

**MURALI SIVARAMAKRISHNAN**  
 Professor, Department of English  
 Pondicherry University  
 Pondicherry, India.  
[s.murals@gmail.com](mailto:s.murals@gmail.com)

## **INVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION:**

### **Some Conceptual Issues in the Contexts of Indian Discourses**

In a land like India with its heterogeneous culture and checkered history, the narratives linking place and humans are innumerable, couched in diverse perceptions and points of view, and filtered through multiple discourses over a long period of time. Geographically, historically and geo-psychically, Indian narratives afford pluralistic and complex readings. Philosophy, religion and poetry have a deep history in this part of the world, as much as oppression, domination, and ideologies of resistance and subversions.<sup>1</sup>

In more ways than one the emergence of ecologically sensitive critical theorizing in the academic world has signaled a resuscitation of the *idea of intrinsic value in nature* that has almost come to be buried under the rubble of a postindustrial consumerist culture which constantly seeks to obliterate all differences and moves toward the making of the omnivorous discourse of globalization and technocracy as monolithic and one-dimensional. Perhaps this return to nature could even be mocked as mere retrogression toward the European Romantic tradition of linking the human and the non-human into some sort of metaphysical essence. Or ecologically sensitive critical theorizing could also be demonized as a debilitating attempt to reinstate the grand narratives of a misplaced cultural humanism, in the lines of high modernist elitism. A third probability is that of a universally developing urban culture demonizing its own predatory roles in the haloed light of a forfeited primitive human culture! Either way the very suggestion of the notion of sacred or spiritual at the heart of nature's being is sure to invite many raised brows in our present day world, especially in India today! Nevertheless the direction that ecologically sensitive critical theory is currently heading toward – a direction that implies a search to reinforce idea and action in the material plane (a union of the spirit and matter in different scale), in terms of environmental justice-- is a sure sign of its not having lost its way *in the dreary desert sand of dead habit...*<sup>2</sup>

The story of the human/nature relationship is the story of the fall from grace, from a life coterminous with the sacred to one of utilizing nature as mere resource. The absence of a cultural basis for valuing the land we inhabit is perhaps the root of human behavior that degrades and pollutes our world! The values (diverse, multidimensional, manifold, heterogeneous and different) that ancient Indian tradition invokes are spiritual and a-temporal. They are rooted in a sense of place and time of course, but transcendental in their significance. They could be seen as proffering both a **bioregional** and **ecosystem** view of life and living. The elemental symbolisms of the Vedic and Upanishadic mantras are rooted in a culture of place and value while the ritualistic and sacred qualities that they evoke are trans-human and trans-natural. Above all the ancient Indian cultural outlook was a constant recognition of the sacred at the heart of all being. This notion of the **sacred** does not devalue the phenomenal world of the senses but on the other hand endows it with deeper significance and value. Ecology might be the socially evoked unified

and holistic view of nature for the present, but the ecological vision that a poetic insight engendered through the spiritual, would nevertheless enhance all qualities of life and living, both in terms of the human and non human, for its significance is not historically conditioned.

*Indian thought is more concerned with seeking connections than separateness.* Even from the very beginnings the conceptual concerns of the ancient Indian reveals a leaning toward the holistic and a seeking after the interconnectedness of all and everything. *Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, says the Rig Veda (1.164.46), the Existent is one, but the sages express it variously. There exists a spatio-temporal interrelatedness of all existence in a continuum of quality and this is further embedded in the notion of all life in the world as forming one whole continuous interrelated being —*vasudaiva kudumbakam*. The earth and all its life forms—living and non-living alike are held to be of equal value. [This is not tantamount by extension to stating that the Indian values of quality and being are universal values, like the widely held view in the present day world of market capitalism that economic prosperity ensures moral superiority!] Nevertheless, in a land like India with its heterogeneous culture and checkered history, the narratives linking place and humans are innumerable, couched in diverse perceptions and points of view, and filtered through multiple discourses over a long period of time. As has been mentioned earlier, Indian narratives on account of their complexities afford pluralistic and complex readings. And a great deal of western understanding of India revolves round the religion of the Hindus which is generally spiritual and theistic.

It is not unusual for non-Indian scholars to often equate Indian with the Hindu—this is not unnatural either because the Indian name for India is *Hindustan*. A long time ago the Persians referred to the people who lived on the other side of the river Indus as Hindus, and the name became synonymous with the culture and religion in this part of the world. However the Hindu religious practices that are prevalent in present day India are a latter day evolution and the Vedic vision that even now underlies it all is “pre Hindu”. The Vedas and their poetic modifications the Upanishadic verses, had formulated a unique world view that was indigenous to this part of the world. This is where our contemporary Eurocentric standpoints fall short in supplying an adequate interpretation—for the Vedic vision is a poetic one and it is an inclusive one—it “pre-modern” and “pre-scientific” too. The material and spiritual life of the human and the non-human nature is ingrained into the Vedic view of evolution and its unique possibilities. The entire cosmos is seen as a manifestation of the Divine which is in fact *avyaktaparatpara*—that which is unmanifest and unreachable by our senses. The poetic resolution of all life that the Vedas and the Upanishads supply is not one of mere religious belief but one that could be internally realized. The path of the true saints who lived and interrogated these living metaphors was riddled with challenge and rigorous intellectual inquisitiveness. Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950)<sup>3</sup> who belonged to the line of Vedic Rishis was one who combined in

himself intellect and emotion, and is often referred to as the *radical mystic* because he was engaged in an adventure of consciousness.

In the words of Aurobindo, the Upanishads are

the expression of a mind in which philosophy and religion and poetry are made one, because this religion does not end with a cult nor is limited to a religio-ethical aspiration, but rises to an infinite discovery of God, of Self, of our highest and whole reality of spirit and being and speaks out of an ecstasy of luminous knowledge and an ecstasy of moved and fulfilled experience, this philosophy is not an abstract intellectual speculation about Truth or a structure of the logical intelligence, but Truth seen, felt, lived, held by the inmost mind and soul in the joy of utterance of an assured discovery and possession, and this poetry is the work of the aesthetic mind lifted up beyond its ordinary field to express the wonder and beauty of the rarest spiritual self-vision and the profoundest illumined truth of self and God and universe.

Truth, experience, aesthetics and poetry all combine in their highest possible manner in the dialogic verses of the Upanishads. Of course, we should realize that only as an aesthetic continuum can the entire universe be finally resolved.

We read in the Upanishads:

*Hiranmayena patrena satyasyapihitam mukham;  
Tat tvam, pusan, apavnu, satya-dharmaya drstyate.*

The face of truth is covered with a golden disc. Unveil it, O *Pusan* (Sun), so that I who love the truth may see it! This is indeed a cryptic mantra. That truth and liberation are interconnected in Indian philosophy is a well recognized fact. And here the Upanishad enjoins us to go beyond the visible light to perceive the greater liberating light that is the true, the vast, and the beautiful. The Upanishads are replete with mantric invocations like this – invoking the reader or listener to seek moksha or liberation through deeper meditation and perception. And it is through the *rupa* or the form that one attains the *arupa*, the formless. The Universe is already an *involved* play ground of the *True, the Vast, the Beautiful* and the Lila of life is the slow *evolution* or inner enlightenment (*anataschamatkara*). This is the poetic realization of life as the Vedic-Upanisadic view maintains, and Sri Aurobindo's experiential realization is in direct line with this. Now let us turn to a brief discussion of his philosophical thinking, as he has explicated through his noted works.

For Sri Aurobindo, *Consciousness* is the essential reality. From the ontological standpoint it is *brahman*; from the psychological it is *atman*. This consciousness which is also pure Existence (*Sat*), Force (*Cit-Sakti*) and Bliss (*Ananda*) is the ultimate ground of all existence. There are varying grades, *avastha*, of consciousness, ranging from gross matter (lacking conscious) to the Absolute Spirit (Super-conscious, Supra-mental). Mental consciousness, polarized by subject-object structure is in its essence, different from the higher Spiritual as well as that lacking consciousness. *Consciousness* is involved in matter (in a pre-stage of Involution) and Evolution is the method by which it liberates itself. This progressive self-revelation of the Spirit, as Sri Aurobindo sees it, is the essence and meaning of the universe. Spirit is the source, evolution and final end.

Man (not the gendered term) at the present stage in his evolution, is a doubly involved being. Part of him in mind and below is involved in subliminal consciousness while that part above mind is involved in Spiritual Consciousness. Sri Aurobindo says that human existence is a sort of refraction of Divine Existence—an inverted order of ascent and descent. As the Divine has descended from Pure existence (*Sat*) through the play of Consciousness-Force (*Cit-Sakti*) and Bliss (*ananda*), man ascends from Matter through a developing Life and Mind towards the Divine. The meaning of human life centers round this cardinal fact of spiritual evolution.

All this is what nature would effect slowly, for the Involved Spirit forges ahead in its own self-expression. But Sri Aurobindo insists that his *Integral Yoga* can effect the triple transformation of Matter, Life and Mind in a rapid revolution. As consciousness in Matter ascends, there is a corresponding descent of the Divine, which in turn releases the spiritual self involved in Matter. In Sri Aurobindo's vision, body as well as the life and mind have to be spiritualized so as to be a fit instrument and receptacle for the realization of the Divine.

During the course of his acutely sensitive lectures at the turn of the twentieth century on **The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature**, William James remarks: "One can never fathom an emotion or divine its dictates by standing outside of it. In the glowing hour of excitement, however, all incomprehensibilities are solved, and what was so enigmatical from without becomes transparently obvious.... The only sound plan, if we are ourselves outside the pale of such emotions, is to observe as well as we are able those who feel them and to record faithfully what we observe..." (New York: Touchstone, 1997; 260)

Of course, James methodology and approach are certainly too old-world for us now in the present, and after the great theoretical debates of the last century in the human

sciences, especially after the poststructuralists and postcolonialists have challenged and exposed many such independent, stand-alone schemas for what they are, through their language and mode, relating them to ideologies and grand narratives, there is little scope for one to talk about emotion, feeling or sensitivity, without being charged either as completely ignorant of contemporary thinking, or worse still, of being a *fundamentalist*. To as much as mention religion or spirituality is to be a revisionist these days (especially in India) and notions of faith and belief (more a matter of heart rather than the head) appear so far distant to be of any aid in the matter. After Edward Said's thesis on *Orientalism* it is less easy to evoke Indian spirituality without resorting to the binary of western or Eurocentric logic that served to create a cultural curio of all the East as Orient: but the point is that both the spiritual and the logic of reason have been equally valid methods in the human search for abiding truth in the Indian subcontinent. At this point of interpretation one requires a considerable sense of history and sensitivity. Amartya Sen has argued for the recognition and understanding of the long tradition of accepted heterodoxy in this part of the world: it is not that logic, rationality and the concern for the material existence have been less pursued at the expense of the mystical Spiritual. (See his **The Argumentative Indian**).

Sri Aurobindo observes that the assertion of higher-than-mental-life is the whole foundation of ancient Indian philosophy and its acquisition and organization the veritable objective served by the methods of Yoga. In the language of Indian philosophy mind is *antahkarana*, inner instrument, and it is essentially a dividing or polarizing consciousness. But at the same time its imperfection is a sign of its transitional status. As he envisions it, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition and Overmind are the next evolutionary stages in the transformation of mind to Supermind. This Supermind occurs at the knot of the two Worlds, the higher and lower hemispheres of being—the *Parardha* or Existence-Consciousness-Bliss and the *Aparardha* or Matter-Life-Mind—and functions as a veil in between. The rending of the veil is the condition of the Life Divine.

Existence	Matter
Consciousness-Force	Life
Bliss	Psyche
Supermind	Mind

The Divine Element in man, the repository of that innate drive towards perfection and divine possibility Sri Aurobindo terms Soul, or Psyche. It is the aesthetic being in man. It

is in constant touch with the Divine and rises on its own curve to its Divine Consummation.

All this is not an intellectual hypothesis in the Western philosophical sense, neither it is prophetically revealed as in religious scriptures of the West, but experientially intuited in Yogic realization. And to that extent, Sri Aurobindo's works—both his poetry and philosophical texts—are to be read as the codified symbolic constructions of an enlightened Rishi who had pierced open the effulgent golden lid and "seen" beyond all, the face of Truth.

Perhaps if one were to read him with the sort of understanding and openness that is most often required while encountering the works of a mystic one could perhaps feel *incomprehensibilities...solved, and what was so enigmatical from without become transparently obvious!* He lived with his spiritual quests as we live with our everyday realities and experienced a meaningful relation with those. In these days of post-capitalist and transnational market economics, when all values are reduced to be mere consumables, such spiritual quests might appear to lack luster and meaning—but all the while we might as well remember that when globalization reduces all differences into one homogeneous whole, the spiritual that continues to exert its relevance to those who can still think on their own retains all difference and heterogeneity. Because we all live in a world that is multi-planed and all meaning is acquired only through this act of recognition of difference. Involution and evolution are never unilateral; the world is *vivarta*—constantly changing. Even the Spirit-- the dance of Siva is never the same.

Aurobindo Ghosh occurring as he did at the turn of the century when Indian nationalism was evolving naturally had his job cut out for him, apparently. He tailored his explorations to suit his times and attempted an integrated thinking of what was current in the west and the east—Hegel, Bergson, and to a certain extent Spinoza go into the making of his creative evolutionary system. The Vedas and the Upanishads proffered him the spiritual model, and his experience and experiments developed through Yoga, provided him with the corresponding vision. He combined in himself the Renaissance *over-reacher*—in his intellectual inquisitiveness—and the radical mystic—in his austerity and Yoga. Involution and evolution were not a matter of philosophy and a system for him, they were lived experiences. His life and work are testaments to his vision, experience and experiment. Of course, the paradox of the spiritual is the paradox of life itself. A *yogi who writes*, in Sri Aurobindo's words, *is not an ordinary man, for he writes only what the spirit wants him to express*. And of course the spirit has a strange delight in remaining silent when the final statements of life are to be made. Of course, by

standing outside in the periphery one may not hear and understand --the real calls for the experience *per se*. Sri Aurobindo's works enjoin us abandon our little selves and plunge into an adventure of consciousness. Revolution is a matter of change of form, perhaps even merely an upheaval; however, evolution is a matter of holistic transformation.

All this is not to state that the Hindu way of life stemming from the Vedic poetic vision that sees all life as Yoga and the creative unfolding of the involuted Spirit is the be all and end all of human thinking. That the Hindu way of thinking itself is amorphous and heterogeneous is an accepted fact, and hence the point I am trying to make is that a healthy sensitivity to this could perhaps guide us away from the crisis ridden present wherein we are struggling with our one-dimensional globalizing force. The protean focus of the Vedic vision argues for the ultimate holistic view that recognizes difference and unity at the same time—the resolution we should remember is not an evasion of the material at the expense of the spiritual, but a recognition of the complementarities of both. We in the present would have progressed with the aid of super science and technology and achieved the acme of our cultural roles, we have digitized the world and can even account for the tiniest fraction of nanoseconds of our lives, but still it is worthwhile to remember that the greatest questions of life and death still continue to haunt us—do we evolve or do we stagnate in this pool of our biological stem cells? In his *The Big Sur Dialogues*, Fritjof Capra records Hazel Henderson, the Economist as stating: “The next evolutionary leap has to be cultural....So many other species before us have not made it, but we have got an awful lot of equipment to make it with.” (**Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People**, London: Flamingo, 1988; p.287) This cultural evolution perhaps is the possible answer—but we must also remember the conflict between cultures and the crisis that has ensued. All this is because of our hierarchical value systems. To think with the spirit is to think for all humanity. To think with the spirit is to recognize the other as one's own self. After all, in the final analysis we have only one life, here and now. And yet, as the multifaceted Hindu Puranas would show, we continue to exist in a million dimensions all at once, here and now. It is the consciousness that would make all the difference. As the great guru and Indian intellectual, Sankaracharya has said, *tasmat, jagrata, jagrata...* (*Therefore, be aware, be aware!*)

- Aurobindo, Sri. **The Life Divine**. Pondiherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972 (Birth Centenary Library.)
- Aurobindo, Sri. **The Foundations of Indian Culture**. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1975.
- Aurobindo, Sri. **Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol**. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970. (Reduced facsimile edition)
- Capra, Fritjof. **Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People**, London: Flamingo, 1988.
- James William. **The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature**, New York: Touchstone, 1997.
- Murali, S. **The Mantra of Vision: An Overview of Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetics**. Delhi: BR Publishers, 1998.
- Sen, Amartya. **The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity**. London: Penguin, 2005.

<sup>1</sup> To refer to the Indian *spiritual tradition* is not to deny the existence and significance of *materialist* discourses that have shaped the thinking of the people of India over the years. There has been a continued debate between the spiritual and the material as much as the theistic and the atheistic (see Debiprasad Chattopadyaya, DD Kosambi, Amartya Sen). However, the focus of my arguments is that Indian thought is *more concerned with seeking connections rather than insisting on separateness*. This claim to connection does not preclude the value of existence and the individual.

<sup>2</sup> These well known lines are echoes from the opening stanza of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1913) : "Where the clear stream of reason /has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father; let my country awake."

<sup>3</sup> **Sri Aurobindo\*** (1872-1950) was among the significant patriotic nationalists who fought against the British Raj, and quite unlike Gandhi he was never a pacifist. Although, right from his early childhood he was brought up in England by his anglophile father, Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose, became one of the most noted of Indian thinkers and philosophers, a radical mystic par excellence! He wrote profusely on various topics ranging from political issues to abstract philosophy, poetics, prosody and history to social and psychological issues, literary criticism to yoga and mysticism, sociolinguistics to Tantric and Vedic studies. His direct involvement in Indian revolutionary nationalism, however, was quite abruptly terminated when he withdrew to the safe haven of Pondicherry (which was a French colony), and continued to live as a recluse. Almost all his major writings and translations have been serialized in his journal *Arya* that he edited. *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972) is his major philosophical contribution. Despite all his multifarious involvements in issues relating to politics and society, Sri Aurobindo continued to write poetry. His magnum opus is, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, which he continued to revise and redraft till his death in 1950.