Sri Aurobindo Ghosh

M.H. SYED

Editors
R.K. Singh  P.K. Choudhry
An Illustrious Life

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghosh) (15 August, 1872—5 December, 1950) was an Indian nationalist and freedom fighter, major Indian English poet, philosopher, and yogi. He joined the movement for India’s freedom from British rule and for a duration (1905-10), became one of its most important leaders, before turning to developing his own vision and philosophy of human progress and spiritual evolution.

The central theme of Sri Aurobindo’s vision is the evolution of life into a “life divine”. In his own words:

• “Man is a transitional being. He is not final. The step from man to superman is the next approaching achievement in the earth evolution. It is inevitable because it is at once the intention of the inner spirit and the logic of Nature’s process”.

An Illustrious Life

and Aphorisms and several volumes of letters. In poetry, his principal work is “Savitri - a Legend and a Symbol” in blank verse.

Early Life and Education

Aurobindo Ghosh was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872 in an influential family of Konnagar in the Hoogly district of West Bengal. His grandfather was a pupil of the celebrated David Hare and was closely associated with the Brahmo Samaj. His father, Dr. Krishnadhan Ghosh was one of the first few Indians to go to Britain for education. After obtaining the medical degree from the Aberdeen University, he returned to India entirely anglicised in habits, ideas and ideals. He was a confirmed atheist and an opponent of every form of religious taboo and absurd customs. After his return from England, he refused the demand of the orthodox section of his village that he should perform prayashchitta purification for having travelled beyond the seas. His distrust of the Indian education was so great that he wanted his children to receive an entirely European upbringing. He sent his children first to the Convent run by the Europeans and then to England.

At the age of five, Sri Aurobindo was sent to the Loretto Convent School Darjeeling (run by the Irish nuns) along with his two elder brothers, namely Benoy Bhushan and Man Mohan. While at Darjeeling, Sri Aurobindo saw a dream which is of great significance. He describes the dream thus:

I was lying down one day when I saw suddenly a great darkness rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole universe. After that I had a great tamas always hanging on to me, all through my stay in England. I believe that darkness had something to do with—tamas—that came upon me. It left me only when I was coming back to India.

Although Sri Aurobindo talks of this childhood encounter with darkness or tamas enveloping him and leaving him only in 1893 on his return to India in negative terms, this experience can be considered as being positive on two counts. Firstly, this darkness sealed the truth, brahma jnana so that he could learn literature,
history, political thought and go through the quidditas of life. *Brahma jnana* kills the thirst for ordinary experience and for mundane knowledge. Secondly, premature *brahma jnana* or premature initiation into the numinous can be destructive and disorienting. From this twin perspective, the *tamas* or darkness should be regarded as positive. Swami Brahmanand says that one should read the whole book of life before *samadhi*.

**To England for Studies**

Sri Aurobindo was barely seven when his father took all the three sons to England and arranged their stay at Manchester with the Reverend William H. Drewett, who was the Minister of the Congregational Church, also known as the Octagonal Church. While his elder brothers gained admission to the Manchester Grammar School, Sri Aurobindo was privately coached at home by Mr. and Mrs. Drewett. Mr. Drewett gave Aurobindo a good grounding in English and Latin. Mrs. Drewett, on the other hand, taught him history, geography, arithmetic and French. As a young scholar, he was not only initiated into Biblical scholarship, but was also introduced to the great English poets which included, among others, Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats. Aurobindo read scores of books on varying subjects and began writing verses for the *Fox Family* magazine even at that early age.

Dr. Krishanadhan Ghosh, the father of Aurobindo, was an ardent Anglophile. He had given strict instructions to the Drewetts that his children should, under no circumstances, get in touch with the defiling, contaminating influence of the Indians living there. This was done in letter and spirit Aurobindo thus grew up in entire ignorance of India, her people, her religion and her culture. Not only that Sri Aurobindo was deprived of the emotional warmth and bodily contact of his parents in his infancy and childhood. This resulted in unfavourable conditioning of his personalised emotions, behavioural pattern and archetypal images. Parental inaccessibility through remoteness made it harder for him to come to grips with his complexes, his inner power. Sri Aurobindo thus grew up, psychologically speaking, in an emotional vacuum, which he filled up with objective, large, vast, linguistic, literary, and historical interest. This is very important to grasp to
understand Sri Aurobindo as a political thinker because later on when he came to Cambridge University, he filled this vacuum with abiding interest in political thought and politics.

On the eve of the departure of the Drewetts for Australia in 1885, Sri Aurobindo was sent to the St. Paul School, London, at the age of twelve. Since he had already made considerable progress in the study of Latin, he proceeded to learn Greek. He was so quick in mastering the Greek language that the Headmaster of the School, Dr. F.W. Walker was taken by surprise. He began taking keen interest in Aurobindo and taught him Greek during the entire period of his stay in the school.

Sri Aurobindo was at the St. Paul School for five years from 1884 to 1889. During this period he spent most of his time in the study of classics, besides general reading, especially English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature and the European history (ancient, medieval and modern). He also devoted some time to learning Italian, German and Spanish. It was because of his total involvement in studies that he not only gained rapid promotions to higher classes but also achieved distinction in literature and history. He was awarded the Butter worth Second Prize in literature and the Bedford Prize in history. Towards the end of his stay at the St. Paul he participated with distinction in a debate on “Swift’s Political Views” (November 5, 1889) and in another debate on Milton (November 19, 1889) organised by the Literary Society of the School. In the former debate, he pointed out Swift’s inconsistencies, using flawless analytic logic. This speaks volumes of his intellectual attainment and superb mastery over English language even at that early impressionable age.

While in London, Sri Aurobindo (as also his two elder brothers) lived in great financial hardship on account of his father’s failure to send them remittances regularly. “During a whole year”, records Sri Aurobindo, “a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny saveloy formed the only food”. Writing to one of his disciples, Sri Aurobindo narrates the painful story of his life thus:

...You will not understand me, unless I tell a circumstance of my life which is unhappily both painful for me to
reveal, and for you to hear. I had no mother. She is insane. You may judge the horror of this, how I strove to snatch a fearful love, but only succeeded in hating and loathing and at last becoming cold. Crying for bread I was given a stone. My father was kind but stern, and I never saw much of him. Thus from childhood I was subjected to fits of gloom and despondence which grew with my age...

In College

At the age of eighteen, Sri Aurobindo went to the King’s College, Cambridge, with a senior classical scholarship of £80 per annum. At Cambridge, he passed the First Part of the Classics Tripos in the first division after two years, and also won college prizes for English and literary ability. During his stay in the College, Sri Aurobindo mastered the Greek and Latin classics and won all the prizes for the year in the King’s College for Greek and Latin verse. However, his interest was not confined to classical studies; he made a deep study of the modern European history and literature. He also appeared in the Indian Civil Service examination and passed all the examinations.

The Aurobindonian biographers are of the persuasion that since Sri Aurobindo was not interested in securing a distinguished administrative post, he managed to get himself disqualified by the simple expedient of not appearing in the riding test, which was one of the compulsory subjects. But the authors are of this conviction that he was suffering from depression during this period which seems natural considering that he had lived a life of loneliness and scholarship and was bereft of any meaningful relationship in the human sense. He deliberately absented himself from the riding test despite having been given three separate trials. To quote Sri Aurobindo:

It was partly father’s fault that I failed in the riding test... He did not send money and riding lessons at Cambridge at that time were rather costly...

It may, therefore, be said that the emotional vacuum in Sri Aurobindo’s life together with depression and inability to engage a tutor due to pecuniary condition account for his failure in the
Initial Political Activities

Dr. Krishnadhan Ghosh had a great faith in the English sense of justice. But his transfer from Rangpur to Khulna despite his being very popular with the people of Rangpur was a great shock to him. He lost faith in the English sense of justice and came to resent English domination. Dr. Ghosh wrote to his children in England of the heartless attitude of the British Government in India. He also began sending them clippings from the Indian newspapers highlighting the British high-handedness. These clippings cataloguing the iniquities of the British rule in India opened Sri Aurobindo’s eyes to the suffering and degradation of his countrymen. It created such resentment against the subjection of India to foreign rule that he became a member of a radical group—The Indian Majlis—at the Cambridge University. He began to participate actively in the revolutionary activities of the Majlis and later became its Secretary. Being a student of European history and politics, which he had studied for years now, he realised what was wrong with the British Raj. Sri Aurobindo also formed a small revolutionary group of Indians in London in collaboration with his elder brother, Benoy Bhushan. The thrust of this small revolutionary group was to undermine the leadership of Dadabhai Naoroji, a moderate leader in the Indian politics. Sri Aurobindo also joined, along with his brothers, a secret Society called the “Lotus and Dagger” in 1892, shortly before he left for India. In this secret Society, each member vowed to work for the liberation of the country from the foreign rule.

Return to India

Sri Aurobindo left England in January 1893 at the age of 21 to return to his homeland. His father, Dr. Ghosh, was eagerly awaiting the return of his children but he was erroneously informed that the steamer in which Aurobindo had sailed from England had sunk off the coast of Portugal. The shock caused a fatal heart attack.

Writing about his ontological, phenomenal and seminal experience when he set his foot on the Indian soil at Apollo Bunder, Bombay, to one of his disciples, Sri Aurobindo writes:
Since I set foot on Indian soil on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, I began to have spiritual experiences but these were not divorced from this world but had an inner and infinite bearing on it, such as a feeling of the infinite pervading material space and the immanent inhabiting material objects and bodies. At the same time, I found myself entering supra-physical world planes with influences and an effect from them upon the material plane.

These experiences of Sri Aurobindo are fundamental to the understanding of Spirit and its many-sided relationship with the world. The Spirit, though transcendent, bears on the world in many ways; it inheres in the world, in its myriad particulars. And then again, the higher, rarefied transcendent spiritual planes affect and influence the mundane, palpable, quotidian planes. So we are dealing with a very complex, comprehensive interanimation. Usually, spiritual experiences take one away from life, world, reality. Plotinus talks about the Flight of the Alone to the Alone. Sri Aurobindo’s involvement with society, culture, civilization, politics is absolutely right in terms of such spiritual experiences which have been called by us as seminal.

Beginning of Career

On his arrival in India, Sri Aurobindo joined the Baroda State Service on February 8, 1893, at a salary of Rs. 200 per month. He continued in service till June 18, 1907. While in service, he worked in the Survey Settlement Department, Stamp and Revenue Department and the Baroda State Secretariat. He drafted important letters of the Maharaja of Baroda and made digests of correspondence and documents. He even drafted agreements. Perhaps, it may not be irrelevant to mention here that Sri Aurobindo’s precision and exactitude of thought has something to do with this early training in drafting, summarising, etc.

In the year 1900, Sri Aurobindo was transferred to the Baroda College as Professor of English and French. He was appointed as Vice-Principal of the College in 1904.
An Illustrious Life

While in the Baroda Civil Service, Sri Aurobindo realised that his background was wholly western and that his knowledge of the Indian life, its history and culture was rudimentary. To compensate for this deficiency, he set apart a portion of his salary for the purchase of books. It is said that he had given standing instructions to two booksellers in Bombay to mail him catalogues of all the latest titles. Books would often come to him in crates, much to the surprise of his friends.

Sitting by a kerosene lamp, Sri Aurobindo would read late into the night unmindful of mosquitoes, unaware of food waiting on the table. In the morning after breakfast, he would again read or write. Unmindful of the personal inconvenience in a dilapidated house, he would study books on a wide range of subjects, such as *The Upanishads*, *The Gita*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, and the Works of Kalidas, Bhavabhuti, etc. This study continued for about a decade almost undisturbed until he was drawn into active politics.

As pointed out earlier, Sri Aurobindo had no personal, familial, emotional identity of any kind. In such a situation, the archetype from the deep unconscious which craves and clamours for identity made itself felt, resuscitated as it were, to give him the beginnings of an identity. So from the time of his return to his homeland at the age of twenty-one (1893), he set himself to the task of forging an identity for himself consciously as an Indian.

**Revolutionary Activities**

From 1905 to 1910, Sri Aurobindo plunged himself as a revolutionary activist, fanning the national movement in Bengal. Despite the all-time active extroversion, he continued delving deep into the *Vedanta* in the Hindu scriptures. It is not surprising, therefore, that while in the Alipur Jail he had his massive visionary experience of seeing Vasudeva everywhere and in all. It is further not surprising that beginning in 1910 with his retreat to Pondicherry, he began carving out an epic synthesis of Vedanta, Tantra and western European thought and political philosophy. This epic synthesis has been bequeathed by him to the East and the West for use, for *sadhana*, for sociology as also for politics.
Six months after his return from England, Sri Aurobindo began sending a series of articles to a Pune weekly, the _Indu Prakash_. The series were significantly titled “New Lamps for Old”. Sri Aurobindo expressed his ideas regarding the contemporary situation. This was the first public expression of his views on the nationalist movement. He wrote:

> With us it rests... with our sincerity, our foresight, our promptness of thought and action... Theorist and trifler though I may be called, I again assert as our first and holiest duty, the elevation and enlightenment of the proletariat: I again call on those nobler spirits among us who are working erroneously, it may be, but with incipient of growing sincerity and nobleness of mind, to divert their strenuous effort from the promotion of narrow class interests, from silly squabbles about offices and salaried positions, from a philanthropy laudable in itself and worthy of rational pursuit... in the range of its benevolence and ineffectual towards promoting the nearest interests of the nation, into that vaster channel through which alone the healing waters may be conducted to the lips of their ailing and tortured country.

Writing about the nationalist movement, Sri Aurobindo said that efforts in political progress were not sustained but were lacking in vigour; that hypocrisy had been the besetting sin of the political agitation; that the institutions were in danger of falling down. He advocated true, matter-of-fact, honest criticism so as to accelerate the pace of Indian independence. Under the circumstances, he thought it to be criminal to remain silent while the whole energy in political progress, according to him, was being spent in a wrong direction. Criticising the Congress policy, he said that its aims were mistaken; its spirit was not the spirit of sincerity and whole-heartedness; its methods were not right methods; and the leaders in whom it trusted were not the right sort of men to be leaders—in brief, ‘we are at present the blind led, if not by the blind, at any rate by the one-eyed.’

The publication of these ideas created a furore in political
An Illustrious Life

circles. The Editor of the paper was warned of prosecution for sedition. The Editor of the paper got so much frightened that he requested Sri Aurobindo to tone down his criticism and write something less violent, Sri Aurobindo, who was burning with nationalistic fervour got so much disgusted that he lost all enthusiasm for writing the series. Instead, he began writing on the philosophy of politics, leaving aside the practical aspects.

In the year 1898-99, Sri Aurobindo formed a secret Society to organise a revolution to bring about the independence of India. To him, the freedom of the country was not a game of politics but was the first step for establishing God’s kingdom on earth. Sri Aurobindo wrote a booklet (1903) entitled “No Compromise”, which was printed in secret by one Abinash, a member of the revolutionary party. It created a stir in the political circles, in the right-thinking persons throughout the country. Sri Aurobindo advocated complete freedom for India in the Congress Session at Bombay in 1904.

The partition of Bengal on October 16, 1905, was a blessing in disguise for Sri Aurobindo to actively engage himself in the struggle for the Indian freedom. While he was working from behind the scene in the earlier years—he had not yet resigned from the Baroda State Service—the partition of Bengal came in handy for him to participate actively in politics. On April 14, 1906, he attended the Bengal Conference, which was declared illegal by the British Government. The procession of protest led by Sri Aurobindo, Bipin Chandra Pal and BC Chatterji was lathicharged and many persons were injured. Despite repression and the draconian laws, the struggle for the country’s freedom continued unabated.

What is important to note here is that the nationalist movement followed by the country until it achieved its independence was initiated for the first time during this period. Sri Aurobindo was the first politician to stand openly for complete and absolute independence—Poorna Swaraj—as the aim of political action in India. Sri Aurobindo contributed some of the opening articles to a weekly Bengali paper called Jugantar (Change of Age) which preached open revolt, guerilla warfare. When one of its subeditors
(a brother of Swami Vivekananda) was prosecuted. Jugantar refused to defend itself in a British Court on the ground that it did not recognise the British Government.

This temper of direct confrontation created a stir in the mind of the British people and they let loose repressive measures. The demand for poorna swaraj could hardly find favour with the British rulers wedded to the traditions of autocracy. Besides, they apprehended a revolt against their thrones in the demand for the poorna swaraj so that the heavy jackboot fell riding roughshod on the legitimate rights and aspirations of the people. Protagonists and upholders of ‘demos’ were harassed and hounded, punished and victimised. Quite often, the governmental action was cavalier and its method, draconian.

Despite repressive measures, the struggle for independence continued unabated. The demand for independence was made through the medium of newspapers, articles, processions and meetings. Sri Bipin Chandra Pal, a nationalist leader, started a newspaper called Vande Mataram on August 6, 1906 and Sri Aurobindo became its Editor. Though the paper was stopped by the government after about two years of its publication, it contained a series of articles advocating the use of Swadeshi goods, boycott of foreign goods, passive resistance, non-cooperation, national system of education, settlement of disputes in law by popular arbitration and other matters. Sri Aurobindo attended the Congress session at Calcutta which demanded, for the first time in the history of the Congress, swaraj or complete independence. While the nationalists interpreted swaraj as ‘Complete independence’ from the foreign yoke, the moderates interpreted it as a ‘colonial self-government’.

In November 1907, Sri Aurobindo led the Nationalist party at the Midnapur session of the Bengal Provincial Conference and later its Hooghly session. His stress throughout was on complete independence or purna swaraj which, however, was a part of an integrated world outlook. He felt that India had a mission to perform in the comity of nations and wrote:

A divine power is behind the movement. The Zeit-
An Illustrious Life

Geist, the time-spirit, is at work to bring about a mighty movement of which the world at the present juncture has need. That movement is the resurgence of Asia and the resurgence of India is not only a necessary part of the larger movement but its central need. India is the keystone of the arch, the chief inheritress of the common Asiatic destiny.... The idea of a free and united India has been born and arrived at full stature in the land of the rishis, and the spiritual force of a great civilization of which the world has need, is gathering at its back.

Surat and After

There appeared three articles from Sri Aurobindo’s pen with the titles “The Foundations of Sovereignty,” “Sankharitola’s Apologia” and “The Unities of Sankharitola” respectively. In these brilliant, satirical, illuminating and nimbly controversial articles, Sri Aurobindo joined issue with Mr. N. N. Ghosh of the Indian Nation; while the articles are doubtless enjoyable on account of their sparkle and their controversial brilliance, they are at the same time a serious study of the problems of nationalism and sovereignty with reference to Indian conditions. In the first of the three articles, Sri Aurobindo wrote, in answer to his own question,—What are the elements of Sovereignty?—as follows:

“We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain political conditions which enable the impulse to realise itself in an organised government expressing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence.” Sri Aurobindo emphatically maintained that these conditions obtained in India, In reply to Mr. N. N. Ghosh’s contention that the mixture of races was an insuperable obstacle in the way of national unity, Sri Aurobindo pertinently declared:

“One might just as well say that different chemical elements cannot combine into a single substance as that different races cannot combine into a single nation.”
In another article, written for but not actually published in the *Vande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo went to the very root of the matter and explained in vivid and almost poetic language the *raison d’être* of Indian patriotism:

“...the pride in the past, the pain of our present, the passion for the future are its (i.e., patriotism’s) trunk and branches. Self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, great service, high endurance for the country, are its fruits. And the sap that keeps it alive is the realisation of the motherhood of God in the country, the vision of the Mother, the perpetual contemplation, adoration and service of the Mother.” If only Indians would learn to realise themselves, not in the stifling groove of a mere party or of a community or of a segment of the country, but in the infinite bounty of the Mother of All, there would then indeed be no “problem” of Indian unity to solve!

But these articles—quite apart from their close-grained fabric of reasoning on the problem of Indian nationalism—were, after all, shots fired in the course of a journalistic duel. Sri Aurobindo is revealed in these articles as an unerring marksman. Did Mr. N. N. Ghosh accuse Sri Aurobindo of “incapacity to understand the substance of his (Mr. Ghosh’s) article?” Very well, then, answered Sri Aurobindo, “we quite admit that it is difficult to understand the mystic wisdom of a sage who asserts that the soundness of his premises has nothing to do with the soundness of his conclusions.” And so the duel proceeds, and the slovenly antagonist, fighting with clubs and other useless old weapons, finds himself worsted in every encounter, and at last quits the field leaving the editor of the *Vande Mataram* in proud possession of it.

**Ideological Differences**

Throughout 1907, the ideological differences between the Moderates, led by Sir Phirozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and V. Krishnaswami Aiyar, and the Nationalists (or Extremists, as they were also called), led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and
Aurobindo Ghosh, continued to be emphasised more and more. The Calcutta Resolutions of 1906 had apparently given little real satisfaction to either party. The Moderates were trying, perhaps, to whittle down the implications of the Calcutta Resolutions; the Nationalists, on the other hand, were even more determined to stick to their guns, nay even to take an extremer stand on the issue of the national demand.

The Surat Congress of December 1907 was to give a final decision in the matter; but even before that, preliminary skirmishes between the rival groups were witnessed all over the country and especially in Bengal and in the Bombay Province. For instance, in the Midnapur session of the Bengal Provincial Conference, held in December 1907, the Nationalists succeeded in getting their own resolutions passed by the Conference; subsequently they held an independent conference of their own with Sri Aurobindo as President and gave a lead to Bengal and a warning to the stage-managers of the Surat Congress. The Lokamanya was overjoyed and asked Sri Aurobindo to bring as many Nationalists as possible to Surat to make the Congress itself an overwhelmingly Nationalist body.

Sri Aurobindo was thus an acknowledged all-India leader and a busy publicist. By temperament he did not love storms and battles; but he had become a hero nevertheless, though by “necessity rather than by choice.” The imprisonment of his principal co-workers in Bengal, the exile of some others, and the publicity given to his name by the Vande Mataram case, all compelled him to come forward and take the lead on the public platform. In addition to the circulation of the daily and weekly editions of the Vande Mataram, reprints from the paper also were published from time to time in Gujarat and had a tremendous vogue all over the country. All this contributed to Sri Aurobindo’s universal popularity and justified his position as the Quartermaster-General of the Nationalist Army.

Shortly before proceeding to Surat to attend the momentous Congress Session there, Sri Aurobindo wrote another letter to his wife which provides us with a slender clue to the workings of his mind during this period. Sri Aurobindo begins by saying that he has not a moment’s rest; public and private work, Vande Mataram
and Congress affairs, are taking up all his time. His wife should remember this circumstance particularly: that her husband is going through a difficult period, different people trying to pull him in different directions, causing almost distraction to him. His wife at least should preserve her poise and be a source of strength to him. Wedded to a unique individual like Sri Aurobindo, she is bound to be pursued by difficulties; but she should bear them calmly and she should learn to derive pleasure only in the success of her own husband’s endeavours. The husband’s dharma should be the wife’s as well; if it were otherwise, she cannot hope to be happy!

From the letter we also learn that Sri Aurobindo proposed to leave for Surat about the middle of December and to return to Calcutta on the 7th January 1908.

Matters came to a head at last at Surat. The rival parties had come to the “Sleepy Hollow” in full strength and the stage was finally set for a Marathon contest,—or rather for enacting a pandemonium. Lokamanya Tilak was the accredited Generalissimo of the Nationalists, and he was a whole host by himself. He was, in Sri Aurobindo’s words, “the very type and incarnation of the Maratha character, the Maratha qualities, the Maratha spirit, but with the unified solidity in the character, the touch of genius in the qualities, the vital force in the spirit which make a great personality readily the representative man of his people.” He was at Surat with a strong contingent from Maharashtra—but, indeed, he spoke for the whole nation. It was inevitable that the Zeit Geist should throw up such a colossus as he:

“The condition of things in India being given, the one possible aim for political effort resulting and the sole means and spirit by which it could be brought about, this man had to come and, once in the field, had to come to the front.” The Moderates too had leaders of the calibre of Phirozesheh Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rash Behari Ghosh (the President-Elect of the Surat Congress), and V, Krishnaswami Aiyar. Besides, there were also Lala Lajpat Rai and Surendranath Banerjee, who were not quite definitely of either extreme group. There were, perhaps, reasons
enough for the two groups to clash mightily at Surat and to carry on the warfare for several months afterwards. At this distance of time, however, let us admit that they were all very sincere patriots, although they did not tackle the problem of winning swaraj in an identical manner. There had to be that trial of strength at Surat and the subsequent mutual mudslinging; but that need not prevent our admiration from going out equally, though not necessarily to an equal degree, to the champions of both Moderatism and Extremism, men who alike according to their lights and temperamental limitations, grappled with tasks of almost superhuman difficulty”.

Rightly or wrongly, the Nationalists thought that the Moderates wished, if not in letter at least in spirit, to go back on the Calcutta stand of the previous year. They therefore held a separate conference under the chairmanship of Sri Aurobindo, “where it was decided that the Nationalists should prevent the attempted retrogression of the Congress by all constitutional means, even by opposing the election of the President if necessary.” The Moderates were equally determined to have things their own way. In the open session the two groups could not agree and the proceedings ended—as the proceedings of the Ramgarh Congress of 1939 nearly ended—in ungovernable excitement and utter confusion. It is not necessary here to recapitulate in detail all the unsavoury events that were enacted in the “Sleepy Hollow” of Surat. The rival Sections gave their own versions of the happenings, the Extremist version being signed by Tilak, Khaparde, H. Mukherji, B. C. Chatterjee and Sri Aurobindo. Now a de facto all-India leader, Sri Aurobindo’s capacity for intrepid leadership made a deep impression on the Nationalists from the different parts of India, and henceforth he could count on a huge, attentive and adoring audience wherever he went. Apart from its immediate political repercussions in the country at large, Surat projected Sri Aurobindo—almost against his will—into the blinding glare of all-India leadership. In one bound, as it were, he had joined the select band of Nationalist-Extremists, rubbing shoulders with men of the stature of Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Bepin Pal.
After the Surat imbroglio, Sri Aurobindo paid a visit to Baroda and delivered a few public lectures on the political situation in the country. His former pupils of the Baroda College were not unnaturally very much excited when they saw their revered old teacher; it is said that they let loose the horses that were yoked to the chariot in which Sri Aurobindo was being taken in a procession and dragged it themselves part of the way!

While in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo consulted Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who had come from Gwalior to Baroda in answer to a wire from Barindra, for some needed guidance in yoga. Political preoccupations apart, or even because of them, Sri Aurobindo was inveterately drawn to the ardours of yoga, its disciplines, its thrills, its ecstasies, its sun-lit beatitudes. Yogi Lele advised Sri Aurobindo to strive to empty his mind of all mere mental stuff — to make the mind a sheet of white paper to receive a piece of Divine calligraphy — to purify the system by ejecting all ego-stuff so that the Divine can take possession of it and direct its future operations. It was but a little hint — no more than a tiny seed; but it fell on the most fertile soil, proved a banyan seed, and grew into a mighty tree branching so broad and long that in the ground.

The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow above the mother tree, a pillared shade high overarched, and echoing walks between.

Sri Aurobindo could now face the so-called “Battle of Life” — a more remorseless and ruthless affair than the Battle of Britain or the Battle of Burma or the Battle of the Pacific — with complete equanimity and sober certainty of ultimate fulfilment. It was in such a mood of shanti and clarity of vision that Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife the third of the famous letters which, ironically enough, owe their preservation to the vigilance of the police. He had, no doubt, originally intended to return to Calcutta from Surat in the first week of January; he had been unable to do so; nor was it, after all, his own doing or lack of doing.

Whithersoever God directed him, there he had to go; he had to go for doing God’s work, not his own; he, her husband, was henceforth not a free man; he was just an instrument in God’s hands; his future movements, his programmes for all the tomorrows yet to come, all would entirely depend on the will of
An Illustrious Life

God, on that alone. The grace that had flooded his own soul and
truly transfigured it would be hers also, if she sought it in the
proper manner. Would she not rise to the height of the possibility
opening up before her and prove her husband’s real helpmate and
shakti?

The three letters that Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife—there
must have been several others also, but only these three have been
saved for posterity—by themselves tell an enchanting and inspiring
story of aspiration, trial, and fulfilment. In the first, we gain an
inkling into the nature of Sri Aurobindo’s “mad” aspirations; in
the second, we snap him in a mood of incipient doubt, but of stern
endeavour; in the third, we see that he has already “arrived,” that
he has successfully accomplished what Teufelsdrockh calls the
“annihilation of the self.” He was no more Mr. Aurobindo Ghosh,—
he was now Sri Aurobindo, the son and servant of God, the lover
and servant of the Mother. He could now have told himself —
as he told “R. on her birthday”:

Rejoice and fear not for the waves that swell,
The storms that thunder, winds that sweep; Always
our Captain holds the rudder well, He does not sleep.

After the Surat debacle, Sri Aurobindo did not return to Bengal
immediately, as he had originally intended, but went to Pune
with Lele; and after his return to Bombay, Sri Aurobindo went
to Calcutta. Wherever he stopped on the way for a day or two,
he spoke in public, raising the current political issues to a moral,
almost a religious and spiritual, plane. Under the auspices of the
Bombay National Union, Sri Aurobindo addressed a large
gathering on the 19th January 1908. He had meditated for three
days with Lele on the top floor of Majumdar’s house in Baroda,
and the meditation had brought Sri Aurobindo to a condition of
silence of the mind, a condition which he kept for many months,
and indeed always thereafter, all activity henceforth proceeding
only on the surface. But when Sri Aurobindo went to address the
Bombay National Union, the silence of the mind was the sole
reality and there was no activity on the surface. Lele told him to
make namaskar to the audience and wait,—and speech would
come to him from some other source than the mind. So in fact the
speech came, and ever since all speech, writing, thought and outward activity have so come to him from the same source above the brain-mind.

The Bombay speech is justly famous. He seemed to the audience as one in the grip of a trance; but as he rose to speak, he found the voice, he found the words; he spoke with feeling, he spoke with conviction; he spoke in small, jerky, almost nervous sentences; and he spoke neither like a professional politician nor like an elder statesman, but rather like an evangelist, a prophet:

“You call yourselves Nationalists. What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live in Bengal, Nationalism has come to the people as a religion and it has been accepted as a religion. But certain forces which are against that religion are trying to crush its rising strength. It always happens when a new religion is preached, when God is going to be born in the people, that such forces rise with all their weapons in their hands to crush the religion Nationalism has not been crushed. Nationalism is not going to be crushed. Nationalism survives in the strength of God and it is not possible to crush it, whatever weapons are brought against it. Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism cannot die.... God cannot be killed, God cannot be sent to jail.” How refreshing—how so very unexpectedly refreshing—must it have been to listen to these pointed, prophetic utterances, so utterly devoid of mere political verbiage and legalistic qualification? The word “Nationalism” is repeated again and again in a caressing manner, as if it were indeed a “flame-word rune”; the sentences send out their fragrance and power and one is soon in their thrall; there is no escape from their magic spells and vast spiritual potency!

The worldly wise people, however, must have heard the speech with a sigh and a shudder, and gravelly nodded their heads in disapproval; the cold rationalists must have been aghast that God—who like the British Crown should be above politics—should thus be trotted out as a clinching argument from a political platform. But Sri Aurobindo persevered; he dinned his message into the public ear, day after day, week in week out; he would
spiritualise politics, he would make the political awakening in the country grow into a Vedantic enquiry into the nature of its own truest essence and reach its fulfilment in a self-realisation of its own infinite potentialities. To the scared eye of calculating reason it might appear that, to unarmed and puny men and women, there is no other go except tamely and abjectly to bear the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”; but even in this degenerate world of ours a David is more than a match for a Goliath; faith can truly lift mountains and perform miraculous feats. What was necessary, then? “What is the one thing needful? What is it that has helped the older men who have gone to prison? What is it that has been their strength, that has enabled them to stand against all temptations and against all dangers and obstacles? They have had one and all of them consciously or unconsciously one overmastering idea, one idea which nothing can shake, and this was the idea that there is a great Power at work to help India, and that we are doing what it bids us.”

Faith, then, was the primary thing; selflessness also was required; as Sri Aurobindo remarked categorically: “this movement of Nationalism is not guided by any self-interest, not at the heart of it, it is not, at the heart of it, a political self-interest that we are pursuing. It is a religion which we are trying to live. It is a religion by which we are trying to realise God in the nation, in our fellow-countrymen. We are trying to realise Him in the three hundred millions of our people.”

Faith, selflessness and courage, triune virtues these that will help the country to realise itself; these must stir within and regulate the conduct of all Nationalists; and aspiring thus and ever so wholeheartedly working, the three hundred millions will soon discover that God Himself is working for them and through them, in order to reveal Himself a new to India and to the whole world!

A new music surely; not statistics, not citations from Burke and Mill and who not, not appeals to British precedents like the Witenagemot and the Magna Charta and collective responsibility, not even a harking back to the French Revolution or the American Declaration of Independence; just an invocation to God and an exhortation to Indians to consecrate themselves to the service of
God, of God in the Mother,—that’s all!

Baroda, Bombay, Pune, Nasik, Amraoti, Nagpur, wherever Sri Aurobindo went, he received a royal welcome and everywhere people listened to him “with bated breath and whispering humbleness.”

In Nagpur, Sri Aurobindo addressed audiences of several thousands; Dr. Moonje translated the speeches into Hindi; and even peasants in large numbers attended the meetings and received the stirring message. As the Nagpur correspondent wrote to the _Vande Mataram_, “his (Sri Aurobindo’s) saintly figure has impressed the masses as well as the classes with such marvellous effectiveness, that he is the sole subject of appreciative talk for the latter part of this week.”

Returning to Calcutta at last, Sri Aurobindo continued to work with vigour and pertinacity. Here too he was much in demand as a public speaker. The themes were the same old themes,—nationalism, swadeshi, self-help, arbitration, the ethics of suffering, unselfish service, and the necessity for reviving all that was good in Hinduism; but Sri Aurobindo deftly played inspiring variations of the same, and every word sounded as a clarion call.

**Revolutionary Articles**

In January 1908, Sri Aurobindo published a series of editorial articles in the _Vande Mataram,_ under the general title “Death or Life,” emphasising some of the ideas he repeatedly stressed in his public speeches. The views expressed in these articles were not unsimilar to those expressed by Carlyle in _Sartor Resartus,_ especially in the chapters entitled “Phoenix” and “Organic Filaments”. Destruction and creation are ever going on together in this world. The future is in very truth being formed in the present. The debacle at Surat was but the necessary prelude to—or even an indication of the throes of—an imminent rebirth. Sri Aurobindo concluded this thoughtful series of articles with this prophetic declaration: “The old organisations have to be reconstituted to adapt themselves to the new surroundings. The death complained of is only a transition. The burial ground of the old Congress is, as the Saxon phrase goes, only God’s-Acre out of which will grow
An Illustrious Life

the real, vigorous, popular organisation.”

The Surat happenings are also the theme of a satirical poem and a satirical drama that appeared in the *Vande Mataram* of the 26th January and of the 16th and 23rd February respectively. The verses “supposed to be written by Alexander-de-Convention during the unhappy abode in the Sleepy Hollow of Surat” are in obvious imitation of Cowper’s *Alexander Selkirk* and have plenty of bite and vim; the play, “The Slaying of the Congress—a Tragedy in Three Acts” is, however, an infinitely more damaging piece of satire. The first Act opens in Calcutta, at the time of the Congress of 1906; Dadabhai Naoroji, the President, introduces to the assembled delegates the “Lady Congress”:

Much have I laboured, toiled for many years to see this glorious day. Our Lady Congress grown to a fair and perfect womanhood, who at Banaras came of age, is now with pomp and noble ceremony arrived in this Calcutta to assume the charge.

Of her own life into her own proper hands....

Subsequent scenes are located in Bombay, Pune, Bombay again, and, finally, Surat; the principal characters are, of course, Mehta, Tilak, Gokhale, Surendranath, and Krishnaswami Aiyar; there are also symbolic abstractions like Congress, Democracy, Nagpur, and Surat. In the end; the Mehta group are shown as succeeding in their endeavour to “slay the Congress.” It is a clever, amusing, and most interesting piece of work; as one reads it today, one might find the satire a little bit too severe and sweeping; but one must remember that it was written only about a month after the abortive Surat session of the Congress.

Platform-speech, editorial article, or patriotic poetry, Sri Aurobindo knew the art of making most of his medium; and every week that passed found him installed firmer than ever in the hearts of his countrymen and countrywomen.

It may be difficult for those of us who reached our early manhood in the twenties and thirties to realise how exactly the men and women of an earlier generation reacted to Sri Aurobindo’s views, speeches, programmes and newspaper articles. Only the facts can be stated: Sri Aurobindo did indeed galvanise Bengal into a blaze of spirited and high-souled endeavour; he anticipated,
to a very considerable extent, some of Mahatma Gandhi’s methods of political action, notably passive resistance; and he did achieve the no mean feat of rousing, if only for a little while, the slumbering spiritual forces in the country. But it would be wrong to assume that Sri Aurobindo’s political standpoint was entirely pacifist, that he was opposed in principle and in practice to all violence and that he denounced terrorism, insurrection and violence as entirely forbidden by the spirit and letter of the Hindu religion. The rule of confining political action to passive resistance was adopted as the best policy for the National Movement at that stage and not as part of a gospel of Non-violence or Ahimsa or Peace. Sri Aurobindo never concealed his opinion that a nation is entitled to attain its freedom by violence, if it can do so or if there is no other way; whether it should do so or not, would depend on what under particular circumstances is the best policy, not on ethical considerations of the Gandhian kind. Sri Aurobindo’s position and practice in this matter was the same as Lokamanya Tilak’s and that of other Nationalist leaders who were by no means Pacifists or worshippers of Ahimsa. Peace is a part of the highest ideal, but it must be spiritual or at the very least psychological in its basis; without a change in human nature, it cannot come with any finality. If attempted on any other basis like a mental principle or the gospel of Ahimsa, it will fail, and even may leave things worse than before.

Nor was Sri Aurobindo wanting in an accommodating temper or in the ability to put forward practical proposals for purposes of social amelioration. He was prepared to do all in his power to bring the two wings of the Congress under a common banner once again, so that the country might express its strength through “the united Congress of the whole people.” He realised from the outset the importance of organising village samitis and of carrying the gospel of swaraj through them to the masses of the country. As regards the rehabilitation of the village, Sri Aurobindo emphatically declared: “If we are to survive as a nation, we must restore the centres of strength which are natural and necessary to our growth, and the first of these, the basis of all the rest, the old foundation of Indian life and the secret of Indian vitality, is the self-dependent and self-sufficient village organism. If we are to organise swaraj, we must base it on the village. But we must,
An Illustrious Life

at the same time, take care to avoid the mistake which did much in the past to retard our national growth. The village must not in our new national life be isolated as well as self-sufficient, but must feel itself bound up with the life of its neighbouring units, living with them in a common group for common purposes."

But, while Sri Aurobindo was not blind to the exigencies of practical politics nor to the importance of village samitis and similar institutions, he confined himself in the main to the stupendous generalities on which alone all durable social and political structures could be reared. Suffering was not a thing to flee from, suffering was the proud badge of our tribe; suffering would ennoble us, purify us, and awaken the slumbering soul within. In his Baruipur speech, Sri Aurobindo detailed the well-known parable of the two birds and drew from it an elevating political lesson:

“We in India fell under the influence of the foreigners’ maya which completely possessed our souls. It was the maya of the alien rule, the alien civilization, the powers and capacities of the alien people who happen to rule over us. These were as it were so many shackles that put our physical, intellectual and moral life in bondage. It is only through repression and suffering that maya can be dispelled and the bitter fruit of Partition of Bengal administered by Lord Curzon dispelled the illusion. We looked up and saw that the brilliant bird sitting above was none else but ourselves, our real and actual selves. Thus we found Swaraj within ourselves and saw that it was in our hands to discover and to realise it."

In his Kishoreganj speech, again, while dealing with the practical problem of organising village samitis, Sri Aurobindo also laid stress on the basic problem of “Unity” in the country:

“Unity is of the heart and springs from love. The foreign organism which has been living on us, lives by the absence of this love, by division, and it perpetuates the condition of its existence by making us look to it as the centre of our lives and away from our mother and her children. This drying up of the springs of mutual affection is the cause which needs
most to be removed.” Wise and candid words! And they are as opportune today as they were over thirty-five years ago when they were first uttered; and alas! as little heeded today as they were then!

**Calcutta Days**

Sri Aurobindo was now in Calcutta; he was at this time comparatively little known outside his own circle of Nationalists and co-workers, but he was, in fact, the power behind the *Vande Mataram* and the brain of the Nationalist party in Bengali. His editorial and other contributions—many of them unsigned—to the *Vande Mataram* were the admiration of the people and the despair of the Anglo-Indian press. In an inconceivably short time, *The Vande Mataram* became the spearhead of the Nationalist movement in Bengal. “The hand of the master was in it from the very beginning. Its bold attitude, its vigorous thinking, its clear ideas, its chaste and powerful diction, its searching sarcasm and refined witticism were unsurpassed by any journal in the country, either Indian or Anglo-Indian”; and this was how, within a few months, “from the tutor of a few youths “Sri Aurobindo became” the teacher of a whole nation.”

Begun as a daily on the 6th August 1906, *The Vande Mataram* became more and more popular in the coming months; its proprietors were therefore encouraged to bring out also a weekly edition of the paper from June 2, 1907. It was now possible for people all over India to get the quintessence of *The Vande Mataram* in the weekly edition; and hence the vogue of the paper but increased with time, to the no small chagrin of the Government and the Anglo-Indian press.

It is beyond the scope of this study to consider in detail Sri Aurobindo’s innumerable contributions to the columns of the *Vande Mataram*. We can only refer to a few significant ones,—but even so the choice is not easy; for, as one examines the old files of the paper, one lights upon so many brilliant and forceful editorial contributions that one is dazzled by their sheer weight and solid and shining structure of argument. Sri Aurobindo speaks often in prophetic accents and he is weighty and solemn and sweetly
persuasive on those occasions; at other times, he is just a superlatively clever controversialist and then one witnesses a true clash of arms, one watches with amusement (and pity) the cumbrous antagonist writhing in the nimble grasp of Sri Aurobindo. There are other occasions still when Sri Aurobindo is the tribune of the Indian people and through him the disarmed and emasculated millions speak with defiance and pride to the civilized world in the strength of their new-found self-confidence and hope. The Prophet of Renascent India, the Tribune of the People, the Quartermaster-General of the Nationalists,—these are the divers powers and personalities of Sri Aurobindo that we glimpse in the Vande Mataram contributions; but even these are only partial manifestations and emanations of the central Power and Personality whose utter essence we ever vainly try to comprehend!

Some of Sri Aurobindo’s political contributions discuss the proposals for constitutional reform outlined by Morley about the middle of 1907. The Vande Mataram editorially called these reforms “Comic Opera” reforms and acidly pointed out that “the right place for this truly comic Council of Notables with its yet more comic functions is an opera by Gilbert and Sullivan and not an India seething with discontent and convulsed by the throes of an incipient revolution.” In a later editorial, entitled “Biparita Buddhi,” the Vande Mataram returned to the attack:

“The atmosphere of the India House, the debasing responsibility of office, the intoxication of power, has brought the Jingo and killed the man. The Biparita Buddhi that helps the regeneration of weak and oppressed peoples is manifestly at work. We welcome it and pray for its complete ascendency for sometime in Mr. Morley and other British statesmen.”

Some of these editorial articles and other snappy items like satiric compositions and parodies were the work of Shyamsundar Chakravarti, not of Sri Aurobindo. Shyamsundar was a witty parodist and could write with much humour as also with a telling rhetoric; he had besides caught up some imitation of Sri Aurobindo’s prose style and many could not distinguish between
their writings. Whenever Sri Aurobindo was away from Calcutta, it was Shyamsundar who wrote most of the editorials for the Vande Mataram, those accepted which were sent by Sri Aurobindo from Deoghar. One of Shyamsundar’s successful skits was the “mock-petition” to “Honest John,” a piece of vigorous and stinging satire which was printed in the inaugural issue of the Weekly Edition of the Vande Mataram; when it was later reprinted in the Glasgow News, it created quite a stir in Britain, a stir which had its official repercussions in India.

As a politician it was part of Sri Aurobindo’s principles never to appeal to the British people; and the Vande Mataram also avoided such a mendicant policy. But the paper certainly tried to awaken the Indian nation from its slumber. Sri Aurobindo’s Vidula appeared in the second issue of the Vande Mataram Weekly, which also contained Shyamsundar’s “Unreported Conversation” in verse between a Briton and Ajit Singh on the eve of the latter’s arrest. Another inspiring item in the issue was “Pagri Samalo, Jata,” a free rendering by Shyamsundar of the poem that used to be sung by the Jats to rouse their countrymen to protest against the imposition of severe taxes. Perseus the Deliverer, Sri Aurobindo’s great poetic play, began as a serial in the issue of June 30, 1907; we have already considered it as poetry and drama, but the readers of the Vande Mataram must have rather seized the significance of the words, the Deliverer. In the issue of July 7, again, the Vande Mataram merely printed Wilfrid Blunt’s poem, “Wind and the Whirlwind,” and left it by itself to speak in defence of Indian nationalism. In the next issue of the weekly edition, Shyamsundar transfers, by sleight of hand, the “Trial Scene” in The Merchant of Venice to a Calcutta Police Court. The Editor of the Yugantar, the Bengali newspaper, is Antonio; and the denizens of Law and Order constitute Shylock. It is all in Shakespeare; but the derogation is directed against the repressive policy of the Government.

A week later the satirical poet turns his attention to the place-seekers and title-hunters who weaken the Nationalist case. “A Hymn to the Supreme Bull” is supposedly the mantra of these people, who raise their hands in prayer to the Supreme Bull and scream the while:
An Illustrious Life

Hail, sempiternal Lord! Be bounteous still To give us only titles and posts, and if sedition Hath gathered aught of evil, or concealed, Disperse it, as your police disperse our crowds.

If satire could hit the bull’s eye with such deadly accuracy,—why, the paper in which such bits appeared had every reason to feel proud of its growing influence in the country. The Vande Mataram was therefore fully justified in writing on the occasion of its first anniversary:

“It (the paper) came into being in answer to an imperative public need and not to satisfy any private ambition or personal whim; it was born in a great and critical hour for the whole nation and has a message to deliver, which nothing on earth can prevent it from delivering. It claims that it has given expression to the will of the people and sketched their ideals and aspirations with the greatest amount of fidelity.”

Alipur Case

The “Alipur Case,” as it henceforth came to be universally called, was the talk of the whole country for the next twelve months or so. It was known that the prosecution were straining every nerve to secure the conviction of Sri Aurobindo and thereby to cast a stain on the white flower of utterly blameless life he had so far held aloft through fair weather and foul weather alike. The eminent criminal lawyer, the late Mr. Eardley Norton, then at the height of his powers and reputation, was engaged by the Government to conduct the prosecution. It was therefore necessary to organise the defence of Sri Aurobindo on an adequate enough basis. His sister, Shrimati Sarojini, appealed in the following terms to Sri Aurobindo’s countrymen:

“I know all my countrymen do not hold the same political opinions as he (Sri Aurobindo). But I feel some delicacy in saying that probably there are few Indians who do not appreciate his great attainments, his self-sacrifice, his single-minded devotion to the country’s cause, and the high spirituality of his
character. These embolden me, a woman, to stand before every son and daughter of India for help to defend a brother,—my brother and theirs too.” The appeal—which even to read today creates a tremor in our whole being, down to the inmost depths—was eloquently supported by the Bengali, the Amrita Bazar Patrika, and other papers. Response to the appeal was not very slow in coming; and it came from the most unexpected places. A blind beggar—all honour to him—gave Shrimati Sarojini one rupee out of the alms he had assiduously collected, perhaps over a period of a month or even a year; a poor student, by denying himself his daily tiffin, gave a modest contribution; the Pune Sarvajanik Sabha bestirred itself to make collections for the Defence Fund. And other individuals and agencies also interested themselves in making proper arrangements for the defence of Sri Aurobindo.

While all this no doubt gave an indication of the amount of goodwill in the country towards Sri Aurobindo, the actual sum of money that was collected from week to week was by no means satisfactory. After two months, hardly Rs. 23,000 had been collected!

Meanwhile the preliminary trial was going on in Alipur before Mr. L. Birley, the officiating District Magistrate. The trial commenced on the 19th May, 1908. At the outset, bail was refused to Sri Aurobindo. Mr. Kingsford, the intended victim of the Muzaffarpore outrage, being summoned to give evidence, said somewhat complacently: “I was Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta, from August 1904 to March 1908. I had to try many sedition cases; I acquitted as many as I convicted.”

The preliminary trial was a long one. When Sri Aurobindo was brought before Mr. Birley “a black ring was distinctly visible round Aurobindo Babu’s eyes”; two days later—“Aurobindo Babu laughed heartily while conversing with his pleaders, only he looked a bit paler than before.” And so with interesting vicissitudes
An Illustrious Life

the trial dragged on; in the early part of August, Sri Aurobindo was ill in jail; and at last, on the 19th August, Mr. Birley framed charges and committed to sessions Sri Aurobindo and the others.

Shrimati Sarojini Devi had collected by then only Rs. 23,000; she therefore appealed to her countrymen for another Rs. 37,000, since the defence costs were computed to exceed Rs. 60,000.

What were Sri Aurobindo’s feelings when he found himself checkmated by this seemingly inexplicable bolt from the blue, which put an abrupt end to his political career? What did he think and feel, how did he bear the rigours of the imprisonment,—the bad food, the inadequate clothes, the lack of books and journals, the lack of light and free air, and, above all, the strain of boredom and the creeping solitariness of the gloomy cell? Were there regrets, recriminations, or expostulations?

Sri Aurobindo has answered our questions, in language that often acquires wings and wafts us to the seventh heaven of radiant ecstasy and hope incommensurable, in his Kara-kahini and also in his Uttarpara speech, delivered a year later. We shall therefore answer our questions in his own words:

“When I was arrested and hurried to the Lal Bazar hajat, I was shaken in faith for a while, for I could not look into the heart of His intention. Therefore I faltered for a moment and cried out in my heart to Him, ‘What is this that has happened to me? I believed that I had a mission to work for the people of my country and until that work was done, I should have Thy protection. Why then am I here and on such a charge?’ A day passed and a second day and a third, when a voice came to me from within, ‘Wait and see.’ Then I grew calm and waited; I was taken from Lal Bazar to Alipur and was placed for one month in a solitary cell apart from other men. There I waited day and night for the voice of God within me, to know what He had to say to me, to learn what I had to do. In this seclusion, the earliest realisation, the first lesson came to me. I remembered then that a month or more before my
arrest, a call had come to me to put aside all activity,
to go into seclusion and to look into myself, so that I
might enter into closer communion with Him.”

On that occasion, however, he had proved weak and had refused to listen to that voice; politics and poetry were too dear to him then, and he could not give them up. Had he not, indeed, told Yogi Lele that he, Sri Aurobindo, would follow the path of Yoga only if it did not interfere with his politics and his poetry? So long as he was a free man, Sri Aurobindo would not break the bonds himself—and therefore God had to do it for him, though in His own way! God seemed now to whisper to Sri Aurobindo: “I have had another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work.”

Meanwhile, Sri Aurobindo had been permitted by the authorities to send for books, and thus it was that he started reading the Bhagavad Gita. “His strength entered into me and I was able to do the sadhana of the Gita.” Sri Aurobindo had already tried over a long period to apprehend the true inwardness and glory of the Indian religion and spiritual tradition, Sanatana Dharma, and to accept it in its entirety; now it all became, not so much a matter of intellectual comprehension, but a fact of intimate realisation; he thus saw by direct illumination the eternal truth of “what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands, to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently.” The constant reading and re-reading of the Gita, ceaseless meditation on its undying truths, made it possible for Sri Aurobindo to seize in an act of undivided attention “the core of the Gita’s teaching”; the Gita seemed to tell him in friendly, yet unambiguous and peremptory accents:

“Slay then desire; put away attachment to the possession and enjoyment of the outwardness of things. Separate yourself from all that comes to you as outward touches and solicitations, as objects of the mind and senses. Learn to bear and reject all the rush
of the passions and to remain securely seated in your inner self even while they rage in your members, until at last they cease to affect any part of your nature. Bear and put away similarly the forceful attacks and even the slightest insinuating touches of joy and sorrow. Cast away liking and disliking, destroy preference and hatred, root out shrinking and repugnance. Let there be a calm indifference to these things and to all the objects of desire in all your nature. Look on them with the silent and tranquil regard of an impersonal spirit.”

The doubts—the few that had persisted yet in prison—were now a thing of the past; Sri Aurobindo’s soul already experienced a calm and rich lucidity and—lo and behold!—Sri Aurobindo opened his eyes, and saw:

“I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell, but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door, and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arm of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover. This was the first use of the deeper vision He gave me. I looked at the prisoners in jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them, I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.”

Incarceration, then, far from breaking Sri Aurobindo, only remade him in the hallowed mould of God’s desire; the prison did not cramp his movements, but proved rather a temple of liberation and fulfilment; even in confinement he experienced neither peril nor shortcoming, but only the soul’s utter joy and freedom;
and even when he inhabited but an area of forty-five square feet, he sensed the splendours of the Infinite and learned to lose himself in the “vasts of God.”

While thus all was felicity within, the world outside continued to be agitated by the imprisonment of Sri Aurobindo and the protracted and sensational trial that followed it. The case commenced in the Sessions Court in October 1908. Mr. Beachcroft, the District and Sessions Judge, who tried the case, had been with Sri Aurobindo in Cambridge, and had stood second in Greek, while Sri Aurobindo had stood first. He had now the by no means pleasant, task of “trying” the chained and handcuffed Sri Aurobindo on a charge of waging war against the King. Mr. Eardley Norton appeared for the prosecution (who obviously didn’t want to take any chances whatsoever); after the first few days, Chittaranjan Das—the “Desabandhu” of a later day—appeared for Sri Aurobindo. Shrimati Sarojini Devi and her friends thus succeeded in avoiding the “sharks” of the legal profession and found in Chittaranjan a true “Defender of the Faith.” At that time, Chittaranjan was known to be a rising criminal lawyer, a sensitive poet, and, above all, an unflinching idealist and an adoring son and servant of the Mother. He came,—and the prospect brightened at once all around!

Chittaranjan, although he was not then the power in the legal world that he became soon after, gave his whole heart and soul to the organisation of the defence, and for the next six months dedicated himself to the sacred task of defending Sri Aurobindo.

We learn that “in this case 206 witnesses were examined, 4,000 documents were filed, and the exhibits, consisting of bombs, revolvers, ammunition, detonators, fuses, poisonous acids, and other explosive materials, numbered 5,000. Poet, idealist, patriot, Chittaranjan enthusiastically came to his brother poet’s rescue, put away from him “all other thoughts and abandoned all his practice” and “sat up half the night day after day for months and broke his health”—and all to save Sri Aurobindo; and he did succeed in saving him. But Sri Aurobindo knew all the time that, though his friend Chittaranjan was the instrument, Vasudeva alone was the prime mover and doer!
It is not necessary here to go over the whole ground once again. Well, the prosecution—though they sought to move literally heaven and earth—failed to prove their case against Sri Aurobindo. Asked by the Court, Sri Aurobindo said that he would leave the case entirely to his Lawyers; he himself did not wish to make any statement or answer the court’s questions. The case for the defence was that it was perfectly true that Sri Aurobindo had taught the people of India the meaning and the message of national independence; if that in itself was a crime, Sri Aurobindo would willingly plead guilty to the charge. There was no need to bring in witnesses to prove this particular charge; Sri Aurobindo readily and gladly would admit it and he would be willing to suffer to the uttermost for having propagated the message and elucidated the meaning of national independence. But let not the prosecution charge Sri Aurobindo with things he had never even dreamed about, which were wholly repugnant to his entire philosophy of life and conduct; he had taught the people of India how the ideals of democracy and national independence could be translated into realities in terms of Vedantic self-discipline and self-realisation. He had never had any part or lot in the terrorist movement, he had never countenanced it, he had never approved of the actions of the people who had implicated themselves in the movement. He was a Vedantic Nationalist, not a revolutionary terrorist.

Chittaranjan’s speech for the defence was spread over eight days and it was an eloquent epic of forensic art. What was Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy of action,—what was it in the individual and national planes? Just this, affirmed Chittaranjan: Vedantism. Sri Aurobindo was not a politician in the ordinary, Western sense, but one to whom politics was as spiritual an experience as was religion itself. Chittaranjan continued:

“As in the case of individuals you cannot reach your God with extraneous aid, but you must make an effort—that supreme effort—you must make an effort before you can realise the God within you; so also with a nation. It is by itself that a nation must grow; a nation must attain its salvation by its unaided effort. No foreigner can give you that salvation. It is within your own hands to revive that spirit of nationality. That is the doctrine of nationality which Aurobindo has preached throughout, and that was to be done not by methods
which are against the traditions of the country the doctrines he preached are not doctrines of violence but doctrines of passive resistance. It is not bombs, but suffering. He says, believe in yourself; no one attains salvation who does not believe in himself. Similarly, he says, in the case of a nation.” How Chittaranjan proved that the letter purported to have been written by Barindra Kumar Ghosh to Sri Aurobindo was no more than a forgery—” as clumsy as those Piggott had got up to incriminate Parnell after the murder of Lord Cavendish in Phoenix Park “—is among the most thrilling denouements in the history of Indian criminal cases. Having thus ably demolished what had initially appeared to be a piece of damning evidence against Sri Aurobindo, Chittaranjan, in his peroration, made a fervent appeal to Mr. Beachcroft the Judge and the two Assessors in the case:

“My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, the agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands. Therefore, I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this court, but before the bar of the High Court of History.”

Prophetic words—and more than prophetic words!

On April 13, 1909, the two Assessors returned a unanimous verdict of “Not guilty.” Nearly a month later, accepting the Assessors’ verdict, Mr. Beachcroft acquitted Sri Aurobindo. But many of the others among the thirty-six accused were awarded various sentences, though it is not to our purpose to follow their fortunes any further.

Asramvas at Alipur

Events were now moving swift to their preordained configuration and conclusion. Curzon had divided Bengal and insulted and enraged a great nation; and, by a strange irony of
circumstance, Minto was now called upon to face the music. “Sedition” was rampant, so thought the chaste officers of the Government; Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Bhupendranath Dutt, and others were hauled up before the court and some of them were awarded drastic sentences or expropriatory fines. Upadhyaya himself died in the Campbell Hospital, before the case against him had been concluded. For the rest, printer or publisher or editor or contributor, one was likely to be apprehended on the slightest pretext and tried for sedition.

These endless trials and the heavy sentences passed on the apprehended patriots seemed shocking to John Morley himself, and on one occasion he wrote to Minto in an outspoken manner:

“I must confess to you that I am watching with the deepest concern and dismay the thundering sentences that are being passed for sedition, etc. We must keep order, but excess of severity is not the path to order. On the contrary, it is the path to the bomb.”

Morley had correctly glimpsed the consequences of “excess of severity.” Some hot-heads wished to avenge the death of Upadhyaya by killing Mr. Kingsford, the District Judge of Muzafarpore, who had previously ordered the flogging of a young boy in the court. On the evening of April 10, 1908, a bomb was thrown by two mere boys at the supposed carriage of Mr. Kingsford; as a matter of fact, it really hit two wholly innocent people, the wife and the daughter of a certain Mr. Pringle-Kennedy. Whatever the provocation, the whole thing was utterly stupid and futile, as all such activities ultimately are. As Shyamsundar wrote editorially in the Vande Mataram:

“Outrages of this kind have absolutely no sanction in our ancient tradition and culture.... Moderatism is imitation of British constitutionalism, this form of so-called Extremism, wherever it may be found to exist in this country, is imitation of European anarchism; and both are equally different from and absolutely foreign to the spirit of the Nationalism which, though opposed by one and occasionally mistaken for the other, is bound in the long run to carve out the future of India, and realise the eternal destiny of her ancient and composite people. “But—most
unfortunately under the circumstances—the Government lost their balance and sense of proportion and started arresting persons right and left. The miniature bomb-factory itself was soon enough located, and Barindra Kumar Ghosh, supposed to be the chief brain of the revolutionary organisation, was promptly arrested along with most of his associates. The situation was ominous and pregnant with sinister possibilities; and as the Vande Mataram wrote editorially, it was the merest affectation to deny that the Muzzaferpore outrage had “created a most critical situation in the country.” It was, perhaps, not wholly unnatural that the panic-stricken authorities should have suspected that Sri Aurobindo—wasn’t he the elder brother of Barindra Kumar Ghosh?—also was somehow or other connected with the revolutionary organisation and the bomb-factory. Orders were therefore issued for his arrest also. Accordingly, on May 5, 1908, at about 5 a.m. the Superintendent, the Inspector and other police officers “entered Aurobindo’s bedroom, and, on opening his eyes, he saw them standing round. Perhaps, he thought himself in the grip of a nightmare, gazing on apparitions in the half-light of dawn. However, he was not left in suspense long, for he was arrested in bed and handcuffed. After securing Aurobindo, his bedroom was searched. ‘Search’ is not the word for it. It was turned inside out. The ransacking went on for three hours....” Sri Aurobindo himself has given a vivid account of his arrest and his subsequent prison experiences in his Bengali book, Kara-kahini. We learn from it that it was from his sister, Shrimati Sarojini, who ran to his bedroom in a frightened condition, that he learned about the arrival of the police officers. As a result of the search, the officers found a number of essays, poems, letters, etc., which they took away from the house.

The arrest of Sri Aurobindo—and not alone the fact of it but also the manner of it—created a great sensation in the whole country. The Amrita Bazaar Patrika asked editorially: “....But why were they (Aurobindo and others) pounced upon in this mysterious manner, handcuffed, and then dragged before the Police Commissioner? Where was the necessity for this outrage? It served no other purpose than that of want only outraging public feeling.” Besides Sri Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghosh, thirty-four others also were rounded up in connection with the Muzzaferpore
outrage, the bomb-factory at Manicktolla, and the supposed widespread revolutionary conspiracy of which these were apparently but startling symptoms.

Produced before Mr. F. L. Halliday, Commissioner of Police at Lal Bazaar, Sri Aurobindo reserved his statement; Mr. Nolini Kanta Gupta stated that he “was oblivious of the reason for which he was charged.” When they were produced later before Mr. T. Thornhill, Chief Presidency Magistrate, the prosecution tried to make capital out of the fact that Sri Aurobindo was one of the proprietors of the garden where the bombs had been manufactured. Mr. Thornhill transferred the case to Alipur. The prisoners also, including Sri Aurobindo, were sent to Alipur and lodged in Jail there.

**Poetry in Prison**

While still in the Alipur jail (the Government Hotel at Alipur, as Sri Aurobindo once humorously called it), he had composed a few poems revealing the strength of his new-found faith. The true path that God wishes His devotee to tread is not the proverbial bed of roses; it is studded with sharp thorns and steely brambles; it is punctuated by the shocks of circumstance. He ever tells His devotee in no ambiguous terms the hazards that he should bravely face and overcome:

I sport with solitude here in my regions, Of
misadventure have made me a friend.

Who would live largely? Who would live freely? Here
to the windswept uplands ascend.

I am the lord of tempest and mountain.

I am the Spirit of freedom and pride. Stark must he
be and a kinsman to danger.

Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.

In another poem, *The Mother of Dreams*, written in long lines of linked sweetness and interior double-rhymes, Sri Aurobindo’s Muse rides triumphantly on the crest of a complicated rhythm and achieves a memorable articulation in eloquent praise of the
Mother—“the home-of-all, the womb-of-all,” in Hopkins’s pregnant phrase—who in myriad ways manifests Herself to terrestrial men and women. What visions are these that visit us as we are lapped in grey, soft, and restful slumber? What sights are these, what sounds are these, what are these images, what is this bliss profound,—what are these that thus implicate us in their grandeur and impenetrable mystery? Sri Aurobindo’s imagination and his spiritual fervour weave a velvet magic about these meandering and soul-enchanting lines; the poem is itself a dream world of incomprehensible beauty and felicity. One must read and chant the whole poem slowly and reverently—for truly is it endowed with something of the mantra shakti of the revealed word—and then only one will be able to gain entrance into the deathless world of its making. We can but quote the concluding lines here, as inspired a piece of utterance as any in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo’s poetry:

Open the gate where thy children wait in thy world of a beauty undarkened.

High-throned on a cloud, victorious, proud I have espied Maghavan ride when the armies of wind are behind him.

Food has been given for my tasting from heaven and fruit of immortal sweetness;

I have drunk wine of the kingdoms divine and have heard the change of music strange from a lyre which our hands cannot master.

Doors have swung wide in the chambers of pride where the Gods reside and the Apsaras dance in their circles faster and faster.

For thou art she whom we first can see when we pass the bounds of the mortal.

There at the gates of the heavenly states thou hast planted thy wand enchanted over the head of the Yogin waving.
An Illustrious Life

From thee are the dream and the shadows that seem and the fugitive lights that delude us.

Thine is the shade in which visions are made; sped by thy hands from celestial lands come the souls that rejoice for ever.

Into thy dream-worlds we pass or look in thy magic glass, then beyond thee we climb out of Space and Time to the peak of divine endeavour.

From the fullness of such poetic revelation, it is sacrilege to detract anything,—and mere exegesis must only end in detraction. Suffice for us to know that Sri Aurobindo had become, while in the Alipur jail, the sort of man who could peep into Infinity and render its untranslatable wonders in such streams of vibrant melody. Sri Aurobindo—and this alone matters to us—has safely and purely come through the devouring coils of adverse circumstance; he has baffled the Everlasting No and affirmed the Everlasting Yea; he has ceased to be a “traveller between life and death” and become instead a Pilgrim of Eternity!

Free from Prison

Sri Aurobindo had spent one whole year in jail—in Alipur most of the time; but it had, after all, been a year of ashramvas, not a year of bleak or painful incarceration; the jail had proved no cage of confinement but veritably a Yogashram where Purushottama was his friend and guru, his companion and master. Thus had his “enemies” by sending him to prison, only opened to him the door of felicity. And it had always been like that! The highest good had invariably come to Sri Aurobindo from his seeming “enemies”; and now he had no enemy in the world!

Emancipated already in his mind and his soul, Sri Aurobindo was now at long last free in a strictly material sense as well. Was he proud of his success, exultant, or triumphant? Not likely! Bengal—and India—had changed somewhat during the twelve months he had spent in jail. His friends and his co-workers were taken far away from him, scattered by the virulent blasts of repression and deportation. In vain Morley nursed the worm of discontent within his own heart; in vain the worm insisted on
muttering unpleasantly to his ear:

“That’s the Russian argument; by packing off train-loads of suspects to Siberia, we’ll terrify the anarchists out of their wits, and all will come out right. That policy did not work out brilliantly in Russia, and did not save Russia from a Duma, the very thing that the Trepoffs and the rest of the ‘offs’ deprecated and detested.”

But the deportations continued still and the ranks of the nationalists thinned almost to nothingness. The very mantra of Vande Mataram was but fitfully, and not so lustily, heard. As Sri Aurobindo remarked in the course of the Uttarpura speech:

“now that I have come out, I find all changed. One who always sat by my side and was associated in my work is a prisoner in Burma;.... I looked round when I came out, I looked round for those to whom I had been accustomed to look for counsel and inspiration. I did not find them. There was more than that, When I went to jail, the whole country was alive with the cry of Vande Mataram, alive with the hope of a nation, the hope of millions of men who had newly risen out of degradation. When I came out of jail I listened for that cry but there was instead a silence. A hush had fallen on the country and men seemed bewildered; for instead of God’s bright heaven full of the vision of the future that had been before us, there seemed to be overhead a leaden sky from which human thunders and lightnings rained.”

It was enough to crack a small man’s faith; but Sri Aurobindo was not a small man, he contained multitudes; he knew, not as the result of close ratiocination only, but even as a matter of unshakable faith, that that too was but God manifesting Himself in His own way for achieving His own purposes in His own good time. Sri Aurobindo knew it all, he was sure of it all, and he wanted others also to share his faith and strength.

Returning from Alipur to Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo hurled himself once more into “divine endeavour,” stern endeavour in
An Illustrious Life

the name of, and on behalf of, the Divine. He spoke in public
meetings, he issued weighty statements, he wrote important
articles; he did the very things he had Hone before, before his
imprisonment and trial,— but in the seeming similarity was there
a vital difference as well. Sri Aurobindo would now be a willing
and plastic instrument in the hands of the Divine; he would no
doubt still pursue his political and other vocations, but without
malice and without rancour and without the least taint of
selfishness. Hundred-limbed repression might prevail for the
nonce, but it should not terrify the just; what, after all, was
repression? Sri Aurobindo answers: “We were building an edifice
to be the temple of our Mother’s worship. It was then that He
came down upon us. He flung Himself upon the building we had
raised. He shook the roof with His mighty hands, and part of the
building was displaced and ruined. Why has He done this?

Repression is nothing but the hammer of God that is beating
us into shape so that we may be moulded into a mighty nation
and an instrument for His work in the world. We are iron upon
His anvil and the blows are showering upon us, not to destroy,
but to recreate. Without suffering there can be no growth.”

Had not Sri Aurobindo seen through the jailer and the jail,
the Judge and the Assessors, the lawyers on either side, Mr.
Norton and Chittaranjan, the witnesses and the visitors, and seen
behind them all but one visage, one form, one manifestation?
Temporary setbacks should not frighten the true sadhaka in the
Temple of Patriotism; setbacks are quite natural, setbacks are
inevitable in a high endeavour like theirs; but Indians as men, and
India as their nation, will prevail nevertheless in the end.

If our cause is just and if our means are not unworthy of our
cause, nothing can stand for ever against the realisation of our aims:

“Our object, our claim is that we shall not perish as
a nation, but live as a nation. Any authority that goes
against this object will dash itself against the eternal
throne of justice—it will dash itself against the laws
of nature which are the laws of God, and be broken
to pieces.”
Finding that the Nationalist Party in Bengal had all but disintegrated, Sri Aurobindo started publishing two weekly papers, the *Karmayogin* in English and the *Dharma* in Bengali, with a view to organising the party on efficient lines and educating public opinion. It is important to remember that, although he was offered the editorship of the *Bengali* and although he was earnestly requested by some people to restart the *Vande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo wished rather to break fresh ground by conducting journals entirely his own, the *Dharma* and the *Karmayogin*. The very names are significant and reveal the mind of their editor like an open book. His aim now was no more party politics; it was rather the dissemination of the principles of Sanatana Dharma; it was rather the hourly practice of the Karmayoga taught by the Lord in the *Gita*.

In the first issue, the *Karmayogin* is described as “a weekly Review of National Religion, Literature, Science, Philosophy, etc.”; the contributors are: “Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and others”; the cover illustration is of the Chariot, with Arjuna and Sri Krishna seated in it; and the motto of the journal is, of course, the *Gita vakya*, “Yoga is skill in works.” Sri Aurobindo editorially explained the “policy” of the paper as follows:

“The *Karmayogin* will be more of a national review than a weekly newspaper. We shall notice current events only as they evidence, help, affect or resist the growth of national life and the development of the soul of the nation.... if there is no creation, there must be disintegration; if there is no advance and victory, there must be recoil and defeat.”

And what is Karmayoga but “the application of Vedanta and Yoga to life”? The paper would seek to explain how Karmayoga may be practised in the daily life of the nation by one and all.

The early issues of the *Karmayogin* published Sri Aurobindo’s English translations of the *Isha, Kena* and *Katha Upanishads*; poems like *Who, Baji Prabhou, Epiphany, The Birth of Sin*, and *An Image* appeared in other issues; likewise the paper gave Sri Aurobindo’s
beautiful renderings of Kalidasa’s *Ritusamhara* and Bankim Chandra’s great novel, *Anandamath*—the latter, however, was not completed, only thirteen chapters appearing in the *Karmayogin*; finally, there appeared serially in the same paper valuable and constructive contributions like A *System of National Education, The Brain of India, The National Value of Art* and *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*. In some of the later issues appeared a series of remarkable, Landor-like, *Conversions of the Dead*—Dinshaw, Perizade; Turiu, Uriu; and Two Souls in Pitri-lok. In the last of the three conversations, Sri Aurobindo makes the Souls in Pitri-lok say: The sorrows of the world call us; we’ll return to the earth; we will re-establish in it the reign of joy and beauty and harmony!

But politics and controversy, too, frequently figured in the *Karmayogin*. Papers like the *Bengali* and the *Indian Social Reformer* had chosen to ridicule Sri Aurobindo’s Uttarparsa Speech. What, Vasudeva appear and speak—actually speak!—to an “under-trial” prisoner? Impossible and altogether improbable! The fourth issue of the *Karmayogin* gave a balanced and detailed rejoinder to these immaculate rationalists of Bombay and Calcutta—a reply that is worth reading even today. Again, when the late Gopal Krishna Gokhale made a speech in Pune in connection with the murders of Curzon Wylie and Lalcaca, the *Karmayogin* came out with a slashingly sarcastic editorial, which concluded with these scintillating words:

He (Gokhale) publishes himself now as the righteous Bibhishan who, with the Sugrives, Angads, and Hanumans of Madras and Allahabad, has gone to join the Avatar of Radical absolutism in the India Office, and ourselves as the Rakshasa to be destroyed by this Holy Alliance.”

Sri Aurobindo, like all his countrymen, did not fail to recognise the finer elements in Gokhale’s mind and character; he described the Pune leader in his Kumartuli speech as “one who had served and made sacrifices for the country;” but when he denounced the ideals and the actions of the Nationalists, when he said that “the ideal of independence was an ideal which no sane man could hold,” when he described the people who advocated the peaceful methods of passive resistance as “men who, out of cowardice, do
not speak out the thought that is in their hearts,” then it became incumbent upon Sri Aurobindo to accept the challenge and enter the fray. In both his College Square and Kumartuli speeches, Sri Aurobindo replied to Gokhale and incidentally went into the implications of the policy of Passive Resistance advocated by the Nationalists:

“This was a very dangerous teaching which Mr. Gokhale introduced into his speech, that the ideal of independence—whether we call it Swaraj or autonomy or Colonial Self-Government, because these two things in a country circumstanced like India meant in practice the same—cannot be achieved by peaceful means. He has told the ardent hearts which cherish this ideal of independence, and are determined to strive towards it, that their ideal can only be achieved by violent means. If any doctrine can be dangerous, if any teacher can be said to have uttered words dangerous to the peace of the country, it is Mr. Gokhale himself. We have told the people that there is a peaceful means of achieving independence in whatever form we aspire to it. We have said that by self-help, by passive resistance, we can achieve it.... Passive resistance means two things. It means first that in certain matters we shall not cooperate with the Government of this country until it gives us what we consider our rights. Secondly, if we are persecuted, if the plough of repression is passed over us, we shall meet it, not by violence, but by suffering, by passive resistance, by lawful means. We have not said to our young men, “when you are repressed, retaliate”; we have said, “suffer”.... We are showing the people of this country in passive resistance the only way in which they can satisfy their legitimate aspiration without breaking the law and without resorting to violence.”

Meanwhile, the Minto-Morley Reforms were in the air and with his intimate knowledge of the British people and their wares he had little doubt that the Reforms belonged to the category of “Brummagem goods”; they would only throw “an apple of fresh discord among them”; they were hollow and pretentious, and this
offer of conciliation in one hand and the pressure of repression in the other was a dangerously double-edged policy. As the late Mr. S. Srinivasa Iyengar pointed out, nearly twenty years later on the floor of the Central Legislative Assembly. “In the one hand there is the sugar plum and in the other there is repression.” Sri Aurobindo therefore rightly insisted that the Reforms were a mockery and a trap and that the cooperation expected from the people was not true cooperation but merely a parody of the same.

What, then, must the people do? In his “Open Letter to My Countrymen,” dated July 1909, Sri Aurobindo discussed with boldness and clarity the major problems facing the country and outlined a six-point programme: persistence, with a strict regard to law, in a peaceful policy of self-help and passive resistance; “No control, no cooperation” with the Government; a rapprochement with the Moderates wherever possible and the reconstitution of an united Congress; revival of the Boycott movement on an effective basis; extension of the programme to other Provinces and ultimately to the whole country; organisation of a system of cooperation which will not contravene the law and will yet enable workers to proceed with the task of self-help and national efficiency.

Philosophical Journal

After four years of silent Yoga, Sri Aurobindo decided to run a philosophical journal from Pondicherry. Fate had just then brought him into contact with a remarkable Frenchman by name Paul Richard and she who is now known as the Mother. They had for years been in search of a Master in whom they could recognise a World Teacher, they had sought him in the West and in the East, and they found him at last in the person of Sri Aurobindo. As M. Richard said later to a Japanese audience:

“The hour is coming of great things, of great events, and also of great men, the divine men of Asia. All my life I have sought for them across the world, for all my life I have felt they must exist somewhere in the world, that this world would die if they did not live. For they are its light, its heat, its life. It is in Asia that I found the greatest amongst them—the leader, the hero of tomorrow. He is a Hindu. His name is Aurobindo Ghosh.”
The Mother, who had already gone far in spiritual realisation and occult wisdom and experience, was no less overwhelmed by this vision—this reality—of the New Man. All three decided to make the new magazine their principal means of reaching to the outer world. At the beginning they published an English journal, Arya, and a French journal, *Revue de Grande Synthese*, the French edition being for the most part a translation of the English edition. Unluckily, the inauguration of the *Arya* and its French counterpart synchronised with World War I. The French edition was therefore discontinued after the first seven issues. *Arya*, however, was published for nearly seven years, commencing on Sri Aurobindo’s forty-third birthday and ceasing publication in 1921.

*Arya* and *Revue de Grande Synthèse* were in the main philosophical journals. Edited by Sri Aurobindo, in collaboration with M. Richard and the Mother, *Arya* placed before itself a twofold object:

- A systematic study of the highest problems of existence;
- The formation of a vast synthesis of knowledge, harmonising the divers religious traditions of humanity, occidental as well as oriental. Its method will be that of a realism, at once rational and transcendental, a realism consisting in the unification of intellectual and scientific disciplines with those of intuitive experience.”

It promised to its subscribers studies in speculative philosophy, translations of ancient texts and commentaries on them, essays in comparative religion, and practical suggestions regarding “inner culture and self-development.” More particularly, it explained its ‘ideal’ in the following words:

“unity for the human race by an inner oneness and not only by an external association of interests; the resurgence of man out of the merely animal and economic life or the merely intellectual and aesthetic into the glories of the spiritual existence; the pouring of the power of the spirit into the physical mould and mental instrument so that man may develop his manhood into that true Supermanhood which shall exceed our present state as much as this exceeds the
animal state from which Science tells us that we have issued. These three are one; for man’s unity and man’s self-transcendence can come only by living in the spirit.”

The principal contributor to *Arya* was Sri Aurobindo. No doubt, M. Richard’s *Eternal Wisdom* and *The Wherefore of the Worlds*—both published serially were interesting sequences; but it is no derogation to the other very occasional contributors to say that Sri Aurobindo was, as a matter of pure fact, the heart and soul and brain of the *Arya*. Without him and his many luminous and voluminous, varied and weighty contributions, *Arya* must have had the look of *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark.

At the very outset, Sri Aurobindo sketched out a number of massive sequences and the permitted each monthly paper boat to carry to its customers, near or far, its welcome load of philosophy, social and literary criticism, exegesis, wisdom, poetry and prophecy. There has been no other magazine quite like it in all the long and diverting history of journalism, in this or any other country. It was truly a “one-man show,” as was the *Prabuddha Bharata*, during the first few months of its existence, under the editorship of that brilliant writer and precocious Yogi, the late B. R. Rajam Iyer. *Arin*, then, was a “one-man show”; but the man was Sri Aurobindo and that gave *Arin*—and gives it even now, although it was discontinued over twenty years ago—a permanent niche in the temple of fame.

Why did Sri Aurobindo call his journal “Arya”? Could he have had a sense of racial superiority,—a la Hitler and the loud protagonists of the Blonde Beast of the Nordic race? An impossible thought! Sri Aurobindo has beautifully and convincingly explained the term:

“Intrinsically, in its most fundamental sense, Arya means an effort or an uprising and overcoming. The Aryan is he who strives and overcomes all outside him and within him that stands opposed to the human advance. Self-conquest is the first law of his nature…. For in everything he seeks truth, in everything right, in everything height and freedom Self-perfection is the aim of his self-conquest. Therefore what he
conquers he does not destroy, but ennobles and fulfils.... always the Aryan is a worker and warrior. He spares himself no labour of mind or body, whether to seek the Highest or to serve it. He avoids no difficulty, he accepts no cessation from fatigue. Always he fights for the coming of that kingdom within himself and in the world.”

The word “Arya” thus connotes certain qualities of “head” and “heart,” certain aptitudes and aspirations, and has no reference whatsoever to race. An austere and uncompromising aspiration and a stern and determined endeavour alone mark the true Aryan; and when the Aryan, after his trials and tribulations, reaches at last the sanctuary of success, he becomes the perfected Aryan, the “Arhat”; he has attained fulfilment in the three rungs of the ascending spiral of consciousness,—the individual, the cosmic-universal, and the transcendent. “The perfect Arhat is he,” says Sri Aurobindo, “who is able to live simultaneously in all these three apparent states of existence, elevate the lower into the higher, receive the higher into the lower, so that he may represent perfectly in the symbols of the world that with which he is identified in all parts of his being,—the triple and triune Brahmin.”

That being the description of the Arhat, he is potentially lodged as much within an Asiatic as a Westerner, as much within a Bengali or Tamil or Gujarati Hindu as a French or American or Australian lady. If Sri Aurobindo conceives of the Arhat, the completed Aryan, as being rather akin to the “Jivanmukta”:

Although consenting here to a mortal body, He is the Undying; limit and bond he knows not; For him the aeons are a playground, Life and its deeds are his splendid shadow; the Mother thus explains the evolutionary process that transforms mere man into the ideal of his fervent imaginations:

“All principle of individuality is overpassed, she (Nature) is plunged in Thy infinity that allows oneness to be realised in all domains without confusion, without disorder. The combined harmony of that which persists, that which progresses and that which eternally is, is little by little accomplished in an always
more complex, more extended and more lofty equilibrium. And this interchange of the three modes of life allows the plenitude of the manifestation. “This is the goal that *Arya* set before all men and women; and it was the aim of the journal to persuade and convert all to its way of thought and life, to make all see in the “Aryan Path” the true and sole means of self-realisation and purposive, fruitful and noble endeavour.”

The major sequences in *Arya* were, respectively, *The Life Divine*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Psychology of Social Development*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Future Poetry*, *A Defence of Indian Culture*, and, the longest and in some respects the most ambitious of them all, *The Synthesis of Yoga*. These are giant thought-structures, reared on a foundation of spiritual experience or intuitive thought and realised in all their solidity and beauty by the magic wand of Sri Aurobindo’s prose style. Of these superb sequences, only *The Life Divine* and *Essays on the Gita* are now available in book form.

The minor sequences included commentaries on *Isha* and *Kena Upanishads*, *The Hymns of the Atris*, and *Heraclitus*, *The Renaissance in India*, *A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture*, and *Is India Civilized*, the last four being reviews or extended reviews. Of these, again, *Isha Upanishad*, *Heraclitus* and *The Renaissance in India* have been issued in book form. Various other contributions to the pages of the *Arya* are also now issued in booklet form—*Ideal and Progress*, *The Superman*, *Evolution*, *Views and Reviews*, and *Thoughts and Glimpses*. But by far the major portion of Sri Aurobindo’s contributions to the *Arya* has not been republished in a handy form. Translations, reviews, aphorisms and epigrams, miscellaneous essays, comments on the progress of the war or on the prospects of perpetual peace, discussions on materialism and self-determination, discourses on the Reincarnating Soul and the Ascending Unity, notices of books and journals, appreciations of poetry and Art,—these too are scattered in princely profusion in the garden of the *Arya*.

Out of these minor sequences and other individual contributions
to the Arya, one of the most interesting and thoughtful of these minor sequences is *The Renaissance in India*, which consists of four chapters initially suggested by Dr. James H. Cousins’s book on the subject. As in *The Future Poetry* also, Dr. Cousins’s book is merely the starting point; the rest is drawn from Sri Aurobindo’s own intuitive grasp of the fundamentals of Indian culture.

The four essays that constitute this illuminating study briefly discuss, firstly, the causes of the decadence of yesterday, secondly, the “indeterminate confusion of present tendencies and first efforts,” and, thirdly, the possibilities of tomorrow. Unlike many others, Sri Aurobindo does not think that India has deteriorated because of too much religion. In India religion has meant more to the people than what it has meant to the Westerners; in fact, there is no exact synonym for the word “religion” in Sanskrit. If, however, argues Sri Aurobindo, “we give rather to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little of it—and in what there was, a too one-sided and therefore insufficiently ample tendency. The right remedy is, not to belittle still farther the age-long ideal of India, but to return to its old amplitude and give it a still wider scope, to make in very truth all the life of the nation a religion in this high spiritual sense.”

Another very informative and most stimulating book is Sri Aurobindo’s *Heraclitus*, it too started as a review—a review of Prof. R. D. Ranade’s paper on the philosophy of Heraclitus—and grew ultimately into a brochure of packed wisdom and critical insight. A diligent and enthusiastic student of Greek thought and literature, Sri Aurobindo is particularly fitted to interpret Heraclitus to present-day Indians, Heraclitus no doubt discussed the very same questions that the ancient Indian thinkers also discussed; the lines of his reasoning were often unexpectedly the same as those that Vedic and Vedantic seers had pursued in some of their boldest adventures and loftiest flights; even the conclusions sometimes reveal a cousin-brotherly relationship, thereby indicating a surprising enough kinship between the higher reaches
of Greek and Indian thought respectively.

Sri Aurobindo maintains that Heraclitus was more than a mere maker of aphorisms and thought-soaked epigrams; “though no partaker in or supporter of any kind of rites or mummery, Heraclitus still strikes one as at least an intellectual child of the Mystics and of Mysticism, although perhaps a rebel son in the house of his mother. He has something of the mystic style, something of the intuitive Appollonian inlook into the secrets of existence.” Not caring to reduce his ideas into a system, Heraclitus only threw out pregnant suggestions here and there,—suggestions often expressed in a language that was as much of a riddle as the general riddle of the universe itself and its infinitely varied and seemingly baffling dichotomies. But Sri Aurobindo thinks that perhaps Heraclitus, as did the Vedic and Vedantic seers as well, located Reality at a being as also in a becoming, that he did, however dimly, posit the theory of pralaya, not far different from the “Puranic conflagration of the world by the appearance of the twelve suns, the Vedantic theory of the eternal cycles of manifestation and withdrawal from manifestation.” And yet Heraclitus’ is not a full and final revelation; his X-raying intelligence, lucid and powerful, discovered and exposed to human apprehension two of the basic principles of existence,—universal reason and universal force; but the third constituent of the triune ultimate Reality escaped Heraclitus, as it has escaped most occidental thinkers and philosophers. Indian thought, however, knew of “a third aspect of the Self and of Brahmin; besides the universal consciousness active, in divine knowledge, besides the universal force active in divine will, it saw the universal delight active in divine love and joy.” And—did Heraclitus see something even of this, a ripple of the divine Ananda, as he saw it manifest in the ineffable kingdom of the child? Perhaps; and there Sri Aurobindo appropriately leaves Heraclitus.

A Defence of Indian Culture is a much longer sequence than either The Renaissance in India or Heraclitus. It started as a critical review of Mr. Archer’s strictures on Indian Culture; but, after the first few instalments, the name of the series was changed from “A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture” into a Defence of Indian Culture, a detailed and splendid apologia in over twenty chapters.
Mr. Archer had pointed out that “India has no spirituality”; and Sri Aurobindo rightly interjects, “a portentous discovery!” It would seem, according to this “rationalistic critic,” that India has succeeded “in killing the germs of all sane and virile spirituality”: Sri Aurobindo’s appropriate comment is:

“The calm and compassion of Buddha victorious over suffering, the meditation of the thinker tranced in communion with the Eternal, passed above the seekings of thought into identity with the supreme light of the Spirit, the rapture of the saint made one by love in the pure heart with the transcendent and universal Love, the will of the Karmayogin raised above egoistic desire and passion into the impersonality of the divine and universal will, these things on which India has set the highest value and which have been the supreme endeavour of her greatest spirits, are not sane, are not virile!” That is the charge,—a charge as absurd as saying that the Pacific is not broad and deep enough or that the Himalayas are not massive and high enough. Sri Aurobindo easily and convincingly turns the tables on the confounded Mr. William Archer; and, on the positive side, Sri Aurobindo enables the reader to take a peep into the true inwardness of Indian culture and helps him to grasp the core of authentic—sane and virile—spirituality in the abiding monuments of Indian culture. Especially is Sri Aurobindo’s appreciation and eloquent defence of Indian Art valuable to us, since we are often apt to be led away by the Archer-like fulminations of most Western, and even some present-day Indian, detractors of our artistic heritage. The gravamen of the charge is that Indian Art is not “realistic.” What do these ancient sculptors and painters mean by giving us images and pictures of men with four hands and three heads and a middle eye and an unbeautiful projection from the nipple,—all totally unknown to even the expertest students of human anatomy? Are we to look upon them, in
accordance with arrogant Western opinion, “as undeveloped, inferior art or even a mass of monstrous and abortive miscreation?”

Let us be done with this self-derogation and inferiority complex, says Sri Aurobindo; let us free ourselves from the dead-weight of foreign standards, let us rather look at our architecture and our painting and our sculpture, our arts of dance and music, in the light of their own “profound intention and greatness of spirit. When we so look at it, we shall be able to see that the sculpture of ancient and medieval India claims its place on the very highest levels of artistic achievement.” And so also with the other Fine Arts that flourished in ancient India. Sri Aurobindo snappingly remarks that “art is not anatomy, nor an artistic masterpiece necessarily a reproduction of physical fact or a lesson in natural science.” Art may be realistic, even crudely naturalistic; it may be impressionistic; it may be shot through and through by symbolism; Realistic or Naturalistic Art, Impressionistic or Cubist Art, they are all valid renderings of Reality, truthful enough all of them, though not all truthful to an equal extent. “Art has flowed,” says Sri Aurobindo elsewhere, “in two separate streams in Europe and Asia”; while the best European Art satisfies “the physical requirements of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and outward reality,” the best Indian Art reaches “beyond them and expresses inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation.” Indian Art—at least the best of it—has had always its origin from the utmost depths of the human soul, and then only rose to the levels of the heart and the mind, to gather itself at last into a radiant, if not a rounded, perfection rendered in terms of sound and rhythm and form and colour. As it originated in the human soul, its appeal also is, not to the rational constituent of man, but to the deeper, truer, psychic constituent.

While reviewing Gangoly’s *South Indian Bronzes*, Sri Aurobindo pertinently remarked with reference to Indian Art:

“...always one has to look not at the form, but through and into it to see that which has seized and informed it. The appeal of this art is in fact to the human soul
for communion with the divine Soul and not merely to the understanding, the imagination and the sensuous eye. It is a sacred and hieratic art, expressive of the profound thought of Indian philosophy and the deep passion of Indian worship. It seeks to render to the soul that can feel and the eye that can see the extreme values of the suprasensuous.” If, then, the aim that the Indian artist sets before himself was a highly laudable one and if, further, he has been able to realise his artistic aims again and again with a marvellous and perennial force, no other considerations should stand in the way of our recognising and appreciating both the inspiration and the achievements of the great Arts of India. After all, Indian culture is ours, and it is the genuine article; its spirituality, far from drying up the foundations of life, only helped the full flowering of Indian life, and it ever acted as “the most powerful force for the manysided development of the human race.”

Even so, Sri Aurobindo is no mere partisan of Indian Culture. He is amazingly clear-eyed in his perception of the strong and weak points of the different civilizations of the world; he judges with knowledge and impartiality, he differentiates with subtlety and lucidity, and he prognosticates with vision and clarity. In just a couple of sentences, Sri Aurobindo spans the past, the present and the future, and gives us a miniature history of human civilization, indicating the triumphs of the past as also the hopes of the future:

“Greece developed to a high degree the intellectual reason and the sense of form and harmonious beauty, Rome founded firmly strength and power and patriotism and law and order, modern Europe has raised to enormous proportions practical reason, science and efficiency and economic capacity, India developed the spiritual mind working on the other powers of man and exceeding them, the intuitive reason, the philosophical harmony of the Dharma informed by the religious spirit, the sense of the eternal
An Illustrious Life

and the infinite. The future has to go on to a greater
and more perfect comprehensive development of these
things and to evolve fresh powers’’

While the *Arya* was in the main a “Philosophical Review,” it
nevertheless occasionally glanced at the contemporary political
scene. It is true that Sri Aurobindo had retired from active politics;
but it was this very circumstance that enabled him to survey the
world crisis created by World War I from the vantage ground of
the sublime aloofness and steady wisdom of the Seer. The life of
the *Arya* was almost exactly contemporaneous with the course of
the War and its Aftermath; and no wonder the War and the Peace
were the subjects of some of Sri Aurobindo’s most trenchant and
prophetic utterances.

When, after four terribly sanguinary years of total warfare,
the Armistice was signed at last, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Arya*
in December 1918 under the heading, “At the end of the War”:

“It is the wrath of Rudra that has swept over the earth
and the track of his footprints can be seen in these
ruins. There has come as a result upon the race the
sense of having lived in many falsehoods and the
need of building according to an ideal. Therefore we
have now to meet the question of the Master of Truth.
Two great words of the divine Truth have forced
themselves insistently on our minds through the crash
of the ruin and the breath of the tempest and are now
the leading words of the hoped-for reconstruction—
freedom and unity.”

The world was tired of total warfare, and men wanted the
reign of perpetual peace; but there were insuperable obstacles on
the way of the realisation of the ideal of human brotherhood.
Without freedom—freedom for individual man and also for each
nationality—healthy self-expression will be impossible; without
order and unity—a sense of self-discipline in individual man and
also in the life of each nation—harmony will be impossible.

Freedom and Unity are indeed the poles of our existence; but
we should learn to preserve the balance between them, else we
shall be lured to one or the other with fatal completeness, and thereby we are sure to destroy ourselves either by indulging in an excess of "freedom" or by succumbing to the deathtrap of total collectivism.

This was the problem that faced the "Big Four" of the Peace Conference at Versailles; but none of them—not even President Woodrow Wilson—could rise to the occasion. They were tired old men, either without vision or without vitality; and the world waited—"humped in silence"—for the results of the Peace Conference. Sri Aurobindo read the signs correctly and wrote on "1919," the fateful year of the Carthaginian Peace, in the July issue of the *Arya*:

"This year too may be only the end of an acute phase of a first struggle, the commencement of a breathing time, the year of a makeshift, the temporary halt of a flood in motion. That is so because it has not realised the deeper mind of humanity nor answered to the far-reaching intention of the Time-Spirit."

The "Big" Powers were but manoeuvring for position in the Post-war world; the imposition of reparations on Germany was, as Lord Keynes was fast realising, a stupid business; the scramble for her former colonies was most unedifying; the inability of the chief Powers to achieve unanimity of opinion on the momentous issues of the day was very portentous. The Allies might have won World War I, but they were fast losing the Peace!

Moreover, for all the talk of "making the world safe for democracy" or making it a "place fit for heroes to live in," the War had not been fought on a clear-cut moral issue; it had been but "a very confused clash and catastrophe of the inter-tangled powers of the past, present and future. The result actually achieved is not the last result nor the end of the whole matter, but it represents the first sum of things that was ready for working out in the immediateness of the moment's potency. More was involved which will now press for its reign, but belongs to the future." In regard, then, to the central human problem of achieving a concord between the two poles of Freedom and Security on a world basis, World
War I was worse than useless; one more chapter of Human History
was ended, but all had yet to be begun; the human spirit had “still
to find itself, its idea and its greater orientation.”

Sri Aurobindo’s worst fears had come true. And so a year later
he wrote again in the _Arya_ under the title, “After the War”:

“The war that was fought to end war has been only
the parent of fresh armed conflict and civil discord
and it is the exhaustion that followed it which alone
prevents as yet another vast and sanguinary struggle.
The new fair and peaceful world order that was
promised us has gone far away into the land of
chimeras. The League of Nations that was to have
embodied it hardly even exists or exists only as a
mockery and a byword. It is an ornamental, a quite
helpless and otiose appendage to the Supreme Council,
at present only a lank promise dangled before the
vague and futile idealism of those who are still faithful
to its sterile formula, a League on paper and with
little chance, even if it becomes more apparently active,
of being anything more than a transparent cover or a
passive support for the domination of the earth by a
close oligarchy of powerful governments or, it may
seem, of two allied and imperialistic nations.”

This “prophecy” was uttered in August 1920; the history of
the two subsequent decades has amply borne it out; and World
War I and the Peace of Versailles did not _end_ War—for we are
again in the midst of another and a bloodier struggle, and none
of us can say when World War II will end or whether it at least
will give us a healthy and a lasting peace!

Thus for six years and a half, the _Arya_ gave its readers and
the world at large sheer plenty in the different departments of
knowledge—philosophy, literature, yoga, politics, art, criticism,
and sociology. M. Richard’s collections of extracts from the World’s
outstanding thinkers, suggestively grouped under various
headings, might also have appealed to many readers of the _Arya;
the wise men and women of all ages and climes figure in these
anthologies and often reinforce, by necessary implication, the
more studied and systematic expositions in Sri Aurobindo’s major sequences and other contributions. The magazine seems to have paid its own way, and even to have left a surplus behind. And, although the *Arya* ceased publication in 1921, its message is there for all time to come; it is there for men and women to read and to ponder, to ponder and to live, to live and to realise.

We have seen that his stay in England gave Sri Aurobindo, not only a perfect mastery of English, but also a very considerable, often a most intimate, acquaintance with other modern European and Classical languages; during his stay in Baroda, Sri Aurobindo likewise mastered Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati and Marathi; in the first years of the Pondicherry period, Sri Aurobindo seems to have read and mastered the Vedas also. Again, by the time Sri Aurobindo began editing the *Arya*, he had already played several roles in the *lila* of life—student and teacher, poet and critic, editor and politician, patriot and prophet,—and he was now a man of steady wisdom, a possessor of a deep, integral knowledge. We thus find in the Sri Aurobindo of the *Arya* period a master of many languages and knowledges and disciplines, which make him, incidentally, a gifted writer in English who finds it easy and natural to turn his thoughts into verse or to give them, in the words of Dryden, “the other harmony of prose.”

Sri Aurobindo’s prose works are many in number, fall under various categories, and are the by-products of about fifty years of almost ceaseless literary activity. The “New Lamps for Old” and Bankim Chandra articles in the *Indu Prakash*; the editorial and other contributions to the *Vande Mataram* and the *Karmayogin* and the *Arya*; and, more recently, the letters—hundreds of them—to the disciples: if one considers all this in bulk, one knows at once that one is standing before a born lord of language; for Sri Aurobindo scatters words about, at once with precision and liberality; he is both voluble in appearance and compact in effect; and he is so consummate a literary artist that his art ever covers up the traces of its toils, leaving only the well-cut diamond behind. There is not, of course, one style in them all but rather many equally significant and triumphant styles; and yet it is not far from the truth to say that Sri Aurobindo’s most characteristic means of self-revelation is a poetic, highly ornate, and richly nervous
style that recalls English masters like Burton and Browne and Lamb and Landor at different times but is, in fact, *sui generis*. Sri Aurobindo’s deliberate compositions in prose, whether they be stray journalistic essays or vast thought-edifices, are generally distinguished by the qualities of clarity, quiet assurance, classical phrasing, and appropriateness to the theme and the mood and the occasion. You may tackle any of his prose “tracts for the times” or journalistic effusions or massive treatises,—there is no faltering at the exordium, no thinness in the structure of the argument, no weakness in the peroration. Works like *The Life Divine, Essays on the Gita, The Synthesis of Yoga, The Future Poetry, The Psychology of Social Development, The Ideal of Human Unity* and *A Defence of Indian Culture* are mighty edifices, boldly conceived and executed with both imagination and a minute particularity. Sri Aurobindo has never felt it beneath his notice to attend to details; a true artist, he has always realised that even seeming trifles have their own appointed place in the fullness of the final achievement. As he once wrote to Dilip:

“Each activity is important in its own place; an electron or a molecule or a grain may be small things in themselves, but in their place they are indispensable to the building up of a world; it cannot be made up only of mountains and sunsets and streamings of the aurora borealis—though these have their place there. All depends on the force behind these things and the purpose in their action”.

Sri Aurobindo has accordingly made his essays and treatises carry much spiritual force and he has written them all with a specific though manysided purpose. Although his prose works were mostly written under the peculiar exigencies of periodical publication, they nevertheless preserve form and unity of impression, and claim and secure for Sri Aurobindo a place among the four or five supreme modern masters of English prose.

It is, perhaps, convenient as it is also necessary to study in particular the two monumental works, *Essays on the Gita* and *The Life Divine*,—study them not only on account of their thought-content but also as works of prose art—because they have the
added advantage of having gone through a process of revision since their publication in the *Arya* and they are, further, easily accessible now in book form. The *Essays* are in intention exegetical; the Lord’s Song is paraphrased, often verse by verse; Lord Krishna’s uttered and unuttered thoughts are sifted, arranged, illustrated, expanded; seemingly and endlessly repetitive, the *Essays* are seen in the end to be somehow endowed with a marvellous compactness and unity of their own. What has happened is this: while doubtless deriving his primary inspiration from the “Song Celestial,” Sri Aurobindo has created out of it his own rich individual music that enchants and exhilarates the reader and gradually effects in him a heightened awareness and a keener sensibility.

Likewise, when superficially considered, a work like *The Life Divine* would appear to be a severely—even forbiddingly—abstruse treatise, bristling with obscurities and technical terms and puzzling differentiations. On the other hand, closer acquaintance with it makes one realise that the whole Himalayan edifice is only a Beethovenian prose symphony. There are discussions, no doubt, and in so far as they are discussions they give adequate proof of a virile mental forge at work; no mere logician or dialectician developed a thesis or elaborated an argument or demolished an imperfect theory better than Sri Aurobindo does—and does frequently—in *The Life Divine*. But, speaking as a whole, “the reasoning and exposition in the book are not of the ‘dialectical’ kind proper to the divided mentality, but are of the same nature as, and cannot be separated from, direct vision.” Sri Aurobindo thus writes with the glad illumined surmise—the calm and complete certainty—of the blest Seer who has been “there,” and is now with us only because;

He who would bring the heavens here Must descend himself into clay,

And the burden of earthly nature bear And tread the dolorous way.

Naturally and inevitably, therefore, Sri Aurobindo’s perceptions and revelations of Reality, his recordations of the choreography of Cosmic *līla*, and his delineation of the contours of Sachchidananda span themselves out into richly cadenced
rhythmical patterns. We can give here only one superb example of such prose rhythm that is nonetheless as evocative and musical as a finely delivered blank verse passage:

“Infinite being loses itself in the appearance of non-being and emerges in the appearance of a finite Soul; infinite consciousness loses itself in the appearance of a vast indeterminate inconscience and emerges in the appearance of a superficial limited consciousness; infinite self-sustaining force loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of atoms and emerges in the appearance of the insecure balance of a world; infinite Delight loses itself in the appearance of an insensible Matter and emerges in the appearance of a discordant rhythm of varied pain, pleasure and neutral feeling, love, hatred and indifference; infinite unity loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of multiplicity and emerges in a discord of forces and beings which seek to recover unity by possessing, dissolving and devouring each other.” A timid writer might have attempted elegant variation in the wrong places and refrained from repeating the clauses “loses itself in the appearance” and “emerges in the appearance” no less than five times in the course of a single sentence; but Sri Aurobindo had courage enough, not only to call a spade a spade, but to call it five times a spade; and the repetitions, in result, sound like refrains contributing to the rich orchestration of the whole passage.

Again, how admirable—metallic in its hardness and lucid clarity—is a summing up like this:

“This then is the origin, this the nature, these the boundaries of the Ignorance, Its origin is a limitation of knowledge, its distinctive character a separation of the being from its own integrality and entire reality; its boundaries are determined by this separative development of the consciousness, for it shuts us to our true self and to the true self and whole nature of
things and obliges us to live in an apparent surface existence.”

It is, of course, not a nursery rhyme about Jack and Jill going up a hill to fetch water in a pail; it is the crest of an argument that has taken Sri Aurobindo some five hundred pages to elaborate. But it is not ‘spoil’d by any avoidable obscurity. Here are some more specimens of such granite phrasing picked at random from these two books:

“When we withdraw our gaze from its egoistic preoccupation with limited and fleeting interests and look upon the world with dispassionate and curious eyes that search only for the Truth, our first result is the perception of a boundless energy of infinite existence, infinite movement, infinite activity pouring itself out in limitless space, in eternal Time, an existence that surpasses infinitely our ego or any ego or any collectivity of egos, in whose balance the grandiose products of aeons are but the dust of a moment and in whose incalculable sum numberless myriads count only as a petty swarm.” “All Nature’s transformations do indeed wear the appearance of a miracle, but it is a miracle with a method: her largest strides are taken over an assured ground, her swiftest leaps are from a base that gives security and certainty to the evolutionary status; a secret all-wisdom governs everything in her, even the steps and processes that seem to be most unaccountable.”

“The love of the world spiritualised, changed from a sense-experience to a soul-experience, is founded on the love of God and in that love there is no peril and no shortcoming. Fear and disgust of the world may often be necessary for the recoil from the lower nature, for it is really the fear and disgust of our own ego which reflects itself in the world. But to see God in the world is to fear nothing, it is to embrace all in the being of God; to see all as the Divine is to hate and loathe nothing, but love God in the world and the
world in God."

One comes across many such passages in the body of Sri Aurobindo’s prose-writings, and indeed their balance, their perspicacity and the sheer vigour of their phrasing are almost as worthy of reverent study as are their logical structure and their close-grained fabric of thought.

Not infrequently, however, Sri Aurobindo’s prose art emits flashes of poetry which subtly illumine and transfigure whole sentences and paragraphs. Simile and metaphor trespass upon the domain of cogent prose and language crystallises into glittering images like these:

“We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.”

“For now the world Being appears to him as the body of God ensouled by the eternal Time-Spirit and with its majestic and dreadful voice missions him to the crash of the battle.”

“It has enormous burning eyes; it has mouths that gape to devour terrible with many tusks of destruction; it has faces like the fires of Death and Time.”

“....She labours to fill every rift with ore, occupy every inch with plenty.”

“He bade us leave the canine method of agitation for the leonine.”

“Knowledge waits seated beyond mind and intellectual reasoning throned in the luminous vast of illimitable self-vision.” In such sentences—their number is legion—dialectical skill gives place to direct vision, the knife-edge clarity and sharpness of prose dissolve into poetic imagery and symbolism; and Sri Aurobindo is seen to be poet no less than the wielder of an animated and effective English prose style.

Some of Sri Aurobindo’s characteristically epigrammatic or aphoristic bits of prose are contained in *Thoughts and Glimpses* and
other “minor” works and letters to disciples. One is occasionally overwhelmed by a whole shower of epigrams as in:

“What is there new that we have yet to accomplish?
Love, for as yet we have only accomplished hatred and self-pleasing;
Knowledge, for as yet we have only accomplished error and perception and conceiving;
Bliss, for as yet we have only accomplished pleasure and pain and indifference;
Power, for as yet we have only accomplished weakness and effort and a defeated victory;
Life, for as yet we have only accomplished birth and growth and dying;
Unity, for as yet we have only accomplished war and association. In a word, godhead; to remake ourselves in the divine image.”

“Love is the keynote, Joy is the music, Power is the strain, Knowledge is the performer, the infinite All is the composer and audience. We know only the preliminary discords which are as fierce as the harmony shall be great; but we shall arrive surely at the fugue of the divine Beatitudes.”

Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo’s wit and imagination fuse into gem-like images, fascinating, clear-cut and profoundly true:

“God and Nature are like a boy and girl at play and in love. They hide and run from each other when glimpsed so that they may be sought after and chased and captured.”

“What is God after all? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden.” “World, then, is the play of the Mother of things moved to cast Herself for ever into infinite forms and avid of eternally outpouring experiences.”

How very pretty, you’ll say, but you’ll also add, how suggestive and how very true! The author of The Life Divine and the other Himalayan sequences in the Arya is not the crusty metaphysician some take him to be,—he was a sensitive humanist and poet before ever he dreamed of Yoga, and he remains a humanist and
The Yoga Poet

How the divinisation of man the individual — the emergence of the Gnostic Being—will inspire his immediate environment and also accelerate the urge towards the realisation of human unity. But the new Man will also favourably and vitally influence our conceptions of poetry and of art in general and thereby facilitate the production of genuine “futurist” art and poetry. Here, again, Sri Aurobindo’s contributions, as futurist critic no less than as futurist poet, will form no mean foundations on which the edifices of the future may be safely and greatly reared.

The refreshingly stimulating and original series of articles that Sri Aurobindo contributed to *Arya* under the general caption, *The Future Poetry*, began as a notice of Dr. Cousins’s *New Ways in English Literature*; the review, however, was only a starting point; the rest was drawn from Sri Aurobindo’s own ideas and his already conceived view of Art and life; and, ultimately, the “review” became a treatise of thirty-two chapters, extending to about three-hundred and fifty pages of the *Arya*. Literary history, aesthetic criticism, appreciations of individual English poets, classical and modern, speculations on the future of poetry in general and of English poetry in particular, discussions on recondite themes like “Rhythm and Movement,” “Style and Substance,” “The Sun of Poetic Truth,” “The Soul of Poetic Delight and Beauty,” “The Form and the Spirit,” etc., all these are seemingly recklessly thrown into Sri Aurobindo’s critical and creative melting pot, and the result is a most refreshingly and illuminatingly informative and prophetic work of literary criticism.

The seer that he is, Sri Aurobindo glimpses the very head and front, feels the pulse and the very heartbeats, of the Future Poetry. Characteristically does he call his series of articles, not “The Future of Poetry,” but simply as “The Future Poetry;” it is a thing as good as decreed—even as the supramental descent is a thing decreed and inevitable—that the future poetry should partake of the nature of the mantra, “that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home
of the Truth. “Not that such poetry will be altogether new: “Poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation; in the future there seems to be some chance of its making it a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour.”

After laying down the important dictum that the true creator, the true hearer of poetry is the soul, Sri Aurobindo maintains that the poetic word acquires its extraordinary intensity and evocative power because “it comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word.” Words in poetry are not just words, words picked at random from a dictionary; words are nowadays printed or written, and hence they catch the eye, but words were not always printed or written; words are spoken, and they are heard by the human ear as they are spoken, but words need neither be spoken by the human mouth nor heard by the human ear. What, then, is the true content of the poetical word? It does have a particular look on the printed page, it does convey a particular sound to the ear, it does communicate something akin to an idea to the mind; but the word is more than what it looks and what it sounds and what it seems to mean; it is a symbol, it is a wave that floats in the ocean of Eternity, sometimes carrying a whisper from God to man or a prayer from man to God. In logical phraseology we might say that a word has both a definitive denotation and an unknown, almost limitless connotation; we might say that a word has both a semantic import and a phonetic significance; but we cannot ever hope altogether to dispossess words of their potency, their mystery and their ineluctable magic. Words that are apparently rugged and prosaic when looked at within the covers of a dictionary or in the columns of a newspaper are suddenly kindled, at the poet’s magic touch, into a flame of beauty that radiates “thoughts that wander through eternity.” The true poetic word, then, while it too catches the attention of the eye and reverberates in the ear, ever strives rather to provoke the inward eye, to reach the inward ear, to sink into the deeper soul; it is akin rather to a blinding emanation of the spirit that annihilates space and time and links the human soul with infinity and eternity.

“Vision,” says Sri Aurobindo, “is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic
observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth. Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of Nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it.” A poet, whatever else he may or may not possess, should be endowed with “sight”—with an eye that can roll in a fine frenzy, glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven—and With “voice”—with a tongue that renders the truths he has seen in terms of vivid imagery and compelling beauty. The thought-content and the rhythmic organisation of a piece, however meritorious in themselves, will not make it a poem so long as they are not properly wedded to a corresponding intensity of vision. “And,” adds Sri Aurobindo, “this does not depend only on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and his country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment.” A poet, even a very great poet, is a product of his own age; he is implicated in its limitations and its possibilities. In like manner, he is also a representative of his race, of his nation, of his people; he derives largely from them, he cannot quite get away from them: “The soul of the poet may be like a star and dwell apart; even, his work may seem not merely a variation from but a revolt against the limitations of the national mind. But still the roots of his personality are there in its spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul into the soul-form of the nation.”

Sri Aurobindo devotes the next few chapters to a survey of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon to our own times. He is not giving us an academic history of English poetry after the manner of Courthope or Oliver Elton or even Earle Welby; Sri Aurobindo’s
Sri Aurobindo Ghosh is a personal, a temperamental survey, and is therefore, not only more fresh and more interesting than the academic histories, but is also, as sheer interpretative criticism, more valuable at the same time. Everywhere one comes across the same passion for seizing the essential truth, the same intuition into the uttermost essence of poetry, the same unfailing sense for detecting subtle sound values and delicate movements in rhythm, and, above all, the same wonderful mastery of language that weaves derogation and appreciation, criticism and prophecy, illustration and generalisation into a truly wonderful and mighty fabric of elaborate and enchanting prose.

Sri Aurobindo begins his account of English poetry by subscribing to the general opinion that of all the modern European tongues the English language “has produced the most rich and naturally powerful poetry, the most lavish of energy and innate genius.” After two chapters on the “character” of English poetry—chapters that reveal both scholarship and insight and lay bare both the great qualities and the still thwarted purposes of English poetry—Sri Aurobindo starts assessing, with the same self-confidence and suggestion of authority, the work of the great or well-known English poets. Most of these assessments are couched in a language that, for all its rhythmical sweeps and imaginative fervour, is crystalline in purity and beauty. We have no space here to refer to Sri Aurobindo’s many individual estimates: but we give below one or two significant extracts to convey a fair idea of the manner in which Sri Aurobindo discharges his function as a true appraiser of poetry:

“Chaucer has his eye fixed on the object, and that object is the external action of life as it passes before him throwing its figures on his mind and stirring it to a kindly satisfaction in the movement and its interest, to a blithe sense of; humour or a light and easy pathos. He does not seek to add anything to it or to see anything below it or behind its outsides, nor does he look at all into the souls or deeply into the minds of the men and women whose appearance, action and easily apparent traits of character he
describes with so apt and observant a fidelity. But neither his poetic speech nor his rhythm has anything of the plastic greatness and high beauty of the Italians. It is an easy, limpid and flowing movement, a stream rather than a well,—for it has no depths in it,—of pure English utterance just fitted for the clear and pleasing poetic presentation of external life as if in an unsullied mirror, at times rising into an apt and pointed expression, but for the most part satisfied with a first primitive power of poetic speech, a subdued and well-tempered and even adequacy. Only once or twice does he by accident strike out a really memorable line of poetry; yet Dante and Petrarch were among his masters.”

“Byron, no artist, intellectually shallow and hurried, a poet by compulsion of personality rather than in the native colour of his mind, inferior in all these respects to the finer strain of his great contemporaries, but in compensation a more powerful elemental force than any of them and more in touch with all that had begun to stir in the mind of the times,—always an advantage, if he knows how to make use of it, for a poet’s largeness,—and ease of execution, succeeds more amply on the inferior levels of his genius, but fails in giving any adequate voice to his highest possibility. Wordsworth, meditative, inward, concentrated in his thought, is more often able by force of brooding to bring out that voice of his greater self, but flags constantly, brings in a heavier music surrounding his few great clear tones, drowns his genius at last in a desolate sea of platitude. Neither arrives at that amplitude of achievement which might have been theirs in a more fortunate time, if ready forms had been given to them, or if they had lived in the stimulating atmosphere of a contemporary culture harmonious with their personality.”

Mark the subtle variations, the suggestive qualifications, the
many parentheses on the way; mark too how in such appraisements comparative criticism acquires a poetical fervour and finality; and *The Future Poetry* is full of such beautiful and memorable and essentially accurate appraisements!

Likewise in the four chapters on “Recent English Poetry,” Sri Aurobindo attempts—and this is a much more difficult and risky thing than the appraisement of the poets of yesterday or the day before!—a personal, unambiguous and clear-voiced appraisement of “recent” poets like Whitman, Carpenter, Tagore, A. E., Phillips, and W. B. Yeats, Whitman is not unnaturally given the largest amount of space and Sri Aurobindo interprets his poetry and his art with great vividness. One of the most luminous passages in the whole book is the one in which Sri Aurobindo elaborates an unexpected, but very convincing, comparison between Homer and Whitman:

> “Whitman’s aim is consciously, clearly, professedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry, and if anybody could have succeeded, it ought to have been this giant of poetic thought with his energy of diction, this spiritual crowned athlete and vital prophet of democracy, liberty and the soul of man and Nature and all humanity. He is a great poet, one of the greatest in the power of his substance, the energy of his vision, the force of his style, the largeness at once of his personality and his universality. His is the most Homeric voice since Homer, in spite of the modern’s less elevated aesthesis of speech and the difference between that limited Olympian and this broad-souled Titan, in this that he has the nearness to something elemental which makes everything he says, even the most common and prosaic, sound out with a ring of greatness, gives a force even to his barest or heaviest phrases, throws even upon the coarsest, dullest, most physical things something of the divinity; and he has the elemental Homeric power of sufficient straightforward speech, the rush too of oceanic sound though it is here the surging of the
Atlantic between the continents, not the magic roll
and wash of the “Egean around the isles of Greece.
What he has not, is the unfailing poetic beauty and
nobility which saves greatness from its defects—that
supreme gift of Homer and Valmiki—and the self-
restraint and obedience to a divine law which makes
even the gods more divine.” Since these articles were
written during the last war, Sri Aurobindo had no
opportunity of commenting on the work of Hopkins,
Eliot, Auden, the later Yeats, D. H. Lawrence and the
rest of the “moderns.” But even with all the
limitations— he had, for instance, to judge “recent”
poetry mainly on the basis of the quotations in Mr.
Cousins’s book—he laboured under, Sri Aurobindo
has given us in the four or five chapters devoted to
“Recent English Poetry” an intensely personal and
hence very helpful account of some of the major
currents in the poetry of the “recent past.”

Having thus admirably and illuminatingly surveyed the
“course” of English poetry from the Anglo-Saxons and Chaucer
to Whitman and Yeats, Sri Aurobindo discusses the possibilities
of the future. He believes that the day is not so far off as we
imagine when the rending of the veil that obscures the vision of
present Mind will be accomplished at last and the new poet will
hymn his songs in the voice of the inmost spirit and truth of
things; when he will achieve the beginningless, eternal, ineffable
rhythms of the spirit,—poetic recordations charged with the triune
glories of the Beautiful, the Good and the True, but wholly free
from the blemish of personality or mortality. The intellectual idea
of man’s unity with man and man’s intimate relation with Nature,
psychic responses and experiences on the basis of this intellectual
idea, and a language elastic and powerful enough for the expression
of the idea and the responses and the experiences,—these things
some of the “recent” poets have given us indeed; but “the pouring
of a new and greater self-vision of man and Nature and existence
into the idea and the life is the condition of the completeness of
the coming poetry.” The idea and the response and the experience
are very creditable things in themselves; but they have yet to pass
into a complete spiritual realisation, they have yet to imprint themselves indelibly in the deeper consciousness of the race, they have still to acquire a natural and general currency in human thought and feeling.

This is the vision, this the experience, this the realisation; these alone can effect in their conjunction the inauguration of a great forward movement in the history of poetry. The genuine “futurist” poet—for instance, the Sri Aurobindo of *Thought the Paraclete* and *Rose of God* and other recent poems—may give a sense of direction and suggestion of achievement to the new movement; but “the Future Poetry” will not prevail on a large or effective scale in our midst so long as humanity does not succeed in energising its consciousness on a more comprehensive and universal basis than obtains now. But we need not despair; the signs are not unpropitious; and the Promised Land itself may be sighted in the far horizons of even our limited consciousness:

“It is in effect a larger cosmic vision, a realising of the godhead in the world and in man, of his divine possibilities as well as of the greatness of the power that manifests in what he is, a spiritualised uplifting of his thought and feeling and sense and action, a more developed psychic mind and heart, a truer and deeper insight into his nature and the meaning of the world, a calling of diviner potentialities and more spiritual values into the intention and structure of his life that is to call upon humanity, the prospect offered to it by the slowly unfolding and now more clearly disclosed Self of the universe. The nations that most include and make real these things in their life and culture are the nations of the coming dawn and the poets of whatever tongue and race who most completely see with this vision and speak with the inspiration of its utterance are those who shall be the creators of the poetry of the future.”

**Great Poetry**

Sri Aurobindo had been writing poetry during the past three
decades of his retired life in Pondicherry, just as he was writing poetry both in the early Baroda period and in the few active years of political life; apart from the manuscripts unfortunately lost consequent on the “house-searches, trials, hasty displacements and other vicissitudes of those years of political action,” the rest of Sri Aurobindo’s pre-Pondicherry poetical works (at any rate, most of them) have been included in the Collected Poems and Plays, published in 1942. It appears “there is a great mass of poems written in the twenties and thirties and after”; but, excepting for Six Poems and Transformation and other poems and the sixteen pieces included in the essay on Quantitative Metre as illustrative extracts, this great treasure-house of “futurist” and other poetry remains as yet a sealed thing to us. It is said Sri Aurobindo is completing an epic entitled, Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol; and he has also written several scores of sonnets and lyrics, and many other poetic wholes and many more poetic fragments. We have thus merely a fraction of his recent poetical output to base a judgement upon; but that is significant and inspiring enough and constitutes in itself a solid and unique achievement.

The Mother of Dreams was composed in the Alipur jail, but its rhythms and images already foreshadow the great achievements of the Pondicherry period. The Birth of Sin, The Rakshasas, Kama and The Mahatmas: Kuthumi, all belong in spirit and execution to the earlier rather than the later period. Although these poems have adequate thought-content, they are to be read and enjoyed rather as the expressions of particular movements of thought or plays of fancy. The language now acquires a far greater degree of pregnancy and suggestion of inevitability than is achieved in some of the poems of the Baroda period.

In The Birth of Sin, Sirioth and Lucifer discuss the causes of their undivine discontent (or is it also divine?); Lucifer desires Power, he would like to enjoy an eternity of rule; Sirioth, on the contrary, wants Love:

To embrace, to melt and mix Two beings into one, to roll the spirit Tumbling into a surge of common joy.
And when Power and Love meet in a wild and mad embrace,
Sin, sin is born into the world, revolt And change, in
Sriroth and in Lucifer, The evening and the morning star.

Like Browning’s *Caliban upon Setebos*, Sri Aurobindo’s poem, *The Rakshasas*, is a poetic rendering of a partial or imperfect theology. If Caliban constructs Setebos in his own image—

Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos! ‘Thinketh, He dwelleth’ the cold of the moon. ‘Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match, But not the stars; the stars came otherwise—

so does Ravan, the Lord of Lanka:
O Rakshasa Almighty, look on me,
Ravan, the lord of all Thy Rakshasas,
Give me Thy high command to smite Thy foes;
But most I would afflict, chase and destroy
Thy devotees who traduce Thee, making Thee
A God of Love.

Thus “each such type and level of consciousness sees the Divine in its own image and its level in Nature is sustained by a differing form of the World-Mother” *Kama* is a fine poetical rendering of another idea—the great truth that by passing beyond Desire and Ignorance one returns to the Bliss of Brahmin; by losing all, one could save all:

They who abandon Me, shall to all time
Clasp and possess; they who pursue, shall lose.

But by far the most amazing and the most wonderfully evocative of the “Nine Poems” is *Ahana*—a long poem of rhymed hexameters. First published in 1915, but perhaps written much earlier, *Ahana* has since been considerably enlarged and revised; it can therefore be looked upon as something of a palimpsest, a convenient bridge between the two great phases of Sri Aurobindo’s poetical career. *Ahana* is the “Dawn of God” and her advent is the occasion for universal rejoicings; the “ Hunters of Joy” now sing a “Song of Honour” replete with innumerable evocations of sound and colour and inwrought with felicities of *dhwani* that strangely echo in one’s ears for ever. Perhaps, the poem is just a little too long; the inspiration now and then flags a little and poetry gives
An Illustrious Life

place to padding,—but this is, after all, inevitable in a long poem.
And yet which modern poet has given us lines more nobly articulate
than these:

Deep in our being inhabits the voiceless invisible
Teacher; Powers of his godhead we live; the Creator
dwells in the creature.

Out of his Void we arise to a mighty and shining existence,
Out of Inconscience, tearing the black Mask’s giant resistance;
Waves of his consciousness well from him into these bodies:

in Nature, Forms are put round him; his oneness,
divided by mind’s nomenclature,

High on the summits of being ponders immobile and
single, Penetrates atom and cell as the tide drenches
sand-grain and shingle. Oneness unknown to us
dwells in these millions of figures and faces,

Wars with itself in our battles, loves in our clinging
embraces,

Only the self and the substance of things and their
cause and their mover Veiled in the depths which the
foam of our thoughts and our life’s billows cover,

Heaves like the sea in its waves; like heaven with its
starfires it gazes

Watching the world and its works

Form of the formless All-Beautiful, lodestar of Nature’s
aspirance,

Music of prelude giving a voice to the ineffable Silence, First
white dawn of the God-Light cast on these creatures that perish,
Word-key of a divine and eternal truth for mortals to cherish,
Come I let thy sweetness and force be a breath in the breast of
the future Making the god-ways alive, immortality’s golden-red
suture: Deep in our lives there shall work out a honeyed celestial
leaven, Bliss shall grow native to being and earth be a kin-soil to
heaven. Open the barriers of Time, the world with thy beauty enamour Vision delightful alone on the peaks whom the silences cover, Vision of bliss, stoop down to mortality, lean to thy lover.

Science and philosophy, thought and magic, introspection and interrogation, fact and myth and symbolism, hope and aspiration and ecstasy, all course through Ahana’s universe of melody with a dizzy velocity—but the result is poetry. The dactyls and the spondees and the closing trochees give this torrential poem a Niagara-like strength and headlong rapidity of motion. Now and then, and anon and again, the resounding cataract crystallises into pearl-like images and captivating evocations:

Brooded out drama and epic, structured the climb of the sonnet.... Bliss is her goal, but her road is through whirlwind and death-blast and storm-race.

All is wager and danger, all is a chase and a battle Memories linger, lines from the past like a half-faded tracing

Fearless is there life’s play; I shall sport with my dove from his highlands, Drinking her laughter of bliss like a God in my Grecian islands. Life in my limbs shall grow deathless, flesh with the God-glory tingle, Lustre of Paradise, light of the earth-ways marry and mingle.

Studded with such iridescent lightnings, Ahana is one long thunder and fascination of music, irresistible, life-giving, and overpowering.

Although the hexameter is normally rhymeless,

Ahana throughout rhymes and chimes to perfection. The history of English poetry is strewn with unsuccessful attempts to acclimatise the sensitive and subtly individual rhythms of the hexameter to the ruggeder climate of English verse. Tennyson has described English hexameters in this derisive parody:

When was a harsher sound ever heard, ye Muses, in
An Illustrious Life

England? When did a frog coarser croak upon our Helicon? Hexameters no worse than daring Germany gave us, Barbarous experiment, barbarous hexameters.

But it is highly doubtful if Tennyson would have stood by this generalisation if he had had a chance of reading *Ahana* or *Dawn over Ilion*. In these two magnificently articulate poems, Sri Aurobindo has put into practice his own “sound and realistic theory” of true quantity. At first one’s tongue makes a slip, one is taken aback, one wonders if all is as it should be; one perseveres again, and perhaps a third time,—and now one’s tongue knows the pace, one’s ear pleasurably responds to the seductive hexameters, and one knows that Sri Aurobindo has really “done the deed.”

It will be noticed that cretic, molossus and anti-Bacchius are used as modulations or substitutes for the dacty.

In *Dawn over Ilion*, Sri Aurobindo produces the effect of magic and melody even without the aid of rhymes; apparently, what he does not know and what he has not done in the matter of variation is not worth knowing or worth doing; but, as he reminds us, “all these minutiae are part of the technique and the possibilities of the hexameter.” It is, however, beyond the scope of the present study to go into greater detail regarding Sri Aurobindo’s theory and practice of quantitative verse technique.

Six Poems, Transformation and other Poems and the sixteen pieces that are printed at the end of *Collected Poems and Plays* alone now remain to be considered. These recent poems are an attempt, not only to adapt classical quantitative metres to English verse, but also to achieve in English something equivalent to the mantra. Mystical experience, being by its very nature untranslatable in terms of logical categories, has perforce to borrow significance from the use of words and rhythms as symbols of, and as intimations from, something above and beyond themselves and at the same time as something springing up from the mystic’s inmost psychic depths, deeper than ever plummet sounded. The great mystic poets of the world are thus inveterately “obscure,” trafficking in symbols that perplex all except the initiated or chosen few who are able or willing to catch the lucent rays that emanate...
from the supernal Light. Such poetry has but rarely been achieved in the past—especially in English. It is, however, Sri Aurobindo’s considered view that the future poetry—even or especially in English—will more and more approximate to the mantra; it will minimise if not altogether eliminate the operations of meddling middlemen—the intellect, the senses, even the imagination—and it will effect in one swift unfailing step the business of communication from the poet to the reader. As Sri Aurobindo has beautifully put it:

“A divine Ananda, a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative,—one might almost say, an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into its original creative vision,—such spiritual joy is that which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it.”

Sri Aurobindo would seem to have almost succeeded in conquering “the human difficulties of his task” and the “futurist” poems that he has given us—albeit they are but a mere fraction of his actual output—constitute the culmination of his long and arduous poetic career.

Nevertheless, these recent poems have puzzled most readers, not only on account of their “obscurity,” but also because they either handle classical metres to which we are not ordinarily accustomed or they are couched in rhythms that seem at first to sway uncertainly and confusingly between the rigid patterns of classical English prosody and the chaotic vagaries of modernist free verse. It will, however, be a vulgar mistake if a reader, after looking into either the essay on “Quantitative Metre” or the notes to Six Poems, rashly concluded that these poems are no more than a prosodist’s experiments in quantity. It is true Sri Aurobindo has given a great deal of attention to the technical perfection of his poems; but this need not trouble us, for as he once wrote to a disciple:
“The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it. There can be no harm therefore in attention to technique so long as there is no inattention to substance.”

When the substance (which, of course, includes bhava) is adequate and when technique leads to art rather than degenerates into trickery, we have a true poem and not an idle experiment in verse; and Sri Aurobindo’s “recent” poems are without the shadow of a doubt, alike in their substance and articulation, truly quintessential poetry.

As for “obscurity,” it is apparently there, but it is unavoidably there. Poetry is always the expression of a mood or a movement of thought or a unit of experience in an outer objective or an inner subjective or spiritual world. We can condemn a poet if he makes—as do some of our ultra-modernists—obscurity or unintelligibility the ruling principle of his poetry. But, as Mr. Aldous Huxley reminds us, “obscurity in poetry is by no means always to be avoided. Shakespeare, for example, is one of the most difficult authors. He often writes obscurely, for the good reason that he often has subtle and uncommon thoughts to put into words.” Who has yet completely understood the “To be or not to be” speech in Hamlet? And a poet has the same right to coin his unique spiritual adventures into imperishable poetry even as he has the right to turn deftly his emotional responses into an elegy or a song or an ode. All that we can legitimately demand from the poet is that he should be as lucid as his particular subject will permit him to be. The point has been neatly clarified in a recent article in the Times Literary Supplement:

“As writing is designed to be read, it is evidently a merit in it to enable, rather than to impede, the reader’s understanding, but it is true also that lucidity is not an absolute but a relative virtue—relative to the reader’s sympathy and to the complexity and remoteness from ordinary experience of the thought or vision to be communicated. If we find Scott’s verse more lucid than, say, Blake’s, we are by no means
entitled to reproach Blake with failure in lucidity. The question is: is he as lucid as possible under the circumstances?
The man who is voluntarily obscure is a 'charlatan; the man who is obscure, though his matter be small, is an incompetent; but let us not pass judgement hastily. A new secret may demand a new idiom, and we must have ears to hear it.”

And the mystic has a “secret” to impart and he is often compelled to invent his own idiom and even his own rhythms. Spiritual experiences being per se ineffable are for that very reason incommunicable through the medium of our everyday vocabulary. And yet such experiences are dear to the heart of man, and he would gladly clutch at the intangible and capture and retain it (if he could!) as a part of himself. That is why we cherish in our heart’s tabernacle revelations like Francis Thompson’s The Hound of Heaven or Sri Aurobindo’s Rose of God and Thought the Paraclete. We love them, we cherish them, we tap them from time to time to draw forth momentary solace,—but do we understand them in every particular, do we gauge the plenty in every crevice or sense the significance of every turn of thought and every shade of colour? We do attempt to reproduce intellectually the poet’s spiritual experience, but the images that we construct in our minds will be but a lifeless facade, a grandiose proxy bloated with mere mental stuff; the experience as such is unfortunately denied to most of us, and hence we blink pathetically in our bewilderment when the poet describes the thrills he has braved, the splendours he has glimpsed, the vast beatitudes he has been. Our doubts and difficulties and bewilderments will, however, tend to disappear if we approach the poems without preconceived notions of what poetry and metre should or should not be; in other words, if we read the poems to ourselves, slowly and deliberately, keeping our physical no less than our inward ear open, and sheathing for the nonce our intellect’s razor-edge. If one reads thus a poem like The Bird of Fire.

Gold-white wings a throb in the vastness, the bird of flame went glimmering over a sunfire curve to the haze of the west, Skimming, a messenger sail, the sapphire-summer waste of a soundless wayless burning sea. Now in the eve of the waning
world the colour and splendour returning drift through a blue-flicker air back to my breast, Flame and shimmer staining the rapture-white foam-vest of the waters of Eternity—one will learn to discover in its unmanageably long lines and their abundant load of polysyllables and unusual word-combinations an approximation to the primordial music Such as the meeting soul may pierce In notes, with many a winding bout Of linked sweetness long drawn out.

One can then read the other poems, feel a quickening of one’s pulses, share with Sri Aurobindo the “vision splendid,” relive his experiences (even in our limited mental worlds), and learn to repeat to the darkness and the stars potent mantras such as:

> My mind is awake in a stirless trance,
> Hushed my heart, a burden of delight; Dispelled is the senses flicker-dance,
> Mute the body aureate with light
> A Bliss surrounds with ecstasy everlasting. An absolute high-seated immortal rapture Possesses, sealing love to oneness
> In the grasp of the All-beautiful, All-beloved.
> My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,
> My body is God’s happy living tool,
> My spirit a vast sun of deathless light.
> Earth is now girdled with trance and Heaven is put round her for vesture. Wings that are brilliant with fate sleep at Eternity’s gate.
> Time waits, vacant, the Lightning that kindles, the Word that transfigures: Space is a stillness of God building his earthly abode...
> I saw the spirit of the cosmic Ignorance;
> I felt its power besiege my gloried fields of trance.

These lines, and indeed the poems in which they occur, are the sheer distillations of poetry; they all aspire (to quote M. Abbe Bremond, though written in a very different connection and, perhaps, in a different sense as well), “each by the mediation of its proper magic, words, notes, colours, lines—they all aspire to
joint prayer.” It were sacrilege to analyse the literary art that has evolved, after a lifetime of arduous metrical as well as spiritual discipline, such splendidous poetic creations.

One can attempt to scan the lines, enumerate the alliterative devices, explain an image here and a metaphor there, cite parallel quotations from *The Life Divine* and other works, elucidate (if one can) the colour symbolism and sound-associations,—but one is not any nearer solving the eternal riddle that all great poetry is or any nearer reducing Sri Aurobindo’s recent poetry into negotiable systems and formulas.

Lines like “a quiver and colour of crimson flame” or “in that diamond heart the fires undrape” or “the Eternal is broken into fleeting lives” or “Time is my drama or my pageant dream” or “a dance of fireflies in the fretted gloom” or “and the gold god and the dream boat come not” or “and a huddle of melancholy hills in the distance”—such lines are just miracles, miracles like the birth of the sun or the blossoming of spring or the sweetness of honey; they are there, they are ours, and let’s bind them to our souls with “hoops of steel!” Poetry, said M. Bremond, is characteristically a mystic incantation, allied to joint prayer; one has just this feeling when one is listening to, or participating in, a recitation or chanting of the *Purusha Sukta* or a hymn from the *Sama Veda*. Likewise when one reads Sri Aurobindo’s *Rose of God*—as perfect a “Hymn” in the English mould as could be imagined—one knows that here rhythm and phrase and music have coalesced into an utter harmony; and even as one slowly reads it—for the tenth or for the hundredth time—one feels.

The melting voice through mazes running;
Untwisting all the chains that tie
The hidden soul of harmony.

And so one’s enraptured ear demands that the strains be repeated again and again; and one is content to chant the poem as often as one likes and let its music and its meaning sink deep into one’s soul’s recesses, there to abide for ever: Rose of God, vermillion stain on the sapphires of heaven, Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the ecstasies seven!
Leap up in our heart of humanhood, O miracle, O flame, Passionflower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits of being, Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate seeing! Live in the mind of our earthhood; O golden Mystery, flower, Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the marvellous Hour.

Rose of God, damask force of Infinity, red icon of might, Rose of Power with thy diamond halo piercing the night! Ablaze in the will of the mortal, design the wonder of thy plan, Image of Immortality, outbreak of the Godhead in man.

Rose of God, smitten purple with the incarnate divine Desire,

Rose of Life, crowded with petals, colour's lyre! Transform the body of the mortal like a sweet and magical rhyme; Bridge our earthhood and heavenhood, make deathless the children of Time.

Rose of God like a blush of rapture on Eternity's face,

Rose of Love, ruby depth of all being, fire-passion of Grace!

Arise from the heart of the yearning that sobs in Nature's abyss:

Make earth the home of the Wonderful and life Beatitude's kiss.

Storming Humanity

If Sri Aurobindo and his two collaborators had planned as it were to storm humanity into accepting the gospel of the Life Divine following the lead of the Arya, they were doomed indeed to disappointment; the circulation of the Arya had, owing to the exigencies of the War, been more or less necessarily limited to India; and even in India, how many were really willing to impose on themselves the continuous intellectual strain that Sri Aurobindo demanded from them? No doubt, the magazine was received and
preserved with great reverence by a “fit audience though few”; young men in colleges wished earnestly to understand Sri Aurobindo’s message and try to live it; and even those who were not quite as enthusiastic as these young men knew that *Arya* was trying to deliver a new message to the world, a message that will create a genuine “Brave New World” in our midst. In any case, when the *Arya* ceased publication, Sri Aurobindo must have begun considering the whole question afresh with a view to discovering, if possible, other ways of educating humanity and exhorting it to rise to the height of its great future in a perfected and divinised world.

Meanwhile the War had come to an end and, after an interregnum of a couple of years when men and women merely resigned themselves to a mood of tired or unbalanced relaxation, the world strove to return again to “normalcy,” and humanity appeared to be not unwilling to discuss the “eternal” questions. In externals, the world still seemed a pitiful prey to conflicting and chaotic interests; men and women, especially those who seemed doomed to spend their lives in crowded and sooty cities, moaned the hurt they had suffered, the felicity that appeared to have passed away for ever from their lives. The sophisticated intellectuals of either sex, the Bright Young Things and the Brown Elderly Wrecks, the “hollow men” and the “stuffed men,” the Prufrocks and the decayed ladies of the post-war world of the twenties, were all unhappy creatures to whom life was merely a rat’s alley, a waste land, a hideous existence made up of prickly-pear, bits of bones, and pursuing shadows.

This was the mood which found its piercing articulation in works like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot’s *Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land*. And not only the broken and empty men of the disillusioned West but even Indian youths, recoiling from the death-stare of utter frustration or writhing under the unescapable vulgarity of so-called “civilized” life or maddened by the vicissitudes of our national and communal politics,—thus the modern man and the modern woman, of the East no less than of the West, alike felt the flutter of despairing thoughts, and they all found in Mr. Eliot a faithful and powerful Laureate:

This is the dead land
An Illustrious Life

This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man’s hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

The idea would not solidify into reality but vaporised instead;
the motion would not realise itself in the act but was paralysed
instead; the conception and the emotion were arrested at the start
and would not lead to creation nor summon the proper response:

Between the desire And the spasm. Between the
potency. And the existence. Between the essence. And
the descent Falls the Shadow.

With such a dismal and deathly prospect facing them in
whichever direction they turned their eyes, these unhappy men
and women, these sensitive humans, raised their despairing voice
to God or whatever gods there be to send down the life-giving
rains of Faith. The roots of life were quickly drying up and men
pathetically cried with Hopkins—Send our roots rain!

And some—a mere handful at the beginning—who had been
carefully reading Sri Aurobindo’s inordinately long sequence, The
Synthesis of Yoga, felt a wrenching turn in their lives—it gave them
pain, it gave them joy, it gave them the pain of struggle, it gave
them the joy of hope—and, making up their minds once and for
all, they boarded the boat or the train—in either case a “celestial
omnibus” —to Pondicherry. There was no Ashram then in
Pondicherry—not as yet; a few people, those who had boldly
boarded the omnibus, had come to Sri Aurobindo—from Bengal,
from Gujarat, from Tamil Nadu, from the north and the south,
and even from abroad—and, under his immediate guidance, they
were practising Yoga. In the meantime, the Mother, after a long
stay in France and Japan, returned to Pondicherry on the 24th
April, 1920. The number of disciples now showed a tendency to
increase rather rapidly. The residence of Sri Aurobindo and the
Mother and their disciples then gradually assumed the complexion
of a Yogashram, more from the wish of the sadhakas who desired
to entrust their whole inner and outer life to the Mother than from
any intention or plan of hers or of Sri Aurobindo. When the Ashram began to develop, it fell to the Mother to organise it on a durable and healthy and all-comprehensive basis; Sri Aurobindo himself retired presently into complete seclusion and hence the whole material and spiritual charge of the Ashram devolved on the Mother.

By and by, fresh buildings were acquired or built or rented for the Ashram; arrangements were made for the satisfactory boarding and lodging of both the inmates or sadhakas of the Ashram and the increasing number of visitors to it; and, above all, a technique—at once elastic and potent and universal in application—was devised for the spiritual guidance of the disciples. It can, however, be truly remarked that the Sri Aurobindo Ashram “has less been created than grown around him as its centre.”

Before describing the Yogashram at Pondicherry in greater detail, we might here indicate, however briefly and however sweepingly, the underlying principles of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga. In his great book, The Life Divine, he told his readers that the “Life Divine”—the satya yuga, the new heaven and new earth—was a consummation devoutly to be desired; and that it could be—and one day anyhow would be—realised even in this terrestrial world of the dichotomies and the dualities. In the complementary treatise, The Synthesis of Yoga,—a massive book considerably even more voluminous than The Life Divine—Sri Aurobindo told his readers: “Well, this is how you should reach the goal of the Life Divine, the goal of Supermanhood and Supernature!”

Sri Aurobindo begins this great sequence with the motto: “All life is Yoga”; there are three rungs in the ladder of life which it is man’s destiny to ascend one by one; and bodily life, mental life and divine life are these three steps that God and Nature have devised for aspiring man. Man too has sprung up from inconscient Matter; Life and Mind, that are in a deep swoon in Matter, are awake in Man; and now it is the burden of his greatness—it is the stern law governing his evolutionary status—that he should strive to awaken the slumbering “soul” within and reach up in one vast whirl of endeavour to the divinity, to the Supermind, incidentally or consequentially lifting Nature itself to the level of Supernature. This, then, is to be the mechanics of his Yoga:
“Yoga is that which, having found the Transcendent, can return upon the universe and possess it, retaining the power freely to descend as well as ascend the great stair of existence.”

It need hardly be emphasised that there have been innumerable Yogis in India in the past just as there are several Yogis even in the India of today. Likewise several systems of Yoga have prevailed and still do prevail in this country—Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, etc.; but Yoga in India may be said to have pursued only three main paths, known respectively as Jnana marga, Bhakti marga, and Karma marga. Although the Gita has been explained by various commentators as if it advocated one of the three classical paths to the exclusion of the others, it is clear, as Sri Aurobindo has shown in his Essays on the Gita, that the Yoga taught by the Gita is essentially integral in character, its aim being atmasiddhi by means of a total self-surrender and self-consecration to the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo calls his Yoga by various names—Supramental Yoga, Purna Yoga, Integral Yoga; but the names should not mislead us. One may ask the question if the Gita’s “way” may not also be described as “integral” or “purna” Yoga. Or one may ask if real siddhi is possible in any Yoga so long as one does not touch the level of the Supermind—it is, of course, immaterial whether or not it is actually called the supramental level—and link oneself up with Sachchidananda. Thus it is possible—fatally possible—to misinterpret the name and misjudge the nature of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga. We shall now try, as far as possible in his own words, to explain why he calls his Yoga “integral,” “new,” and “supramental” Yoga.

“The principle of Yoga, “says Sri Aurobindo,” is the turning of one or of all powers of our human existence into a means of reaching the divine Being. In an ordinary Yoga one main power of being or one group of its powers is made the means, vehicle, path. In a synthetic Yoga, all powers will be combined and included in the transmuting instrumentation.” It is, in the language of modern military strategy, an all-out attack—an attack involving the use of the army, the navy and the air force—to storm the citadel of the enemy; likewise, in an integral or synthetic Yoga, the storm troops of the muscle, the swift squadrons of the brain,
and the flotillas of the heart, all will be energised and directed to
storm and seize the citadel—the invisible citadel—of Reality. All
roads may ultimately lead to Rome; but a pincer has apparently
greater chances of success and a three-pronged movement an
absolute certainty of success. It would appear that this is the
lesson underlying the strategy of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga:

“Each Yoga in its process has the character of the
instrument it uses; thus the Hathayogic process is
psychophysical, the Rajayogic mental and psychic,
the way of knowledge is spiritual and cognitive, the
way of devotion spiritual, emotional and aesthetic,
the way of works spiritual and dynamic by action
but all power is in the end one, all power is really
soul-power.”

Since all is soul-power, this power should be mobilised on a
total basis; then alone would the victory be a near and assured
thing. All the powers of the human frame should be thus energised
and disciplined into a body of troops filled with the zeal and
imbued with the determination to invade Reality, to possess it,
to bring it down; all the approaches to It should in like manner be
filled with the armoured cars of man’s one-pointed acts, aspirations,
hymns of love; and success will follow “as night the day.”

We can now see why Sri Aurobindo calls his Yoga “synthetic”
or “integral” But is not the Gita’s way also “synthetic” and
“integral”? Didn’t Ramanuja and his followers also advocate a
linking up of the three paths and didn’t they even add a fourth,
prapatti marga? Didn’t the Tantrik siddhas base their sadhana on
their synthetic view of human life? When Sri Aurobindo maintains
that an absolute and serene peace and calm is the sine qua non on
which alone the sadhaka can build his palace of realisation, is he
saying anything so very different from what a Buddha or a
Shankara said so many centuries ago? How does the absolute and
serene calm that Sri Aurobindo speaks of differ from the Buddhistic
nirvana or the Virashaiva conception of hayalu nîrbayalu?

Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga is synthetic, professedly synthetic; and
divers threads have woven themselves into this intricate fabric,
many chords have entered and fused into this realm of harmony.
Sri Aurobindo has not created his Yoga out of an impossible vacuum; he has drawn freely from the wisdom of the ages, he has drunk deep in the twin streams of the Vedanta and the Tantra. But while all the known systems of Yogic discipline placed before themselves only the aim of man’s salvation as an individual—the aim of reaching to the regions of the spirit and getting rid, once and for all, of the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, escaping for all eternity from the fatuity and misery of terrestrial life, in other words disengaging oneself from the tiger-clasp of samsara—the aim of Sri Aurobindo’s supramental Yoga is, not only to seize the Supermind, but also to bring it down to our earth life, to make it henceforth the impulse and the law, the motion and the act, the idea and the reality, of every segment of our terrestrial life.

We can thus distinguish between three possible levels in our earthly existence: the life in the ignorance; the life that the Lord of the Gita described to Arjuna; and the life that we might live if we hearkened to Sri Aurobindo. These ‘three levels—or, if you will, these three steps in the stair of Yoga—are thus briefly described by Sri Aurobindo:

“The ordinary life consists in work for personal aim and satisfaction of desire under some mental or moral control, touched sometimes by a mental ideal. The Gita’s Yoga consists in the offering of one’s work as a sacrifice to the Divine, the conquest of desire, egoless and desireless action, bhakti for the Divine, and entering into the cosmic consciousness, the sense of unity with all creatures, oneness with the Divine. This Yoga (i.e., Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga) adds the bringing down of the supramental Light and Force and (its ultimate aim) the transformation of Nature.”

The Supramental or Vijnana Yoga aims at nothing less than a radical reorganisation—a divine transformation—not of individual consciousness alone but even of the earth-consciousness itself. That is why it can justifiably be called both an “integral” and a “new” Yoga—the integrality consisting in the fact that it takes up the essence and adapts many of the processes of the older Yogas and the “newness” consisting in “its aim, standpoint and the totality of its method.” “The Vedic Rishis,” says Sri Aurobindo,
“never attained to the Supermind for the earth or perhaps did not even make the attempt.” In result, while the individual solved his own personal problem,—this might have happened frequently enough,—his consistent ignorance of the earth-crust left the world to its own fate. As the Mother once explained to her disciples:

“An inner illumination that does not take any note of the body and the outer life, is of no great use; for it leaves the world as it is. This is what has continually happened till now. Even those who had a very great and powerful realisation withdrew from the world to live undisturbed in inner quiet and peace; the world was left to its ways, and misery and stupidity, Death and Ignorance continued unaffected their reign on this material plane of existence.... An ideal of this kind may be good for those who want it, but it is not our Yoga. For we want the divine conquest of this world, the conquest of all its movements and the realisation of the Divine here.”

Other Yogas, even the most ambitious and integral of them, do not quite visualise the great aims placed before themselves and placed before their disciples by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother nor do they handle a method quite so all-comprehensive and uncompromising. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple eight years ago: “I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realised in the old Yogas. If I had, I should not have wasted my time in hewing out paths and in thirty years of search and inner creation when I could have hastened home safely to my goal in an easy canter over paths already blazed out, laid down, perfectly mapped, macadamised, made secure and public.”

It is, however, quite immaterial whether Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga is called in one or another way or whether its claim to be a “new” Yoga is conceded or not; the essential thing is that its aims are worthy—to put the matter very mildly—and the method it pursues for the realisation of its aims seems to promise (if Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and their disciples are to be believed) a reasonable certainty of early success. In the earlier stages, perhaps, Sri
Aurobindo’s Yoga may seem to” be not so very different from others; but we are assured that the later stages of the Yoga “go into little known or untrodden regions”; and, while the earlier stages of the Yoga are described with exactitude and particularity in books like The Yoga and its Objects, The Riddle of this World, Lights on Yoga, Bases of Yoga and, of course, in The Synthesis of Yoga, Sri Aurobindo has not so far made public the processes relating to the later stages of his Yoga.

Nor is Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga at all allied to what is derisively called “mysticism and moonshine;” Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s writings reveal the fact that they are both fully cognizant of the latest researches in science and psychology. They had once been intellectuals themselves “insistent on practical results more than any Russell can be;” but their partial experiences and realisations had early facilitated their passage across the sea of philosophic doubt and subsequent safe landing on the shores of Faith. Sri Aurobindo wrote to Dilip about ten years ago explaining the standpoint of his Yoga in the following unambiguous words:

“We (Sri Aurobindo and the Mother) know well what is the difference between a subjective experience and a dynamic outgoing and realising Force. So, although we have Faith—and whoever did anything great in the world without having faith in his mission or the Truth at work behind him?—we do not found ourselves on Faith alone, but on a great ground of Knowledge which we have been developing and testing all our lives. I think I can say that I have been testing day and night for years upon years more scrupulously than any scientist his theory, his method, on the physical plane. That is why I am not alarmed by the aspect of the world around me or disconcerted by the often successful fury of the adverse forces who increase in their rage as the Light comes nearer and nearer to the field of earth and matter.”

“Yoga siddhi,” says Sri Aurobindo, “can be best attained by the combined working of four great instruments.” These four instruments are Shastra, Utsaha, Guru, and Kala. Shastra is a vague
Sri Aurobindo reminds us that “the supreme Shastra of the integral Yoga is the eternal Veda secret in the heart of every thinking and living being. The lotus of the eternal knowledge and the eternal perfection is a bud closed and folded up within us. It opens swiftly or gradually, petal by petal, through successive realisations, once the mind of man begins to turn to the Eternal, once his heart, no longer compressed and confined by attachment to finite appearances, becomes enamoured, in whatever degree, of the Infinite.” And when man is “enamoured” of the Infinite, he will surely and immediately evoke the appropriate response from Him; for, as Sri Aurobindo pithily puts it, “he who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite.” Nay more: we are already the Infinite in our secret and veiled nature and Yoga will change this inner fact into an open and conscious and fruitful reality: “All teaching, is self-revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. Self-attainment is the secret; self-knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process.”

In the same manner, the supreme guru or teacher for the sadhaka of the integral Yoga is the Master “within us.” An external guru, or even a Messiah like Christ or Krishna or Muhammad, is no doubt very helpful at the earlier stages of the Yoga. The sadhaka of the integral Yoga will shun sectarianism, the egoism and the arrogance that cry—“My God, my Incarnation, my Prophet, my Guru!”—and will not be satisfied “until he has included all other names and forms of Deity in his own conception, seen his own Ishta Devata in all others, unified all Avatars in the unity of Him who descends in the Avatar, welded the truth in all teachings into the harmony of the Eternal Wisdom.”

Just as the supreme Shastra is “within,” so the supreme Guru also is “within”: “It is He who destroys our darkness by the resplendent light of His knowledge; that light becomes within us the increasing glory of His own self-revelation.... By the impouring of His own influence and presence into us, He enables the
An Illustrious Life

individual being to attain to identity with the universal and transcendent.”

The Shastra and the Master are both lodged “within” ourselves; but we cannot as yet establish connection with them; we cannot even recognise their existence; much less then can we hearken to their message or make it the basis of our realisation in the individual, the cosmic and the supra-cosmic planes of existence. Here comes the need of utsaha or sraddha or the “decisive turn” that the sadhaka gives to the current of his life: “a great and wide spiritual and intelligent faith, intelligent with the intelligence of that larger reason which assents to high possibilities, is the character of the sraddha needed for the integral Yoga.” No doubt, even this sraddha or utsaha or “decisive turn” is not enough; kala, or the instrumentality of Time, is also needed. Only then will the aspiration from below be met by the Grace from above and bring about the great transformation. But while the instrumentality of Time cannot be bent according to the sadhaka’s sweet will and pleasure, the turning of the current of his own life of aspiration and endeavour is in his own hands; and therefore “the first determining element of the siddhi is the intensity of the turning, the force which directs the soul inward... The ideal sadhaka should be able to say, in the Biblical phrase, My zeal for the lord has eaten me up!” The sadhaka should be able to cry from the depths of the heart as does the Mother in a “prayer” like the following:

“To be the divine love, love powerful, infinite, unfathomable, in every activity, in all the worlds of being—it is for this I cry to Thee, O Lord. Let me be consumed with this love divine, love powerful, infinite, unfathomable, in every activity, in all the worlds of being! Transmute me into that burning brazier so that all the atmosphere of earth may be purified with its flame.”

In The Mother—the great little book that is both a Handbook of Yoga and a blaze of revelation—Sri Aurobindo has delivered the Gita of the integral Yoga. In it the “personal effort” required of the sadhaka is described with clarity and completeness; and we therefore quote the relevant passage here in its entirety:
“The personal effort required is a triple labour of aspiration, rejection and surrender,—an aspiration vigilant, constant, unceasing—the mind’s will, the heart’s seeking, the ascent of the vital being, the will to open and make plastic the physical consciousness and nature; rejection of the movements of the lower nature—rejection of the mind’s ideas, opinions, preferences, habits, constructions, so that the true knowledge may find free room in a silent mind,—rejection of the vital nature’s desires, demands cravings, sensations, passions, selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, hostility to the Truth, so that the true power and joy may pour from above into a calm, large, strong and consecrated vital being,—rejection of the physical nature’s stupidity, doubt, disbelief, obscurity, obstinacy, pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to change, tamas, so that the true stability of Light, Power, Ananda may establish itself in a body growing always more divine; surrender of oneself and all one is and has and every plane of the consciousness and every movement to the Divine and the Shakti.” Once the sadhaka is started—self-started—on the path of integral Yoga by the agency of his utsaha and personal effort, he can battle his way through thick and thin and reach his destination at the God-appointed time. “For me,” confessed Sri Aurobindo in a letter to a disciple, “the path of Yoga has always been a battle as well as a journey, a thing of ups and downs, of light followed by darkness, followed by greater light;” but if the sadhaka is determined to reach the Divine and possess Him and be possessed by Him, “there is an absolute certitude” that it will all be achieved ultimately—and “that is the faith every sadhaka should have at the bottom of his heart, supporting him through every stumble and blow and ordeal.”

Sri Aurobindo roughly indicates three distinct stages in his
integral Yoga. The first is that of “self-preparation,” the period of effort when the sadhaka should endeavour to put forth the “triple labour of aspiration, rejection and surrender” is the extract from The Mother. The second will be a transitional stage between the human and the divine working; during this stage of the march, “there will supervene an increasing purified and vigilant passivity, a more and more luminous divine response to the Divine Force—but not to any other.” In the third and culminating stage, “there is no effort at all, no set method, no fixed sadhana; the place of endeavour and tapasya will be taken by a natural, simple, powerful and happy disclosing of the flower of the Divine out of the bud of a purified and perfected terrestrial nature.” All things are now perceived as God and “the crowning realisation of this Yoga is when you become aware of the whole world as the expression, play or lila of an infinite divine personality, when you see in all, not the impersonal Sad Atman which is the basis of manifest existence,—although you do not lose that knowledge,—but Sri Krishna who at once is, bases and transcends all manifest and unmanifest existence, avyakto vyaktat parah”.

Or, as the Mother aptly describes the process and the aim of the integral Yoga: “What is required of you is not a passive surrender, in which you become like a block, but to put your will at the disposal of the Divine will.... The final aim is to be in constant union with the Divine, not only in meditation, but in all circumstances and in all the active life.”

But the “personal effort” comes first; it is only when this effort “delivers the goods” that further spurts of ascent in the great stair of Consciousness could be attempted with any fair prospects of success. And how difficult is this “triple labour”—how pertinaciously is its achievement thwarted by the siege of varied contraries—how easy is it to fall back and lose in an instant the gains of months and probably years! The “ego-sense” is a very tough customer; the mind is a wanton jade, it is a slippery cliff:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap May who ne’er hung there.
The life-impulses and mind formations may easily betray the sadhaka into taking a wrong turning; and hence the ego-sense should first be put down with an iron hand. “The danger,” says Sri Aurobindo, “can only be countered by the opening of a now nine-tenths concealed inmost soul...that is the inner light we must liberate; for the light of this inmost soul is our one sure illumination so long as we walk still amidst the siege of the Ignorance and the Truth-Consciousness has not taken up the entire control of our Godward endeavour.”

An all-comprehensive, total and radical change in the organisation of our consciousness so that it may function as a self-luminous, self-purposive and all-powerful engine of knowledge and force and stainless bliss is, according to Sri Aurobindo, not only the whole meaning, but, in an increasing force and by progressive stages, the whole method of the integral Yoga. This organisation has to be realised as the culminating result of a threefold movement—inward, towards the psychic being; an ascent or an upward movement, reaching up to the Supermind; a descent or a process of integration, or the downpour of the spirit to effectuate the supramentalisation of our earth-nature. The sadhaka has to begin with the “inward” movement; and then, in good time, the upward and the descending movements too will be possible; and at long last all will fuse into the reality of Yoga siddhi. The purification and energisation of the “inner” life is only the beginning; but it is a necessary beginning. On its broad-based foundation can be reared, surely and securely, the superstructure of the integral Yoga: “It is therefore on the accomplishment of the ascent and the possibility of the full dynamism from the highest levels descending into the earth-consciousness that is dependent the justification of Life, its salvation, its transformation into a transfigured terrestrial Nature.”

The self-surrender to the Divine and the Shakti—the sankalpa of atmasamarpana—is thus the first, decisive and necessary turn that alone will help the sadhaka to pursue the integral Yoga with any fair prospect of success. The Divine and the Shakti, God and the Mother, Existence and Consciousness-Force, Narayana and Lakshmi, Purusha and Prakriti, Ishwara and Ishwari—these pairs connote the same identity in difference. The integral Yoga demands
from the sadhaka a whole-hearted and total surrender to Her, to the Mother, and through Her to Him; but essentially they are one. Whatever is manifested, is His self-expression in Her; and She is filled with His being; to us, therefore, ultimately all is She, and all is He as well.

And yet the sadhaka has to approach Him through Her,—through the Mother; the atmasamarpana is accordingly made to the Mother in the first instance; an unreserved offering of all one is and has and every plane of one’s consciousness and the entire adhara itself is to be made to the Mother—and, of course through Her, to Him also—“in order that She may, unobstructed by human reserves, prepare, purify, empty and refill it with the Divine Substance, and so set it that the Supramental may become the ruling principle of our life on earth.” The Mother’s “grace” thus occupies a pivotal place in the integral Yoga; but, if the sadhaka’s faith is well-grounded and if his aspiration is sincere and if, above all, his self-surrender is complete and final, the grace of the Divine Mother must inevitably—now or tomorrow—and irresistibly pour into his adhara life-giving and life-transforming nectar and the great aim of his endeavour will become an accomplished thing indeed.

The Divine Mother is truly “the divine Conscious Force that dominates all existence, one and yet so many-sided that to follow her movement is impossible even for the quickest mind and for the freest and most vast intelligence. She—the Divine Mother—can be visualised in her transcendent, cosmic-universal, and individual manifestations; these are but “ways of being of the Mother” and all are resolved in the unity of the triune Sachchidananda. And yet the mind in the Ignorance—so long as it is not wholly emancipated—wants some Powers and Personalities of the Divine Mother which it can easily recognise, derive inspiration from and offer sacrifices to: four such Powers and Personalities have been described by Sri Aurobindo in *The Mother*.

The main part of *The Mother*—the latter half of the book—that describes the four Shaktis, four of the Mother’s leading Powers
Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and Personalities, is perhaps the most inspired piece of writing in the whole body of Sri Aurobindo’s prose works. It has been called “the mantra of mantras, the mystery of mysteries,—for the seeker of knowledge it is the divine Gayatri of Para Vidya, for the worker it is the resplendent staircase of truth, for the devotee it is the immortal message of divine love.” So perfectly is the great revelation articulated that it has to be read at a stretch in a mood of imaginative and spiritual concentration; then only can one apprehend in a single act its vast potencies and splendid modulations. Sri Aurobindo has seen the four Shaktis—he has known them, he has been them; his rhythms and his words and the resultant music have therefore the chime and the toll and the sweep of a fervent Sanskrit gadya like Ramanuja’s Vaicuntha Gadya or Venkatanatha’s Raghuvira Gadya.

Sri Aurobindo gives first a summary description of the four Shaktis, to be followed immediately afterwards by a more detailed and an even more evocative and minute description; but we have here space only to extract the preliminary description and differentiation:

“Four great Aspects of the Mother, four of her leading Powers and Personalities have stood in front in her guidance of this Universe and in her dealings with the terrestrial play. One is her personality of calm wideness and comprehending wisdom and tranquil benignity and inexhaustible compassion and sovereign and surpassing majesty and all-ruling greatness. Another embodies her power of splendid strength and irresistible passion, her warrior mood, her overwhelming will, her impetuous swiftness and world-shaking force. A third is vivid and sweet and wonderful with her deep secret of beauty and harmony and fine rhythm, her intricate and subtle opulence, her compelling attraction and captivating grace. The fourth is equipped with her close and profound capacity of intimate knowledge and careful flawless work and quiet and exact perfection in all things. Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection are their several attributes and it is these powers that they bring with them into the world, manifest in a human disguise in their Vibhutis and shall found in the divine
degree of their ascension in those who can open their earthly nature to the direct and living influence of the Mother. To the four we give the four great names, Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati."

One wonders as one reads these twenty-five pages whether one has here a memorable recordation of demonstrable fact or only the subtle elaboration of a poet’s fancy; one realises presently that these portraits in miniature are but faithful prints of the four great Aspects, or suggestive poses, of the supreme Mother, that they are poetically and utterly and quintessentialy true portraits of the Mother, that they are truly the visions that one can see if only one learned to exercise one’s own soul’s sight and sense of apprehension. In any case, judged as English prose, these passages are phosphorescent in their steady luminosity and never did a Sir Thomas Browne or a Walter Savage Landor write anything finer nor even anything half as richly evocative with the rhythms of the spirit.

While the four Aspects of the Divine Shakti are equally the symbols and emanations of Her Power and Her Personality, Maheshwari in particular has “more than any other the heart of the universal Mother”; and her “compassion is endless and inexhaustible.” The gift of the Mother’s grace can be more easily and naturally invoked from Maheshwari than from Mahakali or even from Mahalakshmi or Mahasaraswati; but Mahakali too is the Mother and in her too love wells up from the unplumbed depths of her Being to spray the devotee with peace and gladness and an immense quietude. Maheshwari or Mahakali, Mahalakshmi or Mahasaraswati, She is always the Divine Mother, and She is behind all that is done in the universe, behind all thoughts, all passions, all delights, all actions. If the sadhaka is keen on siddhi, if he calls to Her from his psychic depths in a mood of single-hearted self-consecration, Her grace is sure to respond, and the sadhaka is certain to achieve his aim. Hence it is that, not any human endeavour or tapasya alone, but it is the Mother’s mediation, it is the Mother’s grace, that in the final reckoning can “rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering
Yogi in Practice

Earnest and serious, serene and self-possessed, Sri Aurobindo went through the daily business of his life as if it were all a field for the practice of Yoga, as if indeed “all Life is Yoga.” But occasionally he gave vent to his irritation, and passages of humour or sarcasm resulted. Thus about a certain curfew order:

“It appeared that we were peaceful citizens until sunset, but after sunset we turned into desperate characters,—well, he was told, even half-an-hour before sunset; apparently even the sun could not be entirely trusted to keep us straight. We had, it seems, stones in our pockets to throw at the police and some of us, perhaps, dangle bombs in our chadders.”

Speaking on another occasion, Sri Aurobindo thus described the “resourcefulness” and the imaginative flights of the police:

“there was the imagination of a very highly imaginative police which saw hidden behind the lathi the bomb. Now nobody ever saw the bombs. But the police were quite equal to the occasion; they thought there might be bombs. And what if there were not? Their imagination was quite equal to realising any bomb that could not be materialised. Our efficient police have always shown a wonderful ability. Generally when a dacoity is committed, the police are nowhere near.... They only come up when the dacoity is long over and say, ‘Well, this is the work of the Nationalist volunteers.’”

In his Kumartuli speech, again, Sri Aurobindo described with playful irony his varied “friends”—the Hare Street friend, the Police, the Madras friend—and replied to their “friendly” suggestions.

The Indian Patriot—had advised Sri Aurobindo to give up politics and take to Sannyasa; the police advised him not to open his mouth “too much”; the Hare Street friend advised Sri
Aurobindo to devote himself to literature and religion, and not to make speeches on Swadeshi and Boycott. Sri Aurobindo twitted the last friend with the bland reply:

“He (Sri Aurobindo) was devoting himself to literature and religion. He was writing, as he wrote before, on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was a form of literature. He was speaking on Swaraj and Swadeshi, and that was part of his religion.”

And yet Sri Aurobindo was forced to realise that the country, as a whole, was not ready to give effect to his programme of Swaraj and Swadeshi, the six-point programme he had elaborated in July 1909. Intellectually, people often saw the wisdom of Sri Aurobindo’s programme and its undoubted potentialities. But that was not enough: the first enthusiasm of a few years ago had more or less died down, the new indeterminate flood showed no signs of coming; and Sri Aurobindo saw clearly that a mass movement will not be possible in the near future; the portents were far too evident and he, brave realist that he was, could not miss them; the Minto-Morley Reforms had actually hoodwinked many of his countrymen into a somnolent acquiescence in them; and the bitterness of the fruit can only be felt when it was actually tasted. Such foreknowledge as was his only appeared a disturbing nuisance to the timid and the easy-going. No, no, Sri Aurobindo must throw up the political sponge for good,—and the sooner, the better!

Only against such a twilight background of resignation and approaching renunciation can we rightly understand Sri Aurobindo’s brief spell of political and journalistic activity during the latter half of 1909. He was on his feet frequently enough,—in Calcutta and in other district towns in Bengal; he led the Nationalist Party in the Bengal Provincial Conference at Hooghly in September 1909 and made the Conference accept the Nationalist resolutions; besides, poems, essays, exhortations, these, as they appeared in the columns of the Karmayogin, gave abundant proof of Sri Aurobindo’s restless intellectual activity.

In a series of articles which have since been reprinted under the title, The Brain of India, Sri Aurobindo discussed illuminatingly the problem of educating the youth of India. These articles are not
journalism; they are a serious attempt to outline a philosophy of education. Modern Indian education, being an absurd copy and even vulgarisation of Western models, has compelled us to barter away our ancient heritage for the proverbial mess of pottage; it has debased us, it has almost destroyed us. The clue to reform should lie in reviving, as far as may be feasible, our traditional methods of education. After all, Indians can lay claim to a glorious past. Now asks Sri Aurobindo:

“What was the secret of that gigantic intellectuality, spirituality and superhuman moral force which we see pulsating in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, in the ancient philosophy, in the supreme poetry, art, sculpture and architecture of India? What was at the basis of the incomparable public works and engineering achievement, the opulent and exquisite industries, the great triumph of science, scholarship, jurisprudence, logic, metaphysics, the unique social structure? What supported the heroism and self-abandonment of the Kshattriya, the Sikh and the Rajput, the unconquerable national vitality and endurance? What was it that stood behind that civilization second to none in the massiveness of its outlines or the perfection of its details? Without a great and unique discipline involving a perfect education of soul and mind, a result so immense and persistent would have been impossible.”

There were the ashrams, of course, and there were also the ancient Universities, like those of Nalanda and Takshashila; but were not these ashrams and Universities themselves based on a vital principle? Where did the ancients build and locate the reservoir of vital energy that alone could have upheld those stupendous superstructures in the realms of matter, thought and spirit?

Sri Aurobindo firmly thinks that the clue to the whole secret lies in the practice of brahmacharya, so widely prevalent in the good old days. Brahmacharya sought to “raise up the physical to the spiritual”; it gradually perfected the instruments of knowledge; it led to the heightening and ultimate perfection of the sattvik elements in human nature; it created, as it were, an infallible
An Illustrious Life

engine of universal knowledge within.

But, adds Sri Aurobindo, this is only possible to the yogin by the successful prosecution of the discipline of yoga. Brahmacharya is the starting point, but yoga is the means to the finality of fulfilment. Between these two poles, the ancient Hindus reared their systems of knowledge, their methods of education and their experiments in civilization.

And yet Sri Aurobindo does not say that the old Brahmacharya-Yoga Axis can be reproduced in all its details in twentieth century India. He contents himself by laying bare the “nature and psychological ideas of the old system” so that we may either reapply them to our conditions in a modified form or perfect them even more on the basis of a “deeper psychology and a still more effective discipline.” But this much is certain: our educational ideas and ideals are in need of wholesale overhauling, and this we can successfully do only if we bear in mind the currents and conclusions of our traditional thought and discipline.

Sri Aurobindo knew thus which items in the national life were excrescences that needed to be blotted out, and how they should be replaced by other healthy growths more suited to the genius of the nation. He knew it all very clearly, but he knew also that he could not overnight transform the grim prospect into the beautiful landscape so near his heart’s desire. He could but place the ideal before the nation, and—hope; and would He not achieve the desired transformation in the fullness of time? Why then should he, Sri Aurobindo, worry?

Leaving Politics Behind

Sri Aurobindo, would leave the political arena soon, and all too soon; but before he actually did so, he would restate for the benefit of his more earnest countrymen the “ideal of the Karmayogin” in no uncertain terms, so that they might train themselves and be ready for the supreme ordeal whenever it should confront them. He accordingly wrote a series of ten luminous articles in his English paper, the Karmayogin, and these have since been reprinted, along with two of Sister Nivedita’s contributions, under the title, The Ideal of the Karmayogin.

The message contained in this book is for all, but especially
is it intended for the youth of India. Sri Aurobindo is firmly of the opinion that our salvation lies not in merely reproducing in India a toy model of European freedom, with its bicameral legislatures, casteless societies, utter secularism, and all-pervading materialism. Sri Aurobindo says, on the contrary, First Things First:

“We do not believe that by changing the machinery so as to make our society the ape of Europe we shall effect social renovation. Widow-remarriage, substitution of class for caste, adult marriage, intermarriages, interdining and the other nostrums of the social reformer are mechanical changes which, whatever their merits or demerits, cannot by themselves save the soul of the nation alive or stay the course of degradation and decline. It is the spirit alone that saves, and only by becoming great and free in heart can we become socially and politically great and free.” Sri Aurobindo, again, is not for multiplying new sects; they solve nothing, but only add to our problems. Science and religion, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism have all seized the truth, some partially and others integrally; we need not, and should not, declare war against any of these stupendous achievements of the human race. In a sense, of course, Hinduism “is the most sceptical and the most believing of all, the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive spiritual knowledge.—that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution, which rejects nothing but insists on testing and experiencing everything and when tested and experienced turning it to the soul’s uses, in this Hinduism we find the basis of the future world-religion. “Let the Hindu, let all Indians, only recapture the inner spirit of Hinduism, its abiding
spirituality; matter need not be denied, but spirituality should be affirmed; then all will be well”.

It can never be stressed too often that, while Sri Aurobindo’s vision of Aryan culture was no doubt partly recapitulatory of the remote past and revivalist in objective, it was in its general impulsion dynamic, integral and futurist. He states his position thus with perspicacity and clinching vigour:

“It (Nationalism) must be on its guard against any tendency to cling to every detail that has been Indian. That has not been the spirit of Hinduism in the past, there is no reason why it should be so in the future. In all life there are three elements, the fixed and permanent spirit, the developing yet constant soul and the brittle changeable body. The spirit we cannot change, we can only obscure or lose; the soul must not be rashly meddled with, must neither be tortured into a shape alien to it, nor obstructed in its free expansion; and the body must be used as a means, not over-cherished as a thing valuable for its own sake. We will sacrifice no ancient form to an unreasoning love of change, we will keep none which the national spirit desires to replace by one that is a still better and truer expression of the undying soul of the nation.” Further, Sri Aurobindo’s gospel of Nationalism, aggressive and virile though it undoubtedly is in its first phase, is nowhere tainted by the virus that has made present-day totalitarianism possible in Germany and Japan. Sri Aurobindo’s Nationalism is a Nationalism for enriching and extending life, not for diminishing or destroying it. Sri Aurobindo wisely points out that a nation, once it has set its own house in order both politically and spiritually, “should preserve itself in Cosmopolitanism somewhat as the individual preserves itself in the family, the family in the class, the class in the nation, not destroying itself needlessly but recognising a larger interest.”
A nation, then, should be strong enough to be able to live a healthy and useful life: it should not be so strong that it inevitably starts preying upon weaker nations and even upon the weaker elements within its own boundaries. Whatever happens, the “god-state” should not be allowed to evolve in our midst; the so-called, but really ungodly, god-state only rises from the grave of the individual. But Sri Aurobindo would rather emphasise the “greatness of the individual.” And yet even the greatest of individuals are but instruments in the hands of the Divine—if, you will, the Zeit Geist. Truly did Carlyle point out that “great men are the inspired (speaking and acting) Texts of that divine Book of Revelations, whereof a Chapter is completed from epoch to epoch, and by some named history.” Men in themselves are but helpless thistle-downs, swaying to and fro as the vagrant breeze intermittently disturbs them; they are great only to the extent the Zeit Geist or the terrific energy of Mahakali informs and inspires them, and carries them onward by the great momentum of its own impulsion. In other words, “the greatness of individuals is the greatness of the eternal Energy within.” What should be the ideal of the Karmayogin, then? Yoga “is communion with God for knowledge, for love or for work.” In Karmayoga, man apprehends God’s purposes and lets Him make use of his frail body for achieving His own aims. As Sri Aurobindo puts it beautifully:

“The Charioteer of Kurukshetra driving the cart of Arjuna over that field of ruin is the image and description of Karmayoga: for the body is the chariot and the senses are the horses of the driving and it is through the bloodstained and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to Vaicuntha.” The Karmayogin should perfect his own instrument and leave it in the hands of God. Today a wise passivity may be the proper thing to preserve, tomorrow one may be required to go through fire and brimstone; in either case, the Karmayogin will be ready; the spirit within him will tell him what he should do, and will also give him the strength to do it.

No doubt, if all and sundry begin talking about “inner voices” and proclaiming themselves to be the agents of the Divine, ordinary life would grow quickly untenable. Sri Aurobindo therefore says
that, not everybody, but only the man who has gone through the austere discipline of yoga and has communed with the Divine, can thus interpret His purposes and translate them into action. Everybody is, of course, potentially a great Karmayogin; but few amongst us actually realise our great potentialities,—and the more is the pity! Once, however, individual man has truly realised that he is an heir to immortality and an agent of the Divine, he is an irresistible leader of men; he is irresistible because he is guided by a Power which no other merely human agency can stand against; he is irresistible, being in himself the arm of the eternal Consciousness-Force. He, the great Karmayogin, is in fact God manifesting Himself to average humanity; he has caught a glimpse of Infinity and seen in it both the auspicious God and the terrible God, and seen them too as the One final Reality:

The God of Wrath, the God of Love are one, Nor least He loves when most He smites. Alone Who rises above fear and plays with grief, Defeat and death, inherits full relief From blindness and beholds the single Form Love masking Terror, Peace supporting storm. The Friend of Man helps him with Life and Death, Until he knows. Then freed from mortal breath He feels the joy of the immortal play; Grief, pain, resentment, terror pass away. He too grows Rudra fierce, august and dire, And Shiva, sweet fulfiller of desire.

Move to Pondicherry

Ever since his acquittal in the Alipur case, Sri Aurobindo had repeated intimations from divers sources that he was a “marked” man—“marked,” shall we say, in the Note-Books of the Government! Once before—twice before—he had been prosecuted without a “scrap of reliable evidence”; he had been acquitted, on both occasions, but the acquittal was no security “either against the trumping up of a fresh accusation or the arbitrary law of deportation which dispenses with the inconvenient formality of a charge and the still more inconvenient necessity of producing evidence.”
Sometime in June-July 1909, rumour was “strong that a case for my (Sri Aurobindo’s) deportation has been submitted to the Government by the Calcutta police.” A third time he might be prosecuted, or now he might be even deported! Under the circumstances—the precarious circumstance of his being unsure of the morrow—Sri Aurobindo decided to publish in his paper his “Open Letter to My Countrymen”; this letter was to serve the double purpose of clarifying the political situation of the day and suggesting a programme of action for the immediate future.

In the letter Sri Aurobindo advisedly used expressions like “in case of my deportation”.... “if I do not return from it,” thereby indicating his partial or veiled prevision of the shape of things to come. The “Open Letter” was to stand, said Sri Aurobindo, as his “last political will and testament to his countrymen.” The Nationalist party need not be depressed if a particular leader is jailed or deported. The god-anointed leader will come sooner or later:

“All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when he comes, move forward triumphantly to their fulfilment. The men who have led hitherto have been strong men of high gifts and commanding genius, great enough to be the protagonists of any other movement, but even they were not sufficient. Therefore, the Nationalist party, the custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come”

And yet Sri Aurobindo did not take the final decision to retire from politics; weeks passed, and months passed; he was using the Karmayogin as a mouthpiece for the utterance of his Prophecy, he was placing before its readers both a vision of the future and a programme of action that will lead the nation to the shrine of fulfilment. In December 1909,—as late as that!—Sri Aurobindo made this exhortation to his countrymen in the course of a prolegomenon to a bold programme of action:

“Let us then take up the work God has given us, like courageous, steadfast and patriotic men, willing to sacrifice greatly and venture greatly, because the mission also is great.”
But it was destined otherwise. In the issue of the *Karmayogin*, dated January 22, 1910, we learn that Sri Aurobindo had received an anonymous letter “giving him the momentous information that a certain Gopal Chandra Ray of the C.I.D., with several assistants, is busy watching 6, College Square, and the Post Office, and copying all the letters and postcards that came in his name without exception.” On January 24th, a Bengali youth shot dead in broad daylight, in the premises of the Calcutta High Court, Mr. Shamsululla, a Deputy Superintendent of Police. In the issue of the 5th February, Sri Aurobindo commented on the shooting outrage and explained the Nationalist Party’s future course of action. Terrorist outrages were doubtless on the increase, and for this the Government had only to thank themselves; the wind of repression was yielding the fruit—the poisonous fruit—of the whirlwind of raging terrorism. The Nationalists were powerless to stem the rising gale of terrorism then sweeping over Bengal; they could only suspend their own even strictly lawful and peaceful political activities, hoping that the Government will be thereby able to put an early end to the wave of terrorism.

The Nationalist Party was to suspend its political activities; and they were to wait for the advent of the chosen leader of God. As for himself, Sri Aurobindo would remove himself, at any rate for a time, from the scene of his public activities. He would retire into himself, envelop himself in a vast quietude, and seek the Truth!

Towards the close of February, Sri Aurobindo took the final decision to retire from Calcutta to the neighbouring French territory of Chandernagore. It was hardly ten months after his release from the Alipur prison; he now went into a “prison” of his own forging—Upon Truth’s solid rock there stands A thin-walled ivory tower, Built light but strong by fairy hands with thought’s creative power.

For about a month, Sri Aurobindo stayed secretly in Chandernagore and intently, though silently, pursued the sadhana of Yoga. But Chandernagore was dangerously near Calcutta, the storm-centre of the Indian political world of those days; and hence Sri Aurobindo decided to seek a more secluded spot for continuing his spiritual work. He therefore left Chandernagore also, and reached Pondicherry, another French possession, on the 4th April 1910. He first stayed with Shankara Chetty, but later on moved
to his own quarters in the “White Town” and soon completely surrendered himself to Yoga.

Meanwhile, the muddle-headed authorities had launched a third prosecution against Sri Aurobindo, on account of his “Open Letter” to his countrymen that had been published in the *Karmayogin* over eight months ago! It had taken the authorities such an unconscionably long time to make up their minds whether the “Open Letter” was or was not seditious. The Government surpassed themselves by alleging that Sri Aurobindo had made a precipitate flight in order to escape arrest. Sri Aurobindo, on his part, issued a statement through the columns of the *Madras Times* fully explaining his position. Sri Aurobindo had not sought to avoid the long arm of the law; he had only retired to Pondicherry in answer to an imperative inner need to pursue the path of Yoga; the warrant for his arrest had been issued after he had already reached Pondicherry; he was therefore not obliged to appear before a British Indian court of justice.

The prosecution, on their part, were quite equal to the occasion. They pressed the case (learning, presumably, the wrong side of the lesson of the first *Vande Mataram* case) against the unfortunate printer of the *Karmayogin*. The case went against the printer in the lower court; but the printer appealed against the decision to the High Court, where Mr. Justice Woodroffe and Mr. Justice Fletcher quashed the conviction of the lower court and gave the decision that Sri Aurobindo’s “Open Letter” was not seditious. Thus, “for the third time a prosecution against him had failed!”

It appears that in the beginning Sri Aurobindo had entertained the idea of returning to the political fray under more favourable circumstances and with a better knowledge of the art of purposeful leadership. By and by, however, he fully realised that his destiny was to make spiritual, rather than political or material, conquests. Hence he decided at last to sever his connection altogether from the currents and cross-currents of Indian politics and to devote himself exclusively to *yogic sadhana*.

We have seen how Sri Aurobindo was interested in Yoga during the latter part of the Baroda period. What attracted him to Yoga then? He had spent fourteen years in a foreign country and he had been both amused and edified by the civilization of
the West; but in the end he had found it insufficient. Western civilization flamed forth, indeed, on many sides, at once brilliantly alluring and scorchingly devastating; but wasn’t the central core itself a darkness, rather than a source of Light? What shall it profit man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul!

Sri Aurobindo had acquired a measure of intellectual competency and even eminence as a result of his prolonged stay in England; but that was not enough. Returning to India, he ever kept in his mind the ideal of service to the Motherland,—to the great Mother,—watched the procession of events with absorbing earnestness, and began preparing forces so that he could act when the right moment came. His first organised work in politics was in the nature of grouping people who accepted the idea of national independence and were prepared to take up an appropriate and adequate action; although this was undertaken at an early age, it took a regular shape, as we saw, in or about 1902. Two years later he turned to Yoga—not, indeed, to clarify his ideas in political matters—but to find the spiritual strength which would support him, enlighten his way, and perfect the hidden instrument within. Sri Aurobindo himself thus explained in the Uttarpara Speech the reasons that first attracted him to Yoga:

“When I approached God at that time, I hardly had a living faith in Him. The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all. I did not feel His presence.

Yet something drew me to the truth of the Vedas, the truth of the Gita, the truth of the Hindu religion. I felt there must be a mighty truth somewhere in this Yoga, a mighty truth in this religion based on the Vedanta,”

And Sri Aurobindo wished to wrest that truth somehow,—but not for a selfish reason! He did not “ask for mukti” personal salvation; he did not desire power or success or fame for himself; he rather prayed fervently to God:

“If Thou art, then Thou knowest my heart.. I do not ask for anything that others ask for. I ask only for strength to uplift this nation, I ask only to be allowed
to live and work for this people whom I love and to whom I pray that I may devote my life.”

Yes, for himself he wanted nothing; he had always in him a considerable equanimity, a natural imperturbability, in the face of the world and its difficulties; and, after some inward depression in his adolescence (not due to any outward circumstances, nor yet amounting to sorrow or melancholy, but merely a strain in the temperament), this mood of equanimity became fairly settled. His great passion was “work”—work for the country, for the world, finally for the Divine, and always nishkama karma. During the Baroda period and immediately afterwards, it was work for the country, for the Mother. Such partial realisation as he was then able to achieve through the earnestness and constancy of his sadhana only reinforced his faith in Yoga as the cure for the ills of the world, and of India in particular.

When Sri Aurobindo left Baroda and plunged himself deep into politics, his preoccupation with Yoga remained. He had had, no doubt, spiritual experiences from the time he stepped on the Indian soil; a vast calm descended upon him with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, his first recontact with the soil and spirit of India; and this calm surrounded him and remained with him for long months afterwards. Again, while walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-Sulemani in Kashmir, the realisation of the vacant Infinite came upon him, unbidden as it were; the living presence of Kali in the shrine on the banks of the Narmada came upon him unawares and filled him with its stupendous majesty; and he had, on another occasion, when he was in danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay there, a vision of the God-head surging up from within him and mastering and controlling with its gaze all events and surroundings. But these and others like these were inner experiences coming of themselves, with a sudden unexpectedness, and were hence not the clear results of a Yogic sadhana. When he did begin practising Yoga, he did so by himself without a Guru, getting the rule from a friend who was a disciple of Brahmananda of the Gaya Math; it was confined at first to assiduous practice of Pranayama, and at one time Sri Aurobindo did Pranayama for six hours or more a day. There was no conflict or wavering between Yoga and
An Illustrious Life

politics; when he started Yoga, he carried on both without any idea of opposition between them. He nevertheless wanted to find a Guru, a teacher who would be able to tell him how to proceed in his endeavour to wrest the ultimate secret of knowledge and power from Nature and God. He established some connection with a member of the Governing Body of the Naga Sannyasis. The Naga Sannyasi confirmed Sri Aurobindo’s faith in Yoga by curing Barindra in almost a moment of a violent and clinging hill fever by merely cutting through a glassful of water crosswise with a knife and repeating a silent mantra; Barindra drank the water and was instantly cured of the malady. Although the Naga Sannyasi gave Sri Aurobindo a stotra of Kali and conducted certain kriyas and a Vedic yajna, all this was for his success in politics and not for Yoga, and Sri Aurobindo did not accept the Naga Sannyasi as his Guru. Sri Aurobindo likewise also met Brahmananda and was greatly impressed by him; but he had no real helper or Guru in Yoga till he met Lele, and that too was only for a short time. When Sri Aurobindo was leaving Bombay for Calcutta, he asked Lele how he was to get instructions for Sadhana in his absence; Lele after a little thought asked him whether he could surrender himself entirely to the inner Guide within him, and move as it moved him; if so, Sri Aurobindo needed no instructions from Lele or anybody else. This Sri Aurobindo accepted and made that his rule of sadhana and of life.

And yet the whirl of politics and political journalism cannot constitute an ideal background for Yogic sadhana. But Sri Krishna intervened at last; and the Muzzaferpore outrage and the subsequent incarceration of Sri Aurobindo proved indeed a blessing in disguise to him.

A year’s seclusion and meditation in the Alipur jail no doubt worked a great transformation in Sri Aurobindo. His horizon widened, he was able to discover behind Mother India Vasudeva Himself, the Divine immanent in all. He had as a rule never brought any rancour into his politics; he never had any hatred for England or the English people; he had always based his claim for freedom for India on the inherent right to freedom, not on any charge of misgovernment or oppression; and if ever he attacked persons, attacked even violently, it was for their views on political
action, not for any other motive. As a result of his prison experiences, Sri Aurobindo was now able to see that Sanatana Dharma both included and transcended the baffling vicissitudes of political action. Once again—now as always—nishkama karma was the watchword that spurred him to action. But he decided that first he would follow the path of Yoga—follow it whithersoever it might lead him—so that he might gain perfect control over the instrument of purposive action lodged deep and veiled within himself. A Rishi Vishwamitra is said to have created a whole new world so that King Trishanku could sing thus his Hymn of Triumph:

I shall not die.
Although this body, when the spirit tires
Of its cramped residence, shall feed the fires,
My house consumes, not I
I hold the sky
Together and upbear the teeming earth.
I was the eternal thinker at my birth
And shall be, though I die.

Could not he, Sri Aurobindo, attempt—so to say—a repetition of the feat? As he confessed to Dilip Kumar Roy:

“I too wanted at one time to transform through my Yoga the face of the world. I had wanted to change the fundamental nature and movements of humanity, to exile all the evils which affect mortality. It was with this aim and outlook that I turned to Yoga in the beginning, and I came to Pondicherry because I had been directed by the Voice to pursue my Yoga here.”

We do not know what exactly happened to Sri Aurobindo in the process of Yoga during the first four years of his retirement in Pondicherry. All that we are permitted to know is that this was a period of “silent yoga.” The fever-paroxysms and the incessant rattle and drive of a combative political life were now left far behind. Sri Aurobindo had parted from his wife, his friends, his colleagues, and the very scene of his recent fruitful activities; he had, in short, stripped the Self of its clinging clothes of mere ego-stuff and made it “lone, limitless, nude, immune.
But that was only the beginning. Although the personal problem was in a sense already solved, the infinitely more stupendous human problem yet remained. Could he do nothing to bring about “a new Heaven and a new Earth” in our midst? Having already long outgrown Yogi Lele’s instructions, Sri Aurobindo now experimented earnestly and incessantly in the delectable laboratory of his soul; he bravely adventured on his own, following the divine guidance within him and—in the appointed time—he apprehended all that was to be apprehended, saw very Infinity face to face. He had gone beyond his first experience in Baroda and Bombay described by him in his poem, *Nirvana*. He could say at that time in the strength of his soul’s vision:

Only the illimitable Permanent Is here. A peace stupendous, featureless, still
Replaces all,—what once was I, in it a silent unnamed emptiness content Either to fade in the Unknowable
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.

He had now covered a vaster field of experience both positive and negative and passed beyond both to the Supreme Truth reconciling them.

Sri Aurobindo had, in the light of his own Yogic experiences, invented a new instrument, at once so delicate and so all-powerful; he had developed the spiritual technique of *purna* Yoga or “integral” Yoga, comprehending, harmonising, and transcending the two great categories of experience, Matter and Spirit, and the three great classical high roads to salvation, *Jnana*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*.

It was a significant victory, no doubt; but the victory was also tinged with a huge disappointment. As he said to Dilip Kumar Roy:

“It was then (i.e., after my own *atma-siddhi*) that my outlook changed with the knowledge born of my new Yogic consciousness. But then I found, to my utter disillusionment, that it was only my ignorance which had led me to think that the impossible was feasible here and now,… in order to help humanity out, it was not enough for an individual, however great, to