

Aurobindo's *Savitri* : An Odyssey of Spirit

Bhavesh Chandra Pandey

Shall worms inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?

So shall thou feed on death, that feeds on man,
And death once dead, there is no more dying then.

(Shakespeare, sonnet-146)

The lines quoted from Shakespeare pose a question and make a proposition. The poet wants to ask whether human existence culminates in death or the human soul leaves the body to the inheritors, the worms. The proposition is to conquer death and to achieve eternality. Sri Aurobindo's mammoth spiritual epic *Savitri* tries to answer this question and to show the implementation of this proposition by using the legend of Savitri as narrated in the 'Van Parva' of *the Mahabharata*. Aurobindo proposes the theory of spiritual evolution, the dawn of divine life and the victory of man over death. He makes Savitri the symbol of spiritual evolution and invincibility of human spirit. She does not remain merely a symbol of conjugal fidelity, she becomes the symbol of a supramental being. She represents the mother's spiritual adventure in working for the evolution of a new step in consciousness beyond the mind. She symbolises the transcendence of man as a consummation of terrestrial evolution and the emergence of an immortal, supramental, gnostic race on the earth. Savitri's struggle against death is not a personal endeavour but a symbol of the course of human endeavours.

Aurobindo believed in the inevitability of the advent of a supramental being on the earth. He believed that the present rational shape of man was not his consummate form. In his book *The Human Cycle* he observes, "Finally, if our analysis and forecast are correct, the human evolution must move through a subjective towards a supramental or spiritual age in which he will develop progressively a greater spiritual, supra-intellectual and intuitive, perhaps in the end a more than intuitive, a gnostic consciousness". (Aurobindo 173)

According to Aurobindo human destiny is to evolve from matter to spirit and from infra-rational to supra-rational being. He believed that man was bound to achieve divinity. This is stated quite forcefully in *Savitri*. The purpose of Savitri's arrival on the earth has been stated quite clearly:

To bring God down to the world on earth
 we came, To change earthly life to life
 divine. (*Savitri* Book XI. Canto I)

Aurobindo firmly believes that man is not merely a ‘death-bound littleness’ and human life is a march to a ‘victory never won’. For him man is a transitional being. He is not the final form. Like Bertrand Russell he seems to believe that the present form of man cannot be a worthy climax of the enormous prelude of the omnipotent God. He does not seem to be satisfied with the present state of the human evolution and sees a new form in the waiting. According to him the step from man to superman is the most approaching achievement of earth’s evolution. It is inevitable because it is at once the intention of the inner spirit and the logic of nature’s process. He also believes that our present human state cradles the future god.

The Mother also seems to endorse Aurobindo’s theory of spiritual evolution of man. According to her there is an ascending evolution in nature that goes from stone to the plants, from plant to the animal, and from animal to man. Because man is for the moment. At the summit of ascending evolution he considers himself the final stage of the ascension and believes there can be nothing on earth superior to him. In this he is mistaken. In his physical nature he is yet almost wholly an animal, a thinking and speaking animal in his material habits and instincts. Undoubtedly, nature cannot be satisfied with such an imperfect result; he tries to bring out a being who will be to man what man is to the animal, a being who will remain a man in its external form, and yet whose consciousness will rise far above the mental and its slavery to ignorance.

The key concepts in Aurobindo’s synthesis are the concepts of supermind and the concept of spiritual evolution. He talks about involution and evolution. He believes that the consciousness flows from the unconscious to matter and from matter to life, and then to mind. He talks about four levels of mind – higher mind, intuitive mind, over mind, and supermind. The ultimate form of human consciousness will be supramental. Man is merely a transitional being. His destiny is to rise beyond the mind to become superman. Aurobindo seems to cash in on Darwin’s hinted possibility of the rise of some higher being in future. In his book *The Origin of Species* he gives that hint:

Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his exertions to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his being

risen, instead of having been originally placed there may give him hope for higher destiny in near future. (Darwin 309)

The main theme of *Savitri* is to trace the course of the evolution of human consciousness and nature from the lowest sensual and physical plane to the highest plane of spiritual light. Aurobindo's vision of spiritual evolution is well-defined in this epic. According to him, mind is not the last term in evolution. Mind is an instrument of human ego. It has reached the limit of its possibilities. There is an evolutionary crisis which man is faced today and the only way lies in the attainment by man a higher than mental consciousness into which he is destined to evolve. This will lead to the emergence of a new gnostic being into which we will be transformed by super mind. Man will then live in true bliss, light and harmony. Aurobindo underlines the limitations of mind in *Savitri* as he writes:

There are greater destinies, mind cannot
surmise. (Book XI. Canto I)

He also focuses on the limitation of reason in seeing the truth:

For not by reason creation was made
And not by reason can the Truth be seen.
(Book II. Canto X)

Truth can be experienced only by love. To see and save truth by love is the main philosophy of this epic. Aurobindo makes 'Savitri' a symbol of his spiritual vision and cosmic philosophy of its evolution in mind and matter. The greatest value of this epic lies in its symbolic significance, its cosmological and philosophical background and mystical, psychological delineation of evolution and consummation of life. The purpose of evolution, as suggested in this epic, is the total transformation of the individual through his liberation from the domination of ignorance and inconscience. The transcendence of vitalism, hedonism and exclusive materialism as well as avoidance of excessive reliance on reason by a spiritual culture based on radical change of human consciousness alone can lead to a lasting human unity. This requires the transformation of humanity itself.

The essential theme of *Savitri* is rooted in Aurobindo's Integral Yoga which is the foundation rock of his philosophy and his vision of life. The subject matter is essentially psychological as it explores a higher status of consciousness, large, wide and deep, capable of a contact and union

with the supreme divine consciousness. Savitri affirms the emergence of universal man wholly conscious and fully integrated. Its message is an inspiration and an urge for higher evolution of human spirit through yoga. Aurobindo has provided a map for the journey of the human soul to its ultimate goal. *Savitri* is an embodiment of faith and aspiration for the divine. She struggles for preparing for the advent of the superior race promised by evolution. She has faith in the high destiny of man which she expresses as follows:

...All then shall change, a magic order come
Outstepping this mechanical universe.
A mightier race shall inhabit the material
world. (Book XI. Canto I)

It is highly relevant to note the following idea of Lecomte Dunoy who lived during the period of history when *Savitri* was being given final shape. It is significant to note his thought about human destiny which is the main theme of *Savitri*. In his book *Human Destiny* he observes the following:

The time has come for all man of good will and good faith to become conscious of the part they can and must play in life... Everyone shares a responsibility of the future. But this responsibility can be materialised into a constructive effort only if people realise the full meaning of their lives, significance of their endeavour and of their struggles and if they keep their faith in the high destiny of man. (Dunoy 56)

In his author's note to this epic Aurobindo writes that the tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the *Mahabharata* as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But the legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance. 'Savitri' is the divine word, daughter of sun, goddess of the supreme truth who comes down and is born to save, Aswapati, the lord of Horse. Her father is the lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of the spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes, Dyumatsena, lord of Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan is the divine mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial

kingdom of vision, and through that loses its kingdom of glory. This is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.

Aurobindo believed that it was possible for man to advance yet further in the evolutionary race and reach a new dynamic status – that of a supra-mental being. Man can evolve from matter through a developing life soul and mind and super mind towards the divine being. According to him man is yet almost wholly an animal, thinking and speaking animal, but still an animal in its material and habits and instincts. Undoubtedly, nature cannot be satisfied with such an animal result; she endeavours to bring out a being who will be to man what man is to animal, a being who will be man in his external form and yet whose consciousness will rise far above the mental and its slavery to ignorance. Man is still left with an immense vista of self-development and self-exceeding. According to Aurobindo “man at his highest is a half-god and half- risen to the animal nature and is splendidly abnormal in it, but the thing he has started out to be- the whole god- is something so much greater than what he is that it seems to be the animal. This means to him a great and arduous labour of growth beside which his present triumph in the realm of mind or over external nature will appear only as a rough hint and poor beginning”. (Iyengar 177)

In *Savitri*, Aurobindo harps on this idea of the inevitability of spiritual evolution of man and his victory over death. He clearly states that creation has a supra-rational purpose and mind is not the limit of human existence and evolution. Man is destined to become a divine being. Savitri says:

To bring God down to the world we came,
To change the earthly life to life divine.
(Book XI. Canto I)

Savitri very emphatically states that man is unaware of his next stage in the course of evolution. Due to the cloud of ignorance he does not have any idea of his destiny. He will experience the end of death and the death of ignorance. He shall forget mortality and his frail impermanence. This earth will become the camp of god. These greater destinies are at present beyond the comprehension of man because man is still a rational being. The divine design cannot be wholly understood by the mental faculty alone. It requires spiritual awakening. At present mind is all for man. Savitri declares the purpose of her birth as follows:

To lead man's soul towards Truth and God we are born,
 To draw the chequered scheme of mortal life,
 Into some semblance of Immortal's plan,
 To shape it closer to an Image of God,
 A little nearer to the idea divine. (Book XII. Epilogue)

There is also a clear pronouncement of the descent of the life divine on the earth made by Savitri:

This spirit shall take up human play,
 This earthly life become life divine.
 (Book XI. Canto I)

Savitri is undoubtedly, an odyssey of human spirit. It pleads for the evolution of man from mind to supermind, from material plane to spiritual plane and from mortality to immortality. It is a pronouncement of the spiritual evolution of man. In this way, it is a step forward than the idea of biological evolution proposed by Darwin and the idea of superman proposed by other western scholars. The idea is to make man god and to turn the earth into heaven. Thus *Savitri* ceases to remain a legend. She rather becomes the symbol of man's victory over death and his spiritual quest for divinity. She becomes the rescuer of 'Truth' (Satyavan). She also becomes a winner over 'Ignorance' symbolised by the blindness of Dyumatsena. Above all she becomes the symbol of transcendence from the earthly to the divine.

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