

## Module 4 : Sri Aurobindo (1872 – 1950)

### Section 1 : Life and Work

Aurobindo Ghosh became internationally known as Sri Aurobindo. He was a patriot, poet, philosopher, prophet and mystic. He was born on August 15, 1872 at Kolkata in West Bengal. His father Krishna Dham Ghosh was a medical practitioner and mother Swarnalata Devi a house wife. Krishna Dhan Ghose was an admirer of British system of education and lover of Western culture. Sri Aurobindo was sent to Loretto Convent at Darjeeling in 1877 and after two years was taken to Manchester for his studies. He stayed in an English family under the loving care of Mrs. Drewett who taught him different subjects. Sri Aurobindo studied at Saint Paul's School, London and King's College, Cambridge. He was a shining student and learnt different European languages including Greek and Latin. His father expected him to join ICS and Sri Aurobindo also qualified in the written test. But as he was very averse to join Civil Service, he skipped a practical test to disqualify himself. While in England, he came in contact with the ruler of Baroda. After completing his studies in England Sri Aurobindo returned to India in 1893. Sri Aurobindo joined Baroda State Service which was a princely state in British India. At Baroda he developed interest in Sanskrit and Bengali. These were the years of self-culture as he read Indian philosophy, religion and the ancient scriptures. In 1901 he got married to Miralini Devi who was 14 years younger to him. As Sri Aurobindo was not interested in administrative jobs he joined Baroda College as a faculty and was given the post of vice-principal. After spending nearly twelve years at Baroda he resigned and came to Kolkata.

After partition of Bengal in 1905, there was great political upsurge, Sri Aurobindo took active interest in politics. He published many articles in leading magazines of his time to arouse political awakening. At that time the National Congress was the only political forum to ventilate public opinion to the government. The leaders of the National Congress were moderately putting forth their demands for some dominion status. But Sri Aurobindo wanted Congress to be an effective revolutionary organization to make India free of foreign domination. His secret revolutionary activities and public writings created reaction both in congress as well as in the government. Even he established some youth clubs and wanted to impart martial and spiritual training to them. Within the Congress he was a hard-liner and an aggressive nationalist. At Kolkata he served as principal of the Bengal National College for some time.

In 1908 he was arrested by the government in connection with Alipur bomb case. After one year of confinement in jail finally he was acquitted as charges against him could not be established. But he continued his writings to arouse public awareness. In the meanwhile there was a sea-change in his attitude and conviction. He desired to live a life of spiritual pursuit deciding his retirement from active politics. He came to Pondicherry (April 1910) in disguise as it was a French Colony at that time. According to Sri Aurobindo's own admission an inner voice moved him to come to Pondicherry and engaged himself in spiritual *sadhana*. Some critics hold that Sri Aurobindo got a confidential news of his re-arrest and to avoid that he decided to come to Pondicherry as it was not under the British rule. Whatever the truth may be, it was a turning point in Sri Aurobindo's life as he remained apolitical for rest of his life.

At Pondicherry he lived a life of an ascetic and engaged in Yogic practice. There he published a monthly journal "*Arya*" where he serially wrote on different themes. He began to be known in the intellectual circle of the place and came in contact with a French defense official Paul Richard and his wife Mira Richard. After the First World War the Richard couple left Pondicherry and went to France. Then in 1920 Mira Richard came back to Pondicherry and lived in Sri Aurobindo's Ashram till her death. She is well known as "Mother" of Sri Aurobindo's Ashram. Mother was entrusted with the responsibilities of the *Ashram* and Sri Aurobindo retired to the background. After November 24, 1926 Sri Aurobindo lived a secluded life. He will appear only three/four times in a year to his disciples and followers. Even the Ashram had no access to his room and he lived in silence and concentration. It was said that Sri Aurobindo was engaged in sustained Yoga and concentration to prepare humanity for a spiritual evolution.

Sri Aurobindo's secluded life, spiritual pursuits and concentration made him a mystic. He is very often described as a *Mahayogi*. His spiritual quest and mystic realization had a long history even before he came to Pondicherry to settle there. His biographer-disciples refer to four spiritual experiences of Sri Aurobindo which he himself had admitted. When he returned to India in 1893 spending fourteen years in UK, on his arrival back in the country he had a spiritual thrill giving him the feeling that India must be a great country with a splendid spiritual heritage. His profound spiritual experience leading to calmness of mind continued with him for some months. He came in contact with a Maharashtra saint whom Sri Aurobindo admitted as his spiritual Guru. He is known as Visnu Bhaskar Lole. Sri Aurobindo on the instruction of his Guru meditated for three days and acquired the art of complete calmness of the mind. In this way of mental silence, he had the realization of the indescribable Brahman and the feeling of

unreality of everything including the world. This continued with him for some months. All his activities remained at the level of the surface but the calmness of the mind went deep to his consciousness. Again when he was in the Alipur Jail he saw Swami Vivekananda visiting him for two weeks. Later on in the jail he saw Lord Krishna everywhere and in everything. It is said that it was the realization of the Divine in its cosmic all pervasiveness. Wherever his eyes fell it was an exalted experience of the Divine consciousness. His biographers vividly describe this. It is said that he was successful in his silent concentration in which he was engaged for years at Pondicherry. He realized the descent of the supra-mental consciousness that will help for a spiritual evolution of mankind. Sri Aurobindo was the recipient of the divine consciousness as he would be the forerunner of the new race that will appear on earth.

All these mystic experiences of Sri Aurobindo make him a great *Mahayogi*. His followers and scholars firmly were believed that Sri Aurobindo turned to be a divine personality or the bearer of a divinized consciousness, but these subjective feelings having no rational basis. Because he was deeply engrossed in some mystical thoughts, his mind was conditioned and his experiences were nothing but a kind of psychological aberrations. A common man or even a genius can have mystical experience on the basis of one's mental conditions and the thoughts that engulfs his mind. There is no accepted way in which one's experience can be confirmed or verified. Rather the so called mystic experiences are psychological disposition on the ground of mental conditions.

Some of the great works of Sri Aurobindo were serially written in his monthly philosophical journal "*Arya*" The publication of which was discontinued later on. Some of the important works of Sri Aurobindo are – *Life Divine*, *Synthesis of Yoga*, *Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *Foundations of Indian Culture*, *On the Veda*, *Essays on Geeta* etc. Besides Sri Aurobindo was a great poet and his epic "*Savitri*" is a marvelous literary creation. Sri Aurobindo passed away on December 5, 1950. He had followers all over the country who believe in his legacy that mankind would undergo a spiritual revolution in future. His disciples including The Mother repeatedly have declared that Sri Aurobindo even after his mortal death is working from higher planes of consciousness to expatiate the future evolution of man. That is, he is preparing the future humanity for a new race, a race of supreme with his supranatural consciousness. To a rationalist it may sound absurd or at least very utopian, but this is the belief his followers cherish and his disciple – writers very vociferously have written. Learning aside what his followers believe or what has been written of his mysticism we can attempt to understand the philosophical implication of some of his important ideas.