

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

### Section 3 : Theory of Evolution

How does the world come into existence? How does man originate? Has man been created or have been evolved in the world? What is the *summum bonum*, the ultimate goal of life? Has human life a destiny? Such questions have been discussed by enlightened minds in almost all philosophical traditions.

In this respect theory of evolution has been discussed from different perspectives and various theories of evolution have been developed. Theories of evolution can broadly be classified into two different ways. Scientists discuss theory of evolution from a naturalistic point of view on the basis of wide observation of facts. In scientific framework evolution provides a rational to explain the origin of different species, the physical environment, changes in nature etc. Biologists explain the various variations and the causes of annihilation of species. Social scientists also explain the evolution of social institutions, evolution of languages, political ideals, state etc. Philosophers on the contrary discuss evolution on the basis of some assumption, postulates of metaphysical speculations. Great thinkers like Hegel, Bergson, and Alexander have given different theories of evolution. Sri Aurobindo has also presented a metaphysical view of evolution. Each of these thinkers presume something as absolute in their scheme of explanation. Hegel takes spirit or Reason, Bergson takes Elan Vital (Vital impulse), Alexander considers space-Time and Sri Aurobindo conceives consciousness to be absolute being in order to account for a meaningful explanation of evolution. In case of scientific view of evolution we do not come across incompatible doctrines where in case of metaphysical theories we find mutually incompatible views as they are based on assumption and subjective postulates of the philosopher.

Sri Aurobindo is a metaphysical thinker and in the contemporary philosophical idiom can be characterized as a revisionary metaphysician. His metaphysical system presents a theory of evolution which is very significant in his scheme of thought. His metaphysics and theory of evolution as well is based on his notion of reality. Sri Aurobindo's position can be characterized as spiritualistic or in a technical sense intergalactic. He rejects materialism as a metaphysical doctrine. Materialism has been expressed in different ways but its essential assumption is that matter is the ultimate ontological reality which Sri Aurobindo denies. He does not accept any illusionistic account of the world nor does accept the unreality of matter. He takes Reality as *Sacchidananda*, *Sat* (existence), *Chit* (Consciousness), and *Ananda* (Bliss). He takes Reality as supremely spiritual just as the concept of Brahman is conceived in Vedanta philosophy. Brahman is infinity in the sense that it is not categorized by space and time. To be spatiotemporal means to be finite, but since the ultimate reality is not conditioned by space and time, it is infinite. Further reality is the cosmic consciousness not in the sense of being an attribute of anything but consciousness as such. It is something transcendental. It is construed as being the Divine Force. So also the reality is conceived as something blissful. Similarly, to the idea of theistic God, that is, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, so too Sri Aurobindo conceives of the Ultimate Reality as infinite existence, infinite consciousness and infinite bliss. Keeping this metaphysical speculation of reality as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo, now we shall proceed to explain his theory of evolution.

Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution is spiritualistic for spirit or consciousness projects itself out of itself. Consciousness plays the most significant role in every step of evolution. Evolution is the manifestation of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo explains evolution with another presupposition which is called involution. He believes that there is evolution because prior to evolution there is some involution. Evolution and involution are reverse process. If evolution is considered to be a state of ascent, then it can be understood by the idea of being adescend. Ascent is evolution and descent is involution. In the evolutionary process the unconscious matter is at the bottom. Evolution starts from matter and its goal is to reach the state of Life Divine that is at the top. The process of cosmic evolution begins with matter. Matter evolves into life and life evolves into mind. Evolution is at present at the state of mental plane. In the process of creation there has been immanent movement of consciousness or the Absolute to successive lower ones and finally to the inscient matter. If the matter evolves and gives rise to life and life evolves again and gives rise to mind that is because consciousness has descended to mind, then to life and finally to matter. Since there is an inherent presence of involution of consciousness down the life from the Absolute to the inscient matter, there is evolution from matter in an upward direction. In the words of Sri Aurobindo evolution is the inverse action of involution. What is an ultimate and last derivation in involution is the first to appear in evolution. If Absolute consciousness is the primal existence which comes descending to the level of matter, then it is matter that starts evolving and its ultimate goal is to reach the state of absolute consciousness.

This grand speculation of evolution involution has been further substantiated with many descriptions in minor details. He takes evolution to be a triple process of widening, heightening and integration. Before the emergence of a higher conscious principle the lower one must become receptive, adaptive and sublime to change to the higher. For example, before emergence of life from matter,

matter must undergo a qualitative change of self-differentiation. It must be receptive to take a leap to the higher condition. Similarly evolution is not only a process of widening it is also a process of heightening. Evolution of a higher principle of complexity takes place when the conscious force becomes explicit and fully manifests. Apart from these two processes of widening and heightening, integration is another feature of evolution. In evolution when a higher principle manifests from the lower the higher principle also changes the lower one. In every ascent all the the lower get transformed and turned to the new ones. With the emergence of life, matter does not cease to evolve, rather it is transformed to cope with the new situation. So too when mind emerges matter and life also become transformed, matter becoming more sensitive and life more creative in human being. With the emergence of higher principle or consciousness, all the lower principle get transformed and turned to the system. This is the integral ascent in Sri Aurobindo's vision of evolution. Sri Aurobindo maintains that cosmic evolution at present is at the mental plane. But beyond the mental plane there are higher grades of consciousness which have not yet been evolved. In the past there might be some stray cases where some men attained a height of higher consciousness. The saints, Yogis, seers, by spiritual contemplation might have ascended to a state of higher conscious plane but that vanish with the death of the individual. The spiritual consciousness has not become an integral part or permanent with man. But Sri Aurobindo intends to take evolution ahead of the present condition and make it permanent.

Sri Aurobindo speculates that beyond the mental level there are higher goods of consciousness leading to the apex height of supramental consciousness. He further imagines that there are transcendental states between the mental consciousness and supramental consciousness. So the ascent of man from mental consciousness to supramental consciousness will not happen all on a sudden, but by different grades of existence. In his model the mental consciousness will be transformed to a psychic state. With the outcome of the psychic transformation self-discipline begins from within so that a craving is created for the realization of all that is true and noble. In this state mind becomes repulsive to what is false, obscure and undivine. After the psychic transformation, there will be a higher state that would change the psychic personality to a spiritual personality. In this state the individual will be more elevated towards spiritual consciousness. But his state is not the final state in the evolutionary ladder. This will be followed by a supramental transformation, the apex state in the process of evolution. With the emergence of the supramental being the physical, vital and mental existence will not be annihilated but they will undergo an important change so as to cope with higher level of existence. Sri Aurobindo speculates that in case of any higher emergence, the lower is not rejected, but there happens an integral ascent and they are harmoniously turned together. The realization of supramental consciousness similarly will establish a perfect harmony in all the states of a being. The physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual states will harmoniously be turned together and would exhibit wider and fuller harmony than was open to them when they were living upon their own. There will be perfect adoption of all the beings and states in this spiritual evolution.

The whole scheme of conceiving evolution as the reverse process of involution presents a hierarchical ascent and descent. The descent starts from the Divine coming to the supramental, to spiritual, to psychical to mental, to vital and lastly to physical. This is Sri Aurobindo's notion of creation coming from the Divine to the physical. So evolution starts from the physical and ascending the ladder would reach the Divine through the intermediary stages. The process of creation is a Divine act or *Illa* and evolution is the spirit's return unto itself.

Sri Aurobindo's model of explaining a theory of evolution is metaphysical as it has nothing to do with empirical facts. But within a metaphysical framework it is neither mechanical nor cyclical. In mechanical evolution, evolution proceeds without any purpose or design. In a mechanical evolution the future is neither predictable nor designed. In cyclical theory of evolution, evolution and dissolution are cyclic processes one following the other. The *Sankhya* theory of evolution, though a metaphysical doctrine, is cyclic in nature. Sri Aurobind's theory of evolution is teleological as he believes a divine life from man. Achievement of divine life is the creative fulfillment of man's life on earth. Again the highest achievement of this condition is not the individual fulfillment as conceived in liberation but is divinization of the collective humanity. Sri Aurobindo believes that the divinization of life would be a new birth for humanity as it can wipe out all evil from the world. Achievement of supramentalhood would establish identity among the individual selves. They will realize that they are the integral part of the universal spirit. This can be explained by an analogy. Just as one ocean embraces countless waves, so too the one universal spirit will embrace the plurality of finite individual selves. The sense of self-differentiation of the finite selves change into self-awareness of the many as eternally linked with the one spirit.

Thus Sri Aurobindo's contention is that man is not the highest reality nor is the mental consciousness the highest achievement of evolution. Beyond the mental state, there are higher planes of consciousness which can evolve and elevate manhood to supermanhood. Mind is the medium for the manifestation of the Divine. At this stage of evolution man is an imperfect image of the highest Being but man by achieving supermanhood can be the perfect image of the Divine. Further it must be pointed out that Sri Aurobindo's concept of superman is not to possess some extraordinary quality as some

individuals in human history have achieved. There are some persons who had some extraordinary ability or some rare virtues which are not found in ordinary mortals. Such person may be called superman but it has nothing to do with Sir Aurobindo's notion of superman. His notion of superman is divinized being over passing the level of mental consciousness. His whole assumption is that man is the last product of the evolutionary design of nature. Man will evolve to the state of superman and will go achieving higher levels of consciousness.

Again Sri Aurobindo assumes that the future evolution will be affected as a result of man's aspiration. Evolution from inconscient matter to his state has been the result of automatic operation of the nature. Sri Aurobindo holds that man's aspiration combined with the Divine grace can usher in the process of evolution. In the pre-human stage nature acted automatically for evolution of life and mind. But at this stage man's conscious endeavour would help transform his consciousness to the higher levels. Sri Aurobindo believes that mankind towards a new race. In the processes higher power of consciousness will be manifested progressively till evolution reaches its ultimate goal.

Thus Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution as explained above is spiritual, teleological, integral and cosmic. But the entire approach is not grounded on any empirical finding. It is a metaphysical thesis based on many gross assumptions. Not only it is based on unfounded assumptions but also it contains many mystic elements. It also sounds very utopian and unrealistic. It is out and out speculative and non-naturalistic.