

Notes from "In Portals of Indian Universities"

By C.D. Deshmukh

Sri Aurobindo Relics Enshrinement

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Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on the 15th of August, 1872, a date which, by a coincidence which must have some significance, marked the beginning of the independence of India, an ideal for which Sri Aurobindo struggled hard until he retired from politics in 1910. Sri Aurobindo's early education was purely English, in the course of which he received a thorough grounding in Greek and Latin and laid the foundation for his scholarship in Classicism, besides developing love for English and French literature and for history. During this period he also picked up a good knowledge of Italian and German and his poetic temperament led him to compose poems in English. At Cambridge in 1889 he won all the prizes in King's College in one year for Greek and Latin proficiency, passed the first part of the classical Tripos examination in the first class, but didn't take the second part. In the following year he passed the open competition for the Indian Civil Service examination but maneuvered to fail in the riding test because by that time he was animated by burning sense of patriotism. The three years saw him as a rebel against the modern politics of the Indian leaders of the time and he even attempted the organization of a secret society for overthrowing the foreign rule in India. An introduction to the Gaikwar of Baroda by James Cotton, brother of that great friend of India, Sir Henry Cotton, secured Sri-Aurobindo a promising position in the Baroda State service.

Disqualified for the Indian Civil Services, Sri Aurobindo, who had mastered Greek, Latin, English and French and had acquired sufficient knowledge of German and Italian felt that he was denationalized by his culture and foreign tastes and tendencies, but his wide learning enabled him have a glimpse of the real condition of his country which he was one day destined to re-nationalize.

The thirteen years, from 1893 to 1906, filled Sri Aurobindo's life with varied service experience including teaching. They were also years of much literary activity and considerable self-culture. Much of the poetry afterwards published from Pondicherry was written at this time. It was at Baroda that he made up for his deficiency of oriental and Indian languages especially Marathi and Gujarati, the two official languages of the State. He also learnt Bengali, mostly by himself.

Among Sri Aurobindo's intimate friends at Baroda was Madhavrao Jadhav with whom he lived for most of the time he was there. It was here that he came to be acquainted with spiritual work, through the sayings of Ramakrishna and the writings and speeches of Vivekanandara for whom he developed an immense admiration. He took little interest in Philosophy and Metaphysics although one of his Cambridge friends, K. G. Deshpande, who was a Sadhaka, asked him to take to the practice of Yoga, an idea which he dismissed, as it seemed to him a retreat from life.

It was while in Baroda that Sri Aurobindo began to take stock of the educational conditions and political situation in India and started contributing anonymously, at the instance of his friend, K. G. Deshpande, to the "Indu Prakash" a series of out-spoken articles under the challenging caption "New Lamps for Old." In these articles he gave vent to his dissatisfaction at the manner in which the Indian National Congress, then about ten years old, was conducting its activities. These bold articles made a sensation in political circles and scared Mahadev Gobind Ranade and other leaders of the

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time, at whose instance Sri Aurobindo was requested to moderate his tone. A greater part of the last years of his Baroda service was spent by Sri Aurobindo in behind-the-scenes political activity. The outbreak of the agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905 finally led him to resign from the Baroda Services, and he openly joined the political movement. In 1906 he came to Calcutta as the principal of the newly found National College. This was, as it proved to be, a turning point in his career.

In Calcutta Sri Aurobindo plunged himself heart and soul into the movement to annul the partition of Bengal and to liberate his country. Along with the Bengali-Maratha journalist, Sakkaram Ganesh Deuskar, author of the "Desher Katha" and Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Editor of the *Sandhya*, Sri Aurobindo started a program with object of attaining Swaraj through boycott and swadeshi. To him Swaraj meant complete independence and not merely self-government within the British Empire. Along with Bipin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das, Aswini Kumar Dutta and Rabindranath Tagore, he held out before the country a constructive program of nationalism which was animated by the supreme mantra of *Bandemataram* as depicted by Bankim Chandra Chatterji in *Anandamath*.

Soon Sri Aurobindo found himself at the head of the progressive nationalists in Bengal. He was the real power behind the *Bandemataram*, the journal of the nationalist Party, which in a short time became the spear-head of the nationalist movement in Bengal. It was through this journal that Sri Aurobindo pointed out the hollowness of the Minto-Morley reforms and enunciated the idea of passive resistance as an instrument of political action.

Sri Aurobindo did not rule out violence in all circumstances and was acquainted with the working of certain secret societies in Western and Eastern India. Of these societies, the **Yugantar** group in Bengal became closely associated with these activities, and in August 1907 Sri Aurobindo was actually taken into police custody for having published certain articles in the *Bandemataram*, which were previously published in the society's journal, the *Yugantar*. The strength of character and courage shown by him in the course of this case won him universal applause. It was on this occasion that India's poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote his well known poem on Sri Aurobindo, beginning with the words:

Aurobindo, Ravindrer,
Laho Namaskar

(Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee,
O Friend, my country's friend, O Voice incarnate, free, of India's soul!)

Nationalist politics brought Sri Aurobindo into close touch with other all Indian progressive leaders, the most notable of whom as Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The two together vehemently opposed the moderate policy of the Congress led by Surendra Nath Bannerjee, Pirozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others. Matters came to a head at the famous Surat Congress in 1907. The Maratha and the Bengali succeeded in exposing the real character of moderate politics, and at the end of Congress session, Sri Aurobindo found himself, almost against his will, in the center of the limelight of all-India leadership with "La, Bal and Pal," i.e. Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal.

On his way back from Surat, Sri Aurobindo paid a visit to Baroda, where he met Vishnu Bhasker Lele, who had come from Gawlio to Baroda to give Sri Aurobindo some guidance in Yoga.

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Yogi Lele advised Sri Aurobindo to strive to make his mind a sheet of white paper in order that he might receive a piece of divine calligraphy so that the divine could take possession of it and direct its future operations. The seed sown by Lele fell on a most fertile soil. Sri Aurobindo resigned himself entirely into God's hands. He had lost his identity as an individual and was to become Sri Aurobindo, the son and servant of God. His nationalism was no longer to be a merely political program. It became a religion which had come from God. Spiritualized politics was henceforth to characterize the thought and activities of Sri Aurobindo. His themes were the same old themes, nationalism, swadeshi, self-help, arbitration, the ethics of suffering, unselfish service and the necessity for reviving all that was good in our religion.

He galvanized Bengal into a blaze of spirited and high-souled endeavor and anticipated Mahatma Gandhi's methods of political action, notably passive resistance, in many fields. He realized the necessity of organizing village samities and of carrying the gospel of Swaraj to the villages and through them to the masses.

This work was, however, destined to be cut short. On May 5, 1908, he was arrested and confined in a secluded cell of Alipore Jail where he was permitted by the authorities to have books. He began reading and re-reading the Gita and saw the emanation of God around him. The Alipore trial of Aurobindo Ghose brought by Chittarajan's peroration in the final argument contained a prophetic statement. The prisoner before the court, he declared, was not an ordinary man. "Long after he is dead and gone he will be looked upon as the poet of Patriotism, as the prophet of Nationalism and the lover of Humanity.... His words will be echoed and reechoed not only in India, but across the distant seas and lands.... This man is not only standing before the Bar of this Court but before the Bar of the High Court of history." After a long and protracted trial, the British Judge, accepting the verdict of the two assessors, declared for Sri Aurobindo "not guilty."

Through his jail life Sri Aurobindo acquired the power to peep into infinity. Emancipated in his mind and in his soul, Sri Aurobindo was not completely free, although his friends in all parts of India were deported. Lokamanya Tilka was prisoner in Mandalay, others were undergoing imprisonment without trial in various other places, but Sri Aurobindo hurled himself once more into the divine endeavor. "Our object, our claim is that we shall not perish as a nation, but live as a nation and for this the people must be prepared for any suffering, for without suffering there can be no growth." This period saw Sri Aurobindo's writings in the **Karmayogin** where he expounded the Upanishads and the teachings of the Gita and wrote essays for the regeneration of the country. He laid stress on the necessity of the practice of Brahmacharya, which sought to raise up the physical and the spiritual. "Brahmacharya is the starting point but Yoga is the means to the finality of fulfillment." Nor was his idea of Hinduism parochial. "We will sacrifice no ancient form to an unreasoning love of change. We will keep none which the national spirit desires to replace by one that is a still better and dearer expression of the underlying soul of the nation." Sri Aurobindo's nationalism is a nationalism for enriching and extending life, not for diminishing or destroying it. The Karma yogina should perfect his own instrument and leave it in the hands of God. Only the man who has gone through the austerity and discipline of Yoga and has communed with the Divine is an irresistible leader against whom no human tendency can stand.

Reports spread that the Government wanted to deport him, and so, only ten months after his release from Alipore Jail, Sri Aurobindo decided to go into a prison of his own fashioning. In February 1910 he left Calcutta for the neighboring French territory of Chandranagar and in April 1910 he

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reached Pondicherry, where he could seek a more secluded spot for continuing his spiritual work, and there he soon completely surrendered himself to Yoga.

The political leader was destined to be a saint. "I came to Pondicherry," he said, "because I had been directed by the Voice to pursue my Yoga here." A new chapter in the spiritual history of India was about to open.

At Pondicherry, in the beginning, Sri Aurobindo lived a life of retirement with only four or five companions. This was a period of silent Yoga. Soon he decided to run a philosophical journal from Pondicherry. The *Arya*, as the journal was called, was published for nearly seven years, from 1915 to 1921. About this time Sri Aurobindo received at Pondicherry a remarkable French couple, Paul Richard and the lady who is now known as the Mother. The *Arya* had now a French edition which had, however, to be discontinued on account of World War I. These journals were philosophical treatises, which had as their ideals man's unity and man's transcendence to supermanhood. Among the many invaluable articles are the chapter of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* and *Essays on the Gita*.

The Life Divine, the magnum opus of Sri Aurobindo, contains the broad outlines of his teaching. Sri Aurobindo knew that the life divine can and must be realized on earth. Man, he said, should transcend his human limitations and grow into fulfillment and the rich splendor of the Divine. He should achieve an earthly immortality and even his terrestrial life should assume a divine character. The book deals with what the goal of man is and how and whether he may hope to reach it. Sri Aurobindo showed the strength and weakness of the human mind as the power which interprets the truth of universal existence for the practical uses of a certain order of things, but not the power which knows and guides that existence and therefore not the power that created or manifested it. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "Reason was the helper, reason is the bar." When, as result of the next evolutionary jump, the mind pierces through the lid of ignorance and touches the plan of supramental consciousness, man will have passed beyond "knowings," he will have acquired superconscious knowledge.

Students of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy regard as its most original and valuable part his book *The Life Divine*, with the description contained in it of the nature and evolutionary status of the Supermind, also termed variously "Real Idea, Rita-chit, Vijnana or Truth Consciousness." By seizing the full significance of the Supermind and linking it up with the rest of the available body of knowledge, Sri Aurobindo has been able to give us a convincing, synthetic and integral view of omnipresent reality. *The Life Divine* holds out the prospect of a gradual uprearing of this evolutionary base of a life spiritual and supermental, the supermind.

Sri Aurobindo's teachings do not aim at the development of any particular religion or to amalgamate the older religions or to found a new religion, for any of these things would lead away from its central purpose. The one aim of his Yoga is an inner self-government by which one who follows it can in time discover the one Self in all and evolve a higher consciousness than the mental, that is the spiritual and supramental consciousness which will transform and divinize human nature. "There must be a total and sincere surrender; there must be an exclusive self-opening to the Divine Power; there must be a constant and integral choice of the truth that is descending."

The yoga ashram at Pondicherry is, in fact, a unique spiritual laboratory. It is a dynamic phase of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. All the Sadhakas are one in the Mother; all meditate in the presence of the Mother. The Ashram is but the rough sketch of the promised Land.

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The paramount thing in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is to keep steady the flame of aspiration, to entrust the whole inner and outer life to the Mother and leave the rest in her hands. Sincerity and humility, freedom from desire, control or elimination of the vital movements, **japa** and concentration, all help to achieve the supreme and decisive act of **Atmasamapana** for a Sadhaka.

Sri Aurobindo's message, broadcast from the all India Radio on the eve of Independence Day in 1947, laid stress on the necessity of unity and emphasized the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia. Asia has risen, said he. There India has her part to play in forming a world union for a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind. A total spiritual direction given to the whole life and whole nature can lead humanity beyond itself.

The educational activities of the Ashram at Pondicherry are remarkable. They have sprung from the idea of the Ashram, which means the house or homes of a Teacher or Master who lodges those who come to him for the teaching and practice. Its basis is spiritual. Its aim is to give an integral education to the whole man, intellectual, spiritual and physical.

Sri Aurobindo attained his **Siddhi**, or perfection or self-realization on the 24th November, 1926. He passed away on the 5th December 1950. Soon after the passing of the Master-seer the vision of the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre was introduced to the world by the Mother. Sri Aurobindo conceived the idea of developing at Pondicherry an International University Centre with personnel from all over the world. It was considered that the most fitting memorial to his name would be to fund this University which would give concrete expression to the fact that his work continues with unabated vigor.

Sri Aurobindo International University Centre at Pondicherry aims at that supramental education which will result, not merely in a progressively developing formation of the human nature and increasing growth of its latent faculties, but a transformation of the nature itself, transformation of the being in its entirety, a new ascent of the species above and beyond man towards Superman, leading in the end to the appearance of the divine race upon earth.

Sri Aurobindo did not limit the field of his activity to any particular sphere of the world but included the entire humanity, even going beyond it. The Integral Yoga, Sri Aurobindo declared in 1921, is not for ourselves alone but for humanity, and indeed it is not so much for the sake of humanity as it is first and last, and all the time for the sake of the Divine.

A European philosopher has recently spoken of the real end of the world's religions systems in a way which has some relevance for us. All Indian religions teach us that it is possible to realize the immortality of human souls without direct recourse to the grace of Godhead. For three thousand years the Hindus and Buddhists have believed in this, have practiced it, and have regarded as the supreme bliss the realization of the deep eternal unity of the human soul. This is in sharp contrast with other theologies which broadly postulate the absolute corruption of human nature consequent upon the "Fall of Man," and man's total inability to help himself. It is however a question for consideration what is to be aimed at after the attainment of the identity of the soul with the cosmic soul; for in a sense, whatever satisfaction it may yield to the individual, it is individual satisfaction and therefore something that can be characterized as higher selfishness. This was the dilemma that faced Buddhism, since on the one hand it claimed that the soul's highest goal was Nirvana, that is to say, the extinction of the empirical ego and the realization of the eternal soul of self, and on the other hand, it practically demanded a complete giving of self in the service of others, even unto death.

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It was by way of solution of this dilemma that the later forms of Buddhism introduced the idea of Bodhisattvas, that is to say, the saintly beings who postponed their Nirvana in order to enable others to reach the same blessed state. The same idea is repeated in the later religion of Christianity.

(Several paragraphs skipped. Deshmukh's own ideas on comparative religion which I do not accept and which are not pertinent to the article.)

Those who accept and practice to the extent they can the teachings of Sri Aurobindo believe that, although his terrestrial body has attained its rest, his spirit lives and guides. These relics of the great seer are symbolic of that eternal immanence which will help and guide those that concentrate on their Yoga in these sanctified surroundings. They will assist the sincerity of the Sadhakas and promise their attainment of the ultimate integrity—the climb to divine supermanhood that will usher in, when sufficiently wide-spread, the radiant new world which must be the intent of the Supreme Consciousness above the universe."

(Deshmukh ended with quotations from Sri Aurobindo which were copied from "The Lie Divine" and so not typed here.)