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## National Education Theory of Sri Aurobindo

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of education in national field has very important role to play in even twentieth century India. However here I want to focus on the national theory of education as envisioned by Sri Aurobindo and to reveal the contribution of his integral education theory on modern India while comparing with Gandhi.

**Keywords:** Sri Aurobindo, National education, Gandhi, integral education.

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### INTRODUCTION

The definition of true education is a very debatable concept about which the agreement has to be yet established. Generally we denote by the word 'education' the system of education received by us during our school and college days. But is this denotation is appropriate? If yes, then education will stand just for bookish knowledges encouraged by our traditional educational institutes. Education certainly not means that. In its true sense, education should be that training, both mental and physical, of the children, which will enable them to reveal their internal capabilities as well as introduce them with the knowledge of all things belonging in this vast world. According to swami Vivekananda, by which education we learn to control and dominate our moral wills and to limit their speed completely that education should be considered as the proper kind of education<sup>1</sup>. It will encourage the pupils not only to learn from books, but also from nature. Because a person, who does not believe that nature is the best teacher of a child, is actually rejecting one of the most significant principles of education. A child, deprived from the nature, is unable to utilize his bookish informations due to lack of appropriate training. In books, he will learn the process how to acquire and memorize some informations, but unable to know about their utility; however in nature he will both learn the fact as well as its usage. Thus, the prospective of education over our whole life seems quiet vast; as it does not remain limit only within the small boundary of books, but expanded throughout our whole life-experiences. In this present paper, I will try to compare between the educational theories of Sri Aurobindo and Tagore, whose writings will help us to understand properly the true picture of our present educational conditions and also to reform it whenever found necessary.

It has been a great concern for educators nowadays to evaluate the theory of education. Many Western educators and philosophers of education have tried to understand educational theories not just as mere theories less concern with actual practice, but as a real structure and framework which provide practical guidelines for educational practice.

### POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN NATIONAL EDUCATION AGITATION

However, for doing so, let us at first try to understand the background of that time which led them to think so seriously about formulating their theories of education. In 1905, the most debatable issue of Indian politics took place i.e. the notorious Bengal Partition held in the order of Lord Curzon. The partition of Bengal took the immediate form of a movement during 1905 and became the essential part of the swadeshi or Indian political movement. Then a very highly spirited Anti-Partition Movement begun in which both Sri Aurobindo and Tagore took active part. People of Bengal also protested against this nasty conspiracy of the British government to divide the cultural and intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Swami Vivekanander Bani Sanchayan, p. 22

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capital of India. In the national educational movement at that time, nationalist leaders tried to focus on several essential facts. The first one was, to revive the past glory of India. Another result was to recreate a sense of pride among Indians by learning the traditions, culture and religion of India. The third one was to rediscover the value of using Indian languages as the medium of education.

In the ready-fields of national educational movement, Tagore along with Satish Chandra Mukherjee played the major roles [Sri Aurobindo was also another important one]. For propagating the learning procedure of Indian traditions along with modern Western values, Tagore formed the Visva-Bharati University, Satish Chandra formed Dawn Society and Sri Aurobindo established an ashram in Pondicherry. In order to organize a national education system, the necessity of constituting a National Council of Education was felt heavily. This conception of creating the Council was taken during a meeting held in Calcutta on November, 1905. On 14 August, 1906, the National College was originally founded and Sri Aurobindo [formerly well-known as Aurobindo Ghose] was appointed as its first principal. For spreading the technical and engineering studies in Bengal, an engineering College was founded by the National Council of Education, which, later after being reconciled with the national college, took the form of Jadavpur University after 1947. During this national education agitation period, large number of schools was opened in different parts of Bengal. Among them, the schools established at Faridpur and Bakargunj of East Bengal [now in Bangladesh] were much popular of large numbers of Muslims and women were enrolled here.

However for stopping the spreading of national educational movement, the British government made a very clever trick by imposing the Carlyle Circular over Indian pupils. In this notorious circular, they banned the students to take part of any political movement, to attend any political meeting or talking in the favor of Indian politicians. If they made any attempt to overhear this ultimatum, then by the help of this circular they could even be imprisoned and expelled from the British educational institutes. But its effect was truly devastating in students all over Bengal. Many students participated in showing demonstration against this British circular. As a result, they were expelled from the educational institutions run by the government. Then the requirement of a supplementary educational system was greatly realized. Therefore on 11th March, 1906 the National Council of Education was founded for the establishment of national schools and colleges for meeting with the demands of Indian students. On August, 1906 the Bengal National College was founded in which Sri Aurobindo was appointed as the first Principal. And later Sri Aurobindo Ashram was established in Pondicherry by The Mother in the light of his educational views. And in 1901, Tagore set up *Bramhacharyashram* in Shantiniketan where the pupils would be introduced with the ideal of the *Tapobans* of ancient India. This ashram took the form of Visva-Bharati in 1918. As the active members of National Council of Education, both of them developed certain ideals regarding the teaching procedure, which helped them a lot in their discussion about the reformation of the traditional system of education. However none of them were interested in gaining reputations for themselves as the educationalists, even though their educational concepts have been able to achieve contemporary relevance even today. Let us have a brief look upon these.

### **SRI AUROBINDO’S THESIS ON NATIONAL EDUCATION**

As a mystic and yogi in nature, Sri Aurobindo’s main aim regarding the establishment of national education policy is to concentrate towards the spiritual upliftment of his motherland. He always wanted to advance India and its countrymen in the spiritual path. His so-desired Divine Life will be impossible unless the communal upliftment of all human beings, whether Indians or not. Every individual has spiritual purpose to be fulfilled in his own life, so by the advancement of Spirituality he can reach to internalism from the national arena. India has spiritual mastery over all other nations from birth, it has to teach the materialist world how to live spiritually. Thus, according to Sri Aurobindo, India has to gain the spiritual mastery over the entire materialistic world. And for gaining this spiritual mastery, India has to be advanced from heart and for this above reason, it has to educate its all children irrespective of class-structure or wealth-pattern. Every child of India has the primitive right of education and we should not deprive him/her from this basic right.

Let us, in this context, try to understand the true meaning of national education. Mr. Gopalkrishna Gokhale described ‘national education’ as ‘the independent system of education’. However national education certainly does not mean that, the term has different connotation. The Subjects Committee of Indian National Congress at Calcutta session introduced the word ‘national’ three times. But Nationalist leaders did not accept any suggestion to drop the word ‘national’ from the national

educational system. Sri Aurobindo was in the favor of spreading the national education theory as an essential means of attaining the political freedom. Political liberty can be gained even if the countrymen were illiterate, but the sustenance of it could not be possible without the freedom of gaining education by the young generation of any country. If the children of any nation are deprived of education, then the proper improvement of that country will not happen. We, thus, have to understand the necessity of educational system as a backbone of any highly-developed nation. India is not an exception to this. Hence in his political thesis the educational theory has attained a high place.

Sri Aurobindo's educational thesis has the goal of attaining the universal harmony of mankind, where no bar of nations should be entertained at all. The aim of true education is to make human life to be superior divine life. Three aspects of education are – the man, the nation with all its limitations, and most of all internationalism. The man when become free from all boundary created by the family, clan and nation surrounding him, then he can truly realize the inner spirit of Man. This arousal of inner spirit is termed as 'Divine Life' by Sri Aurobindo.

While determining the principles of education, the first and foremost concern of this great visionary is to build up India as a great nation. Sri Aurobindo truly explained – 'national education cannot be defined in one or two sentences, but we may describe it tentatively as the education which, starting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation.'<sup>2</sup> The primary aim of Sri Aurobindo's thesis of education is to make the youths conscious of their own cultural heritage.

According to Sri Aurobindo, there are three different essential parts taken to be in consideration in a true and living education – the common and unique individual; the nation along with the national spirit; and the inner feeling of universal humanity. The growth and development required of an individual should be the primary objective of that true and ideal education. The aim of education should be to help the individual mind for the complete development of his inner qualities and, in this above way, he may realize the full purpose of his whole life. Through the proper kind of education system, an individual has gained the true attachments with the national spirit as well as international brotherhood.

However his educational doctrine has something spiritual in nature. In Sri Aurobindo's doctrine, man is not merely a living body, rather consist of several vital energies, an ego and a mind with the qualities of reasoning and imagination. The social, political, economic aspects of a human being are truly constitute his external or outer side, but the real nature of a man is the Supreme Spirit or the Self as it is the manifestation of the *Sachhidananda*. Every human life has divine aspect inherent within his nature. The main aim of a human life is to identify his preferable unity with the Almighty. And by realizing this divine truth he can understand the reason behind his own existence. By realizing the existence of Divine in his life, he can understand also the radical transformation procedure of the entire world. Then the Divine satisfied by the prayer of the individual will be bound to emerge upon earth. The so-desired evolution of the matter, life and mind through several layers can go to the supermind level of existence. Thus the Divine will come down upon the earthen plane to fulfil Sri Aurobindo's desire of divine life.

In his theory of education Sri Aurobindo concentrated wholly upon the development of life, mind and soul of the students. Thus his educational doctrine is known to be the *integral education* as it aims at the purification of the life, mind and soul-factor of a pupil unlike others. There are several criterias of training of students in Sri Aurobindo's thesis of education –

- Physical training/education: In this training programme of the physical part of the student, the bodily growth and development procedure is truly desirable. In Sri Aurobindo's own words – 'If our seeking is for the total perfection of the being, the physical part of it cannot be left aside; for the body is the material basis, the body is the instrument which we have to use.'<sup>3</sup> Body is made of material base and for the upliftment of whole student life, the advancement of body should not be ignored. And for this so-desired bodily development, the necessity of games and sports are highly appreciable. Sports and physical training programme given in the childhood and early youth would be tremendously helpful in bringing out the fullest potentialities of a student life.

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<sup>2</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Out of the ruins of the West...INDIA'S REBIRTH*, p. 36

<sup>3</sup> Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, *On Education*, p. 36

- Vital training/education: Sri Aurobindo gave extreme importance on the training of the vital organs i.e. the sense-organs. The training of the sense-organs constitute the vital aspects of education. These senses constitute of eyes, ears, nose, skin and palate etc external sense organs and also the internal sense organ named *citta/manas*. In this part of his life, there exists the roots of different feelings, desires, sentiments, impulses, emotions – the determining factors of his own character. The importance of vital education of the students are two-folds – (1) it helps to develop, as the Mother said, the sense-organs; (2) through it, one can gradually gain mastery over his character which will lead towards his transformation. According to the Mother, the proper nourishment of the senses will help to generate generosity and nobility factors within children.
- Mental training/education: One of the important part of human development procedure is to develop the mind, because, in Sri Aurobindo’s view, the Mind or *Antahkarana* is known to be one of the instrument in the hands of the educationists. Regarding the mental training procedure Sri Aurobindo gave importance on the role played by the tutor as he is the main person who can nurture the mental faculties of his students. In this training of mental faculty, a student’s memory power, powers of judgments and imagination has to be boosted. However the logical faculty has also to be sharpened by training in logic and else. The student has to grow in his own way. His mind can not be moulded or trained in this way so that he should grow under any external pressure.
- Psychic training/education: Sri Aurobindo’s uniqueness is that his educational thesis does not end with the training of the intellect, but also it aims to comprehend the true motive of human life and the reason of one’s existence upon this earth. And for this unique realization we have to go through the psychic training programme. The eternal principle, upon which the basis of his own existence depends, is the *Psychic being* or commonly known to be the Soul. The soul is the inherent factor of a human being. And so in the educational training procedure the training of the soul or psychic being seems extremely necessary for Sri Aurobindo.
- Supramental training/education: The unique highest limit of such educational training procedure, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the supramental training. None other Sri Aurobindo ever thought that possibility of educational training through the supramental side of it. Actually his main aim is to show the extremely difficult path of the ascent of the human race towards the Sachchidananda and to call him down upon the earth, just like Bhagirath called upon River Ganga down in earth. For the fulfillment of his spiritual aim the training of the spirituality i.e. the Supramental education programme is ultimately necessary.

Thus it could be seen that Sri Aurobindo aimed at the wholesome transformation of a student life through his *Integral education* theory. But indeed a truly integral education has three central aims to be fulfilled – (1) for an individual, to outgrow the fullest possibilities of his soul; (2) for the nation, to strengthen and enrich its national-soul, to focus on its *dharma*; and last but not the least (3) for the advancement of both the individual and the nation in such a way that it can grow into the ascending powers of mind and soul of humanity. And all of them aims truly on the Sri Aurobindo’s most desired awakening of Spiritual Being.

In this context we have to go through his three principles of integral education.

The first principle of true teaching is that ‘nothing can be taught’<sup>4</sup> i.e. the student has not been given any pressure upon him in the time of receiving education. Every student born with enormous potentialities and the master has to encourage him so that his inner qualities can be gradually develop. The task of the teacher is certainly not to put lots of information to his student which unfortunately becomes one of the most essential part today’s educational system. The trainer has to show just the proper way of developing the inner possibilities of every child and not more than that.

The second principle is that the child has to grow in his natural growth process. Nothing could be imposed upon him as an external factor. ‘There can be no greater error than for the parent to arrange beforehand that his son shall develop particular qualities, capacities, ideas, virtues, or be prepared for a pre-arranged career.’<sup>5</sup> The student should get enough liberty so that he can be able to nourish his inner potentialities and can make himself perfect.

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<sup>4</sup> Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, *On Education*, p. 12

<sup>5</sup> Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, *On Education*, p. 12

The third principle is that ‘to work from near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be.’<sup>6</sup> According to him, man’s nature is totally dependent upon his heredity, atmospheric circumstances, nationality, love for his country along with the soil, the air, the water etc *Pachabhuta tattva*. As all these above qualities constitute the natural environment of the child, the true education programme can not separate the natural environment from itself as a necessary organ. Thus the natural environmental side of true education helps to nurture the inherent development procedure.

### INTEGRAL EDUCATION: ROAD TOWARDS LIFE DIVINE

Now we can ask an important question regarding the relevance of Sri Aurobindo’s integral education thesis from the social political point of view. Education and social-political thought are two separate fields. How could we correlate them with each other?

But if we think from the point of view of Sri Aurobindo then these two are compatible with each other. Education is the gateway, in his theory, by whose term we can go towards the road of attaining the ultimate spiritual satisfaction. According to critics the specialty of Sri Aurobindo’s education thesis is that it introduces the psychic and spiritual kind of education which is far beyond the limit of understanding of common man. But from the perspective of his social and political thought these psychic and spiritual kinds of education make us prepare to achieve the road of *Life Divine*. It is true that the goal set by Sri Aurobindo is purely metaphysical in nature. And education works as mandatory tools here.

Critics thought that the existence of Psychic education and Spiritual education is the specialty of Sri Aurobindo’s theory regarding education. I am also accepting this. They are indeed the gateways of *Life Divine*. It is thought that *Life Divine* is actually a utopian state and there is no way to achieve it. But *Life Divine* is not at all a utopia and the road towards its achievement is the way of leading a man to achieve the psychic and spiritual senses of education.

If we go through the integral education thesis of Sri Aurobindo, then the integral education has to follow the path of four-fold austerities and four-fold liberations to reach to the ultimate end of *Life Divine*.

The four austerities are as follows –

- *Tapasya* of Love
- *Tapasya* of Power
- *Tapasya* of Knowledge
- *Tapasya* of Beauty

The four liberations are as follows –

- Emotional Liberation
- Mental Liberation
- Vital Liberation
- Physical Liberation

If we discuss the road toward *Life Divine* with the help of Sri Aurobindo’s doctrine of four austerities then the *tapasya* of Love is considered as the gateway of it. However the difficulty is that here the word ‘love’ is not used in the sense of any narrow egoistic human love, rather the divine love. This divine love has two inner movements hidden within – supreme power of attraction and irresistible need of complete self-surrender.<sup>7</sup> Hence if we want to go through the path of *Life Divine* then we have to follow the advice of The Mother –

“If therefore you want to be like the Divine, love Him alone. One must be the ecstasy of the communion of love with the Divine can alone know how insipid, dull and feeble all other love is, in comparison”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>7</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *On Education*, “Four Austerities & Four Liberations”, p. 153

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 157

But very astonishingly all the four liberations are the roads towards *Life Divine*. Emotional liberation helps individuals to be free from emotional bondages and sufferings in such a way that they can enjoy their integral union with the Supreme. Men, being emotional in nature, always remain limited within the boundary of suffering and bondage. If they can make themselves free from this narrow limit of suffering then they can easily correlate themselves with the Divine. Mental liberation or liberation from ignorance helps our mind to realize the existence of Gnostic consciousness<sup>9</sup> within us. Due to ignorance or *Avidya*, we can mistaken our identity and detach us from the Divine. But when with self-knowledge our *Avidya* or ignorance diminishes then we will truly identify ourselves as none other than the manifestation of the Supreme. Vital liberation or liberation from desire is also important in nature. It helps us to identify the divine will hidden within, devoid of the narrow self-centered egoistic human desire. Whenever we are guided by our desires we cannot even reach nearer to the Divine. But the discovery of the divine will deeply inherent within has been the ultimate goal to be achieved by vital liberation. Finally, the physical liberation or liberation from materialistic achievements helps us to gain freedom from our sub-conscious or semi-conscious levels of impulsions. Our impulses limited us within the physical realm. When we free ourselves from the blind impulses then we will be touched by the supramental consciousness hidden within us by the help of *Chaitya Purusha* or the innermost being according to Sri Aurobindo.<sup>10</sup>

From here the road towards *Life Divine* will open by discovering the true nature of Psychic being or *Chaitya Purusha*. The way towards this discovery is not at all an easy road to reach. By the help of self-knowledge (*Ātma-jñāna/tattva-jñāna*) we can discover the existence of inner divinity within us. And for discovering this inner divinity first of all we have to discover the inmost being or Psychic Being (considered as *Chaitya Purusha* by Sri Aurobindo). And this discovery of psychic being leads us to go through Sri Aurobindo's notion of psychic education.

However the discovery of this psychic being is not so easy in nature. An individual, always surrounded by his narrow egoistic ventures, never want to indulged into the search for his inner being deep inherent within. It is a road very difficult for an individual in this materialistic world I suppose.

But our search for *Life Divine* certainly not ends with the discovery of the psychic being or *Chaitya Purusha*. Psychic education just opens the door to reach there. It is better to be known as the gateway towards another education, namely spiritual education which certainly serves our purpose ultimately. By the help of psychic education we can identify our inmost being or psychic being, but with the help of spiritual education we have to comprehend the ultimate truth of our life i.e. men are nothing else but the manifestation of the *Brahman*. The discovery of our psychic being or *Chaitya Purusha* lays the gateway of such self-discovery. So psychic education serves as the basis of the spiritual education.<sup>11</sup>

Actually, according to Sri Aurobindo, spiritual education truly shows us the path of human beings arising to the ultimate level of the *Superman*. And by realizing his identity as none the less but God himself when man considers his inner possibility as superman then this serve our dream of coming down the supermind upon the earthen level truly possible and the result is *Life Divine* for all.<sup>12</sup> Hence spiritual education truly stands for the gateway of *Life Divine*.

## CONCLUSION

But again to tell that the road is not so smooth to reach there. In my view, men can easily serve the goals of physical education, vital education and even of mental education. But the journey towards *Life Divine* via the road of psychic education and spiritual education (this journey is somewhat inward in nature) is very difficult to cope with. However it is not impossible to reach the goal according to Sri Aurobindo but till now we don't have enough example of superman who can bring down the supermind on the earthen level just like Bhagirath call upon Ganga.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 159

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 159-160

<sup>11</sup> Sri Aurobindo, On Education, “Psychic and Spiritual Education”, p. 129

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