

SRI AUROBINDO ON THE FUTURE OF MANKIND: SOME REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo is not only a philosopher but also a visionary who could visualize the future of the human race. He has shown that the present stage of the human race is only transitional and a better and more evolved human race is awaited. This visualization of the future of the human race is not based on a mere speculation or guess; it is based on the hard evidences available in the spiritual past of the mankind. Sri Aurobindo's prophecy regarding the future is not a mere figment of imagination but a part of his yogic experience of the innermost spiritual development of human beings in the centuries gone by. If human beings could exceed their animal nature and could realize the spiritual possibilities of the human soul, then it is not impossible that mankind could make another jump in its own spiritual development culminating in the emergence of a superhuman race. This essay is an attempt to understand the philosophical foundations of the idea of a superhuman race and to bring out the meaning of the Sri Aurobindo's concept of superman.

Keywords: Future of Mankind, Spiritual Evolution, Superman, Supermind, Suprarational Consciousness

The Human Cycle

Human beings have come upon the earth many millions of years ago and have continued to live without interruption while building many civilizations and empires during the course of history. The human race has remained active in building new structures in culture and

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civilization and progressed in making the earth a hospitable place for all its members. Human beings have created literatures and philosophies apart from sciences and technologies which have made human life worth living. The human race has reached the present stage of development after centuries of struggle and sacrifice.

Sri Aurobindo has given an outline of the progress of the human civilization in his epoch making work *The Human Cycle*¹ which has mapped the different stages or cycles in which the human race has progressed from the beginning of history. This work has shown that human beings have moved from cycle to cycle in an evolutionary trajectory. The aim of this evolution is to reach the supramental stage which will bring human development to its culminating stage, namely the arrival of the supramental spiritual race. The broad framework of this evolutionary trajectory consists of the five cycles such as the symbolic, the typical, the conventional, the rational and the subjective² which are marked by the development of the human mind in the different stages of its evolution. The symbolic stage is marked by the early human being's intuitive understanding of the Reality in symbolic forms. This is succeeded by the stage in which human mind is manifested in types of consciousness which have their counterparts in the types of formation of the society. Then the stage of conventional mind takes over with rigid outlines of thought having fixed patterns of life and mental habits. There arrives at the end of the conventional age the age of the reason and individuality, and then that of the age of subjectivity³. Sri Aurobindo has prophesied that the age of subjectivity will be succeeded by the age of the Spirit. This is the singular contribution of the masterpiece, *The Human Cycle* to the philosophy of man. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

There will then be fulfilled the change that will prepare the transition of human life from its present limits into those larger and purer horizons; the earthly evolution will have taken its great impetus upward and accomplished the revealing step in a divine progression of which the birth of thinking and aspiring man from the animal was only an obscure preparation and a far-off promise⁴.

There is thus the promise of the spiritual evolution of human beings which is the final destiny of humanity on earth. This progressive move forward is from the animal nature to the superhuman nature.

However, before we explore the horizon of the spiritual evolution of the human race, we must see what human beings are in their essential nature because of which we can make such promise of the future intelligible. For of all, Sri Aurobindo accepts an idealist view of man according to which man is basically a Spirit or soul because

of which he cannot be taken as a mere physical organism as the materialists believe. This spiritualist or idealist view of man brings in the concept of the Spirit along with the Body or Matter without creating a gulf between the two as the Cartesian dualists do. The reason is that the Spirit and Matter are not two different realities standing against each other. Sri Aurobindo dissolves the binary between Mind and Body, Spirit and Matter and the outer and the inner in his search for an integral reality called the Self or Spirit. He has an integral view of human nature which is explicit in his rejection of the duality between the materialist and the spiritualist view of man and the universe⁵. Sri Aurobindo has brought out altogether a new view of man. In his words:

Man at his highest is a half-god who has risen up out of the animal Nature and is splendidly abnormal in it, but the thing which he has started out to be, the whole god, is something so much greater than what he is that it seems to him as abnormal to himself as he is to the animal⁶.

This spiritual view of man is one of the most important contributions of Sri Aurobindo to the philosophy of man vis-a-vis the many naturalist and materialist views of man prevailing in the world today. The latter views have reduced human beings to the level of animals, though with a complex nature.

The Suprarational Human Nature

The idea that man is a rational being is the foundation of the modern civilization. The modern West carried forward the idea of rational man based on the concept of reason as the ultimate defining characteristic of human nature. The modern scientific and technological civilization is based on the principle that the human reason is the highest faculty of man because of which he has developed science and technology. The sciences are in a sense the highest achievements of the rational man by which he has conquered Nature and has established his own empire on the earth. Technology has empowered man beyond measure and thus has ushered in the mighty technological civilization that is the gift of human reason.

Sri Aurobindo takes the modern rational man as a half-god, or rather the transitional and incomplete man. He views the entire technological civilization as an imperfect and incomplete civilization because it is based on the wrong notion that man is only a rational being and nothing more. For Sri Aurobindo, man is essentially a spiritual being. He says:

But his (man's) nature is rather transitional; the rational being is a middle term of Nature's evolution. A rational satisfaction cannot give him safety from the pull from below nor deliver him from the attraction from above⁷.

This idea that man is a transitional and incomplete being is part of Sri Aurobindo's new philosophy of man in which he has shown that man has a long way to go before he can achieve his full manhood which is nothing other than his spiritual nature. The idea that the rational human being is only the middle term of the evolutionary trajectory shows that the rational nature of human beings could not be the final stage of Nature's development.

The following are Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical presuppositions in his theory of spiritual or suprarational man:

1. There is a higher Self of man than his bodily and mental Self.
2. The higher Self is the Spirit which is the universal divine consciousness.
3. Man can exceed his rational nature by spiritualizing his nature, that is, by ascending to the higher state of supramental consciousness.
4. The evolution of man from the vital and the rational stage is inevitable because of Nature's own design.

Thus Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics of man is part of his integral metaphysics of supramental consciousness which promises to transform human nature in the process of the evolution. What is proposed by Sri Aurobindo in his new vision of man is that rationality has failed to solve the problems facing mankind. Rationality as it stands today is so impoverished that it cannot look beyond itself and cannot understand the underlying divinity in the human nature and the universe. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The solution lies not in the reason but in the soul of man, in its spiritual tendencies. It is a spiritual, an inner freedom that can alone create a perfect human order. It is a spiritual, a greater than the rational enlightenment that can alone illumine the vital nature of man and impose harmony on its self-seekings, antagonisms and discords⁸.

The perfect human order as envisaged here is based on the idea that the Spirit in man when realized will promise the needed solution to the spiritual and moral crisis facing mankind. The rational enlightenment can no longer hold the key to the solutions facing mankind. That is why Sri Aurobindo feels the necessity of looking beyond the so-called rational nature of mankind.

The Crisis in Human Civilization

The present stage of the human evolution is a stage of crisis and instability because at this stage man has no way to be sure about himself. Man is troubled by his own mental conditions which are intermediary between the infrarational tendencies on the one hand and the suprarational aspirations on the other. The so-called rational man is stranded between his infrarational nature and the suprarational counterpart. The human reason can neither overcome his infrarationality nor ascend to the suprarational. This twilight stage of the human evolution is the stage of spiritual crisis in man. This crisis is also the crisis in human rationality because human reason has failed to solved the crisis. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The reason cannot arrive at any final truth because it can neither get to the root of things nor embrace the totality of their secrets; it deals with the finite, the separate, the limited aggregate, and has no measure for the all and the infinite⁹.

Reason fails to arrive at the ultimate nature of things because of its limitations. It can understand only the finite and the limited and not the infinite and the limitless Reality. That is why the present crisis in humanity is due to the failure of reason to arrive at the final and the ultimate truth.

Sri Aurobindo attempts at a critique of rationalism in its accepted sense according to which reason is the highest faculty of man and that there is nothing beyond reason. The modern West has accepted reason as the highest faculty as it has elevated it to the status of a demi-god as result of which it has rejected all ideas about the suprarational and supramental. This has resulted further in the erosion of human faith in the religious truths which are not based on reason. Religion, as Sri Aurobindo defines it, is a search for the Infinite and the Eternal¹⁰ which is revealed in man's suprarational experience. Reason which is limited to the finite and the logical and rational refuses to accept the validity of the religious experience. That is the reason why it either rejects religion as a matter of superstitious beliefs and dogmas or at best tries to rationalizes it by shedding the so-called superstitious elements. In either sense, "the unaided intellectual reason faced with the phenomena of the religious life is naturally apt to adopt one of the two attitudes, both of them shallow in the extreme, hastily presumptuous and erroneous"¹¹. This shows that reason as such without the aid of anything beyond itself cannot accept religious experiences as scientifically and rationally valid.

According to Sri Aurobindo, intellectual or formal reason is

handicapped in many respects because it confines itself to its own categories and does not look to the suprarational realm. Its limitations are its undoing in the matters of religion, ethics and aesthetics in which the suprarational elements are present. Religion as the most important source of the knowledge of the Infinite is codified by reason into a formal system and made into a fixed and rigid system of thoughts and beliefs which lose their living contact with Reality. Reason in a sense suffers from the disability of formalizing the unlimited and ineffable religious experience. As Sri Aurobindo puts it:

And, at best, it has to use a language which is not the very tongue of the suprarational truth but its inadequate translation and , since it is not the ordinary tongue either of the rational intelligence, it is open to non-understanding or misunderstanding , by the ordinary reason of mankind¹² .

Reason in the ordinary sense remains confined to its method of functioning within the limited domain of the logical thoughts and so it cannot adequately explain the subtle nuances of the religious experiences. It misunderstands the language of the suprarational truth and so falls into the trap of ignorance of the ultimate truth.

The crisis in modernity is due to the negative attitude of the rational man towards everything that is outside of the domain of science and of empirical thought in general. This has led to the collapse of the system of higher values in life such as those offered by religion, ethics and aesthetics. As a champion of the higher values like Truth, Goodness and Beauty as the absolute values, Sri Aurobindo is unhappy with the state of modern civilization. He lays the blame for this at the door of modern technological and pragmatic rationality. According to him, it is the pragmatic and utilitarian reason which has led mankind to the present crisis. However, he does not condemn reason and rationality altogether. He believes that reason has to be elevated to the higher realm of the suprarational experience so that it can understand the spiritual truths which are bound to illumine the rational intelligence. All the human faculties including the reason must be transformed into the instruments of the supramental Reality. Sri Aurobindo says:

The widest spirituality does not exclude or discourage any essential human activity or faculty, but works rather to uplift all of them up out of their imperfection and groping ignorance, transforms them by its touch and makes them the instruments of the light, power and joy of the divine being and the divine nature¹³ .

Reason, though limited in its activity, cannot be left behind in the evolutionary progress of mankind as it has to be transformed into an instrument of the Divine Reality. As a result reason becomes the fit instrument of the knowledge of the supramental Reality.

The Spiritual Transformation of Human Nature

The real solution of the present crisis is the transformation of human nature as a result of which man can ascend to a higher level of consciousness so that he realizes the divine Reality and thereby become a suprarational being. Since the ordinary intellectual reason has failed to make human beings capable of solving their own spiritual problems, they have to go beyond reason to make contact with the highest Reality. The main problem of the rational man is his refusal to accept the higher order existence and the reality of the Divine as a result of which he is bound to descend down to his infrarational existence. Man's descent into infrarationality has been rampant in the present age which has accepted only the so-called pragmatic and utilitarian rationality. Therefore there is an absolute need for man to transform himself and begin to rise above this rationality. For, as Sri Aurobindo puts it,

The secret of the transformation lies in the transference of our centre of our living to a higher consciousness and in a change of our main power of living. This will be a leap or an ascent even more momentous than that which Nature must have at one time made from the vital mind of the animal to the thinking mind still imperfect in our human intelligence¹⁴.

The spiritual transformation which is absolutely imperative for the mankind consists in the ascent to a higher consciousness that far surpasses the human consciousness which is commonly available. This culminates into a leap into Supermind and the supramental consciousness.

The idea of transformation is not easy to understand because it involves making man ascend to a higher consciousness and going beyond reason. It involves the transformation of the infrarational desires and instincts which the vital man is constituted of. The reason in man overcomes them to some extent but they remain unchanged at the mental level. That is why Sri Aurobindo takes these forces of the lower nature of man for consideration in preparing for their transformation. The human body and the related physical desires are a stumbling block to the ascent to the higher consciousness. Therefore there is the necessity of transforming these lower desires so as to make them expressions of the higher consciousness. Therefore,

“ the central will implicit in life must be no longer the vital will in life and body, but the spiritual will of which we have now only rare and dim intimations and glimpses.”¹⁵ . The vital will must make way for the spiritual will so that the vital emotions and instincts can be changed into higher forms of emotions Thus there must be a total transformation of human nature so that supramental consciousness becomes the normal consciousness of ordinary human beings.

The process of transformation is not a mere cancellation of the vital and the mental nature but to make it something more, that is, to make it spiritual in the sense of being capable of higher thought and emotions of joy and bliss. There is no way we can describe fully the higher realm of consciousness except by distinguishing it from the lower consciousness. The realm of the lower consciousness is full of conflicts and suffering which are absent in the realm of the higher consciousness. The higher realm is the realm of the Spirit which is eternal and infinite. Therefore when the Spirit takes over the entire human consciousness it leads to spiritual perfection. The Spirit in man elevates the human body and mind and leads it to perfection. As Sri Aurobindo says:

... the perfection of man cannot consist in pursuing the unilluminated round of the physical life. Neither can it be found in the wider rounds of the mental being; for that also is instrumental and tends towards something beyond it, something whose power indeed works in it, but whose larger truth is superconscious to its present intelligence, supramental. The perfection of man lies in the unfolding of ever-perfect Spirit¹⁶ .

Thus we can understand the realm of perfection as the realm of the Spirit. These two realms are the same because there is no way we can achieve perfection except in the realm of Spirit. In the state of spiritual perfection we are liberated from our physical, vital and mental being.

The Superman

The idea of superman which Sri Aurobindo has visualized is the promise of a future man who is yet to come but whose possibility is implicit in the present humanity. Sri Aurobindo has only emphasized the importance of the idea of superman by suggesting that the evolution of the universe has not come to an end with the arrival of man in the universe. The human existence has not been due to a sudden biological accident but due to a long chain of evolution starting with the physical world and life in the forms of animals at

different levels. Then there arose the species of higher animals with man at the apex. This happened in course of evolution because of the force of Nature which has been implicit in all the activities of Nature.

Sri Aurobindo believes that Nature itself has all the power of the Divine to give rise to matter, life and mind in the process of evolution. This he calls the involution of the Divine in Nature which has manifested itself in the form of matter, life and mind. Because of this involution, there is the evolutionary impetus which explains how man arrived on the scene with all the mental and spiritual capacities though in a limited form. The evolution of man is part of the larger scheme of Nature and therefore there is no reason to doubt that man has come into being because of a cosmic design. Sri Aurobindo is not merely concerned with the present stage of the human evolution as he is concerned with the future evolution of superman. He is therefore the prophet of the new age which he calls the spiritual age of the superman. This age will begin when the human race is ready to look to the Spirit or the Divine as the final truth of our existence. As he says:

The spiritual age will be ready to set in when the common mind of man begins to be alive to these truths and to be moved or desire to be moved by this triple or triune Spirit. That will mean the turning of the cycle of social development which we have been considering out of its incomplete repetitions on new upward line towards its goal¹⁷.

Thus the onward march of the human race will be on the path towards the goal of reaching the Divine Reality. The goal is the establishment of the Kingdom of the Spirit on earth.

The individual man who will realize the Divine will be the spiritual man and not merely the mental or rational man. He will enjoy the commanding height of the spiritual realization which will make him the superman and not merely the ordinary rational human being. The fact of the matter is that he will belong to a higher realm of consciousness which is the supramental consciousness. Therefore the superman will enjoy the Kingdom of God within himself. Sri Aurobindo says:

It is this Kingdom of God within, the result of finding of God not in a distant heaven but within ourselves, of which the state of society in an age of the Truth, spiritual age, would be the result and the external figure¹⁸.

That is to say, not only the individual men will be spiritualized but the society and the world at large will realize the Divine Reality in the

sense that they will be transformed into the instruments of Divine Reality.

Is the Coming of a Spiritual Age inevitable?

It is now open to question whether Sri Aurobindo's prophecy about the spiritual age is going to be true. One can argue that like any other prophecy regarding the coming of a new age Sri Aurobindo's prophecy regarding the spiritual age is bound to be fictitious. Such criticisms are likely to crop given the bold assertions made regarding the future evolution of the human race. But one has to understand Sri Aurobindo's arguments regarding the future evolution of the spiritual man before one rejects it out of hand. It is easy to criticize the philosophical vision of a great thinker but it is difficult to reject it precisely because he or she speaks in a language not endorsed by science and common sense.

Sri Aurobindo's main argument for the coming of the spiritual age is that spirituality is already implicit in human nature which is progressively unfolding in the individual as well as social life. The spiritual nature of human beings is manifested in their activities both at the physical and the mental levels. Human nature has both physical and mental capacities which have been present in all human actions. In this sense, human nature has evolved from the physical and vital to the mental level. Human reason as the most evident faculty of human beings has brought about a great change in the animal nature. The idea of evolution of the rational man from the physical and the vital man explains well how human beings have already developed new mental capacities to lead a civilized life.

On the basis of the past history of human evolution Sri Aurobindo has attempted to logically map the future course of human evolution. Like all evolutionists in philosophy, Sri Aurobindo has emphasized that human evolution cannot stop at the present stage of mental development. If the past evolution is any guide, the future evolution of man into the spiritual age seems inevitable. The spiritual age will not be a complete departure from the present rational age; it will carry forward the rational nature of man and transform it into the suprarational nature. On this, Sri Aurobindo boldly declares:

Eve as the animal man has been largely converted into a mentalised and at the top a highly mentalised humanity, so too now or in future an evolution or conversion... of the present type of humanity into a spiritualised humanity is the need of the race and surely the intention of Nature; that evolution or conversion will be the ideal and endeavour¹⁹.

This bold assertion regarding the evolution of the spiritualized humanity is based on the logic of the human evolution so far which shows that the next step in the curve of evolution is the spiritual age. The spiritual age is the new age in which reason is transformed into the suprarational faculty guiding human evolution. It is the age of the new consciousness which is known as the supramental consciousness²⁰.

Of course it cannot be denied that the process of evolution is slow because it has taken millions of years before the rational man arrived on the earth. It is only a few individuals who have attained spiritual life in the rational age: majority of human beings have remained at the mental and rational level. It may take millions of years before more and more individuals attain a complete spiritual life. But the goal of the complete spiritualization of the human race, though a distant goal, cannot be brushed aside as utopian.

Sri Aurobindo's contention is that mankind has been on the path of spiritual progress since the beginning of the rational age but it must make conscious endeavour to achieve greater spiritual perfection on a large scale both at the individual and collective levels. Such is the logical and metaphysical nature of Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future of mankind.

Concluding Remarks

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of superman is the broad idea of how man can transcend his own vital and rational nature and can become the higher man, i.e., the superman. It is a positive philosophy of man which gives hope that man is not a fallen creature but the Spirit within and that the future of man is not bleak but bright with the possibility of a new man with a spiritualized nature.

To sum up: among the philosophies of human existence prevalent today, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy alone gives the hope that mankind can hope for a new future along the line of spiritual evolution leaving behind its past evolution of the mental nature.

Notes

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1962; second edition 1970; fifth Impression 1985).
2. See Ibid, Chapter 1.
3. See Ibid, Chapter 1.
4. Ibid, p. 254.

5. See Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1973).
6. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, the Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, p. 220.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
10. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-126.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
20. See Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, 1973).