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*New Race*

*Blessings*



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From the editor's desk...

In this issue we present three articles focusing on three different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's vision and work: education, Integral Yoga, and poetry. In the first article, Beloo Mehra examines and compares Sri Aurobindo's and Gandhi's aims of education. The aims of an educational approach reflect its fundamental assumptions about the nature of humankind, the direction in which it is developing, as well as its whole pedagogy. This article focuses on the basic assumptions and aims of the two approaches, the ways in which they coincide, and the ways in which they differ.

In the second article, Larry Seidlitz examines how Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga might be utilised as a spiritual basis for the growing movement in the West of spiritual activism. After briefly reviewing the nature of this movement, the article distinguishes between four basic approaches towards spirituality based on Sri Aurobindo's teachings—false spiritual passivity, true spiritual passivity, false spiritual activism, and true spiritual activism. It argues that true spiritual activism must have as its basis true spiritual passivity, and considers spiritual activism in the light of Sri Aurobindo.

In the third article, Goutam Ghosal considers Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry, both as written in *The Future Poetry*, and in his later correspondence with K.D. Sethna. The article discusses the main features of his theory, and suggests that the theory was not fully worked out in *The Future Poetry*. The correspondence with K.D. Sethna dating after 1926 focused on overhead poetry, that is, on sources of poetic inspiration from planes of consciousness above the human intelligence. The article argues that Sri Aurobindo's theory pertains to a poetry of the future, and not to past forms of spiritual poetry.

LARRY

*It is, then, this spiritual fulfilment of the urge to individual perfection and an inner completeness of being that we mean first when we speak of a divine life. It is the first essential condition of a perfected life on earth, and we are therefore right in making the utmost possible individual perfection our first supreme business. The perfection of the spiritual and pragmatic relation of the individual with all around him is our second preoccupation; the solution of this second desideratum lies in a complete universality and oneness with all life upon earth which is the other concomitant result of an evolution into the gnostic consciousness and nature. But there still remains the third desideratum, a new world, a change in the total life of humanity or, at the least, a new perfected collective life in the earth-nature.*

Sri Aurobindo (*The Life Divine*, p. 1031)

# AIMS OF TRUE EDUCATION: SRI AUROBINDO AND MAHATMA GANDHI

*Beloo Mehra*



*Photo credit: <http://www.unc.edu/world>*

In this paper, key similarities and differences between Sri Aurobindo's and Mahatma Gandhi's approaches to Education are theoretically examined to address a few fundamental questions: a) what is human and what is human destiny; b) what is the aim of life and aim of true Education; c) what is the "social" relevance of Gandhian and Aurobindonian thoughts on education?; and d) can Gandhian educational philosophy be considered Integral?

This essay is an attempt to understand Gandhi's vision for education in the light of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's approach to Integral Education. Given that the four guiding questions are closely inter-connected I offer this write-up as an initial attempt at weaving together some responses, with full awareness that many gaps are bound to remain. I am already familiar with some critical gaps, particularly regarding the ideal of human unity as envisioned by these two thinkers, the pedagogical and curricular differences and similarities, and larger differences between the visions and works of these two thinkers—their educational thought being an integral piece of that vision and work. My focus in the present work is on their views of the aim of man<sup>1</sup> and education.

## **Aims of Life and Aims of Education**

Based on a deep and conscious awareness of the significance of socio-cultural variations in the concept of man, his life and destiny, of the nation and of humanity and the life of human race, which get reflected in the

respective philosophies of education, Sri Aurobindo developed his scheme of integral education rooted in the developing soul of India, to her future need, to the greatness of her coming self creation, to her eternal spirit (Raina, 2000). India, according to Sri Aurobindo, has seen always in man, the individual, a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit.

Integral Education is based on this conception of man. This truth of man's existence also carries within it the truth that it is important to distinguish and cultivate in man "a mental, an intellectual, an ethical, dynamic and practical, an aesthetic and hedonistic, a vital and physical being, but all these have been seen as powers of a soul that manifests through them and grows with their growth, and yet they are not all the soul, because at the summit of its ascent it arises to something greater than them all, into a spiritual being, and it is in this that [India] has found the supreme manifestation of the soul of man and his ultimate divine manhood, his *paramartha* and highest *purushartha*" (Sri Aurobindo, 1956/2004, p. 15).

Integral Yoga is the basis for Sri Aurobindo's thought and vision of Integral Education. Integral Yoga is a grand synthesis of several major schools of Yoga—Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga. Without rejecting any of these Yogas, Sri Aurobindo takes the idea of Yoga to the next level—Yoga of self-perfection. But he is careful in explaining that the principle of Integral Yoga is "not perfection of the human nature as it is but a psychic and spiritual transformation of all the parts of the being through the action of an inner consciousness and then of a higher consciousness which works on them, throws out their old movements or changes them into the image of its own and so transmutes lower into higher nature. It is not so much the perfection of the intellect as a transcendence of it, a transformation of the mind, the substitution of a larger principle of knowledge—and so with all the rest of the being" (1993/2000, pp. 9-10).

This transformation or self-perfection, Sri Aurobindo explains, begins with the discovery and knowledge of the powers, principles and process of self-realisation. It requires a patient and persistent personal effort in growth and change. Integral development of different parts of the being—physical, vital, mental and psychic and—brings about a transformation into a spiritual being. Such a transformed and spiritualized being is the final goal of Sri Aurobindo's system of Integral Education.

"[Education's] central aim is the building of the powers of the human mind and spirit, it is the formation, or, as I would prefer to view it, the evoking of knowledge and will and of the power to use knowledge, character, culture,—that at least if no more" (Sri Aurobindo, 1956/2004, pp. 9-10). True

and living education helps to “bring out to full advantage, makes ready for the full purpose and scope of human life that is in the individual man, and which at the same time helps him to enter into his right relation with the life, mind and soul of the people to which he belongs and with that great total life, mind and soul of humanity of which he himself is a unit and his people or nation a living, a separate and yet inseparable member” (pp. 13-14).

A truly Integral Education should have three central aims: 1) for an individual, it is growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities, 2) for the nation, the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the nation-soul and its *Dharma*, and 3) to raise both the individual and nation into powers of the life and ascending mind and soul of humanity. “And at no time, will it lose sight of man’s highest object, the awakening and development of his spiritual being” (Sri Aurobindo, 1956/2004, p. 16).

In the light of these central aims of education, learner’s education and training of the intellect divorced from the perfection of moral and emotional nature is injurious to human progress (Sri Aurobindo, 1956/2004). Moral training can’t be “imparted” in the same way as the training of the mind, because the “heart is not the mind and to instruct the mind does not necessarily improve the heart” (p. 27).

It appears that many of the truths expressed in earlier paragraphs find their equivalents in Gandhian thoughts on education. The emphasis on body, heart, mind and spirit in the educational process is most visible one. As Cenker quotes Gandhi—“Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body, nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all the three is required for the making of the whole man and constitutes the true economics of education” (1976/1994, p. 102). Like Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi also emphasises the cultivation of the heart and refinement of human emotions and impulses. “True education is that which cultivates the soul or the spirit, and leads ultimately to the full and complete development of man’s body, mind and spirit...Literacy then is not the primary goal of education: it is the cultivation of character, and the development of the spirit; it is the education of the heart not the head” (Richards, 2001, p. 12).

The interconnectedness of the individual, nation, and humanity is another important commonality. However, in my readings of Gandhi I haven’t come across anything similar to nation-soul or soul of the people, which is an essential and important aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s thought. Once the truth of a collective soul, as Sri Aurobindo explains, is thoroughly understood and accepted, one can readily accept the immense variation and diversity in the mental, vital, and physical expressions that are manifested

in a group whether it is a community, nation, or the entire world, and at the same time continue to aspire for an inner human unity. What Gandhi does emphasise quite strongly is the social orientation of education, and the role of schools in reconstructing society. I shall revisit this point a little later in the essay.

The true aim for education, for Gandhi, is derived from the whole purpose of life, which “is to know the Self, the *Atman*, which is akin to knowing the Truth, and realizing God” (Richards, 2001, p. 12). A system of education, therefore, should help learners to understand the meaning of such a quest for Truth. Gandhi emphasises a conception of Truth that is not static, dogmatic, or rigid, and one that is same as Reality (*Sat*) and in identity with the Self within (*Atman*). This Self within is at one with the essence of the universe. The quest for Truth therefore is same as seeking to know the true nature of the Self. The Truth here is indivisible, One and implies the essential unity of all existence. This Oneness, however, manifests itself in multiple forms, as reflected in Gandhi’s quote cited by Richards—“What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous” (2001, p. 3).

For Gandhi, this knowing the Truth happens by listening to the inner voice, that is, knowing the Truth in the Self through the Self. But he is also quite clear that it would not be appropriate for anyone to claim to hear the inner voice without showing in the first place a measure of self-discipline, single-minded devotion, and indifference to worldly interests. “Truth resides in every human heart, and one has to search for it there, and to be guided by truth as one sees it. But no one has the right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth” (Gandhi, cited in Richards, 2001, p. 8). So what is truth for one person will not necessarily be truth for another. But the Truth with which Gandhi is concerned is that which can’t be grasped through the instrument of mind, which as Sri Aurobindo reminds us emphatically, is not an instrument of true knowledge.

Thus, the truth that the individual is a soul in its true essence also seems common to both Gandhian and Aurobindonian thought. But let’s look a little deeper.

### **Education for the Individual**

For Gandhi, education should help prepare and direct the learner toward the true purpose of life, which is to realise the *Atman*, the Self, which he

also views as realising God. But Sri Aurobindo distinguishes between the psychic being that is individual and embodied, and grows from life to life; and central being (*Atman*, Self) which is immortal and remains the same through all lives. The psychic being is the link between the outer personality and nature, and the highest *Atman* or Self. It can also be understood as the evolving soul, the soul of the individual evolving in the manifestation, the soul-individuality. Though the word "soul" is sometimes used as a synonym for psychic being, in Sri Aurobindo's terminology there is a difference between the two. The soul is the divine essence or spark of the Divine in the individual, the psychic being is the developing soul-personality put forth by the soul as its representative in the evolution. This psychic being evolves and grows by its experiences in the manifestation; and as it develops, it increasingly aids the evolution and growth of the mental, vital and physical parts of the being.

It is this psychic being that takes an important place in the educational thought of Sri Aurobindo. For him, education must help prepare the learners grow in their psychic being, so it can develop and manifest itself. Because it is this psychic being that supports "the evolution or the unveiling of the Divine Consciousness on earth, so that one day there will be Divine Life possible right here on earth" (Huppés, 2001, p. 9). Gandhi doesn't make this sharp distinction between the evolving and immortal soul and as a true Advaitin values the Self- or *Atman*-realisation as the true and ultimate aim of life. For him, the final aim of life stops here, at the realisation of Self, the realisation of God, *Moksha* or *Nirvana*.

For Sri Aurobindo, that is the beginning of his Integral Yoga, and this Self-realisation is one part of the triple transformation that he views as necessary for the transformation of the individual, society, humanity and the earth as a whole. The first transformation is the psychic realisation or transformation when the psychic being in man becomes the guide and true leader, and his physical, vital, and mental are perfect instruments of this true inner guide, the psychic being. The second transformation is the spiritual realisation or the Self-realisation that Gandhi values as the aim of life. But for Sri Aurobindo, this Self-realisation or *Moksha* is not the goal or ultimate aim of man's life; it is a sure step toward the Supramental realisation and establishment of the Supramental Force on the Earth itself. Also, the realisation of the Self or *Atman* is partial if there is no transformation of the lower nature of man in the Light and Spirit of the Divine. This deeper transformation is needed for the Life on Earth to be transformed into a Life Divine. The central purpose of Integral Yoga is understood as: "Transformation of our superficial, narrow and fragmentary human way of thinking, seeing, feeling, and being into a deep and wide spiritual consciousness and an integrated inner and outer

existence and of our ordinary human living into the divine way of life" (Pandit, 1992, p. 127). The practice of Integral Yoga emphasises the need for personal transformation as a way to act towards a deeper transformation of the evolving outer world with a goal to enable a progressive and fundamental change in individual and collective consciousness.

In the light of these aims of life and the destiny of man emphasised by Sri Aurobindo, one begins to see the fundamental difference between his and Gandhi's thoughts on the role of education. For Gandhi, education must prepare the learners for Self-realisation or liberation (*Moksha*). He emphasised the ancient Indian wisdom—*Sa vidya ya vimuktaye*<sup>2</sup> ("That which liberates is knowledge"). In his socio-political and educational thought, Gandhi talked about two kinds of liberation. One form of liberation consisted in securing the freedom of the country from foreign rule, which for him would also include developing indigenous models of social, economic, educational development. Such freedom, however, may prove short-lived if not understood in the right perspective and light of the other kind of liberation (*Moksha*) which is for all time. As an Advaitin, he is referring to the liberation from the cycles of birth and death on the earth, from the suffering of the world, and he is emphasising this liberation, *Moksha*, as the ultimate goal for life (one of the four *purusharthas*, other three being *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*). It is important to emphasise here that this liberation is an individual liberation, and does not transform the earth-nature in any way.

Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, is not satisfied with individual liberation. He sees it as an escape from life, from the world, a negation of the spirit. He envisions a spiritually transformed man, a spiritually transformed humanity, and a spiritually transformed life on earth, a divine life. As he writes beautifully in his epic poem, *Savitri*:

A high and blank negation is not all,  
 A huge extinction is not God's last world,  
 Life's ultimate sense, the close of being's course,  
 The meaning of this great mysterious world.  
 In absolute silence sleeps an absolute Power.  
 Awaking, it can wake the trance-bound soul  
 And in the ray reveal the parent sun:  
 It can make the world a vessel of Spirit's force,  
 It can fashion in the clay God's perfect shape.  
 To free the self is but one radiant pace;  
 Here to fulfill himself was God's desire

(Sri Aurobindo, 1950/1993, pp. 311-312)

It is this fulfillment of the man in this world, the inner and outer transformation that is necessary for this fulfillment, and the evolution of consciousness that facilitates such transformation that are behind Sri Aurobindo's thoughts on education and its aims. Education, in this light, becomes the means to prepare learners for such transformation, which requires that all parts of their being—physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual—are properly prepared and developed to manifest a harmonious and integral personality. The emphasis is more on integral development, instead of emphasising any one or two aspects of personality. For Gandhi also, education should provide for a harmonious development of the learner, but one can also trace certain special emphases that Gandhian model places on basic education and working with hands.

### **Social Aim of Education**

Education is not a matter that concerns only the individual; it also deeply concerns the society, the collective. And both Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi recognise and deeply value the inter-connection between individual and collective, as reflected in their thoughts on education including its aims. But again one notices a key difference. "The key to Gandhi's social thought and concept of man is characterised in one word: *sarvodaya*" (Cenkner, 1976/1994, p. 97). A strong emphasis on *sarvodaya*, the upliftment of all, certainly gives a very clear orientation to Gandhi's educational approach. He emphasises the significance of school and education for the upliftment of the oppressed of the society, for the organic development and growth of the community, and for building the nation. The "social" role of man, in the sense of what an individual can do for the society, is thus emphasised here. At the same time, the purpose of education for Gandhi is to raise man to a higher moral and spiritual order through the full development of the individual and the evolution of a new man, a *satyagrahi*, one that grasps the truth. This man-making goal of education, for Gandhi, is achieved by service to mankind, by self-giving.

Sri Aurobindo is also equally concerned about the relation between the individual and the society. But he also emphasises that an individual "is not merely a social unit; his existence, his right and claim to live and grow are not founded solely on his social work and function. He is not merely a member of a human-pack, hive or ant-hill; he is something in himself, a soul, a being, who has to fulfill his own individual truth and law as well as his natural or his assigned part in the truth and law of the collective existence" (Sri Aurobindo, 1949/998, p. 24). At the same time, we are also reminded that "as the society has no right in suppressing the individual

in its own interest, so also the individual, in Sri Aurobindo's view, has no right to disregard the legitimate claims of society upon him in order to seek his own selfish aims" (Kishor Gandhi, 1965/1991, p. 67). So there is a much more equal relation between the individual and society in this view, which has implication for the education as well.

An Integral Education, in Sri Aurobindo's view, will not emphasise society's demands over the individual's need for inner development and growth. It will allow complete freedom to the individual soul to grow and evolve in a multi-faceted and harmonious way. At the same time, the social nature of man will not be ignored because not only will the learning be happening in a communal setting and in close relations with the teachers, but more importantly, the role of individual transformation in the larger, spiritual transformation of humanity will be emphasised and modeled for the learners. In the light of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts on the destiny of mankind, this truer and deeper connection between individual and collective in the evolution of consciousness is the basis of Integral Education. Education, in this view, is the means for facilitating individual transformation to prepare man, one individual at a time, for a collective transformation. The nature of upliftment that is of concern to Sri Aurobindo is the upliftment of consciousness—individually and collectively.

Human society, in its present nature—with all its pleasures and pains, abilities and limits, gains and losses, convergences and conflicts, peace and war—is a creation of human consciousness that is in its turn limited by and subject to its present nature. As long as this consciousness remains, all adjustments and readjustments, all revolutions and re-organizations, re-thinking and re-planning in the society and its structures—political, economic, cultural—will be devised by the same consciousness that created the earlier structures, and are therefore bound to solve problems facing humanity only for a short period of time, if at all they are able to solve any. So what is needed? A new consciousness is the key. What will be this new consciousness? A consciousness that is wider, higher, and deeper than the one in which the humanity persists at present. A consciousness which enables the separative, divisive, egoistic tendencies that are presently behind every action and decision we make in our personal and social conduct to transform and evolve into unifying, integrative, harmonising, and ego-less tendencies.

This deep transformation does not happen all at once in masses of humanity, but is a long and arduous process that happens one individual at a time. It occurs through an evolutionary ascent of consciousness and through Divine Grace represented in the descent of Supramental Consciousness that transforms the nature and process of evolution itself.

Sri Aurobindo has illuminated for us the nature of this new supramental consciousness, the conditions necessary for coming of a new spiritual age, the kind of gnostic beings who will be the pioneers of spiritual age, and the nature of transformed social structures in such a spiritualised society. However, it is important to note that these details are not presented in absolute terms based on some abstract sociological projections, but are only indicated as hints in the light of spiritual realisations and experiences of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

This new consciousness does not evolve in a vacuum. It is the most natural progression for an individual consciousness, and indirectly for the group or societal consciousness. This is where the aim of Integral Education comes to the forefront again. It is the evolution of consciousness in the individual that the education is concerned with, but this evolution is an integral part of the evolution of societal consciousness. And in this way the social impact of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts on education are just as important as Gandhi's, but they are emphasising different things. Gandhi is deeply concerned with human society as it exists now, the product of mental consciousness, and all its inequities and sufferings. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, compels us, with our feet planted firmly in the present, to set our eyes on the society of the future that he envisions for us, the spiritualised society that would be the result of a supramental consciousness. Gandhi persuades the learners to act for changing the lives of the marginalised and the oppressed, and in the process, transform and grow in their character. Sri Aurobindo reminds us that "[t]o hope for a true change of human life without a change of human nature is an irrational and unspiritual proposition; it is to ask for something unnatural and unreal, an impossible miracle" (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 1059). The social orientation of education for Gandhi is valuable because social engagement facilitates moral and spiritual development and transformation of the learners. Sri Aurobindo is concerned with the integral development and transformation of inner and outer nature of the learners and educators, and a centre of education that experiments with such a system of integral education becomes a dynamic ideal for the society through the very nature of its work in facilitating individual and collective evolution of consciousness.

At this point I visit the fourth question that I listed at the beginning of this essay – can Gandhian philosophy of education be considered Integral? I am tempted to say, no. Is it holistic? Certainly yes. But it is not integral in the sense of the term used by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. "Integral" in the Aurobindonian sense is a term that comes from the Sanskrit word "*purna*," which means "complete." In more general terms, holism concerns itself with all aspects of existence, which includes physical, emotional,

instinctual, mental, moral, social and spiritual aspects; it looks upon them as equally valid and contributing for growth and evolution. But without transformation of these aspects of existence, a true integration or synthesis is not possible. Cenkner (1976/1994) explains:

Integralism is possible in Sri Aurobindo's system through transformation. He integrated experience not through a forced juxtaposition of realities and levels of being. Diverse principles and realities do not unite on their original level but are first transformed and then enter into a greater synthesis. For example, matter and spirit enter into synthesis only if matter loses its imperfections and limitations, but when it does so it can be integrated on a new level, a spiritual level, of being. The work of transformation is the work of man and the divine; transformation takes place most significantly on a supramental plane. What appears diverse is transformed and then integrated in such a way that unity and not opposition exists in the diversity (p. 147).

It is in this sense that the Integral transformation achieved through an evolution of consciousness becomes much wider, higher and deeper than holistic transformation.

The Gandhian vision of education is concerned with the whole person, but it is not concerned with the divine or spiritualised human, an integrally transformed human. It emphasises the spiritual goal of man, but it is not concerned with the spiritualisation of humanity. It values the liberation (*moskha*) of man, but it doesn't envision the supramental transformation of the earth-life itself.

### **Spiritual and Psychic Education**

In this last section I touch upon another important difference between Gandhian and Aurobindonian thought on the matter of spiritual education.

A spiritual education, in the light of Sri Aurobindo, would help the seeker to view both Spirit and Matter in a new light. Spirituality, in his vision, is an adventure in consciousness with matter for its basis, because the material or the so-called mundane world is neither false nor illusory, but is a truth, a reality shrouded in falsehood and illusion. Therefore, one seeking for Truth must change one's attitude to matter. Sri Aurobindo speaks of the necessity of the spiritual transformation of man which begins with the discovery of the psychic being. The education of the psychic is based on the view that true education aims at the growth of the soul and spirit rather than intellectual, moral or even religious knowledge.

For Sri Aurobindo, an adventure in consciousness begins with psychic education which may be seen as his special contribution to educational theory and praxis. Sri Aurobindo emphasises that the principal function of education is to facilitate the learners' process of discovering their psychic being. Psychic being, the psychological centre of an individual, is the spark of Divine that is spontaneous, direct and luminous, and supports the vital, the physical and the mental being. "[T]he true secret whether with child, or man, is to help him find his deeper self, the real psychic entity within. That, if we ever give it a chance to come forward, and still more, if we call it into the foreground as 'the leader of the march set in our front,' will itself take up most of the business of education out of our hands and develop the capacity of the psychological being towards a realization of potentialities" (1949/1998, p. 33).

Education in this respect becomes a social approach that is aimed at providing the best opportunity for exercise, expression and growth of psychic being. As Cenknner describes:

The starting point is to discover within oneself that which is independent of external reality and the physical body, that is, the discovery of a sense of universality and limitlessness...The educative process is twofold. The first step is surrender to that which is beyond ego, and the second step is to will an identification with one's psychic being.... The four vehicles of learning – the vital, the physical, the mental and the psychic – respectively, cultivate power, beauty, knowledge and love and hence liberate man from material conditioning, desires, ignorance and suffering. This fourfold approach to education is simultaneous, beginning at an early age and all organized homogeneously around the psychic centre. The psychic movement inward which is complemented by opening outward to higher existence brings spiritual transformation (1976/1994, p.170).

For Gandhi, a thoughtfully conceived and open-minded approach to religious education which values and welcomes comparative understanding of various religions becomes an important component of good education. For Sri Aurobindo, psychic education is something not connected with any religious education but a way to prepare learners for a spiritual seeking beyond religion. However, Gandhi's emphasis on religious education does not imply that he doesn't value the primary spiritual aim of education – an aim that is not bound by any one particular religion but points to something that transcends any constructed view of religion.

Sri Aurobindo would also admit that spirituality can be understood and practiced through religion, but he also cautions strongly that religion

has a tendency to become....well, like religion, and therefore dogmatic, creedal and limiting. As he writes in *The Human Cycle*:

There are two aspects of religion—true religion and religionism. True religion is spiritual religion, that which seeks to live in the spirit, in what is beyond the intellect, beyond the aesthetic and ethical and practical being of man, and to inform and govern these members of our being by the higher light and law of the spirit. Religionism, on the contrary, entrenches itself in some narrow pietistic exaltation of the lower members or lays exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system. Not that these things are altogether negligible or that they must be unworthy or unnecessary or that a spiritual religion need disdain the aid of forms, ceremonies, creeds or systems. On the contrary, they are needed by man because the lower members have to be exalted and raised before they can be fully spiritualised, before they can directly feel the spirit and obey its law. An intellectual formula is often needed by the thinking and reasoning mind, form or ceremony by the aesthetic temperament or other parts of the infra-rational being, a set moral code by man's vital nature in their turn towards the inner life. But these things are aids and supports, not the essence; precisely because they belong to the rational and infra-rational parts, they can be nothing more and, if too blindly insisted on, may even hamper the supra-rational light. Such as they are, they have to be offered to man and used by him, but not to be imposed on him as his sole law by a forced and inflexible domination. In the use of them toleration and free permission of variation is the first rule which should be observed. The spiritual essence of religion is alone the one thing supremely needful, the thing to which we have always to hold and subordinate to it every other element or motive (pp. 177-178).

It is this "spiritual essence of religion" that will form the basis of comparative religious education for Gandhi, as this quote of his illustrates:

To me religion means Truth and ahimsa or rather Truth alone, because Truth includes ahimsa, ahimsa being the necessary and indispensable means for its discovery. Therefore, anything that promotes the practice of these virtues is a means for imparting religious education and the best way to do this, in my opinion, is for the teachers rigorously to practise these virtues in their own person (Gandhi quoted in *Young India*, December 6, 1928, as cited in Cenkner, 1976/1994, p. 114).

In addition to emphasising the universal essentials of religion, Gandhi also had specific views on what a curriculum of religious education should

look like, what type of writings should be used in such a curriculum. He also emphasised that a study of other religions besides one's own will give the learner a grasp of the underlying unity of all religions and will also provide a glimpse of that universal and absolute Truth which lies beyond the dust of creeds and faiths. Thus the ultimate aim of such a religious education will also be to prepare learners to eventually experience the search for Truth, the spirit's seeking for the Truth beyond religion.

It seems to me, however, that such a comparative religious education may not always lead towards facilitating a move beyond the mental/intellectual understanding of the oneness of all religions or belief. It may just be a really great and transforming way to intellectually grasp the wisdom of *Ekam Sat, Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*<sup>3</sup> (Truth is One, Sages speak of it by different names) but whether such an intellectual acceptance may also create some openings for learners to feel or experience a central aspiration or a seeking for an inner life is not certain. Perhaps this is because of the human tendency (or mind's tendency) to fall into the trap of religionism (as Sri Aurobindo explains) and steer away from the true spiritual essence of religion. It is here that I find Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's approach of psychic education much more appealing and powerful.

Gandhi's primary approach to spirituality, though beyond the narrow chauvinistic religiosity, is still grounded in the "universal essence of religion." Whereas for Sri Aurobindo, spirituality is about that which is beyond religion, though religion also has the spiritual essence. For Sri Aurobindo, education should help facilitate the opening of learners' minds and hearts to a universal spirituality, should help prepare learners mentally, vitally and physically in such a way that it facilitates a gradual opening or flowering of the inner psychic being, and should instill in learners an aspiration for personal truth through self-search and self-knowledge. For Gandhi, education should help learners develop a sense of universal spirituality through a genuinely respectful and empathic understanding of different religious traditions (though Gandhi also emphasises moral and spiritual development through other important means such as service, manual labor, etc.)

I wish to end this paper with the following passage from an essay by Nolini Kanta Gupta, titled, "The spiritual genius of India." The following words convey succinctly the difference between religion and spirituality, which add an important dimension to the differences between the kind of religio-spiritual education Gandhi envisions and the kind of psychic and spiritual education emphasised by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I include these lines here also because in a rather unique way, they also represent a fundamental difference between Gandhian and Aurobindonian visions

of education. While Gandhian educational thought might have been more influenced with the essence of religion as presented in the following words, Sri Aurobindo's thought seems to be based more on the view of spirituality as described in these words. Though of course, this may not fully illustrate all the important details that make each of their visions unique and relevant.

Religion starts from and usually ends with a mental and emotional approach to realities beyond the mind; Spirituality goes straight forward to direct vision and communion with the Beyond. Religion labors to experience and express the world of Spirit in and through a turn, often a twist, given by the mental being—*manu*—in man; it bases itself upon the demands of the mental, the vital and the physical complex—the triple nexus that forms the ordinary human personality and seeks to satisfy them under a holier garb. Spirituality knows the demands of the Spirit alone; it lives in a realm where the body, the life and the mind stand uplifted and transmuted into their utter realities. Religion is the human way of approaching and enjoying the Divine; Spirituality is the divine way of meeting the Divine. Religion, as it is usually practiced, is a special art, one—the highest it may be, still only one—among many other pursuits that man looks to for his enjoyment and fulfillment; but spirituality is nothing if it does not swallow up the entire man, take in his each and every preoccupation and new-create it into an inevitable expression of its own master truth. Religion gives a moral discipline for the internal consciousness, and for the external life, a code of conduct based upon a system of rules and rites and ceremonies; spirituality aims at a revolution in the consciousness and in the being (Gupta, 1976/1993, p. 117).

Inspired by the above words, I wish to claim that in Gandhian vision, the ultimate aim of education is to help learners develop *human* means of meeting the Divine. In the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the ultimate aim of education is to help learners develop *divine* ways of meeting the Divine and bringing the Divine on Earth.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In order to create an easier flow in writing, throughout this paper I am using the word “man” and its corresponding pronoun “his” in a more generic gender-neutral manner to represent matters concerning the universal person, individual, or human. The use of the word “man” is not meant to exclude women from the applicability of this analysis in any gender-exclusive or male-centric way. This use is also in alignment with the language used by Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi in their writings, both of whom also never meant to exclude women from their vision and thought.

<sup>2</sup> *Visnu Purana*, Amsa 1, Canto 19, Verse 413; Rg Veda 1.164.46

Essentially there is but one single true reason for living: it is to know oneself. We are here to learn—to learn what we are, why we are here, and what we have to do. And if we don't know that, our life is altogether empty—for ourselves and for others.

—The Mother (CWM, Vol. 6, p. 16)

This means to be conscious of one's inner truth, conscious of the different parts of one's being and their respective functions. You must know why you do this, why you do that; you must know your thoughts, know your feelings, all your activities, all your movements, of what you are capable, etc. And to know oneself is not enough; this knowledge must bring a conscious control.

—The Mother (CWM, Vol. 4, p. 34)

## SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM, SPIRITUAL PASSIVITY AND INTEGRAL YOGA\*

*Larry Seidlitz*



*Photo credit: <http://www.totallyfreeimages.com>*

Spiritual activism has recently become a popular movement in the New Age spiritual literature and community, having received strong impetus from the work of Andrew Harvey, author<sup>1</sup> and founder of the Institute for Sacred Activism;<sup>2</sup> Deepak Chopra, author, founder of the Chopra Foundation<sup>3</sup> and member of the evolutionary leaders network;<sup>4</sup> Michael Lerner, author<sup>5,6</sup> and founder of the Network of Spiritual Progressives;<sup>7</sup> Claudia Horwitz, author<sup>8</sup> and founder of Stone Circles;<sup>9</sup> Will Keepin, author and cofounder and director of Satyana Institute;<sup>10</sup> Carla Goldstein, director of the Women's Institute,<sup>11</sup> a unit of Omega Institute, as well others. It has been an increasingly important topic in academics with influential books and papers by such writers as Barbara Marx Hubbard,<sup>12,13</sup> AnaLouise Keating,<sup>14,15</sup> Alastair McIntosh,<sup>16,17</sup> Roger S. Gottlib,<sup>18-23</sup> Ken Jones,<sup>24</sup> David Loy,<sup>25</sup> Donald Rothberg,<sup>26</sup> and many others.<sup>27</sup>

As AnaLouise Keating explains,

...spiritual activism is a visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics—a way of life and a call to action. Spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation... The spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life are parts of a larger whole—interjoined in a complex, interwoven pattern. This synergistic synthesis of apparent opposites distinguishes spiritual activism both from mainstream “New Age” movements and from conventional

\*A slightly different version of this article appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Collaboration*.

organised religions. Whereas “New Age” belief systems focus almost, if not entirely, on the personal and thus leave the existing oppressive social structures in place, spiritual activism requires both the personal and the structural; it starts with each individual but moves outward as we challenge and transform unjust social structures.

Although spiritual activism begins at the level of the individual, it does not result in egocentrism, self-glorification, or other types of possessive individualism. Rather, spiritual activists combine self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change.<sup>28</sup>

Harvey argues that an impending perfect storm of crises facing the world, including overpopulation, global warming, environmental pollution, corporate greed and corporate controlled media is leading towards a catastrophe that can be averted only through a large-scale spiritually-based activism.<sup>29</sup> Harvey aims to “inspire the spread of inter-linked cells of ‘Networks of Grace’ all over North America and the world.”<sup>30</sup> The Institute for Sacred Activism’s website is designed to facilitate the formation and spread of such activist networks.<sup>31</sup>

Various key principles for spiritual activism have been advanced by different proponents. Some of these emphasise emotional and attitudinal underpinnings, others focus on the practicalities of effecting change on the ground. For example, the first of the Satyana Institute’s principles of spiritual activism cites the transformation negative emotions such as fear, anger and despair to positive emotions of love, compassion, and purpose.<sup>32</sup> The Humanity Healing Network emphasises the role of compassion in several of its key principles.<sup>33</sup> The Integrative Spirituality website cites the values of love, forgiveness, inner connection with God and others, and equanimity as its first four principles, but then discusses other practical components such as mindfulness, creativity and strategy.<sup>34</sup> The Activist.org website, based on Horwitz’s work, focuses on practical strategies that have been used successfully in a variety of different contexts.<sup>35</sup>

## **Spiritual activism in the light of Integral Yoga**

Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s Integral Yoga provides a natural and strong basis for spiritual activism, and can contribute a greater depth of insight into its spiritual dimensions. The aim of Integral Yoga embraces a spiritual transformation, a radical divinisation of individual and collective life. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother continually contrasted their Integral Yoga with the traditional yogas of the past in India which they argued focused on an inner individual realisation and neglected the transformation of the

outer life of the individual or of humanity as a whole.<sup>36</sup> The transformation they envisaged is of a thorough-going nature, and would necessarily take within its sweep the more limited political, social, or environmental aims of spiritual activism. They argued that it was only by a radical change of the consciousness that this transformation of the outer life of humanity could be realised, starting with individuals, but progressively spreading to others.<sup>37</sup> While concentrating on effecting this transformation within themselves,<sup>38</sup> they worked tirelessly to guide and materially and spiritually assist others to this change,<sup>39</sup> laid out a detailed teaching and practical method for humanity to follow,<sup>40</sup> and acted inwardly through spiritual means on the world at large to assist it in its progressive change and transformation.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga and philosophy should not be taken as a full endorsement of spiritual activism as it is presently articulated. Integral Yoga is a discipline aimed at an integral union with the Divine, the Divine both in its passive aspect as the underlying ground of all existence, and in its dynamic aspect as the conscious Force which drives all energies in the universe; something far more profound than an activism motivated by spiritual as well as social justice and environmental concerns. It aims at the realisation of a spiritual and supramental consciousness, a divine consciousness vastly superior to the ordinary human consciousness, involving a long and difficult discipline to achieve. It aims at a spiritual and supramental transformation of individual and collective life, not simply at social change based on moral or idealistic principles.

Sri Aurobindo did not view outer social activism as a necessary or a primary outer activity that was to flow out of the inner spiritual realisation. Indeed he suggested that during the development of this spiritual consciousness, the inner life would take precedence over the outer life so that the former would not be over-flooded and submerged by the ignorance. As the spiritual consciousness developed into the supramental consciousness, however, this vulnerability would be overcome, enabling a natural and full outflow of the established inner spiritual peace, love and power in a full engagement with the world. As Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The peace of God within will be extended in the gnostic experience of the universe into a universal calm of equality not merely passive but dynamic, a calm of freedom in oneness dominating all that meets it, tranquillising all that enters into it, imposing its law of peace on the supramental being's relations with the world in which he is living. Into all his acts the inner oneness, the inner communion will attend him and enter into his relations with others, who will not be to him others but selves of himself in the one existence, his own universal existence. It is this poise and freedom in the Spirit that will enable him to take all

life into himself while still remaining the spiritual self and to embrace even the world of the Ignorance without himself entering into the Ignorance.<sup>42</sup>

Because the supramental consciousness embraces the world with which it feels its inalienable oneness, it naturally pours its influence on all around and contributes to the spiritual elevation and transformation of others and the world as whole. Thus, concern with and an extension of a powerful helping assistance on others and the world would be a natural consequence of the integral realisation, but this action could take a variety of different forms depending on the individual. It might well take predominantly the form of a silent, inner action, but would be capable of taking whatever outer forms its inner knowledge and vision saw as useful or necessary.

In order to elucidate a perspective on spiritual activism based on Sri Aurobindo's teaching, it will be useful to clarify distinctions between what I will call true and false forms of both spiritual passivity and spiritual activism. After elaborating on each of these principles, I will come back to consider what an integration of true spiritual passivity and activism might look like in light of Sri Aurobindo's teachings.

### **False Spiritual Passivity**

At the basis of false spiritual passivity is inertia, plain and simple. This is perhaps the most likely and common mode that spirituality takes, because inertia is the dominant principle of our material existence, and the higher evolutionary principles of vital activity and mental understanding and equilibrium develop out of it, against its natural resistance. Its influence permeates, limits, and distorts the embodied life and mind's own characteristic tendencies.

False passivity is passive to all kinds of inner and outer influences. Inwardly, all kinds of mental movements—thoughts, perceptions, memories, imaginations—may impinge on the mind unfiltered and carry it away in various directions one after another. Whereas the mind may become concentrated and directed toward specific aims, it characteristically wanders and loses focus. At the same time, all kinds of lower vital movements—desires, cravings, impulses to action, anger, fear, worry, ambition, striving, struggle—are allowed to continue their unquiet, upsetting, and shifting play in the emotional and dynamic centers of the being. In addition to these varied inward influences, this type of passivity receives, with little or no discernment, all types of mental, vital, and physical influences from without—from family, friends, and acquaintances in the immediate

environment, from the media and internet including its unremitting onslaught of advertising, news, and entertainment, and the more subtle influences from the physical environments in which we live and move. All these influences impinge on the passive person in a continuous manner and the individual remains more or less oblivious of their influences upon him.

Spirituality for this type of passive person may consist mentally in interjecting into this swarm of influences some recurrent ideas of the Divine or of some spiritual ideal, whether through reading or concentration, emotionally through movements of devotion, and/or physically through engaging in religious or spiritual activities. Thus, upon this shifting basis of unconscious influences, a measure of dynamic spiritual activity is attempted or achieved, but this is done in a consciousness still passively receptive to all kinds of other influences, and interjected into this shifting flux at longer or shorter intervals. There is little or no filtering or curtailing of the mental, vital, and physical influences entering from within and from without. As a result, the spiritual activity takes place on an unsteady and shifting base, has to compete for time and attention with innumerable other influences, and when it does occur, may easily be swept away by the latter.

### **True Spiritual Passivity**

In contrast to this troubled state of affairs, true spiritual passivity is to be passive only to the Divine Influence, and to confront whatever outside forces or contacts that may enter one's psychological field with equanimity, such that they do not upset or even touch the inner peace and contact with the Divine. While it is not advisable to indiscriminately expose oneself to adverse outward contacts or conditions, it is not always practicable to exclude them, or for other reasons, it may be deemed necessary to face them. Thus, there are two main aspects of true spiritual passivity: one is passivity to the Divine Power and Influence so that it may work unhindered in the inner and outer life; the second is the maintenance of an unmoved, impartial inner equality to all outside contacts, whatever their character.

In the course of the Integral Yoga, the Divine pours its divine power and influence upon the individual in order to purify, shape, and remould the whole consciousness. The focus of the practice is to enter into conscious relation with this Divine Presence, to open and surrender to it, so that it may act upon and transform the consciousness. The first aspect of true spiritual passivity is to open to the Divine and to no other power or influence so that it may enlighten and transform the consciousness. Sri Aurobindo explains:

In this yoga the whole principle is to open oneself to the Divine Influence. It is there above you and, if you can once become conscious of it, you have then to call it down into you. It descends into the mind and into the body as Peace, as a Light, as a Force that works, as the Presence of the Divine with or without form, as Ananda. Before one has this consciousness, one has to have faith and aspire for the opening. Aspiration, call, prayer are forms of one and the same thing and are all effective; you can take the form that comes to you or is easiest to you.<sup>43</sup>

In general, a firm distinction must be seized between the influence of the higher Divine, or of that which leads towards it, and all that hampers one's spiritual progress. A conscious contact, a clear inner perception of the Presence or influence of the Divine is a necessary prerequisite to the true passivity. This inner contact and perception is something that develops with spiritual practice over time, and is not necessarily an easy achievement. It generally requires some diminution of the unquiet activity of the mind and vital nature. If the mind is constantly busy with its own ideas and preferences, and the vital nature is constantly busy with the pursuit of its own desires and the play of emotions, this noisy activity makes it difficult to become conscious of and perceive the influence of the Divine in us. Therefore an inner calm and peace are a necessary foundation for the Integral Yoga.

According to Integral Yoga, deep within each of us there is what is called a psychic being centred around our divine essence or soul. It is the psychic being in us that is most directly in contact with the Presence and Power of the Divine, open and responsive to it, and is able to clearly discern its influences from those coming from others or from our own mind and vital nature. It is through a growing contact of the outer consciousness with this psychic being and its coming forward into the outer nature that a conscious contact with the Divine and the true response to it comes about.

Therefore, as this development of the inner contact and conscious perception of the Divine proceeds, it is generally important to utilise our own mental discrimination between those influences which further our spiritual development and those which retard it. Indeed this mental discrimination should remain in place and work hand-in-hand with the development of the psychic contact and discrimination until the latter is well-established and secure. Thus, together with the development of the psychic being's more intuitive subtle discernment of what is true and to be accepted as coming from the Divine, there should be developed and enforced a quiet, dispassionate, yet vigilant mental discernment of what is helpful or harmful to one's spiritual growth to see that one is not led astray by wrong "intuitions" or "inner feelings."

The second side of the true passivity is more properly referred to in Integral Yoga by the term 'equality'. Equality is a key inner condition that is to be developed in the course of the practice of Integral Yoga. Sri Aurobindo explains that "Equality is to remain unmoved in all circumstances," and adds, "whatever the unpleasantness of circumstances, however disagreeable the conduct of others, you must learn to receive them with a perfect calm and without any disturbing reaction."<sup>44</sup> This unmoved inner poise has its basis in the spirit which underlies and supports all the movement and multiplicity of the universe. Firmly seated in the spiritual consciousness, no adverse event or circumstance, even intense physical pain, can break or unsettle the realised yogi's inner peace and composure. Thus, an equal, quiet, undisturbed, unrelated response to outside contacts and conditions, whether favorable or unfavorable, may appear to be a kind of passivity, but ideally the inner being is not touched or affected by them at all, and at least should not be allowed to be swept away by them as in the false passivity.

In the course of establishing this inner equality and poise of the spirit, progress may be marked by a gradual development of endurance, philosophical detachment, or a spiritual submission to outside influences. While none of these three psychological attitudes or poises are the true spiritual equality, each can be a stepping-stone towards it.<sup>45</sup> During the development of one or more of these attitudes, it may outwardly appear that the individual is passive to events or circumstances, but this passivity is quite different than the false passivity, because the individual's aim is to be concentrated within on the Divine and remain unaffected by these influences.

In addition, when the development of the true spiritual equality is incomplete and the contact with the divine Presence within is still tenuous and subject to breaks, the individual may elect to focus more time and effort on inner concentration, and as an aid, temporarily retreat to a more protected environment free from distractions and disturbing influences. The person may find that a partial withdrawal from external activities and contacts may be useful or necessary in order to permanently establish and maintain the inner contact with the divine Presence. To the outside world, this may appear as passivity, because he or she is less engaged with the world and with personal and social contacts. However, in actuality the individual is simply focusing full attention on the immediate aim, and is being especially vigilant to protect the developing inner contact with the Divine. It is not a relapse into inertia, but rather an intensified one-pointed concentration on the Divine. Sri Aurobindo has cautioned practitioners of his yoga not to enter into a complete withdrawal from all outer contacts, as this may lead to certain dangers, but he permitted partial temporary withdrawals from outer activities and contacts during certain phases in the

development of the inner consciousness. Furthermore, a withdrawal from contacts and activities which are both unnecessary and detrimental to the aims of the sadhana would not only be permitted, but encouraged.

### **False Spiritual Activism**

False spiritual activism is activism that does not have a real or sufficiently stable basis of spirit behind to support and guide it, nor a real or a sufficiently pure dynamic spiritual power flowing in and through it. Instead, it is supported by mental ideas and ideals mixed with emotional reactions to perceived injustices or wrongs, and is infused primarily with the mental will for change and vital life energy for dynamic power. Because both the mind and vital are subject to error, distortions, and even perversions, false spiritual activism can be or become misguided, degraded, and even dangerously destructive. It would even seem that when it is informed or supported by a limited, narrow religious ideology, carrying a certain absoluteness of conviction and need of converting others, there is the greatest danger for wrong application and perversion, as evident in the history of violent religious persecution and more recent religious fundamentalism-inspired terrorism.

A clear distinction must be made between mental ideals and the true spiritual consciousness; the latter is something vast, calm and eternal, while at the same time extremely powerful. The mind, on the other hand, is a thing of ideas and convictions, which may be based on sound reasoning, sound data, careful reflection, but nearly always is partial and subject to errors. It often is seriously deficient and perverted by wrong influences.

Let us take the general case of science as an example. Science is supposed to be based on careful reasoning, sound evidence, experimentation and testing, and is supposed to provide us with sound and reliable data about and explanations of our existence. But even here philosophers of science have argued that it is generally based on assumptions which may be faulty, is typically oriented towards particular “fashionable” issues and tilted in favor of certain preferred outcomes, and is subject to biases of the investigator and of the institutions in which they work, biases which may be either conscious or unconscious. It should be borne in mind that scientific conclusions are never certain, and that many of even the most important and basic scientific conclusions have been overturned and undergone revision.

In some cases, scientific investigations and conclusions may inform and support activism, for example, in environmental activism. While careful scientific study can provide a strong basis or measure of support for activism, the point is that even here it is not infallible and one is likely to

find dissenting scientific opinions. Often, however, activists may have little basis of sound scientific evidence to support their cause, and it may be based more on beliefs and political preferences. In many spheres of social and political controversy, activism may be based on particular partial mental opinions and preferences, rather than either a scientific or a spiritual basis.

Whereas we may admit that many of the social, political, and ecological projects of activists may express partial viewpoints and preferences, there are certain injustices which would seem incontrovertible and absolute. Take, for example, human trafficking and forced prostitution, child abuse, the toxic pollution of the air or water of a community by a company. Surely standing up to issues such as these is not simply based on a mental preference or a partial viewpoint; can we not take up such causes as spiritual necessities, as spiritually-inspired activist causes? Whereas there certainly are causes that are just, and social changes that imperatively must be made in the forward evolution of human society, it is not the justifiability of the cause taken up that makes activism spiritual, but rather it is the underlying consciousness of the activist and the quality of the force which expresses itself in his or her acts. If these are not spiritual in their essence, even if the cause is undoubtedly just, it is simply activism and not spiritual activism. Ecological, social, and political activism have a rightful place and can serve just causes, but they should not be confused with spiritual activism or be falsely imbued with the sanctity of the spiritual label to further their cause.

When it comes to specifically religious or so-called spiritual matters, the same criteria apply. The world is now awash in religious fanaticism. Religious zealots are busy blowing up crowded airport and bus terminals, bombing places of religious worship, assassinating government leaders, and trying to replace democratically-elected governments, all in the name of God. The individuals involved in these acts are convinced of their justness, of the sanction and perhaps the command of God for their acts. While the evil of their acts may seem obvious to others who do not share their fanaticism, it may be impossible to convince these extremists. A firm distinction must be made between the spiritual consciousness, and a religious and mental and vital consciousness. The distinguishing factor that makes such fanaticism evil is the underlying consciousness that drives them — the hatred, the desire to kill, the perception of others as separate and expendable.

### **True Spiritual Activism**

In assessing this inner condition of the activist, we must refer back to our earlier formulation of true spiritual passivity, and assert that true spiritual activism must be based on a true spiritual passivity. It is precisely on the

basis of the vast, calm, eternal spiritual consciousness that spiritual activism must be founded. If it does not have this stable grounding of spirit, this passivity and receptivity to the inspiration and power of the inner Divine, this stable basis of equality to outer circumstances and influences, it will not be the true spiritual activism. If activism is motivated by mental preferences, emotional recoils or attachments, vital desires for particular outcomes, it may be a noble activism, but it is not true spiritual activism.

While spiritual activism must be founded on a calm, equal, wide spiritual passivity, it requires something more: it also requires the dynamic inspiration, guidance, and driving force of the spiritual consciousness. According to Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and yoga, as well as to ancient Indian spiritual thought, there are both passive and active aspects of the Divine and the spiritual consciousness, represented in the Indian tradition by Shiva and Kali. The dynamic aspect is the One Force that acts in all forces, that expresses itself in all forms in the universe, but can also act sovereignly and intervene in the play of world forces. Supporting this vast dynamic movement in the universe is the passive silence of conscious Being, the Witness and Enjoyer of the creation. The ideal spiritual activist is conscious of both the underlying Oneness of Being and this One Divine Force energizing all things and flowing into him and driving all his or her activities. The spiritual activist is no longer merely a separate individual trying to effect change in a resistant world, but a conscious and responsive instrument of the Force of the Divine breaking up established forms and forces and creating new ones. It is not done out of pity or anger or revulsion, but as a conscious and natural flow of the Divine Force through the activist's words and actions. As Sri Aurobindo says,

How he shall do this, in what particular way, can be decided by no general rule. It must develop or define itself from within; the decision lies between God and our self, the Supreme Self and the individual self that is the instrument of the work; even before liberation, it is from the inner self, as soon as we become conscious of it, that there rises the sanction, the spiritually determined choice. It is altogether from within that must come the knowledge of the work that has to be done. There is no particular work, no law or form or outwardly fixed or invariable way of works which can be said to be that of the liberated being.... The action of the liberated doer of works must be even such an outflowing from the soul; it must come to him or out of him as a natural result of his spiritual union with the Divine and not be formed by an edifying construction of the mental thought and will, the practical reason or the social sense.<sup>46</sup>

Just as it is not easy to realise the passive spiritual consciousness underlying all things, it is not easy to realise this dynamic spiritual Force

working in and through us in a free and unhindered manner. Whereas ultimately all our actions have this One Force behind them, it normally works *through* the limitations of our mental, vital, and physical nature, and therefore, not in a direct and spiritual manner. The aim here is to allow and enable it to substitute its own higher and more powerful working for our stumbling, misguided, and faltering efforts. This cannot be done at once, it occurs gradually over time through a disciplined practice of a Karmayoga in which all the parts of the dynamic nature progressively open and surrender themselves to the guidance and action of the Divine Force, rather than move in their own accustomed manner at the behest of a mixture of inner and outer influences, mental, vital, and physical.

The Bhagavad Gita is the great scriptural authority on this matter, and in discussing it Sri Aurobindo brings out the underlying principles and processes that would lead to a true spiritual activism. The central processes that lead to this taking up of the dynamic parts of the nature by the divine Force can be briefly summarized as follows: "Equality, renunciation of all desire for the fruit of our works, action done as a sacrifice to the supreme Lord of our nature and of all,—these are the three first Godward approaches in the Gita's way of Karmayoga."<sup>47</sup> Sri Aurobindo elaborates,

This, in short, is the demand made on us, that we should turn our whole life into a conscious sacrifice. Every moment and every movement of our being is to be resolved into a continuous and a devoted self-giving to the Eternal. All our actions, not less the smallest and most ordinary and trifling than the greatest and most uncommon and noble, must be performed as consecrated acts. Our individualised nature must live in the single consciousness of an inner and outer movement dedicated to Something that is beyond us and greater than our ego.<sup>48</sup>

It is through this continual reference of all our actions to the Divine Force that is their true source and power that we overcome the sense of our own ego as the initiator of our acts. As long as we engage in activism for the satisfaction of our own preferred outcomes, we are not yet engaged in the true spiritual activism. It is through a progressive and continually expanding self-offering of all our dynamic activities to the Divine Force that we remove the barriers to its unhindered and undistorted action in and through us. The spiritual activist is not merely a person fighting for higher principles, but is a consciously surrendered instrument of the Divine for His action in the world.

As this process of inner surrender progresses, we must continue to act according to our best lights, using the highest and most clear vision of what is to be done as we are capable, and carrying out the action with

as much skill and precision as possible, all the while offering the action to the Divine. The activist must continually seek and call for the guidance as well as the originating and sustaining power of the Divine in the action undertaken. We must leave the results of the action in the hands of the Divine, and remain entirely equal whether they are successful or not. It is not the end result that must be the motivation for the action, but the act of offering, the growing consciousness of the Divine Presence in ourselves and in our activity. These are the inner signs of the deeper and true spiritual activism.

## Summary and Conclusion

The recent explosion of interest in spiritual activism is a healthy development in the field of spirituality, carrying it beyond a self-centered focus on individual health and development towards a fuller embrace of the world and its challenges. However, in its movement outward towards engagement with world challenges, spirituality must maintain its inner centre and poise in the spirit. Sri Aurobindo's ideal of the divine life, which entails a radical transformation of both the individual and collective existence, does just that. In order to bring to bear the necessary spiritual power that can truly transform and divinise the outer life, it strives to reach the highest heights of inner spiritual experience and realisation. It is relatively easier to attain a settled inner state of spiritual peace and harmony when one withdraws from the world and its problems, it is when one aims to change the outer life and the world that the fullness of the inner spiritual realisation is more severely tested and challenged. Thus, the spiritual activist has a double task, to attain the inner poise of the spiritual consciousness, and to maintain it in the midst of engagement with the problems of the world.

What we have called true spiritual passivity reflects this inner poise of the spirit which must attend and serve as the necessary foundation for true spiritual activism. As briefly described here, it consists of two main elements. One is an exclusive passivity to the inner Divine Presence and Power, as distinct from other inner or outer mental, vital, or physical influences. It is not that no other ordinary human forces are allowed to enter the psychological space of the individual, but rather that they are not *passively* allowed to enter. First one must become conscious of their presence and influence, and one must admit only those which are helpful or at least not harmful. The second element is the development of an entire equality or equanimity to all circumstances, conditions, and events. For this latter condition to become complete, one must have a secure poise in the inner spiritual consciousness, because this spiritual consciousness alone is pure and untouched by all that happens in the world. This spiritual

consciousness is distinct from mind, it is the fundamental ground of the universal existence we see around us.

From this poise of the spiritual consciousness, all conditions, all events appear as movements of nature driven by the one Divine Force that dominates all existence. In Sri Aurobindo's view, the world is a progressive evolution of the divine spirit that lies concealed in the stone, emerges in the plant, and becomes progressively more conscious in animals and humanity. It is a difficult evolution of consciousness in the matrix of matter. It progresses through a working out of conflicting forces towards a progressive harmony and is leading towards a divine delight. Birth and death are merely incidents in the long evolution of the eternal spirit. As the Isha Upanishad put it, "He whose self has become all existences, for he has the knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief, he who sees everywhere oneness?"<sup>49</sup> The spiritual activist should be able to look upon the world and its problems with a calm and equal regard, without repulsion. As the Mother said, "You want to correct what the Creator is doing?"<sup>50</sup> We should have, or we should try to develop, a perfect equality for things as they are.

But this does not mean that things should remain the way they are, or that we should not be involved in the change of the world. The world is a progressive manifestation of the Divine, it is not complete. It is constantly changing, constantly evolving into something that more purely expresses the higher qualities of the divine nature. As conscious instruments of the Divine, we must be instruments of its higher evolution and manifestation. But here it is necessary that we do not mistake our own limited ideas of what must emerge and when with the Divine's. We must inwardly unite with the Divine within so that these higher divine qualities may flow through us into the world and into all those who are around us, awakening them to these emerging forces within themselves. Our activism should be more as a catalyst awakening these divine powers in others than as a combatant, though sometimes combat too is required when the opposition is fierce and unrelenting in its obstruction to the truth that is emerging from within.

These are all very fine as high spiritual ideals, one might counter, but as long as we remain stuck in our limited human consciousness, tethered to our mental and vital existence, what are we to do about the gross injustices and the destruction of our planet? Are we to sit quietly and meditate while our fellow human beings are abused and the world is destroyed? This is the difficult dilemma in which we find ourselves, and we feel that we must act. It is here that the Bhagavad Gita advises us to act, but to do our actions as a conscious offering to the Divine. We must act with the sense and feeling that it is the Divine within us that is carrying out the actions through us and that we are merely conscious instruments for his work. Indeed it is

the Divine that in reality always acts through all actions, whether we are conscious of it or not. The key is to become conscious of it, and to more and more align our will and force with the Divine Will and Force, to filter out competing mental preferences and vital desires. If we act unconsciously of the divine impetus behind our actions, the Divine will work through our unconscious and limited instruments, but if we act consciously, the Divine will work through our conscious, responsive and therefore more effective and powerful instruments. This inclusion of the dynamic parts of our nature, our abilities to carry out effective and complex actions in conscious unity with the Divine, is the important and necessary ingredient in true spiritual activism. This comes only through practice, through work done while consciously referring the work to the Divine Force behind. It does not come through meditation or inaction. Act we must, it is impossible to completely cease to act, so it is best that we act consciously, referring our actions to the Divine, seeking the Divine's guidance, and progressively aligning and attuning our actions with the Divine Will and Force.

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37. Ibid. p. 1031.
38. After being a leader of the early Independence movement, Sri Aurobindo “retired” to focus on the development and heightening of the spiritual consciousness, repeatedly refusing to reenter politics.
39. When Sri Aurobindo retired from politics in 1910 to focus on his spiritual work in Pondicherry, several “disciples” joined him. When the Mother joined him in Pondicherry 1920, their number gradually began to increase. In the early and mid 1930s, Sri Aurobindo kept up an enormous correspondence with them regarding their spiritual practice and other matters, at the peak working up to ten to twelve hours per day on this correspondence. In their collected and printed form, they extend to several thousands of pages. The Mother, meanwhile, looked after all the needs of the growing community of Ashramites, showering them with love and attention.
40. Sri Aurobindo’s written works extend to 37 volumes. The Mother’s collected works consist of 17 volumes, and her recorded conversations with a disciple, Satprem, extends to 13 additional volumes. These works are important sources of guidance in yoga. Just as importantly, many of their disciples feel that they are inwardly guided by them.
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## SRI AUROBINDO'S THEORY OF POETRY: SEARCHING FOR A COMPLETE MANIFESTO

*Goutam Ghosal*



*Photo credit: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust*

*The Future Poetry* was a silent revolution between 1917 and 1920 amidst the noise of loudly publicized modern poetic theories in favour of intellectual poetry. It was just the time when people in Europe and America were listening to T.S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry with great attention. In a little known corner of the globe and in a less known journal, Sri Aurobindo was then busy preparing the passage for man to move up to a new species. In the years between 1914 and 1921, he was absorbed in mighty experiential prose works, some of which were either moving together or stopping in parallel with *The Future Poetry* as installments in *The Arya*. *The Life Divine* stopped coming out as a serial in January 1919, *Essays on the Gita* in July 1920, *The Synthesis of Yoga* just a few months later in January 1921, *The Psychology of Social Development* in July 1918.

The aesthetics proper and a half-developed theory of poetry came in the closing session of a great series, as if to give the final shape to the Aurobindonian world view. Contrary to the common belief in our English departments, where the other major prose works are thought of as irrelevant to Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics and theory of poetry, I must say that his poetics can only be grasped thoroughly with reference to his total view of life. How is *The Life Divine* related to his art and poetry? Just a brief explanation from *The Future Poetry* will tell all:

Poetry and art most of all our powers can help to bring this truth home to the mind of man with an illumining and catholic force, for

while philosophy may lose itself in abstractions and religion turn to an intolerant otherworldliness and asceticism, poetry and art are born mediators between the material and the concrete, the spirit and life. This mediation between the truth of spirit and the truth of life will be one of the chief functions of the poetry of the future. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 199)

*The Future Poetry* is not just a search for mantric poetry; it touches on various planes of life, society and culture in general. It starts with a focus on a lost poetry, then becomes a revised history of English poetry, and in the final chapters struggles keenly to define and characterise *mantra* and stops short of a total clarification despite his wonderful language encircling all the time the secret sources of overhead poetry. Never was the language of poetry criticism such a unique blend of revelation and argument, poetry and logic, with the long drawn out Ciceronian, the suspended syntax, balanced by a cool clarified statement.

*The Future Poetry* will restore the element of sight and listening, the rhythmic speech, as it rose in the past from the heart of the seer and from the native home of the truth. The *mantra* will return with a more deliberate subjectivising, a more deliberate exploration of the self. Talking of the evolution of society, Sri Aurobindo remembers the lost art and its distortion in the very first chapter of *The Human Cycle*, refusing to look on it as a 'nautch-girl of the mind', and 'a revel of intellect and fancy.' (*SABCL*, Vol. 15, p. 5) The poets of the old days just saw and sang. Teaching, preaching, philosophising and sermonising had nothing to do with them. In classical Sanskrit, the word Kavi "applied to any maker of verse, but in the Vedic Sanskrit it meant the poet-seer who saw the Truth and found in a subtle truth-hearing the inspired word of his vision." (*The Future Poetry*, p. 27)

Here are some significant highlights from *The Future Poetry*, where he seeks to express his ultimate choice as a theoretician and a practitioner.

But poetry is the *Mantra* only when it is the voice of the inmost truth and is couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 194)

But still all life is one and a new human mind moves towards the realisation of its totality and oneness. The poetry which voices the oneness and totality of our being and nature and the worlds and God, will not make the actuality of our earthly life less but more real and rich and full and wide and living to men. (*Ibid.*, p. 224)

It will be a mistake to consider this poetry as just revivalistic. *The Future Poetry* speaks more about the present and the future than about the past. Here is a relevant passage:

But now the mind of man is opening more largely to the deepest truth of the Divine, the Self, the Spirit, the eternal presence not separate and distant, but near us, around us and in us, the Spirit in the world, the greater Self in man and his kind, the Spirit in all that is and lives, the godhead, the existence, the power, the beauty, the eternal delight that broods over all, supports all and manifests itself in every turn of creation. (*Ibid.*, p. 223)

The frequent use of the comparative degree in *The Future Poetry* simply indicates the progressive awareness of the subjective self. The vision of the 'more' is not just a mere comparative degree. Sri Aurobindo has a distinct perception beyond Tagore, Whitman, Carpenter, A.E., Yeats, Stephen Phillips and the other poets near to him. There is no mention about himself, simply because he was not practicing fully what he was preaching then. But then, he might be having a prescience of his own poetic output between 1926 and 1950, the poetry of K. D. Sethna, Harindanath, J.A. Chadwick, Nirodbaran and Nolini Kanta, and also of Themis and the Aurovilian Poets of today, R.Y. Deshpande, and others working around us.

Yet there was some thing more to be said in *The Future Poetry*, which would have completed a very interesting poetics. The master yearned for revisions. He played the instrument masterfully, but wished to tell something more, something that was still beyond his reach, beyond the capacity of his expressive skill or may be the thing he was trying to formulate took time to shape itself out with reference to his poetics. The knowledge about the planes was certainly there, as he had already spoken of them in *The Life Divine*. But somehow there was still a lack of integration.

The excessive stress on *The Future Poetry* (1917-20) as a pointer to Sri Aurobindo's final theory of poetry has made the book quite popular at the expense of the full view of his aesthetics, which only becomes clear in his post-1926 letters, especially the letters to K.D. Sethna. The last nine chapters of *The Future Poetry* speak of significant overlooked areas, which confirm that Sri Aurobindo is not speaking of a revival but of a dynamic subjectivity following the expanding zones of human consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo wished thorough revisions of the book, which could not be done and for which, maybe, the book remained unpublished during his life time. He must have felt the problem of objective correlative in the book and that could have been the reason why 24 of the book's 32 chapters received some revision at one time or another. Only once in *The Future Poetry*, that too very briefly towards the close of the book, we get a lone reference to the 'overmind' with a nearly accurate focus:

It will be first and most a poetry of the intuitive reason, the intuitive senses, the intuitive delight soul in us, getting from this enhanced source of inspiration a more sovereign poetic enthusiasm and ecstasy, and then, it may even be, rise towards a still greater power of revelation nearer to the direct vision and word of the overmind from which all creative inspiration comes. (*SABCL, Vol. 9, p. 207*)

Regarding the influence of the overmind on poetry, Sri Aurobindo does not say anything more beyond that. It is only in his letters to Mr. Sethna that we see repeated references to, and adequate explanations of, the term overmind. It is curious that Sri Aurobindo had been talking of the overmind in *The Life Divine* in detail with reference to the spiritual planes, as mapped by him. We see just a brief reference to that in *The Future Poetry*, which started coming out in 1917. There are frequent references to *mantra* in *The Future Poetry*, but we do not know as yet that the operating plane is the last summit of the mind, which either influences the style or the substance or both. Hence much of Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry remains unexplained in *The Future Poetry*. Unless we read the letters to Mr. Sethna, no clear view of mantric poetry, or inspired poetry from comparatively low planes, can emerge. Judged from this point of view, it will not be proper to call *The Future Poetry* the complete poetic manifesto of Sri Aurobindo. Yet *The Future Poetry* should be there, the whole of it, along with the letters, in our search for the whole poetics of Sri Aurobindo. In an incomplete chapter entitled "Mantra", which is now put in Appendix III, he made perhaps his last attempt to clarify the nature of *mantra* in the book. This time he was very close as he had been in the chapter "The Word and the Spirit."

Speech, the expressive word, has such a summit or absolute, a perfection which is the touch of the infinite upon its finite possibilities and the seal upon it of its Creator. This absolute of the expressive word can be given the name which was found for it by the inspired singers of the Veda, the *Mantra*. . . . the *Mantra* is the word that carries the godhead in it or the power of the godhead. (*The Future Poetry, p. 279*)

And yet this is far behind the post-1926 clarity, which we see in the letters. Sri Aurobindo became a relaxed guru after 1926. Apart from that, the Mother's influence might have been a significant force behind the clarity of his post-1926 letters. One suspects he learnt a lot about expressive skill from the Mother's writings. There is an obvious change in his prose style in the 30s and the progressive clarity reached a supreme height in *The Supramental Manifestation on Earth*. While writing the introduction to his *Overhead Poetry: Poems with Sri Aurobindo's Comments*, Sethna shuns his complicated and exhaustive language and opts for clarity to explain the overhead aesthetics:

*The Future Poetry* would be written from those rarer levels whose voices have occasionally joined the utterances from the usual sources to make the profoundest moments of past poetry. The rarest of those levels give birth to overhead poetry: they are “planes” whose afflatus comes as if from an infinitude of conscious being above our brain-clamped mentality. (Sethna, p. i)

These commentaries are extremely helpful in our effort to tie up the scattered materials and for our own practice of criticism of overhead poetry, the poetry that comes from the overhead planes: (1) the Higher mind, (2) the Illumined Mind, (3) the Intuition and (4) the Overmind. In these letters, Sri Aurobindo teaches us, through Sethna, how to identify the sources, starting from the voice of the self, the psychic poetry, and then going up from that gateway towards the spiritual planes. He clarifies the fluctuation of the influences, as there is no consistent influence of a particular source on the whole unit. He speaks of how the planes operate separately or mixed up in their touches on a line or lines. All overhead poetry cannot be called *mantra*, as the purest kinds come either by the overmind touch or by the touch of very high spiritual Intuition, which is a plane just below the overmind. Much of the supermind substance percolates down to the overmind, as all our colleagues from the philosophy and yoga-psychology branches present here know very well. And that could be the reason behind Sri Aurobindo’s statement in *The Future Poetry*, which takes us by surprise because of its direct reference to the Supermind.

The voice of poetry comes from a region above as, a plane of our being above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre. (*The Future Poetry*, p. 264)

The most significant phrases, clauses and sentences in these letters to Sethna may be underlined and by repeated readings of these letters the perception has to be formed. Because this is not intellectual poetry, our intellectual judgments will fail to characterise such lines. A different kind of language habit will strengthen that perception. Sri Aurobindo frequently uses words and phrases like ‘inevitability’, ‘absolute inevitability’, ‘supreme inevitability,’ ‘inevitable word,’ ‘revelation,’ ‘direct overmind transmission,’ etc.

Sri Aurobindo’s letters cited in Sethna’s *Overhead Poetry* complete the image of *Mantra* and shows Sri Aurobindo’s humility in statements like the following:

The *Mantra* as I have tried to describe it in *The Future Poetry* is a word of power and light that comes from the overmind inspiration or some very high plane of intuition. Its characteristics are a language that conveys infinitely more than the mere surface sense of the words seems to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the infinite and disappears into it.... (Sethna, p. 12)

The overmind expresses a cosmic consciousness, even by its touch, as the full overmind inspiration rarely comes down upon human poetry. It may be a touch on the substance or the style of a line which may or may not have any relation with mysticism or spirituality proper or it may affect both the style and the substance in its more powerful touch. Sri Aurobindo also speaks of a "mental overmind" (*Ibid.*, p. 18) as contrasted with the overmind proper which has some Gnostic light in it. There are at least four divisions of the overmind in his letters to Sethna: mental overmind, intuitive overmind, true overmind and supramentalised overmind. Sri Aurobindo frankly admitted to Sethna that he was not in a position at that point of time to describe the workings of the "overmind Gnosis."

Sri Aurobindo stresses the point of feeling and perception, because there is still a problem of *objective correlative* for the critic while dealing with lines that drop in from the overmind. There may be an inspired selection, an unusual bringing together of words and obviously they come as discovery refusing to be intercepted by the intellectual mind. One cannot improve such lines, like

The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

or

Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Despite the clarity in the letters to Sethna and a detailed exposition of overmind aesthetics, there are important omissions or the issues were forgotten by Sethna, like the stress on the words 'song' and the 'singer', which we see so frequently in *The Future Poetry*. Mantric poetry has a close kinship with song and that seems to be a reason behind Sri Aurobindo's memory of Tagore, a singer poet from a regional language, while his discussion was centering round the flashes of *mantra* in the English language. Why was the Bengali poet so frequently remembered in the last few chapters of *The Future Poetry*? The old lights up the new in Tagore's songs. I have chosen just one example for my esteemed non-Bengali audience—

“aaji joto tara tobo akashe.”

The ananda from all directions have attained a profound fragrance  
my mind it sweeps across your temple.

now I know no one anywhere

I hear nothing else, but

the breath of the cosmos plays through my heart

To the tune of a flute.

*The Future Poetry* must be properly linked up with Sri Aurobindo's letters on psychic and overhead poetry to form a complete view of his poetics. Many of the lines from today's anti-Aurobindonian school unknowingly focus on Sri Aurobindo's theory of the overhead inspiration kissing the mundane substance. I should not pretend to locate the exact plane, but it will be interesting to have a look at Nissim Ezekiel's surprising line from *Marriage*, where a sudden unusual vibration is caught in the following line describing the walk of a couple:

Wordless they walked like a breeze.

The mundane catching the suggestion of the infinite is certainly not the end point in Sri Aurobindo's poetics. His more significant prophesies relating to the return of incantation in English poetry does not seem unreal for the poets writing from Pondicherry and Auroville. Let us wish the vibration to spread beyond these two cities.

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