

MEETING BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: THE VISION OF SRI AUROBINDO

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1. Person and perspective

Sri Aurobindo, philosopher and mystic, poet and critic, was one of the most outstanding Indian thinkers of the twentieth century. A many-sided genius of extensive knowledge and intense mystical experience, Aurobindo was greeted already in 1928 by his fellow Indian Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore with the words: 'India will speak through your voice to the world.' And indeed he did speak, offered a magnificent message and proposed an integrated synthesis of the Eastern and the Western world. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), born Indian, brought up British, had throughout his life taught man's spiritual growth and eventual transformation leading to the emergence of a Supermind, a thought surprisingly similar to that proposed by the French scientist-mystic, Teilhard de Chardin. By training they were a classicist and a paleontologist respectively, but their thoughts met and merged to a great extent in their emergent mysticism¹.

Aurobindo's intuitive intellect, combined with his yogic experiences of deep mystical dimensions, was able to produce a number of remarkable works in prose and poetry that will become increasingly relevant to the human predicament in the third millennium. We are at a crucial crossroads of our evolutionary progress, our emerging destiny that we alone can determine. The divergence between knowledge and wisdom has grown increasingly dangerous with every new technological innovation. Human beings have power in abundance; whether then, have the wisdom to use that power for creative rather than destructive purposes is still a crucial question. We all have, in the words of William James, reservoirs of life to draw upon, of which we do not dream. Human attempts at development must be coupled with creative dreams. Though there are encouraging signs that the movement towards integration and world harmony is gathering

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¹Cf. Thomas Aykara, *Cosmic Consciousness. A Comparative Study on Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications. 1997.

momentum, there is even more alarming evidence that human folly has by no means exhausted itself. Afghanistan and Kashmir are the latest examples. We must realize that might and material superiority alone cannot bring about human harmony and integral growth. Harmony cannot be created by anybody from outside. It must evolve from within. In this context Aurobindo's synthesis of integral evolution, with his glowing promise of a new leap in the very texture of consciousness, stands as a pathfinder towards brighter dawns of the future, and a prophetic contribution towards the building up of a new humanity.

Both eastern and western thought meaningfully meet in Aurobindo. In his vision evolution and faith are so intimately intertwined in the very depth of reality that every step in the evolution of the universe is progressive growth in consciousness. This encounter, is not in externals but in essentials, and prophetically inspirational. He aims at a real synthesis. Prophetic thinker and profound mystic as he was, Aurobindo was a real discoverer, a discoverer of profound proportion and dimensions of the Spirit. He was a scientist of the Spirit, who laid bare the supernatural level of consciousness, thus opening up an immense realm of spiritual experience. Having attained a perfect silence of the mind, he had no need to think, so he claimed, but only to write down in terms of intellect all that he had discovered and come to know in practicing his integral yoga. His creative discoveries, deeply rooted in his profound mystical experiences of the inner unity of Reality, enabled him to journey in the realms of consciousness leading to an ideal fulfillment of what both the East and the West ardently aspired for. The West naturally aims at a fuller realization of the evolutionary, and cosmic nature of its thoughts. But exaggerated intellectualism and a one-sided analytical approach has apparently fragmented its vision, compartmentalized its thought and hampered its inner evolutionary progress. Eastern thought in general and Indian thought in particular is more spiritual in nature and mostly individualistic in its preoccupations. Both have to transcend their cultural limitations and experiential constraints and aim at an evolutionary fulfillment. Sri Aurobindo tried in his own unique way to fulfil this function by concentrating more on two threads of his thought: the question of evolution and the function of integral yoga.

2. Evolution Reinterpreted

The fact of evolution is accepted today by all scientists. Their

interpretations are evidently different and the evolutionary theory is still developing. The history of evolution is a process of disclosure of reality over millennia, which, however, is still open to the future and which - if human beings do not destroy themselves and their world - will reach further dimensions of reality, but at the same time will come up against new limits to knowledge.² Aurobindo accepted the cosmic view of evolution of the West but rejected its mechanical character and tried to replace it by a spiritual evolution. Similarly, he rejected the cyclical view of Indian thought and the individualistic outlook of its theory of evolution and replaced it by the cosmic and personal outlook of the West. Consequently he reinterpreted the theory of evolution and replaced it by a spiritual evolution, an evolution in integration culminating in final convergence. His theory of evolution is based on a fundamental intuition that human beings have an acute sense of aspiration, which manifests itself in the divination of the Godhead. It is an inner impulse towards, an innate search after, a sense of a secret immortality. At the heart of this existential aspiration is the mutable Becoming of the immutable Being, a self-projection of Brahman into the conditions of space and time. He turns the traditionally miserable man into a magnificent mutable becoming of the infinite essence of the Absolute. Man becomes the incarnation of the Logos, the expression of the creative power; the Absolute becomes involved in matter. His deep mystical experiences coupled with his adherence to Hindu Scriptures (*anubhava* and *Śruti*) made him develop a theory of evolution that was essentially spiritual in character. Consequently evolution becomes a spiritual process and a dialectic of descent and ascent. The ultimate driving force and the ground of evolution is the power of the Spirit that is operative in its dynamic infolding and unfolding in matter. That there is no part of Reality which is not in some degree infused with the absolute Spirit, is another basic intuition on which he develops his doctrine of evolution.

3. The Encounter Between East and West in Evolution

The idea of evolution is certainly more prominent in western philosophy than in Indian philosophy. Greek philosophy gives it

²Hans Kung, *Eternal Life? Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical and Theological Problem*, New York and London 1985, 223-224.

considerable importance. In Aristotle, evolution was more teleological. Plotinus' theory of emanation has some outward similarity with Aurobindo's understanding of Divine involution. The individual souls in Plotinus' thought undoubtedly realize God both as the immanent principle working within and also as the transcendent Source which the individual can reach by a long progression, through a series of stages. But in Aurobindo's thought, both these immanent and transcendent aspects are kept well in mind from the very beginning. Even in the lowest forms of matter, the Absolute is present as an indwelling principle, as in the language of the Bhagavad Gita, the most popular scripture of Hinduism, a dweller within the heart pushing it continually forward. The Absolute is everywhere, writes Aurobindo; it has to be seen and found everywhere. Every finite is an infinite and has to be known and sensed in its intrinsic infiniteness as well as in its surface finite appearance.³

Aurobindo rejects the *Advaita* (monism) of Sankara, for he asserts unity to the detriment of multiplicity, Ramanuja's *Visistadvaita* (qualified monism) denies the unqualified oneness and unity of the Absolute and Madhva's *Dvaita* (dualism) fails to recognize unity in the multiple. It was to correct and complete these three prominent schools in Indian thought that he developed his theory of integral evolution and integral yoga in which transcendence and immanence meet in human transformation, a gradual spiritual evolution. It is the involution of the Absolute in matter that makes this spiritual evolution inevitable. The appearance of human mind and body on earth marks a crucial step, a decisive change in the course and process of evolution. The human ability to know ourselves is a significant step to the ascent to that perfect self-transparency of the Absolute. Thus Aurobindo sees that there can be a higher status of consciousness than this present one, a state beyond the realm of the mental. The final goal he envisages is a spiritual age, a birth of a new consciousness, an upward revolution of the human being, a descent of the Spirit in our members, a spiritual reorganization of our life.

Drawing inspiration mostly from Greek thought, the West formulated different interpretations of evolution down through the centuries. The Greek mind directed its attention first to the outward, and only at a later

³Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, Centenary Edition Vol. XX, Pondicherry 1972, 375.

stage was it directed inwards. The Indian mind, on the contrary, turned inwards right from the very beginning. The highest reality was always conceived as *Atman* or Self. Consequently the interpretation of the universe was always in terms of consciousness. The progressive disclosures of reality, are in evolving stages of consciousness. The creative evolution of Henri Bergson and the organic and emergent evolution of Whitehead have some striking similarities with Aurobindo: the former two are materialistic in outlook whereas Aurobindo's is spiritualistic in essence. The key to the understanding of the sources and nature of evolution is not to be found in the organic process of nature but is to be sought in the ultimate Reality, the ground and goal of All, incessantly converging to the One.

Modern humankind with its magnificent achievements and progress is undergoing an evolutionary crisis. We are still only human animals, says Aurobindo.⁴ Our central will of life is still situated in our vital and physical being; we are enlightened but not yet transformed. If humankind is to survive, a radical transformation of human nature is necessary. Religions and regulations, teachers and treatises, all these have not succeeded in bringing about this indispensable transformation. They often concentrate more on transcendence at the expense of transformation; an other-worldly transcendence that does not pay sufficient attention to human existential strains and struggles. In spite of their extraordinary achievements, human beings today stand fragmented and frustrated. They have to cease to be mere human animals; they have to begin to be supreme human spirits. It is to achieve this new consciousness or new stage of spiritual being that Aurobindo introduces his discipline of yoga.

4. Yoga Made Integral

The synthesis of the inner and the outer, the Teilhardian 'within' and 'without', heaven and earth, One and many, is the central objective of Aurobindo's integral yoga. It is to justify this objective that he repeatedly appeals to the principle of intermediaries. After asserting categorically the essential identity of matter and spirit, Aurobindo establishes the 'law of intermediaries' that is to rule the progressive evolution of the Spirit in matter. Already from time immemorial the Upanishadic teaching said:

⁴*Ibid.*, 408.

energize the conscious energy in you, for the Energy is Brahman. The eternal spirit is not merely an inhabitant of this bodily mansion, but the very matter is a fit and noble material out of which he weaves constantly his garbs, builds recurrently the unending series of his mansions, for 'matter also is Brahman'. Behind the appearance there is an identity in essence of these two extreme modes of existence, matter and spirit. It is in human consciousness that this reconciliation starts, emerges and achieves its goal of integration and convergence. The extension and emergence of this consciousness, to be satisfying, must necessarily be an inner enlargement from the individual to the cosmic existence. This cosmic existence is the final goal of man in his evolutionary journey in consciousness, of which *Saccidānanda* (Existence - Consciousness - Bliss) is the beginning, the middle and the end, the ground and the goal.

Supermind, a unique concept that Aurobindo introduces as the constitutive bridge between matter and spirit, nature and supernature, is the important medium between the *Saccidānanda* and his external manifestations, the unfolding universe of matter-life-mind. This is, therefore, one eternal and infinite Being, but seven distinguishable terms of Being or the sevenfold cord of Being, as Aurobindo would express it. It is the Supermind that develops the triune principle of existence, consciousness and bliss out of their indivisible unity. Aurobindo's unique interpretation of Supermind as the inherent and incessantly transformative power of *Saccidānanda* plays a key role in his understanding of evolution in terms of stages in consciousness. It is a principle of active will and knowledge superior to mind and creative of the worlds. It is the mediating power and state of being between that self-possession of the One and this flux of the many. Supermind is the vast self-extension of the Brahman that contains and develops. Supermind bridges the gap between reason and mystery, and combines the impersonal Being, personal God and individual self into three inseparable and equally real modes of the supreme Reality. The hierarchical stages of mind leading to Supermind are typically expressed in particular kinds of extraordinary activity - higher mind in synoptic thought, illumined mind in mystical inspiration, intuitive mind in religious genius and overmind in world-transforming action, while Supermind has yet to come down and transform our planet. The rational justification of his integral yoga depends on the doctrine of Supermind whose presence and power he discovers at the very root of man's basic aspiration, His search from the aspiring human-animal leads him to a

transparent Supermind who is to be realized in the new consciousness that awaits man. This is the final goal of his journey in human consciousness. Aurobindo made use of the path of integral yoga to realize this goal.

Aurobindo, like the sages of the East, firmly believed that awareness is the door to realization. There is above all the authentic divine dynamism, capable of transforming human nature and creating a new world order. This transformation is made possible through an ascent of consciousness towards the Infinite and final descent of the Infinite into the finite. But human beings are unfortunately wrapped up in manifold ignorance of which they have first of all to become conscious. Awareness of the ignorance that they are in is the beginning of human wisdom and progress. The more we become aware of the limits of our knowledge, the nearer we are to wisdom and true knowledge. The reason and root of our in-built ignorance is our alienation from the divine consciousness. This is overcome only through Yoga, the integral union with the divine. The integral yoga of Aurobindo assimilates the triple paths of Bhagavad Gita and aims at total human transformation, body and soul, an integral and radical transformation. A synthesis of all the yogas implies an integration of all the dimensions of human being, including bodily existence. The human being stands for a complete synthesis, integral fulfilment, and the supra-mental synthesis that indeed fulfils the supreme quest of the human soul.

5. The Significance of Aurobindo's Synthesis

Aurobindo's synthesis is intelligible only in the context of his understanding of Reality as One in All and All in One. His creative vision of integrating the interiority and transcendence in human beings as becoming beings is very significant in the East-West encounter. The scientific rigour of the analytical mind in the West has to be coupled with and supported by the testimony of experience as the expressions of the inner Spirit. The entire person with its physical, psychic and spiritual potentialities is in process, a mutual constitutive process of inner encounter between the mutable becoming of the immutable Being. Human beings' power of self-transcendence is the pivot of their further evolution, their attitude of 'unselfing' (in the language of Iris Murdoch). All cultures have countless records of men and women who have displayed these powers in terms of physical, mental and spiritual capacities. This is supported by

present-day studies in medical science, physical research, psychological sciences and comparative religious studies. As far as the natural scientists are concerned, writes Hans Kung, the evolution process as such neither includes nor excludes the origin and the goal. But they cannot ignore the basic question of origin, meaning and goal of the whole process. We have to choose between the groundlessness or meaninglessness of Jacques Monod or - on the lines of Manfred Eigen - the primordial ground or primordial meaning of everything.⁵ There seems to be a broad agreement emerging that the human nature is undergoing further evolutionary development. Aurobindo's prophetic synthesis becomes extremely significant in the light of humankind's adventurous explorations into the future evolution of human nature.

Aurobindo's integration of matter and spirit, evolution and faith, situated and synchronized at the very heart of human consciousness, and saturated by his mystical experiences, can make a considerable contribution towards the shaping of a more relevant theology. Having long been alienated from the mystical, mythical and cosmic levels of human consciousness, the theologians of the future must open themselves to their depth and power, and integrate their resources into the faith, lived out daily, in which they encounter in concrete form the human consciousness of God. The emergent mysticism of Aurobindo, constitutively integrating unity in diversity, can possibly inspire theologians to create a more open and assimilative theology, especially in the field of theology of religious pluralism. It is by analysing human beings' living and growing consciousness, by reintegrating it into its relational and complementary setting, that the theologians and theologies of the future can make more creative contributions.

6. Conclusion

The evolutionary mysticism of Sri Aurobindo is naturally over-optimistic. While constantly concentrating on the encounter between matter and spirit, Aurobindo did not give sufficient attention to the human problem of evil and misery in the world. Though conversant with some schools of psychology, he does not seem to be sufficiently informed of the scientific findings of modern psychological sciences. Perhaps he attached too much importance to his doctrine of Supermind. He was a prophet of

⁵ Kung, *Eternal Life* (n.2).

the Spirit rather than a scientist of matter. But his integration of matter and Spirit in an emergent consciousness in human beings is a creative contribution towards a meaningful encounter between the Eastern and Western world and a remarkable guide in the march to our destiny. The balance between unity and diversity is the hallmark of his emerging integration realized in the inner encounter. This integration enlightens us on how to escape from the existential estrangements within ourselves and among our fellow human beings, and finally on how to escape estrangement from the Divine.

It is slightly surprising and significantly interesting to see how a similar mystic of the West, Pierre Teilhard Chardin of France tried to understand and interpret reality in terms of evolution. Integrating matter and spirit; the "within" and the "without" of matter, he experienced the core of inner unity and got his consciousness evolved from bio-sphere to Christosphere. The omnipresent spirit of Aurobindo and the 'divine milieu' of Chardin seem very similar. Both of them developed a theory of evolution centring on the spirit and consciousness. The vision of reality proposed both by Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin is basically rooted in their deep personal experiences. In Teilhard too we find a genuine meeting of East and West; while he is more at home in the Christian West, Sri Aurobindo is more inspired by the Hindu East, but both of them have an authentic encounter of East and West.

Perhaps for both of them the innermost aspiration moving dynamically from within us is a perennial source of strength to go forward and an ever-abiding hope that makes human beings look forward to a life beyond. Trust anchored in the permeating presence of the Spirit in us and the hope hidden at the heart of reality is the dynamic source of evolution and the unfailing strength of faith. From a Christian perspective, this in-built trust and the consequent hope will make the risen images of Christ broader and brighter for us, pilgrims on this planet.