Chapter 1

The Making of a Poet

Sri Aurobindo is a legend and a symbol. He himself once explained that lotus, ie "Aravinda", stands for the opening of the consciousness to the Divine. His sadhana and realisation make him the symbol of this opening which signifies the beginning of an inner journey that explores the mystery of existence and makes us see "the secret face that is our own" (Aurobindo 28: 1.3.229).

His multi-pronged achievements are, indeed, legendary. With yogic endeavour and aspiration he, brought up without the Indian breeze being allowed to blow into his mind, could penetrate the heart of Indian ideas and wisdom. He added a freshness to them through his poetic vision and illuminating interpretation. His mighty pen could awaken a blazing aspiration for freedom throughout India. The yogi could discover the hidden planes of consciousness thereby opening new possibilities for humanity. The poet in him transformed poetry into the song of the soul, ie mantra, thereby adding a new dimension and significance to it. He is primarily a poet and ultimately a poet. He has told many times that he is first a poet and a politician, not a yogi or a philosopher. The muse touched his creative chords in his teens. Poetry remained his companion till the last days of his life. He believed in the power of poetry and art that could lead man to enlightenment.

His versatility foils any attempt at a brief life-sketch. Throwing light on his multi-faceted personality A.B. Purani writes that he was "a professor,
a scholar, a poet, a political leader, a journalist, a philosopher, a dramatist, an indologist, a psychologist, a literary critic, a translator, and an original interpreter of the Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita" (The Life, Preface V). Besides, the fact stands that a yogi's real life is his inner life. Sri Aurobindo himself refers to the problem and writes: "Not only in my case but in that of poets, philosophers and yogis it is no use attempting a biography, because they do not live in their external life" (qtd. in Purani, The Life 205). He was a poet, philosopher and yogi all rolled into one. But some precious glimpse of Sri Aurobindo, the inner man, is revealed to us through his poetry and other writings, because his writings are the expression, in intellectual terms, of his spiritual visions, experiences and realisations. Any attempt to present a brief account of the growth of the poet or the poetic life of Sri Aurobindo will undoubtedly bring other facets of his life into discussion because his poetic development is intimately linked up with other developments in his personality. V.K. Gokak rightly observes that his poetry "kept pace with other developments in his personality" (15).

For the first five years of his life he lived with his parents but did not know Bengali, his mother tongue. In his father's house only English and Hindustani were spoken. At five he was sent along with his two elder brothers to Loreto Convent School at Darjeeling, a school intended mainly for the children of European officials in India. Thus since early childhood he was snatched away from family life and significantly enough from the mother tongue. English had become他的自然语言 by force of
circumstances from the very childhood. This was perhaps the sowing of the seed from which was to be born a great poet in English. English was, in fact, to all intents and purposes, his mother tongue until he returned to India at the age of twenty one.

In England Sri Aurobindo grew up in entire ignorance of India. Yet he had no attachment to England as a country. But he was powerfully drawn to Greek, English and European thoughts even if he was not convinced of the value of Western civilization. Braving the life of hardship and starvation he continued drinking deep the thoughts and ideas of Europe and reveling in the realms of classical and modern European languages and poetry. His later life shows that his study did not merely add to his scholarship, but helped shaping him into a force of synthesis. Romain Rolland has described him as the perfect synthesis between the genius of Asia and the genius of Europe. As a thinker and a poet he has brought "the East and the West into full creative partnership" (Prema Nandakumar 6).

Rev. William H. Drewett taught Aurobindo Latin and Dr. Walker, the headmaster of St. Paul’s, Greek. In the scholarship examination, December 1989, for entry into King’s College, Cambridge, he took the papers in classical languages, ie Greek and Latin and was adjudged the best candidate and won the senior classical scholarship. He evinced a strong penchant for learning new languages. He learnt German and Italian well enough to read the great classics in the original, and French; and a little Spanish. The window of his mind opened to the sweet strains of master creators in
different languages. This not only widened his mental horizon but might 
have nourished and inspired the poet in him.

During his last three years at St. Paul's he spent most of his time in 
general reading, especially English poetry, literature and fiction, French 
literature and the history of mediaeval and modern Europe. Now and then 
the poet in him would seek expression and he would work on a poem in 
Greek, Latin or English. At St. Paul's between the ages of sixteen and 
eighteen he wrote more English poetry. During his Cambridge days he 
continued to be in love with poetry and wrote poems more frequently. He 
also experimented with translations of passages from Greek and Latin 
poetry. He was endowed with a sensitive ear for English sound. The incident 
telling how Aurobindo got a clue to the true quantitative hexameter in 
English will be relevant here. While at Cambridge, Norman Ferrers, his 
classmate was once reading out a "very Homeric line" from Clough and his 
recitation of it "gave Aurobindo the real swing (or "lilt") of the metre " 
(Purani, The Life 23). In 1892 at King's College he was awarded the 
Rawley prize for Greek iambics and another for Latin hexameters. In answer 
to a question Sri Aurobindo once told: "I appeared for the I.C.S. because 
my father wanted it and I was too young to understand. . . . My interest was 
in poetry and literature and study of languages and patriotic action"(Purani, 
Evening Talks, Third Series 35-36). Amidst all troubles and turns of his life 
poetry remained his soul's darling.

Referring to the origin of poetic impulse in Sri Aurobindo, Bipin 
Chandra Pal writes that he owes not only his maternal grandfather
Rajnarayan Bose's "rich spiritual nature but even his very superior literary capacity to his inherited endowments from his mother's line" (qtd. in Das, Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century 181). This may be a conjecture based on the belief of the inheritance of hereditary qualities. But it is also likely that his elder brother Manmohan’s preoccupation with poetry stimulated Aurobindo who had the incipient poet in him already trying to come to his own. He has himself acknowledged the stimulus he received from his elder brother who was a promising poet and wrote verses which were published from Oxford in a collection entitled Primavera. He was also encouraged to write poetry by Manmohan's circle of friends which included Laurence Binyon and Stephen Phillips. His wide readings of Classical and English poetry contributed some formative influence to his poetic growth. Besides, there were outings to places of nature's beauty associated with literature which stirred his poetic sensibility. Thus during his days in England the poet in him found a congenial atmosphere to grow.

A vast calm, akin to the calm when one experiences the silent self, descended on him as he stepped on the soil of India. It was as if Mother India revealed to him her hidden spiritual power. His return to India also paved the way for fresh unfoldment of his personality. His whole life, as is his poetry, is a continuous process of unfoldment, petal after gloried petal, culminating in the full bloom, ie the Purnayogi and the seer-poet—the revealer of a new integral yoga and the poet of transformation.

Thereafter Baroda became the field of his activities for the next 13 years. These were the days of self-culture, intense study, literary activities
and of inner preparation for his future work. He himself has said that his interests at Baroda lay "in Sanskrit, in literature and in the National movement" (qtd. in Nirodharan 27). He could gain so great a mastery of Sanskrit that he was later able to make a deep study of the Vedas and, with the help of his spiritual vision, presented a new interpretation of the ancient wisdom. Simultaneously he learnt several modern Indian languages, especially Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi. In England he had received an entirely occidental education without any contact with the culture of India and the East. It was at Baroda, points out Sisirkumar Ghose, that he "made up that supreme gap in his intellectual equipment and delved deep into the motives and sources of Indian thought and culture" (The Poetry of Sri Aurobindo 4). As he delved deep into Sanskrit and Bengali literature, he gained his great cultural heritage. His creative genius now found opulent expression drawing sustenance from this new awakening. The Baroda days were opulently productive both in the interpretation of ancient Indian culture as well as fresh literary creations. His creative inspiration flowed naturally into the moulds of translations, lyric and narrative poetry, poetic drama and prose writings on a wide variety of subjects. He contributed a series of articles to the Induprakash on Bankim Chandra Chatterji and wrote extensively on Kalidasa—on the age of Kalidasa, on his characters, on translating Kalidasa, on his "Seasons", and on Hindu drama. He rendered into English Kalidasa's drama Vikramorvasie (The Hero and the Nymph) and freely rendered into English Bhartrihari's The Nitishataka (The Century
The manuscript of his translation in terza rima of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* was lost in the turmoil of his political career. Further, he translated the "Taittiriya" and "Aitareya" Upanishads and also wrote an essay "On Translating the Upanishads." Commenting on the quality of his translations of the Upanishads and the Vedas in prose Sundaram writes that they "have a deep touch of poetical expression, a turn of phrase which brings out much more fully the significance of the original bare word" (The Advent, Aug. 1975: 45). He also translated select passages from the "Sabhā Parva" and "Udyoga Parva" of the *Mahābhārata* and from the "Bāla Kānda", "Ayodhyā Kānda" and "Aranya Kānda" of the *Rāmāyana* and added the essays "Notes on the Mahabharata", "The Problem of the Mahabharata" and "The Genius of Valmiki." He also translated Bengali poems of Vidyapati, Nidhu Babu, Horu Thakur, Jnanadas and Chandidas.

Besides the vast mass of translations he composed a number of short, reflective poems and two romantic narratives *Urvasie* and *Love and Death*. In the year 1895 the first collection of Sri Aurobindo's poems *Songs to Myrtilla* was published for private circulation. Of course, most of the poems contained in this collection were written between 1890 and 1892 while he was a student at Cambridge. He also began working upon *Baji Prabhou* which narrates a thrilling episode in Mahratta history. He wrote during those days *Perseus the Deliverer*, his first full-length play in blank-verse; *Rodogune*, a tragedy and *The Viziers of Bassora*, a dramatic romance. His plays are in blank-verse and have their own charm of expression and
interest of subject. Each of the plays written by him presents a separate climate of a separate nation in separate ages.

At Baroda he began prānāyāma⁹, a preliminary step towards his real yoga. For him there was no conflict or idea of opposition between yoga and other activities. Rather yoga extended into all other activities and each other activity became an inseparable part of the grand whole. His prānāyāma resulted in the flow of poetry as well as prose in gusts. Sri Aurobindo vividly narrates the results of prānāyāma as follows:

My own experience is that the brain becomes Prakashmaya—full of light. . . . The mind worked with great illumination and power. At that time I used to write poetry. Usually I wrote five to eight or ten lines per day, about two hundred lines in a month. After the Pranayama I could write two hundred lines within half an hour. Formerly my memory was dull, but afterwards when the inspiration came, I could remember the lines in their order and write them down conveniently at any time. Along with this enhanced mental activity I could see an electric energy all around the brain." (Purani, Evening Talks, First series 204)

After his return to India many spiritual experiences came to him unsought. Most of these revelations helped him in his spiritual advancement

⁹ The government and control of the respiration; regulated direction and arrestation by exercises of breathing of the vital currents of energy in the body.
and resulted in poetic expression. The vision of the Being of Light at the moment of a probable accident at Baroda, the experience of the vacant Infinite on the hill of Shankaracharya, the feeling of a Presence in the image of Kali in a temple on the bank of the Narmada, the experience of the Silent Brahman Consciousness at Bombay in 1908 inspired the poems "The Godhead", "Adwaita," "The Stone Goddess" and "Nirvana" respectively. Gradually his poetry began to be an expression of his noumenal experiences. As he intensified his yoga his poetry became a link between his outer and inner working and as he reached higher levels of consciousness beyond the mind he started writing out of an absolute silence of the mind.

Each shifting of the field of his activity to a different locale—for his life falls into four broad divisions each with a different locale, viz England, Baroda, Calcutta and Pondichery—is marked by a growth into the higher and the vast. So when he left Baroda for Calcutta, it was not to be lost in the whirlpool of politics, but to enlighten politics. As his poetic outpouring was the expression of an inner urge, his active participation in politics was another expression of the same inner urge. So also are all his activities. Ghose rightly observes that "all his diverse activities are parts of a same journey and consummation" (Sri Aurobindo: Poet 6). Involvement in politics took him to Alipur Jail where came the most cardinal turning point in his life. He sensed the splendour of the Infinite and lost himself in the omnipresence of God. His outlook underwent a sea-change. His life became "a field of the Divine" (Purani. The life 126) and he was completely an
instrument of the Divine. All his actions including poetic creations became
the expressions of the Divine will. He lucidly explains:

"A literary man is one who loves literature and literary
activities for their own sake. A Yogi who writes is not a
literary man for he writes only what the inner Will and Word
wants him to express. He is a channel and instrument of
something greater than his own literary personality."

(Aurobindo 9: 503)

Sri Aurobindo grew into a yogi-poet. His poetic expression
became the revelation of his spiritual experiences and realisation.

In spite of all apparent tensions and activities during the Calcutta days
Sri Aurobindo, the inner man, was calm and unruffled as is evident from his
behaviour in Alipore jail and from many other incidents. His poetic creation
continued. Even in Alipore jail he composed poems like "Invitation", "Who"
and "The Mother of Dreams." Poems such as "The Birth of Sin" and
"Epiphany" were published in the Karmayogin. Besides the short poems,
Ilion, an epic in quantitative hexametres, was begun in Alipore jail in 1909.
Baji Prabhou first appeared in the Karmayogin between February 19 and
March 5, 1910. He also published a voluminous amount of writings in the
Bande Mataram and the Karmayogin apart from his contribution to Bengali
weeklies Yugantar and Dharma. He wrote editorial articles on nationalism
in the Bande Mataram, series of articles in the Karmayogin on a system of
national education, the articles included in the book The Ideal of the
Karmavogin and many more articles on different subjects. In addition he translated "Bande Mataram" both into prose and verse; the prologue and the first thirteen chapters of part 1 of *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s Bangali novel; and "Isha," "Kena," "Katha," and "Mundaka" Upanishads. Of these, "Isha" and "Kena" Upanishads were translated again at Pondicherry, "Katha" received partial revision and the translation of "Mundaka" was revised.

The poet of yoga in Sri Aurobindo found full expression during his Pondicherry days. His spiritual experiences and realisations gave sustenance to his later poems, whether lyrical, speculative or epic. They came close to his experiences, the sum total of which is Sri Aurobindo. His philosophical writings also emanated from the same source. It was as if the divine creative force in its opulence was seeking expression through him. His poetic career was marked by variety, vastness, experiments, innovations and revelations leading to self-discovery. Both poetry and yoga had been native gifts to him. When both became a unified action his poetry combined intuitive seeing and inspired hearing. A luminous vision became the characteristic power of the poet as a natural consequence of yoga. Poetry that springs out of that vision in highly revelatory and perfectly rhythmic words becomes mantra and the poet a Rishi. To him poetry is a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery. Such poetry transcends all philosophy and view-point and glitters with spiritual reality.

For the expression of such revelatory vision and spiritual or experiential reality a different type of language is required. Sri Aurobindo
evolved a language and a style of his own to express his spiritual experiences and vision. He always looked for inspired and inevitable words. Perfection is the aim of his literary art. He has also been a great experimenter in new metres.

His later poetry is a natural consummation of his long, inspired and enlightened career as a poet. They include, besides others, Savitri and a large number of lyrics. His prose writings which show an amazing plenty are not within the purview of the present study. His last poems mark an attempt to create a body of mantra in English. By this time Sri Aurobindo grows into a Kavi, the poet who is essentially a seer. At its highest his poetry is "the Voice of the Real" (Ghose, Sri Aurobindo Circle 1962: 44).

In The Future Poetry he hints at the possibility of the return of the Rishi in poetry. His later poetry brings fulfilment to this possibility and thereby revives "the archetypal tradition of poetry as Wisdom or Mystery" (Ghose in Indo-English Literature, Ed. Sharma 56).