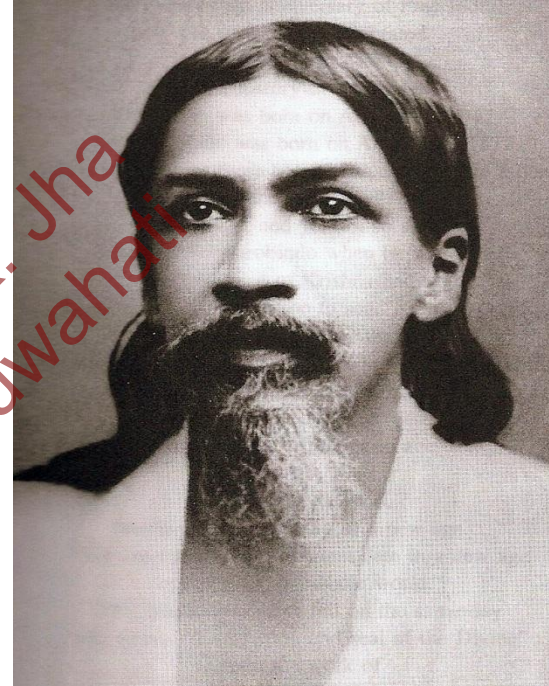


AUROBINDO GHOSH

Key themes :

- Self
- Community & Religion



Aurobindo's views on Community and Religion

- Aurobindo used the rhetoric of religion in his political writings as a means of communication to those who were otherwise non participative in the political domain. It was a distinct way of engaging people in the non-violent struggle against colonialism.
- Andrew Sartori regards his appeal to religious discourse not as a direct traditional attachment to Hinduism but an act of traditionalism seeking to use it as a means of appealing to the 'national-popular' who were subject to the appeal and authority of religion.

- In this context, he can be regarded as a historical figure responding to the immediate context. His engagement with the religious discourse can be treated as ramification of the failure of Swadeshi movement.
- It can also be understood in the light of his conception of an ideal state- which was ethical and not a mechanical system.
- Although there is ample use of religion for practical reasons, it is spirituality and not religion as his central focus of thought.

Spiritual religion of humanity

- As the means for universal human unity, Aurobindo talks of a spiritual religion of humanity. For him, spiritual foundation can lead to the psychological unification of people which will equally respect the socio-cultural diversity among them.
- Spiritual religion of humanity does not imply a universal religion. He writes:

“ Mankind has tried unity by that means; it has failed and deserved to fail, because there can be no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. The inner spirit is indeed one, but more than any other the spiritual life insists on freedom and variation in self-expression and means of development.”
- He further writes:

“ A religion of humanity means the growing realization that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here.”

Spiritual Society and State

- He envisioned a spiritual society in contrast to a bourgeoisie and socialist society/state.
- Concern of the spiritual society is not to solve the material problems of humanity. But its emphasis lies on creating a new basis of our being, life and knowledge.
- He also talked about the “economics of a spiritualized society”. It is to provide all men the joy of work in accordance to their nature and leisure to their inner development. Its aim is not to create a machinery of production but to offer all a prosperous and beautiful life.

- In a spiritual state, people would be regarded as group souls endowed with divinity. It would allow them to develop collectively for the common purpose of humanity.

Science, religion and society

- For Aurobindo, both science and religion hold equal importance as both are necessary for human development.
- He tried to accommodate both science and religion in his thinking to get a synthesized knowledge.
- But, dominance of science and technology can result in isolating the individual which create a sense of insignificance and powerlessness in him.

- The goal of society is to help in achieving the ideal of life which is basically understanding the reality of human existence. Individuals should realize that their true being is not in science and technology but rests in “living in the Spirit”.
- By allowing individuals to develop their spirituality, the ideal society will lead to their overall transformation. And then, in Aurobindo’s words:
“..a self aware spiritual unity of being and a spiritual conscious community and interchange of nature would be the deep and ample root of understanding.”

Subjectivist society as the ideal society

- Applying the categories of Karl Lamprecht, Aurobindo considered his current age as the age of subjectivism. Growing out of the individualist age, the man in the subjective age is the spiritual individual.

- This age is characterized by the faith on the idea that only spiritual inner freedom can establish the ideal human order.
- Recognition of the expression of the divine in the individual and in collectivity will lead to a spiritual evolution which will ultimately unify the humanity.
- In discussing subjectivism, Aurobindo talked about three spheres-the individual, the **community** and the humanity. These three are autonomous yet mutually interdependent. Each has its specific laws of functioning.
- Community is the intermediate sphere between the individual and humanity. While development in the individual leads to the development in the community; development in the community results in the development in the humanity.

- Development in the individual is based on the eternal truth of “self-manifestation of the cosmic Spirit”. This cannot be done in egoism or in isolation but being in a community. This intermediate sphere helps the individual and the humanity to be complementary.
- In the same way, individuals too contribute to the development of the community.
- The conflict between individual and the community can be resolved in two ways: a) treating others similarly as one’s own self and b) in helping the needy.
- Thus, Aurobindo illustrated the holistic relation of the individual, community and humanity which will lead to the realization of ideal human unity.

In Aurobindo's political vision the 'law' of the individual, the community and humanity, and the integral relationships between them are thus summarized:

“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 harmonize 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 harmonize its life with that of the human aggregate and 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.”

Religion and Nationalism

- He resembled nationalism to a religion gifted by God. God is immortal; so is nationalism. On 19 January in 1908, while speaking in the Bombay National Union, Aurobindo remarked, “ nationalism is not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God...Nationalism is immortal...God cannot be killed, God cannot be sent to jail.”
- During his stay in Alipore jail, he experienced a drastic transformation in his thought. He read the Gita and envisioned Krishna as his guide and protector. He said that initially he did not have a living faith in God. But after he realized that he had to work for Him without demanding fruitful results.
- In his Uttarpara speech which was just after his release from jail, he spoke-
“ I spoke once before with this force in me...and I said then that this movement is not a political movement and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, faith; I say that it is the *Sanatana Dharma* which for us is nationalism.”

- Sumit Sarkar regarded this speech an indication of an inversion from treating religion as “a means to the end of mass contact and stimulation of morale” to religion as “an end in itself”. To this, Sugata Bose responded that it was a limitation of Sarkar which resulted from his lack of engagement with Aurobindo’s conception of *Sanatana Dharma*.

Sanatana Dharma

- *Sanatana Dharma* hold a much broader image for Aurobindo. It was not a narrow and partisan creed but was as great is life itself. It was for the salvation of humanity.
- Why India should be free is not for her mere self but for all. It was not to dominate over the weak but to shed the eternal light over the world.

- He further elaborated the concept in many articles which were published in his journal *Karmayogin*. “Building up India for the sake of humanity” was put as the ideal of the journal. In the essay titled “ The Doctrine of Sacrifice”, he stated the necessity to regard the nation as a essential unit but “ no more in a common humanity” as the national ego had the risk of easily converting itself to collective selfishness.

Views on Gita

- For him, the Gita did not represent one of the many philosophies of ancient period but a synthesis of many philosophies in unity and in comprehensiveness.

- In his *Essays on the Gita*, Aurobindo portrayed the text not to be understood in its metaphysical connotations of the ancient time but in renewed relevance of the living truths that it contained.
- Gita was viewed not as a means to unraveling the past but a way forward to the future horizon.
- He writes: “We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future...But just as the past syntheses have taken those which preceded them for their starting point, so also must that of the future...proceed from what the great bodies of realized spiritual thought and experience have given.”

- His assertion of the future is related to the Hegelian theme of subjective freedom through an ongoing transformation. Here he employed the qualities of *prakriti* : *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*; and *karma*, *jnan* and *bhakti yoga* to understand this transformation.
- *Tamas* represents a state of ignorance, *rajas* the will to action and *sattva* is the will to discover the truth of oneself and the world . Combination of *rajas* and *sattva* drives man to the path of yoga. In *karma yoga*, man seeks to arrive at truth through his desireless action; in *jnan yoga* he doesn't only refuse the results of his action but also disregard himself as the actor; and in *bhakti yoga* he has pure devotion to the Supreme self regarding it as the self of all other selves.
- So one can conclude that for Aurobindo realization of true self of the being is possible when enabling or conducive environment for such realization is provided by community or religion.

Critical Assessment of Aurobindo's Thought

- His holistic vision of human evolution is considered a great contribution to political theory. V.R. Mehta was greatly influenced by his idea of 'integral pluralism' which he viewed as alternative to liberalism and Marxism in India.
- But, Aurobindo is not free from criticism. It is argued that his ideas remained limited to an esoteric circle partly due to the use of obscure language and also for the lack a concrete plan to relate it to the human needs of present.
- Moreover, he did not take into consideration the socio-economic and historical processes of his period thus maintaining a gulf of theory and action.

Resources

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