

Module 4 : Sri Aurobindo (1872 – 1950)

Section 2 : Introduction to His Thought

Sri Aurobindo had the privilege of knowing the philosophical traditions of India and West as well. At a time in both the traditions philosophy was supposed to deal with very fundamental questions relating to the nature of ultimate reality, the ultimate destiny of man, *summum bonum* of life, the nature of Truth, Beauty etc. Unlike science philosophy was not concerned with empirical truth nor was it to explain the laws of nature to understand the phenomenal world. It rather raises questions of highest generality and reflects upon the a priori propositions of human knowledge. It deals with conceptual issues and issues relating to the nature of ultimate reality. Despite these similarities great writers make a distinction between the Western philosophical tradition and the Indian Philosophical Tradition. It is maintained that Western Philosophical pursuits are more theoretical than Indian and it is more rational or intellectual than spiritual. On the other hand Indian Philosophy is described as more practical than theoretical and more spiritual than intellectual. There can be a lot of debate on these issues and also the question about the real subject of philosophy. We shall not enter into this debate nor will subscribe to any of these views. In contemporary idiom philosophy is understood as a reflective enquiry with a view to analyzing fundamental issues for conceptual clarity. Philosophy is a second order activity and concerned with conceptual analysis. If we accept this notion of philosophy then Sri Aurobindo would appear as a speculative metaphysician. He deals with the nature of ultimate Reality, the ultimate destiny of human existence, a teleological view of evolution, soul, and immortality of Yoga etc. He does not confine philosophy to a theoretical reflection but builds up a speculative system on the basis of many metaphysical assumptions. Very often he transcends reason and the rational framework on the basis of speculative assumptions. He is more speculative than rational and more metaphysical than analytical.

His metaphysical position reveals that he is an idealist than a realist. He conceives Reality as spiritual and gives ontological primacy to consciousness. He holds that the world or reality exists essentially as consciousness and our knowledge of the world is reflection of our self-conscious spirit.

Though his metaphysical system is a kin to idealism he does not stop at the level of the mind. His speculation that in the evolutionary process mind is not at the apex, rather there are higher stages transcending the mental plane. His idea of evolution which constitutes a major theme of his philosophical discourse is not based on rationalistic conditions. He presents a teleological view of evolution. For him evolution is a hierarchical realization of manifestation of the spirit or consciousness in an upward direction. It is towards the realization of super mind through a number of intermediary stages.ⁱ

On epistemological issue concerning the nature and source of human knowledge perception, reason and intuition are discussed in philosophy. Though perception and reason are important categories, Sri Aurobindo limits them and points out their limitations. Rather he gives emphasis on intuition and considers it as a spiritual awakening. His assumption that there are higher planes of consciousness beyond the mental level necessitates to accept intuitive awareness somewhat similar to divine revolutions. Since he believes that man is destined to be transformed into supreme or a divinized being he goes beyond the boundaries of experience and reason which are the usual categories of human knowledge.

ⁱ Man who is at the level of mental plane at present will climb the higher steps in the ladder of consciousness and would reach a stage of supermanhood in future.

Sri Aurobindo has a vision of future what man, society, civilization would be in the world. His concept of Superman is not like great man or a genius that humanity witnessed. A genius or great man overtops others by virtues of his extraordinary qualities as Buddha, Aristotle, a Newton, a Mahatma Gandhi; Einstein etc. are no doubt great geniuses because of their outstanding ability or character who have brought paradigm shift in human situations. But Sri Aurobindo's concept of Superman is something different. A superman will be a Gnostic being transcending all barriers of human existence. It is the achievement of a Divine position with an integrated vision of truth, and bliss. This position of supermanhood will not be achieved by a few individual but that will be achievement of human race as such. He thinks of a brighter future for mankind, that is the teleological end of evolution is the achievement of supermanhood which is the final fruition of human progress and of the process of evolution. The community of Gnostic supreme will be based on perfect harmony, and unity.

Though Sri Aurobindo's vision of human destiny, society and of the world appears as a utopian dream it has some merit over our philosophical tradition of which he is an ardent forerunner. In Indian philosophical tradition except that of *Lokayat* system life in this world is viewed as full of suffering. This

suffering is the result of bondage arising out of ignorance. Liberation, *the summum bonum* of life, is the passage of the soul from the chain of bondage to a state of spiritual freedom and immortal existence. But Sri Aurobindo does not speak of any liberation of an individual but the emancipation of human race from the fetters of ignorance. The spirit of Indian philosophy may have spiritual but it is very often criticised as an individualistic and other worldly. Its over emphasis on liberation kills the spirit of dynamism and spoils the concern for the greater humanity. A deterministic account of life will not inspire to mitigate human suffering. Sri Aurobindo in his philosophical framework has presented a cosmic vision for humanity at large outgrowing the narrow aspiration of individual liberation. His yoga is not for the union of the individual soul with God. His Yoga is for a divinized race in a divinized world. His vision and aspiration is to prepare humanity for a spiritual evolution. There have great spiritual heroes or intellectual giants who have helped civilization to progress. But the redemption of all sinful deeds or of human suffering has not been worked out in the world. Sri Aurobindo imagines a new world free from all evil. For that he speculates a spiritual evolution in human society so that there can be redemption of all sinful suffering and evil from the world.

Sri Aurobind's whole philosophy reflects a humanistic approach and cosmic vision. He very often appears mystical, sounds very utopian and lives in an imaginary world giving away from the hard realities of existence. Despite these limitations he is system builder and prophet of new world. Though his philosophy has many dimensions, we shall dwell upon a few nations that appear very important to his system.