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SRI AUROBINDO AND THE UTTARPARA SPEECH: AN OVERVIEW

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The Uttarpara Speech is a significant milestone in the Indian National history. Sri Aurobindo delivered this speech regarding Hindu religion on 30th May 1909 at Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public library. The lecture highlighted the essential teaching of the Gita and its impact on his own life. Sri Aurobindo spoke for the first time publicly of his yoga and his spiritual quest in this speech.

Indian freedom struggle-the background:

Before analysing the oration, let us traverse through the period of militant nationalism in the history of Indian freedom struggle of which Sri Aurobindo was a significant figure. The Pre-Independence era during the first half of the twentieth century was a period of strife, agitation and unrest. Aggressive steps were been adopted by the freedom fighters of the Extremist camp who looked down upon the policy of appeasement followed by the Moderates towards the Britishers. Moderate leaders were unpopular to the Indian people because their policy of appeasement to the British for reforms did not fetch any tangible result. The economic and social lives of the people were severely disrupted and devastated. They lacked adequate opportunities in business and commerce. Unemployed youths were frustrated and agitated. They were vocal against the colonial exploitation. The discontent spread among the urban folks, the peasants and the workers.

The new group of leaders, known as the Extremists who came to the forefront were more radical than the moderates. Innumerable Indian youths participated in revolutionary activities. While the Moderates received support from the urban middle class, the new leaders appealed to the lower middle class, the students and a wide section of workers and farmers. Lokmanya Tilak was one of the foremost leaders of the extremist camp. He edited the paper named “kesari” that became a powerful vehicle of the nationalist cause. Besides, Bipin Chandra, Aurobindo Ghose and Lala Lajpat rai were important leaders of the militant school of nationalism. They ignited in the Indian minds the spirit of strength and self-confidence to fight against the British to obtain freedom. They proclaimed that their only goal was to attain swaraj or full independence from the British rule.

The Partition of Bengal brought about massive protest and agitation among all sections of the Indian population. Aurobindo Ghose was one of the prominent leaders of the Anti-partition movement. The Swadeshi and the Boycott movements gained impetus and the national songs aroused intense

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emotions among the masses. The extremist leaders considered boycott of British goods as a weapon to diminish economic foothold of the foreign rulers. The spirit of swadeshi evoked the necessity to establish education on national lines. The Bengal National College was founded in 1906 and its principal was Aurobindo Ghose. Science and technology were incorporated in the curriculum. The main aim was to prepare the cultural foundation of the country so that the people could obtain the ideas of self-reliance, liberty and freedom.

Innumerable secret societies were formed in different regions that adopted various tactics to fight against the rulers. The Government tried to suppress and imprison the conspirators. It took stringent measures to curb the revolutionaries and imprisoned them at large. Aurobindo Ghose was arrested on 2nd May, 1908 under the charge of conspiracy relating to Alipore Bomb Case and in the prison cell, he had a deep and intense spiritual experience.

Truth: Quest and its revelation:

Truth unfolds itself in turmoil. It is really an extra-ordinary event that Lord Krishna gave the instructions to Arjuna in the battle field and not in solitude away from people. Amidst the clink of weapons and neigh of horses, the Lord whispered his sermon in the ears of the devotee. In the battlefield when Arjuna was extremely perturbed about his course of action, it was Lord Krishna who guided him. The beautiful verses of the Gita contain His messages. Surrounded by his relatives and friends, Arjuna, although a great warrior, was hesitant and perplexed. He knew it was inevitable that the war will lead to insurmountable suffering and death. Hence, he resolved to step down and flee away from the battle field. In this state of extreme mental instability and anguish, the Lord advised his disciple to take up the weapons and fight against the enemies, otherwise it would not be possible to establish righteousness upon this earth.

Similarly, Sri Aurobindo experienced a divine intimation in the prison cell in solitary confinement. There was a transformation of his mentality that paved an altogether different bend in his life. He was imprisoned in Alipore jail for twelve months and this speech was the expression of his deep and intense God-realization. He felt that the period of detention was a period of vivid experience of divine bliss that taught him many new things which would not have been possible outside the bars. The unique experience in jail helped him to discover his inner self, the silence unfolded the secret of divine presence. He realised that everything happens at the will of God who pervades the entire universe. At each and every moment in custody, he remained calm and asked himself within what the divine intention was, what purpose had he to fulfil as the instrument of God. He had a vision of God who had ordained him to do His work with sincere effort. The sermon of the Gita resonated in his ears

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and he had an intellectual vision of Lord Krishna's teaching to Arjuna about desireless action. The essence of Hindu religion, i.e. the "Sanatana Dharma" manifested to Him as broad daylight. He discovered the secret link between nationalism and religion. Nationalism is not a mere political concept; it is religion itself throbbing in the veins of the multitude of Indians. Hinduism concentrates and aims at the upliftment of humanity in general that surpasses all petty barriers of caste and creed. To work for the people and their welfare are the primary aim of human life. He realized that the essence of "Sanatana dharma" lies in a continuous striving towards the welfare of people

Love, faith and Self-surrender-The Essence of Hindu Religion:

He observed that the real meaning of "Sanatana Dharma" is not known to the common people. Whereas the other religions are based on faith, the Hindu religion denotes a lived experience and experiment extending throughout one's entire life. The foundation stone of this religion is love, profound and unlimited, crossing the barriers of caste, creed and beliefs. It is love that culminates in perception of all beings as equal without discrimination. A person must surrender himself at the feet of the Divine. He must have the firm conviction that the Divine mercy will shower upon him amidst all contradictions and hindrances.

We find that the spiritual journey of Sri Aurobindo, through intense study and meditation revealed to him the above ideas. He realized that he was a mere instrument in the hands of God and fulfilling his purpose. As long as the purpose is not fulfilled, no human power can stand as an impediment. At the time of his arrest at Lal Bazar he was at first bit shaken. He was taken aback because his imprisonment seemed to prevent him from realization of his mission to work for the Indian masses. After few days it seemed to him that a voice spoke from within that asked to wait and see. Then he was transported from Lal Bazar to Alipore where he spent in captivity in a solitary cell. At different occasions, he had the unique vision of Lord Krishna. He was intimated by the Lord that in all times, in happiness as well as in despair, He protects the devotee in various situations. The solitary prison - cell, with minimum amenities, was considered by Sri Aurobindo as a "sadhan-kuthir" (seat of spiritual discipline). Amidst extreme hardship and suffering, this period of recluse in prison was a period of self-discovery for Sri Aurobindo.

A few lines from his writings in "The Synthesis of Yoga" may shed some light on his observations. "Life, not a remote silent or high-uplifted ecstatic Beyond-Life alone, is the field of Yoga. The transformation of our superficial, narrow and fragmentary human way of thinking, seeing, feeling and being into a deep and wide spiritual consciousness and an integrated inner and outer existence and of our ordinary human living into the divine way of life must be its central purpose. The

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means towards this supreme end is a self-giving of all our nature to the Divine.” (Aurobindo,1948, p.46)

Amidst the odds, occurrences of different incidents convinced him of Divine mercy and protection, as when some of the jailors requested the authorities to allow him to walk outside the cell for half an hour. A kind of bold and invincible power generated within him; his inner eyes opened up to find that the high walls of the prison were no longer mere walls; they were the hands of the Lord embracing him with love. The tree adjacent to the cell seemed to Him as the Lord himself showering mercy upon him and safeguarding him.

Equality of vision:

He envisioned God’s presence not only in the living beings but also in the inanimate objects like the mattresses and pillows. It was the sermon of the Lord to work with the prisoners, the so called “chotolok”, to understand the rhythm of life of the poor, the destitute, the deprived and their sorrows and sufferings. Without interaction with the common people, how could he understand their sufferings? To work for the masses, one should understand their needs, aspirations and pain. When he was taken to the court, his initial feeling was depressing but later, it was transformed into positive feelings of delight and bliss. He had a vision of the Lord residing in all beings around him. He perceived the presence of the Lord in the Magistrate and the Prosecuting Council assuring Him that He has nothing to fear. He felt that the Lord was bestowing him love and shelter from all adversities.

Man, and his existence: A new dimension:

Sri Aurobindo realizes that the life of a human creature is a dynamic growth and development that is different from an animal. It is a meaningful development of consciousness by thought, will, emotion, desire, action and experiences that finally lead to a supreme discovery of oneself. It is the discovery of “Man”, the mental being residing in the physical body. To him, the supreme aim of Yoga is nothing but to accelerate the process of revelation of the self that should not be confused with the slow and confused growth of physical nature. The consciousness centring round the narrow ego constantly seeks the gratification of its petty desires. There lies latent in the human mind the will and aspiration to know one’s essential nature. It is the discovery of an enlarged and illumined consciousness that breaks the limits of the individual ego. It may lead to the revelation of a divine humanity or a superhuman race. The Yoga culminates into a new birth, which is an integral transformation of individuality to divinity in all aspects of human existence. When the egoistic emotions are driven out and a secret vast psychic heart reveals itself, the feelings impelled by this inner

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heart are transformed into Divine love and delight. This is the definition of a divine humanity or a supramental race. Individual man evolves into a superman that is the aim of Yoga.

Sri Aurobindo observed that enjoyment of desire as the ruling human motive should be discarded altogether. Spiritual life does not thrive on satisfaction of human desire. It enjoins pure and selfless delight, limitless and boundless. When the mental being undergoes the divine illumination, it is no longer influenced by half-truths and errors. The limited ego falls to the ground. The purpose of Yoga is to exile the limited selfish ego and realize the presence of the Divine as the ruling guide of human nature. Human existence gains a new meaning.

The above illustration and observation portray how a mortal poet sang to the audience in Uttarpara, a song of immortality, an enlightened journey towards self-discovery and growth towards the Divine. A mind ignited by revolutionary ideas in youth underwent a unique transformation during imprisonment towards a state of spiritual bliss.

I would like to end with a poem written by Sri Aurobindo titled “Soul in the Ignorance” that runs as follows:

Soul in the Ignorance, wake from its stupor,

Flake of the world- fire, spark of Divinity,

Lift up thy mind and thy heart into glory.

Sun in the darkness, recover thy lustre.

One, Universal, ensphering creation,

Wheeling no more with inconscient Nature,

Feel thyself God-born,

Know thyself deathless.

Timeless return to thy immortal existence. (Aurobindo, 2009, p.52)

Notes and References

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