This dissertation is an endeavour to understand the recent trends to explore the various aspects of consciousness. Although the study of consciousness was a long back effort made by philosophers only, it was later taken up by the cognitive science researchers, who contributed a lot in understanding the nature of consciousness. From the very beginning, different Indian philosophical systems (like Cāvākas, Naiyāyikas, Vedāntins, etc.) and Western philosophers (like Descartes, Berkeley, etc.) have made an attempt to explore the nature of consciousness based on their respective metaphysical systems. However, all these separate approaches somehow fell short to explain the holistic nature of consciousness. From the Western perspective, Cartesian dualism admitted mind and matter to be two radically opposite and separately existent substances. These substances are characterised by the property of consciousness and extension respectively. The theory claimed causal interaction between mind and body; but somehow left an unsatisfactory account to explain this interaction. Similarly, the theory of Idealism admitted monism and claimed that only mind and its ideas were existent. Thus none of these theories could comprehensively grasp the nature of consciousness. On the other hand, some theories were also proposed by the Indian philosophical systems. Those included the Cārvāka understanding of consciousness as an accidental property or the Vedāntic theory of pure consciousness that claims consciousness as nothing other than Brahman which is comprised of existence-consciousness-bliss. All these theory-based
approaches are dependent on particular philosophical postulates, which are not shared universally across all systems of philosophical thought. In order to overcome this limitation of the theory-based approaches, the contemporary researchers of the West designed the experimental approach to study the nature of consciousness. This approach deals with the study of different forms of conscious states and also includes within its purview the study of those states, which are conscious but are not attained normally. Such not-normal states are known as the altered states of consciousness (ASC). These altered states include dream state, hypnotized state, drug-induced state, meditative state, etc. The experimental approach was completely based on the empirical findings and the objective analysis of the different forms of conscious states, which is done by the study of brain states or the neural changes taking place during various conscious experiences. But in this whole effort, the very essence of consciousness, i.e. the subjective nature and feeling of being conscious about or being aware of, was sidelined to a great extent. Every conscious/altered state is identified with various functioning of the brain in different areas or the different pattern of neuronal orientation; and hence the brain states could not reveal or understand an individual’s feeling during a particular conscious experience.

In order to explore, understand and realize the nature of consciousness from the subjective point of view, the integral theory of Sri Aurobindo was taken into account. Sri Aurobindo presented an experiential understanding of consciousness by the help of integral yoga that lucidly helps an individual to realize the different stages and realms of consciousness. It is this integral yoga that provides a newer insight of experiencing and exploring the nature of consciousness. Thus the traditional theory-based approaches of understanding
consciousness changed to the experimental approach for understanding the
nature of different conscious states. But the study of only the objective aspect of
consciousness was possible by the experimental method, which was a constraint
to provide a holistic explanation of consciousness. Thus Sri Aurobindo’s
experiential approach was considered, in order to provide some newer insights
in the study of consciousness. It was an attempt in this dissertation to see
whether the experimental and the experiential approach together can unite in
order to provide a more vivid and in-depth notion about the nature of
consciousness. In doing so, the whole dissertation has been divided into six
chapters including the introduction and the conclusion.

In ‘Introduction’ the notion of consciousness is introduced, which
presents the different types of meaning and use of the term ‘consciousness’.
Along with this, the origin of the nature of consciousness study is also
discussed. In this context, different theories are outlined briefly to discuss about
the proposed nature of consciousness. These included the understanding of
consciousness from the Indian philosophical system on one hand and the
theories presented by the Western philosophers on the other. Both the Indian and
Western perspectives present different theories, which are based on the
metaphysical posits of particular philosophical perspectives and hence all these
theories are unique in themselves. But the problem underlying these theories is
that none of them could provide a satisfactory account for consciousness which
can be accepted universally. It rather ended up in categorizing the nature of
consciousness as subjective and objective. This lead to the problem that whether
to understand the nature of consciousness objectively or subjectively? So, an
attempt was made to explore a universal theory for understanding the nature of
consciousness. In this search, the integral theory of Sri Aurobindo was taken into consideration, which provided a unique and innovative understanding and realization of the nature of consciousness. In order to understand and analyse Sri Aurobindo’s integral theory of consciousness, the following two chapters dealt more explicitly with his theory.

In the second chapter ‘Stages of Consciousness in Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga’ discussions have been done on the different metaphysical foundations of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy. In this discussion, the concept of Integral Yoga is presented with its purpose and aim, its uniqueness and the comprehensiveness that makes it different metaphysically from all other Indian philosophical systems. Sri Aurobindo understands the notion of supreme Brahman and the world as the outcome of the dual phenomenon of involution and evolution. This phenomenon takes place simultaneously and hence one cannot be present without the other. It is the supreme spirit that exists as sat-cit-ānanda and out of its pleasure it spreads itself into the forms of multiplicities of the phenomenal world. This chapter is, thus, mainly concerned with the metaphysical structure of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy, which outlines the different realms and forms of consciousness starting from the very matter (where the consciousness is present as the inconscient) to the highest possible realm – supermind (which is the ultimate manifestation of consciousness).

The third chapter ‘Cognitive Developments in Integral Yoga’ clearly brings out the developments and enhancements of the different forms of cognitive abilities of an individual with the advancement in the process of integral yoga. It reveals that higher cognition and deeper understanding of the true nature of reality leads to widening of consciousness and enhancements of
the mental powers and faculties due to which an individual can perform the cognitive activities in a much better way. Here, in this chapter Sri Aurobindo’s own experiential records are cited which expresses the experience of transcendence of the mind levels through the process of integral yoga.

The fourth chapter ‘Understanding Different States of Consciousness’ presents the understanding of different forms of conscious states and some such states that are not observed in normal day to day experiences. These not-normal states include meditation, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, etc. which are a part of the lived experiences and hence are known as altered state of consciousness (ASC). Different experimental studies are conducted to understand and analyse the nature of consciousness during such alterations. In other words, it is an attempt to study and understand the nature and function of consciousness from a wider perspective by including both the normal states and the altered states of consciousness. Both of these are the different forms of conscious experiences that are attained by individual(s). Hence study of all these different conscious experiences helps in understanding the nature and function of consciousness.

The fifth chapter ‘Approaches to Consciousness Studies’ outlines the different approaches undertaken to understand the nature of consciousness. These are the theoretical approach, the experimental approach and the experiential approach. The first approach tries to explain the nature of consciousness by providing different theories about consciousness but could not provide a satisfactory account free from the shortcomings of being limited within a definite philosophical outlook. In comparison to the theoretical approach, the experimental approach provides a methodological framework for
understanding the nature of consciousness, but again fails to grasp the subjective aspect of consciousness, which is the very essence of consciousness or what is revealed as being conscious of something. Finally, Sri Aurobindo’s theory of experiential approach, tries to provide a new scientific insight in the understanding of consciousness by a unique subjective realization of the consciousness itself. The last two approaches have certain features in common, which may further help in making an attempt to unite the two approaches for attaining a comprehensive understanding of consciousness.

Finally, in the concluding chapter ‘A Dual Approach to Study Consciousness’ some of the problems regarding the understanding of consciousness have been put forward. The inter-relation of mind and matter has remained inconclusive. The problem of understanding consciousness from subjective and objective aspects too remained undefined. It was an attempt in this chapter to review these problems from the standpoint of Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga. Although, it is not claimed that integral yoga gives a complete theory once and for all regarding the nature of consciousness, but the intention is to consider this experiential approach with an open mind where this integral yoga blends the chasms of conscious, unconscious, mental and the physical without merely claiming the experiences as mystical or spiritual or occult powers of the mind. Science of yoga reaffirms the infinite potentials latent within every human being, so it is a conviction that Sri Aurobindo’s approach to consciousness would definitely contribute a lot in understanding and realizing the nature of consciousness. Along with this, if the experimental approach can be taken into consideration with the integral theory of Sri Aurobindo, then it might provide an alternative insight of understanding the different aspects of
consciousness. Even though there may be several other possibilities of providing a comprehensive theory of consciousness, but uniting the experimental approach and experiential approach is one among them that has been presented here in this dissertation.