

Sri Aurobindo for Gebserians

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For Sri Aurobindo, the dynamic link between the world and its Origin is supermind. The eternal function of this creative awareness is to develop into significant forms the infinite Quality-Delight which is Reality itself. All contrary appearances are due to the fact that supermind is still involved in mind as mind and life were once involved in life and matter, respectively. Having expounded the rationale of the impending supramentalization of mind, life and matter, Sri Aurobindo set out to liberate the Spirit's determinative self-knowledge locked up in the cells of the body and in their deterministic modes of functioning.

This paper is intended to introduce a Gebser-oriented audience to the life and work of Sri Aurobindo. The following statement by Jean Gebser explains why anyone interested in him should be equally interested in Sri Aurobindo.

Be it noted that my concept of the formation of a new consciousness, of which I became aware by a flash-like intuition in the winter of 1932/33, and which I began to put forward in 1939, largely resembles the world-scheme of Sri Aurobindo, who was then unknown to me. My own, however, differs from Sri Aurobindo's in that it appeals to the Western world only and does not have the profundity and the pregnant origin of his ingeniously presented conception. I see an explanation for this phenomenon in the fact that I was in some way brought into the extremely powerful spiritual field of force radiating through Sri Aurobindo.[1]

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta in 1872. His father, convinced of the superiority of European culture, did everything he could to prevent his son from becoming acquainted with the cultural and religious life of India. At the age of seven Sri Aurobindo was sent to Manchester with instructions for his new guardian not to let him receive any religious instruction, and not to allow him to make the acquaintance of any other Indian. Sri Aurobindo returned to India fourteen years later, after completing a thorough classical education at King's College, Cambridge. This was followed by thirteen years in the service of the Maharaja of Baroda, where he acted mostly as Vice-Principal of Baroda College. During this period Sri Aurobindo worked behind the scenes to establish a revolutionary movement. A certain commitment to revolutionary action had already begun to form in him at the age of eleven, when he read Shelley's "The Revolt of Islam". Soon after, newspaper reports of the mistreatment of Indians by Britons had canalized this general commitment into the idea of the liberation of his own country.

In 1905 the announcement by the British Government that Bengal would be partitioned provoked unprecedented agitation. Seeing improved prospects for open political action, Sri Aurobindo accepted an offer to become the first principal of the newly founded Bengal National College, went to Calcutta and plunged into the fray. Between 1905 and 1910 he acted primarily as a political journalist and as one of the leaders of the radical wing of the Indian National Congress. In 1907 a warrant for sedition was served against him as editor of the journal *Bande Mataram*. He was acquitted, but the trial made headlines around the country and brought him to national attention. The *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo later recalled, was *almost unique in journalistic history in the influence it exercised in converting the mind of a people and preparing it for revolution.*[2] Sri Aurobindo was the first Indian who had the courage to declare openly that the aim of political action in India was complete and absolute independence.

While his fame as a nationalist leader was at its height, Sri Aurobindo, who for some time had been on the look-out for a competent guru, met a yogin named Vishnu Bhaskar Lele. During his stay at Baroda Sri Aurobindo had already become interested in Indian philosophy, and had turned with increasing frequency to the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Initially he had accepted the prevailing illusionistic interpretation of these scriptures, but soon he became convinced that this was not in accord with the texts. The Upanishads declared that everything was Brahman, not that everything except the world was Brahman. The main object of yoga according to the illusionists was to know Brahman-minus-the-world, to unite oneself with the original Reality transcending quality and form. Action in the world was regarded as inimical to this goal. Once Sri Aurobindo realized that, on the contrary, yoga was "skill in works", as the Gita put it, he began to practice yoga in the hope of acquiring spiritual power for carrying out his political program.

When he met Lele, Sri Aurobindo explained to him that he wanted to practice yoga in order to obtain spiritual strength for his political work. They retired to a secluded place, and within three days Sri Aurobindo realized the state of consciousness which in India had come to be looked upon as the consummation of all spiritual seeking. In the absolute stillness of his mind there arose—I quote—*the awareness of some sole and supreme Reality*[3] which was *attended at first by an overwhelming feeling and perception of the total unreality of the world.*[4] By a strange irony, Sri Aurobindo had been engulfed by the very experience that is the solid basis of the illusionistic philosophy which he had previously rejected. *There was no ego, he recalls, no real world... only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indiscernible, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely and solely real.*[5]

Sri Aurobindo lived in this selfless awareness of what he later identified as the *passive Brahman* for days and months *before it began to admit other things into itself and realization added itself to realization.* What was at first seen *only as a mass of cinematographic shapes unsubstantial and empty of reality* eventually became real manifestations of the One Reality. *And this, he recalls, was no reimprisonment in the senses, no diminution or fall from supreme experience, it came rather as a constant heightening and widening of the Truth; it was the spirit that saw objects, not the senses, and the Peace, the Silence, the freedom in Infinity remained always, with the world or all worlds only as a continuous incident in the timeless eternity of the Divine.*[6]

While his body at first continued to act as *an empty automatic machine*,[7] a new mode of action soon became evident. To quote from an autobiographical note written in

the third person, *something else than himself took up his dynamic activity and spoke and acted through him but without any personal thought or initiative.*[8]

Before the two parted company, Lele told Sri Aurobindo to surrender to the guide within him. If he could do this completely, he would have no further need of a human guru. Sri Aurobindo accepted the advice. At least once, however, he took no heed of the inner guide. When a call came to him to put aside his political activity and go into seclusion, he was unable to accept it. About a month later he found himself in solitary confinement as an undertrial prisoner. It was not until a year and a day later that he was acquitted and released.

During his imprisonment, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual realization enlarged itself into an all-encompassing awareness of the Divine. The bars of the cell, the high prison walls, the thieves and the murderers, the magistrate and the prosecution counsel—all became forms of the omnipresent Godhead. The passive impersonal Brahman revealed its other side, the active and all-controlling personal Brahman.

After his acquittal Sri Aurobindo carried on his political and journalistic activities for another nine months, but with a shift of emphasis. He no longer regarded the liberation of India as a goal in itself. If India must become a great and independent nation, it was to give to humanity the spiritual knowledge that a long line of Rishis, saints and Avatars had developed and perfected in the seclusion of the Indian peninsula.

One evening in 1910 Sri Aurobindo received an inner command to go to the French settlement of Chandernagore. This time he obeyed at once. About a month later he moved on to Pondicherry where he remained until his withdrawal from the visible world in 1950.

Sri Aurobindo originally thought to return to politics after completing his yoga in a year or two at most. But before long *the magnitude of the spiritual work set before him became more and more clear to him.*[9] It was no longer a question of *revolt against the British government*; he was now waging *a revolt against the whole universal Nature.*[10]

Between 1912 and 1920 Sri Aurobindo kept a detailed account of his yoga in a series of diaries. They bear out in detail a statement he made years later in a letter to a disciple: he wrote that he had been *testing day and night for years upon years his spiritual knowledge and force more scrupulously than any scientist his theory or his method.*[11] While still in jail, Sri Aurobindo had made the discovery of a series of higher planes of consciousness. In Pondicherry he concentrated his energy on the triple process of ascent, descent and integration: ascent to a higher plane, descent of the powers of the higher plane, and integration of the already established powers into the descending dynamism.

Before long, Sri Aurobindo's inner experiences surpassed anything dealt with explicitly in the Gita or the Upanishads. However, when he took up the Rig Veda in the original, he found his hitherto unexplained psychological experiences *illuminated with a clear and exact light.*[12] And so it was that his experiences enabled Sri Aurobindo to recover, after millenniums, the lost secret of the Veda: the key to its spiritual symbolism.

Between 1914 and 1921 Sri Aurobindo brought out a philosophical review and wrote, under a continual deadline, all of the works upon which his reputation as a philosopher, Sanskrit scholar, political scientist and literary critic is based. For six and a half years he produced from scratch the yearly equivalent of two or three full-length books, but working on as many as seven simultaneously. His principal work in prose, *The Life Divine*, is regarded by some as one of the most important metaphysical treatises

of the present century. Yet Sri Aurobindo not only emphatically denied being a philosopher but also asserted that his works were produced without the aid of thought. *I had only to write down in the terms of the intellect all that I had observed and come to know in practicing Yoga daily and the philosophy was there automatically*,[13] he wrote. Let us now take a brief look at this philosophy.

Sri Aurobindo adopts the Vedantic description of the original Reality in the triple terms of Existence, Consciousness and Bliss or Sat-Chit-Ananda (Sachchidananda). He also endorses the Vedantic concept of a hierarchy of non-evolving worlds coexistent with our evolutionary world. The dynamic link between Sachchidananda and the worlds is a determinative self-knowledge. That is to say, the consciousness by which Sachchidananda knows its determinations is also the power by which it determines, differentiates, multiplies and limits itself. In Sri Aurobindo's terminology, this determinative self-knowledge is called supermind.

In our evolutionary world supermind is still involved in mind, as mind had been involved in life, and life in matter. In fact, consciousness as we know it—mental consciousness—would not exist if supermind had not made itself implicit in mind, which is to say, in a subordinate mode of its own process. For if all is Sachchidananda manifesting itself through supermind, mind, as well as life, can be nothing but particular actions of the supramental knowledge-power.

Two poises of creative awareness coexist in supermind, one transcending individualization, the other supporting a multiple concentration of consciousness. In the latter, consciousness stands back from force, observing and directing it from the standpoint appropriate to each form. This secondary poise is the parent of mind, but it is not until consciousness loses sight of the primary poise, by a voluntary act of self-limitation, that mind as an effectively separate principle is born.

Thus while supermind looks upon itself as the one Conscious-Existence adopting a plurality of knowing and determining standpoints, mind experiences itself as a multiplicity of separate entities. And while supermind perceives each thing as the One Existence under a particular aspect, mind sees each thing as a separate integer. Supermind also transcends the distantiating perspectival outlook of mind. It knows all because it is all, not at a distance but immediately, by identity. Its Self encompasses the world. Its vantage-point is coextensive with space. It likewise encompasses past, present and future time.

The creative action of supermind is primarily qualitative and infinite and only secondarily quantitative and finite. At its origin, mind is the agent of this secondary action—measuring, limiting, defining, individualizing. But when separated in its self-consciousness from supermind, mind becomes a prisoner of the quantitative and finite aspect of reality which it had helped to create.

Our world has been created by mind. In the past,[14] supermind has acted only indirectly, through the creative agency of mind. Life depends on mind to the extent that it may be defined as Sachchidananda's aspect of force operating from the standpoint and conformably to the disjunctive outlook of mind. Matter depends on mind to the extent that it may be defined as Sachchidananda's aspect of Existence as seen by mind and as shaped by life. The evolution of supermind therefore will bring with it not merely a new awareness of the same world, nor merely the revelation of a hitherto unperceived aspect of the world, but a radical transformation of the world.

In a phenomenological sense, the mutation of a new consciousness structure has always signaled the birth of a new world. Phenomenologically speaking, matter came

into being with the mental structure, for mental consciousness, as defined by Gebser, is the first consciousness structure capable of consolidating images into self-existent objects from which the cognizant subject can be abstracted. Yet in an ontological sense, matter existed before the appearance of mental man, for the mental outlook has already been determinative before mind evolved. The supramental knowledge-power, on the other hand, has never before been determinative of our world.

In his philosophical writings, Sri Aurobindo is chiefly concerned with the large-scale evolution of consciousness, whereas Gebser supplies fascinating details of the evolution of human consciousness on a finer scale. For Sri Aurobindo the decisive evolutionary steps are life, mind and supermind; for Gebser they are the magic, mythical, mental and integral structures. From the Aurobindonian point of view, nothing stands in the way of identifying the integral structure with supermind. Such an identification was explicitly endorsed by Gebser. But because of the different evolutionary scales envisaged, the evolution of supermind as expounded by Sri Aurobindo stands out as an even more radical proposition than the manifestation of the integral structure as set forth by Jean Gebser.

Just how radical it is may be inferred from the physiological changes that, according to Sri Aurobindo, are bound to result from supramentalization.

The present organization of the body is largely accounted for by matter's resistance to modifications of its laws. These laws are instruments of involution. In fact, the laws of particle physics known collectively as the Standard Model have been derived by me[15] from the following fact alone: the initial state of our universe is the realization of the maximal involution of the powers of Sachchidananda that is consistent with their progressive evolution. Accordingly, the laws of physics can apply strictly only where life and mind remain in latency.

Yet although life has the power of modifying these laws, that power is severely restricted. Matter resists. Hence the need for evolving the complex quasi-mechanical instrumentation that accounts for most of the structure of the animal or human organism. There is a reason for this resistance: evolution was not meant to be a rapid transformation of matter back into Spirit. In this world, Sachchidananda has opted for a slow and difficult self-affirmation in conditions that appear to be its own opposites, for the joy of a challenging adventure. The poor susceptibility of matter's initial determinism to modification by life is one of the necessary adversities.

Matter's resistance has yet another consequence. Because of it, none of the dynamisms of consciousness-force manifested so far has been able to achieve a complete integration of the previously manifested dynamisms. This has led to a hierarchical organization of the consciousness-force active in ourselves. Each level in this hierarchy is to some extent capable of modifying but not of fully assimilating the subjacent level.

The manifestation of the supermind will change all this. Any level of consciousness-force touched by the supermind in its descent must perforce become fully integrated into the supramental dynamism. For while even the highest mental-spiritual force acts as one among other forces, the supermind is by definition the one and only force in the world. All other forces are its fragmented workings, which are automatically integrated into their parent dynamism wherever that manifests itself in its own right. That is why instead of adding one more level to our psychodynamic make-up, the manifestation of supermind will once again abolish its hierarchical structure. Even the interactions between the body's constituent particles will become part of the

supramental dynamism. Every aspect of the body—form, function, behavior—will be the visible side of an immediately effective act of consciousness. Obviously, there would no longer be any need for the body's intricate quasi-mechanical physiology, and eventually this would be abolished, too.

In 1926 Sri Aurobindo arrived at a turning point in his yoga. There is a highest mental plane bordering on the supramental to which he gave the name "overmind". The Isha Upanishad describes it as a "brilliant golden lid" obstructing the passage from mind to supermind. For years Sri Aurobindo had striven to negotiate this passage. Success came on the 24th of November of that year when the light and power of the overmind descended into his physical being. Subsequently Sri Aurobindo withdrew from outer contacts to concentrate on the more difficult task of enabling the supermind to descend, take possession of his body and for the first time act on matter directly. His withdrawal, however, did not prevent him from attending to world affairs, as may be gleaned from another third-person autobiographical note.[16]

There is... a spiritual dynamic power which can be possessed by those who are advanced in the spiritual consciousness.... It was this force which, as soon as [Sri Aurobindo] had attained to it, he used, at first only in a limited field of personal work, but afterwards in a constant action upon the world forces.... He put his spiritual force behind the Allies from the moment of Dunkirk when everybody was expecting the immediate fall of England and the definite triumph of Hitler, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the rush of German victory almost immediately arrested and the tide of war begin to turn in the opposite direction.... He had not, for various reasons, intervened with his spiritual force against the Japanese aggression until it became evident that Japan intended to attack and even invade and conquer India.... Sri Aurobindo... had the satisfaction of seeing the tide of Japanese victory, which had till then swept everything before it, change immediately into a tide of rapid... and finally... overwhelming defeat.

The progress made by Sri Aurobindo during his last 24 years is not well documented. However, the Mother, his spiritual peer and collaborator since 1920, carried on the work of supramentalization for another 23 years, and she left behind a detailed chronicle. I will offer a few glimpses of this extraordinary document of more than 6000 pages, called *Mother's Agenda*[17], in a separate paper.[18]

Before concluding, I still have to say a few words about Sri Aurobindo's poetry and about his Integral Yoga.

Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*—almost 24,000 lines in blank verse—is of equal importance in the corpus of his works to *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. *Savitri* was begun in 1915 and last revised in 1950. Sri Aurobindo wrote that *Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative*. [19] The result of this experiment is not only a poetic chronicle of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, but a rhythmical embodiment of his experiences that can awaken sympathetic vibrations in those who read it. Containing Sri Aurobindo's most detailed account of the geography of the inner worlds, it is an invaluable chart for the use of future explorers.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the poetry of the highest order comes *from the Overmind inspiration or from some very high plane of intuition* and has the power to

convey not merely the mental, vital or physical contents or indications or values of the thing uttered, but its significance and figure in some fundamental and original consciousness which is behind these and greater.[20] Savitri undoubtedly belong in this category.

It is still more difficult to do justice to the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo in a few lines. *In the right view both of life and of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo wrote, *all life... is a vast Yoga of Nature attempting to realise her perfection in an ever increasing expression of her potentialities.*[21] In a more specific sense, yoga marks the stage at which this effort becomes self-aware. The human being then consciously participates in its own self-exceeding, a participation which essentially consists in an aspiration to the creative power behind evolution and in a surrender to its workings.

The action of this power has three main features. *In the first place, it does not act according to a fixed system and succession as in the specialised methods of Yoga, but as determined by the temperament of the individual in whom it operates.* In a sense, therefore, everyone has his or her own method of yoga. *Secondly, the process, being integral, accepts our nature such as it stands organised by our past evolution and without rejecting anything essential compels all to undergo a divine change.... Thirdly, the divine power in us uses all life as the means of this Integral Yoga.*[22] This means that all inner and outer experiences become so many shocks which disintegrate the teguments of the divine element in us and remove the obstacles to spiritual realization and supramental transformation.

References

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