindo.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The year was 1907. The freedom movement in India was gathering momentum. Its leader was detained by the police. The poet Rabindranath Tagore paid him a visit and wrote the now famous lines: "Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee! O friend, my country's friend, O Voice incarnate, free, Of India's soul....The fiery messenger that with the lamp of God Hath come...Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee." The year was 1928. The leader had now left politics and had gone to Pondicherry where he had plunged himself into the practice of yoga. The poet Tagore once again paid him a visit and declared: "You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, 'Hearken to me!' Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him: "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath." Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of a reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence: "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath!"

How does one describe or speak about such a personality? Sri Aurobindo has been called a scholar, a literary critic, a philosopher, a revolutionary, a poet, a Yogi and a 'Rishi'. He was all these and much more. To have even a glimpse of the true Sri Aurobindo we have to turn to the Mother: "What Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history is not a teaching, not even a revelation; it is a decisive action direct from the Supreme."

Because of it Sri Aurobindo declared, in no uncertain terms that nobody could write his biography: "Neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for men to see." But he was not altogether averse to this effort and even made corrections when some biographers made the attempt. So in this unit, we are making a humble attempt to describe the person, vision and works of Sri Aurobindo. For this section we base ourselves primarily on the Aurobindo Ashram's official writings (SAL 2011).

1.2 BEGINNING OF AUROBINDO'S LIFE IN CALCUTTA

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta. The day was August 15, 1872, the time - 5.00 a.m., the hour of dawn. The date is doubly important. Seventy-five years later, exactly on that date - August 15 - India attained her freedom. In a message given on that day Sri Aurobindo, who had played a leading role in the freedom struggle, said: "I take this coincidence, not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force that guides my steps on the work with which I began life, the beginning of its full fruition."

The date has an even greater and deeper significance. Sri Aurobindo has explained it thus: "The 15th August is the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; it implies that the physical nature is raised to the divine Nature..." And this was in a way the goal of Sri Aurobindo's life. To divinise the earth, "to make matter the Spirit's willing bride."

The name given to Sri Aurobindo at birth was quaintly Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose! His father Dr. K. D. Ghose had returned from England with a completely Western outlook. He was enamoured of everything Western and, because a British lady Miss Annette Ackroyd happened to be present, her name was also added to Aurobindo's name. Later Sri Aurobindo was to say in a humorous tone about his father: "Everyone makes the forefathers of a great man very religious-minded, pious etc. It is not true in my case at any rate. My father was a tremendous atheist."

But Dr. Ghose was also 'generous to a fault'. Nobody went empty-handed from his door. And the mother of Sri Aurobindo, Swarnalata Devi, was so beautiful and gracious that she was known as the "Rose of Rangpur". Sri Aurobindo was the third among five children. The two elder brothers were Benoy Bhushan and Monomohan and the younger sister was Sarojini followed by the youngest brother, Barindranath (SAL 2011).

1.3 THE ENGLISH INFLUENCE (1869-1893)

When Sri Aurobindo was five years old, he was sent to Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling. Two years later, in 1879, Dr. Ghose sent his sons, including Aurobindo who was then only seven,

to England, with strict instructions that the young Aurobindo should have a completely Western education and should not even come into the slightest contact with anything Indian. A new chapter in his life had begun (Prema 1972).

Sri Aurobindo lived at Manchester with the Rev. and Mrs. Drewett. While his brothers studied at school, he was taught at home by the Rev. Drewett. He developed, very early, a love for poetry, which was to last him throughout his life. Even at that young age of eleven he contributed a few poems to the local Magazine.

Mastering Western Culture

In 1884 Sri Aurobindo shifted to London and was admitted to St. Paul's. The headmaster was so pleased with his mastery of Latin that he took it upon himself to teach him Greek. It is here that Sri Aurobindo plunged into the literature of the Western world and studied several languages - French, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Latin, and absorbed the best that Western culture had to offer him.

But these were also difficult times. The generosity of his father Dr. Ghose, had brought succour to many an unknown person in need in Khulna, where he was posted. But it had also made the stipend he sent to his own sons very irregular. Sri Aurobindo was then in his early teens. He describes how he spent several years in the bitter cold of London: "During a whole year a slice or two of bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny saveloy (a kind of sausage) formed the food."

For nearly two years he had to go practically without dinner at that young age. He had no overcoat to protect him from the rigours of the London winter and there was no heating arrangement in the office where he slept, nor had he a proper bedroom. But Sri Aurobindo was immersed in his books and was feasting on the thoughts of the great. He got the Butterworth Prize for literature, the Bedford Prize for history and a scholarship to Cambridge (SAL 2011).

Cambridge

In 1890, at the age of eighteen, Sri Aurobindo got admission into Cambridge with a senior classical scholarship. He studied the classics brilliantly and passed high in the First class. The famous Oscar Browning had examined Sri Aurobindo's classical papers at the scholarship examination. He remarked to Sri Aurobindo: "I suppose you know you passed an extraordinarily high examination. I have examined papers at thirteen examinations and I have never during that time seen such excellent papers as yours. As for your essay, it was wonderful." It was thus that Sri Aurobindo grew, away from his family, away from his motherland, away from his roots and his culture. He knew seven foreign languages but could not speak his own tongue, Bengali. He would not have been able to speak fluently with his own mother.

The ICS

To comply with the wish of his father, Sri Aurobindo also applied for the Indian Civil Services (ICS) Exams while at Cambridge. Here too he did brilliantly. But Sri Aurobindo was not meant

to be an ICS officer, serving Her Majesty's Government as one more cog in a giant bureaucratic machine. Dr. K.D. Ghose had by now become aware of the atrocities being committed by the British on Indians and began to send paper clippings of these to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo also felt that a period of great upheaval for his motherland was coming in which he was destined to play a leading role. He began to learn Bengali and joined a secret society, with the romantic name of 'Lotus and Dagger', where the members took an oath to work for India's freedom.

Sri Aurobindo now looked for a way to disqualify himself from the ICS and did not appear for the horse-riding test. In normal circumstances this would have been a very minor lapse but the British Government, too, was aware of his political views and activities, and found this a good opportunity to reject him. Wrote Lord Kimberly, the Secretary of State for India, on his file: "I should much doubt whether Mr. Ghose would be a desirable addition to the Service." Although he had done brilliantly in the ICS - a most sought-after vocation - Sri Aurobindo now, because of his own choice, found himself in London without a job. But destiny intervened. The Gaekwad of Baroda happened to be in London and offered him a place in his service. For long after, the Gaekwad boasted to his friends that he had got an ICS man for Rs.200/- per month (SAL 2011).

1.4 BACK IN BARODA (1893-1907)

Thus Sri Aurobindo sailed back to his country in 1893, at the age of twenty-one, having spent the most important and formative fourteen years of his life, in a foreign land. He had grown up in England but did not feel any attachment to it. Now India beckoned him. He wrote in his poem called "Envoi".

"Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati

Has called to regions of eternal snow

And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,

Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow."

And how did Mother India receive her son after fourteen years of exile? With her unique and priceless gift - a spiritual experience. The moment Sri Aurobindo put his foot down on Indian soil, at Apollo Bunder in (Mumbai) Bombay, a vast peace and calm descended upon him, never to leave him. Unknowingly and unasked the spiritual life had also begun, which was later to become his sole preoccupation.

But for the moment what occupied him was service in the Baroda State. He started by working in the survey and settlement dept., then in the department of revenue and finally in the Secretariat. He also drafted the speeches of the Gaekwad, who once remarked to Sri Aurobindo that nobody would believe that the Gaekwad could have written such speeches. But his interests lay elsewhere. The Gaekwad, in a report, praised his ability and intelligence but also commented on his lack of punctuality and regularity. After some time Sri Aurobindo was, therefore, transferred to the Baroda College, first as a teacher of French, and then as Vice- Principal, where he was very popular with the students for his unconventional way of teaching (Heehs 1989).

In 1894 Sri Aurobindo was 22 years old. He wrote humorously in a letter to his sister Sarojini in Bengal: "I am quite well. I have brought a fund of health with me from Bengal, which, I hope it will take me some time to exhaust; but I have just passed my twenty-second milestone, August 15 last, since my birthday and am beginning to get dreadfully old." And this is how Sarojini describes him: "a very delicate face, long hair cut in English fashion; Sejda (older brother) was a very shy person." (SAL 2011)

The Study of Indian Culture

In Baroda Sri Aurobindo plunged himself into a study of Indian culture, as if to make up for all the years he had lost. He learnt Hindustani, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Sanskrit. He was a voracious reader, and two bookshops in Bombay kept him regularly supplied with books sent in crates. Sitting by a kerosene lamp he would read late into the night, unmindful of the swarming mosquitoes and often quite unaware of the waiting food. His cousin Basanti Devi wrote about him in a letter: "Auro Dada used to arrive with two or three trunks and we always thought it would contain costly suits and other luxury items like scents etc. When he opened them I used to look at them and wonder. What is this? A few ordinary clothes and all the rest books and nothing but books! Does Auro Dada like to read all these? We all want to chat and enjoy ourselves in vacations. Does he want to spend even this time in reading these books?" Sri Aurobindo read the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bankim as well as Homer, Dante, Horace and many others. He also wrote a lot of poetry and his first collection of poems was published from Baroda (Heehs 1989).

A New Future

But another future was preparing itself for Sri Aurobindo at the same time. It began in a most unobtrusive way soon after he came to Baroda. K.G. Deshpande, a friend from his Cambridge days, was in charge of a weekly, "*Induprakash*", published from Bombay. He requested Sri Aurobindo to write upon the current political situation. Sri Aurobindo began writing a series of fiery articles under the title "New Lamps for Old", strongly criticising the Congress for its moderate policy. Wrote Sri Aurobindo: "Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism."

And he added, "I say, of the Congress, then, this, - that its aims are mistaken, that the spirit in which it proceeds towards their accomplishment is not a spirit of sincerity and whole-heartedness, and that the methods it has chosen are not the right methods, and the leaders in whom it trusts, not the right sort of men to be leaders; - in brief, that we are at present the blind led, if not by the blind, at any rate by the one-eyed." (SAL 2011) It would be interesting to remember that, when Sri Aurobindo wrote these scathing words with such insight he was merely 21 years old. The editors were frightened and requested Sri Aurobindo to write on cultural rather than political themes. Sri Aurobindo lost interest and the series stopped.

Mrinalini Devi

In 1901 Sri Aurobindo married Mrinalini Devi. Mrinalini had to go through all the joys and sorrows which are the lot of one who marries a genius and someone so much out of the ordinary as Sri Aurobindo.

Revolutionary Activity

The period of stay in Baroda, from 1894 to 1906, was significant in several ways for Sri Aurobindo. It was here that he started working for India's freedom, behind the scenes. He perceived the need for broadening the base of the movement and for creating a mass awakening. He went to Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, contacted the secret groups working in this direction, and became a link between many of them. He established close contact with Lokmanya Tilak and Sister Nivedita. He arranged for the military training of Jatin Banerjee in the Baroda army and then sent him to organise the revolutionary work in Bengal.

Cripp's Mission

At the same time he remained in touch with the world events and movements, shaping and moulding them with a purely inner spiritual force and action. When the Second World War broke out, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother came out openly on the side of the Allies because Hitler represented the forces of darkness. He who had fought the British earlier now put his full support and spiritual help behind them for their victory. Though Sri Aurobindo had retired from the political scene, when the Cripps Mission came, he broke his silence and sent an emissary to ask the Indian leaders to accept the proposals. But the country was not yet ready. Sri Aurobindo knew his efforts would not succeed and yet made the attempt as "disinterested work". As he said in his usual impersonal manner: "Well, I have done a bit of Kartavya Karma."

The passage of time revealed the great truth of what Sri Aurobindo had proposed. The late K.M. Munshi, then a senior cabinet minister in the Indian Government remarked about Sri Aurobindo: "He saw into the heart of things.... His perception of the political situation in India was always unerring. When the World War came in 1939...it was he of the unerring eye who said that the triumph of England and France was the triumph of the divine forces over the demoniac forces.... He spoke again when Sir Stafford Cripps came with his first proposal: He said, 'India should accept it.' We rejected the advice... but today we realise that if the first proposal had been accepted, there would have been no partition, no refugees, and no Kashmir problem."

1.5 SRI AUROBINDO'S VISION

August 15th 1947 saw the dawn of India's freedom. In a very significant message given on that day Sri Aurobindo spoke of his five dreams, which is his vision: "Indeed, on this day I can watch almost all the world movements which I hoped to see fulfilled in my life time, though then they looked like impracticable dreams, arriving at fruition or on their way to achievement" (SAL 2011).

- The first of these dreams was a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India. India today is free but she has not achieved unity.... But by whatever means,

in whatever way, the division must go; unity must and will be achieved, for it is necessary for the greatness of India's future.

- Another dream was for the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilisation. Asia has arisen; large parts are now quite free or are at this moment being liberated: its other parts are still moving through whatever struggles towards freedom....
- The third dream was a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind.... A new spirit of oneness will take hold of the human race.
- Another dream, the spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India's spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever-increasing measure....
- The final dream was a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin to solve the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society.

In fact, one of the things that made Sri Aurobindo's vision most appealing was his belief that in all activities, situations, circumstances in life one could bring in a spiritual force to uplift those acts, and evoke the infinite, the miraculous in them. Whether you were a businessman, a writer, a sportsman, a politician, it didn't matter. Everyone and everything was included in this evolutionary movement upward (Posner 2011).

In his view, one does not experience the Divine by retreating from the world to some hermitage or otherwise separate ourselves from the daily activities of life. Spirituality is to be brought into and expressed through life; through every act, circumstance, and situation, evoking the Infinite, the infinite potential in it.

For him every thing is part of this upward world movement and evolution; everything is part of an inner unfolding of consciousness, which from the perspective of the Supreme is a Divine unfolding.

The main problem of course was that humans did not comprehend this evolutionary movement in life. So Sri Aurobindo came along to reveal to us what was not known, to give us a vision of what was possible. That is the great purpose of the Avatar; to bring the world a vision of a new possibility so that it can evolve to a higher plane. In his case, to bring a vision of the possibility of our ultimate possibility, culminating in a Divine life on earth (Posner 2011). He suggested that if we were to come to understand the Spirit that is embedded, hidden, involved within us, and that exists as a Force to tap into about us, we would actively participate in our own personal evolution; in the evolution of our society; even the evolution of the universe itself! That is, we could actively participate in the destiny of the human race.

He repeatedly indicated that we could infuse the spiritual dimension into all planes of our lives -- physical, vital, and mental, in order to uplift all activities and circumstances, whether in our work, our families, our business, or the social institutions we partake in. So everything in life was to be included in this upward, evolutionary movement! Nothing and no one was to be left out, denied. Even the murderer, the dictator, and the promiscuous lover played a role in the universal unfolding. That is because everyone and every thing can go one step further than its

current conditions to grow, develop, and evolve. The consciousness and spirit can be evoked in each thing so that its infinite potential involved, hidden in that thing could come out.

In this way, we move beyond the boundaries of what we perceive as possible. We overcome the boundaries and difficulties of life. Now we understood that the final frontier is not outside ourselves, but is within. That changed the whole dynamic of life; the equation of existence. That opened the doors to infinite possibilities; to a new frontier, a new world, a new future possibility (Posner 2011).

The rest of his life-journey will be taken up in the next Unit.

1.6 MAIN WORKS OF AUROBINDO

To read Sri Aurobindo is to experience the consciousness that lies at the heart of the Truth of existence. Nobel Laureate Roman Rolland said: “Sri Aurobindo (is) the foremost of thinkers, who has realized the most complete synthesis between the genius of the West and the East...” Here are a few enlightening books that can help bridge the gap between life and the spirit.

Sri Aurobindo, who had started writing at an early age, even during his study at Manchester (1879–84), had continued with his creativity through all the turbulent phases of his life, even during his imprisonment. His first book, a collection of poems, entitled *Songs to Myrtilla*, was published in 1895. Between that and the last work to be published during his lifetime, *Savitri* (1950), he had written extensively on Yoga, culture, sociology, in addition to his poetry and plays—contributions of far-reaching and multi-faceted importance to human thought and action. He has given a new cosmology and a new metaphysics in his *Life Divine* “considered as the philosophical masterpiece of the century” (Raina 2000). It has revolutionized our very concept of psychology and education, giving them a new basis in *The Life Divine* and in his letters. He formulated a profoundly new approach to sociology in *The Human Cycle* and showed through a searching analysis of past and current systems of social and political thought how a truly spiritual attitude is essential as a foundation of a new and lasting social order. He extended the application of this very approach to the sphere of international politics in *The Ideal of Human Unity* (Raina 2000).

In his writings on education, he formulated a theory that could, with some variations, be adapted to all the nations of the world, fostering the growth of the integral consciousness in every pupil and bringing back to legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter. He showed in *The Synthesis of Yoga* how all the systems of Yoga combine and converge on the path to Supermind. Further, in *The Secret of the Vedas*, *The Essays on the Gita* and *Writings on Upanishads*, he opened up new and epoch-making ways of studying the ancient Indian texts, throwing new light on philosophy and reducing both anthropology and anthropomorphism to their proper place in a balanced scheme of knowledge. He offered an illuminating interpretation of Indian culture down the centuries in *The foundations of Indian culture*.

Sri Aurobindo’s elaborated epic, *Savitri* reveals the consummation of the many poetic styles that he attempted in all his works. Written in nearly 24,000 lines in blank verse, Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* has been estimated to be the largest poem in the English language. In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo worked out a literary theory considered as an original contribution to aesthetics in

its concept of poetry (Raina 2000). All this and his translations, letters and minor works were compiled and published in a systematic manner after his passing away on 5th December 1950. We present a selection of his writings with our comments.

The Life Divine: "The most vital issue of the age is whether the future progress of humanity is to be governed by the modern economic and materialistic mind of the West or by a nobler pragmatism guided, uplifted and enlightened by spiritual culture and knowledge." This book resolves this question by reconciling the truths behind the metaphysical and the modern with a synthesis of the idea of divine life on Earth.

Savitri: A Legend & A Symbol: A major work, this is a long poem of over 23000 lines based on the ancient Hindu legend of Savitri and Satyavan. Didactic yet inspiring, it depicts myriad aspects of his views and explanation of the ancient Vedic-Yogic path. A unique specimen of spiritual literature, it is, in his own words, "A nectar of honey in the combs of gold" encompassing all human experience in 700 pages.

Arya: Arya was a 64-page monthly review written by Sri Aurobindo. It ran for six and a half years and constituted the appearance in serialised form almost all of his major works except his epic poem *Savitri*. These included *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on The Gita*, *The Secret of The Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, *The Upanishads*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, *War and Self-determination*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and *The Future Poetry*.

The first issue of the Arya appeared on Sri Aurobindo's 42nd birthday (15 August 1914), the last came out in January 1921.

Gems from Sri Aurobindo: This is a gleaning of Aurobindo's statements on subjects of interest from his vast body of works. Aphoristic in style, his sentences illumine the truths within. He packs each sentence with the depth and intensity of the inner meaning, and provides inspiration, themes for meditation and ideas for reflection on a wide array of topics.

The Essential Aurobindo: Writings of Sri Aurobindo: Amassed from over two dozen volumes of Aurobindo's works, this book is essential to an understanding of one of the greatest minds of the 20th century, who combines "the alacrity of the West with the illuminations of the East." Edited with an introduction and an afterword by Dr. Robert McDermott, professor of philosophy and religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.

Collected Works: The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library) were published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1972, on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's centenary. The compilation has 30 volumes, or close to 16,000 pages.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What are the principle works of Aurobindo?

2) Explain the intellectual influences that Aurobindo had.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Sri Aurobindo was an extraordinary genius, mystic and activist. We have seen the first part of his biography, and his vision and writings in this unit. It is very clear that his English influence has been complemented by his devotion to both Indian politics and philosophy.

1.8 KEY WORDS

Saraswati: The *sakti* or wife of God Brahma; the goddess of learning, music, and poetry.

Sister Nivedita (1867–1911), born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was an Anglo-Irish social worker, author, teacher and disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She was a spiritual leader and a true friend of India.

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UNIT 2 SRI AUROBINDO ON INDIAN SCRIPTURES

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To expose the students to the spiritual depth of Sri Aurobindo.
- To encourage them to appreciate his appreciation and interpretation of Indian Scriptures.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to study the impact of Indian scriptures on Aurobindo we first trace his spiritual journey. Then we see his own experience of the Divine which is reflection in his study and interpretation of the Indian Scriptures. For this section we base ourselves primarily on the Aurobindo Ashram website (SAL 2011).

2.2 THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF AUROBINDO

After his return to India, the Divine too, Aurobindo continued to work unseen, within, revealing himself only on certain occasions. In his very first year at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo was going in a horse carriage and there was the possibility of a major accident. Suddenly he felt a Being of Light emerge from him and avert the accident. He described it in a sonnet written later on: "Above my head a mighty head was seen, a face with the calm of immortality and an omnipotent gaze that held the scene in the vast circle of its sovereignty. His hair was mingled with the sun and breeze; The world was in His heart and He was I: I housed in me the Everlasting's peace, the strength of One whose substance cannot die." (SAL 2011).

In 1903 Sri Aurobindo went to Kashmir with the Maharaja. There on the Hills of Shankaracharya he had a revelatory spiritual experience. In another context, he described a similar experience thus: "One stands upon a mountain ridge and glimpses or mentally feels a wideness, a pervasiveness, a nameless Vast in Nature; then suddenly there comes the touch, a revelation, a flooding, the mental loses itself in the spiritual, one bears the first invasion of the Infinite."

Once Sri Aurobindo visited a Kali Temple on the bank of the Narmada. He said: "With my Europeanised mind I had no faith in image-worship and I hardly believed in the presence of God." But he was compelled to do so when he looked at the image and saw a living Divine Presence. As he wrote afterwards: "You stand before a temple of Kali beside a sacred river and see what? - a sculpture, a gracious piece of architecture, but in a moment mysteriously, unexpectedly there is instead a Presence, a Power, a Face that looks into yours, an inner sight in you has regarded the World-Mother."

The fourth experience has an interesting background. His younger brother Barin fell seriously ill with mountain fever. When the doctors were helpless, a Naga Sannyasi happened to come there. He took a cup of water, cut it into four by making a cross with a knife while chanting a mantra and asked Barin to drink it. The next day Barin was completely cured. Sri Aurobindo was greatly impressed and this also proved to be his conscious entry into the field of Yoga. He says. "I thought that a yoga which requires me to give up the world was not for me. I had to liberate my country. I took it up seriously when I learnt that the same tapasya which one does to get away from the world can be turned to action. I learnt that yoga gives power and thought: why should I not get the power and use it to liberate my country?"

Backdoor entry into Yoga

Sri Aurobindo said humorously that he had a backdoor entry into yoga. But the immediate result was that he took up the practice of pranayama. Soon there were some startling physical and psychological results. His mind and memory worked with a greater illumination and power. His skin also became smooth and fair. But it ended with that and when Sri Aurobindo fell seriously ill he stopped, and began to look for another way. This new way opened up much later on but for the moment, the important outer event was that the scene shifted from Baroda to Calcutta.

Calcutta

We may perhaps end the Baroda period with a comment of A. B. Clark, the principal of Baroda College: "So you met Aurobindo Ghosh. Did you notice his eyes? There is a mystic fire and light in them. They penetrate into the beyond." And he added, "If Joan of Arc heard heavenly voices, Aurobindo probably sees heavenly visions".

2.3 NATIONALISM BEGINNING IN BENGAL (1906-1910)

The freedom movement was given a big impetus by the decision of Lord Curzon to partition Bengal. Protest meetings were held all over the country and a mass agitation was launched in Bengal. In June 1906 Sri Aurobindo took one year's leave without pay and went to Bengal to participate in the movement. In 1907 Sri Aurobindo left Baroda College and joined the newly established Bengal National College, as its principal. His salary of Rs.150/- per month was only one fifth of what he was getting in Baroda (SAL 2011).

He had already been contributing articles to the Bengali weekly "Yugantar". Now Bipin Chandra Pal started the daily "Bande Mataram" and Sri Aurobindo soon became its chief editor, though his name was not printed, to avoid prosecution. Overnight, the paper became the organ of the Nationalist Movement and a mighty force in Indian Politics. *The London Times* complained that its articles reeked of sedition but were so cleverly worded that no action could be taken. Mr. Radcliff, editor of *The Statesman*, said about the *Bande Mataram*:

"It had a full-size sheet, was clearly printed on green paper, and was full of leading and special articles written in English with a brilliance and pungency not hitherto attained in the Indian press. It was the most effective voice of what we then called nationalist extremism".

Bipin Chandra Pal described the role of Sri Aurobindo in the *Bande Mataram*: "Morning after morning, not only Calcutta but the educated community almost in every part of the country eagerly awaited its vigorous pronouncements on the stirring questions of the day.... It was a force in the country which none dared to ignore, however much they might fear or hate it; and Aravinda was the leading spirit, the central figure, in the new journal!" (SAL 2011).

An attempt was made to prosecute Sri Aurobindo for sedition in July 1907, but the charges could not be proved, and he was acquitted. In the meantime differences of policy and approach were building up between the moderates and the nationalists. A historic session of the Indian National Congress was held in Surat where it split into two and the nationalists led by Sri Aurobindo and Tilak held a separate meeting. Henry Nevinston, a member of Parliament from England who happened to be present, describes his impressions of Sri Aurobindo and the scene after the split (SAL 2011):

"...a youngish man, I should think still under thirty. Intent dark eyes looked from his thin, clear-cut face with a gravity that seemed immovable.... Grave with intensity, careless of fate or opinion, and one of the most silent men I have known, he was of the stuff that dreamers are made of, but dreamers who will act their dreams, indifferent to means....".

"Grave and silent - I think without saying a single word - Mr. Aravinda Ghosh took the chair, and sat unmoved, with far-off eyes, as one who gazes at futurity. In clear, short sentences, without eloquence or passion, Mr. Tilak spoke till the stars shone out and someone kindled a lantern at his side.

"Sri Aurobindo, who always liked to work from behind the scene, had been pushed into the forefront of the freedom movement. He was its acknowledged leader. The whole country rang with the cry of *Bande Mataram* and a new spirit swept across the country. People had awakened to the need of Swaraj - complete independence- and were willing to give their lives to attain it."

In the midst of this turmoil Sri Aurobindo met in Baroda a Maharashtrian Yogi called Vishnu Bhaskar Lele. Lele asked Sri Aurobindo to remain in seclusion for three days. He told him to sit in meditation and not to think. He would find that thoughts were not his own but came from outside and should be thrown away. Sri Aurobindo describes his experience: "I did not think either of questioning the truth or the possibility, I simply sat down and did it. In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside; I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free." (SAL 2011)

2.4 THE BRAHMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

In three days Sri Aurobindo had achieved the silent mind which deepened into an experience of the Brahman Consciousness. He asserts: "When I was in Bombay, from the balcony of a friend's house I saw the whole busy movement of Bombay as a picture in a cinema show, all unreal and shadowy." (SAL 2011)

But there was a problem. Sri Aurobindo had to address a national meeting after three days. His mind had become calm and blank. How was he to give a speech? Lele told him that it did not matter. He had only to bow down to the audience as Narayana and everything would be all right. As usual Sri Aurobindo followed the directions without questioning and he found that something else spoke through him. And thus it was for the rest of his life. Everything was done from the silent Brahman Consciousness, writing, speaking or the most intense political activity.

This was another great turning point in Sri Aurobindo's spiritual life. He began listening to a Voice within and Lele told him to follow it and that he now had no need for any further instructions or an external Guru. But the Divine had a very different setting for the next major spiritual experience of Sri Aurobindo - the prison-cell of Alipore in Calcutta.

The Prison-Cell of Alipore

The atmosphere in Bengal was tense. The British Government had let loose repressive measures to crush all resistance. In this charged atmosphere an unsuccessful attempt was made on the life of Magistrate Kingsford. Two Bengali youths threw a bomb at his horse carriage. Immediately the police carried out raids on the Manicktolla Gardens, a family property of Sri Aurobindo, where many revolutionaries were undergoing training. Sri Aurobindo was also arrested from his house. He was imprisoned and, for a long time, kept in a small cell in solitary confinement (Srinivasa Iyengar 1985).

Thus began one of the historic trials of the Indian freedom movement. There were 49 accused and 206 witnesses. 400 documents were filed and 5000 exhibits were produced consisting of bombs, revolvers, acid, etc. The judge C.B. Beechcroft had been a student with Sri Aurobindo at Cambridge. The Chief Prosecutor Eardley Norton kept a loaded revolver on his briefcase throughout the trial. The case for Sri Aurobindo was taken up by C. R. Das. The trial lasted for one full year. At the end C. R. Das addressed the court in these ringing words: "My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, the agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands. Therefore, I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this Court, but before the bar of the High Court of History." (SAL 2011)

Sri Aurobindo was found not guilty and acquitted. But this period of one year was a very important period in Sri Aurobindo's life. It was a period of intense sadhana when he had the experience of Krishna as the Immanent Divine. This is how he described the experience in a speech in Uttarpara: "I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover."

Sri Aurobindo saw the same smiling Krishna in the magistrate and even the prosecuting counsel. Where was there any place for fear? When Sri Aurobindo had entered the prison he had said:

"The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all."

But now all was changed. As Sri Aurobindo said afterwards: "I have spoken of a year's imprisonment. It would have been more appropriate to speak of a year's living in an ashram or a hermitage. The only result of the wrath of the British Government was that I found God." (SAL 2011)

India's New Mission

After his release Sri Aurobindo re-entered the political field with a new vision and purpose. India's freedom was necessary if she had to rise and be great and he declared: "India does not rise as other countries do, for self or when she is strong, to trample on the weak. She is rising to shed the eternal light entrusted to her over the world. India has always existed for humanity and not for herself and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great." (SAL 2011)

Sri Aurobindo also started two weeklies: the 'Karmayogin' in English and the 'Dharma' in Bengali. But the air was full of rumours of an impending arrest. The view of the British Government was clearly expressed in what Lord Minto wrote about Sri Aurobindo: "I can only repeat that he is the most dangerous man we have to reckon with."

Aadesh: The Inner Command

One day when Sri Aurobindo was sitting in the Karmayogin office, news was received that the Government intended to arrest him. Immediately, there was an agitated discussion all around. Sri Aurobindo sat calm and unmoving and heard a distinct voice tell him, "Go to Chandernagore". Sri Aurobindo went straight to the Ganga and boarded a boat for Chandernagore which was then a French settlement. Soon he received another 'adesh' to go to Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo remarked later: "I could not question. It was Sri Krishna's adesh. I had to obey. Later I found it was for the Ashram, for the Yogic work." (SAL 2011)

Sri Aurobindo's work in the political field had come to an end. The country had awakened to the call of the Mother and freedom was assured. It was more important to see what India would do with that freedom and what man would do with his future. It was for this work that Sri Aurobindo sailed for Pondicherry to start the most important chapter of his earthly life.

2.5 MYSTIC IN PONDICHERRY (1910-1950)

Sri Aurobindo reached Pondicherry on 4th April 1910. He was then 38 years old. He was received by several revolutionaries of Pondicherry. In fact some of them had been waiting for an Uttarayogi, a yogi from the north. They had heard the prophecy that he would come as a fugitive and practise the Poorna Yoga. He would be recognised by three statements. These statements were made by Sri Aurobindo in a letter he wrote from Baroda to his wife Mrinalini Devi on August 30, 1905 where he spoke about his "three madresses." This letter was later found by the police and produced in court during the Alipore Bomb trial (Srinivasa Iyengar 1985).

Three Madresses

"I have three madresses," accepts our Master. He elaborates as follows (SAL 2011).

The first one is this. I firmly believe that the accomplishments, genius, higher education and learning and wealth that God has given me are His. I have a right to spend for my own purposes only what is needed for the maintenance of the family and if otherwise absolutely essential...

The second folly has recently taken hold of me: It is this. By whatever means I must get the direct realisation of the Lord. The religion of today consists in repeating the name of God every now and then, in praying to Him in the presence of everybody and in showing people how religious one is; I do not want it. If the Divine is there, then there must be a way of experiencing His existence, of realising His presence; however hard the path, I have taken a firm resolution to follow it. Hindu dharma asserts that the path is to be found in one's own self, in one's mind. The rule that enables one to follow the path is also given to me...

The third folly is this: whereas others regard the country as an inert object, and know it as the plains, the fields, the forests, the mountains and rivers, I look upon my country as the mother, I worship her and adore her as the mother. What would a son do when a demon sitting on the breast of his mother is drinking her blood? Would he sit down content to take his meals, and go on enjoying himself in the company of his wife and children, or would he, rather, run to the rescue of his mother? I know I have the strength to uplift this fallen race; it is not physical strength, I am not going to fight with the sword or with the gun, but with the power of knowledge. The power of the warrior is not the only kind of force, there is also the power of Brahman which is founded on knowledge. This is not a new feeling within me, it is not of a recent origin, I was born with it, it is in my very marrow. God sent me to the earth to accomplish this great mission."

Mrinalini passed away on December 17, 1918 in Calcutta, before she could come to Pondicherry. From 1910 for several years Sri Aurobindo lived with a few followers depending entirely on donations to maintain them. Outwardly and financially these were very difficult times. Sri Aurobindo pointed out the precarious nature of their position in a letter to Motilal Roy written half humorously but also half seriously: "The situation just now is that we have Rs. 1 1/2 or so in hand. Srinivasa is also without money... No doubt, God will provide, but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment. I only hope He does not wish us to learn how to live on a minus quantity like Bharati."

The Mother arrives

But the inner yoga, intense and unwavering went on unaffected by outward circumstances. For four years it was a lonely and solitary journey. His sadhana and work were still waiting for the coming of the one who was to be his true collaborator, the Mother. And she came from France in 1914. On March 29th a young French woman, Mirra Richard, came to Pondicherry with her husband Paul Richard and met Sri Aurobindo for the first time on the physical plane. One has to say on the physical plane because Mirra was far on the path of spirituality and had already been inwardly in contact with a person whom she called Krishna, and who had been helping her and guiding her.

When Mirra saw Sri Aurobindo she recognised in him the Krishna of her vision and knew that her place and work were with him in India. She wrote in her diary the next morning:

"It matters little that there are thousands of beings plunged in the densest ignorance, He whom we saw yesterday is on earth; His presence is enough to prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light, and Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth."

Immediately there was a greater impetus to the movement. On August 15th 1914, the monthly *Arya* was launched. The *Arya* continued for seven years and through it Sri Aurobindo presented to the world his great spiritual vision and the path to attain it. Nearly all the major works of Sri Aurobindo which were published later in book form - *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *On the Veda*, *The Upanishads*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, *The Future Poetry* - all of them first came out serially in the *Arya*. It was a veritable torrent which flowed, month after month, on a variety of subjects, words of surpassing depth and beauty. And none of it was thought out; it did not even pass through his mind, but flowed straight from the silent consciousness into his pen.

In 1915, with the outbreak of the First World War, the Richards had to go back to France. Mirra went to Japan in 1916 and returned to Pondicherry in 1920, never to leave.

The Descent of the 'Overmind' Consciousness

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother believe that evolution is primarily a process of the manifestation of higher and higher levels of consciousness upon earth. As life descended into inert matter, and mind into unconscious life, so too higher levels are waiting to descend. The highest of these is the Supermind and it was the constant endeavour of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to bring it down for a radical and permanent transformation of the earth. But before the Supermind could descend, other planes had to manifest to build the proper base.

It was a momentous day. It also brought about many outward changes. Sri Aurobindo now installed Mirra as the Mother of his spiritual endeavour, his collaborator and equal, and handed over to her the responsibility of the inner and outer life of the small group of sadhaks who had gathered around him. He then withdrew into seclusion, to concentrate on the next step of his Yoga.

The Ashram Grows

This was also the beginning of what has now grown into a spiritual community of nearly fifteen hundred persons, known as the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The Ashram grew and expanded under the Mother's guidance. Though Sri Aurobindo had withdrawn physically he continued to guide the disciples inwardly and through letters. Day after day, he sat late into the night answering their smallest queries, apparently even the most trivial, and pouring out his love and light.

2.6 SRI AUROBINDO LEAVES HIS BODY

On December 5, 1950, at the age of 78, Sri Aurobindo left his physical body. His body was kept in State for four days and given Samadhi on December 9, 1950. Dr. P. K. Sanyal, who had attended on Sri Aurobindo during his last illness, was surprised to find that the body had not decomposed. He asked the Mother about this phenomenon (Navajata 1972). He described what happened:

"The Mother and I had a look at Him; how wonderful, how beautiful He looked, with a golden hue. There were no signs of death as science had taught me, no evidence of the slightest discoloration, or decomposition. The Mother whispered, 'As long as the supramental light does not pass away, the body will not show any signs of decomposition, and it may be a day or it may take many more days.' I whispered to Her, 'Where is the light you speak of - can I not see it?' I was then kneeling by Sri Aurobindo's bed, by the Mother's feet. She smiled at me and with infinite compassion put her hand on my head. There He was - with a luminous mantle of bluish golden hue around him."

But the dreams of Sri Aurobindo continue to become a reality. The world moves forward on the destined way. Sri Aurobindo was first and foremost a poet. And his greatest work, on which he spent his maximum love and care, was his Epic "*Savitri*." What he wrote there is very well applicable to himself: "One yet may come armoured, invincible; His will immobile meets the mobile hour; The world's blows cannot bend that victor head; Calm and sure are his steps in the growing Night; The goal recedes, he hurries not his pace, He turns not to high voices in the Night. He asks no aid from the inferior gods; His eyes are fixed on the immutable aim."

There is perhaps no better way to end this narration of Sri Aurobindo's life than to quote the message given by the Mother, which is engraved on his Samadhi: "To Thee who hast been the material envelope of our Master, to Thee our infinite gratitude. Before Thee who hast done so much for us, who hast worked, struggled, suffered, hoped, endured so much, before Thee who hast willed all, attempted all, prepared, achieved all for us, before Thee we bow down and implore that we may never forget, even for a moment, all we owe to Thee."

2.7 SRI AUROBINDO ON INDIAN SCRIPTURES

Obviously our Master was enamoured and fascinated by the Indian scriptures. He studied them thoroughly and personalised them, so that they became part of his existence. But he was not a slave even to the Sacred Scriptures. Stephen H. Phillips (1986) who has written a very illuminating book on Aurobindo, thinks of Aurobindo as a "mystic empiricist" who has high regard for Indian scriptures. He says that Aurobindo had a "metaphorical understanding" of the Indian Scriptures and so he could interpret them creatively to make them relevant for the Indian context. In order to see how Aurobindo creatively interprets the Indian Scriptures, we take one specific case of The Upanishads. Written in between May and September 1920, in Arya, the following gives us an idea of how Aurobindo appreciates the Indian Scripture.

2.8 SRI AUROBINDO ON THE UPANISHADS

[To give an idea of his view on Indian Scriptures, we have some extracts from his writings on the Upanishads, written by Aurobindo himself, in Arya between May and September 1920.]

"The Upanishads are the supreme work of the Indian mind, and that it should be so, that the highest self-expression of its genius, its sublimest poetry, its greatest creation of the thought and word should be not a literary or poetical masterpiece of the ordinary kind, but a large flood of spiritual revelation of this direct and profound character, is a significant fact, evidence of a

unique mentality and unusual turn of spirit. The Upanishads are at once profound religious scriptures, - for they are a record of the deepest spiritual experiences, - documents of revelatory and intuitive philosophy of an inexhaustible light, power and largeness and, whether written in verse or cadenced prose, spiritual poems of an absolute, an unfailing inspiration inevitable in phrase, wonderful in rhythm and expression. It is the expression of a mind in which philosophy and religion and poetry are made one, because this religion does not end with a cult nor is limited to a religio-ethical aspiration, but rises to an infinite discovery of God, of Self, of our highest and whole reality of spirit and being and speaks out of an ecstasy of luminous knowledge and an ecstasy of moved and fulfilled experience, this philosophy is not an abstract intellectual speculation about Truth or a structure of the logical intelligence, but Truth seen, felt, lived, held by the inmost mind and soul in the joy of utterance of an assured discovery and possession, and this poetry is the work of the aesthetic mind lifted up beyond its ordinary field to express the wonder and beauty of the rarest spiritual self-vision and the profoundest illumined truth of self and God and universe. Here the intuitive mind and intimate psychological experience of the Vedic seers passes into a supreme culmination in which the Spirit, as is said in a phrase of the Katha Upanishad, discloses its own very body, reveals the very word of its self-expression and discovers to the mind the vibration of rhythms which repeating themselves within in the spiritual hearing seem to build up the soul and set it satisfied and complete on the heights of self-knowledge.

“This character of the Upanishads needs to be insisted upon with a strong emphasis, because it is ignored by foreign translators who seek to bring out the intellectual sense without feeling the life of thought vision and the ecstasy of spiritual experience which made the ancient verses appear then and still make them to those who can enter into the element in which these utterances move, a revelation not to the intellect alone, but to the soul and the whole being, make of them in the old expressive word not intellectual thought and phrase, but Sruti, spiritual audience, an inspired Scripture. The philosophical substance of the Upanishads demands at this day no farther stress of appreciation of its value; for even if the amplest acknowledgement by the greatest minds were wanting, the whole history of philosophy would be there to offer its evidence.

“The Upanishads have been the acknowledged source of numerous profound philosophies and religions that flowed from it in India like her great rivers from their Himalayan cradle fertilising the mind and life of the people and kept its soul alive through the long procession of the centuries, constantly returned to for light, never failing to give fresh illumination, a fountain of inexhaustible life-giving waters. Buddhism with all its developments was only a restatement, although from a new standpoint and with fresh terms of intellectual definition and reasoning, of one side of its experience and it carried it thus changed in form but hardly in substance over all Asia and westward towards Europe. The ideas of the Upanishads can be rediscovered in much of the thought of Pythagoras and Plato and form the profoundest part of Neo-platonism and Gnosticism with all their considerable consequences to the philosophical thinking of the West, and Sufism only repeats them in another religious language.

“There is hardly a main philosophical idea which cannot find an authority or a seed or indication in these antique writings - the speculations, according to a certain view, of thinkers who had no better past or background to their thought than a crude, barbaric, naturalistic and animistic ignorance. And even the larger generalisations of Science are constantly found to apply to the

truth of physical Nature formulas already discovered by the Indian sages in their original, their largest meaning in the deeper truth of the spirit.

“And yet these works are not philosophical speculations of the intellectual kind, a metaphysical analysis which labours to define notions, to select ideas and discriminate those that are true, to logicise truth or else to support the mind in its intellectual preferences by dialectical reasoning and is content to put forward an exclusive solution of existence in the light of this or that idea of the reason and see all things from that viewpoint, in that focus and determining perspective. The Upanishads could not have had so undying a vitality, exercised so unfailing an influence, produced such results or seen now their affirmations independently justified in other spheres of inquiry and by quite opposite methods, if they had been of that character. It is because these seers saw Truth rather than merely thought it, clothed it indeed with a strong body of intuitive idea and disclosing image, but a body of ideal transparency through which we look into the illimitable, because they fathomed things in the light of self-existence and saw them with the eye of the Infinite, that their words remain always alive and immortal, of an inexhaustible significance, an inevitable authenticity, a satisfying finality that is at the same time an infinite commencement of truth, to which all our lines of investigation when they go through to their end arrive again and to which humanity constantly returns in its minds and its ages of greatest vision. The Upanishads are Vedanta, a book of knowledge in a higher degree even than the Vedas, but knowledge in the profounder Indian sense of the word, Jnana. Not a mere thinking and considering by the intelligence, the pursuit and grasping of a mental form of truth by the intellectual mind, but a seeing of it with the soul and a total living in it with the power of the inner being, a spiritual seizing by a kind of identification with the object of knowledge is Jnana. And because it is only by an integral knowing of the self that this kind of direct knowledge can be made complete, it was the self that the Vedantic sages sought to know, to live in and to be one with it by identity. And through this endeavour they came easily to see that the self in us is one with the universal self of all things and that this self again is the same as God and Brahman, a transcendent Being or Existence, and they beheld, felt, lived in the inmost truth of all things in the universe and the inmost truth of man's inner and outer existence by the light of this one and unifying vision. The Upanishads are epic hymns of self-knowledge and world-knowledge and God-knowledge.

“The great formulations of philosophic truth with which they abound are not abstract intellectual generalisations, things that may shine and enlighten the mind, but do not live and move the soul to ascension, but are ardours as well as lights of an intuitive and revelatory illumination, reachings as well as seeings of the one Existence, the transcendent Godhead, the divine and universal Self and discoveries of his relation with things and creatures in this great cosmic manifestation. Chants of inspired knowledge, they breathe like all hymns a tone of religious aspiration and ecstasy, not of the narrowly intense kind proper to a lesser religious feeling, but raised beyond cult and special forms of devotion to the universal Ananda of the Divine which comes to us by approach to and oneness with the self-existent and universal spirit.

“The Upanishads are the creation of a revelatory and intuitive mind and its illumined experience, and all their substance, structure, phrase, imagery, movement are determined by and stamped with this original character. These supreme and all-embracing truths, these visions of oneness and self and a universal divine being are cast into brief and monumental phrases which bring them at once before the soul's eye and make them real and imperative to its aspiration and

experience or are couched in poetic sentences full of revealing power and suggestive thought-colour that discover a whole infinite through a finite image. The One is there revealed, but also disclosed the many aspects, and each is given its whole significance by the amplitude of the expression and finds as if in a spontaneous self-discovery its place and its connection by the illumining justness of each word and all the phrase. The largest metaphysical truths and the subtlest subtleties of psychological experience are taken up into the inspired movement and made at once precise to the seeing mind and loaded with unending suggestion to the discovering spirit. There are separate phrases, single couplets, brief passages which contain each in itself the substance of a vast philosophy and yet each is only thrown out as a side, an aspect, a portion of the infinite self-knowledge. All here is a packed and pregnant and yet perfectly lucid and luminous brevity and an immeasurable completeness. A thought of this kind cannot follow the tardy, careful and diffuse development of the logical intelligence. The passage, the sentence, the couplet, the line, even the half line follows the one that precedes with a certain interval full of an unexpressed thought, an echoing silence between them, a thought which is carried in the total suggestion and implied in the step itself, but which the mind is left to work out for its own profit, and these intervals of pregnant silence are large, the steps of this thought are like the paces of a Titan striding from rock to distant rock across infinite waters. There is a perfect totality, a comprehensive connection of harmonious parts in the structure of each Upanishad; but it is done in the way of a mind that sees masses of truth at a time and stops to bring only the needed word out of a filled silence. The rhythm in verse or cadenced prose corresponds to the sculpture of the thought and the phrase. The metrical forms of the Upanishads are made up of four half lines each clearly cut, the lines mostly complete in themselves and integral in sense, the half lines presenting two thoughts or distinct parts of a thought that are wedded to and complete each other, and the sound movement follows a corresponding principle, each step brief and marked off by the distinctness of its pause, full of echoing cadences that remain long vibrating in the inner hearing: each is as if a wave of the infinite that carries in it the whole voice and rumour of the ocean. It is a kind of poetry - word of vision, rhythm of the spirit, - that has not been written before or after.” (Aurobindo)

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Narrate the spiritual experiences of Aurobindo.

2) How does Aurobindo view Indian Scriptures?

2.9 LET US SUM UP

After focussing on his deep spiritual experience, we saw how Aurobindo accepts, affirms and interprets the Indian scriptures, making them relevant for his context.

2.10 KEY WORDS

Adesh: The inner (divine?) commandment, which must be followed. Similar to the voice of the conscience.

Sadhak: A spiritual aspirant, generally a devotee, a student, who is following a spiritual teaching or tradition or guru in order to attain realisation.

Tapasya: Tapasya in Sanskrit means "heat". In Hinduism, it is used figuratively, denoting spiritual suffering, mortification or austerity, and also the spiritual ecstasy of a yogi.

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UNIT 3 SPIRITUAL THOUGHT IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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- 3.11 Further Readings and References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To study the spiritual journey of Aurobindo.
- To see how Aurobindo's spiritual thought coexists with the needs of the country.
- To see how Aurobindo drew strength from the rich Indian tradition, while remaining open to other philosophies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to focus on the spiritual thought in Indian philosophy, we study the spiritual adventure of Sri Aurobindo. Basing on Indian traditions, he has perfected the art of blending mysticism with practical needs of the nation.

3.2 SRI AUROBINDO, THE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURER

It was when India lay prostrate at the feet of the British that Sri Aurobindo was born. India had almost lost its ancient glory and attained the peace of the desert. The shadow of British rule in India was so thick and dark that people had almost been blinded of its past glory. A certain systematic impoverishment in various fields pervaded the country. Macaulay's efforts in establishing English in India could create a new class of intellectuals who lost their faith in India's traditional background and cultural heritage. It was to this class of people that Dr Krishna Dhan Ghose, the father of Sri Aurobindo, belonged. This class of people, no doubt, had a new activity which was crudely and confusedly imitative of the foreign culture. It was a crucial moment and an ordeal of perilous severity. What India then required was a strong political awakening, a cultural consciousness and a spiritual rebirth. In fact it required a common stream of creative inspiration, progressive contemplation and a peaceful and powerful reaction. Of this dire need for India Sri Aurobindo was one of the leading spirits (Venkataratnam1978).

Born to a highly anglicised and denationalised father, Sri Aurobindo had become one among the great patriots of India. He got the seeds of this feeling from the very letters of his father when he stayed and was educated in England. At the same time he sucked the Western culture to its core. Though Sri Aurobindo was essentially a seer, he was a great mystic poet. He shed light and warmth on his age, revitalised the spiritual soil of his land, revealed unknown horizons of Yoga and created new hope in bridging the gulf between the East and the West. When he defined India's decline as the ebb-movement of a creative spirit which can only be understood by seeing it in the full tide of its greatness he had a unique type of patriotism. He further explained India's decline as a momentary helplessness which can be overcome by an original dealing with modern problems in the light of Indian spirit and the endeavour to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritual society. To know him fully well it is not enough to read his works or to study the system of his Yoga; one has to dig deep into India's ancient lore-Upanishads and Gita—to practise the system of his Yoga and to drown deep in his inexhaustible mystic layers of thought and poetry. The whole aroma of Upanishads and Gita, is infused into what Sri Aurobindo said and did (Venkataratnam1978). The sharp razor-edged road to spirituality appeared widened and smoothened in his Yogic-Sadhana and man had become elated in admiring him. He who is unsurpassed as a mystic poet, as a scholar of ancient languages, both Indian and European, "as the propounder of Integral Yoga, as a prophet of Life Divine, and as an exponent of a new progress for humanity on the basis of Indian tradition, is really a superman!" (Venkataratnam1978).

3.3 POWER OVER POETRY

According to Sri Aurobindo, poetry comes by inspiration but not by reading. Everything he wrote came from his Yogic experience, knowledge and inspiration. His greater power over poetry and perfect expression was from the heightening of his consciousness. It was Yoga that had developed his poetic style by the development of consciousness, fineness and accuracy of thought and vision, increasing inspiration and an increasing intuitive discrimination of right thought, word-form, just image and figure. The poetic word is a vehicle of the spirit and the chosen medium of the soul's self-expression. The deeper layers of intense personal experience can never be explained unless there is the mere suggestiveness of words and hence 'some kind of figure or symbol more than a direct language.' "Poetry should be half as a prayer from below, half as a whisper from above."

3.4 PERMEATED BY THE SPIRITUAL

If Sri Aurobindo had been nothing more than a mere Indian mystic poet in English, a great patriot and prophet he would still be remembered as one of the world's immortals. But he was something more. Whatever he touched—politics, literature, education—was permeated with his highly spiritual outlook. To omit spirituality from Sri Aurobindo's life and thought would be to miss the very essence of his being. He knew that spirituality was not something to be attained by mere intellect. He saw that the world is almost at the end of the material swing. It is getting exhausted and fatigued with its own material exertions and with tears in eyes, despair writ large on her face! It is now looking up to the East for solace and peace. Tagore saw that Sri Aurobindo had been seeking for the soul and had gained it and through this long process of realisation had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. Early in life, significantly enough, he had a

dream in which a mass of darkness came rapidly towards him, encircled him, entered into him and repeated the same experience while in England. But it was dispelled only when he returned to India.

This notable spiritual experience of infinite calm descending upon him had the climax when he stayed in Alipore Jail and this historic experience leads him to Pondicherry, a centre and sanctuary from which radiated the new gospel of Integral Yoga and evolved a new life and light. He lived here mostly in the inner world, probing into its innumerable mysteries, taking measure of the depths and heights of consciousness. The inner promptings and the decisive urges of his heart were always there as revealed in his early mystic experiences and ultimately they drove him to the exclusive domain of the spirit (Venkataratnam1978). His life in Pondicherry represented one continuous, great and epic struggle against all the retrograde forces of life. It was the result of that strenuous struggle, that Sri Aurobindo evolved his philosophy of the Life Divine, discovered the unique path of Integral Yoga. This laid the foundation for human life on a higher plane – the supramental plane – which is at once subtler, purer, nobler and intrinsically harmonious and evolutionary.

3.5 THE LILA OF CONSCIOUSNESS

It is said that life is a mighty stream of intangible force pushing forward and upward, ever evolving, ever organising matter for its own purpose, and ever making its way through the encircling inert mass in which it lies involved. Sri Aurobindo felt that a stage in the evolutionary movement had been reached when man himself has to launch on the adventure of contributing to the process by his own efforts. Hence he has an irrepressible aspiration to be master of himself, a deepening of his self-consciousness, an ability to meditate on himself and an understanding of the laws of his own evolution. Consequently his intense search for Life Divine led him to the discovery—the aspiration of man to ascend to Life Divine and the downward descent of the Supermind to lift the spirit of man to the divine level. “He sees the cosmic drama of involution and evolution, the Lila of God descending into clay and clay aspiring to godhead; and the mystery of world-existence is a mystery no more”. The supramental consciousness will enable the evolved man to live simultaneously in the transcendent and immanent dimensions of existence (Ghose 1949).

What then is this cult of the new world he promised? Is man to continue to be a prey to the limitations of unavoidable death, unrealizable desire and inflicting incapacity even in this new world? We can aspire an optimistic approach of this great seer to answer the questions. For the heavy task he had undertaken the never ending sources of energy for him are the immortal expressions of the Upanishads and the Gita. He promised a new world surely inhabited by a new race of man. This new man will have ‘a golden body’ or the body beautiful, strong and healthy (Venkataratnam1978). His emotions will well up, not from the muddy unconscious or subconscious, but from the depths of the pure spirit. His arts and crafts, his music and song will be an expression of spiritual realities. His sensual and intellectual faculties will be in an integral subservience to the spiritual, the home of Truth, Beauty, Power and Bliss.

From such an experience, Aurobindo was able to support and nourish himself from the rich spiritual resources of India's religious experience and philosophy. Let us see how history has been preparing him for such an adventure.

3.6 SPIRITUAL THOUGHT AND INDIAN HISTORY

From 1910 onwards the emphasis of Sri Aurobindo's life changed from an outer political quest to the inner spiritual quest which is a significantly more difficult undertaking, because whereas politics is on the surface and can be easily described, the inner spiritual quest does not lend itself as readily to verbalization (Singh 2008).

Right from 1893 when Sri Aurobindo returned from England, along with his political interests he began having a series of spiritual experiences. On his first contact with Indian soil at Apollo Bunder in Bombay after 14 years abroad he had an experience of what he described as a vast calm which descended on him and remained with him for a long time. Then, after he had joined service in Baroda, in 1894 there was a near accident to the carriage in which he was travelling, and on that occasion also he seemed to feel that there was some sort of benign intervention beyond intellectual explanation; he felt he was under some kind of higher protection. In 1901 when he visited Kashmir along with Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad and went to the ancient Sankaracharya Temple in the city of Srinagar, he had another experience of what he called the vacant infinite, and he also wrote a poem about this. From 1906 onwards, he was initiated into into several meditational techniques including Pranayama.

This resulted in a series of tremendously powerful experiences which surprised not only Sri Aurobindo but also his yoga master (Singh 2008). It is clear from reading the description of what happened that Sri Aurobindo had very strong sanskaras, as it were, a very strong background and predilection for spiritual experience, and it required only a touch for the flame to burst forth into tangible experience.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 led to a tremendous upsurge of political aspirations in India, and in 1907 at Surat the Congress party split. The Moderates continued the meeting, while the Extremists had a separate meeting under the Chairmanship of Sri Aurobindo. Next year there was the famous Alipore Bomb Conspiracy Case, and on the 2nd May 1908, Sri Aurobindo was arrested and sent to the Alipore jail. The case itself is fascinating. This is a most enthralling story - high drama with 42 accused, 4,000 documents, 422 witnesses, the approver murdered in jail - all sorts of peculiar things happened. But the point of importance for our present purpose is that this one year in jail had a very significant impact upon Sri Aurobindo's inner spiritual development.

He had been interested in religion, he had been interested in yoga, but so far his predominant interest was the political freedom of the country, the awakening of the masses to a realization of the glory that could be India, the evocation of Bhawani Bharati, the description of India as the Mother and of nationalism as a yajna. When he was sent into jail it was a sort of enforced rest. During the year he remained in the cell in the Alipore Jail he had a number of decisive experiences. Even in the middle of such pain he looked around seeing Krishna in everything.

He shares his experience: "I looked at the jail that secluded me from men, and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned - no it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell, but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door, and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given to me for a couch I felt the arm of Sri Krishna around me the arms of my Friend and Lover" (cited in Singh 2008).

In addition, he has recorded that for fifteen days continuously when he was in jail he heard the voice of Swami Vivekananda speaking to him on certain aspects of Yoga and the supramental. The result of all this was that in the year that he was in jail Sri Aurobindo was transformed. He was finally released after being acquitted, and it was again a dramatic thing how his lawyer C.R. Das gave up every other work in order to defend him and how ultimately in the final peroration, he said: "My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil and agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will have echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands. Therefore I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this court, but before the bar of the High Court of history" (Singh 2008).

After his release, although for another year or two Aurobindo did continue to take an active part in politics, he started the Karmayogin and began writing regularly in it but the emphasis changed. I think he realised that his political role was over and in 'An open letter to my countrymen', published in 1909 he wrote, "All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when he comes move forward triumphantly to their fulfilment. Therefore the nationalist party, custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come." He wrote this a full decade before Gandhiji emerged on the scene, but I think he realised that he had done his bit for the awakening of the nation and could now turn to the deeper things which really interested him. Soon after that, in 1910 he abruptly left for Chandernagore in response to what he called an Adesh, an over-riding divine command, and after a short while there he moved on to Pondicherry (Singh 2008).

For forty years he was in Pondicherry. His interest in Indian politics continued right up to the end, and you will recall his historic message on the day of Independence which, by a very strange coincidence, was his birthday also - the 15th of August - in which he pointed out how the great movements that he had envisaged, including the movement for India's freedom, had succeeded. In these forty years he wrote on a large variety of subjects, particularly philosophy. His work were published in thirty volumes in the centenary edition, and they are unique as a corpus of thinking and writing on almost every subject which concerns human development. The facility with which he wielded his pen, the tremendous depth and range of his thought, is really quite staggering. According to Karan Singh (Singh 2008) his best work is his Essays on the Gita, where you find the full luminosity of his spirit. The Gita itself is a tremendous document, but when you look at it through the vision of Sri Aurobindo the whole thing comes alive and vibrant as if it is being explained by Sri Krishna himself.

Thus in Aurobindo we see someone who has the highest mystical experience by involving himself in the politics of his day. This has enabled him to have a renewed understanding of Indian thought and philosophy.

3.7 'WHO?' - HIS POEM

So from his forty years of intense spiritual experience and engagement with Indian thought (philosophy) we can trace Aurobindo's own spiritual journey. In a fine poem called "Who", Aurobindo has expressed more dramatically, with more immediacy than in his longer and more complex words, his vision of the Divine which is very important for an understanding of his philosophy and spiritual thought.

In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest;
Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?
When the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether,
Who was it roused them and bade them to blow?

He is lost in the heart, in the cavern of Nature,
He is found in the brain where He builds up the thought:
In the pattern and bloom of the flowers He is woven,
In the luminous net of the stars He is caught.

In the strength of a man, in the beauty of woman,
In the laugh of a boy, in the blush of a girl;
The hand that sent Jupiter spinning through heaven,
Spends all its cunning to fashion a curl.

These are His works and His veils and His shadows;
But where is He then? by what name is He known?
Is He Brahma or Vishnu? a man or a woman?
Bodied or bodiless? twin or alone?

We have love for a boy who is dark and resplendent,
A woman is lord of us, naked and fierce.
We have seen Him a-muse on the snow of the mountains,
We have watched Him at work in the heart of the spheres.

We will tell the whole world of His ways and His cunning
He has rapture of torture and passion and pain:
He delights in our sorrow and drives us to weeping,
Then lures with His joy and His beauty again.

All music is only the sound of His laughter,
All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;
Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.

He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;
He slays without stint and is full of compassion;
He wars for the world and its ultimate years.

In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages,
Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,
Beyond the List pinnacle seized by the thinker
He is throned in His seats that for ever endure.

The Master of man and his infinite Lover,
He is close to our hearts, had we vision to see,
We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our passions,
We are bound in our thoughts where we hold ourselves free.

It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone.

3.8 THE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

This poem beautifully expresses the basic feature of Sri Aurobindo's thought that he has derived from Indian philosophy. The first point is that he accepted the primacy of the supreme, all-pervading reality-Vedantic concept of the spirit pervading not only the manifested cosmos but also the unmanifested cosmos and that of the Gita, even transcending both in the concept of the Purushottama who is both the manifested cosmos and the unmanifested cosmos and something beyond. This basic reality Sri Aurobindo accepted.

From there we go to the second point and that is cosmogenesis - the creation (Singh 2008). How does all this come into being at all? Of course, this is essentially something impossible to conceive in verbal terms. Today when we study the cosmos and realize the way in which billions of galaxies spring into being and disappear the mind finds it impossible to comprehend. But the basic point that Sri Aurobindo makes is that this all-pervasive reality plunges into the opposite pole that is the very densest and darkest matter.

There is a process of involution whereby this supreme reality by descending stages - the Brahmanda, the supermind, the over-mind, mind with life and matter - ultimately plunges into the opposite pole, the most inconscient, the deepest and the densest matter. That is the process of creation. Why that happens is a question which I do not think can be answered. Some people say it is *lila*, some people say it is in the very nature of the cosmos. But whatever it is the creation must be in some manner a reality otherwise we will not be there at all.

After the involution, after the downward spiral, the upward spiral begins, and here Sri Aurobindo has in very great detail developed the whole concept of spiritual evolution. If his political thought can be defined as spiritual nationalism, his philosophical thought can be defined as

spiritual evolution. He points out how from the densest matter, from mineral life, life gradually begins to develop. This is now a well-known scientific fact. From the densest matter the early forms of life - mineral, then vegetable, then animal - and after billions of years finally the stage comes when man appears on the scene - anthropogenesis. In Sri Aurobindo's view man is not a being who suddenly descends upon the earth; man is a being who has evolved out of this very matter, and with the coming of man a new dimension is added to the history of evolution. For the first time a being has come into existence who is conscious of being - in other words, who can look inwards and understand himself (Singh 2008).

The next step in evolution is going to be a quantum leap in consciousness. Before man there was the animal - the ape, let us say. Now the ape developed into man - this is something we accept. But Sri Aurobindo puts forward a further point that now man is going to develop into superman, and he holds that the difference between the conscious level of the animal and man is much less than the level of man and superman. Take for example, a dog. Dogs are very intelligent creatures. Let us say you have a dog, howsoever intelligent the dog may be it would not be able to understand what you are saying because while it is intelligent at its own level; it has limitations, it cannot understand abstract concepts, it cannot understand the sort of things that we are talking about. Similarly Sri Aurobindo says that with the advent of superman, instead of the imperfect human reasoning that we now have - we do not know what is happening on the other side of that wall, we have got to reason, we have got to consider, all sorts of conflicting thoughts vie with each other in our mind, we are in an area of indeterminates - at the supramental level there would be direct cognition.

Hints of this are already found in intuition, for example. It has happened to many people that suddenly you get a feeling that something is going to happen somewhere, and you find that it is in fact happening. Now that is just a small spark of the intuitive faculty, and Sri Aurobindo says that the supramental level is a level of direct cognition, of the direct wording of the intuitive faculty rather than the imperfect, complicated and confused consciousness of present man (Singh 2008).

So from the mental you move to the supramental, from man you move to superman, and this whole process, according to him, is the true destiny of mankind. The destiny of mankind is to evolve but of course not everybody will evolve at the same time. All the rocks did not become fish, and all the fish did not become animals, and all the animals did not become men. Some people will evolve, they will be the pathfinders, as it were, into the new consciousness. Thus the theory of spiritual evolution, according to Sri Aurobindo, does not end with man. Above us there are other spheres, and he has analyzed them in great detail - the overmind and the supermind and perhaps spheres beyond. That being so, the question arises as to how this supramental sphere is to be achieved, how does man rise to it? Now in politics, Sri Aurobindo did not only put forward an ideal but also a method for its attainment. Similarly in his philosophical thought he did not only rest at describing the supramental possibility, he also developed an extremely interesting process whereby this supramental can be achieved, which he called the Integral Yoga.

There are three main points which need to be made, there are three great movements in this yoga. The first is a surrender to the divine power that is within us and around us - a surrender not only mental, not only psychological but a total surrender of all parts of our being. It has not been well

established that the conscious mind is only a very small part of human consciousness, there are vast depths below and above the waking mind. Therefore the surrender to be effective has got to be an integral surrender, in all parts of one's mind, one's being, one's emotions (Singh 2008).

Then follows the ascent to the supramental sphere. Through the divine grace, aided by certain yogic practices, there is the ascent of consciousness to the supramental sphere. There the power and the light and the glory of the supramental is absorbed. Then comes the third movement, and this is a very important part of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy which must be clearly understood. The third movement is the return to terrestrial consciousness along with the light and power of the supramental. We have had in our culture many different expressions of people rising into higher spheres of consciousness. The difference with Sri Aurobindo is there is no question of going out in a wave of bliss leaving behind a world as wretched as it was before. That power has got to be brought to bear upon this terrestrial consciousness through this triple movement - the movement of surrender, the movement of rising to the supramental sphere and absorbing its light and power and the third movement of returning to the terrestrial consciousness.

These are the three movements of the integral yoga. It is also integral because it integrates the four major strands of yoga; *Bhaktiyoga*, the devotional input; *Karmayoga*, constant and ceaseless action divine-inspired and divine-dedicated; *Jnanayoga*, the aspect of discrimination, and certain aspects of the *Rajyoga*, the psychophysical dimension. It is integral in yet another way because it does not compartmentalize life. There is no rule to practise integral yoga for a few minutes or for an hour or so a day and then for the remaining 23 hours forget about the path. It is supposed to comprehend and inform the total activity of the human being whether it is work or art or literature or music or whatever it is something which must integrate one's entire being. Sri Aurobindo writes a great deal of the difficulties in the way of the yoga, the forces which help and the hostile forces (Singh 2008).

The important point to remember in all this is that his goal is not individual salvation, his goal is not even racial salvation, his goal is nothing less than a terrestrial transformation itself. This very world is to be transformed into a supramentalized world.

As Karan Singh says Sri Aurobindo was a "born revolutionary" (Singh 2008). Not only did he revolt against the Moderate Congress leadership, not only did he revolt against the British rule, he ultimately revolted against the very texture of human consciousness itself, he revolted against the fact that man should be stuck at an intermediate level and should not be able to go ahead on the evolutionary path.

Our author finally came to the conclusion that it was only when consciousness itself was transmuted that it would be possible to solve the problems of the world. He writes about this: "It is impossible for a man to understand the ultimate secret of this creation unless one enters the Supermind. Nor can the problem of the world be solved unless and until this is done. It is only there on the supramental level that ignorance about the duality of matter and spirit can be dispelled." Ultimately, according to Sri Aurobindo, the final reconciliation between matter and spirit, between thinking and feeling, between being and doing, between two halves of the human psyche the kinetic and the quietistic, can only be attained at the supramental level, and it is only then that the destiny of the human race will be fulfilled and man will grow to his full stature.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Indian tradition view Reality?

2) Explain influences of Indian Scriptures on Aurobindo.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

We have broadly outlined Aurobindo's approach to the spiritual quest, and it is quite astounding the masterly manner in which he evolved spiritually, basing on Indian tradition. In the course of forty years he left for the world a corpus of literature and experience which are unique and unparalleled in modern times.

3.10 KEY WORDS

Lila: *Lila* or *Leela* is a concept within Hinduism literally meaning "pastime", "sport" or "play". It is common to both non-dualistic and dualistic philosophical schools, but has a markedly different significance in each. Within non-dualism, *Lila* is a way of describing all reality, including the cosmos, as the outcome of creative play by the divine absolute (Brahman). In the dualistic schools of Vaishnavism, *Lila* more simply refers to the activities of God and his devotees, as distinct from the common activities of karma.

Sanskaras: In Hinduism *sanskaras* (singular: *sanskara*) (Sanskrit for impression; under the impulse of previous impressions) are the imprints left on the subconscious mind by experience in this or previous lives, which then color all of life, one's nature, responses, states of mind, etc.

Supermind: Supermind in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy refers to the infinite unitary truth-consciousness or truth-idea simultaneously transcendent and immanent to planes of matter, life, and mind.

Yajna: Hindu sacrifice with particular purpose: a sacrifice, often a substantial one, offered to a Hindu deity or deities.

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UNIT 4 INTEGRAL WORLD-VIEW

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
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 - 4.2 The Term: Integral
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To appreciate the integral nature of reality according to Aurobindo.
 - To realize the differences at the levels of beings and to know that these beings with their individual differences are evolving towards the Supermind.
 - To know the basic insight of Aurobindo that we are all related to each other and still one.
-

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the integral world-view developed by Aurobindo, we first try to clarify the terms. Then we approach integral psychology and aspect of being. Finally, we speak of the relevance of an integral world-view for our contemporary times.

4.2 THE TERM: INTEGRAL

The term “Integral” is applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in philosophy, psychology, religious thought, and other areas that seek interdisciplinary and comprehensive frameworks. The term is often combined with others such as approach, consciousness, culture, paradigm, philosophy, society, theory, and worldview. Major themes of this range of philosophies and teachings include a synthesis of science and religion, evolutionary spirituality, and holistic programs of development for the body, mind, soul, and spirit. In some versions of integral spirituality, integration is seen to necessarily include the three domains of self, culture, and nature (IP 2011).

Integral thinkers draw inspiration from the work of Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard De Chardin and others (Pandikattu 2006). Some individuals affiliated with integral spirituality have claimed that there exists a loosely-defined “Integral movement”. The adjective integral was first used in a spiritual context by Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) from 1914 onwards to describe his own spiritual teachings, which he referred to as Purna (“Full”) Yoga. It appeared in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, a book that was first published in serial form in the journal *Arya* and was revised several times since. Sri Aurobindo's work has been described as Integral Vedanta, Integral Psychology (a term coined by Indra Sen) and Psychotherapy that emerges from it. His writings influenced others who used the term “integral” in more philosophical or psychological contexts (IP 2011).

As described by Sri Aurobindo and his co-worker The Mother (1878–1973), this spiritual teaching involves an integral divine transformation of the entire being, rather than the liberation of only a single faculty such as the intellect or the emotions or the body. According to Sri Aurobindo, “the Divine is in his essence infinite and his manifestation too is multitudinously infinite. If that is so, it is not likely that our true integral perfection in being and in nature can come by one kind of realisation alone; it must combine many different strands of divine experience. It cannot be reached by the exclusive pursuit of a single line of identity till that is raised to its absolute; it must harmonise many aspects of the Infinite. An integral consciousness with a multiform dynamic experience is essential for the complete transformation of our nature.” (Ghose 1992)

4.3 INTEGRALITY OF LIFE

To understand the “integrality” of wholeness of life, let us start with knowledge. Knowledge gathers by observation and experience. It becomes practically useful knowledge when a process of a thing is known, e.g. climbing a tree, drawing water from a well, speaking the first few words, art of writing, etc. At this stage, we see our practically useful knowledge is in proportion to our experience as the topography of a locality. A time comes when this partial knowledge becomes perfect knowledge or complete knowledge when the field of observation can be organised into a subject or a branch of science. At this time, the field reveals the laws governing it, not before and we become integral (Karmayogi 2001).

Random knowledge, however great the volume, will not allow itself to be reduced to laws. For the laws of a field to be extracted as the essence of the field, the observation must be complete or exhaustive. When a field exists in more than one plane, the laws cannot be perfectly known until the observation is exhausted in all the planes of existence. Life exists in the mental, vital, physical fields and their respective subtle planes. The spiritual plane cannot be fully excluded if one desires mastery, but as far as physical work is concerned, the direct involvement of the spiritual plane may be excluded, if it is represented by the work values that are spiritual. The Laws of Life Response cannot be seen unless and until life is seen functioning at those points. The greatness of life and its integrality lies in the fact that those great touches are there in ALL acts, small or great, however crudely they reveal themselves. The crudeness is in our perception, not in their revelation. From this point of view, a few conclusions are drawn.

General observation of life, however wide, can only give a random knowledge of Life Response. It can be interesting, cannot be final, cannot conclusively reveal the laws and confirm them. An observation of life, an analysis of events in all planes of its existence is a sine qua non for one who endeavours to lay his hands on these laws. The clue, the key, lies in those subtle points where energy spills over from one field to another, often appearing to be an unconnected vagary, occasionally contradicting the laws. To see such points of contradiction as confirmation is the index for complete understanding. A further point, maybe the most important one, is to render this knowledge useful for evoking life response or to make Life Respond as we intend. Should we do so, he who does it gains mastery over life.

As Sri Aurobindo has detailed in The Life Divine the theory of creation and its process, all these laws are pronounced there abundantly. Over thirty years they have been ‘documented’ after a fashion enough to confirm the understanding. As this is a minor version of the Master’s philosophy, it may not evoke a great response from His disciples. For the layman, it has a

twofold advantage of mastering one's own life and being introduced to His philosophy. A painstaking analysis of events of life, coupled with a study of historical events and events in literature that reveal these laws will be of great interest to the general reader. Obviously there is no use for detailing the laws which may offer a good theoretical knowledge which may not go beyond the first reading (Karmayogi 2001).

The integral view

According to the integral view, there is the Divine Reality which manifests itself as the universe. The universe is a system of planes or worlds, supra-terrestrial and terrestrial. The earth-life is the scene of the evolutionary unfolding of the Divine Reality. There is an all-seeing purpose in the terrestrial creation; a divine plan is working itself out through contradictions and perplexities. To discover the Divine Reality and to work for its full manifestation in physical life is the integral aim of life. All life must be accepted, but all life must be transformed by the highest divine light and power.

4.4 INTEGRAL PSYCHOLOGY

Sri Aurobindo never used the term "Integral Psychology"; the term was coined in the 1940s by Indra Sen, a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, who established the field of Integral Psychology, based on Sri Aurobindo's teachings, as referred earlier (IP 2011). A further interpretation of Integral Psychology was developed, although not in detail, in the 1970s by Haridas Chaudhuri, a student of Sri Aurobindo, who postulated a triadic principle of uniqueness, relatedness and transcendence, corresponding to the personal, interpersonal and transpersonal domains of human existence. According to Brant Cortright, of the California Institute of Integral Studies, Integral Psychology is born through the synthesis of Sri Aurobindo's teachings with the findings of depth psychology. He presents Integral Psychology as a synthesis of the two major streams of depth psychology – the humanistic-existential and contemporary-psychoanalytic – within an integrating east-west framework.

4.5 ASPECTS OF BEING ACCORDING TO INTEGRAL WORLD-VIEW

Sri Aurobindo conceives of human psychology, indeed, of the entire cosmos, as having two major types of distinctions or dimensions. The faculties ascend in a "vertical" fashion, from the subconscious to the higher, transpersonal realms. At the same time, he distinguishes between the Outer being, the Inner being, and the other similarly "concentric" dimensions. The terms vertical and concentric are metaphors for the purpose of visualization and are not meant to be taken literally (IP 2011).

Subconscious

On Aurobindo's psychology, the subconscious is part of our inner consciousness. We are not conscious of its workings. It is influenced by the matter of which our bodies are composed. It is the support of our fear, pessimism, fixed habits, illness, decay and death.

Physical

The Physical faculty or part of the being, refers not just to the physical body, but the body's consciousness as well. The body is just as conscious as the vital and mental parts of the being,

only it is a different type of consciousness. As with the other faculties or principles of the being, in Sri Aurobindo's psychology, the Physical can be subdivided into finer sub-grades, such as the mental physical, the vital physical, and so on. One does not find the distinction of non-conscious body and conscious mind that characterises Western thought.

In Sri Aurobindo's reading of the Taittiriya Upanishad, the physical being (or perhaps just the Physical Purusha) is the *anna-maya-atma* - the self made of food.

- The Inner physical - the physical component of the inner being, which is wider and more plastic than the outer physical body. This is also called the subtle physical
- The True physical being is the Purusha of the physical level, which is like the Inner Physical larger than the surface body consciousness and in touch with the a larger spiritual consciousness.
- The Mental Physical (similar to the Physical Mind - see "Mental")
- The Vital Physical or Nervous Being (which seems to be equivalent to the Etheric body of western esotericism, and hence pertains to one of the subtle bodies)
- The Physical Proper or pure body consciousness, which represents the consciousness of the external physical body itself.

Like the other principles of man, the Physical not only shades upwards to higher ontological levels, but also downwards into the Subconscious, which equates to the Subconscious or Lower Unconscious, although Sri Aurobindo asserts that the Subconscious includes much more than the unconscious of (Freudian) psychology. And like all the faculties of the being, the Physical in all its aspects has to be transformed and spiritualised through the practice of Integral Yoga.

Subtle physical

The Subtle physical is Sri Aurobindo's term for a subtler aspect of the physical nature. This has many qualities not found in the gross physical nature. In *The Agenda*, Mother often refers to it. It might be compared to the etheric body and plane, or even the astral body and plane. The term "subtle physical" to distinguish from gross (*sthula*) or outer material physical (IP 2011). So Aurobindo says: "By the gross physical is meant the earthly and bodily physical - as experienced by the outward sense-mind and senses. But that is not the whole of Matter. There is a subtle physical also with a subtler consciousness in it which can, for instance, go to a distance from the body and yet feel and be aware of things in a not merely mental or vital way." He adds: "...the subtle physical has a freedom, plasticity, intensity, power, colour, wide and manifold play (there are thousands of things there that are not here) of which, as yet, we have no possibility on earth" (Ghose 1969).

Vital

The Vital or Life faculty or part of the being, refers not simply to the life force as to the various passions, desires, feelings, emotions, affects, compulsions, and likes and dislikes that strongly determine human motivation and action through desire and enthusiasm. Unlike Western psychology, in which mind, emotions, instincts, and consciousness are all lumped together, Sri

Aurobindo strongly distinguishes between the "Vital" and the "Mental" faculties (IP 2011). In addition to the individual Vital faculty, Sri Aurobindo refers to a Vital Plane or Vital world.

Mental

The Mental faculty or part of the being, is the conceptual and cognitive mind. Unlike Western psychology, in which mind and consciousness are considered the same, Sri Aurobindo strongly distinguishes between the "Mental" and the "Vital" (emotional) faculties, as well as between Mind and pure Consciousness. Sri Aurobindo in part bases his concept of the Mental on his reading of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, the mental being (or perhaps just the Mental *Purusha*) is the *mano-maya-atma* - the self made of mind or *manas*. For Sri Aurobindo, Mind or the Mental being is not simple and uniform, but consists itself of various strata and subdivisions, the whole contributing to an elaborate integral theory of psychology. These various faculties are described or variously referred to, usually in obliquely or in passing, in some of his books, including *Savitri*, which has poetic references to many types of Mind. In his letters answering questions from disciples, Sri Aurobindo summarises the characteristics of the various levels of Mind (Ghose 1969). These various Minds and Mental principles of being include:

- Higher Mind - the first and lowest of the spiritual mental grades, lying above the normal mental level.
- Spiritual Mind - either the spiritualised mind, or a general term for levels of mind above the normal mental level (the "Mind Proper").
- Inner mind - the mental component of the Inner Being, which lies behind the surface mind or ordinary consciousness and can only be directly experienced by *sadhana*.
- True mental being - is the *Purusha* of the mental level freed from the error and ignorance of the lower *Prakriti* and open to the knowledge and guidance above.
- Psychic Mind - a movement of the mind in which the Psychic Being predominates; the mind turned towards the Divine.
- Mind Proper - is threefold, consisting of Thinking Mind, dynamic Mind and externalising Mind. It constitutes the sum of one's thoughts, opinions, ideas, and values, which guide conscious thinking, conceptualizing and decision-making processes, and is transformed, widened, and spiritualised through the practice of Integral Yoga.
- Thinking Mind - the highest aspect of the mind proper, concerned with ideas and knowledge in their own right. It is equated with the *Ajna Chakra*.
- Dynamic Mind - that aspect of the ordinary mind that puts out of mental forces for realisation, acting by the idea and by reason. It is also equated with the *Ajna* or Brow center.
- Externalising Mind - the most "external" part of the mind proper, concerned with the expression of ideas in speech, in life, or in any form it can give.

- Vital Mind - a mediator between the vital emotions, desires, and so on the mental proper. It is limited by the vital view and feeling of things, and expresses the desires, feelings, ambitions, and other active tendencies of the vital in mental forms, such as daydreams and imaginations of greatness, happiness, and so on. As with the Externalising Mind, Sri Aurobindo associates it with the *Vishuddha* or Throat *Chakra*.
- Physical Mind - refers to either or both the Externalising Mind and the Mental in the Physical; it is limited to a physical or materialistic perspective, and cannot go beyond that, unless enlightened from above.
- Mind in the physical or mental physicalmentalises the experiences of outward life and things, sometimes very cleverly, but it does not go beyond that, unlike the externalising mind which deals with these things from the perspective of reason and its own higher intelligence.
- The Mechanical Mind is a much lower action of the mental physical which when left to itself can only repeat the same ideas and record the reflexes of the physical consciousness in its contact with outward life and things.
- Mind of Light, according to The Mother, is the Physical Mind receiving the supramental light and thus being able to act directly in the Physical. (IP 2011)

Higher levels of Mind

There are still higher levels of Mind, which includes Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, and Intuitive Mind. But we can refer to Overmind and Supermind here.

Overmind

Overmind is the plane of God. Overmental plane is the highest consciousness one can achieve without transcending the mental system. Beyond overmind are the planes of Supermind or unity-consciousness. A detailed description of the Overmind is provided in Book I ch.28, and Book II ch.26, of Sri Aurobindo's philosophical opus *The Life Divine* (IP 2011 & Ghose 1949).

Supermind

Supermind refers to the infinite unitary Truth Consciousness or Truth-Idea beyond the three lower planes of Matter, Life, and Mind. Supermind is the dynamic form of *Sachchidananda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss), and the necessary mediator or link between the transcendent *Sachchidananda* and the creation. (Ghose 1949)

4.6 TYPES OF BEING

There are different types of being or "concentric" divisions in Aurobindo's integral vision of philosophy.

The Outer Being

The Outer Being refers to the superficial and limited surface existence which characterises our everyday consciousness and experience. It includes a physical, vital, and mental aspect, and is also the location of the desire soul. In Integral Yoga it is necessary to go beyond the surface

consciousness to the larger life of the Inner Being, which is more open to spiritual realisation. Outer, Inner, and Innermost Being form a "concentric" sequence or hierarchy, which is a counterpart to the "vertical" hierarchy of Physical, Vital and Mental.

The Inner Being

The Inner Being is the wider and more plastic subliminal faculty of one's being, that lies behind the narrow surface consciousness. As with many contemporary thinkers, Sri Aurobindo speaks of larger and deeper potentials of human nature which can be contacted through spiritual discipline and higher states of consciousness (IP 2011). This Inner Being includes the inner realms or aspects of the physical, vital, and mental being, which here have a larger, subtler, freer consciousness than in the small outer mental, vital, and physical nature of everyday consciousness and experience, and its realisation is essential for any higher spiritual realisation. The Inner Being is also transitional between the surface or Outer Being and the Psychic Being, which is also for this reason known as the "Innmost Being". Outer, Inner, and Innermost Being form a "concentric" sequence or hierarchy, which is a counterpart to the "vertical" hierarchy of Physical, Vital, and Mental (IP 2011).

In the Master's own words: "There are always two different consciousnesses in the human being, one outward in which he ordinarily lives, the other inward and concealed of which he knows nothing. When one does *sadhana*, the inner consciousness begins to open and one is able to go inside and have all kinds of experiences there. As the *sadhana* progresses, one begins to live more and more in this inner being and the outer becomes more and more superficial. At first the inner consciousness seems to be the dream and the outer the waking reality. Afterwards the inner consciousness becomes the reality and the outer is felt by many as a dream or delusion, or else as something superficial and external. The inner consciousness begins to be a place of deep peace, light, happiness, love, closeness to the Divine or the presence of the Divine, the Mother. One is then aware of two consciousnesses, the inner one and the outer which has to be changed into its counterpart and instrument-that also must become full of peace, light, union with the Divine. At present you are moving between the two and in this period all the feelings you have are quite natural. You must not be at all anxious about that, but wait for the full development of the inner consciousness in which you will be able to live." (Ghose 1969).

Psychic Being

The Psychic Being is Sri Aurobindo's term for the Personal Evolving Soul, the principle of Divine spirit in every individual. The Psychic is the "Innermost Being" and is the permanent being in us that stands behind and supports the physical, vital and mental principles. It takes the essence of experience in the Ignorance to form a nucleus of growth in the nature; it "puts forth and uses mind, life and body as its instruments, undergoes the envelopment of their conditions, but it is other and greater than its members" (Ghose 1949).

Sri Aurobindo is careful to distinguish between the Psychic Being as defined in the Yoga and the ordinary meaning of "psychic" which refers more to the desire soul, or to psychological or paranormal phenomena which are connected with the inner mind, inner vital, or subtle physical subliminal nature rather than the true Soul. The Psychic begins its evolution completely veiled and hidden, but as it grows through successive lifetimes it gradually exerts a greater influence, organising the elements of the being, and taking on the role of spiritual Guide (Ghose 1949).

In Integral Yoga the goal is to move inward and discover the Psychic Being, which then can bring about a transformation of the outer nature. This transformation of the outer being or ego by the Psychic is possible and called Psychicisation; it is one of the three necessary stages in the realisation of the Supramental consciousness. This Psychic transformation is the decisive movement that enables a never-ending progress in life through the power of connecting to one's inner spirit or Divine Essence (IP 2011).

Sri Aurobindo asserts that both Psychicisation and Spiritualisation are equally necessary, and complementary prerequisites in the drawing down of the Supermind. So he affirms that “the psychic entity in us persists and is fundamentally the same always: it contains all essential possibilities of our manifestation but is not constituted by them; it is not limited by what it manifests, not contained by the incomplete forms of the manifestation, not tarnished by the imperfections and impurities, the defects and depravations of the surface being. It is an ever-pure flame of the divinity in things and nothing that comes to it, nothing that enters into our experience can pollute its purity or extinguish the flame.” – (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 891.) In this context he further says, “Everything is dangerous in the *sadhana* or can be, except the psychic change” (Ghose 1969).

Central being

Central Being is a technical term used by Sri Aurobindo to designate the transcendent and eternal spirit, as opposed to the incarnate and evolving Soul, which he calls the Psychic Being, although sometimes it refers to both of them together as the essential spiritual core of the being (IP 2011). These definitions are found in Letters on Yoga, Vol.I under "Planes and Parts of Being" (pp. 265ff in the 3rd ed). The Central Being "presides over the different births one after the other but is itself unborn". This transcendent Central Being or Spirit is also designated the *Jiva* or *Jivatman*, although the meaning of these terms in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy differs greatly from that of much of conventional Vedanta. This in the perspective of Aurobindo the whole reality, including being at different levels are inter-connected, inter-related and form an integral whole. Such a worldview, where things may be different in our world (physical, mental and spiritual), but they are connected and evolving to the final fullness. This is the integral worldview of Aurobindo, which is both appealing and relevant for the contemporary world. This we take up in the next section.

4.7 RELEVANCE OF INTEGRAL WORLD-VIEW

The Integral worldview has emerged in the age of global world where the totality of every knowledge, discipline and the wisdom of all existing and previous cultures is readily available. It is very relevant for this age. As noted by Lawrence Wollersheim (2011), for the modern men and women, the new Integral worldview has the following features: It provides a deeper and broader map of the evolution of known reality that embraces an inclusive, multiple perspective way of looking at and understanding personal, cultural and biologic evolutionary development. It excludes nothing needed for balanced understanding and/or growth or wholeness in any area.

It anticipates what more appropriate solution comes next in the unfolding of the evolutionary process. These new solutions are shifted away from today's polarizing and marginalizing, right or wrong, either/or, left or right partial choices toward more inclusive, comprehensive both/and solutions. That's because its new solutions embrace the entire evolutionary developmental

spectrum of life and humanity, allowing the lessons of previously exclusive and competitive worldviews to be systematically meshed, layered and harmoniously integrated to serve the well-being of the whole spiral of life. It is based upon the integral method of inclusion, transcendence and synthesis. It includes the most useful perspectives and values from all previous worldviews where contextually appropriate, while simultaneously pruning away contextually inappropriate perspectives and values.

It unites all things in a coherent and structured matrix of relationship. It combines inner (subjective), outer (objective,) and the inter-subjective (relational) perspectives on any phenomena, whether singular or collective. It re-embraces new forms of non-pathological, integral religion and integral personal spirituality that is congenial to science, philosophy and art and, more universal in its perspectives. Given the contemporary context, its relevance can be seen by its following features. It creates more effective and life-affirming solutions for every challenge or dream we have, whether your interests are culture, politics, religion, science or the environment. It can do this more effectively than ever before because of its new perspectives and understandings relating to personal, cultural and biologic evolutionary development. Armed with this vital new information we now can more wisely participate in actively co-evolving any area of your own life and future. It heals and rebalances the subtle cynicism that results from the fragmentation and complexity of 21st century living by creating a new holism as well as a revitalized sense of achievable purpose. It releases vast untapped personal growth potentials by dramatically expanding who or what you conceive of self, nature and culture to be. (Wollersheim 2011)

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do you understand the term 'Integral'?

2) Explain the world view of Aurobindo as integral.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

In the worldview of our Master, the whole of reality, including physical, psychological and spiritual, is integral. In the ever evolving process of reality, the whole reality is made of different levels of being. But without losing their individual identities, they are all part of one journey to the Supermind. Such a philosophy is relevant to our times.

4.9 KEY WORDS

Overmind: In Integral Psychology, it is the adaptation of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual teachings, referring to the understanding of the various planes and parts of being, which is essential to the practice of integral yoga. The highest, single, non-material consciousness composed of the consciousnesses of a large number of beings,

Integrality: The state of being total and complete

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