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# MOTHER INDIA

MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE



SEPTEMBER 2024

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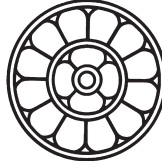
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# MOTHER INDIA

MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 2024

SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM  
PONDICHERRY  
INDIA



Lord, Thou hast willed, and I execute,  
A new light breaks upon the earth,  
A new world is born.  
The things that were promised are fulfilled.



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# MOTHER INDIA

MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

Vol. LXXVII

No. 9

*“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”*

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## LILA

In us is the thousandfold Spirit who is one,  
An eternal thinker calm and great and wise,  
A seer whose eye is an all-regarding sun,  
A poet of the cosmic mysteries.

A critic Witness pieces everything  
And binds the fragments in his brilliant sheaf;  
A World-adventurer borne on Destiny's wing  
Gambles with death and triumph, joy and grief.

A king of greatness and a slave of love,  
Host of the stars and guest in Nature's inn,  
A high spectator spirit throned above,  
A pawn of passion in the game divine,

One who has made in sport the suns and seas  
Mirrors in our being his immense caprice.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Collected Poems, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 611)*



## MAN AND THE SUPERMIND

Man is a transitional being, he is not final; for in him and high beyond him ascend the radiant degrees which climb to a divine supermanhood.

The step from man towards superman is the next approaching achievement in the earth's evolution. There lies our destiny and the liberating key to our aspiring, but troubled and limited human existence — inevitable because it is at once the intention of the inner Spirit and the logic of Nature's process.

The appearance of a human possibility in a material and animal world was the first glint of a coming divine Light, — the first far-off intimation of a godhead to be born out of Matter. The appearance of the superman in the human world will be the fulfilment of that distant shining promise.

The difference between man and superman will be the difference between mind and a consciousness as far beyond it as thinking mind is beyond the consciousness of plant and animal; the differentiating essence of man is mind, the differentiating essence of superman will be supermind or a divine gnosis.

Man is a mind imprisoned, obscured and circumscribed in a precarious and imperfect living but imperfectly conscious body. The superman will be a supramental spirit which will envelop and freely use a conscious body, plastic to spiritual forces. His physical frame will be a firm support and an adequate radiant instrument for the spirit's divine play and work in Matter.

Mind, even free and in its own unmixed and unhampered element, is not the highest possibility of consciousness; for mind is not in possession of Truth, but only a minor vessel or an instrument and here an ignorant seeker plucking eagerly at a mass of falsehoods and half-truths for the unsatisfying pabulum of its hunger. Beyond mind is a supramental or gnostic power of consciousness that is in eternal possession of Truth; all its motion and feeling and sense and outcome are instinct and luminous with the inmost reality of things and express nothing else.

Supermind or gnosis is in its original nature at once and in the same movement an infinite wisdom and an infinite will. At its source it is the dynamic consciousness of the divine Knower and Creator.

When in the process of unfolding of an always greater force of the one Existence, some delegation of this power shall descend into our limited human nature, then and then only can man exceed himself and know divinely and divinely act and create; he will have become at last a conscious portion of the Eternal. The superman will be born, not a magnified mental being, but a supramental power descended here into a new life of the transformed terrestrial body. A gnostic supermanhood is the next distinct and triumphant victory to be won by the spirit descended into earthly nature.

The disk of a secret sun of Power and Joy and Knowledge is emerging out of the

material consciousness in which our mind works as a chained slave or a baffled and impotent demiurge; supermind will be the formed body of that radiant effulgence.

Superman is not man climbed to his own natural zenith, not a superior degree of human greatness, knowledge, power, intelligence, will, character, genius, dynamic force, saintliness, love, purity or perfection. Supermind is something beyond mental man and his limits, a greater consciousness than the highest consciousness proper to human nature.

Man is a being from the mental worlds whose mentality works here involved, obscure and degraded in a physical brain, shut off from its own divinest powers and impotent to change life beyond certain narrow and precarious limits. Even in the highest of his kind it is balked of its luminous possibilities of supreme force and freedom by this dependence. Most often and in most men it is only a servitor, a purveyor of amusements, a caterer of needs and interests to the life and the body. But the superman will be a gnostic king of Nature; supermind in him even in its evolutionary beginnings will appear as a ray of the eternal omniscience and omnipotence. Sovereign and irresistible it will lay hands on the mental and physical instruments, and, standing above and yet penetrating and possessing our lower already manifested parts, it will transform mind, life and body into its own divine and luminous nature.

Man in himself is hardly better than an ambitious nothing. He is a narrowness that reaches towards ungrasped wideesses, a littleness straining towards grandeurs which are beyond him, a dwarf enamoured of the heights. His mind is a darkened ray in the splendours of the universal Mind. His life is a striving exulting and suffering wave, an eager passion-tossed and sorrow-stricken or a blindly and dully toiling petty moment of the universal Life. His body is a labouring perishable speck in the material universe. An immortal soul is somewhere hidden within him and gives out from time to time some sparks of its presence, and an eternal spirit is above and overshadows with its wings and upholds with its power this soul continuity in his nature. But that greater spirit is obstructed from descent by the hard lid of his constructed personality and this inner radiant soul is wrapped, stifled and oppressed in dense outer coatings. In all but a few it is seldom active, in many hardly perceptible. The soul and spirit in man seem rather to exist above and behind his formed nature than to be a part of its visible reality; subliminal in his inner being or superconscient above in some unreachd status, they are in his outer consciousness possibilities rather than things realised and present. The spirit is in course of birth rather than born in Matter.

This imperfect being with his hampered, confused, ill-ordered and mostly ineffective consciousness cannot be the end and highest height of the mysterious upward surge of Nature. There is something more that has yet to be brought down from above and is now seen only by broken glimpses through sudden rifts in the giant wall of our limitations. Or else there is something yet to be evolved from below, sleeping under the veil of man's mental consciousness or half visible by

flashes, as life once slept in the stone and metal, mind in the plant and reason in the cave of animal memory underlying its imperfect apparatus of emotion and sense-device and instinct. Something there is in us yet unexpressed that has to be delivered by an enveloping illumination from above. A godhead is imprisoned in our depths, one in its being with a greater godhead ready to descend from superhuman summits. In that descent and awakened joining is the secret of our future.

Man's greatness is not in what he is but in what he makes possible. His glory is that he is the closed place and secret workshop of a living labour in which supermanhood is made ready by a divine Craftsman.

But he is admitted to a yet greater greatness and it is this that, unlike the lower creation, he is allowed to be partly the conscious artisan of his divine change. His free assent, his consecrated will and participation are needed that into his body may descend the glory that will replace him. His aspiration is earth's call to the supramental Creator.

If earth calls and the Supreme answers, the hour can be even now for that immense and glorious transformation.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, pp. 157-60)*



## THE DEMAND OF THE MOTHER

(From the *Bande Mataram*, April 11<sup>th</sup>, CALCUTTA, 1908)

We have lost the faculty of religious fervour in Bengal and are now trying to recover it through the passion for the country, by self-sacrifice, by labour for our fellow-countrymen, by absorption in the idea of the country. When a nation is on the verge of losing the source of its vitality, it tries to recover it by the first means which the environment offers, whether that environment be favourable or not. Bengal has always lived by its emotions; the brain of India, as it has been called, is also the heart of India. The loss of emotional power, of belief, of enthusiasm would dry up the sources from which she derives her strength. The country of Nyaya is also the country of Chaitanya who himself was born in the height of the intellectual development of Bengal as its fine flower and most perfect expression. If now she tries to recover her enthusiasm and perfect power of self-abandonment, it must be through a means which her new environment provides. This new environment has been responsible for the loss of her springs of vitality; it had turned the Bengalis into a sceptical people prone to swear at and disbelieve in everything great, noble and inspiring. The recovery of her old spirit of enthusiastic faith and aspiration has come about through the sense of political unity which had been slowly developing in the heart of the people as the result of the new environment. That which had supplied the poison, supplied also the cure. If she is to complete the restoration to her true self, the first requisite is that the enthusiasm, the idealism of the new movement should be kept alive. The perfect sense of self-abandonment which Chaitanya felt for Hari, must be felt by Bengal for the Mother. Then only will Bengal be herself and able to fulfil the destiny to which after so many centuries of preparation she has been called.

The great religions of the world have all laid stress on self-abandonment as the source of salvation and the law applies not only to spiritual salvation but to the destinies of a people. Self-abandonment will alone give salvation. He who loses his life, shall keep it, and the life of the individual must be the sacrifice for the life of the nation. When the people of Bengal are able to rise to the full height and depth of this idea they will find the secret of success which till now has escaped them. It is not by patriotic desires that a nation can be liberated, it is not by patriotic work that a nation can be built. For every stone that is added to the national edifice, a life must be given. It is not talk of Swaraj that can bring Swaraj but it is the living of Swaraj by each man among us that will compel Swaraj to come. The kingdom of Heaven is within you; free India is no piece of wood or stone that can be carved into the likeness of a nation but lives in the hearts of those who desire her, and out of these she must be created. We must first ourselves be free in heart before our country can be free. "There is no

British jail which can hold me,” said the great Upadhyay before his death, and he died to prove the truth of his words; but his words are true for all of us that aspire to liberate our Mother, whether we prove it by our lives or by our death. When her sons have learned to be free in themselves, free in prison, free under the yoke which they seek to remove, free in life, free in death, when the text of Upadhyay’s words will receive their illuminating commentary in the actions of a people, then the chains will fall off of themselves and outward circumstances be forced to obey the law of our inward life.

How then can we live Swaraj? By abandonment of the idea of self and its replacement by the idea of the nation. As Chaitanya ceased to be Nimai Pandit and became Krishna, became Radha, became Balaram, so every one of us must cease to cherish his separate life and live in the nation. The hope of national regeneration must absorb our minds as the idea of salvation absorbs the minds of the *mumukshu*. Our *tyaga* must be as complete as the *tyaga* of the nameless ascetic. Our passion to see the face of our free and glorified Mother must be as devouring a madness as the passion of Chaitanya to see the face of Sri Krishna. Our sacrifice for the country must be as enthusiastic and complete as that of Jagai and Madhai who left the rule of a kingdom to follow the *sankirtan* of Gauranga. Our offerings on the altar must be as wildly liberal, as remorselessly complete as that of Carthaginian parents who passed their children through the fire to Moloch. If any reservation mars the completeness of our self-abandonment, if any bargaining abridges the fullness of our sacrifice, if any doubt mars the strength of our faith and enthusiasm, if any thought of self pollutes the sanctity of our love, then the Mother will not be satisfied and will continue to withhold her presence. We call her to come, but the call has not yet gone out of the bottom of our hearts. The Mother’s feet are on the threshold, but she waits to hear the true cry, the cry that rushes out from the heart, before she will enter. We are still hesitating between ourselves and the country; we would give one anna to the service of the Mother and keep fifteen for ourselves, our wives, our children, our property, our fame and reputation, our safety, our ease. The Mother asks all before she will give herself. Not until Surath Raja offered the blood of his veins did the Mother appear to him and ask him to choose his boon. Not until Shivaji was ready to offer his head at the feet of the Mother, did Bhavani in visible form stay his hand and give him the command to free his people. Those who have freed nations, have first passed through the agony of utter renunciation before their efforts were crowned with success, and those who aspire to free India, will first have to pay the price which the Mother demands. The schemes by which we seek to prepare the nation, the scheme of industrial regeneration, the scheme of educational regeneration, the scheme of political regeneration through self-help are subordinate features of the deeper regeneration which the country must go through before it can be free. The Mother asks us for no schemes, no plans, no methods. She herself will provide the schemes, the plans, the methods better than any that we can devise. She asks us for

our hearts, our lives, nothing less, nothing more. Swadeshi, National Education, the attempt to organise Swaraj are only so many opportunities for self-surrender to her. She will look to see not how much we have tried for Swadeshi, how wisely we have planned for Swaraj, how successfully we have organised education, but how much of ourselves we have given, how much of our substance, how much of our labour, how much of our ease, how much of our safety, how much of our lives. Regeneration is literally rebirth and rebirth comes not by the intellect, not by the fullness of the purse, not by policy, not by change of machinery, but by the getting of a new heart by throwing away all that we were into the fire of sacrifice and being reborn in the Mother. Self-abandonment is the demand made upon us. She asks of us, “How many will live for me? How many will die for me?” and awaits our answer.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*Bande Mataram*, CWSA, Vol. 7, pp. 1030-33)



## UNITY

### **An open letter to those who despair of their Country**

To the sons of our mother Bharat who disclaim their sonhood, to the children of languor and selfishness, to the woovers of safety & ease, to the fathers of despair and death — greeting.

To those who impugning the holiness of their Mother refuse to lift her out of danger lest they defile their own spotless hands, to those who call on her to purify herself before they will save her from the imminent & already descending sword of Death, — greeting.

Lastly to those who love & perhaps have striven for her but having now grown themselves faint and hopeless bid others to despair and cease, — to them also greeting.

Brothers, — for whether unwise friends or selfish enemies of my Mother, you are still her children, — there is a common voice among you spreading dismay and weakness in the hearts of the people; for you say to each other and to all who would speak to you of their country, “Let us leave these things and look to our daily bread; this nation must perish but let us at least and our children try to live while live we can. We are fallen and depraved and our sins grow upon us day by day; we suffer & are oppressed and oppression increases with every setting of the sun; we are weak and languid and our weakness grows weaker and our languor more languid every time the sun rises in the east. We are sick and broken; we are idle and cowardly; we perish every year from famine and plague; disease decimates us, with every decade poverty annihilates family after family; where there were a hundred in one house, there are now ten; where there was once a flourishing village, the leopard and the jackal will soon inhabit. God is adverse to us and ourselves our worst enemies; we are decaying from within and smitten from without. The sword has been taken out of our hands and the bread is being taken out of our mouths. Worst of all we are disunited beyond hope of union and without union we must ere long perish. It may be five decades or it may be ten, but very soon this great and ancient nation will have perished from the face of the earth and the negro or the Malay will inherit the homes of our fathers & till the fields to glut the pockets & serve the pleasure of the Englishman or the Russian. Meanwhile it is well that the Congress should meet once a year & deceive the country with an appearance of life; that there should be posts for the children of the soil with enough salary to keep a few from starving, that a soulless education should suck the vigour & sweetness out of body & heart & brain of our children while flattering them with the vain lie that they are educated & enlightened; for so shall the nation die peacefully of a sort of euthanasia lapped in

lies & comforted with delusions and not violently & in a whirlwind of horror and a great darkness of fear & suffering.”

With such Siren song do you slay the hearts of those who have still force and courage to strive against Fate and would rescue our Mother out of the hands of destruction. Yet I would willingly believe that matricides though you are, it is in ignorance. Come therefore, let us reason calmly together.

Is it indeed [*incomplete*]

SRI AUROBINDO

(*Bande Mataram*, CWSA, Vol. 6, pp. 68-69)

[*An incomplete essay from the period before the partition of Bengal (1905), written in a Baroda notebook, probably 1901-03.*]



## THE PASSING OF WAR?

The progress of humanity proceeds by a series of imaginations which the will in the race turns into accomplished facts and a train of illusions which contain each of them an inevitable truth. The truth is there in the secret Will and Knowledge that are conducting our affairs for us and it reflects itself in the soul of mankind; the illusion is in the shape we give to that reflection, the veil of arbitrary fixations of time, place and circumstance which that deceptive organ of knowledge, the human intellect, weaves over the face of the Truth. Human imaginations are often fulfilled to the letter; our illusions on the contrary find the truth behind them realised most unexpectedly, at a time, in ways, under circumstances far other than those we had fixed for them.

Man's illusions are of all sorts and kinds, some of them petty though not unimportant, — for nothing in the world is unimportant, — others vast and grandiose. The greatest of them all are those which cluster round the hope of a perfected society, a perfected race, a terrestrial millennium. Each new idea religious or social which takes possession of the epoch and seizes on large masses of men, is in turn to be the instrument of these high realisations; each in turn betrays the hope which gave it its force to conquer. And the reason is plain enough to whosoever chooses to see; it is that no change of ideas or of the intellectual outlook upon life, no belief in God or Avatar or prophet, no victorious science or liberating philosophy, no social scheme or system, no sort of machinery internal or external can really bring about the great desire implanted in the race, true though that desire is in itself and the index of the goal to which we are being led. Because man is himself not a machine nor a device, but a being and a most complex one at that, therefore he cannot be saved by machinery; only by an entire change which shall affect all the members of his being can he be liberated from his discords and imperfections.

One of the illusions incidental to this great hope is the expectation of the passing of war. This grand event in human progress is always being confidently expected and since we are now all scientific minds and rational beings, we no longer expect it by a divine intervention, but assign sound physical and economic reasons for the faith that is in us. The first form taken by this new gospel was the expectation and the prophecy that the extension of commerce would be the extinction of war. Commercialism was the natural enemy of militarism and would drive it from the face of the earth. The growing and universal lust of gold and the habit of comfort and the necessities of increased production and intricate interchange would crush out the lust of power and dominion and glory and battle. Gold-hunger or commodity-hunger would drive out earth-hunger, the dharma of the Vaishya would set its foot on the dharma of the Kshatriya and give it its painless quietus. The ironic reply of

the gods has not been long in coming. Actually this very reign of commercialism, this increase of production and interchange, this desire for commodities and markets and this piling up of a huge burden of unnecessary necessities has been the cause of half the wars that have since afflicted the human race. And now we see militarism and commercialism united in a loving clasp, coalescing into a sacred biune duality of national life and patriotic aspiration and causing and driving by their force the most irrational, the most monstrous and nearly cataclysmic, the hugest war of modern and indeed of all historic times.

Another illusion was that the growth of democracy would mean the growth of pacifism and the end of war. It was fondly thought that wars are in their nature dynastic and aristocratic; greedy kings and martial nobles driven by earth-hunger and battle-hunger, diplomatists playing at chess with the lives of men and the fortunes of nations, these were the guilty causes of war who drove the unfortunate peoples to the battle-field like sheep to the shambles. These proletariates, mere food for powder, who had no interest, no desire, no battle-hunger driving them to armed conflict, had only to become instructed and dominant to embrace each other and all the world in a free and fraternal amity. Man refuses to learn from that history of whose lessons the wise prate to us; otherwise the story of old democracies ought to have been enough to prevent this particular illusion. In any case the answer of the gods has been, here too, sufficiently ironic. If kings and diplomatists are still often the movers of war, none more ready than the modern democracy to make itself their enthusiastic and noisy accomplice, and we see even the modern spectacle of governments and diplomats hanging back in affright or doubt from the yawning and clamorous abyss while angry shouting peoples impel them to the verge. Bewildered pacifists who still cling to their principles and illusions, find themselves howled down by the people and, what is piquant enough, by their own recent comrades and leaders. The socialist, the syndicalist, the internationalist of yesterday stands forward as a banner-bearer in the great mutual massacre and his voice is the loudest to cheer on the dogs of war.

Another recent illusion was the power of Courts of Arbitration and Concerts of Europe to prevent war. There again the course that events immediately took was sufficiently ironic; for the institution of the great Court of international arbitration was followed up by a series of little and great wars which led by an inexorable logical chain to the long-dreaded European conflict and the monarch who had first conceived the idea, was also the first to unsheathe his sword in a conflict dictated on both sides by the most unrighteous greed and aggression. In fact this series of wars, whether fought in Northern or Southern Africa, in Manchuria or the Balkans, were marked most prominently by the spirit which disregards cynically that very idea of inherent and existing rights, that balance of law and equity upon which alone arbitration can be founded. As for the Concert of Europe, it seems far enough from us now, almost antediluvian in its antiquity, — as it belongs indeed to the age before the deluge; but we can remember well enough what an unmusical and discordant

concert it was, what a series of fumbblings and blunderings and how its diplomacy led us fatally to the inevitable event against which it struggled. Now it is suggested by many to substitute a United States of Europe for the defunct Concert and for the poor helpless Hague tribunal an effective Court of international law with force behind it to impose its decisions. But so long as men go on believing in the sovereign power of machinery, it is not likely that the gods either will cease from their studied irony.

There have been other speculations and reasonings; ingenious minds have searched for a firmer and more rational ground of faith. The first of these was propounded in a book by a Russian writer which had an enormous success in its day but has now passed into the silence. Science was to bring war to an end by making it physically impossible. It was mathematically proved that with modern weapons two equal armies would fight each other to a standstill, attack would become impossible except by numbers thrice those of the defence and war therefore would bring no military decision but only an infructuous upheaval and disturbance of the organised life of the nations. When the Russo-Japanese war almost immediately proved that attack and victory were still possible and the battle-fury of man superior to the fury of his death-dealing engines, another book was published, called by a title which has turned into a jest upon the writer, *The Great Illusion*, to prove that the idea of a commercial advantage to be gained by war and conquest was an illusion and that as soon as this was understood and the sole benefit of peaceful interchange realised, the peoples would abandon a method of settlement now chiefly undertaken from motives of commercial expansion, yet whose disastrous result was only to disorganise fatally the commercial prosperity it sought to serve. The present war came as the immediate answer of the gods to this sober and rational proposition. It has been fought for conquest and commercial expansion and it is proposed, even when it has been fought out on the field, to follow it up by a commercial struggle between the belligerent nations.

The men who wrote these books were capable thinkers but they ignored the one thing that matters, human nature. The present war has justified to a certain extent the Russian writer though by developments he did not foresee; scientific warfare has brought military movement to a standstill and baffled the strategist and the tactician, it has rendered decisive victory impossible except by overwhelming numbers or an overwhelming weight of artillery. But this has not made war impossible, it has only changed its character; it has at the most replaced the war of military decisions by that of military and financial exhaustion aided by the grim weapon of famine. The English writer on the other hand erred by isolating the economic motive as the one factor that weighed; he ignored the human lust of dominion which, carried into the terms of commercialism, means the undisputed control of markets and the exploitation of helpless populations. Again, when we rely upon the disturbance of organised national and international life as a preventive of war, we forget the boundless power of self-adaptation which man possesses; that power has been shown strikingly enough in

the skill and ease with which the organisation and finance of peace were replaced in the present crisis by the organisation and finance of war. And when we rely upon Science to make war impossible, we forget that the progress of Science means a series of surprises and that it means also a constant effort of human ingenuity to overcome impossibilities and find fresh means of satisfying our ideas, desires and instincts. Science may well make war of the present type with shot and shell and mines and battleships an impossibility and yet develop and put in their place simpler or more summary means which may bring back an easier organisation of warfare.

So long as war does not become psychologically impossible, it will remain or, if banished for a while, return. War itself, it is hoped, will end war; the expense, the horror, the butchery, the disturbance of tranquil life, the whole confused sanguinary madness of the thing has reached or will reach such colossal proportions that the human race will fling the monstrosity behind it in weariness and disgust. But weariness and disgust, horror and pity, even the opening of the eyes to reason by the practical fact of the waste of human life and energy and the harm and extravagance are not permanent factors; they last only while the lesson is fresh. Afterwards, there is forgetfulness; human nature recuperates itself and recovers the instincts that were temporarily dominated. A long peace, even a certain organisation of peace may conceivably result, but so long as the heart of man remains what it is, the peace will come to an end, the organisation will break down under the stress of human passions. War is no longer, perhaps, a biological necessity, but it is still a psychological necessity; what is within us, must manifest itself outside.

Meanwhile it is well that every false hope and confident prediction should be answered as soon as may well be by the irony of the gods; for only so can we be driven to the perception of the real remedy. Only when man has developed not merely a fellow-feeling with all men, but a dominant sense of unity and commonalty, only when he is aware of them not merely as brothers, — that is a fragile bond, — but as parts of himself, only when he has learned to live not in his separate personal and communal ego-sense, but in a larger universal consciousness can the phenomenon of war, with whatever weapons, pass out of his life without the possibility of return. Meanwhile that he should struggle even by illusions towards that end, is an excellent sign; for it shows that the truth behind the illusion is pressing towards the hour when it may become manifest as reality.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination,*  
CWSA, Vol. 25, pp. 606-11)

# THE FUTURE POETRY

## Chapter I

### The Mantra

It is not often that we see published in India literary criticism which is of the first order, at once discerning and suggestive, criticism which forces us both to see and think. A book which recently I have read and more than once reperused with a yet unexhausted pleasure and fruitfulness, Mr. James Cousins' *New Ways in English Literature*, is eminently of this kind. It raises thought which goes beyond the strict limits of the author's subject and suggests the whole question of the future of poetry in the age which is coming upon us, the higher functions open to it — as yet very imperfectly fulfilled, — and the part which English literature on the one side and the Indian mind and temperament on the other are likely to take in determining the new trend. The author is himself a poet, a writer of considerable force in the Irish movement which has given contemporary English literature its two greatest poets, and the book on every page attracts and satisfies by its living force of style, its almost perfect measure, its delicacy of touch, its fineness and depth of observation and insight, its just sympathy and appreciation.

For the purpose for which these essays have been, not indeed written, but put together, the criticism, fine and helpful as it is, suffers from one great fault, — there is too little of it. Mr. Cousins is satisfied with giving us the essential, just what is necessary for a trained mind to seize intimately the spirit and manner and poetic quality of the writers whose work he brings before us. This is done sometimes in such a masterly manner that even one touch more might well have been a touch in excess. The essay on Emerson is a masterpiece in this kind; it gives perfectly in a few pages all that should be said about Emerson's poetry and nothing that need not be said. But some of the essays, admirable in themselves, are too slight for our need. The book is not indeed intended to be exhaustive in its range. Mr. Cousins wisely takes for the most part, — there is one notable exception, — writers with whom he is in close poetical sympathy or for whom he has a strong appreciation; certain names which have come over to our ears with some flourish of the trumpets of renown, Thompson, Masefield, Hardy, do not occur at all or only in a passing allusion. But still the book deals among contemporary poets with Tagore, A. E. and Yeats, among recent poets with Stephen Phillips, Meredith, Carpenter, great names all of them, not to speak of lesser writers. This little book with its 135 short pages is almost too small a pedestal for the figures it has to support, not, be it understood, for the purposes of the English reader interested in poetry, but for ours in India who have on this subject

a great ignorance and, most of us, a very poorly trained critical intelligence. We need something a little more ample to enchain our attention and fix in us a permanent interest; a fingerpost by the way is not enough for the Indian reader, you will have to carry him some miles on the road if you would have him follow it.

But Mr. Cousins has done a great service to the Indian mind by giving it at all a chance to follow this direction with such a guide to point out the way. The English language and literature is practically the only window the Indian mind, with the narrow and meagre and yet burdensome education given to it, possesses into the world of European thought and culture; but at least as possessed at present, it is a painfully small and insufficient opening. English poetry for all but a few of us stops short with Tennyson and Browning, when it does not stop with Byron and Shelley. A few have heard of some of the recent, fewer of some of the contemporary poets; their readers are hardly enough to make a number. In this matter of culture this huge peninsula, once one of the greatest centres of civilisation, has been for long the most provincial of provinces; it has been a patch of tilled fields round a lawyer's office and a Government cutcherry, a cross between a little district town and the most rural of villages, at its largest a dried-up bank far away from the great stream of the world's living thought and action, visited with no great force by occasional and belated waves, but for the rest a bare field for sluggish activities, the falsest possible education, a knowledge always twenty-five or fifty years behind the time. The awakening brought by the opening years of the twentieth century has chiefly taken the form of a revival of cultural patriotism, highly necessary for a nation which has a distinctive contribution to make to the human spirit in its future development, some new and great thing which it must evolve out of a magnificent past for the opening splendours of the future; but in order that this may evolve rapidly and surely, it needs a wide and sound information, a richer stuff to work upon, a more vital touch with the life and master tendencies of the world around it. Such books as this will be of invaluable help in creating what is now deficient.

The helpfulness of this suggestive work comes more home to me personally because I have shared to the full the state of mere blank which is the ordinary condition of the Indian mind with regard to its subject. Such touch as in the intellectual remoteness of India I have been able to keep up with the times, had been with contemporary continental rather than contemporary English literature. With the latter all vital connection came to a dead stop with my departure from England a quarter of a century ago; it had for its last events the discovery of Meredith as a poet, in his *Modern Love*, and the perusal of *Christ in Hades*, — some years before its publication, — the latter an unforgettable date. I had long heard, standing aloof in giant ignorance, the great name of Yeats, but with no more than a fragmentary and mostly indirect acquaintance with some of his work; A. E. only lives for me in Mr. Cousins' pages; other poets of the day are still represented in my mind by scattered citations. In the things of culture such a state of ignorance is certainly an unholy state

of sin; but in this immoral and imperfect world even sin has sometimes its rewards, and I get that now in the joy and light of a new world opening to me all in one view while I stand, Cortez-like, on the peak of the large impression created for me by Mr. Cousins' book. For the light we get from a vital and illuminative criticism from within by another mind can sometimes almost take the place of a direct knowledge.

There disengages itself from these essays not so much a special point of view as a distinctive critical and literary temperament, which may be perhaps not so much the whole mind of the critic as the response to his subject in a mind naturally in sympathy with it. Mr. Cousins is a little nervous about this in his preface; he is apprehensive of being labelled as an idealist. The cut and dried distinction between idealism and realism in literature has always seemed to me to be a little arbitrary and unreal, and whatever its value in drama and fiction, it has no legitimate place in poetry. What we find here is a self-identification with what is best and most characteristic of a new spirit in the age, a new developing aesthetic temper and outlook, — or should we rather say, inlook? Its mark is a greater (not exclusive) tendency to the spiritual rather than the merely earthly, to the inward and subjective than the outward and objective, to the life within and behind than to the life in front, and in its purest, which seems to be its Irish form, a preference of the lyrical to the dramatic and of the inwardly suggestive to the concrete method of poetical presentation. Every distinctive temperament has naturally the defect of an insufficient sympathy, often a pronounced and intolerant antipathy towards all that departs from its own motives. Moreover contemporary criticism is beset with many dangers; there is the charm of new thought and feeling and expression of tendency which blinds us to the defects and misplaces or misproportions to our view the real merits of the expression itself; there are powerful cross-currents of immediate attraction and repulsion which carry us from the true track; especially, there is the inevitable want of perspective which prevents us from getting a right vision of things too near us in time. And if in addition one is oneself part of a creative movement with powerful tendencies and a pronounced ideal, it becomes difficult to get away from the standpoint it creates to a larger critical outlook. From these reefs and shallows Mr. Cousins' sense of measure and justice of appreciation largely, generally indeed, preserve him, though not, I think, quite invariably. But still it is not a passionless, quite disinterested criticism which we get or want from this book, but a much more helpful thing, an interpretation of work which embodies the creative tendencies of the time by one who has himself lived in them and helped both to direct and to form.

Mr. Cousins' positive criticism is almost always fine, just and inspired by a warm glow of sympathy and understanding tempered by discernment, restraint and measure; whatever the future critic, using his scales and balance, may have to take away from it, will be, one would imagine, only by way of a slight alteration of stress here and there. His depreciations, though generally sound enough, are not, I think, invariably as just as his appreciations. Thus his essay on the work of J. M. Synge,

“The Realist on the Stage”, is, in sharp distinction from the rest of the book, an almost entirely negative and destructive criticism, strong and interesting, but written from the point of view of the ideals and aims of the Irish literary movement against a principle of work which seemed entirely to depart from them; yet we are allowed to get some glimpse of a positive side of dramatic power which the critic does not show us, but leaves us rather to guess at. Mr. Cousins seems to me to take the dramatist’s theory of his own art more seriously than it should be taken; for the creator can seldom be accepted — there may of course be exceptions, rare instances of clairvoyant self-sight — as a sound exponent of his own creative impulse. He is in his central inspiration the instrument of a light and power not his own, and his account of it is usually vitiated, out of focus, an attempt to explain the workings of this impersonal power by motives which were the contribution of his own personal effort, but which are often quite subordinate or even accidental side-lights of the lower brain-mind, not the central moving force.

Mr. Cousins has pointed out clearly enough that art can never be a copy of life. But it is also true, I think, that that is not the secret object of most realism, whatever it may say about itself; realism is in fact a sort of nether idealism, or, perhaps more correctly, sometimes an inverse, sometimes a perverse romanticism which tries to get a revelation of creative truth by an effective force of presentation, by an intensity, often an exaggeration at the opposite side of the complex phenomenon of life. All art starts from the sensuous and sensible, or takes it as a continual point of reference or, at the lowest, uses it as a symbol and a fount of images; even when it soars into invisible worlds, it is from the earth that it soars; but equally all art worth the name must go beyond the visible, must reveal, must show us something that is hidden, and in its total effect not reproduce but create. We may say that the artist creates an ideal world of his own, not necessarily in the sense of ideal perfection, but a world that exists in the idea, the imagination and vision of the creator. More truly, he throws into significant form a truth he has seen, which may be truth of hell or truth of heaven or an immediate truth behind things terrestrial or any other, but is never merely the external truth of earth. By that ideative truth and the power, the perfection and the beauty of his presentation and utterance of it his work must be judged.

Some occasional utterances in this book seem to spring from very pronounced idiosyncrasies of its distinctive literary temperament or standpoint and cannot always be accepted without reservation. I do not myself share its rather disparaging attitude towards the dramatic form and motive or its comparative coldness towards the architectural faculty and impulse in poetry. When Mr. Cousins tells us that “its poetry and not its drama, will prove to be the thing of life” in Shakespeare’s work, I feel that the distinction is not sound all through, that there is a truth behind it, but it is overstated. Or when still more vivaciously he dismisses Shakespeare the dramatist to “a dusty and reverent immortality in the libraries” or speaks of the “monstrous net of his life’s work” which but for certain buoys of line and speech “might sink in the

ocean of forgetfulness," I cannot help feeling that this can only be at most the mood of the hour born of the effort to get rid of the burden of its past and move more freely towards its future, and not the definitive verdict of the poetic and aesthetic mind on what has been so long the object of its sincere admiration and a powerful presence and influence. Perhaps I am wrong, I may be too much influenced by my own settled idiosyncrasies of an aesthetic temperament and being impregnated with an early cult for the work of the great builders in Sanskrit and Greek, Italian and English poetry. At any rate, this is true that whatever relation we may keep with the great masters of the past, our present business is to go beyond and not to repeat them, and it must always be the lyrical motive and spirit which find a new secret and begin a new creation; for the lyrical is the primary poetical motive and spirit and the dramatic and epic must wait for it to open for them their new heaven and new earth.

I have referred to these points which are only side issues or occasional touches in Mr. Cousins' book, because they are germane to the question which it most strongly raises, the future of English poetry and of the world's poetry. It is still uncertain how that future will deal with the old quarrel between idealism and realism, for the two tendencies these names roughly represent are still present in the tendencies of recent work. More generally, poetry always sways between two opposite trends, towards predominance of subjective vision and towards an emphasis on objective presentation, and it can rise too beyond these to a spiritual plane where the distinction is exceeded, the divergence reconciled. Again, it is not likely that the poetic imagination will ever give up the narrative and dramatic form of its creative impulse; a new spirit in poetry, even though primarily lyrical, is moved always to seize upon and do what it can with them, — as we see in the impulsion which has driven Maeterlinck, Yeats, Rabindranath to take hold of the dramatic form for self-expression as well as the lyrical in spite of their dominant subjectivity. We may perhaps think that this was not the proper form for their spirit, that they cannot get there a full or a flawless success; but who shall lay down rules for creative genius or say what it shall or shall not attempt? It follows its own course and makes its own shaping experiments. And it is interesting to speculate whether the new spirit in poetry will take and use with modifications the old dramatic and narrative forms, as did Rabindranath in his earlier dramatic attempts, or quite transform them to its own ends, as he has attempted in his later work. But after all these are subordinate issues.

It will be more fruitful to take the main substance of the matter for which the body of Mr. Cousins' criticism gives a good material. Taking the impression it creates for a starting point and the trend of English poetry for our main text, but casting our view farther back into the past, we may try to sound what the future has to give us through the medium of the poetic mind and its power for creation and interpretation. The issues of recent activity are still doubtful and it would be rash to make any confident prediction; but there is one possibility which this book strongly suggests and which it is at least interesting and may be fruitful to search and consider.

That possibility is the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry, that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth, — the discovery of the word, the divine movement, the form of thought proper to the reality which, as Mr. Cousins excellently says, “lies in the apprehension of a something stable behind the instability of word and deed, something that is a reflection of the fundamental passion of humanity for something beyond itself, something that is a dim shadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards its Godlike possibilities.” Poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation; in the future there seems to be some chance of its making it a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour.

SRI AUROBINDO

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## **‘MAN IS THE LINK BETWEEN WHAT MUST BE AND WHAT IS’**

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What would be the use of man if he were not created to throw a bridge between That which is eternally but is unmanifested and that which is manifested, between all the transcendences and splendours of the divine life and all the dark and sorrowful ignorance of the material world? Man is the link between What must be and what is; he is the footbridge thrown across the abyss, he is the great cross-shaped X, the quaternary connecting link. His true domicile, the effective seat of his consciousness should be in the intermediary world at the meeting-point of the four arms of the cross, just where all the infinitude of the Unthinkable comes to take a precise form so that it may be projected into the innumerable manifestation. . . .

That centre is a place of supreme love, of perfect consciousness, of pure and total knowledge. There establish, O Lord, those who can, who must and truly want to serve Thee, so that Thy work may be accomplished, the bridge definitively established, and Thy forces poured unwearingly over the world.

THE MOTHER

*(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 1, p. 235)*



## **‘YOU ONLY HAVE TO ALLOW THE LORD TO DO EVERYTHING’**

**79 – God is infinite Possibility. Therefore Truth is never at rest; therefore, also, Error is justified of her children.**

**80 – To listen to some devout people, one would imagine that God never laughs; Heine was nearer the mark when he found in Him the divine Aristophanes.**

Sri Aurobindo  
(CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 432)

Yes, he means that what is true at one time is no longer true at another. And this is why “Error is justified of her children.”

*Perhaps he means that there is no error.*

Yes, it is the same thing, another way of saying the same thing. That is to say, what we call Error was Truth at a certain time.

Error is a concept in time.

*Some things may really appear to be errors.*

For a moment.

The impression is this: all our judgments are momentary. They are . . . one moment, it is like this; the next moment, it is no longer like this. And for us they are errors, because we see things one after another. But to the Divine they cannot appear like this, because everything is within Him.

Now just try to imagine that you are the Divine, for a moment! Everything is within you; you simply amuse yourself by bringing it out in a certain order. But for you, in your consciousness, everything is there at the same time; there is no time — neither past nor future nor present — everything is together. And every possible combination. He amuses Himself by bringing out first one thing and then another, like that. So the poor fellows down below who can see only a tiny part — they can see only so much of it — say, “Oh, that is an error!” In what way is it an error? Simply because they can only see a tiny part.

This is clear, isn’t it? It is easy to understand. This concept of error is a concept

that belongs to time and space.

It is like the feeling that something cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time. And yet this is true, it is and it is not. It is the concept of time which introduces the concept of error — of time and space.

*What do you mean, that a thing is and is not at the same time? How is that?*

It is, and at the same time there is its opposite. So, for us, it cannot be yes and no at the same time. But for the Lord it is *all the time* yes and no at the same time.

It is like our concept of space; we say, "I am here, therefore you are not here." But I am here, you are here and everything is here! (*Mother laughs.*) Only you must be able to leave the concept of space and time behind in order to understand.

This is something that can be felt very concretely, but not with our way of seeing.

Certainly, many of these aphorisms were written at the point where the higher mind suddenly emerges into the Supermind. It has not yet forgotten how it is in the ordinary way, but it also sees how it is in the supramental way. And so the result is this kind of thing, this paradoxical form. Because the one is not forgotten and the other is already perceived.

*(Long silence)*

And yet if one looks attentively, one has to think that the Lord is staging a fantastic play for Himself! That the Manifestation is a play which He is acting for Himself and with Himself.

He has taken the stand of the spectator and He looks at Himself. And so in order to look at Himself, He must accept the concept of time and space, otherwise He cannot! And immediately the whole comedy begins. But it is a comedy, nothing more.

But we take it seriously, because we are puppets! But as soon as we stop being puppets, we can see quite clearly that it is a comedy.

*For some people it is also a real tragedy.*

Yes, we are the ones who make it tragic. *We are the ones* who make it tragic.

Recently, I have been looking at this carefully. I looked at the difference between similar incidents when they happen to men and when they happen to animals. If you identify yourself with the animals you see quite clearly that they do not take it tragically at all — except the ones which have come into contact with man; but then it is not their natural state, it is a transitional state. They become transitional beings between animal and man. . . . And the first things they naturally learn from

man are his defects — they are always the easiest things to learn! And so they make themselves unhappy — for nothing.

So many things . . . So many things . . . Man has made a terrible tragedy out of death. These last few days, I have seen this, because last night or the night before I spent at least two hours in a world which is subtle physical, where the living and the dead intermingle without feeling any difference — it doesn’t make any difference. There, there is no difference. The living were there — those whom we call the “living” and those whom we call the “dead”. They were there together, they ate together, they moved together, they played together; and all this was in a pretty light, quiet and very pleasant, it was very pleasant. I said to myself, “There, men have made a break, like this, and then they say, ‘Now, dead.’” And “dead” — the best part of it is that they treat them as they would treat something unconscious — yet the body is still conscious.

(*Silence*)

Where, where is Error? Where is Error?

That is to say, there is no error. Things only seem to be impossible, because we do not know that the Lord is all possibility and that He can do whatever He likes, as He likes. We cannot get that into our heads, we always say, “This is possible and that is not possible.” But it is not true! For our imbecility, it is not possible; but everything is possible.

(*Silence*)

You see, only the one who is watching the play is not worried, because he knows everything that is going to happen and he has an absolute knowledge of everything — everything that happens, everything that has happened and everything that is going to happen — and it is all there, as *one* presence for him. And so it is the others, the poor actors who do not even know, they do not even know their parts! And they worry a great deal, because they are being made to act something and they do not know what it is. This is something I have just been feeling very strongly: we are all acting a play, but we do not know what the play is, nor where it is going, nor where it comes from, nor what it is as a whole; we barely know — imperfectly — what we are supposed to do from moment to moment. Our knowledge is imperfect. And so we worry! But when one knows everything, one can no longer worry, one smiles — He must be having great fun, but we . . . And yet we are given the *full power* to amuse ourselves like Him.

We simply do not take the trouble.

*It is not easy!*

Oh, if it were easy . . . if it were easy, we would get tired of it!

One also sometimes wonders why, why is this life so tragic? But if it were like a perpetual enchantment, first of all we would not even appreciate it, because it would be quite natural — mainly that, we would not appreciate it because it would be absolutely natural — and then, who is to say that we would not enjoy a little confusion just for a change? One cannot be sure.

Perhaps this is the story of the earthly paradise. . . . In paradise they had a spontaneous knowledge, that is to say, they lived, they had the same consciousness as the animals, just enough to be able to enjoy life a little, like that, to have the joy of living. But they started wanting to know why, how, where they were going, what they should do, etc., and then all the worries began — they got tired of being quietly happy.

(Silence)

I think that Sri Aurobindo meant that error is an illusion like all the rest — that there is no error, that all possibilities are there, that they are often — and *necessarily* — contradictory if they are all there. They appear contradictory. But one only has to look at oneself and say, “What do I call error?” If you look it in the face you see immediately that it is a stupidity — there is no error, it slips through your fingers.

(Silence)

I have a feeling that Sri Aurobindo was in his ascension; the intuitive mind was piercing a hole and coming into contact with the Supermind, and so it would come like that, pop! like an explosion in the thought, and he would write these things. And if you follow the movement you see the Origin.

Obviously what he meant is that Error is one of the innumerable, infinite possibilities. “Infinite” means that absolutely nothing is beyond possibility. So where does error fit into it? We call it error, but it is completely arbitrary. We say, “This is an error” — in relation to what? In relation to our judgment that “this is true”, but certainly not in relation to the judgment of the Lord, since it is a part of Himself!

Very few people can bear this widening of the understanding.

Now, when I start looking like this (*Mother closes her eyes*), two things are there at the same time: this smile, this joy, this laughter are there, and such peace! Such *full*, luminous, total peace, in which there are no more conflicts, no more contradictions. There are no more conflicts. It is *one single* luminous harmony — and yet everything we call error, suffering, misery, everything is there. *It eliminates nothing*. It is another way of seeing.

(Long silence)

There can be no doubt that if you sincerely want to get out of it, it is not so difficult after all: you have nothing to do, you only have to allow the Lord to do everything. And He does everything. He does everything. It is so wonderful, so wonderful!

He takes anything, even what we call a very ordinary intelligence and he simply teaches you to put this intelligence aside, to rest: “There, be quiet, don’t stir, don’t bother me, I don’t need you.” Then a door opens — you don’t even feel that you have to open it; it is wide open, you are taken over to the other side. All that is done by Someone else, not you. And then the other way becomes impossible.

All this . . . oh, this tremendous labour of the mind striving to understand, toiling and giving itself headaches! . . . It is absolutely useless, absolutely useless, no use at all, it merely increases the confusion.

You are faced with a so-called problem: what should you say, what should you do, how should you act? There is nothing to do, nothing, you only have to say to the Lord, “There, You see, it is like that” — that’s all. And then you stay very quiet. And then quite spontaneously, without thinking about it, without reflection, without calculation, nothing, nothing, without the slightest effort — you do what has to be done. That is to say, the Lord does it, it is no longer you. He does it, He arranges the circumstances, He arranges the people, He puts the words into your mouth or your pen — He does everything, everything, everything, everything; you have nothing more to do but to allow yourself to live blissfully.

I am more and more convinced that people do not really want it.

*But clearing the ground is difficult, the work of clearing the ground beforehand.*

But you don’t even need to do it! He does it for you.

*But they are constantly breaking in: the old consciousness, the old thoughts. . . .*

Yes, they try to come in again, by habit. You only have to say, “Lord, You see, You see, You see, it is like that” — that’s all. “Lord, You see, You see this, You see that, You see this fool” — and it is all over immediately. And it changes automatically, my child, without the slightest effort. Simply to be sincere, that is to say, to *truly* want everything to be right. You are perfectly conscious that you can do nothing about it, that you have no capacity. I feel more and more that this amalgam of matter, like this, of cells, all that, is pitiful. It is pitiful! I do not know whether there are certain states in which people feel powerful, wonderful, luminous, capable; but for me it is because they do not really know what they are like! When you really see how you are made — it is really nothing, nothing. But it is capable of everything, provided . . . provided that you allow the Lord to act. But there is always something that wants to do it by itself; that’s the trouble, otherwise . . .

No, you may be full of an excellent goodwill and then *you want* to do it. That’s

what complicates everything. Or else you don't have faith, you believe that the Lord will not be able to do it and that you must do it yourself, because He does not know! (*Mother laughs.*) This, this kind of stupidity is very common. "How can He see things? We live in a world of Falsehood, how can He see Falsehood and see . . ." But He sees the thing as it is! Exactly!

I am not speaking of people of no intelligence, I am speaking of people who are intelligent and who try — there is a kind of conviction, like that, somewhere, even in people who know that we live in a world of Ignorance and Falsehood and that there is a Lord who is All-Truth. They say, "Precisely because He is All-Truth, He does not understand. (*Mother laughs.*) He does not understand our falsehood, I must deal with it myself." That is very strong, very common.

Ah! we make complications for nothing.

*There is something I have often wondered about: when one prays to the Lord, when one wants to make Him understand that something is wrong, I always have the impression that one must concentrate very hard and that after all one is calling to something far away. Is that right? Or is it really . . .*

That depends on us!

Now I can feel Him everywhere, all the time, all the time . . . even a physical contact — it is subtle physical, but physical — in things, in the air, in people, in . . . like this. (*Mother presses her hands to her face.*) And then, it is not far to go, all I have to do is this (*Mother turns her hands slightly inwards*), one second of concentration — He is there! He is there, He is everywhere. He is far away only when we think He is far away.

Naturally, when we begin to think of all the zones, all the planes of universal consciousness and that it is at the very end, at the very end, right at the very end, then it becomes very far away, very, very far! (*Mother laughs.*) But when we think that He is everywhere, that He is everything and that it is only our perception that prevents us from seeing Him and feeling Him and that we only have to do this (*Mother turns her hands inwards*); it is a movement like this and like that (*Mother turns her hands alternately inwards and outwards*), it becomes very concrete: you do this (*outward movement*), everything becomes artificial, hard, dry, false, untrue, artificial; you do this (*inward movement*), everything becomes wide, tranquil, luminous, peaceful, vast, joyful. And it is simply this, that (*Mother turns her hands alternately inwards and outwards*). How? Where? It cannot be described, it is only, *only* a movement of consciousness, nothing else. A movement of consciousness. And the difference between the true consciousness and the false consciousness becomes more and more precise, and at the same time, *thin* — you don't have to do "great things" to come out of it. Before that, one has the impression that one is living inside something and that a great interiorisation, concentration, absorption, is needed to get out of it; but

now the impression is of something one accepts (*Mother screens her face with her hand*), something like a thin little peel that is very hard — very hard but malleable, very, very dry, very thin, very thin, something like putting on a mask; and then one does this (*gesture*), and it disappears.

One can foresee the time when it will not be necessary to be aware of the mask; it will be so thin that one will be able to see, to feel, to act through it with no need to put the mask on again. That is what has just begun.

But this Presence in all things. . . . It is a vibration, but it is a vibration that contains everything — a vibration which contains a kind of infinite power, infinite delight and infinite peace, of vastness, vastness, vastness; there are no limits. . . . But it is only a vibration, it does not . . . Oh, Lord! it cannot be thought, so it cannot be said. If you think, as soon as you think, the whole muddle begins again. That is why one cannot speak.

No, He is very far away because you think He is very far away. Even, you know, if you think He is there, like this (*gesture close to her face*) touching you . . . if you could feel — it is not like the touch of a person, it is not like that. It is not something alien, external, which comes in from outside. It is not that. . . . It is everywhere.

Then you feel — everywhere, everywhere, everywhere: inside, outside, everywhere, everywhere — Him, nothing but Him — Him, His vibration.

No, you must stop that (*the head*), until you stop that, you cannot see the True Thing — you look for comparisons, you say, “It is like this, it is like that.” Oh!

(*Silence*)

And how often, how often the impression . . . there is no form — there is a form and there is no form, it cannot be put into words. And the impression of a look and there are no eyes — there are no eyes, but there is a look — a look and a smile, and there is no mouth, there is no face! And yet there is a smile, there is a look and (*Mother laughs*) one cannot help saying, “Yes, O Lord, I am stupid!” But He laughs, one laughs, one is happy.

One cannot! It cannot be explained. It cannot be put into words. One cannot say anything. Whatever one says is nothing, nothing.

12 October 1962

THE MOTHER

(*On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 10, pp. 145-54)

**“CANTICLE” —  
CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO**

**CANTICLE**

With skill of mortal tongue how shall I phrase  
A mirroring glory for her glorious face? —  
The deep, prefiguring halcyon of those eyes  
Assuaging with love’s intimate replies  
The wounded cry of faith to destiny? —  
The smile wherein eternities awake  
To human mercy, an ineffable sun’s  
    August omnipotence  
Softened to rainbow-beauty for our sake,  
That we of fearful vision may behold  
What fount of delicate-hued felicity  
Hides in that far, keen, terrible heart of gold? —  
The voice of passionate truth which beckons me  
Towards pinnacled perfection, fills my name  
With such celestial music that I rise,  
    My shattered hours made whole,  
Triumphant o’er the agelong, grim distress  
Of life’s embodiment and shackled shame;  
    For the adorant soul  
Hearing its name turn godlike with her tone  
    Feels all its essence grown  
A gleam of her ecstatic loveliness? . . .

O ineffectual words, the endless tale  
Of her transmuting miracles you fail  
    To melodise utterly! x  
    Needs must the soul express  
Its thrilled response to her divinity?  
    Then<sup>1</sup> ’twere indeed more meet x  
To touch with lips of fervour those earth-sojourning feet!

*1. Should I say “in sooth” or “verily” after “Then”?*

The two lines marked x are not very successful. But “in sooth” and “verily” would be worse. It would be better to put something else, as for instance

“In silence ’twere more meet”

The rest is very good.

[undated]

\*

[Question added at the bottom of another undated letter:]

*The line “To melodise utterly”, which you have marked as not very successful, I find difficult to modify. Could you offer some suggestion? The context is*

*O ineffectual words, the endless tale  
Of her transmuting miracles you fail  
To melodise utterly!*

*(Is “utterly” weak only if it is referred to “fail” or even taken in the sense of “perfectly” or “fully” or “with entire adequacy” and referred to “melodise”?)*

It is weak in both cases; but I too found it difficult to “modify”. I would myself write something like “To imprison in melody”.

[undated]

\*

[Remark at the beginning of another letter dated 21.5.1931:]

*Sri Aurobindo —*

*The line which you have suggested is absolutely perfect: the word “imprison” is wonderful.*

...

21 May 1931

(Version from *The Secret Splendour – Collected Poems*  
of K. D. Sethna [Amal Kiran], 1993, p. 41)

### CANTICLE

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Assuaging with love’s intimate replies  
The wounded cry of faith to destiny —  
The smile wherein eternities awake  
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Of Her transmuting miracles you fail  
    To imprison in melody.  
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Its thrilled response to Her divinity?  
    In silence ’twere more meet  
To touch with lips of fervour those earth-sojourning feet!

AMAL KIRAN  
(K. D. SETHNA)

## IN HER COMPANY

(A Talk)

All of you, I suppose, sometime or other attend the meditation, the evening meditation at the Playground. If not all, at least a good many or most of you. Perhaps a few of the younger ones do not. When the Mother was giving this collective meditation in the Playground, almost always there used to happen a strange phenomenon. She has spoken of it, Sri Aurobindo also referred to it, some of you may recall. Among the people who attended the meditation, mostly our Ashram-people, there used to be present strange guests in the company: invisible beings from other worlds, gods, various degrees and kinds of gods, great gods and small gods — disembodied or un-bodied beings jostling with embodied human creatures. They had a great fascination for this meditation. They must have been tempted in view of some profit they would gain by it, as in our human cases we too expected some benefit; apart from that, there was a great fascination for this meeting, especially for these inhabitants of the other worlds; for this was an opportunity, a great opportunity when they could come near and meet the embodied Divine. In the other worlds, in their own domains they were far from the Divine, the contact was indirect, but here at this place was the Divine himself or herself, in a physical body. Nowhere else they could have this vision, this direct contact; that was what prompted them to come here.

We had had, poor human creatures, this great opportunity for years. I have always spoken of it, the presence of the Divine in a physical body. Even if you did not know, something in you knew and the touch was there, you still carry that touch with you, it is indelible. The earth even now retains something of that Divine touch and will retain it for ever; it is that which is helping it to go forward in spite of the tremendous odds and difficulties that the earth is going through and has yet to go through — for sometime — towards its inevitable goal.

There was another phenomenon similar and likewise extraordinary. When the Mother used to play on the organ, to entertain us with her music, sometimes one noted that she would sit quiet for a while before the organ, apparently waiting for something before she began to play. And naturally we in our small way of understanding used to say, “Mother was concentrating or waiting for the inspiration.” Very often it was not that. She herself explained once or twice what it was. She said, here also as at the meditation in the Playground, when she sat with her fingers on the keys of the board, there was a host of invisible musicians assembled there, musicians of course who wanted to hear Mother play, also there were ambitious musicians who sought to play, play through her fingers. That was a great opportunity for them to express themselves, to show their capacity, exhibit their talents through her. Indeed at times

there was a clamour and scramble among these unearthly musicians, as to who should come, whom should Mother allow to appear. It was very interesting, Mother used to say, when for some reason or other she allowed some particular musician, the fortunate being used to play his music through her gracious fingers. And when the music passed through her fingers, something of her own quality or inspiration naturally entered into the music played. When you hear Mother's music now, some are of that nature, not absolutely or wholly by herself, but some other great musician from another world has given his version of the Mother's music. Our Sunil's music is a peculiar case: it is exquisitely human music grafted on the Mother's Divine music — a blend of the two.

It was a great mystery, and a great, as I said, a great phenomenon, this free interchange between the physical world, the physical life and the other heavenly or otherworldly worlds. There was a mixture, a co-mingling, and at times a fusion of these two different dissimilar realms. And it was a very concrete, a very living phenomenon. It is not however as mere isolated instances that the phenomenon occurs: this phenomenon of interaction between two distinct and dissimilar worlds. These higher or other-worldly powers exist not merely for their own sake, for their own delight or growth, they have also a place in the universal play, in the play of earthly evolution: that is to say, they are there in their own realms and come nearer to the earth to extend their help in its forward march. They help individual beings also bestowing their powers and capacities and their inspiration. The word "inspiration" itself means a breath, an influence from elsewhere, from another sphere. It means that which is not confined to the known and the present but something new, something unfamiliar, from somewhere else touches our old life's sphere. Sri Aurobindo has given some instances how, here, people who were very commonplace and ordinary in their intelligence and capacity developed in a strange uncanny way other qualities and accomplishments they could not think of or dream of. This was possible only because of this help, this inspiration or prompting from elsewhere. We have had people in our midst who received or receive still this help in creating their music, poetry and art. I may cite here a remarkable instance. There was a professor here, an Englishman, Professor of Philosophy, but of a special kind of Philosophy, mathematical logic — mathematics and logic married together, two of the driest subjects to students: teachers or students among you will kindly excuse me for this compliment I am paying to their subject. This professor, *dry as dust*, miraculous to say, flowered into a very fine poet. He wrote poetry of an extreme sensitiveness, exquisite in form and feeling. You must have heard of him, some must have read him, I speak of Arjava. A really fine poet he became, no trace of mathematics at all was there — unless it is the magic of the mathematics of the Infinity, of the Unknowable.

I was speaking of the influence of other forces upon human beings and the power they exercise upon external circumstances. These phenomena happen automatically,

we have no control over them. But this too can be acquired. These supra-normal faculties can be brought under control. One can come in conscious contact with such forces and influences and know them and even guide their action. Sri Aurobindo has spoken of this mystery and I think I have referred to it in my *Reminiscences*. Sri Aurobindo himself used to do automatic writing, as perhaps many of you, the older ones particularly, know it. I will explain. Sri Aurobindo used to allow these other-worldly forces and invisible beings to enter into his physical personality, in the same way as the Mother used to do with regard to her music allowing other persons to enter into her fingers and play through them their music. Here also Sri Aurobindo used to do the same and similar things consciously. I have seen it myself, and many others. He used to hold the pen or pencil between his fingers, ready to write on a piece of paper, placed in front; he used to leave his fingers absolutely passive without any will in himself to write: they were almost like an inert object. After a time the pen or pencil used to move by itself and begin to write, write sometimes even speeches, give instructions or information, answer questions also.

Once, it was here in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo was trying this experiment. Mother also was present there. Someone asked the medium, the person who was appearing through the medium, "Can you answer questions?" "Yes, I can." "Will you speak something about the . . ." He mentioned the name of a person we knew. The medium gave a description of the person's nature and various information about him which were marvellously accurate. He described in this way two or three other persons known to us. Then one among us asked, "Can you tell us something about the Mother?" Mother intercepted with vehemence, "No, no, nothing about me." Immediately Sri Aurobindo's pencil dropped on the paper and the matter came to a dead stop then and there. All the same what the invisible being was saying was quite interesting, and even could be of educative value. Sri Aurobindo used to explain that many of these beings were very eager to come but they were not always very truthful. They wanted to show their cleverness or amused themselves by confusing or irritating human beings. Sometimes however higher beings can come and then you get useful instruction or even true knowledge from them. Sri Aurobindo himself has described at length how, when he was in prison, Vivekananda used to come to him and give him important indications in Yoga. What he did not know, Vivekananda was explaining to him.

I have spoken of automatic writing; there is a parallel phenomenon, automatic speech. That is also possible. When you speak, it happens personally you do not speak, in other words, you make no effort, do not exercise your brain or your mind, all remains still, even your tongue, like the pencil in automatic writing. Sri Aurobindo explained how he arrived at this achievement. At one time when he thought of practising Yoga seriously, he was looking for someone who could give preliminary practical guidance. He was told there was such a person somewhere in Baroda. This person was not a guru in the normal sense, he looked like a householder, was not at

all a sannyasi. He was employed in an office, perhaps as a clerk, still he was pursuing some practice of yogic discipline. Sri Aurobindo had an interview with him, and the first lesson was to this effect: Make your mind quiet, absolutely silent, there should be no thought, no ripple of any mental movement, it has to be absolutely blank. Then you will be able to have your first experience. Usually we are in the habit of saying: I think, you think, he thinks, but in point of fact you will observe that you do not think at all — there is nobody who thinks,<sup>1</sup> the thoughts simply come to you: when you have made this field of silence within, you will actually see thoughts arriving from outside into that field, your brain is occupied by intruders as it were, and you have the choice either to accept or to reject, entertain or throw them out. You can keep your mind absolutely blank as long as you like. Sri Aurobindo said, he practised this and in three days he made his mind absolutely blank, a zero, no thought, not even a ripple was there — it was a very remarkable experience at that time, quite new to him, such a peace and stillness, a perfect void! Then one day Sri Aurobindo met his teacher Lele Maharaj and told him that he was doing political work then and the next day he had to deliver a lecture, how was he to do it if he has to continue to be in a blank mind. If I speak, I have to think, I have to choose a subject. What am I to do? Lele Maharaj answered, “Do one thing, go to the meeting, stand in front of your listeners, do namaskar to the public and keep quiet, wait, see what happens. Don’t try to say anything or think of anything, simply remain as a passive instrument in the hands of the Supreme Power.” Sri Aurobindo did as instructed; he stood with folded arms, did namaskar to the public and, within, did pranam to the Supreme. He said: “I was thinking of nothing, awaiting things to happen as a silent witness. Then suddenly I found that something started in me and the tongue began to move, the tongue moved and moved and the lips began to utter words.” He delivered in this way a long lecture, and he said he did not exactly know what was spoken through him, there was only a vague impression, but it was a great speech the others said. And from then on all his public speeches came in that way as automatic speeches. Later he explained to us, and showed to us, by example as it were, how the thing was done. It was at a séance; we used to sit together, a few of us, in his company. We sat, made ourselves comfortable, remained quiet and silent and then the thing happened: suddenly when everybody was quiet, still, he began to speak, I said he, but it was not his voice, it was surely somebody else speaking through him. The speaker sometimes announced himself saying he was such and such a person. Sometimes great historical persons also came, as for example, I have described in my *Reminiscences*, the famous leader of the great French Revolution, Danton. In a terrible voice he cried out: “I am Danton,

1. It is interesting to compare the Buddhist teaching:  
 Suffering there is, sufferer none;  
 No doer, only deed is there;  
 Renunciation is there, no renouncer;  
 Way there is, no wayfarer. — Buddhaghosha.

terror, red terror," etc. Once a great politician of the ancient days, of the Greek times, appeared and started to give lessons on politics. Bankim also appeared once, I have referred to this episode in my book.

So all this is to tell you that you are surrounded by a world of beings and influences and this visible body that you have, the normal mind active in you, are not all that you can call yours. Even in ordinary life when you think that you are acting, you are speaking, it is not at all true, or only partially true. A part, often a small part of you is involved in your activities. You are like an iceberg — the greater part is submerged, only the top, a very small portion of the whole is visible. This becomes apparent in abnormal occasions, when for example, you are upset off your feet, wild with anger, you utter words that you would never think of uttering, or act in a way absolutely contrary to your nature; all this is because at that time you are "possessed", truly possessed by invisible beings and entities. "Possession", possession by a ghost, is a familiar phenomenon. Hysteria also is a familiar case of possession. Hypnotism, mesmerism, various mediumistic practices are attempted ways and means to cultivate conscious and willed communion with the other world. But these are very crude operations and do not go deep or far enough; besides they may prove positively dangerous. Such phenomena are explained in many other ways but these are among things which are not dreamt of by the ordinary mentality. Indeed we live in the midst of a world fair. As I have said, all sorts of beings and influences and forces are there jostling within you and outside, and most of the time you are a mere puppet in their hands. It is not however all so miserable for you: as there are adverse beings and forces, so there are good angels and helpful deities available to you. It depends upon you to choose. And you have to choose rightly, that is how Yoga comes in as the saving factor in your life. We say Yoga is the way to be conscious of these invisible things and forces and to bring harmony and order out of the million contending forces in you. Instead of being driven, pushed and pulled in a thousand ways, Yoga shows how to direct them to a single aim, organise them round a single centre. Organise your life, that is the aim, the very central aim. That centre is the Divine in you, the Divine Presence, the Presence of the Mother, your true self, your soul. As I have said, there are very many forces and movements in you and without you that drag you in conflicting directions, you have to marshal them, direct them towards one goal, organise your being, your self, rather your selves, for you are not one self but many selves; you are not one person, but many persons. All of them have to be comprehended, coordinated, and finally that is the way to happiness — to true happiness. If happiness and contentment in life is life's purpose, then there is no other way than that of harmonising your personalities. Mother was always speaking of this necessity of rounding up, centering or integrating your personality, the only way of securing a fruitful, purposeful, fulfilled life. Indeed Yoga means literally joining together, joining all the discordant parts of your being, all the quarrelling personalities lodged in you in one single harmonious entity — your divine soul.

It is difficult, the process: the path of yoga starts with purification, which involves strenuousness, as *tapasya*, but that is the basis. However, as I have said, you are not alone on the path, the help is there; apart from the helpful person and forces accompanying you there is the supreme unfailing help from the Mother. The Divine came to us in the material body to help us. She has withdrawn, taken away the body outwardly, but the help She has left with us is there almost in the same way as before.

In this age, the saints say, the Divine is near to us, quite near. When we were young we were told that we have entered into Kali age, the age of darkness, of darkness and smallness, that is to say, human beings are small, small and weak in the body and in the inner make-up. But the Divine took pity on us and to be with us became himself small and perhaps apparently weak also (Vamana) to be human with us. In other ages, even in the Satya Yuga, the age of Truth, God, the Divine was very far from earth, away and aloof from the material universe (which was Illusion, Maya). Therefore in those days to reach the Divine, to attain nearness to God, one had to rise and mount on and on almost endlessly, strenuously. It needed tremendous, arduous labour, it was the age of *tapasya*, one had to be a *tapasvi* to find God and reach him. But now it is different. God has come down to us and lodged himself in the material body. He continues to be in the earth atmosphere, but not very far from the material. In our childhood we used to hear that in Kali the practice of religion or spirituality has been made easy by the Divine Grace in view of man's frailty. In Kali man is now incapable of austerity, so, at present simply to utter God's name is sufficient to bring salvation. So I was saying the Divine help is at our door: the Divine himself is there in person. Only you have to be sincere and earnest about it, you have to extend your arms, extend your consciousness. It is a turning of the consciousness that is needed, it is to ask for it with the sincerity of a child. That is what the Mother used to say always: "Be a child, be a child, I am with you always."

NOLINI KANTA GUPTA

(*Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*, Vol. 7, pp. 3-10)

*Leave all care to the Divine's Grace, including your progress, and you will be in peace.*

*The Mother*

(*Words of the Mother – II*, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 14, p. 93)

## ON AMRITA-DA

(A note to *Mother India*)

When we read Nirod-da's reminiscences<sup>1</sup> of Amrita-da, both Gauri and I found that some of the statements were incorrect.

When Mother used to throw sweets to those present in the 1<sup>st</sup> floor corridor of Her apartment on certain days, it was for those of us who were standing at the other end and we could keep as many as we could catch. We, children, couldn't catch too many, also because we had small hands. But Amrita-da used to open out his arms, wide open, when the toffee used to be thrown at him, so he invariably was not getting it.

When Mother said, "What, Amrita, you can't catch a single sweet?" he said, "No, Douce Mère, it's not the sweet that I am trying to catch, it's the sweetness that comes with it."

It was a beautiful answer.

On another occasion, in the translation class, when Amrita-da came late, and Mother was translating *La Manifestation Supramentale*, She said, "Amrita, how far are you from the Supramental?" Immediately he replied, "Only 3 steps, Douce Mère, not far," and he walked up to Her desk.

When She asked, "What is the relation between the Supermind and the Overmind?" Pat came the reply, "Very good relation, Mother, very good relation."

These are some of the very sweet answers that showed his wit as well as his love and devotion to the Mother.

JHUMUR

In Mother's evening translation class in the Playground, Mother was discussing with Pavitra and Satprem — it was about the Supermind and the Overmind.

Amrita-da entered the class room late. Mother saw him and called out, "Amrita!"

He stopped at once and answered, "Yes, Douce Mère!"

Then in a joking tone She said, "Do you know the relation between the Supermind and the Overmind?"

Pat came his reply, "Very good relation, Mother, very good relation!" and quickly he sat down on his seat.

The whole room burst out in laughter, Mother too!

GAURI

1. In the May 2024 issue of *Mother India*.

*Book Review:*

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VEDĀNTIC COSMOPOLITANISM

by Swami Medhananda  
(Oxford University Press, 2022)

*Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*, published by the Oxford University Press, is the first in-depth academic examination of Swami Vivekananda's philosophical views in conversation with modern analytic philosophy. The book addresses four questions central to spiritual thought and practice: the harmony of religions (Part I), ways of knowing and experiencing God (Part II), the relationship between faith and reason (Part III) and the relationship between God and the physical world (Part IV).

Swami Medhananda marries a rigorous textual study of Swami Vivekananda's *Collected Works* with a philosophical imagination that puts him in conversation with cutting-edge philosophers to generate an analytically-grounded defense of Vedantic principles. In this way, Swami Vivekananda becomes the philosophical playground for a cross-cultural dialogue, leading to a rearticulation of his philosophy — neither as a dull reflection of Sri Ramakrishna's views (discussed in the author's previous work *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*), nor as a 'Neo-Vedantin' uncritically influenced by Western outlooks. Rather, the book labours at great length to redefine Swami Vivekananda as a "cosmopolitan Vedantin who developed distinctive new philosophical positions through creative dialectical engagement with thinkers in both Indian and Western philosophical traditions." This approach is both timely and necessary. It avoids insularity and generates mutual criticism, leading to understanding, in common search of truth. It serves as a reminder — in Swami Vivekananda's words, the epigram to the book — that our motto must be to "learn whatever is great wherever [we] may find it." In that spirit, Swami Medhananda admirably treats both allies and opponents of Swami Vivekananda's views with respect, taking their arguments seriously and without caricature.

This orientation to the book is important. As the author notes, he is an insider-outsider: as an insider to the Vedantic tradition of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, he brings the sympathetic heart of a devotee, and as an outsider, a trained philosopher at the University of California, Berkeley, he brings an acute, critical and questioning spirit. The marriage of these two modes — of faith and reason, belief and skepticism — gives us a well-rounded discussion that attends to both heart and mind.

Students of the Integral Yoga will find the book's discussion of Swami Vivekananda's thought particularly illuminating in drawing parallels between these two preeminent, kindred streams of modern Vedantic thinking. Indeed, one may

even see Sri Aurobindo's work as a natural complement to, and completion of, the work begun by Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna, to render a modern, life-affirming spirituality sensitive to the forces of science and globalisation, where interdisciplinary and cross-cultural thinking is a *sine qua non* for philosophical success.

\* \*

Part I of the book provides a detailed historical sketch of Swami Vivekananda's own spiritual development. The author narrates his development from an initial acceptance of the rational monotheism of the Brahma Samaj to the quietistic and world-denying philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta* and finally, the world-affirming and ethically oriented *Integral Advaita* that looks upon the world as a real manifestation of the dynamic personal *śaktī*. The author demonstrates — with a careful examination of textual evidence from the *Collected Works* — the formative influence of Sri Ramakrishna in this development, whilst simultaneously noting Swami Vivekananda's robust engagement with Western thinkers, reflecting his cross-cultural openness. The author's treatment is carefully referenced and where possible, triangulated across primary historical sources and contemporaneous testimony of close associates. The historical development of Vivekananda's views presents a new side of him — neither a static philosopher immune to self-correction, nor one trying to 'fit' his views into prevailing doctrines: the most interesting and compelling example of this discussed in the book is his blunt rejection of Sri Ramakrishna's world-affirming outlook as 'fiction' and 'hallucination' to one that admitted — on the basis of his evolving experience from 1884-85 onwards — the inseparability of *brahman* and *śaktī*, the 'deification of the world'.

The book helpfully outlines five important practical consequences of this panentheism. First, it provides philosophical grounding to the ethical imperative to serve others as real manifestations of God — a key pillar of his teachings on 'practical Vedānta' and later social work. Second, it traces, at least in part, India's recent history of being conquered and colonised to the dimming of vitality born of the dominance of the quietistic outlook — a controversial yet incisive point that requires further examination. Third, it accounts for Swami Vivekananda's attempt to construct a harmonising *via media* in the intractable philosophical battle between *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita Vedānta* — on monism and dualism, and personal and impersonal or theistic and nontheistic interpretations — , grounding his own views as the correct and capacious interpretation of Vedantic scripture harmonising entrenched partialities. The underlying thrust is a unifying one, pushing us to move from interminable, if intellectually satisfying, hermenutical disputations, *tarka dṛṣṭi*, to understanding, *tattva dṛṣṭi*. The book's careful reconstruction is forceful and persuasive, drawing an important distinction between the phenomenological claim that the world is real, as seen from the perspective of the yet unrealised and ignorant,

and the (partially) incorrect ontological claim that the world is unreal, as seen from the perspective of the Advaitin. Rather, the book locates Swami Vivekananda's final position — consistent with Sri Ramakrishna's distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* — that the world is a real, but dependent, manifestation of the Divine, giving it a secondary status that sits uneasily with his 'integralism'. The tension between *māyāvād* and *līlāvād* is thus assuaged but not resolved, a point made later by Sri Aurobindo in his discussion on Swami Vivekananda.<sup>1</sup> Again, whether this resolution is possible at the level of rational debate, or only through spiritual experience, is an open question. This tension also lands us in a further problem, which the author recognises but brackets as minor — whether the soul, immutable and unchanging, is *already* Divine or contracted by ignorance, yet *potentially* Divine. This raises a persistent concern with Swami Vivekananda's theodicy, not discussed in the book — the reality of the manifestation, with its constituent feature of 'un-Divine' suffering and the immutable, unmodified Divinity of the soul, defined by its blissfulness, does not tell us why the latter consents to the former: the needless, even if only phenomenologically real, suffering caused by the soul's manifestation in the world then requires some further explanation. This is the thrust of Savitri's questioning of Narad in 'The Way of Fate and the Problem of Pain' and again of 'The Debate of Love and Death' in *Savitri*.

The book does not claim that Swami Vivekananda fully resolves these tensions — indeed, it brings them to the fore — , but the discussion provides a useful and original canvas which expands our understanding of his attempt to move in that direction. The fourth practical consequence is Swami Vivekananda's attempt to reconcile the four yogas as equal, direct and independent, yet partial, paths to liberation of one aspect of the Divine. The lesson that flows from the rebuttal to Sankara's exclusivism, which relegates *karma* and *bhakti* as stepping stones to *jñāna*, is as important: the temperamental inclination of a seeker to one or the other path makes one *aspect* of the Divine particularly attractive, yet it is a combination of each that leads to an integral realisation of God, consistent with the pantheistic ontology. The fifth practical consequence is the book's novel reconstruction of Swami Vivekananda's religious cosmopolitanism. Speaking about the long-standing debates on religious diversity, inter-faith dialogue and parochialism, the book provides a helpful analytical framework to discuss the issue — distinguishing exclusivist from (often conflated) inclusivist and pluralist positions about religious claims to truth, on one hand, and 'salvific efficacy', on the other. A careful reading of textual evidence indicates — so goes the book's thesis — that Swami Vivekananda started as a religious pluralist, ascribing different, though not all, religions equal access to truth and efficacy, to a Vedantic inclusivist, who saw Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism as superior to devotional forms, and finally, as a Vedantic inclusivist who saw all

1. *Letters on Yoga – II*, CWSA, Vol. 29, pp. 449-50.

religions as sharing the broad conception of accessing one aspect of the Personal-Impersonal Divine, yet differing in method. The book's detailing of this final position is novel and nuanced and merits close reading: Swami Vivekananda here conceives of Vedanta as a universal, meta-religion — responding to long-held aspirations to recast it as a non-sectarian 'world religion' —, one that encompasses and harmonises the apparently contradictory claims of first-order religions (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and others). This recasting of Vedanta as a second-order religion is likely to be controversial, yet the capaciousness of the account is inviting — particularly with the interesting claim that all religions broadly correspond to one of the four *yogas*, thus merging his earlier position within the two-tiered framework. Without stooping to conquer, as it were, this reconstruction raises Vedanta as the expression of a non-sectarian, universal truth. How this account interacts with historical and theological claims made by others of Vedanta's influence on the development of mystical traditions elsewhere is interesting to consider.

The book then takes on the natural objection to this account — of how one would place atheistic, agnostic religions, or those like Jainism and Buddhism that deny a positive, substantial reality, yet avoid an over-broad and meaningless pluralism that also ends up including unethical 'self-styled religions' — with some deft philosophical maneuvering to draw the line appropriately. The definitional edges of the argument raise some questions — for example, one may ask whether the inclusion of 'ethical humanism' that conceives of some ideal essence in the self, far short of a supersensuous Divine reality, dilutes the definitional force of 'religion', or how one defines the 'unethical-ness' of a religion that the book argues places it outside the Vedantic universalist ideal. Yet, even in these penumbral cases, what is noteworthy is the attempt to develop a pluralism that takes doctrinal differences seriously, consciously avoiding a disengaged patchwork common to inter-faith dialogue that does not tackle apparent contradictions head on, often for non-religious prudential reasons. Whether the final account — which the author likens to the contemporary 'fractal theory of religious diversity' — satisfies the self-understanding of seekers across traditions is an open question. With a growing global connect placing pressure on local religious traditions to broaden their horizons, the book places Swami Vivekananda's ambitious meta-theoretic as an important and authentic voice for the future, one that counsels against defensiveness and insularity and towards cross-cultural learning. Here, the book points to an important distinction between the 'fundamental' and what we may call, 'contingent' or 'incidental' claims of world religions — Swami Vivekananda's scheme looks to generate an overlapping consensus between the former and not the latter, which are often the source of division in popular consciousness. This, then, is an implicit call for each religion to return to its mystical core, in the process of which lies the hope for inter-religious harmony. This yields an exciting future for comparative research and practice within the proposed analytical framework — it is one thing to say that harmony is conceptually

possible, and another to detail out that syncretism, to realise the symphonic unity that underlies the heart and soul of religions in the daily rhythms of life.

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Part II of the book deals with ways of knowing God. This part of the book concerns a fundamental problem in spiritual practice and will perhaps be relevant to readers of this journal. What reasons do we have to believe that God is real? If we have good reasons to *believe*, how can we *know* God? And why should we believe mystics, like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, when we ourselves have not had their lofty experiences? These are perhaps the most common skeptical objections to the validity of spiritual knowledge, both in philosophical literature and popular discussion. It is, in a way, a threshold problem to entering the spiritual enterprise. Swami Medhananda's discussion is built along three lines: first, that knowledge of God cannot be got through the mind or the physical senses, but is super-sensuous; second, that we have good reasons both to believe that such super-sensuous knowledge exists and to think that we can find it in our lives; and finally, that neither 'religious popery' — a 'mere' unreasoned belief in God's existence based on social or priestly authority — nor 'scientific popery' — skepticism of God's existence drawing from the idea that the natural sciences define the scope of all achievable knowledge — are valid approaches in the 'science of religion'. Ultimately, direct perception, aided by the presumptively reliable testimony of mystics who have walked the path before us, can alone justify our beliefs: this 'wide empiricism', or the idea that we can empirically verify the truth of God's existence, makes claims on both sides of the aisle, for believers and skeptics. It accepts the rightful claim of the natural sciences on 'falsifiability', but criticises their unjustified insistence that only the method of external, 'objective', sense-based observation can access truth, relegating knowledge arrived at through spiritual practice to the epistemically bankrupt status of pseudo-science. Equally, it accepts the devotee's justified belief in God's existence, but criticises a possible complacency if we fail to walk the path sincerely to translate that belief into experience. This dual criticism is timely, to bridge the cultural gulf that has resulted in many quarters: the philosophical *via media* has social implications for fractious downstream debates between an anti-religious secularity that does not attend to faith and a belief-centric religiosity that is often the cause of credal conflict. This 'science' requires empirical 'verification by everyone', yet as 'each science must have its own methods', the hegemony of the naturalistic worldview and of the religious believer are each rendered precarious.

In a particularly telling discussion, the book details Swami Vivekananda's own journey — not unlike those of many today — from the ideological currents of scientific rationalism that questioned his faith to one that justified it on the altar of hard experience. Calling believers 'insincere atheists' and materialists 'sincere' ones,

Swami Medhananda's reconstruction speaks to how a robust intellectual life fits into our seeking for the Divine. It is neither an unnecessary questioning of God, a mental merry-go-round with no end in sight, nor a dialectical warfare about scripture, an intellectual game of building metaphysical abstractions that denudes our faith. Rather, it is a way for us to build understanding, to deepen our aporetic relationship to God and fortify faith. The book argues that the clarity of a questioning, seeking intellect can prepare the ground for the experience that transcends it, a rational pathway to supra-rational truths. In this, the book defends the predictive efficacy, 'falsifiability' and 'cross-checkability' of spiritual experience — key to the scientific method — with the resulting position that scriptural or testimonial authority is often necessary but never sufficient. We must practise and realise the truth ourselves, aided by the reliable testimony of the masters, yet ultimately verifying their words by dint of our own findings, till intellectual assent to God translates into steady faith and finally, a direct experience, *pratyakṣa*.

That being so, the book argues that our rational proofs against — and indeed, for — the existence of God must remain in suspended animation till we "take up the (spiritual) method and practice honestly." Adopting a scientific attitude, yet expanding the method, the book defends the position that only if we do not find the mystic's truth *after* verification are we rational in denying the existence of God. Our intellect then is a stepping stone, or a springboard, for our spiritual practices, neither a substitute nor a hurdle. This subtle argument for the limits of reason, built in a cross-cultural conversation with William Alton's clinically argued *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religion*, brings Swami Vivekananda's views to bear on current debates in analytical philosophy of religion. Swami Medhananda's lucid and careful presentation pushes devotees and unbelievers alike to not rest easy in their belief or disbelief till it is validated or falsified by experience.

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In Part III, the book enters the long-standing debate on the place and limits of reason in accessing the Divine, to construct an imaginative account of Swami Vivekananda's 'Kantian Vedantic' doctrine. Having something new to say in the debate between faith and reason, the old antagonists, is not an easy task. This section of the book starts with a helpful summary of earlier positions — those of Sri Ramakrishna, Advaita Vedanta and Nyaya on one hand, and Kant, Hamilton, Spencer and Mill, leading figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical landscape and still today to an extent, on the other. While nothing new is added in terms of substance in this part, it generates a fertile dialectic by making two distinct traditions — at whose intersection Swami Vivekananda lived — speak to each other in a common conceptual vocabulary. With this basis, the book reconstructs the 'Kantian Vedantic' position: a rational agnosticism — that God's existence cannot be proved or disproved through

reason — , yet where this (intellectual) unknowability can be surmounted through latent, subtler faculties of perception unearthed by spiritual practice that could result in experiential verification. Like Kant, Swami Vivekananda placed limits on reason's reach based on knowledge gathered by the senses (or the testimony of mystics like Sri Ramakrishna, to whom Kant did not have access in his lifetime); yet unlike him, he argued for a subtler faculty of knowing that can break this cognitive glass ceiling into the noumenal, or 'real', sense-independent, world. Like Sankara, he argued for the validity of supersensuous experience; yet unlike him, he argued for the epistemic superiority of direct, personal experience over scriptural authority. Like Mill, and *contra* Nyaya, he argued for a limited, somewhat dull, force of the design argument, that the intricacy of creation mandates an inference of God's existence; yet unlike him, he countered Darwinian randomness with an account of ordered spiritual evolution, a 'panentheistic cosmopsychism'. What this results in is a Vedantic vocabulary translated into modern terms — that rational beliefs in God's existence, through inference or testimony, while weak, are valid means to fortify our faith; they generate sufficient reasons — an intellectual conviction — to not rule out the validity of spiritual seeking *a priori*, but rather to test their truth value through practice. This circles back to the earlier argument in Part II on the 'science of religion', where philosophy and rational argumentation pass the baton onto spiritual modes of investigation once they have outlived their utility. Not that this is easy or obvious — the discussion gives the ineffability of spiritual experience, and the serious impediments to its realisation, their due, yet removes the objection of permanent inscrutability within which one is forced to arbitrate between competing positions, each spoken from a relative state of ignorance, on the existence of God.

Deepening the cross-cultural conversation, the book brings in two notable interlocutors, W. K. Clifford and T. H. Huxley, to helpfully define Swami Vivekananda's position in terms of an epistemic ladder one ascends: from 'mere intellectual assent' based on the rational possibility of God's existence, yet not a stable belief that translates into daily conduct, to 'faith as belief', where one sincerely *believes* in God's existence as manifested in the concerted effort to practice the spiritual discipline, yet does not yet *know*, and finally, to knowledge through 'self-authenticating experience', the state of the mystic, where the scaffolds of neither reason nor belief are required to justify and propel faith. One may question whether this ladder proceeds in a linear fashion, as conviction, belief, faith and experience can alternate, hide behind each other, intensify or regress in time and so on; yet, the metaphor helps clarify the relative placement of these often confused, and semantically loaded, terms. While the discussion on 'evidentialism' in Chapter 8 is heavy going, the text eases into a lucid presentation, placing Swami Vivekananda as an important contributor to this debate, pushing as always for realisation, rather than lesser, and in some cases, lazy, forms of knowing.

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Part IV of the book deals with the ‘hard problem of consciousness’, a cutting-edge foray into a set of enigmatic questions in modern philosophy that have eluded answers: how did living, mental beings emerge from non-living matter? What is the nature of consciousness, or our first-person experience of the world? Is consciousness a cause or an effect? Is it a range that extends below and above the reflexive activity of the mind? How does the firing of neurons translate into a sense of self? This part makes for demanding reading, with a hectic deployment of philosophical terms of art — the diagrammatic representations at pp. 326 and 330 help simplify the complex discussion, and readers may consider viewing those before entering the text. The book reconstructs Swami Vivekananda’s answer to the problem as that of ‘panentheistic cosmopsychism’, or the idea that God, as spirit, has not only created the material world (as a supra-cosmic entity), but inhabits it — indeed, it *is* it — in a veiled, or concealed, form as inanimate matter and sentient life, slowly recovering its original status as *sachchidānanda* in its evolutionary movement upwards. This scheme of *involution*, of the self-forgetting of the Divine consciousness in seemingly unconscious matter and ego-bound humanity, and *evolution*, of the progressive recovery of the original status of unity, harmony and bliss, is not a view unique to Swami Vivekananda — it is, as the author notes, an answer inspired by Samkhya and Vedanta. What makes his account noteworthy is his dual immersion in the heady tides of 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism and in the teachings of Vedanta under the tutelage of Sri Ramakrishna; and what makes the book compelling reading is its careful reconstruction of Swami Vivekananda’s treatment of the issue in the context of exciting, contemporary developments in the field since.

As a conceptually precise translation and, in some instances, extension of Swami Vivekananda’s views into accessible, secular, analytic terms, the book advances four theses. First, that the omnipresent Divine is the sole reality — that God is not only in the world, but he is the world, manifesting in various forms, some available to the senses, and others veiled from them. In doing so, the materialist claim that experience is the effect of physical processes is put in conversation with the *puruṣa-prakṛti* dualism in Samkhya, which in turn is examined from the point of view of Vedantic panentheism. The sentience of the mind and the apparent inertness of matter are thus claimed to be both made of, and explained by, a prior and indivisible conscious entity. Second, that the ‘explanatory gap’ between the ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ problems of consciousness — the first correlating experience to material states, and the second querying how first-person, intentional experience arises from this interaction — requires a change in investigatory tools, from the ‘objective’ method to the ‘subjective’ one — the first relying on external observation, and the second relying on the range of inner tools, beyond reflexivity and introspection, found in the spiritual sciences, yet misunderstood or derided. Third, that the individuation problem — how the unified Divine entity breaks into individual, self-limited units of experience — is part of the *līlā* of creation, by which the Divine oneness playfully limits itself to the

individual ego in its immanent aspect, whilst retaining its essential character in its transcendent aspect, only for the joy of the recovery. Finer details of how this occurs aside, one may query *why* individuation, and the self-imposed limitation it entails on account of involution, is necessary — that it was motivated by pure, unfathomable creative joy to recover the lost Divine plenitude inspires wonder but leaves one unsatisfied with the meaningless circularity of the explanation. This is Savitri's anguish — “What need had the soul of ignorance and tears? / . . . Or who persuaded it to fall from bliss / And forfeit its immortal privilege?” — and the point of departure for Sri Aurobindo's defense of a terrestrial culmination to the evolutionary process rather than one that abandons the world to take us back to the Absolute. Fourth, the book argues that Swami Vivekananda's views, so developed, not only anticipate modern theories of consciousness but offer a comparative advantage in terms of their internal ontological coherence and epistemic grounding that can justify the intuitive appeal of panpsychism. This orientation of Swami Medhananda's study is helpful, as not just a comparison or retrofitting, a kind of ‘he was there before others’ study, but a compelling account — though by no means free from objection — that contributes much to the seemingly uncrackable problem of consciousness. With a veritable catalogue of theories having exhausted the field, and next generation neural imaging techniques probing the physical constitution of our consciousness, yet each coming up short till now, the book shows that the debate is perhaps coming full circle to the ancient Vedantic solution, fortified and completed by discoveries since. This is, in a sense, unsurprising, for if Vedanta is an expression of the Eternal Truth, it is as one would expect. Nonetheless, its translation into a modern idiom, with necessary detailing out, gap-filling and self-correcting criticism to remove accretions, remains a pressing task, which Swami Medhananda inaugurates in this volume. An auspicious beginning, we may hope.

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Though the book is an academic one, delving deep into subtle philosophical territory, it is written in a lucid and conversational style. It is a demanding yet accessible read, stimulating yet not overbearing. Technical terminology, in Sanskrit or English, is introduced with clear and helpful definitions that will allow the lay reader, as much as the academic one, to benefit from this study. Helpfully, the author builds each part of the book on its own terms, with cross-references as and where relevant, allowing readers to dip in at will. Equally, as Swami Vivekananda's views on a single theme are often scattered across different speeches and conversations made in varied contexts in the *Collected Works*, painting a coherent picture is a difficult task. Here, the discussion across the four clearly marked parts of the book helpfully knits these strands together thematically, and so acts as a useful guide to read the *Collected Works*. It also provides a first-of-its-kind canvas for future research, not

only for devotees but those outside the tradition, skeptics and believers alike, which will hopefully spur more comparative work. Students of Sri Aurobindo in particular will find strong parallels across all four parts of the book, though with one critical difference — the transformation of matter, or terrestrial yoga, absent in Swami Vivekananda’s works — to be explored for the future. Yet, that it was none other than Sri Ramakrishna “who . . . first turned me [*Sri Aurobindo*] to this yoga” and “Vivekananda . . . [who] gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our sadhana”,<sup>2</sup> gives us reason to view them in a continuum, as part of a unified stream of a progressively unfolding non-sectarian modern Vedanta.

In sum, the book combines a comprehensive and elegant analysis of scholars from various fields — traditional Vedantic schools, Nyaya and Samkhya, and modern philosophy of religion and philosophy of mind — to give us a sophisticated yet accessible insight into core questions of spiritual thought and practice, covering ground that would otherwise take us years to trod. Swami Medhananda has done a great service, for which we must be grateful.

RAAG YADAVA

2. *Autobiographical Notes*, CWSA, Vol. 36, p.179.

*Nothing can be compared to the peace that comes from a total trust in the Grace.*

*The Mother*

*(Words of the Mother – II, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 14, p. 93)*

# “LIFE OF PREPARATION AT BARODA” — SRI AUROBINDO, THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN

(Part 48)

(Continued from the issue of July 2024)

## Section 5: Equanimity and Sweetness of Temper

### Alipore Bomb Case

Another distinctive trait of Sri Aurobindo was having no dislike for or aversion to things or people. Even in the awfully unhygienic conditions of Alipore jail Sri Aurobindo overcame his sense of revulsion. He was given a poor-quality plate which was so flimsy that “one had to use one hand for eating while the other held the plate in position.” But worse still was the bowl which served multiple purposes. He humorously notes that the bowl

. . . helped in the act of ablution; later with the same bowl I gargled, bathed; a little later when I had to take my food, the lentil soup or vegetable soup was poured into the same container; I drank water out of it and washed my mouth. . . . Serving all my worldly needs the bowl became an aid in my spiritual discipline too. Where else could I find such an aid and preceptor to get rid of the sense of disgust?<sup>1</sup>

Sri Aurobindo spoke about “the inhuman cruelty of the western prison administration”,<sup>2</sup> and called the British prison system in India “hellish remnants of an alien order”.<sup>3</sup> About his incarceration in Alipore jail he wrote: “. . . for a whole year I would have to live, beyond the pale of society, like an animal in a cage.”<sup>4</sup> He further expounds upon the unhealthy and unwholesome jail conditions:

. . . for one month I acquired an unsought lesson in controlling my sense of disgust. The entire procedure for defecation seems to have been oriented towards the art of self-control. . . . two baskets, with tar coating, would be kept in the room itself. The sweeper (*mehtar*) would clean it up in the mornings and

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, pp. 16-17 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

afternoons. . . . if one went to the privy at odd hours, as penance one had to put up with the noxious and fetid smell. . . . Attached bathrooms are, I know, oftentimes a part of western culture, but to have, in a small cell, a bedroom, dining room and w.c. rolled into one, this is what is called too much of a good thing!<sup>5</sup>

He later told his disciples: “I do not remember to have had any illness in jail, except perhaps eczema-trouble in the foot, due to dirty blankets and germs.”<sup>6</sup>

The food and drinking water facilities for the accused revolutionaries were pitiable; Sri Aurobindo remarked: “. . . to give them food unfit for animals, to make them endure water scarcity, thirst and hunger, sun, rain and cold, all these do not enhance the glory of the British race and its imperial officers.”<sup>7</sup>

About the appalling standard of food, Barin wrote that *lufsi* was served as breakfast. This tasteless dish was nothing else than “watery rice, with a pinch of salt.” He further noted that “*lufsi* could manifest in many forms — sometimes it would appear yellow, sometimes white, and sometimes blood red.” About the subsequent meals he resignedly noted that “lunch would consist of watery dal” comprising “all kinds of leaves, and red rice with stone chips.” He adds: “At four o’clock, we would receive a second edition of the afternoon meal, with the occasional addition of a sour liquid.”<sup>8</sup>

The quality of food in jail was so awful that it even affected the family members of the accused. Sachindra Kumar Sen’s father came to visit him and asked about the food being served in jail. Fearful that his father would be grief-stricken if he knew the actual contents of *lufsi*, Sachin lightened up and praised it profusely and added: “*Lufsi* is extremely nutritious.” The father was not to be fooled. Tears welled up in his eyes. He turned towards the jailor and said: “At home, my boy would throw away even pulao, and now, *lufsi* has become his source of nourishment!”<sup>9</sup>

About the delectability of this dish Sri Aurobindo noted: “*Lufsi*, boiled rice, along with water, is the prisoner’s little breakfast. . . . It should be added that *lufsi* was the only nutritious diet for the Bengali prisoners, the rest were without any food value. But what of that? It had a taste, and one could eat this only out of sheer hunger; even then, one had to force and argue with oneself to be able to consume that stuff.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the food was so unpalatable that it sparked a “massive agitation”. The doctor, an Irishman and a gentleman, explained that his hands were tied as the ration

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, pp. 120-121.

7. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 21 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

8. See Barindra Kumar Ghose, *Barindrer Atmakahani* (translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

9. See Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

10. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, pp. 27-28 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

was fixed as per government regulations. The kind doctor, however, offered some small comfort; in exceptional circumstances he would be able to arrange special food from the hospital. But these special circumstances were only applicable if the prisoner fell ill. The situation was so dire that Upendranath Banerjee noted: “I realised that there was no other way to live but to fall sick. So we all began falling sick. How could we make up new ailments every day? When we exhausted the list of stomach cramps, headaches, palpitation, nausea, one after the other, we were at a loss trying to think up diseases that would not have external symptoms. We needed some disease or the other in order to stay alive.”<sup>11</sup> Sri Aurobindo found no necessity to malingering. He has stated, “Sri Aurobindo did not fall ill while in prison; he was in normal health except for a superficial ailment for some time which was of no consequence.”<sup>12</sup> But Sri Aurobindo has referred to the kindness of the doctor who had arranged a supply of milk from the hospital for him.<sup>13</sup>

After Gossain’s assassination in August the Irish doctor was transferred and all facilities for sick prisoners were revoked. A dejected Upendranath Banerjee noted, “Our visits to the hospital were completely prohibited. If we were ill, we could only lie in our cells. There was no way in which we could talk with one another. Eat and sit quietly within the cell for the entire day.”<sup>14</sup>

There was a time when Sri Aurobindo did not eat for ten days. He told his disciples: “At Alipore I was in full yogic activities. I was not taking my food, and was throwing it away in the bucket. Of course, the Superintendent did not know it; only the warder knew about it and he informed others saying; ‘The gentleman must be ill; he will not live long.’ Though my weight was diminishing I was able to raise a pail of water above my head which I could not do ordinarily.”<sup>15</sup> During his fast Sri Aurobindo sustained himself by drawing “vital force from the universal energy” but there was loss of the material substance of the body. Yet, at the end of the fast he felt much stronger. Sri Aurobindo “had to bear a great pressure of sadhana” so he “had to do without much sleep” and slept every third night.<sup>16</sup>

The dreadful state of food and nutrition in jail was summed up by Sri Aurobindo:

Coarse rice, even that spiced with husk, pebbles, insects, hair, dirt and such other stuff; tasteless lentil soup was heavily watered; vegetables and greens mixed with grass and leaves. I never knew before that food could be so tasteless and without any nutritive value. Looking at its melancholy black visage I was

11. Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

12. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 85.

13. See Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 24 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

14. Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

15. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, pp. 607-08.

16. See *Sri Aurobindo’s Talks of 1926*, recorded by Anilbaran Roy, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 2020, pp. 9-10.

appalled; and after two mouthfuls with a respectful salaam I took leave of it. All prisoners receive the same diet, and once a course gets going it goes on forever. Then it was the Reign of Herbs. Days, fortnights and months pass by, but the same herbs (*shāk*), lentil and rice went on unchanged. What to speak of changing the menu, the preparation was not changed a jot or tittle; it was the same immutable.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, he adds:

Even the strange spectacle of prison diet failed to disturb my attitude.<sup>18</sup>

The only exception to this characteristic of an absence of dislike was noticed by Champaklal, who writes:

Sri Aurobindo had the utmost dislike of flies. If any fly suddenly touched his body or came near during meal-times, though we tried our best to ensure that no flies came, yet, if ever it happened, an expression of dislike would immediately appear on his face. It was the only thing that brought dislike to his face.<sup>19</sup>

During the incarceration a Scottish warder, who had an idiosyncratic demonical laugh, went berserk and lifted Sri Aurobindo on his shoulders and started dancing wildly.

Sudhir Kumar Sarkar recounts:

It was a bizarre sight! The poor fellow seemed unable to decide what to do in his ecstatic state. But Sri Aurobindo was totally still. There was not a trace of smile or vexation on his face. He did not even try to resist. He was in some other world far from this earth. Only the body, separated from his consciousness, was held on the shoulder of the warder.<sup>20</sup>

In *Essays on the Gita* Sri Aurobindo writes about a liberated man: “. . . what comes to him he takes without repulsion and without attachment . . . His heart and self are under perfect control; they are free from reaction and passion, they make no turbulent response to the touches of outward things.”<sup>21</sup>

Sri Aurobindo had to bear the scorching summer heat in an unventilated jail

17. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 24 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Champaklal Speaks*, edited by M. P. Pandit and revised by Roshan, 2002, p. 58.

20. See Mona Sarkar, *Spirit Indomitable*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1989, p. 104.

21. *CWSA*, Vol. 19, p. 180.

cell. This was compounded by an utter lack of proper drinking water. Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The entire room would burn like an oven. While being locked thus the only way to lessen one’s irresistible thirst was the tepid water in the small tin enclosure. I would drink that water often and often, but this would not quench the thirst, rather there would be heavy sweating and soon after the thirst would be renewed. . . . the generous jail doctor found my water trouble unbearable. He made efforts to get an earthen pot for my use . . . at last at his bidding the head sweeper managed to discover an earthen pot from somewhere. Before that in course of my long battle with thirst I had achieved a thirst-free state.<sup>22</sup>

Another excerpt from *Essays on the Gita* reads:

. . . Bear and put away similarly the forceful attacks and even the slightest insinuating touches of joy and sorrow. Cast away liking and disliking, destroy preference and hatred, root out shrinking and repugnance. Let there be a calm indifference to these things and to all the objects of desire in all your nature. Look on them with the silent and tranquil regard of an impersonal spirit.

The result will be an absolute equality and the power of unshakable calm . . .<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, during his incarceration Sri Aurobindo attained equanimity even in his physical body. He revealed:

As for divine rapture, a knock on head or foot or elsewhere *can* be received with the physical Ananda of pain or pain + Ananda or pure physical Ananda — for I have often, quite involuntarily, made the experiment myself and passed with honours. It began, by the way, as far back as in Alipur jail when I got bitten in my cell by some very red and ferocious looking warrior ants and found to my surprise that pain and pleasure are conventions of our senses. But I do not expect that unusual reaction from others.<sup>24</sup>

Later, in November 1938, Sri Aurobindo bore excruciating pain when he had a serious fracture of his right thigh bone. Referring to this accident a disciple wondered, “What is incomprehensible is the unmerited suffering of the physical consciousness in your case.” Sri Aurobindo interjected:

22. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, pp. 18-19 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

23. *CWSA*, Vol. 19, p. 583.

24. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 263.

How do you know it is unmerited? Perhaps it was to give me knowledge of what intense pain is. I had ordinary pains before which I could turn into Ananda. But this was intense. I never had the experience and when it came suddenly and abruptly, I could not change it into Ananda. When it became of a steady nature I could. Besides, we shall see afterwards the full significance. Of course, I accept it as a part of the battle.<sup>25</sup>

The conversation then continued:

DISCIPLE: Is consciousness of the Divine possible in the physical cells even?

SRI AUROBINDO: Yes, the cells can have peace, joy, etc., and when they are quite conscious, they can throw out the opposing forces. When peace descends in the physical it is a great force for cure.<sup>26</sup>

During a conversation in 1970 the Mother revealed the tremendous physical suffering that Sri Aurobindo had to bear:

I had (and that was frightful), I had the consciousness of all that he suffered physically. And that was one of the things most . . . (*Mother's voice is covered in tears*) the hardest to bear. As if . . . physically . . . And our physical unconsciousness beside that, and the kind of physical *torture* he was subjected to. That was one of the most difficult things, most difficult.

The torture he was subjected to, which we treated so lightly, as if . . . as if he felt nothing. That was one of the most frightful things.<sup>27</sup>

The rigorous conditions at Alipore jail were a test of endurance for Sri Aurobindo and his comrades. Nolini Kanta Gupta narrates the ensuing moments immediately after the approver Narendranath Gossain was killed in the jail hospital compound on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1908:

Before we had time to think or realise what had happened, swarms of armed policemen with rifles and fixed bayonets trooped into the courtyard where we had been taking our evening stroll. They pushed us back into our quarters like a drove of sheep or as if we had been animals for slaughter. Everyone was searched and we got a few rude jostlings. We were made to form a line and sit down on the spot and the order came, “Now to the 44 Degrees.”<sup>28</sup>

25. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, pp. 543-44.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 545.

27. Mother's conversation with a disciple on 9 September 1970.

28. Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*, Vol. 7, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 1978, pp. 379-80.

And the 17-year-old Biren Chandra Sen — the brother of Hem and Sushil Sen — noted:

We were removed to the 44 cells the very same day and were deprived of all our comforts. Then began a dreary and solitary life — without books, without company, and without even the chance of looking at the face of any other man outside those who guarded us or were directly concerned with giving us indispensable services.<sup>29</sup>

Upendranath Banerjee gives a fuller account of the unfolding of events. Reproduced below is an excerpt:

But, with Naren’s death, our destiny took a turn for the worse. Within half an hour, the jail superintendent arrived at the barracks with armed guards, and searched each one of us individually before turning us out. Then the barrack was searched . . . the jail was swarming with people, starting from the inspector general, down to a whole range of big and small police officials. All kinds of investigations followed . . . the inspector general left after ordering that we be locked up in individual cells. The 44 degrees was emptied out and arrangements were made to take us there. . . .

Within a week, all the other prisoners from the 44 degrees were sent to other jails, and we were transferred there. After all these days, we now understood what it meant to be in jail. . . .

Gradually, the native guards were replaced by Europeans, and two sets of white soldiers would guard the jail, both inside and outside, day and night. The officials suspected that we would try to escape from jail. Kanai and Satyen were locked in the first two cells. Once in five to seven days, we would be transferred from one cell to another. When we would be near the cells of either Kanai or Satyen, we would be able to talk softly with them at night. There was no opportunity for talking with one another during the day. We were able to walk in the courtyard for about half an hour every morning and evening, but we had to maintain a distance from each other. There was no way of evading the eyes of the guards and talking with one another.

None other than those who have experienced the pain of having to sit quietly all day will be able to understand what it is like. One day, I requested the superintendent sahib for a book. He sorrowfully informed me that he had no authority to do anything for us without permission from the government. He had lost all his power after Naren’s death.<sup>30</sup>

29. Biren Chandra Sen, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Remember Him’, *Mother India*, April 1964, p. 19.

30. Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

The debased conditions in the solitary cells of the ward infamously known as “44 Degrees” are described by Nolini Kanta Gupta:

The name “44 Degrees” was given because the ward consisted of 44 rooms; these rooms were actually more like cells. You know the kennels and sheds where dogs and poultry are kept? These were something very similar. . . . Normally, these cells were set apart for the use of criminals like dacoits or murderers and they were kept singly, one in each cell. . . . How utterly man could degrade man to a state worse than that of beasts even, one might say, was illustrated admirably by the life one had to lead in these “44 Degrees”.<sup>31</sup>

Sri Aurobindo noted what the accused had to endure:

If there is any place where the Indian character may be looked upon with eyes of contempt, if it is possible to see it at its worst, lowest and most hateful state, then Alipore jail is that place, imprisonment at Alipore is that inferior and degenerate state.<sup>32</sup>

And about the dread that any prisoner faces in Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo remarked:

The tired prisoner then takes the refuge of sleep and in that has his only pleasure. It is the time when the weak of heart weeps over his misfortune or in anticipation of the hardships of prison life.<sup>33</sup>

Sri Aurobindo wrote that all the accused came from “gentlemanly stock” and were charged not for “ordinary murder, theft or dacoity” but an “attempt at insurrection to liberate the country”. Yet, they were brutally treated by the British authorities, “herded together like ordinary thieves and dacoits — and not even as thieves and dacoits, to keep them like animals in a cage . . .”<sup>34</sup> Sri Aurobindo further observed:

The prison authorities would mix up those accused on other charges along with us. But this was only in name. There was such obvious disparity between the two types of accused: on the one hand the sharp, intelligent features of those involved in the bomb conspiracy; on the other hand, the soiled dress and lustreless visage of the average accused. If looking at them one could not make out the difference, that could only mean that one was a big fool, bereft of the lowest human intelligence.<sup>35</sup>

31. Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*, Vol. 7, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 1978, p. 373.

32. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 82 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 30.



Sri Aurobindo in Alipore Jail, 1909

Concerning the hardship faced in Alipore jail Sri Aurobindo noted: “. . . peculiar arrangements are made for undertrial prisoners in the civilised British Raj, and what prolonged agony for the innocent.”<sup>36</sup> On the acute injustice meted out to the accused, Sri Aurobindo remarked, “how easily the innocent could be punished,” and how the British legal system is “a lifelong agony for him and his family, his friends and relatives, an insult, a living death.”<sup>37</sup> In an interview Sri Aurobindo revealed the sufferings faced by the accused in the excessively rigorous prison conditions following the assassination of the approver:

*What happened after Gossain’s murder?*

In half an hour’s time the jail authorities came to our hall and sent us away. They made a thorough search and we were deprived of everything excepting the clothes we were wearing. After a few days, solitary confinement became our lot again. We were kept separate and everything went on as at the beginning.

*And the treatment towards you became harsher than before?*

Of course, it was very, very harsh. We were guarded by armed highlanders. I have heard they were ordered to shoot anybody who would try to escape or make any disturbance. All articles from outside were prohibited; even friends were interdicted without the Magistrate’s permission. Those who were ill would get no treatment. Arrangements as to bath and food were made similar to those at the beginning, we were not allowed to speak to one another, not even to jail employees. Only one or two of us could get any books. Only those who were engaged in spiritual exercises did not feel all this much, but to all others this month was a month of great suffering. The court was then closed. We met again after the reopening of the court, but since then we were all along kept in solitary cells.<sup>38</sup>

At the time of the arrests in May 1908 the accused were kept in batches of three or more to a cell but Sri Aurobindo and Hemchandra Das (the one who fabricated bombs) were considered too dangerous, and thus were each put alone in a tiny cell. Sri Aurobindo has noted:

I spent the first part of my imprisonment in Alipore jail in a solitary cell and again after the assassination of Noren Gosain to the last days of the trial when

36. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

38. Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 107-08, pp. 113-14.

all the Alipore case prisoners were similarly lodged each in his own cell. In between for a short period we were all put together.<sup>39</sup>

About the others who escaped isolation in the first two periods, Sri Aurobindo noted:

Those who were fortunate enough to be placed in this decree lived more happily. Many were confined to a room in this decree, with leisure to talk day and night and spend their time happily in human companionship.<sup>40</sup>

In an interview to *Sanjivini*, subsequent to his acquittal, which got wide publicity in the Indian Press, Sri Aurobindo referred to his first phase of solitary confinement of more than a month, immediately after his arrest. We reproduce below an excerpt:

*Were you treated in the Alipore Jail as political prisoners?*

No; they used to keep us in solitary cells. They kept me in a secluded cell.

*What is a solitary cell like?*

It is a small room with no windows, but iron bars in the front.

*Arrangements for bathing?*

A bucketful of water in all. We had to bathe, wash the eating utensils — do everything with it. In the solitary cell I had to spend one and half months in this condition. I had to keep inside the cell always. They did not even allow me to read any book. Our sleep used to be broken when guards changed three or four times at night. They would not leave us until, after shouting, they roused us from sleep. This being done three or four times; we could sleep no more. Sometime after, the doctor came and gave directions and we were allowed to walk twice during the daytime in front of the cell. Eight or ten days after this, books were allowed in. I wanted the Gita and the Upanishad from home and they were given to me. But they gave no light at night, so I could not read. Two coarse blankets were allowed for the bed and we had to lie on the blankets spread on the floor.<sup>41</sup>

Sri Aurobindo described his incarceration in a single cell as an “extreme form or type of punishment.”<sup>42</sup> He realised “the enormity or dangerous potentiality of

39. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 97.

40. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 29 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

41. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, September 2016, p. 738.

42. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 30 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

solitary confinement,” and noted that “even firm and well-developed intellects break down in such a state of confinement and readily turn towards insanity.”<sup>43</sup> About the perils and precariousness of solitary confinement Sri Aurobindo added: “According to the proverb, one who can stand solitude is either a god or a brute, it is a discipline quite beyond the power of men. . . . I could feel that even for one accustomed to the yogic life this discipline is not easy to acquire.”<sup>44</sup>

Sri Aurobindo took his hardship in jail lightly noting that “since my faith in divine mercy was strong I had to suffer only for the first few days,” and thereafter “the mind had risen above these sufferings and grown incapable of feeling any hardship. That is why when I recollect my prison life, instead of anger or sorrow I feel like laughing.”<sup>45</sup> He then narrates how he overcame the menace of being confined alone:

Troubled by mental listlessness I spent a few days in agony in this manner. One afternoon as I was thinking, streams of thought began to flow endlessly and then suddenly these grew so uncontrolled and incoherent that I could feel that the mind’s regulating power was about to cease. Afterwards when I came back to myself, I could recollect that though the power of mental control had ceased, the intelligence was not self-lost or did not deviate for a moment, but it was as if the intelligence was watching quietly this marvellous phenomenon. But at the same time shaking with the terror of being overcome by insanity, I had not been able to notice that. I called upon God with eagerness and intensity and prayed to him to prevent my loss of intelligence. That very moment there spread over my being such a gentle and cooling breeze, the heated brain became relaxed, easy and supremely blissful such as in all my life I had never known before. . . . From that day all my troubles of prison life were over.<sup>46</sup>

To compound the punishment of solitary confinement, Sri Aurobindo was not allowed to go outside his cell for many days. The jail doctor, who was sympathetic to Sri Aurobindo, felt it was “bad for both body and mind” and obtained permission for the chief accused to walk in the mornings and evenings in the open space in front of the cell. During these walks Sri Aurobindo felt God everywhere and sensed being embraced by him. In this state he describes how “a pure and wide peace reigned everywhere.” A love for all creatures flowed out from within him and emotions such as charity and kindness became so predominant that he “found an abundant release.”<sup>47</sup> Sri Aurobindo said that he enjoyed these walks “very much.”<sup>48</sup> Later in his Uttarpara speech, Sri Aurobindo said that Srikrishna

43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

. . . turned the hearts of my jailers to me and they spoke to the Englishman in charge of the jail, “He is suffering in his confinement; let him at least walk outside his cell for half an hour in the morning and in the evening.” So it was arranged, and it was while I was walking that His strength again entered into me.<sup>49</sup>

Regarding transcending the adverse prison conditions Sri Aurobindo wrote:

And the lover of God feels the nearness of his deity, and has the joy of his prayer or meditation in the silent night. Then to these three thousand creatures who came from God, victims of a miserable social system, that huge instrument of torture, the Alipore Jail, is lost in a vast Silence.<sup>50</sup>

Sri Aurobindo also mentioned the “deeper vision” that Krishna gave him in jail for “it was Vasudeva who surrounded” him. And in the tree in front of his cell and in the bars of his cell he saw Krishna. And it was Krishna “who was guarding” him. He further noted: “Or I lay on the coarse blankets . . . and felt the arms of Srikrishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover.”<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo remarked: “The solitary confinement at Alipore was a unique lesson in love.”<sup>52</sup>

Even before his arrest Sri Aurobindo recalled that Krishna came to him:

I remembered then that a month or more before my arrest, a call had come to me to put aside all activity, to go into seclusion and to look into myself, so that I might enter into closer communion with Him. I was weak and could not accept the call. My work was very dear to me and in the pride of my heart I thought that unless I was there, it would suffer or even fail and cease; therefore I would not leave it. It seemed to me that He spoke to me again and said, “The bonds you had not strength to break, I have broken for you, because it is not my will nor was it ever my intention that that should continue. I have another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work.” Then He placed the Gita in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the *sadhan* of the Gita. I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Srikrishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His

49. *CWSA*, Vol. 8, p. 6.

50. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 29 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

51. *CWSA*, Vol. 8, p. 6.

52. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 23 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

hands, to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently.<sup>53</sup>

When a disciple wrote about the prison days: “A year’s seclusion and meditation in the Alipore jail no doubt worked a great transformation in Sri Aurobindo. . . . Once again — now as ever — “service” was Sri Aurobindo’s urge to action,” Sri Aurobindo replied:

The idea was “work” for the country, for the world, finally for the Divine, *nishkama karma*, rather than an ideal of service.<sup>54</sup>

After his acquittal Sri Aurobindo declared in his Uttarpara speech:

. . . India is rising. She does not rise as other countries do, for self or when she is strong, to trample on the weak. She is rising to shed the eternal light entrusted to her over the world. India has always existed for humanity and not for herself and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great.<sup>55</sup>

Sri Aurobindo described the process of carrying the silence attained in solitary confinement to the hectic activity outside — first at the magistrate’s court and then at the Sessions court:

And the more these qualities developed, the greater the delight and the deeper the sense of unclouded peace. . . .

It took some days for these emotions to settle and deepen. It was while this was going on that the case opened in the magistrate’s court. At first the mind was greatly perturbed at being dragged from the silence of solitary confinement to the noise of the world outside. The patience of inner discipline was lost and the mind did not at all consent to listen for five hours on end to the dull and bothersome arguments by the prosecution. At first I tried to continue the inner life while sitting in the court-room, but the unaccustomed mind would be attracted to every sound, sight and the attempt would not succeed. Later the feelings changed and I acquired the power to reject from the mind the immediate sounds and sights, and draw the mind inwards. But this did not take place in the early stages, the true power of concentration had not developed then. For that reason, giving up the futile attempt, I would be content with seeing, now and then, God in all creatures . . . I found that while spending one’s time in solitary

53. *CWSA*, Vol. 8, pp. 5-6.

54. *Ibid.*, Vol. 36, p. 85.

55. *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, p. 6.

imprisonment had grown easy and pleasant, it was not that easy in the midst of the crowd and in the life-and-death game of a serious political case.<sup>56</sup>

Sri Aurobindo was put under solitary confinement in the first and the third or last period of his jail term. In the middle phase he was put in a common cell with the other accused. About this a fellow detainee, Biren Chandra Sen, wrote:

For the first two months or so he was lodged in a separate block of cells all by himself, and we saw very little of him. The only occasions we could see him were on Court days and on Sundays when we had interviews. At first the authorities were very strict about interviews, but in the flush of their apparent success they imagined they had struck the movement a death-blow and became careless.

The undertrials as we were then called in Jail parlance, were huddled together in the back verandah of the Jail office while the interviewers waited outside with only the iron bars of the arched door-openings in the office wall intervening, and for a full half hour or so they had complete freedom.

It was sometimes near the later part of June that Sri Aurobindo and the rest were brought to the cookshed cells where I had been lodged with my two brothers and some others.<sup>57</sup>

About the second period Upendranath Banerjee wrote:

. . . we were kept in three cells, adjacent to one another, of which the one in the middle was larger than the other two. The relatively solemn people such as Aurobindo Babu and Debabrata took refuge in the smaller cells to the side, while those who were ‘wild’ like us occupied the larger cell in the centre and made arrangements to celebrate a grand festival throughout the day.<sup>58</sup>

On 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1908, Barin wrote to Sarojini: “So long we were kept separately in different cells. Now they have put us together in a large cell composed of four rooms. So life is more bearable now.”<sup>59</sup> About this middle phase Sri Aurobindo mentioned:

We were removed to another place. We used to live together in three or four large rooms. Barin, Bibhuti, Bejoy, Naren Baksi, Kunjalal and some others and myself used to live in one room. In another there were Hem Das, Upendra

56. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, pp. 47-49 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

57. Biren Chandra Sen, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Remember Him’, *Mother India*, April 1964, p. 18.

58. Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

59. <https://overmanfoundation.org/barindra-kumar-ghoses-letters-to-his-sister-sarojini/> 27.5.2024.

Banerjee and others — in this room they used to spend their nights and days in amusement and play. In another room there were Naren Gossain, Debabrata and perhaps Hrishikesh also.<sup>60</sup>

Sri Aurobindo noted: “Only a few of the prisoners had been known to me before I met them in prison”.<sup>61</sup> In the second phase dissatisfaction occasionally set in amongst the revolutionaries but Sri Aurobindo remained unaffected. Upendranath Banerjee wrote: “In the leisured life of the jail, these forces of discord broke loose. There was but one man among us who remained supremely above all these petty party-squabbles. It was Arabinda.”<sup>62</sup> Upendranath Banerjee further noted:

Everyone apart from Aurobindo Babu, Debabrata and Barin would join in this merrymaking; but it is not as if they were always left out. . . . A corner was designated for Aurobindo Babu. There he would be immersed in his meditation and worship for the entire morning. Even when the boys shouted very loudly, disturbing him, he would not utter a word. During the evening he would pace up and down for two or three hours and read the Upanishads or some other dharmashastra. However, even he had no respite unless he joined the others in play for an hour or so in the evening.<sup>63</sup>

Biren Chandra Sen alluded to Sri Aurobindo’s yogic comportment in jail:

At night he was often found to be in deep meditation or in various postures of ‘asanas’ or ‘mudras’ . . . But that did not prevent him from mixing freely with the rest. . . .

With nothing to do we made enough noise to disturb the entire jail but there was one man in our midst whom we could not disturb and who appeared like a ‘flame in still air that did not flicker’.<sup>64</sup>

Manoj Das encapsulated Sri Aurobindo’s indrawn state of consciousness in jail:

We have seen from the several accounts left by his fellow prisoners that even when he shared a dormitory with them, he appeared to them to be living in a world far away from his physical situation. Yet he was very much there with them in those sickening and crass surroundings; he never grudged a word of

60. Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 111-12.

61. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 98.

62. Shyam Kumari, *Beautiful Vignettes of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, 2003, p. 10.

63. Upendranath Banerjee, *Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

64. Biren Chandra Sen, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Remember Him’, *Mother India*, April 1964, p. 19.

solace or an answer to a question for anyone who needed it and once in a while even participated in the playful activities of the fearless and jovial young men around him.<sup>65</sup>

About this phase Sri Aurobindo has written:

I was carrying on my yoga during these days learning to do so in the midst of much noise and clamour but apart and in silence and without any participation of the others in it.<sup>66</sup>

In a letter to a disciple Sri Aurobindo wrote:

To remain within, above and untouched, full of the inner consciousness and the inner experience, — listening, when need be, to X or another with the surface consciousness, but with even that undisturbed, not either pulled outwards or invaded, that is the perfect condition for the sadhana.<sup>67</sup>

Upendranath Banerjee noticed that Sri Aurobindo was doing an intense sadhana in jail. He observed that Sri Aurobindo’s eyes were still and he did not blink, suggesting that his mind was silent. And though there was no hair oil available in prison Sri Aurobindo’s hair shone. “My body is undergoing some physical changes along with my sadhana. The hair is extracting fat from my body,” Sri Aurobindo explained. Upendranath added:

Aurobindo Babu sat impassive, like a pillar in the midst of all this furore and factionalism. He would neither say “yes” nor “no” to anything. I would hear strange stories about his behaviour from the jail guards. Some said that he did not sleep at night, others said that he had become insane. When he ate rice, he offered some to the cockroaches, lizards and ants; he did not bathe, did not brush, did not change his clothes — etc., etc. I would be very curious to know some more; but I did not have the courage to ask him anything. . . .

At last, Sachin went up to him quietly and asked: “What did you gain from your sadhana?”

Aurobindo Babu placed his hand on the shoulder of the young boy and smiled as he said: “I have found what I was searching for.”

Then we mustered the courage, so we sat around him. It is not that I understood very much of the unique story about the inner world; but what took root in my heart was the idea that this unusual man had begun an entirely new

65. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, October 2016, pp. 815-16.

66. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 98.

67. *Ibid.*, Vol. 30, pp. 226-27.

chapter of his life. I also heard some descriptions about how, after completing his Vedantic sadhana in jail, he had also practised tantric sadhana. I did not hear him discuss the tantras either in jail or outside. When I asked how he had acquired knowledge of these secret sadhanas, Aurobindo Babu replied that a great man came with a subtle body, and imparted all these traditions to him. When asked about the outcome of the case, he replied: “I will be released.”<sup>68</sup>

In his memoirs Upendranath wrote: “Many a time had I seen Sri Aurobindo earlier . . . but never before had I been lucky enough to talk to him. Today my long-standing aspiration was fulfilled; I stood blessed. The dim flicker of my life’s lamp burnt bright with a new vigour.”<sup>69</sup>

In Alipore jail Sri Aurobindo had several physical siddhis — spiritual power over matter. He had an experience of levitation and of another instance he said: “I practised for a time raising my hands and keeping them suspended in the air without any muscular control. Once in that condition I fell asleep.” When the warder saw that posture he reported that Sri Aurobindo was dead but when the authorities came they found him quite alive!<sup>70</sup>

About his sadhana in jail Sri Aurobindo wrote in the third person:

In the jail he spent almost all his time in reading the Gita and the Upanishads and in intensive meditation and the practice of Yoga. This he pursued even in the second interval when he had no opportunity of being alone and had to accustom himself to meditation amid general talk and laughter, the playing of games and much noise and disturbance; in the first and third periods he had full opportunity and used it to the full.<sup>71</sup>

To a disciple Sri Aurobindo explained the implication of meditation:

What do you call meditation? Shutting the eyes and concentrating? It is only one method for calling down the true consciousness. To join with the true consciousness or feel its descent is the only thing important and if it comes without the orthodox method, as it always did with me, so much the better. Meditation is only a means or device, the true movement is when even walking, working or speaking one is still in sadhana.<sup>72</sup>

68. Upendranath Banerjee, *An Autobiography of an Exile (Nirbashiter Atmakatha)*, translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

69. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, July 2016, p. 536.

70. See Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, pp. 13-14.

71. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 60.

72. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 229.

Barin has also touched upon Sri Aurobindo’s yoga in jail. Referring to the period of the trial in the Sessions court before Judge Beachcroft, Barin wrote: “Amongst those of us who were engrossed in meditation and spiritual practices, Aurobindo was first and foremost, completely immersed in his own yoga . . .”<sup>73</sup>

Although India’s independence was most dear to Sri Aurobindo he did not have any antagonism or ill-feeling towards the British rulers. In his concluding speech the defence counsel, C. R. Das said on behalf of his client, “If it is suggested that I preached the ideal of freedom to my country which is against the law, I plead guilty to the charge. If that is the law here then I say I have done that and I request you to convict me.”<sup>74</sup> And referring to the articles in *Bande Mataram* C. R. Das explained that Sri Aurobindo’s aim was not to attack Britain but to awaken his countrymen to their own intrinsic culture and heritage, instead of being hypnotised by western civilisation. Das then added, “As for antipathy and dislike for humanity they are not to be found in those articles.”<sup>75</sup> Sri Aurobindo writes in the third person:

Sri Aurobindo never brought any rancour into his politics. He never had any hatred for England or the English people; he based his claim for freedom for India on the inherent right to freedom, not on any charge of misgovernment or oppression; if he attacked persons even violently, it was for their views or political action, not from any other motive.<sup>76</sup>

In Alipore jail an unfathomable love for people developed in Sri Aurobindo. He pronounced:

I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies. . . .

When the case opened in the lower court and we were brought before the Magistrate I was followed by the same insight. He said to me, “When you were cast into jail, did not your heart fail and did you not cry out to me, where is Thy protection? Look now at the Magistrate, look now at the Prosecuting Counsel.” I looked and it was not the Magistrate whom I saw, it was Vasudeva, it was Narayana who was sitting there on the bench. I looked at the Prosecuting Counsel and it was not the Counsel for the prosecution that I saw; it was Srikrishna who sat there, it was my Lover and Friend who sat there and smiled. “Now do you fear?” He said, “I am in all men and I overrule their actions and their words. My protection is still with you and you shall not fear. This case

73. Barindra Kumar Ghose, *Barindrer Atmakahani* (translated from Bengali by Kumkum Roy – manuscript).

74. Amiya K Samanta, *Alipore Bomb Trial 1908-1910*, 2017, p. 60.

75. See Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, April 2016, p. 316.

76. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, pp. 80-81.

which is brought against you, leave it in my hands. It is not for you. It was not for the trial that I brought you here but for something else. The case itself is only a means for my work and nothing more.”<sup>77</sup>

In an essay ‘Strength of Stillness’, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The desire-driven mind is enmeshed in the intricate tangle of good and evil, of the pleasant and the unpleasant, of happiness and misfortune. It strives to have the good always, the pleasant always, the happiness always. It is elated by fortunate happenings, disturbed and unnerved by their opposite. But the illuminated eye of the seer perceives that all leads to good; for God is all and God is *sarvamaṅgalam*. He knows that the apparent evil is often the shortest way to the good, the unpleasant indispensable to prepare the pleasant, misfortune the condition of obtaining a more perfect happiness. His intellect is delivered from enslavement to the dualities.<sup>78</sup>

Sri Aurobindo has summed up his incarceration in the “degenerate” Alipore jail:

I have spoken of a year’s imprisonment. It would have been more appropriate to speak of a year’s living in a forest, in an ashram or hermitage.<sup>79</sup>

*(To be continued)*

GAUTAM MALAKER

77. *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 6-7.

78. *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, p. 58.

79. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2014, p. 1 (translated from the Bengali, *Karakahini*).

*The triumph of the Divine is certain. If we keep the true trust, we shall never take the wrong path.*

*The Mother*

*(Words of the Mother – II, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 14, p. 94)*

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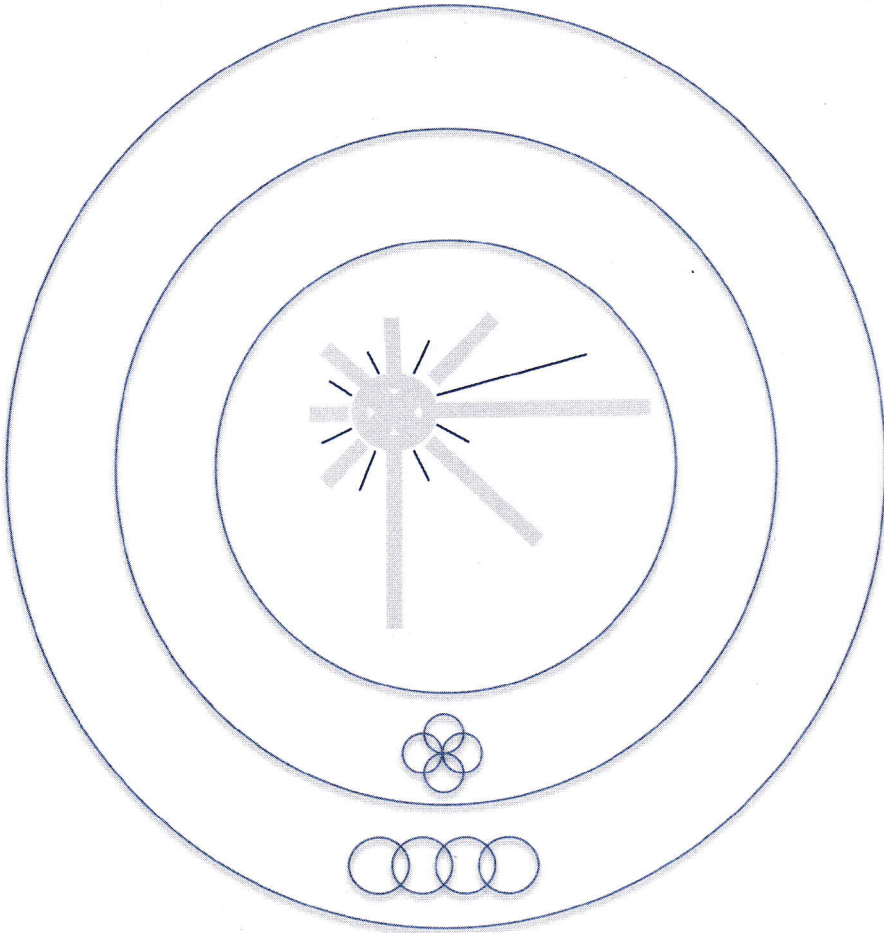
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