



Towards a Synthesis of the Ideals of Nationalism and Internationalism in the Light of Sri Aurobindo's Political Philosophy

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1. Introduction

The present world seem to be oscillating restlessly between the powerful sentiments ignited by nationalism on one side and the growing demands and necessity of internationalism to address and solve the many problems of the globe on the other. Attempts have been made in the past to write off one at the expense of the other only to witness that the ideal that was sought to be eliminated or suppressed springs back in the minds of humanity with an ever greater force. It is increasingly becoming clear that neither nationalism nor internationalism can be wished off or summarily rejected. Both have their appeals to the human mind and both have their respective value in the progress of humanity through its many-sided local and global endeavours. This necessitates a study that seeks to understand the appeal of nationalism and internationalism to the human mind, the value of nationalism and internationalism to human life, the antagonism between them, the need for a synthesis, and a possible synthesis of these two great ideals. This is a vast enterprise and beyond the scope of a paper presented here. But a beginning has to be made. Through this paper I make a humble attempt to do so. My attempt is to look at it in the light of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism and internationalism.

2. Objective of this Research

1. What is the appeal factor of Nationalism?
2. What is the appeal of Internationalism?
3. How and why the appeal of internationalism transcends local, regional and national interests? what is the binding force that cuts across different cultures, ethnicities and religions?
4. How does Sri Aurobindo's vision of these two ideals of nationalism and internationalism fit in the contemporary world view to create a lasting and more permanent balance between the two?

3. Hypothesis

3.1 I propose through this paper that while there can be many ways to arrive at a possible synthesis, according to my understanding of Sri Aurobindo's political philosophy, the seeming mutual contradiction or antagonism between these two great ideals of humanity can be reconciled and a possible synthesis arrived only when we look at these ideals from a deeper and higher spiritual vision. Attempts at reconciliation based on human rationality rooted in the human mind have their utility but they suffer from the limitation which the human mind itself suffers from — it is based on the principle of ignorance and division and not that of true knowledge and unity. Our ordinary human mentality makes us see the world not as oneness but as a collection of separate objects. Thus its attempts at arriving at a synthesis or unity of these ideals too are going to fall short.

3.2 The solution lies, according to my understanding of Sri Aurobindo's political philosophy, in the idea of generating in each individual the consciousness of true oneness of humanity. This consciousness Sri Aurobindo calls the supra- mental consciousness. The vision rooted in this consciousness in its nature is a global vision. This consciousness is beyond the mental consciousness in which we human beings ordinarily live and through which we function. Supra-mental consciousness, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a plane of perfect knowledge that has the full and

integral truth of all. It is a plane that is accessible to human beings. We can rise up to it, overcome division and ignorance, and replace our consciousness of division with a consciousness of unity.

4. Method of Research

4.1 The appeal and value of Nationalism

Nationalism is one of the most potent forces active in the world, exceeded perhaps only by the force of organised religion. Nationalism is a political ideology that in essence promotes the distinctive identity, political sovereignty, and interests of a particular modern nation-state. Nationalism advocates the right of self-determination and tends to negate outside interference in its internal affairs. The cultural programme of nationalism extends beyond the political one. Nationalism in the cultural arena seeks to not only preserve and foster a nation's traditional culture it also aims to build and strengthen a shared national identity and unity and solidarity among its people under the umbrella of the nation's symbols. For many nationalism is an idea as tempting as self-preservation. In fact it wouldn't be wrong to say that at a collective level nationalism has historically been an effective tool for safeguarding the identity and spirit of a nation and thus the identity and spirit of its people. Many present nation-states were able to emerge out and gain independence from the rule of imperialist colonial powers through the force of nationalism. Beyond the creation of a new nation-state, nationalism also has the power to generate a strong bond between an otherwise diverse collectivity living in that nation. Nationalism is also a mechanism to protect and preserve the distinct social, cultural and ethnic fabric of human societies. It stands as a barrier that prevents the sudden onslaught of radical changes brought in by international events and forces. Even though the world may increasingly seem and become international by need and necessity, nationalism is crucial in shielding and promoting the cultural, lingual, religious, and social diversities of nations and their peoples. These are some of the reasons why it has a great appeal to the human mind.

Sri Aurobindo describes the deeper value of nationalism as follows, "Individual man belongs not only to humanity in general, his is not only a variation of human nature in general, but he belongs also to his race-type, his class-type, his mental, vital, physical, spiritual type in which he resembles some, differs from others. According to these affinities he tends to group himself in Churches, sects, communities, classes, coteries, associations whose life he helps, and by them he enriches the life of the large economic, social and political group or society to which he belongs."ⁱ In the absence of the force of nationalism there is a possibility of the world population moving towards a condition in which it loses all its rich diversity and vitality of existence and arrives at a state of monotonous uniformity, which according to Sri Aurobindo, is a great danger to life and its many-sided flourishing. According to Sri Aurobindo, progression towards uniformity "is likely to mean... a suppression of that principle of liberty human life which is the most precious gain of humanity's past spiritual, political and social struggles... freedom is as necessary to life as law and regime; diversity is as necessary as unity to our true completeness. Absolute uniformity would mean the cessation of life, while on the other hand the vigour of the pulse of life may be measured by the richness of the diversities which it creates... Unity we must create, but not necessarily uniformity."ⁱⁱ Herein lies an aspect of the deeper value of nationalism. Pursued in a healthy manner it helps provides a base to the free growth of the individual and group units and preserves the richness and diversity of languages, cultures, religions, and myriad customs of a social group of people.

4.2 The Appeal and Value of Internationalism

Internationalism, in the most usual sense of the term, is a political principle that recognises the necessity of a greater political, social, economic, and cultural cooperation among different nations and people. In the wake of challenges facing humanity and issues that transcend national boundaries such as the environmental crisis, refugee crisis, global wealth and income inequalities, the progress of technological and commercial globalisation, etc., the recognition has taken a deeper root in the mind of humanity that nations need to come together and cooperate. Acting alone they cannot solve the multiple problems they face. Today it seems difficult to imagine that a nation can live and thrive in

isolation from others. Thus a bilateral or multilateral response and international agencies that help do so are required and have been created and developed. Beyond responding to the problems that are global in nature internationalism also seeks to advance common human interest that transcends national boundaries. The ideal of internationalism has been present for a long time in the modern era. Its need, however, has been felt more acutely in the modern times and this need is constantly on the rise. With the growing means of information technology and communication, inescapable economic interdependence, and increasing role of media the urge to identify and relate with different cultures, traditions, methods and opinions has only escalated. This need and appeal has led to institutions and agencies that are working towards economic cooperation, internationally coordinated scientific and technological advancement, intercultural learning, international tourism, and global peace and fraternity. These are some of the reasons why along with nationalism, internationalism too has a great appeal to the human mind.

The need and value of internationalism has deeper aspects also. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "By [a person's] enrichment of the national life, though not in that way only, he helps the total life of humanity. But it must be noted that [man] is not limited and cannot be limited by any of these groupings... he is not merely the Englishman or the Frenchman, the Japanese or the Indian; if by a part of himself he belongs to the nation, by another he exceeds it and belongs to humanity."ⁱⁱⁱ Going by this spirit internationalism is an invocation towards an existence that integrates the individual's existence and harmonises it with the larger consciousness of humanity.

4.3 The Antagonism

In the eyes of the staunch nationalists, generally speaking, internationalists are anti-national. They are against the self-interest of their nation just as other nations are, if not outright enemies, fierce competitors who are trying to fulfil their self-interest and advance hegemony at the global stage at the cost of their nation. A case in point is that of human rights activists who seeking their inspiration from International Human Rights Charter often are critical of the ways of their national governments. These activists are dubbed as anti-national elements by the governments and are advocated that these be despised by those who love their country (often by deliberately blurring the distinction between nation, nation-state, and national government). In the eyes of the internationalists nationalism is parochialism, a narrow minded outlook, that has to be rejected. Nationalism is not merely narrow minded, it is also quite dangerous, internationalists would say. The history of the two world wars and numerous crimes committed against humanity by nationalist governments around the globe is their testimony against nationalism. Nationalists find security and peace of mind in their ideology and site that internationalism creates unnecessary troubles within the nation. A case in point is that of immigration. From the internationalist perspective, we are all part of one humanity, and it is our duty to provide shelter, to protect, and to help those who are seeking refuge. For a nationalist immigration threatens to hit the natives economically by putting a pressure on their livelihood as well as shatter the foundations of their cultural and religious lives. These are just a few examples of the antagonism between nationalism and internationalism. On almost every major policy issue this fissure could be seen and the political scientists, economists, sociologists, industry leaders, general populace could be seen divided. The people with nationalist fervour seem to be forever in conflict with the ideology of the people with a strong internationalist zeal.

4.4 The need for Synthesis

On a cursory glance it may seem that nationalism and internationalism are by nature opposed to each other and that no reconciliation is possible. That we do not know yet. However, this fact is self-evident that the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the contemporary world demands, if not a reconciliation or a synthesis, at least a co-existence with minimal friction of both of these apparently conflicting ideas. Internationalism is at present too vague and powerless to provide law and order that is required by the different human people for their sustenance and progress in life. Only national units can do so. However, national units independently can not deal with the aspirations

of the modern connected world and the various crisis that span across the globe. When we ask whether is it possible that one can work towards the realisation of the full potential of one's nation and its people — the dream of the nationalist — in isolation from the rest of the world i.e. from other nations, or by staying merely in constant enmity or competition with others? The answer we get is a resounding, no! It seems that even the aspirations of the nationalists of the development, growth, and realisation of the potential of its people, can not be satisfactorily fulfilled in the absence of internationalism, if some cooperation does not take place between that nation and others. No nation is self-sufficient in itself. Whether it is for technology, for food, for security, for education, for science, for even leisure and travel. Even if they are antagonistic — we are stuck with both.

The key inquiry would thus be to discover a harmonious balance of the truth and law of the individual, nations and nations. Just as we need the right quantity of ingredients to bake a perfect fluffy cake similarly we need just the right amount of nationalism and internationalism carefully balanced upon the fabric of humanity in its totality.

4.5 The Synthesis

It is not that synthesis or reconciliation between these two great ideals have not been attempted before. Attempts have been made but without taking into account the deeper and higher complexities of the reality of human beings. Sri Aurobindo says “Nothing is more obscure to humanity or less seized by its understanding, whether in the power that moves it or the sense of the aim towards which it moves, than its own communal and collective life. Sociology does not help us, for it only gives us the general story of the past and the external conditions under which communities have survived. History teaches us nothing; it is a confused torrent of events and personalities or a kaleidoscope of changing institutions. We do not seize the real sense of all this change and this continual streaming forward of human life in the channels of Time. What we do seize are current or recurrent phenomena, facile generalisations, partial ideas. We talk of democracy, aristocracy and autocracy, collectivism and individualism, imperialism and nationalism, the State and the commune, capitalism and labour; we advance hasty generalisations and make absolute systems which are positively announced today only to be abandoned perforce tomorrow; we espouse causes and ardent enthusiasms whose triumph turns to an early disillusionment and then forsake them for others, perhaps for those that we have taken so much trouble to destroy. For a whole century mankind thirsts and battles after liberty and earns it with a bitter expense of toil, tears and blood; the century that enjoys without having fought for it turns away as from a puerile illusion and is ready to renounce the depreciated gain as the price of some new good. And all this happens because our whole thought and action with regard to our collective life is shallow and empirical; it does not seek for, it does not base itself on a firm, profound and complete knowledge. The moral is not the vanity of human life, of its ardours and enthusiasms and of the ideals it pursues, but the necessity of a wiser, larger, more patient search after its true law and aim.”^{iv}

Humanity has tried to develop a system to strike a balance between nationalism and internationalism and created multiple institutions like the UN, World Bank, IMF, International Courts of justice, etc. These are external and administrative measures. They have been successful to some extent. But they have not been very effective in what they set out achieve. Their many failures have shown clearly that in order to overcome the challenge of the antagonism and seek a more balanced and more enduring synthesis of nationalism and internationalism we need to also explore other territories. This is where Sri Aurobindo's perspective comes to our rescue. Highlighting first the limitations of present measures he says, “Such an external or administrative unity may be intended in the near future of mankind in order to accustom the race to the idea of a common life, to its habit, to its possibility, but it cannot be really healthy, durable or beneficial over all the true line of human destiny unless something be developed more profound, internal and real. The experiment will break down and give place to a new reconstructive age of confusion and anarchy. Perhaps this experience also is necessary for mankind; yet it ought to be possible for us now to avoid it by subordinating mechanical means to

our true development through a moralised and even a spiritualised humanity united in its inner soul and not only in its outward life and body.”^v

The solution to the problem of synthesis is to be found in the basic ontological foundation of the philosophy of the individual and the aggregate in Sri Aurobindo's concept of the reality of the individual spirit and that of the cosmic spirit. According to Sri Aurobindo, the individual is not merely an ephemeral physical creature, a form of mind and body that aggregates and dissolves, but a being, a living power of eternal Truth, a self-manifesting spirit. It is for this reason that Sri Aurobindo points out that the primal law and purpose of the individual life is to seek its own self-development, to find itself, to discover within itself the law and power of its own being and to fulfil it. He states that in the same way, society, community or nation is also a being, a living power of the eternal Truth, a self-manifestation of the cosmic Spirit, and it is there to express and fulfil in its own way and to the degree of its capacities the special truth and power and meaning of the cosmic Spirit that is within it. It is for this reason, Sri Aurobindo observes, that the primal law and a purpose of the society, community or nation is to seek its own self-fulfilment; it strives rightly to find itself, to become aware within itself of the law and power of its own being and fulfil it as perfectly as possible, to realise all its potentialities, to live its own self revealing life. The interrelationship between the individual and the nation can therefore be harmonised when there is a surge and discovery both of the individual and of the nation as also of the nations of their inner souls and the process of finding in these souls the secret of their true development and their drift towards progressive perfection.

At this point Sri Aurobindo makes a very important distinction namely between the national ego and the national soul, corresponding to the distinction in regard to the individual life where the superficial ego is seen to be distinct from the true individual soul. The mark of egoism, according to Sri Aurobindo, is its superficiality and its ignorant attempt to arrive at superficial unity whether that ego is individual or national. The mark of the ego is its sense of division from all the rest, its pretension to be entirely independent in a poise of superiority over all the others. Corresponding to this ego, Sri Aurobindo points out, there is no real reality. There is no ontological superficial reality, there is no independent divided entity which is superior to all the rest. The true individual, on the other hand, has indeed distinctiveness, but is not divided from the others. The true individual and the true nation-soul are characterised by mutuality, interdependence and inner oneness that manifests in diversity. Based upon this philosophical foundation, Sri Aurobindo perceives the future of nations as entities seeking and finding their inner souls by virtue of which they will remain free but mutually interdependent, and this, in turn, will provide the form of world unity that is supportive and not destructive of the nations.

Sri Aurobindo speaks of a world union of free nations, each having status of equality, and all contributing through their distinctive capacities to the fund of richness and variety at the global level. This philosophy of the individual and the aggregate underlines an inevitable interconnection between the human being and humanity, which is the largest aggregate for human beings. But this interconnection is mediated by the individual's membership of various groups of smaller or larger dimensions. And, at an important stage of development, the formation of nations is initiated. Sri Aurobindo points out, the nation- unit is not formed and does not exist merely for the sake of existing; its purpose is to provide 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 when in all directions, men and women have to come into their own, realise the dignity and freedom of humanhood within them and give play to their utmost capacity.

5. Findings and Conclusion

Thus we can conclude that Sri Aurobindo has formulated an ideal law of social development in which the truths of the individual, of the nations and of humanity are all reconciled and synthesised.

In the words of Sri Aurobindo “Thus the law for the individual is to perfect his individuality by free development from within, but to respect and to 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 for 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. Its law is to harmonise its life with that of the human aggregate and to pour itself out as a force for growth and perfection on humanity. The law for humanity is to pursue its upward evolution towards the finding and expression of the Divine in the type of mankind, taking full advantage of the free development and gains of all individuals and nations and groupings of men, to work towards the day when mankind may be really and not only ideally one divine family, but even then, when it has succeeded in unifying itself, to respect, aid and be aided by the free growth and activity of its individuals and constituent aggregates.”^{vi}

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