

# MOTHER INDIA

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“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”

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## COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

I have wrapped the wide world in my wider self  
And Time and Space my spirit's seeing are.  
I am the god and demon, ghost and elf,  
I am the wind's speed and the blazing star.  
All Nature is the nursling of my care,  
I am its struggle and the eternal rest;  
The world's joy thrilling runs through me, I bear  
The sorrow of millions in my lonely breast.  
I have learned a close identity with all,  
Yet am by nothing bound that I become;  
Carrying in me the universe's call  
I mount to my imperishable home.  
I pass beyond Time and life on measureless wings,  
Yet still am one with born and unborn things.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Collected Poems, SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 134)*

## THE DELIGHT OF WORKS

In thy works there are always these three, the Master, the Worker and the Instrument. To define them in oneself rightly and rightly to possess them is the secret of works and of the delight of works.

Learn thou first to be the instrument of God and to accept thy Master. The instrument is this outward thing thou callest thyself; it is a mould of mind, a driving force of power, a machinery of form, a thing full of springs and cogs and clamps and devices. Call not this the Worker or the Master; it can never be the Worker or the Master. Accept thyself humbly, yet proudly, devotedly, submissively and joyfully as a divine instrument.

There is no greater pride and glory than to be a perfect instrument of the Master.

Learn thou first absolutely to obey. The sword does not choose where it shall strike, the arrow does not ask whither it shall be driven, the springs of the machine do not insist on the product that shall be turned out from its labour. These things are settled by the intention and working of Nature and the more the conscious instrument learns to feel and obey the pure and essential law of its nature the sooner shall the work turned out become perfect and flawless. Self-choice by the nervous motive-power, revolt of the physical and mental tool can only mar the working.

Let thyself drive in the breath of God and be as a leaf in the tempest; put thyself in His hand and be as the sword that strikes and the arrow that leaps to its target. Let thy mind be as the spring of the machine, let thy force be as the shooting of a piston, let thy work be as the grinding and shaping descent of the steel on its object. Let thy speech be the clang of the hammer on the anvil and the moan of the engine in its labour and the cry of the trumpet that proclaims the force of God to the regions. In whatever way do as an instrument the work that is natural to thee and appointed.

The sword has a joy in the battle-play, the arrow has a mirth in its hiss and its leaping, the earth has a rapture in its dizzy whirl through space, the sun has the royal ecstasy of its blazing splendours and its eternal motion. O thou self-conscious instrument, take thou too the delight of thy own appointed workings.

The sword did not ask to be made, nor does it resist its user, nor lament when it is broken. There is a joy of being made and a joy of being used and a joy of being put aside and a joy too of being broken. That equal joy discover.

Because thou hast mistaken the instrument for the worker and the master and because thou seekest to choose by the ignorance of thy desire thy own state and thy own profit and thy own utility, therefore thou hast suffering and anguish and hast many times to be thrust into the red hell of the furnace and hast many times to be reborn and reshaped and retempered until thou shalt have learned thy human lesson.

And all these things are because they are in thy unfinished nature. For Nature is

the worker and what is it that she works at? She shapes out of her crude mind and life and matter a fully conscious being.

\*

Know thyself next as the Worker. Understand thy nature to be the worker and thy own nature and All-Nature to be thyself.

This nature-self is not proper to thee nor limited. Thy nature has made the sun and the systems, the earth and her creatures, thyself and thine and all thou art and perceivest. It is thy friend and thine enemy, thy mother and thy devourer, thy lover and thy torturer, the sister of thy soul and an alien and a stranger, thy joy and thy sorrow, thy sin and thy virtue, thy strength and thy weakness, thy knowledge and thy ignorance. And yet it is none of these things, but something of which they are attempts and imperfect images. For beyond all these it is an original self-knowledge and an infinite force and innumerable quality.

But in thee there is a special movement, a proper nature and an individual energy. Follow that like a widening river till it leads thee to its infinite source and origin.

Know therefore thy body to be a knot in Matter and thy mind to be a whirl in universal Mind and thy life to be an eddy of life that is forever. Know thy force to be every other being's force and thy knowledge to be a glimmer from the light that belongs to no man and thy works to be made for thee and be delivered from the error of thy personality.

When that is done, thou shalt take thy free delight in the truth of thy individual being and in thy strength and in thy glory and in thy beauty and in thy knowledge; and in the denial of these things thou shalt take delight also. For all this is the dramatic mask of the Person and the self-image of the self-Sculptor.

Why shouldst thou limit thyself? Feel thyself also in the sword that strikes thee and the arms that embrace, in the blazing of the sun and the dance of the earth, in the flight of the eagle and the song of the nightingale, in all that is past and all that is now and all that is pressing forward to become. For thou art infinite and all this joy is possible to thee.

The Worker has the joy of her works and the joy of her Lover for whom she works. She knows herself to be his consciousness and his force, his knowledge and his reserving of knowledge, his unity and his self-division, his infinity and the finite of his being. Know thyself also to be these things; take thou also the delight of thy Lover.

There are those who know themselves as a workshop or an instrument or the thing worked, but they mistake the Worker for the Master; this too is an error. Those who fall into it can hardly arrive at her high, pure and perfect workings.

The instrument is finite in a personal image, the worker is universal with a

personal trend, but neither of these is the Master, for neither are the true Person.

\*

Know last the Master to be thyself; but to this self put no form and seek for it no definition of quality. Be one with That in thy being, commune with That in thy consciousness, obey That in thy force, be subject to That and clasped by it in thy delight, fulfil That in thy life and body and mentality. Then before an opening eye within thee there shall emerge that true and only Person, thyself and not thyself, all others and more than all others, the Director and Enjoyer of thy works, the Master of the worker and the instrument, the Reveller and Trampler in the dance of the universe and yet hushed and alone with thee in thy soul's silent and inner chamber.

The joy of the Master possessed, there is nothing else for thee to conquer. For He shall give thee Himself and all things and all creatures' gettings and havings and doings and enjoyings for thy own proper portion, and He shall give thee that also which cannot be portioned.

Thou shalt contain in thy being thyself and all others and be that which is neither thyself nor all others. Of works this is the consummation and the summit.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(The Supramental Manifestation, SABCL, Vol. 16, pp. 287-90)*

*If Krishna be alone on one side and the armed & organised world with its hosts and its shrapnel and its Maxims on the other, yet prefer thy divine solitude. Care not if the world passes over thy body and its shrapnel tear thee to pieces and its cavalry trample thy limbs into shapeless mire by the wayside; for the mind was always a simulacrum and the body a carcass. The spirit liberated from its casings ranges and triumphs.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 457)*

## ‘I AWAIT, WITHOUT HASTE,...’

**December 11, 1912**

I AWAIT, without haste, without inquietude, the tearing of another veil, the Union made more complete. I know that the veil is formed of a whole mass of small imperfections, of attachments without number.... How shall all these disappear? Slowly, as the result of countless small efforts and a vigilance not faltering even for a moment, or suddenly, through a great illumination of Thy All-Puissant Love? I know not, I do not even put to myself the question; I wait, keeping watch as best I can, in the certitude that nothing exists save Thy Will, that Thou alone art the doer and I am the instrument; and when the instrument is ready for a completer manifestation, the manifestation will quite naturally take place.

Already there is heard from behind the veil the wordless symphony of gladness that reveals Thy sublime Presence.

THE MOTHER

*(Prayers and Meditations, CWM, Vol. 1, p. 13)*

## THE SCRIPTURES AND UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS

(1)

**222—The saint and the angel are not the only divinities; admire also the Titan and the Giant.**

**223—The old writings call the Titans the elder gods. So they still are; nor is any god entirely divine unless there is hidden in him also a Titan.**

**224—If I cannot be Rama, then I would be Ravana; for he is the dark side of Vishnu.**

THIS means that sweetness without strength and goodness without power are incomplete and cannot totally express the Divine.

I could say in keeping with the kind of image used by Sri Aurobindo, that the charity and generosity of a converted Asura are infinitely more effective than those of an innocent angel.

*11 December 1969*

(2)

**509—Has thy effort succeeded, O thou Titan? Dost thou sit, like Ravana and Hiranyakashipou, served by the gods and the world's master? But that which thy soul was really hunting after, has escaped from thee.**

**510—Ravana's mind thought it was hungering after universal sovereignty and victory over Rama; but the aim his soul kept its vision fixed upon all the time was to get back to its heaven as soon as possible and be again God's menial. Therefore, as the shortest way, it hurled itself against God in a furious clasp of enmity.**

**511—The greatest of joys is to be, like Narada, the slave of God; the worst of Hells being abandoned of God, to be the world's master. That which seems nearest to the ignorant conception of God, is the farthest from him.**

**512—God's servant is something; God's slave is greater.**

Sri Aurobindo gives us the true way to understand the Scriptures, which thus become universal symbols.

*12 May 1970*

THE MOTHER

*(Thoughts and Aphorisms: The Hour of God, SABCL, Vol. 17, pp. 106-07, 142;*

*The Mother's Commentaries: On Thoughts and Aphorisms, CWM, Vol. 10, pp. 282, 355)*



## (3)

You know the story of the Ramayana. What did Ravana choose? You know that? Very well, this is what is called choosing to disappear: that is to say, he has no longer any individuality.

*What happened to Ravana after his death we are not told.*

We are not told? To me it has been told. It is said that Ravana chose to disappear into the Supreme, and that he was completely dissolved in Him, that is, he lost his individuality, he was no longer a separate being, he returned to the Origin, he was dissolved in the Supreme. And even before doing it, he had chosen to play that part, his part as a hostile being, because the road is much shorter than for those who are devotees and obey. One goes much more rapidly, for, one day, the Divine decides that it is enough, and he just destroys them. He cannot go out of the Divine, for all is divine! He may lose his individuality, that is, may be fused, dissolved into the Supreme.

Besides, nothing disappears, it is the form which disappears but the constituent elements continue. Everything is eternal, for everything is the Divine, and nothing can go out of the Divine, for everything is divine. But the forms disappear. And it is through this identification with the form that the impression of death comes; but the constituent elements are eternal, for all is eternal. It is the form which disappears.

So, some of those beings prefer to be just completely dissolved and to disappear totally like that, into the infinite, the oneness (that is, they lose their personal consciousness, they have no longer any personal consciousness, they exist no longer as a personal consciousness), they prefer that, rather than having a personal consciousness which gives itself to the Divine and becomes by this very fact consciously and personally immortal. They like dissolution and personal disappearance better than conversion, that is, self-giving.

*Why?*

Through pride, I suppose. It is always pride. Fundamentally, from the very beginning it is pride—but almost all the religions have said it. It is pride, that is, a sort of consciousness of one's power and one's importance.

THE MOTHER

*(Questions and Answers 1953, CWM, Vol. 5, pp. 379-80)*

## (4)

There is one tradition which says that Ravana died deliberately, that it was deliberately he chose the role of the Asura and that he died willingly in order to shorten his "stay"

outside the Divine. He dissolved into Rama when he died, saying that thus he had succeeded sooner in uniting with him definitively. Which version is this? Is it orthodox or not?

(Nolini) *Everything is orthodox!*

It is orthodox. The idea (it is an idea, isn't it?) is that the Asuras have chosen to be Asuras because they will be dissolved by the Divine and thus return more quickly, unite more swiftly with the divine essence than the gods or sages who take a big round of labour before being able to return to the Divine. The Asuras, on the other hand, having chosen to be very wicked, will be destroyed much more quickly, they will return much faster. It's an idea! (*Laughter*)

In the same way, I have heard two versions (but as I said, one was broad-minded and the other extremely orthodox) about the end of Sita; one said that Sita chose to be swallowed up in the earth to prove her innocence, whilst the very orthodox version said that it was just because she was not innocent that she was swallowed up! (*Laughter*)

*Flowers fell from the skies, didn't they?*<sup>1</sup>

Ah! that again is another story.... I heard the Ramayana from a man called Pandit, and he was the son of a pandit and had come to Paris to study Law. But he had remained orthodox, as orthodox as one could be, it was tremendous! And he had with him a Ramayana translated into English, with pictures, and he showed it to me. And he told me the story. And then, when he came to the end he told me that. So I said: "What do you mean?" He told me: "You understand, for an Indian, if a woman has lived even for a few hours in another man's house, she is impure...." Oh! it is terrible... So, it was because she was impure that she was swallowed up.... I remember, he was quite short. He was from a Bombay family—not Bombay proper but from that side. He was a Gujarati. I believe he spoke Gujarati.

And then the other version, I heard that from... that man was called Shastri. He was another pandit. He was in Japan. There we are, then.

THE MOTHER

(*Questions and Answers 1953, CWM, Vol. 5, pp. 328-29*)

1. According to the texts, it seems, flowers fell from the skies after Sita's disappearance, proving her innocence.

## DISCOVERING SAVITRI

[The following is an excerpt from a talk given by Amal Kiran to the students of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education on August 28, 1970.

Amal Kiran had settled in the Ashram on December 16, 1927.]

I STAYED on for about six and a half years at first, at one stroke. And during those years I asked Sri Aurobindo to give me a spiritual name. It seems it was very difficult to find that name. Somebody else had asked for a spiritual name and that person had got it almost the next day, but I got it only after a year. I must have been quite a problem: how to pin down something for me? But after a year Sri Aurobindo did pin it down. He sent me the name [03.09.1930], on a very small card, in Sanskrit, with the transliteration in English, followed by the translation. The name, as you know, was “Amal Kiran”—which means, as he says, “The clear ray”. It was a very tall order to live up to such a name. To be a clear ray when one is so full of confusion, and one is so dependent on one’s own intellectual capacity, to become really luminous was quite a job—and still is. But it’s very curious that this word “ray” should have come in, for it repeated itself later in a very important context. The very first time that I heard of *Savitri* from Sri Aurobindo was in connection with the mention of a ray. While critically commenting on a poem of mine, he referred to “the Ray from the transcendent penetrating through the mind’s passive neutral reflection of the supreme quietude of the silent Brahman”. To illustrate the point he cited two lines of poetry:

Piercing the limitless Unknowable,  
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.

The reverberations of these lines shook me so much that I asked Sri Aurobindo where they had come from. The reply was: “*Savitri*.”

*Savitri* has been very closely linked with my life here, as you perhaps know. That is also why I have been quoting *Savitri* at the start of each talk. Naturally after those lines, I was goaded on to make more and more inquiries. And in the course of my poetic aspirations I was all agog to get the inspiration which Sri Aurobindo had called Overhead Poetry. Overhead Poetry is poetry which passes over everybody’s head! (*laughter*) But how is one to receive an inspiration entirely new which comes from the planes which Sri Aurobindo has distinguished as Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind? So I once got the idea to make a very direct appeal to Sri Aurobindo. I pressed on him a singular request, emboldened by his innumerable favours of tutorship. I wrote to him:

“I shall consider it a favour indeed if you will give me an instance in English of the inspiration of the pure Overmind. I don’t mean just a line like Milton’s

Those thoughts that wander through Eternity  
or Wordsworth's

Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone,

which has a brief burst of it, but something sustained and plenary. I want to steep my consciousness in its rhythm and its revelation. It will be a most cherished possession. Please don't disappoint me by saying that, as no English writer has a passage of this kind, you cannot do anything for me."

He wrote back in his characteristic vein:

"Good Heavens! how am I to avoid saying that, when it is the only possible answer—at least so far as I can remember? Perhaps if I went through English poetry again with my present consciousness I might find more intimations like that line of Wordsworth, but a passage sustained and plenary? These surely are things yet to come—the 'future poetry' perhaps, but not the past."

With the familiarity—almost the impudence—he permitted us, I replied:

"I think the favour I asked was expressed in perfectly clear language. If no English poet has produced the passage I want, then who has done so in English? God alone knows. But who is capable of doing it? All of us know. Well, then why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so naturally Aurobindonian as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines—even eight will more than do—all pure gold to be treasured forever. So please... Perhaps it is possible only on Sunday—the day dedicated to golden Surya and rich for you with leisure from correspondence: I can wait answerless for 24 hours with a sweet *samatā*."

The answer came the very next morning:

"I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill, how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written, out of which you could select for yourself anything Overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted Overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from *Savitri*, on condition you keep them to yourself for the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter—and occasionally better."

And then with an "e.g." there followed in his own fine and sensitive yet forceful hand 16 lines of the very first Canto of *Savitri* as it stood then:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.  
Across the path of the divine Event  
The huge unslumbering spirit of Night, alone  
In the unlit temple of immensity,

Lay stretched immobile upon silence' marge,  
 Mute with the unplumbed prevision of her change.  
 The impassive skies were neutral, waste and still.  
 Then a faint hesitating glimmer broke.  
 A slow miraculous gesture dimly came,  
 The insistent thrill of a transfiguring touch  
 Persuaded the inert black quietude  
 And beauty and wonder disturbed the fields of God.  
 A wandering hand of pale enchanted light  
 That glowed along the moment's fading brink  
 Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge  
 A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.

Below the quotations were the words: "There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder."

This day was October 25, 1936—I would say one of the most important days, if not *the* most important, of my life here. But the matter of keeping *Savitri* a secret was a difficult job. In those days Nolini was Sri Aurobindo's postman. He used to bring the letters for everyone; we used to wait for him in the morning. And he knew that some special correspondence was going on between Sri Aurobindo and me, because the Mother might have been giving him the folded letters to put into the envelopes. Each time he handed me my letter he lifted his eyebrows. (*laughter*) I looked very innocent (*laughter*) and took it and waited for him to go away (*laughter*) before opening it. He would hesitate for a minute or two and then go away. (*laughter*) It happened like that 3 or 4 days, and then it got on my nerves, (*laughter*) so I wrote to Sri Aurobindo: "What should I do? I think Nolini is going to ask me." (*laughter*) Then Sri Aurobindo very blandly replied, "Let us hope he won't." (*laughter*) But still the silent inquisition of the lifted eyebrows did not cease! Then I wrote in desperation to Sri Aurobindo: "I am sure it is going to happen now. Please tell me what to do. Can I take him into the secret or not?" (*laughter*) Then Sri Aurobindo said: "All right but only him." (*laughter*) So this secret remained a secret between Nolini and me for 10 years. Only in 1946, when I began to write a book on Sri Aurobindo's poetry, I divulged *Savitri* to the world—with Sri Aurobindo's approval.

AMAL KIRAN (K. D. SETHNA)

(*Light and Laughter—Some Talks at Pondicherry* by Amal Kiran and Nirodbaran,  
 2nd Ed. 1974, pp. 28-31)

[Note 1: Amal Kiran's article, "Sri Aurobindo—A New Age in Mystical Poetry", appeared in the 1946 issue of *Sri Aurobindo Circle*. It discussed *Savitri* and contained passages from the poem. Around the same time, *The Advent* also

published a few passages from Sri Aurobindo's epic. Amal Kiran's article appeared in a book, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, a little later.

*Savitri* was first published in fascicules by the Ashram, and then as a book.

Note 2: In June 2004 when the text of the talk printed in this issue was being readied for the press, Amal Kiran made the following observation:

“Approaching *Savitri* is no easy task. For it is on the whole so different from anything that has gone before in poetry. But here is an attempt to do so, however feeble.”]

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## RECOGNISE ETERNITY AGAIN

THE petals of the heart are stained with grief  
As autumn's chill the bright and tainted leaf

Once vibrant now falls listlessly to earth.  
Is there but one account of human worth

Or does the soul return upon the spring,  
Its instrument the body made to sing

And dance the long dance upon the grave  
Of doubt, desire and all that would enslave,

To repeat no more the trite and hackneyed score  
Of tired songs so often sung before,

The well-trod lanes of trampled innocence  
Resist for paths of God-experience.

A Strong surrender seems the only way  
To loose death's grip and break into the day

Of ever-flowing light, relieved of pain  
And recognise eternity again.

NARAD (RICHARD EGGENBERGER)

# RAMANA MAHARSHI AND SRI AUROBINDO: THE RECONCILIATION OF KAPALI SASTRY

(A talk delivered at the Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry)

## Part IA

It is well known that in T. V. Kapali Sastriar there was a confluence of three mighty rivers of spirituality, Sri Vasishtha Ganapati Muni, Sri Ramana Maharshi, and Sri Aurobindo. Referring to his three Gurus, Sastriar once said:

Vasishtha Ganapati Muni,—Nayana as we called him—was of course my Guru. In fact, I looked upon him as my God. I looked to him for help and he always responded. But when it came to giving me the needed turn for delving into the depths of the spirit, he directed me to the Maharshi. I hesitated because I feared advice of renunciation, etc. But after repeated hints from Nayana for four years, I approached the Maharshi (1911-1912) and what a meeting it was! The very first day wrought a remarkable change in my being and no amount of *tapas* or *japa* would have given me an indubitable knowledge of spiritual consciousness and a correct appreciation of the truth of spiritual life that the Maharshi gave me. In fact, I could not have come to Sri Aurobindo, if I had not got the faith awakened in the spiritual life which I got after seeing Sri Maharshi.<sup>1</sup>

By about 1923 Sastriar had accepted Sri Aurobindo as his spiritual guru after what he described as “an imperative urge of an inner development”. Although he took up the sadhana of Sri Aurobindo, he retained his reverential attachment to the Maharshi until the end of his life. Sastriar’s outstanding contributions to the corpus of the Maharshi’s teachings,—*Sat Darshana Bhasya* and its English rendering and the *Ramana Gita Prakasha* and *Arunachala Pancha Ratna Darpanam*—were written after he had accepted Sri Aurobindo as his guru and adopted his sadhana.<sup>2</sup>

It is common knowledge that the Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo differed in their spiritual ideals and consequently in their teachings. The Maharshi was a stupendous example of the ancient Indian ideal of the liberated man, Jivanmukta, an effulgent manifestation of the Atman, firmly settled in the ineffable Permanence. The Maharshi used to be in Samadhi, in the Nirvanic experience, at all times even while engaged in outer life. Sri Aurobindo was the herald and trail-blazer of a revolution in spirituality. He made Jivanmukti the foundation of a further realisation,—the gnostic consciousness, which he called the Supermind. He sought to bring it down on earth to make our terrestrial existence perfect. Manifesting the effulgence of *Sat-chit-ananda* in one’s individual self was Maharshi’s ideal, while Sri Aurobindo’s ideal was to be the living embodiment of the *Sachchidananda* in oneself and the expression of Him in the universe.



Sastriar did not consider these two ideals discordant with one another and therefore his reverence for the Maharshi and his spiritual attainments remained unchanged until the end of his life. As Ponnuswami Iyer puts it,

This he could do without sacrifice of principle or compromise with conscience for he saw, appreciated and assimilated the realised truth that these two great teachers of the age had given to the world. Small men, with their little egos, boast of their teachers, as they boast of their material possessions, feel needless jealousies, and stir up passion and discord in a realm where harmony should reign. But Sri Sastriar could be loyal to Sri Aurobindo without being disloyal to Sri Maharshi or his still earlier guru Sri Ganapati Sastrigal.<sup>3</sup>

This feat that Sastriar was able to achieve seems to have become a rare achievement. The greatest service Sastriar has rendered to Indian spirituality is the role he played in relating Sri Aurobindo's message and insights to our tradition, which, though ancient and incomparably rich, was yet bound by fetters of orthodoxy and conservatism which made it somewhat stagnant. The great strength of what is called the *sanatana* dharma is that it is not only ancient but it is also constantly renewed, for ever new—*nitya nutana*.

While one finds today a growing appreciation of the dynamic spirituality of Sri Aurobindo in the West, many Indians, particularly the leaders of what may be called the Hindu establishment, continue to be lukewarm about it. Instead of rejoicing in our great good fortune that Indian spirituality has had such a wonderful efflorescence in the form of the Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo, they seem to be using the former as a reason to invalidate the latter and his spiritual experience and teaching. There is a feeling that after the great realisation of the Maharshi, the realisation of oneness with the Divine, there is nothing of you left to aspire for anything else, including the descent of the Supermind. It is contended that after such an experience, world-existence is no more your problem, it is the Divine's.

Some of you may be wondering why I am raising this issue at this point in time. I am doing so because this is a very critical time during which we as a nation are being compelled to make a choice of our destiny,—between the world-view of spirituality and that of the economic vitalism and consumerism promoted by the West. Before making this choice, it is imperative that we understand the best our tradition has to offer. Indians have a pathological weakness for a spirituality that promotes a world-negating loftiness. Even the appearance of such a great world-affirming scripture as the Bhagavad Gita, not long after the establishment of Buddhism, and prior to the appearance of Shankara, was not able to free the country from this world-negating loftiness. There is a world-affirming spirituality in the Indian tradition and Sri Aurobindo happens to be the foremost spiritual figure who has reminded us of this strand in our spiritual legacy. Furthermore, he presents our tradition in a form



in which it becomes capable of facing the twin challenges of modern science and of Western culture that economic globalisation is bringing to our doorsteps. I fear that by making the Maharshi a reason for ignoring Sri Aurobindo we are likely once again to get trapped into the world-negating spirituality which sapped the vigour of this country and made it go down into the shadow of night and suffer so much at the hands of inferior civilisations. The Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo were the foremost recent examples of the static and the dynamic countenances of the experience of the Supreme. One may have a personal preference between them. But to make the static a reason for rejecting the dynamic is an inanity. We need to understand and appreciate the spiritual standpoints and achievements of both these spiritual leaders, and in doing so there is no better guide than Sri Kapali Sastriar.

Sri Aurobindo himself was never dismissive about the experience of Nirvana, which is the name of the psychological state of a Jivanmukta, and the experience of oneness with the featureless Brahman it brings, although he believed that there was a truth higher than the truth of Nirvana. As he has himself told us, he was no stranger to the experience of Nirvana. In fact, Nirvana was the first radical result of his own yoga. We have very authentic descriptions of this state in the great epic, *Savitri*, such as the following one:

A pure existence safe from thought and mood,  
 A consciousness of unshared immortal bliss,  
 It dwelt aloof in its bare infinite,  
 One and unique, unutterably sole.  
 A Being formless, featureless and mute  
 That knew itself by its own timeless self,  
 Aware for ever in its motionless depths,  
 Uncreating, uncreated and unborn,  
 The One by whom all live, who lives by none,  
 An immeasurable luminous secrecy  
 Guarded by the veils of the Unmanifest,  
 Above the changing cosmic interlude  
 Abode supreme, immutably the same,  
 A silent Cause occult, impenetrable,—  
 Infinite, eternal, unthinkable, alone.<sup>4</sup>

He too had this experience of That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, supremely and solely real. As he has told us, he lived in this experience day and night for months until it disappeared into a greater super-consciousness from above. Then slowly the aspect of an illusory world gave place to one in which illusion was only a small surface phenomenon with an immense Divine Reality behind it, above it and within its heart. There was no re-imprisonment in the

senses, no fall or lessening of the supreme experience of Peace, Silence and freedom in Infinity. On the passage from the experience of the static Brahman to one of the dynamic Brahman, he says:

But I do not insist on everybody passing through my experience or following the Truth that is its consequence. I have no objection to anybody accepting Mayavada as his soul's truth or his mind's truth or their way out of the cosmic difficulty. I object to it only if somebody tries to push it down my throat or the world's throat as the sole possible, satisfying and all-comprehensive explanation of things. For it is not that at all.<sup>5</sup>

Sri Aurobindo readily concedes that the Yoga which holds Jivanmukti as its goal serves a great spiritual end, and as a path, it can lead very high and far, though he also says that Mayavada, the standpoint on which it is based, is defective as a mental theory of things.<sup>6</sup>

In *Savitri* too, there is a wonderful passage in which he speaks of both these spiritual goals as valid choices before an aspiring soul. This passage occurs in the last section of Book One, Canto Four. Here he uses an extended metaphor to compare human life to that of a sailor sailing on the flow of Time. He shows how the sailor has to steer the boat of his life along the trade-routes of Ignorance for a long time and gather various experiences in the marts there before he turns his quest to eternal things. Then a time comes when he arrives at the Upanishadic realisation:

He is a spirit in an unfinished world  
That knows him not and cannot know itself:  
The surface symbol of his goalless quest  
Takes deeper meanings to his inner view;  
His is a search of darkness for the light,  
Of mortal life for immortality.<sup>7</sup>

Once he comes to know the real purpose of his voyage, namely, the search for the Light, Bliss and Immortality of the Infinite, he realises that his goal is fixed outside all present maps. But he doesn't yet know where he is headed as he is driven through life's tossing deep, through the thunder's roar and through the windless hush. But how then does he find out? Well, the poet says that this traveller carries within his breast sealed orders from the Universal Mother. Once he opens this "mystic script", he will know the destination to which he is headed:

Late will he know, opening the mystic script,  
Whether to a blank port in the Unseen  
He goes or, armed with her fiat, to discover

A new mind and body in the city of God  
 And enshrine the Immortal in his glory's house  
 And make the finite one with Infinity.<sup>8</sup>

When he opens “the mystic script” that he carries in his own heart, he will know whether he is heading towards “a blank port in the Unseen” or to “A new mind and body in the city of God / And enshrine the Immortal in his Glory's house”. Sri Aurobindo admits that liberation in the formless Infinite can be the destiny of the yoga for some souls. The blank port in the unknown refers clearly to the ideal of Nirvana or Jivanmukti epitomised by the Maharshi and recognised as the highest ideal by all the traditional yogas of India. Finding a new mind and body in the city of God, on the other hand, refers to Sri Aurobindo's goal of transforming body, life and mind by bringing down on earth the Supramental consciousness. We see here that Sri Aurobindo recognises both these goals as valid ideals.

The difference between the two spiritual ideals is clear. Sastriar himself explains it in these words:

In the Maharshi's teaching, as indeed in all yogas of ancient India, the problem to be solved is the problem of the individual. In Sri Aurobindo's teaching, it is the problem of man in the world in his total being and the meaning of his existence on the earth that is sought to be discovered and worked out. The problems are different and so are the solutions.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted here Sastriar equates the Maharshi's teachings with all the ancient yogas in India. He also makes it clear that Maharshi was addressing the problem of the individual while Sri Aurobindo was addressing the problem of giving meaning to man's life on earth. In Sri Aurobindo's epic, Savitri's mother confronts Narad with this question about the meaning of life; she puts it in these words:

Why is it all and wherefore are we here?  
 If to some being of eternal bliss  
 It is our spirit's destiny to return  
 Or some still impersonal height of endless calm,  
 Since That we are and out of That we came,  
 Whence rose the strange and sterile interlude  
 Lasting in vain through interminable Time?<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere in *Savitri*, Aswapati finds the following answer to this question:

A high and blank negation is not all,  
 A huge extinction is not God's last word,  
 Life's ultimate sense, the close of being's course,

The meaning of this great mysterious world.  
 In absolute silence sleeps an absolute Power.  
 Awakening, it can wake the trance-bound soul  
 And in the ray reveal the parent sun:  
 It can make the world a vessel of Spirit's force,  
 It can fashion in the clay God's perfect shape.  
 To free the self is but one radiant pace;  
 Here to fulfil himself was God's desire.<sup>11</sup>

How then does Sastriar work out a reconciliation between these two different ideals? A short answer to this question would be to say that although these ideals are different, they are not really incompatible; Sastriar at least thought so and therefore he had no problem in reconciling them in his own spiritual life and also on the mental plane.

The Maharshi, as I have noted above, was a stupendous example of the ancient Indian ideal of a Jivanmukta. He was a Sada Mukta, always liberated, and he lived in the effortless state of samadhi at all times. This waking samadhi was his effortless normal stage of consciousness. Sastriar has pointed out that even among the Jivanmuktas, the Maharshi was unique:

The Maharshi is unique in the history of the world's saints. To have lived for full fifty-four years after the Realisation, to have influenced so many from his seat in one place, to have been accessible to all at all hours, to have stemmed the tide of scepticism as he did, is something truly unprecedented.<sup>12</sup>

It was Ganapati Muni who brought Sastriar to the Maharshi in 1910 or 1911. A few years later, Sastriar came under Sri Aurobindo's influence. To quote from Sastriar:

The personal attraction [to the Maharshi] was irresistible. But I found his teaching too direct, *immediate*, seemingly simple, having no steps in between i.e. the starting point and the goal, at any rate not practicable to people circumstanced like myself. It was only after I started reading the *Arya* [brought out by Sri Aurobindo during 1914-1921] I found what I wanted. I was convinced that Sri Aurobindo would not have written those words without experience. I saw Sri Aurobindo in 1917. Thereafter, a series of far-reaching experiences in my inner life commenced and they took me to Sri Aurobindo once again in 1923. That trip decided my future. It was an ordeal to come away to Pondicherry cutting through my loyalty to Sri Nayana [Ganapati Muni] and attachment to Sri Maharshi. But I was compelled from within.<sup>13</sup>

As we have already mentioned above, Sastriar remained loyal to Ganapati Muni and to the Maharshi even after he accepted Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as his

Gurus. Subsequently as he advanced in his yoga, his relationship with the Mother grew deeper until he came to see her as the Divine Mother. He described her in these words: “The Mother! O, She is more than a Miracle! The Divine Conscious Force has chosen a human body and Personality.”<sup>14</sup>

(To be continued)

MANGESH NADKARNI

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*There are two paths set for the feet of the Yogin, withdrawal from the universe and perfection in the Universe; the first comes by asceticism, the second is effected by tapasya; the first receives us when we lose God in Existence, the second is attained when we fulfil existence in God. Let ours be the path of perfection, not of abandonment; let our aim be victory in the battle, not the escape from all conflict.*

Sri Aurobindo

(*Essays Divine and Human*, CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 96)

# MEANING OF BIRTH AND QUEST IN SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI

(Continued from the issue of September 2004)

## II

### The Birth

THE poet's arrangement of *Savitri* in three parts resembles the three-tier structure of a mystical dome. Part One, spanning over 24 Cantos and 348 pages, covers nearly half the epic. By making real a whole history of mystic traditions and mapping out the occult splendours of a vast cosmogony, it makes an inviolable preparation of the groundwork for Savitri's incarnation. Part Two, opening with Savitri's birth in "The Book of Birth and Quest" and ending with Satyavan's death in Book VIII, lays bare the multifarious issues involved in the predicament of human existence. Part Three takes us to those inaccessible heights of the fiery mystical dome where burn in their eternal splendour the all-engulfing Savitri-Flames eating up the illusion of Yama and revealing to our gaze the ineffable Mystery of the Supreme Godhead, the Purushottama. Having invoked the whole of Eternity to our view, the last book, "Epilogue: The Return to Earth", is verily the *shantipātha* of the Indian *yagña* that re-poses us, though transformed, safely back to our earth.

"The Book of Birth and Quest" (Book IV) is not only structurally placed at the centre of *Savitri*, but is also, in many ways, central to the meaning of the whole poem. This extraordinary birth of Savitri carries a far-from-obvious significance: it holds the key to the meaning of all births, whether human, cosmic or divine; and in it alone lies the possibility of finding a resolution to all our existential issues. The division of the Book into four cantos describing birth, growth, call and quest is sheer sublime simplicity and elegance: it sums up so neatly the travail and burden of human existence and carries an echo of the fourfold order of Indian society and life.

Every birth is a cosmic event: a 'human' birth is just another of those fluttering illusions created by the density of a material ignorance. Even Wordsworth, the Romantic, could see, albeit in vague intimations, the relationship of birth to earth and heaven in his "Immortality Ode". Birth is always a coming forward into cosmic manifestation of that which was always there but hidden, screened and subliminal. Of course, each cosmic event measures differently on the subtler Richter scale. If our scales get shaken without registering any tremors, it is because Savitri's birth is a never-before happening on earth. It's the birth of the Supreme Consciousness that promises a final deliverance to the agony of Matter. It is the earth who rejoices therefore at her divine conception, and not Savitri's human parents or the city of Madra.

Existence reveals itself in three poises: transcendent, universal and individual.

Thus, whatever exists, whatever takes place has a concurrent occurrence on all the three planes. Then again, the three planes are not separated but have a simultaneous existence: a trinity that is always one. What happens out there also happens here. To quote Sisirkumar Ghose: "It is not that the events recorded take place elsewhere, to 'other' people. Both events and locale are within us. Our lives are its grand theatre."<sup>1</sup>

The cantos describing the birth, childhood and growth of Savitri are called the birth, childhood and growth of the Flame. What is this flame and in which manner is Savitri that flame? The birth of Christ and Krishna, religiously celebrated every year, is the birth of the Sacred in the dimness of our heart, "the miraculous birth" for which "the ages are reverently, passionately waiting" (Auden, "Musée Des Beaux Arts"). This is the birth of the psychic flame, the occult fire, the godhead who shall be the priest and leader of our sacrifice. This is the first and last step of our voyage, for from now on someone other than us will take over the burden and responsibility of our crossing, someone who has the knowledge and certitude of our goal and who shall win for us all our victories.

But this birth demands a necessary preparation. We must have travelled a long way like the magi of yore before we can behold the sacramental marvel. Canto One therefore begins with the portrayal of a cycle of seasons that work as if behind the scene preparing for the coming of Spring. This is the hour of love, the season of a wide efflorescence that makes the sacred conception a possibility. The opening verse describing the earth in its mechanical, unconscious orbit is perhaps a much more accurate rendering of the human situation:

A Maenad of the cycles of desire  
Around a Light she must not dare to touch,  
Hastening towards a far-off unknown goal  
Earth followed the endless journey of the Sun.<sup>2</sup>

Man, living in his senses, his body of earth, and feeding on his sensations, is nothing but a crude bundle of desires; and yet, his centre is 'a Light' within and the real traveller through an infinity of births is his soul, the Sun, and not his earth. Throughout the poem, as actually through all our life, man and earth, the particular and the universal, the microcosm and macrocosm, stand inseparably united as one. The physical and the psychic universe are one.

The seasons also cut across a narrow division of time in terms of its materiality: they are portraits of a year and of an age, of the historical space of human civilisation and of man's timeless soul-space. Here is the onset of the monsoon:

Armies of revolution crossed the time-field,  
The clouds' unending march besieged the world,  
Tempests' pronunciamientos claimed the sky  
And thunder drums announced the embattled gods.<sup>3</sup>

The whole scene comes alive as a cosmic happening and is no mere simple weather on the physical plane. In Savitri's extra-sensory perception, "All objects were to her shapes of living selves [...] / Nothing was alien or inanimate".<sup>4</sup> The distinction between animate and inanimate, on which our world-view is so firmly founded, is certainly blurred in Sri Aurobindo's portrayal of earth and her seasons:

Throongs of wind-faces, rushing of wind-feet  
Hurryng swept through the prone afflicted plains...<sup>5</sup>

As the psyche prepares for its coming forward, all dividing walls of a fragmented world-view founder in the receding dark waters of ignorance. All distinctions between outer and inner, body and soul, matter and spirit are seen as a falsity imposed by a fragmented dualistic mind.

All that has gone before, the seemingly mechanical movement of time, the cycle of seasons, is seen as the necessary enlargement for that psychic birth. Man and earth do need to undergo a violent thrashing by the life-giving rain and thunder and lightning before they can awaken to another poise of living. It is only when one has passed through the shocks and tribulations of life that a calm of understanding dawns upon him. For, now after the rains, it is someone other than us who has awakened:

An inmost self looked up to a heavenlier height,  
An inmost thought kindled a hidden flame  
And the inner sight adored an unseen sun.<sup>6</sup>

Is this, the season after rains, a happening on earth, or in the recesses of man's psychological being, or both? This consanguinity of earth and man is continuously insisted upon by the poem and is not an imposition of our reading of the text.

Having kindled that hidden flame one is ready now to go through the long and chilling hours of autumn and winter. At the end of what seems an unending tunnel there waits for the brave and patient the rejuvenating spring. This is the birth of the heavenly psyche, our second birth in the realm of spirit implied in the Indian tradition of *dwija*:

Then Spring, an ardent lover, leaped through leaves  
And caught the earth-bride in his eager clasp;...  
His voice was a call to the Transcendent's sphere...<sup>7</sup>

Released from the dark ignorant night of egoistic existence one can breathe again the air of "beauty and rapture and the joy to live". Such are the effects of Savitri's approaching steps. And she is not yet born, but only prepares for her coming!

The phenomenal logic of this birth is a two-way process: the truth hidden and



struggling in earth-matter calls by its labour an intervening response, a direct descent, from our transcendent spheres:

Answering earth's yearning and her cry for bliss  
 A greatness from our other countries came....  
 Bridging the gulf between man's mind and God's;...  
 Its brightness linked our transience to the Unknown.<sup>8</sup>

It is this sacred flame which relates the outer phenomenon to the eternal Reality within. But this birth is no freak event; it is the fruition of a long and unending labour, an unending recurrence going on forever in the heart of life. Even as it descends from above, it is at the same time an actualisation of a Will hidden in matter's core. Coeval with earth and contemptuously dismissive of time, fate and death, this Will yet awaits its hour of coming:

Although our fallen minds forget to climb,  
 Although our human stuff resists or breaks,  
 She keeps her will that hopes to divinise clay;...  
 Once more that Will put on an earthly shape.<sup>9</sup>

Not only in her origins but in her form as well, Savitri is so unlike man's earthly phenomenal being. Even in her birth and early years, she is conscious of her transcendent source, and though living aloof and content, her being is continuously flooded with "slow conscient light" and heavenly intimacies:

Her nature dwelt in a strong separate air  
 Like a strange bird with large rich-coloured breast  
 That sojourns on a secret fruited bough  
 Lost in the emerald glory of the woods  
 Or flies above divine unreachable tops.<sup>10</sup>

This strange bird with rich-coloured breast that can fly above divine unreachable tops is surely no ordinary mortal bird but the divine psyche, clear and naked. The image also unifies the twin Upanishadic birds of which the one—the impassive Being—sits on top watching unaffected, while the other, lower down, enjoys the sweet and bitter fruits of becoming (*Shwetashwatara*, 4:6).

Savitri's birth is no mere freak of a dazzling divine splendour of God's *maya* but the fruition of a hard and gruelling aeonic labour. It is the inevitable next step in Nature's evolutionary impulse, a prophecy of things to come:

As from the animal's life rose thinking man,  
 A new epiphany appeared in her.

A mind of light, a life of rhythmic force,  
A body instinct with hidden divinity...<sup>11</sup>

A being beyond man, ‘a mind of light’, prepares for its hour of coming. J. Krishnamurti, the great Indian seer, is reported to have said towards the end of his life that his brain cells had started exploding into light. It is a recorded fact that when Sri Aurobindo left his body, this ‘mind of light’ got realised *en masse* in the Mother’s physical being. A number of articles by Sri Aurobindo’s disciples—in particular, by Sethna—have been devoted to this mysterious event. As the body grows conscious of and realises its hidden divinity it shall herald the end of death, the end of ignorance. This is the supreme goal held out by Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga, and this the meaning of Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri-sadhana. All this and much more is prefigured in Savitri’s birth and childhood.

The next Canto in detailing her growth and early work reveals the two-fold purpose of Savitri’s manifestation. First, she looks at and masters the whole field of human achievement—the arts and sciences and no less philosophy and spirituality. It’s only in a total understanding of something that one moves beyond it: “Transcending all that is, denying none”.<sup>12</sup> Going beyond the highest planes of human thought, Savitri now needs fit instruments that can bear the descent of her heavenly riches. Her next task is to find and nurture such vessels and bring about the necessary mutation in their structure.

The first of the three movements in this canto covers Savitri’s early growth and education. Savitri, or the newly born heavenly psyche in our own being, holds right from the beginning all the heavens and earth in her natural grasp. Everything stands transfigured: the country that harbours “the childhood of the incarnate Flame” is the ancient Madra in its pristine natural beauty, and also something more:

A land of mountains and wide sun-beat plains  
And giant rivers pacing to vast seas,  
A field of creation and spiritual hush,  
Silence swallowing life’s acts into the deeps,  
Of thought’s transcendent climb and heavenward leap,  
A brooding world of reverie and trance...<sup>13</sup>

Only at our dire peril shall we ignore to notice the poet’s labour to paint a universe which is physical and psychical at the same time, and which, in truth, shows the real nature of our own universe. We seldom come across such an assured unification of spirit and matter in English poetry. Our critical faculties, therefore, need a radical re-orientation to glimpse the timeless genius of our own mystical traditions.

One with the being of earth, her mother, “Earth’s brooding wisdom spoke to her still breast”. Savitri now takes up for scrutiny the whole field of human knowledge

—“the knowledge of the thinker and the seer”, “intense philosophies”, sculpture, architecture, dance, music, poetry, all—and makes it a springboard to dive into the Infinite. No time does she take to realise that all our best efforts all through human history have been to create symbols, “to hear the unheard and glimpse the invisible”, to give form to that which is essentially formless, to catch “into a body the Divine”. All human scriptures, poetry and art are no more than fingers pointing to the moon. While most men, like that idiot in the fable, can never free themselves from gazing at the finger, Savitri at the outset has cast that finger aside and gone for a direct look at the moon:

To her they seemed the great and early steps  
 Hazardous of a young discovering spirit  
 Which saw not yet by its own native light...<sup>14</sup>

She bears a heavy burden of divine responsibility, carries in her the whole history of earth and man, and is a trail-blazer of their future:

Over her watched millennial influences  
 And the deep godheads of a grandiose past  
 Looked on her and saw the future's godheads come...<sup>15</sup>

Her growth symbolises the evolution of a future humanity, a new culture, a way of life founded entirely on truth-light:

The harmony of a rich culture's tones  
 Refined the sense and magnified its reach  
 To hear the unheard and glimpse the invisible  
 And taught the soul to soar beyond things known...<sup>16</sup>

Sri Aurobindo in one sweep covers the whole field of education. But first and foremost, “Adept of truth, initiate of bliss”, the disciple is to be “A mystic acolyte trained in Nature's school”. Savitri, exemplifying the ideal student, learns, masters and brings to unheard of heights not only the traditional courses of study – ethics, training of senses, life, mind and psyche, language, philosophy, sculpture, painting, architecture, music, dance, crafts, poetry, mathematics and astronomy – but also the art of living, the greatest of all arts:

She laid the secrecies of her heart's deep muse  
 Upon the altar of the Wonderful;  
 Her hours were ritual in a timeless fane;  
 Her acts became gestures of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>

But however large their scope, Savitri cannot be tied down to these limited fields. Nothing less than “the art and wisdom of the Gods” can quench her thirsting spirit. She is kin to intimations of an immemorial aspiration “locked in the world and yearning for release”, and needs therefore fit and ready vessels to carry forward her work. Herself of the Unborn, she needs to test her treasures and gifts, her mission and soul’s issues, in a limiting circle of the immediate. All those who are drawn to her charm represent the humanity in its diverse stages of evolutionary growth, and also the various members and personae in one’s own being. They all respond to the psychic fire albeit in varying degrees. Some approach half-way, some are dragged reluctantly in spite of their resisting natures, but even those who are fairly advanced and witness to the power and truth of psyche cannot always meet her utmost demands. Not to many is given the assurance of a lasting residing and secure ascent to those sublime heights. The imperfection and darkness of our nether members often pull us down to their known and secure fields:

In man a dim disturbing somewhat lives;  
It knows but turns away from divine Light  
Preferring the dark ignorance of the fall.<sup>18</sup>

The ascending planes need to be assimilated and naturalised before we attempt a further ascent, or else they will appear magical, hallucinatory and at the worst ‘unreal’. In the mountaineers’ language, we need to pitch our base camp again and again and undergo that prolonged and necessary acclimatisation. Rare is the soul that opens its strong wings and takes a direct flight home; others must trudge the heavy and dolorous mountainous path. Savitri, the incarnate Flame, demonstrates the wonder and power of the heavenly psyche, and exemplifies the peaks of human potential that man can harness if he lights that flame and allows it to burn in its resplendent glory. But few can bear the weight of her immaculate gifts:

Among the many who came drawn to her...  
Some near approached, were touched, caught fire, then failed.  
Too great was her demand, too pure her force.<sup>19</sup>

Tied down “to life’s dull ordinary round”, most men are “prisoned by their human grain”. But even if unable either to understand or follow the wide sweeping movements of the psyche, our human members yet remain enamoured of her. Having glimpsed even once the All-Beautiful who is also All-Bliss, our hearts can do nothing but yearn to follow her. At long last man does make a discovery of supreme significance in Savitri:

A key to a Light still kept in being's core,  
 The sun-word of an ancient mystery's sense,  
 Her name ran murmuring on the lips of men...<sup>20</sup>

She in her munificence ever stoops to our lowly plains, grants our little longings, and fills our wave-deep lives with her grace and peace. But vain is her labour to create her kind, and nowhere yet does Savitri find her soul-mate, companion and peer. The lack of response to her transmuting touch from those around her makes her shelve the project for the time being. She will dare beyond the immediate and risk greater enchantments to unravel the knot of resistance and bring home more potent weapons of divine might.

*(To be concluded)*

H. P. SHUKLA

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 361.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 367.

## SRI AUROBINDO AND MAN'S SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

*(Continued from the issue of September 2004)*

THERE are three well-marked stages of man's evolution. Man started as an infra-rational being, guided entirely by his instincts and impulses. He had a crude mind, but no intelligence to whose judgment he could refer his life and action. The next stage was that of reason when his rational intellect controlled his activities. At the third stage, the spiritual and suprarational, man's whole life will pass into the hands of the Divine—yes, the Divine not the frail fallible priest. These three stages are purely internal and do not depend on external circumstances. They may exist in the individual and in the world at one and the same time. No man is wholly infra-rational and no man is wholly supra-rational. A man is neither a brute nor a God. In him the brute and the God live side by side and they act together. It is not possible, nor does it appear to be intended by Providence that a man or a group of men should belong solely and entirely to one of the three stages. Even in the mind of the barbarian, there is some conception of religion, some idea of this world and a hereafter. That idea will possibly appear vague to us, but it cannot be denied that the barbarian thinks, that he can distinguish right from wrong, that he has a social life of some kind. There were primitive men even before these barbarians, who were almost entirely guided by their instincts. There is ample evidence to show that even these people had some organised life, some code of conduct and some idea of religion however crude. Pure rational intelligence and pure spirituality can remain in the minds of very few people. But, with progress, their number goes on increasing, that is why a progressive people can arrive at a predominantly rational or spiritual age. The example of the first was Greece, of the last India.

Greece was dominated by the thinker and the philosopher; India was dominated by God-lovers and godly persons. In both countries the dominant class influenced society and the state. Man was being slowly attracted by higher ideas, but had not as yet realised the secret behind them. But progress did not stop here. In India, the influence of the few saints and mystics blossomed out into the Upanishadic age. In old Greece the thoughts of a handful of philosophers developed into the flood of knowledge of the Sophist age. This kind of blossoming out can lift a few people very high, but the masses after the first flush of ardour begin to go down and slowly plunge into an era of blind ignorance. Things are not yet ripe for all round progress, the awakening of reason must be more general. But there are dangers ahead. Intelligence does not wake up in all nations at the same time; where it wakes up, the people becomes cultured and civilised—as in Egypt, Assyria, India, Persia and China in the East, and in Greece and Rome in the West. But these civilised countries were surrounded on all sides by rude sturdy barbarians, wandering tribes of the desert or

the mountain. As soon as the central authority weakened in any civilised country, these wild tribes rushed in from all sides and put an end to all order and progress. This happened again and again in history, before physical science put tremendously effective weapons in the hands of the big empires, weapons too powerful for the barbarians to tackle. As soon as an old empire passed into the hands of the wild tribes, Nature resumed her work of evolution with the new conquerors and developed new methods and new civilisations. Many instances of this may be cited. In Europe, the Franks adopted the Christian culture and built up a strong empire under Charlemagne. In Asia, the wild Scythians adopted the Buddhist culture and established an empire with Taxila as the Capital and the descendants of Timur founded the imperial throne at Delhi. Old decayed cultures passed away and new ones took their place. Human progress was maintained. A like fate overtook many old religions. A generation of self-seeking priests set about multiplying meaningless rites and ceremonies in order to shackle people's minds with blind conventions. The people swallowed what they said because they knew no better. Thereafter arose reformers and preachers from time to time and preached a simple cult of devotion, often proclaiming along with it the equality of all men before God. A period of release ensued but it did not last. General degeneration continued till a light descended from above and ushered in an age of Reason.

In the next chapters, "The Curve of the Rational Age" and "The End of the Curve of Reason", Sri Aurobindo traces the growth of man's corporate life. The modern age may be characterised as an attempt to discover a secure basis for a rational system of society. It has resolved itself into an uninterrupted series of radical progressions. At every stage the root principle of society is questioned. What actually happens is more or less this: An original thinker puts forward a central principle; it is seized upon by the general mind and becomes, as it were, a social gospel; then it is put rapidly into practice, dethroning the former principle and taking its place as the basis of communal life. A new social organisation comes into force. Its very novelty is attraction enough for a time. But after a while tinkering begins; still even then no one thinks of questioning the central principle. But a time arrives when dissatisfied reason proclaims that the new social system was no satisfying change, it was only a mass of new conventions. The result is a revolt and a move to a fresh radical progression. This process will continue till reason is satisfied. But can reason ever be satisfied without relapsing into a "sleep of tradition" or rising to a spiritual age of mankind? Sri Aurobindo indicates three successive stages of political progress. The first, individualistic and increasingly democratic, with liberty for its principle; the second, socialistic, culminating perhaps in a governmental communism, with equality and the State for its principle; the third, anarchistic in the highest sense, with fraternity and no government for its principle. "Till this third stage has its trial, it is Force that in the last resort really governs."

It is individualism following upon a period of conventions that has opened the



door to rational thought. There were thinkers on social life even before the establishment of reason, but their method was not logical, it was based on insight and intuition. They sought to understand life by symbols, types and institutions. This method is, however, not acceptable to the reasoning mind, for it recognises only one symbol, the idea. To prevent ideas from becoming mere abstractions, the rationalist has constantly to compare them with facts. He also seeks to classify life's facts by the idea and bring them within his grasp. He is always testing both sides and facts to see if they tally. If they do not or if he observes new facts, he calls in new ideas. He is ever ready to change his ideas, for he has to take into account all existing facts as well as all probable facts, all realised truths as well as all conceived truths. He must apply all conceived as well as ideal truths to life. That is why the age of Reason is the age of Progress.

When the old method of mentalising life has outlived its usefulness, when its symbols, types and institutions have become useless, then the time has come for a drastic change. Man may for a time live by tradition, but his reason will never accept tradition or convention or institution merely because it is old or universally respected. Its very nature is to test everything by the rational intellect. Now, whose is the intellect that is going to apply the test? It cannot be the intellect of a dominant class, for the acceptance of their decision would only increase their power and prestige. It cannot be the intellect of a few thinkers, for if the mass of people is infra-rational they will very soon turn the opinion of the wise man into a rigid convention. Therefore the reason of each and all, alone, must decide things for the community. Thus does the principle of individualistic democracy come in. A benevolent ruling class governing with the consent of the governed is not democracy. What is wanted is that each man should be free to live his own life and shape his own destiny provided he accords the same freedom to every other man. In all matters concerning the community, the decision of the whole is binding and final. A practical way has to be devised for finding out the opinion of the whole community. It is also essential that the individual should have sufficient intelligence to understand any question that comes up and that he should be able to comprehend what others have to say on the question. In practice, however, these ideas do not work as they should for three reasons—first, because the masses having lived by the instinct so long are unable to come to a rational conclusion; secondly, because the individual does not use his reason to come to an agreement but only to foist his views on others; lastly because he does not use his freedom to adjust his life harmoniously with the life of others; it is more a spirit of rivalry and competition than that of friendly co-operation which governs his conduct. The democratic ideal may lead at first to the exploitation of the ignorant many by the clever few. But the principle of liberty, once it is proclaimed, cannot be called back. The less fortunate masses will not long acquiesce in “pseudo-democratic falsehood”. They are bound to strike back. This will naturally perpetrate a strife between classes and parties. And the conflict generally results in the victory, not of the fittest spiritually



and intellectually, but rather of the most fortunate and vitally successful. This is a very different thing from the ideal that man set out to realise.

What, then, should be done? Since it is education that opens out man's intelligence, let us spread education far and wide. But first we have to agree as to what this education is. Obviously, we should teach man to observe events, understand their import and then come to a conclusion,—we should teach him to consider things calmly, and then let the community have the benefit of his thought and his decision. Above all, we should develop his character, teach him to cherish his rights and at the same time, not forget his duty to the community. With this training man may be fit for a democratic state. But unluckily this education is seldom given. Disappointed people have begun to say, education is useless, democracy is an illusion, what we had before was the best. But this is not true; education and freedom have done a lot for humanity. For the first time in history we find that man is erect, active and living. All this will not go in vain. The ordinary man has learnt to think, to apply reason to his life and work. He is anxious to be able to pronounce which of several theories is acceptable to him. He has not yet secured equality in education and equal opportunity of life, but there is greater equalisation today than there was before. But supposing man acquired full equality, what will happen? In his semi-infra-rational state, man strove for power, recompense and enjoyment. Under primitive conditions these things were secured to him. But, now, it is wealth alone which can give him these and there is no equality of wealth in the kind of democracy that exists today. It is a society where “a huge organised competitive system, a frantically rapid and one-sided development of industrialism” is the rule.

As a result of these “initial bankruptcies of the rational age”, the mind of man naturally turned towards socialism, which promised him equality. Sri Aurobindo explains how socialism has had no better luck than the democratic individualism in solving the problem of man's group life. Socialism had an initial disadvantage in having been born in a revolt of those Workers against the Bourgeois and the Capitalist. Its struggle has taken the form of a class war. What it wants to do cannot be done on the basis of individual liberty, for that has broken down. Socialism, therefore, must dispense with the democratic basis and formulate perfect social equality as its foundation. This equality cannot be secured if there is any personal or inherited right to property; therefore, this right must go. Who, then, is to hold property, who is to administer it? The community as a whole, obviously. Thenceforth the individual exists only as a member of the community. He belongs to it entirely— he himself, his property, his labour, everything. His individual reason will decide nothing, everything will be decided by collective reason, not only for society, but also for the individual, who vanishes as an independent unit. Of course, there has been a good deal of compromise in practice. In some countries of north Europe, “a temporising, reformist, practical Socialism” has compromised “between the right regulation of the communal life and the freedom of the individual,” and this attempt has met with some success.

The hesitancy of socialism, its uneasy poise between two opposing principles, has to a large extent been responsible for the success of “the more vigorous and ruthlessly logical forces of Communism and Fascism”. It should be noted, however, that the claim to equality does not follow necessarily from the collectivist ideal. Just as it is the individual who demands liberty, so it is the individual who demands for himself equality with all others. When society insists on equality, it is “the individual multiplied claiming for himself and all who are of his own grade”. However that may be, the extreme form of socialism has crushed flat all difference between man and man. In fact, there is no room in that socialism for the individual at all. It is always the State, and nothing but the State. Can man be happy in such a regime? The Nazi claimed that every man in the Reich was happy, he had never been so happy in any other arrangement of society. But it is obvious that it was the happiness of the unthinking animal. We do not think it likely that the individual would, in the long run, take this crushing out of his existence lying down. Probably the next conflagration would decide the matter finally. In the meantime we can take it as *sub judice*. We quote just a few lines to indicate how Sri Aurobindo characterises the two extreme forms of totalitarianism. “In Russia the Marxist system of Socialism has been turned into a gospel. Originally a rationalistic system worked out by a logical thinker... it has been transformed by the... Russian mind into something like a social religion.” “In Fascist countries the swing away from Rationalism is marked and open; a surface vital subjectivism has taken its place... The essential features are the same in Russia and in Fascist countries.” “There is the seizure of the life of the community by a dominant individual leader... head of a small active minority, the Nazi, Fascist or Communist party.” Of the democratic trinity the first two—liberty and equality—have proved unattainable in practice. The third, brotherhood, may be tried next. What Sri Aurobindo says at the end of Chapter XIX is this: “The terrible compression now exercised... having fulfilled its immediate aim may relax and give way in calmer times to a greater plasticity which will restore to the human mind or soul a more natural line of progress, a freer field for their self-expanding impulse.”

The collectivist ideal may be attractive at first sight. The right organisation of society on a basis of equality ought to lead to satisfactory results. If we consider efficiency, the power for production, power for attack and defence, the highly centralised State may show greater success than any other form of the organised State. It may well catch the fancy of people for some time, but when they get used to the benefits enjoyed by them they begin to look upon them as a matter of right and start questioning whether they get enough for the freedom they have surrendered to the State. This stage of discontent may not come very soon, but come it will, that is certain. The real “I” of man is his spirit and this spirit of the individual is ignored by socialistic thought. But the inner being cannot be hoodwinked for long. Sooner or later it is bound to assert itself.

*(To be continued)*

C. C. Dutt

## NISUS

It was one of those magic days when everything seemed the delight of existence. Antique orange trolleys trundled by. Kites dawdled in the autumn sky. A joyous play of the One and the Many. Is not our planet Earth the home of the Divine in the cosmos?

I was walking north along the Embarcadero near the Bay Bridge toward the Ferry Building. It was a breezy Saturday afternoon in October. I inhaled the salty sea air, enthralled by the idyllic atmosphere of one of the world's most scenic walks.

The sunlit piers were all aglow along the Embarcadero esplanade lined with port flags and elegant palms. Mothers strolled baby carriages. Cyclists and romping youth on roller skates passed by under esplanade lamps.

The natural wonder of the San Francisco waterfront inspires the reflective soul. The Bay has existed for many thousands of years with its winds and fog.

I continued along the Embarcadero esplanade toward Aquatic Park, entranced by the prevailing spirit of joy and ethereal beauty of the Bay.

At Pier 39 I paused to view the blue spectacle of bay waterfowl, aquatic paradise of pelicans, geese, swans, ducks, and gulls. Ferries cruised the harbour routes of Tiburon and Sausalito. All seemed a welcome respite from the dreary mood of the workweek.

Children at Aquatic Park were building sandcastles on the shore. Sunbathers and lovers reclined on the grassy knoll gazing toward the glorious estuary and misty hills of Marin.

Continuing on to Fort Mason, I ambled over a Marina hill overlooking Golden Gate Promenade, musing over the white sails and sweep of the estuary when I saw the harbour entrance all ablaze.

Ancient Indians believed the Golden Strait to be a sacred place of the Gods. It has also been called the gateway to the Orient.

I was filled with awe and wonder. Such radiant splendour!  
 The Sun had entirely obliterated the Golden Strait in such wondrous light  
 that it seemed an epiphany of the Gods

and kindled thoughts of human evolution. Are we not evolving  
 toward a heavenly outcropping on earth of the Divine?

Now whenever I look toward the Golden Gate, I recall the dazzling  
 radiance of that Sun, symbol of a creative Supermind  
 that guides the evolutionary nisus toward the gnostic future.

JOSEPH KENT

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## A SMILE

THE true, the good and the beautiful  
 A state of oceanic vastness,  
 Is hidden in the fleeting surface  
 This vibrating Trio,  
 Seated in the heart of things,  
 Can reverse the agony,  
 Such is the power,  
 In an emerging smile.

N. SHAKUNTALA MANAY

## MANDODARI

*[Inner courtyard of Ravana's palace. Split level. On the elevated level in the background, there is a cut-out of a tree. Towards the front of the other level, is Queen Mandodari's chamber. In the foreground, a golden throne is placed, decorated with a red muslin cloth, the seat of pride and ego. The Queen's chamber is aglow with light. Dancers sway to soft music. Mandodari is seated on the throne, enjoying the music and the dance. Two "dasis" (female attendants) enter carrying baskets of flowers. They sit near the Queen and start tying the flowers into bunches.]*

SURABHI: Devi, today you look like the moon!

KALIKA: *Arrey re!* And the king is not present in Lanka!

MANDODARI: Who are these graceful dancers?

SURABHI: Don't you know Devi, Yuvaraj Meghnad has brought a royal *apsara* from Lord Indra's Court.

MANDODARI: Oh, did the Yuvaraj kidnap the lady?

SURABHI: No, no. But see how beautiful she is and how graceful are her gestures.

KALIKA: Maharani, a *gandharva* is accompanying her. It is said that the seven ragas reside in his voice.

SURABHI: Oh, but what's the use of that?

MANDODARI: Why, why do you say that?

KALIKA: What else? Dear lady, he refuses to sing at anybody's request. The Yuvaraj tried his best to coax him to sing. He pleaded with him, ordered, threatened and even offered him money but in vain. The young man heeded not.

SURABHI: A real fool.

MANDODARI: There are many things in this world that cannot be bought with money.

*(There is the sound of ghungroo and tabla. The music and dance become more enchanting.)*

SURABHI: Devi, please come into the *nrityashala*. The *apsara*'s dance will please you.

MANDODARI: Not now, later. They will remain here. Having come here once, it is impossible to leave the kingdom of Lankesh. You two may go now.

KALIKA: Oh, when the *gandharva* sings...

SURABHI: Have you fallen in love with him?

*(Kalika laughs and embraces Surabhi. Both leave.)*

*Soon the music and the dance stop. There is silence. Slowly the lights dim till there is just a lamp burning in a niche in the wall. The silence seems tense*

*and fearful. As Mandodari rises from her seat, one of her ornaments slips down.)*

MANDODARI: There seem to be bad omens today... why are my ornaments falling loose?

*(Terrifying shrieks and cries are heard from within. Deafening war sounds. Sound of strong wind blowing, Mandodari takes the lamp in her hand and looks around anxiously.)*

MANDODARI: What are these terrible sounds? Why is my body becoming so limp and my limbs so weak? Why does it seem that huge birds are covering the sky with their wings? Dark images haunt me! The glitter of Ravana's golden city appears tarnished.... Is anybody there?... Anyone?... Surabhi? Trijata?... Gatekeepers?... Is anybody there?... Oh let someone come!... Oh!

*(Sound of thunder. Sound of heavy footsteps and heavy breathing.)*

Who's there? Who's coming? Why is golden Lanka trembling? Whose footsteps are these? Someone's terribly inauspicious footsteps... announcing some great calamity! Who is trying to frighten the queen of mighty Ravana, the victor of the three worlds? Whoever he may be, I order him to appear before me this instant.

*(Sarcastic laughter heard from within.)*

*Sri Ramachandra charanau manasa smarami. Sri Ramachandra charanau sharanam prapadye.* I, Mandodari, though a demon's daughter and the queen of an *asura*, am devoted to the path of dharma. I order the unseen presence to become visible before me.

*(A circle of light. Kaaldevata appears. All sounds cease.)*

KALDEVATA: *Aham Kaalasmī*—I am the Kaaldevata! I hold the entire universe—of living and nonliving things—within my fist. My laws are omnipotent, eternal, unalterable, all encompassing. I am omniscient, omnipresent, immortal. Yes, I am Kaaldevata!

MANDODARI: O Kaaldevata! I bow to you! Such a great embodiment of power here in Ravana's Lanka?

KALDEVATA: Why, are you surprised?

MANDODARI: Certainly I am surprised, lord. Because today, Kaal meets Kaal!

KALDEVATA: I am untouched by your humour. Know that I am above all worldly affairs. Victory or defeat, laughter or tears—I am far from all these travails. I am omniscient and omnipresent. All things reside in me.

MANDODARI: O lord, why do you cast your shadow on our city? The king is the devotee of Shiva, and Brahma has granted him the boon of immortality. Why have you come to the city of such a great king?

KAALDEVATA: I have come to destroy this golden Lanka.

MANDODARI: O lord, be merciful. Be kind to us and spare us your terrible anger.

KAALDEVATA: The decision of Kaal is unalterable, Devi. The reign of Ravana and the power of his mighty kingdom are over.

MANDODARI: Please don't say that, lord. The queen of this mighty empire bows at your feet. Please go away from here.

KAALDEVATA: Maharani, you are a wise and a devout person. *Rishis* and *munis* praise your extraordinary knowledge and understanding. Why are you agitated like an ordinary woman?

MANDODARI: Who can remain calm and undisturbed and watch the destruction of everything one holds dear? What woman can remain silent and watch the destruction of her beloved husband?

KAALDEVATA: Even the gods are not spared from death in their incarnations. You know this. Such sorrow does not suit you, Devi. You must rise above it.

Lanka's destruction is destined.

MANDODARI: But I shall not allow this to happen. This task of yours must remain unfulfilled.

KAALDEVATA: Even Jagadamba had to undergo the tribulations of several births to win Mahadev Shiva; you are the wife of an *asura*. No one can argue with Kaal. Leave such thoughts.... I shall go now.

*(Mandodari bows then stands erect with pride.)*

MANDODARI: Stop, O Kaaldevata, I invite you to accept my challenge that your task will remain unfulfilled.

KAALDEVATA: A challenge? To Kaalpurush? Foolish lady, are you in your senses? I can demolish the portals of magnificent palaces with one breath. I can devastate glorious civilisations with a single stroke. I can dry oceans and send mountain peaks tumbling into the valleys. I make the earth tremble in fear.

Is the might of Kaal being challenged by an ordinary woman?

MANDODARI: Yes, I remember that Anusuya too was an ordinary woman but she stopped the sun from rising! And yes, you were forced to return Satyavan to life because of Savitri. She too was an ordinary woman!

KAALDEVATA: O foolish woman! I contain within me the mystery of all births and deaths. You are indeed very daring to challenge me.

MANDODARI: Are you afraid that you might lose?

KAALDEVATA: No, I accept your challenge. After all, I have been playing the game of death from time immemorial. It gives me pleasure to accept your challenge today, O foolish Queen Mandodari. It will be like playing a game with myself... a gamble. Yes, I shall play a game of deception.

MANDODARI: You may be aware, lord, that I have invented a game that can be played with pawns.

KAALDEVATA: Do not forget that over-confident players often meet with terrible defeat.

MANDODARI: You may not know that I have helped Ravana many times with battle strategy. I have devised this game with such designs in mind. (*calls*) Surabhi, Surabhi...

(*Surabhi enters. She cannot see Kaaldevata. She spreads the parchment for the game, arranges the pawns and then leaves.*)

... Dev, the first move is yours.

(*Kaaldevata looks at the game. He picks up a pawn, examines it and replaces it on the board. Mandodari watches him and picks up another pawn. There is some noise within followed by shouts: "Stop that fool. Catch him, catch him." Kalika rushes in.*)

KALIKA: Devi, someone dressed as a *sadhu* has entered our palace.

(*Ravana enters angrily, dressed in sadhu's attire. He pulls off his beard and wig.*)

RAVANA: You foolish *dasi*, how dare you stop Lankadhipati, the king of Lanka?

(*Frightened, Kalika bows and leaves hurriedly. Mandodari laughs. Light focuses on the throne. Ravana walks arrogantly towards the throne and sits on it.*)

MANDODARI: My lord, is it you? When I find it difficult to recognise you in this disguise, how can the poor maid? It is not her fault.

RAVANA: Well, I went for a stroll in the forest.

MANDODARI: Yes, I can see that you are very happy.

RAVANA: Anyone would be happy with the interesting events that occurred. Why only me, many generations of *asuras* will be happy.

MANDODARI: Has Mahadev Shiva given you a new weapon or has Brahma granted you another boon?

RAVANA: No, no. I have acquired a precious diamond.

MANDODARI: A diamond... from the forest? That is strange. (*smiling*) I thought diamonds are found in the oceans.

RAVANA: Devi, I have abducted Seeta, the wife of Prince Rama, the son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya, from the forest.

(*Light focuses on Kaaldevata.*)

KAALDEVATA: This is my first move.

(*Light moves back to Ravana.*)

MANDODARI: O lord, what have you done? Abducted Devi Seeta? That is impos-



sible. Who does not know of Lord Rama's valour? It is easier to snatch the gem from Vasuki, the king of snakes, than Seeta from Rama. That is impossible.

RAVANA: Nothing is impossible for Ravana, the great wizard, the *mayavi*. Don't you know that I have the art of invisibility? You are stunned and speechless at your husband's prowess? Do you doubt my powers?

MANDODARI: What shall I say? Kidnapping a helpless lady cannot be an act of valour. I don't find any bravery in it.

RAVANA: Maharani!

MANDODARI: (*anguished*) Oh what have you done, my lord!

RAVANA: To become so perturbed at such a trivial matter does not suit you, Maharani.

MANDODARI: But Dashanana, kidnapping a helpless woman is not a trivial matter.

RAVANA: Who am I? Am I not Samrat Ravana, the mighty *asura*? It is my right to take anything that pleases me. Seeta's beauty pleased me; it aroused the wild fire of passion in me. So I snatched her away as a falcon snatches its prey.

MANDODARI: These words do not befit the victorious conqueror of the three worlds. (*Light focuses briefly on Kaaldevata.*)

KAALDEVATA: Admit defeat now, Mandodari. Soon there will begin a terrible war. The fiery third eye of Mahadev will open and turn the golden capital of the *asura* into ashes. Ravanasura has not brought only Seeta, he has also brought me with him.

MANDODARI: No, I shall play my game too. Lankesh is unaware of the future. I shall explain to him the consequences of his action.

KAALDEVATA: All right. It is now your turn, Devi. (*The light moves away from him.*)

RAVANA: What will you explain to me? What is there to explain? Chandramukhi Seeta is now in the Ashokvatika under the strict vigilance of the demons.

MANDODARI: Please listen to me, O Dashanana. Return Seeta to Rama immediately and seek pardon from the kind-hearted Rama.

RAVANA: Mandodari, what is this foolish talk? Ask for pardon... I, the conqueror of the three worlds, should ask for pardon? And that too from a beggar wandering in the forests?

MANDODARI: He is god himself, O Paulatsya. A man who cares about his own welfare does not look at another man's wife, even if her beauty is like the *chaturdashi* moon. Seeta is not for you. Listen to me, my lord. If Seeta is not returned, Rama and Laxmana will come here and a terrible war will begin.

RAVANA: Who is god? He could not manage his own kingdom and escaped to the forests, is he your god? Devi, a kingdom is to be ruled and enjoyed, not to be relinquished. The wine of power is to be drunk, not to be thrown away. That delicate and trembling woman will summon my death? Lady, do not forget that you are addressing Lankapati!

MANDODARI: This is the same Seeta who used to play with Mahadev's bow that you could not even lift, remember? Do you think she is an ordinary woman?

RAVANA: And now I shall be her lord. I decided to possess her from the day I saw her at the *swayamvara*. Aha! Now she will shine like the moon in this palace.

MANDODARI: Lord, kingdoms built on oppression and exploitation never last. Beware.

RAVANA: Mandodari, the four directions tremble on hearing my name. *Munirishis* leave their *yajna* and hide in caves. But lately jackals have started roaring like lions. Your Rama killed Khara and Dushana. He cut off Soorpanakha's nose. Do you ask me to bow to this man? His wife fell into my hands like a ripe fruit. Why should I not take her?

MANDODARI: Lankesh, a woman is not an object to be used to settle enmity nor is she a victim of lust. Listen to me, my lord, please free Seeta...

*(Ravana leaves in great anger. Mandodari is very disturbed. Lights falls upon Kaaldevata.)*

KAALDEVATA: You could not convince your lord, Rani. Actually, it was not Ravana speaking, but I, his death, speaking through him.

MANDODARI: I am not defeated yet.

KAALDEVATA: Oh? Then watch my next move. *(gestures)*

*(Light focuses on another part of the platform to show Ashokvatika. Seeta sits pensively. Trijata is seated beside her. Ravana enters in an amorous mood.)*

RAVANA: Seetey, Seetey!

SEETA: Why have you come here?

RAVANA: My dear, where is the comparison between me and him? Before you stands the master of the three worlds while he is a poor mendicant roaming the forests. Come to me, dearest. Quench my passion for you with the soothing moonlight of your beauty.

SEETA: Stop, you wicked creature. You are a glow-worm before Rama, the illuminating sun.

RAVANA: O Janaki, behold my golden city... the grand palaces with glowing pillars of marble, the arches like rainbow, the shining lamps like precious diamonds. I possess the wealth of Kubera. I have taken away the riches of all your gods from the heavens. All this will be yours, Seeta, and I too will be yours.

SEETA: You fool. Lifeless objects can be easily bought, but not the honour of a woman.

RAVANA: Seeta, you are unaware of Ravana's power.

SEETA: And you have not tasted the power of Rama's arrow!

RAVANA: Rama's arrow! He who could not keep his kingdom and could not

protect his wife, you are talking about his power? Look at me, Seeta. The beautiful Queen Mandodari will be your attendant. All my riches will be yours. Come to me, Seeta.

SEETA: Stand where you are, O wicked one. I care less for your riches than this blade of grass. Be sorry for what you have done and return me to my lord Rama. He will forgive you.

RAVANA: Seeta, you insult me. I will not take you back. All right, I shall give you some more time to think about my offer.

SEETA: My answer will not change, I promise in the name of Surya, the sun god.

RAVANA: I am also very firm, I have forced the protectors of the ten directions into submission. The gods and demons tremble at the mention of my name. Can't I make you submit to me? I shall come back soon for your answer.

SEETA: Whether it is today or tomorrow, my answer will be the same, O Ravana.

*(Ravana exits angrily. Seeta starts weeping. Trijata comes near.)*

TRIJATA: Be patient, Devi. I shall protect you even at the cost of my life. Devi, I dreamt last night that your lord Rama was coming to Lanka, riding on the waves.

SEETA: O Sri Rama!

*(The light moves away from Ashokvatika to focus on Mandodari's palace.)*

MANDODARI: Your efforts have failed, Dev. Seeta remains safe and chaste. She will not yield to Ravana. He will grow tired and will ultimately release her. So, war won't happen!

KAALDEVATA: Don't get carried away, Maharani. I sent Jatayu to convey the information of Seeta's abduction to Rama. Now the preparations must be on for the invasion of Lanka. Rama must be getting together the monkey army, *vanara sena*, on the opposite coast. I am revealing secret information to you.... But look outside, Mandodari, your golden Lanka is in flames.

*(Shouts are heard from within. Frantic movements as houses are engulfed in fire. Mandodari looks on in fear.)*

MANDODARI: Oh, a ferocious fire has engulfed the city. The houses and the streets are burning; the trees are falling; the people are running around crying in terror. The city looks like a burning pyre! Oh my god, what has happened? What is this tragedy?

KAALDEVATA: Yes, Devi. The city is turning into ashes.

MANDODARI: But how did this happen? Surabhi, Surabhi. *(Surabhi enters)*

SURABHI *(tearfully)*: Rama's emissary Hanuman was captured and brought to the court. Ravana ordered his tail to be set on fire. O Devi, we saw him making his tail grow longer and longer and then he jumped from house to house and set fire to everything. The whole city is burning.

MANDODARI: A *vanara* lit this huge fire?

SURABHI: He is Hanuman, the son of Vayu, the wind god and also the emissary of Rama. Have you forgotten that?

MANDODARI: Go now and bring me the latest news of what is happening in the city.

KAALDEVATA: This is not just a fire, O Queen. It is the trumpet of war.

MANDODARI: Kaaldevata!

KAALDEVATA: Destiny's inevitable cycle cannot be stopped by the puny strength of man. Come on, admit defeat.

MANDODARI: Not so easily, lord. I am the daughter of the legendary Maydanav and an *apsara*. I am Ravana's wife and also his war strategist. I am well versed in *Saam, Daam, Danda* and *Bheda*. I can put these to use too. This time I shall surely be successful with my moves, you will see.

*(The light moves away from Kaaldevata and focuses on the throne. The pathetic lament of a gandharva is heard. Mandodari is disturbed. Ravana enters and sits on the throne.)*

MANDODARI: Oh, that *gandharva* is crying at the sight of such destruction. But my lord, why do you look so pale?

RAVANA: The fire of passion for Seeta is burning up my life. Only you can save me, O Queen.

MANDODARI: Open your eyes, my lord. Your golden city is engulfed in flames. You've seen the effect of Seeta's abduction already.

RAVANA: I have ten heads and twenty arms. Should I be scared of a monkey?

MANDODARI: You forget that this monkey leapt over the sea and flew for miles to reach Lanka. He is Vayuputra, the son of the wind god.

RAVANA: Birds too can fly but none calls them brave!

MANDODARI: He threw your crown from here to Rama's camp. Can you not imagine how powerful his master would be?

RAVANA: Were you not my Queen, I would have killed you for this.

MANDODARI: Rama is the greatest archer, my lord. Tales of his bravery cause abortions in pregnant *asura* women.

RAVANA: But have you forgotten my strength? I lifted the Kailasa mountain with bare hands.

MANDODARI: You mean that person who was caught and tied down in the stable when he went to attack Bali raja? And do not forget the time when Sahasrabahu had captured you like a small insect. And I remember the way Bali crushed you under his armpits for several days.

RAVANA: Mandodari, do not forget that I have got Brahma's boon to remain immortal.

MANDODARI: But every blessing comes with a curse, my lord.

RAVANA: Why are you so afraid, Mandodari? Haven't I fought many battles and

captured many *sur-asura* women?

MANDODARI: O great devotee of Shiva, some unseen power maintains the balance of justice and injustice in this world. Do not upset that balance.

RAVANA: You are a foolish woman. You dare to talk back. I shall certainly make Seeta the queen of this palace. (*exits angrily*)

(*Mandodari is very sad. Kaaldevata laughs loudly. The light shifts to him.*)

KAALDEVATA: The game is over, Devi. Now neither gods nor sages can stop the war. But I admire your spirit and determination. Now I must go to the battlefield.

MANDODARI: Please stop, O Kaalpurush. Why did I not remember Bibhisana? He will surely persuade Ravana to see reason. Let this be my next move...

(*Light shifts to the other platform.*)

BIBHISANA: O brother, what have you done? You must immediately release Mother Seeta.

RAVANA: Seeta dwells in my heart, Bibhisana.

BIBHISANA: Your infatuation for Seeta is as futile as trying to grow lotuses on dry land.

RAVANA: It has now become a question of my prestige.

BIBHISANA: A king's personal prestige or insult has no importance in the matter of the kingdom's welfare.

RAVANA: Bibhisana, take care.

BIBHISANA: When the well-being of a kingdom is threatened due to the rash act of a king, then the king is failing in his duty both as a king and a citizen.

RAVANA: Lankapati's city is golden; your Rama's city is made of clay.

BIBHISANA: People's welfare cannot be measured in terms of gold and clay. Safety, prosperity, unity, morality—these form the basis of a true nation.

RAVANA: You wicked fellow, get out of my sight right now.

BIBHISANA: I shall go, brother. You are like a rogue elephant bent on destroying the forest, your own abode. Lust and evil have blinded you. You will surely destroy our family and our kingdom. Now we shall meet only on the battlefield.

(*The light shifts focus. Mandodari is speechless with shock. Kaaldevata laughs.*)

KAALDEVATA: Now allow me to leave, Devi. All my pawns are in motion. Rama and Laxmana have arrived with their *vanara sena*. Kumbhakarna is awake. Both the armies are ready for battle. Farewell, Maharani.

MANDODARI: Please wait a moment, Kaaldevata.

KAALDEVATA: The pace of Kaal cannot be stopped.

MANDODARI: Please be kind to me and stop for a moment.

KAALDEVATA: It surprises me sometimes how easily humans speak of moments.

So much can happen in a moment! Each moment is valuable. The war has begun. Please let me go.

MANDODARI: Please accept my prayer, O lord, and allow me to play my last pawn.

KAALDEVATA: Mandodari!

MANDODARI: Are you afraid, my lord, to give me this chance?

KAALDEVATA: You are very clever, Maharani. All right, I too want to see this last arrow from your quiver.

MANDODARI: I shall make myself the pawn in my game now, O lord.

*(Both concentrate on the game. The light moves to Ashokvatika. Seeta sits sadly. Trijata is nearby. Kaaldevata and Mandodari enter.)*

TRIJATA: Be patient, mother. Sri Rama will soon arrive.

MANDODARI: Seeta, I offer my *namaskara*.

SEETA: Who is it? Oh, Maharani!

MANDODARI: When I first saw you, Seeta, surrounded by the demonesses, you were like the lightning among the dark clouds. I am not surprised that Ravana is enamoured of you.

SEETA: I hope you've not come with a message from the demon king.

MANDODARI: No, Janaki. Today I come to you not as a queen but as an ordinary woman.

SEETA: Please help me, Mandodari. Please persuade your husband to release me and send me back to my Rama.

MANDODARI: That is impossible now, Janaki.

SEETA: You are a woman. Can't you understand the anguish of another woman?

MANDODARI: Here, woman is an object of pleasure... a mere plaything, to be used like a piece of linen that can be thrown away when it is soiled. To have power over woman is the right of man.

SEETA: Do women get no respect in *asura* culture? Among *aryans*, woman is worshipped as a goddess.

MANDODARI: O Seeta, the daughter-in-law of the Suryavamshis, don't you think that there is ambiguity in the treatment of women as goddesses? When the victorious kings confiscate kingdoms, don't they also take the women-folk of the defeated kings? The gods keep *apsaras* for enjoyment. Your father-in-law has several queens.

SEETA: Have you come here to ridicule me?

MANDODARI: No, Janaki. I have come to alert you.

SEETA: Alert me?

MANDODARI: Yes, Seeta. The bugles of a fearful war are blowing. The world will soon tremble with the deafening sound of terrible weapons. Many innocents will be killed. Blood will flow like rivers and great storms will rise in the sea.

SEETA: Please stop, Mandodari, please stop.

MANDODARI: And you are the cause of this catastrophe that will ensue. Ravana's heart has caught you like a wild animal and refuses to let you go.

SEETA: But what shall I do? Tell me what I can do?

MANDODARI: What you should do, I do not know; I know what you can do.

SEETA: Then please tell me, Mandodari.

MANDODARI: Surrender to Ravana, Seeta, and stop this war.

SEETA: Mandodari!

MANDODARI: If Ravana gets you, he will not fight and many lives will be saved.

SEETA: Stop, Mandodari, do not speak another word. Your husband desires another man's wife and you urge her to surrender to your husband.

MANDODARI: This is the only way left to stop this war, Seeta.

SEETA: I am Seeta. I have accepted Rama with my body, mind and soul. I do not wish to think of another man. I worship Rama as a sati. Are you not ashamed of talking like this to me?

MANDODARI: Sati? Does a woman become a sati by washing the feet of her husband? No, Janaki, sati is one who follows the path of truth.

SEETA: My husband is my god, my truth. I worship him.

MANDODARI: He may be your god, Seeta, but he is still a man. When the tree to which you cling like a creeper falls, who will support you?

*(Mandodari claps. Surabhi enters with a bloodstained basket covered with cloth.)*

SEETA *(alarmed)*: What is this?

MANDODARI: Be calm, Seeta. Your husband was killed in the war. This is his severed head.

SEETA: Oh my god, what has happened? My lord dead? Oh fate! How can I live without Rama? How can I live?

*(Seeta cries. Mandodari puts the basket down and uncovers it to reveal a coconut. Seeta is astonished.)*

MANDODARI: Seeta, do you see the futility of your life? Just the suggestion of your husband's death made you roll down like a rock from the mountain top, broken-hearted. If this was to really happen and he was no longer beside you, what then? What will happen to you?

SEETA: Go away, Mandodari. You are trying to help your lustful husband quench his evil desires. Why don't you leave him?

MANDODARI: Who is free from the cycle of fate? How is it that brave Rama's wife is captive in an *asura's* den?

SEETA: Leave me to my fate then, Mandodari. Go now.

MANDODARI: I am going, Seeta. But I had come to you with great hope.

SEETA: What hope?



MANDODARI: With the hope for humanity. All these people scattered in different factions, forever fighting each other, could be united and could at last live happily in one kingdom under one emperor. This is the dream I had, Seeta, that I hoped to see reflected in your eyes. We have a great opportunity to serve humanity, and prevent further hatred and bloodshed...

SEETA: You call this a great opportunity?

MANDODARI: Yes. Great deeds call for great sacrifice.

SEETA: You may go now, Mandodari.

MANDODARI: I shall go after I have said one more thing.

SEETA: Is there anything left unsaid?

MANDODARI: I have paid the price of being Ravana's wife by burning lifelong in the fire of penance. You too will have to pay the price for causing so much death and devastation with your tears.

SEETA: Mandodari!

MANDODARI: No one is free of karma. No one is spared the consequences of his action, Devi. Pardon me. Farewell.

*(Light is withdrawn from Mandodari's gloomy face and focuses on the Queen's palace. Mandodari enters with slow and heavy steps. Her unhappiness is clearly seen on her face.)*

VOICE: Mandodari, are you jealous of Seeta?

MANDODARI: Why should I be jealous of Seeta?

VOICE: That's an untruth, Mandodari. You are jealous of the love Seeta and her husband share. They share their joys and sorrows; they wander in the forest together; they are ready to die for each other. You have not experienced such deep love, have you?

MANDODARI: What do I lack? I have beautiful palaces, diamonds, ornaments. I am very happy.

VOICE: No, you're not happy. Happiness does not come with palaces. If that were so, Seeta would not have followed her husband into the forest.

MANDODARI: Ah, Seeta, Seeta! Darkness has fallen upon this city since she came here.

VOICE: But you are a devotee of Sri Rama and Seeta is his wife.

MANDODARI: But she is the lady who has captured the heart of my husband.

VOICE: What is Seeta's fault in that?

MANDODARI: I know that. Yet, she is the cause of all this trouble my husband, my family, my people and my city are facing. She is solely responsible. Suppose she wasn't alive...?

VOICE: Mandodari!

MANDODARI: If I could remove the cause of all this destruction... yes, kill Seeta... throw her body into the valley from the top of the Sumeru Mountain...



VOICE: Stop, stop... silence such thoughts!

MANDODARI: Lankesh has immense powers and divine weapons. If he wins the war and Rama is killed, then he will marry Seeta. She will become his queen in this palace and I will become her attendant...

VOICE: What if Ravana is killed?

MANDODARI: Then too my future is bleak. Perhaps I shall then wander like a mad woman among the ashes of the burnt city... or perhaps I shall become sati and throw myself into the pyre of my dead husband. If Rama is victorious, he may even offer me to Bibhisana... oh my god... what shall I do?

*(Kaaldevata enters. Mandodari laughs bitterly.)*

KAALDEVATA: Devi, did you see the shower of arrows shot by Rama and Laxmana that killed hundreds of *asuras*?

MANDODARI: No, no... but what about my Akshay?

KAALDEVATA: He is slain in the battle.

MANDODARI: ... and my Indrajeet?

KAALDEVATA: He too is slain, Devi.

MANDODARI: But my Meghnaad cannot be killed by any man?

KAALDEVATA: There was one condition, remember? He could be killed by some one who had forsaken food, sleep, and the company of women for twelve years. So, he fell to Laxmana's arrow. And I claimed him.

MANDODARI: O lord... Ahiravana will surely carry Rama and Laxmana to the nether world and the war will stop...

KAALDEVATA: But Vayuputra Hanuman will bring them back...

MANDODARI: Gatekeeper of Lanka, Makaradhvaj is a powerful warrior.

KAALDEVATA: But he is Hanuman's son...

MANDODARI: That's not true. Hanuman has never married.

KAALDEVATA: He was born of Hanuman's sweat.

MANDODARI: Oh, what will happen now... all is lost.

*(Changing focus of light shows Ravana in meditation.)*

RAVANA: O Mahadeva, help me. I must destroy all my enemies who have killed my sons, my brothers, my people.

*Paśunām patim pāpanāśam pareśam  
Gajendrasya kṛttim vastrāṅgam varenyam  
Jaṭājūtamadhye sphuradgāṅgavāri  
Mahādevamekam smarāmi smarārim.*

*[Only on Mahadeva do I contemplate,  
The destroyer of Cupid, the extirpator of all sins*

*The Supreme Lord, the Adorable one, wrapped in elephant skin,  
The sacred water of Ganga surging in his matted hair.]*

MANDODARI: Shankar Bhagwan will surely protect Ravana'sura.

KAALDEVATA: Only when he completes the worship...

*(Voices are heard from within: "Where is Ravana? Is he hiding in the women's quarters? A coward... ha, ha, ha." Ravana gets up furiously from his meditation. Kaaldevata laughs.)*

MANDODARI: Don't you know, Kaaldevata, that Lankesh is immortal?

KAALDEVATA: I am present in his navel. When Sri Rama hits him there with his arrow...

*(Light shifts to Ravana. With a sudden cry of agony Ravana falls. Some voices are heard lamenting the death of Ravana; other jubilant voices shout: "Ravana is killed. Hail to Sri Ramachandra!")*

RAVANA: O chariot driver, give the message to Mandodari. He who made the earth tremble in fear, whose lustre outshone that of the sun, who ruled over the three worlds has now fallen. Ravana's body is soiled and has lost its vitality... he will die today and will leave no heirs.... Oh, I was so overburdened with my ten heads and twenty arms... Mahadeva, is it so with all kings, that they are so weighed down with the responsibilities of their kingdoms? I feel so much lighter today. Oh, death seems so peaceful. I did not know this... or I would not have asked for immortality.... Dear mother earth, give me some place to rest...

*(Kaaldevata stretches his hand and takes away Ravana's life. Ravana's body becomes still. Light moves away to focus on Mandodari who stands awestruck and motionless.)*

KAALDEVATA: Maharani Mandodari, in this life the only truth is death. I am touched by your love for your country. I bow to you and bless you. May you always be honoured as a great sati. Now I take leave of you, Devi. My mission is complete. I had told you earlier that Kaal can never be defeated.

*(As Kaaldevata turns to go, Mandodari laughs loudly and scornfully. Kaaldevata is surprised.)*

MANDODARI: You are mistaken, Dev. You have lost the game and I have won.

KAALDEVATA: What are you saying?

MANDODARI: Yes, every move of yours led me towards my ultimate goal.

KAALDEVATA: Was war then your ultimate goal?

MANDODARI: No, I was waiting for my lord's death.

KAALDEVATA: What are you saying, Mandodari?

MANDODARI: How is it that you are omniscient yet did not know my thoughts? Well, to read a woman's heart one has to be a woman perhaps! How would you understand the agony of being the wife of such a lustful and blind man?

KAALDEVATA: I don't understand you.

MANDODARI: Through Seeta's abduction and the ensuing war, I sought redemption of my clan. The arrow that killed Ravana actually released his soul and gave the egoistic man his salvation. Though I am widowed now, I am a happy woman. I have succeeded in what I set out to do, ha, ha, ha.

*(Kaaldevata is stunned and leaves silently. Mandodari slips to the ground. The gandharva cries loudly. Mandodari gets up slowly and walks towards the throne. Her face shows changing expressions of bitterness and anger. Her voice rises in lament.)*

MANDODARI: How will I live alone in this palace? The war has carried away everything I loved. Everything built with tenderness and care through the years, has been destroyed. War! Why do wars happen? What do they achieve? The annals of time record how many civilisations have been wiped out through wars. How long will innocent people continue to be the victims of such needless violence? Why should there be such agony, such suffering? Why should women be left behind to lament their loss? From all directions come the heart-rending cries of the helpless. *(points to the throne)* That is the reason. Yes, the lust for power, the rites of ego, the rituals of evil and inhumanity... lead towards the path of war and destruction. This must stop. Such killing must stop. O, you future generations, stop your armies that trample the earth. Break your armouries. Throw away your weapons of mass destruction. Or else, the day will come when the whole world will be submerged in the ocean of tears of the helpless.... I am a woman who has experienced this pain and suffering. I beg you for peace. But who is there to listen to my feeble voice? My lament is drowned by the sound of war drums that I can hear coming closer. Oh, the war drums beat louder. Who is there to listen to me?

*(Mandodari collapses near the throne. The gandharva's pathetic cry fills the air.)*

VARSHA ADALJA

(Translated from the original Gujarati by Tutun Mazumdar)

## I AM BECKONED IN

I HAVE forgotten what I was,  
I had forgotten who I truly am.  
On this stage inconceivably reduced I walk,  
A player who has learnt his lines to talk  
In accents of this time, this place,  
Of a specific country, of a certain race.  
And yet behind me stretch a thousand lives  
But if today someone were to say of even one of these  
“This too thou art, this thou hast been,”  
I would not recognise the part  
I played but yesterday, in other guise,  
The heroine of a different lay.  
I might in quiet amusement smile  
Or with a sort of fascination try to picture it this wise,  
With mind’s incredulity pushing it away the while:  
How could I all these births have taken?  
How could all these existences be crowded into me?  
Reason lies shaken.  
And yet where reason cannot place its heavy tread  
A lucent wall slides back  
And I am beckoned to come in and read.

From the wings of the world’s theatre  
I watch, enthralled spectator,  
The pageant of my lives go by  
Yet know that not even one of these is truly I  
But each only a bridge to greater life.  
One there is who behind a screen  
Guides all, in silence, unseen,  
Towards the day when all is shorn of grief and strife.  
And as I watch I see;  
I have loved truly and have love forsaken,  
I have saved life and life have taken.  
I have been noble and ignoble,  
Loyal and untrue,  
Slave, and master too,  
I have been on that board  
Where one eagerly climbs the ladder.  
Success to taste and goods to hoard

Much knowledge in my mind I've stored  
Only to find myself in the jaws of the snake  
And sliding down again.  
Countless times have I lost and won  
And shall as many times as serve for all to be done  
In sweet self-offering and without pain.

It is not a shake of the dice that guides our directions  
Nor even the karmic sum of all our actions  
But the secret of their hidden intentions  
A temple Devadasi I have been and ardent nun,  
But now I see, I know  
The purpose is but one:  
To make our souls to grow.

And so my deepest Self, have courage  
To pursue this present turn upon the stage  
For but a while until we turn this page  
And then another and another  
Until the soul on which the ever deeper roles are written  
Is ripe and the world too  
And rich with the wisdom of the ages  
We will support the world's saviours and sages  
Until the last great battle is won,  
And the coming and going is all done.

So take birth, take life, take death  
With ever more easeful deep-lunged breath.  
The promised time is near.  
Heaven has touched our earth  
Do you not hear the soft skirling of its music in your secret ear?

MAGGI

## BETWEEN THE ARRIVAL AND THE DEPARTURE

(Continued from the issue of September 2004)

(Volume II)

I WENT to Calcutta. Kshitindranath Majumdar, my old friend and neighbour from our village, was then the art instructor in the Indian School of Oriental Arts. He was a favourite student of the famous painter, Abanindranath Tagore. He was also the proprietor of the Victoria Hotel. After making the necessary arrangements for my stay in his hotel, I made my way clandestinely to Barindra Kumar's house. From Bhowanipore he had then shifted to North Calcutta and was occupying a separate portion in the house of the well-known actress, Tarasundari.

Barindra Kumar came directly to the point and enquired about my lodging.

I said, "11/1, Harrison Road. Victoria Hotel."

"Good. Stay there for the time being. You'll make an application to the Chief Presidency Magistrate to the effect that you wish to publish a magazine titled *Bijali* (Lightning) from that address. Remember, not a word about us."

"Are you going to publish the *Bijali* from here?" I asked. "This place is so small."

"Oh no," Barindra Kumar assured me. "I'm just managing to bring out the *Narayan* from here. I'm looking for a bigger house. Soon we shall have a better place. Come again tomorrow. I shall have your application and the necessary declaration typed and ready for your signature."

Within a few days Barindra Kumar became my dear elder brother, Barin-da. When I next saw him he gave me the application together with the good news, "We've found a house, in a very good location. It is at the junction of Shyambazar, where five roads meet. Let's go and see it now."

The address was no. 4-A, Mohanlal Street. It was a big house, three storeys. The entire front portion was ours. In addition we had all the three flats on the second floor.

"How do you like the house?" asked Barin-da.

"It's beautiful! But what shall we do with such a big place? Who'll live here?"

Barin-da laughed. "There'll be so many people, that I'm worried whether we shall be able to accommodate everybody here. Abinash's wife and son; Upen, his wife and son; Hrishi with his son; my sister, Sarojini-didi, Biren, Bidhu—they will all live here, and maybe, a few more."

Barin-da gave me a guided tour of the house, pointing out the rooms that he had earmarked as the kitchen, the dining room, the office, etc., and said, "By tomorrow they'll all be here. Come the day after. You'll find the place crawling with people."

The very next day, I took the application to the office of the Presidency

Magistrate. I requested the clerk to expedite the work. He gave me a strange look and said, "Come after a month. Your application will be sent to the Lalbazar Police Station. Then there will be a police enquiry about you. The police will send their report to us. After that, a date will be fixed for the hearing and you will be summoned."

"What do you mean by 'hearing'?" I asked, "I'm not an accused in a court case."

"Don't be afraid. It's nothing really. The Sahib may ask you a few questions, or he may not. It all depends on his mood. After about ten days, enquire at the Lalbazar Police Station."

I went to see Barin-da the next day. The front verandah was no longer empty. There were a few chairs, obviously for the visitors. As I sat down on one of the chairs, a young man came out. He was Bibhutibhushan Sarkar, a revolutionary, just back from the Andamans. Barin-da must have talked to him about me, for he ushered me in to meet the famous Upendranath Bandopadhyay, who had been sentenced to life-imprisonment in the Andamans and had been released recently.

Upen-da, as he was called by everybody, for he was quite a bit older than most of us, was sitting at his desk in the office of the *Narayan*. He was rather short but his face shone with the light of intelligence. When I bowed to him, he made a sign for me to sit down, then very seriously asked me, "You worked for the Raja of Lalgola as his librarian? And you've left that job to come here?"

Without going into details, I answered his query with a 'yes'.

Upen-da said, "It was wrong of you to resign. You could have come here on leave."

"Why do you say that?" I asked him, in a puzzled tone.

"Obviously there is a reason." Upen-da said a little crossly. "Well, let me test you first. I'll ask you just one question. Your answer will indicate whether you are fit to stay here or not."

He had me worried now. Suppose I failed the test? Nervously I waited for the question.

Upen-da asked, "Has there been a case of madness in your family, now or in the past?"

Truthfully I answered, "Not exactly in my family, but my maternal grandfather was mad."

When he heard my reply, Upen-da's glee knew no bounds. He called out joyfully, "Barin, O Barin, you have found the right person. Nolini's grandfather was mad!"

I could hear Barin-da laughing in the next room.

Upen-da turned to me and said with the utmost seriousness, "Your post is now permanent. You are one of us. All of us here, have somebody or the other in our family who is certified mad. So when a new person comes to join us, we look for that qualification first. You have passed the test."

Upendranath Bandopadhyay always bubbled with humour and *joie de vivre*.

Barin-da too had a very fine sense of humour. Who would imagine that they had just returned home after undergoing untold suffering for twelve long years in the Andamans. The incarceration in the notorious Cellular Jail of Port Blair had not been able to diminish in the least their spontaneous sweet cheerfulness.

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In September 1920, the special session of the Congress was convened in Calcutta, Lala Lajpat Rai presiding. The respected barrister and industrialist, Byomkesh Chakravarti was the president of the welcoming committee. The session went on for six days—from September 4 to September 9. Here Mahatma Gandhi presented his idea of the Non-violent Non-cooperation movement with its seven-point plan of action. The extremist leaders, such as Annie Besant, Bepin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das and others, vehemently opposed Gandhi-ji's proposals. Even the president, Lala Lajpat Rai, did not fully support Gandhi-ji. And yet, in the subsequent voting, the motion was passed.

Birbal (the penname of the well-known author Pramathanath Chaudhuri, uncle of Kalyan Chaudhuri of our Ashram) wrote, very caustically: "There was only one vote cast favouring Mahatma Gandhi's motion of Non-violent Non-cooperation and nine hundred and ninety-nine votes were against it. And yet the one vote was victorious because it was followed by many, many ciphers."

There was much agitation in the city. In our house in Mohanlal Street too there was much heated discussion. From time to time some of the important Congress delegates paid a courtesy call to our house to meet the famous revolutionaries, Barindra Kumar and others. But their visit caused them much embarrassment when they had to explain the term 'Non-violent Non-cooperation' to Barin-da and Upen-da. Upen-da called them 'a bunch of eunuchs' to their faces and won the hearts of those delegates who were opposed to the policy of non-violence, especially the delegates from Punjab.

After all this excitement died down, I went to the Lalbazar Police Station to enquire about my application concerning *Bijali*. I was informed that they were waiting for the report to come from my native place and that I must not expect anything until after the Puja holidays.

Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja—all of them came and went, but there was no news of my police report. I was still living in Kshitin's hotel but did not fail to go to Mohanlal Street everyday and spend some time 'in that goodly company'. By now I was on terms of familiarity with all the members of that big family except for the ladies. I had not had occasion to go inside the house, so I had not seen them and they too were not aware of my existence. I had only heard that Upen-da's wife was very conservative and never appeared before strangers.

One morning, on entering the house, I found Upen-da all alone in the office of the *Narayan*, sitting morosely, deep in thought. But as soon as he saw me, he underwent a sea-change. His eyes looked as though while drowning in an ocean of



worries, he had suddenly touched land. Upen-da said, "I'm in deep trouble, brother. Only you can pull me out of it. I see no other way." Then he explained, "For the last ten days we are doing without a cook. The two ladies are cooking everyday for so many people. I don't know what Abinash's condition is before his wife, but I can tell you that today I am trembling at the thought of facing mine. Daily I promise her that I'll get her a cook, and daily I break my promise. Now she has given me an ultimatum. Telling her that I shall bring her a cook immediately, I've escaped her tongue-lashing for the moment. Since then I've been sitting here and praying earnestly, 'Lord, answer my prayer. Lord, manifest yourself as a cook before me.' I think my prayer has been answered."

I said, "So, you've found a cook?"

"Yes, my brother. I shall present you to my wife as the cook I've brought. You will have to act the role. She has never seen you, so the plan will work. After that, whether you cook or don't cook or whether you run away does not concern me. I cannot be held responsible for the conduct of the cook. Come on, brother, stand by me."

Upen-da was so insistent that ultimately I had to agree to participate in this charade. I took off my *panjabi*, tied the front end of my *dhoti* round my waist, which automatically lifted the *dhoti* half way up to my knees, kept my *banian* on but placed a folded *gamacha* on my left shoulder. Giving me a look of approval, Upen-da took me inside the house and called out triumphantly, "I say, where are you? See, I've brought you a cook!"

His wife at once emerged from the kitchen to see the precious cook. I had heard that she was old-fashioned and shy and did not appear before strange men, but I suppose that norm did not apply to cooks. Upen-da laid it on thick, "Look, he is a good class Bengali brahmin. I think he will suit us. Explain his duties to him." Upen-da vanished from the scene, leaving me to handle the situation. I stood there feeling very awkward, while she gave me the once over. Then she said, "Sit down." I sank to the floor and crouched on my haunches in as servile a manner as I knew how.

She now asked, "Where is your native place?"

"I come from Bankura, my lady," I replied, trying to imitate that dialect.

She was obviously pleased. "That's good," she said. "I'll be glad to have a Bengali cook. Well, let's fix the salary. How much do you expect?"

I was now enjoying my role and felt quite proud of my acting capacity. Smoothly I answered, "Madam, in my last position I was getting ten rupees per month. In addition, they used to give me three *dhotis* per year and two *gamachas*."

Upen-da's wife said, "But that was a good salary. Why did you leave that job?"

I was about to deliver a plausible answer, when Upen-da's son Nepen appeared on the scene. Before I could stop him, he blurted out, "Uncle Nolini, when did you come?"

There was no way I could handle this faux pas. Upen-da's wife looked as though

she had seen a ghost. My embarrassment too knew no bounds. I took a step backwards, then made a quick exit from this uncomfortable situation. I did not stop running until I reached the office room and stood before Upen-da. Conspiratorially he asked me, “What happened? You’re back so soon?” I said, “Your son came and upset our apple cart. Now you go and face the music!”

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At last I was summoned to appear before the Chief Presidency Magistrate. On the appointed day I found that Abinash Chandra Bhattacharya and Nolin Chandra Dutta too had been summoned to the court as the publishers of the *Narayan* and the English weekly, *The Standard Bearer*, respectively. Apparently, the Behrampore police had not given me a clean chit, for the magistrate fixed the security deposit for all the three magazines quite a bit on the high side—rupees one thousand each for the *Bijali* and *The Standard Bearer* and two thousand for the *Narayan*.

I made my report to Barin-da. He told me to take up my residence with all the others in Mohanlal Street. I was allotted a room and I was very happy to be officially a part of that household. Next morning Barin-da gave me one thousand rupees and told me to deposit it at the Government Treasury. When I went there, I learnt that the Government was issuing a ten-year War Bond at an interest of six percent per annum. Using my business acumen, I purchased a thousand rupees worth of War Bonds and deposited them at the Treasury. They gave me a receipt which I took to the court and got the necessary court declaration for the publication of the *Bijali*.

Contrary to my expectations, Barin-da was not at all happy that I had deposited the War Bonds instead of cash at the Treasury. When I explained to him that after ten years our one thousand rupees would yield six hundred rupees in interest, he exclaimed, “To hell with your interest! You got tempted by that? But don’t you realise that you will get the interest only after ten years? Do you think that after ten years the British will still be in our country?”

Upen-da had been quietly listening to our conversation. Now, keeping a straight face, he said, “Barin, forget the money. If the Evil quits India taking our one thousand rupees, let him have it. Don’t begrudge him that.”

One Friday morning in December 1920, the streets of Calcutta rang with the cry of newspaper hawkers—“Read the *Bijali*! Barin Ghose’s *Bijali*!”

The *Bijali*, consisting of eight pages of demy quarto size, was printed in the Metcalfe Press with Nolinikanto Sarkar functioning as editor, publisher and printer, all in one. The retail price of each issue was two paise and the yearly subscription was rupees two. Barin-da had prepared a dummy and the pages were arranged accordingly. The top part of the cover page showed a globe with the map of India including Burma and Ceylon prominently displayed. In the heart of India was the word *Bijali* in the Bengali script, each letter caligraphed like a stroke of lightning [The word ‘Bijali’ in Bengali means ‘lightning’]. Barin-da himself had designed the

cover. He had also arranged for five features, with colourful names such as, *Kal Baishakhi* (Summer Storm), *Unapanchashi* (Of Forty-nine), *Panchmisheli* (Mixed Fare) etc. to appear in each issue, to be written mainly by himself, Upen-da and me. The writer's name was not mentioned, or if at all, a pseudonym was used. All kinds of writings used to appear in the *Bijali*: poems, essays, editorial comments, weekly news—both Indian and foreign—, stories and *belles lettres*. Upen-da's *Unapanchashi* articles used to be the most entertaining and very popular. If Barin-da was *Bijali*'s life, Upen-da was its backbone. And yet they had given me full freedom as the editor. It used to embarrass me no end when they themselves came to my room to deliver their articles personally. Such was their nobility! Once I discovered something of a seditious nature in Upen-da's article. When I asked him to change the paragraph, he said, "You do it, or if necessary, just delete it." I deleted it.

The day the *Bijali* appeared, I came home in the evening to find Barin-da holding court with quite a few young men. He introduced one of them to me, saying, "This is havildar Kazi Nazrul Islam. Have you read his poems?" Spontaneously the words escaped my mouth, "He does write like a warrior." Nazrul's full-throated laughter warmed my heart.

Barin-da now turned to Nazrul and said, "Just now you were praising the article 'God may give but not the Weaver'. [The reference is to a Bengali saying that the great are generous, but not so the lowly.] He is the author. Meet Nolinikanto Sarkar, the editor of the *Bijali*."

Under the Montague-Chelmsford Reform Act, all political prisoners were supposed to be set at liberty. But unfortunately, even then, more than a year after the passage of that bill, many political prisoners were languishing in various British jails. Giving all the details about these prisoners and their sad living conditions, I had written a critical article in the first issue of the *Bijali*. That was the article that Nazrul had praised. The foundation of my undying friendship with the great poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, was laid that evening.

Almost all the rooms of our house in Mohanlal Street were now occupied. Our Hindu joint family consisted of Barin-da, his elder sister, Sarojini Ghose, Upen-da, his wife and son, Abinash Chandra, his wife and son, Hrishikesh Kanjilal, Bibhuti-bhushan Sarkar, Birendranath Sen, Bidhubhushan De and me. After a few days Gopaldas Majumdar, the present proprietor of the D. M. Library, joined us. Most of the members of our household were ex-revolutionaries and back from the Andamans. From time to time we were visited by other revolutionaries—Hemchandra Das (Kanungo) from Midnapore, Motilal Roy from Chandernagore, Sudhirkumar Sarkar from Khulna, Ullaskar Dutta, et al.

One day I asked Ullaskar Dutta, "Ullas-da, I was told that you've started a business of buying and selling ghee."

"That's right. My shop is in Amherst Street. Why don't you drop in?"

"How are you doing in your business?"

“Oh, fabulously! Last week in one day I made a profit of five hundred rupees!”

“Really! Or are you pulling my leg?”

“Why should I pull your leg? It’s God’s truth. I had one thousand rupees worth of ghee in my shop. When I went to open the shop in the morning, I found the lock broken and half the stock stolen. The thief did not manage to take away all the tins of ghee. So whatever he had left behind constituted my profit. What do you say?”

Ullas-da was smiling but I could only gape in admiration at his attitude.

*(To be continued)*

NOLINIKANTO SARKAR

(Translated by Aniruddha Sircar from the original Bengali, *Asa Jaoar Majhkhane.*)

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## A LONE FINGER FROM INFINITY...

A LONE finger from Infinity  
 Touches my forehead-centre  
 I glide across spaces dark  
 Of Unknown fragrance sweet  
 Clusters of divinity bright  
 Luminous giants of Innocence  
 Stars or fireflies in the dark dome

The featureless face of Infinity  
 The mysterious breath from nowhere  
 Cold columns of silence deep  
 Bewildering and vast  
 I tremble in my little measures  
 And wake up to the finite  
 Smiling face of my father  
 Kind caressing look of my Guru.

CHANDRASHEKHAR RATH

# STUDY OF WORLD HISTORY—TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH

*(Continued from the issue of September 2004)*

## **The Religious View of History**

THERE is no single religious view of history because there are many religions and a multitude of religious philosophies, each with a distinct view of the world and life.

There are philosophies which consider the human world, life and history as some form of an illusion. For these philosophies history has no great significance because it is part of the illusion from which we have to escape into some Nirvana or an Absolute beyond the illusion. There are other religious philosophies which conceive the world and human life not as an illusion but as the creative expression of a divine Being or Power. But not all theistic philosophies give equal importance to history. Some of them consider the world and the creative act of God as the “play” of a divine child or lover with no great meaning or purpose or significance except the joy of playing. This brings us to a third category of religious thought which views the creative act of God as a purposive movement or play and perceive a divine plan behind the flow of history. It is this perception of history which we may rightly call the religious view of history. For the other two views, for all practical purposes have no historical perspective and therefore do not have much relevance for our present discussion.

In the ancient world, the most articulate and insightful exponent of the religious view of history was the Christian mystic St. Augustine. “The education of the human race,” wrote this great Christian thinker, “represented by the people of God has advanced like that of an individual through certain epochs, or as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things and from the visible to the invisible”.<sup>1</sup> Thus according to St. Augustine human history is a progressive education of the human race leading to the inner awakening of humanity, advancing from the knowledge of the earthly and the visible facts to the heavenly and invisible realities. This perception of St. Augustine sums up succinctly the essence of the religious view of history.

The main strength of the religious view of history is that it reveals a crucial aspect of the spiritual dimension of human life and history and it is based on a constantly recurring spiritual intuition in the religious history of humanity. In fact all the three religious views we have discussed earlier are based on some spiritual intuition. But the intuition behind the religious view of history has caught an important truth of the dynamic, creative and guiding aspect of the spiritual source of the world which the other two intuitions missed. This spiritual intuition is as valid as a scientific fact; it is a spiritual fact which is tested and verified in the inner experiences of a community of mystics spread over space and time, in the same way a scientific fact

of matter is tested and verified by a community of scientists. As Sri Aurobindo points out,

The ground on which skeptical unbelief assails Religion, namely, that there is in fact no conscient Power or Being in the universe greater and higher than ourselves or in any way influencing or controlling our existence, is one which Yoga cannot accept, as that would contradict all spiritual experience and make Yoga itself impossible. Yoga is not a matter of theory or dogma, like philosophy or popular religion, but a matter of experience. Its experience is that of a conscient universal and supracosmic Being with whom it brings us into union, and this conscious experience of union with the Invisible, always renewable and verifiable, is as valid as our conscious experience of a physical world and of visible bodies with whose indivisible minds we daily communicate.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the religious view of history is based on an intuition into the spiritual dimensions of life. It is based on the constantly repeated and verifiable experiences of mystics all over the world of a divine wisdom, infinitely greater than any human wisdom, governing the world. "Wisdom is the Eye of the world," said the ancient sage of the Upanishads. Sri Aurobindo, a modern sage, says in an almost similar language, "A Wisdom knows and guides the mystiered world; / A Truth-gaze shapes its beings and events".<sup>3</sup> So by denying the spiritual dimensions of history, the secular and scientific school of history is deprived of an important source of deeper insights, insights which can also be a source of hope, faith, inspiration and help for humanity as a whole. Interestingly, a well-known "secular" leader and thinker who believed in this religious vision of history is Benjamin Franklin. Here is a great scientist, inventor, thinker, writer, statesman, and one of the founding fathers of a great modern nation, who did not hesitate to proclaim his religious belief in a very secular congregation. In one of his addresses to the constitutional convention of America, Benjamin Franklin said:

In this situation of this assembly, groping, as it were, in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understanding? In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us, who were engaged in the struggle, must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favour. To that kind Providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need its assistance?...

I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that GOD governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that “except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial, local interests, our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a bye-word down to future ages. And, what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom, and leave it to chance, war and conquest...<sup>4</sup>

The above words of one of the founding fathers of a great modern nation brings out forcefully the pragmatic significance of the religious view of history. The most significant part of Benjamin Franklin’s address is “God governs in the affairs of men”. This means God is not an indifferent witness of an illusory universe; nor is He like an absentee landlord, who after creating the universe left it to be managed solely by human beings or abandoned it to the Devil. God works through history. The divine Will and Wisdom works out its purpose through our human life and history and our human wills and it is always available for help and guidance if we can open our mind and heart to it through faith and prayer.

But the main drawback of these religious schools of history is that they failed to translate their intuition into a comprehensive philosophy and science of history. The intuition is presented as a dogma but no attempt is made to link the intuition with the facts of history through progressive and interpretive thought. For a spiritual intuition to have creative impact on the collective thought and life, it has to be converted into a growing body of knowledge, constantly renewing and interacting with the progressive facts and experiences of life, with Reason acting as a link between intuition and life. Without this creative and progressive cogitation in thought and interaction with life, the intuition loses its creative vigour and soon gets petrified into a dogma.

The spiritual force behind history acts through human instruments. The laws and process by which this higher Force works out its purpose through the inner being and outer life in man also have to be investigated by spiritual intuition and reason. This forges the link between the inner spiritual and psychological and the outer economic social, political and cultural factors of history, creating a comprehensive science of history. But the religious view of history seems to have no such intuition or has made no attempt to investigate the linking process between the inner and outer dimensions of history.



### The Secular and Scientific View of History

Let us now move from the religious to the scientific and secular schools of history. The fundamental assumptions and beliefs of this school of history are less diverse and much more homogenous than the religious schools. The scientific school of history does not believe or accept any spiritual basis or divine plan or aim for history. The aim or purpose of studying history is to investigate with an objective, scientific and impartial outlook the physical, economic, social, political and cultural factors or forces which shaped the march of human civilisation. Apart from this general or overarching aim, there may be other specific objectives, for example, “the appreciation of the distinctive achievements and limitations of the principal human societies and cultures, past and present, and an awareness of their relevance for contemporary problems” or an inquiry into “the causes of events and patterns of human organisation and ideas—a search for the forces that impelled humanity towards its great undertakings and the reason for its success and failures.”<sup>5</sup> These objectives are part of the developmental perspective which we have already discussed and are in harmony with some of the objectives of our approach to history.

But for a long time modern studies and research on history tended towards an overemphasis on the political dimensions of history. History writing was centred around kings and dynasties and the rise and fall of empires. Even now much of textbook history is dominated by political events. But at present there is a growing recognition among modern historians for a more holistic approach to history. As the authors of *World Civilizations*, a standard work on world history, point out,

...until deep into twentieth century most historians considered history to be little more than ‘past politics—and a dry chronicle of past politics at that. The content of history was restricted primarily to battles and treaties, the personality and politics of statesmen, the laws and decrees of rulers. But important as such data are, they by no means constitute the whole substance of history. Especially within the last few decades historians have come to recognise that history compresses a record of past human activities in every sphere—not just political development but also social, economic and intellectual ones,... ideas and attitudes too are part of the historian’s concern.’<sup>6</sup>

Here the most interesting part of this new and emerging perception of history is the recognition of the importance of psychological factors like ideas in the shaping of history. In their introduction to the book on world history from which we have quoted earlier, the authors say, “They [the authors] believe it is of greater value to understand the significance of Buddha, Confucius, Newton, Darwin and Einstein than it is to name the king of France.”<sup>7</sup>

The advantage of the secular-scientific approach to history is that it has all the



plus points of the scientific method like its objective and impartial outlook on the facts of and factors behind history; non-dogmatic approach to knowledge; urge for progress in knowledge through constant self-correction and extension of the frontiers of knowledge. At present, there is a growing recognition among scientific minds in all subjects, of the importance of “holistic” understanding of life. As a result there is an increasing willingness and openness in the scientific mind to receive knowledge from sources other than its own field and a recognition of the need for an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. As the American historian, McNall Burns and his co-authors write in their book on world history:

As historians have extended the compass of their work, they have also equipped themselves with new methods and tools. No longer do historians merely pore over the same old chronicles and documents to ask whether Charles the Fat was at Ingelhiem or Lustanu on July 1, 1887. To introduce the evidence of statistics, they learn the methods of the computer scientist. To interpret the effect of a rise in the cost of living, they study economics.... To understand the motives of the men and women they draw on the insights of social psychologists and cultural anthropologists. To illuminate the lives of the poor and of those who have left few written records they look for other cultural remains—folk songs, for example and the tradition embodied in oral history.<sup>8</sup>

But the main problem with most of the modern historians is that the scientific and interdisciplinary approach is not pursued to its logical conclusion to include all the dimensions of history. The predominant emphasis of modern history is still very much on the outer economic, social, political and cultural history. The inner spiritual and psychological dimensions are either ignored or not given the attention they deserve. There is at present a recognition of the psychological dimension in history. The modern historian is beginning to admit psychological factors like ideas, attitudes and motives. But the human psyche is not merely the ideas of the thinking mind or the conscious or subconscious motives studied by modern psychology. There are the instincts and sensations of the body, feelings and emotions of the heart, the will and vital force of the dynamic parts of the psyche, the intuitions and perceptions of the ethical and aesthetic being, and the self-interest of the ego. All these are also part of the human psyche and their needs, motives, power and qualities have profoundly influenced the course of human history. And beyond the conscious and subconscious parts of the human psyche there are the superconscious and spiritual dimensions explored by the great sages, yogis and mystics of the world.

This brings us to the religious history of humanity. Religion was a major influence on human life in the pre-modern world. The influence of religion was temporarily eclipsed or rather suppressed for some time in our modern age under the scientific, rationalistic and materialistic thought. But now it is again slowly and steadily regaining

its hold on the modern mind. So we cannot understand history without understanding the moral, psychological and spiritual sources of religion and its impact on the outer life. The modern historian studies only the external social or political dimensions of religion or the superficial psychological motives like fear. But religion, whatever may be its outer forms and the distortion to which it has succumbed, is in its essence and source a spiritual thing. To understand religion and its impact on human life and history, the historian has to study the spiritual experiences and intuitions of the founders and mystics of religion and the deep-seated psychological urge in man for inner fulfilment and return to the inner sources of his being. These are the deeper spiritual and psychological sources of religion. If the historian studies these spiritual sources of religion with a truly scientific attitude he will find that there is an underlying unity among the experiences, intuitions and teachings of the spiritual teachers of the world. He will find that just as the physical world is governed by physical forces and laws, there are psychological, cosmic and spiritual forces and laws governing the inner nature and life of man and the world, and the outer life of man is shaped and governed by these invisible forces and laws of his inner being.

In an intellectual approach to a field of knowledge like history which covers a wide spectrum of human life, there is only one way to come close to a holistic understanding of the subject. It is to supplement individual insights on the subject with the insights of the collective wisdom of humanity on every activity of human life which is related to or studied in history, arrive at some synthesis of these insights, and look at the flow of history in the light of this synthesis. And the spiritual intuitions of mystics, sages and saints of the world are probably the highest and noblest part of the collective wisdom of humanity, revealing the deepest and the innermost sources of our being and life. So the secular and scientific school of history, by denying the spiritual dimension, is shutting itself to the insights of some of the wisest minds of the world, and to a source of illumination deeper and greater than reason.

### **Our Approach**

We are now in a position to sum up our approach to the subject. In our research project on history we will be exploring an alternative approach which will try to synthesise the religious-theological and the scientific-secular approach in the light of ancient Indian thought and Sri Aurobindo's vision of human life and history.

Our approach accepts the essential spiritual intuition behind the religious view of history. But we will try to link this spiritual intuition to the facts of history and the shaping factors and forces behind history. We will investigate the laws, process and stages by which universal Nature, who is the executive Power of the Spirit, works out the Will and Purpose of the Spirit in and through history. So we accept in principle the emphasis of the secular-scientific approach of history on the fact and factors of history. But we will include the spiritual and psychological factors which are ignored

in the secular-scientific view of history.

Our approach to the study of world history will look at the march of human civilisation from four perspectives: spiritual, psychological, developmental and futuristic.

First, the spiritual perspective. In our approach we consider our human individuality and the collectivity, in their essence, as a spiritual being, and a spark of the universal and transcendent Divine, and our life and mind as the instruments of our spiritual self. In this spiritual perspective we may look upon human history as the progressive working-out of the universal divine Will and its Purpose in human life through various stages and cycles of human evolution. But this working out of the divine Will and Purpose is not something arbitrary, disregarding altogether the human will; it is done through the inner being and outer life of man, using the human being and his will as instruments, through the process of cosmic laws, and under the over-arching guidance of the divine Will and wisdom. So, in our view, the human being is not just a puppet of the divine Will. Our human will with its choice and inclination is an important factor and instrument in the working out of the divine Will. Our human will cannot alter the divine Will but its choice and inclination has consequences for human life determined by cosmic laws. Our human thought and will by the nature of its choice and inclination can facilitate, accelerate or retard our evolution and progress towards our goal depending on how much it is in harmony with or opposed to the cosmic law and the divine Will.

The second is the psychological perspective. The outer history of humanity is the expression of our inner history. The outer events of history are the expression of the inner condition of the people. Every major achievement or advance in human history is the expression of some inner powers, qualities, potentialities, faculties and values of human consciousness and these have helped to bring out, manifest and develop these inner potentialities in man. Similarly the negative, or diabolic events of history may be the expression of some inherent defects, limitations or dark spots in the human consciousness. So the outer events, achievements and failures of humanity cannot be fully understood without knowing their inner causes.

We tend to admire a hero like Gandhi or condemn a villain like Hitler as if they are individually and wholly responsible for what they have done. But they are only individual representatives of what we as a human species collectively hold within us and are capable of. The individual leader is only a channel through which the inner potentialities of a collectivity are released into the outer life. Thus in Indian history, Gandhi became the focal point around which the urge for freedom and the moral energies of a great nation, awakened by earlier leaders, was galvanised and released into action. Similarly with Hitler, but in an opposite way.

But some of the apparently negative events or elements in history, when we look at them from a deeper psychological and human developmental perspective, may reveal some positive elements. For example, frequent wars which dot the map

of human history even up to this day indicate some inherent limitations in human consciousness. But wars have also helped to bring out positive human qualities like courage, endurance and heroism. In this psychological perspective we will look upon history as a progressive awakening of the human being to his highest and total potential through progressive experiences and self-expression of his body, life and mind.

The third is the developmental perspective. We will look into history in the light of an evolutionary vision of the inner and outer development of the human individual and collectivity and try to see what lesson it holds for the present and the future evolution and development of humanity. But while the primary emphasis of the traditional historian is on the outer economic, social and political development of humanity, our predominant emphasis will be on the inner psychological and spiritual development of mankind through history.

And the fourth is the future perspective. The word "History" is so closely associated with the past that the word has become almost synonymous with all that is dead and gone. Very rarely is history studied in relation to the living present and the emerging future. In our research project we will make a conscious attempt to study history in the light of a luminous vision of the future provided by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, in other words, we will try to look at the Past with the Eye of the Future.

These are the main features of our approach to history. Such an approach cannot obviously be of a specialist kind. It has to draw upon insights from many other disciplines like spirituality, philosophy, psychology and the social sciences. The aim of such a study and research is not a specialist's understanding of history but an attempt towards a holistic understanding of human life through history. Or in other words, history providing the context and occasion for a broader understanding of human life as a whole.

*(To be concluded)*

M. S. SRINIVASAN

(Readers may consult the April and May 2004 issues of *Mother India* for M. S. Srinivasan's earlier articles on History.)

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3. *Savitri*, SABCL, Vol. 28, p. 271.
4. Benjamin Franklin, *Writings*, The Library of America, pp. 1138-39.
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## THE SERVICE TREE

WHEN the Sun sends  
its enchantment,  
The Service Tree glows  
with golden blossoms.

Its fragrance spreads far,  
far beyond the distant stars.

It hums with  
the busy bees' buzz,  
Sings with  
the sweet birds' songs  
And answers  
the scurrying squirrels' squeak.

Among the thrilling boughs  
The flowing music of the flowers  
Kindles in it a blithe response.

Each hour the sky leans down  
To cast rainbows over the tree.

When the night descends,  
The merry moon hops down  
To tell fairy tales  
And brings to it a sound sleep.

The birds, the bees and the squirrels,  
All throng and ask,  
"O Dear friend,  
Settled now on the earth  
Where do you hail from?  
From what region far?  
Or from what deep seas?"

With a gentle smile the tree replies,  
"I am born in the lovely lap  
of the earth,  
Thrive under the safe care

of the sun and the rain,  
 And continue to live here  
 beside the ocean.  
 Although now on earth I stand  
 'Tis high Heaven I seek to serve.”

And all marvel and exclaim,  
 “You are really sublime,  
 Really sublime.”

SURYAKANTI MOHANTY

**Sri Aurobindo:** *One can either use efforts and then one must be patient and persevering, or one can rely on the Divine with a constant call and aspiration. But then the reliance has to be a true one not insisting on immediate fruit....*

**Nirodbaran:** *You have shown two ways of sadhana: one of effort, another of reliance on the Divine with constant call. But aren't they really the same? How do they differ? Constant call and aspiration means the constant acceptance of Truth and rejection of falsehood, which means a constant effort at rejection and acceptance since our mind being what it is, will always run after physical things and its pleasure. Is there any less effort in this method?*

**Sri Aurobindo:** *Much less. The other is a constant effort to get things down and pull down what one wants. Acceptance and rejection are quite a different thing.*

(Nirodbaran's Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo, Second Complete Ed. 1995,  
 Vol. 1, pp. 65, 67)

# THE PURANAS AND OUR CENTURY

(Continued from the issue of September 2004)

## 11. Dhruva

It would be a self-defeating exercise if we probe our ancient works only in search of guidelines for contemporary living. The Puranas work upon us in different ways. At times they have an ethical power, often they teach us to follow nothing but dharma. There are passages, symbols and characters that convey to us the best of devotion. Some of the myths inspire us by being just themselves, by being there all the time. The legend of Dhruva the Pole Star is one such permanent *ashraya*. If the *Bhagavata* is the mainstay of devotion-laden souls, sometimes it is because of the children who turn up in the earlier books. These children show great promise and are mature beyond their years. In effect, they are a kind of preparation for the realistic portrayal of Krishna's childhood. The Supreme can have a prankster-childhood too, just as a human being can have a mature-childhood, paradoxical as it is. But there is actually no confusion of emotional categories when we draw close to them. Dhruva, that child-devotee of ancient days is very much with us all the time. Whenever we hold a grandchild's hand and point out to the star-studded sky, we speak of the Pole Star and say, "Ah, that is Dhruva nakshatra. May you have such piety!" and the child looks up at the twinkling star above him, nods sagely and brings his hands together in a namaskar. Has he seen Dhruva up above the whole blue sky? Yes, he has. For a child is very close to the Divine.

That is the significance of the Dhruva legend in the *Bhagavata* which proved that heaven does lie around our infancy, though external conditions might make it a depressing arena. It is a tale briefly told. Again, every move in the tale seems so natural while containing interesting folds of significances. The story in the Fourth Skandha starting in the eighth chapter actually opens like a Morality. It is what we find in the seventh chapter of the first Aswasa of the *Vishnu Purana*. Maitreya seems to be speaking about the Mother of Evil and the Children of Darkness! He tells Vidura that one of the sons of Brahma was Adharma who married Mrisha (untruth). Naturally their children were Dambha (hypocrisy) and Maya (deceit)!

"These two (Dambha and Maya) became united as husband and wife, and they had as their son the Rakshasa Nirriti, who was himself without issue. O Vidura! Dambha and Maya had also as their progeny Lobha (greed) and Nikriti (obstinacy). From them Krodha (anger) and Himsa (slaughter) were born. They gave birth to Kali (evil) and his sister Durukti (foul speech). Kali begot in Durukti Bhaya (fear) and Mrityu (death) and these in turn begot Yatana (intense pain) and Niraya (hell). O pure one! I have thus in brief expounded to you the Pratisarga—counter-evolution based on Adharma which led to the degradation of Jivas."

The intelligent man has always gone in search of an answer for the question: Why is there evil on earth? The Purana's positing the rungs of the counter-evolution shows how when man chooses an apparently "harmless" turn in his life, it leads him on and on till there is no going back. The world has been overpopulated with the progeny of Adharma because man remains incorrigible. An I.A.S. officer who holds a very high position in one of our State Governments has a famous couplet from the *Mahabharata* as the end-line for his e-mails. I never fail to read it and then think of this officer who hopes that by constant exposure at least some of us may try to practise dharma:

I lift up my hands and I shout  
 But no one listens.  
 From dharma come wealth and pleasure  
 Why is dharma not practised?—Vyasa

Apparently things had not improved much after Vyasa, for we find the Puranas getting back to the theme again, and the *Bhagavata* making a neat little family tree as a warning to us. We may not practise Dharma, but what prevents us from turning away from Adharma? For, once you go against Righteousness you are turning away from Truth! As a result Adharma and Untruth become the parents of all evil. The steady downfall which ends with slaughter and death is terrifying and makes us remember Aswapati's descent into night. Each century needs its own mastermind to remind us: "Look on this picture and that!" When we read the opening slokas of this canto in the *Bhagavata* we seem to be reading *Savitri*!

But from the Night another answer came.  
 A seed was in that nether matrix cast,  
 A dumb unprobed husk of perverted truth,  
 A cell of an insentient infinite.  
 A monstrous birth prepared its cosmic form  
 In Nature's titan embryo, Ignorance....  
 Hate was the black archangel of that realm;  
 It glowed, a sombre jewel in the heart  
 Burning the soul with its malignant rays,  
 And wallowed in its fell abysm of might.<sup>1</sup>

Dhruva's tale is about how Hate can pervert a heart that should be full of love and how such evil tendencies can burn our souls to extinction. In this episode in the long march of night, it is Suniti's heart that will not agree to open its doors to hate. Her firm adherence to Dharma redeems the day and transforms a child into a role model for all time.



After the sombre introduction, we plunge into the pellucid story which is briefly told. King Uttanapada was the son of Swayambhuva Manu and Shatarupa. He had two wives, Suniti and Suruchi. The former gave birth to Dhruva and the latter to Uttama. Suniti and Dhruva were neglected by Uttanapada. Once when Dhruva saw Uttama being caressed by Uttanapada, he ran to the lap of his father but alas! Suruchi pushed him away. The *Bhagavata* says Suruchi spoke harsh words of hate:

“If you aspire to sit on the king’s lap, you have got to worship the Lord (*tapasārādhyā puruṣam*) and by His grace (*tasyaivānugraheṇa*), be born in my womb.”

Shocked at this and trembling at the helpless silence on the part of his father the child ran to his mother Suniti. Despite all her suffering, Suniti was a stranger to hate. She pacified Dhruva asking him not to have any ill feeling towards others. Indeed, what is the use of burning one’s own soul with hatred? Rather make it the cool spring for the sport of the Divine! Suniti goes a step further. She asks Dhruva to take the advice of Suruchi to heart. Who knows the ways of the Divine or the instrument used by the Divine to bring the Guru’s message to us?

“Dear one! Accept without any ill-will the advice given to you, even though it be from the co-wife of your mother. Worship the Supreme Lord Mahavishnu, if you desire to be seated in the king’s lap even like Uttama... Dear one! Instal that all-pervading Being in your heart, be prepared by the observance of Bhagavata Dharma and by unswerving devotion, and worship Him who is fond of His servants and whose feet all liberation-seekers strive to attain.”

The epics and Puranas have brought extreme situations to our attention that we may be prepared for any eventuality in this world of human affairs. In the *Ramayana* Kaikeyi tells Rama that Dasaratha desires him to go to the forest and allow Bharata to be crowned. When elders act unreasonably, we are given vignettes on how to face such situations and not go the evil way the elder has chosen. In the Tamil epic of Kamban, Rama’s reply is couched in words of deep understanding and calm as he gently reminds Kaikeyi that she is as much his mother as Kausalya, despite what has happened. He says:

Will I reject it if it were your order, mother!  
Isn’t my younger brother’s prosperity mine?  
I take up your advice immediately. I am going  
To the lightning-bright forest at once. I take leave.<sup>2</sup>

As in the *Ramayana*, here too the neglected wife’s son goes to the forest to perform tapasya. Unlike Rama, Dhruva is still a child. Narada comes to him to dissuade him from undertaking the harsh regimen of meditation. Indeed, what is the use of such self-torture? What if he were slighted? A Bhagavata should be above such feelings. Dhruva answers him sharply that he is a kshatriya boy and must avenge an insult. He must show to the world that he is better than Uttama, why, even better than his

legendary grandfather Swayambhuva Manu! Finding him adamant, Narada advises him to go to Madhuvana and perform askesis there. He also teaches him the methodology of meditation in detail. The object of meditation should be the *divya maṅgala vighraha* of the Lord. Narada also initiates Dhruva in the mantra, *Om namo Bhagavate Vāsudevāya*.

The power of Dhruva's tapasya begins to scorch the worlds. The gods turn to Vishnu and He comes to Dhruva. He who had already filled the boy's heart now stands before him and we are gifted with a wonderful prayer by the boy. Familiar points but ever-new and soul-invigorating! The Lord knows what Dhruva wants and so he grants him suzerainty on earth and also a promise that at the end of it all he will be the Pole Star. Though one should ask Vishnu for Moksha (*mokṣam icchet janārdanā*), Dhruva prefers worldly power for he is a kshatriya at heart and avenging an insult is of prime importance to him. However, the Lord knows of the purity of intention within the heart of the boy. It was not that he had been insulted. But his mother had been humiliated all these years and that has been painful to the child. She deserved to be known as the great Dhruva's mother and so Vishnu gives Dhruva what he wants but something more as well. After ruling for thirty-six thousand years he would be granted the inaccessible sphere of Dhruva "around which all the stars including Dharma, Agni, Kasyapa, Shukra and the Saptarishis circumambulate like animals attached to an oil mill." Vishnu then withdraws.

The *Bhagavata* tells us that though fulfilled, Dhruva went back to the palace with a heavy heart. His brief cogitation on this is a great lesson to the sadhaka who chooses the spiritual path:

"Influenced by His Yogamaya, I was like one in the dream state, and was overcome by the false sense of separateness which made me consider my brother an enemy. Vain is this worldly advantage that I have sought, just like the treatment given to a dead man. After propitiating the Lord, the Soul of the worlds, whose grace is so difficult to obtain, I have, alas! sought of Him who is the destroyer of *samsāra*, my continuance in it."

Fortunately for Dhruva, he knows there is a cut-off stage at 36,000 years. He returns home to a warm welcome on the outskirts of the city. Suruchi is a changed woman, like Kaikeyi whom we meet in Sringeripura. On Dhruva's attaining to majority, Uttanapada crowns him and leaves for the forest. Married to Bhrami and Ila and blessed with three sons and a daughter, Dhruva is leading a happy life when news comes to him that his step brother Uttama has been killed in the Himalayas, possibly by the Guhyaka (Yaksha) tribe. Dhruva wages war upon the Guhyakas and in the fierce battle the enemy opens a terrifying warfare with magic. Dhruva releases the Narayanastra which plays havoc among the enemy forces. Dhruva's grandfather Swayambhuva Manu himself now appears and advises him against continuing this genocide. His advice is another *Gita*, but now the intention is to lay down arms, not take them up. Why kill the Guhyakas when it was Vishnu who had killed using the

Guhyaka as an instrument, a *nimitta*?

“Just as one controls a disease with a powerful drug, one can overcome anger, the enemy of all the higher spiritual developments, by repeatedly hearing and thinking about the truth of the Atman. A man who possesses discrimination and aspires to freedom from fear (Abhaya) should not become a slave to anger, for his anger will evoke agitation and fear in others.”

Immediately Dhruva stops hostilities and receives universal praise. The King of the Guhyakas, Kubera, expresses his pleasure at Dhruva’s move and offers a boon to Dhruva. Dhruva immediately asks for the boon of “unbroken remembrance of the Lord Hari” (*harau savavrechalitām smritim*). Blessed with universal consciousness now, he lives on as an ideal ruler realising the Vishnu Maya that brings the creation as an existence to our intelligence. At the conclusion of his rule, Dhruva retires to Badarikashrama and spends his time in yoga till the moment of leaving the physical plane. Then Vishnu’s emissaries come and with the ease of a trained glider, Dhruva passes through death, brought to us in an unforgettable image by the *Bhagavata*:

“Circumambulating that majestic vehicle and making obeisance to the Lord’s emissaries, he (Dhruva) desired to ascend into the vehicle in a divine body. Dhruva then saw Yama, the god of Death, ready to claim his toll, but Dhruva ascended the aerial vehicle, using the head of Death as a stepping stone.”

This image of a mortal strengthened by the Lord’s Name nonchalantly placing his foot on the head of Yama is a direct inspiration from the Tamil hymnologist, Tondar-adi-podi Alwar whose poem *Tirumalai* exults in the opening verse:

Primal Being that devoured and re-created the worlds three!  
Strengthened by the pride of having learnt your names  
We have been able to overcome karmic evils of uncontrolled senses  
And dance on the heads of Yama and his minions.<sup>3</sup>

Such is the power of the Name which is the Great Bass of the *Bhagavata*. It helps us control our senses and engage ourselves in karma, jnana and yoga with perfect involvement as the sunlit path to the Divine. Again, as soon as Dhruva crosses over by using Death as a stepping stone, he is welcomed by the denizens of heaven with music, flowers and other auspicious things. This too has been dramatically portrayed by another Tamil hymnologist, Nammalwar in the concluding portions of his *Tiruvaimozhi*. Sages, realised souls, heavenly damsels and immortals attend on the person as he enters the Supreme Abode:

At the entrance the immortals  
welcome the devotees of the Lord,  
“Come, enter our abode.” Kinnaras and Garudas  
Sing, scholars recite the Vedas.

The feet of those who have walked on the head of Death are washed, as lovely damsels hold expensive gifts, and lighted lamps. It is a magnificent picture which one can get involved in without suspending disbelief. In the *Bhagavata* world, where is the shadow of disbelief? Dhruva ascends planet after planet as everywhere he is welcomed with flowers and songs till he attains the realm of Vishnu.

The tale of Dhruva as given in the Purana concludes with three verses in his praise by Sage Narad and is very important for the social history of India. Generally India's caste system is considered rigid and an illogical compartmentalisation of the society. Seldom is it realised that these differences were suggestive of the various duties citizens undertook to set up a safe and solid structure. By such suggestions it was impressed upon people to constantly think of their duties, as indeed Dhruva did. The kshatriya power is meant for defending a land and naturally one must possess a vital sense of honour to do that and be prepared to sacrifice one's life at an instant's notice. As Sri Aurobindo writes with great admiration, "the Kshatriya who, hurling his life joyously into the shock of chivalrous battle, held life, wife, children, possessions, ease, happiness as mere dust in the balance compared with honour and the Kshatriya *dharma*, the preservation of self-respect, the protection of the weak, the noble fulfilment of princely duty;..."<sup>4</sup> No caste was considered high or low, and every caste had a royal road to Divine Life provided the people followed their duties with the mind hooked to the *divya mangala vigraha* of the Supreme. For instance, if the Shudra caste was said to have sprung from the Purusha's feet and hence lowly, how come Dhruva prays to the Lord that His feet are the sole object of a devotee's spiritual quest (*bhagavanstava pādapadmāsīstathānubhajataḥ puruṣārthamūrteḥ*)? As if to underline this view, Narada gives an emphasis to Dhruva's kshatriyahood to show how caste can never be a hurdle when one chooses the sunlit path. In fact it is an assurance that man can be an achiever under all circumstances:

"The spiritual goal which Dhruva, the son of the virtuous Suniti and the possessor of infinite prowess arising from his Tapas, gained, cannot be approached even by learned masters of the Vedas, though they know the way to it. Much less is it possible for kshatriyas and others. Being wounded at heart by the shafts of his step-mother's cruel words, he left hearth and home for the forest at the age of five. Directed by me, he meditated on Mahavishnu, who is unconquerable by any except by His devotees, through their virtues. What other kshatriya can even think of attaining to the state attained by him, even in several thousand years? But Dhruva, a mere boy of five or six years, attained to that state of Vaikuntha in a few months."

It was all done by Dhruva eschewing hatred, thanks to Suniti. She did not allow him to grow bitter at the treatment meted out to them by Suruchi. In the course of the *Bhagavata* tale he is made to do so twice. In case the listener should think that it was easy for children to give up hate, as they have short memories regarding such happenings, the poet places before us the adult Dhruva as well. At a very crucial moment in his war with the Guhyakas, Dhruva stops his rising anger and hatred towards

his enemy when he listens to Swayambhuva Manu. It is like a drop of cool water into a pot of milk which is being heated and is threatening to boil over. Suddenly the milk goes down. Even so did Dhruva's anger go down as swiftly and all was well.

There is no story in the *Bhagavata* that is not holy, but some stories have been with us since our childhood as holy icons. In earlier days, grandmothers and grandaunts revelled in telling the legends of Prahlada and Dhruva along with stories of Krishna, for in these legends the child gains the rare experience of sojourning on an equal turf with these divine children. Innumerable children have wept over the way Prahlada was tortured by Hiranyakashipu.

And no child could avoid wet cheeks when listening to the tribulations of Dhruva doing tapasya in the Madhuvana. So he fasted at night, didn't he? To have had only the Kapitha and Badara fruits to eat and that too once in three days! Poor little boy! He ate only grass and fallen leaves later on! And how he stood performing tapas, standing on one leg like a wooden post, unmoving (*padaikena tasthanu sthānuri-vācalah*). And the child imitates the pose and then grows sombre as the tale continues:

“As he meditated with perfect concentration on Brahman, the support of Mahat and the other cosmic categories as also the Master of Pradhana (Nature) and the Purushas (individual spirits), all the three worlds trembled at his puissance.”

Did the child understand the philosophy behind these statements? There really was no need, for the image of Dhruva had been impressed on his heart firmly. When he grew up, when the need and time came, the image would help in instilling concentration, a sense of honour, an anxious, pellucid love for the mother. Could anyone ask for a better nursery tale? Sister Nivedita calls these tales by that name with great accuracy. To think that these tales have been around since the time of *Vishnu Purana*! Maybe they were in circulation long before the writing of this great Purana. In *Vishnu Purana* Dhruva appears in the first *Aswasa* itself and when he goes to the forest for tapasya he approaches the seven rishis there and requests them to show him the way to gain a place which would be superior to the throne of Uttanapada. The rishis, Marichi, Angiras, Vasishta, Pulaha, Kratu, Pulastya and Atri, bless him and ask him to meditate upon Mahavishnu.

When the tapasya of Dhruva is on, it is a story-teller's delight with children to prefer *Vishnu Purana*. Whereas the *Bhagavata* narrative avoids describing the evil forces that confronted Dhruva, the *Vishnu Purana* has the frightening Kushmanda devils take centre stage. One of them puts on Suniti's garb and tries to deflect him from his objective with sweet reasonings. Everything fails and Dhruva's tapasya triumphs. The Lord appears and gently strokes the face of Dhruva with his Panchajanya conch even as the boy utters a lovely, meaningful prayer. The Guhyaka incident is not in this Purana. The legend concludes with Shukracharya hailing Suniti for having had the privilege of becoming the mother of the perfect child, Dhruva. What a wonderful way of drawing a child close to its mother!

Sister Nivedita brought this Puranic tale to the twentieth century in her *Cradle*

*Tales of Hinduism*. She makes the telling contemporaneous for the scientific age and begins in the appropriate setting of one hundred years ago when electric lights had not totally blotted out the starry heavens:

“The poetry of the world is full of the similes devised by poets to suggest the midnight sky. The great multitude of the stars shining and quivering, as it were, against the darkness, have been likened to many things—to a swarm of golden bees, to golden apples on a tree, to a golden snow-storm in the sky, to fire-flies at evening, holes in a tent roof, distant lamps moving in the darkness, jewels on a blue banner, and so on and so forth. But only in India, so far as I know, have they ever been compared to white ants, building up a vast blue ant-hill!

“For the fact that seems most deeply to have impressed the Hindu mind, was not the appearance of the starry dome, so much as the perfect steadiness in it, of the Pole Star.”<sup>5</sup>

A perfect beginning. Sister Nivedita’s version is essentially the same tale, but it is the story of all the smiles and tears of domestic life in the Indian clime. There is an undulating loveliness in the telling, and the conclusion after Dhruva gains the Pole Star as his home, keeps the family together in a kind of *maṅgalacharanam*:

“But some say that away beyond it is another, larger and just as true, and that there Dhruva’s mother, Suniti was placed, that her child might be always at her feet, and joy be hers, throughout the countless ages of those stars.”

A perfect conclusion as well. When the child goes to sleep, what a great comfort it is for him that mother or the maternal person who told him the story at bedtime will be near him for ever and ever!

This is what makes Indian culture unique. There is nothing here which can be compartmentalised as mine and yours; as belonging to childhood, youth or old age; as love or hate; as life or death. It is a wonderful quadrant made up of men and gods, earth and heaven. It is an integral world in every way with the Supreme firmly resting at the centre of everything. The Puranas teach us this truth repeatedly. Suruchi’s advice is for all times: Let your life be a *tapasya*: *tapasā ārādhya puruṣam!* Worship the Supreme through askesis!

(To be continued)

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

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- 2, 3. Translated by Prema Nandakumar.
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# MONSIEUR AND MADAME FRANÇOIS MARTIN IN PONDICHERRY

*(Continued from the issue of September 2004)*

## V

### YEARS FULL OF DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES THEIR CHEQUERED LIFE FROM 1689-1707

IN 1688, Madame Martin had to face another separation; her daughter and son-in-law Boureau Deslandes were to leave for Bengal, as the latter had been appointed director of the French depots around Chandernagore. They set sail from Pondicherry on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 1688, leaving their three-year-old daughter Marie-Marguerite in the hands of her grandmother, as the child would feel more secure in Pondicherry than in new surroundings.

#### 1689

Difficulties of all sorts cropped up in 1689:

1. The ill-fated Desfarges expedition landed up in Pondicherry. Monsieur Desfarges had been entrusted the charge of a whole fleet and troops for securing a stronghold in Siam. His total failure as a general was very hard to bear on his own. So, he requested the Council to discuss the matter with him. Martin and other veterans of the Company advised them to return to France. But the captain was adamant; he decided to go to Josselang and refused to return to France without securing some success. Josselang was a small island off the shore of Siam adjacent to another occupied entirely by Indians. François Martin tried to show that Merguy, which was a port in Siam—at about the same distance from Pondicherry—would be a more useful venture—but to no avail.

2. The Moguls attacked Gingee and the Marattha king asked for 10,000 pagodas from the French. François Martin was already short of funds due to the war in Europe, so he just sent a hundred pagodas to his man in Gingee to buy the secretary and find out what was going on against the French there. The political neutrality of the Company had to be maintained, for his promise to Sivaji had to be kept, never to form a French controlled kingdom here and in case of danger to help Gingee and not remain aloof.

3. The war in Europe was caused by the attack of William of Orange on England. The English royalty had taken refuge in France and the Dutch were gaining ground. In Europe they wanted to establish themselves as a nation. In the far-east, Java, Sumatra and Ceylon were already under their sway. Here in Pondicherry, they

were becoming more and more arrogant. They even tried to bring about a sort of mutiny among the French soldiers. It was only by putting them behind bars and degrading the rank of three sergeants that the situation was brought under control. But the dangers were not fully averted.

4. Just at that moment, Martin had to face another very unexpected problem: a conflict between missionaries in Pondicherry. This is what had happened: Father Felix, a Capuchin, used to hold the Sunday mass in the Church and was liked by the general population for his extraordinary gentle and benign nature. Many people, not only Christians, sought his advice and guidance in matters personal. Now, the Jesuit priests wanted to hold a nine-day-long ritual, austerities known as '*neuvaine*' in French, and requested Father Felix to lend them the keys for ten days or so. He complied with their wishes, never suspecting that any complication would arise out of such a simple gesture. But after ten days the four Jesuit priests refused to return the keys to the appointed Church authority. Jesuits were very much in favour in France at that time, so other members of the Council were unwilling to interfere.

The following Sunday before the Mass began, Father Felix requested the congregation not to leave the Church after the sermon was over. No one could feel any anxiety in him while he read from the scriptures and commented upon the lines. But when he came down from the pulpit and addressed the public as a common citizen to tell them about the keys, he seemed really disturbed. All those who were present were shocked at the behaviour of the Jesuit fathers and requested Martin to intervene. The Council met the four missionaries and tried to explain to them that in a foreign country where they had come to preach the word of God, if the Christian priests, Capuchins or Jesuits, could not work harmoniously together, how could people have faith in them? But the argument fell on deaf ears.... Then the soldiers took up the matter. They started jeering at and insulting all the Jesuits of the region. The General then intervened; along with a few officers he met the priests and told them he would be helpless if the soldiers harmed anyone. At that, the four priests came together, and after some deliberation, gave the keys back to Father Felix.

5. All of a sudden, one ship from the Josselang group returned to Pondicherry. They said they had become separated from the others of the fleet and could not find their companions. The story did sound rather improbable. But Martin fulfilled their demands, giving them enough provisions and supplies to return safely to France. In exchange, they had to fill up the gaps created by the mutiny: 108 soldiers and three sergeants from their ship were to stay back and serve the French factory in Pondicherry.

6. All the European groups (the various East India Companies) in India of the 17<sup>th</sup> century knew very well that a certain pomp around the person of their chief was necessary to impress the common people. Martin had gained so much respect from the local population that they had already conferred on him the right to possess a 'gari'! That meant having a sand-clock with him—every time it was reversed a gong was struck. So, when there were no mechanised clocks available, the fort would



reverberate every hour with this sound—to facilitate administrative work perhaps! But Madame Martin found it difficult to tolerate this noise all the time; nevertheless, as office-bearers they had to get used to it.

Wherever Martin went, on horseback or in a carriage, he had to have a group of officers and a retinue of local inhabitants—including the ‘gari’ and the gong! A little ostentatious, it would seem, but this show of a ‘*garde-de-corps*’ impressed the people and secured their respect and obedience.

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The general confusion and disintegration in the South of India caused by different dynasties claiming smaller and smaller areas as their kingdom, their changing loyalties and the varied religious beliefs had created a sense of insecurity among the people. That is what the foreign traders made full use of. The most open-minded among them found in the ‘natives’, as they called them, quite commendable distinctive features, but did not consider them dependable.

The Maratthas who had failed to create a united front against the Mogul aggression asked to be protected from the repeated attacks on the kingdom of Gingee. The Dutch and the French were approached more often than not. But as François Martin had given his word to Sivaji not to side with the Moguls, he tried to help as best as his funds from Europe would allow.

In fact, all the travellers from France showed that their interest was centred more around the discovery of a new people with a culture so different from theirs. The Mogul administration seemed faultless to them in the North, and in the South they were taken up more by the diamonds and precious stones, the crafts, the miniatures, the intricately designed jewellery and the weaving—all that they could trade in, rather than empire building. Pondicherry and other French settlements created new openings for their own adventures and observant ways.

### 1690-1691

In those days communication was not as rapid as it is now. People had to be more alert and work out a few things through observation and understanding.

One August morning, from the highest point of the fort, François Martin was looking through his small telescope as usual when he observed some suspicious movement near the horizon. He was sure that the catamarans (small raft-like boats) did not belong to the French trading company. Within a few days, a well-equipped fleet of six ships arrived from France, led by de Quesne, bringing good news and the answer to the presence of those other boats that day: a Dutch vessel had been captured on their way to Pondicherry, a feat to be quite proud of, and naturally, the French crew was jubilant. Their actual mission was different: Martin had been raised to the post of General by Louis XIV. A sword bequeathed to him by the King gave him the

honour to be part of the nobility of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This sword had to be formally handed over to him. The ceremony was first held on board the admiral's ship and after that on land, in public, with much pomp. This new position gave him the right to be received with five salvos on any formal occasion here or elsewhere, in Madras, Surat or Bengal.

The de Quesne fleet stayed in Pondicherry for twelve days. Feasts and hunting parties were arranged for them. There was much rejoicing in the open. The crew participated by turns, as some had to be on duty on board. There was much noise and merry-making. Madame had to spend all her talents to plan the days and the meals in an attractive way. Most of her storage of grains and fowl were used up. At their departure, special gifts of Indian crafts and shawls were offered to the commander as well as to anyone in an important position, like the well-known journalist, M. Challes, whose good grace in Paris would have been most welcome here a thousand miles away from home.

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The booty from the Dutch boat, cases of silver, had already been stored away for use of the Company. The eight cannons left by the French fleet were placed along the seafront. The security felt during their stay soon disappeared. There were squirmishes with the Dutch in the bay near Madras; the Moguls besieged Gingee and houses were burnt and plundered by them. Refugees fled from there and sought asylum in Pondicherry. At least five hundred of them had to be looked after! Then rumours of attacks on Pondicherry reached Martin. He received a message from the English Consul in Madras, saying that Madame Martin was not safe any more in Pondicherry. He decided to send the women, children and members of the clergy to San Thome under the protection of Portuguese missionaries. But no real attack took place, so they were called back within a few weeks.

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A priest, Father de Britto, well known in India and revered almost as an apostle, had come to Pondicherry around this time. He had refused an important position in Portugal, simply to be able to continue his work in India. Martin had known him personally since 1673, and now, Madame Martin found in him an ideal religious man. She took great care of him as long as he was with them. For a man of forty-three his appearance wore the evidence of many hardships and austerities, so, she told him he was certainly entitled to that much attention from her as her guest. The Church records show that during his stay he had also blessed the marriage of two poor people: this helped the missionaries to prove that their work was humanitarian and beyond any prejudice of caste system.

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From the archaeological point of view, a very important discovery was made. In 1691, the Dutch had unearthed from somewhere near Pondicherry a life-size metal statue, but as they were very secretive about it, no one knew where it had been kept or removed to afterwards.

The Dutch were, on the whole, quite different from other European traders in India. They not only always had their own troops to protect their factories, but wanted exclusive right in all their activities here.

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There was a strange occurrence at the English factory in Madras. Lightning had struck the flag-pole and broken it into two. The door to the gunpowder storage room was shattered but no other damage was reported. Had it struck a few metres away, the entire city would have been blown up. From then on, all the houses had a pointed metal rod on the terrace to serve as a conductor during a thunderstorm. In French India it was known as '*para-tonnerre*'—safeguard against thunderbolts.

### 1692-1693

There was much unrest all around the place. Refugees arrived from Gingee. There were wounded French soldiers who had to be looked after—all this meant much work for Madame Martin. It was certainly not part of the aim with which they had started their work in Pondicherry (1686). By September 1692, they appealed to the director in France to be relieved of their responsibilities, besieged as they were with worries of all sorts, as soon as the current fighting was over. The digging of a better moat by the citizens on the Northern side of the fort was not a very pleasant additional job. And the fighting went on.

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A group of soldiers, most probably a leftover batch of the Mogul army, camped in front of one of the cannons of the fort, threatening to force open the entry, unless they were given enough ammunition and provided for. But as no one took notice of them, they started plundering one locality nearby, taking away all the clothing available as well as cows and other animals around the place. No amount of argument or pressure from Martin's people with the help of an interpreter could retrieve from them more than a part of the livestock and some jewellery.

This sort of pillaging went on increasing in the areas around the fort. When they burnt down a whole village, Martin again went out at the head of a few soldiers, as if they were out on a hunting spree. Thus they could not be blamed for having come out to attack or chase the soldiers away, but they could go round looking into ambushes if there were any. As they were well-armed and on horseback, Martin and his men were sure they would be quite safe. This stopped the intruders from

encroaching any further into the Pondicherry area.

But Martin felt completely helpless when the whole ‘*Dandenne*’ fleet stopped by mistake at Surat and he understood that it would never reach him in Pondicherry with all the reinforcement he had asked for.

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The Maratthas and the Moguls continued their battles and they did not spare Pondicherry. The soldiers here were constantly on the alert, pushing back one group or the other without taking sides. By then, some of the local people also had been recruited to help the French soldiers. The dispensary of the Jesuits was full of the wounded, about fifty of them, which kept the surgeon, the doctors and the clergy quite busy.

All these anxieties went on bothering them and eventually the ladies had to be evacuated to San Thome; the Dutch almost took over the place, after having secured the support of the kingdom of Gingee.

On the verge of the Dutch occupation of Pondicherry, Martin received an offer from the Danes at Tranquebar to give asylum to ‘*Madame la Générale*’ or anyone else who would want their hospitality. But Martin decided to send his wife and granddaughter to San Thome, for the land journey to the Danish stronghold was through enemy territory and it would take at least 48 hours by sea and there too the Dutch vessels posted in front of Tevenanpatnum might cause trouble. It so happened that a Danish ship was anchored in the bay here to unload some cargo and provisions from Europe. François Martin sent the two family members to San Thome northwards on that boat.

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After the capitulation of Pondicherry to the Dutch, Madame Martin was brought back from San Thome, for, both of them were to be banished to Batavia, via the Malacca Islands. The sea voyage was difficult. A French captain met them at the Islands and a dialogue was again possible. After much discussion they were allowed to go to Bengal, where Deslandes was the director—but, just the three of them, with their Indian retinue. None of the other French officials were to leave. Again there was a long sea voyage. On reaching Bengal they found that the Dutch had impounded two of their ships and Martin and Deslandes spent hours discussing how to retrieve the business of the Company. The scenery recalled the beauty of France, especially the roses and the bowers, and in the cooler breeze of the December and January mornings, Madame Martin could imagine that she was really in France.

The religious practices in Bengal were very different from those of the South and the vastness of the Ganges was entrancing. They spent two restful years during which Martin revised his notes with the intention of writing two books, one on the Dutch in India and the other on the religious missions here in this country. After that

the men decided to be active again. They planned a land route to Surat. They would run a business, mainly in silk, export it, and bring back European goods to Chandernagore. In the meantime, apart from looking after the children, Madame Martin and Marie started a school for the young ones at home. It was the idea of Father Tachard, a missionary friend who they met again by chance in Bengal. They also visited all the different Churches, Jesuit or Capuchin and offered flowers from the French factory garden. Martin, on his side, never stopped reminding the directors in France about Pondicherry where something had to be done at least for the sake of those few Frenchmen who were serving their country so far away from home.

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When the treaty of Rijswijk was signed in Europe, news reached India that the Dutch would go back to the position prior to the occupation. In that case, Pondicherry and the French settlements which had been disturbed during the past four years, would come back to their earlier organisational pattern. One great morning, Martin's former friends suddenly came to Chandernagore—who else but J. B. Martin and Challenge—with orders from Louis XIV himself. They were supposed to give back to Martin, with due honours, his earlier position as Governor; not only that, the army and councillors were expected to consult him before any decision was taken regarding the French position in the East. In a specific message, the King said in praise of Martin that he was the only one who knew in that part of the world what was best for France. They also learnt that J. B. Martin had managed to escape to France from Batavia, and was appointed director at Surat. The return to Pondicherry was delayed, as Martin was too ill to travel and bear the strain of the journey. But everything seemed to have come back to the right place.

### 1698-1707

It is true that Monsieur and Madame Martin were given back their earlier position, but they had quite a strange welcome awaiting them in Pondicherry. They had to wait on board for two days until the final handover and negotiations were completed. It was only the warmth of the people who were genuinely happy to see them again that made up for the political rebuff. The fort was found in a much better state than before. The Dutch had continued its construction retaining as far as possible the original plan. They knew that the design of the French architects was good and dependable. But still much remained to be done.

His failing health forced Martin to remain inside the government house. So, a young engineer was appointed to look after the construction on site. He would discuss the work to be done everyday and report regularly about its progress. His knowledge and observation pleased Martin. Every phase was properly followed up. So Martin felt himself very much part of the work that was going on. Now, this person had

married a woman who was the wife of someone who lived in Madras. The objections raised were purely on ethical grounds and Martin tried to convince the others that such personal questions had nothing to do with the completion of the fort, which was going to ensure everyone's safety! By then, a hundred French settlers and more than a thousand local people were protected within the fort. Missionaries of both Christian sects would also gain. When they still persisted, he was obliged to tell them point blank that the work was what mattered, he was concerned with the supervisor's quality as an engineer and not his personal life—so the work went on.

Age and weakness caused by injuries sustained on the battlefields—everything told on his otherwise strong and sturdy frame, and slowly, in February 1707, he passed away—after having spent the previous Christmas with his grandchildren when all those who cared for him came to see him, knowing the end was near. He was buried in the Church within the fort area, and mourned by all those who had respected him deeply all through his life in India. He too, like Father Zenon, had spent forty years here, but his sole preoccupation was to serve his nation well and build a centre in Pondicherry worthy of the French people. He had certainly done them justice through the clarity of his thinking and the depth of his insight into human nature. His biggest gift to posterity was the European township in Pondicherry based on understanding and mutual trust in the midst of all the factions around him, political or religious.

But the French Governors after him did not have the same ideology. The times had changed. Eighteenth Century Europe had to witness France and England vying with each other for political supremacy in India. The whole approach was different.

*(To be continued)*

AMITA SEN

*One does not learn English or French as an aid to the sadhana; it is done for the development of the mind and as part of the activity given to the being. For that purpose learning French is as good as learning English and, if it is properly done, better. Nor is there any reason, if one has the capacity, to limit oneself to one language only.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Letters on Yoga, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1284)*

# SRI AUROBINDO—THE SOUL OF INDIA

(Continued from the issue of September 2004)

## SAVITRI, THE LEGEND

*Savitri* is a legend. Its beauty lies not so much in the story but in the significance behind the tale. As Browning in “The Ring and the Book”, so Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri*, narrates not so much the facts but the vision beyond the facts. Thus Art obliquely tells the truth where facts hide the real. The myth of *Savitri* is briefly told. Aswapathy, King of Madra, practising penance seeks of the Divine assistance in the Yoga of the Ascent. In answer to his prayer is born to the Queen of Madra, a daughter, Savitri—the incarnation upon earth of the Supramental Light. Grown into womanhood she finds no partner for her seeking lids. She leaves the palace of Aswapathy in quest of her partner. In the woods of Shalwa she meets the man of her choice, the King’s son, Satyavan. As she returns to the palace of Aswapathy to reveal the name of her partner, Narad the sage, looking into futurity warns the King and Queen that Satyavan and Savitri’s life together would be only for twelve months. Then Satyavan would die in the woods of Shalwa and the hand of Yama would seize the prince’s soul as his prize. Thereafter, Savitri would battle with Yama for the soul of Satyavan. Then Fate begins its work of Death and Doom. Savitri with the Supramental Light, at the behest of the Absolute, destroys the power of Yama. Returning to the woods of Shalwa with the awakened soul of Satyavan, the prince and the princess in the comradeship of the Integral Yoga, await the arrival of the new dawn of Supermind on earth.

## SAVITRI THE SYMBOL

Behind the legend of *Savitri* is a symbol. Savitri symbolises the descent of the Supermind onto Earth. Her struggle with Yama is to release, through the supramental descent, the bondage of the World of Nescience from the clutches of Death. Her pursuit of Yama in the immaterial planes is the symbol of the supramental Light dispersing the terrors of the Asuras working behind the veils of Matter and Mind. Likewise, her transformation of Earth into the Supramental Light is the Symbol of the transmutation of Matter, Mind and life into Supermind.

## THE CHARACTERS OF SAVITRI

*Savitri* is, in substance, the Cosmic Vision of the worlds here and the worlds beyond. The characters of *Savitri* are, therefore, not the characters of the vital plane. There is no despondent Hamlet, no jealous Othello, no assassinated Caesar and, no avenging Brutus. All the characters in *Savitri* are symbols of Consciousness seeking the Superconscious Realms of the Supermind.



Aswapathy is not a character but an aspiration. He is the searcher for the Light of Supermind in the fields of Matter gross and rare. The flights of Aswapathy to the heights of Supermind are the flights of the human aspiration. Aswapathy is not an external character and does not reveal any external reactions; he is a Spirit and his searches are of the fields of the Spirit.

Likewise, Savitri is the symbol of the Supermind taking a material form. Her work is not in the external fields of Matter and life; her ordeal is in her battle with Yama for the soul of Satyavan in this subtle-physical in order to conquer Death. Savitri is the symbol of the Supramental transformation and not a character of the vital field.

Yama is the material shape and shadow of pain. He is the symbol of human tears. He is neither a spirit nor a real form nor a real character; he is the appearance of Non-Being and is, therefore, nothing. His combat with Savitri is in the field of shadows. When the shadow disappears there remains nothing of his jest but the smile of the Absolute Light.

Of the minor characters Narad is the symbol of the occult sight; the Queen is the symbol of the Little Life of despondency and tears; Satyavan the symbol of the untransformed consciousness seeking through Savitri the supramental transformation.

Sri Aurobindo writes in one of his letters to a disciple:

“...X has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is criticising, least of all, their inner sense—that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it: inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney. His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the ‘day’ of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announce-ment. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or,



understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

“To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates ‘sombre Vast’, ‘unsounded Void’, ‘opaque Inane’, ‘vacant Vasts’ and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass.”<sup>1</sup>

K. D. Sethna writes: “...From the total Involution cosmic Evolution starts: the submerged qualities of the Supreme Divine gradually emerge, the concealed powers of the Superconscience come out of the Inconscience, grade after grade...

“Now, does the Night, which features in *Savitri*’s opening passage, stand for this Inconscience at the commencement of things?

“The initial clue to the right answer is in the very title of the Canto: ‘The Symbol Dawn.’ The title refers to the dawn of the day which is characterised in the line which occurs at the end of the first canto:

This was the day when Satyavan must die.

(Bk. I, Canto 1, p. 10)

The dawn in question serves as a symbol. The symbolic content is stated in the verses picturing the occult power that has the natural daybreak as its suggestive front and communicative medium:

A glamour from the unreached transcendences  
Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,  
A message from the unknown immortal Light  
Ablaze upon creation’s quivering edge,  
Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues  
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.

(Bk. I, Canto 1, pp. 3-4)

A further pointer follows :

It wrote the lines of a significant myth  
Telling of a greatness of spiritual dawns,...  
Almost that day the epiphany was disclosed  
Of which our thoughts and hopes are signal flares;  
A lonely splendour from the invisible goal  
Almost was flung on the opaque Inane.

(Bk. I, Canto 1, p. 4)

In short, what is symbolised is the descent of the Supramental Godhead into the world's mental human consciousness for a total transformative purpose."<sup>2</sup>

A. B. Purani<sup>3</sup> gives an illuminating exposition of *Savitri*: "*Savitri* is symbolic and the poetic genius of Sri Aurobindo has been saturated not only with English, Greek and Latin poetry but it has dived deep into the earliest poetry of humanity, the Rig Veda. How the Veda is living poetry and how Sri Aurobindo makes it live again in his translations of the hymns of the Veda is well known to those who have seen his epoch-making researches in the realm of Vedic interpretation embodied in his [...] book *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* and the [...] work *Secret of the Veda*. His thesis is that the Rig Veda is symbolic poetry embodying the spiritual wisdom of the early mystics. He himself has been a mystic all along his life and because of his affinity with the spirit of mystic expression it is natural that in *Savitri* there are passages and lines which echo in their proper setting some of the poetic forms of the Vedic symbolists. A list is given below of some analogies which is by no means exhaustive.

The brief perpetual sign recurred above.  
A glamour from the unreached transcendences  
Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen,  
A message from the unknown immortal Light  
Ablaze upon creation's quivering edge,  
Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues  
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.

(Bk. I, Canto 1, pp. 3-4)

“(a) Usha widens bringing out that which lives, awakening someone who was dead. ...projecting forward her illumination, she enters into communion with rest that are to come. (*Rig Veda*, I. 113, 8, 10.)

“(b) Lo, Dawn, queen of the plentitudes,... she has created her host of ruddy cows. (*Rig Veda*, I. 124. 11.)

“(c) Lo! in front of us that Supreme Light full of the knowledge has arisen out of the darkness; daughters of heaven shining wide the Dawns, stand in front of us like pillars in the sacrifices; breaking out pure and purifying they have opened the doors of the pen, the darkness. (*Rig Veda*, IV, 51. 1-2)”

(*To be continued*)

NILIMA DAS

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