

**Rebirth :
In the Light of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Monism**

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

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submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Professor Indrani Sanyal.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This dissertation entitled ‘Rebirth: In the Light of Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Monism’ is quite self-explanatory, wherein my objective is mainly to focus upon Sri Aurobindo’s conception of rebirth and its very significance in his metaphysics. This would also enable to bring out the uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysical perspective.

Sri Aurobindo certainly was a politician, poet, philosopher, mystic, but he was also first and foremost a Yogi. His was the path of Integral Yoga which aimed to attain the divine life. The practical method of integral self-realization is called Integral Yoga or Purnā Yoga which does not speak of the dissolution of the world and the individual being. The word ‘yoga’ has come from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which means ‘to unite’ or ‘to join’. Thus, yoga means to unite man with the Divine within himself. Here a difference between the traditional Yoga and Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga can be observed. While the traditional yoga speaks only of union of man with the Divine, Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga goes a step further and advocates the transformation of matter, life and mind which can be brought about by the power of the Consciousness-Energy of the Spirit. The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, in his own words ‘... has a different purpose from others, — for its aim is not only to rise out of the ordinary ignorant world-consciousness into the divine consciousness, but to bring the supramental power of that divine consciousness down into the ignorance of mind, life and body, to transform them, to manifest the Divine here and create a divine life in Matter.’¹ In this very utterance, it seems to us, lies the main essence of his line of Yoga. In the path of Integral Yoga, its practitioner does not merely crave his own salvation but strives to transform not only his own body, life and mind but also to bring about an integral transformation of the entire world. That is why it can be said that Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga is not the Yoga of self-fulfilment, on the contrary, it aims to bring about a total development of man and that of the entire world. But how can this transformation be brought about? This question can be answered only by a detailed analysis of Sri Aurobindo’s concept of rebirth.

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Lights on Yoga*, p. 1.

Why does one take birth? What purpose is served when one is born? Is there any hidden or secret truth which comes to light when one is born? Does death mark the end of everything? Rather, is death really a complete cessation of everything or does it signify the commencement of something new? These are the queries whose satisfying answers man has sought since time immemorial. The answers to these questions are presented to us from the points of view of materialism and spirituality. The belief in rebirth is quite a universally accepted belief among all the major schools of classical Indian philosophy except the materialist Cārvākas. The materialists would claim that birth is the commencement of life whose end is brought about by death; death is the final word — the ultimate end — after death, nothing remains of the individual being or Jiva. But the second point of view — that of spirituality — preaches something completely different. The spiritualists opine that although it is true that the journey of life starts after birth, but that does not mean that death marks the end of everything. The spiritualists are believers of the existence of an eternal being — which they call the soul or Atman. This eternal being or soul is immortal in nature and cannot be destroyed by death. The soul, based on the fruits of action incurred by the individual being in its former birth, again takes up a new body or takes birth again. First it is birth, then comes death and again birth — thus like a vicious circle the soul moves on from one birth to another. Here it is to be noted that there exist another school of philosophical thought which do not believe in the permanence of the soul but believes in rebirth. The significance and relevance of the view-points of this school of philosophical thought as analyzed and interpreted by Sri Aurobindo would be dealt with at the appropriate place.

The process of taking up a new physical body after death is known as ‘Rebirth’. Sri Aurobindo was a staunch believer of rebirth. It can be said that rebirth carries a special significance in Sri Aurobindo’s teachings as in the other schools of thought of Indian philosophy. Sri Aurobindo does accept the process of rebirth but there are certain original and independent insights to his theory of rebirth. ‘Who is it that takes birth?’ While answering this question, Sri Aurobindo has presented before us a unique line of thinking. With the exception of Buddhism, all the schools of philosophical thought in India preach that it is only the eternal soul which takes birth again and again. Such schools have used the term ‘Jivatman’ or individual soul while speaking of rebirth. But Sri Aurobindo has presented a somewhat different perspective. According to him, it is not the Jivatman which undergoes rebirth but its representative which he has called the ‘psychic being’. That is, instead of using the term ‘Jivatman’, Sri Aurobindo has

used ‘psychic being’ in the case of rebirth. This psychic being, Sri Aurobindo reveals, is the evolving soul. Why has it been called ‘evolving’? This is because, although the psychic being remains unnourished in its initial stage, it gradually gets enriched or nourished and evolves due to the manifold experiences it undergoes during the course of the several births it takes. Sri Aurobindo writes that at the time of taking a new birth, the psychic being selects all those experiences of its previous birth which it considers important and rejects all those which are of no use. By assimilating all the important experiences of its past life, it prepares itself to take up a new earthly life. But the psychic being requires a period of rest or intermission between two births for the aforementioned acceptance or rejection of experiences and their subsequent assimilation. And this period of rest is death.

Sri Aurobindo points out that just as birth has a significance, death too is equally significant. According to him, death is not only important but is also necessary as per the law of Nature. Just as a seed germinates into a sapling which evolves into a tree, similarly, the commencement of a new life is marked through the medium of death. But why does death take place? Sri Aurobindo has answered this question in his famous philosophical treatise, *The Life Divine*: ‘The material or physical causes of death are not its sole or its true cause; its true inmost reason is the spiritual necessity for the evolution of a new being.’¹ This means that physical causes are not the sole reason of death. The failure of physical organs leading to stoppage of the functioning of the heart is generally accepted as the only cause of death. But Sri Aurobindo believes that behind the occurrence of death there lies a little known secret and that is: without death, the beginning or manifestation of a new life cannot take place. It is through death that the individual being gets a new birth and through such series of new births the consciousness of the individual being too blossoms. Therefore, as far as the evolution of consciousness is concerned, Sri Aurobindo believes that death commands an equal significance just as birth does.

Anyway, it is clear from Sri Aurobindo’s statement that death does not mark the end of life for death signifies the commencement of a new birth. This is so because after death, the psychic being brings with itself only the essential portions of its previous life as *śamskāras* or mental dispositions which are utilized to facilitate the creation of its forthcoming birth. Now a question arises: where does the psychic being go after death? Sri Aurobindo has admitted many higher subtle worlds which exist beyond this physical world. After death, the psychic being goes to each

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 854.

of these higher worlds starting from the lower to the highest. But Sri Aurobindo has also pointed out that while ascending to these higher worlds, the psychic being needs to be sufficiently nourished. When the psychic being is aptly nourished it becomes fit enough to ascend to these higher worlds. Sri Aurobindo has recognized the existence of subtle physical world, subtle vital world, subtle mental world, psychic world and many other higher worlds a detailed discussion of which has been made in the chapter on 'Rebirth'. After death, the psychic being with the help of its physical, vital and mental sheathes, proceeds further and higher and each sheath goes on dissolving itself in its respective world during the course of ascension until it reaches the psychic world. After arriving at the psychic world, the psychic being rests and prepares itself for its next birth.

Let's now discuss why does rebirth take place? That is, what is the objective of rebirth? When does the process of rebirth end? Sri Aurobindo says that the aim of life is to attain the completeness of divine life. But what is this divine life? According to Sri Aurobindo, to be firmly established in an unfragmented truth-consciousness denotes Vidya or Knowledge while viewing the same truth-consciousness as a fragment is Avidya or Ignorance. It is a tendency of human consciousness to see absolute truth divisively and fragmentally that is why the knowledge of this absolute truth remains beyond the grasp of human consciousness. Hence Sri Aurobindo has talked of surpassing the human consciousness and reaching out to the higher spiritual consciousness beyond it. This higher spiritual consciousness has been called the 'Supermind' by Sri Aurobindo. It is only in the Supermind or the supramental consciousness that the Supreme Consciousness or the Spirit which is the One, undivided, Truth-Consciousness and Bliss can be known. And once this Supreme Consciousness is known, the knowledge of it would lead to the attainment of a divine life. Sri Aurobindo says that until this divine life is attained, the course of development through the process of rebirth will go on. In other words, according to Sri Aurobindo, the objective of rebirth is to attain the divine life.

One could find a close link between Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution and his concept of rebirth. Whenever rebirth in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision is discussed, the topic of his theory of evolution crops up inevitably and simultaneously. This necessitates a discussion about his evolutionary thesis. So in the second chapter, I would like to concentrate on expounding his views. This would also bring to light Sri Aurobindo's contribution to the understanding of evolution from a different angle.

In his book *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo has repeatedly spoken of the evolution of individual consciousness through rebirth. By evolution of consciousness, he has meant the transformation of consciousness. But why should the consciousness be evolved or transformed? What purpose would it serve? Where would it finally arrive following the course of evolution? One can answer by referring to Sri Aurobindo's explanation that what lies concealed would be revealed or manifested through the evolution of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo has said that the Spirit keeps itself hidden through the various stages of mind, vital, etc. and thus involves itself in the material layer. This means that, according to Sri Aurobindo, it is the Spirit which lies hidden in matter through its different stages. The process of the descent of the Spirit into matter has been termed as 'involution' by Sri Aurobindo. Again, through the process of evolution, the Spirit gradually manifests itself through the various stages till it goes back to its real self. Sri Aurobindo points out that the course of evolution is upward moving. The Spirit which lies hidden in matter, the same Spirit goes on developing higher and higher through the stages of physical, vital and mental etc. But this development has not come to its final halt. Evolution is not yet over, writes Sri Aurobindo. The next step of development would be to attain the supermanhood and this very attainment is the aim of evolution. Sri Aurobindo has said that just as the man-animal has evolved into the present state of manhood, similarly, man would further evolve into a man-divine state. But this evolution would not be possible within a limited span of time and would take centuries — according to him — to arrive at that stage of divine manhood where man would be in a possession of a divine body, a divine consciousness and would live a divine life. Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution can be called the main column of his thoughts and that his theory of evolution is the foundation on which his concept of rebirth is based. This is because if evolution is not recognized, it would not be possible to explain his theory of rebirth.

In Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth, one has to take into account — along with the concepts of involution and evolution — the theories of Ignorance and Māyā in the light of Sri Aurobindo as these concepts are of immense relevance in his analysis of rebirth. This is so because the creation of this world has been explained by Sri Aurobindo through Māyā and Ignorance. He points out that there is a deep link between rebirth and the world because this world is the only sphere where a vast preparation of the progress of the individual being goes on through rebirth. So, the role played by these two forces in the creation of this world has to be analyzed first. What

is this world? How was it created? Is it as true as the Spirit? The answers to all these questions have been provided in the segment on Ignorance and Māyā. In this connection two separate chapters are there, viz., the third chapter dealing with Ignorance and the fourth one with Māyā.

In the theory of involution we have seen how the Spirit gradually involves or descends down to the layers of the human mental and vital until it reaches the inconscient level of matter. Thus creation has been made possible. This means that the Spirit — which is complete in itself — in creation, has gradually become incomplete through the stages of consciousness (in man), subconscience (in animals and plants) and inconscience (in matter). This process of self-contraction of the Spirit has been called Avidya or ‘incomplete knowledge’ by Sri Aurobindo. Creation denotes the plunging down of the Spirit into ignorance; that is, through the process of self-limitation the Spirit gradually multiplies into the many from the One. Although the Spirit remains in the many, the manifestation of its conscious-force is varied; at some places the said manifestation is more while at some places it is less. Where the self-limitation or the self-absorption of the Spirit is more, at such places its manifestation is less; likewise, where the self-absorption or self-limitation of the Spirit is less, the manifestation is more. So it can be said that according to the self-limitation of the Spirit the manifestation of the power of ignorance too varies.

Sri Aurobindo has called ignorance a power as well. According to him, everywhere in this world, a play of the conscious-force is going on. But what is the source of this conscious-force? Sri Aurobindo says that it is the conscious-force of the Spirit itself through which the Spirit manifests in beings and in the world, or rather, through this force the Spirit has sunk in ignorance. Sri Aurobindo has called this conscious-force of the Spirit the ‘Māyā-Shakti’. He has also divided Māyā-Shakti into two categories: one is the Higher Māyā or Divine Māyā or *Para Prakriti* and the other is Lower Māyā or Avidya, or *Apara Prakriti*, that is, ignorance.

The Higher Māyā or Divine Māyā is the conscious-power of the Spirit through which the creation of the world has been made possible while Avidya or ignorance is the Lower Māyā — which Sri Aurobindo has called the power of the lower layers — through which the Spirit limits itself to such an extent that it becomes as inert as matter. So, ignorance is the ‘self-limiting power’ or the self-forgetful power of the Spirit. The creative force of the Spirit and that of the Divine Māyā or *Para Prakriti* is the same. It is this *Para Prakriti* which has manifested as the *Apara Prakriti* or the world in creation. As the world is the manifestation of the Spirit, so —

opines Sri Aurobindo — the world is real. And this world has been created by the Māyā-Shakti (the conscious-force of the Spirit) of the Supreme. So, just as the Māyā-Shakti is real, so, its creation — the world — is also real and not unreal as is claimed by the Monists or Advaita-Vedantists.

Anyway, Sri Aurobindo has said that the *Apara Prakriti* is *Triguṇamoyee* while the *Para Prakriti* is *Triguṇātīto*. The meaning of the term ‘Guṇa’ is ‘rajju’ or rope. Due to the power of ignorance of the *Apara Prakriti*, the individual being is enslaved by this rope as a result of which it considers itself to be one with the physical body, life and mind. In other words, ignorance is a contracted form of the *Para Prakriti* caused by the mind, life and body or it can also be said that the *Para Prakriti* has been manifested in the *Apara Prakriti* as the individual being which is limited by body, life and mind. Again, it is this *Triguṇamoyee Apara Prakriti* which proceeds gradually towards the *Triguṇātīto Para Prakriti* and this proceeding further is made possible through rebirth. It is only through rebirth that the individual being overcomes the bondages or limitations of the physical, vital and mental bodies and ascends to the higher regions beyond the mental layer; that is, the individual being goes back to its real self and here lies the fruitfulness of rebirth.

The fifth chapter of the present dissertation is on Rebirth. In the aforesaid discussion we have seen that through the process of rebirth the individual being goes back to its real self. But what is the real self of the individual being? On one hand, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of unity between the Brahman and the individual being and on the other hand, he has also spoken of the differences between the two. According to him, it is the Brahman which manifests itself in various beings as well as exists as an omnipotent reality. From such a point of view, the individual being and the Brahman are one, that is, despite being many in forms, they are essentially one. But from the perspective of Karma (action) there are certainly well-defined differences in them. Every individual being is an independent sphere of action of the Supreme. They are independent because each of them has a separate ego and it is due to the ego that the individual being considers itself to be separate from the Brahman and other beings. Sri Aurobindo remarks about it in *The Life Divine* that the individual being is ‘one, yet different, one in essential being and therefore in essential nature, different in soul-form and therefore in active nature.’¹ This means that although the Brahman and the individual being are essentially one, but

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 588.

from the perspective of Karma they are possessors of separate individualities. While creating the world, the one Brahman has become many, that is, it has manifested itself in different beings. Such different beings with separate ego overcomes the shackles of ego through the process of rebirth and goes back to their real selves; that is, the beings go back to the Supreme from which they have come through different births. The act of the Supreme of becoming one from many and many from one has been described by Sri Aurobindo as the *lila* or play of the Supreme. In his book *Riddle of this World*, Sri Aurobindo has compared this play of the Supreme with the *yajna* (sacrificial fire) of creation. Just as sacrifice is the chief component in a *yajna*, similarly, the Supreme too undergoes a sacrifice through the creation of the world. Sri Aurobindo has called the creation of this world a great sacrifice of the Supreme because it is through creation that the Supreme voluntarily incorporates within itself the incompleteness of human mind, vital and physical selves. This voluntary self-sacrifice is the *lila* or blissful play of the Supreme.

So, on the basis of the aforesaid discussions, it can be said that in order to understand Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution *in toto*, one has to understand well the theory of creation as described by him. It can be observed that in his theory of rebirth the individual being and the world both occupy a pivotal position. This is because, through the medium of rebirth, Sri Aurobindo has not only spoken of the transformation of the individual being but also that of the entire world which can be brought about by the transformation of the individual being. In that case, a question comes up: how can the rebirth of a single individual being serve as the means of universal transformation? Sri Aurobindo has answered that it is only through rebirth that the individual consciousness can be transformed into the supramental consciousness because the completion of the work of transformation cannot be brought about in a single birth. That is why rebirth or several births becomes indispensable to put the seal of completion on the process of transformation. So, Sri Aurobindo writes that a single birth is not sufficient enough for divine realization. The individual being has to undergo the process of rebirth several times through which he gains opportunities of his own progress which eventually leads him towards the much sought-after God realization.

Thus, in every birth, in a gradual manner, the individual consciousness develops and continues to progress until it reaches the supramental consciousness. But Sri Aurobindo points out that even if the ascent to the supramental consciousness is made possible through rebirth, the objective of rebirth is not fully served because reaching the supramental consciousness is not

enough; what is even more important is to bring down the supramental consciousness upon earth so that mankind could be in possession of this consciousness. But Sri Aurobindo has never claimed that entire mankind would become capable of receiving and possessing the supramental consciousness. He has, in fact, said that upon reaching the supramental consciousness, the supramental being would first cause the descent of this consciousness within a few individuals who have become competent enough to receive it. This means that until one becomes receptive enough to receive the supramental consciousness, the descent of this consciousness does not take place. Even if one individual becomes sufficiently receptive to receive it, the supramental consciousness would descend in him. Following this descent, the consciousness would gradually spread among receptive individuals or a collection of receptive individuals until the entire mankind is in possession of it. Unless the supramental consciousness descends in every human and sub-human beings and in all the layers of consciousness beneath the physical, vital and mental — Sri Aurobindo points out — the complete supramental transformation would not take place.

This supramental transformation is the only objective of rebirth. So it is evident from the aforesaid discussion how rebirth can be an instrument to bring about an overall well-being of mankind. It is through rebirth that the present life of man would be transformed into a divine life the attainment of which is the sole aim of human life. Had rebirth not been there, the progress of the individual effectuated through various births until it arrives at the supramental stage would not be possible. Moreover, without the transformation into a supramental being and the descent of the supramental consciousness, no well-being of the world can be made possible.

The sixth chapter has been named as ‘The Existence of Other Worlds’. Like many other āstika philosophers and the Buddhists and the Jains Sri Aurobindo also speaks of other *lokas*. We shall see what led him to the postulation of other worlds of existence and its relevance in the context of his philosophy of Rebirth.

The seventh chapter will take up the discussion on the link between Rebirth and Karma. All the āstika schools of Indian philosophers and the Buddhists and Jains also found an intimate relation between rebirth and karma. How Sri Aurobindo had tackled the relation between rebirth and karma has been elaborated in this chapter.

In the conclusion, which forms the eighth and final chapter of my present dissertation, I have stated how and when the process of rebirth comes to an end. I have tried to point out in this

chapter how Sri Aurobindo has brought to light the significance of human life through his interpretation of the theory of rebirth and also analyzed how his views are logically and rationally acceptable.

In this introduction apart from highlighting the main contention of my present dissertation, I have also provided a brief introduction to each of the concepts which are very much relevant part of this discussion as basic presuppositions. Nevertheless these concepts are important but it is not possible to accommodate in a dissertation all ideas and thoughts of *The Life Divine* in detail.

Before initiating any discussion on Sri Aurobindo's concept of rebirth, the following presuppositions which play a very pivotal role in his writings need consideration: a) Absolute as Omnipresent Reality b) Pure Existence c) Conscious-Force d) Ananda e) Brahman f) Self g) Jivatman h) Soul i) Psychic Being j) Purusha k) Ishwara. Without a detailed analysis of these presuppositions, the basis of his metaphysics cannot be established. What follows is a detailed explanation of those presuppositions found in Sri Aurobindo's major works.

First, we will discuss here the Supreme Reality or the Absolute which is also termed by Sri Aurobindo as Omnipresent Reality, Sachchidananda, Brahman, Self and Ishwara. Before explaining these terms, let's discuss how Sri Aurobindo envisaged the 'Absolute'. Sri Aurobindo says that the Absolute or the Supreme Reality is the truth of all life and existence without which nothing can exist even for a moment. Not only that, he further adds, the Absolute is greater than this world and everything exists in it and that the Absolute is also God in His ultimate existence which is beyond all-manifestation and all-knowledge.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Absolute is a self-existent Reality as it does not depend on anything. So, as all the relatives depend on something which is the source of their existence, it is not so in the case of the Absolute. The Absolute is free from all sorts of bondage to relativities.

Sri Aurobindo also says that the Absolute can never be grasped by reason or any intellectual faculty. It is only through the spiritual experience that one becomes aware of its existence. As the Absolute is also 'Infinite' as stated by Sri Aurobindo, it is unknowable to finite mind. The finite mind cannot define or conceive the Absolute as it is indeterminable in its essence. Not only is the Absolute indeterminable and unknowable, but also ineffable because the mind cannot describe the Absolute by its own language.

A discussion on Sri Aurobindo's concept of the Absolute is presented here based on the following aspects. We shall first consider the Absolute as the Omnipresent Reality. Then we

would analyze the Absolute as Pure-Existence, Consciousness-Force and Delight of Existence. And finally, we would discuss the Absolute as Brahman, Self and Ishwara.

Absolute as Omnipresent Reality:

Sri Aurobindo begins with the concept of an Omnipresent Reality which is independent, self-existing, perfect in itself, unknowable and unmanifest. No matter how high or complete the conception or expression is, it remains a mystery because the Omnipresent Reality is incomprehensible to the human mind as it is beyond definition, description and formulation. This Omnipresent Reality is all and yet nothing in particular.

Sri Aurobindo explains the Absolute as the ‘Omnipresent Reality’. Everything exists in the realm of the Absolute. According to him, the Absolute is *ekamevadvitiam* — ‘one without a second.’ Just as Sankaracharya interprets ‘Sarvam Brahman’ in Advaita Vedanta as everything we behold around us is Brahman, Sri Aurobindo too interprets in the same line that the Absolute pervades everywhere. He explains that ‘from that all variations begin, in that all variations consist, to that all variations return ... Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent.’¹

Sri Aurobindo says that the Absolute is both Being (Sat) and non-Being (Asat). The Absolute is Being because it possesses all existences and also non-Being denoting that it is the other side of the Being which is incomprehensible but not something contradictory. According to him, Existence or Being is an expression of ‘Asat’ or ‘non-Being’. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says that the Being, that is, Sat, was from Asat, that is, the non-Being. Buddha has described ‘Asat’ as ‘Shunya’ but according to Sri Aurobindo, the non-Being should not be looked upon as mere nullity but as something which exceeds the purest conception and highest experience of Being in the cosmos. Non-existence is only a state of existence beyond any definition or determination. But, though it is free from all determinations, it is not a null or absolute zero. Sri Aurobindo says that the ‘Sat’ and ‘Asat’ are the two aspects and expressions through which the progressive spiritual consciousness of man moves towards the unknowable.²

However it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo has not exclusively referred to the positive principles of the Absolute namely, Good, Light and Truth; he has, on the contrary, taken into

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

consideration their opposite principles too — that is, Evil, Darkness and Falsehood. He says that our relative consciousness i.e. the fragmented consciousness gets engulfed in the web of Māyā and as a result, it is baffled by the play of evil and ignorance which it erroneously thinks to be its own and hence is subjected to pain and suffering. To quote Sri Aurobindo's words: 'Brahman is indivisible in all things and whatever is willed in the world has been ultimately willed by the Brahman. It is only our relative consciousness, alarmed or baffled by the phenomena of evil, ignorance and pain in the cosmos, that seeks to deliver the Brahman from responsibility for Itself and its workings by erecting some opposite principle...' ¹ But when this relative consciousness is transformed into a One and indivisible consciousness, then the relative consciousness no longer would consider these opposite principles to be its own. It would realize that these are, in fact, the representations and becomings of the Absolute.

Now, we will analyze the Absolute as the Sachchidananda — the triune principle of Existence, Consciousness-Force and Bliss. But these triple principles do not mean the existence of three separate attributes. They are actually one and indicate the same reality, that is, Existence is Consciousness and Consciousness is Bliss.

Pure Existence :

'Sat' or pure existence is the fundamental reality in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. 'Sat' has been described in the Gita as 'Saman Brahman', that is, the boundless energy. Pure-existent is free from all sorts of biasness. Just as a human mother does not differentiate between her children and showers her love and affection on them equally, similarly, Energy manifests its force of movement and intensity equally in this world. Pure existence is that which contains everything in itself. In each of the manifested forms, it pours out itself but remains as it was. It is inexhaustible. Neither qualitative nor quantitative changes can diminish it. Man and the world have come into existence from this energy. Sri Aurobindo says that the entire world is a continuous movement of this energy but when we look upon this world in a fragmented or partial view, a play of energy is observed through infinite space and eternal time. The dynamism of energy is witnessed by us in space and time. The pure existence is manifested as many in infinite space. ² This many is also never static; there occurs a qualitative and quantitative changes in it. These changes are nothing

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

but the movements of energy. Hence, a question might arise: is pure existence a mere movement? Sri Aurobindo answers that the pure existence is spaceless and timeless. But space and time come into existence only when the pure-existent is put forth into energy. What is meant by space is not spatial extension and wideness of direction but a psychological self-expansion in pure-existent where the Being widens itself. Whenever a movement occurs in the pure-existent, it is felt as time which, in fact, is the real movement of consciousness in the pure-existent. A careful observation would duly reveal that even in ordinary life, objective time is absent. Time is not something which is fixed. Man perceives Time as a movement, action, process, growth and change. So if there takes place no change, time also goes unnoticed.

Conscious-Force :

According to Sri Aurobindo, Existence is Consciousness and Consciousness is Consciousness-Force. It is through this Force that the Pure Existence manifests itself in the universe although materialists consider this Force to be material and consciousness to be the outcome of this material force. The views of the materialists regarding this topic would be dealt with later on. As Sri Aurobindo has said that this energy is a conscious-force, we would first emphasize on his views.

Sri Aurobindo says that if we look upon this world, we see a great movement of conscious energy. Here one could ask: if the universe is in a constant state of motion, what is the cause of such motion? Sri Aurobindo explains that without the Force or Shakti, no motion can arise and cause any movement in the universe. This Force is neither mechanical nor inconscient but is conscious in nature. Self-concentration and self-diffusion are the two states of the Conscious-Force of the Absolute; when this Conscious-Force is in a self-concentrated state, it becomes static and immutable. But when this Conscious-Force is in a state of self-diffusion, the universe is manifested by it and thus motion is caused. In other words, Pure-Existence manifests itself through its Force and this Force — inherent in Existence — could be at rest as well as in motion. To formulate it differently, Shiva and Kali or Brahman and Shakti are one and inseparable. It is through this Force that the Pure-Existent manifests itself. It may be observed that Sri Aurobindo's use of the expressions 'Shiva and Kali' for Brahman and its Shakti is more than metaphorical use.

Now let's analyze the relation between the Consciousness and its Force. Consciousness, to us, is a waking mental awareness. The surface-level or superficial state of consciousness which we think to be our mental consciousness is a fragment of our whole consciousness. There is a vast region of consciousness — known as the subliminal mind — below the superficial consciousness. This subliminal mind can reach heights which exceeds the capacity of the waking mind. It is wrong to assume that the waking state constitutes the entire mental consciousness. Besides, there exists the sub-conscious mind which is a part of the surface mind and almost the same with it. This sub-conscious mind, however, functions at the back of the surface mind where it has a little larger scope of awareness although the latter remains oblivious of it. The subliminal mind is quite an illumined state of consciousness as compared to the sub-conscious mind with its capacities exceeding those of the sub-conscious mind.¹

Here a question might arise again: where did this force of movement come from? Sri Aurobindo assumes that the force — which could be active or passive, static or mobile — remains inherently in Pure Existence (Sat). This force — under no circumstances — can control the Pure Existence. If controlling the Pure Existent would have been possible, then Existent could no longer be termed as 'Self-Existent'; it would have become dependent on the force. Sri Aurobindo further adds that the Absolute enjoys boundless freedom while manifesting its conscious force and that the Absolute and Conscious-Force are not unknown to each other. Just as fire and the power of fire are related to one another, likewise, the Absolute and the Conscious-Force are inseparable and related to each other. In other words, without its Conscious-Force the Absolute cannot manifest itself.

Sri Aurobindo says that if Unity appears to be true to the divisible mind, multiplicity turns out to be false. Likewise, if multiplicity appears to be true then Unity seems to be false. Similarly, if movements are true then stability becomes false and vice versa. The mind does not behold Unity and Multiplicity, movement and stability as simultaneous Truths. But in his concept of integralism, Sri Aurobindo does not differentiate between Existence and Energy or movement and stability. Shiva is the static state of the Absolute while Kali is its dynamic state. Just as Shiva is true, likewise, its dynamic movement is also true. This world is the play of its energy. But it is to be kept in mind that if the Absolute is in a static state, it does not mean that there is a lack of energy; on the contrary, energy exists in it in a coiled form. This requires some more elucidation.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 92.

When one sits silently, it does not necessarily mean that he has lost his power of speech. Again, it is observed that when one is involved in the process of exchange of views and opinions through verbal communication, deep within he can remain in utmost tranquility. As a matter of fact, silence and scurrility are the two aspects of our existence and energy.

According to Sri Aurobindo, as this force is not a blind force but a conscious force, so it must have a purpose. In all the levels of the mind, vital and physical, where the workings of the force are analyzed, we come across an intelligence or a life-purpose. The movements of this force are governed by this intelligence.¹ Now we shall observe the purpose of this force.

Ananda :

According to Sri Aurobindo, Existence is Consciousness and this Consciousness is Bliss. We have already discussed that Existence is Consciousness which is inherent in it. We have also seen that Sri Aurobindo has said that this Consciousness has a power, a force by which everything exists in this world. So, conscious-force is inherent in everything created by itself. This conscious power remains both in activity as well as in inactivity. Here, one could ask: why did the Absolute move from the inactivity to the activity? Sri Aurobindo answers in response to this question that the movement of the Absolute from inactivity to activity is due to the Delight, that is, Ananda — the Delight of Becoming, the Delight of Manifestation. The purpose of the Absolute is to enjoy the delight of the progressive manifestation. It is Ananda out of which this world has come into being and all appearances are sustained by this Ananda too.

Here another question might come up: if everything is sustained by Ananda then where is the place of pain? Sri Aurobindo replies that happiness is looked upon as a normal trait in one's life. Anything that ushers in happiness is acceptable to man. But when one experiences pain or suffering, he finds it unacceptable. This is because pain and suffering are not accepted in the same spirit as happiness and pleasure. The occurrence of pain and suffering is looked upon as an abnormal trait. Since man is born out of Ananda, he loves to live in a state of happiness because happiness is the normal character of life. He takes happiness for granted. But anything contrary to happiness makes him miserable.²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

In the context of evil too, Sri Aurobindo says that evil has no existence either in the infra-human consciousness or in the supra-human consciousness. Neither in the infra-human consciousness nor in the supra-human consciousness does ethics exist. Hence, the question of morality does not arise in these two levels of consciousness. For instance, destruction caused by natural calamities or killing of a prey by an animal does not come under the purview of morality. It is only in the human level that the sense of ethics has come into existence. Here, Sri Aurobindo has differentiated between individual delight and universal delight. Individual delight is connected with individual ego. Anything which satisfies the individual ego appears to be good whereas things which fail to satisfy the ego appear to be bad. But, the more we tread on the path of conquest of ego, the more we would be able to realize the universal delight. If the boundary of the individual delight can be extended and unified with the universal delight, then the conquest of pain, suffering and evil becomes possible.¹

Brahman :

Sri Aurobindo, in line with Sankaracharya, has called the Brahman the indeterminable, immutable and devoid of any quality, feature and attribute. But, while Sankaracharya has accepted these characteristics of Brahman in a negative sense, Sri Aurobindo, on the contrary, has accepted the same characteristics in a positive sense. Sri Aurobindo remarks that when the Brahman is defined as something which is indeterminable, immutable etc., it does not imply that the Brahman is bereft of those characteristics. But the Brahman is not confined by any quality, feature, attribute, mutability or any other characteristic. These characters do not exhaust the Brahman. He has further added that the Brahman is one and many, finite and infinite, mutable and immutable, form and formless, static and dynamic at the same time. In other words, at the time of the manifestation of the universe, the Brahman becomes many from its state of oneness, from being in a formless state it takes up a form, from the static state it becomes active. But in the process of becoming many from one or active from static state, the Brahman does not lose its formless state. The Brahman remains one and many, static and dynamic, form and formless simultaneously. However, our logical mind considers the co-existence of these characteristics as contradictory. This is because when the one becomes many, the mind tends to consider the one as the summation of the many. The mind fails to recognize the 'One' as an essential character of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

the Brahman (Brahman in essence is one without a second). Sri Aurobindo says that such a limitation of mind is due to the power of Māyā of Brahman. Unlike Sankaracharya, Sri Aurobindo has not accepted Māyā as an illusory power of Brahman. Sri Aurobindo considers Māyā as a conscious power of Brahman through which the Brahman manifests itself. The mind being engulfed by this power of Brahman, fails to realize the true nature of the Brahman. A detailed discussion on Māyā would be made later.

Let's now discuss the nature of the Brahman. Sri Aurobindo says that the Brahman is pure consciousness which is present in all existences in the universe. Nothing can exist without Brahman as everything exists within it. The consciousness is actually the conscious-force of the Brahman which acts in everything, for example, in man, animal and all the forms and energies of Nature. Sri Aurobindo has called them the relativities of Brahman because these are dependent on it for their existences. The 'relatives' are those that lack an independent reality apart from the Brahman. Though the relatives are the manifestation of the Brahman but the Brahman is not the summation of all these relatives. The Brahman is one, indivisible and hence, cannot be split. It is independent of all the relatives as the Brahman pervades, constitutes and governs all the relatives; thus, Sri Aurobindo writes that the Brahman is an omnipresent reality.¹

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Brahman-consciousness is self-aware because it knows itself in all that exists and manifests. The power of Brahman makes itself a self-knower. It possesses a power of its own to effectuate the unending possibilities of which it is aware. This self-awareness of Brahman also knows as pure-chit, is also its self-knowledge.² This pure self-knowledge of Brahman which Sri Aurobindo has termed as the Supermind would be dealt with in the forthcoming chapter.

The Brahman, according to Sri Aurobindo, is revealed to us in three fundamental aspects — Atman (Self), Purusha (Conscious-being or Spirit) and Ishwara (God or the Divine). These three aspects are related to the self-manifestation of the Brahman. In other words, the Brahman manifests itself in this world through these aspects. These three aspects of Brahman also have their three corresponding conscious powers such as Māyā, Prakriti and Shakti.³

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

Self:

In this context it is important to note that Sri Aurobindo has used the terms ‘Self’ and ‘Spirit’ in the same sense. To him, there is no difference between these two terms. According to Sri Aurobindo, the Self has three poises namely ‘Transcendental’, ‘Universal’ and ‘Individual’. The Self is transcendental when it lies in a silent and inactive or static state. When the Self becomes dynamic in the universe, it becomes Universal. At the same time, when the Self lies in every object and in individual being, it is termed as Individual. In other words, when the Self experiences itself as the thinker, enjoyer, etc., then it is called the individual self. In the way of progression, the individual self first rises into the universal self and gradually transforms itself into the transcendental self which passes into the Absolute. The Self or Atman is that aspect of the Brahman which includes the truth of all existences. The Self is an immutable and immobile being and exists in a silent and detached way.¹

Sri Aurobindo says, ‘The spirit is the Self that is not affected by the evolution...’² But its power, that is, Māyā or chit-shakti is ever-active and plays a dynamic role in the creation of the universe. The Self cannot be separated from its Conscious-Force or chit-shakti just as the power of burning cannot be separated from fire. The Self (static) and chit-shakti (dynamic) are the two aspects of the same Reality (i.e. Brahman). Just as the waves of a sea are supported by the bottom of the water-body, likewise, the Self supports the chit-shakti. Though the Self supports and witnesses all the activities of the Brahman, it can never be limited by these activities because it is independent of them.

We would now discuss what Sri Aurobindo has said about the various forms of the Self, namely, Jivatman, Soul, Psychic. According to him, these forms function in different spheres and hence they should not be mixed up.

Jivatman:

According to Sri Aurobindo, when the Divine manifests itself into the multiplicity, the Self or Atman individualizes for this manifestation, that is, it takes up the seat in individual being and becomes the central being, that is, the Jivatman. The central being is itself unborn but presides over the various successive births of man, holds together the various parts of man’s personality

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

² *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 105.

along with the mental, vital and physical being and controls life either through the mental being, mental thought and will or the psychic whichever is more dominant. If the central being slackens its control, the inner equilibrium gets jeopardized because not only does the consciousness in man find itself in a disorderly state but every portion of his personality begins to act for itself haphazardly, thus, leading to incoherent thought, feeling and action.¹

The central being has two forms — the upper is the Jivatman and the lower is the Psychic Being. The Jivatman is the eternal being of man. Neither does it take birth nor does it participate in the process of evolution. It only presides over the individual's birth and his subsequent evolution.² The task of evolving is carried out by the representatives of the Jivatman, namely, the *manamaya purusha* or the mental being, the *pranamaya purusha* or the vital being and the *annamaya purusha* or the physical being. At the back of these beings lies the psychic being although hidden. This psychic being is the true representative of the Jivatman but as it is under the influence of ignorance, it remains unrevealed. As soon as the psychic being is awakened and evolved, it reveals itself and then unites with the Jivatman to get dissolved in it.

Two distinct positions are observed here. In the first position, the Jivatman exists eternally in the Sachchidananda or *Para-Prakriti* in an immobile and static state. Here, the Jivatman remains in union with the Divine and knows itself as one with it. In the second position the Jivatman presides over the lower nature of manifestation (*Apara-Prakriti*), that is, the world of evolution. Here, the Jivatman is the individual self which is the basis of all manifestation of each and every creature of Nature. So, on the one hand the Jivatman remains unevolved in the higher nature of manifestation and on the other hand it presides over each and every individual life in the evolution through its representational powers which include mental being, vital being and physical being. The Jivatman in its essence lies beyond the individual evolution, but it represents itself by the psychic being — which can also be called the central representative — lies hidden behind the mental, physical and vital.³

Soul:

The soul is the representative of the central being. The soul as called the 'Psyche' by Sri Aurobindo is the undifferentiated power of the Divine Consciousness which contains all the

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

possibilities of the Divine within it. In this sense it is immutable. But the soul has to evolve these possibilities and in the process of doing so, it takes up an evolving form to manifest those possibilities. This evolving form of the soul has been called the 'psychic being' by Sri Aurobindo. The soul is seated behind the mental, vital and physical being and continues to grow through the psychic being until it becomes capable of transforming ignorance into knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo says that the soul is the divine spark which is present in all the living beings from the highest to the lowest. Nothing can exist without this spark. This soul is one and universal as it is the same in everywhere and in everything. It descends into the manifestation to support the evolution of everything in the material world.

Psychic Being:

The psychic being is the innermost being of man which lies behind the heart centre. It is a projection of the Jivatman or the central being and supports the mental, vital and physical beings as well as their respective evolution in nature. Not only is it involved in the process of evolution but also provides support to man's complete evolution from within. But it would be wrong to assume that the psychic being is same as the Jivatman or the soul. One must keep in mind that the soul or 'psyche' is a spark of the Divine which exists in all living beings and that it has descended into the manifested world to facilitate its own evolution.¹ The soul has no definite form in its early stages. However, with the progression of the process of evolution it gains a form. During the course of its evolution, the soul forms the 'psychic being'. Does it mean that the soul and the psychic being are alike? Sri Aurobindo says that they are so but with a difference. The soul exists in every being but the psychic being may not be present in all beings. In the initial stages the psychic being — when it remains in an un-awakened state — lies behind the mental, vital and physical beings. But when the mental, vital and physical beings grow by the virtue of the experiences acquired from birth-to-birth, the psychic being too develops along with them and casts away the veil imposed by the mental, vital and physical beings and then begins to control them.

It is very important to mention here that Sri Aurobindo has differentiated between the psychic being and the psychic entity. He has used the terms 'psyche', 'psychic entity' and 'psychic essence' in the same sense. The psychic entity — which descends into this world from the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Ānanda aspect of Sachchidananda — is generally present in everything. It is the un-evolving reality from which the psychic being evolves. It is immutable and imperishable and remains unaffected by the workings of the mind, body and life. So, it can be said from this perspective that the psychic entity and the soul are the same both of which remains in the unevolved state whereas the psychic being is the evolving soul. The evolutive psychic being is individual whereas the psychic entity is very common to all.

Purusha:

The Purusha or the Conscious-Being is the second aspect of the Brahman. Sri Aurobindo says that the Prakriti (Nature) is the Force of the Purusha. Just as the Self and its Consciousness-Force are inseparable, similarly, the same inseparability exists between the Purusha and its Force, that is, Prakriti. Sri Aurobindo says that the Purusha or the Conscious-Being is the controller of Prakriti. The Purusha acts as a witness to and supports all the activities and movements of the Prakriti. If the Purusha does not sanction any of the activities of the Prakriti, then it becomes impossible for the Prakriti to carry out that activity.¹

Sri Aurobindo observes that there are different statuses of the Purusha. The Purusha is the supreme Conscious-Being in its supreme status, that is, in the transcendence. Likewise, it is the cosmic Conscious-Being when it remains behind and within all things and beings. Everything in the universe has manifested in it and from it. Again, the Purusha is the individual conscious-being which lies behind every individual being as the Psychic Entity. Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘The Purusha, individual in us, is cosmic in the cosmos, transcendent in the transcendence...’²

Just as the Prakriti manifests itself in every gradation, accordingly, the Purusha too changes its poise at every level of manifestation. In other words, according to the various gradations in the Prakriti, the Purusha takes up different forms of being. For example, in the lower Nature (Apara-Prakriti) that is, in the Mind Nature, Life Nature and Nature of Matter, the Purusha becomes the mental being, the vital being and the physical being. Similarly, in the higher Nature (Para-Prakriti) which is constituted by Sat (Pure Existent), Chit (Consciousness-Force), Ananda (Pure Bliss) and Supermind, the Purusha becomes the Being of Pure Existence, the Being of Bliss and the Being of Knowledge in its supreme statuses, that is, in Sat, in Ananda and in the

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 363.

² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

Supermind respectively. But one point should be very pertinent to mention here that Sri Aurobindo has made a distinction between the Supermind (Knowledge) and Chit (Consciousness). According to him, 'Chit' is 'uncreative self-awareness' and the Supermind is 'creative knowledge'. Sachchidananda Consciousness supports everything but does not take part directly in the action of transformation of the lower Nature which the Supermind does. So, the Being of Knowledge plays a pivotal role to transform everything below it to divinity.

Here, it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the Purusha and the Prakriti is quite different from that preached by the Samkhya school of thought. This is so because Sri Aurobindo considers the Purusha and the Prakriti to be the two aspects of the same reality whereas in the Samkhya philosophy, the Purusha and the Prakriti have been looked upon as two separate entities. In the Samkhya philosophy, only the Purusha has been called conscious while the Prakriti has been called as unconscious. But Sri Aurobindo has considered both the Purusha and the Prakriti as conscious. Despite differing from the Samkhya philosophy, Sri Aurobindo has not refuted it altogether. Sri Aurobindo has said that though it is true that when one delves into a profound silence within, one realizes the Purusha and the Prakriti to be different entities at a certain level of experience. But when one reaches the zenith, then one realizes that the Purusha and Prakriti are not different but the same reality.¹

Sri Aurobindo says that within every human being, there exists an indwelling Being (Purusha) whose existence is unknown to us. As man remains engrossed with his physical, vital and mental demands, he does not cast a glance at this indwelling Being. As long as this indwelling Purusha remains passive within him, the Prakriti works upon him as a result of which he gets influenced by the capriciousness of the Prakriti. When the Purusha within man awakens, it becomes aware of its own self and detaches itself from the formations of Nature (Prakriti). As a result of it, Prakriti can no longer act upon man. Thus, man becomes free from the disturbances caused by Prakriti and can reach to the spiritual level of consciousness which is not bound by the actions of Prakriti.

God (Ishwara):

The third aspect of the Brahman is Ishwara or God who plays an active role in the process of manifestation. The Ishwara, called by Sri Aurobindo as the supreme Divine Being, initiates all

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 364-365.

the movements of Nature and executes them which have been sanctioned by the Conscious Being. According to Sri Aurobindo, Ishwara is the supreme Person who creates, governs and controls the universe by His Consciousness-Force, Māyā or Shakti which is also inseparable from its own being just as Prakriti from the Purusha and Māyā and Consciousness-Force from the Self are inseparable. The Ishwara gives shape to and guides this world of names and forms by His consciousness-power, that is, Shakti. Sri Aurobindo has said that the powers of Ishwara acts behind whatever has been created in this universe.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Ishwara is both immanent as well as transcendent. He exists within this world and also beyond it. However, he has never confined his concept of God within the well-defined boundaries of any religion. To him, God is not a personal Being who is limited by any quality or representations or names. On the contrary, God is Brahman, Self and Spirit who reveals Himself as a possessor and enjoyer in His self-manifestation. Sri Aurobindo writes that Ishwara is ‘the Eternal, the Infinite, the Ineffable, the Divine Transcendence’.¹

So it is very clear to us from the above explanation that the Brahman has different aspects although there are no real contradictions between them. Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘One Being, one Reality as Self bases, supports, informs, as Purusha or Conscious Being experiences, as Ishwara wills, governs and possesses its world of manifestation created and kept in motion and action by its own Consciousness-Force or Self-Power, — Maya, Prakriti, Shakti.’²

All these concepts are loaded concepts and each of these has been discussed meticulously in *The Life Divine* and in his many other writings. In the context of the present dissertation these are taken as presuppositions for the elucidation and explanation of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of rebirth, its requirements and consequences.

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¹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

² *Ibid.*, p. 372.

Chapter Two

The Theory of Evolution

Sri Aurobindo says that evolution means the gradual manifestation of the unmanifest into manifest, i.e., to evolve into the expressed form from the unexpressed form or the self-revelation of something which has been lying in a veiled form. But here, certain queries do come up: who is it that lies unmanifest and where does he lie? In response to such queries, Sri Aurobindo writes that it is the Spirit which lies unmanifest in matter. This means that Sri Aurobindo has talked of the evolution of the Spirit and its evolutionary system is spiritual in nature. His evolution is not a material evolution. According to him, the Spirit keeps itself involved in matter and afterwards manifests itself progressively through the process of evolution. Hence, evolution is the progressive manifestation of the Spirit. So, before delving deep into a detailed analysis of evolution as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo, it can be said by extracting the essence of his views on evolution that Spirit, at first, keeps itself veiled in matter through involution and goes back to its real nature or manifests itself through evolution. His account of evolution is not complete without involution for evolution presupposes involution. And what is involution? It is the opposite of evolution. In involution, the Spirit descends into matter from its real nature whereas in evolution, the ascension of the Spirit takes place from matter to its real nature. Thus, Sri Aurobindo says that evolution is ‘an inverse action of the involution: what is an ultimate and last derivation in the involution is the first to appear in the evolution; what was original and primal in the involution is in the evolution the last and supreme emergence.’¹

In the Upanishads and Puranas, we find a glimpse of Sri Aurobindo’s theory of evolution. For instance, verse I.1.8 of the *Mundaka Upanishad* says: ‘Brahman grew by his energy, at work, and then from Him is Matter born, and out of Matter life, and mind and truth and the worlds, and in works immortality.’ We also find in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (Verse IV.2.3-4): ‘It thought: “Would that I were many. Let me procreate myself,” and then describes the emergence of fire, water and food in succession.’ In the Puranas, we observe also how a graded evolution has taken place. As we have seen in Sri Aurobindo’s writings, it is the Spirit which evolves successively

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 886.

from inert matter to higher forms; similarly, in the Puranas, we find that Vishnu, keeping its real self intact, evolves from the lowest form to the highest form. The reference of such forms — also known as the ten Avatars — starting with the Fish, Tortoise (amphibian), Boar (mammal), Man-Lion (transitional being between the animal kingdom and the hominids), Dwarf (first hominids), Parashurama (*homo habilis*), Rama, Krishna, Buddha and ending with Kalki — are found in the *Puranas* and these forms give a clear account of evolution.

Let's come back to the main point of discussion. Two observations can be made in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of evolution. The first is, as he points out, that Chit-Shakti or the Consciousness-Force causes evolution to take place. The second observation is that evolution has a purpose. We shall first discuss the cause of evolution and then its purpose as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo.

Cause of Evolution:

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo has talked of the gradual evolution of the Spirit from the material plane or matter. But the very first question which crops up here is that: if Spirit is perfect and Infinite then how could it evolve further? In response to this query, Sri Aurobindo writes that the Spirit is Consciousness-Force which is free to project or involve itself in ignorance and inconscience. As the Spirit is perfect and infinite, hence it is free; and as it is free it has kept itself involved in matter although it cannot be said that the Spirit has exercised its freedom without any specific purpose. Anyway, Sri Aurobindo has said that as the process of involution of Spirit has taken place earlier, hence, it would go through evolution.

But before initiating a detailed discussion on this topic, let's first see what Sri Aurobindo has meant by the term 'consciousness'. By consciousness, he has not merely referred to the mental awakening consciousness; on the contrary, the horizon of consciousness is far more vast in his light. At the middle of this vast consciousness lies the layer of mental consciousness. Behind the layer of mental consciousness lies the sub-conscious and subliminal while beyond the said layer lies the Supramental or the Superconscient sphere. Apart from it, Sri Aurobindo has also spoken of the unconscious layer which is ordinarily known as matter or inconscience. He has further said that unlike the general perception, matter is not inconscient for consciousness does exist in

matter although in a dormant form. It is, to quote his own words, a ‘sudden gulf in Nature.’¹ This dormant consciousness or Chit-Shakti seeks to manifest itself which, in turn, causes evolution to take place.

To Sri Aurobindo, consciousness is Chit-Shakti or Consciousness-Force. This means that consciousness is also a form. Here lies a difference in our outlook with that of Sri Aurobindo’s. What appears to be inconscient or inert matter to us does not appear the same in Sri Aurobindo’s vision. Everything is consciousness or Consciousness-Force to him. He adds that at the source of all objects in this world lies this Consciousness-Force. Be it matter, plants, animals or human beings — in every such level a gradual evolution of the Chit-Shakti has taken place. For instance, the consciousness — which lay hidden in matter — was manifested to a certain degree in plants. From plants, consciousness has progressed and manifested into animals. To quote his words: ‘Another self-evident conclusion is that there is a graduated necessary succession in the evolution, first the evolution of Matter, next the evolution of Life in Matter, then the evolution of Mind in living Matter, and in this last stage an animal evolution followed by a human evolution. The first three terms of the succession are too evident to be disputable.’² Similarly, following a further progress, consciousness has manifested from animals into human beings. Sri Aurobindo writes that the evolution of consciousness does not stop when the human stage is reached. Consciousness would continue to evolve further and manifest in a still higher form of species which Sri Aurobindo has called the Superman.

Purpose of Evolution:

In Sri Aurobindo’s concept of evolution, the term ‘purpose’ is of immense significance. It has already been mentioned that there is a difference in Sri Aurobindo’s outlook with that of ours. Likewise, the term ‘purpose’ has a different meaning when compared to the understanding of ordinary individuals or finite beings. To ordinary humans like us, ‘purpose’ denotes the aim to attain something that one lacks. In other words, it is the objective of attaining what we do not possess. But here a question arises: the Absolute or Spirit is complete in nature so it cannot have any deficiencies, then what purpose does the Spirit serve by immersing itself in inconscience

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

² *Ibid.*, p. 868.

(matter) and then gradually going back to its real self? Sri Aurobindo explains that when the Spirit delves into the inconscience, it is then that creation takes place. Creation too has a purpose. But the said aim is not to fill up a shortage; on the contrary, it is to bring about a gradual but complete manifestation of that which lies hidden and unmanifest. The world was created when the Spirit had plunged into the inconscience, enveloped itself with it and had become finite from the state of infinite. Sri Aurobindo's statement find support in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (II. 4.26) where one comes across the following sentences: 'The finite is in the Infinite. This Ātman is the entire universe.'¹ And then, Sri Aurobindo continues, the Spirit goes back to its real nature, that is, through the process of evolution it goes on through the stages of matter, vital and mind and moves further ahead to the higher stages like the Supermind.* To quote his words: '...the material universe was bound in the nature of things to evolve from its hidden life apparent life, from its hidden mind apparent mind, and it must in the same nature of things evolve from its hidden Supermind apparent Supermind and from the concealed Spirit within it the triune glory of Sachchidananda.'² So, the complete self-manifestation of the Spirit in the material world is the purpose of evolution. Sri Aurobindo has called this involution of the Spirit a Divine play or Lila.

The Spirit is pure consciousness and pure bliss; it is blissful in its own nature. But this bliss is not to be confused with the state of happiness as is generally understood by us. The terms 'bliss' and 'happiness' are not the same. Bliss refers to unconditional and perpetual happiness whereas happiness is a feeling of conditional joy which is earned when one's cravings are gratified. The purpose of the divine play or Lila of the Spirit is to manifest itself in its real nature in the state of perfect bliss. So, the Spirit for the sake of its blissful Lila undergoes the process of involution to create this world and it is also as per its own will that the world moves on in the course of evolution. That is why Sri Aurobindo has remarked in *The Life Divine*: '... it is the result of a divine cosmic Will in the material universe which intends to posit here a physical relation between sense and its object, establishes here a material formula and law of Conscious-Force and creates by it physical images of Conscious-Being to serve as the initial, dominating and determining fact of the world in which we live. It is not a fundamental law of being, but a constructive principle necessitated by the intention of the Spirit to evolve in a world of Matter.'³

¹ Translation taken from S. Radhakrishnan's book, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 190.

* A discussion on the Supermind has been made towards the end of this chapter.

² *The Life Divine*, pp. 283-284.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

So according to Sri Aurobindo, the purpose of evolution is to bring about an evolution of spiritual consciousness. He says that although matter has been transformed into mental consciousness it is yet to be transformed into spiritual consciousness. But what is this spiritual consciousness? Sri Aurobindo writes that the spiritual consciousness is that consciousness which lies beyond the sphere of mental consciousness. In this consciousness we get to know, realize and unite with our inner self. But a query crops up: how does the flowering of this spiritual consciousness take place? Sri Aurobindo has answered that for the progress or evolution of the spiritual consciousness, both individual evolution and cosmic evolution are required.

Let's now see what Sri Aurobindo has said about individual evolution and cosmic evolution.

Individual Evolution:

Sri Aurobindo says that it is through rebirth that individual evolution takes place. The gradual progress of the individual being is the aim of this evolution while rebirth is the most essential means to materialize the said progress.

Sri Aurobindo writes that in the case of individual evolution, the progress of spiritual consciousness can take place in two ways. One is through the process of our external nature or physical evolution while the other is through the progress of our inner nature which our eyes fail to see. Through the process of evolution, just as the progress of our inner consciousness is needed on one hand, similarly, on the other hand, a progress of the physical body is also required so that it may become a fit receptacle to house the developed consciousness. Sri Aurobindo observes that the development of our external nature is actually the development of our mental energy which lies in the physical and vital beings whereas the progress of our inner nature is the development of our inner being or the spiritual energy hidden within us. The physical, vital and mental energies have been addressed as our exterior nature because through them the establishment of contact with the external world is made possible. Without the development of this exterior nature, the development of our inner being or the spiritual energy is never possible. Sri Aurobindo writes that inner and exterior transformation can be brought about only by following the course of rebirth. By taking up a new physical body in each and every birth, the psychic being enriches itself by assimilating all the experiences rendered to it by Nature and thus gradually progresses towards perfection. So, rebirth gives us the assurance that even imperfect

individual beings like us are capable of attaining perfection. That is why Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*:

‘... rebirth is an indispensable condition for any long duration and evolution of the individual being in the earth-existence. Each grade of cosmic manifestation, each type of form that can house the indwelling spirit, is turned by rebirth into a means for the individual soul, the psychic entity, to manifest more and more of its concealed consciousness; each life becomes a step in a victory over Matter by a greater progression of consciousness in it which shall make eventually Matter itself a means for the full manifestation of the Spirit.’¹

Through individual evolution Sri Aurobindo has not only talked of the development of consciousness. Along with the development of consciousness, he has also spoken of the necessity of developing a suitable physical body so that the body can become a fit receptacle to house the developed consciousness. To quote his own words: ‘... the body we have to make a more and more and even entirely conscious frame and instrument, a conscious sign and seal and power of the spirit.’² It means that Sri Aurobindo has spoken of transforming the physical body or the material body into a spiritualized, conscious body which the Vaishnava scriptures have described as the *chinmaya deha*. He adds that the material body is subject to death whereas the spiritualized conscious body would be free from the clutches of death. Such a spiritualized body has been called by Sri Aurobindo as the Divine Body.³

So it can be said that in the course of individual evolution, along with the transformation of consciousness, the transformation of the suitable physical body too takes place.

Cosmic Evolution:

Sri Aurobindo says that it is the Sachchidananda which hides itself in the inconscience and gradually manifests itself to return to its true self. The involution of the Sachchidananda in matter or inconscience is the act of self-absorption or self-concentration of the three principles of Sat, Chit and Ananda. There are eight principles which can be observed in the course of evolution as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. Apart from the three principles of Sat, Chit and

¹ *The Life Divine*., p. 858.

² *The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth*, p. 23.

³ For further details please refer to the chapter on ‘The Divine Body’ included in *The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth*.

Ananda, Sri Aurobindo has also recognized the existence of a fourth and higher principle which he has termed as the supramental or the Supermind. Each of these four higher principles undergoes self-absorption in four lower principles. This self-absorption of the Sachchidananda has been termed as 'Avidya' or ignorance by Sri Aurobindo. (A detailed discussion on this topic has been made in the chapter on 'Ignorance'.) So it can be said that lower principles are nothing but the self-absorption of the higher principles in ignorance. For instance, the self-absorbed forms of Sat or Existence, Chit or Consciousness-Force and Ananda or Bliss are finite matter, life and psychic respectively while that of the Supermind is the mind. These eight principles (Sat, Chit, Ananda, Supermind, finite matter, life, psychic being and mind) have been classified by Sri Aurobindo under 'Para Prakriti' and 'Apara Prakriti'. The four higher principles of Sat, Chit, Ananda and Supermind have been included under 'Para Prakriti' while the remaining four lower principles (matter, life, psychic being and mind) have been included under 'Apara Prakriti'. A few words on these principles would not be irrelevant here.

As much has been already discussed about Sat, Chit and Ananda, so, a repetition of the same discussion is unnecessary here. Only a discussion on the Supermind would be made at an appropriate place in this very chapter, So we would focus mainly on the principles of 'Apara Prakriti' and present a few words on each of the principles.

Matter:

Matter is generally considered to be inert and inconscient. But Sri Aurobindo presents a different point of view. According to him, matter is not inconscient; on the contrary, he has said that matter is the lower manifestation of Sat which is a principle of Sachchidananda. He has argued that as divine consciousness lies dormant in matter, hence, as a result, life has evolved from matter and similarly mind has evolved from life. In this way, the self-manifestation of consciousness proceeds through the course of evolution towards the supreme consciousness. If matter had been inert, as it is commonly believed, then life and mind could not have evolved from it. It is the dormant presence of the higher energies like life, mind and supermind in matter that makes the course of evolution to proceed upwards.

Life:

Despite being a manifestation of the Spirit, life is limited and full of discrimination in the lower Nature. The play of life goes on in all the quarters of the world. At the source of all sorts of changes in this world lies the play of this universal life. In the course of evolution it is seen that life has emerged from matter. This means that if life did not exist in matter, then emergence of life from matter would never have been possible. In fact, in the lower nature of the Spirit, despite having various stages of manifestation like matter, life and mind, at the source of every stage the same Spirit lies involved. That is why it can be said that the evolved form of material energy is vital energy. The Conscious-Force which is indistinct at the material stage becomes a little clear in the vital level and at the mental level it becomes even more clear. Sri Aurobindo has also pointed out how distinct the gradual stages of consciousness of plants and animals are in the vital level. But a discussion on this very topic is not necessary here.

Mind:

The Supermind becomes the mind in the lower nature. The consciousness of the Supermind is unfragmented while the consciousness of the mind is fragmented. The Supermind is the power of Knowledge while the mind is the power of ignorance. All the workings on the mind are based on the principle of division or discrimination as a result of which the mind, instead of acquiring true and unfragmented knowledge, attains partial knowledge.

Psychic Being:

The divine bliss is manifested in the lower nature as the psychic being. The psychic being is something beyond the body, life and mind which lies engrossed in divine bliss. It is our real inner being which Sri Aurobindo has called the evolving soul. Just as the body, life and mind are of two types in the lower nature, similarly, the psychic being too is of two types: one is the desire soul which lies at the surface level of the psychic and the other is our true soul or psychic being which lies deep within it. Our vital thirst, emotions, knowledge, power and the mental eagerness to be happy are the expressions of the desire soul behind which there lies the hidden psychic

being which is the power of light, love and delight. By knowing the psychic being, one would be able to get a touch of the divine bliss in everything. Here it should be noted that to bring about our spiritual transformation, the transformation of the inner self caused by the psychic being is not sufficient. This is so because in the case of spiritual transformation, both our inner and outer nature has to be transformed. But although our inner nature gets enlightened by divine knowledge with the help of the psychic being, our external nature does not get freed from the clutches of ignorance and so we behave like children, devil or lunatics. Thus, the transformation of our inner nature with the help of the psychic being is not the ultimate aim of evolution. In fact, a supramental transformation is required for the complete and fruitful transformation caused by the psychic being. This is because it is only through a supramental transformation that the inner and outer beings can manifest *in toto*.

Triple Process of Evolution:

Sri Aurobindo says that evolution has a character, i.e. it takes place as per a well-defined rule. In other words, evolution does not occur haphazardly. The transformation from a lower principle to a higher principle does not take place in a single leap; the preparation for transformation of the lower principles goes on for a long time. According to Sri Aurobindo, the process of evolution — that is, the gradual transformation from the material inconscience to the spiritual consciousness involves three stages.

Firstly, in the course of evolution, matter has to become subtle and complex slowly and gradually so that along with the growth of consciousness, the higher principle of life can emerge from matter itself. In other words, matter has to be made into an appropriate receptacle so that consciousness may emerge out of it and evolve into a higher vital stage. Matter which is very hard or too simple cannot bring about the evolution of a higher consciousness. Though the consciousness lies hidden in matter, it appears to us as inconscient because matter still possesses the characteristics of hardness, simplicity and non-adjustability due to which it cannot become a fit receptacle to house the higher consciousness. That is why, to manifest the lower principles into the higher ones, matter has to become subtle, complex, organized and expanded. Sri Aurobindo has called this character of evolution ‘the process of widening’.

Secondly, in the process of evolution, the gradual progression of consciousness takes place from the lower layers to the higher ones. Until the complete manifestation of consciousness takes place, the action of evolution goes on from matter to life, from life to mind, from mind to higher mind and to further higher layers. Sri Aurobindo has called this character of evolution ‘the process of heightening’. Through this process, just as the energies of the lower consciousness tries to develop into higher consciousness, similarly, the energies of the higher consciousness tries to pull down the energies of the lower consciousness upwards so that the process of evolution becomes simple. Sri Aurobindo writes about it in *The Life Divine*: ‘Not only must these principles manifest from below in a qualified and restricted emergence, but also from above they must descend in their characteristic power and full possible efflorescence into the material being...’¹

Thirdly, the third stage in evolution involves the process of integration. In this process when the lower principles are transformed into higher ones, then the higher principles integrate with the lower principles. This happens so because the higher principles are not new; such principles have been hidden in the lower principles. So, when a lower principle is transformed into a higher principle, a harmony persists between these two principles.

Spiritual Evolution:

For our development into the spiritual being, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of four factors in the action of Nature. These are 1) Religion 2) Occultism 3) Spiritual Thought and 4) Inner Spiritual Experience.

Religion:

Sri Aurobindo has remarked that religion had begun at the initial stage in the development of human civilization. At the inception of development of human civilization, it was seen that when the human brain was not yet developed, it was unaware of the various forces of Nature. As the unknown forces of Nature were uncontrolled and mysterious to the early men, they thought such forces were dispensers of their well-being so with the view of pleasing these forces, they kept

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 273.

themselves busy with activities like prayers, worship and other moral laws. Thus, religion came into being. With the development of religious consciousness, man began to believe in the existence of gods and goddesses. Although at the beginning of religious consciousness, spiritual consciousness was yet to be developed. But the role religion has played to develop man into a spiritual being is of immense importance. That is why Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*: ‘... the worship of divine powers, sacrifice, a surface piety and social ethics are the main factors.’¹ So it can be said that religion connects man with God and develops his thoughts and actions as well. It is religion which makes man aware of the potentiality of establishing a connection with God which lies involved in him.

Occultism:

The second factor in the action of Nature is occultism. Occultism is another method of Nature which has been used by man to bring out its inner being. Occultism is that effort of man through which he brings out the hidden truth and possibilities of Nature, frees himself from Nature’s control and establishes a sovereign rule over the powers of Nature. Through occultism, one gets to know the powers of Nature which lie hidden within it. This is so because when man’s inner being — crossing the limitations of body, mind and vital — is awakened, it is then that man discovers that supreme truth which lies dormant in nature. By utilizing this method, that is, occultism, man has developed various subjects like astronomy, astrology, chemistry, etc.

Spiritual Thought:

In the third stage of evolution it is seen that man no longer wants to remain satisfied only with the intellectual and sensory knowledge he has acquired. He wants to know the truth which can never be attained by intellect or senses. By exercising one’s intellectual faculty, man judges the truth and the fruitfulness of everything. But even the most rigorous exercise of intellectual faculties cannot lead man to the ultimate truth which alone can satisfy him. It is then that man turns inward to seek that truth. Only by turning inwards can man know that truth.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 902.

Inner Spiritual Experience and Realization:

In the fourth stage of evolution, it is seen that as a result of turning inwards, man comes across certain experiences and realizations which transforms his consciousness and develops him into a spiritual being. In the ancient times, man had renounced the world to become a sage or an ascetic only due to the dawning of inner realizations. Although the three aforesaid factors of Nature are necessary for the expansion of spiritual consciousness, such actions cannot cause the transformation of man into a spiritual being. Only spiritual realizations are capable of transforming the individual being into a spiritual being. The realization of the Supreme or the Spirit is a spiritual realization. Sri Aurobindo says that it is then that the individual being gets transformed into a spiritual being and unites with the Divine to work for the welfare of the world. It is noteworthy that here the liberation of the individual being is not the aim — the attainment of liberation does not put an end to everything. On the contrary, the true aim is to unite with the Divine after attaining liberation and bringing down the higher consciousness into the heart of the world for the welfare of all beings and the world.

Some Arguments favouring the acceptance of Spiritual Evolution:

Sri Aurobindo in typically Indian philosophy style imagines uttarpakṣa or the opponents who may raise questions on his view about spiritual evolution. There are three different objections which are as follows: The first objection is metaphysical, it has been raised on the basis of a antagonistic metaphysical belief, viz., materialistic metaphysics. The second objection has been raised on the epistemological ground from the position that does not share the same epistemological beliefs. The third objection has arisen from the quarter which is not absolutely antagonistic to Sri Aurobindo's viewpoint, but of course differs very much in details. The concept of ignorance may be understood differently from Sri Aurobindo to provide another antagonistic stand to his position.

Firstly, materialists and scientists who believe in material evolution could raise an objection stating that the energy which lies in matter is not conscious but unconscious or inscient so it is not acceptable that a hidden Consciousness-Force is evolving. In response to such an objection, Sri Aurobindo writes that even if it is taken into consideration that the energy which

lies in matter is not conscious but unconscious, the arguments of materialists and scientists would not sustain for they have themselves claimed that it is from such an unconscious energy that the form of consciousness had emerged gradually. In response to this view, Sri Aurobindo has argued that in such a case it is to be accepted that the inconscience is not absolutely inert and that even the inconscience has an urge to manifest itself in various forms and to make itself conscious. Besides, he further says that the inconscience cannot have the aspiration of becoming conscious; this is so because, behind the inconscience, there certainly lies the aspiration of the ‘will of a secret Conscious Being’ due to which evolution has proceeded from matter to life and from life to mind and is proceeding further towards a development into a higher conscious being. Sri Aurobindo writes about in *The Life Divine*: ‘Even in the Inconscient there seems to be at least an urge of inherent necessity producing the evolution of forms and in the forms a developing Consciousness, and it may well be held that this urge is the evolutionary will of a secret Conscious Being and its push of progressive manifestation the evidence of an innate intention in the evolution.’¹

Secondly, another objection could be raised here and that is: what is the evidence that man is proceeding towards a greater and higher consciousness or — to express it differently — proceeding towards the supramental consciousness? If we look back at the sages and ascetics of ancient India, we would observe that our present spiritual development has failed not only to surpass their spiritual development but has also not been able to match theirs in any respect. Keeping such failure in mind, how can we claim that man — in the course of evolution — would gradually evolve into a supramental being and attain physical immortality? It can also be said that in creation every being has a specific nature or habit and the development of such being is possible within the scope of such particular habit or nature. But it is not possible for the being to surpass its specific nature or habit. Likewise, man too has a well-defined nature or habit within the scope of which his development takes place. But man has such exclusive habits due to which he is labeled as a human and surpassing such habits is an impossible task. And if it is assumed that by surpassing such habits there would take place the advent of a supramental being or descent of a supramental consciousness, then it could be said as well that it will be a new creation like matter, life and mind.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 866.

In response to the aforesaid objection, Sri Aurobindo firstly says that although it is true that man has failed to surpass his predecessors in terms of thoughts and ideas, but it does not mean that the present man is considered as a weakling. After all, the way man has tackled the thousand and one difficulties and problems which have cropped up following the development of literature, fine arts, science and industries, it can be said with certainty that man is anything but weak. Secondly, Sri Aurobindo writes that in the case of spiritual development, the modern man may not have advanced as compared to his predecessors but he does possess the aspiration to know the truth of the spiritual world. And it is presumed that this very aspiration of spiritual truth would lead man to the absolute truth-consciousness of the Supermind. Nature too, it seems, is willing to take man to the supramental stage. Thirdly, Sri Aurobindo remarks that man's difference with the different layers of creation lies in the fact that the nature of man urges him to surpass his present condition and transcend to higher and greater layers. In other words, man seeks to overcome his limitations and proceed towards the Infinite. But why does man run after the Infinite? Sri Aurobindo says that man is aware that he is finite and that his consciousness is limited. That is why he strives to surpass his finite consciousness and transcend into the infinite consciousness. This is a natural instinct of man which is not found in any other beings. The instinct of man to ascend higher and his aspiration will enable him to surpass his mental layers and ascend to the supramental layer. Of course, here, Sri Aurobindo could be supported with the claim that there are some animals — as recorded in biology — which have foregone its old features and have transformed into completely new beings. And Sri Aurobindo too has spoken of evolution although his concept of evolution is not merely physical evolution but spiritual evolution. And it is through this spiritual evolution that man's body, vital and mind would be transformed and as a result man would evolve into a supramental being or a Superman.

Thirdly, another objection which could be raised is that in this world of ignorance, the transformation of consciousness is not possible. It means, to develop into a spiritual consciousness one has to rise and go to a world which lies beyond this world of ignorance. In response to this argument, Sri Aurobindo has said that such an objection arises only when ignorance is said to be the cause of creation of the world. If it is so, then it could also be argued that the transformation of consciousness cannot take place in such a world of ignorance. But Sri Aurobindo says that ignorance is not the cause of the world's creation. And such a misconception has arisen due to the fact that the real nature of ignorance has been incorrectly

interpreted or understood. He further says that when the Sachchidananda plunges into the inconscience, its divine knowledge becomes concealed as a result of which ignorance is created. So, ignorance is the veiled form of divine knowledge which lies hidden in the inconscience. Sri Aurobindo points out that the hidden form of divine knowledge can gradually expand and manifest in this world only. This is so because in the course of evolution from matter to life and life to mind, it is the unmanifest which has been manifested. Now, the higher consciousness — which lies hidden in the mental region — is being manifested and is proceeding towards its complete awakening not elsewhere but in this very world only.

Triple Transformation

So we understand from the discussion made above that the individual being (Jiva) —when it is freed from the clutches of ignorance through rebirth — unites with the Soul or Spirit and attains liberation in some greater spiritual world. But such an attainment does not quite fulfil the actual mission of Nature. To manifest the real self of Nature and to bring about its complete transformation is also an objective of Nature. It can be said that this is, in fact, the real aim of evolution. And this complete transformation can be materialized only with the advent of the supramental being. But how can the advent of the supramental species be brought about? Sri Aurobindo writes that when the spiritual being would ascend to the Supramental layer and cause a descent of the supramental force and light on this material world as well as material life, only then would the species of the supramental beings or Supermen — as coined by Sri Aurobindo — emerge. To bring about the advent of the supramental being, Sri Aurobindo has written about the necessity of a triple transformation which involves psychic transformation, spiritual transformation and supramental transformation. While describing this triple transformation, Sri Aurobindo writes that the very first requirement is to transform the psychic being which means the present nature of man has to be transformed into an instrument of the psychic being. The second step involves a spiritual transformation; this particular transformation takes place within our entire being following the descent of higher, spiritual light, happiness, power and purity in our physical, vital and even in the sub-conscious stage of the mind. This means that spiritual transformation does not merely involve a self-blossoming of the supreme consciousness but includes the descent of the forces of the higher, spiritual worlds. The third step involves a

supramental transformation which means an ascension to the supramental layer of consciousness or the Supermind and bring about a descent of the supramental consciousness in our entire nature and being. Here it is to be noted that to effectuate these three types of transformation, one has to recognize rebirth. This is so because, as we have already seen, transformation means a spiritual evolution which can be brought about gradually by the means of rebirth.

Let's now discuss what are the various types of transformations:

Psychic Transformation:

Though a detailed discussion on the psychic being has already been made, yet, for the sake of convenience in this present segment, a few words on the psychic being is presented here. According to Sri Aurobindo, man has two beings: the first is the exterior being which is changeable and mortal while the other is inner which is unchangeable and eternal. This eternal and unchangeable being in man has been called the 'psychic being' by Sri Aurobindo. This psychic being is the actual self of an individual which lies obscurely. The exterior being is constituted as a result of the culmination of physical body, life and mind. This exterior being is mortal and subject to death. The psychic being controls this exterior being of man and uses it as an instrument. Truth, Purity and Beauty are its salient features. Our exterior being could get disturbed by anything which is false, impure or ugly but the psychic being is never affected by such elements. The psychic being is the spark of divine light which, although lying hidden at the innermost core of man's heart, guides the individual being to tread on the path of truth. Sri Aurobindo writes about the psychic being: 'It is an ever-pure flame of the divinity in things and nothing that comes to it, nothing that enters into our experience can pollute its purity or extinguish the flame.'¹ The mind remains enveloped by such guidance which arises out of the deepest of regions within but it fails to ascertain the source of this guidance. The veiled form of the psychic being is brought to light, that is, transformed when a direct contact is established between our exterior being and the inner being which has been termed as the 'Spiritual Reality' by Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*: 'A first condition of the soul's

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 924.

complete emergence is a direct contact in the surface being with the spiritual Reality.’¹ The establishment of such a contact can be materialized in three ways:

Firstly, a direct connection between the exterior being and the inner being can be built through the thinking mind. Sri Aurobindo says that as man is a mental being, so the soul acts on the exterior being through the mind. When the contact between the soul and the exterior being becomes firm, at one point of time, all mental darkness is dispelled and the mind gets illumined by the light which descend from the higher layers of consciousness as a result of which the mind opens itself to the Impersonal Reality for a developed mind is always attracted to the impersonal. So Sri Aurobindo remarks: ‘At its highest the thinking mind is drawn always towards the impersonal; in its search it becomes conscious of a spiritual essence, an impersonal Reality which expresses itself in all these outward signs and characters but is more than any formation or manifesting figure.’² When the mind arrives at the Impersonal aspect of the Reality, it realizes a deep truth, tranquility, beauty and bliss. This realization causes the mind to be calm, generous and pure. M. P. Pandit remarks about it in his *Talks on The Life Divine*: ‘When the mind is open to this impersonal aspect of Reality, there is a great calmness, a concrete quietude, and one tends to settle there; there is no urge for dynamic action, no urge to act in the world or on the world.’³ This means that with the mind’s ascent upwards and with the development of consciousness, the mind realizes a pure, nameless, formless, infinite Reality. When the mind is in such a stage of realization, there blossoms a spiritual consciousness due to which the physical body and the mind becomes calm. Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*: ‘A spiritualised consciousness is achieved and the life falls quiet, the body ceases to need and to clamour, the soul itself merges into the spiritual silence.’⁴ But this transformation which is brought about by the mind is not an integral transformation.* This is so because the transformation leading to the divinization of Nature is still incomplete.

Secondly, through the heart also an indirect realization of the inner being can be made possible. The sadhana of the heart mainly involves sadhana of devotion and love. Its complete fulfilment is attained when the mind surpasses the impersonality and realizes the Supreme Being.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 934.

² *Ibid.*, p.935.

³ M. P. Pandit, *Talks on The Life Divine*, Volume II, p. 493.

⁴ *The Life Divine*, pp. 935-936.

* By integral transformation, Sri Aurobindo has referred not just to the transformation of outer and inner nature of man, but also that of the entire world.

It is through the sadhana of devotion that the individual being finds the innermost being which lies silently within it and thus brings about a divine purity, bliss and love in its life. But Sri Aurobindo says that the sadhana of devotion is also not sufficient to bring about a complete transformation of Nature. This is because only a partial transformation of the mind, vital and physical is brought about by the sadhana of devotion. For an integral transformation, a complete transformation of the body, vital and mind is required. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: ‘... there must be a transmutation of the thinking mind and all the vital and physical parts of consciousness in their own character.’¹

Thirdly, it is also through the consecration of will that the innermost being can be realized. Sri Aurobindo writes that our ego lies at the root of our cravings and attachments. If we relinquish our egoistic cravings and attachments and dedicate our will to the will of the Divine, then such a devoted consecration would be able to facilitate the process of transformation to a great extent. It is then that we would realize that we no longer have a will of our own and that the will of the Divine is working within us and controlling or regulating everything around us. So, we observe that at the root of pure will, i.e., the Divine will, lies the lack of cravings and attachments. It is through this pure will that we can offer and surrender ourselves to the Divine. Sri Aurobindo says that here too the ego in us persists but it helps to surrender ourselves to God. But this ego, also known as the spiritual ego, is free from all worldly cravings and hence it is pure. Sri Ramakrishna has called it the ‘ripe self’. It is through the ‘ripe self’ or ‘pure ego’ that the will to proceed towards the divine consciousness arises in us and thus, in the course of sadhana, our realization reaches the divine consciousness.

Spiritual Transformation:

The second stage in the process of transformation is spiritual transformation. In the first stage of transformation — i.e. through psychic transformation — our consciousness begins its inward journey. The journey is completed at the second stage through spiritual transformation. It is through the spiritual transformation that gradual self-unfoldment of man takes place *en route* the Supreme Reality. This self-unfoldment or self-opening has various stages like ‘Higher Mind’,

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 936.

‘Illumined Mind’, ‘Intuitive Mind’ and the ‘Overmind’. A brief discussion bringing out the details of these aforesaid layers of consciousness is presented beneath:

Higher Mind:

The very first stage is the Higher Mind. An ordinary mind has to look for the truth. But when one’s consciousness is in the Higher Mind, the need to seek truth does not arise for it directly and spontaneously views the truth. Also, in this stage, the mind no longer is disturbed by partial knowledge and partial ignorance. The Higher Mind has two aspects: 1) Knowledge and 2) Will. A part of absolute or complete knowledge is manifested in the Higher Mind. Sri Aurobindo writes about the Higher Mind: ‘This higher consciousness is a Knowledge formulating itself on a basis of self-existent all-awareness and manifesting some part of its integrality...’¹ The knowledge which arises in the Higher Mind is the spontaneous revelation of the eternal Wisdom and not a creation of intellect or logical reasoning. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: ‘... this thought is a self-revelation of eternal Wisdom, not an acquired knowledge.’² In this layer, unity and diversity are felt spontaneously. The power of the Higher Mind comes from the Overmind although the source of this power lies in the Supermind. Thought is a salient trait of this power about which Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘... its special character, its activity of consciousness are dominated by Thought...’³ The Thought views the varied truths in a single unified perspective and also knows *in toto* the different truths revealed by different subjects. Not only in the Higher Mind does our knowledge change but the various parts of our being like heart, life and body too gets purified as a result of its influence. It is also the will of the Higher Mind which renders the real form of truth. This will is mainly based on the Power of Thought which blossoms in body, life and mind and transforms them. In the Higher Mind, through a higher consciousness our entire being becomes powerful following the urge to transform into a higher power. But it is to be remembered here that the forces of the higher worlds get interrupted while working on the lower regions due to which such forces cannot manifest themselves fully. To bring about a wholeness or perfection in these higher forces, the mind, heart, life and body are required to have peace, equality and tranquility in them. These forces manifest in the Higher Mind not wholly but

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 975.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 974.

to a certain extent only. Thus, the Higher Mind executes the work of a primary transformation so that the ascent to a greater force and the descent of a profounder truth is made possible.

Illumined Mind:

Beyond the Higher Mind lies the Illumined Mind which is the region of spiritual light. This light is, according to Sri Aurobindo, 'primarily a spiritual manifestation of the Divine Reality illuminative and creative...'¹ He has pointed out the difference between spiritual light and ordinary light. As per the prevalent view, light is created by physical energy. But Sri Aurobindo says that the light which illumines the Illumined Mind is a divine, spiritual light. The light created by matter originates from this spiritual light.

The Illumined Mind is that greater power of Consciousness and Knowledge which prepares the individual being to attain completeness or perfection. In other words, it is the inner vision which lies beyond thought. Sri Aurobindo writes about it: 'The Illumined Mind does not work primarily by thought, but by vision...'² It is not that the power of thought has no role in the Illumined Mind but the role is of limited importance. Sri Aurobindo writes that through thought only a reflection of Truth can be attained but it is only through direct inner vision that the actual truth can be known. Here is a vivid explanation by Sri Aurobindo: 'Thought creates a representative image of Truth; it offers that to the mind as a means of holding Truth and making it an object of knowledge; but the body itself of Truth is caught and exactly held in the sunlight of a deeper spiritual sight to which the representative figure created by thought is secondary and derivative...'³ So the workings of the Illumined Mind is much greater than imagined. Although the Higher Mind causes a greater consciousness to blossom in us through the spiritual idea and its power of truth, it is the Illumined Mind which, with the help of its truth-sight, truth-light and forces, opens the door leading to a greater consciousness than that of the Higher Mind.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 979.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 980.

Intuitive Mind:

The Intuitive Mind lies beyond the Illumined Mind. In this stage, the Higher Mind and the Illumined Mind both becomes powerful. In the surface or superficial mind too, truth is remembered and revealed with the help of the Intuitive Mind. Sri Aurobindo writes in this context: ‘In the human mind the intuition is even such a truth-remembrance or truth-conveyance...’¹ But as the surface mind is in the clutches of ignorance, the intuition is not perfectly manifested in it.

In the Intuitive Mind, there lies, apart from the vision of truth and idea of truth, the touch of truth. There is also an intimate relation between the Intuitive Mind and Knowledge by Identity about which Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘Intuition is a power of consciousness nearer and more intimate to the original knowledge by identity; for it is always something that leaps out direct from a concealed identity.’² Sri Aurobindo writes that Knowledge by Identity is such a knowledge where there is no distinction between the knower and the known. It is the awareness of one’s own consciousness, that is, the consciousness which knows itself as conscious. So, this knowledge is the ‘direct awareness by identity’. He adds that this Knowledge by Identity remains hidden in the human mind. In the third stage of ascension of the human mind, that is, in the Intuitive Mind, a glimpse or flash of this hidden Knowledge by Identity is attained. So Sri Aurobindo remarks: ‘Intuition is always an edge or ray or outleap of a superior light...’³ This ray of the Intuitive Mind can be compared with the play of lightning-flashes.

The powers of the Intuitive Mind are of four types: the power of truth-seeing; the power of truth-hearing; the power of truth-touching and the power of a true discrimination of the relation between one Truth and another Truth. Through its power of truth-seeing, the Intuitive Mind reveals the true self of objects; that is, through this power of the Intuitive Mind, the truth can be viewed. Through the power of truth-hearing, divine inspiration is received within, that is, truth is heard. Through the power of truth-touching, one gets the knowledge of what has been touched. The fourth power is that of an automatic discrimination which distinguishes between truth and truth, intuition and intuition, idea and idea. With the help of these intuitive forces our entire consciousness can be transformed into intuitive consciousness as a result of which our heart,

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 982.

² *Ibid.*, p. 981.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 983.

vital, senses and physical consciousness too gets transformed. But Sri Aurobindo says that even an intuitive transformation cannot lead to a complete transformation as the inconscience offers resistance. It is only the Supermind which can bring about a complete transformation in the inconscience.

Overmind:

The layer of consciousness beyond the Intuitive Mind is the Overmind. The ascent to the Overmind becomes possible when transformation takes place in the intuitive layer. In other words, the transformation which occurs in the intuitive layer forms the basis of ascension to the Overmind. The Overmind is a 'power of cosmic consciousness.' When one opens up to this cosmic or universal consciousness, not only does the possibility of rising up to the Overmind materialize but so does the possibility of bringing about a descent of the power of this layer of consciousness. The mere opening-up of the individual consciousness is not sufficient enough to cause an ascension to the power of the Overmind and to bring about a descent of the same power. To make this process of ascent and descent of power complete, it is essential to make the individual consciousness universally pervading. When this individual consciousness gets expanded into universal consciousness, the descent of the Overmind consciousness becomes possible as a result of the said expansion. This, in turn, causes a total elimination of our ego-sense and the realization of a infinite universal Self takes place. Sri Aurobindo writes about it in his *The Life Divine*: 'When the overmind descends, the predominance of the centralising ego-sense is entirely subordinated, lost in largeness of being and finally abolished; a wide cosmic perception and feeling of a boundless universal self and movement replaces it...' ¹ As a result of such a profound realization, the individual being no longer feels or realizes a separate existence of its own; it sees itself in everything and everything in its own self. In the consciousness of the Overmind, not only does the eradication of the ego-centric personality or the divisive 'I'-ness or individuality occurs but the very consciousness of being a servant of God or an instrument of God's will also disappears. When one claims that he is acting as an instrument of God, there still persists an element of ego in his consciousness although this ego is quite different from the divisive ego-sense which brings in a sense of superiority or inferiority in man. But in the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 985.

Overmind, the very consciousness of being a mere servant of God too vanishes for good. To express it more simply, all sorts of individualities disappear completely in the Overmind. When the individual consciousness is abolished, there exists only the universal consciousness and the bliss of uniting with this universal consciousness. Sri Aurobindo mentions about this phenomena in *The Life Divine*: ‘In this boundless largeness, not only the separate ego but all sense of individuality, even of a subordinated or instrumental individuality, may entirely disappear; the cosmic existence, the cosmic consciousness, the cosmic delight, the play of cosmic forces are alone left...’¹

Sri Aurobindo says that in the Overmind, the play of the powers of the Higher Mind, the Illumined Mind and the Intuitive Mind become even more concrete and thus give rise to universal consciousness, force and bliss. But even the Overmind cannot become the absolute determinant to bring about a spiritual evolution. This is so because, as Sri Aurobindo points out, the Overmind too is the power of the *Aparardha*, hence the descent of its power cannot transform the inconscience completely. Only the descent or manifestation of the power of the *Parardha* can effectuate the transformation of the inconscience because the Supermind is the power of the *Parardha*. As most of the parts of our being lie enveloped in the inconscience, so it is only with the descent or manifestation of the Supermind that the resistances offered by the inconscience can be eradicated for good.

Supermind or Supramental Transformation:

The last stage in the process of transformation is ascent to the Supermind. The ascent to the Overmind from the superficial mind comes under spiritual transformation as pointed out by Sri Aurobindo. The supramental transformation commences after the completion of spiritual transformation. When the mind ascends to the Supermind, it is then that transformation finds its complete fruition. The consciousness of the Supermind is indivisible and non-fragmented. The supramental consciousness is not just a consciousness — it is a power of consciousness whose lowest manifestation is the mental layer or the mind. In other words, the Supermind lies beyond the mental layer. Sri Aurobindo says that the Supermind lies dormant within the mind and that the mind and the Supermind are essentially the same. But despite being the same, they are

¹ *Ibid.*

distinct from one another on the basis of the difference in their consciousness. While the Supermind is the highest layer of consciousness, the mind is its lowest form of manifestation. In the mental layer, the many seems to be quite different from the one. Not only that, the mind fails to know the many with all its diversities. The mind being finite fails to grasp the Infinite, the Absolute. The mind perceives everything in a fragmented way, hence it judges everything on the basis of a specific time-frame and from a particular and limited perspective. Be it near or far, past or present or future — the mind sees everything from a fragmented consciousness within a specific temporal and special frame. But the Supermind sees everything as a whole. Time and Space cannot influence the vision of the Supermind with its divisiveness. Sri Aurobindo writes about it: ‘We call it the Supermind or the Truth-Consciousness, because it is a principle superior to mentality and exists, acts and proceeds in the fundamental truth and unity of things and not like the mind in their appearances and phenomenal divisions.’¹ Like the Vedic seers and sages of ancient India, Sri Aurobindo has called the consciousness of the Supermind or the Supramental Consciousness the ‘Truth-Consciousness’ because it is the truth consciousness of Sat or Existence. Sri Aurobindo writes about it in *The Life Divine*: ‘... we may accept from this ancient experience the subsidiary term “truth-consciousness” to delimit the connotation of the more elastic phrase, Supermind.’² So here two contradictory conditions can be observed: on one hand, there is the status of the Absolute One — the Sachchidananda — and on the other hand, lies its opposite in the mental status. And the intermediary state of these two contradictory statuses is the Supramental state which manifests all the powers and principles hidden in the One. So, the Supermind is the highest power of the Sachchidananda which establishes a connection between the One (Sachchidananda) and the Many (mind).

In the consciousness of the Supermind, the Purusha and Prakriti, Chit (Consciousness) and Shakti (Force) are the same, two-faced, unfragmented truth. From this point, a distinct difference between the Overmind and the Supermind is noticeable. This is so because in the Overmental consciousness, the Purusha and Prakriti, Chit and Shakti are the different sides of the same truth. These sides exist separately in the Overmind. In other words, the same unfragmented truth is divided into different parts in the Overmind and each part seeks their respective fulfilment. The Overmind sees that different sides of the same truth come together to form a wholeness. As a

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

result, its knowledge is collective in nature. Thus, the Overmind gives the forms of infinite possibilities to the complete truth and creates an infinite world. From this very point of view it can be said that the fragmented consciousness exist in the Overmind. But the Supermind sees the whole as One and indivisible hence the supramental consciousness is unfragmented and complete. It can also be said that as the root of ignorance persists in the Overmind, so complete transformation is not possible in this layer of consciousness. But in the Supermind, this transformation becomes possible. To express it more vividly, just as ascension from the Overmind to the Supermind is an indispensable necessity to complete the process of transformation, similarly, the descent of the supramental consciousness too becomes indispensable for the completion of transformation. As a result of the descent of the supramental consciousness and force, the mental, vital and physical bodies of man would get transformed and their real spiritual force would be manifested. Sri Aurobindo writes about it in *The Life Divine*: ‘... the supramental consciousness and force would take up the transformation directly into its own hands, reveal to the terrestrial mind, life, bodily being their own spiritual truth and divinity and, finally, pour into the whole nature the perfect knowledge, power, significance of the supramental existence.’¹

Sri Aurobindo says that the supramental force is the creative force of the Sachchidananda. Creation is the temporal and spacial expression of the Sachchidananda which itself is beyond Time and Space. Sat, Chit and Ananda — these are not any separate powers; these are, on the contrary, one and the same. What is Sat is Chit as well as Ananda. But no creation is possible in the state of Sachchidananda. So, the Supermind is required to bring about creation. This is so because the Supermind is such a principle through which the Sachchidananda remains one yet manifests itself in several forms. This means that although the Sachchidananda is manifesting itself in many forms, yet its oneness remains unaffected and intact. So it can be said that the one is many and many is one and unified. To express it differently: the Supermind manifests the many which lies seated in the one.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the Supermind has three stages. Unity and oneness is the first stage of Supermind. But this unity of the Supermind is not equivalent to the status of absolute unity of the Sachchidananda. This is so because the Sachchidananda — in its absolute state — is beyond time and space and remains in its real self. But the Supermind in its first stage is all-

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 990.

comprehending, all-possessing and all-constituting. Sri Aurobindo points out that in the first stage of the Supermind, there lies no differentiation or individualization and that 'All is developed in unity and as one'.¹

In the second stage of the Supermind there takes place the play of the unity in many and that of the many in the unity. Although the one becomes many in this stage but unity becomes the primary factor here while the many becomes secondary. In this particular stage, a division is created between the universal self and the individual self. (Sri Aurobindo has used terms like 'Divine', 'Spirit' and 'Self' as synonyms.) The universal self is revealed or manifested in this particular stage as various soul-forms or individual selves. But this division is not permanent in nature. Sri Aurobindo remarks about it: 'There would be no essential difference, but only a practical differentiation for the play which would not abrogate the real unity.'² This is so because the individual self knows that it is the manifestation of the universal Self. The individual self — in this stage — considers itself one not only with the universal self but also with the various individual selves manifested by the universal self.

In the third stage of the Supermind, there takes place a connection with ignorance. That is why in this stage of consciousness the unity becomes insignificant while the many assumes prime importance. While the sense of unity remains intact in the second stage of the Supermind, in the third stage duality gains prominence. The individual soul and the universal soul — both remain blissful but as separate principles in this stage. Just as the individual soul enjoys bliss with the universal soul as well as with other individual souls, likewise, the universal soul too enjoys bliss with different individual souls. Variety becomes primarily important in this stage and brings a completeness of unity. Variety and unity are the two aspects of the same divine play which renders a sense of completeness to this bliss of the divine play. So Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*: 'It would only affirm the truth of the differentiating movement along with the truth of the stable unity, regarding them as the upper and lower poles of the same truth, the foundation and culmination of the same divine play; and it would insist on the joy of the differentiation as necessary to the fullness of the joy of the unity.'³

In the aforesaid discussion we can see how the Sachchidananda gradually, through the process of self-involution, has merged itself in the inconscience and then, gradually evolves or

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

transforms from the inconscience into higher and still higher layers of consciousness through the process of self-expansion. We have already seen how Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution is closely linked with his theory of rebirth. This is so because the psychic being takes birth several times to proceed on the path of gradual self-development. The psychic being arrives at a certain stage of development in a given birth. This development remain within it as a mental disposition or *śamskāra* and in the next birth, the psychic being is born with this *śamskāra*. In every birth, the psychic being gets the opportunity to evolve into a higher and greater consciousness and thus in every birth it gradually proceeds on the path of development. Sri Aurobindo says that the ascent to the supramental consciousness is the last stage in the development of the psychic being and rebirth is the only means through which this stage can be arrived at.

Uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo's Evolutionary Theory:

The uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution lies in the fact that unlike the theories of evolution preached by the Western and Eastern philosophers, his is a spiritual theory. In Western philosophy, we have several concepts related to evolution such as teleological, creative, mechanical and emergent theories to name a few. However, none of these aforesaid theories could provide a completely acceptable interpretation.

Let's take, for instance, Darwin's theory of evolution which is known as the Mechanical Theory of Biological Evolution and which preaches the survival of the fittest beings. Darwin has explained evolution to be a mechanical process but the process of evolution cannot be explained mechanically because when every living being enters into any conflict with other beings to safeguard its own existence or tries to cope up with the changing climate, such an urge of struggle emerges from within and not from any external and material source. Moreover, the different tenets or aspects of Darwin's theory such as accidental variation, natural selection, heredity and struggle for existence have ignored the significance of the objective of evolution. Also, Hegel's philosophy of evolution appears to be more acceptable than Darwin's as one does come across a definite objective of evolution here but even then its shortcomings cannot be ignored. In his theory of evolution, Hegel speaks of evolution as the continuation of old principles which he tried to explain by the virtue of reason, for reason is the principle of continuity between the lower and higher principles in his philosophy. Also, the occurrence of

unpredictable events is ignored in his philosophy. In other words, continuity is emphasized greatly and no gap or deviation in the process of evolution is spoken of. The occurrence of unpredictable events which are beyond the comprehension of thought is ignored.¹

Again, in the Samkhya system of Indian philosophy also, we come across Nature-Evolution (*prakriti-parināmvāda*) where through the twenty-four *tattwas* (*Mahat, Buddhi, Ahamkāra, Manas*, etc.) Prakriti gradually evolves from the subtle state to gross physical form whereas Purusha is the Witness (*sāksīn*), the seer (*Drasṭr*). Here, Prakriti is unconscious while Purusha is conscious. The difference between Prakriti and Purusha is excessively emphasized as a result of which the Samkhya philosophers accept Prakriti as the mere action of matter; however, they could not observe any latent intention of the Purusha in the origin of the actions of the Prakriti.

This is where Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution establishes its supremacy as it excludes nothing and encompasses all the aspects and presents a theory which is logically acceptable and convincing enough. In Sri Aurobindo's teachings, evolution is the emergence of new principles. But these new principles do not arise by terminating the older ones, on the contrary, the old principles get transformed into newer ones. For instance, Sri Aurobindo has shown how matter has been transformed first into life and further into mind and mind would eventually be transformed into the Supermind. But that does not mean that these old principles would cease to exist. In other words, the old principles (like matter, life and mind) get transformed into something new, something greater through the process of evolution. Evolution, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the revelation of the Spirit, the emergence of newer truths.

It can also be said that the way Sri Aurobindo has analyzed evolution from the individual as well as the universal perspectives, such an analysis has not been made by any thinker before or after him. Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution seems to be a gradual development of consciousness where it is observed that matter has been gradually transformed into the mental realm. So, it can be assumed that in the same way, the mental realm would get transformed to a state of higher, spiritual consciousness which Sri Aurobindo has called the Supermind. So, Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution in which he speaks of a spiritual consciousness or the Supramental Consciousness to be the ultimate destiny of man which does not lie confined within the past and the present but presents before us the immanence of a glorious future does not appear to be unconvincing to us.

¹ Rama Shanker Srivastava, *Sri Aurobindo and The Theories of Evolution*, p. 290.

Chapter Three

Ignorance

Ignorance is one of the crucial concepts in the whole domain of Indian philosophy, not only of the āstika schools but of the nāstikas like the Buddhists and the Jains as well. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy as has been delineated through his *magnum opus*, *The Life Divine*, is Vedantic philosophy to its core. The concept of ignorance is a technical concept, and it has been variously understood by the Indian philosophers. In this chapter, Sri Aurobindo's main ideas about ignorance would be dealt with.

The concept of ignorance plays a very important role in Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics. According to him, ignorance is the root cause of our cosmic illusion as a result of which we cannot realize the hidden truth of the cosmos. By 'cosmic illusion' Sri Aurobindo does not imply that the world is unreal as propagated by Sankaracharya. Sri Aurobindo opines that illusion is the misinterpretation of the world by the limited mind. In this connection it is to be borne in mind that the notion of illusion is also in need of much explanation and disambiguation. It is, however, not in the scope of present discussion. The mind tends to create a division and see things from a fragmented angle. So, when the world is looked at from such a fragmented angle, the true nature of the world is not grasped. The real nature of the world, Sri Aurobindo writes, is the manifestation of the One-and-only Brahman. So mind, which is the seat of ignorance, misinterprets the real nature of the world. In this context, Sri Aurobindo has used the term 'cosmic illusion'.

According to Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary hypothesis, the Absolute or Sachchidānanda manifests itself into sevenfold principles which are Matter, Life, Mind, Supermind, Existence, Conscious-Force and Bliss. These seven principles are the self-revelation powers of the Sachchidānanda. During the manifestation, Existence — by dint of its exclusive concentration (which would be dealt with later) — involves itself into the inconscient matter. Though matter seems to be inconscient these seven principles of the Absolute exist in matter secretly. Likewise, Conscious-Force manifests as Life and Bliss in the psychic. Mind is the limiting power of the

Supermind and functions for a subordinate purpose of the latter. All these seven principles are inter-related and exist simultaneously. This is the actual nature of the universe. But ignorance prohibits us to grasp the real truth of the universe and eventually leads towards illusion. That is why Sri Aurobindo has called ignorance a ‘veil that separates the mind, body and life from their source and reality, Sachchidananda. Thus obscured the mind feels itself pierced by the evil that Ignorance creates.’¹

Just as the significance of light cannot be realized without first comprehending darkness, likewise, ignorance cannot be explained without realizing knowledge first. Let’s now observe how knowledge has been dealt with by Sri Aurobindo in his magnum opus, *The Life Divine*.

Knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the realization of the Divine, that is, the knowledge of the Truth.* Now the question arises: how does this realization take place? With reference to this context, let’s see what Sri Aurobindo has said about intellect, reason and intuition.

Intellect: According to Sri Aurobindo, intellect is the highest faculty of our outer mind. This faculty which consists of imaginations, perceptions and inferences cannot lead us to the Divine Knowledge because the Divine can be reached only through the inner mind and not through the outer mind. No matter how sharp the intellect is, it can only provide a vague concept of the Divine but not the knowledge of the Divine. Here lies the limitation of intellect. But Sri Aurobindo has never refused to acknowledge the contribution of a well-developed intellect to attain the Divine Knowledge because a well-developed intellect becomes necessary for the mind to prepare itself to reach the greater knowledge. The intellect, according to Sri Aurobindo, lies beneath the Higher Mind.[#] When the intellect transforms itself into a higher mind through sadhana, it facilitates the path of the Divine Knowledge.

Reason: According to Sri Aurobindo, reason is a distinctive faculty of the human mind which has enabled human beings to secure the highest position among all the living beings in this

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad*, p. 45-46.

* It is to be noted that the first letter in the word ‘Truth’ has been written in capital letter; this is so because whenever Sri Aurobindo has used any word to denote something related directly to the Supreme, he has used a capital letter. But at certain places in *The Life Divine*, its exception has been observed.

[#] There are six layers of consciousness according to Sri Aurobindo: Mind, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind, Overmind and Supermind. These have been dealt in detail in the chapter on ‘Evolution’.

world. He points out that reason acts in two ways: mixed and pure. The action of reason is mixed when reason confines itself within the well-defined boundaries of sense-organs. At that point of time, the truth obtained through the sense-organ is considered to be the highest truth by reason. But due to its dependence on the exterior senses, reason comes to know only of the appearances of things; thus, it is capable of knowing only the phenomenal reality and not the transcendental reality. But when reason no longer depends on the sense-organs, it proceeds without any mental hindrances and reaches that knowledge which lies behind appearances and thus it becomes pure reason. Pure reason, Sri Aurobindo says, has its own power to know the truth directly behind the appearances.

Sri Aurobindo writes that pure reason can lead us to the supra-physical knowledge, that is, the knowledge which lies beyond the physical world. To quote his own words: 'The complete use of pure reason brings us finally from physical to metaphysical knowledge.'¹ He further adds that such meta-physical knowledge can never quench one's thirst for integral knowledge. Human nature is such that it does not remain satisfied only with an idea; it seeks to see the real facts as well. Every idea continues to be incomplete until it becomes real in experience. But Sri Aurobindo says that no ordinary experience can lead us to that ultimate truth. To express it differently, meta-physical truth lies behind the ordinary experience. Hence, we have to ascend to that stage beyond the mind and its faculty of reasoning which Sri Aurobindo has called the realm of intuition.

Intuition: Sri Aurobindo says that Intuition is the first plane where one comes across the real opening which leads to the complete possibility of realization. It has a direct inner contact with the higher Truth where there is no mental intervention. Intuition, despite being superior to empirical and rational knowledge, is not free from its limitations. This is because in intuition there takes place the intervention of the reasoning and doubting mind. As a result of such interventions, the real truth gets adulterated and hence is misrepresented. That is why intuition can never provide us with knowledge of integral truth. Integral truth is that which gives us the truth as a whole. Only the Supermind can reveal this truth to us. That is why Sri Aurobindo has said that intuition is a ray of Truth. When the subjective consciousness meets with the objective consciousness, a spark of Knowledge, i.e. Knowledge by Identity, is flashed out. This flash is the

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 67.

intuitive knowledge. Knowledge by identity has been defined by Sri Aurobindo as the awareness of our own essential existence without the mediation of the outer and inner senses.

Though intuition is superior to reason, yet, the influence of pure reason is far greater than that of intuition on our surface-consciousness. This is so because man's nature is such that it strives to know the truth through a clear and organized way which intuition can never provide. But as reason presents the truth in a well-organized way, it becomes easily acceptable to our surface-consciousness. Hence, Sri Aurobindo writes: 'But in our surface being it is not the Intuition, it is the Reason which is organised and helps us to order our perceptions, thoughts and actions.'¹

Intuition has a tendency of building up a unity of knowledge and to synthesize immediately the parts of the whole as it always tends to see things in the Whole. Reason too attempts to know the Whole but that it tries to do by putting together the facts analyzed by it. Naturally, there would be many conflicts and logical incompatibilities in the facts. Reason accepts what it finds convenient in these contradictory facts and rejects the rest. Thus, reason builds up rational knowledge from the facts obtained by it. The influence of reason is such that intuitional knowledge takes a back-seat and eventually breaks up.

Knowledge has been classified by Sri Aurobindo as (i) Knowledge by Identity (ii) Knowledge by Direct Contact (iii) Knowledge by Separative Direct Contact and (iv) Knowledge by Indirect Contact which is the chief cause of ignorance. Knowledge by identity denotes the awareness of an individual where one need not go through any logical thinking process for his own existence. Hence, it is the most fundamental method of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge by direct contact involves identifications with the different subjective movements of mind as a result of which the mind forgets and loses its real being and becomes one with those movements. Knowledge by Separative Direct Contact involves separating oneself from temporary becomings and observing or evaluating the reasons which lead to the occurrence of various subjective movements in him. The sense organs of an individual separates him from others and prohibits him to bring about a direct contact with external objects by disabling him to get a true and faithful picture of the sense. It is on the basis of this separative indirect contact that man acquires knowledge of the external worlds by the virtue of the instrumentation of his sense organs.

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy — which is known as integral advaita — though very much shares the tradition of ignorance of Indian philosophy, especially from the Advaita philosophy of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Sankaracharya, differs from the other schools. The main point of difference between Sri Aurobindo and Sankaracharya rests on their view of the nature of Avidya or Ignorance. For the sake of convenience of discussion, we would first briefly note down some basic features of ignorance in the light of Sankaracharya and then elucidate and analyze the arguments of Sri Aurobindo to establish his stand concerning the concept of ignorance.

Sankaracharya on Ignorance:

According to Sankara, Brahman is the only reality, and from the point of view of Brahman, the world is unreal, an illusion looked. Sankara makes a distinction between Brahman and Ishwara. Brahman, conditioned by Māyā, is Ishwara who is the creator of this world. Ishwara creates this world through Māyā which is his magical power or energy (Māyā-śhakti). Māyā is of the nature of Avidya which is a false knowledge. Sankara accepts this Avidya or Ignorance as an absence of knowledge of Brahman. According to Sankara, Māyā which is a power of illusion, is distinct from Brahman and does not affect the purity of Brahman. What is Avidya from subjective standpoint is Māyā from the objective standpoint. When one perceives a rope as a snake, it is due to Avidya and the rope appears as a snake due to Māyā. Brahman is real but Māyā is unreal. Ishwara, endowed with Māyā, is the creator but devoid of Māyā he is pure Brahman. As Māyā is unreal and as the world has been created by Māyā, so, the world is also unreal. Owing to Māyā the world seems to have origination. This is because if the Brahman is the sole reality, then the world of multiplicity cannot be real but an illusion and ignorance is the only cause of this illusion. Sankara further adds that there is no difference between Brahman and the Jiva from the transcendental standpoint. Brahman and Jiva are identical but Jiva is a construction of Avidya or Māyā. Through ignorance the Jiva becomes related to the limiting adjuncts like the internal organ (*antahkaraṇa*) and appears as different from Brahman on the one hand and other individuals on the other.

Sankara holds that ignorance, a power of Brahman, disappears when the knowledge of the Reality arises in us. So, as long as ignorance lasts, there is the world and with the destruction of ignorance, all knowledge of duality vanishes and there remains only one Brahman. But Sri Aurobindo's integral Advaita rejects this view. Sri Aurobindo says that ignorance cannot have its origin in the absolute Brahman and that it is not a power of Brahman but an aspect of integral

unity. If ignorance is conceived as a power of the Brahman, then it can never be possible to have a unitary conception of Reality. Sri Aurobindo's view in this connection is, 'If Brahman is the sole existence, Maya can be nothing but a power of Brahman, a force of his consciousness or a result of his being; and if the Jivatman, one with Brahman, is subject to its own Maya, the Brahman in it is subject to Maya.'¹ From the aforementioned quote, Sri Aurobindo explains that if Brahman is the sole reality, then it is also to be accepted that Māyā is not something alien to Brahman. Māyā is the conscious power of the Brahman. This power of the Brahman is the modification of its own being. Hence, Māyā is not different from the Brahman. Sri Aurobindo says that if one accepts the dictum of Sankaracharya that 'Jiva is Brahman', then this too has to be accepted that as Jiva is a captive of Māyā, Brahman too would be subject to Māyā. But this is not logically possible. For, according to Sri Aurobindo, 'Ignorance must be part of the movement of the One, a development of its consciousness knowingly adopted, to which it is not forcibly subjected but which it uses for its cosmic purpose.'² It means that it is the cosmic purpose of the Absolute for which it has become limited through ignorance. Ignorance is a limited state of consciousness which the Absolute has adopted willingly. It is not the case that any force or energy has been subjected upon Him from outside.

Vidya or Knowledge and Avidya or Ignorance:

Sri Aurobindo is of opinion that knowledge and ignorance are not opposite to each other; rather they are fundamentally similar in nature. He conceives both knowledge and ignorance to be the dual powers of the Supreme Reality. Ignorance, for him, is a power just like knowledge. It is nothing but a power of the Divine Consciousness to partially withhold itself and as a divine power it cannot disrupt the Divine Unity. So, ignorance does not mean absence of knowledge and it does not play a negative role in our world and experience. As creation is a plunge of the Spirit into ignorance, the evolution would be impossible if ignorance is not conceived as a positive stage.

The Infinite Brahman holds both knowledge and ignorance, vidya and avidya. At one end, the Infinite is Alone, the Timeless Self, the One immutable, present with dazzling light whereas on

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 587.

² *Ibid.*

the other end, it is the broken light and mist, the mutable many, the One Self immerses itself into Mind and Life and in Time as well for the sake of an adventure of consciousness. Hence, Sri Aurobindo writes: 'Between these two oppositions and as a mediary term we see Consciousness working with a partial, limited self-awareness which is equally superficial, for behind it and acting through it is the divine All-Knowledge.'¹ This means that there exists a fragmented and contracted form of the Supreme Consciousness between knowledge and ignorance although this fragmented form is only a mere appearance. This is because behind this appearance, the Divine Knowledge* manifests itself gradually. Man's limited vision looks upon this contracted form of the Supreme Consciousness as something static but when his vision widens up, he envisages that the power of ignorance is slowly and steadily revealing itself towards the complete knowledge. On one hand exists the Supreme Consciousness and other hand lies the Nescience. The power of gradual manifestation from the Nescience to the Supreme Consciousness is called ignorance. The power of self-consciousness evolves from its latent stage to complete self-knowledge and this takes up the form of ignorance within man.

Sri Aurobindo holds that ignorance is a self-limiting power of knowledge and knowledge is potential within it. So, ignorance is capable of evolving itself into knowledge. Knowledge is the natural culmination of the state of ignorance. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: '... Knowledge and Ignorance are light and shadow of the same consciousness...'² Thus, knowledge and ignorance are not contrary in nature. Ignorance is the limited separative consciousness which attempts to become an integral consciousness. We can say in the words of Sri Aurobindo: '... what is happening is that the Ignorance is seeking and preparing to transform itself by a progressive illumination of its darkneses into the Knowledge that is already concealed within it; the cosmic truth manifested in its real essence and figure would by that transformation reveal itself as essence and figure of the supreme omnipresent Reality.'³ This means that ignorance is transforming itself gradually as it proceeds from abysmal Darkness to the illumined Knowledge. This, however, does not denote that ignorance becomes something new or assumes a new form. The illumined knowledge remained obscurely in the darkness of ignorance. Here, transformation means manifestation of that which remained dormant within ignorance but came forth with the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

* Sri Aurobindo says that the Knowledge which exceeds the mental knowledge is Supramental Knowledge or Divine Knowledge. We know, as he says, that Consciousness manifests itself as Knowledge, that is, Supermind.

² *The Life Divine*, p. 517.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 517-518.

removal of the veil of ignorance. In other words, it denotes the dispersal of partial and fragmented knowledge and manifestation of the truth of Supreme Omnipresent Reality.

Ignorance as a concentrated form of consciousness:

Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics is deadly against any sort of materialism. But his stand is different from that of Sankaracharya, for he does not consider matter to be at all unimportant. But that does not mean that Sri Aurobindo had to be guided by a blind veneration for matter as the beginning and the end of all existence. To some matter may appear as the 'Ashwattha-tree of the universe'¹ and soul as 'a foreigner, an alien' and not 'well treated-guest in the reign of this vast Inconscience.'² To Sri Aurobindo consciousness is basic, — primordial.

Ignorance is a concentrated form of consciousness which also is the inherent power of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo states that this power of concentration is fourfold — the essential, the integral, the multiple and the separative. a) The essential power of concentration is the self-oblivious or luminous self-absorption of the spirit which renders 'material inconscience' on one hand and the 'super-conscient silence' on the other. b) Secondly, the integral power of concentration is the supramental concentration of Sachchidānanda in which 'the Divine knows not only his own essence and being but his manifestation also.'³ This supramental concentration is the supreme Truth-Consciousness which is at once both the self-knowledge and world-knowledge, that is, the 'total consciousness of Sachchidānanda'. 'Truth-consciousness' is that which lies beyond the mind and is involved in every object of name and form. It is also called 'ṛta chit' by Sri Aurobindo. It is only that consciousness or concentration which 'is a self-aware Truth of being in which self-knowledge is inseparable from self-existence...'⁴ According to Sri Aurobindo, self-awareness is pure consciousness which is also self-knowledge. But the difference which lies between the two is that self-awareness is static whereas self-knowledge is creative. This truth-consciousness is inseparable from the being of the Divine just as fire and its burning power cannot be separated from each other. 'Truth-consciousness' is self-awareness of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 137.

⁴ *The Life Divine*, p. 145.

being in which the self-existent, that is, the Supramental Consciousness, knows itself and all that is in itself by identity with it. c) The third is the multiple power of concentration which is the cause of manifestation of the world of multiplicity. This manifestation takes place when the Supermind descends in the Overmind. It is in the Overmind where the supramental consciousness begins to divulge in the various movements of consciousness and as a result, the aspects of the Truth become separated. As ignorance lies in the division of consciousness and the Overmind is that level of consciousness where the division starts. Hence, the Overmind is called ‘a first parent of the Ignorance.’¹ d) The fourth kind of concentration is the separative concentration where everything is separated from each other. Here, the concentration of the individual being is exclusive to other beings. ‘This exclusiveness is the very soul of Ignorance.’²

The essence of ignorance lies in this concentration of the Consciousness-Force. So, it can be said, according to Sri Aurobindo, that ignorance is not opposed to Consciousness; on the contrary, it is a specific power of exclusive concentration of consciousness. It is not the absence of knowledge but a self-limiting and partial knowledge. Sri Aurobindo opines that ‘this Ignorance is limitative, but not necessarily falsificative.’³ This is because though ignorance is addressed as a self-limiting knowledge, it cannot be said that it produces any errors or falsehood. Ignorance has brought about limitation to consciousness but not any error. This means that although the mind is the place of ignorance, it certainly is not the place of errors. According to Sri Aurobindo, the Mind,* being a universal principle, is one and Brahman, tends to unify and universalize knowledge on one hand and divide and particularize on the other. Let’s discuss it more vividly. Sri Aurobindo says that Mind has two faculties: one is to universalize knowledge and the other is to particularize it. Sri Aurobindo points out that the faculty of mind which universalizes is one with the Brahman. Here, Sri Aurobindo has called the Mind as the universal principle because he acknowledges the existence of a universal mind beyond the individual mind whose work is to unify everything whereas the individual mind particularizes everything and creates a division between all. This exclusiveness or a tendency to particularize by the mind assumes the form of ignorance. This faculty of mind functions always under the basis of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

² *Ibid.*, p. 504.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

* Here it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo has used the same term in two different senses. One has been used to denote ‘individual’ and the other to denote ‘universal’. Generally we observe in *The Life Divine* that whenever he has used any term to denote something ‘universal’, the first letter of the word has been put in capital. While denoting something ‘individual’ the first letter of the word has been put in small.

division, differentiation, etc. So Sri Aurobindo says that Mind possesses the powers of both ignorance and truth. The Mind, in its essence, is identical with the Divine. Though the individual mind fails to catch hold of the unity of the Brahman, but it looks upon the partial aspects of the Brahman as the one and only truth. Thus, the starting point in the mind is ignorance while its ultimate destination is knowledge.

The Origin of Ignorance:

One might ponder: in which stage of the Spirit's activity does the ignorance originate. We know that Sri Aurobindo has said that the Brahman is in everything and pervades everywhere. But if that is so, then it is in the Brahman itself that the solution to the mystery of the origin of ignorance has to be traced. In other words, no matter where avidya or ignorance lies, it is a mode of manifestation of the Brahman to which it actually belongs. Sri Aurobindo has said that the Brahman is the Knower and Controller of ignorance who uses ignorance as an instrument for the purpose of creation. Sri Aurobindo writes that 'Ignorance is a self-oblivion of Being'¹ that is, it is a self-oblivious state of the Brahman. This self-oblivion takes place at a certain stage during the manifestation of the Brahman. As the Brahman cannot be considered as the direct seat of ignorance, similarly, the individual self or the Jivatman can also not be called the origin of ignorance because both the Jivatman and the Paramatman are one according to Sri Aurobindo. To quote his own words: '... Jivatman or individual self is no other than the Paramatman, no other than the Absolute.'² Just as the Brahman and the Jivatman cannot be called the source of ignorance, similarly, Sri Aurobindo has opined that the Prakriti too is not the source of ignorance. This is so because, according to Sri Aurobindo, Prakriti is the Consciousness-Force of the Divine. Though this topic pertaining to Prakriti has been dealt with elaborately elsewhere, a brief discussion to facilitate a clear understanding of ignorance is given beneath.

There are two aspects of the Consciousness-Force or Shakti of the Divine. One is the Prakriti which is the outer or executive side of the Consciousness-Force; that is, it is Consciousness-Force which executes the Gunas or the play of forces. Here, Prakriti appears to be very mechanical. The other aspect is that of the Shakti which is the inner and living Consciousness-

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 667.

² *Ibid.*, p. 587.

Force of the Divine. The Prakriti too has two aspects: one is the Para-Prakriti, i.e. the Higher Nature. Sat (Being), Chit (Consciousness) and Ananda (Bliss) is the higher nature or Para-Prakriti. In this state of Prakriti, ignorance has no place. Para-Prakriti is also called the Divine Prakriti because in this state of Higher Prakriti, it is always aware of the Divine. Mind, life and body are the lower nature, that is, Apra-Prakriti, which is separated in consciousness from the Divine. This Apra-Prakriti is the Prakriti of the ignorance. Sri Aurobindo states that ignorance can neither be traced in Para-Prakriti, i.e., Sat-Chit-Ananda nor in the Supermind which is the manifesting Power of the Sachchidananda. According to Sri Aurobindo, mind which belongs to the realm of Apra-Prakriti, is the dividing and differentiating power of consciousness, hence, ignorance operates in the place of mind. When a veil which is created by the mind by its own action is inserted between the mind and the sense of unity that supports the mind, it is at that point of time that ignorance emerges.

A few words about the sense of unity would not be irrelevant here. The sense of unity is the dominant trait of the Supramental Truth-Consciousness or the Knowledge-Will* of the Divine that works as the central principle of vision as well as the supreme principle of action. When the Spirit descends into the Overmind, that is, the following lower level of consciousness, the consciousness of unity or identity gets diluted. The Overmind has the trace of a somewhat luminous ignorance because the Spirit, through its exclusive concentration, develops inherent dynamic possibilities of the various aspects of its nature along independent lines.

The Overmind which is the principle of ignorance makes the full play of it possible and inevitable. The Spirit does not halt at the Overmind but descends further down as a result of which its consciousness becomes more obscure. Due to the exclusive one-pointed concentration, the Spirit falls at the mental level where it becomes self-oblivious of its fundamental unity.

Though the unity takes a back seat and moves away from vision, it continues to exist, supports the Mind and executes its actions. This unity is, in reality, a self-luminous, spiritual Force which works through the instrumentation of mental energy which ignorance allows to pass through.

* Sri Aurobindo, while describing the Supermind, has used the term 'Knowledge-Will'. In the Supramental state, there is no division between 'Knowledge' which is the realization of the Being and 'Will'—which is a conscious energy of the Being in its conscious action viz., it is the Energy which creates the world as well as the consciousness which applies itself to a work and its subsequent outcome. In other words, 'Knowledge-Will' is that where there is no difference between the Brahman who manifests and its manifestation, that is, the world.

How can separative knowledge maintain itself in absolute consciousness?

Sri Aurobindo describes that ignorance is associated with lower Māyā.* In other words, it can be said that creation in the lower hemisphere becomes possible through ignorance. Now a problem arises here regarding the origin of ignorance. Sri Aurobindo tries to give its solution in his own way. He asserts: ‘How could this manifold ignorance or this narrowly self-limiting and separative knowledge arise and come into action or maintain itself in action in an absolute Being who must be absolute consciousness and therefore cannot be subject to ignorance?’¹

Sri Aurobindo seeks to find the solution of the problem in the nature of consciousness itself. For him, the Absolute is not merely *Chit* or Consciousness but also *Shakti* or force. This is also a distinctive aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s concept of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo calls the exclusive concentration of conscious-force as ‘tapas’. He points out that the Supreme Existence is an infinite, indefinable and illimitable Reality whose nature is Consciousness. He further says that this Consciousness is a Power, a Force which is dynamic in nature. In the process of creation, the Power of Consciousness concentrates on its objects and this concentration is called ‘tapas’. This conscious-force or ‘tapas’ is present in both the Brahman and the mental being. The Brahman is expressed in two forms — one is active and the other is passive; which means the Brahman consists of active and passive consciousness. Its active consciousness participates in the process of creation but its passive consciousness lies behind and serves as a great reservoir of Shakti which is unexpressed part of the Brahman from which active energy flows out. With reference to this context, Sri Aurobindo renders an exquisite analogy of ocean and waves; he writes that the waves are the active movements of the ocean beneath whose surface movement lies a vast energy. The movements on the surface of this ocean do not affect these reserves of energy which remains tranquil. The ocean and its waves are not different things and represent the same energy. Similarly, ‘The passive consciousness of Brahman and its active consciousness are not two different, conflicting and incompatible things; they are the same consciousness, the same energy, at one end in a state of self-reservation, at the other cast into a motion of self-giving and self-deploying, like the stillness of a reservoir and the coursing of the channels which flow from it.’² According to Sri Aurobindo, if our own consciousness is analyzed, we would observe that the

* A detailed discussion on it is given in the chapter on ‘Māyā’.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 586.

² *Ibid.*, p. 594.

same process of dynamism occurs in human beings as well. Human consciousness is also constituted by both active and passive parts. The active consciousness is a fragmented portion of the passive consciousness whereas the passive consciousness — which is a deep reservoir of Power in us — always remains at the back of our actions and works in us to manifest knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo says that there lies no distinction between the passive and active, self and not-self, inner and outer in the realms of the Sachchidānanda which one makes due to the limitations of the mind. Actually, our mind fails to conceive the aforementioned distinctions simultaneously. These apparent distinctions occur only to the human mind. But in the Brahman-Consciousness such distinctions are absent. This is because activity or mobility and passivity or immobility are the two aspects of the Brahman. The immobile aspect forms the basis and support of the mobile aspect just as the calm bottom of the sea acts as a basis and supports the mobile activity on the top. To express it differently, all the aforesaid distinctions — according to Sri Aurobindo — exist within the Sachchidānanda which, despite being aware of the said divisions, never loses its identity in any of the distinctions. Hence, the Sachchidānanda has been called the ‘integral Tapas of an integral consciousness in an indivisible Existence’¹ by Sri Aurobindo who also pointed out that: ‘... if Ignorance is not an element or power proper to the absolute nature of the Brahman or to Its integrality, there can be no original and primal Ignorance.’² So it cannot be said that the dividing activities of ignorance has started from the absolute Brahman or integral Sachchidānanda. Ignorance is only an aspect of our being. But when we become one with this partial aspect, at that moment, ignorance is born. That is why, from the point of view of Sri Aurobindo, it can be said that ignorance does not originate from the absolute Brahman although it is the power of Brahman.

According to Sri Aurobindo, there is no original division in the multiplicity of the souls, therefore, there is no ignorance. Ignorance is not inherent in the soul. If it were, none could ever aspire to rise above ignorance into the presence of knowledge. In each soul the immanent Spirit is aware of its oneness with the many. Even ‘our superficial consciousness, identified with body and with divided life and dividing mind, is ignorant; but that also can be illumined and made aware. Multiplicity, then, is not the necessary cause of the ignorance.’³ According to Sri Aurobindo, the superficial consciousness of man is engulfed in ignorance. This consciousness

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

² *Ibid.*, p. 598.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 600.

identifies itself with the dividing life, mind and the physical body. But to awaken it to a higher consciousness and make it aware and illuminating is not an impossible task.

Is this self-absorbed concentration the action of the whole being or partial being?

But here a question persists: what is the origin of ignorance? Sri Aurobindo says: ‘The origin of the Ignorance must then be sought for in some self-absorbed concentration of Tapas, of Conscious-Force in action on a separate movement of the Force...’¹ Now, one might ask here that what is the nature of this self-absorption, the self-forgetful concentration? Is this self-absorbed concentration the action of the whole being or of the partial being? It cannot be the action of the whole being or the whole force of being because if it were so, then it would have all-knowledge and the question of ignorance would not arise. It must, therefore, be said that ignorance can only be regarded as a subordinate phenomenon by some limitation of consciousness absorbed in a partial action of the being. Sri Aurobindo says, ‘Ignorance is Nature’s purposeful oblivion of the Self and the All, leaving them aside, putting them behind herself in order to do solely what she has to do in some outer play of existence.’² This means ignorance is nothing but the purposeful self-oblivion and self-limitation of consciousness. But these self-oblivion and self-limitation of the Infinite consciousness are not weaknesses or deficiencies but are its great powers. It is a specific mode of operation of Infinite consciousness for the fulfillment of a specific purpose. It cannot be said that the secret purpose of ignorance, that is, the controlling movement of consciousness, lies in the fulfillment of any requirement or removal of any deficiency of the Infinite consciousness; rather it is the delight of self-expression of the Infinite which manifests the infinite possibilities inherent within it in infinitely diverse ways.

We can therefore conclude that the purpose of ignorance — which emerges at the mental plane and separates the dividing mind from its spiritual and supramental source — is to manifest the delight of the Spirit in seemingly opposites.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

² *Ibid.*, p. 603.

Who experiences this Ignorance?

Here a very relevant question may arise in this context: who experiences this ignorance? Sri Aurobindo says that it is only the mental consciousness of man which experiences this ignorance. He calls this mental consciousness Chitta. The Chitta — which has no place in the Absolute, the Ultimate Reality — is the creation of Māyā. Chitta is one of the main functions of man's external consciousness. It is a combination of mental, vital and physical consciousnesses which gives rise within the man the movements of thought, emotion, sensation, impulse, etc. When the mental consciousness unites with the individual consciousness, there arises a wall of separation. As a result of it, Chitta fails to realize not only its own total self but also the universal consciousness as well as that of others.

Let's explain it more vividly. Sri Aurobindo says that the ego sense, which is a small part of the individual consciousness, is very much responsible for ignorance. The outcome of the activities of our perceptions, memory, intelligence and coordination which constitutes our faculty of knowledge, are gathered around this ego-sense which goes on responding in every moment. There is the same ego in the mind which is called the 'ego-idea' around which everything is organized. But the ego-sense does not organize. There is the separative ego which is constituted by both the ego-sense and ego-idea. This separative ego makes one feel separate from all others and creates a wall between the surface self and inner self. The surface self veils the inner self and as a result of it, human knowledge becomes confined only to this surface level.

According to Sri Aurobindo, our inner being which consists of subtler, larger states of physicality, vitality and mentality, lies behind our surface being. The superconscious is the largest range of our inner being whereas the subconscious and the inconscient are the lowest. Between these two ranges of our inner being, there lies a large subliminal being which can directly read the thoughts and feelings of other persons by its own vision. Though the elements possessed by the subliminal are the same as possessed by our surface being, the subliminal renders a person more clear consciousness and direct vision than the outer surface mind knowledge. Sri Aurobindo says: 'This inner sense can create or present images, scenes, sounds that are symbolic rather than actual or that represent possibilities in formation, suggestions,

thoughts, ideas, intentions of other beings, image forms also of powers or potentialities in universal Nature.’¹

Though the subliminal is more developed than our wakeful being, but it is not capable to provide us with the complete and pure knowledge. Sri Aurobindo opines: ‘It is true that this knowledge proper to the subliminal being is not complete.’² Sri Aurobindo says that in the subliminal inner consciousness, it is possible to attain that knowledge which exists behind the superficial consciousness. But even that knowledge is not complete because it is a mixture of knowledge and ignorance; hence, it gives rise to true and false perceptions. The subliminal deals with direct contact and not with knowledge by identity. Direct knowledge provides us with the separative knowledge. This separative knowledge which arises from direct contact. But there is an intimate connection even in separation the hint of which we do not get in our surface nature.

But the subtle physical, vital and mental sheaths — which are the boundaries of individuality and separate the subliminal from the cosmos — can be destroyed by the subliminal entering into the cosmic consciousness.* Sri Aurobindo explains: ‘The subliminal is able to widen indefinitely this circumconscient envelope and more and more enlarge its self-projection into the cosmic existence around it. A point comes where it can break through the separation altogether, unite, identify itself with cosmic being, feel itself universal, one with all existence. In this freedom of entry into cosmic self and cosmic nature there is a great liberation of the individual being; it puts on a cosmic consciousness, becomes the universal individual.’³ The subliminal is separated from the cosmic consciousness by the mental, vital and subtle physical sheaths. The subliminal is surrounded by a formation of consciousness beyond these sheaths which has created the circumconscient. Also defined as the ‘environmental consciousness’ by Sri Aurobindo, the circumconscient is the realm where there is mobility of impressions and memories; it is a field of vibration and passage of forces. Through this circumconscient, the subliminal maintains its contact with the world. This subliminal can expand the circumconscient into the cosmic

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 555.

² *Ibid.*, p. 559.

* According to Sri Aurobindo, there is no difference between the universal consciousness and the cosmic consciousness. He says that the cosmic consciousness is that which contains all the beings and forces of the universe. The cosmic consciousness has also been termed as the cosmic spirit by Sri Aurobindo; it upholds not only the universal matter, universal life, universal mind and the Overmind, but also the cosmic forces which are inclusive of the universal mind forces, universal life forces, universal energies of matter as well as the universal forces of the Overmind. In the cosmic consciousness, the boundaries of individual ego, individual mind and body vanishes and the awareness of a cosmic vastness sets in although progressively.

³ *The Life Divine.*, p. 561.

existence around it. In the course of such an expansion, there comes a moment when the walls of separation fall apart and the subliminal unites with the cosmic being and transforms into the cosmic consciousness. Individual consciousness, too, gets transformed into the cosmic consciousness. Thus, the liberation of the individual being takes place when it enters into the universal consciousness.

From the above discussion it is very clear to us that the superconscient* is the highest end and the subconscient⁺ is the lowest end of the subliminal. There are three elements which constitute our whole being. First, the submental upto the subconscient which is below our mind, second, the subliminal which is behind our waking consciousness and the third is the superconscient which is above the mind and beyond which there is the highest and deepest reality. Though, this highest Reality cannot be described or defined but it is not beyond our experience. The superconscient is also called the All-Existence because it is pure self-awareness and inherent in all existences. As this level of consciousness is not veiled by ignorance, so, no separation takes place here and as a result, it identifies itself with all the physical, vital and mental beings. Sri Aurobindo states: ‘... it is intrinsically aware of all that is in its being: this is not by an act of knowledge formulated in a self-regard, a self-observation, but by the same inherent awareness; it is intrinsically all-conscious of all that is by the very fact that all is itself. Thus conscious of its timeless self-existence, the Spirit, the Being is aware in the same way — intrinsically, absolutely, totally, without any need of a look or act of knowledge, because it is all, — of Time-Existence and of all that is in Time. This is the essential awareness by identity; if applied to cosmic existence, it would mean an essential self-evident automatic consciousness of universe by the Spirit because it is everything and everything is its being.’¹

Seven types of Ignorance:

Sri Aurobindo classifies ignorance into seven types: (i) Original Ignorance (ii) Cosmic Ignorance (iii) Egoistic Ignorance (iv) Temporal Ignorance (v) Psychological Ignorance (vi)

* The superconscient is region above man’s present level of awareness and consciousness from which the higher consciousness descends into the body.

⁺ The subconscient is the submerged or waking physical consciousness of man’s being which lies beneath the level of mind and conscious life in which there is no conscious and coherent thought, will, feeling, sensation, notion or reaction. It is an obscure and half-conscious realm into which light and awareness can come with difficulty.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 565.

Constitutional Ignorance and (vii) Practical Ignorance. We are discussing here each type of Ignorance vividly.

According to Sri Aurobindo, Original Ignorance is the very first type and most fundamental form of ignorance. In this ignorance, we forget the true nature of the absolute and as a result we concentrate on either being or becoming* as a mere reality. Sri Aurobindo says, ‘We are ignorant of the absolute which is the source of all being and becoming; we take partial facts of being, temporal relations of the becoming for the whole truth of existence, — that is the first, the original ignorance.’¹ The *Taittiriya Upanishad* declares that the Absolute is the only real existent about which we have no knowledge. This is because, the senses can never provide any knowledge of the Truth which is beyond one’s senses. It is neither perceived by the mind nor by senses. Hence a question arises here: how can one know the Absolute? It can be said that, first we need to have a strong belief on the Absolute. Belief comes either from the scripture or from any knowledgeable or trustworthy person. Scripture is called *veda vākya* or *Āptavākya*. Though our belief makes our path wider to know the Absolute, but it is not adequate to give us such knowledge. To attain such a knowledge, we need a direct experience of it.

The Absolute is the source of everything. All the being and becoming, mutable and immutable things have come from the Absolute. So, it can easily be considered that since everything originates from the Absolute, so, they must possess some qualities of the Absolute. So, it can be said that the Absolute is the source of all qualities which can be both good or evil.

The Absolute remains hidden from us. As long as we do not know the Absolute, all knowledge appears to us as false. This ignorance of the Absolute is called the Real Ignorance. Vedāntins say that that *māyā* with its power of concealment or *āvaraṇa śakti* hides the Absolute from us.

The Absolute is known by *Parāvidyā*. *Parāvidyā* is the knowledge beyond this world and *Aparāvidyā* is the knowledge of this world. Since the Absolute is beyond the world, it cannot be known by *Aparāvidyā*.

* The Omnipresent Reality, the Supreme Purusa is the Being and the becoming is the self-extension and self-expression of that Being. It is the Being itself who becomes the universe. The Being assumes various forms and names to manifest itself and these various names and forms are its becoming. So, Being is the unmanifested form of the Supreme Reality whereas the becoming is its manifested form. It is the Being from where the becoming proceeds.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 680.

When the process of knowing the Absolute goes on, one cannot claim that the mind becomes devoid of any sensory knowledge. Pātanjali advocates *chittavrittinirodha* i.e., the cessation of all mental activities to enable the consciousness to know itself completely. But the process of emptying the mind is not easy as it is claimed. This is because the ego is incessantly active and ever present and continuously generates unending thoughts and feelings pertaining to the future as well as a flood of old memories of the bygone time. It is difficult to make and keep the mind devoid of any thoughts. The mind — which is driven by the ego — continues to be ever-active in its dealings with past or future events. But the mind keeps itself disconnected from the present events. As the result of this disconnection, many unforeseen or unexpected events take place. Due to this said connection, the person not only loses his effective touch with reality, but his behaviour too becomes problematic and inappropriate.

The root cause of the ego is our ignorance of the true self. As long as this ignorance remains, the ego persists. Sri Aurobindo says, ‘Ego implies the identification of our existence with outer self, the ignorance of our true self above and our psychic being within us.’¹ He further says, ‘The “I” or the little ego is constituted by Nature and is at once a mental, vital and physical formation meant to aid in centralising and individualising the outer consciousness and action.’²

Ego causes individualization. On the other side, if there would not have been ego, the evolution of matter would not have been possible, it would remain inconscient forever. Individuation and the consequent ego-building are necessary to manifest the consciousness which is hidden in matter through involution. So, ego also has an important role to play in man. But this does not imply that the ego does not create a hindrance on the path of spiritual development. This is because, it is only the ego which causes all the various types of ignorance.

Egos are of three types: physical, vital and mental. The egos are either *sattwic* or *rajasic* or *tamasic* in character. Each type of ego has three sub-types which are as follows:

1) Outer physical	2) Inner physical	3) Inmost Physical
Outer vital	Inner vital	Inmost vital
Outer mental	Inner mental	Inmost mental

¹ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 111.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Cosmic Ignorance:

The second is the cosmic ignorance due to which the unreal is taken as the real. We forget that the universe is derived from the Absolute and believe that this universe exists by itself. The real nature of the cosmos remains hidden to us due to this ignorance. Vedāntins says, *Māyā* with its *vikshepa śhakti* or the power of projecting false as the true, conceals the real nature of the cosmos. We fail to realize the spaceless, timeless, immobile and immutable self which works behind the universal becomings. Sri Aurobindo says, ‘We are ignorant of the spaceless, timeless, immobile and immutable Self; we take the constant mobility and mutation of the cosmic becoming in Time and Space for the whole truth of existence...’¹

In the cosmic ignorance, the individual consciousness becomes separated from the all-pervading Supreme Consciousness. It is because the ego tries to prevent this perversion of consciousness. The difference between the cosmic ignorance and the ignorance of an individual is that the formation and movement are impartial in the former whereas these are partial and limited in the latter. The mind plays a pivotal role in the creation of a self-will in the individual. This is because, whatever is perceived by mind, is real for the individual. Sri Aurobindo points out that ‘self-will means an egoism in the mind which attaches itself to its preferences, its habits, its past or present formations of thought and view and will because it regards them as itself or its own, weaves around them the delicate threads of “I-ness” and “my-ness” and lives in them like a spider in its web.’² The individual being is much more attached to his own interests than his attachment to the Truth. This happens because, as per Sri Aurobindo’s explanation, ‘... the early preparatory business of man in the evolutionary steps of Nature is to affirm, to make distinct and rich, to possess firmly, powerfully and completely his own individuality.’³ After crossing numerous stages in the evolution of human consciousness, the knowledge of the ultimate Truth is revealed.

The Cosmic Consciousness alone can know the cosmic knowledge which consists of the things in their essence and their relationships with the Divine and with everything else in the world. Though the ego is indispensable for the development of spirituality, at the same time, it becomes a hindrance in the path of spiritual progress. That is why Sri Aurobindo has said in his

¹ *The Life Divine*, pp. 680-81.

² *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 330.

³ *The Life Divine*, p. 719.

Thoughts and Aphorisms: 'Ego was the helper; Ego is the bar.'¹ Hence we observe a striking paradox which Sri Aurobindo has stated in the following words: man 'has to affirm himself in the Ignorance before he can perfect himself in the knowledge.'²

Sri Aurobindo has made a distinction between cosmic truth and Divine Truth. Cosmic truth which is inferior to the Divine Truth, is related only to this world, though it is very difficult to comprehend its depth and vastness for the ordinary human mind. On the other hand, Divine Truth is not only independent of this universe but is also beyond it.

Egoistic Ignorance:

In this ignorance we forget our true self and universal nature and take our limited corporeality, vitality and mentality as a true self. Due to this ignorance, we identify ourselves with this true self. Sri Aurobindo points out that, 'We are ignorant of our universal self, the cosmic existence, the cosmic consciousness, our infinite unity with all being and becoming; we take our limited egoistic mentality, vitality, corporeality for our true self and regard everything other than that as not-self...'³

The ego is the outcome of bodily, vital and mental identification of the self. Though these identifications are not real, the individual remains a captive of a self and thus he is compelled to exist as a separative individual and disallowed to live as a universal individual.

At the first stage ego works as a unifying centre, around which the different states of being are organized. But at the stage of the superhuman birth, the psychic being comes to the forefront and the ego is replaced by the psychic being. According to Sri Aurobindo, ego, at that time 'collapses, losing its wall of separation, into the cosmic immensity; or it falls into nothingness, unable to breathe in the heights of the spiritual ether.'⁴

Cosmic ignorance is also dissolved by this awakening of our real being. As the ego is the cause of the ignorance of our real self and cosmos, so, when the ego is dissolved and our real individuality emerges, the cosmic ignorance is dispelled. Then, the truth of the cosmos is revealed and thus we realize the Divine in the universe.

¹ *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, p. 199.

² *The Life Divine*, p. 719.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 769.

Temporal Ignorance:

Temporal Ignorance is related to time. Actually ignorance is generated through the limited mind. In this temporal ignorance too, our knowledge is confined by the thought that this short period of our terrestrial life is all our existence, but in reality, our existence is eternal. Space and time cannot limit our real nature. So, due to this temporal ignorance, we fail to realize our eternal nature and as a result of it, our life becomes full of miseries.

Sri Aurobindo points out that, 'We are ignorant of our eternal becoming in Time; we take this little life in a small span of Time, in a petty field of Space, for our beginning, our middle and our end...'¹

As long as this temporal ignorance persists, the mind strives to know what lies beyond death. The fear of death is due to this ignorance. But when the cloud of this ignorance will disperse, the mystery of death will be revealed. Then we will realize that we are not confined to the boundaries of birth and death and we will exist in eternity.

Psychological Ignorance:

Psychological Ignorance deals with the superficial layer of human mind. Sri Aurobindo says, 'Our psychological ignorance consists in a limitation of our self-knowledge to that little wave or superficial stream of our being which is the conscient waking self.'² Man erroneously assumes that the superficial mental layer comprises his psychological existence. But in reality, there are several layers in the hierarchy of mind, namely, the superconscient, the surface-conscient and the subconscious. Besides these two layers, there are also two more layers which are known as the intra-conscient and the circum-conscient. These mental layers remain hidden from man due to psychological ignorance which limits self-knowledge only to the surface consciousness. Some guidelines of Sri Aurobindo are quoted here: 'Even within this brief temporal becoming we are ignorant of our large and complex being, of that in us which is superconscient, subconscious, intraconscient, circumconscient to our surface becoming; we take that surface becoming with its small selection of overtly mentalised experiences for our whole existence...'³

Our whole being which remains secret to all, is the source of all the activities of the superficial mind. In this context, a question arises that if consciousness is also hidden in matter,

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

² *Ibid.*, p. 761.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

then what is the difference between matter and man? Sri Aurobindo says in this context that there occurs a partial manifestation of consciousness in man whereas it is subliminal in nature.

The various layers of human consciousness have been vividly defined and described by Sri Aurobindo. As already mentioned before, the layers of consciousness consists of the intra-conscient, the circum-conscient and the super-conscient. The intra-conscient is the internal sense-mind, inner-vital or the ever active inner intelligence which may not arrive at the surface. The circum-conscient is a formation around the human physical awareness which bears and envelops the awakened human consciousness. This enveloping consciousness, which is called the extension of the subliminal, contacts the universal forces which affect man's outward experiences without his knowledge. Sri Aurobindo says, '... the subliminal extends itself into an enveloping consciousness through which it receives the shock of the currents and wave-circuits pouring upon us from the universal Mind, universal Life, universal subtler Matter-forces. These, unperceived by us on the surface, are perceived and admitted by our subliminal self and turned into formations which can powerfully affect our existence without our knowledge.'¹

In the present state, we are not aware of the consciousness which is below the conscious level of mind and life. This consciousness, which is below our surface awareness, is called the level of subconscious where all the happenings are registered. We get all the messages and signals during our sleep or dreams from this level. Little does man have any knowledge about this subconscious and hence it is beyond his control.

So far as we have observed that there are various planes in the hierarchy of consciousness. As man ascends to the higher levels of consciousness, certain influences from the higher stages of mind come to the surface mind of man without his knowledge. When man's consciousness rises to these higher layers of the mind and establishes a direct contact with them, he receives the light and forces of the Spirit which casts an indirect influence on the lower and ignorant parts of his body and helps the said parts to transform or evolve themselves.

If man opens himself to the knowledge and influences of these higher layers of consciousness, the descent of the spiritual light into the ignorant parts of the being takes place and as a result, a great deal of man's constitutional and psychological ignorance is eradicated by the enlightening light of the planes of higher consciousness.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

Constitutional ignorance:

Sri Aurobindo has said, ‘We are ignorant of the true constitution of our becoming; we take the mind or life or body or any two of these or all three for our true principle or the whole account of what we are, losing sight of that which constitutes them and determines by its occult presence and is meant to determine sovereignly by its emergence their operations...’¹ Constitutional ignorance consists of awareness of man’s total self. This ignorance disables man to comprehend his entire integral being and as a result, man erroneously believes that body, life and mind or any two of them constitute his wholeness.

He further adds that, ‘The plane we inhabit is the plane of Matter; the present predominant principle in our nature is the mental intelligence with the sense-mind, which depends upon Matter, as its support and pedestal. As a consequence, the preoccupation of the mental intelligence and its powers with the material existence as it is shown to it through the senses, and with life as it has been formulated in a compromise between life and matter, is a special stamp of the constitutional ignorance.’² The predominant principle of the plane where man inhabits, governs entirely his approach and attitude towards life. When man lives on the physical plane, he ignores the rest of his being as mental self, spiritual self etc. Thus he becomes entirely physical in nature, interests, desires, etc. Similarly, man, who lives in the mental plane, also ignores the other planes which constitute his whole being. Hence he is confined to that principle which predominate his life and makes him ignorant about his true constitution. This self-confinement to the plane man lives in is constitutional ignorance.

Mental development is indispensable to overcome this ignorance and it leads man to the higher and wider existence. Sri Aurobindo points out that ‘our true completeness comes not by describing wider circles on the plane where we began, but by transcendence.’³

Practical Ignorance:

The result of all these six ignorances leads to the practical ignorance which causes all of man’s error, evil, falsehood and pain in this world. Sri Aurobindo has elaborately explained it in the following words in his *magnum opus*, *The Life Divine*:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 756-757.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 758.

‘As a result of all these ignorances, we miss the true knowledge, government and enjoyment of our life in the world; we are ignorant in our thought, will, sensations, actions, return wrong or imperfect responses at every point to the questionings of the world, wander in a maze of errors and desires, strivings and failures, pain and pleasure, sin and stumbling, follow a crooked road, grow blindly for a changing goal, — that is the seventh, the practical ignorance.’¹

Since we are subject to the ignorance, all the responses, reactions and dealings of man with regard to the world go in a wrong way and consequently our life becomes miserable. This practical ignorance disappears only when the aforementioned six ignorances can be removed one by one. We have seen before that only knowledge can eradicate ignorance. So, man has to ascend his consciousness from the sevenfold ignorance to the sevenfold knowledge. The emergence of this sevenfold knowledge becomes possible only when we can deepen, heighten and widen our consciousness into the Divine life of the Truth-conscious Spirit.

Sri Aurobindo concludes that the inner nature of man is not ignorant. He has the power and potency of complete knowledge. Knowledge is inherent in him. So, ignorance does not create any dualism. Let’s cite an instance to express Sri Aurobindo’s views even more clearly. There is a bulb in a room which is shining brightly. The brightness of the bulb eradicates darkness from the room. If the bulb is switched off, then there would be darkness in the room. But does it mean that the bulb does not exist in the room? Of course it does but its existence has been temporarily negated by darkness. But, if we keep the bulb switched on in the room but wrap it with an opaque object, then the room would again be immersed in darkness despite the bulb being shining. So, the light in the room has not been negated but only veiled. Similarly, ignorance does not contradict knowledge. Integral Consciousness includes both Knowledge and Ignorance. Sri Aurobindo says that Ignorance is a self-limiting power of knowledge which limits itself by the exclusive concentration on the work in hand. But as a result of this concentration, one side of the Being becomes prominent while the other remains engulfed in darkness. But in spite of remaining behind there is no deficiency of the complete existence and working of the whole conscious being. He also says that it is the power or force of the conscious being by which it limits itself for its any particular or purposeful working. So, this self-limiting power is not incompatible with the absolute conscious force of that Being, rather, it is one of the powers that exist among the manifold energies of the infinite.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 681.

Chapter Four

Māyā

Some arguments from *The Life Divine* against Māyāvāda:

Māyā originates from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘mā’ which means to measure, to build, to form and the power to produce the form. According to the Vedās, Māyā is the power of the infinite consciousness of the Absolute. Through this power, the Absolute forms the diversified universe of name and form (nāmā-rūpa). In the *R̥g Veda*, it is found that Māyā denotes the super-natural powers of the Vedic gods namely Indra, Varuna and Mitra. There are many hymns in the *R̥g Veda* (iii 38.7; ix 83.3; i, 159.4 etc.) where Māyā is described as a power which sustains the world.

Here we would discuss — in the light of Sankaracharya and Sri Aurobindo — what is the nature of Māyā, where lies its source and whether there is any relation between the Brahman and Māyā. We shall first discuss Sankaracharya’s views on Māyā and how Sri Aurobindo has treated the former’s views.

Māyā as viewed by Sankaracharya:

In the philosophy of Sankaracharya, terms like ‘Māyā’, ‘Avidya’, ‘Adhyāsa’, ‘Ajñāna’ etc. are used as synonyms. In his treatise of the *Brahmasutras*, Sankaracharya has used Māyā and Avidya as synonymous to one another although these very terms have been used differently by some of the Advaita-Vedantins. According to Sankaracharya, the Brahman is the sole Reality while the world is unreal. To illustrate the unreality of the world, he has recognized a power of the Brahman which veils the Brahman and makes the world appear to be an illusion. This power is called Māyā which is illusory. The Brahman is of two types: Saguna Brahman or Ishwara and Nirguna Brahman. The Brahman is said to be ‘nirguna’ when it is indeterminable, indeterminate, nameless, formless, changeless and knows itself only whereas the ‘saguna’ Brahman is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. Māyā is the power of this ‘saguna’ Brahman or Ishwara and not of the ‘nirguna’ Brahman. Ishwara has created this world with the help of the

power of Māyā. So, this world is also an illusion. Although Sankaracharya has said that the world has no transcendental reality like the Brahman, he has recognized that the world has empirical reality because, to the ignorant individual, the world appears to be real.

One cannot fail to notice some clear distinctions between the philosophy of Māyā expounded by Sankaracharya and the theory of evolution (*parināmvāda*) propagated by the Samkhya school of thought.¹ In the Samkhya philosophy, 'Prakriti' has been called as inert and unconscious just as 'Māyā' has been termed as unconscious by Sankaracharya. But, it is to be noted that while Prakriti is looked upon as independent and real (Sat) in the Samkhya philosophy, Māyā or Avidya is considered to be an inseparable power of the Brahman. However, according to Sankaracharya, Māyā is neither 'Sat' nor 'Asat' ; it is, in fact, indescribable and indefinable. It is due to Māyā that the world is created. It is also because of Māyā that the world is super-imposed on the Brahman; that is, the world appears to be illusory as a result of Māyā. If something appears to be what it is not, then it is called superimposition or 'Adhyasa'. Therefore Māyā is a power of Brahman which creates illusion. Māyā has two powers : 1) Āvaraṇa and 2) Vikṣepa. Through its power of Āvaraṇa, Māyā envelops the real nature of the Brahman whereas through its power of Vikṣepa, it projects the illusory world instead of Brahman. According to Sankaracharya, the world has no reality; it is a mere appearance or 'Vivarta' of the Brahman. If anything without losing its actual or real identity appears to be something different, it is called Vivarta. By the superimposition of Māyā, the Nirguna Brahman appears to be Ishwara or Saguna Brahman who creates, sustains and destroys this world. Through the knowledge of Brahman, Sankaracharya opines, Māyā or Avidya can be eradicated, that is, the world appears to be an illusion when the knowledge of Brahman is dawned.

Māyā as viewed by Sri Aurobindo:

Sri Aurobindo, like Sankaracharya, has recognized the Brahman as the one and only Reality and has called Māyā the Chit-Shakti or conscious-power of the Brahman through which the process of creation is regulated. But, unlike Sankaracharya, Sri Aurobindo has not called Māyā an illusory power. According to him, Māyā is the 'Atma-Shakti of the Atman' (the power of the

¹ *Satkaryavāda* (the doctrine that effect is contained in the cause) has two aspects: *Parināmvāda* and *Vivartavāda*. While Sankaracharya was a follower of *Vivartavāda*, the philosophers of the Samkhya school followed *Parināmvāda*.

Self) as this very power is the source of all movements and activities in this world. So, in everything this Chit-Shakti or Atma-Shakti is present. When the Brahman is in a state of activity, then this power becomes universal. And when the Brahman is in a state of passivity, the same power becomes transcendental.

It is clear from the discussion made above that the major point of difference in the views of Sankaracharya and Sri Aurobindo lies in the fact that Sri Aurobindo has called Māyā the Conscious-power or Chit-Shakti of the Brahman with whose help this world has been created. So, this world is not unreal, but real. But Sankaracharya has called Māyā an illusory power which has helped to create this world, so, this world is not real. Again, he says that the Brahman is transcendental; as there is no real relation between the Brahman and Māyā, so Māyā and the world created by it both becomes unreal to the knower of Brahman. But Sri Aurobindo considers the Brahman and its power to be transcendental and universal. So, just as the knower of Brahman realize the Brahman to be transcendental, its universally pervading form, i.e. this world too is the manifestation of the same Brahman. To put it differently — according to Sri Aurobindo — the Brahman has become this world and in every sphere of the world the Brahman is manifest.

Some Objections against the Sankarite concept of Māyā:

Sri Aurobindo has pointed out certain drawbacks in Sankaracharya's concept of Māyā. If the Brahman is regarded as the sole Reality and the world appears as illusion, then one encounters several difficulties as has been pointed out by Sri Aurobindo. Firstly, Sri Aurobindo puts forward the query whether there is any relation between the Brahman and Māyā. The followers of Sankaracharya opines that the 'saguna' Brahman has created the world with the help of its power of Māyā, so Māyā is looked upon as the cause of this world. But Sri Aurobindo says that if Māyā has no place in the 'nirguna' Brahman, how did then this illusory power or Māyā come into being? This query has not been answered by Sankaracharya. Just by considering Māyā to be only an illusory power similar to the magical power of a magician, all possible queries related to it cannot be solved or explained.

Secondly, the aforementioned view of Sankaracharya is self-contradictory. This is so because, according to Sankaracharya, the Brahman is the only Reality and if that is so then it can be said that apart from the Brahman, everything else is unreal. This means that Māyā is also unreal and

that everything created by Māyā is unreal as well. Hence, it is to be acknowledged that neither the world nor its inhabitants have any existence. If everything — that is — the individual and the world are unreal, then the question of an individual's bondage and its subsequent liberation does not arise. Sri Aurobindo further says that if it is also said that the world is an illusion, but the individual is a figment of the Brahman which enters into this world of illusion so such a state becomes a bondage for the individual and when the individual withdraws itself from this world of illusions, then it attains liberation or salvation—even then the problem remains unsolved. This is because in such cases two aspects of the Brahman-Consciousness have to be accepted. The first aspect is the true-consciousness of the Brahman which is always free from the clutches of illusion and the second aspect is consciousness of falsehood which is always subject to illusions. These two aforementioned aspects of the Brahman are self-contradictory in nature. Also it can be argued that neither the Brahman nor any of its figments can be enslaved so the question of their liberation does not arise.

Thirdly, if Brahman is the sole reality and at the same time it is the locus of Māyā, then could Brahman be addressed as a percipient of Māyā? In other words, who knows Māyā? The individual cannot be called the knower of the Māyā because the individual itself has been created by Māyā. Individual is, according to Sankaracharya, 'phenomenal and unreal, a creation of Maya.'¹ Hence it is to be accepted that Brahman is the percipient of Māyā. But the consciousness of Brahman is a truth-consciousness where there is no place for unrealities or illusions. The true consciousness of Brahman is the consciousness of self; this consciousness is always aware of its own self-existence. If the Brahman views the world through its true-consciousness, then the world too should be considered as real. This is because unreal consciousness cannot arise or emerge from true-consciousness. Although Sri Aurobindo says that even if the world is hailed as real, it would never be as real as the Brahman. He further adds that the world is nothing but a form of the Brahman which we perceive through Avidya or ignorance. In other words, the world is one of the infinite possibilities of the Brahman.

Fourthly, Sri Aurobindo writes that if it is said that the Brahman is the percipient of Māyā, then Māyā is real in some sense. Māyā 'may be his power of differentiating perception...'² In such a case two statuses of the Brahman-Consciousness have to be accepted. On one hand there

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 459.

² *Ibid.*

would be a consciousness of Reality and on the other hand, there would be a consciousness of Unreality. ‘... since Brahman is also self-aware for ever, there must be a double status of Brahman-Consciousness, one conscious of the sole Reality, the other conscious of the unrealities to which by its creative perception of them it gives some kind of apparent existence.’¹ Here the Brahman acts as the percipient while the unreal world is the percept. And this unreal world has been created by Māyā. But how does the true-consciousness of the Brahman behold the unreal world through an illusion-creating force (i.e. Māyā) — says Sri Aurobindo — has been left unanswered.

So, Sri Aurobindo says that if there is no dual status in the Brahman consciousness, then there has to be a single conscious power in Brahman and this power is Māyā. But if Māyā is the conscious power of the Brahman, then why would this conscious-power create such an unreal world? Is this power not competent enough to create a real world? Sri Aurobindo writes in this context that if Māyā is looked upon as the conscious power of the Brahman, then either Māyā would be the power due to the subjective action of Brahman consciousness or Māyā is a conscious power of cosmic imagination of the Brahman. According to the first alternative, if Māyā is looked upon as the conscious power of subjective action of the Brahman-Consciousness — the power which has created this world out of nothing, i.e., silence, immobility, etc, then the world has to be accepted as real on one hand because it is created by the conscious power of Brahman. Besides, Sri Aurobindo says that Māyā can also not be called the power of subjective action of the Brahman because the human tends to differentiate between objective and subjective worlds. The subjective world is in our mental plane where one could imagine whatever one craves; such imaginations may or may not be translated into reality. The objective world is the world of realities where one beholds actual occurrences of events and incidents. Only the human mind is capable of viewing things from objective and subjective perspectives. But in the Brahman-Consciousness no distinction between subjective and objective worlds exists. We do have interior and exterior worlds but such worlds do not exist in the Brahman because it is a sole and all-pervading Reality where there is neither any subjective world nor any objective world. Sri Aurobindo writes that the human mind imposes its imperfections on the Brahman. Since objective and subjective differences exist in human minds, man tends to think that the same differences exist in the Brahman as well. But in reality, the Brahman is beyond all differences.

¹ *Ibid.*

Besides, Sri Aurobindo has further stated that it is also logically unacceptable if it is said that the world is unreal as it is not created out of the being of the Brahman, i.e. since the Brahman (nirguna) is not the material cause of the creation of this world, this world too is looked upon as unreal. But Sri Aurobindo says that the human mind is at the root of all creations. First a thought occurs to the mind and when this thought is translated into reality in the exterior world, only then is creation possible. For every creation, the very first requisite is inner consciousness which illustrates the form of creation and afterwards by utilizing the various elements of the outer world, gives it a real form. For finite beings like humans, there lies a distinct difference between the outer being (which is connected with the outer consciousness) and inner being (which is connected with the inner consciousness). But no such differences can be imposed on the Brahman as Brahman is Sat-Chit-Ananda and its being can never be separated from its consciousness. What exists in the consciousness of the Brahman exists in its being as well. So, it is to be accepted that the world which has been created by this consciousness of Brahman is actually a creation of its own being. Though there exists a difference between man's consciousness and his outer being, such difference is absent in the consciousness and being of the Brahman.

The second alternative states that Māyā is the Brahman's inherent conscious power of cosmic imagination. If it is assumed that this world created by Māyā is unreal as it is a product of imagination, then a question may arise: when Brahman is the ultimate Reality, what place does imagination have in its sole consciousness? After all, imagination lies in the ignorant and limited mind of human beings. Sri Aurobindo opines that 'Imagination is a necessity for a partial being with an ignorant consciousness; for it has to supplement its ignorance by imaginations and conjectures: there can be no place for such a movement in the sole consciousness of a sole Reality which has no reason to construct unrealities, for it is the ever pure and self-complete.'¹ The incapacities of human mind cannot be imposed on the Brahman. The creative activities of the Brahman lies confined within imagination — there is no logical basis of such a claim. The Brahman is pure and self-complete and self-reliant, so what is its necessity to imagine an unreal world? Hence the claim that Māyā is the Brahman's conscious power of cosmic imagination is unacceptable.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

Fifthly, Sri Aurobindo points out that although Sankaracharya has differentiated between empirical reality and transcendental reality, only the Brahman is transcendently real whereas the world is empirically real because it is created by the power of Māyā. The world is real in the sense that it has empirical reality. But it lacks the transcendental reality which the Brahman possesses. In this sense the world is looked upon as an unreal reality. When one attains the knowledge of the Brahman, the world ceases to be unreal. The individual is also Brahman but it fails to realize its true nature as it is enveloped by Avidya (ignorance). We shall now discuss how far this theory of Sankaracharya is acceptable.

While evaluating the nature of the world as interpreted by Sankaracharya, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of three alternatives. The three alternatives are as follows:

1. The world is to be accepted as true reality.
2. The world is to be accepted as partially real and partially unreal.
3. The world is to be accepted as unreal.

It is said about the first alternative that if the world is accepted as a true Reality then it cannot be termed as a cosmic illusion as preached by Sankaracharya.

Let's now see what Sri Aurobindo opines about the second alternative, that is, can it be said that the world is partially real and partially unreal. Since Sankaracharya has accepted the empirical reality of the world, hence, it can be argued as per his views that the world is partially real and as the world does not have a transcendental reality, hence it is unreal. But, Sri Aurobindo says that if the Brahman is the sole reality and if it is to be accepted that the world has empirical reality, then it must be acknowledged that the Brahman is the material cause of this world otherwise the claim that the world has empirical reality becomes baseless. But in the philosophy of Advaita, the Brahman (nirguna) is not accepted as a material cause. Hence, the view that the world has only empirical reality and does not have the transcendental reality, that is, the world is partially real and partially unreal is unacceptable. Sankaracharya further says that it is due to one's ignorance of the true nature of the individual and the world that one acquires a false knowledge about their actual nature. He says that as long as Avidya persists, the world appears to be real. But when the knowledge of the Brahman is dawned, the world appears to be an unreality and it is then that the true nature of the individual (Jiva and Brahman are identical) is also revealed. But Sri Aurobindo asks: what is the source of this Avidya? For ignorance can never belong to Brahman as such. An apt reply to this query is missing in the philosophy of

Sankaracharya. Besides, Sri Aurobindo further says that when knowledge is dawned this world can certainly not be dismissed as unreal. Rather, he argues, it can be said that the world has not yet become the complete manifestation of the Divine. It is due to our separative knowledge that we fail to establish a link between this world and the supra-physical reality which exists above the world. But just as the supra-physical reality can be realized through the higher states of consciousness, likewise, this world too is known as real. ‘In a higher status of consciousness the difficulty disappears, the connection is established; the sense of unreality recedes and a theory of illusion becomes superfluous and inapplicable.’¹ The world can never be illusory. Just as the Brahman is real, this world too persists as real. Sri Aurobindo has explained it by citing the following instance. An earthen pot is fragile, hence it cannot be termed as unreal due to its fragility. When the pot is broken up, it gets reduced to a mound of clay — that is, it becomes what it was made up of, hence, the clay — which is indestructible — cannot be labeled as real. This is because unreality cannot be created from reality. Sri Aurobindo says that the relation between the clay and the pot is not of original reality and phenomenal unreality but that of manifestation and non-manifestation. When the earthen pot is disintegrated, it takes up the form of non-manifestation from the state of manifestation. ‘... it only passes out of manifestation into non-manifestation...’² Likewise, when the pot is made, it takes up the form of manifestation from the state of non-manifestation. The Brahman has the power of manifesting one of its innumerable truths; this manifested world is one of the truths of the Brahman. Again, when the world would be destroyed, it would dissolve into the Brahman. But it does not mean that the world is unreal. There arises innumerable bubbles in the sea and it is into the sea that these bubbles get dissolved. But it does not mean that the bubbles are unreal. The bubbles are a manifestation of the ocean.

Sri Aurobindo has refuted the third alternative as well. He says that if the world is unreal then it is to be assumed that as there is no any other creator, the Brahman has created this unreal world. This assumption is unacceptable to Sri Aurobindo. This is so because it has already been said that the truth-consciousness of the Brahman cannot create an unreal world. It is also said that in the philosophy of Sankaracharya that, Brahman — which is indeterminate, indeterminable and static — cannot be the creator of such a world which has varied names and forms.

¹ *The Life Divine*, pp. 472-473.

² *Ibid.*, p. 473.

Sankaracharya says that saguna Brahman or Ishwara (associated with Māyā) is the creator of this world. But all those objections which come up with respect to Māyā are observed here as well. That is why Sri Aurobindo explains that such a wrong notion has emerged due to a lack of complete perspective of Brahman. In Advaita-Vedanta, only one aspect of the Brahman has been dealt with; that is, it has only been said that the Brahman is static but it has not been said that the Brahman can also be dynamic. The Brahman can be both static and dynamic. There is no conflict between the dynamic form of the Brahman and its own nature. ‘... eternal status and eternal dynamis are both true of the Reality which itself surpasses both status and dynamis; the immobile and the mobile Brahman are both the same Reality.’¹ Sri Aurobindo says that the dynamic form of the Brahman — that is, the manifestation of the world is not unreal, rather, it is as real as the Brahman itself. He has explained it by giving an example. If a man — who has never seen the sea — is taken first to its under-water level, he would only behold and know the tranquil and immobile form of the sea as it appears beneath the water body. He would not get an inkling of its turbulent form which exists at its top. But it cannot be said that as the surface-form of the sea was not shown or revealed, hence it does not exist. Just as the tranquil and immobile form of the sea as seen beneath is real, its turbulent form seen at the surface is also real. If the same man is shown the surface of the sea, both the calm and turbulent forms of the sea would appear to be real to him and that both the forms do not oppose each other. Sri Aurobindo points out that when the indeterminate, indeterminable and static form of the Brahman is revealed to the sadhak, then only that particular form appears to be the whole truth to him. As the dynamic form of the Brahman is not revealed, such a form is deemed to be unreal. But Sri Aurobindo speaks of the absolute Reality. He says that the static and dynamic aspects of the Brahman are inseparable from it. Whatever has been created, has originated from the Brahman, hence, they are real. ‘All that is in the kinesis, the movement, the action, the creation, is the Brahman; the becoming is a movement of the being; ... All is one Being, one Consciousness, one even in infinite multiplicity, and there is no need to bisect it into an opposition of transcendent Reality and unreal cosmic Maya.’² When the sadhak plunges into the profound quietude within, realizes the tranquil form of the Supreme Reality and when he comes out of this state of quietude and regains the exterior consciousness, he feels that this world is unreal.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 475-476.

² *Ibid.*, p. 477.

Sri Aurobindo says that if the Brahman is the sole Reality then this world has certainly emerged from the Brahman. ‘If the Reality alone exists and all is the Reality, the world also cannot be excluded from that Reality; the universe is real.’¹ The world is the manifestation of the Brahman although, Sri Aurobindo observes, it has failed to become the complete manifestation of the Brahman. But gradually the world is proceeding towards this completeness of manifestation. But one may ask: how does it proceed? Sri Aurobindo has answered that the world moves towards its complete manifestation through the process of evolution. Sri Aurobindo writes that the world still appears to be undivine to us because though the Divine is the manifestation of perfection, beauty and harmony, the world seems to be a field of imperfection, ugliness and disharmony. Here one could ask: if the world is the manifestation of the Brahman, then why do such imperfections, ugliness and disharmonies exist in it? Sri Aurobindo states that the actual mystery lies here only — it is due to the presence of imperfection, ugliness and disharmony that the human brain and heart finds it difficult to accept the world as a manifestation of the Divine. He points out that the Divine has kept Itself hidden behind such apparent opposites but gradually manifests itself through the process of evolution. It is the Brahman alone which not only reveals its true nature but goes on to know itself. The Brahman immerses itself into the inconscience and manifests itself gradually towards the conscience. This process of immersion and eventual manifestation has been called the ‘Divine Play’ or ‘Lila’ by Sri Aurobindo. Let’s consider the analogy of a carpet with reference to this context. When a carpet is rolled-up, its designs cannot be seen. But when it is spread out, it reveals its beautifully designed self. Similarly, the Brahman keeps itself concealed in the inconscience but gradually manifests itself towards its true self.

Here a question could arise: why does the Brahman have to manifest itself? What is the necessity to do so? Sri Aurobindo agrees that there is no such necessity for the Brahman. ‘The Absolute can have no need of anything; but still there can be — not coercive of its freedom, not binding on it, but an expression of its self-force, the result of its Will to become...’² From this perspective it can also be argued that there was no need for the Brahman to create this unreal, illusory world. But it can be said that the Brahman may not have any need or necessity but it

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

² *Ibid.*, p. 482.

surely has a Will — ‘... a Will to create, a Will of self-expression...’¹ — that is, the Will to take birth first in the inconscience through its conscious-power (Māyā) and then to recede gradually to the superconscience. Whatever happens in this world, points out Sri Aurobindo, is actually the manifestation of the Brahman and hence it is real.

Sri Aurobindo further says that the world appears to be unreal to us as a result of our ego-consciousness which beholds everything in fragmented forms. This ego is also the root of our ignorance. He argues that there lies an absolute consciousness amid such fragmented forms which we fail to realize due to our egoistic ignorance. It is due to the ego-consciousness that the fragmented truth appears to be absolute truth to us. This is a grave error. As long as our mind remains engulfed with this egoistic ignorance, we would not be able to know the Supreme Reality and the Absolute Truth. With the eradication of egoistic ignorance, the knowledge of Supreme Reality is revealed to us.

Sixthly, Sri Aurobindo observes that if the world is unreal, then how would the individual acquire knowledge from within this world? If the world is unreal, then it is to be admitted that the bondage of the individual as well as his liberation would be unreal. Then one could argue that the scriptures — which provide us with knowledge and guidance — are also unreal. Hence Sankaracharya’s testimony of the world being unreal cannot be accepted. That is why Sri Aurobindo argues that it would be much more logical to accept that the world is real but due to the presence of ignorance we fail to realize its true self. ‘...all our illusions and errors arise from a limited separative awareness which creates unrealities or misconceives the Real.’² But our failure to realize does not imply that the world would become unreal. With the eradication of ignorance and revelation of knowledge, there takes place a change in our perspective only; that is, no longer do we behold things as we used to initially due to ignorance. Thus we realize, remarks, Sri Aurobindo, that there is no difference between the One and Many. In fact, the One becomes the Many. One and Many both are same.

Another question arises: is the realization of the indeterminate and indeterminable Brahman the final summit for Sankaracharya? In other words, when they realize the Brahman the world appears to be unreal to them and such a revelation takes place only when the knowledge of Brahman is acquired. So does it imply that there is no other realization to be had once the

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 498.

knowledge of the Brahman is attained? Sri Aurobindo says that the realization of the immobile, indeterminate and indeterminable Brahman is but one aspect of the realization; it is not the end of realization. Sri Aurobindo speaks of the realization of the Absolute Truth where the Brahman is not only immobile, indeterminate but also possesses the aspects of mobility and determinability. Both the aspects of the Brahman are revealed when the Absolute Truth is realized. It is then that the world no longer seems to be unreal. It appears that the Brahman is manifested in many forms. In other words, the world seems to be the manifestation of the Brahman.

It might seem that since the Absolute is illimitable, hence it is real. It might also seem that as the individual and the world are limited, hence, they are unreal. But Sri Aurobindo says that it is wrong to think so because just as it is true that the Absolute is illimitable, likewise, the Absolute manifests itself at the time of creation. Therefore, the Brahman — despite manifesting itself as the individual and the world with varied forms and names — is neither confined by them nor gets exhausted. The nature of the mind is to bring about a division between finite and infinite, mobility and immobility, unity and diversity but in reality there is no division; they are the two aspects of the Absolute. That is why Sri Aurobindo says that it is wrong to assume that the immobility status of the Absolute denotes that the world no longer exists. To quote his own words: ‘This status is not a negation of cosmos; it carries in itself the essence and power of all cosmic existence.’¹

Sri Aurobindo, however, mentions that even if the theory of the Māyāvādins is refuted, a question still remains. And it is this : if the world is the manifestation of the Brahman then how did Avidya enter into it? The answer, too, has been provided by Sri Aurobindo by pointing out the difference between Higher Māyā and Lower Māyā. He writes that Māyā is such a creative power of the Absolute Consciousness through which the Absolute Consciousness reveals itself through different names and forms and thus limits itself. This means that through the power of Maya, the Absolute One is manifested as Many. This is because it is through this Absolute Consciousness that the Infinite becomes finite, the formless takes up forms. This creative power of the Absolute Consciousness has been termed as ‘Higher Maya’ by Sri Aurobindo who also commented that the Higher Māyā works as a mediator between the Absolute One and the world of multiplicity. Lower Māyā, on the other hand, is the power of ignorance of human mind or

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

mental delusions due to which we see everything not as a whole but as fragments. In other words, the Absolute Consciousness exists undividedly in everything; but as we fail to comprehend it due to the play of the power of ignorance or Lower Māyā, everything appears to us as separate entities. Sri Aurobindo says: ‘Stability and movement... are only our psychological representations of the Absolute, even as are oneness and multitude.’¹ The Absolute which is one, infinite and knowledge in the Higher Māyā appears to be many, finite and ignorance in the Lower Māyā into which the Absolute has plunged for its divine play. To put it simply, Lower Māyā belongs to the mental layer of consciousness whereas the Higher Māyā belongs to the Supramental layer of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo says that one has to transcend this Māyā of the mental level or ignorance and rise up to the higher levels of consciousness. This is so because the power of mind is limited; as a result of it, it can neither grasp nor know the Reality. All it can do is to look for the Reality. Sri Aurobindo writes that Reality is that Absolute Truth which can never be known by the dividing mind. This is because the human mind always renders the knowledge of partial truth and at times it also deforms the truth. Therefore, only an absolute perspective can grasp the absolute reality or essential reality. Sri Aurobindo has divided Reality as: 1) the Essential Reality 2) the Phenomenal Reality and 3) the Sense Reality.

By Sense Reality, Sri Aurobindo has referred to that Reality which we come to know of through experience; in other words, it is that Reality which is restricted within the boundaries of sensual feelings. By Phenomenal Reality, Sri Aurobindo has referred to that reality the knowledge of which is beyond one’s senses; that is, it is that Reality which can be known only through reason. Scientists speak of Phenomenal Reality as they come to know of phenomenal truth with the help of reason. But Sri Aurobindo has said that reason can never help to know the whole truth because reason exists in the finite mind which fragments the Absolute and separates one part from the other. These fragments are thought to be the Absolute Truth and strive to dismiss all the remainders as unreal. By Essential Reality Sri Aurobindo has referred to the Absolute Spirit — the Spirit which is the essence of this world. This is because the world is the manifestation of this spirit. Phenomenal Reality is only an aspect of the Essential Reality but there is no conflict between these two realities. ‘... essence and phenomenon of the essence are

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

complementary to each other, not contradictory, — the phenomenon manifests the essence...’¹
‘Even if the universe is only a phenomenal reality, still it is a manifestation or phenomenon of Brahman; for since all is Brahman, phenomenon and manifestation must be the same thing...’²
According to Sri Aurobindo, whatever appears to be real to the finite mind is, in fact, another aspect of the Essential Reality. The Essential Reality is an Absolute Truth; when the light of knowledge of this Absolute Truth will be dawned, this world will take a new shape—that is, the very perception of the world will be transformed before us. Thus, the fragment would no longer be looked upon as unreal and that the fragment would seem to be another form of the Absolute. What seemed to be conflicting to the finite mind would appear to be complementary to the Absolute Reality.

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¹ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

² *Ibid.*, p. 482.

Chapter Five

On Rebirth

Centering rebirth many important questions arise: one such question is relating to the subject of rebirth: who is that takes a re-birth? In this chapter the main emphasis would be laid on providing in detail an explanation about the notion of rebirth after Sri Aurobindo. To begin with ‘On Rebirth’, my attempt would consist in the first place to provide an elaborate account of Sri Aurobindo’s views on rebirth. Hence the very first query is that: who is it that takes a rebirth according to Sri Aurobindo?

Who takes birth?

Sri Aurobindo has recognized an eternal being which is moving from one birth to another. In this respect his position is exactly similar with other non-materialistic classical philosophers. This moving on of the eternal being is not just a revolving in a cycle; behind it lies a profound objective of the eternal as well as a profound significance. In this context Sri Aurobindo has some very distinctive ideas to add. We would discuss it in detail but before that let us see what Sri Aurobindo has understood by this eternal being and what is its true nature according to him. Sri Aurobindo believes that the individual being is an eternal portion of the Divine. There is a continuity of the same individual being through the various births but in every birth the individual being assumes a different name, form and personality. This led to the assumption of an eternal being which maintains a link between these courses of change. This eternal being has been described as the ‘psychic being’ by Sri Aurobindo. He has explained it as the spark of divinity which supports all individual existences in Nature and which has neither any beginning nor any end and thus exists eternally.

To understand Sri Aurobindo’s concept of the Psychic Being, we need to recapitulate some of the metaphysical tenets that provide foundational support to this very concept. In Sri Aurobindo’s integral monism there is only One Eternal Infinite Brahman referred to as Sachchidananda, — the Divine. In his monism this Brahman is Self or Atman. Though the

Divine and Ātman are one and the same, Sri Aurobindo maintains a very subtle but important distinction as well between Divine and Self or Ātman. Though a detailed discussion on the psychic being has already been done in the preceding chapter, yet, for the sake of facilitating the ongoing discussion, a brief explanation on it is presented here. Sri Aurobindo says that the Central Being* has two forms: one is the Jivatman and the other is the Psychic Being. The Jivatman — which is the true being of man — directs the evolution of the divine consciousness in life standing above life while the psychic being supports this manifestation from behind. The psychic being, as it has already been pointed out, can be termed as a spark of the divine consciousness. This spark of divinity gradually proceeds towards ultimate fulfilment by the virtue of its successive births. However, a subtle but distinct difference can be observed in the concepts of the soul and psychic being as explained by Sri Aurobindo. He has used the terms ‘psychic’ and ‘psychic entity’ as synonymous with soul. To quote his own words: ‘I use the word psychic for the soul as distinguished from the mind and vital. All movements and experiences of the soul would in that sense be called psychic...’¹ ‘... our soul, the secret indwelling psychic entity, is a portion of the Divine Consciousness and Essence.’² The psychic being, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the evolving soul which prepares itself through several births for the attainment of divine realization. Sri Aurobindo has said that both the soul and the psychic being participate in the process of evolution. But, despite being same in essence, they are different in functions. ‘The psychic is the spark of the Divine involved here in the individual existence. It grows and evolves in the form of psychic being...’³ All the potentialities of the soul like knowledge, force, etc. are brought about or executed by the psychic being which is instrumental in evolving the soul and the evolution of the soul is dependent on the progression of the psychic being.

The psychic being, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the evolving soul which prepares itself through several births for the attainment of divine realization. Sri Aurobindo has said that both the soul and the psychic being participate in the process of evolution. Thus, the soul and psychic being despite being same in essence are functionally different. All the potentialities of the soul like knowledge, force, etc. are brought about or executed by the psychic being which is

* Already discussed in the first chapter.

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 576.

² *The Life Divine*, p. 403.

³ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 104.

instrumental in evolving the soul and the evolution of the soul is dependent on the progression of the psychic being.

Sri Aurobindo has said that man is constituted by several beings which includes the physical being, the vital being, the mental being, the psychic being to name a few. These beings have been formed by the five sheaths (*kosha*) such as *annamaya kosha*, *pranamaya kosha*, *manomaya kosha*, *vijnanamaya kosha* and *anandamaya kosha*. There also exists man's subtle physical body, vital body, mental body and other subtle bodies. And at the heart of everything lies its psychic being which maintains its central position in the material world as well as in the other worlds. Just as the individual being — during its lifetime on earth — gains various physical, vital and mental experiences the essence of which is gathered by the psychic being, similarly, even after the dissolution of the body at the time of death, the various subtle beings like physical, vital and mental continues to function at their own pace. And the psychic being regulates the subtle physical, vital and mental beings and continues with its functioning. Thus, the psychic being maintains a continuity between life and death through rebirth.¹

Here a misconception could arise. One might think that in the course of rebirth the same soul and the personality it had in the preceding birth is repeated again in the next birth. This means that in rebirth only the body and the surrounding environment of the individual changes but his nature, character, mind etc. do not change at all. To express it in simpler terms, the same person is reborn with only a change in its outer form and environment. But Sri Aurobindo points out that this view is quite similar to a personality's putting off 'one robe of flesh' and then putting on another in the forthcoming birth because when the same personality takes a new birth, there takes place no change in the personality; it is only the body that changes. Here lies, Sri Aurobindo points out, the drawback of this view that if the same personality takes birth in different bodies, why does it fail to recollect the memories of its past births and if the memories of the past births are totally forgotten, then what is the utility of the claim that the same personality reincarnates repeatedly? Sri Aurobindo says that in this view neither the importance of rebirth nor its spiritual necessity is spoken of. He says that if in every birth, the same nature, character, personality and mentality of the individual is repeated, then the spiritual evolution which takes place in man due

¹ Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, *Mrityu Rahasya O Amarattwa Siddhi*, pp. 53-54.

to rebirth — what then, would be its explanation? ‘...it would be not an evolution but the meaningless continuity of an eternal repetition.’¹

So it must be said that the personality does not remain the same in every birth; in fact, along with the changes that takes place in the physical body in every birth, the personality too changes. And this ever-changing personality is, in reality, a form created out of the various complex elements of nature. He further adds that in this combination of elements, there are several layers like physical, nervous, mental and at the fag end there is the supra-mental layer. These layers too have different inner and outer sub-layers. Anyway, the mental being gathers various elements from the mental, vital and material planes of nature to create a new personality in every birth. This new personality which is called the ‘psychic personality’ by Sri Aurobindo — during its tenure in this world — acquires whatever is new and beneficial for its own progress and rejects all those which are no longer relevant to him. Through this process of acquisition and rejection, the physical, mental and neural cells of this personality keep on evolving. That’s why Sri Aurobindo writes: “The mental being in resuming bodily life forms a new personality for its new terrestrial existence; it takes material from the common matter-stuff, life-stuff, mind-stuff of the physical world and during earthly life it is constantly absorbing fresh material, throwing out what is used up, changing its bodily, nervous and mental tissues.”² Sri Aurobindo has written about two sides of the personality; one is at the surface and the other is within. In the preceding paragraph, a brief discussion about the surface of one’s personality has been made. But there is also the inner side where one comes across a vast sphere of super-conscience and sub-conscience from which emerges the external form of our being.

Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic personality evolves and progresses every time it takes a new birth. This means that whenever it takes birth, a new personality is also born. This means that the progression of the psychic personality takes place in every birth as a result of which it assumes a new form in every birth. But behind this changing personality there is an unchanging Person* or an unevolving entity which is the soul. And this soul manipulates the changing personality.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 848.

² *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 19.

* Here a capital ‘P’ has been used in the ‘Person’ so as to denote not the individual person but the Soul which exists in all beings.

So, it is clear to us from the views put forward by Sri Aurobindo that the physical body is a receptacle through which the psychic personality evolves every time it takes birth. But beyond the body and the personality there is the soul which acts as the controller of this evolving personality. Thus, Sri Aurobindo says that without considering the existence of the soul and this evolving personality, the mystery of rebirth would remain unsolved.

Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being — also termed as the ‘real person’ by him — which is seated in every individual, takes up the form of a gross personality by combining the physical body, life and mind in every birth. At the time of death, this psychic being discards the physical body but holds back its subtle physical, vital and mental sheaths for some time. ultimately these sheaths too are dissolved in their respective worlds — that is, subtle physical, vital and mental worlds. A detailed discussion on these worlds would be made later on.

Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being which takes up physical, vital and mental sheaths in every birth, makes a selection of the essential elements from each sheath and accumulates them. The psychic being may or may not use these essential elements in the forthcoming birth as per its plan. Here it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo writes that at the time of death or at the fag end of life, the decision of the psychic being plays the most important role in determining the forthcoming birth. He explains that ‘The psychic being at the time of death chooses what it will work out in the next birth and determines the character and conditions of the new personality.’¹ It could also occur to us: what does the psychic being do with the essential elements of past life? Does it take birth with those elements which could not be used in the forthcoming birth? If that is so, then where does the psychic being preserve these elements? Sri Aurobindo has answered this question. He says that these essential elements lie hidden behind the physical, vital and mental, in the subliminal and in the personality itself along with other miscellaneous elements. At the time of shaping up a new form of the psychic being, these subliminal elements could be utilized or ignored. It may also happen that the essence of the preceding birth was of no use in the present birth or at the time of a new formation. It might happen that the psychic being revealed a disposition (*śamskāra*) of a far-off previous birth in its present birth. That is why Sri Aurobindo says that the present birth can never be the repetition of the soul and personality of the previous birth.

¹ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 532.

Why does rebirth take place?

Sri Aurobindo says that it is for evolution that rebirth becomes indispensable. He also says that not only humans but all the living beings of this world proceed towards that supreme Being through evolution. We have already seen that Sri Aurobindo has said that the Spirit at first remains hidden in matter but it gradually evolves from matter to the vital, from the vital to the mental and then from the mental to the Supramental. Though it can be said that the layer of the Supramental is unknown to us but we are well-acquainted with matter, vital and mind. Anyway, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of the two aspects of the evolutionary development: development which is taking place universally on the one hand and on the other, it is occurring individually. When the Spirit evolves through matter, vital and mind, then we can say that the universal development of the Spirit has taken place. Again, when the individual being or Jivatman is presiding over and influencing the progress from the sub-human to the human level and that of the human level to the super-human level, then it becomes the individual development of the Spirit. (This has already been dealt with.) So it is evident from the observations made by Sri Aurobindo that since time immemorial, a process of transformation is going on in Nature. It is also evident that even before the advent of man — who is constituted with the synthesis of physical, vital and mental elements — the process of transformation takes place between matter and life after which life gets transformed and arrives at the mental layer. Sri Aurobindo says that the development of consciousness has taken place only at the human level presently but this is not the final stage in the process of development. There are various layers of human development and the individual soul has to transcend these layers and rise above the mental level and ascend to the higher, conscious layer. This layer of higher consciousness is the Supramental layer. Until the individual soul progresses and reaches the supramental level, as long as the mental nature is not transformed into the supramental nature, till then the individual soul has to take birth repeatedly. Thus, the cycle of rebirth continues to keep the process of transformation uninterrupted even after arriving at the human level.

Rebirth in Evolution:

Sri Aurobindo says that it is not only that the Spirit remains involved only in Nature and gradually — with the help of its secret self-knowledge — undergoes the process of evolution, it is also our soul — which is the being* of that Being (Spirit) — manifests itself from involved matter and proceeds towards the Divine Consciousness in the course of uninterrupted sequence of birth and rebirth. Hence, Sri Aurobindo remarks: ‘An involution of Spirit in matter is the beginning, but a spiritual assumption of divine birth is the fullness of the evolution.’¹ The attainment of a divine birth through evolution is the greatest significance of the process of rebirth. Once one is uplifted to the state of divine humanity, then would occur a complete transformation of the body, mind and life. Sri Aurobindo explains: ‘Mind will be changed into a greater consciousness, his life will be a direct power and action of the Divinity, his very body no longer this first gross lump of breathing clay, but a very image and body of spiritual being.’² The aim of rebirth is to be illuminated completely in this spirit. Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘Life itself is only a coloured vehicle, physical birth a convenience for the greater and greater births of the Spirit.’³ So, Sri Aurobindo says that all births are a medium of self-realization. Just as a sapling gets transformed into a tree, our consciousness too would get transformed into a universal and transcendental consciousness. This is our divine destiny.

It has already been mentioned that according to Sri Aurobindo Nature continues to evolve itself through the plant and animal stages. The human stage, too, is the outcome of this process of evolution. The individual soul is not that kind of conscious being which is separated from the evolution of nature. The emergence of the individual soul does not occur abruptly in the human body. The advent of human beings on earth is not an unexpected accident. It has become possible for man to reach this level only after passing through the varied experiences of past lives. Just as man — in his external nature — has reached its present stage of evolution after crossing the lower stages of life (like that of plants and animals), likewise, in his inner nature, there has taken place a simultaneous evolution of the soul. According to Tantric philosophy, the present human stage is reached after going through ‘eighty millions of plant and animal lives.’ Sri Aurobindo

* Here the term ‘being’ is used to denote the individuation of the Being or Spirit.

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 71.

² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

says that even if this figure of births is not accepted, one can still accept by considering the formidable arguments put forward by Tantra that the soul had to proceed through the process of evolution until it arrived at the present stage of humans after crossing through the various life-forms of plants and animals. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: ‘...we can appreciate the force of its idea of the difficult soul evolution by which humanity has come or perhaps constantly comes into being.’¹

Here a question could arise: can a soul, after taking birth in a human body, go back to the sub-human level? In other words, can a human be reborn as an animal? Sri Aurobindo has answered that apart from certain rarest of rare and exceptional cases, the individual soul does not go back to the animal or sub-human level after being born as a human being. This is so because the lowest layers of consciousness gradually evolve until it reaches the human stage. Once the individual soul has arrived at the human-conscious level, it acquires such a decisiveness that the descent to the lower layers of consciousness is no longer possible. Here we find that Sri Aurobindo has a sharp distinction with the generally assumed views of the classical Indian philosophers. Of course, it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo does not claim the rebirth in a lower level of being is an absolute impossibility. Sri Aurobindo has also admitted the occurrence of certain exceptional cases where such reversal does take place. For instance, if the soul has been unable to make sufficient progress on the path of evolution, then, despite having the capacity to take up a human body, it could slip back to the sub-human level for not being able to possess the capacity to acquire human-consciousness. Again, if the animal instincts predominate in a person, then some part of its vital energy could go back to the sub-human level and take birth in a lower level of consciousness or in the body of an animal to gratify its desires. Sri Aurobindo opines that ‘... the soul, the psychic being, once having reached the human consciousness cannot go back to the inferior animal consciousness anymore than it can go back into a tree or an ephemeral insect. What is true is that some part of the vital energy or the formed instrumental consciousness or nature can and very frequently does so, if it is strongly attached to anything in the earth life.’²

Sri Aurobindo writes that rebirth attains significance when individual evolution is accepted. His concept of rebirth has been founded on the posthumous permanence of this individual soul.

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 55.

² *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 550.

So it is to be accepted that there exists an eternal soul which lies beyond the corporeal attributes and physical body of man. This is because, if we assume that if only the physical and corporeal attributes are expressed in lineal succession, then one becomes a mere fragment of a flow — one cannot say that there takes place a gradual evolution in him. Let's explain it more vividly. If the existence of man's entire nature is dependent on his biological birth or that of his ancestors' body, life and soul, and that if there is no reality behind the existence of man, then it is to be accepted that the rebirth of man is actually the continuation of his ancestors' body, life and soul. His own soul does not take any birth. In other words, it is to be accepted that beyond his own dynasty, man has no independent past or future. That is why, Sri Aurobindo says that if the meaning of rebirth lies confined within the expression of corporeal attributes obtained through heredity, then the actual meaning of rebirth cannot be ascertained. But if a permanent individual soul is accepted which is not obtained through heredity but which acts as a link between successive births accepting the existence of a past and future evolution as well, then only a precise meaning of rebirth would be ascertained.

According to Sri Aurobindo, it is true that we derive several attributes of our being from our ancestors. But there also exists a certain entity the credit of whose emergence can never be given to physical ancestry or heredity. Sri Aurobindo calls this independent new entity the soul which uses the body, life and mind as a receptacle and gives rise to — in genealogical succession — the new in the path of progress. But how does the soul bring about the new in the path of progress? Sri Aurobindo answers that the soul — whose essential characteristic is its independence — is not only individual but universal. Through an individual soul, nature transforms itself and proceeds towards an ideal, universal soul which means that the individual soul evolves into the universal soul. But it is not the final stage of evolution. Beyond this stage there lies the Supramental layer to which the universal soul ascends through evolution. Sri Aurobindo says that the Supramental Being — who is the Master of the Supramental stage — acts as a controller and regulator of individual soul and universal soul. The individual soul as well as the universal soul lies dormant in the Supramental Being. The Supramental Being is not different from the individual soul or the universal soul; they are, in reality, its self-becoming, i.e., they are the various stages of the same Supramental Being. Sri Aurobindo writes that through the evolution of this self-becoming, the dormant Supramental Being manifests itself gradually. And it is through rebirth that the evolution is made possible. So, if rebirth is judged from this perspective,

then its significance becomes clear to us and it also becomes evident that genealogical succession cannot answer all questions pertaining to rebirth. ‘If the creation of the whole nature is to be credited to the physical birth,’ explains Sri Aurobindo, ‘then the body, life and soul of the individual are only a continuation of the body, life and soul of its ancestry, and there is no room anywhere for soul rebirth.’¹

Only when one reaches the stage of a higher consciousness, one can realize this spiritual entity, i.e., the Supramental Being and the manifestation of a supramental force is felt in this receptacle of the human body. Then the individual soul surpasses not only the individuality but also the universal soul as well. In this context, Sri Aurobindo has said that in the course of the ascension of consciousness, when one reaches the highest spiritual consciousness, he carries forward the evolution of the soul through its own power so that it can surpass the universal consciousness and reach the transcendental consciousness.

Is Evolution in Rebirth Acceptable?

Sri Aurobindo apprehends that a major problem would arise if only the existence of the soul, which is dependent solely on the activity of physical reproduction, is accepted while the concept of evolution is rejected, in such a case, it is to be accepted that the individual may not have a past but has the responsibility of carrying out a great and glorious future. This is because, if the course of the gradual evolution of the individual soul is not accepted and yet its liberation is spoken of, then it can be said that by ignoring the past of the individual being, emphasis is laid only on its future. Evolution is not merely future-centric, it has the active connection with the past as well. Let’s explain it vividly. Sri Aurobindo has mentioned some problems while analyzing the theory of rebirth. Firstly, the individual soul — despite being immortal and independent of the physical body — maintains the permanence of its existence through the process of physical births and that even after the dissolution of the physical body, the soul remains in eternity — such a claim would earn little support from our rational point of view as it seems unconvincing. One might ask why is the soul taking birth repeatedly? What is the purpose for doing so? Secondly, if the soul is not evolving, then it is to be assumed that there is no connection between its past births and its present birth which means no influence of the bygone

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 33.

births would fall on the present birth. And if it is so, then it can be argued that the soul has no disposition (*śamskāra*) of past actions yet it has to reach the zenith of wisdom through its actions in a given birth — this too is not acceptable. The burden of actions can be carried forward through rebirth but if this burden is to be relieved by the soul in just a single birth, then certainly it would be a matter of grave injustice on its part. Thirdly, another difficulty crops up when the individual being (*Jiva*) is held responsible for the consequences of its actions whose inspiration it gets from heredity. But here the actual problem arises: when one has no link or connection with his past, how can the past be brought in as the determinant of his future? This means that if the individual being executes all its actions according to its nature which it has inherited from its ancestors, then it is to be understood that there is a connection between the individual being and its ancestors. Having a connection with one's ancestors denotes having a connection with one's past. But if the evolution of the soul is unaccepted, yet it is claimed that there exists a link with the past — such a claim is unacceptable. Sri Aurobindo further says that if an individual soul does not have a past at all, then one has to arrive at the conclusion that the present and future of all souls would have been the same. But this hypothesis is not observed in reality. The different states of various individual beings are distinctly observed. This is because the past has a major role in giving rise to differences in us. No relation can be established between one's present and future by excluding the past. So, one has to accept that such a difference prevailed in the past as a result of which one sees a critical present and a variegated future. Thus, keeping in mind Sri Aurobindo's claim of the evolution of the soul, it can be said that through the various activities in one's lifetime, the evolution of the soul proceeds from a beginningless past to an infinite future.

Sri Aurobindo says that the doctrine of rebirth will be considered more logical if one accepts the existence of a spiritual being (whether it may be called a soul or given any other name) who witnesses the innumerable past-births as well as a prolonged still-continuing series of births in the future. This spiritual being maintains a link between every birth. Man stands in between infinite past and future. Therefore we can assume that our present state — meaning what we have become — and what we are going to be in the future — there exists a continuation of it as well. So it is unacceptable that man takes birth in this world only once. Man cannot conquer his animal instincts in a single birth. That's why he has to take birth a number of times and thus he proceeds from the lower to the higher spiritual consciousness. And here lies the indispensability of evolution in rebirth.

Sri Aurobindo opines that if evolution in rebirth is accepted then solutions to many problems could be obtained. With the acceptance of evolution in rebirth, the significance of this material life becomes distinctly evident to us. The spiritual evolution is the only aim of this earthly life over a longer period of time and this earth becomes the centre of spiritual practice or sadhana. The significance of rebirth lies in the fact that it attempts to bring about a spiritual evolution on earth. However it would be an error to assume that rebirth denotes the repetition of the same kind of life. The soul does not take birth in a physical body merely to repeat the same old life-pattern. One might ponder: for what purpose does the soul take up a new body in a new birth? Through the continuous process of birth and rebirth, the individual soul's spiritual progress takes place gradually. Sri Aurobindo has remarked with reference to this context that it is through rebirth that we can realize our true nature. He also says that rebirth is the medium of our spiritual evolution through which life becomes meaningful to us. Rebirth is not just a mere mechanical repetition of birth; on the contrary, the real nature of our soul is revealed gradually through rebirth. Rebirth, writes Sri Aurobindo, '... opens to us the divine vistas of a growing soul; it makes the worlds a nexus of spiritual self-expansion; it sets us seeking, and with a sure promise to all of a great finding now or hereafter, for the self-knowledge of our spirit and the self-fulfilment of a wise and divine intention in our existence.'¹

Rebirth as Interpreted by the Various Schools of Thought and their Critical Analysis by Sri Aurobindo:

We shall now discuss how rebirth has been viewed by the various schools of philosophical thoughts along with Sri Aurobindo's critical analysis of their interpretations.

Materialism:

The concept of rebirth is not accepted by materialists because materialism does not accept the existence of a permanent soul which goes on enriching itself by accumulating experiences even after death by taking birth again and again. The materialists opine that there is no such evidence in this world through which one can know the existence of the individual soul. They have

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 41.

explained the existence of individual being and that of the world only through matter. In other words, the materialists have refuted the existence of an eternal being behind matter. As the eternal soul's existence has been refuted in materialism, so the question of accepting the existence of any world or worlds beyond this material world where the soul goes after death does not arise. Hence, any discussion pertaining to this topic is also of no use here. The materialists assume that the human body originates from matter. According to them, the emergence of consciousness from inconscience is a sudden occurrence. The material energies and heredity combine the physical elements which constitute the human body which, in turn, would dissolve back into matter after death. According to materialist theorists, the human body — which is formed by the combination of physical elements — will be relapsed again into matter after death. But, although the human body perishes, what continues to exist in the mind of mankind in general are the benefits and memories of the good deeds done by the person concerned. But Sri Aurobindo says that the materialists have given prime importance to special memories or memorable achievements of human beings which have immortalized them in the society and that they have failed to provide any enlightening answers regarding the pre-existence or post-existence of this earthly life. This is so because as materialism does not accept the perpetual existence of an eternal being which maintains a continuity through different births, it fails to render any sufficiently acceptable explanation regarding the significance of human birth.

The materialists claim that even if there exists a Conscious-Spirit beyond matter, it cannot be known by our sensory knowledge. But Sri Aurobindo differs and opines that it is not logical to presume that what is not known today can never be known in the future. What seems to be unknown or unknowable in the present state of mind can certainly be known with the progression of human consciousness. Such evidences are amply observed in various arenas of science. This is because through various scientific discoveries and researches in modern times, we have seen that many theories which were considered to be true in ancient times have been proved wrong; hence, old or outdated theories have been cast away and new theories have replaced them. That is why Sri Aurobindo observes that one can never arrive at the conclusion based on the theory of materialism which preaches that personal individuality ends with death or that there is no existence of the personal individuality after death or beyond this earth.

Buddhist Theory:

Buddhism does not believe in the existence of the permanent soul. According to it, everything is becoming, change, flux. Likewise individuals are series of momentary states of consciousness. There is no permanent soul behind this succession of momentary mental processes. So, the soul is nothing but a series of momentary psychoses. The soul — according to them — constitutes of a synthesis between various temporary psychic elements. The energy of Karma plays with these psychic elements. According to Buddhist philosophers, just as the physical body takes birth and dies, the momentary soul-sense too emerges and dissolves. This is erroneously addressed by us as the eternal being. Just as death is an inevitable outcome of any being in this material world, the liberation of the soul in the conscient plane is also an indispensable consequence. Prior to the attainment of salvation (Nirvana) there lies a series of momentary existences. Therefore, according to Buddhist philosophy life proceeds from one birth to another through a process of indefinite prolongation.

Sri Aurobindo says that although Buddhism has accepted the theory of rebirth, it has not been able to interpret its significance satisfactorily. According to them, ignorance (*avidya*) is the root cause of suffering. It gives rise to birth and death. It generates thirst, craving and will to live (*trsnā*) in the individual being, so, ignorance is the only cause of rebirth which leads to suffering. That is why the Buddha tells us that to get deliverance from this suffering one has to tread on the path to Nirvana. Sri Aurobindo says that the Buddhist philosophers have viewed this world as mere thrash where man — as a consequence of his ignorance — strives to gratify his worldly desires and takes birth repeatedly to experience pain and grief all over again. This problem has arisen because life is seen as closely connected with the physical body.

Apart from this, Sri Aurobindo further adds, that man's intellect does not find any significance lying behind the incessant repetition of events in the material world. As a result, no possible solutions emerge. But, he says, the moment we would be able to realize that infinite conscious spirit which, despite being transcendental, remains dormant in every being of this world, we would understand that this conscious spirit has a purpose which is to reveal its true nature through evolution. And rebirth, adds Sri Aurobindo, is that medium through which this process of evolution is brought about.

Māyāvāda:

The Māyāvādins, however, have admitted the existence of the eternal soul along with the concept of rebirth of the soul. But Māyāvāda has remained silent on the significance of rebirth. That is, rebirth is not just a mere cycle of a being's taking birth and enjoying the fruits of its actions, it has a fruitfulness of its own. But Māyāvāda has revealed nothing about it.

As the Māyāvādins consider nothing apart from the Brahman as eternal, so everything else — including individual beings and the world, the bondage and salvation of the soul — is looked upon as Māyā or illusion. (Though the individual being is Brahman in reality, but we would understand here the common individual being who is ignorant and egoistic.) Bondage, according to Māyāvādins, is a continuity of the illusory experience of the ignorant individual being whereas in the Brahma-Consciousness, the termination of the continuity of egoistic and illusory experience amounts to liberation. As the Brahman is the one and only existent (Sat) in this world, so the individual being as well as its bondage and liberation is unreal (Asat). Sri Aurobindo opines that if Māyāvāda is accepted then there lies no real meaning in the actions and realizations of the individual being in this world. To express it differently, the existence of the individual being in this world is irrelevant and meaningless just like a dream. He also says that no matter what the real nature of the individual being is, no matter how dreamlike is his life, it cannot be refuted that just as the pain of bondage is true in the life of the individual being, similarly, the joy obtained in this life from the liberation of the bondage is also true. This means that every life has certain significance. No life is meaningless. For, acquisition of knowledge of Brahman is possible only during one's lifetime in this world. So, it is unwise to refute the significance of life and world by claiming them to be unreal. Also, Sri Aurobindo has remarked that the Māyāvādins are unable to comprehend the significance of each and every birth that the individual being takes. He says that though the Māyāvādins have preached to eliminate the earthly existence of being by the virtue of sadhana, yet, the preparation of this self-elimination has to be taken through this very earthly existence. This means that the sadhana leading to salvation, which the Māyāvādins have spoken of, is not accomplished in a single birth; rather, its preparation goes on since many births in the past. Here lies the significance of taking one birth after another which the Māyāvādins have ignored altogether.

Sri Aurobindo further says that just as it is true that at one stage of consciousness, the indeterminate (Nirguna) aspect of the Spirit is revealed and the world appears to be unreal due to which rebirth seems to be a mere mechanical cycle. Likewise, it is also true that beyond this layer of consciousness, there is a sphere of higher consciousness which Sri Aurobindo has called the 'intuitive plane' in which both the determinate (Saguna) and the indeterminate (Nirguna) aspects of the Spirit are revealed. So, the Spirit is not only indeterminate, it is also determinate. He points out that the world is not unreal; it is, in fact, the manifestation of the Spirit. Hence, this determinate aspect of the Spirit carries within it a deep, hidden significance because through the actions of the world nature proceeds the conscious energy of the universal spirit. It is in this world only that the self-revelation of the individual being takes place. The Spirit lies dormant in this world and it gradually ascends from matter to the consciousness of human form through plant and animal-life. It is in the human form only where the Spirit reveals its true self gradually. Sri Aurobindo says that if rebirth is seen from this perspective, then no longer would rebirth be looked upon as a mechanical cycle; in fact, it would be seen as a means of self-revelation. Sri Aurobindo remarks, 'And the soul ascending from the sleep of matter through plant and animal life to the human degree of the power of life and there battling with ignorance and limit to take possession of its royal and infinite kingdom would be the mediator appointed to unfold in Nature the spirit who is hidden in her subtleties and her vastnesses. That is the significance of life and the world which the idea of evolutionary rebirth opens to us; life becomes at once a progressive ascending series for the unfolding of the Spirit.'¹ If we view from this perspective, the significance of rebirth changes completely. Life and the world would seem inter-dependent. Then, the Universe will appear to us — not as a mere illusion — but as the spiritual will and wisdom of the Infinite Reality.

Upanishadic Interpretation:

Sri Aurobindo remarks that the Upanishad speaks of the material world and the individual being to be real but it has stated nothing about the indispensability of the individual being's rebirth. The theory of Monism as preached by the Upanishad does not admit the world and the individual being to be unreal. On the contrary, the Upanishad has called the world and the

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 47.

individual being as real. The world is looked upon as real because it is the becoming of the Brahman and the individual being is Brahman in its own self. The eternal Brahman manifests itself in various individual beings through varied names and forms. Although the individual being is Brahman in its own self, but it fails to realize its actual nature due to its ignorance. This is because ignorance — in the form of various desires — acts as a barrier and prevents it from realizing its actual or real self. That is why it lies trapped in the continuous cycle of rebirth. When the worldly desires are eradicated and the veil of ignorance is lifted, the individual self comes to know of its real self. But Sri Aurobindo says that though the Upanishad accepts the world as real, yet it throws no light on the purpose of creation of the world or on the relationship between the individual being and that of the process of creation. Here, rebirth has been looked upon as a mere incident of the world, its significance or indispensability has been completely ignored. In the Upanishads, it is preached that the world has been created at the wish of the Eternal and it would be destroyed too by the Eternal's wish. But it seems that rebirth has no role to execute in between creation and destruction as desired by the Eternal. Just because the Upanishad has accepted the individual being as the becoming of this world-creation — which means that the individual being had no existence prior to the creation — so the desires of the individual being and the process of rebirth, caused by those desires, too are the outcomes of the play of creation. Here, too, no light has been thrown to illustrate the purpose of rebirth. But Sri Aurobindo says that the world has a purpose and for the successful accomplishment of this purpose, rebirth has been used as an instrument — but it has not been mentioned in the Upanishads.

Vaishnavism:

The Vaishnavites or Lilavādins look upon life and the world from a perspective different from that of the Māyāvādins or Buddhist order. They consider the Bliss (Ananda) of God to be the origin of the universe. Along with this Bliss (Ananda) there exists Wisdom, Power, Will and Labour of God. According to the said thinkers, at the root of rebirth lies the will and wisdom of God. But, Sri Aurobindo says that though Lilavādins accept the world and life as a divine play, they consider liberation as the ultimate goal as a result of which they have failed to provide any satisfactory light on the significance of the world and life.

Tantrism:

The Tantric philosophy proceeds further from the aforementioned thoughts and preaches that it is possible to view the evolution of a superconscious energy within this world. According to them, the supreme power has created innumerable worlds and multitudinous beings. In the last series of birth comes the human form. Man evolves in himself this supreme power and consciousness of his own divinity and proceeds towards the eternal superconscience. Here also Sri Aurobindo points out that though the Tantric philosophy recognizes the utility of life, little does it reveal about the divine potentialities of the individual soul. Hence, here arises a thought-provoking query: if one's spiritual fulfillment (siddhi) is brought about by sadhana, does the said fulfillment expand only the powers of our senses or it transforms our own being? Tantric philosophy has provided a mere unsatisfactory explanation in this context.

General Perspective:

Sri Aurobindo says that according to certain prevalent general notions, God has created the immortal individual souls from His own Being. But he remarks that if such notions are restricted within this well-defined boundary of conviction, then the need to question its logicity does not arise. But man cannot remain satisfied with his conviction only; he seeks to verify everything with the help of his intellect. So, if we are to judge from this perspective we would observe the emergence of two contradictions the solutions to which should be brought about.

Firstly, if God goes on to create all the individual souls, then it is to be accepted that the existence of the individual souls commences at the time it takes up a physical body when it takes birth on earth, for, the creation of any given thing denotes the beginning of its existence. Sri Aurobindo comments — and it is logically true as well — that anything which is created must be destroyed too. But this theory states that even though the existence of the individual soul begins when it takes up a physical body at the time of birth, it does not cease to exist when the body perishes after death. This is so because the individual soul is immortal and following the will of God, it takes up a new body at the very inception of its earthly birth. Thus it proceeds from one birth to another by taking up a new every time it takes a new birth. This means, Sri Aurobindo

writes, that although the commencement of the existence of the soul is accepted here, but the end of the existence of the soul has not been accepted. This logic is unacceptable to the human intellect. It can also be said that if the soul is dependent on the physical body for its existence, or rather, when the existence of the soul begins at the time it takes birth and takes up a physical body, it is to be accepted that if the body perishes then the soul too would perish. But the destruction of the soul is not accepted in this theory. And if it is so, then Sri Aurobindo points out that it is to be accepted that after the physical body gets perished, the soul takes aegis in a subtle body which existed even before the dissolution of the physical body. This is so because it is the law of Nature that the subtle form is always formed before the gross form. It can never be that the gross creation has taken place before the subtle creation. The same can be observed in the Samkhya system where the creation of the gross *Pancha-mahabhoota* takes place from the subtle *Pancha-tanmatra*. Similarly it can be said that prior to the formation of the gross body, there is a subtle body in which the individual soul takes shelter. Thus it is evident that just as the soul took shelter in a subtle body before taking up a physical body, likewise, it would rest in the subtle body after leaving the gross physical body. Therefore, it can never be said that the soul has a beginning but no end.

Secondly, according to this theory, as God has created the individual being, it can be said that the individual being — at the very beginning of its existence — earns the burden of all sorts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, sins and virtues, wealth and penury, etc. at the will of God. Such burdens the individual being acquires neither due to the fruits of its actions in a past birth nor as a result of heredity. This is so because, Sri Aurobindo points out, as the existence of the individual being is created by God, it has neither the fruits of its actions in a bygone birth nor does it have the benefits earned by the law of heredity, for, according to this theory, the nature of the individual being is not acquired from its ancestors through the line of heredity; on the contrary, such a nature is formed at the will of God. However, we don't get a satisfying answer as to how or on what basis did God bring about this discrimination between prosperity and suffering. But the individual being has to bear the burden of prosperity and suffering as per the will of God all its life no matter what nature is rendered by God to the individual being or whether its appropriate assessment has been made or not for which, too, the individual being lies accountable to God. But such accountability, Sri Aurobindo observes, does not appear to be acceptable to the common individual being. Apart from it, Sri Aurobindo also says that if a

certain developed personality is observed in an individual soul, then it becomes evident that the individual soul must have had a past, meaning that the emergence of the individual soul has not resulted due to a sudden will of God; rather there has been a preparation for the development of the personality of the individual soul during the course of a number of successive births.

Therefore, from the aforesaid schools of thought, one can deduce that none of the thoughts provide a distinctly justified interpretation of the significance of rebirth. As a result, the problem has remained as it is. But if one ponders that rebirth is not merely a dragging chain but a process whose aim is the progress of the soul — as Sri Aurobindo has stated — then perhaps one can provide a solution to the said problem to a certain extent.

According to Sri Aurobindo, man does not want to see or believe something which is beyond his knowledge; here lies, he says, the narrowness of his vision. It would be an error to assume the spirit or soul* does not exist in animals. Even animals have souls but that exists there latently. If we observe attentively, we would realize that just as man has not been able to physically supersede his animal instincts, similarly, we have completely failed mentally to transcend the animal mind. According to Sri Aurobindo, there are some similarities between the mind and the physical body. The progression of the mind takes place along with that of the body because the mind and body are the two different forms of the same Spirit. This Spirit exists in one's being and manifests itself in the forms of body and mind. In reality, the Spirit remains in all things in a latent form and with the growth of the body and mind, it too gradually manifests itself. But how does the growth take place? Sri Aurobindo answers that it happens due to rebirth.

Sri Aurobindo further adds that man has proceeded from an unknown past and arrived at his present state. Just as there is the history of a distant past in man's present state, similarly, there exists a distant future before his present state. All these are the divine plays of the Spirit. These plays of the Spirit exist not only in human beings but also in plants and animals. The spirit which works in plants is somewhat less distinct than the spirit present in animals. In the same way, the spirit which is at work in animals is less distinct as compared to that in human beings. The mind of man, actually, is an evolved form of animal-mind. There is no original difference between the animal and man. In other words, from the perspective of consciousness, the mind of plants, animals and humans can be described as inconscient, subconscient and conscient. Thus it can be

* Spirit is that from which the universe manifests. And when the individuation of this Spirit takes place, it is called the 'soul' by Sri Aurobindo; that is, the eternal essence or divine element which is present in the Individual (Jiva) is the soul.

said that mind exists as inconscience in the lower levels of plants while in human beings mind at the higher level exist in a super-conscious state. In matter lies life, in life there is mind and in mind there exists the power of a divine intelligence in a sublimated form. The said power gradually manifests itself from matter to life, from life to mind and from the mind to the Supermind. Thus, there goes in Nature the divine play of the Spirit. Hence it is said that the advent of the Spirit in man is not an accidental event but a gradual manifestation of the inmost Spirit. Sri Aurobindo says that here lies the indispensability of rebirth through which the Spirit manifests itself gradually.

Here a doubt arises: if an absolute Spirit is considered the truth of all Beings, then is there any need to acknowledge the concept of rebirth as an eternal truth? If that is so, how is the Spirit connected with rebirth? In response to this doubt, Sri Aurobindo has said that there are two sides of Conscious-Force of the Spirit: one is expansion while the other is contraction. Just as the force expands itself and becomes universal, likewise, it contracts in individuals. Expansion and contraction are the two forms of Conscious-Force (Energy) and these two join together to bring about the integrality of being. The universal force becomes active with the help of man. The universal force is indeterminate but in man it becomes determinate. When the Spirit is manifested gradually, the individual soul also gradually becomes conscious of its universal nature. And one can transcend from the individual being to the universal being through rebirth.

So, if the universality and individuality of the Spirit is considered as the foundations of rebirth, then the significance of the concept of rebirth will become clear to us. At the heart of rebirth, there lies the ascent of the Spirit — the ascent to life from matter and from life to mind. The ascent of the Spirit does not cease when it reaches the mental plane. The evolution of the Spirit proceeds through the process of rebirth. Sri Aurobindo writes that if the Spirit lacked higher powers its ascent would have ceased as soon as it reached the mental plane. So, evolution too would have stopped at the human stage as a result of which the process of rebirth would have stopped as well. But Sri Aurobindo points out that the Spirit does have higher powers whose revelations can take place only through rebirth. It is through rebirth that the Spirit proceeds on its path of ascension. Rebirth is the medium through which one progress towards the greater manifestation of the Divine and this progress would, one day, make the Divine's intention significant in this world. Here lies the success of rebirth as interpreted by Sri Aurobindo. He

remarks that rebirth is a ‘... progress to some great act and high display of the Divinity which shall give a wise and glorious significance to his persistent intention in an eternal creation.’¹

Significance of Rebirth:

In the classical Indian philosophy, whether of the Naiyayikas or the Mimamsakas, the Sāṅkhyas or the Vedantins, or the Jains or the Buddhists, the phenomena of rebirth has been viewed as the immediate cause of sorrow, suffering (*duhkha*), old-age problems (*jara*) and diseases (*vyadhi*). To prevent the chain of births which is another name for bondage, classical philosophers suggested to pursue the path of Knowledge (Jñānamarga), of work (Karmamarga), of devotion (*Bhaktimarga*). For the classical philosophers the rebirth was a negative factor that hinders individual’s progressive journey from the clutches of *saṁsāra*, i.e. cosmic state. The other corollary of rebirth is transmigration. The Hindus or the Buddhists or the Jains do not believe in transmigration in the sense the Christians believe in transmigration in the resurrection of the flesh. However, what appears to us quite naturally is that rebirth is looked upon as a negative factor by the Indian classical philosophers and that rebirth is considered to be a state of bondage and only those who would pursue the various paths of sadhana would eventually be released from the clutches of repeated births. But in Sri Aurobindo’s explanation of rebirth, we find a more positive view which has been infused into his phenomena. Sri Aurobindo has never considered rebirth to be a mere mechanical cycle or the cause leading to bondage. On the contrary, rebirth is a means through which the progressive evolution takes place in all individuals although this process could be hastened if the aforesaid paths of sadhana are followed by the aspirant.

Sri Aurobindo has said that we would understand the purpose of rebirth only when we would consider it to be an instrument of spiritual evolution without which no spiritual evolution would ever be possible. He writes that at the beginning of creation, the Spirit kept itself involved but then, gradually, through the process of evolution it has continued to reveal itself, rather, it can be said that it is the unfoldment of the higher layers of consciousness. And if rebirth is looked upon as the indispensable instrument of the complete manifestation of the Spirit, only then would the actual significance of rebirth be clear to us. ‘The soul comes into birth for experience, for

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 60.

growth, for evolution till it can bring the Divine into matter.’¹ To express it more vividly, whatever the world has, behind everything there lies involved an infinite existence, an infinite consciousness, an infinite will and power and the reality of an infinite bliss. As the Spirit keeps itself involved in matter in the initial stage, it has to evolve itself in due course, for anything which undergoes involution has to go through evolution as well. Just as the Spirit, remaining involved in matter, has gradually evolved into life and mind, likewise, the consciousness which lies dormant in an individual gradually evolves towards complete self-awareness. This is so because involution is the state of self-forgetfulness of the Spirit whereas evolution is the state of self-awareness of the Spirit. To put it differently, the individual being craves to realize its real nature or self which lies hidden in the clouds of ignorance and also seeks to be completely self-conscious. The individual being can become complete when it is able to make its own self one with the Universal Self and thus, realizes that his own self and the Universal Self are the manifestations of the same Spirit or the Supreme Reality. Sri Aurobindo says that to bring about the ascent of the individual being towards the higher layers of consciousness, rather, to effectuate progress from ignorance to knowledge, rebirth is required. It means that rebirth is an instrument through which spiritual evolution is made possible. However, it is to be noted here that Sri Aurobindo has not merely emphasized on the evolution of consciousness, he has also talked about the transformation of the physical body. This is because a transformed body is needed for the complete manifestation of the Spirit. So, if the evolution of spiritual consciousness takes place along with the transformation of the physical body, then only rebirth becomes fruitful.

Besides, Sri Aurobindo has also said that those who believe that liberation of the individual being is its only destiny also looks upon rebirth as a mere mechanical cycle. He says that the liberation of the individual being does not take place in a single birth; the preparation of liberation goes on slowly through several successive births, which means that the gradual progression takes place through the process of rebirth. The individual being is engulfed in ignorance which means to be at the bottommost layer of consciousness. Liberation means the progression of consciousness and ascent to knowledge from ignorance. Through the efforts the individual being puts in its sadhana, it gradually moves towards liberation from ignorance in every birth. Thus there takes place a gradual development of its consciousness. And if this development of consciousness is the only destiny of the individual being, then the necessity of

¹ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 543.

rebirth becomes indispensable for it is only through rebirth that the gradual progress of consciousness occurs.

So, according to Sri Aurobindo, the existence of the eternal soul has to be accepted and that the soul carries the aspiration of spiritual evolution along with it from one birth to another. If that is not so, then the process of evolution of Nature becomes a mechanical process where the birth of an individual being is only a sudden and meaningless occurrence. So, it has to be acknowledged that the soul is a real and conscious individual inhabiting the physical body and rebirth happens to be its indispensable means to achieve spiritual evolution. If the concept of rebirth is not accepted then the birth of man would only be looked upon as a mere beginning of evolution, that is, it would end at the very beginning of a long journey. So, through rebirth, the incomplete individual being attains the way to make itself complete. And here lies the fruitfulness of rebirth.

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Chapter Six

The Existence of Other Worlds

Does other worlds exist beyond this material world?

From the previous discussion it is clear that rebirth is indispensable for the spiritual evolution of consciousness. But the question which still remains to be answered is: does rebirth take place immediately after the demise of the individual soul, that is, after the dissolution of the physical body or does the individual soul rests in some other worlds for a while before taking birth again in this material world? And if there are any worlds beyond this material world, then what is the relation of such worlds with the material world?

We shall first see whether any world or worlds at all exist beyond this material world, i.e., the earth, and if such a world or worlds do exist, what are the evidences for their existence? As Sri Aurobindo was a Yogi, so — through his yogic perception — he could know of the existence of the higher subtle worlds about which he has written in detail in his book, *The Life Divine*. But here it is to be noted that though he has recognized the important role reason and intellect plays while treading on the path leading to higher knowledge, he has clearly mentioned that such a knowledge can never be obtained fully through reason and intellect for reason acquires knowledge through the elements of outer experiences. And here lies the limitation of reasoning which fails to render any knowledge beyond one's external experiences. So, if we try to realize the existence of the higher subtle worlds with the help of our ordinary perception, we would never be able to do so and at the same time it can be said that it is not at all possible to analyze the truthfulness or falsity of the higher worlds which lie beyond this material world through our limited mental perceptions. It is also to be noted that the belief in the existence of other worlds apart from the physical world is also available in the literature of the āstika philosophers, the Jains and the Buddhists as well.

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo has mentioned about the involution of the Conscious-Force. But it is to be seen whether the Conscious-Force has involved at one go or has it involved slowly and gradually in the material world through the creation of various other worlds or planes. From

the discussion put forward by Sri Aurobindo in his *The Life Divine*, it can be deduced that the involution of consciousness had taken place before the commencement of the process of evolution. This is so because what has not involved can never evolve. Sri Aurobindo has said that the Conscious-Force has not descended abruptly from the Supramental plane to the inconscience. There are various higher layers of consciousness arranged in a sequence proceeding from the lower to the higher. Here it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo has referred to the higher worlds as the higher layers of consciousness which exist between the Supramental world and the inconscient world of matter which are created when the Conscious-Force descends into matter. He has said that these higher layers of consciousness keeps on exerting a pressure on these lower planes so that evolution could start in the lower planes. It is to be accepted that there exists an intimate relation between the higher planes and this world of matter.

Arguments for the supposition of intermediary planes between Supramental plane and material plane:

Sri Aurobindo has said that if this material world had been the only world in existence and that no other intermediary planes existed then it is to be accepted that at the highest layer lies the Spirit whereas at the bottommost part lies the inconscient. This means that the Spirit would involve in matter at one go and evolve back to its real or own self in a similar way. Here, matter and Spirit are, as if, like two ends and there exists neither any world nor its power lying in between. But is the descent from the Superconscience to the Inconscience possible at one go? Does our experience endorse such a claim? Probably not, because even science accepts the fact that the transformation of energy takes place in stages. Let's cite an instance to elucidate this point. The more radioactive elements like uranium is emitted the lesser becomes the number of electrons present in it; thus, at one point of time uranium loses its actual nature and gets transformed into a different element, that is, lead. The transformation of uranium into lead does not take place abruptly and in a single step. It happens so after going through several stages. So we have to accept the fact that the transformation of energy occurs through different stages. Similarly, here also it can be said that the descent of the Superconscient energy (Spirit) takes place gradually and through various subtle layers. Each of these layers has been termed by Sri Aurobindo as a distinct world. We would deal with these worlds later on.

Also it can be said that if there had been no world between this material world of ours and the Superconscient world, then the rebirth of the individual being in the material world would have taken place instantaneously after its demise as it is acquainted only with this material world and that there are not any other worlds apart from this material world. But in that case there would have been no possibility of the gradual evolution of the Conscious-Energy, that is, individual evolution would not have been possible. As these subtle worlds exist in between the Superconscient and Inconscient worlds, that is why the Conscious-Energy could keep its evolutionary process uninterrupted. Thus, after death the individual being leaves for these other worlds where it takes rest and after assimilating the necessary knowledge and power prepares itself for its forthcoming birth.

Sri Aurobindo has further said that if the endless capacity of the manifestation of the Spirit had been restricted to the creation of the material world and that if there were no different layers or planes in between Spirit and matter, then matter would have been looked upon as the only form of Spirit. But, it is unacceptable that the Spirit would manifest itself only through a single form and that the possibility of its manifestation would be restricted to only one form or that it would have no other choice of manifestation. This is because the Spirit is never confined by any form; in it lies the possibility of infinite manifestations. If the Spirit gets confined within a single form, then the Spirit would no longer be called unlimited; it would become limited.

The materialistic evolutionist — who considers only the existence of matter — recognizes the material energy as the one and only energy of the world. On the basis of this material energy, everything belonging to the material world evolves. This means that it is in this material world only that the higher evolution of life and mind takes place. Apart from this material world, the materialists do not recognize the existence of any other higher planes nor the influence exerted by these planes on the material plane. Here Sri Aurobindo remarks that a question persists regarding the true nature of life and mind, for according to this theory, life and mind evolve out of matter. But, the nature of life and mind is so different that it is difficult to address them as outcomes of material evolution. This is because if matter itself evolves out of energy, then life and mind would be the superior outcome of that energy. This energy is indeed spiritual for it is from this energy that life, mind i.e. consciousness emerge. The fact that consciousness cannot emerge from matter has already been discussed. So, this energy cannot be called ‘unconscious

energy'. Thus, it has to be accepted that there is a spiritual energy which manifests itself through matter, life and mind.

Sri Aurobindo says that when this spiritual energy or Spirit manifests through matter, then it becomes the world of matter. Similarly, when this spiritual energy manifests through vital and mind, it becomes the vital plane and mental plane respectively. Apart from this, the Spirit can manifest through various subtle principles which, in turn, leads to the creation of several subtle planes. So, it would be erroneous to claim that there exists only this material plane and beyond it no other planes exist.

Not only has Sri Aurobindo written about the existence of the other worlds beyond the gross physical world but has also stressed on the fact that the influence of such worlds on the physical world is also noteworthy. In support of this assertion Sri Aurobindo has made the following observations.

Firstly, Sri Aurobindo says that if there had been no other worlds beyond the gross physical world, then the manifestation of the Spirit would have been possible in this material world only. This means that for its manifestation the Spirit would have been dependent on the physical world. But it is unacceptable that the manifestation of the Spirit would be restricted within the boundaries of the material world. This is because the Spirit, being unlimited, cannot be confined and dependent on anything.

Moreover, Sri Aurobindo points out that without the influence of the higher worlds, the process of evolution would be incomplete. He also adds that the process of the manifestation of the Spirit could have been different; that is, instead of undergoing involution followed by evolution, it could have followed a different approach. This means that another process — which could have been a more simple process as compared to that of evolution and involution — could have been taken up by the Spirit for its manifestation. For its self-manifestation, the Spirit — instead of descending into matter and then gradually manifesting itself — could have directly manifested itself. This, too, is unacceptable, according to Sri Aurobindo, that the One who possesses infinite possibilities would restrict itself to only a single possibility, for, in the Spirit there are infinite possibilities of its manifestation. So, this material world is only the sphere of the manifestation of the Spirit — such a statement is inappropriate.

Secondly, if it is also argued that as there are no other worlds apart from this material world and that the influence of such worlds does not reach the physical world, then too we would have

to face certain difficulties. This is because in reality we see that the higher worlds try to influence the lower worlds. It cannot be ruled out that life is more developed than matter and so is mind as compared to life. So, if we believe only in the three principles of matter, life and mind and refuse the other principles, then too we have to accept that the mental plane casts an influence on life and life does the same on matter because mind and life are more developed than matter. So, beyond the material plane if any life-world or mind-world or any other world is not accepted, then the influence of life and mind (or any other world) on matter cannot be accepted as well. Sri Aurobindo opines that we cannot address life and mind as the complete dominant principles of this world, for, as already discussed, the forces of life-world and mind-worlds are different from one another. When the forces of the life-world and mind-world spread its influences on the physical world, the forces of the physical world resist them due to which the former forces cannot dominate over the physical world completely.

Thirdly, Sri Aurobindo says that many people think that the world which exists beyond the material world is nothing but a figment of human imagination. In other words, man imagines that he would reside in some other world after departing from this physical world. But in reality such worlds do not exist. Sri Aurobindo says that if the other world is an imagination of the subjective consciousness, then this objective world too could be termed as an imagination of the same consciousness because we know the material world too through our deep inner consciousness. The solutions to the various complex matters of this material world such as physics, mathematics, chemistry etc. are dawned on us through the innermost part of our consciousness. And that is why there is a vast difference between the consciousness of an acclaimed physicist or a mathematician with that of a common individual. So, through our exterior experiences only it is proved that there are various layers of consciousness in man. Sri Aurobindo states that we experience the material world to be true through our consciousness. Now, this superficial mental consciousness may not help us to know the higher worlds. But a higher consciousness would certainly enable us to know of the higher worlds which lie beyond the material world. In such a case, why would such realization of the higher worlds be looked upon as mere imagination? In other words, if knowing the other worlds through a higher consciousness is considered to be a figment of imagination, then the knowledge of the material world acquired through the same consciousness would be considered to be imaginary as well.

But, objections could be raised that how can the objective world be an imaginative affair when all the real experiences of this world take place in our consciousness? Sri Aurobindo also answers that deep within man's consciousness there is such a layer of consciousness which he has called the subliminal consciousness. In this subliminal consciousness experiences of the subtle worlds are witnessed. With the expansion of the realizations of the inner consciousness, man finds various new layers of consciousness in the same receptacle which provides us with a glimpse of the other worlds. Since the experience of such subtle worlds do not take place in the exterior consciousness, it cannot be said that the subtle worlds are imaginary. Apart from these arguments, Sri Aurobindo further adds that one might think that the consciousness itself is 'a myth of the original Nescience.'¹ In such views the Nescience or Inconscience is addressed as the one and only principle because with the exception of Nescience, everything else like the individual being and the world, which has originated from the Nescience, is unreal. Sri Aurobindo writes that '... on this line of thinking, we swing back towards a view of the universe in which all things assume a certain hue of unreality except the all-productive Inconscience out of which they are created...'² And being unreal denotes something which has no existence, something which is void. Sri Aurobindo says that the mind of man — which based on something real and concrete — can spread the wings of its imagination far and wide but the same cannot be accomplished if the basis of imagination is without a substance. Such views can only drive us to the realm of darkness.

From the aforementioned discussion it is clear that Sri Aurobindo has considered direct experience as the most acceptable evidence to prove the existence of the higher worlds. That is, the knowledge of higher worlds can never be acquired by external gross physical senses or by external consciousness. He says that each of the principles of Sat, Chit, Ananda, Supermind, Mind, Life and Matter (as found in Sri Aurobindo's concept of the process of involution-evolution) can create a separate world. But here it is to be remembered that the freedom and self-sufficiency of the higher worlds get hampered gradually as a result of constriction of consciousness due to which one comes across so much disharmony and inequality in the physical world. However, these forces are free and dominant in their own worlds so there is neither any disharmony nor any inequality in these worlds. Anyway, Sri Aurobindo says that if we can

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 808.

² *Ibid.*

expand the horizons of our consciousness and plunge into the subliminal, then we would be able to become conscious of these higher worlds.

So, by analyzing the arguments presented by Sri Aurobindo in the preceding paragraphs, we surmise that anything that would evolve would have to undergo involution. In other words, there is an aspiration or urge in the involved principle to evolve themselves. And the said evolution takes place only when the influence of the higher worlds like life-world, mind-world and the Supramental spreads out. And in this process of evolution, the forces of evolution pulls up the forces of the lower worlds; similarly, the forces of the lower worlds pushes themselves to ascend upwards. Due to the culmination of these two forces, man will surpass the limitation of life and mind in the receptacle of matter and blossom himself into a divine man.

But the human sceptic mind will neither believe in nor accept the existence of any other worlds beyond this material world of ours. So, the questions which come up spontaneously are: if there are at all any worlds beyond this material world, then what are the evidences of their existence? Is there any hierarchy in these planes? Does any relation exist between the material world and these other worlds or do these outer worlds exist self-reliantly and independently of the influence of material world?

Can the existence of other worlds beyond this material world be known?

Let's first see whether the existence of the other worlds beyond this material world as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo could be brought to our knowledge. Here, 'knowing' implies acquiring knowledge through sense-perceptions. Sri Aurobindo says that it would be unwise to presume that substantial evidence could be found to prove the existence of the other worlds from this material world. He further adds that beyond the gross physical, gross vital and gross mental bodies of man, there are subtle physical, subtle vital and subtle mental bodies. The functions of the gross physical, gross vital and gross mental bodies and those of subtle physical, subtle vital and subtle mental bodies are different from one another. For instance, the gross physical body is called the 'annamoy śarīra' while the subtle physical body is known as the 'sūkṣma' or 'linga-śarīra'. The gross vital force acts upon our gross body; the subtle vital force which is larger and more flexible than the gross vital force is free from the limitations of the gross vital force. The gross mental or surface mind is enslaved by ego and desires and pre-dominated by senses due to

which it is engulfed in ignorance. The subtle mind is much wiser as compared to the gross mental and as it is open to the universal mind, it is capable of receiving inspirations from the higher planes of consciousness.¹

Sri Aurobindo opines that the acquisition of knowledge of extra-sensory objects can never be made by the gross senses, gross vital or gross mind. Such knowledge can only be acquired by the subtle senses, subtle vital and subtle mind. But he does mention that there is a strong link between the gross and subtle worlds due to which the impact of occurrences of events in this subtle world is sometimes felt in the gross physical world as well. That is why though it is possible to know of the extra-sensory objects in the subtle worlds, the same cannot be known in the gross physical worlds although an indistinct glimpse of it could be obtained. So these extra-sensory knowledge remains beyond our grasp. But Sri Aurobindo says that if the knowledge of these extra-sensory objects had been confined within the boundaries of gross physical worlds or exterior experiences then the horizons of our knowledge would have been quite restricted.

So it is clear from the aforementioned discussion as put forward by Sri Aurobindo that the acquisition of extra-sensory knowledge is not possible by the means of our exterior sense-experience. So a question persists: does it mean that we would have to rely solely on faith while dealing with extra-sensory knowledge? But we do know that no truth can stand solely on the basis of faith and that direct experience is the best means to know the truth. But it can be said that there is no conflict between the aforementioned views and those expressed by him for he has also shown the path to know the truth with the help of direct experience. The only difference is that the nature of the direct experiences which Sri Aurobindo has spoken of is different from those who accept the outer-sense experiences to be the only direct experiences. So a question arises: what is the real nature of the direct experiences as interpreted by Sri Aurobindo? In response to this query, it can be said that Sri Aurobindo has spoken of the inner perception while referring to direct experiences which are revealed from the innermost core of man's inner consciousness and through which we can realize the truth.

Sri Aurobindo states that it is generally accepted that the existence of anything of this material world depends on our external experiences. But truths which exist beyond the material world is not revealed through external experiences. The knowledge of the higher worlds can only be obtained through our experiences by extra-sensory or beyond-mental means. Sri Aurobindo says

¹ Rishabhchand, *The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 155.

that there are various layers of consciousness beyond the external consciousness of man. Among these layers of consciousness, there is one which is called the 'subliminal' layer which witnesses the events that take place in the higher worlds beyond the material plane although our physical mind gets no hint of it. This is because the physical mind has no relation with this subtle subliminal layer. So it is unwise to expect that one could know of the occurrences of the higher worlds through the physical mind.

Sri Aurobindo points out that beyond man's outer experiences there is a vast realm of consciousness where the inner experiences take place. These inner experiences are subjective and objective in nature. At the beginning of the inner experiences, the subjective experiences occur where we have a vague realization of the forces of the worlds beyond the material world. This means that in this layer of subjective consciousness, one does not acquire a formidable knowledge of the beyond-world forces but a mere subtle influence of it is felt on our actions. But, when the horizons of our inner experience widens further, then we have many experiences of these subtle worlds which exist beyond the material world and such experiences are called objective experiences. These are so termed because through such experiences, one comes to know of the subtle beings of the other worlds. Though these subtle beings have bodies as well but their bodies are not like the physical bodies of the material world. The bodies of such beings are formed by a subtle formation so one cannot know of a subtle body through the physical experience. Only if one transcends the natural experiences of the material world then only one can have subtle experiences. So it can be said, according to Sri Aurobindo's point of view, that the experiences of the physical world can be had through physical senses but those experiences which are not physical — that is, experiences which are of the subtle worlds — can never be had by the physical sense. Such experiences can only be had by the subtle senses. Sri Aurobindo says that some people have in certain cases such profound experience of these subtle worlds that these experiences cannot be merely dismissed as hallucinations. He mentions about it in *The Life Divine* that these experiences are '...too insistent, real, effective, organic in their pressure, too constantly confirmed by their action and results to be so flung aside...'¹

Sri Aurobindo says that the subtle beings of these subtle worlds, at times, exert their forces on the material plane and thus spread their influence. But such forces act upon us so secretly that our physical senses do not get a direct inkling about them. The forces of these subtle worlds can

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 807.

be both good and evil. Sri Aurobindo says that it is the conflict of the good and evil forces that bring about a progressive development in this world many a time. The combination of good forces strives to bring about a development of the individual consciousness while a combination of evil forces retards the progress of individual consciousness. Sri Aurobindo has termed these good and evil forces as 'divine' and 'anti-divine' or 'asuric' forces respectively. Apart from the good and evil forces, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of the existence of another form of forces also which belong not to the other worlds but lies in the heart of the material world in a dormant form. Such forces can be known not with the help of some subtle senses; by delving deep into the heart of subliminal one can have some direct knowledge of it.

Which was created first: the material world or the higher worlds?

If it can be said that as our very first acquaintance happens only with matter, so matter and material force is the source of all creation in this material world. It is after the creation of the material world that the other worlds have been created, or rather it can be said that it is as a result of the evolution of the material world that the higher worlds are created. But in that case, Sri Aurobindo points out, that the higher worlds cannot be addressed as subtle worlds any longer; they become as gross as the physical worlds. This means, just as the material world can be experienced with the help of our gross physical senses, likewise, it can be said that all the other worlds too can be experienced through the gross physical senses. But we don't experience these other worlds even today. Not only that, the process through which the material force created the higher worlds from matter also remains yet to be expressed.

Besides, Sri Aurobindo also says that when we would have an inner experience of the functions and nature of the higher worlds then only we would be able to realize that on this material world — which is given prime importance by us — none of the higher worlds are dependent. On the contrary, it is from these higher worlds that a pressure and influence is exerted on the material world due to which matter evolves into life and mind. For example, above the material world there is the life-world under whose influence the material world has evolved into the vital world. Beyond the vital world lies the mind-world due to the influence of which the vital gets evolved into the mind. Beyond the mind-world lies the Supramental world whose influence would, one day, evolve the human consciousness into the supramental consciousness.

As a result of such an evolution, darkness will be wiped out from the material world and a divine light shall descend on it and everything in this world would be transformed into a divine consciousness.

So, it is to be accepted that prior to the creation of the gross physical world, the subtle worlds are created. But here a question arises: how were these other subtle worlds created? Sri Aurobindo answers that at the time of the descent of the Spirit, its consciousness, power and light gradually becomes indistinct and limited. At last, when the Spirit descends into the material layer, it keeps itself completely involved. During its step-by-step descent, the Spirit becomes self-oblivious and at each step a subtle world is created by it. This means that the form of force and consciousness of every world is distinctly different. So, during its descent from the Supramental level or spiritual world (which is the receptacle of divine consciousness and force) to the mental world, the power and consciousness of the Spirit gradually become indistinct.

Likewise, when the Spirit further descends from the mental level to the vital world, its power and consciousness become even more indistinct and finally when it reaches the material plane, it becomes absolutely indistinct. So, here it is easily comprehensible that just like the physical world, the life-world and the mental-world are separate worlds which have been created during the descent of the Spirit. Sri Aurobindo says that each of these worlds have certain forces of their own which are capable of influencing its own worlds completely and the other worlds partially. This is because when the power of one world tries to influence another world, the power of the latter world offers resistance due to which the former power fails to cast its complete influence on the latter world. For instance, mental-world and life-world have their respective powers. When these worlds try to spread their influence on the physical world, the latter resists due to which the powers of the mental-world and life-world are manifested in the material world as abnormal and inordinate actions. What appears to us as inauspicious, unholy and dark forces are, as a matter of fact, the partial or tampered form of the forces of the higher worlds.

So, according to Sri Aurobindo, the concept of the other worlds is not a figment of imagination. These worlds can be realized — although partially — in the intuitive and overmental consciousness.

But here, certain questions occur to us in the natural courses which are as follows: Firstly, what exactly is the process of rebirth? Does the individual being take birth as soon as it dies or does the psychic being take rest in between life and death? Secondly, if the psychic being has to

take rest, then what is the process of taking this rest, that is, for how long does the psychic being take rest in the worlds beyond this earth? Moreover, on what basis is the resting period ascertained and to which worlds does the psychic being go to take rest? During the interim period of rest between death and the forthcoming birth, what are the various changes through which the psychic being proceeds?

What is the process of rebirth?

In response to the first question — i.e., does the individual being take birth soon after its body gets dissolved — Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being has to take rest in various worlds after death. This is because, from whatever experiences the psychic being acquires in the present birth, it rejects all those that are of no use and assimilates in itself all the necessary experiences and thus prepares itself for the next birth. And it is for this preparation that the psychic being has to take rest in between life and death. Sri Aurobindo also further remarks that if the psychic being is not sufficiently developed and if the vital and mental parts of the psychic being are not sufficiently developed in its earthly life, then it becomes impossible for the psychic being to travel to the other worlds which exist beyond this material world. Here a question arises: when can the psychic being be called sufficiently developed? Following the views of Sri Aurobindo, it can be said that when the subtle physical, vital and mental beings are sufficiently formed and developed, only then can it be said that sufficient development has taken place in the psychic being. Sri Aurobindo, however, also adds that during the course of the evolution of consciousness, the psychic being could remain undeveloped till it arrives at the human level, but once it reaches the stage of human consciousness, it becomes sufficiently developed and at each successive births, it develops steadily and substantially.

Here a question might arise: does the soul, having once reached the human stage, go back to the animal state or a far more inferior state in its next birth? Sri Aurobindo writes in one of his letters that although there is a general belief that a person may be born as an animal in its forthcoming birth, but in reality it does not happen so. What happens is that it is not the soul or psychic being that goes back to the animal state, but a part of the vital consciousness which might resurrect in an animal body or in an even more inferior state. To quote Sri Aurobindo's own words: '... the soul, the psychic being, once having reached the human consciousness

cannot go back to the inferior animal consciousness any more than it can go back into a tree or an ephemeral insect. What is true is that some part of the vital energy or the formed instrumental consciousness or nature can and very frequently does so, if it is strongly attached to anything in the earth life.’¹

While commenting on the journey of the individual being to the worlds beyond the material world, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of certain exceptional cases. If an individual being is extremely attached to worldly things, that is, if the worldly desires of the individual being are too strong or if a psychic being takes up a physical body for a very brief span of time, rather it can be said that it failed to acquire any substantial experience in a given birth — in such cases, the psychic being can immediately take birth in its erstwhile personality without travelling to any other worlds. He writes: ‘... such as a strong will of earthly desire pressing for fulfilment, which would enforce an immediate transmigration of the same persistent form of personality into a new body.’² This means that in such cases the psychic being does not have to go to some other worlds to take rest. Apart from these exceptional cases, Sri Aurobindo says that each time the psychic being takes up a new body in a new birth, it also takes up a new personality.

Process of the psychic being’s migration to the other worlds:

Sri Aurobindo accepts the existence of a subtle body beyond the gross physical body. With the help of this subtle body, the psychic being leaves the material world and travels to the other worlds taking the vital and mental sheathes along with it. It has already been discussed that Sri Aurobindo has spoken of the existence of the subtle physical world beyond this material world and subtle vital world beyond this subtle physical world and also of the subtle mental world which lies above the subtle vital world. With the help of the subtle body the psychic being travels to these subtle higher worlds. He says that ordinary evolving individuals cannot go to the Overmental or Supramental worlds which are above the subtle mental world. Only spiritually advanced people or Yogis are capable of reaching such higher worlds.

Here a question crops up: does the psychic being — which journeys to the higher worlds along with the vital and mental sheathes with the help of the subtle body — return to the earth

¹ *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 550.

² *The Life Divine*, p. 828.

bringing with it the same vital and mental sheathes? If the answer is given in the affirmative, then rebirth loses all significances because if the psychic being returns to earth bringing with it the same vital and mental sheathes, then the theory of the psychic being undergoing evolution in the higher worlds beyond the material world — due to which the path of evolution of the psychic being becomes easy in a new birth — lies refuted. Sri Aurobindo states that, ‘There must be an individuation of the psychic person itself sufficient for it not to depend on its past mind and life formations any more than on its past body, but to shed them too in time and proceed to a new formation for new experience.’¹ To explain it more vividly: Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being — after discarding the gross physical body — takes refuge in the subtle body and journeys to the worlds beyond the material world along with the vital and mental sheaths. In these higher worlds the psychic being evolves to a great extent. In other words, the preparation to take birth in a new body goes on in these higher worlds. But in these higher worlds, the psychic being discards the old vital and mental sheaths — just as it had given up its gross physical body — and creates a new formation for its forthcoming new birth with which it comes back to earth. Sri Aurobindo says that the psychic being ‘... throws off its mental and vital personality and goes into rest to assimilate the essence of its past and prepare for a new life. It is this preparation that determines the circumstances of the new birth and guides it in its reconstitution of a new personality and the choice of its materials.’²

To which worlds does the psychic being travel after death?

Sri Aurobindo writes that the nature of man is constituted of various complex elements. Man is constituted of physical, vital and mental beings and beyond these beings there is the psychic being. It has already been said that each and every being has a respective world of its own beyond this material world. For instance, vital beings have a vital world, mental beings have a mental world; similarly, the psychic being has a psychic world. But these are not the only worlds. This is because between the material world and the higher worlds beyond it, there are various subtle physical sub-planes which are constituted by the vital and mental elements of the material world. These subtle physical sub-planes act as a bridge between this material world and

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 829.

² *Letters on Yoga*, Volume I, p. 534.

the higher worlds beyond it; that is, through these subtle physical sub-planes communication flows between the earth and the higher worlds. Those mental beings who are quite gross in nature — meaning those whose consciousness has not developed and who are deeply habituated to vital interests or rather it can be said that their worldly hunger is extremely strong — such beings live in these subtle worlds after death. Not only that, such beings — instead of travelling to the higher worlds — directly take birth on earth. This is so because for such gross individual beings it is not possible to travel to the other worlds and prepare for its next birth. ‘It might then be possible,’ writes Sri Aurobindo, ‘for the mental being, so long as its mentality is not sufficiently developed, so long as it is restricted mainly to the more physical forms of mind and life activity, to be caught and delayed in these media. It might even be obliged to rest there entirely between birth and birth...’¹ However, it is to be mentioned here that just as rebirth has a special significance, similarly, the voyage to the other worlds beyond the material world too is equally significant. The significance of these higher worlds lies not in the psychic being’s mere gradual ascent to such worlds. Its significance lies in the fact that after death the psychic being travels to such worlds and rests there during which period it acquires strength so that the process of transforming consciousness is brought about swiftly. During its lifetime on earth, the influence of the higher worlds fall on the individual beings as a result of which a relation is established between the individual being and the higher worlds, which, in turn leads to the ascertainment of the span of tenure that the individual being would have in each of these worlds. Here, one may put a question: instead of travelling to the higher worlds, the individual being can rest in the material world. So what is the need to accept the higher worlds? Sri Aurobindo has answered this question. He explains that the higher worlds are far greater in strength as compared to the material world and that the psychic being travels to those higher worlds to accumulate strength so that its forthcoming birth becomes significant. The psychic being can never acquire those powers in the material plane which it can accumulate in the higher worlds. This is because when the spirit descends on the material plane it forgets itself completely; that is, in other words, as the material plane is the bottommost layer of the sequential descent of the spirit, so when the spirit descends in the material plane its consciousness gets totally veiled. That is why the manifestation of the consciousness of the spirit does not take place in the material world so the psychic being cannot accumulate strength in the material world only. So it has to be accepted

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 830.

that the psychic being has to travel to the higher worlds beyond the material world where the Conscious-Force of the spirit manifests in various worlds sequentially — such worlds which are far more powerful than this material world.

Besides, Sri Aurobindo says that at the time of its earthly existence, the individual being converts certain elements of the higher worlds into earthly realization. Whatever the individual being imagines in its earthly life, after death, his subtle beings based on those imaginations creates a world of imagination where it can spend some time as long as this world of imagination is not broken up by the pressure of the soul. In other words, during its lifetime the individual being has certain dispositions, notions, imaginations and desires of its own. After its death, its subtle physical being, vital being and mental being can create with the help of its dispositions, notions, imaginations and desires certain worlds of imagination which can be as beautiful as heaven or horrible as hell. But these worlds have no real existence. When the worlds of imagination gets disintegrated due to the influence and pressure of the individual soul, the real and spiritual momentum of the psychic being finds expression. Sri Aurobindo states that ‘For the image-making power of the human mind, its imagination, which is in its physical life only an indispensable aid to his acquisition of knowledge and his life-creation, may in a higher scale become a creative force which would enable the mental being to live for a while amid its own images until they were dissolved by the soul’s pressure.’¹ To explain it more vividly: during his lifetime, man’s imaginations and desires keeps him so overwhelmed that even after death he has to remain, for a while, as a captive in the artificial cage created by his imaginative power. To cite an instance: during his lifetime if a man craves to dwell in heaven, accordingly he imagines the various pleasures he would enjoy when he would be in heaven. Then after his death he would create a similar heaven-like world through his imaginative power where he could gratify his desires. Thus, after the death of the individual being, its subtle beings could create a world of imagination based on its desires for the gratification of the same.

But Sri Aurobindo says that even if man could satisfy his worldly cravings in the beyond-material worlds, yet, such worlds are not higher like the mental worlds or vital worlds. On the contrary, these worlds are subtle-worlds or intermediary worlds which lie between the earth and the higher worlds. Sri Aurobindo has called these subtle worlds ‘annexes of the Supra-physical world’. Thus the individual being ascends from the subtle world to the higher worlds following

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 830-31.

the profound attraction of the consciousness and thinks the imaginative world to be a continuity of its earthly life.

Sri Aurobindo opines that these subtle worlds could be called the beginning of an ascent towards the higher worlds. Beyond the subtle worlds lies the pure vital world. If the vital desires of the individual being are very strong and if such desires have greatly influenced him during his lifetime on earth, then the pure vital world would attract the individual being after his death as a result of which he would have to stay in the pure vital world for a while. Beyond the subtle world and the pure vital world lies the pure mental world and above it lies the worlds of higher consciousnesses like the Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind, Overmind and at the peak lies the Supermind. But only the yogis are capable of reaching the higher layers of the mental world. But as we are dealing with the process of rebirth of ordinary individuals so these higher layers of the mental world are excluded from the purview of our present discussion. We would discuss here primarily how the ordinary mental being evolves through rebirth.

Anyway, the individual being travels to the vital world where it casts away its vital sheath and rests awhile. From the vital world it goes to the mental world where it stays for some time. In the mental world it discards its mental sheath. But Sri Aurobindo says that if the individual being cannot transcend the boundaries of its mental realm during its lifetime on earth, then it would not be possible for it to cross the mental world and travel to the higher worlds after death. But if, by the virtue of sadhana, the individual being can surpass the mental boundary in its lifetime, then it could go to the mental world as well as to the higher worlds after death. But here a question persists: all those individual beings who are not capable of surpassing the boundaries of the mind, would their ascent be restricted only to the mental world? That is, if the individual being fails to transcend the mental world to reach the higher worlds beyond it, would it come back to earth from the mental world? In response to this question, Sri Aurobindo answers that if the mind is not adequately developed, it would not be able to go beyond the mental plane and retrace its movement back to the earth. ‘... it is not likely to live consciously there if there has not been a sufficient mental or soul development in this life.’¹ But, Sri Aurobindo has also said that ‘... man is not entirely mental: it is the soul, the psychic being, and not the mind, that is the traveller between death and birth...’² This means that it is not the mind of man but its psychic being

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 831-832.

² *Ibid.*, p. 832.

which treads on the path of life and death. If the psychic being progresses sufficiently in the material world then after death it can leave for the pure realm of the psychic world. And it is in this psychic world that the psychic being would undergo the preparation of its forthcoming birth. This means that for ordinary individuals like us, the psychic being travels step-by-step to the subtle world, vital world and mental world after death and after crossing them ascends further to the psychic world. He further adds that ‘There must then be a final resort to a plane of pure psychic existence in which the soul would await rebirth; there it could assimilate the energies of its past experience and life and prepare its future.’¹ At the time of crossing every higher world, the psychic being discards the temporary and unimportant parts of its former earthly existences. Similarly, on the path of its ascension, the psychic being discards its physical sheath, vital sheath and mental sheath in the physical, vital and mental worlds respectively and after assimilating the subtle essences of physical, vital and mental experiences as the ingredients to form its future life, it journeys to the psychic world. ‘... he would cast off his mind sheath and life sheath as he had already cast off his body sheath: but the essence of the personality and its mental, vital and physical experiences would remain in latent memory or as a dynamic potency for the future.’²

Sri Aurobindo says that at each and every birth, it is extremely essential for the psychic being to be free from the shackles of the physical attractions (like physical, vital and mental desires and cravings) of the former lives for the sake of its own development. And in such cases the influence of the higher layers of consciousness is of immense importance. This is because just as the physical desires of the individual being gets exhausted in the subtle physical after death, similarly, the vital and mental desires of the individual being gets exhausted in the vital and mental worlds. In this way the psychic being exhausts all the physical, vital and mental desires accumulated in its former life and then proceeds to the psychic world where it rests and after taking up a new formation returns to earth.

It might occur to us quite spontaneously that the various higher subtle worlds — about which Sri Aurobindo has spoken of — which exist beyond this material world and into which the psychic being takes the different subtle sheathes of man after death, do these world really exist or are they figments of Sri Aurobindo’s imagination? Was Sri Aurobindo a fiction-writer? In response to such a query we could say that these higher worlds are certainly not imaginary at all.

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*

It is observed that Sri Aurobindo has followed the traditional path of the Veda and the Upanishads to critically analyze rebirth and the existence of the higher subtle worlds. But in Sri Aurobindo's writings, we come across a unique interpretation which has brought in a novelty to these concepts. Through the study of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, we come to know of the existence of the different higher worlds. Also in the writings of different yogis and seers as well as in their conversations which they had with their followers, we come across the various details they have provided about the higher worlds the knowledge of which they have acquired through their spiritual realizations and by the virtue of their sadhana although each of them has given different names to such worlds based on their respective realizations. As Sri Aurobindo himself was a yogi, so the direct experiences he had of these higher worlds have been revealed by him in his writings; so it cannot be said that his views were merely figments of imagination.

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Chapter Seven

Karma and Rebirth

Sri Aurobindo's view on Karma:

In his book, *The Problem of Rebirth*, Sri Aurobindo writes that the theory of Karma has four essentially important pillars. He says that these four pillars are 'the four truths of the dealings of Self with Nature.'¹ First of all, an ordered energy — which works in the mental and moral world — ensures, through the law of cause and effect, the path towards the Divine. But here exists a possibility of the emergence of a problem. If the said energy is all-in-all and if man is created by this power, then he won't have any control or command over this energy. This point of view ascertains everything after evaluating the pre-determined consequence of Karma. This means, Karma will exert mastery over man as a result of which man will lose all supremacy over his own life. At this point, the second step of the doctrine of Karma comes into being. Sri Aurobindo says that the Idea or the Superior Intelligence creates all relations in this world. This Idea has been termed by him as 'Bhava' or 'Vijnana'. Man's own idea is the expression of that great Idea. This Idea exists in the root of all our actions. Man can transcend his present state of existence by the will and energy of Idea in him. The third stage says that the seed of all of man's actions lie within him only. Man's present state is the outcome of his soul's past idea and action. Likewise, man's future state would be the result of his present idea and action. Sri Aurobindo says: 'What I have become, I have made myself by the soul's past idea and action, its inner and outer karma; what I will to be, I can make myself by present and future idea and action.'² In the fourth stage, man arrives at the realization of his true self when he identifies himself with the realization of the spirit and frees himself from the shackles of action and proceeds to embrace the supreme divinity or the soul which is free from all bondages. All of our ideas and actions trace their source in this soul. This ever-free illumined soul is the Brahman. Hence, the four main aspects of Karma are *Shakti Spanda*, *Bhava Spanda*, *Atma Spanda* and *Brahma Spanda*.

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 81.

² *Ibid.*

According to Sri Aurobindo, the universal-force acts through three principles — Will, Karma and its Consequence. We know, from Sri Aurobindo's interpretation, that universal force is a universal consciousness. He has stated that man is a part of this universal consciousness. Here it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo has accepted the presence of consciousness in everything. When this consciousness takes form in the individual, it becomes the individual consciousness; similarly, when the consciousness takes form in the universe and beyond this universe, it becomes the universal consciousness and transcendental consciousness respectively. So there exists no difference in man's inner consciousness, the universal consciousness and the transcendental consciousness. That is why man has a profound connection with the world. The self-consciousness of man will enable him to blossom into a universal and transcendental consciousness. Therefore man has no existence which is sundered from the universe. Sri Aurobindo adds that the Will-Force of the eternal Spirit which acts very inherently in this universe will take form in man's life as well and Karma and its Consequences become the resultant of this Will-Force. According to Sri Aurobindo, man's life is both individual and universal. He says that man is independent in reality but the external personality of an individual is controlled by the laws of Nature. When the individual realizes an inmost connection with the universal consciousness and that eternity is his real nature then the life of man becomes universal. The freedom of the universal consciousness becomes its own freedom. As long as the individual consciousness looks outward, man fails to observe the truth of freedom and infinity. But when vision is turned inwards, man realizes that he is not controlled by the laws of Nature but is completely independent, free. While the external consciousness which enables man to realize himself subservient to the laws of Nature, the internal consciousness reveals to him that the laws of Nature are nothing but the Spirit's independent Will.

Therefore from the aforesaid discussion, it is clear that the significance of Karma and its consequences are of one type in a self-limiting consciousness and again, this significance of Karma as well as its consequences change in the expansion of this limited consciousness. In the limited consciousness, happiness and sorrow become the ultimate resultant of the consequence of action. But when this limited consciousness merges into the universal unlimited consciousness the appearance of the fruits of action change before us. Sorrow does not seem to be a result of our actions anymore. On the contrary, it seems that the divine consciousness, power and bliss of Spirit blossom through such painful experiences. Sri Aurobindo opines that action does not cease

its workings once it reaches the Universal Consciousness. For action then stops being a personal one and becomes universal in nature. Thus, universal action becomes man's own action. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: 'Karma and consequence draw their meaning from their value to the soul; they are steps by which it moves towards the perfection of its manifested nature. And even when this object is won, our action need not cease, for it will keep its value and be a greater force of help for all these others with whom in self we are one.'¹

Sri Aurobindo says that Karma is the active will-force of the Spirit and the consequence of this will-force gives rise to the results of Karma or it can be said that the Will of the Spirit finds expression through Karma and its consequences. If this will-force gets restricted in the boundaries of a limited consciousness, action seems to be a bondage. If action is realized as a will-force of the eternal, it becomes blissful. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: 'When the will is limited in mind, karma appears as a bondage and a limitation, consequence as a reaction or an imposition. But when the will of the being is infinite in the spirit, karma and consequence become instead the joy of the creative spirit, the construction of the eternal mechanist, the word and drama of the eternal poet, the harmony of the eternal musician, the play of the eternal child.'²

So, according to Sri Aurobindo, it is through Karma that the self-consciousness is blossomed. And this self-consciousness or self-knowledge evolves through the series of birth and rebirth until it arrives at complete fruition. But it would be erroneous to assume that the complete revelation of the soul happens to be the last word. On the contrary, with the complete revelation of the soul man shall attain the bliss and power of the Spirit. Sri Aurobindo has used the terms 'Shiva' and 'Shakti' [Kali] metaphorically. Shiva is the static mode of the Brahman while Shakti is the active mode of the Brahman. We have already discussed before that Shiva and Kali are the two aspects of Brahman and that these two aspects are one and blissful. In the state of inaction Shiva is blissful whereas Shakti finds bliss in action. Therefore when man attains that eternal delight (Ananda), he does not get mingled in the void as perceived by the Buddhists but becomes a partner in the joy of creation. But this joy of creation has not yet manifested in the limited mental plane of man because the Spirit lies concealed in him and man has to struggle all the time to seek it. Thus, the joy of creation gets translated into sorrow to him. Sri Aurobindo aptly remarks: '... let this struggling self-creator and doer of works once grow into the consciousness

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 99.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

and power of the secret infinite spirit within it and all this passion and suffering passes away into an immeasurable delight of liberated being and its liberated action.’¹

Relation between Rebirth and Karma:

Sri Aurobindo writes: ‘Rebirth is meaningless without karma...’² The theory of Karma and Rebirth is closely related to one another. However Sri Aurobindo has denied the claim that the individual being takes birth only to face the fruits of his actions. On the contrary, he points out that rebirth has a great purpose which is being fulfilled through the law of action. ‘... Karma is more than a mechanical law of antecedent and consequence.’³ This means that the law of Karma is not of prime importance here. What is of prime importance is the fact that through the law of Karma, the Spirit is fulfilling its grand purpose of bringing about a complete development of the individual being. For the fruition of its self-development, the individual being has to take birth repeatedly in this world and the process of rebirth is controlled by the actions of the individual being. Therefore, the fruitfulness of rebirth and the law of action lie in the self-development of the individual being.

Sri Aurobindo has further said that it is not that the actions of an individual being would impact only his life; he has also spoken of the connection between the actions of an individual being and those of collective humanity. According to him, just as an individual has a soul, so too does a society, nation and universal mankind. Similarly, just as an individual has some actions so does the human collectivity of this world. According to Sri Aurobindo: ‘Mankind itself has this separate collective soul and collective existence. And on that community the community of karma is founded...’⁴ This means that just as there goes on an indivisible continuity between the actions and its consequences in the life of an individual being, similarly, there takes place a continuity between universal actions and their consequences. Individual actions and those of a collective humanity are dependent on one another. The vibrations of actions of collective humanity (which is felt with the help of subliminal consciousness) are generated in the consciousness of the individual and thus makes him active. Likewise, the actions of an individual

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

are capable of impacting the consciousness of collective humanity. To quote the words of Sri Aurobindo: ‘... the action and development of the whole produces consequence of karma and experience for the individual and the totality even as the action and development of the individual produces consequences and experience for others, for the group, for the whole.’¹ Sri Aurobindo says that it is thus that collective consciousness is regulated through individual action while individual consciousness is regulated through collective actions and subsequently moves on the path of progress. Or it can be said that it is through the progress of individual consciousness and collective consciousness that the Spirit goes on manifesting itself.

We have seen in the previous discussion that the Spirit manifests itself universally on the one hand and individually on the other. Sri Aurobindo has said that it is through the progress of the individual consciousness that the Spirit can have a complete manifestation universally. And the progress of the individual consciousness takes place in this world through the rebirth of the individual with his Karma or action. So, the complete development of the consciousness of the individual being can never be done by excluding this world. That is why the aim of action is not to eradicate worldly bondage. On the contrary, its aim is to effectuate the self-development of individual consciousness so that it realizes itself to be one with everything of this universe. Sri Aurobindo aptly remarks: ‘The self-effectuation of the Spirit in the world is the truth on which we take our foundation, a great, a long self-weaving in time. Rebirth is the continuity of that self-effectuation in the individual, the persistence of the thread; Karma is the process, a force, a work of energy and consequence in the material world, an inner and an outer will, an action and mental, moral, dynamic consequence in the soul evolution of which the material world is a constant scene.’²

Sri Aurobindo’s Critical Analysis of the Materialistic and Spiritualistic View of the Law of Karma:

Materialistic Perspective:

The law of Karma is that behind every effect there lies a cause. It is viewed from two aspects — one is material and the other is spiritual. From the materialistic perspective, it is merely the

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

law of causation where every cause has an effect. To materialists, everything in this world is created and regulated by the law of causality and they also tend to explain every event on the basis of this law. Science too gives a similar explanation. But Sri Aurobindo points out that the law of Karma is not limited to this law of causality. He says that the materialists fail to answer where did this law come from and who created it. If the inconscient is capable of creating this law of causality, then it can also be argued that this law has been created by Chance (Yadricchā). Sri Aurobindo says that the materialists have, in a way, accepted this accidental or mechanical theory (Yadricchāvāda). When it is said that there lies no inspiration of a well-determined Will at the origin of events occurring in this world and that everything takes place abruptly, such a theory is known as Yadricchāvāda. Just as no well-disciplined and harmonized world can be created by Chance, similarly, the inconscient too is incapable of creating such a law because the inconscient does not have any will or purpose just like chance. Sri Aurobindo says that the views of materialists ultimately arrive at agnosticism because they have accepted that which is unknowable and indefinable behind the law of causality.

Sri Aurobindo says that though the same energy works throughout the universe, there are various planes in it. The same energy acts in different planes. In each plane the nature of the energy differs. For instance, the working of energy in material plane will differ from its working in the mental plane. But Sri Aurobindo remarks that as there lies the same conscious energy at the root of everything, so they are not separated from one another — it is the same energy which goes on working in matter and mind in various ways but interdependently. The consequences of action of every sphere is not dependent on the causality of that specific sphere only, it is dependent on the causalities of other spheres as well. Just as the consequences of mental energy are dependent on the causalities of the mental plane on one hand, similarly, on the other hand, they are also dependent on the causalities of the physical plane. Sri Aurobindo writes that in reality, the conscious-energy and the physical energy* work interdependently. The conscious-energy craves to break free from the clutches of matter but without separating itself from the latter; rather conscious-energy uses the physical energy as a vehicle of its inmost will.

* By Physical or material energy, Sri Aurobindo does not refer to the unconscious energy. To him, all energies are conscious. But the energy which works in matter apparently seems to be unconscious. However there lies a consciousness within it but as this consciousness lies hidden in matter it appears to be unconscious.

Spiritual Perspective:

The doctrine of Karma says that from the spiritual perspective there goes on an incessant working of an energy in this universe. This energy creates on one hand and destroys on the other. There exists a causal relation behind creation and destruction. What happens in the present is the outcome of a past action; similarly, the future action would be the outcome of a present activity. All these causes and effects are the workings of this energy. This working of energy or the effect of the working of energy does not necessarily occur in the external world only; it takes place in our inner consciousness too accordingly. Whatever happens here does not occur abruptly or suddenly. This doctrine states that things occur as a result of the law of causality which is a universal law. Here it is said that it is not only the fact that every cause has an effect, rather, here it is said that when the cause is put into action, one must suffer its effects. Karma here is the law of moral retribution. Radhakrishnan has called it ‘the law of the conservation of moral energy.’¹ It means that good deeds will generate happiness whereas evil deeds would lead to the attainment of grief. But Sri Aurobindo says: ‘...true ethics is dharma, the right fulfilment and working of the higher nature, and right action should have right motive, should be its own justification and not go limping on the crutches of greed and fear.’² The sense of dharma is closely associated with the surface mind. This sense of dharma has been established on the basis of man’s lower nature — greed and fear which are not ethical parts of spiritual consciousness. They are — on the contrary — the workings of the lower nature, that is, the animal-nature in man. But true dharma or ethics has been established in man’s inmost spiritual consciousness that is in *Para-Prakriti* and not in *Apara-Prakriti*, meaning, not on greed and fear of lower nature. By true ethics Sri Aurobindo has referred to that which is not related to our natural instincts, that is, the acquisition of worldly happiness and rejection of sorrows.

Again, in this theory of Karma, it is preached that the practise of ethical action produces righteousness while unethical action produces un-righteousness. But the mechanical aspect of this theory of Karma does not reveal its integral significance. Sri Aurobindo says that it would be untrue to claim that man’s sorrow and happiness are judged by his fruits of action. The conflict related to happiness and sorrow is actually the dharma of the lower strata of man’s

¹ Christmas Humphreys, *Karma and Rebirth*, p. 12.

² *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 113.

consciousness. But one must not forget that there exists the power of the higher layer of consciousness as well. This power too controls our action. Besides, the freedom of soul works in our action. There might exist a set of pre-fixed rules with regard to the actions and its consequences in the external world; but, in the inner world, the reaction of a particular action will depend on the person concerned. *Duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ* and *sukheṣhu vigata-sprīhaḥ* — one remains unperturbed in the states of sorrow and happiness. Man can conquer sorrow by endurance and vigour and he can also remain untouched when he is in a state of utmost delight. This means that in the material world, the laws of Karma can be mechanical but in the inner world it no longer remains so.

Sri Aurobindo says that in reality man is conscious, blissful and free. Sorrow-happiness, good-evil are the tendencies of man's nature. In the light of the higher consciousness man can conquer these tendencies and rise above them. Actually man tends to give an imaginary interpretation of the law of Karma based on the gains and losses he incurs in the short tenure of his earthly life but it would be erroneous to view this universal law of Karma from a narrow perspective. Sri Aurobindo remarks that the play of various energies acts in the different periods of man's life. There are several energies which are at play in a man's life. To judge or ascertain the consequences of these energies, one has to take into consideration all of them. No proper judgment can be arrived at if only one consequence is selected. Let's explain it by citing an instance. Suppose, a man is intelligent but lazy in nature. Just as he will reap the benefits of being intelligent, he will also face the consequences of being lazy. So, both the aspects of his personality have to be considered while ascertaining the impact of the law of Karma on him. So, opines Sri Aurobindo, one has to connect Karma (action) with these various phases of man's life and judge them accordingly; or else the doctrine of Karma becomes one-sided.

When one is in a lower state of consciousness, his way of seeing the world and life would differ greatly from his viewing of the same while in a higher consciousness. Therefore to ascertain aptly the significance of the law of Karma, one has to place the part into the whole, the infinitesimal into the vast. Only then would the doctrine of Karma be fruitful.

Rebirth and Karma as Interpreted by Buddhism and Māyāvāda:

Buddhism lays a great emphasis on man's freedom of will, moral effort, energy and activity. Man is only responsible to make his own destiny. Man is the owner of his actions (karma) because he is free to make himself pure or impure by his own good or bad volitions and actions. Though Buddhism does not accept the existence of an imperishable individual soul, it recognizes a continuous stream of energy in action which can be compared with a continuous flowing of a river or the continuous burning of a flame. It is the karma which makes a connection between one life of an individual and another. So, it is not the soul but karma that incarnates. Karma creates an ever-changing form of a mental and physical process. This constantly changing form which calls itself 'I' creates a knowledge of separateness which is caused by the continuous stream of *samskāras*. The Buddhists reject the immortality of the soul, but accept the continuity of personality.

Therefore, Karma leads to rebirth because it is only the Karma that transmigrates from one body to another. When a person departs and takes a new birth, he inherits his karma in that new body. According to Buddhists, rebirth happens due to Karma and it is not the eternal soul that transmigrates from one body to another. A continuation of the identical series of mental processes takes place. Rebirth occurs when the first mental act receives the causal energy of the last mental act (at the time of the latter's cessation) in a new embryonic germ-cell and when a conscious act emerges in a new organism, the last conscious act disintegrates. Neither absolute difference nor absolute identity is traced here. Rebirth involves the transmigration of character from the final conscious act in one life to the first conscious act in the forthcoming life. The concept of transmigration of a soul is explained in Buddhism by the instance of a lamp. Though the lamp burns all night, the flame of light does not continue all along but changes constantly. There is continuity but no identity in the lamps' various flames of light. Similarly, in the series of birth, there is no permanent identity of an unbroken continuation. In transmigration, the permanent soul has no identity though there is a continuity of the psychic series.¹

The concept of Karma in Buddhist philosophy has been viewed analytically by S. Radhakrishnan. According to him, Buddhism does not preach the journey of the soul from one

¹ Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, Volume II, p. 301.

life to another. It says that man's psychical life ends as soon as his physical sheath is dissolved when he dies; hence, the dead man does not take a new birth but a new man is born. In other words, the soul does not migrate from one body to another but the character moves on. Buddhism assumes but does not explain the mechanism through which the continuity of action (karma) is maintained in two lives sundered by death. Further, it states that a chain of natural causation links the successive births. When death occurs, there exists a force as a desire under which the scattered elements combine together. This force of attraction is called *upādāna*. Karma could do nothing without this force.

Māyāvāda also holds that man is bound by the Law of Karma. Every action produces its own result. Good actions render good results whereas evil actions give evil results. Man works according to his desires. When a man engages himself in virtuous deeds, he becomes righteous; similarly, he becomes unrighteous if he commits evil deeds. All actions, whether good or bad, lead to rebirth for righteous as well as unrighteous actions are motivated by the attraction of emotions and passions which arises out of desire. So, desire is the chief cause of transmigration. If desire is eradicated completely, all actions would lose their ability to produce virtuous or non-virtuous outcomes and as a result the process of rebirth will be stopped.

In the present birth, man enjoys and suffers for his actions performed in the previous births. Ignorance utilizes this mind-body complex as a medium to generate enjoyment and suffering based on the actions incurred in his previous birth.

According to Māyāvādins, the Law of Karma is dispensed with by God who allocates happiness and misery to individual souls on the basis of their virtuous deeds and evil actions. The individual souls who are responsible for their activities create or destroy their own fortunes as a result of their good or evil actions. The individual soul acquires demerits if it indulges itself in evil actions. Similarly, it acquires merits if it works according to Vedic injunctions and refrains itself from indulging in prohibited activities. Happiness and unhappiness which are produced by merits and demerits respectively are dispensed among earthly beings by God (who is the Lord of Karma) based on their actions in an unbiased manner. As actions are unintelligent, they are unable to reap the fruits of its workings in specific time and places without God's guidance. The individuals acquire their respective happiness and misery in accordance with their merits and demerits due to ignorance which functions through different types of organisms.¹

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

Here, the freedom of will enjoyed by an individual plays a pivotal role in this Law of Karma because the individuals are solely responsible for their actions. They are at liberty to select whether they would perform good or evil actions. They are governed by the dispositions (such as desires, impulses, etc.) of their previous births which they are capable of conquering and controlling and transcend their psycho-physical individuality as they are infinite in essence. After acquiring the knowledge of the Brahman, they can cease the ignorance which causes their individuality and become free from the realm of the Law of Karma.

According to Māyāvāda, it is the Jiva or empirical self that transmigrates at the time of the demise of the body. The empirical self — as it is distinct from the physical body — is imperishable although the physical body perishes. Birth is the union of the soul with the body while death is the separation of the soul from the body. In Māyāvāda it is said that the transmigration of the empirical self takes place with a subtle body which is transparent, irresistible and invisible. In other words, it is subtle in its essence and dimension. This subtle body carries with it the seed of the future body based on its merits and demerits (Karma) of its previous birth, hence, the future birth depends on the actions done in the present and past lives. At the time of transmigration, the empirical self is followed by Knowledge (Vidya), character (karma) and impressions of past experience (*purva-prajna*).¹

Sri Aurobindo's views regarding the Buddhist and Māyāvādin's Treatment of Karma and Rebirth:

Sri Aurobindo says that although Buddhism and Māyāvāda accept the law of Karma and the freedom of Will, they view the law of Karma and the freedom of Will as separate and absolutely opposite to one another. This is because in both these theories, it is said that as long as avidya or ignorance persists, man lies in enchainment by Karma. It seems as if such a captivity is the inevitable destiny of man. According to Buddhist philosophy, in a life engulfed in ignorance, just as liberation from action cannot be brought about so freedom too cannot be attained in this life. According to Buddhism, freedom means attainment of Nirvana. And Nirvana is the freedom from suffering. 'The Buddha himself,' writes Sri Aurobindo, 'it may be remarked, seems to have

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

conceived of Nirvana as a status of absolute bliss of freedom...'¹ But Sri Aurobindo says that Nirvana, as preached by Buddhist philosophy, seems to be the mere liberation from grief but it cannot be termed as freedom. This is so because such a concept of Nirvana through which one is liberated from the cycle of Karma — according to Buddhism — is not affirmative and is indefinable. In Buddhist philosophy we have seen that the attainment of liberation means attainment of the state of Nirvana where everything becomes extinct. For, Nirvana is a condition of which nothing whatsoever can be predicted, not even whether it exists at all or not. It is a state of extinction of everything. But, freedom means an affirmative permanent status about which Sri Aurobindo has said that it 'can only repose upon an affirmation, a permanence, not upon a negative and extinction of all affirmations...'² Buddhism preaches that the absolute freedom of consciousness lies beyond this world and this freedom takes place in this world when the chain of Karma is shattered and ignorance is eradicated. But Sri Aurobindo says that according to Buddhism nothing is permanent.

Sri Aurobindo observes that it is in Māyāvāda where we come across an affirmative aspect in which the existence of an eternal soul is recognized and it is this eternal soul which is capable of attaining eternal freedom. But this freedom means the extinction of Karma. Here it is said that the individual being — which is eternal in its own nature, has its real self veiled by Māyā. Thus, the individual being loses all freedom as it becomes engulfed in ignorance and is enslaved by the shackles of action. Or, it can be said that it is due to ignorance that the individual being becomes active. But when the individual being is freed from Māyā and ignorance, it also gets freed from the shackles of action and attains liberation from the bondage of births in this world. Here too the meaning of liberation is to become free. So, freedom of Spirit lies beyond this world and not within it.

Sri Aurobindo says that the two abovementioned theories would never be able to refute the fact that there exists the freedom of will in the individual being. Everything depends on the discretion of the individual being. If it wants, it can strive to seek liberation and at the same time it can opt to remain a slave of human bondage. So it has the freedom to regulate action as per its own discretion. He also writes that actually there exists deep within our mental consciousness, an infinite freedom which enables us to steer the laws of nature as willed by us. This freedom is,

¹ *The Problem of Rebirth*, p. 85.

² *Ibid.*

in fact, the nature (dharma) of the mind because in the world of matter we find no sign of this freedom. The world of matter works on its own rules — there exists no intelligent aim or objective there. But there exists in individual life an infinite potentiality to liberate itself from the bondage of Karma. No matter how formidable the grip of bondage of Karma is, the individual being feels the inspiration to break out of it within itself. Sri Aurobindo opines that there is no distinction between this absolute freedom and the law of Karma. From the exterior point, man might seem to be controlled by the law of Karma but this Karma is, in reality, the independent action of its inmost soul. Sri Aurobindo says that Karma and Freedom are not separate; rather, ‘...that behind and even in Karma itself there is all the time a secret liberty of the indwelling Spirit.’¹

So, apparently it seems that man is controlled by Karma and that the law of Karma binds man. But as the mind looks deep within, it realizes that the law of Karma is not a bondage in reality; on the contrary, it is an instrument by which one can reach their goal. Sri Aurobindo says that when the mind turns inward, it feels the absolute freedom of the Spirit; this same freedom determines action. He also says that at the root of this world there lies a well-defined objective. In order to translate this objective into an attainable reality, freedom has created the rule of action. So, the law of Karma is controlled by absolute freedom but not vice versa.

Sri Aurobindo says that there are two aspects of man: one is the external which is constituted by body, life and mind. This external being is the instrument of Nature. The external nature of man is stricken with ignorance and thus it becomes enslaved by the law of Karma. Sri Aurobindo has called man a slave of Nature which means in the material world, he is controlled by Karma. The other aspect of man is his inner being which is independent and spiritual. This inner being is beyond Karma. To the inner being, this Karma is only an instrument by which it proceeds on the path of rebirth to realize the integral freedom. Sri Aurobindo observes that Spirit is the power of knowledge and it is this power only which is absolutely free.

So man is not absolutely free. But an inkling of absolute freedom does occur to man or else there would have no joy or inspiration in action. This means that some distinct indication of eternal freedom can be found in the realm of our superficial mind. As our superficial mind is a captive of ignorance and ego, hence it is not absolutely free. In fact, it is a slave of action. Sri Aurobindo says that eradication of the bondage of such ignorance and to proceed towards the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

power of Knowledge is the only objective of human birth. So, man would truly become free only when he would be able to surpass his egoistic personality and transcend beyond the mental realm which is the kingdom of the Spirit. That is why Sri Aurobindo has said: 'A real freedom comes when we get away from the mind into the life of the spirit, from personality to the Person, from Nature to the lord of Nature.'¹

According to Sri Aurobindo, one can be free in both the spheres of action and inaction. In the field of Karma or action, freedom means proceeding towards unending action uninterruptedly. It means action is under the domination of man but man is not under the domination of any action. In other words, instead of becoming a slave of action, if one strives to act incessantly this would denote a form of freedom. Again, the independent will to become free from performing any action is another form of freedom. It means man would not let any wave of action arise in him — such is the freedom of his will. If man can have absolute control over these two forms of freedom, the attainment of integral realization would be possible.

Sri Aurobindo's arguments against the Prevalent View of the Law of Karma:

According to Sri Aurobindo, there is a general notion which has been prevalent in the minds of ordinary individuals since ages that human beings depart to heaven and hell based on the results of their actions in this world and they take birth on earth repeatedly to face the consequences of their actions. As per this generally believed theory, if one does good deeds in one birth then not only does he go to heaven — the supposed land of perpetual happiness — after death but also enjoys happiness and prosperity as a result of his past actions in the forthcoming birth. Similarly, it is also believed that if one indulges in evil actions, then he goes to hell after death where he is made to suffer in a thousand and one ways and then he takes birth on earth again to suffer and perish as a consequence of his past actions. Thus, as long as the desires and cravings of man are not gratified or rather it can be said that until ignorance is cast away, man would have to come back to earth to face the consequences of his actions. But Sri Aurobindo opines that one comes across a system of two-fold punishment and reward in this aforementioned theory. A man would go to heaven after death as a result of his good deeds and then he would take birth on earth to enjoy the fruits of his past good deeds whereas evil actions would take him to hell where

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

he would be made to suffer and as an extension of his sufferings he would take birth on earth to spend his earthly life amid penury and sorrow — this concept of law of action is not acceptable to the rational mind for it seems that the individual soul takes birth on earth only to suffer or enjoy the consequences of its actions within a well-defined system of calculation or to undergo ethical lessons in earthly life. Sri Aurobindo has put forward some arguments while refuting this theory. Man — being the possessor of divine powers which have although not manifested completely — would take birth on earth only to face the consequences of his past actions and that there is no other objective of his taking birth — such an assumption is not acceptable too. The arguments put forward by him are as follows:

Firstly, when a man indulges into any action irrespective of the fact whether the said action is good or bad, then it is wrong to presume that only he would enjoy the fruits of his actions or suffer for the same. This is because apart from the doer of actions those who are around him also enjoy the fruits of his actions. When an individual is rewarded for his good deeds, the benefits of the reward are enjoyed by his relatives, friends and acquaintances. Similarly, when an individual does anything bad he is not the only who is punished but those around him also faces the consequences of his actions. So it cannot be said that only the doer of action would take birth repeatedly to face the consequences of his actions.

Secondly, Sri Aurobindo says that the world has been considered only as a sphere of ethical judgment in the aforesaid belief. It seems as if the world has no other purpose and that it exists only to serve as a place where the individual being faces the fruits of his past actions. But Sri Aurobindo points out that beyond the cosmos there is a Cosmic Being on whose directions all the laws and regulations of the cosmos are executed. This world never functions like a machine — no laws function mechanically — beyond all laws there lies hidden a Cosmic Being under whose divine direction the cosmos functions. Not only that, men who are known to be the combination of physical body, vital and mind — beyond them lies the psychic being or *chaitya purusha* which goes on progressing from one birth to another. This psychic being is not regulated by any mechanical law of action or it can be said that no shackles of karmic law can enslave the psychic being. By this statement Sri Aurobindo tries to explain that our present life has taken shape as per the consent of the psychic being only and not by any mechanical law. Let's explain it more elaborately.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the psychic being — which is present in us — proceeds from one birth to another to bring about a complete manifestation of itself. But here a question emerges. If the psychic being determines how each birth would take shape, then does it imply that the law of action has no importance in our life? Sri Aurobindo replies in the affirmative but also adds that the life of man is not controlled by the law of action. He says that within each human being there lies a divine consciousness, a divine will and a divine impulsion or it can be said that the Supreme is seated within us. It has already been said before that the psychic being is a spark of this Supreme. This divine consciousness, divine will and divine impulsion utilizes karma or action from within like an instrument to accomplish its divine mission or purpose. And what is this divine mission? It is to bring about the self-revelation of the Divine on earth. So, action is the instrument while divine consciousness, divine will and divine impulsions are executioners of this instrument. Sri Aurobindo says that action is mechanical but divine consciousness, divine will and divine impulsions are spiritual as they have a divine purpose. Action is the material part of our being and this material part is the exterior side of the said being. Behind this material being lies the vital being and mental being which acts as the controller of our destiny as long as the complete manifestation of the psychic being does not take place. When the psychic being manifests fully, it becomes the absolute controller of destiny. So Sri Aurobindo writes that it cannot be accepted that action is the sole controller of our life. To quote his own words: ‘Karma, then, — or at least any mechanical law of Karma, — cannot be accepted as the sole determinant of circumstances and the whole machinery of rebirth and of our future evolution.’¹

Sri Aurobindo further adds that one cannot explain the complex evolutionary theory of Nature with the help of such simple, prevalent theories of law of action. He points out: ‘Action is a resultant of the energy of the being...’² — this means that any person can give form to action by exerting his force. It is obvious that the result of the energy would be proportional to the energy exerted. This energy is varied in Nature — the individual being as it is a combination of physical body, vital and mind, so it possesses physical energy, vital energy and mental energy. The resultants of such energies too are different. For instance, the quest for truth or acquisition of perfect knowledge can be brought about by exerting mental energy. In other words, the result of

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 841.

² *Ibid.*

exerting mental energy leads to the acquisition of knowledge. Similarly, the results of exerting vital energy and physical energy lead to the gratification of desires and acquisition of physical strength. So, energy is the cause whereas its outcome is the effect. It is the natural law of Nature that benefits would be reaped according to the energy exerted. But the consequence of such energies in the life of man involves certain complexities. Along with one energy many other energies are also at play. For instance, as Sri Aurobindo says, if a person is honest and good-natured but is, at the same time, weak and stupid, then he cannot expect to attain strength and knowledge from Nature as reward for being good and honest. It is logically acceptable that the merits of only that energy will be obtained which one would strive to attain. The person in question is weak and stupid as well so the consideration of only energy would not suffice. As many energies work in him so it is to be analyzed which energy has influenced him the most.

So it would be an error to judge the complicated diversity of consequences of actions of the energy only in terms of sin-virtue and punishment-reward. The vast and varied activities of Nature cannot be judged solely by considering the fruits of action. If it is so done, then it can be said that the foundations of prevalent laws of action are quite weak. This is because we try to judge the vast, diversified activities of the cosmos which are governed by a divine cosmic intelligence with the help of our limited mental faculty and restricted knowledge. And here lies the limitations of this law of action. Sri Aurobindo says that Nature has various energies and the consequence of each energy, too, is varied. But one tends to emphasize only on two consequences — righteousness and unrighteousness, virtue and sin, auspicious and inauspicious and bliss and sorrow. But by considering only two of the aforementioned consequences, an attempt has been made to illustrate an equation between them. Virtuous deeds lead to the attainment of bliss and sin leads to punishment — these two outcomes are, as it were, the ultimate justification of Nature.

One might wonder: is there no iota of truth in the law of action? Sri Aurobindo says that in this vast play of Nature, a consistent connection can be observed between sin-virtue and happiness-sorrow in a certain layer although he does not call it a 'rigidly fixed law of correspondence'. We can interpret Sri Aurobindo's explanation as follows: it is an innate demand and belief of the vital part of our being that the consequences of virtuous deeds lead to the attainment of reward whereas sinful actions lead to punishment. And Nature too reacts positively in response to our belief and demand. This is so because, Sri Aurobindo explains, as

the consciousness of Nature and our own consciousness both are the becomings of the same Consciousness-Force, so Nature acts in support of our demands and desires. For instance, if someone abides by the law of Nature and does not ignore or oppose it and acts in favour of Nature's law, then Nature certainly helps him to gratify his needs. But if someone goes against the law of Nature and tries to cause harm to others under the influence of vital egoism for the accomplishment of his own goals, then Nature too revolts against him. Thus his powers are overpowered by Nature by the virtue of its rod of punishment. So, if the powers of Nature are mis-utilized then Nature certainly, as a means of reaction, takes steps to punish him. Such a reaction of Nature could follow him in his forthcoming birth as well. Sri Aurobindo writes about it: 'This reaction to his energies may come upon him in another life and not at once, it may be a burden of consequence he takes up in his return to the field of these Forces...'¹

Apart from it, Sri Aurobindo also says that rebirth occurs to enjoy or suffer the fruits of action is also unacceptable because no one can recall which action of his previous birth is entitling him to certain privileges or punishments in his present birth. Let's explain it in simpler terms. It is generally presumed that we — the ordinary individuals — take birth only to bear the outcomes of actions of the previous births. But we cannot recall the consequence of which action in our previous birth is causing the occurrence of happiness and suffering in our present birth. Those who believe in the law of Karma (action), that is, those believers who know for certain that rebirth happens only to go through the fruits of actions of the past birth — would certainly admit that there is a purpose which lies concealed in the law of Karma. But what is that purpose? It could be expressed thus: the doer of evil actions in a previous birth is made to suffer in the present birth so that his character could be re-shaped or developed for his own benefit. And the one who has been the doer of good deeds in the bygone birth is being rewarded in the present birth for being good. Now the problem lies in the fact that those who have no recollections of past life would never comprehend that he is suffering in this present birth due to his deeds in a past life. It can be said that there are no means by which one may ascertain the extent of good or bad deeds of the past life to judge the degree of prosperity or penury one enjoys or suffers in the present life. So, the virtuous one who has worked honestly in the present life, through his sufferings gets his character cleansed in the present life and the sinner, who indulged in dishonest actions, is rewarded by prosperity for his past-life actions — such a theory is difficult to accept.

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 845.

Again, it might occur to one that as there remain no memories of past births, so rebirth has no importance. This is because, if there had been any memories of past births, then one could have chalked out the course of actions in the present birth based on the memories of the bygone births so that the memories of past births would have facilitated the decision-making process as to which action would lead us to the attainment of happiness and which would lead us to sorrow. But such an opportunity does not remain at our disposal in the present birth due to the lack of past births' memories. So it can be argued: what is the necessity of rebirth in the development of consciousness? Sri Aurobindo answers that the aforementioned view considers rebirth to be a means of attaining happiness and sorrow only; as a result the indispensability of rebirth has been ignored. The fact that rebirth is an indispensable tool of spiritual evolution has not been realized here at all. Apart from it, he also adds that even if the memories of the past lives were alive, then too we would have faced varied problems. Although Sri Aurobindo says that all the memories of the former births lie dormant within the psychic being or subliminal consciousness but the exterior mind — through which our day-to-day activities take place — does not have access to the past memories which are preserved in the psychic being or subliminal consciousness. As a result of it we assume that there are no memories of previous births in us. Sri Aurobindo has appropriately explained the benefits of the non-remembrance of the memories of past lives. In any case we find it tough to retain the memories of our present life in a proper sequence and if the memories of the past lives were also to be remembered, such an act would have jeopardized us. Also, Sri Aurobindo says that the memories of past lives act as a hindrance as attachment to such memories hampers the spiritual progress of the individual personality. Hence, memories of past life are of little significance and not needed much. Sri Aurobindo says that the progress of the individual personality depends on the progress of the psychic being. And in the progress of the psychic being the influence of all the memories of past lives is meaningless. The individual being only makes good use of the results of becoming of the past and thus proceeds towards the future.

So, based on the aforesaid discussions we can arrive at the conclusion that the way Sri Aurobindo has presented before us the relation between karma and rebirth none has perhaps been able to do it in the past with such precision. He has shown to us the possibility of physical immortality which could be brought about only by rebirth and how karma acts as a supporting

instrument to achieve this goal. Through various births we shall advance towards knowledge — the light of which would enlighten us to conquer death one day.

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Chapter Eight

Conclusion

So far we have discussed why does creation take place, what purpose is served by it and how rebirth acts as an indispensable means in creation in the light of Sri Aurobindo's teachings. In the previous discussions, we have seen that Sri Aurobindo has said that through the process of rebirth, consciousness would be evolved or transformed into supramental consciousness. He says that consciousness does not attain its absolute form unless it is evolved into the supramental consciousness. If by the complete manifestation of consciousness we meant only the mental consciousness, then evolution would have been meaningless, rebirth would have been devoid of any significance and above all, human life too would have been without any fruition. Sri Aurobindo opines that the complete fruition of human life would take place only when mental consciousness would be transformed into supramental consciousness which, in turn, would manifest upon earth. He further says that if we have an in-depth observation of this phenomenon, it would come to our notice that through the process of rebirth, mind, life and body goes on evolving gradually towards a divine perfection — the attainment of which is the sole objective of evolution. Sri Aurobindo has explained that ascension to the supramental consciousness means attainment of absolute freedom and it is in this process of attainment of perfection that the significance of rebirth lies.

In the previous discussions we have seen already that Sri Aurobindo has said that the absolute conscious-power has involved into matter through mind and vital. This means that as consciousness is hidden into matter by veiling its real nature, hence matter appears to be inconscient to us. So, what appears to be inconscient is, in reality, not inconscient for consciousness exists in it in a hidden manner. Matter appears to us as inconscient because we are sunk deep into ignorance and hence cannot realize the truth. Sri Aurobindo says that through the process of rebirth, we are evolving from ignorance to knowledge and proceeding towards the absolute consciousness. The absolute consciousness-force — which was involved in matter — goes back to its real self through the process of evolution. So, the ascension to the supramental consciousness does not mean transforming it into a new consciousness; it is in reality the

manifestation of that consciousness which lay unmanifested or unfolded. From this perspective, rebirth can be called the ‘unfoldment of consciousness’, because, according to Sri Aurobindo, in every birth the ascension of consciousness occurs. And thus, in every birth, slowly, through the gradual progression of consciousness the individual being or Jiva goes back to its real self. Going back to the real self of the individual being means returning to that absolute consciousness which Sri Aurobindo has termed as the Supramental Consciousness. Therefore, one could ask: if the objective of evolution is transformation into the Supramental Consciousness, how would the material world be affected when consciousness would be transformed into Supramental Consciousness or when this Supramental Consciousness would manifest itself upon earth? What is the difference between our present state of consciousness and the Supramental Consciousness? And what would be the features of the Supramental being that would manifest on earth? The answers to all such questions would be dealt with in the following segments.

Gnostic Being

Sri Aurobindo has called the ‘Supramental Being’ or ‘Divine Being’ as the ‘Gnostic Being’. According to him, the life of a Gnostic Being would be that of an indivisible unity. As the Supermind is completely opposite to the mental realm, what appears to the mind as completely different or contraries, the Supermind looks at the same as something united and indivisible. The Supramental life would be such that there would be no conflicts in it — neither within, nor without, neither in the inner world nor in the external world. This is so because all differences are outcomes of our ego-sense. Petty desires, cravings, dissatisfactions, sorrows — all these are part of human ego and ignorance. But the Gnostic Being would neither have any ego-sense nor any form of ignorance, no disunity or conflicts would arise in it. In fact, it would view everything from a perspective of supreme unity.

The Gnostic Being would be the individual, collective and universal forms of the Supreme. Just as it would, on one hand, be able to feel and realize the divine presence in entirety in all its being including the physical, vital and mental selves, similarly, on the other hand, it would be one with the universal and transcendental forms of the Supreme and work according to the will of the Supreme. The divine love in its heart would spread out all over the world; everything of

this world would be linked with its own soul and so it would feel itself to be one or united with everything of this world.

Here a question crops up: would the Gnostic Being be personal or impersonal? Sri Aurobindo has answered that by personal we mean the egoistic personality and when this ego-sense gets submerged in the universal consciousness, the personality too loses its existence for good. So, personality and impersonality appears as opposites in our mental consciousness. But, in the Supramental Consciousness, there is no conflict between the personality and impersonality. There is, to quote the words of Sri Aurobindo, ‘no opposition, no incompatibility, no impossibility of a coexistence or one-existence of the Impersonal and the Person.’¹ The Impersonality is an existence, a force and a consciousness. This Impersonality has various forms. To create its personality, the individual being takes up a distinctive form although each and every form is impersonal and universal. Sri Aurobindo has tried to explain this point by citing a beautiful instance of a warrior and a lover. The nature of a warrior is that of valour and courage while that of a lover is endearment. Sri Aurobindo has called endearment and courage as impersonal and a distinct force of nature. Neither love nor courage is personal; they are, on the contrary, impersonal forces. Each of these forces is adopted by persons to form and develop their personalities. The warrior adopts the impersonal force of courage to develop his personality and so does the lover by adopting the force of love. In other words, the impersonality is borne by the person. Though there takes place the manifestation of each of such well-defined forces in every individual or person, but that does not mean that he would be in possession of that specific force only. In fact, there are innumerable possibilities of manifestation of infinite forces within him. He is much more than all the manifested forces in him. In other words, every individual or person is the receptacle of impersonal forces and that impersonality lies within the personality.

Sri Aurobindo has said that God or the Supreme or the Divine manifests Himself as Sat, Chit, Ananda, Wisdom, Love and Beauty but although these attributes are His impersonal forces, we cannot term Him as an impersonal state or quality. This is because the Divine is a Supreme Being. On one hand, he is transcendental and on the other hand, he is universal and individual. To quote Sri Aurobindo’s own words: ‘... he is not himself an impersonal state or abstract of states or qualities; he is the Being, at once absolute, universal and individual.’² Just as there is no

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 1029.

² *Ibid.*

conflict between personality and impersonality in the Divine, similarly, in the Gnostic Being too, there would be no clash between the personality and impersonality. To Sri Aurobindo, the Gnostic Being is the ‘conscious expression of the universal and the transcendent.’¹ The Gnostic Being cannot be limited or confined within certain specific qualities, nor can some qualities be its finest definition. The consciousness of the Gnostic Being, moreover, is infinite.

According to Sri Aurobindo, in the life of the Gnostic Being, there would be no conflict between sin and virtue because its life is absolutely complete so the question of any morality does not arise in it. It is only in the life of an incomplete being that the necessity of morality arises because there exist possibilities of conflicts between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, sin and virtue, etc. Due to the absence of ego and ignorance in the Gnostic Being, all its actions are spontaneous expressions of Truth so there would neither be any doubt or scepticism in its actions nor would arise any question of morality nor any sense of sin and virtue, right or wrong.

Sri Aurobindo believes that all the Gnostic Beings would not be of the same type. Every such being would certainly be marked by certain differences. But in spite of such differences there would exist an oneness and unity between them. Sri Aurobindo writes about it in *The Life Divine*: ‘... the individuals would not be cast according to a single type of individuality; each would be different from the other, a unique formation of the Being, although one with all the rest in foundation of self and sense of oneness and in the principle of his being.’² Apart from it, Sri Aurobindo has also spoken of certain physical attributes of the Gnostic Being in his book entitled *The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth*. He writes in this book that the Gnostic Being would have a body of light; this body would be free from redundant organs. It would also be free from the pangs of hunger and thirst. There would be no requirement to speak — whenever anything has to be conveyed, it would be communicated directly. The body of the Gnostic Being would be plastic in the sense that it would not be vulnerable to any touch nor to any attack from external sources. It would also be able to expand or reduce its physical size as per its own discretion and adapt itself to changing climates whenever necessary. And finally, the body of the Gnostic Being — which would be a divine body — would be able to conquer death and enjoy physical immortality.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1030.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1006.

But we have to remember that Sri Aurobindo has never said that following the manifestation of the Supramental Consciousness, all the layers of consciousness would be transformed into the Supramental Consciousness and that there would be no life of lower consciousness on earth after its descent. He says that even after the advent of the supramental species, just as the ignorant beings would continue to exist, similarly, there would exist a stage which would be an intermediary between knowledge and ignorance. But the difference between the world of today and that which would take shape following the manifestation of the Supramental Consciousness is that: the conscious-force which lies hidden within the inconscient and ignorance would become active very swiftly due to the influence of the Supramental truth. And everything of this world would begin to become resplendent due to the Supramental light. Also, as a result of it, conflicts which plague the world today would be replaced by harmony and integrity and the power and beauty of this world would increase significantly.

Divine Life

Through his interpretation of the theory of rebirth, Sri Aurobindo has attempted to bring to light the significance of human life. Sri Aurobindo remarks that the Supramental Consciousness is the only Truth-Consciousness which lies hidden in everything. And the complete manifestation of this gradually manifesting Truth-Consciousness is the ultimate outcome, or rather, the only significance of human life which is slowly being translated into reality through rebirth. The life enriched by Supramental Consciousness has been termed as the 'Divine Life' by Sri Aurobindo. In this divine life, just as all the beings of man like his physical, vital and mental sheathes would be transformed, likewise, the external world too would be transformed. The creation of a new species and the emergence of a new worldly life — this is the aim of complete transformation. Such is the divine intention, the divine purpose that both the internal and external lives would be transformed. But here it is to be remembered that until the individual being's inner life has been sharpened, his outer life cannot be changed. This is because he who is himself incomplete cannot bring about a complete change in the outer world. According to Sri Aurobindo, in order to attain a divine life, the individual being has to plunge inwards and know its true self. As a result of this turning inwards, man's ego-centric external consciousness will be freed from the clutches of narrowness and would become one with the universal consciousness.

The divine life would be a life of perfection. And to attain this life of perfection, one has to establish unity with all the consciousness, power and bliss of the world and realize itself to be one with them. To attain the divine life, the purification of one's inner life is necessary and it is through rebirth that one's inner life is gradually purified. In other words, through rebirth the shackles of ignorance are discarded for good and thus an inner life can be carved out and subsequently one's external life too would be changed.

Sri Aurobindo has said that deep within every individual being, there lies seated a divine truth the quest of which or whose manifestation is not only the sole significance of human life but it is also the very objective of every birth. If the manifestation of this truth cannot be brought about in a single birth, then one has to take birth again and again to accomplish it. Thus, until the absolute truth is not revealed or manifested, one has to proceed continuously through the process of rebirth. Sri Aurobindo says that the absolute truth is that through the manifestation of which we would realize that this world is the manifestation of the Brahman. The divine being would be realized in everything and that everything would be felt to be one and the same with oneself. This attainment of absolute perfection has been called the divine by Sri Aurobindo and this life is the final outcome of human life. And rebirth is the indispensable means to achieve it.

Sri Aurobindo has said that the life of a supramental being or Gnostic Being is called the divine life. If one has to point out the differences between the present life and the divine life in a single phrase, then it can be said, following Sri Aurobindo's words, that the present life is an incomplete life whereas the divine life would be a complete life. This is so because in our present life, the manifestation of the complete being or the spiritual being — which is seated within us — does not take place completely whereas the same manifestation takes place completely only in the divine life. While defining the divine life, Sri Aurobindo has not referred merely to a couple of stray but fully manifested individual lives; on the contrary, he has said that the divine life would commence with the advent of a race or society of Gnostic Beings and their social lives would be far greater than the present individual or collective lives of men. In this divine Gnostic life, every being would consider itself to be the various forms of the same Spirit or Truth; each would consider the other to be one and inseparable and there would exist a sense of unity among them.

In this context, it is essential to mention that there is no similarity between the prevalent concept of the Superman as preached by Fredrick Nietzsche, the famous German philosopher,

and the Superman or Gnostic Being whose advent Sri Aurobindo has written about. Nietzsche's Superman will be a power-hungry, egomaniac and ignorant being who would consider himself far superior than others and would also be in possession of titanic powers. If such a Superman emerges as a result of evolution, then it is to be understood that man, instead of progressing further, has regressed so much that it has gone back to its former state of barbarism. The real aim of evolution is spiritual progress due to which the ego-sense garbed in ignorance can be surpassed but to be under the spell of ego would mean not a spiritual upliftment but descent towards regression.

Is There Any Epistemological Truth in Rebirth?

Let's now see whether there is any epistemological truth to support Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth, or rather, whether the acceptance of rebirth can be established with the help of any firm logical arguments. To the seers and yogis of ancient India, rebirth happened to be an accepted reality as it was based on direct experience. But what about us — ordinary, rational individuals? Are there any valid evidences by which rebirth can be proved to be a reality?

As supporting arguments in favour of Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth, certain *sutras* from Pātanjal-Yogā, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Upanishads have been discussed here. In Indian philosophy, various schools of thought have presented their logical arguments in favour of rebirth. With the help of these arguments, rebirth can be easily inferred. The arguments put forward by Patanjali, the yogi-philosopher of ancient India, appear to be quite convincing to us. Patanjali says that in the *citta* of every individual being, there are five inborn *kleśas* or afflictions such as *avidya*, *asmita*, *raga*, *dvesa* and *abhinivesa*. These are the natural instincts of every individual being. There is not a single being in whom the seed of such afflictions are absent. Of these five *kleśas* Patanjali has talked of *abhinivesa* or the fear of death while presenting his arguments inferring rebirth (Sutra 4/10). According to him, every individual being of this world — ever since its birth — suffers from fear of death and this fear lies within him as an instinct. Science has described this fear of death as the 'instinct of self-preservation.' If the individual being had not felt the sorrow of death in its previous birth, and if it had not borne the disposition or *śaṁskāra* of this sorrow in its present birth, then this fear of death would never have acted as an instinct in him. So, rebirth can be inferred from the disposition of fear of death.

Also, in the *Nyaya-darshan*, Maharshi Gautama in the Sutra 3/1/21 has mentioned instinct to be a supportive argument of rebirth and has said that in a newborn baby, no matter what sort of a being it is — certain inborn instincts can be distinctly observed in them. For instance, a newborn baby craves to be breast-fed, a newborn duckling craves to swim and a newborn monkey hangs on to the branch of a tree to prevent itself from falling down — all such instincts are easily observed. If all these instincts had not existed as dispositions of past habits, then these instincts would not have surfaced soon after one's birth. Also in the Sutra 3/1/25, we find the believers of *Nyaya* philosophy stating that in every individual being, certain *raga* and *dvesa* are observed. The individual being is born with this *raga* and *dvesa*; these are its inherent instincts. And as these are not earned in its present birth then these certainly have originated as a result of the dispositions incurred in its past birth. What experiences the individual being had gone through in its previous birth, the dispositions or impressions of those experiences are carried by him as memories in his present birth. And it is from the memories of past birth that *raga* and *dvesa* arise in him in his present birth. Thus the arguments favouring rebirth have been explained in *Nyaya-darshan*.

In Indian philosophy, with the exception of materialists, all the schools of various philosophical thoughts have accepted rebirth and have put forward arguments establishing its acceptance. But a detailed analysis of all the arguments propagated by the various schools of thought does not come under the purview of the present discussion.

We shall now see whether rebirth has been accepted by *śhabda-pramāṇa* or testimony. The *Upadesha* given by an *āpta* or a reliable person is called Testimony. Such *Upadesha* is generally known as *Shastra* or scriptures. In the scriptures the utterances of omniscient sages and seers are preserved and that is why the scriptures are called Testimony.

The Gita is said to be the essence of scriptures. And the Gita speaks about rebirth of the soul in the following *shloka*: *jatasya hi dhruvo mṛtyur dhruvam janma mṛtasya ca* (2.27). The meaning of the *shloka* is: It is certain that he who takes birth must die and he who dies would certainly take birth. Birth and death followed by birth and death once again — thus the individual being moves on in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.¹

¹ Anilbaran Roy, *Srimadbhagavad Gita*, Volume I, p. 108.

Also in the Vedic scriptures like the Upanishads, rebirth has been mentioned distinctly. For instance, verse 2/2/7 of the *Katha Upanishad* says: *yonimanye prapadyante śarīratvāya dehinaḥ / sthānumanye'nusamyanti yathākarma yathāśrutam*. That is, the individual beings or Jivas enter into the womb to be embodied while some others pass into the immoveable states such as trees or other static bodies based on the karma performed by them in their previous birth and also according to the nature of knowledge acquired by them. In other words, a body is taken up corresponding to the nature of their actions and knowledge.¹ Also, in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, we come across verse 1/2/9 and 1/2/10 which says:

*avidyāyaṃ bahudhā vartamānā vayaṃ kṛtārthā ityabhimanyanti bālāḥ |
yatkarmiṇo na pravedayanti rāgāttanāturāḥ kṣīṇalokāścyavante ||
iṣṭāpūrtam manyamānā variṣṭhaṃ nānyacchreyo vedayante pramūḍhāḥ |
nākasya prṣṭhe te sukrte'nubhūtvemaṃ lokam hīnataraṃ vā viśanti ||*

The ignorant being acts diversely according to ignorance and flatter themselves with their achievements. They consider acts like organizing sacrificial rituals and charitable activities as the most important aids to achieve their objectives and find happiness in such activities. As they do not acquire the truth or the realization of the knowledge of self owing to their desires, they become miserable and after the fruits of their actions (karma) are consumed, they fall from heaven and enter again into the physical world based on the residue of their actions.²

Rebirth is also mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in verses 4.4.5 and 4.4.6. According to these verses, the individual being becomes what he does; it becomes virtuous through good actions and vicious through evil deeds. Deeds done under the impulse of cravings leads to the identification of the soul with everything as a result of which, the soul undergoes transmigration and passes from one body to another. Desire is the root of rebirth. When the fruits of action earned by the individual being during its lifetime in the physical world are exhausted during its tenure in the other world, it comes back to the physical world to earn the fruits of a fresh set of actions.³

¹ Swami Lokeshwarananda, *Upanishad*, p. 128.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

³ Swami Madhavananda, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, p. 712, 716.

Verses 5.3 (*sa yadhyekamātramabhidhyāyīta sa tenaiva saṃveditastūrṇameva jagatyābhisampadhyate/ tamṛco manuṣyalokamupanayante sa tatra tapasā brahmacaryeṇa śraddhayā sampanno mahimānāmanubhavati*) and 5.4 (*atha yadi dvimātreṇa manasi sampadhyate so'ntarikṣaṃ yajurbhirunnīyate somalokam/ sa somaloke vibhutimanubhūya punarāvartate*) of the *Prashna Upanishad* also speak of rebirth. Verse 5.3 says that he who meditates on the first *matra* or measure of *Omkar* (A of AUM) he returns to the physical world soon after his death and starts the struggle of his life from that very point where it had ended. But, according to Verse 5.4, if the individual being meditates on the second *matra* of *Omkar* (U of AUM), he goes to the lunar world after death where he enjoys all the earthly pleasures. His stay in the lunar world depends on the nature of his actions in the physical world. When the tenure of his stay in the lunar world expires, he comes back to the physical world again.¹

So, it is evident from the discussions made above that the theory of rebirth can be established on the basis of *pramāṇas* such as inference (*anumāna*) and scriptural testimony. Rebirth is not merely a common belief or notion which has been brought to life by superstitions. Not only does rebirth have a metaphysical aspect but it also has an epistemological aspect. This means that rebirth too can be known by the virtue of evidences or *pramāṇas*.

But it is noteworthy here that the way Sri Aurobindo has explained rebirth, no other philosopher prior to him has perhaps done so. Through his rational and logical analysis, Sri Aurobindo has explained that this world and life in it has a greater mission to accomplish which is brought about through the process of rebirth. Some of the philosophers before Sri Aurobindo have emphasized on the significance of earthly life; some have declared the world and worldly life as unreal and have considered only the transcendental Brahman to be the one and only truth while some have preached that the fulfilment of life has to be sought not in this physical world but in some other worlds. But what is the aim of this present life, what is its significance — no acceptable explanation has been provided by them in their interpretations. And here lies the uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo's teachings for his views on rebirth appears to be convincing to both the sceptic as well as the believer of rebirth. Sri Aurobindo is probably the first philosopher who has spoken of the realization of the supreme truth through the realization of unity with the individual being, physical world and the Divine. Just as he finds the Divine to be absolute truth,

¹ Swami Lokeshwarananda, *Upanishad*, pp. 205-206.

so does the individual being and the physical world appears to be real to him. The Divine manifests itself as the world and individual beings. That is why Sri Aurobindo has said that the aim of life is not merely to be freed from the clutches of ignorance. On the contrary, through the process of rebirth, he has shown the supreme fulfilment of life which would be translated into reality in this physical world only. This fulfilment of life lies in uplifting one's nature into the divine nature by becoming one with the divine consciousness. The sole aim of life is to bring about the complete manifestation of the divine, not only in individual lives, but also in the physical world and in everything which exists in the physical world. And to reach this aim, Sri Aurobindo remarks, rebirth acts as an indispensable means. According to him, the divine power which lies latent in the individual being gradually manifests itself through rebirth. None of the philosophers before Sri Aurobindo have provided such a rational interpretation of the significance of rebirth. Rebirth was considered to be a mere mechanical law for a long time but the fact that it is an indispensable means of manifesting completely the divine consciousness — this theory was brought to light for the first time by Sri Aurobindo. Here lies the novelty of Sri Aurobindo's teachings for he has given a new sense to life and the 'idea that the world is not either a creation of Maya or only a play, *līlā*, of the Divine, or a cycle of births in the ignorance from which we have to escape, but a field of manifestation in which there is a progressive evolution of the soul and the nature in Matter and from Matter through Life and Mind to what is beyond Mind till it reaches the complete revelation of Sachchidananda in life.'¹

We have also seen how, in Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of rebirth, the psychic being turns the human consciousness towards the Divine through the process of rebirth. The psychic being, which lies seated in the innermost core of the heart-centre, remains engulfed by the mental and vital, as a result of which man fails to feel its presence. The emergence of the psychic being also takes place through rebirth. Through the experiences it is subjected to in every birth, the consciousness and power of the psychic being gradually increases and thus, during the course of evolution, in a particular birth, the psychic being realizes the supreme eternal truth and also attains a new life. Then the cycle of rebirth would cease for good, the sum total of all the experiences earned in the past lives would be dawned and thus, it would conquer death and reach immortality — the eternal consciousness beyond life and death.

¹ *The Integral Yoga: Sri Aurobindo's Teaching and Method of Practice*, p. 29, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1993.

In the end a question still persists: would the attainment of a divine life — the hope of which Sri Aurobindo has presented before us — be an attainable reality? Would our sceptic mind accept it as a logical justification? Would our human consciousness be really able to transform itself into the supramental consciousness? These are the various queries which occur to us after analyzing Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth.

In Indian philosophy, *Pramāṇa* (instrument of valid knowledge) plays a pivotal role in the ascertainment of the nature of reality or truth. In philosophy, without *Pramāṇa*, the *Prameya* (objects of valid knowledge) cannot be ascertained. Now the question is: what is the evidence that Sri Aurobindo's grand vision of the divine life would be attainable in the future? At the very outset it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo — while expressing his philosophical outlook — has neither followed any traditional methodology of classical Indian philosophy nor written any commentary on it. In spite of it, we cannot say that Sri Aurobindo's thoughts and views are figments of imagination which do not come under *Pramāṇa*. This is so because his Integral Yoga traces its roots to the ancient scriptures of Indian philosophy a study of which he had plunged himself into. With unshakeable faith in the Veda and following the path of ancient Indian philosophical thoughts Sri Aurobindo's philosophical outlook has taken shape and developed. The various schools of Indian philosophy believe in the validity of Veda and have established their theories mainly on three *prasthānas*: 1) *Shruti-Prasthāna* 2) *Smriti-Prasthāna* and 3) *Tarka-Prasthāna*. In the philosophy of Vedānta, the six *Pramāṇas* are recognized but in spite of such recognition the validity of *Shruti*, *Yukti* (reasoning) and *Anubhava* (realization) is taken into consideration for the acquisition of knowledge of reality. The Veda is also known as *Shruti* and its last part, which is known as the Upanishad or Vedānta, is also considered to be an authoritative source of knowledge. The outline of Indian philosophical thought has been developed on the basis of the Vedānta or Upanishad. The classical Indian philosophers and *acharyas* looked upon the Upanishads as *Shruti-Prasthāna*. The following verse of the Vedānta — ‘*om śabda iticennātaḥ prabhavātpratyakṣānumānābhyām om*’ (*Brahmasutra*, 1.3.28) accepts *Shruti* as *pratyakṣa* (direct) *pramāṇa*. Sankaracharya in his commentaries on the same *Brahmasutra* has written: ‘*pratyakṣam śrutiḥ, prāmāṇyam pratyanapekṣatvāt*’ — as *Shruti* is not dependent on any *pramāṇa*, hence it is self-evident. Again, the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita are considered as *Smriti-Prasthāna* whereas various schools like

Samkhya, Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika etc. have brought together their philosophical outlooks logically through various sutras which are categorized as *Tarka-Prasthāna*.

One comes across all the three aforementioned *prasthānas* at every segment of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*. In this book, while discussing about the concept of rebirth, we have seen passages from the Gita, *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, *Mundaka Upanishad*, *Katha Upanishad*, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and *R̥g Veda* being extensively quoted in support of Sri Aurobindo's views. Sri Aurobindo's concept of integral monism has at its very foundation the *prasthānas* of *Shruti*, *Smriti* and *Tarka*, so it would be erroneous to assume that Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is not based on any traditional philosophical method and so he is isolated from all philosophical schools.

In *The Life Divine*, we have seen that Sri Aurobindo has placed Māyāvāda, Nihilism and Materialism as *purva-paksha* (the study of opponent's arguments) and refuted them logically. We may not come across any distinct classification of *Pramāṇa* in Sri Aurobindo's epistemology which is observed in other philosophical schools. But in spite of that, it is observed that if the instrument of valid knowledge (*Pramāṇa*) is not fit enough to receive the object of knowledge (*Prameya*), then no valid knowledge could be obtained by this instrument. And hence we would find appearance instead of reality.¹

Therefore, Sri Aurobindo's thoughts can never be dismissed as a baseless imagination. This is so because it cannot be claimed that Sri Aurobindo's thoughts are mainly based on realization and that it has no logical ground. He has called reason 'a helper' upto a certain point in one's quest for truth. Through his various writings and letters, we do come to know that Sri Aurobindo had ventured into the path of Integral Yoga with a sceptic and rationalistic mind. And he has said in one of his conversations that 'it was then that my outlook changed with the knowledge born of my new yogic consciousness.'² In his *The Life Divine*, he has discussed at length the real nature, scope and activities of reasoning.

We are also confronted with the question whether the spiritual realization which Sri Aurobindo had had during the course of the practice of Integral Yoga had any validity. Or, was Sri Aurobindo the very first person whose realizations (*anubhava*) were accepted as a distinct *pramāṇa*?

¹ Indrani Sanyal, *Darshanik Sri Aurobindo O Tanr Purna-advaitavada* in Sebanti Bhattacharya (ed.), *Adhunik Bharatiya Darshan*, 2018, p. 117.

² *Among The Great*, p. 219.

A detailed study would enable us to know that Sri Aurobindo was certainly not the very first person. Sankaracharya too in his commentaries on the *Brahmasutra* has recognized the *pramāṇa* of spiritual realizations along with *śhabda-pramāṇa* such as *shruti*, *smriti* etc. There can be no hindrance to accept every *anubhava* or realization of Brahman as *pramāṇa*.¹ Here, Sankaracharya had used the term ‘*anubhava*’ to denote realization of the Brahman. So, it can be said that the acceptance of spiritual realization as *pramāṇa* has not been done only in the case of Sri Aurobindo. Also, in the book *Naiṣkarmya-siddhi*, Suresvaracharya has written that Brahma-Jñāna (Knowledge of the Brahman) is not dependent on any *pramāṇa* of ordinary perception, inference, etc. and that knowledge of truth rises from testimony or *āgama*. He also says that the realization of the Atman is always direct as it is self-evident.²

Although Sri Aurobindo has based his philosophical thoughts on the lines of Vedic philosophy, he has presented the theories of Vedic philosophy in a new light. For instance, the concept of physical transformation about which Sri Aurobindo has written extensively has already been mentioned in the 10th Mandala and 91st sutra of the *Ṛg Veda* where Indra, by granting a boon to Apala, caused a transformation of her physical body. But Sri Aurobindo’s uniqueness lies in the fact that he has presented the concept of physical transformation backed by logical explanation in a new perspective so that its acceptability becomes convincing to us. While discussing the theory of rebirth in the light of Sri Aurobindo we have seen that the aim of rebirth is to get transformed into the supramental consciousness and to attain a divine life. The concept of the Supermind which Sri Aurobindo has called the ‘truth consciousness’ can also be traced to the *Ṛg Veda* where it has been described as ‘Satyam’, ‘Ritam’ and ‘Vrihat’. The Upanishad too speaks of the Supramental Consciousness while referring to the *vijnanamaya Purusha*.³

Thus we observe while discussing rebirth in the light of Sri Aurobindo’s integral monism how he has expanded his philosophical thoughts through his spiritual realizations. But realizations can never be solely dependent on reason nor can reason ever judge realizations. The path leading to the realization of the infinite which Sri Aurobindo has mentioned in his Integral Yoga can never be confined within the boundaries of reason. For, according to Sri Aurobindo, truth lies beyond our intellect. And it is here that Sri Aurobindo becomes abstruse to us. For, we seek to grasp the

¹ Minati Kar, *Shabdaparokshavada*, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³ Kireet Joshi, *The Veda in the Light of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 34.

infinite realizations of Sri Aurobindo through our finite mind and judge him through our limited intellect. And when we fail to do so, we arrive at the conclusion that Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is obscure.

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