The Greatness of India and Its Culture

15. The Greatness of Indian Literature – 13

The Culmination – Sri Aurobindo's Savitri

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The Spiritual Foundation and the Further Evolution of Indian Culture

"The dominant note in the Indian mind, the temperament that has been at the foundation of all its culture and originated and supported the greater part of its creative action in philosophy, religion, art and life has been, I have insisted, spiritual, intuitive and psychic: but this fundamental tendency has not excluded but rather powerfully supported a strong and rich intellectual, practical and vital activity. In the secular classical literature this activity comes very much to the front, is the prominent characteristic and puts the original spirit a little in the background. That does not mean that the spirit is changed or lost or that there is nothing psychic or intuitive in the secular poetry of the time. On the contrary all the type of the mind reflected there is of the familiar Indian character constant through every change, religio-philosophic, religio-ethical, religio-social, with all the past spiritual experience behind it and supporting it though not prominently in the front; the imagination is of the same kind that we have found in the art of the time; the frames of significant image, symbol and myth are those which have come down from the past subjected to the modifications and new developments that get their full body in the Puranas, and they have a strong psychic suggestion. The difference is that they take in the hands of these poets more of the form of a tradition well understood and worked upon by the intellect than of an original spiritual creation, and it is the intelligence that is prominent, accepting and observing established ideas and things in this frame and type and

making its critical or reproductive observation and assent vivid with the strong lines and rich colours of artistic presentation and embellishing image. The original force, the intuitive vision work most strongly now in the outward, in the sensuous, the objective, the vital aspects of existence, and it is these that in this age are being more fully taken up, brought out and made in the religious field a support for an extension of spiritual experience. The sense of this evolution of the culture appears more clearly outside the range of pure literature in the philosophic writings of the time and in the religious poetry of the Puranas and Tantras. It was these two strains which mixing together and soon becoming a single whole proved to be the most living and enduring movement of the classical age, had the most abiding result in the mind of the people, were the creating force and made the most conspicuous part of the later popular literatures."[1]

1. The Philosophic Writings

"It is a remarkable proof of the native disposition, capacity and profound spiritual intelligence and feeling of the national mind that the philosophic thinking of this period should have left behind it this immense influence; for it was of the highest and severest intellectual character. The tendency that had begun in earlier times and created Buddhism, Jainism and the great schools of philosophy, the labour of the metaphysical intellect to formulate to the reason the truths discovered by the intuitive spiritual experience, to subject them to the close test of a logical and severely dialectical ratiocination and to elicit from them all that the thought could discover, reaches its greatest power of elaborate and careful reasoning, minute criticism and analysis and forceful logical construction and systematisation in the abundant philosophical writing of the period between the sixth and thirteenth centuries marked especially by the work of the great southern thinkers, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa. It did not cease even then, but survived its greatest days and continued even up to our own times throwing up sometimes great creative thinking and often new and subtle philosophical ideas in the midst of an incessant stream of commentary and criticism on established lines. Here there was no decline but a continued vigour of the metaphysical turn in the mind of the race. **The work it did was to complete the diffusion of the philosophic intelligence with the result that even an average Indian mentality, once awakened, responds with a surprising quickness to the most subtle and profound ideas. It is notable that no Hindu religion old or new has been able**

to come into existence without developing as its support a clear philosophic content and suggestion.*

The philosophical writings in prose make no pretension to rank as literature; it is in these that the critical side is prominent, and they have no well-built creative shape, but there are other productions in which a more structural presentation of the complete thought is attempted and here the literary form adopted is ordinarily the philosophical poem. The preference for this form is a direct continuation of the tradition of the Upanishads and the Gita. These works cannot be given a very high place as poetry: they are too overweighted with thought and the preoccupation of an intellectual as distinguished from an intuitive adequacy in the phrase to have **the breath of life and impetus of inspiration that are the indispensable attributes of the creative poetic mind. It is the critical and affirmative intelligence that is most active and not the vision seeing and interpretative. The epic greatness of the soul that sees and chants the self-vision and God-vision and supreme world-vision, the blaze of light that makes the power of the Upanishads, is absent, and absent too the direct thought springing straight from the soul's life and experience, the perfect, strong and suggestive phrase and the living beauty of the rhythmic pace that make the poetic greatness of the Gita.** At the same time some of these poems are, if certainly not great poetry, yet admirable literature combining a supreme philosophical genius with a remarkable literary talent, not indeed creations,

*The Bold letters are used here just for stress and are not there in the original text.

but noble and skilful constructions, embodying the highest possible thought, using well all the weighty, compact and sparing phrase of the classical Sanskrit speech, achieving the harmony and noble elegance of its rhythms. These merits are seen at their best in poems like the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇī* attributed to Shankara, and there we hear even, in spite of its too abstract turn, an intellectual echo of the voice of the Upanishads and the manner of the Gita. These poems, if inferior to the grandeur and beauty of earlier Indian work, are at least equal in poetic style and superior in height of thought to the same kind anywhere else and deservedly survive to fulfil the aim intended by their writers. And one must not omit to mention a few snatches of philosophic song here and there that are a quintessence at once of philosophic thought and poetic beauty, or the abundant literature of hymns, many of them consummate in their power and fervour and their charm of rhythm and expression which prepare us for the similar but larger work in the later regional literature.

The philosophical creations of India differ in this respect from the bulk of the metaphysical thinking of Europe that even when they most adopt the intellectual form and method, yet their real substance is not intellectual, but is rather the result of a subtle and very profound intelligence working on the stuff of sight and spiritual experience. This is the result of the constant unity India has preserved between philosophy, religion and Yoga. The philosophy is the intuitive or intellectual presentation of the truth that was sought for first through the religious mind and its experiences and it is never satisfied by discovering truth to the idea and justifying it to the logical intelligence, although that is admirably done,

but has its eye always turned to realisation in the soul's life, the object of Yoga. The thinking of this age, even in giving so much prominence to the intellectual side, does not depart from this constant need of the Indian temperament. It works out from spiritual experience through the exact and laborious inspection and introspection of the intellect and works backward and in again from the intellectual perceptions to new gains of spiritual experience. There is indeed a tendency of fragmentation and exclusiveness; the great integral truth of the Upanishads has already been broken into divergent schools of thought and these are now farther subdividing into still less comprehensive systems; but still in each of these lessened provinces there is a gain of minute or intensive searching and on the whole, if a loss of breadth on the heights, in recompense some extension of assimilable spiritual knowledge. **And this rhythm of exchange between the spirit and the intelligence, the spirit illumining, the intelligence searching and arriving and helping the lower life to absorb the intuitions of the spirit, did its part in giving Indian spirituality a wonderful intensity, security and persistence not exampled in any other people. It is indeed largely the work of these philosophers who were at the same time Yogins that saved the soul of India alive through the gathering night of her decadence.**"[2]

2. The Tantras and Puranas

The work of saving the soul of India that the Yogi philosophers did could not have been done "...without the aid of a great body of more easily seizable ideas, forms, images, appealing to the imagination, emotions, ethical and aesthetic sense of the people, that had to be partly an expression of the higher spiritual truth and partly a bridge of transition between the normal religious and the spiritual mentality. The need was met by the Tantras and Puranas. The Puranas are the religious poetry peculiar to this period: for although the form probably existed in ancient times, it is only now that it was entirely developed and became the characteristic and the principal literary expression of the religious spirit, and it is to this period that we must attribute, not indeed all the substance, but the main bulk and the existing shape of the Puranic writings. **The Puranas have been much discredited and depreciated in recent times, since the coming in of modern ideas coloured by Western rationalism and the turning of the intelligence under new impulses back towards the earlier fundamental ideas of the ancient culture. Much however of this depreciation is due to an entire misunderstanding of the purpose, method and sense of the mediaeval religious writings. It is only in an understanding of the turn of the Indian religious imagination and of the place of these writings in the evolution of the culture that we can seize their sense.**

In fact the better comprehension that is now returning to us of our own self and past shows that the Puranic

religions are only a new form and extension of the truth of the ancient spirituality and philosophy and socio-religious culture. In their avowed intention they are popular summaries of the cosmogony, symbolic myth and image, tradition, cult, social rule of the Indian people continued, as the name Purana signifies, from ancient times. **There is no essential change, but only a change of forms. The psychic symbols or true images of truth belonging to the Vedic age disappear or are relegated to a subordinate plan with a changed and diminished sense: others take their place more visibly large in aim, cosmic, comprehensive, not starting with conceptions drawn from the physical universe, but supplied entirely from the psychic universe within us.** The Vedic gods and goddesses conceal from the profane by their physical aspect their psychic and spiritual significance. The Puranic trinity and the forms of its female energies have on the contrary no meaning to the physical mind or imagination, but are philosophic and psychic conceptions and embodiments of the unity and multiplicity of the all-manifesting Godhead. **The Puranic cults have been characterised as a degradation of the Vedic religion, but they might conceivably be described, not in the essence, for that remains always the same, but in the outward movement, as an extension and advance. Image worship and temple cult and profuse ceremony, to whatever superstition or externalism their misuse may lead, are not necessarily a degradation.** The Vedic religion had no need of images, for the physical signs of its godheads were the forms of physical Nature and the outward universe was their visible house. The Puranic religion worshipped the psychical forms of the Godhead

within us and had to express it outwardly in symbolic figures and house it in temples that were an architectural sign of cosmic significances. And the very inwardness it intended necessitated a profusion of outward symbol to embody the complexity of these inward things to the physical imagination and vision. The religious aesthesis has changed, but the meaning of the religion has been altered only in temperament and fashion, not in essence. **The real difference is this that the early religion was made by men of the highest mystic and spiritual experience living among a mass still impressed mostly by the life of the physical universe: the Upanishads casting off the physical veil created a free transcendent and cosmic vision and experience and this was expressed by a later age to the mass in images containing a large philosophical and intellectual meaning of which the Trinity and the Shaktis of Vishnu and Shiva are the central figures: the Puranas carried forward this appeal to the intellect and imagination and made it living to the psychic experience, the emotions, the aesthetic feeling and the senses. A constant attempt to make the spiritual truths discovered by the Yogin and the Rishi integrally expressive, appealing, effective to the whole nature of man and to provide outward means by which the ordinary mind, the mind of a whole people might be drawn to a first approach to them is the sense of the religio-philosophic evolution of Indian culture.**

It is to be observed that the Puranas and Tantras contain in themselves the highest spiritual and philosophical truths, not broken up and expressed in opposition to each other as in the debates of the thinkers, but synthetised by a fusion,

relation or grouping in the way most congenial to the catholicity of the Indian mind and spirit. This is done sometimes expressly, but most often in a form which might carry something of it to the popular imagination and feeling by legend, tale, symbol, apologue, miracle and parable. An immense and complex body of psycho-spiritual experience is embodied in the Tantras, supported by visual images and systematised in forms of Yogic practice. This element is also found in the Puranas, but more loosely and cast out in a less strenuous sequence. This method is after all simply a prolongation, in another form and with a temperamental change, of the method of the Vedas. The Puranas construct a system of physical images and observances each with its psychical significance. Thus the sacredness of the confluence of the three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, is a figure of an inner confluence and points to a crucial experience in a psycho-physical process of Yoga and it has too other significances, as is common in the economy of this kind of symbolism. **The so-called fantastic geography of the Puranas, as we are expressly told in the Puranas themselves, is a rich poetic figure, a symbolic geography of the inner psychical universe. The cosmogony expressed sometimes in terms proper to the physical universe has, as in the Veda, a spiritual and psychological meaning and basis. It is easy to see how in the increasing ignorance of later times the more technical parts of the Puranic symbology inevitably lent themselves to much superstition and to crude physical ideas about spiritual and psychic things.** But that danger attends all attempts to bring them to the comprehension of the mass of men and this disadvantage should not blind us

to the enormous effect produced in training the mass mind to respond to a psycho-religious and psycho-spiritual appeal that prepares a capacity for higher things. That effect endures even though the Puranic system may have to be superseded by a finer appeal and the awakening to more directly subtle significances[1], and if such a supersession becomes possible, it will itself be due very largely to the work done by the Puranas.

The Puranas are essentially a true religious poetry, an art of aesthetic presentation of religious truth. All the bulk of the eighteen Puranas does not indeed take a high rank in this kind: there is much waste substance and not a little of dull and dreary matter, but on the whole the poetic method employed is justified by the richness and power of the creation. The earliest work is the best – with one exception at the end in a new style which stands by itself and is unique. The Vishnu Purana for instance in spite of one or two desert spaces is a remarkable literary creation of a very considerable quality maintaining much of the direct force and height of the old epic style. There is in it a varied movement, much vigorous and some sublime epic writing, an occasional lyrical element of a lucid sweetness and beauty, a number of narratives of the finest verve and skilful simplicity of poetic workmanship. The Bhagavat coming at the end and departing to a great extent from the more popular style and manner, for it is strongly affected by the learned and more ornately literary form of speech, is a still more remarkable production full of subtlety, rich and deep thought and beauty.

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[1] All this and infinitely more has been done by Sri Aurobindo in Savitri.

It is here that we get the culmination of the movement which had the most important effects on the future, the evolution of the emotional and ecstatic religions of Bhakti. The tendency that underlay this development was contained in the earlier forms of the religious mind of India and was slowly gaining ground, but it had hitherto been overshadowed and kept from its perfect formation by the dominant tendency towards the austerities of knowledge and action and the seeking of the spiritual ecstasy only on the highest planes of being. The turn of the classical age outward to the exterior life and the satisfaction of the senses brought in a new inward turn of which the later ecstatic forms of the Vaishnava religion were the most complete manifestation. Confined to the secular and outward this fathoming of vital and sensuous experience might have led only to a relaxation of nerve and vigour, an ethical degeneracy or licence; but **the Indian mind is always compelled by its master impulse to reduce all its experience of life to the corresponding spiritual term and factor** and the result was a transfiguring of even these most external things into a basis for new spiritual experience. The emotional, the sensuous, even the sensual motions of the being, before they could draw the soul farther outward,were taken and transmuted into a psychical form and, so changed, they became the elements of amystic capture of the Divine through the heart and the senses and a religion of the joy of God's love, delight and beauty. In the Tantra the new elements are taken up and assigned their place in a complete psycho-spiritual and psycho-physical science of Yoga. Its popular form in the Vaishnava religion centres round the mystic apologue of the pastoral life of the child Krishna. In the

Vishnu Purana the tale of Krishna is a heroic saga of the divine Avatar: in later Puranas we see the aesthetic and erotic symbol developing and in the Bhagavat it is given its full power and prepared to manifest its entire spiritual and philosophic as well as its psychic sense and to remould into its own lines by a shifting of the centre of synthesis from knowledge to spiritual love and delight the earlier significance of Vedanta. The perfect outcome of this evolution is to be found in the philosophy and religion of divine love promulgated by Chaitanya."[3]

3. The Regional Literatures

"It is the later developments of Vedantic philosophy, the Puranic ideas and images and the poetic and aesthetic spirituality of the religions of devotion that inspired from their birth the regional literatures. The literature of the Sanskrit tongue does not come to any abrupt end. Poetry of the classical type continues to be written especially in the South down to a comparatively late period and Sanskrit remains still the language of philosophy and of all kinds of scholarship: all prose work, all the work of the critical mind is written in the ancient tongue. But the genius rapidly fades out from it, it becomes stiff, heavy and artificial and only a scholastic talent remains to keep it in continuance. In every province the local tongues arise here earlier, there a little later to the dignity of literature and become the vehicle of poetic creation and the instrument of popular culture. Sanskrit, although not devoid of popular elements, is essentially and in the best sense an aristocratic speech developing and holding to the necessity of a noble aspiration and the great manner a high spiritual, intellectual, ethical and aesthetic culture, then possible in this manner only to the higher classes, and handing it down by various channels of impression and transfusion and especially by religion, art and social and ethical rule to the mass of the people. Pali in the hands of the Buddhists becomes a direct means of this transmission. The poetry of the regional tongues on the contrary creates, in every sense of the word, a popular literature. The Sanskrit writers were men of the three highest castes, mostly Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and later they were learned men writing for a highly cultured elite; the Buddhist

writers too were for the most part philosophers, monks, kings, preachers writing sometimes for themselves, sometimes in a more popular form for the mass of the people; but the poetry of the regional tongues sprang straight from the heart of the people and its writers came from all classes from the Brahmin to the lowest Shudra and the outcaste. It is only in Urdu and to a less degree in the Southern tongues, as in Tamil whose great period is contemporaneous with the classical Sanskrit, its later production continuing during the survival of independent or semi-independent courts and kingdoms in the South, that there is a strong influence of the learned or classical temperament and habit; but even here there is a very considerable popular element as in the songs of the Shaiva saints and Vaishnava Alwars. The field here is too large to be easily known in its totality or to permit of a rapid survey, but something must be said of the character and value of this later literature that we may see how vital and persistently creative Indian culture remained even in a period which compared with its greater times might be regarded as a period of restriction and decadence.

As the Sanskrit literature begins with the Vedas and Upanishads, these later literatures begin with the inspired poetry of saints and devotees: for **in India it is always a spiritual movement that is the source or at least imparts the impulse of formation to new ideas and possibilities and initiates the changes of the national life.** It is this kind that predominated almost throughout the creative activity of most of these tongues before modern times, because it was always poetry of this type that was nearest to the heart and mind of the people; and even where the work

is of a more secular spirit, the religious turn enters into it and provides the framework, a part of the tone or the apparent motive. In abundance, in poetic excellence, in the union of spontaneous beauty of motive and lyrical skill this poetry has no parallel in its own field in any other literature. A sincerity of devotional feeling is not enough to produce work of this high turn of beauty, as is shown by the sterility of Christian Europe in this kind; it needs a rich and profound spiritual culture. Another part of the literature is devoted to the bringing of something of the essence of the old culture into the popular tongues through new poetic versions of the story of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana or in romantic narrative founded on the ancient legends; and here again we have work of the very greatest genius as well as much of a lesser but still high order. A third type presents vividly the religious beliefs and feelings of the people, the life of court and city and village and hamlet, of landholder and trader and artisan and peasant. The bulk of the work done in the regional tongues falls under one or other of these heads, but there are variations such as the religio-ethical and political poems of Ramdas in Maharashtra or the gnomic poetry, the greatest in plan, conception and force of execution ever written in this kind, of the Tamil saint, Tiruvalluvar. There is too in one or two of these languages a later erotic poetry not without considerable lyrical beauty of an entirely mundane inspiration. The same culture reigns amid many variations of form in all this work of the regional peoples, but each creates on the lines of its own peculiar character and temperament and this gives a different stamp, the source of a rich variety in the unity, to each of these beautiful and vigorous literatures.

Thus under the stress of temperamental variation the poetry of the Vaishnavas puts on very different artistic forms in different provinces. There is first the use of the psychical symbol created by the Puranas, and this assumes its most complete and artistic shape in Bengal and becomes there a long continued tradition. The desire of the soul for God is there thrown into symbolic figure in the lyrical love cycle of Radha and Krishna, the Nature soul in man seeking for the Divine Soul through love, seized and mastered by his beauty, attracted by his magical flute, abandoning human cares and duties for this one overpowering passion and in the cadence of its phases passing through first desire to the bliss of union, the pangs of separation, the eternal longing and reunion, the *līlā* of the love of the human spirit for God. There is a settled frame and sequence, a subtly simple lyrical rhythm, a traditional diction of appealing directness and often of intense beauty. This accomplished lyrical form springs at once to perfect birth from the genius of the first two poets who used the Bengali tongue, Vidyapati, a consummate artist of word and line, and the inspired singer Chandidas in whose name stand some of the sweetest and most poignant and exquisite lovelyrics in any tongue. The symbol here is sustained in its most external figure of human passion and so consistently that it is now supposed by many to mean nothing else, but this is quite negatived by the use of the same figures by the devout poets of the religion of Chaitanya. All the spiritual experience that lay behind the symbol was embodied in that inspired prophet and incarnation of the ecstasy of divine love and its spiritual philosophy put into clear form in his teaching. His followers continued the poetic tradition of the earlier singers and

though they fall below them in genius, yet left behind a great mass of this kind of poetry always beautiful in form and often deep and moving in substance. Another type is created in the perfect lyrics of the Rajput queen Mirabai, in which the images of the Krishna symbol are more directly turned into a song of the love and pursuit of the divine Lover by the soul of the singer. In the Bengal poetry the expression preferred is the symbolic figure impersonal to the poet: here a personal note gives the peculiar intensity to the emotion. This is given a still more direct turn by a southern poetess in the image of herself as the bride of Krishna. The peculiar power of this kind of Vaishnava religion and poetry is in the turning of all the human emotions Godward, the passion of love being preferred as the intensest and most absorbing of them all, and though the idea recurs wherever there has been a strong development of devotional religion, it has nowhere been used with so much power and sincerity as in the work of the Indian poets.

Other Vaishnava poetry does not use the Krishna symbol, but is rather addressed in language of a more direct devotion to Vishnu or centres sometimes around the Rama Avatar. The songs of Tukaram are the best known of this kind. The Vaishnava poetry of Bengal avoids except very rarely any element of intellectualising thought and relies purely on emotional description, a sensuous figure of passion and intensity of feeling: Maratha poetry on the contrary has from the beginning a strong intellectual strain. The first Marathi poet is at once a devotee, a Yogin and a thinker; the poetry of the saint Ramdas, associated with the birth and awakening of a nation, is almost entirely a stream of religious ethical thinking raised to the lyrical pitch; and it

is the penetrating truth and fervour of a thought arising from the heart of devotion that makes the charm and power of Tukaram's songs. A long strain of devotee poets keeps sounding the note that he struck and their work fills the greater space of Marathi poetry. The same type takes a lighter and more high-pitched turn in the poetry of Kabir. In Bengal again at the end of the Mahomedan period there is the same blending of fervent devotion with many depths and turns of religious thought in the songs of Ramprasad to the divine Mother, combined here with a vivid play of imagination turning all familiar things into apt and pregnant images and an intense spontaneity of feeling. In the South a profounder philosophic utterance is often fused into the devotional note, especially in the Shaiva poets, and, as in the early Sanskrit poetry, vivified by a great power of living phrase and image, and farther north the high Vedantic spirituality renews itself in the Hindi poetry of Surdas and inspires Nanak and the Sikh gurus. The spiritual culture prepared and perfected by two millenniums of the ancient civilisation has flooded the mind of all these peoples and given birth to great new literatures and its voice is heard continually through all their course.

The narrative poetry of this age is less striking and original except for a certain number of great or famous works. Most of these tongues have felt the cultural necessity of transferring into the popular speech the whole central story of the Mahabharata or certain of its episodes and, still more universally, the story of the Ramayana. In Bengal there is the Mahabharata of Kashiram, the gist of the old epic simply retold in a lucid classical style, and the Ramayana of Krittibas, more near to the vigour of the soil, neither of

them attaining to the epic manner but still written with a simple poetic skill and a swift narrative force. Only two however of these later poets arrived at a vividly living recreation of the ancient story and succeeded in producing a supreme masterpiece, Kamban, the Tamil poet who makes of his subject a great original epic, and Tulsidas whose famed Hindi Ramayana combines with a singular mastery lyric intensity, romantic richness and the sublimity of the epic imagination and is at once a story of the divine Avatar and a long chant of religious devotion. An English historian of the literature has even claimed for Tulsidas's poem superiority to the epic of Valmiki: that is an exaggeration and, whatever the merits, there cannot be a greater than the greatest, but that such claims can be made for Tulsidas and Kamban is evidence at least of the power of the poets and a proof that the creative genius of the Indian mind has not declined even in the narrowing of the range of its culture and knowledge. All this poetry indeed shows a gain in intensity that compensates to some extent for the loss of the ancient height and amplitude.

While this kind of narrative writing goes back to the epics, another seems to derive its first shaping and motive from the classical poems of Kalidasa, Bharavi and Magha. A certain number take for their subject, like that earlier poetry, episodes of the Mahabharata or other ancient or Puranic legends, but the classical and epic manner has disappeared, the inspiration resembles more that of the Puranas and there is the tone and the looser and easier development of the popular romance. This kind is commoner in western India and excellence in it is the title to fame of Premananda, the most considerable of the Gujerati poets.

In Bengal we find another type of half-romantic half-realistic narrative which develops a poetic picture of the religious mind and life and scenes of contemporary times and has a strong resemblance in its motive to the more outward element in the aim of Rajput painting. The life of Chaitanya written in a simple and naive romance verse, appealing by its directness and sincerity but inadequate in poetic form, is a unique contemporary presentation of the birth and foundation of a religious movement. Two other poems that have become classics, celebrate the greatness of Durga or Chandi, the goddess who is the Energy of Shiva, – the "Chandi" of Mukundaram, a pure romance of great poetic beauty which presents in its frame of popular legend a very living picture of the life of the people, and the "Annadamangal" of Bharatchandra repeating in its first part the Puranic tales of the gods as they might be imagined by the Bengali villager in the type of his own human life, telling in the second a romantic love story and in the third a historical incident of the time of Jehangir, all these disparate elements forming the development of the one central motive and presented without any imaginative elevation but with an unsurpassable vividness of description and power of vital and convincing phrase. All this poetry, the epic and the romance, the didactic poem, of which Ramdas and the famous Kural of Tiruvalluvar are the chief representatives, and the philosophic and devotional lyrics are not the creation ormeant for the appreciation of a cultivated class, but with few exceptions the expression of a popular culture. The Ramayana of Tulsidas, the songs of Ramprasad and of the Bauls, the wandering Vaishnava devotees, the poetry of Ramdas and Tukaram, the sentences of Tiruvalluvar and

the poetess Avvai and the inspired lyrics of the southern saints and Alwars were known to all classes and their thought or their emotion entered deeply into the life of the people.

I have dwelt at this length on the literature because it is, not indeed the complete, but still the most varied and ample record of the culture of a people. Three millenniums at least of a creation of this kind and greatness are surely the evidence of a real and very remarkable culture. The last period shows no doubt a gradual decline, but one may note the splendour even of the decline and especially the continued vitality of religious, literary and artistic creation. At the moment when it seemed to be drawing to a close it has revived at the first chance and begins again another cycle, at first precisely in the three things that lasted the longest, spiritual and religious activity, literature and painting, but already the renewal promises to extend itself to all the many activities of life and culture in which India was once a great and leading people."[4]

4. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri

"Sri Aurobindo's achievement in this great poem is one of which it is not easy for us to grasp the full significance. It is not a mythological poem, and ancient myth – as often as not even believed – used as a back-cloth against which to display poetic virtuosity. Neither is it a philosophical poem, an exposition in verse of doctrines whose more natural vehicle would be prose. Nor, again, is it mere literature, to be evaluated according to the canons of traditional, or even modern, English poetry. Indeed one remembers Sri Aurobindo's explicit rejection of certain criticisms – not of this poem – made by the Irish poet A.E.[2] The English language

[2] A.E. wrote in a letter to Sri Dilip Kumar Roy (dated 6-1-1932): "English is a great language but it has very few words relating to spiritual ideas. For example, the word 'Karma' in Sanskrit embodies a philosophy. There is no word in English embodying the same idea. There are many words in Sanskrit charged with meaning which have no counterpart in English – words like *dhyani, sushupti, turiya* – and I am sure the language which the Hindus speak today must be richer in words fitting for spiritual expression than English, in which there are few luminous words that can be used when there is a spiritual emotion to be expressed. I found this difficulty myself of finding a vocabulary though English is the language I heard about my cradle." To this Sri Aurobindo replied in a letter:

"But this seems to me a reasoning from the conventions of a past order which cannot apply to a new poetry dealing with spiritual things. A new art of words written from a new consciousness demands a new technique. Truth first – a technique expressive of the truth in the forms of beauty *has* to be found if it does not exist. It is no use arguing from the spiritual inadequacy of the English language: it has to be made adequate. It has been plastic enough in the past to succeed in expressing all that it was asked to express, however new: it must now be urged to a farther new progress." (A.E. referred to some poems of Sri K.D. Sethna sent to him for opinion by Sri Dilip Kumar Roy).

has been given to the world and its usages and limits can now no longer be determined exclusively by the ears of the islanders whose tongue it originally was. Those who would remain sole rulers of their language must abjure empire. But to return.

The uniqueness of the achievement lies in the fact that Sri Aurobindo has closed a gulf that has yawned in the human psyche for many many centuries. In the ancient world, poetry, whether in Vedic hymns or elsewhere, was – above all – revelation. Its subject matter was the eternal truth which dwells in the heart of all life. Of that secret 'Truth-Consciousness' – to use Sri Aurobindo's own terms – Poetry was the essential expression: the Poet was the Seer, not in some mild Wordsworthian sense, but in the full and ancient meaning of the word. He *saw* in very actuality the ever-living Gods who from within ruled and still rule all life and he used all the magic of the divine Logos to weave garments of sound in which those powers could dwell, as it were, embodied. He was the Seer, the Prophet, the Magician and his speech was mantra and enchantment, not only in India but throughout the world. It was a dim memory of this that remained n the medieval European tradition of Virgil as the great Enchanter.

But this of which we speak was in that archaic world when men were still embedded in the matrix of the universal life – in touch with Gods above and beasts below – the days before the rise of tyrannous, self-conscious, separative mind, that "slayer of the Real." Gradually, with the rise of this self-arrogating power a separation came about. One became two and head sundered itself form heart, knowledge form feeling. For itself the head forged the new tool of prose with which to express what it termed the facts of life, while to the

more conservative heart was relegated whatever was left of the old magic language, shorn indeed of its prestige and power but still possessing the glamour which clings to the language of an old but conquered race. Poetry thus became the language of the dispossessed heart, the vehicle of its dreams and misty unfulfilled longings, a glowing many-coloured rainbow arched over the rushing waters of life but existing – as the analytic head is careful to tell us – only in the eye of the beholder.

Perhaps the last great Western poet to have made any real attempt to grasp the inner unity was Dante, and even he made use of merely traditional myth – and somewhat degenerated myth at that – for most of his structure, while Milton who came later used even more degenerated myth for purposes which it is not unfair to describe as theological apologetics. Still later, Blake, a genuine but undisciplined seer, attempted to recover the lost unity but lost his way in uncharted private worlds.

After him the venture fails. The best poetry became, more and more, purely lyrical and subject. The rainbow still gleams above the waters, the magic light still glows within the heart; but more and more, the fissure widened, polarising, however unspokenly, the *poetic* with the *actual*, poetry with life.

In this poem the fissure has been closed. Savitri (and it is no mere coincidence that the name is that of the quintessential verse of all the Vedas as well as that of the wife of Satyavan) is neither subjective fantasy nor yet mere philosophical thought, but vision and revelation of the actual inner structure of the Cosmos and of the pilgrim of life within its sphere – Bhu, Bhuvah, Swah: the Stairway of the Worlds reveals itself to our gaze – worlds of Light above, worlds of Darkness

beneath – and we see also ever-circling life ("kindled in measure and quenched in measure") ascending and descending that Stair under the calm unwinking gaze of the Cosmic Gods who shine forth now as of old. This and much more can be seen, not as some theory to be agreed or disagreed with, but as present living fact by any who can open their inner eye. For poetry – all poetry – is evocative. "Out of discussion," says Plotinus, "we call to vision." Far above the plains of prose with their challenge to agreement or disagreement, tower the mountain peaks of poetry calling to vision. Poetry is indeed the full manifestation of the Logos, and when, as here, it is no mere iridescence dependent on some special standpoint, but the wondrous structure of the mighty Cosmos, the 'Adorned One', that is revealed, then in truth does it manifest in its full, its highest grandeur.

Such Poetry can only be written either in the early days before the rise to power of self-conscious mind or when that particular cycle has run its course and life establishes itself once more in the unity beyond, this time with all the added range and power that has been gained during the reign of mind. It is an omen of the utmost significance and hope that in these years of darkness and despair such a poem as *Savitri* should have appeared. *Let us salute the Dawn.*"[5]

– Yogi Sri Krishnaprem, Almora, 12.7.1948

I. The Original Mahabharata Legend and Sri Aurobindo's Savitri

a. Author's note in Savitri

"The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering death.

But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life."[6]

– Sri Aurobindo

b. Sri Aurobindo's Talk of January 3, 1939

"DISPLE: Has your own epic Savitri anything to do with the Mahabharata story?

SRIAUROBINDO: Not really. Only the clue is taken from the Mahabharata. My story is symbolic. I believe that originally the Mahabharata story was also symbolic, but it has been made into a tale of conjugal fidelity.

DISPLE: What is your symbolism?

SRIAUROBINDO: Well, Satyavan, whom Savitri marries, is the symbol of the soul descended into the

Kingdom of Death; and Savitri, who is, as you know, the Goddess of Divine Light and Knowledge, comes down to redeem Satyavan from Death's grasp.

Aswapati, the father of Savitri, is the Lord of Energy. Dyumatsena is "the one who has the shining hosts". It is all inner movement, nothing much as regards outward action.

The poem opens with the Dawn. Savitri awakes on the day of destiny, the day when satyavan has to die. The birth of Savitri is a boon of the Supreme Goddess given to Aswapati. Aswapati is the Yogi who seeks the means to deliver the world out of Ignorance."[7]

c. The Story of Savitri in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri

The basic plot of the story – with some notable differences – is the same in the Mahabharata and Sri Aurobindo's epic Savitri. But, as pointed out by Sri Aurobindo in his talk above, they do not really have much to do with each other, especially when one sticks to the outer form of the Mahabharata legend and does not go behind to the original symbol. However, even when this is done, there is much in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri that could not have been even conceived at that stage of the cycle of the Vedic Civilisation. One finds that the 600-line verse (7 cantos, 300 couplets) Mahabharata legend has been turned into a massive 23,829-line verse (12 Books. 49 Cantos) symbolic epic by Sri Aurobindo.

Cantos One and Two of Book 1 have no counterparts in the Mahabharata legend. Canto One (The Symbol Dawn) corresponds to Sri Aurobindo's own experience of the origin of the world. In Canto Two (The Issue) the real issue before Savitri's soul is:

"*Whether to bear with Ignorance and death*
Or hew the ways of Immortality,
To win or lose the godlike game for man,
Was her soul's issue thrown with Destiny's dice."[8]

Obviously, this is a much deeper issue with cosmic dimensions than the one present before the Mahabharata Savitri. It is only Sri Aurobindo's Savitri – the Divine Grace incarnate – who could resolve it; because not to submit and suffer was she born but to lead and deliver. For here was no fabric of terrestrial make fit for a day's use by busy careless Powers, but one who could match with the iron law her sovereign right.

In the original legend the description of Aswapati's eighteen-year-long tapasya and his getting of the boon from Goddess Savitri are all covered in just twenty couplets (forty lines). In Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, Aswapati's Yoga occupies a very central place and accounts for almost half of the length of the epic. In the last three Cantos of Book I, Book II and Book III a vivid account of Aswapati's Yoga – of his entry into the occult regions and the resulting psycho-spiritual transformation enabling him to break into another Space and Time (Book I, Cantos 3-5); of his descent into Night and an encounter with the Mother of Evil and the Sons of Darkness; of his journey through the various subtle physical, vital, mental, psychic and mental-spiritual planes of existence (Book II); of his pursuit of the Unknowable (Book III) where he enters into the supracosmic realms and comes face to face with the Supreme Divine Mother who grants him his desired boon by promising that One shall descend and break the iron law and change Nature's doom by the lone spirit's power – is

provided in over ten thousand lines of the most sublime verse in any language.

The Book of Birth and Quest (Book IV) covers Savitri's birth, childhood and quest and provides a vivid and penetrating insight into her divine nature which made her a being quite above and apart from all those around. Savitri is a personification of the Divine Grace and her birth here, unlike in the original legend, is the Supreme Divine Mother's answer to Aswapati's intense aspiration to lift the whole human race out of its present predicament into a diviner condition of being. The next Book, the Book of Love (Book V) – which describes how Savitri meets Satyavan and how they recognize, each in the other, their destined soul mate – has no counterpart in the Mahabharata legend which has no description of Savitri's meeting with Satyavan.

In the Mahabharata the story of Savitri's meeting with heavenly sage Narad, the latter's forecast of Satyavan's death and Savitri's resolve to marry Satyavan in spite of the forecast are all covered in the second canto of the Savitri Upakhyana which consists of 33 couplets. Here there is no mention of Savitri's mother and the whole thing is disposed off quite summarily without any attempt to penetrate into the deeper issues which, in the face of such a predicament, must have been unquestionably present, at least behind the surface, to the heart and mind of Savitri's parents. These deeper issues lie at the core of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* and have received the attention and treatment due to them in about 1700 lines of the Book of Fate(Book VI). This is the part of *Savitri* which is supposed to have received its final revision at the hands of Sri Aurobindo in the middle of November 1950, just three weeks before his passing away. When he was reminded that

the Book of Death (Book VIII) and the Epilogue (Book XII) were still to be attended to, he remarked: "Oh, that? We shall see about that later on." That "later on" was never to be. This shows the importance Sri Aurobindo attached to this part of *Savitri*.

In the Book of Fate, Savitri's mother Malwi takes a leading part in the debate that got initiated after Savitri resolutely refused to go back on her choice of Satyavan. Overwhelmed by a sense of the futility of life in the presence of such an adverse inexorable fate, the queen passionately questions Narad on the necessity of falsehood, evil, pain and suffering in this world and even why such a creation should have been necessary. And if there is no creator, what hard impersonal Necessity compels the vain toil of brief living things? In this Book the nectar-like words flowing from the lips of heavenly sage Narad in response to Malwi's passionate questionings provide a very deep and immensely valuable insight into all these deep-rooted problems that have beset humanity ever since it began to feel, think and live on this globe.

Savitri's marriage with Satyavan and her life in the hermitage (Canto 3 in the original legend) is described in the first canto of the Book of Yoga (Book VII). Savitri's recourse to a three-night vow of standing night and day at one place in order to prepare herself to face Satyavan's death four days later has been mentioned in Canto 4 of the Mahabharata legend. This has been made use of by Sri Aurobindo and developed into a full-fledged Yoga in the next six cantos of Book VII. These cantos provide a most vivid, living and accurate account of Savitri's Yoga – her penetration into the deepest layers of her inner being, the finding of her soul, the

experience of Nirvana, the experience of Cosmic Consciousness, etc. – in more than three thousand lines of captivating verse which are so packed with deep, profound and powerful occult and psychic vibrations that few can read them without feeling at least a touch of these realms traversed by Savitri. This Yoga prepares Savitri for her encounter with Death in the next three books. Books VIII, IX and X deal with Satyavan's death in the forest and Savitri's encounter with Yama, the god of Death. In the Mahabharata, the conversation that takes place between them is rather traditional and religio-ethical in nature by means of which Savitri is shown to please Yama, win his favour, and dispose him to grant her one boon after the other till the last one leading to the return of the life of Satyavan. In Books IX and X of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, which deal with Savitri's encounter with Death, the two antagonists face each other as equal powers and by means of a debate, subtle, ingenious, and deeply penetrating and extending over the entire length of these books, the later is pressurized into yielding one boon after the other except the last, which he obstinately refuses, saying:

"*O human claimant to immortality,*
Reveal thy power, lay bare thy spirit's force,
Then will I give back to thee Satyavan.
Or if the Mighty Mother is with thee,
Show me her face that I may worship her;
Let deathless eyes look into the eyes of Death,"[9]

Savitri looks on Death and does not answer but a mighty transformation comes on her

"*In a flaming moment of apocalypse*
The Incarnation thrust aside its veil."[10]

But Death still resists and a direct confrontation takes place in which Death, knowing his defeat inevitable, flees from the scene taking refuge in the retreating Night. In the Mahabharata tale, Savitri gets back her husband after Yama departs from the scene. But at the end of Book X of Sri Aurobindo's epic, when Death flees leaving Satyavan and Savitri alone, a mute invisible and translucent wall rises between them.

Book XI, the Book of the Everlasting Day, which is the culmination of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, has no apparent basis in the original legend. Here, at the beginning of this book, we find that the one whom Savitri had faced as Death and Night reappears before her with a wonderful transfigured shape as the Tempter of the Worlds. He repeatedly offers boons to Savitri and asks her to ascend to his higher worlds with Satyavan to enjoy there these boons. But Savitri, who sees clearly the real issue behind appearances, resists saying, "*I sacrifice not earth to happier worlds*", and asks him to give her all these boons for "*earth and men*". At last, pleased by Savitri's resoluteness and fidelity to the innermost truth of her being, the supreme voice puts off the veil and says:

> *""O beautiful body of the incarnate Word,*
> *Thy thoughts are mine, I have spoken with thy voice.*
> *My will is thine, what thou hast chosen I choose:*
> *All thou hast asked I give to earth and men.*
> *All shall be written out in destiny's book*
> *By my trustee of thought and plan and act,*
> *The executor of my will, eternal Time."*[11]

The above seven lines are followed by 460 more of the same most inspired and utterly uplifting verse which provides us an essential picture of how the earth shall open to divinity

and this earthly life become the life divine in not too distant a future – a future that exists already on the highest planes. The Supreme's promise and the announcement of the Everlasting Day for earth ends with the following three supremely important lines :

> "'*Nature shall live to manifest secret God,*
> *The Spirit shall take up the human play,*
> *This earthly life become the life divine.*'"[12]

II. Sri Aurobindo on Savitri (*Excerpts from letters on Savitri*)

"I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular – if part seemed to me to come from any lower levels I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. **In fact *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.**"[13]

* * *

"The poem was originally written from a lower level, a mixture perhaps of the inner mind, psychic, poetic intelligence, sublimised vital, afterwards with the Higher Mind, often illumined and intuitivised, intervening. Most of the stuff of the first book is new or else the old so altered as to be no more what it was; the best of the old has sometimes been kept almost intact because it had already the higher inspiration. Moreover, there have been made several successive revisions

each trying to lift the general level higher and higher towards a possible Overmind poetry. As it now stands there is a general Overmind influence, I believe, sometimes coming fully through, sometimes colouring the poetry of the other higher planes fused together, sometimes lifting anyone of these higher planes to its highest or the psychic, poetic intelligence or vital towards them."[14]

* * *

"The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable."[15]

* * *

"I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I

have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any *à peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do."[16]

* * *

"Its expression aims at a certain force, directness and spiritual clarity and reality. When it is not understood, it is because the truths it expresses are unfamiliar to the ordinary mind or belong to an untrodden domain or domains or enter into a field of occult experience: it is not because there is any attempt at a dark or vague profundity or at an escape from thought. The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity."[17]

* * *

"Every word must be the right word, with the right atmosphere, the right relation to all the other words, just as every sound in its place and the whole sound together must bring out the imponderable significance which is beyond verbal expression."[18]

* * *

"All birds of that region are relatives. But this is the bird of eternal Ananda, while the Hippogriff is the divinized Thought and the Bird of Fire is the Agni-bird, psychic and tapas. **All that however is to mentalise too much and mentalising always takes most of the life out of spiritual things. That is why**

I say it can be seen but nothing said about it."[19]

* * *

"First of all, are words like Inconscient and Ignorance necessarily an abstract technical jargon? If so, do not words like consciousness, knowledge etc. undergo the same ban? Is it meant that they are abstract philosophical terms and can have no real or concrete meaning, cannot represent things that one feels and senses or must often fight as one fights a visible foe? The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstractions and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. In fact, in writing this line I had no intention of teaching philosophy or forcing in an irrelevant metaphysical idea, although the idea may be there in implication. I was presenting a happening that was to me something sensible and, as one might say, psychologically and spiritually concrete."[20]

* * *

"**But if I had to write for the general reader I could not have written *Savitri* at all. It is in fact for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject-matter, images, technique of mystic poetry.**

This is the real stumbling-block of mystic poetry and specially mystic poetry of this kind. The mystic feels real and present, even ever present to his experience, intimate to his being, truths which to the ordinary reader are intellectual abstractions or metaphysical speculations. He is writing of experiences that are foreign to the ordinary mentality. Either

they are unintelligible to it and in meeting them it flounders about as if in an obscure abyss or it takes them as poetic fancies expressed in intellectually devised images. That was how a critic in the Hindu condemned such poems as *Nirvana* and *Transformation*. He said that they were mere intellectual conceptions and images and there was nothing of religious feeling or spiritual experience. Yet *Nirvana* was as close a transcription of a major experience as could be given in language coined by the human mind of a realisation in which the mind was entirely silent and into which no intellectual conception could at all enter. One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. The critic's non-understanding was made worse by such a line as:

Only the illimitable Permanent

Is here.

Evidently he took this as technical jargon, abstract philosophy. There was no such thing; I felt with an overpowering vividness the illimitability or at least something which could not be described by any other term and no other description except the "Permanent" could be made of That which alone existed. To the mystic there is no such thing as an abstraction. Everything which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness, substantiality which is more real than the sensible form of an object or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. If I wrote "His anger climbed against me in a stream", it would be to

the general reader a mere image, not something that was felt by me in a sensible experience; yet I would only be describing in exact terms what actually happened once, a stream of anger, a sensible and violent current of it rising up from downstairs and rushing upon me as I sat in the veranda of the Guest-House, the truth of it being confirmed afterwards by the confession of the person who had the movement. This is only one instance, but all that is spiritual or psychological in *Savitri* is of that character. What is to be done under these circumstances? The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity. A new kind of poetry demands a new mentality in the recipient as well as in the writer.

Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but of something of its beauty, its light or its power."[21]

* * *

"The philosophy of *Savitri* is different but it is

persistently there; it expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other. Whatever language, whatever terms are necessary to convey this truth of vision and experience it uses without scruple or admitting any mental rule of what is or is not poetic. It does not hesitate to employ terms which might be considered as technical when these can be turned to express something direct, vivid and powerful. That need not be an introduction of technical jargon, that is to say, I suppose, special and artificial language, expressing in this case only abstract ideas and generalities without any living truth or reality in them. Such jargon cannot make good literature, much less good poetry. But there is a 'poeticism' which establishes a sanitary cordon against words and ideas which it considers as prosaic but which properly used can strengthen poetry and extend its range. That limitation I do not admit as legitimate.[22]

* * *

"As to the title of the three cantos about the Yoga of the King, I intended the repetition of the word "Yoga" to bring out and emphasise the fact that this part of Aswapati's spiritual development consisted of two Yogic movements, one a psycho-spiritual transformation and the other a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power. The omission which you suggest would destroy this significance and leave only something more abstract. In the second of these three cantos there is a pause between the two movements and a description of the secret knowledge to which he is led and of which the results are described in the last canto, but there is no description of the Yoga itself or of the steps by which this knowledge came. That is only indicated,

not narrated; so, to bring in "The Yoga of the King" as the title of this canto would not be very apposite. Aswapati's Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as the individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the Second Book: but this too is as yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother."[23]

* * *

"One who has had the kind of experience which *Savitri* sets out to express or who, not having it, is prepared by his temperament, his mental turn, his previous intellectual knowledge or psychic training, to have some kind of access to it, the feeling of it if not the full understanding, can enter into the spirit and sense of the poem and respond to its poetic appeal; but without that it is difficult for an unprepared reader to respond, – all the more if this is, as you contend, a new poetry with a new law of expression and technique."[24]

* * *

"Men have not learnt yet to recognize the Inconscient on which the whole material world they see is built, or the Ignorance of which their whole nature including their knowledge is built; they think that these words are only abstract metaphysical jargon flung about by the philosophers in their clouds or laboured out in long and wearisome books like *The Life Divine*. But it is not so with me and I take my stand on my own feeling and experience about them as Keats

did on his about truth and beauty. My readers will have to do the same if they want to appreciate my poetry, which of course they are not bound to do."[25]

* * *

"If you are right in maintaining that *Savitri* stands as a new mystical poetry with a new vision and expression of things, we should expect, at least at first, a widespread, perhaps, a general failure even in lovers of poetry to understand it or appreciate; even those who have some mystical turn or spiritual experience are likely to pass it by if it is a different turn from theirs or outside their range of experience. It took the world something like a hundred years to discover Blake; it would not be improbable that there might be a greater time-lag here, though naturally we hope for better things. For in India at least some understanding or feeling and an audience few and fit may be possible. Perhaps by some miracle there may be before long a larger appreciative audience."[26]

* * *

III. The Mother on Savitri (*Report by a Disciple*)

"On my birthday, I went to see Mother. First of all, She spoke to me about how to kindle the psychic flame. Then She spoke about *Savitri.*

Many a time, She had already spoken on *Savitri,* but this time, it was in a special way, for it was a complete teaching that She revealed. I remained as quiet and as concentrated as possible, in order to assimilate Her words.

Back home, I wished to note down what Mother had explained to me about *Savitri.* But something within me kept saying that I wouldn't be capable of rendering it, that it was

too beautiful and much too extraordinary and that I would spoil it all. And I brushed aside the idea to write down what Mother had explained.

Years passed but some phrases kept echoing in my mind, such as: "I have launched myself in a rudderless boat in the vastness of the Infinite." Mother had repeated to me these magical words of Sri Aurobindo. And likewise there were many others which came floating in. But still I didn't like the idea of noting them down. And then, one day, I was advised to write what Mother had told me.

However, seven years had passed. It was a work which I would not have ventured to do myself. I could only try to be as docile and receptive an instrument as possible. I then concentrated and what Mother had told me, began to come back to me: "Each verse of *Savitri* is like a revealed Mantra which surpasses all that man possesses by way of knowledge, and is arranged in such a way, that the sonority of the rhythm leads you to the origin of sound, which is OM... It is the most beautiful thing He has left for man, the highest possible." So slowly, almost the whole of it was written down.

Later on, I showed to Mother this report written from memory. She Herself brushed it up a bit and gave Her blessings. She intended to work anew on the text and bring in some changes. But perhaps the time to reveal had not come and the circumstances did not allow Her to finish.

As it is, She found this report "very useful". And She replied to a disciple, 'Years ago I have spoken at length about it *[Savitri]* to Mona Sarkar and he has noted in French what I said. Some time back I have seen what he has written and found it correct on the whole.'

* * *

Do you read *Savitri?*

Yes, Mother, yes.

You have read the whole poem?

Yes, Mother, I have read it twice.

Have you understood all that you have read?

Not much, but I like poetry, that is why I read it.

It does not matter if you do not understand it – *Savitri,* read it always. You will see that every time you read it, something new will be revealed to you. Each time you will get a new glimpse, each time a new experience; things which were not there, things you did not understand arise and suddenly become clear. Always an unexpected vision comes up through the words and lines. Every time you try to read and understand, you will see that something is added, something which was hidden behind is revealed clearly and vividly. I tell you the very verses you have read once before, will appear to you in a different light each time you re-read them. This is what happens invariably. Always your experience is enriched, it is a revelation at each step.

But you must not read it as you read other books or newspapers. You must read with an empty head, a blank and vacant mind, without there being any other thought; you must concentrate much, remain empty, calm and open; then the words, rhythms, vibrations will penetrate directly to this white page, will put their stamp upon the brain, will explain themselves without your making any effort.

Savitri alone is sufficient to make you climb to the highest peaks. If truly one knows how to meditate on *Savitri,* one will receive all the help one needs. For him who wishes to follow

this path, it is a concrete help as though the Lord himself were taking you by the hand and leading you to the destined goal. And then, every question, however personal it may be, has its answer here, every difficulty finds its solution herein; indeed there is everything that is necessary for doing the Yoga.

He has crammed the whole universe in a single book. It is a marvellous work, magnificent and of an incomparable perfection.

You know, before writing *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo said to me, *I am impelled to launch on a new adventure; I was hesitant in the beginning, but now I am decided. Still I do not know how far I shall succeed. I pray for help.* And you know what it was? It was – before beginning, I warn you in advance – it was His way of speaking, so full of divine humility and modesty. He never ... *asserted Himself.* And the day He actually began it, He told me : *I have launched myself in a rudderless boat upon the vastness of the Infinite.* And once having started, He wrote page after page without intermission, as though it were a thing already complete up there and He had only to transcribe it in ink down here on these pages.

In truth, the entire form of *Savitri* has descended "en masse" from the highest region and Sri Aurobindo with His genius only arranged the lines – in a superb and magnificent style. Sometimes entire lines were revealed and He has left them intact; He worked hard, untiringly, so that the inspiration could come from the highest possible summit. And what a work He has created! Yes, it is a true creation in itself. It is an unequalled work. Everything is there, and it is put in such a

*The words in between the two asterisks – wherever they appear – were spoken in English by the Mother.

simple, such a clear form; verses perfectly harmonious, limpid and eternally true. My child, I have read so many things, but I have never come across anything which could be compared with *Savitri*. I have studied the best works in Greek, Latin, English and of course in French literature, also in German and all the great creations of the West and the East, including the great epics; but I repeat it, I have not found anywhere anything comparable with *Savitri*. All these literary works seem to me empty, flat, hollow, without any deep reality – apart from a few rare exceptions, and these too represent only a small fraction of what *Savitri* is. What grandeur, what amplitude, what reality: it is something immortal and eternal He has created. I tell you once again there is nothing like it in the whole world. Even if one puts aside the vision of the reality, that is, the essential substance which is the heart of the inspiration, and considers only the lines in themselves, one will find them unique, of the highest classical kind. What He has created is something man cannot imagine. For, everything is there, everything.

It may then be said that *Savitri* is a revelation, it is a meditation, it is a quest of the Infinite, the Eternal. If it is read with this aspiration for Immortality, the reading itself will serve as a guide to Immortality. To read *Savitri* is indeed to practise Yoga, spiritual concentration; one can find there all that is needed to realise the Divine. Each step of Yoga is noted here, including the secret of all other Yogas. Surely, if one sincerely follows what is revealed here in each line one will reach finally the transformation of the Supramental Yoga. It is truly the infallible guide who never abandons you; its support is always there for him who wants to follow the path. Each verse of *Savitri* is like a revealed Mantra which surpasses

all that man possessed by way of knowledge, and I repeat this, the words are expressed and arranged in such a way that the sonority of the rhythm leads you to the origin of sound, which is *OM*.

My child, yes, everything is there : mysticism, occultism, philosophy, the history of evolution, the history of man, of the gods, of creation, of Nature. How the universe was created, why, for what purpose, what destiny – all is there. You can find all the answers to all your questions there. Everything is explained, even the future of man and of the evolution, all that nobody yet knows. He has described it all in beautiful and clear words so that spiritual adventurers who wish to solve the mysteries of the world may understand it more easily. But this mystery is well hidden behind the words and lines and one must rise to the required level of true consciousness to discover it. All prophecies, all that is going to come is presented with a precise and wonderful clarity. Sri Aurobindo gives you here the key to find the Truth, to discover the Consciousness, to solve the problem of what the universe is. He has also indicated how to open the door of the Inconscience so that the light may penetrate there and transform it. He has shown the path, the way to liberate oneself from the ignorance and climb up to the superconscience; each stage, each plane of consciousness, how they can be scaled, how one can cross even the barrier of death and attain immortality. You will find the whole journey in detail, and as you go forward you can discover things altogether unknown to man. That is *Savitri,* and much more yet. It is a real experience – reading *Savitri.* All the secrets that man possessed, He has revealed, – as well as all that awaits him in the future; all this is found in the depth of *Savitri.* But

one must have the knowledge to discover it all, the experience of the planes of consciousness, the experience of the Supermind, even the experience of the conquest of Death. He has noted all the stages, marked each step in order to advance integrally in the integral Yoga.

All this is His own experience, and what is most surprising is that it is my own experience also. It is my sadhana which He has worked out. Each object, each event, each realisation, all the descriptions, even the colours are exactly what I saw and the words, phrases are also exactly what I heard. And all this before having read the book. I read *Savitri* many times afterwards, but earlier, when He was writing He used to read it to me. Every morning I used to hear Him read *Savitri*. During the night He would write and in the morning read it to me. And I observed something curious, that day after day the experiences He read out to me in the morning were those I had had the previous night, word by word. Yes, all the descriptions, the colours, the pictures I had seen, the words I had heard, all, all, I heard it all, put by Him into poetry, into miraculous poetry. Yes, they were exactly my experiences of the previous night which He read out to me the following morning. And it was not just one day by chance, but for days and days together. And every time I used to compare what He said with my previous experiences and they were always the same. I repeat, it was not that I had told Him my experiences and that He had noted them down afterwards, no, He knew already what I had seen. It is my experiences He has presented at length and they were His experiences also. It is, moreover, the picture of Our joint adventure into the unknown or rather into the Supermind.

These are experiences lived by Him, realities,

supracosmic truths. He experienced all these as one experiences joy or sorrow, physically. He walked in the darkness of inconscience, even in the neighbourhood of death, endured the sufferings of perdition, and emerged from the mud, the world-misery to breathe the sovereign plenitude and enter the supreme Ananda. He crossed all these realms, went through the consequences, suffered and endured physically what one cannot imagine. Nobody till today has suffered like Him. He accepted suffering to transform suffering into the joy of union with the Supreme. It is something unique and incomparable in the history of the world. It is something that has never happened before, He is the first to have traced the path in the Unknown, so that we may be able to walk with certitude towards the Supermind. He has made the work easy for us. *Savitri* is his whole Yoga of transformation, and this Yoga appears now for the first time in the earth-consciousness.

And I think that man is not yet ready to receive it. It is too high and too vast for him. He cannot understand it, grasp it, for it is not by the mind that one can understand *Savitri*. One needs spiritual experiences in order to understand and assimilate it. The farther one advances on the path of Yoga, the more does one assimilate and the better. No, it is something which will be appreciated only in the future, it is the poetry of tomorrow of which He has spoken in *The Future Poetry*. It is too subtle, too refined, – it is not in the mind or through the mind, it is in meditation that *Savitri* is revealed.

And men have the audacity to compare it with the work of Virgil or Homer and to find it inferior. They do not understand, they cannot understand. What do they know? Nothing at all. And it is useless to try to make them understand. Men will know what it is, but in a distant future.

It is only the new race with the new consciousness which will be able to understand. I assure you there is nothing under the blue sky to compare with *Savitri.* It is the mystery of mysteries. It is a *super-epic,* it is super-literature, super-poetry, super-vision, it is a super-work even if one considers the number of lines He has written. No, these human words are not adequate to describe *Savitri.* Yes, one needs superlatives, hyperboles to describe it. It is a hyperepic. No, words express nothing of what *Savitri* is, at least I do not find them. It is of immense value – spiritual value and all other values; it is eternal in its subject, and infinite in its appeal, miraculous in its mode and power of execution; it is a unique thing, the more you come in contact with it, the higher will you be uplifted. Ah, truly it is something! It is the most beautiful thing He has left for man, the highest possible. What is it? When will man know it? When is he going to lead a life of truth? When is he going to accept this in his life? This yet remains to be seen.

My child, everyday you are going to read *Savitri;* read properly, with the right attitude, concentrating a little before opening the pages and trying to keep the mind as empty as possible, absolutely without a thought. The direct road is through the heart. I tell you, if you try to really concentrate with this aspiration you can light the flame, the psychic flame, the flame of purification in a very short time, perhaps in a few days. What you cannot do normally, you can do with the help of *Savitri.* Try and you will see how very different it is, how new, if you read with this attitude, with this something at the back of your consciousness; as though it were an offering to Sri Aurobindo. You know it is charged, fully charged with consciousness; as if *Savitri* were a being, a real guide. I tell you, whoever, wanting to practise Yoga, tries sincerely and

feels the necessity for it, will be able to climb with the help of *Savitri* to the highest rung of the ladder of Yoga, will be able to find the secret that *Savitri* represents. And this without the help of a Guru. And he will be able to practise it anywhere. For him *Savitri* alone will be the guide, for all that he needs he will find in *Savitri*. If he remains very quiet when before a difficulty, or when he does not know where to turn to go forward and how to overcome obstacles, for all these hesitations and incertitudes which overwhelm us at every moment, he will have the necessary indications, and the necessary concrete help. If he remains very calm, open, if he aspires sincerely, always he will be as if led by the hand. If he has faith, the will to give himself and essential sincerity he will reach the final goal.

Indeed, *Savitri* is something concrete, living, it is all replete, packed with consciousness, it is the supreme knowledge above all human philosophies and religions. It is the spiritual path, it is Yoga, Tapasya, Sadhana, everything, in its single body. *Savitri* has an extraordinary power, it gives out vibrations for him who can receive them, the true vibrations of each stage of consciousness. It is incomparable, it is truth in its plenitude, the Truth Sri Aurobindo brought down on the earth. My child, one must try to find the secret that *Savitri* represents, the prophetic message Sri Aurobindo reveals there for us. This is the work before you, it is hard but it is worth the trouble."[27]

Blessing.

5-11-1967

– The Mother

* * *

January 22, 1961

"*Savitri* is really a condensation, a concentration of the universal Mother – the eternal universal Mother, Mother of all universes from all eternity – in an earthly personality for the Earth's salvation. And Satyavan is the soul of the Earth, the Earth's *jiva*. So when the Lord says, 'he whom you love and whom you have chosen,' it means the earth. All the details are there! When she comes back down, when Death has yielded at last, when all has been settled and the Supreme tells her, 'Go, go with him, the one you have chosen', how does Sri Aurobindo describe it? He says that she very carefully takes the SOUL of Satyavan into her arms, like a little child, to pass through all the realms and come back down to earth. Everything is there! He hasn't forgotten a single detail to make it easy to understand – for someone who knows how to understand. And it is when *Savitri* reaches the earth that Satyavan regains his full human stature."[28]

* * *

July 4, 1961

"*Savitri* is an exact description – not literature, not poetry (although the form is very poetical) – an exact description, step by step, paragraph by paragraph, page by page; as I read, I relived it all. Besides, many of my own experiences that I recounted to Sri Aurobindo seem to have been incorporated into *Savitri*. He has included many of them – Nolini says so; he was familiar with the first version Sri Aurobindo wrote long ago, and he said that an enormous number of experiences were added when it was taken up again. This explained to me why ...suddenly, as I read it, I live the experience – line by line, page by page. The realism of it is astounding."[29]

* * *

September 23, 1961

"This analogy between the ancient form of spiritual revelations and *Savitri*, this blossoming into poetry of his prophetic revelation is ... what could be called the most exceptional part of his work. And what is remarkable (I saw him do it) is that he changed *Savitri*: he went along changing it as his experience changed. It is clearly the continuing expression of his experience.

There were whole sections he redid completely, which were like descriptions of what I had told him of my own experiences. Nolini said this. When I recently reread *Savitri*, some phrases were very familiar and I said to Nolini, 'How odd, these are almost my very words!' And he replied, 'But this has been changed, it was written differently; it has BECOME like this'. As the thing became more and more concrete for him, he changed it. The breath of revelatory prophecy is extraordinary! It has an extraordinary POWER!

What struck me is that he never wanted to write anything else. To write those articles for the *Bulletin* was really a heavy sacrifice for him. He had said he would complete certain parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, but when he was asked to do so, he replied, 'No, I don't want to go down to that mental level'! *Savitri* comes from somewhere else altogether. And I think that *Savitri* is the most important thing to speak about."[30]

* * *

April 20, 1963

"This *Savitri* is wonderful, he foresaw everything, saw everything, everything, absolutely everything, there isn't one point he left unexplored!"[31]

* * *

June 6, 1970

"Every time I read *Savitri*, I feel as if I am reading it for the first time, really. It's not that I understand differently, it's that it's completely new: I never read it before! It's odd. It's at least the fourth time I read it.

And truly there's everything in it. All the things I've discovered lately were there. And I hadn't seen it. It's odd.

The first time I read it was a revelation; it hung together perfectly well from beginning to end, and I felt I had understood (I did understand something). The second time I read it, I said to myself, "But this isn't the same thing as what I read!..." It hung together, it made up a whole – and I understood something else. Then, recently when I read, at every passage I said to myself, "How new this is! And how the things I have found since are there!" Today again, that's how it is, as if I read it for the first time! And it puts me into contact with the things I have just discovered.

It's a miraculous book! *(Mother laughs)*"[32]

* * *

"*As one too great for him he worships her;*
He adores her as his regent of desire,
He yields to her as the mover of his will,
He burns the incense of his nights and days
Offering his life, a splendour of sacrifice....
In a thousand ways he serves her royal needs;
He makes the hours pivot around her will,
Makes all reflect her whims; all is their play:
This whole wide world is only he and she.

Savitri (I.4.62)

What a marvelous work!

He goes into a completely different region, so much above thought! It's constant vision, it isn't something thought out – with thought everything becomes flat, hollow, empty, empty, just like a leaf; while this is full, the full content is there, alive.

It's an explanation of why the world is as it is. At the start he says, He worships her (here again, there are no words in French: *Il lui rend un culte*, but that makes a whole sentence). He worships her as something far greater than Himself. And then you are almost a spectator of the Supreme projecting Himself to take on this creative aspect (necessarily, otherwise it couldn't be done!), the Witness watching His own work of creation and falling in love with this power of manifestation – you see it all. And ...oh, He wants to give Her her fullest chance and see, watch all that is going to happen, all that can happen with this divine Power thrust free into the world. And Sri Aurobindo expresses it as though he had absolutely fallen in love with Her: whatever She wants, whatever She does, whatever She thinks, whatever She wills, all of it – it's all wonderful! All is wonderful. It's so lovely!

And, I must say, I was observing this because, originally, the first time I heard of it, this conception shocked me, in the sense that ...(I don't know, it wasn't an idea, it was a feeling), as though it meant lending reality to something which in my consciousness, for a very long time (at least ... millennia perhaps, I don't know), had been the Falsehood to be conquered. The Falsehood that must cease to exist. It's the aspect of Truth that must manifest itself, it's not all that: doing anything whatsoever just for the fun of it, simply because you have the full power.... You have the power to do everything,

so you do everything, and knowing that there is a Truth behind, you don't give a damn about consequences. That was something ...something which, as far back as I can remember, I have fought against. I have known it, but it seems to me it was such a long, long time ago and I rejected it so strongly, saying, "No, no!" and implored the Lord so intensely that things may be otherwise, beseeched Him that his all-powerful Truth, his all-powerful Purity and his all-powerful Beauty may manifest and put an end to all that mess. And at first I was shocked when Sri Aurobindo told me that; previously, in this life, it hadn't even crossed my mind. In that sense Theon's explanation had been much more (what should I say?) useful to me from the standpoint of action: the origin of disorder being the separation of the primal Powers – but that's not it! HE is there, blissfully worshipping all this confusion!

And naturally this time around, when I started translating it came back. At first there was a shudder (*Mother makes a gesture of stiffening*). Then I told myself, "Haven't you got beyond that!" And I let myself flow into the thing. Then I had a series of nights with Sri Aurobindo ...so marvelous! You understand, I see him constantly and I go into that subtle physical world where he has his abode; the contact is almost permanent (at any rate, that's how I spend all my nights: he shows me the work, everything), but still, after this translation of *Savitri* he seemed to be smiling at me and telling me, "At last you have understood!" (*Mother laughs*) I said, "It isn't that I didn't understand, it's that I didn't want it!" I didn't want, I don't WANT things to be like that any more, for thousands of years I have wanted things to be otherwise!

....

Of course, it [*this vision or conception*] isn't allowed into action, because when you start accepting everything and loving everything and seeing Glory everywhere – why change!? This is why the Force that had been in me for so long for the world to progress further made me reject precisely all that legitimized things as they are by putting you into contact with the inner joy of living – as he puts it, His Joy is there, everywhere, so nobody wants to leave the world.

In short, I was able to see the situation from above, a little higher than the creative Force – from the other side."[33]

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