

Vedantism in Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought

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Sri Aurobindo is well known as a yogi striving for *purnayoga* who is not only a spiritual leader but also a political leader. He actively participated in the freedom struggle of India from the British rule and had undergone imprisonment for a long time. His political idea has its roots in the philosophy of Upanisads and Vedanta. The highest ideal of Vedanta is moksa which is the union of the individual soul with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. This final teaching of the Vedanta is being reflected in Sri Aurobindo's political ideals also. He has shown how being united with the highest reality, man attain freedom from all kinds of bondage. He politically fought for India's freedom. But his concept of freedom did not mean political freedom only but freedom from all types of bondage. This write-up will be an attempt to show how Sri Aurobindo's political thought is actually based on Vedanta, the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads, and his notion of freedom is rooted in the Vedantic notion of freedom, nay, *moksa*.

Sri Aurobindo's political ideals are best expressed in book, *Bande Mataram* which comprises his writings on politics. Sri Aurobindo who is not only a political leader but also a spiritualistic preacher has founded his political views based on the teachings of the Vedanta. The Vedanta is the foundation of his political ideals. In the series of articles under the title, "Doctrine of Passive Resistance", included in the *Bande Mataram*, he designed his plan of action in the light of Vedanta for fighting in India's freedom from the British rule. Sri Aurobindo is of the opinion that aspiration for freedom must be from the core of the heart. The word bondage is meant for physical bondage not for internal bondage. He fights for awakening manhood in the nation which cannot be attained without following Vedantic ideals. The teachings of Vedanta is man's freedom from

this worldly happenings and to become one with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. So he tries to establish political Vedantism in his ideal of political freedom.

According to the Vedantic ideal the whole of man's life aims at the Divine consciousness and this is the goal of life that proceeds towards development and aims at realisation of Divine consciousness. The process of development which aims at realization of Divine consciousness appears as struggle of life in this world. Thus it appears that so far as the Vedantic view is concerned, negation of life is not desired for the teaching of Vedanta. According to the Vedantic teachings man is a spirit in himself so he is not the finite being as existed in this world. The spirit is nothing but Brahman. Man must try to go beyond this limited existence and to become one with Brahman. Thus we find that the doctrine of Vedantism is that man is not dissociated from God. Man will find God within himself. As man realizes the existence of God within himself, within his soul, so salvation is nothing to be attained from some external sources.

Sri Aurobindo throughout his political carrier as a freedom fighter has tried to preach India the ideal of Vedanta i.e. freedom is not something of a foreign ideal, it is rooted within the very core of man's heart. "And the freedom of the soul is the realization of god within himself and this is the ideal of Vedanta."¹ So he says that not only man's freedom can be attained within himself but also nations' freedom is within the reach of nation. Thus it follows that the freedom of the nation from some foreign rule is not different for the freedom of the soul.

Sri Aurobindo aims at the application of Vedantic ideals in politics and with this view he maintains that the sole objective of political movement is Swaraj or national freedom. This can be attained at by passive resistance which can be regarded as the final *sadhana*.

According to him Swaraj or national freedom should be the only goal of India. Swaraj here means complete freedom without any limitation or reservation. He maintains that Swaraj or complete freedom is inherent within each and every human being. God has given man this feeling of Swaraj, which on the other hand is the main preaching of the Vedanta. This kind of freedom does not commit to any kind of boundary whatsoever. The Swaraj is the main inspiration that has been invoked within us by

God. He maintains that while striving for freedom in India's freedom movement one should not forget this feeling of inner freedom or Swaraj which is designated by him as *Paresh-Pathar*, the alchemic stone. So he says that, "We shall condemn ourselves to the fact of the man who in the eagerness of picking up pebbles on the sea shore threw away the alchemic stone which God had for a moment given into his hands."² Man must not be ignorant about precious thing he possesses within himself since time immemorial. Ans that feeling of the possession of the precious thing i.e., Swaraj can break all the boundaries of imprisonment

He is so much after Swaraj that according to him all the phases adopted for attaining freedom viz. village samiti, boycott, swadeshi, arbitration etc. have worth only for Swaraj. So while doing any of the above mentioned phase one must not forget that the aim is freedom only which is like attaining the goal by the loving touch of God called Paresh Pathar and that cannot be attained by boycotting foreign goods, creating village samitis etc. Because for him Swaraj is the direct revelation of God which aims at, "not mere political freedom but a freedom vast and entire freedom of the nation, spiritual freedom, social freedom, political freedom"³

Sri Aurobindo while preaching for spiritual freedom does not ignore the necessity of political and social freedom. According to him, without political freedom the soul of man will be crippled and cannot aim at higher form of freedom i.e. spiritual freedom. Again only a large hearted free and genius man can attain social freedom. Such a freedom cannot be given by the society. It can be attained by man's intellect and nobility of the human soul. A selfish man cannot attain social freedom. Because such a man always hankers after petty ends. He tries to attain superiority by way of caste, wealth etc., to his fellow man. As a result he cannot have the feelings of brotherhood with his fellows. On the other hand, political bondage narrowed down man within a narrow circuit. In such a narrow circuit man can have no higher ends in view, he will hug only after superiority of caste, wealth etc. As soon as man attains political freedom his heart will find a wider horizon and he forgets about all kinds of lesser ambition. Political bondage makes a man slave who cannot be noble and broad minded. A

slave cannot take service at his willing self devotion, since a slave is bound to give service as prescribed or ordered by his master. In such a degraded situation of political bondage society is bound to be degraded and it is idle to think about any kind of higher spiritual ideals as preached by the Vedanta. It is true that a few mighty spirits may lift themselves from such a degraded situation but the mass people will remain within the sinking position of degradation.

Sri Aurobindo argues that a selfish man who remains indifferent to the conditions of his brothers cannot attain salvation. A man who does not become affected by the cries of sufferings of man around him, he who only tries for his relation ignoring the sufferings of the oppressed and those who are sacrificing themselves to the greed of others is actually stumbling block his own ways of salvation. "He is forgetting that god is not only in himself but in all these millions"⁴

According to Sri Aurobindo, God has placed India in the eternal fountain head of holy spirituality. But as India is politically not free so its spirituality becomes weaker and weaker. As soon as India will get political freedom every man of India will be endowed with that spirituality and he will set his foot in the stars of heaven. He is of the opinion that only by the revealed Swaraj, India will attain political freedom and the holy spirituality.

"Nationalism is not a mere political programme" says Sri Aurobindo. He maintains that India does not aim at political materialism. Cultural and spiritual ideas of a nation are what India sought for. By nationalism he does not mean an 'ism' which helps to safeguard the interest of one nation by ignoring the interest of other nations. Nationalism for him is a religion that has come from God. This is in fact the religion of one's own (*svadharmā*). In such a concept of nationalism one must think himself as an instrument of God. His idea of nationalism is the basis of his political thought which proceed through internationalism and its goal is ultimate human unity.

Sri Aurobindo in his discussions on politics has elaborately discussed about the different human organizations viz. state, nation etc. . He shows how there are the different stages of human approaches towards a final goal, i.e., internationalism. His concept of internationalism has its bearings with the ultimate realization of man where there is no difference

of caste, creed, higher, lower etc. All are equal and striving for the ultimate realization of the Vedantic ideal i.e., the spirit of all men are the same Brahman so there persists a feeling of universal brotherhood. According to him, the State is an organized group which develops for the survival, growth, efficiency and self assertions of individuals. Again, he says that the State has no soul but an individual has a soul. He maintains that the existence of a soul in man is responsible for morality. This sense of morality in turn develops his social responsibility. And without the individual growth there cannot be real and permanent good of all. In this sense, State has importance as it tries to assure the intellectual and moral development of man, nay, the whole community. He finds the idea of Nation is far more basic than the idea of the State. According to him if the State is not based on nationality it is bound to be artificial, mechanical and will perish. Because, in his opinion there is a Nation soul not State soul. Thus his political thought begins with the concept of nation and nationalism which proceeds through internationalism and its goal is ultimate human unity. There is no contradiction among these three ideals. Nationality is the religion, he says, the religion of one's own (swadharma).

According to him there must be the process of transition from nationalism to internationalism. The idea of internationalism is the attempt of the human mind and life to grow out of the national idea and form and even in a way to destroy it in the interest of the larger synthesis of mankind. Actually, the idea of internationalism was born of the thought of the eighteenth century and it took some kind of voice in the first idealistic stages of the French Revolution. However, the idea of internationalism that had been developed out of the French Revolution was rather a vague intellectual sentiment than a clear idea seeing its way to practice; which is a complete and self-conscious nationalism and not internationalism. In the nineteenth century the idea of internationalism developed in a modified form finding nationalism as a narrow spirit of the past. He says that, nationalism is, "a maleficent corporate egoism characteristic of narrow intellects and creative of arrogance, prejudice, hatred, oppression, division and strife between nation and nation, a gross survival of the past which the growth of reason was destined to destroy." ⁵

Sri Aurobindo while discussing about the concepts of State, Nation,

Internationalism has tried to establish that the fundamental idea is that mankind is the godhead to be worshipped and served by man. The respect, the service, the progress of the human being and human life are the chief duty and chief aim of the human spirit. And this cannot be attained by the ideas of State, Nation, etc., which are still guided by some sort of narrowness.

To sum up, we can make it clear that Sri Aurobindo is of the opinion that man is spirit in himself, he is not coward, he is divinity within himself. Man as a spirit is eternally free; freedom to man cannot be bestowed by some foreign ruler. Man must be in quest of complete freedom or purna swaraj. He should develop within himself the feeling of internationalism with the idea that each and every man is the godhead to be worshipped. Thus it can be seen that Sri Aurobindo tries to transform politics into an effective vehicle of the teachings of the Vedanta. Rabindranath Tagore rightly says, "It was Sri Aurobindo and none else who had the courage to preach the noble teachings of the Vedanta in politics to ensure India's rebirth." ⁶

Notes and References

1. Samar Basu, *Glimpses of Vedantism in Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought*
2. *Sri Aurobindo*, Vol-I, p.699
3. *Ibid.*, p. 699
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 700,701
5. Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, Vol-15, p. 526
6. Samar Basu, *Glimpses of Vedantism in Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought*, p. 36