

SRI AUROBINDO'S CONCEPT OF IMMORTALITY IN SAVITRI



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Introduction

Sri Aurobindo's Savitri is one of the most philosophical poems in the world literature. Several philosophical and spiritual issues are dealt with a master hand by Sri Aurobindo. Though the concept of immortality is highly debatable, he had a clear idea of the nature of immortality man can attain. He had a very high ideal of immortality of the nature directly derived from the Vedas and Upanishads. He was of a confirmed view that along with Purusha, Prakriti, which is considered to be limited, unstable, mortal and therefore anatma, can be immortal provided that appropriate yogic methods are applied. Purusha the absolute soul is inherently immortal since it is beyond the limited and mortal planes of existence. So the soul is considered immortal. The question is: Can Prakriti composed of mind, vital and body be immortalized? Sri Aurobindo believed that it is possible to transform the mortal nature into immortality. That is why, he chose the Satyavan and Savitri tale to communicate the possibility of immortalization of the nature he had envisioned. Man can win immortality by conquering death which is considered both inevitable and unavoidable.

Two Ways of Immortality

Sri Aurobindo states that there are two methods of attaining immortality. First, to live in the divine and to have the divine consciousness is one way of attaining immortality. The other way of attaining immortality is to change the present consciousness into divine consciousness. The former is the way of attaining the Nirvana which entails the negation of everything and being perfectly one with the Absolute which itself is all transcending. The latter prescribes the

path of total transformation of the vital and the body which is believed to be ever mortal. *Savitri* reveals both ways of attaining immortality.

The Nirvana Experience, the Soul's Immortality

Some Vedic sages believe that the material being is mortal and the soul is immortal. If one realizes one's soul, one becomes immortal. For the realization of the soul, one has to unite oneself with 'That'. It is achieved only when one shakes off one's body in death and the spirit is released to go to the world of immortals i.e. the Absolute. Death is thus a passage from mortality to immortality. *Savitri* also reveals this approach to it and states that death is a door to eternity:

Death is a stair, a door, a stumbling stride
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state. (600)

Death is a door that makes one pass from one state to another state. One knows the Self after leaving the body. It is known as *Videhmukti* (liberation after death) . However, by being in the body one can know the Self. For the Upanishadic seers, immortality is the realization of *atman* (Self). If one knows *atman*, one knows everything. Katha Upanishad affirms this truth: *He who knows this self, experiences it as the living spirit, close at hand* (The Principles of Upanidhads, 630). Sankaracharya expounds the idea of *Jivanmukti* (liberation in life). He says that immortality consists in recognizing one's own Self as no-different from Brahman. In other words, immortality is the realization of one's identity with the supreme. Sri Aurobindo's concept of immortality is obviously connected with that of Upanishads, for both of them emphasise the truth that the realization of one's soul is necessary for one's liberation from the cycle of life and death. *Savitri* deals with this issue of immortality with reference to Ashwapathy's integral yoga and Savitri's supramental yoga. In the integral yoga of Ashwapathy, the Nirvana experience is a must. Basically, the integral yoga is a path of ascent to the Divine. In the ascent to the Divine, one has to attain the liberation from his own limiting nature by being perfectly poised in the Self, *atman*. So Ashwapathy attains the liberation first:

At last was won a firm spiritual poise
A constant lodging in the Eternal' realm
A settlement in the Immutable
His heights of being lived in the still Self (36)

This Nirvana experience brings him the liberation from—mind, intellect, consciousness and ego, which represent inner *Prakriti*. The discriminative thought is the only weapon that helps the seeker to differentiate between *atman* and *anatman*. *Prakriti* is *anatman* and therefore it is negated. Then he enters into nameless vast where he realizes that the world is an expression of the Absolute. It is the peak of Nirvana experience:

The Supreme's gaze looked out through human eyes
A knowledge which become what it happened
Replaced the separated sense and heart
And drew all Nature into its embrace: (37)

Ashwapathy attains his infinity and loses his life on it. Then he moves ahead in his ascent process. It is recorded that Sri Aurobindo himself had realized this state of consciousness under the guidance of a Maharatrian yogi Lele during his stay in Baroda. He calls this experience to be the sheer Nirvanic Silence:

All was abolished but the mute alone
The mind from thought released, the heart from grief
Grow inexistent now beyond belief;
There is no I, no Nature known-unknown. (37)

Though the Nirvanic experience brings liberation of the soul, it is still incomplete liberation. In Nirvanic experience the mind is liberated from ignorance; it is made to shed its impressions of being attached with the material world and ultimately dissolved in the Self. The vital and the body are still left in the undivine state in which they are subject to death, disease and decay. Sri Aurobindo is of the opinion that it is also possible to transform the vital and the body into divinised, immortal state and attain the total transformation of the nature. The vital and the body can be immortalized by the appropriate yogic methods. Sri Aurobindo unfolds another dimension of immortality of the mortal. In fact, it is the Vedic ideal both realized and actualized by the Vedic sages. In the Vedas, sages are found worshipping the lord of Gods, Indra. They request the lord to pour *amruta* on them so that they can drink and become immortal on the earth itself. Sri Aurobindo was quite familiar with the method of immortalizing the body i.e. earth-nature, earth-consciousness. So he decided to communicate in modern times this Vedic ideal through the tale of Satyavan and Savitri, which is, in fact, the Vedic vision narrated in the *Vyasa's Mahabharata*.

Path of Transformation, the Body's Immortality

The path of transformation is the other way of attaining immortality through which the vital and the body are divinized and rendered the home of divinity. Normally, it is believed in spiritual world too that the vital and the body are mortal, subject to perish in Time and Space. So these planes of existence are neglected in spiritual sadhana. According to Sri Aurobindo, the vital and the body are mortal because they are subject to death, disease and decay. Through the process of transformation they are freed from mortality. Once they are turned into the home of divinity, there is no death and decay. Man is not ready to realize this truth. One thinks that his vital and body are mortal. Death, disease and decay are both inevitable and unavoidable. The very impression of this assumption, experience and its deep-rooted impressions open the vital and the body to its mortality. The Vedic sages and Sri Aurobindo too have discovered that the body has a mind; it is known as cellular mind or physical mind which holds the thousandfold impressions of mortality of the physical. These impressions are perpetuated now and then ages together by the physical mind and thus material being grows prone to death, disease and decay. The great yogis like Sri Aurobindo advocate that if one removes the assumptions and its impressions of body's mortality from the cellular mind, one can feel one's body growing immortal. One has to accept the fact that death, disease and decay are neither inevitable nor unavoidable. If man is a portion of the Divine, how can he be mortal?

Sri Aurobindo's Savitri is determined to avoid the death of Satyavan on this ground. For her, the whole world is a spiritual fact. In her experience, it is the manifestation of the Divine. If the Divine is immortal, all portions of the Divine are also divine freed from the bondage of death and disease. Savitri's dialogue with the lord of Death throws some lights on this issue. The God of Death argues that if freedom, bliss, and immortality are to be found, they can only be found in life after death. As long as man wears the garb of body, he can not experience anything better than this imperfect world which is subject to pain, strife, death and evil. Savitri does not remain silent. She points out to him that if this creation has risen out of the meaningless void, if matter can forth from energy, and life from matter, and mind from life, and if soul can peep through the flesh, what is wrong in hoping that the imperfect man of today will someday transform himself into the perfection of God. Even now there are seen in man glorious hints of coming perfection:

What then can hinder God from stealing in
Or who forbid his kiss on the sleeping soul?
Already God is near, the truth is close
But standing on Eternity's luminous brink
I have discovered that the world was he
I have met Spirit with spirit, Self with self,
But I have loved too the body of my God
I have pursued him in his earthly form. (649)

It is the vision of Savitri about the world and man who defeats the God of Death and she wins the immortality for Satyavan. The supramental yoga imbues Savitri with the vision of the material world as the spiritual fact and not an undivine affair left in mortal state. It is potentially divine and capable of evolving divinity.

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