

**INTEGRAL EDUCATION – A CONCEPT OF SRI AUROBINDO****S. Babu**Kanchi Mamunivar Centre for P.G. Studies
Puducherry- 605008.**Abstract**

India is the land of sages, saints, philosophers and reformers since ancient times. One among them in the modern era was Sri Aurobindo. He is regarded as one of the most gifted philosophers of the twentieth century. He was as nationalist revolutionary turned spiritualist, educationalist and moralist. He was a great champion of education in the evolution of superman or mind. He strongly believed that life has a divine purpose and one of the most important tasks of education is to lead the student to discover for himself the aim of life and the specific role that he himself has to play in it. He conceived education as an instrument for the real working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual and the nation. This he called it as an integral education that inspires the children to develop the five essential aspects of personality such as the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. Integral education is conceived as a process of organic growth and the way in which the various faculties could be developed and integrated. It is dependent upon each child's inclination, rhythm of progress and law of development swabhava (inherent disposition) and swadharma (inner nature). The idea is to provide facilities for varieties of faculties, varieties of subjects and various combinations of pursuits of knowledge, power, harmony and skill in work. These faculties are so provided that they could be made use of by each student and the teacher so that a natural process of harmonious development could be encouraged. This paper attempts to highlight the evolution of integral education and its execution in the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education as the educational philosophy of Sri Aurobindo under the caption "Free Progress in Education".

Key Words: Integral Education, Sri Aurobindo

Life

Sri Aurobindo Ghose was born on 15 August 1872 in Calcutta, as the third son of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose and Swarnalatha Devi. At the age of seven, he was sent to England, as his father wanted him to receive English education. He studied several languages like Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, etc. After completion of his education in London and Cambridge Universities, he returned to India in 1893. He entered into Baroda state educational service in February 1893, one of the princely states and continued in different

capacities till he resigned his post at the time of partition of Bengal in 1905 and went to Calcutta.² Here he studied Sanskrit, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati and other Indian languages and familiarised himself with the cultural heritage of India.³ Later he joined the political struggle and wrote several articles in newspapers and journals to arouse the feeling of nationalism among the people.

For his revolutionary political activities Sri Aurobindo was imprisoned several times. In the Alipore jail, he had a divine vision which changed the course of his life. Then he remained politically silent in both word and action and revised the divine life and synthesis of yoga. He settled down in Pondicherry, where he spent the rest of his life for penance and spiritual advancement. He tried to bring down spiritual power into his physical being during this period.⁴ Many visitors were attracted by him. One M. Paul Richard, a French man met him in 1910 and was much impressed by Sri Aurobindo's spiritual personality. He came back in 1914 with his wife Mira Alfassa and she became the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo and later she became the "Mother of the Ashram".⁵ His soul left his mortal body on 5th December 1950.

Philosophy

Three fundamental problems gave direction to the spiritual quest and philosophical thinking and helped to fashion Sri Aurobindo's major theories. They were the ongoing national struggle for Indian independence, the supposed conflict between spirituality and action, and the evolution of man. The search for solutions to these problems made him to experience a struggle between spirituality and politics, both during his years of political activity and during his four decades of *sadana* (spiritual discipline) at Pondicherry.⁶ Sri Aurobindo's writings provide the needed force for action, realization and transformation which is reflected in his philosophy through inner experience. He wrote, 'in fact I was never satisfied till experience came and it was on this experience that later on I found my philosophy'.⁷ His integral philosophy grew out of his yoga. In the writings of Sri Aurobindo two phrases 'Integral Perfection' and 'Spiritual religion of humanity' surge out. To attain integral perfection, Sri Aurobindo found education as the most critical and powerful tool.

Educational Philosophy

Aurobindo is one of the greatest educators whose educational philosophy swayed the masses of India as never before. He engaged himself for forty five years out of his seventy eight years in the practice of yoga and developed a philosophy of complete affirmation, affirming the reality of the world from the ultimate stand point and the meaningfulness of socio-political action from the spiritual stand point.⁸ He dedicated his life to make all men travel towards divine perfection and to express the power, the harmony, the beauty and joy of self-realization.⁹

According to Sri Aurobindo education means one that will offer the tools whereby one can live 'for the divine, for the country, for one self and for others' and this must be the ideal in every school which calls itself national. The guiding principle of the philosophy of education of Sri Aurobindo was the awakening of man as a spiritual being. According to him neither education nor religion in the past had changed man. Now it is the time to give a total spiritual orientation to the whole education and the life of the nation.¹⁰ This he called it an

integral education. It imparts an integrated view of the universe to the learners and tries to bring about an all round harmonious balanced and integrated development of the learners. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “there will be needed a yoga which shall be at once a yoga of integral knowledge, a yoga of integral will and it works, a yoga of integral love, adoration and devotion and a yoga of an integral perfection of the whole being and of all its parts and states and power and motions”.¹¹ When the number of integral men is increased evil will disappear from ignorance, hatred, untouchability, slavery and exploitation, people will be in a position to live of justice, equality, freedom, peace, love and brotherhood. Thus integral education will be able to produce Supermen having virtues of a super human being. In devising a true and living education, according to Sri Aurobindo three things should be taken into account. They are the man, the individual in his commonness and his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity.¹²

Sri Aurobindo conceived education as an instrument for the real working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual and the nation.¹³ It is conceived as a process of organic growth, and the way in which various faculties could be developed and integrated is dependent upon each child’s inclination, rhythm of progress and law of development, *Swabhava* (inherent disposition) and *Swadharna* (inner nature).¹⁴ Integral education is conceived to provide facilities for varieties of faculties, varieties of subjects and various combinations of pursuits of knowledge, power, harmony and skill in works. These faculties are so provided that they could be made use by each student and the teacher so that a natural process of harmonious development could be encouraged.¹⁵

Integral Education

The word “integration” means a unity of parts into a whole in such a way that the parts themselves are blended and transformed into a new character.¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo was of the opinion that the education should meet the mental and spiritual needs of children and the demand of the country. He believed that the education of a human being should begin at birth and continue throughout his life. This education should help to bring down the best in every individual, by giving ample opportunities for the development of the child’s interests and abilities. It should lead to the spiritual development of the child and should create dynamic citizens who are able to meet the needs of the complex modern life. This he called as an integral education.¹⁷ This has been explained by Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator the Mother as, “Education to be complete must have five principal aspects relating to the five principal activities of human beings: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. Usually these phases of education succeed each other in a chronological order following the growth of the individual. However, this does not mean that one should replace another but that all must continue, completing each other, till the end of life”.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo’s scheme of education is integral in two senses. At first, it is integral in the sense of including all the aspects of the individual being, physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual. Secondly, it is integral in the sense of being an education not only for the evolution of the individual but also of the nation and finally of the humanity.¹⁹ In his ‘Essays on Gita’ Sri Aurobindo initially presented the concept of integral education to bring out all the facets of an individual personality. The ultimate aim of education is the evolution of total

humanity which includes the evolution of the nation which in its turn depends upon the evolution of the individual. In this scheme of education the principle of growth is unity in diversity. Thus each individual in nation and each nation in humanity has to develop a system of education according to its own *swabhava* and fulfilling its *swadharm*.²⁰

Physical Education (Tapasya of Beauty)

According to Sri Aurobindo beauty is the ideal physical life. The Mother therefore says, “You must hold within yourself the living ideal of beauty that is to be recognised”.²¹ It is a *tapasya* (*yoga*) of beauty. When grows, the liberation gradually takes place. Physical education should begin at birth and continue throughout the life of the individual. Sri Aurobindo’s theory of education lays emphasis on physical and spiritual mastery.²²

The physical education should provide the child with knowledge about the human body, its structure and functioning. The child should be taught to observe the functioning of all his body organs, so that he can control them and see that their functioning remains normal and harmonious.²³ Mainly they have four important goals.²⁴

- i. To discipline and control the physical functions.
- ii. Harmonious development of the body and physical movements.
- iii. Rectification of defects and overcoming physical limitations.
- iv. To awaken the body consciousness.

To achieve the first three aims one has to undertake physical exercises. To achieve the fourth goal one has to draw upon multiple faculties. Sri Aurobindo felt that spiritual discipline, service, *bhakti* and *yoga* as the essential of physical education. *Asanas* (physical exercise) *pranayama* (breathing techniques) were considered to be the most important to control the restlessness of the body and to achieve concentration.²⁵

Physical education is also essential for controlling the sex drives. According to Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of education a seeker of truth should have control over the sex-impulses. Emphasis on games and sports was given to renew physical and higher forms of energy and to develop tolerance, self-control, friendliness, self-mastery of ego. This scheme of physical education is not confined to classroom period. In “Ashram School” at Pondicherry a definite portion of the time table is allotted for physical education. Along with this, often minute period is allotted for concentration.²⁶ Thus through this physical education programme attempts are made to express the inner consciousness.

Vital Education (Tapasya of Power)

Vital education emphasises on observation of impulse, energies and desires of the vital being of the man. Of all the forms of education, vital education is considered to be the most important. Sri Aurobindo was of the opinion that the vital education of a child should begin as early as possible. Vital education has two principle aspects.²⁷

i. The development and utilisation of sense organs. The sense organs help an individual to receive knowledge. The senses like sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste and mind should be trained.²⁸ Sri Aurobindo advises “that their training should be the first care of the teachers.”²⁹

ii. Vital education according to Sri Aurobindo is also a training of the aesthetic personality. Awareness and control of the character would bring transformation. To get the

training, one should give up bad habits. He should develop human habits like emotions and their associations. He is to develop observation and self-knowledge which will lead to concentration of vital energies. It is the first step in the growth and self mastery of one's character.³⁰

Mental Education (Tapasya of knowledge)

For the education of the mental being emphasis is laid on mental silence and concentration. The Mother says "The mind has to be made silent and attentive in order to receive knowledge from above and manifest it."³¹

To silent the mind, one has to take the help of 'classical yoga'. By yoga one acquires mastery of the mind and reaches a region higher than the mind which we call knowledge. This "Tapasya" of knowledge is the education of the mental being.³² This helps in the gradual liberation from ignorance. Mental education has three fold functions (i) to gather old knowledge (ii) to discover new knowledge and (iii) to develop the capacity to use and apply the knowledge acquired. Through the application of the knowledge the student develops cognition, ideas, intelligence and mental perceptions. As a result of this, man himself becomes the source of knowledge.³³

Describing the mental education the mother has laid down the following five phases:³⁴

- i. The development of the power of concentration, the capacity of attention.
- ii. Development of the capacities of expansion, wideness, complexity and richness.
- iii. Organisation of ideas around a central idea or a higher ideal or a supremely luminous idea that will serve as a guide in life.
- iv. Thought control, rejection of undesirable thought so that one may, in the end, think only that on what one wants and when one wants.
- v. Development of mental silence and calm, to receive inspirations from the inner being.

Psychic Education (Tapasya of Love)

While the physical, vital and mental educations are the means to develop the personality, the psychic education alone leads to the future evolution of man.³⁵ This is the most important contribution of Sri Aurobindo to educational theory, psychic being is the psychological centre of man. The function of education is to enable man to become conscious of this psychological centre. Their consciousness is the key to an integral personality.³⁶

Psychic education is to enable an individual to see his soul to grow in freedom according to its inner nature. Psychic education helps the individual to realise the true motive of his existence on the earth. It helps him to discover the purpose of his life and the end to which his life must go. It helps him to become conscious of a psychic presence embedded in the depths of his inner being.³⁷ However, this requires great determination, a strong will power and great perseverance. In the words of the Mother "only one thing is absolutely indispensable: the will to discover and realise".³⁸ This in fact is the field of occult and yoga.

Spiritual Education

The spiritual education requires the above steps as a prelude to its realisation. It is only after one gets through the physical, vital, mental and psychic education, one realises a certain transformation that one can enter into spiritual education.³⁹ The aim of the spiritual

education is to escape from all earthly manifestations and helps the individual to realise the presence of god.⁴⁰

It involves an earthly escape from all earthly manifestations from the whole universe, to return to the absolute. The supra mental education will progress from above to downwards. It will not merely progressively develop human nature; it will transform nature itself, heightening the consciousness and bringing down the higher consciousness into the lower.⁴¹ According to Sri Aurobindo, the transformation when it is supra mental as a result of the descent of the super mind, the body life and mind of a man are also greatly transformed. The supra mental Education, he believes, will bring about ascent of the species, leading in the end to the appearance of a divine race upon the earth.⁴²

Psychic and spiritual education together is also called “supra mental education”, because it not only works on the consciousness of the individuals but also on the very substance of which they are built and on the environment in which they live.⁴³

According to Sri Aurobindo, true education as a process of self-development through physical education, vital education and mental education may be the goal of ordinary men. This process of self development if carried further leads to a total transformation. True education will establish life divine upon earth.⁴⁴ True education will be an instrument for real working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual and the nations. Thus understood, education would be an instrument for social change.⁴⁵ This is more important at the present juncture when most of the educationist are realising the need for an educational system aiming at man making. The different types of education system discussed above should not begin successively but simultaneously. The focus should be all the time on the inner growth. As the educand advances he should be taught to identify his real self and to find out the law of his being. The principles and practices of this new type of education have been explained by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in their different works.

Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education

Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, an integral part of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, serves as a field of experiment and research in education.⁴⁶ For years Sri Aurobindo considered the formation of an Education Centre as one of the best means of preparing the future humanity to manifest upon earth a divine consciousness and a divine life. To give a concrete shape to his vision, the Mother opened a school for children on 2 December 1943. Since then it has continued to grow and experiment on various educational problems and issues.⁴⁷ In 1951, a convention was held at Pondicherry which resolved to establish an International University Centre in the town as a fitting memorial to Sri Aurobindo. Accordingly on 6 January 1952, Sri Aurobindo University Centre was inaugurated by the Mother. In 1959, the Mother decided to rename it “Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education”.⁴⁸

Objects and Approach

Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education strives towards the evolution of a system of integral education, of an environment that inspires children to develop the five essential aspects of personality visualised by Sri Aurobindo.⁴⁹ There is an underlying unity in all knowledge, which the artificial boundaries between academic subjects fail to emphasise. The centre encourages the students to choose subjects without regard to specialisation or the pressures of having to choose a career.⁵⁰

According to Sri Aurobindo, “the aim is to help the child to develop his intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, moral, spiritual being and his communal life and impulses out of his own temperament and being.”⁵¹ The centres approach is therefore not only academic but dynamic and integral. Knowledge is not something that it seeks to impart to the student; rather opportunities and carefully selected material are presented to him in such a way as to stimulate him to an inner activity by which real knowledge can be evolved from within.⁵²

After all, the child is essentially a soul with a body, life, energy and mind. He needs to be developed integrally and harmoniously. The centre tries to provide the fullest possible development of the physical, a fruitful channelization of the life energy in pursuits that contribute to the growth of the personality, a thorough training of the mental faculties in the humanities and sciences; and the requisite help, through a powerful spiritual atmosphere, for the soul to come forward and gradually begin to govern the rest of the being.⁵³

“The aim of education,” the Mother wrote, “is not to prepare the individual student to succeed in life and society but to increase his perfectibility to the utmost”. In keeping with these aims and ideas, the centre of Education awards no degrees or diplomas, but attempts to provide an atmosphere where knowledge is sought for the sake of knowledge and for the building of the character.⁵⁴

Courses and Subjects of Study

The academic programme comprises of three years of kindergarten, six years of primary, four years of lower secondary and three years of higher courses. The subjects include English, French, Mathematics, Science (including the Physical Sciences, the Life Sciences, Applied Sciences, and Computer Science), Indian languages, History, Geography, Drawing and Painting, Music and Dance, Handwork (like needlework, carpentry, pottery, leather work) as well as Gardening and typewriting. The higher course comprises of three years graduate course in Arts and Sciences and a provision for a five year course in Engineering and Technology.⁵⁵

The centre of Education is international in character and Students come here not only from different states of India but also from foreign countries. As a result of this there is a provision at the centre to teach various Indian and foreign languages. English is the medium of instruction for English, History and Geography, and French for French, Mathematics and Science. In addition, most of the students learn their mother tongues, and Sanskrit is studied by a large number. Moreover, some students opt to learn one or two additional Indian or foreign languages.

Whenever possible, the subject is not taught in isolation but sought to be related to the integral vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

In general, the endeavour, is to help the child, as he reaches adolescence with its accompanying growth in awareness and maturity, to assume more responsibility for education himself, so that he may learn to find within himself the lives of his own development.

At the same time, a close observation and a continuous assessment of the child's activities, as well as, individual contact between teacher and student, eliminating the necessity of using examinations as a tool to evaluate progress

The educational goals and attitudes, begun in the kindergarten and continued with increasing emphasis and complexity in each progressive section, are meant to engender in the child an awareness of the world through observation, creative expression and exploration, an appreciation of beauty in all its forms, and a development of the powers of the mind comprehension, expression, reasoning, concentration, independent and original thinking, assimilation, selection and judgement. The ideal is a building of character so that the students may, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "grow up into straight forward, frank upright and honourable human beings".⁵⁶

There is no system of conventional examinations or tests at the centre. Close observation and continuous assessment of the student are the teacher's primary tools for evaluating progress. The centre awards no degrees or diplomas. However, when a student successfully completes the higher course, a certificate to this effect is given to him, if he requests it. The centre is trying to follow the educational ideal of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Free Progress in Education

Free progress is the perception that man is an evolutionary being and education fulfils itself when through it man consciously seeks to elaborate with evolving nature in order to exceed him-self, to break the limitations of the past and to open him-self to new future possibilities. On this basis, education would become a process of free growth and not rigid system.

This is the truth of education underlying the free progress approach as adopted at the centre of education. It is free because it is not pre-fabricated, it is free because it is not imposed on any individual and finally, it is free because it is guided, not from without, but by oneself, by one's inner self, one's inner soul. In the words of the Mother "free progress is progress guided by the soul and not subjected to habits, conventions and preconceived ideas".⁵⁷

Physical Education

Physical culture occupies a very important place in the life of the Ashram and in the Centre of Education. A rational and well conducted programme that includes athletics, gymnastics, exercises, combative sports, aquatics and field games has been chalked out and the students participate in these activities every evening. The basic programme "the Mother spells out" "will be to build a body, beautiful inform, harmonious in posture, supple and agile in its movements, powerful in its activities and resistant in its health and organic function."⁵⁸ Contest and tournaments are spread over the year. Individual attention is paid to each student and care is taken to inculcate in all an aspiration for a healthy body endowed with beauty, grace, strength and endurance, in the hope of moving towards the goal of physical perfection.

The aim of Physical Education here is not to produce champions or winning athletes, but to train the body and perfect it into an instrument capable of manifesting something higher than the physical- the "Truth Force".⁵⁹

Conclusion

The educational doctrine of Sri Aurobindo is closely linked with his futuristic vision of human destiny on the *Upanishadic* model. For him human destiny is an ascent towards the supra mind, towards realisation of God head and his philosophy of education provides a forceful and resilient frame work to attain this goal. He was one of the greatest educators in the history of education in India and dedicated his life for the society.

His vision of integral education was executed by the Mother when the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education was established in 1943. The centre was conceived as one of the best means of preparing humanity for future that would be marked by manifestation of a new light and power - the supra-mental light and power.

The elite of the humanity would be able to work for the progressive unification of the race and who at the same time would be prepared to embody the new force descending upon the earth to transform it. Since inception the Centre conducted a programme of experimental research under the guidance of the Mother, and it became a laboratory of education for tomorrow. Thus, the idea of integral education formulated by Sri Aurobindo that could, with some variations may be adopted by all the nations of the world, fostering the growth of the integral consciousness in every pupil and bringing back to legitimate authority of the spirit over a matter fully developed and utilised.

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