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**Sri Aurobindo on Nationalism- A Perspective**

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*Abstract*

The long mendicant era of the Indian National Congress (1885-1905) created a need for a leader in Indian nationalist politics who could rally the populace to struggle for political independence from the British. Sri Aurobindo fulfilled that space and employed his ideas of nationalism that has been the subject of scholarly debate for a long period. His inclusive national strategies to stir the entire nation played a key role. But his conception of nationalism goes beyond the struggle for freedom. He was on a mission to create a new country based on India's rich spiritual and cultural heritage and modern European sciences. As far as India's diversity is concerned, the task seemed greater than anything else. His writings especially in his journal *Bande Mataram* created waves among the masses. He appealed to the then-fragmented population to ascribe to the identity of one nation. His nationalism aimed at the Indian Renaissance through both political freedom and spiritual regeneration. This study will highlight most of the salient features of his nationalism.

**Keywords:** Identity, national identity, nationalism, religious nationalism, spiritual nationalism

## **1. Introduction**

In India's fight for freedom, a fiery youth like Sri Aurobindo couldn't keep away from Indian politics. He joined Bengal politics for the Swadeshi movement in 1905 and immediately became the face of the Indian National Congress. To achieve independence, he employed spiritual vigour as the strength. Initially, he subscribed to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's political ideologies and eulogized the Bengali song *Bande Mataram* to weave a common sentiment among Indian people. He aimed at national unity through the revival of India's rich cultural heritage and Indian spirituality. His speeches and journalistic essays have been

continuously interpreted and misinterpreted. He was unduly charged by the British as a religious politician while only a few could see through and go beyond his words and perceived his actual motive.

Sri Aurobindo wrote many essays on Indian scriptures including *the Mahabharata*, *the Bhagavad Gita*, and *the Upanishads* to disseminate indigenous knowledge. Through these writings, he tried to bring the Indian Renaissance. D.P. Chattopadhyay in the book *Sri Aurobindo and His Contemporary Thinkers* edited by Indrani Sanyal and Krishna Roy, pointed out that his (Sri Aurobindo's) original distinctive critical-creative approach to the subject of the Renaissance left behind the popular claim that Germanic and Italian culture served as the primary sources of inspiration for the Indian Renaissance (38). Through his impassioned writing, Sri Aurobindo stirred the population with courage and moral strength. In their book *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Politics*, Haridas and Uma Mukherjee mentioned that Sri Aurobindo was the one who provided a most ardent and courageous expression to the growing dreams and aspirations of the new-born enthusiasm for the land, which at that time had captured the people's minds and no longer looked to be a piece of earth but a picture of the cosmos (xiv).

Sri Aurobindo's tactics in India's independence war are distinctive for a variety of reasons. To Kireet Joshi, Sri Aurobindo stands out as the most heroic nationalist who formulated the true aim of Indian nationalism within a short period of two years (1906-1908) through his electric writings in the magazine *Bande Mataram* (16). Aparna Banerjee has pointed out that by his theory of spiritual evolution, Sri Aurobindo has more successfully overcome the anglicized underpinnings in his political thought than his contemporaries like Tilak and Gokhale (195). Moreover, before Sri Aurobindo, no one had ever examined the elements of geographical unity, a shared past, and a compelling shared interest that drive toward unification and are vitally necessary for fostering a sense of national identity in India (Sanyal and Roy 2). To get a comprehensive view of Sri Aurobindo's concept of nationalism, this study focuses on all the aspects including his challenges, inspiration, and strategies, and their impact on contemporary national politics.

## **2. Methodology**

This study is based on the textual analysis of the primary sources i.e., the writings of Sri Aurobindo, and secondary sources viz. Sri Aurobindo-related books, journals, and articles. This research concentrated on Sri Aurobindo's ideas and their practical outputs.

### **3. Challenges to National Unity**

#### **3.1. Fragmented Population**

Sri Aurobindo took two fundamental initiatives to form a new India. First, to cater to the current political needs, religious and spiritual nationalism. Second, to build a strong future generation, national education that aims at the revival of India's glorious past. His main challenge was to mobilize the masses for a political cause. Just to give an example of Bengal, the epicenter of national politics during the independence struggle, as mentioned by Barbara Southard there were three upper castes namely *Brahmans*, *Vaidyas*, and *Kayasths* who as *Zamindars* (landholders), were identified under the term *Bhadralok* (gentleman) which signifies cultural and religious disparity with the rest (354). Again, the two main factions were the upper class, who were relatively few, the followers of the Sakta cult of Kali, and the masses who followed the Vaishnava cult of Radha-Krishna (356). There was also a third section of the population, the English-educated middle class occupying more than eighty percent of the government's official jobs in Bengal (361). The problem was the disconnection among these sects. As pointed out by Dr. Anil Seal, in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, the group of professionals with English education had very few ties to the land (57). Being aware of all these facts, Sri Aurobindo's challenge was to merge the educated elite with the other groups for his political program.

#### **3.2. Attack on Image and Ideologies**

Sri Aurobindo knew that the image of an extremist leader is subjected to misinterpretation of all his policies and ideologies and could be rejected by the masses. In fact, British officials, journalists, and many others misinterpreted his ideas and labelled him and his associates as "terrorists" and "extremists." So, Sri Aurobindo took a stance and cleared the position by calling himself and his associates "serious" and "advanced" politicians. (*Complete Works*, Vol. 6-7, 1109).

He simply did not want people to have a false impression of him or his views on nationalism. People might easily misunderstand their stance and take them as violent and extreme terrorists who are against law and order. He gave justifications for why a nationalist might wilfully break the law. For him, "Nationalism refuses to accept Law as a fetish or peace and security as an aim in themselves; the only idol of its worship is Nationality and the only aim in itself it recognizes is the freedom, power and well-being of the nation" (*Complete Works*, Vol. 6-7, 1111).

## 4. Inspirations and Strategies

### 4.1. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and *Bande Mataram*

Sri Aurobindo considered Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay as his political Guru and as the originator of the “religion of patriotism” (Heehs, “Bengali” 121). By adopting the latter’s all-inclusive ideology of regarding the country as mother and the mantra *Bande Mataram* (hail the mother), he aspired to give the entire nation one identity. Personally, Sri Aurobindo expressed in a letter to his wife in 1905 that he viewed his country as the Mother whom he was determined to free from a demon’s grasp through the application of his *brahmatej* (divine power) (Bose 132). Sri Aurobindo strategically tried to employ this mother/demon cultural binary against British colonial rule. The cultural fact, women being considered more spiritually inclined, became a weapon for the nationalist leaders (Bagchi 68). It symbolizes *Shakti*, the creative force that not only vanquishes demons but also rejuvenates life. Eventually, this strategy worked and the song-turned-slogan *Bande Mataram* became a rage. Consequently, the song as well as the novel *Anandamath* which comprises the song was banned legally in 1905 and it remained so until 1947 (Chatterji 76). The ban impacted inversely as the slogan gained wider recognition across the subcontinent despite the prohibition (Elias 96). To A.G. Noorani, these two words (*Bande Mataram*) have inspired some of the greatest sacrifices in human history (1040). Later in 1939, Gandhiji in his weekly magazine *Harijan* expressed his feelings about the song “Vande Mataram:” “It is enthroned in the hearts of millions. It stirs to its depth the patriotism of millions in and outside Bengal” (Noorani 1042).

### 4.2 The New Nationalism and Japan

Sri Aurobindo describes his idea of nationalism and how he wants to build the nation clearly in his essay *The New Nationalism*. The following lines of Sri Aurobindo are worth quoting, “The New Nationalism is a negation of the old bourgeois ideals of the nineteenth century. It is an attempt to relegate the dominant bourgeois in us to his old obscurity, to transform the bourgeois into the Samurai and through him to extend the workings of the Samurai spirit to the whole nation” (*Complete Works*, Vol. 6-7, 1110). The allusion to Japan and the success stemming from the Japanese spirit, is apparent here. Not only Sri Aurobindo but every nationalist leader was fascinated by Japan’s emergence as a modern non-European power that too within a very short span of time. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta cited Sri Aurobindo’s own words from his controversial pamphlet *Bhawani Mandir* for taking Japan as a model for a progressive nation:

There is no instance in history of a more marvelous and sudden up-surgings of strength in a nation than modern Japan. All sorts of theories had been started to account for the uprising, but now the intellectual Japanese are telling us what were the fountains of that mighty awakening, the sources of that inexhaustible strength. They were drawn from religion. It was the Vedantic teachings of Oyamel and the recovery of Shintoism with its worship of the national Shakti in Japan in the image and person of the Mikado that enabled the little island empire to wield the stupendous weapons of Western knowledge and science as easily and invincibly as Arjun wielded the Gandiva (81).

#### 4.3. The *Bhagavad Gita* and National Politics

The novel *Anandamath* alone sowed the seeds of a different kind of nationalism among the Swadeshi fighters. Within two decades the song *Bande Mataram* became the slogan for every freedom movement in the country. But Bankim Chandra's theological writings in the same decade (1880s) especially on Krishna and *Bhagavad Gita* were recognized forerunners of Swadeshi thought's pervasive obsession with the *Gita* (Sartori 324).

The *Bhagavad Gita* can be called the central cultural asset that is used not only by Bankim Chandra but by many nationalist leaders including Bipin Chandra Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Mohandas Gandhi during India's freedom struggle. The leaders didn't consider the *Gita* as a dogma or a religious scripture but a living reality that appealed to everyone to take the necessary action. The very reason for choosing *Bhagavad Gita* for political affairs is evident. It carries the crux of all the major scriptures of India. Tilak Bahadur Khatri cited Swami Gambhirananda's beautiful analogy worth quoting here "All the Upanishads are cows, the milker is Sri Krishna, the calf is Arjuna, the enjoyers are the wise ones and the milk is the fine nectar that the *Gita* is" (106).

Sri Aurobindo also started mentioning Krishna/Vasudeva in his speeches and writings, especially after his imprisonment was over (1909). He reminded, "The very foundation of the *Gita* is Sri Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna to forget his petty affections for a greater good" (Grover 72). So, he asked everyone to be selfless and only think about the greater good of the nation.

To strengthen the tie between rural and urban, he advised, in his periodicals, *Jugantar* and *Bande Mataram*, the educated Bengalis to maintain a connection with their rural mass (Southward 365). These appeals resulted in the participation of professionals and students in the revolution over many years. Again, as mentioned by Barbara Southward, between 1907 to

1917 out of 186 convicts for revolutionary crimes 165 were either professionals or students (370).

In the essay series (later published as a book titled *The Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo mentioned two elements to look for. One is the temporary and perishable element that is limited to the current time and another is the eternal and imperishable element to which every epoch can connect (Aurobindo 3). Both elements are important for creating a new nation. Political freedom was the most necessary element in India at that time. In his own words, “Political freedom is the life breath of a nation” and it is futile “to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, and the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom” (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 173-174). Second, a nation is to be constructed with vigour, spirit, and enduring principles that are meant to be lived, experienced, and seen with a different vision higher than mere intellectual (Aurobindo 5). Citing Partha Chatterjee, Peter Heehs pointed out that as far as spirituality is concerned, the nationalists did very well to awaken the country by referring to India’s cultural and scriptural wealth (“Bengali” 132).

## **5. Nationalism and New India**

Sri Aurobindo shared his concept of a new nation. He declared that the intention is not to break the law as it is necessary for a nation to abide by certain laws. In Sri Aurobindo’s own words, “The Nationalist is no advocate of lawlessness for its own sake, on the contrary, he has a deeper respect for the essence of law than anyone else, because the building up of a nation is his objective and he knows well that without a profound reverence for law, national life cannot persist and attain a sound and healthy development” (*Complete Works*, Vol. 6-7, 1111).

### **5.1. Nationalism as Religion**

To Sri Aurobindo, nationalism is nothing but a religion. His exertion was to make the country's people believe in this doctrine because he knew that only religion, not education, was an immediate means to bring people together for the country's good. At that time, more than 90% of the populace was not well-versed in the so-called modern method of education (“Education for All in India.”) and had lost its spiritual vigour. To him, nationalism is a divinely appointed Shakti of the eternal (Grover 79). He openly and sternly declared before the Bombay National Union on 19 January 1908, “Nationalism is not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God. . . Nationalism is immortal. . . God cannot be killed, God

cannot be sent to jail” (Bose 135). Though this religion is based on the Hindu way of life, he distinctly mentioned that it’s an inclusive nationalism that includes Mohammedanism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Judaism. In short, he explained the universality and inclusivity of the new nationalism that aims at spiritual regeneration.

## **5.2. Inclusive Nationalism: From Religious to Spiritual**

Sri Aurobindo considered, “the true aim of the nationalist movement is to restore the spiritual greatness of the nation by the essential preliminary of its political regeneration” (Grover 69). But the fact is, as Sugata Bose has pointed out, many regional patriotisms, competing interpretations of nationalism, and extraterritorial affinities of religiously inspired universalisms fuelled Indian anti-colonialism (131). So, the need for a common national identity had been integral to India’s freedom struggle. To weave a national identity to achieve national integration, Sri Aurobindo gave importance to the Indian spirit. He perceived that regardless of the diversity of cultural backgrounds, the whole of India breathes the same through its spiritual soul. For Sri Aurobindo, spirituality is a religion as he believed that dharma holds an individual and to him, the spirit only can hold an individual (M. Sarkar 49). He was fully aware that political ideologies, religious or cultural commonalities, and celebrating commonality maniacally or frantically had already given birth to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (M. Sarkar 49). So, he made it very evident that human and national unity can only be accomplished by realizing one's genuine self. In the pamphlet, *Bhawani Mandir*, he repeatedly discussed all kinds of strength: physical, mental, moral, and spiritual and this “Strength can only be created by drawing it from the internal and inexhaustible reservoirs of the Spirit” (Aurobindo, vol. 6-7: 86). According to Peter Heehs, early twentieth-century Indian nationalists including Sri Aurobindo turned to politics under the onus of the necessity of political freedom, but their mission remained cultural and spiritual (“Bengali” 132).

## **5.3. Other Impacts of Nationalist Politics**

Sri Aurobindo's national politics has a wide range of effects. The plea to save Mother India prompted lives to be lost from the response. He was instrumental in ensuring that the two words (*Bande Mataram*) became the rallying cry that served as many people's eulogy. To A. G. Noorani, "During the long and arduous struggle for freedom from 1905 to 1947 'Bande Mataram' was the rallying cry of the patriotic sons of India, and thousands of them succumbed to the lathi blow of the British police or mounted the scaffold with 'Bande Mataram' on their lips” (1040). Despite all these, some other facts can't be overlooked.

### **5.3.1. The Question of Muslim Population**

Whatever the purpose, in a country like India, which is the most diverse in the world, no decision can be inclusively appealing to all the countrymen. Unfortunately, many Indian Muslims could not follow wholeheartedly Sri Aurobindo's spiritual/cultural nationalism. Though he tried to keep it all-inclusive, the sources from which he drew inspiration were Hindu scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita*. As a result, most of the Muslim population, (the second largest in India and somewhat more than half the population of pre-partition Bengal) (Heehs, "Bengali" 122) felt insecure, and nationalist Muslims also found it difficult to chant "Vande Mataram" since the hymn personalized the motherland as a goddess, making it inaccessible to Muslims and Christians whose religions could not recognize a personified divinity, embodying in a specifically Hindu form (T. Sarkar 3963). It was not at all a deliberate attempt but an automatic misapprehension. Peter Heehs, in this context, cited K R Kripalani who wrote, "Tilak, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo 'gave to Indian Nationalism its fiery basis in India's ancient cultural glory:' but this was 'so intensely Hindu that the Muslims', although not 'deliberately excluded,' were 'automatically left out'" (155). So, Muslims took the least interest in participating in many movements including Swadeshi.

### **5.3.2 Hindu Nationalism and the Birth of the Hindu Right-Wing**

Following the spiritual tradition of Bankim Chandra and Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo sowed the seeds of strong Hindu nationalism. Later, leaders like Savarkar and Golwalkar gave birth to the exclusive idea of the Hindu right-wing. They went on to form parties like Hindu Mahasabha, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. The later leaders should have been more concerned about the inclusive appeal of Indian spirituality. As Peter Heehs cited K N Panikkar who wrote, "Dayananda, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo were celebrated by the Hindu Right 'as the progenitors of Hindu nationalism. But their ideas of inclusive nationalism were completely overlooked" (161).

## **6. Conclusion**

Sri Aurobindo created a storm with his ideas like *Purna Swaraj* (total independence) and the Indian Renaissance. He gained wider recognition through his writings within a short span. Before Sri Aurobindo, no political leader had received such an enthusiastic reception from the public. His reputation was such, as mentioned by Manoj Das, that even the government counsel Mr. Eardley Norton who was trying to prove him guilty for the Alipore Conspiracy case



commented, “Aurobindo was treated with the reverence of a king wherever he had gone. As a matter of fact, he was regarded as the leader not merely of Bengal but of the whole country” (378). This is purely because he stuck to his fathomless faith in the feminine cultural strength of the Orient, besides being aware of the Occident’s typical masculinity. He remained a distinct nationalist who inspired millions by his literary writings and speeches to regain spiritual vigour. RC Majumdar described Aurobindo's nationalism in a piece that Peter Heehs cited, “the inmost hunger of his whole soul for the rebirth in him, and through men like him in the whole of India, of the ancient culture of Hindustan in its pristine purity and nobility” (156). However, Sri Aurobindo's nationalism was more cultural and spiritual than religious. Rabindranath wrote a poem addressed to him, “Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee! (Das 375) and later depicted him as the Messiah of Indian culture and civilization (“Sri Aurobindo Ghosh”). He was remarkable in his tactics to embrace nearly all social groups and paved the groundwork for the subsequent leaders to benefit from widespread nationalist sentiments.

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