Abstract:
In this article the main focus is on the use of the methods of Reason and Intuition in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. This article includes references to the Upanisads, Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta for the justification of the focus area. The paper also discusses Sri Aurobindo’s epistemological position in his integral philosophy, with special emphasis on Reason and Intuition.

1. Introduction

Philosophy is a kind of enquiry and every enquiry is reason-based, having a starting point and an end in view. In order to reach the goal or end enquiry must have a well-defined method to pursue. In Western Philosophy it is reason as such. In Indian Philosophy it is also a sort of reason. In short, the method of philosophy is always and everywhere reason and reason only. And this is what primarily distinguishes philosophy from science, the method of which is, to start with, observation and, experiment, and whatever reason science applies to discover laws of nature is based on those instruments, observation and experiment.

In Science, reason follows the dictates of observation and experiment, deduces consequences out of them, only to be verified by further observation and experiment. Only the formal science of mathematics is an exception to this general rule. It is out and out an exact science, where analytical reason reigns supreme starting from a limited number of actions and postulates. It weaves an intricate corpus of discipline consisting of highly abstract entities like numbers, figures and shapes of diverse forms. Mathematical reasoning is mostly deductive, partly intuitive in character. Mathematics supplies the basic methodological tools to natural sciences, based on observation and experiment.

Philosophy is akin to mathematics as regards its essential reasoning potentials. But it differs from mathematics in that it abjures any kind of presumption, carefully and meticulously avoids making any assumptions in the forms of actions and postulates. Strangely speaking, it comes closer to natural sciences, in so far as it takes observation, Pratyaksha or perception as its initial point of departure of several means of valid knowledge or pramanas. Philosophy takes pratyaksha as stronger than anything else including inference or Anumana, etc. Unlike natural science, again, philosophy does not make reason serve the interests of observational and experimental verdicts, even upto an extent. Philosophical reasoning is always vigilant about its strongest pramanas, pratyakshas, pitfalls. Philosophy tries to make maximum use of pratyaksha without getting itself ensnared by its tentacles. In Indian Philosophy, there is a measure for every other measure-inference, correcting errors of perception, or vice versa, upamana and analogical reasoning supporting or negating inference or perception and vice versa and so on. Indian philosophy is a rich commonwealth of pramanas, several methods of enquiry which are mutually supportive or corrective of one another. This is nowhere to be seen. Herein lies the excellence of the Indian philosophical method of enquiry.

The paper studies two most important methods of philosophical enquiry, especially of Indian philosophy - Reason and Intuition, of an eminent Indian thinker, Sri Aurobindo. These two methods not only engaged the minds of the foremost Indian thinkers of the past, but they have also been given a fairly important place by the great Indian thinkers of this century. The paper makes an attempt to study the concepts of Reason and Intuition as two important methods of philosophical enquiry conceived and developed by the Indian philosophers of the twentieth century, especially, Sri Aurobindo.
2. Reason and Intuition in Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy and a Comparative Study of Indian Philosophical Systems

Indian philosophers of this century have mainly expounded and developed the philosophy of the Vedanta in their own ways. Though they accept the metaphysical doctrines of the Vedanta, absolutistic as well as theistic, yet one finds a good deal of originality in their world views. There seems to be a distinct change in their views concerning man’s life in the world, the secular and spiritual problems of life, his aspiration and destiny. One finds a good deal of originality and freshness in their approach to these problems. It can be clearly perceived in the philosophies of Sri Aurobindo.

Indian philosophical thought has entered a new era in the present times. The eminent thinkers have generally made serious and sustained attempts to re-interpret the great Indian philosophical tradition of the past and to give a new value concerning man’s ethical, social and religious life and his ultimate destiny. Thus they cannot simply be called the interpreters of the past thinkers. Thinkers like Sri Aurobindo, K.C Bhattacharya, R.N Tagore, Radhakrishnan and others show a profound impact of the great stream of Western thought in the development of their philosophical systems and views on the different methods of philosophical enquiry. On the other hand, they are also shaped and moulded under the influence of the great idealistic tradition of the West. Thinkers like Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Radhakrishnan also show considerable influence of modern evolutionary philosophy in the development of their thought. Thus, the twentieth century Indian philosophy presents a happy confluence of the two great philosophical traditions of the world, namely, of India and the West. Though the philosophical systems of Sri Aurobindo, K.C Bhattacharya, Radhakrishnan and other twentieth century Indian thinkers are largely founded on the ancient Vedantic thought, yet they show distinct originality and freshness in respect of their methodology and their approach to the problem of man’s life, world existence and ultimate reality. This freshness and originality is distinctive in Sri Aurobindo’s treatment of the concepts Reason and Intuition as distinct methods of philosophical enquiry.

Sri Aurobindo lays emphasis upon Intuition and Reason, in relation to the fundamental Reality and Man. He proposes a critical and systematic study of the two most important sources of knowledge, also called, methods of philosophy, namely, Reason and Intuition. It is true that Intuition has not been overtly recognized as a source of knowledge or a method of philosophical enquiry. But, the concept of perception in Nyaya Vaisesika for example, includes Yogaja Pratyaksa that is a direct form of cognition going beyond ordinary or Laukika Pratyaksa which is as well a method of philosophy. Similarly, the pramanya of Sabda Jnana also involves at a deeper level the validity of the Vedas. There is a tradition according to which the Vedic truths were directly known by the sages. This also comes very near to what Sri Aurobindo means by intuition. However, in Indian philosophy we do not find any argument that is based on the authority of the intuitive knowledge as a valid method of philosophy. The same, however, applies to Sri Aurobindo. He uses arguments in the usual sense in order to establish the limits of Reason and the possibility of Intuition, although his mode of presentation is not overtly argumentative.

Etymologically, the term ‘Reason’ is derived from ‘ratio’. It means relation. “In the most generalized sense of all, Reason might be defined as the relational element in intelligence…” (Hastings, 1908). Senses can apprehend ‘A’ and ‘B’ separately. Reason alone can relate them. This is a method. Philosophical thinking starts at the level of reflection, at the level of what is rationally thought as to the problems of life and reality. The distinction between knowledge and error is possible only at the level of reflective consciousness. It is only at this level that one can determine the nature of knowledge and distinguish the different sources of knowledge. Sense experience, Reason and Intuition are generally treated as different sources of knowledge. These are the various methods of philosophical enquiry. As Radhakrishnan puts it, “while all varieties of cognitive experience result in a knowledge of the real, it is produced in three ways, which are sense experience, discursive Reasoning and intuitive apprehension” (Radhakrishnan, 1998).

Those who are in favour of the view that sense perception is a source of knowledge which can be relied upon, envisage a counterview that there are many evidences which go against the validity of sense perception as a source of knowledge. Hence there are many philosophers or thinkers who lay weightage upon the maximum utility of what is known rationally or reflectively. But here also, if we adopt the attitude of impartiality, we come to find that reason or rational knowledge has also its limitations in so far as its fullest applicability in the sphere of knowledge, both sensuous and non-sensuous, is concerned. In that case, what comes as a reliable source of knowledge or as a sure method of knowledge is called intuitional knowledge or intuition as a method of knowledge. Many philosophers are there who cast their vote in favour of both reason and intuition as methods of knowledge.

As we know there are many western thinkers who put their trust in Intuition absolutely, that is, beyond intuition there cannot be anything which can be regarded as a superior method in relation to what are called Reality and man. But here at this juncture Sri Aurobindo differs from them when he states that even intuition has its own limitations, that is, for him intuition as a method cannot give us the absolute knowledge of the Reality, although at the level of intuition we can have glimpses of Reality. The limitations of both Reason and Intuition can be best apprehended if we consider the whole thing from the point of view of the level of consciousness - the level which starts from Spirit to Matter, or from Matter to Spirit. Whatever way we follow each point of consciousness is taken as a level of consciousness and these levels of consciousness give us an impression of a hierarchical process starting from the lowest to the highest. Thus, at the level of mental consciousness we get what is called Reason. And this Reason has its limitations as we ascend still higher and reach another level of consciousness at which we get intuition as another method of knowledge. But intuition here is not the highest one since there are levels higher than the intuitive level, as we have said already that at the level of intuition we get glimpses of the Reality, but the whole of the Reality can be visioned or experienced at the highest level of consciousness, at the level of Divine Gnosis or the Supramental level.

The concepts of Reason and Intuition as methods of philosophical enquiry also engaged the attention of the seers of
the Upanisads. The Upanasadic seers seem to have a very close understanding and appreciation of the nature of Reason and Intuition as the two vital methods of philosophy. They seem to be keenly conscious of the limitations of reason and of its finitude. Reason, according to them, cannot comprehend the Real or the Absolute. The Real, according to the Taittiriyaka Upanisad, is that “from which all speech with the mind turns away unable to reach it” (Swami, 1921). The knowledge or realization of Reality cannot be attained by reason. Reason gives us imperfect and partial picture of reality. The Upanisads also make a distinction between the para and aparida vidya, the higher and the lower knowledge. The higher knowledge is intuitive whereas the lower knowledge is rational. Reason can know only the world and not the Absolute Brahman. Man can attain unity with Brahman only when he transcends the level of Reason and attains spiritual experience or direct intuitive consciousness. This is the method of Upanisad to attain the knowledge of the Absolute.

These two methods, namely, Reason and Intuition also figure prominently in Buddhism. The Buddhist philosophers make a distinction between buddhi and prajna. The madhyamika school of Buddhism propounds the conception of two truths, namely, Samvritti Satya or empirical truth and Paramartha Satya or ultimate truth. The Samvritti Satya is the truth attained by Reason or Buddhi, whereas the Paramartha Satya is attained by prajna alone. Buddhi or reason gives man knowledge of the phenomenal world, whereas prajna enables him to attain the knowledge of the Real. It gives man absolute freedom from the sufferings of life.

The Advaitavada also throws a flood of light on the concepts of Reason and Intuition - as important methods of philosophical enquiry. It makes a distinction between empirical knowledge and spiritual experience. This is made clear in the doctrines of two truths propounded by the Advaita Vedanta, namely, Vyavaharika Satya and Paramartha Satya. The Vyavaharika Satya is the empirical knowledge, the knowledge of the world and it is attained by Reason. The Paramartha Satya is the knowledge of the Absolute or the unconditioned which is attained when man transcend the level of Reason and attains intuitive or spiritual experience. The Advaita Vedanta does not make any attempt to reconcile Reason and Intuition. Reason gives man knowledge of the world, whereas intuition enables him to attain oneness with Brahman. The Advaita Vedanta makes a dialectical criticism of realistic categories and shows their self-contradictory nature. It makes it clear that the Absolute or Brahman cannot be comprehended in terms of any rational concept or category. They give only the appearances of reality and not reality as it is. Thus the Advaita dialectic shows the self-contradictory nature of reason and points out to the higher dimension of consciousness called intuition which is free from all antinomies or contradictions, which are inherent in Reason. The true nature of Self and the Absolute can be revealed only by intuition. Samkara regards aparoksanubhuti as the highest source of knowledge. When intuition or aparoksanubhuti occurs, the knowledge, the knower and the known, all become one. This is the method applied in Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

The method applied by Sri Aurobindo in his philosophy, is integral. In his integral philosophy of man he points out one important feature of man’s nature. In the evolutionary scale through his process of becoming, man has proved himself to be a being of great plasticity. It is, therefore, dangerous to formulate the nature of man too narrowly. No matter whether we characterize man as ‘rational animal’, or ‘primarily economic’ our characterizations will fail to characterize man in his full import. The main principle of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy is that man is what he can be and that human existence is full of possibilities.

Being in line with the ancient Vedantic tradition, Sri Aurobindo, the Neo-Vedantin, also is of opinion that the highest object of knowledge is Brahma, the absolute reality. But, how do we know that? Here, there is a place for epistemological enquiry because if the pramana method is ignored, the prameya would hardly be intelligible. After discussing about “Human Aspiration” and “Two Negations” in The Life Divine, Sri Aurobindo devotes a full chapter on “Methods of Vedantic Knowledge” (Sri Aurobindo, 2001) as a preliminary to his metaphysical standpoint which is discussed in the later portion of his The Life Divine, and this itself is ample proof that there is an epistemological approach or method in Sri Aurobindo’s thought. Much discussion on means of knowledge, limitation of sense-knowledge, mental knowledge and intuitive knowledge is found in his philosophical works like The Life Divine, The Synthesis of Yoga etc. The concept of ‘Supramental Consciousness’, theory of ‘Integral Knowledge’ and ‘The Logic of the Infinite’ are his unique contributions to epistemological method of his philosophical enquiry. There is not only an epistemological enquiry in Sri Aurobindo, but also it is integral to his metaphysics.

The whole method of Sri Aurobindo’s epistemology is based upon some basic presuppositions.
1. All experiences are real and worthy of philosophical interpretation.
2. All possible knowledge is knowledge within the power of humanity.
3. Knowledge must be integral.

There has been much controversy among the epistemologists regarding the sources of knowledge, and this paves the way to different epistemological schools like, Empiricism, Rationalism, Transcendentalism etc. Sri Aurobindo’s integral method of knowledge overcomes all the shortcomings and defects of the above-mentioned methods. There is no place for either skepticism or agnosticism in Sri Aurobindo’s thought. According to Sri Aurobindo, all knowledge is within the power of humanity. According to him, the unknown does not remain unknowable forever unless we choose to remain in ignorance.

The role of reason and sense experience has never been ignored in Indian epistemology. The highest and the ultimate pramana has always been revelation which gives authentic knowledge of the reality paving the way for the immediate knowledge or aparoksanubhuti.

Sri Aurobindo observes, “Reason is science, it is conscious art, it is invention” (Sri Aurobindo, 2010). It can observe and arrange truths of facts. Reason is discursive but limited in nature. Its function is to analyse, delimit and deampie. It is the faculty of intelligent will. The manomaya purusa or the mental being is distinguished from animal and other creatures because he is endowed with the capacity of Reason.
The Acaryas of Vedanta, like Samkara, Madhva and others as well as their western counterparts, like Spinoza, Bradley and Bergson have regarded intuition as the supreme source of knowledge. Now, the question is, is intuition the highest source of knowledge? To Sri Aurobindo, Intuition is not the paramount source of knowledge. It occupies an intermediary and not the highest place in Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy. This indicates a change in Sri Aurobindo’s view from the traditional conceptions of Intuition as a method of philosophical enquiry.

The term ‘Intuition’ as a method of philosophy has been used in various senses. Spinoza apprehends Intuition in the transcendental sense. For Bradley, intuition is grasping of reality as a concrete system not only in its universal aspect but in its unique singularity and individuality. Bergson holds that Reason bisects and fragments the whole and distorts the essential nature of reality. Intuition penetrates deep into the heart of reality. It is not mental consciousness. It gives us direct realization. It transcends the limit of Reason.

Sri Aurobindo uses the word Intuition in a restricted sense. He divides the higher knowledge into several grades. Intuition, according to him, is superior to mind, yet it is not the highest source of knowledge. It does not give us an integral and all-embracing view of Reality. Intuitive knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, is not the highest source of knowledge or of spiritual experience. It does not comprehend Reality in all its dimensions. Such comprehension is possible only by Supramental Consciousness or integral knowledge which is superior to Intuition. Reality which is integral can be apprehended, according to him, only by integral knowledge and not by any other partial source of knowledge, whether it is sense-experience or Reason or Intuition. These are all, we see, methods of philosophical enquiry. Reason and Intuition, according to him, find their fulfilment in the Supramental or Integral Knowledge. Integral Reality can thus be realized by Integral Knowledge and this is the method followed by Sri Aurobindo in his philosophical thought.

Sri Aurobindo holds that Integral Knowledge gives an all-embracing view and comprehensive vision of Reality, whereas Intuition is not very successful. He adheres that Intuition, as viewed by the different Vedantic systems and some other systems, does not take us to the Transcendent. Intuitional Knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, is not altogether free from the limitations of mind or intellect. Intuition seems to be dominated by mind and thus fails to give us an integral view of Reality.

Some philosophers confine experience to sense experience, others to rational experience. But, according to Sri Aurobindo, in a true sense of the term, the mission of philosophy is to have integral experience of the Reality. Here differs the method of Sri Aurobindo from that of other philosophers. Sri Aurobindo maintains that Reality is not mere ‘existence’ but existence-cum-consciousness. Reality is Integral because it includes Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. In Integral Knowledge there are three steps of self-realization. The first is the discovery of the psychic entity, the second is the realization of the eternal self in all beings and the third step is to know the Divine Being who is the transcendental self. Sri Aurobindo envisages that in the course of evolution, Gnostic Being will emerge. He will know all the aspects of existence and consciousness. Reason fails to have an all-embracing view of Reality. Its approach is partial. It lacks wholeness of the philosophical truth.

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy embodies the spirit of integralism and this is a method which is absent in other philosophical theories. Its method is monistic, all inclusive and comprehensive. The more integral the experience, the more integral will be the philosophy based upon it. The integral knowledge is possessed by the Supremind. But it does not reject the knowledge obtained through other sources. Man, at the present level of existence, cannot have the all-embracing knowledge of Reality in its entirety, even on the attainment of Intuition. Intuition is also conditioned by man’s subjectivity. The fullest manifestation of knowledge is possible only when man is freed in every way from the limitation of nature and finitude. This is possible only after the descent of Supermind in man and the Supramental transformation of his entire nature. In this respect Sri Aurobindo’s conception of knowledge differs radically from the different schools of the Vedanta and the Western intuitionist philosophers.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, we must say that, Sri Aurobindo’s epistemology is integral in nature, even though it may appear to many that it is too much of an overestimation of his thought. But a sympathetic and unprejudiced understanding of his epistemology reveals the fact that there is a harmonious blend and filling up of the gap among the various methods of philosophical enquiry, like, Spiritualism, Idealism, Realism, Mysticism, Pragmatism etc. We find a kind of assimilation of different faculties of human experience in a comprehensive truth vision. Sri Aurobindo justifiably builds up an epistemology supporting his method of integral metaphysics. He does recognize the important role of the existing methods of knowledge; however, for him, though they are necessary, they are not sufficient in comprehending the multidimensional reality. We are to reach the Divine standpoint from the human standpoint which starts from below and proceeds from ignorance. In between Mind and Overmind there are some important gradations of consciousness, such as, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind and Intuition. At the summit lies the Supermind or Divine Gnosis. Here we get the multidimensional reality and this is the integral method of Sri Aurobindo which proves his excellence.

References:


