

Introducing

Sri Aurobindo



Sri Aurobindo, 1920

“...neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for men to see.”

(Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo [CWSA], Vol. 36, p. 11)

Sri Aurobindo wrote the above as part of his reply to someone who had expressed an interest in writing the Master's biography.

Indeed, how does one speak of the outer life of Sri Aurobindo? How does one write a small note about someone who has been spoken of as a modern Rishi, a Maha-Yogi, a sage-philosopher, a seer-poet, a political revolutionary, a visionary intellectual, an explorer and adventurer in consciousness, even an *avatār*?

In a talk given in Italy in 2015, Shri R.Y. Deshpande, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, a litterateur, widely published author, a poet and a man of Science, said:

“Philosophers have described him as the finest synthesis between the East and the West; critics have acclaimed him as a poet par excellence; social scientists regard him as the builder of a new society based on enduring values of the life of the spirit; devotees throng in mute veneration offering their heart and their soul in a silent prayer that can secure for them the happy gifts of the Deity; Yogins long to live in the sunlight of his splendour to kindle in it their own suns; in the tranquil benignity of his spiritual presence is the fulfilment of all the hopes and all the keenest and noblest aspirations; gods of light and truth and joy and beauty and sweetness are busy in their tasks to carry out his will in the creation; in him the *avatāric* incarnation becomes man to realise the divine in man. Such is the stupendous birth of the Immortal in the Mortal. He comes here now as Sri Aurobindo.”

Having gathered into his Yoga the essential elements of spiritual experience that are gained by the old Yogic paths, Sri Aurobindo pursued his search for a more complete experience uniting and harmonising the two ends of existence, Spirit and Matter. This new path of spiritual practice, which he called the Integral Yoga, has for its aim a spiritual realisation that not only liberates man's consciousness but also transforms

his nature. The discipline of Integral Yoga has for its goal not merely the fulfilment or self-realisation or *moksha* of a few isolated individuals but the uplifting of the whole collective life of humanity. It emphasises personal transformation as a way to act towards a deeper transformation of the evolving outer world with a goal to enable a progressive and fundamental change in individual and collective consciousness.

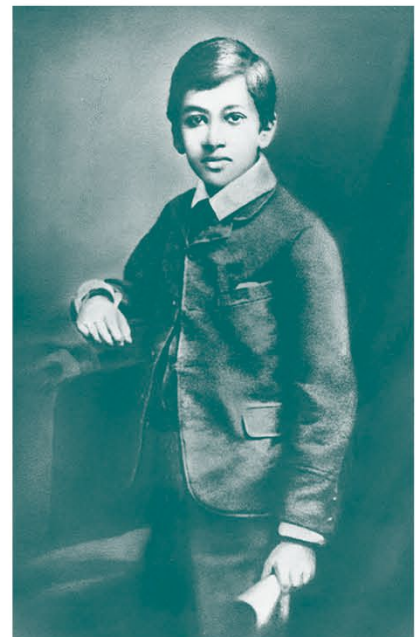
Dr. M.K. Raina, former Professor and Head, DEPFEE, NCERT summarises Sri Aurobindo's life and work as follows:

"Originally a poet and a politician, not a philosopher, Sri Aurobindo engaged himself for forty-five years out of his seventy-eight years in the practice of Yoga, and developed a philosophy of complete affirmation, affirming the reality of the world from the ultimate standpoint and the meaningfulness of socio-political action from the spiritual standpoint."

So how do we begin to know Sri Aurobindo? The following brief sketch may open the door to a deeper seeking for some readers.

August 15, 1872, Calcutta - the date and birthplace of Sri Aurobindo, the harbinger of New Age. At the young age of seven, Aurobindo Ghosh was sent by his father to England where he studied at St. Paul's School, London, and at King's College, Cambridge. He excelled in many languages including Latin, Greek, French, Italian, German, and mastered the Classics and much of the Modern European Literature. As per his father's strict instructions, he received an entirely occidental education with no contact with the culture of India. He cleared the open competition for the Indian Civil Service in 1890, but was disqualified from the Service because he failed to present himself at the horse-riding examination.

He returned to India in 1893 and for the next thirteen years worked in the Princely State of Baroda, first in the Revenue Department and in secretarial work for the Maharaja, afterwards as the Professor of English and, finally, as the Vice-Principal of the Baroda College. During



Sri Aurobindo, 1883

this period, Sri Aurobindo engaged in intense self-culture and literary activity. He learned Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages, assimilated the spirit of Indian civilisation and its forms past and present.

During the later years of his Baroda period, Sri Aurobindo was also deeply engaged in silent political activity. But after the partition of Bengal in 1905, he quit his Baroda Service and openly joined the Nationalist movement to free India from the British colonialist rule. In 1906, he went to Calcutta as Principal of the newly founded Bengal National College.



Sri Aurobindo, 1903

Sri Aurobindo was the first political leader to openly put forward the idea of complete independence, *Purna Swaraj*, for India. He was also the first revolutionary to advocate an economic, national, educational, judicial and administrative boycott as a tactic to fight the imperialists. He laid down clear and specific guidelines for setting up *Swadeshi*, a national education system, a system of national arbitration courts, and a national organisation for self-government. His vision was a rare combination of remarkable idealism and practical programme of action. Prosecuted twice for sedition and once for conspiracy, he was released each time for lack of evidence.

Politics was not the end-goal of Sri Aurobindo's revolutionary work. His political writings in *Bande Mataram* anticipate the philosophy his disciples and devotees have come to associate with the sage of Pondicherry. He wrote:

"...the next state in the human progress is not a material but spiritual, moral and psychological advance that has to be made..." (CWSA, Vol. 6, p. 572)

India's freedom was seen by Sri Aurobindo in this larger context of the destiny of the human race. He wrote:

"India must have Swaraj in order to live for the world, not as a slave for the material and political benefit of a single purse-proud and selfish nation, but a free people for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of the human race."

(ibid., p. 573)

Sri Aurobindo had begun the practice of Yoga in 1904 in Baroda. In 1908, he had the first of several fundamental spiritual realisations. In 1910, he withdrew from active politics and went to Pondicherry on an inner 'ādes̄h' in order to devote himself entirely to inner spiritual life and work. In one of Sri Aurobindo's autobiographical notes written in third person, we find this:

"Sri Aurobindo had left Bengal with some intention of returning to the political field under more favourable circumstances; but very soon the magnitude of the spiritual work he had taken up appeared to him and he saw that it would need the exclusive concentration of all his energies. Eventually he cut off connection with politics, refused repeatedly to accept the Presidentship of the National Congress and went into a complete retirement. During all his stay at Pondicherry from 1910 onward he remained more and more exclusively devoted to his spiritual work and his *sadhana*." (CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 8-9)

Sri Aurobindo reached Pondicherry on April 4, 1910. He was then 38 years old. He was received by several revolutionaries of Pondicherry. In fact, some of them had been waiting for the Uttara Yogi, a yogi from the North. They had heard the prophecy that he would come as a fugitive and practice the Poorna Yoga. He would be recognised by three statements. These statements were made by Sri Aurobindo in a letter he wrote from Baroda to his wife Mrinalini Devi on August 30, 1905, where he spoke about his 'three madnesses'. This letter was later found by the police and produced in court during the Alipore bomb trial.

"I have three madnesses. Firstly, it is my firm faith that all the virtue, talent, higher education and knowledge and wealth God has given me, belong to Him. I have the right to spend only so much as is necessary for the maintenance of the family and on what is absolutely needed.

The second madness has recently taken hold of me; it is this: by any means, I must have the direct experience of God. The religion of today, that is, uttering the name of God every now and then, praying to Him in front of everybody, showing to people how religious one is—that I do not want. If the Divine is there, then there must be a way of experiencing His existence, of meeting Him; however hard be the path, I have taken a firm resolution to tread it.

The third madness is this: whereas others regard the country as an inert piece of matter and know it as the plains, the fields, the forests, the mountains and the rivers, I know my country as the Mother, I worship her and adore her accordingly. What would a son do when a demon, sitting on his mother's breast, prepares to drink her blood? I know I have the strength to uplift this fallen race; not a physical strength, I am not going to fight with a sword or a gun, but with the power of knowledge. God sent me to the earth to accomplish this great mission. I do not say that the work will be accomplished while I live, but it will certainly be accomplished."

The Mother, Mirra Alfassa, came to Pondicherry on March 29, 1914, and met Sri Aurobindo for the first time. The Mother, after Her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo, wrote in Her diary:

"It matters little that there are thousands of beings plunged in the densest ignorance, He whom we saw yesterday is on earth; his presence is enough to prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light, and Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth." (CWSA 13:3)

The Mother was Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator. The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo's vision was entrusted to the Mother. Founded in 1926, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram has grown into a spiritual community under the Mother's guidance, who initiated the disciples into the new consciousness which Sri Aurobindo was bringing down on earth.

In 1914, following four years of silent Yoga, Sri Aurobindo began the publication of a philosophical monthly, the *Arya*. It was in the pages of *Arya* that most of his important works— *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Isha Upanishad* – were first serialised. Sri Aurobindo also wrote several essays concerned with the spirit and significance of Indian civilisation and culture (*The Foundations of Indian Culture* - later published as *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture*), the true meaning of the Vedas (*The Secret of the Veda*), the progress of human society (*The Human Cycle*), the nature and evolution of poetry (*The Future Poetry*) and the possibility of the unification of the human race (*The Ideal of Human Unity*). His collected

poetic works include poems written in England, Baroda and Pondicherry.

Sri Aurobindo's published works comprise thirty-seven volumes and his writings cover the whole gamut of human experience. His *Letters on Yoga* in particular serve as a complete practical guide to an aspirant and deal with practically all real-world struggles a *sadhak* may face on the path.

Savitri, his epic mantric poem, the longest poem in English language (24,000 lines), was used by Sri Aurobindo, in his own words,

“As a means of ascension... *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative?” (CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 272)

The more time we spend with Sri Aurobindo's writings, -- be it his fiery political speeches or his mantric poetry, his vision for World Unity or his deep explorations into the psychological-occult significance of the Vedic hymns, his essays on Indian Art or his practical advice on human relationships in the path of Yoga -- we realise that nothing has been left out, and everything has been raised to the highest level of consciousness, studied from the deepest view of reality and existence and expanded to the widest range of possibilities and potentialities. Reading Sri Aurobindo becomes a transformative experience, on many levels.

This brief introduction to the outer life of Sri Aurobindo would be incomplete without mentioning one endearing aspect of his personality, namely his amazing wit and sense of wry humour. To see this side of him, we turn to volumes such as *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* and *Champaklal Speaks*, where we find many instances of Sri Aurobindo's charming expression and witty one-liners on topics ranging from the most mundane to the most profound. Reading these volumes, one cannot help but fall in love with the Master.

Sri Aurobindo left his body on December 5, 1950.

“The greatness of the Great
is the greatness of the Divine in him.”

(COLLECTED WORKS OF NOLINI KANTA GUPTA, VOL. 5, P. 7)



Sri Aurobindo, 1950



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