

# SRI AUROBINDO ON THE PROSPECT OF SPIRITUALISING POLITICS

by Sanjyot D.Pai Vernekar

In the West, the term 'spirituality' is defined by reference to the term 'spiritual'. And 'spiritual' means: 1. Having to do with the human spirit as opposed to physical things, 2. Having to do with religion or religious beliefs<sup>1</sup>. In the East, this is not so, especially for seers like Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo defines spirituality as an awakening to the inner reality of our being or spirit which is different from our mind, life and body. It is an inner aspiration to know and feel and to come into contact and be in communion with the greater Reality pervading the universe. This aspiration leads to a transformation of our whole being into a new being or a new self or new nature.<sup>2</sup>

Sri Aurobindo holds that spirituality is not a high intellectuality nor idealism nor a religiosity. It is also not a complex of all these things. He says further that a mental belief or creed or regulation of conduct according to religious norms is also not a spiritual experience.<sup>3</sup> Sri Aurobindo points out that "the meaning of spirituality is a new and greater inner life of man founded in the consciousness of his true, his inmost, highest and largest self and spirit by which he receives the whole of existence as a progressive manifestation of the self in the universe and his own life as a field of a possible transformation in which its divine sense will be found..."<sup>4</sup>.

For Sri Aurobindo, spiritual life is a growth into divine living. The mental and the divine life project into each other and intermingle. The spiritual urge

does not turn away from the world. In this context, Sri Aurobindo writes, "...as the mind and life become illumined with the light of the Spirit, they put on or reflect something of the divinity, the secret greater Reality, and this must increase until the interspace has been crossed and the whole existence is unified in the full light and power of the spiritual principle"<sup>5</sup>.

Sri Aurobindo has been known the world over as a yogi, seer or *maharshi*. As a *yogi*, he was out of the ordinary. We see this especially in his attitude to this world and the other world. For it was refreshingly different from the attitude of most of the *yogis* and sages of the twentieth century. He said, for instance, "my own life and my Yoga have always been...both this-worldly and other-worldly without any exclusiveness on either side."<sup>6</sup> All the spiritual experiences he had from the day of his return from England in February 1893 were not divorced from this world but had an inner and infinite bearing on it. He said, "for me all is Brahman and I find the Divine everywhere"<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, 'All life is Yoga', was Sri Aurobindo's spiritual dictum born of his firm belief as well as holistic realisation. Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga aims at the conversion of the whole being into a higher spiritual consciousness and a larger divine existence. In this context Sri Aurobindo says, "our parts of will and action, our parts of knowledge, our thinking being, our emotional being, our being of life, all our self and nature must seek the Divine, enter into the Infinite, unite

with the Eternal.”<sup>8</sup> What is more, from the early Baroda period of his life he began to spiritualise every aspect of life. He became extremely simple in his living. Beginning with his own life, he did not attach any importance to food or dress. He never cared for them. He firmly believed that the higher learning and wealth God had given him, all belong to Him, and that he was entitled to use only so much of them as was necessary for the maintenance of the family. To offer money to God is to spend it in sacred causes. The whole country, in its plight, was at his door, seeking for shelter and help. There were three hundred millions of his brethren in this land, of whom many were dying of starvation and afflicted with sorrow and suffering. Sri Aurobindo said that it is our duty to do good to them.<sup>9</sup> He found all such high spiritual values of life in the ancient Indian scriptures and literary classics. They opened to him the immense treasure-house of the Indian heritage of spiritual culture and creative vitality. In them he discovered the secret of India’s unparalleled greatness. In discovering the greatness of India, he also discovered himself and the greatness of his soul.

Ancient India’s spiritual culture also gave Sri Aurobindo the clue to building of the greater India of the future. The governing force of this culture is spiritual aspiration. Spirituality was the highest aim of life. The predominance of the spiritual idea necessitated a casting of thought and action into the religious mould. Sri Aurobindo says: “Man does not arrive immediately at that highest inner elevation and if it were demanded from him at once, he would never arrive there. At first he needs lower supports and stages of ascent; he asks for some scaffolding of dogma, worship, image, sign, form, symbol, some indulgence...motive on which he can stand while he builds up in him the temple of the spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

The goal Sri Aurobindo always held up to humankind was : do not to reject any department of worldly life but spiritualise life as a whole. Sri Aurobindo held that spirituality must not belittle the mind, life or body but rather give them immense importance because they are the instruments of the life of the spirit in man.<sup>11</sup> He was in favour of man’s spiritual involvement in life’s upward march in the evolution of consciousness. He always favoured life’s expansion and enrichment, its divine illumination and fulfilment.

Sri Aurobindo instinctively revolted against the ascetic life. He emphatically declared, “...a Yoga which required me to give up the world was not for me”<sup>12</sup>, because he had realised that the ancient Indian spirituality was not at all a despairing gospel of world-disgust. His deep study of it revealed to him that it was an affirmation of life, a life for God and in God, a perpetual call to divine self-expression in creative action. His whole being responded to this central thought of Indian spirituality. From the early period of his self-development, therefore, he spurned all thought of escape. “Escape brings not the victory and the crown”<sup>13</sup>, he averred. Therefore, he resolved to labour throughout his life for God’s victory on earth, for establishing God’s kingdom of Light in this dim vale of tears, for transforming suffering itself into eternal bliss. For this highest purpose, the only means was, according to him, a systematic spiritualisation of all departments of human life and activity including political and patriotic struggle. In this respect, he emulated late nineteenth-century European revolutionaries such as Mazzini and Garibaldi of Italy. Like them, therefore, he started making use of his literary abilities to spread his spiritual message. All his literary and journalistic writings, therefore, need to be considered as instruments for spiritualising life.

Sri Aurobindo's spiritually oriented political ideas and activities were threefold.<sup>14</sup> First, action in the form of a secret revolutionary propaganda and organization for the preparation of an armed insurrection. Secondly, a public propaganda intended to convert the whole nation to the ideal of independence. Thirdly, organization of the people to carry on a public opposition through non-cooperation and passive resistance. As editor of *Bande Mataram* he seized this opportunity for spreading his message to the nation for his revolutionary purposes with the forward group of young men in the Congress. He persuaded them to take up the *Bande Mataram* daily as their party organ. As a result, the paper began to circulate throughout India. Through the journal Sri Aurobindo declared and developed a new political agenda for the country as the programme of the Nationalist Party comprising non-cooperation, passive resistance, *Swadeshi*, national education, etc. *Bande Mataram* also published a series of articles on Sri Aurobindo's political philosophy of revolution. Assisted by this publicity, the ideas of the Nationalists gained ground everywhere.

When Sri Aurobindo was arrested and held in prison, *Bande Mataram* came to an end. After his release, he became a speaker on the public platform and addressed large meetings. He started two weeklies, the *Karmayogin* and *Dharma*. At this time, his vision of the future grew clearer and he saw that the eventual independence of India was assured by the march of forces. As a result, he discontinued political activity, went to Pondicherry and turned to Yoga and spiritual pursuits exclusively.

Sri Aurobindo stands out as the first Indian exponent of the new revolutionary political thought and idealism rooted in spiritualism. His leadership was of a brief duration, no doubt. But it inspired

national effort, struggle, and suffering for half a century.<sup>15</sup> His outstanding contribution to Indian politics was the creation of a passion in the hearts of his countrymen for a complete and unqualified independence. The means he advocated for the purpose was the religion of patriotism, the worship of India as the Mother. He was eminently qualified to play this spiritual role.

During the second half of his Baroda days, a mighty spirituality was rising from within Sri Aurobindo and he gave himself up to it without reserve. He took his inspiration from Jeanne d'Arc of medieval France and Mazzini of nineteenth-century Italy. The latter, for example, had told his countrymen: "Your country is the token of the mission which God has given you to fulfil in Humanity. The faculties, the strength of all its sons should be united for the accomplishment of this mission...Your country should be your Temple...Be apostles of this faith, apostles of the brotherhood of nations, and of the unity of the human race."<sup>16</sup> Sri Aurobindo followed the same line of argument in spreading his spiritual patriotism among Indians.

On account of such high spiritual ideas and ideals espoused by Sri Aurobindo, his contemporary stalwarts such as Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpatrai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and C.R. Das noted that he was one of the few Indian leaders of the day who had grasped the full force and meaning of the true Nationalist ideal. Bipin Chandra Pal points out that "in him...not merely the spirit of Hinduism...but the whole spirit of Indian culture and manhood stood up to defend and assert itself against every form of undue foreign influence and alien domination."<sup>17</sup> He had clearly realized the spirit and actualities of the life of his nation. For him, politics was not a game of expediency but a school for developing human character. In his opinion, even education

could not be divorced from politics, religion or morals. His ideal of modern education was, therefore, supremely spiritual. Its aim was to actualize the highest and deepest God-consciousness of the human soul. Sri Aurobindo longed to fix the realism of the spirit of modern culture into the mould of the idealism of ancient philosophy. He got an opportunity to undertake this task when *Bande Mataram* was started. He was the leading spirit, the central figure in the new journal.

What is amazing is the fact that Sri Aurobindo's acquittal in the Alipore Bomb Case was also entirely because of the spiritual nature of his political ideas, ideals and action. The defence counsel's argument was centred on Sri Aurobindo's spirituality. What is more, C. R. Das's defence of Sri Aurobindo was accepted even by the judge, Mr Beachcroft. He agreed with C. R. Das's view that from the middle of 1904 onwards the whole life of Sri Aurobindo was actuated by noble ideals stemming from what C. R. Das described as Vedantism.

Sri Aurobindo was motivated by those noble ideals in the case of both India as a nation and Indians as individuals. In so far as the nation was concerned, Sri Aurobindo preached the lofty ideal of freedom. In the case of individuals, his idea was always to appeal to each individual to look for the Godhead within. Sri Aurobindo said: "If you want to realize [Him]...you must look...within your heart and... realise God within you; so also in the case of nations...No nation can attain [its salvation]... unless it realises the highest and noblest and the best of that nation... No foreigner can give you that salvation. It is within your own hands to revive that spirit of nationality"<sup>18</sup>. That is the Vedantic doctrine of nationality which Sri Aurobindo preached throughout his political career. From this it

becomes clear that his political doctrines were not of violence but of passive resistance. He never asked his countrymen to apply force, as he thought it was not a practical course under the circumstances. His only advice to them was to break and disobey any law which hindered them from attaining national salvation.

In his judgement on the famous Alipore Bomb Case, Mr. Beachcroft, the judge, concluded that "in Aurobindo's speeches...we get an idea of the stress...he laid on...his policy that India is to find her salvation from within and not from without"<sup>19</sup>. Thus, it was on account of his spirituality that Sri Aurobindo was acquitted by the judge.

Yet the question which naturally occurs, as it then occurred even to many of his colleagues, is: Why did Sri Aurobindo engage in revolutionary politics?<sup>20</sup> The answer is to be found in Sri Aurobindo's understanding of the Indian situation at the end of the nineteenth century. His observation of that situation had convinced him that the prevailing mood of the people was of apathy and despair—characteristic of *Tamas*. The inertia of his countrymen had to be turned into passionate drive in order to prepare them for their duty towards their nation. Since political freedom was his immediate objective, Sri Aurobindo initiated passive resistance and disobedience. As for the violence involved in the movement, he was not committed to non-violence at all. Meanwhile, the division of Bengal was enforced by the British. That left no option but revolutionary activities. Seizing the opportunity, Sri Aurobindo gave tremendous fillip to the revolutionary movement. Once encouraged thus, the newly roused insurrectionary spirit spread like wild fire. No doubt, the revolutionary movement entailed violence, bloodshed, imprisonment, suffering, even sacrifice of some

thful lives. But, according to Sri Aurobindo, was the price for wresting freedom from killing hands. As such, he did not grudge the use of violence, even as Joan of Arc in medieval France. Mazzini, the lover of God and humanity in 19th century Italy, had not. He knew that was the shortest and surest way to national awakening.

Aurobindo also knew that the nation was ready for completely eschewing violence. Keeping his stand clear in this respect he wrote in 1907: "To ask masses of mankind to act as saints, to rise to the height of divine love and to practise it in relation to their adversaries or aggressors is to ignore human nature...The Gita is the best answer to those who shrink from the use of violence...Hinduism recognises human nature...It sets one ideal for the saint, another for the man of action, a third for the trader, a fourth for the serf. To prescribe the same ideal for all is to bring about...the confusion of duties. Politics is the ideal of the *Kshatriya*, and the morality of the *Kshatriya* ought to govern our political actions. To impose in politics the unhuman duty of saintly sufferance is to preach a confusion of duties]. The sword of the warrior is necessary to the fulfilment of justice and righteousness: the holiness of saint Ramdas is not complete without Shivaji"<sup>21</sup>. "Therefore," says Sri Krishna in the Mahabharata, "God created the world with title and armour, the sword, the bow and arrow as a danger"<sup>22</sup>. "Liberty is the life-breath of a nation; and when the life is attacked...and every means of self-preservation becomes ineffectual and justifiable."<sup>23</sup>

Sri Aurobindo was not alone to maintain such views on resistance. Not only Tilak but also Sri Anandakrishna thought similarly. Tilak said: "...As for God, so even for a...saintly man—the first religious duty is the overcoming of the wicked. For this overcoming, the 'reactional thrust' or

'responsive blow' is at times necessary"<sup>24</sup>. According to the Paramahansa: "You must hiss at wicked people. You must frighten them lest they should do you harm"<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, it was Sri Aurobindo's conviction that the evil of war and aggression was inevitable so long as man in the mass is what he is. He writes in his *Essays on the Gita*: "War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence...In the actual life of man...we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives and what seeks to exist and live: [Till the day]...when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; ...the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion."<sup>26</sup> Hence Sri Aurobindo's acceptance of revolutionary politics. Hence, too, his preaching of revolutionary ideals through *Bande Mataram*.

In prison, Sri Aurobindo had come to realise that all life was *Karmayoga* in the true spirit of the Gita, and all life was *Dharma*, a true religion dedicated to winning God through constant *sadhana*.<sup>27</sup> This was a new and newly enhanced spiritualism acquired by him. He expressed it in his public speeches too. For example, in 1909 he declared: "God is the leader of this movement. God is within you...An immortal Power is working in you." He had said in 1906: "Work that Mother India may prosper; suffer that she may rejoice." and that "To save the light, to save the spirit of India, God was raising the nation."<sup>28</sup> He further pointed out that liberty is a necessity of national life, an indispensable condition of national development. He was of the opinion that liberty was worth striving for; for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of the human race. In 1908 he declared: "The work of national

emancipation is a great and holy *yajna*...Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice...Our attitude is a political Vedantism."<sup>29</sup>

The Nationalism revealed by Sri Aurobindo was, thus, a unique evangel, a broader, nobler and

mightier conception of the awakened soul of this ancient land. The vision of such free India, held up before the nation by Sri Aurobindo in his articles in *Bande Mataram*, therefore, converted nationalism into a new religion of patriotism. Nationalism, in fact, became a *Dharma*.

#### REFERENCES :

- <sup>1</sup> Catherine Soanes, Alan Spooner, Sarah Hawker (eds.), *Compact Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Word Power Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001), p.872.
- <sup>2</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Volume 19) (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1970), p.857.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* (Volume 9) (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), p.251.
- <sup>5</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Volume 19), p.1018.
- <sup>6</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1972), p.98.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Volume 20) (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1971), p.265.
- <sup>9</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique* (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1981), p.39-40.
- <sup>10</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (New York: The Sri Aurobindo Library, Inc., 1953), p.138.
- <sup>11</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (Volume 14) (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), p.427.
- <sup>12</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, p.36
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.
- <sup>14</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p.21 ff.
- <sup>15</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, p.91 ff.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.
- <sup>17</sup> Bipin Chandra Pal quoted in Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972), p.179.
- <sup>18</sup> Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century*, p.56.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.
- <sup>20</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, p.116 ff.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.124-5.
- <sup>22</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Morality of Boycott*, an unpublished writing seized and produced as an exhibit in the Alipore case, May 1908.
- <sup>23</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, pp.125-6.
- <sup>24</sup> Tilak quoted in Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, p.126 footnote.
- <sup>25</sup> Sri Ramakrishna quoted in Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, p.126 footnote.
- <sup>26</sup> Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique*, pp.126-7.
- <sup>27</sup> R.R. Diwakar, *Mahayogi: Sri Aurobindo* (Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1967), p.73.
- <sup>28</sup> A.B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo: Some Aspects of His Vision* (Bombay: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1977), pp.31-2.
- <sup>29</sup> S. Mitra, *Sri Aurobindo: Towards Victory of the Light Supreme* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1976), pp.68-9.

□