

**Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*:
A Quest for a Deathless State**

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Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)

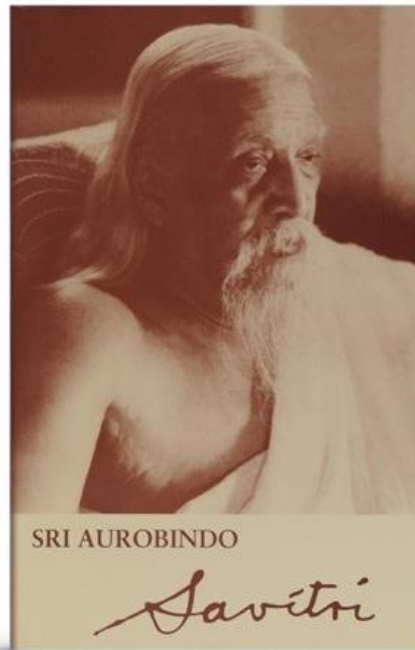
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Aurobindo's *Savitri*: A Deathless State

Seems a bit confusing, 'a deathless state' is not it? But Sri Aurobindo has always envisaged that- 'a deathless state'. In fact, this state of deathlessness is not an *el dorado*, not a utopia either; rather, it can be experienced with a certain mental attitude and attribute, where death ceases to exist, at least in a subtle sense, no matter how much death-bound we may be in reality.

That's what this magnum opus *Savitri*, a long narrative poem, an epic in the true sense of the term, tells us in almost 24000 lines of blank verse in iambic pentameter. The simple story of Savitri and Satyavan, taken out of the 'Banaparba' of the great Hindu epic *The Mahabharat*, has been treated as the base for this great poem which is the symbol of the future of the mankind as well, as per Sri Aurobindo's version.

Achieving Divinity



The title of the poem is *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, which is self-explanatory as every character of the poem symbolizes one or the other attributes of human endeavour to achieve divinity. In the ‘Author’s Note’ of this epic poem, Sri Aurobindo says,

Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine word, daughter of the sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save ; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan is the Divine mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision and through that loss its kingdom of glory. (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* - Author’s Note).

A Symbol for Spiritual Destiny, A Continuing Process of Evolution

Thus Sri Aurobindo has made the Savitri-Satyavan legend a symbol. The characters do exactly what they stand for. It is again ‘death’ that is the moot point of the epic which (death), Sri Aurobindo says, is not the be-all and end-all of everything in this world.

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Sri Aurobindo's writings revolve around the fact that man has a spiritual destiny and a divinity which he has the potential to rise into and the whole of evolution is nothing but a process towards that. An *involution* is the beginning where the spirit gets involved in gross matter and then the long, tardy process of evolution starts. Matter-life-mind- and thus the evolution has not stopped, as many scientists would admit and have accepted. But what would happen, if at all this evolution has to stop one day, still eludes the imagination and thought of many.

Sri Aurobindo, with this uncanny seer-vision tells us that this evolution is not mechanical and meaningless. Rather, it is part of a great dispensation, a grand plan that encompasses journey from inconscient to superconscient, from nothing to everything, from gross matter to superhumanhood and a lot more. And in the process, death is a transition, a temporary dissolution of body to give way to a more enlightened body to sustain the spirit which in itself, is immortal. Hence, from a death-bound state to a death-less one is the possibility this journey envisages.

A Well-known Story Used to Enlighten Us about the Vision into Future

The Savitri-Satyavan story is well known to every Hindu. We are not going to dwell upon that in detail. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri is not a story retold with imaginations or phantasmagoria. It is a vision into this future, both imminent and long.

The real picture unveils itself after Satyavan dies in the forest for which Savitri has been long prepared after the heavenly bard Narad's foretelling before she marries Satyavan. She has been forewarned, advised to change her choice, but she has never yielded to the fate. She is determined to get back her Satyavan and get back him alive. Death cannot separate her from Satyavan and she is not going to live her life alone.

Death is a Perversion Imposed on the Individual Life

Death is a perversion; it is not permanent and though seems formidable at present, it cannot stand life, for, life goes on despite the presence of death. This is the most important point

of our discussion. In one of this magnum opuses 'The Life Divine' Sri Aurobindo gives the reason for the existence of death in his impeccable style:

'Death is imposed on the individual life both by the condition of its own existence and by its relations to the all-force which manifests itself in the universe. For the individual life is a particular play of energy specialized to constitute, maintain, energise and finally to dissolve when its utility is over, one of the myriad forms which all serve, each in its own place, time and scope, the whole play of the universe. The energy of life in the body has to support the attack of the energies external to it in the universe; it has to draw them in and feed upon them and is itself being constantly devoured by them. All matter according to the Upanishad is food, and this is the formula of the material world that 'the eater eating is himself eaten.' ...

'Not only so but again in the languages of the Upanishad, the life force is all food of the body and this body the food of the life-force; in other words, the life energy in us both supplies the material by which the form is built up and constantly maintained and renewed and is at the same time constantly using up the substantial form of itself which it thus creates and keeps in existence. If the balance between these two operations is imperfect or is disturbed or if the ordered play of the different currents of life force is thrown out of gear, then disease and decay intervene and commence the process of disintegration. ... '

Seeking Infinite Experience on a Finite Basis

But apart from all these necessities, there is the one fundamental necessity of the nature and object of embodied life itself, which is to seek infinite experience on a finite basis, and since the form, the basis by its very organization limits the possibility of experience, this can only be done by dissolving it and seeking new forms. For the soul having once limited itself by concentrating on the moment and the field is driven to seek its infinity again by the principle of succession, by adding moment to moment and thus storing up a Time-experience which it calls its past; in that Time it moves through successive fields, successive experiences or lives, successive accumulations of knowledge, capacity, enjoyment, and all this it holds in

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subconscious or superconscious memory as its fund of part acquisition in time. To this process change of form is essential ...” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, pages 192-193).

Death – A Change of Form

This is ‘death’, a change of form that is indispensable at the present human state and the reasons have already been ascribed in the above passage by Sri Aurobindo. But man can surpass this stage to something beyond which is contrary to this state at present. And that is what Sri Aurobindo has tried to present in a majestic manner in his *Savitri*.

Sri Aurobindo has used the word *death* in *Savitri* for more than four hundred times in different contexts, sometimes as compound words like ‘death-less’, ‘death-bound’, ‘death-claimed’ etc.. He has even used contradictory words like ‘immortal death’, which the present mankind thinks and which means, death cannot die and it has to stay forever. This, he says, is the important thought process of man. But a time will come when this change of form will not be required and the spirit will get a befitting garb so that it cannot have to shed it when the utility of the garb (body) is over. This is what says the *Bhagavadgita* also.

Death also Undergoes a Metamorphosis

While meditating on death, Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri* tells us about his visions in different chapters on different contexts. During the process of a great transformation, death also undergoes or is bound to undergo a tremendous metamorphosis.

When Narad forecasts the death of Satyavan within one year of their conjugal life after *Savitri* chooses him as her life-partner, *Savitri* is advised to change her choice which she rejects and her father expresses a chord of hope and trust:

Our destiny is written in double terms;
Through nature’s contraries we draw near God;
Out of darkness we still grow to light,
Death is our road to immortality. (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*-424)

As the reason of the cycles of birth and death the man undergoes, in the words of Narad, he tells us:

Men die that man may live and God be born. (Sri Aurobindo, Savitri-444)

With comforting words, Narad pacifies the queen, Savitri's mother:

In vain thou mournst that Satyavan must die;
His death is a beginning of a greater life,
Death is the spirit's opportunity.
A vast intention has brought two souls close

Love and Death

And love and death conspire towards one great end. (Sri Aurobindo.Savitri-459)

Death should not be mourned. It has a greater role/ responsibility to discharge. It is not a loss either. For a greater life, for vaster vistas to encompass, for the time being this has to be endured. Though seem contraries, life and death here work hand in glove. In beautiful lines, Sri Aurobindo points that out:

All here is a mystery of contraries:
Darkness a magic of self and hidden light,
Suffering some secret rapture's tragic mask
And death an instrument of perpetual life.
Although Death walks beside us on life's road,
A dim bystander at the body's start
And a last judgment on man's futile works,
Other is the riddle of its ambiguous face:
Death is a stair, a door, a stumbling stride
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth,
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state. (Sri Aurobindo. *Savitri* 600-601)

Savitri's Fight against God of Death

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Savitri has to fight almost single-handedly, when the god of death came to take away Satyavan. The only weapon she has is love and it is love indeed which has the power to deliver life from the clutches of death and she does exactly that. The vigour with which the god of death came could not be sustained through Savitri's onslaught, a verbal duel with the black God with her spirit's light. He had to acknowledge defeat after he desperately fought for long:

He called to night but she fell shuddering back,
He called to hell but silently it retired;
He turned to Inconscient for support,
From which he was born, his vast sustaining self,
It drew him back towards boundless vacancy
As if by himself to swallow up himself;
He called to his strength, but it refused his call,
His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured. (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* - 667)

The dark cloak fell at last .The force of darkness that is death, had to be transformed to light and there is everlasting day everywhere without any sign of night. The very existence of death has been annulled and Savitri no more finds the darkness and death.

One whom her soul had faced as Death and Night
A sum of all sweetness gathered into his limbs
And blended her heart to the beauty of the suns.
Transfigured was the formidable shape.
His darkness and his sad destroying might
Abolishing for ever and disclosing
The mystery of his high and violent deeds,
A secret splendour rise revealed to sight
Where once the vast embodied Void had stood. (Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* 678-79)

Quest for a Deathless State

So, that's it. The quest of a deathless state can easily be traced through *Savitri*. The quest is a gradual development, a true revelation of the inner divine energy through which man can

achieve higher goals, for he is divine in his intrinsic nature. If Savitri can do it, everybody could do it. In the words of K. D. Verma,

In Sri Aurobindo's treatment of the Mahabharata legend of conjugal love, Savitri's struggle is twofold. On the one hand, in human form she undertakes the process of realizing her inner unity through a rigid discipline of yoga, such that this divine energy reveals itself in her. This revelation of the divine in her signifies her own infinitely expanded consciousness, the virat form, the transcendent wisdom, the gnosis, with the help of which she wages an all-out war against Yama, the god of death and of a lower order in nature. (Peter Heehs, page 15) (Quoted by K D Verma in the book edited by Peter Heehs)

Every human being is originally divine and has a spirit (soul) in him that does not die and thus some part of us is virtually deathless. So striving towards deathlessness or immortality is native, intrinsic to our nature. The only problem with us is the oblivion which we are doomed to. That's what Sri Aurobindo tries to do, to make us remember that. We are no different from the Creator. It's only with a perfect sincerity and unflinching devotion, trust and faith, life can be meaningful which no death can erase or banish.

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