**THE SAGE AND HIS IDEA OF INDIA**

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**Sri Aurobindo's vision of India had no place for pseudo-secularism, vote-bank politics and repudiation of Bharatiya civilisation. The Sage was also the quintessential internationalist, yet his internationalism was not a rootless cosmopolitanism but steeped in Sanatana Dharma**

Trinamool Congress Member of Parliament and Harvard historian, Sugata Bose, recently quoted the Sage out of context in the Lok Sabha. BJD Member of Parliament, Bhartruhari Mahtab, did well in countering Bose, in pointing out how the Sage’s words were cited without referring to the context in which they were made. Unlike West Bengal, where the comrades once monopolised all avenues of discussion and intellectual quest and the ‘syndicated’ Trinamool members now, which has given up on all semblance of intellectuality, Odisha has a vibrant tradition of discussing Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts, not only in institutions of higher learning but also right down to the grassroots and in far-flung districts through *pathachakras* and study-circles. Mahtab’s rejoinder was symbolic of the awareness that the people of that State have for Sri Aurobindo’s works.

It is strange that a Harvard historian should have indulged in such academic theatrics to score a political point, and that too by citing one of the most fascinating minds — not according to Marxist standards, though — of modern India. But then Bose’s knowledge of Sri Aurobindo is limited. One witnessed, a few years ago in Kolkata’s Jadavpur University, how Bose confessed, just after he had delivered a talk on Sri Aurobindo, his ignorance of the Sage’s interventions during the Cripps proposal. Studying any historic and complex personality in silos and in isolation may not be the right academic or ethical approach; studying Sri Aurobindo in such a manner is especially not advisable. Let us examine some of that which Bose left out from Sri Aurobindo.

In his historic and immortal Uttarpara speech, Sri Aurobindo, unequivocally said how he realised what the Hindu religion, *Sanatana Dharma*, meant. For Sri Aurobindo, and one hopes Bose may be in a position to publicly quote this some day, “This Hindu nation was born with the *Sanatana Dharma*, with it, it moves, and with it, it grows. When the *Sanatana Dharma* declines, then the nation declines, and if the *Sanatana Dharma* were capable of perishing, with the *Sanatana Dharma* it would perish. The *Sanatana Dharma* that is nationalism...”

For Sri Aurobindo, the ideal was “an Indian Nationalism, largely Hindu in its spirit and traditions, because the Hindu made the land and the people and persists, by the greatness of his past, his civilisation and his culture and his invincible virility, in holding it, but wide enough also to include the Moslem and his culture and traditions and absorb them into itself”. Any attempt to cite this passage in its entirety by the likes of professor Bose, would invariably invite the bamboo-like wrath of the TMC high command.

On the communal question, especially exacerbated around 1909, Sri Aurobindo, in his characteristic frankness wrote, “We do not fear Mohamedan opposition; so long as it is the honest*Swadeshi*article and not manufactured in Shillong or Simla, we welcome it as a sign of life and aspiration.” Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo argued against shunning the “awakening of Islam” in India “even if its first crude efforts are misdirected against ourselves”; for he saw “all strength, all energy, all action” as “grist to the mill of the nation-builder”. He was, however, ready, “when the times comes” to “meet in the political field, to exchange with the Musulman, just as he chooses, the firm clasp of the brother or the resolute grip of the wrestler”.Of one thing, Sri Aurobindo was extremely certain, and it was that “Hindu-Mahomedan unity cannot be effected by political adjustment or Congress flatteries. It must be sought deeper down, in the heart and in the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought”. He was also clear that one needed to cease approaching the “Musulman brother” “falsely or flatter out of a selfish weakness and cowardice”, ;better mutual knowledge and sympathy" was the way out. Sri Aurobindo insisted on nationalists working towards that. Professor Bose would of course not dare to refer to the ‘falsely’, ‘selfish weakness’ and flattery bit. It would be tantamount to repudiating the politics he has made his own.

In a letter to one of his close disciples, sometime in 1934, Sri Aurobindo refuted a position which accused the *Swadeshi* movement of antagonising Muslims. “As for the Hindu-Muslim affair”, he noted, “I saw no reason why the greatness of India’s past or her spirituality should be thrown into the waste-paper basket in order to conciliate the Moslems who would not at all be conciliated by such a policy. What has created the Hindu-Moslem split was not *Swadeshi,* but the acceptance of the communal principle by the Congress... and the further attempt by the Khilafat movement to conciliate them and bring them in on wrong lines. The recognition of that communal principle at Lucknow made them permanently a separate political entity in India which ought never to have happened; the Khilafat affair made that separate political entity an organised separate political power.” Professor Bose, would be hard-pressed to explain away this aspect of the Sage’s stand, it has no shades of semblance to the politics he has adopted. Such words are out of place in the vote-bank politics frame-work that his party has unabashedly adopted in Bengal today.

As an aside, it becomes clear as to why the comrades never discussed Sri Aurobindo’s contribution and ensured that a conspiracy of silence shrouded his legacy. Sample the following reply that the Sage gave to a question posed to him sometime towards the end of 1938: “Under communism they [the people] are conscious slaves.... They are bound to the State, the dictator and the party. They can’t even choose the dictator. And whoever differs from them is mercilessly suppressed.... The whole thing whatever its name is a fraud...”

When a disciple pointed out (December 1939) how some object to *Vande Mataram* as the national song and of how some Congressmen support the removal of parts of the song because the argument is that the song speaks of Hindu gods, like Durga, and that is offensive to the Muslims, the Sage answered in his inimitable way: “But it is not a religious song: it is a national song and the Durga spoken of is India as the Mother. Why should not the Muslims accept it? It is an image used in poetry. In the Indian conception of nationality, the Hindu view would naturally be there. If it cannot find a place there, the Hindus may as well be asked to give up their culture...”

From a comprehensive reading of the vast corpus he has left behind, one aspect clearly emerges in Sri Aurobindo’s vision of India: It had no place for pseudo-secularism, vote-bank politics and repudiation of*Bharatiya* civilisation. Sri Aurobindo himself, while being the inveterate nationalist, was also the quintessential internationalist, yet his internationalism was not a rootless cosmopolitanism; it was anchored in the very spirit and soul of, as he himself would perhaps say, *Sanatana Dharma.*