UNIT 8: AUROBINDO: EVOLUTION

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1. Learning Objectives

8.2. Introduction

8.3. Notion of Creation and the world process

8.4. Nature and kinds of ignorance

8.5. Theory of Evolution

8.6. Let us sum up

8.7. Future Reading

8.8. Answers to cheeck your progress

8.9. Model Questions

8.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- describe the nature of creation.
- Illustrate the various kinds of ignorance.
- explain the relation between evolution and involution.
- discuss the theory of evolution.

8.2. INTRODUCTION

In the ocean of Indian thought the philosophy of Aurobindo is like a stunning island. He is one of the most outstanding figure of Indian Nationalism and a dazzling star of ancient Indian thought. Aurobindo's entire attitude to Indian philosophical thought is based on the presumption that the highest truth of philosophy, social life and even Science are contained in the Vedas. The Vedas are the original foundation or roots of Indian wisdom. Aurobindo tried to reveal how the tree of Indian Culture and Philosophy is rooted in the Vedas which are deep, sturdy and tenacious. So in his philosophy we find a gigantic synthesis in which the gains of modern scientific thought are fully recognized on the metaphysical plane.

In the Indian National Movement Sri Aurobindo was a most popular revolutionary leader, a brilliant orator and a journalist. He declared a political struggle against alien rule can be waged by peaceful means. His political work was marked by absolute faithfulness to the high ideals of truth and universal love that he had made his own. After some years he shifted to Pondicherry where he lived remaining forty years of his life.

The philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is the meeting point of both Indian and western thought. Western thought aims at a fuller realization of the evolutionary and cosmic character of its thought. But it is hampered by its intellectualism and its existential outlook. On the other hand its requirement is spiritual standpoint. Similarly Indian thought is spiritual but individualistic and static. It must break its narrow walls of individualism and acquire a dynamic and cosmic character. Aurobindo's philosophy fulfils this function by dealing with the main problem of Evolution.

The idea of Evolution is undeniably more prominent in western philosophy than Indian philosophy. Greek philosopher Aristotle says evolution is teleological as it was the gradual transformation of the potential into the actual. In fact the problem of creation has been stumbling block in Greek philosophy. According to Plato, creation is not a material process, but an ideal and intellectual process. So he says the idea of creation existing prior to creation. So in Plato we find a double set of creators—the ideas which are the ultimate creators and God. God evidently has not got the power to create without getting the pattern from the ideas and the ideas can not also create directly as they have no power of generation.

The Greek philosophers were always at first directed outward and at later stage it is directed inwards. That is why the approach from the standpoint of consciousness was never fully established in Greek Philosophy. On the other hand Indian philosophy from the beginning turned inwards. The highest reality was always conceived as Atman or Self. Therefore the interpretation of the universe was always from the standpoint of consciousness. The different grades of Reality were explained in terms of the different grades of consciousness. Sri

Aurobindo looks at the whole universe from the standpoint of Sachchidananda or highest consciousness. According to him, all reality is consciousness as well as the measure of reality of anything is determined by the nature of consciousness that is revealed in it. The higher the position of anything in the scale of reality, the deeper and more unified is the consciousness that is revealed in it. *Sachchidananda* is nothing but a common name for the triune principles of existence (*sat*), consciousness-force (*chit*) and bliss (*ananda*).

8.3 NOTION OF CREATION AND THE WORLD PROCESS

Regarding the question 'Why the Absolute is conceived as absolute and infinite?' or 'How the Absolute is conceived?'—the notion of creation will arise. Sri Aurobindo observes creation as a double process: First, it is a descent of the spirit into the worldly forms and second it is an ascent of the worldly forms to the spirit. So creation is a process of descent and ascent or evolution or involution. Just as we attain knowledge we ascend to it, but knowledge has descended down to us. Similarly spiritual transformation presupposes the descent of the spirit which is nothing but the origin of creation.

- Descent or involution

Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the involuntary aspect of creation follows to some extent the Vedantic description of creation. In the Vedanta, creation is described as a result of *avidya*. Due to ignorance we come to regard the world and the apparent self as the only realities. But according to Vedanta there is no creation in reality and this cosmic delusion is nothing but a joyous act or *Lila*.

According to Sri Aurobindo, creation is nothing but an expression of joy. Delight is the secret of creation which is also the cause of birth and death. Like Vedanta Aurobindo also said creation is nothing but a joyful game—a Lila. The world appears most casual and insight as a movement of Force which also appears to be consciously creative. It is

creating and giving expressions to newer and newer forms. But the moment we reflect upon the purpose of the creation of these forms we realize that the universe is an expression of delight. As a result we become one with it. This delight of world-process in relation to the *Saccidananda* is called Lila. That is why Sri Aurobindo says the whole of creation is a Lila-the child's joy, poet's joy, the actor's joy etc. The Absolute Himself the play, he is the player and he is playground. Lila is created out of Bliss, by Bliss and for Bliss. So Creation is pure Lila, which is an express of the spontaneous and sportive activity of Brahman.

Sri Aurobindo also describes creation as the plunge of the spirit into ignorance. Ignorance is the power of divine consciousness to withhold itself partially. Ignorance is part and parcel of Divine consciousness itself. Ignorance is in between the two realms. One extreme is the supreme Divine consciousness and other is the possibility of complete nescience. Ignorance stands in between two of them and this is the sphere of created world. Therefore the Absolute itself decides to descend into ignorance i.e. creation. Sri Aurobindo is aware of the issues that why should the Absolute choose to create out of ignorance? Why it is not out of knowledge? Is it not a limitation of its power? etc. Regarding these problems Aurobindo says the Absolute can create out of fullness of its self-knowledge. But it is only higher creation—a greater world that can only be seen by seers and the sages. But creation arises out of the lesser world in which humans' lives which is through ignorance. By distinguishing between two worlds Aurobindo had given a different standpoint from Advaita Vedanta. World has been given a status and reality by Aurobindo. But without the conception of Maya the world can not be understood properly.

The notion of Maya has understood in two different ways. In the first sense it is a power, constructive and creative and in the second sense it is a delusion producing mechanism. Sri Aurobindo accepts the first meaning of Maya as the power that creates the world. It is a power of *Saccidananda* which can comprehend, contain and measure out of forms of the world out of Infinite Existence. In another sense Aurobindo

can use the second meaning of Maya also. According to him, the world may also be called Maya as it is not the essential truth of infinite Existence.

As we have already known that creation is a plunge of the Spirit into ignorance. So it is necessary to try to establish the nature of ignorance.

8.4 NATURE AND KINDS OF IGNORANCE

According to Sri Aurobindo, ignorance is a form of knowledge though it is partial, fragmentary and distorted. Ignorance is conceived not as a sign of weakness, but as a power just like knowledge. It may be said as the power of partially withholding itself, but being a Divine power can not affect the Divine unity. Knowledge and ignorance are not essentially opposed each other. These are two different but the complementary aspects of the Reality. Ignorance proceeds towards the realm of knowledge and consequently knowledge becomes the natural culmination of ignorance. Thus ignorance is also potentially knowledge. It is a step towards knowledge.

There are three different ways for the operation of knowledge. At the highest, it is Divine Self-knowledge—that is also Divine All knowledge. On the other extreme, there is a complete negation of knowledge, 'effective dynamic, creative nescience.' In between the two there is the state of ignorance. Ignorance is conceived as the power of Divine consciousness itself, as its power to withhold itself partially. It is a power just like knowledge. Thus knowledge is the natural culmination of the state of ignorance. He feels that the soul, in the state of ignorance itself, makes all the preparation required to attain the supramental state, only a divine veil is preventing it so far from attaining that state. Ignorance is called ignorance because in this state one is ignorant of the supramental vision of the mental, ignorance from the higher standpoint. Moreover it is also a step towards knowledge, a possibility always bubbling with the potency of knowledge, waiting for the supramental descent.

According to Sri Aurobindo, ignorance is not a power of the Absolute Reality. It does not dwell in Him. Again it is not an inherent characteristic of the multiplicity of souls. When the individual soul is in the superficial stage of consciousness, it is shut out from the deeper consciousness that shows its unity with other souls and with the Supreme Being. But it also opens the deeper levels of consciousness where the individual soul sees itself in fundamental unity with other souls and with the whole universe, and with the Supreme Being.

Sri Aurobindo is aware that any attempt to determine the nature of knowledge must first be able to explain the various aspects of ignorance. The reasons behind it are—ignorance is not absence of knowledge, but incomplete or partial knowledge. Moreover it is also from the state of ignorance that one has to grow into the state of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo talks about seven kinds of ignorance. In order to discover seven sides of ignorance he asserts seven fold ignorance. These are—the original, the cosmic, the Egoistic, the Temporal, the psychological, the Constitutional and the Practical. Let us discuss the nature of these various types of ignorance—

1. The Original Ignorance: By 'the original ignorance' Sri Aurobindo meant that beings are ignorant of that which is really real. Human beings are ignorant of the Absolute which is the source of all 'being and becoming'. This is called 'the original ignorance' as it is the most basic of all types of ignorance—others somehow arising from this primal ignorance.

2. The Cosmic Ignorance: It is the ignorance about the real nature of the cosmos. Generally it is believed that the world of space and time in which all beings are live, move and have being is the real world. So the changes that appear to take place in the world appear to beings as wholly real. According to Aurobindo, this is ignorance about the real nature of the universe itself and thus it is called cosmic ignorance.

3. The Egoistic Ignorance: This form of ignorance concerns the nature of the self itself. Sometimes one feels that the embodied individual presents the real self. One takes his I-sense—the ego as everything and

never realized that there is a basic unity underlying all forms of being and becoming. Consequently he takes his limited egoistic mentality, vitality, corporeality for our true self and regards everything other than that as not self. So it is described the Egoistic Ignorance.

4. The Temporal Ignorance: Sri Aurobindo says that everyone is ignorant of their eternal nature also. That is why they believe that human life-span represents the essence of existence. They never realize that their true nature is somehow beyond these spatial or temporal dimensions. This ignorance which is rooted in temporal conditions has been called the Temporal Ignorance.

5. The Psychological Ignorance: There are deeper realms of human beings which are not open to superficial view but which constitute their true nature. Man in ignorance are so much occupied and almost overwhelmed by the surface activities of human life, that completely ignore 'the super-conscient, the sub-conscient, the intra-conscient and cicum-conscient. This ignorance has been called the psychological ignorance.

6. The Constitutional Ignorance: Generally human beings thought that either their body or their life-force or mind or any two of these or all the three would represent their true constitution. The most prevalent belief is that life, mind and body constitute the whole constitution of man. It indicates that human beings are ignorant of the fact that there are other—deeper aspects of human constitution as well. In fact men are ignorant of the fact that it is these deeper aspects of human being that nourish and sustain the bodily, the vital and the mental activities of self. This is called constitutional ignorance.

7. The Practical Ignorance: In the mental activities human beings are invariably chaotic and aimless as on account of the ignorance of the 'goals' and the 'ways' of being. Sri Aurobindo says, "as a result of all these ignorance (the above six) beings miss the true knowledge, government and enjoyment of life in the world". Beings are ignorant in thought, will, sensations, actions; return wrong or imperfect response at every point to the questioning of the world, wander in a maze of errors

and desires, pain and pleasure etc. This is the seventh practical ignorance.

The second process of creation is Ascent or Evolution. Let us discuss it—



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the literal meaning of the word Sachidananda?

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Q 2: What is creation, according to Sri Aurobindo?

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Q 3: What are the two ways of understanding 'Maya' given by Aurobindo?

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Q 4: "Knowledge and ignorance are not essentially opposed to each other, but complementary……." Is this statement true?

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Q 5: What are the seven kinds of ignorance mentioned by Sri Aurobindo?

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8.5 THEORY OF EVOLUTION

Evolution is the soul of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. His theory of evolution is the pivot round which the entire philosophy of Sri Aurobindo moves. Evolution is the movement which is the reverse of the movement of involution or creation. Because of the descent of the Spirit into matter, life and mind that these can ascend to the higher regions of the Spirit.

The Spirit in creation has involved itself in matter, life and mind. As a result matter, life and mind feel an impulse to rise to their source. So it seems to say that evolution 'is a sort of home-sickness of the Spirit'. The Spirit has descended into the lowest particle of matter and that is why matter seeks to evolve into something higher than itself—mind. In the same way there is a descent of the Spirit into mind and accordingly mind must ascend to something higher than itself i.e. Supermind. But evolution can not stop with mind for mind is not its last word. It must move further up. This is the most optimistic scheme of evolution in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.

According to Sri Aurobindo, evolution is nothing other than a heightening of the force of consciousness. It has a distinctive character of its own which comprehends all other forms of evolution. The nature of evolution has been conceived as repetitive or emergent or as mechanical or teleological. Repetitive theories of evolution suggest that evolution is a process in time that gives out, more or less, the same kinds of forms. Evolution goes on bringing out the same kinds of entities—repeating the same kinds of beings of existence. Again the theory of emergent evolution believes that at every stage of evolution something new emerges or comes out. Mechanical theories of evolution seek to explain everything in terms of antecedent conditions whereas teleological theories relate everything to some goal or purpose which the evolutionary process seeks to realize. And Sri Aurobindo's Integral Theory of Evolution comprehends all the relevant features.

In the philosophy of Aurobindo, the theory of evolution is a triple process which involves process of widening, heightening and integration. These are—

1. The first factor is widening. The process of widening refers providing scope for the operation of every new element or principle as it emerges.
2. The process of heightening means a process of ascent. It is ascent from grade to grade, from level to level. In the process of

evolution, there is a movement from the lower grades to the higher grades.

3. The third important ingredient is the process of integration. Integration means taking up within itself as soon as a higher grade is reached all the previous grades and transforming them. In the process of evolution, the attainment of a higher grade does not mean the cancellation of lower grade. Instead of cancel the lower grade they are retained. So integration implies a descent of the higher principle into the lower principles. Integration is an ascent through descent.

The entire chain of evolution is divided into two hemispheres. The higher is constituted of Existence, Consciousness-Force, Bliss (Delight) and Supermind. The lower is constituted of Mind, Life and Matter. Sri Aurobindo conceives these seven poises of Reality. These may be regarded as an ascending series of evolutionary steps of the descending of the Absolute to matter. Sri Aurobindo calls these the seven chord of Being.

Human beings contain explicitly the first three Matter, Life and Mind. But every being have also an inner and abiding psychic entity which is called soul. So adding this to seven, we have eight aspects of Reality. These are conveniently arranged in two columns.

Existence	Matter	
	Consciousness-Force	Life
	Bliss	Psyche
	Supermind	Mind

The left hand column represents Spirit's descent into the world and the right hand column represents the individual's ascent towards the Spirit. The first principle of the evolutionary process is Matter. Mind and Life evolve in matter. The liberation of Spirit into its true consciousness can not be attained by the emergence of the principles of mind and life. These two principles change the nature and working of matter. But these two are also changed and modified by matter. The original creative power is neither material nor vital nor mental, but is supernatural in nature. It is

the power of spirit. So in order to have an integral and total transformation of matter, there must emerge the supramental principle.

The evolution of nature from matter to mind is an evolution in and through Ignorance. Evolution must proceed upwards to attain the supramental status. It can be attained only when the 'Supermind' descends into earth-consciousness.

The process of evolution has not merely to be scientifically described as we are ourselves involved in it and also because the next stage of evolution is going to take us into the spiritual realm. We can expedite this process of impending spiritual transformation by our efforts also. We have reached the mental stage by our own efforts and strive to transform the mental into the higher form—the supramental. Therefore Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution is a description of cosmic evolution as well as the evolution of individual. In fact he recognizes that the individual is the medium through which spirit reveals and discloses its being. So it seems to say that the integral theory of evolution attempts to describe the basic features of individual's evolution also.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What is evolution, according to Sri Aurobindo? Write Briefly

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Q 7: In the philosophy of Aurobindo, the theory of evolution is a triple Process- What are the triple process- Mention

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Q 8: What are hemispheres into which Aurobindo divided the chain of evolution? Mention briefly.

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

- Aurobindo's theory of evolution is part and parcel of contemporary Indian thought.
- The theory of evolution also found in the writings of Plato. But Plato's view is differ from Aurobindo.
- Greek Concept of evolution has also spiritual standpoint but not individualistic and static. Moreover the approach from the standpoint of consciousness is not also established here.
- On the other hand in Aurobindo's philosophy the highest reality Atman or Self were discussed from different grades of consciousness.
- The highest consciousness in his philosophy is Sachidananda. It is the combination of sat (existence), chit (consciousness force) and ananda (bliss).
- In Aurobindo's philosophy this highest reality is conceived when the notion of creation arise. Creation is a process of evolution and involution. Creation is nothing but a process of delight. And when this delight is related to Sachidananda it is known as Lila.
- According to Aurobindo the whole creation is the play of the Aurobindo.
- Creation is the stab of spirit into ignorance. So here concept of ignorance may occupy an important place. It is not opposed to knowledge. They are two different harmonizing aspects of reality. There are seven types of ignorance are found in Aurobindo's philosophy.
- The process of evolution in Aurobindo's philosophy is nothing but the heightening of the force of consciousness. It is descendent of the spirit into matter. It is discussed through two hemisphere—higher hemisphere and lower hemisphere. Both of these two contain seven poises of Reality which is called by Aurobindo as

Seven cords of Being. Thus in his philosophy the theory of evolution is understood as a narrative of both cosmic evolution and individual evolution.



8.7 FURTHER READING

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8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The literal meaning of the word 'sachidananda' is 'sat' (existence), 'chit' (consciousness) and 'Ananda' (bliss)

Ans to Q No 2: According to Sri Aurobindo, creation is expression of joy. Delight is the secret of creation, which is also the cause of birth and death.

Ans to Q No 3: 1) It is a power, constructive and creative, 2) A delusion producing mechanism

Ans to Q No 4: True

Ans to Q No 5: 1) Original ignorance, 2) Cosmic ignorance, 3) egoistic ignorance, 4) temporal ignorance, 5) psychological ignorance 6) Constitutional ignorance, 7) Practical ignorance

Ans to Q No 6: According to Aurobindo, evolution is nothing other than a heightening of the force of consciousness. It is the movement of which is the reverse of the movement of involution or creation. In creation the spirit has involved itself in matter, life, and mind.

Ans to Q No 7: 1) Process of widening, 2) Process of heightening. 3) Process of integration

Ans to Q No 8: 1) Lower hemisphere, 2) Higher hemisphere



8.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Short Questions:

Q.1. what is the aim of Aurobindo's philosophy?

Q.2. Is Aurobindo's philosophy an integral idealism?

Q.3. Are Greek philosophers associated with the theory of Evolution?

Q.4. what do you mean by Lila?

Q.5. Is Sachidananda a combination of triune principle?

Q.6. What are two hemispheres of evolution?

Q.7. What are the two meanings of Maya?

B. Short questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q.1. Write short note on

a) Theory of Creation

b) Theory of involution.

Q.2. Explain the seven stages of ignorance.

Q.3. Write a note on Maya.

Q.4. What are the seven cords of Being.

C. Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500)

Q.1. Explain the relation between Maya and Sachidananda.

Q.2. Elaborate the theory of Evolution.

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