
UNIT 1 PERSONALITY, VISION AND WORK OF AUROBINDO

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To lead the students to the world and vision of Aurobindo.
- To familiarize them with the history of Sri Aurobindo.
- To give them a sense of the literary and political background of Sri Aurobindo.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The year was 1907. The freedom movement in India was gathering momentum. Its leader was detained by the police. The poet Rabindranath Tagore paid him a visit and wrote the now famous lines: "Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee! O friend, my country's friend, O Voice incarnate, free, Of India's soul....The fiery messenger that with the lamp of God Hath come...Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee." The year was 1928. The leader had now left politics and had gone to Pondicherry where he had plunged himself into the practice of yoga. The poet Tagore once again paid him a visit and declared: "You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, 'Hearken to me!' Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him: "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath." Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of a reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence: "Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath!"

How does one describe or speak about such a personality? Sri Aurobindo has been called a scholar, a literary critic, a philosopher, a revolutionary, a poet, a Yogi and a 'Rishi'. He was all these and much more. To have even a glimpse of the true Sri Aurobindo we have to turn to the Mother: "What Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history is not a teaching, not even a revelation; it is a decisive action direct from the Supreme."

Because of it Sri Aurobindo declared, in no uncertain terms that nobody could write his biography: “Neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for men to see.” But he was not altogether averse to this effort and even made corrections when some biographers made the attempt. So in this unit, we are making a humble attempt to describe the person, vision and works of Sri Aurobindo. For this section we base ourselves primarily on the Aurobindo Ashram’s official writings (SAL 2011).

1.2 BEGINNING OF AUROBINDO’S LIFE IN CALCUTTA

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta. The day was August 15, 1872, the time - 5.00 a.m., the hour of dawn. The date is doubly important. Seventy-five years later, exactly on that date - August 15 - India attained her freedom. In a message given on that day Sri Aurobindo, who had played a leading role in the freedom struggle, said: “I take this coincidence, not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force that guides my steps on the work with which I began life, the beginning of its full fruition.”

The date has an even greater and deeper significance. Sri Aurobindo has explained it thus: “The 15th August is the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; it implies that the physical nature is raised to the divine Nature...” And this was in a way the goal of Sri Aurobindo’s life. To divinise the earth, “to make matter the Spirit’s willing bride.”

The name given to Sri Aurobindo at birth was quaintly Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose! His father Dr. K. D. Ghose had returned from England with a completely Western outlook. He was enamoured of everything Western and, because a British lady Miss Annette Ackroyd happened to be present, her name was also added to Aurobindo’s name. Later Sri Aurobindo was to say in a humorous tone about his father: “Everyone makes the forefathers of a great man very religious- minded, pious etc. It is not true in my case at any rate. My father was a tremendous atheist.”

But Dr.Ghose was also ‘generous to a fault’. Nobody went empty- handed from his door. And the mother of Sri Aurobindo, Swarnalata Devi, was so beautiful and gracious that she was known as the “Rose of Rangpur”. Sri Aurobindo was the third among five children. The two elder brothers were BenoyBhushan and Monomohan and the younger sister was Sarojini followed by the youngest brother, Barindranath (SAL 2011).

1.3 THE ENGLISH INFLUENCE (1869-1893)

When Sri Aurobindo was five years old, he was sent to Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling. Two years later, in 1879, Dr.Ghose sent his sons, including Aurobindo who was then only seven, to England, with strict instructions that the young Aurobindo should have a completely Western education and should not even come into the slightest contact with anything Indian. A new chapter in his life had begun (Prema 1972).

Sri Aurobindo lived at Manchester with the Rev. and Mrs. Drewett. While his brothers studied at school, he was taught at home by the Rev. Drewett. He

developed, very early, a love for poetry, which was to last him throughout his life. Even at that young age of eleven he contributed a few poems to the local Magazine.

Mastering Western Culture

In 1884 Sri Aurobindo shifted to London and was admitted to St. Paul's. The headmaster was so pleased with his mastery of Latin that he took it upon himself to teach him Greek. It is here that Sri Aurobindo plunged into the literature of the Western world and studied several languages - French, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Latin, and absorbed the best that Western culture had to offer him.

But these were also difficult times. The generosity of his father Dr. Ghose, had brought succour to many an unknown person in need in Khulna, where he was posted. But it had also made the stipend he sent to his own sons very irregular. Sri Aurobindo was then in his early teens. He describes how he spent several years in the bitter cold of London: "During a whole year a slice or two of bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny saveloy (a kind of sausage) formed the food."

For nearly two years he had to go practically without dinner at that young age. He had no overcoat to protect him from the rigours of the London winter and there was no heating arrangement in the office where he slept, nor had he a proper bedroom. But Sri Aurobindo was immersed in his books and was feasting on the thoughts of the great. He got the Butterworth Prize for literature, the Bedford Prize for history and a scholarship to Cambridge (SAL 2011).

Cambridge

In 1890, at the age of eighteen, Sri Aurobindo got admission into Cambridge with a senior classical scholarship. He studied the classics brilliantly and passed high in the First class. The famous Oscar Browning had examined Sri Aurobindo's classical papers at the scholarship examination. He remarked to Sri Aurobindo: "I suppose you know you passed an extraordinarily high examination. I have examined papers at thirteen examinations and I have never during that time seen such excellent papers as yours. As for your essay, it was wonderful." It was thus that Sri Aurobindo grew away from his family, away from his motherland, away from his roots and his culture. He knew seven foreign languages but could not speak his own tongue, Bengali. He would not have been able to speak fluently with his own mother.

The ICS

To comply with the wish of his father, Sri Aurobindo also applied for the Indian Civil Services (ICS) Exams while at Cambridge. Here too he did brilliantly. But Sri Aurobindo was not meant to be an ICS officer, serving Her Majesty's Government as one more cog in a giant bureaucratic machine. Dr. K.D. Ghose had by now become aware of the atrocities being committed by the British on Indians and began to send paper clippings of these to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo also felt that a period of great upheaval for his motherland was coming in which he was destined to play a leading role. He began to learn Bengali and joined a secret society, with the romantic name of 'Lotus and Dagger', where the members took an oath to work for India's freedom.

Sri Aurobindo now looked for a way to disqualify himself from the ICS and did not appear for the horse-riding test. In normal circumstances this would have been a very minor lapse but the British Government, too, was aware of his political views and activities, and found this a good opportunity to reject him. Wrote Lord Kimberly, the Secretary of State for India, on his file: “I should much doubt whether Mr. Ghose would be a desirable addition to the Service.” Although he had done brilliantly in the ICS - a most sought-after vocation - Sri Aurobindo now, because of his own choice, found himself in London without a job. But destiny intervened. The Gaekwad of Baroda happened to be in London and offered him a place in his service. For long after, the Gaekwad boasted to his friends that he had got an ICS man for Rs.200/- per month (SAL 2011).

1.4 BACK IN BARODA (1893-1907)

Thus Sri Aurobindo sailed back to his country in 1893, at the age of twenty-one, having spent the most important and formative fourteen years of his life, in a foreign land. He had grown up in England but did not feel any attachment to it. Now India beckoned him. He wrote in his poem called “Envoi”.

“Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.”

And how did Mother India receive her son after fourteen years of exile? With her unique and priceless gift - a spiritual experience. The moment Sri Aurobindo put his foot down on Indian soil, at Apollo Bunder in (Mumbai) Bombay, a vast peace and calm descended upon him, never to leave him. Unknowingly and unasked the spiritual life had also begun, which was later to become his sole preoccupation.

But for the moment what occupied him was service in the Baroda State. He started by working in the survey and settlement dept., then in the department of revenue and finally in the Secretariat. He also drafted the speeches of the Gaekwad, who once remarked to Sri Aurobindo that nobody would believe that the Gaekwad could have written such speeches. But his interests lay elsewhere. The Gaekwad, in a report, praised his ability and intelligence but also commented on his lack of punctuality and regularity. After some time Sri Aurobindo was, therefore, transferred to the Baroda College, first as a teacher of French, and then as Vice-Principal, where he was very popular with the students for his unconventional way of teaching (Heehs 1989).

In 1894 Sri Aurobindo was 22 years old. He wrote humorously in a letter to his sister Sarojini in Bengal: “I am quite well. I have brought a fund of health with me from Bengal, which, I hope it will take me some time to exhaust; but I have just passed my twenty-second milestone, August 15 last, since my birthday and am beginning to get dreadfully old.” And this is how Sarojini describes him: “a very delicate face, long hair cut in English fashion; Sejda (older brother) was a very shy person.” (SAL 2011)

The Study of Indian Culture

In Baroda Sri Aurobindo plunged himself into a study of Indian culture, as if to make up for all the years he had lost. He learnt Hindustani, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Sanskrit. He was a voracious reader, and two bookshops in Bombay kept him regularly supplied with books sent in crates. Sitting by a kerosene lamp he would read late into the night, unmindful of the swarming mosquitoes and often quite unaware of the waiting food. His cousin Basanti Devi wrote about him in a letter: “Auro Dada used to arrive with two or three trunks and we always thought it would contain costly suits and other luxury items like scents etc. When he opened them I used to look at them and wonder. What is this? A few ordinary clothes and all the rest books and nothing but books! Does Auro Dada like to read all these? We all want to chat and enjoy ourselves in vacations. Does he want to spend even this time in reading these books?” Sri Aurobindo read the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bankim as well as Homer, Dante, Horace and many others. He also wrote a lot of poetry and his first collection of poems was published from Baroda (Heehs 1989).

A New Future

But another future was preparing itself for Sri Aurobindo at the same time. It began in a most unobtrusive way soon after he came to Baroda. K.G. Deshpande, a friend from his Cambridge days, was in charge of a weekly, “*Induprakash*”, published from Bombay. He requested Sri Aurobindo to write upon the current political situation. Sri Aurobindo began writing a series of fiery articles under the title “New Lamps for Old”, strongly criticising the Congress for its moderate policy. Wrote Sri Aurobindo: “Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism.”

And he added, “I say, of the Congress, then, this, - that its aims are mistaken, that the spirit in which it proceeds towards their accomplishment is not a spirit of sincerity and whole-heartedness, and that the methods it has chosen are not the right methods, and the leaders in whom it trusts, not the right sort of men to be leaders; - in brief, that we are at present the blind led, if not by the blind, at any rate by the one-eyed.” (SAL 2011) It would be interesting to remember that, when Sri Aurobindo wrote these scathing words with such insight he was merely 21 years old. The editors were frightened and requested Sri Aurobindo to write on cultural rather than political themes. Sri Aurobindo lost interest and the series stopped.

Mrinalini Devi

In 1901 Sri Aurobindo married Mrinalini Devi. Mrinalini had to go through all the joys and sorrows which are the lot of one who marries a genius and someone so much out of the ordinary as Sri Aurobindo.

Revolutionary Activity

The period of stay in Baroda, from 1894 to 1906, was significant in several ways for Sri Aurobindo. It was here that he started working for India’s freedom, behind the scenes. He perceived the need for broadening the base of the movement and for creating a mass awakening. He went to Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, contacted the secret groups working in this direction, and became a link between many of

them. He established close contact with Lokmanya Tilak and Sister Nivedita. He arranged for the military training of Jatin Banerjee in the Baroda army and then sent him to organise the revolutionary work in Bengal.

Cripp’s Mission

At the same time he remained in touch with the world events and movements, shaping and moulding them with a purely inner spiritual force and action. When the Second World War broke out, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother came out openly on the side of the Allies because Hitler represented the forces of darkness. He who had fought the British earlier now put his full support and spiritual help behind them for their victory. Though Sri Aurobindo had retired from the political scene, when the Cripps Mission came, he broke his silence and sent an emissary to ask the Indian leaders to accept the proposals. But the country was not yet ready. Sri Aurobindo knew his efforts would not succeed and yet made the attempt as “disinterested work”. As he said in his usual impersonal manner: “Well, I have done a bit of Kartavya Karma.”

The passage of time revealed the great truth of what Sri Aurobindo had proposed. The late K.M. Munshi, then a senior cabinet minister in the Indian Government remarked about Sri Aurobindo: “He saw into the heart of things.... His perception of the political situation in India was always unerring. When the World War came in 1939...it was he of the unerring eye who said that the triumph of England and France was the triumph of the divine forces over the demoniac forces.... He spoke again when Sir Stafford Cripps came with his first proposal: He said, ‘India should accept it.’ We rejected the advice... but today we realise that if the first proposal had been accepted, there would have been no partition, no refugees, and no Kashmir problem.”

1.5 SRI AUROBINDO’S VISION

August 15th 1947 saw the dawn of India’s freedom. In a very significant message given on that day Sri Aurobindo spoke of his five dreams, which is his vision: “Indeed, on this day I can watch almost all the world movements which I hoped to see fulfilled in my life time, though then they looked like impracticable dreams, arriving at fruition or on their way to achievement” (SAL 2011).

- The first of these dreams was a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India. India today is free but she has not achieved unity.... But by whatever means, in whatever way, the division must go; unity must and will be achieved, for it is necessary for the greatness of India’s future.
- Another dream was for the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilisation. Asia has arisen; large parts are now quite free or are at this moment being liberated: its other parts are still moving through whatever struggles towards freedom....
- The third dream was a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind.... A new spirit of oneness will take hold of the human race.
- Another dream, the spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India’s spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever-increasing measure....

- The final dream was a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin to solve the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society.

In fact, one of the things that made Sri Aurobindo's vision most appealing was his belief that in all activities, situations, circumstances in life one could bring in a spiritual force to uplift those acts, and evoke the infinite, the miraculous in them. Whether you were a businessman, a writer, a sportsman, a politician, it didn't matter. Everyone and everything was included in this evolutionary movement upward (Posner 2011).

In his view, one does not experience the Divine by retreating from the world to some hermitage or otherwise separate ourselves from the daily activities of life. Spirituality is to be brought into and expressed through life; through every act, circumstance, and situation, evoking the Infinite, the infinite potential in it.

For him every thing is part of this upward world movement and evolution; everything is part of an inner unfolding of consciousness, which from the perspective of the Supreme is a Divine unfolding.

The main problem of course was that humans did not comprehend this evolutionary movement in life. So Sri Aurobindo came along to reveal to us what was not known, to give us a vision of what was possible. That is the great purpose of the Avatar; to bring the world a vision of a new possibility so that it can evolve to a higher plane. In his case, to bring a vision of the possibility of our ultimate possibility, culminating in a Divine life on earth (Posner 2011). He suggested that if we were to come to understand the Spirit that is embedded, hidden, involved within us, and that exists as a Force to tap into about us, we would actively participate in our own personal evolution; in the evolution of our society; even the evolution of the universe itself! That is, we could actively participate in the destiny of the human race.

He repeatedly indicated that we could infuse the spiritual dimension into all planes of our lives — physical, vital, and mental, in order to uplift all activities and circumstances, whether in our work, our families, our business, or the social institutions we partake in. So everything in life was to be included in this upward, evolutionary movement! Nothing and no one was to be left out, denied. Even the murderer, the dictator, and the promiscuous lover played a role in the universal unfolding. That is because everyone and every thing can go one step further than its current conditions to grow, develop, and evolve. The consciousness and spirit can be evoked in each thing so that its infinite potential involved, hidden in that thing could come out.

In this way, we move beyond the boundaries of what we perceive as possible. We overcome the boundaries and difficulties of life. Now we understood that the final frontier is not outside ourselves, but is within. That changed the whole dynamic of life; the equation of existence. That opened the doors to infinite possibilities; to a new frontier, a new world, a new future possibility (Posner 2011).

The rest of his life-journey will be taken up in the next Unit.

1.6 MAIN WORKS OF AUROBINDO

To read Sri Aurobindo is to experience the consciousness that lies at the heart of the Truth of existence. Nobel Laureate Roman Rolland said: “Sri Aurobindo (is) the foremost of thinkers, who has realized the most complete synthesis between the genius of the West and the East...” Here are a few enlightening books that can help bridge the gap between life and the spirit.

Sri Aurobindo, who had started writing at an early age, even during his study at Manchester (1879–84), had continued with his creativity through all the turbulent phases of his life, even during his imprisonment. His first book, a collection of poems, entitled *Songs to Myrtilla*, was published in 1895. Between that and the last work to be published during his lifetime, *Savitri* (1950), he had written extensively on Yoga, culture, sociology, in addition to his poetry and plays—contributions of far-reaching and multi-faceted importance to human thought and action. He has given a new cosmology and a new metaphysics in his *Life Divine* “considered as the philosophical masterpiece of the century” (Raina 2000). It has revolutionized our very concept of psychology and education, giving them a new basis in *The Life Divine* and in his letters. He formulated a profoundly new approach to sociology in *The Human Cycle* and showed through a searching analysis of past and current systems of social and political thought how a truly spiritual attitude is essential as a foundation of a new and lasting social order. He extended the application of this very approach to the sphere of international politics in *The Ideal of Human Unity* (Raina 2000).

In his writings on education, he formulated a theory that could, with some variations, be adapted to all the nations of the world, fostering the growth of the integral consciousness in every pupil and bringing back to legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter. He showed in *The Synthesis of Yoga* how all the systems of Yoga combine and converge on the path to Supermind. Further, in *The Secret of the Vedas*, *The Essays on the Gita* and *Writings on Upanishads*, he opened up new and epoch-making ways of studying the ancient Indian texts, throwing new light on philosophy and reducing both anthropology and anthropomorphism to their proper place in a balanced scheme of knowledge. He offered an illuminating interpretation of Indian culture down the centuries in *The foundations of Indian culture*.

Sri Aurobindo’s elaborated epic, *Savitri* reveals the consummation of the many poetic styles that he attempted in all his works. Written in nearly 24,000 lines in blank verse, Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* has been estimated to be the largest poem in the English language. In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo worked out a literary theory considered as an original contribution to aesthetics in its concept of poetry (Raina 2000). All this and his translations, letters and minor works were compiled and published in a systematic manner after his passing away on 5th December 1950. We present a selection of his writings with our comments.

The Life Divine: “The most vital issue of the age is whether the future progress of humanity is to be governed by the modern economic and materialistic mind of the West or by a nobler pragmatism guided, uplifted and enlightened by spiritual culture and knowledge.” This book resolves this question by reconciling the truths behind the metaphysical and the modern with a synthesis of the idea of divine life on Earth.

Savitri: A Legend & A Symbol: A major work, this is a long poem of over 23000 lines based on the ancient Hindu legend of Savitri and Satyavan. Didactic yet inspiring, it depicts myriad aspects of his views and explanation of the ancient Vedic-Yogic path. A unique specimen of spiritual literature, it is, in his own words, “A nectar of honey in the combs of gold” encompassing all human experience in 700 pages.

Arya: Arya was a 64-page monthly review written by Sri Aurobindo. It ran for six and a half years and constituted the appearance in serialised form almost all of his major works except his epic poem *Savitri*. These included *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on The Gita*, *The Secret of The Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, *The Upanishads*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, *War and Self-determination*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and *The Future Poetry*.

The first issue of the Arya appeared on Sri Aurobindo’s 42nd birthday (15 August 1914), the last came out in January 1921.

Gems from Sri Aurobindo: This is a gleaning of Aurobindo’s statements on subjects of interest from his vast body of works. Aphoristic in style, his sentences illumine the truths within. He packs each sentence with the depth and intensity of the inner meaning, and provides inspiration, themes for meditation and ideas for reflection on a wide array of topics.

The Essential Aurobindo: Writings of Sri Aurobindo: Amassed from over two dozen volumes of Aurobindo’s works, this book is essential to an understanding of one of the greatest minds of the 20th century, who combines “the alacrity of the West with the illuminations of the East.” Edited with an introduction and an afterword by Dr. Robert McDermott, professor of philosophy and religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.

Collected Works: The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library) were published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1972, on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo’s centenary. The compilation has 30 volumes, or close to 16,000 pages.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What are the principal works of Aurobindo?

2) Explain the intellectual influences that Aurobindo had.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Sri Aurobindo was an extraordinary genius, mystic and activist. We have seen the first part of his biography, and his vision and writings in this unit. It is very clear that his English influence has been complemented by his devotion to both Indian politics and philosophy.

1.8 KEY WORDS

- Saraswati** : The *sakti* or wife of God Brahma; the goddess of learning, music, and poetry.
- Sister Nivedita** : (1867–1911), born as Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was an Anglo-Irish social worker, author, teacher and disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She was a spiritual leader and a true friend of India.

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