

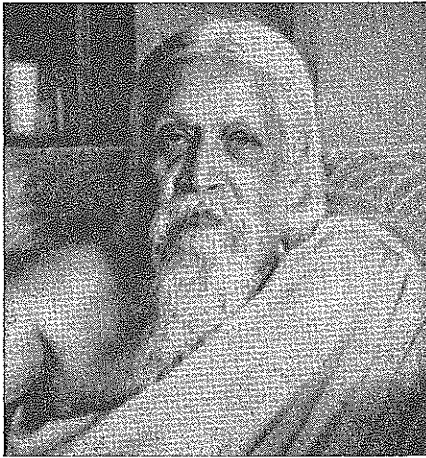
\$1.50

Volume XXII

# CROSS CURRENTS

Number One

## SRI AUROBINDO



**His Life, Thought and Legacy**  
**Integral Yoga, Evolution and Auroville**  
**Edited by Robert A. McDermott**



ROBERT A. McDERMOTT

## THE LEGACY OF SRI AUROBINDO

Of the four great exponents of modern Indian ideals, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, S. Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo, the least understood in both India and the West is surely the political revolutionary, poet and philosopher of Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo (Ghose), 1872–1950. If the first half of the century belonged to the first three of these figures, the last half (dating from his death in 1950)—or, more certainly, the last quarter (dating from the centenary of his birth, August 15, 1972)—will belong to Sri Aurobindo. This belated recognition of Sri Aurobindo's unique importance is not surprising: his radical political activities during the first decade of the century, though pioneering at the time, were overshadowed by the Nationalist Movement of the '20's and '30's; further, his life and writings at Pondicherry appeared to be (and in some respects were) so esoteric and inaccessible that most interpreters of Indian thought and culture have required the perspective of several decades in order to perceive his work coherently.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the problem in approaching Sri Aurobindo is the difficulty of reconciling two seemingly unrelated careers: first, Aurobindo Ghose, leader of the Extremist faction of the Nationalist Movement in Bengal (1905–10) and second, Sri Aurobindo, the philosopher-yogi of Pondicherry, South India. Frequently, those who know one of these two figures fail to know or appreciate the other. This phenomenon is best exemplified by the attitude of one of the great figures of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru. In his Foreword to Karan Singh's study of Sri Aurobindo's political thought from 1893–1910, Nehru wrote as follows:

It is extraordinary that a person who had spent fourteen of the most formative years of his life, from the age of 7 to 21, cut off from India and steeped in the European classics and the England of his day, should have become, in later years, the brilliant champion of Indian nationalism based on the philosophic and the spiritual background of Indian thought. His whole career in active politics was a very brief one, from 1905 to 1910, when he retired

---

*Robert McDermott is assistant professor of philosophy at Baruch College, City University of New York. He edited RADHAKRISHNAN: SELECTED WRITINGS ON PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND CULTURE, and contributed the introduction and bibliography for the edition of Sri Aurobindo's THE MIND OF LIGHT. A member of the executive committee of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, his articles on Aurobindo have appeared in PHILOSOPHY EAST AND WEST and INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY. His essay, "Religion as an Aca-*

to Pondicherry and devoted himself to spiritual and yogic exercises. During these five years, he shone like a brilliant meteor and created a powerful impression on the youth of India. The great anti-partition movement in Bengal gained much of its philosophy from him and, undoubtedly, prepared the day for the great movement led by Mahatma Gandhi.

It is significant to note that great political mass movements in India have had a spiritual background behind them. In Sri Aurobindo's case, this was obvious, and his emotional appeals were based on intense nationalism and a concept of Mother India. Mahatma Gandhi's appeal to the people of India, to which they responded in an amazing degree, was essentially spiritual. Though it grew out of the background of India's philosophic heritage, it was addressed to the world.

Sri Aurobindo retired from politics at the early age of 38. Most of the people of my generation, who were immersed in political aspects of our struggle, did not understand why he did so. Later, when Gandhiji started his non-cooperation movements and convulsed India, we expected Sri Aurobindo to emerge from his retirement and join the great struggle. We were disappointed at his not doing so, though I have no doubt that all his good wishes were with it. During his retirement, he wrote, in his usual brilliant style, a number of books, chiefly dealing with philosophic and religious subjects.<sup>2</sup>

Nehru was not alone in his inability to fathom Sri Aurobindo's precipitous withdrawal from active politics in favor of a life based on yoga. In retrospect, however, the apparently discrete stages of Sri Aurobindo's career evidence a startling continuity (the letters to Mrinalini, 1905, and to Barindra, 1920, are helpful in this respect).

Prominent among those who have understood this continuity is the poet Tagore, Sri Aurobindo's fellow Bengali, who saw in Sri Aurobindo's sadhana (spiritual discipline; yoga) at Pondicherry not only his personal fulfillment but the forging of an instrument for India's spiritual regeneration. The relationship between Tagore and Sri Aurobindo dates back to 1905 when they were principal figures in the creation of Jadavpur National College, Bengal, a nationalist-inspired institution of which Sri Aurobindo was appointed Principal in 1906. Eventually, this joint effort by Tagore and Aurobindo led to the founding of Tagore's Shantiniketan, the renowned educational center in Calcutta, and the Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education at Pondicherry. When Tagore visited Sri Aurobindo at Pondicherry in 1928 he perceived his friend in the role of prophet and poet of a new India:

I felt that the utterance of the ancient Hindu Rishi spoke from him of that equanimity which gives the human soul its freedom of entrance into the All. I said to him, "You have the Word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world, 'Hearken to me.'"

In her earlier forest home Sakuntala had her awakening of life

in the restlessness of her youth. In the later hermitage she attained the fulfilment of her life. Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him,

"Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath."

Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of a reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence,

"Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath."<sup>3</sup>

Tagore's line, "Aurobindo, accept the salutation from Rabindranath" (begging comparison with Emerson's salutation to Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* established the author as the poet of the American spirit<sup>4</sup>) appears in his five page poem, "Salutation":

Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee!  
O friend, my country's friend, O voice incarnate, free,  
Of India's soul.<sup>5</sup>

While Sri Aurobindo shares with Tagore the poetic expression of the Indian spirit, he shares with Radhakrishnan the philosophic expression of the Indian intellectual tradition and with Gandhi the socio-political expression of Karmayoga or selfless action. Curiously, Radhakrishnan's voluminous writings contain only fleeting and insignificant references to Sri Aurobindo,<sup>6</sup> and Gandhi's career consistently missed Sri Aurobindo's—when Sri Aurobindo returned from England in 1893 Gandhi was sailing for South Africa, and when Gandhi returned to India after twenty years in South Africa, Sri Aurobindo had already settled permanently in Pondicherry. Irrespective of this lack of personal contact, a comparison of Sri Aurobindo with Radhakrishnan and Gandhi should help to locate Sri Aurobindo in the modern Indian tradition.

Tagore, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan were all influenced by Western values, spoke and wrote English with facility, and lived or at least traveled in the West, but only Sri Aurobindo had a thoroughly British education. From age 7 to 21 the young Aurobindo was educated successively by a tutor in Manchester, at St. Paul's School in London and at King's College, Cambridge. Upon his return to India in 1893 he learned Sanskrit and modern Indian languages in order to sink his roots into the Indian cultural soil. He continued to write English poetry, translated and wrote commentaries on classical Indian texts, and gradually became involved in political as well as cultural nationalism.

If one compares his turbulent career before his move to Pondicherry with the rather orthodox early years of Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, it is perhaps not surprising that Aurobindo Ghose developed a profound and radical sense of his own and India's destiny. On the political side, as a student at Cambridge he was a member of two secret societies dedicated to Indian nationalism, and as the leader of the Extremist faction in Calcutta, he advocated complete economic boycott of British goods, armed insurrection, and the goal of complete Independence—steps more

radical than those adopted by Gandhi at any time during his leadership. On the religious and philosophical side, Sri Aurobindo not only reinterpreted the Indian intellectual tradition more imaginatively than Radhakrishnan, he based his interpretation on his own intense religious and philosophical experience. Although he worked on the same metaphysical and epistemological problems as run through the Advaita Vedānta tradition from Śankara to Radhakrishnan, his philosophical system is consistently informed by insights derived from yoga.<sup>7</sup> Sri Aurobindo's philosophical system, as developed principally in *The Life Divine*, resembles the progressive or qualified monism of Royce, Bradley or Radhakrishnan, but Sri Aurobindo's own experience, primarily the transformation of the intellect by yoga, support his contention that his philosophical system, albeit precise and comprehensive, should be understood as one of several mutually dependent ways of progressing toward individual and historical evolution.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it may not be claiming too much to say that whereas Tagore embodies Rasa-yoga (or the discipline of aesthetic experience<sup>9</sup>), Gandhi embodies Karma-yoga (or the discipline of selfless action), and Radhakrishnan embodies Jñāna-yoga (or the discipline of knowledge), Sri Aurobindo seems to embody all of these disciplines and achievements. In this sense, Sri Aurobindo's yoga system, Purna or Integral Yoga, is not an academic or formal synthesis of competing yogas, but a systematic expression of each of these yogas in his own integrated life experience. The integrality of thought, work and love, of the inner and the outer, and of his aspiration and legacy, all suggest that he will continue to be revered as a paradigmatic individual.<sup>10</sup> As is the function of a paradigm, Sri Aurobindo will continue to generate a legacy of ideals, achievements, activities and institutions. Elements in this legacy will probably be of unequal fidelity to his spirit, but even at this early date it can be claimed with some confidence that the legacy has the scope, depth and fervor to effect a significant transformation. Obviously, the quality of the change depends on the ever-increasing community of disciples in India and throughout the world.

While the quality of discipleship for the philosopher, whether Indian or Western, is frequently significant for that philosopher's place in the philosophical tradition, the stakes are clearly higher when the historical meaning and direction of a great individual's legacy, including the quality of his life, thought, discipline and vision, are dependent on the interpretation and application rendered by the community of disciples. The historical wisdom and self-discipline which Sri Aurobindo exemplified will be equally required of the disciples if they are to succeed where traditional religions, philosophies and social theories have failed.

The Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, who is presently 94, has been entirely responsible for the material and spiritual welfare of the Ashram and all of its members since 1926, and is well aware of the prob-

lems besetting the attempt to create a model society based on Sri Aurobindo's vision and discipline—but she is also uncommonly aware of the extraordinarily positive possibilities of such an attempt.

To find an analogy for this uniquely ambitious enterprise, one has to return to the communities of disciples in the first century after the death of Buddha, Jesus or Mohammed—but unlike the launching of these three great traditions, Sri Aurobindo's legacy is self-consciously and almost aggressively working within the framework of spiritual and historical evolution. In this respect, the work of the Mother, the Ashram and Auroville are distinctly modern.

For a modern analogy, however, one would have to imagine a community built on the vision, philosophy and spiritual discipline of someone like Teilhard de Chardin. By broadening the Christian vision (notably in *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Future of Man*) and revitalizing the Christian yoga (principally in *The Divine Milieu*), Teilhard clearly embodies some of the same strengths as Sri Aurobindo. Both the similarities and differences are noteworthy: the most striking similarity between Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard is their celebration of human evolution and human unity; both systems argue for the ever increasing spiritualization of man and the world. In short, they share an unqualified confidence in the realization of a global, ultra- or super-humanity. By way of contrast, Sri Aurobindo conceives this evolution in terms of individual and historical discipline (i.e., Integral Yoga), whereas Teilhard, in distinctively Western terms, contends that science and technology is the instrument of this spiritualization. Although some may fault Teilhard for this total confidence in technology (which would seem to be at the expense of the eco-system), it would nevertheless be easy to establish the strength of Teilhard's case for the positive function of technology for social and historical evolution. Although Sri Aurobindo does not share the extreme suspicion of technology typified by Gandhi, neither does he see its enormous significance for the spiritualization and liberation of the material world. On the other hand, there are perhaps two points on which Teilhard's position is less adequate than Sri Aurobindo's: First, despite the many years that he lived in China, Teilhard apparently had so little contact with the mainsprings of Chinese culture and spirituality that his Christian vision remained impervious to Eastern influence;<sup>11</sup> in short, Teilhard lacks the range which Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan and other Indians have developed by virtue of cultural and religious bilingualism. Secondly, Teilhard and the Christian tradition generally are less confident than Sri Aurobindo concerning the value of human action in the dual task of individual and historical perfection.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this comparison between Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard is not to criticize Teilhard, but rather to explain in more familiar terms the originality and comprehensiveness of Sri Aurobindo's legacy. Of course, it is possible to interpret any one part of this legacy (e.g., Sri

Aurobindo's early political career, his poetry, philosophy, aspects of the Ashram or Auroville) just as one can separate the science and spirituality of Teilhard, but in both cases the coherence of the parts contributes to their significance. If, on the other hand, Sri Aurobindo's legacy were to lose its experimental vitality, then there would be cause to break this cohesiveness in order to save whatever elements retained their viability. While the discipline remains honored and experimental, Sri Aurobindo's legacy may indeed initiate a genuine transformation of man and society. But since the discipline of selflessness, like Christian love, is easier to advocate than to practice, and since disciples are not always effective instruments of their masters' work, Sri Aurobindo's legacy will run perilously close to the kind of religious institutionalization which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have emphatically rejected. At this time we can only say that Sri Aurobindo's legacy is a uniquely promising attempt to spiritualize human institutions without institutionalizing the spirit.

The following pages describe this attempt.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, the chapter on Sri Aurobindo in V. S. Naravane's masterful study, *Modern Indian Thought*, which begins with this observation: "The philosophy of Aurobindo is like a beautiful but somewhat inaccessible island in the river of Indian thought" (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 203).

2. Karan Singh, *Prophet of Indian Nationalism: A Study of the Political Thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghose, 1893-1910*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963.

3. *Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1961), p. 12; reprinted from *The Modern Review*, 1928.

4. Upon first reading *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson wrote to Whitman:

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. (Stephen E. Whicher, ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company (Riverside Editions), 1960, p. 362.)

Sri Aurobindo was also enthusiastic about Whitman's poetry, as for example in the following comparison of Whitman and Tagore:

The poetry of Whitman and his successors has been that of life, but of life broadened, raised and illumined by a strong intellectual intuition of the self of man and the large soul of humanity. And at the subtlest elevation of all that has yet been reached stands or rather wings and floats in a high intermediate region the poetry of Tagore, not in the complete spiritual light, but amid an air shot with its seekings and glimpses, a sight and cadence found in a psycho-spiritual heaven of subtle and delicate soul experience transmuting the earth tones by the touch of its radiance. The wide success and appeal of his poetry is indeed one of the most significant signs of the tendency of the mind of the age. (*The Future Poetry*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1953, p. 400; reprinted in *Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 6.)

5. *Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 20.

6. Considering all that Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo share intellectually, and the proximity of Pondicherry to Radhakrishnan's own city of Madras, it is most intriguing that Radhakrishnan never made contact with Sri Aurobindo or the Ashram.

7. Sri Aurobindo attributes to his yoga not only particular insights or a philo-

philosophical style, but the initial capacity to philosophize. In a reply to his disciple's questioning his extraordinary range of abilities, Sri Aurobindo asks a series of rhetorical questions, to each of which "yoga" is the obvious answer:

Why was it that I who never understood or cared for painting, suddenly in a single hour by an opening of vision got the eye to see and the mind to understand about color, line and design? How was it that I who was unable to understand and follow a metaphysical argument and whom a page of Kant or Hegel or Hume or even Berkeley left either dazed and uncomprehending and fatigued or totally uninterested because I could not fathom or follow, suddenly began writing pages of the stuff as soon as I started the *Arya* and am now reputed to be a great philosopher. (*Correspondence with Nirodbaran*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1969, p. 10, from a note written ca 1935.)

8. The fourth and final section of Sri Aurobindo's *Synthesis of Yoga* develops the relation between the disciple of self-perfection and the evolution toward Supermind; similarly, the discipline of this ascent in his metaphysical treatise, *The Life Divine*, presupposes the ways of perfection developed in his system of yoga.

9. *Rasa* is not considered a yoga *per se*, but art in India would seem to be as valid and as significant a way of selfless liberation as are the ways of knowledge, devotion or action. See John B. Chettimattam, "Rasa, the Soul of Indian Art," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, X (March 1970), 44-62.

10. See "The Paradigmatic Individuals: Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and Jesus," in Kari Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, trans. Ralph Manheim, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962.

11. In "The Spiritual Share of the Far East--Some Personal Reflections," for example, Teilhard offers some vague generalization on Indian, Chinese and Japanese spiritualities, and concludes that these traditions are waiting to be fulfilled by "the way of the West."

12. See Beatrice Bruteau, "Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo on the Problem of Action," to be published in a Sri Aurobindo Centennial Issue of *International Philosophical Quarterly* (June 1972).