

Śraddhā

*A Quarterly devoted to an exposition of the teachings of
The Mother and Sri Aurobindo*

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Contents

The Country and Nationalism	Sri Aurobindo	7
Sri Aurobindo, Namaste	Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati	10
Sri Aurobindo and The Veda	Kireet Joshi	14
The Path of Nachiketa	Alok Pandey	34
Veda Vyasa's <i>Mahabharata</i> in Sri Aurobindo's <i>Savitri</i>	Prema Nandakumar	41
Sadhana and Sahitya : The Early Years in Pondicherry	Richard Hartz	52
Sri Aurobindo and the Bengal Renaissance	Debashish Banerji	67
Sri Aurobindo's Concept of Freedom	Sonia Dyne	95
Nation and Beyond – Aspects of Sri Aurobindo's Political Vision	Dasharathi Sengupta	103
Five Martyrs of Bengal	Amalendu De	120
Beyond Mind : A New Paradigm of Psychology Based on the Mystical Exploration of Nature	Kundan Singh	128
Science and Religion	Georges Van Vrekhem	142
The Theme of Urvashi in the Indian Renaissance : Madhusudan Datta, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo	Ranajit Sarkar	168
Rabindranath and Sri Aurobindo : Towards Divine Humanity and Human Divinity	Saurendranath Basu	181

श्रद्धां लब्ध्वा ज्ञानं
Śraddhāvāṃl labhate jñanam

Who has faith.he attains knowledge

—Gita IV. 39

Editorial

To the celebrated young barrister who defended his case with a rare single-mindedness, he was ‘the poet of patriotism, the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity’; to the bard of Santiniketan, he was ‘the voice incarnate of the soul of India’. Bepin Chandra Pal, the great and revered nationalist leader, remarked that Sri Aurobindo was ‘the youngest in age... but in endowment, education and character, perhaps superior to them all’, ... ‘from a tutor of few youths he thus became the teacher of a whole nation’; of whom the great European savant, Romain Rolland, said ‘One who realised the most complete synthesis up to the present between the genius of the west and of the east’, ‘the last of the great Rishis holds in his hands the bow of the Creative Impulse’. But who can ever describe the indescribable or speak of the Ineffable – the ‘Myriad One’, ‘the Innumerable One’. Yet through some memorable lines in his epic *Savitri*, he has half parted the veil and let us have a glimpse into the Unknowable Mystery that he was.

A colonist from immortality...

As if a weapon of the living light
Erect and lofty like a spear of God

A marvel of the meeting earth and heavens...
A sapphire cutting from the sleep of heavens
A ray out of the rapturous infinite...
A living knot of golden Paradise...

But the nearest that we can get to a complete understanding of The Master are the words of the Mother whose consciousness was identical with his own. To the Mother, Sri Aurobindo is the Avatar of the Future...

Sri Aurobindo does not belong to the past nor to history.

Sri Aurobindo is the Future advancing towards its realisation.

In this issue, readers will find that we have laid a special emphasis on the social and political aspects, mainly because the Indian Independence day coincides with the birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo. We have also started from this number a separate section on ‘Notes about authors’, which, we hope, readers will find useful. We are grateful to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust for permission to reproduce Sri Aurobindo’s article ‘The Country and Nationalism’ from the book entitled ‘*Bengali writings*’ published by the Ashram Trust in 1991, Sri Aurobindo’s photograph inside the journal with a few lines from *Savitri* appended to it and Krishnalal’s painting ‘Salute to the Advent of Truth’ preserved in the Studio. Our grateful thanks to Samata in the Studio for identifying this painting by Krishnalal for the cover of the journal. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Chaitanya of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives for making available high resolution images of the painting and to Sri Robi Ganguly, formerly of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, for his unstinted help in doing the layout and design of the cover. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are reproduced here with acknowledgements and thanks to the Trustees.

The Country and Nationalism

Sri Aurobindo

The country and nothing but the country is the foundation of Nationalism, neither the nation, nor religion, nothing else matters. All other elements are secondary and contributory, it is the country alone that is primary and essential. Many, mutually exclusive races live in the land, perhaps there never was enough goodwill, unity or friendliness. What is there in that to worry about? When it is one country, one Mother—there is bound to be unity one day, and out of the union of many races shall emerge a strong and invincible nation. Our religious views may differ, there might be endless conflict among the communities, neither concordance nor any hope of concordance, still one need not have any misgivings. By the powerful magnetic attraction of the Mother embodied in the country, by fair means or foul—whether by mutual understanding, or by force or by appeasement—harmony will be achieved; communalism, separation will be drowned in fraternal feelings, in a common love and worship of the Mother. In a land of many languages brother is unable to understand brother, we do not sympathise with each other's feelings, between heart and heart there are immense barriers. These have to be overcome with much effort. Yet one need not fear. There is the same current of thought in every mind, of one country, one life, and under pressure of need a common language is bound to evolve, either one of the existing languages will come to be accepted, else a new language will be created. In the Mother's temple all will use that language. There is nothing permanent about these obstacles. The Mother's need, her attraction and deeper desire are not to be frustrated, these will surmount all obstacles and conflicts. Born of the same Mother, on her lap we live, in her five elements we merge and melt, in spite of a thousand real dissensions we shall unite at Her call. This is a law of Nature, the lesson of history everywhere: the country is the base of nationalism, an inevitable bond. Where there is a country of one's own, nationalism is bound to be there. On the other hand, if the country is not one, even if the race, the religion and the language are the same, nothing will come

of that. One day a separate race is sure to appear. By yoking together separate countries a great empire may be built; But that is not how a great nationality comes about. When the empire declines, separate nations spring up. Very often it is this inherent separateness that causes the empire to crash.

But even if the result is inevitable, the speed or delay with which it materialises will depend on human effort, human intelligence or the absence of it. In our country there never was unity before, but there had always been a pull, a current tending towards unity, towards welding the different parts into some kind of unity. There were some major obstacles regarding this natural attempt: first, the provincial differences; secondly, the Hindu-Muslim conflict; thirdly, the lack of a vision of the country as Mother. Its vast area, the delays and difficulties of communication, and the differences in language are some of the primary factors responsible for provincial disunity. Thanks to modern science, except for the last factor, the rest have lost their separative vigour. In spite of Hindu-Muslim differences, Akbar did manage to unify India. And had Aurangzeb not been a victim of lowly impulses, the Hindus and Muslims of India, like the Catholics and Protestants of England, would have long been united thanks to the time factor, habit and the threat of foreign invasion. Due to Aurangzeb's folly and the instigation of some of our English diplomats, the fire of conflict, fanned once more, refuses to go out. Our chief obstacle, however, is an absence of vision of the country as our Mother. For the most part our politicians have been incapable of a close and full vision of the Mother. Ranjit Singh or Guru Gobind Singh had seen only the Mother of the Land of the Five Rivers instead of Mother India; Shivaji or Baji Rao had seen a Mother of the Hindus instead of Mother India. The other Maharashtrian statesmen had seen only a Mother for the Maharashtrians. At the time of the Partition we ourselves had been blessed with a vision of Mother Bengal, that was a vision of unity, hence the future unity and progress of Bengal is assured. But the unified image of Mother India is yet to be realised. In the Congress, the Mother India that we hymned, adored and worshipped was a figure of fancy, a companion and obliging maid of the British Raj, an undivine illusion in occidental outfit. She was indeed not our Mother. All the same, hid in a deep or vague murkiness our true Mother drew our heart and soul. The day we see Her true indivisible image, struck by Her beauty and grace, we shall eagerly lay down our lives in Her service. Then this obstacle will be gone, and India's unity, freedom and progress be easier to achieve. The barrier of language will no longer divide. Accepting Hindi as a link language but with due regard for one's own regional language, we shall

get rid of the disability. We shall succeed in finding a true solution of the Hindu-Muslim conflict. For want of a vision of the country as the Mother, the urge to do away with these obstacles has not been strongly felt. That is why the means has not been found and the conflict been growing worse. What is required is an image of the country, true and indivisible. But if, under the illusion of that true vision, we still cherish only the Mother of the Hindus or Hindu nationalism we shall fall for the old error and deprive ourselves of the full flowering of Nationalism itself.

(The above is a reproduction from the book '*Bengali Writings of Sri Aurobindo*' and is a translation of the original article in Bengali which appeared in *Dharma*, No. 14, December 1909)

Sri Aurobindo, Namaste

Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati

“O Adorable Fire”! the Dawn of Divine Inspiration opens
with the hymn to Fire—
As the Power radiant that burns and bores,
As the Light supernal that leads and lays, the Way
To the deepest-laid treasure-bed of abiding Value
Thou art that Fire incarnate, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste*!
The Fire leaps with its threefold Flame—
As Inspiration high and sublime,
As Aspiration that conquers and consorts all,
As Attainment that completes and consummates all:
Not Fire alone that burns in the suns and atoms,
Nor Fire alone that shines in gods and godlike beings,
But, *par excellence*, the Fire that informs and transforms
creation’s Form and Pattern,
Enlightens its Soul, illumines its Spirit:
Thou art that Fire incarnate, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste*!
The Fire that in *one pada* (dimension) pervades and sways,
The positions and postures of existence here below,
But exceeds, in three other unrestricted, measureless measures;
Of whose deathless glory (*Mahima*) Vedic hymns sing;
The Fire celestial (*Divya*) shining beyond the sense that clouds.
Mind that doubts
And Intellect that debates and dogmatises

Thou art that Fire Supramental, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste!*
The Fire that resides as cave-dweller in the Creative *Vak* (word)
But releases the seeker of Fire Immortal from the cave of dark,
dubious being ;
The Fire that is ‘born’ on the altar of *Karma* (purifying Discipline)
The Fire that ‘grows’ in flames of *Bhakti* (steady and
single Devotion),
That fulfils with the shining Nectar of *Jnana* (whole Realisation),
Thou art that Fire incarnate, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste!*

The Fire as seeking Ardour, fearless and tireless, that in Upakos'ala
and Nachiketah burns—

Fire as the highest Illumination sought;
The Fire, Agni and Yama, lights and leads;
The Fire as Seeker, Seeking and Sought combined,
As also Guide, Seer and Teacher,
Thou art that Revealing Fire, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste!*
Seers know of *padas* (dimensions) numberless of Fire;
Tho' they speak of them, now as three, now as five, now as seven;
They so speak to make transcending Total Significance to us
comprehensible;

But it is the unfathomed Immensity of Significance,
Where both star and dust, soul arid sense,
Their import receive, their commerce carry, their destiny fulfil:
Thou art that Fire of Complete Significance, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste!*
Thy incarnation here, now ended, is unlimited in time, space and event:
Thy Life an eternal Code (*sutram*),
Thy Sadhana an eternally lucid Commentary (*bhashyam*),
Thy creation in Thought and Harmony, in Whole Yoga and
Divine Communion,
Is an Epic incomparable,
Unique and profound, surpassing and sublime;

O Expression and Exponent of Life Divine, of Perfect Yoga,
Of Meaning and Spirit of all Time, Sri Aurobindo, *namaste!*
Momentous is the Epoch that turns the Wheel and ushers the
present age—
Momentous in human sadhana in knowledge, in power, for both
emancipation and achievement;
The curtain rises, the stage lighted for the play of new Creative Event:
Mother Bengal wakes with the mahamantra, Bande Mataram:
To thee, Sri Aurobindo, is assigned the role that inspires, leads and fulfils:
To thee is committed the Charge Divine,
Of keeping alive and carrying to its culmination
The Fire— with threefold flame:
Of Man's integral self-awakening, self-avowing, self-emancipation
here and now:

The last, specially, as the End —
Which to thee, Sri Aurobindo, is Purna Svaraj — Freedom Perfect as in
Life Divine, *namaste!*
The curtain riseth again, the scene changeth:
In the solitude of Asrama,
Broadened and deepened, embalmed and inspired,
By the divinely significant Sea lapping in homage low and ecstatic at
Ramesvaram — and Kanya Kumarika,
Thy asana is unshakably laid in glory of Purna Yoga,
Invoking and realising,
The Divine Mother as Perfect Power, as Perfect Harmony, as
Perfect Vidya (Knowledge), and Perfect Godhead:
Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati, Maheshwari.
The deluge of radio-active destruction, now mounting high, and
looming near, now low, and receding —
What does it spell, Seer! to whom Time has nothing secreted
sealed ?

Thy immortal Epic Voice in Savitri assures and cheers —
The colossal unrest and abysmal fear of the age,
 Is mighty travail of re-birth,
Of Man, Divine in spirit and expression,
From under the appalling pall of blinded belief, confounded
 lust and greed and spite.
O, that message of Fire Divine, as saviour and builder of the
 coming Age, come true, now!
Devoutly aspires a lagging wayfarer on thy Way,
As the shades are fast falling and gathering,
And his pace slackening on the immensely intriguing,
 yet arresting shore:
The Shore kneeling and accosting (greeting) the Sea,
 Sri Aurobindo, *namo namaste!*

Sri Aurobindo Day,
15. 8. 1963.

Sri Aurobindo and The Veda

Kireet Joshi

I would like to share with you some of the statements of the Veda and Sri Aurobindo's light on these statements and reflections. There is one very important statement that Sri Aurobindo has made in *The Foundations of Indian Culture* where he speaks of the immediate work of India. And I would like to underline this, because this meeting is being held in Bharat Nivas, which is dedicated to the promotion of Indian culture. Sri Aurobindo has said: There are three tasks that India has to accomplish.

The first task is to recover the ancient spiritual knowledge in its fullness, in amplitude — this is the first task. And this means of course, basically, the recovery of the *Veda*, *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, and the *Puranas* and *Tantras*. This is, you might say, the basic stuff of what can be called the ancient spiritual knowledge of India. I underline the word knowledge because, usually, although this knowledge is contained in what are called scriptures — and scriptures are sometimes regarded as the revelations which are made once for all and have to be accepted unquestioningly, and therefore philosophers do not accept them as bodies of knowledge — whereas here, although these are scriptures, Vedas are scriptures, *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, *Tantra*, *Puranas*, they are still to be considered as books of knowledge, because India does not regard them as revelations made for all time, which cannot be repeated, which cannot be verified. According to the Vedic tradition, the faculty of revelation can be so developed that one can have a constant stream of revelations. And, therefore, it is not something which comes once for all, but one can have repeated revelations, and revelations can be verified by revelations, and they can be experimented upon, they can be enlarged as in scientific knowledge you can enlarge upon the knowledge, you can even overpass, you can have a new revelation, a new knowledge. So Sri Aurobindo has deliberately used the word, "Ancient Indian spiritual knowledge." This has to be recovered. It has to be recovered because it has greatly been lost. Mother once wrote down one message in which She said:

“India has or rather had the knowledge of the Spirit.” So She wanted to underline that India should not take the pride of having today a living knowledge of the Spirit. India has deviated a long way from the possession of that knowledge and therefore it has to be recovered. This is the first task.

The second task, Sri Aurobindo has said: India has to pour that knowledge into new modes of philosophical, scientific and critical knowledge. This is a very difficult task. In fact it has been made easy because Sri Aurobindo himself wrote a huge philosophical work called *The Life Divine*, in which he has demonstrated how the ancient knowledge can be poured into the philosophical modes of thinking, and how in modern times it can be presented in the modern fashion and even shown how we can advance from the past towards the new.

The third task, Sri Aurobindo has said, is to deal with the contemporary problems in a new manner, and to realise a spiritualised society. These are the three tasks, of which the last one, he said, is the most difficult task. And the proportion in which India can accomplish these three tasks — to that extent India will have fulfilled her mission. In fact the third task also Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have initiated and where we are sitting now, this great seat called Auroville, is India’s effort inviting the whole world to meet together and attempt to create a spiritualised society. So, in fact, the extent to which we can succeed here, in Auroville, to that extent India will have fulfilled her mission.

But these last two tasks will depend very largely upon the recovery of the first task, the recovery of the ancient spiritual knowledge. It would be very useful if we can enter into the ancient treasure of spiritual knowledge. It is a very difficult terrain, it is so complex, and it is buried under so much of a plethora of interpretations that it is extremely difficult to penetrate like into a jungle. To someone like me who has been brought up in India right from childhood in the real Indian tradition, where the Veda was my constant childhood friend, I had a home in which Veda was recited every day — and in spite of this kind of upbringing, it is only when I came to Sri Aurobindo that I really entered into the real portals of the Vedic knowledge, and till that time, all that I knew of the Veda and the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* and the *Puranas* was a real dense forest, difficult to penetrate, difficult even to walk, even one mile, into that big terrain. We recited the mantras of the Veda, the hymns of the Veda, understood a little, because sometimes the words are not so difficult and you can make out some meaning out of it, but when you try to penetrate into, what we can call knowledge, there was a constant failure.

Many of us who read the western scholars interpreting the Veda, found in their interpretations an echo of our own lack of understanding. The western scholars came across this great body of Vedic knowledge in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps many of you may not know the vast corpus of the Veda itself. Apart from the interpretations of the Veda, which are also huge, the mere text of the Veda itself is very vast. What is called Veda consists of four huge books: the first one is called *Rig Veda*, the second is called *Yajur Veda*, the third is called *Sama Veda*, and the fourth is called *Atharva Veda*. These are four huge volumes. *Rig Veda* is the biggest. It has ten chapters and totally it has ten thousand verses. In a recent publication, mere Sanskrit text and English translation has come to twelve volumes of *Rig Veda* alone. *Atharva Veda* is half of the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda* is the shortest, and *Yajur Veda* is more than one fourth of the *Rig Veda*.

Basically, *Rig Veda* is regarded as *the Veda*, and Sri Aurobindo made a study of this *Rig Veda* in depth. But when this study was made by the western scholars in the nineteenth century, after studying them they found that the Veda seemed to be compositions of barbarians, naive in their imagination, superstitious, materialist, seeking for wealth, and progeny and cows and horses. Not understanding the real depth and not understanding the connections of ideas, they really felt that the entire Vedic corpus is simply a bundle of worthless material, which may be studied for historical reason to show to people what barbaric people of ancient times thought and conceived and imagined, but for no other purpose. In fact Max Müller, after interpreting the whole of the Veda, wrote a letter to his wife, I don’t quote exactly the words, but he said: “I have now accomplished the task of translating the whole of the *Rig Veda* and when people, even in India, when they will read my translation and understand what Veda contains, they will find that there is nothing in it, and then they will easily turn to Christianity and embrace it.”

This was the confidence with which he translated, and many others who came to translate and many of them who interpreted the Veda coincided in their interpretations and many of the Indian scholars who read these western scholars, also dared not depart from this interpretation of the western scholars. Even a philosopher like Radhakrishnan, while writing on the Veda in his book called *Indian Philosophy*, says, in one of the paragraphs of his writings, “Sri Aurobindo sees a great light and psychological truth in the Veda,” but he remarks: “But when we see that western scholars do not agree with him, we also cannot

agree with Sri Aurobindo.” This is the remark of a man like Radhakrishnan, who is supposed to be one of the foremost philosophers of India. You can see, therefore, how difficult it is for scholars to understand the Veda. Now there is a history of the interpretation of the Veda, and this history has to be understood before we can appreciate how Sri Aurobindo penetrated through this great forest of the Vedic interpretations and brought a great light out of these Vedic verses.

This interpretation starts with the *Upanishads*. *Upanishads* claimed that what they have written in their compositions are nothing but reaffirmations of the Veda. Now, this is a very important point because *Upanishads* are regarded by scholars all over the world to be of tremendous importance and full of light. On this there is no dispute either in the East or in the West. And the *Upanishads* themselves declare that they are nothing but affirmations of the Veda. Therefore, at least for the Upanishadic seers, Veda are books of knowledge. When we come to the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is regarded to be the quintessence of the Veda, it also mentions that Veda is a book of knowledge. *Puranas* also claimed that Veda is a book of knowledge. *Tantra* also regards Veda as a book of knowledge. Indian schools of philosophy regard Veda as an authority, and it is a tradition in Indian philosophy, if your conclusions of philosophical thought do not coincide with what is in the Veda, then your conclusions are wrong, but what is in the Veda is true. Such is the tradition in Indian philosophy.

In spite of this great tradition of the authoritativeness of the Veda, there came a school of interpretation, and a long line of interpretation, starting with Yaska, one of the great interpreters of the Veda. And this line ended with a great scholar of the fourteenth century A.D. called Sayana. He was himself a Prime Minister of a state in South India and also a great Vedic scholar, and he had the possibility of employing a whole huge mass of scholars to assist him. And Sayana interpreted all the four Vedas — a huge task he accomplished, and it is itself so big that it requires a long life time to study and therefore to differ from him would require a further time, and therefore Sayana’s interpretation ultimately became the standard interpretation of the Veda in India, after a long period. If you read Sayana’s interpretation, it would seem that Vedic Rishis and the greatness of Vedic Rishis and the claim that Vedic texts contain knowledge is a colossal fiction. If you read Sayana, you would be obliged to conclude that his claim that Veda contains knowledge cannot be sustained. Sayana himself is

a ritualist, who believes that Vedas were written for ritualistic purposes. He reveres the Veda, not like the Vedic interpreters of the modern scholars of western scholarship. He reveres, he has a respect for the Veda but he believes that Veda is simply a book of rituals. And if you recite the Mantras, they have a magical effect and it will give you certain rewards if these mantras are recited properly. In other words, they are magical superstitions, magical mantras which can be recited, which can produce results in your life. Results as of materialistic gains, of progeny and wealth and so on, such will be the meaning of the Veda according to Sayana. It was on Sayana’s basis that Vedic scholars of the West made their interpretations and they went one step further. Whatever reverence there was in Sayana for the Veda was blotted out, and it was proved that Vedas are important only from the point of view of the primitive history, but of no further use for mankind in the future. It has no message.

Now Sri Aurobindo himself, when he came to study the Veda in his early stages of his life, without studying Veda properly, too, had felt that these modern interpretations may be quite meaningful, may be quite valid. This was the climate of the modern Indians and even now it is largely so. One of the last interpretations of the Veda was by a great scholar of the nineteenth century in India called Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati. He interpreted the Veda. He criticised Sayana very severely and affirmed that Veda is a book of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo himself has written a very illuminating article and essay on Dayananda and though he has paid tribute to Dayananda, yet he does not coincide his own interpretation with the interpretation of Dayananda.

It was when Sri Aurobindo had already had three great realisations of his yoga, and when he came to Pondicherry that he turned to Veda seriously for the first time. By this time he had the realisation of the Brahmic nirvana under the guidance of the Maharastrian yogi, Lele. He had a further realisation of the universal Vasudeva Krishna in the Alipore jail and he had already in the Alipore jail also heard the voice of Vivekananda for fifteen days uninterruptedly, where Sri Aurobindo was given the knowledge of the planes between the mind and the Supermind. It was after this background that Sri Aurobindo had numerous experiences to which he had no clue, either in western psychology or modern psychology or ancient psychology or anywhere, but these experiences were rising in his consciousness, as he says himself. Particularly, he had the experiences of what in the Veda are called *Ila*, *Saraswati*, *Sarama*, *Daksha*.

These are four female energies described in the Veda and, without knowing this, Sri Aurobindo already had experience of these energies. And he had no clue as to what these energies are. What are these powers which were rising in his own consciousness on their own? And then when he happened to read the Veda, with this background, he directly contacted and understood and found a confirmation of his own experiences in the Veda. This was the way in which the key of the Veda was found by his own personal experiences which preceded his understanding of the Veda. It is not as if these experiences came to him after reading the Veda and then finding them in the Veda he confirmed his own experiences; it is the other way round. He already had the experiences of these highest powers of consciousness and found a clue to them in the *Rig Veda*. It is said in the Veda that only the seer can understand the words of the seer. This is the Vedic expression itself *ninya vachamsi*, that is, secret words, *kavaye nivachanani*, they are revealed only to the kavi, to the poet, to the seer, and it is confirmed in the case of Sri Aurobindo: the secret meaning of the Veda was revealed only to the seer, to Sri Aurobindo.

After studying this Veda—to cover, within two or three years, such a huge mass of Vedic knowledge, is really something like a Herculean labour which he accomplished within a short time, as if he dived into the Veda and collected all the treasures and brought the jewels and diamonds out of the Veda—Sri Aurobindo began to express and put them before mankind. It was in 1914, that is to say, 1910, he came to Pondicherry, and by 1914, within four years, he had attained to such a mastery of the secret meaning of the Veda that he began to write a series of articles under the title *The Secret of the Veda*. It is a masterly interpretation because he finds the proof of his own interpretation in the Veda itself. It is by internal evidence that he shows that the interpretation he has given follows clearly and obviously, luminously, from the Vedic verses themselves.

It is in the light of this that he says that *Upanishads* also can be understood properly. In fact, although *Upanishads* are famous for their knowledge, even today if you go to the scholars to ask the interpretation of the *Upanishads*, three fourths of the *Upanishads*, is a closed door, even today. Even those who praise *Upanishads* to the sky, whether in the East or in the West, even they when they read the *Upanishads* and you ask them questions you really find that they are absolutely out of their depth. They cannot explain, and it is quite obvious because unless you understand the Veda, and the secret of the Veda,

Upanishads cannot truly be understood. Fortunately Sri Aurobindo has written for us also, at least two great commentaries, on two important *Upanishads*: *Isha Upanishad* and the *Kena Upanishad*, and he has translated eight *Upanishads* in totality. That is a tremendous help that we can get to understand the *Upanishads* properly. Similarly if you do not understand the Veda properly, you cannot understand properly the *Bhagavad Gita*, although *Bhagavad Gita* is not a secret book like the Veda, nor like the *Upanishads*, so pregnant with meaning. And yet the *Bhagavad Gita*, too, cannot be understood properly, if you do not understand the Veda. In other words, the recovery of the ancient knowledge — Vedas, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* cannot be achieved except in the light of what Sri Aurobindo has written on the Veda. That is how I consider Sri Aurobindo's *The Secret of the Veda* to be of the highest importance.

I spoke till now as if the Veda is important for India, and for the recovery of India, but, actually speaking, the Veda may be looked upon as *the* only document of the ancient time available to the whole humanity, that is to say, if you trace the world history, and if you try to find out what was the earliest composition of the earliest stage of humanity, nothing is available to us today except the Veda. This is the only, we can call, document, the only composition which is available to humanity. There were of course many other traditions in the ancient times, and there was certainly a great tradition of knowledge, there were traditions which you find in ancient Chaldea, in ancient Persia, in Egypt, in Greece, but all these traditions have been lost. There is hardly anything available, in the form of any text. There are ideas, there are mythologies, but as far as the texts are concerned, even the Greek mythology which is available is a later statement of the earlier Eleusinian tradition, and the secret knowledge which is lost.

So if you want to know what was the earliest thought of mankind, and if you want the proof of that earliest document of mankind, we have to turn only to the Veda because it is the only document available for the whole humanity. If you want to reconstruct human history, and the thought of human history, all the nations have to turn to the Veda to seek the description of the earliest thoughts of mankind for which you have proof. And what a proof! Because we must remember that this Vedic text was right from the beginning so much revered in India, obviously because it was considered to be a book of knowledge at that time, whatever you might say in modern times about it.

It was known to the Vedic seer that they contain supreme secret knowledge, and therefore a tradition had developed in India that this knowledge should never be allowed to be lost. And a system was evolved in India so that one section of people of India had the obligation to memorise either all the four Vedas or at least one Veda. This has been the tradition. And memorising not in a haphazard manner, but a very special system was evolved of memorising, of singing, of chanting the mantras of the hymns where every syllable was measured, and its place was fixed absolutely. Fortunately, even today, in spite of great losses of many kinds, there are at least two thousand chanters, singers, who can recite the Veda exactly as it was recited five thousand years ago. I have myself, in one of the capacities of my governmental work, made a survey in India, and, in Andhra Pradesh particularly, we have a large number of singers of the Veda, also in different parts of India, and I have tried to record on tape some of the chanting of these Vedic recitations, so that we can one day hear them even here before us.

The specialty of this method of singing is that it is sung in seven different ways, and all the seven ways should coincide so there is no mistake occurring anywhere. All the seven different methods, and the last method, which is called the *ganapatha*, the method in which you first pronounce the first syllable, then you pronounce the second syllable, then you go back to the first syllable, and pronounce again the second, and then pronounce the third, then you go back again to the second, and then pronounce the first, and then again you go back to the second, and third, and fourth, and go back to the third, and second, and first, until you come to the end of a verse, which takes nearly from ten to fifteen minutes, even to recite one mantra like *Agni mile purohitam yagnasya devamritvijam hotaram ratnadhatamam*. This is a very simple first verse of the *Rig Veda*. This recitation in this *ganapatha* takes at least fifteen minutes, because of this method. And it is chanted, it is not only recited like prose, it is chanted. In fact even the chanting is so wonderful that when you hear the chanting, you know, these repetitions are so beautiful and so marvellous that you would like to go on hearing, hearing, hearing again and again, marvellous! And then the whole of *Rig Veda*, ten thousand verses, if you have to recite in this way you can imagine what a tremendous feat it would be, and how to memorise! And these memorisers remember both ways, and every word, as you move forward and backward and they have complete memory of it. It is a part of the training, right from the childhood at the age of four or five they start memorising. This is a part of their work. The tradition is so revered that even till today we have at least two thousand people in India who can recite exactly in

the way in which they were reciting five thousand years ago. This is the reason why we have today an accurate text, of which there can be no question at all. If anybody doubts that this is not the text, you can just call a singer and ask him to recite in the *ganapatha* and every syllable is caught, even today, so that it is not left to the printer's mistakes. The printing came much later. In fact throughout the history of India, it has been an oral tradition. That is why, as Sri Aurobindo says, today we have almost an accurate text of the Veda, and not only of the Veda, this is true also of the *Brahmanas*, and *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* and many others scriptures, the same method. It is tremendous. What a prodigious memory these Brahmins developed! In any case, there is no dispute about the fact that these Vedic texts are accurate, whether we understand them or not, but on this question there is no doubt that these are the most ancient texts available to mankind.

So if human history has to be written correctly, if the thought of human mind has to be written historically, there is no recourse for mankind except to go back to the Veda. So the importance of the Veda is not only for India but for the whole world. It is the world's earliest text available and therefore what the earliest man thought, what he conceived. If you want to find out, we have got to go back to the Veda. Even though they may not be the most ancient, because as Sri Aurobindo says, it is very clear that the Vedas were preceded by a very great civilisation, a very powerful stage of civilisation. And it was only when that age was declining that it was felt that the fragments of the knowledge of these Vedic seers were put together by a Rishi called Vyasa. In any case this is the tradition, that there was a great Rishi called Vyasa, who knew the Vedas in their fullness and he made an anthology, so these four Vedas are not the full text of all that was in that civilisation available as the Veda. But this is only an anthology, only selections, it is a miscellany you may say.

What we call Veda is therefore an imperfect statement of what was at that time developed in that ancient time. So what must have been the civilisation at that time can only be imagined when we first understand the light that Sri Aurobindo had shed upon these texts, and secondly when we understand the poetic brilliance — you know, one of the marks whether the poetry is barbaric or naive or primitive or very developed can be seen by the metrical perfection and, as Sri Aurobindo remarks, the rhythms of the Veda. As Sri Aurobindo says, the rhythms of the Veda are like the chariots of the Gods and they have a perfect symmetrical form, perfect, and this is Sri Aurobindo's remark, who is

one of the greatest poets. It is his tribute to the Vedic rhythms, perfect symmetrical forms, that we find in the Veda. So even if you do not understand the meaning of the Veda, even if they are barbaric, at least the poetical form is not barbaric, that is certain. Barbarians could not have produced that kind of symmetrical perfection of the rhythms throughout the Veda. It is lyrical in its sublimity; both the elements of lyricism, and epic character, both are present. In all the verses of the Veda, as you recite the Vedic verses, and even if you do not know, if you simply listen to it, the rhythms, the symmetrical forms, the sounds, the ringings of these Vedic verses are so perfect. As Sri Aurobindo says: You fly on the wings, as you sing these Vedic verses. This is the kind of power that the Vedic verses possess.

Sri Aurobindo has said that Vedic poetry is *mantric* poetry. And this is a very important point to be underlined. Vedic poetry is *mantric* poetry. What does it mean? In fact Sri Aurobindo has explained the meaning of mantric poetry in his great book *The Future Poetry*. Sri Aurobindo has said: To arrive at *mantra* — *mantra* cannot be translated into English, but, let us say, what Sri Aurobindo calls the highest expression, which is poetical in character, is, let us say, it is *mantra*. And in India, *mantra* is that rhythmic expression which, when recited, produces a physical effect this is called *mantra*. If you say *Tathastu*, in a *mantric* form, let it be so, it will be so, physically. This is the Indian tradition, that if you have attained to *mantric* power in your poetry then any *mantric* expression will produce physical effects. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is entirely *mantric* in character. This is how Sri Aurobindo has shown what he has written in *The Future of Poetry*, that Future Poetry will be *mantric*, he has said, and to give an example of it the whole of *Savitri* is now available to us which is *mantric* in character and that is why *Savitri* is not merely poetry, it is effective force in action.

And that is true of the Vedic mantras and, in very brief, Sri Aurobindo said: The *mantric* poetry must satisfy three criteria: first, it must have the highest intensity of rhythm. In fact Sri Aurobindo has said that the one mark of poetry is rhythmic words. There is no poetry if there are no rhythmic words; prose and poetry differ in this: in prose you may not have rhythmic words, but poetry is marked by rhythmic words. But the highest intensity of rhythmic words, that is a mark of *mantra*, not merely rhythmic words. There are so many poems which are in rhythms, but that is not highest poetry, not *mantric*. *Mantric* poetry must have the highest intensity of rhythmic expression. That is the first mark.

Second, highest intensity of style. What is style? It is the perfect correspondence with the mode of expression and the meaning of expression. What you want to say is conveyed exactly by the mode in which that meaning is suitable to it. The higher intensity of style is a second mark of *mantric* poetry.

And the third mark is the highest vision of the highest truth. The intensity of that vision, because all poetry or all art is basically a perception. Where there is no perception, it is not poetry, not art, not sculpture. Perception and the deep perception. Such a perception that you go on, deeply perceiving, until that perception gives out an image. That is called the depth of perception. All art is nothing but this: a perception, perceived so deeply, so deeply, that what you are perceiving begins to take a form, an image. And when you can express that image, you are an artist. In poetry, the highest vision of the truth, not anything, not like experience of a stone, or of sleep, or a beautiful moon or a sun, not that, but the highest vision of the highest truth, the widest truth, the most comprehensive truth, and the deepest experience of it. When that is captured in your poetry that is *mantra*.

And Sri Aurobindo has said: The entire corpus of the Veda is *mantric* poetry. So you can imagine, apart of the meaning of the Veda, if the very poetic form has got this much of power, how could it be termed as primitive or barbaric at all. This is the first point that we have to make with regard to what Sri Aurobindo has said about the Veda.

The second point I want to make is that Sri Aurobindo discovered that Vedas have been written in a secret way. That is to say, outwardly it has one meaning, inwardly it has another meaning. Although there is a parallelism, there was a reason behind it. The reason was that a secret knowledge had to be communicated, and if that communication falls into the hands of an uninitiated, he can misuse it both for himself and the others. Fortunately, in the modern time, some of the secrets of knowledge are very difficult; even if you start learning, it takes twenty, thirty years to find out the secret of that knowledge. But we know that once it is known, like atomic energy, or any other, even making telephone, and Internet and so on, you know how misuses can be made of all these instruments and what terrible effects it has already produced in our civilisation. Now this was known to the Vedic seers that knowledge if it is given to an uninitiated can be very harmful to the people — and yet it had to be communicated. So they developed a secret code, and Sri Aurobindo calls it algebraic code; that is, the Veda is written in a form of algebra.

If you do not know algebra and you read the book of algebra, what meaning can you make out of it? Unless the meaning of the figures and symbols is known to you, you cannot make out anything out of an algebraic book. The Veda is therefore algebraic in character. Now this is a second point I want to make, that Veda is difficult to understand, the meaning of it is secret because of this fact. It is written in algebraic form. You use the word cow, in an ordinary sense we all know what is cow, but in the algebraic form, cow means light. And if you read the Veda throughout, wherever the word cow comes, you put the word light, it will fit in very well. But if you don't put cow for light, it will look very bizarre. The cow stands before a horse, and what is the light, what is the luminous meaning in it? Nothing! A cow stands before the horse. But the same thing, you turn it, and say, the horse is the symbol for Power, Energy, *Shakti*, cow is Light, so *Chit-Shakti*. Cow and horse together is a symbol for *Chit-Shakti*, which makes a tremendous meaning. Now, you put it anywhere in the whole of the Veda, wherever it comes, you put these two words, do not use cow and horse, you simply use the word light and power. It will make a very simple, luminous, obvious meaning. But if you don't know this, then everything look bizarre, and it may look very primitive, and barbaric. This is the reason why many people, not knowing the algebra of Veda, have come to the conclusion that the Veda is barbaric and primitive. Now, it is Sri Aurobindo's tremendous insight, because of his own experiences, that he discovered this algebra of the Veda in this all-great book, *The Secret of the Veda*. This *Secret of the Veda* gives you the algebraic meanings of various words and terms which have been used in the Veda.

The third point I want to make is that this Veda contains a very deep knowledge of reality, of the world, and of the self. Triple knowledge: god-knowledge, world-knowledge, and soul-knowledge (self-knowledge). Now, what is that knowledge, what is the content of that knowledge?

What is God? What is ultimate reality? It is not the kind of god sitting in the seventh heaven with a long beard. In one of the first statements in the first chapter of the Rig Veda, I will only recite one couplet of this particular mantra which is very, very curious:

*Na nunamasti no shvah kastadveda yadadbhutam anyasya
chittamabhi samcharenyamutadhitam vinashyati.*

This is the Sanskrit couplet, which says: The ultimate reality is neither today nor tomorrow. Who knows that reality, which is wonderful. Why is it wonderful? It has motion, it is alone, there is no other, but it has motion in another. Therefore it is *adbhutam*, wonderful. It has motion in another, and when you try to approach it through your intellectual thought, where you always distinguish between one and another, and divide the two, and don't understand the mystery of one itself being another, if you apply that intellect on it, it vanishes. In other words, if you try to understand it intellectually, you will never grasp it, because it is wonderful. It does not follow the logic of the finite, it follows the logic of the infinite. The one that is many. As Sri Aurobindo says in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, ultimate reality is simple-complex. It is simple complex, at the same time. It is one that is many, it is static that is dynamic. It is the same thing which is said in the *Upanishad*. In the *Isha Upanishad* the same idea is expressed.

Etad ejati, etad na ejati, tadejati tannaijati.

It moves, it moves not. It is far, it is near.

It is wonderful. Now this is the first starting point of the Vedic knowledge of reality, of God. And there are so many other verses to which I do not make reference here for the sake of brevity. Then comes the world-knowledge. What is the world knowledge of the Veda? They say the physical world that we see is only the outer fringe of the whole world. But even this world consists of three earths. There are three earths, not one earth. Even the earth that we see is not one earth. Then there is the intermediate between earth and heaven. Heaven is a word used in the algebraic language of the Veda as mind. Wherever the word heaven comes in the Veda you have to say, it is mind. Wherever the word *prithivi*, earth, comes, you have to understand it to be the physical. Wherever the word *antariksha* comes, it is algebraic term for the intermediate world. So there are three worlds, first of all: the world of the physical, the world of the vital and the world of the mental. These are the first three, to which we have a normal access. But then it says: The Vedic seers took a long time in their search to find out *turiyam svid*; this is another word which is very important in Sanskrit, *turiyam svid*, that fourth one. *Turiyam svid* is again an algebraic term, That fourth one. There is a short story in the Rig Veda given of a Rishi call Ayasya. Ayasya is a name of a Rishi. The story is that there were nine

Angirasa Rishis. Angirasa is a name of the clan. Nine Rishis were in search of the highest that is possible. There were searching, and searching, and searching in their quest. At last they came across a great man called Ayasya and they got his help in this search, and, with his help, these nine Angirasa seers, when they became ten with Ayasya, then they found *turiyam svid*, they found the fourth one, the fourth reality. The three are: earth, the intermediate, and heaven: body, life and mind. But the fourth one, they discovered; with what? *Saptadhi*.

There is another word in the Veda, again another algebraic term, *saptadhi*, seven-headed thought, a thought which has seven heads. With seven heads of thought, that is mind has to be so wide as to become seven-headed. With the help of the seven-headed thought, Ayasya broke open the fourth world and with the opening of the fourth world he became universal. *Vishvam ajanayat*. He manifested the whole universality. This fourth is regarded as the most important discovery of the Vedic seers. And Sri Aurobindo afterwards tells us that this fourth is the Supermind. *Turiyam svid* is the Supermind. So the Vedic seers had discovered the Supermind. And beyond the Supermind, they discovered the triple reality which, in later times, came to be recognised as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*: the Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. These are also the name of three gardens of Matrimandir that Mother has given. Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. So, if you now see the world, as we saw in the Vedic times, consisted of these planes, three highest, Existence, Consciousness, Bliss. Then comes the Supermind, and then come mind, life and matter. This is their world-knowledge. I must tell you that I am making a great injustice to the Veda by summarising so primitively and so very briefly, so naively, but this is the basic formula, you might say, of the world-knowledge of the *Rig Veda*, of the Veda.

What is the soul-knowledge? According to the *Rig Veda*, this is one of the most secret knowledge. Now let us give a little time to this most secret knowledge of the Veda. This has very much to do with our own yoga. This soul is given an algebraic term in the Veda, called *Agni*. *Agni* is the mystic fire. Fire is that which you see outside very easily but, inside, it is our inner self, inner soul, what we call in Sri Aurobindo's psychology, "psychic being". This psychic being is our real inner, inmost soul. And this was discovered after a long, long search. If you read the Vedic verses you will find what a tremendous search they were making and there is so much of knowledge of *Agni* given, and so important that Sri Aurobindo himself has written one full book of hymns addressed to *The Mystic Fire*, in the *Rig Veda*. Sri Aurobindo has collected and

translated each one of them. And this is the most precious knowledge that we have now, because *Agni* is the most profound secret of the Vedic knowledge, according to Veda. In fact, the very first verse of the Veda starts with *Agni*. Without *Agni*, without the knowledge of mystic fire, you cannot enter into the portals of Vedic knowledge. You must know yourself very deeply, profoundly, to understand the world, and it is by rising from plane to plane that you rise to the Supreme and discover that wonderful reality that has motion in another plane.

Now this mystic fire has been described variously in the Veda. Apart from the Rig Veda, there are many Agni mantras in many other Vedas also, but this knowledge which is available about Fire, mystic Fire, it is to that that Sri Aurobindo makes a reference when he describes in *The Life Divine* about the psychic being. And he says: It is the flame that burns in the heart, which is inextinguishable; it is the conscience deeper than the conscience of the moralist. It is the Daemon of Socrates, it is that which turns always towards the truth and beauty and goodness, which detects the truth from falsehood, unmistakably. *That* is our true soul which is within ourselves and the Veda makes out that without illumining this Fire, you cannot enter into the deeper knowledge that is in the Veda. That is the importance of Mystic Fire. What you are internally is this Fire. And this Fire itself has an origin. And Sri Aurobindo speaks of the origin of the psychic being also.

But in the Veda there is a very tremendous story which Mother has sometimes told. She said: I talk about it very childishly, and says that a time came in the history of the world when the four emanations, which had originated from the ultimate reality, separated from the origin and there came about a complete darkness. And when that darkness came, then the supreme Divine Mother went back to the Supreme Lord and said: An accident has occurred and there has come about a complete darkness. And what is to be done? And then the Lord said: You create some other beings who will not separate themselves from the origin. And that was the origin of Gods. Gods were created, but even the gods when they saw darkness and they were asked to go down into the darkness so that then the light can come out of it, they refused, they said: It is so dark, we shall not enter into it. It was then that the Gods saw in the Divine Mother, in the *Aditi*—*Aditi* is the Sanskrit name for Divine Mother—they saw in *Aditi* a special Light, something special, and they said: *That*, if it can be brought down, then it can bring back light into this darkness. That Light is

Mystic Fire. That who is called *Agni*, that is the origin of *Agni*, is in the Supreme Divine Mother.

And it was put forth. In one of the talks, Mother has said that the Supreme Divine Mother, when she saw the darkness, a tremendous Love oozed out of Her and that Love crystallised and fell upon the darkness, this is the psychic element which entered into the darkness. And all the psychic beings are nothing but evolutionary developments of this original psychic element which is nothing but Love of the Divine Mother. And that is why the psychic being automatically turns to the Divine Mother in an experience of Love. That is why in our own yoga, that is the importance given to it. But this is the Vedic truth told in a very algebraic term.

There is one very important word in the *Rig Veda* which says that, if you recite this mantra, you will be free from all sins. And this is the promise given in the Veda. It is called *Agha marshana mantra*. *Agha* means “sin”, *marshana* means “wiping out”. A mantra which can wipe out all the sins. And that mantra is very simple:

*Ritam cha satyam chabhiddhat tapaso dhyajayata tato
ratryajayata tatah samudro arnavah.*

Why is it called the mantra that can wipe out the sins? Because if you know the origin of all this, what is all this darkness and how darkness can be removed by the power of the Divine Love and by Mystic Fire, if you know this, all sins can be wiped out. So that is why it is called the mantra of wiping out the sins, which simply says: In the beginning there was *Tapas*. *Tapas* is nothing else than Power of concentration, power of concentration of the Supreme. There is first the Supreme, that which is neither here nor there, that Supreme has a power of concentration. That is *Tapas*. From the *Tapas* comes out first *Ritam ca Satyam*, that which is Truth and the Right. This is the first. In other words, out of the *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, by the power of *Tapas* comes out Supermind. *Satyam*, *Ritam*, *Brihat* is the formula of the Supermind. This is what Sri Aurobindo has revealed in *The Life Divine*. And also in *The Secret of the Veda*. So *Ritam cha Satyam*, from the *Tapas*, power of *Tapas*, comes out this great Supermind. Then, having brought out the Supermind, suddenly something happens: *tato ratryajayata*, from there arose the Night. A sudden jump. Supermind is the supreme Light and suddenly there happens a night. Night still has got some light because of stars and moon. Then it says: after the night, *tato samudro arnavah*, then came a complete ocean of darkness. Not only night,

complete darkness. This is what Sri Aurobindo calls the Inconscience. From the Supermind there was a descent by the separation from the origin, the night came out and then came out the complete darkness. And then it says, after this, *samudradarnavadadhim samvatsaro ajayata*, out of this great darkness came *samvatsara*. *Samvatsara* is the algebraic term for the Mystic Fire. The *Agni* was put there. And once *Agni* was put, all the evolution comes out. Then the description of *Surya*, *Chandra*, there is sun, moon, everything that came out. It gives a description of the whole world thereafter. Now, this is the fundamental psychic knowledge, the knowledge of the soul which is given.

It is this psychic being which is presided over by *hamsa*; *hamsa* is another algebraic term. *Hamsa* means swan. Over this Mystic Fire is a *swan* which is tied up, according to the Veda, in hundred nets, and cannot flutter its wings. It is in bondage. But, in this bondage, there is a tremendous battle going on. Now, what is the battle? In fact the world-knowledge and soul-knowledge, when put together in the Veda, is the great story of the forces of Light and the forces of Darkness. The forces of light are called the Gods and forces of Darkness are called *Dasyus*, *Panis*, *Pishachas*, *Rakshasas*, *Asuras*. These are the words which are used in the Vedas to describe the forces of darkness, and there is a great battle between the two. If you want to fight the battle, this battle can be fought, and can be fought systematically, and this is the yoga of the Veda. The mystical discipline, by which the psychic being and the soul, which are caught in this great battle, can be liberated. So the first step is the discovery of the Mystic Fire within you. This is the first step in the mystic discipline of the Veda.

Veda, Sri Aurobindo discovered, is a great book of Yoga. It is not any superstition or magic or any kind of barbaric mantras, to get some gains here and there. It is a knowledge of the battle of Life. It is a revelation of the real nature of Life. Suddenly, in harmony, disharmony comes about.

Suddenly, when Rama is to be crowned, Kaikeyi happens to demand certain things overnight, and Rama is thrown out and the great tragedy occurs thereafter, until a battle takes place and only after the battle the victory comes. So, in the human life, there are forces of darkness and forces of light which are described in detail in the Veda — what are the Gods; and the whole knowledge of the Gods, and how they can help. And the Vedic seers found out the existence of the Gods, not as imaginations, or formations, or premonitions, but real, objective, existence of the Gods, and they found out the names of these Gods, names, meaning, the secret of each God and the function of each God. It is like you are going to a Ministry, and finding out who is the minister and who

is the secretary and who is the clerk and who is the cashier, what is the function of each one and then, unless you know this, you can never succeed in the Ministry. Similarly in the Ministry of the world, you cannot succeed unless you know who are the Gods, and what are their functions.

So to say very briefly, once again, just bear in mind, that the first, as you rise up and kindle your Mystic Fire, the first one that comes in answer is *Indra*. *Indra* is a name of a God whom Sri Aurobindo describes algebraically as the God of illumined mind. So you first of all come into contact with the illumined mind. He descends, that is the nature. *Agni* always ascends, fire always rises up in aspiration. In answer there is a descent of the illumined mind. Only of the illumined mind, first, this is the first God that comes to your help. But he is very powerful and he is able to fight with the demons tremendously. So there is a whole story as to how *Indra* comes to our help, but then, that is not enough. You gain a lot, but that is not the end of the story, you still have to rise higher, and higher than *Indra* is *swaha*: this is a very special word in the Veda. In fact all the people who know Sanskrit and *Gayatri* mantra, we start with

*Om bhur bhuvah swah
tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat*

So *swah* is constantly used in the Vedic lore. This *swah* is a light which has condensed itself by a constant rising of the mystic fire and the constant descent of *Indra*. And it is a very beautiful world of Light. You come across this world of Light, but even that is not the Supreme Light. It is only the medium Light. There is a very famous proposition made in the Veda to distinguish between the darkness, then the intermediate light and the Supreme Light. It is said in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* that Krishna was given through one word the Supreme Knowledge by his teacher, Ghora. Ghora speaks one word to Krishna and gives him the Supreme Knowledge. And what is that mantra he gives?

*Udvayam tamasaspari svah pashanta uttaram
devam devatra suryamaganma jyotiruttamam*

This is the mantra. That we went beyond the darkness and saw the intermediate Light which is *Svaha*, but then we did not stop there, we went further, we

went to the Gods, and we went to *Surya*, *Suryam*; we went to the Supreme Light, *Jyotiruttamam*; it is *Jyoti*, which is *uttamam*, the Supreme Light. The Supreme Light is not *Swah* — *Swah* is an intermediate Light, but *uttamam* is *Surya*, is the sun. The sun is the symbol of the Supermind in the Veda. Whenever the word sun comes, Sri Aurobindo says: It is the symbol of the Supermind. But before you enter into the Supermind, there are four Gods who stand as sentries. They will not allow you to enter into sun, into the Supreme realm. You have to be qualified. Who are these four Gods? *Varuna* — *Varuna* is the God of Vastness. Unless you become very vast, you cannot enter into it. Narrow-minded can never enter into it. That is why Sri Aurobindo constantly says: Widen yourself. Unless you widen yourself fully, you cannot enter into the Supreme Supermind. The second is — *Varuna* is always accompanied by *Mitra*, *Mitra* is God of harmony. So as long as you quarrel, you can never enter into that Light. That is certain. There must be harmony, a tapasya of harmony. Vastness and harmony. Then comes *Aryaman*. *Aryaman* is the Lord of austerity. Great tapasya, for the fullness of tapasya you must do greatest effort, you must master the effort itself. And then *Bhaga*. *Bhaga* is the God of enjoyment. Unless you know how to enjoy truly, you cannot enter into the Supermind. But enjoy truly, that is to say— usually even a small joy makes us dance and flutter and throw away all the energies— when you are able to contain the highest joy in yourself without shaking. In the Veda it is said that when you are unbaked and if the great *soma*, the great nectar, falls into it, the unbaked jar breaks down. It is only when you are so purified, so purified, so purified thoroughly, that your jar becomes baked, in which, if the joy falls into it, you can hold it.

This capacity to hold the joy allows you to enter into Supermind. This is also called the attainment of Immortality. *Amritam*, the great achievement of the vedic Rishis, was that the soul which is tied into hundred nets, the swan which wants to fly, cannot fly and has to battle, when it attains to this state, going beyond *Indra* into *Swah*, and going beyond *Swah* to *Varuna*, *Mitra*, *Aryaman* and *Bhaga* and entering into *Surya*, then comes Soma. The highest is Soma, the great delight. When that delight can be held in the body, that is Immortality. This was the greatest achievement of the Vedic Rishis.

Sri Aurobindo has written in one chapter called, “The Victory of the Fathers”: the Vedic Rishis, what was their victory? Their victory was this. To hold the Supermind in the body was the highest achievement of the Vedic Rishis. Sri Aurobindo found that that is not enough. If there is a distinction between the Veda and his achievement on the one hand and Sri Aurobindo’s discovery,

there is one step farther. Mother told me that Sri Aurobindo is not a logical continuity of the past, it is not as if you continue what they were doing and then you get Sri Aurobindo's path. No. It is something newly discovered. That is why Mother said: Sri Aurobindo does not belong to the past or to history. He is constantly fabricating the future. It is because of this reason that it was not known that apart from holding the Supreme Light in the body, there is also a possibility of the permeation of Light in the body. Now, this was the new knowledge that Sri Aurobindo gives in his yoga. Permeation, it is penetration, only when there is a permeation of this light that the human species can be turned into the supramental species. But now you can see that if you want to understand Sri Aurobindo's yoga, how much you need to know the Vedic yoga and how much certainty and confirmation you get by reading the Vedic yoga. Because many clues you will get in the Veda, in large amplitude; and if Auroville is to be the cradle of this Superman, in which the light of the Supermind has to permeate and penetrate into the cells of the body, then Vedic knowledge is indispensable.

Let me conclude by quoting from Sri Aurobindo what he wrote in his earliest manuscripts on the Veda:

I seek not science, not religion, not Theosophy, but Veda, the truth about Brahman, not only about His essentiality, but about His manifestation, not a lamp on the way to the forest, but a light and a guide to joy and action in the world... I believe that the future of India and the world to depend on its discovery and on its application, not to the renunciation of life, but to life and the world and among men.... The Veda was the beginning of our spiritual knowledge; the Veda will remain its end. These compositions of an unknown antiquity are as the many breasts of eternal Mother of knowledge from which our succeeding ages have all been fed. The recovery of the perfect truth of the Veda is therefore not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity, but a practical necessity for the future of the human race. For I believe firmly that the secret concealed in the Veda, when entirely discovered, will be found to formulate perfectly that knowledge and practice of a divine life to which the march of humanity, after long wanderings in the satisfaction of the intellect and senses, must inevitably return. (India's Rebirth, pp. 90, 94-5)

(This is an edited version of a talk given at the Auroville Auditorium some years ago)

The Path Of Nachiketa

(Continued from the previous issue)

Alok Pandey

This is the eternal uswattha tree whose roots are aloft, but its branches are downward. It is He that is called the Bright One and Brahman and Immortality, and in Him are all the worlds established; none goeth beyond Him. This is the thing thou seekest.

Yama has taken the young aspirant to the last seat where he could lead him, the last outpost of his kingdom as it were, for beyond it are the luminous regions of immortality and Death hath no entry there. It is the seat of the Self, the eternal Brahman and none can go beyond it. Below this Immortal realm are the death-bound worlds of the Cosmic manifestation. Yama is their guardian so to say, for these are mortal kingdoms and the beings who inhabit them have a term of existence after which they return back to the heart of the Bright One from whom they, as indeed the entire cosmos, have emerged. In our Ignorance we believe that the universe owes its origin to some kind of mechanical inconscient energy, inanimate and lifeless. We see forms emerging out of a material void, cold and soulless to our limited vision. We see ourselves and all we think and do as merely a by-product of a blind mechanical energy. But there is another way to look at this cosmos, as the involution of some Primal Superconscious Energy— stupendous and creative— out of whose silent hush creation has leaped as leaps out a tree from a seed. Yama reveals this other view to Nachiketa— the top-down view of the cosmos, a reversal of one's ordinary outlook that one gains when one has climbed step by step to the highest peaks of the cosmic manifestation from where one more step leads to the utter vastness of the All-sustaining, All-supporting Self. But that is not all. This immortal Self, this eternal Brahman is not only a

silent witness and support but the very root and origin of the cosmos. In other words the universe is not an accident and its origin is not in some dark contrary reality. It has emerged from the Transcendent Supreme and draws its secret life and sustenance from Him. What we see as the mechanical Inconscient energy is simply its outermost body, the leaves and the branches of the huge cosmic tree. But were we to go deep inside its immense and enormous working, we shall find that it leads to the secret home of the Eternal into which its roots are plunged.

In fact it is He, the Eternal who dwells within it and it is He who governs and commands its million forces and energies. The Fire burns by His Power, the sun gives light and heat due to His Presence, the gods do their appointed task because of Him. He is the life-force, the dynamic and dynamising Energy, Prana within all that has come into being. Even the most material, most inert, most obscure of elements, the *jada prakriti* does what it must and stays in its assigned place in the universe because of His Presence. He is the original cause, the root and the Power behind the least grain of sand, each atom of existence, even as it is by His Power that the cosmic suns whirl in space and the galaxies drift along their pre-ordained orbits. Out of Him stars arise and in Him collapse.

This is the vast Truth of the indwelling Universal that Yama now reveals to Nachiketa whose consciousness has by now become subtle enough to grasp deeper mysteries and profound spiritual truths. If one can apprehend Him while still being in the physical body then one can apprehend Him in all the other worlds that are spun like a robe around Him. For of all the dresses that the Indwelling Universal wears, the robe of matter is the most obscure. Of course His true reflection is seen only in the depths of one's soul. But one can also see Him in different ways depending upon the worlds through which and in which one sees Him. He stands behind each system of worlds as the secret Godhead and manifests Himself to the experiencing consciousness accordingly. The first task, therefore, given to man if he is to discover all else in its entirety and truth is to discover the Secret God within him, the Divine Presence while he is still in the body and before Death overtakes his various members.

But how is one to do it? How are we to realise Him, the ever Bright and Pure, the self-Luminous One while still wearing the obscure cloak of mortal-

ity. Step by step it is being revealed to us. First and foremost, we have to rise above the senses and become the silent witness of the emergence of various nervous and vital responses of pain and pleasure, grief and joy. Thus restraining, thus training our being we come to acquire that calm which is the possession of those who have learned to separate themselves from the various reactions that arise in prakriti, nature. To do this we can take the help of the mind that is higher than the senses. To learn to separate some part of our mind or better still our essential mentality from the nervous, sensational being is possible and helpful. Then we must rise beyond the mind that is ever engaged with the play of emotions and analysis and judgment etc. to a still higher Thought-world. To dwell in the realm of pure thought, thought that is freed from the clutch of the senses and the mind, thought that reflects in its purity and brilliance, is to rise above the mind and draw closer to the mighty formless Spirit that broods above the universe of and form. But we must not stop with this formless Impersonal self that is behind all that is manifest in this or another universe and the countless worlds that are but only shadows and pale reflections before what yet may come. Beyond the manifest there is still greater and higher, a deeper and mightier Truth, the Unmanifest One. By a constant turning upwards we must rise tier by tier to the very highest. But this highest is above both the manifest and unmanifest. He is the Supreme Being, the Purusha who sits alone and sublime within all, governing and pervading all things. When mortal man has known Him then is he released into immortality

He, the Supreme Purusha cannot be seen nor can our earthly eyes behold Him. Yet He can be known, through the heart and the mind and best of all, by the Supermind to which He is fully manifest. He is beyond the ken of our physical senses but to our deeper and inner senses He is manifest. Thus, we may say that the highest state according to the Katha Upanishad is that in which the senses cease and the mind is quiet and Thought itself is quiescent. Released from sense and mind and thought while still in his body, one apprehends the highest Self. This is the state of Yoga, of utter Union which is a state full of a supreme awareness since it is the origin and end of everything. All things have emerged out of Yoga and all things are absorbed back into their origin through a secret Yoga. It is through Yoga that the Divine Reality releases, sustains and destroys the universe. But how can one know Him through

the limited sense-bound mind and death-bound eyes? One cannot. It is through the eye of faith that one has to begin till experience grows and one is able to enter into a state of communion and union with Him. One must start with faith for how else can we begin the journey or reach the goal if we have not the faith that He exists! For our senses and mind cannot bear witness to His Presence. They cannot give us the proof so to say. If we rely only on Their evidence then we shall remain bound to these lesser instruments that have not the power to reveal Him to us. This is only natural since He is higher not lower than the mind and senses and therefore cannot be seized by them. But there is something in man, something like a divination, an eye of faith that says “He is”, not the eye of our material corporeal senses that says “He is not”. There arises in us a greater seeing when the mind is stilled and thought and speech are silent and upturned or in-turned towards the deeper heart or to regions higher than the mind and thought. In that state we can know Him. To that we must climb with faith as our staff. Then one knows Him not only in His essential principles but also in His totality.

So does Death reveal the higher knowledge, the knowledge of the highest Self in us. Not only does he reveal the knowledge and the pre-requisites to arrive at it, he throws bright and luminous hints that would help us undertake the great journey into the Unknown who is yet not the Unknowable. Before closing the dialogue, he once again reveals the secret asked of him by Nachiketa, the young aspirant, as if to emphasise what he has been hinting all through. When we have done with desire in every form and detected and expunged it in every mask, then can we hope to see Him, to meet and enjoy the soul’s rendezvous with Him, the Eternal Brahman while still in the human body. When the hundred and one strings that bind the heart of the creature to his lower and lesser nature, to his sensational and desire-self have been cut asunder then do we discover immortality while still in the mortal body. That is to say, we discover the immortality of the Self of the immortal Self in us even though the body is still subject to the law of death. Yet our inner consciousness is freed and enjoys the bliss of Brahman while still in the human body. To concede to the hundred pulls of the heart strings is to remain tied to mortality and identified with this perishable stuff of self. To turn them all upward in a luminous aspiration, silencing sense and thought and mind and the insistent cry

of life that hankers after desire is to find our immortal home. The means and the door are given to man. They lie in the secret cavern of his heart, in the being, purusha, no bigger than the thumb of man that is now identified with the body-self that it occupies and fills. This must be separated carefully as one would extract a blade of grass from all that has grown around it and surrounds it or holds it. That is the doorway to our immortal Self. Once we can do that all other knowledge is added to us – God-knowledge, deeper world-knowledge that sets us free from all error and stain of sin. Thus did Nachiketa, the young aspirant found the pathways to immortality and so do all others find the path who are sincere in their seeking and steadfast in their aspiration even as Nachiketa. To them Death itself becomes their teacher and reveals the science of the Spirit, leading them from mansion to mansion till they are freed from the clutches of mortality and discover or rather recover their immortality.

When every desire that harboureth in the heart of a man hath been loosened from its moorings, then this mortal putteth on immortality; even here he enjoyeth Brahman in this human body.

When all the strings of the heart are rent asunder, even here in this human birth, then the mortal becometh immortal. This is the whole teaching of the Scriptures.

A hundred and one are the nerves of the heart and of all these only one issueth out through the head of a man; by this the soul mounteth up to its immortal home but the rest lead him to all sorts and conditions of births in his passing.

The Purusha, the Spirit within, who is no larger than the finger of a man is seated for ever in the heart of creatures; one must separate Him with patience from one’s own body as one separates from a blade of grass its main fibre. Thou shalt know Him for the Bright Immortal, yea, for the Bright Immortal.

Thus did Nachiketas with Death for his teacher win the God-knowledge; he learned likewise the whole ordinance of the Yoga: thereafter he obtained Brahman and became void of stain and void of death. So shall another be who cometh likewise to the science of the Spirit.

The dialogue concludes in a hopeful way. The meeting of death and Nachiketa is the meeting of the deathless immortal soul in us with this finite

mutable death-bound universe where everything seems to have a term for its birth and growth and eventual disintegration. Life is a constant change, a perpetual swing between birth and death. The ordinary men go through it with fear and terror as if Death were some ominous dark unknown whose sole business is to take away whatever little joys and pleasures we can acquire in our brief earthly life. Indeed to such an ordinary vision of things Death does come this way, for it swallows all that is perishable and subject to decay. But we have a choice and this choice is to concentrate our effort and energy to discover the divine principle, the immortal soul within us while we journey through this mortal world. Once we make this choice and stick to it, then Death itself becomes our helper, and time our friend who leads us step by step towards the secret of our own being that is hidden from our earthly sight and sense. This secret is the Divine Presence within our heart revealed to our inward gaze as the immortal swan and the deathless flame. It is also revealed to us as the Master and the Mother of the worlds, the Mother of Light, the possessor of the Undivided Consciousness and Oneness, Aditi whom we must seek and find. This happens as our consciousness begins to turn inward and upward away from the field of the senses and our ignorant attachments and small joys and blind thoughts and the restless state of mind in which we are as if trapped. Through persistent practice, through tranquillity, through Grace, as we quieten our members and look deeper within us, this higher Self begins to reveal Itself to us. Having found That Self and beyond it the Supreme Purusha, we are freed from the clutches of Ignorance and Death. We discover the universe in a new sense, not as the action of a blind mechanical energy but the manifestation of a Supracosmic Will that descends from Above into the very leaves and branches of this vast enigma of God that we call our universe. Then we discover Immortality and not just a prolongation of life, that seed state of an original boundlessness. This is the real work of man, this his secret mission, his true business upon earth without which he remains yet another creature subject to death and caught in the never ending cycles of creation and birth and death.

Thus ends the great teaching or rather the path shown to man by the Katha Upanishad. Thus begins the greater yoga of Savitri, the greater path being revealed to man by Sri Aurobindo, the path that leads not only to the discovery of the immortal Self in us and an identification with the highest Self of the Divine but the very change of our death-bound nature into a frame luminous and powerful and divine:

*This Light comes not by struggle or by thought;
In the mind's silence the Transcendent acts
And the hushed heart hears the unuttered Word.
A vast surrender was his only strength.
A Power that lives upon the heights must act,
Bring into life's closed room the Immortal's air
And fill the finite with the Infinite.
All that denies must be torn out and slain
And crushed the many longings for whose sake
We lose the One for whom our lives were made.*

(Savitri, Bk.3, Canto2, pp. 315-16, SABCL)

*The Voice replied: "Remember why thou cam'st:
Find out thy soul, recover thy hid self,
In silence seek God's meaning in thy depths,
Then mortal nature change to the divine.
Open God's door, enter into his trance.
Cast Thought from thee, that nimble ape of Light:
In his tremendous hush stilling thy brain
His vast Truth wake within and know and see.
Cast from thee sense that veils thy spirit's sight:
In the enormous emptiness of thy mind
Thou shalt see the Eternal's body in the world,
Know him in every voice heard by thy soul:
In the world's contacts meet his single touch;
All things shall fold thee into his embrace.
Conquer thy heart's throbs, let thy heart beat in God:
Thy nature shall be the engine of his works,
Thy voice shall house the mightiness of his Word:
Then shalt thou harbour my force and conquer Death."*

(Savitri, Bk.7, Canto2, p.476, SABCL)

(Concluded)

Veda Vyasa's *Mahabhatara* in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*

(Continued from the previous issue)

Prema Nandakumar

5. A Superb Aspiration

According to Sri Aurobindo re-telling an existing story has its advantages. All his dramas were based on easily available dramatic tales. For instance, **Vasavadutta's** inspiration was Bhasa's **Pratigna Yaugandharayana** and **The Viziers of Bassora** harked back to a story told by Scharezade in the **Arabian Nights' Entertainments**. Evidently he felt happy with the creed of Shakespeare and preferred to work upon an existing theme as may be inferred from the following passage in the unfinished play, **The Maid in the Mill** :

“... the plot known,
It (the mind) is at leisure and may cull in running
Those delicate, scarcely-heeded strokes, which lost
Perfection's disappointed. There art comes in
To justify genius. Being old besides
The subject occupies creative labour
To make old new. The other's but invention,
A frail thing, though a gracious. He's creator
Who greatly handles great material,”

This was the way of the classical dramatists and epic poets. Sri Aurobindo had studied them carefully and had even translated a canto from Kalidasa's **Kumara Sambhavam**. Indeed he prepared three renderings of this canto! Such was his involvement with the way Kalidasa had taken the original legend from the **Ramayana** and embroidered an epic out of the few hints in Valmiki.

The brief legend has a reference to Shiva's consort Uma as being rich in askesis: *ugram suvrathamaasthaayathapasthepe thapodhanaa*. Kalidasa has been inspired by the line and described Uma's tapasya in the course of one full (fifth) canto.

Apart from Valmiki, the legend of Subramania's birth is found in several Puranas and the Vana Parva of the **Mahabharata**. Sri Aurobindo's studies in Vyasa thus kept yielding him precious ore and he noted how the stray words used by Vyasa or Valmiki were actually containers of immense potency. One line about Uma's tapasya and Kalidasa weaves the scene in so many verses! The story of the birth of Skandha and his heroic war waged against the enemies of gods must have thrilled Sri Aurobindo as indeed it did when the legend was recounted by Rishi Markandeya to the exiled Pandavas in the Vana Parva.

“When that adorable son of the Fire-god was anointed as leader of the celestial army, that grand and happy lord, Hara (Mahadeva) riding with Parvati in a chariot shining with sunlike refulgence repaired to a place called Bhadravata. His excellent chariot was drawn by a thousand lions and managed by *Kala*. They passed through blank space, and seemed as if they were about to devour the sky; and striking terror into the heart of all creatures in the mobile divisions of the worlds, those maned beasts flitted through the air, uttering fearful growls. And that lord of all animals (Mahadeva) seated in that chariot with Uma, looked like the sun with flames of lightning illuminating masses of clouds begirt with Indra's bow (rainbow).....The son of Krittika, the leader of the celestial army, respectful to Brahmanas, surrounded by the celestial forces, also followed that lord of the gods. And then Mahadeva said these weighty words to Mahasena, ‘Do thou carefully command the seventh army corps of the celestial forces.’”¹

These colourful legends then contained much that could be brought out if one undertook to meditate upon their significances. This is how the legend of Aswapati's eighteen years' tapasya became the extended travels of the King of Madra through innumerable symbol worlds which were nevertheless reared upon the real-life yogic experiences of Sri Aurobindo.

When recounting Savitri's story to the exiled Pandavas, Rishi Markandeya has this to say about Aswapati's prayers to Goddess Savitri for the birth of a child to continue his race.

“Therefore he resorted, with the concern of getting a child, to holy austere practices; only at fixed times he ate a little, and he observed continence, and restrained the senses fully.

Daily a hundred thousand oblations he, the most excellent among the kings, offered to Savitri; and it was only in the sixth part of the day that he took a small quantity of food.

Eighteen years passed this way, he being given to observances of such rules of penance; at the end of the eighteen-year period Savitri was much pleased with him.”²

These three verses in the Upakhyana have become the *Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*. If it was a tapasya that had been followed by Aswapati according to the rules and had yielded the desired answer, then the entire pathway had to be explored. Apparently here had been a massive barrier-breaker and it was not right for us to remain where we are. The time had come to cross the barrier and achieve further progression. Of course it is not as easy as it sounds but one must not make the past attempts vain by our own tamas! Sri Aurobindo had innumerable experiences in his yoga that assured him of success in the pathway of intense meditation. He sought to incorporate some of them in the tapasya of Aswapati. Thus the verses in the **Mahabharata** became a “small passage” in the early drafts of **Savitri**. Finally, this “small passage” became a whole Book in 15 cantos. If we add the Book of the Divine Mother which is Goddess Savitri's answer to Aswapati, we would have almost half of the epic dealing with Aswapati's yoga which would account for a thousand-fold expansion!

In the externals, Aswapati's tapasya seems simple enough. Time-tested observances. He lessened his intake of food, and of course controlled his senses well. Austere practices like Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama and Pratyahara tuned the external way of living. Traditional yoga sutras have taught us this and have also underlined the need for Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi which control the mind and make it blossom into higher reaches of knowledge leading to

achievement. What then were the steps that were ascended tirelessly by Aswapati during the eighteen years referred to by Vyasa?

While sense-control, breath-control and such disciplines of the body can be visible and audible for the aspirant to keep a note of his progress, tapasya, yoga and prayer have to be measured in subjective and not objective terms. To progress in Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (Meditation) and Samadhi (Self-absorption) is no easy task. Hence, what Aswapati did was not merely placing offerings in the sacred fire. Along with such external practices as fasting, physical endurance and sense-control, he went deep into the inner countries of his mind and gained a vision of Goddess Savitri.

Again, one is confronted with another question. The opening description of Aswapati is of a superior person. Would he have undertaken austerities for eighteen years just for the birth of a child? Was he such a materialist? Surely in the course of his dharana and dhyana he must have had access to the psychic and spiritual realms within and without us. He must have grown in understanding and may have aspired for a child not only to continue his dynasty but to continue the race of mankind from destruction by evil forces.

Sri Aurobindo accordingly explores in his epic the nature of Aswapati's Yoga, presents its various stages, maps out the worlds travelled by him, the depths sounded, the heights scaled. The experiences described are supra-normal; and besides the inspiration of the Vedas and the Upanishads, Sri Aurobindo has also drawn very largely upon his own Yogic experiences. Aswapati comes in the Vedic tradition and his tapasya was based on the Vedic scriptures. Sri Aurobindo draws our attention to the importance of the ‘secret knowledge’ in the Vedas and Upanishads that provide a base for Aswapati's yoga. He understands that there is a power transcending the gods which is our true guide in this spiritual journey. This Power is not a monolith but the ineffable “Two-in-One”, a concept that is somewhat difficult to understand. Once understood, such knowledge is strength, an assurance that God is working here on earth, amidst us.

“The Absolute, the Perfect, the Immune,
One who is in us as our secret self,
Our mask of imperfection has assumed,

He has made this tenement of flesh his own,
 His image in the human measure cast
 That to his divine measure we might rise;
 Then in a figure of divinity
 The Maker shall recast us and impose
 A plan of godhead on the mortal's mould
 Lifting our finite minds to his infinite,
 Touching the moment with eternity.”³

Thus it is a natural transition from the Vyasana Aswapati to the Aurobindonian Aswapati. It is time for him now to search for the secret self within, “the Absolute, the Perfect, the Immune”. Like Kalidasa drawing out of one line in the Ramayana the varied contours of Uma's tapasya, Sri Aurobindo proceeds to build a massive tower of worlds through which Aswapati journeys in search of his secret self. This is not as easy to explain as the ceremonies associated with Vedic sacrifices.

The “secret knowledge” has released Aswapati from ignorance. It is an amazing array of experiences, as visual as it is for the yogin's vision. Soaring past the limitations of his mind, Aswapati enters the occult worlds where he comes across the ideals and images of aspirants who have striven to find ways of transforming man. Ah, if only life on earth could be transformed on these lines! So what are the elements that make up man within? Aswapati now moves up the world-stair to get a complete view. The 18-years' tapasya by Vyasa's Aswapati is thus presented as a yogin's autobiography. Sri Aurobindo has himself indicated as much in a letter written to Nirodbaran in 1936”

“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.”

This is, of course, quite different from extending an existing tale with sheer imagination. Sri Aurobindo was firm that experiences should be tested as in a scientific laboratory. He has done that with great patience and understanding. Otherwise the lines in Savitri would not sound so deep and laden with whorls of significances. The journey into the inner worlds takes us through the kingdoms

of subtle matter, little life and greater life. Before we undertake a journey into the inner countries of the mind, Aswapati has an idea of how we pervert god's gifts. The Supreme gave us an Eden and we have transformed it into a Hell!

“Overshadowing earth with its huge body of Doom
 It chilled the heavens with the menace of a face.
 A nameless Power, a shadowy Will arose
 Immense and alien to our universe.
 In the inconceivable Purpose none can gauge
 A vast Non-Being robed itself with shape,
 The boundless Nescience of the unconscious depths
 Covered eternity with nothingness.”⁴

Fortunately for us, we are soon out of these dark spaces and follow Aswapati into the paradise of life-gods, of little and greater mind and finally enter the kingdoms of greater knowledge. Sri Aurobindo's Aswapati thus indicates that Vyasa's king after the tapasya of eighteen years would have been a transformed person. No more the anxiety for a daughter to continue the Madran race. His aspiration has now widened to embrace the whole of human race.

“In the kingdom of the Spirit's power and light,
 As if one who arrived out of infinity's womb
 He came new-born, infant and limitless
 And grew in the wisdom of the timeless Child;
 He was a vast that soon became a Sun.
 A great luminous silence whispered to his heart;
 His knowledge an inview caught unfathomable,
 An outview by no brief horizons cut:
 He thought and felt in all, his gaze had power.”⁵

It is obvious that Sri Aurobindo found in Aswapati the right personality to project his own aspiration for a life divine on earth. When he came to India in 1893 as a young man of twenty-one, such an aspiration for an earthly heaven had been lit in him. One has to go to his early writings for a clear indication of the same. Consider the very opening of his essay series for Indu Prakash:

“If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into a ditch? So or nearly so runs an apothegm of the Galilean prophet, whose name has run over the four quarters of the globe. Of all those pithy comments on human life, which more than anything else made his teaching effective, this is perhaps the one which goes home deepest and admits of the most frequent use.”⁶

Sri Aurobindo is speaking of the political situation in India and how the Congress is not able to lead the fallen nation into freedom because the Congress itself remains bound by *tamas*. Time was when the Congress had put forth a great aspiration to spearhead the movement.

“How shall we find words vivid enough to describe the fervour of those morning hopes, the April splendour of that wonderful enthusiasm? The Congress was to us all that is to man most dear, most high and most sacred; a well of living water in deserts more than Saharan, a proud banner in the battle of Liberty, and a holy temple of concord where the races met and mingled.”⁷

What happened to that ‘splendour’? Sri Aurobindo draws our attention to the Athenian qualities of mind and spirit that not only set up a high aspiration but followed it up with single-minded intensity. The French come in for Sri Aurobindo’s admiration: “He (the Frenchman) also has a passionate craving for equality and a large and just social principle”, unlike the Englishman or the American who does not give primary importance to “intellect, lucidity, happiness.”

Such thinking on the part of Sri Aurobindo shows us how important it is for man to aspire to something superior, something seemingly unattainable and never be bogged down by the hucksterings of the market place. An aspiration cannot be a trade! An aspiration for national freedom cannot be a matter for bargain. The true aspiration of a freedom-loving Indian is articulated in the unique document, *Bhawani Mandir*.

“You who feel Her stirring within you, fling off the black veil of self, break down the imprisoning walls of indolence, help Her each as you

feel impelled, with your bodies or with your intellect or with your speech or with your wealth or with your prayers and worship, each man according to his capacity.”⁸

At that time, the flame of aspiration that burnt in Sri Aurobindo was to see a free India, independent and rising again to posit achievements as in the earlier times. There was no place for compromise here and the *tapasya* to achieve the end must be structured accordingly. Political freedom called for the *kshatra tejas* to be at the forefront.

“Justice and righteousness are the atmosphere of political morality, but the justice and righteousness of a fighter, not of the priest. Aggression is unjust only when unprovoked; violence, unrighteous when used wantonly or for unrighteous ends. It is a barren philosophy which applies a mechanical rule to all actions, or takes a word and tries to fit all human life into it.

The sword of the warrior is as necessary to the fulfilment of justice and righteousness as the holiness of the saint. Ramdas is not complete without Shivaji.”⁹

But then, Sri Aurobindo’s aspiration was not meant for the limited area of the political independence of his motherland. His wings widened further to include the entire humanity and soon the future of civilisation itself. Naturally, his aspiration went beyond what he had begun with. Now it was for the freedom of the spirit to shape its future. The superb aspiration that Sri Aurobindo now nurtured was nothing less than installing the life divine on earth. Towards achieving this step, individual transformation was important. There had to be at least a few who could undertake this work of divinising themselves. It would be an arduous path but there would always be representatives of this human race who would undertake this task and take humanity higher on the steps of evolution.

So Sri Aurobindo takes up the symbol of Aswapati, the Lord of Horses, the Lord of life-energy. Like Agni the Vedic Purohita, he is the leader of mankind.

“A thinker and toiler in the ideal’s air,
Brought down to earth’s dumb need her radiant power.

His was a spirit that stooped from larger spheres
 Into our province of ephemeral sight,
 A colonist from immortality.
 A pointing beam on earth's uncertain roads,
 His birth held up a symbol and a sign;
 His human self like a translucent cloak
 Covered the All-Wise who leads the unseeing world.
 Affiliated to cosmic Space and Time
 And paying here God's debt to earth and man
 A greater sonship was his divine right.”¹⁰

Nor need we wonder at the status given to Aswapati. This is also Vyasa's Aswapati, a unique king whose virtues included doing good to all living beings, *sarva bhuta hite ratah*. Mayn't he have seen enough tragedies in his longish life (he had been childless for a long time) to think on the origin of sorrow like Buddha? Buddha's illumination led him to the knowledge that it is desire that makes one experience sorrow. Detachment, destruction of desire and performing good deeds was Buddha's answer to the problem. This included death too. Sri Aurobindo went further and wished to overcome not only sorrow and pain but also death itself. Which ought to be possible if a transformation does take place in the next step in our evolution. Such was Sri Aurobindo's superb aspiration with which he filled his life of yoga and which finds recordation in his Independence Day message in 1947.

He began the message saying he had four dreams to begin with and the first was one for free India, “*a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India*.” India became free though it was a fractured freedom because of the selfishness and shortsightedness of her leaders who were at the political helm then. His fourth and last dream was a marvellous aspiration:

“The final dream was *a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness* and begin the solution of the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society. This is still a personal hope and an idea, an ideal which has begun to take hold both in India and in the West on forward-looking minds. The difficulties in

the way are more formidable than in any other field of endeavour, but difficulties were made to be overcome and if the Supreme Will is there, they will be overcome. Here too, if this evolution is to take place, since it must proceed through a growth of the spirit and the inner consciousness, the initiative can come from India and, although the scope must be universal, the central movement may be hers.”

Sri Aurobindo's splendid aspiration which unfurled its wings from Aswapati's desire for a child, has been stated in all his works and in his own life of yoga. In *Savitri*, the tapasvin Aswapati sitting motionless in meditation looking for the divine humanity of the future while traversing various worlds in the inner countries of the mind, is a yogic portrait of Vyasa's Aswapati, the benevolent ruler seeking the good of his people in every way:

“Performer of Yajnas, presiding over charities, skilful in work, loved by the city-dwellers and by all the people of his kingdom, one who was absorbed in the welfare of everybody, there ruled the Sovereign of the Earth, named Aswapati. Of a forgiving nature, one whose speech was truth, and who had subdued his senses, though he was so he had no issue; with the advancing of age this increased his affliction greatly.”

Sri Aurobindo had found the ideal person to represent his aspiration, for today as we stand on the brink, because of the nuclear power on one hand and terrorism on the other, there is a sense of urgency about our endeavours for initiating the supernature on earth. Aswapati symbolises this sense of urgency. Aswapati succeeded and Savitri, the *kanya tejaswini* was born. It is for us (represented by the phrase ‘world's desire’ in Savitri) to strive and hope for the *tejasvi bhavishyat* to become a firm reality. We can achieve this provided we remember Savitri's clear message to Death as well as to all of us:

“My will is greater than thy law, O Death;
 My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate:
 Our love is the heavenly seal of the Supreme.
 I guard that seal against thy rending hands.
 Love must not cease to live upon the earth;

For Love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven,
Love is the far Transcendent's angel here;
Love is man's lien on the Absolute.”¹¹

(To be continued)

References:

- 1 Translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli
- 2 Translations from Vyasa's upakhyana cited in the essay are by R.Y. Deshpande
- 3 Book I, canto iv, p. 67
- 4 *Savitri*, Book II, canto viii, pp.222-223
- 5 Ibid., canto xv, p.301
- 6 SABCL, Vol. I, p. 5
- 7 Ibid., p. 7
- 8 Ibid, p. 71
- 9 Ibid., p. 127
- 10 Book I, canto iii, p.22
- 11 Book X, canto iii, p.633

Sadhana and Sahitya The Early Years in Pondicherry

Richard Hartz

When Sri Aurobindo left Bengal, never to return, he left revolutionary politics behind him to become a pioneer of spiritual evolution. As we look back on this event a century later, it appears to us as a decisive break with the past. At the time, this was not obvious. It would be years before the nature and magnitude of his future work could be adequately foreseen. Only then was it clear that he had come to South India to stay.¹ Yet in retrospect we can say that Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry on April 4th, 1910, was a turning-point. Cutting short his brief but eventful career as a national leader, henceforth he would live and work far from the public eye, but for even larger aims concerned with the future not only of his country, but of the world.

There was also a continuity, though, between the period that had just ended and the one that was beginning. Sri Aurobindo's sadhana in his early years in Pondicherry had already been foreshadowed to some extent, especially during his year in jail. When he started to keep the diary he called the *Record of Yoga*, at first sporadically and then more regularly from 1912 onwards, he sometimes referred to what he had previously experienced in the Alipur jail. In one of the first entries mentioning the jail period he observed:

The nature of the siddhi... approximates to the sadhan in the jail and is indeed in its nature the same sadhan, without its intensity, passing into siddhi.²

The distinction between sadhana and siddhi is roughly the difference between spiritual practice, with the experiences it brings, and permanent realisation or irreversible transformation. On the one hand, the rigours of prison life had evidently contributed to giving Sri Aurobindo's practice of Yoga in the jail

an unusual intensity that could not easily be repeated under more normal conditions. On the other hand, when the experiences of the jail sadhana returned and developed further under the freer circumstances of life in Pondicherry, it was as part of a thoroughgoing change of his everyday consciousness in which they no longer appeared to be so out of the ordinary. If somewhat less intense, the sadhana became more integral. Later he would write that “the very spirit of Yoga is this, to make the exceptional normal, and to turn that which is above us and greater than our normal selves into our own constant consciousness.”³ Extraordinary experiences had crowded upon him in jail, but it was after Sri Aurobindo’s arrival in Pondicherry that his sadhana – though its results seemed less striking at first – began “passing into siddhi”. The supernormal gradually became a new normality.

The Yogi from the North was already a liberated being, Jivanmukta, when he came to the French colonial town where an Ashram would eventually grow up around him. He had realised the Brahman, the infinity of the Spirit, in its impersonal and personal, Nirguna and Saguna aspects. From the standpoint of traditional spirituality, there seemed to be little left for him to do.

But within a year or two after he settled in Pondicherry, at the latest, a detailed and exacting “programme” for his future sadhana was revealed to him.⁴ It became clear that his Yoga had hardly begun. The essential inner realisations were well established, but as he remarked years later, the “real difficulty which took decades of spiritual effort to carry out towards completeness was to apply the spiritual knowledge utterly to the world and to the surface psychological and outer life and to effect its transformation...” He would have to deal not only with the ordinary mental, vital and physical parts of our nature, but with the subconscious and the even obscurer inconscient depths in which they are rooted. This would require bringing down the force of “the supreme Truth-Consciousness or Supermind in which alone the dynamic transformation could be entirely integral and absolute.”⁵ But many intermediate levels had to be mastered, step by step, before that would be possible. All this was to be done in himself first, so that afterwards it would be easier for others.

The outline Sri Aurobindo had received for the practice of this life-transforming spirituality consisted of a set of Sanskrit formulas arranged in seven groups with four elements in each. Accordingly it was called the Sapta

Chatusthaya or seven quaternaries.⁶ This provided a sort of map of the sadhana whose process he soon began to note systematically day by day in the *Record of Yoga*. Later he set out to explain its principles in “The Yoga of Self-Perfection”, the last and – though far from complete – the longest part of *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Many aspects of the Yoga of self-perfection also figure in his epic, *Savitri*. There it is especially in the third canto of Book One that we find correspondences with Sri Aurobindo’s own sadhana as he had recorded it more prosaically in his diary, years before most of *Savitri* was written.

A significant feature of the Sapta Chatusthaya is the juxtaposition of pairs of contrasting terms such as Shanti and Shakti, peace and force, which give their names to the first and second Chatusthayas.⁷ Instead of emphasising one at the expense of the other, they are treated as complementary and equally indispensable to an integral perfection. Likewise in the third and fourth Chatusthayas, Vijnana or supra-intellectual knowledge is joined with Sharira or physical embodiment, overcoming the traditional dichotomy of Spirit and Matter.

These four divisions of the Yoga taken together – with the four members of each and their various subdivisions – define the perfection of the individual nature in all its faculties and capacities. The next two divisions, the Karma and Brahma Chatusthayas, are more general, dealing with the relation of the individual to the world and to the eternal Reality manifested in it. Again, as in the reconciliation of peace and force, no essential conflict between contemplation and action is admitted. Karma, the subject of the fifth Chatusthaya, is to find its foundation in the realisation of the Brahman as an all-pervading existence, force, consciousness and bliss: *Sarvam Anantam Jnanam Anandam Brahma*. This forms the sixth Chatusthaya.

The seventh or Siddhi Chatusthaya sums it all up. Its first two members are the preparatory stages of Shuddhi and Mukti, purification and liberation. If understood in the traditional way, these might seem to undermine the motives of mundane action and point towards a world-shunning asceticism. But here they are interpreted in a radically life-affirming spirit without compromising the insistence on the abolition of separative ego and personal desire. Thus they lead to the unambiguously positive stages of Bhukti and Siddhi, divine enjoyment and all-embracing perfection, in which the whole process culminates.

however brilliant and versatile. It was part of a Yoga that accepted all life and pursued in the usual way as an activity of the mere imagination and intellect, to all this many-sided writing and meticulous research show that it was not fore 1912 – this type of work is often mentioned. The references in the Record much else. Later, when his diary begins – unfortunately there is little of it because languages, explorations of the mystical symbolism of the Rig Veda and verse dramas set in distant times and places, philological comparisons of an are struck by an outburst of scholarship and literary creativity: epic poetry and If we examine the notebooks Śrī Āurobindo started to use in April 1910, we his first years in Pondicherry, namely, writing.

daily life. To illustrate this, let us take one of the best-documented activities of of Yoga, where Śrī Āurobindo noted in detail his application of the system in his of the elements of the Śatbhāṣā can be seen throughout the Record an organic unity reflecting the integrity of the Godhead. The interconnectedness sadhana was not an artificial construction. As the lines in Āurobindo suggest, it has For all its seeming complexity, the system on which Śrī Āurobindo based his fected being.

Chatushtaya sets the integral seal of the Godhead on the liberated and perfected being. of the third and fourth, the Vijnana and Shakti Chatushtayas. Finally, the Siddhi must receive the stamp of a supernatural capacity, accomplishing the programme wholly effective, both soul and body – the inner being and outer nature alike – plete human nature serving as an instrument of the divine Force. For this to be for the second and fifth Chatushtayas which develop a dynamism of the communalisation of universal Oneness in the sixth, supplying an unshakable support Chatushtayas: the edamunity established in the first Chatushtaya prepares the harmony of the Shakti and Brahman Chatushtayas with the Shakti and Karma ness and Power, of the static and the dynamic, is to be achieved through the This can be restated in terms of the Śatbhāṣā Chatushtaya. The union of One-

His soul and body take that splendid stamp.⁸
Descend in him, the integral Godhead's seals;
A static Oneness and dynamic Power

jective domains, is compressed into three densely packed lines:
give and active realisations and encompassing both the subjective and the ob-
In Āurobindo the transformation envisaged by Śrī Āurobindo, harmonising pas-

dreaming and deep sleep, the terms Svapna and Shushupta Samadhi are used normally to states withdrawn from outer awareness. Based on analogies with ple for reaching the final goal of Yoga. Samadhi, understood as trance, refers ing the range of consciousness. He rejected only the notion that it is indispensable systems, Śrī Āurobindo recognised the value of Samadhi as a means of extending it has a minor place in the integral Yoga compared to its central position in some usually translated "trance," is the last member of the third Chatushtaya. Though the samadhi was used persistently as a preparation for shakti."¹⁰ Samadhi, and the Vijnana Chatushtaya is suggested when Śrī Āurobindo writes: "Today A few days later, on February 2nd, 1912, another connection between Shakti's stage of evolution already achieved.

most external. Another Yoga might have been satisfied to hear within himself to the lowest and a harmonisation of all activities from the most internal to the self-perfection demands an integration of all parts of the being from the highest form of Karma on two other Chatushtayas is already evident. For the Yoga of in one of the first references to Shakti in the Record, the dependence of this the higher knowledge, which belongs to the third or Vijnana Chatushtaya. Thus, Shakti Chatushtaya. "Vak," is here the inwardly heard speech inspired by Jnana, refusal of the annam," has to do with an obstruction in the fourth, the physical or "the refusal of the annam," is an Upanishadic term for material substance. Therefore, the opy or even contain the vijñanmaya movements of the vak.⁹ Shakti's is once more hampered by the refusal of the annam to

terminology that is typical of the Record):

which somewhat regular diary entries survive, he observed (using the Sanskrit Near the end of January 1912, for example, shortly into the first period for setbacks in relation to several other parts of the sadhana.
He noted its progress and as a subdivision of Karma in the fifth Chatushtaya. He noted its progress and fied this wide-ranging poetry and prose under the heading "Shakti's," literature, thought as its field, though it transcended life and thought. Śrī Āurobindo classi-

for different degrees of absorption. But Sri Aurobindo also recognised two forms of Jagrat Samadhi. By this he meant an inward condition in the waking state itself when, with eyes open or closed (Bahirdarshi or Antardarshi), one is receptive to the experience of subtle realities not belonging to the physical world.

A poem apparently inspired by this type of experience is called “Invitation”. This also provides an example of the continuity between Sri Aurobindo’s sadhana in jail and in his early years in Pondicherry. The poem was published on November 6, 1909, in the *Karmayogin*, with a note informing the reader that it was composed in the Alipur jail. This is a surprising fact, considering the stark contrast between life in prison and the liberty of the “wind-swept uplands” it evokes. The poem might be read as a heroic attempt to escape from this harsh confinement on the wings of imagination. But as we will see, there is more to it than that.

With a few minor changes, “Invitation” was reprinted in 1915 in *Ahana and Other Poems*. As revised it reads:

With wind and the weather beating round me
Up to the hill and the moorland I go.
Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?
Wade through the brook and tramp through the snow?

Not in the petty circle of cities
Cramped by your doors and your walls I dwell;
Over me God is blue in the welkin,
Against me the wind and the storm rebel.

I sport with solitude here in my regions,
Of misadventure have made me a friend.
Who would live largely? Who would live freely?
Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend.

I am the lord of tempest and mountain,
I am the Spirit of freedom and pride.
Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger
Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.¹¹

What prompted Sri Aurobindo to compose these lines in his cramped cell, so remote from any hill or moorland? Undoubtedly they express in a vivid symbol the indomitable spirit of one whom no prison walls could restrain, who under any conditions whatever could live largely and freely within himself. But apart from the psychological explanation, some of the poem’s imagery may have had a more specific source. In an entry in the *Record of Yoga* in January 1913, Sri Aurobindo noted that

rain & wind of the other world were actually felt as in the jail not in touches but in a composite & well-materialised experience.¹²

This sheds new light on “Invitation”. If, as he recalled in 1913, Sri Aurobindo had concretely sensed the “rain & wind of the other world” in Alipur jail, perhaps it was this experience that suggested the “wind and the weather” of the poem he composed there under circumstances that seemed to offer so little occasion for such a theme. In that case, the poem becomes more than a product of the literary imagination. It takes on a deeper meaning that links it to the poetry of direct spiritual and occult experience that would eventually flood forth in Pondicherry.

On January 3rd, 1914, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Record*: “The whole sukshmbodha [subtle awareness] is now extending its sense-perceptions to the mental & pranic [vital] heavens as well as to the mental & pranic koshas [sheaths] of the material world. This movement initiates the completion of the trailokyadrishti [perception of the three worlds] first indicated in the Alipur jail.”¹³ “Invitation” seems to have been composed when he was beginning, in the jail, to experience these subtler planes of existence.¹⁴ The uplands to which we are invited to ascend are not located, then, among the hills and mountains of this world. They belong to a domain we cannot enter unless we are prepared to live more largely and freely than the limits of the ordinary sense-consciousness allow. At the same time, something of the atmosphere of these rarefied realms can surely be felt in the wild and exalted moods of Nature’s altitudes, from which the poet draws his images.

Another poem – or fragment – published in the *Karmayogin* two weeks after “Invitation” was probably also among several poems Sri Aurobindo composed in jail without writing materials, kept in his memory and wrote down after he was freed.¹⁵ “An Image” is the title that was given to a passage of thirteen

and a half lines of dactylic hexameters in a Homeric style. The Trojans led by Paris are described advancing towards and engaging with the army of the Greeks:

Rushing from Troy like a cloud on the plains the Trojans thundered,
Just as a storm comes thundering, thick with the dust of kingdoms,
Edged with the devious dance of the lightning, so all Troas
Loud with the roar of the chariots, loud with the vaunt and the war-cry,
Rushed from Troywards gleaming with spears and rolled on enormous.
Joyous as ever Paris led them glancing in armour,
Brilliant with gold like a bridegroom, playing with death and the battle
Even as apart in his chamber he played with his beautiful Helen,
Touching her body rejoiced with a low and lyrical laughter,
So he laughed as he smote his foemen. Round him the arrows,
Round him the spears of the Argives sang like the voices of maidens
Trilling the anthem of bridal bliss, the chant hymeneal;
Round him the warriors fell like flowers strewn at a bridal
Red with the beauty of blood.¹⁶

A notation in the earliest known manuscript of *Ilion* informs us that the epic, then entitled “The Fall of Troy”, was commenced in jail in 1909 and resumed in Pondicherry in April 1910. The lines published as “An Image” were not, in the end, incorporated in *Ilion* as it took shape through many drafts, mostly between 1910 and around 1917. Fighting between the Trojans and the Greeks begins in the unfinished Book Nine, but not exactly as described here. Nevertheless these hexameters are the only such passage that has been preserved from Sri Aurobindo’s pre-Pondicherry period, and they have much in common with *Ilion*. It seems not unlikely that he regarded these lines as part of the genesis of the poem when he referred to its origins in the Alipur jail.

Sri Aurobindo’s notebooks show that *Ilion*, along with the play *Eric*, was among the first things he took up within a month after his arrival in Pondicherry. Once work on it was resumed, the writing and revision of the epic accounted in the next few years for much of the type of Sahitya he called *Kavya*. As we have seen, Sahitya was always connected for him with *sadhana*. In this case, one aspect of the connection is suggested by some lines in a description of the Greek warriors in Book Seven of *Ilion*:

Bearers mute of a future world were those armoured Achaïans.
So they arrived from Zeus, an army led by the death-god.
So one can see them still who has sight from the gods in the trance-sleep
Out from the tent emerging on Phrygia’s coasts in their armour....¹⁷

“So one can see them still....” Had this been written by another poet, it could have been dismissed as a literary fiction. But Sri Aurobindo, when he wrote *Ilion*, was consciously and systematically cultivating the kind of “sight” alluded to here, both in the waking state and in what he calls elsewhere *Swapna Samadhi* and here “the trance-sleep”.

In the Record, the vision of subtle forms is termed “rupadrishti”. In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, using a less technical vocabulary, Sri Aurobindo refers to the same faculty when he states that, among the various “psychic” senses, that of subtle sight is ordinarily “the first to manifest itself with any largeness when the veil of the absorption in the surface consciousness which prevents the inner vision is broken”. The images this subtle sight receives are usually formed in the subtle matter of the mental ether, the *cittākāśa*. They “may be transcriptions there or impresses of physical things, persons, scenes, happenings, whatever is, was or will be or may be in the physical universe”, or else they may be “representations or creations not of the physical world, but of vital, psychic or mental worlds beyond us”.¹⁸ Thus the faculty of subtle vision is a means of access to other planes of reality, but it is also capable of presenting “images of all things in time and space”.¹⁹ Therefore it can serve as an instrument of “trikaldrishti”, the triple time-vision which, if perfected, would give unlimited, direct knowledge of things past, present and future.

We have no way of knowing how far the details of *Ilion* were supplied by such occult vision, though it evidently played a role. In any case, Sri Aurobindo concerned himself here with the past, present and future of our own world, its actualities and its possibilities, much more than with worlds beyond. He depicted even the Gods primarily in their relations to human life, though with a mystic’s depth of insight. This poem is in many respects not what might have been expected from a Yogi. Perhaps it is not surprising that in 1916 it began to be superseded as the main vehicle of Sri Aurobindo’s inspiration by *Savitri*, an epic based on an Indian rather than a Greek legend. Yet *Ilion* was the first outpouring of his epic genius and he returned to it occasionally up

to the early 1940s, when he thoroughly revised the opening for *On Quantitative Metre*.

An aspect of *Ilion* that deserves to be explored is the philosophy of history implied in it, anticipating ideas found in works such as *The Human Cycle*. One might be tempted to assume that, whatever its aesthetic qualities, a poem based on a legendary event in antiquity and written in an adaptation of an archaic metre could not have much contemporary relevance. But in fact a number of issues of our times were touched upon in *Ilion* long before they became common topics of debate. One of these is globalisation. Though the word was coined only a few decades ago, scholars recognise that long-term processes of globalisation have been under way for millennia, as have trends resisting them. The forces binding humanity closer and closer together and those that in reaction tend to drive it apart are central to the theme of Sri Aurobindo's unfinished epic, as they are to *The Ideal of Human Unity*, a ground-breaking work of globalisation theory which he began to publish while still actively engaged in writing *Ilion*.

The dream of human unity, as far as it could be entertained by the ancient mind, is represented in *Ilion* by the vision of Achilles. Portrayed as a precursor of Alexander, he envisages a union of the entire known world of his time:

*Asia join with Greece, one world from the frozen rivers
Troed by the hooves of the Scythian to farthest undulant Ganges.*²⁰

But this vision was not to prevail. On the contrary, *Ilion* deals explicitly with the sort of cultural struggle that is now called a “clash of civilisations”:

*Europe and Asia, met on their borders, clashed in the Troad.*²¹

On the other hand, an economic solution not unlike the optimistic fantasies of neoliberal globalism is suggested by Poseidon, god of the seas and commerce. He boasts to Zeus:

*Now all your will shall be done, so you give me the earth for my nations.
Gold shall make men like gods and bind their thoughts into oneness;
Peace I will build with gold and heaven with the pearls of my caverns.*

Zeus is unconvinced. He grants that a time will come when “earth shall be seized as a booth for the trader”. But greed and self-interest cannot eradicate the causes of division and violence. The hope that commercialism and the “invisible hand” of the market will usher in a millennium of peace and prosperity is a delusion springing from an incomplete view of human nature. The fate of this project is all too predictable:

*Even as Troy, so shall Babylon flame up to heaven for the spoiler
Wailed by the merchant afar as he sees the red glow from the ocean.*²²

In the Book of the Gods we find an interpretation of the forces that move the human world as well as an overview of the sweep of history and the meaning of its intertwined tendencies of progress and decline. For understanding the relation of *Ilion* to Sri Aurobindo's other writings, the speeches of Athene and Apollo and those addressed to them by Zeus are especially significant. The issue here is whether, ultimately, the rationalism of Athene or the spirituality of Apollo is the key to human destiny. By the time of the Trojan War, the antique symbolism of the Mystery Religions was waning. Zeus promises supremacy to his daughter in the coming ages of triumphant secularism:

*Girl, thou shalt rule with the Greek and the Saxon, the Frank and the Roman.
Worker and fighter and builder and thinker, light of the reason,
Men shall leave all temples to crowd in thy courts, O Athene.
Go then and do my will, prepare man's tribes for their fullness.*

But the fullness for which Athene is to prepare the human race is that of the spirit, not of the mere intellect. The goddess herself understands that the power of reason, over which she presides, is not the highest faculty of consciousness. Her role is to create conditions under which the attempt to spiritualise humanity can be made more successfully than in the past, basing it on an ampler development of the whole nature that will be more secure against a relapse into the infrarational. But finally she will have to submit to something beyond herself:

*This too I know that I pass preparing the paths of Apollo
And at the end as his sister and slave and bride I must sojourn
Rapt to his courts of mystic light and unbearable brilliance.*²³

Sri Aurobindo had grown up in the land of the Saxon under the reign of Athene and Poseidon, reason and commerce. But by the time he arrived in Pondicherry, he had placed his formidable intellect at the service of the mystical illumination associated by the Greeks with Apollo. Nevertheless, his first few years in Pondicherry were only a preparation for what was yet to come. During this period he achieved neither the final siddhi of his Yoga nor the definitive masterpieces of his poetry and prose. It was only in August 1914, when the *Arya* was launched, that some of his major works began to appear. But the phenomenal fluency with which Sri Aurobindo wrote what came out in the *Arya* was only possible as a result of the intensive sadhana of the preceding years. Even a preliminary physical transformation was required if the brain was to respond to nearly unlimited demands on its capacity. Long hours of walking – occasionally as many as sixteen hours in a single day – were part of the strenuous discipline by which this was achieved.²⁴ This activity to overcome the inertia of the body was part of the programme laid out in the *Sharira Chatushtaya*.

Perhaps an even more important condition for Sri Aurobindo's future work pertained to the second *Chatushtaya*. His preoccupation with finding the right balance of the working of the various powers of the divine Force, the *Shakti*, is evident in the *Record of Yoga*. "The method chosen for preparation has been Mahasaraswati's," he wrote, "but the method chosen for fulfilment is Mahakali's in the Mahasaraswati mould. Mahakali's method is vehemence, force & swift-ness, attaining knowledge by swift intuitions, moving to success in action by forceful strides." He added: "The literary work, the subjective action on others, the outward physical speech and action have all to be done with this swift elaboration...."²⁵ The swiftness was Mahakali's contribution, the detailed elaboration was Mahasaraswati's.

On the last day of 1912, Sri Aurobindo anticipated that the coming year would see "the progress of the siddhi of Mahakali-Mahasaraswati".²⁶ 1913 turned out to be a year when, among other things, large portions of *Ilion* were

written in a few weeks in March and April, thanks to a "great activity of the poetical power... in epic poetry".²⁷ This was perhaps an instance of the "swift elaboration" made possible by the Mahakali-Mahasaraswati combination.

Summarising the status of his sadhana at the end of 1912, Sri Aurobindo noted that "the theory of the Yoga has been proved". He continued:

The perfectibility of the human being, trikaldrishti, Power, the play of the Divine Force in the individual, the existence of the other worlds, & of extra-mental influences, even the possibility of the physical siddhis are established facts – *vijnana*, the Vedic psychology, the seven streams, everything is established.... It has been seen that in repose, in *nivritti*[,] in *udasinata*, perfect peace and *ananda* are possible; but the thing the Yoga has set out to establish is the perfect harmony of *Nivritti* & *Pravritti*, of desirelessness & *Lipsa*, of *Guna* & *Nirguna*, complete *Ananda*, *Tapas*, *Knowledge*, *Love*, *Power* & *Infinite Egoless Being*, consummating in the full and vehement flow of the *Pravritti*. By the fulfilment or failure of this harmony the Yoga stands or falls. The siddhi has now reached a stage when the test of its positive worldward side has to be undertaken. *Tyaga* is finished; *shama* & *shanti* & *udasinata* have had their fulfilment; but in that resting place there can be no abiding. It is the starting point of the *Lila*, not its goal.²⁸

The "positive worldward side" of the siddhi would not begin in earnest until 1914. The publication of the *Arya* and other events of that year marked the beginning of a new phase. Little of what Sri Aurobindo had done between 1910 and 1914 was even accessible to the public during his lifetime. But now we can read his fascinating writings of this period and appreciate the extraordinary wideness and richness of the consciousness they express. We can catch glimpses of his inner life from his own record of his sadhana. Today we can see more clearly how his inconspicuous arrival in Pondicherry, on an April afternoon a hundred years ago, silently heralded the dawn of a new era.

(This is the revised version of a talk given at Swarnabhoomi near Pondicherry on 3 April, 2010.)

Notes

1. As late as April 1920, Sri Aurobindo wrote to his brother Barin that until his sadhana was finished he probably would not be able to return to Bengal and that this might take another two years (*Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research* 4 [April 1980], pp. 1, 11). In 1931, recalling this statement, he commented: “I had then a less ample view of the work to be done than I have now....” (Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* [Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972], p. 162)
2. Sri Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), p. 57. In another diary entry he spoke of “the old powers & experiences in the jail” re-emerging “on a new basis of perfection” (ibid., p. 158).
3. Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1999), p. 595.
4. See “The Date of Sri Aurobindo’s ‘Sapta-Chatusthaya’”, *Mother India*, June 1984, pp. 377–80.
5. Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), p. 86.
6. Note that the anglicised spelling “chatusthaya” occurs much more often in the *Record of Yoga* than “chatushtaya” (though there are several instances of this, as on p. 23). I have adopted the latter because it is a closer equivalent of the Sanskrit word.
7. The first Chatushtaya was also referred to as the Samata Chatushtaya.
8. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1993), p. 24.
9. *Record of Yoga*, p. 66.
10. Ibid., p. 70.
11. Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2009), p. 201.
12. *Record of Yoga*, p. 216.
13. Ibid., p. 374.
14. It should be noted that the term “drishti”, as in “trailokyadrishti”, is used in the *Record* not only for vision but for other forms of subtle sense-perception including “sparsha” or touch. The experience of the “rain & wind of the other world” was recorded as an instance of “sparshadrishti”.
15. When “The Mother of Dreams” was published in the *Modern Review* in July 1909, two months after Sri Aurobindo came out of jail, it was accompanied by the following note: “This poem was composed by Mr. Aurobindo Ghose in the Alipore Jail, of course without the aid of any writing materials. He committed it to memory and wrote it down after his release. There are several other poems of his, composed in jail.”
16. *Collected Poems*, p. 274.
17. Ibid., pp. 434–35.
18. *The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 875–76.
19. Ibid., p. 894.
20. *Collected Poems*, p. 350.
21. Ibid., p. 442.
22. Ibid., p. 456.
23. Ibid., pp. 457–58.
24. See *Record of Yoga*, pp. 154–56.
25. *Record of Yoga*, pp. 170–71.
26. Ibid., p. 173.
27. Ibid., p. 241.
28. Ibid., pp. 173–74.

Sri Aurobindo and the Bengal Renaissance

Debashish Banerji

Modernity

We call our present world the modern world, it is the global condition and the age in which we live. We often forget that this Age has its own history, its own initiating conditions, its own projections into the future. We take it for granted because we are immersed in it. However, in recent times, there has been much thinking on the phenomenon of modernity. All human beings living today are participants in this phenomenon partaking of its quality of being. It is a quality we take for granted and thus assume as defining what it means to be human. I don't mean by this that we take for granted the kinds of objects that we are surrounded by today, objects which are subject to rapid change, but increasingly, we believe that we have always had the same kinds of needs, desires, emotions, responses and determining forces to our human condition. This kind of experience arises from an understated homogeneity that marks an epoch and the global universality of our present epoch reinforces this experience as never before. Yet, such a sense of time is illusory, every epoch—and modernity, along with the ages that have preceded it—is only a temporal phenomenon. It was preluded by another way of being and it will be followed by other ways of being. Modernity as a way of being, that we can call truly global today, has crystallised due to certain historical events that made their appearance in Europe some 500 years ago. It is not a conspiracy, nor is it predictable or fully explainable in historical terms. A study of history shows us that the way people experience their times is marked by a sense of uniqueness when compared with other times. Such changes of Age represent forms of disclosure of Being; each Age hides certain aspects of Being and discloses others. The enterprise of History is one of trying to make sense of these changes and the relations between them. Yet, try as we may to find causes which allow us to explain away the change of an Age, there remains

something mysterious about these transitions. Changes of age occur by the fiat of what Sri Aurobindo calls the Time-Spirit; Hegel calls this the *Zeitgeist*. Since the Hegelian *Zeitgeist* smacks of a determinism in a predictable history of Being, and our present Age is premised on a rejection of transcendental determinism, it might seem unfashionable to talk of Time-Spirit and *Zeitgeist* today, but even contemporary thinkers cannot put a finger on all the causes that make an age change.

Such a change of Age took place around the 17th century. The century is a convenient marker, we cannot pin the change of an age to a date because it proceeds through a process which occupies a shifting span of time. Events relate to other sporadic events loosely in an inseparable matrix flowing from an indistinct “past” to a “present” gathering qualitative character, till we suddenly find ourselves in a new way of being which we call the Modern Age. One may speak of the European Renaissance as a cultural movement which leads to Modernity, but increasingly today, in identifying the peculiarly technical mode of being in Modernity, thinkers isolate the post-Renaissance phenomenon of the Enlightenment as its founding event. This is a chapter in the intellectual history of Europe, which belongs more properly to the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment can be seen as providing the idea-forces, leading to consequences in the life-world, the world of life, leading to what we know today as Modernity. So in our consideration of Modernity, as it pertains to India, I would like to turn to the Enlightenment and isolate its master ideas in order to see how they have impacted our times and the responses they were met with in Calcutta, the earliest “modern” city of India from the 19th century, moving into the turn of the 20th century.

Enlightenment

In this transnational transaction of early modernity, its encounter with India, it may be useful to begin with the very ambiguous nature of the term Enlightenment. A favourite Orientalist trope which remains with us in our conversational reference, is the use of the term to describe the spiritual attainment of yoga – we speak for example of “the Buddha’s Enlightenment” to translate romantically a specific category in the philosophical and psychological history of India, Buddha’s Nirvana. But in the intellectual history of the west, when we use the term Enlightenment, it also comes with vast hazy overtones and undertones. For one, it invokes a shift in the focus of knowledge,

we may think of it as a knowledge revolution, a revolution in the location of knowledge. What it represents is a turning from a certain orientation towards the Transcendent, one in which it is not directly accessible. In pre-Enlightenment Europe, God is authorised by religious institutions, He is accessible only through mediators— churches, priests, power structures. The Enlightenment turns away from this by affirming a domain of knowledge which is accessible and common to all humanity. With this arises the intuition of a common humanity, what we may call Humanism. Let us ponder this point: Enlightenment thinkers looked for the essence of human knowledge in the lowest common denominator that all human beings can agree upon. They situated this foundation in the senses. As against a mediated knowledge in which we must take someone else's word for the truth, Enlightenment thinkers sought for a source of direct or immediate knowledge, something they found in the human senses and reasoning. Human beings share a world due to the commonality of what they can describe through their sense experience and infer through their reasoning on the data of the senses. Therefore, sense knowledge became the primary mode of acquisition of knowledge to this direction or turn or switch from a mediated knowledge.

This line of understanding went further to ask what is the scope or ambit of sense knowledge. This is where the philosophers of the Enlightenment grasped and leveraged the fact that though we take it for granted, there is something miraculous about the world which we receive through our senses and 'understand' with our minds. This world when we probe it using our intellect reveals itself as having laws which we can understand. This is indeed a source of profound wonder. It is part of our normal condition but when we stop to think about it, our ability to 'make sense' of the material cosmos and to adapt it to our convenience is an unexpected fact of existence. This is something extremely attractive to the intellectual movement called the Enlightenment. So, particularly in its early phase, the notion of Reason as a divine power, determining the manifestation of the world and mediating between it and the human being is a key idea of the Enlightenment. We can know the world because the world is rational and because we are also rational. In effect, this represents a change in the location of truth from the Transcendence of God to the immanence of Reason in the world and in human beings. The Biblical adage that man is created in the image of God lends itself well to this kind of understanding where the human being finds its definition in the

possession of the Divine Faculty underlying the entire cosmos— ie. Reason. This rational focus thus inaugurated a new way of knowing, which is also a new way of being.

The Enlightenment from this point of view would be our ability to arrive at a totality of knowledge using the reason. If we understand this basis of the Enlightenment, we can see the central place occupied by the Knowledge Academy in it. This gives birth to the modern institutions of schooling with the University at its head. This entire structure of the modern academy, spread across the globe, is intimately interwoven so as to arrive at a culture of knowledge, to give us a totality of the knowledge of the world. This is what may be called the *nomos* of modern education – the development of a systemic rational omniscience. This international enterprise of knowledge generation is the hidden engine to which modern humanity is yoked. This places demands of standardisation on the human understanding of knowledge, its methodology and its boundaries. Without questioning these boundaries, we share this knowledge, we consider it “academic” in our ability to cross-reference each such work of knowledge, we grow on the shoulders of those who have gone before us in the evolution of knowledge thus conceived. We have thus been inducted as a “humanity” into a worldwide enterprise which begins with the Enlightenment.

Just as we find ourselves in an age and a world which we hardly question, an age whose historicity escapes us and a world whose rationality we assume, so we take this knowledge enterprise for granted. To be literate is to be a “knowledge worker” at the centre of a global modernity. Thus, whether we are conscious or not, to be literate is to be yoked, a yoking to the engine of world knowledge, just as we say yoga is a yoking to a structure of undivided consciousness. In the modern world, humanity has been yoked to an enterprise of seeking for the rational omniscience of the Enlightenment, the knowledge which will grant us totality of understanding of the world and ourselves. This yoking has led to certain interesting results. To grasp the scope of these results it is necessary to understand the two sides of this knowledge enterprise.

Knowledge and Power

One aspect of this knowledge is knowledge of the world as we receive it through our senses, in its most material sense. This is the domain of science, primarily what are known as the hard sciences or material sciences, the

knowledge of the world as object. But also, and perhaps more centrally if less overtly, this includes the knowledge of the subject, that is, knowledge of ourselves as human beings. This seeking for a knowledge of the subject opens up the field of what we call the human sciences. I am not talking here of the Humanities, which constitute the study of subjective expressions and their evaluation, and which in themselves, in an Age of Science, are obliquely situated with relation to the human sciences. The human sciences constitute our attempts at arriving at a definition of the Human. They include disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history. These exist in a similar way to the sciences that give us knowledge of the world, to give us knowledge of ourselves. It is as if in the same way as we have embarked on a journey to know fully the laws that run this world, we would also like to know the laws that constitute us as human beings. Thus the human sciences have opened up a certain normative vista which defines us as subjects and which we hardly think about. In our modern world it is something that characterises our mode of being, in a deep sense I would say, differently from the being of people in pre-modern times, in that we have a sense of the human which is different from that of earlier times.

This sense of being has a negative side and a positive side. On the one hand, it implies a crystallisation, a reduction of identity. Human beings today are increasingly understood in predictable moulds, behaviourally, socially, culturally. On the other, we have developed a more universal sense of the human; an intuition of the human. Today a human being can immediately recognise the humanity of another human being, irrespective of his/her culture, nationality, race, or history. This is also a legacy of the Enlightenment. Perhaps at the centre of the Enlightenment is this new international humanism.

If the domain of Science is the “pure” side of the knowledge enterprise of modernity, there is also another side we need to acknowledge. As an obverse of the “pure” Sciences, this is what may be called the “applied” Sciences. But if the obverse of “purity” is “application,” the traces of its converse, “impurity” are not absent in its implications. Contemporary philosophers, drawing their heritage from Nietzsche have even posited that this other side is the primary side, that latent under the guise of the noble enterprise of “pure” knowledge always lay the more ignoble motive of application, the enterprise of power. Knowledge leads to Power, and perhaps always, Power

drives the engine of Knowledge. Whatever I know I can control. Knowledge lends itself to the designs of power, of exploitation, possession and enjoyment. One may question whether indeed it is always the case that the Will to Power hides under every Will to Knowledge. But, at the least we can assert, following Sri Aurobindo, that the Vital being of man has its own understanding of the Enlightenment and very quickly aligns the mental enterprise of Knowledge to its own designs of Power.

The voyages of discovery became the means of colonisation. Very quickly, even in the domains of its origin, the discoveries of Science lent themselves to the applications of Technology, to mass production, forced consumption, the operations of power and the creation of new desires in people so that they may consume what has been produced in excess. Along with the Knowledge Academy and the international definition of the human, this spawned that other peculiarly modern reality, the global World Market as the field for the play of Power as capital and its accumulation.

Colonialism and the Bengal Renaissance

In India, this mercantile expansionism sought its fortunes and made its firm settlement with the founding of the modern city of Calcutta in the 18th c. But such a founding was impossible without extensive close interactions with Bengalis and the consequent class of Bengali middlemen that arose came to constitute what was called the *bhadralok*, a new strata of Bengalis educated in the English language and the ways of occidental civilisation. From the late 18th c. this *bhadralok* class began to develop an internal reality of its own through a culture which engaged in a rethinking of what it meant to be Bengali and Indian and a critical assimilation of western modernity. Today, we think of all this as “the past,” a distant and unnecessary detail lost in dusty history books. This sense of irrelevance and distance has also been exacerbated by the peculiar temporality of modernity, in which a sense of rupture mediates between the past and the present, as an ever accelerating material instrumentality determines our sense of time. In terms of the history of the Modern Age, it is true that the Age of Colonialism has passed. But it isn’t a chapter that has disappeared, its hidden reality continues to determine our times. If we interrogate Colonialism, we find that what is behind it is the geopolitics of domination. The geopolitics of domination has changed its name but it is no

less present in our times. It is true that today it is more subtle and cannot express itself with the undisguised nakedness of the heyday of colonialism. Today we call it neo-liberal globalisation. What this subtle shift points to is a disjuncture between the enterprise of Knowledge and the enterprise of Power within the Enlightenment, its evidence of the fact that they interact with each other, modifying each other. The designs of Power cannot be as naked as they were before, because the designs of Knowledge have refined the operations of Power. This demonstrates a certain kind and degree of progress within the historical trajectory of the Enlightenment, an evidence of the ongoing complexity of the history of modernity.

Thus, the modern age came upon India in the guise of colonialism, securing its global capitalist drive with the settlement of a modern urban centre, Calcutta from the 18th c. And with it came a new class of Bengalis, who were necessary not only to its mercantile designs but its civilisational ambition, as native informants in the institutional nexus of Knowledge and Power with which the Enlightenment proceeded in its world expansionism. But to put it thus would be to see it only from one side of its complex reality. It would be to deny agency to the Bengali middleman, overlooking his resistance and selective assimilation of the ways of colonialism and modernity. From the late 18th c., one sees a many-sided critical engagement with modernity among the *bhadralok* class of Calcutta. Many scholars have analysed this as a cultural engagement with colonial domination and an initiation of the process of nationalism. But the rethinking that began in the 18th c. and ran through the entire 19th century went much deeper than the stirrings of political independence, opposing colonialism with a predictable nationalism. This rethinking is better seen as a critique of post-Enlightenment modernity. This is what constitutes the post-colonial potential of the Bengal Renaissance, its continuing legacy. If we investigate this aspect of the Bengal Renaissance today, two hundred years from its inception, we rediscover its fertility. It is for us to re-open the pages of that chapter and probe its answers, answers and approaches that may be better adapted to our times than when they were given.

The Bengal Renaissance has been seen as a complex movement that has both revivalist and reformist tendencies in it. Of these, the reformist tendencies arose in alignment with the forces of modernity. An important strand of the Bengal Renaissance welcomed modernity as something to embrace, except

for the oppressive aspects of colonialism. Many of these thinkers felt that colonialism was a blessing because it brought the gifts of an 'enlightened civilisation' to India. According to them, the oppressive aspects of colonialism were in contradiction to the enlightened principles espoused by the colonisers, and they could be contested on the grounds of these principles. This was the position of those who were later called the Moderates. The Moderates sought to appeal to the conscience of the coloniser, to change the conditions of inequality and oppression wherever they were seen to be practised. A variant strain was constituted by those who embraced modernity conditionally, and rejected colonialism. Both these strains could be called reformist. On the other side of the drive to reform were the revivalist forces. These were conservative elements who felt threatened by change and by what were understood to be "foreign" elements. The tendency here was to revive past forms of culture and religion so as to resist the forces of modernity.

Interestingly, if we study the major figures of the Bengal Renaissance, we see that most of them demonstrated a mixture of these reformist and revivalist tendencies in a close braiding. In this kind of internal dialogue, the reformatory tendency was applied not merely to one's own culture but became a critical force which challenged colonialism and the contradictions of modernity, and the revivalist tendency was not merely a call to repeat ancient forms and customs but a new birth or renaissance engaged with modernity. Here, I would like to isolate some forms of response which I consider to be central to modernity, seen as a derivative of the Enlightenment, in terms of these two tendencies of reform and revival.

Humanism

The first of these comes in response to the spirit of Humanism which is intrinsic to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment ideal is based on an understanding of all human beings as equal possessors of Reason, seen as the ultimate principle which pervades the Universe. I would say, this is the most powerful contributing factor that reformist tendencies open up in Bengal of that time, i.e., the acknowledgement of the fact that all human beings are equal. This profound wave of thought, sentiment and idealism enters as a strain into the Bengal Renaissance at a very early stage. It is present in most of its thinkers and has a variety of repercussions. One of these is the idea that

whatever has created inequalities among human beings, such as class, gender and caste hierarchies should be eradicated. The Young Bengal movement of Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) is an example of this kind of reformist tendency. Another approach to the same perceived inequalities is a rethinking of cultural behaviours and customs so as to make them egalitarian. This was the revivalist or more properly, nascent idea, which often worked through etymology and genealogy to demonstrate the historical bases of cultural transformations leading to forces of division for the play of power. These thinkers pointed to some nugget of truth within traditional norms which could be re-established within the normative frame of modernity. A good example of this kind of rethinking is provided by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who reinterpreted caste through Vedanta, writing about it in terms of the professional division of society and soul capacity.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) entered into and furthered this discourse. He provided an interpretation of caste which went beyond professional necessity to an analysis of the soul, substantiating a theory of the soul as a form of becoming or evolution, resting on four lines of manifestation of the powers of the Divine Shakti, the four Mother Powers of wisdom, strength, exchange and service.¹ This reinterpretation of the idea of caste while rejecting hereditary and hierarchical notions, brings to the front a mystical idea resting on traditional sources such as the Gita and Tantra, but re-interpreting these in terms of the dignity of all human work and the discovery of the dynamic inner proclivities of individual expression.

The importance of this move lies in its revision of the bases of Enlightenment humanism. It demonstrates a transformative ideal that, while accepting the modern premise of human equality, displaces its rational bias to accommodate the spiritual history of India. In his later writings, such as *The Human Cycle*, written in Pondicherry in the second decade of the 20th c., Sri Aurobindo continued to engage Enlightenment humanism in this revisionary manner, demonstrating the ideal of humanism to be realisable only through the spiritual experience of the soul of humanity in all human beings.²

Rationality

Again, as we have seen, Rationality is the watchword of the Enlightenment, its very foundation. In his displacements, Sri Aurobindo does not reject rationality but exploits its own uncertainties to indicate ways to the experience

of greater clarities. In this kind of exploitation, Sri Aurobindo is not the first nor the only thinker. Indeed, we find that most of the principal thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance strongly embrace rationality. This is an important revisionary factor because the Enlightenment was, in fact, largely a reaction against the irrationalism of religion in Europe and in the colonised domain of India, a purely revivalist impulse could very well have asserted a spirit of pre-modern religion that rejected reason. The Enlightenment came as a reaction to what have been called the Dark Ages in Europe. The Dark Ages were the ages of superstition and religion, of the control of Knowledge and Power by the Church, and, putting their weight on an authority which could not be universally verified, they were seen as irrational. Hence a gulf was dug deep between the modern age based on Reason and the pre-modern world which was irrational. This gulf is still with us. In fact, we may surmise that the reason we have not been able to engage seriously with the solutions that were opened up during the Bengal Renaissance, is the continuing presence of that gulf in our times.

During the Bengal Renaissance an attempt was made to close that gulf. Rationality and spirituality walked hand in hand. From the late 18th c., whether we consider Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833), Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the foundations of the Brahmo movement, or whether we look at Vivekananda, or later Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) or Sri Aurobindo, in all of them there was an attempt to build a bridge between rationality and the life of the spirit. Once more, in this, these thinkers were not creating in a vacuum, but rekindling the rich intellectual discursive tradition of *darshana* (yoga philosophy), *bhashya* (commentary) and *vitarka* (debate), now translated into a hybrid engagement with an occidental philosophical discourse. Sri Aurobindo's contribution here, too, is profound because he draws close attention to the transition between reason and what transcends it. He demonstrated the limits of Reason, why the Enlightenment was blighted by principled internal conflict and impotence in the achievement of its own goals of knowledge. Like Immanuel Kant, who used the tools of logic to demonstrate the limits of Reason, Sri Aurobindo engaged the discourses of Philosophy and Psychology to work out the properties and office of Reason. He then indicated the transition from the power of rationality to the power of a spiritual rationality, a supra-rationality, through the mediation of an intuitive mind. In this, he

critiqued the mainstream Enlightenment notion of a static rational definition of the human by translating the premises of Indian yoga and echoing Nietzsche at the same time – “Man is a transitional being.”³ This transitionality opens up a post-humanist possibility, seen by Sri Aurobindo as the transformation of human Reason to an individualised cosmic Mind and what he calls Supermind. Thus, Sri Aurobindo, in his engagements with the discursive grounds of the Enlightenment, demonstrated its fulfilment through the marriage of rationality and spirit. But this discourse found its voice in Sri Aurobindo due to the ground prepared by earlier thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance. The Bengal Renaissance provided the rich soil and Sri Aurobindo planted the tree which yields the flower of an alternate fulfilment to the Enlightenment. Though we have largely swept aside (or under) this discourse, a contemporary postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment makes its consideration possible and urgent.

This aspect of the Bengal Renaissance seemed to get attenuated and finally disappear from the 1920s. As the movement of cultural critique gave way to the political imperative of independence, the gap between the rational and the irrational on which the Enlightenment was premised re-asserted itself through a division into a political left and a right – socialism or religious orthodoxy, the first fashioned in the moulds of an occidental humanism and the second after politicised indigenous religions. Reform and revival parted ways and reverted to a more simplistic antagonism.

Social Concern

But the Bengal Renaissance has other lessons to teach us. Along with the ideas of the power of rationality and the equality of human beings, as a corollary of these, comes social concern, concern with the emancipation of downtrodden people, women, subjugated classes and castes. This social concern also becomes an important and ubiquitous undercurrent of the Bengal Renaissance. We have already touched on some of these concerns in considering humanism and the caste system. But this concern finds more active manifestations, in which a revisionary transformation of Hinduism is mobilised to the benefit of social welfare. We find here personalities such as Swami Vivekananda, with his social service programs, introducing ideas on the emancipation of the downtrodden in terms of Hindu spiritual practice—the service of God, Narayana, in humans – Naranarayana. Bankim Chandra

Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) is another important early figure of the Bengal Renaissance who couched an impulse towards social and political betterment in terms of a revisionary social spirituality.

Hinduism

In all these engagements with the prerogatives of the Enlightenment, whether in the concern with rationality, the equality of human beings, social service or other normative vectors of modernity, we find the Bengal Renaissance responding with an attempt at articulation which preserves the cultural history of varieties of Indian spirituality. Here I would agree with recent thinkers such as Wilhelm Halbfass that in all these instances of engagement, what results is a transformed Indian discourse.⁴ This discourse of what has often been called Neo-Vedanta is castigated as a derived Orientalism by some contemporary critics, but I see this as a productive force whose discursive energy has found a place in modernity’s voice and whose potential is hardly spent. In these engagements the Bengal Renaissance takes a resistant and transformative stand on post-Enlightenment modernity. If one may say, echoing Nietzsche, that the modern age begins with the death of God, we may propose an alternate discourse arising from Bengal of the late 18th to early 20th centuries, in which modernity is premised in a new birth of God. Such a birth is no more one of a God who stands at the head of religions, claiming a fascist right on all humanity, but a God who awaits each human being as the ever-extending horizon of his/her own self-exceeding, a God more akin to Nietzsche’s Overman. If such an ideal could be said to stand at the head of the contemporary critique of modernity in the words of Nietzsche, a concern with its praxis meets us in the voices of the Bengal Renaissance. We encounter this from an early stage, in lineages such as Ram Mohun Roy, Debendranath and Rabindranath Tagore, or Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), Vivekananda and his collaborators, or with isolated personalities who assimilate what exists or create new ideas, such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee or Sri Aurobindo. In all these voices, the ideal of a spiritual reconstitution of individual and social life is powerfully present as an alternative form of living modernity. It seeks to express itself not outside of the modern but within the modern and not outside of life but as a transformed definition of life. Each of these figures represents a powerful social force through which a spiritual practice expresses itself in its own way. Sri Aurobindo’s contribution to this core concern of the

Bengal Renaissance is perhaps the most profound, in that he heralds a new age of spiritual experimentation and development which treats all life as yoga.

It is important to note that this articulation straddles two discourses – reformist and revivalist, modernist and traditionalist— and is revisionary to both. We have touched on its contribution to the discourse of modernity, but this also implied a large scale redefinition of what we call Hinduism. This is not clearly perceived, since there has been the rise of Hindu nationalism in India since the 1980s and many contemporary commentators have attributed the origins of Hindutva to the Bengal Renaissance. This is far from the truth. As an interrelated discourse, what the Bengal Renaissance introduces is a creative redefinition of Hinduism. This is because they inflect the burgeoning history of Indic spirituality in terms of modernist concerns. As I have mentioned, this discourse is conscious of the fascist implications of a God who claims unity through division. Its locus is therefore stretched from the start between the horns of universalism and plurality. In Sri Ramakrishna, for example, we find a mystic who can embrace any discipline or sectarian formulation of spirituality and arrive at an ecstatic realisation from it, without the need to hierarchise or structure into a metaphysics. In Vivekananda, it is true, that the urge towards metaphysics moves towards the formulation of a universalist Advaita Vedanta, but this is powerfully tempered with the message of individual freedom in seeking and spiritual practice. Again, in the Brahmo lineage, we find this braiding of universalism and pluralism. We find Ram Mohun Roy dialoguing throughout his adult life with Christians and Muslims, attempting to demonstrate the convergences of all spiritual approaches in a Vedantic monotheism, a grappling with plurality so as to bring it under a universalist frame. We find a much subtler approach to the same dialogue between universalism and pluralism with Rabindranath Tagore, and so on even with a number of lesser known figures.

The two most powerful and popular cultural histories of spiritual practice in Bengal are Vaishnavism and Shaktism. Naturally, these two approaches inflect the writings of the Bengal Renaissance strongly, but in new and revised ways. Of course, we know the case of Sri Ramakrishna, who attained to the spiritual realisations of Vasihnavism and Shakta Tantra but these two sectarian practices make their way into several other major figures of the time, in the writings of Bankim Chandra and Sri Aurobindo, for example. If we look at

the origins of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, his *Record of Yoga*, we find the central place both Krishna and Kali have in it;⁵ and decades later, we find him state in a correspondence that the two names Krishna and Kali arising together during the practice of his yoga, provide a powerful sign towards the transformation of consciousness. Thus, it is this ability of taking localised practices and relating them to each other in syntheses, or making them universal that constitutes a highly creative contribution of the Bengal Renaissance and Sri Aurobindo's work constitutes a central part of this.

Universality and Plurality

Indeed, it is this dialogue between universalism and plurality which is initiated in the Bengal Renaissance, something fraught with difficulty. It is much easier to define a national identity around a single ideology and a privileged history. This is what Hindutva attempts to do to the rich and complex history of Indic spiritual practice. The Bengal Renaissance, on the other hand, was largely creative and progressive in seeing this long cultural discourse as a living and mutating one, something lending itself to innovation in different contexts and demanding ongoing adaptations in the present. This redefinition of Hinduism was one which made it evolutionary, not something which embraced only a specific ideology but one which engaged with all histories of spiritual practice, making up the fabric of its unfinished body. This indeed, is how Sri Aurobindo presented his definition of Sanatan Dharma in the famous *Uttarpara speech* (1909).⁶

Sri Aurobindo saw clearly that the difficulty of defining a national identity in terms of religious ideology went back to the limitations of the mind. The mind divides reality in terms of binaries. Thus, we can dwell on unity and we can dwell on infinity, but the mind cannot hold these radically different realities at the same time. But the Brahman is both one and infinite. Hence we see that though Universalism seems to be an all-inclusive idea, what this implies to the mind is problematic, because true universality, or more properly integrality, is not within the power of human reason to grasp. In the contemporary academic discipline of religious studies, this problem is very clearly acknowledged through the use of the term 'inclusivism'. As against 'exclusivism,' which refers to religions establishing their identity by denying relevance to

other religions, or dubbing them as satanic, ‘inclusivism’ proceeds by subordinating other religions under itself, a kind of ideological totalitarianism. The ideological construct of Hinduism, under mental compulsion to define itself in terms of a national identity, introduces this difficulty into modern India. However, this mental over-determination is not recent in origin, its roots may be seen in the attempts of the Vedantic acharyas, particularly Shankara, to define a hegemonic Hinduism in terms of Advaita Vedanta, perhaps as early as the 9th c.

Thus ‘inclusivist’ religious ideologies appropriate to themselves the right over all other religions. This can be seen as a peculiar problem of a universalism forced to define itself in terms of a mental taxonomy, which is one of the world organising features of post-Enlightenment modernity. The hegemonic construct of Advaita Vedanta lends itself eminently to this ordering paradigm. In terms of the Bengal Renaissance, though it is true that Vivekananda privileged such an Advaita Vedanta as a “national” definition of Hinduism, as mentioned earlier, there was enough richness and complexity in his approach to spirituality to render this construct dialectical. However, it is in time conflated and identified with his teachings and normalised by later nationalistic philosophers and teachers such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) or Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993). The problem with this definition is its erasure of the irreducible difference between spiritual experiences. There is something that escapes every formula in any approach. Just as human beings are distinct— though we may intuit the common humanity in every human being, each individual is unique – so each name, relationship and experience of the Divine has its irreducible reality, a unique form of the Supreme. This mentally irreconcilable plurality forms part of the mystic richness of the spiritual approach initiated in the Bengal Renaissance, and given a philosophical and psychological formulation to by Sri Aurobindo.

Further contemplation may bring us closer to the solution proposed by Sri Aurobindo. This contemplation can come to us from the Gita’s *Viswarupa Darshan*. In this section of the Gita, Arjuna asks to see Sri Krishna in his original form, undisguised by the Ignorance. Sri Krishna says to Arjuna that this vision is beyond human capacity but he will grant it to Arjuna by giving him “divine eyes” to see. He then provides Arjuna with a new sight and

bestows on him the *Viswarupa Darshan*. In this darshan, Arjuna sees the ultimately paradoxical image. He sees something which is formless and infinite – a mass of radiance extended on all sides without beginning, middle or end – and simultaneously he sees all possible beings, past present and future present in this Being, being born acting and dying. Such a co-existence of unity and infinity, or of formlessness and all possibilities of form or of a static eternity and a dynamic perpetuity is bewildering beyond measure to the mental consciousness of Arjuna and he entreats Krishna to revert to his “universal” form, all-encompassing with four hands. Of course, an ‘inclusivism’ can easily be derived from this description and this too has happened, a theistic inclusivism, which subsumes all possible experiences under the rubric of Avatar Krishna. But what Sri Aurobindo sees in this kind of image is a post-humanist possibility. What Arjuna has been granted with the Viswarupa is not so much a proclamation regarding the avatara as the possibility of an experience which surpasses the limitations of the mental consciousness and heralds the evolution of the overmental or supramental species. The Gita being a book of yoga, it is clear that such an evolutionary possibility is pointed to as an eventual outcome of human praxis.

Sri Aurobindo provides a philosophical basis for this form of experience in his written works such as *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. In a chapter in *The Life Divine* on “The Triple Status of the Supermind,” he develops the form of supramental experience as a co-existence of transcendental, universal and individual being-experiences.⁷ Similarly, in the last chapter of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, titled “Towards the Supramental Time Vision,” he discusses both the psychology and philosophy of supramental time experience, dealing with the question of the co-existence of eternity and temporality within the same experience.⁸ Here he discusses how the supramental existence, operating in time and outside it, can maintain its reality as a becoming as well as a knowing of all possibility. This is achieved through degrees of self-concealment, or rather, co-existing modalities of self-access within the same being. At once, there is all revelation in eternity and the immanence of this knowledge working out as creative skill in time. This range of coincident consciousness is natural to supermind and is possible through the development of human consciousness extending beyond its mental limits. A transition to

such a realisation is mediated by an expansion of human capacity in terms of an infinite openness to God experience, allowing pluralism to prepare the ground for the supramental experience in which all possibilities of the divine may co-exist. Such a solution is not merely a repetition of the assertions of the past of Indian spirituality, but a pointer to a post-humanist future.

Body Without Organs

In this post-humanist orientation, the work of Sri Aurobindo converges with the thoughts of certain postmodern seers. We may consider, for example, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). Deleuze pushed the boundaries of thinking about the experience of radical plurality. He concluded that such an experience could be found only beyond reason and beyond present ‘natural’ human ability, but it is within our aspiration as an expansion of capacity. To Deleuze, the capacity for infinite variety of experience constituted ‘the earth’ as a universal Body-without-Organs (BwO).⁹ This ‘ground’ would be open to all experience, yet it would be one in its infinite expansiveness and productive creativity (the full earth). Though such a condition of experience would be beyond present human comprehension, it is latent as immanent possibility of evolution and one could prepare for it by increasing the body’s capacity for experience. According to this, any experience, met with by the body’s expanded capacity, would be an experience of bliss, belonging to a scale of intensities. This praxis of preparation comes close to Sri Aurobindo’s experiments in the *Record of Yoga* where he attempts to turn all experiences into delight through the transformation of the body’s capacity. It is through transformative preparations of this kind that we can develop the capacity to experience a consciousness which is supramental. According to Sri Aurobindo, the structures for this do not exist in human beings at present, but this does not mean that the definition of the human is bound within existing structures. At the same time, without aspiration and practice/preparation, they will not appear, as if by miracle. Sri Aurobindo, in his essay on the *Viswarupa Darshan* points out though it is through a kind of “miracle” that Arjuna is granted the supramental vision by Krishna, such a “miracle” is overpowering for Arjuna. Hence, a much longer preparation of yogic practice is necessary to bring humanity to the expansion of capacity necessary for this evolutionary transition to a consciousness beyond the mind, which resolves unity and plurality.¹⁰

Nation

So far, in our consideration of the transformations in Humanism, Rationality or Religion, we have skirted around the category of the Nation. The Nation forms a central concern in any consideration of the Bengal Renaissance; indeed, the Bengal Renaissance has often been seen mainly as a form of cultural nationalism. Here too, we find the discourse opened up by the thinkers of this period, though preparing the ground for nationalism, also providing interesting critiques highlighting its problematic nature. In contemporary postcolonial thinking, several of these problems have been articulated with clarity. This is not to under-rate the need of a subjugated people to rise as a collective and assert their own right to exist. The central problem associated with such collective movements is the problem of identity politics – in what name is collective unity to be orchestrated? Any collective unity becomes a contested domain in which a number of interests vie to lay claim to the ideological definition of the group. “Nation” in this sense, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, is an “imagined community,” a reified category made up of selections and suppressions.¹¹ Such an identity builds its reality through the creation of a subjective sense of belonging, something achieved by the use of culture. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance, as a cultural movement consolidating a subjective consciousness in the face of political and cultural subjugation, can be seen pre-eminently in these nationalistic terms.

We discover that from an early period this cultural nationalism sought to focus attention on the unified territory and history of India as a substantialised agent, Mother India or Bharat Mata. Among the earliest articulations of this sentiment is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Ananda Math* (1882), in which a band of revolutionary sannyasis take arms against injustice in the name of the nation seen as the Divine Mother. *Ananda Math* also introduced the song of adoration to this Mother, *Bande Mataram*. This image of the nation (along with Bankim’s song) became very popular in Bengal during the early 20th c, by dint of its spread through political propaganda and cultural dissemination. Sri Aurobindo was among those of the later generations of the Bengal Renaissance who were deeply influenced by Bankim’s vision and actively promoted a form of nationalism in which Indians were asked to perceive the nation as the living form of the Divine Mother. He and his revolutionary collaborators published their rousing articles in a journal by the name of *Bande*

Mataram. Songs addressing the Divine Mother, adapted from the rich tradition of Bengali Kali and Durga worship, carrying obvious nationalist overtones appeared in large numbers, including in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976). Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) painted a poster of Bharat Mata which was used in a political rally. The practice of Durga Puja (worship of the warrior Mother) in public, particularly in Calcutta, was introduced as a quasi-nationalist call to arms as well as a celebration of collective identity, a practice which continues to this day. All this has caused some contemporary critics to see this aspect of the cultural nationalism of the Bengal Renaissance to be Hindu dominated and fascist in potential. However, as Sugata Bose has pointed out, the image of Bharat Mata translated hazily between regional (Banga Mata) and national (Bharat Mata) realities in this early phase of Indian nationalism. As a regional Bengali movement, it drew on sources of popular sentiment which had developed a long history of syncretic devotional practice transcending sectarian or religious boundaries.¹² Testimony to this fact is also borne by the large number of national songs addressed to the Divine Mother written by Kazi Nazrul Islam, a Bengali Muslim, who is today considered the national poet of Bangladesh; as well as by the large corpus of songs using Divine Mother imagery which were revived in the later movement for political independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan (1971).

Moreover, in a large number of its personalities, the problems associated with a fascistic nationalism were well understood and critiqued. A contemporary postcolonial scholar has used the term “strategic essentialism” to speak of the possibility of subjugated individuals coming together to contest classes or other large-scale group identities which oppress them.¹³ Whereas a simplistic essentialism implies an ahistorical set of characteristics and “ideologemes” which are said to define a nation, a “strategic essentialism” implies the dynamic consciousness of the political use and constructed nature of such characteristics, accepted by a group for its self-definition as a means to consolidate identity. “Strategic essentialism” implies the continuous presence of self-critique within the identity construct, a consciousness towards the undoing of hegemonic essentialisms which suppress minority voices and push towards the erasure of individual and local agencies and histories. As the name itself suggests, the Bengal Renaissance, as an early movement of cultural

nationalism, was largely conscious of shifting between the prerogatives of regional and national culture. Along with this was the larger awareness of a civilisational critique, which might be called trans-national and/or international. This awareness of shifting boundaries and negotiations between micro and macro communities, or lived and imagined communities of various cultural characteristics, pervades the discourse of the Bengal Renaissance, allowing for a greater cosmopolitanism in individual creative agency. The plural space of early urban Calcutta allowed for a rich mix of transactions and translations relating to regionalism, nationalism, pan-Asianism and international Orientalism, opening up networks of affiliation and fraternity which allowed for a dynamic complexity in the construction of national subjectivity.

The category of “nation” is also a peculiarly modern form with its basis in the Enlightenment and its incipient ideology of arriving at a single unified description of the cosmos, what in today’s terms is called a TOE (Theory-of-Everything). This is why the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has referred to our age as the “Age of the World Picture.”¹⁴ Such an epistemological drive proceeds by creating classifications which tend to become more and more inclusive and normalise themselves as absolute. With the will-to-power which drives this knowledge-enterprise, the world-making endeavour of the Enlightenment may be well captured in the contemporary image of an omni-database, a kind of universal arrangement of data, in which all nameable entities are put in their slots along with their definable properties so that they can be manipulated at will. Such an image leads to Heidegger’s designation of “standing reserve” as a characteristic feature of modern ontology – a drive to translate all things into static manipulable “resources.”¹⁵ This idea of putting in place, of classifying according to an absolute scheme, is profoundly problematic due to the fact that any “universal” perspective represents a contest of power to claim itself as truth.

Once more we return to the problem of universalism and pluralism. We may even say that there can be many possible universalisms. But the Enlightenment is premised on a single absolute universalism, the System. Thus, the notion of systematicity is intrinsic to the Enlightenment. These underlying epistemological ideas characterise modern understanding. A major discipline in the contemporary academy is Systems Theory. This discipline has been loosely classed as an inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary discipline, but it may be more properly addressed as an omni-disciplinary discipline. Behind it is the

late 20th c. idea of modular assemblage, the development of a coherent model for the universe by creating seamless interfaces across the boundaries that separate the specialised disciplines that bring us our knowledge of the world (object) and the human (subject) – the disciplines of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology and the other humanistic disciplines. If we bring them all together, we will find the links and create one picture of the universe. This is the ambition of Systems Theory.

This systematicity is present not only in the knowledge enterprise of modernity but also in its drive for power. The geopolitics of domination is a systematicity related to the creation of a unified political and economic world order. A world order implies something at the centre and other things at various distances from the centre, leading to its peripheries, so that they can be granted different degrees of agency and dominated to different degrees. This world ordering imagination finds its convenient handles in the idea of ‘nations’. To arrive at such changeless and absolute classifications of people sharing territory and history, it becomes necessary to think of them in reified terms outside their lived experiences as individuals. Individuals with a collective history share a living sense of togetherness. Individual “Indians,” for example, carry their own living sense of a cultural history of togetherness. They share symbols, practices, local histories. This constitutes their living social reality as a population, but if an absolute reality is to be sought for a people over-riding individual reality of social memory and lived experience, this can be orchestrated in two ways. One is to posit an ahistorical essence of the nation, something transcending any conglomeration of people and their histories. That is the ‘nation soul’. The second is a political and administrative structure imposed on the people. That is what we call the ‘nation state’. Thus, it is between the ‘nation soul’ and the ‘nation state’ that the Enlightenment project effectuates itself in its integration of nations.

Nation Soul

Like several other categories we have considered, which arose as a result of the cultural engagement between indigenous spiritual histories and modernity in the Bengal Renaissance, the idea of a nation soul took its hybrid form as a national reality. Though today, there is an attempt to claim an archaic origin of this idea within Indian history, it was not present in its theorised form prior to the modern period. Certainly, there are references to a quasi-national consciousness, going back to the Vedas, as in the Hymn to the Divine Word,

Vak, where the Goddess is identified as *rashtri*, the Nation-Mother or in the Puranic idea of the subcontinent united by the distributed limbs of Sati after her self-immolation, but these are sporadic and nascent ideas. The properly theorised idea of “nation soul” in modern times makes its appearance in late 18th century Germany. It is voiced in the writings of a philosopher named Johann Herder (1744-1803) and soon, through Herder’s contemporary, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel takes Herder’s idea and makes it the cornerstone of his *Philosophy of History* which is a theory of evolution consonant with the ideology of the Enlightenment.¹⁶ One could argue in fact, that Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* provides the best philosophical description for the teleology of the Enlightenment. In Hegel’s scheme, it is Reason (he calls this Consciousness) which is God, trapped in matter. Matter has laws but these laws are not self-conscious, they are expressed unconsciously. But they evolve in time creating forms that have greater and greater power of consciousness, leading to the human being, who has rational choice. For Hegel, the human being is the pinnacle of this evolution of Reason. As we know, according to the Enlightenment idea (and the Renaissance which preceded it), Man, as possessor of Reason, is the measure of all things. Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* then proceeds to trace the further evolution of Reason through human collectivities, the nation-souls.

For those who know of the evolutionary philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, we can see how close, and yet how subtly different Hegel’s idea is from that of Sri Aurobindo. At the start of this discussion, I spoke of the changes in epochs being guided by what Hegel calls the *Zeitgeist*, the Time-Spirit according to Sri Aurobindo. According to Hegel, the change of an age is related to specific expressions of Rationality. Reason proceeds through dialectical experiments in different milieus, the nation-souls, bringing to the social surface certain contradictions which are subconscious within it. But once a contradiction is solved in a certain set of people, according to Hegel’s philosophy, the Time-Spirit leaves this “nation” and proceeds to another milieu to work out further possibilities. Each nation is thus chosen to express a stage in the evolution of Reason and remains forever stuck in that stage after it has served its purpose. For Hegel, India and China expressed two of the most primitive conditions in this history of the *Zeitgeist*, because they represented solutions to problems which arose prior to the appearance of political self-consciousness. They were thus doomed to remain as static preserves of essentialised identity. On the other hand, the same *Zeitgeist* advanced finally to Europe of

the 18th century, where it achieved the fullness of its expression. Hegel's idea encompasses what he calls 'the end of History', a term that is making its reappearance in recent times in the writings of some philosophers, e.g., Francis Fukuyama (1992-), who argues in his book *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the global universalisation of the political form of liberal democracy and the world market constitute the finality of history as an experimental process seeking perfection and stabilisation.¹⁷ There are many others who have echoed this sense of culmination of Enlightenment teleology in our times, as a fulfilment of Georg Hegel's prophecy of the power of Rationality articulating itself in its fullness in a collective Godhood of Omniscience, Omnipotence and Omnipresence. Any deeper genealogical perusal of such ideas takes us back surely to the Eurocentric roots of the Enlightenment, its neo-colonial global world order and geopolitics of domination.

In passing, we may note the apparent similarity between Hegel's Metaphysics and Sri Aurobindo's idea of evolution as stated in *The Life Divine*. Though a similar process of the Involution-Evolution of Consciousness forms the basis of Sri Aurobindo's theory, Consciousness does not equate to Rationality in Sri Aurobindo's case, nor does it eschew Reason. As mentioned earlier, the hybrid form of this Metaphysics straddles two discourses, that of western speculative Metaphysics and of the Indian dasrhana-yoga tradition, which invites subjective verification through the praxis of yoga. This dependence on praxis renders Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary theory closer to Nietzsche's project of self-transcendence. Even prior to the human with its location in terms of a "reversal of consciousness" and agency in his scheme, the steps of the evolution are not continuous and determinable but having discontinuities and processes involving agency. Finally, the source of Consciousness in the evolution reveals itself to be the Supermind, with its transcendental freedom from cosmic conditions and ability to transform them, as discussed above. In this cosmic evolution, souls (including individual and collective souls, such as nation-soul) have a part to play, but none of these are static. We will consider this in some more detail below.

Thus it is in Germany of the 18th/19th c. that we find the beginnings of the theory of "nation soul," serving the ordering impulse of the Enlightenment. Such a nation soul is static. This idea of the nation soul migrates rapidly to the rest of Europe and often takes a dangerous form when it associates itself with colonialism and racism. As we know, Germany itself was hugely infected

by racist essentialisms, leading ultimately to the World War II. The idea of nation soul, a subjective essence for the German nation developed a strong resonance in its thought. It is present before Hegel in philosophers like Kant and continues after him in personalities such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. This is why Nietzsche was heralded as the source of Nazi ideology, though this was far from the truth. Nietzsche did not support racism, but the notion of a superior subjective essence was strong in German culture.

An acknowledgement of this fact with its promises and dangers is what we find in Sri Aurobindo's powerful and seminal chapter 'True and False Subjectivism' in *The Human Cycle*.¹⁸ This chapter is primarily aimed at Germany but it also addresses the general idea of the nation-soul for the future so as to distinguish the salutary possibility from the peril that nations may avoid falling into such a trap. The idea of the nation soul lends itself to the purposes of nationalism and makes its entry into the Bengal Renaissance at this time. This idea is not fully theorised in other thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance but is present as the notion of a cultural identity independent of the civilisational norms of the coloniser and as the dispenser of the destiny of the Indian people – what Rabindranath Tagore calls Bharata Bhagya Vidhata in his famous song *Jana Gana Mana*, which became later the National Anthem of independent India. We have also noted earlier the equation of this nation soul with the image of Mother India. We find a continuation of the matristic and spiritual ideas of this image and its form of address in the yogic praxis and teaching of Sri Aurobindo. Thus, Sri Aurobindo does not reject the idea of the nation soul but theorises it so as to introduce a variant response to the Eurocentric discourse. The reality given by him to the nation soul is not that of a simplistic ahistorical essence. This is something to be noted, since the idea of "India" as an eternal Hindu nation has made its appearance in today's world with religious nationalism, staking its claim of identity on the nation soul.

The idea of nation soul in Sri Aurobindo has a basis in historicity. In Sri Aurobindo's yoga philosophy, there are two aspects to the nation soul, just as there are two aspects to the human soul – a psychic entity and a psychic being. The psychic entity is an unformed matrix or reservoir of psychic energy out of which, through historical processes, a psychic personality or psychic being gets formed. These historical processes are determined by the relationship between soul and nature. Again, as we saw with the cosmopolitanism of the Bengal Renaissance, collective entities are not restricted to nations. So, too,

in Sri Aurobindo's idea of a cosmic evolution, the collective soul is not restricted to nations, and includes sub-national and supra-national conscious agencies. Thus, one may speak of a pan-Asian soul, the soul of Asia or a regional soul, the soul of Bengal. These souls develop a cultural orientation over time. But this orientation is not static, it is in a process of continuous becoming. As a historical discourse, each collective soul develops a specificity and also a perspective towards the universal. Each such perspective develops through its interactions with other perspectives and in this growth, moves towards an international culture and human unity.¹⁹

As in the process of reconciling universalism and pluralism through praxis of individual consciousness, such a collective process ultimately rests on human agency if its trajectory is not to be derailed either through hegemonic universalisms (such as the "world-picture" of the Enlightenment) or through anarchic chaos (as in rabid contested particularisms). A modern commentator, Benjamin Barber has characterised this dangerous polarisation as the contemporary scenario of Jihad vs. MacWorld.²⁰ Sri Aurobindo's thought was prescient of this danger and holds out instead a solution which privileges cultural histories in confederated unities of dynamic interaction in a post-human becoming as discussed earlier.²¹ To understand this kind of collective process in terms of spiritual praxis is a contribution of Sri Aurobindo to the journey of the expansion of consciousness in the world.

Modernity and Community

One of the more subtle contributions of the Bengal Renaissance was its critique and alternative formulations of the social dimension of modernity. A village sociality was largely self-governing in small-scale communities whose members interacted in the flow of a life in which the boundaries between work and play, public and private were porous. The modern colonial city was organised and administered instead under the imperative of colonial governmentality, through taxonomic grids for productivity, utility and control. The construction of the native subject through these practices was contested by a variety of strategies devised during the Bengal Renaissance. These ranged from creative mistranslations of both native and colonial terms so as to elude or satirise the classificatory intent of modernity, a thriving vernacular literature normalising a new communitarian modernity, native architectural

practices in which the home and the street were not strictly demarcated so as to allow porous interactions, alternative descriptions of the city in terms of neighbourhoods utilising a quasi-rural functionality, social practices such as adda, etc.²²

At a more clearly articulated level of this discourse, the yoking of colonial and modern subjects to the post-Enlightenment imperative of knowledge and capital production was contested by a model of sociality built around human self-exploration and expression in loose forms of communitarian life. Two of the thinkers who took this discourse furthest, were Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. They both saw that, given the ubiquitous world-wide sweep of modernity, such an alternative destining could only be secure in islands dedicated to subjective exploration where the expansion of the inner life would provide a selective filter for the assimilation and reconstitution of modernity. In this, they both rethought the pre-modern form of the ashrama, a communitarian habitus of continuous learning and spiritual growth, in engagement with the forces of the world. Tagore's ashrama of universal man-making, Visva-Bharati, at Shantiniketan and Sri Aurobindo's ashrama at Pondicherry may be seen as the materialised topoi of these creative social ideas. Since then, the inexorable forces of modernity have continued in their global spread but these ashramas still thrive and draw renewed attention. This is a testament to the insight of their founders, though the present dynamics of these organisations have developed along lines of their own. The success of these strategies and experiments and their value to the future rest on continuous subjective engagement, critique and furtherance by living milieus, something dependent on succeeding generations.

In summing up, we find that the Bengal Renaissance initiated a wide and deep engagement with post-Enlightenment ideology, both in its more immediate expression as colonialism and in the global teleology of modernity. Within this discourse, we find the contribution of Sri Aurobindo as one which provided a penetrating critique and profound alternatives. These alternatives were not isolated solutions tangential to modernity or anachronistic regressions to the pre-modern. By demonstrating the limits of the Enlightenment idea and the creative adaptation of both new and pre-modern ideas towards overcoming these limits, the Bengal Renaissance opened up ways towards alternative modernities, and Sri Aurobindo's solutions in this context, may be seen as not merely critiques but fulfilments of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

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Sri Aurobindo's Concept of Freedom

Sonia Dyne

On August 15th India's National Day, the anniversary of Indian Independence is celebrated by people around the world. Many of them will also remember the birthday of Sri Aurobindo, one of the early architects of that independence. It seems entirely fitting that we should be celebrating both of these anniversaries together – and in London, where Sri Aurobindo as a boy was a pupil at St Paul's School.

I have been invited to say something about Sri Aurobindo's concept of freedom. This is not easy, for Sri Aurobindo's thought is a vast synthesis of human knowledge and isolating one aspect of it for closer study is like pulling out a single thread from a closely woven tapestry. We may get a closer look at the thread, but we lose the significance of its place in the pattern. So whatever I can say will bear the same relationship to the whole body of his work as the cover of a book to its contents – you have to read the book.

No one has ever explored the nature of freedom more profoundly and passionately than Sri Aurobindo. *'The longing to be free'* he wrote *'is lodged in such a deep layer of the human heart that a thousand arguments are powerless to uproot it'*. The longing to be free—it was always, for Sri Aurobindo, something more than a question of civil liberties or human rights or even the nation's right to independence from foreign rule, although he fought long and passionately for all of these.

Sri Aurobindo looked at the thousand arguments – the doubts we have about the limits of freedom – first through the eyes of a revolutionary political leader who was also a poet, and later through the eyes of the mystic and spiritual Master that he became. What does 'freedom' mean? How can it be realised for the individual and in the collective life of a nation? How do we strike the right balance between individual freedom and the collective interests of a society or nation? Why does the struggle for freedom, fuelled by brave and inspiring words, so often end in bloodshed and a new kind of tyranny?

In the course of a lifetime devoted to finding answers to these questions he gradually developed an integral vision of human freedom that has become his legacy to India and through India to the world. For him, freedom was more than just 'a convenient elbow room for our natural energies' – and I guess most of us would define it in some such way – for him, freedom was an eternal aspect of the human spirit, as essential to life as breath itself. His whole concept of freedom is based on the premise that there is in mankind an evolving soul requiring freedom for its evolution, just as there is in nature a secret urge towards unity. These twin demands of our nature, acting overtly or behind the scenes, act as a spur to progress until man fulfils his destiny to exceed himself. They must be reconciled if our questions about freedom are to find an answer.

My hope is that I will be able to convey something of that vision and to show how it developed and was enriched in the course of an extraordinary and often turbulent life. Sri Aurobindo was, at different times, respected as an intellectual and an academic (acting principal of a college), hailed as an inspired revolutionary leader, imprisoned while awaiting trial on charges of sedition, finally revered as a teacher of yoga, a mystic and a seer. Despite these many roles, he said of himself 'I was first and foremost a poet.'

Sri Aurobindo was a prolific writer. Through his political speeches, in the journals and newspapers he founded in the first decades of the nineteenth century, as well as in his private correspondence, the theme of liberty runs like a shining thread.

Tonight, almost on the eve of India's National Day, I can think of no more appropriate place to start than by the first part of Sri Aurobindo's message to the new nation, broadcast on All-India Radio over 60 years ago:

'August 15th 1947 is the birthday of free India. It marks for her the end of an old era, the beginning of a new age. But we can also make it by our life and acts as a free nation an important date in a new age opening for the whole world, for the political, social, cultural and spiritual future of humanity.'

August 15th is my own birthday and it is naturally gratifying to me that it should have assumed this vast significance. I take this coincidence, not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force that guides my steps on the work with which I began life, the beginning of its full fruition. Indeed, on this day I can watch almost all the world-movements which I hoped to see fulfilled in my lifetime, though

then they looked like impracticable dreams, arriving at fruition or on their way to achievement. In all these movements free India may well play a large part and take a leading position.'

The message continues with an outline of the goals to which he had directed a lifetime of effort—a free and united India, the resurgence and regeneration of the peoples of Asia, a world-union 'forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind', the spiritual gift of India to the world, and finally 'a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness'. This final goal, Sri Aurobindo predicted, would have formidable difficulties to overcome, but the initiative, and even the central movement, could come from India.

To appreciate this extraordinary message, with its confident vision of India's world-destiny, we need to understand what he meant by 'the spiritual gift of India' – not the dogmas and rituals of religion, but the gift of the characteristic qualities of her soul as a nation – 'the genius of India' and 'the living energy of a great spiritual conception.'

This was a message that looked to the future. The achievement on Independence was only a prelude to India's future role as a world power—an essential stage in order that the qualities of India's soul might re-emerge from the sleep of ages and be given to the world. But at the turn of the last century the immediate need was the liberation of India from foreign rule. Nations, like individual men, cannot evolve to their fullest potential as long as the *swadharma* is not able to express itself freely in the collective life. From a very young age Sri Aurobindo seems to have had some intimation of the role he was destined to play.

I have mentioned earlier some turning points in the life of Sri Aurobindo. The first was in 1879, when his father, a convinced anglophile, brought him to England with his two older brothers and left them all in the care of a Congregational minister, a Mr Drewett, who was given strict instructions that 'they were not to make the acquaintance of any Indian or undergo any Indian influence'. It seems that he wished his sons to be brought up as English gentlemen, with a view to meeting the rigorous demands of entry into the Indian Civil Service.

While his brothers attended Manchester Grammar school, young Aurobindo was taught at home by the Drewetts. It must have been a lonely life for a young boy, but he had time to satisfy his passion for reading. His love for poetry and his intuitive grasp of the technique of writing was evident even then. Shelley was a favourite; something of that poet's fervent admiration for the ideals of

the French revolution entered deeply into his consciousness. Later he would recount that he read over and over again Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, with its passionate advocacy of freedom as an ideal, because something in him responded to it. He had even then an idea of devoting his life to a similar world movement in defence of freedom. At this time, and during his years at St Paul's school, he saw the French Revolution through the eyes of the English Romantic poets and from them first learned the magical formula – Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. That formula would become central to his concept of freedom.

In London, and later at King's College Cambridge, which he entered with a classical scholarship, Sri Aurobindo found himself drawn to the nationalist ideals of men like Charles Stuart Parnell in Ireland. One of his early poems in praise of Parnell is significant in the light of what was to come:

*'Patriots, behold your guerdon. This man found
Erin, his mother, bleeding, chastised, bound,
Naked to imputation poor, denied,
While alien masters held her house of pride...*

That image of the Mother in chains entered so deeply into his consciousness that it would become a rallying cry to galvanise the youth of India, and unite her citizens in their opposition to British rule. But at this time Sri Aurobindo was still a 'probationer' for the Indian Civil Service and beginning to discover how India was governed as part of an Empire; while at Cambridge he now came into contact with other Indian students for the first time.

On 6 February, 1893 Sri Aurobindo returned to India. He was 21 years old and had been away from the land of his birth for 14 years. His father had died 3 months earlier, heartbroken by the false report of his son's death in a shipwreck. Now there was no longer any need for Aurobindo to break the news to his father that he had lost his chance of a place in the ICS by deliberately failing to turn up for the compulsory riding test. Instead he had accepted a position in the service of the Maharaja of Baroda. The second great transitional point in his life was about to begin.

He began by immersing himself in every aspect of Indian life – her culture, her traditions, her religions, her languages (ancient and modern), the aspirations of her people. He taught English and French at the English College in Baroda

besides a variety of other duties in the service of the Maharaja. And all the time he continued to write, not only poetry but letters and articles critical of the Indian National Congress for its lack of firmness in dealing with the imperial government. He became increasingly aware that his true mission in life was to work for the Independence of India from British rule and he threw all his energies into the struggle. Through political activity and his editorship of two influential newspapers, his fame and influence grew rapidly.

In his public speeches and writings, Sri Aurobindo began to lay stress on the importance of Independence not only for India's sake but for humanity as a whole. His concept of freedom had widened to embrace the whole world, and he had come to see clearly the importance of harmonising the claims of freedom with those of equality and brotherhood. Concerning the failure of the revolution in France he wrote:

It (freedom) is the goal of humanity, and we are yet far off from that goal. But the time has come for an approximation being attempted. And the first necessity is the discipline of brotherhood, the organisation of brotherhood; for without the spirit and habit of fraternity neither liberty nor equality can be maintained for more than a short season. The French were ignorant of this practical principle; they made liberty the basis, brotherhood the superstructure, founding the triangle upon its apex the triangle has to be reversed before it can stand permanently'.

Sri Aurobindo was convinced that once given her freedom, India would develop in herself the means to reverse the triangle. It would be her gift to the world. In an essay, *The Renaissance of India*, he lists the qualities which from ancient times have characterised the Indian nation-soul. There is a sense of the infinite and a strong intellectuality founded on a seeking for the inner law and truth of things. There is something he calls 'the synthetical tendency' – the need not only to analyse and explore the world around us - and within - to the limits of possibility, but also to create out of the separate elements a synthesis of a higher order. One can say that these characteristics of the Indian soul are characteristic of Sri Aurobindo himself, especially the first: that innate sense of a spiritual Presence surrounding and pervading everything that exists.

Inevitably, Sri Aurobindo's political activities and those of his associates brought him into conflict with the British in India. He was arrested on charges of sedition in 1908 and spent a year in the grim conditions of the jail at Alipore.

It was a time of great significance in his life. He realised more vividly than ever before the one spirit that unites and moves mankind, and it changed his perception of role that the political struggle had played in his life. It no longer seems an end in itself, but only the beginning of his work to hasten the advent of a new consciousness in mankind based on the acceptance of human unity as a fact. His experiences while in prison convinced him of the truth long preserved in the ancient spiritual traditions of India. "The only result of the wrath of the British Government" he wrote "was that I found God".

Sri Aurobindo saw that a sense of the infinite pervading all things, even the most material, is native to the Indian soul. That sense is what makes true brotherhood possible. The basis of human unity belongs to the spiritual realm, and brotherhood is human unity in practice. Human unity underpins liberty, equality, fraternity – because it is founded in the spirit. In their essence, he says, these three are eternal aspects of the spirit. Human Unity is therefore the most difficult of the necessary conditions for true freedom to exist, for it demands as a prerequisite the creation of a spiritualised society, which does not yet exist anywhere in the world, although in Auroville the developing seed of such a society has been sown. It was Sri Aurobindo's dream for India that such a society might one day be created on Indian soil. The Mother's wish, in founding Auroville, was to turn the dream into a reality. Returning to this question of human unity in *The Human Cycle* he wrote:

'Yet is brotherhood the real key to the triple gospel of the idea of humanity. The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood and it cannot be founded on anything else. But brotherhood exists only in the soul and by the soul; it can exist by nothing else. For this brotherhood is not a matter either of physical kinship or of vital association or of intellectual agreement. When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its self-development, the self-development of the Divine in man and in all his being. When it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the same soul, the same godhead, in all human beings. When it strives for brotherhood, it is founding that equal freedom of self-development on a common aim, a common life, a unity of mind and feeling founded upon the recognition of this inner spiritual unity. These three things are in fact the nature of the soul; for freedom, equality, unity are the eternal aspects of the Spirit. It is the practical recognition of this truth, it is the awaken-

ing of the soul in man and the attempt to get him to live from his soul and not from his ego which is the inner meaning of religion, and it is that to which the religion of humanity must also arrive before it can fulfil itself in the life of the race.

After his release from Alipore, Sri Aurobindo returned to the political arena. He started an English language weekly paper the *Karmayogin* and a Bengali weekly, speaking at nationalist meetings and challenging the moderate faction for their lack of firmness. At this time he began to be known in British circles as the most dangerous man in India. There was a real possibility that he would be arrested again. Being forewarned, Sri Aurobindo left British India and took refuge first in Chandernagore, and then in Pondicherry, another French enclave at that time.

Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry on 4 April 1910. He would remain there for the rest of his life, working out the vast synthesis of intellectual knowledge and spiritual experience that he called Integral Yoga. All the knowledge he had amassed during his explorations of Western and Indian philosophy, culture and tradition, was poured out into a series of studies published in serial form in a new journal called the *Arya*. It was an achievement without precedent, more than thirty volumes of philosophy, yoga, history, social and political studies, translations and commentaries on ancient texts, literary criticism, poetry, plays – a complete and integrated system of thought and knowledge that pointed to something beyond itself, the discoveries of the future. He had already prepared the ground for the independence of India. It was a certainty, as he knew already in the second decade of the 20th century. He had laid the sure foundation, now others would continue to build on it. His own work for human progress would no longer be on the surface for all to see.

The last 40 years of Sri Aurobindo's life were spent in seclusion, but that did not mean a withdrawal from life. He kept before him the ideal of freedom and knew from experience that true freedom has to be discovered within the human heart, has to flower into the acceptance of 'the other' as brother or sister, not just in theory but in fact. His final definition of freedom is a vision that transcends rational thought and leaps up towards an almost mystical insight, expressed as a paradox, a meeting of opposites. He defines freedom in terms of its opposite, servitude:

"Freedom is the law of being in its illimitable unity, secret master of all Nature: servitude is the law of love in the being voluntarily giving itself to serve the play of its other selves in the multiplicity.

It is when freedom works in chains and servitude becomes a law of Force, not of Love, that the true nature of things is distorted and a falsehood governs the soul's dealings with existence."

Hearing this, we begin to understand why Sri Aurobindo could say 'I never, never was a philosopher'. Philosophy advances to its conclusions by small logical steps, but Sri Aurobindo the poet has the breadth of vision to embrace the Infinite at play in all that we normally see as contradictions. It is he who wrote: '*our life is a paradox, with God for key*'.

Let us continue to look at Sri Aurobindo's profound definition of freedom and see where it leads:

"Nature starts with this distortion and plays with all the combinations to which it can lead before she will allow it to be righted. Afterwards she gathers up all the essence of these combinations into a new and rich harmony of love and freedom.

Freedom comes by a unity without limits; for that is our real being. We may gain the essence of this unity in ourselves; we may realise the play of it in oneness with all others. The double experience is the complete intention of the soul in Nature.

Having realised infinite unity in ourselves, then to give ourselves to the world is utter freedom and absolute empire.

Infinite, we are free from death; for life then becomes a play of our immortal existence. We are free from weakness, for we are the whole sea enjoying the myriad shock of its waves. We are free from grief and pain; for we learn how to harmonise our being with all that touches it and to find in all things action and reaction of the delight of existence. We are free from limitation: for the body becomes a plaything of the infinite mind and learns to obey the will of the immortal soul. We are free from the fever of the nervous mind and the heart, yet are not bound to immobility.

Immortality, unity and freedom are in ourselves and await there our discovery; but for the joy of love God in us will still remain the many."

This was Sri Aurobindo's last word on the nature of freedom, and it must also be mine .

(This is a transcript of a talk given at the Nehru Centre, London, in 2007)

Nation and Beyond – Aspects of Sri Aurobindo's Political Vision

Dasharathi Sengupta

1

Sri Aurobindo stands apart from and above all other philosophers and humanists of modern India. He is also regarded as the foremost and, perhaps, the only original political thinker of 20th century India. The centenary years of the Bengal chapter of his life provide an occasion to remember our indebtedness to this great mind. Shafts of light emanating from this source did not leave untouched even the apparently insignificant parts of human life and society. They travelled from sociology to culture, from history to politics and economics, from the spiritual to the mundane, from the problems of the body to those of mind and soul. In him culminates the tradition whose germination can be traced back to the Vedas and which flowered through subsequent ages to reach the likes of Vivekananda, Rabindranath and Gandhi.

Sri Aurobindo and these great contemporaries had many things in common, two of which may be referred to as relevant in the context of what this article seeks to deal with. Firstly, the value-goals which motivated them were essentially spiritual. Secondly, though the missions pursued by the members of this quartet – a political leader, a literary genius, a patriot-prophet and a Rishi – were different, they were linked together through their concern for the larger problems facing mankind. What, however, distinguished Sri Aurobindo from the rest was, firstly, his ever-widening political perspective which, starting from the restricting confines of nation, came to embrace the total human aggregation moving upon the terrestrial space and through historical time, and secondly, his focus on and concern with the problem of human freedom, of autonomy of the individual as a member of a collectivity, of his liberation from servitude to animality. No aspect of this problem escaped Sri Aurobindo's sensitive cogitation.

Sri Aurobindo's whole mortal life represented a movement – intellectual as well as spiritual – that projected itself into the future. He never exhausted

himself in the present. The present, to him, was always a launching pad for exploring the vast possibilities of the future. This, perhaps, was a Divine Dispensation. Otherwise a person who emerged on the national stage as a political publicist would not have reached the pinnacle of a spiritual achievement, a hand that penned *New Lamps for the Old* could not have opened the doors to *The Life Divine*, and reached the last couplets of *Savitri*. From this viewpoint, Sri Aurobindo's journey from Baroda to Pondicherry via Kolkata did not sketch a horizontal movement, it represented a vertical progression designed by the Divine.

2

It is from this perspective that Sri Aurobindo's transition or passage from nationalism to internationalism has to be viewed. This transition also exemplified a stage by stage transformation brought about by an inner thrust reaching towards the stars. From one perspective the movement was continuous, spiral and dialectical; from another, it consisted of overlapping stages. This is why Sri Aurobindo could bring about a synthesis of seemingly opposites. The reference here is not merely to the reconciliation of liberation with surrender, which his *sadhana* brought within the range of possibility, but also to that of such political concepts and ideals as Nationalism and global Oneness. Though apparently mundane, such opposites were fused together by an extraordinarily strong spiritual force, and through continuous flow of a super-human consciousness. This is why, while the political ideas or ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath remained more or less unchanged throughout their lives, those of Sri Aurobindo continued to change, develop, grow and expand – through 'negation of negation' – preserving the old while going beyond it. Thus he never subscribed to the common political cognition that nationalism and internationalism are binary opposites. He never thought that we have to turn our face away from one in order to embrace the other. He did not think, even during the most intense nationalist phase of his life, that the political state of national unity must be assigned priority over the ideal of One World, or that the process of nation-building operates against that of global integration.

3

Mahtama Gandhi and Rabindranath are also, along with Sri Aurobindo, considered to be great prophets of human brotherhood. All three of them,

looking beyond the limitations of the physical and the bio-psychological, were able to comprehend man as a moral being and mankind as a single moral collectivity. Though basically individualists, they could easily weave their individualism into the ideal of moral collectivism. This also led them to deny absolute sanctity to territorial nationalism and the finality of nation-state as its political manifestation. Some analysts of modern Indian political thought seem inclined to include Ram Mohan Roy and Pandit Nehru also among those Indians whose mental horizon extended beyond the confines of Nation. The claim for Ram Mohan Roy may, however, be set aside, for he lived at a time (1772-1833) when the idea of nation, the contour of Nation-State or the ideology of Nationalism were yet to percolate through the Indian mind.

To include Pandit Nehru among the politico-ideological successors to Gandhi, Rabindranath or Sri Aurobindo as visionaries or prophets of International brotherhood would also be somewhat inapposite, for, both politically and ideologically, the latter were what Nehru was not. To place Nehru among them would not be consistent with the fact that the latter's commitment to global unity was peripheral to his nation-state-centric world view. Peace, stability, unity and cooperation at international level were, for Nehru, dictated by national interest, by the experiences of the World Wars. His doctrine of peaceful coexistence did not envisage a mosaic of borderless world. A careful reading of Nehru's statement as the leader of the Interim Government at a press conference on 26 September, 1946¹ and his famous speech at the special session of the central Legislature² on the eve of India's independence would reveal that India as a prospective Nation-State lay at the centre of his political vision. Nehru was a nation-builder or aspired to be one. Though aware of the causal and interactive relationship between the nation-state and its international environment, his feet remained planted within the confines of the former.

This was not the case with the Mahatma. He, along with Rabindranath, stood apart from the West-inspired vindicators of nation and nationalism. He, like the poet, found the western concept of nation-state and its ideology to be in conflict with the ideals of tolerance, universal love and autonomy of the individual. They— nation-state and nationalism – never, as a matter of fact, entered into the framework of Gandhian thought, defined by ethical norms derived from traditions largely spiritual. Gandhi thought in terms of community in its macro and micro form – global and rural. Nation hardly had a place in this spectrum. It was, along with other ideological and institutional para-

phernalia of western political universe, quietly set aside at the earliest stages of Gandhi's political career. A part of the conversation between the Reader and the Editor in *Hind Swaraj* (1908)³ may be quoted at length to indicate Gandhi's line of thinking at a time when he was yet to reach the half-way mark of his life. [It should be borne in mind that it was a period when the Moderates were lobbying for colonial self-government and the extremists were demanding complete independence from British rule, both swearing by the goal of Swaraj]. When the Reader asserted that, "As is Japan, so must India be. We must own our navy, our army, and we must have our own splendour....", the Editor (Gandhi) replied, "...In effect it means this: that we want English rule, without the Englishman, you want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan, but Englishstan. This is not the Swaraj that I want."

For Gandhi, "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves."⁴ His ultimate ambition was not only to liberate the individual from every external control, but also from the baser propensities of his lower nature. [Would it be very much off the mark to say that Mother-Sri Aurobindo's sadhana represents the most decisive strategy to achieve what Gandhi conceived as human emancipation?] Final liberation, thus, is to be realised at individual, and not at national level or through any other configuration of communal life. Gandhi's political ideas flowing from his moral equation of Truth with God, his philosophy of Ahimsa and his identification of individual as "the supreme consideration" could hardly accommodate the ideology of nationalism or institutionalisation of centralised power. His insistence on maximum decentralisation of power through Panchayati Raj is the other side – the positive side of his rejection of nation and national state.

If the former had no legitimate place in the Gandhian construct of political values, the latter was roundly denounced. To Gandhi, the modern state not only represented centralised power, but also organised violence. It cannot be reformed simply because it is a soulless machine. It moulds the individual into a tiny insignificant cog of the gigantic state machinery. He loses his autonomy, his uniqueness, his rationality and human qualities in the fold of the vast rigid apparatus. Gandhi made fun of the English model of democracy and even had some 'unparliamentary' words for the English Parliament.⁵ And this at a time when his political mentors like Gokhale were all for transplantation of English

political institutions on the Indian soil. Whether Gandhi was a philosophical or a political anarchist is a moot question. Let scholars debate over it, but that he had no love lost either for the western ideal of nation or for the western model of state is beyond question.

4

Rabindranath, too, did not assign a higher value to nationality than that of humanity. His attitude towards the latter along with nation and nationalism was, in its preliminary outline, shaped by the Upanishadic ideas of cosmos, of 'Purna', of the unity of the creation in the creator himself – ideas that he received and assimilated through his 'Brahmo' spiritual heritage. The philosophical world view moulded by them also influenced his reflections on Indian history, his view of Indian society and the essence of her cultural tradition. The dominant trend he found in them was towards harmony and not strife, towards unison and not division, towards symphony out of discordant notes. The political idea and ideology of nationalism, which divide the people in absolute terms, thrive on in-group/out-group mind-set and encourage we/they demarcation on psychological plane, could hardly be reconciled with such a syncretic tradition. Rabindranath built his resistance to nationalism on India's cultural heritage and plural ways of life. India, to him, was a perfect illustration of the Upanishadic concept of One realising itself through Many.

It is generally thought that Rabindranath too, initially, was a staunch nationalist and continued to be so till the first flush of Swadeshi Movement, a period when his finest patriotic lyrics were composed. It is also believed that it was the excesses of Swadeshi Movement, its undercurrent of racial animosity, its narrow focus which ignored the larger problems of society that produced a reaction in Rabindranath against nationalism as an ideology as well as a political trend. He moved away from national and nationalist politics. And then came the horrors and holocaust of the First World War (1914-1918), that led to Rabindranath's final rejection of Nationalism and Nation-State. He became a votary of Internationalism, a prophet of One World.

This, however, is a lop-sided explanation that ignores the mystic world in which the poet lived, overlooks his views about the history and culture of India – views that have been developing over time. It pays no heed to the Upanishadic roots of his political ideas. The fact is that Rabindranath had ceased to be a 'nationalist' in the usual political sense of the term by the turn

of the century and even before Bengal's partition was mooted. Writing as early as 1901,⁶ Rabindranath declares in unambiguous terms that the European model of nation-state, and the ideology of legitimising it, are inconsistent with the ethos of India and her genius. The latter, the poet believed, has never sought to erect and maintain walls around religious, linguistic, racial and cultural divides but has always sought to smoothen and soften their sharp edges. Movement towards union through assimilation, and not uniformity through obliteration, has been the natural course of Indian history. Rise and fall of dynasties, unification and fragmentation of polity have never had anything to do with that history. The western concept of nation or national state, Rabindranath believed, could never be India's cup of tea.

Rabindranath's early but well-considered view about the relevance of nationalism in the context of Indian society and her history found elaborate exposition in the articles included in *Atmasakti*⁷, particularly in *Bharatbarshiya Samaj* and *Swadeshi Samaj*. He states categorically in these writings that it is not state with a narrow power base but the broad-based society that represents the synthetic character of Indian civilisation and culture. The poet found a basic contradiction between Nationalism and Humanism. If state is the vehicle of the former, then society is the repository of the latter. In Europe, the country is thrown into calamity if the state-power is delivered a fatal blow. In India, the stability, security and harmonious contentment of collective life disappears if society, as a macro-functional unit, is incapacitated. So the priority for India should not be a nation-state or *Swadeshi Raj*, it should be *Swadeshi Samaj*.

Initial indifference on the part of Rabindranath towards the traditional idea of nation and national rule (*Nationtantra* as he termed it) developed into an antipathy during the later years of Swadeshi Movement, and finally into a hostility towards nationalism, when its relation – direct or collateral – with the Great War (1914-1918) was perceived by the poet-philosopher. His lectures on nationalism during that period⁸ no longer display the tolerance towards Nation that marks his earlier articles⁹. He turns away from the traditional western views about the psycho-cultural basis of nationalism. The latter is now directly linked with Capitalism, Hegemonism and Imperialism. Nation is now depicted as a political-economic union of self-seeking people¹⁰, characterised as their 'organised interest'. It is now viewed as a power-mechanism geared to serve the Mammon. Nationalism as nation-worship is one of the most

powerful anaesthetics that man has invented. It is, according to Rabindranath, an epidemic that spreads hatred and conflict, that cuts man off from his ethical ideals, from his human values and destroys the harmony of higher social life.

There is no evidence that Rabindranath ever changed or modified this negative evaluation of nationalism. Replacement of the Rule of Nation (*Nationtantra*) by the Rule of Society (*Samajtantra*) remained one of his prescriptions for India. Writing on the eve of Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934), he states¹¹ that both China and India have, throughout their history, been able to protect the essence of their civilisation and culture against the impact of political changes only because the all-pervasive society remained immune from them, and was in control. The idea of an umbilical relation between rapacious European nationalism and exploitative colonial rule peeps even through the final indictment of British rule in India¹².

5

When we come to Sri Aurobindo, we enter into a different universe of discourse. The first thing that strikes us is the dynamic and evolving nature of his ideas. Neither Rabindranath nor Gandhi changed their theoretical position or their convictions in later years. We have seen how the poet remained consistent in his political views right from the turn of the last century. Gandhi was, of course, by his own admission, ‘...not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent’¹³. He claimed to have discarded many ideas in his ‘search after truth’¹⁴. But, referring to *Hind Swaraj* (1909), after more than a decade of its publication, Gandhi did not hesitate to announce that he would withdraw ‘nothing except one word of it, and that in deference to a lady friend’¹⁵. Mahadev Desai also tells us that he (Gandhi) would alter nothing in the book even in 1938, except perhaps the language in some parts. And *Hind Swaraj* – we should bear in mind – written originally in Gujarati in 1908, continues to be regarded by many as Gandhi’s seminal book.

As observed at the beginning of this article, what is unique in Sri Aurobindo lies not merely in what he said, but how his intellectual journey reflected an imperceptible but quietly accelerating spiritual progress since his return to India. His life, one should remember, consisted of overlapping stages, potentialities of one exhausting itself to realise the next one, just like germinating seeds disappearing in and through sprouts. Baroda, Bengal and Pondicherry do not represent distinct and separate categories in time and space. They are

bends and turns of an overflowing, ever widening stream. The progress was dialectical in the sense that the old was never discarded in toto, nor cast off to realise the new. Modification preceded and preservation followed change. This applies to his political ideas as well.

The discarded nature of Sri Aurobindo’s political thought is evident in his evolution from a staunch Indian nationalist to a man whose final ambition was global unification of a liberated humanity on a spiritual plane. This subjective phenomenon matched the objective scheme of a larger political development that appeared in Sri Aurobindo’s political vision. In that evolutionary scheme, the historical value and role of every human group – from the smallest to the largest – is recognised and textured into a seamless whole. Neither Gandhi nor Rabindranath had this holistic historical perspective that was both objective and evaluative in relation to a higher goal. Though extremely concerned with the problems of both the individual and the humanity, their political quest remained focused on India, and related to the environment and experiences of colonial India. That, initially, was also the case with Sri Aurobindo – as his political writings from *New Lamps for Old* (1893) to *Karmayogin* (1909-1910) indicate. But imperceptible changes appear to be creeping into Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts and ideas, slowly perhaps, but surely nevertheless. Evident in *Karmayogin*, they reached their meridian within a decade. Even a cursory reading of *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* would reveal that Sri Aurobindo’s perspective and his concern had come, by the second decade of the 20th century, to embrace the whole human society, irrespective of time and space. The spread of this vista is both awesome and inspiring.

This movement was natural – almost a destiny – for a man in whom two different and apparently inconsistent traditions, acquired and inherited, met and blended into a unique synthesis. One was that of western rationalism born out of Enlightenment and the other that of mysticism springing from an ageless Eastern spirituality. They joined together in Sri Aurobindo in perfect harmony. Hence he had no difficulty in discovering a soul in the Nation, and dreaming of a world-union as a historically decisive stage in man’s spiritual ascension¹⁶. Though this convergence of East and West reached its full fruition in the Pondicherry chapter of his life – clearly revealed in his major sociological and political writings of the period, and in his evolutionary approach to the study of human society and polity – they are also evident in many articles written

for the *Bandemataram* and *Karmayogin*. *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* is a perfect product of rational pragmatism. Just three years after its publication comes the *Uttarpara Speech*. In between stands the *Life of Nationalism*, in which the political phenomenon of nationalism is explained in terms of a spiritual world-view¹⁷. One may also refer to ‘*Spirituality and Nationality*’ in which the self-assertion of an emergent nation is viewed as a movement overflowing the borders of terrestrial politics to end in spiritual consummation¹⁸.

6

Standing on the ground where East and West meet, Sri Aurobindo accepts ‘nation’ as a necessary stage in the collective development, but rejects its finality as the ultimate human group. This qualified acceptance of nation and his vision transcending it, is what sets Sri Aurobindo apart from contemporary protagonists of human unity. He does not ignore the nation for being a non-event; he does not set it aside as not being germane to India’s progress towards self-rule through constructive ‘swadeshi’. He does not regard nationalism as an aberration, a negation of higher values of humanity. Sri Aurobindo viewed it as a historically given situation, that cannot be wished away because it is supposed to stand in the way of larger human unity. As his theory of ‘human cycles’ suggests, the nation is a natural human group, emerging at a certain stage of human development, and lasting as long as the psychological and spiritual possibilities of that stage are not exhausted. It is a subjective phenomenon with an objective base, moving within a time-frame, but not bound by it. Nation, from Sri Aurobindo’s perspective, is propelled beyond its historically defined limitations by the spiritual drive for self-realisation. The Divine in man provides the impulse for ceaseless movement in and through bigger and more self-sufficient units. Nations grow out of the sub-national, but only to pave the way for the supra-national.

Sri Aurobindo did not, at one level, say something absolutely novel or unique. He only refined or fine-tuned the age-old Aristotelian or 19th century Hegelian theory of political development – a teleological theory that explained as well as justified emergence of larger political units from smaller and lesser predecessors. Thus both Aristotle and Hegel trace the roots of state to family. For Aristotle it is the psychological drive to attain self-sufficiency— material and moral – that is finally satisfied by ‘polis’ (considered optimum political

unit in the Hellenic political world). Similarly for Hegel, man’s quest for freedom leads him to group-life, whose initial form is family. But family characterised by unity, mutual love and cooperation, fails to assign identity and rights to the individual *qua* ‘individual’. Its narrow confines do not provide enough scope for individual self-development. These imperfections produce its negation, its antithesis – the civil society. With differentiated structure, and characterised by competition, strife and unequal share, the civil society comes to provide a definitive identity and rights to the individual. But it fails to reconcile the subjective will of the individual with the common will of the group. This reconciliation, which is the basis of rational and universal freedom, is finally achieved with the emergence of state (Nation-state to be more precise) – the final form of human association, representing the final synthesis, the end product of reason’s dialectical progress in human universe¹⁹.

7

Sri Aurobindo’s theory of political development also accepted the nation and the state as natural outcomes of human efforts, and like that of Aristotle or Hegel, provided legitimacy to human groups of lesser dimension. At the same time he brought about a refined transformation of the age-old version of Idealist theory by a simple but profound innovation. He substituted the ‘psychological’ and the ‘moral’ of Aristotle, as well as the ‘rational’ of Hegel, by the ‘spiritual’. Man, Sri Aurobindo asserted, is basically a spiritual being. He contains, as Mother was never tired of insisting, the sparks of Divine within him. This is the spring behind all those human actions that are not merely moral, nor merely rational or impulsive. It is this that propels man beyond his physical and earthly limitations to seek harmony through resolution of contradictions. The ‘spiritual’ in man turns inwards, towards itself. As he does so, his consciousness ascends vertically towards its higher levels and expands horizontally beyond the limitations and divisions imposed by his egocentric reason in its search for identity. The previous is not denied, nor accepted as final. The more man advances towards the realisation of self as a soul, the more irrelevant become the divisions of caste and community, of language and culture, of religion and creed, of region and nation. The urge to belong to something greater than oneself is a human and spiritual urge. It is this urge that propels man beyond the extant frontiers that define the layers of his hierarchically arranged identity.

Man thus moves from lesser to bigger aggregates till he arrives at the

realisation that ‘... there is a secret spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, ...the realisation by the individual that only in the life of his fellow men is his own life complete’²⁰. So in Sri Aurobindo’s scheme of things family, clan, tribe, intermediary associations and nations— based either on what sociologists mark as primary or secondary relations – have historical legitimacy in so far as they are stepping stones towards the ultimate ideal of human unity – the spiritual brotherhood of man transcending all biological, social, cultural and political divisions. From this perspective, nations represent a progressive movement, but not the final synthesis. It grows out of the infra-national and moves on to the supra-national. Its ideological mooring – nationalism— is a half-way stop between restrictive localism of various types and all-encompassing internationalism.

8

As a person aware of the broad historical movement towards larger human aggregates, Sri Aurobindo never pined for (like Gandhi or Rabindranath) the bygone era of self-sufficient micro-units. For in his view, localism in any form is bound to be superseded by the iron-law of dialectical progress. The following quotation from *The Village and the Nation* brings out Sri Aurobindo’s perspective very clearly²¹.

‘The day of the independent village or group of villages has gone and must not be revived; the nation demands its hour of fulfilment and seeks to gather the village life of its rural population into a mighty, single, compact democratic nationality. We must make the nation what the village community was of old, self-sufficient, self-centred, autonomous and exclusive – the ideal of national Swaraj’.

These lines were written when Sri Aurobindo was journeying through the nationalist phase of his life. It was a period when a national state of her own appeared to be the *sine qua non* for India’s self-realisation and self-development. This was clearly stated in the very first chapter of ‘*The Doctrine of Passive Resistance*’:

No national self-development is possible without the support of *rājśakti*, organised political strength, commanding, and whenever necessary compelling general allegiance and obedience.... The primary requisite for national progress,

national reform, is the free habit of free and healthy national thought and action which is impossible in a state of servitude. The second is the organisation of the national will *in a strong central authority*’²².

But even when the nationalist in Sri Aurobindo was articulate, he considered nationalism as a movement that serves the cause of human progress and would exit from the world-historical stage as and when its spiritual potentialities have been exhausted. Attention may be drawn, in this context, to the last few lines from *The Life of Nationalism*²³. Though the article was written to counter the contention (of the Moderates) that Indian nationalism was a chance product of history, a negative response to the high-handedness and insensitiveness of British rulers, the sentences quoted below state Sri Aurobindo’s general position on the historical character of nationalism. ‘Nationalism’, wrote Sri Aurobindo, ‘is an *avatāra* and cannot be slain. Nationalism is a divinely appointed *śakti* of the Eternal and must do its God-given work before it returns to the bosom of the Universal Energy from which it came’.

These lines – much misunderstood though – also contain the essence of Sri Aurobindo’s notion of nationalism as a spiritual phenomenon and an initial hint of his idea of Divine as the author of History. They suggest that to him nationalism, that reared its head in Europe in the aftermath of Renaissance and Reformation and spread to all corners of the political world within a span of three centuries, had a spiritual kernel inside its political shell. In Western Europe it was born out of the struggle of the emerging bourgeoisie against the ‘kamsa’ of feudal localism and ecclesiastical universalism in Eastern Europe through the rise of the oppressed ethnic groups against the Czarist, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman rule, and in the rest of the world as a reaction against exploitative colonial subjection.

In *The Human Cycle*, written nearly a decade after *The Life of Nationalism* (16 November, 1907), Sri Aurobindo presents his concept of ‘Subjective Age of History’ to explain this political phenomenon – emergence of nationalism – in terms of psychological evolution preceding the coming of the Spiritual Age. The former, in his view, is a necessary development when the human subject, both as an individual and a collective unit, turns inwards, towards ‘the subjective secret of himself and things...’ It is an age when the ‘mental’ comes to assert itself over the ‘physical’ and the ‘vital’, when ‘the utilitarian standard gives way to the aspiration towards self-consciousness and self-realisation,’²⁴. This nascent subjectivism comes to express itself in the ‘new collective

self-consciousness of man in that organic mass of his life....the nation',²⁵. The latter is depicted as individual writ large, a being, a living power of the eternal Truth, a self-manifestation of the cosmic Spirit. It has a body, an organic life, a moral and an aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and a soul. It is a group-soul with a self-expressive life..

If we accept such a spiritualised definition of nation, then it becomes easier to understand what Sri Aurobindo wrote earlier in the *Life of Nationalism*. In the relevant passage quoted earlier, 'Avatara' stands for a historically necessary phenomenon. As a world-historical force, it represents the 'shakti' of the Eterenal. Everything that moves human society forward has a divinely planned role to play. So is the case with nationalism. It operates as a liberating force in so far as it inspires struggle against oppression and exploitation; it acts as a unifying force in so far as it creates a common identity for diverse lesser aggregates. This, we may say, is its 'God-given work'. But then the progress of the Divine drive towards self-realisation and self-development does not stop simply at the level of nation. On the contrary, nation itself becomes, at a certain stage of development, a fetter on the ever-widening human consciousness that seeks to rise above the borders and boundaries defined by terrestrial and material differences. Sri Aurobindo arrived at this realisation even before compulsions of *sadhana* took him to Pondicherry. (His mystic experiences and encounters with the highest truths of the Upanishads and the Gita might have something to do with it). Thus he writes in the *Karmayogin* '...the nation is the chosen means or condition through which we rise to the higher synthesis, God in humanity, God in all creatures, God in Himself and oneself'²⁶.

Sri Aurobindo goes on to state that a nation develops in two stages. In its initial and formative stage, it lives within itself demanding absolute loyalty from its members. But in the second stage of its life, it should preserve itself in cosmopolitanism somewhat as the individual preserves itself in the family, the family in class (more in the sense of a territorial and cultural category than in the Marxian sense of an economic category), the class in nation, 'not destroying itself needlessly, but recognising a larger interest'²⁷.

Now we are in a position to appreciate the significance of Sri Aurobindo's assertion that nationalism has a God-given work to perform²⁸. In so far as the nation is a mental construct, in so far as the drive for the nation is a spiritual drive, nationalism is – historically – an inevitable development. It cannot be wished away, nor strangulated. It is consciousness incarnate, ascending and

expanding. If liberation from the limited into the limitless is the destiny of man, then nationalism, too, is a phenomenon divinely willed and designed to break the brickworks raised by kinship, community-sentiments, religious bigotry or cultural chauvinism. This is the 'God-given work' it has to complete 'before it returns to the bosom of the *Universal Energy*'²⁹. To the nationalist in Sri Aurobindo, thus, nationalism is a historical force issuing from the Energy that shapes and moves the human world.

9

This also means, by implication, that nationalism is an intermediary solution, and not the final solution to the problem of Human Unity. This problem is very clearly stated in *The Ideal of Human Ulnity* :

'...the perfection of the individual will be incomplete if it does not help towards the perfect state of the social aggregate to which he belongs and eventually to that of the largest possible human aggregate, *the whole of a united humanity*'³⁰.

This is the final outcome of a spiritual process whose end-product, Sri Aurobindo thought, would be a perfectly syncretised mosaic of nations as units of a World Union. He finds the latter as emerging from '...the inevitable final trend of the working of Nature in human society which... cannot fail to arrive at a total aggregation of mankind in a closer international system'³¹. Vivekananda had declared that expansion is life and contraction a sign of death. Sri Aurobindo would similarly affirm that expansion proceeds compulsively from the very pulsation of Nature, which, working in and through the human society, would propel mankind towards the final integration of interacting parts.

Sri Aurobindo thus moves beyond the parameters of nationalism, and writing at a time when the League of Nations was still in its embryonic stage, visualises the European Union of the present UN era. Centripetal forces, comprehended and harnessed by human mind, are sure to lead mankind towards international unification. The great vehicle of this progress is human consciousness, derived from and blessed by the Supreme, the Divine Consciousness. It is not a unilinear progress, but is achieved through life-experiences, through conflicts with centrifugal forces, through division and strife, through violence and bloodshed, through Kurukshetras and Gettysbergs³². These forces operate, not on physical or vital, but on mental plane, and lead inexorably to what Sri Aurobindo describes as 'The idea of humanity as a

single race of beings with a common life and a common general interest...³³.

This is the ethical essence of internationalism which Sri Aurobindo defines as ‘...the attempt of the human mind and life to grow out of the national idea and form and even in a way to destroy it in the interest of the larger synthesis of mankind’³⁴. Nation has a space in this synthesis, but not the whole space. It cannot be made to disappear in the interest of world-unity. That would be against the law of ‘natural evolution’. But nation is not the end of the road either. The ideal it represents is destined to flower into ‘the ultimate ideal of a free association of free human aggregates’³⁵. Nobody can predict exactly as to when the process would reach its terminal point. May be there is no terminal point, an ascent with no climax. Hence there is no time-frame either. The Supreme creator of Time has plenty of it at His disposal.

The concept of such a timeless process shaping human destiny is apparently Hegelian. But Sri Aurobindo, while absorbing the tenets of Hegel’s philosophy of history, outgrew the latter in his political vision. National liberation was for him a necessary step towards Human Liberation³⁶. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, the State (in which the soul of nation finds its body) is the march of God upon earth. Sri Aurobindo would not disagree. But for him God (meaning the Divine) marches also beyond the nation, or the nation-state as its political embodiment. For He is Infinite Unity³⁷.

Notes and references

The major works of Sri Aurobindo referred to or quoted from in this article are:

1. *Bandematarām*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972
 2. *Karmayogin*, CWSA, vol.8, 1997
 3. *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1970
 4. *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1970
- The last two, along with *War and Self-Determination*, form parts of a combined edition, brought out in 1962.

References:

1. Govt. of India Press Information Bureau, 15.10.1946
2. 14.08.1947. Also known as the ‘Tryst with Destiny’ speech.

3. *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Navajiban Publishing House, 1939, Ch.iv, p.26
4. Ibid, Ch. xiv, p.56
5. *Hind Swaraj*, Ch.v
6. *Bharatbarshiya Samaj*, Rabindra Rachanavali, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1990, vol. xiii
7. Ibid
8. *Nationalism*, 1918
9. *Nation ki? Atmashakti*, Rabindra Rachanavali, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1990, vol. xiii, p.38
10. *Nationalism*, 1918
11. *Rabindranather Rastranayitik Mat*, Kalantar, 1929, Rabindra Rachanavali, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1990, vol. XIII, p.713
12. *Sabhyatar Sankat*, Rabindra Rachanavali, Paschim Banga Sarkar, 1990, vol. xiii
13. *Harijan*, 20.4.1938
14. Ibid.
15. *Young India* (January, 1921)
16. Independence Day Message, SABCL, vol. IV, Section 8, pp.404-5
In this message Sri Aurobindo refers to a series of hierarchically arranged ‘dreams’ he had always entertained. Beginning with the dream of a ‘revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India’, the series ends with the dream of evolution of ‘man to a higher and larger consciousness...’. In between stands the dream of a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, ‘brighter and nobler life for mankind’. Sri Aurobindo observed in this context that ‘...unification is a necessity of Nature, an inevitable movement’. He also dreamed that nationalism, having fulfilled its historical role, would lose its militancy in ‘...international spirit and outlook...’ ‘in a new spirit of oneness’.
17. *Life of Nationalism, Bandematarām*, 16.11.1907
18. *Bandematarām*, 28.3.1908
19. ‘The State’, according to Hegel, is the Divine Will, in the sense that it is mind present on earth, unfolding itself to be the actual shape and organisation of a world (*Philosophy of Right*, section 270, note)
20. *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1970, Ch. xxxv, p.554
21. *Bandematarām*, 8.3.1908, p. 739
22. *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance, Bandematarām*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972, p.85
23. Ibid, 16.11.1907, 1972
24. *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1970, Ch. iii, p.24
25. Ibid, p.28
26. *The Highest Synthesis*, CWSA, 1997, vol.viii, p.85
27. Ibid, The Doctrine of Sacrifice, pp.139-40

28. *Life of Nationalism, Bandemataram*, 16.11.1907, p.600
29. Ibid.
30. *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1970, Ch.ii, p.267
31. Ibid, Ch.xxxv, p.548
32. The Battle of Gettysberg (July 1-3, 1863) was the goriest battle in the history of American Civil War (1861-1865). Somewhat unexpected defeat of the secessionist and reactionary feudal forces in this battle ensured that victory would finally go to the Union representing politically the forces of integration and equalisation.
33. *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Ch. xxxii, p.525
34. Ibid, p.525
35. Ibid, Ch.x, p.333
36. George Sabine comments that for Hegel, as a new emanation of the World Spirit, the national state is really divine. See *History of Political Theory* by GH Sabine, Indian edition, 1968, Oxford and IBH, Ch.xxx, p.650
37. It is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo had arrived at this position when he was still in the thick of his two-pronged struggle (against the Raj and the Moderates) as a champion of Indian Nationalism. The following excerpt is both contextually significant and illustrative of Sri Aurobindo's dialectic that does not recognise any borderline between the political and the spiritual:
 'In India we do not recognise the nation as the highest synthesis to which we can rise. There is a higher Synthesis, humanity; beyond that there is a still higher synthesis, this living, suffering, aspiring world of creatures, the synthesis of Buddhism; there is a highest synthesis of all, the synthesis of God...' See No. 26 in the list of references, p.84.

Five Martyrs of Bengal

Amalendu De

I am extremely grateful to the authorities of the Asiatic Society for inviting me to deliver the inaugural address at the seminar to commemorate the 100 years of martyrdom of Prafulla Chaki, Khudiram Bose, Kanailal Dutta and Satyendra Nath Bose. My researches in analysing their role in the context of nationalist revolutionary movement in our country are contained in several publications, notably *The Bengal Past & Present*, later incorporated in the form of a book entitled *Raja Subodh Mallik and his times*, published by the National Council of Education, Jadavpur University, *Banglar Panch Sahider Smarane* in Bengali, etc.

To understand the underlying reasons for which the young rebels could sacrifice their lives for the freedom of our country, I would like to draw your attention to the following points related to the events of the time: (1) Role of Aurobindo Ghosh in organising this revolutionary group, and ideas and principles forwarded by him to motivate them. (2) Importance of manufacturing bomb emphasised by Aurobindo and the principles for using bomb were mentioned by him. (3) Actually five young men lost their lives, who belonged to the same group. So five martyrs instead of four martyrs would be more correct to mention in this connexion. (4) National and international significance of this martyrdom. Let me now analyse these points.

It is quite well known that right from 1893 Aurobindo gave a new direction to the struggle of this country. In that year he assertively stated that the Congress was the organisation of the rich people. It should be converted into an organisation of the 'masses', into an organisation of the 'proletariat'. He was also connected with the revolutionary group of Maharashtra and thought of giving military training to the revolutionary youth for pushing the movement to a higher level. For that he brought Jatindranath Bandopadhyay to Baroda in 1899 and helped him to enter the military department of Baroda State. He sent him to

Bengal after proper military training to organise the youth. Jatindranath found that preparation was already made in Calcutta to found the Anushilan Samity by some other people in 1902 and being advised by Aurobindo he merged his group with this Samity along with other members of the group formed by him. Aurobindo also became one of the leaders of the Anushilan Samity. Swami Vivekananda had already ignited the minds of young men to move forward to build up this country. After his death in 1902, Sister Nivedita devoted her time to strengthen the revolutionary movement. She met Aurobindo at Baroda in 1902 and discussed with him different aspects of the movement. Charles Tegart in his confidential note wrote that what Swami Vivekananda had said had been incorporated in a different form in the programme of the revolutionary movement by Aurobindo as a political leader. In fact, the voice of Swami Vivekananda was uttered by Aurobindo in a much more vigorous and organised way. This note of Tegart was not known to many for a long time. This is now available in Sri Amiya Kumar Samanta's edited book *Terrorism in Bengal* (6 vols.)

After visiting the eastern parts of Bengal, especially studying the level of consciousness of the people in 1904, Aurobindo adopted steps to galvanise the mind of the people. He forwarded an idea before his followers so that they could develop a clear view of the future of independent India. This was clearly explained by him in a monograph entitled *Bhowani Mandir*. Aurobindo said that the future structure of new India would be erected on the foundation of spiritualism and values which India had from very early times, on which with the help of modern science and technology the country would be developed in such a way that everyone would get meal twice a day, would get clothings to wear, would get education, would get proper treatment for the maintenance of their health and would get proper shelter. The new India would be like this. In the year 1905, at the time of anti-partition agitation, Aurobindo inspired young men with this idea. This monograph was secretly circulated among them. So the members of the revolutionary group had clear perceptions before them. After procuring one copy of this, the Intelligence Branch observed that Aurobindo was trying to explode 'a spiritual dynamite' by this note. So they took all necessary measures to stop its circulation.

Then, in 1906, Aurobindo explained to them that they would have to work for 'Swaraj' or complete independence. He was opposed to the Moderates who spoke of self-government within the British Empire. In so many articles and speeches Aurobindo highlighted the principles of complete independence.

It was clearly inscribed on the *Bande Mataram* (1906-1908), an English daily, edited by Aurobindo, *India for Indians*. Aurobindo exposed those who did not use the word 'freedom'. I quote from Aurobindo to elaborate his statement: "There are some who fear to use the word 'freedom', but I have always used the word because it has been the mantra of my life to aspire towards the freedom of my nation". It should be noted that his young followers were very much influenced by this concept. The weekly Bengali journal *Yugantar* (1906-1908) vigorously campaigned for 'revolution.' This paper was supervised by Aurobindo and young talented men were collected to run these two papers. Both these papers prepared the ground for revolutionary upheaval from 1906 to 1908 for which the Government repeatedly attacked them and ultimately were successful in silencing the voices of these papers. There are some scholars who tried to prove that young men who sacrificed their lives were detached from the 'masses' and Aurobindo himself made no attempt to develop the 'mass contact'. Moreover, they were 'emotional young men' without any proper education. But the vast documents of the movement would easily refute the charges against them. I have personally consulted the vast materials of Alipore Bomb case wherein I have found that their findings were not correct at all. The Government submitted these documents in the court as 'exhibits' when they accused Aurobindo and his followers of 'waging war against the British Empire. Both the *Bande Mataram* and the *Yugantar* could withstand the onslaught of the Government due to the unqualified support of the people. A few years back a booklet containing the advertisements in the *Yugantar* were published. From that booklet, scholars would get ample evidence regarding the support of the ordinary people for protecting this paper. The files of the *Bande Mataram* and the *Yugantar* are also available. I have been requested by the authorities of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry to write a foreword to the files of weekly *Yugantar*. This is a gold mine for studying the revolutionary movement properly. The *Yugantar* regularly published the national and international news. At that time, this paper published in detail the working class movement in Europe and America and the role of Karl Marx in it. This has been highlighted in my foreword to the paper.

Moreover, Aurobindo made concerted efforts to enlist the support of the Muslims as he believed that cooperation between the Hindus and the Muslims would be essential to achieve independence. For that, on the front page of *Yugantar* it was clearly printed the *Chakra and Trident* of Hinduism and

Crescent and Sword of Islam. Thus this emblem was included as the symbols of two faiths. It should be noted that no other journal at that time mentioned the symbols of two faiths in this way. Charles Porten Beachcroft made this comment on the emblem of *Yugantar* during the trial of Alipore Bomb Case : “The passages which I have quoted from *Yugantar* exhibit a burning hatred of the British race, they breathe revolution in every line, they point out how revolution is to be effected ; no calumny and no sacrifice is left out, which is likely to instil the people of the country into the same idea or to catch the impressionable minds of the youth What was advocated in the *Yugantar* can be gathered from the pages quoted, there can be only one opinion as to what it was, viz, to forcibly expel the British from India, in other words to wage war on the king and deprive him of the sovereignty of British India.” The British authority could understand from what sources the young rebels got their inspiration.

The next important question is how did Aurobindo teach his followers to look at religion in a multi-religious setting like India. This would help us to know that his young followers had clear perception on religion. They received this idea from the sayings of Aurobindo. After the death of Swami Vivekananda “the religio-philosophical movement was continued through the personality of Aurobindo.” At that time Aurobindo was very much in the thick of political movement. In fact in him, “spirituality was wedded to politics.” He was convinced that ‘spiritual enlightenment was necessary for effective nation service’. To elaborate his ideas on religion in the context of political movement initiated by him he coined two words *Sanatan Dharma* from the Upanishad. He explained that *Sanatan Dharma* was eternal religion. He himself asked the question, what would be the scriptures of this Religion? He said Veda, Vedanta, Gita, Upanishad, Purana, Bible and Koran. Long before the arrival of Mohatma Gandhi on Indian political scenario, Aurobindo inspired young men with this new idea. Aurobindo said : “The Eternal Religion... is to harmonise all religion, science and philosophies and make mankind one soul”. Aurobindo’s ideas on Sanatan Dharma or Eternal Religion have been thoroughly analysed and discussed by me in several books and articles by me both in Bengali in a monograph entitled *Relevance of Sri Aurobindo’s thought in Modern Times* and in (a) *Sri Aurobindo and Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (1876 to 1947)* and (b) *Banga Bhanga Andolan : Bisleswanattak Parjalochana*.

Aurobindo never concealed his opinion that a nation was ‘entitled to attain its freedom by violence’ and made efforts to prepare the bomb. The young

rebels, assembled at Manicktola Secret Society under the direct guidance of Aurobindo’s younger brother Barindra Kumar Ghose, took the initiative to manufacture bomb. Ullaskar Dutt, a student of Presidency College, decided to manufacture bomb in 1906. He was a leading member of the secret society. Like him, Hem Chandra Das (Kanungo) was ‘an expert in explosives’. He joined the secret society in Midnapore around 1900 and first met Aurobindo and Barin in 1903. During the anti-partition agitation in 1905, Hem Chandra ‘became fully involved in revolutionary work.’ In July 1906 he sold part of his property and went to France ‘to learn about revolutionary movements’. He ‘learned to make explosives’ and returned to India in January 1908. Hem Chandra began to work with Barin’s group in Calcutta. Later he collaborated with Ullaskar Dutt “in making the small dynamite bomb which killed the ‘two Kennedy women’ at Muzaffarpur”.

Aurobindo gave specific instructions for using the bomb. He advised his young followers to observe the following principles. Aurobindo wrote the following articles, viz. (i) policy of the Bomb, (ii) messages of the Bomb, (iii) philosophy of the Bomb and (iv) morality of the Bomb. Thus they had an ideal before them. They never used the bomb, killing people in an indiscriminate manner. They always followed these guidelines. So the rebels of that time should not be equated with the terrorists of modern times.

The name of another martyr who lost his life during testing of effectiveness of bomb prepared by Ullaskar Dutt was not available in the police file. In fact, the scholars are not acquainted with his name. His name was Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, an outstanding student of Presidency College, who hailed from Rangpur. He joined the Manicktola Secret Society in 1907. Perhaps toward the end of 1907 or the beginning of 1908, Barindra Kumar Ghosh, Ullaskar Dutt, Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, Bibhuti Bhusan Sarkar and Nolini Kanta Gupta went to the top of a hill in Dighiriyā, near Deoghar, to test the live bomb manufactured by Ullaskar Dutt. It was decided that Prafulla would take his shelter behind a slab and from there he would throw the bomb at the sloping rock. Ullas was to stand by Prafulla. Other members observed the bomb throwing from a distant place. Nolini Gupta climbed a tree to watch the whole scene. Prafulla had thrown the bomb. It exploded with a spark of fire flash, producing a puff of smoke and a terrific noise. Nolini Gupta shouted at the top of his voice, ‘Successful, successful’. But Prafulla ‘lay limp at Ullas’s chest; Ullas held him in his arm’. Then, Ullas slowly laid down the body. One side of Prafulla’s fore-

head 'was broken through and a portion of the brain coming out'. All other members could not bear to see this 'unbearable sight'. The splinters might have hit him after the explosion of the bomb. The silence was broken by Barin with the remarks, "It's all over, there is not a hope." Prafulla's body showed no signs of life.

Now, the question was, what was to be done with the body? It was impossible to bury the body in that hard stone. Cremation by lighting a fire 'might attract people and the news might spread in the neighbouring villages.' So it was difficult for them to bury the body or make necessary arrangement for the cremation. At this stage Barin said, "We need not do anything, let us go away leaving it as it is. This is a field of battle. Our first soldier has given up his body in the battlefield, this is our first casualty." Then, they began to move down the hill, with not a word on their lips. Their minds were stunned and 'throats all choked with emotion: Quoting from an English poem Nolini Gupta said, 'Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note' He also said, 'We were five when we came, only four are now returning.' Barin gave him a rebuke, 'No sentimentality, please.' The reaction of Aurobindo to this incident was expressed in these words, "Heaven awaits the patriot who dies for his country". After the successful testing of this live bomb, the rebels got a weapon in their hands. Moreover, Hem Chandra's bomb also helped them to move forward to realise the objective. Barin, the leader of the group, clearly mentioned that Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty was their 'first casualty'. Scholars should think of including Prafulla Chakraborty's name as the martyr of this period. Recently a plaque was installed at Dighiriya by Sri Aurobindo Bhavan. The Intelligence Department had no knowledge of this incident. Nolini Kanta Gupta, one of the participants, recorded this incident in his reminiscences.

Now, I shall draw your attention to the national and international significance of the martyrdom of the four persons. The bomb throwing incident at Muzaffarpur on 30 April 1908 to assassinate the Magistrate Kingsford by Khudiram and Prafulla Chaki created a great sensation throughout the country. Tilak justified this bomb throwing incident in his paper *Kesari*. He was arrested and prosecuted for it. He was secretly banished to Mandalay. When it was leaked out, the working class of Bombay mills organised an unprecedented hartal on 23 July, 1908. All the mills were paralysed by this hartal. The ordinary people also joined the protest meetings of the workers. They demanded the unconditional release of Tilak. Within a short time the movement took the form

of an upsurge in Bombay. The general political hartals continued till 28 July 1908. The clashes between the workers and general people on the one hand and the military police on the other resulted in an unusual blood-bath for which many workers and ordinary people lost their lives. Many persons were severely injured by the firing of the army and armed police. Clerk, Lieutenant Governor of Bombay, wrote in his secret note that the participants in the hartals and demonstrations used Russian style bombs. The Government ruthlessly suppressed this movement. It should be noted that the young rebels trained under the supervision of Aurobindo had thrown bomb at Muzaffarpur, and Bombay witnessed the upsurges for six days. We cannot discuss this incident without referring to Aurobindo. So Aurobindo, Tilak, activities of Khudiram-Prafulla Chaki and Bombay upsurge were interlinked.

At that time V.I. Lenin minutely observed this Bombay upsurge and wrote a thought-provoking article under the title *Inflammable Material in World Politics*. In this article he also referred to Aurobindo, Tilak and others. He was elated to mention that a new force had arisen in Indian political arena, the Indian working class, which will ultimately be a determining factor in Indian politics. He did not criticise anywhere in this article the activities of young rebels as 'childish' or 'emotional youth' like some of our present day scholars.

Another point is to be noted here. Both Marx and Engels in their anti-colonial thesis clearly demanded the complete independence of the colonies. They also said that the working class of England and other capitalist countries should move for this demand. This was essential for their emancipation too. Since 1906 Aurobindo also explained *Swaraj* in terms of complete independence. For this reason Madam Cama's resolution submitted to the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International in 1907 was supported by the Leninists, but opposed by the Revisionists. The British Government submitted this resolution as one of the exhibits of Alipore Bomb Case, because they believed that the resolution moved by Madam Cama was written by Aurobindo himself.

When Kanailal Dutt and Satyendra Nath Bose killed Naren Gossain within the prison for protecting their leader Aurobindo from execution then this was published with much importance in the organ of the socialist party in Paris *L'Humanité*. This paper commented that this heroic deed would always be remembered as the first incident in the history of the world.

There was no doubt that Aurobindo was the most powerful of all the non-proletarian publicists of the time. The critics of Aurobindo have completely

ignored these points mentioned. Aurobindo never spoke of ‘Hindu Nationalism’ from the beginning of his political career since 1893. In fact, he firmly stood for ‘Indian Nationalism’. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also made this mistake while he characterised the movement led by Aurobindo as ‘Hindu Nationalism’. But when he became the Prime Minister of independent India, he revised his earlier opinion on Aurobindo. He said that Aurobindo prepared the ground for which it was possible for Mahatma Gandhi to launch powerful mass struggle against the British for the liberation of this country. In this way Pandit Nehru paid great tribute to Aurobindo.

I hope learned scholars will be able to throw enough light on the five disciples of Aurobindo who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of our country and re-arrange the above-mentioned historical data in proper perspective.

(This is a transcript of the inaugural address delivered by Professor Amalendu De at a day-long seminar to commemorate the 100 years of martyrdom of Prafulla Chaki, Khudiram Bose, Kanailal Datta and Satyendra Nath Bose held at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, on December 9, 2009.)

Beyond Mind: A New Paradigm of Psychology Based on the Mystical Exploration of Nature

(Continued from the previous issue)

Kundan Singh

The simultaneous existence of right and wrong, true and false, and relative and absolute that produces a paradox poses no problem for the Mādhyamakā¹ philosophers. In this section, we will examine how these paradoxes can be resolved paving the way for intuitive knowing or for the study of psychology with consciousness as its subject matter.

Nagarjuna, a second century Mādhyamakā philosopher, stated that concepts, events and entities do not exist in isolation but exist in relation to one another. He further contends that concepts, events and entities called *swabhāva* lack any intrinsic existence, and that any attempt to reduce them to having an independent status will lead to absurdity. He defines *swabhāva* as “*nirapekṣa paratra* (independent of others), *ahetu pratyaya* (without cause or conditions), *nitya* (permanent or unchanging), *aparijñāna* (unknowable), and *akriyate* (unmade)” (McCagney, 1997, p. 61). According to Nagarjuna, however, nothing exists in-itself and of-itself, and no concept has any meaning independent of a relation. This is the principle of *pratītya samutpāda* or dependent origination, and the main philosophy under which this is discussed is called *sūnyavāda* or *sūnyatā* or the doctrine of emptiness. Black and white, good and evil, valleys and mountains, friends and enemies are co-implicates. All contradictions and oppositions, seen from a slightly different perspective reveal that they are one and essentially whole. The opposites are not against each other but complement each other. Darkness is born out of light and day is born out of night. Nagarjuna writes:

How, indeed, will disappearance exist at all without origination?

1. The Philosophy is Mādhyamikā whereas the philosophers are called Mādhyamakā

[How could there be] death without birth? There is no disappearance without [prior] origination. It does not obtain that origination and disappearance are the same thing. It does not obtain that origination and disappearance are different. [Cited in McCagney, 1997, p. 59]

McCagney (1997) citing from the Nagarjuna's work *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* writes:

Without one [*eka*] there are not many [*aneka*]. Without many [*aneka*] one [*eka*] is not possible.... The father is not the son, the son is not the father. Neither exists without being correlative. (p. 60)

Employing the principle of *pratītya samutpāda* or dependent origination and his dialectical skills, he refutes the contention of the realists that a thing exists in-itself or of-itself. The subject does not exist independent of the object; neither does the cause exist without the effect. These dichotomous pairs—like all that we use in everyday life—have no meaning beyond their relationship with one another.

Thus, the rigid dichotomy between the subject and the object crumbles down, for the Mādhyamikā critique shows that the act of knowing is a product of the interaction between the observer/knower and the observed/known. Any dichotomised way of thinking results in *avidyā*, loosely translated as spiritual ignorance, which motivates the mind to grasp thoughts as things to be grasped by the individual ego. The solution to the enigma of our existence or the knowledge of the ultimate is gained by the transcendence of all the reified and rigid thoughts through a way of “seeing” and “being” called *prajñā*. The search for knowledge is grounded in our language, presuppositions and all those concepts and entities that we hold on to as givens in our everyday life. We attach transcendental and eternal value to these givens, which a Mādhyamakā deconstructs by placing them in a sociolinguistic and historical context, thus paving the way for a spiritual seeker to transcend the rationalistic tendency to make sense of the truth through any epistemological or ontological suppositions. Huntington (1989) explains this most beautifully:

According to the Mādhyamikā, a...convoluted and subtle relationship holds between any two dichotomies of conceptual thought, whether expressed in ontological, epistemological, ethical or any other terms: Cause/effect, subject/object, substrate/predicate, absolute/relative, truth/error, good/evil, and all other

dualistic concepts find their meaning in the context of their elusive relationship with each other and with an interrelated network of other such concepts. The structure that they give to all experience—a structure that seems “to emerge from the things themselves”—is also dependent on an illusion similar to the Necker cube where each image finds its meaning and existence only in the context of its relationship to partners that must always remain out of sight. The critical difference is only that the context of everyday life in which these other relationships are embedded is infinitely more complex, for it embodies an indeterminate number of historical and circumstantial factors shared by the sociolinguistic community in which this vocabulary is used and thought and perception take place. (p. 121)

Similarly, Advaita Vedānta posits that this world consists of dualities, and that the Ultimate Reality, which is the source of all that exists, is beyond all these dualities. True knowledge can only be gained when one transcends the dual world. Swami Satprakashananda (1977) writes:

It is *māyā* that brings about the relativity of subject and object, the knower and the known. The two are dissimilar, yet inseparable. One does not exist without the other. The universe is a conglomeration of pairs of opposites, such as life and death, light and darkness, joy and sorrow, knowledge and ignorance, plenty and want, beauty and ugliness, kindness and misery, love and hatred, good and evil, in which the antitheses are correlated; yet either factor appears to be an independent element and in vain we try our utmost to have one of the pair to the exclusion of the other. This is the effect of the *māyā*. There is no elevation without depression, no construction without destruction, no addition without subtraction. In each case they the contraries form a single process. They are inseparable; yet they appear disparate. This is the effect of *māyā* (pp.96-97).

Having addressed how the subject-object dichotomy can be transcended, let us examine the cause of underlying relativism, though generally not acknowledged in the discipline of western psychology. This is because, as supported by many mystical traditions, mind—with reason, logic and intellect as its instruments—cannot arrive at the truths of our existence. Intellectual activity, discursive thinking and logical analysis alone are not capable of solving the final enigmas of our existence—it cannot unravel all the mysteries.

According to Sri Aurobindo—one of the greatest mystics of the last century—mind and its instruments cannot perceive the reality as a whole as its very nature is to classify, divide, compare and measure. It tries to understand things through categories, concepts and formulas. This is perhaps why in the intellectual history of mankind there have been scores of such formulas and theories but nothing definitive can be said about the fundamentals of our existence. Despite that most psychological theories have almost equal intellectual appeal, and have evidence to support their claim even if they contradict each other. What we have today are thousand and one schools of psychology each claiming an exclusive monopoly on the truth of human behaviour. Sri Aurobindo (1997), commenting on the limitation of the mind on numerous occasions throughout his writings, puts it most succinctly:

Mind in its essence is a consciousness which measures, limits, cuts out forms of things from the indivisible whole and contains them as if each were a separate integer. Even with what exists as obvious parts and fractions, Mind establishes this fiction of its ordinary commerce that they are things with which it can deal separately and not merely as objects of a whole. For, even when it knows that they are not things in themselves, it is obliged to deal with them as if they were things in themselves; otherwise it could not subject them to its own characteristic activity. It is this essential characteristic of Mind which conditions the workings of all its operative powers, whether conception, perception, sensation or the dealings of creative thought. It conceives, perceives, senses things as if rigidly cut out from a background or a mass and employs them as fixed units of the material given to it for creation or possession. All its action and enjoyment deal thus with wholes that form part of a greater whole, and these subordinate wholes again are broken up into parts which are also treated as wholes for the particular purposes they serve. Mind may divide, multiply, add, subtract, but it cannot get beyond the limits of this mathematics. If it goes beyond, and tries to conceive the real whole, it loses itself in a foreign element; it falls from its own firm ground into the ocean of the intangible, into the abysses of the infinite where it can neither perceive, conceive, sense nor deal with its subject for creation and enjoyment. (pp. 162-163)

And again,

Mind is an instrument of analysis and synthesis, but not of essential knowledge. Its function is to cut out something vaguely from the unknown Thing in itself and call this measurement or delimitation of it the whole, and again to analyse the whole into its parts which it regards as separate mental objects. It is only the parts and accidents that the Mind can see definitely and, after its own fashion, know. (Sri Aurobindo, 1997, p.127)

Western psychology—due to the spirit of the times—has mainly been inspired by an intellectual and cognitive activity with a heavy reliance on the logical and discursive mind to find out the truths of human behaviour, for the West has considered intellect with its purified reason to be the ultimate instrument for exploring the nature of human existence. But the reason of individuals varies according to their belief, upbringing, culture, attitude, language and perspective. Also the reason that has money and power to back its claim becomes the right reason. Recognising the relativity of reason, which also explains the presence of relativism in psychology with respect to theories, Sri Aurobindo (1995) states:

You believe according to your faith, which is quite natural, he believes according to his opinion, which is natural also, but no better so far as the likelihood of getting at the true truth of things is in question. His opinion is according to his reason... How is reasoning to show which is right? The opposing parties can argue till they are blue in their face – they won't be anywhere nearer a decision... But who can look at the world as it is and say that the trend of things is always (or ever) according to the right reason – whatever this thing called the right reason may be? As a matter of fact there is no universal infallible reason which can decide and be the umpire between conflicting opinions; there is only my reason, your reason, X's reason, Y's reason multiplied up to a discordant innumerable. Each reasons according to his view of things, his opinion, that is his mental constitution and mental preference. (p. 178)

Similarly, according to Advaita Vedanta, mind is not the knower of things but an object of knowledge. Just like physical objects, like a chair for instance, can be observed, mind also can be observed—which makes it an object of knowledge rather than a knower. Hence the knowledge of our existence

cannot be grasped by the mind—it is something else that is the knower. That according to Vedanta is the Self, which is the self-intelligent, self-aware, self-evident, self-illuminating consciousness.

It is only by consciously identifying oneself with the consciousness beyond the mind that one finds the truths of one's existence. That Self is the self of all selves, and by knowing that one not only gains the knowledge of one's own self but also the knowledge of the selves of all others. According to Advaita Vedanta and Sri Aurobindo, all the things that we call our real self like mind and body are not the self at all — these are external aspects of personality put forth by the Nature for the play of life. The real Self is within and above all that we usually identify as our self. The identification with the real Self reveals to us the knowledge of all the mysteries that the universe has concealed from us, which includes the truth that lies behind the psychology of every human being. Sri Aurobindo (1996) comments:

Since the Self which we come to realise by the path of knowledge is not only the reality which lies behind and supports the states and movements of our psychological being, but also that transcendent and universal Existence which has manifested itself in all the movements of the universal, the knowledge of the Self includes also the knowledge of the principles of Being, its fundamental modes and its relations with the principles of the phenomenal universe. This was what was meant by the Upanishad when it spoke of the Brahman as that which being known all is known. It has to be realised first as the pure principle of existence, afterwards, says the Upanishad, its essential modes become clear to the soul which realises it. We may indeed, before realisation, try to analyse by the metaphysical reason and even understand intellectually what Being is and what the world is, but such metaphysical understanding is not the Knowledge. Moreover, we may have the realisation in knowledge and vision, but this is incomplete without realisation in the entire soul-experience and the unity of all our being with that which we realise. It is the science of Yoga to know and the art of Yoga to be unified with the Highest so that we may live in the Self and act from the supreme poise, becoming one not only in the conscious essence but in the conscious law of our being with the transcendent Divine whom all things and creatures, whether ignorantly or with partial knowledge and experience, seek to express through the lower law of their members. (pp. 374-375)

Consequently, psychology needs to be a science of consciousness as opposed to a science of mind and behaviour. This new paradigm of psychology will be based on the mystical exploration of nature, for we have already seen that classical methodology of the discipline based in a strict dichotomy of various dualities like subject and object, fact and value, universal and local, relative and absolute, etc. is doomed to failure. The future psychology can be made possible by transcending our mind, and by implication its various created dualities, by attaining *prajñā* or by realisation of the Self. This paradigm of psychology warrants the transcendence of mind, logic, intellect and reason by using our mind to the hilt to see how logic, reason and intellect are inferior instruments in the pursuit of the truths of our existence. The mystics claim that the deeper truths of our existence unravel themselves on a silent mind, compared metaphorically to an ocean that is absolutely calm. Due to the paucity of space, I will limit myself to the accounts of just one mystic, Sri Aurobindo. In other words, stillness of the mind is the necessary condition for accessing knowledge that lies beyond the domain of intellect. It is this region that holds the key to the secrets of mind and consciousness. Sri Aurobindo (1995) states that the “pure stillness of mind is always the required condition, the desideratum, but to bring it about there are more ways than one” (p.193). A complete silence of the mind and a change of ordinary human consciousness hold the promise of accessing knowledge of the fields not available to the physical eye. Writes Sri Aurobindo (1995):

The mind can think and doubt and question and accept and withdraw its acceptance, make formations and unmake them, pass decisions and revoke them, judging always on the surface and by surface indications and therefore never coming to any deep and firm experience of Truth, but by itself it can do no more. There are only three ways by which it can make itself a channel or instrument of Truth. Either it must fall silent in the Self and give room for a wider and greater consciousness; or it must make itself passive to an inner Light and allow that Light to use it as a means of expression; or else, it must itself change from the questioning intellectual superficial mind it now is to an intuitive intelligence, a mind of vision fit for the direct perception of the divine Truth. (p. 174)

A change of ordinary human consciousness becomes a necessary condition for undertaking such a pursuit of psychology. It is not by looking outside of us that we can find answers to the enigmas that shroud us, but by looking

within. In this research the researcher and the researched become one; the subject becomes the object and vice versa, leading to the transcendence of the strict dichotomy of subject-object that psychology has practised so far. Yoga, which actually means a union with the Divine or with the essential ground of all beings — whichever way one may want to see it according to one's preference — is the key through which a change of human consciousness — and hence a transcendence of mind — is possible. The Indian mystics have practised this art for centuries together, and have left behind a rich source of literature for all kinds of aspirants who want to take this path. Many of them have always stated that there is no one right way to take; that is the reason why there is a plethora of paths leading to the oneness that underlies this Universe, based on the different constitutions and psychological make-up that humans have. However, when I talk about the distinctiveness of India in this field, I do not mean to suggest that such experiments have not been conducted anywhere else in the world — what I definitely mean is that they have been fewer in other parts of the world limiting the many possibilities of approaching the consciousness that humans have in their repertoire.

From the spiritual literature, and the written accounts of mystics we know that there are layers and layers of consciousness, and forces that are invisible to the ordinary human eyes that are constantly impinging on human beings that determine their behaviour. These forces and levels of consciousness can only be discovered if we undertake a mystical enquiry into the nature of things. This requires a yogic development, which involves a direct and intuitive experience with the nature of things. Sri Aurobindo (1994) is quite forthright about such a kind of psychology rooted in a mystical exploration of our existence.

A direct and experiential and experimental psychology seems to be demanded if psychology is to be a science and not merely a mass of elementary and superficial generalisations with all the rest guesswork or uncertain conclusions or inference. We must see, feel, know directly what we observe; our interpretations must be capable of being sure and indubitable; we must be able to work surely on a ground of sure knowledge. (pp. 335-336)

Identifying that the basis of human behaviour lies much deeper in the realm of consciousness and nothing much can be achieved by studying the outer aspects, Sri Aurobindo (1994) explains:

Psychology is the science of consciousness and its status and operations in Nature and, if that can be glimpsed or experienced, its status and operations beyond what we know as Nature.

It is not enough to observe and know the movements of our surface nature and the superficial nature of other living creatures just as it [is] not enough for Science to observe and know as electricity only the movements of lightning in the clouds or for the astronomer to observe and know only those movements and properties of the stars that are visible to the unaided eyes. Here as there a whole world of occult phenomena has to be laid bare and brought under control before the psychologist can hope to be master of his province.

Our observable consciousness, that which we call ourselves, is only the little visible part of our being. It is a small field below which are depths and farther depths and widths and ever wider widths which support and supply it but to which it has no visible access. All that is our self, our being, — what we see at the top is only our ego and its visible nature.

Even the movements of this little surface nature cannot be understood nor its true law discovered until we know all that is below or behind and supplies it — and know too all that is around is and above. (pp. 333-34)

To sum up, psychology needs to move beyond mere inference and conjectures. It needs to base itself on the foundation of a sure knowledge— on having a first hand knowledge of the hidden layers and layers of consciousness, which means mastering the occult and the subtle realms of human existence that is not visible to the ordinary human eye. It needs to go into the trans-mental and trans-intellectual realm through purification of mind and body, by transcending logical and intellectual thought, by stilling the mind within all internal and external chaos and flux so that the knowledge of the subtle and the invisible becomes known. Within the Indian tradition, it means seeing things with the “third eye.” The future psychology as a science or the psychology that I envision, primarily based on the insights of Sri Aurobindo, is one in which such knowledge of “psychology by identity” becomes a legitimate field of enquiry in academia, and is taken up by large numbers of people.

The Foundational Principles for Indian Psychology

These are my general views regarding the nature of psychology per se; however, now I want to focus on what the above means for Indian psychology

as a discipline to be taught in Indian universities. The West has its own history and it will have its own trajectory with regard to its movement towards a mystical exploration of nature, if at all it does. For centuries together in India, the exploration of the deeper truths of our existence has been engaged by the mystics—*Riṣis*, *Munis* and Sufis. Under the destruction brought about by colonisation and the dominance of western heuristics in academia since then, a legitimate field of enquiry into the nature of human existence was systematically decimated and discredited. In the modern times, the pursuit of knowledge has come a full circle, and the time has come to pursue the ancient science once again. Within the Indian context, the time has come for us to bestow legitimacy to the age-old tradition of ours, and inspire the younger generation of psychologists to become mystics who can determine the psychological laws and the psychology of individuals based on knowledge by identity, and we need to make a quantum jump by exploring the mystical and the invisible realm of Nature who carries in herself all the secrets that govern the human behaviour.

Ancient India always honoured the word of the *Riṣi*—the mystic had the final word in all matters dealing with the most mundane to the most esoteric. Though not with the educated elites, this tendency or proclivity is still seen among the common masses where they go and seek answers from known and renowned *Riṣis*.

As we intensify our efforts to carve out a new and specific discipline of Indian psychology, it will incredibly befit us to look into what one of the foremost mystics of the last century, Sri Aurobindo, had to say in this matter. It is almost received knowledge that in the Indian universities, it is primarily Western Psychology which is being taught, and that it does not explain most of the psychological processes of the Indians. According to Sri Aurobindo, the key factor that distinguishes Indian living from the rest in the world is that spirituality is the master-key of Indian living. The discipline of Indian Psychology would want to recognise this fundamental truth and start constructing its knowledge base from this foundation. It is important to recognise that there is an invisible reality that surrounds the visible and that the consciousness is the primary reality out of which has emerged everything manifest and unmanifest. For the renaissance of Indian thought, Sri Aurobindo (1998) gives us the following three lines of action or pursuit:

The recovery of the old spiritual knowledge and experience in all its splendour, depth and fullness is its first, most essential work; the flowing of this spirituality into new forms of philosophy, literature, art, science and critical knowledge is the second; an original dealing with modern problems in the light of the Indian spirit and the endeavour to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritualised society is the third and most difficult. Its success on these three lines will be the measure of its help to the future of humanity. (p. 15)

Thus, for the introduction of Indian Psychology in the Indian Universities, it is of capital importance to formulate a curriculum that gives an intellectual foundation of the various spiritual traditions of India—a curriculum that encapsulates and embraces Upanishads, Bhagavatgita, Yogasutras of Patanjali, Yogavasistha, Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, and texts on Buddhism, Jainism and Sufism. We have to come back to this assertion time and again that consciousness is the primal reality and that it is the cause of everything. We may want to take the help of all the current research in different disciplines that point to the existence of a spiritual world. For example, we can incorporate into the curriculum the most recent research of Quantum Physics which is identifying that an objective pursuit of truth in the conventional dichotomy of subject and object comes to a collapse when we begin to investigate the atomic universe, and that modern Science has come a full circle and it is validating some of the insights that the ancient seers and mystics in India have had for centuries together.

Secondly, we need to understand that though political colonisation may have been over but in a real sense it is not. Our minds have become colonised. By and large the English-educated intellectuals of this country, who incidentally form most of the academics, do not think through and in the categories that are Indian or that they are dictated by categories and worldview that our ancestors have practised for centuries together. We still judge and visualise our culture and the way of living through the lens of how the British saw us—we have internalised all the judgments that were heaped on us, and we still look to the West for the validation of our existence and wisdom. We lack the necessary courage and confidence, and largely this process is unconscious. To give you an example, we in India began to talk about Yoga after it was accepted in the West and a certain section of the population began to practise it articulating its effects. Similar is the case with the Ayurveda and other traditional medicines; only when the people in the West began to express dissatisfaction with the mainstream medicine that we began to see value of

things in our own backyard. This tendency will have to change; otherwise we will be lagging behind the West by at least fifty years without showing any sense of originality and creativity. Consequently, it will jeopardise the future of Indian Psychology.

Decolonising the mind may not be a very easy process. Just like peeling off an onion, there may be layers and layers of training that we will have to deconstruct in order to intellectually understand the Indian existence and cosmology from within. The first step towards doing it effectively is to become conscious that a colonised mind in us exists, and it exists way more than we are actually aware of it existing. It is important to understand that within the language there is a worldview which gets transmitted to the learner. With an intense process of introspection and self-inquiry we will be successful in breaking the shackles that have made us our own enemies while understanding that all that comes from the West is not a gospel of Truth and not all that has been in existence in India for centuries is a heap of superstition, falsity and ignorance. We need to understand the colonial process in which the orientalist language created these binary divisions of Civilised West and Savage East, the knowledgeable West and the naive East, the rational West and the irrational East, and how we have internalised these fictive creations which almost unconsciously force us to seek the validation from the West, almost like a child seeking validation from his or her father. For the creation and furtherance of the field of Indian Psychology, this tendency needs to change. We need to have much confidence in the wisdom and deftness of our ancestors. It does not mean that we accept hook, line and sinker whatever that comes from our past but that we should be open, inquisitive and adventurous in exploring our ancient knowledge; and that we should give these knowledge-systems a fair chance of dispassionate inquiry and exploration before our experience and investigation can suggest that they are false and worth rejecting. What certainly we must be wary of is an *a priori* denial or rejection, which in my understanding is grossly counterproductive to the pursuit of Knowledge and Truth.

However, situating Indian Psychology on its own terms without it being in interaction with Western Psychology is neither possible nor desirable. If we look into the history of India, it has been an assimilative culture. Travellers, invaders, and persecutors among many others have come to India bringing with themselves different ways and thoughts. Every time that it has happened, the Indian spirit has stood up, and while embracing all these novel ideas it has

assimilated them into its own fold giving them a unique spin in accordance with the spiritual values. A similar approach needs to be applied to western psychologies—its value and truth need to be weighed against the Indian spirit, and whatever is assimilable in accordance with its core needs is to be absorbed and the rest rejected. However, I am very clear that this assimilation needs to be creative, and that we guard ourselves against any kind of jingoism, parochialism and cultural nationalism.

Ultimately, we need to understand that the Indian spiritual systems are not speculative and metaphysical, and that they have come about from the experiences of the proponents. These experiences are verifiable and that Indian Psychology will not become a totally thriving discipline till its practitioners and teachers become yogis, mystics and seers of the spiritual reality. The last, of course, is a difficult thing to accomplish—definitely extremely difficult till the spiritual paradigm does not get more acceptance in the mainstream education. At least till then we can start with a discussion which allows students to intellectually study spirituality within the context of Indian Psychology.

(Concluded)

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Science and religion

Georges Van Vrekhem

The Western God

“I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.” It is remarkable that these passionate words of Richard Dawkins are from a man who considers himself a scientist, and whose name is now often conjoined with the name of Charles Darwin. “I have never heard such hardline, aggressive promotion of atheism under the guise of science as I have heard from the Darwinists,” writes Denyse O’Leary. “It is, at best, amusing to hear Darwinists charge that the creationists have an underlying religious agenda, when the Darwinists’ own anti-religious agenda is pretty obvious.”¹

The literature produced by zealous atheist scientists, mainly biologists, is increasing steadfastly. Some telling titles are: *A Devil’s Chaplain* and *The God Delusion* (Richard Dawkins, 2003 and 2006), *Breaking the Spell* (Daniel Dennett, 2006), *The End of Faith* (Sam Harris, 2006), *God is not Great* (Christopher Hitchens, 2007), *God - The Failed Hypothesis* (Victor Stenger, 2008). In all these books religion is presented as irrational, by which they are continuing the tradition of the Enlightenment; totalitarian, reigning by dogma and fear as well for the earthly as the eternal destiny; and outright evil, given the uncountable instances of physical and moral cruelty in history and even today. “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you’d have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion.” (Steven Weinberg²)

It is noteworthy that the controversy between religion on the one side and atheism and anti-theism on the other was and is taking place almost exclusively in the West, within the culture dominated by Christianity and having its roots in

Europe. Modern culture, carrier of Christianity, the Enlightenment values and science, has spread over the globe from Europe, which deemed itself superior to all the peoples and cultures it discovered, conquered and exploited during the era of colonialism. The general outlook was Eurocentric, an attitude which has broadened into 'Western' when America entered the global stage, and which is still alive, consciously or subconsciously, as proved by the ongoing attack of science on religion.

The God in the literature mentioned above is invariably the bearded Man in nightdress Upstairs, a kind of irresponsible autocrat. "A naive Western view of God is an outsize, light-skinned male with a long white beard, who sits on a very large throne in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow."³ (Carl Sagan) In his Gifford lectures, the theologian Etienne Gilson argued: "Christian thought did not simply cloak itself in Greek philosophical ideas. What it uniquely added to Western philosophy was the Hebrew Creator."⁴

Like so many other concepts in the Christian religion, the mental idea of 'God' is, in itself, confused and contradictory. Arthur Lovejoy called "the word 'God' in the last degree ambiguous." In the Bible we find at least three different kinds of God: the tribal terrible, jealous and vengeful Yahweh, the meta-physical God of the prophets, and the loving God, the Father, of Jesus Christ. To these quite different Gods the Church Fathers added the Trinity, the three-in-one God.

The tribal God belonged to a period of the establishment of morality among the primitive Hebrews, the new moral precepts being hewn in stone as the Ten Commandments. It was the tribal God who ordered: "If your brother, the son of your father or of your mother, or your son or daughter, or the spouse whom you embrace, or your most intimate friend, tries to secretly seduce you, saying: 'Let us go and serve other gods', unknown to you or your ancestors before you, gods of the peoples surrounding you, whether near you or far away, anywhere throughout the world, you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must show him no pity; you must not spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death, since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God." This passage from the book *Deuteronomy* is here quoted from Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*. Lots of passages from *Deuteronomy* and other books constituting the Bible are ready ammunition for use by the anti-religious, not entirely without justification, for

the Bible has provided, in the West, the religious and moral inspiration for centuries.

Another easily accessible provision of anti-religious ammunition is the history of Christianity. As soon as Catholicism was recognised as the official church of the Roman Empire, around the year 400, hordes of 'monks' went on the rampage, murdering 'heathens' and destroying the buildings of the existing religions and cults. There have been the Crusades, the Inquisition (still extant), the witch hunts which killed hundreds of innocent women in the cruellest manner, and the burning of unbelievers from within and without the Church's ranks. Dogmatic fanaticism brought Galileo to trial, "the most tragic event in the whole of the scientific revolution." Less well-known is the anti-modernist action of the Catholic Church following the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870. "The Vatican did not merely now make the claim of papal infallibility. In the nineteenth century, in its assaults on every development in scientific knowledge, every glimmering of light shed in the field of biblical scholarship, every advancement of technical skill (it even issued condemnation of the electric light), the Vatican was the great powerhouse of reaction, posing very grave difficulties for those who wished to practise the Catholic faith without committing intellectual suicide."⁵ (AN Wilson)

The anti-religious attitude of many scientists has been sharpened by the 20th century trials about the teaching of evolution in the educational institutions of the USA. Christians tried to have the teaching of evolution forbidden by law or demanded equal time for biblical creationism. The most famous trial remains the State of Tennessee vs. John Scopes in 1925, known as "the monkey trial." In recent years, against the background of the controversy between creationism and "intelligent design," there have been several more court cases in which evolution was at stake.

The three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are highly esteemed by theologians because they are supposed to be the only monotheisms. This is a gross misconception. "The earliest Greek natural theology was certainly monotheistic ... The Greeks did not invent polytheism but instead spoke of a single god whom they call Zeus, whose mind embraces all things in its knowledge, and who guides all things and is king of all."⁶ (Werner Jaeger) And there was the Platonic Absolute, the God identified with the Idea of the Good as perfection or self-sufficiency. Moreover, one must be ignorant of Hinduism not to know about Brahman, the Absolute, of whom the gods and goddesses are the cosmic powers, and who is represented above the entrance of the temple of every Hindu god and goddess by the glyph for OM.

What the three Abrahamic monotheisms certainly have in common is their totalitarianism and the ruthlessness of its enforcement. It may be remembered that the Hebrews were the Chosen People to whom all “the nations” were to bow, and whose reign over the Earth would be the sign for the Last Judgment. Nor should it be forgotten that Judaism had its own Galileo in the person of Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), one of the great philosophers. “On 27 July 1656, the elders of the Amsterdam synagogue made the following *cherem*, or damnation, or fatwa, concerning his work: ‘With the judgment of the angels and of the saints we excommunicate, cut off, curse, and anathemise Baruch de Espinosa, with the consent of the elders and of all this holy congregation, in the presence of the holy books: by the 613 precepts which are written therein, with the anathema wherewith Joshua cursed Jericho, with the curse which Elisha laid upon the children, and with all the curses which are written within the law.

“Cursed be he by day and cursed by night. Cursed be he in sleeping and cursed be he in waking, cursed in going out and cursed in coming in. The Lord shall not pardon him, the wrath and fury of the Lord shall henceforth be kindled against this man, and shall lay upon him all the curses which are written in the book of the law. The Lord shall destroy his name under the sun, and cut him off for his undoing from all the tribes of Israel, with all the curses of the firmament which are written in the book of the law.”⁷ Excommunication was common practice in the Catholic Church also. Some popes excommunicated whole nations, thereby, at least in intention, sending the souls of their people to burn in hell for eternity, and this every so often for the basest political or financial motives.

Where the anti-religious scientists go seriously wrong, however, is when they consider the mania shown by the religions to be an exclusively religious phenomenon instead of a way the human mind functions. Nowhere in the books mentioned at the beginning of this chapter does one read about the philosophical and political manias of Russian communism, Nazism or Maoism, or of the general aggressive egoistic attitude of individual versus individual, community versus community, caste versus caste, nation versus nation, culture versus culture. The egocentric, sectarian functioning of the mind is part of our evolutionary condition, as are our fears and insecurity. Education, inculcation and brainwashing construct a human mind in a way which is near to impossible to change, except by a long and painful conversion process. The attitude of the atheist and anti-theist scientists becomes quasi farcical when they do not seem to realise

that they themselves are defending a dogmatic totalitarianism that has become the Church of Scientism (not to be confused with Scientology). “It is easy to forget that both science and religion are preoccupied with justifying beliefs,”⁸ (Steve Fuller) which is putting it mildly.

Religion or spirituality

“There is nothing accidental about the difference between a Church and its Founder,” wrote Bertrand Russell. “As soon as absolute truth is supposed to be contained in the sayings of a certain man, there is a body of experts to interpret his sayings, and these experts infallibly acquire power, since they hold the key to truth. Like any privileged caste they use their powers to their own advantage.”⁹ This sequence of events has been repeated throughout history and *is* actually the history of religion: a Person has a new revelation or realisation which attracts a group of followers; they lower his inspired message to their level of understanding and fix it into a set of formulas comprehensible by all; the new message is declared the absolute truth; this truth is to be approached solely through a body of initiated representatives, who invent a set of rules and rituals to be executed obligatorily. To this has to be added that an individual approach to the Truth is forbidden. Such, by and large, has also been the history of Christianity.

“The religious life is a movement of the same ignorant human consciousness, turning or trying to turn away from the earth towards the Divine, but as yet without knowledge and led by the dogmatic tenets and rules of some sect or creed which claims to have found the way out of the bounds of the earth-consciousness into some beatific Beyond,” wrote Sri Aurobindo. “The religious life may be the first approach to the spiritual, but very often it is only a turning about in a round of rites, ceremonies and practices or set ideas and forms without any issue. The spiritual life, on the contrary, proceeds directly by a change of consciousness, a change from the ordinary consciousness,... in which one finds one’s true being and comes first into direct and living contact and then into union with the Divine.”¹⁰

The spiritual life is an individual, inner exploration. The spiritual aspirant undertakes the adventure of the discovery of Reality by a direct contact, for the Real is present in himself. To start on his quest, he may follow the inspiration of persons who have preceded him on the different levels of the human personality. His first task is the mastery of the way evolution has produced our extremely complex being. This effort itself is already so daunting, especially in the

nether vital and material regions, that several spiritual paths have limited their exploration to the more accessible regions of the soul and the mind.

Practitioners of the individual inner exploration are not welcome in the body of the established religious communities, ruled by dogma and authority. In the West, where they are called ‘mystics’, hardly a single one has escaped persecution by the Church, and many have paid with their life for the truthful confession of their spiritual attainments.

For scientific materialism there is no inner reality, and consequently no spirituality. Those who still believe so are retarded, mystics or charlatans. They are derided on practically every other page written by the positivist reductionists, who do not mind to flaunt their ignorance of such foolish if not cretinous matters. Take for instance Daniel Dennett, the American philosopher in the Dawkins camp. He concedes: “I simply do not know enough about religions to write with any confidence about them,” but he attacks them nevertheless with candid confidence. “Perhaps,” he writes, “I should have devoted several years more to study before writing this book,” namely *Breaking the Spell* – the spell of religion. “I will try to tell the best current version of the story science can tell about how religions have become what they are. I am not at all claiming that this is what science has already established about religion. The main point of this book is to insist that we don’t yet know the answers to these important questions. ... The spell that must be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”¹¹

Besides, why should religion or spirituality remain of interest at all? “We scientists have the drama, the plot, the icons, the spectacles, the ‘miracles’, the magnificence, and even the special effects. We inspire awe. We evoke wonder. And we don’t have one god, we have many. We find gods in the nucleus of every atom, in the structure of spacetime, in the counter-intuitive mechanisms of electromagnetism. What richness! What consummate beauty!”¹² (Carolyn C. Porco) The leading promoter of the poetry of science and poetry *in* science was Carl Sagan, who said: “Science arouses a soaring sense of wonder,” and let no occasion pass by without trying to prove his point. He has been arduously imitated by the militants in the anti-religious camp, e.g. Peter Atkins, who exclaimed in an interview: “The world around us is extraordinary: it’s delightful, it’s wonderful, it’s awesome. Science enables us to pick it apart, to look inside and to see why it is so wonderful.”¹³ In the works of thus-minded authors, this

praise of materialistic science is expressed again and again – till one reaches the pages on theodicy, where the horror of life and human existence are being discussed, and the incompetence of the Good God to change or put an end to them.

Empiricism and religion

As we have seen, Dennett wants “to investigate religious phenomena scientifically” without knowing what they are. He praises “those pioneers who are now beginning for the first time really to study the natural phenomena of religion through the eyes of contemporary science.” He wants “to put religion on the examination table.”¹⁴ Victor Stenger is of a similar mind: “If a person undergoes a religious experience that truly places him in communication with some reality from beyond the material world, then we may reasonably expect that person to have gained some deep, new knowledge about the world that can be checked against empirical facts.”¹⁵ However, the problem, which Stenger here curiously overlooks, is that “some reality beyond the material world” and the reality of “empirical facts” are in the eyes of scientific materialism two utterly different realms, of which the former is *a priori* censured by the latter.

Empiricism recognises only what it calls ‘objective’ facts perceived through the senses. That matter is the one reality, is also the basic principle of the new field of ‘neurotheology’, in which scientists seek the biological basis of spirituality, asking questions like: Is God all in our heads? Countless articles in science magazines carry titles of the same sort: “How God lives in my right brain ... Do we have neurons specialised in the divine? ... The biology of religious faith ... Three religious experiences under the microscope ... Is fanaticism a molecule? ...” In France, Patrick Jean-Baptiste has even published a book with the title *La biologie de Dieu*, the biology of God (2003). John Horgan, a journalist and contributor to *Scientific American*, wrote three books based on interviews with key figures in science, trying to fathom the heart of the matter. In the last one, *Rational Mysticism*, he comes to the conclusion: “Scientists studying mysticism are still in the fact-accumulation stage, and may always be. ... The fact is, neuroscientists cannot explain how the brain carries out the most elementary acts of cognition.”¹⁶

“To say for all my colleagues and for the umpteenth millionth time: science simply cannot, by its legitimate methods, adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply cannot comment on it as scientists,” writes Dawkins.¹⁷ Stephen Gould, an agnostic

materialist, but a cultured one (which is not as common as one might wish), has introduced a much discussed concept in his *Rocks of Ages*: NOMA. NOMA stands for “non-overlapping magisteria,” which means that science and religion both rule in their own domain and cannot or should not be in conflict. As Gould sees it – and many agree with him – the magisterium of science covers the empirical realm of fact and theory; the magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. (The term ‘magisterium’ is best understood as sphere of authority or domain of competence.)

“I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesised, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis,” wrote Gould, “but I also do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve. ... These two magisteria do not overlap ... To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven.”¹⁸

The representatives of sociobiology could not possibly accept such a standpoint. According to them, biology, based on physics, is the science that will provide humanity with a total explanation and interpretation of what it is, where it is, and why it is there. Such was the vision of Edward Wilson, and such is the still more extreme gospel of Richard Dawkins: “Science shares with religion the claim that it answers deep questions about origins, the nature of life, and the cosmos. But there the resemblance ends. Scientific beliefs are supported by evidence, and they get results. Myths and faiths are not and do not.”¹⁹

Might there not be a way to bring science and religion to a common understanding? “Convergence? Only when it suits,” answers Dawkins. “To an honest judge [which must be a scientific materialist, of course], the alleged convergence between religion and science is a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham.”²⁰ “Science and religion cannot be reconciled,” concurs Peter Atkins, “and humanity should begin to appreciate the power of its progeny [science, that is] and refuse all efforts at a compromise. Religion has failed, and its failure should be brought into the open. Science, with its present successful effort at universal competence through identification of the smallest [reductionism], she who is the highest joy of the intellect, should be recognised as the universal Queen.”²¹ Steven Weinberg, caustically, is “all in favour of a dialogue between

science and religion, but not a constructive dialogue. One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious.”²²

The end of science?

The question which is the title of this section may shock at first sight in a culture which prides itself on being scientific, but it is on the order of the day especially among theoretical physicists. The following recent book titles speak for themselves: *The End of Science* (John Horgan), *La fin des certitudes* (The end of certainties, Ilya Prigogine), *Science in the Age of Uncertainty* (John Brockman, ed.), *The Trouble with Science* (Robin Dunbar), *The Trouble with Physics* (Lee Smolin), *The End of Physics: The Myth of a Unified Theory* (David Linley) ... Jean-Pierre Vigié, a French physicist, said that “physics is in crisis, we are in full struggle, the stakes are enormous.” Steven Weinberg, Nobel Prize in physics, conceded that “it is a terrible time for particle physics.”

Not only particle physics is in difficulty. We find alarming words of desperation from prominent scientists in other fields which are commonly regarded as definitively acquired and established knowledge. “Perhaps the resolution [of some problems] is that our theory of gravity – the general theory of relativity – is just plain wrong.” (David Susskind). “The results [of some experiments] could send us back to the drawing board about the early universe.” The Big Bang, multiple universes, black matter and energy in macrophysics; the unification of relativity and the quantum theories; string theory, the search for the Higgs boson and the problem of reality in microphysics – these are only some of the problems now in need of an urgent solution.

“Science is a human institution, subject to human foibles – and fragile, because it depends as much on group ethics as on individual ethics. It can break down, and I believe that it is doing so now. ... There can be no doubt that we are in a revolutionary period. We are horribly stuck, and we need real seers, and badly,” writes Lee Smolin, one of the founders of string theory who became its severe critic. And he reminds us that “there is no scientist, not even Newton or Einstein, who was not wrong on a substantial number of issues they had strong views about. ... There is a great tendency to think that the fundamental principles of physics, once discovered, are eternal, yet history tells us a different story. Almost every principle once proclaimed has been superseded.”²³ Nowadays the influence of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the paradigms, the changing views of the basics of science, is felt everywhere.

As this issue is so important, and for the most part still unrealised by the educated public, we quote the statements of two other scientists. The first one is Ilya Prigogine, Nobel Prize winner. “At the macroscopic and microscopic levels, the natural sciences have rid themselves of a conception of objective reality that implied that novelty and diversity had to be denied in the name of immutable universal laws. They have rid themselves of a fascination with a rationality taken as closed and a knowledge seen as nearly achieved. They are now open to the unexpected, which they no longer define as the result of imperfect knowledge or insufficient control.”²⁴ In another essay he writes: “The fundamental laws are now the expression of possibilities and no longer certitudes ... I think that we are only at the beginning of the adventure. We are witnessing the emergence of a science which is no longer limited to simplified, idealised situations, but which puts us face to face with the complexity of the real world ...”²⁵

Another voice is that of Sven Ortoli, a journalist trained as a physicist, who says: “Determinism is badly shaken. What is more, there are some scientists, Nobel Prize winners among them, who go far enough to consider the universe as an essentially spiritual phantasmagoria. The majority of the physicians reject such an extreme hypothesis, but this does not prevent it from being there and from being accepted by what may still be considered demented beliefs, to the outrage of the defenders of intellectual traditions dating back to the 19th century. ... The physics of the last century has been completely destroyed ... The facts that those pieces of matter [the elementary particles] have proved to be in reality nothing but mathematical abstractions, non-local, which means that they can spread out over the whole of space, and that they obey determinism no longer, has given a fatal blow to ‘classic’ materialism. True, materialism is still possible, but then ‘quantum’ materialism, which should be called ‘fantastic materialism’ or ‘science fiction materialism’.” And he goes still further: “The idealism that believes in the autonomous existence of the spirit, comes to the fore again. A kind of new religion, which we have called ‘quantum syncretism’, is being born; it refers everything – matter and spirit – to an Absolute that is unknowable, but whose existence could be deduced from the extraordinary aspects of the new physics.”²⁶

Towards the end of his life, Albert Einstein once said: “You probably think that I look back on the work of my life with quiet satisfaction. Seen from nearby, it is totally different. There is not a single concept of which I am convinced that

it will remain unchanged, and I feel uncertain to be even on the right path. ... If there is something that I have learned from the intricacies of a long life, it is that we are much farther from a more profound insight in the elementary complexities than most of our contemporaries think we are.”²⁷

In evolutionary biology the question becomes still more pressing: if the foundation of biology is physics, and physics seems badly shaken by the uncertainty about its underpinnings, how does biology react to this? The answer in Dawkins and his supporters is quite simple: it takes no notice and looks the other way. Dawkins writes: “I am a biologist. I take the facts of physics for granted. If physicists still don’t agree over whether those simple facts are yet understood, that is not my problem.” If the accepted fundamental basis of biology is shaking, is that not his problem too, especially he being a reductionist?

Other biologists are more reasonable, or more sincere. “We know better than we did what we do not know and have not grasped. We do not know how the universe began. We do not know why it is there. Charles Darwin talked speculatively of life emerging from ‘a warm little pond’. The pond is gone. We have little idea how life emerged, and cannot with assurance say that it did. We cannot reconcile our understanding of the human mind with any trivial theory about the manner in which the brain functions. Beyond the trivial, we have no other theories. We can say nothing of interest about the human soul. We do not know what impels us to right conduct or where the form of the Good is found.”²⁸ (David Berlinski)

Scientists pro and contra

Ken Wilber was one of the thinkers who reacted strongly against the thesis of popular books like *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. He “disagreed entirely” with such books “which had claimed that modern physics supported or even proved Eastern mysticism. This is a colossal error. Physics is a limited, finite, relative, and partial endeavour, dealing with a very limited aspect of reality. It does not, for example, deal with biological, psychological, economic, literary, or historical truths; whereas mysticism deals with all that, with the Whole.”²⁹

One of Wilber’s least known books is *Quantum Questions*, in which he examines the sources of the thought that created 20th century physics: Einstein, Eddington, Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Born, Pauli ... some of whom he quotes extensively. “Everyone of the physicists in this volume was a mys-

tic,” he writes. “They simply believed, to a man, that if modern physics no longer objects to a religious worldview, it offers no positive support either; properly speaking, it is different to all that.” It is different because physics was and is a work of the mind, and the mind is only part of the Whole, incapable of grasping the Whole. “They all shared a profoundly spiritual or mystical worldview, which is perhaps the last thing one would expect from pioneering scientists.”³⁰

Wilber quotes Arthur Eddington: “Briefly the position is this. We have learned that the exploration of the external world by the methods of physical science leads not to concrete reality but to a shadow world of symbols, beneath which those methods are unadapted for penetrating. Feeling that there must be more behind, we return to our starting point in *human consciousness*, the one centre where more might become known.”³¹ A mathematical formula can never tell us what a thing is, only how it is moved. It can only specify an object through its external properties: movement, measure, mass.

Wilber also quotes Erwin Schrödinger: “The scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously. ... In brief, we do not belong to this material world that science constructs for us. ... From where do I come and to where do I go? That is the great unfathomable question, the same for everyone of us. Science has no answer to it.”³²

This is of course a tone which differs altogether from much that we have heard before. These physicists, among the very greatest, dared to reflect and to speak out on the essential problems of our lives and on the relation of science to them. The difference between them and the parochial reductionists we have become acquainted with, is considerable. Moreover, “their writings are positively loaded with references to the Vedas, the Upanishads, Taoism (Bohr made the yin-yang symbol part of his family crest), Buddhism, Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, Berkeley, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Kant, virtually the entire pantheon of perennial philosophers.”³³

Consequently Wilber divides the 20th century physicists into two batches: the open-minded “mystics” including all those named above, and the mathematical

theorists of the next generation like Dirac, Weinberg, Feynman and Witte, plus most of the physicists active at present. As to the latter, one quote from Steven Weinberg says it all: “Among today’s scientists I am probably somewhat atypical in caring about such things [the concept of God]. On the rare occasions when conversations over lunch or tea touch on matters of religion, the strongest reactions expressed by most of my fellow physicists is a mild surprise and amusement that anyone still takes all that seriously. ... As far as I can tell from my own observations, most physicists today are not sufficiently interested in religion even to qualify as practising atheists.”³⁴

Whence this huge existential and perspectival difference? The “mystic” physicists lived on the fault line between two eras, between two Kuhnian paradigms in science. They personified the transition between the Newtonian era, as it were, solidified by the 19th century positivism we have met in the lives of Lamarck, Darwin and Wallace, and their own 20th century thinking which put everything into question. An important factor here is that religion was no longer part of the equation. Spirituality, or “mysticism”, or “the oceanic feeling,” yes; dogmatic religion, no. To Einstein, Eddington, Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Born and Pauli – to name only the best-known – re-thinking the universe in the terms of physics was their life task. In their quest, time and again, they found resonances and references in the testimonies left behind by others who had undertaken a similarly daunting task, though necessarily in other terms: the “mystics” in West and East, who had put *their* life on the line for similar reasons: to find out about Reality. Those who say that physics (and science in general) has nothing to do with “mysticism” are ignorant of its copiously documented history of a century, and less than a century, ago.

It may, moreover, be remembered that science was born within religion and in reaction to it. Galileo was as good a Catholic as any, for instance as the late-medieval monks who, together with the great Greeks, were his predecessors; but he shared the Renaissance mind to ask questions and to dare to answer them, even if they did not agree with the teachings of Rome. Johann Kepler, the great astronomer and mathematician so often ignored, was a mystic pure and simple, and spoke out as such, for instance in his *De Harmonia Mundi*. Descartes had been educated by the Jesuits, spent much of his life in hiding for fear of suffering the same treatment by the Inquisition as Galileo, and did his best to find room for God in his worldview. Newton, as has become well known, dedicated more years of his life to alchemy and biblical theories than he did to

science, and all that *after* the publication of the *Principia Mathematica*. The erosion of the concept of God in the Western mind was the work of the Enlightenment, followed up in this by 19th century positivism, not by the actual founders of science, who would have been troubled by the consequences of their genius.

Fundamentally, science is the search for Truth through the instrument of the mind. Religion and spirituality are the search and the effort to know and to live Truth through the instrument of the whole being, including the mind. Therefore there should be no contradiction between science, religion and spirituality. The attitude of the one or the other becomes twisted when one or the other claims an absolute prerogative, as do the religions in their Churches and as do the sciences in the Church of Scientism. This selfish, egocentric attitude is common to everything naturally human, because it is common to life's evolution of which we are the children.

The human being is human in the measure that it can overcome its selfishness – curiously enough the argument of Richard Dawkins when he divides the human personality in the part that is subject to the selfishness of the genes and the part of the memes that belongs to the other, cultural half. As Thomas Kuhn has made clear in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: no scientific truth is absolute; all theories and paradigms are a partial approach. And as Sri Aurobindo has made clear on the very first page of his *Essays on the Gita*: no written truth or holy book contains the absolute spiritual truth. Truth, to be known, has to be realised, lived, and as such is always an approach, conditioned by the earthly circumstances of the beings who dedicate their life to this kind of realisation.

There are even now many scientists who are religious. One is the astronomer Owen Gingerich, who writes: “As a scientist I accept methodological naturalism as a research strategy. ... There is no contradiction between holding a staunch belief in supernatural design and working as a creative scientist ... No one illustrates this point better than the seventeenth century astronomer Johann Kepler ... Kepler's work and life provide central evidence that an individual can be a creative scientist and a believer in divine design in the universe, and that indeed the very motivation for the scientific research can stem from a desire to trace God's handiwork. ... I think my belief makes me no less a scientist. ... It is a matter of belief or ideology how we choose to think about the universe, and it will make no difference how we do our science. ... Science

remains a neutral way of explaining things, not anti-God or atheistic. ... I do believe, however, that religious belief can explain more than unbelief can do.”³⁵

Another prominent scientist who professed his religious belief is Francis Collins, the leader of the International Human Genome Project. In his book *The Language of God* he writes: “For me the experience of sequencing the human genome, and uncovering this most remarkable of all texts, was both a stunning scientific achievement and an occasion of worship. Many will be puzzled by these sentiments, assuming that a rigorous scientist could not also be a serious believer in a transcendent God. This book aims to dispel that notion, by arguing that belief in God can be an entirely rational choice, and that the principles of faith are, in fact, complementary with the principles of science.”³⁶

As to be expected, there are the believers and the non-believers, and every shade in between. For example Alister McGrath, a theologian with a scientific training, is an absolute believer: “I write as a Christian, who holds that the face, will and character of God are fully disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth.” The astronomer Jean Delhaye has reservations: “As to me, I belong to the Catholic Roman Church. I am thankful for all the riches I own to her, and the tie which attaches me to her is a tie of love. But I regret her too heavy institutional character, certain archaisms in the formulation of the faith which it is her mission to transmit, a dogmatism which one does not find in the Gospels, some misuses of a power which she holds without any contestation, and her hesitations in front of any innovation.”³⁷ The mathematician Paul Germain sees his faith as purely personal: “I believe. This has nothing to see with scientific reasoning. It is an affirmation which is my own, which I take as my own responsibility. I see myself as part of the Church and I commit myself to her. I bet my life on her, freely and daily, without any rational proof and without experimental evidence.”³⁸

The unknown God

If scientists admit that they know so little about religion and God, why are they talking so much about him, and this in statements which read like final verdicts? “I simply do not know enough about religions to write with any confidence about them,” we remember Daniel Dennett admitting, but he composes all the same an ample polemical volume on the topic. “Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology,” finds Terry Eagleton.³⁹ As we have seen, the ‘God’ in the mind of

practically all scientific materialists is the Judeo-Christian God, the irresponsible autocrat seated on a throne above the clouds. As to their knowledge of religion, it is in most cases limited to anecdotes they have heard in their youth: the horrors and bizarreries in the Ancient Testament, the unbelievable miracles in the New Testament, the tragi-comedy of Christianity's history, and some quotations from Voltaire (who was, though not religious, an ardent believer in God), David Hume and Bertrand Russell.

The physicist Paul Davies started his career as a bestselling science author with *God and the New Physics* (1983) and *The Mind of God* (1992). For the second book he was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion to the amount of roughly \$1 million, slightly above the value of the Nobel Prize. It is the most lucrative prize in the world today, prestigious enough to be presented in Westminster Abbey by royalty. In this book Davies writes: "I would rather not believe in supernatural events personally. Although I obviously can't prove that they never happen, I see no reason to suppose that they do. My inclination is to assume that the laws of nature are obeyed at all times. But even if one rules out supernatural events, it is still not clear that science could in principle explain everything in the physical universe. ... The 'ultimate' questions will always lie beyond the scope of empirical science as it is usually defined."⁴⁰ Reading both books, one finds them void of any knowledge about religion, except for the usual clichés. The prize may have been awarded because a scientist deigned to touch the subject of religion at all. In *God and the New Physics* Davies had already written: "In my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion."⁴¹

The professional knowledge of the scientists who attack religion is poorly balanced by their knowledge of religious matters. Carl Sagan has given an example of the professional formation required of them. "Imagine you seriously want to understand what quantum mechanics is about. There is a mathematical underpinning that you must first acquire, mastery of each mathematical subdiscipline leading you to the threshold of the next. In turn you must learn arithmetic, Euclidean geometry, high school algebra, differential and integral calculus, certain special functions of mathematical physics, matrix algebra, and group theory. For most physics students, this might occupy them from, say, third grade to early graduate school – roughly fifteen years. Such a course of study does not actually involve learning any quantum mechanics, but merely establishing the mathematical framework required to approach it deeply."⁴²

How is it then that the same scientists, thoroughly schooled in their profession and indoctrinated in their reductionist worldview, think they are qualified in everything else, including the fundamental matters of human existence? "Has there ever been a religion with the prophetic accuracy and reliability of science?" asks Sagan.⁴³ The predictive accuracy of physics, and of no other science, is limited to physical processes within exactly repeated experimental circumstances. If scientific formulas and mechanisms can be approximately repeated in the complexity of the world as given, it is thanks to the technological skill of the engineers who have, by trial and error, made them applicable. And it is intriguing to read about "reliability" decades after Kuhn's essay on the relativity of all scientific paradigms.

Indeed, the miracles told in the religious literature are often folklore or superstition. But what about the miracles of science? For science demands that you should believe that the universe originated from something much smaller than a mustard seed; that most of your body and the marble of Michelangelo's *David* is empty space; that the smallest bit of matter is at the same time a particle and a wave; that matter is nothing but energy although you may badly butt your head against the door; and, yes, that the Sun moves around the Earth, despite you seeing otherwise with your own eyes every day. What is more, each one of the theories by which these wonders are explained is being questioned at the moment. Of the "accuracy and reliability" of the biological sciences, we have had some examples earlier.

"No information supposedly gained during a mystical or religious experience, which could not have been otherwise known to the individual claiming the experience, has ever been confirmed," asserts Victor Stenger. Probably not in the literature he has read, which will not have included, let us say, the writings of the medieval mystics of the Rhine Valley or the Zen masters. "...all spiritual disciplines; in the East or in the West, have a common core of experience for all" wrote Sri Aurobindo,⁴⁴ who *had* read the literature of both hemispheres, and who had had such experiences himself. "If a person undergoes a religious experience that truly places her in communication with some reality from beyond the material world," continues Stenger, "then we may reasonably expect that person to have gained some deep, new knowledge about the world that can be checked against the empirical facts." Yet, his "empirical facts" are from the material world, not from beyond it. And if Stenger wants to disprove the existence of God (in *God - The Failed Hypothesis*), he should at least

have read something or other about the difference between subjective and objective reality.

“Subjective experience cannot be referred to the evidence of the external senses; it has its own standards of seeing and its inner method of verification: so also supraphysical realities by their very nature cannot be referred to the judgment of the physical or sense mind except when they project themselves into the physical, and even then that judgment is often incompetent or subject to caution; they can only be verified by other senses and by a method of scrutiny and affirmation which is applicable to their own reality, their own nature. There are different orders of reality; the objective and physical is only one order. It is convincing to the physical or externalising mind because it is directly obvious to the senses, while of the subjective and the supraphysical that mind has no means of knowledge except from fragmentary signs and data and inferences which are at every step liable to error. Our subjective movements and inner experiences are a domain of happenings as real as any outward physical happenings ...”⁴⁵ (Sri Aurobindo)

“Scientists studying mysticism are still in the fact-accumulation stage, and may always be,” is the conclusion of John Horgan’s inquiry in *Rational Mysticism*. Here the following quotation from Brian Pippard (1920-2008), the late Cavendish professor of physics at Cambridge University, may be apt: “The scientist is right to despise dogmas that imply a God whose grandeur does not match up to the grandeur of the universe he knows. But when we have chased out the mountebanks there remain the saints and others of transparent integrity whose confident belief is not to be dismissed simply because it is inconvenient and uncharted. We may lack the gift of belief ourselves, just as we may be tone-deaf, but it is becoming in us to envy those whose lives are radiant with a truth which is no less true for being incommunicable. As scientists we have a craftsman’s part to play in the City of God; we cannot receive the freedom of that city until we have learnt to respect the freedom of every citizen.”⁴⁶

To believe is proper to the human personality; without belief, or a mosaic of beliefs, a human cannot live. The essential question and target of the positivists is not religion as such, but the constitution of the human species (to which they too belong), more specifically the human mind. As Jacques Arsac puts it: “One cannot escape believing. Either one believes that there is nothing exterior to science, or one believes that there is something. It is not science which answers this question, it is not science which accepts or refutes that ‘exterior’,

for a formal [mathematical] system cannot say anything about what is exterior to it. This is a question which is of the order of belief, and nobody can escape it. Every answer is a way of reading, of interpreting the book of science, and belongs to philosophy”⁴⁷ – which ultimately, in its origin and its ground, belongs to the realm of the spirit.

A diminished God

“The God whose existence Dawkins is prepared to challenge seems a curiously diminished figure,” writes David Berlinski.⁴⁸ One expression of Dawkins’ idea of God is as follows: “Any designer capable of constructing the dazzling array of living things would have to be intelligent and complicated beyond all imagining. And complicated is just another word for improbable ... Either your God is capable of designing worlds and doing all the other godlike things, in which case he needs an explanation in his own right. Or he is not, in which case he cannot provide an explanation.”⁴⁹

What Dawkins and Co. do not seem to realise is that the concept of ‘God’ they are juggling with is of the same order of magnitude as their own very human dimensions. They are attacking the shadow of Yahweh, yet the archetype determining their reasoning is identical. It is a ‘God’ in the image of man, tribal because Eurocentric, and quite childish. Their arguments hardly differ from those already in use about the popular, exoteric religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. If an atom and a cell are so fantastically complex as science has discovered; if there are trillions of cells active in a human body, and trillions of planets, stars, galaxies, quasars and black holes in the universe, all in unceasing motion; if quadrillions of particles are traversing the Earth and every body on it, every moment of their existence – what being in the image of man, even magnified, could keep this show going in all its tiniest and most gigantic parts?

There is no excuse for the professed ignorance of scientists and philosophers of the subject on which they are not only writing extensively, but intend to effect an adjustment in the opinions (the discourse) of humankind. Such a way of argumentation, at times heightened into raving, is at the very least unscientific, often logically inaccurate if not internally contradictory, and uncultured for its lack of factual and historic knowledge. Moreover, the arguments of most authors in this field are a beguiling potluck of theories and hypotheses which true science keeps apart with care and of necessity. Astronomy is different from quantum field theory, plasma research from paleontology, anthropology

from herpetology – without even considering the ‘human sciences’. Evolution is a long-term historical event, having taken and taking place one time without any element ever repeating itself. If such, it can only be documented and never proven, for scientific proof demands repetition within identical conditions.

The reason of these reflections is not to be pedantic, but to adduce the necessary thought for the consideration of an evaluation one finds time and again in the writings of the anti-religious: ‘God’ as a tinkerer or a fumbler. To quote a few such remarks: “An intelligent designer might have managed without these chaotic episodes of boom and bust [like the Cambrian explosion and the Permian extinction]. (Hitchens) ... The design of the eye is not just bad design, it is the design of a complete idiot.”⁵⁰ (Dawkins) ... There is certainly a lot of order in the universe, but there is also a lot of chaos. The centres of galaxies routinely explode, and if there are inhabited worlds and civilisations, they are destroyed by the millions, with each explosion of the galactic nucleus or a quasar. That does not sound very much like a god who knows what he, or she, is doing. (Sagan) ... If God created the universe as a special place for humanity, he seems to have wasted an awfully large amount of space where humanity will never make an appearance. ... He wasted a lot of time too. ... Let us also ponder the enormous waste of matter. (Stenger)”

The amazing pretension behind such statements is that the authors seem to know what God is, intends and does – while, being human, they doubtlessly have some problems understanding themselves. If they have anything to do with the search for truth which is science, or with the search for truth which is philosophy, why do they not limit themselves to the findings they can validate? Agreed, the discussion of our limited knowledge within a larger framework is an innate exercise of the human mind, as illustrated abundantly throughout history, and discussion is part of the scientific process. But there is a difference, of sincerity or intelligence, between discussion, speculation and condemnation, or just talking one’s head off without rime or reason, repeating hackneyed platitudes.

“With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world,” writes Christopher Hitchens. “The sun is getting ready to explode and devour its dependent planets like some jealous chief or tribal deity.”⁵¹ The Abrahamic religions live in the expectation of the end of the world by water or fire, but this is a prelude to the Last Judgment and the descent of the New Jerusalem on Earth. The heat death of the Earth preceding

the death throes of the Sun is one of the favourite themes of popular science, rehearsed by the media in the holiday seasons when there is not much else to report.

The Earth is going to die. When? In five *billion* years. (Mankind is supposed to have originated around two *million* years ago.) “The surface of the Sun at a temperature of several thousand degrees will come extremely close. The Earth will be charred; it will be a cinder.” The Sun is going to die. “The sun that has nurtured us for so long will turn into a violent and unpredictable monster prone to sudden nuclear shutdowns and re-ignitions, expansions and contractions, alternating over several millennia. It will end its days as a red giant so gigantic that its wayward mantle of gases will swallow up half the planets of the solar system, including the Earth.” The universe is going to die. (The universe is nowadays thought by most cosmologists to have begun 14 billion years ago. Its future life is estimated at about 100 trillion years.) “The stars begin to fade like guttering candles and are snuffed out one by one. Out in the depths of space the great celestial cities, the galaxies, cluttered with the memorabilia of ages, are gradually dying. Tens of billions of years pass in the growing darkness. Occasional flickers of light pierce the fall of cosmic night, and spurts of activity delay the sentence of a universe condemned to become a galactic graveyard...”

It has already been noted that the positive science seems to relish demeaning the human condition – when it is not promoting itself by praising “the grandeur of its view of life.” The Copernican Principle, or Principle of Mediocrity states that humans are nothing special in the universe – though more and more voices are heard which assert the contrary, and which find support in the anthropic principle. The second law of entropy, the law of inevitable degradation, is the staple reference of scientific materialism – but no organism is an independent or closed system, and now the universe itself is thought by many physicists to be part of a greater whole, a “multiverse.” It is with gusto that the representatives of ‘black science’ state and repeat on all possible occasions that humans are animals – although, when it suits their view, they will declare them ‘special animals’, whose constitution and functioning remain for the greatest part unknown. “By taking the Darwinian ‘cold bath’, and staring a factual reality in the face, we can finally abandon the cardinal false hope of the ages: that factual nature can specify the meaning of our life by validating our inherent superiority, or by proving that evolution exists to generate us as the summit of life’s purpose,” writes Carl Zimmer.⁵² Stephen Gould denied any sense of progress in evolution, and evaluated bacteria as more successful than humans.

All the same, it would be wrong to include *all* scientists in the ranks of ‘black science’. There are some who are as questioning and open-minded as those of the great generation in the first half of the 20th century, and their number may increase because of the present crisis in physics and genetics. In the history of the Gifford Lectures as studied by Larry Witham, “the scientists, philosophers, and theologians brought many views of God to bear, but when it came to find God in nature, there were two primary options: a process God or a traditional omniscient monarch: a God who grew up with the universe or a king who imposed his will on nature. A third kind of deity, which was more Platonic, was a borderline case, but was generally viewed as transcendent, as far outside of nature, whether as an idea, mathematical form, the ground of being, or ‘the wholly other’.”⁵³

Witham quotes Freeman Dyson as having said: “God learns and grows as the universe unfolds.” which is close to Sri Aurobindo’s “progressively manifesting god.” This idea Sri Aurobindo quotes also in the original Greek of Heraclitus, “ho theos ouk estin alla gignetai”: God is not but he is becoming, which here means developing, increasing or growing in the evolution on Earth, as born out by the increasing level of consciousness. Dyson said he found this viewpoint “congenial and consistent with scientific common sense. I do not make a clear distinction between mind and God. God is what mind becomes when it has passed beyond the scale of our comprehension.”

Few words are more often quoted than those of Stephen Hawking at the end of his *Brief History of Time*, where he expresses the hope that a complete theory of physics, a Grand Unified Theory, will soon be discovered. If that is found, “it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would truly know the mind of God.” Opinions of the tragic case of genius that is Stephen Hawking differ, especially about the value of his theories. His quoted words, however well formulated and strategically placed to conclude his book, have contributed to the simplistic opinion that the mind of God is of the same order as the human mind, albeit of the most intelligent among *homines sapientes*. Mathematicians have marvelled at the complexity, refinement and beauty of mathematics, and seen God as a Mathematician. Others have called him the Great Geometer or the Great Architect. But no reasonable person could suppose that a galaxy and a grain of sand, or a living cell, are held together, in their unimaginable complexity, by a mind comparable to the human. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, the divine Mind must be of a different order, it must be a

‘supra-mind’ or supermind, which is a word, a label covering by definition something of which we can have no idea.

“We have to regard therefore this all-containing, all-originating, all-consummating Supermind as the nature of the Divine Being, not indeed in its absolute self-existence, but in its action as the Lord and Creator of its own worlds. This is the truth of that which we call God. Obviously this is not the too personal and limited Deity, the magnified and supernatural Man of the ordinary occidental conception, for that conception erects a too human Eidolon of a certain relation between the creative Supermind and the ego ... Supramental nature sees everything from the standpoint of oneness and regards all things, even the greatest multiplicity and diversity, even what are to the mind the strongest contradictions, in the light of that oneness; its will, ideas, feelings, sense are made of the stuff of oneness, its actions proceed upon that basis. Mental nature, on the contrary, thinks, sees, wills, feels, senses with division as a starting-point and has only a constructed understanding of unity; even when it experiences oneness, it has to act from the oneness on a basis of limitation and difference.”⁵⁴ (Sri Aurobindo)

Omnipresent Reality

“Generally speaking, when we have no evidence or other reason for believing in some entity, then we can be pretty sure that entity does not exist. We have no evidence for Bigfoot, the Abominable Snowman, and the Loch Ness Monster, so we do not believe they exist. If we have no evidence or other reason for believing in God, then we can be pretty sure that God does not exist,” writes Victor Stenger.⁵⁵ The evidence he has in mind is obviously of the scientific, reductionist kind, valid only where material objects are the case. David Berlinski reasons to the contrary: “Either the Deity is a material object or he is not. If he is, then he is just one of those things, and if he is not, then materialism could not be true.”⁵⁶ What kind of God would it be who is a material object perceptible by the human senses, and as such the potential object of scientific experimentation?

No evidence? Only if one is blind or refuses in principle to look at the facts, like there were people who refused to look through Galileo’s telescope. There is, for instance, Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*; or the literature of great Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart, Marguerite Porete, Hadewych, St. John of the Cross; or the heritage of the Zen Masters, whose poetry is truth and truth poetry; or the Indian mystics; or the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the most voluminous epics in the world, filled to the brim with spiritual lore.

The authentic spiritual experience is the same in East and West, and it is the same at the core of every religion, for the human being is the same everywhere. “The perennial philosophy holds that the world’s great spiritual traditions, in spite of their obvious differences, express the same fundamental truth about the nature of reality, a truth that can be directly apprehended during a mystical experience.”⁵⁷ (John Horgan) “The fundamental truth of spiritual experience is one, its consciousness is one,” writes Sri Aurobindo, “everywhere it follows the same general lines and tendencies of awakening and growth into spiritual being, for these are the imperatives of the spiritual consciousness. But also there are, based on those imperatives, numberless possibilities of variation of experience and expression: the centralisation and harmonisation of these are possible, but also the intensive sole following out of any line of experience are both of them necessary movements of the emerging spiritual Conscious-Force within us. Moreover, the accommodation of kind and life to the spiritual truth, its expression in them, must vary with the mentality of the seeker so long as he has not risen above all need of such accommodation or such limiting expression.”⁵⁸

Still, even in the camp of the anti-religious writers the new spirit of the inner exploration as opposed to the outer, mental and dogmatic one, seems to have penetrated. Sam Harris, in his book *The End of Faith*, writes: “Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not.” He writes about a wealth of mystical evidence. “Spirituality can be – indeed, must be – deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason. ... When the great philosopher mystics of the East are weighed against the patriarchs of the Western philosophical and theological traditions, the difference is unmistakable: Buddha, Shankara, Padmasambhava, Nagarjuna, Longchenpa, and countless others down to the present have no equivalent in the West. In spiritual terms, we appear to have been standing on the shoulders of dwarfs. It is little wonder, therefore, that many Western scholars have found the view within rather unremarkable.”⁵⁹

The necessity of Something which brings forth the world, life and ourselves, with all the marvels, riddles and atrocities, cannot but keep humanity spellbound now as it has in times past. Many are the myths which have tried to explain how it all came about and what it all means, for a human’s understanding is limited, as are his or her powers, and the fear for tomorrow is ever present. In the myths, the human capacities were magnified to the superhuman and mysterious, and that was ‘God’. The rationally thinking people in the West can no longer accept this kind of projection, but they have enclosed themselves in their

own mind, proud of their rationality and of the new world it has produced, and hanging on to matter as to a raft on a stormy sea.

God, the Divine, ‘That’ has to be something more, essential, worthwhile. The patient people of the East discovered ‘That’ long ago, but the discovery is difficult and may demand the wager of an entire life. Above the mind one has to reach the spiritual levels of the being, behind the heart one has to enter the soul. There one finds what one really is – and what all is. “Brahman is in all things, all things are in Brahman, all things are Brahman,” said those who had attained the goal.

“An omnipresent Reality is the truth of all life and existence whether absolute or relative, whether corporeal or incorporeal, whether animate or inanimate, whether intelligent or unintelligent; and in all its infinitely varying and even constantly opposed self-expressions, from the contradictions nearest to our ordinary experience to those remotest antinomies which lose themselves on the verges of the Ineffable, the Reality is one and not a sum or concourse. From that all variations begin, in that all variations consist, to that all variations return. All affirmations are denied only to lead to a wider affirmation of the same Reality. All antinomies confront each other in order to recognise one Truth in their opposed aspects and embrace by the way of conflict their mutual Unity. Brahman is the Alpha and the Omega. Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent.”⁶⁰ (Sri Aurobindo)

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The Theme of Urvashi In The Indian Renaissance: Madhusudan Datta, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo

(Continued from the previous issue)

Ranajit Sarkar

Sri Aurobindo (1872 - 1950): From Urvashi to Savitri

The Background

The works we have so far studied, were written in Indian languages. Rabindranath's rendering of his own "Urvashi" into English does not have the strength of originality and lacks the lustre of the Bengali. The poem we are going to take up now was written in English, a language which has become an inseparable part of the Indian cultural tradition. "English", writes Ifor Evans very pertinently, "as a language and as a literature has penetrated very deeply into the Indian mind. If that tradition were lost much that is valuable to the human spirit as a whole would perish."¹⁴⁴ The validity of this remark is fully justified when we look at the quantity and the quality of creative Indian writing in English.¹⁴⁵

Among the Indian writers of English, Aurobindo Ghosh, better known as Sri Aurobindo, is, according to Srinivasa Iyengar, the historian of Indo-Anglian Literature, "the one incontestably outstanding figure".¹⁴⁶ His writings cover a vast area of human interest: politics, philosophy, literary criticism and creative literature. But what for us is of immediate concern is his poetry.

He was born in Bengal, in a family which had approximately the same cultural and social background as that of Madhusudan and Rabindranath. Rajnarayan Basu, his maternal grandfather, we have seen, was an intimate friend of Madhusudan, and a sensitive critic of his poetry; he had also left a

strong impression on the young Rabindranath. His ideas of India's national spirit were a strong factor in the growth of Indian national pride and pride in Indianness. But it seems that his ideas did not impress his son-in-law who believed that India's future lay in the acceptance of the English language and culture. So when Aurobindo was barely seven his father took him, along with his two elder brothers, to England and left the three boys to be brought up in a purely Western way.

The Indian renaissance was gradually taking shape drawing its life-substance from the twin source—India and the West. But Aurobindo did not get the opportunity to drink simultaneously from these two sources. Fourteen formative years of his life passed in England in an English surrounding, geographical and cultural. English became, so to say, his mother-tongue. A brilliant student, he grew up to be an accomplished scholar; he read the Greek and Latin classics, “spent most of his spare time in general reading, especially English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature and the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe.”¹⁴⁷ He was a voracious reader, and like Madhusudan had a strong hunger to read the world classics in their original language. He also started learning Sanskrit and Bengali, the knowledge of which languages he perfected on his return to India. With this thirst for knowledge he developed during this period, along with his brother Manmohan a passionate love for poetry. He wrote his first poems in England but they were published two years after his return to India in the collection *Songs to Myrtilla* (1895). This was followed the following year by the long narrative poem, *Urvashie*.¹⁴⁸

Madhusudan's poem on Urvashi was one of his last works; Rabindranath's poems on the same theme were written in his maturity, but Sri Aurobindo's is one of his earlier poems. It is a significant landmark in his poetic evolution. After his return to India he read the great Sanskrit epic poets, Valmiki and Vyasa, and the *kāvya*-poets, Kalidasa and others. He also began his study of the Vedic and the Puranic heritage. Thus he developed “an aesthetic temperament and being impregnated with an early cult for the work of the great builders in Sanskrit and Greek, Italian and English poetry.”¹⁴⁹

It is against this background that we must read his *Urvashie*. When he wrote the poem he was still deeply imbued with the English poetical world-vision. The Indian matter and temperament were not yet fully integrated in his mind with his early education and sensibility. But *Urvashie* already shows more than only the promise of the future integration which will find its accomplishment in *Savitri* ¹⁵⁰ both in form and in substance.

In this context of the Urvashi-theme mention should also be made of his verse-translation of *The Hero and the Nymph* of Kalidasa's play

Vikramorvaśīya and a study of the characters of this play. The translation was done a few years after the composition of the poem but there is no doubt that before he wrote the narrative he had thoroughly read the play. He does not follow too closely Kalidasa's version but there are unmistakable imprints of Kalidasa's play on the poem. The translation, which “has a unique force, compelling its presence in any selection”¹⁵¹ of Sanskrit plays in English translation, shows the imaginative understanding and spontaneous sympathy with the original. Although the translation itself is only marginal in our study, it shows, nonetheless, Sri Aurobindo's preoccupation with the theme for several years.

The Poetic Context.

The poetic context in which the poem *Urvashie* is composed represents the first synthesis of two phases, the English and the Indian. About his early poems, “offspring of the divine Hellenic Muse”¹⁵² he remarks: “What these poems express is the education and imaginations and ideas and feelings created by a purely European culture and surroundings— it could not be otherwise.”¹⁵³ But on his return to India he discovers a new landscape, physical and spiritual; he knows that a new poetic world has opened before his eyes and the early vision of beauty and passion must gradually change:

... in Sicilian olive-groves no more
Or seldom must my footprints now be seen,
Nor tread Athenian lanes, nor yet explore
Parnassus or thy voiceful shores, O Hippocrene.
“Envoi”, *Songs to Myrtilla*.

From the Parnassus and the Hippocrene he turns his spirit's gaze towards the Saraswati and the Ganges “upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.”¹⁵⁴ However there is no rejection of the past. The past is assimilated in the newer phase. *Urvashie* represents a first step in this process of assimilation.

In England Sri Aurobindo certainly had imbibed the romantic spirit and the Hellenic tradition. A large part of Hellenism was romantic¹⁵⁵ and he was nourished by the Greek sense of beauty and harmony,¹⁵⁶ and by the Greek poetry which “dealt with life from one large viewpoint, that of the inspired reason and the enlightened and chastened aesthetic sense.”¹⁵⁷ However it had its limits. Romanticism, accepting a great deal of the Hellenic ideal, had enlarged its vision to embrace “the totality of man's forces, not reason alone, not sentiment alone, but rather intuition, ‘intellectual intuition’, imagination.”¹⁵⁸ The Greek poetry, poetry of the European Renaissance and the Romantics, have all left

their impress on his early poetry. But he himself names a few poets of the Victorian age whose works helped shape his own poetic temperament in the first period.¹⁵⁹ Out of these poets we shall name only two, Meredith and Phillips, who had marked the young poet most intensely. In a letter written much later he recognises the influence of these two poets; Meredith, especially his *Modern Love*, he recalls, “may have helped in forming the turn of my earlier poetic expression.”¹⁶⁰ And about Phillips’ two poems, *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades*, he says, “... they aroused my admiration and made a considerable impression on me.”¹⁶¹

Marpessa is based on a classical myth, a story of love. The human maiden Marpessa is given the choice by Zeus to marry either the god Apollo or the mortal Idas. Apollo promises to give her heavenly bliss:

... if thou’lt live with me, then shalt thou bide
In mere felicity above the world,
In peace alive and moving, where to stir
Is ecstasy, and thrilling is repose.

But the mortal Idas makes no pale promises; he speaks of love human and passionate, and love for the physical beauty which is at once woe, early light and dying music. Marpessa chooses the mortal.

“We note,” Sri Aurobindo writes about this poem, “a new treatment of life and human emotion. The love of Idas for Marpessa is not satisfied with the old forms of passion and feeling and imaginative idealism, there are here other notes which carry the individual emotion out of itself and strive to cast it into unity with the life of Nature and the whole past life and love of humanity and the eternal continuity of passion and seeking and all the suggestion of the Infinite.”¹⁶²

In this poem there is a passionate love of earth and physical beauty, not just some vague idealism. But this passion for the body is universalised on the one hand, to include all life and nature, and on the other, to grasp some intimations of the beyond. Idas says that he loves Marpessa not only for her beauty but

Because Infinity upon thee broods,
And thou art full of whispers and of shadows.

Marpessa chooses a man when she could choose an immortal god. Earth for her is greater than heaven; man, life and nature are not to be despised. And for

Idas, physical body and physical nature are the concretisation of the spirit and the spiritual world:

I am aware of other times and lands,
Of births far back, of lives in many stars.

In Meredith, too, Sri Aurobindo discovered a similar movement “to unite the life of the earth, not lessened, not denied, not cast away, but accepted, with its own hidden spiritual reality...”¹⁶³ Meredith did not reject earth, or regard it as hollow. The account of his thought-world that Grierson and Smith give will show what Sri Aurobindo learned from him: “Earth’s ultimate goal is spirit. ... the spiritual is rooted in the natural. Earth disowns the ascetic and the sentimentalist, who sever their roots in the natural life, no less than the sensualist who rises no higher but to those who serve her she lends her strength.”¹⁶⁴ From these poets, Sri Aurobindo learnt the power of love, and love of the earth, and realised that both love and earth held within them the possibility of surpassing themselves. Man can have intimations of immortality here and now, in harmony with the universe. Hellenism taught him that it was possible to be in harmony with the universe. But that harmony is limited. Already at the age of 18, in an unfinished Platonic dialogue he makes his protagonist say, “May we not attain to a more perfect harmony with the universe than those who have been most in harmony with it?”¹⁶⁵ These poets taught him that the universe was fraught with the spirit. Thus, in essence, man, nature and spirit formed an unbroken whole.

Sri Aurobindo had already read in England a lot of Indian literature either in the original languages or in translations. On his return to India, he further deepened his acquaintance with the Sanskrit epics and poems, as well as the Vedic literature. The epic poets taught him the lofty ideals of *dharma*. In them and in Kalidasa he found that life, man and nature were not denied but integrated in a larger vision of thought, emotion and aesthetic delight. In Kalidasa he saw “the great, the supreme poet of the senses, of aesthetic beauty, of sensuous emotion”,¹⁶⁶ who had reached poetically the harmony with the universe. He speaks of Kalidasa’s “sensitive appreciation of trees and plants and hills as living things”, of his “sentimental feeling of brotherhood with animals”, of his “warm humanism”.¹⁶⁷ But this sensuality, this vitalism and emotionalism in nature did not cease with nature, there was also “the Nature-Soul’s search for and attainment of God.”¹⁶⁸ Thus his acquaintance with the Indian literature strengthened and enlarged some of his earlier ideas. At the same time he discovered a vast world of myths and legends which was peopled by gods and nymphs and other supernatural beings—a world full of poetic possibilities.

Such is, in brief, the context in which Sri Aurobindo wrote the poem *Urvashie*.

Urvashi

After his farewell to ‘the divine Hellenic Muse’ Sri Aurobindo discovers the poetic possibility of Indian myths. He knew that it was a difficult task. “To take with a reverent hand the old myths”, he writes in a letter to his poet-brother strongly attached to the Hellenic tradition and its sense of symmetry and finite beauty, “and cleanse them of soiling accretions, till they shine with some of the antique strength, simplicity and solemn depth of beautiful meaning, is an ambition which Hindu poets of today may and do worthily cherish. To accomplish a similar duty in a foreign tongue is a more perilous endeavour.”¹⁶⁹

But he was not impressed by the difficulty of the task. When his brother contended that the Indian myth had nothing in it simple, natural, passionate and human, he wrote a long letter to define his own standpoint, and to reassure himself, as he says, “in the line of poetical art I have chosen.”¹⁷⁰ Although the letter deals mainly with the poem *Love and Death*, a companion to *Urvashie*, which takes the Mahabharata-story of Ruru and Pramadvarya¹⁷¹ as its theme, yet the arguments and justifications are equally applicable to *Urvashie*. Comparing the Greek and the ancient Indian myths he writes, “Inferior in warmth and colour and quick life and the savour of earth to the Greek, they (Indian myths) had a superior spiritual loveliness and exaltation; not clothing the surface of the earth with imperishable beauty, they search deeper into the white-hot core of things and in their cyclic orbit of thought curve downward round the most hidden foundations of existence and upward over the highest, almost invisible arches of ideal possibility.”¹⁷²

He recognises on him the influence of his brother’s Hellenic taste, but now he develops an independent temperament. He has “entered into a path, perhaps thornier and more rugged” but which is his own.¹⁷³ And he will pursue, in spite of adverse criticisms sometimes, his poetic path which will lead him to *Savitri*, the grand epic of spiritual adventure. *Urvashie* is the first poem which delves into some of the foundations of existence and soars to the ideal possibilities.¹⁷⁴

The Story

Urvashie is a narrative poem of about 1500 lines in blank verse. It is divided into four cantos. We know that Sri Aurobindo translated Kalidasa’s play on the same theme a few years later. But the poem does not follow exclusively Kalidasa. He draws freely also from the Vedic and the Puranic traditions.

As in Kalidasa the poem opens with the meeting of Pururavas and Urvashi. But whereas Kalidasa’s hero was returning from the worship of Surya, the sun-god, Sri Aurobindo’s hero returns from the war with the demon-hordes:

Pururavus from Titan conflict ceased
Turned worldwards, . . . (I.1.2)

He drove his own chariot; he had no charioteer, a character who was needed for the drama. And looking at the east he saw the heavenly nymph Urvashi among her comrades with “delightful names”.

Here the poet makes a strong imaginative use of the suggestions that Vedic scholars made regarding the mythological interpretation of the Urvashi myth, namely that Urvashi was Ushas, the Dawn. As the hero looked, watching the birth of day

The grey lucidity and pearliness
Bloomed more and more, and over earth chaste again
The freshness of the primal dawn returns,... (I. 26-28)

Then “a face of dawn, a body fresh from mystery” draws nearer to him.

.....It was she,
The golden virgin, Usha, mother of life,
Yet virgin. In a silence sweet she came,
Unveiled, soft-smiling, like a bride, rose-cheeked,
Her bosom full of flowers, the morning wind
Stirring her hair, and all about her gold. (I. 35-40)

This is the face of the Vedic Dawn. But is this not Urvashi’s face too? Nothing is said about the identification. But it is all there in the poetic symbolism.

The king saw Urvashi and shuddered “as of felicity afraid”. It was love. He felt smitten by Kama; he sighed:

.....“O thou strong god,
Who art thou graspest me with hands of fire,
Making my soul all colour?... (I. 76-79.)

But like a darkness came the dreadful demon Keshin and covered the dawn.

.....Immense
He stooped upon the brides of heaven. They
Like flowers in a gust scattered and blown
Fled every way; but he upon that beauty
Magical sprang and seized and lifted up, ... (I.176-180)

The king rushed to her rescue. Keshin knew the valiant king, and groaning in despair “he dropped upon the snow heaven’s ravished flower / And fled...”

Pururavas lifted her up on the chariot. In this poem, Urvashi is alone at this point, Chitrlekha is not there; the king is alone too. Slowly Urvashi opened her eyes, first a surprise crept into them, then, “something far lovelier, / Which was herself, and was delight, and love.” And Urvashi woke to love.

What was Pururavas before this meeting? A hero with a great austere mission. He knew no love. And when the other nymphs saw the hero and their friend Urvashi they had two different reactions: one was voiced by Menaka. She seemed to think that the king was incapable of love and passion; he was only capable of victory, virtue, austerity. She said:

.....Wilt thou set her
A golden triumph in thy halls? But she
Is other than thy marble caryatids
And austere doors, purity colourless... (I. 260-63.)

So she wanted back her sister. On the other hand, Tilottama saw in the love the failure of the king’s destiny. He would have to renounce passion so that he could perfect his nature. One cannot make the right choice and follow one’s true destiny when the heart is blinded by passion:

..... For one who tames
His hot tremulousness of soul unblest
And feels around him like an atmosphere
A quiet perfectness of joy and peace,
He, like the sunflower sole of all the year,
Images the divine to which he tends:
So thou, sole among men... (I. 280-86.)

Silently taking a last look at Urvashi, Pururavas plunged towards earth, “his spirit all a-storm”.

In the second canto the poet narrates the lovelorn condition of the two lovers. Urvashi experienced a kind of love which she had never experienced before: a love in which the whole being was lost in the thought of the beloved. But in heaven Bharata staged for the gods the play *Lakshmi-Svayamvara*, in which Urvashi played Lakshmi’s part and Menaka Varuni’s. Here the story follows

the scene as depicted by Kalidasa in his prologue of the third act. Urvashi made the fatal slip and said “Pururavas” when she should have said “Puruṣottama”. And as in Kalidasa the curse fell on her; Indra intervened, Bharata mitigated the curse, for fate was not something unnatural, superimposed, but the working-out of one’s karma:

“...Fate, / The dim great presence, is but nature made / Irrevocable in its fruits”. Urvashi had to go down to earth but she would return to heaven changed. Bharata said,

For she will come soft with maternal cheeks
And flushed from nuptial arms and human-blest
With touches of the warm delightful earth. (II. 110-13)

Tilottama escorted her to earth. The lovelorn king, weary of his kingship, thinking of the Himalayan snows where he had met the nymph, had left the capital and journeyed to the mountain. Hoping perhaps to catch a glimpse of the goddess, he would climb at dawn the summits and come down in the evening to a secluded spot. Then after seven months he abandoned this restless desire and “added / To the surrounding hush sat motionless.”

He sat there six days and on the seventh came Urvashi with Tilottama. It was a victory of love over duty. Tilottama tried again to impress upon the king that he should not sacrifice for love the future greatness of his people and the glorious ascent of the human soul. But her exhortation was of no avail. She, too, recognised the triumph of love, a love made “heavenlier by loss”. The king sacrificed his glorious mission of uplifting mankind and Urvashi her divine abode. However, Tilottama added, the gift of gods was not unconditional. Here Sri Aurobindo follows the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition of the lovers’ pact: he should never appear naked before her.

In Kalidasa Bharata had said that Urvashi could live on earth until she gave birth to a child and the king saw the child’s face. Sri Aurobindo uses maternity as a positive gain for Urvashi and for heaven, and introduces the more ancient taboo giving it a mystical turn:

.....for never man
With Opsara may dwell and both be known:
Either a rapture she invisible
Or he a mystic body and mystic soul.
Reveal not then thy being naked to hers,

0 virgin Ila's son, nor suffer ever
 Light round thy body naked to her eyes,
 Lest day dawn not on thy felicity,
 Sole among men. (II. 317-325)

This is the only condition fixed. Sri Aurobindo will also follow the ancient tradition of the two rams which will be stolen by the *gandharvas*. But the protection of the rams is not a condition; it is used to make the king stand naked before Urvashi.

In the third canto we see the wanderings of the lovers in the lovely hills and woods, as in the Puranas. After three years of this carefree life of love's delight a son, Ayus, was born to them. They came back with him to Pratisthana, Pururavas' royal city, where she was to sojourn four more years, bearing "a race of glorious children".

The gods were unhappy in heaven without heaven's loveliest flower. Menaka and the *gandharvas* then plotted to bring Urvashi back. The story proceeds on the lines of the Vedic-Puranic tradition. Urvashi's rams were stolen; Pururavas, naked, rushed in the night's darkness, forgetting fate, listening to the call of duty, to rescue them, but then a lightning flashed and he stood naked before Urvashi. And the nymph vanished.

The king tried to bear his loss bravely, but in vain. He could not forget her. And finally he summoned his people together and giving them Ayus as their king he took leave of them to seek Urvashi and claim her back from the gods.

The last canto describes the quest and the final union with Urvashi. The quest reminds us of the fourth act of Kalidasa's play where the king asks trees, birds and beasts if they know where his beloved is. He journeyed through places where old and happy memories lingered. But she was not anywhere. After this seeking Sri Aurobindo leaves Kalidasa completely. Instead of the Kalidasa's supernatural he introduces symbolic occult elements. The king met Indira/Lakshmi, patroness of the land of the Aryans, land of India, who admonished him: "For passion dost thou leave thy strenuous grandeurs,/ A nation's destinies..."

Love (*kāma*) is a weakness in a soul destined for great deeds. But as Pururavas' "love was singly great", he would doubtless possess his "whole desire". Such were her prophetic words. But she also prophesied the decline of India. Here the reader can see the expression of Sri Aurobindo's political and historical vision of the time. India had a glorious past, the great dynasties descended from Pururavas would rule in Hastinapura and Indraprastha, but, she continued,

.....at last
 Their power by excess of beauty falls,—
 Thy sin, Pururavas— of beauty and love:
 And this the land divine to impure grasp
 Yields of barbarians from the outer shores. (IV.177-181)

But the king did not turn back to his great duty. Impelled by desire he moved on till he encountered Ila, his mother, mother of the Aryan people, sitting on the banks of a lovely lake. She had dreamt of greatness for her sons. Now she felt Pururavas' failure to reach those sublime heights as her own failure. But she knew that all was not lost. Even if the Vedic and the epic greatness did not last, there would come a glorious age of romance—the age of poetry, beauty, love and high hedonism.

In Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of history the Vedic age was the symbolic age¹⁷⁵ which brought with it the seeds of the fulfilment of human civilisation. His philosophy of history was yet to take a definite shape¹⁷⁶ but already here we find a first poetic vision of that philosophy. Pururavas was the bringer of the heavenly sacrificial fire:

"Hast thou not brought the sacrifice from heaven
 The unquenched, unkindled fire, Pururavus?" (III. 157-8)

The Vedic was the epoch in which sacrifice was of utmost importance.¹⁷⁷ Pururavas was the hero of that symbolic age. But he failed. Then the epic age— age of the law (*dharma*) would also fail. After that would come the age of aesthesis, of *kāvya*, the classical age, the age of Kalidasa. Perhaps it was this age, that Ila referred to when she said:

0 one day I shall turn from the great verse
 And marble aspiration to sing sweetly
 Of lovers and the poms of wealth and wine
 And warm delights and warm desires and earth. (IV.240-3)

But to Pururavas his individual quest of love surpassed all other goals. Ila, then, making him drink some water of the lake deified him and made him immortal, and sent him to the Mighty Mother, on the peaks of Kailasa.

The Mighty Mother said that he had failed. "But God blames not / nor punishes." He could take up his personal joy and live, re-united with Urvashi, till the end of creation: "Till the long night when God asleep shall fall."

Pururavas then ascended to the home of the *gandharvas*. As he arrived at the gate, the door opened. He was led to where Urvashi was. They found each other again in that far heaven of joy, far from the green earth below.

(To be continued)

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- 145 K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi 1983.
- 146 *Ibid.*, p.144.
- 147 Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, Vol. 26. p.1. For more details of his stay in England and his brilliant scholastic record at Cambridge see A. B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo in England*. Pondicherry 1956. During this period he learnt German and Italian and started the study of Sanskrit and Bengali.
- 148 This is the transcription that Sri Aurobindo uses in the poem. I shall take this form for denoting the poem, and in other contexts the common transcription will be used.
- 149 Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, Vol. 9. p.6.
- 150 A poem in English blank verse, approximately 24,000 lines, based on the well-known Mahabharata story. He started writing it at the same time as Urvashie but continued to revise, enlarge, rewrite throughout his whole life. A study of the growth of the poem could give us an insight into the poetic evolution of Sri Aurobindo.
- 151 H. W. Wells, "General Introduction", *Six Sanskrit Plays*, London 1964. p.xxix.
- 152 Sri Aurobindo, "Envoi", *Songs to Myrtilla*, Vol. 5..
- 153 Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p.6.
- 154 "Envoi", *Songs to Myrtilla*.
- 155 René Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism", p.165.
- 156 He started writing a Platonic dialogue, *The Harmony of Virtue*, Vol. 3 at the age of 18.
- 157 Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, p.46.
- 158 René Wellek, *The Concept of Romanticism*, p.165.
- 159 Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p.255.
- 160 *Ibid.*, Letter dt. 4.5.1947. p.255 (George Meredith, 1828-1909).
- 161 *Ibid.*, p.254. Stephen Phillips (1864-1915) is now a forgotten poet and dramatist. Sri Aurobindo regrets that these two poems should be relegated to oblivion along with his later works. See also *The Future Poetry*, pp.163-164; 184-186.
- 162 *The Future Poetry*, p.184.
- 163 *Ibid.*, p.187.
- 164 M. Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry*, Harmondsworth 1966. p.437.
- 165 *The Harmony of Virtue*, p.22.
- 166 "The Age of Kalidasa", Vol. 3. p.223.
- 167 *Ibid.*, p.225.
- 168 *Ibid.*, p.227. In Meredith too there is the idea of the "Earth's ascent to the sight of her just Lord". Grierson and Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry*, p.440.
- 169 "To my Brother", Vol. 27. p.151.
- 170 *Ibid.*, p.148.

- 171 *Mahabharata* I.8ff. Sri Aurobindo changes the name of Pramadvava to Priyamvada for he finds the latter more manageable in English.
- 172 "To my Brother", vol. 27, pp. 150-151. He further elaborates the idea more precisely.
- 173 *Ibid.*, p.160.
- 174 For a general study of the evolution of Sri Aurobindo's poetic mind from the Europeanised state, through the Indian, to the synthetic universalised state one may read K. D. Sethna, *Sri Aurobindo - The Poet*, Pondicherry 1970. pp.56-147.
- 175 See Grace E. Cairns, "Aurobindo's Conception of the Nature and Meaning of History" in: *International Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol.12, 1972. Pp. 205-19.
- 176 Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, first published serially in *Arya*, 1916-1918, under the title *The Psychology of Social Development*.
- 177 Cairns, "Aurobindo's Conception", p.209.

Rabindranath and Sri Aurobindo Towards Divine Humanity and Human Divinity

Saurendranath Basu

This beautiful world is God's own creation and man's life is also God's own gift. What more felicity can fall to man than the joy of living in the midst of God's own creation and what greater favour can he expect than an opportunity to give unto God a permanent home within his heart! Then only, says Rabindranath,

‘...the gift is realised.’
(*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol.3, p.30,
Sahitya Akademi)

And in this way is realised man's knowledge of own self, his own truth. His own truth again helps him to acknowledge the inviolable bond between himself and God and God's own universe. It also makes him feel that humanity composed as it is of innumerable separate personalities is linked deep within by a single tie.

‘I have pursued this thought’, the poet explains to Albert Einstein,
‘through art, literature and the religious consciousness of man’.
(‘Einstein and Tagore’, Ibid, p.911)

This purely human conception, a product of the poet's perception, knowledge and feeling, strengthens, nevertheless, his conviction that

‘When the universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty’. (Ibid, p.911)

Rabindranath believes that the Eternal Man, free of individual limitations, is an individuality embodying Universal Humanity, the pursuit of whom fulfils man's deeper needs suggesting religious values. Therefore, the poet elucidates, his religion is,

‘in the reconciliation of the Super-personal Man, the Universal human spirit, in my own individual being’. (Ibid, p.913)

This is how he has expounded his philosophy of religion in the Hibbert Lectures (*The Religion of Man*) and in many other talks and philosophical writings as well. His terminology may differ on different occasions, but not the bulk of his argument. Sometimes he calls it divine Humanity denoting a strong conviction that the emergence of the Spiritual Man within a man's own self is an imperative. But often he defines it as a poet's religion and that is not because he is primarily a poet but as a poet he feels and realises that his own experience is sustained by a truth that is creative of celestial values without the constraints of dogmas and platitudes.

As a poet also his voice is a voice of serenity that quietly announces :

‘I have anointed my forehead with thy dust, seen the glow of the eternal behind the shadows of adversity’. *Salutation* (E dyulok madhumaya, from *Arogya*, tr. By Humayun Kabir in *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Humayun Kabir, p.248).

It is a poet's religion that speaks of the joy of life in a cadence of its own creation :

‘...I tasted immortality in sorrow and in joy. Again and again have I seen the Infinite through through the veil of the limited. For me the final meaning of life lay there: In beauty's forms, in harmonies divine’. *The Final Offering* (Sristi lila pranganer prante, from *Janmadin*, tr. By Somnath Maitra, Ibid, p.245).

And a poet who has come to terms with himself and the world he lives in can alone affirm :

‘My faith is in myself; this cup I have filled with the universe and drunk. And filled it too with every moment's love.

.....
.....
A lifetime's gift, this love is the truth. At the time of my departure this truth, unfading, will deny death’. *Not My Achievement* (Amar kirtire ami korina biswas, from *Rog Shajya*, tr. By Abu Sayeed Ayyub, Ibid. p.235).

We feel we are in the company of a poet who has saved his soul from the pitfalls of false beliefs and faced the stark and rugged truths of life in the light of his own heart. We also feel what the poet confides in poetry he states in plain prose also when he says that all the facts of his life and the branches of his knowledge, however discreet and contrary they may be in nature, unite within his own self in a single point of Oneness. And this One in him is creative and suggestive of one single ideal of unity that expresses itself in countless forms –

‘Such are its pictures, poems, music, in which it finds joy only because they reveal the perfect forms of an inherent unity’.
(Introduction - *Creative Unity, The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol.2, Sahitya Akademi, p.494)

The One in the poet requires for itself the support of the unity in knowledge and for its delight and understanding images expressive of that unity. But it is only in love that he gets into with the joy of discovering the ultimate truth of the One,

‘To give perfect expression to the One, the Infinite, through the harmony of the many; to the One, the Love, through the sacrifice of the self, is the object of our individual life and our society’.
(Ibid, p.494)

This philosophy has indeed in its background a long tradition of meditation and quest for Truth. Out of it the poet shapes an order of living that accepts, enjoys and realises a harmony between the finite, the familiar providing man with an apparent sense of stability and the Infinite that invites him to an adventure into the Unknown to assure him of his ultimate safety. Moreover man’s faith in the Infinite, the poet believes, is itself creative and with the help of his creative and formative faculties he can express truth and through his expressive mode he realises its full import. But the poet would suggest that it is the poet in man who alone knows that,

‘...reality is a creation and human reality has to be called forth from its obscure depth by man’s faith which is creative’.
(*Creative Unity*, Ibid, p.505)

Thus the poet attributes unto faith the scope and weight to recover and articulate what would otherwise have remained in the obscure depth. Naturally,

when he examines the possibility of a new orientation of social and individual life he believes faith will have a role to play. It will make man realise that he is Infinite himself, and if he allows this divine nature to cooperate with himself and cultivate the creative faculties that unravel the deeper secrets of life, he will cast away the mere exercise of intellect and craving for earthly possessions and material prosperity. Then guided by the illumination of his mind, he will recognise the world as,

‘...a habitation of man’s spirit, with its eternal music of beauty and its inner light of the divine presence’. (Ibid, p.505)

It is this faith that should find expression in man’s literature, art, science, society, religion and everything and it is this that the Great Teachers, the Revealers, have preached. They have tried to teach that by giving up his little self that man would know the meaning of soul and the way to love mankind :

‘They live the life of the soul, not of the self’, the poet remarks, ‘and thus they prove to us the ultimate truth of humanity’. (*Sadhana*, Ibid, p.291)

2

Sri Aurobindo would approve of man’s necessity to live the life of the soul and appreciate also Rabindranath’s quest for the One or Oneness within his own self to arrive at an understanding of his own universe, but would never assent to his belief that man is sufficient to himself and is himself the Eternal. By himself man, Sri Aurobindo argues,

‘...cannot be the explanation of the cosmos of which his mind, life and body are so evidently an infinitesimal detail’. (*The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Library, New York City, p.614)

That is why man would have to arrive at

‘... a Supreme, a Divine, a Cause, an Infinite and Eternal, a Permanent, a Perfection to which all tends and aspires, or an All to which everything perpetually and invisibly amounts and without which they could not be’. (Ibid.)

The value of man’s mental sensations and perceptions of self, his human experiences as such contribute very little to his co-ordinated knowledge. He would have to enlarge, therefore,

‘his knowledge of himself, his knowledge of the world and knowledge of God until in their totality he becomes aware of their mutual indwelling and oneness’. (Ibid, p.615)

Without this sense of unity he would never arrive at the total truth and realise the very basis of existence. Thus, it seems, when Rabindranath makes an instinctive effort to harmonise his supersensuous and hypersensitive personal experiences with an idealised totality, what he tends to produce are glimpses and cadences of the subte-physical human world, by no means a mean achievement in itself. But it is the poetry, however, of a world where all forms seem lovely, all shapes beautiful and all things true :

In that lucent ambience mystically clear
The eyes were doors to a celestial sense,
Hearing was music and the touch a charm,
And the heart drew a deeper breath of power.
(*Savitri*, Bk.2, Canto 2, p.103)

It is a world where beauty, delight and love are but laws of life :

Where the response to Truth is swift and sure
And spirit is not hampered by its frame
And hearts by sharp division seized and rent,
And delight and beauty arethe law of life.
(Ibid, p.111)

Sri Aurobindo would tell us that though the finer substance of this world embodies earth’s own dream of divinity, it is not for that matter a world that bathes in a fine spiritual light. To have a direct and intimate contact with Truth, to realise a unity between the finite and the Infinite, an interrelation of the being with the Being, the poet’s soul would have to soar beyond the bounds of the know, a preparatory step for his great journey afterwards. And when in the course of his journey he will enter into the Immortal’s world then alone would he realise what it is to be

Invested with a rhythm of higher spheres. (Ibid, Bk. IV, Canto 2, p.360)

It is then that the veil of last mysteries would be removed and new patterns of the unseen be created. We would get

Poems in largeness cast like moving worlds
And metres surging with the ocean’s voice
Translated by grandeurs locked in Nature’s heart
But thrown now into a crowded glory of speech
The beauty and sublimity of her forms,
The passion of her moments and her moods
Lifting the human word near to the god’s.
(Ibid, Bk. IV, Canto 2, p.361)

But this is not the widest seeing of the soul

Not yet the vast direct immediate touch,
Nor yet the art and wisdom of the Gods.
(Ibid)

Sri Aurobindo forewarns. The Divine will lead him to an ocean of knowledge beyond the reach of human thoughts and to a peak of happiness too high for his heart and sense.

3

For Rabindranath the true meaning of *Saguna Brahma* is that God himself is the repository of all the faculties of man, internal and eternal. This suggests that the ultimate Truth for man is a ‘...human truth’. (*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol.3, p.204) This is the Truth that is to be reasserted in

‘religion, in political and economic affairs, in the spheres of education and social intercourse’.
(*Letter to Prof. Gilbert Murray dt. Sep.16, 1934*. Ibid, p.355.)

This will, the poet believes, bring about ‘a deeper transformation of life’, liberate man’s ‘consciousness in love’ and in a ‘realisation of God in man’.
(*Race conflict – An address at New York, USA, in 1912*. Ibid, p.363.)

And Sri Aurobindo would intervene at once suggesting that to ask for a deeper transformation of human life, a liberation of consciousness and a realisation of God within a man’s self without changing human nature itself is to pine for something irrational, unreal, an impossible miracle. He would argue

‘For the awakened individual the realisation of his truth of being and his inner liberation and perfection must be his primary seek-

ing,— first, because that is the call of the Spirit within him, but also because it is only by liberation and perfection of the truth of being that man can arrive at truth of living. A perfect community also can exist by the perception of its individuals, and perfection can come only by the discovery and affirmation in life by each of his own spiritual being and the discovery by all of their spiritual unity and a resultant life unity. There can be no real perfection for us except by our inner self and truth of spiritual existence taking up all truth of the instrumental existence into itself and giving to it oneness, integration, harmony. As our only real freedom is the discovery and disengagement of the spiritual reality within us, so our only means of true perfection is the sovereignty and self-effectuation of the spiritual reality in all elements of our nature’.

(*The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo library, New York City, p.931)

Notes on Authors

Alok Pandey is a seeker on the path of Integral Yoga. A psychiatrist by profession, he has had several encounters with death during the course of his medical practice. A philosopher by temperament, he raised several issues and sought answers to these both within and without. It is only when he came in touch with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that he found these issues abundantly answered. He has been working in the field of psychiatry with a spiritual approach for more than 15 years. He has developed a working concept of integral health and integral psychology which he is using in his life and practice. He is one of the founders of Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Integral Health and Research (SAIHR), Pondicherry.

Amalendu De, M.A, D.Litt, F.A.S., retired as Guru Nanak Professor of Indian History, Jadavpur University. Subsequently he served as the General Secretary and President of the Asiatic Society and rose to prominence as a distinguished historian of the country. He has thrown new light on Sri Aurobindo’s role in the freedom movement of our country. His research works are innumerable.

Dasharathi Sengupta, born in January, 1941, was an Asst.Prof.of Political Science in West Bengal Education Service.His basic interest is in Political Philosophy.It is this which has led him to become a student of Sri Aurobindo’s political ideas in the later days of his teaching career spanning roughly four decades.

Debashish Banerji is an English Literature graduate from Elphinstone College, Bombay University and an MA in Computer Science, University of Louisville, Kentucky, USA. A former President of the East-West Cultural Centre and Sri Aurobindo Centre, Los Angeles, USA, from 1992-2005, he has a PhD in Indian Art History from University of California , Los Angeles. He teaches Art History at the Pasadena City College and Indian Studies at the University of Philosophical Research, Los Angeles, USA. He has been a long-standing student of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga and its contemporary relevance, on which subjects he has spoken and written extensively.

Georges Van Vrekhem (b.1935) is a Flemish speaking Belgian who writes in English. He became well-known in his country as a journalist, poet and playwright. For some time he was the artistic manager of a professional theatre company. He gave numerous talks and presentations in America, Europe and India.

He got first acquainted with the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in 1964. In 1970 he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, and in 1978 he became a member of Auroville, where he is still living and writing.

He wrote *Beyond Man, the Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother* (1997), *The Mother, the Story of Her Life* (2000), *Overman, the Intermediary between the Human and the Supramental Being* (2000), *Patterns of the Present, in the Light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother* (2001), *The Mother: the Divine Shakti* (2003) and *Hitler and His God – The Background to the Nazi Phenomenon* (2006).

Books by him are translated into Dutch, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish. He was awarded the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar for 2006 by Sri Aurobindo Samiti, Kolkata.

Kireet Joshi (b. 1931) studied philosophy and law at the Bombay University. He was selected for the I.A.S. in 1955 but in 1956, he resigned in order to devote himself at Pondicherry to the study and practice of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. He taught Philosophy and Psychology at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry and participated in numerous educational experiments under the direct guidance of The Mother.

In 1976, the Government of India invited him to be Education Adviser in the Ministry of Education. In 1983, he was appointed Special Secretary to the Government of India, a post he held until 1988. He was Member-Secretary of Indian Council of Philosophical Research from 1981-1990. He was also Member-Secretary of Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan from 1987-1993. He was the Vice-Chairman of the UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg from 1987-1989.

From 1999-2004, he was the Chairman of Auroville Foundation. From 2004-2006, he was Chairman of Indian Council of Philosophical Research. From 2006-2008, he was Editorial Fellow of the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture. Currently, he is Education Adviser to the Chief Minister of Gujarat.

Kundan Singh A devotee and servant of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, Kundan Singh, Ph.D. is an adjunct faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto and the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco from where he also obtained his doctorate in Humanities.

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Prema Nandakumar obtained her Ph.D in 1961 for her study of Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem *Savitri*. Since then, she has been an independent researcher, publishing critical and biographical works. As a translator, her career spans half a century, with the UNESCO publishing her book on Subramania Bharati. Dr. Nandakumar’s translation into English of *Manimekalai*, the ancient Buddhist epic in Tamil has been received with enthusiasm. She is also a creative writer in English and Tamil. One of her recent publications is **K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar**, a monograph on her father for Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (2008). Dr. Nandakumar is a frequent keynote speaker and draws her inspiration from sources as varied as the Vedas, ancient Hindu and Buddhist epics, ancient and modern Indian literature. She is a recipient of several awards, including the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar and Panditha Ratna.

Ranjit Sarkar (b.1932) At the age of 12 he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry; studied and later taught there at the International Centre of Education. In 1965 went to France, studied at the Sorbonne; he got his doctorate at the University of Aix-Marseille. From 1970 until his retirement he taught Sanskrit literature and Indian culture at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He has published poems, literary studies and Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts. He lives in the Netherlands.

Richard Hartz studied philosophy at Yale University and received an M.A. in South Asian languages and literature from the University of Washington. He has worked in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives since 1980.

Saurendranath Basu is a retired Reader In English. Apart from his academic pursuits – he did valuable research work on Sir Herbert Read, the English poet and critic of art and poetry – he is primarily interested in a reconciliation between the facts and philosophy of life. Thus having made profitable contact with some great creative minds, especially Rabindranath, he passes his days now reading Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and writing on them in the hope that they would open their door for him some day.

Sonia Dyne, born and educated in England, graduated from St Anne's College, Oxford in 1956 with a degree in Modern Languages. Soon afterwards she went to Singapore where she married and raised a family. She remained there for nearly 50 years, working as a teacher and free lance editor, and continuing her language studies with a post graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics. In 1973 she made the life changing discovery of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* and later became a member of the Sri Aurobindo Society of Singapore. At the request of the late Devan Nair, she took over the Chairmanship of the Society and remained in that office for almost 20 years. Following a visit to Auroville in 1979, she took a keen interest in the development of the township. Currently she is a Board member of Auroville International and a trustee of Auroville International UK.

Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati (1880-1973), who in earlier life was known as Pramathanath Mukhopadhyaya, was one of the brightest luminaries of 19th century Bengal, who shed light on various aspects of life: political, historical, philosophical as well as mystical. The first nationalist resurgence of India, which had its roots in Bengal, drew this brilliant young man when he had just completed his academic career and he decided to dedicate himself to the service of the motherland by holding up the ancient ideal of education and culture through his mighty pen. Equally at home in Sanskrit, English and Bengali, with a style all his own, he made a rich contribution to various newspapers, periodicals, journals and also wrote voluminous books, being invited to deliver lectures by the University of Calcutta and other learned societies.

A colleague of Sri Aurobindo at the National Council of Education and also of Ramendrasundar Trivedi in the Ripon College as well as a collaborator with Arthur Avalon, pseudonym of Sir John Woodroffe, Pramathanath developed, very early in life, a wide philosophical outlook, which sought to synthesise the modern scientific spirit of enquiry with the ancient intuitive method of approach to reality. He firmly believed that what the ancient Rishis have left for us has a deep scientific basis and it is for us to explore it with the help of modern science. It is this belief that led him to interpret the age-old Vedanta through modern mathematical terms and symbols and in this way he was absolutely unique and original.

Later in life when he withdrew himself in his own inmost sanctuary, his one and sole preoccupation was to discover the rationale of Mantras and Tantras. On the pattern of the *Vedanta Sutras*, he wrote in Sanskrit his *Japa-Sutram* in four *adhyas* (chapters) and four *pādas* (sections) and an exhaustive commentary thereon in Bengali, which have been published in six big volumes, running to more than 2000 pages. This may be considered his *magnum opus*, in which is reflected his poetical genius, literary talent as well as his philosophical insight.