The Best of

Sri Aurobindo Circle

Revisiting some of the timeless writings from the vast archives of Sri Aurobindo Circle, an annual journal published from 1945 to 1998.

Sri Aurobindo Society
BHĀRATSHAKTI
INDIA – FROM PAST DAWNS TO FUTURE NOONS

Sri Aurobindo Society
Creating the Next Future

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INTRODUCING
THE BEST OF *SRI AUROBINDO CIRCLE*

Namaste and warm greetings to all,

We are happy to launch this new electronic publication, *The Best of Sri Aurobindo Circle*. Many of our regular readers may be aware that *Sri Aurobindo Circle* was a print journal published annually from 1945 to 1998. Several well-known sadhaks of Integral Yoga as well as scholars deeply engaged with the study of different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's vision and works contributed to this journal.

Since 2019, we have been featuring some selections from the archives of *Sri Aurobindo Circle* in the monthly online journal, *Renaissance*. But a need was felt to thematically highlight some of the best offerings from the pages of this prestigious journal. With Mother's Blessings, we now bring the first issue of *The Best of Sri Aurobindo Circle*.

We have kept the same cover image that was drawn by the Mother at the launch of this journal. The journal title written in Mother's own handwriting has also been kept.

For the first issue, we focus on a timeless work from the vast literary tradition of India, which has endured the test of time and remains just as relevant today as when it was first composed thousands of years ago.

Vol. 1, Issue 1

RĀMĀYANA'S IMPACT ON NATIONAL MIND

Beloo Mehra

Dr. Prema Nandkumar, in the 1984 issue of *Sri Aurobindo Circle,* had written a remarkable piece describing Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of Rāmāyana as a significant work that expressed the noblest aspects of Indian culture and went on to become one of the most loved and enduring literary compositions to shape the Indian national mind.

> "As long as the mountains and rivers flourish on the surface of the earth,
> so long the legend of Rāmāyana will flourish in this world."[1]

A masterful literary creation of the early creative age of Indian civilization, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the Rāmāyana as the early record of an age of powerful and beautiful development of the intellect and of life. As an *itihāsa* (also called epic in modern parlance), it gives us in beautiful poetry extensive record of the ideal, ethical, aesthetic, psychic, emotional, sensuous, and physical knowledge, vision and experience that informed life at individual and collective levels. The *itihāsa* was an ancient historical or legendary tradition, which as Sri Aurobindo explains, was turned to creative use as a significant tale that expressed some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning. In this way, this literary form became formative of the mind of the people.

Valmiki, the poet of the Rāmāyana, has taken as his subject an *itihāsa*, an ancient legend associated with an old Indian dynasty and filled it in with detail from myth and folklore. From beginning to end, the whole story is of one piece with no deviation from the stream of the narrative. But as Sri Aurobindo reminds us, at the same time, we find here a vastness of vision and a wide-winged flight of epic sublimity in the conception and sustained richness of minute execution in the detail.

As compared to the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyana has a greater simplicity of plan, a more delicate ideal temperament and a finer glow of poetic warmth and colour. Here we find less of the philosophic and more of the purely poetic mind. According to Sri Aurobindo, Rāmāyana is a supreme creation of a fusion of the ethical and the aesthetic mind of India into a harmonious unity.

The subject matter of the strife of the divine with the titanic forces is depicted in purer ideal forms. We see a frank use of supernatural dimensions and an imaginative heightening of both the good and the evil in human character. On one side, Vālmiki portrays an ideal manhood, a divine beauty of virtue and ethical order, and a civilization founded on the Dharma which exalts the moral ideal – and he portrays this with a singularly strong appeal of aesthetic grace, harmony and sweetness. And on the other side, we have wild, anarchic and almost amorphous forces of superhuman egoism, self-will and exultant violence. The two ideas and powers of mental nature, living and embodied, are brought into conflict, and led to a decisive issue of the victory of the divine man over the Rākshasa.

Noticeable in Vālmiki's poem is the absence of all shade and complexity; that would have diminished the purity of the ideal and the representative force in the outline of the figures, says Sri Aurobindo. Only so much shade is admitted which is sufficient to humanize the appeal and the significance of the figures. The Rāmāyana embodied for the Indian imagination its highest and tenderest human ideals of character. But what gives Rāmāyana a timeless appeal is that it presents virtues such as strength, courage, gentleness, purity, fidelity, and self-sacrifice in the suavest and most harmonious expressions which appeal to the emotion and the aesthetic sense. Even when speaking of high moral-ethical virtues, we do not find here any repellent austerity nor any commonness.

[1] Vālmiki Rāmāyana, 1.2.36

The poet lends a certain high divineness to the ordinary things of life. Things such as conjugal, filial, maternal, and fraternal feelings, the duty of the prince and leader, and the loyalty of follower and subject, the greatness of the great, and the truth and worth of the simple, are all presented in a manner which while toning down the ethical note lends them a more psychical beauty, hence giving them a glow of their ideal nature. It is this sublimity that has made Rāmāyana an "agent of almost incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India."

Ramayana has presented to the Indian cultural mind divinely real figures of Rama and Sita to be loved and imitated and worshipped, says Sri Aurobindo. It has also given images of Hanuman, Lakshmana and Bharata who are living embodiments of highest ethical ideals. "[Ramayana] has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character, and it has evoked and fixed in it those finer and exquisite yet firm soul tones and that more delicate humanity of temperament which are a more valuable thing than the formal outsides of virtue and conduct."[2]

We hope our readers will enjoy Dr. Prema Nandkumar's detailed analysis in this first issue of *The Best of Sri Aurobindo Circle* highlighting Sri Aurobindo' interpretation and selected translations from the "grandest and most paradoxical poem" Rāmāyana.

On behalf of the editorial team, led by Shri Vijay Bhai, I remain ever in gratitude.

[2] CWSA, 20: 350-351

Rama's Court, Folio from a Ramayana, painting from Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, 1775-1800, currently in the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art; available in public domain at Wikimedia Commons

SRI AUROBINDO'S INTERPRETATION OF INDIAN CULTURE: THE RAMAYANA

Prema Nandkumar

Editor's note: Prema Nandkumar's essay on the Ramayana in the light of Sri Aurobindo was first published in the 1984 issue of *Sri Aurobindo Circle*. For ease of reading, we present the long essay in 4 parts. The first part provides an overview of the deep influence of the two *itihāsa*-s, Ramayana and Mahabharata on Indian collective consciousness. It also speaks of Sri Aurobindo's growing fascination with these epics during his Baroda phase. The second part summarises Sri Aurobindo's translations of selected passages from the Ramayana. Parts 3 and 4 describe how we can understand in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision the profound and lasting influence of Ramayana's story and the portrayals of its key characters on national consciousness.

PART 1
"ENSOULED IMAGE OF A GREAT CULTURE"

In the historical development of Indian culture, after the sublime utterances of the Veda and the spiritual transcendences achieved by the Upanishads comes the Heroic Age. The Vedas and the Upanishads may not be a day-to-day reality for the common man in India. But the Ramayana and the Mahabharata dating back to several centuries before the advent of Christ continue to affect his thinking. He still tries to fashion his life according to the ideals expressed by Valmiki and Vyasa.

If the Indian culture of the past is the richest and best in the world and if it has kept India in a pre-eminent position in the spiritual, religious, ethical and artistic fields, it is partly because of the twin epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

These epics are not rough, oral sagas exulting over blood spilt in battle-victories; nor are they mere conglomerations of sub-human and super-human mythology. They are, in the words of Sri Aurobindo,

> *". . . a highly artistic representment of intimate significances of life, the living presentment of a strong and noble thinking, a developed ethical and aesthetic mind and a high social and political ideal, the ensouled image of a great culture.*
> *"As rich in freshness of life but immeasurably more profound and evolved in thought and substance than the Greek, as advanced in maturity of culture but more vigorous and vital and young in strength than the Latin epic poetry, the Indian epic poems were fashioned to serve a greater and completer national and cultural function and that they should have been received and absorbed by both the high and the low, the cultured and the masses and remained through twenty centuries an intimate and formative part of the life of the whole nation is of itself the strongest possible evidence of the greatness and fineness of this ancient Indian culture."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 353*

The Veda *vangmaya* and the Upanisad *vangmaya* had yielded place to the *kavya vangmaya* in deference to the command of the Time Spirit. What had been seen in the illumined recesses of the seer's heart in the Vedic Age had been analysed clinically by the teachers and the students together in the Upanishadic times. The Taittiriya Upanishad makes this clear in the prayer for mutual good-feeling between master and disciple.

> *"Hari OM. Together may He protect us, together may He possess us, together may we make unto us strength and virility. May our study be full to us of light and power. May we never hate. OM! Peace, peace, peace."*
>
> *~ Translation by Sri Aurobindo,*
> *~CWSA, Vol. 18, p. 216*

Now the time had come to see these Vedic-Upanishadic radiances influencing the life of the people. Indians of ancient times: were they living like the "*amritasya putrah*", children of immortality? Did the native spiritual view affect the kings and commoners alike? What were the heights they managed to attain? How strong the asuric forces, how detestable the kingdoms and godheads of

little mind? Where were the pockets that contained the mothers of evil and the children of darkness?

Looking at the life around them, the poets began to indite *upakhyanas*, stories based on the civilisation of which they too were a part. Presently the epic genius seized the Indian mind. The Sanskrit language which had echoed lyrically the subtle spaces of spiritual attainments by the Vedic seers later gathered the conversational crispness needed for a meaningful dialogue between the teacher and the taught.

With the emergence of the Heroic Age, the language too grew in strength, collecting an appropriate vocabulary, perfecting a virile grammar and spreading the rainbow-colours of imaginative exuberance. Comparing this Sanskrit with Bengali in India and French in Europe, Sri Aurobindo remarked that it was natural to have great epic poets like Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa in Sanskrit for "the very language is epic" unlike the other two which were "too lucid and orderly and graceful". (3 January, 1939, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Nirodbaran, 1966, p. 153.)

> At some fortuitous moment of time the glory of Indian civilisation met the grandeur of the Sanskrit language. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata were born. Both the epics had grown out of India's ancient culture. In their turn, they have been a source of inspiration, encouragement, pride and comfort for the Indians through the centuries.

Even today, every action on the Indian clime is viewed through the tinted glasses of the twin epics. The ideals of the Rama Rajya and the scene of the Kurukshetra War enthused millions to take an active part in India's independence movement, for, great leaders like Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Subramania Bharati and Mahatma Gandhi used these images in their speeches and writings quite often. The infights in politics, the problem of poverty and the moral-ethical prerogatives in the social system were often analysed in terms of the actions and the characters found in the two epics. Sri Aurobindo himself used parallel situations and names from the epics in his political articles.[1]

The call of the epics never fails to touch sympathetic chords in the Indian psyche. For instance, as recently as 1983, a political party, hardly a few months old, won an absolute majority in the Andhra Pradesh Legislature by splashing in advertisements and echoing through cassettes the assurance given by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita:

> *"Whensoever, O Bharata, there is the fading and crisis of the Dharma and the uprising of unrighteousness, adharma, then I loose myself forth (into birth). For the deliverance of the good and the virtuous, for the destruction of the evildoers, for the enthroning of the Right (Dharma) I am born from age to age."*
> *~ Bhagavad Gita in the Light of Sri Aurobindo (Ed. Maheshwar), p. 64.*

From Greece to India

However, the early literary foundations of the author of *The Foundations of Indian Culture* were wholly Greek and Latin and the culture of the Occident. As a boy not yet seven, Sri Aurobindo was given a good grounding in Latin by Mr. Drewett. This helped him enter St. Paul's School and very soon he became a scholar in Greek and Latin.

Soon after, he won a classical scholarship at King's College, Cambridge. Translating Greek and Latin verses became an interesting pastime, and one such piece, "Hecuba", received praise from the scholar-poet, Laurence Binyon. Sri Aurobindo won the Rawley prize for Greek iambics in King's College, and scored record marks in Greek and Latin in the I.C.S. examination. His conversations contained enthusiastic references to Greek literature. (See A. B. Purani, *Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 1960, pp. 48-9).

His first volume of verse, *Songs to Myrtilla* was the fruit of his overwhelming involvement with the Greek muse. At the close of Songs to Myrtilla is the poem, 'Envoi'. He may have meant it to be a formal good-bye as he was returning to India soon. But the few lines turned out to be prophetic as far as his literary career was concerned.

[1] An example from one of Sri Aurobindo's articles in *Karmayogin*, titled 'Exit Bibhishan' – "He [Gokhale] publishes himself now as the righteous Bibhishan who, with the Sugrives, Angads and Hanumans of Madras and Allahabad, has gone to join the Avatar of Radical absolutism in the India Office, and ourselves as the Rakshasa to be destroyed by this new Holy Alliance. Even this formidable conjunction does not alarm us. At any rate Bibhishan has gone out of Lanka, and Bibhishans are always more dangerous there than in the camp of the adversary." (CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 121)

For in Sicilian olive-groves no more
Or seldom must my footprints now be seen,
Nor tread Athenian lanes, nor yet explore
Parnassus or thy voiceful shores, O Hippocrene.
Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.
~ CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 37

Thus when Sri Aurobindo entered the Baroda State Service, he was a total stranger to Indian language except a little Bengali which he had had to learn as an I.C.S. probationer who had opted for service in Bengal. His teacher was an Englishman who himself knew very little of the language.

At Baroda, Sri Aurobindo first made arrangements to improve his Bengali. Marathi and Gujarati too invited his attention as the languages were current in Baroda. And as a classical scholar who had mastered Greek and Latin, he was attracted to Sanskrit.

Sanskrit brought him a tremendous revelation. To one who had been an enthusiastic admirer of the Athenian civilisation, the culture unveiled by the Sanskrit heritage through Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa and Bhartrihari appeared altogether unique. Though apparently older than the Greece of his classical studies, this was a brave new world; it mirrored a beauteous mankind that had attained perfection in several spheres and had based its civilisation on foundations that were aesthetically pleasing and spiritually noble.

Yes, this was quite different from the Greek past that Sri Aurobindo had hitherto known. The glory that was Greece, its heroes and heroic battles, gods and titans, were all frozen within the parchments of a few epics, dramas and histories. Greece was no longer a living influence. The gods had departed from the hearths and temples, from art and poetry. A solitary poem like Keats' *'Ode to a Grecian Urn*' was itself a commentary upon this irrevocable passing of the Greek past.

. . . thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

Not so the Indian past. Sri Aurobindo found that what belonged to the yesterdays of Indian culture remained relevant and active even on the day when he was reading and writing. The stories of Rama and the Pandavas were part of the day-to-day life of the Indians. The anecdotes and poetry of the epics were remembered with effortless ease in the conversations of the common man. They still wept with Sita and Draupadi at the dramatic representations in country fairs.

Toru Dutt's memorable poem 'Sita' recalls this perennial recreation of epic scenes by mothers telling stories to their children. Not a modern room, but it is Valmiki's ashram that encloses the children as they listen and see before them the consort of Rama enveloped in gloom:

But who is this fair lady? Not in vain
She weeps, — for lo! at every tear she sheds
Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain,
And bowed in sorrow are the three young heads.
It is an old, old story, and the lay
Which has evoked sad Sita from the past
Is by a mother sung…

Introducing her *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* based mainly on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata legends, Sister Nivedita says:

"These two great works form together the outstanding educational agencies of Indian life. All over the country, in every province, especially during the winter season, audiences of Hindus and Mohammedans gather round the Brahmin story-teller at nightfall, and listen to his rendering of the ancient tales. The Mohammedans of Bengal have their own version of the Mahabharata. And in the life of every child amongst the Hindu higher castes, there comes a time when, evening after evening, hour after hour, his grandmother pours into his ears these memories of old.

"There are simple forms of village-drama, also, by whose means, in some provinces, every man grows up with a full and authoritative knowledge of the Mahabharata."
~ 1972 edition, p. vi

Parents wished their sons to be obedient as Rama; and their daughters to be as chaste as Savitri. This remarkable

endurance of the legendary characters was no doubt due to the basic spiritual strength garnered in the epic past. What was then the secret of these Indian epics that they had been "received and absorbed by both the high and the low, the cultured and the masses and remained through twenty centuries an intimate and formative part of the life of the whole nation?" (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 353)

Sri Aurobindo launched upon his significant archaeological venture of getting at the foundations of Indian culture by taking up Valmiki and Vyasa for careful study. The more he delved into the Sanskrit epics, greater grew the distance between Greece and himself.

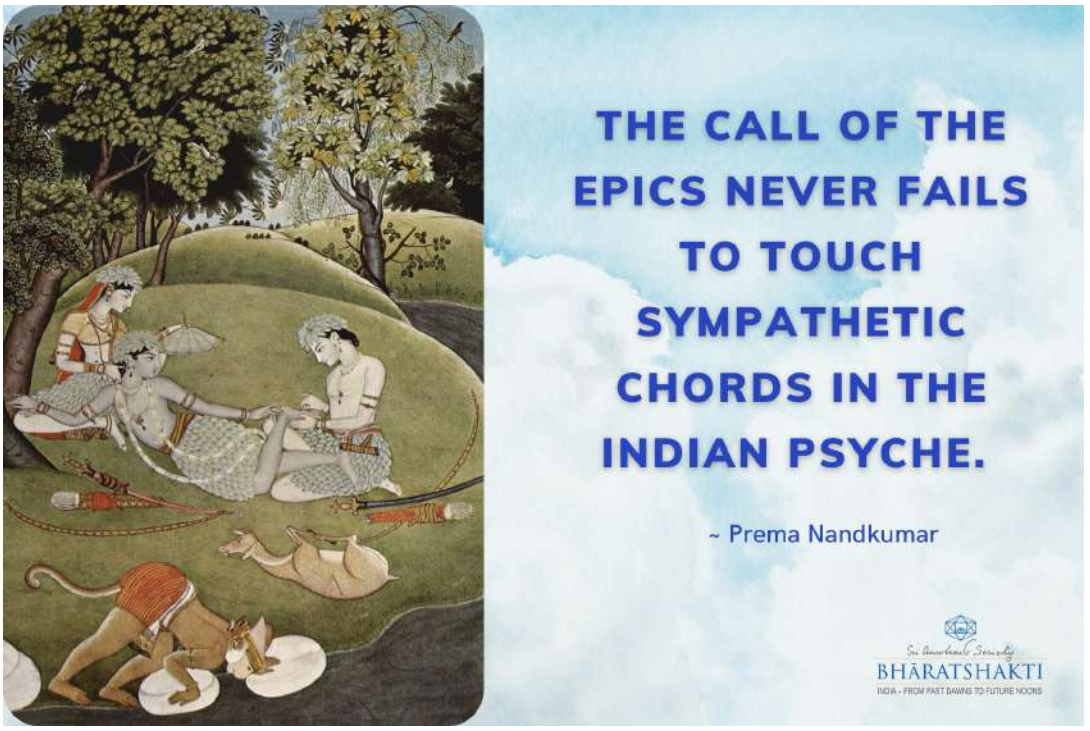
For instance, his political journalism began to reflect his Sanskrit studies in a large measure. *'The Life of Nationalism'*, an article written for the *Bande Mataram* makes magnificent use of Krishna's birth in the prison at Mathura, his secret growth in Gokula and his destruction of Kamsa and assuming the leadership at Dwaraka to suggest the stages in the growth of the idea of Nationalism.

> *"Last is the season of rule and fulfilment, the life of Krishna at Dwaraka, when the victorious idea lives out its potent and unhindered existence, works its will with a world which has become in its hands as clay in the hands of the potter, creates what it has to create, teaches what it has to teach, until its own time comes and with the arrow of Age, the hunter, in its heel, it gives up its body and returns to the great source of all power and energy from which it came."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 7, p. 745*

The Greek influence was, of course, never completely shaken off. Even after his retirement at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo did experiment with classical Western prosody, revised *Perseus the Deliverer* and began writing *Ilion*, a wholly Greek epic which was, however, left unfinished.

After meeting Valmiki and Vyasa, he never parted from their company. *Savitri*, quarried from the Mahabharata was still in the process of composition, when he attained Mahasamadhi in 1950. It is quite possible that he may have wished to translate the twin epics into English (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History*, 1972, p. 143). He did render into English some chosen passages from Vyasa and Valmiki during his Baroda days.

The 'Notes' and the experiments in translation were his first soundings in the oceanic vastness of the two epics. Other interests – politics, poetry, political journalism, yoga, Yogashram – must have gradually pushed the original intention out of the field of actual execution. But the specimens that remain— even if they are no more than 'drafts'— are certainly suggestive of the great unfulfilled possibilities." (Iyengar, p. 143-144).



PART 2

TRANSLATING THE RAMAYANA

Sri Aurobindo's translations of a few selected passages from the Ramayana are among his earliest attempts to convey Indian poetry into English. The first two cantos of Aranyakanda were rendered into prose. He skipped the description of the hermitages, keeping strictly to the story-line. The Aurobindonian style is unmistakably there as when he translates '*prajāḥ kāla ivāntakaḥ*' into "Death the ender leaping on the nations"; and '*kruddhō ruddhō nāga iva śvasan*' into "his eyes filled with the rush of grief, panting like a furious snake controlled." (CWSA, Vol. 5, pp. 24-26)

Sri Aurobindo chose a few passages from the epic for translation into English blank verse as well. Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has traced an "artistic intention" in what appears as a random choice on the surface:

> *"... first the description of Ayodhya, then three forays into the magnificently dramatic Ayodhya Kanda. It is the perfect tragedy, the coronation turning into exile... Rama's fate impinges with particular force on two women, Kausalya and Sita — the mother and the wife. Sri Aurobindo therefore chooses passages from Sarga 20 and Sargas 26-30 for translation: Kausalya's tears are the background, while the issue between Rama and Sita is the foreground drama.*
>
> *"Only a few fragments chosen as if at random — An Aryan City, Dasaratha's Speech to the States-General, A Mother's Lament, The Wife — and, whether intended or not, there is here a whole drama packed with irony and catastrophe, poetry and pity, defiance and triumph."*
>
> *(K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History, 1972, p. 144).*

Since Sri Aurobindo felt that "a translator is not necessarily bound to the exact word and letter of the original he chooses; he can make his own poem out of it, if he likes, and that is what is very often done" (CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 199) his verse translations attempt no word-for-word representation. Yet, no vital detail is missed by him. Nor does he adventure out of bounds in the name of transcreation. What we have in his translations is Valmiki. Only the external garb is Aurobindonian English.

A Mother's Lament

In the Sarga, 'Kausalyakrandha' we are made to watch in a flash the sad truths that often lurk behind the façade of high life. Kausalya, the chief consort of Dasaratha, mother of Rama, gives vent to her lifetime's anguish in this canto. Slighted by the other wives of the king, and neglected by him — *na dṛśtpūrvam kalyānam sukham vā patipauruśe* — she seems not to have fared better even after the birth of Rama. And we had all the while thought of her as the proudest and happiest of ladies!

Sri Aurobindo brings out the waves of pain in Kausalya's heart by using simple words that are most appropriate to Valmiki's pellucid Sanskrit (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 20, Slokas 47-50):

Ah how shall I without thy face
Miserably exist, without thy face,
My moon of beauty, miserable days?
Me wretched, who with fasts and weary toils
And dedicated musings reared thee up,
Vainly. Alas, the river's giant banks,
How great they are! and yet when violent rain
Has levelled their tops with water, they descend

In ruin, not like this heart which will not break.
But I perceive death was not made for me,
For me no room in those stupendous realms
Has been discovered; since not even today
As on a mourning hind the lion falls
Death seizes me or to his thicket bears
With his huge leap,—death, ender of all pain.
~ CWSA, Vol. 5, p. 10

The Wife

The five Sargas (26-30) from Ayodhya Kanda which are really one long argument between Sita and Rama form a single block. Sri Aurobindo had a fondness for heroines who did not merely weep laying everything on fate, but were practical and adventurous. In such women he saw reflected the Saviour Grace of the Divine and had faith in their helping humanity to move forward.

In all the ancient legends of India, there is one woman who does not shed tears even in the direst extremity. He chose her, Savitri, as the heroine of his immortal epic. Chitrangada, Uloupie, Vasavadutta, Comol Cumary: they are all capable of decisive action in times of crisis.

Though the Ramayana is known as '*Sitayah Charitham Mahat*' (the noble story of Sita), the epic is mostly about Sita's patient endurance. However, there is one instance when she does argue with Rama and wins too. Sri Aurobindo chose this particular episode for translation as it brings out the best in woman: self-sacrifice, practical wisdom, an ability to disregard 'the comforts of life' and shining idealism.

In this encounter with Rama, Sita is no gentle princess brought up in the lap of luxury but a wise counsellor and a willing life-partner. All her dreams of the grand coronation are shattered in a moment, but it is not the loss of Rama's position that stings her.

It is when he advises her to be a silent and obedient subject of Bharata and live the fourteen years of exile away from him that she is incensed. The luxury of royalty does not tempt her for a moment. Spontaneous is the reaction of this high-born, high-souled heroine of Valmiki:

. . . but Videha's daughter, she
Whose words were ever soft like one whose life
Is lapped in sweets, now other answer made
In that exceeding anger born of love,
Fierce reprimand and high. "What words are these,
Rama, from thee? What frail unworthy spirit
Converses with me uttering thoughts depraved,
Inglorious, full of ignominy, unmeet
For armed heroical great sons of Kings?
With alien laughter and amazed today
I hear the noblest lips in all the world
Uttering baseness.
~ CWSA, Vol. 5, p. 14 (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 27, Slokas 1-2)

In this passage as well as the following, Sri Aurobindo has elaborated upon the actual words of Sita. He seems to have been enthused to do so: just an extra word here and there for emphasis. However, the essential idea remains the same.

The picture of Sita grows in epic dimensions as she rejects all the comforts of life and prepares to walk by Rama's side in the difficult, dim forests. When Rama tries to trip her by reminding her that a wife's prime duty is to obey her husband's will, she rejects it as a specious argument. But she does it sadly, for it pains her that Rama does not know her real self in spite of their loving each other and living together in mutual understanding. The voice is "sad and low" (*duhkhita, mandarn vacanam*):

Yea, thou who know'st, wilt thou, forgetful grown
Of common joys and sorrows sweetly shared,
The faithful heart reject, reject the love?
~ CWSA, Vol. 5, p. 18 (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 29, Sloka 20)

It must have been sincere admiration that led Sri Aurobindo to translate these Sargas which bring out the reserves of will-power in a frail woman. Anger, angry laughter, tears: now Sita takes up the sharpest arrow from her quiver and strikes with unerring aim into the manly heart of the hero.

Surely my father erred, great Mithila
Who rules and the Videhas, that he chose
Thee with his line to mate, Rama unworthy,
No man but woman in a male disguise.
What casts thee down, wherefore art thou then sad,
That thou art bent thus basely to forsake
Thy single-hearted wife? Not Savitri
So loved the hero Dyumathsena's son
As I love thee and from my soul adore.
~ CWSA, Vol. 5. p. 19 (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 30, Slokas 3-6)

One subtle change introduced by Sri Aurobindo in this passage is Sita considering her love for Rama as of greater strength than Savitri's for Satyavan. Valmiki's Sita only says: Know me as Savitri who loved Satyavan deeply. Sri Aurobindo's Sita wants to succeed in her mission, and such a changed emphasis adds power to her arguments, as the English language cannot put as much coiled power into its words as Sanskrit.

Sita wins and when Rama asks her to renounce

Our priceless diamonds and our splendid robes,
Our curious things, our couches and our cars,
The glory and the eye's delight,. . .

~ CWSA, Vol. 5, p. 22 (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 30, Slokas 44-45)

She does so gladly and instantly, *ksipram pramudita devi*

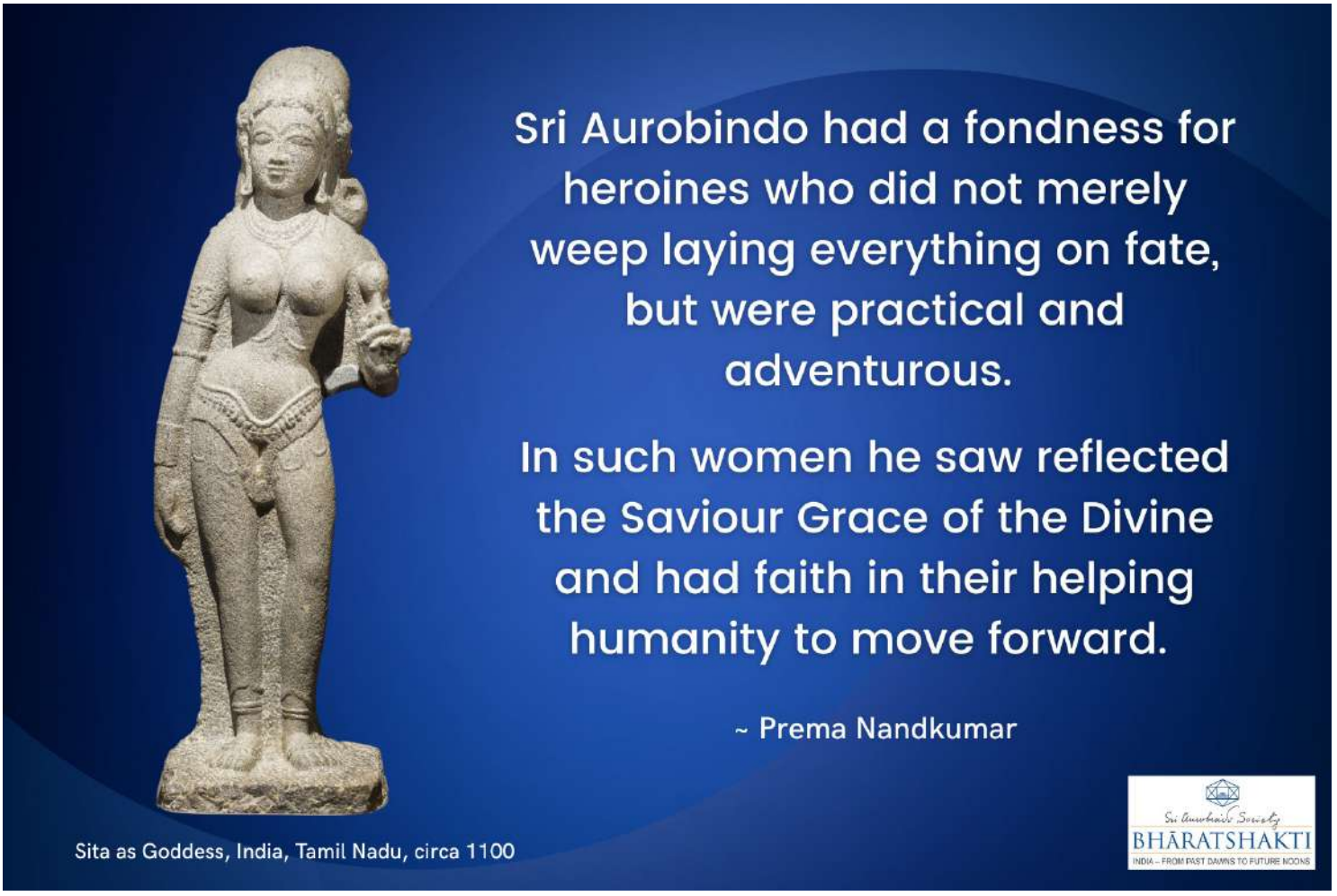
Sita, of that consent
So hardly won sprang joyous, as on fire,
Disburdened of her wealth, lightly to wing
Into dim wood and wilderness unknown.

~ CWSA, Vol. 5, p. 22 (Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 30, Slokas 46-47)

All of Sita is contained in these five Sargas. Sri Aurobindo's choice was dictated by his heart which had summed up brilliantly the character of Janaka's daughter in a letter written to Manmohan Ghose in 1899:

"Sita is too gracious and sweet, too full of human lovingness and lovableness, of womanly weakness and womanly strength!"

~ CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 132



PART 3

THE STORY OF RAMAYANA, NO ORDINARY STORY

Sri Aurobindo admired Ramayana for its structure and simplicity of plan. He wrote:

> *"The whole story is from beginning to end of one piece and there is no deviation from the stream of the narrative."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 349*

It is the story of Rama's banishment, Sita's imprisonment and the destruction of Ravana. We follow the hero's adventures step by step, — as he walks with Viswamitra in the Bala Kanda and later when he crosses the Ganges with Guha in the Ayodhya Kanda, or as he journeys in Dandaka with Sita and Lakshmana in the Aranya Kanda. We follow him when he meets Sugriva in the Kishkindha Kanda, when he listens to Sita's message from Hanuman in the Sundara Kanda, and as he destroys Ravana in the Yuddha Kanda.

Several times 'the tale so far' is recapitulated. Repetitions are used as brush strokes to make the structure absolutely clear. Though the epic is long, nowhere do we miss the main thread of the story. And yet, the epic has several carefully-laid minute details that together form a wealth of unforgettable scenes involving a variety of characters.

> *Passing with ease into the unplumbed depths*
> *Of yogic meditation,*
> *He saw everything as a gooseberry*
> *set on the palm of his hand.*
> *Having seen all exactly as they once*
> *happened, the Sage indited*
> *the beauty and bounty of Rama's life*
> *in verse of compelling charm."*
>
> *~ Bala Kanda, Sarga 3, Slokas 6-7,*
> *Translated by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar,*
> *The Epic Beautiful (1983), p. 55.*

In the opening cantos Valmiki is the hero. We see him before us as he listens intently to Narad's description of Rama as the ideal man. And he is walking the banks of Tamasa, enjoying the scenic grandeur in the company of his student, Bharadhwaja. We see him struck by pain and a nameless anger as he watches the lament of the female *krauncha* mourning the sudden death of its mate.

There again he is, listening to Brahma who reassures the Rishi about his poetic capabilities. And we also see him sitting silently in yoga, as the entire Ramayana unveils before him as a cinematograph in the third Sarga of the Bala Kanda.

One is reminded of Sri Aurobindo himself sitting motionless in an upstairs room in Pondicherry as Savitri was in the making. According to him neither was the philosophical content carefully planned nor were the mystic flights results of an unfettered imagination. Like Valmiki, he saw and wrote it down.

> *"I have not anywhere in Savitri written anything for the sake of mere picturesqueness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience. . . Savitri is the record of a seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 343*

This was a lifetime's conviction after having tried to record all that he saw when composing *Savitri*. The pictures had formed of themselves from the depths of Sri Aurobindo's yogic trances. That this could be so, that

such yogic stillness could lead to the enriching digging of the depths of the infinite within oneself and come out with the vastnesses of its manifestation as the finite without, had perhaps been shown to him when he met Valmiki in the opening cantos of the Ramayana decades earlier at Baroda.

The Ramayana seemed to tell a story, but it was certainly no ordinary story. It was not merely that of a Prince's exile, the kidnapping of his wife and her rescue after killing the kidnapper-king in a battle. If it were so, the story could not have endured the pitiless judgment of time. Nor could it have caught the imagination of peoples all over Asia.

There surely were imbedded spiritual radiances within the tale which came from a yogic poet's prophetic vision and it is these radiances that have made the story dear, purposeful and aesthetically appealing. Sri Aurobindo went to the heart of the matter when he remarked thus in an unfinished article, '*The Genius of Valmiki*' (later titled, '*The Voices of the Poets'*)

> *"The kavi or vates, poet & seer, is not the manishi; he is not [the] logical thinker, scientific analyser or metaphysical reasoner; his knowledge is one not with his thought, but with his being; he has not arrived at it but has it in himself by virtue of his power to become one with all that is around him.*
>
> *"By some form of spiritual, vital and emotional oneness, he is what he sees; he is the hero thundering in the forefront of the battle, the mother weeping over her dead, the tree trembling violently in the storm, the flower warmly penetrated with the sunshine. And because he is these things, therefore he knows them; because he knows thus, spiritually & not rationally, he can write of them."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 405*

Because of this spiritual-vital-emotional identification, the Ramayana becomes one vast gallery of memorable portraits, each a unique symbol of the ways of the world. If Rama is seen as a figure of Dharma, Sita of chastity and Lakshmana of service (*kainkarya*), there are also others who exist as themselves within their confines, and yet are an invaluable part of the main story. Guha the boatman, Sabari the Ashram maid, Tara the Vanara queen, Trijatha the Rakshasa woman: Sarga after Sarga throws up such pearls of character, each worthy of taking the lead in an epic. Even the villains and base women provoke our thoughts, kindle our imagination and create the stirrings of compassion in our hearts. Kaikeyi, Kabandha, Lankini, Akshaya Kumara: prisoners of circumstance, all!

And every single character in the Ramayana makes us think of ourselves, our hopes and despairs, our aspirations and anxieties, our basenesses and perfidies, our attempts to break out of the egoistic hell-charms of pride and cupidity, our successes, failures and renewed endeavours to ascend the ladder of perfection with Rama and Sita in the lead.

Valmiki has not told the tale as a mere remembrance of things past. The Ramayana has been written not for passing one's leisure-time as the battle-drums fall silent, and the soldiers rest in their tents over cups of wine after victory-celebrations. The epic is a path-finder, a character-builder, a time-table document for attaining human perfection. Sri Aurobindo recognised this while comparing Indian legends with Greek myths in his letter to Manmohan Ghose:

> *"Inferior in warmth and colour and quick life and the savour of earth to the Greek, they had a superior spiritual loveliness and exaltation; not clothing the surface of the earth with imperishable beauty, they search deeper into the white-hot core of things and in their cyclic orbit of thought curve downward round the most hidden fountains of existence and upward over the highest, almost invisible arches of ideal possibility.*
>
> *"Let me touch the subject a little more precisely. The difference between the Greek and Hindu temperaments was that one was vital, the other supra-vital; the one physical, the other metaphysical; the one sentient of sunlight as its natural atmosphere and the bound of its joyous activity, the other regarding it as a golden veil which hid from it beautiful and wonderful things for which it panted. The Greek aimed at limit and finite perfection, because he felt vividly all our bounded existence; the Hindu mind, ranging into*

the infinite tended to the enormous and moved habitually in the sublime."

~ CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 128

But as Sri Aurobindo is quick to point out, "the infinite is not for all to meddle with; it submits only to the compulsion of the mighty" (ibid). The story of Rama has been told hundreds of times, but Valmiki remains unsurpassed till today. He is the hero as a poet, the bold planner who goes to the battle prepared and yet is forgetful of himself, concentrating on the execution of the work on hand from planes that do not belong to ordinary human consciousness.

Valmiki is not telling a mere story, though that appears to be the surface intention. Actually, he is taking the civilisations of the past in their entirety to study the step reached so far by mankind struggling towards perfection. The future possibilities are projected by placing before us ideal figures, at the same time warning us from falling a prey to the *preyas* of our own making.

One who has chosen the life of the spirit must not give way to self-satisfaction and temptation. Precisely the tragedy that befell Ravana, for who is there who has achieved more than the King of Lanka? Even Hanuman who comes to Ravana's court with terrible anger at the Rakshasa Lord for having caused Sita's unhappiness, even he the *buddhimatam varistha* is for a moment struck dumb at Ravana's personality. (And we must remember that by this time Ravana has begun to slide down, thus affecting the inner glow of his achievements as a devotee, a *tapasvin* and battle-warrior):

What splendour of form! What poise of courage!
What puissance! What effulgence!
Beyonding all limits, what perfections
hem this proud Rakshasa King!
But for his outrageous unrighteousness,
this mighty Rakshasa King
Could lord it over the world of the gods,
aye, over Indra himself.[1]

~ Sundara Kanda, Sarga 49, Slokas 17-8,
Translated by Iyengar,
The Epic Beautiful, pp. 352-3

Valmiki's Ravana is cast not only in superhuman proportions. He is, in his own way, noble. Valmiki alone could achieve this. Sri Aurobindo considered Valmiki's Ravana a masterpiece in characterisation. He felt that though Madhusudan Dutt was able to make Ravana a major hero in Meghnad Vadh, "even then his Ravana is insignificant as compared to the tremendous personality in Valmiki's Ramayana". (*Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 1966, edited by Nirodbaran, p. 153.)

Valmiki's characters come to us with immense reserves of symbolism and even seemingly identical cities are described with subtle differences in emphasis, making it possible to study them as symbol worlds.

When Dasaratha's Ayodhya is described, we see a prosperous city. But Valmiki projects the people and not material grandeur, though the latter is not absent. The sargas, 'Ayodhya Varnana', 'Raja Varnana' and 'Amatya Varnana' give us an idea of perfect citizenship, mutual goodwill and the absence of greed, lust, pride, hate and jealousy. The men and women are young and healthy, well-clothed and well-ornamented. An impregnable city of heroes, and how noble!

Nor only was she grandiosely built,
A city without earthly peer, — her sons
Were noble, warriors whose arrows scorned to pierce
The isolated man from friends cut off
Or guided by a sound to smite the alarmed
And crouching fugitive; but with sharp steel
Sought out the lion in his den or grappling
Unarmed they murdered with their mighty hands
The tiger roaring in the trackless woods
Or the mad tusked boar. Even such strong arms
Of heroes kept that city and in her midst
Regnant king Dussaruth the nations ruled.

~ Bala Kanda, Sarga 5, Slokas 20-23,
Translated by Sri Aurobindo,
CWSA, Vol. 5, pp. 8-9

Almost an identical city, prosperous and peopled with heroes is Lanka. But how different! Valmiki lavishes all the colours in his palette to describe the material

[1] Also see: "And Hinduism admits relative standards, a wisdom too hard for the European intelligence. Non-injuring is the very highest of its laws, ahimsa paramo dharmah; still it does not lay it down as a physical rule for the warrior, but insistently demands from him mercy, chivalry, respect for the non-belligerent, the weak, the unarmed, the vanquished, the prisoner, the wounded, the fugitive and so escapes the unpracticality of a too absolutist rule for all life." (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 149)

magnificence of Ravana's palace and capital. High living, revelries: but there is no mention of compassion, pity or rectitude with reference to Lanka's citizens. Everywhere a spread of vital energy:

> *And moonrise meant the eclipse of the night,*
> *the assault of the blackness*
> *of the heavy meat-gorging Rakshasas*
> *and their riot of revelry:*
> *the scuttling of distrust between lovers*
> *and their immersion in lust:*
> *all this ensued from the efflorescence*
> *of the splendour of moonlight."*
>
> *~ Sundara Kanda, Sarga 5, Sloka 8, Translated by Iyengar, The Epic Beautiful, p. 102.*

Man can rise. Unless he is eternally vigilant, he will fall. To show this, Valmiki presents the contrastive cities and their citizens. In fact, every single line of Valmiki is structured to tell us: "Look here upon this picture and on this,/The counterfeit presentment of two brothers"! (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene iv, 11. 53-4)

Interpreting the Adi Kavya in these terms, Sri Aurobindo says:

> *On one side is portrayed an ideal manhood, a divine beauty of virtue and ethical order, a civilization founded on the Dharma and realising an exaltation of the moral ideal which is presented with a singularly strong appeal of aesthetic grace and harmony and sweetness; on the other are wild and anarchic and almost amorphous forces of superhuman egoism and self-will and exultant violence, and the two ideas and powers of mental nature living and embodied are brought into conflict and led to a decisive issue of the victory of the divine man over the Rakshasa.*
>
> *All shade and complexity are omitted which would diminish the single purity of the idea, the representative force in the outline of the figures, the significance of the temperamental colour and only so much admitted as is sufficient to humanise the appeal and the significance.*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 350*

It is because Valmiki has succeeded eminently in presenting the two pictures that his appeal has been heard through the centuries in India. Indian civilisation, despite rude knocks and bufferings, has successfully held on to the ideal of the divine forces though it might have meant suffering and exile; and consistently rejected by and large the blandishments of material success. It is Rama who gives up his kingdom that is called a *dheera*, a hero, a strong man; and our heroine is Sita who rejects the offer of being made the queen of magnificent Lanka.[2]

Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar following the path hewed by Sri Aurobindo, explicates the Adi Kavi's intention as found in the Asoka Vana scene where Ravana meets Sita:

> ***And when the Lord of all this suicidal load of Preyas chooses to confront Sita, like Darkness daring to invade the Sun, like Death facing Savitri in Sri Aurobindo's epic, the predictable happens. During the fateful confrontation, it is Preyas against the Sreyas that is Sita, for sufferance is Divine. Who is whose prisoner in Lanka? Sita is not Ravana's prisoner, except in appearance; Ravana is the real prisoner, self-imprisoned by his poisoned appetites… The ego-inflated Rakshasa is a darkness that cannot stand the flame of Sita's Sreyas, her fiery immaculateness and her reserves of primordial Shakti."***
>
> ***~ The Epic Beautiful***

Though Valmiki's intention is clear, though the Ramayana is a tale based on the eternal confrontation between light and darkness, the divine and the asuric in man, the poet in him takes infinite care with the structural motifs lest the tale become a morality play.

The Ramayana is a *kavya* where aesthesis is the major force. The poet's aesthetic sensibilities which

[2] "The idealism of characters like Rama and Sita is no pale and vapid unreality; they are vivid with the truth of the ideal life, of the greatness that man may be and does become when he gives his soul a chance. . ." (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 353)

result in *kavya saundarya* are not the same as algebraic equations. Therefore at the very temple of nobility, veiled malignity builds her shameful shrine of petty jealousy and suicidal tale-bearing. Manthara and Kaikeyi are also part of Ayodhya.

In the same way, Lanka has its pockets of sanity as well. Trijatha in the Asoka Vana, Prahastha softening Ravana's words when acting as an interpreter in the Court, the wives of Ravana comforting Sita by their compassionate looks and Vibhishana are also part of Lanka. In Sri Aurobindo's words, such variations as also the killing of Vali are admitted "to humanise the appeal and the significance" of the message enshrined in the epic.

Ascent of Rama, From the Mewar Ramayana. Artist Unknown, Udaipur, 1653.
British Library; available in public domain at Wikimedia Commons

PART 4

RAMA, THE NATIONAL IDEAL

Even his first encounter with Indian legends had shown Sri Aurobindo that these were no mere stories spun by an idle imagination. Long before he took up the intuitive interpretation of the Vedas, he had decided that the Indian legends had to be interpreted as symbols.

The West had seen the Indian myths as barbaric. The westernised Indian also tended to condemn Hindu legends as "trivial and insipid, a mass of crude and monstrous conceptions, a lumber-room of Hindu banalities" (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 125). Even today myopic Indian intellectuals fed on the 'honey-dew' of English education dismiss the legends as "puerile Puranic stuff" (Iyengar, *the Epic Beautiful*, p. 16). Sri Aurobindo swam against the tide and put the record straight. He declared:

> *"It is notable that the two vast Indian epics have been considered as much as Dharma shastras as great historico-mythic epic narratives, itihāsas. They are, that is to say, noble, vivid and puissant pictures of life, but they utter and breathe throughout their course the law and ideal of a great and high ethical and religious spirit in life and aim in their highest intention at the idea of the Divine and the way of the mounting soul in the action of the world."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 227*

Intense human dramas, yes; but also dramas of preparation for the life divine.

Hence the characters act out the legend in the foreground while the background lights up the ethical ideals they represent. The Ramayana is no old wives' tale. When Valmiki writes, a marvellous meeting of a human act and an ethical ideal takes place giving rise to a permanent inspiration for future generations.

"The Ramayana embodied for the Indian imagination its highest and tenderest human ideals of character," said Sri Aurobindo. And added that it:

> *"made strength and courage and gentleness and purity and fidelity and self-sacrifice familiar to it in the suavest and most harmonious forms coloured so as to attract the emotion and the aesthetic sense, stripped morals of all repellent austerity on one side or on the other of mere commonness and lent a certain high divineness to the ordinary things of life, conjugal and filial and maternal and fraternal feeling, the duty of the prince and leader and the loyalty of follower and subject, the greatness of the great and the truth and worth of the simple, toning things ethical to the beauty of a more psychical meaning by the glow of its ideal hues."*
>
> *~ (CWSA, Vol. 20, p. 350)*

This passage explains the secret of the epic's fascination.

Rama has been the national ideal for several thousands of years. An endless debate has raged around some of his actions. If he were Dharma incarnate, how could he kill Vali? Again, is Rama a human being like any of us, or is he an Avatar? Must we judge him as a man or as a God?

What should be our attitude to his stern rejection of Sita after winning the war in Lanka? Was he justified in remaining a silent spectator, unmoved, as Lakshmana prepared the fire and Sita entered it? Where was *manava dharma* when he banished Sita who was carrying his child? Was it not rather unpardonable of Rama to ask Sita to prove her chastity again to the assembled court, in the presence of Lava and Kusa?

The Vali incident has engaged scholars and exegeticists for several centuries. Vali was undoubtedly a hero who did not deserve death engineered from an unexpected quarter. But Valmiki makes no excuses for Rama. He allows the dying Vali to have his say and Rama is allowed a reply, however unconvincing.

But why didn't Rama kill Vali in a straight fight, nags our questioning mind. In our own times, Rajaji has given his version of the Ramayana where he solves the problem by holding on to the Avatar theory:

"Against this accusation (of Vali) what defence could Rama offer? Valmiki has it that Rama gave some explanation with which Vali was satisfied. But I am omitting all this as pointless and pray that the learned may forgive me. What I think is that an avatar is an avatar and that among the sorrows that the Lord and His Consort had to endure in their earthly incarnation, this liability to have their actions weighed on the earthly scales is a part."

~ Ramayana, 1962, p. 81

Another great scholar-statesman, V. S. Srinivasa Sastri has dealt with this controversy in detail in his *Lectures on the Ramayana*. His conclusion is that Rama suffered from human indecision first and later killed Vali by a spasmodic spurt of sudden action. (For a fuller comparison of the views of Rajaji and V. S. Srinivasa Sastri on the controversial episodes in the epic, see 'The Ramayana as Viewed by Two Modern Rishis' included in my book, *The Glory and the Good: Essays on Literature*, 1965, pp. 1-16).

Sri Aurobindo does not take the Avatar-view or human-view in entirety. He reconciles the human being and the Avatar in the racial and universal contexts.

"Cowardice is the last thing that can be charged against Valmiki's Rama. . .Valmiki everywhere paints him as a great warrior. His employment of ruse against an infrahuman enemy does not prove the opposite—for that is always how the human (even great warriors and hunters) has dealt with the infrahuman.

"I think it is Madhusudan who has darkened Valmiki's hero in Bengali eyes and turned him into a poor puppet, but that is not the authentic Rama who, say what one will, was a great epic figure, — Avatar or no Avatar…
"…he [Rama] was the Avatar of the sattwic human mind—mental, emotional, moral—and he followed the Dharma of the age and race."

~ CWSA, Vol. 28, pp. 493-494

Sri Aurobindo felt that when dealing with the human personality of Rama one should get into the spirit of his age and race. Rama's life should not be read as that of a modern man. That is the only way to understand the inconsistencies in his character.

The killing of Vali, the fire-ordeal of Sita, her banishment in the Uttara Kanda: these have to be seen from the angle of the heroic age of which Rama was a part. Sri Aurobindo imparts common-sense to the critics going round the prickly pear of irreconcilable controversies by advocating a mental preparation to absorb the best in the epics:

"I consider myself under an obligation to enter into the spirit, significance, atmosphere of the Mahabharata, Iliad, Ramayana and identify myself with their time-spirit before I can feel what their heroes were in themselves apart from the details of their outer action."

~ CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 490

Sri Aurobindo viewed Rama as an incarnation. He could not think of the Ikshvaku hero as merely a pattern of moral excellence. He exclaimed in his letter to Manmohan Ghose, "surely Rama puts too much divine fire into all he does to be a dead thing" (CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 132).

However, Sri Aurobindo's idea of an Avatar is not merely the guarding of good men and destroying the evil-prone to lessen the burden upon Mother Earth. He considered the Hindu idea of a succession of Avatars to be a parable of evolution. Each incarnation gives a decisive push to the upward evolution of mankind.

"…when I read the Ramayana I feel a great afflatus which I recognise and which makes of its story—mere faery tale though it seems—a parable of a great critical transitional event that happened in the terrestrial evolution and gives to the main character's personality and actions a significance of the large typical cosmic kind which these actions would not have had if they had been done by another man in another scheme of events.

"The Avatar is not bound to do extraordinary actions, but he is bound to give his acts or his work or what he is—any of these or all—a significance and an effective power that are part of something essential to be done in the history of the earth and its races."

~ CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 490

What was Rama's main business? In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "to typify and establish the things on which the social idea and its stability depend, truth and honour, the sense of Dharma, public spirit and the sense of order" (CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 492).

If this mighty work demanded a few sacrifices, well, he would not remain indecisive. Truth and honour demanded his kingdom and fourteen years of exile. His public spirit divorced him from domestic happiness. His leadership to make the world safe for the ideal of the sattwic human being led him to the terrible battle in Lanka.

> *"All this he did with such a divine afflatus in his personality and action that his figure has been stamped for more than two millenniums on the mind of Indian culture and what he stood for has dominated the reason and idealising mind of man in all countries—and in spite of the constant revolt of the human vital is likely to continue to do so until a greater Ideal arises."*
>
> *~ CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 492*

Rama has been criticised not only for such major episodes like the killing of Vali and the banishment of Sita. Lesser questions have also been raised against his actions. Why did he shed tears? Why did he go to the tree and the creeper expressing the pangs of his separation from Sita? Why not, Sri Aurobindo asks back with a glint in his eye. Must we impose "the colder and harder Nordic ideal on the Southern temperament which regarded the expression of emotions, not its suppression, as a virtue"? (CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 493)

The spontaneous ease with which Rama made friends with all kinds of people shows that he was not perfect in a splendidly null, negative, lofty way. He was a faithful lover and husband to whom Sita was everything. This is an example for *sattwic* mankind. He was the perfect man, warm-hearted, dutiful, obedient, tender, brave and compassionate.

He was no doubt an Avatar, says Sri Aurobindo. And he was aware of his mission as an Avatar, "only uncommunicative about it" (CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 496). No miracles are performed by him. Every single episode connected with him — Ahalya gaining her original form, the breaking of Shiva's bow, the piercing of seven trees by a single arrow — can be explained in rationalistic terms.

na kashcit na aparaadhyati

Just as Rama symbolises the ideal sattwic man ("not necessarily a perfect" man), the other characters in the epic also are not mere algebraic symbols of ethical principles. They are utterly human.

> *"They are none of them copy-book examples, but great men and women with the defects and merits of human nature, as all men, even the greatest, are."*
>
> *~ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 28, p. 493*

Dasaratha, Kausalya, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Vali, and Sugriva and many others do commit mistakes. Under the stress of a crisis they give utterance to words not quite in keeping with their character. Why, even Sita, the immaculate heroine, is guilty in this respect. Hence her sad words to Hanuman when the latter wishes to punish the demonesses of the Asoka grove for harassing her. They were but obeying the orders of the tyrant.

In any case, there is none in the world who is not guilty. *na kashcit na aparaadhyati* (Valmiki Ramayana, 4-36-11). Had she not spoken hot words to Rama in moments of anger? Had she not accused the innocent Lakshmana of harbouring ignoble desires?

Such occasional lapses do not detract from a person's character, as long as he is motivated by nobility of intention. It is character that counts ultimately. All the great men and women of Valmiki's world go through the fire-ordeal of *dharma sankatas* as well as momentary loss of their natural poise. This makes them true to life. And this inspires man not to be depressed by his own shortcomings. *na kashcit na aparaadhyati*!

With these words as a saviour-mantra, man tries to shed the impurities in his character in the fire of service, knowledge and devotion. And thus becomes worthy of being an inheritor of the Ramayana tradition. The Ramayana, thus, is one of the strongest foundations of Indian culture.

> *"The work of Valmiki has been an agent of almost incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India: it has presented to it to be loved and imitated in figures like Rama and Sita, made so divinely and with such a revelation of reality as to become objects of enduring cult and worship, or like Hanuman, Lakshmana, Bharata*

the living human image of its ethical ideals; it has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character, and it has evoked and fixed in it those finer and exquisite yet firm soul tones and that more delicate humanity of temperament which are a more valuable thing than the formal outsides of virtue and conduct."

~ CWSA, Vol. 20, pp. 350-351

Ramayana in relief carving at Cave 16, Ellora, Maharashtra; available in public domain at Wikimedia Commons

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