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## **AUROBINDO'S THEORY OF NATIONALISM**

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Among the contemporary Indian philosophers, Aurobindo has presented the most elaborate discussion on the terms nation and nationalism. Being a propounder of the theory of integralism, already discussed in Chapter II, in his political philosophy, everywhere one finds wholes within wholes. “An Individual is complete within himself and yet he is also a constituent of the nation. A nation is complete in itself and yet each nation is part of humanity. Humanity again is complete in itself and yet it is part of Nature”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one finds wider and wider wholes from individual to cosmic reality but each one of them is integrally connected with the wider one.

### **The Concept of Nation**

Under British rule, Aurobindo played an important role in the Indian freedom movement from 1893 to 1910. His idea of nationalism follows from the gospel of Bunde Matram. For him, nation was not a geographical area, physical territory or mental idea. He worshipped India as the ‘Mother’, the ‘Living Mother’ and made it clear to his countryman that this mother power has sustained Indians for thousands of years. He accepted the notion put forward by many other writers that common language, similarity of manners and customs, mode of living and tradition, racial similarity may be the factors for constituting a nation. But those are not the exclusive component. According to Aurobindo, “a geographical unity, a common past and powerful common interest” are important elements. “But a common enthusiasm coalescing with common interest is the most powerful fosterer of nationality”.<sup>2</sup> His notion of common enthusiasm is similar to the views of Frnz Oppenheimer, who says that “the consciousness of nationality

makes the nation and not the nation the consciousness of nationality.”<sup>3</sup> Ramsay Muir also think that “in the last resort, we can only say that a nation is a nation because its members passionately and unanimously believe it to be so.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words unlike of many western writers Aurobindo does not subscribe to the biological and physical factors being the corner stone of a nation. Instead he adheres to the spiritual basis of a nation and nationalism. Although some one has characterized Aurobindo’s concept of nation as a psychological one<sup>5</sup> but the central theme of his theory is Dharma or spiritualism. Sisir Kumar Mitra, a noted scholar on Aurobindo’s philosophy comments : “The vision of free India, the promise of the glorious dawn of a new life, held up before the nation by the soul stirring articles of *Bande Mande Matram*, converted it into new religion of patriotism. Nationalism became a Dharma.”<sup>6</sup> To quote Aurobindo “I say that it is the Sanatan Dharma which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the Sanatan Dharma with it, it moves and with it, it grows. When the Sanatan Dharma were capable of perishing, with the Sanatan Dharma it would perish. The Sanatan Dharma, that is nationalism.”<sup>7</sup>

Further he planned a Bhawan Mandir scheme on the pattern of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s scheme of Sannyasins as propagated by him in his famous novel *Anandmath*. He exhorted the countrymen in like manner by reviving the gospel of Sanatan Dharma<sup>8</sup> In his famous Bhawan Mandir book Aurobindo wrote that “sometimes Bhawani is love, sometimes she is knowledge, sometimes she is Renunciation, sometimes she is pity. This infinite energy is Bhawani, she also is Durga, She is Kali, She is Radha the Beloved, she is Lakshmi, She is our Mother and the creative of us all”.<sup>9</sup>

Thus raising nationalism and patriotism to the pedestal of Dharma he further observed that our motherland or nation “is not a piece of earth, not a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha Mardini sprang into being from the Shakti of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the shaktis of three hundred millions people”<sup>10</sup>.

To the persons adhering faith in the territorial concept of nation and nationalism as developed in the west the above mentioned spiritual basis of nationalism might not augur well and the charge of utopian philosophy might be easily leveled against it. But in India Aurobindo was the not the first philosopher who talked about spiritual nationalism. Prior to him since the time of Vedas adherence to spiritual nationalism was in vogue and in modern times Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand and some of his contemporaries like BalGangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Mrs. Annie Besant and several others were its chief exponents. Hence, Aurobindo was of the firm view that not only spiritual forces but also spiritual men were at work in their own way for the advancement of this spiritual nationalism. In fact, they had been working from much earlier times. Tukaram, Ramdas and the Sannyasis of the eighteenth century Sannyasi Rebellion in Bengal belonged to this line of spiritual workers for India's freedom. Many of those who were leading the national movement were disciples of Sri Rama Krishna, of yogi Bejoy Krishna Goswami or of some other Guru of the time.<sup>11</sup>

It is a characteristics of Hindu culture that it has never separated the mundane from the spiritual and the former has always been interpreted as an expression of the later. Aurobindo's patriotism and nationalism were never mundane; rather they were full of religious fervor. Service of the nation was his highest Swadharma and hence, he gave nationalism the highest place among human sentiments. According to him a person devoted to his country feels almost physical delight in the touch of its earth. He loves the seas, rivers, hills, music, poetry, literature and culture of the country. This love for the motherland is the basis of nationalism. It is due to nationalism that we have a pride in the past of our country, suffer for it in the present, and undergo all sorts of sacrifices to build up its future. This sacrifice, service and endurance results from nationalism and patriotism.

Echoing the Aurobindo's concept of 'Nationalism as an Avatar' or the 'Divinely appointed Shakti' Mrs. Annie Besant eulogized the invaluable service rendered by Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott in the following words : "Realising the at spirituality must first be restored to its place in life, they began by the revival of religion. There was then no national life, no congress, no industrial exhibitions, no ideas of the unity of the Indian people – Colonel Alcott and Madame Blavetsky saw that no until India recognized the value of its ancient faith could there be any bond of unity among the Indians separated by

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provincial jealousies and hatreds. So they began with the revival of religion; they pointed the value of Hindu teachings; they help up the Vedas and the Upanishadas as the glory of India, proclaimed the value of Indian thought and the priceless heritage of the Indian people; until at last the Indians began once more to pride themselves on their past and to realize that the Hindu scriptures were not the babblings of children or the fancies of seeking, but were the foundation of a mighty system, the glory of the past and the life of the future.<sup>12</sup>

However, Aurobindo's doctrine of nationalism is not to be termed revivalist. Because he looked to the ancient heroic periods of Indian splendor and not to the revival of the decadent and moribund superstitions which resulted in the downfall of the motherland and ultimately gave way to foreigners to dominate her. He wanted to inculcate the spirit, ideals and methods of the ancient India in a yet more effective form and with a more modern organization".<sup>13</sup> At the same time he had in depth knowledge of western concept of nationalism and in one of his letters dated August 13, 1905, he wrote : "I have adopted the principles of the political philosophy of the west and I have assimilated that to the immortal teachings of Vedantism".<sup>14</sup>

At the same time Aurobindo was against any imitation. He wanted India to be faithfully to her real self. Prior to him scepticism and materialism had eaten out the life of India. The crowds of so-called English educated class were followers of Huxley, Mill and Spencer and had entirely forgotten their own literature. They were contemptuous of the past and hence, hopeless for the further. They were copying English ways, English manners, filling their houses with English furniture to the destruction of Indian arts and crafts. Really speaking they had lost all national spirit.

So he wanted India to be faithful to her real self. He categorically states that nationalism based on Sanatana Dharma does not signify any narrow creed. It is the basis of the future world religion, towards which the world spirit was moving. He stresses that in order to be the basis and spiritual foundation of the future world religion. Hinduism had to be dynamic, to "Vindicate the freedom of man within as well as without.<sup>15</sup> Aurobindo believed that "humanity needs us and it is the love and service of humanity, of our country, of the race, of our religion that will purify our heart and inspire our action in the struggle."<sup>16</sup>

## **Propogation of India's Freedom**

This unbounded faith in the doctrine of political Vedantism led Aurobindo to champion the cause of India's freedom in unambiguous terms. To quote him again : "If India does not become free, man will not be free. People of other countries think only of their own interest; people of India even when they think about India, think of the whole world."<sup>17</sup> Counting in the same vein he further observed that "Swaraj is the life belt. Swaraj the pilot, Swaraj the star of guidance – India is the guru of the nation, the physician of the human soul in its profounder maladies she is destined once more to new mould the life of the world and restore the peace of the human spirit. But Swaraj in the necessary condition of her work and before she can do the work. She must fulfil the condition"<sup>18</sup>.

On account of his unblemished doctrine of nationalism Aurobindo was a very severe critic of the aims, objectives and activities of the Indian National Congress, its timid moderation, its begging and petitioning policy. He castigated the Congress as "Indian unnational Congress"<sup>19</sup> and emphatically observed that "I say, of the Congress, that its aims are mistaken, that the spirit in which it proceeds towards their accomplishment is not a spirit of sincerity and wholeheartedness and the methods it has chosen are not the right sort of man to be leaders; in brief, that we are at present the blind led, not by the blind, at any rate, by the one-eyed- The congress which represents not the mass of the population but a single and very limited class – could not honestly be called national".<sup>20</sup> And when Justice M.G. Ranade, at the close of 1893, tried to persuade Aurobindo to give up such writings in "Indu Prakash" of Bombay, strongly protesting against the congress policy of prayer and petition, he refused to change his views.<sup>21</sup> colonial self government within the British Empire. Instead he always stood for full and total independence from the Britishers. He was not cowed down by the mighty power of the British Empire where the sun never sets in' in those times. Most daringly he gave the clarion call to the nation that "Nationalism survives in the strength of God and it is not possible to crush it, whatever weapons are brought against it. Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism can not die; because it is no human thing; it is God who is working --- God can not be killed, God can not be sent to fail".<sup>24</sup>

This unbounded and purset religiosity of nationalism led Aurobindo to come upon heavily on the Moderates who had set the goal of colonial self government in the National Convention and were ready to live under the shackles of English education, English Commerce, and English political system. Lashing out against this position he stated that “the degradation of a great nation, by the loss of her individuality, her past and her independent future to the position of a subordinate satellite in a foreign system, is the ideal of the convention. It is sheer political atheism, the negation of all that we were, are and hope to be”.<sup>25</sup>

Not only that but one finds that after the death of Tilak when Dr. B.S. Moonje, alongwith Dr. K.B. hedgewar, subsequently the founder of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, went to Pondicherry to see Aurobindo with a reuest to take over the leadership of the congress, he politely but firmly declined. In a lengthy document addressed to Dr. B.S. Moonje on August 20, 1920 he categorically stated that I have never signed and would never care to sign as a personal declaration of faith the Congress creed, as many own is of a different character holding these ideas, it is not possible for me to intervene and least of all on the chair of the President (of the Congress)”.<sup>22</sup>

Aurobindo was not simply a philosopher and visionary but also a man of action. From 1893 to 1910 he dominated the national scene and to the best of his abilities he exhorted the country man to wage a relentless war against foreign subjugation. To him the “Political freedom is the life breath of a nation; to attempt; social reform, educational reforem industrial expansion, the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is the very height of ignorance and futility”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in order to ensure its very ‘life breath’ and all round progress Aurobindo vehemently opposed the idea of

### **Means and Ends**

Regarding the question about the means by which political freedom – the life-breath of the nation for Aurobindo- any means can be undertaken to achieve and preserve it. He explicitly observed that “We accept no method or action as policically good or evil except as it truly helps or hinders our progress towards national emanicipation.<sup>26</sup> Hence, he was not opposed to violence and he espoused revolutionary strategies precisely in terms of the efficacy of their results. He himself had stated that very few people

knew that it was Aurobindo who without consulting Tilak gave the order that led to the breaking of the Congress at Surat. Similarly very few people were aware of the fact that he gave the militant turn to the national movement in Bengal.<sup>27</sup> Thus Aurobindo was not overzealous in the observance of non-violent methods like Mahatma Gandhi for the emancipation of the Mother India. Moreover, he vehemently criticized Gandhi for applying spiritual methods in solving the socio-political matters including the achievement of freedom from the foreign rule.<sup>28</sup> According to Aurobindo, "Politics is concerned with masses of mankind and not with the individuals. To ask masses of mankind to act as saints, to rise to the heights of divine love and practice it in relation to their adversaries or oppressors is to ignore human nature. It is to set a premium on violence by paralyzing the hand of the deliverer when raised to strike."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Aurobindo, like a number of other nationalist leaders of his times, was of the view that Gandhian non-violence partook for more of the spirit of the Western Dvakers, pacifists and Tolstoy than it did of the Rigveda, the Vedant or the Gita.<sup>30</sup> These leaders also agreed that the Buddhist philosophy of total non-violence had been a factor leading to national ruin and collapse, because the Hindus who believed in this doctrine could not successfully oust the Muslim invaders. Vivekananda had also considered the indiscriminate Buddhist Ahimsa a factor which brought ruin upon India.<sup>31</sup> Tilak defended political murder of Afzal Khan by Shivaji on the basis of Gita. Similarly Aurobindo praised the exemplary heroism demonstrated by Baji Prabhu on the same philosophical basis and one writr had termed the book on Baji Prabhu as "Sri Aurobindo's greatest contribution to the patriotic literature of the country."<sup>32</sup>

However, being a pure Vedantic and Yogi, Aurobindo was not like Hegal and some other western philosophers who eulogized violence and war for the development of human personality and the advancement of the nation. Instead he categorically stated that "It is the nature of the pressure which determines the nature of the resistance"<sup>33</sup> continuing he observed that "The sword of the warrior is as necessary to the fulfillment of justice and righteousness as the holiness of the saint."<sup>34</sup> Hence, he never condemned the activities of the revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi who condemned the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh and his associates. But Aurobindo never subscribed to the theory of imperialism in the name of national pride and the glorification of the nation. Commenting upon the three ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution, Aurobindo criticizes the French for underestimating the

importance of the last. He considers their revolution a failure on the basis that, because France was so concerned with gaining social and political liberty and equality, the French revolutionaries did not sufficiently value fraternity. Without fraternity the establishment of social equality is not possible.

These values indicate Aurobindo's concern with ideals as well as with political maneuverings. Although political concerns and strategies are ever present in Aurobindo's image of the future, it must be remembered that these questions are always placed within the context of his overarching religious vision. For, in his words, there is, "One entity which we believe to be all important, the Dharma, the national religion which we also believe to be universal. There is a mighty law of life, a great principle of human evolution, a body of spiritual knowledge and experience of which India has always been destined to be guardian, exemplar and missionary. This is the Sanatana Dharma, the eternal religion".<sup>36</sup>

#### **Four Fold Scheme for National Liberation**

As already pointed out above that the nature of pressure determines the nature of resistance, Aurobindo further observed that where the need for immediate liberty is urgent and it is a present question of national life or death on the instant, revolt is the only course. But where the oppression is legal and subtle in its methods and respects life, liberty and property and there is still breathing time, the circumstances demanded that we should make the experiment of a method of resolute action by withdrawing our support from the government of the day.

Hence, in the aftermath of the partitioning of Bengal Aurobindo, in collaboration with Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lajpat Rai and other nationalist leaders of the time, formulated a four fold scheme for national liberation. It included, Swaraj, Swadeshi, Boycott and national educational. Tilak was named the undisputed leader of this Nationalist Party within the Congress. As a result Aurobindo poured into the yajna of national emancipation all his energies by organizing all the nationalist and revolutionary workers before the Calcutta Congress of 1906 and took a leading part both in the reception and the working committees of the congress. It was mainly due to his efforts that a resolution was passed declaring that nothing short of Swaraj as completed independence would satisfy the political aspirations of the country. In the open session, this resolution which included Swadeshi, Boycott, National Education and

Independence on an all India basis was ultimately adopted as Dada Bhai Naoroji successfully avoided an open split in the Congress by getting certain minor changes being made in the original resolution in the face of stiff opposition of the Moderates led by Pherozeshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhle and Surendra nath Banerjee.

Although in the next session of the organization at Surat a split did take place in the congress but upto that time a great mass upsurge had taken place in the country in which Moderate leadership had not only relegated in the background but had also lost its relevance on the national scene. In this way it was triumph for the nationalists and for the whole country.

Thus, Aurobindo alongwith other nationalist leaders presented before the nation the goal of complete independence as well as the effective means to achieve it. Swadeshi and Boycott techniques were so effective that very soon it was totally evident that Britain's trade shrank Manchester and Liverpool shriveled and shrieked. An axe was laid at the root of the British domination. The other and the positive aspect of this success was the foundation it laid of an industrial India which is now rapidly developing, although wholesale industrialization was not the aim of the early sponsors. Handlooms, spinning and weaving mills sprang into existence in Bengal and multiplied in Bombay, and then in other provinces. All these undermined the very roots of British Imperialism in India based on economic and commercial exploitation of the country.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, settlement of disputes in law by popular arbitration under this movement of passive resistance further undermined the British authority in India. The spread of national education by establishing a large number of educational institutions by leaders and workers wedded to the philosophy of Swaraj or complete independence gave a further fillip to the national cause. The success of this passive resistance was so overwhelming that Governor Frazer in 1907 wrote a confidential letter to the Governor General of India suggesting the detention of Aurobindo which was immediately after carried out. But when the British administration failed to substantiate the charge leveled against Aurobindo in a law court he was very soon put behind the bars under Alipore Conspiracy case. In like manner Tilak and Lajpat Rai were deported from the country immediately after the Surat Congress split of 1907. But all these tactics

adopted by the Britishers failed to suppress the aspirations of the countrymen for pursuing the path of liberation and one finds since then a relentless war against British subjugation continued till August 1947 when the Indians snatched their complete independence from the British hands.

After his release from the Alipore Conspiracy case Aurobindo sneaked away from the mainland firstly to Chandranagar and than to Pondicherry, the then French colonies, and got himself absorbed in meditation. But it was not escapism because for Aurobindo nationalism is Sanatana Dharma and therefore, nationalism as a religious process of spiritual self-realisation and dynamic fulfillment of the nation does require Sadhana and Jnana. Moreover, one finds that even when Aurobindo was in the thick of politics he was practicing yoga and he experienced no opposition for his political activities. Instead claims had made at that time that his yogic powers were supplementing the cause of political liberation because they generated the super human qualities of forbearance, selfless service, total sacrifice and other virtues of life so vital for national liberation. Hence, he got himself submerged into the Ocean of spirituality by renouncing the world with a view to generate superhuman qualities all around amongst countrymen so that they might be successful in achieving political liberation from the British subjugation. Furthermore, Aurobindo's letter to Joseph Bapista in 1920 explains that he had always placed a dominant stress on the spiritual dimension of life but that this emphasis was in no way intended to suggest withdrawal, contempt or disgust for secular life, and that all human activity was to be included in a complete spiritual life.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Thus Aurobindo's doctrine of nationalism is not narrow but it is placed on a very high pedestal. In him one finds the gospel of nationalism as a pure Dharma suited to the needs of the time. His conception of India as the Mother Divine and not a mere geographical entity is wedded to the Vedantic philosophy which was popularized by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee firstly in modern times. He championed the cause of complete independence because it is the life breath of the nation and further suggested the practical means to achieve it. There are no two opinions that his doctrine of passive resistance proved successful and subsequently it was vehemently pursued by the countrymen under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in a somehow modified form which ultimately resulted in achieving the independence of

the country. But since nationalism is spiritual in character Aurobindo stressed the need of moral training of Sadhana and Yajna, both for the leaders and for the followers or the masses. The present day state of affairs clearly testifies his analysis that without spiritualism the nation can not progress. Hence, we should give serious thought to his teachings.

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