

## **Savitri: The First Canto**

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Savitri is a cosmic epic. For it presents man against the enormous backgrounds of “a complex and vast cosmos made of a hierarchy of planes of consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> So its canvas is truly stupendous. Written in twenty four thousand lines, it is by far the most massive epic in the English language. Originating in the super mental consciousness, the whole poem has that mantra quality which we come across in the Vedic and Upanishadic compositions.

“...by some innate power the true sublime uplifts our souls ; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaulting joy ...”<sup>2</sup>, says Longinus. All serious readers of Sri Aurbindo’s Savitri would testify to this uplifting power of the poem. This ecstatic power no doubt springs from, to quote Longinus words, “a certain excellence and distinction in expression”<sup>3</sup> that the poem shows. Indeed, each and every line of this vast work is characterized by profound thought and passion as well as elevated expression – Longinus chief criteria of sublimity.

“Savitri is in a way the sole justification of what we call Indo – Anglican poetry. Without this soaring solitary peak, Indo-Anglican poetry would really be a meager thing. For whatever we might say about other Indo Anglian poets, they at best give us a patch here and a patch here, but do not show any sustained elevation. To put this proposition more forthrightly, where would Derozio and Toru and Sarojini and Harindra, not to mention a number of other versifiers past and present, stand if we consider them in the overall context of English literature? But Sir Aurbindo would distinguish himself, no doubt because of his magnum opus, even in this high company.

In more sense than one, ‘Savitri’ is an uncommon poem and therefore poses obvious difficulties of understanding. Sriprex Aurbindo himself was quite conscious of this problem: “Savitri is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind...”<sup>4</sup> So, one needs approach ‘Savitri’ with a good deal of patience and preparation. But this is more or less a necessary precondition in approaching all major poets and writers. ‘Savitri is not “Savitri” is generally shunned because of its opening canto, which really poses formidable difficulties to its reader. Once we understand its import, it’s should not be that difficult to appreciate the other portions. The poem opens thus:

This was the house before which the gods awake.

The gods, our religious books state, awake at dawn. Dawn or Usha in the Vedas is the symbol of the beginning of new life : “Usha widens Bringing out that which leaves, awakening someone who was dead.”<sup>5</sup> It also symbolizes life’s eternal cycle: “She desires the ancient mornings and fulfils their light ; projecting forward her illumination she inters into communion with the rest that are to come.”<sup>6</sup> “The Symbol Drawn”, the title of the opening canto, suggest a fresh beginning of what once existed.

But drawn is yet to break, and it is still pitch dark. So, it is Night, which stands for the Nescience that reigned before the cosmos was created. Mother has thrown ample light on the opening line : “There is an ancient tradition which describes the creation as done by some first emanations of the Supreme Mother, who were four emanations. In the sense and feeling of their supreme power, they cut connection with this origin and became independent. And these emanations being separated from their origin, entered into darkness.”<sup>7</sup> So, Consciousness turned into Unconsciousness, Bliss into Suffering, Truth into Falsehood, Life into Death. “This happened after they came into the vital level. When this was seen, it was decided that some second emanations would be made to repair the mistake of the first; and the second emanations were the Gods.” So, the first line refers to the time before the Gods came.

Then follows a breath-taking description of the Night of Nescience, which is reminiscent of the primordial condition described in the Rig Veda: “Then existence was not nor non-existence. The mid world was not nor either nor what is beyond.”<sup>9</sup> “The huge foreboding mind of night” was alone in her “until temple of eternity.” The mind of the night “longed to reach its end in vacant Naught.” Sri Aurobindo significantly calls it “A featureless semblance of the unknown” which  
Cradled the cosmic drowse of ignorant Force  
Whose moved creative slumber kindles the suns

And carries our lives in its somnambulist whirl So, the night here holds immense possibilities of creation. Is the Night here synonymous with Prakriti or Nature?

In this state of Nescience, the earth was “A shadow spinning through a soulless void,” completely forgetful “of her spirit and her fate”. Then something stirred in “the inscrutable darkness” which “Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance”. So, it was a leap from in conscience to ignorance. It was a longing for “absent light” till now slumbering in this “Naught profound” the memory of “a slain and buried past”:

An unshaped consciousness desired light.

And a black prescience yearned towards distant changed.

Then “a breach began in the impenetrable Night and “A long lone line of hesitating hue” disturbed “life’s obscure sleep.” Thus, the night consented to the birth of the dawn. A new world must now be created:

And all that was destroyed must be rebuilt.

It was a stupendous task. But “All can be done if the god-touch is there”. So, the dawn was about to break:

The darkness failed and slipped like a falling clock.

From the reclining body of a god.

The Goddess of light – the drawn- was approaching. There was an air of expectancy all around:

Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven;

The wide winged hymn of a great priestly wind

Arose and failed upon the altar hills;

The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky.

It seemed that “this anguished and precarious field of toil”, that is, our earth, would enjoy undying beatitude.

But that was not be, for the goddess found of the earth quite unprepared for her supernal touch:

Then the divine afflatus, spent, withdrew,

Unwanted, fading from the mortal’s range.

So, the Divine power put on the mask of matter. Consequently, the divine light gave place to the “the common light of earthly day” and man had still to bear the burden of his fate.

It was left to Savitri the incarnation of the Divine Mother to divinize the earth-life;

The proud and conscious wideness and the bliss.

She had brought with her into the human form,

The calm delight that weds one soul to all.

The key to the flaming doors of ecstasy.

But the earth’s ignorant nature refuses to change:

It meet the sons of god with death and pain. But Savitri embodied the love and power of the divine mother and was therefore fully equipped to challenge fate and death. At last the fatal day dawns when she has to take on death not only for satyavan but for whole universe:

Her spirit opened to the spirit in all,

Her nature felt all nature has its own,

The “fatal morn” soon changed into noon. So, the terrible hour was at hand. But Savitri was clam and composed in her strength:

Clam was her face and courage kept her mute.

And the canto ends with the chilling declaration:

This was the day when Satyavan must die.

The setting of the first canto is rather enigmatic. In the normal course, Sri Aurbindo should have stopped after describing the arrival of the dawn and its instant retreat. He takes up the story of Ashwapati, Savitri’s father from control. Why did he bring in Savitri in the opening canto itself when he was to describe in detail her birth etc, from book IV onwards? It was indeed in a bold stroke to state the central crisis of the poem in the every first canto. It goes to the eternal credit of Sri Aurbindo that this unusual arrangement does not prove discordant, but splendidly fits into the epic symphony. The poet performs the feat with a single line that opens the third canto:

A world’s desire compelled her mortal birth,

King Ashwapati is then introduced as “eternity’s delegate”.

So, the opening canto possesses multidimensional complexity. Here, the poet presents a bird’s eye – view of the whole cosmic evolution. So it is full of breath-taking transition. To quote Sir Aurbindo himself, “I am describing a rapid series of transitions, piling one suggestion upon another. There is a black quietude, then the persistent touch, then the first ‘beauty and wonder’ leading to the magical gate and the ‘lucent corner’. Then comes the failing of darkness, the smile used suggesting the rapidity of change...” And, to cap it all, the saga of Savitri up to the fatal day of her encounter with death is suggested. All this must prove too much even for an initiated reader of poetry. But properly approached, the first canto may also provide the richest ever poetic fare.

**REFERENCES:**

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- [2]. Classical Criticism, p.107, Penguin Books 1977
- [3]. Ibid
- [4]. Letters on "Savitri", Savitri, p.794
- [5]. The Rig Veda, 1.113.8-10 (Sri Aurobindo's own translation)
- [6]. Ibid
- [7]. Mother, About Savitri, SABDA, Pondicherry
- [8]. Ibid
- [9]. Rig Veda x, 129 (Sri Aurbindo's own translation)