CHAPTER VIII

*AUROBINDO AND MODERN AGE*
Since the dawn of human civilization thousands of years ago, education of the young has engaged the anxious attention of the older generations. Parents and teachers have always found it difficult to agree on the kind of education that must be imparted. There is such a contrariety of even expert advice in this field that it seems that rearing the young is a perennial problem and can never be solved. The problem becomes acute when the social conditions are in a state of accelerated change as they are in the world today. Whatever policies and courses are planned become outdated even before they are implemented. There is a phenomenal increase in the number of young boys and girls coming to schools and colleges and a corresponding increase in the fund of knowledge and variety of skills that must be imparted to them.

The accelerated rate of change in the modern society is a fact to be reckoned with. In the past, education was mainly entrusted with the task of reproducing the values or the mode of behaviour of the contemporary society. The relative stability of the society made the task of education comparatively easier. Today the force of circumstances demand that education must train unknown children for an unknown world. "For the first time in history education is now engaged in preparing men for
a type of society which does not yet exist. This trend is clearly visible in countries like India where efforts are being made to create a society radically different from that which exists.

As the societies evolved slowly in the past, there was no contradiction between the products of education and the needs of society. In the changed situation, the knowledge and skills that the child learns today are likely to become obsolete by the time he enters the world of work. The things that will be in use in a decade hence do not exist yet, nor do the materials of which they will be made or the methods with which they will be produced. Margaret Mead has stated this fact in vivid terms:

No one will live all his life in the world into which he was born and no one will die in the world in which he worked in his maturity.

It is assumed that the gigantic scientific and technological discoveries have reached such an extent that from now onwards knowledge will double itself in every decade. It creates a puzzling enigma for the contemporary educationists. They are forced to modify the course-content for students every two or three years. Under these circumstances pupils should acquire, therefore, the competence and self-confidence that will train them to improvise the necessary skills to meet the contingencies

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1. Learning to be, p.13
2. The Teacher and the Taught, p.271
and challenges of an unknown future. The teacher should not impart knowledge but show the child how he can acquire it himself. He should help him in devising his own ways of learning and of organising facts that he discovers.

His business is to suggest and not to impose. Consequently the child should learn how to learn. This is what Aurobindo conceives to be the role of education. His prophetic statement that nothing can be taught is of great significance for modern education.

The rapid obsolescence of knowledge has also generated a new awareness. It was once believed that life could be divided into two well-demarcated stages: a stage of preparation for life followed by a stage of exploitation of acquired knowledge and skills in life. Such a bifurcation has become meaningless in the modern age. Learning has become a function of living. In order to lead a meaningful life, people must learn all the time all their lives. "Every individual must be in a position to keep learning throughout his life. The idea of life-long education is the key-stone of learning society." Education should be co-extensive and coterminous with life. Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on the concept of education that begins even before the birth of the child and continues throughout life acquires an added significance.

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3. Learning to Be, p. 181
The concept of life-long education covers all aspects and embraces the whole being. Based essentially on the unity of educational processes, it transcends the artificial barriers between academic and non-academic education on the one hand and school education and adult education on the other. It takes into account all the educational influences that shape the human personality. Life-long education is "the answer to the basic problems of education in the future because it intends to aim at the whole, evolving human being in all his aspects and throughout his life-time". It presupposes a society that would be favourable to personality development.

Integral education of Sri Aurobindo aims at development of all the five principal aspects of human personality. "A total perfection", Aurobindo says, "is the ultimate aim we set before us, for our ideal is the Divine life which we wish to create here". In order to rise to this goal of perfection, the Mother has pointed out that there should be a proper development of the five principal aspects of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. In a similar vein the Report of the International Commission on the Development of Education (1972) has stated:

The physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man is a broad definition of the fundamental aim of education.

4. Learning to Be, p.156
It is not for nothing that the only Indian educationist represented in the Background Papers prepared for the Report of the Commission and now published in the form of a book is on Sri Aurobindo and is entitled ‘Nothing can be taught’.  

Educationists today recognise the importance of freedom in the learning situation. The child is considered the starting-point, the centre and the end. To the growth of the child all other factors are subservient. New education is really a new attitude towards the child—an attitude of understanding love and respect. "A child is like the seed which bears within it, invisible yet present, the entire plant with all its leaves, flowers and fruit. We should not aim to teach him what he ought to be, but to help him express what he is. Each human being has his own nature, his own laws governing his development and he alone can gradually come to understand them". The teacher should not force him to be something that he is not. His role is to protect him from danger and provide conditions suitable to his proper growth. He has the capacity to grow; the teacher should only help him to do so. Nothing should be imposed on him. Learning should be full of joy and happiness. This idea is in conformity

5.  Education on the Move, p.209
6.  Ibid, pp.209-210
with Aurobindo's 'second' principle of teaching in which he points out that the child should be consulted in his growth. "The idea of hammering the child into shape desired by the parent or teacher", he says, "is a barbarous and ignorant superstition". Once again the report of the International Commission on the development of Education can be quoted in the context of Aurobindo's ideas on freedom to the child:

'It should be made a principle to centre educational activity on the learner, to allow him greater freedom, as he matures, to decide for himself what he wants to learn and how and where he wants to learn it."

The curriculum and the methods of teaching adopted at Sri Aurobindo Centre of Education are characterised by freedom. The many choices that are open to the child and the worksheet technique adopted by the teacher allows the child the freedom to learn what he wants and at a pace that suits him best. Thus the child is given complete freedom except with the condition that his freedom will not impinge on the freedom of others.

In an atmosphere of freedom, the individual should therefore, be helped to realize his utmost potentialities, find his proper relation with his group or nation and should also be encouraged to find his true position in the world community. Education

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7. op.cit., p.220
should not simply aim at the development of the individual or the nation but aim at the collective liberation of mankind. In the shrinking world today the old Indian concept of the world as a big family must be revived. National pride is an essential quality in an individual but it must be subordinated to the international feeling of world peace and brotherhood. The two global wars have proved for us beyond doubt that narrow nationalism should give way to internationalism, otherwise the human race cannot survive. To avoid another world war, defences of peace must be built through education.

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Iqbal made a passionate plea for international understanding and world brotherhood. He preached the ideal of human unity. Men and women of diverse faith and nationalities who gathered round him at Pondicherry made efforts to translate his ideas into action. In the Ashram, the Centre of Education and the Auroville, it is the same message of the brotherhood of man that we see in action. Their mentor was not interested in the uplift of the individual alone; he was concerned with the complete transformation of human society so as to hasten its march towards perfection. Integral education helps the individual to become conscious of the genius of his nation and at the same time become aware of the modes of living of other nations so that the students may know and respect equally the true spirit of
all the countries. The Mother has pointed out, that for all "world organisation, to be real and to be able to live, must be based upon mutual respect and understanding between nation and nation as well as between individual and individual". Sri Aurobindo believed that having once accepted the ideal of human unity mankind should be engaged in the process of giving it a shape in all its activities and institutions.

Sri Aurobindo believed that India had a great and glorious contribution to make to the modern world. The western world has emphasised outward efficiency and neglected the inward nature of man. It has accumulated material wealth at the cost of the wealth that comes from within. The crisis that faces the world today can be summed up in these words:

Man's knowledge and mastery of his own self are out of balance. It is this imbalance which mankind must seek to redress. Man now faces himself. He faces the choice of rolling down a nuclear abyss to ruin and annihilation or of raising himself to new heights of glory and fulfilment yet unimagined.9

In Sri Aurobindo's message to the world we come across the ideal, the yearning that can take man to the new heights of glory.

8. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother of Education, p
India is today making a big effort at industrialization, removal of poverty, ignorance and a reasonable standard of living. She has the advantage of having immense geographical resources and the wealth of science and technology developed in the West. In return she can impart the message of spirituality sorely needed in what has come to be termed the materialistic West. India can certainly add a new dimension to the achievements of science and technology. It is the combination of science and spirituality that alone can solve the crisis facing the world today. In his great synthetic vision, Aurobindo has brought the East and the West together; he has worked out a synthesis between India's past and present, between the materialist's negation and the refusal of the ascetic, between science and spirituality.

In the educational sphere, he recommends an integration of humanities and science, of the faculties of the right hand and the faculties of the left hand.

In his concept of total development of personality, Sri Aurobindo has laid a special emphasis on physical education. He considers body to be an instrument of spiritual perfection, the means of fulfilment of dharma, and not an obstacle or impediment to the realization of divine life on earth. The divine life will reject nothing that is capable of divinization; all is to be seized, exalted, made utterly perfect. For the
perfection of the body, he recommends that games and sports and yogasanas should be organised. Games and sports help greatly towards the creation of physically fit and energetic people. But games and sports, according to Sri Aurobindo, are not to be organised for the purpose of physical fitness alone. There is a higher purpose, that of "development of discipline and morale and sound and strong character towards which these activities can help". He maintained that games and sports develop the qualities of courage, hardihood, energetic action, initiative, steadiness of will, rapid decision, dexterity, leadership, obedience, acceptance of victory or defeat without bad humour and many others. He sincerely believed that these qualities should be developed keeping in view the interest of the nation and the world at large. Referring to these qualities he said:

The nation which possesses them in the highest degree is likely to be the strongest in victory, success and greatness, but also for the contribution it can make towards the bringing about of unity and a more harmonious world order.  

Not brute strength but the qualities of character is the aim of physical education. The values of games and

10. Sri Aurobindo and Mother on Education, p.64
11. Ibid, p.67
Sports in the building of intelligence and character are being increasingly realized today. They find an ample space in the curricula of schools and colleges in the advanced countries. Educationists in India cannot afford to neglect them any longer. It has been established beyond doubt, by scientific research that:

Boys and girls learn their lessons more easily, take in new knowledge and understand new ideas more readily, if their daily programme includes periods of sport and physical exercise which they enjoy—the time given to sport, is not lost; it pays a big dividend in the greater alertness of the pupils in other lessons, and their greater ability to absorb and to retain what they are taught.12

Games and sport should, therefore, be given more time in the school curricula and more importance in college and university life than they have today. It is time that we pay heed to the advice given by Sri Aurobindo in this respect.

Sri Aurobindo's analysis of the functions of mind should serve as an eye-opener to the teachers who still have faith in the outmoded and traditional methods of teaching. Education of the mind is a very significant aspect of the education of the young. The most important

thing in the education of the mind is the development of the power of intuition, the fourth layer of the mind. This aspect of mind is not yet developed in man and is chiefly known to us from the phenomenon of genius. Psychologists like Paul Torrance have done commendable work in the field of creativity and come to the conclusion that creativity is a distinct power of mind unrelated to intelligence. Still they have not been able to go into the depth of the very source of the creative talent. When we read Aurobindo's description of the hierarchical layers of mind we discover the source of all creative power, intuition. The development of this extraordinary power is a big challenge to educationists today. But the challenge must be met, ways and means must be found for the development of this power, the element of genius in the pupil. It is clear that humanity would not have advanced to its present stage if it had not been for the help of this power of intuition. The least that the teacher can do in this regard, suggests Sri Aurobindo, is to provide an atmosphere of freedom to the child.

Sri Aurobindo's ideas on moral and religious education are extremely relevant to the existing situation in the country and the world. Secularism has lead to an omission of religious ties, many people have learned to get along with few or no religious observance at all. Indifference to religion has come to be regarded as the characteristic of the young and the 'enlightened'.
The constitution-makers in our country guaranteed the freedom of religion and at the same time placed a ban on religious instruction in institutions wholly maintained out of state funds. All this was done in the name of secularism. But secularism does not mean an irreligious or anti-religious policy; it does not belittle the importance of religion as such. The importance of religion in a man’s life cannot be over-emphasised. However, on account of a “ban placed on religious instructions in the schools and the weakening of home influences which, in the past, often imparted such instruction, children are now growing up without any clear idea of their own religion and with no chance of learning about others”.\(^{13}\) "Vriobindo emphasises the fact that religion is not something that can be taught; it has to be lived. Many of his ideas on religious instruction have been incorporated in the reports of various committees and commissions on education. Yet a closer and detailed examination of his ideas on religious education is warranted.

The concept of vital education covers the field of moral education or the building up of character. For moral training Vriobindo prefers suggestion to imposition, example rather than precept. He recommends a closer contact between the teacher and the pupil, a contact between the soul and another, for the development

of morality. For this purpose it is essential that the teacher should himself be a man of sterling character. No amount of teaching will do any good if the teacher teaches one thing and practises another. A low standard of morality is a poor reflection on the quality of teachers that we have.

Sri Aurobindo is not in favour of intellectualization of moral education. Text-books on moral and religious education are not completely useless; they throw certain seeds of thought into the mind which can ultimately influence the conduct of the pupils. Still he would not have encouraged the present trend of writing books on the subject and neglecting the spirit behind it. He pointed out that the moral and religious textbooks make the teaching of noble ideas mechanical and artificial and whatever is mechanical and artificial becomes ineffective.

Sri Aurobindo has given the golden rule on the basis of which moral instruction can be organised in the schools and colleges today. "The first rule of moral training," he has pointed out, "is to suggest and invite not command and impose." The teacher should put the child on the right road to perfection and encourage him to follow it, watching, suggesting, helping but not interfering. Pupils should be given freedom even to err and stumble in action. If they have bad habits

14. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Education, p.29
they should not be treated harshly but encouraged to think of them as symptoms of curable disease. Much of the wildness and recklessness that we see in the young, he remarked, are only the overflowings of an excessive strength, greatness and nobility.

Boys and girls, according to Sri Aurobindo, should therefore, be given intellectual encouragement as well as practical opportunity to develop morally. "To teach moral knowledge is one thing but to ensure that the knowledge issues forth in moral conduct is quite another." 15 All attempts at moral education will prove abortive unless there is an opportunity for the child to practise what the school preaches. If the young are not able to embody in action, Sri Aurobindo points out, their moral impulses, they are not likely to develop them in full force. It implies that the work of the school in this direction can never be complete unless supplemented by society. A corrupt society cannot expect a new generation of incorruptible people.

In an age of competition, Sri Aurobindo wants students to get rid of all urges of rivalry; all struggle for precedence and domination. Competitive spirit is good to some extent but it should never be encouraged excessively. Pupils should be made to realize the basic unity of mankind; nothing can be achieved by domination or subjection, each individual

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must find his true place and play his role in accordance with his essential nature.

Sri Aurobindo has debunked the idea of the modern utilitarian approach to education. Students today hanker after degrees and diplomas which in the long run help them in getting lucrative jobs. When they think of their studies, they think of what can be useful to them when they grow up, from the monetary point of view. What is more important to them is to pass an examination and not to aspire for knowledge or the qualities of character. Students of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education are not awarded any degree or diploma "simply to demonstrate this to them that we do not prepare them for any official examination and competition". The aim of education is not just to enable the students to pass an examination. This highly unorthodox idea should be viewed in the context of the demand of a delinking of degrees and jobs. Degrees have become a passport for employment with the result that many malpractices have crept in our examination system and even day-to-day teaching. It may be mentioned that this suggestion is applicable in case of only select or elite institution and not in all.

The utilitarian approach to education has been criticised from a different angle. Aurobindo's philosophy of education has no place for what is known today as 'job-oriented education' and 'work experience'.

16. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Education, p.168
In a fast changing world these concepts are likely to become useless and obsolete. The job for which we train the young today may not exist in their present form or completely disappear when the students enter the world of work. What education should do is not to provide the saleable job-skills but in the words of Sri Aurobindo, put the growing soul into the way of its own perfection. No amount of factual knowledge is going to help him. What the pupils should acquire, through self-effort, as far as possible, the sort of competence and confidence that will train them to improvise the necessary skills to meet future contingencies.

Sri Aurobindo has repeatedly drawn the attention of the educators to the cultural development of the pupil. Culture is what remains, after everything is forgotten. He wants every child to become conscious of the culture of the nation to which he belongs and also become aware of the other cultures existing on the earth. The unity of human race can be achieved only by a synthesis of all cultures of the world. The young are most suited for this work of progressive unification of the human race.

Students in our schools today are over-burdened with subject-matter to be learnt. Their bulging satchels tell a pathetic tale. It is believed that in order to meet the challenge of the explosion of knowledge in the modern world the only way out is the enriched curriculum or what Maurice P. Hunt calls 'curriculum clutter'.

In the recent years there has been a proliferation of subjects and a corresponding increase in the factual information to be mastered in each subject. Sri Aurobindo prefers the old system in which two or three subjects, mainly the instruments of knowledge, were thoroughly mastered before moving over to other subjects.

Formal education is today divided horizontally in a number of subjects and vertically in grades and classes. This structure or the ceremonial of school has become more important than the content. The curriculum is neatly packaged into units, subject-wise or yearly. "Both progress and fulfilment are measured and recorded. The measurement defines the market value of an individual and is taken by him as an indication of competence for the performance of certain functions. Schooled into measuring their worth by curricular standards, men no longer try what they have not been entitled to do. Self-activity is demeaned into an extra-curricular past time—something to be done after school or after work and of no real value except as an outlet, for idiosyncrasy."

No better comment can be made on the tyranny of structures and content of the school curriculum, Western or Indian. Aurobindo pleads for horizontal and vertical integration of the curriculum. Only an integrated curriculum as envisaged in integral education

18. Ivan Illich, Education on the Move, p.72
can remedy the weaknesses of the present-day education.

Today we talk of 'revolution in education' and yet in actual practice remain glued to the obsolete and worn-out systems of education. Only a revolution in the field of education can set in motion the much-desired social, economic and cultural revolution in the country. What we need today is not simply to add more education to what we are now offering our people but to change in a fundamental way the entire structure, direction and content of our educational system. At the same time we should not be oblivious of the higher purpose of life, every man is God's 'secret workshop' the divine laboratory in which a new man, a supramental man is being forged.

In one of her New Year messages, the Mother gave the clarion call that has a tremendous significance for the educationists, not of India alone but of all the countries of the world. She said:

The world is preparing for a big change.

Will you help?

To conclude, Sri Aurobindo's message of integral yoga is highly meaningful in the present context of time. Its counterpart in education, which can be aptly termed as integral education, is a seminal idea and must engage the anxious attention of educationists all over the world. Sri Aurobindo's vision of a new world order, a progressive unification of the human race that will usher in an era of peace and prosperity, can become a possibility
through integral education. His vision is not just another Utopia, an academic exercise of an idle brain, but something towards which humanity must strive to save itself from the perils of a global holocaust. His vision is India's great contribution to the modern world.