

# **MAHATMA GANDHI & SRI AUROBINDO – THE ETHIST & THE SPIRITUALIST.**

The mid-nineteenth century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the births and workings of 2 visionaries – Mahatma Gandhi and Mahayogi Sri Aurobindo – who, traversing different courses through similarities and dissimilarities, tried to realize their visions – establishment of the ‘Kingdom of God’ on the earth or ‘Life Divine ‘ or divinity in man, for a blissful and peaceful existence of man, respectively. [We should keep in mind here that the Mahatma was 3 years senior to the Mahayogi (1869 & 1872). However the Mahayogi joined the Indian politics much early to the Mahatma.] The 20th Century had seen much advancement in scientific and technological spheres, but the woes of man could not be solved, as we witness today. This compelled the Mahatma or Gandhiji and the Mahayogi or Sri Aurobindo to undertake ‘Sadhana’ in their own realization to find means to enable the mankind to overcome their woes and ultimately free the spirit, the true identity of man. In the process the lives and teachings of Gandhiji and Sri Aurobindo not only make an interesting study, but expand our knowledge in matters mundane, metaphysical and even spiritual, for our own benefit.

The inter-action may start from here.

One was the Mahatma or the Great soul and the other was the Mahayogi or the great Spiritual Leader. Both, however, have the same identity. Unless and until one is a Mahayogi one could not be a Mahatma or without being a Mahatma one could not be a Mahayogi. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore observed that there might be some other Mahatmas. But that Gandhiji had been called the Mahatma had a different meaning and significance. Describing him as the ‘Supreme Man’ on the 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1930, Gurudev wrote “Great as he is as a politician, as an organizer, a leader of men, as a moral reformer, he is greater than all these as a man, because none of these aspects and activities limits his humanity. When the time comes Gandhi will be known for the world needs him and his Message of Love, Liberty and Brotherhood (Mahatma Gandhi, 14, 62, 63).

About the Mahayogi or Sri Aurobindo the Gurudev wrote – “At the very first sight I could realize that he had been seeking for the soul and had gained it, and through this long process of realization had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration.....

I felt 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.....

Years ago I saw Aurobindo in the atmosphere of his earlier heroic youth and I sang to him ‘Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath. Today I saw him in a deeper atmosphere of reticent richness of wisdom and again sang to him in silence, “Aurobindo, accept the salutations from Rabindranath” (1928)

Be these as these are.

History records the inter-actions between Gandhiji and Sri Aurobindo from quite early years. When Gandhiji was undertaking non-violent movement in South Africa (Transvaal) Sri Aurobindo had been found referring to this in his writings. When, in the year 1921 or so, the Bengal Revolutionaries urged him to come back to politics to take the leadership Sri Aurobindo told them that the 'Leadership' was in right hand and when, on the 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1948, Gandhiji was assassinated Sri Aurobindo told over a Radio Broadcast – "I would have preferred silence in the face of these circumstance that surrounded us. For any word we can find will fall flat on such happenings. This much, however, I shall say that the light which led us to freedom, though not yet to unity, still burns and will burn till it conquers....."

Similarly Gandhiji had great regards for Sri Aurobindo and he went to Pondicherry on 17-02-1934 to pay his respects to the Mahayogi. But as in the case of Swami Vivekananda, so this time also he could not meet Sri Aurobindo. In the year 1928 Gandhiji sent his youngest son Devdas Gandhi as his special messenger to request Sri Aurobindo to take over the leadership again – "the Congress Gadi was ready for him".

We shall now move over to similarities and dissimilarities in the minds and workings of the two great Freedom Fighters. Interestingly, although both plumped for politics for exigency, freedom of the Motherland, they both perhaps were not politicians parse and fixed greater role for themselves in time to come, the true freedom and unity of man. As we find, both Gandhiji and Sri Aurobindo thought about the future of India as a part of the future of mankind. In other words they were imbued with a sense of mission that they had something or worthwhile to contribute towards the enrichment of humanity and that a free and successful India would serve as a model for other nations to follow. So for both Gandhiji and Sri Aurobindo the ultimate aim of the freedom movement was 'Liberation of the humanity'.

In India, however, Sri Aurobindo was Gandhiji's precursor not only in the freedom movement, but also introducing and upholding the three (3) cardinal principles of struggle for achievement of politico-social justice-non-violent, non-co-operation and passive resistance. Gandhiji later on changed passive-resistance to 'Satyagraha'. Sri Aurobindo also advocated the 'Boycott Movement' during the Bengal Partition Movement in 1905 and backed up this with positive development of alternatives, almost Gandhiji's 'Constructive Programmers', his unique package for social development. Swadeshi and Swaraj, the twin principles of nation-building, were also projected by Sri Aurobindo before Gandhiji, with variations here and there. In Gandhiji's terminology and practice these were more fundamental, had more dimensions and significance.

However, in the year 1910 Sri Aurobindo took up another course and Gandhiji came back to India in the year 1915 to fill the void created by Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal from the politico-social arena. Sri Aurobindo observed that his 'Sadhana', spiritual, would help India to achieve his freedom and goals.

## **Man & Nature – an integralist view**

Gandhiji never regarded man as mere physico-chemical entity but he has soul or consciousness. His thoughts emanated from the Upanishads, Vedanta and the Gita, and the Vedic description of the Brahman as 'Sanchidananda' or sat-chit- Ananda served as the intellectual frame-work of the philosophical thoughts of Gandhiji. Same could be true of Sri Aurobindo. Only Gandhiji emphasized mainly on the sat aspect, while Sri Aurobindo emphasized on the chit aspect. His fundamental assumption was that all reality is consciousness and believe in the evolution of man to gnostic and supramental being. He also emphasized that one's true self is identical with the self of the Universe and as such one should shake off one's egoistic position and adopt a benevolent attitude to fellow men and fellow – creatures.

## **Role of Men in History**

Sri Aurobindo conceived an idealistic interpretation of history not merely in the sense that ideas play a pre-dominant role in the process of history, but also ideas are prior to matter. Ideas are thus dynamic but originate insuper mind and history evolves towards the supra mental stage.

Sri Aurobindo had also a spiritualist conception of history. Gandhiji had a moralist conception. The twin values to which Gandhiji primarily owed his allegiance were Truth and Non-Violence and in human history he found a steady progress towards 'Ahinsa' with several dimensions and significance.

### **Social Philosophies of Sri Aurobindo and Gandhiji:**

Although somewhat difficult, after perusing Sri Aurobindo's earlier and later writings and speeches we could obtain a definitive philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and his ideas and thoughts about the social aspects. These, however, would have to be conducive to the spiritual growth of man. He also held that the nature of the human society and the nature of the individual man are closely akin. Like Gandhiji Sri Aurobindo performed small units for socio economic – political structure and limited role of the state. Both wanted that institution and organization do not go over man.

Gandhiji's social philosophy is more fundamental, comprehensic and positive. He wanted to establish a Truth or Moral and Sarvodaya society encompassing everything in Universe or 'basudhaibha kutumbakam' and tried to re-orient the existing. Socio political-economic institutions to his likings for establishment of 'Kingdom of God' in man.

## **Divergence or Dissimilarities**

Sri Aurobindo almost introduced the 'Cult of Bomb' in the early stage of the Indian Freedom Movement. He wrote 4 essays – 1. The Message of the Bomb, 2. The Morality of the Bombs, 3. The Psychology of the Bomb and 4. The Policy of the Bomb 1909, while in custody at the Alipore Jail.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote against the use of violence at a very early stage, in the year 1909 itself. Later on Sri Aurobindo pursued the Cult of Spiritualism and Mahatma Gandhi introduced the Cult of Ethics in the Indian politics. Sri Aurobindo preferred renunciation in seclusion, Gandhiji remained earth-earthly, yet he could practice the life of an Ascetic. Sri Aurobindo was, as such, an elitist, highly scholastic and his last life was shrouded in mystery for the ordinary. Mahatma Gandhiji never eschew the people's contact his life was an open book since the year 1906 and he sacrificed his life apparently for a mundane cause – Communal Harmony.

The difference between them pursued till the year 1942 when, in spite of Sri Aurobindo's advocacy, the Congress, under Gandhiji's leadership, rejected the 'Cripps Proposal'.

These could be extended. But the unity underlying between them is real and true.