CHAPTER II

"LIFE AND WORK"
The quintessence of the life of a philosopher cannot be grasped by a rapid survey of facts and incidents relating to the visible parts of his journey on Earth. For he lives, not in the outward existence but in the inwardness of the development of his thought. It is different with a man of action. His conquests, trials and tribulations are there for all to see. In his case we are not concerned with what was within but what he did in full view of the men of his time. It was with this distinction in mind that Sri Aurobindo stated emphatically "to write my biography is impossible" in spite of this assertion, a spate of biographies have appeared in print some of which are written by his ardent devotees and followers.

Aurobindo Ghose was born on 15th August, 1872 in Calcutta. His father Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose was a government civil surgeon who had received his advanced medical training in England. Dr. Ghose was so much enamoured of English customs and manners that he decided to give a thoroughly European education to his children. He sent Aurobindo and Aurobindo's two older brothers, Benoybhushan and Nanomohan, to Loretto Convent, Darjeeling. Later, he took his three sons, his wife Swarnlata and his only daughter Sarojini to England with the avowed purpose of

1. A. Purani, Life of Sri Aurobindo, p. 235
making arrangements for the education of his sons there. Another son Berindro was born during this visit. Dr. Ghose left his three sons in England to the care of an English family Mrs. and Mr. William Drewett and returned to India to rejoin his service. His wife, daughter and the youngest son joined him later. Before leaving England Dr. Ghose left instructions with the Drewetts that his sons were to be given a thoroughly European education and not to be exposed to any Indian influence.

School in England

Aurobindo's brothers attended the Manchester Grammar School but Aurobindo himself, being only seven, was privately tutored by the Drewetts. Mr. Drewett was an accomplished Latin Scholar and he grounded his pupil thoroughly in this language. Aurobindo spent most of his time in reading books - and particularly books of English poetry. He also started writing verses in English and got them published in the local magazines. The Drewetts followed the instructions of Dr. Ghose rather strictly. Aurobindo and his brothers were not allowed to mix with other Indians and become familiar with the Indian way of life. They did not, however, convert them to Christianity.

In 1894, Aurobindo was admitted to St. Paul's School in London. The head-master of the school was greatly impressed with his proficiency in Latin and took personal care in his studies. At St. Paul, Aurobindo continued his study of the classics in addition to English and French literature and European history. He learnt Italian, German
and Spanish. He read Dante and Goethe in original. He took part in various academic activities organised in the school and showed hardly any inclination for sports.

In all Sri Aurobindo spent 5 years at St. Paul.

The last two years of his stay at St. Paul was a time of "the greatest suffering and poverty." This was a time when remittances from his father became more and more irregular and inadequate and finally stopped. Aurobindo and his two brothers were left to their own resources, so far away from their homes. "During a whole year," Aurobindo once remarked, "a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny-worth of saveloy formed the only food." The suffering of the three brothers were lessened for a while when the eldest, BenoyThushan became an assistant on five shillings a week to an Englishman.

During these two years at St. Paul, the young Aurobindo won a senior classical scholarship of £ 80 per year tenable at King's College, Cambridge and also got himself registered as a candidate for the Indian Civil Service examination. He could not afford any tutor and therefore prepared the subjects for the I.C.S. examination all by himself. Working for his degree at King's College he also passed the Civil Service examination in 1890 getting 11th place and scoring record marks in Greek and Latin.

1. Sri Aurobindo on Himself, p.11-2
2. Ibid.
This entitled him to a stipend for the probationary period. Financially, he was now placed in a much better position than before.

From King's College in Cambridge, Sri Aurobindo passed the First part of classical Triops Examination in the first class but left without a degree as he had no interest in a purely academic career. The years spent at King's College were the years of preparation for a higher calling. Likewise, he had no interest in the I.C.S. and he passed the examination simply to please his father. He avoided the horseriding test which was compulsory for candidates for appointment to the Civil Service in India. Four different chances were given to him but each time Aurobindo failed to appear in the test. Later Sri Aurobindo said, "I appeared for the I.C.S. because my father wanted it and I was too young to understand. Later I found out what sort of work it was and I had no interest in the administrative life. My interest was in poetry and literature and the study of languages and patriotic action."

After his rejection at the I.C.S. Aurobindo's elder brother became worried about his future career. An interview was arranged with the Gaekward of Baroda, who was then on a visit to England. As a result of this interview Sri Aurobindo was selected for the Baroda state service. He left England after 14 years of study. During these years, he did develop an attachment to

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European thought and culture but not to England as a country. He had no ties there. If there was any attachment to a European country, it was to a country that he never saw during his lifetime - to France.

In January 1893, Sri Aurobindo set foot on the soil of India with very little knowledge about her. His father's efforts of making him every inch an Englishman had not succeeded. While Aurobindo was away to England, his father had taken to drinking and his mother was inflicted with some mental disease. His father died even before his arrival to India and his mother did not recognise him first when he met her after a long separation.


daroda and state service

Aurobindo was twenty-one when he became a State Official at Baroda. For the next thirteen years he served the State in several capacities and in various departments. He was first put in the Settlement Department, then in the Stamps and Revenue Department and later in the Secretariat. Later he was made lecturer in French at Baroda College and finally at his request was appointed as Professor of English.

In Baroda, he pursued his private studies intensely. He learned Sanskrit, and also Marathi and Gujarati which were the official languages in Baroda. He also learnt Bengali that was ironically his mother-tongue, in the literal sense of the term only. He had tried to learn it earlier in England from an Englishman called Pandit Towers, who himself did not know it well. Here also he spent more and more time on learning the history, traditions and
achievement of India. In Baroda also he got married at the age of 28, to Mrinalini Devi who was barely half his age and in the words of K.K.Biwakar, "destined to suffer for marrying a genius".  

Sri Aurobindo was highly respected by his students at Baroda College not only for his profound knowledge of English literature but also for his saintly character and gentle manners. His magnetic personality was imbued with a mighty purpose. He left an indelible impression on all those who came in contact with him. One of his students, the renowned Shri K.K. Kunshi wrote about his student days thus: "The Aurobindonian legend in the college filled me with reverence, and it was with awe that I hung upon his words whenever he came to the college as Professor of English."

Sri Aurobindo's usual method of teaching English literature was applauded by his students. He introduced the subject matter of an English classic with a few lectures. After that he read the text explaining meaning of difficult words wherever necessary. He ended by giving general lectures on the various aspects of the subject-matter. For him the main thing in the study of literature was to awaken mind and sensibility of the student and bring it in direct contact with "the precious life-blood of a master spirit."

During the years he spent at Baroda he wrote a good

5. K.K.Biwakar, Mahayogi, p.50
6. Quoted by Jisir Kumar Mitra
7. Nirodtaran, Talks with Sri Aurobindo, pp.120
deal of poetry. Among these are included songs to
Myrtilla and other poems, Urvasie and Love and Death. He
also wrote a dramatic romance the 'Viziers of Bassora' and
the drama 'Perseus the Deliverer'. He also did some
translation of Sanskrit classics including the Century of
Life by Bhartrihari and Kalidasa's play Vikram Urvasie
and his famous narrative poem Meghabuta.

During these years Sri Aurobindo became increasingly
interested and involved in political matters. Soon after
his arrival at Baroda, he was invited to write articles
on the political situation in the country in Indu Prakash,
Bombay weekly. In these articles 'New Lamps for Old'
Sri Aurobindo made a severe criticism of the policies and
programmes of the Indian National Congress. The title
was not used in the sense of the Aladdin story but was
intended to imply "The offerings of new lights to replace
the old and the faint reformist lights of the congress".
This series of articles exhibited "the fusion of a young
man's intolerance and idealism and wise man's deep and
abiding wisdom". He was only 22 then.

In the latter part of his stay at Baroda he was often
absent on leave and was engaged in silent political
activity as he was barred from open public action by his
position in the state service. In 1906 when the nationalist
movement against the partition of Bengal started
he resigned from his post of Vice-Principal in the Baroda

8. Sri Aurobindo on Himself, p.27
9. S.K.Ramakrishnam Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo, p.98
college where he was drawing a monthly salary of ₹800 and joined as principal of newly founded Bengal National College, Calcutta on a salary of ₹150 per month.

Calcutta - Political Activity

In Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo plunged into the heart of the political agitation. The mistakes of the British government had precipitated the wrath of the students and he saw an opportunity to direct the newly awakened spirit of nationalism. His political activity lasted only four years, but during this short period he "wrought a great-revolution in the political thought of this country through his speeches and writings." He did not remain in the college for long, for his all-consuming passion for service to the nation did not leave him time to do anything else. He resigned his post as principal of National College even before he had completed the full year. In a farewell speech to students he said, "There are times in a nation's history when providence places before it one work, one aim, to which everything else, however high and noble in itself, has to be sacrificed. Such a time has now arrived for our Netherlands when nothing is dearer than her service, when everything else is to be directed to that end. If you will study for her sake; train yourselves body and mind and soul for her service. You will earn your living that you may live for her service. You will go abroad to foreign lands that you may bring back knowledge with which you may

10. "Sri Aurobindo, Hinduism Through the Ages, p.204
11. "Sisir Kumar Mitra, Sri Aurobindo, pp.61-61
In the years he spent at Calcutta, he gave his attention, mainly to two things. First, to organise the Nationalist Party so as to counteract the influence of the moderates in the Congress. Secondly, to start an English daily for wider propagation of the gospel of revolutionary nationalism. As to the first objective the Nationalist party was formed with the active help of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The opportunity for the latter came when Bipin Chandra Pal started an English daily under the name of Bande Mataram and invited Sri Aurobindo to be its editor. The Bande Mataram became the party organ of the Nationalist, and gained wide circulation. It was the policy of this paper to publish articles that were seditious and inflammatory but not actionable. Sri Aurobindo showed himself to be a master-craftsman in this kind of writing.

The programme which Sri Aurobindo formulated as leader of the nationalist party of the Congress included passive resistance to British government, boycott of British trade, settlement of disputes by Arbitration Courts, starting of Swadeshi industries and national education. The Nationalists rejected the moderates' policy of prayer, petition and protest, and declared Swaraj as the goal of

11. Sisirkumar Mitra, Sri Aurobindo, pp.60-61
India. Through his speeches and writings Aurobindo became an acknowledged leader of the Indian struggle for independence even though he always preferred to avoid the limelight and worked behind the scenes.

During this busy but brief period of political activity, Sri Aurobindo also strove hard to become a Yogi. He had experiences of mystical nature earlier also and had adopted various practices of Yoga to get more strength for his political work. Toward the end of 1907 he met Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who was a firebrand nationalist in his youth and was a convert to the life of a yogi. Aurobindo approached him for guidance in his yoga. Lele promised to help him provided he suspended his political activity for some time. Sri Aurobindo agreed and the two were closeted in a room for three days. Later, Lele found that Sri Aurobindo was far ahead in Yoga than he had imagined and therefore decided that there was no need for further instruction.

In May, 1908, Sri Aurobindo was arrested by the British Government on suspicion of secret, revolutionary activities. An attempt on the life of British Magistrate of Calcutta had just failed; the bomb had been manufactured in the garden where Barindra, his youngest brother was training revolutionaries.

The Alipur Jail

Sri Aurobindo was 36 when he was imprisoned in Alipur Jail. He remained in jail for a year as an undertrial prisoner. In the jail he spent almost all his time in reading the Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads and in
intensive meditation and the practice of yoga. In the
beginning Aurobindo took up yoga with the sole purpose of
acquiring spiritual force and divine guidance for his own
work in life—the freedom of the country. But as he
entered deeper into yoga, his entire outlook underwent a
drastic change. The profound religious experiences he
had in the prison totally altered the course of his life.
It was indeed a momentous period of his life.

The major experience that Aurobindo had was
recounted by him later in a speech he made at Uttarpara
immediately after his release from jail. He said, "I
looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no
longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it
was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches
do the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I
knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing
there and holding over me his hands. I looked at the
bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door
and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was
guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the
course blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the
arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and
lover." This was the first time that the spoke publicly
of his yoga. Earlier Aurobindo took no interest in
the trial, he sat meditating throughout. It was mainly by

12. Bisirkumar Mitra, Sri Aurobindo, pp. 92-93
the efforts of a prominent lawyer H.C.R. Das that he was acquitted.

Even after he was set at liberty he did not take any interest in politics. His was a work of Yoga, a work that could be undertaken only in seclusion. He continued with his literary work. He founded two journals, the Karmayogin in English and Dharma in Bengali. In the Karmayogin he published his poems, his translations of Upanishads and series of articles later published as the Ideal of Karmayogin, the Brain of India and A System of National Education.

In Pondicherry

Sri Aurobindo felt that he was not safe in British India. Also he was no longer interested in politics and he wanted to be left alone to pursue his yoga. In 1910 he went to Pondicherry, the capital of French India and the scene of his last, and most significant chapter of his life. For the next forty years, he did not leave Pondicherry and for a large part of that time he did not even leave his room.

In 1914 he was visited by a French scholar Paul Richard and his talented wife Nizza Richard. These two had been looking for such an enlightened man. Together, they started the publication of a monthly journal, the Arya. With the outbreak of the First World War the Richards left India and Sri Aurobindo was faced with the task of writing the entire journal himself, month after month.
During the next six years and a half he wrote his major prose works serially. These include the *Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *On the Veda*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. The *Arya* ceased publication thereafter.

In the early years of his stay at Pondicherry, a few persons became his disciples and came to live with him. They sought his advice in spiritual matters and felt his benign presence. In 1920 Mirra Richard came to Pondicherry and settled permanently. More disciples came and Sri Aurobindo handed over the entire administration of the Ashram to her. Mirra Richard became the Mother of the Ashram and Sri Aurobindo retired more into the background. He would now appear in public only on three or four special days in a year otherwise he was completely inaccessible. "In the midst of absolute silence he was engaged with sustained concentration in bringing down into the flux of human evolution the creative light and transmutative power of the higher divine consciousness - the supermind".13

The retirement of Sri Aurobindo from the political activity did not mean that he took no interest in the affairs of the world or the future of India. In fact he kept a close watch on what was happening in India or in the world. However only on very rare occasions did he openly

try to influence public opinion. During the Second World War he publicly declared himself to be on the side of the Allies and warned that a "Nazi victory would mean a terrible slavery for mankind and a severe setback for the evolution." In 1942 he advised the acceptance of Cripps proposals but Indian leaders did not heed his advice. In 1947 India gained independence on Sri Aurobindo's birthday, the 15th of August.

The retirement of Sri Aurobindo also did not mean any cessation of literary activity. He continued writing English poetry to the end of his life. His most ambitious attempt in this field in his long epic poem Savitri - a poem that deals with "the fundamental epic theme: that of evolution from darkness to light, the growth of consciousness, the overcoming of the demonic powers and of death itself, in the achievement of divinity." On 5th December, 1950 Sri Aurobindo died after a brief illness. From those who were with him at the time of his death, we learn that he knew precisely when the end was to come. He had realized that his life's mission was over.

The Mother of the Ashram about whom Sri Aurobindo had said that whatever came from her also came from him announced that even after his death Sri Aurobindo "had given assurance of his continued activity from higher planes of consciousness until human evolution blossomed forth into a new era of enduring peace, harmony and uninterrupted progress."
Aftermath

The Ashram and the Centre of Education at Pondicherry survived the shock of Aurobindo's passing away and continued to expand and grow under the personal care and direction of the Mother. The ashram was there, in a way, ever since the arrival of Sri Aurobindo in the then French Colony in 1910, but it was given a concrete shape in 1926 when the disciples were entrusted to the charge of the Mother. Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education had a modest beginning in 1943 with about 20 Ashram children. In 1952 it became Sri Aurobindo International University Centre and in 1959 it was renamed as Aurobindo International Centre of Education. Centre of Education is an integral part of the Ashram, almost all the teachers and most of the students belong to the Ashram.

At the Centre of Education, the students pay no fees and the teachers are maintained by the Ashram like other sadhaks and receive no salaries. Students wear no uniforms and the teachers wear no academic gowns. There are no holidays, not even vacations. There is no distinction between work and play. Pupils are free to choose the subjects they like; they are even free to take the examinations or not to take them. Diplomas and certificates are not given. The aim of the Centre is to usher in a new race, ready to face and shape the future and not to prepare students for petty jobs. A distinctive feature of the Centre is the free progress system which allows the student to learn at his own pace. Freedom is the very essence of the atmosphere at the Centre.
In 1968, Auroville, City of Dawn, was inaugurated in a solemn ceremony in which handfuls of earth from 124 nations of the world was mixed with the earth of the new city symbolizing the unity of mankind. The charter of this futurist town says, "Auroville belongs to nobody in particular it belongs to humanity as a whole". Auroville was hailed as an international city of hope. The Mother died in 1973 and with her death the hope dimmed.