



The Relevance of Spiritual Humanism in the Contemporary World: Insights from Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi

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Abstract

The contemporary world is marked by rapid technological advancement, materialism, social fragmentation, environmental crises, violence, and a growing sense of psychological insecurity. In this context, spiritual humanism offers an alternative framework that integrates human dignity, ethical responsibility, inner development, and universal compassion. The present study examines the contemporary relevance of spiritual humanism through the philosophical insights of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi. Sri Aurobindo's vision of spiritual evolution emphasizes the transformation of human consciousness and the emergence of a higher humanity. Tagore connects spirituality with universal humanism, freedom, harmony, and the unity of humanity with nature. Acharya Tulsi's philosophy, particularly through Anuvrat, emphasizes self-discipline, moral conduct, non-violence, and responsible citizenship. A comparative examination of their ideas demonstrates that spiritual humanism can provide meaningful responses to contemporary challenges by balancing material progress with moral and spiritual development. The study argues that their teachings remain significant for creating a more compassionate, peaceful, sustainable, and ethically responsible society.

Keywords: Spiritual Humanism, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Acharya Tulsi, Spirituality, Human Values, Ethics, Non-violence, Contemporary Society, Human Consciousness

1. Introduction and Conceptual Framework of Spiritual Humanism

The contemporary world is characterized by unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, economic globalization, rapid communication, and expanding material opportunities. Yet, alongside these developments, humanity continues to experience violence, social fragmentation, ecological degradation, intolerance, consumerism, psychological alienation, and a weakening of ethical responsibility. The advancement of external civilization has not necessarily been accompanied by a corresponding advancement of inner consciousness and moral sensitivity. This contradiction makes it necessary to reconsider the relationship between



material progress and human well-being. In this context, spiritual humanism emerges as an important philosophical and ethical framework because it attempts to bring together the values of human dignity, moral responsibility, inner development, compassion, and universal human unity. Rather than rejecting reason, science, or material progress, spiritual humanism seeks to place them within a broader understanding of human existence in which the development of the individual is connected with the welfare of society and the larger living world. Such an approach becomes particularly significant when contemporary civilization increasingly measures progress through technological efficiency, economic productivity, and material consumption while questions of meaning, ethical responsibility, and human connectedness remain insufficiently addressed.

The concept of spiritual humanism has developed through the intersection of two major intellectual orientations: humanism and spirituality. Humanism places human dignity, freedom, rationality, moral agency, and the value of human life at the centre of philosophical reflection, while spirituality concerns the deeper dimensions of existence, consciousness, self-knowledge, ethical transformation, and the individual's relationship with the larger reality. Spiritual humanism therefore does not simply mean the religious interpretation of humanity; rather, it represents an attempt to understand human beings as moral, conscious, and potentially self-transforming beings. In this sense, spirituality provides humanism with an inward and ethical dimension, while humanism gives spirituality a social and practical orientation. The human being is not viewed merely as a biological or economic entity but as a being capable of compassion, self-discipline, creativity, moral choice, and consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's philosophical thought is particularly relevant to this understanding because he regards humanity not as the final stage of evolution but as a transitional stage toward a higher consciousness. In *The Life Divine*, he argues that "Man is a transitional being; he is not final" (Sri Aurobindo 6). This conception expands the meaning of humanism by connecting human development with spiritual evolution.

In this broader context, spiritual humanism can be understood as a synthesis of inner transformation and social responsibility. It begins with the recognition that many social problems have an ethical and psychological dimension and that sustainable social change requires more than external institutions. The transformation of consciousness, however, cannot remain confined to individual spiritual experience. It must find expression in relationships, social institutions, ecological responsibility, public conduct, and collective life. This is where the complementary perspectives of Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi become particularly valuable. Sri Aurobindo provides a vision of evolutionary transformation in which human consciousness moves toward a higher stage of existence; Tagore develops a humanistic spirituality grounded in freedom, universal fellowship, creativity, and harmony with nature; and Acharya Tulsi translates spirituality into a practical ethical programme centred on self-discipline, non-violence, and responsible conduct. Although their philosophical approaches differ, all three challenge the reduction of human life to material achievement and emphasize the possibility of a more integrated human existence.



The significance of spiritual humanism in the contemporary world therefore lies not in its rejection of modernity but in its attempt to humanize modernity. Scientific knowledge, technology, economic development, and democratic institutions remain indispensable to contemporary civilization, but their benefits depend upon the ethical consciousness with which they are employed. Spiritual humanism calls for a model of development in which external progress is accompanied by inner maturity, where freedom is balanced by responsibility, where individual advancement is connected with social welfare, and where humanity recognizes its relationship with the natural world. In this respect, the philosophical insights of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi provide three complementary pathways toward rethinking human development. Their ideas collectively suggest that the deepest crisis of the contemporary world is not simply technological, economic, or political; it is also a crisis of values and consciousness. Addressing this crisis requires the cultivation of human beings who are not only knowledgeable and technologically capable but also ethically responsible, spiritually aware, compassionate, and committed to the welfare of others. Spiritual humanism, understood in this comprehensive sense, thus remains a significant philosophical resource for imagining a more peaceful, humane, and sustainable future.

2. Sri Aurobindo's Vision of Spiritual Humanism

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy offers one of the most comprehensive Indian approaches to the relationship between spirituality, human development, and the future of civilization. His vision of spiritual humanism is based on the conviction that human beings are not merely rational, social, or biological entities but participants in an ongoing process of spiritual evolution. Unlike forms of humanism that focus primarily upon the intellectual, political, or material emancipation of the individual, Sri Aurobindo places consciousness at the centre of human development. For him, the present human condition represents a transitional stage in a larger evolutionary movement. Humanity has achieved considerable intellectual and technological power, but its mental consciousness remains incomplete and conflicted. The next stage of development, therefore, requires an evolution of consciousness capable of transforming human nature itself. As he states in *The Life Divine*, "Man is a transitional being; he is not final" (Sri Aurobindo 6). This proposition provides the philosophical foundation of his spiritual humanism: human beings possess not only an achieved nature but also a potential nature, and the realization of that potential constitutes an important dimension of human existence.

Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolution differs significantly from an exclusively biological interpretation of evolutionary development. While biological evolution explains the emergence and adaptation of physical life, Sri Aurobindo argues that the appearance of consciousness introduces another dimension into the evolutionary process. Matter develops into life, life into mind, and mind points toward a higher spiritual consciousness. In this evolutionary movement, human beings occupy a distinctive position because they possess the capacity to become conscious participants in their own transformation. The human mind, according to Sri Aurobindo, is not the final destination of evolution. It is an intermediate stage that can become the basis for a



higher form of consciousness. He consequently interprets the human crisis not simply as a failure of social institutions but as an indication of the limitations of the present mental stage of humanity. In *The Life Divine*, he describes evolution as an emergence of consciousness from apparently unconscious matter and suggests that the evolutionary process ultimately points toward the manifestation of a higher spiritual reality (Sri Aurobindo 11–16). Spiritual humanism thus acquires an evolutionary dimension in his thought: to be human is not merely to possess certain characteristics but to participate in the continuing development of consciousness.

This evolutionary understanding provides the philosophical basis for Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on the transformation of human nature. Human beings are capable of reason, creativity, compassion, and moral reflection, but they are also affected by egoism, desire, fear, competition, violence, and ignorance. External institutions can regulate some of these tendencies, but lasting transformation requires a deeper change in consciousness. Sri Aurobindo therefore does not regard spirituality as an escape from worldly existence. Instead, spirituality becomes a means through which life itself can be transformed. The objective is not to abandon the material world but to bring a higher consciousness into it. In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he explains that the spiritual path can involve the transformation of the whole nature of the individual rather than merely the attainment of an inward experience (Sri Aurobindo 23–25). This comprehensive orientation distinguishes his philosophy from approaches that treat spirituality and worldly life as fundamentally opposed domains.

The concept of Integral Yoga occupies a central position in this transformative philosophy. Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga seeks the development of the whole human personality—physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual—rather than the cultivation of only one dimension of existence. The aim is not simply liberation from worldly suffering but the progressive transformation of the individual and the manifestation of a higher consciousness in life. The individual must therefore work upon desires, emotions, thoughts, habits, and actions while simultaneously opening consciousness to a deeper spiritual reality. In this process, self-knowledge and self-discipline become essential. Integral Yoga is consequently not limited to formal religious practices; it is a way of transforming ordinary life through greater awareness and conscious action. Sri Aurobindo describes Yoga as a means of “union” with the Divine and emphasizes that the integral path seeks to bring the spiritual into all aspects of human existence (Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga* 5–8). Such an approach has considerable relevance to contemporary humanism because it does not reject worldly responsibilities. Instead, it seeks to make human activity itself an instrument of spiritual development.

The transformative character of Integral Yoga also changes the meaning of freedom. In a predominantly modern political understanding, freedom is frequently interpreted as the ability to make individual choices without external interference. Sri Aurobindo's conception is deeper because genuine freedom involves mastery over the forces within oneself. An individual dominated by uncontrolled desire, fear, anger, social conditioning, or material ambition may possess external freedom but remain inwardly unfree. Spiritual development therefore involves a



movement from unconscious reaction toward conscious self-mastery. This dimension of freedom has particular significance in a contemporary culture increasingly shaped by advertising, digital platforms, consumer impulses, and algorithmic influence. The ability to choose consciously becomes more difficult when desires are continuously stimulated and attention is constantly captured. Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on inner mastery offers a philosophical response to this condition by suggesting that human freedom depends not merely upon external choice but upon the development of a consciousness capable of directing itself.

Individual development, however, cannot be separated from collective progress in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. His spiritual humanism does not advocate an isolated form of self-realization in which the individual withdraws from society. The transformation of the individual has implications for the transformation of collective life. Society is composed of individuals, and the quality of its institutions ultimately reflects the consciousness of those who participate in them. Political, economic, and cultural reforms are necessary, but they remain incomplete when human beings continue to reproduce domination, greed, violence, and intolerance through their everyday conduct. Sri Aurobindo therefore connects the evolution of individual consciousness with the evolution of society. In *The Human Cycle*, he examines the movement of human societies through different stages and argues that the future development of civilization requires a greater recognition of the spiritual dimension of human existence (Sri Aurobindo 1–8). Collective progress, from this perspective, cannot be measured exclusively through economic growth, political power, or technological sophistication. It must also be evaluated through the development of freedom, cooperation, ethical responsibility, and consciousness.

3. Rabindranath Tagore and the Humanistic Vision of Spirituality

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and literary thought occupies a distinctive position in the development of spiritual humanism in modern India. His understanding of spirituality is deeply connected with human freedom, universal fellowship, creativity, nature, and the ethical development of personality. Rather than conceiving spirituality as a withdrawal from worldly existence, Tagore views it as a process through which the individual discovers a deeper relationship with humanity and the world. His humanism is therefore neither exclusively secular nor narrowly religious. It emerges from an understanding of the spiritual unity underlying diverse forms of human life. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore argues that the deepest realization of human existence lies in the discovery of the "Universal Man," through which the limitations of the isolated individual self can be overcome (Tagore 20–21). This conception provides a significant foundation for spiritual humanism because it combines the dignity of the individual with a recognition of humanity as an interconnected whole. For Tagore, the purpose of civilization is not simply the accumulation of power or wealth but the progressive realization of human personality through love, freedom, creativity, and fellowship.

Tagore's conception of universal humanism is grounded in the belief that human beings possess a capacity to move beyond narrow identities and recognize their fundamental relationship with one another. He does not deny differences of culture, language, religion, nationality, or social



organization; rather, he questions the tendency to transform these differences into rigid boundaries. His vision of humanity seeks unity without uniformity. The individual becomes fully human not by abandoning his or her particular identity but by opening the self to a larger world of relationships. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore explains that the spiritual realization of humanity involves the expansion of the individual personality beyond its limited self-interest toward a universal human consciousness (Tagore 30–33). This movement from the particular to the universal is central to his spiritual humanism. Human beings are not isolated entities but participants in a larger network of relationships, and the recognition of this interconnectedness forms the basis of ethical life.

Tagore's humanism is consequently inseparable from his understanding of spiritual freedom. Freedom, in his philosophy, cannot be reduced to political independence or the absence of external restrictions. It is also an inward condition in which the individual develops the capacity to think, feel, create, and act without being imprisoned by fear, prejudice, social conditioning, or narrow self-interest. Such freedom enables the personality to realize its fullest potential. Tagore consistently opposes systems that subordinate individual creativity to mechanical conformity. In *Sadhana*, he describes the realization of the larger self as a process through which the individual transcends the limitations of the isolated ego and participates in a greater unity (Tagore, *Sadhana* 65–68). Spiritual freedom therefore involves both self-realization and self-transcendence. The individual does not become free by separating from others but by developing a consciousness capable of recognizing the freedom and dignity of others.

This conception of freedom has profound implications for the development of personality. Tagore does not view the individual merely as a social or economic unit whose value is determined by productivity. The human personality contains intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual dimensions, all of which require opportunities for development. His emphasis on creativity is particularly important because creative expression allows individuals to discover and communicate dimensions of experience that cannot be reduced to utilitarian calculations. Poetry, music, art, literature, and nature therefore occupy an important place in Tagore's understanding of human development. Creativity is not merely entertainment; it is a means through which the individual encounters beauty, develops sensitivity, and participates in a larger reality. In this respect, Tagore's humanism offers a corrective to contemporary systems that increasingly evaluate education and human capability through measurable economic outcomes alone.

4. Acharya Tulsi's Ethical and Spiritual Humanism

Acharya Tulsi occupies an important place in the modern Indian tradition of ethical and spiritual humanism because he sought to translate spiritual principles into practical guidelines for everyday individual and social life. His philosophical approach was deeply rooted in the Jain tradition, particularly in the principles of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *anekānta* (many-sidedness of reality), *aparigraha* (non-possession or limitation of possessions), self-restraint, and ethical discipline. However, his vision was not restricted to the boundaries of a particular religious community. He sought to develop a universal ethical framework capable of addressing the moral



problems of modern society. His central concern was that social transformation cannot be achieved merely through political or institutional reforms unless individuals themselves develop ethical awareness and self-discipline. This conviction provides the foundation of his spiritual humanism. For Acharya Tulsi, spirituality becomes meaningful when it transforms conduct, relationships, and social responsibility. His philosophy therefore shifts the focus from spirituality as an abstract metaphysical concern to spirituality as a practical way of living.

The philosophical foundation of Acharya Tulsi's thought lies in the recognition that the human being possesses both material and moral dimensions. Modern civilization has generated enormous material capabilities, but material progress alone cannot guarantee ethical progress. Human beings may become more technologically advanced while simultaneously becoming vulnerable to greed, violence, dishonesty, intolerance, and uncontrolled consumption. Tulsi's response to this contradiction was to emphasize inner discipline as the basis of social order. The individual must learn to regulate desires, actions, speech, and relationships before meaningful social transformation can occur. His approach does not deny the importance of external institutions; rather, it emphasizes that institutions are ultimately operated by human beings and therefore require morally responsible individuals. In this respect, his thought complements Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on inner transformation and Tagore's emphasis on the ethical expansion of personality. While Sri Aurobindo approaches transformation primarily through the evolution of consciousness and Tagore through universal human fellowship and freedom, Tulsi gives particular attention to disciplined ethical conduct as a practical instrument of transformation. The most significant contribution of Acharya Tulsi to contemporary ethical thought is undoubtedly the Anuvrat Movement, initiated in 1949. The term *Anuvrat* literally refers to "small vows" or limited vows, and the movement was designed to provide ordinary people with accessible ethical principles that could be incorporated into everyday life. Tulsi recognized that traditional spiritual disciplines could sometimes appear too demanding for people engaged in ordinary social and professional responsibilities. He therefore sought to translate the fundamental ethical values of Jainism into practical commitments suitable for people irrespective of caste, religion, occupation, gender, or social position. The Anuvrat Movement emphasized that moral reform should begin with the individual and gradually extend into society. The Anuvrat code included commitments relating to non-violence, truthfulness, honesty, restraint, and freedom from harmful social practices (Tulsi, *Anuvrat: A New Dimension of Religion*). In this sense, Anuvrat represents an important example of applied spiritual humanism because it seeks to connect inner ethical awareness with concrete behaviour.

The significance of the Anuvrat approach lies partly in its emphasis on self-discipline rather than external coercion. Laws and regulations can prohibit certain forms of behaviour, but they cannot completely transform the intentions and attitudes of individuals. A person may obey a law because of fear of punishment while continuing to possess greed, hatred, prejudice, or dishonesty. Ethical discipline, by contrast, seeks voluntary transformation. Tulsi believed that individuals should consciously regulate their conduct and accept moral responsibility for their



choices. This emphasis is especially significant in contemporary societies where the expansion of regulatory systems has not eliminated corruption, violence, exploitation, or unethical conduct. The Anuvrat approach suggests that social morality becomes more sustainable when individuals internalize ethical principles rather than merely respond to external pressure. The movement thus places responsibility at the centre of citizenship and connects spiritual practice with social life.

Non-violence constitutes one of the fundamental principles of Tulsi's ethical humanism. Drawing upon the Jain philosophical tradition, he treats non-violence not simply as abstention from physical harm but as a broader discipline involving thought, speech, and action. Violence can emerge through hatred, intolerance, exploitation, humiliation, and aggressive language as well as through physical force. Consequently, the cultivation of non-violence requires an examination of the attitudes and emotions that produce harmful behaviour. This understanding is particularly relevant in the contemporary world, where violence appears in multiple forms, ranging from armed conflicts and terrorism to communal hostility, domestic violence, cyber abuse, and hate speech. A purely legal response to such problems is insufficient unless accompanied by an ethical transformation in the attitudes of individuals and communities. Tulsi's emphasis on non-violence therefore provides a framework for developing a culture of restraint, dialogue, and mutual respect.

5. Comparative Analysis, Contemporary Relevance and Conclusion

A comparative examination of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi reveals a remarkable convergence in their understanding of the human being as more than a material, economic, or purely rational entity. Although they emerged from different intellectual and spiritual contexts and developed distinctive philosophical vocabularies, all three thinkers regarded the transformation of human life as inseparable from the development of inner consciousness, ethical responsibility, and a broader sense of human unity. Their spiritual humanism does not reject the material world or modern civilization; rather, it questions the assumption that material and technological advancement alone constitutes genuine progress. For Sri Aurobindo, the human being is an evolutionary being whose consciousness can develop toward a higher spiritual realization; for Tagore, the individual discovers fulfilment by transcending the limitations of the isolated self and realizing a universal human fellowship; and for Acharya Tulsi, the transformation of human life begins through conscious ethical discipline, self-restraint, and responsible conduct. Their approaches differ in emphasis, but their shared objective is the creation of a more complete human personality and a more humane social order. The first major common foundation of their thought is the rejection of a purely materialistic conception of human existence. All three recognize that material well-being is necessary but insufficient for human fulfilment. Sri Aurobindo regards material existence as an essential part of evolutionary life but insists that human evolution cannot end with material or mental development. His philosophy seeks an integration of matter and spirit through the transformation of consciousness (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* 8–10). Tagore similarly rejects the reduction of human beings to economic or political categories and emphasizes the spiritual, aesthetic,



creative, and relational dimensions of personality. His conception of the “Universal Man” suggests that the fulfilment of individual existence depends upon participation in a reality larger than the isolated self (Tagore 20–21). Acharya Tulsi approaches the same problem from an ethical perspective: uncontrolled material desire, possession, and consumption can weaken moral consciousness and produce social conflict. His emphasis on restraint and non-possession consequently challenges the assumption that accumulation necessarily leads to happiness (Tulsi). Thus, while their philosophical formulations differ, all three question the dominance of materialism and affirm the need for an inner dimension of human development.

A second common foundation is their emphasis on individual transformation. None of the three thinkers believes that society can be permanently transformed through external arrangements alone. Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga seeks the transformation of the whole human personality through the development of consciousness. The individual must become aware of the forces operating within the mind, emotions, desires, and actions and progressively transform them (Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* 23–25). Tagore's emphasis on freedom and self-realization similarly places the development of personality at the centre of human progress. The individual must overcome fear, narrowness, prejudice, and egoism and become capable of creative participation in the larger world. Acharya Tulsi translates this principle into a practical ethical programme through Anuvrat, encouraging individuals to undertake small but meaningful commitments relating to truth, non-violence, restraint, and responsible conduct. In this respect, their philosophies share a crucial methodological principle: social transformation must begin with the transformation of the human being.

Nevertheless, the three thinkers differ considerably in the way they understand this transformation. Sri Aurobindo's approach is primarily evolutionary and consciousness-oriented. He sees humanity as a transitional stage in an ongoing spiritual evolution and anticipates the emergence of a higher consciousness beyond the present mental condition (Sri Aurobindo 6–7). Tagore's approach is more humanistic, aesthetic, relational, and educational. His central concern is the development of a free personality capable of experiencing unity through love, creativity, nature, and cultural exchange. Acharya Tulsi's approach is more ethical, practical, and disciplinary. Rather than focusing primarily on metaphysical evolution or aesthetic realization, he concentrates upon everyday conduct and the cultivation of moral habits. These distinctions should not be interpreted as contradictions. Instead, they can be understood as three complementary dimensions of spiritual humanism: Sri Aurobindo provides the vision of transformed consciousness, Tagore provides the vision of liberated and universally connected personality, and Tulsi provides a practical ethical discipline through which spiritual values can be embodied in daily life.

The differences become particularly evident in their treatment of the relationship between spirituality and social life. Sri Aurobindo seeks the transformation of life through the descent and manifestation of higher consciousness; spirituality is therefore not an escape from society but a force capable of transforming individual and collective existence. Tagore places greater emphasis



on human relationships, freedom, creativity, and the unity of humanity with nature and the larger spiritual reality. His spirituality becomes visible through education, art, culture, love, and social fellowship. Acharya Tulsi, meanwhile, focuses on the moralization of social life through individual vows and ethical self-regulation. His Anuvrat Movement provides a practical bridge between personal spiritual aspiration and social responsibility. Thus, if Sri Aurobindo may be associated primarily with consciousness, Tagore with human fellowship and freedom, and Tulsi with ethical conduct, all three ultimately direct spirituality toward the improvement of human life.

The contemporary relevance of spiritual humanism, therefore, lies not in a rejection of modernity but in an effort to humanize it. Science and technology need not be opposed to spirituality; economic development need not be opposed to ethics; cultural identity need not be opposed to universalism; and individual freedom need not be opposed to social responsibility. The challenge is to establish a creative balance among these apparently competing dimensions. Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi collectively demonstrate that such a synthesis is philosophically possible. Their thought encourages contemporary humanity to move from mere external advancement toward a deeper conception of progress in which the quality of consciousness and character is as important as the quantity of material achievement. Ultimately, spiritual humanism offers a vision of the human being as a conscious, ethical, relational, and potentially transformative individual. It recognizes that peace begins with inner discipline, social harmony with respect for others, ecological responsibility with a transformed relationship with nature, and sustainable progress with ethical consciousness. The enduring contribution of Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Acharya Tulsi is therefore their shared insistence that the future of humanity depends upon a transformation not only of its institutions and technologies but also of its understanding of what it means to be human. In a world confronted by unprecedented challenges, their philosophies remain valuable resources for imagining a civilization grounded in dignity, freedom, compassion, moral responsibility, ecological sensitivity, and universal human fellowship.

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