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Śraddhā



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Above them all she stands supporting all

Savitri

Śraddhā

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The Mother and Sri Aurobindo*

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Editorial

There are times when we genuinely feel that with all our foibles, failings, our smallness, our petty attitudes and the limitations of our mind, our vital demands and insistences, the doubts and confusions that surround and engulf us, we can hardly express, in words strong enough to convey in the right spirit, our deepest yearnings for those ‘sun-bright kingdoms’ that are rightfully ours, all our aspirations for that ‘flaming rhapsody’ of white beatitudes that are within our reach, the glorious splendour of joy and harmony, secretly hidden in the essence of life. Let us, therefore, refrain from mere verbal orisons and instead listen to the luminous words of the Mother, from a few of her selected ‘*Prayers and Meditations*’, included in the journal, how we can climb those distant summits and make those ‘brighter earths and wider heavens’ our natural habitat. On this auspicious occasion of the anniversary of her second and final coming which is considered to be ‘the tangible sign of the sure Victory over the adverse forces’, let this be our humble offering at the lotus feet of the Divine Mother.

We owe a debt of gratitude to *Mother India* for permitting us to reproduce the article by Charu Chandra Dutt which had been serialised earlier in the journal in the fifties. Our thanks to *Srinwantu* (English version) for the three articles by Santosh Krinsky, Sisir K Ghose and the brief note by Sri Aurobindo on the Mother taken from their archives. Our sincerest thanks to my ever helpful young friend Anurag Banerjee, Founder of Overman Foundation, for allowing us to reprint the article by Sri KRS Iyengar posted on his website. We acknowledge our thanks to The Infinity Foundation for the article by Don Salmon posted on its website. Last but not the least, we are particularly grateful to the Sri Aurobindo Managing Trust, Pondicherry, for granting permission to use the following materials.

- Extracts from the Mother’s ‘*Prayers and Meditations*’, CWM, vol.1
- Photo of the Mother taken from the Ashram digital photo catalogue with a line from *Savitri*

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श्रद्धाबाँल्लभते ज्ञानं

Śraddhāvāṃl labhate jñānam

Who has faith.he attains knowledge

—Gita IV. 39

A Note on the Mother

Sri Aurobindo

[A note in his own handwriting a la manière de '*Prières et Meditations*' de La Mère.]

Sri Aurobindo speaks as the Mother:

I am the Shakti of Sri Aurobindo alone and the Mother of all my children. My children are all equally part of my Consciousness and of my Being. When transformed and realised all will have an equal right to manifest, each one, an aspect of Sri Aurobindo and myself. It is the unity of all in the solidarity of a common manifestation that will allow the creation of the new and divine world upon the earth. Each will bring his part but no part will be complete except as a power in the solidarity of the whole.

Note:

Nolini Kanta Gupta in a tape-recorded reading on 16.10.82 says:

This note is written on a bit of loose paper, old and musty. It had become so after the lapse perhaps of more than half a century. But the writing is neat and clear. It was found among other similar papers all lumped together and thrown away among debris. They were rescued and are now in the sole and safe custody of our Archives.

(Reproduced with acknowledgement and thanks from *Srinvantu* (English version), Nov, 1982)

Prayers and Meditations

The Mother

August 21, 1914

O LORD, Lord, the whole earth is in an upheaval; it groans and suffers, it is in agony ... all this suffering that has descended upon it must not be in vain; grant that all this bloodshed may produce a swifter germination of the seeds of beauty and light and love which must blossom and cover the earth with their rich harvest. Out of the depths of this abyss of darkness the whole being of the earth cries to Thee that Thou mayst give it air and light; it is stifling, wilt Thou not come to its aid?

O Lord, what must we do to triumph?

Hear us, for we must conquer at any price. Break down every resistance: appear!

January 31, 1914

Every morning may our thought rise fervently towards Thee, asking Thee how we can manifest and serve Thee best. At every moment in the manifold choices which we can make and which, despite their apparent insignificance, are always of great importance — since according to our decision we become subject to one category of determinisms or another — at every moment may our attitude be such that Thy divine Will may determine our choice and that thus it may be Thou who directest our entire life. According to the consciousness in which we are when taking a decision, we become subject to the determinism of the order of realities in which we are conscious; whence the consequences, often unforeseen and troublesome, that are contradictory to the general orientation of one's life and form obstacles which are sometimes terrible to overcome later. Therefore, O Lord, Divine Master of love, we want to be conscious of Thee and Thee alone, be identified with Thy supreme law each time we take a decision, each time we choose, so that it may be Thy Will which

moves us, and that our life be thus effectively and integrally consecrated to Thee.

In Thy Light we shall see, in Thy Knowledge we shall know, in Thy Will we shall realise.

January 23, 1916

O THOU divine Inhabitant of this gross form, Thou seest that it is a mass of limitations: wilt Thou not break all these limitations so that it may participate in Thy infinity? Thou seest that it is full of obscurities: wilt Thou not dissolve this darkness with Thy resplendent light so that it may participate in Thy brightness? Thou seest it burdened with ignorant impurities: wilt Thou not consume all these impurities with Thy devouring fire of love, so that the being in its integrality may now become one in all consciousness with Thee?

Dost Thou not find that this sombre and sorrowful experience of egoistic separativity has lasted long enough for the earth and humanity? Has not the hour struck in the universe for this phase of development to be replaced by another, dominated by the pure and vast consciousness of Thy Unity?

Lord, O Lord, take possession of Thy kingdom, illumine it with Thy eternal Presence, put an end to the cruel error in which it lives believing itself separate from Thee, while in its reality and essence it is Thyself.

Break, break down the last resistances, consume the last impurities, blast this being if need be, but let it be transfigured!

October 23, 1937

(A prayer for those who wish to serve the Divine)

Glory to Thee, O Lord, who triumphest over every obstacle.

Grant that nothing in us shall be an obstacle in Thy work.

Grant that nothing may retard Thy manifestation.

Grant that Thy will may be done in all things and at every moment.

We stand here before Thee that Thy will may be fulfilled in us, in every element, in every activity of our being, from our supreme heights to the smallest cells of the body.

Grant that we may be faithful to Thee utterly and for ever.

We would be completely under Thy influence to the exclusion of every other.

Grant that we may never forget to own towards Thee a deep, an intense

gratitude.

Grant that we may never squander any of the marvellous things that are Thy gifts to us at every instant.

Grant that everything in us may collaborate in Thy work and all be ready for Thy realisation.

Glory to Thee, O Lord, Supreme Master of all realisation.

Give us a faith active and ardent, absolute and unshakable in Thy Victory.

Hidden Meaning of the Veda - Part I

Santosh Krinsky

It is the thrust of this thesis that the symbolic and sometimes obscure language of the Rig Veda hides a deeper spiritual significance behind the material symbols which are used. ... The various symbols employed by the Vedic Rishis can be properly understood in a spiritual context. It is now to be shown how these symbols fit together to reveal deep spiritual and psychological truths. By uncovering this deeper meaning of the Veda, it is not meant to deny the sacrificial, ritualistic or naturalistic interpretations of the Veda. It is in fact likely that the Veda contains several levels of meaning, and that the Rishis' attempt to protect the inner truth from the uninitiated or unprepared would lead them to construct outer figures which would both veil and reveal the deeper truths at one and the same time. If our thesis is correct, we should be able to apply the symbolic significance to any hymn of the Veda and find a straightforward and meaningful rendering giving the spiritual truths, thereby showing the Rig Veda to be a manual of experience and realisation expressed by seers and yogis having experience of consciousness other than that of the normal man. Further, if this is the central theme of the Veda, we should expect to find a number of places where the other external interpretations would falter and fail to give a coherent sense. In this chapter we shall review several hymns to see where we stand. Part I will review hymns to the Ribhus and an introduction to the study of Soma. Part II will involve an in-depth analysis of Soma. Later in this thesis we shall examine the Vedic view of Sacrifice, the hymns to Indra and the significance of Mitra Varuna to further support our contention herein.

Some of the most enigmatic and difficult hymns of the Rig Veda concern the Ribhus. An attempt to understand these hymns in a ritualistic or naturalistic manner leaves us wondering as to what they can mean, since certain turns of the thought refuse to make sense to our outward intellect. For instance we see the rik of Medhatiti Kanwa concerning the Ribhus: "O Ribhus, in your pervasion you made young again the Parents, you who seek the straight path and have the Truth in your mentalisings." (1.20.4 Rig Veda, translated by Sri Aurobindo)

Griffith, following the lead of Sayana and the ritualistic interpreters, translated the same Rik as follows: "The Ribhus, with effectual prayers, honest, with constant labour, made their Sire and Mother young again." (*Hymns of the Rig Veda*, Griffith).

On the material level such a statement, that the parents were made young again as a result of prayers, honesty and constant labour, does not make any sense to us, so we must conclude that this statement is either patently absurd or symbolic. However, if we choose to apply the significances which we have heretofore propounded to the various terms in the hymn, a surprising result emerges — the rik takes on a significant meaning fitting in with the general thrust of the spiritual interpretation of the Veda. The symbolic content of the mantra is patent. In the outer physical world in which we live, the process of aging appears inevitable and irreversible. What can be meant by the phrase "rendered the parents young again?" To understand this phrase properly we must find out who are the Ribhus and what are their powers; we must establish the true identity of the parents; and we must be able to discover the powers and effective methods used to effectuate the rejuvenating process.

If we follow Sri Aurobindo's method of interpretation, we find that the Ribhus are humans who have attained to the divinity and who act to aid the human seekers in the sacrifice to attain the higher truth, (see *The Secret of the Veda*, SABCL, vol.10, p.326) "They are represented as human beings who have attained to the condition of godhead by power of knowledge and perfection in their works. Their function is to aid Indra in raising man toward the same state of divine light and bliss which they themselves have earned as their own divine privilege."

Throughout the Vedic and Upanishadic literature we find references to the Earth — the material consciousness — as the Mother and to Heaven — the mental consciousness — as the father. The union of the material consciousness with the mental consciousness, of heaven and earth, brings to birth the human existence, and as such we can consider the heaven and earth to be our parents.

The rejuvenation of the parents spoken of in this rik is brought about through the characteristic action of the Ribhus. It is implied that the heaven and earth are tired and worn out, "old", and therefore require rejuvenation. The mental consciousness, the physical consciousness, without some informing inspiration or illumination, take on the appearance of being old and worn out. There is no vigour or energy, the activities are mechanical and lifeless. However, when some breath of inspiration awakens the mind and the body, new energy comes and moves the being to act with joy and interest, what we may call, bringing new life or making them young and vigorous. For the earth, the material, physical

consciousness, the problem is one of illness, sickness, the breaking down of the physical body and its eventual decay and disintegration. We can find a number of cases where the process of aging has been delayed, especially in people who have a youthful, inspired energy filling their lives with meaning. However, we have not seen any permanent inhibition or effective reversal of the physical aging process. In the field of science we also see partial successes in extending life or in maintaining the youthfulness of the physical body and its parts. Is it possible that the Vedic seers saw the possibility of effecting radical change in the relation between man and the physical body which would bring about the eventual removal of illness and even death? Let us keep this thought in mind as we look at the characteristic actions attributed to the Ribhus to see if we can find any clues in this direction.

First, the names of the Ribhus are significant. The traditional interpretations hold that the Ribhus are rays of the sun. This is a very transparent material symbol for the action of the Truth-Light. We can understand them as powers of the sun, the Light of Illumined consciousness, the Truth. The names are each significant of certain powers: "The names of the three Ribhus are, in the order of their birth, *ṛbhu* or *ṛhbukṣan*, the skilful Knower or the Shaper in Knowledge, *vibhva* or *vibhu*, the Pervading, the self-diffusing, and *vāja*, the Plenitude." (Ibid). Each one of the three has its own characteristic power to contribute to the manifestation of the higher light; the first, Ribhu, shaping the action through knowledge; the second, by its power of pervasion, spreading this knowledge and diffusing it throughout the levels of the life; and the third, the Plenitude, bringing the fullness and outflowing of the solar truth as a result of the shaping by knowledge and the subsequent diffusion of the force of the two elder Ribhus.

It is significant that the Ribhus are originally thought to have been humans who by their efforts were able to reach the divine realisation of the Truth. In Mandala IV, Sukta XXXIII, the methods used by the Ribhus to achieve their divine status are described: "As for one year the Ribhus protected the milch cow of light, throughout a year fashioned and formed her body, and through a year's space still sustained her brightness, through these labours they were made immortal." (Rig Veda, IV.33.4) The cow, symbol of the Light, rays of the sun of Truth, was given a form by the Ribhus and then protected and sustained by them. (Note also sequentially the characteristic powers of each of the three in action in this legend) By their actions, the Ribhus were able to build a suitable human vessel for the descent of the Light and were able to hold that light and make it active in the human instrument. This led directly to the immortality of the Ribhus. The next rik further amplifies on the steps taken by the Ribhus in this regard: "Two bowls let us make, thus said the eldest. Let us make three, —

this was the statement of the younger. Four bowls let us make, — thus spoke the youngest. *Twashtri* approved this speech of thine, O Ribhus." (IV.33.5) We can understand the significance of these vessels (bowls) by an interesting passage in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* which bears a direct relationship hereto. "*Bhur*, *Bhuvar* and *Suvar*, these are the three Words of His naming. Verily the Rishi Mahachamasya made known a fourth to these which is *Mahas*. It is Brahman, it is the Self and the other gods are his members." (*Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Shikshavalli*, Chapter 5) The clue here is in the name of the Rishi Mahachamasya, which means "great vessel". *Bhur*, *Bhuvar* and *Suvar* represent the three vessels of physical consciousness, vital consciousness and mental consciousness. The "great vessel" is the fourth, known as *Mahas*, the Brahman, the Self. The Upanishad explains further: "*Bhur*, it is this world; *Bhuvar* it is the sky; *Suvar*, it is the other world, but *Mahas* is the Sun." This ties in directly with the symbols used in the Veda and sheds light on the deeper meaning of the Veda, and it gives us insight into the real work of spiritual development accomplished by the Ribhus, and why they were able thereby to achieve the permanent divine station which they enjoy. After fashioning and sustaining for a year (read "a long expanse of time", indicating the slowness of the process) a suitable form for the manifestation of the higher light, they fashioned immediately three vessels to hold that light, indicating suitably prepared mental, vital and physical instruments for the holding and manifestation of the light, the new life of the parents. In addition, the fourth vessel, that called *Mahas* and holding the Solar Light itself, was fashioned by the Ribhus. This fits easily into the Vedic Cosmology of the various planes and worlds which make up the existence, and gives us the secret that the Ribhus through the discipline they undertook and carried out were able to attain a station at the fourth level of consciousness, the level beyond the mental level and were able to, from there, manifest their powers onto all four levels to help the human seekers of the Truth attain to the Divine Light and Consciousness. The power of this fourth level, coming into action, was able to new-fashion the mental and physical vessels (the parents) which were the starting point for the manifestation of the Ribhus, and bring about their youth forever, as mentioned in Mandala IV.33.3 which we have been reviewing.

In order for us to support our theory of a spiritual interpretation of the Veda, it will be necessary for us to show the deeper significance of Soma. This is necessary because more than 100 hymns, including the entire 9th Mandala, are dedicated to Soma, and numerous other hymns refer to Soma. Any spiritual interpretation of the Veda will have to clearly show the significance of the Soma hymns.

We are met with a symbol which has been widely interpreted to mean a specific type of plant which, when pressed out and the essence thereof drunk, would intoxicate the user. Commentators through the centuries have done scholarly work to fix the meaning of Soma as this plant or the beverage distilled therefrom. (See e.g. Alfred Hillebrandt, *Vedic Mythology*, Vol. I, Chapter 4 and Appendix I) In more recent days, following the experience gained from usage of "magic mushrooms" or hallucinogenic cactus, modern day commentators speculate that the Soma was a form of plant which could cause an hallucinogenic reaction in the user, and thereby, create states of consciousness other than that of the normal man, which would lead to the widespread hymning of the Soma as a divine beverage by the Vedic Rishis. All of these theories rest upon and support the outer, external and ritualistic interpretations of the Veda. "This liquid has the power to elevate the spirits and produce a temporary frenzy ... they found in it something divine; it was to their apprehension a god, endowing these into whom it entered with god-like powers; the plant which afforded it became to them the king of plants; the process of preparing it was a holy sacrifice; the instruments used therefore were sacred." (Professor Whitney, cited in *Mystic Approach to Veda and Upanishads*, Sri M. P. Pandit, p.32) Other commentators have pointed out the American Indian medicine man and the herbs and plants used by these shamans to create ecstatic states, and thereby infer a relation to the Soma rites of the Vedas, further reinforcing the view that Soma, intoxicating liquor of the Rishis, brought about temporary consciousness changes which were considered divine by the users of this herb.

In the face of such overwhelming weight of intellect and scholarly research, is it possible for us to find some spiritual significance to the symbol of Soma? Dare we deny these outer interpretations and rest our thoughts on the idea that Soma is a symbol of deeper spiritual importance in the psychological and yogic development undergone by the Rishis? Can it be that, just as we have shown for other aspects of the Vedic language, Soma both veils and reveals the deeper truth, veiling it behind a grossly external meaning and revealing it in a subtle and engaging symbolic sense, meaningful only to the practitioner who arduously cultivates the inner states and experiences which give meaning to the symbols? We must ponder over these questions when we come across the Rik of Dirghatamas: "The Riks abide in the Immutable, supreme Ether where are seated all the Gods; what can he do with the Rik who knows not that? Those who know that are indeed here assembled." (Rig Veda 1.164.39 translated by T. V. Kapaly Sastry in *Rig Veda Samhita*, Vol.I, p.85) The Rishi points out that superficial knowledge or interpretation of the riks is valueless without the deeper experience of the source of the riks in the Immutable, supreme Ether. Without

this deeper knowledge and experience, what meaning can the rik have to the unknowing?

We have already established that the Upanishads are a continuation of the Vedic spiritual seeking, couched now in philosophical rather than in purely symbolic terms. The Upanishads, through their constant referral to the authority of the Veda, and their repeated allusions to Vedic symbols or riks, reinforce the idea that there is a spiritual significance hidden in the Veda. In the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, one of the older Upanishads which is therefore closer to the spirit of the Vedic symbolism, there are extended definitions of Vedic terms and symbols in philosophical language. Further into this Upanishad there is the following passage: "Lo, this that is well and beautifully made, verily, it is no other than the delight behind existence. When he has got him this delight, then it is that this creation becomes a thing of bliss; for who could labour to draw in the breath or who could have strength to breathe it out, if there were not that Bliss in the heaven of his heart, the ether within his being?" (*Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Brahmananda Valli*, Chapter 7, translated by Sri Aurobindo in *The Upanishads*). We find in this passage a hint which leads us directly to the inner meaning of the Soma of the Veda. This Bliss, this Ananda, reposes in the heaven of the heart, the ether within the being. In the Veda, we find that the home of the Soma is considered to be in heaven, (see Rig Veda IX.38) There are constant references to Soma as the "rasa", the sap, the intoxicating flow, the honied wave, all of which give us an unmistakable connection to the Ananda of the Upanishads. Just as in the Upanishads it is this Ananda which is the sap of existence, the *rasa*, without which one could not labour to draw in or breathe out the breath, so also in the Veda we see Soma lauded as the essence of the experience, the sustainer and the God who creates the joy of life. There is then the distinct possibility that the Upanishad is giving us in philosophical language the inner meaning of the symbol. This would explain the closing verse of the *Brahmananda Valli* of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* where there is a direct statement of this correlation: "And this is Upanishad, which is thus the Veda." (or as translated by Sri Aurobindo: "And this is Upanishad, the secret of the Veda.") Sri M. P. Pandit, in his *Mystic Approach to Veda and Upanishads* has aptly summarised the meaning of Soma as follows: "It is this sap of delight, *rasa*, the draught of all experience and life that is called Soma in the parlance of the Vedic Mystics. The Deity presiding over this *Rasa* of life is Soma the Lord of Delight. This *Rasa* represents the essence of all experience and movements which the individual being has derived and accumulated in his venture in the field of life and it forms his means of subsistence, urge for growth and seed for rebirth." (*Mystic Approach to Veda and Upanishads*, Sri M. P. Pandit, p.41)

If we accept this as the true significance of Soma, then we must see what role Soma plays in the Vedic symbology, in relation to the action of Soma, its role in the development of the thought of the Rishis, and the manner in which it is brought forward for action in the consciousness of man. Only after we have worked out these details can we truly be confident that we have unlocked the hidden inner meaning of the Veda. In Part II, we propose to therefore work out the details of the Soma worship of the Veda and establish without remaining doubt the spiritual significance of the Veda.

Vedic View of Sacrifice – Part II

The concept of sacrifice is one of the most important and central concepts of the Rig Veda. Every hymn is permeated with the idea of sacrifice, and subsequently a great body of ritual activities centred around the sacrificial rites was built up and became the foundation of the teaching of the Mimamsakas. We have, in the course of our overview of the Veda and later scriptures, already touched upon the various views of the sacrifice. We shall, therefore, not elaborate further on the outer significance or the external rites.

It is our intent in this chapter to deal with the inner meaning of the Vedic sacrifice, drawing upon the hymns themselves, the discussion on sacrifice in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the luminous interpretation of Sri Aurobindo.

The Veda gives us a clear idea of its view of the sacrifice in the hymn of Kutsa Angirasa to Agni, Mandala 1, Sukta 94. Because of its seminal importance in interpreting and understanding the inner nature of Vedic sacrifice, we take the liberty of reproducing it here in full, although it is a bit lengthy. This will, however, aid us in our subsequent interpretation of the hymn:

This is the omniscient who knows the law of our being and is sufficient to his works; let us build the song of his truth by our thought and make it as if a chariot on which he shall mount. When he dwells with us, then a happy wisdom becomes ours. With him for friend we cannot come to harm.¹

Whosoever makes him his priest of the sacrifice, reaches the perfection that is the fruit of his striving, a home on a height of being where there is no warring and no enemies; he confirms in himself an ample energy; he is safe in his strength, evil cannot lay its hand upon him.²

This is the fire of our sacrifice! May we have strength to kindle it to its height, may it perfect our thoughts. In this all that we give must be thrown that it may become a food for the gods; this shall bring to us the godheads of

the infinite consciousness who are our desire.³

Let us gather fuel for it, let us prepare for it offerings, let us make ourselves conscious of the jointings of its times and its seasons. It shall so perfect our thoughts that they shall extend our being and create for us a larger life.⁴

This is the guardian of the world and its peoples, the shepherd of all these herds; all that is born moves by his rays and is compelled by his flame, both the two-footed and the four-footed creatures. This is the rich and great thought-awakening of the Dawn within.⁵

This is the priest who guides the march of the sacrifice, the first and ancient who calls to the gods and gives the offerings; his is the command and his the purification; from his birth he stands in front the vicar of our sacrifice. He knows all the works of this divine priesthood, for he is the Thinker who increases in us.⁶

The faces of this God are everywhere and he fronts all things perfectly; he has the eye and the vision; when we see him from afar, yet he seems near to us, so brilliantly he shines across the gulfs. He sees beyond the darkness of our night, for his vision is divine.⁷

O you godheads, let our chariot be always in front, let our clear and strong word overcome all that thinks the falsehood. O you godheads, know for us, know in us that Truth, increase the speech that finds and utters it.⁸

With blows that slay cast from our path, O thou Flame, the powers that stammer in the speech and stumble in the thought, the devourers of our power and our knowledge who leap at us from near and shoot at us from afar. Make the path of the sacrifice a clear and happy journeying.⁹

Thou hast bright red horses for thy chariot, O will divine, who are driven by the storm-wind of thy passion; thou roarest like a bull, thou rushest, upon the forests of life, on its pleasant trees that encumber thy path, with the smoke of thy passion in which there is the thought and the sight¹⁰

At the noise of thy coming even they that wing in the skies are afraid, when thy eaters of the pasture go abroad in their haste. So thou makest clear thy

path to thy kingdom that thy chariots may run towards it easily.¹¹

This dread and tumult of thee, is it not the wonderful and exceeding wrath of the gods of the Life rushing down on us to found here the purity of the Infinite, the harmony of the Lover? Be gracious, O thou fierce Fire, let their minds be again sweet to us and pleasant.¹²

God art thou of the gods, for thou art the lover and friend; richest art thou of the masters of the Treasure, the founders of the home, for thou art very bright and pleasant in the pilgrimage and the sacrifice. Very wide and far-extending is the peace of thy beatitude; may that be the home of our abiding!¹³

That is the bliss of him and the happiness; for then is this Will very gracious and joy-giving when in its own divine house, lit into its high and perfect flame, it is adored by our thoughts and satisfied with the wine of our delight. Then it lavishes its deliciousness, then it returns in treasure and substance all that we have given into its hands.¹⁴

O thou infinite and indivisible Being, it is thou ever that formest the sinless universalities of the spirit by our sacrifice; thou compellest and inspirest thy favourites by thy happy and luminous forcefulness, by the fruitful riches of thy joy. Among them may we be numbered.¹⁵

Thou art the knower of felicity and the increaser here of our life and advancer of our being! Thou art the godhead!¹⁶

(translation by Sri Aurobindo from *Hymns To The Mystic Fire*, SABCL, vol.11, pp. 66-69)

The first rik introduces the sacrificial fire, Agni, as "the omniscient who knows the law of our being". That this relates to the inner flame of consciousness and will is obvious. How is this flame to be attained in the consciousness? "Let us build the song of his truth by our thought." The thought is the instrumentality of the creation of that flame of sacrifice. Again, there is no opportunity for us to equate this "thought-produced" flame with the external fire. The result of the birth of the flame in us is that "a happy wisdom becomes ours." Here the Rishi has succinctly described the psychological nature of the flame, the method of bringing it into activity in the consciousness and the result in the being of so doing. The second rik makes it clear that this flame of the

sacrifice has powers far beyond those of physical fire: "(he) reaches the perfection that is the fruit of his striving." The flame of Will, of Aspiration is ultimately effective and never failing. It leads man to his final perfection of being. He attains to a home "on a height of being where there is no warring and no enemies." This is a very insightful turn of thought, which can only be understood in the context of the spiritual teachings that there are various levels of consciousness which make up the being. The physical, vital and mental levels each operate on the principle of duality, and for that reason, there is still the possibility of opposition, thus, warring and enemies. It is only when the consciousness goes to levels higher than the mental, in the solar world, that the contradictions and oppositions of the lower level are resolved and their underlying harmony is revealed. To remove the warring and enemies one must attain to the level of consciousness where the Oneness is the firm foundation of all vision and action. Just as on the earth, the various peoples dispute with one another and create conflicts, so also, this same principle is active in the lower hemisphere of being, the mental, vital and physical levels. However, when one is in outer space, the earth is one and the people are one. From that level there is no conflict. At that level, there are no enemies. All forces, howsoever contradictory they may appear to the mental spectator, become harmonious and complementary from that higher station. And this is one of the fruits of the inner sacrifice. By the practice of this spiritual discipline, one is able to move beyond the contradictions and disharmonies of the lower levels of being and achieve a station at new wider levels where all contradictions are resolved into complements of one another. There are other characteristics of this level as well, an "ample energy" is vouchsafed to the seeker who attains to this home on the height of being. An unconquerable strength abides there, which keeps evil at a distance.

The third rik removes any doubt that these results are related to the sacrificial fire, when it says "This is the fire of our sacrifice!" To keep this fire of sacrifice burning at all times in the being, and to increase its activity requires strength, thus, the prayer of the Rishi, "May we have strength to kindle it to its height." Once again we need only mention that it does not require much in the way of physical strength to kindle and increase a purely material flame. What result will eventuate from this high-kindling of the inner flame? "May it perfect our thoughts" prays the Rishi. The flame is kindled in the first place by the thought. As the Will and Aspiration become effective in the action of the consciousness, certain results begin to emerge. New levels of consciousness open to the aspirant, a new wide vision emerges. Strength and energy pervade the being and now we see, that all of the thoughts are also to be perfected. This

is certainly a truth of the spiritual disciplines, that by using one master thought as a key, one can attain to new realisations. However, all the ordinary thoughts still remain. Further disciplines are undertaken to remove, uplift or transform the other thoughts. The Rishi acknowledges this truth when he asks for the flame of the sacrifice to "perfect our thoughts." The next statement gives us a clue as to how this is to be accomplished: "In this all that we give must be thrown that it may become a food for the gods." The ordinary thoughts and actions must be offered in the fire of aspiration in order that the being can become ...ready to receive the gods, the powers of life and action. That this is the sense of the Rishi's thought can be seen from the immediate next statement: "This shall bring to us the godheads of the infinite consciousness who are our desire." By offering up into the flame of aspiration and will-force all the ordinary thoughts, motives and desires, these very forces become the sustenance of the gods, which means that they are used as a foundation or base for the action of the higher powers in man. They are not destroyed; rather, they are uplifted and transformed and given a new action under the impulsion of the higher powers. By going through this process of offering and uplifting of the actions springing from the mental, vital and physical levels, the being becomes receptive to the higher levels of existence and comes in contact with the infinite consciousness, beyond the mental. The powers of being operative at this higher level of consciousness come to the seeker at this point and become active in the being. This is the object of the sacrifice, to make active here in the human world, the wider and higher powers of the infinite consciousness.

The fourth rik continues this thought, giving a few more details of the process involved. "Let us gather fuel for it, let us prepare for it offerings." A conscious effort has to be made to offer up all the various movements of the lower being. The process does not happen automatically, but rather the Rishi must consciously use his personal effort to gather fuel for the fire. The fuel being the movements — thoughts, desires, actions and reactions, emotions — of the lower human nature, it must be consciously gathered up in the consciousness, placed before the flame of aspiration and will, and then offered into this flame for transformation. The result of this yogic discipline is again indicated by the seer: "It shall so perfect our thoughts that they shall extend our being and create for us a larger life." Once again this process is said to perfect the thoughts, but here the result is expanded to include "extending the being" and "creating a larger life." With the widening of the consciousness and the rising to new wider and more inclusive levels of consciousness, one naturally feels an extension of the being taking place. As the narrow walls of the mental-vital-physical personality

are broken down, one experiences the inclusion of all life as One. A Unity of all things is concretely experienced and the consciousness and the life are widened to include everything in one vision and one embrace. The outlook and action of the being become universal in scope.

It is appropriate that once one reaches this universal level of development, the fifth rik would begin to discuss the action of the force on a universal rather than on a personal basis. Thus, "This is the guardian of the worlds and its peoples, the shepherd of all these herds." We are now prepared to see the action of this flame, this Will, this Aspiration, throughout the world in all beings. It is noted as the guardian and the shepherd, indicating that this force or flame is the inner guide and that it is able to protect the evolutionary movement in the world. The Rishi explains further when he states: "all that is born moves by his rays and is compelled by his flame, both the two-footed and the four-footed creatures." Agni, the inner fire, inhabits all forms in the world, and acts as the motive force of all beings and their actions. The two-footed and four-footed creatures can be understood, not simply as the physical forms of animals and man, but rather, they take on also a psychological significance in perfect accord with the sense of the hymn, if we look to the underlying root of the word "*pada*" "foot". This word not only means "foot", but it also means "base" or "foundation". From this meaning we can understand two-footed and four-footed from an entirely different perspective, meaning, respectively, those who dwell and act on the vital and physical levels only, the two-footed creatures; and those who have widened their being to include the four levels, physical, vital, mental and the wide consciousness, *Mahat*, beyond the mental, expressed by the fourth *vyahriti*, *Mahas*. This understanding fits into the movement of this hymn and gives a coherent sense. The fire, Agni, is active in the form of desires in the two-footed creatures; while it becomes active in the forms of aspiration and will in the four-footed creatures. This image, while being just the opposite of the way in which we would normally view such a turn of phrase, also fits in neatly to the Rishis' conscious use of double meanings and abstruse concepts and physical images to keep the real inner sense hidden. In either case, the two-footed or the four-footed creatures, the flame of Agni compels the action of the nature and develops the lines of action, working out the principles of either the ordinary human life or the spiritual life of the evolved man. The Rishi then gives us a further insight into the working of Agni when he says "this is the rich and great thought-awakening of the Dawn within." The force of aspiration and illumined will, at work in the seer, creates the inner dawn, the illumination of the mental being, the beginning of the enlightened states of consciousness which

lead eventually to the possession of the fully illumined consciousness known in the Veda as the solar world and the light of the sun. The Dawn is the first glimmering of this inner light in the being, bringing the start of a new working of consciousness, replacing the logical, plodding mental action by the first glimmerings of inspiration and intuition.

The next rik gives us a description of the sacrificial priest, Agni, which reminds us of the description in Mandala One, Sukta One. Let us examine the nature of the priest, who "guides the march of the sacrifice". He is "the first and ancient." The awakened Will and Aspiration are the first stage in the attempt to move beyond the human life into something higher. Therefore, Agni is the first of the gods, first of the powers of the divine to become active in man. It is this power which brings man into contact with the other divine powers, and for this reason Agni is said to "call to the gods." It is by this fire in the inner being that the movements of the life are offered for the divine uplift and transformation. Agni, representing this illumined Will, is said to direct the consciousness and actions of the aspirant, and thus it is said "His is the command." The fire purifies all the life movements and thus, "his the purification." The Veda constantly refers to Agni as the Vicar of the sacrifice, the leader in front who shows the right movements and offers up to the gods the human movements. Agni is known as "*Jatavedas*", the knower of all things born, because he is the "immortal in mortals", and the indwelling conscient Will in all existences. Therefore, he knows the goal and the path and is able to lead man from his present darkened state of existence of the solar world of light and illumination. For this reason he is said to "know all the works of the divine priesthood." He is further described as "the Thinker who increases in us." Once again we may point out that from all these descriptions of Agni, we can only conclude that Agni is a psychological power and not a material or ritual sacrificial flame. The nature of Agni as the illumined Will is hinted at by the phrase "the Thinker who increases in us." We have here in one succinct rik a far-reaching description of Agni, the power active in mortals to direct man to the heights of consciousness, to overcome the limitations of the lower, desire-driven consciousness, and to bring man face to face with the greater powers of life and consciousness which await his evolutionary growth.

The seventh rik continues the description of Agni, the priest of this inner sacrifice. The sixth rik dealt mainly with the action of Agni in the seeker; the seventh moves now to his universal nature. Agni is present in all existences, thus "the faces of this God are everywhere." His knowledge of all things and his intimate knowledge of the goal, the path and the steps of the journey give him "the eye and the vision." Agni is brilliant, indicating the luminosity of his knowledge.

Because of his divine vision, Agni is conscious of the difficulties and is not misled by the apparent darkness of the moment. He can see the future divine perfection, the fulfilment of the striving of the seeker, and thus is able to "see beyond the darkness of our night."

It might also be pointed out once again that all these descriptions of Agni make absolutely no sense when applied to a ritual flame, but are perfectly clear and straightforward explanations of the workings of our inner psychological nature. (To be continued)

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Mundaka Upanishad

Chapter Two: Section II

The Omnipresent Reality

(Continued from the previous issue)

Alok Pandey

Having laid the broad foundations of the secret Knowledge of Brahman which is the goal of life, the Upanishad expounds it further, taking us, as it were, into deeper and deeper chambers of this mystery. It provides us beautiful images born of a Truth-vision of the seers to meditate and reflect upon. By thus meditating and reflecting upon these images, the truths they contain begin to get revealed to the seeker. This is the way of the Upanishads in general. Unlike the Vedas that invoke the gods through the power of mantras and are then carried by their power and energy from one layer to another, the Upanishad takes a shorter and more direct route towards the same Truth. It starts with the faculties that are natural to us, — the powers of thought and imagination, reflection and concentration, discrimination and introspection and uses them to help us go deeper within the heart of creation.

1. Manifested, it is here set close within, moving in the secret heart, this is the mighty foundation and into it is consigned all that moves and breathes and sees. This that is that great foundation here, know, as the Is and Is-not, the supremely desirable, greatest and the Most High, beyond the knowledge of creatures.

The creator is hidden in the depths of His creation. He is there in the heart of everything, from the atomic existence to the galaxies, from the worm to the man, in the titans and in the gods He is there secret within the heart, the centre, the core from which all things proceed, are born and sustained; into which they

return when they pass away from a state of manifestation to the unmanifest state. He is beyond both, — the manifest and the unmanifest. He holds both these states within Himself and yet exceeds them. Therefore does the shruti say that ‘He is and He is not.’ And since all our knowing is a defining of things, a setting of limits in word and speech of That which is ever beyond these, therefore is He beyond the grasp of Knowledge. We cannot know Him, in the sense that the very effort to know and understand becomes a veil, a limit. But we can experience and become Him or That. That is the only way to know, if we like. But the attempt to express that knowledge and translate it in mental knowledge or thoughts fails us. Such is His seat, beyond the highest pinnacle of thought and knowledge and yet close enough if we look deep within our hearts, since there He dwells, the Master and Lord of our existence.

2. That which is the Luminous, that which is smaller than the atoms, that in which are set the worlds and their peoples, That is This, — it is Brahman immutable: life is That, it is speech and mind. That is This, the True and Real, it is That which is immortal: it is into That that thou must pierce, O fair son, into That penetrate.

Nay He is closer still. It is He who has become all this. Once again we hear the great liberating Truth, — That is This. This is what we need to remember and bring back constantly to our memory that the luminous Brahman is everywhere, in the atomic world and in the gigantic cosmos, as their stable base as well as the power that holds them together and sets them into motion. The various creatures and human beings and the inhabitants of other worlds are none else but He wearing various masks and shapes for His own delight. Though our Life and speech and thought cannot reach Him, yet it is He who has become these too! That is the signpost for His road. If we dive deep within the heart of anything we will find Him there. Indeed thus we must dive rather than merely swimming upon and skimming the surfaces of life. We must dive deep to find That which has become this, the immortal who has assumed the changing masks of mortality..

3. Take up the bow of the Upanishad, that mighty weapon, set to it an arrow sharpened by adoration, draw the bow with a heart wholly devoted to the contemplation of That, and O fair son, penetrate into That as thy target, even into the Immutable.

But how are we dive into our depths? What power can help us in the process?

The Upanishad answers it beautifully giving us the image of the bow and arrow. Upanishad is the bow, meaning thereby at once the truths that have been revealed in the soul vision of the seers of old. These need to be applied in practice. Upanishad means the inner knowledge that goes to the heart of things as well as sitting at the feet of those who have acquired this knowledge. That is the bow we need to acquire to arrive at our goal. But merely having the bow of a great teaching or even a great Master is not enough. The arrow is the power of concentration sharpened by our adoration towards the object of our pursuit and seeking. It should be an act of love and not just a mechanical process of heartless concentration. The power that launches this arrow towards its target is a constant contemplation of That which we want to attain and arrive at. Such is the method given by the Upanishad for arriving at Truth, the ultimate Reality.

Interestingly it refers to the seeker as the fair one, which is surely not about the colour of the skin but about the inner being that has been purified of the stains of egoism and desire. Our inner being must be refined and purified of grossness and darkness that prevent us from such a contemplation of Truth. To use the language of the Gita, one must cultivate in oneself Sattwic and godlike qualities and attitudes to be able to thus sit and contemplate effectively.

4. OM is the bow and the soul is the arrow, and That, even the Brahman, is spoken of as the target. That must be pierced with an unfaltering aim; one must be absorbed into That as an arrow is lost in its target.

When these conditions are ready within, then the aspirant seeker must focus with all the energy of his inner being and soul on the contemplation of Brahman with the divine syllable OM. One-pointed in concentration, unfaltering in one's aim, one must sit absorbed in the divine contemplation regardless of whatever is happening around him.

5. He in whom are woven heaven and earth and the mid-region, and mind with all the life-currents, Him know to be the one Self; other words put away from you: this is the bridge to immortality.

Thus concentrated fully, we must contemplate Him who holds within Himself the earth and heavens and all that is in between. Thus focused on Him we pass from the state of mortality into the immortal state, from a limited awareness to the limitless vast, from a state of falsehood and ignorance and darkness into a state of Truth and Freedom and Light.

6. Where the nerves are brought close together like the spokes in the nave of a chariot-wheel, this is He that moves within, — there is He manifoldly born. Meditate on the Self as OM and happy be your passage to the other shore beyond the darkness.

The Upanishad gives us one further instruction. We have been asked to concentrate on the mantra OM, upon the One Self who is the Source and End of all things and yet exceeds all, who contains all within Himself and dwells secretly within each element. But there must be a centre, an occult centre as it were, through which the energies and forces of the Higher worlds of Brahman enter and pour into us and through which our being stays connected with its Almighty Source. This hidden door must be found and opened by the arrow of concentration sharpened by adoration so that we may enter into the Truth and Light and Bliss of Brahman. The Upanishad answers that such a door is there in the heart. All energies of life, all central movements proceed from the heart, that occult centre in middle of the chest where all currents meet and dive into and from where all currents emerge into this world of manifold activities. There we must concentrate.

7. The Omniscient, the All-wise, whose is this might and majesty upon the earth, is this self enthroned in the divine city of the Brahman, in his ethereal heaven.

It is here, in the core of our being and the world existence that the Lord and Master is enthroned. It is from here, from these depths that He oversees and governs His kingdom on Heaven and Earth. Indeed His kingdom is everywhere. He is the Master of this manifold creation and it is He who holds the handle that moves creation around Him. That is why it is said that He moves and He moves not, even as the centre of a wheel moves with the wheel and yet remains where it is always, ever the same. There, in the centre and core of creation He dwells in all His majesty and Splendour, in the divine city of Brahman and not as He is here, hidden by His own works.

8. A mental being, leader of the life and the body, has set a heart in matter, in matter he has taken his firm foundation. By its knowing the wise see everywhere around them That which shines in its effulgence, a shape of Bliss and immortal.

He dwells in matter, each grain of sand is effulgent by His Presence. A

secret heart is there in everything, a heart of Love, a heart of Joy that throbs in creation and fills all things with a sacred joy in the depths as the sap of existence. When we have discovered IT, then we discover the immortal Bliss everywhere, in each and every shape.

9. *The knot of the heart-strings is rent, cut away are all doubts, and a man's works are spent and perish, when is seen That which is at once the being below and the Supreme.*

But first we must make the opposite movement, a narrowing down as it were, a movement of intense concentration within the heart until the knots that tie us to the surfaces and keep us outside, as if exiled from our own Truth and Bliss, are cut asunder as laser can cut through layers of matter. Then we stand before the great One, the ever shining effulgence, the Imperishable, the Luminous column that extends below and above and all around and everywhere, and into the infinity beyond, without beginning or end. Then, before that grand vision, all doubts melt away and the mind's 'can and cannot', 'ifs and buts' vanish and we are freed from birth and death and works and consequences.

10. *In a supreme golden sheath the Brahman lies, stainless, without parts. A Splendour is That, It is the Light of Lights, It is That which the self-knowers know.*

The Upanishad actually gives us a foretaste of this vision wonderful, the vision of the ever pure stainless whole, the undivided Consciousness, the unwallled, unpartitioned Truth, that lies in a golden sheath, the Source of all Light and Life and Love, a Splendour beyond words. That the Self-knowers know.

11. *There the sun shines not and the moon has no splendour and the stars are blind; there these lightnings flash not, how then shall burn this earthly fire? All that shines is but the shadow of his shining; all this universe is effulgent with his light.*

Such is that effulgence that our sun and the stars appear a dark shadow before it. No other knowledge can remain there and all our thoughts and mind-made constructions of Truth fail and fall away before That even though they are lit by Its Light and are aglow with Its effulgence.

12. *All this is Brahman immortal, naught else; Brahman is in front of us,*

Brahman behind us, and to the south of us and to the north of us and below us and above us; it stretches everywhere. All this is Brahman alone, all this magnificent universe.

The Upanishad taking us step by step towards the unfolding of this great vision through a most sublime poetry, ends this part by extending this vision of Brahman into ever-widening circles until the whole cosmos is covered and suffused by Its Glory and Glow. It makes that bold statement once again, - 'All this is Brahman'... the Immortal, the Imperishable and nothing else. It confirms what life already knew through a secret intuition but the mind had lost in its divided perception and a fragmented way of seeing things.

All this is Brahman, it sounds us, that which we see and touch and hear and know as well as that which we do not see or sense and cannot know. Space and Time and the events arranged as the drama of our life are nothing else but Brahman. This many hued, many toned, many coloured universe is nothing else but He or That extending in endless Time and boundless Space. And we are left quivering with delight before the grand revelation.

Sri Aurobindo reveals this to us in several places in His own uniquely wonderful way:

Lift your eyes towards the Sun; He is there in that wonderful heart of life and light and splendour. Watch at night the innumerable constellations glittering like so many solemn watchfires of the Eternal in the limitless silence which is no void but throbs with the presence of a single calm and tremendous existence; see there Orion with his sword and belt shining as he shone to the Aryan fathers ten thousand years ago at the beginning of the Aryan era, Sirius in his splendour, Lyra sailing billions of miles away in the ocean of space. Remember that these innumerable worlds, most of them mightier than our own, are whirling with indescribable speed at the beck of that Ancient of Days whither none but He knoweth, and yet that they are a million times more ancient than your Himalaya, more steady than the roots of your hills and shall so remain until He at his will shakes them off like withered leaves from the eternal tree of the Universe. Imagine the endlessness of Time, realise the boundlessness of Space; and then remember that when these worlds were not, He was, the Same as now, and when these are not, He shall be, still the Same; perceive that beyond Lyra He is and far away in Space where the stars of the Southern Cross cannot be seen, still He is there. And then come back to the Earth and realise who this

He is. He is quite near to you. See yonder old man who passes near you crouching and bent, with his stick. Do you realise that it is God who is passing? There a child runs laughing in the sunlight. Can you hear Him in that laughter? Nay, He is nearer still to you. He is in you, He is you. It is yourself that burns yonder millions of miles away in the infinite reaches of Space, that walks with confident steps on the tumbling billows of the ethereal sea; it is you who have set the stars in their places and woven the necklace of the suns not with hands but by that Yoga, that silent actionless impersonal Will which has set you here today listening to yourself in me. Look up, O child of the ancient Yoga, and be no longer a trembler and a doubter; fear not, doubt not, grieve not; for in your apparent body is One who can create & destroy worlds with a breath.

Yes, He is within all this as a limitless ocean of spiritual force; for if He were not, neither the outer you nor this outer I nor this Sun nor all these worlds could last for even a millionth part of the time that is taken by a falling eyelid. But He is outside it too. Even in His manifestation, He is outside it in the sense of exceeding it, *atyatisthaddsangulam*; in His unmanifestation, He is utterly apart from it. (*The Ishavasyopanishad*: CWSA 17: pp.130 –31)

(To be continued)

Sri Aurobindo's Interpretation of the Gita, Pt. 1

C C Dutt

This interpretation is contained in the two volumes, *Essays on the Gita* and in various parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*. It is necessary for us to understand the real nature of this interpretation. It is not what we may call a merely rational interpretation — a commentary in only the light of mental intelligence. Sri Aurobindo has seen with the subtle and integral vision of a seer and understood things with the luminous comprehension of a truth-conscious sage. What he has realised and verified in his inner Self, he has given us in language that is comprehensible to the human mind. This is true of his teaching generally. He has grasped the Ultimate Truth of things and has applied it for the elucidation of man's many-sided life. In his presentation of Indian Culture, as well as in his exposition of man's social and political life, he has dealt with human existence as an evolving whole, — as a steady movement towards the Highest principle of Sat, Chit and Ananda — Pure Existence, Conscious Force and Delight.

Within the short compass of this article it is not possible even to touch on all the varied aspects of the Gita as presented by Sri Aurobindo. We shall have to restrict ourselves to the most salient features thereof. To those of our readers who desire to go to the original, we would suggest, as a preliminary, the perusal of Chapter III of *The Synthesis*, "Self-surrender in Works" — and of Chapters I and IV of the *Essays* — "Our Demand and Need from the Gita" and "The Core of the Teaching", respectively. In the former book, Sri Aurobindo calls the Gita the greatest gospel of spiritual works ever yet given to the race, the most perfect system of Karmayoga known to man in the past. In it, we are told, are laid down for all time to come the basic lines of Karmayoga in a masterly and unerring fashion. So far it is easy enough to understand. But has it any limitations, especially for those who follow the Purna or Integral Yoga? The seeker of this Yoga is not restricted to any path, to any method. He belongs to no path and all paths are his. His field is not a remote, sublime blissful beyond, all life is the field of his yoga. He has to grow from the normal mental consciousness of man to

the highest spiritual consciousness. In the ordinary course of natural evolution there is but a "tardy method of slow and confused growth" at work. The process is thus described by Sri Aurobindo — it is "at its best an uncertain growth under cover, partly by the pressure of the environment, partly illumined and half-automatic use of opportunities with many blunders and lapses and relapses...apparent accidents and circumstances and vicissitudes — though veiling a secret divine...guidance." Yoga seeks to bring in the place of this confused zig-zag motion a rapid, conscious and self-directed progression, straight towards the goal. A growth into supreme consciousness of all the parts of our nature is the whole meaning of Purna Yoga. To ensure this growth, the integral yogi is forced to seek the aid of knowledge or action or devotion or of all three as the occasion demands. But it must be remembered that "a Yoga of works, a union with the Divine in our will and acts — and not only in knowledge and feeling — is then an indispensable, an inexpressibly important element of an integral Yoga." Still there must be no rigidity, no compulsion. Each sadhaka must follow his own nature; he must have the liberty to choose any method he likes to get over passing obstacles. The Gita speaks of action purified by knowledge. Sri Krishna exhorts Arjuna to be God-minded, to be devoted to God, to be a worshipper of God. Thus are the three paths interrelated in the great scripture. Sri Aurobindo sums up the position of the follower of his Yoga by saying that he should, even from the start, have an integral outlook; for him the movement should throughout be integral in its process and many-sided in its progress, "integral in its aim...but starting from works and proceeding by works, although at each step more and more moved by a vivifying divine love and more and more illumined by a helping divine knowledge." We get some idea here of the connection between the synthesis of the Gita and the synthesis of the Purna Yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

In studying the Gita we have to grasp, at the outset, the lines of the Karmayoga laid down by it. Its key principle can be summed up as the combination of Equality and Oneness — the acceptance of the Divine in our outer life, as much as in the inner life of the spirit. To arrive at equality, a total renunciation of desire is demanded, and the oneness to be achieved must be as much in dynamic force as in static beatitude. The Gita proposes, Sri Aurobindo says, "a largest possible action irrevocably based on an immobile calm." There is nothing in this that is unacceptable to Integral Yoga. But its clear meaning has often been twisted right round by the commentator for the purpose of establishing his own sectarian views. For instance, action has been interpreted to mean only action enjoined by the Shastras, and all other acts alleged to be forbidden to the seeker.

Sri Aurobindo emphatically repudiates this view. We shall have to come, back to this very important point, again and again, as we proceed.

The philosophy of the Gita sets forth the ideal of Karmayoga briefly in three formulas:

- (a) To live in God and not in the ego.
- (b) To be perfectly equal always and to all beings; to feel all in oneself and all in God.
- (c) To act in God and not in the ego.

The question is how to attain this ideal, by what practical steps? Desire and ego-sense are the two knots by which we are tied down to ignorance. And these knots we must undo, if we wish to be free from bondage. We have to live in God, to act in God and to be equal to all things and all beings.

Ordinarily, man is guided in the field of action by an attachment to the fruit of action and by the craving for an inner and outer satisfaction by a desire for internal pleasure and for an external reward, such as money, power, honour and fame. The first rule of action that the Gita lays down is work without desire for the fruit — *Nishkama Karma*. This can never be done by any partial or imperfect self-discipline, and the test is acceptance of whatever comes without being moved, in a condition of absolute equality, when good luck and ill luck, victory and defeat, pleasure and pain, make not the slightest difference to us. The complete liberation, that the Gita holds up before us, can be achieved only thus and not otherwise. The tiniest pebble of imperfection in the masonry may bring down the whole edifice of the yoga.

There is a word of warning conveyed by Sri Aurobindo here that we have to pay heed to. The equality needed is the deep and vast equality of the spirit. The equality that comes from disappointment or pride or hard indifference, egoistic in its nature, will not do, nor will the loftier equality of the Stoic or the devotee or the wise man suffice. What is essential is a true quietude. It is obvious that such perfect calm can come only by stages. Initially we must learn to bear the shocks of the environment with our central being silent and unmoved, even when the surface nature is being violently shaken. A certain amount of stoicism or devotion or philosophic calm may be of great use at this stage. But ultimately, we have to discard or transform all these aids and arrive at a perfect and equal poise of the soul.

But, will there be any action at all, when this poise has been reached? With the passing away of all desire, it would seem that all motive power has been removed and the whole machinery must come to a stop. Not so, says the Gita,

"all action must be done in a more and more Godward and finally a God-possessed consciousness; our works must be a sacrifice to the Divine, and in the end a surrender of all our being, mind, will, heart, sense, life and body to the One must make God-love and God-service our only motive". This divinisation of the very character of Karma is the keynote of the Gita. On it is based its masterly synthesis of Knowledge, Love and Works. In the sadhana indicated by this scripture, the first thing to go is the attachment to the fruit of the act, the second is the attachment to the act itself, and the third is the delusion that man himself is the doer of his act. To understand this, it is necessary to comprehend the Law of Sacrifice put forward by Sri Krishna in the Gita. In his *Essays* and in his *Synthesis* Sri Aurobindo has expounded this Law with remarkable lucidity. We shall set forth a few of its principal features.

The word sacrifice is, however, not to be understood in the narrow sense of a sacred rite — the pouring of clarified butter into the sacrificial flame or the killing of animals before the altar. "The All-Father created these peoples", says the Gita, "with sacrifice as their companion" and said "By this shall you bring forth (fruits or offering), let this be the milk of your desire." By accepting this law of Sacrifice, the ego admits that it is not alone in creation and that there is beyond its narrow, limited existence a greater and diviner All, which demands its submission. The sacrifice by the man and the return by the god constitute the bond between man and god, — in Sri Aurobindo's words, a gladly accepted means towards our last perfection. The text of the Gita is: — "Foster by this the gods and let the gods foster you; fostering each other, you shall attain to the supreme good." In exchange for the offering in Sacrifice the gods grant the devotee his desire. But, warns the Gita, he who enjoys the benefits conferred without having offered it to the gods is a thief. Sacrifice is the eternal interchange between the creator and the created. But most often this rite is done unknowingly, without any understanding or acceptance of its import. The profound joy of fruitful divine sacrifice can come only when the mind and the will and the heart consciously cooperate with the Law. It has to be understood and felt that, as the Gita says, "from food creatures come into being, from rain is the birth of food, from sacrifice comes down the rain, sacrifice is born of work; work know to be born of Brahman, Brahman is born of the Immutable (*Akshara*); therefore is the all-pervading Brahman established in the sacrifice," Thus a wheel has been set in motion, an unbroken bond established, between the Highest and his creatures. He who does not follow the movement of the wheel in this world, "evil is his being, sensual is his delight, in vain does he live." But conscious identification with the World-Sacrifice cannot come at once. There is a gradual ascent of the sacrifice from the lowest rung to the topmost.

The gradation depends on the interpretation we put on the words Yajna, Karma and Brahman — Sacrifice, Works and the Divine. Yajna may mean the Vedic ceremonial sacrifice as a means of gaining children, wealth and enjoyment — as a means of destroying enemies or bringing down rain. The works may all become Vedic Karma — that is to say, all human action may be turned into a sacrament by ritualistic worship; Brahman the Divine may be taken to be *Shabda-Brahman* — the letter of the Veda. Obviously, says Sri Aurobindo, this cannot be the true interpretation of the Gita. "Janaka and men like him gained perfection by Karma," cannot mean that they arrived at realisation and liberation by the due performance of ceremonial rites; such interpretation is inconsistent with phrases like "*Sarvagatam Brahma Nityam Yajna pratishthitan*" — "the all-pervading Divine ever established in Sacrifice." In order to grasp the Gita's conception of Yajna, in order to understand the precise meaning of, say, "*Bhoktaram yajan-tapasam sarvabhuta Maheshwaram*" — "the great Lord of all creation, the enjoyer of all sacrifices and energies" — we have to take Vedism along with Vedantism, we have to comprehend that the true nature of all cosmic action is a sacrifice. Just as the Gita has in a subtle manner unified the Sankhya and Yoga school of philosophy, so has it reconciled the highest spiritual conception of sacrifice with the physical and material, *Dravyayajna* with the psychological *Jnanayajna*. Likewise the Gita has reconciled the worship of the many cosmic gods with the adoration of the supreme Ishwara, by insisting that the Devas are only forms of the Supreme Deva, the Lord of all Yoga and worship and sacrifice. The following words of Sri Aurobindo's are pregnant with meaning, "It is with this object of reconciliation in his mind that the Teacher first approaches his statement of the doctrine of sacrifice; but throughout, even from the very beginning, he keeps his eye not on the restricted Vedic sense of sacrifice and works, but on their larger and universal application, — that widening of narrow and formal notions to admit the great general truths they unduly restrict, which is always the method of Gita." There are various grades of yajna mentioned in the text, such as *Dravayajna*, *Tapoyajna*, *Yogayajna*, *Jnanayajna*. "Some offer their senses into the fire of control, others offer the objects of sense into the fire of sense, and others offer all the actions of the sense and all the actions of the vital force into the fire of Yoga of self-control kindled by Knowledge." What is common to all these variations is the subordination of the lower activities to a higher energy, the abandonment of egoistic enjoyment for the divine delight which comes by sacrifice and self-dedication. In the words of the Gita, all these forms of Yajna have been "extended in the mouth of the Brahman. Know them to be all born of work. So knowing thou shalt become free." Sri Aurobindo explains this verse thus — "all

proceed from and are ordained by the one vast energy of the Divine which manifests itself in the universal Karma and makes all the cosmic activity a progressive offering to the one Self and Lord and of which the last stage for the human being is Self-knowledge and the possession of the divine or Brahmic consciousness." It is this knowledge that brings liberation. The very highest form of Yajna is that in which the act and energy and materials thereof, the giver and receiver of the offering, the goal and object of the sacrifice, all merge in the one Brahman. In the words of the text, "Brahman is the giving, Brahman is the food-offering, by Brahman it is offered into the Brahman-fire, Brahman is that which is to be attained by samadhi in Brahman-action." Absolute unity, where the One is the doer and the deed and the object of works. Knowing this and living in this consciousness is freedom. To sum up, — By action done for sacrifice and by abandonment of desire we arrive at Knowledge and are "liberated into the unity, peace and joy of the Brahmic consciousness."

The opening chapter of Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* is "Our Demand and Need from the Gita". Right at the outset he proceeds to examine what exactly is the sacrifice of which the Gita speaks, what we expect to get from it and how we should approach it. The Gita is undoubtedly a Gospel of Works, but only of such works, Sri Aurobindo says, as culminate in knowledge or are motivated by devotion — "not at all of works as they are understood by the modern mind, not at all an action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal social, humanitarian motives, principles, ideals".

This exposition of the Gita's message is very important in view of the fact that so many persons of note in modern India constantly cite the authority of this scripture in their exhortations to their countrymen to shake off their quietistic tendencies and engage ardently in political, social and philanthropic work. "To all this", says Sri Aurobindo, "I can only reply that this is a modern misreading, a reading of the present-day European and Europeanised intellect into a thoroughly antique and...Indian teaching." What this great book teaches is divine action, the abandonment of all other standards of duty for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature. No other interpretation is consistent with the famous mandate of the divine Teacher to his disciple towards the end of the book:

"Abandon all other dharmas (standards of conduct) and seek shelter with Me alone. I shall give you protection from all vice and evil".

Likewise, there are those who urge that this book teaches, not works at all, but a renunciation of life and action and formulates the course of preparation

for the abandonment of all works. They argue that the unattached performance of action enjoined by the holy books and the doing of indispensable bodily functions form part of the discipline leading to ultimate renunciation of life and works. This view is supported by convenient citations from the texts but these arguments are obviously untenable in the face of persistent assertions to the very end of the book that action is superior to inaction. In this connection Krishna makes a very important remark to Arjuna, "Even for the keeping together of this world you have to engage in action." That is to say, not only for the keeping up of your own bodily life but also for the maintenance of corporate existence — your family, your Society, your State — you have to work assiduously. What the superior type of man does in this direction is an example to his inferiors. The Teacher, therefore, exhorts his disciple to pick up his bow and arrows and perform his knightly duties. "With your consciousness fixed in the spirit, give up all your work to me and without desire, without attachment, fight on fearlessly": such is the command of the divine Charioteer. Arjuna, influenced by a false pity, overcome by a softness of heart unworthy of a soldier, had cast aside his weapons. His friend and guide urges him to pull himself together and fight for the cause of righteousness, in a spirit of detachment and surrender. What the Gita teaches, then, is clearly not an outer renunciation of the act, but the inner renunciation of desire by an equality of the soul and the offering of all Karma to the supreme Lord of the universe.

Again, there are some people who argue that the Gita is a gospel of Bhakti (devotion) more than anything else. They put in the background, says Sri Aurobindo, "its monistic elements and the high place it gives to quietistic immergence in the one Self of all." There is undoubtedly in this scripture a strong emphasis on devotion and an insistence on the conception of the Supreme who is ever seated in the heart of every individual. But this immanent Lord, says Sri Aurobindo, "is the Self in whom all knowledge culminates and the Master of Sacrifice to whom all works lead as well as the Lord of Love into whose being the heart of devotion enters." The Purushottama of the Gita is the Supreme being in whom Knowledge, Action and Devotion meet and become one. A perfectly equal balance is preserved. We shall revert to this anon.

Like the Veda or the Upanishads or any other ancient scripture, the Gita is principally engaged in seeking the one ultimate and eternal Truth. It is obvious that a Truth of truths, such as this, cannot be tied down to a set dogma, cannot be contained in all its bearings in any single philosophy or in the teachings of any one Teacher. But one and eternal though it be, it is made up of two distinct elements or aspects — one, temporary and mutable, applicable to the ideas of a definite period and country, and the other of eternal and universal application.

Also, as time progresses, this latter Truth takes on new forms and new modes of expression, what is really valuable is whether it has been lived and experienced and seen with a higher vision. How the Gita was understood by contemporary men, or by the men of the periods that followed, is but of little importance. So many are the commentaries on this great book, and so widely do they differ from one another, that they cannot point out to us any definite metaphysical connotation. But, says Sri Aurobindo, "what we can do with profit is to seek in the Gita for the actual living truths it contains, apart from their metaphysical form, to extract therefrom what can help us or the world at large and to put it in the most natural and vital form and expression we can find, that will be suitable to the mentality and helpful to the spiritual needs of our present-day humanity." There is in this scripture very little that is local or temporal. What little there is can be very easily universalised and the way is suggested in the text itself. We have already dealt with the subtle symbolic sense imported to the Yajna or Sacrifice of the Veda. Vedism and Vedantism have both been put forward and reconciled. Equally, shows Sri Aurobindo, "the idea of action according to the Shastra, the fourfold order of society, the allusion to the...spiritual disabilities of Shudras and women seem at first sight local and temporal, and if too much pressed in their literal sense,...deprive it (the teaching) of its universality and spiritual depth and limit its validity for mankind at large." But looking behind the apparent and superficial, we cannot fail to discover that the sense is profound and spiritual and universal. By Shastra we perceive that the Gita means the law imposed on humanity by itself as a substitute for the pure egoism of the unregenerate man who seeks only the satisfaction of his desire. The division into four castes is the outward form of a spiritual truth, which is independent of that form. Its basis is "the conception of right works as a rightly ordered expression of the nature of the individual being through whom the work is done."

With the element of current philosophical terms and religious symbols that have entered into the book we shall deal in the same spirit. It has, we find, given its own meaning to these terms and symbols, regardless of the dogma or creed with which they were connected in the contemporary mind. Sankhya in the Gita, for instance, is very different from the agnostic school of philosophy founded by Kapila, with its scheme of one Prakriti and many Purushas. Yoga, likewise, in this scripture, is not the philosophy of that name propounded by Patanjali — a rigidly defined and graded system of discipline — but is a rich and flexible yogic attitude leading steadily to action without attachment and desire. The first, Sankhya, is concerned with renunciation of Karma while the second, Yoga, is based on the doing of Karma, though in a particular manner. Are they really different in their precepts? The Gita recognises no difference

and says, "It is only children who call them different; wise men see no distinction." The common mind of the time looked upon these two systems as contradictory. So Arjuna is perplexed and asks, "Thou declarest to me the renunciation of works, O Krishna, and again Thou declarest to me Yoga; which one of these is the better way, that tell me with a clear decisiveness." The Teacher replies that the salvation of the soul is brought about by both, but, of the two, Yoga of works is distinguished above renunciation. He explains that a man who applies himself integrally to one gets the fruit of both, but adds that renunciation is difficult to attain without Yoga. Sri Aurobindo sums up the Gita's point of view this way: — "In the Gita the Sankhya and Yoga are evidently only two convergent paths of the same Vedantic truth or rather two concurrent ways of approaching its realisation, the one philosophical, intellectual, analytic, the other intuitional, devotional, practical, ethical, synthetic, reaching knowledge through experience."

The Sankhya school had conceived an all-powerful Prakriti, the doer of all acts, and many Purushas, for whose enjoyment Prakriti does her acts. The Gita, though it formulates one Prakriti and one Purusha, agrees that Prakriti performs all actions and for the enjoyment of the Purusha. But there is a very great difference between the two views. It is that Purusha in the Gita does not occupy a position subordinate or secondary to that of Prakriti. On the contrary, Nature is "my nature" as Krishna describes it in passages like, "Controlling my Nature I create again and again". But he also tells Arjuna that both Purusha and Prakriti are without a beginning; side by side, the two principles have existed eternally. According to this scripture, therefore, there has always been a Nature acting by her three Gunas (modes), but every one of her acts has throughout been sanctioned and upheld by the Lord. We shall revert to the Gita's presentation of Purusha and Prakriti at greater length, later on. It is enough to indicate here that the book adopts older terms and symbols for its own purposes and uses them in its special way. The conception of the two aspects, *Para* and *Apara*, of Nature and the three aspects of the Purusha (or the Divine) are the Gita's own, though they were not quite unknown to older scriptures.

The Gita has, no doubt, a philosophic system of its own, but more important than the system itself is the varied material, of which it is made up. For, a great part of this material is not so much ideas and speculations of the intellect as abiding truths of spiritual experience, verifiable facts of the highest psychological possibilities. One thing, however, is clear; this system is not intended to support any narrow and exclusive line of thought, as sectarian commentators have sought to make out. The following remark of Sri Aurobindo is explicit: — "The language of the Gita, the structure of thought, the combination and balancing of ideas belong neither to the temper of a sectarian teacher nor to the spirit of a rigorous

analytical dialectics cutting off one angle of the truth to exclude all the others; but rather there is a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience." Indian spirituality has been particularly rich in these great syntheses. The method of the Gita, as we have indicated before, "does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies." Its thought is not pure Monism though it sees in the one eternal unchanging Self the basis of all creation. It is not Mayavada (Illusionism) though it speaks of the Maya of the three modes of Nature, though Krishna tells Arjuna, "Enveloped by my *Yogamaya*, I am not manifest to all beings". It is not Sankhyavada though it explains creation by the dual principle of Prakriti-Purusha. It is not Qualified Monism though it lays more stress on dwelling in the Divine than in dissolution as the great goal. It is not Vaishnava theism though it places Krishna in the forefront as the supreme Ishwara — Krishna says in the text, "There is no principle higher than myself." The Gita is all these lines of thought and yet none of them.

Like the earlier spiritual synthesis of the Upanishads, the synthesis of the Gita, at once spiritual and intellectual, avoids all rigid determination such as would detract from its universal character. Its various sectarian commentators delight in dialectical warfare, but in the midst of their impassioned clamour the immortal text shines in its calm and sublime impartiality. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "It maps out, but it does not cut up or build walls or hedges to confine our vision." The Gita is a gate opening into the whole world of spiritual truth and experience.

In the long history of Indian spiritual thought there have been many attempts at synthesis. In the opening chapter of his *Essays*, Sri Aurobindo goes briefly over these and shows where the Gita stands in relation to the others. "The crown of this synthesis", says he, "was in the experience of the Vedic Rishis something divine, transcendent and blissful, in whose unity the increasing soul of man and the eternal divine fullness of the cosmic godheads meet perfectly and fulfil themselves." When the Truth-consciousness of these early seers got lost in the maze of elaborate rituals, the Rishis of the Upanishadic period took it on themselves to rediscover the lost key of Vedic Sadhana. By earnest meditation they sought to realise the highest spiritual Truths and embodied the result in the sublime scriptures known as the Upanishads. In these books we find constant reference to the sages and seers of old and occasionally come across whole verses taken from the Veda. The achievements of these later Rishis is thus summed up by Sri Aurobindo: — "They drew together into a great harmony all that had been seen and experienced by the inspired and liberated knowers of the Eternal throughout a great and fruitful period of spiritual seeking." The Gita

starts with the experience of these sublime God-knowers and builds up on it its remarkable harmony of the three great paths of Love, Knowledge and Works, by which the human soul can come into direct contact with the Supreme.

Of the more recent attempts at synthesis, Sri Aurobindo picks out the Tantra and pays a very high tribute to it indeed: — "It is even more bold and forceful than the synthesis of the Gita, — for it seizes even upon the obstacles to the spiritual life and compels them to become the means for a rich spiritual conquest and enables us to embrace the whole of Life in our divine scope as the Lila of the Divine." The Tantra also grasped at the old Vedic idea of the perfectibility of man which had been lost during the intervening ages and brought out to the forefront the idea of using the body and the mind for the opening up of divine life on all planes, which has been so highly developed in Hathayoga and Rajayoga.

All this makes it clear that we are called upon, today, to proceed to a newer and larger synthesis than any that has gone before. In this progress, we must not get caught within the four walls of the teaching of even a great scripture like the Gita. For, as says Sri Aurobindo, "we do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future". Fresh material is flowing freely into us from many sources. We have to assimilate not only the influence of the past, in India and elsewhere, including a recovered sense of Buddha's message, but also to take full account of modern knowledge. All this, says Sri Aurobindo, "points to a new, a very rich, a very vast synthesis". The Gita occupies a prominent place in the store of spiritual knowledge that the past has bequeathed to us. But we should approach it for help and light in our great quest and not with any idea of academical scrutiny or analysis.

The seeker must not, however, expect to find in it what is clearly beyond its scope. What this scope is has been set forth very briefly by Sri Aurobindo in his *The Synthesis of Yoga*. We shall quote a very few lines. "It is true that the path alone, as the ancients saw it, is worked out fully; the perfect fulfilment, the highest secret is hinted rather than developed; it is kept back as an unexpressed part of a supreme mystery".

The reason for this is also indicated: — "Fulfilment is...a matter of experience and no teaching can express it. It cannot be described in a way that can really be understood by a mind that has not the effulgent transmuting experience."

The Vedic sages made it amply clear that the words of the supreme wisdom convey a meaning only to those who have already had the light. Sri Aurobindo calls the ending of the Gita cryptic and says that it has not crossed the border into the glory of supramental illumination. This requires a little elucidation for the ordinary reader. The Gita's exhortation to dynamic identity with the Divine

and its insistence on absolute surrender to the inner Lord constitute the core of its teaching, its central truth. After preparing his beloved disciple in various ways, the Teacher imparts to him the supreme secret in two or three verses, the secret of the completest surrender without which no supramental change can come. And again, says Sri Aurobindo, it is only through supramental transformation that a dynamic identity with God is possible. Now, what is the effect of the supreme disclosure on Arjuna? He says at once, firmly and clearly: — "By your grace, O Achyuta, my delusion has been shattered, my memory has come back; I have gained my poise, my doubts have vanished, I will do your bidding." A state of the fullest submission, the pith of the teaching of the Gita. This is the cryptic close of the great scripture. The sun-lit summit of the Supermind stands clear and bright before the disciple, but it has yet to be climbed.

The method of the Gita is its own; it is never dogmatic. Krishna leads his beloved disciple from point to point, opening out the lotus of truth, petal by petal, slowly. He appeals to Arjuna's Kshatriya tradition and says, "the assembled warriors will think that you are turning your back on the battle through fear;...you would lower yourself in their eyes; it would be painful for us to hear them talk ill of you." Victory or death, what does it matter? "If you die in battle, you go to heaven; if you win, you rule the world." Speaking of Karma, the Teacher says, "Your right is to the action only, never to the fruit thereof." But this statement is valid only as long as the disciple thinks that he is the doer of his works. The moment he knows that he does nothing, it is Prakriti who is the doer of all action, the teaching of unattached Karma falls to the ground. For the Gita says, "It is only the man deluded by egoism who thinks that he is the doer." Thus, on and on, the standpoint changes as Krishna leads Arjuna forward. Work without attachment, equality of will, these are but the means of entering into the consciousness of the Divine. The Gita says expressly that they are to be employed as such means as long as the sadhaka is unable to attain to this higher state, the consciousness of the Purushottama, whose executive force is Prakriti, who is beyond the self that acts not, beyond the Prakriti that acts. The surrender of all Karma, then, has to be made by the Karmayogi not to the doer of the Karma but to the Supreme beyond her, by whose sanction and authority, for whose enjoyment, she acts. This is the solution the great Teacher offers to his puzzled disciple.

The path of the Divine Teacher's exhortation to his pupil throughout is, "Therefore, O Arjuna, engage in the fight." Fight, but without any desire, without any feeling of enmity or hatred. Fight, impersonally, for *lokasaṅgraha* — "for the keeping and leading of the peoples on the path to the divine goal." It is a rub that arises out of the sense of oneness of the human soul with the Divine and

with all other souls — even those that appear before us as enemies. The divine goal is the secret aim of all, friends as well as foes. Resistance and defeat are the best outward service that can be done to the Divine's opponents. Two extracts from the Gita, one from the eleventh chapter and the other from the eighteenth, should be considered in this, connection. The first is: "I am Time, the Destroyer of creatures, here I am engaged in that work of destruction. None of these sons of Dhritarashtra who are standing against you on the field will survive, even if you abstain from fighting; even before this they have been killed by me, be only the instrument, O Savyasachi (ambidextrous fighter)." The second is: "I have explained to you the great secret; consider it well and then do as you wish." It is thus clear that the battle of Kurukshetra, the progress and the result thereof were all part of a predestined whole, of a universal action. A remark of the Teacher towards the end of the book is also of very great importance as indicating the relationship between Nature and man's ego — he says in effect, "The egoism which has led you to resolve 'I shall not fight' is meaningless. Fighting is your natural occupation; Nature will make you fight; what you refuse to do because of a delusion you will do under compulsion." Whatever the pacifist may say, we have to realise that the way to immortality lies through death. Before death, before the blood-smeared Kali we must learn to say, "This, too, is the Mother; this also know to be God; if thou hast the strength, adore."

Sri Aurobindo's position is clear. There is no reason to explain away the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the constant exhortation of the divine Charioteer, "Shake off thy weakness, overcome thy self-pity, arise, slay thy enemies, O Partha". In fact, in order to understand the complete meaning of the Gita's philosophy we must give full value to the dramatic setting. The first chapter with its vivid pen-picture provides the preamble. Into the battlefield, the field of Dharma enters majestically the beautiful chariot of the Pandava general drawn by four white horses. On this *ratha* stand Krishna and Arjuna blowing their world-famed conch-shells in defiance of the enemy. All the warriors on their side follow their example. The trumpet call resounds all around and up in the firmament, striking terror into the hearts of Dhritarashtra's sons. Arjuna asks Krishna to let the car stand for a while between the two opposing armies,... saying, "Let me have a good look at my antagonists — those who, as the friends of my cousins, have come to give battle to me." Krishna places the chariot between the two hosts and says, "Look at the assembled Kurus." Arjuna looks and, overcome by a sudden weakness and depression unworthy of an Arya fighter, throws down his bow and arrows, crying with tearful eyes, "I shall not fight." Krishna turns round on his friend promptly and reprimands him, "Whence has come to thee this dejection, this stain of darkness of the soul, in the hour of

difficulty and peril?" and proceeds to discuss the question before his beloved pupil from all points of view.

One is apt to ask, "Will the gospel of universal peace and goodwill among men never prevail?" Sri Aurobindo replies to this question, taking a broad comprehensive view: "A day may come, must surely come, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile, the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by some practical philosophy and religion. The Gita taking life as it is, and not only as it may be in some distant future, puts the question how this aspect and function of life, which is really an aspect and function of human activity in general can be harmonised with spiritual existence." For, "not a physical asceticism, but an inner askesis is the teaching of the Gita."

The unification of the human soul with the supreme Ishwara, Purushottama, by a Yoga of the whole being is, says Sri Aurobindo, its complete teaching. But one has to attain to it through a firm realisation of the Immutable, *Akshara Purusha*. This realisation is a prior necessity and the Gita Insists on it. The insistence has led to a certain amount of misunderstanding. Some partisan commentators have interpreted Krishna's teaching to be an exhortation to seek inaction, *Brahman Sthiti*. But what this *sthiti* means is clear from the verse — "The Yogin who has taken his stand upon oneness and loves me in all beings, however and in whatever ways he lives and acts, lives and acts in Me." The book brings in bhakti as the climax of its Yoga, when it says, "Whoever loves God in all and his soul is founded upon the divine oneness, however he lives and acts, lives and acts in God." The first six chapters form a sort of preliminary block of the whole teaching; the closing words are — "Of all Yogins he who, with all his inner self given up to Me, for Me has love and faith, him I hold to be the most united with Me in Yoga." Obviously what has been said up to this is not enough. If Krishna had merely said, "Work this at first, live out what I have told you; if difficulties arise, they will solve themselves or I shall help", Arjuna would have replied somewhat in this strain, "You have talked much of works and knowledge, but very little or nothing of bhakti; this bhakti which you have called the greatest thing, to whom is it to be offered?" — The first six chapters have provided us with a large preliminary basis of Works and Knowledge, Bhakti has been brought in but not elaborated. The remaining portion of the book elucidates what has been hinted at, works out unfinished figures. Sri Aurobindo sets forth briefly how the two portions stand with regard to each other: "The first six chapters of the Gita have been treated as a single block of teachings, its primary basis of practice and knowledge; the remaining twelve may be similarly treated

as two closely connected blocks which develop the rest of the doctrine from this primary basis. The seventh to the twelfth chapters lay down a large metaphysical statement of the nature of the Divine Being and on that foundation closely relate and synthesise Knowledge and Devotion, just as the first part of the Gita related and synthesised Works and Knowledge. The vision of the World-Purusha, intervening in the eleventh chapter, gives a dynamic turn to this stage of the synthesis and relates it vividly to works and life. Thus, again, all is brought powerfully back to the original question of Arjuna round which the whole exposition, revolves and completes its cycle. Afterwards the Gita proceeds by the differentiation of the Purusha and Prakriti to work out its ideas of the action of the *gunas* and of the culmination of desireless works with knowledge, where that coalesces with Bhakti — knowledge, works and love made one — and it rises thence to its greatest finale, the supreme secret of self-surrender to the Master of Existence."

There is a difference in the manner of expression between the two parts. In the second portion we find a more concise way of stating things; more concise, but more liable to be misunderstood, for we have to deal with an intellectual presentation of supra-intellectual truths — a statement that seeks to define to the mind what is really infinite. These spiritual truths could have been expressed more effectively, and without ambiguity, in the Upanishadic language. But the Gita has not adopted that style because it seeks to satisfy an intellectual difficulty, to lead reason to truths beyond itself by its own method.

(To be continued)

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Darshan of Sri Aurobindo

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar

They were coming still, the stream of visitors to the Ashram swelled day by day till it grew into a flood on the day of *darshan*. Men, women and children, with their packages and their hold-alls, their *Sunday Hindu* and their umbrellas, crowded near the gate of the Ashram on the morning of the fifteenth of August 1943 — and the sadhaks discharging “gate duty” patiently coped with the rush with a quiet assurance, with a ready smile for one and all. From the four ends of India — from obscure nooks and bypaths, from distant cities and inaccessible hamlets — the pilgrims had assembled in Pondicherry in the vicinity of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

They had come braving the hundred and one annoyances minor and major that our imperfect society engenders in its midst; they had come — these princes and paupers, these financiers and politicians, these landlords and merchants, these poets and philosophers, these students and teachers, these sinners and saints, these seeming scoffers and these half-hearted believers — they had all converged towards the *sanctum sanctorum*, desiring to have *darshan* of Sri Aurobindo. Did they know — did all of them know — what *darshan* meant? What precise experience was in store for them, how exactly it was going to grow into their being and shape their future — they cared not, perhaps, to speculate about all this or, if they did, their minds were baffled in an instant and they quickly gave up the struggle.

Maybe, it was only an idle curiosity that brought some of the visitors to Pondicherry; maybe, some had caught the contagion of enthusiasm from their friends and had therefore proceeded to the Ashram on *darshan* day to put their half-baked aspirations through the acid test of experience, so that the fluidities of enthusiasm may harden into the pure gold of faith or — failing in the test — break into so many drops and atoms of disillusionment; maybe, some had accidentally chanced to read *Yoga and Its Objects* or *Baji Prabhou* or *Heraclitus* or *The Mother* or an instalment or two of *The Future Poetry*,

had been swept off their feet, the spark thus enkindled had, day by day, hour by hour, blazed into a bonfire of adoration — unreasoned, irrational adoration — and the poor victims had by sheer gravitational pull, been drawn to the Ashram, they had to count the minutes, the seconds, that divided them from the “unhoped-for elusive wonder”... “the illimitable”... “the mighty one”... “the minstrel of infinity”; maybe, again, some had learned by slow degrees to follow and admire the career of Sri Aurobindo as a nationalist, as a poet, as a philosopher, and yet had failed to go further, had in fact nurtured a giant scepticism about the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, had even — once or twice — dubbed it all mysticism and moonshine, and had accordingly, come to satisfy themselves whether their own views were not, after all, the correct views, whether Sri Aurobindo was not, essentially, a poet and an apostle of nationalism rather than a saint and a *mahāyogin*. There were men and women of all categories, and children too of all categories, some carrying heaven in their hearts, others merely frolicsome and gay, many suddenly charmed and chastened by the Ashram atmosphere, but a few stubbornly resisting even its invisible currents and persisting in their own unique life-force movements and convolutions.

One heard casual remarks, stray greetings, whispered confidences. The premises of the Ashram were filled with a suppressed excitement. One heard the accents of many Indian languages. One idly wandered hither and thither: one gazed and gazed about oneself and — one felt fairly at home in those seemingly exotic and unusual surroundings. What did it matter if one didn’t know who one’s neighbour was? One knew what he was, or seemed to be, — a co-pilgrim to the shrine of fulfilment. One might speak to one’s neighbour if occasions arose — or if the formal introductions had been made — but it was safer, on the whole to sit or move about quietly. It was better to participate in the luxurious repast of silence; it was more becoming to seek refuge in the wisdom and strength of a chastening and uplifting reticence.

Many of the sadhaks, and many even among the visitors, had a noticeably abstracted air. They sat, by themselves or in little clusters, on the pavements or on the steps of a flight of stairs — and seemed to be lost in thought; of them perhaps it was written

wisdom’s self
Oft seeks a sweet retired solitude,
Where with her best nurse contemplation
She plumes her feathers, and
lets grow her wings,
That in the various bustle of

resort

Were all too ruffled and
sometimes impaired.

And there were others too — other groups and clusters — and the men and women were agitatedly conversing in pointed jerks, expressive gesticulations, and impatient exclamations. But the generality belonged, perhaps, to neither of these categories. The majority of those who had come to the Ashram for the first time wore just a puzzled air: they had indeed come to an Ashram, they were on the threshold of a unique experience (if the sadhaks were to be believed), they were suddenly projected into a strange new world — and they just wondered, they wondered in their ignorance, they wondered in their humility and awe, they just wondered whither all that pageantry was leading, what priceless revelation was waiting for them round the corner, and how exactly they were going to embalm it and preserve it during all the savourless tomorrows of their star-crossed lives.

The queue was being formed at last. It was about two in the afternoon. It was a bright day in Pondicherry, and it was a great day for Pondicherry. The queue was forming, and though the endless line of pilgrims hardly seemed to move, it actually did move on; the coil curved upwards towards the library and reading room, and curved downwards, emerging into the garden, followed for a little while a straight course, soon turning sharply towards the meditation hall. It moved on, like an impossibly long centipede, enveloping the pillars, scaling the stairs now in one direction now in another and at last reaching the very hall, the very spot... The queue was long, with its cusps and crests, links and breaks, its ascents and descents, it swayed and moved, it stopped and moved and swayed, and a hushed expectancy filled the pores and cells of the human frame and even the very chambers of the obscure human heart. How patiently they awaited their proper chance — how statuesque many of them stood, their eyes avoiding the midday glare of the sun, their fingers firmly clasping the Tulsi garland or the fair white flower or the bright red rose — they waited and they moved, they moved and they prayed. “I cannot believe... I want to believe... I must believe... I will believe... let me believe”... and thus even the agnostic prayed, and hope and despair warred in his bosom, and he held the garland in a yet firmed grasp.

The last turn was taken. One’s eyes grazed over the intervening pilgrims and rested on the two figures seated together in unblenched majesty and aura serene. The Mother and Sri Aurobindo! The great moment had come... the presence was a flood of Light and Truth... and the mere mind staggered under

the blow, the mere human frame lurched forward mechanically, but the eyes were held irretrievably in a hypnotic spell. Thought was impossible then... the mind had abdicated its sovereignty for the nonce... and one (dare one say it?) had become almost a living soul. The crowning moment of all! One faced the Mother, one faced the Master... it was impossible to stand the smile, it was impossible to stand the penetrating scrutiny of those piercing eyes. A second or two, perhaps, no more... but how can one take count of the fleeting units of Time? One rather glimpsed then the splendid truth — “There shall be no more Time!” Eternity was implicated in a grain of Time... one all but crossed the boundaries of Space and Time... one experienced a sudden upsurge of glory that was nevertheless grounded on a bottomless humility. And — but already one was out of the room!

The pulses of life started beating once again; the wires, the machinery of the mind were resuming their work once more; the feet knew whither they should go. The heart was agog still with the agitations of the hour — and one returned to one’s room to gather, to piece together, the thousand and one fancies, the thousand and one aspirations, that had welled up in prodigious exuberance during that one great moment of timeless Time. One grew quieter, serener, one registered a feeling of singular, inexpressible fulfilment. One was abnormally calm, but one was also radiantly, almost divinely, happy!

The presence that thus flooded my storm-tossed soul and chastened it with the gift of grace bore little resemblance to the published photographs and even less to one’s deliberate mental imaginings. And yet — how can I account for it? — it was a truly familiar face. Where had I seen the Master before? I had seen Him ever so often — yet where? The mind raced through the dizzy corridors of thirty-five years of terrestrial life... where, O where had I seen His face before? Was it the face of Zeus that had once held me enraptured as I chanced upon it in a book of mythology? ... Or was it rather the face of Aeschylus? — Perhaps, Vasishtha looked even like this when he blessed Dasaratha’s son; and it was thus, perhaps, that Valmiki sat when the whole of *Ramayana*, even to the minutest particularity, shaped itself before his wise and lustrous eyes! And the vision of the Mother and of the Master — were they in very truth the cosmic Mahashakti and the all-highest Ishwara? — the vision remained, the experience persisted, the memory of the smile eased yet the multitudinous pricks of the workaday world, and the memory of the *brahmatej*, austere yet inconceivably beautiful, that was resplendent on Sri Aurobindo’s face yet gave one the hope and the strength to bear the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world — nay, gave one even the strength to aspire to change it all and boldly to

nurture the incipient hope that even the frailest and the foulest clay can evolve — however long the journey and arduous the path — into the supermanhood of the Gnostic Being and the triune glory of Sachchidananda!

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The Mother Image in Sri Aurobindo

(Continued from the previous issue)

Prema Nandakumar

10. The Mother

I have always called it “the great little book”. Once I was being interviewed over a TV channel and was asked: “For the common man who has great devotion for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, which book of Sri Aurobindo will you recommend? It is a fact that people are generally frightened by the voluminous writings of The Master.” I replied at once: “Sri Aurobindo’s book simply titled *The Mother*.” “Could you give us a reason?” “Ah, it contains Sri Aurobindo’s message in full and is easy to carry around, so you can read a sentence and then meditate upon it, if you find a little time.”

As I never tire of repeating, in the Aurobindonian world the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. Such is the divine consistency in Sri Aurobindo’s writings. Be it poetry, fiction, philosophy, literary history or writings on yoga, there are no contradictions that hold us up at a dead-end. I am reminded of a wonderful image in the Buddhist scripture, The *Mahavaipulya Buddhavatamsaka Sutra*, considered as a very important text of Mahayana Buddhism. There is in the realm of Indra a net of pearls which stretches all over infinity. Each node of this net has a bright pearl hanging from it, and so the pearls too are infinite in number. Amazingly, if we look into any one of the pearls closely, we can see all the other pearls reflected on its surface. For, studying *The Mother* one can enter the Aurobindonian world in its entirety.

After the siddhi attained by Sri Aurobindo in 1926, he retired into greater seclusion. The Mother took charge of the disciples, and the work of New Creation. In the very first year of Sri Aurobindo’s seclusion, we were gifted with *The Mother*, a seminal book which reveals the combination of Vedanta and Tantra in his yoga as also the alliance of the secular and the spiritual in integral yoga. The book was published in 1928. When T.V. Kapali Sastri asked

The Master whether The Mother was about “our Mother”, the answer was, “yes”. The statement in the book is clear:

“Individual, she embodies the power of these two vaster ways of existence, makes them living and near to us and mediates between the human personality and the divine nature.”

This is a pointer to how the mother image in Sri Aurobindo’s works had now gone beyond mere political inspiration and literary creation, and had entered the very spaces of his integral yoga. Beginning with the publication of *Arya*, we have a fully documented account of the Mother’s external life, a life of ceaseless striving and achievement when her work embraced larger and larger sections of humanity, culminating in the vision of Auroville. She withdrew from the physical in 1973 but not from remaining as a nectarean presence for her children. She is the Presence in the Matri Mandir that is our heart. To open this Matri Mandir within us, Sri Aurobindo has given us a golden key. That happens to be the volume *The Mother* which he wrote after attaining Siddhi in 1926.

Sri Aurobindo’s book explains how the Mother has always been with us and will always be with us. At the transcendental level we may not be able to envision her; to know her transcendent state, to see her God-face and hear her transcendent speech, we would need to do the *tapasya* of Aswapati, the traveller of the worlds and of Sri Aurobindo, the Master of Poorna Yoga. To reach the transcendent Mother-power one has to be literally engaged in the pursuit of the Unknowable:

Near, it retreated; far, it called him still.
Nothing could satisfy but its delight:
Its absence left the greatest actions dull,
Its presence made the smallest seem divine.
When it was there, the heart’s abyss was filled;
But when the uplifting Deity withdrew,
Existence lost its aim in the Inane.”ⁱ (*Savitri*, 4th rev. ed, 1993, pp.305-6)

Sri Aurobindo has projected the meditative stance of Aswapati as that of a role model for us. In fact, we can visualise Sri Aurobindo himself in the Matri Mandir of his heart, touching the Divine ground of Being in his meditation:

“In the passion of its solitary dream

It lay like a closed soundless oratory
Where sleeps a consecrated argent floor
Lit by a single and untrembling ray
And an invisible Presence kneels in prayer.
On some deep breast of liberating peace
All else was satisfied with quietude;
This only knew there was a truth beyond.”ⁱⁱ (*Ibid*, p.332)

Though such a *tapasya* is way beyond most of us, Sri Aurobindo tells us that the Mother is close by and that she is the Way and the Goal. The transcendent Mahasakti can be attained through her individual emanation. The Mother was such an individual emanation. For instance, he wrote to Aurobindo Basu who had been disturbed by some sceptic remarks he had heard in Calcutta:

“The Mother is not a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. She has had the same experience and realisation as myself. The Mother’s sadhana started when she was very young. When she was twelve or thirteen every evening many teachers came to her and taught her the various spiritual disciplines. Among them was a dark Asiatic figure. When she first met she immediately recognised me as the dark Asiatic figure whom she used to see a long time ago. That she should come here and work with me for a common goal was, as it were, a divine dispensation. The Mother was an adept of the Buddhist yoga and the yoga of the *Bhagavad Gita* before she came to India. Her yoga was moving towards a grand synthesis. After this it was natural that she should come here. She has helped and is helping to give a concrete form to my yoga. That would not have been possible without her cooperation. One of the two great steps in the yoga is to take refuge in the Mother.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Mother takes the argument steadily forward for us who cannot envisage the transcendent state of the Divine Mother. The great spiritual luminaries of the past from the Vedic times onward have visualised innumerable cosmic godheads. Sri Aurobindo chooses four of them for our easy alignment, as they are familiar to our consciousness through the *Devi Mahatmyam* (also known as *Chandi* or *Sri Durga Saptasati*) when we have readings and worship during the Navaratri festival.

“Four great Aspects of the Mother, four of her leading Powers and Personalities have stood in front in her guidance of this universe and in her dealings with the terrestrial play. One is her personality of calm wideness

and comprehending wisdom and tranquil benignity and inexhaustible compassion and sovereign and surpassing majesty and all-ruling greatness. Another embodies her power of splendid strength and irresistible passion, her warrior mood, her overwhelming will, her impetuous swiftness and world-shaking force. A third is vivid and sweet and wonderful with her deep secret of beauty and harmony and fine rhythm, her intricate and subtle opulence, her compelling attraction and captivating grace. The fourth is equipped with her close and profound capacity of intimate knowledge and careful flawless work and quiet and exact perfection in all things. Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection are their several attributes and it is these powers that they bring with them into the world, manifest in a human disguise in their Vibhuti and shall found in the divine degree of their ascension in those who can open their earthly nature to the direct and living influence of the Mother. To the four we give the four great names, Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati.”

We must remember that this last chapter in *The Mother* which deals with the Mother-powers of the Supreme was originally written as a reply to Sri Kapali Sastri to assure him that behind the physical form of the Mother are many powers and personalities that we are able to identify in the cosmic god-forms. Once a student of Sri Kapali Sastri, Sri Sankaranarayanan, told him he could see that of these four personalities in Sri Aurobindo’s book, only Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati were mentioned in the Durga Saptasati. How was he to identify Maheshwari then? Sri Sastri assured him that Maheshwari is very much in the scripture and that is why Sri Aurobindo had included her among the four great and powerful personalities. He recited a verse from the work and said that she combined all the other three powers as one. After the destruction of Mahishasura by Mahasaraswati, the gods hymn the Divine Mother:

*Medhaasi devi vidithaakila saastra saara
Durgasi dhurgabhavasaagara naurasangkaa
Sri: khaitabhaari hrudayaika krithaa nivasaa
Gauri thvameva sasimaulikrithaprathisthaa* ^{iv}

Sri Aurobindo begins with Maheshwari describing her as “the mighty and wise One who opens us to the supramental infinities and the cosmic vastness, to the grandeur of the supreme Light”. She is all-wisdom and is absolutely calm. These cosmic powers who chisel human beings into personalities that

glow with the touch of the Divine are not engaged in any mechanic production. That is the secret of this creation. There seems to be some uniformity but in effect, each individual is quite, quite different from another. This is an everyday phenomenon we see. One may come across baskets of *har-singar* or chrysanthemum flowers. They may appear alike, all of them. Yet no two flowers are the same. Such is the creative exuberance of the cosmic powers. With infinite patience the powers turn out different beings as they are in different planes of evolution. Maternal affection and a high detachment mark the work of Maheshwari, says Sri Aurobindo:

“Equal, patient and unalterable in her will she deals with men according to their Nature and with things and happenings according to their force and the truth that is in them. Partiality she has none, but she follows the decrees of the Supreme and some she raises up and some she casts down or puts away from her into the darkness. To the wise she gives a greater and more luminous wisdom; those that have vision she admits to her counsels; on the hostile she imposes the consequence of their hostility; the ignorant and foolish she leads according to their blindness. In each man she answers and handles the different elements of his nature according to their need and their urge and the return they call for, puts on them the required pressure or leaves them to their cherished liberty to prosper in the ways of the Ignorance or to perish.”

Is it possible for people to be so, to reject grace when it is offered to them? Quite possible. Man’s cupidity, cussedness and moral myopia automatically pull him back to wallow in the despair of his own making. All these are but tests and if he is unable to overcome them, it can only mean that he is not yet ready to move forward to perfection with the Divine’s help. If one wants to move forward, one must be prepared to be a disciplined soldier of the Mother. If discipline (physical, mental, vital) is frowned at by the individual, the Mother simply “leaves them to their cherished liberty to prosper in the ways of the Ignorance or to perish.”

But the Mahakali power does not leave such people alone. Mahakali works from another angle, that of direct disciplinary action. As we have been travelling the path in which the Mother image has slowly but surely found its place in integral yoga, it is also a cause for amazement that Sri Aurobindo had looked into it so minutely, not missing a single nuance. If the cosmic figure of the all-knowing Maheshwari (Gauri) seemed a bit remote, Mahakali is a familiar figure for us and so too her instant reactions.

“Not wideness but height, not wisdom but force and strength are her peculiar power. There is in her an overwhelming intensity, a mighty passion of force to achieve, a divine violence rushing to shatter every limit and obstacle. All her divinity leaps out in a splendour of tempestuous action; she is there for swiftness, for the immediately effective process, the rapid and direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. Terrible is her face to the Asura, dangerous and ruthless her mood against the haters of the Divine; for she is the Warrior of the Worlds who never shrinks from the battle.”

This is very important for the cultural history of India. Invoking the Durga power for battle victory seems to be inbuilt in our tradition. For instance, just before the Kurukshetra battle was to begin, Krishna asks Arjuna to pray to Mother Durga. Arjuna gets down from the chariot, folds his palms together and begins:

*Namasthe siddhasenani arye mandaravasini
Kumari kaali kaapaali kapiple krishnapingale
Bhadrakali namasthubhyam mahakali namosthu the
chande namasthubhyam taarini varavarnini*

The fourteen-verse prayer^v is answered by Mahakali appearing in his inner vision and assuring him that in a very short time he will posit a victory over his enemies, “*svalpenaiva tu kalena sathrun jeshyasi pandava.*”

And yet when Krishna brings the chariot closer to the soldiers in battle-array, Arjuna is stung by doubts. It takes all of Krishna’s arguments and appearing in his cosmic figure to get Arjuna back to the battle! Our history is redolent with the worship of Durga as a guardian deity of an empire. Once upon a time Patan was a fortified city and capital of Gujarat for six hundred years before it was sacked by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1024. Even today there is a small portion of the fort wall standing as witness to the glorious past. Here you can also see the guardian deity, Durga with *trishul* in hand just as the eight-armed Durga was the guardian deity of the Chola capital, Pazhayarai near Thanjavur. Durga has been the warrior’s inspiration and guardian everywhere. The hero-warriors were inspired by the rider on the lion, Mahakali. And they also knew that a warrior had to fight and win or else, attain *veera-swarga*. Anything less was not acceptable to her. Her spirit that infused these warriors from the *Mahabharata* times is evoked accurately by Sri Aurobindo:

“There is in her an overwhelming intensity, a mighty passion of force to

achieve, a divine violence rushing to shatter every limit and obstacle. All her divinity leaps out in a splendour of tempestuous action; she is there for swiftness, for the immediately effective process, the rapid and direct stroke, the frontal assault that carries everything before it. Terrible is her face to the Asura, dangerous and ruthless her mood against the haters of the Divine; for she is the Warrior of the Worlds who never shrinks from the battle.”

That is the role-model for the heroes who would fight for upholding Dharma and safeguard the weak and the lowly. There is no time for trembling in a battlefield! No time for indifferent action, nor any for being sluggish and wallowing in sloth. Beware, Mahakali is close by and will wake up “at once with sharp pain, if need be, the untimely slumberer and loiterer.” The Mother has pointed out that this need not turn us away from Mahakali. Our withdrawal from Mahakali’s presence is actually due to the way she is portrayed in popular media:

“This is the human way of seeing things. She (Mahakali) is not like that...She does not avenge herself, she never does harm to those who love her, she does not strike with epidemics the countries which do not show her sufficient respect and consideration. But she likes violence, she likes war and her justice is crushing.”

Almost all our spiritual luminaries have drawn close to the Durga-ideal, when they have tried to cleanse the evils that had crept into our society. For, they considered her help and guidance absolutely necessary in what they considered as their battle against evils like ignorance, sloth, nescience and indiscipline. Sri Aurobindo wrote the ‘*Durga Stotra*’ and a little before him Swami Vivekananda had spelt out his vision in ‘*Kali the Mother*’:

“For terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,
And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e’er.
Thou "time", the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love,
And hug the form of Death,
Dance in Destruction's dance,
To him the Mother comes.”

Mahalakshmi is quite, quite different in our experience as also in Sri Aurobindo's description in *The Mother*. Maheswari's wisdom, Mahakali's force: we also need Mahalakshmi's grace and tenderness, according to Sri Aurobindo. "Magnetic is the touch of her hands and their occult and delicate influence refines mind and life and body and where she presses her feet course miraculous streams of an entrancing Ananda." It sounds so simple, but it is no easy task to become the *upasaka* of Mahalakshmi. Somehow we find it difficult to bring harmony in our lives due to our constant honeymoon with our own ego. Where the thoughts of ego – "Me", "Mine" and "For My sake" – keep scurrying within our mind, how can we achieve harmony with the outer world as also with the inner countries of our mind? Mahalakshmi is the very image of harmony, the ideal for a human being in his outer and inner lives.

"For it is through love and beauty that she lays on men the yoke of the Divine. Life is turned in her supreme creations into a rich work of celestial art and all existence into a poem of sacred delight; the world's riches are brought together and concerted for a supreme order and even the simplest and commonest things are made wonderful by her intuition of unity and the breath of her spirit."

There is then Mahasaraswati in *The Mother*. The Mother has revealed all these aspects in her terrestrial sojourn, but since our little minds cannot easily comprehend the vastnesses of several powers in one image, it has been generally felt that Sri Aurobindo's description of Mahasaraswati is her portrait. All of us who have been held within her gaze as we came to her as a children, youth, adults or old people know how perfect the description is of the creatrix who built the Ashram, inaugurated the Auroville and made the Sri Aurobindo Darsana a global phenomenon.

"Mahasaraswati is the Mother's Power of Work and her spirit of perfection and order. The youngest of the Four, she is the most skilful in executive faculty and the nearest to physical Nature... A mother to our wants, a friend in our difficulties, a persistent and tranquil counsellor and mentor, chasing away with her radiant smile the clouds of gloom and fretfulness and depression, reminding always of the ever-present help, pointing to the eternal sunshine, she is firm, quiet and persevering in the deep and continuous urge that drives us towards the integrality of the higher nature. All the work of the other Powers leans on her for its completeness; for she assures the

material foundation, elaborates the stuff of detail and erects and rivets the armour of the structure."

Our wants are indeed infinite but she is a mother. That is the truth about *Matri-hridaya*, the heart of a mother. The Mother knows, she smiles, she gives, for she is a mother. This all-loving Mother is also indicated by Sri Aurobindo in the book. He writes:

"There are other great Personalities of the Divine Mother, but they were more difficult to bring down and have not stood out in front with so much prominence in the evolution of the earth-spirit. There are among them Presences indispensable for the supramental realisation, — most of all one who is her Personality of that mysterious and powerful ecstasy and Ananda which flows from a supreme divine Love, the Ananda that alone can heal the gulf between the highest heights of the supramental spirit and the lowest abysses of Matter, the Ananda that holds the key of a wonderful divinest Life and even now supports from its secrecies the work of all the other Powers of the universe."

Would this be an all-loving Mahapremi? Would this be Savitri? But the Mother is sure to come, she will never abandon her children. Such is the nectarean message of Sri Aurobindo's "great little book," an invitation to us to look up to the Mother image in existence.

"And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one."^{vi}

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- i. *Savitri*, Book III, canto i.
 - ii. *Ibid.*, canto iii
 - iii. From Aurobindo Basu's last talk at Savitri Bhavan, Auroville in April, 2009.
 - iv. Devi! You are Durga the boat that helps us cross the terrible sea of birth; You are the Knowledge-formed *Medhaa* (Saraswati), the essence of all the Shastras; you are Lakshmi who resides in the heart of the slayer of *Khaitabha*, Vishnu; You are Gauri of Mahadeva who wears the crescent moon.)"
 - v. *Mahadharata*, *Bhisma Parva*, Conto 23, sl. 4 & 5
 - vi. T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding'

Attainment of Immortality – Pt. IIa

Interpretation

Debashish Banerji

Savitri, Book VII, Canto V – The Finding of the Soul

In response to a summons from her own transcendental self, Savitri journeys inward to find her soul as the essential first step towards discovering a solution to the problem of being beset by the knowledge of Satyavan's death. As she plunges her attention within, she successively resides in the different planes of consciousness she encounters. Each of these is a universal plane by dint of her own naturally universal consciousness. Sri Aurobindo has pointed out that the avatar does not evolve towards the divine, but progressively manifests the divine consciousness. This is the case with Savitri. Passing through different modalities of consciousness, in a movement paralleling in the internal dimension the upward journey of Aswapathy, she finally enters the psychic zone. Here she encounters the triple soul-forces who are the goddess powers of the supreme Shakti at work in the cosmos, subject to Ignorance or Avidya. But these are not the true soul of Savitri. We have had occasion to consider these Shaktis, who are each limited by their specialised qualities and their relative power vis-à-vis the forces of Falsehood in the Ignorance. Each claims to be Savitri's true soul but she realises their limitations and continues beyond them. Eventually she discovers a yet unmanifest Consciousness, her true soul or psychic being. Savitri's psychic being is unique and unlike that of other souls in the Ignorance because, as a Shakti avatar, she is the individualisation of the transcendental supreme Shakti. In this journey, passing beyond the triple soul-forces of the Ignorance, she encounters what one may call a first shadow of Death or Non-Being, a night of God, what some mystical traditions have called the dark night of the soul. Since her journey is undertaken with the aim of overcoming the power of Non-Being represented by Satyavan's impending death, she makes her first acquaintance with this Power in this manner in an intermediate zone between the borders of

an immanent Ignorance and a transcendent psychic realm yet to become operative.

Onward she passed seeking the soul's mystic cave.
At first she stepped into a night of God.
The light was quenched that helps the labouring world,
The power that struggles and stumbles in our life;
This inefficient mind gave up its thoughts,
The striving heart its unavailing hopes.
All knowledge failed and the Idea's forms
And Wisdom screened in awe her lowly head
Feeling a Truth too great for thought or speech,
Formless, ineffable, for ever the same. (*Savitri*, 4th ed, 1993, p.522)

Thus she enters a zone where all that she has known is erased in preparation for something yet unmanifest. As we have seen earlier, for example in the first canto of *Savitri*, The Symbol Dawn, the experience of Consciousness is an unending journey marked by successions of realms, in each of which a power of Non-Being can erase the extant experience of Being, so that a greater or more complete power of Being can manifest. These are symbolised by the succession of Days and Nights or Deaths and Births. This is what Savitri encounters in the form of this dark night. In the mystical Christian tradition, this kind of experience has been called the dark night of the soul. In a letter, Sri Aurobindo mentions that though this is treated as an agonising period of great deprivation and pain in the Christian tradition, in Eastern traditions this dark night of the soul is often experienced as a liberation. It is recognised as a hiatus, a calm neutrality through which the individual must pass to affirm a greater power of Being. This, indeed, is how Savitri experiences it.

An innocent and holy Ignorance
Adored like one who worships formless God
The unseen Light she could not claim her own.
In a simple purity of emptiness
Her mind knelt down before the unknowable. (Ibid)

Savitri is faced here with that which is greater than all that she has known; and she experiences a power of surrender through her own inmost soul.

All was abolished save her naked self
And the prostrate yearning of her surrendered heart:
There was no strength in her, no pride of force;
The lofty burning of desire had sunk
Ashamed, a vanity of separate self,
The hope of spiritual greatness fled,
Salvation she asked not for a heavenly crown: (Ibid)

We start our struggle of consciousness in an unconscious world, with an individual aspiration. Aspiration originates in the psychic being but as we enter into close contact with the soul, there is a point where even the aspiration is hushed and one finds the simple presence of Truth, undistorted by the Ignorance. Savitri here experiences such a disappearance of her aspiration, its surrender to what must come from the unmanifest origin of the psychic.

Humility seemed now too proud a state,
Her self was nothing, God alone was all,
Yet God she knew not but only knew he was. (Ibid)

Savitri experiences a transition in which all her secular knowledge and knowledge of the occult realms, seem to be insufficient. At the same time, she experiences the presence of a great Origin, a Soul-Consciousness within, without knowing what it is. She know it exists but not its reality.

A sacred darkness brooded now within,
The world was a deep darkness great and nude,
This void held more than all the teeming worlds,
This blank felt more than all that Time has borne,
This dark knew dumbly, immensely the Unknown.
But all was formless, voiceless, infinite. (Ibid)

This is the positive power of Non-Being as Savitri encounters it. This is *nivritti*, the cessation of the cycles that prepares the ground for a new manifestation.

As might a shadow walk in a shadowy scene,
A small nought passing through a mightier Nought,
A night of person in a bare outline
Crossing a fathomless impersonal Night,

Silent she moved, empty and absolute. (Ibid, p.523)

Savitri's own individuality, the *jiva* who Savitri is, her the mental-vital-physical personality-complex has become a complete silence. It has surrendered itself and she experiences it like "a small nought" passing through a vast conscious Silence, a little silence in a greater Silence. This is how Sri Aurobindo refers to the transition of Savitri's surrendered personality within her larger cosmic consciousness, during the passage towards her own Origin.

In endless Time her soul reached a wide end,
The spaceless Vast became her spirit's place,
At last a change approached, the emptiness broke; (Ibid)

This state of positive silence, a silence void, empty, but at the same time full of an approaching Presence, an expectant advent, is something Savitri guards and nurtures till it breaks by the Grace of the approaching Dawn and she experiences what she sought.

A wave rippled within, the world had stirred;
Once more her inner self became her space,
There was felt a blissful nearness to the goal;
Heaven leaned low to kiss the sacred hill,
The air trembled with passion and delight. (Ibid)

The absence yields to a Presence. These transitions between absences and presences is an aspect of yoga. The erasure of the past yields to a future that is anticipated but unknown. The mood of such a growing receptivity can be and must be cultivated in us in yoga. The recently late French philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to this kind of anticipation of the unknown as "*l'avenir*" contrasting it with the "known future," the future that is a prolongation of the past. The consciousness needs to void itself for the unborn to be born. Only then, by its own power, *swayambhu*, and not by our effort, a new consciousness will appear.

A rose of splendour on a tree of dreams,
The face of Dawn out of mooned twilight grew,
Day came, priest of a sacrifice of joy
Into the worshipping silence of her world;

He carried immortal lustre as his robe,
Trailed heaven like a purple scarf and wore
As his vermilion caste-mark the red sun. (Ibid)

This is a new dawn of consciousness that Savitri experiences. It is reminiscent of the Symbol Dawn at the initiation of Savitri. It awakes, arising, as if out of a Nothingness, a Non-Being; and this alternation of the dawns and nights of Being are the very essence of manifestation. Savitri experiences a growth to a greater power of Consciousness, a new status of Being, a different kind of existence in the soul through the erasure of the Ignorance by this Non-Being. After she has experienced the ontological Absence, it arrives like a Dawn. Sri Aurobindo describes its arrival in the image of a beautiful priest of the sacrifice of Joy wearing the sun as his caste-mark and carrying lustre and trailing heaven, illuminating everything, bringing delight.

As if an old remembered dream come true,
She recognised in her prophetic mind
The imperishable lustre of that sky,
The tremulous sweetness of that happy air
And, covered from mind's view and life's approach,
The mystic cavern in the sacred hill
And knew the dwelling place of her secret soul. (Ibid)

Savitri is filled with a precognition as she arrives at her psychic being, it is as if her mind becomes prophetic. This is how our consciousness recognises the dwelling place of the Soul within us, because that is our Origin. It carries its own meaning and sense of identity. There is a sense of deep and intimate familiarity arising from that origin. This is one of the essential features differentiating true spiritual experiences from experiences of the vital. Vital experiences carry a sense of the dramatic and alien, something we don't feel equal to, a distortion of the easy familiarity of truth; while true spiritual and psychic experiences carry within them an intimacy of identity, as if we had already known this, because it is the intrinsic truth of all things, more intimate than our normal sense of self. This is how Savitri arrives at her soul.

After experiencing her soul and identifying her consciousness completely with it, Savitri goes through a transformative experience, by which her nature becomes psychicised. This is the first of three transformations which characterise the goal of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. After the psychic identification and consequent

descent of a higher power from above, this psychic transformation process occurs rapidly in Savitri, because the psychic identity activates the seven chakras or mystic centres through which the individual nature is controlled. Sri Aurobindo describes this process of psychic identification and transformation through the centres inside the occult body.

In this human portion of divinity
She seats the greatness of the Soul in Time
To uplift from light to light, from power to power,
Till on a heavenly peak it stands, a king.
In body weak, in its heart an invincible might,
It climbs stumbling, held up by an unseen hand,
A toiling spirit in a mortal shape.
Here in this chamber of flame and light they met; (Ibid, p.527)

This is a description of the psychic being and the "they" in the last line refers to Savitri's individual consciousness and her psychic being.

They looked upon each other, knew themselves,
The secret deity and its human part,
The calm immortal and the struggling soul.
Then with a magic transformation's speed
They rushed into each other and grew one.

Once more she was human upon earthly soil
In the muttering night amid the rain-swept woods
And the rude cottage where she sat in trance:
That subtle world withdrew deeply within
Behind the sun-veil of the inner sight. (Ibid)

Savitri returns to her everyday life and her experiences of the inner world withdraw behind the surface, and are reabsorbed into the depths of her consciousness. But something has irreversibly changed which calls down the descent of a transfiguring power that will psychicise her completely.

But now the half-opened lotus bud of her heart
Had bloomed and stood disclosed to the earthly ray; (Ibid)

That mystic centre, the heart lotus opens completely and becomes the central

agent for the transformation of her entire nature.

In an image shone revealed her secret soul.
There was no wall severing the soul and mind,
No mystic fence guarding from the claims of life.
In its deep lotus home her being sat
As if on concentration's marble seat,
Calling the mighty Mother of the worlds
To make this earthly tenement her house. (Ibid, pp.527-28)

Savitri's entire consciousness is focused and centred in the open lotus of her heart and from there becomes a constant aspiration to the Divine Mother to manifest here.

As in a flash from a supernal light,
A living image of the original Power,
A face, a form came down into her heart
And made of it its temple and pure abode. (Ibid, P.528)

This is the descent that takes place in answer to that call and it enters rapidly and transforms all the centres of her being.

But when its feet had touched the quivering bloom,
A mighty movement rocked the inner space
As if a world were shaken and found its soul:
Out of the Inconscient's soulless mindless night
A flaming Serpent rose released from sleep. (Ibid)

An inner movement of descent and ascent occurs in Savitri as a prelude to the complete transformation originating in her psychic being. This double movement is the essence of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, mirroring the yoga of Nature itself. What occurs so rapidly in Savitri is the individual accelerated counterpart of the slow process of universal nature which Sri Aurobindo identifies in *The Synthesis of Yoga* translating it into the mantric epigram "All life is yoga" at the beginning of that text. This double movement is also the basis of Sri Aurobindo's symbol which consists of intersecting ascending and descending triangles. It is through repeated movements of the aspiration of matter, life and mind calling to the supreme Existence-Consciousness-Bliss descending to meet

it that the pressure from above and the pressure from below carry out the process of evolution, bringing about the divine manifestation in Nature and in the yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

The knowledge of the seven occult centres of the being can be found in the Indian mystic tradition, particularly in Tantra. Here the Divine Mother, involved in nature as the coiled serpent power, *kundalini*, is invoked from below and rises up the spine opening up the mystic centres. Sri Aurobindo teaches a reversed process, invoking the liberated and self-conscious power of the Divine Mother from above to descend through the *chakras* and release the *kundalini* asleep below. The supreme Shakti, not coiled in the Inconscience, but uncoiled and supremely liberated in the Supramental Consciousness descends, entering the *chakras* and awakening the force of the serpent power at the base of the spine, causing the two currents to meet. This double movement of yoga effecting a transformation can occur repeatedly, with progressive completeness. In this canto, we encounter the first of these double movements in Savitri, effecting the psychic transformation. The powerful response of the *kundalini* rising to meet the descending power of the Divine Shakti and opening the *chakras* is what Sri Aurobindo first describes:

It rose billowing its coils and stood erect
And climbing mightily, stormily on its way
It touched her centres with its flaming mouth;
As if a fiery kiss had broken their sleep,
They bloomed and laughed surcharged with light and bliss.
Then at the crown it joined the Eternal's space.
In the flower of the head, in the flower of Matter's base,
In each divine stronghold and Nature-knot
It held together the mystic stream which joins
The viewless summits with the unseen depths,
The string of forts that make the frail defence
Safeguarding us against the enormous world,
Our lines of self-expression in its Vast. (Ibid)

These "flowers," often refreedom to in the Tantric tradition as "lotuses," are the mystic centres through which the nature-power in us is manifest and controlled. This is the basis of our creative expression at different levels of consciousness and these secret centres, which Sri Aurobindo also describes as 'forts' become transformed. They unveil their divine realities, which become

connected to a higher power of existence, the psychic power.

An image sat of the original Power
Wearing the mighty Mother's form and face.
Armed, bearer of the weapon and the sign
Whose occult might no magic can imitate,
Manifold yet one she sat, a guardian force:
A saviour gesture stretched her lifted arm,
And symbol of some native cosmic strength,
A sacred beast lay prone below her feet,
A silent flame-eyed mass of living force.
All underwent a high celestial change: (Ibid, pp.528-29)

Savitri perceives this Divine Shakti at the centre of her existence and multiplied in every *chakra* or mystic centre. Sri Aurobindo then proceeds to describe these centres and the kind of transformation they undergo with the entry of this Divine Shakti.

Breaking the black Inconscient's blind mute wall,
Effacing the circles of the Ignorance,
Powers and divinities burst flaming forth;
Each part of the being trembling with delight
Lay overwhelmed with tides of happiness
And saw her hand in every circumstance
And felt her touch in every limb and cell. (Ibid, p.529)

Sri Aurobindo begins with the lotus of the head:

In the country of the lotus of the head
Which thinking mind has made its busy space,
In the castle of the lotus twixt the brows
Whence it shoots the arrows of its sight and will,
In the passage of the lotus of the throat
Where speech must rise and the expressing mind
And the heart's impulse run towards word and act,
A glad uplift and a new working came. (Ibid)

He starts with the first three centres from above, what are known as the

mental centres. The highest such centre is, in fact, above the crown; it is usually called the “crown chakra,” *sahasrara* or *sahasradala*, a thousand-petalled lotus above the head. This is what Sri Aurobindo designates as “the country of the lotus of the head” here, from which our intuition and thought-power originate. This is a higher mind centre, a centre above the normal thinking of human beings, which opens itself to Intuition and pure Vision (*drishti*). One may posit further sleeping centres of Superconscience within the *sahasrara*, connecting and leading up to the supreme knowledge of the One (*Vijnana*), the knowledge by Identity of Supermind. Below this is a centre between the eyes, which is often called “the third eye.” This is the source of mental ideation and will. Mental plans and visions are developed from this centre and sent out as a will to control our nature as well as into the world around us. Below this is the “lotus of the throat,” concerned with verbal expression, the power of the creative word. These are the three “mental centres.” This is followed by the centre of the higher vital and the emotional being, in the heart region. All these centres become transformed into engines of divine action in Savitri.

The immortal's thoughts displaced our bounded view,
The immortal's thoughts earth's drab idea and sense; (Ibid)

We see here the displacement of the ignorant, bounded view and the drab idea and sense of the Ignorance.

All things now bore a deeper heavenlier sense.
A glad clear harmony marked their truth's outline,
Reset the balance and measures of the world.
Each shape showed its occult design, unveiled
God's meaning in it for which it was made
And the vivid splendour of his artist thought. (Ibid)

In their place all things reveal the deeper idea-forces that are latent in them. The ideas that are at work in the forms of things became manifest in them, even through the senses and understanding, such as in the sight and in the thought, as well as in the expression of Savitri. These ideas then manifest through her as new powers of formation through the will.

A channel of the mighty Mother's choice,
The immortal's will took into its calm control

Our blind or erring government of life;
A loose republic once of wants and needs,
Then bowed to the uncertain sovereign mind,
Life now obeyed to a diviner rule
And every act became an act of God. (Ibid)

We see here not only a divine working but an integration of these centres, so that a single power, the psychic power, may act through them using the power in the crown centre and the mental will to effect a government of the vital forces in us. There is experienced an obedience to a diviner power.

In the kingdom of the lotus of the heart
Love chanting its pure hymeneal hymn
Made life and body mirrors of sacred joy
And all the emotions gave themselves to God. (Ibid)

The decisive sign of the psychic transformation is that the sense of the Divine is always present in front of the consciousness. There is a seeing of divine significances and ideas and also an adoration of the Divine through the emotions. In all things there is constantly felt the remembrance of the Divine due to the transformation of the emotional “heart” centre by the psychic power.

In the navel lotus’ broad imperial range
Its proud ambitions and its master lusts
Were tamed into instruments of a great calm sway
To do a work of God on earthly soil. (Ibid, p.530)

Below the heart centre, the force descends to the navel, our centre of divine works, or of the vital will. This power of action becomes transformed into a calm active instrument of the divine will of work.

In the narrow nether centre's petty parts
Its childish game of daily dwarf desires
Was changed into a sweet and boisterous play,
A romp of little gods with life in Time. (Ibid)

Even the lower *chakras*, below the navel, associated with selfish unconscious energies and sex, become now sources of a divine action, that of the sentiments

turned towards the Divine.

In the deep place where once the Serpent slept,
There came a grip on Matter's giant powers
For large utilities in life's little space; (Ibid)

Finally, the force descends to the centre at the base of the spine, the *muladhara* or material base where the serpent or *kundalini* slept. Here the divine consciousness lay involved in Inconscience. Even this becomes now the firm seat, open to denser levels of subterranean Consciousnesses, that allows itself to be used by the Divine for basing a large action upon earth.

A firm ground was made for Heaven's descending might.
Behind all reigned her sovereign deathless soul: (Ibid)

Through this process the psychic being becomes the governor of all these actions of the divine power in the centres.

Casting aside its veil of Ignorance,
Allied to gods and cosmic beings and powers
It built the harmony of its human state;
Surrendered into the great World-Mother's hands
Only she obeyed her sole supreme behest
In the enigma of the Inconscient's world. (Ibid)

This is how Savitri undergoes her first major transformation, what Sri Aurobindo has called the psychicisation of the nature. Sri Aurobindo gives us a description of this at the end of the canto:

In the slow process of the evolving spirit,
In the brief stade between a death and birth
A first perfection's stage is reached at last;
Out of the wood and stone of our nature's stuff
A temple is shaped where the high gods could live.
Even if the struggling soul is left outside
One man's perfection still can save the world.
There is won a new proximity to the skies,
A first betrothal of the Earth to Heaven,

A deep concordat between Truth and Life:
A camp of God is pitched in human time. (Ibid, p.531)

As a result of this transformation, Savitri realises her temporal eternity. The psychic being is that part within each of us that persists from life to life as the reincarnating element. It is eternal, yet its existence is lived in Time, and it carries the memories of its innumerable lives. Savitri, having realised this part, now lives in the awareness that she and Satyavan have been immortal and death will not have a hand in divorcing his existence from hers. She is privy to the lived knowledge that she and he have always been present and will always be present from life to life. The powers of all her other lives became manifest in the experience of Savitri and in her memory of her lives together with Satyavan.
(To be continued)

Beyond the mask

An exploration of human identity based on the work of Sri Aurobindo

Matthijs Cornelissen

PART I: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

It has been argued that the post-modern developments of constructivism and social constructionism have been a shift in the direction of the Indian tradition (for example, Singh 2004). At first sight, there seems to be a point to it. By taking mainstream psychology at least partially beyond the simplistic, single-track positivist assumptions of behaviourism, these developments have created a greater openness towards cultural variety in general, and there are a number of issues that seem to point specifically to the Indian tradition: The use of constructivism in research and education introduces a certain amount of self-reflexivity, and self-reflexivity has been a hallmark of the Indian tradition since time immemorial. Similarly, the respect for the individual and his active involvement in the construction of his very own way of looking at the world, can be seen as pointing in the direction of the Indian concepts of *svabhāva* and *svadharma*, which say that each individual has his own ideal way of being and his own inner law, or form of “right action”. The complementary stress of social constructionism on relationships and the influence that society has on our thinking goes, again, well with the stress in the Indian civilisation on the social embeddedness of the individual.

However, from an Indian perspective, all these developments are still insufficient on at two counts. First, because the level of self-reflexivity does not go deep enough with as result that the explanatory discourse remains limited to the physical, biological and social domains. Second, and this is arguably the cause of the first, because the enquiry is still third person. The latter is unfortunate because it means that in mainstream psychological research, the inside story of psychological phenomena is left to members of the lay public, and the researcher has to rely on the low-quality self-reports they provide. As a result, it is exceedingly

(DVDs of the complete series of talks are available at a price from Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, 8 Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata 700 071. For details, please contact Arup Basu, Editor, **Śraddha** at 98302 58723)

difficult for mainstream psychology to go deeper than the little bit of our surface nature that all of us human beings have a natural, immediate access to. The only two large-scale attempts at digging below these surface phenomena, introspectionism and psychoanalysis, got mired in irresolvable difficulties in terms of method of enquiry, interpretation, and extrapolation.

Within this context, the introduction of qualitative methods (for example, Braud and Anderson 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Polkinghorne 1983) can be hailed as a considerable further progress, because these methods allow, at least in principle, for subtler and more refined forms of enquiry. Participative and Collaborative forms of research (for example, Reason 1988), in which the results are consciously co-created between the researcher and the researched, are, moreover, likely to lead to more humane and better “grounded” research environments. All this is for the good, but it has not solved the real problem, the superficiality of the original data. Methodologies which rely exclusively on naïve introspection, can, in principle, produce not much more than a social demography of unskilled perceptions of surface psychological phenomena. This has its use and can even be important, for example, to give a voice to traditionally underprivileged and under-represented groups in society,¹ but it is insufficient for psychology to reach the depths from where the processes on the surface are actually determined. From a classical European perspective, one could say that in spite of all its advances, our present academic understanding of human nature has not been able to move beyond what the Romans used to call the “persona”, the mask of actor. In other words, what mainstream science has not yet discovered is the actor behind the mask, the deeper, innermost Self that the philosophers and sages from ancient Greece exhorted us to know. From a classical Indian perspective, these deeper layers of the personality are the most interesting part of human nature, and what the Indian tradition can offer to academic Psychology is a sophisticated theoretical framework and a well worked-out methodology for their rigorous and intellectually coherent exploration.

In the rest of this article, I’ll indicate, in very short, how the Indian tradition has gone about its study of this inner realm and what this has led to with regard to the centre of our human identity. As representative of the Indian tradition, I’ll use the work of Sri Aurobindo.²

Science has to pierce below the surface

To make progress, science has to pierce below the surface: It has to build theories about the underlying processes that give rise to the phenomena; check these out with minute and disciplined observations executed by trained and dedicated specialists who use the best instruments available; adjust the theories

to arrive at a closer match with the observed phenomena; and as an offshoot, suggest methods that can produce desirable results on a larger scale. These applications then lead, in due time, to new and better instruments as well as to further theoretical and practical questions and refinement. This is the way the hard sciences are making their phenomenal progress, and interestingly, in a somewhat more informal way, this is also the way yoga develops, at least in its earlier stages: A student accepts a theory from literature or on advice from his teacher, practises accordingly, adjusts his understanding on the basis of new experience, gradually builds up a set of personal theories that explain his experiences, and then allows these theories to guide his further inner work. Gifted yogis have a broader range of experience to start with, and in the later stages of their life, they learn not only from their own experiences but also from those of their disciples. As a result, they develop a broader understanding and on that basis, create more universal and more widely applicable theories and methods, which in due time end up being used by larger numbers.

The basic, overall process by which yogic knowledge develops is thus quite similar to the way scientific knowledge develops, but there is one crucial difference, and it might well be the refusal of mainstream psychology to accept this one crucial difference that has prevented it from reaching the depth of understanding and making the type of cumulative progress that we see both in yoga and in the hard sciences. The crucial difference is that the deeper knowledge of the Self, which Plato enjoined and which the Upanishads acclaim as the highest good, involves different pathways to knowledge and perhaps even different types of knowledge than those that the hard sciences have used with such astounding success in the physical realm. It is useful to look at this in some more detail.

How to study consciousness: Two different types of knowledge

According to cognitive science, scientific knowledge, like all other human knowledge, is constructed by the nervous system on the basis of prior knowledge stored in the brain and fresh inputs coming in from our external sense organs. Functionally, the process is assumed to be somewhat similar to the way “artificial intelligence” builds up knowledge in computers and robots, though it is increasingly clear that the underlying physical processes must be entirely different.³ The most interesting difference is, however, not mechanical or even functional, it is that human knowledge does not consist only of processed data: it is conscious. And it is here that modern science draws a complete blank. Science has ignored consciousness for a long time, and still does not make much headway with its study, for the simple reason that science limits itself to objective knowledge,

while consciousness is quintessentially subjective. An exclusively objective, third-person science can study physical correlates of consciousness, but consciousness itself escapes.

Before we go further, it is important to realise that the incapacity of objective science to deal with consciousness is not just some small, trivial gap in its understanding of the world, because consciousness is, literally, all-important. Everything that really matters to us — truth, love, beauty, meaning, their derivatives, their opposites, even science — all of it is inconceivable without consciousness. In a deep sense, we cannot exist without consciousness.

That science is unaware of the role consciousness plays in its own existence is not unique to science: it has this in common with our ordinary awareness of the world. Consciousness is in our normal waking state almost entirely transparent to itself: Though we have some vague sense of “being conscious”, what we are aware of is not consciousness itself but whatever our thoughts, feelings and sensations present to ourselves. In other words, in our ordinary waking state we identify our consciousness with the workings of our mind — with our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations — and we are aware of whatever they are busy with. This is so even in introspection where we look with some part of the mind at what is happening in another part of the mind (or rather, at what did happen there a moment earlier). This identification of consciousness with the workings of the mind is the reason why it is so difficult for the modern mind to accept the idea that the whole world might be conscious: Because inanimate things have no nervous system, they cannot think the way we do, and so they can also not be conscious the way we are. What we forget is that there is no reason why there could not be other ways of being conscious than those of the thinking mind.

The Indian tradition never had this difficulty. In fact, in the Indian tradition, identification of one’s self (as the bearer of one’s consciousness) with the workings of the mind is commonly seen as the root-cause of human suffering. Accordingly, it developed ways to experience consciousness as separate from the workings of the mind. It did that through an entirely different way of knowing than the one used by science. The scientific way of knowing is made by a movement, which feels subjectively as a movement outward: one follows, and identifies with the active, constructive labour of one’s thought. In the type of psychological knowledge the Indian yogis developed, one does the opposite, one makes a movement backward: one withdraws one’s consciousness from its involvement in the workings of the mind, and one becomes a kind of silent space in which these workings take place as if on their own. It may be noted that this is an entirely different process than introspection. In introspection one turns one’s

thoughts and perceptions inwards, and one observes whatever happened there a moment earlier. In other words one is still identified with one’s thoughts, though in this case with thoughts that are turned inwards rather than outwards. The practical difference between the two is that in ordinary introspection, there is judgment and a running commentary on what one sees happening inside. In the yogic self-observation things are left “as they are” and kept in silent attention without comment or judgment. It may also be noted that initially, when one has just learned to silence one’s mind, the silence has to be maintained somewhat artificially as one actually still identifies with that silent mind: the moment a thought occurs one either comments on it, or one gets carried away by it. In due time, one can, however, learn to identify instead with the intrinsically silent consciousness that surrounds and supports the mind. In that state, thoughts or images can occur without disturbing the silence one has become.

Yoga as rigorous science of the subjective reality; the role of inner silence

It is this state of an imperturbable inner silence which allows a truly effective study of psychological processes, as one has, from there, a kind of front-row view of what happens, directly from within, uncluttered by the obscuring, and often falsifying, intermediate layers of thoughts and outer behaviour on the side of the subject, and the easily misguided observation and speculative interpretation of that behaviour on the side of the researcher. Once fully established, the silence also allows the discovery and employment of a deep inner power of harmony that can effect inner change in ways inconceivable as long as one lives closer to the noisy surface of our nature.

Establishing a pure silence within is of course not easy, and even when achieved, it is still not sufficient for the development of a fully reliable, “objective” study of the inner processes that underlie human nature. The conditions that need to be fulfilled for an effective and reliable study of subjective phenomena are far from trivial, and the failure of early European and American attempts at the use of introspection in psychology can safely be attributed to a gross underestimate of the difficulties involved. Within the Indian tradition, these difficulties are, however, well-known, and though not always used properly, several effective ways to overcome them have been worked out.

Whether science can absorb elements of the Yoga tradition in order to develop a rigorous and effective science of subjective phenomena depends largely how wide or narrow we make our definition of science. If we take as our starting point that science should limit itself to data that are publicly, physically observable, then, of course, the methods of yoga have to be discarded. But doing so, one

makes a pre-scientific, philosophical choice on the nature of reality and the limits of human knowledge, and this would be a choice which closes the door to the most effective study of the field in question, for there is, in fact, good reason to presume that at least some of the most important psychological phenomena are not of a simple physical nature. Consciousness is not the least of them, and if consciousness plays as big a role in human life as I have suggested earlier, science has either to adopt appropriate methods to study it — and India has developed such methods — or accept defeat and define itself as a knowledge system with a limited scope. The latter choice would oblige society to employ other knowledge systems to fill up the lacuna in fields like education, governance, etc. Given that in our global civilisation, science is the knowledge system with by far the best track record in terms of being progressive and self-correcting, this does not seem to be an attractive option.

If, on the other hand, one drops the physicalist requirement as something relevant only to the study of physical reality, and if one defines the scientific method simply as a form of rigorous, disciplined curiosity tempered by exemplary intellectual rectitude, then the answer to the question whether yoga could help in the development of a more profound and comprehensive type of psychology, can be, I think, an unambiguous “yes”. Even when one takes as the hallmark of science the rigorous application of the cycles of theory formation, testing, observation, and application, mentioned earlier, the methods of yoga not only qualify, but may prove to be, by far, the most effective way to study psychological phenomena. One can look at a large part of the literature on Yoga as a testimony to the work the Indian people have done, over several millennia, to develop effective means to arrive at detailed and reliable psychological knowledge. Especially *jnanayoga* can be regarded as a systematic endeavour to create an “inner instrument of knowledge”, *antahkarana*, suitable for psychological enquiry of the highest order.

Before we proceed to what the Indian tradition arrived at in its study of identity, it may be useful to remind ourselves that at present, Yoga as a complete system of psychological knowledge is suffering from a tragic state of cultural neglect. Education in India is seriously biased towards western values, and India’s educated middle class is ambivalent about the amount of attention India’s traditional knowledge systems still deserve. In the more conservative corners where the tradition survives, it is often devotional, burdened with sectarian fragmentation, encrustation in rituals, excessive claims, and scholasticisms. Though the increasing economic wealth, with its concomitant increase in national self-confidence may change things, there is as yet much that stands in the way of dynamic new developments in this area. In India, spirituality is still “in the

air”, and yoga probably survives due to the millions of practitioners who each keep some element of the collective heritage alive in their personal experience. Outside India, and in India’s metropolitan areas, hathayoga is enjoying a peculiar kind of revival in various sub-cultures, where sophisticatedly packaged, but actually simplified versions are acclaimed for their power to induce relaxation and well-being. In the process, the powerful psychological knowledge system that forms the core of the yoga tradition is ignored.

Luckily, India has spawned at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, a whole series of spiritual giants who managed to pour the very essence of the tradition into forms that are amenable to introduction into the mainstream global culture. All of them have contributed something special, but for psychology, Sri Aurobindo’s work is the most interesting, as he developed an exceptionally broad, comprehensive and intellectually coherent framework for the understanding of human nature. In the second half of this chapter, we will now have a quick look at what he has to say about the Self at the centre of human identity.

PART II. YOGA APPLIED TO THE STUDY OF IDENTITY

The surface nature

Sri Aurobindo describes what one sees during “a first look inside” in the following, perhaps not too flattering terms:

The practice of Yoga brings us face to face with the extraordinary complexity of our own being, the stimulating but also embarrassing multiplicity of our personality, the rich endless confusion of Nature. To the ordinary man who lives upon his own waking surface, ignorant of the self’s depths and vastnesses behind the veil, his psychological existence is fairly simple. A small but clamorous company of desires, some imperative intellectual and aesthetic cravings, some tastes, a few ruling or prominent ideas amid a great current of unconnected or ill-connected and mostly trivial thoughts, a number of more or less imperative vital needs, alternations of physical health and disease, a scattered and inconsequent succession of joys and griefs, frequent minor disturbances and vicissitudes and rarer strong searchings and upheavals of mind or body, and through it all Nature, partly with the aid of his thought and will, partly without or in spite of it, arranging these things in some rough practical fashion, some tolerable disorderly order, — this is the material of his existence. (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, v.23, pp.74-5)

Though harsh, it is difficult to deny that this is pretty much what it boils down to.

The ego, West and East

If there is some truth in this description, then what is it in us that gives us our sense of identity, what is it that makes us feel that we are “ourselves”? In our ordinary waking consciousness, the agency that Nature seems to have provided for this purpose is quite obviously the ego, and this brings us straight to the heart of the difference between the present mainstream of psychology and the various yoga-based approaches to psychology. Though in the English language, egoistic, egocentric and egotistic all have largely negative connotations, in mainstream psychology, the ego plays an unambiguously heroic role. It is the protagonist in the human saga, and a well-developed and assertive ego is widely considered a pre-condition for psychological health and effective social functioning. In harmony with this assessment of the place of the ego, lack of ego-strength is seen as a serious developmental handicap. In yoga literature, on the other hand, the ego is generally seen as the villain of the piece. The ego symbolises everything that stands in the way of happiness and realisation, and getting rid of the ego is promoted as the quickest road to salvation. The difference is so striking that S. Kiran Kumar and his co-workers at Mysore University, have wondered whether the traditional translation of the Sanskrit word *ahamkāra* with ego actually makes sense, and they did find a considerable number of differences (Murthy & Kiran Kumar, 2002). Sri Aurobindo translates *ahamkāra* as ego-sense rather than as ego, but other than that, he does not pay much attention to the difference in meaning between the two concepts. He explains the enormous difference in their valuation and connotations mainly in terms of their utility during different stages of human development. He sees the ego as a contrivance which in the early stages of one’s development is needed to establish one’s individuality, but which should be discarded in the later stages, somewhat like a raft which can be left behind once one has crossed the river, or the scaffolding of a building which is needed during construction, but which has to be dismantled once it is finished. He writes:

This ego or “I” is not a lasting truth, much less our essential part; it is only a formation of Nature, a mental form of thought-centralisation in the perceiving and discriminating mind, a vital form of the centralisation of feeling and sensation in our parts of life, a form of physical conscious reception centralising substance and function of substance in our bodies. All that we internally are is not ego, but consciousness, soul or spirit. All that we externally and

superficially are and do is not ego but Nature. An executive cosmic force shapes us and dictates through our temperament and environment and mentality so shaped, through our individualised formulation of the cosmic energies, our actions and their results. Truly, we do not think, will or act but thought occurs in us, will occurs in us, impulse and act occur in us; our ego-sense gathers around itself, refers to itself all this flow of natural activities. It is cosmic Force, it is Nature that forms the thought, imposes the will, imparts the impulse. Our body, mind and ego are a wave of that sea of force in action and do not govern it, but by it are governed and directed. The sadhaka in his progress towards truth and self-knowledge must come to a point where the soul opens its eyes of vision and recognises this truth of ego and this truth of works. He gives up the idea of a mental, vital, physical “I” that acts or governs action; he recognises that Prakriti, Force of cosmic nature following her fixed modes, is the one and only worker in him and in all things and creatures. (Ibid. p. 214)

That the ego is a constructed contrivance, provided by nature to give us a sense of coherence in our mind, a kind of rallying point around which we can organise our defences against the myriads of forces that try to impinge on our independent existence in nature, few modern psychologists will find fault with. Even the idea that most of what happens inside us is not our own voluntary action, but the result of autonomous forces at work in nature, of which our consciousness is only secondarily aware,⁴ is perhaps not easily palatable to our assertive egos, but certainly in harmony with the deterministic processes science claims to detect everywhere except, perhaps, at the quantum level. The great divide comes with the question whether this is really all there is to our individuality.

Is there a self beyond the ego?

If our ego is an artificial construct, whether laid on us, as the Indian tradition holds, by Maya,⁵ or arisen, as evolutionary Psychology would have it, by a Darwinian need for evolutionary survival, then the question is whether there is anything to our identity that goes beyond it, anything genuinely worth living for? The Indian tradition did not search for the answer outside, but cultivated instead the special inner “knowledge by identity”, the mystical knowledge of the innermost Self and pure consciousness, which we alluded to earlier.

The question of our innermost identity is posed in the first lines of one of the older Upanishads, the *Kena*. It asks, “By whom missioned falls the mind shot to its mark? By whom yoked moves the first life-breath forward on its paths? By whom impelled is this word that men speak? What god set eye and ear to their

workings?” (trans. Sri Aurobindo, 2002). It may be noted that the quest of the *Kena Upanishad* is for the same mystery that the temple in Delphi admonished its visitors to know, one’s innermost Self. In its answer, the *Kena* identifies that Self with nothing less than the Self of the Universe, Brahman. When Shankara looks for the secrets of his deepest, innermost Self, he finds that it merges with an impersonal Absolute. The Gita finds deep within an emptiness, and beyond that Silence, again a Person, the supreme conscious being, the Purushottama. When the Bhakta (the follower of the yoga of devotion) looks for the Absolute, he meets his very own *Ishta Devata* (the personal Divine), and when the Sufi looks for God, he finds the All-merciful wearing his own face. At the very borders of human experience, there is a mystery that is described by different traditions in very different ways, but that itself must go beyond all these mental distinctions, beyond the personal and the impersonal, beyond emptiness and fullness, beyond the dichotomy of self and world.

How to weave a coherent story out of such seemingly contradictory facts of experience? One solution, which the Vedic tradition found millennia ago, is twofold. The first part of it is, that in our deepest, innermost Self we are one with the single, transcendent Absolute, which manifests the worlds in and out of itself. The second half is, that this Absolute is in a deep sense ineffable, and that it can, as such, be described by different people differently.⁶ However different these descriptions may be, they are still based on the same existential experience that we are in the depth of our being an inalienable portion of the same transcendent One. According to the Vedic tradition, it is this essential oneness of the individual with the whole, which is the ultimate source of our sense of identity. In manifestation, each one of us is different, and even on a much deeper level, each individual has still his very own *svabhāva* and *svadharma* to express in the world, and yet equally, and at the same time, in our deepest essence, we are all one with the Absolute, and thus one with everything else in the universe. It may be noted that in this complex situation, the image the Absolute takes in each of us doesn’t appear to be entirely a projection, and not a purely God-given absolute either. One could perhaps call it, in good constructivist fashion, something co-created between “the Divine” and ourselves. As the *Kena* says, we know it, and yet we know it not.

Our double identity

This double identity consists of an ephemeral ego on the surface and an eternal soul in the deepest depths of our being that manifests differently according to the stage of development one has reached. In the most ordinary waking state, we identify with a quite arbitrary and ever-shifting centre in our

surface nature. In fact, we identify with whatever feelings, thoughts, bodily sensations happen to occupy central stage in our consciousness at a given moment. As the *Sāṃkhya* discovered millennia ago, and neuroscience increasingly admits, these mental activities themselves are unconscious and identity-less, but there is a secret ingredient that gives awareness and light to some of them. This is what the *Sāṃkhya* calls the *puruṣa*, and what in the *Katha Upanishad* (II. 1. 12, 13) is described as a being smaller than the thumb of man, the representative of the eternal Self in our incarnate outer nature. In Sri Aurobindo’s poetic rendering:

[The Soul] puts forth a small portion of herself,
A being no bigger than the thumb of man
Into a hidden region of the heart
To face the pang and to forget the bliss,
To share the suffering and endure earth’s wounds
And labour mid the labour of the stars.
This in us laughs and weeps, suffers the stroke,
Exults in victory, struggles for the crown;
Identified with the mind and body and life,
It takes on itself their anguish and defeat,
Bleeds with Fate’s whips and hangs upon the cross,
Yet is the unwounded and immortal self
Supporting the actor in the human scene.
...
This is in us the godhead small and marred;
In this human portion of divinity
She seats the greatness of the Soul in Time
To uplift from light to light, from power to power,
Till on a heavenly peak it stands, a king.
In body weak, in its heart an invincible might,
It climbs stumbling, held up by an unseen hand,
A toiling spirit in a mortal shape. (*Savitri*, 4th ed. 1994, pp 526-27)

In the ordinary state we are, of course, not always aware of the high origin of our sense of identity. Our identification with the surface structures tends to be so complete that it is not surprising that modern psychology describes that surface biological and social identity as all there is to us: it is certainly all that many of us are ever aware of. It is only on rare occasions that we have faint intimations of a deeper truth behind the surface, and this may then find its

expression in a feeling of gratitude, of awe, of wonder, a sense of beauty, a moment of true Love. But we need not be content with that. As the Indian tradition found out, we can ferret the greater truth out from behind its coverings, and, interestingly, we can do so in virtually any direction. There are many quite different paths of yoga, and any of them, if followed to its furthest end, does lead to the Absolute, who is after all hiding behind all appearances.

Sri Aurobindo makes an interesting distinction between two pathways, or inner movements, that both, in quite different ways, could play a major role in the further development of psychology, the psychic and the spiritual. The psychic path is based on an inward movement of concentration deep behind the heart. It leads to the realisation of our inmost soul, or “psychic being”. This centre of our embodied individual consciousness, guides our lives as if from behind, and its discovery tends to go together with the sense of a deep, intimate relation with a personal form of the Divine. The other approach is based on a movement upward, leading to realisation of the immutable Atman above all manifestation. While the psychic realisation tends to give a sense of direct inner guidance focused on “right action” in daily life, the spiritual realisation leads more commonly to an opening upwards to the planes of a more impersonal spiritual understanding and insight. Development in the psychic direction tends to lead, first, to a state where one still identifies with the instrumental nature, but where one begins to feel an increasingly concrete guidance from some inner source of absolute truth, love, and beauty. Later, the sense of an independent ego begins to diminish and is gradually replaced by the sense of some aspect or portion of the Divine being the only real actor. The spiritual development leads more easily to an increasingly impersonal sense of eternity and vastness, in which the individual incarnated being and its adventures in time lose their all-absorbing interest.

Religion, science and spirituality

One may object that the study of these inner states belongs to the field of religion and has nothing to do with science. I think this is an error. The strict division in territory between religion and science has its roots in some very specific developments in post-medieval Europe, where a newly developing, rich, and curious middle class wanted to explore the wonders of the world unfettered by the dogmatic clergy of the times. As such, this division is an artefact of an incidental series of historical events, and it cannot make any claim on universal validity. The ranges of consciousness and experience I have discussed here are exactly that, ranges of human consciousness and experience, and as such, they form a perfectly legitimate subject of psychological study. The real difference

between science and religion is not one of territory, but one of method. Religion tends to be conservative, and centred in beliefs blindly accepted on the basis of established authority. The *svadharma* of science is a spirit of wide-open exploration, based on a continuous rigorous evaluation of theories against ever more detailed experiential data. The Vedic tradition has provided us with excellent tools to explore these furthest ranges of human potential, and psychology would fail in its duty if it did not make full use of them. Humanity is badly in need of a psychology that is commensurate with the greatest depths and heights of consciousness available to us. We desperately need the Love and Wisdom that will flow in abundance once we reach these deeper layers of understanding our selves and our world.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Frank (2000) and Ellingson (1998) (with thanks to Kumar Ravi Priya at IIT Kanpur who brought these papers to my attention).
- 2 I am deeply indebted to Sri Aurobindo and the many great Indian sages before him on whose work this chapter is based and I sincerely apologise for the rather drastic simplification of their work that I present in this chapter. For the full story, I recommend the interested reader to take up *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo 2005, 1999). The former is more philosophical, the latter more psychological in style.
- 3 It may be noted that in spite of tremendous progress made over the last few decades, the exact way our brains process and store information is still not very well understood.
- 4 See Libet (1999).
- 5 *Maya* is originally the force which creates and “measures out” the world in front of itself. In later times, this force came to be seen more and more as a trickster, who fools us into believing in realities and values that are actually not there, or at least not there in the way we see them.
- 6 *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*: There is One Truth, which the wise call by many names (*Rg Veda* I.164.46).

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Is India Civilised?

Some personal reflections on prevailing views of Indian Culture

Don Salmon

Introduction

The Infinity Foundation has as one of its primary aims the promotion of a deeper and more accurate understanding of Indian culture and spirituality. During the past two years, through my association with the Infinity Foundation, I've learned a great deal about Indian cultural and philosophic traditions. I've also learned much about the numerous ways in which these traditions have been misrepresented. I'm grateful for what I've learned, as the varied and often contradictory portrayals of Indian culture have puzzled me for many years. In this personal essay, I reflect on some of the major mistaken and misleading stereotypes of Indian culture.

In the early 20th century, Sir John Woodroffe, a scholar and writer on Indian philosophy, published a book entitled *Is India Civilised?* He wrote it in answer to negative criticism of Indian culture by the English drama critic William Archer. Indian philosopher-yogi Sri Aurobindo, in harmony with Woodroffe's point of view, used that book as the starting point for a series of inspiring reflections on Indian art, architecture, history, literature, and philosophy, which have been published under the title *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. I recently looked again at Sri Aurobindo's essays, and was struck by the persistence, to this day, of many of the negative ideas and images of Indian culture which he addressed over 80 years ago. In this article, I will describe my efforts to discover the underlying reasons for the endurance of these negative portrayals.

I offer the following medley of quotations as my starting point since, collectively, they contain the major themes around which my own reflections have revolved.

"[Archer believed that Indian] emphasis on the Self, the eternal,... the infinite, discouraged life [and] action and led to a false and life-killing asceticism. [According to Archer] India achieved nothing of importance, produced no

great personalities, was impotent in will and endeavour, her literature and art are a barbaric and monstrous nullity not equal even to the third-rate work of Europe, her life story a long and dismal record of incompetence and failure." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*¹.

"Ramakrishna's relationship with his young followers appears to have all the characteristics of what Freud called a polymorphous sexuality, a pregenital sexuality in which the whole body is sexually sensitive and alive.... A full dialectic of the sacred in which the pure is synthesised with the impure – in which infantile sexuality is replaced (but not lost) in genital sexuality – is not present in Ramakrishna... Ramakrishna .. is emphatic about the fact that the purity [of his disciples]... should never be sullied by the impurities of the world; and insisting that this is the ultimate unspiritual practice, he precludes the full operation of the dialectic of the sacred. In Normal O. Brown's neo-Freudian vision, "love's body" is not possible without full immersion in the world. The mature lover rediscovers the polymorphous sexual body in a process of returning to Eliot's garden and 'knowing it for the first time.' Eliot's development may be seen as fulfilling the threefold dialectic of premodern>modern>constructive postmodern, while Ramakrishna's position may be interpreted as one stuck in premodern notions of innocence and totality." – Nicholas Gier, *Spiritual Titanism*².

"Indian philosophy does in fact elevate power, control or freedom to a supereminent position.. the ultimate value.. is not morality but freedom... complete control over one's environment – something which includes self-control but also includes control of others and even control of the physical sources of power in the universe...." – Karl Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*³.

"[Karl]Potter concludes that Euro-Americans have a better understanding of their limitations than their Indian counterparts. The scientific view of nature as 'impersonal neither in our control nor controlling us' is alien to the Indian mind, which has no doubt about 'the power of the yogi to control not only his body but the bodies of others – indeed, the whole universe'. – Nicholas Gier, *Titanism*⁴.

"It's not an accident if America [has today undertaken] military actions in numerous countries where generations of colonial British soldiers have campaigned (...) in zones where Western armies had to intervene in order to quell disorder... Afghanistan and other troubled countries are today imploring [the West] to impose an enlightened foreign administration like that once offered by those confident Englishmen wearing jodhpurs and their colonial helmets." – Max Boot, *The Case for American Empire*⁵.

Personal Background

Before entering high school, I had not read much serious literature, much less philosophy. I'm not sure what moved me one day to pick up an encyclopedia of philosophy at my high school library. I do remember quite vividly, however, the effect of two of the articles I read. The first statement which caught my attention was a comment from Immanuel Kant, asserting (more or less) that space and time are basically constructs of the human mind by means of which it attempts to understand the universe. Upon reading this, I felt dizzy, and reached out to a nearby shelf to steady myself. I then took the book to a nearby table where I sat down and continued browsing. At Plato's parable of the cave, I paused. In reading of the prisoner who broke free of his chains and ascended to the light above, I had a dim feeling of recognition, as if I had somehow heard this story before.

Having no background in philosophy, I turned to the commentary by eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell with the hope of gaining some greater understanding of this inspiring story. Russell presented what I later discovered was the standard interpretation of Plato's "Ideas" – essentially that all earthly forms are imperfect replicas of highly abstract intellectual forms known as "archetypes". As an example, Russell described the hypothetical existence of a perfect triangle that serves as an archetype and source for all the triangles with which we are familiar.

I had a feeling of discomfort as I read this as I felt Plato was trying to convey something quite at odds with Russell's interpretation. But who was I, I thought, to question one of the great philosophers of the 20th century. Over the next seven years, I read quite a bit of philosophy – at first Western, later Indian. From time to time, I would look at other commentaries on Plato's parable. All presented Plato as developing his "theory" of archetypes by a process of pure intellectual speculation. Each time I had the same reaction: that they had somehow failed to see what I sensed Plato was pointing to, in spite of being "expert commentators."

When I was 21, I happened upon a commentary on Plato's allegory by a Swami of the Ramakrishna order. To my surprise and delight, the Swami's comments were perfectly in tune with what I had dimly felt seven years before. By that time, I had been reading extensively a wide range of original works and commentaries on Indian philosophy. Again, I was struck by the difference between what I understood of the original texts and the interpretation of the commentators. Again, I assumed that this was a result of my ignorance and lack of philosophic training.

Since my late teens I'd had the sense that one day I would be engaged in

developing an integration of psychology and spirituality, and by age 20, I had come to believe that Indian spirituality provided the best foundation for this integration. I considered many options for further study along those lines, none seemed appealing at the time. Behaviourism was still the dominant outlook in psychology. Psychiatry was moving away from psychoanalysis – a good thing, I thought – but seemed bent on finding a biological basis for all mental phenomena, leaving little or no room for spirituality. I briefly considered doing graduate work in Indian philosophy, but realised that would require spending an inordinate amount of time studying the works of the same western commentators whose interpretations I found so contrary to my own intuitions.

Some 35 years after having first encountered Russell's interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave, I had completed my doctoral degree in psychology, was working as a psychologist, and had begun my association with the Infinity Foundation. By then many years had elapsed since I'd looked at academic portrayals of Indian culture and philosophy. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that, to some extent, times had changed. Through my association with the foundation, I discovered an increasing number of highly qualified scholars writing with a deep intuitive understanding of Indian philosophic and spiritual texts, some of who were long-time practitioners of the contemplative arts.

However, I also learned that some things had not changed. As I continued to explore the writings of some leading scholars in the field of South Asian studies, I found echoes of previous criticisms still resounding in the halls of the academy. The same pejorative portrayals of India seemed to emerge over and over: her thought and culture as naïve, primitive, obsessed with the return to a narcissistic infantile state; her spiritual philosophies as pessimistic and world-negating; her ethics as seriously lacking; her religion a confusing mixture of high culture and barbaric superstition, whose universalist tendencies lead to the devaluation of religious diversity and a "pallid universalism".

Here I explore some of these critical themes.

I. India as a backward, primitive culture

The typical scholarly perspective on India's most ancient scriptures – the Vedas – is here nicely encapsulated by Nolini Kanta Gupta, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo:

"... the Vedas [according to this view] are the first attempt of man at literature. They are a mere collection of pastoral songs comparable to the lisps of a baby. Man in his uncultured and innocent state used to feel every object infused with life and imagined spirits behind the forces of Nature.

Therefore he prayed to Indra and Varuna for rain, to the Sun for its rays of light. Frightened by the hurricane and storm he would implore the Maruts for safety, and charmed by the soothing beauty of Dawn he would sing her eulogy." – Nolini Kanta Gupta, *An Introduction to the Vedas*⁶

Sri Aurobindo, in stark contrast to this typical scholarly construal, sees the Vedic texts as presenting, in a symbolic manner, profound psychological and spiritual truths. For example, he sees "Nature" in the Vedic sense as referring to more than that which we perceive with our physical senses. Rather, it is the expression of the infinite Spirit, something which imbues every flower, rock and stream with the glory of the Divine. I find it not surprising that a yogi whose consciousness is united with the Infinite, would see inner truths expressed through symbolic language in the pages of a sacred text such as the Vedas. Nor should I be surprised to find scholars – who are trained to actively ignore intuitive promptings from within – seeing in those same pages the musings of "man in his uncultured and innocent state". But this inability (or unwillingness) of modern thinkers to enter into the worldview of a sacred text has unfortunately also biased many who look to these thinkers to shed light on such texts – people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the subtler aspects of Indian spiritual writing and are thus deprived of its deeper significance and impact.

I remember reading the comments of historian William Irwin Thompson on Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the Vedas. So convinced was he of Sri Aurobindo's stance as a mere 'apologist' for Indian texts, that he didn't even think it necessary to support his contention that there was no basis for a psycho-spiritual interpretation of the Vedas. They were, he said, exactly what conventional scholars had portrayed them to be – interesting, perhaps sometimes inspired, poetry conveying the ritual practices of a primitive nature-worshipping people. I've also come across numerous Jungian writings which, while granting some degree of wisdom to India's sacred texts, assert that they nevertheless reflect a basically pre-modern, naïve understanding on the part of yogis whose primary aim was to escape from a painful world they couldn't comprehend. What is the fundamental dynamic underlying this persistent interpretation of ancient Indian texts as "naïve" and "primitive" on the part of contemporary scholars and western thinkers in general? Another passage from Nolini Kanta Gupta on the subject of Indian unity illustrates a different approach:

"The unity of India lies in her soul-power. The unity that we see in the education, culture, behaviour, conduct and the mould of her character are the outer manifestation of an inalienable unity which is derived from a still

profounder living being. Behind India stands the 'One being', *puruṣam ekam*... It is the descent of the soul-power of India that is pressing to fuse India into a single nation. The political unity of India is not only possible but inevitable, and the secret of that consummation is to be found in this mystic fact." – Nolini Kanta Gupta, *The Unity of India*⁷

What a far cry from the usual cautious academic style. Gupta does not intend this "living being" to be taken as some poetic fancy; he is speaking of a "soul-power" that he considers to be as real – or more real – than the physical chairs and tables whose "reality" we take for granted.

What is at stake in beginning to question this commonsense "reality" that we have assumed to be the one and true reality? How would our world change, how would our view of ourselves change? Psychologist Charles Tart suggests that there is a great deal of fear involved in letting go of the attachment to what we ordinarily take to be real.

In the next passage, Sri Aurobindo describes the attitude of the rationalist when faced with a spiritual teaching rooted in the fearsome vastness of Infinity:

"[To the rationalist, spirituality should be] directed towards the finite, not towards the infinite, towards things temporary, not towards the eternal.... The thought and suffering which seam and furrow the ideal head of Homer, there, we are told, is the sane and virile spirituality. The calm and compassion of Buddha victorious over ignorance and suffering, the meditation of the thinker tranced in communion with the Eternal, lifted above the seekings of thought into identity with a supreme light, the rapture of the saint made one by love in the pure heart with the transcendent and universal Love, the will of the Karmayogin raised above egoistic desire and passion into the impersonality of the divine and universal will, these things on which India has set the highest value and which have been the supreme endeavour of her greatest spirits, are not sane, not virile. This, one may be allowed to say, is a very occidental and up to date idea of spirituality. Homer, Shakespeare, Raphael, Spinoza, Kant, Charlemagne, Abraham Lincoln, Lenin, Mussolini, these, shall we suggest, are to figure henceforth not only as great poets and artists or heroes of thought and action, but as our typical heroes and exemplars of spirituality. Not Buddha, not Christ, Chaitanya, St. Francis, Ramakrishna; these are either semi-barbaric Orientals or touched by the feminine insanity of an oriental religion. The impression made on an Indian mind resembles the reaction that a cultured intellectual might feel if he were told that good cooking, good dressing, good engineering, good schoolmastering

are the true beauty and their pursuit the right, sane, virile aesthetic cult; and literature, architecture, sculpture and painting are only a useless scribbling on paper, an insane hacking of stone and an effeminate daubing of canvas; Vauban, Pestalozzi, Dr. Parr, Vatel and Beau Brummell are then the true heroes of artistic creation and not Da Vinci, Angelo, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare or Rodin. [Here] we see the opposition of the standpoints and begin to understand the inwardness of the difference between the West and India." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*⁸

Sri Aurobindo here identifies several of the attitudes which underlie the difficulties of Western scholars in attempting to understand Indian texts. He notes several times that the focus on egolessness, transcendent love, infinite calm, etc. appears somehow "effeminate." I would suggest that the term "effeminate" here stands not only for the quality of being inappropriately feminine, but carries with it as well the sense of being primitive, infantile and naïve. We've seen above how Gier characterised Ramakrishna as being stuck in a state of premodern innocence, still bound to a kind of "infantile sexuality".

But lack of virility is not the worst accusation thrown at the Indian yogi apparently lost to the world in his meditative trance. Sri Aurobindo suggests that anyone who takes the Spirit to be a reality – particularly one more real than the banks and shopping malls which sprout like weeds across the American landscape – must have taken leave of his senses, perhaps suffered a full-blown psychotic break.

At the end of the passage, Sri Aurobindo refers to the "inwardness of the difference between the West and India". Now we start to see some of the reason for the incapacity of so many scholars to understand the point of view of the Vedas, to grasp the meaning of the "soul-power" which inspires Indian civilisation. It is an inner, psychological difficulty having its roots in the disparity between intellectual and intuitive ways of knowing. For one attached to the rigid boundaries of the intellect, the experiences of the yogi might well seem indicative of a loss of sanity.

In the next passage, Gupta portrays the difference between a philosophy based on intuition and one that takes its stand on reason:

"The Indian standpoint... is first to contact the truth by a direct realisation – through meditation, concentration, an uplifting and a deepening of the consciousness, through yoga, spiritual discipline, and then endeavour to express the truth thus realised, directly intuited or revealed, through mental terms, to make it familiar and communicable to the normal intelligence.... One sees

the truth or reality and describes it as it is seen, its limbs and gestures, its constituents and functions. Philosophy here is fundamentally a recording of one's vision and a translation or presentation of it in mental terms.

The procedure of European philosophy is different. There the reason or the mental light is the starting-point. That light is cast about: one collects facts, one observes things and happenings and then proceeds to find out a general truth – a law, a hypothesis – justified by such observations." – Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Darshana and Philosophy*⁹

One of the defining characteristics of modernity is a belief in the supremacy of rationality. Truth is sought – by philosophers and scientists alike – by means of the intellect. All other ways of knowing – intuition, imagination, inspiration, revelation – are lumped together and seen as essentially inferior.

I recently observed an exchange of letters between a materialist and someone interested in Indian philosophy. The materialist – a computer scientist working in the field of artificial intelligence – was obviously exasperated by the audacity of the other to even suggest that physical science could not account for everything in the universe. At the conclusion of his final letter, he delivered what amounted to a mini-lecture saying in effect: "Anybody who believes that consciousness has a status greater or more all-embracing than matter is obviously a child ruled by wish-fulfilment rather than an adult who has come to terms with the real nature of the universe".

This sometimes seems to be the predominant position of some of the scholars who study Indian philosophy and religion as well: "Ramakrishna's position may be interpreted as one stuck in pre-modern notions of innocence and totality."¹⁰

In the next passage, Sri Aurobindo challenges the belief that reason should be the rightful basis of a truly mature civilisation:

"Does the future of humanity lie in a culture founded solely upon reason and science? Is the progress of human life the effort of a mind, a continuous collective mind constituted by an ever changing sum of transient individuals, that has emerged from the darkness of the inconscient material universe and is stumbling about in it in search of some clear light and some sure support amid its difficulties and problems? And does civilisation consist in man's endeavour to find that light ... in a rationalised knowledge and a rationalised way of life? An ordered knowledge of the powers, forces, possibilities of physical Nature and of the psychology of man as a mental and physical being is then the only true science. An ordered use of that knowledge for a progressive social efficiency and well-being, which will

make his brief existence more efficient, more tolerable, more comfortable, happier, better appointed, more luxuriously enriched with the pleasures of the mind, life and body, is the only true art of life. All our philosophy, all our religion – supposing religion has not been outgrown and rejected – all our science, thought, art, social structure, law and institution must found itself upon this idea of existence and must serve this one aim and endeavour. This is the formula which European civilisation has accepted and is still labouring to bring into some kind of realisation. It is the formula of an intelligently mechanised civilisation supporting a rational and utilitarian culture." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*¹¹

Is Indian thought and culture essentially pre-modern? Was Freud right when he suggested to the French writer Romain Rolland that Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences represented a desire to return to the womb? If this view is accurate, then by all means, we need to grow up, face the cold, hard facts of reality and accept reason as the highest means of gaining knowledge of the universe. Was Max Boot correct when he stated that the civilisations of the Non-Western world need the modern-day equivalents of "confident Englishmen wearing jodhpurs and their colonial helmets" to save them from their primitive heritage? The problem is that these questions have no final answer within the purview of the rational intellect.

II. The Pessimistic, World-Negating Spirituality Of India

Equally is it a misrepresentation to say that Indian culture denies all value to life, detaches from terrestrial interests and insists on the unimportance of the life of the moment. To read these European comments one would imagine that in all Indian thought there was nothing but the nihilistic school of Buddhism and the monistic illusionism of Shankara and that all Indian art, literature and social thinking were nothing but the statement of their recoil from the falsehood and vanity of things. It does not follow that because these things are what the average European has heard about India or what most interests or strikes the European scholar in her thought, therefore they are, however great may have been their influence, the whole of Indian thinking. The ancient civilisation of India founded itself very expressly upon four human interests; first, desire and enjoyment, next, material, economic and other aims and needs of the mind and body, thirdly, ethical conduct and the right law of individual and social life, and, lastly spiritual liberation; *kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, *mokṣa*. The business of culture and social organisation was to lead, to satisfy,

to support these things in man and to build some harmony of their forms and motives. Except in very rare cases the satisfaction of the three mundane objects must run before the other; fullness of life must precede the surpassing of life. The debt to the family, the community and the gods could not be scamped; earth must have her due and the relative its play, even if beyond it there was the glory of heaven or the peace of the Absolute. There was no preaching of a general rush to the cave and the hermitage." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*¹²

Over the years, I've encountered many critics who believe that Indian spirituality is essentially pessimistic and world-negating. While, as Sri Aurobindo acknowledges, there are certain schools of Indian philosophy that might be characterised as such, they represent only a small portion of the vast spiritual tradition of India. Some of these criticisms seem based more on ignorance of the facts than an aversion to mystical experience. In the next passage, Sri Aurobindo counters the criticism that the best India has to offer is in the more "effete" realm of literature, art and philosophy, but nothing of any practical consequence.

"[William Archer grudgingly acknowledges that India has at least some forms of literature, art, philosophy, etc to its credit] But these things are, it may be said, the things of the mind, and the intellect, imagination and aesthetic mind of India may have been creatively active, but yet her outward life depressed, dull, poor, gloomy with the hues of asceticism, void of will-power and personality, ineffective, null. That would be a hard proposition to swallow; for literature, art and science do not flourish in a void of life. [But] India has not only had the long roll of her great saints, sages, thinkers, religious founders, poets, creators, scientists, scholars, legists; she has had her great rulers, administrators, soldiers, conquerors, heroes, men with the strong active will, the mind that plans and the seeing force that builds. She has warred and ruled, traded and colonised and spread her civilisation, built polities and organised communities and societies, done all that makes the outward activity of great peoples." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*¹³

Among the many possible reasons why critics of Indian philosophy persist in this characterisation, once again what stands out to me as most significant is the inability of the reasoning mind to grasp the outlook of the intuitive mind. For the academic who believes that scholarship requires a purely objective, analytic stance, the inner, subjective outlook of Indian philosophy may appear not only

impractical and "effete", but threatening to the solidity of his own worldview.

One well-known description of mysticism characterises it as "beginning in 'mist' and ending in 'schism'." To the logical mind, comfortable with neatly defined boundaries, the inner-directed attention of the mystic may well seem 'misty'. Such inner-directedness may also seem to negate in some way the hard, solid reality of earth, rocks, trees, of "banks and shopping malls." One often hears, in the West, the word "introspection" accompanied by the adjective "morbid." For someone attached to objective forms, the inward turn required by spiritual endeavour may look like a kind of "death." It can in fact be said that in a certain sense, all spirituality is "world-negating" – however, the "world" which it negates is not the real one, but the model constructed by the mind.

"[There is an unwillingness of] objective, scholarly and analytical thinkers to deal adequately with the subjective, the intuitive and the more humanistic and cultural forces at work in the world. This is precisely the challenge that Sri Aurobindo is offering as he reflects upon the destinies of India and the destinies of man in the twentieth century when basic decisions must be made in India on whether to conform to the more objective and rational approach of the West or to maintain the spiritual approach of traditional India in order to sustain a more meaningful vision and to release the abundant psychic energies needed for building the future" – Thomas Berry, *"The Foundations of Indian Culture": Its Contemporary Significance*¹⁴

To the modern mind, which takes reason applied to action as the foundation of a healthy life, religion is a thing best confined to Sunday mornings. Religion is understood to have no practical bearing on the way life is conducted on the other days of the week. If by "religion" is meant a blind acceptance of a dogmatic creed, concerned mostly with the afterlife, this modernist attitude of rationality certainly represents an improvement over the pre-modern attitude of blind superstitious belief. But "religion," in the European sense of an organised set of beliefs to which adherents must subscribe, never really existed in India. Sri Aurobindo, in the next passage, makes clear the distinction between this conventional notion of "religion" and true spirituality – a spirituality which he says offers the most practical means of attaining the goals of world peace, economic justice and international unity, deemed worthwhile in the modern era.

"Religion has been a central preoccupation of the Indian mind; some have told us that too much religion ruined India, precisely because we made the whole of life religion or religion the whole of life, we have failed in life and

gone under..... If we give rather to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little of it – and in what there was, a too one-sided and therefore an insufficiently ample tendency. The right remedy is, not to belittle still farther the agelong ideal of India, but to return to its old amplitude and give it a still wider scope, to make in very truth all the life of the nation a religion in this high spiritual sense. This is the direction in which the philosophy, poetry, art of the West is, still more or less obscurely, but with an increasing light, beginning to turn, and even some faint glints of the truth are beginning now to fall across political and sociological ideals. India has the key to the knowledge and conscious application of the ideal; what was dark to her before in its application, she can now, with a new light, illumine; what was wrong and wry in her old methods she can now rectify; the fences which she created to protect the outer growth of the spiritual ideal and which afterwards became barriers to its expansion and farther application, she can now break down and give her spirit a freer field and an ampler flight: she can, if she will, give a new and decisive turn to the problems over which all mankind is labouring and stumbling, for the clue to their solutions is there in her ancient knowledge. Whether she will rise or not to the height of her opportunity in the renaissance which is coming upon her, is the question of her destiny." – Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*¹⁵

III. The Absence of Ethics in Indian Culture

"To many Westerners, all Hindu thinkers tend to treat the problem of evil too cavalierly and nonchalantly. [who are these 'many westerners'; certainly not the materialists who find no basis in a world of meaningless matter for any kind of values] The Hindu non-dualistic perspective and the concomitant belief that good and evil (together with all the other sets of polar oppositions) are nothing but complementary facets of a single reality, must appear to those who have been nursed by the milk of Moses and the Hebrew prophets, of Jesus, Augustine, an Aquinas, to meld the polarities together and to pass over the dilemma posed by their contrariety without actually confronting the problem of conflict seriously." – J. Bruce Long, *A New Yoga for a New Age*¹⁶

I have never understood the "problem of evil" which seems to plague so

many philosophers. If you're a materialist, the question of the ultimate meaning of "good" or "evil" can't arise, because neither good nor evil is an inherently existing reality in a strictly material universe. If nothing in the world exists but the Brahman (the Divine, God, Ultimate Reality or whatever term you wish to use) then good and evil have only a relative, not an absolute meaning. It seems to me that evil only presents a philosophical "problem" if you believe in an extra-cosmic God who – in a matter I can't comprehend – created a world entirely separate from himself over which he has complete control. If this were the case, evil would be an overwhelming and ultimately unsolvable problem.

But did Jesus really teach the existence of such a God? Did any spiritually awakened individual ever teach the existence of such a monstrous being who would create a world separate from himself and subject it to all the horrors born of evil? If not, then is it possible that the whole "problem of evil" has its roots in the misunderstanding of what the great religious founders actually taught – that they never taught the existence of a God separate from his creation?

J. Bruce Long, author of the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, goes on to acknowledge that Indian spirituality might hold a legitimate answer to the problem of evil:

"[A Hindu might] respond to this contention with the observation that Westerners are too preoccupied with the problems of sin and evil and that, were they to view the world through the spectacles of non-dualistic Truth, they would perceive that good and evil are but two sides of the same reality, are nothing but chimeras in the passing scene of life, and therefore do not deserve the excessive dotage which Western thinkers have bestowed upon the topic." – J. Bruce Long, *A New Yoga for a New Age*¹⁷

If we grant Long his point, would there then be any basis for the accusation that Indian civilisation lacks an ethical sense? Is non-dualist awareness perhaps only for the yogi elite, leaving the rest of the population bereft of a moral compass? Once again, I believe the difficulty lies in the difference between two different ways of knowing and understanding reality. The European ethical sense derives from a rather rigid intellectual categorisation of behaviours seen from an outer perspective; the Indian sense derives from an inner intuitive discernment of relative good and evil within an Infinite Divine Reality beyond mental comprehension.

"In Europe they want to regulate life through codes, moral and legal; forced by circumstances and for the sake of mutual interest they have set up a

mode of moral standard, and this they want to impose on all peoples and countries. The utmost contribution of European religion has been a kind of temporising and understanding with the lower propensities of men and somehow presenting a smooth and decorous surface of life.

No doubt, the East has moral codes and in profusion, but they are not considered to be the last word on spirituality; they all fall under the category of the 'Lesser Knowledge' (*Apara Vidya*) and therefore the East has not confined itself within the play of the lower – the three *gunas* of nature. Its gaze is fixed on a still higher region." – Nolini Kanta Gupta, *East and West*¹⁸

A large number of contemporary individuals have rebelled against the rigidity of European civilisation's long-standing moral and ethical codes. However, with nothing greater or truer to replace the old constraints, the result seems to have been an increase in the reign of desire and ambition, rather than a growth into a more fluid understanding based in a consciousness beyond the mind. Perhaps it is precisely its understanding of what lies beyond the mind and beyond ethics that has allowed India to sustain its rich tradition of ethical culture for so many centuries.

In a conversation with some of his disciples, Sri Aurobindo said, "Indian culture knew the value of morality, and also its limitations. The Upanishads and the Gita are loud with and full of the idea of going beyond morality. For instance, the Upanishad says, 'he does not need to think whether what he is doing is good or bad' – *Sadhu, Asadhu*. Such a man attains a consciousness in which there is no need to think about morality because the action proceeds from the Truth."¹⁹

Glimmers of such an understanding can be found in European culture as well. In light of speculations about Indian influence on the development of early Christianity, is it possible that when St. Augustine declared, "Love and do what you will" as the basis of ethical behaviour, he had the Upanishads in mind?

IV. The "Pallid Universalism" Of Indian Spirituality

"The initial difficulty that militates against an understanding of Hinduism is that it seems to be many things to many people. Has it a single scripture like the Bible or the Koran? A single founder like the Buddha, Christ or Mahomet?... No wonder [someone] once said, stung by exasperation, that Hinduism is not a religion, but a contagious disease!" – K.R.S. Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and History*²⁰

I'm perhaps biased toward a universalist perspective, having been raised in

the Unitarian (now "Unitarian-Universalist") church. I find it difficult to understand the need many seem to have for establishing a rigid boundary between one religion and the other. Perhaps in a previous birth I was one of those Chinese people whom Buddhist practitioner John Blofeld spoke of as feeling perfectly at ease in calling himself a Taoist, Confucianist and Buddhist.

From a largely Jewish background, at age 7, I decided I was an atheist. When at age 15, my friend Joshua explained that not all religious people believed in a God who was an old man with a long white beard living somewhere up in the sky, I revised my status to "agnostic." Over the next 30 years, I went on to study with an Indian meditation teacher for ten years, a Sufi teacher for two years, and a Tibetan Buddhist teacher for one year. During that same period, as choir director at a Catholic Church for ten years, I had many conversations with a mystically-oriented priest who taught me a number of medieval Christian contemplative practices. I also attended a Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn for one year, and have practised Buddhist meditation for more than 25 years. So as a Jewish, Unitarian, atheistic, Pentecostal, Sufi, Tibetan Buddhist agnostic who believes with Sri Aurobindo that "there is nothing in the universe but the Divine", why is it that I don't feel the least bit confused?

Here is someone who appears to be confused by the "universalist" perspective of Indian philosophy:

"The question that must arise inevitably when confronting a highly eclectic and synthetic system of thought is this: despite the obvious gains in incorporating a great diversity of ideas and perspectives within a single philosophical orientation, does not one face a far greater danger than sterile scholasticism and intellectual parochialism? Namely, does one not run the risk of identifying entities which are clearly distinct and arise from quite different existential bases and thereby bypass or ignore intellectual distinctions which are crucial in defining one's intellectual position and style of life? From the viewpoint of religious theism, nothing is more devoid of religious meaning than a pallid universalism, just as in the eyes of a historicist, nothing is more destructive of the integrity of historical facts than a philosophical Idealism." – J. Bruce Long, *A New Yoga for a New Age*²¹

To me, this statement exemplifies the typical misunderstanding of the universalist perspective of Indian spirituality. It is true that virtually all major philosophic and theological ideas and attitudes can be found in one or another school of Indian thought: theism, non-theism and atheism; non-dualism, qualified non-dualism, and dualism; ascetic purity, hedonistic indulgence, etc. Looking at

this apparent diversity – which some would call a "cacophony" – many scholars have difficulty understanding how all its elements could possibly be reconciled. However, the vision of a unifying Absolute reality has existed in India for millennia.

"That which is known by Shaivas as Shiva, as Brahman by the Vedantins, as Buddha by the Buddhists, as Arhat by the Jainas, and as all-ruling Karma by the *Mimāṃsakas*. May that Hari, Lord of the Triple world grant us the Fruit we desire". Commenting on this verse, Sri Krishna Prem writes, "Such expressions as this can be found throughout the Indian tradition, which from the far-away Vedic times, has ever proclaimed that 'the Real is One; [though] the learned call It by many names". – Sri Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Kathopanisad*²²

I recently spent several months living in a spiritual community. The core of the community's mission involved the development of what was termed a "universal" form of spiritual life. The nature of this "universalism" ultimately became the source of much controversy. One member of the community grew to feel that a universalist approach somehow made his individual spiritual path less valuable, and that it ignored meaningful distinctions between various spiritual traditions.

As I understand the term, a true "universalism" does not ignore differences or foolishly fuse together distinct entities. What is the difficulty so many scholars and lay people alike seem to have in understanding the nature of the Indian universalist perspective? How can we make sense of this confusion?

Steven Hagen, a research scientist and Zen Buddhist teacher, has a clever way of illustrating what seems to me to be the source of this difficulty. And, yet again, we find ourselves face to face with the limitations of the mind's way of knowing.

The mind, Hagen explains, works by means of a process of conceptualisation which splits the world into opposites – good vs. evil, simplicity vs. complexity, tradition vs. progress. As an example, he gives the typical opposition of good vs. evil embodied in old western movies in which the "good" guys wore white hats and the "bad" guys wore black ones. This made the story easy to follow – you always knew whom to root for, and you could rest assured that the good guys would always win in the end. The problem, Hagen points out, is that life is not so neatly divided up according to our mental categories. If we wish to arrive at a reconciliation of good and evil, we need to transcend both without ignoring the distinctions between them (which would mean a regression to a state of

ignorance prior to the emergence of these distinctions). So what is the position which transcends the opposites of "white hat" and "black hat"? According to Hagen, it is "no hat". One simply "sees" (in the Indian sense of "*darshana*" – literally, seeing the Divine) that Absolute reality which contains all 'hats' (or perspectives) in itself.

But let's suppose that in a brief flash of insight, we were able to gain a glimpse of this transcendent reality which holds all opposites. In the next moment, the mind leaps on this insight, saying "Now I've got it", and, before we know what's happened, the new insight becomes one side of a new opposition – black and white hats vs. no hats, or "good and evil" vs "transcendent insight". The "transcendent insight" thus loses its absoluteness, its reconciling power, and becomes relativised.

Curiously, so-called "simple" people – those lacking much formal education – are often better able to grasp the essence of this than are many highly educated scholars. Perhaps it is because with increasing years of education, it becomes increasingly difficult to let go of conceptualisation long enough to allow a ray of insight into the mind.

What are the consequences of being able to hold such a transcendent view? Perhaps the most important one from a social perspective is that it allows for an embrace of differences, because one's being is rooted in a larger Unity.

"[The Indian spiritual tradition] is... catholic and synthetic, a cosmos of creeds and experiences... the Indian view and way of life are responsible for the utter lack of religious intolerance we observe in Indian history." – K. D. Sethna, *The Indian Spirit and the World's Future*.²³

The universalism of the Indian tradition does not, in fact, ignore differences. It is an all-embracing, comprehensive view based not on reason but on a direct perception of Unity – a Unity that cannot be conceived by the intellect, but can be seen by the intuition.

"It is essential to go beyond the more-or-less typical Western points of view – in practically all areas of philosophy – in order to reach a comprehensive and therefore adequate philosophy... The greatest contribution.. of Indian traditional philosophy, especially in the Upanisads and Indian philosophy derived therefrom – is the need to advance beyond even the highest reaches of traditional western philosophy so as to attain a higher and more comprehensive, truer view which will not only include the partial points of view of the West but also bring to light the highest truth, the highest reality,

spiritual perfection. In this sense, the West is not wrong but is merely inadequate in its search for truth." – Charles Moore: *Sri Aurobindo on East and West*²⁴

Sri Ramakrishna, the great Indian saint whom Gier characterised as "stuck in premodern notions of innocence and totality," was perhaps one of the greatest postmodern geniuses in regard to a profound understanding of this universalist vision. According to Gupta:

"When spirituality had almost disappeared from the world and even in India it existed, as it were, merely in name, there was the advent of Sri Ramakrishna bringing with him spirituality in its sheer plenitude and investing it with eternal certitude and infallibility. [Sri Ramakrishna] sowed the seed of a new future creation.... He seems to have assimilated the essence of all the different spiritual practices of the past and discarded... all the non-essentials. – Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Sri Ramakrishna*²⁵

Rather than a "pallid univiersalism" which collapses differences, the universalist view which has prevailed in India for thousands of years is a vibrant and dynamic one, embracing distinctions within an infinite unity. At a time when there are so many conflicting forces in the world, it may be that only such an integral and universalist vision can provide lasting resolution to our many problems.

"The religion which embraces Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these, is that to which the World-Spirit moves... This *sanatana dharma* [Eternal Truth] has many scriptures.. but its real most authoritative scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling²⁶ ... A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future. By this is not meant what is ordinarily called a universal religion, a system, a thing of creed and intellectual belief and outward rite. Mankind has tried unity by that means; it has failed and deserved to fail, because there can be no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. The inner spirit is indeed one, but the spiritual life insists on freedom and variation in its self-expression. A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a divine Reality in which we are all one... It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and bring about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth." – Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*²⁷

Closing Reflections

I don't know if I've grown any wiser since that day some 35 years ago when I first read Bertrand Russell's commentary on Plato's parable of the cave. Perhaps the Western scholars are right and my reading of Plato as describing a suprarational reality is incorrect. Perhaps there is no suprarational reality, and Indian culture and spirituality is truly primitive, irrational, without ethical foundation and a confused hodge-podge of conflicting and contradictory beliefs.

But suppose that the rational understanding of life held by the modern world to be the supreme achievement of 'man' is not the ultimate form of knowledge. What if there is a way of knowing which is superior to reason? If the attainment of "*jnana*" – a Sanskrit word meaning "direct unmediated knowledge of Reality" – is a real possibility, then the Indian tradition has something to offer that modern interpreters are missing. Having attained *jnana*, giving up the limits of the intellect may be seen to be the means of gaining access to a greater reality; what looks like a loss of identity may actually be the finding of a greater identity; what seems to be a meaningless dissolution of ethical standards may be actually lead to the development of a greater love.

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Sri Aurobindo and the Challenges of the Contemporary World

Sachidananda Mohanty

Sri Aurobindo has been described variously as a poet, patriot, mystic, visionary, philosopher, Yogi, and lover of mankind. While each of the attributes is important in itself, and all add to the overall contribution of one whom Romain Rolland described as the greatest synthesis between the East and the West, they miss the real nature of Sri Aurobindo's genius.

For, Sri Aurobindo is first and foremost, a futurist. This fact has to be stressed because, generally this is lost sight of in most discussions; it is the Mother who constantly reminds us of the future vision of Sri Aurobindo. She tells us that Sri Aurobindo does not belong to the past, but to the future; this is not sufficiently understood or understood partially.

Recognising Sri Aurobindo as a futurist is not easy for most of us who otherwise are able to see his centrality to the crisis of the present civilisation. Sri Aurobindo outlines this crisis well in his magnum opus *The Life Divine*. He calls for a change of consciousness. He wrote:

At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way...Man has created a system of civilisation, which has become too big for his limited mental capacity...a too dangerous servant of his blundering ego and its appetites. (SABCL, vol. 19, p. 1053)

Finding a remedy in the form of a change of consciousness is hard, for there is a deep-seated world tradition that believes in the notion of the middle path that Buddhism preaches, the need for a 'balanced approach' that tries to reconcile

the contrary positions, and binaries, the need, for instance, to follow steadily the fourfold order in Hinduism, the *Purushartha*, to avoid all extremes and to be moderate in the realm of rationality, such as the one propounded by philosophers like Bertrand Russell.

Modern education teaches us to look at all issues in a balanced, objective and pluralistic manner. The basic idea is that all issues can be solved if we were to devote sufficient time and attention in a sustained and in-depth manner, without being partial and partisan. That is at the heart of our citizenship projects. In a varying manner, this epistemological view has come to characterise the modern temper. While the approach may have considerable merit, and may be an antidote to the option of an internecine warfare, this may not be truly the approach we are looking for as a radical alternative. A close look at some of the momentous historical developments including the Centenary of World War I, currently being observed, may give us some clues for an answer.

For the basic failure of the 'rational' approach, we must see the rise and fall of the Enlightenment philosophy that arose in Britain and the West. This tradition pinned its hopes on the virtues of Rationality, Universality and Progress, and argued that Europe was at the vanguard and the rest of the world simply had to follow the European model to succeed in their mission. The major evidence of the failure of this approach was of course the two Great Wars in 1914 and 1939 over the spoils of the Empire. Colonialism cannot be seen without the ingrained doctrine of violence: violence that is not only physical in character, but, as recent scholarship on this issue has shown in the post-colonial field, it is fundamentally violence to the way of life of the subject people, their deeply-held traditions, beliefs and memories.

It is not clear if the world has come to understand the real nature of this failure, based on the claims of superior knowledge masquerading as universal Truth, a panacea for all problems. After all, speaking on 'Our Asiatic Subjects' in the British Parliament, Charles Grant, one of the architects of colonial India, said:

And how are our subjects to be formed to disposition thus favourable to us, to be changed thus in their character, but by new principles, sentiments, and tastes, leading to new views, conduct and manners; all of which would, by one and the same effect, identify their cause with ours, and proportionately separate them from opposite interests?ⁱ (Charles Grant in 'Observations on the State of Society among our Asiatic Subjects', *Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32).

It is generally not realised that the European approach to Knowledge and Power, embodied in the observation of Charles Grant and others, was ingrained in the Western worldview that dominated our thinking for many centuries. The anti-colonial, national independence movements that were witnessed in the post-war situation worldwide were evidence of this fact. It was clear that Rationality was not a neutral category that sought, as the Victorian philosopher Jeremy Bentham argued with hope, the greatest good of the greatest number of people; but served basically the interests of a narrow section of the world's people. This failure has not been seen for what it is, but regarded as an accidental fact of history: 'Change the circumstances, and the fate of the civilisation would be changed'. It has not been realised that the seeds of this failure lay in the inherently limited ambit of the rational temper one of whose consequences was colonialism. There is therefore the need to radically alter our way of thinking in order to avoid the earlier dangers in new forms. Sri Aurobindo urges us to free ourselves from the shackles of a limited rationality. He speaks of a spiritual approach to life which integrates the warring parts of our being.

Influential sections of secular opinion may not, however, be in sympathy with the psycho-spiritual approach to problem solving that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo affirm. Their advice is generally seen applicable in the context of the growth of one's inner life; it is seldom regarded as having any bearing on the external world of storm and strife. Most aspirants are, therefore, quick to appropriate this as a quick-fix panacea of the religious kind, one that can be a perfect tool in programmatic action. 'One set of rules and norms for the Puja Room, the other for the Board Room', as it were, in a Manichean manner.

That is perhaps the reason why many followers of Sri Aurobindo unwittingly create the division between the spiritual and the secular that he had all along stood against. By so doing, he suggested, we would relapse to an approach typical of the religious worldview. Instead, there is a paramount need to free ourselves from the received wisdom and the embedded knowledge systems. In his important book, *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo speaks significantly of the office and limitations of Reason, and Reason as the Governor of Life. By so doing, he does not argue for the abrogation of Reason and Rationality; he visualises their role in a higher context. It is possible, he suggests, to resolving conflicts with the help of an enlightened and illuminated Mind that transcends our habitual thinking, based on binaries. 'If this is true, that cannot be true!' approach needs to be given up. Instead of 'this and that' at the same time; a prospect anathema to the modern mind.

How do we deal with some of the challenges of the modern world? I propose not to list or catalogue the many ills of this world, most of which in any case are known to us. What I should like to do instead is to single out one of most pressing of them, and try to find a solution in the Aurobindonian light. I shall speak on the contemporary problem of cosmopolitanism. What precisely is the meaning of the term, and the nature of this problem, as envisaged by theorists and thinkers? How may we find solutions to some of the impasses of the contemporary cosmopolitanism? And finally, how do we find the answers in the futuristic sense?

‘Cultural elites’ have prided themselves everywhere in being both ‘modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan’. Indeed, it has been a badge of honour in all societies to be so. From the Greek philosophers in and around the Aegean Sea to Phoenician traders in the Levant, from the early Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims and travellers in South and South East Asia to the builders of the vast political empires, civilisations across the world have seen themselves championing the cause of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘modernity’ in intellectual, artistic and spiritual terms.

The remnants of the world that lie in the buried amphitheatres of Alexandra, in the oasis of Sewa, the oracle of Delphi, the antiquities of the Holy Roman Empire, or the weed-covered temples of Angkor Vat in Kampuchea are eloquent testimony to the ‘cosmopolitan’ transactions in the ancient world. At the same time, the term has had problematic associations with the notion of ‘barbarism’ that ‘advanced’ societies have systematically foisted upon the ‘other’: the ‘*Mlechha*’, as a mark of disrespect and contempt, is not unique to our land, it has had a variation of use, or rather abuse, in spatial and temporal terms and continues to enjoy currency today, albeit in more ‘civilised’ incarnations. Cultural aristocracy, rooted to birth, espoused by the so called elites in all societies, old and new, has historically led to dangerous and destructive ends. The Nazi experiment in racial supremacy is not the only one of its kind in human history.

In contemporary India, elite public schools proudly announce ‘cosmopolitanism’ as a badge of their mission and goals. The Indian State increasingly lobbies for the setting up of the foreign universities, and is all set to bring about the necessary legislations to affect this end. Educational and cultural exchange, the long-standing strength of universities from the ancient to the modern, is no longer perceived as sufficient: The new generation must have a global vision and ‘cosmopolitan’ approach to learning.

The Global Cosmopolitan Today

The ‘global cosmopolitan’ is the mark of the new pop culture, the envy of

upwardly mobile parents. No longer confined to scions born with a silver spoon in feudal, aristocratic families, the newer aspiring elites in India and other developing nations, are urged to tread the ‘cosmopolitan’ path to success. Like most other things today that are under the fateful lure of commerce, the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ suggests more a mystique than understanding of what it precisely means, aside from being a value added product.

English language as part of the MacWorld global culture is held a necessary requisite to the goal of cosmopolitan modernity. It is the magic glue that holds all. Consequently, Indian languages and the cultural traditions they represent are increasingly looked with disfavour among the newer elites. To be ‘Indian’ is to be atavistic and backward looking. Monte Carlo and Benetton must guide our sartorial choices. Newer gadgetry, technological apparatus, hair style and costumes must mimicry their counterparts in the West from Barcelona to Brisbane. The ethnic is fine as long it is commodified and masquerades as ‘cosmopolitan’. At the school and college level, choice for the students and learners must quickly gravitate to foreign languages rather than one’s mother tongues adding a new meaning to multilingualism. A whole new generation is born completely oblivious of its roots and origin. Perfectly suited to the demands of business, commerce, technology and management, such ‘products’ are held assets of our families and communities whereas Indian languages and traditions must be carried on the back of the non-literates.

Cosmopolitanism and the Global Capital

Cosmopolitanism has had unique expressions in the age of late capitalism; it is governed by the transnational trafficking of ideas, the powerful spread of costumes, manners and life styles, marked by the monochrome commodification of cultures, uniformly across the globe, from California to Caracas. In this scenario, nation-states that enjoy asymmetry with the West in economic and political terms are destined to remain culturally subjugated and cannot aspire to be ‘cosmopolitan’ on their own terms.

Some of the influential strands of cosmopolitanism and modernity in early 20th century have seen themselves antithetical to the local and the regional. Indeed, according to some proponents, the outlying province or the principality must always take a back seat. In this cultural universe, to be ‘cosmopolitan’ is to pay sole allegiance to the metropolis; all constituents must give way for the greater good in terms of the centralisation of authority, political, economic, legislative and cultural. The cultural imperialism and the rise of the intellectual capital in the metropolitan centres of learning in the West is a manifestation of this trend; it has reached its peak today and seems invincible in the era of cul-

tural globalisation. Cosmopolitanism, in this sense, becomes coterminous with 'globalisation' and a problematic category. What could be the alternative trajectories to the dominant versions of cosmopolitanism?

Cultural transactions through the mode of travel have been a fact of life in the ancient world. As Pollock correctly observes, 'some people in the past have been able to be cosmopolitan or vernacular without directly professing either, perhaps even while finding it impossible rationally to justify either.'ⁱⁱ On the other hand, beginning with the early decades of the 20th century, newer and more particularised forms of transactions took place thanks to the clash between imperialism and liberation movements across the world.

However, it must be stated at the outset that travels across several countries or residence abroad does not, *ipso facto*, create cosmopolitanism. The basic requirement here would be a genuine belief in eclecticism and in a world without borders such as the one Rammohan Roy had once contemplated. Similarly, Swami Vivekananda can be seen as a Universalist and a cosmopolitan figure although some critics might disagree.

Etymologically speaking, the term 'Cosmopolitanism' has for its source two Greek words '*Kosmou*' and '*Politeis*', meaning 'citizens of the world'. 'Cosmopolitan thinking,' as Nick Stevenson suggests, 'is concerned with the transgression of boundaries and markers, and the development of intercultural of an inclusive cultural democracy and citizenship. Yet cosmopolitanism is not only concerned with intermixing and the ethical relations between the self and others, but seeks an institutional and political grounding in the context of the shared global problems.'ⁱⁱⁱ

It is equally important to note here the differences and overlaps between cosmopolitanism produced by the European Enlightenment and that manifest in recent times. The former, based on the Cartesian primacy of Reason and the Hegelian sense of History, conferred upon the West the unique mission to lead the world. The 'others' had to be necessarily followers in historical and cultural terms. There is the Whiteman's burden, his civilising mission in the world. Orwell's protagonist Flory aptly captures the liberal dilemma in his semi-autobiographical novel *Burmese Days*. Inter-cultural or cross-cultural travel was consequently asymmetrical. Few from the non-West actually travelled and revolutionised the foundational beliefs the West cherished. Most became the mimic-men, a term effectively used by the Caribbean novelist V.S. Naipaul.

How do we reconcile the claims of the universal with those of the particular, a question central to the theory of cosmopolitanism? As Saranindranath Tagore says,^{iv} the 'understanding of universality is not of an abstract Kantian sort but assumes that particular cultural traditions can provide the base for understanding

and morally relating to others'. Such a 'conception of 'rationality does not merely yield postmodern toleration of alterity, but aspires to dissolve instances of otherness altogether by enriching one's own tradition through hermeneutic absorption and assimilation.'^v

The cosmopolitan path that Tagore and Sri Aurobindo speak of is radically different from the global cosmopolitanism of today. Such cosmopolitanism is not homogeneous in character, one that effaces all particularities, and differences, demanded by the global capital.

What are the defining characteristics that make this movement radically different from its dominant contemporary version, the so called Macworld 'global culture'? First, it believes in the sovereignty of Reasoning, the 'fearless reasoning of Freedom' that we find in Tagore. This reasoning combines the universal with the particular, to consider the world as an essential part of oneself^{vi}, an idea that is integral to Sri Aurobindo. Thus, while Tagore upheld the transcendence of cultural boundaries in favour of the 'universal Human,' he also critiqued the neglect of cultural specificities in favour of universalism. We are reminded, in this context, of the controversy he had with the *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* in the early years of the 20th Century on precisely this question.

Secondly, this worldview does not devalue tradition even as it embraces modernity.^{vii} Next, it does not demand of its patriot's levels of abstractions and disembodiment most men and women would be unable to muster. Life of Reason detached from Tradition would be unintelligible. Finally, Cultural Relativism cannot be a viable answer to the question of cosmopolitanism. For, such relativism, while appealing to many, including the enlightened sections, has the danger of slipping into isolationism or parochialism. We may, therefore, that there is a great loss when tradition is devalued to achieve the cosmopolitan attitude.^{viii}

Crucial to the theory of cosmopolitanism is the notion of freedom of choice and self-determination. But then, isn't freedom itself a loaded term? It is not freedom by itself as a category but the agents and practitioners of freedom who matter. Freedom is an attribute, a state of existence, or a way of life, political, moral and spiritual, that is invoked arbitrarily and used indiscriminately. For instance, Sri Aurobindo points out that a rank capitalist invokes freedom of economic enterprise while suppressing the labour, just as patriarchal men habitually use the ploy of freedom in order to oppress women.

The problem arises, according to Sri Aurobindo, because of our limited understanding of the notion of the "Self". What we understand by this term is generally understood as the ego: a limited, flawed and petty being that mas-

querades as the noble, the altruistic and the universal. The ego feeds by other egos, individual and collective, just as it finds itself in antagonistic terms with similar egoistic formations. A mechanical accommodation of interests, of mutual tolerance, based on the need for mutual survival is the inevitable condition for the egoistic existence. We see this manifest in the clash between the "idea of liberty" and the "idea of law." Equally does it manifest, he points out, in the European statesman's desire to teach liberty to the Asiatic: The civilising mission of the West.

Thus, it is clear that we cannot equate the self with the ego. We must move beyond this limited notion to one that is based on mutual acceptance and mutual recognition. It is essentially the human failure to accord this recognition, based on deeper affinities, that is the cause of war.

The key approach to self-determination, argues Sri Aurobindo, is that the law of one's own being must be "essentially determined from within". Viewed from this angle, despite the passage in time, the role of self-determination continues to be relevant throughout the world — from the relationship of the family as a basic social unit to the relations between nations. Self-determination as a factor operates today in the arena of ethnicity, identity politics and multiculturalism, in citizenship rights and in the rights of minorities. It is a problematic concept in the politics of representation that asks: who decides and for whom?

It is here that, we may consider the answer Sri Aurobindo provides. As he writes insightfully:

The right idea of self-determination makes a clear sweep of these confusions. It makes it clear that liberty should proceed by the development of the law of one's own being determined from within, evolving out of oneself and not determined from outside by the idea and will of another. There remains the problem of relations, of the individual and collective self-determination and of the interaction of the self-determination of one on the self-determination of another. That cannot be finally settled by any mechanical solution, but only by the discovery of some meeting-place of the law of our self-determination with the common law of mutuality, where they began to become one. It signifies in fact the discovery of an inner and larger self other than the mere ego, in which our individual self-fulfilment no longer separates us from others but at each step of our growth calls for an increasing unity. (SABCL, vol. 15, p. 604)

The idea that each individual, be at adolescent, adult or the child, must be given the greatest respect in terms of the freedom of choice and well-being is central to Sri Aurobindo's thinking, as evidenced in this crucial quotation from *War and Self-Determination*. While order and unity are important, it is equally important, argues Sri Aurobindo, to allow the free play of diversity, but it must be freedom from within, from the deepest core of our being, and not that which springs from our desire and egoism. This is a refrain that is found in most of his writings on the subject. In *The Ideal of Human Unity*, writing on the apparent conflict between law and liberty, Sri Aurobindo says:

The quarrel between law and liberty stands on the same ground and moves to the same solution. The diversity, the variation must be a free variation. Nature does not manufacture, does not impose a pattern or a rule from outside; she impels life to grow from within and to assert its own natural law and development modified only by its commerce with its environment. All liberty, individual, national, religious, social, ethical, takes its ground upon this fundamental principle of our existence. By liberty we mean the freedom to obey the law of our being, to grow to our natural self-fulfilment, to find out naturally and freely our harmony with our environment. ... If a real, a spiritual and psychological unity were effectuated, liberty would have no perils and disadvantages, for free individuals enamoured of unity would be compelled by themselves by their own need, to accommodate perfectly their own growth with the growth of their fellows and would not feel themselves complete except in the free growth of others.^{ix} (SABCL, vol. 15, p. 403)

Growth from within and not so much from outside, the need to see the completeness of one with the completeness of all — these remain deeply spiritual ideals before mankind. Such an ideal goes beyond the world of binaries and polarities typical of the rational approach to life; it calls for a faculty and instrumentality hitherto unknown in our individual and collective life.

In this essay we have looked at one of the vexing problems of the contemporary world, namely that of cosmopolitanism. We have seen that cosmopolitanism is not internationalism or globalism as the terms are commonly understood; nor is it the notion of the 'global modern' that constantly assails us today in the context of the unipolar world. We have looked at some of the theories and practice of contemporary cosmopolitanism. The conventional thinking on the subject is that cosmopolitanism involves going beyond the local,

and the traditional to the universal and the non-local. In fact it entails the conscious discarding of the local and the traditional for the more valorised global. That is certainly the wisdom of the past, based on thinking of the Western Enlightenment, followed by the rest of the world.

We have argued in favour of the opposite. Based on the insights of Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, we have noted that tradition and modernity, local and the global must go hand in hand, and not one at the expense of the other. It is the freedom of choice that the Self makes that is of crucial importance. Sri Aurobindo teaches us that the self has to be understood as an entity distinct from the ego. It is then that the contraries could be resolved and we can fashion out a new model of cosmopolitanism.

- i. Charles Grant, *Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, General Appendix, 'Observations on the State of Society Among our Asiatic Subjects,' 8-10, p.80.
- ii. Pollock, p.593.
- iii. See, Nick Stevenson, 'Introduction', 'Cultural Citizenship' in *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitan Questions*, McGraw Hill, Open University Press, 2003, p.5.
- iv. See 'Tagore's Conception of Cosmopolitanism: A Reconstruction', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol.77. No.4, fall 2008:1070-1084.
- v. Ibid.p.1070.
- vi. For more of the universal-particular debate, see, Roland Robertson, 'The Universalism-Particularism Issue,' in *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture*, London: Sage, 1992.p.102.
- vii. As Saranindranath Tagore correctly states, Tagore is against the 'vacuous cosmopolitanism that ignores the weight of tradition'. He aptly wrote: 'I have come to feel that the mind, which has been matured in the atmosphere of a profound knowledge of its own country and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from other countries'. See, Sisir Kumar Das. Ed. 'The Way of Unity' *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol.3. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996.
- viii. See Hilary Putnam, 'Must We Choose Between Patriotism and Universal Reason', in Cohen, Op. Cit.pp.91-97.
- ix. Sri Aurobindo : *A Contemporary Reader*, Ed. Sachidananda Mohanty, New Delhi: Routledge India, pp.65-66.

Auroville and Experiments in Education

Deepti Tewari

"Greetings from Auroville to all men of goodwill. Are invited to Auroville, all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life", was the message The Mother sent out into the world on the 28th of February 1968. Upon a barren and denuded plateau in rural Tamil Nadu, Auroville was born. A further step in concretising Sri Aurobindo's vision of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying a new consciousness was brought into matter.

Sri Aurobindo's world view demands an integral perfection. A perfection, that aims to bring the highest powers of the spirit into this material world of matter, life and mind that we inhabit. For such a manifestation to be effective, a collective effort is essential to bring about a change in the collective human consciousness. The launching of the project of Auroville was a more exterior step that considerably widened the previously established material base of this evolutionary work.

Auroville as a collectivity is aimed at creating a fraternity of collaboration that results in just such a collective realisation. Why is this so crucial to the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother?

Until Sri Aurobindo, all previous spiritual philosophies have been other-worldly in their offered solutions. That matter can be transformed seems not to have been considered possible. But, Sri Aurobindo's position is that life in matter is ignoble only because of its present obscure state. Matter evolves; this accepted there is then no reason to doubt that this material life, this earth, is meant ultimately to embody divinity. This is the aim of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, and The Mother's launching of Auroville, – that she offered to "humanity as a whole" – was an attempt to create a large enough material field for research, study and experimentation in just such an accelerated collective realisation:

For millennia, we have been developing outer means, outer instruments,

outer techniques of living – and finally those means and techniques are crushing us. The sign of the new humanity is a reversal in the standpoint and the understanding that inner knowledge and inner technique can change the world and master it without crushing it.

Auroville is the place where this new way of life is being worked out, it is a centre of accelerated evolution where man must bring to change the world through the power of the inner spirit. The Mother's Agenda 9.221

Humanity is not the last rung of terrestrial creation. Evolution continues and man will be surpassed. It is for each one to know whether he wants to participate in the advent of this new species. For those who are satisfied with the world as it is, Auroville obviously has no *raison d'être*. *The Mother's Agenda* 21.9.66

To understand what has been placed before Auroville as its collective aim, it is important to look at the moment when Auroville took birth. Through the '50's and the '60's, Mother's yoga in the body consciousness had developed apace acting upon the universal cellular sphere. The time was ripe for a larger more exteriorised experiment.

There are few specific directions given to Auroville on the topic of education by The Mother. 'I want to insist on the fact that it will be an experiment, it is to make experiments — experiments research, studies' (30.12.67) she said. And from the beginning Her guidance came in broad strokes rather than detailed explanations: an approach she referred to as a 'pressure of consciousness' which would 'arrange' people and things according to their own state of consciousness or lack thereof. The onus seemed to be rather on individual choice demanding an effort and a 'rising up' of consciousness. The seminal idea-forces that represent Auroville's spirit, such as *The Charter of Auroville*, and the set of six steps she titled *To be a True Aurovilian*, create the wholeness of vision as well as the programme of action – an individualised self-education – that every Aurovilian undertakes. Indeed, every person, who chooses Auroville, becomes a student of self-seeking, whether this search has awakened to awareness or not. These mantric texts contain an all-encompassing programme of yogic self-development and sadhana for anyone who sincerely adopts them. They constitute the real guideposts in Auroville's journey in all domains of its endeavour, including education.

Yet, in all Her remarks there has been a great insistence on Life, – a life infused with a conscious and willed aspiration, guiding the journey of individual Aurovilians in the karma yoga that is Auroville.

"For there is a starting-point: when you have found within yourself the light that never wavers, the presence which can guide you with certitude, then you become aware that constantly, in everything that happens, there is something to be learnt, and that in the present state of matter there is always a progress to be made. That is how one should come, eager to find out at every minute the progress to be made. To have a life that wants to grow and perfect itself, that is what the collective ideal of Auroville should be: 'A life that wants to grow and perfect itself', and above all, not in the same way for everyone – each one in his own way." CWM, 13.318-9

Amongst the few comments specific to education in Auroville, is a list in Mother's hand of school names. For many years this was seen as names given by her to school buildings under construction in 1971 on the Last School campus in Aspiration. But was it really so?

LAST SCHOOL
AFTER SCHOOL 1
AFTER SCHOOL 2
AFTER SCHOOL 3
SUPER SCHOOL
NO SCHOOL

The names themselves invite a second look. What emerges is a developing sequence, a growth from a last outpost of schooling to something that evolves into a 'no school'. The Mother's list seems to be suggestive of a psychological progression.

As Auroville grew into an awareness of the deeper springs of its impulsion, so too was awakened the idea that an orderly progression through stages of psychological growth was not only possible but essential. Auroville itself is a vast field where every single person is a learner in a collective evolutionary field of accelerated self-evolution. Earlier, when speaking of the education she had wanted practised in the school at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, she used the term 'Free Progress'. Asked to define what she meant by 'free progress' The Mother said: "A progress guided by the soul and not subjected to habits, conventions or preconceived ideas." CWM, 12:172

What did The Mother intend when she spoke of education as a progress guided by the soul and not subjected to habits, conventions and preconceived ideas? And how would this apply to Auroville: "*Auroville wants to be a new creation expressing a new consciousness in a new way and according to*

new methods.' The Mother.

Auroville ought not merely to settle for systems and methodologies in common practice around the world. Would that not defeat its intention as a place for experiments, research and study and orient it towards programmes and methodologies constructed for an industrial age, utilitarian mind set, somewhat inimical to the spirit of Auroville?

In another context, at the Ashram school, The Mother had said something that was even more relevant to a collective experiment oriented towards the future:

We are not here to do (only a little better) what the others do.

We are here to do what the others cannot do because they do not have the idea that it can be done.

We are here to open the way of the Future to children who belong to the Future.

Anything else is not worth the trouble and not worthy of Sri Aurobindo's help. *CWM*, vol. 12:113

There would need to be an imperative insistence on progress, a conscious progress that must arise from the deepest impulses of the being. Moreover, this would need to be combined with the idea of perfectibility rather than a pursuit merely of success, career and money – the commonplace reasons for education in modern times. "The aim of education is not to prepare a man to succeed in life and society, but to increase his perfectibility to the utmost", *CWM*, vol.12, p.120 And if the means to the goal becomes the growth of consciousness, limitless vistas open, for there is no limit to the growth of consciousness. We enter into a pattern of delight in learning as we explore the secrets of this mysterious universe that stretches outwardly before us and inwardly within us; and we discover the joy of the mind's soar and soul's dive into the infinite. Finally, and most importantly, we find a primary focus on the necessity of bringing forward the soul personality as the true centre of life and action. Both The Mother and Sri Aurobindo repeatedly place this requirement as the one indispensable thing, upon which a new consciousness may be securely constituted.

"In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls; education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones..." *CWM*, vol. 12, p.93

It would seem that to be given conditions conducive to keeping a conscious awareness of its psychic being ought to be the birthright of every child in Auroville. This self-finding has been set by The Mother for all who choose Auroville, as the first essential in the process of becoming what she called a 'true Aurovilian':

"The first necessity is the inner discovery, in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being, free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the effective centre of our being and our life in Auroville."

When one speaks of contents and methodologies the question arises: What are the processes of an education whose aim is the bringing forward of the inmost personality – the soul personality? What constitutes the content of such an attempt? Already the aim of perfectibility rather than success, with the growth of consciousness as the means, calls for a different basis of action. Consciousness is everywhere but expresses itself in the individual through faculties present in every part of the being. These must be refined and developed.

"The Divine manifests in the psychic as love, in the mind as knowledge, in the vital as power and in the physical as beauty." *CWM*, vol.13, p.380

Each instrument of the nature – mind, life and body – must be encouraged to grow and manifest its unique capacities. For the body, this is a balanced and stable strength, agility, endurance and beauty. The life spirit, the vital nature of the being, and the seat of its enthusiasms, energy, effort and courage is also the source of most of the difficulties that vex human nature. This is an aspect of the instrumental nature which is perilous to ignore. Yet, few modern systems address it consciously. The awakening and development of both the aesthetic as well as the ethical personality is essential for the fullness of self-expression. The mind in its turn, powered by an awakened and concentrated will, must be capable of wideness and suppleness, expansion and synthesis. And finally, an education aimed at perfection must subtly orient all its impulses towards the deepest and inmost self as the sun orients the sunflower. The body and the life-spirit are the base and pedestal upon which the psychological being rests. Perfectibility begins with concentration in the body and a refinement of the life being. It is never too early to create the conditions for this. The training and purification of the senses, the development of balance and judgment, in action and in expression, are aspects

that greatly influence the dynamic and practical side of the nature. Knowledge can be sought in all parts of the instrumental nature – the intellectual, psychological, aesthetic and ethical, dynamic and practical – each grows when given conscious time and attention.

When speaking of the training of the mind, The Mother remarked that students should learn to think with ideas rather than with words, this, she said would be simply a small step to a greater progress when one could learn to think with experiences – a stage embodying a decisive progress from the present poise of human nature.

“Regarding the questions that will be put to the students, I would ask the teachers to think with *ideas* instead of with *words*. And, a little later, when it becomes normal for them to think with ideas, I shall ask of them a greater progress, which will be the decisive progress, that is, instead of thinking with ideas, to think with *experiences*. When one can do that, one really begins to understand.” The Mother

Then a teacher asked for clarification with the following question: “You have asked the teachers “to think with *ideas* instead of with *words*”. You have also said that later on you will ask them to think with *experiences*. Will you throw some light on these three ways of thinking?”

And The Mother gave this marvellous response, so relevant to all teaching and learning:

“Our house has a very high tower; at the very top of that tower there is a bright and bare room, the last one before we emerge into the open air, into the full light.

Sometimes, when we are at leisure to do so, we climb up to this bright room, and there, if we remain very quiet, one or more visitors call on us; some are tall, others small, some single, others in groups; all are bright and graceful. Usually, in our joy at their arrival and in our haste to receive them well, we lose our tranquility and come galloping down to rush into the large hall which forms the base of the tower and which is the store-room of words. Here, more or less excited, we select, reject, assemble, combine, disarrange, rearrange all the words within our reach in an attempt to transcribe this or that visitor who has come to us. But most often the picture we succeed in making of her is more like a caricature than a portrait.

“And yet if we were wiser, we would remain up there at the summit of the

tower, quite still, in joyful contemplation. Then, after a certain length of time, we would see the visitors themselves descending slowly, gracefully, calmly, without losing anything of their elegance or their beauty and, as they cross the store-room of words, clothing themselves effortlessly, automatically, with the words needed to make them perceptible even in the material house.

“This is what I call thinking with ideas.

When this process is no longer mysterious to you, I shall explain what is meant by thinking with experiences.” The Mother, *CWM*, vol.12: pp.187-8.

“When you think with words, you can express what you think with those words only. To think with ideas is to be able to put the same idea in many kinds of words. The words can also be of different languages, if you happen to know more than one language. This is the first, the most elementary thing about thinking with ideas.

“When you think with experience, you go much deeper and you can express the same experience with many kinds of ideas. Then thought can take this form or that form in any language and through all of them the essential realisation will remain unchanged.” The Mother, *CWM*, vol.12, p.188

The Mother’s suggestion harks back to ancient Upanishadic education where students came to learn from a Rishi, a being of wisdom, and one who could lead through pithy aphoristic teachings such as ‘*Tat tvam asi*’, You are That; an experience regarded as the one true knowledge when it emerged from within in the awakened consciousness of the student’s being.

The core question of the Upanishadic quest: ‘*Kasmin Vijnate Sarvam Vijnatam*’, Is there a knowledge, having which, all can be known, is a radiant light that can yet illumine the pathways to the future. The attempt was an evocation of the inmost entity within. And, if social and collective expression must be revolutionised, such a journey of discovery is essential to create the pathways to the future. And it is the essential truth of this approach that Auroville can draw from to create the spirit, the forms and the processes of its educational journey

The illumined hero-soul, ready to embark on the quest of self-discovery, must be awakened to its full harmonious self-expression. Yoga is practical psychology, remarked Sri Aurobindo. And the time is ripe to generalise this psychological knowledge if the conditions of human consciousness are to change. It is the psychic being within who is able rightly to be the true guide and inspirer of such a progress; the teacher in a classroom can be merely the medium whose quiet wisdom in action creates the conditions for this alchemy to take place. The first learner of any class room is always the adult instructor.

A new approach requires a conscious evaluation of the tools and materials used in the educational process. Textbooks have subtle orientations that create determinisms and psychological types that perpetuate the social, cultural and national order. Many artificial mental constructions and prejudices, unnecessary determinisms that limit the being, can be avoided if there is alertness in this regard.

The Mother worked hard to dispel the idea that some subjects were not 'spiritual'. It is not the subject but the manner in which it is 'taught' that is the issue:

"[Students] are taught history *or* spiritual things, they are taught science *or* spiritual things. That is the stupidity. In history the Spirit is there; in science the Spirit is there — the Truth is everywhere. And what is needed is not to teach all that in a false way, but to teach it in a true way." *CWM*, vol.12, p.403

It seems almost a matter of asking pertinent questions: For instance, in the social sciences, one may ask: are the young persons, growing up in today's world, to be given a nationalistic perspective on human development? Do not the complexities of the present day world call for a larger outlook? Topics in these fields can be consciously used to awaken the capacity for comparison and contrast, leading to a balanced, discerning judgment. One may easily work to create a vaster, more comprehensive and universal approach, — a celebration of humanity's material, social and psychological evolution.

Sciences such as ecology can oblige one to see the earth body as a precious blue planet floating in space and worth preserving as fosterer of all life on earth. A good basis in science is essential for a robust capacity to deal with the material universe while yet retaining a wonder at its mystery and variety:

"Do not divide what is one. Both science and spirituality have the same goal — the Supreme Divinity. The only difference between them is that the latter knows it and the other not." *CWM*, vol.12, p.248

In an age that celebrates individuality and freedom, a certain moral relativism has set in. What is the position that Auroville schools should take? Most social systems approach this aspect of the nature as if it can be built upon reason. But the moral impulse is either a gut feeling or a sense of wideness that is more intuitional. This is a domain most germane to the developing personality. The power of reflective thought leading to discriminative intelligence, the Indian

idea of *vichar* that arrives at *vivek*, is an essential element of the educational process. The intelligent will is the first instrument of the inmost being, the psychic being, and its powers must be awakened as early as possible.

"For the children, precisely because they are children, it would be best to instil in them the will to conquer the future, the will to always look ahead and to want to move on as swiftly as they can ... towards what will be... *CWM*, vol.12, p.404

Teachers have to give thought to living situations, examples or contexts that can set in motion this significant aspect of the dynamic nature.

All challenges to the life spirit: in sports, in endurance training and in awakening the spirit of adventure; tests of will and tests of achieving and arriving at goals, are essential to the developing psychological nature. There must be awakened a consciousness and responsibility for the maintenance of the collectivity. Familiarity with accounts that activate the ethical impulse, hero stories that abound in every culture, are a marvellous tool to awaken this aspect of the personality.

Our sense of refined conduct often stems from a more inward appreciation of the Right and True, being also the Beautiful. *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*. Children should discover this sense early for it becomes more difficult to address at puberty when the nature undergoes powerful developmental changes.

"In a general way, education, culture, refinement of the senses, are the means of curing movements of crude instincts and desire and passion. To obliterate them is not curing them; instead they should be cultivated, intellectualised, refined. That is the surest way of curing them. To give them their maximum growth in view of the progress and development of consciousness, so that one may attain to a sense of harmony and exactitude of perception is a part of culture and education for the human being. *CWM*, vol.12, p.121

The body is the base upon which all is built. Youth should have a firm grasp of the material field within, through an understanding, physical and psychological, of their own being; as also without, of the world they perceive around them. *Padbhyam Prithivi* — Earth is His footing, says the Upanishad. This contact and understanding of matter is invigorating. The robustness that comes from the touch of earth, combined with a conscious awareness and plasticity is the platform upon which to grow into wholeness.

In the modern age the science of yoga has emerged from its secret retreats and the knowledge it gives of practical psychology is an empowering tool that the youth of today should not be denied:

“It seems to me that psychology without yoga is lifeless. The study of psychology must necessarily lead to yoga, at least to practical yoga if not theoretical.” *CWM*, vol.12, p.248

The gifts of accelerated psychological change that this science can give are the very tool required by a human mentality, arrested and bewildered by the complexity of problems it confronts today.

Finally, there are domains that lend themselves to soul awakening more directly; areas that are often relegated at great hidden cost, to a subordinate position. All that awakens the creative impulse – imagination, dreaming, visioning – is a most vital aspect of the educational process.

“Poetry raises the emotions and gives each its separate delight. Art stills the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction. ...Music deepens the emotions and harmonises them with each other. Between them, music, art and poetry are a perfect education of the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious. These, therefore, are agents which cannot profitably be neglected by humanity on its outward march or degraded to the mere satisfaction of sensuous pleasure which will disintegrate rather than build the character. They are, when properly used great educating, edifying and civilising forces”. *CWSA*, vol.1, p.447

The Veda saw in the universe a conscious mediating energy, Agni, the mystic fire, the leader of the march, the priest of the sacrifice, the son of heaven by the body of the earth. It is this mystic fire, the psychic flame in the inmost heart, which must be awakened and brought forward to generate the acceleration that can lead us on the pathways of the future. This will fashion the ‘living souls’, to hold Auroville’s aspiration for Union.

The Future Poetry : An Aurobindean Critique

Sisir Kumar Ghose

Romain Roland described the contribution of Sri Aurobindo as the greatest synthesis as yet achieved of the genius of the East and the genius of the West. Today Sri Aurobindo is widely known as yogi and thinker, but few have heard of him as a poet, fewer as literary critic. This in spite of the fact that his writings are characteristic and commanding, and indeed copious. But even more than the scope — which includes *Letters* ranging from Aeschylus to the Age of Anxiety — it is the quality of writing which sets him apart, and makes the task of assessment both mandatory and difficult. Above all, there are serial essays, *The Future Poetry*, written between 1917 and 1920 but published in book form only in 1953. Here is the pith of the Aurobindean criticism. What is it like?

The Future Poetry is concerned with the now vital question of a civilisation on trial, to use Toynbee's phrase, and what poetry, "the rhythmic voice of life," can do about it. It can and must, according to our critic, bring back the possibility of "the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry," roughly the poetry of vision, prayer, magic, and incantation : poetry as *mantra* and poetry as the key to the future. Poetry is neither an elevated pastime — "mug's game," as Eliot once informed a bemused Harvard audience — nor is it a matter of technique alone. Its privilege and higher function, its real business is to suggest rhythmically the soul-values of our expanding universe. The nature and essence of poetic speech and the poetic movement comes, he tells us, "from distress of soul-vision behind the world; it is the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery among the magic islands of form and name in these inner and outer worlds." It holds a mirror to our soul-vision and progressive self-discovery, "the progression of consciousness which conceives, orients and controls life." The possibility of a new and higher evolution of mankind, of which poetry is both an index and instrument, is taken for granted. For to doubting Thomases it can never be *proved*.

Briefly, and in Indian terms, the thematic burden of *The Future Poetry* is poetry as *mantra*, poetry as prayer, invocation, and magic, above all as vision. Let our critic explain: "The mantra, poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality, is only possible when the highest intensities of poetic speech meet and become indissolubly one, the highest intensity of rhythmic movement, of verbal form and thought-substance of style, and of the soul's vision of truth. Or, let us say, it is a supreme rhythmic language which seizes hold upon all that is finite and brings into each the light and voice of its own infinite." This may sound — our author himself is aware of it — a somewhat mystic and Oriental account of the matter, but substantially there could hardly be a more complete description.

Such, then, is the hypothesis or point of view. But it is not a dogma, pronounced *ex cathedra*, though now and then it may sound like that. For, as we shall see, the evolutionary scheme is fundamental to all Sri Aurobindo's writing, analysis, and insight. "Poetry, like everything else, evolves," he says. And since poetry "is a psychological phenomenon, the poetic impulse a highly charged force of expression of the mind and soul of man, there-fore, in trying to follow out the line of evolution, it is the development of the psychological motive and power, it is the kind of feeling, vision, mentality which is seeking in it for its word and idea and form and beauty, and it is the power of the soul through which it finds expression or the level of the mind from which it speaks which we must distinguish to get a right idea of the progress of poetry."

So much by way of definition or statement of attitude. There is another, and bigger, surprise in store. He chooses the history of English poetry, from Chaucer to early twentieth century, as illustration to prove the point. He does this because — though few perhaps will agree with him — to him English poetry seems to follow most faithfully the ascending curve of the human spirit in this kind of imaginative rhythmic self-expression. And so, after a glance at the national evolution of poetry, Greek, Latin, and French, he proceeds to sketch the progress of English poetry, which he says, "began by a quite external, a clear and superficial substance and utterance (that is Chaucer). It proceeded to a deeper vital poetry, a poetry of the power and beauty and wonder and spontaneous thought, the joy and passion and pain, the colour and music of life, in which the external presentation of life and things was taken up, but exceeded and given its full dynamic and imaginative content (the Elizabethans)." From there the attempt was made to master "the secret of the Latins, the secret of a clear, measured and intellectual dealing with life, things and ideas (the Augustans). Then came an attempt, a brilliant and beautiful attempt to get through Nature and thought and mentality in life and Nature and their profounder aesthetic suggestion to certain underlying spiritual truths...." The attempt of the Romantics "could not

come to perfect fruition, partly because there had not been the right intellectual preparation or sufficient basis of spiritual knowledge and experience," and what could be offered depended on the solitary and individual intuition of the poet; partly because after the lapse into an age of reason the spontaneous or the intense language of spiritual poetry could not always be found, or, if found, could not be maintained. "So we get a deviation into another age (the Victorian) of intellectual, artistic or reflective poetry, with a much wider range, but less profound in its roots, less high in its growth; and partly out of this, partly by a recoil from it has come the turn of recent and contemporary [that is, what was recent and contemporary at the time these essays were written] poetry which seems at least to be approaching the secret of the utterance of profounder truth with its right magic of speech and rhythm."

At the end of the historical survey — the *précis* does it less than justice — he states his aesthetic ideals once more. The concluding portion is frankly more apocalyptic, and after giving some example of this kind of writing in the past he explains the conditions necessary if poetry is to fulfil its highest promise. In this he notes that "a collapse to the lower levels might bring human civilisation to a new corrupted and intellectual barbarism . . . the possibility of such a catastrophe is by no means absent from the present situation." The approaching end of poetry has been announced by many a prophet of doom. But this is to take a small view of its resources, its rationale, and the way out. "Why in such spiritless times, be a poet at all?" asked Hölderlin. The answer came, strangely, from Nietzsche: "To affirm, bless and deify existence." The way out, the hope of the race lies, we are told, in an "open realisation" of the spirit of man, the infinity of Self and its fit expression in poetry, that is, in *mantra* again. According to Sri Aurobindo, "a larger range of existence made more real to man's experience will be the realm of the future" and it is this which, as Wordsworth had seen earlier if in a slightly different context, "will bind together the vast empire of human society."

This at least is a strong possibility suggested by the newer trends, if we know how to read the signs. (Have not Rimbaud and Eliot and the symbolists all said the same thing in their own, different ways?). In other words, "the idea of the poet who is also a Rishi (seer-poet) has made again its appearance."

Of all the theories and histories of English poetry — and we have had quite a few during recent years — this sacred or hieratic *ars poetica* put forward by Sri Aurobindo is surely one of the strangest, one to tease us out of thought as doth Eternity. In his own words, "Perhaps no thinking age has been so far removed from any such view of life as the one through which we have recently passed, and even now we are not well out of its shadow . . . And yet curiously

enough it is to some far-off light, at least to the view of ourselves at our greatest . . . that we seem to be returning." The progress of poetry, as he has viewed it, "has been an index of the advance of the cultural mind in humanity, which having increased its scope by a constant expanding of the soul's experience, has now risen to a great height and breadth of intellectual vision and activity, and the present question concerns the next step in the scale of ascension." Differently, "if poetry is a highly-charged power of aesthetic expression of the soul of man, it must follow in its course of evolution the development of that soul. I put it that from this point of view the soul of man like the soul of Nature can be regarded as an unfolding of the spirit in the material world. Our unfolding being has its roots in the soil of the physical life; it shoots up and out in many directions as the stalk and branches of the vital being ... and from there, nestling in the luxuriant leaves of the mind, and rising from the spirit which was concealed in the whole process, must blossom the free and infinite soul of man, the hundred-petalled rose of God."

And the beautiful river still flows.
And flows in time, and makes us
Part of it, and part of him.
That, children, is what is called
A sacramental relationship.
And that is what a poet
Is, children, one who creates Sacramental relationship.

Granted his hypothesis, the conclusion is not only consistent, but inescapable. He is presenting us not with a fiat but a fulfilment of what has been known and practised all through history. Even T. E. Hulme talked of an "intuitive language," while some years back Signor Vivante (*English Poetry and Its Contribution to the Knowledge of a Creative Principle*) began by pointing out that "the consciousness of a principle of inward light — an original self-active principle, which characterises life and spontaneity as contrasted with mechanism — has found in English poetry one of its richest and highest expressions." Sri Aurobindo's commentary only points out the logical finale of such a self-expressive tendency. As in other areas of thought and experience, here too he has seen things in a new and reconciling, fusing vision. He sums up long, lingering, scattered suggestions and turns them, without palpable design, into a rationale of poetry at its purest, poetry of the peak, relating it to the larger laws of human becoming. From Plato's enthusiastic madman, the sublimity of Longinus, the Christian hymns of glory and praise; from Shakespeare's poet, his eye in a fine frenzy

rolling, to the Romantic visionary, usually an outsider, peering into the life of things; through the symbolist strategy, full of fine sound and refinement often signifying nothing; through Rilke's "terrible angels," and the dislocation ("I hold sacred the disorder of my brains") and dubious illuminations of Rimbaud, through the cults of obscurity and "pure poetry" as some kind of sublimated musical nonsense, then the poetry as prayer (Abbé Brémond) and the poet as a mystic *manque*; the dry dogmatics of Eliot, most competent verse rather than genuine incantation ("Out of the agony and the imprecision there springs the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation"); the superb rhetoric and the defiant gesture that had become a second nature with William Butler Yeats ("Cast a cold eye/on life, on death. /Horseman, pass by."); the ironic Alexandrian poets of anxiety and the troubled doubtful personalities of the little self ("Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood/of conscious evil runs a lost mankind,/Dreading to find its Father lest it find/The Goodness it has dreaded is not good . . ."); the highly-wrought *Canticles* of Edith Sitwell; the later apocalyptic writers and the latest of bardic passion in Dylan Thomas ("After the first death, there is no death") ... in Sri Aurobindo's hands all these broken hints have come together and turned into a certainty. It is his amazing psychological maturity and orchestral oecumenical mind that can unite all these into a single theme — *Mantra*. Instead of the self-inflicted tortures of the "disinherited mind" he can point to a tradition at once more normal and universal and arrive at a far more striking and genuine reconciliation of tradition and individual talent than we have known for some time.

Mantra is not just good, or even great poetry, but poetry *per se*. It is not religious poetry but spiritual poetry that he is talking of. The rest is literature. The theory and practice of *mantra*, Sri Aurobindo's vision of poetry and poetry of vision is surely his most appropriate gift to the life of an evolving humanity. For him it was a daring and simple thing to do. On our part we must try to understand and assimilate — since knowledge is by assimilation, as Aquinas puts it — this emerging truth, unless of course we prefer to be flowers of evil with a short and fierce season in an adolescent hell or wish to suffer the nuances of the *Néant*.

It is only proper to point out here that the early poets of India, the Rishis, were seers and hearers of the supra-sensible Truth-World. They had also the gift of communicating, expressing, or, as the Indian aesthete would say, "generalising" (*sadharanikrita*) their experience. "One might almost say that ancient India was created by the Veda and Upanishads, and the visions of inspired seers made a people." They were among the acknowledged legislators of mankind. Obviously poetry such as this was not an entertainment, an

intellectual exercise, or a display of "complex sensibility." The poet was something more than a maker of beautiful word and phrase, a favoured child of fancy and imagination, a careful fashioner of idea and utterance. The poet was a spokesman of the eternal spirit and beauty and delight, and he shared the highest creative and self-expressive rapture not unlike the original ecstasy that made Existence, the divine *Ananda*. Poetry such as this was a ritual and a remembrance, a purifier and builder of the soul, a means for the culture and integration of personality, *atmasamskriti*. As Robert Graves (*The White Goddess*) says: "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse."

The soul of man and the soul of poetry ("the true creator, the true hearer is the soul") are a reality to Sri Aurobindo, and he can make them real to us as well. Needless to say, he writes throughout as the poet that he is, even if some will demur to his novel annotation of the art of the possible, this pure, divine assault of the ether and fire. He speaks with authority, with full awareness of the foundations of his judgment, a clear and inspiring vision of the destiny of the spirit in man. He is not a doctrinaire nor is he excessively schematic. He is not a "philosopher-aesthetician," a creature against whom Eliot inveighs in his Preface to Vivante's book. He is not trying to choke or force growth and inspiration into a system. Tolerant of a hundred ways of the spirit, he knows that the intensity of the *Mantra* "belongs to no particular style, depends on no conceivable formula." A master of distinctions, of levels of consciousness and level of poetic adequacy, he is particularly careful not to play off poetry in terms of "philosophy." What he is not willing to forget is poetry's essential nature and deepest destiny.

The awareness of crisis and emergence — "At present the human mind is occupied in passing the borders of two kingdoms," he says — exposes the vast sweep of an inner, cosmic evolution, which extends almost beyond history. According to this view, "the human intelligence seems on the verge of an attempt to rise through the intellectual into an intuitive mentality." We become part of a greater reality, seeking expression in the poetry of awareness. "Poetry and art are the born mediators between the immaterial and the concrete, the spirit and the life." Sri Aurobindo places poetry, fairly and firmly, at the centre of human knowledge and activities, as the leader of our inner progress, the divine Agni, the sacred Fire in our creative evolution. And once more we hear of

O word concealed in the upper Fire,
 Thou who hast lingered through centuries,
 Descend from thy rapt white desire,
 Plunging through gold eternities.

.....

Out, out with the mind and its candle flares,
 Light, light the suns that never die.
 For my ear the cry of the seraph stars
 And the forms of the Gods for my naked eye!
 (*Musa Spiritus*, SABCL, vol.5, p.589)

Notes On Authors

(Includes names of those contributors whose writings have not appeared in this journal before)

Charu Chandra Datta (Dutt) (1877-1952), member of the I.C.S., appointed at first as magistrate and then as judge in Bombay. Sri Aurobindo met him in 1904 in Thane (Maharashtra). Charu Chandra joined the revolutionary party.

Charu Chandra had already, while in England during the period 1896-99, established contact with the Irish revolutionaries, and was a member of a group of Indians who had pledged themselves to work secretly for the liberation of their country. He continued his secret activities even after joining the Indian Civil Service.

Charu Chandra passed ICS examination in 1899 and was posted as District Judge and Magistrate in Bombay Presidency. He married Lilabati Basu Mallik, daughter of Hemchandra Basu Mallik and Bhubanmohini. They had daughter, Lilabati, and son Arindam Dutta.

Don Salmon, a clinical psychologist and composer, is the co-author (with his wife, Jan Maslow) of *“Yoga Psychology and the Transformation of Consciousness: Seeing Through the Eyes of Infinity,”* a comprehensive study of yoga psychology based on the synthesis of the integral yoga tradition presented by 20th century Indian philosopher-sage, Aurobindo Ghose. Jan and Don are developing a website on the brain and meditation, www.remember-to-breathe.org.

Kodaganallur Ramaswami Srinivasa Iyengar (1908-1999) popularly known as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar was an Indian writer in English, former Vice Chancellor of Andhra University. He was given the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 1985.

He joined the Department of English, Andhra University which was started in 1947. In 1966 Prof. Iyengar became the Vice-chancellor of the Andhra University on 30 June 1966 and continued till 29 November 1968. The Department of English, one of the oldest in the University, was carved out of the Department of Modern European Languages.

He prepared his lectures in Indian Writing in English to be given at the University of Leeds in 1958 that later formed the basis of the famous book, *Indian Writing in English*. Iyengar in October 1972, gave a series of six lectures on Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, covering the following themes: the Yogi and the Poet; the Savitri Legend; Aswapati the Forerunner; Savitri and Satyavan; Savitri's Yoga; Dawn to greater Dawn. His biographies of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are

outstanding pieces of literary work. Some of his other publications include works on Lytton Strachey, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Shakespeare, Guru Nanak and most notably his writings on Indo-Anglian literature.

Sisir Kumar Ghose, Dr. Born on May 1, 1919, Sisir Kumar did his B.A. (English Hons) and M.A. (English) from Patna University, securing the Chancellor's Gold Medal for standing 1st in both B.A. and M.A. Later he did his PhD in English from Calcutta University. His teaching experience spanned a colossal 42 years in all. He was Professor of English at Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal from 1969-1984. He also served as Visiting Professor in the USA, Bulgaria and Japan and a Rockefeller Scholar in residence at Bellagio, Italy. He was President, All India English Teachers Conference (1973) and National Fellow (1974-76) and National Lecturer (1982-83). A prolific writer, he contributed the article on Mysticism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974) and published papers and articles on a variety of subjects in major newspapers and journals. His publications on Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Aldous Huxley and Mysticism deserve special mention. Sisir Kumar passed away on 16 April, 1991.