Preserving Sri Aurobindo's Epic

Authors
Nina Jethwa, Barbie Dailey . Collection Care
Richard Hartz . Editor
Archives & Research Library, Sri Aurobindo Ashram

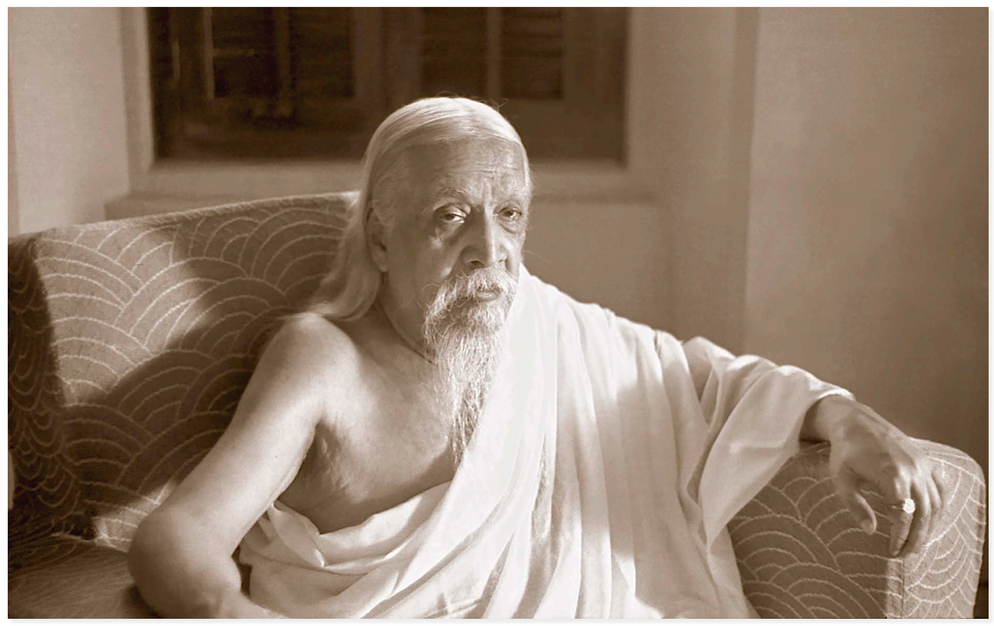
Savitri

'The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be by an intuitive poetry, are his [a poet's] greatest possible subject.' [1]
Sri Aurobindo

Savitri — A Poetic Philosophy Of the Spirit and of Life

Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol is Sri Aurobindo's greatest literary achievement, an epic poem in the English language nearing twenty-four thousand lines of blank verse.

Inspired by the tale of Savitri and Satyavan in the ancient Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*, Sri Aurobindo retells the legend in an original way, charging it with his own spiritual vision. Through *Savitri* the author reveals 'from the highest pinnacle and the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and the presence and ways and purpose of the Divinity in man and the universe'.[2]



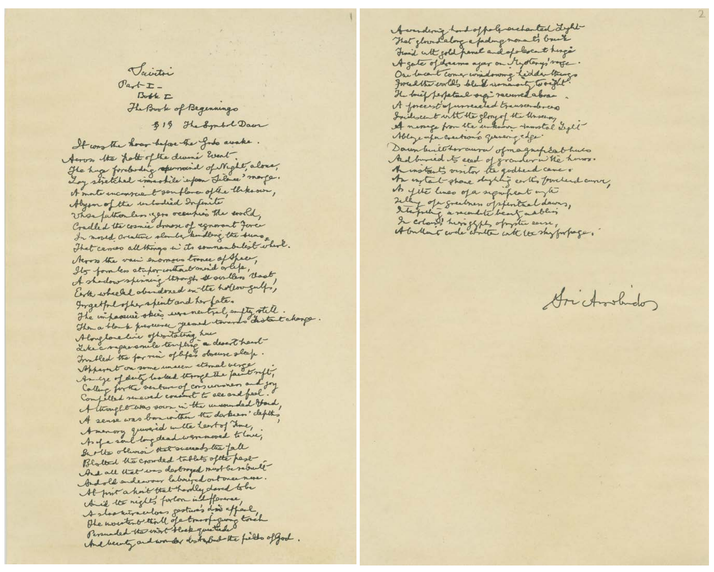
Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) Photography: Henri Cartier-Bresson

Sri Aurobindo

'Aurobindo (then Aravind Acroyd) Ghose came up from St Paul's in 1890 . . . . At Kings's he was a scholar, and Prizeman, and in 1892 was placed in the 1st Class of the Classical Tripos.'

'His gifts of spirit and of intellect had plainly been of the loftiest quality, and to this was added the romance of a unique career. Some would say that his position, among the great men produced by the new India of this century, is equalled only by that of Gandhi and Tagore.'

Extract: Kings College 1951 Annual Report, Cambridge University

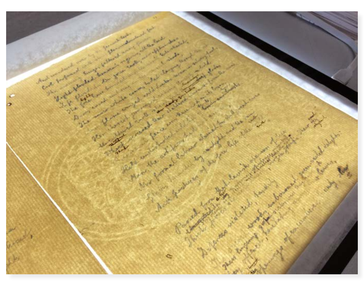


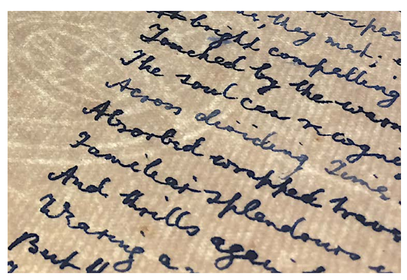
Savitri Manuscript

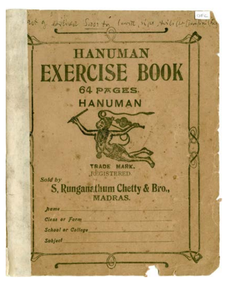
Facsimile of an unpublished version of the opening of Book I, Canto I, version 43 of 55.

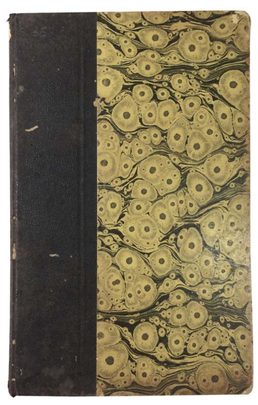
The Collection

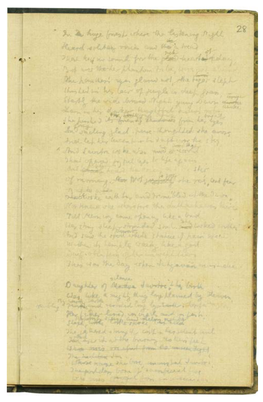
The *Savitri* manuscripts form a part of the larger collection of Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts preserved at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Southern India. The manuscripts and typescripts of *Savitri* amount to almost eight thousand pages dating from 1916 to the 1940s, when Sri Aurobindo was residing in the small coastal town of Pondicherry. The collection includes the author's hardbound and softbound notebooks, small perforated chit-pads, loose sheets, fascicles and correspondence in various paper types and media. The manuscripts are in long-term storage and are presently being rehoused, emerging momentarily to reveal in their splendour the remarkable journey of the poet-seer.







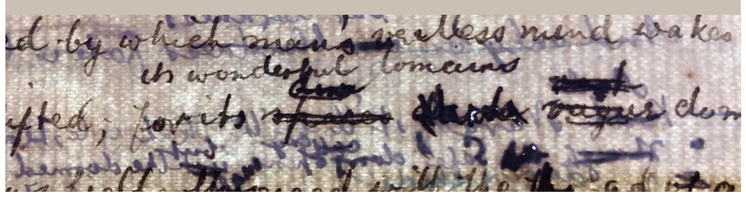




1916 : An Early Draft

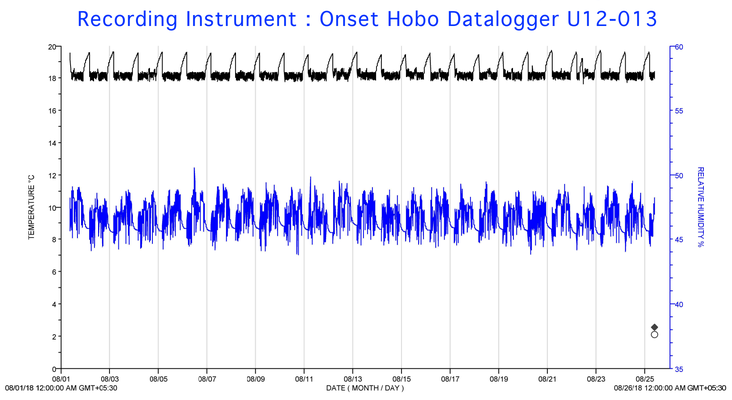
This exquisite little notebook of page size 10.5 x 16.8cm, was first used by Sri Aurobindo for aphoristic writings, parts of which were published in the *Arya* in May 1915. The drafts of *Savitri* are likely to be the very first drafts of the poem, the first draft dated 8th and 9th August 1916.

Preservation in the Tropics



Preserving manuscripts in tropical climates presents a considerable challenge. To create and maintain favourable environmental conditions in order to slow down complex ageing processes in paper and ink is the primary focus. The *Savitri* manuscripts have been exposed to high, fluctuating humidity and soaring temperatures and show varying degrees of accelerated ageing. Pages containing mechanical pulp are intensely discoloured and brittle. Beautiful watermarked script takes on impressionist hues with extensive water damage. Many manuscripts from later periods however remain well preserved.

Archival Store Temperature and Relative Humidity, August 2018
Recording Instrument : Onset Hobo Datalogger U12-013



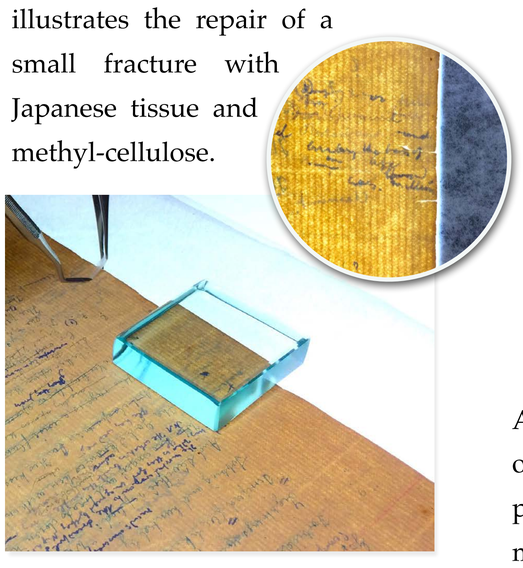
Temperature, deg C : Avg 18.4, Max 19.8, Min 17.6
Relative Humidity % : Avg 47, Max 51, Min 44% (+/- 3%)
Fire Safety : Overnight HVAC shutdown 10pm-4am

One of the greatest risks to collections in long-term, air-conditioned storage in developing nations is interrupted power supply. When collections are insufficiently buffered against potential rapid changes in climate this can lead to damage. Building design, generator backups, engineering support and layers of housing are essential. The graph above shows temperature and RH readings for the month of August 2018 in the Ashram's archival vault.

Protective Housing and remedial conservation

Above : An early *Savitri* manuscript interleaved with buffered tissue and housed in an acid free, buffered manuscript folder made from 100% cotton rag at the Ashram handmade paper mill.

Minor repairs are carried out to prevent loss of text and imminent fragmentation. The image below illustrates the repair of a small fracture with Japanese tissue and methyl-cellulose.

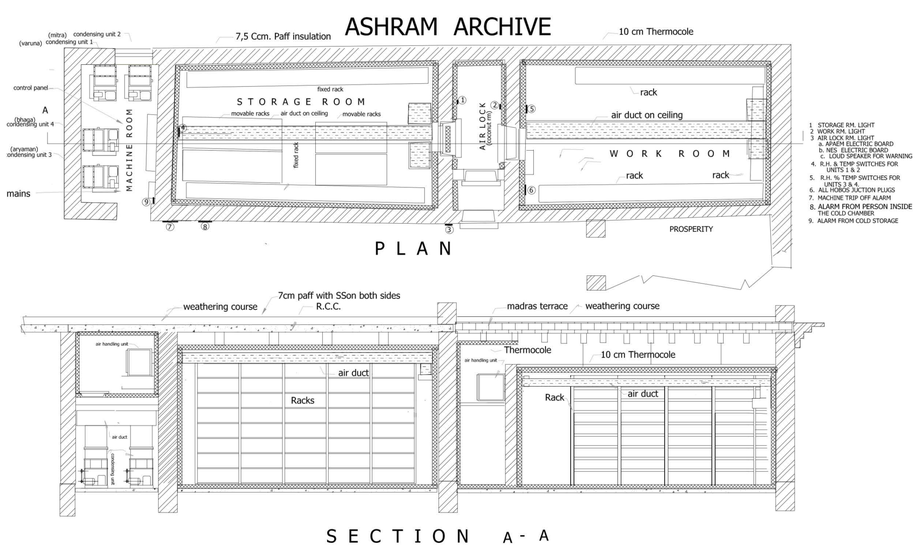


Sustainable Preservation

Left: Acid free, buffered self-assembly storage box made from 350lbs handmade cotton rag board.

A tradition of hand papermaking in India and the availability of virgin textile off-cuts from the local textile industry provide an indigenous and sustainable source of raw material for protective preservation housing.

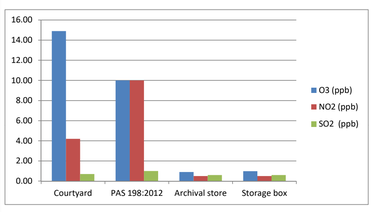
Preservation Building



A new climate-controlled archive storage facility was constructed in 2005 within the framework of an existing heritage building. The old archival store from the 1970s, marked on the drawing as 'Work Room', was converted into a climate-controlled workspace for digitisation, rehousing and remedial conservation of the Ashram collections.

Monitoring Gaseous Pollutants

Sample results of a 27 day monitoring period from 26 April to 23 May 2016



Monitoring Instrument
Gradko diffusion tubes, O_3, NO_2/SO_2

With the help of UCL Institute for Sustainable Heritage, levels of nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and ozone are being monitored in the archival store. Initial results indicate levels below threshold limits according to BSI PAS 198:2012 for pollutant-paper interactions during long-term storage.[3]

References
1. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, An Approach and a Study, A B Purani, 2nd Edition, 1956, p.61
2. The Future Poetry, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo , Volume 26, 1997, p. 286
3. UCL Institute for Sustainable Heritage, August 2016 Report : Gaseous pollutant monitoring of archival storage at Archives and Research Library, Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

Archives & Research Library
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India
archives@sriaurobindoashram.org

Acknowledgements
For the kind assistance and support of :
British Library, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi,
Centre de Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections, Paris,
University College London Institute for Sustainable Heritage