



American Journal of Educational Research and Reviews (ISSN:2474-9265)



Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo- A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Sri Aurobindo, was an Indian nationalist, freedom fighter, philosopher, yogi, guru and poet. He joined the Indian movement for freedom from British rule, for a while became one of its influential leaders and then turned into a spiritual reformer, introducing his visions on human progress and spiritual evolution. Swami Vivekananda, known in his pre-monastic life as Narendranath Datta, was born in an affluent family in Kolkata. His father, Vishwanath Datta, was a successful attorney with interests in a wide range of subjects, and his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was endowed with deep devotion, strong character and other qualities. A precocious boy, Narendra excelled in music, gymnastics and studies. By the time he graduated from Calcutta University, he had acquired a vast knowledge of different subjects, especially Western philosophy and history. These, then the Shâstras, the Guru, and the Mother-land are the three notes that mingle themselves to form the music of the works of Vivekananda. The present paper brings out the critical analysis of the philosophies of the two great spiritual philosophers and writers in a comparative style.

Keywords: Philosophy, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Critical Analysis

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How to cite this article:

S.Lalitha. PHILOSOPHY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND SRI AUROBINDO A CRITICAL ANALYSIS. American Journal of Educational Research and Reviews, 2018,3:17.

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DETAILED PAPER

Swami Vivekananda is one of most admired spiritual leaders of India. The world knows him as an inspiring Hindu monk, his motherland regards him as the patriot saint of modern India, and Hindus consider him as a source of spiritual power, mental energy, strength-giving and open-mindedness. An avid scholar of Western and Hindu philosophy and ever thirsty for the mystery of Creation and the law of Nature, Vivekananda found his guru in Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa. He toured across India to know his country and people, and found his spiritual alma mater at the Kanyakumari rock in Cape Comorin at the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula. The Vivekananda memorial is now a landmark for tourists and pilgrims, and a tribute to him by his countrymen. "Art, science, and religion", Vivekananda said once, "are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. But in order to understand this we must have the theory of Advaita." The formative influence that went to the determining of his vision may perhaps be regarded as threefold. These are the treasure which it is his to offer. These furnish him with the ingredients whereof he compounds the world's heal-all of his spiritual bounty. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality. All his words, from one point of view, read as a commentary upon this central conviction.

Swami Vivekananda was the chief disciple of Ramkrishna Paramhansa. Ramkrishna Paramhansa's first spiritual teacher was an ascetic woman skilled in Tantra and Vaishnava bhakti. Later an Advaita Vedantic ascetic taught him non-dual meditation, and according to Ramkrishna, he experienced nirvikalpa samadhi under his guidance. Swami Vivekananda expanded on this knowledge and he is considered a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the "Western" World.

According to Vivekananda, three religions now stand in the world which has come down to us from time prehistoric Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. They have all received tremendous shocks and all of them prove by their survival their internal strength. But while Judaism failed to absorb Christianity and was driven out of its place of birth by its all-conquering daughter, and a handful of Parsees is all that remains to tell the tale of their grand religion, sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the seashore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith. From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion. Where then, the question arises, where is the common centre to which all these widely diverging radii converge? Where is the common basis upon which all these seemingly hopeless contradictions rest? And this is the question one shall attempt to answer.

The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of

all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them. So then the Hindu believes that he is a spirit. Him the sword cannot pierce — he the fire cannot burn — he the water cannot melt — he the air cannot dry. The Hindu believes that every soul is a circle whose circumference is nowhere, but whose centre is located in the body and that death means the change of this centre from body to body. Nor is the soul bound by the conditions of matter. In its very essence it is free, unbounded, holy, pure, and perfect. But somehow or other it finds itself tied down to matter, and thinks of itself as matter. A man he attains perfection when he lives a life of bliss infinite. He enjoys infinite and perfect bliss, having obtained the only thing in which man ought to have pleasure, namely God, and enjoys the bliss with God. So far all the Hindus are agreed. This is the common religion of all the sects of India; but, then, perfection is absolute, and the absolute cannot be two or three. It cannot have any qualities. It cannot be an individual. And so when a soul becomes perfect and absolute, it must become one with Brahman, and it would only realise the Lord as the perfection, the reality, of its own nature and existence, the existence absolute, knowledge absolute, and bliss absolute. We have often and often read this called the losing of individuality and becoming a stock or a stone. "He jests at scars that never felt a wound."

Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal. Thus Chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all other could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfil its services in discovering one energy of which all others are but manifestations, and the science of religion become perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death, Him who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world. One who is

the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestation? Thus is it, through multiplicity and duality, that the ultimate unity is reached. Religion can go no farther. This is the goal of all science.

All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run. Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today, and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language and with further light from the latest conclusions of science. Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. My brethren, we can no more think about anything without a mental image than we can live without breathing. By the law of association, the material image calls up the mental idea and vice versa. This is why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays. He knows as well as you do that the image is not God, is not omnipresent. He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion, but they had never been taught the life-giving, ennobling principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life. Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: secular knowledge to improve their economic condition and spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their moral sense.

The next question was how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses? Through education this was the answer that Swamiji found. One thing became clear to Swamiji: to carry out his plans for the spread of education and for the uplift of the poor masses, and also of women, an efficient organization of dedicated people was needed. As he said later on, he wanted "to set in motion machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." It was to serve as this 'machinery' that Swamiji founded the Ramakrishna Mission a few years later. It was when these ideas were taking shape in his

mind in the course of his wanderings that Swami Vivekananda heard about the World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers in India wanted him to attend the Parliament. He too felt that the Parliament would provide the right forum to present his Master's message to the world, and so he decided to go to America. Another reason which prompted Swamiji to go to America was to seek financial help for his project of uplifting the masses.

Swamiji, however, wanted to have an inner certitude and divine call regarding his mission. Both of these he got while he sat in deep meditation on the rock-island at Kanyakumari. With the funds partly collected by his Chennai disciples and partly provided by the Raja of Khetri, Swami Vivekananda left for America from Mumbai on 31 May 1893.

Through these inspiring and profoundly significant lectures Swamiji attempted to do the following:

to rouse the religious consciousness of the people and create in them pride in their cultural heritage; to bring about unification of Hinduism by pointing out the common bases of its sects; to focus the attention of educated people on the plight of the downtrodden masses, and to expound his plan for their uplift by the application of the principles of Practical Vedanta

Sri Aurobindo, born Aurobindo Ghosh, was an Indian nationalist, freedom fighter, philosopher, yogi, guru and poet. He joined the Indian movement for freedom from British rule, for a while became one of its influential leaders and then turned into a spiritual reformer, introducing his visions on human progress and spiritual evolution. Sri Aurobindo studied for the Indian Civil Service at King's College, Cambridge, England. After returning to India he took up various civil service works under the Maharaja of the princely state of Baroda and began to involve himself in politics. He was imprisoned by British governance in India for writing articles against

British rule. He was released when no evidence was provided. During his stay in the jail he had mystical and spiritual experiences, after which he moved to Pondicherry, leaving politics for spiritual work.

During his stay in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo evolved a new method of spiritual practice, which he called Integral Yoga. The central theme of his vision was the evolution of human life into a life divine. He believed in a spiritual realisation that not only liberated man but also transformed his nature, enabling a divine life on earth. In 1926, with the help of his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa "The Mother", he founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He died on 5 December 1950 in Pondicherry.

Aurobindo was the first Indian to create a major literary corpus in English. His main literary works are *The Life Divine*, which deals with theoretical aspects of Integral Yoga; *Synthesis of Yoga*, which deals with practical guidance to Integral Yoga; and *Savitri*, an epic poem which refers to a passage in the Mahabharata, where its characters actualise integral yoga in their lives. His works also include philosophy, poetry, translations and commentaries on the Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. In July 1905 then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, partitioned Bengal. This sparked an outburst of public anger against the British, leading to civil unrest and a nationalist campaign by groups of revolutionaries, who included Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo said he was "visited" by Swami Vivekananda in the Alipore Jail. It is a fact that he was hearing constantly the voice of Vivekananda speaking to me for a fortnight in the jail in my solitary meditation and felt his presence. The voice spoke only on a special and limited but very important field of spiritual experience and it ceased as soon as it had finished saying all that it had to say on that subject. Many years later, Aurobindo revised some of these works before they were published in book form. Some of the book series derived out of this publications were *The Life Divine*, *Yoga*, *Essays on The Gita*, *The*

Secret of The Veda, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, The Upanishads, The Renaissance in India, War and Self-determination, The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity and The Future Poetry were published in this magazine. Sri Aurobindo's main literary output was his voluminous correspondence with his disciples. His letters, most of which were written in the 1930s, numbered in the several thousands. Many were brief comments made in the margins of his disciple's notebooks in answer to their questions and reports of their spiritual practice others extended to several pages of carefully composed explanations of practical aspects of his teachings. These were later collected and published in book form in three volumes of Letters on Yoga. In the late 1930s, Sri Aurobindo resumed work on a poem he had started earlier he continued to expand and revise this poem for the rest of his life. It became perhaps his greatest literary achievement, Savitri, an epic spiritual poem in blank verse is of approximately 24,000 lines.

Sri Aurobindo calls his yoga as integral yoga, and according to Sri Aurobindo most ways of other yoga are paths to beyond of human existence and towards reaching spirit as a final objective and away from normal life. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy aims at ascending to the spirit and again descending to normal existence to transform it. According to Sri Aurobindo, mind is the highest term reached in the path of evolution till now but has not yet reached its highest potency and calls current mind as an ignorance seeking truth, but he also states that even though the human being is treading in ignorance there is in every human being a possibility of divine manifestation. Sri Aurobindo states that there is a possibility to open oneself to higher divine consciousness which would reveal one's true self, remain in constant union of divine and bring down a higher force, which he names as superamental force which would transform mind, life and body. To realise the above has been the main objectives of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Sri

Aurobindo explained that Man is born an ignorant, divided, conflicted being; a product of the original in conscience inherent in Matter that he evolved out of. As a result, he does not know the nature of Reality, including its source and purpose; his own nature, including the parts and integration of his being; what purpose he serves, and what his individual and spiritual potential is, amongst others. In addition, man experiences life through division and conflict, including his relationship with others, and his divided view of spirit and life. The Life Divine is a combination of summarisation of the letters published in Arya and interpretation of Isha Upanishad and is one of Sri Aurobindo's major philosophical opus. It tries to decipher the process of evolution and nature of reality and to give a metaphysical interpretation of Upanishads along with his own experiences. It is divided into two parts, the first explaining nature of reality and the second part on knowledge and evolution. In the first part disseminating creation and the nature of reality, analysis about human aspiration and current system of spirituality, there repercussions in understanding of reality, proposes different levels of reality and in eventuality of the humans rising to these different levels of reality. The analysis the interplay of reality and the nature of human and the second part describes evolution and knowledge, how the knowledge has been interpreted and the reason for the way it is. Finally hints of existence of a higher consciousness which would include all in reality and make sense of everything in reality, and calls this as a possible bringing down of Divine life on earth. The early writings of Aurobindo Ghosh consist of the poems that he penned down when he was a student in England. He wrote quite a number of plays and poems, during his thirteen years of stay in Baroda. If you want to have a look at Sri Aurobindo works, you can check out the volumes titled Collected Plays that contain the short stories and plays written by him. His poetry is published in the volume Collected Poems.

Sri Aurobindo came in limelight due to his editorials and articles that were published in the Calcutta daily newspaper named Bande Mataram. His political articles got published in the Calcutta weeklies. In the beginning, he was actively involved in the politics of the country. However, later, he focused his attention on the practice of yoga. After having concentrated on yoga for a long period of fourteen years, he came out with a 64 page monthly philosophical review called 'Arya' in the year 1914, which consisted of all his important works. Important Works of Aurobindo are the Essays on the Gita, The Life Divine, The Secret of the Veda, The Synthesis of Yoga, The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, The Foundations of Indian Culture, and The Future Poetry. According to Aurobindo, There was no ego, no real world—only when one looked through the immobile senses, something perceived or bore upon its sheer silence a world of empty forms, materialised shadows without true substance. There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relation less, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real. This was no mental realisation nor something glimpsed somewhere above, no abstraction, it was positive, the only positive reality, although not a spatial physical world, pervading, occupying or rather flooding and drowning this semblance of a physical world, leaving no room or space for any reality but itself, allowing nothing else to seem at all actual, positive or substantial. I cannot say there was anything exhilarating or rapturous in the experience . . . but what it brought was an inexpressible Peace, a stupendous silence, infinity of release and freedom.

There are two things noteworthy about this experience. The first is that it was not a fleeting experience but a true realisation in the sense that the peace and inner silence never diminished. The other is that the experience of the silent Brahman and the Māyāvādin sense of the unreality of the world were not at all what

Aurobindo had expected or wanted from yoga, and they did not fit either within the mental framework of his instructor, Lele, whose own experiences were with the personal Divine. During the following weeks Lele still taught Aurobindo how to rely both for his outer work and for the rest of his inner development on an inner guidance, but after that, they parted ways. The presence of the silent Brahman never left Aurobindo, though it subsequently merged with other realisations of the Divine. Interestingly, all this happened during one of the busiest periods of his life while he was at the peak of his political influence, and he managed, in his own words, to organise political work, deliver speeches, edit his newspaper and write articles, all from an entirely silent mind.

Sri Aurobindo described the main areas of his life's work as five world-movements which he wished for as a young man, and which he worked for during the different phases of his life. The people looked, in his own words, like impractical dreams when he was young, but he saw all of them fully or partially fulfilled during his lifetime:

1. A free and united India;
2. The resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilization;
3. A world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind;
4. The spread of the spiritual gift of India to the world;
5. A step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin the solution of the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society.

For several years Sri Aurobindo was a pivotal figure in the movement for independence. He had the qualities of a natural leader but was

always happy to work in the background as much as possible. It was during this period that Sri Aurobindo also became increasingly interested in Yoga and meditation. Sri Aurobindo was able to practice meditation and read about the ancient principles of yoga, undisturbed by outer commitments. Sri Aurobindo began to have profound meditations. Entering into higher realms of consciousness he became aware of the omnipresence of God. It was also in prison that Sri Aurobindo was visited by the soul of Swami Vivekananda, who instructed Sri Aurobindo about the workings of the super consciousness which was above the mind. Sri Aurobindo also became aware of a divine inner guidance that was never to leave him. From this divine source he was given an Adesh 'inner command' that henceforth he should not worry about politics. India would gain her independence in due course but this would be achieved by others. The task for Sri Aurobindo was the renewal of 'sanatana dharma, the eternal religion.' To pursue this spiritual task it was necessary for Sri Aurobindo to leave the political arena. In his own words Sri Aurobindo said of his mission.

'We must return and seek the sources of life and strength within ourselves... It is the spiritual revolution we foresee and the material is only its shadow and reflex.' Sri Aurobindo's style varies from the wit and humor of his letters to the austere tone and architectonic structure of his philosophical texts. Whereas spiritual experience and enlightenment are transcribed in classical prose, his experimental poetry is expressed through the mantra, which is a kind of language that aims to capture different states of consciousness or what he defines as the "overmental" verse of the future poetry.

Sri Aurobindo was a rare combination of poet, philosopher, writer and spiritual Master. During his time in Pondicherry he wrote several books explaining his view on Yoga and spirituality. His most notable exposition was perhaps in 'The Life Divine' which is a comprehensive explanation of his integral yoga. Sri Aurobindo

was also a noted poet. Many of his poems are vivid and soulful portrayals of his supramental experiences. For example,

Only the illimitable Permanent
Is here. A Peace stupendous, featureless, still.
Replaces all, – what once was I, in It
A silent unnamed emptiness content
Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.

Sri Aurobindo taught that the different world religions were right in their own way. However Sri Aurobindo also stated that there was no need to repeat what had happened in the past. The world is in continuous evolution and there is a need to bring down a higher truth with each age. Continuing the vision of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo sought to combine the best from Eastern spirituality and Western materialism.

"I saw them cross the twilight of an age
The sun-eyed children of a marvelous dawn...
The massive barrier-breakers of the world..
The architects of immortality...
Bodies made beautiful by the Spirit's light,
Carrying the magic word, the mystic fire,
Carrying the Dionysian cup of joy.. "

All these "world-movements" have begun, though none of them has been perfectly accomplished in the direction Sri Aurobindo envisaged. In the long run, it seems likely that Sri Aurobindo will be remembered mainly for his role in the fifth movement, on which he worked incessantly during the last 40 years of his life. Just before his death in 1950, he still wrote a few essays for a newly started Ashram Journal on the transitional period between our present state and the supramental stage he envisaged for the future. He also completed the revision of the first part of The Synthesis of Yoga and the whole of Savitri. The Mother continued his work till her own passing in 1973 at the age of 95. The Ashram and the international township, Auroville, which she started in 1968, still exist and continue to develop as creative spiritual communities.

The view of Vivekananda on the diversity of religious expressions in India was greatly admired and reiterated by Sri Aurobindo. The European mind 'cherished the aggressive and quite illogical' idea of a single religion for all mankind...and so it considered the endless variety of Indian philosophy and religion as not only bewildering and wearisome but also useless. But Vivekananda came and asserted not only the unity of all religions based on Ramakrishna's realisations, but also that this unity must necessarily express itself in an increasing variety of forms. Sri Aurobindo own realisations underscored this fact. Along with Vivekananda he asserted that the perfect state of the unity of all religions would come when each man had his own religion for spiritual upliftment suited to his nature.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Annie Besant and Sri Aurobindo caused a social upheaval through spiritualism. Even the nationalist spirit of the freedom movement was deeply influenced by spiritualism. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Mahatma Gandhi and the other leaders of the Indian Freedom Movement derived their inspiration and motivation from the Indian spiritual philosophy. Swami Vivekananda's advent into the scene brought about an assimilation between the Indian and the Western spiritualism, philosophy and science, as well as the realities about the correlation between life and religion, materialism and mysticism, humanity and Godhood. It is therefore predictable that his creative energy would reflect his ideals, beliefs and intuitions. No wonder his immense creative energy was spontaneously channelized occasionally in the form of poetry. His poetry was what Sri Aurobindo calls as 'intuitive poetry.'

First, his poems are not easily available to readers; and secondly, short citations may not be adequate to visualise the magnitude of the

Swami's thought and style. Now let us look at a few selections from Swami Vivekananda's poems. A sensible reader can easily correlate the idea of "intuitive poetry" with the two excerpts that follow.

'All nature wear one angry frown,
To crush you out - still know, my soul,
You are Divine. March on and on,
Nor right nor left but to the goal.
Nor angel I, nor man, nor brute,
Nor body, mind, nor he nor she,
The books do stop in wonder mute
To tell my nature; I am He.

A true poet, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a seer, one who can transcend all conventional stereotypes to ascend to the level of a visionary, where the idea of "tat sat" is realised. Sri Aurobindo goes on to say that Vivekananda came to assert that in every one of the three hundred million men and women, of India at the time, from the Raja on his throne to the coolie at his labour, from the Brahmin absorbed in his Sandhya to the Pariah walking shunned of men, God Liveth. "We are all gods and creators, because the energy of God is within us and all life is creation".

Swami Vivekananda's popular Chicago speech delivered at the 'Parliament of the World's Religions'. He played an important role in introducing Hinduism to the western world. His historic speech in Chicago on September 1893 delivered with crisp logic and scientific insight attracted major attention. The speech earned him a two-minute standing ovation from the present dignitaries and the title of 'the cyclonic monk of India'. Though the speech was delivered 125 years ago it is relevant even today. Here are some impressive lessons from the famous speech.

- **Love for all religion-** The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his

individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

- **Being patriotic-** We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.
- **Analysis of religions-** I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world.
- **Acquaintance with science-** The Vedas teach us that creation is without beginning or end. Science is said to have proved that the sum total of cosmic energy is always the same.
- **Goal of science-** Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal.
- **Faith in god-** Whatever may be the position of philosophy, whatever may be the position of metaphysics, so long as there is such a thing as death in the world, so long as there is such a thing as weakness in the human heart, so long as there is a cry going out of the heart of man in his very weakness, there shall be a faith in God.

Like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo too had the vision that India must be reborn, because “in her rebirth is the future of the world”. With Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo too held that India has the undisputed right to extend spiritual sway over the world. It may not be an exaggeration to conclude that the poetry of Swami Vivekananda attains that lofty height of the mantra --“the inspired rhythmic word”, which is not meant for mere aesthetic delight of the reader but for the quest of the divinity within one’s own self, to borrow Sri Aurobindo’s words again, to realise God as “the Self of all things and beings, the Life of the universe, the Divinity

in man.” This must not of course be understood as some sort of spiritual imperialism...it is the reading of India’s destiny based on deep introspection.

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