CHAPTER I
SRI AUROBINDO’S POETIC CAREER

Sri Aurobindo is one the world’s greatest names in poetry. He occupies a pre-eminent place in Indo-Anglian poetry. He is gifted with surprising powers of intellect and wisdom. His reputation as a mystic – philosopher and yogi of Modern India has obscured his greatness as a poet. He represents the return of Rishi as a poet. His creative span stretches over more than sixty years and runs to some thirty thousand pages which includes lyrics, narrative poems, philosophical poems, a few poetic plays besides translations and the monumental futurist cosmic epic Savitri which illustrate the range of his poetical genius.

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872, in the Hoogly District of West Bengal to Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose and Swarnalatha Devi. He accompanied his two elder brothers to England at the age of seven for his schooling in Manchester under the care of Drewetts, an English family in Manchester. He read the poetry of Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats at an early age and also wrote verses for the Fox Family Magazine. Later he won all the prizes in one year for Greek and Latin verses in the Kings College, Cambridge. His early poetic career began during his stay in England. Sri Aurobindo is not merely a writer who happened to write in English but really an English writer – almost as much as, a George Moore, a Laurence Binyon or a W.B Yeats. His poem Hecuba written in England was admired by no less a personality than Laurence Binyon.

As Sri Aurobindo set foot on the Indian soil in 1893 from Cambridge, he found his roots in Indian culture. The Baroda Period (1893 – 1906) is the significant seed – time of his life that his Poetic Muse came of age. He was influenced by the Romantic Poets like Keats, Wordsworth and Shelley. Songs to Mytrilla (1895) is the poet’s first published volume of verse. They were written mostly during the poet’s eighteenth and twentieth years. In this volume he wrote poems which revealed Greek influence and also the influence of decadent English Poets. His best and fine lyrics like To the
Cuckoo and A Rose of Women, remind us of the sensuousness of Keats at every step, of his enjoyment of the beauty of nature and of the beauty of female body. A few lyrics are translations and adaptations from the Greek and Bengali. Two groups of poems stand out: the political poems and the tributes. Most of the political poems are about Ireland and her tragic hero Parnell. Among tributes may be mentioned one on Goethe and the other, a sonnet, on his grandfather, Rajnarayan Basu. In Envoi the young poet bids his return home. In Songs to Myrtilla, we have a few poems of love. Night By the Sea pictures a dim, dull and sad atmosphere. In the very bosom of nature represented by “the stern and cheerless sea” and “the garden’s dim repose”, the poet is overpowered by grief, sense of loneliness and dejection. A Thing Seen is the vision of a woman sleeping in her garden. The Lover’s Complaint has a plaintive murmuring in it. Even natural elements like the “reed” become a part of the lover’s grief. In Love In Sorrow, nature sympathises with the lover in his misery. The best love poems by Sri Aurobindo are Urvasi and Love And Death. These poems are long narratives written in blank verse. Urvasi deals with the theme of king Pururavas, a mortal hero, and Urvasi, a heavenly nymph, whom the king makes his bride. In Love And Death, Ruru invades “Patala’ to claim dead Priyumvada and willingly barters away half his own life to live the other half with his restored wife. According to K.R. S Iyengar, “Both the narratives are quarried from the ranges of deathless romance, for Pururavas and Ruru are great lovers, and Urvasi and Priyumvada are truly worthy of their love.” Some other love poems written by Sri Aurobindo are: “Immortal Love”, Chitrangada and The Tale of Nala. The former is based on the love – relations between Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur and Arjun, the heroic Pandava. In the latter poem we find Nala, Nishada’s king, pacing by a stream and capturing one of the “moon – bosomed nymphs “, swimming and bathing in it in the shape of birds who love the strength and initiative in man.

Sri Aurobindo’s second volume poems (1905) containing short reflective poems like Who, The Fear of Death, The Sea, A Vision of Science, The Rishi, In the Moonlight are full of philosophic beauty. The mood and
manner of these writings explain why in certain minds Sri Aurobindo is equated with "the philosopher as poet." In his next volume Nine Poems, lyrics belong to the early phase but published much later. The most characteristic poem of this volume is Ahana which can be described as one long feast of music and revelation, the philosophy being subsumed in the poetry, the poetry crystallizing as philosophy. Ahana may almost be described as an "Aurobindonian Gita", in more than 250 rhymed hexameter couplets. Ahana in many ways is a prologue to Savitri. The central theme of the descent of the Divine to the earth, the symbolism of Dawn and the allegorical figures like 'the Hemters of the joy' 'the seekers of knowledge', 'the climbers in quest of power', distinctly anticipate Savitri. His next volume More Poems, published in 1967, after the death of the poet, contains a number of lyrics written during his early phase like Tiresias, The Symbol Moon, Sun of Lightening and several other poems which are incomplete and fragmentary.

In 1901, Sri Aurobindo was slowly drawn to the centre of Revolutionary Politics in Bengal. In 1905, he wrote Bhavani Mandir, " a handbook for Revolutionaries dedicated to the service of Bhavani," which caused a flutter in the bureaucracy. On May 4th, 1908, he was arrested in connection with the Muzaffarpur bomb blast. While inside the prison he wrote a magnificent anthem of freedom and adventure entitled Invitation. The poem is packed with power and pulse and is sure to delight the youthful hearts. He wrote another long narrative poem in blank verse entitled Bhaji Prabhou soon after coming to Calcutta, which focuses on a thrilling episode in Maratha history. This poem is founded on the historical incident of the heroic self-sacrifice of Baji Prabhou, the reputed Maratha hero and warrior, who, to cover Shivaji's retreat heed a mountainous pass for two hours together with a small band of men against twelve thousand enemy soldiers.

Sri Aurobindo's later lyrics – contained in Six Poems (1934) Poems (1941) and several of those included in Last Poems (1952) and several poems in quantitative metres are printed at the end of the second volume of Collected Poems and Plays. He wrote an epic poem Ilion entirely on the Homeric pattern, but was able to complete only eight books and a part of the
ninth, totalling about 5000 lines. It is set against the background of the Trojan War. Sri Aurobindo's two most ambitious efforts in quantitative hexameters are Ilion and Ahana.

The poet of yoga in Sri Aurobindo comes fully into his own during Pondicherry period beginning in 1910. His later poems read like the best of the 17th century Metaphysical Poetry. His later poems like Jivanmukta, Thought the Paraclete, The Bird of Fire, Rose of God, Ocean Stillness are composed in a new world of poetic inspiration and in fulfilment in Collected Poems (Volume-V). His Last Poems (1952) is mostly a collection of sonnets. The fifty and odd sonnets in which he expressed his spiritual realizations and occasionally, his moods of exquisite satire, are noted for their simplicity, directness and intensity of language. His Transformation is one of the undated sonnets which is charged with spirituality and divine inspiration. A Dream of Surreal Science composed on September 25, 1939 is a satirical piece in which the poet suggest a number of impossibilities turned into possibilities to a dreamer. It is through dreamer that the poet expresses indirectly the disgust and horror of the present day world which is madly running after the giant-killer 'Science'.

Sri Aurobindo also translated both from Sanskrit and Bengali. From sanskrit he made translations of three remarkable works. They are Kalidasa's Meghaduta and Vikramorvasie and Bhartrihari's Niti Shataka. The Hero and the Nymph is Sri Aurobindo blank verse translation of Vikramorvasie. The Century of Life, Vidula and Songs of Sea are some other notable translations.

Sri Aurobindo's important prose works include The Life Divine, The Future Poetry, and his Letters to his many friends, disciples and other correspondents. The Life Divine, his monumental work published in 1939-40, envisages the divinisation of common human life by the decent of supermind. It is this philosophy which has given a poetic mould in Savitri, and hence a knowledge of it is essential for a full understanding of the immortal epic. Sri Aurobindo primarily belongs to the future. His Savitri is a model of The Future Poetry. Sri Aurobindo, as the poet of the Supramental Age says that The
Future poetry is to fulfil the task of giving the fullest and most perfect presentation of the creative essence of the spirit; the Supreme Reality at all levels of being and in all forms of existence. The Future Poetry is the poetics of Sri Aurobindo which reveals his profound knowledge of poetry and political art. Sri Aurobindo defines in his Future poetry an epic as a poem of the soul which explains the real nature of the universe and interprets the ultimate destiny of man. The Letters of Sri Aurobindo are valuable pieces of Literary Criticism. More specially the letters on Savitri are valuable. They have been appended to the one volume edition of the epic published in 1950 and since reprinted many times.

Sri Aurobindo's last years were devoted much to the revision of his monumental epic Savitri. He first versified the legend of Savitri during his stay in Baroda. It was just a legend and it had only two parts; Part I Earth containing four books; while part II Beyond containing three books and an epilogue. He started revising Savitri after his settlement in Pondicherry. In some early versions there are Cantos instead of Books. Later, Books include those Cantos. On the eve of Darshan Day on 24th November, 1938 Sri Aurobindo met with an accident and was forced to be bedridden for at least two years. During this period, he must have struggled against Death. Thus he had the first-hand experience to describe Satyavan's death, in the forest as well as Savitri's pursuit of death in the subtle worlds. After he recovered he started working on The Life Divine and after its publication in 1940 he took up Savitri for revision. Most of his time was taken up by Savitri: a 'legend and a symbol' which has a Universality in its theme being concerned with destiny of man and his relations with the Divine. It is more autobiographical than Milton's Paradise Lost, more inclusive than Dante's The Divine Comedy and more intimately and intensely emotional than Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey. Savitri, as we have it, consists of twelve books and forty-nine cantos. The spiritual experiences of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are quarry from which the epic hews its subtle and fascinating material for this purpose.

Savitri is a new kind of epic poetry in the sense that it brings in Yoga and Philosophy to weave its poetic texture. It broadens the frontiers of the
traditional epics and raises their structure to the summit of spirituality. Thus, the brief survey of Sri Aurobindo poetic achievement fully brings out the versatility of his genius and the gradual evolution of his genius, till he came to be ranked with the greatest poets of the world. He is the Vyasa of the Modern World.