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Sri Aurobindo's Contribution to the Knowledge of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, His Vision of Indian Culture and Human Unity

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo has been described as an adventure of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga rises to the highest level but also bring down the power of the highest into the lowest terms of consciousness. This Yoga aims at the conquest of the higher pinnacles of consciousness and crossing beyond mind and overmind to the supermind. Sri Aurobindo has provided us illuminating insights as to how Vedic Yoga has developed the long history of India a number of systems of Yoga, as also how there have been periods of specialization and also periods of synthesis. And his own synthesis of Yoga is an integration of the past systems and the new methods that he himself has discovered and perfected. This new synthesis embraces within its wider embrace the truth of the Vedic synthesis of the psychological being of man in its highest flights.

Keywords- *Integral yoga, Vedas, Upanishads, Supermind, Evolution, Human unity*

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo has been described as an adventure of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga rises to the highest level but also bring down the power of the highest into the lowest terms of consciousness. This Yoga aims at the conquest of the higher pinnacles of consciousness and crossing beyond mind and overmind to the supermind. In his monumental *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo said that there were three tasks that India had to accomplish. The first task is to recover the ancient spiritual knowledge of India. It meant the recovery of the Veda, Upanishads, the Gita, the Puranas and the Tantras. It has to be recovered because it has been lost. The Mother once wrote down a message in which she

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said: “India has or rather had the Knowledge of the Spirit “She wanted to emphasis on the point that India has deviated a long way from the possession of that knowledge and therefore it has to be recovered.

The second task, Sri Aurobindo said that India has to pour out that knowledge into new modes of philosophical, scientific and critical knowledge. Through his magnum opus, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo has demonstrated how the ancient knowledge can be poured into philosophical modes of thinking and how it can be presented in modern times in a contemporary fashion. Kireet Joshi states in his *Philosophy and Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and other Essays*: “He has even shown how we can advance from the past towards the new.”

The third task, Sri Aurobindo noted, is to deal with the contemporary problems in a new manner, and to realise a spiritualised society. Sri Aurobindo has given us these three tasks. The last one, he said, is the most difficult. He also observed that India’s mission is to accomplish these tasks.

The success of the last two tasks will depend largely on the recovery of the ancient spiritual knowledge. There are four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva. The Rig Veda is the biggest. It has ten chapters and it has ten thousand verses. Sri Aurobindo made a study of the Rig Veda in depth.

When the Indologists in the nineteenth century made a study of the Vedas, they considered them as the compositions of barbarians, and superstitious tribes. In fact, Man Mueller, after interpreting the whole of the Veda, wrote a letter to his wife: “I have now accomplished the task of translating the whole of the Rig Veda. And when people, even in India, will read my translation and understand what the Veda contains, they will find that there is nothing in it, and then they will easily turn to Christianity and embrace it.” Many of the Indian scholars who got acquainted with the western scholarship, did not question this interpretation. Even philosopher like Radhakrishnan did not agree with Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the Vedas.

The Indian philosophical tradition affirms that if a particular stream of thought does not coincide with what is in the Veda, then that is untrue and the Veda is true. In the 14th century Sayana interpreted the four Vedas. His commentary on the Vedas became the standard interpretation in India. Sayana was a ritualist who believed that the Vedas were written for ritualistic purposes. Though Sayana respected the Veda, he believed that it was simply a book of rituals. Mantras have a magical effect, he said, and give us certain rewards. It was on the foundation of Sayana that Vedic scholars of the west made their interpretations. Moreover they had no respect for the Veda. They were important, according to the Indologists, only from the point of view of primitive history. They have no use for the mankind in the future. One of the last interpretations of the Veda was in the 19th century by

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Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati. He criticized Sayana severely and affirmed that the Veda is a book of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo himself has paid a glorious tribute to Dayananda Saraswati.

It was in Pondicherry that Sri Aurobindo turned his attention seriously to the Veda. Before this, he had the realisation of the Brahmic nirvana under here, the Maharashtrian Yogi. He also had a realisation of the universal Vasudeva – Krishna – in the Alipore Jail. In the Alipore Jail he heard the voice of Vivekananda for fifteen days uninterruptedly where Sri Aurobindo was given the knowledge of the planes between the mind and the supermind. As he rose in consciousness, Sri Aurobindo, had experiences of what the Veda calls *Ua*, *Saraswati*, *Saroma* and *Daksha*. These are the four female energies described in the Veda. These personal experiences preceded his understanding of the Veda. It is said in the Veda that only the seer can understand the words of the seer. The Vedic expression *ninya vachamsi*, secret words, *kavaye nivachanani*, are revealed only to the *kavi*, to the poet, to the seer. Sri Aurobindo studied the Veda in depth from 1910 (the year in which he landed in Pondicherry) to 1914; Sri Aurobindo had attained such a mastery of the secret meaning of the Veda that he began to write a series of articles under the title, *The Secret of the Veda*. It is a masterly interpretation because Sri Aurobindo found the proof of his own interpretation the Veda itself.

In the light of this, Sri Aurobindo observed, that the Upanishads can also be understood properly. Unless the Veda is understood, the Upanishads cannot truly be understood. Sri Aurobindo's commentaries on the two important Upanishads: Isha Upanishads and Kena Upanishad are packed with Shakti. He translated totally eight Upanishads.

It is not possible to understand the Bhagavad Gita without understanding the Veda. In short, the recovery of the ancient knowledge – Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita – cannot be achieved except in the light of what Sri Aurobindo has written on the Veda. Therein lies the supreme importance of Sri Aurobindo's *The Secret of the Veda*. A thorough knowledge of the Veda is essential to understand the earliest thought of mankind, if one wants to reconstruct even human history, all the nations have to turn to the Veda to get the description of the earliest thoughts of mankind.

Sri Aurobindo says that the Vedas were preceded by a very great civilisation. It was only when that age was declining that the fragments of the knowledge of these Vedic seers were put together by a Rishi called Vyasa. What we call Veda is an imperfect statement of what was developed in that ancient time.

Sri Aurobindo remarks that the rhythms of the Veda are like the chariots of the Gods. They have a perfect symmetrical form. He states that Vedic poetry is mantric poetry. In *The Future Poetry*, Sri Aurobindo has explained the meaning of mantric poetry. His *Savitri* is

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entirely mantric in character. In *The Future Poetry*, he states that the future poetry will be mantric.

Sri Aurobindo discovered that the Vedas have a secret meaning. Outwardly it has one meaning, inwardly it has another meaning. Since the knowledge cannot be given to the uninitiated (which can be harmful) they developed a secret code. Sri Aurobindo calls it an algebraic code. The Veda is therefore algebraic in character. Unless the meaning of the figures and symbols is known to us, we cannot make out anything. For instance, the word “Cow” in the algebraic form means “light”. When the Veda states, “The cow stands before a horse,” it means, “The horse is for power, Energy, Shakti, the cow is light, So Chit-Shakti. The cow and horse together are a symbol for Chit-Shakti. It is Sri Aurobindo’s rishi-like insight that discovered this algebra of the Veda.

The next point is that the Veda contains a profound knowledge of the reality of the world and the Self. It contains the triple knowledge: god-knowledge, world knowledge and the self-knowledge. What is the ultimate reality? In the first chapter of the Rig Veda a particular mantra states: *na nunamasti no shvah kastadveda yadadbhutam anyawya chittamabhi samachereniyamutadhitam vinashyati*. This Sanskrit couplet states: the ultimate reality is neither today nor tomorrow. Who knows that reality, which is wonderful? Why is it wonderful? It has motion - it is alone, there is no other but it has motion in another. Therefore, it is *adbhutam*, wonderful. It cannot be understood through the intellect. It does not follow the logic of the finite, it follows the logic of the infinite. The one that is many. As Sri Aurobindo states in *The Synthesis of Yoga* the ultimate reality is simple and complex at the same time. The same idea is expressed in the *Isha Upanishad*: *tadejati tannaijati*. It moves, it moves not. It is far, it is near.

What is the world knowledge of the Veda? The Physical world we see is only the outer fringe of the whole world. Even this world consists of three earths, not one. There is an intermediate world between earth and heaven. “Heaven” is a word used for “mind” in the algebraic language of the Veda. The three words are the physical, vital and the mental. These are the first three to which we have a normal access. The Vedic seers took a long time in their search to find out *turiyam* said – “the fourth one” Sri Aurobindo has informed us that “this fourth” is the supermind. The Vedic seers discovered the supermind. The Vedic rishis discovered that beyond the supermind is the triple reality which came to be recognised as Sat-Unit-Ananda: Existence, consciousness and Bliss. The Vedic seers saw that the world consisted of these planes: the three highest Existence, Consciousness, Bliss. Then comes the supermind, and then comes mind, life and matter.

According to the Rig Veda, the knowledge of the Self is the most secret knowledge. It is the given an algebraic term in the Veda, it is called Agni. Agni is the mystic fire. The

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inner self is called “psychic” being in Sri Aurobindo’s psychology. This psychic being is our real innermost soul. Sri Aurobindo himself wrote a full book where he collected and translated all the hymns addressed to the mystic fire in the Rig-Veda. The most profound Vedic knowledge, according to the Veda, is Agni. In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo makes a reference to the mystic fire in the Rig Veda when he describes the psychic being.

The Upanishads

Sri Aurobindo perceives an unbroken continuity between the Veda and the Upanishads. The Upanishads seek to hold and continue the mystic and spiritual experience – with the knowledge ensuing from it – recorded in the hymns of the Veda. The Rishis of this era start from the fundamental truths proclaimed in the litany and strive to realise them in their own experience. Or when they arrive at any realisation of the Supreme Truth by their own tapasya, they seek confirmation from the experience of the earlier seers. Sri Aurobindo cites several instances of these exercises and describes how the cryptic contents of the hymns come in for amplified re-statement in the Upanishads, although in a language more suited to the mentality of a later age.

Naturally the outlook of the Rishis of the Upanishads – at any rate of the earlier and authentic texts – is in the line of the seers of the Veda. The emphasis is on the realisation of the Truth and living it is here only, *ihaiva*, not somewhere beyond after death. The world to them is a manifestation of the Divine, the Brahman, with the Gods as so many Powers and Personalities entrusted with the task of governing the universe and helping the creation – at the levels of its life – to evolve into the image of the creative Divinity and fully participate in the glory of the Manifestation. The approach is positive and comprehensive. The whole of creation is embraced in the scheme of life.

The Isha Upanishad begins with the declaration that All this is for the habitation of the Lord. It describes how the universe is a Becoming of the Divine Being in His mood to manifest. It concludes emphasising the identity between man and God and shows the “straight way of the truth” to realise it in life. The Kena Upanishad asks what it is that impels the eye to see, the ear to hear, the mind to hit its mark? In a word, what makes the senses reach out to and grasp the world in their experience? And it answers that there is a Master-Sense that operates through all these external faculties. This Master-Sense is a function of the Divinity manifest in the universe and it should be worshipped as Delight, *tadvanam*. Delight is the key-note of creation and life is intended to participate in this Pure Joy by eliminating from its course all the obscuring, deflecting, depraving elements of ignorance, inertia and falsehood. The Taittiriya Upanishad celebrates the pervasion of the Diving Reality at all the levels of creation from gross Matter, *annam brahma* to the Blissful Spirit, *anadam brahma*. It describes the multiple being of man, relates it step by step to the corresponding planes of

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universal existence and calls upon the seeker to concentrate his consciousness and realise this Reality integrally in the universe.

Sri Aurobindo's commentaries on the Isha Upanishad and the Kena Upanishad, readings in the Taittiriya Upanishad, translations of Katha Upanishad, Mundaka Upanishad, Mandukya Upanishad, Aitareya Upanishad and Prashna Upanishad expound this Integral Knowledge embracing Man, Nature and God in a meaningful whole. His series on the Philosophy of the Upanishads, written early in his career, draw pointed attention to the fact of growing confirmation of the Vedantic truths enshrined in the Upanishads by the findings of modern Science.

Bhagavad Gita

It was inevitable that the Gita should find an important place in a system of thought and spiritual practice as catholic and universal in spirit and applications as Sri Aurobindo's. To Sri Aurobindo the Gita marks a crucial turn in the history of the development of Indian Philosophy and religion. For, it takes up the diverse traditions and lines of thinking that had developed in the post-Upanishadic age following the eclipse of the ancient Vedic Spirit and attempts a living synthesis of all the elements into one broad many-sided system assimilating into itself the fundamental truths of the Vedic and Upanishadic wisdom, harmonising their various strains and formulating them into forms and terms more suited to the mind of a later stage.

Thus, the *Gita* rescues the *Vedic* conception of sacrifice from the overgrowth of ritualism and hedonism that had succeeded in effectively covering the visage of the truth of yajna. It separates the basic truth of sacrifice from the restricted form it had come to acquire and presents it in its cosmic setting with bearings on each individual life. The Gita describes how sacrifice, self-giving, was the central lever on which the creator has set the machinery of the universe into operation, how life is governed by the principle of sacrifice at every level of creation. Man is called upon to recognise this truth of inner sacrifice as the key to his larger development and enjoined to train his faculties of body, life and mind and heart in the yoga of self-consecration, yajna, to the Divine, the Divine in himself, the Divine in All, the Divine in Nature, thereby forging a solidarity with the whole of creation and embracing the Divine Manifestation in a scheme of progressive self-enlargement and self-transcendence.

The Gita rights the balance of relation between man and the universe, between the individual and collectivity that had come to be tilted in the ascetic extremes of the period following the era of the earlier Upanishads. The emphasis had been shifted to the salvation of the individual in total disregard of the world which was looked upon as a field of ignorance and falsehood to be discarded. The Gita underlines the inter-relation of man and the environment in which he lives and thrives and calls upon the seeker of God to pursue his

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quest simultaneously on both the levels – individual and collective – through disinterested works, equality of soul and universality of outlook, and exert himself, even after self-liberation, for the world, lokasamgraha. In asking the seeker to pour his purified, and later his liberated, energies on the world, the Gita links up the Kingdom of the Spirit with the field of strife on Earth and opens a wide way for the upliftment of the latter towards the heights of Freedom and Harmony.

Another distinct contribution of far-reaching significance, points out Sri Aurobindo, is the resolution of the dichotomy of the Mutable, ksara, and the Immutable, aksara, Brahman posted by the philosophies of different scholars, each claiming higher status to its own position. The Gita finds the reconciliation in its concept of Purushottama, the Transcendent Person of whom the personal and the impersonal are two poises, two aspects, in the creative Movement. Each derives its full value from the other and both find their intrinsic and completing truth in the Transcendent. The Purushottama presiding over the unmanifest and manifest in his absoluteness is the last word in this synthesis of apparent opposites in the creation.

The Doctrine of Purushottama opens the door of re-conciliation to yet another set of oppositions, e.g. Knowledge, jnana, Devotion, bhakti, Works, karma, in this field of spiritual effort. For by its emphasis on devotion, love for the supreme Lord culminating in utter surrender to the Divine, the Gita finds the meeting ground of common fulfillment among different lines of Yoga. True Knowledge of the Divine melts in Love for the Divine; intense self-consecration through works flows into an adoration of Love for the Lord; full Love yields complete Knowledge of the Beloved, it pours itself into a delighted offering of Works to the Master of Love.

In his monumental work, *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo expounds in modern terms many ancient spiritual concepts of importance cryptically mentioned in the Gita, e.g. avatara, vibhuti, the truth of svabhava and svadharma, self-being and self-law, the relativity of human standards, the overriding claims of the Divine Truth on man, etc. etc.

Indian Culture

In a series of articles in the *Arya* journal (1914-20) which began with a review article on the Renaissance in India by Dr. James Cousins, and another series provoked by an insensate attack on Indian culture by William Archer, Sri Aurobindo analyses the basis and the motivating spirit of Indian culture.

The culture of a people is the way of life, thought and action developed by them to express certain values that have a special appeal to their collective Soul. Thus ancient Greece cherished the ideals of Beauty of form and elegance of mind and their culture and civilization was characterized by a seeking for these truths. Similarly the Roman life was governed by a

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spirit of organisation, of Law and Order, that of Hebrews by an ethical strain, of the Japanese by love of Art. The dominant note of the Indian life-effort, Sri Aurobindo points out, has been the spiritual.

To say that the character of Indian culture is spiritual does not mean that it is life-shunning and other worldly. Its spirituality, on the contrary, is all-embracing. The whole of life is invested with a deep significance of the Spirit. In this perspective, all existences, all movements in the universe are part of a vast manifesting Spirit. There is a Divine Reality behind and above all that lives and moves, originating all, governing all, leading all. Life is an effort to express this Divine Reality, its Consciousness in a growing manner. The early dawns of the Veda see an open avowal of this perception and Faith in the divine purpose of man's life-journey. All is one in this basic Consciousness – all worlds, their inhabitants, all powers and beings are one in the one Divine. Behind all the apparent diversity there is this Oneness. The aim of life to realise this consciousness of Divinity and manifest it in the diverse fields of activity.

This is the central motive of Indian life from the beginning. And the best periods in the growth and efflorescence of the Indian civilisation has been those in which the people have kept close to this Ideal and vision. Periods of decline have been precisely those when the inspiration has been relegated to the background and lesser attractions have occupied the people.

It is said by the Western critics that the religious and spiritual turn of the Indian people has been the cause of their material downfall. Exposing the absurdity of this charge, Sri Aurobindo points out how this very turn in the character of the Indian race has raised the value of life in all its gradations, in all its movements and invested it with a profound meaning. The whole of life is looked upon as a journey from Ignorance to Knowledge, from limitation and incapacity to Power and Strength, from pain and suffering to Joy and Bliss. All the Branches of life-activity are geared to this purpose – Art, Literature, Science, Philosophy, Polity – and no gulf is left unbridged between Earth and Heaven. Matter is regarded as the robe of the Spirit and the Spirit as the soul of Matter. The celebrated sixty four arts of Indian knowledge interpret the one in terms of the other and link them both in the consciousness of man. Sarvam khalu idam brahma, All this is verify Brahman; ayamatma brahma, this self is Brahman: tat twarnasi. That thou art; these are the ringing truths reverberating in the Indian consciousness down the ages.

A fundamental tenet of faith in this approach is the truth of Karma. Here again, belief in Karma has not made the people pessimistic and prone to fatalism as the critics think. The perception that there is a law of action and reaction in life makes man awake to his responsibility in determining his future. He has it in his hands to shape his destiny. The

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corollary of the truth of Rebirth gives an enlarged perspective of the goal of life. The knowledge that this one brief tenure of life on earth is not all and that one has an eternity of time in which to grow and perfect oneself in the image of God gives a security and poise to the awakened individual that lifts him out of the fevered stampede of hurrying life.

If the Indian mind believes in Fate, a cosmic Will that effectuates itself regardless of individual conveniences, it also knows that this will operates through so many constituent individual wills and that there is a Divine Grace transcending all determinisms – individual and universal – a grace which can be invoked by a soul-movement. All religions, all philosophies in India recognise the omnipotent character of this Power of Divine Grace.

Thus man is regarded as a conscious participant in the manifestation of the Divine that is this universe, a being who can determine the direction and the pace of his journey towards the eventual goal of divine perfection and freedom. Even the Gods are his helpers, the earth is the chosen field for this progression of man. This is the central Idea in the Indian outlook and the culture based upon it.

Sri Aurobindo on Human Unity

Sri Aurobindo perceives in the growth of the society an ordered, progressive evolution. As in the case of the individual, the rudiments of the soul gradually take shape and a collective soul gets formed and develops in the direction of a spiritual fulfillment. This progression may be studied in three or four well-marked steps of growth.

As a rule a strong religious and symbolic spirit governs the mind of man in the early stages of society. Instinctively man feels and recognises some higher Powers at work in Nature and he submits himself to their care. Everything in life symbolizes to him something other than, and greater than the appearance. His life is crowded with the influences and activities of Powers and Beings greater than himself and he forges a relation between himself and the Powers or Gods through ritual, prayer, adoration and the like. Such are the early societies of the Vedic Aryans, the Mystics of Greece, Egypt etc. This is the first, the Symbolic Age.

This live organism of society, however, tends to fix itself into an organisation. Gradually there emerges a typical order with certain sections performing certain duties and the society falls into distinct constituent types. The living ritual of religion, dynamic movement of the inner spirit, the spontaneously growing and self-adjusting norms of the society begin to petrify into fixed conventions and ill-understood customs. The climax of this typical and Conventional Age comes when the society is over-burdened by this mechanical apparatus of Law and Custom and the individual questions and revolts.

This ushers in the third age, the Age of Individualism and Reason. Everything is challenged; the human mind armed with reason questions every custom and every faith. Man

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asserts his right to think and chalk out for himself his path of progress. The general result of this double movement of destruction and freedom is to pull down the old structure of time-worn Custom and Law, to break down many walls of superstition and dogma that bar the route to progress. Reason probes everywhere, plumbs into the depths of existence, in order to find the basic truth of life. Now it seems to have found it in physical Matter, now in life-energy, now in a mental substance. It cannot rest anywhere because fresh evidence constantly turns up exposing the inadequacy of this formed conclusions and pointing to other possibilities. The thinker moves from materialism to Vitalism and then to mentalism; when all these are found insufficient to guide towards an effective government and direction of life, he steps into the subjective era; he is faced with testimonies of the existence of a belt of existence behind the veil of the surface exterior – the subliminal which is the seat of the many para-psychological and psychical phenomena that exceed the range of mental reason. The present age of humanity is this Subjective Age; man confesses to the existence of a supra-rational range of life and awakens to faculties within himself that correspond to the realities of this order of life – the faculties of telepathy, pre-sight, intuition, inspiration, etc.

The culmination of this subjective movement is the entry into the fourth, the Spiritual Age in which all routes lead to the truth of the Soul. Man discovers his true centre of existence in the soul, a divine entity at the core of his being and equally a pervading Spirit in the universe. He further realises that at this soul-level all existence is One. The self of the individual, atman, and the Self of the universe, Brahman, are the same. Once this truth is perceived and realised there is an irresistible movement towards Harmony, Commonalty and Unity. The Truth of the manifesting Spirit begins to organise itself in the collectivity of the Human Race.

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