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Chapter 276 - Sri Aurobindo: A Yogi and a Poet

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Keywords

Sri Aurobindo, Biography, Creativity, Spirituality, Poetry, Yoga, Evolution of Consciousness

Glossary

Brahman: The Absolute; the Supreme Being; beyond whom nothing else exists

Integral Yoga: A system of Yoga, developed by Sri Aurobindo, that aims not only at realisation of the Divine, but also at transformation of one's nature under influence of the highest consciousness.

Overmind: the highest level of cosmic consciousness within the mind plane, just below the supermind

Pranayama: control of the vital currents of energy in the body by regulation of the breathing

Sadhanā: spiritual practice, or effort

Śakti: force, energy; particularly the power of the divine presence within the manifestation; the female aspect of the personal divine

Supermind: a principle of truth-consciousness, or divine gnosis, entirely beyond the mind; the highest divine consciousness and force operative in the universe.

Yoga: The act of union; yoking; from there, the path towards realising one's unity with the Absolute, the Divine.

A Synopsis

Sri Aurobindo was one of the most distinguished spiritual leaders of India. He was essentially a scholar, a poet, a philosopher, and above all, a yogi. His accomplishments as a writer can make it seem as though he led four or five different lives in a single lifetime. His creativity and inspiration came from his practice of yoga and ascension to higher states of mind and consciousness. He wrote extensively on Yoga and his poetic genius epitomized in his classic work

Savitri. Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry was set up to pursue Sri Aurobindo's vision of human life.

I. Introduction and Early Childhood

Sri Aurobindo had a multifarious personality. Though in his later years he was known mainly as one of the most distinguished spiritual leaders of India, he began his public life as a political activist. He was the first one to push the agenda of complete Independence of India from the British rule, yet he was essentially a scholar, a poet, a philosopher, and above all, a yogi. He was a profound thinker and a prolific writer. The wide range of his achievements made one of his biographers entitle his book "The lives of Sri Aurobindo".

Except for a short period of 6-7 years of active public life as a political activist, Sri Aurobindo seldom made public speeches. He was a very private person and rarely entertained visitors. Even to his close disciples he spoke more in silence than in words. He did communicate, however, in letters, which he wrote in thousands. He devoted the second half of his life to a combination of scholarly work and yoga, developing his vision of and ongoing evolution of consciousness and propounding a new school of integral yoga, and at the same time producing poetry of exquisite beauty. He was a gifted writer with amazing fluency, much of which he cultivated through yoga. He wrote poetry, plays, essays and seminal works on a wide variety of subjects. He ended up writing the equivalent of close to twenty thousand printed pages, though much of this work was published only after his passing away.

Sri Aurobindo was emphatic in stating that only he could write truly about himself. As a man who lived more an inner than an exterior life, he considered it impossible for others to know about it. His was a deeper life and there was not much on the surface for others to see. In spite of his objections, numerous biographies were written, both during his lifetime and in later years. Though Sri Aurobindo did not believe in biographies, he did correct some of the earlier ones for factual errors. During the early years of his stay in Pondicherry, he also maintained a detailed record of his inner development. This *Record of Yoga* came to light more than 25 years after his death, and its 1500 pages shed a fascinating light on his inner development. These records were written in the manner of laboratory notes, using technical terms and abbreviations which are often difficult to decipher. During the later period, he gave now and then a glimpse of his inner life in his letters and in his poems, especially in the later sonnets and in *Savitri*. Together, all this still forms quite a rich source of information about his life.

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta, on 15th August 1872. His father Krishna Dhun was a medical doctor, educated in Kolkata and later in London. He was an atheist, a Darwinian and a thoroughly Anglicised doctor in British Government service. Sri Aurobindo's mother Swarnalata hailed from a family of Bramho Samaj, a religious reformist group of eastern India, who were deeply influenced by Christian theism. As such, the family of Sri Aurobindo was so much

Anglicised that he was given a British middle name and was named Aurobindo Akroyd Ghosh. Dr. Ghose was so convinced of the superiority of British culture that he discouraged the use of his mother tongue Bengali in his house. There was a butler and a governess in the house with whom Sri Aurobindo used to talk in broken English. Sri Aurobindo grew up speaking, thinking, and dreaming in English. As he mentioned to a friend, till the age of 5 he did not know his mother tongue Bengali.

II. Education in Britain

When Sri Aurobindo was five years old, he and his two brothers were sent to the Loreto Convent School at Darjeeling, a school meant for children of British officers in India. His father wanted his sons to have a solid, British education, and when Sri Aurobindo was seven, he sent him, together with his two brothers, to England for further education. The three brothers stayed with the family of Rev. William H. Drewett at Manchester, with the specific instruction that the boys should not mix with Indians and should be kept free from any Indian influence. Sri Aurobindo was too young at that time to go to school and was taught at home. Later he attended what was at the time one of the best public schools in London (St. Paul's). The young Sri Aurobindo was a brilliant student who was consistently amongst the best one's in his class in English and Latin. The school principle Dr. Walker personally supervised the education of Sri Aurobindo whom he found weak in Greek initially. He was rapidly pushed to higher classes, which saved him a few years of school education. He won many literary prizes at the school. His teachers found him hard-working and promising; though with time he was hardly maintaining his old level of excellence and was putting up less effort, as his teachers commented. Sri Aurobindo later recalled that he was by then at ease in his classical studies and did not think it necessary to labour over them any longer. Instead, he read books not assigned in class: English and French poetry and fiction, European history. His English master was struck by the extent of his reading, and commented favourably on his writing style.

Dr. Ghose had asked the Reverend Mr. Drewett not to give his sons any religious training, but the boys inevitably absorbed much of the intellectual and moral atmosphere of Christianity. Sri Aurobindo later wrote that Christianity was the only religion and the Bible the only scripture with which he was acquainted in his childhood. He knew nothing about India, its culture and history. He and his brothers were understood by their classmates to be Christians, but they had by then become indifferent if not openly hostile to Christianity. For a while Sri Aurobindo considered himself an atheist before adopting an agnostic attitude.

Meanwhile the financial condition of Sri Aurobindo's father deteriorated and the remittances to support his children's education became irregular and ultimately almost stopped. It created a very difficult and embarrassing financial condition for the three brothers, who had to survive together on Sri Aurobindo's

scholarships. For years they lived a very Spartan life, at times having insufficient food to eat and little money to spend on other necessities.

Sri Aurobindo began writing poetry during his early schooling. His elder brother Manmohan also inspired Sri Aurobindo to write poetry. Most of his early attempts went into the wastepaper basket, but before he left college he produced a number of poems that he included in his first collection years later.

He and his brothers later moved to London where Sri Aurobindo won a scholarship to join King's College of Cambridge University. His competition papers were judged to be the best ever seen by an examiner who happened to be a noted writer (Oscar Browning). At Cambridge, Sri Aurobindo set three major goals for himself. The first was to study for his B.A. degree and prepare for the 'Indian Civil Services' (ICS) examination; the second was writing poetry; the third was to participate in the activities of the *Indian Majlis* and to work toward India's independence. Sri Aurobindo's father wanted his son to qualify for ICS, to be one of the topmost administrative officials in India. In deference to his father's wishes he sat in the exam and qualified. This also earned him a fellowship which he badly needed to support himself and his two brothers at Cambridge. Before returning to India as a last requirement for an ICS probationer Sri Aurobindo had to clear a horse riding test. He decided not to show up and as a result got himself disqualified. At King's College Sri Aurobindo acquired great proficiency in Greek and Latin and was devoting a good deal of time in writing poetry which had become a passion for him. Sri Aurobindo knew several other European languages, French, German and Italian to be precise; and could read original literature in these languages. He was involved in the literary circles at Cambridge. He wrote a large number of poems during this period but seldom cared to publish them. He was by now getting more and more interested in India and in the political movement to liberate it from the British rule. The Indian Majlis was an activist group of Indian students studying in England. Sri Aurobindo was its secretary for some time and he used to give fiery speeches to mobilize Indian students. During the last days of his stay in London Sri Aurobindo joined the 'Lotus and Dragger' society. It was a secret society in which each member vowed to work for the liberation of India, even by violent means. This society was, however, still-born. The police came to know about it and this was probably one other reason which went against his final selection as an ICS officer.

Sri Aurobindo started learning his native language Bengali when he was at Cambridge from an Englishman and acquired a sufficient working knowledge to read some Bengali literature, like Bankimchandra, the revolutionary poet. He also acquired a working knowledge of Sanskrit but was otherwise barely familiar with Indian scriptures and history. His knowledge was largely limited to Max Muller's the 'Sacred Books of the East' series. Another source of Sri Aurobindo's information about India were the newspaper clippings which Sri Aurobindo's father started sending him. Increasingly hurt by the attitude of British officers, his

father's positive regard of the British was diminishing, and he had begun briefing his sons about protest movements in India.

III. Life in Baroda

Sri Aurobindo returned to India in the beginning of 1893 after staying in England for 14 years. His father who was eagerly awaiting Sri Aurobindo's arrival died under unfortunate circumstances just before Sri Aurobindo arrived in Mumbai. While still in England, he was offered a job by one of the Indian princes, the Gaekwad of Baroda, and after his return, he worked in Baroda for twelve years, as teacher, as private secretary to the Gaekwad, and finally as the Vice-principal of Baroda College. Though he stayed in Baroda for a long time his heart was in Bengal which he visited very frequently. He also used to visit Deoghar where his mother and younger sister were staying. In April 1901 Sri Aurobindo was married to Mrinalini. Sri Aurobindo brought his wife and sister to Baroda to stay with him.

During his sojourn at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo, as a daily routine, was practicing *pranayama* (breathing exercises). As his friends in Baroda observed, he was remarkably simple in his living, and least fastidious about his food and clothing. His friends were struck by his indifference to physical discomfort. He never complained about the heat of Baroda summers or the chill of its winters. Only on the coldest mornings did he throw a shawl over his shoulders; only on the coldest nights did he sleep under a cotton blanket. His bed, a thin mattress on a cast-iron frame was something on which even a man of very simple means would not sleep. Though he was getting a good salary he was hardly concerned about spending it on himself or saving it. He was rather detached in these mundane aspects of life. He was better taken care of when Mrinalini was around, but she spent more time in Deoghar than in Baroda. Even when she was around, Sri Aurobindo was mostly absorbed in his studies and had no time for mundane matters. As people around him had often observed, he would sit for hours at a stretch, his eyes glued to the page, his attitude unchanging, like an ascetic rapt in contemplation, oblivious of the world. He also wrote extensively during this period. He would read or write till after midnight, he got up in the morning and resumed where he had left off. He used to have a cup of tea, smoke and then sit at his writing table. Once he began, he wrote slowly but steadily, rarely stopping to strike anything out. If someone spoke to him while he was writing, he may have been disturbed but never let the other person know about it.

Incidentally, little of what Sri Aurobindo wrote during that period has survived. Only half-dozen of the poems he wrote in the first six years in Baroda were retained. In 1898 he put together a collection of the poems he wished to preserve from his first decade of writing. *Songs to Myrtilla*, printed privately in Baroda, contains twenty-one pieces. About a third of them are on political and literary heroes: Parnell, Goethe, Madhusudan, Bankim; the rest are on love and romance. After publishing *Songs of Myrtilla*, Sri Aurobindo worked on a long narrative poem based on the story of Pururavus and Urvashi. A little later, he completed

another long poem, *Love and Death*, which was based on a story from the Mahabharata “in the heat of ... 14 days of continuous writing”. Sri Aurobindo described the main features of inspiration in an essay on Kalidasa, written three years after *Love and Death*. He saw it not as a nebulous term for an unusual fluency in writing, but as a specific sort of energy that was behind all genuine poetry.

As Sri Aurobindo became more familiar with the Indian tradition, his admiration for the Indian tradition grew, and it became increasingly clear to him that the Indian civilization could not regain its full stature as long as India was under foreign occupation. Interestingly, at that time, this was not at all a common view: the Indian elite of those days had widely accepted the superiority of the English culture, and Sri Aurobindo would become the first Indian intellectual who dared proclaim publicly that complete independence from Britain should be the primary aim of Indian political parties. As his increasing political involvement embarrassed his employer, whose position was entirely dependent on British approval, he left Baroda service in 1906 and moved to Calcutta where he soon became one of the most outspoken leaders of the political movement for Indian independence. His writings brought him in frequent conflict with the British authorities but he carefully chose his language and repeatedly managed to escape conviction. Around this time Sri Aurobindo wrote his famous revolutionary booklet *Bhawani Mandir* with a call to prepare revolutionaries for freedom movement.

This was the time when Sri Aurobindo was intensely pursuing both, political activities on one side, and yoga on the other. Sri Aurobindo had no interest in personal liberation, but he knew from experience that yoga could increase one's mental energy and clarity, and he hoped that yoga could develop other psychological powers, which he intended to use for his political work. During a visit to Baroda in 1907, Sri Aurobindo met a yogi, Bhaskar Lele who agreed to give lessons to Sri Aurobindo provided he could dissociate himself from all political activities for a while and stay with him. Lele asked him to make his mind blank which he could do the very first day. Within three days Sri Aurobindo managed under Lele's guidance to completely and permanently silence his mind. He wrote about this experience.

"It was my great debt to Lele that he showed me this. 'Sit in meditation,' he said, 'but do not think, look only at your mind; you will see thoughts *coming into it*; before they can enter throw these away from your mind till your mind is capable of entire silence.' I had never heard before of thoughts coming visibly into the mind from outside, but I did not think either of questioning the truth or the possibility, I simply sat down and did it. In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside; I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free. From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a

universal Mind, not limited to the narrow circle of personal thought...
 "(Sri Aurobindo, 1972, p. 84)

There are two things noteworthy about this experience. The first is that it was not a fleeting experience but a true realisation in the sense that the peace and inner silence never diminished. The other is that the experience of the silent, spaceless, timeless Brahman¹ was not at all what Aurobindo had expected or wanted from yoga and that it did not fit either within the mental framework of his instructor, Lele, whose own experiences were with the personal Divine. During the following weeks Lele still taught Sri Aurobindo how to rely both for his outer work and for the rest of his inner development on an inner guidance, but after that, they parted ways. After this Sri Aurobindo never sought the guidance of a teacher and moved on to develop his own system of Integral Yoga. The presence of the silent Brahman never left Sri Aurobindo, though it subsequently merged with other realisations of the Divine. Initially the experience of the silent Brahman came together with an overwhelming sense of the total unreality of the world, but the latter gradually disappeared when he had the realization of the cosmic consciousness pervading all things and all beings. Interestingly, all this happened during one of the busiest periods of his life while he was at the peak of his political influence, and he managed, in his own words, to organise political work, deliver speeches, edit his newspaper and write articles, all from an entirely silent mind.

IV. As a Revolutionary

By that time Sri Aurobindo was getting more and more involved in the underground movement for the freedom of India. He preferred to remain in the background, but he was indirectly involved in recruitment of young people and arranging their physical training, so as to prepare them for action against the British. He secretly visited many such revolutionary organizations to bring them under one banner and pool their resources. He became the co-editor of *Bande Mataram*, a political paper aiming at national construction, passive resistance and self-reliance. He was also contributing to another paper, *Yugantar*, which was to preach open revolt against the British rule.

In the meantime, his younger brother Barin got involved in increasingly daring but largely ineffective exploits of violent revolt. In May 1908 Barin played a role in the organisation of a bomb attack on a horse carriage in which some British officials were presumed to be travelling. As it turned out to be, two British ladies had occupied the coach and died in the bomb-blast. Sri Aurobindo was arrested by the police under suspicion that he was the brain behind this violent incident. He was put on trial for “waging war against the King”, a charge that could have sent him to the gallows if convicted. This case sent shock waves all over India and across the British Empire. Sri Aurobindo’s case was pleaded by a well known Indian barrister C.R. Das. Lack of evidence of direct, active involvement in violent action finally led to his acquittal after one year, much to the discomfort of

¹ The Supreme Being.

the British Viceroy, who by that time had come to the conclusion that Sri Aurobindo was “the most dangerous man in the British Empire.” His incarceration had one major effect, which the British police could not have foreseen, or, for that matter, understood. Sri Aurobindo took his arrest and year-long incarceration as a God-imposed opportunity to concentrate fully on his inner, spiritual development, or *sāadhanā*. While in jail, he showed remarkably little concern about the court-case, but made an in depth study of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and realised the presence of the personal Divine in everything and everybody around him.

By the time Sri Aurobindo was released from the Jail the political scenario had very much changed. Almost all leaders of the Nationalist party were either in jail or in self-imposed exile. Everywhere there was depression and hopelessness, though underneath the feelings against foreign rule were becoming stronger. Sri Aurobindo remained for another two years in Calcutta and used his persuasive skills to unite the moderates and the extremists to a common agenda in order to give the freedom movement a realistic direction. He was by now convinced that the political independence of India was only a matter of time, and that he had to concentrate on another important work, that of the inner growth of his countrymen. He started two journals – *Dharma* in Bengali and *Karmayogin* in English, both focused more on culture and yoga, less on politics.

Even after his release from jail, there was a realistic possibility that he might be rearrested again. One evening when Sri Aurobindo was sitting with others in the office of *Karmayogin*, one friend burst in with the news that Sri Aurobindo was about to be arrested. A relative of his, who worked in the police department, had told him that a warrant had been issued. (This information was premature. The government was thinking of arresting Sri Aurobindo, but the warrant was issued six weeks later.) The young men began talking about what they would do. Sri Aurobindo coolly announced that he was going to Chandernagar, a part of the French colony not too far from Kolkata. Arrangements were made and Sri Aurobindo silently sneaked out of Kolkata to evade arrest. However, this arrangement did not work very well. Sri Aurobindo’s friends in Chandernagar had difficulty sheltering him. Aware that the present arrangement was not viable, they began looking into various alternatives, even of shifting him to France. Then, sometime in March, Sri Aurobindo decided to go to Pondicherry. Pondicherry, the capital of the French settlements in India, was more than a thousand miles to the south. With great secrecy and meticulous planning, on April 1, 1910 Sri Aurobindo boarded, under a false name, a Colombo-bound steamer, which was to go via Pondicherry.

V. Settling in Pondicherry

Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry on April 4. He expected initially to stay in Pondicherry only for few months, or at most a year, to have time for his yoga meditation and inner growth, before re-entering active political life. He was not inclined to meet anyone and did not want visitors to disturb his solitude. He was living on the upper floor of a rented house and would come down only to take his

bath. A few youngsters who joined him from Kolkata were looking after the household.

Those early years of his stay in Pondicherry were difficult times. There used to be a perennial financial crisis; British spies kept a tab on all his visitors and activities. There was a warrant against him and there was apprehension that the French Government might deport him. Sri Aurobindo himself remained, however, completely unruffled, fully immersed in his meditation.

In Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo devoted most of his time to *sādhanā*. Though still interested in the large scale political and social developments that shook the world at that time, his concentration was on yoga. His principal study during the early years in Pondicherry was the *Rig Veda*, which he read, took notes on, analyzed, and translated into English. In contrast with his interests during his stay in Baroda, when he devoured works of Indian and European literature in large numbers, during this period his more conventional reading consisted largely of newspapers and a few Indian journals.

One settled in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo decided to call his wife Mrinalini. She had been detained till then in Bengal by the British police and was staying in Kolkata with some family friend. Before she could embark on her journey to Pondicherry Mrinalini suffered, however, from some undiagnosed disease and died.

In 1914, a French couple, Paul Richard and his wife, Mirra Alfassa, visited Pondicherry and soon became acquainted with Sri Aurobindo. Paul Richard invited Sri Aurobindo to join him in bringing out a new journal named *Arya*. The objective of the journal in Sri Aurobindo's words was, "to feel out for the thought of the future, to help in shaping its foundations and to link it to the best and most vital thought of the past". By the time its first issue came out, World War I had started and soon after, the Richards had to return to France. This left the task of filling the 64 pages of the monthly journal to Sri Aurobindo, and he earnestly carried on with this responsibility for the next 6 years. He serialized many of his seminal writings in the pages of *Arya*. By the time he closed down the journal, he had completed almost all his major works, *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, *Essays on the Gita*, *Foundations of Indian Culture*, translations and commentaries on several major *Upaniṣads*, etc. Only a few of these texts, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Life Divine* and the first part of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he revised and brought out in book form during his lifetime. Others were published as books only posthumously. Around 1915-16 Sri Aurobindo started working on a poem, *Savitri*, that would become his most extensive literary creation.

Paul Richard and Mirra Alfassa returned to Pondicherry in 1920. Paul Richard did not stay for long, as he had other engagements in France and as he found it difficult to reconcile himself with the by now obvious spiritual and intellectual superiority of Sri Aurobindo. Mirra stayed back and gradually took up an increasingly important role in the small community that began to form around Sri

Aurobindo. Initially she was simply regarded as the most gifted of Sri Aurobindo's disciples, but over time, Sri Aurobindo, as he now came to be known, began to address her as "the Mother", in honour of her complete identification with the *śakti*, the Power which mediates between the Divine and the manifestation. In letters to his disciples, he often stressed that their consciousness and realisation were essentially one, and that they differed only in their most outer roles and forms of manifestation.

On November 24, 1926 Sri Aurobindo had another major breakthrough in his own *sādhanā*. Sri Aurobindo had been patiently waiting and preparing for this event for months and years, but for others it was difficult to understand what actually happened on that day. At the time he only said "the power has descended into the subconscious." Almost 10 years later he once remarked, rather casually, while correcting someone, that it had been "the descent of the Overmind into the physical". In Sri Aurobindo's terminology, the Overmind is the type of cosmic consciousness, way above the ordinary mind, from where, amongst several other things, all the major religions originate. According to the Vedic tradition there is a layer of consciousness still higher than the Overmind, which Sri Aurobindo called the Supermind. The exact nature of the Supermind is obviously difficult to grasp with the ordinary human consciousness: Sri Aurobindo describes it in fact as more difficult than it would be for a monkey to understand the nature of abstract human thought! The relative place of the Supermind in the Vedic hierarchy of different layers of conscious existence can however more easily be indicated. It is conceived as a link-layer between the upper hemisphere of *sachchidananda* (the unity of divine existence, consciousness and bliss) and the lower hemisphere of matter, life and mind. It is described as a world where there is already differentiation into form and function, but no diminution yet of the Divine omniscience and omnipotence. In other words, it is the only type of consciousness in which perfect harmony, knowledge, light, freedom and immortality are in principle compatible with some form of individual existence. The Vedic Rishis knew about this type of consciousness, and strived to reach it, but considered it incompatible with life in the ordinary physical world. They described the Overmind, just below it, as a "golden lid", a layer so light and blissful that nobody could pass through it and return. Sri Aurobindo felt however that the time had come for the Supramental type of consciousness to become more accessible to humanity. He looked at it, in fact, as the inevitable next step in the evolution of humanity. It is in this light that we have to look at the event that took place on 24 November 1926: For Sri Aurobindo, the "descent of the Overmind into the physical" was a necessary step in the larger project of making the Supramental consciousness a normal part of biological existence. He argued, in his main philosophical work, *The Life Divine*, that just as the human consciousness has come into being as the result of the gradual evolution of mind within other living material forms, the Supramental consciousness might get a natural biological embodiment as the result of a further evolution within humanity.

VI. Self-Confinement

The immediate practical result of the events that took place on November 24, 1926 was that Sri Aurobindo retired entirely to a small, first floor apartment in order to concentrate fully on his inner work. From this time onwards, he left the daily care of the small community that had begun to develop around him, to the Mother, and this was the formal beginning of the “Sri Aurobindo Ashram”. We know relatively little about what kind of inner work Sri Aurobindo did during the 24 years after his retirement to his rooms. He spoke hardly to anybody, entertained no visitors. Just before the Second World War he broke his leg and needed help for his daily chores. That was the only time when a few of his closest disciples had a chance to know about his daily activities from a close quarter. Otherwise he saw his disciples only 3-4 times a year in a silent “*darshan*”. What we know of his inner life during this period is largely from his letters, from his poetry, and from the changes he introduced in some of his earlier writings. During the 1930s Sri Aurobindo answered a staggering number of letters to his disciples, of which over 5000 have been published. The published portion of Sri Aurobindo’s correspondence runs to over 2000 pages. For several years, Sri Aurobindo would work till six in the morning to answer the letters he received. Most of them deal with *sādhana*, quite a few with literature, and a smaller number with other issues.

Around the same time he also took up the revision of a few of his major works like his *Essays on the Gita*, the first two parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and *The Life Divine*. His poetic writings include besides sonnets, other short poems and metrical experiments, also his most important written work, the epic poem *Savitri*. With its almost 24000 lines and 724 pages, *Savitri* is in a class of its own. Its richness of imagery, beauty of expression, and sheer number of memorable lines could remind one of Shakespeare, but in terms of depth and width of spiritual experience it simply has no equal in the English language. It would not be surprising if posterity would count *Savitri* amongst the most valuable texts ever composed.

On a more mundane level, it may be noted that in spite of his official retirement from politics, Sri Aurobindo was one of the very few major public figures in India who recognised how serious the consequences of a victory of Nazi Germany and Japan would have been for the future development of human civilization, and during the Second World War he gave his full support to the Allied war-effort. He publically supported Cripps’ Mission which proposed a gradual transfer of power to Indians. One may wonder whether it was just a coincidence that the day India got its Independence from the British rule happened to be Sri Aurobindo’s 75th birthday.

Just before his passing away in 1950, Sri Aurobindo wrote a few essays for a newly started Ashram journal, *Bulletin of Physical Education*, on the transitional period between our present state and the Supramental stage he envisaged for the future evolution of humanity. He also completed the revision of the first part of *The Synthesis of Yoga* and the whole of *Savitri*. He breathed his last on December 5. For three to four days Sri Aurobindo’s body did not show any sign of decomposition. His body was finally laid to rest on 9th December in the

courtyard just below his room. The Mother continued his work till her own passing away in 1973 at the age of 95. The Ashram and the international township, Auroville, which she started in 1968, have continued to thrive as creative spiritual communities.

VII. The Relation between Yoga and Creativity

Sri Aurobindo was at the same time a yogi and an embodiment of a highest order of creativity. He took an *evolutionary* view of both reality and creativity, and looked at creativity in the context of the transformation of consciousness to higher and higher levels. Creativity is then not seen primarily as tied with productivity in the material sense, but as arising out of spiritual experience, out of purity in thought and action, out of the process of becoming fully liberated. The focus is neither on the creator nor on the product, but on the possibility of overcoming the limitations of one's individuality in order to achieve an increasingly direct, unmediated experience, and expression, of the truth-consciousness from which reality itself arises.

Sri Aurobindo lived his life in accordance with his own premises about the ascent of consciousness from normal human intelligence to higher levels of consciousness. For him consciousness is not only power of awareness, it is also dynamic and creative energy. As one moves from the ordinary, sensory mind-consciousness into the higher realms of consciousness, one becomes more and more illumined about the nature of reality. In this evolution of mind, the initial step is to elevate one's consciousness to a level where it comes in contact with that region of consciousness from which we occasionally receive insight, intuition and holistic understanding. The mind is there no longer limited by sensory experiences and personal biases, but capable of seeing beyond fragmented and divisive appearances. As the mind gets more and more "illumined", it begins to work more through visions than thoughts, more through direct insight, intuition and inspiration than through "constructed knowledge". Ultimately, an illumined mind can get in touch with the spiritual source of inner illumination and creativity, and can then acquire knowledge directly, through intuition. Many of us have occasionally moments of intuitive understanding, something which comes in a flash, the source and timing of which remains a mystery. According to Sri Aurobindo, intuition is a power of consciousness that can be developed systematically. It is when the consciousness of the subject comes into direct contact with the consciousness of the object, that intuition can leap out like a spark or lightening. When human consciousness further ascends and unites with layers of consciousness closer to the spiritual origin of things and beings, then the sparks or flashes of intuition lit up more and more purely till one can have a direct perception (without any mediation) of the truth behind manifest reality. At the highest levels of the evolution of consciousness intuition is not any longer a fleeting presence but stays as the primary source of knowledge. At the highest stage of consciousness, what Sri Aurobindo calls *supermind*, one is in a perpetual state of both cognitive and creative perfection, which at that level are one.

The conception of an evolution of consciousness has been elaborated by Sri Aurobindo most extensively in his main philosophical work, *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo starts there by pointing out that the gradual evolution of which Darwin had found his proofs in nature, is not just a matter of increasing complexity, but a progressive manifestation of ever-higher types of consciousness. Nature began its evolution from the seemingly unconscious state of inorganic matter to the half-conscious plant and animal life; then it gradually developed within certain mammals, the mental consciousness which we now see in humanity. Sri Aurobindo argues in *The Life Divine* that it appears *prime facie* unlikely that our present mental consciousness, with all its limitations, confusions and obvious defects, would be the final end product of this huge, aeonic process of biological evolution. There should be further steps in the evolution of consciousness, steps that ought to bring us closer to the consciousness, in which, according to the Vedic tradition, the entire manifestation has its origin. According to Sri Aurobindo, the next stage of this process should be a cosmic truth-consciousness in which the ego and the division between self and other will disappear. He holds that the evolutionary process will continue at least till there will be embodied individuals living in the perfect harmony of the divine consciousness of *Brahman*.

Sri Aurobindo constantly worked on the yogic technology of observation and transformation for the further evolution of himself and his disciples, which he took as samples or prototypes for the wider, collective evolution he saw taking place, more slowly, in humanity as a whole. For him yoga had the same relation to the inner nature and being of man as the natural sciences have to the forces of external nature like, say, steam or electricity. In another monumental work, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he laid down the detailed processes through which one can successively progress and attain higher and higher states of consciousness. Authenticity and veridicality were the primary concerns of Sri Aurobindo in developing the methodology of this “integral yoga”. This type of yoga can be considered scientific in the sense that it proceeds by experiments and that it bases all its findings on experience. The processes may as such still belong to the “subjective” domain, but within that domain, they are rigorously investigated. As one moves further in inner exploration through yoga, many new capacities for knowledge, action and enjoyment are discovered. Inspiration, intuition and creativity develop as products of these newly emerging capacities

A substantial support for the validity of Sri Aurobindo’s conception of creativity can be found in his own monumental writings, which comprise plays, poems, essays, commentaries and thousands of letters, and particularly in his pristine poetry, which epitomizes in *Savitri*. It is interesting to note in this context that Sri Aurobindo used *Savitri*, in his own words, as a “means of ascension”. He began with a passage on a certain mental level, and then, each time he reached a higher level, he rewrote that passage from the higher level. In fact, for many years, he did not regard *Savitri* as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation, to see how far poetry could be written from the different levels of yogic consciousness, and how far each of these could be made creative. With

each revision Sri Aurobindo tried to lift the level of the poem higher and higher towards what he called ‘overmind poetry’, the mantric, revelatory utterances of that highest of the spiritual mind ranges. *Savitri* was published in its complete version only after he left his physical body.

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