

Invocation

Savitri

B H A V A N
Study notes and Newsletter

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*“Lo! Here are flowers and benedictions!
Here is the smile of divine Love!
It is without preferences and without repulsions.
It streams out towards all in a generous flow
and never takes back its marvellous gifts!”*

*Her arms outstretched in a gesture of ecstasy,
the Eternal Mother pours upon the world
the unceasing dew of Her purest love !*

*The Mother's 'Prayers and Meditations'
April 28, 1917*



“Altar and Kitchen” in Savitri

Talk at Savitri Bhavan on February 16, 2003

by Dr. Prema Nandakumar

We had been hoping for a visit from Dr. Prema Nandakumar for a long time. It was a great joy that she was able to be our guest in Auroville for two days in February. She gave two talks, the first in English on February 16, and the second in Tamil on February 17th. Here is the text of her English talk. Although Dr. Nandakumar delightfully and fluently spoke and sang her quotations in their original tongues, for typographical convenience we have substituted English translations in this edited version.

Life for us is a constant attempt to tune the internal and external spaces within and without us. Which is more important in the home? The altar or the kitchen? Which is better – *Aham* or *Puram*? Can one lead a complete life in one of these spaces alone? Obviously this is not possible. The two words are closely interlinked in earth-life. Though for the sake of convenience in setting up philosophical concepts we speak of the material life as different from spiritual life, the two are together all the time, each with innumerable gradations within themselves and every one of them strung to the rest, like beads on a string.

For instance, man is not able to imagine an earth without God. There is no term for such an existence except the word, “godless”. One has to deny God or affirm God, and so the Divine merrily has his existence all the time! This is but one of the many miraculous paradoxes of earthly life. One may deny God, refuse to salute an icon of God, recite a prayer or meditate upon God, but still godliness is flowing in him all the time, as long as his heart is touched by compassion. That sentiment which impels man to love another, feel the pain of the other person as his own and rush to the rescue of the other man in distress is a godly sentiment; who can deny it? This compassion, love, *karuna*, so beautifully imaged in the life of Buddha has been immortalised by Narsingh Mehta in the poem, “Vaishnava janato” [*Translated by Swami Mahadevananda*]

*A true Vaishnava has compassion for all,
Any who suffer he helps,
But having helped he never then feels
Proud of the deed he has done.*

*He will bow down his head and make himself low
To all, he despises none.
He is pure in his thoughts, in his speech and his deeds,
Their mothers are blessed by such ones.*

Why should man look beyond what he eats, where he sleeps and how he thinks, go out of his way not to despoil others by his greed, fraud, desire or anger? Who knows? Suffice it to say that in him are integrated the two spaces within and without:

*Ignorance will never rule over him,
And his mind is always detached.
In him one can see God's ecstasy.
He is the true 'pilgrimage'.*

In the same manner, even the most spiritually inclined in us cannot do without sustenance of some kind or the other. Born on earth, we are, willy nilly, part of a social group that has learnt to abide together in terms of mutual help. There is variety in this living together, people catering to the different needs of other people that may be brought under the categories of food, clothing and dwelling place: *roti, kapda aur makhan*. Of course, Indian adventurers in the realms of the inner spaces have tried to escape the shackles imposed by the external paraphernalia by running away from society. But run where?

Along with the Vedic stream in India that gave prime place to married life (there are no monks in ancient Vedic culture) there has also been the Sramanic stream which has extolled the efficacy of monkhood. The *Dhammapada* has special chapters on those who have taken to renunciation. The verses reveal that the renunciate has to be on guard all the time and it is not easy to be a bhikku. There are rules and rules and the perfect Bhikku is hard to find:

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He indeed is a Bhikku who does not identify his soul with his name and form, his mind and body, and who grieves not for what he does not possess.

The Bhikku who practises Metta, Compassion, and who abides happily in the Wisdom of the Buddha, he has stilled conditioned existence and attains of a surety the blessed state of Peace Supreme.

Even if the renunciate achieves perfection in desirelessness, still the body has to have sustenance. One can give up everything and go away to the Himalayas, yet the person would still need sustenance ... fruits, roots, whatever. Even if he is able to give up all food and water and sit still in yoga posture for a period of time, still would the body keep acting with cells and blood, and the body keep functioning, for such is the material sheath in which the spark of divinity has chosen to reside as soul, giving it life. There is a wonderful legend about this problem of the inner and outer spaces, the body and the spirit and the aspiring spirit that feels confined by the body.

About 1400 years ago a brahmin named Madhurakavi lived in a place called Tirukkolor in Tirunelveli District in South India. Impelled by a desire to know about the Truth of Existence, he travelled in search of a proper Teacher who could initiate him into god-knowledge. As with millions before and after him, Madhurakavi went to the Himalayas in search of a Guru but could find none to set his heart aflame with god-consciousness.

When he was about to give up his search in despair, he saw a brilliance appear at a distance. As he went towards it, the light kept receding. Thus many days and nights were spent in wandering till Madurakavi came to a village adjacent to his own village. The brilliance led him into the temple of Tirukurunkudi and withdrew at the trunk of a tamarind tree that was growing within the temple wall. Madhurakavi found a young man seated there in yoga. His face flashed a divine calm. Trying to draw him out, Madhurakavi posed a question. Pat came the answer from the young yogi. Madhurakavi's doubts were set at rest in a moment and he became the earnest disciple of the young Yogi who was later to be hailed

as Nammalwar, known as the prime among the aspirant community (*prapanna jana kootastha*) by Vaishnavas.

Madhurakavi's question had seemed a conundrum: "If the little one were to be born in the womb of death, what will it eat to sustain itself and where will it be?" This is the riddle of existence. If the individual soul, the jivatman, were to be born in a body that is already dead (and what is our body but matter that is sure to disintegrate?) what will it hold on to to keep itself alive, and where will it find its place of existence? The reply is the answer: "The jivatman will eat That (the knowledge of Brahman) as sustenance and remain there."

Matter and the Spirit are thus co-ordinated into a whole. It is no use rebelling against Matter as it is also Reality (Sat). Any such clawing and criticising of matter would be no more than the rattling of the cage by a mouse that has been trapped. It were best to remain quiet within the trap, for there is sure to be a way out of the trap at the proper time. Instead of such rattling, make matter itself reflect the spirit within! Hence Sri Aurobindo's promise: *Even the body shall remember God!*

Tuning the inner and outer spaces to perfection when the Spirit gets reflected in Matter is Integral Yoga. The epic poem *Savitri* helps us in such tuning to the divine. Here are the mantric lines which describe such a perfect tuning by Savitri in the forest hermitage:

*A worshipped empress all once vied to serve,
She made herself the diligent serf of all,
Nor spared the labour of broom and jar and well,
Or close gentle tending or to heap the fire
Of altar and kitchen, no slight task allowed
To others that her woman's strength might do.
In all her acts a strange divinity shone.
Into a simplest movement she could bring
A oneness with earth's glowing robe of light,
A lifting up of common acts by love.*

(p. 470)

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The altar needs fire; the kitchen too. What is impossible if we have the Seer-Will, Agni, showing us the way? He can give us all the riches we want for our material existence as well as for our soul's sustenance:

*I adore the Flame, the vicar, the divine Ritwik of the
Sacrifice, the summoner who most finds the ecstasy.*

Thus runs Sri Aurobindo's translation from one of the "Hymns to the Mystic Fire".

So what is the altar and what is the kitchen?

While the kitchen represents our material life, the altar we set up at home may be likened to all that mankind has garnered in terms of religion and spirituality, the symbols, the icons, the myths. The age-old evolved symbol of worshipping on an altar is very much present throughout *Savitri*. Indeed, one may safely say that the diction of ritualistic worship on an altar is used all over the epic to give a local habitation and a name to the meandering moments of yogic practice and yogic realisation. We find this at the very beginning, in 'The Symbol Dawn':

*All grew a consecration and a rite
The wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind
Arose and failed upon the altar hills;
The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky.*
(p. 4)

In Vyasa's epic we have a verse when we get introduced to Savitri who is now grown up as promised by the Goddess, *Kanya tejaswini*. She has just completed the rituals of a festival (bathing, fasting, chanting hymns, offering oblations to Agni) and she comes to Aswapati with the prasada, gives it to him and salutes him:

*First giving the prasada to her father she touched his
feet in obeisance; then that beautiful maid stood, with
her hands folded, close by the side of the King.*
(Tr. by R.Y. Deshpande)

In Sri Aurobindo's epic, there is Aswapathy at peace, with his daughter Savitri growing up beautiful and brilliant in every way. Then a day comes when he sees her as if with a new pair of eyes, walking towards him. The Vyasan idea of a god-worship (*devata-abhigamanam*) in traditional terms is not found here, but the soul-significance of a person coming after completing a worship is unmistakable. This is the special Aurobindonian way of tuning the inner and outer spaces:

*But like a shining answer from the gods
Approached through the sun-bright spaces Savitri.
Advancing amidst tall heaven-pillaring trees,
Apparelled in her flickering-coloured robe
She seemed, burning towards the eternal realms,
A bright moved torch of incense and of flame
That from the sky-roofed temple-soil of earth
A pilgrim hand lifts in an invisible shrine.*

(p. 372)

This is exactly how we move from the plane of religion to the plane of spirituality. We need the symbols, we need the altar. Even Savitri needed it at the most challenging moment in her life. Sri Aurobindo describes Savitri as she wakes up on the Fated Day:

*Then silently she rose and service done,
Bowed down to the great goddess simply carved
By Satyavan upon a forest stone.
What prayer she breathed her soul and Durga knew.
Perhaps she felt in the dim forest huge
The infinite Mother watching over her child,
Perhaps the shrouded Voice spoke some still word.*

(p. 561)

However, the point to be noted is that the spiritual space widens beyond the religious symbol of the altar. The carved Durga is a physical representation of what Savitri is sure about: how the Divine Mother as the Indwelling Universal is watching her and is guarding her all the

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time! This is the certainty that is given to those who set up an altar as a guide, not as an end in itself. For the realised soul looks upon all creation as the altar. We have innumerable instances of this in the Indian heritage. There is the immortal hymn of Guru Nanak

*The firmament is Thy salver;
The sun and the moon Thy lamps;
The galaxy of stars are as pearls scattered,
The woods of sandal are Thy incense.
The breezes blow Thy royal fan;
The flowers of the forests
Lie as offerings at Thy feet.
What wonderful worship with lamps is this
O Thou destroyer of fear!
Unstruck Music is the sound Thy temple drums.*

Such mystic visions of Existence have led many great hymnologists to use the diction associated with an altar to convey their experiences. Here is Poygai Alwar, the first of the great Vaishnava hymnologists, who lights a lamp in front of the Discus-wielding Lord:

*Deeming the world as bowl, the full sea as ghee, the
fierce-rayed Sun as the luminous wick, I have twined
a garland of speech for the feet of Him who wields
the red-flaming discus so that there may be freedom
from the ocean of misery.*

(Tr. K.C. Varadachari)

When the mind needs strength, when the soul seeks to fly in the free spaces of the beyond, every aspect of existence becomes the altar. The figure of Durga becomes the macrocosm, and the deities look at us from everywhere in *Savitri*. The poem gives us such altar-spaces throughout the telling, drawing us to a meditative mood by a mere association of ideas. As for instance, when we are being overwhelmed by a veritable downpour of the Overmind in the second Canto, suddenly a familiar-yet-distant altar appears before us, giving us a

moment to take breath and then enter the spaces of meditation by gazing at a living, golden image:

*As in a mystic and dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies
Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple-door to things beyond.*

(p. 15)

In one stroke, Sri Aurobindo has telescoped our idea of an external altar into the image itself, where the dancer and the dance have become one, where the way and the goal have become inseparable.



*Dr. Prema Nandakumar
speaking under the trees at Savitri Bhavan on February 16, 2003*

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We are shown Savitri in yogic meditation, and Aswapati too. We have the incandescent image of Aswapati at the altar in the canto 'The House of the Spirit and the New Creation'. Rather we are given the image of Aswapati's "*living, sacrificed and offered heart / Absorbed in adoration mystical*":

*In the luminous stillness of its mute appeal
It looked up to the heights it could not see;
It yearned from the longing depths it could not leave.
In the centre of his vast and fateful trance
Half-way between his free and fallen selves,
Interceding twixt God's day and the mortal's night,
Accepting worship as its single law,
Accepting bliss as the sole cause of things.
Refusing the austere joy that none can share,
Refusing the calm that lives for calm alone.
To her it turned for whom it willed to be.
In the passion of its solitary dream
It lay like a closed soundless oratory
Where sleeps a consecrated argent floor
Lit by a single and untrembling ray
And an invisible Presence kneels in prayer.*

(p.132)

Here, as in several places, we are made aware of the "*longing depths*" with which we are certainly bound close. One is also reminded at this juncture of Sri Aurobindo's great little poem, 'A Tree':

*A tree beside the sandy river-beach
Holds up its topmost boughs
Like fingers towards the skies they cannot reach,
Earth-bound, heaven-amorous.*

*This is the soul of man. Body and brain
Hungry for earth our heavenly flight detain.*

(SABCL 5:47)

However, Sri Aurobindo's words in these passages are not ones of despair, for his yoga was not confined to consciousness alone. The body was equally important. Altar, yes: but the kitchen is as important for the home and the world! Even renunciate siddhas like Tirumoolar have not rejected the body. Tirumoolar calls upon us to sustain the body as it is the temple of God:

*Having understood his presence in Linga plane and
searched for him there and unable to find him, when
I understood that He is indeed immersed in the eight
[the five elements, the sun, the moon and the soul],
He was pleased to consider my body as his temple.*

(Tr. by Prema Nandakumar)

One must have a double, integral vision of the body and the Divine's presence in the body and then there would be no hurdle to our progression in the path of yoga. Tirumoolar uses yet another telling simile to bring to us the close interaction of the altar and the kitchen in drawing us close to the Divine:

*When looking at the elephant doll carved of wood,
one had no idea of the wood. But when one thought
of the wood, the elephant vanished. In the same way
the Supreme is not visible to them who see this world
made of elements. But when with the help of the Guru
one is able to take the vision beyond the elements,
then the Supreme Brahman veils the elements.*

(Tr. by Prema Nandakumar)

Since all of us are sustained by the kitchen in the course of our lives on earth, and at the same time, we guard our altar with loving devotion, Savitri becomes our ideal leader, the avatar who can draw us to the royal path for she never forgot her yoga whether in the kitchen and before the altar: Her "close gentle tending or to heap the fire / Of altar and kitchen" went on at the appropriate time. It was an integral life, in which she lifted up even the most ordinary gestures by love. This life of Savitri had been

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going on for one whole year and the passage brings us the realisation that there has been no division of the inner and the outer. Together they have been working at tandem. Hence the “kitchen” and the “altar” together become core-icons in the epic poem.

The message of *Savitri* is clear. There is going to be no rejection of life. But just as Savitri does all her work with love, and “*in all her acts a strange divinity shone*” one has to make the material life perfect too, so that it will not hinder or destroy the soul within.

Sri Aurobindo also teaches, in certain seminal passages of *Savitri*, how **not** to keep our kitchen, how not to pollute and corrupt our external activities. Avoid the excess in all that forms the material life! How we do destroy the harmony of existence in a million ways!

*Impure, sadistic, with grimacing mouths,
Grey foul inventions gruesome and macabre
Came televised from the gulfs of Night.
Her craft ingenious in monstrosity,
Impatient of all natural shape and poise,
A gape of nude exaggerated lines,
Gave caricature a stark reality,
And art-parades of weird distorted forms,
And gargoyle masques obscene and terrible
Trampled to tormented postures the torn sense.*
(p.212-13)

...

*A bull-throat bellowed with its brazen tongue;
Its hard and shameless clamour filling Space
And threatening all who dared to listen to truth
Claimed the monopoly of the battered ear;
A deafened acquiescence gave its vote,
And braggart dogmas shouted in the night
Kept for the fallen soul once deemed a god
The pride of its abysmal absolute.*

(p. 216)

But we need not feel totally disturbed, for the Ideal has not vanished from the mind-screen of mortal man. He continues to hope, to strive in the Sunlit Path marked out by elders like Hanuman who went in the path of Charanas in the sky (*chaaranaa charithe pati*) when he went in search of Sita to Lanka. Sri Aurobindo places before us the Ideal we should strive for (as many children of the Divine Mother are doing all over the world) by tuning ourselves to the Divine both in our outward life and in our inscape:

*Onward he passed to a diviner sphere:
There, joined in a common greatness, light and bliss,
All high and beautiful and desirable powers
Forgetting their difference and their separate reign
Become a single multitudinous whole.
Above the parting of the roads of Time,
Above the Silence and its thousandfold Word,
In the immutable and inviolate Truth
For ever united and inseparable,
The radiant children of Eternity dwell
On the wide spirit height where all are one.*

(p. 282)

When we tarry at those soft moments when Savitri calms Satyavan and they converse in the final canto, the altar-kitchen combine gets underlined with indelible ink. Not division but unity, integrality, togetherness and fulfilment! Thus Savitri to Satyavan:

*All now is changed, yet all is still the same.
Lo, we have looked upon the face of God,
Our life has opened with divinity.
We have borne identity with the Supreme
And known his meaning in our mortal lives.
Our love has grown greater by that mighty touch
And learned its heavenly significance,
Yet nothing is lost of mortal love's delight.
Heaven's touch fulfils but cancels not our earth:*

(p.719)

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Each aspect of our inner life (meditation, vision, life's experience) can help us perfect our external life. The Doubting Thomas, the mischievous charioteer Salya within, could make us regress. But the Guardian Mother will not allow them to have the upper hand. A little faith and we certainly join the bands of the Omniscient's flaming pioneers. Sri Aurobindo has said so and I believe it. Moving between the altar and the kitchen, a time comes when the two merge into one meditative whole. This is the golden promise of our Golden Purusha:

*A prayer, a master act, a king idea
Can link man's strength to a transcendent Force.
Then miracle is made the common rule,
One mighty deed can change the course of things;
A lonely thought becomes omnipotent.*

(p.20)

Our Mother referred to the Savitri tale as told by Sri Aurobindo as

“the effort of the Divine to divinise the material creation... The creation is plunged in misery, suffering and death. But it can and will be saved through Her (Savitri's) intervention.”

And I believe the Mother.

I would like to conclude this brief literary meditation with the words of my Acharya, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, which he jotted down on 20th November, 1973, soon after the Mother withdrew from the physical:

*She had seemed a power and a fragrance,
a divine extravagance:*

*A priestess of mother-sovereignties,
a Goddess accessible.*

*And could it be the marvel was ended,
the glory wholly withdrawn?*

*But this immersion of the source of Light
was also its dispersal.*

*This centre of concentration ordains
universal diffusion.*

*The descent of the supramental Light
heralds heaven's strategy.*

*The Unconscious and Inconscient in league
meet their final defeat here.*

*The mist and opaqueness are touched with light,
and matter feels Spirit's glow.*

*The promised transfiguration of life
starts its realising phase.*

*The millions the Power had drawn to her
Feel filled by her and fulfilled,*

*A light is lit in everyone, and these
Emblazon the Living Flame.*

(Tryst with the Divine, 1974)

Savitri's Boon

A Letter from Kenya

Sri Aurobindo's Grace showered upon the Sri Aurobindo Society, Nairobi in early 2001 – the beginning of this new millenium – (as a boon when the Nairobi Centre was inspired to embark upon the herculean task of "Savitri Study" page by page. The whole movement got arranged amazingly and mysteriously and materials came to hand as if The Mother was guiding us by the fingers.

We started on the adventure of consciousness on 6.1.01, Saturday (the members of the Society in Nairobi meet regularly every Saturday from 5.30 to 6.30p.m. – and the time frame is exactly half an hour, every Saturday). We began with the introduction to *Savitri* with the article of Mona Sarkar as written by him, having received it from The Mother. Then with the aid of materials from Dr. Nadkarni's *Introduction to Savitri, Perspectives on Savitri, part 1*, edited by R. Y. Deshpande, Madhav Panditji's articles introducing *Savitri* and of course from Sri Aurobindo's letters on *Savitri*. The introduction continued almost one whole year. In between, we had the visit to Nairobi by Dr. Alok Pandey, and of Dr. Ashwinbhai Kapadia from India who conducted an eight day Satra on *Savitri* and we received lot of inspiration from there. We had the regular inflow of 'Invocation' from the Savitri Bhavan which also added fuel to our aspiration and which provided much more material. We took help from 'About Savitri' with The Mother's commentaries and Huta's paintings, and also listened to Sunilda's cassettes with music related to *Savitri* passages and Mother's own recitation from *Savitri*.

Sri Aurobindo and The Mother constantly poured Their Grace upon us and gave us the inspiration, strength, patience, perseverance and the energy to continue with the study, week after week, with no short cuts anywhere and no cutting of corners when confronted by the time factor. Many members have bought their own *Savitri* copies and bring them to the centre and participate by following the readings and making their own notes.

Some of our members became so inspired that they started reading *Savitri* to their one year, three year and ten year olds at bed time and the children responded in such a manner that they would not sleep before listening to *Savitri* being read to them. The parents observed that there was some strange change coming over their children. One parent's son who is at an Australian University, a brilliant student who scored top marks and obtained full scholarship to the University, recently e-mailed to his parents stating that he finds remarkable guidance in Physics from *Savitri* and he is doing a kind of research into it.

The older members who come for the *Savitri* study every Saturday are all receiving immense help from *Savitri*. Even a few women members who are not well-versed in English are making an attempt and reciting *Savitri* aloud every day. And some of us have now undertaken reciting some passages from *Savitri* by heart and memory, and find that some lines now and then come to us in moments of some unique conversations and experiences and events in our daily life.

Recently we had the privilege of having Dr. Nadkarni himself here in Nairobi, who was of great inspiration and assistance to us too. We are on page 61 to date and we are approaching the second anniversary of the readings and study of *Savitri* on 6.1.03. We pray to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo to bless us so that our study of *Savitri* may continue with the same fervour and love and zeal and aspiration, so that it may invoke Savitri to dwell in our hearts constantly and lead us on the path laid out by the Master of the Integral Yoga. We bow to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo with deep gratitude for this boon granted to us. Please continue to lead us kindly, O Sweet and Luminous Heart and Light of Lights.

With love and adoration,

Your children from Kenya.
Sent by Varsha Vora, Nairobi.

Book Twelve, “Epilogue” and an Overall Review

*Dr. Nadkarni’s talk at Savitri Bhavan
on March 5, 2003*

This is the concluding session of our *Savitri* study camp that began eleven days ago at the Beach Office of Sri Aurobindo Society in Pondicherry. We will all remember this session being held at Savitri Bhavan this afternoon for a long time to come because it marks the conclusion of the first cycle of *Savitri* study camps that we began some fourteen years ago. *Savitri* is inexhaustible as a source of spiritual delight, power, illumination and inspiration and the completion of the first cycle of study camps cannot be taken as anything more than the completion of our first reading of this wonderful epic. After this first cycle, let us hope and pray, there will be more such cycles. Holding these study camps is like performing a *yajna*; so many things have to go right and so many people have to work together before a study camp can be held successfully. I have no doubt in my mind that those of us who have been privileged to participate in these study camps for so many years have been the recipients of a special grace from the Mother. For me personally these study camps have been an abounding Grace. Let me therefore at the very outset offer our gratitude to the Mother who has kept us focussed on *Savitri* through all these years. Without her support at every stage these camps could not have been held.

One of the happy developments in the structure of our study camps in more recent years has been this addition of a concluding session held at Savitri Bhavan. This is a most happy occasion for all lovers of *Savitri*, whether they come from Auroville, or from the Ashram in Pondicherry or from any part of India or of the world; we can all come together here for a celebration of *Savitri* from time to time. May I on behalf of all of you and on my own behalf say a hearty word of thanks to Shraddhavan and her very dedicated team for hosting these sessions. And finally, I would like to say how very grateful I am to all of you who have been able to join us here, year after year, often

facing hardships like waiting in the sun for the bus to come out here. Savitri Bhavan has this wonderful open-air lecture hall in which we have been meeting, and this place with so many shade-giving trees exudes not only oxygen, much needed for our bodies, but also delight and peace so precious for our souls. The only problem we have, as I heard one of our organisers saying, is that each time we take photographs of this gathering, they come out looking exactly the same. So we are looking for volunteers who are willing to go up into the trees and take photographs from there – we haven't found them yet!

This time at our study camp we first took up for study Book Twelve, the concluding Book of *Savitri* with the title "Epilogue". As you know, Book Twelve, like Book Eight, received very little attention from Sri Aurobindo during his extensive revisions of the epic undertaken mostly after 1930. As Richard Hartz has observed, this is something very interesting in itself. In the original Legend of Savitri and Satyavan, the two central facts are the death of Satyavan (the theme of Book Eight) and his resuscitation, his revival, his coming back to life (the theme of Book Twelve). Exactly these are the two books, Books Eight and Twelve, that have not received much revision from Sri Aurobindo. This suggests that Sri Aurobindo was not so much interested in the fact of death itself, or in the fact of revival, but rather in the spiritual facts and forces behind them, and in the spiritual solution to the problem of death.

Nevertheless, Book Twelve is a very pleasing piece of narrative poetry. The first version which Sri Aurobindo wrote between 1916 and 1918 was probably a very inspired composition, and many lines from that early version are still found in the present form of this Epilogue. This part of course does not have the epic elevation of many other parts of *Savitri*. But as narrative poetry, this Epilogue has a movement which is limpid and smooth in flow and it has some great and wonderful lines. To give you a taste of what the poetry is like in Book Twelve, I will read out just one short excerpt from it. When Satyavan regains his consciousness, he begins to wonder where he is and where he has been. He sees a change in Savitri, so he is wondering whether this is the same Savitri that he had known earlier, and he doesn't quite know

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how to deal with her. And Savitri reassures a bewildered Satyavan with these words:

*“All now is changed, yet all is still the same.
Lo, we have looked upon the face of God,
Our life has opened with divinity.
We have borne identity with the Supreme
And known his meaning in our mortal lives.
Our love has grown greater by that mighty touch
And learned its heavenly significance,
Yet nothing is lost of mortal love’s delight.
Heaven’s touch fulfils but cancels not our earth:
Our bodies need each other in the same last;
Still in our breasts repeat heavenly secret rhythm
Our human heart-beats passionately close.
Still am I she who came to thee mid the murmur
Of sunlit leaves upon this forest verge;
I am the Madran, I am Savitri.
All that I was before, I am to thee still,
Close comrade of thy thoughts and hopes and toils,
All happy contraries I would join for thee...”*

(p. 719)

In the original legend of Vyasa, the events related in this Epilogue take up almost one third of the total number *slokas* in which the legend has been narrated. We are told in some detail what each of the major characters in the story, including Satyavan’s parents and some of the venerable sages and Rishis who lived in their neighbourhood, did and said. Sri Aurobindo is not interested in dealing with this part of the story but he had to bring his epic poem to a conclusion. And he does exactly that in this Epilogue. When Nirod-da reminded him about revising Book Eight and Book Twelve, he said, “Oh that – we will see about that later.” He knew exactly what was happening. He seems to have been in a great hurry at this point in time. This was some time in the second fortnight of November 1950. Sri Aurobindo had already taken the decision to leave his body. In spite of all these factors, Book Twelve seems to be an adequate conclusion to the epic, although it is

by no means as outstandingly appropriate as the opening section of the epic, which, according to Richard Hartz, Sri Aurobindo is believed to have revised at least fifty times. According to the information Richard has given us, there are forty-five manuscripts of the first canto, and on five typescripts Sri Aurobindo has made further changes, so in all there are at least these fifty versions. I don't think that many of us have read the first canto fifty times – I haven't. That is the care that Sri Aurobindo bestowed on some parts of *Savitri*. There are other parts, however, like the great benediction of the Supreme Divine in Book Eleven, which consists of about 500 flowing lines and which he dictated to Nirodbaran almost uninterruptedly over a few days. I don't think that Sri Aurobindo had time to revise this section. May be Nirod-da read out to him each day the lines he had dictated the day before.

Book Twelve is a short book and we completed our reading of it in about three days. As the duration of our Study Camp was eleven days, we had eight extra days left. During these eight extra days I tried to do some sort of a review of the epic as a whole, by focussing on certain major themes in it. The themes which we explored during our review were, first “Sri Aurobindo's vision and its fulfilment in *Savitri*”; second, “The Mother's footsteps in *Savitri*”; and third, “Sri Aurobindo's vision of our future”. These were the three themes we pursued during the last eight days. Today I will try to review the poem in another fashion, and to do this in the limited time we have at our disposal here is indeed to attempt the impossible.

We don't realise sufficiently that the goals Sri Aurobindo defined for his yoga were not only revolutionary for his own times, they remain revolutionary even today, since even today very few thinkers dare set such high goals for man's future on earth. Traditionally, spiritual paths have had two kinds of goals: finding one's place in some Vaikuntha or some Kailash, or some special heaven or paradise where you will be waited on by eight damsels, where you will have all the comforts of life and no inconveniences and imperfections, where you will never grow old or fall ill. One is supposed to earn this kind of fulfilment for oneself by doing the right kinds of things and living the right kind of life while one lives one's life here on earth. Although this goal has

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received some attention in the Indian spirituality as well, the Indian tradition has shown its preference for another kind of goal, which is merger into Nirvana, getting out of the cycle of death and birth. Almost all the religious and spiritual traditions swear by this goal. If you ask any Indian, whether he is learned or an ignoramus, if you catch him in a spiritual kind of mood and ask him “What is your life’s greatest ambition?” he will say, “My life’s greatest ambition is to get out of this cycle of birth and death.” He hasn’t thought about it, but by virtue of being Indian it is in his bloodstream, he is supposed to say it and he says it. This whole attitude is one of negation of life. By implication it means that once you become spiritual you have to regard this life as an error made by God and it is your responsibility to correct him by seeking to withdraw totally into some kind of nameless and featureless existence beyond.

Sri Aurobindo brought the revolutionary idea that spirituality is not a way to abrogate life, to cancel life, but to bring fulfilment to life. And he defined his spirituality in these terms. He said that spirituality should bring fulfilment not only for man’s spirit, but also for the instruments of man’s spirit, that is for the mind, the vital and the body. He defined it as clearly as possible. And secondly he maintains that his aim is not to bring perfection which is limited to an individual or to a few individuals. His aim is to make this perfection accessible to the whole of humanity. What we want is a new consciousness that settles down here and becomes accessible to the whole of humanity. This is something new. This collective aspect is the demand of the Time Spirit. If anything is great and good, you cannot get it just for yourself - if it is good and it is great you must also make sure that everybody else can participate in it. Sri Aurobindo was ahead of his times. And even in those days he kept saying, “I don’t want the Supramental consciousness as an individual attainment only. It has to be the gain of the whole earth-consciousness.” This was his definition of the aims of his yoga. And his great epic, *Savitri*, is a story of the pursuit of these aims.

In *Savitri*, as you know, there are two biographies and one autobiography. It contains a description of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga,

which is Aswapati's yoga, so it has a first part that is autobiographical. It is also a spiritual biography of the Mother. So there are many passages in *Savitri* which remind us of the Mother, and the Mother herself in her *Agenda* and other places has said that much of *Savitri* is a narration of her own personal experiences. Some of these experiences, she says, she had even thirty years before she came to Pondicherry. She never mentioned these experiences to Sri Aurobindo. Yet Sri Aurobindo was able to depict these experiences, write about these experiences in *Savitri*. Then there is a third biography here, and it pertains to you and me – it is our biography, telling us how we got here, from where and through what stages, and where we are supposed to go from here. At this stage, why is our life in such a mess, and after man, who? And what will ensure our passage to the next stage.? Sri Aurobindo deals with all such questions in his epic.



Dr. Nadkarni speaking on March 5th, 2003

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To start at the beginning, we find that already in the second canto of Book I Sri Aurobindo very beautifully summarises the central issue in Savitri's life:

*For this she had accepted mortal breath;
To wrestle with the Shadow she had come
And must confront the riddle of man's birth
And life's brief struggle in dumb Matter's night.
Whether to bear with Ignorance and death
Or hew the ways of Immortality,
To win or lose the godlike game for man,
Was her soul's issue thrown with Destiny's dice.
But not to submit and suffer was she born;
To lead, to deliver was her glorious part.*

(p. 17)

This was the issue of her life: “*Whether to bear with Ignorance and death*”. We humans have always made compromises with Ignorance and Death. We have said to Ignorance and Death, “All right, give me some relief from your onslaught while I am here on earth, however temporary it may turn out to be. Let this world belong to you, you can reign here as long as you like.” So we have always sought escape from this world, we have always refused to confront the problem of Ignorance and Death. We have said, “This cannot be changed, this is the ultimate dispensation of God here for man and for earth, who are you and I to challenge this?” But Savitri has come precisely to challenge this. This is what these lines tell us.

Then in the following canto, we get the beginning of Aswapati's story. Aswapati's yoga, as you know, takes up about 320 pages, about 12,000 lines. No one can write about anyone else's life or yoga in so much detail. It is very clear that here Sri Aurobindo is writing about his own yoga. In a letter of 1946 he has given us some indications of what this yoga was about and what are the different stages we have to look for in this yoga. In Cantos Three to Five of Book One Aswapati is shown achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as an individual, and this part of his development consists of two yogic movements,

first a psycho-spiritual transformation and then a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power.

In Book Two we are shown how Aswapati undertakes an exploration of all the worlds and planes of consciousness, right from the subtle physical, the vital, through the mental and then through the spiritual worlds. He is in search of the creative principle which will help him or show him how to transform the nature of life, how to bring perfection to life. In spite of all this exploration which is contained in the fifteen cantos of Book Two, nearly 200 pages of spiritual experiences in the various worlds, he is unable to find the secret he was looking for. The very dynamics of this upward journey he has undertaken bring him to the doorstep of the Nirvanic experience. This climactic moment is described in Canto Two of Book Three. And this is, I think, a very great moment in the spiritual history of mankind and particularly of India. This is the moment when Aswapati is on the verge of entering Nirvana but something in him says that there is another, a more glorious destiny possible for man.

This moment is in some sense comparable to a similar moment in Amitabha Buddha's life. Legend has it that when the Buddha was about to enter Nirvana, he stopped and looked back on life and saw the whole of humanity immersed in ignorance and suffering. He decided to turn back to help humanity to liberate itself from ignorance and suffering. Buddha, of course, had great compassion and love for humanity. But I do not think that he had any particular remedy to correct the problems of life. He only thought "I do not want Nirvana only for myself. I would like to take with me as many people as possible." So the only way he had of saving mankind was to try to save each human individual separately, make him realise that this world is transitory and full of suffering and then persuade him to join him in the pursuit of Nirvana. Very laudable indeed, and we must praise him for that, and he has been rightly declared an Avatar for that by the Indian tradition. But how many people can you save like this? Besides, ultimately what is it that you are trying to teach them? You are trying to teach them how to escape from this life. You are not teaching them anything about how to bring perfection to this life.

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That is something new about Sri Aurobindo. Like Amitabha Buddha, his compassion for mankind too was boundless but he had something more than compassion. It is not enough to have compassion and love because by themselves they do not go very far. You need something more, you need a power strong enough to transform human consciousness and through it human nature. And Sri Aurobindo had discovered this power. He has written about it in *Savitri* and in his other books such as the *Life Divine*. In *Savitri*, Aswapati finds that this power is not available in any of the realised worlds, so he goes into the Transcendental World, where the past, the present and the future are one, and there he experiences a world of perfection that is waiting to come down. In Book Three we have a wonderful description of this world of perfection which is called the Supramental World :

*A Bliss, a Light, a Power, a flame-white Love
Caught all into a sole immense embrace;
Existence found its truth on Oneness' breast
And each became the self and space of all.
The great world-rhythms were heart-beats of one Soul,
To feel was a flame-discovery of God,
All mind was a single harp of many strings,
All life a song of many meeting lives;
For worlds were many, but the Self was one.
This knowledge now was made a cosmos' seed:
This seed was cased in the safety of the Light,
It needed not a sheath of Ignorance.
Then from the trance of that tremendous clasp
And from the throbbings of that single Heart
And from the naked Spirit's victory
A new and marvellous creation rose.
Incalculable outflowing infinitudes
Laughing out an unmeasured happiness
Lived their innumerable unity;
Worlds where the being is unbound and wide
Bodied unthinkably the egoless Self;
Rapture of beatific energies*

*Joined Time to the Timeless, poles of a single joy;
White vasts were seen where all is wrapped in all.
There were no contraries, no sundered parts,
All by spiritual links were joined to all
And bound indissolubly to the One:
Each was unique, but took all lives as his own,
And, following out these tones of the Infinite,
Recognised in himself the universe.*

(p. 322)

Even in the midst of experiencing the glories of this supramental world, Aswapati is still concerned about the earth. Even in that new world waiting to be born, he is aware of the need of the earth. Even when he is experiencing this blissful future he is concerned about you and me, and says, “How do I make this world accessible to mankind?” At the same time he sees his own small, pitiable little fragile body, lying at the edge of the world and says “What about that body? That is also part of me. Here, the spirit is all fulfilled, it has bliss, it has oneness, it has perfection, but shouldn’t my body also be participating in this perfection? How can I make this possible?” These are Aswapati’s concerns because they are the concerns of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga. And finally, since he can not figure out any way of bringing this world down himself, he approaches the Supreme Divine Mother, the *Adishtatri* of this world and of all the worlds, and prays to her. In the next canto we see what Aswapati has to do to bring this world on earth.

When he sees the Supreme Mother, the first thing that she tells him is that man is exactly where he is now because he belongs there: “Don’t try to accelerate the progress, because man is not yet ready to say goodbye to Ignorance. He likes to wallow in Ignorance. Let him have a long enough innings – some day he will begin to look for this perfection, but not yet.”

But Aswapati, being Aswapati, says

*“How shall I rest content with mortal days
And the dull measure of terrestrial things,*

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*I who have seen behind the cosmic mask
The glory and the beauty of thy face?
Hard is the doom to which thou bindst thy sons!
How long shall our spirits battle with the Night
And bear defeat and the brute yoke of Death,
We who are vessels of a deathless Force
And builders of the godhead of the race?
...
Ever the centuries and millenniums pass.
Where in the greyness is thy coming's ray?
Where is the thunder of thy victory's wings?
Only we hear the feet of passing gods.*

(p. 341)

We are all ready to receive gods, we have kept everything ready; but we hear only shuffling footsteps, and then somebody comes and tells us that the gods have gone away, we must wait for the next time. Man is reduced to despair and hopelessness. And if you trust his judgement he will be for ever lost in the labyrinthine mental consciousness which he has woven around himself. The only solution to this, O Divine Mother, is for You to come down and take on the responsibility of bringing this new consciousness down. Human effort, human power and strength are inadequate to do this. Only an avatar can do this.

So he prays to the Divine Mother :

*Omnipotence, girdle with the power of God
Movements and moments of a mortal will,
Pack with the eternal might one human hour
And with one gesture change all future time.
Let a great word be spoken from the heights
And one great act unlock the doors of Fate."*

(p. 345)

The Mother listens to this prayer and agrees to send an emanation, an avatar of hers.

*"O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry.
One shall descend and break the iron Law,*

*Change Nature's doom by the lone spirit's power.
A limitless Mind that can contain the world,
A sweet and violent heart of ardent calms
Moved by the passions of the gods shall come.
All might and greatnesses shall join in her;
Beauty shall walk celestial on the earth,
Delight shall sleep in the cloud-net of her hair,
And in her body as on his homing tree
Immortal Love shall beat his glorious wings.
A music of griefless things shall weave her charm;
The harps of the Perfect shall attune her voice,
The streams of Heaven shall murmur in her laugh,
Her lips shall be the honeycombs of God,
Her limbs his golden jars of ecstasy,
Her breasts the rapture-flowers of Paradise.
She shall bear Wisdom in her voiceless bosom,
Strength shall be with her like a conqueror's sword
And from her eyes the Eternal's bliss shall gaze.
A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour,
A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;
Nature shall overleap her mortal step;
Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will."*

(p. 346)

This is the promise made by the Supreme Divine Mother.

As you know, in Vyasa's legend of Savitri and Satyavan, Savitri is an exceptionally gifted young woman but there is no reference to her being an avatar. Recent work by Richard Hartz and others has shown that somewhere around the mid 1920's, Sri Aurobindo realised who Mirra Richard really was. His recognition of her as the Mother, as an Avatar of the Supreme Divine Creatrix, became the seed for the revision that Sri Aurobindo undertook on *Savitri* after 1926 or 1928. He clearly saw that it was the Mother's mission in life to bring down the new consciousness. If we look at the description of the birth of Savitri that Sri Aurobindo has given, there can be no doubt at all that Sri Aurobindo means to present her as an avatar. As we are told in the

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pages of the *Essays on the Gita*, an avatar comes down particularly when there is an impasse, some kind of a blockage to the progress of evolution and only an avatar can clear this; so the avatar is needed; but it looks to me that this time we had to have twin avatars – Sri Aurobindo came as an avatar, and the Mother also came as an avatar. I wonder whether there have been any feminine avatars in the past, although the consciousness of the Mother has been present on earth in some form whenever a breakthrough in evolution was about to take place. But this time the Supreme Divine Mother herself has come down as an Avatar. This is probably because the change now contemplated, the transformation anticipated now, is going to be so radical, so unheard-of in the history of evolution. The work to be undertaken this time is not an ordinary one. The magnitude of the issues involved is such that two avatars had to come. You should realise that this doesn't happen very often in the history of evolution. Those of us lived in the last century had the enormous good fortune of being contemporaries of the first feminine avatar on earth. That is something to celebrate, and I thought I should mention this because we are this year celebrating the 125th birth anniversary of the Mother.

This marks the culmination of Aswapati's quest, and from then onwards in the poem it is basically Savitri's story, starting with her birth. It is very clear from the way Sri Aurobindo describes Savitri's birth that he saw her as an Avatar. Consider the following lines:

*In this high signal moment of the gods
Answering earth's yearning and her cry for bliss,
A greatness from our other countries came.
A silence in the noise of earthly things
Immutably revealed the secret Word,
A mightier influx filled the oblivious clay:
A lamp was lit, a sacred image made.
A mediating ray had touched the earth
Bridging the gulf between man's mind and God's;
Its brightness linked our transience to the Unknown.
A spirit of its celestial source aware
Translating heaven into a human shape*

*Descended into earth's imperfect mould
And wept not fallen to mortality,
But looked on all with large and tranquil eyes.
One had returned from the transcendent planes
And bore anew the load of mortal breath,
Who had striven of old with our darkness and our pain;
She took again her divine unfinished task:
Survivor of death and the aeonic years,
Once more with her fathomless heart she fronted Time.*
(p. 353)

There are also a number of passages further on in Book Four – if you read them, those of you who were in the Ashram in the 50s and 60s might even begin to hear the footsteps of the Mother, they are so closely modelled after the Mother. We can immediately see that this is the person Sri Aurobindo is describing in these lines. Take these lines, for example,

*A friend and yet too great wholly to know,
She walked in their front towards a greater light,
Their leader and queen over their hearts and souls,
One close to their bosoms, yet divine and far.
Admiring and amazed they saw her stride
Attempting with a godlike rush and leap
Heights for their human stature too remote
Or with a slow great many-sided toil
Pushing towards aims they hardly could conceive;
Yet forced to be the satellites of her sun
They moved unable to forego her light,
Desiring they clutched at her with outstretched hands
Or followed stumbling in the paths she made.*
(p. 363)

*Some felt her with their souls and thrilled with her,
A greatness felt near yet beyond mind's grasp;
To see her was a summons to adore,
To be near her drew a high communion's force.
So men worship a god too great to know,*

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*Too high, too vast to wear a limiting shape;
They feel a Presence and obey a might,
Adore a love whose rapture invades their breasts;
To a divine ardour quickening the heart-beats,
A law they follow greatening heart and life.*

(pp. 363-64)

*Some turned to her against their nature's bent;
Divided between wonder and revolt,
Drawn by her charm and mastered by her will,
Possessed by her, her striving to possess,
Impatient subjects, their tied longing hearts
Hugging the bonds close of which they most complained,
Murmured at a yoke they would have wept to lose,
The splendid yoke of her beauty and her love:
Others pursued her with life's blind desires
And claiming all of her as their lonely own,
Hastened to engross her sweetness meant for all.*

(pp. 364-65)

After this “Book of Birth and Quest”, we come to Book Five, “The Book of Love”. I think that this book belongs primarily to the legend of Satyavan and Savitri. It is not directly connected either with the Mother’s life or her yoga. Sri Aurobindo develops this into a very beautiful book and I have said in many places that if Sri Aurobindo had written nothing else but The Book of Love he would have still left an indelible mark on English literature. Nowhere else in the world’s literature do we find such beautiful poetry based on love fulfilled. We have great poetry on love frustrated, but love fulfilled is hardly regarded as a fit subject for poetry, but in Book Five there is wonderful poetry. We have to move on just now because it does not immediately concern our present frame of reference.

Book Six, the “Book of Fate” is also a very important Book and is a testimony to Sri Aurobindo’s great gifts as a poet and a thinker. But we need not pause here to take a closer look at this Book since, like Book Five, it does not address the central issue we are pursuing here.

We move on to Book Seven, the Book of Yoga. As you know, in the original legend Savitri performs a *vrata*, a vow, a *trirathra vrata*, for three days and nights, close to the day on which that Satyavan is destined to die. Sri Aurobindo has taken this event and transformed it into Savitri's yoga. Just as Aswapati's *yagna* becomes Aswapati's yoga, and gets an expansion of about 12,000 lines – what Vyasa describes in ten lines, Sri Aurobindo describes in 12,000 lines – similarly here the austerities practised by Savitri in the Mahabharata legend get converted into Savitri's yoga. And the description of this yoga, while reminding us in some of its general features of the Integral Yoga developed by Sri Aurobindo, also brings to our mind many of the special features of the Mother's "psychic approach". Aswapati's yoga is the yoga of a scientist. Very leisurely, very impersonal, he has all the time at his disposal and he observes unmoved whatever is presented to his view, whether he is in the vital worlds of the gods or in the world of darkness and falsehood. His job is to report, his job is to observe, and that is what he does. And he goes like a cone of fire ascending from one level to another level, one level to another level. Savitri's yoga has a different kind of tempo. Hers is a more impassioned, more dynamic, more direct approach. She goes through her psychic being. Through her psychic she makes her way into the Supramental realm. The other difference between the two yogas is that in Aswapati's yoga you have a description of the psycho-spiritual transformation of Aswapati – a psychic transformation, and also a spiritual transformation; there is no description of Aswapati undergoing the supramental transformation. But in my view in Savitri's yoga we have a description not only of the psychic and the spiritual transformation of Savitri, but also of her supramental transformation. And this is to my mind described or indicated in Canto Five of Book Seven, "The Finding of the Soul."

This is my hypothesis, and I won't mind being proved wrong on this. Instead of being evasive, it is good to formulate a hypothesis and leave it for other scholars to contend with and improve upon. I can't believe that Savitri was ready to take on the God of Death as she does in Books Nine, Ten and Eleven without having acquired the supramental consciousness and its powers, that is my first point. The second is that our psychic being, when it meets the soul, meets the *jivatman*. But for Savitri's psychic

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being, the jivatman is the Supreme Mother herself. So when Savitri's psychic being meets the jivatman, the soul, it must be merging with the Supreme Divine Mother. And once you merge with the Supreme Divine Mother, your consciousness merges with the Supramental because the Supreme Divine Mother stands for the Supramental. And the descriptions given in this canto suggest this extraordinary happening. I will just read a little bit to illustrate what I have just now said:

*At last a change approached, the emptiness broke;
A wave rippled within, the world had stirred;
Once more her inner self became her space.
There was felt a blissful nearness to the goal;
Heaven leaned low to kiss the sacred hill,
The air trembled with passion and delight.
A rose of splendour on a tree of dreams,
The face of Dawn out of mooned twilight grew.
Day came, priest of a sacrifice of joy
Into the worshipping silence of her world;
He carried immortal lustre as his robe,
Trailed heaven like a purple scarf and wore
As his vermilion caste-mark a red sun.*

(p. 523)

Another passage which describes this scene is equally suggestive:

*A sealed identity within her woke;
She knew herself the Beloved of the Supreme:
These Gods and Goddesses were he and she:
The Mother was she of Beauty and Delight,
The Word in Brahma's vast creating clasp,
The World-Puissance on almighty Shiva's lap,—
The Master and the Mother of all lives
Watching the worlds their twin regard had made,
And Krishna and Radha for ever entwined in bliss,
The Adorer and Adored self-lost and one.
In the last chamber on a golden seat
One sat whose shape no vision could define;*

*Only one felt the world's unattainable fount,
A Power of which she was a straying Force,
An invisible Beauty, goal of the world's desire,
A Sun of which all knowledge is a beam,
A Greatness without whom no life could be.*

(p. 525)

There are other descriptions here which are extraordinary in their implications. At the end of this canto, we are shown the *mahakundalini* descending into Savitri, and opening up each of her chakras. This descent of the *mahakundalini* is the descent of the Supramental Force into Savitri - that is how I understand these lines.

There is one more thing I would like to mention about Savitri's yoga, and that pertains to the most interesting Canto Four, where Savitri is met by three madonnas – the Madonna of Compassion and Love, the Madonna of Might, and the Madonna of Wisdom. Each of these madonnas comes to Savitri and says that she is her soul. What is interesting is that after each madonna finishes whatever she has to say to Savitri, an egoistic perversion of each madonna complains to Savitri about how the world has ill-treated that particular being. Now it seems to me that these madonnas, who are godheads like Durga and Lakshmi and Kali and so on, are overmental godheads. And if Savitri after meeting these godheads goes beyond them, it can only be into the Supramental realm.

The other interesting implication of this is equally important. The overmental gods and goddesses have been with us for a very long time. To these gods and goddesses we have been praying, we have been offering our adoration and worship. Yet these gods and goddesses have proved, by and large, ineffectual in remedying the basic inadequacies of human consciousness. They have been able to give to their chosen devotees money, fame, success, long life, health, progeny, etc.; that is why they are honoured as gods. But I don't think that these overmental godheads have been effective in cleansing the human heart of things which have darkened human existence here - namely, jealousy, greed, lust, pride, hatred, and egoism of all kinds that have made our world such a miserable

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place. For that to happen, we need stronger gods, more powerful gods. Sri Aurobindo says in one place that the battle between the asuras and the devas has always been taking place in the quivering theatre of the human consciousness. Since the human consciousness has emerged from the inconscient it still has on it a large stamp of the inconscient. It is in the arena of this consciousness that gods and divine influences, as well as the hostiles and asuric forces descend and a struggle has been going on for the control of the human consciousness. In spite of our mental allegiance to the gods, it seems that most often it is the asuras who are winning. As a result, our world is in such a big mess in spite of the gods we worship. Either there must be something lacking in the gods we worship, or there must be something wrong in the way we receive these gods within us. It doesn't matter which gods we worship, what is important is which gods we incarnate in our own life. And so a time has now come, not to discard the overmental gods, but to invoke more powerful gods. Somebody once asked the Mother, "Mother, once we are in this new yoga, should we still be worshipping old gods?" And the Mother gave a reply which is simple and yet very subtle. She said, "Once you are in this yoga and you start getting the real experiences of this yoga, you will never be satisfied by worshipping all the old gods, either individually or all of them put together." So a time has now come for us to focus on new gods, because we need a new consciousness to come down. And ultimately the gods will not be able to destroy the asuras around us. We have to do it ourselves and the godly forces that we receive now are too weak to accomplish this task.

The Mother makes a very interesting comment in one place. She says, "Durga, Mahishasuramardini, comes down and slays the demon Mahishasura. But then she has to come again the following year to do the same thing. She has to come down and do this every year." Why does she have to come every year? Once she comes and destroys the demon, we get busy; after she has destroyed it, we ourselves recreate or resuscitate the demon. It is something in us that feeds these asuric propensities. And that is why the Buddha once said that when a vibration of evil comes to the human heart, the human consciousness does not have the capacity to convert it into its opposite.

It only strengthens it and sends it back. Buddha did not know how to avoid doing this; the remedy he suggested was that we should sever all relationship with the world. Then only will we be safe. But we don't want to do that. Our aim is to continue to live in this world and to bring perfection to life here. So all this indicates that a time has come for us to take a new step if we want to ward off all the asuric and hostile forces that manifest themselves in Hitlers or Stalins, or Idi Amins or in Osama Bin Ladens. They are all fed on the lifeblood of our own consciousness, we are all responsible for them in some sense. It is no use thinking "I am very pure, I am very holy, I have nothing to do with them." We all connected from within. And if we want really to get rid of them, we need to be able to receive the new gods, we need to receive into our consciousness the victorious power of the supramental consciousness. That is what I see as the message of this particular Canto, Canto Four of Book Seven, "The Triple Soul Forces".

Savitri has then, after Canto Five, still a long journey ahead of her. She is asked to go through an experience of emptying herself. Savitri is reminded that she has not come down on earth to manifest the Supramental consciousness only in herself, but to become a channel through which this new force, its light and power can flow and spread through the whole world. For this Savitri had to undergo the discipline of emptying herself. This is described in Canto Six and the word Nirvana in the title of this canto refers to this process of emptying oneself, of surrendering one's siddhis to the Divine. There are two kinds of nirvana. One is the nirvana of the adwaitic and Buddhist kind, but in Sri Aurobindo's yoga there is a nirvana where after reaching a particular siddhi you offer this siddhi to the Divine and empty yourself. Otherwise, as I said jocularly, as we see around us, our spiritual track is all full of frozen yogis; there are as it were frozen yogis all over, who don't want to move, who don't want to stir because they are all big with their own siddhis. But at every stage, once you have acquired a siddhi, you have to learn to offer it back to the Divine so that there is space in you for a further siddhi. Savitri therefore goes through this process of emptying herself and finally attains what is called the Cosmic Consciousness, and then she becomes an effective channel through which the higher force begins to come down on earth.

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This completes the description of Savitri's yoga.

Then comes Book Eight where we meet the god of Death, and after that, there are Books Nine, Ten and Eleven. These Books describe the confrontation between the God of Death and Savitri. We studied these three books in some detail in the study camps held during in recent years, so I do not wish to deal with them here except very briefly.

Somewhere there is a reference in the writings of the Mother to these three books as the collective yoga of the Mother. Death is not just the negation or disintegration of physical existence. Death comes to us in many forms. Very often death comes to us in the glorified form of temporarily captivating intellectual philosophies which hold us spellbound and do not let us move into the higher regions. They blind us with the light they bring with them, and as a result we can't see beyond them. They say, "You have reached here, you are high enough". The intellect has a way of fascinating the human mind because man is primarily *manomaya*, a mental being. When the intellectual solution comes we feel thrilled. We do not even ask what purpose such solutions serve. So there are various philosophies: idealism, pragmatism, realism, nihilism and so on. And then we see in *Savitri* that Death can profess any philosophy to badger Savitri with – Buddhist philosophy, Advaita philosophy, etc. None of the philosophies he professes is completely false, but each one of them is incomplete. And Savitri completes each of the philosophies he professes. The integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, as you know, does not negate or ignore any of the other philosophies. Take for example Marxism. Sri Aurobindo says that Marxism is not all wrong, the only problem with Marxism is that it is incomplete. Similarly Freud's psychology – it is not wrong but it is incomplete. Similarly Darwin's biology and all the theories based on it – they are not wrong, but they are one-sided and therefore suffocatingly incomplete. This is the stance of Sri Aurobindo: that every one of these philosophies contains a kernel of truth, but that there is a tendency to exaggerate things. And for each one Sri Aurobindo brings the completion for it. The same thing Savitri does again and again with the arguments of Death until finally all his philosophies are exhausted. There are many wonderful passages in this part of the epic poem, and if I begin to read those passages the

organisers will begin to feel jittery and start thinking “Oh dear, probably all these people will stay on for dinner tonight, and we haven’t organised any dinner . . .” I won’t go that far. But one or two passages must be read. Otherwise it would be an injustice to a book like this in a place like this.

One of the favourite debating points the God of Death uses is the fickleness and physicality of much that goes in the name of human love. He says that love is just a glandular disorder, it is a physical attraction embellished with imagination. Savitri does not deny this at all. But she says that it is only partly true. Love has other more refined, sublime, and less physical expressions. In one of these passages, she asserts the great value of love in these words:

*For Love must soar beyond the very heavens
And find its secret sense ineffable;
It must change its human ways to ways divine,
Yet keep its sovereignty of earthly bliss.
O Death, not for my heart’s sweet poignancy
Nor for my happy body’s bliss alone
I have claimed from thee the living Satyavan,
But for his work and mine, our sacred charge.
Our lives are God’s messengers beneath the stars;
To dwell under death’s shadow they have come
Tempting God’s light to earth for the ignorant race,
His love to fill the hollow in men’s hearts,
His bliss to heal the unhappiness of the world.
For I, the woman, am the force of God,
He the Eternal’s delegate soul in man.
My will is greater than thy law, O Death;
My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate:
Our love is the heavenly seal of the Supreme.
I guard that seal against thy rending hands.
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.”*

(p. 633)

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I don't think that even Shakespeare has comparable lines on love although he is supposed to be a great poet of love.

There is another equally wonderful passage. Often people ask, "How do you know that the Supramental will come? So far it has not come." That's a very profound argument isn't it? "So far it hasn't come, so how do you know that it will come in future? How do you know?" Death is asking that question, and Savitri's answer is very simple.

*How sayst thou Truth can never light the human mind
And Bliss can never invade the mortal's heart
Or God descend into the world he made?
If in the meaningless Void creation rose,
If from a bodiless Force Matter was born,
If Life could climb in the unconscious tree,
Its green delight break into emerald leaves
And its laughter of beauty blossom in the flower,
If sense could wake in tissue, nerve and cell
And Thought seize the grey matter of the brain,
And soul peep from its secrecy through the flesh,
How shall the nameless Light not leap on men,
And unknown powers emerge from Nature's sleep?
Even now hints of a luminous Truth like stars
Arise in the mind-mooned splendour of Ignorance;
Even now the deathless Lover's touch we feel:
If the chamber's door is even a little ajar,
What then can hinder God from stealing in
Or who forbid his kiss on the sleeping soul?
(p. 648-49)*

Finally, Death is vanquished. At this point something very significant happens. Savitri does not conquer her own death. Savitri conquers death for Satyavan. Who is Satyavan? We have been told by Sri Aurobindo that Satyavan is the Earth-Soul, Man's soul in evolution. So in granting Satyavan freedom from death what Savitri has done is to grant to the whole of mankind the potential for immortality. We have all been rendered potentially immortal by this great gift of Savitri.

Well, we have now reached the final stage of this drama. The God of Death is vanquished, but he comes back as the Supreme Divine himself, and once again tests Savitri, offering her a special world, a special heaven of peace and bliss to live in with Satyavan. Savitri rejects that offer saying “I have come down with Satyavan to help mankind reach perfection. I don’t want any solitary happiness for just the two of us.” When Savitri passes this last test as well, the Supreme Lord is very pleased with Savitri and says to her “Savitri, you have fulfilled all my expectations of you.” He predicts that because of what she has done, one day everything will change, a new world will be born, and this life will turn into the life divine. Savitri then returns to earth with Satyavan’s soul clutched to her heart.

*All then shall change, a magic order come
Overtopping this mechanical universe.
A mightier race shall inhabit the mortal’s world.
On Nature’s luminous tops, on the Spirit’s ground,
The superman shall reign as king of life,
Make earth almost the mate and peer of heaven,
And lead towards God and truth man’s ignorant heart
And lift towards godhead his mortality,
A power released from circumscribing bounds,
Its height pushed up beyond death’s hungry reach,
Life’s top shall flame with the Immortal’s thoughts,
Light shall invade the darkness of its base.
Then in the process of evolving Time
All shall be drawn into a single plan,
A divine harmony shall be earth’s law,
Beauty and joy remould her way to live;
Even the body shall remember God.*

(p. 706-07)

*Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The Spirit shall take up the human play,
This earthly life become the life divine.*

(p. 710)

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is extremely difficult to summarise this immense and magnificent epic in fifty minutes, but I have been foolish enough to try it. I hope I have achieved what I set out to do in some small measure. Hasn't it been said of the Divine's Grace that it can make the dumb eloquent and the lame scale the top of a mountain? Thank you very much.

Two recent additions to the Savitri Bhavan Library

1. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* : an adventure of consciousness, by Asoka K. Ganguli, published by the Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry, 2002

This book has been prepared as an aid to students and other readers who might attempt to understand Sri Aurobindo's epic according to our present poetic sensibility. There are four sections. The first, "Making of a New Poetry", deals with Sri Aurobindo's new concept of the poetry of the future its laws of composition and new aesthesis. The second, "*Savitri* as an Epic", deals with the form, design, structure and technique of *Savitri*; while the third and fourth deal with the themes of Evolution of Consciousness and Transformation of Consciousness in the poem.

2. The Birth of *Savitri*, by R. Y. Deshpande, published by Sri Aurobindo Centre and East-West Cultural Centre, Los Angeles, USA, 2003

This is essentially a poetic composition based on Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. The 49 Cantos of the Epic have been presented in 12-line synoptic stanzas, keeping the contents as close to the original as possible, but without curbing the creative spirit. These are preceded by a foreword by Debashish Banerji of the East-West Cultural Center and an "Apologia" by the author, and are followed by a brief prose summary of each canto of the cosmic *Savitri* which is at once a legend and a symbol.

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