



The Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality as a Pedagogy to Social Progress and Development: From Sri Aurobindo's Perspective

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I. Introduction:

From the early period of human civilization mankind has put its incessant efforts to realize a meaningful, prosperous and peaceful life on earth. Besides, the keen desire and the intense aspiration to know the unknown, has been one of the primary driving forces of human life from the early dawn of human civilization. Hence, the inquisitive minds of men engaged themselves to the task of unveiling the mystery underlying the external life and world. Some men of wisdom, in the light of their reason and understanding started analyzing the different natural phenomena and tried to explain them in terms of their causes and effects. In this way there developed a special branch of knowledge which came to be recognized as 'science'. Gradually science enriched the bounds of human knowledge regarding the world and its natural phenomena, and thereby, strengthened human mind and reason leading to the overall advancement of human civilization. But the inquisitive minds of men were not satisfied only with the knowledge of the external world; they wanted to know whether there is any such truth beyond this phenomenal world the realization of which would enable humanity to find the way to a perfect life of peace and harmony. It was in this desire to fulfill the aspiration for a perfect and meaningful life that, the journey of philosophy and philosophers began. Thus both science and philosophy evolved out of the necessities of human life. But the methods through which they seek to fulfill such necessities were different.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that at the very beginning of their journey the path of science and philosophy were not different and they went hand-in-hand. But gradually as life became complex, to deal with the greater problems of human life and existence, the pedagogy or the methods of science and philosophy to study human

life became different. While science with its methods of experiment and observation began to concentrate and resolve the problems pertaining to the external aspects of life, philosophy with its rational, intuitive and analytical methods delved into the deeper secrets of life which cannot be perceived externally. As a result the subject matter of science got limited to this material world which is presented to our sense-experience and materialism formed its very basis. On the other hand philosophy inspires human beings to look beyond their material life and realize their true selves lying within their innermost being. And in this way philosophy actually abided human life on this earth with a sense of spirituality centering round which there developed some deeper spiritual thoughts and theories which came to be known as spiritualism especially in the Indian philosophy. Generally spiritualism and materialism are considered as two diametrically opposite theories. Materialism holds that matter is the only reality; the material world which is known through sense-experience is the only thing which exists in reality. Further, the spirit is an imagination of mind only. On the other hand spiritualism regards spirit as the only reality; matter and the changeable material world has no existence in reality. Now since materialism is the basis of science and scientific endeavor, science and spirituality are generally thought to be as opposed to one another.

Now in this paper I would like to show that although science and spirituality are supposed to be opposed to one another, but for a true understanding of the meaning of our life and for achieving real progress and development in our social life, what we need is a reconciliation of science and spirituality. And I would try to show this through the discussion of the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. This is because this great philosopher attempted at a reconciliation of materialism and



spiritualism, or science or spirituality and showed that it is through such reconciliation that we can realize a meaningful and significant life on this earth.

Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo:

Sri Aurobindo, who emerged during the end of the 19th century, was one of the greatest spiritual seekers of Bengal and India, a *mahayogi* who wanted to bring about resurgence of the entire mankind through the awakening of spirituality within it. He presented before mankind, the pedagogy or the method of spiritual self-realization as a means through the application of which mankind can realize its most cherished ideals of a peaceful and harmonious life on earth. But besides being a profound spiritualist, Sri Aurobindo was also a great social and political thinker. In his book '*The Human Cycle*' he has put forward a theory of social change and evolution of human society where he has explained the different ages through which human society has evolved. And in this regard he admitted the contribution of science and technology and the role of reason in the uplift of human life and the gradual progression of society. But he showed that finally for the evolution of human life and society humanity has to undergo a spiritual evolution of its consciousness. In this paper, I would like to show that how Sri Aurobindo through his method of spirituality and his attempts towards the reconciliation of materialism and spiritualism tried to elevate the social and the material life of humanity as a whole. And I would try to point out the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts in the context of our present social life. Sri Aurobindo attempted towards such reconciliation of material energy with spiritual energy through this theory of the spiritual evolution of consciousness.

In this regard we may note that the British naturalist philosopher, Charles Darwin put forward the theory of biological evolution of life on this earth and brought about a revolution in the history of natural science. He showed that life evolved in this earth through a gradual process and the primary causes behind it were natural selection, variation and heredity. What is important is such a theory of biological evolution holds that life evolved out of life only. But Sri Aurobindo pointed out that these biological theories of evolution cannot answer the question that why at all life evolved in this earth. And here Sri Aurobindo was of the view that it is because that the Supreme Spiritual truth expressed itself in this material world that life evolved out of matter.

It may be noted that this great seer was deeply influenced by the philosophy of the Advaita Vedānta and conceived reality as the one eternal all pervading *Brahman* or the *Sacchidānanda*, the realization of which is the highest aim of human life. However unlike the Advaita Vedānta of Saṅkara, Sri Aurobindo regarded the material world also as real. In his magnum opus '*The Life Divine*', he pointed out that if everything is *Brahman* (*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*), then matter also is *Brahman* and hence matter also is real. Sri Aurobindo explained that since the Supreme Spirit or the Divine Reality is all-pervading, it is already present within us as well as in the external material world. The aim of human life is to discover the divine and then to work for its manifestation in the entire material world. As a result of this, there will be a radical transformation of our entire phenomenal life and a Divine Life characterized by unity, peace and harmony would emerge upon earth. Sri Aurobindo was convinced that mankind can realize such a life through a gradual process of spiritual evolution of consciousness. Now, the question is: What is evolution? Sri Aurobindo points out that the Supreme Spirit (*Sacchidānanda*), which is essentially one, descended straight into the grossest and the densest matter, in order to realize its manyness. This descending process is called involution. The Spirit that remains involved in the inconscient matter again begins its slow but sure movement upwards, i.e. back to its source of origin in order to realize its original unity. This ascending process is called evolution. The first principle that evolves is matter. From matter, evolves life, and from life, there is evolution of mind, i.e. at present there is appearance of the mental men. But Sri Aurobindo says that man, capable of possessing higher consciousness would definitely take its leap into the next higher spiritual realm that is into the realm of Supermind. Now, the process of evolution presupposes involution. Hence, evolution or the ascent of mental man into the level of Supermind would be possible only if Supermind or the Divine Reality itself involves or descends into the lower realm of matter, mind and life. But Supermind will descend into the material world only if it finds the lower realm suitable for its manifestation. And this ground has to be prepared by the individual. The individual, through the practice of integral yoga would have to undergo an integral transformation of his mind, life, body and of his entire being. With the involution or descent of the Supermind into the entire being of man as well as into the phenomenal world, there would be a Supramental divine



transformation of the earthly existence and a divine life of unity, peace and harmony would dawn upon earth. Being guided by such a spiritual motive, he has put forward a theory of social evolution where he showed that the evolution of human society would ultimately take a spiritual turn. It may be noted that according to Sri Aurobindo the process of evolution is already going on in nature in its natural course. However, according to Sri Aurobindo when individuals would take part in it, it would accelerate the process of evolution. Hence, in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy individual would play a very important role as he is the key to the evolutionary process.

Now how Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution is different from Darwin's theory of evolution? For Sri Aurobindo evolution is not a biological and mechanical process, but a conscious teleological process having a definite purpose and i.e., the spiritual transformation of the external Nature as well as the entire physical existence of man and thereby the establishment of a divine life upon earth. And he believed that social evolution too would ultimately take a spiritual turn. Since he believed that behind all the worldly phenomena there is a cause or the Supreme Spirit which is essentially one and from which everything proceeds and recedes to, the cycle of human society would also ultimately return back to this spiritual reality and unity. And as a means towards this total transformation of human life and society Sri Aurobindo has emphasized upon the evolution of the immense conscious spiritual power latent within every individual. But at the same time he has also admitted the role of science in the progress of human society. And this becomes very clear as we look into his concept and description of the various stages through which human society has evolved, as found in his book, 'The Human Cycle'.

In his book *The Human Cycle* Sri Aurobindo is of the view that there are profound psychological, even perhaps some soul factors that are responsible for the historical and social development. He has explained this by referring to the various stages of social evolution as found in the European history and culture and also as reflected in the Indian society and culture. Following the German theorist Karl Lamprecht Sri Aurobindo has also named the various stages of human society as symbolic, typical, conventional, individualistic and subjective. He has explained the nature and significance of each of these stages as they flourished in the Western world and often compared it with the social changes that took place in the Indian society.

According to the great seer the early symbolic stage was predominantly religious and spiritual in nature. Human life and activities were then primarily guided by symbols which actually stood for some hidden, mystic power, the Divine, the Gods, which the individuals believed to have guided their lives. Here Sri Aurobindo refers to the early Indian Vedic age which according to him was profoundly symbolic in nature. As people followed the symbols with great religious sentiments and respect, gradually that religious sentiment turned into ethical motives and ideals of their lives and this marked the beginning of the typical age.

The typical age was primarily psychological and ethical in nature. As a result of attaching ethical and social values to the different thoughts and practices that were prevalent in the society, those practices gradually turned into social traditions and conventions, as a result of which the typical age gradually passed into the conventional age.

In the conventional age people's life started being guided by certain conventions which were neither ethical nor rational. During this age the social and ethical ideals lost their inner essence, while the external customs and practices became all the more important. The society became divided into various classes and caste system became prominent. However when such gulf between convention and truth became intolerable, some men of intellectual power once again started to search for the Truth behind the customs and practices of the society with the help of their individual reason, moral sense and emotional desires. It was then that the individualistic age, the age of reason, the age of revolt, progress and freedom began.

During this age individuals tried to get back from conventionalism of belief and practice of Truth and Reality. Individuals started questioning those social and religious practices which they have been following blindly in the conventional age. Their aim was to reestablish religion, society, politics and ethics on the basis of reason. It was during this age of reason that the irresistible progress of science began and reached its height. It gave mankind a reasonable basis of life where men learnt to accept things only after judging it by the criteria of experiment and observation. And Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the advancement of science gave human civilization and culture some essential means to sustain their permanent existence, it provided humanity with some effective ways to protect themselves from any form of adverse situations. By fulfilling the basic needs of life and extending the bounds of knowledge, reason



and understanding science enabled mankind to establish itself firmly amidst this vast universe. But, at the same time, Sri Aurobindo pointed out that in the individualistic age the negative effects of science upon human life gradually became prominent. Sri Aurobindo is of the view that when based upon science the success of materialism reached its height, science started ignoring philosophy; due its practical significance, it even refused to make proper evaluation of literature and art. As a result of this there were degradation of art and literature. And in the overall human society there developed a form of narrow materialistic and utilitarian attitude towards life which led to the gradual erosion of human values. Moreover, science gave birth to a form of barbarism in the society- it is the barbarism of industry, technology and economics which have reached its height today. The ideals which became prominent in the individualistic age are fierce competition, individual success, accumulation of wealth and property and leading a luxurious life without taking care of the social and moral values.

At present mankind is going through this individualistic age or the age of reason where depending upon science and technology there has been immense progress and development with respect to the external material life of human beings. But in comparison to their external life, individuals have failed to nurture and develop the moral and spiritual aspects of their inner beings. And thus a form of social and moral deterioration is getting prominent in every aspect of social life.

Crises of present human life and existence:

Today humanity is intensely suffering from the crises of values- the values of peace, unity and freedom and brotherhood. And this is evident from the different forms of corruptions, exploitations, violence, oppression and injustice in every field of social life, in politics, economics, education, health, everywhere. The frequent march of destructive forces in the form of wars has brought human existence at stake. Moreover despite all forms of modern technologies of communications like whatsapp, facebook, instagram, at the end of the day every individual is suffering from a feeling of insecurity and loneliness. Here Sri Aurobindo points out that it is actually the egoistic consciousness of the individual that is responsible for most of our difficulties and conflicts. It is the nature of our vital ego that it tries to fulfill its desires and self interests at the cost of others. Under the influence of such egoism individual feels himself to be separate from

others and is confronted with disunity and disparities in the personal as well as the social life of mankind. Therefore, through his theory of spiritual evolution of consciousness, Sri Aurobindo is emphasizing upon the fact that what we need today is to overcome our physical-vital tendencies and gradually expand our consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo's Suggestion:

Now it may be noted that Sri Aurobindo admits that the individual has every right to satisfy his desire for knowledge, his desire for self manifestation of his potentialities and his desire for freedom. But their satisfaction should not be egoistic at the cost of others. Similarly the society also has no right to exploit the individual for its own development. Here the individual is to realize that he exists in this world not all by himself, but his life is in constant solidarity with all others in the society and the world. And the basis of such solidarity is spiritual. For, he is not merely a physical or a mental being, but he is also a spiritual being whose essence consists not in his external mind, life or body but in his being a soul or the self which is actually a manifestation of the Ultimate Spiritual Reality. And through such self he is actually connected with all other beings of the society and the world as every other being is also the manifestation of the same ultimate reality. Thus, time has now come when individual must try to look into his innermost being, and realize the nature of his true self by living within his own being and finally connect his own self with that of others. It is only through such expansion and union of one's consciousness with that of all others that man can ultimately realize the true unity and harmony lying within his social life and the universe as a whole. As a means to such expansion and evolution of consciousness Sri Aurobindo suggests the practice of integral yoga which aims at an integral development of the external as well as the inner mind, life and body of the individual. And according to Sri Aurobindo when this desire to attain self-knowledge will arise within the individuals, they will enter into the subjective age crossing the individualistic age and finally mankind will step into the spiritual age.

At present we find that the education system has undertaken an integrated approach in the dissemination of knowledge aiming at an overall development of the individual – that is the development of his intellectual abilities along with his interpersonal skills as well as his social abilities. Its objective is to make every individual an ideal citizen. And we know that education is one



of the primary basis, the fundamental pillar of social progress and development. In that case as a pedagogy towards such integral approach in learning, philosophy, following the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of India and following the thoughts of Sri Aurobindo would suggest the process of spiritual self-realization as one of the primary means towards integral development of the individual and social progress. Based upon scientific and rational temperament the present education system emphasizes upon the development of a strong knowledge base that considers the nurture of the critical and analytical abilities of the individuals along with the practical ability to implement such knowledge in practical life to sustain one's existence. This would perhaps lead to the further advancement of the individual and the society. But such advancement would be incomplete without the inner development of the individuals. The education system or the pedagogy of teaching should be such which would enable the individuals to learn to create balance or harmony between their outer and inner lives. Besides helping the individuals to evolve into a successful person, in his professional, social or political life, the education system should also inspire one to discover the deeper meaning of life. Instead of remaining confined to the surface level of consciousness, the individuals must learn to look within their innermost beings and try to know and understand himself; for the first step towards understanding others and developing bond with them is to understand one's own self, one's own being and develop bond with one's own self. Thus self-knowledge, self-awareness is the key towards living a good meaningful life on earth. However, despite all external efforts, this journey to know and discover the 'real me' within one's being, will be possible only when the individual himself will have that intense aspiration to go beyond his egoistic and materialistic tendencies and unravel the mystery lying within him. And the significance of Sri Aurobindo as well as the other contemporary thinkers lies in the fact that they are convinced that every individual possesses that immense power within him by which he can arouse that inner spark which will enlighten his outer/external life and bring positive changes in it. That is why Sri Aurobindo rightly said that individual is the key to the evolutionary progress of the society and Nature. Hence, following the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo it may be said that it is through the reconciliation of the external social or political or scientific measures with the inner power of the soul or the self that mankind can realize its most cherished

ideals of a meaningful, prosperous and peaceful life on earth.

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