

POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY IN SRI AUROBINDO'S *SAVITRI*

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ABSTRACT

Sri Aurobindo, a yogi and a philosopher, writes an epic named *Savitri* perhaps to express his abstract philosophy of the Life Divine into concrete symbolic images and metaphors. He narrates the story of a young princess who saves the life of her husband from Death to suggest the ultimate liberation of man from universal Death in time to come. Sri Aurobindo, therefore, does not write poetry to enunciate his philosophy; his aim is to present a philosophy in terms of spiritual action and vision. *Savitri* is a 'Upanishadic' poem in the sense that its principal theme is the search for knowledge (*vidya*), that liberates man from ignorance (*avidya*), and that its main stylistic device is the colloquy between two characters, human and divine. This search is beautifully suggested by two mystical journeys undertaken by Aswapathy and *Savitri*. *Savitri* is also described as a 'Kalidasian poem' for it employs similes to connect the present with the past and to relate man to Nature. The verse of *Savitri* is said to be the *mantra*; it is significant, not for its meaning, but for its rhythm and sound. *Savitri*, I think, should be read even to see how conversational English can be raised to the level of a *mantra*. But *Savitri* should be read primarily for the perception and the realization of the Supreme Reality. I have been studying *Savitri* intermittently for last two decades. I have also submitted a thesis entitled, *Savitri-A Study* to Gujarat University that conferred its Ph. D. on me in 1979. But this book is not the exact copy of my thesis. It is a comprehensive study of *Savitri*. It examines its symbolism, sources, composition leitmotifs, verse, diction, style and imagery. It is an attempt to understand *Savitri* that reinstates the dignity of disintegrated man and suggests a meaning for him in this meaningless world. It is a great epic of love and hope.

Keywords: Atman, Purusha, Ishwara, Maya, Prakriti, Shakti, Divine, Consciousness, Existence, Bliss.

The Absolute, says Sri Aurobindo, is the essential reality of our existence. It is undeterminable and unknowable. However, it is identified as Sachchidanand by immortal soul. Sachchidanand has three aspects, namely, *Sat* (Existence), *Chit* (Consciousness) and *Anand* (Bliss); but these aspects are interrelated and indivisible. The Absolute, though formless and featureless, is recognised as Existence-Consciousness-Force-Bliss. The question arises: What is Existence?

Existence, *Savitri* reveals, is the omnipresent reality. It is pure, indefinable, infinite and absolute. It is a static being; but it causes the movements of Becoming. *Isha Upanishad* affirms:

It moves and It moves not; It is far and It is near; It is within all this and It is also outside all this.¹

In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo says that Existence is really the substratum of becoming:

The very conception of movement carries with it the potentiality of repose and betrays itself as an activity of some existence; the very idea of energy in action

carries with it the idea of energy abstaining from action; and an absolute energy not in action is simply and purely absolute existence.²

Existence is essentially indeterminate. *Svetashvatara* Upanishad calls It, "without parts, without activity, tranquil, irreproachable, without blemish"—*niskalam niskriyam shantam nirvadyam niranjanam*³. True, existence is indeterminable by any determinants; but it is capable of self-determination. The indeterminability of existence is natural and necessary for the creation of infinite determinations. The indeterminate existence alone can manifest myriad determinations because it cannot be identified with them.

Existence has thus two aspects—the indeterminate (*Nirguna*) and the determinate (*Saguna*). For Sankara, existence is the indeterminate; for Ramanujan it is the determinate. But Sri Aurobindo believes that existence is both the indeterminate and the determinate, *Nirguna* and *Saguna* simultaneously.

Existence is said to be Consciousness-Force. Now the problem is: How can pure existence be a force at the same time? Sri Aurobindo, like the Upanishadic seers, believes that force is inherent in existence:

Shiva and Kali, Brahman and Shakti are one and not two who are separable. Force inherent in existence may be at rest or it may be in motion, but when it is at rest, it exists none the less and is not abolished, diminished or in any way essentially altered.⁴

The Absolute possesses Force; but It is not subject to Force. It manifests itself as force in both its static and dynamic aspects and at the same time it transcends both the aspects. Here the question arises: What is the nature of Force? Is it conscious or unconscious? Sri Aurobindo is of the opinion that force is conscious; for the phenomena of consciousness cannot come about from unconscious Force. Unlike the materialists, Sri Aurobindo holds that matter itself is the form of Consciousness-Force. The Absolute, *Savitri* reveals, creates the cosmos out of Its Consciousness-Force:

The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone
Has called out of the Silence his mute Force
Where she lay in the featureless and formless hush
Guarding from Time by her immobile sleep
The ineffable puissance of his solitude
The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone
Has entered with his silence into space;
He has fashioned these countless persons of one self;
He lives in all, who lived in his vast alone;
Space is himself and Time is only he.⁵

Existence manifests itself in relation to the universe in three aspects: *atman* (self), *purusha* (spirit) and *Ishvara* (God). Similarly, Consciousness-Force appears as *maya*, *prakriti* and *shakti*, corresponding respectively to the three aspects of existence. So there are *atman-maya*, *purusha-prakriti* and *Ishvara-shakti*. Let us explain them briefly.

The Absolute expresses itself as the *atman* of all existence. *Atman* is perceived as the individual-universal in each being. *Maya* is said to be the self-power, *atman-shakti* of *atman*. It is

only through *maya* that *atman* creates itself into many forms:

He whose transcendence rules the pregnant Vasts,
Prescient now dwells in our subliminal depths,
A Luminous individual Power, alone.⁶

Purusha is said to be the conscious Being of the Absolute; *prakriti* is its consciousness force. *Purusha* is intimately related to *prakriti*. In fact, *purusha* supports *prakriti*:

His soul, silent, supports the world and her,
His acts are her commandment's registers.⁷

He witnesses the acts of *prakriti*:

A witness and student of her joy and dole,
A partner in her evil and her good,
He has consented to her passionate ways,
He is driven by her sweet and dreadful force.⁸

He also enjoys the works of *prakriti* and becomes what she wants him to be:

He rejoices in her every thought and act
And gives consent to all that she can wish,
Whatever she desires he wills to be.⁹

In the state of ignorance *Purusha* is always led by the powerful forces of *prakriti*. But when he realises his independent identity, he keeps himself back from the movements of *prakriti*:

At last he wakes to a memory of Self;
He sees within the face of deity, ...
Till then he is a plaything in her game;¹⁰

Sri Aurobindo's conception of *purusha-prakriti* differs from that of Sankhya philosophy. The Sankhya philosophy says that *purusha* and *prakriti* are two distinct entities. *Purusha* is conscious but inactive, while *prakriti* is active but unconscious. But Sri Aurobindo thinks that *prakriti* and *purusha* are essentially one. True, *prakriti* is apparently inconscient; but it conceals a secret consciousness. Similarly, *purusha* seems to be led by *prakriti*; but in reality, *purusha* controls *prakriti* because he is his own *prakriti*. Even in the state of ignorance and passivity, *prakriti* acts only when she has the consent of *purusha*:

The Two who are one are the secret of all power, The Two who are one are the
might and right in things.¹¹

Ishwara is recognised as the Lord of Creation. He is both supracosmic as well as intracosmic. He is the divine Inhabitant of all the individual beings and the underlying reality of the universe. *Shakti* is itself the power of *Ishwara*. Thus, in the first aspect of the Reality, *Atman* creates out of His *Maya*. In the second aspect, *Purusha* does what *Prakriti* wants him to do. In these two aspects Reality is not perceived in any definite form. But in the third aspect Reality is overtly seen. There he is the Lord of his *Shakti* and of all things:

He is the substance, be the self of things;
She has forged from him her works of skill and might:
He is the Maker and the world he made,
He is the vision and he is the seer;
He is himself the actor and the act

He is himself the knower and the known,
He is himself the dreamer and the dream.
There are Two who are One and play in many worlds;¹²

Bliss is the third attribute of the Absolute. It is for bliss and out of bliss that the Absolute creates the world. The soul is said to be the eternal portion of bliss. The presence of pain and suffering does not contradict the universality of bliss. Even pain and suffering hide a kind of bliss:

Bliss is the secret stuff of all that lives,
Even pain and grief are garbs of world delight,
It hides behind thy sorrow and thy cry.¹³

Taittiriya Upanishad affirms that Brahman is bliss:

He knew that Brahman is bliss. For truly, beings here are born from bliss,
when born, they live by bliss and into bliss, when departing, they enter.¹⁴

When All-Consciousness descends into mental consciousness, he assumes the form of Ignorance. It is ignorance that causes sorrows and sufferings:

The All-Consciousness ventured into Ignorance,
The All-Blissful bore to be insensible.¹⁵

But the problem is: Why does All-Consciousness descend and take the mask of ignorance? And why does divinity become humanity at all? Sri Aurobindo believes that Ali. Consciousness assumes the mask of ignorance to transform ignorance into knowledge. Indeed, he becomes human to make human divine:

A mutual debt binds man to the Supreme;
His nature we must put on as he put ours;
We are sons of God and must be even as he;
His human portion we must grow divine.¹⁶

The Life Divine emphasises the same truth:

Brahman is in this world to represent Itself in the values of Life. Life exists in Brahman in order to discover Brahman in itself. Therefore man's importance in the world is that he gives it that development of consciousness in which its transfiguration by a perfect self-discovery becomes possible. To fulfil God in life is man's manhood. He starts from the animal vitality and its activities, but a divine existence is his objective.¹⁷

The Absolute descends, Aurobindo says, through Existence Consciousness-Force-Bliss and also through the medium of the Supermind into the overmind, mind, psyche, life, matter and the inconscient. Therefore, in the manifestation, Existence becomes matter; Consciousness-Force becomes life; Bliss becomes the psyche and the Supermind becomes the mind. In the course of evolution, the inconscient is destined to evolve matter, life, mind and the supermind.

According to Sri Aurobindo, Spirit is involved into the inconscient and it is evolving itself slowly into different forms to establish *The Life Divine* on earth. Therefore, the physical world might be described as the evolution of involved spirit. The process of evolution, it is said, follows a triple character: a widening, a heightening and an integration. When evolution starts, the forms of matter proceed from simple to more complex forms. This process is called "widening". Heightening is a process in which the forms of the lower grade move to the higher grade. When the evolution reaches a higher grade it takes up all the lower grades and transforms them in the light of

its own principles. Thus, there is not merely an ascent from a lower to the higher grade; but there is the transformation of the lower grades as well. This is known as the process of integration.

Here the question arises: Why does a lower grade move to a higher grade? Sri Aurobindo gives two reasons to explain this phenomenon. He says that first there is the intensification of consciousness from below and then there is a pressure of a flame which comes down from the summit of higher consciousness:

What is necessary is a working that brings the lower gradation of being to a point at which the higher can manifest in it; at that point a pressure from some superior plane where the new power is dominant may assist... It is in some such way that the transition from the lower to higher grades of consciousness seems to have been made in nature.¹⁸

Evolution, as we have said, starts from the inconscient which appears to be a void of impenetrable darkness. The inconscient is really a fathomless zero that includes the whole infinity within its fold:

At first was laid a strange anomalous base,
A void, a cipher of some secret Whole,
Where zero held infinity in its sum
And All and Nothing were a single term,
An eternal negative, a matrix Nought:¹⁹

The Rig Veda also describes the beginning of the creation in the same way:

Darkness was concealed in darkness there
and all this was indiscriminate chase
That One which had been covered by the void
Through the might of Tapas was manifested.²⁰

The inconscient belches out gaseous matter. Gaseous matter whirls through aeons and forms the cosmos:

A gas belched out from some invisible Fire,
Of its dense rings were formed those million stars;
Upon earth's new born soil God's tread was heard.
Across the thick smoke of earth's ignorance
A Mind began to see and look at forms
And groped for knowledge in the nescient Night:
Caught in a blind stone-grip Force worked its plan
And made in sleep this huge mechanical world,
And like a busy midwife the life-power
Deliver the zero carrier of the All.²¹

Matter is not inert or devoid of consciousness as the materialists think it to be. The *Upanishad* says that Matter is Brahman, *Annam Brahmeti Vyajanat*. Even modern physics proves that matter is not dead; it is, in fact, the form of energy. Moreover, Einstein's theory of relativity has established the truth that matter can be converted into energy. The mathematical relation between the energy "e" and the mass "m" is given by the famous equation $E=mc^2$ where "c" is the speed of light. Einstein proves that the mass of any body (matter) depends upon speed (energy) with which the body is moving. Energy thus supports matter and matter embodies energy.

Indeed, matter has its own soul or consciousness. Arouse matter, awaken the consciousness in it and see that matter manifests God. In the realm of subtle matter, Aswapathy perceives that both matter and spirit exist in perfect harmony:

In its antechambers of splendid privacy
Matter and soul in conscious union meet
Like lovers in a lonely secret place:²²

In *The Life Divine* also Sri Aurobindo has stressed the truth that matter is the body of spirit:

Matter reveals itself to the realising thought and
to the subtilised senses as the figure and the body
of Spirit-Spirit in its self-formative extension.
Spirit reveals itself through the same consenting
agents as the soul, the truth, the essence of matter.
Both admit and confess each other as divine, real
and essentially one.²³

Matter evolves the principles of Life. First, there is the plant life:

Alive and clad with trees and herbs and flowers
Earth's great brown body smiled towards the skies,
Azure replied to azure in the sea's laugh;²⁴

Then comes the animal life:

Amid a tedious crawl of drab desires
She writhed, a worm mid worms in Nature's mud,
Then, Titan-statured, took all earth for food,
Ambitioned the seas for robe, for crown the stars.²⁵

Life evolves mind. Thus, man is the latest evolution of Spirit. He has a mind which is half-lit and ignorant. He reasons to trace the mystery of the universe, but he fails to solve the enigma of life:

For not by Reason was creation made
And not by Reason can the Truth be seen ...²⁶

It is generally believed that mind is not capable of grasping the reality. But this is only partly true. It is the analytic, dialectic, argumentative mind, a mind impelled by desires and dominated by a separate ego-sense that cannot know reality. But mind can be made free from these defects. Mind is a derivative power of the Supermind which possesses a knowledge of unity inherently. Since it is fallen from a higher consciousness it can be made pure; the purified mind will be capable of receiving and reflecting the knowledge, power, peace, bliss descending from that plane of consciousness.

Mind, however, is not capable of realising all the aspects of truth integrally. So man must evolve in himself another level of consciousness which has the integral knowledge of the Absolute. This another consciousness, quite distinct from is named the Supermind by Sri mental consciousness, Aurobindo. The Supermind, we are told, is Truth Consciousness and the conscious creatrix of the world:

There is a world of everlasting Light,
In the realms of the immortal Supermind
Truth who hides here her head in mystery

Unenigmaed lives, unmasked her face and there
Is Nature and the common law of things.²⁷

The Supermind, *Savitri* reveals, shall be the next manifestation of spirit. Of course, it will emerge only when truth dictates life and mind aspires for the divine light. The poet prophesies that even truth will be established on earth:

And Truth shall be a sun on Nature's head
And Truth shall be the guide of Nature's steps
And Truth shall gaze out of her nether deeps.²⁸

After the manifestation of supramental consciousness, matter, life and mind will be radically transformed. They will be the vehicle of truth and God. Matter shall reveal Spirit:

The Spirit shall look out through Matter's gaze
And Matter shall reveal the Spirit's face.²⁹

Truth shall dictate Life:

The Truth shall be the leader of their lives,
Truth shall dictate their thought and speech and act,³⁰

Mind will aspire for the divine light:

Minds lit, inspired, the occult summoner hear
And lives blaze with a sudden inner flame...
And human wills tune to the divine will,³¹

The body will carry out the force of the divine:

A divine force shall flow through tissue and cell
And take the charge of breath and speech and act
And all the thoughts shall be a glow of suns
And every feeling a celestial thrill.³²

Ultimately, man will be able to conquer death:

Even there shall come as a high crown of all
The end of Death, the Death of Ignorance.³³

It is to be noted that Sri Aurobindo's idea of the Supermind is different from Alexander's concept of Deity. For Alexander, deity is a general term indicating the next higher principle. When matter is evolved, deity is the principle of life and when life is evolved deity is the principle of mind. Now when mind is evolved, what will be the next deity? Alexander does not give any *Satisfactory* answer. He simply says that the next deity will be something different from mind. But Sri Aurobindo has a definite idea of the Supermind. He stresses that the Supermind will be radically different from mind and it shall descend in order to transform the mind, life and body in its own light and power.

It is quite possible that the rationalists may have a doubt about the emergence of the supermind. But Sri Aurobindo says that the manifestation of the supermind is not merely a hope, but a certainty, "a thing decreed." *Savitri*'s answer to death is very convincing:

If in the meaningless Void creation rose,
If from a bodiless Force Matter was born,
If Life could climb in the unconscious tree,
If green delight break into emerald leaves

And its laughter of beauty blossom in the flower.
If sense could wake in tissue, nerve and cell,
And thought seize the grey matter of the brain,
And soul peep from its secrecy through the flesh,
How shall the nameless light not leap on men,
And unknown powers emerge from Nature's sleep³⁴

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also believes in the emergence of "a spiritual reality":

Over the centuries an all-embracing plan seems in truth to Something is afoot in the be unfolding around us... the birth of a spiritual reality formed by the universe ... souls of men and by the matter which they bear along with them.³⁵

Savitri, thus, lays bare the process of spiritual evolution. The ideas of evolution is not something new. It has been a dominant concept in western philosophy. Plato refers to it in his *Timaeus*. For Aristotle, evolution is teleological, it is the gradual transformation of the potential into an actual. But the theory of evolution has been explained from different viewpoints in the nineteenth century. Darwin thinks that evolution is a mechanical process; it is the progressive adjustment of the individual with his environment. Hegel considers it to be spiritual in the sense that it is gradual enfoldment of the universal reason in matter, life and mind. Bergson has the theory of Creative Evolution. He is of the opinion that the Creator has no control over the creation. Besides, the creator knows nothing about the end of the creation. Just as a painter does not have a fore-knowledge of a finished portrait, so the creator does not have a final picture of the end of the world:

The finished product is explained by the features of the model, by the nature of the artist, by the colours spread No one, not even the artist could have foreseen exactly what the portrait would be, for to predict it would have been to produce it before it was equally produced—an absurd hypothesis which is its own refutation... And just as the talent of the painter is formed or deformed—in any case is modified—under the influence of the works he produces, so each of our states, at the moment of its issue, modifies our personality, being indeed the new form that we are just assuming.³⁶

Sri Aurobindo agrees with none of these thinkers. For him evolution is spiritual in the sense that it is Spirit's return to itself. Just as in involution Spirit projects Itself out of Itself, so in evolution It comes back to Itself. Evolution is thus the home-coming of Spirit. Further, evolution is both cosmic and individual. On the cosmic plane, Nature is evolving the principles of matter, life, mind and the Supermind. On the individual plane, each one of us has to evolve the psychic being which dwells within the heart. The psychic being is a spark of the divine; it is known as *chaitya-purusha* in Indian philosophy. Evolution stands for the development of this psychic being in order that the pure light from it may flood the whole of surface life, mind and body.

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