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## **The Main Features of Sri Aurobindo's Life and Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

*Aurobindo is one of our great spiritual savants that have left us a rich spiritual heritage in the form of prodigious literature in poetry, prose, drama, epic and a cluster of letters. Besides, this has built an imposing international spiritual centre where he lived for over half century in Pondicherry. It is difficult to summarize Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy. It goes by the name Integral Yoga. According to Sri Aurobindo, Supreme Reality is not a homogeneous Consciousness. It is consciousness. It is consciousness force and bliss. However, I would like to discuss in this article about the life and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.*

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### **The life of Sri Aurobindo**

**His childhood:** Sri Aurobindo was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1872 at 4.50 a. m. in Calcutta. His father Dr. Krishnadhan Ghosh was a doctor who never wanted his three sons to inherit anything of the Indian culture, including their mother tongue Bengali. His mother Swarnalata Devi was the daughter of Rishi Rajnarayan Bose. From 1872-1879 he lived with the parents at Khulna and Deoghar (Bengal) and from 1877-1879 he read as a boarder in the Loreto Convent School in Darjeeling. From Darjeeling he was taken to England and put in St. Paul's school, London (1885-89). He won the Senior Classical Scholarship for Cambridge and entered King's College, Cambridge (1890-92), where in his very first year he took away all the prizes for Greek and Latin verse, and soon became the secretary of the "Indian Majlis". He passed Classical Tripos in first class in only one year. But he did not obtain any degree.<sup>1</sup> He passed the Final I. C. S. Examination (1891) beating in Greek Mr. C.P. Beach craft who, ironically enough, later as Additional Sessions Judge was to try him (Sri Aurobindo) in the Alipore Bomb Case. Deliberately he failed in the horse riding test and hence not selected for I.C.S. He had mastered in many subjects that is English, Latin, Greek, French Literature and European History. He also learnt Italian, German and Spanish and he had written admirable poetry in Greek, Latin and English, more particularly in English. He landed at Apollo Bunder, Bombay, in the year 1893 and immediately he had a mystical experience on touching the Indian soil. He served in the Baroda State Service first in the Revenue Department, then as a French teacher in a College and afterwards, as Professor of English and Vice-Principal of Baroda College. Then he studied Sanskrit and

Bengali which he had not known till and read the sacred books of India, the Gita, the Upanishada and the Ramayana, besides novels, English, Russian, French and German<sup>2</sup>.

In the year 1901 he married Mrinalini who was the daughter of Bhupalchandra Bose of Ranchi. She died in 1918. They had no children. Sri Aurobindo did not remarry. He escaped an accident while driving in a carriage and had the apprehension of a divine figure seeming to emerge out of his body and saving him. In the year 1903 he visited Kasmir and he had another mystical experience. In 1904 he started 'pranayam' and yoga-sadhana at the instance of Deodhar, a Baroda engineer and disciple of Yogi Brahmananda. He wrote the famous letter revealing his inner working to Mrinalini, his wife in 1905. He left for Bengal whose partition had been affected by the Britishers in September, 1905.

From the year 1906, Sri Aurobindo contributed to the English Weeklies 'Yugantar' and 'Vandemataram'. He began his own Weeklies, 'Karmayogin'(English) and 'Dharma' (Bengali) in 1909. He attended different political conferences, the first on the 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1906 at Barisal, Bengal, and the first political conference ever held in India; then the Surat Congress Session in December, 1907. On the 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1907 Sri Aurobindo sought the help of Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, a Marathi yogi, with whom he spent three days. The yogi accepted Sri Aurobindo and offered to initiate him into silence. "Sit down, close your eyes. You will see thoughts entering your mind from outside. Refuse them entry," he said to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo did so and found Lele's words to be true. He could, after considerable effort, reject the thoughts. In three days, Sri Aurobindo succeeded in establishing silence in his mind. To Lele this was unbelievable, since success in such an experiment would normally be achieved only after a number of years. However since Sri Aurobindo was an avatar [a being who has come to enable a new stage in human evolution], such a great yogic realization came to him in a few days.

Sri Aurobindo did not believe in terrorism, even though he was a radical to the core. The British police arrested him and clapped him in Alipore jail, implicating him in a bomb throwing case from May 4, 1908 to May 4, 1909. While in Alipore Jail, Sri Aurobindo used to be visited by the renowned Swami Vivekananda in his meditation. The swami guided Sri Aurobindo's yoga [the discipline to attain union with the Divine] and helped him to scale great heights. It was there Sri Aurobindo saw the convicts, jailers, policemen, the prison bars, the trees, the judge, the lawyer etc., in the experience and realization of Narayana -- that all is Divine in essence. Sri Aurobindo was even able to see compassion, honesty and charity in the hearts of murderers.<sup>3</sup>

Sri Aurobindo described his self- realization in his famous historic speech at Uttarpara, Bengal, on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1909. He left Bengal on a direction from his inner voice on February in 1910. Sri Aurobindo had earlier had the experience of spiritual liberation (Moksha) but he did not accept that as his final course or goal. The Divine's intention for him lies elsewhere. It intended Sri Aurobindo to become a pure instrument that would hasten the descent of the Divine consciousness into earthly life to enable a divine life on earth. He edited and wrote for the 'Arya' (1914-1921), out of which grew his prose

magnum opus, 'The Life Divine'. On the 4<sup>th</sup> April in 1910, Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry and established in a house which was near the sea-beach and after that the place grew as an Ashram. From 1910 to 1914 he was engaged in silent yoga sadhana. Separating from his wife, friends and all, he made his life 'lone, limitless, nude, and immense' and he continued Sadhana.<sup>4</sup>

For the first time Sri Aurobindo made reference to bringing down the Supramental to transform mind, life and matter on the 15<sup>th</sup> August in 1924. The day of Sri Aurobindo's 'Siddhi' that was his highest divine realization was on the 24<sup>th</sup> November in 1926. From the year 1926, he lived in a separate flat of the Ashram and he had cut off himself from all acquaintances to the world and the Ashram except through the Mother. He came to the people every year for 'darshana' on four occasions. These are as follows:

1. 21<sup>st</sup> February, the birthday of the Mother;
2. 24<sup>th</sup> April, the coming of the Mother to the Ashram;
3. 15<sup>th</sup> August, the birthday of Sri Aurobindo; and
4. 24<sup>th</sup> November, the day of Siddhi.<sup>5</sup>

Formal foundation of the Ashram under the sole charge of the Mother was in 1926. Gradually, the Ashram grew into a big self-sufficient, international, residential centre for yogic sadhana and education. His prose magnum opus, "The Life Divine" was revised in 1939. He delivered his statement regarding India's independence was on the 15<sup>th</sup> August in 1947. He felt illness for kidney trouble on the 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1950. After attaining 'Mahasamadhi' [i.e. spiritual liberation from the material world] on the 5<sup>th</sup> December in 1950, his body was laid on his bed. It was kept there for over four days. Over 100,000 people then had Darshana [i.e. passed in front for the purpose of spiritual connection] with the Master. The Golden Light slowly entered his body for three full days, and then gradually withdrew. During that time, The Mother said she 'saw' him sitting on his bed -- though the body was lying flat, and now fully supramentalized and golden.

**Bringing Down the Truth Consciousness:** Sri Aurobindo had earlier had the experience of spiritual liberation (Moksha) but he did not accept that as his final course or goal. The Divine's intention for him lies elsewhere. It intended Sri Aurobindo to become a pure instrument that would hasten the descent of the Divine consciousness into earthly life to enable a divine life on earth.

It is in this way not the Divine intention for the embodied soul (i.e. the individual human) to seek release from the cycle of birth and death; instead one should seek total release from the falsehood and ego of the parts of the being; and, rising to the spiritual heights, bring down the spiritual Force and truth into life, so that death, suffering and disease can be abolished forever.

According to Sri Aurobindo, each level of the ascent of consciousness is followed by the descent of forces of that level into the being. In his case, he first raised himself to the level of higher (silent) mind, and waited for the force of that level to descend into him, saturating

his nerves and mind, and even reaching down to the very physical body. Earthly sphere is to enable a new type of existence on earth.

In other words, even if the power of Supermind descended through Sri Aurobindo's efforts, that light could not remain on earth without others' collaboration. Unfortunately, no one was able to help him further in his attempt to bring down the Truth Consciousness.

In 1956, Sri Aurobindo's work from the subtle plane bore fruit. During the meditation in the playground on February 29, 1956, The Mother saw Her subtle body enlarging to the size of the universe and becoming golden. Before her appeared a massive golden door, and beside her was an equally massive golden hammer. With one blow, The Mother smashed the door, breaking the curtain between earth and the golden supramental realms. Floods of living light of golden color poured down into earth. Earth had thus realized the Supramental Truth Consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

**Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo:** Sri Aurobindo has significantly been described as adventure of consciousness. Even in his quest of India's freedom, during the first decade of the last century, he departed courageously from the orthodox and conservative path of the Moderates and infused in the country a new electric force of Nationalism. He chalked out a new path of Swadeshi, boycott, passive resistance, and national education, — the path that ultimately came to be adopted as the national programme during the subsequent period of the struggle.

The central theme in Sri Aurobindo is that of the contemporary evolutionary crisis of humanity, of the perception that man is a transitional being and that he is a "thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious co-operation she (Nature) wills to work out the superman, the god."<sup>7</sup> The true and whole seeing that we find in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy was a result of his attainment of the integral supramental knowledge. Philosophy, according to Sri Aurobindo, "can be conclusive only if the perception of things on which it rests is both a true and whole seeing."<sup>8</sup>

The philosophy of The Life Divine is the philosophy of complete affirmation; it perceives the truth behind each system of philosophy but rejects its exclusiveness; it is thus a denial of all denials. In the One Existent, sat, it finds the sound basis for Conscious-Force (Chit) and also in their union the inalienable delight (Ananda). If it finds the rational assurance that God exists not only on the basis of essential truths that lie behind the rationalistic, ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments, but also on other grounds that explain even such difficult phenomena as those of the ignorance, error, falsehood and evil, it also provides rational assurance that "Life is neither an inexplicable dream nor an impossible evil that has yet become a dolorous fact, but a mighty pulsation of the divine All-Existence."<sup>9</sup>

All-comprehensive integrality is the basic characteristic of the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. It is the philosophy of integral Monism that reconciles the supra-cosmic, supra-terrestrial and cosmic views of existence. The integral Monism of Sri Aurobindo is not pure

Monism, although it sees in one unchanging, pure, eternal Self the foundation of all cosmic existence; nor is it qualified Monism although it places in the One his eternal supreme Prakriti manifested in the form of the Jiva and lays a great stress on dwelling in God rather than dissolution as the supreme state of spiritual consciousness. It avoids all rigid determinism as would injure its universal comprehensiveness.<sup>10</sup>

Sri Aurobindo, in a brief summary statement, describes the ultimate Reality as follows: There is then a supreme Reality eternal, absolute and infinite. Because it is absolute and infinite, it is in its essence indeterminable. It is self-evident to itself and, although inexpressible, yet self-evident to knowledge by identity of which the spiritual being in us must be capable; for that spiritual being is in its essence and its original and intimate reality not other than this Supreme Existence.<sup>11</sup>

It is conscious Reality throwing itself into mutable forms of its own imperishable and immutable substance. The world is therefore not a figment of conception in the universal Mind, but a conscious birth of that which is beyond Mind into forms of itself."<sup>12</sup>

The accordance of conscious mind and conscious will with a form and a life in themselves not overtly self-conscious and capable at best of a mechanical or sub-conscious will is another problem of opposites in which she has produced astonishing results and aims always at higher marvels; for there, her ultimate miracle would be an animal consciousness no longer seeking but possessed of Truth and Light, with the practical omnipotence which would result from the possession of a direct and perfected knowledge. Not only, then, is the upward impulse of man towards the accordance of yet higher opposites rational in itself, but it is the only logical completion of a rule and an effort that seem to be a fundamental method of Nature and the very sense of her universal strivings.<sup>13</sup>

The complete process of transformation is described by Sri Aurobindo as triple, — psychic transformation, spiritual transformation, and supramental transformation. In the words of Sri Aurobindo: ... there must first be the psychic change, the conversion of our whole present nature into a soul-instrumentation; on that or along with that there must be the spiritual change, the descent of a higher Light, Knowledge, Power, Force, Bliss, Purity into the whole being, even into the lowest recesses of life and body, even into the darkness of our subconsciousness; last, there must supervene the supramental transmutation, — there must take place as a crowning movement the ascent into the Supermind and the transforming descent of the Supramental Consciousness into our entire being and nature.<sup>14</sup>

As these influences grow and come more and more consciously to cooperate with each other, it might be hoped that the necessary psychological modification will quietly, gradually, but still irresistibly and at last with an increasing force of rapidity, take place which can prepare a real and fundamental change in the life of humanity.<sup>15</sup>

**Conclusion:** Sri Aurobindo concludes, the religion of humanity must be a spiritual religion of humanity, not an institutional religion, not an intellectual religion, not a sentimental religion. That humanity is pressing forward towards this spiritual religion of humanity is of

great significance for all of us who are keen to find the solution to the contemporary crisis. And it is here that Sri Aurobindo's perception of the significance of the contemporary crisis and his philosophy and yoga of supramental transformation come to us as the needed light and guidance.

At the same time, we may note what Sri Aurobindo has stated about the first step towards the supramental manifestation. In this context, we may cite the following remarks that Sri Aurobindo had made in his Letters on Yoga:

The whole of humanity cannot be changed at once. What has to be done is to bring the Higher Consciousness down into the earth-consciousness and establish it there as a constant realized force. Just as mind and life have been established and embodied in Matter, so to establish and embody the supramental Force.

It would not be possible to change all that in a moment - we have always said that the whole of humanity will not change the moment there is the Descent. But what can be done is to establish the higher principle in the earth-consciousness in such a way that it will remain and go on strengthening and spreading itself in the earth-life. That is how a new principle in the evolution must necessarily work. It is first through the individuals that it [the supramental consciousness] becomes part of the earth-consciousness and afterwards it spreads from the first centers and takes up more and more of the global consciousness till it becomes an established force there.<sup>16</sup>

### **Foot notes and Reference:**

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2. (Sri Aurobindo: The Story of His Life, 1<sup>st</sup> edition: August 15, 1972, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2006, 3<sup>rd</sup> impression 2012, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry 605002, p. 16-17.)
3. Rameshwar Gupta, "ETERNITY IN WORDS Sri Aurobindo's Savitri", 1969, Chetna Prakashan, Bombay, p. 37-38.
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6. JESSE ROARKE, "SRI AUROBINDO", November 24, 1973, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, p.15.
7. Sri Aurobindo: The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 4
8. Ibid. p. 493.
9. Sri Aurobindo: The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 231
10. See Essays on the Gita, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 6

11. Sri Aurobindo: The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 322
12. Sri Aurobindo: The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 117
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16. Sri Aurobindo: Letters on Yoga, SABCL, Vol.22/ pp.13, 14, 15.