



# Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Nationalism and Internationalism

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## 1. Introduction

Sri Aurobindo was a revolutionary nationalist, scholar, poet, mystic, evolutionary philosopher and a yogin. After a short political career he became a leader of the early movement for the freedom of India from British rule and a pioneer leader to declare and work for the aim of Swarajya. His powerful and bold writings for Bande Mataram and Karma Yogi surcharged the people and electrified the nation which ultimately led the nation to her freedom. It was therefore significant that when India attained her liberation in 1947, it was on 15th August, the birthday of Sri Aurobindo. This article attempts to explore and analyse the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism and internationalism by tracing the evolutionary development of a nation- unit and consequently the infusion of the consciousness of unity. A careful examination has been conducted of the social law of evolution as postulated by Sri Aurobindo whereby, he emphasises the significance of observing the sanctity of individuality whilst observing the international law of diversity and this he proposes to achieve by means of nurturing inner oneness and not merely through external imposition.

## 2. Objective of the Research

1. Make a study of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Nationalism
2. Make a study of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Internationalism.
3. Observe the need for the co- existence of the ideals of Nationalism and Internationalism.
4. Identify the contemporary relevance of Sri Aurobindo's thought on Nationalism and Internationalism

## 3. Hypothesis

This study aims to postulate the importance of both nationalism and internationalism in the contemporary society. At the same time it strives to arrive at a possible manner in which these two concepts can co-exist harmoniously at the national and international level. It propounds to do so through an in-depth study of Sri Aurobindo's political Philosophy.

## 4. Method of Research

My goal in the proposed research is twofold:

1. Understand, summarise, and synthesise the existing literature of Sri Aurobindo and identify the parameters of the research,
2. attempt a conceptual synthesis of the thematically identified existing research,
3. provide recommendations for practice in the area of what comes to be known through new research, and

The research will be qualitative in nature and involve an extensive review of the present literature. It aims to be both descriptive and explanatory. If required, it may also include historical research to identify patterns of the progression of history with regards to humanity's attempt at harmonising the ideals of nationalism and internationalism.

**"To hope for a true change of human life without a change of human nature is an irrational and unspiritual proposition."**

— Sri Aurobindo

Nationalism as an idea and feeling had already made way in the mind and soul of the teeming Indians. But the blazing ideas of Sri Aurobindo awakened and infused in them, with profound intensity the true meaning of nationalism, the life of which could be satiated only when the goal of Purna Swaraj was achieved in its true spirit.

The moderates professed their faith in the British sense of justice, education and benefits accruing from foreign government in India. They termed the nationalist philosophy as being extremist and infeasible. Then, there existed a faction which disapproved of the servile doctrine but intellectually were so enslaved by the British that they found themselves inept to espouse the philosophy of nationalism. Consequently, they struck a compromise in which blessings of freedom could be harmoniously coalesced with blessings of subjection!

There was a perilous contention amongst journalist such as N. N. Ghose of Indian Nation that "The essential conditions for nationality were absent in India owing to diversity of race, religion and language." As a reply to this unfounded belief Sri Aurobindo wrote in *Bande Mataram* (August 17, 1907), "Every nationality has been formed in spite of diversity of race, religion or language, and not often in spite of the coexistence of all these diversities. He pointed out that the English - nation has been built not only out of various races but keep to this day their distinct individuality and each one of them clings to its language tenaciously. He referred to the striking example of Switzerland where distinct racial streams speaking three different languages and, later, professing different religions coalesced into and persist as one nation without sacrificing a single of those diversities. He referred to France where three different languages are spoken; he pointed that in America, the candidates for White House addressed the nation in fourteen different languages; he referred to acute divisions in Russia."

**4.1** Sri Aurobindo maintained that the belief that unity in race, religion and language will not bear scrutiny. In his opinion the above elements are helpful in growth of nationalism but do not pass the test of indispensability. Referring to the Roman Empire he dexterously pointed that even though it created a common language, a common religion and life and it did its best to obliterate racial diversities under the weight of its uniform system, failed to make one great nation.

What then, Sri Aurobindo asked, are the essential elements of Nationality? And he answered: "We answer that there are certain essential conditions, geographical unity, a common past, a powerful common interest impelling towards unity and certain favourable political conditions which enable the impulse to realise itself in an organised government expressing the nationality and perpetuating its single and united existence. A common enthusiasm coalescing with a common interest is the most powerful fosterer of nationality."

**4.2** Sri Aurobindo while expounding his philosophy of Indian Nationalism which is at the same time the philosophy of patriotism transcends the customary connotation ordinarily associated with the term nationalism. In general parlance the term restricts its ultimate meaning to the love of the land of the country. Sri Aurobindo's vision however, surpasses and outshines the hitherto conventional outlook towards nationalism. He postulates a far more integral and holistic philosophy of nationalism, a new brand altogether, which not only professes love for one's country, *Janmabhumi*, but also confirms its faith in love for the people of the land. Further, he expounds the love for the culture of the land which imparts the essential element of uniqueness and thereby generating within every individual the feeling of unison borne as a result of being culturally unique. The theory culminates with the idea of the incessant and illumined worship of

Shakti, which we call Mother India. As Sri Aurobindo wrote "A nation is not a piece of earth, nota figure of spirit, nor a fiction of mind, it is a mighty shakti composed of the shakti's of all the millions of units that make up the nation". He further pointed out that so the nation is veritably a soul, which is immortal and even when geographically fragmented or divided, it has the power to reunite itself as one unity in diversity."

This consciousness of unity, according to Aurobindo, amongst the individuals living in geographical proximity, is fostered as a result of an evolutionary process of stages of development, dependent upon the existence of certain elements. First and foremost necessity is that of a common type of civilisation accompanied by an apparent order of society. This serves as a mould and proves instrumental for the edifice of the nation to be developed. In the second stage rigorous groundwork is carried out for bringing in organisation directed towards nurturing unity and strengthening centrality of control. The third stage is characteristic of free internal development devoid of the threat of disorder owing to work done in the second stage. Though the spirit, form and equipoise worked out differently in different parts of the world, the aim and need of creating a social, political and economic order bearing the attribute of fixity of status, and striking unity of individual and collective interest, was uniform and widespread.

The rationale and justification according to Sri Aurobindo of the formation of nation- units is not merely ceremonial or purely incidental. It has a higher and nobler purpose of providing a larger mould of human aggregation in which the race, and not only classes and individuals, may move towards its full human development. A stage must therefore come in the life of the nation when all men and women realise the dignity and freedom of humanhood within them and give play to their utmost capacity.

**4.3** According to Sri Aurobindo a nation-unit is basically a manifestation of the psychological unity or of the nation soul which has the quality of abandoning of egoism both individually and collectively and also venturing to think beyond communal lineation. Only then, Aurobindo says, can man rise to that third ideal of French revolution along with liberty and equality- "the greatest of all the three, though till now only an empty word on man's lips, the ideal of fraternity or, less sentimentally and more truly expressed an Inner Oneness. That no mechanism social, political, religious has ever created or can create; it must take birth in the soul and rise from hidden and divine depths within."

Nationalist movement in India according to Aurobindo was a part of that world-wide movement of early twentieth century where nations were seen feeling for their source. The reason for this phenomenon is that it was these nations which needed more to feel the difference between themselves and others so that they could assert and justify their individuality as against the powerful countries which tended to absorb or efface it.

Formation of even larger aggregates than nation-units seems to be a natural corollary if we were to trace the origin of the state from its most primary stage of being a tribal state till current times. The current trend and proclivity towards internationalism, globalisation and formation of larger collectivities in the form of a post-nation state is also discernable in contemporary social, economic and political agendas and activities.

Illustrating by means of an example of a pre-nation empire building process, Sri Aurobindo draws a clear distinction between political unity and real unity. Historically tracing empires were founded even before the stage prior to them, of constituting mature and stable nation states could be attained. Consequently, the empires collapsed as they only exhibited political unity which was artificial and externally imposed rather than real unity which would have been an inherent and

integral part nurtured and depicting a consistent path of evolution. Sri Aurobindo further explains by pointing towards Austria a non-national empire, and says, "When such a unity is broken it perishes as there is no real inner oneness but only external projection of it. But a real national unity broken up by circumstances will always preserve a tendency to recover and reassert its oneness." The basic principle underlying Sri Aurobindo's idea of nationalism is that it is imperative for real unity to manifest as inner oneness and thus help in discovery of the nation soul first and only thereafter proceed towards consolidating itself as a political unity. A distinct, unique and instinctively inherent psychological parity when established amongst the aggregate is the appropriate line of growth, which when transpires, subdues and defeats the play of centrifugal forces as it did in case of Italy, Greece under Turks and in the formation of United States of America.

In functioning as well as organisation the modern times are witnessing a major proclivity, towards the ideal of globalisation or a world-union. A nation is an aggregate of individuals and each individual in spite of being an integral part of the collectivity is still able to retain his distinctive unique identity. Similarly, a nation being individual writ large is also a living spirit and therefore purports to have its independent aura, even while developing and inculcating within itself necessary conditions of internationalism.

**4.4** In this context Sri Aurobindo draws a distinction between national ego and national soul. Ego dwelling in division begets a shallow and superficial unity as it prides itself with the attitude of being independent, self-sufficient and superior, whether individually or collectively. The true individual on the other end nurtures the attribute of being distinct yet divided from the rest. "A true individual and the true national soul are characterised by mutuality, interdependence and inner oneness that manifests in diversity. Based upon this Aurobindo perceives the nations as entities seeking and finding their inner soul by virtue of which they will remain free but mutually interdependent, and this, in turn will provide the form of world unity envisioned to be supportive and not destructive of nations."

'Thus the social law as formulated by Sri Aurobindo begins with the individual seeking his holistic development from within and respecting the same right of others. At the same time contributing to the growth of community and perfection of humanity by means of development of the self. Law for the community or nation is similar whereby sincere effort is made for progress of the social aggregate, and also contributing in its part to the development of other nations bearing in mind the right of others to grow and flourish.

An obvious question which confronts the mind- what is the contemporary relevance of philosophy of Indian nationalism as propounded by Aurobindo? Given that India is now a sovereign entity free of foreign control and stands united as a nation which was the aim of the nationalist philosophy. However, the philosophy of Indian nationalism as given by Aurobindo is as relevant today as it was during the time when India was struggling for freedom. At that time it justified its value by providing the necessary foundation, impetus and the much needed character which was a pressing requirement for uniting the scattered and diverse masses of India, functionally as well as psychologically.

**4.5** Today it holds even greater significance in light of the fact that now humanity has moved ahead from the goal of uniting merely as a nation state. The call is now for a world union which requires the union of total humanity and not just India. Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism logically begins from the basic unit- the individual. Where, the individual is required to "perfect his individuality by free development from within." This notion holds universal applicability transcending the barrier of time and age and the resultant differences in political, social and

economic conditions of that particular period. This idea viewed in conjunction with his idea of inner oneness not only encourages development of the individual himself but at the same time fosters the feeling of oneness towards others, thereby facilitating the evolutionary process.

**4.6** He further observes that while perfecting his own individuality "One should respect and aid and be aided by the same free development in others. His law is to harmonise his life with the life of the social aggregate and to pour himself out as a force of growth and perfection on humanity. The law for the community or nation is equally to perfect its corporate existence by a free development from within, aiding and taking full advantage of that of the individual, but to respect and to aid and be aided by the same free development of other communities and nations."\* This thought if applied in its true essence to the contemporary period will not only further the case of globalisation but can also help in effacing, to a large extent, the global menace that terrorism has come to assume. The hideous face of terrorism today, has managed to make all other hazards to humanity seem insignificant. The aims and efforts made to expunge the growing peril of terrorism and numerous but the one thing common in all is that they are all externally imposed maneuvers. Sri Aurobindo's idea of generating the feeling of oneness from within and the consequent realisation of the philosophy of respecting diversity and otherness within union can prove to be of great value in combating the forces of violence, which is to a great extent borne of ideological and other discrepancies. This implies that harmonious blending of different component units must aim at understanding - understanding of the otherness of the other and of the necessity of that otherness; at the same time not losing its own distinct identity; it must go further and aim at mutual respect.

Harmonious co-existence requires dispensing of selfishly motivated use of force and violence. As Prof. Kireet Joshi observes "In the new age dialogue then appears to be the modern tool of synthesising of distinctions, which must aim at knowledge; it must seek the knowledge of what is common in all, and where exactly differences lie and how those differences can be fostered for purposes of enrichment of unity. Dialogue must aim at excluding exclusivism and it must promote inclusiveness. And yet inclusiveness should avoid the mistake of imposing uniformity in the world. Even the world culture, which is being generated today under the forces of international interchange, should not be allowed to be a worldwide expansion of one culture; our paths should be directed towards the blending of many cultures worldwide, a blending that benefits from the wealth of diversity created over time throughout the entire world."

## **5. Contemporary Implications**

Today, the rationale and justification of his theory can be seen, firstly, in his idea of generating in each individual the feeling of true oneness towards humanity- from within rather than as an externally imposed conception of unity which is ephemeral and superficial. Secondly, his theory has two-sided implication and utility upon the prevailing global shift towards the phenomenon of internationalism. In the first instance if the idea of inner oneness, as given by Aurobindo, is nurtured in its right spirit it would provide the right impetus in the right direction for the harmonious and holistic progression towards the goal of world union. At the same time it would also help in realising the necessity of maintaining the much stressed individuality while progressing towards an ever growing collectivity. And yet, it must be admitted that the contemporary trends in globalisation do not seem to be favourable to this path. In the progress towards the ideals of internationalism, individual is today witnessing an identity crisis as now the individual is not regarded anymore as the fundamental unit of humanity but only minute part whose existence is subordinated to the common aims and interests of the organised society. This would result in piece-meal growth of internationalism as it would lead to uniformity and not a true union which has respect for individuality and diversity. Individual according to Aurobindo "Thus there must be a constant endeavour to keep alive the creative individuality in the midst of growing

internationalism in a way that every aspect retains its character or diversity by avoiding total uniformity and thus preventing its premature decay and disintegration like the Great Roman Empire".

Finally, it was his immense foresight and thorough understanding of the issues that made him a visionary, which is precisely why he gave a complete philosophy of internationalism at the time when the existing political and social structure was still struggling for the formation of a nation unity. His unique quality was that, not only did he have prolific knowledge and keen insight of the interplay of various aspects-social, political, economic and cultural- of his times- at the same time he was not a captive of his age. Therefore, his writing not only reflected and addressed the then current issues but also envisioned their application, progress and implications upon the future to their perfection. An important point to observe here is that Sri Aurobindo lays equal emphasis upon, both the development of individual personality and the social aggregate of nation and nations.

### References

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