
UNIT 9 SRI AUROBINDO'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Sri Aurobindo : His Life and Work
 - 9.2.1 Early Life—Formative Stage
 - 9.2.2 Preparatory Phase
 - 9.2.3 Phase of Political Activism
 - 9.2.4 Later Phase—1910 Onwards
- 9.3 Philosophical Foundation of Aurobindo's Political Thought
- 9.4 Political Thought : Early Phase
 - 9.4.1 His Views on the Indian National Congress
 - 9.4.2 Nature of the British Rule
 - 9.4.3 Concept of Nation and Theory of Spiritual Nationalism
 - 9.4.4 Final Goal — Swaraj
 - 9.4.5 Positive Programme of Political Action
- 9.5 The Second Stage — From 1910 Onwards
 - 9.5.1 Evolution of Human Society
 - 9.5.2 Nature of Human Unity
- 9.6 Critical Evaluation
 - 9.6.1 Theory of Nationalism — Spiritual or Religious?
 - 9.6.2 Emphasis on Political Issues
 - 9.6.3 Sri Aurobindo: An Anarchist/Terrorist
- 9.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.8 Some Useful Books
- 9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

9.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the political thought of Sri Aurobindo and his contribution to modern Indian political thought and national freedom struggle in India. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- enumerate the factors responsible for shaping his thought,
- analyse the philosophical foundations of his thought,
- describe his views on the concept of nation and nationalism, the objective of national freedom struggle, his positive programme of political action, human unity etc., and
- evaluate his role as a thinker and activist in the freedom movement.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The closing decades of the nineteenth and the dawn of the twentieth centuries are very important in the history of modern India. During this period, religio-cultural nationalism emerged as a powerful force in opposition to the western inspired liberalism and the British rule. Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda in Bengal and Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Punjab led a revival of interest in Indian tradition. The movement resulted in a major attempt to reinterpret Indian tradition so as to instill a sense of pride in the Indian youth. Another aspect of this movement was its radical political outlook. These two aspects reinforced each other. Sri Aurobindo represents the best example in this tradition of a leader who provided a spiritual foundation to Indian nationalism.

In this unit, a sketch of Sri Aurobindo's life and the major landmarks influencing his thought has been provided. Then, we will analyse the philosophical foundations of

his views on nationalism, Swarajya and the course of political action prescribed by him have been analysed. At the end, his contribution to Indian political thinking has been evaluated.

9.2 SRI AUROBINDO: HIS LIFE AND WORK

Born in Calcutta on 15th August 1872, Sri Aurobindo lived an eventful life and contributed immensely to the fields of philosophy and politics. His life span can be studied by dividing it into four stages.

9.2.1 Early Life — Formative Stage

Aurobindo's upbringing was completely western. For a period of fourteen years—from 1879 to 1893—he studied in England. During this period, he showed extraordinary intellectual abilities. He learned various classical and modern European languages. During his Cambridge University days, he began to take an interest in Indian politics and came in contact with some young revolutionaries from India. He was also deeply influenced by Irish nationalists and their efforts for achieving independence for Ireland. He returned to India in 1893 at the age of 21 with the fire of nationalism burning in him and a strong and resolute will to work for it.

9.2.2 Preparatory Phase

On arriving in India he joined government service in the princely state of Baroda. At Baroda, he undertook a serious study of Indian history, philosophical texts and Bengali literature. He was impressed by the spiritualism underlying Indian philosophy and literature and this added a new dimension to his political thinking. During this period, Aurobindo wrote extensively on the then situation in the country and elaborated his ideas about nation, nationalism etc. He also remained in touch with the freedom movement generally and particularly with revolutionary activities in Bengal. His interest in revolutionary politics, however, did not keep him away from his spiritual quest.

9.2.3 Phase of Political Activism

In 1905 Bengal was partitioned. This event evoked strong resentment throughout the country. Aurobindo resigned from his job in Baroda (1906) and plunged into active politics which marked the beginning of the third phase of his life. This phase of political activism was very brief (1906-1910). During this period, he participated actively in politics and supported the radical group led by Tilak. He participated in the Surat session of the Congress. He also wrote extensively on various topics of national importance in this period. In 1908, he was implicated and arrested in the Manikola Bomb Case. He was honourably acquitted in 1909. After his release, he remained involved in politics for a short while. In 1910, he withdrew from active politics and went to Chandra Nagar and later on moved to Pondicherry. His sudden withdrawal was a result of his desire for spiritual development.

9.2.4 Later Phase : 1910 Onwards

During this period, Aurobindo wrote mainly in the wider context of humanity and its spiritual future. He elaborated his ideas and ideals in the context of human development and its ultimate goal of human unity. His important works like the *Life Divine*, *Essays on Geeta*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and the epic poem 'Savitri' were written during this period.

To sum up, we can say that his political activism and spiritual development were not separate but went together. His political thought was an extension of his yogic and spiritual vision. Therefore, before we study his views on the key concepts in politics, it is necessary to understand the philosophical foundations from which his political thought emerged.

Check Your Progress 1

Note i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at end of the unit.

1) What are the major factors which influenced Aurobindo's political thinking?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Fill in the blanks with the correct alternatives:

- i) Sri Aurobindo studied.....in England.
 - a) Classical and modern European languages.
 - b) Indian history
 - c) Christian theology.
- ii) Sri Aurobindo established contacts withafter he returns to India.
 - a) moderate leaders
 - b) revolutionaries in Bengal
 - c) Indian princes.
- iii) Sri Aurobindo entered active politics in
 - a) 1893
 - b) 1901
 - c) 1906
- iv) In the later phase Sri Aurobindo mainly wrote in the context to.....
 - a) human unity
 - b) freedom struggle
 - c) world wars.

9.3 PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF AUROBINDO'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Aurobindo's writings reflect diverse influences. Of these, the Indian tradition of idealism in philosophy seems to have impressed him the most. The great European philosophers from Homer to Goethe influenced him the maximum during his formative period and the study of Geeta, Upanishads and Vedanta had a deep impact on his political thinking. As Romain Rolland said, Sri Aurobindo was "the highest synthesis of the genius of Asia and the genius of Europe". He tried to integrate the materialist trend in western philosophy with the idealist tradition in Indian philosophy. Vedantic philosophy as propounded by Ramakrishna and Vivekanand also influenced Aurobindo's thinking.

He was also inspired by the remarkable vitality and diversity of the Indian intellectual tradition. He believed that the writings of the Vedantic sages and the Buddha reflect the genius of the Indian mind. However, at a later stage, according to Aurobindo, the Indian philosophical tradition became narrow in outlook and lost its dynamism and vitality. As against this, western philosophy managed to retain its dynamism and continued to grow. Aurobindo wanted to combine the best elements of the Indian and western philosophical tradition.

He explained the origin, nature and destiny of this world in his theory of evolution. According to his theory of creation, matter passes through various stages of development; from the plant and animal stages to that of the mind and the supermind. In his view, matter is spirit in a hidden form, growing progressively towards the revelation of the spirit which is the supreme, unconditioned and absolute reality. In this process of evolution, in the transformation from the mind to the supermind, the technique of 'yoga' helps human beings to hasten the process. Sri Aurobindo developed his own technique called 'Integral Yoga' or 'Purna Yoga' which incorporates the techniques of four yoga i.e. Karma yoga, Bhakti yoga, Jnana yoga and Raja yoga—as well as the Tantrik philosophy. Through this integral Yoga, a Yogi can rise to the supramental level, which will bring him joy (**Ananda**). The attainment of Ananda helps in self-realization and assists in the service of humanity.

According to him, since 'matter' is not different from 'spirit' gradual evolution of matter will convert it into pure spirit. Despite the obstacles in the way which may

slow down the process, the advancement of humanity in the direction of spiritual perfection will continue. In this process, a few developed souls will work as pathfinders and will struggle hard to find the path for others.

Aurobindo believed that India's tradition of spiritual thought and practice was very advanced and the whole of humanity could benefit from this in its spiritual journey. He wanted India to take the lead and for this reason, thought that India ought to be free, to play her true role in the spiritual regeneration of the world.

9.4 POLITICAL THOUGHT : EARLY PHASE

A close scrutiny of Aurobindo's writings show that he wrote extensively on problem of current political importance in the early phase of his political activity. His political thought at that time consisted of :

- His views on the Indian National Congress and the British rule in India.
- The Concept of Nation and the Theory of Spiritual Nationalism.
- His programme of action — Theory of Passive Resistance etc.,

His writings in this period must be seen against the political background of our country in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His objective was to mobilize the masses for the fight against the foreign rulers and his ultimate goal was full freedom for the country.

Aurobindo's thoughts in the later phase, i.e. from 1910 onwards reflect clearly the need for humanity to return to the spiritual motivations of life. In this section, we will concentrate on his political thought, which he expressed in the earlier phase of his life (1883-1905) and the first phase of his political activity (1905 to 1910). Later, we will proceed to study his views on human unity.

9.4.1 His Views on the Indian National Congress

When Aurobindo returned from England, he observed the political scene and expressed his views through his writings in journals like 'Bande Mataram'. He was critical of the Congress organization and its leadership at that time. He criticised the Congress on four counts—viz. i) its aims and objectives, ii) its composition, iii) the motives of the leaders and iv) the methods adopted by them for the realisation of their aims and objectives. This does not mean that he was basically against the national Congress. On the contrary, he declared that "The Congress was to us, all that is to man most dear, most high and most sacred." But at the same time, he did not hesitate to express his disillusionment and dissatisfaction about its working.

About the aims and objectives of the organization, he thought that the Congress did not have a clearcut goal of national freedom. The leaders of the Congress were wasting time on trifles like certain administrative reforms, which were totally inadequate to meet the need of the time. Their demands, he delivered were 'shamefully modest.'

About the composition of the Congress, he thought that the Congress was a middle class organization and therefore, did not represent the Indian masses. The newly educated middle class leadership was only interested in gaining power and a place in the Indian polity. He emphasised the need for converting the national movement into a mass movement by including in it the vast numbers of the proletariat. He believed that the emergence of the Indian 'proletariat' on the horizon of the national movement would be an important key to the solution of the problem of transforming the Congress into a truly national and popular body.

Thirdly, regarding the motives of the Congress leaders, his observation was that they were not sincere leaders. They were timid and afraid of displeasing their rulers. He believed that these defects in the organization had adversely affected the national movement in the country.

He felt that the Congress leadership had not perceived the British rule correctly and therefore, instead of boldly asserting their goal, the leaders relied on the sense of

justice and benevolence of the British rulers. They resorted to futile petitions and requests in the annual sessions of the Congress.

He therefore stressed the need for a broad based organization that could channelize the entire power of the country to free it from foreign rule. Thus, his insistence on enthusing the masses with the spirit of independence was one of the first efforts to give a mass character to the freedom movement.

9.4.2 Nature of the British Rule

Aurobindo's first political writings in 'Indu-Prakash' — an Anglo-Marathi paper — was a direct attack on British rule. Of course, some leaders participating in the national movement were also criticising British rule at that time, but their criticism was quite indirect. His writing was a departure from this style of expression. He created such a sensation in the country that justice M.G. Ranade had to warn the editor of Indu-Prakash to be careful, and subsequently the editor had to request Aurobindo to modify his tone, which he did rather reluctantly.

The purpose of Aurobindo's criticism of the British rule was two fold. In the first instance, he wanted to strengthen the anti-British sentiments in the country and secondly, to break the myth of British superiority.

He expressed the view that the British political system was in no way the best as was widely believed by Indian intelligentsia. He was also critical of the absence of social freedom and equality. Hence, he believed that copying the British model was not in the interest of our country. Regarding the nature of the British rule in India he expressed the view that, "It is mercantile in foundation and exploitative in character". It must be, therefore, weakened from its base itself, in order to achieve freedom and independence of the country.

Aurobindo described the behaviour of the British officials as rude and arrogant. He believed that the system of administration set up by the British in India was thoroughly unsuitable to the Indian people, their socio-economic system, their mind and genius. He was also critical of the anglicised Indians who regarded the British way of life and culture worth emulating.

He, however, did not object to learning from the experience of the British, though he was against the thoughtless aping of European ideas and ideals. He objected to the growing tendency among Indians to ignore the past and of having no clear vision for the future.

9.4.3 Concept of Nation and Theory of Spiritual Nationalism

Aurobindo's concept of nation was deeply influenced by Bankimchandra—a great Bengali novelist. He believed that the nation is not just a piece of land nor a mass of human beings. It is neither a figure of speech nor the creation of mind. It is something more than a geographical unit or a figment of peoples' imagination. Thus, his concept of nation is profound and very different from the commonly held patriotic notions about the nation.

To him, India was like his mother and hence he was highly devoted to her. He glorified India as a Mother Goddess, and advised the young patriots to work for their nation which is their mother. He believed that the liberation of the motherland is the most urgent duty of her children for which they must be ready to sacrifice even their lives.

According to Aurobindo's understanding, the 'nation' is a mighty 'shakti' composed of all the shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation. It is thus a living entity. He expressed his deep feelings of love and dedication to the motherland in numerous articles and poems. Such patriotism he believed could work miracles. Thus, Aurobindo's definition of nationalism had a spiritual dimension, unlike the ordinary patriotic understanding of the terms nationalism.

Nationalism in his opinion is not merely a political movement. It is neither a political programme nor an intellectual past time. In his opinion, nationalism is akin to religion. It is a faith and a creed which one has to live. It is a religion which has come from God. Hence, it cannot be crushed. Even if attempts are made by external forces to suppress it, it reemerges and survives due to the strength of God in it.

Nationalism is immortal. It can not die, because it is not a creation of human beings, but is created by God. If one wants to be a nationalist, one must work for his nation. Nationalism in his opinion was a deep and fervent 'religious sadhana'. Here in lies the difference between Aurobindo's concept of nationalism and nationalism as perceived by other thinkers and political activists of his time.

Nationalist movement sparked off by the partition of Bengal was in the opinion of Aurobindo a divinely inspired and guided movement. In his opinion, this movement was not guided by any political self interest, but it was a religious mission which the people were trying to fulfil. Thus for him, "nationalism is a religion by which people try to realise God in their nation, and their fellow country men".

9.4.4 Final Goal — Swaraj

India's liberation from foreign domination was the final goal for Aurobindo. 'Swaraj', i.e., self rule by Indians was not merely of economic and political nature. It was necessary for India to perform its spiritual mission dedicated to the upliftment of humanity. He advocated independence for India for the following reasons:

- Liberty being the first indispensable condition of rational development—intellectual, moral, individual and political—is in itself a necessity of national life. Hence it was worth striving for its own sake.
- Secondly, in the process of development of human beings, spiritual and moral advance is more important than material advance. Aurobindo was of the opinion that India with her spiritual development was destined to take the lead for the progress of the world and for this reason too India must be free.
- India must have swaraj to live well and happily. For this Indians should not live as slaves but as free people to work for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of the human race.

The concept of nationalism which dominated his thought and activity in the early phase was just a stepping stone to move in the direction of the unity of humankind. This unity of humankind was regarded by him as a part of nature's eventual scheme and as the inevitable goal of human development. (This point is discussed in detail in Section 10.5). To achieve this goal of national independence, he explained the methods to be followed. We shall see in detail his plan of political action which he advocated in his very brief association with political activity.

9.4.5 Positive Programme of Political Action

In 1906, Aurobindo left his job at Baroda and plunged into active politics. It is at this stage that he thought and wrote about the political techniques to be adopted against the British. The theoretical base of the political course of action that he suggested was two fold. Complete freedom from British domination was his ultimate goal and this he believed, could not be achieved by appeals to the charity of foreign masters, but by channelising the unlimited reserved strength of millions of Indians.

According to Aurobindo, this limitless reservoir of inner strength and power of the people could be channelised through different kinds of political actions; viz.,

- 1) through secret revolutionary propaganda by setting up revolutionary organization. The object of this action was to prepare for an armed insurrection.
- 2) Secondly, continuous propaganda against foreign rule through writings, speeches, public contacts etc. This was regarded by many at that time as an impossible scheme because in their opinion the British Empire was too strong to be destabilised through such techniques.
- 3) Thirdly, mobilising the masses through various organizations to carry an open and total opposition to foreign rule through methods of non-cooperation and passive resistance.

Aurobindo tried all the three methods. Even when he was at Baroda, he had contacts with the revolutionary organizations in Bengal as well as Maharashtra. He tried to establish secret groups through his Bengali contacts in the Baroda Army. At the same time, he developed contacts with radical Congress leaders like Tilak and co-operated with him to reduce the influence of moderates on the organization. In the situation of political turmoil following the partition of Bengal, he organised and propagated methods of passive resistance.

His advocacy of the method of passive resistance was the result of his disillusionment over the constitutional methods of moderate leaders. He was opposed to methods like passing resolutions, sending petitions, and entering into negotiations with British rulers. Instead, he advocated methods like 'boycott' of foreign goods 'non co-operation' with the rulers etc. These were, according to him, the methods most suitable at the time since Indians were faced with rulers who were oppressive and insensitive to the demands of the people.

Thus, the measures he advocated were not moral or spiritual but very practical political measures. He did not reject the use of force in the application of these methods. Violence was not taboo for Aurobindo. The use of force and violence was justified, if circumstances demanded them. Here in lies the difference between Gandhiji's method of civil resistance and Aurobindo's method of passive resistance. Gandhiji regarded violence as unethical and hence, harmful and undesirable. He also regarded it as tainted by moral cowardice and as incompatible with the end for which it could be used. But for Aurobindo passive resistance was a comprehensive programme of national regeneration.

Programme of Action

Boycott was the key word in the programme of action proposed to resist high handedness and oppressive measures employed by the British rulers. 'Boycott' in this context means an act of organised refusal to do anything which shall help or assist the British officialdom in administration of it. This non co-operation was to continue as long as the aspirations of the people remained unfulfilled. The object of putting this method of 'boycott' on the forefront of the programme was to make the administration under present conditions impossible. The main target of the 'boycott' was British goods, since economic exploitation by the British rulers was to be stopped forthwith. Aurobindo believed that if this was done, the empire would collapse in consequence.

Boycott of the British system of education was another part of the programme. This system was found to be anti-national as well as faulty in its very foundations. It was completely controlled by the government as was used by foreign rulers to inculcate loyalty to them and discouraged patriotism and the national spirit. This programme included boycott of government run schools and colleges and sought to establish national education institutions and a system directed towards creating awareness about the problems of the country, love for the nation and mental preparedness among the youth of the country to fight against the dominance of alien power.

It also advocated boycott of the British judicial system. The system was regarded as partial, costly, frequently subordinated to the political objects of the rulers and ruinous as far as the people of this country were concerned. The administration of justice was criticized for being bureaucratic in nature.

Finally, this programme included boycott of administration. The executive/ administrative machinery were regarded as ruthless, repressive, arbitrary, meddling and inquisitorial in character. The objective of boycott was to reduce the administrative machinery to a mere skeleton so that it would be useless for the rulers in their efforts to exploit and harass the helpless masses of this country.

Aurobindo was well aware of the importance of orderliness and discipline for a nation. When he advocated boycott, he also advocated alternative arrangements to replace the existing system. He regarded this programme as a scheme of self development and believed that if the people were firm in enforcing these methods, British rule could be ended within no time.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Write in brief four major points on which Aurobindo criticised the Indian National Congress.

.....
.....

2) Explain in brief Aurobindo's concept of nation.

3) State whether the following statements are true or false:

- i) Aurobindo criticised British rule because he wanted to strengthen the anti-British sentiments. (True/ False)
- ii) Nationalism is immortal; hence it can not be crushed. (True/ False)
- iii) Passive resistance means opposing the rulers by passing resolutions against them. (True/ False)
- iv) Aurobindo regarded violence as taboo and advocated non-violent methods. (True/ False)
- v) Objective of boycott was to make the working of the administration impossible. (True/ False)

9.5 THE SECOND STAGE: FROM 1910 ONWARDS

We have already noted that Aurobindo dramatically withdrew from politics in 1910 and moved to Pondicherry, following the persistent calls from his inner self through mystic experiences. His writings during this phase are mainly philosophical in nature, in which we find extension of his earlier political ideas now expressed in the wider context of humanity and its spiritual future.

9.5.1 Evolution of Human Society

Aurobindo argues that, in the course of its development, human society has to pass through three stages. The first is the stage of spontaneity. At this stage, the forms and activities of community formation, its traditions and customs and institutional setup are the result of natural organic growth. Natural instincts and environmental needs play an important part in its formation. The people believe in certain symbols which are imaginative and instinctive in nature. The people belonging to the same race or kinship follow identical symbols which become a religion for them. Thus, in this stage of development, natural instincts and religious symbols go together.

The second stage is the stage of consciousness in which people become intellectually self-conscious and start thinking about this life and its problems with the help of intelligence and creative power. This stage, is predominantly psychological and ethical in nature. In this stage intellectuals get importance and come forward as the initiators of the age of reason and revolt or progress and freedom.

The third stage is the stage that represents both the triumph and failure of reason. In this stage, human beings in collectivity begin to live more deeply and purposively. Life of human beings at this stage will be governed by a sense of unity, sympathy, spontaneous liberty and the spirit of individual and communal existence. From here humankind has to advance towards the realization of spiritualised society. This is the ideal towards which this process of evolution of society points out.

In this spiritual society, 'nation' as a regulating mechanism will have no place. It will not be worshipped by people as their God or their larger self. There would be no clashes or conflicts on the basis of separate identities as nations. There would be unity within the nations as group but there would also be ultimate unity and oneness of the humankind. The primary responsibility of achieving this unity was entrusted by Aurobindo to India.

9.5.2 Nature of Human Unity

It will not be a mechanical unity established under the iron law of the state or any organization because such kind of mechanical unity will negate the diversity of various groups, individuals or races. There would be no suppression of individual life or the life of smaller community. All individuals and communities will get the fullest opportunity for the full development of their potentialities and the full expression of their multifaced diversity.

The future society will be a society of complex oneness, a world society in which present nations will be intrinsic parts of the whole. The national societies would continue to function as cultural units but their physical boundaries will have no relevance as they would look beyond them to realise the vision of the unity of mankind.

Aurobindo was aware of the problems and hurdles in the way of the emergence of such spiritual society at that time, but he was optimistic about its advent in the near future. He was not only hopeful but certain about the achievement of world unity and peace. Mankind's aspiration for peace and unity had become a reality to some extent in the form of the establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 and the United Nations in 1945. He was also aware of the practical limitations of such organisations in the face of the realities of international politics, but firmly believed in the emergence of united world. It was his belief that this was certain because it was essential for the very continuance of humanity and failure in this respect meant the failure of the human race itself. This could never be, for humanity would not, whatever be its occasional lapses, work for its own extinction.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) According to Aurobindo, what are the stages through which the human society develops?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Explain in brief Aurobindo's vision of the future society.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

9.6 CRITICAL EVALUATION

The study of Aurobindo's political thought raises certain points of criticism which need to be discussed before we take into consideration his contribution to modern Indian political thought and the national movement.

9.6.1 Theory of Nationalism: Spiritual or Religious?

In the context of his theory of 'spiritual nationalism', it is argued that though it is called spiritual nationalism, in reality it was religious, as we have known it, and therefore reactionary in character. It was an attempt to mobilize the masses on an emotional basis and detracting their attention from real issues like poverty, economic exploitation, inequality which are inimical to the progress of the individual as well as the community. It was an appeal to Hindu religious sentiments in the garb of the cultural heritage of the land.

Further, it is argued that to regard nationalism as an instrument of spiritual perfection is too idealistic and visionary for the common person. To associate religion with politics, though in the name of spirituality, is a dangerous proposition in a multireligious, multicultural plural society like India. It is argued that in the ultimate analysis, this exercise has resulted in increasing the strife between the Hindus and the Muslims—two major religious communities in India, which finally resulted in the partition of the country.

Aurobindo's defenders would, however, claim that his concept of nationalism and human unity were based on his understanding of the Hindu Sanatana Dharma, which to him meant an open and universal philosophy of life.

His concept of nationalism clearly indicates his spiritual approach to politics. Not merely his theory of nationalism, but his political philosophy in its totality has spiritual overtones. Politics for him was an aspect of the broader process of personal, national and international spiritual development. He looked upon Indian independence as an essential turn in the life of this ancient land for playing the role of a spiritual guide of humanity at large. He believed this was India's predetermined role and that she could rise to that level only through the teachings of the Hindu religion. Nationalism cannot afford to neglect any one. It is therefore imperative for one to bring all the sections of the society into the mainstream of political life. In the Indian context, he believed that all the sections including tribals and communities outside of Hindu civilization must form part of the process of national independence as nationalism excludes none. It is in this sense, Aurobindo's followers say that, his concept of spiritual nationalism should be understood.

9.6.2 Emphasis on Political Issues

Critics point out that Aurobindo paid less attention to the issues of social reform, which were perhaps more important and urgent. The defence of the radicals in this regard was that it was a matter of giving preference in the light of circumstances existing at that time. To them the problem of social reform was not in any way unimportant in comparison with the issue of national independence, but the latter was considered as a matter of primary importance. In this context, Aurobindo had a very clear approach. He stated that, "political freedom is the life breath of a nation, to attempt social reforms, educational reforms, industrial expansion, the moral improvement of race, without aiming first and foremost at political freedom is the very height of ignorance and futility."

9.6.3 Sri Aurobindo : An Anarchist/Terrorist

Because of his advocacy of force or violent means in the fight against foreign rule, Aurobindo is criticised as an anarchist as well as a terrorist in his approach and action. He was certainly not an anarchist. Neither was he a terrorist though he did not disapprove of the use of violence on moral and spiritual grounds. But he did not

approve of blind terrorism against individuals in the manner of a violent anarchist. In his vision of a future society, he accepted existence of nations as cultural units in the broader scheme of human unity at the spiritual level. Hence, the charge of being 'anarchist' in case of Aurobindo is without a basis.

As far as his advocacy of violent means and association with the revolutionary groups is concerned, it can be said that it was a reaction against the increasingly intolerant and uncivilised way of the British rulers. It was a reaction to British policy and to the partition of Bengal. It was the reaction of an emotional patriot to brutal exploitation of his motherland and tyrannical government at the hands of the alien rulers. To him, ends were important, by whatever means they were achieved. However, within a short period the limitations of this strategy became very clear. Aurobindo himself has pointed out these.

Aurobindo also pointed out that moral standards are only relative and cannot be held to be universal. According to Aurobindo, violence was best avoided but could not be totally avoided or prohibited.

9.7 LET US SUM UP

We have taken into account some major points of criticism regarding Aurobindo's thought. We shall now proceed to estimate his contribution to modern Indian political thought and the national movement.

His theory of spiritual nationalism is a unique contribution to modern thought. His writings inspired the educated youth of his time to take up the cause of national freedom. By interpreting the concept of nationalism in spiritual terms he gave a new dimension to the national movement and lifted it above the economic and political context and a new kind of spiritual idealism was set before the nationalists in the country.

Secondly, by advocating complete freedom from the foreign domination as the final goal of the freedom struggle he brought a change in the texture of our national movement. It was quite a bold stand taken by him when the moderates were spearheading the national movement.

Thirdly, it may be pointed out that Aurobindo was the first political thinker who recognised the need of giving a broad base to the national movement. He emphasised the need of mass mobilization and participation of all sections of society in the national movement way back in 1893. In this sense, he was a true democrat relying on the joint action by the many rather than the intellectual initiative of a few. His advocacy of passive resistance created a sense of renewed confidence among the masses and exposed the contradiction between the myth and reality of British raj.

With his advocacy of radical methods to attain the goal of full freedom for Indian nation, he created a favourable atmosphere for revolutionary spirit among the political activists and by participating in it as their leader he set an example of being both, a theoretician as well as practitioner and a good organizer which is a rare combination of the qualities of the prophet and the leader.

Check Your Progress 4

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Identify two major points of criticism about theory of spiritual nationalism.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Was Sri Aurobindo an Anarchist?

3) Fill in the blanks and complete the sentences.

- i) Not merely his theory of nationalism but his political philosophy in totality had.....
- ii) Political freedom is the.....of a nation.
- iii) As a patriot he continuously wrote about political matters on the theme of.....
- iv) Sri Aurobindo is the unique example of being both..... as well as.....which is a rare quantity found among leaders.

9.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Karunakaran K.P. (1975) : *Indian Politics from Dadabhai Naoroji to Gandhi*. Gitanjali Prakashan, New Delhi.

Mehta V.R. (1983) : *Ideology Modernization and Politics in India*. Manohar Publications, New Delhi.

Sarma G.N. (Ed.) (1973) : *The Vision of Sri Aurobindo* Dipti Publications, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

Sarma G.N. (Ed.) and Shakir Moin (1976) : *Politics and Society : Ram Mohan Roy to Nehru*. Parimal Prakashan, Aurangabad (Ch. 3).

Singh Karan (1970) : *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay.

Panthan Thomas (Ed.) (1986) : *Political Thought in Modern India*. Sage Publication New Delhi (Ch. 12).

Varma V.P. (1971) : *Modern Indian Political Thought*. Laxmi Narayan Agarwal, Agra.

9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

Ans. 1 — 9.2.1; 9.2.2.

Ans. 2 — i) A ii) B iii) C iv) A

Check Your Progress 2

Ans. 1 — 9.4.1.

Ans. 2 — 9.4.3.

Ans. 3 — 1 — True

2 — True

3 — False

4 — False

5 — True

Ans. 4 — 9.4.5.

Check Your Progress 3

Ans. 1 — 9.5.1.

Ans. 2 — 9.5.2.

Check Your Progress 4

Ans. 1 — 9.6.1.

Ans. 2 — 9.6.3.

Q. 3 — 1 Spiritual overtone

2 Life breath

3 Full independence

4 Theoretician — practitioner.