

# An Insight into Aurobindo's 'Savitri'-Canto 1: A Journey of the Human Soul from Material to the Divine

**Shipra Malik, Anupriya Singh**

Department of English, Swami Keshvanand Institute of Technology, Management & Gramothan, Jaipur, India

Email: [shipra.malik@skit.ac.in](mailto:shipra.malik@skit.ac.in), [anupriya.singh@skit.ac.in](mailto:anupriya.singh@skit.ac.in)

Received 06.01.2024 received in revised form 20.02.2024, accepted 09.04.2024

DOI: 10.47904/IJSKIT.14.1.2024.105-108

**Abstract-** Shri Aurobindo's 'Savitri' is an immensely prophetic work which transcends the philosophies circumscribing all the religions of the world. It does not emphasize any particular religion or philosophy, instead, it universalises the very concept of spirituality and God. This lofty and grand work unfolds the depths of spirituality, beginning from the origin of the soul to its sufferings in the materialistic world because of the unending cycle of birth and death. It is a theological work based on Aurobindo's experience of his journey to the Divine. This seminal work describes the realization of the truth by the human soul and its blissful union with the supreme soul by defeating the dark and the dominating forces of the material world.

**Keywords-** transcendent, omniscient, Savitri, eternity, un bodied

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to unravel the mystery of human's soul journey from the transitory life on the earth to the eternal destination- the Divine. This paper is an original attempt and is based on the experiential learning and interpretation rooted in the spiritual philosophy beneath all the religions of this world. The poet in this epic poem has aimed at a universal approach and appeal with an intention to unify the spiritual essence embedded in all the religious philosophies.

The Canto 1, which is entitled 'The Symbol Dawn', 'Dawn' symbolizes the spiritual knowledge or the divine enlightenment of the soul. Aurobindo introduces to us the main protagonist or the title character of this epic poem of spirituality- 'Savitri', which represents an awakened soul, the symbol of Divine enlightenment.

Aurobindo, through the parable of 'Savitri' states that when the soul enters the dominion of this world, it forgets about the seed of enlightenment which is inherently present within it. While living in this materialistic world, the soul gets so much entangled in the journey of life that it surrenders itself to the dark forces and enters into a state of oblivion, forgetting the actual goal of human existence. It exists under an illusion of being the controller of its destiny and future. It fails to understand that it is a mere prisoner and a plaything at the hands of destiny

which has entrapped it into a ceaseless karmic cycle. The Canto begins with the description of a preordained, inevitable event which is the death of 'Satyawar', who symbolises the state of matter living in utter ignorance and subjected to the uncertainties of earthly life. Words like- 'Foreboding mind of night', 'unlit temple of eternity', 'opaque', 'impenetrable', 'sombre', 'eyeless muse', 'abysm of un bodied infinite', 'fathomless zero' etc.(Aurobindo 1), are employed to describe three aspects- the death of Satyawar, the time of the creation of earth and the condition of the ignorant human souls who have lost their true path and purpose of their lives and are residing in material darkness and illusion. An ignorant human soul is described through the phrase- 'fallen boundless self-awake' (1). Soul is described as boundless because it is a miniature representation of the entire cosmos which is infinite and limitless. But living on earth and being overpowered by the dark material forces, the soul has become disillusioned and powerless. It has entered into a state of deep spiritual slumber and numbness. Shri Aurobindo talks about the creation of the entire cosmos which began with Nothingness and will end into Nothingness, a similar trajectory is followed by a human soul towards the path of enlightenment:

'Between the first and the last Nothingness,  
Recalling the tenebrous womb from which it came,  
Turned from the insoluble mystery of birth  
And the tardy process of mortality  
And longed to reach its end in vacant Nought.'  
(Aurobindo 1)

When a soul comes into existence, it is free from the material burdens and is conscious of its Divine origin and its constitutional elements, but when it identifies itself through the body, it gets enslaved by the dark, material forces and loses its divine vision. It becomes so much attached to its medium of expression i.e., body, that it forgets its real motive of life. It believes that death, which finally brings an end to everything, is the ultimate truth of life. In the next few lines, Aurobindo talks of the initial stage of the creation of this universe when the Earth was an uninhabited place that 'wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs'

and was 'forgetful of her spirit and her fate' (1). Then a 'nameless movement' (1) began, and the souls were sent to the earth 'dissatisfied' and 'without an aim' because the 'Inconscient' (2) was made ignorant about the presence of the Divine, but still some clues were left, tracing which the souls find their true self. Aurobindo describes it as an unthought idea, i.e., an altogether unique idea, which means the obstinacy to achieve the God by remaining dissatisfied with the materialism of human life. It evokes the unfilled, old, tired want, which illuminates the extinguished lamp of true peace within the unconscious self. It is an attainment of internal peace within, when the ignorant human soul, i.e., 'Satyawan', in us realises that all the worldly desires and hopes are futile as they are transient. The human soul has been termed as 'a survivor of a slain and buried past' (2), who is condemned to resume its effort and suffer the pangs of misfortune of previous birth just like 'Savitri' who was bound to suffer the pangs of her misfortune when she got separated from her husband. Thus, we remain stuck in the cycle of life and death which is controlled by our karmas of previous births. Savitri is depicted as an illuminated soul, determined not to surrender to the vagaries of time or destiny. She is driven by her awakened Divine self. In the lines:

'Insensibly somewhere a breach began:

A long lone line of hesitating hue

Like a vague smile tempting a desert heart

Troubled by the far rim of life's obscure sleep.

Arrived from the other side of boundlessness

An eye of deity peered through the dumb deeps.

A scout in a reconnaissance from the sun' (2)

'Savitri' is described as 'A scout in a reconnaissance from the sun' (2). The above-mentioned lines depict very beautifully the initial stage of spiritual awakening. The phrase 'An eye of deity' (2) refers to the third eye chakra, the opening of which is the harbinger of one's spiritual journey on the path of illumination and union with the Divine. When the soul descended on earth, it got entangled in the sickness and weariness of the world and into the incessant Karmic cycle which is denoted by the phrase 'mindless universe' (2). Thus, it was unable to recollect the real bliss and purpose of human life. It got disillusioned and surrendered to the pleasures and possessions of the world. But suddenly, in this utter disillusionment and dark soundless void, there arose a ray of hope- 'A soul long dead were moved to live' (3), the real awakening of the soul begins. The awakened soul like an orphan child, starts the search of its real home- 'Orphaned and driven out to seek a home' (3). A sudden revelation is dawned upon the soul and an eternal flame within it is discovered in the depths of darkness- 'A glamour

from unreached transcendences Iridescent with the glory of the Unseen' (3). Savitri, 'The omniscient Goddess' (4) descends from the eternal glory which can be revealed to us only with spiritual eyes. Savitri or the awakened soul is the ambassadress between the divine eternal world and the earth, a world which is transitory. The earth is defined as an uncertain and confusing place where even the truth is overshadowed by doubt and fear. The ultimate end of life on earth is considered as death, degeneration, change and disintegration:

'A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,

The worship of a Presence and a Power

Too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts,

The prescience of a marvellous birth to come'. (5)

In the above lines, Aurobindo talks about the innate desire to find eternal happiness and satisfaction in life which is present only in the union of the soul with the Divine. The soul when touches the sill of birth, and expresses itself through the body, forgets and loses 'the spark', 'lustre', 'transitory glow', 'magic fire' (5) in the inconscient plane, i.e., unconsciousness; and hence, the Divine message and the messenger get faded in the far-off secret world. Aurobindo also says that such Divine beauty and supernal beam cannot be seen by materialistic eyes as the physical eyes do not have the power to see it. Human beings believe that the herald of morning is a kind of next opportunity, or a day to run after the material things in order to satisfy the 'unforeseeing instant's urge' and 'blinded quest' (6). But, 'Savitri' is not satisfied with this 'small happiness' (6) or ephemeral joys of life, rather, her soul proceeds towards a higher aim, i.e., to defeat the death- 'Time's message of brief light was not for her' (6). The daylight of morning is symbolic of a new dawn or spiritual awakening after a period of darkness and ignorance. But still people are oblivious to it. They continue to follow their blind quest for material joy. They are enslaved by instant urges and desires. There is nobody to guide them to the true path and purpose of their lives. They continue to perform the karmic deeds and carry their Karmic debts to successive births thinking they are moving towards an appropriate goal and purpose. The future towards which they are heading is full of uncertainty and doubt. 'Savitri' too is born among these ignorant human souls, but she is different from them as she is not swayed by the transitory joys of life. Her aim in life is different and she has been called a 'mighty stranger' (6). She is not tempted by the 'illusion of desire' (6). All these material voices felt to her like a 'sweet alien note' (6). Her soul is aware of being trapped in a transient human mould, i.e., the body, which is mortal and hence temporary. Here, the soul is called as 'deathless' (6) or immortal – the one

which has overcome the death of body or matter on earth. In the next few lines, the soul is lamenting because it has lost its true joy and golden heavenly hue, spiritual ecstasy, for not being able to stand on a firm spiritual ground based on faith. The soul has lost its way by accepting the baser and brittle ground of the material pleasures of life. The life of the soul in the human body and on the earth is fragile and of a very short duration. When the soul descends from the Divine, it contains within it the conscious bliss, the true knowledge of existence or the key to the door of ecstasy or 'Moksha,' the knowledge of its origin and its ultimate destination. The 'splendid sacrifice' and 'a prodigal of her rich divinity' (7), 'hoping her greater being to implant' (7) refers to the separation of the soul from its source and being implanted to the human body. The Earth instead of accepting the immortality and eternal love of soul, offered to her the 'passion-flower' (7) of earthly love and death. In other words, the soul gets entangled in the material pleasures of life. The human body, which is termed as 'a prodigal of her rich divinity' (7) by Aurobindo, keeps on wasting the powers of the soul within it through wrong deeds. Soul came down to the earth with a hope of turning the mortal earth into heaven. But it is highly disappointing as it is found to be very difficult to change the nature of the earth and earthly beings. The earth is afraid of the 'eternal's touch', 'pure divine intolerance', 'sorrowless happiness', 'the light' and the 'naked power of Truth' (7) i.e., the ultimate truth. In other words, the earth or the ignorant human souls on the earth are afraid of the eternal touch of the Divine, i.e., they are afraid to walk on the path of salvation. The earth turned itself away from her saviour, the God. As a result of this, the children of God, i.e., the human beings are punished with endless sorrows and pains in their lives. Aurobindo aptly describes the condition of human beings on earth as:

'Their sun-thoughts fading, darkened by ignorant minds,  
Their work betrayed, their good to evil turned,  
The cross their payment for the crown they gave,  
Only they leave behind a splendid Name'. (7)

There are only a few souls which are able to behold the Divine flame lurking within them and adopt the path of spiritual elevation. 'Savitri' symbolises all such souls and is hailed as the Divine incarnation by Aurobindo- 'Too unlike the world she came to help and save (7). She came on this earth and accepted the earthly life not in a passive way, but as the star or the enlightened soul who was not powerless-

'To live with grief, to confront death on her road,  
The mortal's lot became the Immortal's share.  
Accepting life's obscure terrestrial robe,

Hiding herself even from those she loved,  
The godhead greater by a human fate.' (7-8)

In these lines, Aurobindo equates the knowledge of Savitri regarding her husband Satyawati's death to the knowledge or spiritual awareness of an awakened soul about future. Nature and the ways of nature are cruel and inevitable in the form of death which is defined as the breaking of soul from the tree of life or 'grim rendezvous with death and fear (8). The divine soul after death proceeds on its spiritual journey leaving the 'slain' (8) - the body behind. Savitri's soul was calm and resolute within as it possessed the uncommon divine strength and enlightenment. She enjoys 'universal Mother's love' (8), that is, the love of the Supreme Being. The sorrows and sufferings direct the soul towards spirituality. Such people remain unaffected by the trials and tribulations of life and their hearts get filled with love and kindness. Such souls become 'Obtuse and tranquil like the stone and star' (9). The stages of spiritual elevation of the soul are described by Aurobindo in the following lines:

'Obtuse and tranquil like the stone and star.  
In a deep cleft of silence twixt two realms  
She lay remote from grief, unsawn by care,  
Nothing recalling of the sorrow here.' (9)

When a person meditates, he feels that his soul is suspended between the two realms of the known and the unknown. In this process, it slowly drifts away from the sorrows and pains of life. It becomes stoic like a stone and bright like a star. The pain of separation from the Almighty is always there in the human heart right from the very beginning of life but still its origin and reasons are unknown. There is also the description of an ignorant soul which lacks the illumined mind. Such a soul is powerless and is a plaything in the hands of fate. Such kinds of people live an unhappy life because they work to fulfil the material aims rather than working to achieve permanent bliss. They are like the workers who do not get a penny for their work. They have no guidance or sense of direction in life. Their lives are completely ignorant and full of illusion. But 'Savitri' is an illumined and awakened soul - 'Her strong far-winged spirit travelled back' (9). The premonition of the inevitable tragic event is revealed to her through strange symbols and dreams. Thus, slowly life's 'Illumined swiftly were life's darkened rooms' (9). Her soul is encircled by -Earth, love and doom which have been termed as 'the ancient disputants' (9) struggling like the giant dark forces. Aurobindo, in these lines describes the condition of Savitri's soul on earth. Though she was aware of the impending disaster, which was going to hit her life, but still she was ignorant of being overpowered by the dark materialistic forces of human life on earth. Death has

been described as 'A guardian of the unconsolated abyss' and 'A stone- still figure' that 'Stared into Space with fixed regardless eyes' (10). Here, God of Death or 'Yama' is referred to as the guardian of the material world from where the escape of the souls is difficult because they are thrown into the endless cycle of birth and rebirth from which the escape is difficult, as the souls are never able to get rid of their karmas. This rule of 'Yama' is uncompromising and stern that even He himself feels helpless and is not appeased by the tears of the suffering souls. In the next few lines, there is a description of Earth and its inhabitants. Earth has been called as the 'green smiling dangerous world' (10) by Aurobindo. It has been described as a place where we can hear the ignorant cries of living beings, the sounds here are trivial and the scene 'unchanging' because the cycle of life never changes, for it is never ending. But since, Savitri is an awakened soul, she has the power to confront time and fate which are obscure and at the same time inevitable. So, she gathers herself and prepares to confront the time and fate, as today is the day, when Satyawant's death must take place.

Overall, the first Canto of 'Savitri' paints a vivid picture of spirituality and different experiences of an enlightened and ignorant soul. It encourages us to choose the enlightened path of spirituality, which in fact, is the source of permanent bliss and is the real home of the human soul. Also, Aurobindo talks

about the life on earth which has distracted the human souls from their actual aim or purpose of life. The human soul has surrendered itself to the darker material forces of life. We get instant gratification of our senses when we surrender to these material aspects of life. We think that we are working towards a valuable goal of human life and that the ultimate reality of life is death, which will bring an end to everything. The soul realises itself through body or matter. We start to give more importance to matter than to the essence and believe that nobody, but we ourselves are the controller of our lives and destiny. Whereas the reality is that death is not an end, and the future is uncertain and obscure. The body is just a medium of expression of the powers of the soul and it should only be used to attain the higher goal of human life. But on the contrary, we surrender ourselves to the baser aims of life, thereby, forgetting the real purpose, and as a result, we are pushed into the unending cycle of birth and death carrying the Karmic debts onwards. At the end of the Canto, Aurobindo describes Savitri as a symbol of an illumined human soul which has the divine power to enlighten the ignorance.

#### REFERENCE

1. Aurobindo, Sri. *Savitri*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, 1993