

## SRI AUROBINDO ON THE INDIAN EPIC RAMAYANA

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Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) wrote commentaries on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two epics of India. He observes that few works of literature produced anywhere in the world have so influenced the life and culture of a people as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. He compared the Indian epics with Homer's *Iliad*, and *Odyssey* in their impact on the culture of a people. He called Tulsidas' Ramayana "a long chant of religious devotion."

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is a major world literary figure of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a prolific writer and a poet. His works appear in thirty-five volumes. He was steeped in Western scholarship. He commented on the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Racine, among others. He also wrote commentaries on the Hindu scripture, the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. His *Essays on the Gita* are unequalled in scope and insight.

From age seven onward, Sri Aurobindo was educated in England at St Paul's School and then at the Kings College, Cambridge. He was a brilliant student of the Classics and won numerous prizes in Latin and Greek. He also wrote poetry at a young age.

Upon his return to India in 1893, Sri Aurobindo taught English and French literature at Baroda College. He rose to become the vice-Principal of the College. During this period, he learnt Sanskrit and Indian languages. He translated portions of the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into English. Sri Aurobindo represents a unique integration of the scholarship of the East and the West.

Sri Aurobindo was drawn to the nationalist anti-British fervor sweeping India at the turn of the century. He was influenced by the writings of nationalists like Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Gokhale and Tilak. He joined the radical wing of the nationalist movement and wrote for *Bande Matram*, a fiery publication.

In 1907, he was jailed for a year by the British for his writings and speeches. This was a period of great transformation for him. In solitary confinement at the Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo practiced deep concentration and yoga. He was blessed with a vision of the Supreme Reality; he realized that Krishna was the author and creator of all that surrounded him. Solitary confinement had little meaning for him. The British jailor meant it bad, but God meant it good.

His life was radically changed. Upon his release from prison, he gave up political activity. He moved to Pondicherry in Southern India, which was then under French rule. He did *Tapasya*, intense yogic austerities, for a number of years. An Ashram grew up around him, which now draws devotees from around the globe.

## **SRI AUROBINDO ON THE RAMAYANA**

**The epic poem Ramayana was composed in Sanskrit by poet Valmiki around first century B.C. (estimates for date varies). Few works of literature produced anywhere at any time have so influenced the life and culture of a people as the Ramayana. The Ramayana has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the Hindu national character. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, the Ramayana**

**has been an agent of almost incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India: it has presented to it to be loved and imitated in figures like Rama and Sita, made so divinely and with such a revelation of reality as to become objects of enduring cult and worship, or like Hanuman, Lakshmana, Bharata, the living human image of its ethical ideals.**

**The Indian epics are not like any other two epics in the world: they incorporate a great deal of ethical and moral content.**

**A profound stress of thought on life, a large and vital view of religion and society, a certain strain of philosophic idea runs through these poems and the whole ancient culture of India is embodied in them with a great force of intellectual conception and living presentation.**

**The poem represents “the youth of a people,” a youth not only “fresh and buoyant, but also wise and noble.”**

**Sri Aurobindo tells us that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata played a great role in molding the mind of the common people. That which was for the educated elite contained in the Vedas and the Upanishads was brought to life in story and legend for the masses in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.**

**The Ramayana has been converted to popular speech in various regions and languages of India. These regional renderings do not reach the intensity of feeling or the beauty of the original epic crafted by sage Valmiki some 2,000 years ago. Sri Aurobindo says that only two succeed in recreating vividly the epic masterpiece: one is Kamban, the Tamil poet who creates “a great original epic.” The other is Tulsidas. Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas is “a long chant of religious devotion.” Tulsidas’ famed Hindi Ramayana “combines with a singular mastery lyric intensity, romantic richness and the sublimity of the epic imagination.”**

The leading theme in Tulsidas' epic poem is the Vedic notion of the struggle between forces of truth and light and those of falsehood and darkness. "On the one side is portrayed an ideal manhood, a divine beauty of virtue and ethical order; on the other are wild and anarchic and almost amorphous forces of superhuman egoism and self-will and exultant violence." This theme has been popular with the masses.

Sri Aurobindo reminds us that Tulsidas' poem is not greater than Valmiki's: "It cannot be greater than the greatest."

Tulsidas was ostracized by the orthodox priesthood for having composed Ramayana in the vernacular language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. His Ramayana has had greater impact on the common person in India. It reaches the masses in the language that they can understand.

Sri Aurobindo's literary reach is vast and unparalleled. Unfortunately, his works are not well known. His writing style is terse and compacted for the uninitiated. A beginning student will do well by first turning to one of the secondary works on the life and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Recommended are Satprem's *The Adventure of Consciousness*, M. P. Pandit's *Sri Aurobindo and his Yoga*, and a biography of Sri Aurobindo by Peter Hees.

Information on the web:

[www.miraura.org](http://www.miraura.org)

[www.sriurobindosociety.org.in](http://www.sriurobindosociety.org.in)

[www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org)

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References:

The quotations in this article are from Sri Aurobindo's *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, published at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1959. See Chapter XII of the volume titled "Indian Literature."