CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The animal is satisfied with a modicum of necessity; the gods are content with their splendours; but man cannot rest permanently until he reaches some highest good. He is the greatest of living beings because he is the most discontented, because he feels most the pressure of limitation. He alone perhaps, is capable of being seized by the Divine frenzy for a remote ideal."

- Sri Aurobindo
(The Life Divine)
Before we discuss the concepts, 'Man' and 'Spirituality' in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, we need to justify a study of this kind first. There are many contemporary writers, thinkers and statesmen who have their message. Why do we turn to one who lived and wrote some four-five decades ago? How is he relevant to us today?

Among many remarkable persons born in the later half of the 19th century, Sri Aurobindo stands unique in many respects. His passionate patriotism, his abrupt withdrawal from politics, his commitment to divine life and spiritual transformation, his concept of gnostic society - distinguish Sri Aurobindo from others.

He was born on 15th August 1872 in Calcutta, the birth place of so many greatmen in India. His father, *The date August 15th was also the birth day of Nepolean and Sri Aurobindo became a kind of super Nepolean, a conqueror and emperor of entire 'New World'; also a kind of super great Alexander uniting East and West in consciousness which helps for human development.

* 'Aravinda' means Lotus.
Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose who had studied medicine in England admired everything British. Sri Aurobindo was admitted to Irish Nuns' school at Darjeeling, when he was five. In 1879 two years later, he and his two elder brothers were taken to England and placed in the care of Rev. Drewitt. The purpose was to make the boys thorough-bred Englishmen and ignorant of their native culture. It was irony that Sri Aurobindo who was to be weaned from the Indian culture as per the instructions of his father, was pulled back to its fold. Sri Aurobindo was trained in French and Latin. When he joined St. Paul's school in London in 1885 at the age of twelve, he impressed his teachers as a prodigy. In 1889, he went to Kings college, Cambridge with a senior classical scholarship. Apart from French and Latin, he learned some Italian, Spanish and German and continued to write poetry. He passed the I.C.S. examination with credit in 1890. Dissolutioned by the bureaucratic life even while he was undergoing his probation, he realised that his real interest lay in "poetry and literature and study of languages and patriotic action."¹ He left England in 1893. He and his father never met again since his father died because of a false information that the ship in which Sri Aurobindo was travelling was wrecked.

Sri Aurobindo was considered to be an acknowledged leader in those days, but shunned publicity. During this time and the last part of his Baroda period, he wrote several letters to his wife from whom circumstances separated him for long intervals, explaining to her the changes that had come over him and his purpose for the future and inviting her to go with him working for a regeneration of India. It was at this period, he became yogi.

Sri Aurobindo's own mood after renunciation of politics was neither one of elation nor of depression. He felt he was in the hands of a higher power which knew what was best for him and for his country. He denied that he had withdrawn from politics in despair. He writes "I came away because I did not want anything to interfere with my yoga and because I got a very distinct Ādesh (command) in the matter. I have cut connections entirely with politics, but before I did so, I knew from within that the work I had begun there was destined to be carried forward, on lines I had foreseen, by others and that the ultimate triumph of the movement I had initiated was sure without my personal action or presence."¹ Sri Aurobindo was not cut out for politics or administration. He was inspired from divinity within and hence wanted to lead a secluded life. Pondicherry was

¹ Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother, Pondicherry, 1953, p.314.
absolutely suitable for his type of life. Sri Aurobindo was passionately attached to it which he described as "My place of retreat, my cave of tapasya." ¹

He had certain experiences of mystical nature in this transition period. The feeling of peace when he stepped off the ship in Bombay, which remained with him for months; afterwards an experience of the vast infinite while walking in the hills of Kashmir; the presence of Kali at another time; the vision of living God-head at once - but these were not part of a regular 'Sādhana' or 'aspiration' and discipline in yoga. He began yoga at first in 1904, hoping to get more strength for his political work. He adopted various practices including 'Prānāyāma' and got various results but nothing decisive. At the end of 1907, he met Vishnu Bhaskara Lele and under his direction, he was supposed to have absolute nirvāṇa. He had achieved one of the major spiritual experiences, the very crown of the yoga. From this time onwards, he lived in a transcendental consciousness that was beyond thinking and speculation. But this, he thought was not the end of yoga, it was rather the foundation and the starting point.

Sri Aurobindo's own spiritual life transformed his way of looking at the world. After 1910 his principal interest

was in the realm of the spirit. This does not mean that he cut himself off from the problems of suffering humanity. The purpose of the old yoga, he thought, had been to get away from this life to the Divine; the purpose of the new yoga was to reach the Divine and bring the fullness of what was gained into the life.

He concerned himself not with the religion but with the spirituality, with new visions of Divine grace, inner freedom and joy and of a society composed of men and women who had realised life at deep levels of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo was more than a philosopher. His writings were affirmations of spiritual truths and values which formed the heritage of mankind.

In 1950 Sri Aurobindo observed that humanity was not responding well enough to the increased evolutionary spirit and power. In a kind of sacrifice for the Divine, he descended to the depths in a struggle to the death with the last stronghold of untruth, ignorance and inconscience. This involved taking upon himself, upon his physical body, a great sickness, that it might be abolished from the earth. It was a mortal sickness and on the 5th of December he gave up his body in which the supramental transformation was already far advanced. The Mother has said that he is now established on the subtle physical plane, the one just beyond this plane of the gross physical and is carrying on his work from there. We are told that at the moment of his
relinquishment of his body the mind of light became established and operative for Mankind.\(^1\)

The great poet Rabindranath Tagore pays his tribute to Sri Aurobindo in a beautiful poem "..... the fiery messenger who has come with the lamp of God..... I hear the Soul's great and rapturous song ringing with Hope's undying splendour."\(^2\) Jawaharlal Nehru described him as "one of the greatest minds of his age."\(^3\)

Among the contemporary Indian philosophers, Sri Aurobindo stands unique as the champion of a new movement in Philosophy. The aim of classical Indian Philosophy was liberation which was exclusively individualistic and had nothing to do with collective life. In fact it was alleged that in its enthusiasm to attain ultimate spiritual ideal, it was unconcerned with anything of the physical, vital and mental existence. As against, it was construed that the chief aim of western thought was worldly prosperity of an individual who is a complex of body, life and mind. Sri Aurobindo's position is happily free from these exclusive overtones. As Prof. Kalidas Bhattacharya in his article 'Sri Aurobindo - The Philosopher', observes

\(1\) The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth.


"Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy is literally integral. In it, the physical, vital, mental and spiritual worlds, the individual and collective life, have all been accorded their deserved places..... In the philosophy of new India Sri Aurobindo is 'Ekamevādvītiyam' - one without a second."¹

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is designated differently as 'Real Advaita', 'Purnādvaita', 'Integral Idealism' etc. Prof. S. Benerji in his short treatise on 'The Life Divine' designates Sri Aurobindo's system as 'Real Advaita'.² It is realistic because the manifestations of Brahman namely the world and its objects are not illusory but real. Sri Aurobindo says "An Omnipresent reality is the Brahman, not an Omnipresent cause of persistent illusions."³ For Sri Aurobindo creation is real. The ascent and descent of the spirit is real. In short all operations in the empirical world are real. It is also called 'Purnādvaita'⁴ for the reason that it fills the gap in the traditional Advaita. Sri Aurobindo's system is also designated as 'Integral idealism'⁵ for the reason that it establishes harmony

3. The Life Divine, p.31.
between the matter and spirit. But the truth is as the great Sri Aurobindo scholar, Sri Arabinda Basu observes, "He defies description, no objective, no epithet, no appellation seems to be adequate, so universal is his genius, so many faceted his personality, so varied his life and career that mind and speech are overwhelmed and fall silent when confronted by him...."¹

Another uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo is that he does not discard the lower but elevates and integrates it with the higher. In the traditional systems of Hindu philosophy, Mokṣa consists in realising the true nature of the Self (Atman). This realisation manifests itself in the form that Self has nothing to do with the body or matter; it has nothing in common with it; it is accidentally related to body. Self-realisation consists in the severance of soul's relations with the imperfect body and attaining isolation (kaivalya). But in Sri Aurobindo the 'imperfect' or 'the lower' is not discarded; it is made perfect, elevated and made to suit the living of the higher in it. This is what Sri Aurobindo calls the physical transformation. This is unique to Sri Aurobindo's system.

In Sri Aurobindo's thought we find a comprehensive system of philosophy. No other contemporary Indian

philosopher aimed at such a system. Like Sankara and Ramanuja, Sri Aurobindo was inspired by the Hindu scriptures, Vedās, Upaniṣads and Gītā and built a system of Philosophy by means of the raw material available in the Hindu scriptures. He was also influenced by the philosophies of evolution in the west such as Darwin, Bergson, Lamark, Samuel Alexander etc. Sri Aurobindo is on par with the classical Indian philosophy in its depth and width. Just as Kanāda built a system of philosophy known as Vaiśeṣika, Sankara that of Advaita Vedānta, Ramanuja that of Visisṭādvaita, Sri Aurobindo has a system of his own.

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy lends itself more easily to rational exposition than the philosophies of other Indian thinkers of our age. His unique achievement is that he has constructed a complete and comprehensive system at a time when others were content to speak in general terms about world views and attitudes. He has attempted to offer answers to all the traditional problems of philosophy; he has sought to explain the 'why' and 'how' of creation; the existence of evil and suffering, the nature of reality, the status of individual self etc. It is, therefore, worthwhile to dwell deep into the insights of this great thinker in respect of man and spirituality.

'Man' has been of great interest from times immemorial. Lot of mist surrounds the concept, whether man is identical with the material body or with the immaterial
spirit. We have an astronomical view of man which looks at him as a tiny physical process lost in the vast galactic universe. There is the biological view of man which focuses him as a living being and regards him as the last stage of protracted process of evolution. There is the animalistic view of man which concentrates upon his awareness of pleasure and pain and his elementary appetites. There is the rationalistic conception of man which looks at him as a rational being with a sense of curiosity. Finally there is the religious view of man which interprets his whole being in terms of a relation to eternal spirit or God.

Broadly we meet with two conspicuous views in respect of the nature of man in the history of philosophy both in the East and West; the materialistic and spiritualistic conceptions of man. The materialists do not find anything other than the four or five elements in man namely, fire, earth, water and air (Ether). As against this, the spiritualists believe that the true nature of man is spirit, soul or ātman and body is merely an abode for this spirit to reside in its empirical existence. The Taittiriya Upaniṣad distinguishes that man is a complex of five sheaths and a soul. The five sheaths are subject to destruction whereas the soul is not. Man is of the nature of the indistructable soul. This is the view held by all Orthodox schools of Indian philosophy and also Jainism among the Heterodox schools. Plato holds the same view in the Greek philosophy.
Sri Aurobindo was alive to this mystery of man and his destiny. He has tried to understand the true nature of man. For Sri Aurobindo "Man is a spirit using the mind, life and body for an individual and a communal experience and self manifestation in the universe."¹ Man is a complex of both matter and spirit. The Matter according to Sri Aurobindo is not unreal or illusory. The true nature of man consists in realisation of spirit and not mere Inconscient matter. Though matter is not unreal still the material man is at a lower level when compared to the spiritual man. He explains the levels of man viz., physical, vital, mental and spiritual in his system. Sri Aurobindo is very optimistic that man would evolve himself to superman. He also considered the ancient sages and seers of India like Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva as the freaks of nature. But he foresaw that superman or gnostic being would be born on earth as a race.

It is obvious that Sri Aurobindo believes, following the Vedic tradition, that man is of the nature of spirit living in matter and guiding him to the higher and higher spiritual or divine realms.

'Spirit' literally means breath, life, soul, mind or spirit. Spirit stands for energizing principle of cosmos. It also means a being capable of consciousness and commonly

¹ Synthesis of Yoga, p.713.
considered as possessing will and intelligence. It is also understood as a disembodied or incorporeal conscious principle.

Spiritualism as a doctrine holds that the ultimate reality i.e., the source of the universe is Spirit. It is an over-mind akin to human spirit. It pervades the entire universe as its ground and rational explanation. It is opposed to materialism. Sometimes, spiritualism used to denote the idealistic view that nothing but an absolute spirit and finite spirit exist.

Most of the religions have an abiding faith in the ultimacy of spiritual power. They reduce matter and everything other than spirit to the dependence on spirit. Spirit is considered to be the highest truth, the ideal to be realised.

Sri Aurobindo accepts the view that the spirit has a determining voice in the ordering of the universe. Matter cannot govern and guide spirit. It is the spirit that governs, guides and lifts matter to the higher and higher realms through different stages. The entire evolutionary and involutionary process, envisaged by Sri Aurobindo is nothing but the play of the spirit. Spirituality is the dominant ideal in Sri Aurobindo's system. It is Saccidananda, the ultimate reality that descends and ascends; and in the process, elevates man to higher states of his being and
enables him to realize his true nature. Sri Aurobindo says "Spirituality is in its essence an awakening to the inner reality of our being, to a spirit, self and soul which is other than our mind, life and body, an inner aspiration to know, to feel, to be that... a growth or waking into a new nature."¹ Thus spirituality in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is a dynamis of a higher luminous and infinite consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo explains the progression of man from a lower stage to the higher stage i.e., Gnostic being based on his theory of evolution. We find the meeting of East and West in his philosophy. S.K. Maitra points out "This meeting is not mere handshaking, but that there is real synthesis of these two types of thought in him. There is even something more, a fulfilment of what each of them aims at but has not been able to realise."² The West aims at a fuller realisation of the evolutionary and cosmic character of its thought. But it reveals its intellectualism and its existential outlook. It requires the acceptance of a spiritual standpoint and a modification of its extreme intellectualism. Similarly Indian thought is spiritual but individualistic and static. Sri Aurobindo feels that, it has to transcend the constrains of the individualism and its static character.

Sri Aurobindo not only emphasises that all reality is consciousness, but he goes further and says that the measure of reality of anything is determined by the nature of consciousness that is revealed in it. Therefore, Sri Aurobindo says "The Absolute far from being characterised by the total absence of consciousness, is on the contrary, the highest consciousness. And the individual, if he is to attain union with the absolute, must possess the broadest, deepest and most unified consciousness."¹ Unconsciousness is the characteristic of matter in its grossest form. There is nothing devoid of consciousness according to Sri Aurobindo. Consciousness is present in its most rudimentary form even in the so called matter. Hence, according to Sri Aurobindo evolution involves a transition from less-conscious to a more conscious state.

According to Sri Aurobindo evolution requires at every critical stage the divine intervention in the shape of a direct descent of the divine consciousness. No radical change in the stage of evolution is for him possible without such a Divine descent. Prof. S.K. Maitra observes, "Evolution is not only a movement upwards and a movement downwards, but it is also a movement inwards."² Evolution, however, is the soul of Sri Aurobindo's system. His theory

1. V.C. Joshi (Ed), Sri Aurobindo - An Interpretation, pp.15-16.
of evolution is the pivot on which his whole philosophical edifice moves. Evolution is the movement which is the reverse of the movement of involution or creation. It is because of the descent of the spirit into matter, life and mind, that these can ascend to the higher regions of the spirit.

Sri Aurobindo has accepted the cosmic view of evolution of the West but has rejected its mechanical character and replaced it by a spiritual evolution. Likewise he has rejected the cyclical view of the universe of Indian philosophy and the individualistic outlook of its theory of evolution and substituted for the cosmic and over-personal outlook of the West. The result is altogether a new theory of evolution.

The study is undertaken in six chapters. Chapter I 'INTRODUCTION' brings out the need for study of the concepts of 'Man' and 'Spirituality' in Sri Aurobindo's system. Chapter II 'THE NATURE OF REALITY' explains Sri Aurobindo's conception of the Absolute, the Saccidananda. Sri Aurobindo's Absolute is a harmonious and integral blend of the apparently incompatible reals namely, body, life, mind, consciousness and divinity. Sri Aurobindo makes a distinction between two aspects of the ultimate reality; Brahman in His active poise (supermind) and Brahman in His silent poise (Saccidananda). However, he shows that they
are not irreconcilable opposites, but two aspects of one and
the same Brahman, each being necessary to the other.
Supermind, the dynamis of the ultimate reality is very much
essential in his system for a total transformation of the
being. Different aspects of the supermind and its
distinctive characteristics are discussed in detail in this
chapter.

Chapter III 'THE NATURE OF MAN' centres round the
discussion of the concept of 'man'. The materialistic and
spiritualistic conceptions of man are elucidated and
examined with an emphasis on Sri Aurobindo's conception of
man. Chapter IV 'THE NATURE OF SPIRITUALITY' explores the
nature of spirit and the importance given to the
spirituality in Sri Aurobindo's system. Sri Aurobindo
explains how a man evolves from his lower nature to the
higher spiritual heights overcoming his material, vital and
mental existence and attains spiritualisation. It is this
spiritualised man that constitutes the most conducive medium
for the descent of the Divine light to invade and take up
his body.

Spiritual man is the highest product of evolution but
is not the highest to be realised. The highest is the
supermind, the dynamis of Saccidananda or Saccidananda as
such. It is the descent of supermind into spiritual man
that transforms him into the Gnostic being, the philosophical
ideal of Sri Aurobindo. Spiritual man, the highest product of evolution is not philosophically the highest namely the Absolute. The transformation of spiritual man into a Gnostic being is not the outcome of evolution. On the other hand it is due to the descent of supermind in it. This is made possible by what he calls 'triple transformation'.

Chapter V 'SELF-BONDAGE AND LIBERATION' explains the nature of Self, the sevenfold ignorance leading to bondage and the state of liberation. The central position of Sri Aurobindo's system is built on the assumption that not all bodies are of the same kind, similarly not all forces, nor all mental capacities nor spiritual consciousness are of the same kind. The difference between them is not in degree but in kind. The body of an animal which constitutes the locus for its life to reside in is qualitatively different from the body of human being wherein his life-force has emerged. The nature and quality of the body of an animal is such that it cannot constitute a conducive instrument for the human life to evolve or reside in. Similarly the life force of an animal cannot constitute the instrument for the human mind to reside in. In the same way the mind of an animal cannot be a suitable medium for the human consciousness to reside in. As is the nature of the evolvent, so is the nature of the evolute. Hence in Sri Aurobindo's system, the Self evolves from its lower state to its evolutionary summit i.e., spiritual state. Spiritual state is also not perfect
in his philosophy for the reason that it also comes under mentality. Sri Aurobindo believes that supermind should intervene into the spiritual consciousness so that it transforms it into a supramental consciousness. This Sri Aurobindo calls a liberated state in his system. Supramental conscious being or a Gnostic being or a liberated man is the summit of his philosophy. Here we should not forget that Sri Aurobindo differs in explaining the concepts like Karma, re-birth and liberation from the traditional systems. They are clearly discussed in this chapter. Chapter VI 'CONCLUSION' evaluates the position of Sri Aurobindo on 'Man' and 'Spirituality'. 