

Matter's Logic and Spirit's Dreams

A Sheaf of Essays

Dr. (Mrs.) Prema Nandakumar

Centre for Policy Studies

Gayatri Vidya Parishad

2016

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First Edition : 2016

Copies can be had of : **DIRECTOR**
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47-7-23, Ba-Bapu Bhavan
Dwarakanagar, 4th Lane,
Visakhapatnam - 530 016.
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Printers : **Sathyam Offset Imprints**
49-28-5, Madhuranagar,
Visakhapatnam - 530 016
Tel : 0891-2796538, 9849996538

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Grateful thanks to Prema Nandakumar

Mrs Prema Nandakumar's first article for the Bulletin of Centre for Policy Studies was published in 1999. The bimonthly Bulletin's latest issue of February 2, 2016 carries her article on *Sri Aurobindo's Philosophical Epic: Savitri*, a subject on which she had worked for her doctorate degree and has extensively written. Seventeen of her articles sent during these years are now presented in this small book, a token of grateful appreciation. This is a compilation of her articles and lecture-summaries in English, Tamil and Telugu covering a wide range of subjects. The torch of wisdom glows luminously in her hands.

Years ago, sixty one to be precise, we as students of history and politics, used to watch with awe and admiration, laced with forgivable envy too, Prema and her brother Ambirajan walk with their father Prof K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in the evenings on the hallowed Sri Ramakrishna beach in Visakhapatnam. Aristotle's legendary peripatetic lectures to his disciples came to our minds. Prema by then had already received an idol of Goddess Saraswati from her noble mother with 'blessings for good education'. That little idol placed on Prema's desk continues to inspire the versatile septuagenarian in her unrelenting pursuit of knowledge and dissemination of ideas and values through scholarly writings and lectures. She grew up 'literally in her father's sumptuous library'. From her parents she also inherited the virtues of simple living and high thinking.

I cannot adequately thank Dr.Prema for the promptness and generosity with which she accedes to my request for articles for the Bulletin. If her illustrious father used to work on the typewriter every day for his works, Prema dexterously operates the computer for her lectures, articles and books. It is indeed a pleasant coincidence that this small publication is being released on the eve of her birthday on February 23. What better gift can one give to her whose 'life has been inextricably woven with books' than a small compilation of her own writings with sincere thanks and good wishes on her birthday!

A. Prasanna Kumar

Centre for Policy Studies
Visakhapatnam
February 18, 2016

Preface

When my first collection of essays, **The Glory and the Good** was brought out by Asia Publishing House in 1965, I had not yet completed a decade as a writer. So I had no problem with ‘selection’ at that time. But half a century later, with my filing cabinets bursting at the seams, it is no easy task to gather what I think will interest the future generations. Fortunately for me, these essays have been sieved through our Bulletin of Centre for Policy Studies, under the watchful eye of the editor, Dr. Prasanna Kumar and I am delighted that they are being issued as a handy book. It is particularly gratifying to me as the CPS is located in Visakhapatnam which is associated with the honeyed memories of my parents. Also, because it is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, the beaconlight for my mother-in-law, Srimati Kumudini, a famous Gandhian writer and activist.

My own life has been closely aligned with reading and writing. When I took the conscious decision of being a full-time housewife so that I could build up my own career as an independent researcher, I had to prove myself to my ‘self’. I remember the day when a hawker of clay dolls came to our porch in Siripuram House, Visakhapatnam when I was a child. My mother bought a Saraswati for six annas and gave the image to me: “Pray to her and you will get good education”. The love and reverence for Saraswati instilled in me at that moment by my mother has remained with me till today. The image has also presided over my work-table all of these seven decades; wherever I have had to go and make a home. As I bow to her now, I also bow to the memory of the unknown craftsperson who made this image with care and adoration. Such is the intricate web which binds us all with invisible threads of practical knowledge and deep piety. Can I dismiss my Saraswati as

a handful of clay daubed with a painter's brush? That is the message of the title of this collection. Matter speaks to us in terms of science, technology, profits and loss. But it is the spirit's dreams that make life cultured, livable and capable of exceeding itself as well.

My own writings are an expression of wonderment at our traditional ways, scriptures, literature and art. Coming from a family of South Indian Srivaishnavas who consider Sanskrit and Tamil as their twin windows into life, religion, philosophy and spirituality, I was no stranger to the presence of the Sanskrit 'greats' in our culture. However, it was English literature that drew me into its varied lanes and by-lanes with those high-rise buildings of Shakespeare, Milton and Charles Dickens. Also I loved reading world literature in English translation. Guided by my father, I entered Sri Aurobindo's universe. He was the prime inspiration for my going back to the Sanskrit epics and Puranas. Even after leaving Visakhapatnam, I did not bid goodbye to Pothana, Krishnadeva Raya, Bhakta Ramadasu and Viswanadha Satyanarayana. It has been a life of constant reading and writing and listening to great speakers. This, this is my India. Even the heavens cannot equal its riches! *Mama janmabhûmî svargâdapi garîyasi!*

Aren't there some blots in this tradition? Yes, I am aware of them, and I am also aware of great personalities who have tried to put an end to such blots. This is a culture that accepts correctives; but it takes time. This is a culture that has welcomed science and technology from time immemorial, but has frowned upon the destruction of Mother Nature by the acquisitive instinct in man who loses his balance by the power placed in his hands. The nuclear peril is but one instance of such *asuric* grab. There are then the varied ways in which our mangroves and water

sources have been treated with scant respect. So we have to be constantly alert to point out the mistakes and for applying the correctives. In this matter, it is a matter of pride that the Centre for Policy Studies has been doing priceless service to keep us awake by its lectures and seminars, the Bulletin and the periodical release of books on subjects of lasting significance. My grateful thanks to the Gayatri Vidya Parishad headed by Shri A.S.N. Prasad for their kind gesture in publishing this book, and to Professor Prasanna Kumar for his enthusiasm in giving it a final shape. To Nandakumar an affectionate smile for allowing me to keep the house as I like it to be: a jungle of books and files. And to Ahana, Bhuvana and Raja, never to have demanded a television set and instead accept as gifts books, books and books always.

Prema Nandakumar

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A Touch of Politics

ISSUES OF CONCERN TO TAMIL NADU : THE ROOTS

The Principles on which the present series of regional workshops are being conducted are unexceptionable:

“... That liberty and individual responsibility are the foundations of civilized society; that the state is only the instrument of the citizens it serves; that any action of the state must respect the principles of democratic accountability; that rights and duties go together; that every citizen has a moral responsibility to others in society and that a peaceful world can only be built upon respect for these principles.”

High thoughts that are also sobering in the present socio-political context. In Tamil Nadu (perhaps elsewhere too) there have been too many disturbing trends and it will be futile on my part to touch them all. A state in which the idea of accountability has been thrown to winds due to the inability to convict corrupt people, where liberty is quite, quite limited as it is so easy to silence voices of truth with the help of lumpen elements. Where the caste war has taken cosmic proportions, where even if the State wants to do the right thing it is gagged by frequent elections along with the accompanying noise and mutual accusations, where almost all the universities have come under the cloud of corruption, and where all the despicable manifestations of western culture is threatening to overwhelm an existent, wonderful, 3000 year old culture; such a state is not in good position to speak of liberal principles. Liberal principles are not meant for oration; they are meant to be put in use for the good of the common people.

But it would be silly to throw up our hands in despair. We must light a candle? Where? How? So how shall we go about educating a state (and a country) which has been on the downward slide?

Here is a State with an unbroken language – tradition built upon mutual respect and trust. As old if not older than the Sanskrit language. Tamil alone, among all Indian languages, is in proud possession of a living literature of more than 2000 years. Of particular importance is the vast volume of didactic literature which prove that the Tamils have been closely concerned with the everyday life of the common man. The aim has always been the common good and Dharma – Aram – has been like a Vedic Skhambha holding up and sustaining the Tamil ethos. This is why Dr. C.R. Krishnamurti, Professor Emeritus in the University of British Columbia and a longtime resident of Canada has dedicated his recent book, *Tamizh Literature Through the Ages : A Socio – Cultural Perspective* to his parents “who taught their children the value of liberal education through words and deeds”. This came naturally to people of an earlier age whose everyday life consumed the moral code in verses that could be easily memorized and used to control any deviation attempted by the younger generation. Religions may be different but the values of life are the same.

We do not know whether Tiruvalluvar belonged to any of the Vedic religions or Buddhism Or Jainism. But that has not affected the force of his authority. Introducing his English translation of the **Tirukkural**, K.R. Srinivasa lyengar says :

“The individual, society or the social aggregate, the nation or the state : these are surely interlinked, if not indeed enacting a splendid interpretation. Individuals make society, and the composition and health of the society ensure the strength of the state as well... Individuals and aggregations seek pleasure (preyas) in its multitudinous forms, but only when such pleasure flows from the ground and the living springs of Virtue (sreyas) can it truly be pleasure; else it will be dead – sea fruit, mere weariness and mockery, and devoid of all praise.”

Hence, it is the individual who has to be perfected first and that too when the individual is young. This takes us to the school and collegiate levels of growing up. **Tirukkural** and also the other famous didactic works (**Naladiyar, Moodurai, Tirikadukam** among others) should be taught in an attractive manner. Another method to inculcate liberal values would be to highlight the sacrifices made by the older generations of freedom fighters by repeatedly referring to them in the school text books. Children should be encouraged to read and understand the sufferings gone through by these noble persons. You could call it a “brain washing” technique, but this is the only way to create a genuine awareness so that the younger generation would imbibe a spirit of sacrifice and face the challenges flung at their faces by leaders who do not seem to be ashamed of indulging in corruption and other malpractices.

When conveying the messages of these great freedom fighters, no thought should be given to their caste, creed or class.

The present set of principles (quoted in the beginning)

could be crystallized into a shorter form with a simpler phraseology and in different languages and presented to schools so that the students could take it as an oath every day at the beginning of the school day. After all, do we not see grown up men with a glow lighting up their faces when they are reminded of their Scout days? Immediately they do repeat the scout promise.

“ On My Honour, I promise to do My Best to do My Duty

To God and Country

To Help other People at all Times

To Obey and keep to the Spirit of the Scout Laws.”

It is encouraging to know that most of those children who have undergone some such discipline – it could be the Scouts and Guides, or NCC – do strive not to fall prey to the evil methodologies of going on and on and up and up in their profession.

We need not feel despondent because each of the many actions discussed in this workshop is a candle, and my suggestion also is a candle. Let us light the candle in the encircling gloom. Only in this way can the present unhealthy trends and activities be changed which can lead to a true and lasting change of values. After about ten or 15 years this pledge and this closeness to didactic works would definitely bear fruit as an army of right thinking citizens of our nation.

Let us remember that the motto for the Union of India. Satyameva Jayate, is not just an abrupt phrase. In fact, if only we had been explaining to the students the entire Upanishadic verse in which it occurs, probably the

moral fibre would not have grown so lax. Forty years ago Rajaji realized this and hastened to explain the entire verse.

“The path that the Rishis, undisturbed by unrealized desires, take the bright path that leads to the supreme abode of reality, that path is paved with Truth: Victory is for Truth ever, never for un-Truth.”

Truth is the means to reach the supreme goal. Anything that is not True cannot take one to it.

It is the sure road the seers have always taken. “Let us take the road where the Maharshis go, said Viswamitra to the princes. And so says the Mundakopanishad Rishi to all.”

Satyameva Jayate : Truth alone wins. But also remember Naanrutham : Untruth never wins. It can never take you to the goal.

If our goal is a healthy, prosperous and free democratic India, we must ensure that the younger generation is warned that untruth will not win. And if they answer you back saying, why should I tie myself up with these axioms when so-and-so or so-and-so has risen up rapidly, and such-and-such a person is able to evade the rule of law, simply assure them that they are children of light, not of darkness. The ideal child of Mother India is not meant for the sunless spaces of glitter, rowdiness, conspicuous consumption, corruption, chicanery. Simply tell them in your own words what was effectively put into English by Rajaji when he spoke to us while we were growing up:

“Do not put out the light by denying the soul. Those

who deny the soul kill it and they will wander in dense darkness, not knowing right from wrong, making a hell of this very life by converting the world into a sunless place.

Deny God, deny the soul, and you will be like vehicles without lights on the road in a dark night.

But is there not Morality, though there may be no soul? Yes, the moon may be there though the sun may not be seen. But the light of the moon, you know, is got from the sun, and it wanes and waxes and wanes again and there are a great many clouds that hide the light of the pale moon.”

This is how he taught us to avoid confusion and error. We should now pass on these great candles of illumination to the future generation.

(Note submitted by Dr. Prema Nandakumar to the Workshop on Liberalism for Tamil Nadu held by Project for Economic Education (Bombay) in collaboration with TANSTIA-FNF Service Centre, an association of Tamil Nadu Small and Tiny Industries at Chennai on 28 & 29 August, 1999)

TEACHING CULTURED DISCOURSE

The recent elections have revealed the importance of cultured discourse. Cultural discourse is one thing and cultured discourse is another. The former deals with histories, traditions, rituals, art and all that. It can be taught in classes, learnt by sitting for hours in a library or wandering through a land interacting with the people. The latter is learnt by us in our childhood by watching ideal personalities in the family and outside world who inspire us by their example, by the way they work, talk and move around.

In earlier generations, cultured discourse was learnt by simply observation and an occasional corrective from the elder in the family. Seventy years ago, it was automatic for us to bend before elders in salutation if we met them for the first time, and whenever we met them after a little interval. My grandfather would say that if you do namaskaram to elders, even if he dislikes you, it will turn into a blessing, such is the power of humility. He would speak of Vedanta Desika's work, 'Anjali Vaibhavam', how 'Anjali' means "turns to water", and that the heart of the person receiving the honour would melt immediately with love. These days this has been sadly replaced by hand shakes and hugs which are a western import.

Recently the world saw how the PM-elect of India did namaskaram to the steps of the Parliament before going up. This is exactly what is done in temples even today. There is an interesting legend associated with the temple steps which are referred to as 'Kulasekaran Padi'. It was the desire of Kulasekara Alvar, the Chera king, to lie as a

step in the Venkateswara temple at Tirumala so that he could watch the Lord going out of the sanctum in procession.

“Lord Venkateswara who removes our misery
That keeps entangling us! I would love to be
The doorstep of your temple on which walk
Men and gods, and watch your coral-red lips.”

Such briefings now and then from the elders in a Hindu household made for physical discipline in various ways. “Do not throw away food, the rice will go and complain to Mother Ganga” was a familiar admonition that taught me never to waste food. “Do not leave the plate unwashed after eating food”, was a command that we dare not disobey as children. Naturally, even today not for me piled up dishes in the kitchen sink that is a familiar (and ugly) scene today in many households!

Just as the outer discipline was instituted without taking recourse to punishment except in extreme cases, the growing mind also was helped to blossom in a healthy manner. I belonged to a traditional household that had quite a few children. Come evening, we had to repeat certain Tamil verses that marked a daily time-table for us. While we had **Tirukkural** in the school, our uncle made us learn ‘**Aathi Soodi**’, ‘**Nanneri**’, ‘**Moothurai**’ and the rest. Seven decades have passed by but the village pial, the evening twilight, and the children reciting have not faded away. **Ulaganeethi** was a must and as it was rhythmical, we shouted ourselves hoarse reciting the poem. “**Odhaamal orunaalum irukkavendaam**”!

“Never allow a day to pass without studies.

Do not speak ill of others;
Never forget your mother.
Do not rub shoulders with the deceitful.
Do not go to forbidden areas;
Do not keep complaining thereafter.
Ever, forever hail Subramania,
The rider on the peacock.”

It is a short poem of one hundred and four lines. One need not study tomes of books on self-control and attend special lectures on how to lead a moral life. All is contained in these lines and if they are allowed to sear into a person's heart, an ideal citizen would be born. Whenever a temptation to take the wrong path rises, a line from this work would scotch it immediately. Watching the recent Indian elections, I marveled at the manner in which unconditioned, indisciplined mind can commit mistakes and idiocies for a minute's appreciative snigger from an equally curmudgeonish audience.

For instance, we read that the mother of the then Chief Minister of Gujarat who lived in her small house, went to the polling booth in an autorickshaw and cast her vote. Since most of my mother-grandmother group had done the same thing, we were happy to know that the lady was so self-reliant, had no wish to ask for a car from her son nor had she cared for the trappings of officialdom. Unfortunately, within two days, we read an open letter from a Congressman who wished to speak of the lady's son (the Chief Minister) as a heartless son in a bid to tarnish his image. It was addressed to Narendra Modi: “Your mother is like my mother. I have immense respect for her. I may not be as resourceful as you are, but I would request

you to allow me to provide her all the necessary comforts of life according to my capacity.” If Rashid Alvi was trying to insult, the attack failed. He did not realize that living a simple life linked to high thinking has always been the Indian ideal. Giving up luxuries is automatically praised by the tradition.

This incident was one of those many that ultimately cost the Congress Party its defeat. Which is very unfortunate, for I have the highest regard for the institution which once upon a time, long, long ago, gave us Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, and of course, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Come to think of it, the speeches and incidents of this Election need scientific analysis to find out wherein our system of education has lost its moorings, settling down into the Serbonian Bog of unbridled thought, speech and action. Shall we begin again with **Ulaganeethi** and recite, “Do not speak of what you do not know!”

Courtesy : *The School* (Bangalore)

SHIMMERING WITH A STEADY GLOW

Jawaharlal Nehru and India remained closely aligned to each other for several decades. Whether for Nehru or for the nation, the Past we know; the Present, we can gauge with some degree of accuracy, provided we keep ourselves somewhat neutral; the Future, ah, who knows? Hence the seminarians gathered for these two days can give a fairly plausible account of the Nehru inheritance, by taking up the different segments with diligence and enthusiasm.

There is the Past, the life of Nehru (1889-1964), his achievements. The son of Motilal Nehru, a prominent lawyer and nationalist statesman and Swaroop Rani, Nehru was a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge and the Inner Temple, where he trained to be a barrister. Upon his return to India, he enrolled at the Allahabad High Court, and took an interest in national politics, which eventually replaced his legal practice. A committed nationalist since his teenage years, Nehru became a rising figure in Indian politics during the upheavals of the 1910s. He became the prominent leader of the left-wing factions of the Indian National Congress during the 1920s, and eventually of the entire Congress, with the tacit approval of his mentor, Gandhi. As Congress President in 1929, Nehru called for complete independence from the British Raj and instigated the Congress's decisive shift towards the left. History has recorded his strivings, jail terms and role in getting the Congress enter the provincial elections, get powers to administer, the Quit India Movement and finally the dismemberment of the Indian nation with the British Rulers leaving the land leading to his Prime Ministership for the seventeen years following India's independence.

This brief recap of a momentous life need not make

us feel guilty for it is all an open book. Nehru's India during his years as Prime Minister and even for a few decades after, was largely the creation of his ideas of socialism. The problem with Jawaharlal Nehru was that he was not a dictator. Given the immense popularity he enjoyed when he came to power in 1947, he could have assured India of never having to look back at poverty and disparity by taking harsh steps. But he was no Stalin. Industrialisation was his mantra and he turned away from his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of Small is Beautiful. Russia had almost caught up with the United States with its huge industries. India shall follow suit. Thus was born the famous Five Year Plans concept.

An under-developed country like India, almost undeveloped when it came to heavy industries, had to be carefully nurtured as it was a fledgling democracy. Of course, one had to take infinite care with its defence and finance. But industries? Ah, Nehru was in a hurry. To him the Russian Five Year Plans seemed a disciplined genie that yielded the desired results at an early date. After all Planning was a way of giving direction to the mass and so there had been Bombay Plan, Gandhian Plan and so on. But this was to be a State funded Plan with clear cut objectives. As early as 1959 when I was a doctoral student in Andhra University, my brother, Ambirajan, published his book, **A Grammar of Indian Planning**. For almost one whole year the house had reverberated to discussions and arguments and exchange of ideas between my father, Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar and my brother.

Though my subject was literature, I imbibed enough of economics in those days which would help me later when I became a journalist writing for Swarajya that was being piloted by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari. One thing

troubled me then. How were they going to achieve the Five Year Plans when the First Plan itself did not adhere to the time slot of 1951 to 1956? Such plans which poured in huge resources could not waste time. And yet the first Plan was released only in 1953, eighteen months behind schedule! I was a student of literature and all I could gather from the newspapers and discussions at home was that by the end of 1956, there was going to be a terrific amount of expenditure – 2378 crores in the remaining three years: it seemed so terrific in those days. All this did not seem visionary but just Alnascharism, day-dreaming to put it plainly. Already the dreadful news about forced labour in Russia was making the rounds: what price Planning and Progress?

Soon I entered the world of journalism and my days of journalism remain memorable for the guide was no less a person than Chakravarti Rajagopalachari and these were the last years of Nehru as the Prime Minister. Days of reading books and papers carefully, marking, taking down notes to reveal the problems that had crept in with the unbridled expenditures of Planning and the resultant power-brokerage that was underlined by the powerful coinage of Rajaji – Permit-Licence-Quota Raj: heady days indeed! And this Raj seems to continue till today. Jawaharlal Nehru would not have gone for the kind of suppressions of freedom like Emergency nor would he have accepted corruption as an inevitable, global failing. With the kind of popularity he enjoyed, a free economy may have helped India better than the mire of mixed economy we have found ourselves in with the increasing failure of our Five Year Plans to show results. The reason is not far to seek. The iron hand behind the administration was absent. The red rose on the shirt's lapel was mistaken for a take-it-easy attitude. I am surprised by the accurate

prescience of my brother Ambirajan when he wrote way back as 1959:

“In a sense our Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is our greatest asset, for while he enjoys the prestige and wields the authority of a dictator, he has also the emotional nuances and ready adaptability of a true democrat. Even as he is conscious of the possibilities of planning, he is not unwilling at the same time to acknowledge the limitations of democratic planning. But the Prime Minister is not the whole of the administration, and there is always the danger that the circumstances may turn the best asset into a dangerous liability. The Prime Minister should be an example, not a glittering façade for others to hide behind and pursue their respective ends.”

This is precisely what has happened, but that is not our subject today. It is Jawaharlal Nehru.

A seminar which is ready to discuss the relevance of Nehru for India's future is a bold attempt, and a welcome one too. For, this would make us go back to Nehru again. Fortunately for us, he has left behind a few good books that act as guidelines on cultured living, patriotism and humanism. There is his ancestry, son of a very capable lawyer of Allahabad, Motilal Nehru. In Cambridge Nehru was a student of Science but had an interest in reading books on politics and economics. He studied law and returned home to follow his father's footsteps as a lawyer. But he could not. He has confessed that the profession did not interest him and meanwhile he had been drawn into politics.

The story of Nehru's work as a fighter for Indian independence under Gandhi's leadership and his holding the Prime Minister's post for seventeen long years is well known. Biographers apart, Nehru himself has been honest

enough in writing his autobiography which was published in 1936. I came to his books quite early for when I expressed my ambition to become a writer, my father directed me to a long list of books that were a must for the seed time of an Indian journalist. All the three books of Nehru were included in this list: Nehru's Autobiography, Glimpses of World History and The Discovery of India. I was fascinated both by the content and the style, and what seemed to me then to be a rare open-mindedness. The fascination continues and has led me to write and speak about him, even to criticize him at length, but I have never doubted the lambent sincerity of his writing. **The Autobiography**, for instance. Back in the 'thirties, how sure he was about the way the Indian National Congress was moulding India's future under Gandhi's direction! As this passage:

“I have no doubt whatever that Hindustani is going to be the common language of India. Indeed it is largely so today for ordinary purposes. Its progress has been hampered by foolish controversies about the script. An effort must be made to discourage the extreme tendencies and develop a middle literary language, on the lines of the spoken language in common use. With mass education this will inevitably take place.

Some people imagine that English is likely to become the lingua franca of India. That seems to me a fantastic conception, except in respect of a handful of upper-class intelligentsia. It has no relation to the problem of mass education and culture. It may be, as it is partly today, that English will become increasingly a language used for technical, scientific, and business communications, and especially for international contacts.... This does not mean that English should be neglected, but, if we are to have a balanced view of the world, we must not confine ourselves to English spectacles.”

Sometimes he gets into trouble unwittingly as when he lashes out at Hindu Mahasabha as communal in Banaras Hindu University with Madan Mohan Malaviya, the Vice-Chancellor, presiding over the function. But were not Moslems communal? There is widespread criticism in the papers. Though he knows he has committed a faux pas, Nehru wriggles out by saying, "Deliberately I laid stress on the reactionary character of the Hindu communalists, for there was no point in my criticizing Moslems before a Hindu audience."

Again, it was very obvious that Motilal Nehru who had presided over the Amritsar Congress in 1919, had wished his son to follow his footsteps and become the Congress President sooner than later. There were other stalwarts (Subhas Chandra Bose, Vallabhbhai Patel to name a few) but Mahatma Gandhi saw to it that Nehru's name was proposed at the very last moment, taking everyone by surprise. But who dare speak out at that moment? And Nehru became the President of the Indian National Congress. What should interest us in this questionable election (which probably changed the future course of India) was how Nehru perceived it and was honest enough to put it down in words, which must have cost him quite a pang. He says that his election went unchallenged in a spirit of resignation from the members of the All-India Congress Committee:

"I have seldom felt quite so annoyed and humiliated as I did at that election. It was not that I was not sensible of the honor, for it was a great honor, and I would have rejoiced if I had been elected in the ordinary way. But I did not come to it by the main entrance or even a side entrance; I appeared suddenly by a trap door and bewildered the audience into acceptance. They put a brave face on it and,

like a necessary pill, swallowed me. My pride was hurt, and I almost felt like handing back the honor. Fortunately I restrained myself from making an exhibition of myself and stole away with a heavy heart.

Probably the person who was happiest about this decision was my father. He did not wholly like my politics, but he liked me well enough, and any good thing that came my way pleased him. Often he would criticize me and speak a little curtly to me, but no person who cared to retain his good will could run me down in his presence.”

This honesty is what makes the **Autobiography** readable and even touching at times. The **Discovery of India** and **Glimpses of World History** also charm us by the easy flow of his language, and the style was a great help to me in sculpting my own approach to journalistic writing. Indira Gandhi’s foreword to the 1980 edition of the **Discovery** is a moving and correct appraisal of the author and his writing. She says:

“Books fascinated Jawaharlal Nehru. He sought out ideas. He was extraordinarily sensitive to literary beauty. In his writings he aimed at describing his motives and appraisals as meticulously as possible. The purpose was not self-justification or rationalization, but to show the Tightness and inevitability of the actions and events in which he was a prime participant. He was a luminous man and his writings reflected the radiance of his spirit.”

One could find faults with many of Nehru’s statements like the Aryan invasion of India theory, but all that is beside the point. What we must admire in him is that in spite of his western education, he remained a child of India and took proper pride in India’s past so that, “Out of that distant past, which is history and the present, which is the burden of today, the future of India is gradually taking

shape. We must have an intellectual understanding of these mighty processes of history. We must have even more, an emotional awareness of our past and present, in order to try to give right direction to the future.”

A wider canvas is taken for **Glimpses of World History** which brings out the priceless habit of reading good books Nehru had cultivated from his days as a student in Cambridge. All was grist to his mill and hence when the **Glimpses** is read, one gets an accession of health, getting injected by the precious blood of master-spirits, as Milton described a good book. Which Indian will not be proud of his past, when it is brought so in the brush-strokes of an excellent communicator? Nehru writes:

“We are apt to be taken in a little by the glitter of Europe and forget the past. Let us remember that it is Asia that has produced great leaders of thought who have influenced the world perhaps more than anyone or anything elsewhere—the great founders of the principal religions. Hinduism, the oldest of the great religions existing to-day, is of course the product of India. So also is its great sister-religion Buddhism, which now spreads all over China and Japan and Burma and Tibet and Ceylon. The religion of the Jews and Christianity are also Asiatic religions, as their origin was in Palestine on the west coast of Asia. Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsis, began in Persia, and you know that Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca in Arabia. Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, Mohammed, and Confucius and Lao-Tse, the great philosophers of China— you could fill pages with the names of the great thinkers of Asia. You could also fill pages with the names of the great men of action of Asia. And in many other ways I could show you how great and vital was this old continent of ours in the days gone by.”

And lest Indira feel disheartened by the contemporary fall of Asian countries, Nehru hastens to assure her the good days are coming, one can already see Asia awakening, “The eyes of the world are upon her, for everyone knows that Asia is going to play a great part in the future.”

Nehru went to prison nine or ten times but certainly they turned out to be the most fruitful for the world’s granary of prison literature. History may have its own judgement regarding Nehru’s life and times. But Time the great critic, has pronounced that when it came to writing he produced classics which can be glimpsed in his individual speeches as well. The “Tryst with destiny” speech on the day we gained independence; it must have cost Nehru quite a lot emotionally to be speaking in such a positive tone when his sensitive soul was getting news of the Partition massacres that had already begun. With adroit care, Nehru does slip in his thoughts about what is happening as a grim reminder:

“Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom, so is prosperity now, and so also is disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.

To the people of India, whose representatives we are, we make an appeal to join us with faith and confidence in this great adventure. This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill will or blaming others. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell...

It is a fateful moment for us in India, for all Asia and for the world. A new star rises, the star of freedom in the east, a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materialises. May the star never set and that hope never be betrayed!”

Half a century has passed by since he wrote his last word, and left his notepad with Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening':

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."

And yet, I return to him often, and thousands do so. Once you have entered Nehru's world, it becomes a constant search for the personality of Nehru, an attempt to discover him, which would be the task of the scholars gathered at this seminar. To conclude with the words of my father, Professor Srinivasa Iyengar:

"... we go to these books, we linger in their company, we return to them again and again, for a very different reason – to know Jawaharlal Nehru, to watch the leaps of his agile intellect, to follow the sinuous movements of his singular sensibility, to exchange pulses with this great son of India who is verily the greatest internationalist of our time ...Wisely and widely learned in the ancients and the moderns, enjoying the companionship of great thoughts and great minds, Jawaharlal Nehru's writings too breathe the life-giving air of culture and lightly shimmer with a steady glow."

With this mesmerizing subject on hand, I am sure it is going to be a wonderful gathering. I wish the seminar all success.

(Inaugural Address at the UGC National Seminar on "Nehru's India, Past, Present and Future" at the Centre for Nehru Studies, Bharatidasan University, Tiruchirapalli on 30th March, 2015.)

CENTENARY OF A DEFIANT GESTURE

This month we are celebrating the centenary of Sri Aurobindo's launching of *Arya*, the journal in which many of his magnificent philosophical and cultural studies appeared as serials for the first time. The journal was a defiant gesture towards the increasing militarism that led to two Balkan Wars in 1912-13. Assassinations had become common and terrorism was in the air. Can the world be educated not to regress? Sri Aurobindo was assisted in his venture by two remarkable personalities from France, Paul Richard and Mirra Richard.

The Supreme has not created the world to have it destroyed! Philosophy, current political and social scenario and pellets of wisdom gathered from world literature would be presented in the magazine. It was a bold dream which became a grand reality and remained so for more than six years. A superhuman feat as Sri Aurobindo was managing the journal single-handed while in self-exile in Pondicherry and had to fill up the pages as well, since the exigencies of the First World War had taken the Richards away to Japan. As I spend the centenary year of *Arya* browsing through the pages of the magazine, Sri Aurobindo appears in his Viswarupa. So many facets to the same personality! Great men whom we have known like Acharya J.B. Kripalani, Veluri Chandrasekaram and T.V.Kapali Sastriar eagerly waited for the first of every month to get at the journal and read it repeatedly for the new approaches to Vedanta, the return to the Vedic past and the firm foundations of Indian culture. Most of the classics of Sri Aurobindo – **The Life Divine, The Synthesis of Yoga, The Ideal of Human Unity, On the Veda, The Psychology of Social Development** – saw the light of day in *Arya* and were read avidly at that time. Paul Richard and Subramania Bharati also contributed now and then. Begun on 15th August 1914, the journal's last issue came out in January, 1921.

It is from *Arya* that we come to know Sri Aurobindo, the reviewer. He is totally focused on the book he is reviewing and sees it always in a larger background and analyses the significances of the publication. His review of **Shamaa**, a quarterly edited by Mrinalini Chattopadhyay reveals his generosity of understanding. This is the second issue and is certainly “a sure promise, of a progressive reawakening of the higher thinking and aesthetic mentality in India after a temporary effacement in which the eastern mind was attempting to imitate in the wrong way elementary second-rate occidental ideas.”

Wholesome praise. But where Sri Aurobindo’s critical blade flashes out, it does its work thoroughly, with brilliant finality. Criticism, yes; but not invective. That was always Sri Aurobindo’s style in all his writings. Writing of J.B. Raju’s essay on S. Radhakrishnan’s work on the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore published in **Shamaa**, Sri Aurobindo teaches us how to make a corrective statement in a review:

“The criticism gives unhappily, inspite of its interest, an impression of ability very badly used, for it is throughout what a criticism of this kind should not be, censorious, hostile, bitterly incisive and sometimes almost brutal in the inimical tone of its phrases. A philosophical discussion should surely be conducted in a graver and more impersonal tone.”

In fact one of the reviews he wrote for *Arya* became a book! Beginning as a review of John Woodroffe’s *Is India Civilized* which in its turn was a rebuttal of William Archer’s despicable book, **India and the Future**, the serial review is now the well-known masterpiece, **The Foundations of Indian Culture**. It was our good fortune that Archer should be reviewed by Woodroffe and Sri Aurobindo be inspired by the review to teach us how to take pride in our culture. All, all because the noble *Arya* came into existence on 15th August, 1914 !

COURTESY AND LIBERTY

When we open the newspaper in the morning and find a happening which goes entirely against the bases of cultured living in the political arena, i.e. courtesy and liberty, we always reach out for John Milton's *Areopagitica*. Unfortunately, this book has not been allowed to gather dust on our shelves during the last few decades in independent India, for we are taking it down quite often.

As a document, it has sustained liberalism the world over. It has proved to be the very spirit of the fight for freedom of thought and expression. True, it has a blind spot or two (as in Milton's excluding the Catholic Church from such liberty), but *Areopagitica* has mantric passages that teach us on the need to be eternally vigilant in a democracy, and the Press happens to be one of the major instruments of such vigilance on behalf of the common man.

Areopagitica was published in the month of November, 1644. A passionate document which was the immediate result of the licensing system of the British Parliament, the work points out how such censorship would affect good and truthful writing and keep the common man ignorant. If we are not allowed to think, we would soon lose the ability to think because knowledge thrives only by exercise as do our limbs. Milton says:

“Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believes things only because his Pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy.”

In a democracy we want to know, analyse facts on our own and exercise our franchise based on our analysis of the situation. It has been a matter of great pride that our democracy has sustained itself for more than half a century holding on to the liberal spirit. At the same time this fact should not dazzle us into a state of self-complacency as the Press has had a tough time of it through these decades. It has survived, because from the very beginning, eminent intellectuals and patriots have also been journalists. The roll call of honour starts with high eminences like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Subramania Bharati, G. Subramania Aiyar, and Sri Aurobindo. Later came Mahatma Gandhi and Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, Kalki Krishnamurthy. Khasa Subba Rao, M.Chalapati Rao, Iswar Dutt, N. Raghunathan, Pothan Joseph, Frank Moraes, ...to be growing up in their times was verily heaven for the liberal spirit!

This is what makes me hope that here are temporary clouds but the Press will remain strong and united as ever in guarding liberal thought thanks to the firm foundations. And that the authorities will show proper courtesy when having to probe alleged mis-statements and misconduct. A vibrant democracy cannot afford to set aside cultured levels of discourse and behaviour. Searching the bedrooms when the owner is not around sounds so pathetically repetitive. We have derived no end of fun reading the tragicomic situation when Sri Aurobindo was roused on a Friday night (another interesting coincidence, but this happened in 1908, and an intolerant British Government was in power!) by Superintendent Cregan and a posse of policemen who all came “running like heroes, pistols in hand, as though they were besieging, with guns and cannon, a well-armed fort”, but then, those were the days when the search

was done when the owner was present. Sri Aurobindo writes in *Kara Kabini*:

“Nothing remarkable transpired in the course of the search. But I recollect Mr. Clark looking long and suspiciously at the sacred earth from Dakshineswar that had been kept in a small cardboard box; he suspected it might be some new and terribly powerful explosive. In a sense Mr. Clark’s suspicions were not unfounded. In the end the decision was reached that it was a piece of earth which was unnecessary to send to the chemical analyst.”

Indeed the spiritual revolution set in motion by Bhagawan Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar has been taking us very fast to the ideal of making India the Guru of the World, as visioned by Sri Aurobindo. I would love to think of our democracy becoming the ideal of the world in political arena too, and our rulers upholding the values of liberal thinking. One must needs conclude with Milton’s peroration:

“Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance, while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.”

May the clouds disperse soon, the Indian Press remain the puissant guardian of our democracy, and Mother India become powerful in truth as the Garuda Eagle!



**The Glory and
Good of Literature**

SRI AUROBINDO'S PHILOSOPHICAL EPIC: SAVITRI

Recently a Professor of Philosophy in an Indian College who was on a visit to Srirangam went around my library for a while. He was particularly struck by the fine production values of the Aurobindonian literature, which he found a joy to handle. But he exclaimed: **Savitri** is so difficult! He did not even know that the poem is about the legend which is familiar to us all. "What? The same Savitri-Satyavan story for which my wife takes auspicious objects to the vat-vriksha and performs puja?" As he had to go away immediately, he requested me for a simple write-up on the epic. Though I have been writing on Savitri from 1957 when I chose the epic as my doctoral subject, I found it a joy to write yet another brief note for this friend. For I find reading Savitri, writing about the poem and even typing the script cover me with Ananda. I wrote a brief introduction and I would like to share it with the readers.

It was natural for Sri Aurobindo to choose to write in English his great philosophical poem, though after a few years in India he had gained sufficient mastery of Sanskrit and Bengali. But English came to him naturally as from his childhood he had been using the language as his mother-tongue. It is as well, for he has given a unique epic for the English language and enriched English literature. It is entirely Indian in cast. Of course, being a recordation of mystic-yogic experiences, **Savitri** is not an easy read. In any case, the Hindu tradition is to read great poetry as parayana every day. One has to have a mood of reverent attention over a period of years, coming to the poem again and again, for not in one reading alone can one hope to

conquer its heights of significance. **Savitri** too calls for such continuous and reverent study. If it baffles us at first, it may be that it is a new kind of poem, demanding a new alertness in response.

Savitri was begun in the closing years of the last century and concluded about the mid-point of the present century. It is a great Yogi's poetic testament. It is the story of a heroine enshrined in immemorial Hindu legend, and it carries the name of the holiest of Hindu mantras. It spans the past, the present and the future, man, Nature and God; it has an immediate human urgency, and also an enveloping cosmic background. Its very composition is largely the result (so it is confidently claimed) of a new aesthesis with its source of origin located in the overhead planes. At any rate, one must needs bring patience, receptiveness and humility to appreciate this epic, a poetic rendering of his philosophy of man's transformation, a symphonic recordation of a great Yogi's mystic apprehension of the aspirations and struggles of mankind for defeating death and achieving immortality.

Savitri is based on the Pativrata Upakyaana in the Vana Parva of the **Mahabharata**. Rishi Markandeya tells many stories to Prince Yudhishtira in the forest, partly to instruct him and largely to console him. Yudhishtira is still scalded by the memory of the outrage on his wife Draupadi, following the disastrous game of dice. He therefore asks Markandeya whether he has seen or heard of Draupadi's peer, in her chastity and strength. In reply, Markandeya tells the story of Savitri and her *pativrata mahatmya*, which may be explained as the 'glorious efficacy of wifely chastity'. Indeed it is more than a mere story, for Savitri to this day

is deeply imbedded in the Hindu woman's consciousness, as the pure virgin awaiting her future husband or as the pure wife warding off with the armour of her chastity all evil and danger that threatens her husband.

The Savitri story is told by Rishi Markandeya in the course of seven cantos. Aswapati, King of Madra, is pious and virtuous. But he is sorrow-stricken, as he is childless. For eighteen years he undergoes austerities, daily offering a hundred thousand oblations to the fire to the accompaniment of mantras in honour of the Goddess Savitri, who appears at last in her resplendent form and promises that a daughter of great beauty will soon be born to him.

Returning to his duties as King, he lives as righteously as before, and his eldest wife bears in due course a daughter, who, being the gift of the Goddess Savitri, is also now named Savitri. She grows in beauty worthy of a goddess. On a certain auspicious day, having fasted and taken her bath and offered prayers to the gods, Savitri approaches her father, touches his feet in reverence, offers flowers, and stands silent and expectant by his side. He tells her simply: "Seek a husband and choose for yourself". Savitri starts on her quest accompanied by wise and elderly counselors.

When Savitri returns home, she finds her father seated along with Sage Narada. When asked by her father, Savitri says that she had chosen as her husband Satyavan whom she found in a forest hermitage living with his exiled father Dyumathsena of Shalwa. Narada is not too happy. Satyavan is a brilliant person in every way but has only one more year to live. Taken aback, Aswapati asks his

daughter to choose another young man in the place of Satyavan.

But Savitri answers with firm resolve : “There are things that are done but once; be he long-lived or short-lived, be he endowed with or bereft of virtues, I have chosen, and cannot choose again; seized by the mind, presented in speech, it remains only to be translated into deed”. The elders are overwhelmed and bless her. Aswapati takes Savitri to the forest, has the marriage performed, leaves her in her future home and returns to his kingdom.

Satyavan and Savitri are mutually happy in having secured their heart’s desire. She now puts by all her ornaments and rich clothes, and lives the bare pure life of a dedicated hermitess. Her many virtues, her serviceable acts and her gentle, subdued behaviour please one and all. Yet, as time passes by, day and night Savitri keeps in mind the fateful word spoken by Narad, and she can have no inner peace.

When hardly four days are to go before the threatened danger to Satyavan’s life, Savitri, resolves to undertake the *tri-ratra* vow, fasting, praying, and standing night and day. She stills Dyumathsena’s fears and anxieties on her behalf and assures him that she will be able to carry out her vow. She does so and takes the blessings of the elders, then goes to the forest along with Satyavan on his daily routine to gather wood.. Though with a heavy heart, Savitri accompanies Satyavan, admiring the multifoliate woods echoing with the peacock’s cries.

A little later, in the act of felling a tree, Satyavan is overcome by fatigue and his head begins to ache. Savitri

makes him sit by her side, and lays his head on her lap. She sees before her a bright-robed figure, handsome and majestic, a diadem on his head, a noose in his hand; altogether terrifying is his aspect. She rises, having first gently shifted her husband's head to rest on the ground, and salutes him reverentially. She learns that he is Yama who has come to carry off Satyavan as his days on earth are over; and Yama has come himself, as befitting so worthy and virtuous a person as Satyavan. So saying Yama draws forth from Satyavan's body his life (*prana*), which is the measure of a thumb, and so the body becomes untenanted, lustreless, inert and unsightly. As Yama now walks away in a southerly direction, Savitri too follows him, her heart overwhelmed by sorrow.

Now begins the great debate between fixt fate and the power of Love, the law of adamantine Necessity and the variant play of Freedom; Yama at first asks Savitri to retrace her steps and perform her husband's funeral rites. She says that wherever her husband goes or is taken; there she must follow him; Having walked seven paces with Yama already; she can claim the privilege of friendly converse with him; Actually she seems to talk in conundrums. Her whole point is that Yama, who is also Dharma, should permit Savitri and Satyavan to continue their dharma or *grihastha* mode of life and not separate them.

Yama is pleased, and asks her to choose a boon, only the life of Satyavan excepted. Savitri asks for the restoration of eyesight to her father-in-law, and this is granted, But she is not to be shaken off still, and she keeps speaking to Yama, pleading and almost preaching. A second

boon he grants, and a third; she desires that her father-in-law may regain his kingdom, and that her father, Aswapati, may have a hundred sons of his own. Pressed now to return, Savitri says again that her place is with her husband wherever he may be, and adds fair and flattering speech, which invokes the grant of a fourth boon. "May a hundred sons be born to me and Satyavan"; she says. Yama grants this boon as well and begs her to return, But she tarries still, and speak more sweetly and wisely than ever before extolling the efficacy of the good and the righteous, so much so Yama concedes her a final incomparable boon. Savitri tells him simply that Satyavan's life be restored. Yama is pleased, gives back Satyavan's life, blesses her heartily, and disappears. Savitri, her love's labour won, returns to the place in the forest where she had earlier left her husband's listless body.

Satyavan regains consciousness, views her face with lingering affection like one just come home after a long sojourn abroad, and says; "I seem to have slept long, you should have awakened me; but where is that dark person that tried to take me away"? Savitri answers suitably and together they return home.

On being asked by the sages of the forest, Savitri reveals all the circumstances—Narad's prophecy, her vow, her accompanying Satyavan to the woods, Yama's coming, her truthful speeches, the five boons, and the happy ending of it all. The ascetics praise her with one voice, take leave of Dyumathsena and Satyavan, and go to their respective abodes. As the **Mahabharata** says: 'Even thus did Savitri redeem from peril and raise to high fortune herself, her father and mother, her father-in-law and mother-in-law, as

also the whole race of her husband(*bharthuh kulam*).

It is this poem in seven cantos, making a total of about 700 lines in the original Sanskrit, that Sri Aurobindo has expanded and transformed into a modern English epic in 12 Books, of 49 cantos, spread over nearly 24,000 lines. What is omitted in the original is supplied by Sri Aurobindo in luxuriant detail (for example, the details of Savitri's 'quest' and the first meeting of Savitri and Satyavan); What is seminal or vaguely implied is elaborated with almost overwhelming effect (for example, Aswapati's Yoga and Savitri's Yoga); and what is seemingly a personal victory is invested with the overtones and under-tones of spiritual significance so as to chime in with the current psychological idiom and gain a sure access to human consciousness. Professors of philosophy are missing much if they overlook **Savitri** in their reading lists. For the poem gives a local habitation and image to what appear to be no more than concepts of evolution, the psychic being and the ability to transcend the veils of physical limitations. In any case it helps the Indian Professor master the idiom of philosophy and logic (which is particularly visible in the debate between Savitri and Death).

Sri Aurobindo perhaps thought that a poetic projection of his philosophical thought and yogic experiences could convey his ideas better to the reader. Being a poet by nature, writing **Savitri** was a natural corollary to his works like **The Synthesis of Yoga** and **The Life Divine**. Thus Aswapati's 18-years' tapasya is taken up by Sri Aurobindo to give a living movement to his ideas. Eighteen years'austerities? Only for the birth of a child? What symbol worlds, spiritual realms, psychic

regions might Aswapati not have traversed in the course of his austerities? Musn't he have grown in understanding, musn't even his original aspiration have suffered a progressive sea-change with the widening of the horizons of his understanding? Sri Aurobindo accordingly explores in the epic the nature of Aswapati's Yoga, presents its various stages, maps out the worlds traveled, the depths sounded, the heights scaled. The experiences described are supra-normal; and besides the inspiration of the Vedas and the Upanishads, Sri Aurobindo has also had to draw very largely upon his own Yogic experiences. A few verses in the original poem became a whole Book, in 15 cantos! In fact, Aswapati's Yoga and the promise of the Goddess Savitri, which take about 10 lines in the *Mahabharata*, occupy almost half of Sir Aurobindo's entire epic, which means more than a thousand-fold expansion!

The second key event is Narad first uttering a grave warning against Savitri's marrying Satyavan, and, later, after hearing Savitri, actively advising Aswapati to allow Savitri to have her own way. Sri Aurobindo has an entire Book, The Book of Fate to discuss the philosophical idea of Free Will vs. Pre-destination. A Professor addressing his students in an Indian classroom will be particularly benefitted by Rishi Narad's tremendous speech on the theory of incarnation.

There is, then, the *tri-ratra* vow in the Sanskrit original observed by Savitri - fasting, standing day and night, offering libation to the fire, saluting the elders. Sri Aurobindo sees this as yoga so we have a massive Book of Yoga describing Savitri's experiences as she sits in meditation. We watch Savitri's quest for her soul, her entry

into the “inner countries”, and her ultimate finding of her true soul and the Soul. This is Psychology in action. How does a person gain self-confidence and what are the stages he passes through till the realization comes to him that in him reside all the powers? It is scintillating poetry as also a manual of intuitive psychology in terms of self-analysis and self-watch.

Finally there is the scene, where Savitri faces Yama that is Dharma as well, and follows him as he carries away Satyavan’s life, and compels the law of predestination itself to yield ground and submit to the imperatives of Savitri’s love for her husband. . Three whole Books,—‘The Book of Eternal Night’, ‘The Book of the Double Twilight’ and ‘The Book of Everlasting Day’,—taking up a total of over 150 pages, are devoted by Sri Aurobindo to this unearthly scene. Here Savitri comes to clash with alien or seductive powers and succeeds finally in asserting the claims of Life, Light, and Joy. She also images the Bodhisattva ideal in giving precedence to the ensuring of happiness to all living beings instead of herself and Satyavan gaining the Heavens of Bliss.

Taken as a whole, Sri Aurobindo’s epic projects his philosophy of transformation that marks the pace of evolution. An integral transformation of all the elements that make man is indeed the whole aim of the evolutionary adventure. Sri Aurobindo saw this—almost experienced it—as a distinct possibility and as a near probability. In *The Life Divine* he wrote:

“Life and the body would be no longer tyrannous masters demandin nine-tenths of their satisfaction, but

means and powers for the expression of the spirit. At the same time, since the matter and the body are accepted, the control and the right use of physical things would be a part of the realized life of the spirit in the manifestation in earth-nature”.

“The matter and the body are *accepted*”,-accepted and made fit instruments for housing the divine; this is no turning away from life, seeking felicity in a remote Vaikuntha or Paradise in a vague hereafter, but seeking it *here and now*. Sri Aurobindo affirmed, indeed, that an integral transformation, a divinisation, of human nature and earth-nature is a thing “decreed and inevitable”. He even laid down the main lines of this progressive transformation in his treatise, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and hinted at the nature of the final change:

“The integral liberation comes when this passion for release, *mumksutwa*, founded on distaste or *vairagya*, is itself transcended; the soul is then liberated both from attachment to the lower action of nature and from all repugnance to the cosmic action of the Divine. This liberation gets its completeness when the spiritual gnosis can act with a supramental knowledge and reception of the action of Nature and a supramental luminous will in initiation. The gnosis discovers the spiritual sense in Nature, God in things, the soul of good in all things that have the contrary appearance. The liberation of the Nature becomes one with the liberation of the spirit, and there is founded in the integral freedom the integral perfection”.

The message of **Savitri** is indeed this as she prefers to return to the world with a living Satyavan and transform

life on earth into a life divine:. As she assures the Supreme:

“My soul and his indissolubly linked
In the one task for which our lives were born,
To raise the world to God in deathless Light,
To bring God down to the world on earth we came,
To change the earthly life to life divine.
I keep my will to save the world and man;
Even the charm of thy alluring voice,
O blissful Godhead, cannot seize and snare.
I sacrifice not earth to happier worlds.....

Since God has made earth, earth must make in her God;
What hides within her breast she must reveal.
I claim thee for the world that thou hast made.
If man lives bound by his humanity,
If he is tied for ever to his pain,
Let a greater being then arise from man,
The superhuman with the Eternal mate
And the Immortal shine through earthly forms.
Else were creation vain and this great world
A nothing that in Time’s moments seems to be.
But I have seen through the insentient mask;
I have felt a secret spirit stir in things
Carrying the body of the growing God:
It looks through veiling forms at veiless truth;
It pushes back the curtain of the gods;
It climbs towards its own eternity.”

(Savitri, Book XI, canto 1.)

THE PLEASURES OF LITERATURE

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, eminent scholars and academicians, students of this distinguished University, ladies and gentlemen :

At the outset, I would like to express my grateful thanks to the Vice-Chancellor Dr. Ramanathan, to the Registrar Dr. Rathinasabapathi and to the Dean, Faculty of Arts for having invited me to your University. I have always cherished my earlier visits to this institution and I deem it a privilege and pleasure to be speaking to you on this day marking the importance of Social Sciences and Humanities in a world that has become increasingly technological and science-oriented. You may remember that as early as 1959, the British novelist and scientist C.P. Snow had pointed out in his Rede Lecture that the humanities and the sciences were not interacting enough; and unless that were done and the two cultures came together, it would not be easy to solve the problems faced by humanity.

Appropriately the day is to commemorate the hallowed memory of Dr. Malcolm Adiseshiaiah and this too makes this occasion a privileged one for me. Dr. Adiseshiaiah was a friend of my father, Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and my brother, Dr. Ambirajan. My father used to say that Dr. Adiseshiaiah was a power-dynamo. His creative facets were many, both as a teacher and as an administrator. He was an ideal teacher who encouraged his students to fan out into the nearby villages, as he had imbibed the call when he worked in Calcutta and knew Sriniketan and Santiniketan in person. He was never frightened of the unknown as his career and achievements at the UNESCO and other institutions testify. My brother would often refer to the MIDS Library funded by

Dr. Adisheshaiah's trust as one of the best for social sciences in India. Dr. Adisheshaiah's gargantuan appetite for books is another facet that I had always admired. He was a great reader and this was reflected in his brilliant penmanship.

I have a connection with Dr. Adisheshaiah too. He was a lover of Tamil literature and obtained UNESCO assistance to the programmes of translation of Tamil classics into English. The series began in 1961 with Rajaji's *The Ayodhya Canto of the Ramayana as told by Kamban*. A.K. Ramanujan's *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* came out next in 1967. My *Poems of Subramania Bharati* followed in 1977. I must also point out with gratitude that he initiated Jeanine Auboyer's research work on Sri Ranganathaswami Temple at my native place, Srirangam. His pointed foreword is a delight wherein he writes:

“Out of India's vast artistic heritage, the temples of South India present to the traveler, to the student of Hindu architecture and its evolution in South India, as well as to the pilgrim – in fact, to all men – a many faceted interest. They are anchored firmly in India's long history and yet soar upwards to emphasise the limitlessness of man's dreams and aspirations. Some gigantic and massive, almost brutally imposing, others light and airy, with delicate towers, columns and elegant porches, collectively they reflect the pageant of the development of one of man's oldest cultures, and individually, through the hundreds of sculptures and paintings which adorn their surfaces, they depict the struggles, failures and successes of the men who made them the centre of their lives. More than that, the South Indian temples are today as much a part of life of those who live at their feet as they were when they were built. They continue to be used daily by hundreds of pilgrims and visitors as

religious shrines, cultural centres and places of repose and meditation.”

Such fine, meaningful writing! This is what makes me very happy to be with you to speak about the pleasures of literature which gave us a stylist like Dr. Adisheshaiah. Before I proceed, I would like to add my thanks to Dr. Ramgopal who got in touch with me and gave the welcome suggestion that I speak on the pleasures of literature.

Literature was born when man learned “to connect”. Two disparate entities were brought together in a double-vision that coalesced into a single seeing as when a lover saw his beloved’s eyes as pools of lotuses or watched a baby at home as lovely as a little parrot.

How is this possible? But then that is the secret of creation. As I wrote more than four decades ago while seeking to do a comparative study of Sri Aurobindo and Dante, there is no repetition in nature’s infinite variety:

“On the other hand, the universe being certainly a cosmos, and not a chaos of contraries and contradictories, not only is there the ground of transcendent unity, there are also infinite gradations of intermediate unity and similarity, and it could be both an interesting and rewarding adventure to observe these and make recordings.”

These recordings achieved unconsciously in moments of self-lost inspirations become great literature offering shoreless Ananda to generations. This Ananda is also ethical in its deepest sense, a point caught effortlessly by John Keats when he exclaimed:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” - that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Literature is a question of word-combinations, for

sure. A dictionary is not literature. But surprisingly, literature seems to cover all the rest! Economics, politics, science, spirituality, religion: all become great literature in the hands of the genius. Hence, the world of literature has appropriated *The Origin of Species*, *Das Kapital*, *Social Contract*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the rest. Science, philosophy, history, social studies, even grammar! Dare anyone of us say that the Tamil work on grammar and poetics, *Tolkappiyam* is not literature? I remember my father asking my brother and me to read carefully the two huge volumes of Holmes-Laski Letters that had been published in 1953 to learn how to use the English language!

All writers use their language as a catalytic agent to convey their thoughts. Their success depends on their mastery over the medium. De Quincey gives us a clue to distinguish literature from what is not. He says: “All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge.” How does this happen? The eminent literary critic, R.A. Scott-James has a clue:

“The eager scientist is constantly trembling with the excitement and imagination of the artist. The historian is compelled to lift his story above bare fact, to recreate and dramatize incident, reclothe his persons and shape the setting in which he places them.”

Books of power or books of knowledge: my life has been inextricably woven with books since I was born more than seventy years ago. I grew up literally in my father’s sumptuous personal library. There were no luxuries in our lower middle class home, but one never felt the lack of them. What if there was no fridge nor radio nor a car? My brother and me always had books and we simply traveled

in faery lands forlorn. We were also encouraged to have “our own” library for father believed only in books as gifts. I started mine in 1944 when father gave me P.Sri’s *Andal*. This is a book in Tamil and remains the proudest possession of my library.

It also helped that we were multilingual in our household. There were books in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Kannada and English. Never a dull moment! I just cannot think of any time in my life when I have felt “bored” with life. And even all those moments of sorrow, loss, frustration, depression and anger just melted away in a trice when I curled up with a book. Literature has a way of siphoning of all these attacks of unhappy forces in one’s life, such has been my experience. Yes, even old age that has been creeping upon me as a tiger in the forests, gets effectively halted when I take down my Globe edition of Wordsworth and open it at random:

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting :
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar :
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”

In a trice I am back in my childhood reciting Telugu nursery rhymes with my brother. “Kothi puttinadhendukuraa?” Where have the wrinkles gone? Such is the gift of literature.

So, what are the pleasures of literature? In fact, John Cowper Powys has published a book, *The Pleasures of Literature* (1938). This is yet another of my prized

possessions. The Powys brothers and sisters were my father's friends. John's brother Llewelyn used to correspond with father in the 'Thirties and when my father went to Great Britain in 1951, he visited the Powys sisters, Gertrude and Philippa. Both Llewelyn and John were great writers. In his introduction to the book, John points out how literature can hold you in a vice-like grip once you have surrendered to its pleasures. I can understand when he writes about libraries and second-hand book shops (another of my weaknesses):

“Though books, as Milton says may be the embalming of mighty spirits, they are also the resurrection of rebellious, reactionary, fantastical and wicked spirits! In books dwell all the demons and all the angels of the human mind. It is for this reason that a book-shop – especially a second-hand bookshop – is an arsenal of explosives, an armoury of revolutions, an opium-den of reactions.”

True enough. You never know what you are in for when you take up a book just on hearsay. But then, great literature has a way of making us slip out of the present and travel in unknown pathways, experiencing strange new adventures of the spirit. Mere imagination cannot give this pleasure. It is when imagination is woven with sublimity of utterance that we remain in this brave new world for a while. This is just not pleasure nor profit but a terrifying wonderment that a series of murders can become almost a scripture for the lover of literature. Lady Macbeth is dead. The murders and other evils that Macbeth has perpetrated seem to mock him now. What was the purpose of it all, this corruption of the flesh, of the mind and of the atmosphere? Is it not a warning to the megalomaniacs in India today who prefer the rosy pathways of corruption?

“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

Or just a crow! Can you weave an unforgettable scenario with a crow that can be terrifying to the soul? And yet, after reading Edgar Allan Poe’s poem, ‘The Raven’ several decades ago, the scene has returned to me, whenever I sit alone, deep into the night, reading Aeschylus or Euripides:

“Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a
flirt and flutter,

 In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of
yore;

 Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped
or stayed he;

 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my
chamber door -

 Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber
door -

 Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

 Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into
smiling,

 By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance
it wore.

 “Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said,
“art sure no craven,

Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the
Nightly shore -

Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's
Plutonian shore!"

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

In the hands of a great artist, the blood-spattered guillotine of the French Revolution becomes a lesson in what constitutes love, pity and self-sacrifice: all that we hold beautiful, holy, divine. One learns what exactly literature does to our psyche while reading *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens when Sydney Carton muses a few moments before he is to be cut down by the guillotine's blade:

"I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out. . . .

I see that child who lay upon her bosom and who bore my name, a man winning his way up in that path of life which once was mine. I see him winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the light of his.

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known."

This is how the novel concludes. And here is the unforgettable beginning of the novel:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was

the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

Whenever I look upon the scenario in our motherland, or read what is happening in Egypt or Afghanistan or Behrein or Japan, I am reminded of this passage and take the book down to read it again. Such is the vision of the great writer, a Seer, a Dhrashtaa as the Vedas call him. Each time one reads the passage new significances swirl around our thoughts, a point well made by Tiruvalluvar:

“Wise men’s friendship is like reading classics:
One derives more and more good.”

The *nava-rasas* that come upon us wave after wave when we read our favourite books cannot be explained in verbal terms. It is something so close to our soul-affinities. There are favourites too even among the classics. I never tire of reading Sherlock Holmes stories but I have no turn for Hercule Poirot. St. Paul’s dithyramb on charity is a favourite at any time of day:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long

and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails”.

Apart from my father who was a bibliophile, I was also able to come into contact with some great men when I accompanied him to their houses. I cannot forget the day I went with father to the house of Chakravarti Rajagopalachari in his Bazlullah Road house on 15th April, 1958. He had just then given up the Chief Ministership. When we entered his room, he looked up from the book he was reading and welcomed us. “Iyengar, you have come at the right time. I am reading Shakespeare”. As I sat silently listening to them, for one hour I was transported to the Shakespearian world where much of their conversation was punctuated with Shakespearian quotes! That is another gift of great literature. One or two lines and an entire world opens before us! For these lines were written when the author was somewhere far above the mere questioning, mental level. Sri Aurobindo calls this level of consciousness, the Overmind. For instance, the entire Ayodhya Canto in the Ramayana, with its epic-sized dramatic irony, is unveiled before us in a moment when we hear Sumitra tell Lakshmana:

*Ramam Dasaratham viddhi maam viddhi
janakaathmajaam*

*Ayodhyaam ataveem viddhi gachcha thatha yathaa
sukham*

Indeed, a love of reading great works in any language, cultivated from one’s childhood is the best fixed deposit for a purposive and happy life as the uses of literature are

indeed innumerable. The sheer joy of word combinations like the line, “beaded bubbles winking at the brim” (which I made the subject of a classroom lecture by an English Professor in my Tamil novel, *Oru Naal Pozhudu*); the sense of pride at being able to tell others how we are no strangers to the Russian Dostoevsky, the German Goethe, the French novels of Alexander Dumas or the Hindi novels of Premchand, thanks to English literature which has a vast amount of translated works from the world’s languages; the fulfillment we gain by knowing the story-patterns of classics like *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* cannot be verbalised. I was a little girl when I read Hugo’s classic, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* for the first time. When I read it years later, I was older, and I could enter the whirlpools of passion raised by the lust of the Archdeacon and the selfless love of the hunchback Quasimodo for the gypsy girl Esmeralda. There were so many descriptions of the famous cathedral of Our Lady of Paris in the novel that I imagined walking around it myself! Wherever I could (Encyclopaedia Britannica, travel books) I read about it and gazed at the photographs, all the time the heroic hunchback a presence. I never knew that a day would indeed come to me to actually step inside the Cathedral which forms the background for the novel. It is a beautiful representative of Gothic architecture. And when I did enter the Cathedral, it was 2001. I had become quite old. But then, the Cathedral had been restored just then through a period of ten years. The place just glowed and it was fantastic when I went into it at 9 A.M.

With guidebook in hand, it was easy enough to see what I wanted. The stained glass windows, the figures of various saints, the gargoyles and of course Pieta. “Overwhelming”, says my diary. The history of the cathedral speaks of great works of art and also immense

destruction. Hugo's novel had given me plentiful descriptions and made it all familiar, since the entire action of the novel takes place in and around this Cathedral. As I looked up I could remember Hugo's description of Quasimodo:

“Many a time had he climbed up the façade composed of several elevations, assisted only by the asperities of the sculpture. Often might he have been seen crawling up the outside of the towers, like a lizard up a perpendicular wall: those two giants, so tall, so threatening, so formidable.”

The Pieta sculpted by Guillaume Coustou held my attention almost totally. The Virgin seated with Jesus Christ on her hands, gazing intently at the face of her Son, the mother's heart bleeding as the Saviour had on the Cross. As I stood there looking up at the stained glass windows in the background, a riot of yellow, marine blue and red, I found that people were coming in and settling down. Prayer time? Let me not disturb them, was the first thought. So I went out only to see that more groups were coming and standing in rows, as it was filled up inside. What is going on?

I was told that there was to be a Requiem Mass for those who had lost their lives in the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September the 11th, just two days earlier. This was the third day. There were some strains of a choir from somewhere at the back. And then the rituals of the Mass. There was deep silence as we stood outside the cathedral, people from ever so many nations, almost all of us strangers in Paris. There were two speeches which we heard with absorption. Both the speakers were priests, one white, one black. They spoke in measured accents, never giving way to anger or raising their voice. They called for patience and courage to bear the tragedy;

and they invoked the Virgin's Grace for global peace. There was not a single wrong note as they referred to Jesus Christ's sacrifice for mankind.

Now there came to us music from the organ. Not familiar with the words in the verses used for a Requiem, I just told myself in English: "Jesus Lord, grant them everlasting rest." Somehow the dark romance of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, the terrible end of Esmeralda and Quasimodo, the calm that comes upon us as we close the novel after all the terror and the fury, seemed to be in tune with the somber mood of the people around me. The kindly heart of Esmeralda, the pure love of Quasimodo and the Passion of Jesus would never have been in vain for mankind. They spread the life-giving nectar of compassion as subterranean springs to create on this earth a divine life. Such are the sublime moments gifted to us by our love of literature.

After the Mass, I walked towards the Seine river and sat on a bench for a while, watching the boats moving on its quiet waters. The many times I had read the novel, my father explaining some of the passages to me long, long ago, the tragedy of Esmeralda and Quasimodo in the novel and the Twin Towers in America were all churning within me as I sat for quite sometime in that alien land, sorrowing for the lot of mankind. The heart sought for a word of comfort. That came from another great poem of our times, *Savitri* by Sri Aurobindo, my constant companion.

"The Son of God born as the Son of man
Has drunk the bitter cup, owned Godhead's debt,
The debt the Eternal owes to the fallen kind
His will has bound to death and struggling life
That yearns in vain for rest and endless peace.
Now is the debt paid, wiped off the original score.

The Eternal suffers in a human form,
He has signed salvation's testament with his blood:
He has opened the doors of his undying peace."

Literature remains the secret of remaining intellectually rich all one's life. In my own library I have several series (each with several volumes), from the Encyclopaedia Britannica to Penguins, Pelicans, the Gita Press, the ISCON library, Narmada Pathippakam, Writers Workshop, Collected works of Sri Aurobindo, T.V. Kapali Sastri and so on, the latest entrant being the 12-volume Collected Works of Kavya Kantha Ganapati Muni in Sanskrit. And the many volumes on Siddha poetry, and ancient Tamil (like Kuruntokai) published by your (Annamalai) University. Most of them have some motto. The one I love most belongs to the Everyman's Library which has, among other volumes, the six volumes of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Macaulay's *History of England*. The motto describes best what I have received from literature: "Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side".

The lines are from the medieval morality play, *Everyman*. Here the hero Everyman (who represents all of us) is comforted by another character, Knowledge. They are both starting on a journey which promises to be full of difficulties and unknown terrors. But Knowledge assures Everyman that as long as he is with the hero, all will be well. As long as these books are with us, as long as literature is loved by us and as long as we cherish our classics, all will yet be well for the future of humanity. And this would also be our tribute to one of the greatest Indians of our times, Dr. Malcolm Adiseshiaiah.

(Social Science & Humanities Day Address
delivered at Annamalai University on 18th April, 2011)

WRITING AS A DIALOGUE

For one whose life has been inextricably linked with books for close to seven decades, I must confess that writing has been a great help in holding a daily, hourly converse with the 'other' person and helped me overcome a million confusions of the mind and conscience. I have now come to the conclusion that writing is a constant dialogue with oneself - one moment you are the actor, the other moment you are the listener - and the story unfolds. It is an attempt where you place yourself in the seat of the gentle reader and compose a narrative to pass on the intended message. It may seem as if it is a simple presentation of ideas from one side to the other. But the ability to deliver the message to an audience depends on the ability to first deliver it to oneself. Following on the example of great leaders like Swami Vivekananda, the importance of clarity in the information one is trying to convey cannot be overstated. It could even be a writer like Conon Doyle. The management of dialogue in the stories of Sherlock Holmes has been a great inspirer for my own writing, though I have never attempted detective fiction.

Clarity in weaving a dialogue can come only through a discussion with the finest and closest critic a writer has for discussion - oneself. Stretching myself comfortably in my favourite easychair in the corner of my personal library, I realize that writing has also had a cathartic effect on my psyche. No wonder I have loved it to clear my psyche of the cobwebs that gather somehow, anyhow in this world of confounding human affairs.

But then, it was not so always. Certainly not in the beginning when soon after my Masters, I plunged into doctoral research. Sixty years ago, we still remained a rare breed. Recently, I was made to go into a reminiscence of things past when a friend turned up with a piece of letter from a colleague in a distant State:

Dear Chippsie: Glad u r trying for phd admn. if possible plz try to avoid admission in pvt univ. for ur phd. if you r not able to get admission anywhere in any govt. one then only u opt for it. theoretically there is no problem but practically everybody knows that there degrees r not obtained they r purchased. plz dnt mind my honest opinion.”

Now, in those days such a dialogue was not possible at all. We were positively in terror when writing to the Professor or even a friend about our ambitions. Shorthand such as this was simply not possible. Writing a letter itself was a dialogue held in stately language. As for my Professor who was himself a scholar and author, one could not get away holding on to the line of least resistance. When I had chosen Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri** as my doctoral subject, the Professor directed me first to go to other world epics in English or in English translations. “Read them and take down notes”, he ordered. He must have seen the dismay on my face and flung at me choice words about there being no other way into reaching out to my subject. By reading “The **Odyssey** and the **Iliad**, the **Aeneid** and Scandinavian Sagas, you would be able to understand your own subject better. You can have a dialogue with the characters in the epic by comparing them with others you come across from beyond the shores of India.”

Dialogue with the characters in the epic **Savitri**? In those days we did not dare to express our feelings aloud. But the Professors had only one or two doctoral students and could spend quality time. They would watch each contour in our face and understand the problem. “What I mean is”, the Professor continued: “You will converse with the characters silently by comparing them with others in the western epics.” In my innocence, I thought this would be very easy. Savitri, a heroine. There are dozens of heroines

in the western epics I thought, for I had studied Bullfinch's Mythology since my school days.

Then, the problem started. Except for Alcestis, there was not a single epic heroine to compare with Savitri. They were all Helens and Cleopatras and Clytemnestras. As for Alcestis, she was devoted to her husband but then she is a very pale character, and comes nowhere near the empowered Savitri of Vyasa's **Mahabharata**. Then I realised how writing becomes a dialogue. You keep probing into the psyche of the subject and coils upon coils of significance move around you as a psychedelic phenomenon.

So much for the critic's converse with the subject. When I think of my days as a creative writer, the dialogue with the character or situation on hand becomes almost physical. For one thing, all my creative writing has started from a personal experience.

It could be an exchange heard when traveling in a bus, a dream, a family problem or even the reaction I notice on a particular face in this audience as I deliver the speech. I have never taken up the pen to 'write' a story because someone has asked me to do so. The cells in my brain are conditioned in such a way, I guess, that they will not stand to attention if I ask them to. "Look here, I have this phone call/letter from the editor of Trisanku that he would like a story from me for a particular issue. You better get going." But my imagination is a rebel. It simply shuts up. But occasionally I am able to accede to the request (usually for Diwali Special issues) because I have the basics of the story already jotted down as a painter has a portfolio of line-drawings. My habit of writing a diary for the last several decades has been, I admit, a great advantage too.

IYENGAR'S HUMOUR

Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar was born on April 17, 1908. His birth centenary is being celebrated by the Andhra University where he taught for over two decades as Professor of English and was its Vice Chancellor when he retired from service. A renowned authority on English literature and a pioneer in the study of Indo-Anglian literature, Prof. Iyengar was also a prolific writer with over 50 books and hundreds of articles in journals, news papers and magazines, including the highly popular Shankar's Weekly. Worthy daughter of an eminent father and an outstanding scholar and writer with a mastery of at least four languages Dr.(Mrs.) Prema Nandakumar recalls in the article below her father's sense of humour.

- Editor

Sri Aurobindo was once asked about humour and he replied: "Humour? Without a sense of humour the world would have gone to blazes long ago!"

It has been my experience that this angle has been a strong element in the personality of many Aurobindonians. Nirodbaran and Amal Kiran readily come to our mind. Two other Aurobindonians who were full of such divine laughter were Chachaji (Surendranath Jauhar 'Faqr') and my father, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar. Perhaps this caused the strong bonding between the two who were actually quite different in their everyday life. Chachaji was a builder, a Karma Yogi; father a writer, a Jnana Yogi. But both were subsumed in Bhakti Yoga. Together they made a wonderful pair, as the golden swans foretelling the coming of the Supramental Age.

It was as well they had this fine sense of humour as their lives were not easy at all. They had to work very

hard to come up and disappointments were a dime a dozen in their lives. But they triumphed because they could laugh and make others laugh. A portion of Chachaji's wit and humour can be found in his published writings. And so it is with father too.

The earliest of his writings in this genre that has been traceable by me is a story, "The Shoe Stealers" in **The Citizen of India**. Written in 1930, the footnote says: "Copyright reserved by the author. The characters in the story are entirely imaginary. K.R.S.) To make his writing appear mature, father had tagged "Iyengar" to his K.R.Srinivasan. He was in Ceylon at this time, far from his family and we get an accurate picture of father's life thanks to the omniscient narrator. A friend has come to meet the narrator of the story without advance notice, but still the intrusion is welcome though it disturbs the author who is busy reading D.H. Lawrence: "I was alone there in the sanctuary of my Library, mine own guardian, mine own cook, mine own everybody and everything, I was living apart, a life at times mythical to myself and to others. And now there was Nana, so ill-looking and come all the way from far-off India and appearing suddenly on the scene, not less startling than the rise of a midnight apparition, whiteclad and ominous."

Of course Dr. Nana has come to the author to unravel a haunting mystery about Nana's shoe. It is pure Conan Doyle, especially the 'The Adventure of the Six Napoleons'. . The author goes over with Dr. Nana to his place in India and begins his detective work, disguising himself as a prospective buyer of farmlands. The Iyengar humour which would be heavily drunk with academia in the future is already evident in the descriptions:

"I was closeted for one full hour with the President

— an enormous thick-lipped rope of sand, intellectually and physically, who has however been honoured by the chivalrous and indiscreet and liberal Madras University with a B.A., and a B.L. and our talk was quite an informal one.”

The solving of the mystery is child’s play for the author who has all the hints and style pre-cooked by Conan Doyle. As Iyengar devoured classics, English style became pliable in his hands quite early in his writing career, as seen in the story-series, **Three Burian Revolutions: A Study in Rural Progressivism**. In making fun of the characteristics of the folk of the Bury village, father was wreaking vengeance upon Ananthakrishnapuram which was richer than its neighbouring village, Kodakanallur (father’s village). The conservative Burians looked down upon the Kodakanallurians as incapable of earning or saving a penny. The Kodakanallurians shot back that AKPuramites were woefully henpecked. So the story has a deputation of the wives of Bury to their menfolk demanding changes:

“Mrs. Dwi, who led the deputation put forward three demands, the irreducible minimum as she called them, which after great hesitation I have decided to divulge. The first was that a Burian husband shall thenceforward acknowledge the paramountcy of his wife in all home affairs; in return for which the wife shall show due respect to the husband in all outside activities. The second may strike the reader as curious and so it did me also. It was to the effect that the Burian husband shall thenceforward spend no money in buying shawls, towels and the like separately but shall utilize torn fragments of his wife’s garments for these purposes, it being understood however that nothing under this rule shall prevent a husband from

buying 2 white cloths each of four-and-a-half yards every year, as the main contribution towards his dress. The third was more audacious and decidedly to the advantage of the wives. The demand aimed at nothing less than an extraction of a promise that every wife shall thenceforward be provided with a pair of Diamond Ear-studs, the cost in no case to be less than Rs. 1000 but to be proportionate thereafter according to the wealth of the husband.”

When Iyengar came to Chennai to study for a post-graduate degree in literature, he had almost an empty pocket and had to depend upon his journalism to feed him his two meals a day. He learnt to review even music and dance recitals. There were film reviews too and reviews of cricket. Some of these early writings have survived mainly because of the folio he made of them to take with him when he attended interviews later. His ironic tone and bubbly satire often provoked the VIPs of the day. He described the shining star of classical music of the day, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, as little better than a gramophone record and had to be rescued by his editor from a defamation case. Ramanuja Iyengar was mollified that the review was written by a young man (also an Iyengar!) hardly out of his teens and was eking out a livelihood this way to better his educational qualifications. There is a review of **Sati Savitri** produced by T. Sadasivam (in which M.S.Subbulakshmi appeared as Narada and sang the mellifluous song, ‘Bruhi Mukundeti’) in which poor Satyavan is described as looking like Yama, thanks to the weird imagination of the make-up man!

Many of Iyengar’s humorous skits appeared in **Merry Magazine**, where R.K. Narayan also began his career as a writer. Using the nom-de-plume, ‘Rajaram’, he even wrote a novel, having received inspiration from F.E.Anstey’s **Vice**

Versa.Topsy-Turvey: a Fantasy which was serialised in the paper, takes place in a small-town college in India. Written within two years of his joining the Lingaraj College, Iyengar is able to place a delightful spread before us.

Professor Thurkov, Professor of Chemistry in a college at Modalkar (Belgaum) is taking an evening walk and is joined by his student, Nargun. The garrulous Professor gets into form in his bullying tone:

“Been doing any reading lately? No? Just as I expected: Good-for-nothing fellows you are! No concentration, no application, no ambition! Look here, Nargun, when I was an Inter Science student, things were different. We respected and feared our professors, and the professors bullied us terribly. We read a lot, memorized a lot. The Chemistry, boy; you haven’t the brains of a hare, not even of a rabbit. You read Senter’s Chemistry now and say it’s difficult, but mind you, we read Smith, Mellore, even the big Rosehoe and Schrolmer!”

Nargun thinks Thurkov is a bore but he cannot say it aloud, can he? While he almost envies the Professor’s lot who need not be “at the mercy of an angry father or an angrier professor” all the time, Thurkov is equally jealous of the college youth who can dive from hill tops and swim in the waters. This is when the Witch of Modalkar appears before them and curses the “meeserable mortals”:

“It is not for ye to wish and aspire, but to accept and obey! You stout booby professor, wouldst thou be pupil indeed? I grant thy wish. And you arrogant chip of youth, wouldst thou aged professor be? I grant thy wish too. Go hence, and enjoy your ill-desired states. Leave me in peace. I’m sovereign bride of Bhima!”

So the new life begins. It is a hilariously bizarre situation, of course for Thurkov is a Tamilian.

“He had gone to Modalkar five years ago from Coimbatore and all these years he had not picked up any knowledge of the local Mahratti. His wife, Mandodhari, and himself, talked Tamil at home, and the children talked a polyglot that was 50% Tamil, and the rest made up of Mahratti, Telugu, English and what not. Nargun’s family talked pure Mahratti at home –though the father and the children, Prema and Madhu, talked both English and misunderstood correct English.”

The two hapless playthings of destiny decide to talk less and think more and go on with their lives. We are in for a sizzly comedy of mistaken identities and the suppressed rage getting bottled up in them as the hours pass by. The following day is the real test: Nargun as the portly professor has to take classes and Thurkov as the lean student has to attend them. Nargun (in the guise of Thurkov) has a brainwave. He calls Thurkov (in the body of Nargun) as his ideal student and invites him to lecture on the Nitrogen group. The class of 75 is dumbfounded when the lean student (who had scored 7 per cent in Chemistry in the last test) lectures blithely on the intricate subject: “everyone thought Nargun’s teaching was better than Thurkov’s!”

Necessarily there are moments of hanging on the edge, looking down at a precipice and the two heroes are at daggers drawn soon enough. At last, Iyengar allows us to breathe easily with the last chapter, “All’s well that ends well”. The Witch of Modalkar is sighted again, she pulls them up and yet is kind enough to allow them get back to their original frames.

Iyengar always toyed with imagination: what would happen to us if we have to reverse our roles? The drama, **Suniti and her Spouse or Storm in a Tea-Cup** is about the travails of a Professor who has to manage the house with two children while his wife goes to the College to do the teaching. Teaching, college, the quirky ways of professors and the carefree attitudes of students are all welcome to dance in Iyengar's hilarious style and so we have **The Battle of the Optionals Or, Elsie's Trump Card** and the very telling names like Potato Prufrock (Potty), Tomato Tiptoft (Tippy) for Professors and Jolly Jowari and Satyanand Sleepappa for students is enough to keep us in stitches. The optionals to choose from are inviting: Expression & Communication, Pity & Pathos, Culinary Science and Fine Arts. The Professors vie with one another to get the best students into their department. The boys would rather choose the one that would be Elsie Excellent's choice, but she says different things to different people. Poets from Chaucer to Eliot are parodied by Iyengar:

*“Let us go, then, you and I
 And lose our souls the books among ...
 Or away, let's fly away
 To eating houses cheap and low
 'tis not tea there you get
 tis only cheap stuff so red,
 And you sit awhile and sip the tea
 And talk and smoke and dream awhile ...
 Away, away, let's fly away
 From Umlaut Town ...”*

In the 'fifties and 'sixties, the **Shankar's Weekly** published Iyengar's humourous poems, skits and essays regularly. He signed himself “R.R.” (for Raja Ram) in these contributions. There was a pause when he became

the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University but he took to recording such moods of jollity (with a meaningful turn) after he divested himself of the post three years later.

The **Shankar's Weekly** writings remain quite contemporaneous. Here is a review of a book imagined by Iyengar. Himself hailed as the father of Indo-Anglian literature, he was surprised at the manner in which Professors from abroad began to dig into the writing of Indians in English and their weird studies. **Indo-Anglian Swearology: A Study of Usage and Abusage in Indian Writing in English.** By Cuthbertson B. Swalinski. University of Middle Panama Press, \$ 7.50. So very realistic!

“Now at last a Daniel from overseas has made exhaustive exploration and inquiry and delivered weighty judgment (the memoir weighs about 1 kg.)... One must envy him the possession of so much time, so much cash, so much electronic machinery, so much technical expertise, so much contact-engineering. The results, as might be expected, are truly astonishing, unexpected, illuminating.”

According to our reviewer, Swalinski finds in some American writers swearology as high as 27.9% of the total vocabulary, while the Indians have as low a percentage as .767%. The percentage is certainly higher in little-read magazines like **Speak-Easy, Cooum Coouings and Ballygunge Ballyhoo.** With phrases like “Naxalite Messalina” and “Navelite nudestar” culled from Indo-English novels by Dr. Swalinski, the “review” is one big guffaw.

Week after week we enjoyed these packets of fun. It could be Sherlock Holmes at Chennai, the inauguration of a college association or advice to an examiner. “How He Got a First”, “The Jambav Tract”, “The Yogi and the

Professor”. Never, never a dull moment. Two favourite areas are academia and politics. Iyengar’s University of Nav-Nalanda is a scintillating bed of intrigue, corruption and pseudo-scholarship wrapped up in sparkling English. When the University is hosting a Somnambulists Conference, need anything more be said? The welcome addresses and key-note addresses have been misplaced but somehow things get into order and the Kulapati begins his welcome:

“We have had great traditions of somnambulism in this Campus of ours. I understand that many of our Faculty go somnambulistically to the wrong classes, or deliver the wrong lectures, or forget to go to their laboratories, and go to the cinemas instead. This is, therefore, not an unideal place for your momentous deliberations.”

As for politics, a sample from “A Minister’s Complaint” would do. How can the Planning Commission ask his ministry to do with a beggarly thirty crores? Iyengar is writing in 1961 and has pointedly noted how the disastrous Five-Year Planning idea of Nehru has spawned a “spending consciousness” in politicians, a sickness that plagues them even today!

“No money!
Nonsense!
Prohibition could go
And the tax on salt return.
Gandhiji, revered Bapuji
(May his soul rest in peace!)
Said, of course, no drink, no tax
On salt and all that
And fought and fasted;
But that was in pre-Plan days
Don’t circumstances alter cases? ...
No money!

The puerilest of excuses!
Another printing press,
Another paper mill,
Easy, easy, can't you see!
Impose another tax,
The Plan surtax
With progressive propensities:
Impose a tax on babies
And a tax on bachelors too
And a tax (especially) on life (after fifty)
And a tax on graduates;
Let literacy pay
For illiteracy's exit.
Money must be got
And, besides,
Have you tried to tap
Taipeh?"

When the Emergency was imposed by Indira Gandhi, **Shankar's Weekly** had to cease publication. After all, how could it be countenanced by the authorities when there were writers like Iyengar who could boldly wield a caustic pen? 'Ministry of Untruth' brings back all that we had experienced in those days three decades earlier:

"The dissemination of ignorance
Is achieved with little fuss.
There's a haemorrhage of false statistics
And massive stifling of truth.
You could be fed with surfeit on nothing,
And be starved of everything."

But why blame the so-called Supremo? What else can be done with a pack of servile partymen asking for pig-feed? 'Circe's Lament' is a powerful commentary from the side of the Leader:

“My pretty rabbits have begun to stink,
My tortoises sleep and snore.
The motley of birds I’d plumed to my taste
Can now neither sing nor fly.
Ah, ‘tis easy to turn men into swine,
But what useless appendage!
Could I but reverse the operation,
Turn them into men again!
There my spells and witchery seem to fail
And I’m covered with disgrace.”

The serious critic, the sterling teacher, the sublime epic poet, the intense translator: Iyengar also knew how to remain a happy family making the spaces echo to laughter. And dare to laugh at himself as a personality. For he wrote on invitation a self-obituary in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the 2nd July, 1950 issue. The series of ‘self-obituaries’ was launched by that unforgettable editor, C.R.Mandy and Iyengar’s appeared as the 4th in the series. He was forty-two years old, a Professor of English in a premier university, enjoying the work he did like teaching, guiding research and writing books and reviews. Already a hallowed name for two reasons: the biographer of Sri Aurobindo and the creator of the new academic discipline: Indian writing in English. The obituary begins easily:

“The death of a mere teacher, however eminent in his particular sphere, is news only for a day. His students get a holiday, a half-holiday at least; his colleagues look inscrutable, and even a little sad; a patronising notice appears in the local paper; then Oblivion comes along and resolutely covers him.”

The writer is supposed to have known Iyengar “on rather very intimate terms.” Literary giants like Dostoevsky lend their names to this life-history. He began

his life in North Ceylon as a teacher of mathematics and English. After some hiccupings, he managed to become a good teacher. How?

“To Iyengar mathematics seemed to be a very teachable subject, and he was thus quite at home with A, B and C and their miscellaneous activities; he discussed reconditely how the cyclist balanced himself, how birds flew in the air, and how steeples cast shadows on the lawn; and he even discoursed on analytical conics and the funicular polygon.”

Nothing outstanding, nothing to regret, either on the part of the students or Iyengar himself, he gets an embarrassing promotion in 1947. The style of teaching gets replaced, for he need shout or shriek no more, nor act the police sergeant. “He could now mutter or whisper before small groups of advanced students, he could even soliloquise before empty benches. He didn’t relish the change at first, for he didn’t know where to look in these nearly or wholly empty classes.” Soon he was merrily discoursing on Hamlet and Othello, Pater and D.H. Lawrence. His relations with his students were always cordial. He did not even object to their sleeping in their classes. His only humble request was that they should avoid snoring.

The writer touches upon Iyengar’s published works beginning with Lytton Strachey that received flattering reviews. The variety of his subjects was, of course, baffling. Was he a universalist or just a ventriloquist? But he was indeed an odd person if one wandered in the inner countries of his mind. “He loved his village, but avoided its inhabitants; he loved rivers, but couldn’t swim; he loved Sanskrit but couldn’t read it.”

Then comes a scathing bit of dark laughter recording

all that he had to endure and opportunities denied to reach the Professorial throne.

“His credentials to be the Head of a University Department of English were comic. He had never gone west of Suez, never been smoked at by an English don, he couldn't say ‘How do you do?’ in the right style, he had a wholesome hatred of philology and Anglo-Saxon, and his accent was un-English., if not altogether atrocious. He couldn't play cards. He never rode a bicycle.”

His marriage on 31st March 1930 was only to beat the Sarda Act! He is sure to be forgotten soon enough, though he may haunt libraries because of his books on famous personalities like Hopkins and Sri Aurobindo. Now they say he is dead, but then he was always quoting, “Death once dead, there is no more dying then ...”

The conclusion assures the reader that he will live in the affections of those “whom he held most dear, who had cared to love him inspite of his sins, and who had even with the transforming power of their love crowned him in their heart of hearts.”

He does not specify names. Family? Friends? Students? Editors? But that is the truth as Time has told us. Obviously all of them, as another half a century after we would realise, for real and miss his presence.

The self-obituary led to an interesting incident in his village. Someone from the nearby Tirunelveli Town who had seen the page in the Illustrated Weekly spread the word, and relations came wailing to Kodakanallur to condole with Iyengar's mother. Fortunately Iyengar's brother clarified the position, though I guess the poor dear mother was not amused.

AMID THE LEAVES THE INMATE VOICES CALLED

In the years of growing up, in that tricky period of teenage, in those seven years of bridging childhood and early adulthood, one definitely needs an icon. It may not be oriented towards a repeat performance of the achievements of the icon. But the presence of an icon is a constant inspiration. Someone points out this image: try to be like this in real life!

India, fortunately, is rich in this sphere. For millennia great men and women have worked like gods on this earth. People have followed them eagerly as a talisman against going under. It is as well, for day-to-day living in India has never been an easy-going affair. Struggle is the reality which has been effectively countered by the call for simplicity, sacrifice, immense scholarship and sterling tapasya by these icons. Their achievements are Himalayan, yet we have not recorded the life and work of all these great personalities. Where we manage to do that at least with partial brush-strokes, there come the icon-shatterers looking for cheap publicity. Handling vague research instruments such as Marxian sociology and Freudian psychology that can only lead to dubious results, the icon-shatterers invariably suffering from metaphoric scotoma, exult into their cracked mirrors. "I have managed to scratch this face with a rusted knife!" However, Mother India is a tough goddess. Rooted in Sanatana Dharma, She remains spiritually a single unit. Her image endures for all time. Like her eternal youth and strength, Rishi Bankim's hymn endures for ever:

"Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
Thou art heart, our soul, our breath
Though art love divine, the awe

In our hearts that conquers death.
Thine the strength that nerves the arm,
Thine the beauty, thine the charm.
Every image made divine
In our temples is but thine.
Mother, mother mine!
Mother sweet, I bow to thee,
Mother great and free!”

My early years were practically spent among my father’s bookshelves. There never was a separate library room in any of the houses we lived, and one was in no way surprised to find a shelf of books even in the kitchen. All his life, father remained a teacher and could not afford big houses. He never built one either. That was his way. Books were his career; not applying for loans to build houses or buy cars. “I have never owned a car, and cannot pedal even a bicycle”, he would say laughingly.

But he bought books, read them and wrote books also. As one who shaped my thoughts, quite early in my life, father showed me an icon who was very much present in the house as portraits and books. He would speak to me of how as a very young boy, Sri Aurobindo had become a voracious reader and achieved academic excellence. That was the time when Ambalal Purani was gathering original papers of Sri Aurobindo’s stay in England. Oh yes, father would say, Sri Aurobindo had studied in England and so you better study English literature well. He would not be happy if you are lax with this area of literary studies. If you want to understand Sri Aurobindo, first try to know the history of the language which he wields with such expertise.

Such was father’s constant emphasis on Sri Aurobindo the reader-scholar. Mother would be stringing

parijatha blossoms to make garlands for the portraits of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and just listen as father went on speaking about Sri Aurobindo. It was familiar territory for her as she was there from day one when father borrowed the **Collected Poems and Plays of Sri Aurobindo** from Shankargowda Patil in 1942 and brought the volumes home to read. Then father had gone deep into Aurobindo studies, written a biography of Sri Aurobindo which was corrected by the Master himself. He had indeed spent his lifetime writing and lecturing about Sri Aurobindo in various fora. At home too he went on speaking about Sri Aurobindo but each time it sounded new, there was something new to know about the Master.

Father would exclaim at times: “How much he must have read to write such beautiful English!” and then read a page from a book picked up at random from his Aurobindonian shelf. It could be just a brief poem, maybe a sonnet:

“O Thou of whom I am the instrument,
O secret Spirit and Nature housed in me,
Let all my mortal being now be blent
In Thy still glory of divinity.
I have given my mind to be dug Thy channel mind,
I have offered up my will to be Thy will:
Let nothing of myself be left behind
In our union mystic and unutterable.
My heart shall throb with the world-beats of Thy
love,
My body become Thy engine for earth-use;
In my nerves and veins Thy rapture’s streams shall
move;
My thoughts shall be hounds of Light for Thy power
to loose.

Keep only my soul to adore eternally
And meet Thee in each form and soul of Thee.”

This would be followed by some words on the sonnet form and how Sri Aurobindo was a master of English prosody.

All this had led my taking up English literature for my graduate studies in the Andhra university. In the ‘fifties we were still in the syllabus-content of British universities, though other universities (Madras, for instance) had jettisoned some subjects like Old English. Studying Sri Aurobindo I have felt at home precisely because his writing has a total view of English literature and reflects it from the Anglo-Saxon days to his own time.

More than half a century has passed me by since those college days. Looking back I feel happy that we had this heavy, wholesome syllabus in my student days. If one goes by today’s list of subjects studied by students, I can only pity them. To study English literature without having watched Beowulf kill Grendel in the deep seas or watch Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest recount the tale of the Chaunticleer! To say I am a student of English literature without watching the Lady Britomart in her male disguise rout a whole set of Knights in Armour! To think of oneself as a Master of Arts in English literature without having had several glimpses of the History of the English People by the Venerable Bede! The Venerable Bede gave me my earliest introduction to the mystery of life and death and the days we spend on earth. He records in the History about the missionary Paulinus who had come to the court of King Edwin of Northumberland and told his royal host:

“It seems to me that the life of man on earth is like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with

your captains and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall. Outside, the storms of winter rain and snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one window of the hall and out through another. While he is inside, the bird is safe from the winter storms, but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. So man appears on earth for a little while – but of what went before this life, or what follows, we know nothing.”

Sri Aurobindo was a master of many languages. He even wrote works in Bengali and Sanskrit. But English was his favourite. There may be richer literatures in the past but English was in the forefront as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century. I have always enjoyed his document on the character of English poetry which is part of *The Future Poetry*. There is the firm opening:

“Of all the modern European tongues the English language— I think this may be said without any serious doubt,—has produced, not always the greatest or most perfect, but at least the most rich and naturally powerful poetry, the most lavish of energy and innate genius. The unfettered play of poetic energy and power has been here the most abundant and brought forth the most constantly brilliant fruits.”

He finds it curious that English literature has not been a force in offering plenty of inputs for Europe’s creative genius. But no matter. We know that it has had a very big hand in shaping the bhasha literatures of India thanks to the colonial rule. At the same time, Indians have taken to English with enthusiasm and have created a branch for English literature, “Indian writing in English”! Again, the unique star that has continued to shed its brilliance in

this branch is Sri Aurobindo himself. History has many pleasant turns and this has been one, for it has given us Savitri .

It goes without saying that English literature exercised its inspirations also on Sri Aurobindo as an Indian writing in English. Of course he subsumed all that came to his creative forge with his yogic fire, and it will be vain to go in for comparative passages and thoughts and techniques as we do when writing soulless research dissertations. At the same time it is of incalculable Ananda for us personally to traverse those regions where he had also wandered long ago.

One of his statements that has charmed me no end refers to his habit of taking in the whole of a book and not harping upon individual words and phrases as writers of bazaar notes do. They may present the body but they lose the life-spirit. As he said on 29th December, 1938:

“Once I was giving a lecture on Southey’s ‘Life of Nelson’. My lecture was not in agreement with the notes. So the students remarked that it was not at all like what is found in the notes. I replied that: ‘I have not read the notes — in any case they are all rubbish!’ I could never go to the minute details. I read and left my mind to do what it could. That’s why I could never become a Scholar.”

I guess this attitude helped me keep my love of English literature undimmed during all these decades. The text has been my joy. Sri Aurobindo read voraciously and Dinendra Kumar Roy who was with Sri Aurobindo in Baroda has said that he saw all the poets from Chaucer to Swinburne in his library. It must have contained the literature preceding Chaucer too. With his passion for the classics, he would have had books on Old English literature also in his Baroda library. For he spent lavishly on books

which seems to have been his solitary luxury in those days.

Whenever I have come to **The Future Poetry** and read his references to the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic element in English literature, I have simply spent sometime with a text of those times. So it has been whenever I see the mention of a familiar name from that literature in all his writings: Chaucer, Marlowe, Rossetti or Morris. This has been a luxury indeed! I used to wonder sometimes at this habit of repeatedly going back to such writings when they have nothing to do with my work on hand and positively do hamper my deadlines. That is, till suddenly a line in **Savitri** brought me illumination one day.

“Hidden in the forest’s bosom of loneliness
Amid the leaves the inmate voices called,
Sweet like desires enamoured and unseen,
Cry answering to low insistent cry.
Behind slept emerald dumb remotenesses,
Haunt of a Nature passionate, veiled, denied
To all but her own vision lost and wild.
Earth in this beautiful refuge free from cares
Murmured to the soul a song of strength and
peace.”

This is the introduction to the forest where Satyavan has spent his childhood, boyhood and youth. Savitri’s chariot is passing through the area and we have this splendid description. The unseen inmates were welcoming her to come, see and stay. Who wants to leave a place that gives you a feeling of absolute peace, comfort, the adventure of quiet imagination, the rainbow hues of loving togetherness?

Browsing in my library I have often felt the same way, the silent call of a book. So many inmate voices! Many had been handled by my father long before I was born. Some very precious volumes too: the books which carry

the divine signatures of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother given to my parents at various times: To Srinivasa; to Padmasani. And all those books given to me by my father at various times, the earliest dated 1944!

Perhaps this immersion in English literature has made me feel absolutely at home with the writings of Sri Aurobindo. I find delight in well-wrought phrases and Sri Aurobindo never fails to surprise me in his regard. Have I understood all that he has written? Certainly not. I am, after all, a human being with limitations. But the sheer pleasure of reading him! Ah, yes, it is good that my basic grounding was in English literature.

The entry into that field was quite harsh. It was alien territory in all respects. Like ancient Tamil of the Sangam Age, the Old English period traverses the same time scale, 500 B.C. to 2nd century A.D. And like Sangam Tamil, Old English sounds like another language. Even the script has variations. For both, written records come much later. In the beginning, it was quite a pain to attend the Old English classes. We had come to the discipline hoping for an absolutely lovely time reading novels (!) as already various serials like Classics Retold had charmed us. Nor were we strangers to English poetry. The Golden Treasury was a beloved companion for the aspiring teenager in those days. But here the Professor was spreading several tough nuts for us to crack, including the epic poem **Beowulf**.

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,

þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum ...*

This is not English, our minds rebelled. But we

plodded through the words for there was no choice. There was also a temptation. Papers on Old English, Middle English and the History of the English Language could help us score marks as in mathematics. Memory power was important too. But once the coveted degree was in my hands, promptly I forgot the originals. But the story of heroism, the battle between Beowulf and the sea-monster Grendel and some of the kennings have continued to walk with me down the decades. Scyld, the heroic king had wanted a sea-burial. When he dies, he is placed in a boat which is set adrift in the sea. As I was living in a coastal town at that time, the scenery would come back to me as I stared at the Bay of Bengal in the evenings. Scyld's son was the hero Beowulf. It is an incomplete epic, though.

Old English literature is mostly about battle heroism and the pain of war, loss and death. Even later poems (5th, 6th centuries) can overwhelm us by sheer melancholy. 'The Battle of Maldon' was a prescribed text and we learnt about the horrifying Viking invasions of Britain which were repeated, and our Professor helpfully linked it to the repeated invasions of Mahmud of Gazni who plundered India. Athelgar, Godric, Godwig, Wulfstan, Aethelred the Unready and Brihtnoth became familiar names. Brihtnoth was of course the heroic warrior who challenged the invading Vikings, avaricious for Anglo-Saxon riches:

"Thou messenger of the seamen, back with thy message.

Tell to thy people, these far more hateful tidings,
There stands here a good earl in the midst of his men,
Who will this country ever defend,
The kingdom of Aethelred, mine overlord,
The folk and the ground - but they shall fall,
The foemen in the fight; too shameful methinks

That ye with our tribute, to ship should be gone
Without a blow struck - now that ye have thus far
Made your incoming into our land.
Nor shall ye so softly carry off our riches.
Sooner shall point and edge reconcile us,
Grim warplay indeed - before we give tribute.”

So why should we be surprised that the seeds of patriotism had been sown in Sri Aurobindo’s heart even when he was in England, studying such books? However, battle heroism is not all about these Anglo-Saxon recordings. There are also the earliest references to the coming of Christianity, the change from the terrifying gods of Norse mythology like Thor to the beckoning love of Jesus Christ’s message. ‘The Dream of the Rood’ was another prescribed poem. It was amazing to know that part of the poem had been carved on a wooden pillar known as the Ruthwell Cross but it was pulled down during a Protestant revolt. Who was the author? Caedmon? Cynewulf? What does it matter who the author was? The poem is the reality and is a wonderful introduction to the art of personification.

The poet has a dream in which he comes across the Cross on which Jesus Christ had been nailed. Encrusted with precious gems as also stained by blood the Cross speaks to the poet of the last hours of Jesus. It was originally a tree which was cut down to make the Cross crucify Jesus. It had shared the pain of being nailed with Jesus and had been mocked by the onlookers. Later, just as Jesus is now praised by all, the Cross too has gained a very high position. It is now decorated with gems to celebrate it.

“Now the time has come
That I will be honoured far and wide
By men over the earth and all this glorious creation;

They will pray to this beacon. On me the Son of
 God
 Suffered for a while; because of that I am glorious
 now,
 Towering under the heavens, and I am able to heal
 Each one of those who is in awe of me.
 Formerly I was made the hardest of punishments,
 Most hateful to the people, before I opened for them,
 For the voice-bearers, the true way of life.
 Listen, the lord of glory, the guardian of the kingdom
 of heaven,
 Then honoured me over the forest trees,
 Just as he, almighty God, also honoured
 His mother, Mary herself, for all men
 Over all womankind.”

I studied Old English between 1954-57. That was a
 time when we did not (or could not) even consider writings
 by Americans or Africans or Canadians or Indians writing
 in English as ‘English literature’. The austere Professor K.
 Viswanadham saw to it that we did not let our attention
 wander away, as he painstakingly went through the
 syllabus. There were good moments of laughter when he
 explained a few Old English “riddles” and drew our
 attention to “naivam chindanthi sastraani” sloka in the Gita
 when explaining one of them:

“A noble guest of great lineage dwells
 In the house of man. Grim hunger
 Cannot harm him, nor feverish thirst,
 Nor age, nor illness. If the servant
 Of the guest who rules, serves well
 On the journey, they will find together
 Bliss and well-being, a feast of fate;
 If the slave will not as a brother be ruled

By a lord he should fear and follow
Then both will suffer and sire a family
Of sorrows when, springing from the world,
They leave the bright bosom of one kinswoman,
Mother and sister, who nourished them.
Let the man who knows noble words
Say what the guest and servant are called.”

So apt an image to explain the relationship of the body and the soul! I salute the Professor who made the distant Anglo-Saxon poem come so close to our own religious experience.

*... “Lo! the Spear-Danes’ glory through splendid achievements

The folk-kings’ former fame we have heard of,
How princes displayed then their prowess-in-battle.
Oft Scyld the Scefing from scathers in numbers
(Translated by Lesslie Hall)

(Courtesy: *Mother India* Pandicherry September, 2013)

INESCAPABLE GRACE : ENGLISH POETRY BY INDIANS

When we draw close to the wonderful, multifoliate creativity that is going on in Indian literature today, poetry makes us stop for a moment with astonishment. The commitment and the faith of Indians writing poetry in English is sometimes deeply touching. For nearly one hundred and fifty years, Indian poets have been prolific and they have given us some of the finest flights of English poetry. Of course, imitators of Eliot and Pound, Sexton and Plath have been aplenty and they have even achieved success in terms of getting published abroad and gaining awards and finding themselves spread out in Indian anthologies and even syllabi. But even if Indians have chosen a foreign language like English, most of them have found it impossible to escape the magnet of Grace that is India's rich past. That is why a good deal of their poetry will stand the test of time. Unlike their tool, the English language, their subject matter has a literature and culture several millennia old. Those who have allowed themselves to be blessed by this Grace have gained the needed strength to endure and carry the torch onward.

For, what is generally overlooked is the manner in which Indian culture has been reflected even in our earliest poets in English. Our first poets like Vivian Derozio and Swami Vivekananda expressed our historical sense and mythological symbols with a sense of undeniable power. Even a non-Indian could sense the sway of a hidden strength in a poem like 'Kali, the Mother' by Swami Vivekananda:

“For Terror is Thy name,
Death is in Thy breath,

And every shaking step
Destroys a world for e'er.
Thou 'Time' the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!"

Toru Dutt's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan* (1882) is now a classic. So is Romesh Chunder Dutt's *Lays of Ancient India* (1894). Manmohan Ghose, of course, preferred western themes (*Adam Alarmed in Paradise*, left incomplete) but his brother Sri Aurobindo drew from the *Mahabharata* to write narratives like *Love and Death* and the epic, *Savitri*. Sarojini Naidu recorded the sounds and sights of India with exquisite embroidery:

"Sweet is the shade of the coconut glade,
and the scent of the mango grove,
And sweet are the sands at the full 'o the moon
with the sound of the voices we love.
But sweeter, O brothers, the kiss of the spray
And the dance of the wild foam's glee:
Row, brothers, row to the blue of the verge,
Where the low sky mates with the sea."

(*"Coromandel Fishers"*)

Just as the tapestry of the Indian poet in English was gaining richer shades and subtleties in the background of the greatest tradition in the world, some poets changed gear to get into the grove of the Eliotesque conundrums of "broken images". It was no doubt the call of the Time Spirit, and Indo-Anglian literature, perhaps, needed these inputs as well. India had become independent, and increasingly our young men were going to American Universities, and the exchange of printed material was speedier in a world growing smaller in distance. As one who was an undergraduate at this time, it was somewhat exciting to turn to the shorter, slicker and tantalisingly

shocking poems. After all those lilies blooming on one's backyard in American poetry, it was a sand-paper feeling to have the ugly raised up as the poetically beautiful:

“Hernia, goitre and the flowering boil
Lie bare beneath his hands, for ever bare.
His fingers touch the skin: they reach the soul.
I know him in the morning for a seer.”

(Dom Moraes, *At Seven O’Clock*)

Also, the “confessional poetry” of some of these versifiers invited with a wicked gleam, especially if it was a poetess like Kamala Das or Gauri Deshpande:

“You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed My
poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and to offer
at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering beneath your
monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a dwarf. I
lost my will and reason, to all your Questions I mumbled
incoherent replies. The summer Begins to pall.”

(Kamala Das, *The Old Playhouse*)

There was also the sand-paper daring of some poets who could desecrate with impunity terms and beliefs we had been holding in reverence, using a facile English style:

“We all pad the hook with the bait, Allah downwards.
What is paradise, but a promissory note
Found in the holy book itself? And if you probe
Under the skin what does it promise us
For being humble and truthful, and turning
Towards Kaaba five times a day,
Weeping in Moharrum and fasting in Ramadan?
What does it promise us except

That flea-ridden bags that we are
We will end up as splendid corpses?”

(Keki N. Daruwalla, *Apothecary*)

With so much churning of a received tradition regarding prosody, themes and aesthesis, the English-educated Indian (specially of the academic areas) could flaunt a wonderful feeling: “I too can be a poet. No need to play an imaginary piano with my fingers counting the syllables and struggling to decide where to have the ‘compensatory pause’ and weigh the words for a spondee or a dactyl. Enough of deciding whether wink will go with sink, stink or brink! Freedom from all prosodic shackles!”

Along with the externals of a poem, the subject-matter also was in for change. Keeping up with the tradition that what Bengal thinks today, the rest of the country psittacises tomorrow, the change was announced formally in Kolkata. The Writers Workshop of Prof. P.Lal took the lead and found the “spiritual poetry” of the Aurobindonian School (Nirodbaran, K.D. Sethna and others) not healthy enough for the growth of Indian poetry in English (*Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*, 1959). In fact, Prof. Raghavendra Rao found eminent poets like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo to be manipulators of the English language and not creators! Nor did they have any use for our rich tradition. However, their “cat on a hot tin roof” attitude did not go unquestioned and within a couple of years Prof. Lal (backed by many young writers like Anita Desai and Pradip Sen) issued a statement which said:

“Sri Aurobindo happens to be our Milton, and Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Manmohan Ghose and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya our Romantic singing birds. They provide sufficient provocation to experiment afresh, set new

standards, preserve what is vital in the tradition and give a definition to the needs of the present.”

In the last forty years there has been plentiful experimentation and an amazing amount of poetic output in English in India. Prof. Lal’s Writers Workshop has been in the forefront of giving a base for those who want to publish. It may be remembered that many poets like Vikram Seth originally published their work in Writers Workshop. The publishing house continues to be active. The “Bombay Group” (Nissim Ezekiel, for instance) has been very visible in anthologies. Orissa has enthusiastic poets publishing all the time, while Jayanta Mahapatra remains one of our best recorders of the Oriya land. South India has the untiring Krishna Srinivas and his monthly *Poet* that has always tried to be international in its spread, while encouraging English poetry by Indians. There is then Karnataka (the Chetana group readily comes to mind) and Kerala (Gopi Krishna Kottoor’s *Poetry Chain*).

Sitting in a room lined with rows and rows of such volumes, do I perceive any “trend” today? Indeed, it appears that Indian poetry in English has come full circle. The brief poem – no rhyme, no rhythm and often no reason either – continues to be popular. Despite attractive titles, often we get lost in inchoate thought-processes:

“never low as my staying over here
that has no intrigue or song;
just a simple act of hinging upon
what one wishes to do across the shrunken
horizon.”

(Rabindra Swain, *I Forget the First Line*)

It appears that such free verse has at last begun to pall and a bit of rhythm and rhyme have been sneaking in

with plentiful laughter. For instance, a seasoned academician like Prof. M.K. Naik has been publishing volumes of limericks and clerihews. Tinier and tinier the form has grown in some hands, drawing upon the reservoir of Haiku and Tanka in Japan. Some lovers of poetry have tried to come back to prosodic poetry that has an explicit message or an internalised autobiographical recordation or a report of social concern. Indeed, Dr. H. Tulsi has even been bravely publishing a journal exclusively for structured verse in *Metverse Muse*. She has never failed to enthuse prospective poets as in this Spenserian Stanza:

“From ‘Free Verse’ freedom you have won at last;
Restored to you has been your rightful throne.
Your darkened days have now become your ‘past’;
To fresh attacks your fort is no more prone.
Your harp, henceforth, will never hoarsely drone;
Repaired has been each broken string and dent.
With rhythmic chimes to guide your dulcet tone,
Your anklets new, with tinkling bells, are meant.
So sing and dance away, to all our hearts’ content!”

(*To Tradpoesia*)

Of course there are wags around who always say that there are definitely more writers of poetry than readers in India, a point referred to wanly by the practitioners themselves:

“O Poet
How long will you too
Continue to arduously compose the poems
Despite knowing well and true this fact
That people have absolutely stopped
Reading now whatsoever the verses?”

(Suresh C. Jaryal, *Inquest*)

Anyway, this is a global phenomenon and the Indian poet need not feel disheartened. Unlike his counterparts elsewhere, he has a very strong tradition to infuse him with new strength. Here it is also understood that the poet has an important place as the conscience-keeper of the society which is beset with a million problems. As J. P Das, the eminent Oriya poet says:

“It is true that life is getting more prosaic and less poetic. It is true that there is difficulty in finding publishers for poetry. But no one has yet written off poetry as a gone case, and though they talk of the end of history and of civilisation, no one has suggested the end of poetry. New poets are born and poetry books are published every day.”

The Indian poet writing in English has, of late, been tapping the ancient past with a rare finesse and in this manner he has kept the poetic spirit alive for he knows that a nation must keep its poetry vibrant to meet any contemporary situation.

“Poetry remains man’s inalienable
birthright and paramount need.
Call it verily the voice of the soul
and the *elan* of the race.
It survives fashions and revolutions
in taste and social upsets...
Isn’t a poet the brave intrepid diver
who explores life’s ocean-depths?
Dying almost, he collects his findings
and shores up the oyster-pearls.
But the Rasika alone sees the pearl
to prize it, and thanks the poet.”

(K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Microcosmographia Poetica*)

The rasikas of this nation may be poor in monetary

terms when it comes to buying books and periodicals, but they have never failed to read, encourage and salute the Indian poet. Now that the English poet is turning to sustained projections of themes, the poetry scene in English is becoming rich fast both by original productions as well as beautiful works in translation. During the last quarter century, my shelf of English poetry has had plentiful inputs that are sublime, readable, thought-provoking, meditative. One cannot say the poets always succeed; even among those who achieve signal success there may be patches of dryness. But then this is to be expected in long poems. As the situation is today, one can only say the Indian poetic voice in English is quite, quite vibrant.

Maha Nand Sharma has retold the tremendous life of Bhishma and has made use of the Shiva cycle of myths for his *Rudraksha Rosary*. His *Flowering of the Lotus* is about the colourful Sanskrit poet, Bartrihari. Lakshmi Narayan Mahapatra has drawn upon Vedic images for *Bhuma*. C.S. Kamalapati's *The Song of Songs: The Song of the Seven Hills* intersects the legends about the pilgrim hill of Tirupati with innumerable contemporary adventures in spiritual spaces. Drawn deeper and deeper into the spaces of the spiralling legends, these poets do get caught occasionally in a whirl of words. It is a pardonable evil though, as Kamalapati would have it:

“The Rajayogi like the Ancient Mariner
Sometimes never stops, until he has fully explained
All points relevant to the subject concerned.”

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, an Aurobindonian himself, has sought a way out by controlling mythic effusiveness with his own prosodic structure of an unrhymed quatrain of 34 syllables (10-7-10-7) as “an English approximation to the Samskrit anushtup.” His *Sitayana*, *Sati Saptakam* and

Krishna Geetam retell ancient legends with a contemporaneous thrust, as when Sita is heard musing on the nuclear threat while she is in the Ashrama of Valmiki. S.M. Angadi's *Basava Darsana* is an amazingly sincere attempt to present the Basava phenomenon that gave Saivism a high pedestal and inspired the Vacana canon in Kannada language. Angadi's is a breathless narrative in epic proportions. There are passages that move us deeply as in the legend of Akka Mahadevi. Immersion in the past history and alertness to the present make Angadi's poetry meaningful. Thus Basavanna to his followers:

“Beggary and parasitism have been in our country
Raised to dignified, nay, glorified status, but they in
fact,
Must be outlawed at once and ruthlessly banished.
He who does not work for his bread has no right
To eat. So everybody without exception must work
According to his ability, in which case there'll never
be
Dearth, destitution, poverty and the like left on
earth.”

These poets give a creative and meaningful turn to the past in their English productions. Here is Amreeta Syam's Kaikeyi speaking to her grandchildren

“Ask
“Ask questions, my grandchildren.
Always.
Rule with your
Hearts
But keep a little
Of yourselves
Aside

For life
And laughter.”

Interestingly enough, the richest area in Indian literature in English translation is also bagged by poetry. Some of the finest English verse to come to us in recent times is through translations which are creative in their own right. An example is O.N.V. Kurup’s *Ujjayini* which takes the received tradition regarding Kalidasa’s life but modifies it with new insights drawn from his writings. Familiar scenes and phrases flit by, and when touching upon *Raghuwamsa* there is almost an echo of the passage from Ulloor quoted above, for the heroic ideal in India has remained alive all the time. Concluding his saga, Kalidasa wonders at this phenomenon with pardonable pride :

“Where are the ones who wore
the sceptre and the crown, yet
diligently placed immortal reputation
above the stirrings of their mortal bodies
and knew what they gave as price for
preserving it unsullied and bright,
was the only real investment?
And where do the ones stand
Who sucked only the nectar of power?
As he finished writing that tragic saga,
From Dileep to Agnivarana,
The words of his guru long ago
Echoed in his soul, ‘Your words
Would one day reach Ujjayini!’”

A tremendous undertaking that has been enriching Indian poetry in English is Prof. P. Lal’s verse-by-verse translation of the *Mahabharata*. The power of the Sanskrit verses composed several millennia earlier come now in the simple, crystalline English of P. Lal, trailing clouds of glory

from the stately style of Vyasa. An occasional slipping in of a Sanskrit adjective or noun but helps the English rise in sublimity:

“Like a musth-elephant
separated from his herd,
your maha-powerful son
Duryodhana advanced;
And the Pandavas broke
Into loud exultation...
O raja! Seeing Duryodhana,
Mace in hand,
Looking like the tall-peaked
Kailasa mountain,
Advancing,
Bhima said:
Remember how Draupadi
In her period
Was insulted in the sabha,
And raja Yudhishthira
Was cheated at dice
By Sakuni?
O wicked-atmaned Duryodahana!
Today you will taste
The Maha-bitter fruits
Of these and other crimes
You perpetrated against
The innocent Pandavas.”

(*Bhimasena-Duryodhana Samvada*, verses 40,42-44)

Twentieth century Kannada literature has given K. V. Puttappa's (Kuvempu) *Ramayana Darsana*. This has now been brought to English by the renowned English scholar and poet, Shankar Mokashi-Punekar. Reading Kuvempu in Kannada is a rare experience; and absorbing his thoughts

in Dr. Shankar Mokashi Punekar's stately English leads us to a state of exaltation. Ah, the long poem is alive; the ancient myths are relevant still; the English language can convey the Indian experience as clearly as the waters of Sarayu in Valmiki's time!

Going through *Sri Ramayana Darsana* slowly (the poem calls for frequent meditation) one comes across many thought-provoking changes. As when Rama begs for Vali's pardon in a long passage:

“Admitting irreparable wrong done is the mark
Of knight templars: but ha! My mind seething hot
Day and night by Sita's severance, dimmed reflectors
And fuddled my thought. I chose devious pathways
To quick finis.”

To the reader of *Shri Ramayana Darsana*, there will never be a lack of such very interesting innovations. When did we ever hear of Rama proceeding to join Sita in the fire in Yuddha Kanda? A scene follows “as if the gateway of supersensuous was thrown open to the sensuous”, and Rama is cleansed by the trial by fire. Divided into four Books (Ayodhya, Kishkinda, Lanka and Shree), the epic concludes with Rama's coronation described in terms of the glory and grandeur of Mother Nature. The epic opens with Kuvempu's salutations to world poets including Firdausi and Sri Aurobindo, a passage that assures us that the poet in all climes and at all times has been the heart-beat of humanism:

“Obeisance to poets ... to Homer, Vergil, Dante
And Milton; ... to Kumaravyasa, to Pampa,
Sage Vyasa, Bhasa, Bhavabhooti, Kalidasa and others:
To Narahari, Tulasidasa, Krittivasa,
Nannaya, Firdousi, Kamba, sage Aurobindo.
To ancients, moderns, elders and youngsters,

Regardless of time, land, language or caste distinctions,

I bow to one and all world Acharyas of art,
Discerning God's glory wherever some light shines
I bend my knees and fold my hands in salutation.
May Guru's kindness abide; poet's mercy prevail;
May the yearning heart of the world crystallise
Into a blessing. Bend, heads; hands, fold; life, be clean.
May Rasa penance triumph; may perennial peace
Prevail."

Poetry is indeed a "Rasa penance", a tapasya, not to be lightly taken up. One should not squander away one's gifts in purposeless self-pity or elitist star-gazing. The Great Indian Tradition as well as its folklore counterpart have always watched the sacred and the secular as a helix, each twining with the other and both enriching the country and the people, applying the needed correctives and inspiring people to exceed themselves in heroic ways. In India, the hero as a poet has been given the highest throne termed as the Kavi, the Dhrishta, the Seer. Looking around the new wave of poets and translators, I do have a feeling that the day is not far off when Sri Aurobindo's prophecy regarding the future poetry might come true and the Mantric Word is heard in India. Caught as we are in this extremely complicated world, I would like to conclude with the solemn hope of George Santayana stated in *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante and Goethe*(1935):

"It is time some genius appear to reconstitute the shattered picture of the world. He should live in the continual presence of all experience, and respect it; he should at the same time understand nature, the ground of that experience; and he should also have a delicate sense of the ideal echoes of his own passions, for all the colours of

his possible happiness. All that can inspire a poet is contained in this task, and nothing less than this task would exhaust a poet's inspiration. We may hail this needed genius from afar ... we may salute him, saying:

Onorate l'altissimo poeta.

Honour the most high poet, honour the highest possible poet.”

Amukta Malyada

A TRIPLE SOUL-FORCE FROM AN ILLUSTRIOUS EMPEROR

The obscure beginnings of a great empire :

The concluding decades of the thirteenth century pointed to a bleak future for South India. At that time there were five important kingdoms south of the Vindhyas. The Yadava kingdom of Deogiri and the Hoysala kingdom of Dvarasamudra were in the west; in the east was the Kakatiya kingdom; the Pandyan kingdom lay in the south. Apart from them, there was also the Kampili kingdom, which was no more than a small principality. Situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra river, the tiny kingdom had been founded by Singaya Nayaka III who was a commander in the Hoysala army. He dared to declare himself as the chief of an independent kingdom which irritated the Hoysala rulers. Naturally, it was his son, Kampili Raya who bore the brunt of this anger though he defended his kingdom heroically. But the holocaust that came in the shape of Mohammad bin Tughlak wiped out the Kampili kingdom. It was out of the ashes of Kampili that a Hindu Empire arose like a phoenix.

When he became the Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughlaq used more and more force to control his satraps managing huge territories in South India. His activities only resulted in the rise of sultanates in South India, created by rebel commanders of the Delhi Sultanate. One of the strongest and most enduring was the Bahmani kingdom which began with the crowning of Malik Ismail in 1346 who was succeeded by Alauddin Bhaman Shah I. The Bahmani rulers were intent upon increasing their hegemony in South India and the spread of Islam. Mention may also be made of the Ma'bar Sultanate that ruled over

Madurai from 1335 to 1378. We owe all these details to the Muslim historian Ibn Battuta in his chronicles, known as **Rihla**.

Meanwhile, the last of the great Hoysala kings, Vira Ballala III was showing a brave front to the invading Islamic hordes from Delhi. He had two commanders, Harihara and Bukkaraya, popularly known as Hukka and Bukka. Their father, Bhavana Sangama had been in the employ of the Hoysala king. Vira Ballala's raising high the flag of Hinduism and the legendary riches of South Indian temples drew Allauddin Khilji's attention to Dwarasamudra, also known as Halebeid. His commander Malik Kafur plundered the capital of its vast riches. By 1336 almost all the Hindu kingdoms of South India had come under Muslim hegemony. Vira Ballala was the sole challenger now to the imperial ambitions of the Delhi Sultanate. To make his defences stronger, Vira Ballala founded the new administrative capital of Vijaya Virupakshanagara (also called Hosapattana, the New Metropolis) on the banks of the Tungabhadra river. Just when things seemed to be going right for the great king, he died. The year was 1343. Fortunately, the torch of Hindu resistance had been passed on to Harihara who began ruling most of the Hoysala areas with Vijaya Virupakshanagara as the capital. He was the eldest son of Bhavana Sangama. The others were Bukkaraya, Kampana, Muddappa, and Marappa, and all of them equally capable. Before long the entire area ruled over by Vira Ballala in Karnataka and Andhra territories came under the new kingdom presided over by the Sangama dynasty.

Harihara I (1336-1355) was the first Sangama ruler. His greatest asset was his guru, Vidyaranya. There are conflicting reports about how Vidyaranya came to help

Harihara. One of the traditions refers to Harihara and his brother being forcibly converted to Islam after the fall of the Kakatiya rulers of Warangal. However, they found an enlightened acharya in Vidyaranya who was then the pontiff of Sringeri Sarada Peetham. He abdicated his pontificate to help found a Hindu kingdom to stem the Islamic tide, re-converted the Sangama brothers to Hinduism, and crowned Harihara as the king in a sacred spot, perhaps Anegundi, on the banks of the Tungabhadra. Under his directions, the Sangamas built the Vijayanagar City which had as its heart the ancient and holy Pampa which has been mentioned in the Ramayana.

Pampa (Hampi) has also a long history. Emperor Ashoka's edicts have been found in its adjoining villages like Siddhapuram, Koppal and Erragudi. From 3rd to 7th century A.D. the area was under the control of various famous dynasties like the Satavahanas, Pallavas and Kadambas. It was after the declaration of the Vijayanagar Empire that Hampi became a capital city. The temple to Virupaksha (also known as Pampapati) had been a pilgrimage centre and was perhaps chosen by Vidyaranya as an auspicious place to declare the birth of the new empire. The temple had received royal offerings from the Chalukyas, the Nagas and the Hoysalas. Legends associated with the temple speak of Lord Shiva marrying Pampa Devi, belonging to the Tungabhadra area.

Harihara was succeeded by Bukkaraya I (1355-1376). It was Bukka's son Kumara Kampana, who brought down the Madurai Sultanate in 1371 which had been mercilessly plundering Hindu temples, decimating agraharas which contained the society's living heartbeats in the palm-leaf manuscripts owned by Vedic scholars, and destroying cultural monuments. For his priceless services to

Hinduism, Kumara Kampana was blessed with the epithet, “Vedanta Marga Pratishtapaka”. His wife Gangadevi recorded those days in her **Madura Vijayam**, a Sanskrit poem in nine cantos where she refers to the atrocities of the Islamic invaders. One of the favourite pastimes of these Sultans was impaling Hindus. Vast coconut groves and forests were destroyed by the rulers:

“Iron spikes had been planted in these spaces. On the wire fencing joining them bunches of skulls had been hung. In earlier times, travelers on the high road heard the sounds of women learning dancing in their homes. Now there were only ear-piercing cries by Brahmins who were bound by iron wires and being dragged on the streets.”

It is sad that this work still remains largely unknown. One reason is our continued attunement to the histories written by westerners. It is also quite possible that the work has not been given due recognition because it was written by a woman! For long we had been fed with the Aryan Invasion theory, carefully orchestrated by westerners and parochial politicians so that the terror-striking Islamic invasions would be pushed away from people’s memory. Such were the vast deprivations committed by the invaders that even the premier Vishnu temple at Srirangam was victimized by the marauders. Some faithful devotees saved the icon by going into exile.

Madura Vijayam speaks of all this and the command of Bukka to his son Kumara Kampana; “The sultans of Madurai are like Ravana. Be a Rama and retrieve the people from sorrow. You have to undertake this task for the good of the world.” It was a difficult command to execute for the Muslims had achieved a stranglehold on all important areas of the Hindus:

“In the streets of Srirangam where Brahmins lived, now rises the noxious fumes of meat being roasted by the Muslims. The Muslims quaff plenty of wine and fight with one another in a state of intoxication.” The Muslim historian Ibn Batutta has given descriptions which corroborate Ganga Devi’s writing. Maiming and killing of Hindus were obviously a pleasant time-pass for the Sultans. Thus Ibn Batuta:

“The Hindu prisoners were divided into four sections and taken to each of the four gates of the great catcar. There, on the stakes they had carried, the prisoners were impaled. Afterwards their wives were killed and tied by their hair to these pales. Little children were massacred on the bosoms of their mothers and their corpses left there.”

At last, some relief was coming to the Hindus. Kumara Kampana posited a definite victory over the Madurai Sultan Khurbat Hasangang in 1371, thus putting an end to the terror that had oppressed Madurai as an incubus for decades. The Sangama dynasty lasted till 1485 with the kings, Harihara II, Bukka II, Virupaksha I, Devaraya I, Vijaya, Devaraya II, Mallikarjuna and Virupaksha II. Then the succession passed on to the Saluva dynasty with Saluva Narasimha who was a capable administrator and won battle victories to strengthen the weakening threads of the Vijayanagar Empire. He was also a poet and is well known as the author of **Ramabhyudayam**. Worried about the future, he rested full faith in his capable administrator, Tuluva Narasa Nayaka. Throughout his life, Narasa Nayaka was a faithful administrator for the kings of the empire. However, when Narasa Nayaka died in 1505, his son Viranarasimha led an insurrection and occupied the throne. With him the Tuluva dynasty became the third major line to rule over the Vijayanagar kingdom.

King Viranarasimha had come to the throne by eliminating the imprisoned king Immadi Narasimha and busied himself consolidating his gains which meant a constant feud with the rebels. Fortunately, he was a good administrator, and when he died in 1509, his step-brother Krishnadeva Raya was crowned king of Vijayanagar. This scion of the Tuluva dynasty was destined to take Vijayanagar Empire to its noon-day glory.

An Emperor is Born

Krishnadeva Raya was born on 17 January 1471. His father was Tuluva Narasa Nayaka, the faithful administrator of Saluva Narasimha. Although after Saluva Narasimha's death, the effective power of the empire was in the hands of Narasa Nayaka, he never thought of eliminating his master's heir and of usurping the throne. Perhaps his elder son, Viranarasimha nurtured such ambitions but did not dare to go against his father's wishes. Narasa Nayaka's death gave him the chance to rebel and occupy the throne. But Viranarasimha himself did not last long and so the way was cleared for Krishnadeva Raya to ascend the throne of Vijayanagar.

It is said that Saluva Timmarasu had a hand in the bringing up of Krishnadeva Raya and subsequently making him the king. He was a Brahmin and had been Viranarasimha's prime minister. The Portuguese traveler Fernando Nuniz has recorded that when the king was on his death-bed, he asked his prime minister to blind Krishnadeva Raya so that his eight-year old son will be assured of succeeding to the throne. Timmarasu did not carry out the order and thus helped Krishnadeva Raya to become the king. This story has been contested as Viranarasimha and Krishnadeva Raya were friends, though they were but step-brothers.

Krishnadeva Raya was the son of Narasa Nayaka and Nagalamba. The Raya's daughter Mohanangi mentions his year of birth as 1471 in her work, **Marichi Parinayam**. He was about forty years old when he became the king. It was a difficult situation for the new ruler as the Kalinga king had occupied the eastern part of Vijayanagar kingdom. The northern boundary was in constant threat and even deprecation from the Muslim rulers. Indeed, the moment the Raya ascended the throne, Muhammad Shah of Bahmani Kingdom, along with a few more Muslim heads opened a *Jihad* against him.

The opening battle proved auspicious. The Raya's forces defeated the invaders roundly after a fierce battle and sent them scurrying back to their respective cities. When being pursued, the Sultan of Bijapur was killed at Koilkuntla. With the advantage of a confused leadership in Bijapur, the Raya swiftly occupied Raichur and went forward to capture the forts of Gulbarga and Bidar. Since a wise king would not allow himself to be surrounded entirely by enemies, with foresight the Raya helped Muhammad Shah become the Bhamani sultan. We are told that he was even hailed as Yavana Rajya Sthapana Acharya!

The enemies of Vijayanagar were not only Muslims. The polegar Gangaraja of Umathur was one who engaged the Raya in war for two years. He lost his life in the war and his fort of Srirangapatna and Sivasamudra came under the Raya's rule. The Raya's strength was in his clear understanding of priorities. Thus he knew when and where to make friends as well. This is why he negotiated with the Portuguese and stocked his cavalry with the finest and swiftest horses available.

The Raya's major war with the Kalinga kingdom in 1513 resulted in his wresting back the Udayagiri-Kondavidu

areas for the Vijayanagar empire. The capture of the Kondavidu fort has been recorded as the result of an imaginatively forged plan. On his return path as a victor, Krishnadeva Raya worshipped at Tirupati and Simhachalam. The Kalinga king, despite huge losses continued to defy the Raya who successfully attacked Cuttack in 1518. The hostilities ended with the Raya marrying the Kalinga princess. The Vijayanagar-Kalinga wars have been historically famous.

But where is peace for the crowned head? Kutub Shah of Golconda and Ismail Adil Khan of Raichur had to be defeated when they sought to attack the Kondavidu and Raichur forts. Even after this, Krishnadeva Raya had to be wary of the machinations of his enemies both inside and outside Vijayanagar. However, his extraordinary administrative capabilities helped the maintenance of peace and the growth of the nation's economy. With the birth of a son to his chief consort Tirumala Devi in 1519, the Raya felt fulfilled.

Solon, a wise man of Greece had once told Croesus, king of Lydia: "Call no man happy till he is dead." How true! Krishnadeva Raya's young son died all of a sudden. It was rumoured he had been poisoned. The Raya suspected his benefactor-minister Thimmarasu. The latter was jailed and blinded. It is said the Raya realised Thimmarasu's innocence soon after but it was too late. Meanwhile his own robust health was giving way and Krishnadeva Raya passed away in 1529 universally mourned. The Vijayanagar Empire carried on bravely for a couple of decades but the Islamic powers surrounding the empire were too strong. The Empire was ruined by the disastrous Tallikota War of 1565 which ended with the savage destruction of the capital city, Hampi. To quote from Robert Sewell's **A Forgotten**

Empire:

“Never perhaps in the history of the world has such havoc been wrought, and wrought so suddenly, on so splendid a city, teeming with a wealthy and industrious population, in the full plenitude of prosperity one day, and on the next, seized, pillaged and reduced to ruins, amid scenes of savage massacre and horrors beggaring description.”

Ah, scepter and crown must tumble down, as it has been said. But Krishnadeva Raya continues to be an inspiration for what he achieved as a die-hard hero, for his love of his motherland, for the way he managed the administration. And an icon for those who love arts and literature and would like to press forward with social reform.

A Down-to-Earth Administrator

Though hemmed in by Jihadi kingdoms, Vijayanagar was a fairly well-administered territory when Krishnadeva Raya inherited the reins of the state. But he knew that an empire’s sustenance depended on good administration and proceeded to make it near-perfect. Because he was able to deliver the goods in this matter, Vijayanagar became a prosperous state. We have on hand detailed information about it from records of various kinds like Kavilas (land records) and the like. Agricultural land-tax was known as Dhanyadaya and industrial tax as Swarnadaya and house-tax as Illari. Both internal trade and international trade were healthy and made the kingdom rich. The Gold, Silver and Copper coins issued by Krishnadeva Raya are silent witnesses to those far-off days of affluence.

The attention to detail evinced by the Raya in administrative matters is revealed in his epic poem, *Amukta*

Malyada. The epic contains a detailed account of the eminent Vaishnava acharya Alavandar (Yamunacharya). The Raya has made bold departures from the traditional account of Alavandar's life. One cannot say whether the changes were due to the Raya's burgeoning romantic imagination, or there were some received traditions in his time (16th century) that indicated such turns in the life of Alavandar. Perhaps, the king used the life-story to detail the practical possibilities of an ideal administration to help future rulers.

Though the epic poem is about Goda Devi, the fourth Aswasa of the epic is entirely about Alavandar. The Raya brings in the branch story through a conversation between the Lord and Lakshmi. The Lord says:

“These two, Yamunacharya and Perialwar have literally given a new lease of life for Sri Vaishnava Darsana and have become worthy of my infinite grace.” On Lakshmi asking about Yamunacharya, the Lord began to relate the life of the great Acharya.

There was once a Pandyan king who was deeply immersed in Saivism. So much was he taken up with the Jangama wanderers, that he built a number of Saiva Maths, while the ancient temples of Vishnu remained in neglect. However, the Queen was a devotee of Vishnu and was unhappy at the ways of the king. But she did not deviate from her devotion to her husband and in this she pleased Vishnu also.

Yamunacharya came to the Pandyan court and sent word to the queen to help him take part in a contest so that he could effect a transformation in the king. Since the king was willing, a contest was arranged. Alavandar came to the fore-court of the palace and promptly made the

Aswaththa (peepul) tree growing there as his witness for the contest. The King was not impressed by Alavandar whom he considered to be too young. He vowed that he would become a Vaishnavite should his pundits lose in the contest. Unflappable, Alavandar proceeded systematically to refute the bases of the arguments put forth by his opponents. Even as he established Visishtadvaita as the true Path, a disembodied voice from the Aswaththa tree outside pronounced clearly: “O King! This is indeed the true religion. Narayana is Supreme. Worship Him!” The king was happy and hailed Alavandar. He also gave his sister in marriage to Alavandar and announced that Yamunacharya would succeed him to the Pandyan throne. Subsequently Alavandar gained fame as a very capable administrator.

Years rolled by, and it appeared Alavandar had almost forgotten his Srivaishnava heritage in the agonies and ecstasies that surround temporal power. Saddened by this turn, Manakkal Nambi (Sri Ramamisra) of Srirangam went to Alavandar’s palace and drew his attention by sending in a bunch of “alarka” greens (thooduvalai keerai) and gained an audience. He told Nathamuni’s grandson, Alavandar:

“The treasure left behind for you by your grandfather lies in an island at the centre of Kaveri waters, encircled by a snake. I can show it to you.” Alavandar then handed over the kingdom to his son, gave him soulful advice and left for Srirangam.

Thus, a brahmin from Srirangam is shown as an administrative genius by the Raya in his epic. Perhaps the idealism that was native to the Vijayanagar emperor was recorded in the section, ‘Yamuna Prabhu Rajaneeti’ under the guise of Alavandar’s advice. In any case, we get a

sustained treatise on ideal administration. The discourse issues several warnings against the cunning, treachery and corruption that pervade administration everywhere and sounds awesomely contemporaneous.

Yamunacharya, about to relinquish his royal seat, deals with a variety of issues that confront the ruler and how he has to be alert all the time against corruption at all levels in administration. One example:

“Do not entrust the temples of your kingdom
To an officer who is intent upon amassing wealth;
For he would, out of greed, divert the temple income
To compensate for the losses sustained by his
province!

Such money is not at all proper to be spent on a state
business!

So, a separate officer should be appointed to
administer them.

If such an officer misappropriates the property of the
temples

He will alone suffer for it and the king would have
no share of it!”¹

Through Alavandar we are told that people from all
castes have become increasingly powerless. There were
times in India when an Agasthya drank up the ocean waters,
a Viswamithra created a new world, a Vasishta turned the
Brahmastra back with his staff! Where are now such
tapaswins of power? Alavandar tells his son:

“Hence try to do your best and leave the rest to
Narayana who guards the helpless. If you give up egoism,

all your efforts will come to fruition. Follow dharma under all circumstances. By doing so you would fulfil the duties towards the sages, the gods and your ancestors. Praise will come to you from all people.”

Such was a healthy mix of extreme practical wisdom and total faith in the Divine that marked this illustrious Emperor’s personality. In the same way he helped in guarding Hinduism by a perfect mix of concrete assistance and personal example. So we have our temples standing as citadels of traditional worship. And the Raya’s epic poem, **Amukta Malyada** as a record of his personal anubhava and anubhuti in the kingdom of devotion.

An Emperor’s Offering

The manner in which the Islamic onslaught on Hindu temples went on from the 9th century onwards is a story too deep for tears. For instance, the temple of Somnath was ravaged several times in 8th century and in the following centuries by Muslim iconoclasts like Junayad, Mahmud of Ghazni, Allauddin Khilji, the sultans of Gujarat Muzaffar Shah and Mahmud Begda. Aurangazeb destroyed the temple in the 18th century and built a mosque using the sculptures of the destroyed temple to build mosques. Such total destruction had been a familiar occurrence in North India. South India was also subjected to such deprivations but at a critical moment, the Vijayanagar empire arose, stayed the terrible force, and gave a fillip to temple restoration and building new ones. In fact, such were the generous services of the kings that we have a genre called Vijayanagara architecture. Their structures are rich in sculptured pillars and rayagopuras that accost people from afar with holy thoughts. A disciple of Vyasa Tirtha of the Madhwa Samparadaya, the Raya was very devout and worked for the building as well as

restoration of temples dedicated to all Hindu deities.

Krishnadeva Raya is credited with the building of Vitthala, Krishna and Hazara Rama temples. He had the Virupaksha temple restored. Innumerable temples in South India received generous offerings from him with Tirupati in the lead. The Raya's personal interest in temple worship thus restored Hinduism to its original glory in a big way.

At the same time, the Raya led his people by his personal example. His immersion in our epics, Puranas and the bhakti hymns of the Alvars found recordation in the manner he lived as a hero and as a bhakta. An important facet of his guardianship of Hinduism was his writing the epic **Amukta Malyada**. He has been rightly hailed as the "sahiti samarangana sarvabhauma". The Raya's reign brought a golden harvest for Telugu literature. His court was called Bhuvana Vijaya which was open to poets and scholars for showcasing their works and expositions. Led by Allasani Peddanna, the ashta diggajas (eight poet laureates as great as the elephants of the directions), Nandi Timmana, Dhurjati, Madayagari Mallana, Ayyalaraju Ramabhadra, Tenali Ramakrishna, Ramaraja Bhushana and Pingali Suranna made the Raya's reign a memorable one by their epic poems. It is not surprising then that the Raya himself was inspired to write an epic in Telugu, **Amukta Malyada**.

Understanding the epic for people who have not had a proper grounding in Telugu literature is impossible. Fortunately we have excellent and detailed commentaries by Vavilla Rama Sastry and Vedam Venkatarama Sastry to help us approach the poem. Further help comes from translations which are now available. M.K. Jagannatha Raja's Tamil and Srinivas Sistla's English versions are complete translations, easy to read and faithful to the original.

The epic's preamble speaks of the circumstances which led to the writing of the epic. The Raya writes:

“Sometime ago I had decided to defeat Kalinga in war. Leading my army, I spent a few weeks near Vijayawada in the holy place of Srikakulam where the presiding deity is Andhra Vishnu. Having fasted on the Ekadesi day, I rested in the temple at night. Towards dawn I was vouchsafed a wonderful vision. Darker than the rain-bearing clouds, with eyes that were far more beautiful than lotuses, wearing garments that were a brighter gold colour than that of Garuda's wings, with the Kausthuba gem shining like the early morning sun, accompanied by Lakshmi holding a lotus in one hand and the other promising Grace; Andhra Vishnu appeared smiling and commanded me”.

It was a strange command to be delivered to a king who would soon be engulfed in the blood-bath of the Kalinga war. The Raya had been writing in Sanskrit so far. He should now write an epic in Telugu about the Tamil devotional poetess Goda Devi. The vision continued its command :

“Should you wonder why write in Telugu, hear me. I live in the Telugu land. I am Andhra Vishnu. Have you not spoken in different languages when consorting with kings from different areas? Telugu is the best among the national languages.”

These words, *desa bhashalandhu Telugu lessa* have become the flag of self-confidence and proper pride for the Telugu nation. The King then proceeded to Kalinga and won the historically famous war. On his return, he set about writing **Amukta Malyada** which opens in Srivilliputtur. There is a heartwarming description of the temple-city with its presiding deity, Vatapatrasayi. Here

resides the devotee Vishnuchitta (Perialvar) tending his private garden and making garlands for the Lord and writing devotional poetry. Presently he goes to the court of the Pandyan king at Madurai, Vallabhadeva where he wins the contest and concludes with a retelling of the Kandikya-Kesidhwaja conversation in the **Vishnu Purana**. Madurai is decorated and Vishnuchitta is taken around in a procession. He has a vision of Vishnu and Lakshmi on the Garuda Mount. Traditionally he is said to have burst out with the poem, "Pallandu, pallandu". But Krishnadeva Raya makes him recite a beautiful dasavathara stothram instead.

All this takes place in the first three aswasas. The fourth one gives us the life of Yamunacharya. Apart from his adoration of Vishnuchitta and Goda Devi, Krishnadeva Raya seems to have had a special regard for Yamunacharya who gave a mighty fillip to Srivaishnavism by inditing the **Catuh-sloki** and **Stotra Ratna**, and also holding the position of the pontiff of the Srivaishnava world.

The fifth aswasa of the epic opens with Vishnuchitta finding a baby girl near a Tulsi plant. He takes the baby home and brings her up with great love. The twenty verses describing Goda Devi's youthful form in **Amukta Malyada** are a splash of colourful images, all of them related to the divine form of the Lord in some way or other. She leads a devotion-laden life and even when bathing repeats the pasurams of Alvars, goes to the temple regularly and worships the Lord. A time came when her total immersion in the Lord made her reject marriage to an ordinary mortal. Interestingly enough, Krishnadeva Raya does not retell the traditional incident of Vishnuchitta surprising Goda Devi wearing the garland meant for Vatapatrasayi and chiding her. All that we are told is the maiden loved to keep on

her crown for a while the garland woven by Vishnuchitta for decorating the image of Vatapatrasayi in the temple.

“The girl would have a bath
After putting on turmeric paste;
Wear her garment, decorate her breasts
With scented saffron, fix a tilak
Of camphor, with love wear on her crown
The garland woven by her father for God,
Replace it in the flower-basket
And looking at her friends, sigh deeply.”

In this context, the Emperor’s imagination transforms a familiar scenario with novel brush-strokes releasing an unflinching charm even for the common reader. The angry ‘feminist’ words of Goda Devi give us a long and exquisite ninda stuti, a unique genre found only in Hinduism:

“In the ages past this same Srihari had made his beloved gopikas shed tears and suffer tingling of the skin due to intense emotion. This was truly a sin. He had to suffer the effects of these sins by moving in waters (as fish and tortoise) and going about with stiff bristles (as a boar and a lion). As for his activities as Vamana, Parasurama and Rama, giving endless pain to women, O friends, hear me speak.

Remember Vishnu cutting off the heads of Bhrigu’s wife? He incarnates as Vamana and proclaims he is Brahmacharin, leaving behind beloved Lakshmi Devi, who never likes to be away from her Lord.”

If Krishnadeva Raya can ride the wings of imagination and zoom all over the skies, he can also be quite realistic and create an enchanting scene out of an everyday occurrence:

“The lotus-faced Goda devi woke up at dawn from her silent quietude. Along with her friends she carried a golden plate with turmeric and soap-nut powder as also other toilet preparations, freshly laundered clothes and towels to the pond behind her house. She walked to the pond in her garden reciting the *Divya Prabandha* hymns. After her bath, she dried her body glistening with the golden colour of turmeric. Pushing her tresses to the back she drew an uprising mark of white paste and a saffron image in the shape of a pumpkin seed. She wore a white-and-ochre coloured sari and set about drying her thick tresses with scented smoke.”

Her passion to become one with the Lord reaches such a state that Perialvar is worried. He speaks to the Lord Vatapatrasayi and gets a reply in the form of the story of Mala Dasari (Nambaduvan). It is obvious that this insertion is to record the Raya’s accurate perception of Vaishnavism as transcending caste, class and gender; and a stern royal warning to the common people to respect the Dalits and not treat them as untouchables. The story of how a Dalit singer of Tirukurungudi helped a brahmarakshas regain its original form as a brahmin has been immortalised in the Kaisiki Ekadesi observed by devotees. Srivaishnavism is a religion which believes in alleviating the misery of the misguided and the downtrodden people. The Dasari had been caught by a brahma rakshas which gave him permission to fulfil his offering of music at the Kurungudi temple before being devoured. When the Dasari returned after having sung (what he considered to be) his last song, the dread spirit was taken aback. The astonishment knew no bounds when the Dasari submitted humbly:

“O brahmarakshas, I have come here having rid

myself of all desires by worshipping the Lord. Also I have returned with all my limbs intact. Check for yourself!”

Would anyone willingly return to certain death just to keep a promise made to a demon? The repulsive spirit saluted the Dasari:

“In this wide world, among gods, demons and kings, there is none as truthful as you are. This is scriptural truth. There is none equal to you. You have been swimming in the floods of music with the help of your lute’s calabash shell. You have received the grace of Lord Nambi, the presiding deity of Kurungudi. You have heroism, knowledge, truth, devotion, to the Lord. Who can equal you?”

Such is the greatness of devotion (bhakti) and devotees (bhagavatas) as revealed in **Amukta Malyada**. The brahmarakshas pleaded with the Dasari to part with the fruits of his bhakti to free him from the hateful form. But the Dasari replied that he would rather die than give up the fruits of bhakti. Alienating oneself from the fruits of one’s Vishnu bhakti for saving one’s life would be like exchanging camphor for salt! Ultimately, the Dasari relented and prayed to the Lord: *Bhagavatunda rakshinchu*, “O Lord save the unfortunate devotee!” Immediately the luminous form of the brahmin issued out of the spirit. The brahmin worshipped the Dasari saying that here was a perfect image of bhagavata with the eightfold lakshanas intact and that he was a *gayaka saarva bhauma*. Having completed the tale of Mala Dasari, Vatapatrasayi assures Perialvar that Goda Devi is lost in bhakti-bhava, and they should all go over to Srirangam.

When at Srirangam, father and daughter go to the temple and have darshan of Lord Ranganatha. After

praying soulfully to the lord, Perialvar finds Goda Devi missing. Then he is assured by the Lord to go to Srivillipputtur and he would come there and wed Goda Devi in the proper manner as desired by Perialvar. The marriage takes place in a grand manner.

“There on the banks of the Cauvery,
That originated in the Sahya Mountains,
In a garden, under the shade of a sandalwood tree,
Caressing her long and black hair,
He allowed her to play the love-god’s game,
And thus, blissfully ruled the entire universe!”

(Courtesy : Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai)

The Eternal Feminine

EPIC HEROINES

(Keynote Address delivered at the Conference/ Performance Conclave on 'Epic Women' held by Kartik Fine Arts in association with Arangham Trust on December 20 - 23, 2012 at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai).

I am delighted to be part of this Conference which is set to explore some of the women characters in epics from the world over. It is a matter of pride for the Indian that in this global spread, the epic women of India are in the majority and also they are the ones who challenge the wits of contemporary humanity. It would be so wherever such a Conference is held, whether in India or abroad. For India alone has epic heroines who continue to live amongst us, directing our lives in a million ways.

I grew up in Andhra Pradesh in my formative years. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were a series of brilliant evocations of epic heroines on the silver screen in Telugu. There was an unspoken law which kept the producers away from desiccating or glamorizing the heroines in these films. The women came to us as in Vyasa, Jaimini or any of the classic Telugu authors like Tirupati Venkata Kavulu. The portrayals drew us closer to the classics in Sanskrit and Telugu. Somehow, somewhere, those black and white pictures were able to catch the imagination of the adolescent mind. One felt so very close to Draupadi in *Narthanasala* stinging Bhima to action. It was a kind of strengthening the girl's backbone to face the future which was becoming a bigger and bigger question mark.

Another reason for our feeling close to the heroines was because in India the myths and legends of the past are not Dead Sea Scrolls. Sita, Savitri, Renuka, Draupadi and

Kannaki are living heroines, role models in preparing, planning and executing our lives. Swami Vivekananda whose 150th Jayanti we would be celebrating in another twenty days worked tirelessly for empowering Indian women and placed these role models before them:

“O India !forget not that the ideal of thy womanhood is Sita, Savitri, Damayanti. Sita is the name in India for everything that is good, pure, and holy, everything that in women we call woman.”

The Savitri *vrata* is observed as Karadaiyan nonbu by the Tamilians, Vat-Savitri by the Maharashtrians and so on. Renuka not only reigns over the Padaiveedu temple but is found in thousands of temples as Mariamman or Ellamma or Pydamma. I need not remind the audience of Draupadi Amman festivals in India, one of which inspired the great Tamil poet Subramania Bharati to write his magnificent epyllion, *Panchali Sapatham*. Kannaki who was iconised in *Silappadhikaram* itself is worshipped in South India and Sri Lanka.

Yes. The epic heroines and heroines in history faced such challenges with great determination. Mahatma Gandhi held such a view, as I see from his correspondence with my mother-in-law, Srimati Ranganayaki Thatham. Obviously she had problems in the family and had been advised patience by Gandhi. When she retorted angrily to his advice whether she should blind her eyes like Gandhari, he replied suavely and to the point that Ranganayaki should not accept literally all that is written in the *Mahabharata*. Gandhari could have served her husband better if she had kept her eyes open. The self-binding of her eyes must be taken as a symbol and no more. “Do not bind your eyes literally or metaphorically. Use them and serve your husband well. Serving one’s husband is not blind adoration. When her

husbands were helpless, did not Draupadi speak angrily to them?”

Coming back to the subject, we find that caste has never favoured the talented woman. Yet there is the 16th century Telugu poetess Molla whom Nabaneeta Dev Sen admires no end. Molla was doubly tainted, being a Sudra, says Dr. Nabaneeta:

“Although Molla is very popular today, she was silenced in her time, her *Ramayana* barred from the King’s court. The potter’s daughter, turned classical poet, was rejected because of her caste and gender. Literary excellence was not enough to win recognition in the court.”

However, it must be admitted that caste and gender have never been too oppressive for people who joined the stream of Bhakti Movement. When the Western influence and English education allowed new breeze to blow across our land, a transformation in creative writing began in a big way. People went back to epic heroes and heroines as well as historical personalities. Sri Aurobindo finds this a great help for the creative artist who is interested in conveying a message to the audience.

“the plot known,
It (the mind) is at leisure and may cull in running
Those delicate, scarcely heeded strokes, which lost
Perfection’s disappointed. There art comes in
To justify genius. Being old besides
The subject occupies creative Labour
To make old new. The other’s but invention,
A frail thing, though a gracious. He’s creator
Who greatly handles great material”

“He’s creator / Who greatly handles great material.”
India’s classical myths and legends provide great material.

Sita is one such great material. We have such a great creator in the Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan who wrote *Chintavishayaya Sita* in 1919. According to Sukumar Azhikode, Sita is seen here as “a critical, sharp-tongued, passionate woman speaking out for the legitimate rights of the women of all times”, and yet she calms down remembering her father’s ways described by Valmiki, for she is full of sorrow and the glow of the Eternal Feminine. She tells herself that even towards someone who has treated her so unfairly, she should not have hatred:

“My thoughts are carried back
To the selfsame love you so tenderly
Bore in your heart for all creation,
Tree or bird or beast, the same affection you
Had for men and gods alike.”

The conclusion in Kumaran Asan’s reading of Sita is so natural, not quite unexpected but has a terrible beauty about it all the same. After the entire narrative based in the sylvan surroundings of Valmiki’s hermitage where Sita had sat in reverie comes to a conclusion, we enter the Court of Ayodhya for those few, last lines:

“Her comely head bent and eyes fastened on
The feet of the Sage conducting his precious
Charge to her husband’s court,
Sita followed Him where the great nobles waited upon
The king. She spoke no word. She gave one look
At her husband’s anguished face. A glance
At the assembled court. The next moment
She had released herself and stepped across
The great divide.”

This is how myths are transformed to gain entry into contemporary hearts. No coming of Vasundhara from the depths of the earth seated on a throne. *Chintavishayaya*

Sita was a great favorite of my father, Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar. He knew no Malayalam, but he used to read with wet eyes Bhaskaran's translation, and the poem inspired father to insert an extended, powerful soliloquy of Sita in his English epic *Sitayana*, bring her further down to our own times making her cogitate on issues like the Nuclear Horror.

Looking back on our classical myths and legends, it is wonderful to note how writers have been re-formatting these works to help woman fight back. Draupadi is brought to the Pandava court and held out as the property of the Kauravas. Is woman no more than a chattel that can be bought and sold, that can be won or lost in a game of dice? When appealed to by Draupadi, Bhishma is helpless and talks of the sanctions of Dharma in this version by the renowned poet Subramania Bharati:

“Dharma sanctions
Your sale as a slave.
I know what they do here
Is repugnant beyond measure.
But Sastras and customs
Are alike against you.
Impotent am I to halt this evil.”

Draupadi answers:

“Finely, bravely spoken Sir!
When treacherous Ravana, having carried away
And lodged Sita in his garden,
Called his ministers and law-givers
And told them the deed he had done,
These same wise old advisers declared:
Thou hast done the proper thing:
Twill square with dharma's claims!

When the demon king rules the land
Needs must the sastras feed on filth!...”

I could go on in this fashion. There is S.K. Ramarajan’s Tamil epyllion **Meghanadam** (1956) which has Indrajit’s Sulochanai as the heroine. How helpless a woman can be, when she speaks out for Dharma! Indrajit has no answers for Sulochanai’s questions. Like Bharati’s Draupadi who wonders whether the land has no man to come forward to stand up for Dharma when an innocent woman is dragged and disrobed in a royal court, like Kannaki who cries out whether Madurai city has not a single man to speak out against the wrong done to her by executing her innocent husband, like Sita who exclaims whether Lanka has no man to give wholesome advice to Ravana, Sulochanai tells Indrajit:

“My handsome Lord! When your father
Imprisoned the beautiful Sita,
Were there no wise men here
To warn him: The eyes of chaste women?
They are balls of fire; their cloud-like
Tresses? They are Yama’s noose
Terrible. Their body is a tender creeper?
No, they are powerful lightning!”

Are there other ways of reading the epic heroines apart from such somber retellings? Can we inject humour to trace the truths in the lives of the past? This way of re-reading the epic characters could be in the style of my mother-in-law, the renowned Tamil writer, Ranganayaki Thatham, also known as Kumudini. Her long life was one of deep involvement with the plight of women. The Gandhian institution, Tiruchi Seva Sangam that she founded in 1948 has given a new life to thousands of orphaned and abandoned girl children and women.

Though involved in such serious social work, she felt that woman brought on much of her problems by not protesting at the right time. In her brilliant drama, **Viswamitrar** she imagines a situation when Chandramati refuses to go in exile with Harischandra. A pointed introduction tells us of the thought-movements of Kumudini in the matter of women's independence:

“It is usual to say that one cannot triumph over destiny. Yet, some with their ability and cleverness, are able to control even destiny. In the original story when Harishchandra left the country, Chandramati went along with him without any qualms and endured privation along with him. Savitri, on the other hand, learnt in advance about the departure of Satyavan from this earth and as soon as that time came, made appropriate arrangements and followed Yama who is not visible to human eyes, defeated him and got her husband back, and in the process, earned two boons as well. If, in Chandramati's place, there had been a woman like Savitri, what would have been the fate of Viswamitra?”

One has to read the play to understand the various nuances of female power. If only woman would use it with due circumspection, while anchoring herself firmly in the family, what can even a fiery ascetic do? Caught in the mazes of the nation's politics, bedeviled by the foreign minister's statesmanship to marry the twenty seven daughters of Anga's king, the return of his companion Menaka demanding a place by his side in the throne, Viswamitra can do nothing but run away. And that is exactly what he does!

I have enjoyed this play of Kumudini since I was ten years old and have drawn the needed lessons from it. Her other play, **Varied Advice** is also a reinterpretation of epic

heroines in the light of contemporary culture. This play was actually produced as a musical. She flayed the patriarchal system which gave the choice to man. Despite their heroism and virtue, would a girl choose any of the ancient heroes as her life's partner? But then, did the contemporary girl have any choice? Often her parents were full of self-pity so she preferred not to burden them more and accepted what came by her way; or they were in search of a fat catch in the marriage market, a Suitable Boy. The young Gita has no idea how to choose from the list presented by her enlightened family. IAS, CA, an engineer in Dubai or Doha minting gold or the son of a cabinet minister? After a whole scene of rib-tickers, all go away and Gita falls asleep.

Now come several epic heroines to her in her dream. First is Sita. Gita's question evokes a speedy answer. She can choose anyone but not someone who professes lofty ideals. Draupadi comes. Her hair is still unplaited. Hasn't Dushasana been killed and his blood pasted on her tresses, asks Gita. Draupadi's answer is typical of Kumudini's humour in this play and elsewhere.

"A matter of habit, child. I have become used to wandering around with my hair loose. Besides this is now the fashion. I just cannot gather my tresses."

When Gita asks for advice, Draupadi has no hesitation in answering her:

"You can marry the hunter who wanders in the forests;
Or a highway robber; or a horrible fellow
Who might beat you black and blue;
Even a fifty year old dodderly chap.
But never, never a man who is a gambler."

Damayanti appears and assures Gita that one who runs away from the responsibilities of the house should be

studiously avoided. Chandramati is all thunder and lightning. No, Gita should never opt for someone who insists upon telling the truth. It is now the turn of Sakuntala to sail into the vision and warn the sleeping girl against marrying one whose memory is weak. What kind of domesticity is possible with such a person?

“Did you post the letter? I forgot.
Where is the tomato? I don’t remember.
What about coffee powder? Ah, my memory
Slipped and so I did not buy...
So I did not give you housekeeping money?
Where did I leave my box?
Who is my wife? I don’t remember!
Gita, beware a person with weak memory!”

There is then Radha who says one should learn to identify the mood of the husband to keep him under control at all times. Surely not an easy task! The last to come is Savitri who advises Gita not to worry but just look after the husband, whoever he be, as her eleventh child. According to her, the whole problem arises because we think of men as heroic, a helpmate, a guardian, a provider and so on. Naturally there is disappointment. Why have high expectations about men? Certainly they are no repositories of all the glory we praise day in and day out. We have to make do with them! They are just babies, no more! So use the Vedic blessing: *dasaasyaam putraanaam patim ekaadasam kuru!* When Gita wakes up she is delighted that her problem has been solved in a trice. Gita, her mother, aunt and grandmother now sing in unison, dancing on the stage:

“Problem has been solved! Yes!
Husbands are just children,
The last baby for the wife.

In outside world they are heroes,
Within home, just prattling babes.
B.A., C.A., M.A., M.D.,
B.E., P.P., but a child.
Musician, scholar, Vice chancellor
At home they are weeny babes.
Pilot, Scientist also babes only.
M.P., M.L.A., they are babes too,
Minister, sinister, all be kids.
Problem has been solved!
Yes, indeed!”

Very rarely staged, yet, **Varied Advice (Buddhimatigal Palavitam)**, has never failed to tickle the audience to a wiser view of life.

There have also been other ways of looking at our epic heroines. Remember, their lives have not been in vain. We would do well to conclude with Savitri whose story of *paaativratya* (Vowed to her Husband) I am afraid has not been rightly understood in a male-dominated society that has sought to trap female chastity with iron chains. Savitri’s story is not regressive at all. If we get back to the original Upakhyana in the **Mahabharata**, we would see her as very brave, very free, very loving and very duty-conscious, the ideal woman who can uplift a whole race. Unfortunately the twists and turns of Katha-telling has made her into one who played a cheap trick on Yama by asking for one hundred children. He granted her request and then, says the modern narrator, Yama realised the faux pas and had to release Satyavan’s life, lest the ideal of female chastity get tarnished.

On the contrary, in Vyasa’s narrative, Savitri emerges as a strong lady who first empowered herself before facing the crisis. Vyasa tells us that three days prior to the day

foretold by Rishi Narad, Savitri undertook the rigorous Three-nights Vow, *Tri-ratra Vrata*. She fasted, meditated day and night and stood still appearing like a block of wood (*kaashtabhuteva*). On the concluding day she performed a fire-sacrifice. Now what does the Tri-ratra vrata signify?

The Vedas have two major divisions: Purva Mimamsa (Rituals) & Uttara Mimamsa (Philosophy). According to the Path of Purva Mimamsa, it is not merely faith in one receiving the fruits of the rituals. We are told that a power descends into the person performing it and remains with him till the fruits are realized.

“The Mimamsakas have attempted to answer the question how a remote result, say, the attainment of heaven, is obtained by an action such as a sacrifice, which belongs to and in fact ceases in the present. Injunctive texts ordain that the fruits, namely, heaven and the like, should be achieved by sacrifices such as *darsa-paurnamasa*. And this implies that the sacrifice is means to the fruit, viz. Heaven. A sacrifice is the nature of an action which is very soon lost. Hence the instrumentality of the sacrifice to the fruit which is to take place at a distant time is hardly possible. To establish this instrumentality, which is propounded by the Sruti, between sacrifice and heaven, an invisible potency is admitted which issues from the sacrifice and which endures till the fruit is generated and which resides in the soul of the sacrificer. This is called *apurva*. It ceases on producing the result...It is a power in the sacrifice.”

No doubt Savitri's aim had been non-widowhood (*avaidhavya*). She needed a power to help her achieve it and the Vedic ritualism gave her such a power. There is no other explanation for Savitri's ability to follow Yama beyond the earth when the dire god was taking away Satyavan's "thumb-sized life". This is mentioned clearly

by Vyasa. *Niyamavrata samsiddhaa mahabhaagaa pativrataa.*

Sita is an epic heroine who dares to question Rama with satiric barbs when he points out that as a woman she would find it difficult to live in the forest. Of course Sita did it in privacy and with a sense of loving possession: *pranayaascha abhimaanaanacha parichikshepa raghavam.* She asks him questions. What is this about her being termed weak and from whence this fear in Rama to take her to the forest? After living with her all these years, hasn't he realised her strength of mind? Isn't she like Savitri, the brave wife of Dyumathsena's son, Satyavan: *Satyavantha manuvrataam savitrimiva maam vidhdhi?*

In the end, Rama gives in for he really loves her no end. And then says something which I have always wondered whether Rama was not testing the woman in Sita, after all. What do we hear today all the time when men chat? Or exchange emails? Ah, women are possessive of material things, they love luxury, jewels, sarees, scents ... Anyway Valmiki's Rama tells her that prior to going, she will have to give away quickly all her possessions.

Apparently Rama does not know the in-depth psyche of women. Sita smiled immediately, says Valmiki. *Kshipram pramudita devi!* Was it due to happiness at her having won the day or was there a trace of derision at the way a man's mind moves? All that we know is that Sita is ready to sacrifice the frills of everyday living at a moment's notice, and with a smile.

Saluting this smiling *manasvini*, Sita, I wish the Conference a happy, purposeful, interactive, creative, enlightening and beautiful time of discussions and reliving the experiences presented on the stage by your team of brilliant artistes who have come here from all over the world. Thank you.

A SPECTRUM OF FEMINISTIC IDEOLOGIES

“A tree beside the sandy river-beach

Holds up its topmost boughs Like fingers towards
the skies they cannot reach, Earth-bound, heaven-amorous.

This is the soul of man. Body and brain Hungry for
earth our heavenly flight detain.”

Sri Aurobindo, ‘A Tree’

Such is the basic struggle in man’s life on earth. The poem also holds the clue as to how we should take yet another fresh look at education today. From times immemorial, India has not only been educating her children but also educating them to become as perfect as they can be with the talents they have been gifted with when they were born. The unique system of guru-sishya combine was cultivated in classical times wherever civilisation flourished like India, Greece, China and Egypt. This is a system which has endured till today in India. Its outer form may have changed somewhat, especially in secular education. But religious and spiritual education as well as education in arts (including sculpture, music, dance) continue to hold on to this system.

What bound the guru and sishya was nothing external but the deeply significant upadesa. The upadesa or initiation preceded the actual education. The disciple had to be accepted first and we have the legend of Satyakama Jabala in Chhandogya Upanishad. Satyakama had wished to be a religious student under Rishi Gautama. But he had no gotra, the family name of ‘belonging’. As suggested by his mother Jabala, Satyakama went to the Rishi and told him that he had no family name as his mother had worked in various houses as a servant when she had borne him,

and that he was simply Satyakama, son of Jabala. The Rishi said:

“None, but a true Brahmin would have spoken thus. Go and fetch fuel, for I will teach you. You have not swerved from the truth.”

The sage then gave Satyakama initiation and took him under his tutelage. How he trained him to become a fine teacher is another story. What we have to note here is the manner in which the Vedic educators kept academia open for all, and gave initiation followed by secular-sacred education with no reservations. As Sri Aurobindo points out:

“It appears from this story as from others that, although the system of the four castes was firmly established, it counted as no obstacle in the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual advancement. The Kshatriya could teach the Brahmin, the illegitimate and fatherless son of the serving-girl could be guru to the purest and highest blood in the land. This is nothing new or improbable, for it has been so throughout the history of Hinduism and the shutting out of anyone from spiritual truth and culture on the ground of caste is an invention of later times.”

Not caste alone, but gender too has had its say in demoralizing the learning process. It was not so sixty years ago when I went to school. For one thing, there was no feverish marks-mania at the school level and the parental level at that time. If I received three marks for forty in my English paper in my third form, all my father did was to ask me how much it would be for hundred! When I could not get the terrifying sum right, he showed me how to arrive at seven-and-a-half percent, instead of worrying how his daughter would fare in this competitive world!

Today, such parental breeziness is, perhaps, not possible. Though the girl-child has a long way to go to survive, get educated and become capable of achieving economic independence, I must say there are also good signs. A good number of parents are showing deep interest in educating their daughters. But the girls have to contend against general as well as special hurdles. Of the former, there is the instance of caste. Let us begin at the admission table. When one takes a child to be admitted in the school, one has to fill in the box for religion. It is no use arguing with the clerk (or teacher or principal) that our Constitution has averred secularism. They say such information as Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Isaayi is needed for census. A lawyer from Chennai who has no faith in religion, P.V. Bhaktavatsalam, had to struggle to set things right for the admission of each of his three daughters. Being a lawyer, he did have the last word when he asked the school to add a new box for "Those without caste or religion"!

True secularism is equal opportunity for all religions, but there is no need to list it out among a child's qualifications to enter the school. So they must needs have a box for religion. If asked, the clerk says, it is for "census purposes". Fortunately, the child is too young to understand this problem. So far so good. She is too busy carrying a load of books and notebooks which grows in weight as she goes up the ladder of classes. Weighing my granddaughter's backpack as she leaves for school, I find that it is never less than eight kilogrammes. Then she must carry her food and of course water. And charts of all sizes at least twice a week. I am not surprised that children these days develop a stoop which is helpful only when the school needs the character of the evil Manthara, for its annual staging of a Ramayana scenario!

So many books.Notebooks.Languages. Are we

driving towards educating a child to integrate knowledge or converting her brain into a shining waste paper basket? With the government also pompously announcing some policy or other at all odd times, the red tapism that keeps the administrators of these institutes on their toes and the general climate of inefficiency and visual media, I am astonished that the educational system in India presents some sane form at all!

As for using education as a means for the development of the student's personality, what is it that our schools are doing today? They said they were giving multiple choice to help the brain think sharply. They said the language texts were being pared to the minimum to lessen the burden on the young heads for language is after all a "tool" to almost everyone who wants to get a job and settle down. And now this "tool" too is not delivering goods. In the process of handing down a tool, we have taken away the glory and good of literature from the hands of the children. In the name of secularism, even the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have come under the scanner. How can we tell the children people fought from the Garuda formation and Lotus formation? Do we have any record of Drona or Dhrishtadyumna passing out of the Doon School or the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst that they could command huge armies in the Kurukshetra field? Mr. M. Karunanidhi, safe from his Chief Ministerial gaddi had questioned the basis of the Sethu bridge being built by Rama with his pompous question flung at an audience: "Rama build a bridge? From which engineering college did he get his degree?"

How can we tell the children that heroines like Satyabhama drove chariots? Wise men in power might stop us saying whether we have any record of Satyabhama getting her Driver's Licence from the Regional Transport

Office. Or, I might be speaking on the glorious stand taken by Panchali in Subramania Bharati's poem, when she replies to Bhishma's unteneable defence of dharma's ways regarding women:

“Bravely and learnedly spoken, Sir!
When treacherous Ravana, having
Carried and lodged Sita in his garden,
Called his ministers and law-givers
And boasted of the big deed he had done,
These same wiseacre advisers declared:
‘You have accomplished the properest thing,
For it will square with dharmic requirements!
When a demon kind misrules the land,
Needs must the Shastras feed on garbage!”

Then I would speak of Draupadi's prayer to Krishna and recite:

“Like the woes of liars,
The fame of the wise,
Like woman's pity
Like the waves of the troubled sea:
Even as, when people praise the Mother,
The tide of their fortunes surges more and more,
As Duhshasana dared the outrage
There came robe after robe
By the grace of the Lord:
They came without end,
Clothes of colours how many,
And clothes innumerable!
Silks with golden hues,
Robes new, for ever new,
Grew and clasped Draupadi
As she stood with folded hands
The clothes became a heap

And bore stern witness
To the power of Hari's name.
Tired Duhshasana sank upon the floor."

Certainly after reciting this in a classroom I will not be able to produce receipts from this Silk Sari Palace or that Pudavai Kadal where a Minister is releasing a forty thousand rupees sari: or is it forty lakhs?

Let us get it right. We must remember that academic excellence is not enough. The Indian woman should go for all-round excellence without undergoing any torture to gain this limited excellence. Sri Aurobindo has given very helpful hints to go about this task. "In the right view both of life and of Yoga all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga." Why is life a yoga? Yoga for what? The answer is self-evident. We are engaged in the yoga of perfection and this needs the attunement of all our faculties in an integrated manner. In the field of education, which is itself a part of the yoga of perfection, we have the Physical, Mental, Vital and Psychic facets of a person. When the four facets are healthy and moving towards the goal, the spiritual side of the student's personality automatically glows, self-luminous.

According to Nolini Kanta Gupta, a great educationist and disciple of Sri Aurobindo, there are three levels of education: a mastery of the subjects, a cultivation of various faculties and determination of the mould of the child's mind. According to him the existing system handed down by the British has been preoccupied only with the first which has led to the ills in the educational system today. The mind must determine what would be good for its perfection. It should not be smothered with facts from outside but come to it all in a natural, phased manner. In short, allowed to be creative:

“To create does not mean an accumulation of material things or placing them in order; creation is manifestation, a bringing forth from inside to outside, a burgeoning of the blissful Self through rhythm and melody and life. It is such a mind that not only knows but discovers its own strength, its own living being which it has at first obtained and experienced within; it is such a mind that becomes perfectly nourished and perfectly beautiful.”

Does it all sound too idealistic? We tend to think so because the present educational system is too much with us. Surely all this has been totally concretized that it would be vain to think of transforming the system! Mercifully the methodology of integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo itself is one that calls for a change in pace, in one’s view, and one’s aim, not for blind destruction. For the rest, all life is yoga. We need not reject or destroy what has been achieved so far. We need to think of what can be done to bring a creative calm to the tree which is “earth-bound” and yet happens to be “heaven amorous”. Deep thinking and intelligent research are the need of the hour:

“Nuclear science, molecular biology, and the opening up of the frontiers of the mind have forced upon us the necessity for the revaluation of old values. How does the earth look from a far point in space to an astronaut? What is the residual value of ‘man’ if ‘transplant’ of almost every limb should be possible? Notions about ethics, about human personality, and about ‘life’ and ‘death’ seem to ask for new formulations. Without continual research in education and in Yoga (which is education in its fuller amplitudes and larger dimensions), we may be making education and Yoga superstitious survivals, but of little practical relevance to the problems that confront us in this thermo-nuclear and space age of radical changes and infinite possibilities.”

Where is then time to lose now when the new century is already seven years old and we are still doddering with the marks sheet and material success as the aim of school education? If all life is yoga, education too is yoga and the need of the hour is to infuse strength into the psyche of the students. There is so much real, real violence on one hand and plenty of reel violence too. Somebody is always pushing or pummeling or pulverizing or shooting another either in real life or on the silver/television screen. The newspapers are full of disaster information about murders, molestations, suicides. What horrifies me no end is that all this is done mostly in the educated group. Does it mean our education is lacking in something important? Let us take up the segment of women in our population. What is it that we need to add to their education? Or, what kind of New Woman we want Indian women to be?

What is it that we women want? The Durbar of Alli Arasani? Do we wish to be Amazons? Or gain the power of Lysistrata to manipulate men in such a way that they would give up war-mongering?

We can say that at the beginning of this century women are almost fully awake. In South Africa women are very much in the forefront of the struggle. We are told that it has the largest percentage of women in parliament in the world. I need not speak of what we see happening in our own country. Woman continues to look after the house, works and feeds the family. It is thrilling to find our women facing a million hurdles and still becoming achievers in one way or another. Consider the women who work in the fields in our villages, the Hamal ladies who are coolies carrying heavy weights in Pune city, Muslim women who work day and night making quilts in Daryapur to get at least gruel for their children, domestic servants in our homes, the vegetable sellers, fishwives,

municipal cleaners ... each and every one of them is an image of the Eternal feminine who carries immense power.

Half a century ago our only desire was to be seen as equal to men. The ideal of girls of my kind belonging to the middle class was only this and no more. I too should go out and take up a job, I must take to post graduate studies like my brothers, my husband should help me in the housework ... heroic or heroine-like ideals indeed! In those days we felt that we were surrounded by enemies and were victims of a great fear, a shoreless frustration. We were sure that even the law was against women. When Katherine A. Macguinnes, an American lawyer said that “the law also behaves like men in its treatment of women”, we assented gravely: “She is absolutely right!”

With communications turning our world into a global village, we have become aware of what is happening elsewhere. And this has clarified one thing. There can be no generalized feminist ideology for all womankind. Each nation is entrapped in its own culture and so each land must have its own approach to education.

Our problems are not the same as those of a British woman or a French woman. In those lands a man is not able to flaunt two or three wives boldly. I have myself been a victim of an embarrassing situation when I was invited for lunch by a well known Tamil novelist. He introduced his wife to me and we spent sometime conversing about such profundities as servant maid problem, the cost of tamarind and the use of ayurvedic oil message to combat ankle pain. In came another lady, and the novelist introduced her to me nonchalantly. “Meet my second wife”. I was flabbergasted in my innocence but had sufficient presence of mind to clear my throat like a mule and say: “Oho, like Subramania!” “Yes, yes”, was his

easy reply, with a touch of what seemed to me male arrogance: "Also like Sri Devi and Bhudevi for Vishnu." I choked and it was good that lunch was announced at that precise moment.

There are then the innumerable indignities that await a woman in India. If she is dark; if she does not get married at the proper time; if she does not give birth to a child (preferably male); if she does not follow the tradition the moment she becomes a widow. Nothing has really changed since the Sangam times. This was demonstrated by the sorrows of Perunkoppendu in Purananuru:

"O wise elders! O wise elders!
O wise elders who yet perform evil
By preventing me from suttee
Instead of encouraging me
To join my dead lord on the pyre!
I am no widow to eat cold rice
Without ghee that has silvery granules
Like finely sliced cucumber
That is bent like the lines
On a squirrel's back;
And to put up with ordinary greens
Cooked with sesamum paste.
Ah, and lie on the bare stone.
You may consider as terrible
The pyre built with black wood
In the crematorium. For me whose lord
With broad shoulders has died,
Fire and the brimful lake where bloom
The lotuses with petals wide open,
are the same."

These were no words of empty eloquence. Perunkoppendu entered the fire with ease as if entering a

bed of lotuses. The poet Madurai Peralavayar who watched the actual happening in the dire circumstances of Bhutapandiyan's funeral has etched an unforgettable scene:

“...a woman wanders toward the burning ground, her hair streaming wet and falling loose down her back while her large eyes are filled with grief! Though she, in the vast well-guarded palace of her husband Where the eye of the concert drum never is silent, has only been alone for a little while, She is fleeing her young years that make her tremble with the sweetness of life!”

And yet, the gender has its uses for publicity for the Indian male.. Literature is the best recorder of what is happening around us. A little care, a little close study, an enduring passion to get at the sub-text can reveal the man concealed in the name of a Pushpa Thangadurai or Sujatha. Sometimes, the very compassion of male writers seems suspect. I remember the days when we read in a weekly decades ago harrowing accounts by a male author of what he had witnessed in the red-light districts of Bombay. Much later I came to know that it was a gentleman who had never crossed the Central Station! For such people who seem to show compassion for women, it is obvious that woman too is business material to push up sales, and no more.

Women's writing has no such problems of double-think for when they write of women, they write of themselves. And if they do write of women in shameful terms –which mercifully I have not come across so far in Tamil though in English we have a few – we must simply reject them. Woman was not born to increase the sales of a magazine, a washing powder or a cooking oil! When women write, they should not depend upon the tears of a woman either, and show her as always weeping, ever the victim. Bama speak right in this context and what she says

of the Dalit woman writer is equally applicable to all women:

“I really feel that I should underline their resistance rather than their victimhood ... you know, they can achieve so much by *naiyandi* (ironic parody and satire), like the young man in *Annachi* who accomplished his mission by addressing the upper caste man as *annachi* (elder brother). That’s why these women have no inhibitions about shouting or using bad words which may seem indecent to middle class sensibilities. In reality these are their outlets, they let their anger out of their system and retain their sanity. They can contain neither their happiness nor their sorrow —once they let off steam they are calm. My life has been different even though I am a Dalit by birth so, actually, these women give me the courage to regain myself.”

The reference to herself is revelatory and gives us a clue for the classroom. Education and upward mobility that bring with them certain societal norms regarding the behavioural patterns of women often rob them of their self-confidence. This can be verified with statistics of suicides and attempted suicides. I am told the ratio is much greater among educated women than the illiterate. Women who have no education and who work in fields or as servant maids go on with the struggle for existence never losing hope.

Our ancient writers had recognised the need for such role models in educating the society. Sita is seen as giving wholesome advice to Rama at crucial moments; Draupadi is verily Shakti incarnate in the Kuru court when she pulls up the elder statesman Bhishma himself on the manner in which patriarchy was being used unjustly to put down womanhood; Damayanti’s courage; Savitri who was veritably “an ocean of untrembling virgin fire”: Each of

them went through intense suffering yet none of them committed suicide. The manner in which each responded correctly to the situation and suffered and struggled and hoped and achieved victory marks them out as lighthouses of the spirit. Such are the role models that Indian feminists have readily on hand.

We have to take the lives of these women into our educational system in a big way, for women today continue to suffer like these classical heroines. They are abducted like Sita. They are disrobed in public like Draupadi. They are abandoned like Damayanti. They are administered drugs by predator men like Yayati who drugged Devayani. They are left friendless to suffer and sorrow in alien climes like Kannaki. They are misused like Madhavi of the Mahabharata. M.V. Venkatram has written a powerful novel on the subject titled Nityakanni. What strikes us most about all these women is that they never run away from the battlefield seeking a draught of poison or a bottle of kerosene. No, they never take the easy way out. And that is what education is about. It must make us harder than vajra, but softer than flower. A holistic education can definitely perform this all-important feat by bringing back the classics to our classrooms.

Not classical heroines alone. There have been other heroes and heroines down the centuries whom we have neglected in the classroom and our young men and women have no idea about them. If an education should teach the youth the need for a strength of purpose and rebel without losing faith in man, it must include in its syllabus books like **Padayil Padintha Adikal** by Rajam Krishnan. While Rajam Krishnan has confessed that all her fiction is based on some chunk of reality, this novel on a real-life character is an outright biography of a legendary rebel. Yet Maniammal the young widow had never thought of

breaking traditions. She had accepted her widowhood as a matter of course and come back to her natal home to spend the rest of her life very much in the tradition mapped by the Bhakti Movement when women like Mahadevi Akka turned to God.

Almost every page of **Padayil Pathintha Adikal** speaks of the hangman's rope that tradition has come to be in India through its caste system and its treatment of women. So what is this tradition about? How did it come to be? How much can a woman achieve today? The heroine Maniammal is a legend in this Thanjavur countryside. She was a labour leader, an active member of the Congress Party and later of the Communist Party both of which gave her a raw deal. Gender partiality as always! The book is sure to teach boys and girls how to suffer, work, struggle, cultivate social consciousness and achieve.

A last word. It is unrealistic to think that woman alone must hold the reins of everyday life. A Lysistratan world cannot exist. For mankind to make progress, man and woman must put forth cooperative efforts in every aspect of life. Education should make it a point to underline the need for such a philosophy of Equals=One. That alone would ensure a holistic development for the carefree youth of today who are going to be the responsible leaders of tomorrow.

It is now time for me to wish the workshop every success and sit back to listen to your meaningful, passionate, idealistic and practical papers on the subject, "Education for Holistic Development."

(Chairman's address at the workshop on "Education for Holistic development" delivered on 24.1.2008 at Swami Dayananda College of Arts & Science, Manjakkudi -612610, Tiruvarur District.)

TRIJATHA: BELOVED FIFTH COLUMNIST

The twentieth century saw the rise of feminism in India. Suppressed for long by a society that had turned quite patriarchal more than a millennium ago, Indian women woke up and looked for role-models to reshape their lives. It has been a generally held belief that the Indian woman has been suffering from what was termed a Sita-Savitri syndrome and must come out of these mental shackles of being born subservient. Interestingly enough, a closer look at our classical heroines has revealed that it is these ladies who shine as role-models inspiring women with strength, courage, sincerity, compassion, knowledge and love. The very best in our great culture has been the gift of these women who are prepared to rebel against the Establishment in moments of crisis. Some of them are quite well known: Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Draupadi. Great poets have retold their lives in many ways down the centuries and the heroines always appear contemporaneous, such is their presence in India. Sri Aurobindo has even given us a modern-day epic, **Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol**. Of these heroines, Sri Aurobindo wrote to his brother Manomohan Ghose:

“Yet are these great figures, are Rama, Sita, Savitri, merely patterns of moral excellence? I who have read their tale in the swift and mighty language of Valmekie and Vyasa and thrilled with their joys and their sorrows, cannot persuade myself that it is so. Surely Savitrie that strong silent heart, with her powerful and subtly-indicated personality, has both life and charm ... Sita is too gracious and sweet, too full of human lovingness and loveliness, of womanly weakness and womanly strength!”

He thought that taking up such great characters and re-writing their lives would be an inspiration.

“To take with a reverent hand the old myths and cleanse them of soiling accretions, till they shine with some of the antique strength, simplicity and solemn depth of beautiful meaning, is an ambition which Hindu poets of today may and do worthily cherish. To accomplish a similar duty in a foreign tongue is a more perilous endeavour.”

Yet it had to be done and Sri Aurobindo was to give us works like **Love and Death** and **Savitri** in English. Incidentally, even the ladies who walk in our epics and Puranas about whom not much is known, turn out to be ideal path-finders and there are hundreds of them, so vast is the received tradition of Sanatana Dharma. All of them face life with a stern resolve; none of them runs away from life. In this sense, these classical heroines also celebrate life in a sublime manner.

Readers of the **Ramayana** are familiar enough with Trijatha. She stands for the way a woman should speak out for her sisters in distress whatever be the calamitous situation. She is a lesson to those educated Indian women who are not prepared to give a helping hand to other women who suffer from so many ills in our society. As a one-woman army right in the heart of Ravana’s kingdom, Trijatha guards Sita from giving way to despair. Our eternal gratitude to this gracious daughter of Vibhishana whose moral support to Sita is almost equal to that of Hanuman.

Trijatha is seen first in the **Sundara Kanda**. Daughter of Vibhishana by Surama who was herself the daughter of the Gandharva, Kailusha, she appears to be sleeping when the ogres threaten Sita with dire consequences and that they were going to eat her up. Valmiki writes that she wakes up and says:

“Gobble up yourselves, O evil ones!; you will never be able to eat Sita who is the beloved daughter of Janaka and the daughter-in-law of Dasaratha. I have had a terrifying dream. Look, my hair stands on end. Oh, I have seen the destruction of the rakshasas and the prosperity of Sita’s consort.”

The mental level of the rakshasis is one of obscurantist faith. They are immediately frightened for one may not disregard dreams. They give up torturing Sita with words and crowd around Trijatha who is described as aged. Here “vriddha” could also mean mature in understanding. Trijata then gives a detailed account of her dream in which she describes Rama and Lakshmana riding a divine palanquin drawn by a thousand horses, the princes dressed in white silks and wearing white garlands. They get united to Sita who is clad in white garments and is sitting on a white hill girt by the sea. Then the three move away towards Ayodhya on a white elephant. Trijatha says these auspicious dreams recur in different forms. Once she had seen the three riding a chariot drawn by eight white bullocks. In yet another Trijata had seen them riding the Pushpaka.

In the same breath, Trijatha speaks of the darkness that was converging upon Lanka’s noon.

“I saw King Ravana with a shaven head. He was dripping with oil, clad in red garments, drunk and still quaffing wine. He was wearing garlands of oleanders and had fallen down from the Pushpaka air-car.”

Trijatha sees him again dressed in black, pulled by a woman on a chariot drawn by asses. Ravana in these dreams is drinking and laughing madly, and appears confounded by fear (*hasan nrithyan, bhayamohitah*). Presently Ravana moves around stark naked and disappears in filth and mire.

It is a terrifying dream, and Trijatha was taking chances by recounting this dream of Rama's victory and Ravana's fall, as Lanka's administrative system was quite famous for its spy-system, with its own brand of Wikileaks. In fact, there is more to come. Trijatha boldly recounts Kumbhakarna's fall as well as the destruction of the many sons of Ravana. Indeed the whole of Lanka is in flames in the dream while very few live to tell the tale. One of them is Vibhishana who rides a four-tusked elephant which stands in the air.

Trijatha commands the rakshasis to desist from irritating Sita further. Rather, they should ask her forgiveness. Rama is sure to deal harshly with such offenders. Trijatha, who is well-versed in the received tradition, remarks that she sees auspicious signs on Sita and that she has no doubt about her being rescued by Rama. All these words are heard by Sita in silence. When Trijatha ceases, Sita says spontaneously: *avochad yadhi tat thubhyam bhaveyam saranam hi vah*, if what has been recounted does happen, I shall definitely be your protector.

Words are never uttered casually by these epic heroines. Sita remembers this promise when the battle is over and Hanuman wants to know from her whether he should punish the rakshasis. They had not asked Sita for protection, yet when Trijatha's dream had become a reality, Sita remembers her promise to her, and says her famous verse full of divine compassion, *kaaryam karunamaaryena*
...

“An Arya (noble person) should be compassionate towards sinners as well as the good people. Why, even those deserving death need to be protected. There is no one who has not committed a mistake.”

Indeed, how can Valmiki's Sita forget what Trijatha and her mother Sarama did to shore up her spirits at crucial

moments? The latter had consoled Sita in the Yuddha Kanda when Rama's severed head had been brought to her on a platter. Sarama told Sita that this was nothing more than a conjuring trick by the demon Viddhujjihva. In that island of total insanity, these were the pockets of sanity on the side of Truth, women helping a woman in distress, a very risky act in the governance of pitiless Ravana.

Trijatha has an important place in the **Ramcharitmanas** of Tulsidas. He refers to her as a woman of perfect wisdom, *nipuna viveka*. Indeed, she dissuades Sita from entertaining ideas of suicide: "Listen, gentle lady, one cannot procure fire at night in Lanka"! Trijatha reappears in the Lanka Kanda when Sita laments that Rama is not striking Ravana down immediately, and gives a very interesting reason for the delay on Rama's part:

"Rama thinks that Janaki has been imprisoned in Ravan's heart. Well, Janaki's heart is His own residence! Since he contains the entire creation, if he aims a killer arrow, the entire creation will be struck down and perish."

A charming chinese-box image but it cannot comfort Sita, of course. So Trijatha tells her that the moment Ravana forgets Sita, Rama will kill him. And that is how events progress immediately after.

Almost all the poets who have retold the Ramayana have referred to Trijatha with great respect. Kamban refers to her in his Tamil version as one whose love was greater than that of a mother. It is Sita who wakes up Trijatha to know why her left eye is throbbing. Trijatha replies that she had been dreaming of Ravana's death, Lanka's destruction and just when she watched Lakshmi going into Vibhishana's house with a lighted lamp, she had been woken up from sleep. The poet says that Sita raised her palms in salutation and said: "Please watch the rest of the

dream by sleeping again”. Now Ravana comes with his ladies and converses with Sita. After he leaves the garden in fury, the canto concludes with Trijatha again predicting the victory of Rama. Thanks to these words, “the innocent, helpless Princess retained her life within.”

Kamban’s Trijatha reappears “as the fruit of tapasya” in the Yuddha Kanda when Sita is taken by Ravana’s henchmen to watch the battlefield full of dead monkeys and the senseless Rama. She reminds Sita of the illusory deer Maricha, the supposed killing of Janaka and the time when the Naga missile bound the army of Rama:

“Can you ever doubt
That dream seen earlier, the good omens,
Your own chastity, the sins of the rakshasas,
The heroism of your Lord who upholds
Dharma? Can there be an end to the Lord
And not to these evil-prone?”

Sita thanks Trijatha in sweet words and speaks of her as her “saviour-divine”. Such is the important place given to Trijatha ever since Valmiki brought out her presence in the **Ramayana**. In K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar’s epic poem in English, **Sitayana**, Trijatha gains an even more elevated place in keeping with the tuning of the narrative to the woman’s point of view. Trijatha thus becomes a constant companion to Sita, and quite, quite close to her unlike Valmiki’s who seems to maintain a distance. Iyengar prefers to have followed Kamban’s clue and proceeded with the urge of a political scientist to explain why Trijatha is the only good woman in the Ashoka grove:

“I’m Trijata”, she introduced herself
with a touch of nervousness;
“be not afraid, O virtuous Sita,
for you have friends in Lanka.

Vibhishana my father is the King's
 Younger brother; my mother,
 Sarama, and my sister, Anala,
 Are all for the verities.
 My father's position in Ravana's
 Court is something delicate,
 Aye, like that of the soft sensitive tongue
 Surrounded by the sharp teeth.
 He has somehow persuaded Ravana
 That I might be asked to join
 The wardresses, and keep an eye on them –
 Also be in touch with you.”

It is Trijatha who tells Anala to get information of what passes on in Ravana's Council and report to her. Through Trijatha Sita learns all about Lanka, the tapasya-rich Ravana and his family. Instead of the dream with its symbol-tones, we have descriptions of the good Mandodari, her loveable daughter-in-law Sulochana and other consorts who have sympathy for Sita. Later we see the events of the whole of Yuddha Kanda through the reports of Anala. Trijatha's visionary eye notes events like Vibhishana's seeking refuge with Rama. Trijatha also refers to her earlier travels in India where she had been to the temple of Madhav in Ayodhya. There she had seen Mythili and Rama and Lakshmana who had come to worship in the temple. Always a tower of moral strength for Sita, Trijatha says: “now all will be well – Grace has taken things in hand.”

In fact Trijata pervades the entire Yuddha Kanda of **Sitayana**. As Sulochana, the wife of Indrajit says:

More than once, the clairvoyant Trijatha
 Has lisped in accents of love
 And adoration of the wronged Sita,
 The sole cause of this conflict.”

Trijatha takes on the role of the Announcer about the coming age, in favour of the feminist principle, seeking a transformation of a society which has till now remained a woeful, abusive patriarchy. As she tells Sita with the prescience of a seer:

“O all-suffering Sita, I but see
 mother, sister, child in you;
I think I glimpse behind the wronged woman
 The sole saviour Madonna.

Let this age waste itself out as it likes,
 Let the Dark Ages to come
Enact their sundry self-wrought ironies
 Of ambition, pride, defeat.

But Sita, your Yoga of Sufferance,
 Your containment of Power
In the face of Evil Unlimited,
 Must yet redeem the future.”

Trijatha's speeches insinuate that man is destroying Nature, the Material Mother which is nothing less than “purblind self-slaughter.” It is interesting to note that Trijatha reappears after the war is over and Sita has emerged victorious from the fire. The symbol of Trijatha's dream in the earlier Ramayanas is transformed by Iyengar into a kind of Cassandran power which notes the indignities and tortures yet to come for womanhood. In this sense, Trijatha in **Sitayana** is a chorus too. She comes to the coronation at Ayodhya but is moody for she seems to sense the impending exile of Sita. When the rejected Sita, heavy with child is in Valmiki's Ashrama, Trijatha hears of it in distant Lanka and comes to see her. So we take leave of Trijatha who decides to be with Sita always as a protective

mother and spend her days in the lambent peace of the
Ashrama:

“The dark withdrew, a mellow beauty dawned,
I saw you as in Lanka
Yet now bathed in ochre serenity
And glory of motherhood.

This new vision became a settled thing,
And I knew I must join you;
So after a brief stop at Ayodhya
I have found my way to you.

This was surely love beyond reckoning,
And with Valmiki’s consent
Trijatha stayed on in the Ashrama
And merged in its ambience.”

(All translations from Kumudini are by Ahana Lakshmi)



Dr. Prema Nandakumar obtained her Ph.D in 1961, at the age of 22, for her study of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*. Since then, she has been an independent researcher, publishing critical and biographical works. As a creative writer in English, Tamil and Telugu and as an able translator, her career spans half a century. Her works include *Subramania Bharati* published by the UNESCO and Sahitya Akademi, translation into English of *Manimekalai*, the ancient Buddhist epic in Tamil, *Swami Vivekanana*, *Adi Sankara: Finite to the Infinite* by Chinmaya International Foundation, Velianad, Kerala and more recently *Women in Vedas*, a translation of women-related hymns from the Vedas.

Introduced to the Sri Ramakrishna Movement at a tender age, she has been writing and lecturing on the subject with great enthusiasm. She is a recipient of several awards, including the **Sri Aurobindo Puraskar (West Bengal)**, **Pandita Ratna (Warangal)**, **U.Ve. Swaminatha Aiyar Award (Coimbatore)** and **Thamizh Thendral Thiru.Vi. Ka. Award (Government of Tamil Nadu)** and has been chosen for the **Ilakkiya Peedam Award** for this year. Dr. Prema Nandakumar is a frequent contributor of literary essays, reviews and short stories (in Tamil and English) to various other publications in India and abroad. Dr. Nandakumar has been lecturing on the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother for more than thirty years in India and abroad. Dr. Prema and her husband Shri Nandakumar live in Srirangam. Ahana, their elder daughter and a well known writer, lives in Chennai while the younger daughter Bhuvana and son Raja are in U.S.