

***Vision of Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin: Empowered by Creative
Evolution and Mysticism***

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Abstract

This paper is an effort to understand vision of Sri Aurobindo and Piere Teilhard de Chardin pertaining to the future of man. Both were fervid believers in evolution as well as mystics. Evolution occupies a special place in their vision of cosmic consciousness. Evolution theory empowered Teilhard to introduce the idea of re-visioning of Christianity. His spiritual and mystical experiences empowered him to discuss 'cosmicisation' of Christ, culminating into, Omega Point. His position was in stark contrast to Biblical fundamentalism, due to which he suffered at the hands of the church authorities till his death, but his faith in Christ and science, compelled the Papal authorities to declare that Christianity is not opposed to evolution.

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of involution-evolution enabled him to reinterpret vedas and Upanishads. Indian philosopher's interpretations were idealistic and world-negating. Sri Aurobindo in his reinterpretation did bring out their essential concern in this world, which was a necessary corrective to the dominant inwardness of later Upanishads. The culmination of his integral evolution is the birth of a Gnostic being and Gnostic society. Both the thinkers accept emergent evolution, although there are differences within. Convergence and integration, is common to them, however, for Teilhard it is a closure at the Omega Point. Both the thinkers are influenced by Marxist thought as far as the social aspect of our life is concerned. While Sri Aurobindo's 'Life Divine' can be called post-modern Upanishad, Teilhard is a visionary of new Christianity.

Keywords: Involution, Evolution, Gnostic Beings, Omega, Integration, Cosmicisation.

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Introduction

This paper begins with chief characteristics of Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution, which is followed by main features of Teilhard's evolutionary theory. A comparison of Aurobindo's philosophy of evolution with Teilhard's 'hyperphysical' account of evolution features next, followed by conclusion, which highlights their contribution to the humanity in general.

Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin had two things in common, the profound belief in evolution and the repeated experience of cosmic consciousness. Both saw that the ultimate goal of this was to be the divinization of man.

Sri Aurobindo's educational upbringing in England played a vital role in his reinterpretation of the vedic and upanishadic texts. The western concept of evolution influenced Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and understanding. Through reinterpretation of the ancient scriptures he gave a new meaning to the concept of salvation, which aimed at universalization of man. S. K. Maitra, in his book, 'The Meeting of the East and West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy', observes that, Sri Aurobindo treated creation and dissolution of the Universe as a Maypole dance, which has no place for individual creativity.

As well as, there was no cosmic, collective forward-moving of progressive human race. He also accepted nature/matter as real as Brahman or Sat-cit-ananda, the fact which ancient Indian philosophers, including Shankara had denied. Therefore, it is very clear that, he too was influenced and empowered by modern western science, integrating it in his theory of spiritual evolution. Also, it is very important to mention here that his mystical experiences, have played a crucial role in providing a rock solid foundation and evidence to his evolution theory.

He was well acquainted with the western culture and philosophy and also very greatly influenced by Indian scriptures. Like Teilhard, he too was enchanted with the idea of evolution. According to him, theory of evolution has been the key-note of the nineteenth century thought. He found the Heraclitian dictum, "one out of all and all out of one" very simulative, which was very insightful to his conception of 'evolution' and 'involution'. He believed that this Heraclitian principle was in conformity with science.

The western idea of evolution is the statement of a process of formation, not an explanation of our being. In his philosophical interpretation, Sri Aurobindo seeks to account for the fact which satisfies science, that is, the fact that the higher emerges from the lower. The term evolution carries with it in its intrinsic sense, in the idea at its root the necessity of a previous involution. In other words, we are bound to suppose that all that evolves already existed involved, passive or otherwise active, whatever is the case, hidden or concealed from us in material nature. Hence it is important to note that the spirit involved in material energy is there with all its powers—life, mind and a greater supramental power are involved in matter. The future evolution of man, which involves transcending oneself and moving towards, 'the superman, the God' is justified by the human aspiration towards God, Light, Bliss, Freedom, Immortality.

This aspiration is a 'constant' in human nature which no scientific theories have quenched, and Sri Aurobindo offers an experiential basis for the expectation of the further step in human development.

There are two factors involved in this intuitive spark or flash of involution-evolution dialectics. One is speculative and the other is existential. First, the speculative factor, to explain the fact of evolution, Sri Aurobindo lays down the principle of involution: nothing evolves which was not previously involved ___ with the scientific evidence that, the higher is shown to develop from the lower. This principle of involution, also is a logical explanation of the process of evolution. Hence, speculating further, he locates the mind and the spirit as well at the deepest level of matter, thus accepting the satkaryavada theory of causation, that effect is in the cause in the latent form. Thus, he concludes that, "If it be true that spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth."¹

The existential factor has reference to the undeniable fact of man's undying aspiration. That is, what is involved, also necessarily must evolve, this reasoning is inspired by the existential factor. If evolution does have a further term, then our aspiration towards something higher is perfectly natural and justifiable. For Sri Aurobindo 'man' cannot be the last product of evolution, as he puts man only as a middle term, which is characterized by the consciousness of mind, therefore occupies a transitional status. Although it is so, he (man) fulfills an indispensable function, for it is through him that the divine realizes itself in the universe. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of evolution is essentially concerned with the future of man, fundamental inspiration being the existential factor of profound "aspiration" ___ the divinization of man on earth.

His philosophy of evolution has other characteristic features. It is anthropocentric, that is, all evolution tends to manifest the divine, and the locus of that manifestation is no other than man, it is revealing God's face in 'man'; and has a spiritualist outlook, that is, it is finalistic in nature, since there is priority of spirit over matter which gives an orientation to matter. Sri Aurobindo's evolution accounts for the journey of consciousness from 'physical' to 'vital' and from there to 'mental' and beyond this to 'supramental'. According to him, primarily consciousness is evolving and 'mind' cannot be the last manifestation of this evolving consciousness, as 'mind' is fundamentally an 'ignorance' seeking knowledge. Evolution for Sri Aurobindo is a process by which the face of God behind and within this creation is gradually unveiled and so there is no reason to dispense with God. Sri Aurobindo writes in his Magnum Opus, *The LIFE DIVINE*, "The animal is a living laboratory in which nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious co-operation she wills to work out the superman, the God."²

Integration of the lower into the higher, and triple transformation are two important characteristics of future evolution. If our terrestrial existence (material, vital and mental) should rise to a higher principal, then we should bring about a radical and integral transformation in our present nature. The rational mind has not yet risen to the supermind, and so there is a big gap between the two.

To achieve this goal, Sri Aurobindo uses 'integral yoga' and the process of 'triple transformation' (psychic, spiritual and supramental). The two stages in triple transformation result in the transition from intellectual to spiritual mind. The third stage is the passage from the spiritual to supramental mind. During this transformation there is gradual ascending of mental powers starting from the Higher Mind, to Illumined Mind, to Intuitive mind and to Overmind. This ascending movement has to be complemented by one of descent, that is the overmind and supermind, as supernatural realities should set in our present nature. In order to achieve this, the individual intuitive consciousness must act only in subordination to the Universal Being. In this ascension, one experiences universal consciousness, thus making a human being as 'universal individual'. The newly formed nature is not mere substitution for a previous one, but integrates it while transforming it. Thus, Sri Aurobindo is very sure about establishment of a race of gnostic spiritual beings on earth.

Sri AUROBINDO as a Mystic

The architecture of Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution lies in his mystical experiences. There are four landmark, higher yogic or mystical experiences as recorded in his biographical account of Sri Aurobindo's yogic development. A first and second experience occurred in quick succession at Baroda in January in 1908 and in Alipore jail, from May of the same year to May 1909. These two were the contrary experiences of acosmic selfhood and cosmic consciousness. The third and the fourth experiences were those of a protracted development. The third experience was the achievement of a synthesis of the previous two. In the fourth experience he rose still further to achieve a supreme form of consciousness. This spiritual experience, led Aurobindo to the threshold of the supramental.

Sri Aurobindo's system is called purna- adwaita, integral yoga, which is very innovative and constituted a clear break with traditional system of Samkhya-yoga. He was honest to say that, "Heaven we have possessed, but not the earth; but the fullness of the yoga is to make... Heaven and earth equal and one."³ He showcased his own spiritual experiences, whatever he experienced through the process of integral yoga. His epic poem "Savitri" is a record of his progressive achievement of higher states of consciousness those he experienced in self-realization.

Teilhard's Philosophy of Evolution

He interpreted the existence and origin of species within earth's history and this cosmos. He was silenced by his religious superiors for taking an evolutionary stance, at the time when this theory is perceived as a serious threat to already established orthodox theology. Teilhard's position was in stark contrast to Biblical fundamentalism, which holds the view that creation of this entire universe to be a completed event that happened ten thousand years ago. This was unacceptable to Teilhard as he was convinced of the fact of evolution and that it continues still more magnificently and at the highest levels of the world. His work, 'The Phenomenon of Man' was perceived as a threat to traditional theology and the Vatican denied its publication.

Like Aurobindo, Teilhard evolved a system, with mystical experience as its base, and developed it along evolutionary lines. In his book, *Science and Christ*, Teilhard writes— “It is not I that have laboriously discovered the whole; it is the whole that has presented itself to me, imposed itself on me, through a sort of ‘cosmic consciousness’. It is the attraction of the whole that has set everything in motion in me, has animated and given organic form to everything.”⁴ It is said that, during the first world war, where he acted as a stretcher-bearer, he seems to have lived in an almost permanent state of ‘cosmic consciousness’.

To begin with Teilhard’s philosophy of evolution, a quotation to clarify his ideas :

“ In the world, nothing could ever burst forth as final across the different thresholds successively traversed by evolution(however critical they be) which has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way ”⁵ According to Teilhard then, life comes from nowhere than earth itself. He puts forth the only scientific explanation that the original earth-mass already contained the elements of future life, when it first separated itself from the larger volume of stellar matter. This matter contained pre-life within it, which emerged as the ‘elementary consciousness’, which brought about the ‘wonderful phenomenon of life, with its noble corollary, the phenomenon of man’. Although consciousness is “only completely recognizable in man”⁶ but it does not mean that consciousness is restricted to man alone. That is, since man is himself a cosmic phenomenon, then consciousness too ‘has a cosmic extension’. According to Teilhard, life is the flowering of matter. “far from being an exception in the material realm, organic matter is a prolongation at a higher level of the potentialities of inanimate matter.”⁷

He views consciousness as transposition at a higher level, of the phenomenon of life. He is reluctant to label his evolutionary theory as metaphysics, but instead calls it ‘hyperphysics’, or ‘ultraphysics’. He was perfectly aware of the fact that his phenomenological view does not exhaust the depths of reality. Yet, he allowed philosophy to influence his theory by formulating two basic assumptions, which guide him throughout his evolution theory, “The first is the primacy accorded to the psychic and to thought in the stuff of the universe, and the second is the ‘biological’ value attributed to the social fact around us.”⁸ The other philosophical assumptions which he tacitly accepts include— the principle according to which ‘union differentiates’; that the universe is intelligible and reducible to unity— without which he could not attempt to discover a ‘coherent order’ in the universe and finally the deduction of ‘Omega’ as necessary condition of human activity. It is to be noted here that the ‘total’ explanation of evolution requires both the scientific and the metaphysical approach, which are complementary viewpoints.

Teilhard admits the distinct nature of thought as opposed to mere life, because of its universality and its world-wide significance. “The biological change of state terminating in the awakening of thought does not represent merely a critical point that the individual or even the species must pass through. Vaster than that, it affects life itself in its organic totality, and consequently it marks a transformation affecting the state of the entire planet”.⁹ For e.g. When life constitutes in a sphere, and emergence of thought affects the very nature of life, then the appearance of thought must result in the formation of yet another sphere.

In this theory the notion of spheres is essentially linked up with evolution itself. In other words, a distinct phase in evolution is automatically translated into a corresponding sphere. Further, the successive superposition of spheres keeps pace with the successive leaps in evolution: so we have the parallel series of geogenesis, bio- and psychogenesis on the one hand, and on the other the geological spheres, the biosphere, and finally the noosphere.

Teilhard introduced the notion of “threshold” and connected it with spheres. The various layers correspond to so many phases in evolution, the passage between the two different phases in evolution represents a ‘threshold’ separating two levels of earth- existence. Also a discontinuity in the movement is marked by a break in the stratification. He distinguishes two such thresholds__ the threshold between matter and life and that between life and thought. A threshold, according to Teilhard is, a crisis of the first magnitude, the beginning of a new order. A threshold despite all discontinuity, does preserve a real unity between the two realms it separates. Teilhard brings in the fundamental laws of his evolution theory at this juncture: first, all forms of earth-existence have a within, by which he understands some form of consciousness in the widest sense of the word, and the second, the degree of interiority corresponds to the degree of structural complexity.

He recognizes some form of interiority in matter and therefore a real continuity between matter itself and life, he also stands for an equally real discontinuity between both. At the next threshold Teilhard distinguishes between thought and mere animal consciousness. The within of man is specifically ‘reflection’ i.e., “no longer merely to know, but to know oneself; no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows”.¹⁰ He views consciousness as ‘in the second degree’ and maintains that reflection is that form of interiority, which constitutes man into a center, where man consciousness no longer diffuses itself over a multiplicity of exterior things, but it returns to the unity of its own interiority. This re-turn of man upon himself is called by Teilhard ‘reflection’, which distinguishes between the human and non-human consciousness. Further, he conceives of evolution as progressive deepening of the within of things, an increasing interiorization, with thought an entirely new type of interiority appears.

Teilhard’s evolution theory is anthropocentric, that is, he begins with, ‘pre-eminent significance of man in nature’. The whole argument of ‘The Phenomenon of Man’, is to justify Teilhard’s anthropocentrism which emphasizes the threefold qualification: first, that man is not so much the center as rather the direction of evolution; second, that evolution leads up to mankind rather than to man; third, mankind in its turn has its center beyond itself. Social dimension or socialization is common mark of both, Aurobindo’s as well as Teilhard’s evolution theory. Both show a dynamic evolutionary tendency towards mankind, and through it beyond.

Teilhard’s theory is finalistic and has spiritual character. He introduces ‘a divine focus of mind’ which according to him is the center of humankind. Since it is divine, in his evolution theory it is radically transcendent with regard to man. Teilhard places a supreme center of attraction__ an ultimate, ‘Omega Point’, which he places beyond man and makes it the summit of phenomenal evolution. He also makes it preexisting to evolution as the prime condition of its entire development.

Further, it is not a product of evolution, but the source of evolutionary push, which it sustains throughout by attracting it towards itself. Thus, Omega is God, in whom man finds his fulfillment. It is God who realizes the fullness of 'man' by drawing him (man) to himself (God). Further, Teilhard brings out the concept of 'planetisation', a process by which mankind achieves its unity as a collective reality. A quote from Teilhard's 'The Future of Man' to clarify more on 'planetisation'__ "projected forwards, this law of recurrence makes it possible for us to envisage a future state of the Earth in which human consciousness reaching the climax of its evolution, will have attained a maximum of complexity, and as a result, of concentration by total 'reflexion' (planetization) of itself upon itself."¹¹

Comparison of Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution with that of Teilhard de Chardin

While Teilhard's philosophy of evolution is founded on his profound acquaintance with the scientific data, Sri Aurobindo's theory is based on spiritual transformation, however, for him the scientific and philosophical ideas were very simulative.

Upanishadic interpretation looks at the individual liberation as a release of the spirit from its material conditions but, Sri Aurobindo going a step further, sets up his ideal of spiritualization of matter, that is, he does not want an escape but a transformation. Both the thinkers use the term social dimension, as an essential feature of future humanity. Teilhard's picture of a future is where humanity as a whole would converge upon itself. He conceives of 'collectivity' as a reality_ in its own right. He gives priority to the collective, saying that there is 'more in society than in the individual.' Aurobindo thinks of the 'collective' in terms of the common nature. For Sri Aurobindo, 'the Self as individual is no less real than the Self as cosmic Being or Spirit.' According to his theory of future evolution, that is, his ideal of a universal liberation of mankind requires the realization of super-nature in the individual as a pre-condition. It is clear that the gnostic community can be born only from the association of gnostic individuals.

Both were sympathetic to Marxian socialism. Aurobindo specially felt that, there must be some connection between collective socialist ideal of unity in diversity and his own inner experience, as much the same thing. However, later he rejected it, because the type of society which forcibly subjects the individual to the community, and whose only ideal was economic development, cannot bring about overall development and thus should be a failure.

With reference to the convergence of individuals into the Omega point, Teilhard makes it clear that this Omega is the meeting point of consciousnesses in their individuality. He mentions that Omega is personal in nature and should remain distinct from these elements. Otherwise, if and when individual consciousnesses merge in Omega, then they would destroy themselves at the very moment they hope to fulfill themselves. Aurobindo's Purna Adwaita, monism stems from his experience of his 'own individual consciousness'. According to him the individual is 'universal' in his conscious comprehensiveness. Thus this individual consciousness will become universal in extension. It will reach its universality when it will not feel itself to be opposed to its individuality.

With reference to the collective dimension, although their terminology differs, they affirm the same thing: the individual has to transcend his limitation and to universalize himself.

Conscious union, thus is equated by Aurobindo with Ontological identity. On the contrary Teilhard presupposes distinction in union, both conscious and ontological. As the ontological reality of the individual is constituted by his capacity of conscious reflection, according to Teilhard man finds himself transcended by Omega; and for Aurobindo man transcends himself in reaching supramental consciousness.

For Aurobindo experiencing the depths of consciousness became the foundation of his spiritualistic evolution theory, while Teilhard discovers the other's consciousness, that of his fellow-men. According to him, the interpersonal relationship justifies the paradox of 'differentiating union'. In other words, the individual gifts himself by communicating his very self to others and in this process, far from dispossessing himself of his self, his personality grows through this reciprocity__ to the extent that, the closer he unites himself with the others, the more he becomes himself.

The concept of involution too, is treated differently by both of them. What Sri Aurobindo means by 'involution', is that the Absolute, before evolving out of matter, first involved itself into it. For Teilhard, involution is the very process or the product of it. For the former, involution precedes evolution, whereas for the later, it is evolution coincide with involution.

Conclusion

Despite the intricate differences, there is something which is fundamental in their outlook, their sense for universal unity, which is identified as cosmic consciousness. Both, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard single out consciousness as the golden thread running through evolution.

Both, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard were mystics, and mystics are of their very nature concerned with eternity rather than time. However, both were staunch believers in evolution and we know that evolution takes place within time. So, both of them treated the great orthodoxies of the world as the best approximations of the truth or reality; and also simply a stage in the evolutionary process which must be transcended or even discarded in the light of new scientific age.

It is the scientific theory of evolution which empowered Teilhard to introduce the idea of re-visioning of Christianity. It was his spiritual, experiential and mystical aspect of life which empowered him to discuss cosmicisation of Christ, culminating into one point, i.e., Omega Point. Although Teilhard suffered a lot at the hands of the church authorities till his death, his striving faith compelled the Papal authorities today, to declare that Christianity is not opposed to evolution. This is surely Teilhardian unshakable faith in scientific facts which empowered him and gave him courage to rethink about the 'Historic Christ'. This in turn empowered the church towards the amalgamation of 'evolution' in the changing face of Christianity. The following statements from the Papal authorities demonstrate the gradual change in their attitude towards evolution theory and science in general, showing that it is not in conflict with science:

Pope John Paul II in 1996 stated that: "...new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge..."¹²

However before this statement, Pope Pious XII (1939-1958)" opened the door to the idea of evolution and actively welcomed the Big Bang theory.

The present Pope Francis backed the theory of evolution and the Big Bang. According to him, "The Big Bang, which today we hold to be the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of the Divine Creator but, rather, requires it. Evolution in nature is not inconsistent with the notion of creation because, the evolution requires the creation of beings that evolve".¹³

The accommodation of the evolutionary theory, to explain the creation and genesis of the universe is a great step forward towards, Teilhard's remolding or reshaping the new theology. This phase is also, very prominently pushed by the power and faith in science and the faith that Teilhard had in his mystical experiences.

Ancient Indian Scriptures also required a refreshing review, a dynamic reinterpretation, to highlight their relevance and applicability in the post-modern world. Sri Aurobindo not only excelled in this task, but also came to be known as the supreme yogi or sage of the post-modern world, through his new 'integral yoga'. He found that, all Indian Philosophy as such was interpreted as Idealistic and World negating. However in his re-interpretation of the Vedas, he brought out their essential concern with this world, which was a necessary corrective to the dominant inwardness of later Upanishads.

He found the justification of this dynamic interpretation of the Vedanta in the ancient Hindu Scriptures, i.e. Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagwad Gita. He had mystical experiences of Oneness of Cosmic Consciousness as he practiced Yoga and his Philosophy of "Life Divine", is an account of his real practical experiences of the Divine. Through his lifelong yogic 'sadhana', and his mystical and occult experiences, he introduced the concept of involution and evolution__ connecting Science, Spirituality and Religion – further making his Integral Yoga, religiously neutral. Teilhard's as well as Sri Aurobindo's invaluable contribution to humanity thus was possible through their integration of science and religion. While Sri Aurobindo's 'Life Divine' can be called post-modern Upanishad, Teilhard is a visionary of new Christianity.

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