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Bringing Brahman Down to Earth:
Līlāvāda in Colonial India*

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1. A Risky and Playful Modernity

It is the dawn of the 20th century. Your task, should you decide to accept it, is to develop a philosophical foundation for India’s entry into modernity and a major independence movement. Where do you look? Materialism? Plenty of that on offer in European and Indian marketplaces of ideas. Logicism? Another good, modern idea. How about British empiricism? Or the Cartesian individualism that launched European modernity? You reject all of these as a suitable foundation for modernity. Instead you reach way back into India’s past to create the future. You adopt Advaita Vedānta, an orthodox, monistic, an idealist school of thought, with an approach to life and a way of thinking that goes back to the ancient philosopher Śankaracarya. What could possibly motivate such a choice?

This, as we have seen in this section, is no fantasy, but the reality of colonial Indian philosophy. How did Vedānta emerge as the dominant voice in Indian metaphysics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? In this essay, we explain how Aurobindo’s Līlāvāda interpretation of Vedānta made so much sense in India at that time as a vehicle for modernity. We explore how Aurobindo understood Līlāvāda, and the impact of this understanding on subsequent developments in Indian philosophy and culture.

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the political and philosophical problems confronting Indian philosophy in this period. First of all, there was the pressing need for a theoretical foundation for modernity. The context of

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Indian modernity was determined by the encounter with modern Europe and East Asia. The pressures of global trade and the interchange of ideas initiated by British colonialism made intellectual retreat, even to an imagined golden age, impossible. To insist on a scholastic focus on the sūtras and on an Indian identity chained to its past would be to guarantee irrelevance. On the other hand, to rush headlong into the embrace of European foundations of modernity would be to forego any hope of national intellectual emancipation or identity. For this reason, the political, scientific, technological, or economic bases of European (or even Japanese) modernity were not live options. Indian philosophy did not compromise here either. Indian philosophers instead developed an altogether different approach to modernity. They erected a metaphysical foundation that at once unifies a modern vision of India with a classical tradition and breaks with that tradition to forge a creative vision of future philosophy.

Such a strategy is fraught with risk. After all, at the core of classical Indian metaphysics is the doctrine of māyā—the doctrine that the world is, au fond, a grand illusion, and that reality is to be sought in the transcendent. So, to remain faithful to this tradition is to risk a status as an antique culture, at best one more diorama in a contemporary museum of premodern human history. This is not the only risk. To modernize this classical tradition could be to do it serious violence, and to impose contemporary European ideas on an Indian tradition. To navigate between Scylla and Charybdis is to articulate a transcendent idealism that is at the same time an immanent materialism, an ideal of human life that can be lived in the actual world. Līlā was the answer. This answer, however, came with its own risk—the risk of communalism in a philosophical context. The fact that Indian philosophy avoided this eventuality is a testament to the success of an unusual secularization of an originally religious tradition.

2. Līlā and Māyā

From the beginning, Advaita Vedānta employs both the language of māyā and of līlā. Both terms, for instance, figure in Śaṅkara karikās. The term māyā connotes both measurement and magic, or illusion. So, when the world is represented as māyā, it is represented as a magically created illusion, no more real than the snake for which the rope is mistaken; it is the necessarily failed attempt to take the measure of reality, and not reality itself. Śaṅkara does insist that the world is illusory in this sense, and māyavāda has been the dominant strain in Advaita metaphysics since his time. Indeed, the rubric of māyā dominates even the early 20th Century Vedānta rhetoric of such figures as Swami Vivekananda.
Nonetheless, Śaṅkara also introduces the term līlā. In classical Vedānta thought, līlā answers an important question: Why did Īśvara create the world? To appeal to a motive would be to presuppose a need, and hence an imperfection; to appeal to a purpose would be to presuppose a duality, in virtue of the need for an unrealized goal beyond Īśvara himself. But to regard the act of creation (or for that matter, the acts of sustenance or of destruction) as accidental would be to regard Īśvara as a bumbling fool. The obvious solution is to take the creative, sustaining, and destructive acts of Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva as mere sport, or play—līlā. In this sense, these acts are not purposeful but are yet intentional; not necessary, but good fun. They are represented as the overflowing into action of divine joy (see Isayeva, 1993).

Seen in this way, līlā accomplishes a secondary religious and philosophical purpose. It infuses an aesthetic dimension into the fabric of the universe. The world, ab initio is a site of ānanda, of bliss. As an artistic creation, it is already suffused with rasa and cannot be understood even metaphysically without being understood aesthetically. Art, on the other hand, becomes not an incidental human activity, but rather a central arena in which we partake of the divine activity of creation—of the manifestation of sat, cit, and ānanda in the temporal realm.

Inasmuch as the central insight of Advaita Vedānta is advaita, or nondualism, māyā and līlā can be seen as two alternative ways of developing this insight. Until the early 20th century, māyā is dominant. It expresses the idea that there is ultimately no duality in reality because all apparent duality is just that—mere appearance. When we recoil from the rope taking it to be a snake and then pick up the useful rope, there are not two objects to which we react—a snake and a rope, each with its proper grade of existence—but one, a rope, mistakenly regarded as a snake.

Mayavada establishes nonduality by removing one of the dual poles, viz., the world. This is all right as far as it goes, of course, so long as one is metaphysically content to reject the entire phenomenal world, including the empirical human subject, as illusory. One might be content to reduce one's own existence to cosmic illusion. The doctrine of māyā, however, raises further problems. As Bannerjee (1944) puts it:

The Absolute Spirit is said to appear quite unaccountably as the world of plurality, and not to truly create it or transform Himself into it. But how can the Absolute Spirit appear falsely as a diversified material world and to whom should He appear as such?... The appearance of the Absolute Spirit as a plurality of finite spirits and a world of finite transitory phenomena experienced by them is, therefore, regarded as inexplicable. [p. 276]
The point is this: The doctrine of māyā, while it secures nonduality, does so at the price of mystery. Not only do we need to swallow the inconceivability of our own nonexistence despite our conviction to the contrary (or even despite our conviction in favor of this doctrine), but we must accept that the very existence of the supposedly explanatory illusion is itself inexplicable. Sri Aurobindo put the point this way: “The theory of illusion cuts the knot of the world problem, it does not disentangle it; it is an escape, not a solution…. It effects a separation from Nature, not a liberation and fulfillment of our nature.” [The Life Divine, p. 419]

But suppose one wanted to take the world seriously, while retaining the Advaita insight. Līlā, if adopted as an ontological option, as opposed to a mere divine psychology, offers hope. On this understanding, the world is not the illusion that emerges when we take the measure of a nondual reality; instead, it is the manifestation of that reality, its play in space and time. Just as when we watch a dancer perform the role of Krishna in a Bharatnatyam we do not see two personae—the dancer and the Lord—but a dancer playing the Lord; when we encounter reality, on this metaphor, we encounter not reality and its manifestation, but reality manifested—or played out—as a universe.

Banerjee explores this rich analogy between performance or art and the manifestation of the universe as divine līlā with particular clarity:

A true sportsman and a true artist give expression to their inner joy and beauty and power and skill in various outward forms with perfect freedom and self-consciousness, without any motive, without any sense of want or imperfection, without any concern about consequences…. A true sportsman thus becomes a creator of beauty and he imports his own inner joy into the hearts of the spectators. A true artist’s action is also of similar nature… His aesthetic consciousness is embodied in his artistic productions…. In such cases we find a type of actions, which are essentially distinct from our ordinary voluntary actions, but in which, nevertheless, there is manifestation of free will, dynamic consciousness, creative genius, wisdom and knowledge, power and skill, all these being merged in or unified with a sense of inner joy and beauty. According to the līlāvadins, actions of this type may give us a clue, however imperfect, to the nature of the divine self-expression,…

[The perfect artist—Brahman] may be described as a rasa-raja—Beauty personified, or as self-conscious and a self-determining Beauty. Whatever he perceives is beautiful; whatever he thinks is beautiful; whatever he does is beautiful. [pp. 278–279]
There is, on this view, no duality between creator and creation, as the creation is the creator as he chooses to manifest himself. This manifestation is spontaneous—as Aurobindo would put it, "an act of free unity," arising not from imperfection or need, but from a pure aesthetic impulse, an impulse that infuses the world not only with being but with primordial aesthetic value. Sri Aurobindo's genius was to elevate this second interpretation of Vedānta as a foundation for modern Indian philosophy.

3. The Project of The Life Divine

It is a truism to say that Aurobindo's magnum opus is called The Life Divine. But the obviousness of what is printed on the cover can lead us to overlook its significance. In fact, it indicates clearly the nature of his project, a project whose nature is easily obscured by the luxuriant prose within those covers. The dominant Mayāvāda development of Advaita sharply distinguishes between the illusion we call life and the reality of the divine. Aurobindo's project is the radical integration of life and divinity in a unitary totality that is at once jiva and jagannath, at once immanent and transcendent. This, for Aurobindo, is the true sense of nonduality in Advaita. But why adopt this interpretation?

In many quarters, Aurobindo's interpretive project is read as a Hindu theology. On this account, Aurobindo's lilavāda is represented as a solution to the problem of evil. In the Indian context, this is the problem of explaining how a perfect Brahman or Isvara could create an imperfect, indeed, deceptive and illusory world, one at that filled with serpents, investment bankers and other forms of evil. On this view, Sri Aurobindo is a kind of Indian Saint Augustine, trying to solve the conundrum posed by a world permeated by evil created by a perfect God. On this reading of Aurobindo, however much he diverges from the Christian tradition regarding the nature of evil itself, regarding the nature of the Divinity (for sure) and regarding the role of evil in the world, he nonetheless follows Augustine in seeing evil as a necessary consequence of a descent. In the case of Augustine, that is a descent from divine grace; in that of Aurobindo, a descent from divine consciousness.

The problem of evil is said by many who read Aurobindo in this way (Burtt, 1956; Maitra, 1956; Deutsch, 1969; Herman, 1971; Betty, 1976; Phillips, 1985) to be solved by denying that an illusory world is created in the first place, and by identifying the putatively problematic evil with the infinitely conscious, good, and blissful Brahman, either at present or in a future state of world evolution. Since Brahman is possessed of all of these positive qualities, the apparent evil in the world, not the world itself, is what is illusory, either a mistaken apparition to ignorant consciousness (Maitra), or a failure to appreciate the
teleological character of history in which this illusion and evil will be dispelled (Phillips). Phillips puts the point this way:

The central argument of *Life Divine* is that two facts, one Brahma's being *Sachchidananda*, particularly *Ananda*, and two, the presence of evil, together indicate the inevitable emergence of divine life, through the instrumentality of evil. [p. 276]

Despite its popularity, this view is in error. It is a superimposition of a Christian framework on a text that shares neither its ideology nor its problematic. It is easy to be misled, perhaps, by the parallel sets of three that schematize the relation between divinity and the mundane in the two traditions. The Christian God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent; *Brahman* is *sat, cit*, and *ananda*. Theodicy emerges naturally from the first, Christian, *triguna*. It does not from the second, Indian, one. *Brahman* is, as Dubey (2002) perceptively puts it, *supramoral*, not good. *Brahman* *manifests* as the universe; he does not *create* it. Aurobindo is concerned not with the conflict between evil and good, but with that between ignorance and knowledge. Christian *man falls* from a state of innocence; the *Brahman* of Advaita *purposefully descends* in the act of creation. Aurobindo himself puts it this way: "The Ignorance is a necessary, though quite subordinate term, which the Universal Knowledge has imposed upon itself that movement might be possible, not a blunder and a fall, but a purposeful descent, not a curse, but a divine opportunity." (*The Life Divine*, Vol. 2, p. 361? Cited in Nikam, within Amalner symposium, 1950, present volume.)

Inder Sen (often cited as Indra Sen) characterizes Aurobindo's problematic as follows: "His *leitmotiv* and the first formulation of the philosophical question is, "How is divine life, a full life of the Spirit, possible on Earth? How can Spirit be reconciled to Matter" (present volume p. 596) This gets things exactly right. *The Life Divine* is not aimed at the *moral* reconciliation of a good god with an evil world but rather with the *metaphysical* and *epistemological* reconciliation of mind and matter, knowledge and ignorance. (This is why the late Daya Krishna remarked in conversation that *The Life Divine* marks Aurobindo as a *philosopher*, not a *religious leader*.) Bannerjee (1944), commenting on the term *lila* in this context, says:

...The perfectly free and delightful, sportive and artistic, self-expression of the One in the many, of the Infinite in the finite, of the Eternal in the temporal, of the Absolute in the relative, is called by the Vaishnava devotees, his *lila*. [p. 277]
This connection of the term *lilā* to Vaishnavism is worth further comment, and we will return to this issue in our concluding remarks. For now, though, note that although Aurobindo, like Augustine, is concerned with perfection, and its relation to imperfection, their respective conceptions of perfection, and hence of the reconciliation of it with its opposite, are entirely different. Augustine's perfection is the omniscience-omnipotence-omnibenevolence variety scouted above; Aurobindo's is the perfection of self-understanding and joy in life. Augustine's perfection is the necessary, but humanly impossible perfection of God; Aurobindo's, the anticipated and possible perfection of human life. Augustine's is, however problematically, already, and essentially, realized; Aurobindo's is the cosmic *telos*. Perhaps most importantly, the dialectic instituted by Augustine's thought demands *distance* between the perfect and the imperfect (hence free will, the serpent, and the fall, which insulate God from evil, ignorance, and responsibility); that instituted by Aurobindo demands the *unity* of the perfect and the imperfect through sublation in the historical, dialectical, ethical, and aesthetic processes of evolution and revolution.

The mystery to be solved then, in Aurobindo's words, is this:

> How did an illimitable consciousness and force of integral being enter into this limitation and separateness? ... It is the mystery not of an original Illusion, but of the origin of the Ignorance and insconsequence and of the relations of Knowledge and Ignorance to the original Consciousness or Super-Conscience. [The Life Divine, p. 430]

Aurobindo raises the central philosophical problems in this passage. The first concerns the *metaphysical* relation between the reality of the totality of an unlimited being and its instantiation in finite particulars. On the one hand, the requirement that reality must be an infinite unity appears inconsistent with the reality of its many particular parts; on the other hand, without these parts, there is no way for this reality to be manifest at all. The second concerns the *epistemological* relation between the consciousness to which we aspire and our present cognitive status. We are frankly unable to conceive of the epistemic perspective to which we aspire, while at the same time conscious of it as the intentional object of legitimate aspiration. While Aurobindo casts all of this in the language of creation and evolution, the fundamental problem he addresses is that of the relation between the finite and the infinite as it manifests in each of these domains.

Let us crystallize this problem further, so as to feel its irresistible pull on philosophical thought. We can always, on the one hand, as Kant and Hegel—both of whom are important influences on Aurobindo—emphasize, conceive
reality as an unbounded whole, and we must think ourselves as parts thereof. But on the other, we are always conscious of our particularity and limitation and so think of ourselves not as moments in a cosmos, but as independent original existences. These ontological perspectives are in tension and demand unification. On the epistemological side, we are always committed to the views we in fact hold, and to their warrant. Nonetheless, no matter how committed we are to a view we endorse, we are also always conscious of our own limitation, and so of a higher epistemic standpoint from which what we take to be knowledge is exposed as error. Once again, these perspectives are in tension and demand unification.

The moral and aesthetic domains give rise to parallel tensions. As Kant noted, we are forced to think of ourselves as biological organisms governed by the inexorable laws of a causally closed nature; as moral agents, we are forced to conceive ourselves as free. This is an apparent duality that demands reconciliation, but whose poles each resist treatment as mere illusion. As aesthetic subjects we are simultaneously aware of the particularity of our taste and aesthetic response and of the universality of claims to beauty. This requires us, as K. C. Bhattacharyya so perceptively put it (present volume, pp. 196–198), to be simultaneously engaged with and detached from the object of aesthetic experience.

Aurobindo's resolution of these tensions—the project of Life Divine—is distinctive in its creative blend of ideas drawn from Vedānta, Śāṅkhyā, and Hegel. Vedānta motivates the project through the conviction that the solution is to be found in a kind of nonduality of the mundane and the transcendent, although, as we will see in our exploration of his conception of śūra, Aurobindo was convinced that the then-dominant interpretation of this tradition is untenable. Vedānta also delivers to him the insight that the world we experience conditioned by our own sensibility and conceptual framework (saguna) is nondifferent from the reality we also must think as transcendent of those conceptual categories (nirguna).

But Vedānta is not the only well from which Aurobindo draws. Śāṅkhyā is another principal resource both Phillips (1985) and Dubey (2002) note; Śāṅkhyā is the origin of Aurobindo's conception of evolution. From Śāṅkhyā, and in particular from the primordial principles of prakṛti and puruṣa, Aurobindo also draws his conception of the regulative and causal roles played by the idea of progress in human history. This idea of progress is inflected by Aurobindo's understanding of Hegel, filtered through the British neo-Hegelians Bradley and Caird, all as interpreted by the Indian neo-Hegelian Haldar (1927) (see also Odin, 1981.) He thus reconstructs Śāṅkhyā through the framework of dialectical progress through sublation. This Hegelian reading of Śāṅkhyā structures his account of the unity of apparent contradictions in higher moments of
understanding. The consequent dialectical understanding of knowledge and reality in turn allows Aurobindo to reconcile the metaphysical and epistemological oppositions he takes to structure our lives and to imagine transcending them in a life divine.

4. Aurobindo’s Critique of Māyā

At the core of The Life Divine lie two chapters (II: 5 and 6 on cosmic illusion) in which Aurobindo considers and refutes the hypothesis that the phenomenal world is a grand illusion. He sets up the māyāvāda hypothesis as follows:

The cosmic illusion is sometimes envisaged... as something that has the character of an unreal subjective experience; it... may be... a figure of forms or movements that arises in some eternal sleep of things, or in a dream consciousness, and is temporarily imposed on a pure and featureless self-aware Existence; it is a dream that takes place in the Infinite, [The Life Divine, p. 377].

He points out the role of stock analogies such as dreaming or hallucination in classical arguments for this version of Vedānta idealism. Aurobindo then, taking this analogy seriously, argues that it fails as an account of ordinary experience. First, he argues, while dreams may contrast with waking life, that mere fact of contrast is insufficient to justify distinguishing them as unreal as opposed to real; for all we know, dreams and waking life could be equally real, though different in other respects, or even equally unreal (p. 378). After all, mirages and water, to take another stock Indian example, are both real. But one is a real liquid and the other a real refraction pattern. Similarly, mirages and water in works of fiction are equally unreal. Nonetheless, within those fictional realities, they differ in ontic status. Second, he points out, dreams and waking life are in fact very different, and in specific ways: dreams lack the continuity, coherence, and stability that characterize waking life. So, proposing the dream state as an analogy for waking life seems at least unmotivated, at worst misleading (pp. 378–379).

The most significant critique Aurobindo develops of the metaphor of māyā is the third: Aurobindo argues that even if we set aside the first two difficulties, the dream analogy, even if taken seriously, fails utterly to establish the unreality of the world; in fact, if it establishes anything, he argues, it is instead, the reality of the world. This critique is important not only because of its depth, but also because it constitutes the foundation for Aurobindo’s alternative itilavāda.
Aurobindo points out that dreams are in fact real: they are real dreams. So, to argue that the phenomenal world is a dream is not to argue that it is unreal in the first place; it is only to characterize the mode of its reality. In this context, Aurobindo notes that psychology, in particular, psychoanalysis, takes dreams seriously as real phenomena to be explained and that can explain other psychic phenomena (pp. 379–385). He concludes that “the dream analogy fails us altogether, and is better put out of the way; it can always be used as a vivid metaphor for a certain attitude our mind can take towards its experiences, but it has no value for a metaphysical inquiry into the reality and fundamental significances or the origin of existence” (pp. 385).

Aurobindo then offers a parallel critique of the metaphor of hallucination, arguing that it is no more useful metaphysically than the dream metaphor. He surveys a number of stock analogies for understanding maya:

The familiar existence of mother-of-pearl and silver, turns also, like the rope and snake analogy, upon an error due to a resemblance between a present real and another, an absent real; it can have no application to the imposition of a multiple and mutable unreality upon a sole and unique immutable Real. (pp. 387)

Here and in his subsequent discussion of a number of other putative metaphors for maya, Aurobindo emphasizes the pervasive disanalogy between a case in which one real entity is mistaken for another, or one possible property is misattributed instead of another, and the case of maya, in which something entirely unreal and impossible is supposed to be projected. He concludes that the metaphor of cosmic illusion is unwarranted and misleading as a metaphysical image. Instead, he urges, to the extent that any of these metaphors is useful at all, they force us to take seriously the reality of the world. Taking its reality seriously, Aurobindo urges, should lead us to inquire not into the mystery of its appearance, but rather into that of the precise nature of its reality.

Aurobindo offers a second line of critique, arguing that even if these metaphors could be made to work in some sense, they would still not solve the problem that maya is introduced to solve, viz., to explain the relation between the manifold nature of experience and the unity of being as such. We begin with the assumption that Brahman (Absolute) is real. If the phenomenal world is a product of maya rather than of Brahman, the question then arises, “Is Maya also real?” This is a difficult question for the mayavadin. If it is real, then it seems that we are committed to a fundamental duality, that of Brahman and Maya. But if it is unreal, then it cannot be causally efficacious in generating the world of appearance. A traditional response is to conceive of maya
as both real and unreal. Aurobindo agrees that māyā is real in some sense. But in that case, we need an account of the nature of its reality.

There is a deeper, internal problem for māyāvada here: whether we conceive māyā as unreal or as real in some sense, we must ask, “Why does māyā mediate between us and the ultimately real Brahman?” Nothing in the theory of māyā explains this. This strikes at the heart of the māyā metaphor, for that metaphor is posited as an explanation, as an account of why a nondual reality appears dualistically. But if the theory itself requires a totally inexplicable explanans, it is no explanation at all.

Third, Aurobindo poses an insoluble dilemma for Māyāvada:

[If] Brahman is the sole Reality, and if he is not the percipient, who, then, perceives the illusion? Any other percipient is not in existence; the individual who is in us, the apparent witness, is himself phenomenal and unreal, a creation of Māyā. But if Brahman is the percipient, how is it possible that the illusion can persist for a moment, since the true consciousness of the Percipient is consciousness of self, and awareness solely of its own pure self-existence? If Brahman perceives the world and things with a true consciousness, then they must all be itself and real, but since they are not the pure self-existence, but at best are forms of it, and are seen through a phenomenal ignorance, this realistic solution is not possible. [p. 397]

Illusion must be someone's illusion, but neither the absolute Brahman nor the phenomenal consciousness can be the subject. Nothing is solved by māyā. As Aurobindo concludes his refutation, “The theory of māyā... does not really solve the problem of existence, but rather renders if forever insoluble” (p. 418). This is why Aurobindo says that taking the entire world of experience to be māyā accomplishes nothing so much as rendering it all meaningless and worthy only of escape, effecting “a separation from Nature, not a liberation and fulfillment of our nature” (p. 419). Aurobindo insists that a solution to the problem of existence should account for existence, not explain it away. This, not theology, not a mystical vision of transcendence, is the real point of The Life Divine and explains why this frankly impenetrable volume of Vedānta metaphysics has exerted such a powerful influence on modern Indian philosophy.

5. Aurobindo's Doctrine of Lilā

What, then, is real? And in what sense is it real? Phenomenal reality is real. That is where we live, and that is where ontology begins. But phenomenal
reality is not therefore the measure of all things. As Aurobindo points out (pp. 427–428), it stands corrected both by science, and by rational reflection, each of which can correct its illusions and defects and each of which is of assistance in the evolution of our understanding of reality and its nature. This evolution is what makes possible the attainment of the immanent life divine Aurobindo envisions.

At each level of the dialectic of knowledge (the dialectic of spirit?), our apprehension of reality is enhanced, and more of what is real is manifested. This demands an account of the now central construct of manifestation. Aurobindo’s account is strikingly Hegelian: “All manifestation depends on being, but also upon consciousness and its power or degree; for as is the status of consciousness, so will be the status of being.” (pp. 427–428) Manifestation, Aurobindo argues, is always manifestation for a consciousness. To be, in a Hegelian—not a Berkeleyan sense—is to be apprehended, and so all Being is in this sense dependent upon consciousness; as a consequence, the nature and scope of consciousness is not only of psychological, but also of epistemological and metaphysical significance, determining both the range of objects of knowledge and of beings.

This reading allows us to make sense of one of the more obscure aspects of Aurobindo’s ontology, one which, when misunderstood, gives aid and comfort to the Theodicitists, viz. his account of plunging. Aurobindo poses the question of why there is a material world rather than nothing, or rather even than a world of pure spirit, by asking why consciousness plunges into insentience in its manifestation as matter. It is easy to read this as an extravagant metaphysical presupposition of the literal materialization of the psychic. Read in this way, The Life Divine posits a “fall” from spirit into matter parallel to Eve’s from grace into sin. But Aurobindo is making a different point. He is arguing that for that matter to be a manifestation of being at all, consciousness is presupposed as its ontological ground, and matter must come into existence as its object. The necessary coordination of subject and object entails, he argues, that matter is object consciousness made concrete. This is more Schopenhauer than Berkeley, a Kantian transfiguration of metaphysics into epistemology. He writes:

This, then, is the mystery,—how did an illimitable consciousness and force of integral being enter into this limitation and separativeness? How could this be possible and, if its possibility has to be admitted, what is its justification in the Real and its significance? It is the mystery not of an original Illusion, but of the origin of the Ignorance and Inconscience and of the relations of Knowledge and Ignorance to the original Consciousness or Superconscience. (p. 430; emphasis ours)
The solution to this mystery, the mystery of the nature of the manifestation of reality in experience, is, for Aurobindo, līlā. It is worth thinking about the etymology of this term. A. K. Coomaraswamy’s comments are useful in this context. He locates the first occurrence of this term in Brahmaśūtra II.1.32,33: “Na prayojanaśvat, lokavat tu līlakayāvyam. (Brahma’s creative activity is not undertaken by way of any need on his part, but simply by way of sport, in the common sense of the word.)” [1941, p. 98]. The point here is that līlā is introduced as a way of accounting for voluntary, but not purposive, action, action done just for its own sake, but action nonetheless. In the jātakas, Coomaraswamy also notes, the term occurs frequently in the context of Buddha’s manifestation in virtuous action or miraculous deeds. Of these occurrences, he writes, “the rendering of līlā here [in the jātakas] and in the Pali Text Society Dictionary by ‘grace’ is far too weak; the grace of the Buddha’s virtuosity [kusalaman] is certainly implied, but the direct reference is to his ‘wonderful works’; the Buddha’s līlā is, like Brahma’s līlā, the manifestation of himself in act” [1941, p. 99]. Līlā, therefore, in its classical connotation, is not an attribute of the divine, but a manifestation of divinity in action. Indeed, this connotation of līlā as manifestation, as opposed to play, is reflected in the fact that in the Upaniṣads, the manifestation of the elements in material objects is also līlā. “Yataḥ līlāyataḥ hy arciḥ.” (As soon as the point of flame burns upward, Mundaka Upaniṣad 1.2.2).

How does this account of līlā as manifestation help to solve the problem that maya left insoluble? We are still left with a set of crucial distinctions toward the overcoming of which Vedānta is directed—that between the absolute and the relative; the Divine and the mundane; the unconditioned and the conditioned; the unitary and the manifold; the perfect and the imperfect. Mayavāda, Aurobindo argues, attempted, but failed, to reconcile these by denying the reality of one term in each. Līlāvāda, by contrast, affirms the reality of the relative, the mundane, the conditioned, the manifold, and the imperfect but sees them as manifestations of the absolute, the Divine, the unconditioned, the unitary, and the perfect. The resolution of the tension and the dichotomy is thus achieved through an account of nonduality in which the apparent opposites are reconciled as identical in the same sense that the dancer and the divinity are one and the same in the nātya. Just as the dance cannot be performed unless we have an imperfect—all-too-human—dancer, and it is not a successful performance unless the divinity is evoked, imperfection and its metaphysical, moral, and epistemological cognates are necessary for the manifestation of the perfect in reality. Aurobindo puts the point this way: “When we say that all is a divine manifestation, even that which we call undivine, we mean that in its essentiality, all is divine, even if the form baffles or repels us” (The Life Divine, p. 333).
In Aurobindo’s hands, then, līlā replaces māyā as a way of making sense of the nonduality at the heart of Advaita. Whereas māyā, he shows, promises a resolution of the tensions inherent in the apparent duality of Brahmān and lokāyathā, it fails in two respects. First, any resolution is achieved at the expense of denying the reality of the world we inhabit, hence not so much solving the problem of existence as wishing it away. But second, even if we were to accept that solution, all of the problems that originally attended the duality of lifeworld and ultimate reality reappear for māyā itself.

Līlā explains both the apparent duality and its ultimate unreality. The duality is that of player and role; the dancer is not a deva, and we know that. On the other hand, nor is he different from the deva we see on stage, and so the apparent duality is unreal. Līlā explains this apparent but unreal duality without denying the facts of our ordinary life, which are rejected as illusory in māyāvāda but affirmed as an ineliminable aspect of reality in līlā. Finally, līlā provides an account of why life in the world we inhabit is meaningful; it is in fact potentially divine and is the locus of our potential for transcendence. Līlāvāda thus provides a metaphysics consistent both with the Indian philosophical tradition and with modernity.

Whether the critique of māyāvāda Aurobindo mobilizes was the point of his līlāvāda or merely an incidental consequence, and indeed whether these two viewpoints can be reconciled in the end, is the subject of the fascinating debate held in Amalner in 1950 (the present volume). That question need not detain us here. Instead, we turn to the momentous impact of Aurobindo’s līlāvāda on subsequent Indian philosophy of the late colonial period.

6. The Impact of Līlāvāda

When Aurobindo left politics for philosophy, Advaita Vedanta was indeed dominant in Indian metaphysics and indeed was already being appropriated as a medium for the assertion of Indian national identity. But the Advaita that was current was that of Sri Ramakrishna and his mātin, most eloquently articulated by his student Swami Vivekananda. That Advaita was Māyāvadin through and through. (See the selections from Swami Vivekananda, 1913, present volume, p. 000) Of course, this does not mean that Aurobindo and Vivekananda are philosophical adversaries. For, as a close reading of Vivekananda on māya reveals, in the end he takes māya more in the sense of manifestation than of illusion. Nonetheless, his metaphors are the metaphors of māya. When he asserts that “This, too is māya,” he indicates illusion and not reality, an appearance to be rejected. When Ras Bihari Das follows him in announcing
the falsity of the world (present volume), we see the impact of this metaphor of illusion so long dominant in Vedânta. In metaphysics, metaphors are often the most salient and effective expository devices. (As Sellars was wont to say, “In doing philosophy, we stack metaphors one on top the other until, like a house of cards, it all falls down, and then we start again”). It is not surprising that Aurobindo, originally a theorist of poetry, was drawn to these metaphors. In effecting this shift of metaphor from mâyâ to lîlā, Aurobindo reoriented Vedanta thinking from the transcendent to the immanent and so allowed its discourse to enter that of modernity.

The transmission from Pondicherry to the universities was not entirely literary; it was oral as well. We know (Aster Patel, 2007, personal communication) that numerous professional philosophers were regular visitors to the ashram. Professor Indersen, once he left Delhi to join Aurobindo, was specifically assigned the role of liaison to the academic community. M. Hiriyanna and T. M. P. Mahadevan, among others, were regular visitors, followed later by Daya Krishna. Aurobindo exercised direct influence on academic philosophy in India through these interactions.

We see that influence spreading in the philosophical community in, for example, the work of A. C. Mukerji, distinctive in its development of Vedânta-infected idealism, redolent with Hegelian themes in a decidedly realistic, scientifically oriented direction. While the line of influence is not so direct in cases like this, there is certainly reason to believe that the wetanschauung that makes this philosophical innovation possible derives in large part from the taming of Vedânta accomplished by Aurobindo’s lîlavâda. The Amalner symposium on Aurobindo’s impact on Vedânta reproduced in the present volume is additional evidence of the importance of his ideas in academic metaphysics and epistemology.

Lîlā is not new to India. But there is Lîlā and lîlā. Indian popular religious culture has for centuries manifested itself in public festivals, such as Râm lîlā, in which communities gather in mass performances in which deities and asuras are enacted, and attain concrete reality in that enactment. (Sax, 2002). These festivals and attendant practices are woven into the fabric of popular culture and constitute a shared understanding of lîlā as a site of divine manifestation in the everyday world. Recasting the central idea of Advaita Vedanta in this language presents the possibility of linking this prima facie abstruse metaphysics to Indian popular culture. Aurobindo may thus have forged, if only in homonymy, a link between the rarefied world of the math and the temple and the workaday world of the village and the peasant. This link is reminiscent of that to which Tagore alludes explicitly in his presidential address to the inaugural session of the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1925 (present volume). Tagore and Aurobindo, however much they disagree about other matters, agreed
that Indian philosophy was not the exclusive province of the elite but saturates Indian culture.

_Lilavāda_ also reinforces the centrality of aesthetics to Indian philosophical activity in this period. As Bannerjee (1944) notes, and as we have argued, a fertile _lilavāda_ metaphor is that of the consummate artist manifesting her skill in creation. This suggests an everyday world pervaded not only by a sense of divine action, but also by a divine beauty produced in the play of reality. To understand Being, therefore, demands an understanding of beauty; to understand the nature of art and of the creative act is to understand the nature of reality. No wonder that so many Indian metaphysicians of this period are also aestheticians!

We should not forget that Aurobindo, before his life as a _rishi_ was a political activist and editor of _Bande Mātārām_, an influential political journal of ideas. And even after leaving political life for the ashram, Aurobindo's thought developed and spread in the context of the independence movement and provided a philosophical foundation for the construction of a sense of Indian national identity linking contemporary India with its classical past. At the same time, India was negotiating modernity in the context of a vexed relationship with Europe and its version of modernity. Aurobindo's essays, which became _The Life Divine_, were widely read, and, were widely influential. It is apparent that Aurobindo was taken seriously not merely as a religious figure, but also as a philosophical writer.

Neither for the purpose of nation building nor for that of constructing a distinctly Indian sense of the modern was a doctrine of the unreality of the world an ideal vehicle. Aurobindo's genius was to see that idealism did not disqualify Vedānta from this role, and that Vedānta could be given a startling, realistic twist. _līlā_ provided the framework and the metaphors that allowed India to construct its ideological identity and its engagement with modernity on its own terms.

7. Conclusion

Such metaphysical experiments do not come without risk. The great risk of _līlāvāda_ was a descent of philosophy into a divisive, sectarian, and even communal popular religion. It is easy to convert the idea of divine manifestation into that of the manifestation of a _divinity_, and once one adopts a nondual, even materialistic metaphysics, the most obvious divinity is the _Brahman_ of the Vaishnava sects, whose divine _līlā_ is that which brings the world into being. To take this route could be both politically and philosophically disastrous: politically because of its communalist implications; philosophically,
because of the inevitable reintroduction of duality, illusion, and a difficult-to-sustain theism.

Tagore famously averted the politically disastrous consequences of bringing theism into Indian poetic modernity (see his “Pathway to Muktì”, 1925, this volume) even as he advocated the reintroduction of Baul folk songs with a Vaishnavite flavor into the modern Indian aesthetic canon. In a stroke of genius, rather than emphasizing the religious sectarian quality of the songs, he showcases their religious cosmopolitanism. Tagore accomplishes this by juxtaposing the texts of Baul songs with the texts of English poetry, which had the dual effect of rendering the traditional folk songs in a contemporary light as it deemphasized its sectarian aspect. In this way, Tagore successfully navigates the risk inherent in giving lìla a theistic interpretation.

In the work of Aurobindo, we see an avoidance of the distinctly philosophical risk associated with lìla. How does the doctrine of The Life Divine avoid this risk? Precisely by proposing not the life of a divinity, but a divine life for us. Aurobindo urges that the world we inhabit is indeed the manifestation of an ultimate reality, but that reality is not a personal divinity, but consciousness itself; that manifestation is not the projection of one entity by another, but rather the identity of the lifeworld with the spiritual reality that completes its dialectical development. The promise of The Life Divine is simply the promise of our own potential realized.

References


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