SRI AUROBINDO’S VIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF INDIVIDUAL SELF TOWARDS SUPREME SELF

In the last Chapter we have seen through different verses of the Gita that man’s life is a continuous process of improvement upon itself, which practically takes him to the realization of the Supreme Self in him. In this Chapter we shall see how Sri Aurobindo’s view upholds this from his point of view. Sri Aurobindo held that form of knowledge consists in realizing Advaita and Vishistadvaita a new relation between jivatma and paramatma. The inherent truth of the world is consisted in the omnipresent all comprehensive truth of the Real Truth. We are part of this world as human beings. Our everlasting aspiration is to know this truth with mind and to give it a form in our daily life. In his ‘The Life Divine’ he writes the tendency of our mind is to form a whole out of parts. Our wisdom develops a unity in diversity. Mind is inclined to feel intimately the variety in one’s self after assimilating it as a one whole. Thus according to him the Real Truth of Unity, which he terms as Brahma, must be realized through mind, wisdom and soul in a one and only Reality of Man.¹

But he believes that this state of success progresses by stages. For same, the success at the initial stage may appear to ‘wonder’. He can differentiate his conscious self form the bodily self but one should not be carried away by this primary achievement of consciousness.
According to him, men’s individual self should move ahead by developing it further, for only then the new horizons will open in front of him. In fact when one’s consciousness is developed he gets the world and when his thoughts rise higher, he realizes the presence of a Supreme Self who is the authority of this world and of us.

Here we may say that Sri Aurobindo’s ‘rise’ of a human being by stages is a kind of transition of the individual self from his social-physiological being towards a spiritual being. The realization of the Supreme Soul inside one’s inner feeling opens newer avenues for rising to a higher state of consciousness. This sense of presence of the Supreme in one’s heart gives the feeling of joy that can be a vital force for attaining to the ultimate goal.

About how that works, Sri Aurobindo says that the common man is filled with joy by the various manifestation of this world. But the Supreme Self winds up his manifestation in this world by further developing a seed of Supreme joy in man. Thus he ultimately proceeds to his final stage of realizing the Supreme Self in him. In his ‘The Future Evolution of Man’ (1995) he writes, “A Spiritual evolution, an evolution of consciousness in matter in a constant developing self-formation till the form can reveal the indwelling spirit, is the key-note, the central significant motive of the terrestrial existence”.\(^2\) It may be noticed that his view of this transition is not a simple straight line process of development of the individual only.
He is of the view that the manifest existence has three aspects: the individual, the Cosmic and the Transcendent. The individual, though a small unit, is the key to the entire universe. The universe is too wide and too amorphous while the Transcendence is above the individual and the universe. So the individual is the most important and the concentrated unit for the spiritual progress of the world.

The individual is a miniature cosmos. The universe is composed of billions of individual units. The three entities are intimately connected with each other. The universe (cosmos) is the objective form of the Transcendent and the individual beings are the miniature form of the universe, the manifestations of the Transcendent. If the individual progresses spiritually, the universe gets progressed. That is the reason why Nature, in her evolutionary march has taken up the individual as a basic and starting unit. Individual is the beginning and the basic unit. The more the spiritual individuals are in the world, the more is the progress of the world and the universe. So the Nature has her spiritual evolutionary journey with the individual as the beginning of the historical journey of human civilization. The present civilizations are individual oriented. The individual has developed his multi-faceted personality. All the components of the individuality are developed to a certain goal. Thousand of years have thus elapsed and the individual has been dominating the world scene. Now the time has come for a new era in the evolutionary march of man for a simple reason, namely the inadequacy that is rooted in this march.

It is true that the evolutionary process is going on to a developing dimension. Still we are experiencing some sort of
inadequacy in the process. Which is rooted in the tendency of neglecting the vitality of the spiritual element in man, that is to say, the real truth to be found in human soul, It should be an inward movement to discover the real need of human well being. For attaining this goal, human being should not be regarded merely “as a mind, a life and a body, but as a soul incarnated for a divine fulfillment upon earth, not only in heavens beyond....” Sri Aurobindo opined.³ The individual dominating world can not reach to its actual target if the target is not identified properly. Evolution process of an individual proceeds to a successful state when it starts to feel for the collective welfare.

In this following we shall see how this development is explained. Nature has been consolidating her gain by grooming and shaping the individual till now. Sri Aurobindo believes that at this state there is no danger to the existence of the individuals, for he has enough individualized himself. Now nature has taken up her second trend i.e. the formation and development of the collective unit what we call social community. According to the second trait of nature, the individual has to reflect and manifest the real collective spirit which is full of love for others. Of course the individual works hard for the maintenance of the members of the family but that is not a real collective deal. Nature oscillates between the individual and the collective and the progress depend on the amount of harmony generated by the interaction of these two units. They are independent and yet complementary units.
About how Nature works for this progress, Sri Aurobindo says-here Nature works in a specific method which may be said to exhibit a plan. It works through the developed and evolved individuals. They are known as pioneers. The collectivist trend is manifested in certain individuals. This ultimately is a spiritual progress based on cooperation which cannot be total without this outlook.

It may be said that there is a feeling of freedom in this world all around. It is filled with man’s self-force. This is not the craziness or fanaticism that leads to destruction. Here the consciousness of man mixes with the consciousness of the world and is developed by the consciousness beyond this world. In his ‘Life Divine’ Sri Aurobindo writes that the liberation of the individual Soul is therefore the keynote of the definite action; it is the primary divine necessity and the pivot on which all else turn. It is the point of light at which the intended complete Self-manifestation in the many begins to emerge. But the liberated Soul extends its perception of unity horizontally as well as vertically. That is, it extends through other fellow individuals on the one hand and rises to the unity of the cosmos on the other.

Going by our hypothesis about man’s natural transition we may say that Sri Aurobindo’s view may be stated as a two-way progress: (1) the extension of one’s individuality to the individuality of the other through love, affection, duty, sacrifice, service and so on, as are the most coveted aspects of living a good social life, and (2) the spiritual development of one’s own self to reach the state of unity with the
Supreme. If we represent it through a diagram, it will look something like the following:

![Diagram of Supreme Unity]

In other words we may say, man’s realization of the Supreme-Self in him consists neither in his achievement of the highest form of social good only nor in his own spiritual achievements only, but on a unified form of both. To quote Sri Aurobindo: “Its unity with the transcendent one is incomplete without its unity with the cosmic ‘many’. This is horizontal expression of the Self. And this lateral unity translates itself by a multiplication, a reproduction of its own liberated state to achieve perfection as the highest state. This is vertical
progress”. In this connection he refers to Buddha’s attainment of liberation. He says, due to the developed consciousness Goutam Buddha was not satisfied with his own liberation and by considering Maha Nirvana as immaterial he came down on earth to link self liberation with universal liberation.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the all comprehensive Supreme Self that is beyond the limits of this world, is Universal. But to realize the supreme self is to realize one’s own self. That means he never said that the worldly existence is false and should be discarded. On the contrary he said that through this life the Supreme truth can be achieved. Its manifestation is in the jivatma. There are varieties in this manifestation and there are many steps also. It cannot be reached all of a sudden. To acquire it one has to cross the steps of consciousness one by one. Here mention can be made of the five layers of mind as given by Sri Aurobindo which lie as steps in the process of mental-physical development. They are higher mind, illumined mind, intuitive mind, over mind and super mind. In this context it would be worthwhile to mention that his view of the mind differed from that of modern psychological theories. For instance, in Psycho Analysis (1920) Sigmund Freud recognized three layers of the mind. Namely, the Id, the ego and the super ego. The Id is dominated by the reality principle. The ego develops out of the Id and serves as a connecting link between the Id and the outside world. It is intermediate principle between the Id and the super ego. It unconsciously executes the commands of the Id and consciously acts as controlling force over the Id. The conflict between the Id and the ego is further complicated by
the super-ego. It corresponds to conscience. The ego corresponds to prudence. The Id is the primitive rebellious instinct. The super ego is peculiar to man, and is said to originate in the thwarted sex urge or libido of the little child.\textsuperscript{6}

C. G. Jung has pointed to the important fact that Freud’s “Super Ego” is a projection of the unconscious image of the ‘Self’. The collective moral consciousness, the ‘Conscience’, which the super ego represents is according to Freud derived from the child’s fear of the parents; it is the representative of our relationship to the parents, and as such “the heir of the Oedipus-Complex”.\textsuperscript{7}

Some psychologists, however, thought that this point of view overlooks the fact that our ‘conscious’, our inner moral and ethical laws, our inner voice, or whatever else one may like to call these higher mental forces, are due to a prior condition of the human psyche which is not acquired during his ‘personal’ existence, of worldly psyche of actions-reactions with individuals and situations around, but only become manifest in him. They are, in other words, manifestations of the non-ego or the Self. As long as we are unconscious of the Self, it appears projected in to the environment (e.g. the parents). With the growing integrations of the Self the projection is withdrawn, and the “Moral law” is experienced as an apriori condition of our psyche.

Sri Aurobindo goes a step further to give a clearer idea of the human self or the jivatma in ‘Lights on Yoga’ while talking about man’s nature. There he says, “The being of man is composed of these
elements- the psychic behind supporting all, the inner mental, vital and physical and the outer i.e. quite external nature of mind, life and body which is their instrument of expression. But above all is the central being (jivatma), which uses them all for its manifestation; it is a portion of the Divine Life”.  

In fact, Sri Aurobindo divides the central being of man into two aspects: the upper and the lower. The upper is the jivatma and the lower is the psychic being - the subliminal self or the chaitya purusa. The upper is that aspect of man which is prior to human evolution, which transcends the process of ascent, but the lower represents the true man in the process of evolution. 

Here we find Sri Aurobindo’s points for establishing the individual self as the machinery of all Supreme ability. Whatever may be the lower from of the representation of man, he is having the ability of being the Supreme. Here also we find the necessity and the positive point for the process of evolution. This process of evolution is making man, though not very large in number, able to overcome most of his mental limitations as a psychic being. For this growth process we are getting great thinkers, for which we have become able to know how to think properly. We have come to know from the teachings of the great thinkers of the world that the human soul as such is beyond transcendence because this is its real nature. Our main duty is to realize that reality through the natural evolutionary process.
That is why Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being is inside the evolutionary process, whereas the jivatma is beyond evolution. He distinguishes between these two aspects of man in yet another way. Every thing being an expression of the Divine, both the psychic being and the jivatma are also expressions of the Divine, but, whereas there can be relation of ‘identity-in-difference’ between the Psychic being and the Divine, the Jivatma can merge itself in identity with the Divine. Here we come across a very illuminating interpretation of the Vedantic utterance- ‘Tat Tvam Asi’ (Thou is that). Here ‘Thou’ stands for the jivatma and ‘that’ stands for the paramatma or Supreme self. ‘Thou’ is both different and identical with ‘That’. If ‘Thou’ represent the Psychic being it is different from the divine (the That’); but ‘Thou’ is identical with ‘That’ if ‘Thou’ represents the Jivatma.

Thus we find that there are three aspects of man according to Sri Aurobindo the surface or the outer Soul, the inner Soul or the chaitya purusa and Divine Soul or the Jivatma. The first is akin to our physical nature of the social being, the second and third are akin to the spiritual nature of man. The second is in a process of change and get transformed. The third is the potentiality of Divinity that has to be finally expressed.

As to question how man crosses the different layers of mind, Sri Aurobindo says that the path is through worldly knowledge. Through this path we have to reach Supreme Knowledge by way of the realisation of the inadequacy of the former. In his view man has to cross many ‘deaths’ in order to reach the ocean of immortality. Here
‘deaths’ means abandoning the inadequate experiences of the worldly individual as ‘mine’, ‘his’, ‘there’ etc. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “Through Avidya, the multiplicity lies our path out of the transitional egoistic self expression in which death and suffering predominate, through vidya consenting with Avidya by the perfect sense of oneness even in that multiplicity”. 11

In this connection, let us refer to the concepts of Vidya and Avidya. In one interpretation Vidya means appropriate knowledge and Avidya is inappropriate knowledge. Some others say Avidya is false bindings and vidya is Supreme knowledge. Advaita Vedantin Shankaracharya holds the latter one. To speak a bit differently, Avidya is consistent in terms of worldly activities. According to Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy Avidya is the knowledge of worldly sciences, that is, Avidya is the knowledge of different subjects of this material world. The knowledge concerning paramatma is vidya. Brahmajnana is vidya. In some cases Avidya is called aparavidya and Vidya is called paravidya.

Thus according to some Indian philosophical trends the avidya is not related to vidya or true knowledge. It has no role to play in acquiring vidya.

But Sri Aurobindo did not accept the view that avidya is totally useless. Instead he maintained that to acquire Supreme knowledge or vidya, one must know avidya too.
Sri Aurobindo does not accept this view. According to him to know Supreme knowledge or vidya one must know avidya. This avidya is not false knowledge or negation of truth. It is only apparent truth serving upto a certain limit. He believes that as a worldly being, we cannot avoid avidya. But at the same time man cannot remain confined to this only. According to him avidya is one form of reaching Vidya.

S. Radhakrishnan has differentiated between avidya and maya. According to him, Avidya is the fall from intuition, the mental deformity of the finite self that disintegrates the Divine into a thousand different fragment. Deussen calls avidya “the innate obscurcation of our knowledge”. Avidya in the Upanisads is only ignorance as distinct from knowledge possessed by the individual subject.

Sri Aurobindo however has not called Avidya opposed to man’s real self just because it is not Vidya or Supreme knowledge. He says that if one does not know Avidya, one cannot know its limitations. Even though man’s main aim is to achieve Param Brahma or Vidya, yet to achieve it one has to go through the steps of Avidya. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “...the real world cannot be known and none of these possibilities can be put to the test if we consider Mind alone or only Mind’s power for ignorance. Mind has a power also for truth; it opens its thought-chamber to Vidya as well as to Avidya, and if its starting point is ignorance, if its passage is through ways of error, still its goal is always knowledge: there is in it an impulse of truth seeking,
a power, even though secondary and limited, - of truth finding and truth creation”. 16

Hence, from Sri Aurobindo’s point of view avidya or worldly knowledge of the social being and Vidya or the knowledge of the Supreme Self are one and inseparable. All floats in Vidya, hence avidya is also floating in Vidya. Vidya and Avidya are essence of consciousness as a whole. At the root of Avidya is the force of Vidya, so there is a rhythm in its gradual development. Avidya slowly becomes Vidya.

Now, if we look at the passage of an individual being to Vidya or spiritual realization of Unity with the Supreme through Avidya or his worldly experiences, we find that the transformation of the social being into the higher spiritual being which we have been trying to establish is the core of Sri Aurobindo’s thought in this respect. It is a practical necessity that man ceaselessly tries to supersede his limitations, primarily as a social being breaking through the limitations of his social existence such as family, wealth, possessions etc. and in the next as an intellectual being looking forward to realizing a state where his self is free from all limitations including social, moral and religious mores of right and wrong. According to Sri Aurobindo, like the flame of a lamp one wants to transcend him and mingle with the Supreme truth. 17

Unlike other animal species of the world, man follows the path of conscience progress. As a creature he too follows the same dictates
of nature but only up to a certain limit. As a self-conscious being he bears more responsibilities. Individually or socially whatever function man carries out indirectly keeps the activities of the Supreme Self continued. This is a gradual process. We have said that the ‘man’ we see in an individual and others around him are a reality, but an incomplete one. And with the special capacity bestowed on him, he always strives to overcome incompleteness. His feelings, emotions, response to social and biological demands are real, but as his intellect begins to look through, it immediately realizes that these are only apparently real and takes his search for an illumined life. In Sri Aurobindo’s vision too we find a similar approach regarding the nature of worldly man. He writes, “…..we are composed of many parts, each of which contribute something to the total movement of our consciousness, our thought, feeling, action, ……but we are aware only of their confused and pell-mell result on the surface”. 18

How man and Superman are the two aspects of the same truth, Sri Aurobindo had said “One is a descent, the birth of God in humanity, the other is an ascent, the birth of man into the God-head, man rising into the divine nature and consciousness, madbhavam agatah” 19 This ‘birth of God in humanity’ may be interpreted as a change of the individual towards his ultimate goal, the unity with the Supreme. He, however “did not think of a sudden and wholesale change of the human mind and of human society” 20 He visualized an intermediary race between present humanity and the race of the Superman. This is called ‘New humanity’ bridging the two.
In fact this concept of ‘New humanity’ provides an altogether new interpretation of the process of man’s spiritual evolution by bringing to light a ‘missing link’. The chief exponents of the theory of evolution of life have tried to trace the process of transformation of living creatures with the changing time and condition at the final stage of which man of today come into existence. But the fact that human beings possess some properties, e.g. rationality, which could not be attributed to any of the prior conditions, they could not deny. Hence many of them unable to explain the missing link described this passage in many ways such as an accident, a wonder and enigma etc. For example, the emergent theory of evolution says - from the lower form of life to its higher form, there was a great leap. From the exposition of Lloyd Morgan’s observation of “Emergent Evolution” as referred to by D.M. Datta 21 we may say that Morgan was an exponent of “emergence of the new”. Morgan said –“Salient examples are afforded in the advent of life, in the advent of mind, and in the advent of reflective thought”. According to Morgan in the process of evolution there arise at times also some properties which are not merely additive and subtractive, not merely resultants, but altogether new and unpredictable.

But Sri Aurobindo’s ‘New humanity’ concept is different from that since, according to him, what will emerge is already there latent in man. This intervention makes the future evolution possible. Without the intervention of a radically puissant element it is difficult to conceive of a general elevation of the human mind.
As to how does this ‘new humanity’ concept, go with our view that man is primarily a social being and cannot ignore its impact on his living, we find that Sri Aurobindo considers the social factors of a man very significant for the formation of “his humanity”. The society is not a redundant affair. On the contrary it provides an answer to the question of why and how man “leaped” to leave behind his biological existence and this was possible only because man consciously progressed through his social role. But since that was the creation of consciousness it cannot end in itself. Since consciousness always tends to extend its horizon of grasp.

This is where Sri Aurobindo’s concept of new humanity becomes relevant. The society of the new humanity as a creation of the Mind of Light, is a different thing from the present society in this sense that it transcends the limits of normal social requirements. This race of the new humanity may be described as a transitional stage in the process. The ‘humanity’ of the social being to passes through a series of rapid and drastic changes before the new humanity and then the Super – humanity may appear in the scene. According to Sri Aurobindo the focal point of the whole process is the descent of the Supermind and its gradual forging out the emerging consciousness. 22 It works as follows:

Amidst the variety of the world the individual self has various roles. But this variety or diversity gradually progresses towards unity. The realization of this unity at the social placed individual is limited. Because, in man’s consciousness the primary center of this unity is
his ego. Centered on this ego he tries to create a world for himself. But this ego of his is the ego of mind. Hence the capacity of this is limited. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “Multiplicity permits of the interference of a determinative and temporarily determinative factor, the individual ego, and the nature of the ego is a Self-limitation of consciousness by a willed ignorance of the rest of its play and its exclusive absorption in one form, one combination of tendencies, one field of the movement of energies”  

But the effort to maximize this consciousness leaves behind his ego-centric consciousness and takes him to a state what Sri Aurobindo calls the manifestation of God. Men always try to be great in some way or the other. No one is pleased with his limited life. In this respect the Upanishads say “Naalpe Sukhamasti, Bhumaiva Sukham”. It means limitedness does not please but only vastness pleases us. And according to Sri Aurobindo, the vastness of consciousness is God Himself. The root of all ideal is the urge for self-consciousness that reveals the vastness of God in one. Thus we may say Sri Aurobindo’s God is some one not to be idolized but the concrete form of man’s Supreme ambition.

All the inferior identities have to agree to this realization. It is not sufficient to understand through wisdom. The mind has to accept universal love and joy. The mind seeks the feeling of God and Supreme self. It comes from this realization that all the worldly activities and aims are part of one’s own self. Sri Aurobindo says in this context, “In that power lies the justification to individual
existence; the individual and the universal unfolding in themselves the divine light, power, joy of transcendent Sachchidananda always manifest above them, always secret behind their surface appearances, this is the secret intension, the ultimate significance of the divine play, the Lila.25

Thus, following Sri Aurobindo, we may say that the ultimate result of natural life is the unfolding of that divine light. But while moving along the worldly path towards this aim we have to face numerous obstacles. It seems celestial life is a consolation only but in daily life the tortures of worldly life are unbearable. The conflict between divya (or the divine light) and adivya (or the worldly experiences) and the question of how to relate these two in consciousness is the main concern that needs to be resolved. And if we are not able to find a solution to it we cannot find the strength to meditate in life and to find the rhythm of ‘Rta’.

Let us see how this conflict has been resolved by Aurobindo. From his point of view there are two aspects of adivya (or non-celestialism); inconsistencies that come through the failure of senses, and the failure of power to overcome them. Many things are piled in our consciousness. We cannot create a balance between them, and there occurs an inconsistency in our thoughts and actions. This inconsistency leads to incompleteness. The lack of power is behind it. But how this incompleteness is consistent with man’s natural goal? In one sense it is consistent if we see that this incompleteness is created due to the ‘shyness’ in our consciousness. An worldly man is always

88
centered around himself and does not ordinarily find himself in the vastness of the divine light. All his sensations are filled with a sense of division. This sense of division not only fills his consciousness but also perverts it.

So Sri Aurobindo says there are two evils of life, namely, sufferings due to incompleteness and powerlessness to overcome that, both arising out of Avidya. Yet Avidya is not meaningless in the worldly affairs. It is also a manifestation of power and a part of manifestation of Vidya. It is a natural process without which the existence of Vidya would have been meaningless for ‘man’. At the centre of this process is the beginning of the power of Vidya. There is a continuous flow of power from the non-living to the conscious and from worldly consciousness to the supra-consciousness that is to realization of the unity with the supreme. At its centre says Sri Aurobindo is the supreme power of intention. Which is not ‘known’ as ‘a R b’ (of Wittgenstein’s terminology in Tractatus)\textsuperscript{26} form of statement, but ‘felt’ in the depths of self-consciousness.

About how this is felt and how it works in ordinary human life we find a very simple exposition in Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘The Religion of Man’. There he refers to this feeling in connection with one’s personal experience. Some songs which he had often heard from wandering village singers, belonging to a popular sect of Bengal, called Bauls, tell that they have no images, temples, scriptures, or ceremonies. But they declare in their songs the divinity of Man, and express for him an intense feeling of love. Coming from the class of
men who are unsophisticated, living a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all searches. For it suggests that these searches including the religious ones are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality. 27

This humanly working ‘naive spiritualism’, so to say, of the Bauls equating life on earth (sahajia sadhan) with that of divine fulfillment i.e. with the supreme self or the paramatma comes very close to the core message of Sri Aurobindo’s Life Divine that every individual being serves his life on earth only to fulfill the ‘Divine’ scheme of ascend to the state of Vidya where a Supreme unity is realized by him without denying his apparent differences with that, (Tat-Tvam-Asi’). Only thing is that he seeks to achieve the best of what he does as a worldly person, no matter what is filed of work is, from growing crop to meditation, from sweeping dirts to singing to the glory of the Almighty. And we have seen that man by nature helps from within the process of evolution to follow its course of constant improvement on the existing. In other words, to use our terminology, this is the inherent drive that takes man from the state of his individual being in the society, i.e. in the world of qualified identity to the Supreme being that is to the state of Unqualified Unity.
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