

Prof. Arabinda Basu
Sri Aurobindo Research Academy, Pondicherry

LANGUAGE OF THE ABSOLUTE : A CONTEMPORARY INDIAN INTERPRETATION

Sri Aurobindo has a distinctive theory of the origin, development, capacities and limitations of language and of Aryan speech. He planned a whole book on "The Origins of Aryan Speech"¹ It was unfortunate that other preoccupations prevented him from completing it, for to judge from the published portions of the proposed work, the complete treatise would have been most stimulating and thought provoking and given scholars in the field of linguistics very valuable guidelines for their research. It is not my purpose to expound the theory now. But a brief description of its main points will be in place because that has a bearing on our subject.

Language, according to Sri Aurobindo, originated from sensation and not from ideas. The practical utilities of our daily life are quite well served by ordinary speech. It is sufficient for normal communication. The words used for such communication are purely conventional. There is no reason. Once it is agreed by consensus to call a horse a cow, why it cannot be so designated. But if we go back to the origins of language we find that words represented primarily sensation and activity and not fixed ideas expressed by means of conventional words. Sri Aurobindo gives the Sanskrit word *vṛka* as an example for his theory. "We mean by wolf", he writes, a certain kind of animal, but why we use this word and not another to mean it except as a lawless fact of historical development, we do not know, we do not think. Any sound would for us be equally good for the purpose, provided the custom-bound mentality prevailing in our environment could be persuaded to sanction it.² But when we examine the word *vṛka* we find that its root meaning is "tearing"

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on Gita*, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (Hereafter referred as SABCL) Vol. 10, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, pp. 551-81.
2. Op.cit. page 563.

and we get a glimpse of one law at least of the development of language. The ancient Indians did not arbitrarily decide upon the word *vṛka* which came to mean the animal wolf derivatively because it tears open violently. They expressed the sensation of tearing, or perhaps being torn open by the fierce animal in the forest. Sri Aurobindo continues, "We see the word *vṛka* in modern Sanskrit used only as noun signifying wolf: in the Veda it means simply tearing or a tearer, it is used differently as noun or adjective, even in its noun-use it has much of the freedom of an adjective and can be applied to a wolf, a demon, an enemy, a disruptive force or anything that tears."³ When we read a phrase like *avṛkāni jyotiṃṣi*, no one with any sense of the nature of the multi-significance of words in the Vedic literature can think that these words mean "wolfless illuminations" and not unhurting luminations. This meaning is easily discernible by people who know that the root of *vṛka* which can and does have the sense of hurting the gods in the veda are described as *vṛka*, beings do not hurt or do Violence *Dhenu* means "fostener", therefore also cow, cattle.

In another book, *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo expresses the same idea about the origin of language not as part of the history of its development but in relation to poetic speech, which is not our subject now. But it will be instructive to see how he utilises the same example, *vṛka*, to make his idea clearer to our minds. "Ordinarily speech uses language for a limited practical utility of communication," says he. "It uses it for life and for the expression of ideas and feelings necessary or useful to life."⁴ He reiterates that we treat words as conventional signs for ideas and pay no or only... attention to their natural force as we use a machine or an implement. "But if we go back earlier in the history of language and still more if we look into its origins," he writes, "we shall, I think, find that it was not always so with human speech. Words had not only a real and vivid life of their own, but the speaker was more conscious of it than we can possibly be with our mechanical and sophisticated intellects."⁵ The reason was the primitive nature of language which he says was not intended, or better did not intend

3. Op.cit. p. 563-4

4. SABCL. vol. 9, *The Future Poetry*, p. 12.

5. Ibid.

“to stand for ideas of the intelligence but for feelings, sensations, broad indefinite mental impressions with minute shades of quality in them which we do not now care to pursue. The intellectual sense in its precision must have been second only to an element which grew more dominant as language evolved.”⁶

Citing the example of the word *vṛka* again, he says that its origin is no longer present to our minds. That it denotes to our intelligence only a certain living object as it came to do in classical Sanskrit also. “. . . but originally it expressed the sensational relation between the wolf and man which most affected man’s life, and it did so by a certain quality in the sound which readily associated it with the sensation of tearing. This must have given early language a powerful life, a concrete vigour in one direction, a natural poetic force which it has lost, however greatly it has gained in precision, clarity, utility”, Sri Aurobindo shows how poetic speech goes back and recovers in a different way as much as it can of this original element.⁷

The mind of the primitive man – primitive not in the sense of uncivilised but ancient – was symbolic in nature. To him everything was a symbol of a more subtle reality. A symbol according to Sri Aurobindo is a reality on one plane of existence representing a reality on another plane. The mind of the Vedic rishis was intuitive and their language symbolic. They may or may not have been intellectual in a logically sophisticated fashion, and in that sense they were not philosophers. No wonder their way of recording their experiences was not precise in the modern sense of the word. As consciousness of man became more intellectual in character, language has become more and more precise. This development of language has been both a gain and a loss – a gain because science and intellectual philosophy can not record respectively their findings and speculations in symbolic language but must do so in definite and precise forms, a loss because the more logical and precise language becomes, more it loses the capacity to communicate vividness and concrete nature and the aliveness of actual experience.

6. SABCL Vol. 9. The Future Poetry, p. 12.

7. Op.cit. p. 13.

The inadequacy of language is so much more obvious when it has to deal with spiritual experience. By definition the Spirit is beyond the grasp of rational intellect. It is One, Self-awareness and in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy also self-knowing. While in one great systems of Indian spiritual philosophy Brahman is static, silent and devoid of any force. Sri Aurobindo accepts that it is also Conscious Force and the Power of Brahman's self-manifestation. It has many aspects and statuses. For example, it is Transcendent, Universal and Individual. It manifests itself by a downward evolution as diverse levels of being and consciousness in which it becomes progressively hidden and involved. The nethermost stage of the descent of Consciousness is the Inconscient which despite its designation is only a hood and mask of the Conscious Being, the Spirit.

It has been said above that in one of his aspects God is Individual which means that by a movement of his inherent Conscious Force he manifests his Universal Being as the individual Self. Whom Sri Aurobindo describes as the Divine as individual and also as the individual Divine. Now from the point of view of the individual soul which is a deputy as it were of the individual self in the world of evolutionary manifestation, that is in this universe, its relation with God can be threefold. God is free and is not limited to any one of his various and variegated aspects. So we too may and should be able to realise that freedom and be not confined to any one status in our relation to God when we become one with our divine Self. We may certainly have the experience in which "we may and should be able to stand out as the Self of all things and all beings, yet differentiated in the symbol so as to enjoy a blissful divided closeness such as that of the Lover and Beloved mingling yet separate in their rapture; and may and should even be able to stand away from God with a sort of active separateness holding his hand still, unlike the pure dualist, but still standing away from Him so that we may enjoy that infinity of human relation with God which is the wonder and beauty and joy of dualistic religions. To accomplish this is the full or Purna Yoga and the Sadhak who can attain to it is in his condition the complete yogin."⁸

Sri Aurobindo himself raises the question whether such a triune condition of the soul is possible, for logic cannot admit trinities

8. SABCL. Vol. 17, *The Hour of God*. pp. 58-9.

which Sri Aurobindo says must be chimeras to it. Surely "a thing must be one thing at a time" and "cannot combine three such divergent states as oneness, differentiated oneness and effective duality."⁹ "But", continues Sri Aurobindo, "in these matters an inch of experience goes farther than a yard of logic, and experience you will find, affirms that the triune Godhead is perfectly possible and simple once you had attained God's fulness".¹⁰ The truth of the matter is that a logic based on the peculiarities of Matter should not and must not be applied to the spiritual soul. "It is true of a clod that it cannot be at the same time a clod hanging up or posted on some bough, a clod protruding from the earth or a shapeless mass trodden into the mother soil. But this is because the clod is divided from the earthly form. The soul is not divided from God by these barriers of material dimension. What is true of matter is not true of spirit nor do the standards of form apply to the formless".¹¹

It should be clear from what has been said above and especially from the citations from Sri Aurobindo's writings that spiritual realities cannot really be described by ordinary speech. Now thought and language are very closely connected. We have said before that God, the Self of all things, is beyond the comprehension by the rational intellect. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy may be aptly described as Integral Monism. Though it grew out of his own incredibly comprehensive and harmonious spiritual experiences, its statement is made mostly along the lines of the Vedanta - Vedanta not of the Schools but of the Upanishads. He has made a very original contribution to Vedantic thought which we will briefly mention later.

From the standpoint of the universe in which we live, move and have our being, God is said to be Sachchidanada. Being, Consciousness, Conscious-Force and Delight. The Universe is a self-manifestation of Sachchidananda, as said above, by the descent of Consciousness through different levels down to the Inconscient. There are statuses of God beyond Sachchidananda the highest of which Sri Aurobindo terms Parabrahman, the Absolute. Parabrahman is behind all things. There

9. Op.cit. p. 59.

10. Op.cit. p. 59.

11. Op.cit. p. 59.

is nothing which is not Parabrahman *in essence*. It is indescribable because indeterminable as this or that since it is everything. This means that it is Nothing because it is no thing in particular and thus All which is the universal status of Sachchidananda. "Our fundamental cognition of the Absolute is intuitive and reveals to our substantial spiritual experience an infinite and eternal Existence, an infinite and eternal Consciousness, an infinite and eternal Delight of Existence".¹² "Words fail to describe it," writes Sri Aurobindo, "since words which are created to express relations, cannot deal successfully with a state which is perfectly pure absolute and unrelated; nor is it a condition which the bounded and finite intellect of men on this plane can envisage".¹³ He points out that intellect works only so long as there is something external to it and ungrasped. Therefore the state of Brahman cannot be defined in words because it cannot be realised by the intellect.¹⁴

Sri Aurobindo says that everything in the universe is a self-symbol of the creative Divine Being – self-symbol because God has put them out of his own essential being to express himself. The Upanishad says that God manifested the world in order to make himself known. It is wrong to take any symbol of Brahman as Brahman as such. They are means of expression and not the Expressed. As the Kena Upanishad says: Know that to be Brahman, nor this that thou approachment. The same Upanishad speaks of the speech of the speech. *vācasya vācah*. This Upanishad asserts that behind every sense that we possess there is a subtler sense, there is the Eye or the eye, Ear or the ear, life or life etc. Ultimately they are traced back to Brahman. The Speech of speech is not something that can be uttered and heard, and yet that is the basis and power behind our speech. Here we may mention that thought has several levels starting from the human intellectual up to the supramental thought. The supermind is the Divine's Self-knowledge of himself and his Will of self-manifestation. While our thought is ignorant of the Truth, on higher levels of consciousness thought becomes illumined. "... in the development out of the mental ignorance into the supramental knowledge." writes Sri Aurobindo, "this illumined thought comes to us often, though not always first,

12. SABCL Vol. 18. The Life Divine. p. 314.

13. SABCL Vol. 12. The Upanishads. p. 13.

14. Ibid.

to open the way to the vision or else to give first supports to the growing consciousness of identity and its greater knowledge. This thought is also an effective means of communication and expression and helps to an impression or fixation of the truth whether on one's own lower mind and being or on that of others."¹⁵ The supramental and the intellectual thought differ in this that the former is the direct Truth-Idea and not a representation of Truth to the Ignorance which is now the source and guiding Power of the world and our life in it. For it is the Truth-Consciousness of the Spirit presenting to itself its right forms – the *satyam* and *ṛtam* of the Veda – and because of its strong reality, body of light and substance.

In conclusion I may briefly mention that there is a language of the Absolute Divine. The business of language is expression by sound which is in the last analysis vibration. Well, there is a vibration in the ever still and yet perpetually creative Being and Consciousness of God. It is the *parā vāk*, the Supreme Word, his self-knowledge and original self-manifestation to himself and also objectively projected as the universe. As Sri Aurobindo has said, "The Supermind using the Word is the creative Logos."¹⁶

15. SABCL Vol. 21. The Synthesis of Yoga. pp. 804-5.

16. SABCL Vol. 12 The Upanishads. p. 111.