

# Mystical poetry -- Sri Aurobindo and Sir William Blake in comparison.

Girija Jayanandan, M A; M Phil.

Head of the Department of English (Retd), Queen Mary's college, Chennai-4.

## Abstract

As one grain of rice is enough to test if the whole pot of rice is boiled, a few lines of poetry of the great luminaries [i.e.] Sri Aurobindo of the East and Sir William Blake of the West testify that great minds think alike. Both Aurobindo and Blake had a strong spiritual intention of discovering the infinite in all things. Though both had one vision their direction and method was a bit different. Blake's philosophy differed from primitive animism but resembled that of Aurobindo in his subtlety of apprehension, in spiritual discipline and above all in its recognition of unity in all things. He was a mystic who had a perception of some great absolute truth and he acted upon this realisation. His mystic expression longed for a complete harmony with the transcendental Order.

Born in a family of dissenters Blake was imbued with a deep sense of piety, enthusiasm and vision. From a very young age he claimed that he saw God's appearance; Even the rising sun seemed Godly vision :-

'Then the Divine vision like a silent sun appeared above.' [-Jerusalem, plate 96]--1

Blake's spiritual intent was not other-worldly and had no concern with heaven elsewhere. He intended to discover the Infinite in all things. He felt that nothing is more real than the Universe of forms, both of the outer and inner world. The living person as Blake understood was the One in whose being all forms and images are perpetually generated. He arrived at the profound truth that there is nothing in heavens or upon the earth which does not also exist in man and God.

Blake was a mystic who sought for truth and dealt with human toil and turmoil all the time. There are features of his thought that contain shrewd psychology beyond the subtlest understanding of men and women. To the mystic, God is the nucleus of creation. The mystic begins with a submission to the Divine order which he accepts with such conviction that earthly life becomes nothing to him. Whereas Aurobindo arrived at a particular yogic practice called Internal Yoga and deep meditation for reaching God, Blake insisted upon man purifying himself of all sins like pride, envy and jealousy. In addition to external fetters, man by no means is free from pride, envy and jealousy and the reciprocatory stages of man becoming divine and Divine extending His mercy to the human was possible because God sent His son to the world to undergo the pain and suffering of man and to teach him mercy, compassion and forgiveness to overcome his vices. Blake as a Christian emphasizes on the birth of this Holy man as the example to show that the ever-merciful Lord is waiting patiently for man to purge himself of all the worldly vice.

In addition to being a poet-seer, Blake was a painter and engraver of unique importance. Not properly schooled but for painting and engraving Blake was not very careful in grammatical constructions of his

sentences but nevertheless he was able to convey his experiences powerfully through his poetic and prosaic medium. His poems were greatly influenced by the spirits and visions he experienced and he even claimed that the spirits dictated his writings.

**Key words:** Aurobindo, Blake, mysticism, philosophy

## **Mystical poetry -- Sri Aurobindo and Sir William Blake in comparison.**

### **Introduction**

Knowledge is developed by curiosity and the truth is arrived at by research. Time immemorial, philosophers and physicists have tried to arrive at some conclusion regarding the creation of the universe and the questions of time and space. The understanding developed by them is that the supreme consciousness desired to have its representatives in the lower consciousness and therefore manifested in them. Sri Aurobindo was convinced that God created the universe and manifested in His creations. The two mystic poets Sri Aurobindo and Sir William Blake drew their theory and concept with their firm belief that God created the Universe and manifested in His creations.

### **Elaboration**

According to the Christian faith God loved mankind so much and was so compassionate that He sent His own son to the world to undergo similar experiences and suffer like any other human being, at the same time have the divine love, pity and mercy. Whereas Sri Aurobindo believed that the human beings can, by their persevering effort of prayer, meditation and staunch mental discipline can become divine or in his terms, superhuman, Blake believed that man should cleanse himself of vices like pride, envy and jealousy to become divine. Man's senses lead to sin. Man must endeavour to overcome the temptations of the five senses. In 'Everlasting Gospel' he States,

Life's five windows of the soul

Distorts, the heaven from pole to pole

And leads you to believe a lie

When you see not with but through your eye' [ lines 96 to 102]--3

Falling in line with Blake's opinion that man should be free from his mind- forged manacles, Sri Aurobindo states--

There is no 'I', no nature, known and unknown

Only the illimitable permanent

is here [Nirvana 31- 34]-4

He took the divine task of helping others uncover what was hidden within themselves [ie]their higher self .His poems depicted God as the prime mover and dealt with man's relationship with God.This esoteric tradition viewed spirit and matter ,light and darkness time and eternty, above and beneath as complimentary principles both alike rooted in a divine essence.He firmly beleived that we are all co-existent with God and are members of on big family Sri Aurobindo and Sir William Blake had a sacred mission of going beyond their own self and revealing cosmic grandeur. Blake's poetry was unique in encompassing a wide range of deep emotions arousing from the influence of the spirits and visions that visited him

A large number of critics have noted the influence of hindu mythology in Blake's writings.In 1902 Foster Damon claimed that Blake's thinking and writing were in accordance with the Eastern mysticism. In 1947 Frye observed in 'Fearful symmetry' that Blake was one among the European idealists to link his tradition with that of the Indian classics, including his last drawing based on Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavat Gita*.This influence lead him to state the aphorisms'There is no natural religion' and 'All Religions are same'[1788]-2Blake and Aurobindo were of the opinion that spirit and visions were not cloudy vapours but are organised and minutely articulated beyond all the natural and perishing materials of nature.

Mystic, scholar, poet, sage, journalist,statesman, freedom fighter,-with his subime personality Sri Aurobindo explored the depth of divinity and human consciousness He is called as 'Treasurer of sublime dreams'[Preface by Dilip Kumar Roy].This sage of the great age sought to bring from above a super-consciousness which would guide and control the spiritual life and actions of mankind .He dreamt of a day that will bring together the people of the globe.

The basic phlosophy is given in a wide context which relates to the seen and unseen world.He believed that the harmony of life takes a long time to aquire and more careful study. His insight springs from every world- religion and from many languages. He draws them together elegantly with fascinating cross-references and keen insight into the customs,words and invention of the world's greatest spiritual books .For more than six years he poured forth on the philosophy of Being and Becoming, the acumen of man, nature and God.His writings offer a thorough study on the nature of man's existence and God's presence .and a formation of vast synthesis of knowledge, harmonising world's greatest traditions- Occidental and Oriental.

Blake and Aurobindo were born and brought up in entirelty different cultures and beliefs in diffeent parts of the globe, but they started getting inspired,rather,had visions and spiritual experiences which they expressed mostly in similar ways and at sometimes in different terms .they both strongly believed in their weird experiences and felt that they were dictated by spirits who guided them in their vocation and daily chores of life.These two visionaries have brought out their opinions and firm belief in the development and creation of new human being , prhaps a spiritual superhuman through transcendence and transformation.

Both had a firm conviction that God is manifest in His creations both human and nonhuman ;There is universal self and the world is a very big universal family.If man cleanses himself of all vices the Infinity will in all glory appear to him.Mystical illumintion is something to be deepy felt after evere practise and this experience and can never be passed on or communicated.Transcendence or elevation through mystical experience is a total separation of the human from the Divine .It also expresses the possibiity of attaining God-head.

Whosoever goes into that transcendent regions to behold the glory of God himself becomes the glory and God . This is the magical charm of mysticism and and that glory transforms the human into divine . To paraphrase Tagore's words They dive down into the ocean of the forms hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the Formless.Enlightenment after a mystic experience makes the soul bath in light which is not bound by space ,and listen to an eternal music and break into a fragrance not borne away by the wind.

According to Aurobindo we must return and seek all sources of life and strength within ourselves. it is the spiritual revolution we see and the material is only its shadow and reflex.To quote the unforgettable and very often quoted lines of Blake;

To see the world in a grain of sand

And Heaven in a wild flower,

Hold infinity in th palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour'[ from "Auguries of Innocence' ]-5

Sri Aurobindo uses the same phrase in his epic'Savithri'

'Almost she nears what never can be attained

She shuts eternity into an hour

And fills a little soul with the Infinite.'-6

The phrase'an hour into infinity ' conveys the illimitable power which encompasses the cosmos and relieves men of their shackles of death.

His contribution to the society is the philosophy of ascent of man to divinity and the descent of God to Humanity ;and the evolution of supreme consciousness brings the cosmic vision down.To Quote the great epic 'Savithri'-

A cosmic vision a spiritual sense

Feels all the Infinite lodged in the finite form

and seen through the quivering ecstasy of light

Discovers the bright face of the bodiless

in the truths of the moment's soul

Can sip the honey-wine of Eternity [Savithri'- book IV canto X]---7

The folowing lines from the same text stand testimony and indicate the kind of boon that he aspired for .-

Thy embrace which rends the living knot of pain

This joy, o Lord, in which all creatures breath

Thy magic flowing waters of deep love

Thy sweetness give to me for earth and man.[697]

---8

He believed that man lives mostly by his surface life, mind and body but there is an inner being which aspires for greater beauty, harmony, power and knowledge. Man has to awaken his inner soul to reach a reality beyond- a spark of the divine fire. The origin of Aurobindo's mysticism can be traced back to his return from abroad to Apollo Bunder in Bombay where a vast calm descended upon him and this calmness remained for a long time. His training under Yogi Lele Maharaj in Baroda was so intense that he achieved the glory of sainthood or Nirvana in three days.

He had great visionary power and experienced hallucinations. He gave a new dimension to the theory of creation and felt that if man cleanses himself of his wickedness and vice he can reach the god-head and this he called transcendence. Starting from his small poems and ending in the great epic 'Savithri' Aurobindo never failed to mention the co-existence of God along with man, waiting for man to get ready by cleansing his soul for better purposes and this stage he called being 'superhuman'. His integral yoga and mental discipline led to his arriving at the theory of involution, a further step from evolution.

He believed in seeing beyond senses and reaching at a higher vision which enables a man to have imagination beyond human understanding and level. This macro-vision can be explained with a mini-vision of a child holding a small bit of paper placed beneath a small lens which in all probability brings the image of the circle of the sun in miniature on the piece of paper. Therefore Sri Aurobindo concluded that God is manifest in the tiny beings He created. This is the understanding of the ultimate consciousness and endeavouring to reach the cosmic consciousness.

Mystics hold that there is a deeper and fundamental state of existence beneath the appearances of day-to-day living. The unity with the higher consciousness is both internal and external, focussing on seeking the truth about one self, one's understanding with the others and reality. The mystical state is the bursting of the soul into the little flame of the divine to mingle with the source. The poetry of Sri Aurobindo brings our whole conscious being into relation with the Divine, praying Him to transform our lives into eternal.

He felt that the world is a manifestation of the divine and matter is but a form of the spirit. By his constant effort man can widen and heighten his consciousness and transmute the body appropriately so that it can be a new vehicle of consciousness. The spiritual aspiration is innate in man; For, he is, unlike the animal, aware of imperfections and limitations and feels that there is something to be attained beyond what he now is.' [Life divine 843]-10

Mysticism starts appearing in the small poems starting with 'Who' In which the poet affirms the manifestation of God in His creations and the invisible hand as that of a painter rocking the earth to activate the life. The fine images with fine epithets flow endlessly and bring the colourful images of God. God is in the laugh of a boy and the blush of a girl. The poet questions the unique identity of the personality of the creator. He wonders,

In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest

Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?

when the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether

who was it that roused them and bade them to blow ?[OP Mathur, p 26]---10

in 'The Rose of God' lyric impulse merges with the philosophic, mystic strains and rises to higher potency and even visual beauty. Rose itself is the symbol of divine love and 'Rose of God' is a prayer for the descent of God's grace- symbolically describing the blossoming of God in the garden of love with bliss, light, power, life and love. Man is but a shadow and his knowledge is like a veil; Man's earthly delight is labouring in the opposite direction, making the rose curled and dry. Man feels dull and dispirited; is unable to differentiate between real knowledge and the dull rut of bookish knowledge. He uses the symbol in his *magnum opus* 'Savithri'

Time is personified as a drama or a paigent's dream in the poem 'Transformation'. The poet's nerves have been transformed into channels of rapture for the influx of the Supreme. The poem depicts the poet's ecstatic delight of having realised God's presence. He is not the slave of nature any more and is free from the mesh of senses. The comparison between the Infinite and the giant is expressed in the following lines-

I have drunk the infinite like the giant's wine' -11

The last three lines of the poem reveal the poet's ecstatic delight -

My soul unhorizoned, widens to measureless height

My body is God's living tool

my spirit a vast sun of deathless light -12

Aurobindo's poems are exercises which he called sadhana for the advent of a new consciousness to cleanse the earth of all evil and usher in, the life divine. As a mystic he knew what he felt not because of any earthly gain but because without the mystical light, life is a blind alley.

In the vast impenetrable universe the human being is a tiny part; he does not know its mysteries.

Impenetrable, a mystery recondite

In the vast plan of which we are part

Its harmonies are discords to our view

Because we know not the great theme they serve [Savithri, 160]--13

Mystic poetry is subtle and suggestive; Mere intellect cannot decipher the meaning or essence. It stirs the deeper inner mind. The mystic visualises the world of a divine reality behind the ordinary world of sense and matter. In 'Hymns to the mystic fire' we find the following lines. 'the doctrine of the mystic recognises an unknowable, timeless and unnameable, behind and above all things, not seizable by the studious pursuit of the intellect'-14 God is manifest in all beings in all creations and sometimes it is difficult for the mystic to separate and identify the human and the divine because 'All is boundless He[ The unseen infinite]' our vision is His vision and our understanding is His understanding. The poet continues in the same poem-

In His ray that dazzles our vision everywhere

Our half -closed eyes see the fragment of the One;

Only the eyes of the immortality dare

To look unblinded on the living sun.[Ibid]--15

Aurobindo felt that the world is a real manifestation of the Divine and matter is but a form of the spirit. He also felt that man by his tireless efforts and strong will, man can widen his consciousness and train the body appropriately so that the renewed physic will be the new vehicle of consciousness. The spiritual aspiration is innate in man. For, he is unlike the animal, aware of imperfections and limitations and feels that there is something to be attained beyond what he now is. [Aurobindo,843] Man is a transitional being. His position is not final. Still there are mental elevations to be climbed purging oneself of negative feelings of anger, jealousy envy, and to mention the Seven deadly sins, to say. Poetry is of a noble quality and sometimes poets are called prophets. According to Aurobindo 'Poetry draws into itself a fuller language of intuitive inspiration, illumination or the higher thinking and feeling that is found in the Upanishads and the vedas and the passages of the Gita' [135] as found in the notes on 'Savithri'

In the poem 'Thought the paraclete' the holy spirit rises high and high in the colourful sky 'As some bright archangel in vision' The poet is able to glance the face of the luster, gleaming over the summits of the Timeless Being. The Blue bird 'is another lyric where the blue bird symbolises the individual soul. It indicates the mind-power or the power of the soul. The symbolic fire of the image represents the poet's soul. The bird symbolises a vehicle of God the blue bird transcends worlds.

I am the bird of God in his blue

Divinely high and clear

I sing notes of the sweet and true

for the God and seraph's ear.[16]

The bird soars beyond time and space; The flight is like the flight of the spirit and soul towards heaven. Another poem of mystic delight is entitled 'Invitation'. Written in Alipure jail after the vision of Lord Krishna, the poem motivates the readers to undergo rigorous practice to see the Divine. 'A God's labour' is Indian in theme. The tendency of the human to spur the Divine because of lack of vision is enumerated :-

The Truth of truths men fear and deny

The Light of lights they refuse

To ignorant God they lift their cry

to or a demon-altar choose-17

The poem 'A Tree' stands testimony to Blake's statement 'A fool sees no the same tree as a wise man does'[18] The poet shows the man's soul struggling to reach out to heaven, like the branches of a tree that try to reach out to the sky. The persevering efforts of man by his penance and prayers to reach heavens is nevertheless a truth but how may succeed in their efforts, is very uncertain. To quote a few lines -

A tree beneath the sandy river-beach

Holds up its top-most boughs

Like fingers towards a heaven they cannot reach

Earth-bound, heaven-amorous

This is the soul of man, body and brain

Hungry for reach other our heavenly flight detain.[lines 42-47] -18

Another poem of mystic delight is 'Invitation' written in Alipore prison. This poem resonates with divine energy. Having had the vision of Bhagavan Vasudeva under the trees and inside the prison, the poet calls for the followers to realise inner freedom and peace. The poem resonates with inner energy[.ie] soul-force .'

The knowledge of the Divine and the revelation of the spirit are a kind of apotheosis as found in the poem 'Revelation' where the passing glimpse of the Great Almighty is revealed;

Someone leaping from the rocks

past me ran with wind-blown locks

like a startled bright sunrise

Visible to mortal eyes [47]--20

Both Blake and Aurobindo create a world which allure man from the phenomenal world. In the inspired moments there is a tremendous transformation in the individual consciousness and there is a poetic grasp of metaphysical truth. They are inspired by the transcendent power immanent in man; Inspiration occurs in unusual and exceptional moments.

Blake transcended his own self In his poems 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' He showed mystic leanings in highlighting the manifestation of God in his creations and the dichotomy of desires and wishes of youth is contradicted with the experience and wisdom of old age. The trend of his imagination is towards the evocation of things without form. The creation of Beings exist in his imagination or in the nebulous kingdom of his dreams. His vision of life is clear and naive. He delights in the physical attributes of nature, its breath and wonders of light and motion., of forms and melody. The essence of all is set forth in the poetic piece entitled 'Divine image' which delineates the spirit of mercy, pity, peace and love. Here his vision of the divine image is that of the spirit which is at once universal and particular.[ie] God and man;

Both the poets had cosmic consciousness. The prime character of the cosmic consciousness is that it is constantly aware of the cosmos; the life and order of the universe and eternity happens to be the theme of both the poets. Both enlighten the people about the soul of man. Their expanding affections embrace universal man and societal human being. They were endowed with spiritual insight and bright visitations from the inner realm of thought.

They stood out as most illumined minds from which cosmic wisdom sprang. They knew the wonders within



human beings and attempted to enlighten them towards looking up to God. Both were involved in politics but their spiritual inclination was more powerful. Both firmly believed that God does not exist apart from man. They also felt that we are men fallen not from God but from ourselves. Man is a potential collaborator with God. The supramental manifestation can intervene and change the purblind mind of man with an onrush of the supermind with radiance and knowledge. In this connection Sri Aurobindo was confident that a mind of light would replace the present darkness of earthly ignorance.

The writings of Sri Aurobindo culminate in the epic 'Savithri' which he entitled 'A Legend and a Symbol', considered as his spiritual autobiography. It is based on the story from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Aurobindo entitled the epic 'A legend and a symbol.' The story of Savithri arguing with the Lord of Death to give back the life of Sathyavan, her husband, maybe something unbelievable but as most saints and sages claim it all depends on the mind. In the interplay between man and the Gods it is a prayer, a right request and a rightful demand. The prayer and request are fulfilled because the pleader, for her own cause again is a very pious virtuous woman of no sin. It is an incomplete epic of 24000 lines and Aurobindo claimed that he took a break in between when his consciousness was elevated to a higher level each. The mutual longing between the human and the divine to reach out to each other is depicted in the following lines:-

A mutual debt binds the man to the Supreme

His nature we must put on as He put on ours

We are the sons of God and must be even as He

His human portion we must grow Divine' ['Savithri, [I, 4]---22

One can consider a statue as a statue or some energy depicting the power of God; As when Aurobindo stood transfixed in front of the idol of Kali Matha and got almost transmuted in thought. The central theme revolves around the transformation of man as the consummation of terrestrial evolution and the emergence of supramental race upon the earth. There was a felt vision of transcendental reality, a consummation of all mystical experience. The following lines of the epic make this evident:-

A key turned in a mystic lock of time ,

but where the silence of the Gods has passed

A greater harmony from the stillness

Surpassed with joy unborn and a sweetness yearning

An ecstasy and a laughter and a cry' [23] time.

Aurobindo's message to the society is indirectly conveyed through the epic which elaborates the triple prayer from Brahadaranyaka Upanishad and which can be everyone's prayer ;-

Lead me from non-Being to Being

From Darkness to light

From death to immortality' [25]

understanding mystic poetry is like yogic breathing. such reading and understanding brings the reader close to the writer .

He claimed it as new dimension of mystical poem and he was not surprised by the time it took for the readers to understand and appreciate. In all acceptance, he stated that it took at least a hundred years for Blake to be understood and appreciated.

The claim or argument of this article is to emphasize on the similarity of the philosophical and deeply mystical tendencies of Sri. Aurobindo and Sir. William Blake .To sum up the article, Both echo the vedic precepts of the divine wisdom of man being led from darkness to light ignorance to wisdom and death to eternal life .

### **References**

1. 'Jerusalem' by Blake
- 2 'Everlasting Gospel' by Blake.
- 3 'Nirvana' by Aurobindo.
- 4 'Auguries of Innocence' by Blake

References from 5 to 17 all from Aurobindo.

- 5 to 8 'Savithri' 10 'Lifedivine' 11 'Who' 12 'Transformation.' 13 Ibid,
- 14 'Hymns to mystic fire.' 15. 'All is boundless He'
- 16 'Blue bird' 17. 'A God's Labour'
- 18 'Proverbs of Hell' Blake.
- 19 'A Tree' 20 'A God's labour' 21 'Revelation' 22 Evolution-[Poems - by Aurobindo.]
- 25 Brahadaranhaka Upanishad.

### **Bibliography**

- 1 Benz, Ernest-- 'Evolution and christian hope' Trans doleby & co., 1966. 2 poems and prophecies , pub Everyman's Library, prints Asia
2. Bowra, C.M.-- 'Songs of innocence and Experience' ed., Basingstoke, Macmillan Press 1950.
3. Brookington, Allen. 'Mysticism in poetry on a basis of experience' Port Washington, 1950.
4. Brownski-- 'William Blake- A man without a mask' Penguin Classics., 1944
5. Bucke, R.M. 'cosmic consciousness', 1901.
- 6 Deshpande, 'Perspectives of 'Savithri' pub., Aurobharathi Trust, 2002

7. Damon, Samuel Foster, -The Ideas and symbols of William Blake.
8. Frye, Northrop. - 'Blake after two centuries' Princeton University Press, 1947.
9. Ghose Aurobindo, 'A Collection of short poems and sonnets' Ashram publications,
10. Hayles, Catherine 'The cosmic web' Ithaca Cornell University press 1984
11. Iyengar, KRS-Sri Aurobindo- A biography and history 1972.
12. Murray, Paul., T.S. Eliot and mysticism Palgrave, Macmillan, 1994
13. Nirodbharan-Aurobindo for all ages, Aurobindo Ashram publications, n.d.
14. O.P. Mathur, 'Critical Considerations' Prakash book Depot, Rai Barielly. 1997.
15. Palke, GS -Image, symbol and Myth in Sri Aurobindo's Poetry' Harman publishing House, , New Delhi-2006.
16. Parrinder, Geoffrey-- 'Mysticism in the world Religions' New York OUP, 1976.
17. Raine, Catherine - 'Blake ,after two centuries' A Bolling Series, Paperback, Princeton University Press., 2002.
18. Ryon, Robert. Blake and Religion. ed., Morris Eves, Cambridge University Press, 2003.