



**AUROBINDO'S VIEWS ON INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY, STATE, LAISSEZ FAIRE, SOCIALISM
AND FREEDOM**

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Autobindo was a prolific writer as well as a distinguished metaphysicist. He dedicated his entire life for the betterment of humanity and mankind through the practice of Yoga in his own life and also proclaimed that the mankind is progressing towards the goal of perfect unity with the Infinite. Hence, the complex problems of the relationship between individual and society or the state does not bother him as it did in case of western thought and philosophy since the times of Plato; and philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and political scientists there in have failed so far to give any coherent view upon the subject. According to some, individual is more important than the society and that liberty should be given to him even at the cost of the society. On the other hand, some opine that society as an organized unit is more important, and all considerations concerning the individual are only subservient to social welfare. But it does not mean that Aurobindo ignore the problem of synthesizing the relationship between the individual and society, and the individual and the state, or the fundamental problem of the dynamics of power and liberty, like a large number of other Hindu seers, Aurobindo being a true and faithful Vedantin, always advocates the synthesis of outer and inner freedom because the two, i.e. the individual and society both are oriented towards the same end the realization of the great objects of human endeavour. The entire spirit of Hindu social thought, culture and structure, originating from the most ancient times of the Vedas upto the present time, has accorded due regard to individuals as individuals, and all efforts of Hindu social theorists have been directed, not only towards the betterment of the individual, but also towards providing every individual ultimately and finally with the opportunity to attain his social destination. The Hindu mind traditionally

does not bother about ideologies or isms as such like the West. According to Aurobindo “We are not yet individual’ we are struggling towards individuality; and that is the infinite, our real nature.”¹

Moreover, according to Advait Vedanta, there is no antagonism between individual and society, because if the individual knows his divine nature, the conflict between the two is automatically resolved. The conflict between individual and society in western thought is that people there associate individuality with the body. Whereas in Vedanta, “there can not be an individuality in this Jagat because individuality means tht which does not change; there can not be any changeful individuality; it is a contradiction in terms. There is no such thing as individuality in this little world of ours, the Jagat. Thought and feeling, mind and body, men and animals and plants are in a continuous state of flux. But suppose you take the universe as a unit whole; can it change or move ? Certainly not – the universe, as a whole is motionless, unchangeable. You are, therefore, an individual then and then alone when you are the whole of it, when the realization of “ Iam the universe’ comes”.²

Individual and Society

This Vedantic conception of individual and society leads him to reject both the materialistic and sociological explanation of the individual self. Materialists regard the individual as only developed manifestation of matter or energy, although qualitatively different from the material source of his origin. Whereas organicists, sociologists and social psychologists think of the individual as a ‘cell’³ of society. But Aurobindo rejects these explanations and holds the view that they have got hold only of the ‘obscurer side’⁴. Although Aurobindo like some of the Western sociologists and political thinkers, refers to the vital basis and foundation of society, he, unlike the Hegelians, does not stand for he submergence of the individual in the larger social aggregation. Yet as a spiritualist and a metaphysican he accepts that the collectivity or the society also is a formation of the divine spirit and is therefore, a soul. He thinks that “even the physical being of the society is a subjective power, not a mere objective existence. Much more is it in its inner self a great corporate soul with all the possibilities and dangers of the soul life.”⁵ While analyzing the organic analogy in his conceptual analysis of he society Aurobindo points out that “society, like the individual, has a body, an organic life, moral and aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and a

soul behind all these signs and powers for the sake of which they exist.⁶ He further states that with having a group soul society wants to obtain distinctness and a growing self-consciousness. The growth of its corporate action and mentality and its organic self expressive life amounts to its progressive self realization. Sri Aurobindo has also drawn a distinction between the natural or organic and the mechanized or rational society⁷.

However, this organic conception of society put forward by him is different from the western thinking represented by Plato. St. Paul and Spencer etc. Being a metaphysician Aurobindo accepts the supra material importance of the individual and does not pursue the organic conception too far. He uses it with great reserve and only to illustrate aim is to make possible the progressive spiritualization of man. In his own words nature's aim is "the perfection of the individual in a perfected society or eventually in a perfected humanity".⁸

Thus to Aurobindo both the individual and the society are manifestation of the divine reality and so there is not any antagonism in their aims and practice. He condemns any exaggerated notism of self-assertive, vital, egoistic, self fulfilling individual as one sided as the equally exaggerated conception of the all encompassing totalitarian claims of the society. To him a harmonious synthesis and not a mechanical one is to be arrived at and the ideal law of social development is the rule for perfect individual and perfect society. In his opinion, "self realization is the sense, secret or overt, of individual and of social development".⁹

From the above discussion it becomes clear that, according to Aurobindo, individual and society are the warp and woof of the same fabric. Individual and family, family and society, society and nation, nation and humanity, and all human groupings from the lowest to the highest formed only different steps of the same spiral process.¹⁰

Evolution of the State

In the west a number of theories regarding the origin and evaluation of the state viz., the theory of divine origin, the Force theory, the social contract, the Patriarchal and the Matriarchal and the

Evolutionary theories have been propagated so far out of which the Evolutionary Theory is accepted by the modern political scientists. But Aurobindo's analysis of the modern state system is linked with his concept of integral progress of mankind. Hence, it is more sound and logical than all the above theories. In Aurobindo's view inner spirit in man resulted in a slow evolution of the outer forms of social political life in response to an inner need. The earliest collective forms of human being in family and clan needed to organize themselves in a village or a city state or a tribal kingdom for the purpose of defence and integral progress. To quote Aurobindo ; "In its first forms, the state almost everywhere coincided with the clan or tribal system, perhaps migratory in the early stages but later setting down within fixed geographical limits, very often with the village as the basic unit."¹¹ As the variant there arose the city states which helped to cut across the clan or tribal groupings in some of the more advanced areas of the world. He further explains that "Greece, Italy, Gaul, Egypt, China, Medo-Persia, India, Arabia, Israel, all began with a loose cultural and geographical aggregation which made them separate and distinct culture units before they could become nation units. Within that loose unity the tribe, clan or city or regional states formed in the vague mass so many points of distinct vigorous and compact unity".¹²

According to Aurobindo, "In the old infra-rational societies at least in their inception, what governed is not the state, but the group soul itself evolving its life organized into customary institution and self-regulations to which all had conform; for the rulers were only its executors and instruments".¹³ King's position as hereditary ruler came afterwards with the assent of the people. What made the state a necessity was primarily the danger, almost constantly present of disruption from within and attack from without. Of these the second was more important. War and the threat of war led to the concentration of energies; and this creates a tendency towards a strong political and military centralization. Thus, the history of the state, is simply a record of this self conscious process, a process which was aided more and more by a centralized agency mainly in the form of monarchy.¹⁴

From the above discussion it may be concluded that Aurobindo's theory of the evolution of the state is related to his theory of the role of reason in the socio-political evolution of man. The state represents the great instrument of transition from the infra-rational organic stage to the rational society. The rational and mechanically organized state marks the growth of the organized legal order represented

through the structure of an impersonal bureaucratic mechanism. Aurobindo opines that, “the intelligent will of the whole society expressed in a carefully thought out law and ordered regulation replaces its natural organic will expressed in a mass of customs and institution which have grown up as the result of its nature and temperament”.¹⁵

He further hopes that “in the last perfection of the state, a carefully devised, in the end a gaint machinery productive and a regulative, replaces the vigour and fertility of life with the natural simplicity of its great lines and the obscure, confused, luxuriant complexity of its details”.¹⁶

Commenting upon Aurobindo’s views upon the evolution of a state it is observed that his “evolutionary theory, the advent of the state symbolized the replacement of infra-rational instincts, institutions and natural experimentations as social agencies by social reason, yet he thinks of the state only in mechanical terms and points out that the attempt of the state to grow into an intellectual and moral being is a very interesting phenomenon of the modern world”.¹⁷

However, it must be noted that Aurobindo repudiates the organic conception of state although he makes the organic analogy with reference to the society. In his own words, “the state is bound to act crudely and intelligently or instinctively varied action which is proper to organic growth. For the state is not an organism, it is a machinery and it works like a machine, without tact, taste, delicacy or intuition. It tries to manufacture, but what a humanity is here to do is to grow and create”.¹⁸

State’s Importance

From the above discussion, it can be safely observed that according to Aurobindo state is a social compulsion on the infra-rational man that he could be helped towards a better status. It is there for the individual’s need for survival, growth efficiency and self assertion. It is man’s first defence against a hostile world of men and beasts and adverse nature, the sole condition under which the undeveloped individual may hope to progress. As a result, the individual is also required to submit to the organized coercive power of the state. But as the individual and the state have both an innate tendency to assert

themselves against each other, there is a constant tendency towards conflict between them irrespective of the form of government whether it is a monarchical system, or a democratic majority or a dictatorial one.

At the same time Aurobindo is of the view that the state cannot be regarded an end in itself. “It is a convenience and a clumsy convenience for our common development”¹⁹ The state exists for an end which it has not created and which by its very nature it can never create. Therefore, Aurobindo neither absolves the state from the higher principles of morality like Machiavelli nor supports the Hegelian doctrine of considering the state as the march of God on earth. According to ancient Vedic view, the political authority or the state is essential for the maintenance of peace and order, for the protection of life and property, and without it, it is not possible for the individuals even to live their daily life, yet peace and order, security and justice, property and right are viewed not primarily as the creation of the political authority, but as the objectives for the sake of which the state exists. Aurobindo clearly opines that “the business of the state, so long as it continues to be a necessary element in human life and growth, it is to provide all possible facilities for cooperative action, to remove obstacles, to prevent all really harmful waste and friction – removing avoidable injustice, to secure for every individual just and equal a chance of self-development and satisfaction to the extent of his powers and in the line of his nature without individual growth there can be no real permanent good of all.”²⁰

Thus it is clear that Aurobindo treats the state as an instrument of helping human development to the best possible extent. He rejects outrightly the two extreme Hegelian and Marxist notions regarding the nature of the state because the former terms the state as the manifestation of collective wisdom or reason and hence omnipotent whereas the later regards it as a tool of exploitation and so its abolition. But Aurobindo accepts the inevitable existence of the state for the security, safety and development of the individual and therefore, advocates the view that man can not live without the state. But at the same time he treats state simply as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

From the above analysis it may appear that Aurobindo while treating the state as a means to an end is propagating the Green’s doctrine of ‘hindering the hindrances’ regarding the nature of the state. But it is not so. The reason being that Green stood simply for the material and moral development of individual and

society whereas Aurobindo, being a true Vedantin, always stands for the metaphysical or spiritual development of the individual, and like Vivekananda advocates the realization of one's self, or the being, or the Brahman, who is the cause of this entire universe. Hence, the two cannot be equated together.²¹

Laissez Faire and socialism

In the west from earliest times a continuous debate regarding the importance of the individual and of the state is going on. But in India no such problem ever arose because Vedic principles always advocated the good of all. Moreover, in them the element of spiritualism or the spirit has always been not only the dominant one but the basic one. Aurobindo, being a true Vedantin like Ramkrihna Paramhans, Vivekanands, Ramatirtha, Tilak and several others, always propogates the doctrine of Sarvabhutahita of the Gita or the good of all creaturs and not the good of the greatest number. This led him to severaly criticse the prevalent doctrine of laissez faise on the one hand and the totalitarian and socialistic principles on the other. In his early writings he, like Dadabhai Naoroji, denounces modern capitalism in the form of an imperialistic 'drain' on Indian financial resources. But late on he criticizes and condemns it on other rounds also. He clearly states that whatever contribution might have been made by capitalism under the theory of laissez faire regarding the economic development of mankind ultimately it proved disastrous to the humanity. Its social cost outweighed its economic gains. Long hours of labour, inadequate wages, overcrowded factories and insanitary arrangements these were the lot to which workers and labourers had to submit. Hence, the idea of a police state under laissez faire theory proved totally inadequate and it enlarged the area of misery to unbounded limits.²²

While rejecting the doctrine of laissez faire Aurobindo never supports the fascist theory of state action which preached state control to every act and every interest of every individual or group in the name of the good of the nation and authorizing the state to be its sole judge. Thus this totalitarian concept of state advocated the dictum "Nothing beyond the state, nothing against the state, everything within the state" Aurobindo being a spiritualist and metaphysicist, rejects it on the ground that his doctrine is altogether inimical to liberty whereas he throughout his life, exhorts the mankind to attain perfect liberty. Moreover, the state is always governed by a few whether it is democratic, socialistic or totalitarian. Under Fascism

state comes into total control of a clique which in the name of the good of the nation exploits the mankind for its own selfish motives. So he rejects the totalitarian philosophy of state activity.²³

So far as socialism is concerned, Aurobindo appreciates its social and economic egalitarianism but at the same time condemns it on the ground that it leads to the emergence of an omnipotent state. Organised socialism represents a further process of the extension of an authoritarian state by encompassing the economic sphere also under its domain. He thinks that “State control and direction are the essence of socialism”.²⁴ Under socialism state control would cover the entire gambit of society encompassing under it the economic, social, political educational, industrial, intellectual and every walk of human activity. In other words it means the thorough extension of the administrative activities of the state and in the words of Max Weber it “signifies not dictatorship of the proletariat but the dictatorship of the officials”.²⁵ The full development of socialism resulting in total control in every walk of life and resulting in the obliteration of the individual as simply a means in the hands of a few officials is an anathema to the spiritual and liberal outlook of Aurobindo. Hence, he writes that “nothing great or small escapes its purview. Birth and marriage, labour and amusement and rest, education, culture, training of physique and character, the socialist sense leaves nothing outside its scope and its busy intolerant control”²⁶ It signifies the full proliferation of the omnipotent state leviathan.

Aurobindo is very apprehensive of the extension of state power to such unbounded limits. He is a severe critic of socialist centralization and authoritarianism to him, totalitarianism, whether it be practiced by fascism or communism, spells repression, savagery and tyranny which he vigorously opposes. Instead having profound faith in spiritualism and analyzing the human development on the psychological basis he advocates that the power of the state as a function has to be diffused in society at various levels. The legal framework alone can not cope with the diverse problems of modern society. Therefore, an adequate political theory must take into account the intricate web of individual life and the state’s task is to preserve the harmony of social life so that neither part of the society come into conflict with the other. The state is there simply to harmonise the interests of the individual with those of the society. Hence, it must not be considered an end in itself. In his own words, “The state is a convenience and a rather clumsy convenience, for our common development; it ought never to be made an end in itself”.²⁷ From

Aurobindo's opposition to the idea that the state is an organic conception, and his view of the state as only a mechanical convenience, follows his views of the limitation of the functions of the state. To him the business of the state is "to remove obstacles, to remove all really harmful waste and friction – and removing avoidable injustice, to secure for every individual a just and equal chance of self development and satisfaction of the extent of his powers and in the line of his nature but all unnecessary interference with the freedom of man's growth is or can be harmful".²⁸ Individual growth is essential for the real and permanent good of all. A state education, a state religion and a state culture are unnatural violence.²⁹

Freedom

The whole career of Aurobindo was an incessant fight for freedom. His active involvement in the political struggle for Indian Independence from British rule during 1905-1910 and his retirement to a more contemplative life style at Pondicherry offer both a political and spiritual perspective on the meaning of human life. His political and spiritual writings exhibit a concern for the meaning and value of liberation. He considers political freedom as the "life breath of nation" and asserts that "to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is the very height of ignorance and futility".³⁰ To achieve political or national freedom or Swaraj to Aurobindo mind is identical with insuring the very life of India and on account of this conviction he exhorted his countryman to achieve this natural goal much earlier in contrast to the call given by the congress at the close of 1929. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when he gave this clarion call to the countryman, congress was grouping in the dark under the Moderates and the cause of complete independence of India was an anathema to them for which he came heavily upon those easy chair politicians.³¹ He was a champion of freedom for all nations of the world and always treated subjugation as a sin. In other words he valued the independence of the country "in terms of of creed expressed in a mission of service to shed eternal light and save the whole world".³²

Political freedom, to Aurobindo means radical independence from not only British in government but also from things European s well s also in consciousness and life style. The Indian people are to rediscover and tap resources of their own rich heritage as they regain their self-dependence, saying no to

domination from without, no to dependence on process from without no to dependence on process from without the means of saying no include openness to insurrection and armed revolt, yet in effect, emphasis procedures of passive resistance through economic, educational, judicial boycott and self help through positive programmes for developing indigenous economic educational and judicial structures.

As already pointed out Aurobindo advocates the freedom of all mankind and his reflections on equality indicate once again his religious world view as he remembers that Hinduism claims equality to be the essential condition of liberation. Similarly he champions the cause of fraternity in most unambiguous terms that means brotherhood, peace and love to all. He criticizes the French for underestimating the importance of fraternity which resulted in the failure of French revolution. He is of the view that fraternity alone is the basis of social equality. Only brotherly feelings can bring about brotherhood.³³

However, Aurobindo views political freedom not as an end but as a condition and starting point. His perspective always a freedom to a freedom beyond that a political freedom, a freedom he names inner freedom. As pointed out earlier the political freedom of India is a necessary step in the total process and he never forgets that it is precisely that a step. Unity among nations and unity of all people with the supreme spirit in the final goal on which his hopes and his vision are fixed.

Commenting upon Aurobindo's views on freedom, June O' Conner observes that "His participation in the political arena and his personal pursuits into yoga constitute the experimental base of concretely lived moments and events. These experiences precipitated his position with respect to the meaning and value of political and personal (inner, spiritual) freedom - These interpretations and valuation in turn have prompted Aurobindo to recommend strategies for action; self help and resistance for the achievement of political freedom; yogic discipline and concentration for the achievement of inner freedom (both individually and collectively)".³⁴

The above account makes it clear that Aurobindo, like Vivekananda and several others, is a true Vedantin and, therefore, his views regarding the individual, society and state are altogether at variance of the political thinkers and theorists of the West. For him the individual is the basic unit but at the same time the organized society is not antagonistic to the former. Whereas the institution of state extends a helping

hand to him for the development of individual's inner self. Hence, he advocates that man must be made the measure of all things and also the instrument of realizing his highest end. It is the man, marching from savagery to civilization, may reach his highest political goal, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

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