CHAPTER V

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE TREATISE
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So far we have been pondering over the concept of social development against the backdrop of the metaphysical world-view of Sri Aurobindo. Though adequacy and exactness of the treatment on the subject can not be claimed within the short span of this dissertation, it can be said at this point that a sincere effort has been made here to see the macrocosm in the microcosm. Our effort has been an exercise to focus the viewpoint of Sri Aurobindo with regard to his idea of social development in a faithful way. It has been seen that social development is a spiritual development rather than a mere physical development with all its ramifications. The Eternal and the Absolute spirit is at the root of the evolutionary processes in general and the social development in particular. This spirit is at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. As the Bhagavad Gita says, "I am at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the universe".¹

This hypothesis has been taken in lieu of the other hypotheses in order to project a unique view of evolution. However, this hypothesis comes within the purview of a world-view which can not be termed as a scientific world-view. Obviously this is a spiritualistic world-view. As such an assessment of this hypothesis should be made from a different light. But since our's is a philosophical
deliberation, one can not but pause a while and consider some of the important criticisms levelled against this spiritual world-view in general and Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics in particular.

The modern era is a scientific era. Tremendous expansion of scientific knowledge has a profound influence upon religious belief. As such, religious belief, religious experience and religious world-view have been subject to scientific onslaught. Scientists have cumulatively established the autonomy of natural order. John Hick has focussed the scientific temper in a lucid way.

From the galaxies whose vastness numbs the mind to the unimaginably small events and entities of the subatomic universe, and throughout the endless complexities of our own world, which lies between these virtual infinities, nature can be studied without any reference to God. The universe investigated by the sciences proceeds exactly as though no God exists.2

It is needless at this stage to elaborate the scientific temper and different criticisms of science against the spiritualistic world-view. The expansion of scientific knowledge has gone a long way to throw-away the concept of God in its praise for the naturalistic explanation. But
it still remains an open question as to whether the scientists have been able to dislodge God from the conceptual map of mankind. John Hick even goes to the extent of saying that if we cannot decisively prove the existence of God we cannot also decisively disprove his existence.  

The problem of the existence or the non-existence of God is not so significant here. We are concerned with a metaphysical outlook and we are to examine if this hypothesis can be a plausible hypothesis. We shall come to this discussion later in this chapter as certain other important criticisms are still awaited for discussion.

In the words of H.H.Price,

A philosopher has a duty to believe only those propositions which are favoured, on balance by the evidence available to him. 

This is not the only function of the philosopher. The stipulation given by Price is a general stipulation which is applied to any discipline. But applied to philosophy with a special stringency we shall see that philosophy, which is a rational exercise, also plays a significant role since philosophy is deeply concerned with understanding religion, or spirituality for that matter. One must understand the implication of the metaphysical tenets as
well as the criticisms thrown against these. With this background the criticism of H.H. Price deserves consideration. In the words of Price again,

... atheist, and especially a theistic philosopher, is peculiarly vulnerable to the charge of wishful thinking.\(^5\)

Again he points out that if we are to discuss religion or spirituality we have to make an assumption which many will think questionable. We have to assume that each of us has an inner life and lives through experiences which only he can describe at first hand. But this assumption is subject to stringent criticism by many a thinkers including Gilbert Ryle\(^6\). Gilbert Ryle, for example is vehemently against the idea of a life inside life or a 'ghost in the machine'. The inner life is a tandem operation which can not be justified by the logic of language. Considered in this light, Sri Aurobindo's idea of the Absolute spirit involved in the progress or evolution also demands consideration. He makes certain statements in connection with his hypothesis of social development which appear to be empirical statements but on a closer analysis distinctness of these statements is clear. For example, when he says that social development or, for that matter, the process of evolution is the unfoldment of the Divine, or that the Divine is involved in the evolutionary process, his
statements are apparently empirical, just as 'an object is the result of the combination of atoms'. But the difference between an empirical statement and a religious statement is very clear. Taking this difference into account the sceptic goes on disbelieving the claim of religion where as the believer or the agent of faith goes on claiming the truth of religious statement. This raises a controversy between the sceptic and the believer. The believer sometimes claims that there is an autonomy of religious language which is unique in its own way. Religious language, according to him, does not enter into the domain of reason. The sceptic, on the other hand, does not allow any autonomy on the ground that nothing is meaningful unless it either stands the test of reason or it is empirically verifiable. This has particularly been the stand of the logical positivists, the chief exponent of which was A.J. Ayer. We are not at this stage going to enter into a detailed discussion on this problem. It will, however, be sufficient to see that the controversy centres round the question of interpretation, rather than rational justification.

Both spirituality and science fall back upon human experience which is the real data of both the disciplines. The religious data is neither intuited by a sixth sense nor by some special organ. What is most important is the
ordinary human experience which is common to believer and non-believer, to the sceptic and the faith-seekers. What then is the difference? The difference lies between sense-experience and religious-experience. While the sense-experience is coercive, religious perception is not. Sense-experience is coercive because it is related to the perceived world which has an objective character. Religious perception is not coercive in the ordinary sense. It is at the top level of intensity that religious experience is coercive, as it gives rise to the situation of the person who cannot help believing in God. Sense experience is universal amongst mankind and the world which it reveals is public to all where as religious perception is not universal among mankind. Again sense experience is highly coherent in the sense that the perceived world exhibits continuity and order both in space and time where as the religious awareness of different individuals varies greatly in degree of coherence. 8

The question now is, if experience is the only data of science as well as spirituality, how is it that they differ sharply? The only answer is that there is a difference in interpretation. Reference may be made to the parable of two people. Two people returning to their long neglected garden find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other
"It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants". The other person denies and explain it as an outcome of chance. Both of them disagree regarding the presence or the absence of the surreptitious gardener. John Wisdom suggests that the theist and the atheist do not disagree about the empirical facts, or about any observations which they anticipate in the future. They are, instead, reacting in different ways to the same set of facts. They are not making mutually contradictory assertions, but rather are expressing different feelings. In other words, they are looking at the same facts from different stand points. While the sceptic is casting his doubt on the presence of a supramudane reality in the process of evolution, and the scientist is explaining the fact of evolution in a naturalistic way, the believer interprets it as a game or Lila of God.

Now the question is, should we reject the interpretation of the spiritualist just because his interpretation is not accepted by the sceptic or the scientist? That will not be a proper understanding of religion. Neither also it will do any justice to the spiritualist. The case under reference is Sri Aurobindo's idea of Divine Life which, as stated earlier in the previous chapter, is the postulate of social development. If the postulate can meaningfully and plausibly explain the process of social development there is no harm in accepting the interpretation of the believer.
Moreover, Sri Aurobindo not only explains the fact with the model of Divine Life but he also predicts the shape of things to come in future.

Of course, in predicting the future shape of things a believer like Sri Aurobindo can not be termed as a scientist. This is not so fundamental to neglect the claim of a spiritual thinker like Sri Aurobindo. Again it is to be noted significantly that there is not only a scientific explanation but there is also a metaphysical explanation though, admittedly, the two explanations differ in their way of approach.

A review of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics in general shows that he speaks of two important concepts like descent and ascent. This might appear to be picture thinking to which ordinary people are very often prone, Sri Aurobindo says that there is the descent of the Divine into the realm of matter as well as there is the ascent of matter to the status of the Infinite. The entire process is made possible through the practice of Yoga. The entire thing is analogous to the picture of a ladder with the help of which we ascend and descend. The ladder is Yoga. But let us see if Sri Aurobindo can be subject to criticism on this account. No doubt, we have to take the help of analogy in explaining certain issues in the realm of spirituality. But
we are to see if this analogical argument is entirely useless. It is to be observed that even in the sphere of science where we are postulating certain theoretical concepts, analogy becomes a useful instrument to explain facts. If the concepts in the sphere of metaphysics can be properly understood with the help of analogy there is no reason why this should be rejected out right. For the same reason, there is no justification why Sri Aurobindo should be criticised as being involved in picture thinking. It has been clarified in the course of our previous discussion that some of the concepts which Sri Aurobindo has used in order to explicate his own position are trans-empirical concepts. In other words, these concepts are the extensions of the concepts used in the sphere of ordinary language.

Sri Aurobindo might be termed as an anti-rationalist as he very often speaks of the limits of human reason in apprehending the nature of the Absolute. But it will be an unsympathetic attitude to treat Sri Aurobindo in that manner. In assigning a limit to human reason, he does not discard the role of reason altogether. Rather he gives it an important place in organising human action, social behaviour etc. with a view to lead them to a definite goal. As Brookman says;
In Aurobindo's philosophy reason finds its proper place as an indispensable instrument of organisation and action. But it is also apparent that if offers no direct access to essences or to the true nature of things. Reason works with the data of qualities of things. Then it constructs inferential knowledge of facts beyond superficial qualities.

Sri Aurobindo's concept of ideal society deserves special consideration. In analysing the importance of Marxian ideology vis-a-vis Sri Aurobindo's utopia, Chottopadhyaya has brought out a very pertinent point against both ideology and utopia. He has raised a number of issues with regard to these concepts, but has made particular reference to the concept of ideal society so far as Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics is concerned. According to him the attitude of the people towards utopia is consistently ambivalent. On the one hand people want a state of individual and social life which, given our values and beliefs, will be most ideal for us, and, on the other hand, we do not like to be placed in a state of life which might appear insecure and unsafe. The ideal society, as envisaged in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is expected to provide us such primary goals as justice, equality, freedom from hunger, want and other constrains which man always apprehends. On the other hand in exercising our sense of equality or freedom and other allied values, people are also conscious of the checks and
balances and other threats which might deprive people of their valued objects. This leads to a sense of negation or a sense of social insecurity. Thus the speculation of an ideal society is subject to this ambivalent attitude. A close review of Sri Aurobindo’s hypothesis highlights one side of the story and neglects the other side, though not absolutely. He places human aspirations and their fulfilment in the proper perspectives. He also projects these negative elements but he has not treated them elaborately. That is exactly the reason why his idea of social development is very often criticised as one-sided. He is conscious of the human follies and social aberrations but his treatment is not elaborate and adequate. That is exactly the reason why all the great exponents of Ideal society are very often criticised as arm-chair thinkers or impractical theorists. Even Gandhian concept of the ideal society which has been articulated in his concept of *Ramarājya* or *Gramswarāj* is prone to this criticism.

Again, Sri Aurobindo’s ideal society is criticised as maintaining an unapproachable distance from ordinary life. The ordinary life as has been discussed earlier, is a life of ups and downs. In other words, it is not a straight line from matter to spirit though Sri Aurobindo accelerates the process of progress, through the practice of Yoga. The path is not so straight as it appears to be. But this
criticism is not significant as Sri Aurobindo has time and again insisted upon the fact that Divine Life is no more distant from the human life than the latter is from the animal life. On the contrary when the resistance of the material conditions of existence is overcome through the practice of Yoga and the life-phenomenon becomes possible, their evolution, evolution of the higher forms, proves to be relatively easy. Therefore, there is no point in criticising Sri Aurobindo on this front. It has been seen in our previous discussion that the idea of spiritual life so far as Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics is concerned is a state of excellence of the life-empirical. As such Life Divine and Life - empirical do not pole apart.

The model of social development as conceived by Sri Aurobindo is a universal model which explains in its own way the evolution of Nature, the evolution of man and the evolution of society in the similar pattern. But this idea of his deserves close scrutiny. This point has been significantly raised by Goutam Biswas. He says,

That the society is undergoing change and massive modifications both structurally and functionally in multi-dimensional directions is a phenomenon hardly disputed by any body engaged in
sociological studies. Change or mutation is a cosmic phenomenon...... Evidently the manner in which changes sweep the physical world are characteristically different from the social change.\textsuperscript{13}

In the similar Vein Robert A. Medermitt points out that there is a wide gap between spiritual wisdom and social progress so far as Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution is concerned. He, according to Dermitt, sets forth his integral insight into the structure of being in the metaphysical spiritual terminology of the Indian tradition. But in coming to the realities of social progress, he finds a gap between the spiritual model and social progress.\textsuperscript{14}

These criticisms, though not quite new, raise significant points for a close observation of Sri Aurobindo's idea of social development or social progress for that matter. It is to be noted that the uniqueness of his metaphysics, particularly his integral vision lies in placing a model for humanity in general. Undoubtedly, he has pleaded for a similarity between the triple transformation of man and Nature and society as well. One has to agree with Goutam Biswas that there is a wide gap between social manifold and the workings of Nature. Similarly, the ways of Nature and the ways of man are different due
to the fact that the way of Nature being absolutely deterministic on account of the operation of the inscrutable laws, there is some degree of unpredictability in human affairs. 15

However, Sri Aurobindo's effort in giving a universal model can not be underestimated on account of two reasons. First of all, he is working under the idea of a spiritual weltanschauung just as Karl Marx or, for that matter, a host of scientists are labouring under the idea of a materialistic world-view. While the claim of a philosopher can not be discarded just because he champions the cause of a spiritual world-view, it is only to be observed if he has argued out his position in a consistent and meaningful manner. A deep study of Sri Aurobindo will reveal that he has not failed in his mission. Secondly, he deserves praise as he heralds a new path. His path may be termed as a revolutionary path since he has been successful in disturbing the settled thought process of man. As Chattopadhyaya rightly remarks;

Progress requires disturbing the status-quo, giving rise to puzzles, anomalies and problems. When our social habits and thought-habits are disturbed by new, unfamiliar and 'strange' modes of thought and action, we feel puzzled and we cannot immediately decide how to respond in terms of the available thought
and action to the newly emerging situation. When the change in our social structure or thought-structure proves very 'radically' new, we call it revolutionary.¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo's greatness lies in revolution-sing ideas and placing a unique model for mankind to ponder over and act. That is why though a spiritualist out and out, his ideas are not obsolete, rather he is more relevant both philosophically and extra-philosophically. We shall come for this discussion in the chapter following.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p.39.


5. Ibid., p. 4.


