

The Synthesis of Oriental and Occidental: Sri Aurobindo's Poetry and Philosophy

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Abstract: A versatile genius and a revolutionary turned Mahayogi, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was the visionary of a new world order. He may be called the most radical spiritual master ever, who challenged not only perceptions and theories but also our very idea of reality. Aurobindo's integral vision of life and spirituality, his theory of evolution of not only consciousness but matter as well, place him at the head of cutting edge thinkers of all time. This paper presents a bird's eye view of the synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophy, literature and psychology in his works – especially his verses. His poetry as well as his philosophy may be regarded as a happy synthesis of old and new, East and West, realism and idealism, pragmatism and spiritualism.

Keywords: Spirituality, Brahman, Integralism, Yoga, Mysticism, Philosophy, Poetry.

Sri Aurobindo (Arbind Ackroyd Ghose) occupies a pre-eminent place among the philosophers and thinkers of modern India. His life is “a glorious chronicle of progress from patriot to poet, yogi and seer” as M. K. Naik epitomises (Naik: 47). He has produced monumental works on the *Veda*, the *Bhagavadgita* and on *Yoga* and has presented the philosophy of the *Upanishads* in a new light, and in all its integrality and depth. Poetry was his passion besides spiritual seeking. He had the advantage of both the Occidental and Oriental education. In fact, after spending his early days in England and then returning to Baroda he reoriented his western studies with the studies of Sanskrit and modern Indian languages. Aurobindo's thoughts, ideals and approach to spiritualism are mirrored in his works, more famous among which are: *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture* and *The Future Poetry* (published first of all in the philosophical monthly of the Ashram, *Arya*).

Aurobindo's poetic evolution corresponds roughly with the three phases of his life: 1879-1893, when he was in England for his studies; 1893-1906 at Baroda and 1906-1910 at Calcutta were the periods of his deep involvement in the freedom struggle – this was the time of his intense personal *sadhana*, when he also acquainted himself with Indian Literature and culture: a period of *jnana* and *karma yoga*; 1910-1950 is the third and final stage of his *siddha yoga* at Pondicherry. He wrote many lyrics, sonnets, futurist poems in quantitative metre. His early poems – *Songs of Myrtilla*, *Night by the Sea*, *Urvashie*, *Love and Death*, *Chitrangada*, *The Tale of Nala* and *Baji Probhou* are written in a totally romantic style. In his magnum opus *Savitri*, (23,813 lines, in twelve books and forty-nine

cantos, on which the poet worked for fifty years and more), he has retold the story of Savitri given in the Mahabharata, in an allegorical fashion. He reminds us of the love poet John Keats not only through his music, romance and the use of sensuous imagery but also by introducing Greek names such as Aethon and Glaucus which add a classical touch to his poetry. His early poetry bears the stamp of classical impact:

Thus too Heracles
In exile closed by the Olynthian seas,
Not seeing Thebes nor Dirce any more,
His friendless eyelids on an alien shore. (*Lines on Ireland*, 1896)

In the following stanza the European and eastern myths are blended together in an extraordinary meeting across the world:

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.
("Envoi", *Songs of Myrtilla*: 1895)

His poetry is philosophical, theological, mythological and epic, drawing on an eclectic mix of ancient Hindu tradition, modern European universalism, mysticism and even contemporary science. In his writings it is difficult to determine where poetry ends and mysticism begins; in fact both are interwoven. In Sri Aurobindo there is a deep and profound hope for the East because of its spiritual tendencies. His life is a saga of psychic experiences. Some such experiences— the lifting of an enveloping darkness while he was returning to India, a deep sense of inner peace that descended on him as soon as he put his foot on the soil of India (Apollo Bunder in Bombay), the experience of the vacant Infinite in Kashmir (Takht-i-suleman or Hill of Shankaracharya), the experience of a presence and a power in the shrine of Goddess Kali in a temple on the bank of the Narmada, the experience of finding thoughts entering from outside and flowing out as speech after the Surat Congress in 1907, the vision of Krishna or Narayana in Alipore jail and the epoch making realization in 1926 – are the turning points of his life. Like the Sufis, Sri Aurobindo feels that the entire creation is said to be pervaded by the presence of God. When we read the poems of Sri Aurobindo, like *The Hilltop Temple*, *The Stone Goddess*, *Nirvana* and *Shiva* we can imagine and understand the supreme height of creativity that he has attained.

All is abolished but the mute Alone.
The mind from thought released, the heart from grief,
Grow inexistent now beyond belief;
There is no I, no Nature, known-unknown. (*Nirvana*)

In *The Stone Goddess* the expression is still vivid:

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.

Sri Aurobindo grasps the eternal reality in his works. His pilgrim soul voyages through the myriad ways of life to the region of the timeless. He taught us the possibility of transformation of the world-consciousness

through a spiritual journey of discipline and yoga. Though the potential is inherent in all, it is a receptive mind that through discipline can grasp the profound and succeed in attaining Realization.

A literary person is as much a product of his society as his art is a product of his own reaction to life. Literature, as we know is also affected by the physical, cultural, social, political, psychological and literary background of a country (Samantaray: 133). Ghosh was born during the period when India witnessed the wave of renaissance. It had shaken the traditional foundation of Indian polity and brought about an intellectual, social, cultural, religious and political revolution in India (Mohanty: 221). The cultural contact India had with the West through British rule moulded his mind. The Greco-Roman culture, according to Sri Aurobindo, is predominantly mental and intellectual, and the modern European culture is predominantly materialistic, whereas India continues to manifest her spiritual tendency. The central theme of his vision is the evolution of human life into life divine. He envisaged a world union where the entire humanity could exist in peace, harmony and unity. *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* is an exposition of this ideal. Spirituality, according to the seer, has helped Indian culture to retain its originality in the world culture. Since he was educated in the English schools and Universities from an early age, it may be assumed that he was influenced by the western philosophy and philosophers and was aware about the value of western secular thought, its intellectual tradition, its science and technology:

He had studied western philosophy and literature at an early age and was well acquainted with the comprehensive systems of some of the Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. He was well acquainted with some of the idealistic philosophies of recent times. Hegel, Whitehead and the vitalist Bergson seem to have exercised some influence on the mental make-up of Sri Aurobindo. (Lal: 159)

His works reveal a wonderful unison of oriental and occidental learning. If Sri Aurobindo is known to the world, it is for his philosophy of Integralism as expounded in *The Life Divine*, wherein he has presented a synthetic view of Western rationalism and Indian spiritualism. His main objective was to present the Indian metaphysical heritage in the English language to the western elite in the western format. He also imbibed literary ideas from Matthew Arnold and the British Romantics. In spite of his anglicized childhood and youth, he remained Indian in sensibility. Aurobindo wrote in 1891:

Mine is not Byron's lightning spear,
Nor Wordsworth's lucid strain'
Nor Shelley's lyric pain,
Nor Keats's, the poet without peer.
I by the Indian waters vast
Did glimpse the magic of the past,
And on the oaten-pipe I play
Warped echoes of an earlier day.
(“To a Hero-Worshipper”, *Collected Poems*: 8)

As we know, the Vedas and Vedanta are the inexhaustible fountains of Indian spirituality and Aurobindo was deeply influenced by the vedic wisdom and knowledge. He had also studied the ancient Indian Philosophies including the *Darshans* particularly those of Advaita Vedanta and Yoga.

Like most of the Western poets, Aurobindo enunciated a poetic theory of his own. He never wrote a poem just for artistic satisfaction or for the pleasure of publication. He thought of poetry as *sadhana yantra* for achieving the life divine or in other words we may say, poetry for him was a part of *sadhana*, “a means of contact with the divine through inspiration” (*The Future Poetry* : 504). He conceptualized poetry as the “Mantra of the Real”. The function of poetry, according to Aurobindo, should be to channelize human mind from mundane and materialistic disorder towards intellectual maturity and spiritual orderliness. He recognizes that the poetic inspiration cannot be subject to rational scrutiny. Poetry aims at achieving the harmony of five perennial powers – Truth, Beauty, Joy, Life and Spirit – labelled by Aurobindo as the suns of poetry. In his literary order poetry is a means of spiritual expression that “helps to open the consciousness” (Sri Aurobindo: 505).

Aurobindo believes that philosophy is not religion; it is a way of understanding concepts, including the Ultimate Reality or Brahman. Brahman, in itself, is indeterminable and unknowable. It cannot be determined either by affirmation or negation. According to the seer, such a negation limits the Absolute by denying it the freedom of self-expression and self-determination. His Integral Advaitism establishes the oneness of the Absolute or Brahman without denying the reality of the world.

The real monism, the true Advaita”, observes Sri Aurobindo, “is that which admits all things as the one Brahman and does not seek to bisect Its existence into two incompatible entities, and eternal Truth and an eternal Falsehood, Brahman and not-Brahman, Self and not-Self, a real Self and an unreal, yet perpetual Maya. If it be true that the Self alone exists, it must be also true that all is Self.

(*The Life Divine*, Vol. 1:39).

The triune principle of Existence, Conscious-force and Bliss (*Sachchidananda*) remains central to Aurobindo's metaphysical stand. His main philosophical achievement was to introduce the concept of evolution into vedantic thought. He rejected the materialistic tendencies of both Darwin and Samkhya and proposed an evolution of spirit along with that of matter. He realized that Matter and Spirit are the two inseparable poles of Reality. In his supramental vision, Life cannot exist without Matter, and so, Spirit without Life. In Aurobindo's philosophy, the process of ascending towards Supreme Reality or Evolution of man and the process of descending towards Matter is possible only because there has been an involution of Spirit into Matter. Evolution is not ascending from the lower to the higher by rejecting the lower, but the lower is uplifted and transformed. When life evolves from matter, matter is not destroyed; neither is life destroyed when the mind emerges from it.

He traces this theory of involution and evolution in *Heracitus*. A mystic and yogi as well as a born poet that Aurobindo is, he has explored and examined and classified the planes of poetic inspiration or we may say the four levels of consciousness from which springs the inspiration for mantric utterances of poetry. He labels them as Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind and Overmind. Above even Overmind is what he calls Supermind. The chief beauties that glorify the poetry of Sri Aurobindo are *Dhvani* (suggestion), *Rasa* (taste), *Bhava* (idea), *Alamkara* (beauty), and *Auchitya* (propriety). As an upholder of Dhvani theory, he declares that dhvani or suggested sense is the soul of poetry. Dhvani theory goes hand in hand with rasa theory - one of the greatest contributions that India has made to the world literature. Rasa is never directly expressed but always suggested. Indian poetics equates the pleasure of rasa with that divine bliss which the seer gets when he realizes God in the depths of his being. The main function of rasa is to create a state of perfect beatitude when mind becomes serene and tranquil and susceptible to perpetual bliss or *akhanda ananda*. Sri Aurobindo has interpreted the concept of rasa in Upanishadic lights. Aurobindo's Absolute (Brahman) is not just beyond distinctions of Being and Becoming, Inactivity and Activity, Unity and Multiplicity, but embraces them in all Itself. It is not merely *neti-neti*, "not this, not that" but also *iti-iti*, "this, this".

We know love and death are the two most powerful and fundamental forces in life, in the human psyche and in the very structure of existence. In the early poetry of Aurobindo we find passion, power and impulse. In his later poetry, Divine Love takes the place of romantic yearning.

Love is Divine

Love is the hoop of the God's

Heart to combine

Someday surely, the world too

Shall be saved from Death by Love (*Eric*, Aurobindo: Act I, Sc. I, p. 2)

The celestial love between Urvasie and Pururavus, Chitrangada and Urjoon, Savitri and Satyavan assumes spiritual significance and attains fulfillment. Aurobindo feels that love is the immortal element in the mortals. It is in *Savitri* that the theme of love becomes most overt:

Love must not cease to live upon the earth;

For love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven,

Love is the far Transcendent's angel here;

Love is man's lien on the Absolute.

(Aurobindo, Book 10 Canto III: 633)

Death asks Savitri to forget Satyavan since he is dead and that love is a desire of the flesh. But Savitri retorts saying that her love transcends the limitations of the flesh:

My love is not a hunger of the heart,

My love is not a craving of the flesh,

It came to one from God, to God it returns. (p.688)

He is convinced that it is only through love, spiritual love, a symbol of the Divine that the entire life of humankind can be transformed. The poem

The Fear of Life and Death, by Sri Aurobindo is mystic and the figurative description of death is amazing. The poet says that death is like a beautiful bride, with a laughing face, who opens the gates of eternal bliss for the humankind. For the seer death is only a passage from one form of life to another. The Upanishads teach that the soul is unborn and undying. Birth and death are the attributes of the body and not of the soul. Death, according to the seer, is a transition. It is an apparent negation between two affirmations of birth and birth. Echoing *The Gita*'s attitude towards death, Sri Aurobindo says:

Death is but changing of our robes to wait
In wedding garments at the Eternal's gate.

And again

Out of darkness we still grow to light
Death is our road to immortality. (*Savitri*: 482)

The notion of rebirth plays a vital role in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy because it is an aspect of the process of evolution.

Aurobindo's *Synthesis of Yoga* outlines how the yogas of the *Bhagavad Gita* could be harmonized into a synthesis that would serve the entire globe. In its spiritual sense, yoga is the process by which the individual identifies with the cosmic. The word yoga is used throughout the *Bhagavad Gita* in the sense of integrating oneself with the Ultimate Reality. Yoga is a science of experience in which *Jivatman* (individual soul) is merged with the *Paramatma* (Universal Soul or God). Yoga disentangles the individual soul from the phenomenal world of sense objects and links with the Absolute. It harnesses the will and emotions and expands the power of analysis, insights and visions. *Purna yoga* or Integral yoga, to which Aurobindo subscribes, is not only the attainment of *mukti* but also an active participation in the creative delight of the Absolute in order to achieve the divinization. The aim of Aurobindo's yoga "is to bring down the power of the Absolute in order to harness it to the service of man and establish the kingdom of God on earth" (Raju: 300). He, and his spiritual collaborator The Mother (Mira Alfassa Richard), are convinced that integral education can play an important role in the development of the individual and the blossoming of the nation. In fine, Sri Aurobindo represents a remarkable amalgamation of Indian and Western traditions, and his poetry is a dialogue between the past and the present. His philosophy (which cannot be separated from his poetry) may be regarded as a happy synthesis of old and new, East and West, realism and idealism, pragmatism and spiritualism. In his thought a true synthesis of Indian and Western philosophies allows each to reach their fulfillment. The West, hampered by its intellectualism and existential outlook, requires the acceptance of a spiritual standpoint. Indian thought is spiritual but must break out of its individualism and acquire a more dynamic and cosmic character. We may quote Romain Rolland here who called him "the completest synthesis of Asia and Europe".

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Mystic Force

- Itishri Sarangi

I find the mystic force within me
 The canopy of my dreams that blankets me
 I feel the thrill of exploring the unexplored
 That revitalize the energy within me.
 To feel myself fully humane , fully alive
 A soul that is ready to unfold
 I let the soul fly away
 Ah! My soul is flying across time in the endless sky
 Like an eagle over the majestic mountain
 Almost touching the heaven
 Above all ego and stress.

