

SAVITRI: A Summary of Sri Aurobindo's Epic Poem

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The Drama of Integral Self-Realisation (The Spiritual Message of Savitri)

Sri Aurobindo's Savitri is an epic poem of high spiritual challenge in the Yoga or Divine Union or Goal of Self-Realisation it presents. Its spiritual conception is so all-embracing, so integral that it gives birth to a power which transforms life on earth to a life of divine activity rather than leading to an escape from life. The epic is a mantric expression of this great Seer-sage's inner findings and conquests, leading to his vision of an age of truth-consciousness and immortality. It portrays in living drama the daring climb within of a king-soul through progressive states of consciousness to Nirvanic heights and beyond to summits never reached before. The poet reveals how at meditation's peaks at one with God, where many cease their search, he becomes aware of a Presence, God's Consciousness, Power and Bliss, which he calls the Divine Mother. He relates how this Creatrix of boundless Love and Wisdom-Splendor comes down to transform Darkness into Light, the Unreal into the Real, and Death into Immortality.

The famous Mahabharata (from the Pativrata Mahatmya Parva in chapters 291-297 of the Aranyaka Parva) legend of "Savitri and Satyavan", the story of "Love Conquers Death" is made the basic symbol of this mystic scripture of "Divine Life on Earth". The legend tells of the noble and virtuous King Aswapathy performing all kinds of austerities in order that God might be pleased and grant him a child to uphold his kingdom. After 18 years the goddess Savitri, wife of the Divine Creator, issues forth from the sacrificial flames and promises the king a radiantly spiritual daughter to spring from her own being.

The child is born and is named Savitri. She grows up "like unto the Goddess of Beauty" herself in embodied form and is blessed with godlike qualities. When she reaches maturity, kings and princes, overwhelmed by her divine character, dare not ask her hand. So her father sends her forth to seek her own lord. Her heart finds Satyavan, the faithful son of Raja Dyumatsena, a blind and exiled king who lives in a forest hermitage.

When Savitri comes to declare her love to her father, she finds him in a conversation with Narada, the great heavenly sage. When Narada hears Savitri's words, he warns that Satyavan, though endowed with all high qualities and honor constant as the Pole Star, is destined to die in a year. The parents try to persuade their daughter to choose another, but in vain. Narada advises the father, however, to allow Savitri to marry Satyavan. So the princess is married and lives a simple, quiet life in the forest. She pleases all with her tender service, self-denial, evenness of temper, her skill and gentle speech and her love for Satyavan.

But night and day Narada's prophetic words are present in her mind, but she speaks of them to no one. When the appointed day for Satyavan's death approaches, Savitri fasts and prays, and on the fated day she begs permission to follow her husband into the forest in order to see the blossoming woods through which he passes daily. Never having petitioned anything previous to this day, she is granted her request and soon comes to where he stops to cut wood for the home fire.

After a few strokes, Satyavan falls smitten with pain and Savitri, stricken with grief, sits and holds his head in her lap. Suddenly she beholds Yama, the God of Death, standing before her with noose in hand. She rises and asks why he had come himself instead of sending one of his emissaries as was his custom. Yama tells her that this prince is endowed with such a sea of virtue and accomplishment and beauty that he is too worthy to be borne away by anyone but the God of Death himself. Then Yama takes the soul of Satyavan and proceeds southward. Savitri, undaunted, follows him. Time and again Yama turns to stop

her, but with wise and appealing words, she moves him to grant one boon after another, save the life within his hand. Still she continues to follow him, right into his dark cave, until finally her devotion and unparalleled love and wisdom move Yama to return the soul of Satyavan. Savitri hastens to the woods where her lord's body lay and woos the soul back into consciousness, and together they return to their home, and all the boons promised by Yama are fulfilled.

Adapting this legend as a symbol for a great living spiritual experience, Sri Aurobindo changes King Aswapathy's sacrificial asceticism into the Tapasya, or conscious spiritualisation, of an aspiring soul of humanity. Savitri is not only the incarnation of a goddess, but Divine Grace born in answer to Aswapathy's longing for help in bringing some living form of God on earth to relieve it of its burden of inconscience. The marriage of Savitri and Satyavan is the divine linking of their lives for the raising of the world and man to God and the bringing of God to earth to transform it into an abode of Divine Delight.

Sri Aurobindo first gives a panoramic vision of the character and mighty events of the momentous day of Divine Conquest (book 1, canto 1). Dramatically he opens the epic with a description of the dawn of the day destined for Satyavan's death and makes it the symbol of the dawn of the spiritual tomorrow which is to usher in an age of Truth-Consciousness and immortality. How this wondrous dawn appears to humans with "time-born eyes" and how it affects Savitri awaiting her mighty struggle with Death is compared. Telling verses give the key to the source of Savitri's power to rise above her lone grief and the thoughts oppressing her mind. Her godlike character and sensitive nature are set forth and reveal the source of her power and will in the battle of Death.

As the significant day of death arrives (canto 2), Savitri is pictured preparing within, struggling with the burdens of her karmic past, seeking the aid of her will born of Self to help her disown the trials and legacy of past selves which were "a block on the immortal road". As she reviews her past, we hear the radiant prologue to this day, her twelve months' life in the secluded beauty of the woodlands where there was "deep room for thoughts of God".

Striking verses tell of how, when faced with the death of Satyavan, her heart stood "in the way of the driving wheels" of the "engines of the universe", how she kindled her divine strength, how pain assailed her divinest elements, and how the truth of her divinity "broke in a triumph of fire" and empowered her to smite "Death's dumb absolute" and "burst the bounds of consciousness and Time".

After this survey of the mighty moments of the epic, the poet takes up the sequence of events (canto 3) in accordance with the original legend, commencing with a description of the spiritual steps taken by Aswapathy for his soul's release. We learn how through inner concentration and a steady will he kept his consciousness in his supernature and is helped in turning "his frail mud-engine to heaven-use". To free himself from ego and its finiteness, from mind's limits and "the lines of safety reason draws" are his task. What a conscious sleep brings once one is no more drugged by Matter, what powers develop are part of the spiritual romance related.

Then we are told how "these wide-poised upliftings" whose peace the "restless nether members tire of" are made to endure, how the spirit's power gradually transforms the darker parts of man's being, even the body's cells, and makes them feel the need and will to change in order that "this immense creation's purpose may not fail". What he must check crowding through mind's gates under "forged signatures of the gods", what the silences of his being reveal, and what priceless riches he finds in the deep subconscious as his being becomes transfigured are all here described.

The secret knowledge (canto 4) follows, giving out the grandiose meaning of our lives, the story of the climb of the god-spark through the kingdom of the earth to Godhead, how the Spirit-guardians of the Silence of the Truth work in the vicissitudes of our lives, what the true sources of our beings are, who the cosmic managers are, and how the secret God within makes himself felt in our lives. But still unexplained problems make Aswapathy plunge into "unplumbed infinitudes" in order to find the key to what could join Spirit and Matter, join "what is now parted, opposed and twain" and fulfill the Oneness that was the stamp of Being.

So Aswapathy moves (canto 5) into the freedom and greatness of his Spirit, dares "to live when breath and thought were still" and steps into the magic place where all is self-known, where the riddle of the world grew plain and "lost its catch obscure". In magnificent poetry we follow him as he rises, leaving earth-nature's summits below his feet. We are made to feel the ecstasy, might and sweetness of God's mystic power, as he is drawn from his loneliness into God's embrace.

As he climbs, his sealless eye uncovers a series of graded kingdoms twixt life's poles through whose "organ scale of consciousness" souls move. Up this stairway of worlds he starts and enters into another space and time. With Aswapathy, we travel (book 2, canto 1) and become acquainted with the nature of these spheres and their godheads. Here Sri Aurobindo unveils the occult cosmogony in grandiose and vibrant detail in clarity of language that only direct experience can utter. To read of these inner states of ourselves, also the pattern of the universe to be seen within, below, without, above, is to understand ourselves more fully.

Aswapathy crosses out of this gross material world into a subtle material existence where the patterns of our forms are found: then into planes of pure life-force, where in the lower regions, "an unhappy corner of eternity", the little cravings of earth's beings and a motley mass of lower vital creatures abound; while in its higher regions live the higher emotions, desires, and aspirations, where unattained ideas are beings and kings. Then lower into the dangerous nether regions of nescience with its brood of hate and selfishness along with this explorer we go to find the causes of the failure of the desire-worlds to fulfill themselves. There we see the twists of Nature. Further below into Hell we penetrate with this warrior-adventurer who keeps "a prayer upon his lips" and the great "Name" to protect him from its terrors and demoniacal creatures. What scenes of horror and yet grim majesty are portrayed! Even to the hidden heart of Night, the absolute denial of Truth and Being, this spirit-soul dives, where the "hypocrite blooms", a "spiritless hollow", a home of the dark Powers, "a studio of creative Death" and a dire place to torture. Passing through the suffering of its blackest pit, while "treasuring between his hands his flickering soul", Aswapathy discovers that the highest secrets are locked in these abysmal depths.

Then up into the paradises of the Gods of Life and Hope we are made to feel the sweetness and joys of this state. But this too he quickly leaves, journeying on to find something higher, that which makes all One; for to remain within the limits of Desire's satisfactions delays the discoveries of that Immortal One who gives all one could desire and more. The kingdoms and godheads of the little Mind show him their ceaseless analytical workings, and we are introduced to the three dwarfs of mind: habit, desire, and reason. Then into the more luminous planes of Greater Mind, where few are guests, he enters and finds there a plane which God uses as a bridge to send his forms of Truth to man. Inspiring are the lines outlining what could be ours if we opened the gates leading to this shining corridor of Mind.

Next Aswapathy ascends to the blissful heavens of the Ideal, the home of the source of our spiritual longings from where we hear "the flutings of the Infinite" which rouse the soul from its depths. From this beautiful realm where mind's radiant flower-children dwell, he enters into the Silence where the Self of Mind, the witness-Lord of Nature has his secret base. Aswapathy watches the motive-thoughts of this Thinker, but this firmament of abstract thought he observes is a Finder only, but not a Knower or a Lover.

Seeking for an escape from these limits, the king-soul goes through a brilliant opening carried by a mysterious sound into the Soul of the World. Here the poet describes the universal harmonies, sympathies, and wisdom of this Cosmic Consciousness, home of souls in spiritual sleep between lives on earth. We learn how souls plan there in this "fashioning chamber of the Worlds" the adventures of their new lives. The watching eye of this spiritual traveler sees there his own soul, and now soul-conscious, becomes aware of the "Two-in-One", the Cosmic Father-Mother absorbed in deep creative joy, and learns of their works and powers. In awe, he falls before this unveiled Goddess, knowing he is nearing the heart of things. Now our hero-soul steps into a realm of boundless silence "where all are different and all are one". The plenitudes of Wisdom found there are spread before us.

Next (book 3) on creation's heights this tireless seeker arrives where only a formless Form of Self is left. There appears the Godhead of the whole with "his feet firm-based on Life's stupendous wings". The utter aloneness, stillness, and inscrutability of this God with diamond gaze rejecting from itself world and soul

is powerfully set forth. Still, this "Consciousness of unheard bliss" did not satisfy him. He sought in this absolute silence "the Absolute Power", for he knew that a huge extinction is not the crown of the Self's mission or the Self's power, or the meaning of this great mysterious world. Verses of challenge ring forth to the soul who might seek the end of his being in Nirvana.

Passages pregnant with deep meaning then flow forth from the poet as he narrates the drawing near of the Divine Presence behind the Godhead, that luminous heart which Aswapathy has been yearning for with the passion of his soul. Here was the Glory of God, the Divine Mother of all. Soul-stirring is his prayer to the Mighty Mother after having torn up "desire from its bleeding roots and offered to the gods the vacant place". The poet depicts the transformation that comes over Aswapathy as his heart meets the Divine Mother and describes the vision that comes to him of the New Creation to dawn on earth, bringing with it a harmony of all contraries. Splendid and prophetic passages! Suddenly the Divine Mother rises in him and speaks in his heart's chambers, warning him not to awake too soon the immeasurable descent, and revealing her miraculous powers. But Aswapathy, who has now beheld this wondrous Mother, pleads with a heart grown vibrant with love for all: "Incarnate the white passion of thy Force" (book 4). The beautiful Immortal's consent and her promise to come down to earth is one of the lofty mantric passages of the epic. So to change Nature's doom Savitri is born. Exquisite poetry recounts her childhood, the gradual growth of the Flame within her, the call to her divine quest and the meeting of the two young lovers (book 9).

Then we hear Narada (book 6), the heavenly sage, not only announcing to Aswapathy, Savitri's father, the fated death of Satyavan, but giving out with singular force the laws and ways of Karma, fate, pain, and the mystery of why great souls suffer. Like the despondency of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, the ordeal of the foreknowledge of Satyavan's death and heart's grief are shown to be the beginning of Savitri's yoga (book 7), her union with God. With the poet we watch the struggles with forces of indifference and inertia, and with the senses, desire and the restless brain, against truth mixed with poison, and against weakness of heart. The strong charge of her soul in response to her command - "Speak to my depths, O great and deathless Voice, for I am here to do thy will" - is the spiritual charge for every soul seeking to serve the Divine and conquer Darkness.

Next we are given a picture of what Savitri sees when she looks into herself and seeks her soul. Closing the door to the God within are serpents of temptations of all kinds, limitations luring to the easier paths of the all-negating absolute, to escape from the battle with life and to Nirvana. How she answers these and pushes them away is told. On seeking the occult Fire within, three Soul-Forces appear: the Mother of Divine Pity, the Mother of Might, and the Mother of her Secret Soul. Each relates her various forms and work in the world. Finally the poet chants Savitri's finding of her Secret Deity.

But soon the portentous yet promising day of Satyavan's death (book 8) arrives, and it is portrayed in verses of poetic pathos. At the moment of death (book 9), Savitri enters the mystic lotus in her head, "a thousand-petalled home of power and light", and rises to meet the dreadful God, the limitless denial of all being. The two oppose each other, Woman and Universal God of Death. The poem shows Satyavan moving with Death into the silence beyond and Savitri casting off her sheaths and entering into the trance of her soul in order to stay with Satyavan. At the brink of the shadow world, Death peals forth his abysmal cry ordering her to go back. But silent, she dares enter into the Eternal Night with them. Death warns her to go no further and depicts his home of dark immensity and the helplessness of all in his power. After his ruthless speech, Savitri answers what to her is a black lie of Night and declares her spirit's power can resist him and then demands and challenges Death to give what Satyavan desired in his life for his parents. Death smilingly yields, but demands she return to earth lest she be destroyed. But Savitri boldly states her powers, which, like fire, can destroy him. Death in mocking verses cries out that he is the Originator and Destroyer of all. Savitri then meets scorn with scorn and in dynamic poetry proclaims the wondrous might of her God's will and Love. Death refutes all her statements, claiming his Power can deny them all, make all things vain.

Savitri's soul continues to wrestle with Death and to ridicule his words of Reason. Death challenges her to seek to *know*, for knowledge kills love. Quickly comes her response that the Nature of Love gives birth to knowledge. Drifting along with them as they move into the Land of Nought (book 10), we hear the debate

continue, hear them pit all the contraries of life against each other, and we hear from Savitri the very reason of Death's existence. Death peals forth a long proclamation of how he cancels all life's golden truths. To his dangerous music this warrior-maiden gives a picture of what her God of Love has done and will yet accomplish, and dares Death to produce a greater God to captivate her soul. Death sneeringly interprets her words as hallucinations of the mind and gives an oration on the deceptions of mind and raises Unconsciousness as the pinnacle of all. Savitri answers in Death's own words, calling him the dark-browed sophist of the universe masking divinity with his dance of death. She sings forth in glorious poetry the occult miracle of God's wonders from a tiny seed; and then again in lines of majesty power speaks of her assured triumph, of her love as stronger than his bonds of death.

The Dark King still trying to discourage her, ironically speaks of her fantasy of Truth, says that Truth is hard as stone. Back and forth sparkle the words of the debate. Death uses subtle reason and arms himself with all man's faltering searches, his limiting spiritual goals, and exaggerated and imperfect understanding of Truth to prove the futility of God's power, but Savitri, delivered of twilight thoughts, with a heart of Truth, answers his lures. Here Savitri chants lyrics of Nature's miracles, of the wonders of the Infinite and of the limitless powers of a soul integrally surrendered to God.

Death, suspecting her to be the Mother of the Gods embodied, challenges her to show a body of living Truth, for has matter ever been able to hold Truth? Savitri tells Death who he really is and warns him he will cease to be when he touches the embodied Truth Supreme, and then reveals her being all one with God. Death, still unconvinced, makes his last stand in support of his blind force and dares Savitri to reveal the Power of the Divine, for many have Truth, but who has the Power to radiate it? Then is given a picture of Savitri as she becomes transformed into a divine being with all her chakras or lotuses of Power scintillating. The most powerful speech of all follows, and Savitri exhibits her living Power of Truth and proves that death is needed no more. Death is shown gradually vanishing and finally defeated, eaten by light.

In the silences of the beyond (book 11), Savitri and Satyavan were alone. Into the avenues of the Spirit they roam happily. But even there voices rise enticing them to come to a blissful home away from the battles of life, but Savitri again meets the test of strength. With sun-words she replies that she was born on earth to dare the impossible, that imperfect is the joy not shared by all. Then God, knowing Savitri now to be absolutely at one with his diamond Heart, rings forth the final joyous paeon of the divine transformation that shall be on earth and sends Savitri as his Power and Satyavan as his Soul back to earth to change this earthly life into a life divine.

Savitri falls to earth like a star (book 12) and Satyavan invisibly drawn, soars past her. They reunite on earth and the epic closes unveiling the age-long secret deep-guarded in the stillness - the promise of a greater dawn.

Iti maya srutam - Thus have I heard.

*Thus have I heard the revelation of **Savitri**, Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, truly an apocalypse of the treasures of spiritual experience and of the Perfect Divine Existence.*