

## AUROBINDONIAN CONNOTATIONS IN IYENGAR'S SITAYANA

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### ABSTRACT

*The influence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on the mind of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1908-1999), a widely admired poet, critic and an erudite scholar who straddled the world of English and Indian literature with perceptible self-assurance, has been powerful and pervasive. It covers not only his life and philosophy in general, but also his epic retellings and his critical thinking in relation to literature. Iyengar's recourse to the Upanishads and the integral yoga of Aurobindo is significant and indicates the author's consistent regard for weighting the Ramayana muthos with the philosophic wisdom of the ancients, enriching Sitayana with the Upanishadic wisdom. On his own admission, Aurobindo has been a major influence on his life and writing. My pronounced undergraduate admiration for Lytton Strachey as a critic was later qualified by my acquaintance with the critical works of Virginia Woolf, Middleton Murray, Lascelles Abercrombie, Herbert Read, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, Allen Tate and Yvor Winters. During the last twenty years, however, the major influence on my life and critical writings has been Sri Aurobindo....(1962).*

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### Introduction

Iyengar who had deeply imbibed the philosophy of Integral Yoga and who had extensively perused Aurobindo's works, be it poetry, yoga, philosophy, theory or criticism, would naturally give an echo of all of these in his poetic outputs. The epic *Sitayana* is replete with Aurobindo's philosophy of integral yoga, evolution of consciousness and life-divine. It is also rich with Vedic and Upanishadic connotations. He, like his master, weaves the different strands of yoga, evolution, consciousness, realization and a complete transformation behind the popular story of the epic, as Aurobindo does in *Savitri*. *Sitayana* seems to bear spiritual analogy to Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. Aurobindo, we know, calls *Savitri*, 'Legend as well as a symbol'. *Savitri* is not mere physical entity but a spark of the Magna Mater. *Sita* likewise is aptly described by the poet not merely as a woman, not merely as the beloved but as the all-pervasive, all-inclusive Mother.

*It was her self-ordained role as transforming  
Spirit—as the great Earth-born  
symbol of life, love, strength of sufferance-  
to initiate the new times. (4:327)*

It becomes necessary, therefore, to have a glimpse of the philosophy propounded in epic *Savitri* by Sri Aurobindo, and beautifully echoed by Iyengar in *Sitayana*. The Sanskrit word yoga means union. All the systems of spiritual discipline may be considered as varied systems of yoga. All of them aim at the attainment of union with the One Reality that underlies the beings and objects of the world and gives them their significance. It has become, as Sri Aurobindo wrote in *Arya*, the 'generic name' in India for the processes and the result of processes by which we transcend or shed off our present mode of consciousness which is not that of the ordinary animal and intellectual man. No longer could Aurobindo look, unlike most of the seers, on the world as the creation of an illusory *maya*. He saw it, instead, as the self-manifestation of the *Shakti* or creative energy of the Supreme. He wrote that it "starts from the

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method of Vedanta to arrive at the aim of the Tantra" (*Synthesis* 586). Drawing on the essence of all paths but bound down by none of their forms, it had as its central principle, 'a self-surrender, a giving up of the human being into the being, consciousness, power, delight of the Divine'. The physical universe may be seen as a general settled poise or world of relations between the soul and nature. There were, wrote Sri Aurobindo, other poises or worlds, 'which were practically, different harmonies from the harmony of the physical universe; they occupy as the word plane suggests, a different level in the scale of being' (*Synthesis* 429). He distinguished seven principal planes, the first three being those we are familiar with: matter, life and mind.

According to physical science, these are simply different forms of activity of physical substance. The Indian spiritual tradition, that Sri Aurobindo accepted, regards them as separate worlds, together making up the *aparardha* or lower hemisphere. The higher hemisphere consists of pure existence, pure consciousness and pure bliss, which together comprise the nature of the absolute Reality. According to Sri Aurobindo, between the upper and lower hemispheres there was a link plane, which he called *supermind*. It was a different power altogether, as different from mind as mind is from life and life is from matter. Because he visualized the plane of *Supermind* as lying above mind, life and matter, Sri Aurobindo spoke of a movement of consciousness in its direction as an 'ascent' and referred to the inflow of energies from it as a 'descent'.

The spiral of consciousness was a climb  
from the darkest inconscience,  
past the plateaus and hillsides of ascent  
to super conscient summits. (4:151)

It has been affirmed that, in fact, life, mind and *supermind* are present in the atom, are at work there, but invisible, occult and latent in subconscious or apparently unconscious action of energy. Man, not only turns his gaze downward and around him, but also upward towards what is about him, and inward towards what is occult within him. To climb to higher altitudes, to get a greater scope, to transform his lower nature, this is always a natural impulse of man as soon as he has made his place for himself in the physical and vital world of the earth and has a little leisure to consider his further possibilities. He is capable, unlike other terrestrial creatures, of becoming aware of what is deeper than mind, of the soul within him, and of what is above the mind, of *supermind*, of spirit, capable of opening to it, admitting it, rising towards it, taking hold of it.

What is of primary consequence is the fact of a successive creation with a developing plan in it. Another conclusion is that there is a graduated necessary succession in the evolution; first the evolution of Matter, next the evolution of Life in Matter, then the evolution of Mind in living Matter, and in the last stage an animal evolution followed by a human evolution. In particular, the essential point in the theory of spiritual evolution is the fact of the evolution of consciousness, a progression of spiritual manifestation in material existence. Man can universalize himself, exceed himself and fashion from his stuff and spirit a new being, a superman. Man, the mental being is sublimated by the endeavour of the Energy to evolve out of him as the spiritual man, the fully conscious being, man exceeding his first material self and discoverer of his true self and highest nature. In her discourse with Sita, Ahalya reveals the secret strength of our soul, and says:

the human psyche is destined to fare  
forward and reach greater heights. (2:93)  
Asura and Rakshasa will alike  
be left behind, and the gods,  
even they may be exceeded at last  
by the New Woman, New Man. (2:94)

The greatest feat according to her is not simply to checkmate or destroy the evil forces but to knead and transform them into 'the golden sublime'. As Sri Aurobindo explains, the divine superman combines and synthesizes the highest powers of love, power and wisdom. He saw that the contemporary human crisis cannot truly be met without the evolutionary saltation or mutation. And to resolve this human crisis, the divinity blesses the world with its manifestation:

It was with infinite hope she had left  
her sphere of Peace in response  
to the human cry, and taken the plunge  
into manifestation. (4:103)

The mind is the highest level yet reached in evolution. The evolution does not end with the emergence and the growth of the mind, it contains its ascent, its release into something greater and higher, the Supermind and the spirit, the self-aware and self-determining power of knowledge. The next step in evolution lies in the direction of man's conscious and willed attempt to rise to the level of the Supermind and the descent of the Supermind into his mind, life and body. Therein lies the full freedom and perfection of man. Then the mind, life and body receive a new light and dynamics from the inner source. Their inertia and ignorant movements are replaced by a harmonious luminous guidance from within. And Iyengar echoes the faith of Aurobindo in the great destiny envisaged for man:

The human body, a complex workshop  
engineered by the spirit  
had some potentialities  
beyond mental reckoning. (4:125)

Virtually in the Upanishads, Aurobindo discovered the image of the divine humanity, wherein the soul-vision has been amply bodied forth, implying both perfection and transcendence. To be confined in his ego was not the perfection of man; he could become one with others, with all beings, a universal soul, one with the supreme unity. To aspire to that perfection and transcendence through his mind, reason, thought and their illuminations, his heart and its unlimited power of love and sympathy, his will, his ethical and dynamic being, his aesthetic sense of delight and beauty or through an absolute spiritual calm, largeness and peace was the high ultimate sense of Aurobindo's humanity.

#### **Divine Grace**

*...Let the worst happen,  
my child, let the nether depths  
chill your being, but the grace is around,  
the redemption is decreed! (4:369)*

Iyengar, like his master Aurobindo, has a great faith in the redemption of man by the grace of the supreme mother. He believes that humankind is not the last rung in the evolutionary scale, but can evolve spiritually beyond its current limitations to a state of spiritual and supramental existence. This evolutionary existence he called a 'Divine life on Earth', characterized by a spiritualized, supramental, truth-consciousness-oriented humanity. He speaks of two central movements in the process of creation: an *involution* of consciousness from an original omnipresent Reality, manifesting a universe of forms, including matter; and an *evolution* of those material forms in creation upward toward life, mind, and spirit, reconnecting to their spiritual source. It is also a process of evolution.

Aurobindo's vision of the future includes the appearance of what we may call a new species, the supramental being, a divine being which would be as different and superior to present humanity as humanity is to the animal. It would have a consciousness different in kind than the mind of the human, a different status and quality and functioning. Even the physical form of this being would be different, more luminous and flexible and adaptable, entirely conscious and harmonious.

By involution he means the process by which the Energy of creation emerged from a timeless, spaceless, ineffable, immutable Reality. In that process, the Reality extended itself to Being/Existence (Sat), Consciousness, that generated a Force - (Chit); and Bliss (Ananda)—self-enjoyment in existing and being conscious. Similarly, the process of existence emerging out of the Inconscient is referred to as evolution. Initially, it emerges gradually in the stages of matter, life, and mind.

Out of the sole cosmic Egg, a billion  
had sprung into existence—  
species with their teasing variations,  
and life with its mutations. (6:576)

Humanity represents the stage of development of mind in complex material forms of life. The higher development of mind in the mass of humanity is not yet a secure possession. Reason and intellect still do not dominate the life of most human beings; rather, mind tends to be turned to the purposes of the life principle, which is focused on self-preservation, self-assertion, and satisfaction of personal need and desire. But evolution does not cease with the establishment of reason and intellect; beyond mind are higher levels of a spiritual and supramental consciousness which in the nature of things must also emerge. This higher evolution is described as a dual movement; inward, away from the surface

consciousness and into the depths, culminating in the realization of the Psychic Being (the personal evolving soul); and then upward to higher levels of spiritual mind Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind, and Overmind), culminating in the final stage of supramentalisation. Whereas these higher levels of consciousness have been attained in particular individuals, they must eventually emerge more universally as general stages in the evolution. He believed that Man is born an ignorant, divided, conflicted being; a product of the original inconscience (i.e. unconsciousness,) inherent in Matter that he evolved out of. As a result, he does not know the nature of Reality, including its source and purpose; his own nature, including the parts and integration of his being; what purpose he serves, and what his individual and spiritual potential is, amongst others. To that end, he undertakes a three-step process, which he calls the Triple Transformation. The first of the three stages is a movement within, away from the surface of life, to the depths, culminating in the discovery of his psychic being (the evolving soul). From that experience, he sees the oneness and unity of creation, and the harmony of all opposites experienced in life. As a result of making the psychic change, his mind expands and he experiences knowledge not through the hard churning of thought, but through light, intuition, and revelation of knowledge, culminating in supramental perception. Light enters from the heights and begins to transmute various parts of his being. It is basically a complete transformation of the mind, the heart, the emotions, and the physical body. He indicated that when we plunge within and touch the evolving soul, we move up in consciousness above mind to spiritual mind of illumination, intuition, revelation, and (supramental) truth consciousness.

In Asoka, Sita, while lost in the exhilarating processes of the climb of consciousness thinks that all life with its million variations is lost in quest of the Unknown. she remembered how, before they commenced their *sadhana* in exile, she had assured Rama that she would not add to his cares, and indeed they had lived for thirteen years practicing the askesis, they had known 'neither passion nor satiety' (4:298):

Life and love and askesis  
defied differentiation,  
and all existence was a flowering,  
an offering, a *siddhi*. (4:300)

It was with her crystalline purity serenely poised, Sita was aware that she was immune from Ravana's machinations,

This was an interim for loneliness,  
and nude self-sufficiency;  
this too was a part of her askesis,  
and she watched, and she waited. (4:313)

Sita ponders about how abandoning his pioneering role in the evolving helix, man had moved to the sidelines and become bird or beast or leviathan;

or fabricated lethal tooth and claw  
or concocted reptile's spue;  
or lightning and thunder in mushroom clouds,  
and death in myriad forms. (4:342)  
But when man advances on this journey:  
higher still and higher,--broader, broader!—  
and deeper too; from the depths  
to the heights and back, a two-way traffic,  
a world-stair of consciousness! (4:749)

This leap of transcendence could land one happily on the inexpressible Permanent, the ultimate mystery and reveal multitudinous matter, the countless forms of life, the myriad creepers of consciousness, and the blinding heights of Illumination:

Caught in this magic web of the Real,  
Sita saw nor beginning  
nor end, the still centre was everywhere  
and the boundary nowhere. (4:754)  
As her soul went in search of the Divine,  
didn't all Asoka, Lanka,

all the world, join in the great adventure,  
 coalescing and hastening? (4:755)  
 She pursued and the Divine gave the slip,  
 or teasingly, blindingly,  
 popped up here- there!—though still elusive, till  
 she found Him within at last. (4:756)

and she felt a great peace descend and permeate all her body, mind and soul. She believes the world of evil, the sons of Darkness, aren't to be merely put down but need to be wholly transformed by a new power of alchemy and until that ultimate battle is definitively won, the drama of manifestation cannot be wound up as obsolete.

In canto 2, Iyengar describes in detail Sita's journey into the higher realms of Consciousness, the nature of her mission on Earth and her preparation to meet the challenge life has to offer. Arundhati and the whole galaxy of realized souls in the epic bespeak of their belief in Sita, who has descended on this earth as a manifestation of divine:

You're come to humankind as a power,  
 a penance and a promise. (Arundhati 2:168)  
 She the Earth-born now come with a mission  
 of change and transformation,  
 carrying Agni in her heart of ruth,  
 she can suffer and redeem. (Agastya 3:391)  
 and even mother of the ashrama:  
 I know you have come missioned to this earth,  
 and must run the whole gamut  
 between the termini of Light and Dark,  
 and aye, exceed them as well. (1:527)

Iyengar believed that Aurobindo's is a philosophy of becoming, a philosophy of transformation from a limited earth-mind and earth-nature, with all their current negations and confusions, to a supermind and supernature that shall cancel all the accumulated frustrations of the ages and establish the Life Divine in our midst. It is a philosophy meant, not to meet any particular local or national crisis, but the challenge at the heart of human history.

who was it, that marvellous catalyst  
 of change and transformation,  
 whose smile had the power to redeem all  
 from their crass mortality? (1:492)

As the sittings ran their course, Maithili felt lifted to higher and still higher states of puissance of consciousness, evening after evening

'T was a bare small retreat, and there behind  
 the high-backed chair she sat in  
 the backgrounding walls were serenely blue,  
 as though the sky was around. (1:507)

The mother of the *mandala* who guides Sita on the path of divinity, resembles the Mother of Aurobindoashrama, and the yogi is none other than Aurobindo himself:

The Yogi who founded this Ashram  
 had a clear sense of mission,  
 and I came driven by an afflatus  
 and found in him my Godhead. (1:516)

And the 'Dome of Holiness' reminds one of Auroville with its stunning stillness, and serene ambience:

An impressive breath-taking edifice  
 reared upon a high platform,  
 a granite poly hedronic marvel  
 with terrace upon terrace. (1:542)

### Holistic Education

As Sita has to face an unusual destiny in near future, all the rishi-patnis and the mother prepares her how to face with serenity the trials and tribulations in her life:

When danger in the future assails you,  
fear not but look deep within  
and seek tearing through all barrier veils  
the invulnerable You. (1:526)

The education imparted to Sita and her sisters in the ashramas in the guidance of the sages of yore, made them explore the riddles of existence, aim of life, and ultimately leading them towards the different planes of consciousness—physical, mental, vital, intuitive or higher mind—

And this great adventure of consciousness  
from almost the nether end  
of Inconscience, and cantering beyond  
the vital and mental, (1:315)  
and reaching up to the dizzy plateaus  
of the imaginative,  
intuitive, or still higher zones—added  
new dimensions to their lives. (1:316)

Maitreyi, in her discourses to the sisters, reveals that ignorance is the root cause of many distortions, and a great divide between what we are and what we intended to be. Just as there is an awakening from sleep, one can shake off ignorance too and wake up from the nightmare existence, that is nothing more but everyday scaffold. Further, she elaborates that only those elect, realized souls who have achieved, and rest in, this total wakefulness of body, mind and soul, are the truly wise:

A still more elusive power is Mind,  
and its range is infinite,  
from the centre to the circumference,  
and there is the soul above all! (1:443)  
This is the central paradox, Sita,  
the world is one and many,  
and all fragmentation, contradiction  
and self-division are false. (1:461)

Sita thinks her sisters, also, to be diverse manifestations of the one supreme *Shakti*:

Urmila was manifest Lakshmi, and  
Srutikirti was Kali,  
and Mandavi was Saraswati, and  
she felt drawn towards them all. (6:454)

Not only the divine manifests itself in the form of women, Rama, the hero of the epic is also the incarnation of lord Vishnu, and Lakshmana wonders that Ahalya first, Viradha the Gandharva, Sarabanga, Kabandha, Sabari, all these and more were waiting for Rama to walk their way and sanctify the earth and liberate them.

Gargi takes Sita to Devi Manasi, the Priestess of the place, who would raise her to high plateaus of puissance and light. Sita was overpowered having now stolen a glimpse into a tunnel in the depths of God where the Dark is light indeed.

The within and without universes  
became unseverable,  
and she saw the Tree in the seed, the Sun  
in the nethermost darkness. (1:573)  
And the more she gazed, her consciousness grew  
new wings of discovery  
and Manasi, Gargi, and herself too  
all in one and one in all. (1:574)

Sita's subjective space experienced a permanent change of Light, and she knew that a qualitative change had come about in her life. Manasi's realization that with a destiny like hers, Sita may have to face trials far beyond the range of the average, prepares her for the future, guiding her that in times of terrific perplexity, she should dive deep within, looking for the hub, the prime source of it all, the fear will vanish and she will be sovereignly free. She says;

In this unrelenting movement of Time—  
in this cosmic living space—  
remember, the centre is everywhere,  
the circumference nowhere. (1:587)

Trijata, although a demon by birth, had progressed on the path of yoga and through her askesis she had the revelations of the divine, and echoes her vision:

'T was the stairway of the worlds, and between  
the Dark below and the Light  
above, the steps of descent seemed the same  
as the steep rungs of ascent. (5:967)

It but called for a firm decisive step, she says, in direction, and the Dark and Death were left behind, and Light and Life streamed down in torrents of Love:

And I saw that, not aggression but love,  
not seizure but surrender,  
held the key to communion with Nature  
and the sovereignty within. (5:969)

#### **Avatar (Divine Manifestation)**

*Hadn't she come down to this unfinished Earth  
coercing her transcendence  
and cabining it within the schedules  
of a space-time Mandala? (4:325)*

The descent of the Divine which is a typical Aurobindonian concept along with the reference to the Dawn which is ushered with the touch of the divine, is used by the poet to demonstrate the fact of Sita being an incarnation of the Divine destined to uplift Dharma for the benefit and betterment of humanity, "for hastening the Greater Dawn" (7:407). And Sita, proper to her role in this world, with her compassionate descent and divine ministry of sufferance and grace to redeem the humanity, had intimations from invisible powers pervading 'the spirit realms above'.

If only our age with its discontents  
and proneness to suffering  
could invoke the descent of the Divine  
in a meltingly fair form,  
that Radiance, the blessed Feminine,  
that compassionate Power,  
that symbol of Shakti as sufferance,  
might usher in a New Dawn. (1:90, 91)

The very word 'avatar' means descent, obviously the descent of the Divine into the lower earthly or human mould; a strategic retreat as it were, or a parachute raid perhaps, to provoke, promote and facilitate an ascent of the lower into the higher, the human into the divine. Whenever things go awry in the world, the Divine may think it fit to come down from time to time no doubt to restore *dharmic* normalcy, but even more to the divine purpose, would it be to make each crisis an opportunity, a springboard, for a new heave of consciousness, a new spirit in the evolutionary adventure. Aurobindo explicitly makes it clear, "...there are two aspects of the divine birth; one is descent, the birth of God in humanity, the Godhead manifesting itself in the human form and nature.... the other is an ascent, the birth of man into the Godhead, man rising into the divine nature and consciousness." (*Essays on Gita* 140)

Even Narada, when answering the dialectics of the king Janaka says:

In the great cosmic choreography,  
the Divine is self-involved  
in the unfolding of Evolution  
for the Future's ordering. (1:107)  
Diverse the deputations from Above  
that are tested and withdrawn;  
now it may be the turn of woman, fair  
fire-pure and long suffering! (1:108)

The divine becomes man so that man, who is potentially divine, may more easily realize this potentiality and become a god. The object of the avatar's descent is precisely to show that the human birth with all its limitations can be made such a means and instrument of the divine birth and divine works. He further explains "The avatar is not supposed to act in a non-human body---he takes up human action and uses human methods with the human consciousness in front and the Divine behind (409)." An avatar, an incarnation, does not occur merely to satisfy the longing of an aged man for a child; an avatar is essentially the channel of a new power of consciousness which is to be wielded to set right a world that is out of joint, and therefore that power will become the informing *lan* of the new world. As Andre Malraux puts it, speaking of Indian temple structure: 'It is in India alone that Being, conquered from universal appearance and metamorphosis doesn't part company with them, but often becomes inseparable from them like the two other sides of a medal.'" What seems so contradictory—the holding of the Absolute and the manifest—might have some connection with the Indian mind's ability to accept paradoxes as truth.

In the prologue of the epic, Iyengar like a master musician who indicates to the responsive audience the range and intensity of the treatment of his musical notes, suggests the full range of the poem's theme and sets the tune for the epic. He declares here his lofty aim, like a *Vedic rishi*, to sing:

of Prakriti and her infinite modes  
of the primordial Shakti's myriad  
manifestations on earth;  
of the lure and leap of transcendences  
of the ruby feminine; (Prologue 2)

Iyengar opens the narrative with Narada and Janaka, in Canto 1, having a discourse on the ways of Providence and the eternal riddle of life and death. Janaka, like Aswapathy in Savitri, is the leader of the human race on its evolutionary march, he is the Forerunner trying to fulfill the inmost aspiration of the human being by bringing down to the earth a kind of perfection in life. His intellectual and spiritual unease lead him to self-discovery, to find out what a man is?

But what teases, what defeats, is the lack  
of an infallible link  
that makes acceptable at once both ends  
of the existential run. (1:13)  
The real is the immeasurable  
ineffable Permanent  
but how about the foam, froth, bubble-glow  
of this phenomenal life? (1:18)

And he finds out after his long dialectics with seers like Satananda, Gautam, Yajnavalkya and Narada that a human being is not merely his mind and life and body, a bundle of desires, made up of material elements, of thoughts and ideas but that he is a spirit, and that there are powers and capacities in him which he can awaken and then he finds that man is cosmic. He finds further that man is not only cosmic but something beyond the cosmos too; he can ascend to a plane of consciousness where he can be identified with the supreme divine.



Janaka, a King among Rishis and realised One, grounded in Brahma Jnana, on the limitless and immutable, discourses with Narada on the knot of life and death, and the ways of Providence:

In this intricately interwoven  
web of existential life,  
how was self-isolation or selfish  
insulation to be won? (5:809)

And, Yajnavalkya initiates Janaka into the path of integral yoga of Aurobindo by highlighting the seven steps of ascent on the part of man and descent on the part of divine grace:

And yet, O King, as you're doubtless aware,  
There's a hierarchy of planes  
Of consciousness, and all must depend on  
Where you are, and what you want. (1:209)

Iyengar, thus, has beautifully embedded the whole of the *Sitayana* with the philosophy of Indian scriptures, of Vedas and Upanishads, and more than that the philosophy of Aurobindo, the divine master who shaped his vision.

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