

# MOTHER INDIA

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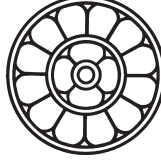
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Lord, Thou hast willed, and I execute,

A new light breaks upon the earth,

A new world is born.

The things that were promised are fulfilled.



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## MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

Vol. LXXIV

No. 10

*“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”*

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## O WILL OF GOD

O Will of God that stirrest and the Void  
Is peopled, men have called thee force, upbuoyed  
Upon whose wings the stars borne round and round  
Need not one hour of rest; light, form and sound  
Are masks of thy eternal movement. We  
See what thou choolest, but 'tis thou we see.

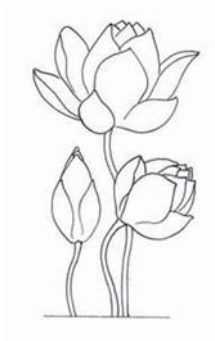
I Morcundeya, whom the worlds release,  
The Seer, — but it is God alone that sees! —  
Soar up above the bonds that hold below  
Man to his littleness, lost in the show  
Perennial which the senses round him build;  
I find them out and am no more beguiled.  
But ere I rise, ere I become the vast  
And luminous Infinite and from the past  
And future utterly released forget  
These beings who themselves their bonds create,  
Once I will speak and what I see declare.  
The rest is God. There's silence everywhere.

My eyes within were opened and I saw.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Collected Poems, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 520)*

[1913. No title in the manuscript. Incomplete. — Editorial Note in CWSA]



## COMMENTS ON SOME REMARKS BY A CRITIC

You have asked me to comment on your friend Mendonça's comments on my poetry and especially on *Savitri*. But, first of all, it is not usual for a poet to criticise the criticisms of his critics though a few perhaps have done so; the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure. As for the contemporary world he might be said rather to throw his poem in its face and leave it to resent this treatment as an unpleasant slap, as a contemporary world treated the early poems of Wordsworth and Keats, or to accept it as an abrupt but gratifying attention, which was ordinarily the good fortune of the great poets in ancient Athens and Rome and of poets like Shakespeare and Tennyson in modern times. Posterity does not always confirm the contemporary verdict, very often it reverses it, forgets or depreciates the writer enthroned by contemporary fame, or raises up to a great height work little appreciated or quite ignored in its own time. The only safety for the poet is to go his own way careless of the blows and caresses of the critics; it is not his business to answer them. Then you ask me to right the wrong turn your friend's critical mind has taken; but how is it to be determined what is the right and what is the wrong turn, since a critical judgment depends usually on a personal reaction determined by the critic's temperament or the aesthetic trend in him or by values, rules or canons which are settled for his intellect and agree with the viewpoint from which his mind receives whatever comes to him for judgment; it is that which is right for him though it may seem wrong to a different temperament, aesthetic intellectuality or mental viewpoint. Your friend's judgments, according to his own account of them, seem to be determined by a sensitive temperament finely balanced in its own poise but limited in its appreciations, clear and open to some kinds of poetic creation, reserved towards others, against yet others closed and cold or excessively depreciative. This sufficiently explains his very different reactions to the two poems, *Descent* and *Flame-Wind*, which he unreservedly admires and to *Savitri*. However, since you have asked me, I will answer, as between ourselves, in some detail and put forward my own comments on his comments and my own judgments on his judgments. It may be rather long; for if such things are done, they may as well be clearly and thoroughly done. I may also have something to say about the nature and intention of my poem and the technique necessitated by the novelty of the intention and nature.

Let me deal first with some of the details he stresses so as to get them out of the way. His detailed intellectual reasons for his judgments seem to me to be often arbitrary and fastidious, sometimes based on a misunderstanding and therefore invalid or else valid perhaps in other fields but here inapplicable. Take, for instance, his attack upon my use of the prepositional phrase. Here, it seems to me, he has fallen



victim to a grammatical obsession and lumped together under the head of the prepositional twist a number of different turns some of which do not belong to that category at all. In the line,

Lone on my summits of calm I have brooded with voices around me,

there is no such twist; for I did not mean at all “on my calm summits”, but intended straightforwardly to convey the natural, simple meaning of the word. If I write “the fields of beauty” or “walking on the paths of truth”, I do not expect to be supposed to mean “in beautiful fields” or “in truthful paths”; it is the same with “summits of calm”, I mean “summits of calm” and nothing else; it is a phrase like “He rose to high peaks of vision” or “He took his station on the highest summits of knowledge”. The calm is the calm of the highest spiritual consciousness to which the soul has ascended, making those summits its own and looking down from their highest heights on all below: in spiritual experience, in the occult vision or feeling that accompanies it, this calm is not felt as an abstract quality or a mental condition but as something concrete and massive, a self-existent reality to which one reaches, so that the soul standing on its peak is rather a tangible fact of experience than a poetical image. Then there is the phrase “A face of rapturous calm”: he seems to think it is a mere trick of language, a substitution of a prepositional phrase for an epithet, as if I had intended to say “a rapturously calm face” and I said instead “a face of rapturous calm” in order to get an illegitimate and meaningless rhetorical effect. I meant nothing of the kind, nothing so tame and poor and scanty in sense: I meant a face which was an expression or rather a living image of the rapturous calm of the supreme and infinite consciousness, — it is indeed so that it can well be “Infinity’s centre”. The face of the liberated Buddha as presented to us by Indian art is such an expression or image of the calm of Nirvana and could, I think, be quite legitimately described as a face of Nirvanic calm, and that would be an apt and live phrase and not an ugly artifice or twist of rhetoric. It should be remembered that the calm of Nirvana or the calm of the supreme Consciousness is to spiritual experience something self-existent, impersonal and eternal and not dependent on the person — or the face — which manifests it. In these two passages I take then the liberty to regard Mendonça’s criticism as erroneous at its base and therefore invalid and inadmissible.

Then there are the lines from the *Songs of the Sea*:

The rains of deluge flee, a storm-tossed shade,  
Over thy breast of gloom.

“Thy breast of gloom” is not used here as a mere rhetorical and meaningless variation of “thy gloomy breast”; it might have been more easily taken as that if it had been a human breast, though even then, it could have been entirely defensible in a fitting context; but it is the breast of the sea, an image for a vast expanse supporting and

reflecting or subject to the moods or movements of the air and the sky. It is intended, in describing the passage of the rains of deluge over the breast of the sea, to present a picture of a storm-tossed shade crossing a vast gloom: it is the gloom that has to be stressed and made the predominant idea and the breast or expanse is only its support and not the main thing: this could not have been suggested by merely writing “thy gloomy breast”. A prepositional phrase need not be merely an artificial twist replacing an adjective; for instance, “a world of gloom and terror” means something more than “a gloomy and terrible world”, it brings forward the gloom and terror as the very nature and constitution, the whole content of the world and not merely an attribute. So also if one wrote “Him too wilt thou throw to thy sword of sharpness” or “cast into thy pits of horror”, would it merely mean “thy sharp sword” and “thy horrible pits”? and would not the sharpness and the horror rather indicate or represent formidable powers of which the sword is the instrument and the pits the habitation or lair? That would be rhetoric but it would be a rhetoric not meaningless but having in it meaning and power. Rhetoric is a word with which we can batter something we do not like; but rhetoric of one kind or another has been always a great part of the world’s best literature; Demosthenes, Cicero, Bossuet and Burke are rhetoricians, but their work ranks with the greatest prose styles that have been left to us. In poetry the accusation of rhetoric might be brought against such lines as Keats’

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down.

To conclude, there is the “swords of sheen” in the translation of *Bande Mataram*. That might be more open to the critic’s stricture, for the expression can be used and perhaps has been used in verse as merely equivalent to “shining swords”; but for anyone with an alert imagination it can mean in certain contexts something more than that, swords that emit brilliance and seem to be made of light. Mendonça says that to use this turn in any other than an adjectival sense is unidiomatic, but he admits that there need be no objection provided that it creates a sense of beauty, but he finds no beauty in any of these passages. But the beauty can be perceived only if the other sense is seen, and even then we come back to the question of personal reaction; you and other readers may feel beauty where he finds none. I do not myself share his sensitive abhorrence of this prepositional phrase; it may be of course because there are coarser rhetorical threads in my literary taste. I would not, for instance, shrink from a sentence like this in a sort of free verse, “Where is thy wall of safety? Where is thy arm of strength? Whither has fled thy vanished face of glory?” Rhetoric of course, but it has in it an element which can be attractive, and it seems to me to bring in a more vivid note and mean more than “thy strong arm” or “thy glorious face” or than “the strength of thy arm” and “the glory of thy face”.

I come next to the critic’s trenchant attack on that passage in my symbolic

vision of Night and Dawn in which there is recorded the conscious adoration of Nature when it feels the passage of the omniscient Goddess of eternal Light. Trenchant, but with what seems to me a false edge; or else if it is a sword of Damascus that would cleave the strongest material mass of iron, he is using it to cut through subtle air, the air closes behind his passage and remains unsevered. He finds here only poor and false poetry, unoriginal in imagery and void of true wording and true vision, but that is again a matter of personal reaction and everyone has a right to his own, you to yours as he to his. I was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and that may be because I could not express myself with any power; but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel and see what I felt and saw. I can only answer to the intellectual reasonings and judgments which turned up in him when he tried to find the causes of his reaction. These seem to me to be either fastidious and unsound or founded on a mistake of comprehension and therefore invalid or else inapplicable to this kind of poetry. His main charge is that there is a violent and altogether illegitimate transference of epithet in the expression “the wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind”. A transference of epithet is not necessarily illegitimate, especially if it expresses something that is true or necessary to convey a sound feeling and vision of things: for instance, if one writes in an Ovidian account of the *dénouement* of a lovers’ quarrel

In spite of a reluctant sullen heart  
My willing feet were driven to thy door,

it might be said that it was something in the mind that was willing and the ascription of an emotion or state of mind to the feet is an illegitimate transfer of epithet; but the lines express a conflict of the members, the mind reluctant, the body obeying the force of the desire that moves it and the use of the epithet is therefore perfectly true and legitimate. But here no such defence is necessary because there is no transfer of epithets. The critic thinks that I imagined the wind as having a winged body and then took away the wings from its shoulders and clapped them on to its voice or hymn which could have no body. But I did nothing of the kind; I am not bound to give wings to the wind. In an occult vision the breath, sound, movement by which we physically know of a wind is not its real being but only the physical manifestation of the wind-god or the spirit of the air, as in the Veda the sacrificial fire is only a physical birth, temporary body or manifestation of the god of Fire, Agni. The gods of the Air and other godheads in the Indian tradition have no wings, the Maruts or storm-gods ride through the skies in their galloping chariots with their flashing golden lances, the beings of the middle world in the Ajanta frescoes are seen moving through the air not with wings but with a gliding natural motion proper to ethereal bodies. The epithet “wide-winged” then does not belong to the wind and is not

transferred from it, but is proper to the voice of the wind which takes the form of a conscious hymn of aspiration and rises ascending from the bosom of the great priest, as might a great-winged bird released into the sky and sinks and rises again, aspires and fails and aspires again on the “altar hills”. One can surely speak of a voice or a chant of aspiration rising on wide wings and I do not see how this can be taxed as a false or unpoetic image. Then the critic objects to the expression “altar hills” on the ground that this is superfluous as the imagination of the reader can very well supply this detail for itself from what has already been said: I do not think this is correct, a very alert reader might do so but most would not even think of it, and yet the detail is an essential and central feature of the thing seen and to omit it would be to leave a gap in the middle of the picture by dropping out something which is indispensable to its totality. Finally he finds that the line about the high boughs praying in the revealing sky does not help but attenuates, instead of more strongly etching the picture. I do not know why, unless he has failed to feel and to see. The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees. The wind is the great priest of this sacrifice of worship, his voice rises in a conscious hymn of aspiration, the hills offer themselves with the feeling of being an altar of the worship, the trees lift their high boughs towards heaven as the worshippers, silent figures of prayer, and the light of the sky into which their boughs rise reveals the Beyond towards which all aspires. At any rate this “picture” or rather this part of the vision is a complete rendering of what I saw in the light of the inspiration and the experience that came to me. I might indeed have elaborated more details, etched out at more length but that would have been superfluous and unnecessary; or I might have indulged in an ampler description but this would have been appropriate only if this part of the vision had been the whole. This last line is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry not only in the dawn but at other times and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the experience or in the words that express it. If the critic or any reader does not feel or see what I so often felt and saw, that may be my fault, but that is not sure, for you and others have felt very differently about it; it may be a mental or a temperamental failure on their part and it will be then my or perhaps even the critic’s or reader’s misfortune.

I may refer here to Mendonça’s disparaging characterisation of my epithets. He finds that their only merit is that they are good prose epithets, not otiose but right words in their right place and exactly descriptive but only descriptive without any suggestion of any poetic beauty or any kind of magic. Are there then prose epithets and poetic epithets and is the poet debarred from exact description using always the right word in the right place, the *mot juste*? I am under the impression that all poets, even the greatest, use as the bulk of their adjectives words that have that merit, and the difference from prose is that a certain turn in the use of them accompanied by

the power of the rhythm in which they are carried lifts all to the poetic level. Take one of the passages I have quoted from Milton,

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues . . .

or

Blind Thamyris, and blind Maeonides,  
And Tiresias, and Phineus, prophets old,

here the epithets are the same that would be used in prose, the right word in the right place, exact in statement, but all lies in the turn which makes them convey a powerful and moving emotion and the rhythm which gives them an uplifting passion and penetrating insistence. In more ordinary passages such as the beginning of *Paradise Lost* the epithets “forbidden tree” and “mortal taste” are of the same kind, but can we say that they are merely prose epithets, good descriptive adjectives and have no other merit? If you take the lines about Nature’s worship in *Savitri*, I do not see how they can be described as prose epithets; at any rate I would never have dreamt of using in prose unless I wanted to write poetic prose such expressions as “wide-winged hymn” or “a great priestly wind” or “altar hills” or “revealing sky”; these epithets belong in their very nature to poetry alone whatever may be their other value or want of value. He says they are obvious and could have been supplied by any imaginative reader; well, so are Milton’s in the passages quoted and perhaps there too the very remarkable imaginative reader whom Mendonça repeatedly brings in might have supplied them by his own unfailing poetic verve. Whether they or any of them prick a hidden beauty out of the picture is for each reader to feel or judge for himself; but perhaps he is thinking of such things as Keats’ “magic casements” and “foam of perilous seas” and “fairy lands forlorn”, but I do not think even in Keats the bulk of the epithets are of that unusual character.

I have said that his objections are sometimes inapplicable. I mean by this that they might have some force with regard to another kind of poetry but not to a poem like *Savitri*. He says, to start with, that if I had had a stronger imagination, I would have written a very different poem and a much shorter one. Obviously, and to say it is a truism; if I had had a different kind of imagination, whether stronger or weaker, I would have written a different poem and perhaps one more to his taste; but it would not have been *Savitri*. It would not have fulfilled the intention or had anything of the character, meaning, world-vision, description and expression of spiritual experience which was my object in writing this poem. Its length is an indispensable condition for carrying out its purpose and everywhere there is this length, critics may say an “unconscionable length” — I am quoting the *Times*’ reviewer’s description in his otherwise eulogistic criticism of *The Life Divine* — in every part,

in every passage, in almost every canto or section of a canto. It has been planned not on the scale of *Lycidas* or *Comus* or some brief narrative poem, but of the longer epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor *Ramayana*; it aims not at a minimum but at an exhaustive exposition of its world-vision or world-interpretation. One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness: that is the method I have chosen in *Savitri*. But Mendonça has understood nothing of the significance or intention of the passages he is criticising, least of all, their inner sense — that is not his fault, but is partly due to the lack of the context and partly to his lack of equipment and you have there an unfair advantage over him which enables you to understand and see the poetic intention. He sees only an outward form of words and some kind of surface sense which is to him vacant and merely ornamental or rhetorical or something pretentious without any true meaning or true vision in it: inevitably he finds the whole thing false and empty, unjustifiably ambitious and pompous without deep meaning or, as he expresses it, pseudo and phoney. His objection of *longueur* would be perfectly just if the description of the night and the dawn had been simply of physical night and physical dawn; but here the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the “day” of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening canto is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement. So understood there is nothing here otiose or unnecessary; all is needed to bring out by suggestion some aspect of the thing symbolised and so start adequately the working out of the significance of the whole poem. It will of course seem much too long to a reader who does not understand what is written or, understanding, takes no interest in the subject; but that is unavoidable.

To illustrate the inapplicability of some of his judgments one might take his objection to repetition of the cognates “sombre Vast”, “unsounded Void”, “opaque Inane”, “vacant Vasts” and his clinching condemnation of the inartistic inelegance of their occurrence in the same place at the end of the line. I take leave to doubt his statement that in each place his alert imaginative reader, still less any reader without that equipment, could have supplied these descriptions and epithets from the context, but let that pass. What was important for me was to keep constantly before the view of the reader, not imaginative but attentive to seize the whole truth of the vision in

its totality, the ever-present sense of the Inconscience in which everything is occurring. It is the frame as well as the background without which all the details would either fall apart or stand out only as separate incidents. That necessity lasts until there is the full outburst of the dawn and then it disappears; each phrase gives a feature of this Inconscience proper to its place and context. It is the entrance of the “lonely splendour” into an otherwise inconscient obstructing and unreceptive world that has to be brought out and that cannot be done without the image of the “opaque Inane” of the Inconscience which is the scene and cause of the resistance. There is the same necessity for reminding the reader that the “tread” of the Divine Mother was an intrusion on the vacancy of the Inconscience and the herald of deliverance from it. The same reasoning applies to the other passages. As for the occurrence of the phrases in the same place each in its line, that is a rhythmic turn helpful, one might say necessary to bring out the intended effect, to emphasise this reiteration and make it not only understood but felt. It is not the result of negligence or an awkward and inartistic clumsiness, it is intentional and part of the technique. The structure of the pentameter blank verse in *Savitri* is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambement or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; there must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere, — there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence — whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. It is this use that is served here by the reiteration at the end of the line.

I have not anywhere in *Savitri* written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. When the expression has been found, I have to judge, not by the intellect or by any set poetical rule, but by an intuitive feeling, whether it is entirely the right expression and, if it is not, I have to change and go on changing until I have received the absolutely right inspiration and the right transcription of it and must never be satisfied with any à

*peu près* or imperfect transcription even if that makes good poetry of one kind or another. This is what I have tried to do. The critic or reader will judge for himself whether I have succeeded or failed; but if he has seen nothing and understood nothing, it does not follow that his adverse judgment is sure to be the right and true one, there is at least a chance that he may so conclude, not because there is nothing to see and nothing to understand, only poor pseudo-stuff or a rhetorical emptiness but because he was not equipped for the vision or the understanding. *Savitri* is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch; as I have pointed out, there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry. Moreover if it is really new in kind, it may employ a new technique, not perhaps absolutely new, but new in some or many of its elements: in that case old rules and canons and standards may be quite inapplicable; evidently, you cannot justly apply to the poetry of Whitman the principles of technique which are proper to the old metrical verse or the established laws of the old traditional poetry; so too when we deal with a modernist poet. We have to see whether what is essential to poetry is there and how far the new technique justifies itself by new beauty and perfection, and a certain freedom of mind from old conventions is necessary if our judgment is to be valid or rightly objective.

Your friend may say as he has said in another connection that all this is only special pleading or an apology rather than an apologia. But in that other connection he was mistaken and would be so here too, for in neither case have I the feeling that I had been guilty of some offence or some shortcoming and therefore there could be no place for an apology or special pleading such as is used to defend or cover up what one knows to be a false case. I have enough respect for truth not to try to cover up an imperfection; my endeavour would be rather to cure the recognised imperfection; if I have not poetical genius, at least I can claim a sufficient, if not an infinite capacity for painstaking: that I have sufficiently shown by my long labour on *Savitri*. Or rather, since it was not labour in the ordinary sense, not a labour of painstaking construction, I may describe it as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right. Mendonça was evidently under a misconception with regard to my defence of the wealth-burdened line; he says that the principle enounced by me was sound but what mattered was my application of the principle, and he seems to think that I was trying to justify my application although I knew it to be bad and false by citing passages from Milton and Shakespeare as if my use of the wealth-burdened style were as good as theirs. But I was not defending the excellence of my practice, for the poetical value of my lines was not then in question; the question was whether it



did not violate a valid law of a certain chaste economy by the use of too many epithets massed together: against this I was asserting the legitimacy of a massed richness, I was defending only its principle, not my use of the principle. Even a very small poet can cite in aid of his practice examples from greater poets without implying that his poetry is on a par with theirs. But he further asserts that I showed small judgment in choosing my citations, because Milton's passage<sup>1</sup> is not at all an illustration of the principle and Shakespeare's<sup>2</sup> is inferior in poetic value, lax and rhetorical in its richness and belongs to an early and inferior Shakespearean style. He says that Milton's astounding effect is due only to the sound and not to the words. That does not seem to me quite true: the sound, the rhythmic resonance, the rhythmic significance is undoubtedly the predominant factor; it makes us hear and feel the crash and clamour and clangour of the downfall of the rebel angels: but that is not all, we do not merely hear as if one were listening to the roar of ruin of a collapsing bomb-shattered house, but saw nothing, we have the vision and the full psychological commotion of the "hideous" and flaming ruin of the downfall, and it is the tremendous force of the words that makes us see as well as hear. Mendonça's disparagement of the Shakespearean passage on "sleep" and the line on the sea considered by the greatest critics and not by myself only as ranking amongst the most admired and admirable things in Shakespeare is surprising and it seems to me to illustrate a serious limitation in his poetic perception and temperamental sympathies. Shakespeare's later terse and packed style with its more powerful dramatic effects can surely be admired without disparaging the beauty and opulence of his earlier style; if he had never written in that style, it would have been an unspeakable loss to the sum of the world's aesthetic possessions. The lines I have quoted are neither lax nor merely rhetorical, they have a terseness or at least a compactness of their own, different in character from the lines, let us say, in the scene of Antony's death or other memorable passages written in his great tragic style but none the less at every step packed with pregnant meanings and powerful significances which would not be possible if it were merely a loose rhetoric. Anyone writing such lines would deserve to rank by them alone among the great and even the greatest poets.

*(To be continued)*

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Letters on Poetry and Art, CWSA, Vol. 27, pp. 332-46)*

1. *With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In adamantine chains and penal fire,*
2. *Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast  
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains  
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,*

## THE PURANAS

In the previous article I have written about the Upanishads and shown the method of seizing on their true and complete meaning. Like the Upanishads, the Puranas are authoritative scriptures of the Hindu dharma. Like the 'Sruti' (the audible word), the 'Smriti' (the divine word remembered) is an authoritative scripture though not of the same order. If there is any conflict between the 'Sruti', the direct evidence, on the one hand, and the 'Smriti' on the other, then the authority of the latter is inadmissible. The revelations of the Rishis who were accomplished in Yoga and endowed with spiritual insight, and the Word which the Master of the Universe spoke to their purified intelligence, constitute the 'Sruti'. Ancient knowledge and learning, preserved through countless generations, is known as the 'Smriti'. This kind of knowledge in transmission might have suffered change, even deformation through different tongues, various minds and, under altered conditions, might have been modified by new ideas or assumed new forms suitable to the needs of the times. Therefore, a 'Smriti' cannot be considered to be as infallible as a 'Sruti'. The 'Smriti' is not a superhuman creation but the product of the limited and variable ideas and intelligence of man.

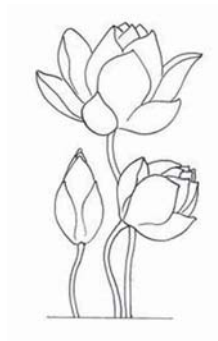
The Puranas are the most important among the 'Smritis'. The spiritual knowledge contained in the Upanishads has, in the Puranas, been transformed into fiction and metaphors; we find in them much useful information on Indian history, the gradual growth and expression of the Hindu dharma, the condition of the society in ancient times, social customs, religious ceremonies, Yogic methods of discipline and ways of thinking. Apart from this, the composers of the Puranas are either accomplished yogis or seekers of Truth. The Knowledge and spiritual realisations obtained by their sadhana remain recorded in the respective Puranas. The Vedas and the Upanishads are the fundamental scriptures of the Hindu religion. The Puranas are commentaries on these scriptures. A commentary can never be equal to the original. My commentary may be different from yours but none of us have the right to alter or ignore the fundamental scripture. That which is at variance with the Vedas and the Upanishads cannot be accepted as a limb of the Hindu dharma; but a new idea even if it differs from the Puranas is welcome. The value of a commentary depends on the intellectual capacity, knowledge and erudition of the commentator. For example, if the Purana written by Vyasa were still existing, then it would be honoured as a 'Sruti'. In the absence of this Purana and the one written by Lomaharshana, the eighteen Puranas that still exist cannot all be given the same place of honour; among them, the Vishnu and the Bhagwata Purana composed by accomplished yogis are definitely more precious and we must recognise that the Markandeya Purana written by a sage devoted to spiritual pursuits is more profound in Knowledge than either

the Shiva or the Agni Purana.

The Purana of Vyasa being the source-book of the later Puranas, there must be, even in the poorest of them, much information unfolding the principles of the Hindu dharma and since even the poorest of the Puranas is written by a seeker of Knowledge or a devotee practising Yoga, the thought and knowledge obtained by his personal effort is worthy of respect. The division created by the English educated scholars who separate the Vedas and the Upanishads from the Puranas and thus make a distinction between the Vedic dharma and the Puranic dharma is a mistake born of ignorance. The Puranas are accepted as an authority on the Hindu dharma because they explain the knowledge contained in the Veda and the Upanishads to the average man, comment upon it, discuss it at great length and endeavour to apply it to the commonplace details of life. They too are mistaken who neglect the Vedas and the Upanishads and consider the Puranas as a distinct and self-sufficient authority in itself. By doing this, they commit the error of omitting the infallible and supernatural origin and of encouraging false knowledge, with the result that the meaning of the Vedas disappears and the true significance of the Puranas is also lost. The Vedas must ever remain the basis for any true understanding of the Puranas.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Bengali Writings, [English translations of some of  
Sri Aurobindo's original writings in Bengali], 1991, pp. 71-73)*



## INTEGRALITY

You have stepped on to the path of integral Yoga. Try to fathom the meaning and the aim of the integral Yoga before you advance. He who has the noble aspiration of attaining the high summit of realisation should know thoroughly these two things; the aim and the path. Of the path I shall speak later on. First it is necessary to draw before your eyes, in bold outline, the complete picture of the aim.

What is the meaning of integrality? Integrality is the image of the Divine being, the dharma of the Divine nature. Man is incomplete, striving after and evolving towards the fullness and moving in the flow of gradual manifestation of the Self. Integrality is his destination; man is only a half-disclosed form of the Divine, that is why he is travelling towards the Divine integrality. In this human bud hides the fullness of the Divine lotus, and it is the endeavour of Nature to bring it into blossom gradually and slowly. In the practice of the Yoga, the Yoga-shakti begins to open it at a great speed, with a lightning rapidity. That which people call full manhood — mental progress, ethical purity, beautiful development of the faculties of mind, strength of character, vital force, physical health — is not the Divine integrality. It is only the fullness of a partial dharma of Nature. The real indivisible integrality can only come from the integrality of the Self, from the integrality of the Supramental Force beyond the mind, because the indivisible Self is the real Purusha, and the Purusha in mind, life or body is only a partial outward and debased play of the Supermind. The real integrality can only come when the mind is transformed into the Supermind. By the Supramental Force, the Self has created the universe and regulated it; by the Supramental Force, it raises the part to the Whole. The Self in man is concealed behind the veil of mind. It can be seen when this veil is removed. The power of the Self can feel in the mind the half-revealed, half-hidden, diminished form and play. Only when the Supramental Force unfolds itself, can the Self fully emerge.

SRI AUROBINDO

*(Bengali Writings, [English translations of some of  
Sri Aurobindo's original writings in Bengali], 1991, pp. 182-83)*

## ‘I BOW BOWN BEFORE THY GLORY . . .’

**July 16, 1914**

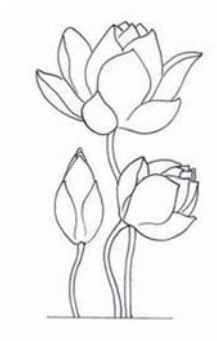
Salutation of my silent and humble adoration. . . .

I bow down before Thy glory, for it dominates me with all its splendour. . . .

Oh, let me dissolve at Thy feet, melt into Thee!

THE MOTHER

*(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 1, p. 203)*



## A CONVERSATION OF 4 JANUARY 1956

*“If we are to attempt an integral Yoga, it will be as well to start with an idea of the Divine that is itself integral. There should be an aspiration in the heart wide enough for a realisation without any narrow limits. Not only should we avoid a sectarian religious outlook, but also all one-sided philosophical conceptions which try to shut up the Ineffable in a restricting mental formula.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*Sweet Mother, what does Sri Aurobindo mean by an integral idea of the Divine?*

Everyone forms an idea of the Divine for himself according to his personal taste, his possibilities of understanding, his mental preferences, and even his desires. People form the idea of the Divine they want, the Divine they wish to meet, and so naturally they limit their realisation considerably.

But if we can come to understand that the Divine is all that we can conceive of, and infinitely more, we begin to progress towards integrality. Integrality is an extremely difficult thing for the human consciousness, which begins to be conscious only by limiting itself. But still, with a little effort, for those who know how to play with mental activities, it is possible to widen oneself sufficiently to approach something integral.

You form an idea of the Divine which suits your own nature and your own conception, don't you? So if you want to get out of yourself a little and attempt to do a truly integral yoga, you must try to understand that the Divine is not only what you think or feel Him to be, but also what others think and feel Him to be — and in addition something that nobody can think and feel.

So, if you understand this, you have taken the first step on the path of integrality.

Instinctively, and without even being aware of it, people persist in wanting the Divine to suit their own conceptions. For, without thinking, quite spontaneously, they tell you, “Oh, this is divine, this is not divine!” What do they know about it? And then there are those who have not yet set foot on the path, who come here and see things or people, and tell you, “This Ashram has nothing to do with the Divine, it is not at all divine.” But if you ask them, “What is divine?”, they would be hard put to it to answer; they know nothing about it. And the less one knows, the more one judges; that's an absolute fact. The more one knows, the less can one pronounce judgments on things.

1. *The Synthesis of Yoga*, CWSA, Vol. 23, p. 82.

And there comes a time when all one can do is observe, but to judge is impossible. One can see things, see them as they are, in their relations and in their place, with an awareness of the difference between the place they now are in and the one they ought to occupy — for this is the great disorder in the world — but one does not judge. One simply observes.

And there is a moment when one would be unable to say, “This is divine and that is not divine”, for a time comes when one sees the whole universe in so total and comprehensive a way that, to tell the truth, it is impossible to take away anything from it without disturbing everything.

And one or two steps further yet, and one knows with certainty that what shocks us as a contradiction of the Divine is quite simply something not in its proper place. Each thing must be exactly in its place and, besides, it must be supple enough, plastic enough, to admit into a harmonious progressive organisation all the new elements which are constantly added to the manifested universe. The universe is in a perpetual movement of inner reorganisation, and at the same time it is growing larger, so to say, becoming more and more complex, more and more complete, more and more integral — and this, indefinitely. And as gradually new elements manifest, the whole organisation has to be remade on a new basis, so that there is not a second when *everything* is not in perpetual movement. But if the movement is in accordance with the divine order, it is harmonious, so perfectly harmonious that it is hardly perceptible, it is difficult to see it.

Now, if one comes down again from this consciousness to a more external consciousness, naturally one begins to feel, very precisely, the things which help one to reach the true consciousness and those which bar the way or pull one back or even struggle against the progress. And so the outlook changes and one has to say, “This is divine, or this helps me toward the Divine; and that is against the Divine, it is the enemy of the Divine.”

But this is a pragmatic point of view, for action, for the movement in material life — because one has not yet reached the consciousness which goes beyond all that; because one has not attained that inner perfection, having which one has no longer to struggle, for one has gone beyond the zone of struggle or the time of struggle or the utility of struggle. But before that, before attaining that state in one’s consciousness and action, necessarily there is struggle, and if there is struggle there is choice and for the choice discernment is necessary.

And the surest means to discernment is a conscious and willing surrender, as complete as possible, to the divine Will and Guidance. Then there is no risk of making a mistake and of taking false lights for true ones.

*Sweet Mother, Sri Aurobindo says here: "His is the Love and the Bliss of the infinite divine Lover who is drawing all things by their own path towards his happy oneness."*<sup>2</sup>

*All things are attracted by the Divine. Are the hostile forces also attracted by the Divine?*

That depends upon how you look at it, you cannot say that. For there is a potential attraction, but so veiled and so secret that you can't even tell that it exists.

In Matter which has an appearance of inertia — it is only an appearance, but still — the attraction for the Divine is a possibility rather than a fact; that is, it is something which will develop, but which does not yet exist perceptibly.

It may be said that all consciousness, whether it knows it or not — even if it doesn't know it — gravitates towards the Divine. But consciousness must already be there in order to be able to affirm this.

And even among men, who at the moment are the most conscious beings on earth, there is an immense majority who are potentially drawn towards the Divine, but who know nothing about it; and there are even some who deliberately refuse this attraction. Perhaps, in their refusal, behind it, something is preparing but neither willingly nor knowingly.

*(Speaking to the child)* And so, what was the last part of your question? . . . First you assume something which is not correct, and on top of that you ask a question which naturally doesn't make sense, for the assumption is incorrect.

*I wanted to say . . .*

Yes, yes, I know quite well what you want to say.

In fact, finally, everything will be attracted by the Divine. Only, there are direct roads and there are labyrinthine paths where one seems to be going further away for a very long time before drawing close. And there are beings who have chosen the labyrinthine paths and who intend to remain there as long as they can. So, apparently, they are beings who fight against the Divine.

Although those who are of a higher order know quite well that this is an absolutely vain and useless struggle, without issue, they still take pleasure in it. Even if this must lead them to their destruction, they have decided to do it.

There are human beings also who indulge in vice — one vice or another, like drinking or drug-injections — and who know very well that this is leading them to destruction and death. But they choose to do it, knowingly.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 83.



*They have no control over themselves.*

There is always a moment when everyone has self-control. And if one had not said “Yes” once, if one had not taken the decision, one would not have done it.

There is not one human being who has not the energy and capacity to resist something imposed upon him — if he is left free to do so. People tell you, “I can’t do otherwise” — it is because in the depths of their heart they *do not want* to do otherwise; they have accepted to be the slaves of their vice. There is a moment when one accepts.

And I would go even further; I say, there is a moment when one accepts to be ill. If one did not accept to be ill, one would not be ill. Only, people are so unconscious of themselves and their inner movements that they are not even aware of what they do.

But it all depends on the way one looks at things. From a certain point of view there is nothing that is totally useless in the world. Only, things which were tolerable and admissible at a certain time are no longer so at another. And when they become no longer admissible, one begins to say they are bad, because then a will awakes to get rid of them. But in the history of the universe — one can even say in the history of the earth, to limit the problem to our little planet — I think everything that exists had its necessity and importance at a given moment. And it is as one advances that these things are rejected or replaced by others which belong to the future instead of the past. So, of things which have no further purpose one says, “They are bad”, because one tries to find within oneself a lever to push them out, to break with the habit. But perhaps at one time they were not bad, and other things were.

There are ways of being, ways of feeling, ways of doing, which you tolerate in yourself for quite a long time, and which don’t trouble you, don’t seem to you at all useless or bad or to be got rid of. And then all of a sudden one day, you don’t know why or what has happened, but the outlook changes, you look at things and say, “But what is this? This is in me! Am I carrying this in myself? But it is intolerable, I don’t want it any longer.” And suddenly it seems bad to you because it is time to reject these things, for they do not harmonise with the attitude you have taken or the progress you have made in your march forward in the world. These things should be elsewhere, they are no longer in their place, therefore you find them bad. But perhaps the same things which seem bad to you would be excellent for other people who are at a lower level.

There is always someone more dull, more unconscious, more ignorant or worse than oneself. So the state which is intolerable for you, which you can no longer keep, which must disappear, would perhaps be very luminous for those who are on the lower rungs. By what right are you going to say, “This is bad”? All you can say is, “I don’t want it any longer. I don’t want it, it’s not in keeping with my present way of being, I want to go where these things have no place any more; they are no

longer in their place, let them go and find their place elsewhere!” But one cannot judge. It is impossible to say, “This is bad.” At the most one can say, “This is bad for me, it is no longer in its place with me, it must go.” That’s all. And one drops it on the way.

And this makes the progress much, much easier, to think and feel like that instead of sitting down in despair and lamenting about things and what you are like, and the misery you endure and the defects you have and the impossibilities which beset you and all that. You say, “No, no, those things are no longer in their place here, let them go elsewhere, where they will be in their place and welcome. As for me, I am going forward, I am going to climb a step, I shall go towards a purer and better and more complete light; and so all these things which like the darkness must go away.” But that’s all.

Each time one sees in oneself something which seems really nasty, well, that proves that one has made progress. So, instead of lamenting and falling into despair, one should be happy; one says, “Ah! that’s good. I am getting on.”

*Mother, what does “a powerful Yoga” mean?*

A powerful yoga? You don’t know what “powerful” means?

*But here Sri Aurobindo says, “This intellectual preparation can indeed be the first stage in a powerful Yoga, but it is not indispensable . . .”<sup>3</sup>*

Yes. A powerful yoga is a very complete yoga, which contains many things, takes in many elements. So this element of intellectual knowledge makes the yoga more powerful.

*Is it the same as the integral yoga?*

Not quite. An integral yoga is one which comprises all the parts of the being and all the activities of the being. But the activities of one being are not as powerful as the activities of another; and the integrality of one being is not as total as the integrality of another. You don’t understand?

If all your being, as it is, participates in the yoga, it becomes for you an integral yoga. But your participation may be very poor and mediocre compared with that of someone else, and the number of elements of consciousness which you contain may be very small compared with the elements of consciousness contained in another person. And yet your yoga is integral for you, that is, it is done in all the parts and all the activities of your being.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

You know, I had a cat which was doing yoga. Well, the yoga of the cat could not be as powerful as the yoga of man, and yet it was *as* integral, it was quite complete; even its body took part in its yoga. But its way of doing it, naturally, was not human.

*Mother, what does “the moving idea-force” mean?*

It is an idea which gives you will, enthusiasm and a power of realisation. A “moving” thing is that which tends towards realisation and gives you the impetus towards realisation.

*Here Sri Aurobindo writes, “But still the greater and wider the moving idea-force behind the consecration, the better for the seeker . . .”<sup>4</sup>*

Have you never felt the difference between a small idea and a great idea, a narrow idea and a wide one?

*But, earlier, Sri Aurobindo has said that if this is accompanied by a self-giving, that is enough. Later he says that if it is wide, it is better.*

Listen, I am going to give you quite a concrete and material example. You make an offering of your purse; it contains three rupees. Your neighbour offers his purse which contains fifty. Well, the gift of fifty rupees is larger than the gift of three. That’s all.

But, from the moral point of view, if you have given *all* that you have, you have done the utmost you could have done, nothing more can be asked of you; you understand, from the moral point of view, from the pure spiritual point of view, not from the point of view of realisation. From the purely spiritual point of view the gift of your three rupees has exactly the same value as the gift of fifty. And even he who gave fifty rupees, if he has kept back one, his gift is less integral and pure than yours of only three. So, it is not on that plane that the thing must be seen. But from the point of view of the material realisation it is undeniable that fifty is more than three, for all those who know mathematics!

(Silence)

*Mother, the message you have given this year, will you explain it a little?<sup>5</sup>*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

5. The New Year Message of 1956: “The greatest victories are the least noisy. The manifestation of a new world is not proclaimed by beat of drum.”

The message I have given this year, what's your objection to it?

*Does it imply that there will be great victories this year?*

This means perhaps something very simple: that it is better to let things happen without speaking about them. If you ask me, I think this is what it means: that it is much better to say nothing about what will happen before it happens. Otherwise it becomes what I call "beat of drum", what could be called publicity.

It is like those who ask, "What will it be like?" We shall see! Wait, at least we should get a surprise! . . . And I reply, "I know nothing about it." For I put myself immediately in the consciousness of the world as it is, to which is announced that extraordinary things are going to happen, and which is quite incapable of imagining them — for as I told you once, if one begins to imagine them, it means they are *already* there. Before you can imagine something, it has to exist, otherwise you cannot imagine it.

Yes, in our higher being we can have a very clear, very exact, very luminous perception of what it is. But if one comes down into the material consciousness, one has to say, "Well, I know nothing about it." When it is there, I shall tell you what it's like — and probably I won't even need to tell you, you will be able to see it. I hope you will be among those who are able to see it. For, there again, there are some who won't be able.

And so, what's the good of it? What's the use of going round telling people, "It is there, you know, it is like this"? They will reply, as in that play which was staged here: "But I can see nothing!" Do you remember, it was in *Le Sage*? Don't you remember that in *Le Sage* the messenger says that the Divine is there listening to you, that He is present? And then someone replies, "But I don't see Him!" It is like that.

It is like those people who come to visit the Ashram and say, "But there is no spirituality here!" . . . How could they see it? With what organs?

But still I do hope that when something manifests, you will be able to see it.

Naturally, if all of a sudden there were luminous apparitions or if the outer physical forms changed completely, well then, I think even a dog or a cat or anything whatsoever would notice it. But that will take time, it can't happen right now. It can't happen right now, it is farther off, for a much later time. Many great things will take place before that, and they will be much more important than that, mark my words.

For, indeed, that is only the flower which blossoms. But before it blossoms, the principle of its existence must be there in the root of the plant.

*If there is some manifestation, will it be purely spiritual, that is, will only those who do yoga be able to perceive it, or will there be any consequences in the world of facts?*

My child, why do you put this in the future?

There have already been, for years, extraordinary, fantastic consequences in the world. But to see this, one must have a little knowledge; otherwise one takes them for quite normal and ordinary things — because one doesn't even know how they happen.

So perhaps this will be exactly the same thing; there are likely to be tremendous changes, fantastic actions, and, well, people will say, "But this — naturally, it is like that", because they don't know how it comes about.

An action in the world? — It is constant. It is something which spreads and acts everywhere, gives out everywhere new impulsions, new orientations, new ideas, new acts of will — everywhere. But still, as one does not see how it happens, one thinks it "quite natural", as they say.

It is quite natural, but with another naturalness than that of ordinary physical Nature.

Indeed, it is quite logical to say that one must be conscious of the Spirit to be able to perceive the work of the Spirit. If you are not conscious of the Spirit, how will you be able to see it at work? Because the result of what the Spirit does is necessarily material in the material world; and as it is material, you find it quite natural. What do you know of what Nature does, and what do you know of what the Spirit does? All that Nature does — I am speaking of physical Nature — we know very little about it, almost nothing, since we have to constantly learn things which upset all that we thought we knew before. And so, how to distinguish between what is purely the work of Nature and the work of the Spirit through Nature? One should know how to distinguish the one from the other. And how to distinguish them when one's consciousness is not quite limpid and sure of what the Spirit is? How to recognise It, and how to see Its Work? This seems to me very simple logic.

The world will go on. Things will happen. And perhaps there will be a handful of men who will know how they were done. That's all.

And if today one were suddenly precipitated, without any transition, into the world as it was, let us say, two or three thousand years ago; oh! even less than that perhaps — one or two thousand years ago — it would be such a suffocating contrast that probably very few people would be able to bear it. But as this came about "like that", with the amiable slowness of Nature, with all her fantasies, one finds it quite natural and doesn't even notice it.

It is not an image, it is not just fine words when it is said that if one enters the true consciousness, if one changes one's consciousness, well, the world itself changes for you. And it is not only an appearance or an impression: one sees differently than one does in the ordinary consciousness; relations are different, causes are different, effects are different. And instead of seeing only something which is not transparent — one cannot see what's behind, it is a surface, a crust; it is only this one sees and one can't even see what moves it, what makes it exist — everything is turned inside

out, and it is that which appears artificial and unreal, and almost inexistent. And so, when one sees things in this way, normally, you know, without straining oneself, without having to practise meditation and concentration and make strenuous efforts to see things like this, when it is one's normal, natural vision, then one understands things in a completely different way — naturally, the world is different!

There is a short preliminary passage which is indispensable, and those who have made this little preliminary journey, well, there are all sorts of things, all sorts of speculations and questions which they can no longer ask themselves.

But truly, to come back to our point, what I wanted to say very simply is that one day, at the time I was asked for a message — I give it because I am asked — they ask and tell me, “Oh! we want to print it, couldn't you send it to us?” Then, what do I do? I look at the year that is coming — to be able to speak about it, I must look at it — I look at the coming year, and then, looking at it, I see at the same time all the imaginations of people, all their speculations and all their inventions about what is going to happen in this so-called wonderful year. I look at that, and at the same time I look at what it is — what it already is beforehand, it is already like that somewhere — and immediately I know very clearly that the best thing to do is not to say what it will be like. And as people expect a lot of flourish and proclamations, I said what I said, that's all. Nothing more. That is all I meant to say: “Let us not speak about it, if you please, that is better, that is preferable.” I haven't said anything but this: “It is better not to speak about it, don't make a lot of noise about it, because that doesn't help. Let things happen in accordance with a deeper law, without being bewildered like one who does not understand anything and just looks on.”

And above all, above all, don't come and say, “You know, it will be like this.” Because that is what makes the thing most difficult, I don't say that what has to be will not be, but perhaps there will be many more difficulties if one speaks about it. So it is better to let things happen.

And, after all, if one wants to be very reasonable — very reasonable — one has only to ask oneself, “Well, in ten thousand years, this realisation we are preparing, what will it be? An imperceptible point in the march of time, a preparation, an attempt towards future realisations.” Oh! it is better not to get so excited. Let us do all that we can and keep quiet. That's all.

Now, there are people who need a little whipping, as one whips cream. But they should go to the poets, not come to me. I am not a poet, I am content to act. I would rather act than speak.

THE MOTHER

*(Questions and Answers 1956, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 8, pp. 1-13)*

**“O SILENT LOVE . . .” —  
CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO**

Sri Aurobindo —

I was thinking to stop writing poetry for some time in order to let the inspiration come richer through a medium of hushed intensity. But the following lines got written somehow. Are they any good?

Because You never claim of us a tear,  
    O Love, how often we forget  
    The eyes of countless centuries were wet  
To bring Your Joy so near!

Forgive if I remember not the blaze,  
    Imperishable, infinite,  
    Of far Omnipotence from which You light  
Your lamp of human face!

Make me a worship-vigil everywhere,  
    Slumber and wakefulness one memory  
    That You are God: O let each pore of me  
Become a mouth of prayer!

Sri Aurobindo's comment:

It is very good. The last poems or some of them showed a fatigued inspiration, but here there is full recovery, freshness and perfection.

6 February 1934

\*

Sri Aurobindo —

Just a little after I sent up my poem I found that I had negligently left some obvious flaws in it. So please consider this version instead of the other:

Because You never claim of us a tear,  
    O silent Love, how often we forget  
    The eyes of countless centuries were wet  
To bring Your Joy so near!

Forgive if I remember not the blaze,  
 Perfect, imperishable, *perfect*, infinite,<sup>1</sup>  
 Of far Omnipotence from which You light  
 Your lamp of human face!

Make me a worship-vigil everywhere,  
 Slumber and wakefulness one memory  
 That You are God: O let each pore of me  
 Become a mouth of prayer!

Sri Aurobindo's comment:

1. Sri Aurobindo crossed out “Perfect” and inserted it after “imperishable.”.

The flaws were not felt in the original version because of the perfect expression.

6 February 1934

\*

Sri Aurobindo —

Of the two versions of my poem I suppose the second where the “flaws” are corrected is to be preferred, even though they were not felt in the first?

Sri Aurobindo's answer:

Yes, if you want regularity of form.

7 February 1934

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(Version from *The Secret Splendour* —  
*Collected Poems of K. D. Sethna [Amal Kiran]*, 1993, p. 459)

### O SILENT LOVE . . .

Because You never claim of us a tear,  
 O silent Love, how often we forget  
 The eyes of countless centuries were wet  
 To bring Your smile so near!



Forgive if I remember not the blaze,  
Imperishable, perfect, infinite,  
Of far Omnipotence from which You lit  
Your lamp of human face!

Make me a worship-vigil everywhere,  
Slumber and wakefulness one memory  
That You are God: O let each pore of me  
Become a mouth of prayer!

AMAL KIRAN  
(K. D. SETHNA)

*The spiritual vision must never be intellectual, philosophical or abstract, it must always give the sense of something vivid, living and concrete, a thing of vibrant beauty or a thing of power. An abstract spiritual poetry is possible but that is not Amal's manner. The poetry of spiritual vision as distinct from that of spiritual thought abounds in images, unavoidably because that is the straight way to avoid abstractness; but these images must be felt as very real and concrete things, otherwise they become like the images used by the philosophic poets, decorative to the thought rather than realities of the inner vision and experience.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Letters on Poetry and Art, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 99)*

# JOHN ALBERT CHADWICK: THE LIFE OF ARJAVA

## Introduction

Near a rugged coastline there is a memorial, a picture created to honour a man of faith. He is young and on bended knees before his risen Lord. Blue light shimmers through his transparent frame. The sea is less than a mile away and the fishermen are going about their business as they have always done since time immemorial. The man, whom we can call Chadwick, is far from the Cambridge College where he studied, far from the world of privilege that was his birthright. This, he doesn't mind. He appears at peace with himself for he knows what he is seeking for and believes he has found it. There are no regrets about the choices he has made in his life.

If Dilip Kumar Roy had stood before this picture, breathing in the scent of lilies placed before it, perhaps he would have recalled what he had once said about how the Chadwick he had known “. . . came to be swept off his feet by Sri Aurobindo, whom he accepted, once and for all, as the keeper of his soul, insomuch that after his surrender to Sri Aurobindo he never once looked back although his people in England pressed him repeatedly to come back home.”<sup>1</sup> The irony would be that the Chadwick that Dilip came to love was John Albert Chadwick, a frail man with an exquisitely delicate mind. Sri Aurobindo named him Arjavananda (meaning ‘Joy of straightforwardness’). More simply, he became known as Arjava.<sup>2</sup> The young man in the picture, on his knees and “swept off his feet” as it were, was not Arjava. It was not the man whose poetry Sri Aurobindo sometimes praised as having a “strong overmind touch,”<sup>3</sup> whose views (along with Amal Kiran’s) he elicited on poetical experiments culminating in the majestic *Ilion*.<sup>4</sup>

The man in the picture was Albert Chadwick, Arjava’s father, immortalised in stained glass in a small church in the remote working class parish of Cromarty in Scotland. As late as 2001 the UK Census recorded it as having a modest 719 inhabitants although its numbers now inflate over the summer months when tourists flock towards its idyllic landscape. The sea that provides a livelihood for many of its inhabitants is the icy cold North Sea, not its Indian cousin that flows along the Coromandel Coast. Of course, the faith of Albert was an ardent devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to the Lord whose presence was enough, said the Mother, “. . . to

1. *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem* by Dilip Kumar Roy (Fourth Ed.), p. 70.

2. ‘The Inspiration and Art of John Chadwick’ by Amal Kiran.

3. *Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 51.

4. *Sri Aurobindo – a biography and a history*, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 1039.

prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light. . . .”<sup>5</sup> It is only once we have seen Arjava’s father, forever frozen in ecclesiastical worship, that we truly appreciate the distance his son travelled, both spiritually and physically, to reach the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where he ended his days.



(A scene from the north wall of Saint Regulus’ Church, Cromarty, Scotland.  
The image is of the Reverend Albert Chadwick, Arjava’s father.)

## Arjava’s Family

Arjava’s family was rooted in a time of certainties. It was certain of where it came from in this world, certain of its station in society, and certain of its trajectory in the afterlife. On his father’s side, his great grandfather, Samuel Chadwick (1764 to 1838), was a Yorkshire man. He came from Dewsbury. This was true of his son, Joseph (1809 to 1873), and his son’s son, Albert (1863 to 1931). Dewsbury is a tiny market town situated amidst the English countryside with a history stretching back over a thousand years to the Domesday Book. This was the Chadwicks’ ancestral home. Cosmopolitan it is not. The family was of some significance with Joseph describing his occupation at various times as that of landowner or, more quaintly, gentleman.<sup>6</sup> His family’s existence was a privileged one with their home being the

5. Mother’s *Prayers and Meditations*, CWM, Vol. 1, p. 113.

6. See, for example, the UK Census return of 1871 and the baptism record of 1863 for Joseph’s son, Albert.

permanent residence of at least a house maid, a house keeper and someone to help in the kitchen. What would Joseph have made of his grandson, Arjava, the anomaly in his proud male lineage? Arjava was not born in Dewsbury. He was born in Sussex. He did not live in Dewsbury. He lived where his father's ministry took him, Swindon being the most notable example. Neither was he educated in Dewsbury. His schooling was in several counties and culminated in him winning a place at Trinity College, Cambridge. In some respects, he was a male Chadwick of a different vintage to those who came before him, one not tethered to the Yorkshire soil of his forefathers.

If Arjava's father's side of the family was rooted to the Yorkshire Dales, his mother's was bound to the faith that sustained them. Arjava's mother was Madeleine Ann Comper. She was born on 1 April 1866. We know little about her except that the men of her family had deep bonds with the clergy. Her father was the Reverend John Comper (1823 to 1903), a priest of the Episcopal Church in Scotland. He spent "over 40 years working with the poor and destitute in Aberdeen's East End slums."<sup>7</sup> He also founded many schools throughout Scotland. According to a Father Clive Clapson, "there was a whole generation of Scots, many of them not Episcopalians, who would have had no education at all but for Father Comper." A revered figure in his lifetime, long after his death in 2003, he was "declared a 'Hero of the Faith' by the Scottish Episcopal Church — the greatest honour the Church can bestow. The Scottish Episcopal Church has not created a saint since the Reformation in the 16th century."<sup>8</sup> Arjava's grandfather changed that. He became a saint.

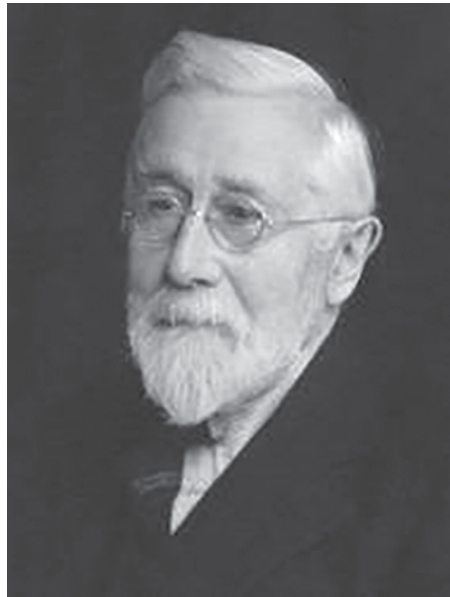


(The Reverend John Comper, Arjava's grandfather)

7. *The Scotsman*, 8 April 2003.

8. *Ibid.*

Alongside Madeleine's father, mention must also be made of two of Madeleine's brothers. The first is Leonard William Comper. He read theology at Worcester College, Oxford and, like his father, became a man of the cloth. The other is Sir John Ninian Comper (1864 to 1960), a man knighted for his services to architecture. He may not have been a clergyman but he might as well have been: the blood of the church flowed through his veins as much as through anyone within the Comper clan. He worked almost exclusively in ecclesiastical architecture and was responsible for the stained glass memorial erected to Arjava's father in St Regulus' Church, Cromarty, as well as a separate one dedicated to his father, the Reverend John, in an Aberdeen church. His credentials as a scion of the church were cemented when, upon his death, his ashes were interred amongst those of England's greatest sons at Westminster Abbey.



(Sir John Ninian Comper, Arjava's uncle)

Through the fog of the past we see then the chinks of light beginning to shine on Arjava's family, revealing the deepest of loyalty to faith and country that abided there. This he would eventually eschew, turning his back on his family and the faith of his youth even in the twilight of his young days, when death beckoned to him. This was the price of the inner freedom he was seeking and eventually found at the feet of his gurus, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

### Arjava: The early years (1899 – 1912)

The Reverend Albert Chadwick was born on 21 February 1863. He, like his father before him, was raised in Dewsbury before going on to read Theology at St John's College, Cambridge from 1882 to 1886.<sup>9</sup> We are not certain of when he married Madeleine Ann Comper. It may have been in 1896. He lived, from what we can tell, an uneventful life moving through several parishes in England before he and his wife ended up in Swindon.

Arjava was born on 23 May 1899. He was to be the oldest of three brothers, being followed several years later by Leonard Mark Chadwick (1904 to 1968) and Paul Chadwick (1906 to 1987). We know little of Arjava's early years. In 1901 he appeared, along with his parents, as living in Swindon, along with the family's live-in help. The location is explicable if we take it that the Reverend Albert was serving there with the Church. Arjava was just a baby, not even two. His father was 38 (according to the Census), and his mother 34. His family arrangements changed over the following decade leaving a void in our understanding of what life was like for him in his most formative years. The simplest of snapshots, which is all that Census returns ever give, suggests that in 1911 he was no longer within the family home. His two brothers, along with a governess to presumably steer their education, were. He had left. By that stage, he was lodged in a boarding school in Hunmanby in Yorkshire. At what age was he sent away to this school? In 1905 his father had moved parish and was back in Yorkshire (in Shadwell), just 20 miles from Dewsbury. Perhaps this was when Arjava was sent to his boarding school. He was young, but not much younger than some of the other children listed as residing there at that time. Was he close to his family, to his mother? A senior colleague with whom he was close at Cambridge would come to remark, "there was something in Chadwick's nature which needed to lean upon a woman much older than himself whom he could treat as a mother. . . ."<sup>10</sup> We can speculate on whether this need was a reflection on something he lacked from his own mother but we will never be able to solidify such speculation into hard fact.

Was he happy? We do not know. All we know is that his father was busy from 1905 as the parish priest in Shadwell, Yorkshire and stayed there with his family until 1916. By then, Arjava was at Marlborough College, no doubt looking with some apprehension at the prospect of having to join the Great War.

Much of what we know from this point onwards in Arjava's life comes from C. D. Broad, a senior fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. The obituary he would come to write on Arjava's passing remains a critical document for anyone seeking to understand Arjava's early life. It is a curious piece, lacking the impartial tone

9. *The Eagle*, 1931 edition.

10. C. D. Broad in *Mind*, Vol. 49, No. 193 (Jan., 1940), pp. 129-31.

expected of an eminent philosopher, supplanting that with acerbity. Look a little deeper and an undercurrent of grief is also apparent. It was the grief of a man unable to understand how his young friend and former colleague could have forsaken England, particularly for what he must have deemed an intellectually and climatologically arid climate. Glimpsing Broad's *The Mind And Its Place in Nature* (1925), we see that it is dedicated to Arjava and contains in its preface touching praise born of affectionate camaraderie: "I have also learned much from him in the many conversations we have had together. . . ." We are obliged to address the nature of Broad's relationship to Arjava now because much of what we know of Arjava's remaining time in England is thanks to clues that Broad gives us.



(Professor C. D. Broad)

### From Marlborough College to War: 1913-1919

*But the children born in Europe, latterly, these little ones, who were children of the war, carry something in them which will be very difficult to eradicate, a kind of horror, a fright. One could not have been mixed up with that without knowing what horror is. The first war was perhaps worse than the second. The second was so atrocious that all was lost. . . . But the first, oh! I don't know. . . . The last months I spent in Paris were truly fantastic. And it can't be told. The life in the trenches, for example, is something that cannot be told.*

— The Mother<sup>11</sup>

11. *Questions and Answers 1950-1951*, CWM, Vol 4, p. 302.

Located in the beautiful Wiltshire countryside, Marlborough College was founded in 1843 as a boarding school with the prime purpose of educating the sons of clergy. It was (and is) one of the finest schools in England, perfect for a refined boy with a sensitive mind. It must have been an obvious choice for the Reverend Albert to send his eldest son. We know Arjava started there in January 1913 but details of his time at Marlborough are limited. However, we do know that in May 1913 he had joined the Officer Training Corps (OTC). This would have been expected of most, if not all, of the boys at Marlborough. To be in the OTC in 1913 was not a pastime. Its members wore military uniform and were groomed to be future military leaders. Colonel Seeley, the British Secretary of State for War, declared the OTC to be ‘undoubtedly’ part of the defensive forces of the Crown.<sup>12</sup> They were, of course, also school boys, and they must have known that the major European powers were in a heightened state of tension. This tension led to the carnage that commenced the following year and continued for four years thereafter. No doubt, a steady stream of boys joined Marlborough’s OTC with every new intake it welcomed.

Marlborough College suffered heavily in the First World War (1914 to 1918), sending many of its young men to fight and die. Its monthly school magazine, *The Marlburian*, went from covering trivial school rivalries on the rugby field to the trauma of recounting, month after tragic month, the death toll of the young men it had sent to war. One cannot begin to imagine the sadness of teachers who wrote and published those reports of killings knowing, as they did, that it was they who had carried the burden of attesting on military application forms that the boys they sent were of good moral character and ready for soldiering. It is in one of those fateful editions of *The Marlburian*, on 21 June 1917, that we see Arjava listed as a serving soldier, amongst 15 of the school’s alumni who had been reported dead that month. This is the only reference we find to him in the magazine. C. C. Carter was Arjava’s housemaster at the conclusion of his time at Marlborough. He was the teacher attesting to Arjava’s character, signing the papers leading to Arjava’s enrolment as a soldier.

Arjava’s brothers were too young to enlist. He was the only member of his immediate family that did fight, although we know he had cousins that did so too.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this life-defining experience, which no immediate kin had to suffer, was enough to separate him from them in some fundamental way that could not be defined.

Arjava enlisted in the British army on 19 February 1917. He was still only 17 years old. The Military Service Act had introduced conscription the previous year for those above eighteen. This means that Arjava volunteered to serve as, we imagine,

12. See Hansard: HC Deb 29 April 1913 vol. 52 cc 969-70.

13. Nick Comper being one example. He was the son of Sir John Ninian and served in the Royal Flying Corps. He survived the war and went on to become a distinguished Aeronautical Engineer.



was expected of a boy from one of the great English schools. He did not exercise his right to wait to see if the winds of fortune could end the war before his eighteenth birthday and thereby prevent him being forced to fight.<sup>14</sup>



(C. C. Carter, Arjava's Housemaster at Marlborough College)



(Arjava, aged 16, in his last year before joining the Great War.)

After enlisting, he was mobilised and posted to the Devonshire Regiment on New Year's Eve, 1917. He was now an officer cadet. We do not know where he saw active service in the following months but the needs of the British army meant that his sojourn with the infantry was short lived. On 29 May 1918 he was discharged from the Devonshire Regiment so that he could join the Special Brigade of the Royal Engineers. Military records state his "theatre of war" as France without specifying further. He was now a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant.<sup>15</sup> His period of cadetship was over.

"Of all the weapons employed in World War I, none stimulated public revulsion more than poison gas."<sup>16</sup> Gas was unpredictable, liable to change direction with the breeze, leaving the assailant the assailed. It could be unmercifully slow and torturous in its work and appears to have repulsed leaders on both sides of war who deemed

14. While some of Arjava's military records are available online, some are only accessible at the (UK's) National Archives. Some of the details regarding Arjava's war record are derived from a blog by Professor Raymont who researched Arjava whilst conducting research on philosophers who served in World War One: <https://praymont.blogspot.com/2016/08/john-albert-chadwick-wwi-vet-who-left.html>

15. Supplement to *London Gazette* of 21 June 1918.

16. 'Chemical Warfare in World War I: The American Experience, 1917-1918' by MAJ(P) Charles E. Heller, USAR (September 1984), p. 3.

its usage a necessary evil.<sup>17</sup> The Great War poet, Wilfred Owen, captured the hideousness of a gas attack he witnessed in the poem ‘Dulcet et Decorum Est.’ Here we quote just one verse:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime. —  
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In 1915, chemical weapons became a feature of World War I. That was when the Special Brigade was created as an offensive poison gas unit that accompanied the infantry along the front, embedding alongside them in the trenches. Arjava joined his new unit as they embarked on a new fighting tactic:

The British [conducted] . . . what they called “beam attacks”. These attacks called for placing numerous cylinders on narrow-gauge tram cars that troops pushed forward to positions just behind the front trenches. After the cylinders were opened, the resulting gas concentration became so dense that friendly troops had to be evacuated from the path of the gas “beam”. On 24 May 1918 the British launched their first beam attack<sup>18</sup>. . . . The beam attacks were especially deadly when launched from six or more separate railheads and when the individual clouds merged behind German lines. Prisoners taken from the German 9th Uhlan Regiment reported that one such attack caused 500 casualties in the neighbouring 1st Landwehr Regiment, which, as a result of the attack, had to be withdrawn from the line. According to the British, the effectiveness of the improved cloud attacks, with their increased density, continued to frustrate the German Army.<sup>19</sup>

The use of “beam attacks” was devastating, indiscriminate in whom they affected and, paradoxically, personal in whom they targeted.

“Once a German unit became a target for a gas attack, the Special Brigade made a point of following that unit around the front. The 1st Bavarian Regiment, for instance, was gassed fifteen times; the 1st Guards Regiment twelve times in

17. Legal attempts to prevent or limit the use of gases in war have a long and sorry history. The Hague Conference of 1899 was but one example of attempts to curtail its use. The Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 was another.

18. i.e. five days before Arjava joined the Special Brigade.

19. ‘Chemical Warfare in World War I: The American Experience, 1917-1918’ by MAJ(P) Charles E. Heller, USAR (September 1984), p. 17.

six months; the 10th Bavarian Regiment ten times in five months, and the 9th Bavarian Regiment fourteen times from 28 June 1916 to 1 August 1917. The effects could be devastating to the morale of the gassed units and those units around them.”<sup>20</sup>

Aggressive poison gas attacks that kept specific German regiments in the line of chemical fire, this then was the work that was assigned to Arjava. It was a terrible ordeal for the refined soul whose earliest hobby we know of was cultivating bonsai trees and who would be remembered in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as “troubled by the imperfections in himself and others and the world.”<sup>21</sup> Arjava “was of an exceptionally sensitive nature, and the war itself and the stupidity and malevolence of the subsequent peace had left scars on his spirit.”<sup>22</sup> The feeling of outrage at the draconian peace settlement was not uncommon, certainly not amongst the Cambridge intelligentsia that Arjava would come to find himself. John Maynard Keynes, who was one of the British negotiators at Versailles, wrote that “if the European Civil War is to end with France and Italy abusing their momentary victorious power to destroy Germany and Austria-Hungary now prostrate, they invite their own destruction also, being so deeply and inextricably intertwined with their victims by hidden psychic and economic bonds.”<sup>23</sup> It was a view shared by Bertrand Russell and C. D. Broad, both leading philosophers associated with Arjava’s *Alma Mater*. Sri Aurobindo would opine that “a great intellectual and moral bankruptcy, an immense emptiness and depression has succeeded to the delirium of massacre.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that Britain had pushed so hard for Germany to be brought beneath its heels was, for Arjava, a barbarous assault on the fairness that the British psyche embodied. He never came to terms with it. In a 1936 sonnet, ‘To The King’, for example, he called for the rebuilding of “the fairer England callousness had killed.”<sup>25</sup> It was a deep seated sentiment, leading Sri Aurobindo to once remark, “have you not heard Arjava inveighing against post-war England?”<sup>26</sup> The fragility of Arjava’s temperament suffered greatly at having to experience, first hand, “the delirium of massacre” and the moral bankruptcy that followed it.

Unidentified illnesses later assailed him in his time at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Their intensity was such that Mother once had a vision of him beseeching the Ashram doctor for relief. “Why don’t you cure me?” Arjava had called<sup>27</sup> to the oblivious

20. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

21. This was Bob Zwicker’s recollection of what Jayantilal Parekh had said. Jayantilal was the sole Ashramite with Arjava when he passed away in 1939.

22. C. D. Broad in *Mind*, Vol. 49, No. 193 (Jan., 1940), pp. 129-131.

23. J. M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919).

24. *War and Self Determination*, CWSA, Vol. 25, p. 668.

25. *Mother India*, January 1956, p. 19.

26. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks*, Talk of 30 December 1938, p. 213.

27. Nirodbaran, *12 Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 93.

doctor. Did the use of poison gas in the war have anything to do with such an anguished cry? Did he even mention to his gurus what he went through in the war?

Indications of what we now understand as posttraumatic stress disorder were discernable. Dilip said that Arjava suffered shell shock,<sup>28</sup> a little-understood term that was coined during the First World War. It signified a severe concussive motion of a shaken brain in a soldier's skull, usually as a result of proximity to bomb blasts. It came to also encompass psychiatric disorders inflicted by the terrors of modern warfare.<sup>29</sup> The doctor at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram said that in his final years Arjava was "mentally shaken"<sup>30</sup> but offered no insight beyond that. He merely affirmed the unyielding compassion with which the gurus expected Arjava to be treated: "The Mother and Sri Aurobindo knew his temperament very well and instructed me to look after him with a large consideration as they themselves had always done."<sup>31</sup> For insight, we turn to the Mother. In general remarks she made on 9 April 1951, she referred to children who carried "something in them which will be very difficult to eradicate, a kind of horror, a fright."<sup>32</sup> Her remarks were specifically directed to those children who came after the Second World War. However, their application to survivors of the Great War seems equally obvious. The quiet Englishman who turned to her when he found life bereft of meaning is proof of that.

In the 1930s, Arjava would write 'Totalitarian':

Night was closing on the traveller  
 When he came  
 To the empty eerie courtyard  
 With no name.  
 Loud he called; no echo answered;  
 Nothing stirred:  
 But a crescent moon swung wanly,  
 White as curd.  
 When he flashed his single sword-blade  
 Through the gloom,  
 None resisted — till he frantic,  
 Filled with doom,  
 Hurlled his weapon through the gloaming,  
 Took no aim;  
 Saw his likeness around him  
 Do the same:

28. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me* (6<sup>th</sup> Ed), p. 315.

29. The Smithsonian Magazine, 'The Shock of War by Caroline Alexander', September 2010.

30. Nirodbaran, *12 Years with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 91.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Questions and Answers 1950-1951*, CWM, Vol. 4, p. 302.

Viewed a thousand swordless figures  
 Like his own —  
 Then first knew in that cold starlight  
 Hell, alone.

Sri Aurobindo would say this poem contained a “. . . powerful vision of an occult world . . . it is not on earth”; it is a “terrible elsewhere . . .”; “we are at once in an unearthly world and in a place somewhere in the soul of man. . . .”<sup>33</sup> One wonders if he was not alluding to the place in Arjava’s soul that held the memory of the horror of poison gas and war.

Dilip regarded this poem as prophetic, signifying a “power of vision” in Arjava, providing a glimpse of the Second World War to come. He would say, “that what he [Arjava] had seen in 1936 [when ‘Totalitarian’ was composed] proved to be literally true subsequently, during the dark days of the Hitlerian hell-regime. . . .”<sup>34</sup> The poem testified to Arjava’s “authentic power of vision that had lain latent in his nature, a power which opened in him under the aegis of Sri Aurobindo.”<sup>35</sup> Regardless of whether the poem was looking forward to the horror of a war to come, or to the tragedy of one already endured, it is, as Sri Aurobindo said, undoubtedly “a terrible elsewhere.” No man should have to hold such a “terrible elsewhere” in his soul. Arjava, it appears, did.

Armistice Day fell on Thursday 11 November 1918 in France. For his efforts, Arjava was to leave the war with a Victory medal.<sup>36</sup> Eligibility for this award consisted generally in having served in any of the theatres of the war. Arjava ceased being paid by the army on 21 October 1919, leaving the military as Broad would say, with “scars on his spirit.”



(Victory medal awarded to those, such as Arjava, who served in World War I)

33. *Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA, Vol. 27, pp. 487-88.

34. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 117.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Arjava’s War Medal Record.

Like many veterans of the Great War, he did not take time to recover from the damage done to him in the trenches. This is an enormous shame as through one lens it appears as if his remaining years were an attempt to make whole in himself what the war had cracked.

### **Cambridge: The final years in England (1920 – 1927)**

There are not many who could walk through the gates of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram with an undergraduate academic record at Cambridge that could rival that of the Master himself. Arjava could.

In 1920 Arjava matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge. He took Part I of the Natural Science Tripos before studying for Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos in Advanced Logic. He went on to obtain a first class honours degree with special distinction. This was impressive, but perhaps the most valuable prize he gained was a love of plants. Botany featured in the natural sciences Tripos and it was the botanical world, not the philosophical one, which seems to have comforted him in the recurring moments when he was oppressed by life. This did not go entirely without notice. In the foreword he wrote for Arjava's posthumously published anthology, *Poems*, Krishnaprem drew attention to the reverence Arjava held for the natural world. For Arjava, he wrote, "nature was a shrine. . . ."

An academic career beckoned after Arjava's undergraduate success. He began work for a prize-fellowship at Trinity. This he achieved. An Arnold Gerstenberg Studentship (for moral philosophy and metaphysics) followed, an attainment that got him mentioned in the highly respected science journal, *Nature*.<sup>37</sup>

In October 1925, Arjava was elected as a Philosophy fellow of Trinity College. It was an accomplishment of the highest order, coming as it did in a period when Trinity was associated with some of the greatest philosophers of the age. Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein were but two who floated in and out of the College in various parts of the decade, as did C. D. Broad and G. E. Moore, both of whom maintained an association with Arjava after he took the decision to leave Cambridge. Outwardly, therefore, it looked as if life was good. Broad, who came to be the University Professor of Moral Philosophy, held great hopes for Arjava. He said that "one might reasonably have expected that Chadwick would go on to make regular and increasingly important contributions to those more abstract parts of philosophy which he was so admirably fitted to study."<sup>38</sup> The abstract parts he referred to concerned the philosophy of logic, this being "the study, from a philosophical perspective, of the nature and types of logic, including problems in the field and the

37. *Nature*, 28 November 1925.

38. C. D. Broad in *Mind*, Vol. 49, No. 193 (Jan., 1940), pp. 129-131.

relation of logic to mathematics and other disciplines.”<sup>39</sup> Broad’s expectation was not fulfilled.

We have the limited record of Arjava’s published output but the real question is not what he wrote about. This we know.<sup>40</sup> The question is why he stopped. Within two years of obtaining academia’s jackpot of tenure at Cambridge, he left for India, not as the apocryphal “distinguished don” that some have referred to.<sup>41</sup> He was too young for that, and his published output too scant. No doubt he was marked as an intellectual of great promise, one who was expected by the leading lights of Cambridge, to make “increasingly important contributions” to his field of expertise. Indeed, the likes of J. M. E. McTaggart, one of the most important systematic metaphysicians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>42</sup> supervised Arjava for a time and came away with a “high respect for his intellect.” This, however, was not enough for Arjava. If anything, his gaze was continually cast towards other horizons.

The seeds of Arjava’s seeking were sown on the battlefield. The war had affected him deeply, its aftermath, equally so. Arjava saw the world globally. The decimation of Europe distressed him. The political “callousness” of England towards the war-vanquished distressed him too. So did English callousness to events taking place in the East. An embittered idealism attracted by worldwide amity consumed the young Cambridge Don. As uncomprehending as ever regarding Arjava’s emotional make up, Broad would lament that the latter accepted “quite uncritically every tale that any disgruntled Indian might tell against the British government in India.” We do not know if there was a specific event that triggered this interest in matters Indian but the impassioned advocacy of India was long standing. It continued deep into his time at Pondicherry and was detectable in correspondence he sent back to the West. On 6 February 1935, for example, he wrote to G. E. Moore, a Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge to whom he remained close. “England’s moral credit [in India],” he would say, “is completely exhausted by the violation of solemn pledges and promises, the reliance solely on brute force. . . .”<sup>43</sup>

39. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

40. Broad tells us, “Chadwick’s dissertation was concerned with very fundamental points in philosophical logic. It was an acute and original bit of work. As a whole it has never been published, but the article ‘Logical Constants’ in *Mind*, vol. xxxvi, is a brief abstract of one part of it. This article led to a discussion with Mr. (now Prof.) C. H. Langford in the pages of *Mind*. The discussion opened with ‘Propositions Belonging to Logic’ (vol. xxxvi), and was continued in the next volume into a discussion on ‘Singular Propositions’. Chadwick’s only other published writings on philosophical topics, so far as I know, are two short notes in *Mind*; one on ‘Families included in the Field of a Relation’ (vol. xxxvii), and one on ‘Classification of Maximal Systems and their Sub-systems’ in the next volume. Chadwick had become interested in *analysis situs*, and the last two notes are exercises in formal analysis and definition occasioned by his reflexions on this subject.”

41. For example, see Georges Van Vrekhem, *The Mother – The Story of Her Life*, page 237. Perhaps the source of the phrase can be found in Dilip Kumar Roy for he refers to Arjava as such in *Sri Yogi Krishnaprem* (1968), page 69.

42. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

43. A cache of correspondence between Arjava and Professor Moore is held at Cambridge University Archives.

Arjava's disillusionment with the state of the world was compounded, as if any soldier of the Great War needed reminding, by further proof of the fragility of human life. In 1923, his third year as an undergraduate, he had a severe case of Infantile Paralysis, now better known as Polio. Polio is a viral disease which can affect the spinal cord causing muscle weakness and paralysis. We are not certain of how long his recuperation lasted but it left him with an element of lameness that worsened over the years. It drew him further into himself and left him feeling isolated and perhaps inadequate before his healthy fellow students: here was a brilliant man but clearly young and in need of emotional confidence.

Two years later, whatever jubilation he may have felt at the award of his fellowship was abruptly halted when someone who he was "deeply attached to" in his undergraduate days died of Typhoid. We know nothing of that friend. All we know is that the death was sudden, it took place in the East, and that it cut Arjava to the core. After Arjava's death, *Mother India* published a short, undated, poem that captured something of the mournful cadence that must have governed the young Don's life during that time. Alas, we do not know to whom the poem refers:

#### **AT THE TIME OF THE NEW MOON TO ONE WHO IS LOVED**

If at joy's noon you are the sun,  
A sapphire-girded flame,  
Each veering crescent and half moon  
Turns lightward memory's aim  
When noon is done.

If one star fills the daybright thought,  
The myriad glitter-play  
Of evening spreads in a thousand rills  
For the Delta of dreams that ray  
Which you have brought.<sup>44</sup>

His sense of isolation must have deepened at his friend's death as not only was he now emotionally distant from his peers, the physical distance between him and his only obvious source of support increased also. In 1925, his father's ministry took him and his wife from Denbury, Yorkshire to the remote Scottish parish of Cromarty<sup>45</sup> where the Reverend Chadwick was ultimately laid to rest. This was a

44. *Mother India*, December 1956, page 18.

45. It is not clear whether Arjava's two brothers accompanied their parents to Cromarty. Indeed, at present, we know nothing at all about them and their relationship with their brother.



dark period for Arjava. However, “. . . Night itself carries in it the burden of the light that has to be.”<sup>46</sup>

If Cambridge was a place of disconsolation for Arjava it also carried the ray that ultimately directed him to India. The son of the preacher may have been “acridly anti-clerical,” (which begs the question of what he made of his father’s vocation) but he was also “intensely religious by nature.” Arjava was seeking for something, stumbling in the weeds of spiritual truth but sincere beyond doubt.

Sri Aurobindo himself gave the first hint as to the nature of Arjava’s seeking at this time, referring to Arjava’s joining of a Rosicrucian group.<sup>47</sup> The Rosicrucians are “a worldwide brotherhood claiming to possess esoteric wisdom handed down from ancient times. . . . Rosicrucian teachings are a combination of occultism and other religious beliefs and practices, including Hermeticism, Jewish mysticism, and Christian gnosticism. The central feature of Rosicrucianism is the belief that its members possess secret wisdom that was handed down to them from ancient times.”<sup>48</sup> The influence of their teachings sank deep into Arjava, “creating a lot of difficulty” for his sadhana, as Sri Aurobindo would say, when Arjava entered the Ashram over five years later.<sup>49</sup> The fascination for the esoteric was obvious, perhaps even all-consuming, and certainly shared by others in Trinity, C. D. Broad, being the obvious example.<sup>50</sup> His interest in psychical phenomena like clairvoyance and telekinesis was well known. Krishnaprem later suggested that there may also have been an initiation into the Jewish, Kabbalistic tradition of mysticism<sup>51</sup> during Arjava’s Cambridge days. With such an initial sphere of interest, it is a testament to the genius of Sri Aurobindo that he took the raw stuff of this fascination and moulded it into a fine poet with the power of spiritual — and occult — vision. Sri Aurobindo would come to comment, “All I can say is that Arjava writes most often from the plane of inner thought and occult vision. . . .”<sup>52</sup>

As a young man searching for a deeper meaning in his life, Arjava lacked companionship amongst his peers, a friend with whom to process the wheat from the spiritual chaff that he must have been encountering. It was then a matter of providence that he met the British philosopher John Stuart Mackenzie and his wife, Hettie Millicent. Professor Mackenzie was a retired fellow of Philosophy at Trinity College who had taken up residence at 2 Hertford Street, near the college. His wife

46. *Letters on Yoga* - Volume IV, CWSA, Vol. 31, p. 673.

47. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* Vol. 1, p. 305.

48. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

49. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* Vol. 1, p. 305.

50. Broad “did investigations of psychical phenomena and parapsychology, and served two different times as the president of the Society of Psychical Research – 1935 and 1958. He concluded that the experimental data warranted a belief in a “psychic factor” : [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/C.\\_D.\\_Broad](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/C._D._Broad).

51. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p. 71.

52. *Letters on Poetry and Art*, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 476.

was equally impressive, an educationalist and suffragette who became the first female professor appointed in Wales. To Arjava's immense good fortune, the Mackenzies were not confined to a western philosophical straightjacket. They had their own search for truth. It had led them to India, twice, and seen them discussing the fundamental questions of life in Varanasi, something that Arjava would also later do (with Krishnaprem). It was in Varanasi that the Mackenzies developed good relationships with leading Theosophists of the day, George Arundale and Bertram Keightly. They would also come to befriend Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy. He apparently found much to appreciate in Professor Mackenzie's writings on Hegel.

Arjava became devoted to the Mackenzies, visiting them frequently and finding in them a refuge in which his interests were shared and explored with Hettie, in particular, taking him under her wing. "It would be impossible to exaggerate the kindness and the patient understanding sympathy with which they treated him."<sup>53</sup> The intensity of his relationship with the Mackenzies was such that in July 1926 he went on holiday with the couple to Marseilles for a month. They were nearly four decades older than him but there was nothing unusual in their friendship but for the fact that the passenger list for *The Leicestershire*, the ship on which they travelled out, recorded all three as residing at the same house on Hertford Street. This suggests that, at some point during his brief tenure as a Cambridge fellow, Arjava rejected his rooms at Trinity College for the warm family home that the Mackenzies offered him. This brief period was almost certainly the happiest Arjava had experienced for a decade if not more.



(2 Hertford Street, Cambridge, the home of the Mackenzies)

53. C. D. Broad in *Mind*, Vol. 49, No. 193 (Jan., 1940), pp. 129-31.

One final point to note about the trip to Marseilles is that it was in all likelihood the first time Arjava had set foot on French soil since the trauma of war. One hopes it helped him call a temporary truce with the feelings that weighed on him so heavily. By this stage “he had lost his faith in the materialistic civilisation of the West which he branded as the arch-hatcher of the most cruel fratricidal strifes in human history.”<sup>54</sup> With such strident convictions, leaving Europe was only a matter of time. That time was a year later. In 1927, with the help of the Mackenzies, Arjava secured a position as Professor of Philosophy at Lucknow University. Thus it was that the young Cambridge Don whose academic career looked so promising heeded the call of India.

*(To be continued)*

BALVINDER BANGA

54. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p. 70.

*What the poets feel when writing (those who are truly inspired) is the great Ananda of creation, possession by a great Power superior to their ordinary minds which puts some emotion or vision of things into a form of beauty. They feel the emotion of the thing they express, but not always as a personal feeling, but as something which seizes hold of them for self-expression. But the personal feeling also may form a basis for the creation.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Letters on Poetry and Art, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 107)*

# COSMOPOLITANISM

## A Book Review

*Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early Twentieth Century India*

Author: Sachidananda Mohanty

Publisher: Routledge, 2 Park Square, Abingdon, OX144RN.

Edition: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2018

A challenging title that tickles the reader to enclose the area of the protagonists by the splash of photographs on the cover: you recognise some immediately, others are a vague presence, who come near with that twilight vagueness and you exclaim: aha, this is, of course Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, a presence in one's childhood with his tales for children in English accompanied by illustrations! Dilip-da, our singer unparalleled for Bande Mataram. And then one settles down to reading this unusual approach to the cultural cauldron of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But no wizard's brew this. The honeyed delight of creative thoughts and views covers us with their vibgyor histories.

By the time one bravely goes through the tiny print and comes to the 'last page', we seem to have drawn quite close to the term 'cosmopolitan' and prepare for the worry expressed by Dr. Mohanty. Are those days of closeness between intellectuals and artistes from different lands leading to new creations? Has this move towards new creations become increasingly impossible in our own times?

*Cosmopolitan Modernity* is an educative book in many ways. For those who are familiar with the cultural arenas of the East and the West, the spray of well-known names stokes the memory and suddenly we sigh to ourselves: Ah, how could I forget Hillary Putnam? So the hand opens a forgotten shelf and worries the books which are neatly lined up, neatly because I haven't opened the glass doors for perhaps a decade or more. I take out the book and Hillary comes alive through the brown pages. It was a joy to drop such names to one's friends that I was in touch with the latest philosophical thought-currents abroad. I prefer Margaret Cousins who was familiar to one's consciousness some decades ago. All that and the work of her husband James Cousins surround me. For one who had come within the magic circle of Sri Aurobindo, these names and their work has always been there. For Dr. Mohanty who grew up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, these names including Tagore, Dilip Kumar Roy and Sisir Kumar Das give a direction to explore his subject of cosmopolitan modernity.

The coming together of great writers, thinkers and artistes from early twentieth century has been of great profit. Thoughts have winged to and from across the lines

of demarcation such as East and West or South East Asia and the Middle East and have created the culture of the modern world in a big way. Dr. Mohanty's study may be taken as a quick set of brush strokes to mark the traces of such interactions.

So what is cosmopolitanism? It has always been there as when a wandering sannyasi from North India came to a tiny village in the far South of India and stayed in the temple premises for a few days or weeks. He knows Sanskrit; the villagers do not know Hindi (or Avadhi or Bengali). There is no problem because his chanting of Sanskrit shlokas on the local deity (could be Srinivasa, Madhava) opens a bridge. The few who know a bit of Sanskrit are happy and a couple of students studying in the Intermediate class in the nearby town are able to exchange words in English. His steady and simple ways make the villagers prostrate before him for blessings. A fortnight after, he takes leave of them saying he is going farther south in his pilgrimage. He has already been to Pondicherry. The villagers are sad, but they know a flowing river should not be stopped. They give him a bundle of fruits and walk with him upto the lotus pond a mile away. Then he goes forward on his path, slinging the bag of fruits onto his shoulders and a bamboo stick in his hand. The villagers return home. But already the cosmopolitan breeze has touched them.

So this 'coming together to mark a new phase in life' has been happening all the time. The press, the speeding up of communications have only accelerated the blowing of the breeze. One may say the breeze blew very thick from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today Dr. Mohanty is able to give us solid results of this cosmopolitan breeze that has been transforming the world in a big way. For India, it is — freedom, new thoughts, a revival of the precious past and turn towards the future.

Where the British had set up their colonial master-slave category, a set of English educated Indians and foreigners who admired Indian culture began to hold hands together and India became cosmopolitan with a difference. This was an "equals-all" culture and Dr. Mohanty's computer pours down names that we have all known and admired in earlier times. There may have been some 'mimic-men' in India and elsewhere. But the positive results gave us a tremendous leap forward into the new era; the most important of these was the education of women, something that may have taken several centuries to be achieved in India.

Dr. Mohanty's arguments, however, keep taxing at the theoretical level most of the time. We get good inputs that way: like Kropotkin's disillusionment with the Bolshevik Revolution, the novelist Dhan Gopal Mukherjee who died young in America but left behind a life of astonishing drive that has given Indian writing in English its early blooms both for adults and children, the brilliant couple James and Margaret Cousins who chose to come to India as their 'karma bhumi', Paul Richard from France.

And of course, of course, Rabindranath Tagore, Dilip Kumar Roy, Mirra Alfassa from France (who came to be known as the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram

and who created the cosmopolitan city of Auroville) and Sri Aurobindo; poetry, music, yoga take human forms to descend from areas beyond space. Creators unparalleled. *Cosmopolitan Modernity* is a book that has to be put on the table frequently because I had to close my eyes and travel in the time machine to the days decades ago to remember the names and their achievements, to enrich India. I dare not go to other lands in search of ‘cosmopolitan modernity’ for India has always been a wide space of creative exuberance and welcomed external influences; and of course, rejected them if they do not chime in with the in-depth movement of Indian culture. But always a wide hug for what will enrich Mother India: the English language is one of them, the prime example of cosmopolitan modernity, the gift of Mother Saraswati to India, as was stated by another fine example of cosmopolitan modernity, Chakravarty Rajagopalachari.

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

*When one is living in the physical mind, the only way to escape from it is by imagination. Incidentally, that is why poetry and art etc. have so strong a hold. But these imaginations are often really shadows of supraphysical experience and once the barrier of the physical mind is broken or even swung a little open, there come the experiences themselves if the temperament is favourable. Hence are born visions and other such phenomena — all those that are miscalled psychic phenomena.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Letters on Yoga – III, CWSA, Vol. 30, p. 9)*

## THE MASTER

*This is dedicated at the feet of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, my Lord and Master, my Gurus, my everything in my journey into infinity beyond this life, without whose grace I would be nothing, I offer my utmost gratitude.*

*To them who have given me all, made me all what I am, I express my deepest gratitude.* — K. G.

### PREFACE

#### **‘Your way, My way and the Right way’**

Many years ago I had a chance to observe a great and famous orthopedic surgeon, Dr. K. T. Dholakia of Mumbai, operate on a relative for total knee replacement surgery. Dr. Dholakia was in his mid-seventies and his assistant was in his mid-forties. At one point the assistant told Dr. Dholakia how he would perform a particular procedure, implying that it would be a better step. Dr. Dholakia made an interesting remark. “Son, there are three ways of doing a thing — your way, my way and the right way.” The profoundness of the words and the humility struck a deep chord in me. Here was a renowned surgeon, at the fag end of his career, with tremendous experience and knowledge who, instead of saying, “I know better than you,” had come out with a rare nugget of wisdom, putting the Truth above himself.

When we look at anything and try to assess or judge, our assessment gets influenced by where we stand in relation to the thing, our knowledge or database, our conditioning, our ignorance, preferences, prejudices, emotions, wants, needs, greed and our capacity or limitation to see the truth behind the thing.

What appears right from one perspective appears wrong from another. The reasons are the limitation of our vision, an immature or unevolved mind and intellect, undeveloped consciousness and lack of sincerity to the highest truth. When we assert that this is the only way, or the true way, it in truth tells about our own limitations to express, to understand, to follow, to represent that which we are trying to attain. The way which, if ever it can be called the only way, the right way, has the Truth in the centre and we look at it from all the viewpoints simultaneously and integrally, and in that light whatever is placed, it will show the way that is necessary for the thing to be done. So your way could be right, my way too could be right and there may be a way truer than both our ways, or a way which takes into account both our ways and synthesises them to make it the right way.

## A GOLDFISH IN A PAINTED GLASS BOWL

The Master and the disciple walked silently. The enchanting music of the forest filled this silence. The sun's rays filtered through the trees casting a magical spell. The path seemed endless. A peacock swooped from one tree to another and a deer raised its head to look benignly at them. The Master's gaze took everything in with an impersonal, compassionate love as if everything belonged to him and he belonged to everything. Some monkeys kept them company, following them on the trees and a parrot came fluttering down and gently perched on the Master's shoulder. A fawn walked in front like a guide. A gentle, cool breeze brought the fragrance of the flowers from a distant valley. Their silent communion with the forest continued for a while, till it was interrupted by the roar of a lion. A lion was lying by the side of the path, partly camouflaged by a bush. The fawn stopped, the parrot fluttered its wings, the disciple's heart skipped a beat, but the Master moved on — his gaze fearless and loving. The lion stretched and yawned. The disciple was sure he could have stroked his back, as of a puppy. As they passed on, the parrot turned to the Master and twittered in his ear. The Master chuckled. He turned to the disciple and said, "The parrot says you are a brave boy." They both laughed and their laughter filled the forest. The parrot flew away to join its friends.

From far they could see the town called *Bazar shahar* — the city of markets. Everything that could be sold was sold there. They entered the market square amidst its cacophony. It was crowded, a bit filthy and noisy. Suddenly here and there the arguments would erupt mostly ending up in shouts and threats, sometimes fights. The undeterred salesmen shouted at the top of their voices to capture the attention of the passers-by above the din and noise. Everyone was busy making money — buying and selling, cheating and being cheated. Honesty and dishonesty, cunning and naivety, selfishness and generosity, trust and distrust lived side by side, each one trying to oust the other.

The Master changed the direction, avoiding the centre of boom and doom, he chose another path. They came to a place. The streets were crowded and noisy. They were lined on both sides with temples, mosques, churches and various structures of religious worship. Some were bustling with activity while others were quiet. All displayed boards of welcome.

Unfamiliar people in distinct attires entreated passers-by with promises — of *moksha*, nirvana, eternal salvation, *jannat*, benefits in this life and after life, charity, financial and emotional help — or threatened them into submission, with stories of hell, eternal damnation. Some preferred elegant arguments to project the uniqueness of their philosophy, their prophet, their gods, their way of life.

"What is this place, Master?" asked the disciple, placing his hands over his ears to block the noise.

"It is a bazaar — a bazaar of religions," said the Master, with a twinkle in his eyes.



The disciple saw that some, who were on the streets, bowed reverentially to the Master, while others looked on him with disdain, even hate. A man bowed to the Master and said, "Come visit our place, O Master, let your sacred feet purify our place." At the same time another man came and looked arrogantly at the Master, "Come to our place too, Master, that your 'sacred' feet may be purified," he taunted derisively, and there was a guffaw of laughter from the crowd with him. The Master walked on unperturbed, calm. Suddenly, it dawned on the disciple that his Master was like the sun in the sky — self luminous — illumining others, unaffected by adulation or rejection. He realised that just as our adulation or criticism does not affect the sun, similarly his Master is unaffected by such praise or ridicule. He treated both with calm equanimity.

His chest puffed up with pride for being the disciple of such a great Master. Instantly, the Master bent down and touched the feet of a woman. The woman was very old. She stood alone, with a faraway look. Her all-seeing eyes focused on the Master's face, and there was a flicker of recognition. A smile appeared, lingered a moment and disappeared. Her face again turned into an impassive mask. The Master took the dust from her feet and put it on his head, straightened and walked on.

The disciple realised his mistake. Without uttering a word the Master had shown him that his pride was misplaced; there were beings as great or greater than his Master, who were silent, unknown, unrecognised.

"Master, why did you not respond to those who invited you?" The Master walked on silently. "Master, do you believe in them, the religions?" The Master still kept quiet. "Master, what is the Truth? Do they have the Truth? If each one has known the Truth then how come they make contradictory statements? How come they compete with each other, quarrel with each other? How can you reconcile them all?"

The Master looked at him with compassion. "The Truth is unlimited, not confined by dogmas, beliefs, or philosophies. What we hear represents the human perception, and interpretation and expression of that perception of the vast and unfathomable Truth. The Truth belongs to no one, and can be perceived by all who aspire. However, one's perception of it is limited by the limit of one's mind and heart," he said.

He took the disciple into a large building, which had windows of different sizes and shapes. They entered a room. He asked the disciple to look at the sky through the window. Then they went out. They entered another room, again the Master asked him to look at the sky through the window. They visited many such rooms and looked at the sky from different windows in all directions.

As they came out of the building, the Master asked, "So what did you see?"

"A sky, but just a small patch of sky, Master!"

"Yes," said the Master, "and that patch of sky looked like a square, a round, an oval, a rectangle, a pentagon, large or small, similar or different, depending on the

size and the shape of the window and in which direction it was, isn't it?"

"Yes, Master."

"When we look at the supreme Truth, the infinite reality, through the window of our mind and heart — that same reality takes different forms depending upon the window in our minds, in our hearts. As a window confines the view of the sky, so also our own limitations confine our perception of the truth. If you want a wider view, you must abolish the window, go out of it onto a terrace and you see a vaster sky. And the higher you go, the vaster is the sky. Your vision becomes vaster. Your vision is wider from the rooftop and becomes increasingly wider from the hill tops, mountain tops and then you go even higher, shoot into space and suddenly the whole vision changes — the earth looks so tiny, just a warm, lovable globe. You forget about your room, your house, your street, your city, your nation because all becomes one to you. All the divisions that existed in your mind dissolve into Oneness of the earth. It is the same with the Truth. So long as you cling to the window of a dogma or a belief in your own mind you feel your view of the sky is the only true, good and perfect view. You feel that even if the others see, they don't see the true thing, at the best only a little of what the true thing is."

"Now I'm beginning to understand, Master. People see the Truth through the prism of their faith, their philosophies and dogmas. Each perceives the Truth — but the perception is limited by their own windows of beliefs and ideas. To see the whole they must become freed of all mental concepts, dogmas, beliefs, formations."

"Yes or you turn people into a goldfish in a glass bowl," the Master said.

"What is that Master?" queried the disciple.

"Have you seen a goldfish in a glass bowl?" the Master asked.

"Yes."

"What does it do?"

"Well, it circles in the glass bowl, moves up and down in that little space, looks at the world from inside its glass bowl and seems content in it," the disciple replied.

"Can you not, then, see the parallel?" the Master prodded.

"You mean to say this is what we do with ourselves? We create our glass bowl of religion or faith or creed as our space and keep on moving within it, and remain content that that is the be-all and end-all of everything that is to be and that is the whole Truth and perfect expression of the Truth?" the disciple asked.

"Well, we place a glass bowl with a goldfish wherever we want and so the goldfish can see only that which we want it to see," the Master went on.

"So religion, different faiths create an environment which they want their followers to see? Is that what it is?" Slowly a newer vision was unfolding in front of the disciple.

"We can even paint the glass bowl so that wherever we place the glass bowl the goldfish always sees the same thing," the Master added.

"So we indeed blind ourselves to the supreme Reality, by painting our own

concepts, beliefs, dogmas!” the disciple exclaimed. “Then how can we free ourselves?” he asked.

“By becoming like a fish in the ocean — freed of all constraints and barriers, free to explore and fathom the sea, to learn, to expand continuously, to grow in knowledge and wisdom.”

“But Master, the fish in the ocean is in constant peril of being eaten up or getting trapped into wrong currents. It is much safer in the glass bowl. At least it will not be dead, in the jaws of another,” the disciple argued.

“So it is preferable to be living dead in a glass bowl, than living freely, albeit dangerously? Then the whole life is wasted! The very purpose of living is lost,” said the Master quietly. “The very *raison d’être*,” he murmured.

It took quite some time for this to sink in; the disciple walked silently by the Master’s side. In that contemplative silence, a new knowledge, a new awareness seeped into his mind and his mind took off leaving behind all its fixed ideas, formations, beliefs into a vast expanse where one’s gaze became unhindered and could absorb the illumined spectacle of all that was known or yet to be known.

But the old ideas pulled him back violently and he blurted out in a voice familiar yet distant to his newer self. “Then the religions have no meaning, no role to play? Are they useless?”

“The religions, of whatever name, have value — they are formed around certain truths glimpsed by someone in the past and passed over to future generations for those who wish to glimpse them. But the human mind tries to possess the Truth rather than be possessed by the Truth. Rather than belonging to the Truth, human beings want the Truth to belong to them, as an exclusive right. It is impossible to put the Truth in a box. Instead one ends up putting oneself in a box and then one looks at the Truth by creating a window in the box, believing, one has the Truth, the whole Truth,” the Master explained.

“Then one becomes a goldfish in a glass bowl,” the disciple murmured softly.

“Yes, and when one blindly believes in one’s own perception or belief or religion as the only truth, one gets blinded by that falsehood, develops a puffed-up ego. And under the spell of that falsehood and ignorance, one becomes a ferocious piranha attacking others, wanting to devour or destroy others as soon as one comes across someone different. One is completely cut off from the highest Truth, the Supreme Reality. This is the cause of all the religious impositions, intolerance, hatred, persecution, violence and wars. The desire to overwhelm others, to impose one’s own belief upon others by whatever means consumes their minds and hearts. But Truth, the Supreme Reality cannot be realised by those who are vain, egoistic, insincere and dishonest or whose minds and hearts are primitive and unevolved, who are content with little knowledge and sit on the throne of falsehood passing judgments, condemning others, persecuting others.”

## BE THE OCEAN

“Then how do we know the Truth, the Supreme Reality?” the disciple asked with humility.

“To know the Truth one has to become the Truth, to know the ocean, one has to become the ocean,” the Master uttered cryptically.

“You are pushing too much Master,” the disciple complained, half-frustrated. “Just now you said you have to be like a fish in the ocean, completely free to roam, to explore, to expand, to grow and now you say to know the ocean a fish has to become the ocean itself?” He looked a bit incredulously at the Master and protested.

“The freedom is the beginning and not the end. As the fish explores, it knows the ocean here and there and that too not completely. The only thing the fish knows is that there is a lot more to know and that each fish knows a little of the ocean and they can share these bits of knowledge to widen their understanding. But it certainly does not exhaust all that is to be known.”

“Then one day they can all pool all their little bits of knowledge and piece it together like a jigsaw puzzle and know the ocean completely,” said disciple, exhibiting confidence in his logic. “It is just a question of ego, if they shed their ego and in all humility share the knowledge surely one day they will map the whole ocean,” he added.

“It is indeed a step in the right direction, the shedding of one’s ego and replacing it with a true and sincere seeker’s humility. But still you can know the ocean only when you become the ocean,” the Master replied.

“This is beyond me, Master, kindly explain,” requested the disciple humbly.

“Imagine a painting. Can you remember any painting?” asked the Master.

“Indeed, I can still remember the painting that I painted of that valley full of blooms. I can still remember it as if it were in front of my eyes, every line, every single stroke of paint,” he said softly going down memory lane.

“Do you think the valley is the same as your painting now?” The Master watched him contemplating.

“How can that be Master? It may somewhat look similar but never the same! From morning, noon to evening it looks different. It looks different in the spring and the winter.”

“So also is the ocean,” replied the Master. “Every one of its waves is different, never any two waves are the same. It changes from time to time. Now think of the ocean as the replica of ever changing dynamic reality, which changes from moment to moment.” The Master paused. “To know the ocean you have to become one with the ocean completely, constantly and consciously,” he whispered.

The silence that followed was dense. “Master let us sit down, please,” the disciple begged. His concentration was total. The Master sat with him in silence. After a while, the disciple opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came

out of it. He sat speechless for some more time, filled with inner joy. The hair raising *ānandā*, the delight, gripped him. Thrilled at the new inner discovery, he spoke, “Master, with a painting — which is static, frozen in time, one can know every single detail of it. But the ocean is ever changing, from moment to moment it is different. Hence one must become that ocean — one must become all the fish, all the waves, all the boats and ships, all the seagulls, all the shells, all the sea weeds, the ocean bed, in fact all of the ocean all the time. The moment one becomes one with every single thing consciously, one is that fish and one is the ocean. And one ceases looking at the ocean only from the eyes of a fish, but one looks at the fish from the eye of an ocean and then one knows the will of the ocean, then one knows the will of the ocean for the fish. The fish is no more the centre of the universe. But the fish is a part of the universe, a part of the infinite Reality. And so, then even if the fish dies the ocean continues to exist. Then one becomes immortal. One now exists as the One in many — the infinite.” With tears rolling down the cheeks, the voice filled with ecstasy, the mind enlightened with newfound knowledge, the heart expanding to overtake the sky, he knelt at the feet of his Master. “Give me your blessings, Master, that I become the ocean, the Infinite Divine — the boundless, everlasting, Supreme Reality, the One which exists as many.”

“Aspiration is the beginning of your journey. May the flame of aspiration ever burn so high and guide you always,” the Master blessed him.

## EXISTENCE

“Master, tell me what is the purpose of existence?” he asked with folded hands. “Why did this existence come into being?” He wanted to know more.

“This existence came into being because THAT which is Eternal, Timeless, the Supreme Reality willed to manifest and take delight in it, to enjoy the delight of existence,” the Master said, absorbed within.

“What is the delight of existence?” the disciple enquired.

The Master kept quiet for a while and the disciple stood there immobile — his face showing intense curiosity and humility.

The Master got up and drew an imaginary circle around the disciple and said “Now, you are a pure visual awareness — you will be able to see everything.”

The disciple felt as if his body was about to disappear, all the sensations in his body were getting numb. He could not feel his toes, knees, chest, hands, face. The sense of smell, touch, taste, hearing, seeing disappeared. He was surprisingly able to see — not with his human eye, but a sort of an all seeing eye. He could see himself, standing in the same posture as he was but could not identify himself with his own body. He could see around himself, in fact he could see everything, anywhere. He could see a tree and a bird sitting on the tree, he could see a child on the ground

eyeing a ripe fruit on the tree. The child picked up a stone and flung it at the fruit. He shouted to the bird to get away. But nothing happened, no sound came out of him. He could see simultaneously, the tree from where the boy stood and also could see the boy from the tree. He could see the tree and the fruit and the bird on the tree as if he is the stone flying towards them. He was aware of all, but unable to do anything.

He left the place and thought of his village. Suddenly he thought of his house. He entered the verandah. He saw his mother cleaning rice. "Mother, I'm here," he shouted with joy, rushing to embrace her. She continued, unperturbed. That perturbed him. His mother, sweet mother, who would run leaving everything at the sound of his footsteps was not even looking up. He realised with a pang that she felt nothing, she saw nothing. She heard nothing. Dejected he went inside. There he saw his grandfather's photo hanging on the wall. Suddenly he felt he was like a photo in the photo frame able to see but do nothing. As nobody took notice of the photo, nobody took notice of him. He went out, he saw his niece, he went to her to lift her up and fling her in the air to hear her delightful laughter, but he could not. He went to the pond and some of his younger friends were jumping into the water from the treetops. "Hey, I am here." He ran to them, shouting in his old familiar way. But none noticed or looked at him, they all went about as if he did not exist. He felt sad.

He came back where he stood, his body stood. Two cute puppies were licking his toes. He wanted to caress them, but he knew he couldn't, he didn't exist. He looked at his Master, who was sitting there on a stone enjoying the cool breeze. After what seemed like eternity, his Master smiled. He lifted his hand and the disciple felt all the sensations gushing back into him like a Niagara fall. He could feel the sensations returning from head to toe. He could hear the old familiar sounds, he could talk, he could smell, he could touch in the old familiar way. He existed after all. He could talk, walk, take part in his surroundings. He could interact and others would take notice. He bent down and caressed the puppies — the delight of touch went quivering down his entire body. The puppies leaped with joy. They started licking his hands, his face, eagerly asking him to pick them up. He picked them up and they wriggled in the crook of his arms, looking down at the receding ground. He felt a ripple of laughter coursing through his body. He laughed — a gentle ripple at first "I exist," he murmured, and the ripple expanded and became a wave "I exist, I am not only a pure awareness." The laughter came cascading down pouring out of him. "I exist," he shouted, "I am happy to exist." His laughter and his shouts filled the valley. "I exist," he ran from one tree to another, the tears of joy trickling down his cheeks. The birds looked at him in wonder and the sun shed his golden light upon his face. The cool breeze played with his flowing hair. He turned round and round and round — looking at the flowers, the trees, the birds, the animals, the distant mountains. "I exist and I am happy to be with you. I am happy to be with you all at this very moment." He screamed exploding with Joy. "I am a part of this

world, I can do whatever I want.”

He knelt again at his Master’s feet. “Thank you, Master.” He lay there, losing all awareness at his feet till the Master’s gentle touch on his head brought him back. He held his Master’s hand. “Master, please do not take your hand away. There is so much peace, that I am happy to remain thus.”

The Master held him by the shoulder and raised him. “Now you understand the delight of existence?” The Master enquired in a half mocking tone. “Master, it is in the ‘existence-consciousness-delight’ that the Divine manifests. It takes conscious delight in manifesting,” said the disciple, his being filled with supreme *ānandā* — delight.

## HARMONY

“The purpose of manifesting this universe is to manifest universal progressive harmony, where the divine manifests itself from perfection to a higher perfection — more integral, harmonious, progressive, conscious.” The Master’s voice broke his spell of bliss. “Through this all Sat-Chit-Anand expresses itself,” the Master paused.

“Master,” he silently urged the Master to go on. But the Master kept quiet, waiting for the disciple to digest, to assimilate, to analyse and to imbibe what he had just said. At last, the disciple awoke to the Master’s silence and asked, “What is harmony, Master, and what is this Universal progressive harmony?”

“Harmony, my son, is a perfect equilibrium. When the right things are at the right place, at the right time in the right manner and in the right measure, they express themselves in tandem to express something perfect. Everything is just right. A gliding of a seagull in the sky, a noiseless car in motion on a smooth road, where hundreds of machine parts work together to create a flawless motion, is harmony. A circle is an expression of harmony where all points are equidistant from the centre. A perfect painting with all the colours, hues, lines, and strokes is a harmony manifest. But harmony is of two types: static and dynamic.” The Master paused.

“Static and dynamic harmony?!” astonished, he asked.

“Harmony is a perfect equilibrium expressing something. In a static harmony, this balance or equilibrium is constant, unchanging as is seen in a painting or a block of perfect cube, a beautiful sculpture or an architecture for example, ‘a thinking man’ of Rodin, the Taj Mahal or an Eiffel Tower. But in a dynamic harmony the equilibrium is constantly re-established or maintained by a smooth exchange between the interacting parts, things or people. Each one has its place and part to play in the expression of totality. Nothing is more important or less important. Our very existence constantly uses the principles of harmony in a million ways,” the Master explained.

“How is that Master?”

“See that butterfly gently sitting on the flower, that eagle gliding in the sky.

They are examples of dynamic harmony in motion. There is required a constant balancing of the wings of the body. Look at your hand. You can open and close your fingers, can't you? Now, the muscles which bend your fingers to form a fist are called flexors and the ones which open your fingers are called extensors. There are small muscles in the hand, which bring your thumb towards your fingers or take it away. When you close the fingers to form a fist, the extensors relax and stretch in proportion to and in tandem with the flexors, which contract and shorten. While opening the fingers, the extensors contract and shorten and the flexors relax and stretch in proportion. If the tensions between these two groups are not continuously adjusted, your opening and closing of your fist will not be smooth but jerky, uneven or even awkward and that is what you see in people with spasticity or paralysis. And yet the function of the hand is more complex than just opening and closing — requiring a fine balance between different muscles all the time,” the Master explained.

They walked silently for a while. The disciple was lost again in deep thought. After a long time he spoke, the words sparkling with new illumination.

“I understand Master,” he said humbly. “You have given me a new perspective. I can see that harmony plays a very important part in this existence, yes, in a million ways. When I speak to you, when I walk with you, when a car moves, an airplane flies, a baby smiles, when a bud unfolds, when a fish swims, when a hawk swoops in the midair, when . . . oh, all over, all the time you can see harmony in motion,” he said softly; “There is harmony in emotions too!” the Master rhymed.

“I know, Master — when a mother feeds her baby, when a cow licks her calf, when an athlete tenses his body at a starting line, when people work together happily,” the disciple murmured, with a faraway look. “There are so many ways to express harmony,” he murmured.

“The world was created to express this universal progressive harmony,” the Master reiterated.

“Look at the evolution. First, there was nothing. Only the whirling masses of hot gases of Hydrogen made up of the simplest and smallest of an atom. Gradually more atoms and molecules formed, the gases cooled and got organised and formed solar systems with planets moving around the Sun in orbits. Consider, if the Earth was too near the Sun it would have been too hot and if was too far, it would have been too cold to sustain life. It is just at the right distance from the Sun, revolving at the right speed for the day and night, orbiting at the right speed around the Sun. And on the Earth, the first place to evolve life in matter, life started with a single cell organism. And then came multi-cellular organisms forming various plants and animals. As you can see — all the time a harmonious relation is constantly required to be formed.” The Master went on. “When the cells got organised, they formed different organs of a body — a heart, lungs, brain, etc. Each organ is nothing but an organised group of cells doing its own work in harmony as required. So from a single cell, a group of cells forming an organ with a purpose and specific function and many



such organs working in harmony to support a living being in a living body, which itself is a house for the soul, to manifest something even higher.” The Master went on pouring nectar in the eager ears of his disciple.

The two figures walked together on a path which seemed to enter into a blazing Sun.

*(To be continued)*

KALPESH GAJIWALA

*It is a well-known fact that one must never speak of one's spiritual experiences if one does not want to see vanishing in a flash the energy accumulated in the experience, which was meant to hasten one's progress. The only exception which can be made to the rule is with regard to one's guru, when one wants to receive some explanation or teaching from him concerning the content and meaning of one's experience. Indeed, one can speak about these things without danger only to one's guru, for only the guru is able by his knowledge to use the elements of the experience for your own good, as steps towards new ascents.*

*The Mother*

*(On Education, CWM 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Vol. 12, p. 63)*

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

(Part 19)

*(Continued from the issue of July 2021)*

## SECTION 2: SIMPLICITY AND AUSTERITY

Sri Aurobindo’s simplicity was also reflected in his love for Nature. In 1903 he accompanied the Maharaja as his secretary to Kashmir. In a letter he admires the natural beauty of Kashmir, comparing it to a heaven on earth, and amusingly adding as a footnote the Maharaja’s enthusiasm in overburdening him with work whilst Nature beckoned:

Quite agree with your estimate of Kashmir. The charm of its mountains and rivers and the ideal life dawdling along in the midst of a supreme beauty in the slowly moving leisure of a houseboat — that was a kind of earthly Paradise — also writing poetry on the banks of the Jhelum where it rushes down Kashmir towards the plains. Unfortunately there was the over-industrious Gaekwar to cut short the Paradise! His idea of Paradise was going through administrative papers and making myself and others write speeches for which he got all the credit. But after all, according to the nature, to each one his Eden.<sup>1</sup>

In another letter he reiterates the scenic splendour of Kashmir:

Kashmir is a magnificent place, its rivers unforgettable and on one of its mountains with a shrine of Shankaracharya on it I got my second realisation of the Infinite (long before I started Yoga).<sup>2</sup>

About this experience, Sri Aurobindo wrote a sonnet:

I walked on the high-wayed Seat of Solomon  
Where Shankaracharya’s tiny temple stands  
Facing Infinity from Time’s edge, alone  
On the bare ridge ending earth’s vain romance.

1. CWSA, Vol. 35, pp. 14-15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Around me was a formless solitude:  
All had become one strange Unnameable,  
An unborn sole Reality world-nude,  
Topless and fathomless, for ever still.

A Silence that was Being's only word,  
The unknown beginning and the voiceless end  
Abolishing all things moment-seen or heard,  
On an incommunicable summit reigned,

A lonely Calm and void unchanging Peace  
On the dumb crest of Nature's mysteries.<sup>3</sup>

On the love of Nature the Mother has said:

Love of Nature is usually the sign of a pure and healthy being uncorrupted by modern civilisation. It is in the silence of a peaceful mind that one can best commune with Nature.<sup>4</sup>

And on communing with Nature the Mother said:

. . . if one deeply feels the beauty of Nature and communes with her, that can help in widening the consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

The Mother has also spoken of how Nature can be a medium for receiving the universal vital force:

But when one has this capacity in his own consciousness — for example, you go for a walk and come to a place which is somewhat vast, like the seashore or like a great plain or the summit of a mountain, a place where the horizon is fairly vast, then if you have this kind of physical instinct which suddenly makes you as vast as the horizon, you have a sense of infinity, immensity; and the vaster you become, the quieter and more peaceful you become.

It is enough for you to have a contact with Nature like that.<sup>6</sup>

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 621.

4. *CWM*, Vol. 16, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., p. 401.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., p. 73.

From Manmohan’s letters to his illustrious poet friend Laurence Binyon — whom Sri Aurobindo called “a fine poet and an admirable critic”<sup>7</sup> — we can ascertain that Manmohan, Sri Aurobindo and Benoybhusan immensely enjoyed their walks in the picturesque hilly regions of Lake Districts and Derbyshire during their youth in England. In his letters to Binyon Manmohan strongly recommends that he should visit both these regions. An excerpt of a letter reads:

And Derbyshire, I can tell you from my own experience, is one of the loveliest counties in England if you only go to the right part. I stayed one whole summer at Mallock Bank, and from there had a splendid walking tour. . . .

My brothers are all right and enjoying themselves.<sup>8</sup>

In another letter Manmohan writes to Binyon about his and Sri Aurobindo’s experiences in the charming Lake Districts, a vast green mountainous region dotted with pretty lakes located in North West England. Like Sri Aurobindo, he too liked to muse and compose poems in the midst of Nature:

Lake Derwentwater is a very beautiful lake, and it has a great charm for me. I wander about the shore and muse, or compose poetry if I feel inclined — it is most charming to sit there of an evening. . . .

I have seen Borrowdale, the Honister Pass, Buttermere, Newland’s Vale, and a little while ago I and my younger brother went together to Thirlmere, with Helvellyn looming up on one side all the way, but we did not see the lake which is a very pretty one — for, being a bleak, misty day it came on to rain when we were a mile from it and we had to turn back.<sup>9</sup>

Poets usually have an affinity with Nature and the trio of poets in Manmohan, Sri Aurobindo and Binyon unmistakably had a deep love for Nature. William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, referred to as the ‘Lake Poets’, were another trio who fell in love with the Lake Districts and even lived there. On India’s golden classical age and its foremost poet, Kalidasa, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The flourishing of the plastic arts had prepared surroundings of great external beauty of the kind needed for Kalidasa’s poetic work. The appreciation of beauty in nature, of the grandeur of mountain and forest, the loveliness of lakes and rivers, the charm of bird and beast life had become a part of contemporary culture. These and the sensitive appreciation of trees and plants

7. CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 449.

8. Manmohan Ghose, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, University of Calcutta, 1970, pp. 105-06.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

and hills as living things, the sentimental feeling of brotherhood with animals which had influenced and been encouraged by Buddhism, the romantic mythological world still farther romanticised by Kalidasa’s warm humanism and fine poetic sensibility, gave him exquisite grace and grandeur of background and scenic variety.<sup>10</sup>

That Sri Aurobindo enjoyed the mountain scenery in the Lake Districts is evident since for days on end he, Manmohan and Benoybhusan went out for long walks or hikes leaving their hotel in the morning and returning late in the evening. Manmohan writes to Binyon about the joys of wandering through beautiful landscapes:

But all last week was so much taken up with walks that I really had no time to sit down and write even a few lines to you. On Friday we went all three of us with a gentleman to Thirlmere — up to the middle of it along the western side which is wooded with firs. Thirlmere is a lovely lake, and wonderfully placid and calm, lying between Helvellyn on the east and a high range of fells on the west, and its banks all round the brink are beautifully wooded, the trees going some distance up the hill sides. Helvellyn that day was shrouded in a white mist and could not very well be seen. We crossed the lake in the middle by the Bridges, and came back by the beautiful Vale of St. John and a path round Naddle Fell, getting home at 6. p.m. and eating a tremendous tea (the four of us getting through two considerable loaves).

On Saturday we went to Watendlath, which is certainly the loveliest place I have yet seen in the Lake District. It was a very fine day, and the whole party of us started at 9.40. . . . My younger brother, myself, and the same gentleman walked along Lake Derwentwater and then up the Barrow woods, a steep hill-climb into Watendlath. The scenery in these woods is quite alpine (with only the absence of snow) being a sheer rock at one place, densely wooded, from top to bottom rising one thousand feet from the Borrowdale Valley — while the hills above the woods are covered with the most lovely heather bloom. A stream goes along the little valley (when we get out of the woods) which is more than a thousand feet above Borrowdale, which afterwards makes the Lodore Falls. In a pool here I had a splendid dip, only the current was very strong, and the water in some parts quite deep enough to drown me. We all met at a hill above Watendlath, had tea at a farm-house, and returned very leisurely by the Barrow woods, reaching home at 10. p.m.

Today has turned out very fine and we intend to have a walk somewhere, though I don’t know where as yet.<sup>11</sup>

10. CWSA, Vol. 1, pp. 164-65.

11. Manmohan Ghose, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, University of Calcutta 1970, pp. 109-10.

In another letter Manmohan writes to Binyon about a walk that he missed but which Sri Aurobindo and Benoybhusan completed and also remembered it very well:

Your description of your Grisedale walk I appreciated very much. It is one of the places I did not get to: but my brothers went, and they at once remembered, when I told them, of the wrong way up which you describe, only they came down that way instead of going up.<sup>12</sup>

Manmohan so deeply loved the Lake Districts that he knew most of the trekking trails accessible from Keswick. Since Sri Aurobindo was there with him, he too probably was well-versed with these wandering paths. In a letter Manmohan recommends to Binyon the treks he should cover. In the process he reveals an adventure when he and his brothers had a narrow escape:

I hope you will enjoy yourself at Keswick, you are sure to with such enchanting mountain walks all around. Do not fail to go to a place called Watendlath, not far from Keswick right up among the hills with a lovely little lake, and, if you can, go across Watendlath Fell down to Thirlmere and home by the Ambleside Rd. There is a description of that walk in a poem of Matthew Arnold's called "Resignation". You go up to the place by a small pass with a stream running down which ends I think in the Lodore Falls — I hope there is the same glorious heather there as there was last year. You must also go over the Sticks Pass, a high gap of Helvellyn, down to Ullswater the loveliest of all the lakes and return by a path over the shoulder of Helvellyn which faces Blencathra, only this is wild and dreary. You should do it all by daylight; for we, who came back by the Sticks Pass and went to Ullswater by the shoulder of Helvellyn, started too late and were caught by the darkness in the Pass, and came down by striking matches to find the path and the sticks set up to guide the quarrymen in the snow — at the risk of breaking our necks every step. I think, after you have tried everything, you will find Borrowdale perhaps the loveliest place of all. Tell me of any walks you go; for I know the places very well.<sup>13</sup>

The Mother too had a great love for the mountains and countryside. During her youth she went for hikes in the mountains in Europe, at times for days together.<sup>14</sup> When she lived in the cities of Paris, Tokyo and Kyoto she regularly visited their gardens. She discovered Japan to be very picturesque and has also spoken about the Japanese having a "perfect love for nature and beauty".<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, the Mother

12. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

13. Papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

14. See *CWM*, Vol. 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., p. 384 and Vol. 10, p. 129.

15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., p. 152.

speaks about the joys of walking through pristine Nature:

. . . there is a subtle joy, both sweet and profound, in the sensation one feels while walking alone or with a companion with whom one is in perfect harmony, through seldom trod or virgin tracts of countryside unspoiled by any human atmosphere, where Nature is tranquil, vast, pure like an aspiration, holy like a prayer; on mountains, in forests, along stray paths beside limpid streams, or on the shores of a boundless ocean. So long as the *prana* remains individual, this joy can only be experienced when certain outer conditions are fulfilled. On the other hand, when the *prana* is truly impersonalised, universalised, *one becomes this delightful bliss in all those who feel it*; one no longer needs, in order to enjoy it, to be surrounded by certain specific material conditions.

With regard to the nervous plane, one is then perfectly free from all circumstances. One has attained liberation.<sup>16</sup>

Sri Aurobindo's love for Nature is again apparent in one of his aphorisms:

What is the use of admiring Nature or worshipping her as a Power, a Presence and a goddess? What is the use, either, of appreciating her aesthetically or artistically? The secret is to enjoy her with the soul as one enjoys a woman with the body.<sup>17</sup>

Mother's deep love and rapport with flowers is well known and in spite of her busy schedule in Pondicherry she went out for long car drives into the countryside. Sri Aurobindo notes that “plants are very psychic, but they can express it only by silence and beauty,”<sup>18</sup> and “Flowers and trees are the poetry of Nature”.<sup>19</sup>

An affinity with Nature can also help in the sadhana as indicated by Sri Aurobindo in a letter to a painter sadhak:

Your relation with Nature has been much more psychic than your relation with human beings. You must have met the latter mainly on the vital plane and not come in close contact with the eternal Beauty behind. In Nature you have felt the touch of the eternal and infinite and entered therefore into a truer relation with her.<sup>20</sup>

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

17. *CWSA*, Vol. 12, p. 483.

18. *Ibid.*, Vol. 28, p. 407.

19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 84.

20. *Ibid.*, Vol. 27, p. 687.

Sri Aurobindo was also farsighted and understood the importance of ecology and the preservation of Nature, decades before these subject matters were seriously discussed all over the globe. As far back as 1939 Sri Aurobindo told his attendants:

The forests have to be preserved, otherwise the animals will become extinct. China has lost her forests and there are floods every year.<sup>21</sup>

Towards the end of his service for Baroda State, Sri Aurobindo was specially noticed by the great yogi, Swami Brahmananda. Sometime around 1905 Sri Aurobindo with K. G. Deshpande, Madhavrao Jadhav, Barin and Devdhar made an excursion from Baroda to Ganganath (Chandod) to meet Swami Brahmananda at his ashram. This is the only time Sri Aurobindo met Brahmananda. At the time of farewell each one did *pranam* to the Swami. When Sri Aurobindo's turn came something extraordinary happened. He remarked:

He had the most remarkable eyes. Usually they were either closed or half shut. When I went to see him and took leave, he opened them fully and looked at me. It seemed as if he could penetrate me and see everything clearly.<sup>22</sup>

Sri Aurobindo has noted:

Brahmananda never gave him any counsel or advice nor was there any conversation between them; Sri Aurobindo went to his monastery only for *darshan* and blessings. Barin had a close connection with Ganganath and his Guru was one of the Sannyasins who surrounded Brahmananda, but the connection with Ganganath was spiritual only.<sup>23</sup>

But Sri Aurobindo was “greatly impressed”<sup>24</sup> by Brahmananda and called him “a great Yogi”.<sup>25</sup> In June 1906, Sri Aurobindo visited Chandod for the last time along with his friend K. G. Deshpande. Swami Brahmananda had by then passed away, and Sri Aurobindo met his successor, Swami Keshavananda. At Chandod they also inspected Deshpande's new national school.<sup>26</sup>

That Sri Aurobindo thought highly of Brahmananda is again reaffirmed in one of his letters:

21. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 678.

22. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 95.

23. CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 108-09.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

26. See A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, pp. 86-87; Website: [https://www.aurobindo.ru/images/places/index\\_12\\_e.htm/5](https://www.aurobindo.ru/images/places/index_12_e.htm/5) April 2021.



It is known however that he lived on the banks of the Narmada for 80 years and when he arrived there, he was already in appearance at the age when maturity turns towards over-ripeness. He was when I met him just before his death a man of magnificent physique showing no signs of old age except white beard and hair, extremely tall, robust, able to walk any number of miles a day and tiring out his younger disciples, walking too so swiftly that they tended to fall behind, a great head and magnificent face that seemed to belong to men of more ancient times. He never spoke of his age or of his past either except for an occasional almost accidental utterance. One of these was spoken to a disciple of his well known to me, a Baroda Sardar, Mazumdar . . . Mazumdar learned that he was suffering from a bad tooth and brought him a bottle of Floriline, a toothwash then much in vogue. The Yogi refused saying, “I never use medicines. My one medicine is Narmada water. As for this tooth I have suffered from it since the days of Bhao Girdi.” Bhao Girdi was the Maratha general Sadashiv Rao Bhao who disappeared in the battle of Panipat and his body was never found. . . . Nobody who knew Brahmananda would doubt any statement of his — he was a man of perfect simplicity and truthfulness and did not seek fame or to impose himself. When he died he was still in full strength and his death came not by decay but by the accident of blood poisoning through a rusty nail that entered into his foot as he walked on the sands of the Narmada.<sup>27</sup>

About the rusty nail leading to Brahmananda’s death, Sri Aurobindo said:

In the case of Swami Brahmananda, he lived upto 300 years so that he seemed practically immune from the action of age, but one day a rusty nail pricked him and he died of that slight wound. On the physical plane something you have not worked out turns up and shows that your conquest is not complete. That is why the process takes such a long time. You must establish the higher Consciousness in every atom of the body, otherwise what happens is that something escapes your view in the hidden depth of the lower physical being which is known to the hostile forces and then they can attack through that weak point.<sup>28</sup>

In connection with Brahmananda’s death Sri Aurobindo remarked about a boastful Bengali Sannyasi who once took some financial help from him:

Once he went to see Brahmananda. He began to curse him because he was so great. Shortly after, Brahmananda died of the prick of a nail. The Sannyasi

27. CWSA, Vol. 35, pp. 15-16.

28. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 514.

took all the credit himself! What might have happened was that Brahmananda’s death was near and this man got the suggestion of it from the subtle planes.<sup>29</sup>

About Brahmananda’s longevity, Sri Aurobindo has said:

Yes. If you know Hatha Yoga you can keep the body safe against disease. You can also reduce the slow process of ageing by supplying the vital force. The difficulty is you can’t be always in Samadhi.<sup>30</sup>

Another person known to Sri Aurobindo who prolonged his life with yogic powers was Sakaria Swami. Sri Aurobindo notes:

Sakaria Swami was Barin’s Guru: he had been a fighter in the Mutiny on the rebel side and he showed at the breaking of the Surat Congress a vehement patriotic excitement which caused his death because it awoke the poison of the bite of a mad dog which he had reduced to inactivity by a process of his Yogic will . . .<sup>31</sup>

In *The Synthesis of Yoga* Sri Aurobindo writes that Hathayoga can lead to robustness and long life:

The chief processes of Hathayoga are *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. By its numerous *āsanas* or fixed postures it first cures the body of that restlessness . . . By various subsidiary but elaborate processes the Hathayogin next contrives to keep the body free from all impurities and the nervous system unclogged for those exercises of respiration which are his most important instruments. These are called *prāṇāyāma*, the control of the breath or vital power; for breathing is the chief physical functioning of the vital forces. Pranayama, for the Hathayogin, serves a double purpose. First, it completes the perfection of the body. The vitality is liberated from many of the ordinary necessities of physical Nature; robust health, prolonged youth, often an extraordinary longevity are attained.<sup>32</sup>

But Sri Aurobindo adds:

But the weakness of Hathayoga is that its laborious and difficult processes make so great a demand on the time and energy and impose so complete a

29. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 108.

30. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 181.

31. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 75.

32. *Ibid.*, Vol. 23, p. 34.

severance from the ordinary life of men that the utilisation of its results for the life of the world becomes either impracticable or is extraordinarily restricted. If in return for this loss we gain another life in another world within, the mental, the dynamic, these results could have been acquired through other systems, through Rajayoga, through Tantra, by much less laborious methods and held on much less exacting terms. On the other hand the physical results, increased vitality, prolonged youth, health, longevity are of small avail. . . . Hathayoga attains large results, but at an exorbitant price and to very little purpose.

Rajayoga takes a higher flight. It aims at the liberation and perfection not of the bodily, but of the mental being, the control of the emotional and sensational life, the mastery of the whole apparatus of thought and consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

About his own practice of pranayama from 1904 to 1906, Sri Aurobindo has said: “Pranayama had given me good health, a lot of poetry and various experiences.”<sup>34</sup>

A disciple of Swami Brahmananda was Balananda Brahmachari Maharaj who practised tapasya in a small cave in Deoghar. He had several eminent disciples. He had great regard for Sri Aurobindo’s grandfather Rajnarayan Bose and often visited him after he became bedridden in 1897. The Sanskritist Gobindo Gopal Mukhopadhyay — whose father was a disciple — remembers: “Barin-da stayed at Deoghar for some time after his return from Pondicherry (in December 1929). I remember very clearly that one day Barin-da came to pay his respects to Balananda Maharaj, who rather chided him by saying, ‘Why have you returned to family life instead of following in the footsteps of Sri Aurobindo who has remained self-lost in yogic sadhana?’ Then itself I observed how very deep was Balanandaji’s affection for Barin-da, and how profound was his respect for Sri Aurobindo.” Mukhopadhyay has stated: “I heard from my father that whenever Sri Aurobindo came to Deoghar during the summer or Puja vacations and was to return again to Baroda, Balananda Maharaj would send through him clothes or other useful things to his guru Brahmananda Maharaj. Thus Sri Aurobindo was the connecting link between the two, and the bridge of union between Baroda and Deoghar.”<sup>35</sup> Later in the 1940s when Sri Aurobindo was shown some photos of Balananda, he remarked, “He was young when I saw him. In this photo he looks very jolly. (*About another photo of him*) Yes, this is more like him.” Sri Aurobindo was then asked if he knew him and what he thought of him; he replied, “I saw him only once. He was doing much Tapasya.”<sup>36</sup>

Speaking of Tapasya, Sri Aurobindo himself, ever since his Baroda days, was a great Tapaswi. Nirodbaran remarks: “Actually Sri Aurobindo was a born Yogi.”<sup>37</sup>

33. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

34. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2013, p. 953.

35. See Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles*, Book V, pp. 77-78.

36. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2013, p. 550.

37. Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo for All Ages*, 1994, p. 47.

As far back as 1898, prior to the days Sri Aurobindo was practising *pranamaya*, Dinendra Kumar Roy observed:

It seemed that he had made a vow to devote his life to the acquisition of knowledge. Even in the midst of the hustle-bustle of this world he was immersed in intense *tapasya* in order to fulfil this vow.<sup>38</sup>

Sri Aurobindo, however, was not a traditionalist and had varied interests. When a disciple showed a controversial section in a biography written on him by a Marathi author, Sri Aurobindo clarified about his stay in Baroda:

He creates an impression that I was seeking satsang, holy company, during my stay in Baroda. It is not true. It is true I was reading books, but on all subjects, not only religious books.<sup>39</sup>

Charu Chandra Dutt first met Sri Aurobindo in 1900. He writes:

That he was always a Yogi, a Seeker, I never doubted. Towards the end of his Baroda days, he initiated Deshpande and Madhavrao in the Onkar Mantra, and they practised it assiduously.<sup>40</sup>

Rajaram Patkar had observed Sri Aurobindo’s austerity and self-denial in Baroda and felt the seeds “of his future life as a great Yogi” lay here.<sup>41</sup> The Mother has said: “Liberation is obtained through austerities, we know that.”<sup>42</sup>

Sri Aurobindo’s absoluteness and utter determination to follow the spiritual path right to its end is palpable in a letter of August 1905 to Mrinalini Devi:

My second madness has only recently seized me. It is this by whatever means I must have the direct vision of God. . . . If God exists, there must be some way of experiencing His existence, to meet Him face to face. However arduous this path is, I have made up my mind to follow it.<sup>43</sup>

38. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 2006, p. 17 (Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Aurobindo Prasanga* — Translated from Bengali by Maurice Shukla).

39. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 113.

40. Charu Chandra Dutt, ‘My Friend and my Master’, *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, 1952, pp. 125-26.

41. Reminiscences of Rajaram N. Patkar dated 30 September 1956; sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

42. *CWM*, Vol. 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 371-72.

43. A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, pp. 81-82.

And in October 1905 he abruptly ends his letter to Mrinalini Devi stating: “It is time for evening prayer. I stop here for the day.”<sup>44</sup>

Sukumar Sen, a close friend of Raja Subodh Mullick, notes his impression of Sri Aurobindo: “I knew he used to practise Yoga.”<sup>45</sup> And Sri Aurobindo’s cousin, Sukumar Mitra, observed: “Aurobindo was of a very religious disposition. . . . He was translating the Vedanta but I do not know whether he was a Vedantist or not”<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Radha Kumud Mukherjee, a professor of history at the Bengal National College under Sri Aurobindo’s principalship and later a Padma Bhushan awardee, writes:

At home, in the domestic sphere, at the college, I had rare glimpses of his innate spirituality which made him always keep calm and reticent. I used to sit by him and had the natural advantage of studying some of the remarkable traits of his spiritual life at close quarters. . . .

Indeed I found him always absorbed in meditation and it was in that supreme state that Sri Aurobindo felt that he was seeing Lord Vasudeva all around him in the Alipore Jail. I feel it is not proper of me to reveal the secrets of Sri Aurobindo’s Divine Life at its beginnings when I had the privilege of working with him at the Bengal National College.<sup>47</sup>

Incidentally, the younger brother of Radha Kumud Mukherjee, Radha Kamal, was a college classmate of Nolini Kanta Gupta.<sup>48</sup>

Balai Deb Sharma, a student of the Bengal National College who later worked at *Bande Mataram*, writes of an incident where “Sri Aurobindo is seated like a self-forgetful poet or Yogi absorbed deep within himself.”<sup>49</sup> As regards *Bande Mataram*, Hemendra Prasad Ghose, one of its principal writers, writes:

The *Bande Mataram* was eminently successful. Here I came in intimate contact with Aurobindo — working at the same table for hours every day, discussing men and matters and adumbrating plans of work. I at once realised that the years Aurobindo had spent at Baroda were years of *sadhana* — call it *tapasya* if you like — for his great political work. His intellect has been sharpened by steady practice till it rejoiced in its own power.<sup>50</sup>

44. *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., p. 67.

45. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, January 2016, pp. 37-38.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

47. Dr. Radha Kumud Mukherjee, ‘Some Reminiscences of Sri Aurobindo’, *Mother India*, December 1963, pp. 20-21.

48. See Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 2015, p. 10.

49. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, December 2013, p. 1028.

50. Hemendra Prasad Ghose, ‘Reminiscences of Aurobindo Ghose’, *Orient Illustrated Weekly*, 27 February 1949; papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

Hemendra Prasad Ghose also notes:

Aurobindo was either practising ‘Yoga’ or immersed in writing for the *Bande Mataram*, and they [his attendants] would not worry him.<sup>51</sup>

In January 1908 Sri Aurobindo was invited by Tilak to several towns in Maharashtra to give a series of speeches on Nationalism. At Poona Sri Aurobindo privately met Tilak’s Guru, Yogi Annasaheb Patwardhan. It seems that Annasaheb predicted the yogic greatness of Sri Aurobindo and considered him to be the greatest of all contemporary leaders.<sup>52</sup>

Even the future head of the Shankaracharya sect, who in 1908 was student and a follower of Tilak, writes that in those days he and his young companions revered Sri Aurobindo so much that whenever the word *Bhagavanuvacha* (said the Lord) occurred, whilst reading the Gita, they replaced it in ink with the words *Aurobindo Uvacha* (said Sri Aurobindo).<sup>53</sup>

A few months later when Sri Aurobindo was imprisoned in Alipore jail, Nolini Kanta Gupta observed that he was “engrossed most of the time in his *sadhana* and meditations.”<sup>54</sup>

Biren Chandra Sen writes of the time in Alipore jail:

Those who practised Yoga or any form of *Sadhana* exchanged their experiences. Sri Aurobindo, again, was the centre of this group. But his interest was not confined to the spiritual sphere.<sup>55</sup>

Biren Chandra Sen adds:

My elder brother, the late Hem Chandra Sen consulted the Master about his experiences [on *sadhana*], and took instructions. . . .

At times he would relate his experiences of Yoga, at other times he would listen to experiences of his comrades and help them with suggestions . . .<sup>56</sup>

If we go back to Sri Aurobindo’s early life in India and England, his first experience in his childhood, at Darjeeling, was a strange one. He told his disciples:

51. *Ibid.*

52. See Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles*, Book V, p. 444.

53. See Nolinikanto Sarkar, *Asa Jaoar Majhkhane* (translated from Bengali by Aniruddha Sircar), *Mother India*, June 2004, p. 516.

54. See Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 1978, p. 378.

55. Biren Chandra Sen, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Remember Him’, *Mother India*, April 1964, p. 21.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

. . . it was not light but darkness that I saw at Darjeeling. I was lying down one day when I saw suddenly a great darkness rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole of the universe. . . . I had a great Tamas always hanging over me all along my stay in England. I believe that darkness had something to do with the Tamas that came upon me. It left me only when I was coming back to India.<sup>57</sup>

Many years later Sri Aurobindo candidly told his attendants:

No, I had no extraordinary spiritual experience in my early life. I remember only three experiences.

One was the Darjeeling experience. And the second came upon me at the age of twelve or thirteen. I was extremely selfish and then something came upon me and I felt I ought to give up selfishness and I tried in my own way — of course, imperfectly — to put it into practice. But that was a sort of turning-point in my inner life. The last came just before I left England. It was the mental rather than the spiritual experience of the Atman. I felt the One only as true; it was an experience absolutely Shankarite in its sense. It lasted only for a short time.<sup>58</sup>

About his experience with religion and spirituality in England, Sri Aurobindo has written:

Sri Aurobindo's first turn towards spiritual seeking came in England in the last year of his stay there. He had lived in the family of a Non-conformist clergyman, minister of a chapel belonging to the “Congregational” denomination; though he never became a Christian, this was the only religion and the Bible the only scripture with which he was acquainted in his childhood; but in the form in which it presented itself to him, it repelled rather than attracted him and the hideous story of persecution staining mediaeval Christianity and the narrowness and intolerance even of its later developments disgusted him so strongly that he drew back from religion altogether. After a short period of complete atheism, he accepted the Agnostic attitude. In his studies for the I.C.S, however, he came across a brief and very scanty and bare statement of the “Six philosophies” of India and he was especially struck by the concept of the Atman in the Adwaita. It was borne in upon his mind that here might be [a] true clue to the reality behind life and the world. He made a strong and very crude mental

57. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 393.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 395.

attempt to realise what this Self or Atman might be, to convert the abstract idea into a concrete and living reality in his own consciousness, but conceiving it as something beyond or behind this material world, — not having understood it as something immanent in himself and all and also universal.<sup>59</sup>

From the mental attempt to realise the Self in England Sri Aurobindo, soon after, had the true experience of the Self in 1893, and again later in 1903. He told his attendants:

In England, when I was reading Max Muller’s translation of the Vedanta, I came upon the idea of Atman, the Self, and thought that this was the true thing to be realised in life. Before that I was an agnostic and even an atheist. How do you explain that? You can’t say that it was in the atmosphere of the place. It was in the blood or perhaps carried from a past life. And the curious thing is that as soon as I set foot on Apollo Bunder the experience of the Self began — I did not know, of course, that it was the experience of the Self. It was a sense of calm and vastness pervading everywhere.

Then there is contact with a place which gives you an experience, and sometimes the experience is appropriate to the place. For instance, the sense of the Infinite I had at the Shankaracharya Hill in Kashmir, and at the Parvati Hills in Poona, and the reality of the Goddess in the Karnali temple near Chandod.<sup>60</sup>

Sri Aurobindo’s understanding of Indian philosophy started from his late England days and continued in Baroda and Bengal. He notes how his philosophy, instead of being merely intellectual, turned into concrete experiences:

As to Indian Philosophy . . . I made no study of it, but knew the general ideas of the Vedanta philosophies, I knew practically nothing of the others except what I had read in Max Muller and in other general accounts. The basic idea of the Self caught me when I was in England. I tried to realise what the Self might be. The first Indian writings that took hold of me were the Upanishads and these raised in me a strong enthusiasm and I tried later to translate some of them. The other strong intellectual influence [that] came in India in early life were the sayings of Ramakrishna and the writings and speeches of Vivekananda, but this was a first introduction to Indian spiritual experience and not as philosophy. They did not, however, carry me to the practice of Yoga: their influence was purely mental.

59. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 106.

60. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 695.



My philosophy was formed first by the study of the Upanishads and the Gita; the Veda came later. They were the basis of my first practice of Yoga; I tried to realise what I read in my spiritual experience and succeeded; in fact I was never satisfied till experience came and it was on this experience that later on I founded my philosophy, not on ideas by themselves. I owed nothing in my philosophy to intellectual abstractions, ratiocination or dialectics . . .<sup>61</sup>

Sri Aurobindo did not lay emphasis on the outer forms of religions; his was a spiritual path marked with experiences and realisations. In a letter of 1912 to Motilal Roy he wrote:

Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came & first turned me to this Yoga. Vivekananda in the Alipore jail gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our sadhana. The error of the Mission is to keep too much to the forms of Ramakrishna & Vivekananda & not keep themselves open for new outpourings of their spirit, — the error of all “Churches” and organised religious bodies.<sup>62</sup>

As early as 1905 Sri Aurobindo told Mrinalini Devi that “Religion these days means repeating the name of God at any odd hour, praying in public, showing off how pious one is . . .”; instead what he wanted was a direct experience of God.<sup>63</sup>

About his sadhana Sri Aurobindo has stated: “I began my yoga in 1904”.<sup>64</sup> However, prior to formally taking up yogic practice, Sri Aurobindo had some profound and significant spiritual experiences. He writes:

Before he met Lele, Sri Aurobindo had some spiritual experiences, but that [was] before he knew anything about Yoga or even what Yoga was, — e.g. a vast calm which descended upon him at the moment when he stepped first on Indian soil after his long absence, in fact with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay; (this calm surrounded him and remained for long months afterwards,) the realisation of the vacant Infinite while walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-[Sulaiman] in Kashmir, the living presence of Kali in a shrine in Chandod on the banks of the Narmada, the vision of the Godhead surging up from within when in danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay etc. But these were inner experiences coming of themselves and with a sudden unexpectedness, not part of a sadhana.<sup>65</sup>

61. CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 112-13.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

63. See A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, pp. 81-82.

64. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 98.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Let us first touch upon on the carriage incident that occurred at Baroda. Sri Aurobindo owned a horse-carriage for his city travel. In 1894 whilst he was travelling in this horse-carriage through the city streets the carriage lost control. A serious accident was imminent but was averted. The incident was so significant that in September 1939 he composed a sonnet around it named ‘The Godhead’:<sup>66</sup>

I sat behind the dance of Danger’s hooves  
 In the shouting street that seemed a futurist’s whim,  
 And suddenly felt, exceeding Nature’s grooves,  
 In me, enveloping me the body of Him.

Above my head a mighty head was seen,  
 A face with the calm of immortality  
 And an omnipotent gaze that held the scene  
 In the vast circle of its sovereignty.

His hair was mingled with the sun and breeze;  
 The world was in His heart and He was I:  
 I housed in me the Everlasting’s peace,  
 The strength of One whose substance cannot die.

The moment passed and all was as before;  
 Only that deathless memory I bore.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, whilst commenting about his first realisation in January 1908 we learn that the Divine help was always with him:

It took me four years of inner striving to find a real Way, even though the Divine help was with me all the time, and even then it seemed to come by an accident; and it took me ten more years of intense Yoga under a supreme inner guidance to find *the* Way — and that was because I had my past and the world’s Past to assimilate and overpass before I could find and found the future.<sup>68</sup>

Apropos the experiences at Apollo Bunder, Bombay in February 1893 and on the Takht-i-Sulaiman (Shankaracharya Hill), Srinagar in 1903, Sri Aurobindo told his attendants:

66. See Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo for All Ages*, pp. 47-48.

67. *CWSA*, Vol. 2, p. 607.

68. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 239.

When I landed in Bombay a great calm and quiet descended upon me. Then there was the experience of the Self, the Purusha. Later there were other characteristic experiences — at Poona on the Parvati hills, and in Kashmir on the Shankaracharya hill — a sense of a great infinite Reality was felt. It was very real.<sup>69</sup>

About his experience in Bombay, immediately on returning to India, Sri Aurobindo told his disciples:

When I first got the cosmic consciousness — I call it the passive Brahman — I did not fall into unconsciousness of common things; I was fully conscious on the physical plane. It was at Baroda and it did not go away soon, it did not last only a few moments . . . It lasted for months. . . . I could see the Higher Consciousness above the mind and I saw that it was that which was reflected in the mind. The world and all people appeared in a cinema; all these things appeared very small.<sup>70</sup>

And about his second experience of the Self, in Kashmir — he composed a sonnet, ‘Adwaita’, on it — he wrote:

One stands upon a mountain ridge and glimpses or mentally feels a wideness, a pervasiveness, a nameless Vast in Nature; then suddenly there comes the touch, a revelation, a flooding, the mental loses itself in the spiritual, one bears the first invasion of the Infinite.<sup>71</sup>

Later, whilst on a trip to Brahmananda’s Ashram near Chandod, probably in 1905, Sri Aurobindo and his friends visited the nearby temple town of Karnali. There at the Kali temple Sri Aurobindo saw the living presence of Kali. One has to climb about 100 steep steps to reach the temple after about a mile’s boating on the Narmada from Chandod.<sup>72</sup> About this visit he told his attendants:

With my Europeanised mind I had no faith in image worship and I hardly believed in the presence of God. I went to Karnali [*near Chandod*] where there are many temples. There is one of Kali, and when I looked at the image I saw the living Presence there. For the first time I believed in the presence of God.<sup>73</sup>

69. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, p. 612.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

71. CWSA, Vol. 28, pp. 333-34.

72. Website: [https://www.aurobindo.ru/images/places/index\\_12\\_e.htm/5](https://www.aurobindo.ru/images/places/index_12_e.htm/5) April 2021.

73. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2007, pp. 613-14.

In a letter to a disciple he described this experience:

Or you stand before a temple of Kali beside a sacred river and see what? — a sculpture, a gracious piece of architecture, but in a moment mysteriously, unexpectedly there is instead a Presence, a Power, a Face that looks into yours, an inner sight in you has regarded the World-Mother.<sup>74</sup>

In 1939 Sri Aurobindo depicted the experience at the Kali temple in a sonnet titled ‘The Stone Goddess’:

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,  
 From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me, —  
 A living Presence deathless and divine,  
 A Form that harboured all infinity.

The great World-Mother and her mighty will  
 Inhabited the earth’s abysmal sleep,  
 Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,  
 Mute in the desert and the sky and deep.

Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,  
 Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,  
 Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard  
 The secret of her strange embodiment,

One in the worshipper and the immobile shape,  
 A beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape.<sup>75</sup>

*(To be continued)*

GAUTAM MALAKER

74. CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 334.

75. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 608.

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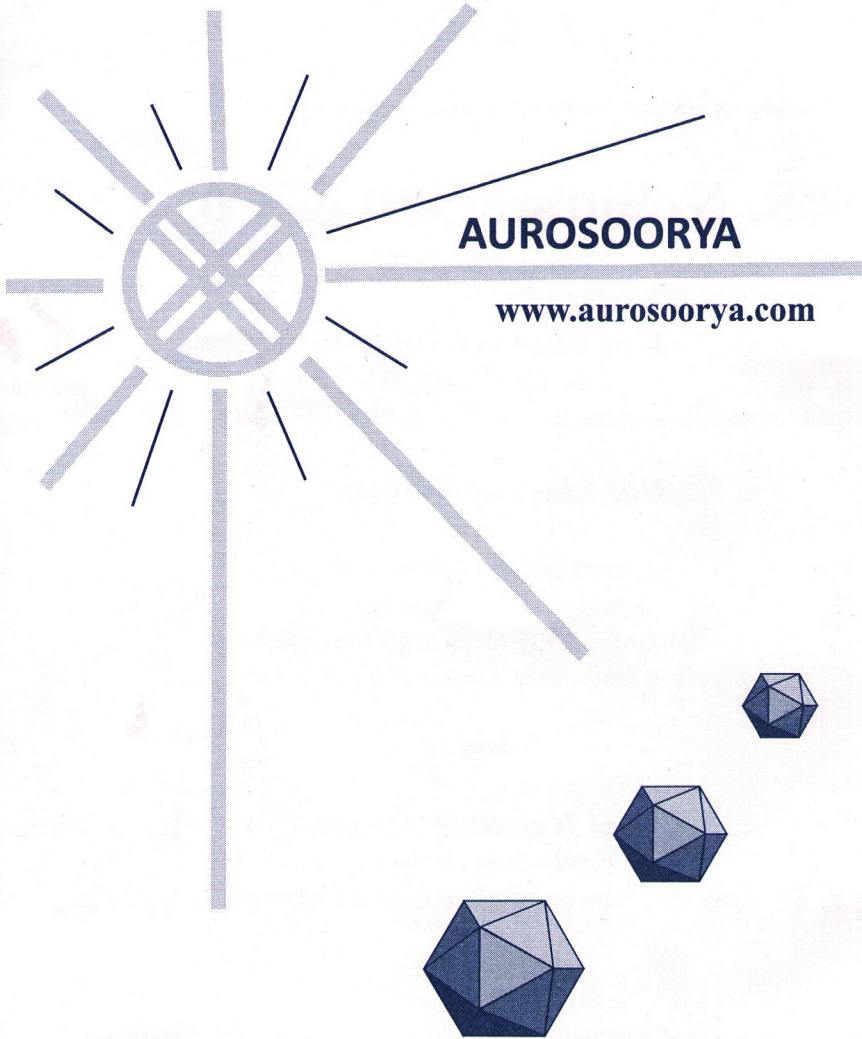
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