

Some Introductory Remarks on Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy

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Abstract

In this paper, we intend to make some introductory remarks about Sri Aurobindo's philosophy in general, and about his understanding of Absolute as Saccidānanda and his theory of evolution in particular. My proposed discussion is primarily based on *The Life Divine* (henceforth, LD), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (henceforth, SY), *The Human Cycle* (henceforth, HC), *The Hour of God* (henceforth, HG, written between 1910–1940 and published posthumously, 1959), *Essays in the Gītā* (henceforth, EG), *The Future Evolution of Man* (henceforth, FEM), *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (FIC.1918–1921; 1959), and secondarily on K. D Sethna's *Aspects of Sri Aurobindo* (1995), Haridas Chaudhury's *Sri Aurobindo: The Prophet of Life Divine* (1973), *Philosophy of Integralism* (1954), S.K. Maitra's *An Introduction to The Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (1941) and Arabinda Basu's collection of Essays titled *Sri Aurobindo: The Poet, Yogi and Philosopher* (2011).

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Introduction

Sri Aurobindo is a mystery to many thinkers. His genius has many appreciators. There are genuine admiration for his brief and his pioneering political work and leadership, both in India and abroad. "But very few know, far less understand, what he was doing at Pondicherry" said Arabinda Basu in his short essay titled "*Sri Aurobindo*".(33). How could we address this situation? But it is indeed true that "the appreciation of greatness by us adds nothing to it, on the contrary it is only a proof of our ability to appreciate. To be open and clear in our understanding, to have the proper sense of values, to be attracted by the compelling force of greatness, all this does credit to us instead of increasing the lustre of one who is great" like Sri Aurobindo.(33). Without this modest way of understanding it is very difficult to say anything describing the thought-world of Sri Aurobindo.

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Every human being has great interest in the world we live in and we know, in our experience, it as real. But the question that disturbs us is sometimes as follows: Is the world ultimately illusory? Scholars of Indian philosophy are divided in response to this question. According to Saṅkara, 'the world is illusory' in a specific and technical sense, and according to Sri Aurobindo, 'the world is real and not illusory' in a different technical sense. It is argued that Sri Aurobindo's interpretation is only an extensional interpretation of contextualizing the Vedic-Upaniṣadic philosophy in his own time when development of science has positive impact on philosophical thinking and it is 'Integral Non-dualism' (*pūrṇādvaita*).

Sri Aurobindo 'reinterpreted, reconstructed and re-validated' the entire structure of Vedic-Upaniṣadic philosophy. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is integral to the core in the sense that it is both profound and comprehensive in its nature. Sri Aurobindo is one of the finest interpreters of modern Indian philosophy for he belongs to the rare multi-dimensionality of his genius, remarkable profundity of intellectual acumen, unparalleled creative insight gifted with the spirit of synthesis. He could explore our own cultural roots after engaging himself with the wisdom of the Non-Indian Traditions. He has no philosophy if by it we mean 'academic philosophy' with theories and counter theories. But his massive structure of metaphysics is only an insight into reality. In his own words, "I had only to write down in terms of intellect all that I had observed and come to know in practising Yoga daily, and philosophy was there automatically. But that is not being a philosopher." (Diwakar 73).

Three Senses of the Use of the Word 'Philosopher'

There are three different senses in which the term 'philosopher' is used. In the narrow sense it means a group of thinkers who do not have any realization of truth but have the interest in comprehensive analysis of the truth discovered by the poets and seers. They hope that their analysis of the composition of those who had first-hand experience of truth or God realization will enable them and their readers to experience the truth in future. In some cases they have some awareness of truth. In this sense Sri Aurobindo is half philosopher. We see his rational analysis of what he had realized in Yogic practice in his writings. But in the narrower sense a philosopher is one who has no realization of truth but one who gives arguments for a theory or a counter-theory and proceeds through analysis which is traditionally known as *buddhibalāpekṣāvyaḥnyā*, and this type of a person is usually called an 'academic philosopher' as we see in our academic institutions today. In this sense Sri Aurobindo is not a philosopher. Still there is a broad sense in which the term 'philosopher' is used in India. He is called *Tattvadarśī*, a seer of truth / Reality. A poet in India is called *Krānta-darśī*. And there is no essential difference between a *Tattvadarśī* and a *Krānta-darśī*. Such a person is one who has realised the truth, either partially or fully. And in the light of this act of seeing of the truth face to face for the benefit of mankind, he expresses in rational language what is being realized by him in

mystical experience as supernatural truth which has impact on individual, society and the state such as the truth had been seen by the seer-poets of the Veda-s. In this broad sense Sri Aurobindo is certainly one of the greatest philosophers.

According to his own admission, Sri Aurobindo 'was first a poet and a politician and later became a Yogi'.(Basu 1). But he is a philosopher in the traditional line of Indian thinkers as tattvadarśī. He is called a Yogi also in a technical sense. Yoga in this technical sense points to "the means of achieving the direct knowledge of man's true being. ... Yoga is primarily an organon of knowledge. The practice of yoga not only can give direct experience of Atman but also provides man with very direct and minute knowledge of the non-Atman, to wit, body, life, mind etc. And it is this detailed knowledge of the non-Atman aspect which is necessary for liberation from that which prevents us from having direct realization of the Atman.... All the founders of the great Indian systems of philosophies were yogis and mystics and those who came after them elaborated, explained, and interpreted the founder's principles but did not really add anything new to their insights into the nature of Reality. ... The fact that he depends on his yogic experience as materials of his integral idealism should not in any way raise doubts about his being a philosopher as Indian tradition thinks of a darshanika"(5). As Sri Aurobindo said in *Essays on the Gita* "Philosophy is only a way of formulating to ourselves intellectually in their essential significance the psychological and physical facts of existence and their relation to any ultimate reality that may exist." (241-42)... "All philosophy is concerned with the relations between two things, the fundamental truth of existence and the forms in which existence presents itself to our experience. The deepest experience shows that the fundamental truth is truth of the Spirit; the other is the truth of life, truth of form and shaping force and living idea and action."(106).

In the light of this explanation let us move further to see how Sri Aurobindo's philosophy contributes to the development of India's philosophical thought. In India characteristically philosophy is 'synthetic'. But this does not mean that it is devoid of analytic characteristic. To understand the nature of the world we shall have to analyse critically what is given before us. " There are great deal of logical controversies, refutations and partial support of other philosophers' doctrines, there are also frank and deep appreciations and even instances of acceptance, thought partial, of whatever is true in other philosophies. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is no exception in this respect." (Basu 2).

In his magnum opus, *The Life Divine* (LD) Sri Aurobindo reconciles the traditional Vedantic varieties of philosophic thought such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita into his 'Integral Non-dualism' (purnādvaita). For the advaitins, Brahman alone is real. On the other hand, Viśiṣṭādvaitavādins say that the Supreme Reality is Divine personality and it is endowed with all auspicious qualities. Again, Dvaitavādins speak of the distinct reality of individual selves and the one Supreme Lord to whom they attribute love and devotion. But in Sri Aurobindo's writings the esoteric meaning of the mantras of the

Vedas is elucidated from a mystical plane and his philosophy does not find to be easily intelligible to our ordinary thoughts unless one is ready to accept it through meditative experience. His new interpretation based on inner symbolism clears our 'confusion and misunderstanding' regarding truths realized by the Vedic Seers.

Creation vs Evolution

Sri Aurobindo in his Integral non-dualism also reconciles the major tenets of Indian spiritualism with that of the Western thought currents in their own cultural ethos. We get a marvellous synthesis of the East and the West which permits the logic of the Infinite and the logic of finitude appears side by side. The first one has no limitation of possibility whereas the second one is conditioned by limited possibility. Contrary to the idea of creation (as traditionally conceived as 'creatio ex nihilo'), Sri Aurobindo speaks of the theory of evolution as follows. It is the central theme around which all his metaphysical positions move around. Its integrity and profundity makes it different from theories of evolution. His view on māyā appears only in connection with his theory of evolution. Maya is as significant notion to maintain his non-dualistic view of reality along with the reality of the world of plurality. It is interesting to see that for him, the supra-cosmic, transcendent and cosmic—each is real. He developed a vision of integral Reality in which the Nirguṇa Brahman and the world (jagat) are perceived in the unity of self-evolving and self-revealing Absolute. This gains his philosophy, a unique characterisation, 'Integral Non-dualism'. For Aurobindo, matter is implicitly conscious. Seeming contradiction is a part of Nature's general feature. Nature is working towards reconciliation through evolutionary progress. "Life evolves out of matter, Mind out of Life, because they are already there: Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life a form of veiled Mind. May not Mind be a form and veil of a higher power, the Spirit, which would be supra-mental in its nature?" (*Life Divine* 1) Man's highest aspiration would then only indicate the gradual unveiling of the Spirit within. It marks the preparation of a higher life upon earth. It is noteworthy that the idea of evolution allows him to reject the otherwise known illusionary interpretation of the world.

According to Sri Aurobindo, man occupies the central position in evolutionary wave as it gives a ground for the possibility of a passage 'from an unconscious to a conscious evolution'. (470) There is no reason to believe that this evolutionary process will stop with man. 'Man's urge towards spirituality is an undeniable indication of the inner drive of the Spirit within towards emergence, its insistence towards the next step of its manifestation'. (Maitra 55). There is an upward transformation in the evolutionary process from matter □ Life □ Psyche (Soul) Mind (Higher Mind Illumined Mind □ Intuition □ Over Mind) □ Super Mind. (*Life Divine* 972). From Mind to Super Mind there seems to be a bridge through Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition and Over Mind. The ultimate stage is the evolution of the Super-mind. "When this takes place, Nature becomes transformed into Super-nature and human beings into Gnostic Beings" (*Synthesis of Yoga*, IV : 18). Here we see a radical change in evolutionary process,

because from this stage onward, the evolution is through knowledge and not through ignorance. The fourfold process of ascent explores the hidden consciousness-truths gifted with the higher spiritual lights that causally effects the supra-mental modifications “as a series of sub-limitations of the consciousness ... All these degrees are grades of energy-substance of the Spirit”ⁱ (Sethna 165-66) Sri Aurobindo gives a philosophical interpretation of the theory of evolution which the western idea of evolution fails to give. The Western idea of evolution is limited to the physical and bio-logical data of nature but it is blind to the explanation of our being. It cannot explain adequately how mental consciousness could come into being from physical stuff? The modern scientists explain the ‘how-ness’ of evolution, but they fail to give an answer regarding the ‘why-ness’ of it.

Sri Aurobindo realises that we are bound to suppose that consciousness force or spirit must be involved from the beginning in the whole of matter, life, mind. Before there could be an evolution there must be an involution. Hence all are latent, inactive or concealed active powers in all the progression of material, energy. “Unless we assume this previous involution we cannot justify and explain the evolutionary process at all. Evolution does not produce anything new; rather it unveils what was already there. He views the entire evolutionary process from a spiritual perspective and it is spiritual evolution, because the Spirit is hidden in the world order and it is an evolution guided by the spirit. The movement of ‘descent’ and ‘ascent’ constitute a circular movement and man belongs to a stage in this order of cycle. Evolution without involution is unbelievable. It is a sort of home-sickness of the Spirit and the final result of this is the Supreme manifestation of the Existence, Consciousness, Delight – *Saccidānanda*.” (*Essays on Philosophy and Yoga* 16)

It is important to see that the Absolute of Sri Aurobindo is not the same as the Absolute of Hegel. The Absolute of Hegel is ‘self-distinguishing and self-objectifying’ principle of self-consciousness. For Hegel, the world is a form of self-externalization of the Absolute. Thought evolves there dialectically. For Hegel, Logic follows the principle in the development of thought. Hence the world follows the same principles in its evolution. In Hegel, Reality is identical with thought. But this ‘thought’ is not changing its nature. It is relative and hence cannot transform to the Absolute. This is because for Sri Aurobindo, the Absolute is at once static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent.

No Academic Philosophy

What is said earlier about the nature of academic philosophy, I fear, Sri Aurobindo’s thought may not be included within it. In other words, our narrowly conceived scope of the term ‘philosophy’ cannot include his thought. However, by ‘philosophy’ Sri Aurobindo does not mean a heavy intellectual practise or a fascinating gaiety of thought. For him, philosophy is an integral view of life. As human life is a multi-dimensional unity, it is to be viewed not in parts but as a whole. Hence philosophy should aim at integration and unity of experience. Neither dry intellectualism nor mere existentialist outlook has any place in his scheme of Integral Non-dualism. The standpoint of philosophy must be

all inclusive and harmonious and truth must be 'non-one-sided'. He said, "Philosophy dealing with the principles of things must come to perceive the principle of all these principles and investigate its nature, attributes and essential workings." (Choudhary 207). Philosophy, for Sri Aurobindo, although is not capable of securing spiritual realization, it is an indispensable aid to such realization. In the words of K. D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) "His philosophy is not abstract logic-spinning from a few principles of thought mixed with a few data of ordinary observation. It is only the intellectual elucidation of the systematisation of concrete and direct experience of realities lying beyond the mere mind; it is but a mental picture of what is reached by the inmost consciousness in its Yogic penetration of the subliminal and supraliminal." (*The Life Divine* 418).

The Status of the World as not Illusory

With this introductory observation let us concentrate on Sri Aurobindo's View on the status of the world. This world, for Sri Aurobindo, is the self-manifestation of the pure Being. It is a "free creative act on the part of the Absolute Spirit – an act which is eternal, which expresses the mystically latent power of self-determination (śakti) of the Absolute, and which symbolizes the Absolute's delight of mutable becoming or variable self-manifestation." (430) The Supreme Reality, Saccidānanda, is manifesting Itself through its creation, a joyful play (līlā) of the Absolute. The world is not the essential truth of Absolute but phenomenal truth of its free multiplicity and infinite superficial mutability and not truth of its fundamental and immutable unity.

Māyā in the Sense of Cosmic Illusion Becomes Meaningless, a Mere Phantasy

For Aurobindo there is no need of inventing an illusive principle of maya. The following are the reasons. "If this world expresses a great creative motive, if it is a manifestation of a divine life into the finite life then, as Sri Aurobindo says, māyā in the sense of cosmic illusion becomes meaningless, a mere phantasy." (Essays Divine and Human 183-185) He does not want to deny the joy and pain, the struggle and effort of human life that one may find in the philosophies of Buddhism or Advaita. He takes them as real as Brahman of the Upanishads As stated in *The Life Divine*, "All the stress of struggle and effort, success and failure, joy and suffering, the mixture of ignorance and knowledge would be the experience needed for the soul, mind, life and physical part to grow into the full light of a spiritual perfected being." (470) Sri Aurobindo firmly believes that the world expresses a foreseen truth, obeys a pre-determining will, realises an original formative self-vision. Sri Aurobindo thus rejects Śaṅkara's view that the universe is a mere illusion. Some philosophers consider the status of the world as illusory just like dream or hallucination. The world, for them, is only an appearance and therefore should not be taken as real. It is called māyā in the sense of something artificial. It seems to be real but

not actually real. Such a view is called by Sri Aurobindo, 'the world negation theory' and he rejects this view.

Analogy of Dream-Life Argument Rejected

Sri Aurobindo questions the argument given by Śāṅkarite philosophers from the analogy of dream to explain the world of experience as false. For him, it does not succeed to establish the falsity of the world. He compares the objects of dream as transcripts of reality. In other words, our awaking experiences are series of collection of symbol-images. But in the theory of illusion the only reality is an indeterminable featureless pure existence, Brahman, It is not a transcript of images or symbols. . . Again, when it is said that dream is felt to be unreal because it ceases and has no further validity when we pass from one states of consciousness to our normal state. This reasoning is not agreeable, because we know that there are different states of consciousness, Every state of consciousness has its own reality. But when a state of consciousness fades back as soon as we pass into another state, it would not prove the reality of the state in which we exist now and the unreality of the other which we have left behind us. It is equally possible to regard them as three different orders of one Reality.

The Analogy of Hallucination Argument Rejected

There are two aspects of hallucination— mental and visual. When we see an image of thing where it does not exist, this is a case of visual hallucination as the case of a mirage. But when we see a snake in a piece of rope, it is an instance of mental illusion. Now Sri Aurobindo explains that in each case either it is visual or mental – the illusion is not an image of something quite non-existent, but an image of something which exists elsewhere; here it has been imposed by the mind's error or by a sense-error. In *The Life Divine* this argument which is based on this analogy is rejected as "unhelpful; it would be valid only if our image of the universe were a falsity reflecting a true universe which is not here but elsewhere, or else if it were a false imaged manifestation of the Reality replacing in the mind or covering with its distorted resemblance a true manifestation." (Amalendu 16) What we see is that the one manifests itself into a reality of numberless forms and powers. "Sri Aurobindo admits that there is no doubt that the process of such manifestation is a mystery, he also calls it magic; but altogether he denies explaining it as a magic of the unreal. All mental errors and illusion are only a wrong perception of realities, a wrong relation which is the result of the ignorance. But the cosmic illusion is not of such nature; it imposes, figures, happenings that are pure invention on a Reality in which there never were or never will be any happenings, names or figures. Our mind, the parent of these illusions is a seeker and discoverer or a creator of truths, possibilities and actualities but it is limited in knowledge. The Original consciousness, from which

mind must be a derivation, on the contrary, is not limited like mind; it is cosmic in its scope. It is free from all ignorance as it opens to no error." (16)

This way of understanding of the status of the world has direct bearing on his socio-political philosophy. As he said in *Karmayogin*, "The religion which embraces science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these is that to which the World-Spirit moves... All religions are seen as approaches to a single Truth, all philosophies as divergent viewpoints looking at different sides of a Single Reality, all sciences meet together in a supreme science" (16) For this much would depend upon us "who by their self-evolution or self-transcendence into a higher mould have qualified to be leaders of the spiritual march." (Hilaire 437) In this way Sri Aurobindo has thrown adequate light on 'man and collective man'. This is, of course, a subject of separate and elaborate discussion. So I put this as outside of my present discourse.

Conclusion

Therefore, according to Sri Aurobindo, the Supreme Reality manifests itself and reveals its true nature in countless number of ways. It takes innumerable forms and reveals its powers in infinite ways and enjoys itself through its creation (*līlā*). He discards the illusionist interpretation of the world. For him, "Brahman, the supreme Reality, is that which being known, all is known; but in the illusionist solution it is That, which is being known, all becomes unreal and incomprehensible mystery." (*The Life Divine* 470) Sri Aurobindo affirms that the cosmic universe is real, not illusion. The eternal static and the eternal dynamic are both true of the Reality, both the immobile as well as the mobile Brahman represent the same Reality. Sri Aurobindo emphasises the reality of the empirical world, because it is essentially equal with the Supreme Reality. He does not subscribe to the view of Śaṅkara that the status of the world is as good as an illusion (*jaganmithyā*). He holds the reality and sanctity of the empirical world in which the Supreme Divinity is immanent. His interpretation is not only an extensional interpretation contextualizing the issue of his time when development of science has positive impact on philosophical thinking, but also an addition of new meaning to the tradition of Vedic-Upanisadic Culture. He gave us a message of 'growth from within in response to the influences from without'. In his own words, it is a message for India to "act in its own kind after its proper dharma in the right measure of importance, its spiritual, intellectual, ethical, aesthetic dynamic utility." (*Culture* 437) His idea of evolution allows him to reject the illusionary interpretation of the world. He gave us a philosophy of robust optimism that "a new spirit of oneness will take hold of the human race"; and "a spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future". (Amalendu 16).

Notes

[1] The term 'subliminal' is used to mean something which is capable of influencing our

mind even though we are unaware of it and the term 'supraliminal' means that though something exists above the threshold of consciousness but it is adequate to evoke a response or induce a sensation.

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