

Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Sketch

Madan Lal Goel

Sri



Sri Aurobindo at St. Paul's School, London, 1884

Aurobindo was born on 15 August 1872 in Bengal to Hindu parents. Aurobindo spent two years at the residential Loreto Convent School in Darjeeling, W. Bengal. At the tender age of 7, Aurobindo and his two elder brothers were taken to England for a European education. The brothers were placed in the care of Reverend and Mrs. William Drewett. Rev. Drewett was an Anglican clergyman. The Drewetts tutored the three brothers privately. The Drewetts had been asked by Aurobindo's father to keep the instruction completely free of any Indian or Hindu influence. In 1884, Aurobindo joined St Paul School in London. Here he learned Greek and Latin, spending the last three years reading

literature, especially English poetry.

Sri Aurobindo returned to India in 1893 at age 21. He taught English and French literature at Baroda College. During this period, he taught himself Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages. He translated certain Sanskrit works into English.

He was a prolific writer. His works fill some thirty-six volumes. He was steeped in Western scholarship as well as Hindu sacred writings. He commented on the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, and Racine. He also wrote commentaries on the Hindu scriptures: the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Aurobindo had a keen appreciation of the scholarship of both the East and the West.



of the nationalist anti-British fervor sweeping the Indian nation at the turn of the century. He was influenced by the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He led the radical wing of the nationalist movement and wrote the revolutionary and a fiery publication.

The British put him in solitary confinement in 1908 on charges of sedition (treason). In solitary confinement at the Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo practiced deep meditation and yoga. He also studied the Bhagavad Gita. His spiritual practices led to a personal transformation. For a while, he thought he was going mad with his mind in over drive. By going within, he realized that the mind was agitated but the deeper part of him was calm. He also concretely witnessed that Lord Krishna was the secret author of all that happened around him, including the actions of his jailors.

As to his solitary confinement, he remarked: "The British meant it bad, but God made it good."

After being released, he gave up political activity and moved to Pondicherry in Southern India, then under French rule and beyond the reach of the British police. He secluded himself for years and

practiced yogic meditation. He also wrote voluminously, published in some 36 volumes. An Ashram grew up around him in 1926, which now draws devotees from around the globe. Mira Alfassa, known to her followers as the Mother, a French lady and a spiritual genius in her own right, collaborated with Sri Aurobindo.

It was not Sri Aurobindo's aim to found a new religion or to seek followers. Yet, his spiritual force draws many seekers worldwide. Sri Aurobindo Centers exist in several countries in the world, including one in Pensacola, Florida.

SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

GOD

The teaching of Sri Aurobindo starts from that of the ancient sages of India. Behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by the illusion of separation.

Sri Aurobindo taught that the One Reality and Consciousness is beyond number, gender and definitions. This reality is seen in the cave of one's heart, and it is described it as *Sat, Chit, Ananda* --Existence, Consciousness, Bliss.

CREATION

God is complete in Himself/Herself. He/she lacks nothing. God is not compelled to create. God creates for joy. Creation is an act of Ananda in Sanskrit, or bliss. God fulfills himself/herself in his/her creation, just as an artist fulfills himself in his creative work.

As God is all, contains all, the creation is more accurately described as a manifestation. God is manifested as the creation. The creation is His *Lila*, a play. But we should not conclude that it is whimsical. There is a purpose in the cosmos which is both earnest and joyful.

God is not diminished by his creation. He (she) is full and complete before creation and full and complete after creation.

ONENESS

A fundamental teaching of Sri Aurobindo is one of Unity of all created things. Encompassing diversity, there is unity. Behind individual souls, there is the Self, one with the Divine.

Not only human life but all created life including animal life is a unity. We spring from one source. Differences and divisions are unreal. The belief that we originate from one common source and are all One with that source has ethical implications: it leads to a kinder and a gentler world.

Is Creation Accidental? Material scientists would have us believe that creation is an accident or the work of chance. It is a machine that somehow got started without purpose or goal. Sri Aurobindo disagrees. Creation is not an illusion or Maya or an accident. It is not a dream. It carries in itself the Word of God. He penned these lines in *Savitri*, an epic poem.

This world was not made with random bricks of chance
A blind god is not destiny's architect,
A conscious power has drawn the plan of life,

There is meaning in each curve and line.

EVOLUTION

Sri Aurobindo puts forward the cardinal fact of a spiritual evolution as the meaning of existence. Existence is not a finished product. God did not create the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Existence is a Truth of things unfolding by a gradual process of evolution. "The Truth of Existence is its Becoming."

Evolution is not the evolution of matter but evolution of consciousness. Consciousness is the fundamental thing. Consciousness is the life force, the energy, the motion that creates everything in the universe, from the microcosm (the smallest) to the macrocosm (the largest). There is consciousness in matter, for example in the movement of electrons and protons within the atomic structure. The vegetable kingdom of trees and plants exhibits a certain degree of consciousness. Consciousness evolves in the animal. Presently, the mind of man is the highest expression of consciousness. But evolution does not end with mind. There is the 'Higher Mind.' In deep contemplation, Rishis (seers) reach the higher mind.

Consciousness is usually equated with the mind. But mental consciousness does not exhaust the complete range of consciousness, just as the eye cannot exhaust all the gradations of color or the ear all the gradations of sound. So there are ranges of consciousness below as well as above the human mind.

Sri Aurobindo laid out the entire ladder steps of higher consciousness: mind, intuitive mind, overmind, and supermind.

THE GOAL

Christians seek Heaven, Buddhists seek Nirvana, and Hindus seek Moksha (liberation from the cycle of life and death). These are otherworldly goals. Salvation and freedom lie elsewhere, not here on earth in this life. Sri Aurobindo's teaching is affirmative. The goal is not the attainment of Heaven in afterlife but a perfect life here on earth.

The solution to mankind's problems consists in spiritual rebirth. The true aim will regard man as not a mind, a life and a body, but as a Soul incarnated for divine fulfillment on earth. The goal is to live from within, from the soul center. The aim is to establish in society a true "inner theocracy," not the false theocracy of a Church, priesthood, an *ummah*, but that of the inner Priest, the inner Prophet.

Man's goal is to discover hidden divinity in himself. "To fulfill God in life is man's manhood." He starts from animal life but a divine existence is his objective. A person who lives in the Spirit is one with all. Sri Aurobind's teachings now have a global reach.

Sri Aurobindo's collaborator, the Mother, penned the following lines:

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.



He came on earth not to bring a teaching or a creed in competition with previous creeds or teachings, but to surpass the past and to open concretely the route towards an imminent and inevitable future.

Sri Aurobindo came upon earth to teach this truth to men. He told them that man is only a transitional being living in a mental consciousness, but with the possibility of acquiring a new consciousness, the Truth-consciousness, and capable of living a life perfectly harmonious, good and beautiful, happy and fully conscious. During the whole of his life upon earth, Sri Aurobindo gave all his time to establish in himself this consciousness he called supramental, and to help those gathered around him to realise it.
-The Mother