
*Received: 10th March 2022**Revised: 16th April 2022**Accepted: 25th May 2022***EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY IN CONSIDERATION WITH INTEGRAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION****AKANKSHA MISHRA, DR. ALKA MUDDGAL AND DR. NEERAJ KUMAR SHUKLA****ABSTRACT**

A comprehensive view of human transformation can only come through an absolute understanding of human nature and process of evolution. The dimension of the human personality provides the point for initiation to assess and understand their process of development. This further leads to an inquiry into what comes next and where would this development lead to? Is the development an end or a means to achieve a higher goal of attaining transcendence? The focus of every human life is to reach the pinnacle of human existence and, the doorway of same leads through the way of consciousness and spiritual evolution. It is possible that the two terminologies, evolution and development are interconnected and in a way influence each other. Spiritual evolution is the result of a conscious effort to develop one self, in other words evolution is the outcome of development. The state of mind where a human being achieves the spiritual evolution requires the needs of the mind to be fulfilled, so it is through knowledge that a being experiences integral consciousness and achieves the state of transcendence.

Keywords: Epistemological inquiry, consciousness, Integral consciousness, spiritual evolution, transcendence.

INTRODUCTION

“Every soul is destined to be perfect and every being in the end will attain the state of perfection.”

Swami Vivekananda (CWSV, 1893)

The material prosperity, possessions, credentials, academic excellence and achieving a higher social status are not adequate to meet the needs of human. The need to be satiated, inside-out and acquisition of something “more” has nudged the mankind to dig deep into knowledge. If the human existence has to evolve, it is imperative to leap towards greater heights of consciousness, the means to which can only be knowledge. From science to philosophy the mystics and academicians have discovered a great capacity in human consciousness and the potential to awaken the highest power of human mind.

It is the philosophy which helps a being to search for “what is” and helps them find answer to the real problems of life and their existence. With the advent of modern age there came a necessity to find the answers to vital questions concerning human existence, realization of necessity for higher knowledge and attainment of higher intellect. Philosophy concerns itself with art of knowing and knowledge. The term knowledge however, can be diminished to information, memory, understanding and awareness but knowing connotes to wisdom and attainment of consciousness. What comes in between the knowledge and knowing is the “mind”, there can be no mind without consciousness as mind arises out of consciousness. If one is not conscious, there can be no question of being knowledgeable or understanding. So, it follows that human consciousness is the primary source which sustains the human mind. It is the human mind which serves as an instrument to acquire higher form of knowledge, wisdom and state of consciousness (Puri, I. 1983).

Beyond the ordinary pursuits of life there lies a great mystery of deeper realities which the mankind is unknown from. There lies a higher form of reality than we perceive empirically, when a human being surpasses the state of outer reality, and proceeds towards a higher level of knowledge, it is then where a human being attains wisdom. Higher than the state of wisdom is the fully developed and aware human being, where one attains the total knowledge, which is often called “transcendental knowledge” as it transcends the human being from ordinary knowledge to the higher level of consciousness. It is at this state that a human being is completely transformed and evolved, and it is only through higher knowledge and consciousness that progress becomes conceivable. It is so often quoted by many philosophers that, the answer to all human quests lie within their own consciousness. Hence, the first and foremost need is to go within the inner self and dig deep into our own consciousness. One needs to discover the power, the source of all energies within them in order to be fully evolved and transformed (Ranganathananda, S. 1983).

The mind in a human being possesses extraordinary powers, and helps in manifesting the thoughts to actualization. There is continuity in mind, and it is not isolated or static. The mind is universal, what happens in the mind of a particular individual transcends to the others around them, it is in this way that human beings

evolve universally and not in an isolated manner. The mind, body, spirit, intellect and the spirituality continuously influences others and conversely one is influenced by them. The one and only instrument which governs the mind is knowledge. The ideal aim of all knowledge hence must be, polishing a man from core to the outside. End aim of knowledge is to acquire perfection already present or latent in every human. (CWSV, 1984).

The Consciousness Within: In Conjunction with Indian Epistemological Tradition

The position of epistemology is different in Indian tradition in comparison to the western tradition and thought. Discussion with the knowledge and problems associated with knowledge form the essential part of philosophical traditions in India.

Consciousness helps in acquiring empirical experiences in the world, the consciousness which is already there within us, within our own self and all answers must come from there. The self and the being is the totality of consciousness, almost all the system of philosophy and school of thoughts accept that perception is the valid knowledge produced by empirical experiences. However, the Indian epistemological tradition accepts six important sources of knowledge (jnana) namely, perception (pratyaksha), Inference (anumana), Verbal testimony (sabda), Comparison (upamana), Presupposition (arthapatti) and Non-apprehension (anupalabधि). In the Indian philosophy and tradition the word jnana denotes both true knowledge (prama) and false knowledge (aprama), knowledge opens the world of reality (Das Gupta S. 1975). Knowledge is the essence of self, Nyaya point of view defines three characteristic of knowledge,

- a. It defines quality (guna)
- b. It influences behavior vyavahara)
- c. It emanates consciousness (jnanatva)

The Nyaya school of thought considers that knowledge comes from perception, inference, comparison and verbal testimony and the objects of learning are self, body, sense organs, objects, intellect, mind and activity. It is through senses and mind that one gains empirical experiences. For Nyaya school of thought knowledge is the knowledge of things, i.e. knowledge gained through perception, disposition of which is already present in mind. Along the similar lines of Nyaya school of thought, the Vaisheshika philosophy also acknowledges perception, inference, comparison and verbal testimony as main sources of knowledge. It recognizes knowledge as means to find intellectual discrimination and generality in experiences. On the other hand the Mimamsa philosophy, cognition arises from impression of a priori cognition, which means a valid knowledge is innate and arises as an effect of certain cause. Validity of knowledge according to Mimamsa school of thought is called, 'svatah pramanayavada' i.e. knowledge is valid right from the time it arises and from the very conditions it arises. In other words knowledge and truth is self-evident. The highest good is the attainment of state of bliss, which gives the being liberation from all bondage. (Das Gupta S. 1975)

Knowledge is a cognitive act which helps in manifestation of perfection, the luminous light of perfection helps the human being act rationally and logically and hence becomes the means for intrinsic change. Advaita Vedanta defines knowledge as one which grows by connecting unknown with the known, mind is not a blank sheet of paper instead it holds possession of some knowledge. The ultimate aim of all knowledge is consciousness, knowledge cannot be considered to be completely acquired if it is not illumined by consciousness (Sharma, C. 2000).

Shankaracharya, who propounded the Advaita philosophy pointed out that consciousness is the only thing which is real, the nature of consciousness is similar to the absolute, existence (sat) knowledge (chit), and bliss (ananda). It is when the human being realizes the state of sat-chit-anand and is illumined by the transcendental consciousness, they realize the pure bliss and intelligence and achieve the highest level of consciousness and consequently evolve as a higher being. In this state of transcendence and spiritual evolution, where difference of mine and yours diminish and all perceptions of multiplicity end. (Mohanty. J.N. 1979).

Ramanuja, who propounded the Vishishtadvaita philosophy explicated that consciousness is an attribute and an entity in itself. One cannot experience consciousness if one's mind is veiled by ignorance, absolute consciousness is absolute knowledge in itself. It is this state of absolute bliss and ultimate self-realization which is termed as samadhi, nirvana or kevala in the ancient schools of thought. When one reaches the state of higher consciousness and realizes the true essence of being, there is a total annihilation of ego, the false self and is merged with highest self, which is consciousness itself. Consciousness frees the mind from ignorance and a limitation of body, sense organs, and mind which unites with the ultimate reality. (Sharma, C. 2000)

According to the Buddhist teachings the term consciousness refers to the state of self-awareness and capability to discern energies that influence lives. Buddhism also enumerates that, there are nine levels of consciousness. The first five levels are the five senses i.e., touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell, a being is aware of these five levels right from the time they are born in the physical world. The sixth consciousness is when the being learns about what is learnt from the first five levels of consciousness. The sixth level integrates all the sensory experiences. The seventh level is directed towards the inner thoughts, which deals with abstract and helps the being apprehend the unseen spiritual life. It also entails self-awareness and ability to attach and detach. The eighth level stores all thoughts, words and actions, accumulated over a lifetime. It is also the storehouse of karmic deeds, in a way it defines causes and effect of one's action. Unlike the first seven levels, which cease to exist after life, the eighth level of consciousness continues after life, as it holds the account of karmic deeds. The ninth and the final level of consciousness is the purest of all. It is the foundation for life, and is the core of all energy. It serves as the source for all mental and spiritual activity. In order to rise above and get rid of all negative karma, one needs to attain the ninth level of consciousness. (Sinar, A.R. 1984)

Jainism explicates that knowledge is the essence of soul, but is masked by the karmic particles. As one acquires knowledge, one sheds off the knowledge obscuring karmic particles. Consciousness is the primary attribute of soul, and consciousness manifests itself as knowledge. According to Jain texts and scriptures, knowledge is five kinds namely, sensory, scriptural, clairvoyance, telepathy and omniscience. Sensory knowledge is the knowledge acquired by perception through sensory experiences, knowledge through scriptures is acquired by understanding of verbal and written facts, clairvoyance is possessed by birth, it is the knowledge of all objects, telepathy is the knowledge one gains directly from the thoughts of others and, omniscience is acquired only by shredding all karmic particles, it is the perfect knowledge and from this perfect knowledge the soul becomes one, this is also known as 'kevala jnana'. (Sharma, C. 2000)

Integral Consciousness: Merger of Mind, Body and Spirit

"The spiritual life, proceeds directly by a change from consciousness, a change from the ordinary consciousness, ignorant and separated from its true self and from God to a greater consciousness in which one finds one's true being and comes first into direct and living contact and then into union with the Divine."

(Sri Aurobindo, Synthesis of Yoga 1971)

Knowledge encompasses integrated development of the human being, the aim of all knowledge acquisition must be comprehensive and integrated development of the being, and must enable them to be the best they can be. The Indian school of thought emphasize on synchronous relationship between body, mind and spirit, as mind defines the actions of body, and the spirit guides every action of the mind and body and the body acts as an instrument for actions of mind and spirit. Consciousness is an idea which is not static, but continues to evolve. As, a being evolves and develops since childhood, the sense of values also evolves and leads to trajectory of self-realization with attaining a higher level of truth. The process of gaining higher consciousness also instigates a change in thought, feelings, sense of self and behavior, and this process continues till the being realizes the integral oneness with the universe. As described by the Indian philosophers, the mind is in a state of constant activity, manas is capable of reflecting the light of absolute consciousness, which appears as chetna. In fairness it can be noted that, consciousness is predominantly a form of self-awareness. Manas or mind mediates between the self and the senses, and in turn affects the empirical experiences of the being (Kak, S. 2008).

The consciousness within is the creator of all empirical experiences, everything a being perceives is experienced by the consciousness within them. Hence to achieve complete consciousness and to evolve one must realize the consciousness within the physical body. Body and sense organs becomes the instrument of consciousness and a gateway to emanate that consciousness to the outer world. The 'self' is the totality of consciousness, the total consciousness individuates into different parts- spirit, body and mind. Body is the foundation for life and serves as a means for action, the divine spirit resides within the body. Hence, it is a moral imperative to keep the body a pure shrine for divine. It is then, the duty of mind to keep a watch on actions of the body and ensure control over senses. All senses must aim at self-transformation to reach the supreme goal of life which is to achieve supreme consciousness and experience spiritual evolution. The human body is the chariot and the sense organs are horses, the mind is the reigns and the intellect is the charioteer. It is the sense organs drives help in driving the mind, but also depend on the firmness of mind and, the spirit serves as the guiding light for the mind and the body. Spirit is connected with the divine, it is pure, absolute and eternal. (Puri, I. 1983).

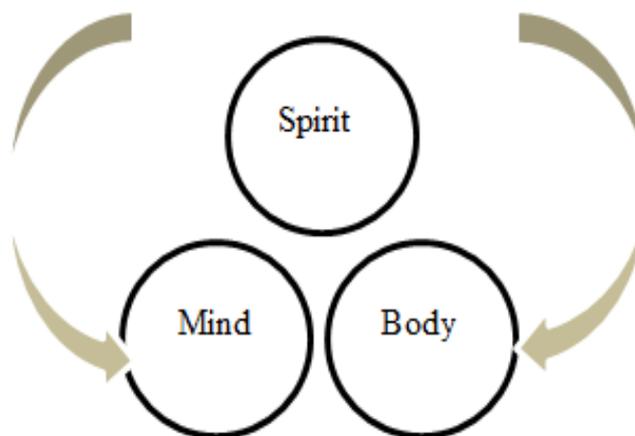


Figure 1: Consciousness through unity of mind, body and spirit.

A synchronous connection between body, mind and spirit helps in attainment of happiness, peace and bliss, it paves the way for liberation from the karmic bondages and develops serenity of mind. One is enlightened after being free from all desires of mind, feels the satisfaction in the eternal being. This state denotes the pure transcendental consciousness and equanimity, the being becomes “sthiti-prajna”. (Bhagvada Gita, 2.55)

“Oneness of body mind and spirit emanates the eternal oneness” (Bhagvada Gita).

The state of Integral consciousness where body, mind and spirit align together, is the state of transcendence and the state of mind goes beyond the physical realm to the spiritual realm. In the spiritual real, the barrier of “individuation” diminishes and the being is transcended to a “universal being”, this state also entails “totality”.

Sri Aurobindo elucidated that the one and only means to reach a higher level of consciousness is Yoga. The integral yoga aims at achieving the state of liberation and transcendence, it transforms the entire being. Yoga is a systematic effort towards perfection of self, it enables a being to realize the latent potentiality in them. Yoga for Aurobindo is the only means to realize the universal self and the source for inherent oneness. It brings forth an awareness of the divine existence and integrates the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of the being to manifest the divine. Integral Yoga is not limited to the boundaries of being a physical exercise, it is instead “sadhana”, a methodical effort towards self-perfection. It unites the infinite to the finite and progresses temporal into the transcendent. (Ghosh, A. 1971)

The perfection of body must be the ultimate aim of human life, body serves as an instrument for the perfection whereas, mind controls the actions of body for fulfilling the aim of perfection. A divine life implies necessarily union of the three ends of existence, body, mind and spirit to reach the supramental consciousness (Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, 1997).

Spiritual Evolution: The Supramental Consciousness and Supermind in Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy

Sri Aurobindo saw evolution as an ongoing process of evolution of consciousness, for the evolutionary consciousness he based himself on Vedanta view of consciousness, which entails that consciousness is pervasive and it manifests as range of higher gradations of consciousness. The main philosophical work of Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* engages with the imperative urge of progress in human, the yearning for freedom and perfection. The supramental consciousness implies a global vision, the mind connects everything with a single beam and sees everything as unitary and universal. At the level of supramental consciousness, the mind sees the wholeness in things and connects the different aspect in a being. Each thing, each being and each force on this physical plane is moving towards absolute, “sat-chit-ananda”. (Ghosh, A. 1971)

The communion with the divine requires a methodical transformation into the being. The holy trinity of “sat-chit-anand” is not three different factors but on single sum “sachidananda”. The human soul exists on three levels i.e., Individual, universal and transcendental, it is only when the individual soul realizes its universal existence it can progress towards the transcendental level and acquire supramental consciousness. The experience of supramental consciousness is infinite, lived in as being in an infinite state of ‘ananda’, it is the manifestation of the ultimate truth and aim of existence. It is only through evolution that one can experience this transformation, it envisages an evolution from human imperfection and ignorance into a greater truth and spirit. The spirit descends from the transcendental consciousness, pre-exists in the vessel of body and then emanates from that vessel. (Ghosh, A. 1971)

Spiritual evolution is a progressive unfolding of the divine, where spirit is the supreme reality, source of creation and ultimately evolution. The whole purpose of spiritual evolution is the manifestation of "sachidananda", the triune principle of transcendent and infinite existence, supramental consciousness and bliss. It is an integration of being and becoming, it encompasses the spirit which evolves into supramental consciousness and the supramental consciousness then evolves to the supermind. Sri Aurobindo talks about evolution in connection to involution, in other terms involution is a necessary condition of evolution. Hence spiritual evolution can then be understood as the return of the spirit to itself, it reaches the farthest limit of self-projection and then comes back to itself, and the coming back of the spirit denotes evolution. This cycle of the divine descending to the spirit of the being and spirit being one with the divine continues till it the spirit amalgamates with the absolute and reaches the highest stage, the ultimate reality of "sachidananda". The process of evolution is ascent of spirit to the divine consciousness and involution is the descent of divine into the spirit. Ascent or evolution is only possible when there has been a descent or involution of the divine into the spirit (Barnard, A. 2005).

"All evolution is in essence a heightening of the force of consciousness in the manifest being so that it may be raised into greater intensity of what is still un-manifest, from matter into life, from life into mind, from the mind into the spirit"

(Sri Aurobindo, 1971)

The spiritual evolution is not merely an ascent from a lower to the higher state, instead it encompasses an integration of the higher consciousness to the inner consciousness at lower level. The supramental consciousness that is engrained in the mind is transmitted to the matter for a complete transformation. This process of progressive and transformative evolution culminates into supramental consciousness, which is referred as supermind (Deconick, A. 2013). The supermind becomes the intermediary between the absolute and the being and it is through this that "sachidananda" manifests the indivisible unity with the divine.

CONCLUSION

Human being and spirit is in a state of continuous evolution, the question which arises here isn't the human being already evolved? And, isn't the spirit or soul eternal, how can it evolve? Sri Aurobindo gives a very coherent vision of evolution, he refers that evolutionary process is the basis of all. It is through knowledge that one is enlightened and the mind which is veiled by ignorance reaches a conscious state. Consciousness for Aurobindo carries the quintessence of the qualities of the absolute. The mind essentially connotes the part of being which engages with cognition and intellect, with ideas and perception, with reaction and thought. Mind is an instrument of analysis and synthesis, mind in its origin is the principle of consciousness, an instrument or sub-ordinate power of the supermind (Huppés, N. 2001).

Mind is capable of progressing towards supreme consciousness and can converse into the next hierarchical level into a "higher mind". The higher mind is the first plane of spiritual consciousness, at this stature the one becomes closely aware of the innate oneness in their existence. The supramental consciousness is the greater force and illumined, it possesses a higher form of reason and intellect. Consciousness is always free from all ignorance and it possesses the divine omnipotence. The attainment of this supramental consciousness entails that human being goes through perpetual process of evolution and constantly strives to attain perfection. (Huppés, N. 2001).

The Indian tradition of epistemology in several aspects provides a more sophisticated and effective approach towards knowledge and the ultimate goal of life. It implies that there is an internal coherence, comprehensiveness and intricacy in all existing entities, and it is through knowledge that one realizes this inherent oneness in their existence. The Indian tradition has realized that consciousness is a state of mind which exists on different planes and is far more perceptive, effective and harmonious than the ordinary state of mind. Sri Aurobindo located the secret of human knowledge in the depths of being and their existence, knowledge for him started with the knowledge of inner self and ends with the knowledge of the outside world and the universality in the existence of being. As, the kind reaches the plan of supramental consciousness there comes a feeling of equanimity and the mind becomes free from all judgments. (Ghosh, A. 1993)

The state of spiritual evolution requires purification of mind from the shackles of ignorance, desires and obstacles. It is only through knowledge that the being can silence the mind, and achieve a calm state of mind isolated from the defects of material world (Subbiondo, J, 2006). Sri Aurobindo mentioned three conditions to create a subtle space to enter the supramental consciousness, Freedom from the senses, keeping it detached from the defects of the material world and engaging the senses to create a subtle perception to enter supramental consciousness.

Freedom from the past and future and, maintaining perfect equanimity, detachment and inner calm.

Silencing the mind, enter into the centre of consciousness, a realm of silence that is deep within the mind (Ghosh, A. 1997).

The Integral consciousness is unitary, comprehensive and impersonal, it possesses a sense of perfection, unity and truth which increases as the level of consciousness goes higher. Epistemological tradition in the Indian school of thought relies on the foundation of systematic development of knowledge and harmony (Kramer, M. 2010). It is through a harmonious and integral development that the being is able to acquire a higher state of consciousness and transcends towards spiritual evolution. Spiritual evolution can only be experienced with equanimity, knowledge, mastery over harmony and through the light of consciousness.

DECLARATIONS

1. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.
2. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.
3. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.
4. The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.
5. The submitted work is original and has not been submitted or published anywhere else.
6. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.
7. The participant has consented to the publication of this work.

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