

COMPLETED RESEARCH REPORT, March 2023-September 2023

Prepared and Submitted by BhāratShakti

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RESEARCH TOPIC:

Indian Literary Tradition in the Light of Sri Aurobindo

RESEARCHER:

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GENRE(S) OF RESEARCH:

Text-based

DURATION:

7 months (March 2023-September 2023)

OVERVIEW/BACKGROUND:

“Spirituality is the master-key of Indian mind,” says Sri Aurobindo. This research explores how this truth has also been reflected in the Indian literary tradition that flourished and evolved over thousands of years.

While much of the vast literature created over several millennia has been lost or remains to be deciphered, from the vast corpus that is available, a clear emphasis on certain characteristic aspects can be seen. This emphasis reveals the inner temperament of the Indian people and their cultural ethos.

In 1906, in a small essay titled ‘Originality in National Literatures’, Sri Aurobindo wrote that it is an unexplained phenomenon in the psychological history of mankind that out of so many magnificent civilizations, so many powerful, cultured and vigorous nations and empires, only a select few have been able to develop a “thoroughly original and self-revealing literature”. And that still fewer have actually succeeded in maintaining these characteristics from beginning to end of their literary development. He added,

“...the Hindus have revealed themselves the most perfectly, continuously and on the most colossal scale, precisely because they have been the most indomitably original in the form & matter of their literature. The Vedas, Upanishads & Puranas are unique in their kind; the great Epics in their form and type of art stand apart in the epic literature of the world, the old Sanscrit [sic] drama has

its affinities with a dramatic species which developed itself in Europe more than a thousand years later, and the literary epic follows laws of form and canons of art which are purely indigenous. And this immense body of first-rate work has left us so intimate & complete a revelation of national life & history, that the absence of pure historical writings becomes a subject of merely conventional regret. The same intense originality and depth of self-expression are continued after the decline of the classical language in the national literatures of Maharashtra, Bengal & the Hindi-speaking North.” (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 1, pp. 146-147)

The above has been the inspiration behind this research project.

RESEARCH FOCUS:

The goal of this research project was neither to collate and present an exhaustive compilation of all writings of Sri Aurobindo on Indian literature, nor to present a commentary on his writings.

Rather, the purpose was to discover how Sri Aurobindo when presenting us with a simultaneous wide look at the vast canvas and an in-depth view of the evolution of Indian literature over millennia helps us clearly discern a definite course of movement which has been progressively followed in the Indian literary tradition.

The findings of the research were presented in the form of an e-book, which was published by Auropublications, Sri Aurobindo Society.

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology involved identifying, reading, collating and summarizing relevant selections from Sri Aurobindo's vast writings on Indian literature and present it in a reader-friendly way.

The objective was to present the findings in such a manner which will help document the progression of Indian literary tradition over thousands of years, keeping in perspective the innate focus of Indian culture and its natural development over time.

Following steps were employed to conduct systematic inquiry into the topic.

Review of Literature

1. An intensive review of literature of the published works of Sri Aurobindo on Indian literature.
2. A word-search through electronically available reference materials was also conducted.

3. In addition to the writings of Sri Aurobindo, I also sourced relevant material from early scholars-practitioners of Integral Yoga including A.B. Purani, Kireet Joshi, Nolini Kanta Gupta, Nirodbaran, M.P. Pandit, Prema Nandkumar to name a few.
4. Several compilations and other secondary works were also reviewed.
5. Old volumes of journals published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Sri Aurobindo Society were also researched to identify relevant material.
6. The selections were organised in themes for an in-depth exploration of the topic.
7. Summaries were prepared for the selected passages.
8. Selected quotes were pulled out for highlighting the key ideas in the research report.

LIMITING THE SCOPE OF INQUIRY:

The primary source of literature to be researched was the major works of Sri Aurobindo which are compiled under his Complete Works. His numerous conversations and correspondence on the topic of Indian literary tradition were not exhaustively reviewed.

In the final book resulting from this project, the reader will get several glimpses of the *littérateur* facet of Sri Aurobindo, for example, through his various commentaries and translations. But the book does not speak of his original literary creations including his poetry, prose, and poetics. That would have required a separate research project.

The focus of the present project and e-book remained on the overall Indian literary tradition with a closer look at a few key literary figures on whose works Sri Aurobindo has commented and who, in his view, have shaped the general progression of Indian literary tradition.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS:

1. A long essay was prepared synthesizing all the themes that came up in the review of literature.
2. Proper citations and references were added for all direct quotes and passages.
3. The essay eventually took the form of an e-book.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES:

The e-book begins with the Veda as the most ancient and sacred literature of humanity. Of course, in Indian cultural tradition which emphasizes the sacred origin of all manifestation and creation, including literary and artistic creative activity, a distinction such as sacred literature and secular literature is mostly an artificial one.

Yet we must note that the focus of the project remains primarily on highlighting the literary aspect and not on the deeper spiritual or metaphysical aspects of texts such as

the Vedas, Upanishads or Itihāsa-s which are revered as great scriptures of Indian religio-spiritual traditions. Keeping this in consideration, the findings were organized in 8 chapters in the following manner:

INTRODUCTION

I: THE EARLIEST SACRED LITERATURE

- Scriptures as 'Lamps of Great Power'
- Śruti and Smṛti
- Śruti (Shruti)
- Smṛti (Smriti)

II: THE VEDA

- Rishi, the Seer of the Vedas
- The Vedic Literature
- The Samhitās
- The Brāhmaṇas
- The Āraṇyakas
- Mantra
- The Ideal of Mantra
- Some Well-known Mantras from the Vedas
- Chandas, Vedic Metres
- Symbolism in Vedic Poetry
- The Example of Agni
- Some Key Words of the Veda and Their Symbolic Meaning
- Sri Aurobindo's Psychological Interpretation
- Core of the Vedic Teachings

III: THE UPANISHADS

- The Significance of the Upanishads
- The Upanishadic Poetry
- Difference between the Vedic and Upanishadic Poetry
- Some Examples of Upanishadic Poetry

IV: THE SŪTRA LITERATURE

- Vedānga
- Social Treatises

V: THE EPICS: RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA

- Impact on National Mind
- The Mahabharata
- The Bhagavad Gita

- The Ramayana

VI: THE AGE OF CLASSICAL SANSKRIT LITERATURE

- Changing Cultural Mentality
- Purāna and Tantra
- Sri Aurobindo on Kālidāsa
- Some Verses from Kālidāsa Translated by Sri Aurobindo
- Sri Aurobindo on Bhartr̥hari
- Some Translations from Nītiśataka by Sri Aurobindo
- Science and Art of Poetics
- Difference between the Poetry of Epics and Poetry of the Classical Age
- Difference between the Sanskrit of the Epic Age and the Classical Age
- What Came Next?

VI: TAMIL CLASSICAL LITERATURE

- Sangam Poetry
- A Few of Sri Aurobindo's Translations from Kural -1
- The Tamil Epics
- Devotional Literature
- Sri Aurobindo's Essay on Maran
- Sri Aurobindo's Translation of Nammalwar's 'Love-Mad'

VII: THE GROWTH OF REGIONAL LITERATURES

- Devotional Poetry
- Diversity of Vaishnava Poetry
- Sri Aurobindo's Translation of Poem – XVI by Vidyapati
- Sri Aurobindo's Translation of a Poem by Andal
- The Narrative Poetry
- Sri Aurobindo on Bankim Chandra Chatterjee
- Sri Aurobindo's Translation of Bande Mataram

VIII: CODA

APPENDIX I How to Approach the Scriptures

- Adhikāri: Tapasyā and Śraddhā

APPENDIX II

- Sri Aurobindo on Veda Vyasa
- Sri Aurobindo on Valmiki

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS:

A nation's literature though not the complete, but is still the most varied and ample record of the culture of a people. India's great literary creation over the several millennia is surely the "evidence of a real and very remarkable culture" (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 382). While music and art reveal more absolutely the soul of a nation, literature is the whole expression of its mind and psychology, "not only of what it is in action, or what it is in essence, but its thought, character and aspiration" (CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 398)

This is why it becomes critical for a lover of Indian culture, a genuine student of India to have a fairly decent awareness and appreciation of the literary history of India. Literature helps us connect with the mind of our people, become a part of the shared aspiration of our fellow beings and grow towards a deeper sense of unity.

Sri Aurobindo says emphatically that while the visual arts help us arrive at a peculiarly concentrated expression of the spirit, it is in a people's literature that we must seek for the spirit's most flexible and many-sided self-expression, "for it is the word used in all its power of clear figure or its threads of suggestion that carries to us most subtly and variably the shades and turns and teeming significances of the inner self in its manifestation" (CWSA, Vol. 20., p. 314).

This research project attempted to synthesize some of the leading strands in Indian literary tradition – admittedly, not in an exhaustive manner – in the light of extensive writings of Sri Aurobindo on Indian literature. The findings were presented in an e-book. While the reader may feel that several other key literary creations, expressions, and leading figures of the Indian literary scene are left out in this book, it must be remembered that the focus has been to highlight those expressions, forms and names on whom Sri Aurobindo has specifically commented. In doing so, a necessary context is presented to the reader in which to fully appreciate Sri Aurobindo's relevant remarks.