

Sri Aurobindo's Views on Indian Nationalism

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Introduction

Indian nationalism was not a single, uniform ideology. Rather, it was a composite and multifaceted phenomenon. It evolved through diverse intellectual, social, cultural and political traditions during the struggle against the British colonial rule. These different strands reflected varying visions of India's identity, methods of struggle, and future political order. Among these various strands, the two most significant were the 'Moderate' and 'Extremist' schools of Indian nationalism. Though both sought India's advancement and eventual self-government, they differed considerably in their methods, political outlook and strategies. Together they contributed to the development of the Indian national movement and, finally, the achievement of independence in 1947.¹

The Moderate Strand

The Moderates dominated the early phase of the Indian National Congress (INC) since its establishment in 1885 until around 1905. They believed in constitutional methods and gradual reforms within the framework of the British rule. Major proponents of this school were Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendranath Banerjee and Pherozeshah Mehta among others.

Believers in the liberal democratic tradition, they followed the peaceful methods of protests and agitations which

included submitting petitions and memorandums, sending delegations to Great Britain, organising public meetings, and creating public opinion. They demanded expansion of representative institutions in India and scope for greater participation of the Indians in British administration. They also developed an economic critique of colonialism (Naoroji's 'Drain Theory' e.g.).

The Moderates, however, have been criticized on the ground that their movement was largely confined to educated elites, relied excessively on the goodwill of the colonial masters, and thus, progressed slowly.

The Extremist Strand

The Extremists emerged in response to the perceived failure of moderate politics. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 and increasingly repressive policies of the British rulers accelerated the rise of extremist or militant nationalism. Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal (commonly known as Lal-Bal-Pal) and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh were the major proponents of this school. The Extremists demanded *Swaraj* or self-rule. They drew inspiration from India's cultural tradition and sought mass participation in the nationalist movement.

Their methods of agitation included boycott of foreign goods, promotion of *Swadeshi*, national education, passive resistance, and mass mobilization through

public festivals and processions. The Extremists aimed at transforming the Indian national movement from an elitist one to a mass movement and to foster self-confidence and self-reliance among the masses.

However, the Extremists lacked a uniform organizational structure and faced severe repression and internal divisions.

The Moderates and Extremists thus represented two successive phases in the development of Indian nationalism. Together, they significantly shaped the evolution of India's freedom struggle.²

It is in this perspective of the national movement in India that we would like to focus on the views of Sri Aurobindo on nationalism as he occupies a unique position in the history of Indian political thought and nationalist movement. A philosopher, poet, revolutionary leader, and spiritual guru, Aurobindo developed a comprehensive understanding of nationalism that transcended conventional political definitions. But before we delve into his concept of nationalism, a brief life sketch of Aurobindo will help us to understand better the evolution of his views on nation and nationalism.

Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950)

Aurobindo was born on 15 August 1872 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) into a Bengali Kyastha family. His father Krishna Dhan Ghosh was a Western educated surgeon and his mother Swarnalata Devi came from a culturally distinguished family. Aurobindo's maternal grandfather Rajnarayan Bose was a well-known intellectual of his time and a leading figure in the Brahmo Samaj.³ At the age of seven Aurobindo was sent to England for his education. He studied at St. Paul's school and later at King's College, Cambridge. To

fulfil his father's wish, Aurobindo appeared for the ICS examination and passed the written test. However, as he had no intention to be a civil servant under the British administration, Aurobindo purposefully kept himself absent from the practical horse riding test to disqualify himself for the service.⁴ In 1891 Aurobindo felt that a period of great upheaval for his motherland was coming in which he was destined to play an important role. He left England for India in 1893.

Returning to India, Aurobindo joined in the state service of the princely state of Baroda. During his days in Baroda, Aurobindo contributed a number of articles on India's political situation in *Indu Prakash* and took an active interest in the Indian independence movement against the British colonial rule. He established contacts with Lokmanya Tilak and Sister Nivedita. Aurobindo formally moved to Calcutta in 1906 after the announcement of the Partition of Bengal. In Bengal, with the help of his brother Barindra Nath Ghosh, Aurobindo established contacts and inspired revolutionaries such as Bagha Jatin (Jatindranath Mukherji) and Surendranath Tagore. He helped establish a series of youth clubs including the 'Anushilan Samiti' in Calcutta in 1902.⁵ Aurobindo became involved in the nascent revolutionary movement in Bengal. Gradually he emerged as a leading figure of the extremist wing of the INC and advocated complete independence from British rule. Through articles in journals like *Bande Mataram*, he inspired young nationalists and called for passive resistance and national awakening. In the 1906 session of the INC presided over by Dadabhai Naoroji, Aurobindo participated as a councillor in forming the fourfold

objective of 'Swaraj, Swadesh, Boycott, and National Education'. In the 1907 Surat Congress the Moderates and Extremists had a major showdown. Aurobindo led the Extremist group along with Tilak. In 1908 he was arrested in connection with the Alipore Bomb Case. Aurobindo was subsequently released after he spent nearly a year in prison. During his imprisonment, Aurobindo underwent profound spiritual experiences that transformed the course of his life. Out of prison, Aurobindo started two new publications—*Karmayogin* (in English), and *Dharma* (in Bengali). He delivered his famous 'Uttarpara Speech' (1922), hinting at the transformation of his focus to spiritual matters. Repression of British colonial government against him continued because of his writings in the new journals.⁶

After his release from the jail Aurobindo gradually withdrew from active politics. In 1910 he permanently moved to Pondicherry. There he devoted himself to his spiritual pursuits and developed his philosophy of Integral Yoga, which aimed at the spiritual evolution of humanity and the integration of all aspects of life with divine consciousness. At the beginning of his stay at Pondicherry, there were few followers, but gradually their numbers grew, leading to the formation of Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1926. From this time onwards Aurobindo started to sign himself as 'Sri Aurobindo', Sri being commonly used as an honorific. Aurobindo's major literary works came out during his Pondicherry days—*The Life Divine* (1919), *Essays on the Gita* (1922), *Uttarpara Speech* (1922), the epic poem *Savitri* (1947) and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1948). On 15 August 1947 Aurobindo strongly opposed the partition of India stating that he hoped 'the nation will not accept the

settled fact as forever settled, or as anything more than a temporary expedient'.⁷ Aurobindo breathed his last on 5 December 1950.

It is evident from the discussions made so far that Indian nationalism emerged as a powerful force against British colonial rule and sought to restore political independence and cultural self-confidence. Among the leaders who shaped Indian nationalism, Sri Aurobindo occupies a distinctive place. Let us now analyze in detail his ideas about 'nation' and 'nationalism'.

Nation and Nationalism as perceived by Sri Aurobindo

Aurobindo's concept of nationalism was not merely confined to political or territorial boundaries; rather it was founded on the idea of spiritual unity and cultural resurgence. Aurobindo believed that true nationalism should be based on the spiritual and cultural heritage of a nation emphasizing the need for revival of India's ancient wisdom and value. He argued that India's nationalist movement should not only strive for political freedom, but also for the rediscovery of its spiritual essence, which has been suppressed under colonial rule. Such a view of nationalism set Aurobindo apart from other nationalist leaders of his time.⁸ Unlike many of his contemporaries who viewed nationalism merely as a political movement aimed at attaining self-government, Sri Aurobindo regarded it as a spiritual awakening and a divine mission. He said, 'Nationalism is not a mere political programme; nationalism is a religion that has come from God'.⁹

The Nation as an organism

Aurobindo viewed the nation as an organism, a living entity with its own distinct personality, consciousness and

destiny. It is not merely an aggregate of individuals but has a collective life and soul. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism emerged from his understanding of Indian culture, Vedantic thought and the historical destiny of nations. If every nation possesses a collective soul or national spirit, India's soul is fundamentally spiritual. Therefore, India's freedom struggle was not merely a political conflict but an effort to recover its spiritual identity and fulfil its universal mission.

This organic view implies that the nation grows, evolves, and has a life cycle, requiring care and nurturing from its members. The health and strength of the nation depend on the health and harmony of its constituent parts, which are the individuals and communities within it.¹⁰

Integral Nationalism

Aurobindo's vision of nationalism was integral, encompassing all aspects of human existence—political, social, cultural and spiritual. He advocated for a holistic approach to nationalism that transcended narrow sectarian interests and embraced the diversity of India's cultural and religious traditions. According to Aurobindo, integral nationalism sought to harmonize the various elements of Indian society fostering unity without erasing the rich tapestry of its cultural fabric.¹¹ This is a concept of nationalism that integrates the material and spiritual dimensions of life. Aurobindo envisions a nation that recognizes the unity of all aspects of human existence including the physical, vital, mental, and spiritual realms.

Nationalism: An Evolutionary Perspective

Aurobindo's views on nationalism were also influenced by his evolutionary philosophy which posited that nations, like individuals, undergo a process of growth and self-realisation. He viewed the nationalist movement as a crucial phase in

India's evolutionary journey, wherein the nation was striving to fulfil its destiny and contribute to the progress of humanity. Aurobindo's evolutionary perspective provided a broader framework for understanding the significance of nationalism in the context of India's spiritual and cultural evolution.¹² Aurobindo envisions a nation evolving towards a higher consciousness, transcending mere political boundaries and contributing to the collective evolution of humanity. In his writings in the *Karmayogin* a recurring theme is the spiritual evolution of humanity. Aurobindo believes that humanity is in a process of evolution towards a higher consciousness and that India has a pivotal role in this evolutionary process. He views India's spiritual traditions, particularly her '*Sanatan Dharma*' as the foundation for this global transformation. Aurobindo argues that the liberation of India is necessary for the world to evolve spiritually as India will be a guiding force in spreading spiritual consciousness and leading humanity towards a higher state of being.¹³

Nationalism as a religion

For Aurobindo nationalism was a religion—a divine mission, a profound moral duty. In *Bande Mataram* and other early writings Aurobindo states, 'nationalism is a religion that has come from God; its temple is the whole of its vast country'.¹⁴ One of Aurobindo's most significant contribution was his conception of nationalism as a religion. To him serving the nation, which Aurobindo often referred to as 'Mother India', was equivalent to worshipping the Divine Mother. However, by describing nationalism in religious terms, Aurobindo did not advocate sectarianism or theocracy. Rather, he sought to inspire Indians with a sense of moral and spiritual commitment towards their motherland.

According to Sri Aurobindo, political movements succeed only when they evoke deep emotional and spiritual dedication among the people. Nationalism becomes powerful when individuals regard service to the nation as a sacred responsibility. The nation, therefore, assumes the character of a divine mother deserving devotion and sacrifice. Nationalism, to Aurobindo, was not merely a political programme, but a spiritual calling that demanded complete devotion and sacrifice. It involved a transformation of the individual's inner being, cultivating virtues like selflessness, courage, and integrity for the nation's sake.¹⁵ This religious interpretation of nationalism infused the Indian freedom struggle with idealism and moral strength. It encouraged individuals to transcend personal interests and dedicate themselves to collective welfare.

Spiritual Nationalism

The central element of Sri Aurobindo's nationalist philosophy is spiritual nationalism. Unlike political nationalism, which seeks merely state power and territorial independence, spiritual nationalism aims at the awakening of the national soul. Aurobindo viewed the nation not just as a political or geographical entity, but as a living being, a divine manifestation, and an expression of the 'Divine Mother'. Such a view is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition. To Aurobindo, nationalism in India was fundamentally a spiritual movement, an awakening of the nation's soul. Serving the nation was seen as a spiritual discipline, a path towards self-realisation and divine service.

Sri Aurobindo believed that every nation has a unique mission in human civilization. India's mission, according to him, was spiritual. Throughout history, India had contributed profoundly to philosophy,

religion, ethics, and metaphysical inquiry. The colonial domination had weakened this spiritual vitality of our country, leading to cultural decline and loss of confidence. The objective of Indian nationalism, therefore, was not simply the expulsion of British rule but the revival of India's spiritual consciousness. Political independence was necessary because a nation cannot fulfil its spiritual mission under foreign rule. Swaraj, or self-rule was, therefore, essential for the recovery of national selfhood.

Aurobindo's notion of spiritual nationalism also emphasized harmony among communities. He opposed narrow forms of nationalism based on racial superiority or hatred of others. Since all nations are manifestations of the 'divine', each has an equal right to existence and self-development. Genuine nationalism, argued Aurobindo, respects the diversity of cultures while contributing to universal human progress.

National Education and Cultural Revival as major components of Nationalism

Sri Aurobindo recognized that political freedom could not be sustained without cultural and intellectual renewal. Colonial education, in his view, had alienated Indians from their own heritage and encouraged imitation of Western values. He advocated a system of national education rooted in Indian culture and traditions while remaining open to scientific and intellectual progress. Aurobindo argued that education should cultivate character, self-confidence, and awareness of India's spiritual legacy. According to him, cultural revival was an essential component of nationalism. Nations survive not merely through political institutions but through shared memories, traditions and ideals. India's strength lay in her ancient civilization and spiritual wisdom. Nationalism required the rediscovery and

creative reinterpretation of this heritage. Sri Aurobindo did not reject Western civilization entirely. He appreciated Western achievements in science, rational inquiry, and political organization. However, he argued that India should assimilate these achievements while preserving her distinctive cultural identity.

Nationalism and Human Unity

Although Aurobindo was a passionate nationalist, he did not consider nationalism the final stage of human development. He believed that history represents a progressive movement toward greater unity and cooperation among peoples. In his work *The Ideal of Human Unity*¹⁶, Sri Aurobindo argued that humanity evolves through successive forms of collective organization—from family to tribe, from tribe to nation, and eventually toward international unity. Nationalism is an important stage in this process because it enables collective self-consciousness and self-development.

However, Aurobindo believed that nationalism becomes destructive when it degenerates into aggression, imperialism, or exclusivism. He criticized European nationalism for often promoting conflict and domination. He envisioned a future world order based on free cooperation among independent nations. Aurobindo's notion of nationalism was thus universal rather than chauvinistic in nature. He opined that love for one's nation should ultimately contribute to the welfare of humanity. The spiritual development of each nation enriches the collective progress of the human race.

Concluding observations

Sri Aurobindo played an active role in India's nationalist movement during the first decade of the twentieth century. Dissatisfied with the moderate methods of petitions and

constitutional agitations, he advocated more assertive forms of political action. Sri Aurobindo was among the earliest leaders to demand complete independence for India. At a time when many moderate leaders sought constitutional reforms and limited self-government for India within the British empire, he insisted that nothing short of full independence (Swaraj) was acceptable. Aurobindo supported boycott movements, passive resistance and national self-organization. He encouraged Indians to reject economic dependence on British goods and to develop indigenous industries and institutions. For Aurobindo Swaraj was not merely political autonomy but self-realization. The term implied freedom in every respect—political, economic, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual. He argued that foreign rule restricted the creative energies of the nation and prevented the expression of its true identity.

Sri Aurobindo believed that dependence on colonial institutions produced psychological inferiority and undermined national confidence. He, therefore, advocated national education, economic self-reliance, and cultural regeneration along with political struggle. Aurobindo's notion of Swaraj anticipated later movements that emphasized self-determination and decolonization. By linking freedom with spiritual and cultural awakening, he broadened the meaning of independence beyond conventional political definitions. Although Aurobindo sympathized with revolutionary activism, his ultimate objective remained spiritual transformation rather than violent conflict. Political action, argued Aurobindo, must be guided by ethical and spiritual principles. His revolutionary nationalism inspired many young Indians and contributed significantly to the growth of militant nationalism. At the

same time, his later philosophical writings emphasized inner transformation and spiritual evolution as the foundation of lasting social and political change.

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism emerged from his understanding of Indian culture, Vedantic thought, and the historical destiny of nations. He believed that India's freedom movement was not merely a political struggle but an effort to recover its spiritual identity and to fulfil its universal mission. Aurobindo believed that all human beings and societies are manifestations of the Divine. Nations are not accidental political arrangements but living entities possessing a collective consciousness. He rejected the purely materialistic conception of nationalism prevalent in Europe. According to Aurobindo, European nationalism often emphasized territorial sovereignty, military strength, and racial identity. He, on the contrary, argued that nationalism should be understood as an expression of spiritual consciousness. Aurobindo stated that the nation is not merely a geographical territory or a collection of individuals, but a '*Shakti*' or living power. Such an understanding transformed nationalism from a political ideology into a spiritual principle. For Aurobindo, patriotism was akin to religious devotion because the nation embodied divine energy. Service to the nation, therefore, became a sacred duty. The liberation of India, to him, represented the awakening of this divine power and realization of the nation's spiritual destiny.

Sri Aurobindo's views on nationalism remain highly relevant in the contemporary world. In an era characterized by globalization, cultural homogenization, and identity politics, his philosophy offers valuable insights. Aurobindo's emphasis on cultural self-respect encourages nations to

preserve their heritage while participating in global interactions. He clearly demonstrated that modernization need not necessarily require the abandonment of cultural identity.

Today, in many parts of the world, nationalism has become aggressive and exclusionary, leading into intolerance, xenophobia, and conflict. Sri Aurobindo's nationalism, grounded in selflessness, service and universalism, offers an alternative path that fosters unity rather than division. His ideals can help nations balance patriotism with global cooperation, preventing conflicts rooted in narrow national interests.¹⁷ By emphasizing the spiritual dignity of all nations, Aurobindo advocated a nationalism rooted in cooperation and mutual respect.

Sri Aurobindo's belief in human unity anticipates contemporary efforts towards international cooperation and global governance. He recognized that humanity's future depends upon balancing national identities with universal values. His insistence that political freedom should be accompanied by moral and spiritual development remains particularly relevant. Contemporary developments at different corners of the globe have revealed that material progress without ethical foundations often leads to social fragmentation and conflict. Aurobindo's philosophy reminds us that true national development requires the harmonious growth of political institutions, cultural values, and spiritual consciousness. His spiritual perspective on national identity offers a transformative model in today's globalized yet fractured world. It can unite people through shared purpose rather than divisions, foster ethical leadership, and integrate material progress with higher consciousness. As the world struggles with extremism, cultural conflicts and political unrest, Aurobindo's vision offers an alternative path toward a harmonious and

enlightened future, where nationalism can be a force for collective good rather than mutual conflict.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo's views on nationalism represent one of the most original contributions to modern Indian political thought. He transformed nationalism from a purely political doctrine into a comprehensive philosophy grounded in spirituality, cultural revival, and human unity. In Aurobindo's view Indian freedom struggle was, therefore, not merely a battle against British colonial rule but an endeavour to awaken the nation's soul and restore its spiritual destiny. By linking Swaraj with self-realization, cultural renewal, and universal human progress, Aurobindo developed a holistic vision of national development. Although he was a committed

nationalist, Sri Aurobindo ultimately viewed nationalism as a stage in the humanity's movement toward greater unity and cooperation. His philosophy continues to offer us valuable guidance in addressing contemporary challenges of identity, globalization, and international relations. While celebrating the 79th year of India's Independence (which is also the 154th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo) with proper enthusiasm throughout the country, let us remember to have a relook and attempt a re-reading of Aurobindo's philosophy. For Sri Aurobindo's nationalism remains a profound synthesis of patriotism and universalism, demonstrating that love for one's nation and commitment to humanity are not contradictory but complementary ideals. ■

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