

## Sri Aurobindo's Integral Nationalism: Bridging the Gap Between his Seemingly Contradictory Spiritual and Secret Nationalist Life

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#### Abstract

Sri Aurobindo is seen most prominently as a spiritual leader and defender of Indian culture. However, a significant portion of his life consisted of both aggressive and passive resistance. He frequently tried to unite young Indian to be ready for armed revolution and openly advocated for it. His defence of violence and secret political activities can seem contradictory when compared to his spiritual philosophy and ideal of human unity. He advocated for both active and passive techniques for fighting for freedom in India. This research paper reexamines Sri Aurobindo's extremist nationalist philosophies with his own integral approach so as to determine whether it was contradiction or integration which modeled Sri Aurobindo's seemingly contradictory Spiritual and Nationalist lives.

**Keywords** Sri Aurobindo, Integral Nationalism, Spiritualism, Philosophy, Spiritual Consciousness, Spiritual Nationalism, Active and Passive Resistance.

#### Introduction

When talking about spiritual nationalism in India, one most commonly points to the Gandhian philosophy of unconditional passive resistance which preaches to never use violence as a method of achieving freedom no matter the condition. However, Sri Aurobindo was one universally praised freedom activist cum spiritual leader who, while primarily emphasizing the need for passive resistance, was not hesitant to carry out an armed revolution if the conditions called for it. Over the years, he wrote volumes of literature defining his philosophies of both human and spiritual ideal pursuits. In his later work *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he envisages a world where all materialistic pursuits are given up in favour of the pursuit of the divine. Yet he still manages to allow appreciation of the aesthetic. All of this made his philosophy everything it was intended to be, integral and comprehensive. As a revolutionary, Sri Aurobindo wrote volumes of literature asking for absolute freedom from the British government and urging readers to treat the fight like a spiritual duty. However, along with this he was establishing youth camps and aiding in helping people learn how to make bombs if the time calls for such action.

#### Aim of study

For the research on the concerned topic the scholar's prime objectives are-

1. To know the techniques for Spiritual Nationalism by Sri Aurobindo.
2. To discuss how Aurobindo was moulded by the Spiritualistic ideals of the Bhagwadgita.
3. To understand Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolutionary concept of Consciousness, which is an integral approach to all aspects of life.
4. To throw light on Sri Aurobindo's secret Revolutionary activities to make India free from the British rule.

**Review of  
Literature**

Survey of related literature is an essential part to start an actual planning and avoiding duplication of research work. Some works which are already done on the subject are being discussed below:

**Nationalism as a Spiritual Path: Sri Aurobindo's Philosophical Interpretation By Dr. Rashmi Rana (March, 2023)**

In this paper the researcher explores Sri Aurobindo's idea of nationalism from a Spiritual perspective. And presents a vision of nationalism that goes beyond nation and a belief in its superiority.

**Life Divine: Spiritual Aim Behind Aurobindo's Politics & Education- Prof. Debashri Banerjee**

This paper presents a study on the inherent Spiritual Aim behind Sri Aurobindo's entire Social and Political system. According to Sri Aurobindo the arrival of British merchants in India was destined by God. It was the part of its training, to taste the glory of power and Spiritual advancement of its countrymen.

**Aurobindo Ghosh: Theory of Spiritual Nationalism Dr. Santosh Yadav (April 2023)**

It focussed on the detailed study on the meaning and nature of Aurobindo's Spiritual Nationalism. The paper also studied the factors which were responsible to arouse the feeling of nationalism in Sri Aurobindo. Although his active participation, in Indian Freedom Struggle was only for five years from 1905 to 1910. But in this short period of time Aurobindo made the people of the country recognize their real personality and regain the glory of their past.

**Main Text**

**Sri Aurobindo's Secret Revolutionary Activities and the Justification of Violence:**

With the ever-increasing nationalist spirit amongst Indians, Sri Aurobindo saw the opportunity to prepare for an armed revolt against the British government, especially amongst the youth of India. For this, he went about travelling and establishing organizations and uniting people, especially the youth, that supported violence as a means of fighting the British rule such as the Anushilan Smiti in 1902 (Heehs, 2008, 67). His idea was to secretly plan for an armed revolt by organizing various smaller groups, primarily throughout Calcutta. With the help of one of Sri Aurobindo's friends in the Baroda army, he managed to send his first emissary to join as a trooper who formed the first Calcutta based organization. Sri Aurobindo travelled to villages and towns to establish secret societies and unite regiments of the Indian army to plan a secret revolution. Especially in Bengal, he organised revolutionaries and established contacts with nationalists like Bhaha Jain. At one point, he organised for a young man to travel to Europe to learn how to make bombs. While at face he was supporting non-violent movements like the non-cooperation movement, he was privately getting ready for armed revolt in case passive resistances did not succeed. He was also heavily influenced by historical revolutions against the English rule such as in Italy or the United States of America.

All of this presents the picture of Sri Aurobindo's political ideal as radical and violent. However, these activities were more so contingencies than preparations. Sri Aurobindo went on record to claim multiple times that he did not mind violent action when it comes to fighting for nationalist freedom, however, such action must be just. In his own words: "We preach defensive (passive) resistance mainly passive in its methods at present, but active whenever active resistance is needed, but defensive resistance within the limits imposed by human nature and demands of self-respect and the militant spirit of true manhood." (Aurobindo, 2002, 296). For Sri Aurobindo it was not necessarily about the necessity, rather it was about choosing what is better.

**The Ideal of Human Unity:**

When Sri Aurobindo left India for Pondicherry in 1910, it was not exhaustion with politics or fear of the British government which compelled him to move. He had heard a calling from above which called him to move. Sri Aurobindo used the word *Adesh* to describe instructions he received from the higher power. He later said that it was an *Adesh* that told him to move to Pondicherry to seek a spiritual life (Purani, 133). After moving to Pondicherry he hardly ever concerned himself with political matters (except for responding to a few incidents like World War II and the Indian Independence). He had

dedicated his life towards a greater, spiritual cause, and thus the scope of his political and social literature evolved from a nationalist one to universal. That is not to say that earlier his writings were not spiritually charged. Ever since he came back to India after receiving education abroad he dedicated most of his free time to study Indian cultural history and spirituality and his political philosophies were still presented most prominently with spiritual light. However, it is obvious that whatever the cause may have been, his mind was conditioned to evaluate even the most mythical concepts of idealism with a pragmatic lens. What differentiated Sri Aurobindo's doctrine of passive resistance from moderates' was the nature and limits of practice. Sri Aurobindo only supported those methods of passive resistance which involved directly going against what the British government allowed or stood for. Therefore he openly opposed concepts like petitioning saying "Petitioning, which we have so long followed, we reject as impossible, — the dream of a timid inexperience, the teaching of false friends who hope to keep us in perpetual subjection, foolish to reason, false to experience." (Aurobindo, 2002, 298).

Sri Aurobindo denies the Gandhian thought that Gita teaches non-violence. Rather, he believes that the Gita presents violence as a last resort in case humans could not come to peaceful unity on their own. In his *Ideal of Human Unity* he echoes the same sentiment when he says that if people could not come to such an understanding, nature finds a way to "bring about her end": "If the humans cannot find out the way, Nature herself is sure to shape these upheavals in such a way as to bring about her end." (Aurobindo, 1997, 573).

However, one need not look much further than his theory of the evolutionary concept of Consciousness to understand how and why he chooses to stay pragmatic with everything in life. His theory of Evolutionary Consciousness follows a scientific chain of progress. In it, starting from the Inconscient Mind, where all the divine energy is hidden, to the Truth-Consciousness, which is essentially everything that is true in the world, the Divine Consciousness undergoes first the process of involution and then evolution to become one with the Truth-Consciousness. (Aurobindo, 1970, 232-277). This change is very slow and cannot be done in one's lifetime, however, one can speed up the process and experience the divine in life via Integral Yoga and following a spiritual lifestyle. This process of evolutionary consciousness encompasses not only the mental planes of existence but physical and supernatural planes as well. Sri Aurobindo's concept of evolutionary consciousness stands as a testament to Sri Aurobindo's integral approach to all aspects of life. Even while presenting his major spiritual philosophy, he makes sure to incorporate the physical element so as to not miss out on any aspect, much like his political philosophies which advocated for fighting by any means necessary with the greater picture of freedom in mind.

#### **Freedom, Spiritualism, and the Concept of Integral Nationalism:**

Even when talking about the Ideal, Sri Aurobindo did not miss out on the opportunity to check for its pragmatic possibility. He was aware that at the current pace if human beings do not move forward towards spiritual unity, nature will bring it about whatever way necessary. He always wanted spiritual undertones to go along with nationalist sentiment. During the partition of Bengal in 1905, his approach was to unite the people under a spiritual sentiment with the publication of the pamphlet titled 'Bhawani Mandir' which pushed for the establishment of a temple of goddess Bhawani, whom he also called the 'Mother of India', and carry out nationalist activities for her and in her name, forsaking the self towards a greater cause (Aurobindo, 2002, 1182). In fact, most spiritual schools demand a forsaking of the self in favour of the spiritual pursuit. One can argue this justifies his approach towards the use of violence when necessary. However, for Sri Aurobindo, the necessity was more about not missing out on any possible variable rather than focusing on any single one like the need to fight for something greater than the self. As such, to understand his justification of violence, one must understand his approach to everything- the 'integral' approach. For him, violence was not merely a plausibility, but a probability, just like boycott and national education one, despite the latter being relatively more ideal. Therefore, with this integral approach, Sri Aurobindo merely tried to argue that one must not leave any tables turned when it comes to fighting the right fight. Therefore, for him, the ultimate aim was to put together a program which blends all the possible effective elements of attaining national independence so as to carry out a movement which has no chance of failing: "...there must be an increasing non-cooperation and passive resistance which would render the administration of the country by a foreign Government difficult or finally impossible, a universal unrest which would wear down repression and finally, if need be, an open revolt all over the country. This plan included a boycott of British trade, the substitution of national schools for the Government institutions, the creation of arbitration courts to which the people could resort instead of depending on the ordinary courts of law, the creation of volunteer forces which would be the nucleus of an army of open revolt, and all other action that could make the programme complete." (Purani, 152-153)

This was simply pragmatic yet intellectually ideal nature of Sri Aurobindo's philosophies which compelled him to integrate all the successful elements of various historical struggles of independence along with an emphasis on the value of Indian culture and spirituality. Even with his spiritual teachings, Sri Aurobindo opted to stay pragmatic about the possibilities, nature of things, and the end goal. His philosophy of the Ideal of Human Unity does not forget the mischievous nature of man. For him, the end goal is to merge all Consciousness to the ultimate Truth-Consciousness, which according to him is inevitable regardless of one's which as all Consciousness is a part of the Truth-Consciousness and is destined to evolve into it. For this, it is ideal that humans should achieve a level of unity where the concepts of division and hatred based on geographical boundaries are overcome in favour of spiritual pursuit. This is not optional. With his usual pragmatic approach, he says that if the human race is not able to achieve this unity on its own nature always has a way of bringing about her end. "If the humans cannot find out the way, Nature herself is sure to shape these upheavals in such a way as to bring about her end." (Aurobindo, 1997, 573)

Sri Aurobindo could not entertain the possibility of an India which remained a British colony forever due to the passive and cowardly nature of her citizens. Therefore, conclusively, the main focus for him was not achieving the status of political freedom, but a revival and protection of the rich culture and history of India which was steadily being destroyed by the British government. He would settle for nothing less than this ideal, and thus violent or non-violent, the fight had been about India and not geographical borders. In his own words:

"To strive for anything less than a strong and glorious freedom would be to insult the greatness of our past and the magnificent possibilities of our future." (Aurobindo, 2002, 298)

#### Conclusion

This paper studied how the seemingly contradictory spiritual and political lives of Sri Aurobindo were not really contradictory at all. In all variables of life, Sri Aurobindo took an Integral approach. Even with his spiritual teachings, Sri Aurobindo incorporated all the elements of passive and active resistance. For him, it did not matter what steps are needed to be taken to achieve spiritual awakening, it just had to be done. Thus he also treated the act of achieving freedom for India like a spiritual feat. The rich spiritual history and culture of India had to be preserved, and the whole fight for India's freedom had been a spiritual one. Therefore, violent or non-violent, the means were aimed to protect the great spiritual history of India objectively. For him, it was not about the moral code, but rather the ends without which India's great spiritual past would inevitably die under the western influence.

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