



Humanisation of Social Life: Sri Aurobindo's “Integral” Sociology

Kamaladevi Kunkolienker

*Associat Professor of Philosophy,
P.E.S' R.S.N. College of Arts and Science, Ponda, Goa*

Abstract: This paper presents an overview of Sri Aurobindo's 'integral sociology'. An attempt is made to understand how the concept of social evolution along with evolution in an individual from within is required to understand humanity in the world at large. A brief sketch of stages in the evolution in individual and society is given. This is followed by a critical appraisal. Some observations are made regarding Sri Aurobindo's unique and rich contribution to humanity and humanism by way of concluding remarks.

Keywords: Integral Sociology, Humanity's Evolution, Collective Life, Aurobindo.

Introduction

“Long after this turmoil, this agitation ceases, 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.” -Deshbandhu Citta Ranjan Das

Sri Aurobindo puts humans as the middle term between God and nature. Humans are integral to, but may not be supreme, in the Divine scheme of things, yet they are involved in realising the human unity through association and union, and strife and opposition. The concept of social evolution for him, is the development of the integral relation between the three terms—the individual, the community and the mankind. This is in contrast with Karl Marx’s socialist theory where non-economic factors are relatively unimportant. Sri Aurobindo departed from the vedantic idea, which treated or conceived, “the empirical world and finite individuals are illusory.”¹ The Indian philosopher J.N.Mohanty points out, “Sri Aurobindo most definitely rejects Shankara’s Advaita” and “regards the world as real and incorporates an evolutionary theory of reality into his conception of reality (Brahman manifests himself in progressively evolving forms of reality) and finds a place for history of mankind within the Advaita, and proposes a new kind of yoga adapted not to the goal of an individual’s own liberation, but to the (collective) goal of elevating mankind to a higher of consciousness (‘supermind’)”². Sri Aurobindo advanced an integrated understanding of the material and spiritual transformation in human beings. He asserted that, if human unity is to contribute to individual and collective growth of nations and the people of the world, then it must have spirituality as its foundation. This unique understanding may be contrasted with that of Kant who maintained that “even without any inner, moral improvement, man will improve his outward legal conduct. In the end, a moral attitude will come to prevail.”³

A Brief Sketch of Sri Aurobindo’s Life

To begin with his childhood, he spent fourteen years of his formative life in England and had a very ‘anglicised upbringing’. His ‘working life’ may be divided into three phases: the first phase began as a student in the University of Cambridge in

1889 and ended in 1905. In this phase of his life, he was mainly engaged in study, teaching, experimenting and thinking. His extraordinary contribution to political movement in the history of India comes in his second phase. It was short and stormy and he embraced political extremism, where he criticised the moderate Congress leadership for indulging in “little too much talk about the blessings of the British rule”⁴. He was implicated in Alipore bomb case in 1908, and he came out of the jail as a changed man. In the third phase of his life, he left Calcutta in 1910 and came to Pondicherry, a French settlement, devoting his remaining life to experiment with his integral yoga and writing about his rich spiritual experiences. The journey of his idea of humanism and human unity takes place through his evolutionary philosophy which is showcased in his major works like *The Life Divine*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Human Unity*, *Savitri*.

Integral Sociology, Social Evolution and Human Unity

Philosophers, in general, have been more concerned with the problem of relating to man’s individual life than with those to his social or collective existence. Although both the sides of his human existence are inseparable, yet there are distinct issues when we try to understand one aspect in relation to the other. In Aurobindo’s philosophy, we find a unique knowledge of not only of basic issues of an individual’s existence but of his social existence as well. He perceived these two aspects as fundamentally real and strived to integrate man, spirituality and society.

Consistent with his integral monism, he develops ‘integral sociology’. He speaks of the necessity of avoiding two extremes. According to him, we should not ignore the empirical findings in the name of spiritualism and soar to the heights of empty speculation or ‘transcendental abstractions’ and in the name of empiricism, one should not resort to ‘fact-fetishism’. Since a proper understanding of social life requires a shift from the emphasis of external data to internal data. The idea of complete

knowledge is itself vague and still, further an idea of complete knowledge of collective life is still vague. Sociological hypotheses, in general, are advanced to explain specific social problems and so these causal explanations are inadequate. He is looking for the 'teleological or purposive explanation' in his integral sociology. He asserts that, we should know the purpose of man in the world, if we wish to fully understand his thoughts and actions, which are being continuously influenced by it_ either consciously or unconsciously. Generally, the human purpose may be understood in two different ways__ in a secular way and in a larger context of the divine purpose. The human context is said to be an open context, which is open to the larger context of the divine itself. Some sociologists, because of the methodological convenience study the complex nature of human phenomenon within a closed context, as if it can be understood satisfactorily without reference to the distant past and the far-away future and what lies deep into it. But this is bound to fail in its purpose, as it pays attention only to unconnected 'fragments and pieces'.

Sri Aurobindo favours the psychological approach in his integral sociology. But it does not mean the ordinary empirical psychology. This integral psychology is based on introspection, insight and intuition and not on an experiment and observation. It is not just empirically observing and looking at things, but by looking through them that he wants to get to the truth or rationale of the problems to be explained. He is not in favour of an 'objective scientific' approach because the deeper truths escape or elude the inspection of the eyes and lie beyond the reach of the senses. He advocates the 'subjective' method but cautions us against being misled by a false sort of subjectivity which is fed by and based upon sense-data. For him, true subjectivity is spiritual, where at that level mind can work and carry on its search for truth. In 'The Human Cycle' Aurobindo states that,

...the law for the individual is to perfect his individuality by free development from within but to respect and to aid and be aided by the same free development in others. His law is to harmonise his life with the life of the social

aggregate and to pour himself out as a force for growth and perfection on humanity. The law for the community or nation is equally to perfect its corporate existence by a free development from within, aiding and taking full advantage of that of the individual... The law for humanity is to persuade its upward evolution towards the finding and expression of the Divine in the type of mankind,... to work towards the day when the mankind may be really and not only ideally one divine family.⁵

His concept of the human being is different from what we know of the person in a limited sense. The principle of evolution and more so of spiritual evolution is the foundational principle of Aurobindo's philosophy and it is the governing principle of his social philosophy too. The theory of evolution of human society is a theory of both individual and collective evolution. He refers to Karl Lemprecht and his luminous idea that every nation or civilisation passes through some kind of definite rhythms of psychological cycle – the symbolic, typical and conventional, individualist and subjective. He admits that it is difficult to rigidly classify the pathways of social evolution and also states that its empirical analysis cannot exhaust all the possible curves, turns and twists which are exhibited in the process. However, he found this theory useful to explain his own theory. The human society assumes the collective forms over the ages, and the individual soul also evolves towards becoming one with the ultimate reality. we may observe that, these two processes of evolution are closely interlinked, as some forms of collective social life may facilitate the growth of the spiritual self while other forms may constrain it. Aurobindo deals with the collective evolution in his works. The Human Cycle and The Ideal of Human Unity and with the individual evolution in his masterwork, The Life Divine.

As far as collective life is concerned, Aurobindo described societies over the ages either through a classification of central psychic features or through the political form they assumed. Aurobindo right in the beginning of his work, The Human Cycle criticises historical and sociological studies in the following

manner: “Modern science is obsessed with the greatness of its physical discoveries...It is not surprising therefore in history and sociology attention should have been concentrated on the external data, laws, ...customs economic factors and developments, while the deeper psychological elements so important in the activities a mental, emotional, ideative being like man have been very much neglected.”⁶. Aurobindo criticised Marxist ideology as disturbing tendency which tried to, explain everything in history and social development as much as possible by economic necessity.

To state his alternative spiritual approach, he uses the above mentioned stages of evolution in human society. The symbolic stage – “wherever we can seize human society in what to us seems its primitive beginnings – no matter whether the race is comparatively cultured or savage or economically advanced or backward, – we do find a strongly symbolic mentality that governs or at least pervades its thought, customs and institutions.”⁷. In this stage, the human being felt, “...present behind himself and his life and his activities, the Divine...”⁸. Next, “the tendency of the conventional age of society is to fix, to arrange firmly, to formalise, to erect a system of rigid grades and hierarchies, to stereotype religion, to bind education and training to a traditional and unchangeable form, to subject thought to infallible authorities, to cast a stamp of finality on what seems to it the finished life of man.”⁹. The next age ‘individualistic age of human society comes as a result of the corruption and failure of the conventional, as a result of the revolt against the reign of the petrified typical figure.’¹⁰. He mentions that, “when man begins to be predominantly intellectual , sceptical, ratiocinative he is already preparing for an individualist society.”¹¹. In this stage, there is “an attempt to get back from the conventionalism of belief and practice to some solid bed-rock, no matter what, of real and tangible truth.”¹². This stage in the evolution of society “is necessarily individualistic, because all the old general standards have become bankrupt and can no longer give any inner help; it is therefore the individual who has to become the discoverer, ... to search out by his individual reason, intuition, idealism, desire,

claim upon life or whatever other light he finds in himself the true law of the world and of his own being.”¹³ Europe was the principal site of this development, where individualism has “exercised its full sway”. During this stage individualism faced two problems: how can we arrive at the universal standard of truth? And second, how to get at a satisfactory principle of social order? Aurobindo states that, Europe found the answers to both these questions of individualism in science. On the one hand, it satisfied the critical reason of the individual without living room for the clashes of personal opinions and yet without working as an authority to be blindly submitted to. On the other hand, it started from ‘a crude primitive perception of natural right and justice’ individualism resulted in ‘a rigid economic or governmental socialism’. Thus, science and socialism seem to have provided answers to these two problems. Yet Aurobindo points out at two contributions of this stage: “first, the democratic conception of the right of all individuals to the full development of their capacities; and secondly the realisation, however inadequate, that the individual is not merely a unit of society but is a being with his own destiny, his own truth and law of existence.”¹⁴

It represented both ‘the revolt of reason’ and the ‘triumphal progress of physical science’. Individualism attempted at two aspects of humans – the vital and the rational. During this stage there is the rejection of the society and politics of the old order. This stage is succeeded by the age of ‘subjectivism’, where an attempt is made to go deeper to catch a glimpse of true nature of individual and to found the principle of social order on that knowledge. In this stage, first, there arises a belief that “ it is a spiritual, an inner freedom that can alone create a perfect human order”¹⁵ and second a belief that the Supreme Being “ is one in all, expressed in the individual and in the collectivity and only by admitting and realising our unity with others can we entirely fulfil our true self-being.”¹⁶ These statements unfold a dialectic by which we should understand that, it is the spiritual evolution of the individual that must underlie all human unity if it is to be a unity that facilitates the equal and free development of all. This

development may come about slowly in the beginning, but there is no other possible solution.

But Sri Aurobindo cautions us that, "...there is a false and true subjectivism and the errors to which the subjective trend may be liable are as great as its possibilities and may well lead to capital disaster. This distinction must be clearly grasped if the road of this stage of social evolution is to be made safe for the human race."¹⁷

Sri Aurobindo maintains that the true self is the spiritual individual. Next, for him, the individual, as well as the group, has a body, are living organisms, have minds, have ethical ideals and aesthetic emotions__ not only have all this but is more than all this. He draws a kind of parallelism regarding the stages in human evolution in both, the individual as well as in society. The inner being of humans generally exhibits roughly three strata: the infra-rational, the rational and the supra-rational. The evolution begins with an infra-rational stage where men "act principally out of their instincts, impulses, spontaneous ideas, vital intuitions or else obey a customary response to desire, need and circumstance"¹⁸ and these are the things channelised in their social institutions. Man proceeds further, through various stages of this beginning strata towards a rational age, where his intelligent will which is more or less developed, becomes the judge, arbiter and presiding motive of his thought, feeling and action, the moulder, destroyer and re-creator of his leading ideas, aims and institutions. This rational stage also exhibits the traditional tripartite division into the intellectual, the ethical and the emotional. The third stage, supra-rational, also has a complex structure with its own inner stratifications. Evolution in this stage will move towards a supra-rational age in which man will develop a greater spiritual, supra-intellectual and intuitive, perhaps in the end a gnostic consciousness. To illustrate further a quote from Sri Aurobindo's work titled *Social and Political Thought*: "These stages or periods are much more inevitable in the psychological evolution of mankind...for they depend not on outward means and or accidents but on the very nature of his

being.”¹⁹. These stages are neither naturally exclusive or absolute in their nature. We should understand that a clear conception of the inner relationships involved shall give us a practical direction. Rationalistic thinking sought in the reason the guiding principle of human life, both__ individual and collective. However, reason has proved that it is incapable of controlling, guiding and regulating the infra-rational. Since it is not the original power, but standing and mediating in between two realms, the infra-rational and the supra-rational, it fails to be the guiding principle of life. What is required is the sublimation of the infra-rational, which is possible only with the help of the supra-rational. In this endeavour, reason may play a significant role, but it is not the sole master of the situation.

Sri Aurobindo holds that the “community stands as a midterm and intermediary value between the individual and humanity and it exists not merely for itself, but for the one and the other and to help them to fulfil each other. The individual has to live in humanity as well as humanity in the individual...”²⁰. Therefore, the individual cannot only be himself but in solidarity with all of his kind. There has to be a harmonious relationship between the individual, the community and the humanity and ideal order of social development has to recognise a kind of mutual interdependence which does not annul the autonomy of each constituent element. Because each of these has a distinctive mode of self-consciousness, its own law and line of development, each of these has to consider the interest of the other. That is the group self cannot regard the individual as a mere cell of its body. It is true that each society has to follow a line of development according to one’s ‘soul’ and it is also true that humanity is marching ahead with one distant goal. So, it becomes imperative that consistent with this common goal of humanity, consistent with the line of development of the society, the individual has to abide by his own ‘dharma’. Aurobindo states that, “... mankind is or has been too large an aggregate to make this mutually a thing intimate and powerfully felt in the ordinary minds of the race.”²¹. However, this does not justify the community usurping the place

of humanity, controlling the life of the individual. Because "... the free developments of individuals from within is the best condition for the growth and perfection of the community, so the free development of the community or nation from within is the best condition for the growth and perfection of the mankind"²². True subjectivism also ought to recognise another trinity: the individual, the universal and the transcendent reality.

We observe that the present age has not yet completely overcome the ideal of rationalism, which begins with the age of individualism. In the social polity, this kind of thinking led to an overemphasis on individual liberty, which did not work because it conflicted with the other realities of life. The ordinary man, as well as the leader, is not a perfectly rational being, as he is not able to form a perfectly rational judgement. Since the infra-rational in man—his interests, prejudices, impulses play a determining role in his judgements. Even today, we use reason, not as a principle of harmony between individuals but is used as a weapon for competing with others. This individual democracy gave place to the ideal of democratic socialism, which stressed the need for the ideal of equality, not only political but also economic and social. In such a set up competition was to be replaced by organised order and harmony, and the individual had to sacrifice his interest for the sake of the community. It combined both—the socialist ideal with the concept of limited freedom but these ideas refused to be combined and ended in 'totalitarian collectivism'. Sri Aurobindo maintains that if this collectivism, in the long run, wishes to make room for free individual development on the basis of unity and a closely harmonised common existence, then in it a radical transformation is required. It cannot be achieved on the basis of reason and a mechanically scientific ordering of life, but the collective must spiritualise itself.

It must be remembered that, man's need for freedom is no less fundamental than his need for unity. The ideal of human unity cannot be realised alone by social and political adjustments. What was required was "inner change".

Variety of religious creeds have influenced the fabric of various nations, and they may be combined with various political ideologies also. Each ideology has a dream of establishing its own international community under the aegis of its own world-view. But they are all imperfect images of the absolute truth. In the end, none can lay a claim to absolute validity. However, at best, they can enjoy a relative measure of validity depending upon the socio-political and cultural conditions prevailing in a given country. Every nation, therefore, must have the freedom to choose its own socio-political system in full consideration of its own basic needs and of its own distinctive national genius. Sri Aurobindo also was of the opinion that the United Nations can hardly succeed in establishing effective human unity and the world peace as long as the political leaders shaping its policies and nations which control its deliberations, are dominated by the concept of primacy of national interest over the collective welfare of mankind.²³

Sri Aurobindo criticised the idea of a 'nation-state' which was the political form, that human unity assumed in modern times, since according to him the modern state, both bourgeois and socialist, greatly circumscribed the real democracy.

Critical Appraisal

Aurobindo is criticised for his leaving politics and his refusal to actively participate in politics after 1910. According to some critics, religion became for him, a "royal road for an honourable retreat," whereas others look at forty years during which he undertook his spiritual journey as "sterile from the point of view of history." According to B.S.Chimni, although Sri Aurobindo recognised the importance of material developments, he did not perceive that as a major obstacle in transforming the human psyche. Further, Prof. Chimni also feels that there is a lack of detailed attention to mapping appropriate social structures and institutions by Aurobindo, as his emphasis was only on 'living within and from within'. He did not do full justice to his radical

social interpretation and therefore neglected the entire domain of political economy, which Karl Marx so assiduously addressed. Next, Sri Aurobindo is also criticised for not fully appreciating the role of individual and collective struggle for social change for bringing about inner transformation. Regarding this, prof. Chimni remarks that “His subsequent turning away from active politics and his lifelong focus on self-realisation led him to somewhat ignore the role of struggle in bringing about inner change.”²⁴

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of evolution is essentially concerned with the future. His fundamental aim has always been the perfection not only of the individual but also of the society and ultimately of the whole of humanity. In today’s society, humanity is suffering from serious limitations, and these are fundamentally due to limitations of consciousness, which are the causes of our basic troubles. Further, it should be noted that the basic factors behind all the external socio-political events affecting us are always inner because they are the acts of our consciousness. It is a fact we mankind in our contemporary society and culture has devoted much of its energy in improving the external aspects of life, and we have achieved incredible success in this endeavour. But we have failed in improving and upgrading our moral life and the spiritual aspect of our inner being. This proves that our consciousness has not yet received the proper expansion. As a result, the egoistic tendencies of division and disharmony, in our individual as well as social life, are gradually becoming prominent troubles, leading to strife and conflict, rivalry and violence. Aurobindo points out that we possess the power to overcome all these limitations through the expansion of our consciousness. Hence, “according to Sri Aurobindo, the crisis of mankind is neither economic nor social nor political but evolutionary in character. The complexity and the speed of the contemporary life demand of man the development of consciousness, which is so integral and comprehensive that it surpasses the piecemeal and analytical and slow consciousness of the human reason”²⁵. The whole transformation should take place in the individual himself first__ that is, he has to rise from the infra-rational level to the

rational and then to the supra-rational level. To rise a little higher level of consciousness than what we are today in our practical life, we can practice a kind of “practical spirituality”²⁶. This concept is introduced by Prof. A. K. Giri as a fifth ‘*purushartha*’. According to him, practical spirituality is a multidimensional struggle for food and bliss through which we can make creative links between practical issues of human development and spiritual issues of our goals for which we live. It may help us to realise a new kind of bonding between our self and society. A. K. Giri is hopeful that this practical spirituality can transform the discourse of human development, happiness and well-being. According to him, there is an integral link between food and bliss as suggested in the Taitreya Upanishad, and practical spirituality strives to realise ‘Ananda’ in ensuring human security and social quality for us.

But this is not a very easy task as it involves new value formations both at the individual self and society. It pleads for values of ‘voluntary poverty, voluntary sharing and voluntary insecurity.’ He mentions that, today the structural interventions are not enough unless the middle and the upper class undertake voluntary poverty. In the same way the transformation of the contemporary situations and conditions will not happen unless we undertake voluntary insecurity. This will lead to a kind of voluntarily sharing of whatever is happening in society ²⁷. This concept also goes beyond gendered fixations as it is to be practised as being creative mothers. He urges for a kind of feminisation of spirituality, where spiritual realisation lies in our capacity to be mothers to ourselves, each other and society. However, this is very much consistent with Sri Aurobindo’s concept of spiritualisation or transformation of inner being, which would automatically bring about changes in our inner structure, which will facilitate the progress towards uplifting of humanity.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo contributed immensely towards developing an integral sociological perspective, which he developed on his basic original concept of integral yoga. For him, social evolution is the development and realisation of the integral relation between the three terms__ the individual, the community and mankind. At the individual level, it is a struggle between various inner strata of levels of morality, which leads to self-development on the one hand and on the other should facilitate the social evolution also. By doing so, he attempts to resolve the dichotomies of this plural world, which otherwise are seen to be conflicting. Unlike Marx's social philosophy, it is not lopsided. It takes care of the destiny of individual, society and humanity at large and is futuristic and teleological in nature. He is the lover of humanity. He also assures about a stage of supramental consciousness in human beings, where humans will become gnostic beings. According to him, it is our prime duty to evolve or carve out the god or divinity, which is hidden in us, and by doing so, we will contribute towards the progress of our society.

Notes

1. Hees Peter (ed) (2013): *Situating Sri Aurobindo: A Reader*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 149.
2. Mohanty J.N.(2001): *Explorations in Philosophy Vol. 1, Indian Philosophy*, ed. By Bina Gupta, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p 67.
3. Jaspers Karl (1963): *Philosophy and the World: Selected Essays*, Chicago Gateway Edition, p 106.
4. Sarkar Sumit: *Modern India 1885–1947*, Springer, 1989, p 98.
5. Sri Aurobindo (1997): *The Human Cycle*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, pp 63-64.
6. Ibid., p 1.
7. Dalal A. S. (ed 2004): *A Greater Psychology: An Introduction to the Psychological Thought of Sri Aurobindo*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, p 251.
8. Ibid., p 251.
9. Sri Aurobindo (1997): *The Human Cycle*, Pondicherry: Sri

Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, p 8.

10. Ibid., p 11.
11. Dalal A. S. (ed 2004): *A Greater Psychology*, p 251.
12. Sri Aurobindo (1997): *The Human Cycle*, Pub by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, p 11.
13. Ibid., p 11.
14. Mohanty J.N.: “Sri Aurobindo on Ideal Social Order” in Peter Hees ed. *Situating Sri Aurobindo- A Reader*, p 155.
15. Sri Aurobindo (1997): *The Human Cycle*, p 206.
16. Ibid., pp. 40-41.
17. Mohanty J.N.: “Sri Aurobindo on Ideal Social Order,” p 158.
18. Dalal A. S. (ed 2004): *A Greater Psychology*, p 262.
19. Ibid., p 263.
20. Sri Aurobindo (1997): *The Human Cycle*, p 62.
21. Ibid., p 62.
22. Ibid., p 63.
23. Chaudhari Haridas: “The Philosophy and Yoga of Sri Aurobindo” in Peter Hees ed. *Situating Sri Aurobindo- A Reader*, p 178.
24. Chimni B.S.: “Retrieving other Visions of the Future – Sri Aurobindo and the Ideal of Human Unity”, Peter Hees ed. *Situating Sri Aurobindo: A Reader*, p 146.
25. Indrani Sanyal and Krishna Roy (ed 2007): *Understanding Thoughts of Sri Aurobindo*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld and Kolkata: Jadhavpur University, p 222.
26. Giri A. K. (2011): *Rethinking the Human and the Social: Towards a Multiverse of Transformations*, Pub Berghan Books, See also *The International Journal of Social Quality*, Vol I, No. 1, p 116.
27. Ibid., p 116. “We can put ourselves imaginatively in the bleeding bodies, souls and hearts of many of our fellow beings and realise what it means to be subjects and objects of many insecurities in the world today. Such voluntary insecurity would create an ontological and social basis for transforming contemporary conditions of insecurity. Voluntary insecurity also helps us realise that some amount of chosen insecurity, which is not imposed upon us by structural conditions, can be a source of creative breakthroughs and new realisations in the lives of self and society.”

References

Sri Aurobindo (1970) *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
Gandhi Kishor (2008) *Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The New Age*,