

SRI AUROBINDO- JOURNEY FROM OCCIDENT TO BHARAT

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ABSTRACT

Modern Indian history is characterized by renaissance in manifold sphere. The rediscovery of ancient spirit of liberty (svatantrata) not only led to the biggest non-violent independence movement, but it also impregnated the arts and literature, spirituality and religion, ancient thoughts and modern novelty. Sri Aurobindo (15 August 1872 – 5 December 1950) emerges as the most prominent face of this manifold renaissance. He was foremost a thinker and a revolutionary. He was a fugitive and a saint. He was a commentator on Greek drama and interpreter of Indian culture. He meditated over effulgent sun, what he termed as tratakadhya, and himself radiated the fiery thoughts through his columns in *Bande Mataram*. He had a prophetic voice which could apprehend the coming turbulence of world wars and the breaking of colonial yokes in India. Nowadays many of his ideas are emerging as catechism to define Bharatiyata. But, his journey to discovery of Bharat was not linear, as he like other bhadraloka Bengali family, was groomed in the western education system. This paper reconstructs the transition from Occidental categories of thinking to Indian categories in Sri Aurobindo's early writings.

Keyword: *Bande Mataram*, Baroda, boycott, chhayamay, Greek, Nationalist, Ramakrishna, shakti, swadeshi, tantra, Vivekananda, yoga,

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sri Aurobindo was born on 15th August, 1872 in Calcutta at 4.52 A.M. in the brahmamuhurat. His birth date and India's Independence Day coincides, something which he had inklings a score of years before India achieved independence. When he was 5 year old, he was sent for studies along with his two elder brothers Benoy Bhusan and Mano Bhusan to Loreto Convent School at Darjeeling. In 1879, trio went to England for education and Sri Aurobindo lived there for fourteen years. The brothers were reared first in an English family at Manchester. Later; Sri Aurobindo joined St. Paul's School in London in 1884. In 1890, he got a scholarship for further studies at prestigious King's College, Cambridge. He remained there till 1892. In 1890, he also qualified the toughest examination in colonial India and much sought out job of Indian Civil Service. But, his formative years of grooming in occidental culture began to have counter-movement. British superiority and Greek tradition of western culture had pushed him to the wall. There was no escape but to bounce back with own cultural strength. Aurobindo did not appear for the riding examination after the end of two years of probation. He was disqualified for the civil service. He must have felt pleasantly relieved.

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The destiny had different plan in store for the young lad. The Gaekwar of Baroda was visiting London. Brilliant that he was, Sri Aurobindo was offered an appointment in the Baroda State Service and left England for India, in February, 1893. In a way, the journeys of two towering personalities who redefined Bharatiyata intersected. Exactly this was the moment when Swami Vivekananda was planning to embark on a journey to the west and to propagate the superiority of Indian civilization over decadent Occidental civilization.

Sri Aurobindo remained in the Baroda Service from 1893 to 1906. He became Professor of English and later Vice-Principal in the Baroda College. It was here in Baroda that he was finally rooted in the Indian tradition and got enamored with the ancient Indian scriptures like Mahabharat, Upanishads, and literature of Kalidas. In England, he was given overdose of occidental education upon instruction of his father. But, in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo learned Sanskrit to study Indian civilization, first hand. He was closely following the works both of Indian and western orientalist on Indian civilization. He would read John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon)'s massive enterprise on bringing out obscure texts on tantra and read Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee for understanding the modern currents in ancient thoughts. After refreshing studies of Indian civilization, he was also getting restless with current Indian condition under colonial rule. The job with the Baroda princely state was a stumbling block for his political activities. He was quite active with propagating Swadeshi philosophy. When the agitation against partition of Bengal flared up in 1905, he left his job as Vice Principal in Baroda College and joined the movement. He came back to Calcutta and took charge as the Principal of the swadeshi-inspired Bengal National College. In a way, if his London days made him to flatter with the western culture, Baroda stay turned him into a radical Swadeshi-proponent. But, this transformation towards discovery of Bharat, which began at political level, soon gripped his soul. Within a decade, Sri Aurobindo underwent metamorphosis and his soul was radicalized into the radiating entity of Bharatiyata.

When Sri Aurobindo landed in Bengal, he was in the forefront of the leadership of the Nationalist faction of the Indian National Congress. He was instrumental in making Tilak as the head of this group. The Moderate vs. Nationalist struggle culminated in the Surat split of 1907 between two factions of the INC. The Nationalist faction of Tilak-Aurobindo-Lala Lajpat Rai put forward the idea of swaraj as the final goal unlike the Moderates who were reluctant to take on the colonizers frontally. Under the swaraj scheme, it was envisioned to create indigenous institutions/organizations in the realm of education, production, trade, governance, jurisprudence and complete non-cooperation with the Government. Swaraj was to move hand in hand with the policy of Boycott of British and foreign goods. In fact, the Boycott was meant not only against the foreign goods but also foreign institutions like British law courts, Government universities and colleges. Sri Aurobindo became the brain of the new movement. Apart from running the Swadeshi college, Aurobindo could see the power of print medium to energize more and more young men to rise up against the demeaning colonial rule. The party financed the new venture a daily paper, Bande Mataram. Sri Aurobindo became the acting editor. The newspaper could run only for a year. This had to close down in 1908. This newspaper emerged as the voice of India in international affairs and domestic political thinking. Sri Aurobindo kept an eye over the affairs in Persia and China, Egypt and Russia. But, Sri Aurobindo was arrested in Alipore Conspiracy case in May, 1908 and implicated in the activities of revolutionaries led by his brother Barindra Ghose. He spent 12 months in Alipore jail. This was the period when he was deeply integrated into yoga. When he came out of the jail in May, 1909; he started a weekly English paper, Karmayogin and a Bengali weekly, the Dharma. On 31st July, 1909, he wrote "An Open Letter to My Countrymen" after rumours were afloat about his deportation after certain report was submitted by the Calcutta Police to the British government. Sri Aurobindo was a changed man. He pleaded for passive resistance and rapprochement with the moderates and declared the editorial as

his last political will. Sri Aurobindo stated, "In case of my deportation it may help to guide some who would be uncertain of their course of action, and, if I do not return from it, it may stand as my last political will and testament to my countrymen."¹ In February, 1910, Sri Aurobindo left Calcutta for Chandernagore which was under French control. The experience in Alipore jail was life-changing. He bid goodbye to politics. The work of bringing out Karamyogi was entrusted to Sister Nivedita.

In April, 1910, he sailed for Pondicherry, another French territory and he remained in Pondicherry till his death. He remained in silent meditation for four years. In 1914, he began the publication of a philosophical monthly, the Arya. His popular works like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* appeared serially in the Arya. The Arya ceased publication in 1921. By this time, Pondicherry Ashram came into existence.

In November, 1926, Sri Aurobindo underwent powerful spiritual experience. All the external work was entrusted to his spiritual collaborator Mirra Alfassa, popularly known as Mother. Sri Aurobindo left his body on December 5, 1950.

OCCIDENT IN AUROBINDO'S EARLY WRITINGS

While Aurobindo was studying in the King's College and also on probation for the Indian Civil Services, his first brush with writing happened. He wrote a short 1400-word piece, *The Sole Motive of Man's Existence*, in 1891. The manuscript remained incomplete and unpublished during his life time. He was just 19, but his depth of western philosophy was fathomless. He wrote on western ideas with the kind of passion which many British writers could not have dared. In this short script of a conversation among all-European characters in a banquet party, conversation turned on the subject of the Christian religion, wine, women, beauty, sex, blasphemy. All characters had European names- Julian, Helen Woodward, Corydon, Lionel, Powell, Erinna, Dufresne, Philip, O'Ruark, Marc, Pattison Ely, Helen Woodward, Ella.

Julian, a female character enjoyed throwing banquet. The dual presence of wine and women made the conversations lively. Aurobindo brings in the name of Greek gods of revelry and drinking, Aphrodite and Bacchus in the script.²

When the Greek gods of excesses were mentioned, a character raises the issue of Love.

"Ah but Love is as bottomless as the sea."

"Yet Plato was an excellent diver and brought up the richest pearls."³

The conversation turned on the Christian religion and Julian, another character closed the subject by observing:

"The popular Gods should be denied but respected."⁴

Another character Erinna surprised by direct attack, "Yet you couple women and wine in your banquet-room".⁵

The influence of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau on Aurobindo's writings are evident as he raked up the issue of state of nature. In the script, the characters converse as below:

"Ah, my friend, I only observe Nature's ordinances: in social life sex does not exist. Besides conversation requires speech as well as reason."

"You insinuate?"

"Nature gave man reason, speech to woman."

"To what end has man used reason? To make Truth incredible. To what purpose has woman employed

speech? To say nothing.”⁶

In fact, Aurobindo was totally embedded in the Greek philosophy when he narrates through his character Julian’s voice, “Record me a confirmed Pythagoreanthe soul of Agathon did not perish in Macedonia.”⁷

The young Aurobindo was pondering over the western culture of love and carnal pleasure. This was used to interpret Indian mythological figure of Kamadeva. He wrote:

How then shall I paint the idea of Love? The Greeks have described a child with a warlike bow of horn and bitter arrows tipped with steel, and modern poets inspired by this rude conception have fabled of the smart which is the herald of Love’s shaft. But these ideas however happy in themselves are by no means suitable to Love; for they are without two of his most essential elements, the subtle and the impalpable. The Hindus are more felicitous when they sing of Kama—for poetry alone can express him—the divine and radiant youth mounted on [an] emerald parrot, and bearing in his right hand a bow of flowers; the arrows too must be of the same soft and voluptuous material—for a preference I would name the shefali, the only blossom which has a soul. For Love’s arrow never pains while in the wound—it is too subtle and flower-like...⁸

Such was the infatuation of young writer with the cocktail of love and wine that he records through the character of Marc, “Love is spiritual champagne, the best of wines if the briefest.”⁹

But, the undercurrent of spirituality made infrequent eruptions in the young mind. His character, O’Ruark dissented on the issue of love with other friends, “It is a strange mania which everyone is bound to catch, mostly at a certain age—in short the spiritual measles.”¹⁰

The script which remained incomplete ends with the following scene:

“Night flew on wing’ed feet and the wine was in their speech. At last the ladies rose and left the room; to the heart of Ella it seemed as....” [incomplete]¹¹

CONFLICT OF OCCIDENT AND ORIENT IN THE HARMONY OF VIRTUE (1892)

His next work which again remained unpublished during lifetime was extensive and he introduced Indian character in the conversation. This clearly establishes Aurobindo’s gradual disenchantment with alien philosophy and musings. The Harmony of Virtue contains the record of writing as “May 1892” towards the middle of the manuscript. This was again written when he was in the King’s College. He referred to The Harmony of Virtue when he wrote late in his life: “It is true that under his [Plato’s] impress I rashly started writing at the age of 18 [more likely 19] an explanation of the cosmos on the foundation of the principle of Beauty and Harmony, but I never got beyond the first three or four chapters.” Yet, the name of the principal character was no longer British or Greek. It was an Indian- “Keshav Ganesh Desai”, perhaps derived from Aurobindo’s real-life friend at the Cambridge, Keshav Ganesh Deshpande. The main conversation revolves around two characters- Keshav Ganesh and Broome Wilson. Aurobindo could see the decadence of the western civilization behind the high-flowery intellectual outpourings. His character Keshav argues,

“In Rome the triumphal chariot of Corruption was drawn by the winged horses, Culture and Art. And it is always so. From the evergreen foliage of the Periclean era there bloomed that gorgeous and overblown flower, Athens of the philosophers, a corrupt luxurious city, the easy vassal of Macedon, the easier slave of Rome. From the blending of Hellenic with Persian culture was derived that Oriental pomp and lavish magnificence which ruined the kingdoms of the East. And Rome, their conqueror, she too when the Roman in her died and the Italian lived, when the city of wolves became the abode of men, bartered her savage prosperity for a splendid decline....Yes, the fullness of the flower is the sure prelude of decay.”¹²

Aurobindo swings the narrative to India. Since Kalidas's *Shakuntala* was very popular for its romantic tale and the spiritual personality of Aurobindo was coming to the fore, he wanted to harmonize the romantic tales in Kalidas with the fullness of India's ancient past. He picked up the history of Vikramaditya and discussed how the "mightiest marvel of all were the philosophers." But what was Indian philosophy during the fullness of its civilization? This was the God as the supreme goal. Aurobindo interprets Indian history differently. India lost to barbaric Muslim invaders because it was more civilized. More civilized a society becomes, more feeble it turns and thence prone to conquest by the less civilized marauders. Aurobindo's character Keshav mentions,

"What a Philosophy was that! For she scaled the empyrean on the wing`ed sandals of meditation, soared above the wide fires of the sun and above the whirling stars, up where the flaming walls of the universe are guiltless of wind or cloud, and there in the burning core of existence saw the face of the most high God. She saw God and did not perish; rather fell back to earth, not blasted with excess of light, but with a mystic burden on her murmuring lips too large for human speech to utter or for the human brain to understand. Such was she then. Yet five rolling centuries had not passed when sleepless, all-beholding Surya saw the sons of Mahomet pour like locusts over the green fields of her glory and the wrecks of that mighty fabric whirling down the rapids of barbarism into the shores of night. They were barbarous, therefore mighty: we were civilized, therefore feeble."¹³

But, Greek references still conjure up images in young Aurobindo's mind. Sri Aurobindo while referring to a fictional character Vallabha Swami compares him to the Indian Epicurus.¹⁴

By the end of the year 1892, his drift both in idea and geography began. One of his last recorded musings in London was that of *Stray Thought* in which he contrasts Greek and Hindu mythology:

"One step beyond the sublime & you are in the grotesque. The Greek mythology was evolved by poets and sculptors; therefore it is beautiful. The Hindu mythology fell into the hands of priests and moralists; therefore it has become hideous."¹⁵

Before bidding goodbye to the west, Aurobindo picked up two powerful tools for his writing in India, which later became characteristic of his lyrical powerful writings. Aurobindo admits in his musings, *Stray Thought*,

"It was Meredith who taught me that the epigram is the soul of style, and Plato who whispered that rhythm is its body. Words are the texture of the flesh and sentences the system of hard matter that gives it consistency: the texture of the flesh may be coarse or delicate, and as you design so you shall build."¹⁶

ENCOUNTER WITH YOGA-THE CHALICE OF TRANSFORMATION

Aurobindo arrived in Baroda in 1893. While he was engaged in his service and writings in English literature, he also followed the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement closely. After Swami Vivekananda left the world on 4 July 1902, his daughter like disciple, Sister Nivedita began to tour India to spread the revolutionary message of Swami Vivekananda. Since Sister Nivedita is said to be an inspirational figure for the revolutionary extremists and forced out of Ramakrishna Mission after the monks accused her of sheltering the young revolutionary nationalists in the premises, her nation-wide tour might be seen as reinvigorating the patriotic and revolutionary spirit among young literate class across India. When she visited Baroda in 1902, she met young Aurobindo and greeted, "I hear, Mr. Ghose, you are a worshipper of Shakti". Nivedita herself was a worshipper of Kali and she wrote an inspirational book on Kali for the revolutionaries. Even the Japanese artist Okakura could not resist the devotion for the terrible Kali and he wrote the radical, anti-western work,

The Awakening of the East in 1903 with explicit reference to Kali and exhorted to not resist the temptation of sword while fighting the colonial rulers.

It was after this brief encounter that Sri Aurobindo began his practice of yoga in 1904. The spiritual practice and Sanskrit studies progressed in tandem. This was the phase when Sri Aurobindo started writing about Indian culture and civilization. But his spiritual transformation accelerated only when he deepened his spiritual practice in Alipore jail in 1908-09. He had spiritual communion with Ramakrishna. In a letter to Motilal Roy dated August 1912 or after, Sri Aurobindo wrote,

“Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came & first turned me to this Yoga. Vivekananda in the Alipore jail (again, not physically but in the occult plane) gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our sadhana.”¹⁷

After this guidance, he had vision of Swami Vivekananda for two weeks in Alipore jail. He wrote:

“It is a fact that I was hearing constantly the voice of Vivekananda speaking to me for a fortnight in the jail in my solitary meditation and felt his presence.”¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo was released from custody in May, 1909. He was spiritually transformed. He records his experience about these changes in his diary immediately after his release dated 18th June 1909:

“Afternoon. All liberty of bodily movement being steadily taken away. Second voice in brain. Sri K.’s voice once in heart. “I come to slay.” First voice sometimes rises from heart still to take its place in brain. First has personality, second none as yet. Night. Bhava of Avesh in steamer shaking body; also in Kalimandir and on way to lodging. Swarupa bright star on dark background. Thin Nil triangle with very sharp apex like old Hindu pinnacle, a bright golden line in the middle.”¹⁹

Sri Aurobindo was in close interaction with Sister Nivedita when he started Karamyogi. In fact, Sister Nivedita informed him about impending deportation after which Sri Aurobindo left Calcutta and went to French territories. Sri Aurobindo’s relationship with Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement has not been properly assessed. But, it is evident that the major influence over his life was that of three personalities, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as subtle bodies (in vocabulary of Sri Aurobindo) and Sister Nivedita as the manifestation of dynamic Shakti.

Sri Aurobindo began to practice meditation over the Sun. He learnt the technique of Chhayapurusha meditation over the Sun in which one can create the actual shadow personality of a person through the power of mind. While doing such a practice, Sri Aurobindo records, he encountered chhayamay of Sister Nivedita. She was the spiritual mother of Sri Aurobindo. This event is recorded in his diary on Feb 6th, 1911. Soon after, Sister Nivedita took her last breath in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911, a few days away from her forty-fourth birthday. She too was free from physical limitation. Sri Aurobindo was happy to have regularized trikaldrishti at the end of 1911. He records in his diary on January 14, 1912:

The siege will be over in ten minutes.

Lipi. “Efficient tapas”. Interpretation. “commences from today.”

“European civilisation in extremis”.

“21 years of strife before Indian civilization is willingly accepted in its flawless perfection.”²⁰

Sri Aurobindo was certain that western civilization is falling and Indian civilization will again rise to the occasion. Therefore, when the First World War started, Sri Aurobindo launched the magazine Arya which carried his major enunciations on Indian culture and civilization like The Renaissance in India, “Is India Civilised? A Defence of Indian Culture. Sri Aurobindo came full 180 degree within a span of two decades. His

works on Indian culture and civilization remain to be interpreted with new perspective and one may discover how spiritual gossamer and innate Bharatiyata unites and weaves the personality of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita and Sri Aurobindo.

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