

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

(Synopsis)

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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. 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?

Here lies the indispensability of rebirth which I have discussed in the light of Sri Aurobindo in my research. In the present dissertation an attempt has been made to discuss after Sri Aurobindo as to how this work of transformation could be effected. This discussion has been divided altogether into eight chapters including both introduction and conclusion.

I have discussed the following themes chapter-wise:

1. Introduction
2. The Theory of Evolution
3. Ignorance
4. Maya
5. On Rebirth
6. The Existence of Other Worlds
7. Rebirth and Karma
8. Conclusion

In the introduction, I have tried to point out how Sri Aurobindo has interpreted rebirth in his teachings and what, according to him, is the novelty of rebirth. I have also briefly discussed how the various chapters of my dissertation are relevant to Sri Aurobindo's concept of rebirth.

In the second chapter, I have discussed the relation between Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution and his concept of rebirth for whenever rebirth in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision is discussed, the topic of his theory of evolution crops up inevitably and simultaneously. 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 following 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. The purpose of evolution is to bring about an evolution of spiritual consciousness which lies beyond the sphere of mental consciousness. In this consciousness, we get to know, realize and unite with our inner self. For this progress of spiritual consciousness, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of both individual evolution and cosmic evolution. 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.

While discussing Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth, I have tried to show through the chapters of my dissertation how Sri Aurobindo has placed Mayavada, Nihilism and Materialism as his *purva-paksha* and refuted each of these traditional schools of thought through his logical arguments. He has also brought to light the partial truth of each of such schools and established the integrality of his own perspective 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 Maya 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 Maya 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 for 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 segments on Ignorance and Maya. In this connection two separate chapters are there, viz., the third chapter dealing with Ignorance and the fourth one with Maya.

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), subconsciousness (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 ‘Maya-Shakti’. He has also divided Maya-Shakti into two categories: one is the Higher Maya or Divine Maya or *Para Prakriti* and the other is Lower Maya or Avidya, or *Apara Prakriti*, that is, ignorance.

The Higher Maya or Divine Maya 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 Maya — 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 Maya 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 Maya-Shakti (the conscious-force of the Spirit) of the Supreme. So, just as the Maya-Shakti is real, so, its creation — the world — is also real. Here it is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo, despite being a monist himself, has not called this material world to be unreal as Sankaracharya has done.

Anyway, Sri Aurobindo has said that the *Apara Prakriti* is *Trigunamoyee* while the *Para Prakriti* is *Trigunatito*. 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 *Trigunamoyee Apara Prakriti* which proceeds gradually towards the *Trigunatito 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.

In the fifth chapter of my dissertation, I have discussed in detail the concept of rebirth in the light of Sri Aurobindo and its significance. 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 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 in 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. Sri Aurobindo has accepted the classical Indian philosophical view about rebirth in general but has added more speciality to the concept. 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. He believes that physical causes are not the sole reason of death and 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 *samskaras* 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? This query has been dealt with in the sixth chapter of my dissertation which deals with ‘Rebirth and the Other Worlds’. 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. As he 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.

Sri Aurobindo writes that the nature of man is constituted of various complex elements. Man is constituted of vital being and mental being and beyond these two beings there is the psychic being. He says 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 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—that is, those beings whose consciousness has not developed and who are governed by vital interests or extremely strong worldly hunger live in these subtle worlds after death. 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. According to Sri Aurobindo, just as rebirth has a special significance, similarly, the voyage of souls 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 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.

Sri Aurobindo apprehends that it is not the mind of man but its psychic being 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. 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.

It might occur to us 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 individual being after death — do such worlds really exist or are they figments of Sri Aurobindo's imagination? In response to such a query we might say that these higher worlds are certainly not imaginary at all. We have observed that Sri Aurobindo has followed the traditional path of the Vedas 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*, *Brihadaranyaka* and *Swetaswatara* Upanishads, we come to know of the existence of the different higher worlds. 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. In the writings of different yogis and seers and in the conversations which they had with their followers, we come across the various details they have provided about these higher worlds the knowledge of which they have attained through their spiritual experiences 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 self-realization 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.

In the seventh chapter of my dissertation, I have included a study of the relation between Rebirth and 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. Interestingly, one comes across the law of Karma in the various works of William Shakespeare as well. The three main aspects of Karma ‘action brings consequence’, ‘intention behind the action determines the nature of the consequence’ and ‘good intention bring good consequence whereas bad intention leads to bad consequence’ are easily noticeable in Shakespeare’s dramas. Shakespeare has judged Karma on the basis on its consequences and also pointed out that the wider role Karma plays in human life has not been touched upon by Shakespeare but by Sri Aurobindo who has pointed out that Karma is not a mere cause of suffering or prosperity but a means by which one could transcend happiness and sorrow.*

* Shukla Sanyal, *The Law of Karma in the Light of William Shakespeare and Sri Aurobindo*, *Yearly Shakespeare*, 2020, Volume 18.

Sri Aurobindo writes: 'Rebirth is meaningless without karma.'¹ 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.'² It means that the law of Karma is not merely a law of causation, where every cause (antecedent) has an effect (consequence). It is not limited to the law of causality. So, 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. 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 are capable of impacting the consciousness of collective humanity. 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

¹ *Problem of Rebirth*, p. 102.

² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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.

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. Also, in this concluding chapter, I have tried to analyze the extent of acceptability of Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth and that whether this theory has any supporting *pramanas* which is observed in various schools of Indian philosophy.

From Sri Aurobindo's observation one can arrive at the conclusion that rebirth can be called the "unfoldment of consciousness", because in every birth the ascension of consciousness takes place and thus, through the gradual progression of consciousness the individual being or Jiva goes back to its real self which means returning to that absolute consciousness that has been termed as the Supramental Consciousness by Sri Aurobindo. With the descent of this Supramental Consciousness upon earth, life would be transformed into a divine life. And man — through the process of rebirth — would eventually get transformed into a divine man which Sri Aurobindo has called the Gnostic Being. Once this divine life is attained, the cycle of rebirth would cease for good and man would be able to conquer death and achieve physical immortality.

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