



Sri Aurobindo: A Visionary Voice in Indian English Literature

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Introduction

In Indian English Literature, the English language is adapted to reflect Indian themes and the unique characteristics of Indian literary creativity. While this body of work clearly bears the influence of British literature—a natural outcome of prolonged British colonial rule—it is gradually evolving towards a distinctly Indian identity. Though not yet fully "Indianised," many Indian English writers have made commendable progress in shaping a literature that blends Indian sensibilities with the English language. It is indeed a source of pride that Indian English Literature is now studied and appreciated in universities around the world.

Literary scholars and enthusiasts, when engaging with the works of Sri Aurobindo, often seek to uncover the essence of his extraordinary personality. Some perceive in him the resolve of a Superman, others revere him as a devoted practitioner of *Purna Yoga* and the visionary behind *The Life Divine*. Many are drawn to his deep sense of patriotism and view him as a fervent advocate of nationalism. He is also widely recognized for his profound intellect and deep understanding of the Vedas. Beyond his philosophical and spiritual insights, Sri Aurobindo is celebrated for his remarkable literary contributions—as a writer, dramatist, and poet who blended emotion with thought in a uniquely powerful way.

The vibrant and inquisitive voices of Indian writers have powerfully shaped Indian English Literature. By choosing English as their medium of expression, these writers have conveyed Indian values, wisdom, and philosophy to a global audience. Their works, though written in English, reflect the essence of Indian culture and thought, and are collectively recognized as Indian English Literature. In defining this genre, M.K. Naik, in his book *A History of Indian English Literature*, states: "Indian English Literature may be defined as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality" (2).



It can be stated without doubt that Sri Aurobindo's personality and creative genius hold a unique and unparalleled place in Indian English Literature. While Rabindranath Tagore made significant contributions to English literature alongside his profound influence on modern Bengali literature, Sri Aurobindo stood apart—not merely as an Indian who wrote in English, but as a true English writer in the fullest sense. It is difficult to confine his legacy to a single genre, as he embodied many roles in one: a writer, poet, philosopher, spiritual master, and visionary pathfinder—an eternal gem of Indian intellectual and literary heritage.

Sri Aurobindo was born on August 15, 1872, in Calcutta (now Kolkata). His father, Krishnadhan Ghosh, was a well-known physician, while his mother, Swarnalata Devi, was the daughter of Raj Narayan Rai—a culturally diverse figure shaped by the Indian Renaissance, encompassing Vedic, Islamic, and European influences. Influenced by Western ideals, Krishnadhan arranged for Aurobindo's education in England, where he was sent to Manchester and later London. There, Aurobindo studied English, Greek, Latin, and History, and was honored with the prestigious Butterworth Prize for Literature. His writings reflect his broad and deep academic exposure. Though Indian by origin, Sri Aurobindo consistently wrote in English, earning him a distinctive place in Indian English Literature. Notably, none of his works are self-translations from other languages. His literary brilliance also earned him admiration and respect among European readers.

Sri Aurobindo initially began his career in India as a teacher at Baroda College. During his time there, he developed a deep interest in Indian philosophy, education, culture, and heritage. It was also in Baroda that his patriotic spirit began to take root, leading him to write bold and direct political articles. However, after some time, he shifted his focus from political expression to more reflective and philosophical writing. He distanced himself from political commentary and immersed himself in the study and discussion of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's works.

Even in his early writings, Aurobindo displayed remarkable seriousness, depth, artistic imagination, and a strong sense of balance. His literary output is marked by three key characteristics: mastery of the English language, calm intellectual inspiration, and a profound spiritual essence. He wrote on a wide range of subjects and in diverse forms, proving that even a yogi can adapt to various modes of expression. Whether political, spiritual, poetic, or prose, his writings continue to inspire readers across generations.



In 1906, Sri Aurobindo resigned from Baroda College and entered active politics. He took up the role of editor for *Bande Mataram*, an English-language nationalist journal. His powerful and inspiring writings quickly drew the attention of the British authorities, leading to his imprisonment on several occasions. However, he was eventually acquitted by the courts. During this period, Aurobindo came into contact with a yogi named Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, often referred to as Lele Maharaj. This encounter awakened within him a profound spiritual awareness, rooted in Vedic and Advaitic traditions. In the early months of 1908, he began to balance his political involvement with intense yogic practice, finding a deep inner peace.

On May 4, 1908, he was arrested in connection with the Alipore Bomb Case and imprisoned in Alipore Central Jail. It was during this time that his spiritual transformation deepened. In the solitude of his prison cell, he devoted himself fully to yogic practices and experienced a profound realization of the divine—feeling the presence of *Narayana* (God) in all things around him. This mystical experience fundamentally changed his perception of life. Sri Aurobindo’s literary works are deeply infused with philosophical, metaphysical, and mystical dimensions. His core ideas can be briefly outlined to reflect his unique literary and spiritual vision. He once remarked, “*A Yogi who writes is not a literary man; he writes only what the inner will and word want him to express.*” Through this, he emphasizes that while a yogi-writer listens to the inner voice, he does not remain entirely bound to it—he also draws from his own intellect, wisdom, and real-world experience. This perspective is clearly reflected throughout his writings. The presence of the *yogic element* is a consistent feature in all of Sri Aurobindo’s literary creations. Among his most celebrated works are *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and *The Future Poetry*. The central ideas and themes of these works are magnificently woven into his magnum opus, *Savitri*—an epic poem that stands as the pinnacle of his literary and spiritual expression.

The Life Divine is a monumental work that presents a visionary theme: the affirmation of divine life on earth and the existence of immortality within mortal beings. It serves as a bridge between the material world and higher human consciousness—a difficult divide to reconcile. While ascetics and yogis often reject materialism, materialists deny the soul’s existence. Sri Aurobindo seeks to harmonize these opposing views. In this book, he offers a fresh interpretation of the Rig Veda’s verses, emphasizing the Vedic message of moving from ignorance to truth, ultimately achieving the triumph of eternal spiritual reality.



The distinguished Indian critic D.S. Sharma has described this extensive work as a ‘prose epic,’ highlighting its role as a profound source of knowledge and consciousness, leading to the realization of *Sachchidananda*—the ultimate truth for the ‘supermind.’ The book offers a blueprint for achieving peace and self-awareness. Echoing this view, Otto Wolff remarked, “It is not only Indians who recognize this work as the final bridge of human thought and effort, connecting the ancient Vedic wisdom to the present and transcending ordinary human consciousness.” Through this prose epic, Sri Aurobindo outlines the paths for evolving human consciousness and developing the ‘supermind.’ It provides a way to reclaim lost virtues such as true knowledge, supreme power, bliss, and eternity—embodied in *The Life Divine*.

The Synthesis of Yoga reflects Sri Aurobindo’s deep engagement with yogic practice. In this work, he explains that *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), and *dhyana* (meditation) help maintain a peaceful mind and cleanse it of negative thoughts, while also enhancing the power of concentration. He defines *yoga* as the union or communion (*yog*) with the natural power and the soul. Sri Aurobindo described **Yoga** as an integral practice encompassing three key aspects: Yearning, Devotion, and Refusal. *The Synthesis of Yoga* thoroughly explains these concepts. In one of his letters, he wrote, “Suffering is the inevitable result of all worldly desires,” emphasizing that only through yoga can one attain the Super, the Divine, and the Advaita (non-duality). He asserted that this spiritual goal should be the aim of every human being.

The primary aims of Yoga, according to Sri Aurobindo, are:

1. The unity of the Divine and the Super Being
2. The communion (*Yog*) of the soul with the Almighty
3. The transformation of individual unity into collective or mass unity
4. In this comprehensive work, Sri Aurobindo offers practical methods for attaining the Almighty, making it more accessible in spirit than *The Life Divine*.

The Future Poetry is his groundbreaking treatise on poetry, which departs significantly from traditional or contemporary views. Regarding the future of poetry, he proclaimed: “A larger field of being made more real to man’s experience will be the realm of Future Poetry” (F.P. 327). Sri Aurobindo aspired to elevate poetry to a divine level. To achieve this divinity, he identified five essential elements of poetry:

1. **Life**



2. **Beauty**
3. **Soul**
4. **Truth**
5. **Pleasure**

By *Truth*, he meant a dynamic, divine truth infused with deep spiritual meaning. *Pleasure* refers to poetic delight, which is the source of *Beauty*. The *Life* of poetry is its sustaining power, while the *Soul* represents self-realization expressed through universal consciousness. Sri Aurobindo provided clear guidance on the direction future poetry should take, recognizing that as the human mind evolves, poetry would expand in form, theme, and impact. He described poetry as a *mantra*—a self-effective language capable of profound transformation. **Savitri**, as we have it, is divided into three parts and twelve books, making it one of the most remarkable and widely read epics in Indian English literature. Sri Aurobindo conveys his profound spiritual experiences through poetry. He chose the poetic form because experience, emotions, and philosophy require *rhythm* to be fully expressed—and poetry uniquely provides this. According to him, the *Supramental* vibrations can only be captured through poetic rhythm; prose lacks this capacity.

Sri Aurobindo refers to the highest stage of mental awakening as *Supramental Consciousness*, a concept vividly explored throughout *Savitri*. **Savitri** encompasses the full range of human experiences, weaving together intuitive insights and perspectives from the Vedic era to the modern age of scientific exploration. While it is inspired by the *Mahabharata*, it is not a mere retelling; instead, Sri Aurobindo transforms it into a profound symbol, reflected in its title—“*Savitri: A Legend and A Symbol*.” In this epic, Savitri is portrayed not as an ordinary human but as a divine figure who attains self-realization through yoga. *Satyavan* represents the soul on the path to self-realization, while death is symbolized as unconsciousness. The central theme of *Savitri* revolves around *Bhagavatism*—the devotion to the Divine.

The majority of Sri Aurobindo’s writings reflect his deep yogic experiences. His spiritual and religious philosophical works were primarily published in *The Arya*. These writings carry a profound truth, arising from the harmonious union of intellectual rigor and personal spiritual experience, making them relevant and impactful across all ages. His poetic talent was evident early on with *Songs to Myrtilla*, written at the young age of 18. His *Collected Poems and Plays*, composed between 1906 and 1910, also made a strong impression upon their initial publication. Among his notable works is the epic *Ilion*, inspired by the *Trojan War*.



In addition to original works, Sri Aurobindo translated several Sanskrit poems and plays, with *The Hero and the Nymph* and *Hymns to the Fire* being particularly acclaimed. He also wrote numerous plays, including *Basabadutta*, which showcases his deep affinity for Sanskrit literature and Indian mythology. Sri Aurobindo's writings beautifully unify the past, present, and future, reflecting a timeless vision. He was a master of blank verse, with his early compositions demonstrating powerful evocative strength and resilient rhythm. He portrayed turbulent and intense situations with both force and subtle artistry. For example, consider this vivid passage:

*“She, o'erborne,
Panting, with inarticulate murmurs lay,
Like a slim tree half seen through driving hail,
Her naked arms clasping his neck, her cheek and golden throat averted,
And wide trouble
In her large eyes bewildered with their bliss...”* (p. 154)

This excerpt highlights his ability to capture emotional intensity and delicate imagery within the fluidity of blank verse. Sri Aurobindo transcended the boundaries of reason and logic—at least to the extent necessary for the advancement of human consciousness—and illuminated the path to spiritual awakening. This profound insight is reflected in his major works such as *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, and *The Future Poetry*. These writings have earned him great acclaim as the ‘Supreme Master of English Prose’.

Sri Aurobindo made a significant and distinguished contribution to Indian English Literature, and his impact extends beyond this to English literature as a whole. His creativity is truly unique. His works are deeply rooted in *Upanishadic* philosophy and imbued with a profound sense of truth. He wrote in an elevated and refined style, with central themes revolving around his philosophical and spiritual discoveries. As noted earlier, he regarded poetry as a *mantra*—a spontaneous outpouring of thoughts from a sincere and truthful heart. His influence also reached poets writing in other Indian languages, inspiring luminaries such as Subramaniya Bharati (Tamil), Nishi Kant (Bengali), Sumitranandan Pant and Ramdhari Singh ‘Dinkar’ (Hindi), Bendre (Kannada), and Sundaram and Pujalal (Gujarati).

Sri Aurobindo's writings offer a conscious guide for living life, helping readers attain spiritual strength and mental clarity that open doors to broader and deeper dimensions of existence. He revived



and uncovered the profound philosophy and teachings embedded in ancient Indian scriptures. By presenting myths, teachings, and scriptural wisdom in a clear and accessible manner, he made these complex ideas easier to understand and embrace. His work emphasized Indian social and moral values alongside scriptural insights, elevating them on a global literary stage. This provided a platform for Indian and international writers, scholars, and critics to reengage with India's rich heritage, honoring and glorifying the nation's past. In doing so, Sri Aurobindo enriched both India and Indian English Literature.

In today's world, Sri Aurobindo's works remain highly relevant, offering a comprehensive guide to achieving the state of a 'Superhuman'—a rare ideal in an age dominated by unchecked materialism and superficial pursuits. His literary creations exhibit a strong current of 'Neo-Classicism,' seamlessly blending ancient wisdom with modern ideas. This fusion helps bring forth Sri Aurobindo's vision of the 'Superman.'

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