

## **‘Lotus and the Dagger’: A Reading of Vedantic Nationalism of Sri Aurobindo**

**Nilanjan Chakraborty**

*Panchla Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India*

### **Abstract**

Sri Aurobindo’s ideas of nationalism are eclectic, deriving their tradition from Hindu spiritualism, the vision of perfection in man as an entity, and intense esoteric realisation in the mystical philosophy of supramental consciousness of the being, as expounded in the Vedas and the Upanishads. Sri Aurobindo’s writings on political philosophy are a continuum, ranging from the utopian socialist ideas in *Bande Mataram*, a newspaper he edited to present the ideas of social, political, and judicial boycott to counter the British, to the writings of post-1910, when his life took a spiritual turn after years of spiritual realisations and yogic sadhana, where he mixes the power of the proletariat with the power of Vedantic mysticism. Sri Aurobindo’s ‘political vedantism’ is an attempt to restructure the political and social life of a colonised nation so that an indigenous idea of a nation can be constructed in concurrence with the Vedantic concept of society as a manifestation of a collective supremacy in man. Sri Aurobindo accepts spiritual determinism as the central principle of a nation, but at the same time, it is not a static concept to him but a constant movement of progressive self-evolution towards a perfection of the collective consciousness, manifested through the entity called the ‘nation’. This paper proposes to look at the ideas of spiritual nationalism of Sri Aurobindo and establish a dialogue with a nationalism that is neither socialist nor rightist.

**Keywords:** Internationalism, Postnationalism, Supramental consciousness, Eclectic nationalism, Humanism

### **Introduction**

When Chittaranjan Das called Sri Aurobindo “the poet of patriotism, the prophet of nationalism, and the lover of humanity” (Bose 140) during the Alipore bomb trial between May 1909 and May 1910, he was quite true to the narrative of nationalism that Sri Aurobindo wanted to propagate through his writings in *Bande Mataram*, *Karmayogin*, and numerous speeches delivered at various places around Calcutta and Bengal. Sri Aurobindo’s writings and development of thought were one continuous process from 1893, the year in which he returned to India after spending 14 years in Britain, to 1950, when his mortal remains passed into eternity. Sri Aurobindo’s engagement with nationalism is not simply a political involvement

with territorializing India as a geographical entity, nor is it a force to re-establish a connection with an elusive national 'past' to reclaim the identity politics of the colonised. Sri Aurobindo's nationalism is an engagement with a metaphysical and spiritual quest to find the perfection in Man as a state of being and to make the collective a manifestation of that individual idealism. To a large extent, Sri Aurobindo's concept of the nation is a thought process arising out of the tenets of universal humanism, where every individual contributes to the social and political progression of the nation as individual forces connecting the larger collective consciousness. It must be understood that while reading the ideas of nationalism of Sri Aurobindo, one cannot read them as a materialist projection of ideology, or as an overt postcolonial response to a colonial construction of India as a nation. Althusser contends that "ideology has a material existence" since "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and in its practice and practices" (Althusser, *Lenin* 112).

Sri Aurobindo's notion of the nation does not arise out of an engagement with an apparatus, but as a narrative of spiritual engagement between the collective force of the people and its manifestation in the nation. Sri Aurobindo's concept of India as a nation is constructed from the perspective of spirituality (what Sri Aurobindo calls the *Sanatan Dharma*), as he equates the nation with the mother, the feminine force of birth, and considers the nation a sacred extension of man's spiritual quest to connect with the divine ideal. As Sri Aurobindo notes, "Nationalism is simply the passionate aspiration for the realisation of the Divine Unity in the nation, a unity in which all the component individuals, however various and apparently unequal their functions as political, social, or economic factors, are yet really and fundamentally one and equal" (Sri Aurobindo, *The Unhindu Spirit* 228). Sri Aurobindo's idea of the nation is, by nature, eclectic. He does not consider the nation an abstract construct or an ideological space to be filled in by epistemological signs. To him, nation belongs to the field of experience that

is individualistic. Along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal, Sri Aurobindo was expounding a theory of the nation that was very aware of the heritage of India as a civilization that is, at least, five thousand years old, if not older. It is true that one of the political aims of postcolonialism is to reclaim the past of the nation in order to challenge the colonial construct that the history of the colonised starts with colonial intervention. However, Sri Aurobindo's concept of the Indian past is rooted in the ideas of a syncretic value of the *Sanatan Dharma*, which believed in the unification of the body with the spiritual force of the being to produce an eclectic vision of individual and collective existence. For this, Sri Aurobindo's main influence was the classical Sanskrit texts like the *Gita*, *Upanishads*, and *Vedas*. To Sri Aurobindo, it was an intellectual battle to codify the tenets of this new nationalism where the country is primary and its freedom is the primary goal of individuals as well as the collective spirit of Indian society at large. While criticising the role of the Congress in "New Lamps for the Old" in becoming a power-driven institution, he says, "But an institution is a very different thing, it was made for the use and not at all for the worship of man, and it can only lay claim to respect for so long as its beneficent action remains not a memory of the past, but a thing of the present. We cannot afford to raise any institution to the rank of a fetish" (Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram* 12). Therefore, it can be said that Sri Aurobindo was not building up a narrative of the nation where the nation becomes an institution. Sri Aurobindo was moving away from the politics of constructing an institutionalised notion of the nation since he saw that tendency as a potential danger to human freedom and spiritual independence.

At the outset, it is important to note what Sri Aurobindo means by the idea of the *Sanatan Dharma*. Historians like Romila Thapar argue that nationalists like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo contributed to the cause of Hindu revivalism in India through their politics of nationalism. Thapar points out that the Hindu spiritualists saw industrialization

as a binary to the spiritual progression of man, as envisaged by the classical Hindu spiritual texts. She says, “The rejection of materialism became such a dominant theme that it gradually got woven into an anti-machine complex” (Thapar 16). Effectively, what Thapar argues is that the spiritualists engaged in a dialectical opposition with the materialism of a mass society and took to nationalism as a weapon to counter the challenges of a bourgeois society that is colonially appropriated towards a consumptive practise of living. However, Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism cannot be bracketed by a sweeping term like Hindu revivalism, nor is it necessarily anti-progress in terms of materiality. Sri Aurobindo’s conception of Hinduism is eclectic and universal, encompassing every faith that has developed in the course of history across the globe. He says that Hinduism is a religion “which embraces Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these, is that to which the World-Spirit moves” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal* 26). What comes across very distinctively is the word science in this observation. Thus, by connecting science with Hindu faith, Sri Aurobindo refuses to construct a mutually exclusive proposition between the two ideas, but rather advocates for a narrative that encompasses the rationality of science and the growth of universal consciousness through faith to construct the eclectic notion of nationhood. If Hinduism “is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution,” then the faith becomes “the basis of the future world-religion” (26). There is a certain ideological principle to which Sri Aurobindo binds his aim of nationalism. He says, “Our aim will therefore be to help in building up India for the sake of humanity; this is the spirit of the Nationalism which we profess to follow” (26). While studying Sri Aurobindo’s idea of nationalism, it must be remembered that spirituality is the very experiential and ideological centre from which his theory of the nation emanates. However, this spirituality is not a Hindu revivalism, as many of the Leftist historians would like to believe, but a practise through which the nation achieves perfection in the social, political, and economic order.

Sri Aurobindo recounts a personal experience of spiritual revelation that he achieved during the Alipore Bomb Trial case in 1919 after passing through a phase of intense spiritual doubts. A critical look at this narrative is important to shape our reading of Sri Aurobindo's notion of India as a nation. He calls his detention in prison "God's purpose" (Sri Aurobindo, *Uttarpara Speech* 4), and he found his seclusion an opportunity to establish a communion between God and his soul. In prison, he envisioned that God would hand over a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* for him to read. He says,

I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce the self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands [...]. (6)

What emerges from this secluded communion with God is a realisation of the supra-rational potentiality of man, whereby he is able to create a synaptic connection between the finite and the infinite. Therefore, to Sri Aurobindo, India is a collective manifestation of this supra-rationality through which it has played and has the potential to play as the leader of a world consciousness of spiritual emancipation. He observes, "India has always existed for humanity and not for herself, and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great." (*ibid*) In the narrative gaze of Sri Aurobindo, nationalism is not catering to a geographical landmass with imagined borderlines for the production of power. To him, nationalism emanates from the individual and traverses towards the collective. The individual's supra-rationality directs others to join in the collective mission to make the nation-state a perfected image of that supra-rationality, and that is where India becomes a unique proposition in the world order of states since it is the only nation that possesses the Sanatan Dharma. Such was the perfected state of spiritual realisation in Sri Aurobindo that he found the trees, the walls of the jail, and even the prosecutors and judges as manifestations of Vasudeva, or Sri Krishna. Ethically speaking, Sri Aurobindo moves beyond the Hegelian dialectics of moral binaries and traverses to a space

where these binaries are non-existent. In a moment of revelation, Sri Krishna reveals to Sri Aurobindo, “This is the nature of the nation I am raising up and the reason why I raise them” (7). Thus, the nation is not a geographically bound symbol of power or a tool to further racial or religious exclusion, nor is it a mechanism for territorial expansionism. To Sri Aurobindo, the nation is an expression of the collective supra-rationality in man through which a collective goal of spiritual awakening can be achieved.

An important aspect that needs to be considered is the rise and expansion of Hindu nationalism in colonial India in the 1920s and its further strengthening in post-independent India, notably around the same time when Sri Aurobindo’s ideology was taking shape through his writings in *Bande Mataram* and *Karmayogin*, and later in other books published from Pondicherry. C. Jaffrelot notes,

Hindu nationalism [...] rejected both versions of the universalist view of nationalism articulated by Congress. This ideology assumed that India’s national identity was summarized by Hinduism [...]. Indian culture was to be defined as Hindu culture, and the minorities were to be assimilated by their paying allegiance to the symbols and mainstays of the majority as those of the nation. (5)

The Hindu nationalism that rose to prominence in the 1920s sought to define nationalism in terms of cultural territorialization rather than through geographical terrain. Sri Aurobindo was not a Hindu nationalist because he did not see Hinduism as an organised religion in the way Abrahamic religions are, but he sought to define spirituality in the Indian way, as an all-encompassing experience that makes spirituality the core principle of national life and identity. He says that the main problem of the Indian intelligentsia is that their “political activity has crept in a channel cut for it by European or Europeanized minds [...]” and hence “what the European understood by religion, had to be got rid of and put out of life, but real religion, spirituality, idealism, altruism, self-devotion, the hunger after perfection, is the whole destiny of humanity and cannot be got rid of” (Sri Aurobindo, *Ourselves* 22). So, what is to be seen is

the paradigmatic shift in terms of using religious identity for the construction of a national identity between Hindu nationalist discourse and Sri Aurobindo's narrative on nationalism.

Sri Aurobindo's criticism of the "Europeanised mind" makes him a postcolonial activist whose reclamation of the national past is based on 'writing back' at the European gaze to construct India as per its narrative. Sri Aurobindo further clarifies that cultural and religious appropriation over the national identity is a dangerous political act because it will only feed the European interest in dividing India in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. He says that India requires "Brahmatej" (the mythical power of Brahma, the creator of the Cosmos and Being, according to Hindu mythology), but he warns that "what the Europeans mean by religion is not Brahmatej; which is rather spirituality, the force and energy of thought and action arising from communion with or self-surrender to that within us which rules the world" (21). The supramental consciousness that Sri Aurobindo advocates for is a collective force or will of the entire population that will direct them towards an understanding of their origin and how they can use that energy for the collective good of the nation. The pronouncement of Sri Aurobindo, on the lines of Christ is "The kingdom of Swaraj is within you" (Sri Aurobindo, *Beadon Square* 16). Thus, what he says is that the Swaraj should awaken out of the "psychology of men and nations" (16), and hence, the Swaraj that awakens out of the supramental consciousness of a race is more permanent and indestructible than the one that arises out of external political movements and acts. Sri Aurobindo, as a spiritualist and postcolonialist, is critical of the bourgeois capitalism that has been imposed upon India as an ideal of progress and civilization. Sri Aurobindo sets the ideological framework of his nationalism, which is based on the moral perfection of man and in man rather than a political narrative that simply looks at a nation as a geographical territory. He says, "The task we set before ourselves is not mechanical but moral

and spiritual. We aim not at the alteration of a form of government but at the building up of a nation” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal* 24).

It is interesting to note that the most prominent national political leader of the 1920s and 1930s, M. K. Gandhi, also advocated for a nation that stands for moral perfection rather than a state that gets used as an agent of repression of the people. Gandhi asserted, “It is not the nationalism that is evil, it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil” (Gandhi 73). Sri Aurobindo reflects a similar concern with nationalism becoming a tool of repression in terms of constructing a power hierarchy based on exclusiveness and separation of the citizens as non-state actors. The postcolonial mind of Sri Aurobindo leads him to critique the bourgeois post-industrialised ideology of Europe and look at a nation as a larger manifestation of the machine-act of industrial output, thereby disengaging man as a marginalised entity in the production-consumption cycle. The disruption of such a mechanised construction of nationalism happens through the intervention of the spirit as “the mighty law of life”, since “machinery is of great importance, but only as a working means for the spirit within, the force behind” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal* 24). The spiritual force of man acts as the disruptive force that disengages the state from becoming a production mechanism of the capitalist-bourgeois nexus, and thus the state becomes a space of moral perfection in man through which the life force of supramental consciousness can be achieved.

The important aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism is that he is not denouncing the importance of capitalist materialism since that is the driving force of the economy in Europe, and if a postcolonial nation needs to progress on the path of economic power, then such material production through machine dominance is inevitable. However, materiality must remain the backdrop to a larger notion of national thought, and that is spiritual nationalism. The only means by which this spiritual nationalism can be attained is through a practise of faith in



Hinduism, which is eclectic as a force of spiritual universalism. Sri Aurobindo makes it clear that “our aim will therefore be to help in building up India for the sake of humanity; this is the spirit of the nationalism which we profess and follow” (26). The human is a problematic area since it might have exclusivist potentialities in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, or linguistic identities since what constitutes the human is constructed through productions of power. However, to Sri Aurobindo, the human is born out of the spiritual, and hence it has no disengagement with any group of people since the spiritual encompasses every notion of man as a subject. As a postcolonial thinker, Sri Aurobindo rejects the material conception of the nation and rewrites the narrative of Indian nationalism on the basis of the history of Indian spirituality, which he claims is at least five thousand years old, if not earlier. He states, “Our business is to realise ourselves first and to mould everything to the laws of India’s eternal life and nature” (27).

Sri Aurobindo’s notion of spiritual nationalism encompasses the larger postcolonial concern of resisting the epistemological violence perpetrated through the dominant discourse of Europe. As Bill Ashcroft and Russell Tiffin observe,

Language becomes the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected by the emergence of an effective postcolonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of postcolonial writing, by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, have been wrested from the dominant European culture. (72)

Sri Aurobindo’s activism takes the form of a resistance to the meta-language of nationalism in Europe that constructs the colonised nation as not only the Other but also as pre-historical. Sri Aurobindo’s insistence that the spiritual consciousness of India goes back five millennia at least resists the European claim that India’s history is not old enough. As Ashcroft notes, Sri Aurobindo wrests the colonial narrative about India’s past and reclaims it to construct a space

of spiritual identity for India that is older even than the Hellenic culture. And by doing so, Sri Aurobindo deconstructs the dominant colonial discourse that India has an insignificant history.

At this point, it is imperative that we draw some comparisons between the ideas of nationalism of Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. Sri Aurobindo notes, “We must live as a nation before we can live in humanity [...]. A man must be strong and free in himself before he can live usefully for others, so must a nation” (Sri Aurobindo, *Opinion* 85). Rabindranath Tagore, in his lectures on nationalism, says, “A nation, in the sense of the political and the economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 37). The contrasting voice is quite apparent since, as a liberal humanist, Tagore finds his final vocation in the freedom of man’s self-expression. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo charts the movement of nationalism from the community to the individual. He states, “Our position is that Nationalism is our faith, our dharma, and its realisation the duty which lies before the country at the present moment” (85-86). Tagore’s trajectory towards nationalism is on an opposite plane, as in a letter to A. M. Bose in 1908, he wrote, “Patriotism can’t be our final spiritual shelter. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live” (Tagore, *Selected Letters* 126). Sri Aurobindo’s critical epiphany lies in the realisation that the nation is the chief source behind the construction of man’s social and national identity. Tagore, on the other hand, proposes that the nation derives its identity from the collective consciousness of man. Tagore’s idea of the nation is not produced through active participation in the political capital of the nation but through an expression of man’s spiritual perfection and the individual’s growth in moral consciousness, through which he can contribute to the ethical development of society and the nation.

Both Tagore and Sri Aurobindo move towards post-nationalism and internationalism through their discourses of national identity, but the means to produce that end are significantly different in each other's opinion. Sri Aurobindo himself sets the dialogue between the two visionaries. Sri Aurobindo's critical insight into Tagore's poetry establishes the contour of nationalism that he wanted to project through his own ideas on nationalism: "One of the peculiarities of Rabindra Babu's genius is the happiness and originality with which he has absorbed the whole spirit of Vaisnava poetry and turned it into something essentially the same and yet new and modern" (Sri Aurobindo, *SABCL* 430). Sri Aurobindo found the essential essence of Indian nationalism in the classical texts of the Vedas and Upanishads and in the aesthetics of Vaisnavite poetry. To him, humanity arises out of a core national spirit that is not material, geographic, political, or even economic, but spiritual and aesthetic. Hence, in the poetry of Tagore, Sri Aurobindo finds that classical and aesthetic energy that constitutes the very core idea of Indianness. Goutam Ghosal observes, "Sri Aurobindo, least affected by garlands and abuses, was never hesitant about an aggressive nationalism even as a Lover of Humanity. His love of India was perfectly harmonized with his love for man" (Ghosal 36). Sri Aurobindo's emphasis is on the macro and not on the micro. He says, "We deny that individual life is as sacred as national life; the smaller cannot be so sacred as the greater, self cannot be so sacred as the greater, self cannot be so sacred as others, and to say that it is quite as sacred for its own purposes is to deify selfishness" (Sri Aurobindo 1997, 90). Thus, there is a fundamental difference between the way Rabindranath looks at the nation and the way Sri Aurobindo does.

In Rabindranath, the individual is the centre of the universe of intuitive consciousness, and to Sri Aurobindo, the nation is the 'sacred', the absolute centre of consciousness that connects the individual to the larger intuition of the yogic spirit. In a letter written on October

20, 1936, Sri Aurobindo talks about the importance of the psychic being that touches upon the intuitive consciousness in order to connect the finite with the infinite. In that letter, he says, “The psychic has two aspects – there is the soul principle itself which contains all soul possibilities and there is our psychic personality which represents whatever soul-power is developed from life to life or put forward for action in our present life-formation” (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters* 84–85). The aspect of the psychic affects the way a nation develops into a system with no repression. The co-opted notion of repression between the citizens and the state is diluted if the psychic becomes dominant in the emergence of society since the psychic creates a space for individual freedom in understanding his role in relation to the nation. To Sri Aurobindo, the role of the citizen is to merge his interests with the larger interests of the society or nation through the potential force of psychic energy, and that is where the state ceases to become an instrument of coercion since it emerges out of the collective will of the people to serve the interests of all and not any individual.

Sri Aurobindo lists three important aspects of nation-building: association, equality, and fraternity. By association, he implies that society moves with the ultimate aim of achieving *moksha*, the “utter freedom of the soul, of the body, of the whole man, that utter freedom from all bondage” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Right* 69). A very important aspect is the idea of equality and fraternity, terms that Sri Aurobindo takes from the French Revolution but gives them an Indian context to talk about social cohesion and the integration of the marginalised into the mainstream. Sri Aurobindo says, “In the high and the low, in the Brahmin and the Shudra, in the saint and the sinner, there is one Narayana, one God and he is the soul of all men” (Sri Aurobindo, *Karmayogin* 70). A significant aspect of Sri Aurobindo’s notion of the idea of fraternity is that India needs to have her own trajectory of fraternity, as India cannot afford to imitate Europe’s commitment to its ideological construct. He observes that the Eurocentric

notion of fraternity is an “external political equality” and “merely a political liberty” (70). Sri Aurobindo offers a criticism of the rising socialism in Europe in the early twentieth century as an external tool to achieve social equality, but that will not liberate man spiritually to the space of individual freedom. Many years later, while talking about the rise of neo-liberal politics at a global level, Gill used the phrase “neoliberal market civilisation” (Gill 416) to designate the reductionist purpose of the bourgeois market economy to relegate the human towards a market, or even a technologically driven entity. If Socialism wanted to marginalise the human by the state to resist the market driven desirability of product valuation, Sri Aurobindo anticipated this fate in the early twentieth century while saying that “through all its differences and discords humanity is striving to become one” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Right* 71).

The political strategy of the Left and the New Left had been to position Marxism as a problematic discourse to counter the radical nationalism of the far Right, especially while negotiating with Nazism, and to use state capitalism to subvert the infrastructure to counter the economic structure of oppression. Though spaced apart by many years, the theory of Harvey regarding space as a social production holds relevance in the way Sri Aurobindo looks at space as a division to produce the social out of the individual. Harvey says:

We have already acknowledged that the organization of space can reflect and affect social relationships. But created space has a deeper meaning than just that. In the ancient city, the organization of space was a symbolic re-creation of a supposed cosmic order. It had an ideological purpose [...] created space is an integral part of an intricate sign-process that gives direction and meaning to daily life [...]. (Harvey 310)

Sri Aurobindo reflects a similar notion of space that has a symbolic meaning to produce the nation as a collective of the individual. Harvey talks about the “symbolic re-creation of a supposed cosmic order” to signify the reductionist purpose of ideology to use space in order to create identity, and Sri Aurobindo also reflects a similar concern with the reductionist purpose of ideology to use space to create systems of symbolic order. He observes, “The village has

lost its community, it has lost its ideals, it has lost mutual cordiality and the binding together of an intimate common life that held it up and made its life sweet and wholesome” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Right* 72). So, Sri Aurobindo binds the ends to theorise upon a concept of the nation, which is primarily a psychological unit, and the construction of that unit is possible only when the external space moves towards an inner realisation of the nation as an expression of the divine and creative self of man.

Sri Aurobindo constructs a shift in the idea of nationalism by shifting the telescopic focus on the psychological aspect of nation-building from the intellectual to the political. The theory of the nation, coming over to India through colonial import, has always concentrated on the political engagement between the collective will of the people and the abstract notion of the nation, but Sri Aurobindo shifts the paradigm from the political to the psychic and the supramental. He says that the “primal law and purpose of the individual life is to seek its own self-development” and this self-development at the national level is to locate creation as “a living power of the eternal Truth, a self-manifesting spirit” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Discovery* 35). Sri Aurobindo counters the emotional capital that is often used to rake up the narrative of nationalism. He says that in the common parlance of nationalistic history and movement, there is a strong tendency to define a nation in its “geographical, its most outward and material aspect,” but then “land is only the shell of the body,” and “the real body is the men and women who composed the nation-unit, a body ever changing, yet always the same like that of the individual man” (35).

Sri Aurobindo constructs the nation as a psychological entity that manifests the sacredness of the divine consciousness of a culture and civilization, and in the case of India, India is defined by its yogic tradition to translate the community from a political unit to a psychic unit. As a colonised subject, Sri Aurobindo critiques the Western notion of nationalism,

which is dominated by “political status” and “economic well-being and expansionism” (35). This statement makes it clear that Sri Aurobindo does not subscribe to the Marxist discourse to understand society or the nation as a historical development of materialist occupation and bourgeois expansionism. In fact, he identifies the rise of the Nazi state as a result of this nationalist expansionism, which he says arises out of an immature understanding of the nation. Sri Aurobindo says that Germany as a nation-state has always been aggressively intellectual because “no other nation has so self-consciously, so methodically, so intelligently, and from the external point of view so successfully sought to find, to dynamise, to live itself and make the most of its own power of being” (40). Sri Aurobindo says that the Nazi state is a warning sign of an aggressive nationalism that is based only on intellectual power with no mature spiritual recognition to conceive the nation-state as an aggregate of the individual minds of the people. Sri Aurobindo observes that a nation is an aggregate of the “time-spirit of the human race,” through which a nation finds subjectivity “not only in the individual but in the nation and in the unity of the human race, its deeper being, its inner law, its real self” (39). He historicizes the argument by stating that Bengal (as a sub-nation) and Ireland qualify as nation-states that have sought to find their spiritual identity through the force of time that has constructed the notion of the nation. On the contrary, the Nazi state has relied only on its intellectual self, resulting in a nation that has encouraged political and economic expansionism at the cost of human life.

It must be emphasised here that Sri Aurobindo was not a Hindu nationalist in the way the members of the Hindu Mahasabha were. The Hindu nationalists saw India as a political unit that was an extension of the disciplined institution of Hindu iconographies. In the Presidential Address to the Hindu Mahasabha annual meeting in 1923, Madan Mohan Malaviya said, “It is our individual and social duty to increase our strength and be on the terms of love

and good-will with Muslims. It is most deplorable that Hindus are so fallen that a handful of foreigners can be ruling over us” (qtd in *Hindu Nationalism* 66). The ideology of Hindu majoritarianism and Muslim separatism that began its political journey with the publication of W.W. Hunter’s *The Indian Musalmans* (1871) reached its culmination with the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915. However, Sri Aurobindo’s idea of nationalism is not based on Hindu expansionism with Hinduism becoming an organised religious institution; his idea of Hinduism is an eclectic vision of a way of life that stresses the psychic divinity that is reached through yogic philosophy and not through external political motivations. Since “Nature starts from Matter, develops out of its hidden life,” knowledge, science, art, thought, ethics, philosophy, religion, this is man’s real business, these are his true affairs” (Sri Aurobindo, *Civilisation* 83). To him, religion is the manifestation of the perfected state of the soul rather than an organised establishment, and that is why Sri Aurobindo’s nation is an expression of the divine will, a manifestation of nature’s perfect state.

Sri Aurobindo conceives of a nation being born out of the dissolution of a strong political and administrative control, and he illustrates his point by looking at the evolution of Europe. He observes that the tussle between the Church and the state in Europe resulted in the reconfiguration of the ambit of power of the Church, which ultimately led to the establishment of the monarchy as the absolute authority over the political affairs of the Church. Sri Aurobindo comments, “In other words, the institution of a fixed social hierarchy, while it seems to have been a necessary stage for the first tendencies of national formation, needed to modify itself and prepare its own dissolution in the later stages were to be rendered possible” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Formation* 376). Sri Aurobindo’s contention is that the basic tenet of any nation’s building is “political self-consciousness,” and it is necessary to put the leadership of a nation “under a secular rather than a religious head” (378). This makes it amply clear that Sri Aurobindo did



not subscribe to the rising Hindu right of his time that India should become a Hindu state. By the phrase ‘political self-consciousness,’ Sri Aurobindo meant a historically evolved society that has learned to understand how the centralization of authority works to create the political unit of a nation. A political unit does not necessarily function as a voice of authoritarianism but becomes an instrument through which the sacred will of the people’s consciousness is expressed.

Sri Aurobindo notes that whereas a nation should have strong centralised political leadership, kingship is not the alternative in the modern world of liberty, though the historical genealogy of the Western states has been through the centralized authoritarianism of monarchy. Monarchy causes the “suppression of the internal liberties of the people” (380) and also results in the subordination of the “religious liberties of men” (381). To Sri Aurobindo, a state is not simply an expression of the egalitarian desires of the people but also a manifestation of the moral, ethical, and spiritual perfection in man. He states,

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. (382)

Thus, for Sri Aurobindo, a nation state is not simply a unit of political space but a reflection of the ethical supremacy of God, as manifested in man. As a postcolonial critique of the materialist assumptions of nation-building, Sri Aurobindo looks at a model of assimilation in creating a syncretism between statehood and spirituality. Sri Aurobindo notes,

True spirituality rejects no new light, no added means or materials of our human self-development. It means simply to keep our centre, our essential way of being, out inborn nature and assimilate to it all we receive, and evolve out of it all we do and create. (Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance* 38)

It is noteworthy to analyse the context in which Sri Aurobindo uses words like “centre” and “essential”. In postmodern praxis, the Western logocentrism has already been challenged by

the poststructuralist politics of Derrida and Sri Aurobindo, who position the centre as a spiritual core that is ever shifting through the incursion of newer ideas and ideologies, thereby implying that there is no essentialism associated with spirituality; in fact, spirituality is not a dogma, but a space of constant re-identification and re-definition. Sri Aurobindo detaches his interest from “Westernised intellectuality” (19) but does not adopt a dogmatic approach towards cultural purity. He asks the Indian intellectuals to “admit Western science, reason, progressiveness, the essential modern ideas, but on the basis of our own way of life and assimilated to our spiritual aim and ideal” (38). Sri Aurobindo’s postcolonial politics aim at assimilating Western science with Eastern spirituality, much in line with Rabindranath Tagore when he says, “Then, again, we have to consider that the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth.” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 41). In both Sri Aurobindo and Tagore, there is a postcolonial angst to situate Indian nationalism as a force of identity in global politics. The polemic restructuring of a nation leads to its spiritual recognition of the self, and that is the way, as Sri Aurobindo proposes, in which India will be able to disseminate itself and assert itself autonomously from the Other. Gayatri Spivak, while discussing this polemic politics of identity formation in Asia, observes,

It seems unquestionable that sustainable change takes place if change in the human mind supplements institutional change. This conviction itself supplements the other, that institutional change brings change of mind – epistemic change. (3)

It is significant that Spivak echoes what Sri Aurobindo said almost a century ago: it is the mind of the people that changes with the institutional change in national episteme, and that change is designated by Sri Aurobindo as a spiritual change. Spivak’s political engagement with the idea of the nation draws some parallels with the politico-spiritual engagement of Sri Aurobindo with the idea of nationalism. Spivak says,

Nationalism is the product of a collective imagination constructed through remembrance. It is the comparative imagination that undergoes that possessive spell. The imagination must be trained to take pleasure in such strenuous play. (“Nationalism and the Imagination” 86)

The narrative of nationalism, as recounted by Spivak, is produced by a collective recalling of narratives, stories, and images through memory across generations to construct the idea of nationalism. Sri Aurobindo also stresses the importance of memory as an important constituent of the psychic being to raise the collective consciousness of the nation. The spiritual in Sri Aurobindo intersperses with the political at the point of the individual meeting the collective, which has been stressed by Spivak that the collective imagination of the nation is a conglomeration of the micro-memory of the individuals.

The reading of Sri Aurobindo’s idea of nationalism will not be complete without briefly touching upon the notion of internationalism that he expounds in his writings, perhaps a movement he took towards postnationalism during his secluded life in Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo’s notion of the nation was always tending towards the formation of a larger international community based on global peace and collective global spiritual connect. It is important to look at what he says about an emerging world state, which, according to him, comes into existence as a result of the strict centralised authority of the modern nation states and the inner spiritual unity that exists among human beings by virtue of being created by the same natural laws:

The unity of the human race by political and administrative means implies eventually the formation and organisation of a single World-State out of a newly created, though still loose, natural organic unity of life, of involuntary association, of a closely interdependent existence of the constituent parts in which the life and movements of one affect the life of the others in a way which would have been impossible a hundred years ago. Continents no longer have a separate life from continents; no nation can any longer isolate itself at will and live a separate existence. Science, commerce and rapid communications have produced a state of things in which the disparate masses of humanity, once living to themselves, have been drawn together by a process of subtle unification into a single mass. (Sri Aurobindo, *World Union* 463)

Sri Aurobindo offers his criticism of nationalism as an ideology that resulted out of geographical, historical, or even economic necessities, but the new emerging internationalism is a result of a spiritual alliance of humanity that is not based on any vested material interest. Sri Aurobindo observes that since nations were born to create divisions at the level of geographical identity, military alliances, or even religious amalgamations (religion in the sense of an organised, institutional hegemony), internationalism still remains an abstract idealisation that has no apparent need to exist. Yet, he says, nature finds ways to create situations pertaining to human unity since man is “driven by the idea or Truth within him to unify himself with others of his species... This will in him is not always or often quite conscient or foreseeing; it is often largely subconscious, but even then it is eventually irresistible” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* 557). The spiritual alliance that Sri Aurobindo talks about falls in line with American transcendentalists like Emerson, who said, “The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, - and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man” (Emerson). The transcendental idealism in Sri Aurobindo does emanate from the Vedas too, portraying society as a conglomeration of spiritual summations of idealised minds. Sri Aurobindo notes that the “national ego” of every nation is based on separatist realities since it thrives on the nation’s identity as separate from the other nations, and this has led to conflicts and wars. Rather, a psychological union of humanity will give rise to a world state that “will give its inhabitants the great advantage of peace, economic well-being, general security, combination for intellectual, cultural, social activity and progress” (Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* 562).

### **Conclusion**

Sri Aurobindo’s concept of internationalism is indeed unique since no theorist of postnationalism has ever talked about the psychological unity of the human race to move

towards a borderless absolution of the nation-states. The federal cosmopolitanism of a globalised world has actually created more structures of hegemony by imposing the economic power of the First World over the Global South, and hence the true spirit of internationalism has remained a distant utopia. Sri Aurobindo's conception of internationalism puts into context why the nations were formed in the first place and hence seeks an inner, spiritual union of the human race that will be able to resist the structures of power by inverting the very idea of postnationalism. To Sri Aurobindo, the negation of national borders can never happen through external means like peace treaties and military de-escalation, but it must only happen through psychological means since the "mind of man is to be released from all bonds, allowed freedom and range and opportunity" (Sri Aurobindo 566) since "oppression and exploitation of man by man, of class by class, of nation by nation" can only be counter-hegemonized through the spiritual unity among man at an individual level. This bond is not a Marxist one through a material association of classes but a spiritual and psychological one through individualistic association.

### Works cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Ashcroft, Bill and Russell Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. Routledge, 1989.
- Bose, Bejoy Krishna. *The Alipore Bomb Trial*. Butterworth and Co. (Ind), 1922.
- Emerson, Ralph. *The American Scholar*.  
<http://digitalemerson.sulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/text/the-american-scholar>.  
Accessed on 14 Feb, 2023.
- Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*. Triplicane, 1927.
- Ghosal, Goutam. *The Rainbow Bridge*. D K Printworld, 1997.
- Gill, Stephen. "Globalization, market civilization and disciplinary neoliberalism." *Journal of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1995, pp. 399-423.
- Harvey, David. *Social Justice and the City*. The University of Georgia Press, 2009.

- Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Other Asias*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- . "Nationalism and the Imagination." *Lectora*, 15, 2009, pp. 75-98.
- Sri Aurobindo. *Bande Mataram*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 2002.
- . "Beaon Square Speech." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "Civilisation and Culture." *The Human Cycle*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . *Letters on Poetry and Art*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 2004.
- . "Internationalism and Human Unity." *The Human Cycle*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "Opinion and Comments." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "Ourselves." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Volume*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Discovery of the Nation Soul." *The Human Cycle*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Formation of the Nation Unit." *The Human Cycle*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Ideal of Karmayogin." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Renaissance in India." *The Renaissance in India*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Right of Association." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "The Unhindu Spirit of Caste Rigidity." *On Nationalism*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1996.
- . "Uttarpara Speech." *Karmayogin*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- . "World Union or World State." *The Human Cycle*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 1997.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. Penguin, 2009.
- . *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Thapar, Romila. *The Past and Prejudice*. National Book Trust India, 1975.