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Matter in Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract

Matter is the first stage in the evolution of consciousness and the ultimate step in involution. In this stage consciousness appears to lose itself in an infinite in conscience. Sri Aurobindo in *Life Divine* describes two important processes in the creation of the world- the aspect of the ascent of the spirit into the world and its descent. Without the descent of the spirit into the world, there cannot be any ascent of the world into the spirit. There is a descent of the spirit even into Matter. Matter is the ultimate step in involution. In this stage consciousness appears to lose itself in an infinite in conscience. Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary cycle begins with the inconscient and thereafter the first three stages are matter, life and mind. For Sri Aurobindo, matter is a pulsation of the divine. It possesses awareness which is on the level of the inconscient. It contains within it fixed stage which exist each with its appropriate order of nature. Evolution is inevitable. Even Matter evolves. It proceeds step-by-step.

Keywords- *Matter, Evolution, Inconscience, Consciousness*

The two extremes which philosophy must avoid are materialism ignoring Spirit and spiritualism ignoring Matter. The affirmation of a divine life upon earth and immortal sense in mortal existence can have no base unless we recognize not only external Spirit as the inhabitant of the bodily mansion, the weaver of this mutable robe, but accept Matter of which it is made as a fit and noble material.

Matter is the first stage in the evolution of consciousness and the ultimate step in involution. In this stage consciousness appears to lose itself in an infinite in conscience. Sri Aurobindo in *Life Divine* describes two important processes in the creation of the world- the aspect of the ascent of the spirit into the world and its descent. Without the descent of the spirit into the world, there cannot be any ascent of the world into the spirit. There is a descent of the spirit even into Matter. "That is why matter seeks to evolve into something higher than Matter – life," states S.K. Maitra. (p3) He further observes, "There is a descent of the spirit into life, and that is why life seeks to rise to something higher than itself- mind.

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Similarly, there is a descent of the spirit into mind, and the mind must therefore move more towards its source by ascending into something higher than itself – super mind. The ascending process does not stop with the super mind but continues till... Sachidananda is reached.”(3)

The descending process is called involution, and the ascending process Evolution. Everywhere Evolution is conditioned by involution.

S. K. Maitra observes:

The evolution of matter is possible only because there has been an involution of the spirit into matter... You cannot talk of evolution and yet deny the spiritual element in matter. As with matter, so is it with life, soul and mind. There cannot be any talk of any upward movement of these unless each of these bears the stamp of the spirit - upon its back. Ascent without descent, evolution without involution is unthinkable. The vedantist in his enthusiasm for the ascent of the human consciousness into the divine forgets this fundamental fact. He ignores altogether the mainspring of all evolution – the descent of the spirit into the minutest particle of matter.”(3-4)

Matter is the ultimate step in involution. In this stage consciousness appears to lose itself in an infinite in conscience. In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo States;

It made of knowledge a veiled and struggling light,
Of being a substance nescient, dense and dumb,
Of Bills the beauty of an insentient world,
In finite things the conscious infinite dwells:
Involved it sleeps in Matter's helpless trance, (Savitri: 658)

This plane is characterized by the fullness of ignorance. Division reaches its peak. The supreme that is veiled here gets lost to knowledge.

Evolution

Consciousness beings an upward course to gain its original status. This process is called Evolution. The consciousness that is hidden in the inconscient presses for self expression. Sri Aurobindo describes this in *Savitri*.

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred;
A nameless movement, an unthought idea
Insistent, dissatisfied, without an aim,
Something that wished but knew not how to be,
Teased the inconscient to wake ignorance. (Savitri: 1)

This is the stage when evolution begins. Ashok K Ganguli states in his Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*: “In essence evolution is not making a more organized body or a more efficient and capable life and mind. These are only part of the mechanism of evolution and its outward circumstance. In truth evolution is ‘the strife’ of a somnambulised

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consciousness ‘to wake and be free and find and possess itself and all its possibilities to the very highest. It is a slow becoming of a Godhead, the growth of a Spirit’.” (p 167) The tardy evolutionary movement is a field:

...of the mysterious play
In which the Unknown pursues himself through forms
And limits his eternity by the hours
And the blind Void struggles to live and see,...

Savitri: 22

The present terrestrial evolution begins as Ashok K Ganguli states, “from the second involution in inconscient Matter in which all the powers of the Spirit’s consciousness had plunged during devolution –

...Matter’s rigid hard unconsciousness
Harbouring brilliance of a transient soul
That lights up birth and death and ignorant life

Savitri (p454)

Sri Aurobindo describes this state in another beautiful verse:

A darkened Nature lived and held the seed
Of Spirit hidden and feigning not to be.
Eternal Consciousness became a freak
Of an unsouled almighty Inconscient;

Savitri (p455)

Sri Aurobindos evolutionary cycle begins with the inconscient and thereafter the first three stages are matter, life and mind. For Sri Aurobindo, matter is a pulsation of the divine. It possesses awareness which is on the level of the inconscient. It contains within it fixed stage which exist each with its appropriate order of nature. Evolution is inevitable. Even Matter evolves. It proceeds step – by – step. There is a progressive ascent of consciousness in various forms of matter. Sri Aurobindo notes in *Life Divine*: “life is already involved in matter and mind in life because in essence matter is a form of veiled life, life a form of veiled consciousness.” (p3) He further observes in *Letters on Yoga*, “It is very true that physical things have a consciousness within them which feels and responds to care and is sensitive to careless touch and rough handling. To know or feel that and learn to be careful of them is a great progress of consciousness” (p717). In a recent book *Mind Before Matter* Will Keepin states that David Bohn in his wholeness and the implicate order postulated a system of creation that is based on holomovement and which consists of two fundamental aspects: the explicate and the implicate order. (p217). The explicate order is the world and the matter that we see. It is the appearance of reality only. The true reality is the unseen implicate order. In the implicate order everything is enfolded into everything. The boundless finite of the material universe is created by cosmic consciousness. Andries Gustav Bernard

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observes that Sri Aurobindo asserts that out of a particular Energy, a covert involved cosmic infinite consciousness Brahman built the boundless finite of the material universe. (p123) There is in this universe an inconscient which is immanent an all that is. This inconscience is a pre-requisite for the evolution out of the material world – substance to the eventual supreme consciousness. This process is possible because of the Divine powers are contained within everything. Andries Gustav Bernard goes on to observe that there is an ignorance in matter, but for Sri Aurobindo this is not a bland ignorance but a powerful enlightened ignorance, namely the power of Brahman to create illusions and to be aware that they are illusions while Mind has the ability of taking these illusions for real. (p123)

Evolution is the result of a pressure of the spirit within for unfoldment of its Divine possibilities in creation. The spirit involves itself in matter. Prema Nandakumar observes in her, *Savitri: A Study of the Cosmic Epic*, “The imprisoned consciousness in matter forces itself to be conscious again. The ascending consciousness starts from matter. It rises into life it passes on through mind. It moves towards the supermind and the Sachchidananda” (p86). In *Savitri*, the evolution of consciousness is described vividly. It begins in the involution in the inconscient matter. On this all the powers of the spirit’s consciousness plunges:

A darkened Nature lived and held the seed
Of spirit hidden and feigning not be
Eternal consciousness becomes a freak
of an unsoiled almighty inconscient.

Savitri:(p455)

In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo graphically describes the beginning of creation. He states that, before the gods came into being the downwards descent or involution had reached the opposite side separated from its origin. These forces were inconscient and dark. In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo states:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon silence marge,
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the somber symbol of her cycles nurse
The abyss of the unbodied infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world

Savitri (p1)

This was a stage of dark unconsciousness still there was a remembrance of the divine origin. Earth was formed for the evolution of consciousness. Consciousness was hidden in the dark in conscience:

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Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs
Forgetful of her spirit and her fate

Savitri (p1)

This is the beginning of creation. The consciousness that was hidden tried to stir, since the beginning of creation. In the evolutionary process two forces are indispensable the ascent and the decent. Kalpana Bidwaikar states:

There has to be a power of aspiration that forms the ascent from below followed by an answering grace from above as the first condition for all the stages in evolution. The teasing of the inconscient is an aspiration from below but is insufficient to evolve all on its own. A secret intuition which is the divine urge working within matter aspires towards the higher places. (99) (Savitri: 89)

The Inconscient

The Inconscient lies below the subconscious. It is the lowest plane of consciousness. Evolution begins from the inconscient and matter emerges from it. It is full of darkness:

The inconscient is the Superconscient's sleep.
An unintelligible intelligence
Invents creation's paradox profound;
Spiritual thought is crammed in Matter's forms,
Unseen it throws out a dumb energy
And works a miracle by a machine.

Savitri: (p.600)

Further Sri Aurobindo describes another quality of the inconscient:
For the inconscient too is infinite;
The more its abysses we insist to sound,
The more its stretches, stretches endlessly

Savitri(p 318)

Man evolves from the animal. He has a mind. He possesses emotions and desires. He has intelligence. Life and matter do not disappear but are taken up by the mind. Life includes matter and mind Sri Aurobindo states in *Life Divine*:

We speak of the evolution of life in matter, the evolution of mind in matter, but evolution is a word which money states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why life should evolve out of material elements or mind out of living form, unless we accept the vedantic solution that life is already involved in matter and mind in life because in essence matter is a form of veiled life, life a form of veiled consciousness. (p.3).

In this passage, Sri Aurobindo clearly states that life and mind do not evolve out of nothing. They are already involved in the form of consciousness in matter itself. Evolution

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succeeds involution. Evolution moves from inert matter to sub-conscious plant, from plant to semi-conscious animal and then to the conscious human being. Man is also imperfect. Man has to evolve into superman.

Man is a complex being. For the evolution of consciousness, a knowledge of the different parts of man's being is required. We live in surface consciousness. In *Letters on Yoga*, Vol.I Sri Aurobindo states: "there are two systems simultaneously active in the organization of the being and its parts". (p.251). They are the concentric system and the vertical system.

The concentric system consists of a series of sheaths. They constitute the outer being, the inner being and the inmost being. The outer being and the inner being constitute the being. They belong to nature or prakriti. The inner most being is the Purusha or spirit. It is the true being in the Purusha there is the inmost physical, vital, mental. At the centre is the psychic being.

The vertical system consists of a ladder of consciousness—from the inconscient to the Sachchidananda. All these have been discussed in detail by Sri Aurobindo in *Life Divine* and *Savitri*.

The outer being or the outer surface consciousness consists of the physical (matter), the vital (life) and the mental. The physical is the gross body.

The physical – the physical manifests as the gross body. It is responsible for physical consciousness. The body-physical is full of impurities. The divine dwells even there:

In this institute of fleshly life
A soul that is a spark of God survives
And sometimes it breaks through the sordid screen
And kindles a fire that makes us half divine
In our body's all there sits a hidden power
That sees the unseen and plans eternity,

Savitri (p 169)

The gross physical body has its own physical consciousness. The surface mind knows very little of the physical consciousness. It is largely subconscious. The physical being has two more parts- the one is mental and the other vital.

Through the journey of Aswapati Sri Aurobindo takes us to the kingdom of subtle matter. Prema Nandakumar observes in her, *Savitri: A Study of the Cosmic Epic*, "Aswapti catches sight of the immense "high- curved world- pile", reared against the base of matter's plinth, and rising 'towards breadths immeasurable'." (p 86) The descending stair from the summits of the Spirit to matter's abysses is balanced by this other,

....single stair to being's goal.
A summary of the stages of the spirit,
Its copy of the cosmic hierarchies

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Refashioned in our secret air of self

A subtle pattern of the universe.

It is within, below, without, above.

From the kingdom of gross matter or the material cosmos of order and harmony, though lacking “the sole timeless word”, Aswapati crosses to the world of subtle material existence where “dwell earth- nature’s shining origins”. This is the world of physical mind, or, in other words, the world of matter shot through by the mind:

The golden issue of mind’s labyrinth plots,

The riches unfound or still uncaught by our lives,

Unsullied by the attainment of mortal thought

Abide in that pellucid atmosphere.

Savitri (p44)

It is “the brilliant roof of our descending plane”, it is an intermediate power- house or reservoir; almost a world of archetypes, its location and function are best described thus:

A heaven of creative truths above,

A cosmos of harmonious dreams between,

A chaos of dissolving forms below,

It plunges lost in our inconscient base.(p45)

In the kingdom of subtle Matter, Aswapati discovers a wonderful, hitherto hidden world. Through this chapter, Sri Aurobindo reveals to us the grandeur of Matter:

And found a life that lived not by the flesh,

A light that made visible immaterial things.

A fine degree in wonder’s hierarchy,

The kingdom of subtle Matter’s fiery craft

Savitri(p103)

The ‘earth nature’s shining origins’ is revealed to Aswapathy. He sees the ‘perfect plan on which she moulds her works’:

In that lucent ambience mystically clear

The eyes were doors to a celestial sense,

Hearing was music and the touch a charm,

And the heart drew a deeper breath of power.

There dwell earth- nature’s shining origins:

The perfect plan on which she moulds her works,

Savitri (p103)

Matter, in its deepest essence, is energy. Material energy, vital energy, mental energy, and the like, are different forms of manifestation or modes of operation of the fundamental spiritual energy which is dynamism of the pure Spirit. Matter is the starting- point of Sri

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Aurobindo's order of evolution, but that only means that matter is the earliest to make its appearance in the scheme of terrestrial evolution. In *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo states:

And authorizes our mortality.
This medium serves a greater Consciousness:
A vessel of its concealed autocracy,
It is the subtle ground of Matter's world,
It is the immutable in their mutable forms,
In the folds of its creative memory (p 106)

It is because of Matter that life is gross and limited and stricken with death and pain, because of Matter that Mind is more than half- blind.

The success of this inertia and obstruction is due to a power of Matter; for one of the fundamental oppositions which Matter offers to Spirit is this that it is the culmination of the principle of division and struggle. In *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo states

A heaven of creative truths above,
A cosmos of harmonious dreams between,
A chaos of dissolving forms below,
It plunges lost in our inconscient base.
Out of its fall our denser Matter came. (p107)

Man is essentially a prisoner of his animal habits. The inconscient Matter is not easy to overcome:

But soon the inert flesh responds no more,
Then sinks the sacred orgy of delight,
The blaze of passion and the tide of power
Are taken from us and, though a glowing form
Abides astonishing earth, imagined supreme,
Too little of what was meant has left a trace.

The inconscience to which Man is born prevents him from moving to higher levels of consciousness. His body, mind and intellect are ill-equipped for such an important task. Intense sadhana is required for this Himalayan endeavour:

Here is man's ignorant dividing mind,
His genius born from an inconscient soil.
To copy on earth's copies is his art.
For when he strives for things surpassing earth,
Too rude the workman's tools, too crude his stuff,

Matter, thus, is invested with a great evolutionary significance. It is a form of manifestation of the Spirit and contains within itself such other powers of the Spirit as life, mind and the rest of them. It is because of this that they can be brought forth in the course of evolution into overt manifestation in material conditions. Matter contains the potency of all

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terrestrial life. It is important not as an absolutely non- spiritual blind entity, but as an apparently unconscious mode of operation of the superconscient creative energy of the Spirit. The manifestation of the Spirit is a complex web and in the design and pattern of one principle all the others enter as elements of the spiritual whole. Our material world is the result of all the others, for the other principles have all descended into Matter to create the physical universe, and every particle of Matter contains all of them implicit in itself; their secret action is involved in every moment of its existence and every movement of its activity.

There is the possibility of the material being transfiguring itself through the acceptance of a higher law than its own. which is yet its own because it is always there latent and potential in its own secretcies:

And the hidden miracle of our destiny.
What we are there and here on earth shall be
Is imaged in a contact and a call.
As yet earth's imperfection is our sphere,
Our nature's glass shows not our real self:
Savitri (p110)

That greatness still abides held back within.
Earth's doubting future hides our heritage:
The Light now distant shall grow native here,
The Strength that visits us our comrade power;
The Ineffable shall find a secret voice,
Savitri (p110)

The Imperishable burn through Matter's screen
Making this mortal body godhead's robe.
The Spirit's greatness is our timeless source
And it shall be our crown in endless Tiem.
A vast Unknown is round us and within;
Savitri (p110)

The two extremes which philosophy must avoid are materialism ignoring Spirit and spiritualism ignoring Matter. The affirmation of a divine life upon earth and immortal sense in mortal existence can have no base unless we recognize not only external Spirit as the inhabitant of the bodily mansion, the weaver of this mutable robe, but accept Matter of which it is made as a fit and noble material "out of which He weaves constantly His garbs, builds recurrently the unending series of His Mansions".

Life is neither an inexplicable dream nor an impossible evil but a mighty pulsation of the divine All- Existence. Life stands upon the principle Life Divine Matter as upon a pedestal or out of Matter it evolves like 'the form of a many- branching tree out of encasing seed'. The mind, life and body of man depend upon this physical principle. The out

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flowering of Life is the result Life Divine Consciousness emerging into Mind, expanding, elevating itself in search of its own truth in the largeness of the supramental existence. It also seems to be conditioned by this case of body and by this foundation of Matter:

Alive to the luster of the wearer's rank,
Fit to endure the rub of Change and Time.
A tissue mixed of the soul's radiant light
And Matter's substance of sign- burdened Force,-
Imagined vainly in our mind's thin air
An abstract phantasm mould of mental make,-

Savitri (p105)

Sri Aurobindo has given us a lucid account of the spiritual sadhana of Aswapathy as he endeavours to rise above Matter:

And sinks in Matter to fulfil his soul.
Awakened from her lower driven forms
The Earth- Mother gave her forces to his hands
And painfully he guards the heavy trust;
His mind is a lost torch- bearer on her roads.

Savitri p338

As man is accustomed, owing to inconscience and the bond of Matter, to a sensuous life, Aswapathy breaks himself free from all these bonds to become a 'god':

And love to rule a realm of strife and hate.
A mind impotent to reconcile heaven and earth
And tied to Matter with a thousand bonds,
He lifts himself to be a conscious god.
Even when a glory of wisdom crowns his brow,
When mind and spirit shed a grandiose ray

Savitri p 338

This is another description of the painful efforts of Aswapathy to get rid of the enslaver from Matter:

His life still keeps the human middle way;
His body he resigns to death and pain,
Abandoning Matter , his too heavy charge.
A thaumaturge sceptic of miracles,
A spirit left sterile of its occult power

Savitri p 338

The ascent of man from the physical to the supramental must open out the possibility of a corresponding ascent in the grades of substance to that ideal or causal body which is proper to our supramental being, and the conquest of the lower principles by supermind and

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its liberation of them into a divine life and a divine mentality must also render possible a conquest of our physical limitations by the power and principle of supramental substance. And this meant the evolution of an untrammelled consciousness, a liberated life- power, a physical life fit for the divine inhabitant, an earthly immortality

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