



Sri Aurobindo's vision of India and the world

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Every year, when we celebrate Independence Day, we are reminded of Sri Aurobindo, whose birthday also falls on August 15. What a great coincidence! Aurobindo had predicted the rise of India and its independence was surely the first step towards the fulfilment of that vision. On that great day, his message was: "I take this identification not as a coincidence or fortuitous accident, but as a sanction and seal of the Divine Power which guides my steps on the work with which I began life." His vision of free India was prophetic, since when we read his letters and articles commenting on the political events or the underlying concepts, we feel that he is talking of our times.

Remembering Sri Aurobindo brings to mind multiple images of this personality, often conflicting with each other – a recluse yogi cocooned in his Pondicherry ashram; a freedom fighter taking to violent methods; an incomparable scholar of western as also Indian literatures and philosophies, a creative writer, and so on.

Aurobindo was born in 1872 at Konnagar in Hooghly district of Bengal. His father was a renowned civil surgeon and mother, the daughter of Rishi Rajnarain Bose, who has been feted as one of the great men of Indian Renaissance. This precocious child was sent to England at the age of seven along with two elder brothers -- Manmohan Ghosh and Binoy Bhushan Ghosh. There, he was taught privately by an English couple. Thereafter, he went to St. Paul's School, before moving on to Cambridge. As was the norm with the elite families of Bengal in those days, he appeared for the ICS exam and succeeded, but as ordained by fate, he didn't join service. The loss to the bureaucracy under the British regime was to benefit Indian freedom movement in a big way.

Sri Aurobindo emerged as a great scholar and a polyglot with command of English, Latin, French, German, Italian, etc. languages. Later, he learnt Indian languages like Bengali, Sanskrit, Marathi, Gujarati also. This was to help him express his reflective mind in an eclectic manner. Influenced by Greek civilization, he wrote like the English, says K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, a literary historian. In 1893, he came to India and located himself in Baroda state for the next 13 years – first in the service of the Maharaja of Baroda; then joined Baroda college as a professor.

The year 1906 was important in young Aurobindo's life when he attended Barisal Political Conference and took a plunge in politics. But the partition of Bengal created a revolutionary fervour which contracted Aurobindo too and he became interested in armed struggle. In 1908, he was imprisoned in connection with the Muzaffarpur Bomb Blast case. His heroic role as a revolutionary impelled Subhash Chandra Bose to write later: "The illustrious example of Aurobindo Ghosh looms large before my vision. I feel that I am ready to make the sacrifice which that example demands of me." (Ratna Ghosh 42) However, his life was meant for a unique role in the world. While in jail, he had a strange experience. Lord Krishna appeared before him and this changed his future course of life. After all, Lord Krishna too was born in King Kamsa's prison! Aurobindo noted in his diary that it was not the high walls but "Vasudev surrounded me; the tree in the compound became Lord Krishna providing shade; the inmates of the jail – guards and criminals alike appeared to be Narayan even "in these darkened souls and misused bodies."



He now distanced himself from politics. In 1910, Aurobindo reached Pondicherry and set up his ashram, where he was to devote the rest of his life practicing yoga and meditation and writing remarkable literary and philosophical works. Four years later, he was joined by Madame Mirra Richard, an Egyptian Jew with French nationality, later called simply the Mother, along with her husband. This phase that would end with his demise only, produced 36 books and articles running into 21000 pages. The corpus included poems, plays, theory of poetry, commentaries on Veda, Yoga, Upanishads, Gita, etc. Most popular of these are *Savitri*, a long poem that follows the pattern of an epic; and *Urvashi*, a short epic – both based on stories of Mahabharata. Besides, *The Life Divine* and *The Secret of the Veda* are philosophical texts.

Aurobindo described his poetry as the poetry of the soul – a unique though fit categorization for the poems composed by him, it appears, in a state of intuition. Such poetry surely is esoteric since it verbalizes spiritual experience. A view is that instead of intellectual approach, one needs to have practice of Yoga to understand his works. It is another matter that critics found him “guilty” of Sanskritizing English language, as if the Irish and the Scottish litterateurs had not imbued English with the words and language use practices of their native tongues, or the Americans had not Americanized English!

It goes without saying that Sri Aurobindo was a staunch nationalist. Nationalism for him was not politics but religion. Even after partition, he believed the soul of India was alive. “I believe firmly that a great and united future is the destiny of the nation and its peoples.” He was a devotee of Bharat Mata. In a letter to his wife from jail, Aurobindo wrote: “Whereas others regard the country as an inert piece of matter and know it as plains, fields, forests, mountains and rivers, I know my country as the mother I worship her and adore her accordingly. What would a son do when a demon sitting on his mother’s breast prepares to drink her blood -- content or would he rather run to the rescue of his mother? I know I have the strength to uplift this fallen race. This is not a feeling in me this is not a new feeling in me, not of recent origin. I was born with it. It is in my very marrow. God sent me to earth to accomplish this great mission.”

However, Aurobindo’s vision was not narrow. It was in sync with the cultural ethos of India. His message to the nation on the auspicious day of 15th August, 1947 mentioned his dream of not just a free India, but also of the resurgence of Asia, paving way for human unity inspired by the spiritual message of India going out to the world. That would, one day, bring about a supramental state leading to a total change of human consciousness. Romain Rolland rightly found in him the greatest synthesis of the genius of Asia and the genius of Europe, the last of the great Rishis who held in his hand in firm unrelaxed grip, the bow of creative energy.

Aurobindo’s vision of the world was infused with spiritualism. Even though the three-fold slogan of the French Revolution, viz., Liberty, Equality and Fraternity was held aloft as the guiding spirit of the future world, Aurobindo questioned it. He found liberty and equality being talked about as myths as, according to him, the principle of fraternity had been neglected in the formation of USSR. He said that all three ideals relate to soul, not to material development. Fraternity can be achieved only through soul’s development as embodiment of the divine. Only when as Vedantin, one espies divinity in diversity, can one achieve the ideal of fraternity.

Such elevated state is what he meant by superhuman with super-mind. This concept came up at a time when the theory of Evolution was being discussed by philosophers in the West.

Nietzsche envisioned a Superman and explained it in terms of a man with superior potential who masters himself and can coin his own value system. This later became the cornerstone of existentialism. But elsewhere, Nietzsche mentioned that he wanted “A Caesar with Christ’s soul”, but we know how the Nazis understood it. Around the same time, Bergson’s *elan vital* had created waves. It was envisioned as a blind life force that followed ruthlessly its own evolutionary course, without taking any straight line. Hegel called it Absolute Spirit. American poet Walt Whitman talked of it as Oversoul, and G.B. Shaw referred to it as Superman in his magnum opus *Man and Superman*.

Sri Aurobindo believed that Darwin merely described a phenomenon of the evolution of matter into life, but did not explain the reason behind it, while he found life to be already present in matter, because all existence is a manifestation of Brahman according to Vedanta. Aurobindo’s life force which we can interpret as the yogic prana shakti or kundalini is not blind. Having attained that evolutionary stage, which Aurobindo calls supermind, the evolved divine being will transform the human race into a supramental race. Thus, he advocated spiritual regeneration of mankind.

In developing this concept, Aurobindo synthesized the western and Indian philosophies. Come to think of it, Aurobindo himself was an evolved being and in our philosophical system based on rebirth, we believe that the spiritual progress happens over several lives, unless one has had the wild card of gurukripa or divine blessing. The way Aurobindo’s life turned from a person immersed deeply in western lifestyle and learning to an elevated Bhartiya soul seems to be the impact of previous births in which he might have inched closer to enlightenment. The seeds of spirituality must have been there in him which sprouted in the Baroda jail.

Aurobindo lived a versatile life: a revolutionary, nationalist, philosopher, creative writer, journalist, and a practising yogi. His life inspired many in the world. American poet Dorothy Richardson paid tribute to this great soul in the following words: “Has there ever existed a more synthetic consciousness than that of Aurobindo? Unifying he is to the limit of the term”. Sri Aurobindo’s amazing felicity with western as also Indian cultural texts holds a lesson for the people in that, one should not forget one’s roots. His patriotism riveted on the image of Bharat Mata has an emotional appeal to it which is more steadfast and sincere than the western notion of a nation based on material considerations. But his kind of nationalism will not take people into the fold of an ultra-nationalist philosophy of a Hitler, because nationalism based on Vedantin principle transcends the political boundaries and treats people all over the world as kindred souls. The only rider is that one country or people should not subjugate the other the way British colonizers did to India for which Sri Aurobindo had no qualms taking the path of a revolutionary.



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