

**The Mysterious Paradox of Time: A Brief Study from Sri Aurobindo's
Philosophy and Classical Indian Art
by Susmita Bhattacharya**

In the Bengali drama, *Dakghar* (1911) (*The Post Office*), written by Rabindranath Tagore, the central character is Amal, he is a little ailing boy who sits beside the window all day long and remains confined to a room since he is suffering from an incurable disease. One day Amal asks the guard (one of the characters of the drama) a very pertinent and mysterious question,

Amal: Some say, time goes on; some say time has not come. When you ring the bell it is time. Isn't it?

Guard: Is it possible? Actually when it is time, I ring the bell.

Amal: Okay, why does your bell ring?

Guard: Why does it ring? The bell reminds everyone that time does not wait. Time keeps flowing in one direction. It never comes back.

Amal: Where does it go to?

Guard: Goes to an unknown land, the one nobody could ever know.

Our world is four-dimensional. Time is one of the dimensions of it and the most mysterious one. The rest are spatial. In our daily life we experience that there is a spatiotemporal world and whenever we encounter a certain object, we perceive that object is placed or embedded in that spatiotemporal world. In life we can perceive time from different perceptual orientation and also from the different stages of consciousness and we always experience change and movement, we can differentiate between past and future; to our senses, time can never be invariant since the external world and our inner world is always in the process of becoming and change. Our past lies beyond any change but our future is yet to be determined. Time as we conceive it is only our means to realize things in succession, thus, in our vocabulary we always

use these form of expressions like 'before-after', 'past', 'present' 'future' etc. It works as a condition and also is the cause of conditions. But noticeably, it varies on different planes of existence and varies also for beings who are on one and the same plane. So for us, it is not something that can be called 'Absolute' in a true sense. In our experience, what we observe is a kind of division and succession and moreover 'change', through which we can live our so-called 'normal' life with accepted or given conditions. Thus, successions and change always motivate us to read, re-read and discuss the temporal concept through human cognitive approach from time immemorial. Let us start this paper with the question: whether the time has got any Absolute status or is it Relative or is it both at the same time? If we accept it as 'Absolute' then in what sense can it be called so? Secondly, is time 'Eternal' or changeless? If so, then, how can we explain the change? Or, can it be both at the same time, eternal and changing? Is it itself a condition or lies beyond all conditions? It is human rationality or logic which makes us accept one alternative by denying the other if they seem to us contradictory or opposite concepts. Thus, in rationality, two contradictory concepts can never be reconciled at any cost.

Sri Aurobindo in his magnum opus, *The Life Divine* discusses this issue of time with special reference to the Supreme or Absolute Consciousness and describes time as 'Timeless Eternal' and 'Time Eternity' and he conceives both the concepts, not as a contradictory concepts but it can be easily reconciled if we are able to see things in totality from a different perspective altogether. We can get the touch of his view in the classical Indian art form also. So this paper will discuss the concept of time as Timeless Eternal and Eternity in Time — apparently two opposite aspects and show how significantly they are unified, in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision and classical Indian art form.

(1)

In Upanishadic philosophy, there is the idea of Transcendental Unity, Oneness and Stability behind all the flux and variety of phenomenal life. This transcendental,

indefinable, immutable something cannot be touched or conditioned by time, perturbed by motion, indivisible because it is not conditioned by Causality.

For that which is in Time must be born and perish, but the unity and stability of things are eternal and must therefore transcend Time. That which is in Space must increase & diminish, have parts & relations, but the unity and stability of things is immutable... independent of the changefulness of its parts and untouched by the shifting of their relations, and must, therefore, transcend Space; — and if it transcends Space, it cannot really have parts, since Space is the condition of material divisibility; ... Finally, that which is subject to Causality is necessarily subject to Change; but the unity and stability of things is immutable, the same now as it was aeons ago and will be aeons hereafter, and must, therefore, transcend Causality.¹

Now the problem is: what exactly is the notion of Timeless Eternal and Eternity in time in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy? Or, what according to Sri Aurobindo is the exact status of time? Is it only a construct or an independent ontic entity? If Spirit is the fundamental reality, Time and Space as we know are the conceptive conditions under which the Spirit sees its own movement of energy or different appearances or status according to the status of consciousness in which they manifest. But what do we exactly mean to say by timeless? According to Sri Aurobindo,

The non-manifest is the timeless, the utterly eternal, an irreducible absolute self-existence to which the manifestation can give no clue or only a clue that by its insufficiency is illusory and deceptive.²

Thus it is the problem between Non-manifest and the manifestation. Accordingly, this raises the problem of time to the timeless spirit in our sense of rational reasoning. In

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, it has already been supposed, what is unmanifested in the timeless Eternal is manifested in Time Eternity. According to Sri Aurobindo,

*... what we mean by the Timeless is a spiritual status of existence not subject to the time movement or to the successive or the relative time-experience of a past, present and future.*³

What is in the timeless unmanifested, implied, essential appears in Time in movement, or at least in design and relation, in result and circumstance. Thus Eternity is the common term between Time and the Timeless Spirit. Thus, the two, i.e. the unmanifest and the manifest are the same Eternal in a double status. One an eternity of immobile status, the other is an eternity of motion in status.

The original status is that of the Reality according to Sri Aurobindo, timeless and spaceless. Space and Time are names given by us for the self-extension of the One Reality. We are apt to see Space as a static extension in which all things can move or stay together, and Time as a mobile extension which is measured by movement and event. Thus Space would be an Absolute in self-extended status and Time would be the same in self-extended movement. So, Space and Time would then be a dual aspect of One and the same self-extension of the Cosmic Eternal.

Now the problem is if Time is Eternal, then what about the Time observation and Time movement? Are they also real and Eternal? If they are not Eternal in a strict sense, then they will be relative. If they are relative then what will be the parameter by which time can be measured? Sri Aurobindo in his *Life Divine* very aptly suggested an answer:

*If we go behind Time by a similar inward motion, drawing back from the physical and seeing it without being involved in it, we discover that Time observation and Time movement are relative, but Time itself is real and Eternal.*⁴

Thus Time observation is not entirely dependent on the measurement but on the consciousness and the position of the observer. The fundamental point is each state of consciousness has its own time and yet there can be relations of time between them. According to Sri Aurobindo,

*When we go behind the physical surface, we find several different Time Statuses and Time movements co-existent in the same consciousness. This is evident in dream Time where a long sequence of happenings can occur in a period which corresponds to a second or a few seconds of physical Time. There is then a certain relation between different Time statuses but no ascertainable correspondence of measure.*⁵

Someone may object, if Time has no objective reality then it utterly depends on conditions and actions of consciousness and in that case, it would seem to be purely subjective. Then how will it be possible to measure time objectively? Here Sri Aurobindo raises a pertinent point that subjectivity and objectivity are not at all different but two sides of the same consciousness and force of the being. Sri Aurobindo illustrates this issue in this way. Any given time or space or time-space as a whole is a status of being in which there is a movement of the consciousness, it is such a movement that creates or manifests events and incidents. Moreover, it is the relation of the consciousness that sees and the power which actualises the happenings, a relation inbuilt in our consciousness which determines the sense of time and creates our awareness of Time-movement, Time-relation and Time-measure. Thus, the cardinal fact is that the original status of Time behind all its variations is none other than the eternity of the Eternal, just in case of Space is, it is the infinity of the Infinite.

Hence, time itself is a particular movement of Infinite Consciousness. It can be called a mode or derivative of Eternal Consciousness; it has not its own existence apart from the Eternal Consciousness.

Now Sri Aurobindo in this regard further illustrates the time-movement by pointing out that the Eternal Being can have three different states of its consciousness with regard to its own eternity:

*The first is that in which there is the immobile status of the Self in its essential existence, self-absorbed or self-consciousness, but in either case without the development of consciousness in movement or happening; this is what we distinguish as its timeless eternity.*⁶

*The second is its whole-consciousness of its successive relations of all things belonging to a destined or an actually proceeding manifestation, in which what we call past, present and future stand together as if in a map or a settled design or very much as an artist or painter or architect might hold all the detail of his work viewed as a whole, intended or reviewed in his mind or arranged in a plan for execution; this is the stable status or simultaneous integrality of Time.*⁷

T. S. Eliot has penned down this notion of tense in his famous poem, *FOUR QUARTETS* such as:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.*⁸

In this connection, Sri Aurobindo makes us aware that this kind of time-observation is not at all a part of our normal awareness of events as they happen, although we can view the past, because it is already known and can be grasped as a whole but we don't have that exceptional state of consciousness to view things simultaneously of the past, present and future.

The third status is that of a progressive movement of Consciousness-Force and its successive working out of what has been seen by it in the static vision of the Eternal; this is the Time-movement.⁹

It is clear from his above arguments that it is in one and the same Eternity but there are three different statuses of Consciousness with regard to one Eternity. There are not really two eternities, i.e. one an eternity of status or immobility and another an eternity of movement. Rather there are three different statuses or positions taken by Consciousness with regard to the one Eternity. It is possible only for This Eternity to see Time development from above and inside Time, exceeding it and not within it. It can take a stable position within the time-movement and able to see the before and the after in a fixed, determined or destined succession. Again, it can take a mobile position in the movement, by moving from moment to moment and see all that has happened receding back into the past and all that has to happen to move toward it from the future. Apart from these, there is another possibility in which the Eternal Consciousness may concentrate on the moment it occupies and see nothing but what is in that moment and immediately around or behind it. Before manifestation of this creation it was Timeless but developed the Time-movement without ceasing to be timeless, it can engulf the whole movement of creation in a static and dynamic vision and put out at the same time something of itself into the moment vision.

It is very interesting to note that this opposite or contradictory simultaneity is utterly confusing and inconsistent with our finite consciousness. Since we have a limited perception, we can see only one status at a time. So any sort of opposite simultaneity seems to us logically impossible and unreal at the same time. We can never conceive any diverse presentation of concomitant aspects of the One Reality due to our monochromic point of view. But to an infinite consciousness, this concomitant aspect and simultaneity of time-movement are perfectly logical and consistent. In the infinite consciousness and Reality multiple, diverse, concomitant aspects can be harmoniously arranged since there exists a co-relation of two powers of the self-awareness: one is, a power of status and non-manifestation and second is, the power of

self-effecting action, movement and manifestation. This static and dynamic power of action or self-manifestation is however contradictory and irreconcilable to our finite consciousness but it is absolutely intrinsic, normal to the eternal self-knowledge or *Māyā* of the self-existent *Sachchidānanda*.

(2)

From the above discussion, it appears that there are dual contrary aspects of one Infinite or the Eternal Reality. (1) power of static, non-manifested form and (2) power of movement, or manifestation in the phenomenal world. In the Hindu Mythology, or in the traditional Indian Art Form or in the philosophy of *Tantra* one can see how far this dual contradictory aspect of Time had been reflected in another mode of language.

In Hindu Mythology *Shiva* is the personification of the Absolute. *Shiva* is *Mahākāla*, Great Time, Eternity, the swallower of time, swallower of all ages and cycles of ages. Renowned Austro-German thinker Heinrich Zimmer in His famous book, *Myths And Symbols In Indian Art And Civilization* described this state of *Mahākāla* as,

*He reduces the phenomenal rhythm and whirlpool to nought, dissolving all things, all beings, all divinities, in the crystal pure, a motionless ocean of Eternity — from the viewpoint of which nothing whatsoever fundamentally comes to pass.*¹⁰

Shiva holds apparently two opposite aspects: archetypal ascetic and archetypal dancer. On the one hand he is total Tranquillity, absorbed in itself where all distinctions merge and dissolve; on the other hand, he is full of energy, i.e. life's energy and sublime passion. These two aspects are the dual features of an absolutely non-dual ultimate Reality.

Now if we delve into the study of Shaivaite-Tantric tradition we can get the impression of the same truth. To explain this Truth we will take the help of some Indian paintings i.e. Rajput and Kangra painting of 1800 A.D.

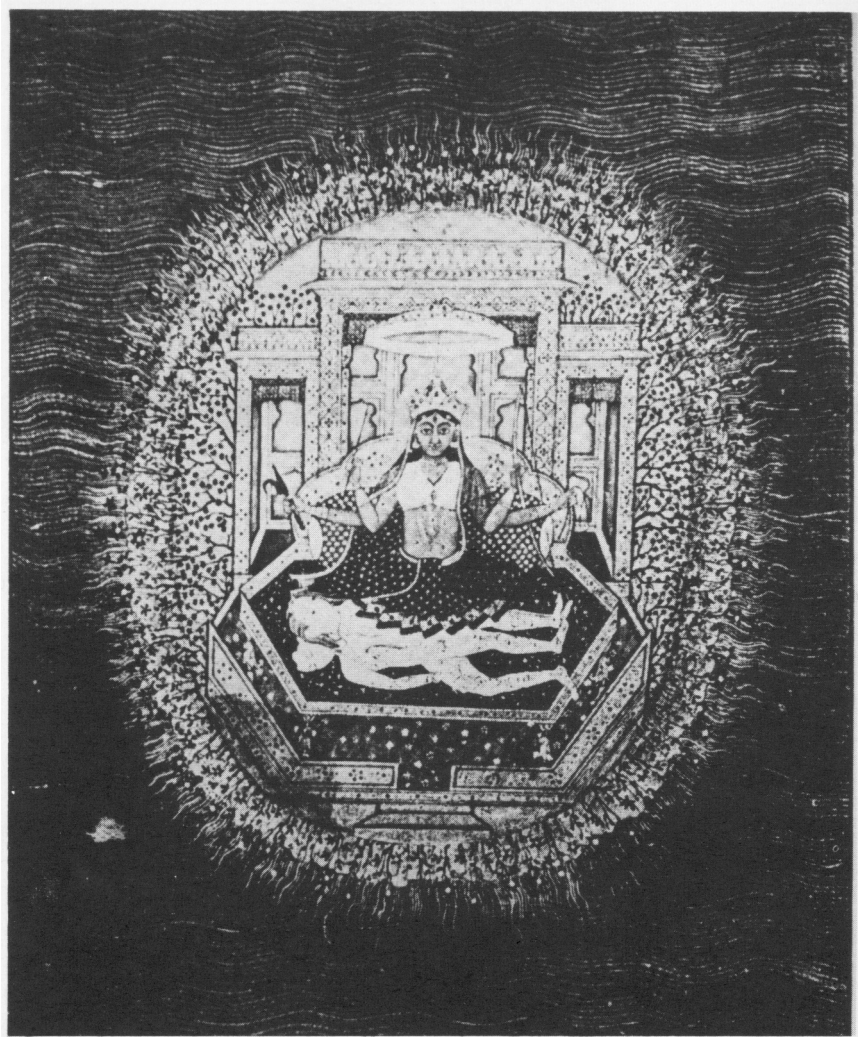


Plate - 1 *The Island of Jewels (Rājput), c. 1800 A.D.*

It is the pictorial representation of the ‘*Mani-dvipa*’, i.e. Island of Jewels. It reveals a deeper meaning in detail. It appears from this pictorial form that there is the pair of opposites though they are in the mode of union with each other and gradually grow out of each other. They are supporting and counterbalancing each other.

The deep blue, tranquil waters of the ocean reflect the life substance. This is the ocean of eternal life in its original state. It is potential but at the same time latent in itself. It conceives the innumerable possibilities of all conflicting opposites. This ocean represents the universal consciousness and it is also comparable to the ubiquitous, subtle element of the *ākāśa* (ether). The *ākāśa* again constitutes all space, and within this, all subsequent evolution and manifestation occur.

The Island, in contradiction to this surrounding ocean, is regarded as metaphysical Point of Power. It is called '*Bindu*', which spreads, unfolds, expands and becomes manifested into the tangible realm of our limited consciousness and the universe. The Island is represented as a golden, circular figure. The shores constituted of gems (*mani*) — thus it is called Mani-dvipa. In the centre stands a palace made of the precious stone that grants all desires (*cintāmani*). Within the palace there is a jewelled *mandapa* (awning), under that *mandapa*, the Universal Mother is seated on a jewelled and golden throne. She is the deity and energy of *Bindu*, she holds in herself immense potential to be the first concentrated point of dynamic force of universal Divine substance.

The Universal Mother is red in colour since she is creative. Red is the colour of dynamic force. She is the primordial energy, *Śakti*, force and she makes her planning for the evolution of the universe. Within the Throne-hall of the mani-dvipa, the Universal Mother sits upon two immobile, corpse-like male figures, which are lying one upon the other on the six-sided throne. Both these figures represent Shiva as the Absolute. The upper is called "*Sakala*" Shiva. '*Kala*' means a small part of anything, '*sa*' means 'with'. When the moon possessed of all its digits or parts is known as the Full moon. The opposite of *sakala* is "*niskala*"—"devoid of constituent parts". It can be called New Moon. The *Niskala* moon is virtually existent but at this stage, it is imperceptible, intangible, and apparently non-existent.

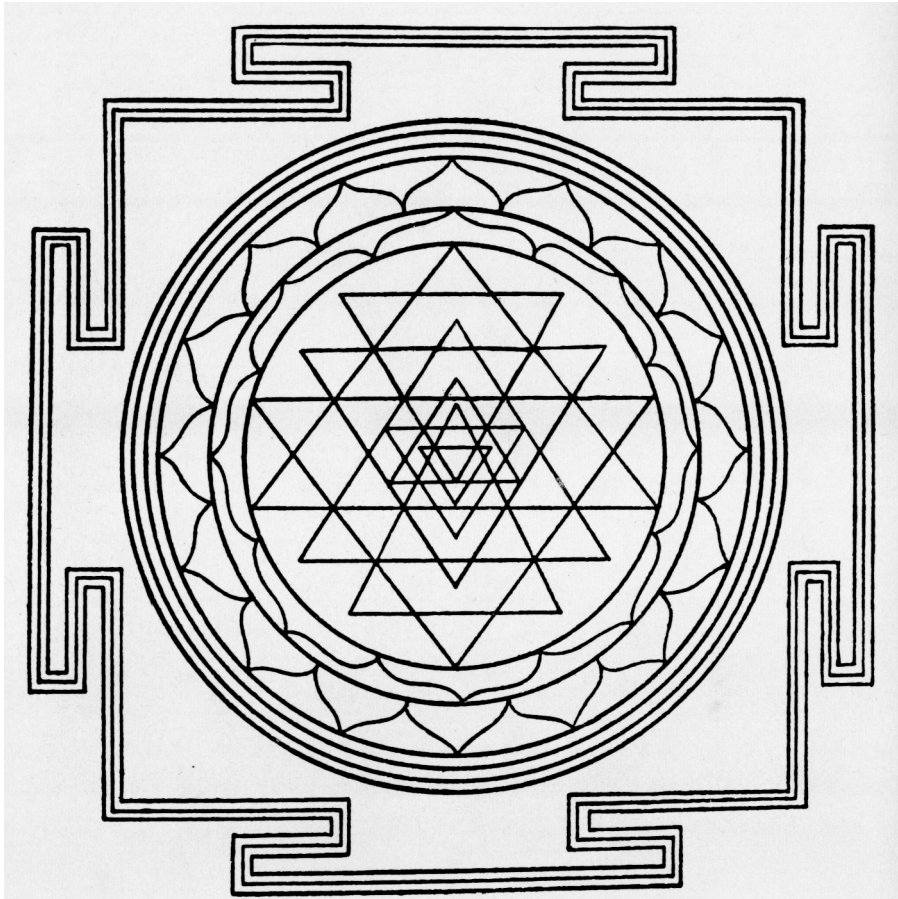
On the other way, the upper figure, that is *Sakala Śiva*, is all-conceiving, omnipotent and omniscient supra-consciousness. It is in the state of action or dynamism because he is in bodily contact with his own universal energy, the *śakti*, the feminine active principle, the efficient and material cause of the universe. The figure beneath the *Sakala śiva* is *Niskala Śiva*, who is the Absolute in nature and at the same time holds all state of action and inaction; actual and potential. The lower Shiva though is in deep slumber, seems to be unconscious, inactive and motionless.

These two aspects are antagonistic to our rational mind but the Absolute contains and reflects all and everything, and in which all distinctions and oppositions disappear since to the Absolute each and every contradiction has its own place. The Absolute is

both plenitude and Voidness, everything and nought. It is the source and repository of any kind of energy, but at the same time, it is an utter inertia, ‘the slumber of all slumbers’, profound and quiet.

Now in this picture the three figures — Niskala Shiva, Sakala Shiva and Sakti — superimposed as they are, one upon the other, can be viewed either upward or downward as, respectively, the evolution and the involution process of the Absolute, i.e. its expansion or manifestation as the phenomenal universe and again its coming back to its primordial state. Nishkala Shiva is the Absolute, the Divine essence in and by itself, beyond event and change, inactive and in a quiescent state. Sakala Shiva is the state in which the Absolute shows its infinite potentiality for differentiation and this differentiation is needed for the creation of this material universe.

Thus viewing the picture from bottom to top, the Absolute evolves through three stages, starting from the stage of inertia, complete inactivity and void to that of Infinite activity and dynamic manifestation. From top to bottom, three figures express in abbreviation the journey from normal consciousness to the stage of the Self-realization.



Shri Yantra (Plate - 2)

The ‘*Bindu*’ which we have already discussed in the context of plate 1, it actually belongs to the Tantrik tradition. The ‘*Bindu*’ or the seed may be symbolized in the Shri Yantra (Plate 2) by a central dot, the original point of energy. It has the spatial location but no magnitude, is usually depicted as white. The downward pointing triangle, which is red, indicates the fundamental originating movement in the form of a woman. There are nine triangles in the figure, interpenetrating, five pointing downward, four upward. The downward pointing triangle is a female symbol, it is known as ‘*śakti*’. The upward pointing triangle is the male, is called ‘*Vahni*’ (the fire) or *tejas*. Thus the vahni triangle denotes the male essence of the God, and the Shakti-triangles, on the other hand, shows the female essence of the consort.

The most significant point to be noted is that the Absolute cannot be found in the diagram. It cannot be represented because it lies beyond spatial and temporal form.

The Absolute is to be visualized as a “Bindu” amidst the interplay of all the triangles. The ‘Bindu’ is the power-point; the source from which the entire diagram takes its shape.

Like the Shiva-Shakti images (plate 1), the Shri Yantra (plate 2) symbolizes life, both universal and individual, as the relentless interaction of co-operating or co-existing opposites. The five female triangles expanding from above and four male emerging from below, signify the continuous process of creation.



Plate - 3 *Kālī on Shiva-Shava (Kāngrā), c. 1800 A.D.*

In Tantra, the principal divine figure is called *Mahākāla*, the great Time, and *Kālī*, who is the female personification of a great Time. In a Tantric representation of

Kali standing on Śhiva-Śava, (shown in plate 3), the total aspect of female divine power can be viewed. She is absolutely black and her tongue is out to lick up the world. Her teeth are dreadful fangs. Beneath the feet of this horrifying figure, there are the two Shivas again. The lower is 'Śava', the Absolute as total void. The upper Śiva lies as if in a dream, he is about to awake. The living Śiva raises his head and begins to lift his left arm, he becomes dynamic when his inactive body gets the touch of the feet of the goddess Kāli who is none other than the physical embodiment of his very essence and who, also enact as the destroyer of this universe.

Thus it would be the same Eternity viewed by a dual self-awareness as reflected from our above discussion. Actually, there could be no opposition between the two powers of the Self-awareness of the Infinite and Eternal Reality, i.e. 'a power of status and non-manifestation' and secondly 'a power of self-effecting action and movement and manifestation'. The Universal Mother or *Prakṛiti* is none other than his own kinetic Power or Shakti for creating this phenomenal world. Thus She is the executor of the latent, potential energy of the Absolute. This juxtaposition of these two temporal realities had been narrated by Sri Aurobindo in his Epic Poem *Sāvitrī* in an unparallel manner:

*He gives to his timeless thoughts a form of Time.
He is the substance, he is the self of things;
She has forged from him her works of skill and might:
She wraps him in the magic of her moods
And makes of his myriad truths her countless dreams.¹¹*

List of References

1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads: The Philosophy of The Upanishads*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, SABCL, 1972, vol.12, pp6-7
2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo Library, New York City, 1951,p.324

3. Ibid, p.325
4. Ibid,p.327
5. Ibid,p.327
6. Ibid, p.327-28
7. Ibid,p.328
8. *Collected Poems*,1909-1962, T.S. Eliot, Rupa& Co., Calcutta,1992
9. Op.cit, p.328
10. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilizations*, Ed. by Joseph Campbell, Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, 1999, p.167
11. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, p. 61

Further References

Phillip Rawson, *Tantra*, Thames and Hudson, London,1973

Sir John Woodroffe, *Sakti and Sakta*, Ganesh & Company, Madras, 1975

Dr. Susmita Bhattacharya,
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
Deputy Director of Public Instructions (UGC)
Government of West Bengal,
West Bengal

© Susmita Bhattacharya

Email: susmitab196@rediffmail.com