

# AUROBINDO GHOSH

(1872-1950)

Key themes:

- Self
- Community & Religion



# Introduction

- Aurobindo, regarded as one of the prominent philosophers of twentieth century India, combined both political and spiritual dimensions of human life in his political thought. He is known as a revolutionary, spiritual leader, poet, philosopher and socio-political thinker.
- But his personality and contribution is not examined in its totality which often lead to reducing him to a religious figure. The tendency of the secularists to distance themselves from him as well as the selective appropriation of Aurobindo by the right wingers are equally accountable for somewhat under-explorations of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts and ideals in their totality.
- Therefore, the need is to revisit Aurobindo and engage with his thought in all its possible dimensions.

- When Aurobindo was tried under famous *Alipore Bomb Conspiracy Case* along with others, Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das appealed to the magistrate in these words expressing the significance of life and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. “My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil and agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands. Thereafter I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this court, but before the bar of the High Court of History”.
- His life and thought exemplify a living dialogue between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ philosophy. Professor Robert McDermott states that the “complementarity of politics and spirituality typifies Sri Aurobindo’s ability to draw diverse streams into a rich and dynamic synthesis: as he combined politics and Yoga, he also combined Western and Indian values”.

## Early Life

- His father, Krishnadhan Ghosh, an anglicised doctor, wanted his sons to have an European upbringing. So, along with his brothers Aurobindo was sent to an Irish nun's school in Darjeeling and later to England.
- Under his advice, Aurobindo was totally kept in distance from any Indian influence.

- He graduated from the King's College, Cambridge with academic excellency.
- Aurobindo also appeared in the Indian Civil Services Examination but could not qualify due to his failure in the riding test.
- After coming to India he worked in Baroda State Service for 14 years. During his stay in Baroda, began the period of his political life with the publishing of a series of essays titled 'New Lamps for Old'.

➤ He wrote- *“Theorist and Trifler though I may be called, I again assert as our first and holiest duty the elevation and enlightenment of the proletariat... the proletariat is, as I have striven to show, the real key to the situation. Torpid he is and immobile, he is nothing of an actual force, but he is a very great potential force, and whoever succeeds in understanding and eliciting his strength becomes by the very fact master of the future.”*

### **Active Political Life (1905 -1910)**

- He had a very short yet quite powerful period of political activism.
- He was one of the influential members of the extremist section of Indian National Congress.

- He actively participated in the national movement of India for around five years (1905-1910). In companionship with Bipin Chandra Pal and Bal Gangadhar Tilak he vehemently protested against the partition of Bengal and also criticised the moderates and their methods within the Congress.
- In this period, he continuously wrote in *Bande Mataram*, the journal edited by Bipin Chandra Pal and he too started *Karmayogin* which remained a powerful political commentary of that time.
- Treating the native land as motherland and believing and worshipping it as divine remains central to his political philosophy.

- Convicted of the Alipore bomb case, he was jailed for one year after which he put an end to his active political career and through the later part of his life limited his activities to the spiritual domain.

## **Spiritual Life (1910 - 1950)**

- After retiring from active politics, he founded one Ashram in Pondicherry which formally came into being in 1926 where he continued to stay till the end of his life engaging himself in writing and meditation.
- He considers the mystic experience of those days in Alipore jail as the factor leading to his transformation.
- This was a transition from the nationalist and anti-colonial Aurobindo Ghosh to the international and cosmopolitan Sri Aurobindo.



## Major Ideas

- He is known for his synthesis of eastern and western values. While taking the Western form in philosophy, he kept it Indian in its substance.
- He believed in the “objectification of spirit” that is the expression of the universal in individual life. In his opinion, it is the spirit alone that saves and only by becoming great and free in heart can we become politically great and free’.
- He was deeply influenced by European thinkers like Karl Lamprecht and August Comte. He borrowed the idea of distinct psychological stages that society passes through from Lamprecht (symbolic, conventional, individualist and subjective).

- He regarded the path of passive resistance as appropriate in India's struggle for independence.
- He was a passionate supporter of nationalism. For him, nationalism was not merely a political programme but resembled a religion, gifted by God.
- He had a decolonised vision of international relations. It was inclusive of 'the other' and recognised the possibility of alternative visions of a world state.

- He was critical of democracy in both its bourgeois and socialist form. What he proposed was a loose confederation of the people. Aurobindo considered a spiritual religion of humanity as the hope of the future. He thought that spiritual unity will lead to psychological unity. His primary concern was the spiritual transformation of the people.
- Apart from being a radical activist in his early life and a spiritual leader in the rest of it; Aurobindo was a prolific writer. Some of his remarkable works are- *The Ideal of Human Unity*; *The Life Divine*; *Savitri*; *The Synthesis of Yoga*; *Essays on the Gita*; *The Integral Yoga: The Mind of Light*
- He had also published a journal titled *Arya* from 1914 to 1921.

## Aurobindo's Idea on Self

- “The ego is not the self; there is one self of all and the soul is a portion of that universal Divinity. The fulfillment of the individual is not the utmost development of his egoistic intellect, vital force, physical well-being and the utmost satisfaction of his mental, emotional, physical cravings, but the flowering of the divine in him to its utmost capacity of wisdom, power, love and universality and through this flowering his utmost realisation of all the possible beauty and delight of existence.” (Aurobindo, “True and False Subjectivism”, *The Human Cycle*)

# The Individual and the Eternal Self

- Unlike the Christian theology, duality in the natural and supernatural is not perceived in Indian philosophy. It views the natural and supernatural as the manifestation of the same energy.
- Aurobindo, too, making the connection between the individual and the universal, argues that the eternal is the self of all other selves. It is the origin of all energy and support in nature.
- For him, the Eternal or the Supreme Self is the supreme *Purusha*; individual selves are manifestations of it.

# The True Self

- In the individual self; Aurobindo talks about the true individual self and deputy selves. These deputy selves are-i) the physical self, ii) the vital self, iii) the mental self, iv) the supramental self and v) the blissful selves.
- For him, the true self is not the body, the vital ego or the rational mind. The spiritual individual resembles the true self.
- He has evolutionary understanding of human collective self: - From *symbolic*, to *conventional*, to *individualist*; and to finally *subjective*.

- *Symbolic* stage is the one in which all the institution and things becomes for men a symbolic expression of the divine.
- *Conventional* stage is more rigid and formalized and a bears a mark of finality.
- Reason and individual freedom is the hallmark of the *Individualist* Age.
- *Subjective* Age is characterized by the emphasis on the spiritual freedom of individuals. This can be attained with a belief that “the Supreme Being “is one and all, expressed in the individual and in the collectivity and only by admitting and realizing our unity with others can we fulfill our true self-being.”

- Aurobindo was very critical of Western Liberal conception of man as an rational and autonomous being. He was equally critical of Utilitarian view of greatest happiness of the greatest number. In his view such approach not only limits the rationalism but also obstruct the spiritual and political evolution of individual.
- For him man is not just a material or a soul but an spiritual evolutionary being. And also a necessary force of spirit for its evolutionary manifestations in the physical world. Here he interrelates the individual with the collective self or society.
- Summarizing his views on this relationship, Deutsch writes – ‘Spiritual and political liberation is to be found in a very specific kind of relationship between the individual and society. It is Aurobindo’s insightful discussion on this relationship that makes his great contribution to world political thought and becomes the basis for his solution to the perennial question of how political freedom can be realized within the context of spiritual perfection.



## Resources

1. *Foundations of Indian Political Thought* by V.R. Mehta, Manohar Publications, 1996
2. 'Sri Aurobindo and the Search for Political and Spiritual Perfection' by Kenneth L Deutsch in Pantham and Deutsch eds., *Political Thought in Modern India*, Sage Publications, 2016
3. *Situating Sri Aurobindo*, edited by Peter Heehs, Oxford University Press, 2013
4. *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* by Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1997
5. *Prophet of Indian Nationalism* by Karan Singh, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1963
6. 'Aurobindo: The Revolutionary' by Karan Singh, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol.17, No. 3/4