Chapter Two
Savitri - An Overview
The Philosphic Concepts, the Legend and the Symbol

Sri Aurobindo's poetry is the outcome of the soul's sublime experience of transcendental bliss. Poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, comes from the 'stress of soul vision' and is 'the mantra of the Real'. His epic poem Savitri is a fine fusion of mysticism, spirituality, philosophy and poetry, in the beautiful tradition of Indian Vedic poetry. It represents the poetry of the future as conceptualized by Sri Aurobindo in The Future Poetry, which elaborates his poetic theory. Savitri 'voices the oneness of our being with Nature and God, travels the realms of the soul, widens our bounds and unveils the human godhead that individual man and his race can become; it does this by vision, by the power of the word, by the attraction of the beauty and delight of what it shows us.'

An ordinary person who has not touched even the peripheries of spiritual experience cannot fathom the depth and range of such divinely inspired poetry. In the context of presenting Sri Aurobindo's works to the students, the mother has appropriately remarked: "... you must understand that comments and explanations about Sri Aurobindo's writings cannot avoid being inadequate; the original text far surpasses anything you can say about it." While the validity of this statement is unquestionable, it is heartening to note that a sincere study of Savitri and repeated readings can result in a genuine appreciation which may even motivate the reader to undertake an exciting journey of discovery of the self and its immense possibilities. Even a student who lacks the knowledge of the spirit cannot but understand the fact that Savitri is a verbalization of a fully realized spiritual experience and not merely a physical vision.
Reading *Savitri* enables one to catch a glimpse of Sri Aurobindo as a poet who does not satisfy himself with mere imitation of the external world in poetic terms. One can clearly perceive his capacity to go beyond its physical confines and envision a greater reality. The reality thus expressed is both beautiful and highly spiritual.

Just as a fledgling that has just began fluttering its wings hesitates to fly into the boundless open blue skies, even the reader who has not ventured far into the explorations of the Self, is likely to be in awe of the grandeur of *Savitri*. Such a reader may find reassurance in Sri Aurobindo's reply to a disciple who was overawed by his 'Himalayan austerity and grandeur', and felt discouraged that 'the Overmind seems so distant'. In his reply he points out the futility of such an attitude and suggests that one should not take leave of common sense, which he defines as "simply looking at things as they are without inflation or deflation."³

Nolini Kanta Gupta has cautioned us that it is rather difficult to grasp intellectually the writings of Sri Aurobindo.⁴ It is accepted that a solely intellectual approach to the study of *Savitri* may be a deterrent at the very outset, but it is hoped that a common sense approach might prove useful initially. Hence an attempt is made to understand certain basic concepts of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy and the structural features of *Savitri*.

This chapter seeks to prepare the ground for a better understanding of Sri Aurobindo’s concept of evolution and man’s destiny by discussing the meaning of certain special terms and expressions. An attempt is also made to give a broad outline of *Savitri* with the intention of highlighting the major symbolic overtones that synchronize with the legend.
Evolution of Consciousness - Sri Aurobindo’s Concept:

Faith in the Future:

"The whole future of the earth as of religion, seems ... to depend on the awakening of our faith in the future" said Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This faith in the future may be interpreted as an active and fervent conviction that mankind as a whole possesses a future - a future consisting not merely of successive years, but of higher states to be achieved; not merely survival, but some form of higher life. This trend towards a state of higher being is as old and universal as the world itself.

Sri Aurobindo believes that man has not yet found his true self. 'He is yet to lift himself up to a spiritual level and wide horizon. He is still to discover the immortal life in a body subjected to death.' Man lives mostly in his surface mind, life and body, but there is an inner being within him with greater possibilities to which he has to awake. Sri Aurobindo emphasizes the need for the total transformation of man's life into the image of the true, the good and the beautiful, through a progressive self-unfolding, that is, man becoming *satya-siva-sundara*.

Sri Aurobindo rejects *mayavada* and declares the world to be as real as its divine essence. The aspiring soul has to first realize the silent, spaceless and timeless Self or *Brahman*. This is followed by a realization of the cosmic consciousness and the vision of the Divine as all beings and all that is. The next stage is an experience of an abiding realization and constant living in the Supreme Reality or *Parabrahman*. Finally, there comes the descent of the Supermind or eternal Truth Consciousness into the physical and not just the mental and the vital. What is remarkable about Sri Aurobindo is his firm
conviction in the possibility of further evolution of the human being from the present situation to a condition of supermanhood.

The evolution of consciousness is the central framework for understanding Sri Aurobindo's thought. Consciousness is inherent in all things, in seemingly inert matter as well as plant, animal, human and superhuman life. Consciousness liberates itself through an inner law that directs evolution. The purpose of man is to go beyond his present form of consciousness. Yoga is a means for cooperating with the cosmic evolutionary urge that is destined to take mankind ahead from the present mental stage to a higher, supra-mental stage of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo visualizes a progressive growth of the finite consciousness of man towards the eternal, and the infinite: his growth into spiritual consciousness by the development of his ordinary ignorant being into an illumined divine nature.

A Glimpse into the Past:

The Indian concept of evolution is said to be evident in the RigVeda, which mentions in the Purushasukta that Purusha involved himself in the world resulting in the creation of the world. In the Upanishads, the Absolute is said to be realized as matter, life, mind, Vijñana and Ananda. The Bhagavadgīta gives the concept of Purusha and Prakriti. Ishvara, the Divine, is Purusha who contains Prakriti and rules by the power of the Shakti within him. Shakti is Prakriti ensouled by Purusha and manifests the Divine in Time and Space thus forming the link between the eternal One and the manifested many.

The general arrangement of things in the evolutionary process is considered to be a gradual ascent from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, and from animal to man. It is believed that up to the level of the animal,
penultimate to the human stage, the process of evolution is spontaneous, without
the lower species having to put forth any special effort to evolve into the higher
level. The reason for this appears to be that Nature in its all-inclusiveness works
automatically in the case of the lower species. However, from man onwards a
conscious effort seems to be inseparable from natural evolution, though the
universal working of Nature cannot be said to have ceased its functions even
then. Nature’s work is not complete until the Absolute is realized in a state of
Universal Selfhood.

The determinism of the purpose of Nature cannot easily be defied by any
effort on the part of the individual, for individual effort may even work contrary
to the intentions of Nature. The pre-determinism of Nature restrains the freedom
of the individual. Man believes that his freedom of action is ultimate; that he can
conquer Nature itself. An investigation into the subtle potentials of human
nature and the underlying basis of human history is likely to reveal that human
freedom is the boast of the ego, and that all activity is ultimately universal
activity. Another significant factor is the interconnectedness of things in the
universe. One thing depends on another even for its existence, and there is no
room for the total freedom of any individual. The freedom of choice of the
individual and the consciousness of effort are to be intelligently harmonized with
the consciousness that the Universal Intention rules everything. The epic
illustration of Krishna being at the back of every action of Arjuna brings out the
unavoidable situation of the Absolute being there at all times as the directing
power behind every event in creation and every action appearing to proceed
from the individual nature of the various species of living beings.

The process of evolution does not end with man. The restlessness, the
finitude, the consciousness of limitation from every side, the incessant longings
for expansion of one’s domain in larger dimensions of space and endless life
time, even the compulsions of birth and death - all point to the fact that man is far from the expected perfection to be reached in Nature's scheme of evolution, and there is a long way higher up. Man has to evolve further with a conscious effort on his part guided by the Divine Will.

In his Essays on the Gita, Sri Aurobindo observes: "There is a supernature of the Divine which is the real source of cosmic existence and its fundamental creative force and effective energy, and of which the other lower and ignorant nature is only a derivation and a dark shadow." This lower nature may be overcome through spirituality alone. The unique contribution of the Gita is its focus on a comprehensive spirituality that embraces action and contemplation, man in society and man as an individual, man at work and man at worship.

Sri Aurobindo’s Teaching - The Beginnings:

Sri Aurobindo seeks to harmonize the Vedantic concept of a transcendent and all-inclusive Brahman with a theory of emergent evolution. In the words of Sri Aurobindo himself, his teaching "starts from that of the ancient sages of India, that behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all the things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that one Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life and body. It is possible by a certain psychological discipline to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us and all."  

Sri Aurobindo describes the present cosmic manifestation as the result of a double movement - Involution and Evolution.
Involution:

Involution is a process by which the universal Consciousness Force involves itself in the world; it veils itself by stages until it assumes the appearance of a dense cosmic Inconscience or lack of Consciousness.

"Involved and drowned in Matter's giant trance,
An infant heart of the deep-caved world-plan
In cradle of divine incosscience…"

Sri Aurobindo points out that

"In finite things the conscious Infinte dwells:
Involved it sleeps in Matter's helpless trance"

Involution precedes evolution. The Supreme and Eternal Being, in the process of Becoming, first descends into the deepest ignorance and inconscience and then ascends by stages through gradual evolution to find Himself back. This perpetual downward passage from the Being to the Becoming, the densification, and condensation of spirit into matter is a gradual process. The cosmos is formed during this process. In the Vedic terminology this process of involution and creation is called Purusha Yajna.

Planes of Consciousness:

Consciousness literally refers to the faculty of becoming aware of anything through identification, knowing one's own existence and one's surroundings. This power of awareness of self and things is also a dynamic and creative energy.
It is fundamental to the being. Sri Aurobindo attributes a greater significance and wider range to the term consciousness: "It is no longer synonymous with mentality, but indicates a self-aware force of existence of which mentality is a middle term; below mentality it sinks into vital and material movements which are for us subconscient, above, it rises into the supramental which is for us the superconscient. In all it is one and the same thing organizing itself differently. This is once more the Indian conception of chit which, as energy creates the world."9

Sri Aurobindo envisages a series of planes of consciousness. These correspond with the eight Lokas discussed in the Vedas and the Upanishads: Sat, Chit, Ananda, Vijnana, Manomaya, Chaitya, Pranamaya and Annamaya Lokas.10 The first four belong to the upper hemisphere or the Higher Nature and the latter four belong to the lower hemisphere or the lower nature. The Chaitya Loka or the psychic world does not form part of this graded world order. It supports the three lower planes from behind.11

Sat is the pure, undivided and immutable Existence. It is the essence of our Being in its highest, eternal and infinite form. Chit is the pure energy of the consciousness, free in its rest or action. It is not only consciousness but also consciousness-force or Chit-Shakti. It is supreme awareness and supreme force. It is both static and dynamic. Ananada is Delight, Bliss or spiritual ecstasy. It is not joy or pleasure but a self-existent rapture. It is the secret source and a support of all existence. Sri Aurobindo refers to the Vijnana Loka as the Supermind or the Supreme Truth-Consciousness Force. It is the Adya Shakti or the primordial force where multiplicity takes roots from and the myriad universe below is created. It is the secret wisdom. In the gradual process of devolution, the Supermind, with the power of the Sat-chit-ananda at its back formulates the lower worlds of mind, psyche, life and matter.12 The Manomaya Loka or the world of mind creates
finitudes. It is an instrument of analysis. It cannot synthesize by itself without the aid of the higher principles. It does not have concrete vision and takes refuge in abstractions. The Chaitya Loka, or the world of psyche, lies below the mind and above the vital or life. Its inherent characteristics are purity, light, peace and power to turn everything to the Divine. The Pranamaya Loka or the vital world is the energy aspect of the Sachchidananda in the lower nature. Without the vital there is no life force of creation or manifestation. It is a necessary instrument of the spirit for life. Annamaya Loka or the world of matter is the lowest and the grossest in the creation. It is perceptible through the senses and consists of the Panchabhutas of which Prithvi or the earth is densest. Sri Aurobindo calls the world of matter the 'boundless finite'. The vastness of this world is bewildering to the human mind; the subtle planes above the material world are beyond space and time and hence difficult for the ordinary human mind to grasp.

The part of human nature of which one is generally aware is the surface personality – the body, the vital and the mind. The body refers to the physical or the matter. The vital is the life nature made up desires, sensations, feelings, passions, instincts like anger, fear, greed, lust and so on. The mind refers to that part of nature, which is concerned with cognition, intelligence, memory, will, imagination and reason. Man is often so wrapped up in this surface personality that he does not look beyond the body, mind and senses. The fact is that one cannot sever mental and physical evolutions from spiritual evolution. As one's consciousness awakens, the body and mind also work in harmony with the Supreme Will for, in this 'brute half-conscious, time-bound body is housed the illimitable', 'our senses blindly seek for bliss' and 'the half-lit groping mind must recover a knowledge lost'.

Behind the superficial consciousness there is another deeper and more powerful consciousness that influences and governs us even as it is hidden.
Sri Aurobindo differentiates it into three parts: the subconscient, the subliminal and the superconscient.

The subconscient is concealed, unexpressed and retains obscure impressions of past experiences. Sri Aurobindo describes the subconscient mind as an 'ill-trained slow stammering interpreter' that functions 'in the subterranean reaches of the spirit; using unthinking monitors and scribes, it is the cause of what we think and feel.'

The subliminal may be referred to as an inner mind behind the surface mind, an inner vital behind the surface vital and a subtle physical consciousness behind the surface physical being. As man gets in touch with the subliminal plane, which operates just below the threshold of the surface consciousness, he becomes aware of his inherent powers and possibilities. In the course of the evolution of consciousness, man recognizes his dual nature - faltering, failing, weak and unstable on the surface, yet innately majestic, potent and invincible. As he reflects upon the higher Self and tries to find it, the lower nature gradually fades away.

"A vast subliminal is man’s measureless part.
The dim subconscient is his cavern base.
Abolished vainly in the walks of Time
Our past lives still in our unconscious selves
And by the weight of its hidden influences
Is shaped our future’s self-discovery."

(7.II.325-330)

The superconscient is a higher consciousness, which contains sources of the higher intuitions and inspirations. It also houses the Supermind and the planes of
Sachidananda. At this stage the spirit goes beyond all limitations of temporal existence. Savitri has numerous references to this higher consciousness hidden behind the other layers of consciousness.

"His greater consciousness withdrew behind;
Dim and eclipsed, his human outside strove
To feel again the old sublimities,
Bring the high saving touch, the ethereal flame,
Call back to its dire need the divine force."

(1.III.476-480)

Sri Aurobindo also refers to the "Images in a supernal consciousness embodying the Unborn who never dies." The Supermind is the full Truth-Consciousness.

"In the realms of the immortal Supermind
Truth ... hides ... her head in mystery."

(10.IV.748-749)

The Supermind has the power of Self-realization that leads to Sachidananda—experience of the unity of the Divine Existence (Sat), the power of the Divine Consciousness (Chit) and the bliss of the Divine Delight (Ananda).

"Thought's wings climbed up towards heaven's vast repose.
Lost in deep blues of immortality.
A changed earth-nature felt the breath of peace.
Air seemed an ocean of felicity ... 
A vast quiescence swallowing up all sound
Into a voicelessness of utter bliss;
Even matter brought a closed spiritual touch,
All thrilled with the immanence of one divine.”

(11.1.55-63)

Evolution:

Evolution is a process by which the Consciousness Force emerges gradually from the apparent cosmic Inconscience and manifests its hidden power. It is the reverse process of Involution. Sri Aurobindo defines evolution as “a movement to manifest whatever is unmanifest, a movement for the complete expression of the spirit concealed behind it.” Evolution takes place at the levels of the macrocosm, as well as the individual or the microcosm. The individual is the medium through which the spirit discloses its being. It may therefore be concluded that individual evolution and cosmic evolution are inter-related.

Man’s Place in Evolution:

The One Being or the universal Consciousness-Force is involved here in matter. It liberates itself through evolution. The first step in this evolution is life: living physical beings - plants and animals. Mind is the next step. Sri Aurobindo points out that until the advent of a developed thinking Mind in Matter, evolution had been effected by Nature without a conscious will, in the plant and animal life. In Man a change has been made - in his mind there is the will to develop, to grow. According to Sri Aurobindo, the aspiration, the urge, the persistent endeavour in Man may be taken as “a sure sign of Nature’s will for a higher way to fulfilment, the emergence of a greater status.”
The Ascent of Consciousness:

The next step in the evolution of man is the ascent of consciousness until the Supermind emerges. Between the thinking mind and the Supermind, Sri Aurobindo identifies intervening planes. These steps of ascent are the Higher Mind, the Illumined Mind, the Intuitive Mind and the Overmind.

The Higher Mind is characterized by clarity of the Spirit, the power of the Idea of True Reality and the Will-Force. The Higher Mind is ‘awake to his hidden possibility.’

The Illumined Mind, which works primarily by vision and not by thought, is the consciousness of a seer. In this stage –

“... one is one's own infinity.
His centre was no more in earthly mind;
... Into a vision that surpasses forms,
Into a living that surpasses life,
He neared the still consciousness sustaining all.”

(1.111.371-377)

The Intuitive Mind has “a power of revelatory truth-seeing, a power of inspiration or truth-hearing, a power of truth-touch or immediate seizing of significance and a power of true and automatic discrimination.” Savitri describes the Intuitive Mind as a state when –

“A dense veil was rent, a mighty whisper heard;
Repeated in the privacy of his soul,
... And flame-wrapped outbursts of the immortal word
And flashes of an occult revealing Light
Approached him from the unreachable Secrecy.
An inspired Knowledge sat enthroned within
Whose seconds illumined more than reason’s years:
...And like a sky-flare showing all the ground
A swift intuitive discernment shone.
One glance could separate the true and false,
Or raise its rapid torch-fire in the dark.”

(1.III.554-570)

The Overmind is the highest of the intervening stages where there is a discovery of the true individual, who is one with the supreme Self. The Overmind may be looked upon as a layer that separates the Higher Hemisphere consisting of the Supermind and Sachchidananda and the lower hemisphere of Mind, Life and Matter.

“He scanned the secrets of the Overmind,
He bore the rapture of the Oversoul.
A borderer of the empire of the Sun,
Attuned to the supernal harmonies,
He linked creation to the Eternal’s sphere.
His finite parts approached their absolutes,
His action framed the movements of the Gods,
His will took up the reins of cosmic Force.”

(2.XV.180-187)

A last transition from Overmind to Supermind, and a descent of Supermind will complete the evolutionary process. This final step is beyond the grasp of mental perception, knowledge and imagination.
The Supramental Being and the Divine Life:

According to Sri Aurobindo the Supramental Being or the Gnostic Being "sees everything from the standpoint of oneness and regards all things, even the greatest multiplicity and diversity ... in the light of that oneness." In *Savitri* he proclaims:

"A greater Gnosis shall regard the world
Crossing out of some far omniscience
On lustrous seas from the still rapt Alone
To illumine the deep heart of self and things.
A timeless knowledge it shall bring to Mind,
Its aim to life, to Ignorance its close."

(2.X.729-734)

*The Life Divine* describes the gnostic being as the consummation of the spiritual man who would be governed by the power of a vast universal spirituality. In him will be a new relation of the Spirit with Mind, Life and Matter, leading to the acceptance of material Nature as an instrument of spiritual manifestation. The body will then be "turned by the power of the spiritual consciousness into a true and fit and perfectly responsive instrument of the Spirit." The gnostic life will exist and act for the Divine, resulting in an increased presence of the Divine Light, Power, Love, Joy and Beauty in the world. This kind of life may be referred to as a divine life.

It is important to note that at every step of the higher evolution, integration of the higher and lower principles takes place. This integration is a highly complex process. It needs not only the ascent of the soul to the higher level of consciousness but also a descent of the higher consciousness to the lower
nature to effect a transformation. Thus the lower nature is widened and transformed when the evolution to the higher levels of consciousness takes place.²¹

The Method:

Sri Aurobindo cautions that the evolution of consciousness and the supramental descent is not likely to happen by some sudden, quick or miraculous transformation. This is possible through the practice of Yoga. Yoga may be defined as the union of the Soul with the Divine and the discipline by which one seeks, deliberately and consciously, to realise this union. Sri Aurobindo believes that all life is yoga. All activities and aspects of life are included in the integral vision of his yoga.

In the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo there is "a combination of the principles of the old systems - the way of knowledge through the mind's discernment between Reality and appearance; the heart's way of devotion, love and surrender; and the way of work turning the will away from motives of self-interest to the Truth and the service of a greater Reality than the ego."²² His yoga aims at rejecting and removing ignorance, falsehood, darkness, egoism and imperfections and achieving knowledge, light and perfection of the Divine Self.

Calmness, Peace and Equality in the vital, physical and the mental consciousness form the foundation of yogic consciousness. It also demands a total faith, aspiration and surrender. All life, all thought, all faculties, all experiences work only towards removing the obstacles when one follows the Spirit, because the Infinite has a way of finding the one who seeks it. As Sri Aurobindo says, "All teaching is a revealing, all becoming is an unfolding.
Self-attainment is the secret; self-knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process.  

This hope and vision of a divine life on the earth is beautifully conveyed in Savitri:

"Earth shall be made a home of Heaven's light,
A seer heaven-born shall lodge in human breasts;
The superconscient beam shall touch men's eyes
And the truth-conscious world come down to earth
Invading Matter with the Spirit's ray
...This mortal life shall house Eternity's bliss,
The body's self taste immortality."

(6.II.507-515)

Savitri - A Revelation:

Sri Aurobindo's Savitri may be described as a revelation - it reveals the history of man, of nature, of creation, of evolution, its purpose and destiny. It is a record of yogic experience and contains the supreme Knowledge of the Spirit. It follows the ascent of the Spirit through the different planes of consciousness.

The canvas of Savitri takes into its purview worlds of being that are connected with humanity but which are not perceived by it because of its limitations of ignorance. In Savitri human evolution transcends the mind, scales new heights and reaches its destiny of the life divine by a transformation of the earth-nature. Savitri, the Divine Grace Incarnate, battles against the force of ignorance represented by Death. She emerges victorious giving humanity the hope of a 'greater dawn'. Savitri discusses the problem and the cause of man's
imperfection, suffering and evil; it raises the question of eliminating the Inconscient; it transcends the material planes of consciousness; it breaks away from the bounds of logic and reason that accept death as the ultimate certainty; it presents a grand vision of a new world where -

"... knowledge shall pour down in radiant streams ... 
The frontiers of the Ignorance shall recede,
More and more souls shall enter into light,
A divine force shall flow through tissue and cell
And take charge of breath and speech and act
And all the thoughts shall be a glow of suns
And every feeling a celestial thrill.
Often a lustrous inner dawn shall come
Lighting the chambers of the slumbering mind;
A sudden bliss shall run through every limb
And Nature with a mightier Presence fill
Thus shall the earth open to divinity."

(11.1.1402-1424)

The Legend and the Symbol:

Sri Aurobindo chose the seemingly simple legend of Savitri and Satyavan and charged it with great significance. The strands of legend and symbol are beautifully interwoven. The legend provides the story element and imparts a unity of structure. The symbolism gives the epic poem the depth and intensity characteristic of spiritual poetry. A 'sacred legend and immortal myth' is transformed into a living symbol.
The Legend:

The story of Savitri and Satyavan occurs in the Aranyakarna of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by Rishi Markandeya to Yudhishthira.

Aswapati, king of Madra, is childless. After practising severe austerities and performing sacrifices, yajnas and tapasya for eighteen years, he succeeds in propitiating Goddess Savitri who appears before him and grants him a boon because of which he has a daughter. Savitri, thus born, is a gift from the Divine Mother, a portion of Herself, incarnate in human form. When Savitri grows up she blossoms into a radiant maiden of golden glow making it impossible for suitors to seek her hand. Aswapati suggests that she find her own life’s companion. Savitri goes all over the country visiting several places. Not finding anyone worth her choice, she enters a forest. There she comes across Satyavan, a prince in exile. He is the son of Dyumatsena, who had turned blind, a king dispossessed of his kingdom and driven out into the forests. Satyavan lives in a hermitage in the forest with his aged parents and takes care of them. He is brave, intelligent, kind and generous.

Savitri sees in Satyavan her future companion, and returning from the forest, tells her father of her choice. Savitri’s parents are satisfied with her choice but sage Narada who happens to be there at that time, foretells the impending doom that Satyavan would die one year after his marriage to Savitri. Inspite of the opposition to her selection in view of this revelation, Savitri sticks to her decision insisting that one chooses a husband only once. She gets married to Satyavan and shares his simple and hard life. Even though she is very happy she does not for a moment forget Narad’s prophecy. She prepares herself for the great crisis. She observes complete fast for the last three days.
On the fateful morning Savitri accompanies Satyavan when he goes to the forest to fetch wood for the sacrificial fire. After cutting some wood, Satyavan complains of a severe pain in his head, and resting his head in Savitri's lap, falls asleep. That was the sleep of death. Savitri sees Yama, the Lord of Death who arrives there to carry Satyavan's soul. Armed with the secret power of her penance she follows Yama and engages him in an absorbing conversation pleading for her husband's life. She discusses several points of Dharma with him. Yama, pleased with her love and devotion, her skill and her capacities, grants her three boons. The first two boons were subject to the condition that she should not ask for her husband's life. She requests him to restore sight to her father-in-law Dyumatsena and for the second boon asks him to bless her father Aswapati with male offspring. The third boon was unconditional. She asks Yama for the restoration of her husband's life. Yama then releases Satyavan's life, blesses her and dissapears in a flame. Satyavan comes to life. As it gets dark they find it difficult to trace their way back to the hermitage. When they finally reach there, they see that Dyumatsena's eyesight is restored. Soon his kingdom is restored as well. Yama's second boon is also fulfilled and in due course of time Aswapati becomes the father of a hundred sons.

Savitri thus triumphs over Yama and lives happily with Satyavan, who rules over his father's kingdom for a long time. This is a simple legend from ancient Indian literature, which illustrates how the power of love and devotion can conquer death itself.

The theme of love conquering death has fascinated Sri Aurobindo from the early stages of his poetic career. He poetised it in two of his earlier narrative poems *Urvusie* and *Love and Death*. In these poems love is presented as an indomitable force that gains a victory over death in some way. In *Savitri* this theme finds an extended and complete treatment. K.R. Srinivasa lyengar
observes: "Both the narratives - \textit{Urvasie} and \textit{Love and Death} - are quarried from the ranges of deathless Romance. Yet Sri Aurobindo seems to imply that the lovers have somehow failed, and have, after all, preferred the lesser realization of personal felicity to the greater realization of world redemption and total transformation of our earth-nature. It is \textit{Savitri} alone that fuses the lesser and the greater realizations into an integral and total transformation of limited human life into the fullness and splendour of the Life Divine."\textsuperscript{24}

The Symbol:

In \textit{Savitri} events and characters are dealt with as conscious agents in the working out of the problem of man's destiny. Sri Aurobindo effectively uses a host of symbols to convey the power of mystical experience and spiritual truth. Various characters and events are used symbolically. Sri Aurobindo's symbolic treatment of the legend is in accordance with his belief that "the forms of legend and symbol and myth must open to other and deeper meanings ... and come in changed and vital again into poetry to interpret the realities behind the veil."\textsuperscript{25} Sri Aurobindo has universalized the issue of human destiny as involved in the personal experience of Savitri and Satyavan.

In \textit{Savitri} there is little story and few incidents. Retrospective narration is also limited only to some sections of the epic. The main action of the legend comprises but a single day; all time and eternity are involved in the symbol. There is thus double time and double action. The opening canto projects the 'symbol dawn' thereby anticipating the 'greater dawn' referred to in the last line of the epic. Dawn forms a link between Night and Day. Savitri, the 'incarnation of the Divine Mother' is the vanquisher of Night and redeemer of Day. Sri Aurobindo's remarks on \textit{Savitri} provide valuable insights: "The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the \textit{Mahabharata} as a story of conjugal love conquering
death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. 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; Aswaphati, 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.”

Savitri is not a simple allegory. The characters are not personified qualities; they are emanations of living and conscious forces. Savitri is symbolic of beauty, chastity, love and devotion. Satyavan is truth. When love and truth come together, great things can be accomplished. On another plane, Savitri embodies divine grace. She is the human manifestation of the Mother of Eternal Light. She descends on the earth to change human destiny. She symbolizes the light of wisdom. Yama, the legendary god of Death, is the force of Cosmic Ignorance, the Inconscient represented by its extreme form of death. The Truth that is descended into the Inconscient, is veiled by Ignorance, and is in the grasp of Death, can be reached and made to manifest in Life only through the power of the Supreme Light. The union of Savitri and Satyavan is thus the union of Light and Truth. The revival of Satyavan’s life heralds the dawn of a new age.

In the legend Savitri and Satyavan return to the earth after the conquest of Death. In Sri Aurobindo’s symbol both Savitri and Satyavan rise from the kingdom of Death to the region of Eternal Day where the Sun of Truth never sets, where ignorance is unknown and Death has no place. They stay awhile in this realm of Truth where they experience ‘the harmonic order of self’s
vastitudes', where 'grief can never come', where 'a vast quiescence swallows up all sound into a voicelessness of utter bliss'. Then they look towards the earth which is the 'heroic spirit's battlefield' and choose to return to it in order to accomplish their divine work - the creation of a new humanity:

"To raise the world to God in deathless Light,
To bring God down to the world on earth we came,
To change the earthly life to life divine ...
I sacrifice not earth to happier worlds."

(11.1.761-767)

An Outline of *Savitri*:

Night and dawn:

*Savitri* opens with a description of Night, which is 'opaque, impenetrable' symbolising the Inconscient.

"It was the hour before the Gods awake
A fathomless zero occupied the world." 27

It is heartening to know that this darkness is not unending, for the Night lays "stretched immobile upon Silence's marge / across the path of the divine event." 28 Something then stirred in the vast nothingness:

"A nameless movement, an unthought Idea ...
Teased the Inconscient to wake Ignorance." 29
This faint stirring is like ‘a child’s finger laid on the cheek of the Mother of the universe, reminding her of the endless need of things.’ Then her “message crept through the reluctant hush, calling the adventure of consciousness and joy.”

Then came the Dawn, ‘the divine event’ that dispels ‘Night’s forlorn indifference’. This dawn is not the ordinary morning rise of the sun. It is a ‘symbol dawn’ – the first awakening of man to his divine potentiality; it is the first promise of the spiritual fulfilment in man:

“Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours.”

(1.1.106-107)

The magnificent vision of Dawn became ‘a vibrant link between earth and heaven’. However Dawn did not stay for long –

“Here where our half-lit ignorance skirts the gulfs ...
Here where one knows not even the step in front
And Truth has her throne on the shadowy back of doubt.”

(1.1..140-143)

The goddess of dawn withdrew, ‘fading from the mortal’s range’. The ‘rarity and wonder’ of Dawn’s glorious and powerful presence is ‘too perfect to be held by death-bound hearts.’ Her withdrawal suggests that humanity is faced with the task of preparing to receive the Divine Grace. The brief appearance of Dawn holds the promise of ultimate fulfilment:
"A sacred yearning lingered in its trace,...
The prescience of a marvellous birth to come."

(1.1.152,155)

Humanity now has the difficult task of preparing itself to receive the Light, to become one with the supernal beauty and brilliance of the Divine. This is to be achieved in time, when human spiritual aspiration meets Divine Grace.

Savitri - Divine Grace Incarnate:

After withdrawal of Dawn, there is only the 'common light of earthly day and once more Life pursues the cycles of her blinded quest'. Savitri too wakes up along with the 'thousand peoples of the soil and tree' who pursue their 'unvarying daily acts'. However she does not share with them the 'ephemeral joy' of common pursuits, for 'even her humanity was half divine.' Savitri is Divine Grace descended on the earth, to give humanity the hope that the great transformation of earth nature into the life divine can indeed be accomplished.

"She had brought with her into the human form
The calm delight that weds one soul to all,
The key to the flaming door of ecstasy."

(1.1.208-210)

Savitri prepares herself for the struggle ahead for she knows that 'this was the day when Satyavan must die.'

The Book of Beginnings thus plunges straight into the crisis of the story - the imminent death of Satyavan. It also brings out the nature of the crisis, its cosmic significance and thereby raises the character of Savitri to that of a saviour
of man. The issue is not Satyavan's life but the destiny of man. Savitri is introduced in glowing terms:

"Her spirit opened to the Spirit in all,
Her nature felt all Nature as its own . . .
Aloof, she carried in herself the world."

(1.1.275-278)

As 'her soul arose confronting Time and Fate and her mind moved in a many-imaged past', in her mind's eye she saw the 'hours and people' from her past. She saw 'her life's broad highways, its sweet bypaths, the bright country of her childhood, the blue mountains of her soaring youth and the paradise groves of love'. She had grown up in the heart of Nature imbibing its beauty, grandeur and vastness. Savitri is love, beauty and grace in human form:

"A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity . . .
Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
Her looks, her smile awoke celestial sense
Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives."

(1.11.148-154)

The silence and seclusion of her surroundings had shown her 'the bare reality of herself'. Her life was simple and she was not burdened with the 'mass of outward needs'. She had always had 'room for thought and God'. It was here that Love found her. In the purity of her heart, and the sincerity of her mind and the sublimity of her spirit, the god of love met a 'vastness like his own'. So great
were her magnanimity and compassion that 'the whole world could take refuge in her single heart.'

Savitri's childhood, youth and twelve months of married life passed in joy. However 'joy cannot endure till the end for there is darkness in material things'. Mortality cast its shadow. She was alone as she faced the crisis of Satyavan's imminent death. She was the only one aware among the many 'unknowing happy hearts'. She remained calm and courageous in the face of the crisis. She had to endure sorrow and suffering like other human beings. In spite of her divine element, she had to accept the limitations of human nature during her earthly existence. She, however, recognized that the inner self, the soul of all, comes from the same source, the Divine.

Earth, Love, and Doom:

Savitri was conscious of the essential oneness of all and bore in herself the sorrow and suffering of the world. Her individual suffering became the sword with which she was determined to fight Death. When her consciousness was fully stirred, she became aware of her own personal anguish as being symbolic of the universal burden of pain and grief. She confronted the central problem of man: 'Earth, Love and Doom'. Earth represents Matter, which masks the Infinite. Love is the immortal element in mortals and represents in its essence the Divine Grace that saves. Doom is the apparent determinism of Nature trying to perpetuate the rule of Ignorance in mankind. Its support systems are self-love and desires, which cause pain and suffering. Awareness poses several questions about the aim of earthly existence, the power of love, whether human destiny is pre-determined, whether it can be altered by human effort.
“In the shadow of her flaming heart, ... 
All the fierce question of man's hours relived.
The sacrifice of suffering and desire
Earth offers to the immortal Ecstasy
Began again beneath the eternal Hand.”

(1.1.322-335)

Savitri’s heart, which burned with intense grief, was concerned with the problem of whether Nature’s determinism can be altered and man, like Satyavan, saved from their appointed doom. Every human heart nurtures an intense urge to break free from the dark confines of Matter and evolve to higher and higher planes till it becomes one with the Divine. However this drive to evolve is manifested only in some heroic souls like Savitri. Only a few enlightened persons who embody Earth’s aspiration set out on the path of spiritual evolution, bravely prepared to offer the sacrifice of pain and grief.

Savitri faced the future with a deep quietude. Her spirit braced itself to confront Time and Fate and break the chain of Nature’s determinism. She had to gather all her spiritual strength to be equal to the task. She was 'kin to the striving human heart', for her mortal life was destined to wrestle with the dark shadow of Death and free man who seems to be just a pawn 'in the chess-play of the earth-soul with Doom'.

“Whether to bear with Ignorance and death
Or hew the ways of Immortality
To win or lose the godlike game for man,
Was her soul's issue thrown with destiny's dice.”

(1.11.233-236)
The Issue of Man’s Destiny:

Savitri, conscious of her own divine origin, was ready to defy the laws of Ignorance and Death and assert the sovereign right of her spirit. She refused to accept the common lot. She was not prepared to compromise with earthly laws, ‘or quench with black despair the God-given light’. She was conscious of not only the presence of the divine in herself, but also the urge of the evolutionary force taking life upward from earth-existence to the Supreme. She was determined to ‘oppose the cosmic will with her single will’.

This possibility of the individual challenging the cosmic rule and trying ‘to stay the wheels of Doom’ may seem farfetched to an ordinary reader. However, one is swept along in the force of the poet’s faith that there comes a moment when man becomes aware of a conscious power, when ‘his soul steps back and sees the Light supreme’. Then man is no longer just ‘a machine amid machines’ but draws courage and strength from the ‘Godhead who stands behind him’. The divine element in Savitri also came to the fore in those moments of crisis. The great World-Mother arose in her and she was transformed into a ‘flaming warrior’ who was

“Empowered to force the door denied and closed
Smote from Death’s visage its dumb absolute
And burst the bounds of consciousness and Time.”

(1.II.365-367)

The first two cantos thus project Savitri’s radiant personality and establish her as one endowed with all that is needed for the victory of the soul over Doom. Her love is the Love of the Universal Mother, her force is the Force of the Divine and her will is unwavering and resolute. Here is a spirit aware of its celestial
source that 'descended into earth's imperfect mould'. She represents the 'consanguinity of earth and heaven'.

To show how Savitri came to be constituted as a half divine being, the poet turns to the circumstances of her birth and explains how 'a world's desire compelled her mortal birth'. This opens the context to introduce the character of Savitri's father, Aswapati, whose great aspiration for spiritual attainment forms a natural background for the birth of Savitri.

**Aswapati's Yoga, the Vision and the Boon:**

The last three cantos of Book One as well as Books Two and Three describe the yoga of King Aswapati and its success, with the Divine Mother bestowing her grace. In Sri Aurobindo's symbol Aswapati is not just a childless king desiring offspring. To paraphrase A.B. Purani's words, Sri Aurobindo symbolizes the aspiring human soul in his search for the truth of himself, of the world and of God. Aswapati starts on the ordinary human level and soars higher and higher till his soul is released from its bonds and is in a condition to receive the 'Secret Knowledge'. This Secret Knowledge is a series of flashes, a wide-reaching, all-transfiguring illumination. As the Knowledge grows into him the human mould breaks; his consciousness rises to higher planes of being; he enters the realm of the spirit. He carries to the Divine Mother the intense aspiration of the earth and prays to her to come down. His prayer is granted:

"A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour,
A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;
Nature shall overleap her mortal step;
Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will."

(3.1V.449-452)
The Terrestrial Drama:

The fulfilment of the Divine Mother’s boon to Aswapati begins in the Book of Birth and Quest. Savitri’s birth and childhood are described. There are also descriptions of the beautiful, ideal, harmonious atmosphere of Aswapati’s kingdom, Madra, where Savitri grows up. Those who knew Savitri adored her ‘with a turbid human love and clung to her for heart’s nourishment and support’. They were ‘drawn by her charm’, admired the greatness they could sense in her and ‘answered to her lead’, but were taken aback by her radiant majesty. Some even ‘pursued her with life’s blind desires and yearned to draw her down to their own earth but none could stand up her equal and her mate’.

Aswapati ‘saw through the familiar cherished limbs, the great and unknown spirit born his child.’ He exhorts her to ‘venture through the deep world’ to find her mate who will be the ‘lyricist of her soul’s most intimate chords’. She is told that the strength of her soul will be her support and that she needs no other guide in her venture. Book Four ends with a narration of Savitri’s quest for her mate. Her search is long and tedious but she continues.

The Book of Love deals with the meeting of Savitri and Satyavan. Savitri’s wanderings lead her to the hermitage where Satyavan is in attendance on his aged parents, the blind king Dyumatsena and his queen, who were deprived of their throne. There she meets the ‘one for whom her heart had come so far’. Savitri and Satyavan recognize the hand of fate in their sudden meeting:

"The lovers met upon their different paths, ...
Together drawn from fate-led journeyings ...
The mist was torn that lay between two lives;
Her heart unveiled and his to find her turned; ..."
A moment passed that was eternity's ray.
An hour began, the matrix of new Time.”

(5.11.251-265)

The Book of Fate deals with the sequel to their love. Returning to her father Savitri reports her joy. When Savitri speaks about Satyavan, sage Narada predicts Satyavan's death after one year. Savitri remains undaunted. She declares:

“Once my heart chose and chooses not again ...
Death's grip can break our bodies, not our souls;
I am stronger than death and greater than my fate,
My love shall outlast the world …”

(6.1.611-627)

Her mother's worldly wisdom fails to affect Savitri's decision. She is ready to accept the joy of love even if it is only for a year. Dimly she sees her real self and knows that this threatening shadow can be met and chased away:

“If for a year, that year is all my life.
And yet I know this not all my fate ...
For I know now why my spirit came on earth
And who I am and who he is I love.”

(6.1.748-752)

Narada too sees wondrous possibilities being realized as the result of Savitri's will power. So he assures Aswapati and the queen that they must hope and believe, for Savitri is cast for a unique cosmic role of struggle and redemption. He exhorts them not to interfere with the working of destiny:
"Think not to intercede with the hidden Will,
Intrude not twixt her spirit and its force
But leave her to her mighty self and Fate."

(6.11.895-897)

Book Six also contains a discussion on human suffering. Savitri's mother poses questions about the origin of pain and suffering in mankind and its reasons. Narada's answer begins on a note of hope:

"Was then the sun a dream because there is night?
Hidden in the mortal's heart the Eternal lives: ...
A Light shines there nor pain nor grief can cross."

(6.11.202-205)

The answer shows the place of pain in the process of man's evolution. Pain is looked upon from an interesting perspective - as the result of one's choice: "Thou art thyself the author of thy pain.”35 A.B. Purani explains that pain is indirectly a question put by the inner self of a person about why he is unhappy and not better than what he is. Savitri gives the answer that pain exists because man is living only in his mind, in his vital being and in his physical being, but when he begins to live in his inner spirit, he would not require the goad of pain to make him feel delight.36

The Preparation, the Struggle, the Triumph, the Transformation:

The Book of Yoga begins with a description of the wedded bliss of Savitri and Satyavan, marred by Savitri's knowledge of Satyavan's impending death. Savitri is determined to know herself fully, realize her strength and prepare herself for the coming trial.
The Book of Yoga is significant for its detailed description of the process of yoga, the various stages the spirit travels through and transcends. Savitri looks inward, discards the veils of blinding appearance, rejects the mere reflections that claim to be the self, passes by the Mother of Sorrows, The Mother of Might and The Mother of Light, turns away from emphatic denials and arrogant affirmations, and moves on:

"... all experience a long march towards Light.
Out of the Inconscient I build consciousness,
And lead through death to reach immortal Life."

(7.1V.450-452)

While Aswapati represents human aspiration, Savitri is the Divine Response. She represents the transformed soul who is capable of effecting a transformation of the earth-nature.

The Book of Death gives an account of the death of Satyavan on the fateful day. As Satyavan walks beside Savitri while going to the forest, she keeps herself calm and composed inspite of the intense anguish within her. On his death, she feels the presence of Death near her: "she knew that visible Death was standing there."^37

The Book of Eternal Night and the Book of the Double Twilight give a detailed account of the struggle between Savitri and Yama. Savitri's ordeal takes her through the symbol world of Eternal Night with its oppressive load of evil, pain and death, and through the double Twilight of the earthly real and the symbol world. Savitri's debate with Death is one of the most interesting passages in the epic poem. Every argument addressed, every inducement offered to Savitri to persuade her to give up her demand for the restoration of Satyavan's
life, is met with a firm rebuttal or rejection. Wondering about the real identity of Savitri who dares to stand up to the mighty Death, he questions her:

"Who then art thou hiding in human guise? ...
Reveal thy power, lay bare thy Spirit's force,
Then will I give back to thee Satyavan."
(10.IV.817, 830-831)

It was a moment of great change as Savitri stood before Yama transformed into a figure of Infinity.

"Eternity looked into the eyes of Death
And Darkness saw God's living Reality."
(10.IV.889-890)

Then was heard a voice that seemed to come out of the depths of infinity addressing Death:

"Thou art my shadow and my instrument
I have given thee thy awful shape of dread
And thy sharp sword of terror and grief and pain
To force the soul of man to struggle for light ...
Thou art his spur to greatness in his works,
The whip to his yearning for eternal bliss,
His poignant need of immortality.
Live, Death, awhile, be still my instrument ...
But now, O timeless Mightiness, stand aside
And leave the path of my incarnate Force."
(10.IV.905-919)
Death then flees leaving Savitri and Satyavan alone. For Savitri herself the trial is not over yet. She has to face the temptations in the symbol realm of Everlasting Day. Satyavan is no doubt won back but there is the predicament of why return to the earth, instead of enjoying paradise or opting for personal salvation. However, Savitri is not deflected from her purpose of transforming the earth-nature. Earth alone is to be the scene of her strivings, the field of her achievements. Savitri accepts neither 'solitary bliss' in some remote heaven nor 'an immense extinction in Eternity'. She is determined to return to the earth with Satyavan to build there the bliss of heaven. Then the transfiguring Word of release and benediction come to her at last:

"Descend to life with him thy heart desires.
O Satyavan, O luminous Savitri,
I sent you forth of old beneath the stars,
A dual power of God in an ignorant world,
In a hedged creation shut from limitless self,
Bringing down God to the insentient globe,
Lifting earth-beings to immortality."

(11.1.1124-1130)

The Book of Everlasting Day thus visualizes the process of transformation when 'the Immortal fire is kindled in earthly hearts'. The Epilogue gives an account of the return of Savitri and Satyavan to the earth. Satyavan's earthly body comes back to life and a deep feeling of peace and fulfilment descends upon him. Death has been defeated. The fateful day ends. Savitri says:

"Let us go back, for eve is in the skies
Now grief is dead and serene bliss remains ...
Let us give joy to all, for joy is ours ...
To lead man's soul towards truth and God we are born ...  
To shape it closer to an image of God, 
A little nearer to the idea divine.”

(12. Epilogue. 195-211)

Thus ends Savitri, the epic of the soul, awakening the hope of a greater future for mankind.

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