

IN SEARCH OF A SOUL

Religion and National Integration

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1. Introduction

It was said of Poland in a situation of division that the soul of Poland was in search of a body. Thinking about the current socio-religious and political scenario of India, I feel that the reverse is true that the body of 'Bharath Matha' is in search of her (lost) soul!

Two powerful institutions that determine the course of any country or, broadly put, the very course of world history, are religion and politics. Indian history is no exception to it. Perhaps India may be one of the rarest countries where we see this influence very much, although it is not the same as how religion and politics influence the destiny of her neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Nepal. The basic difference between the two is that while India generally maintains an open approach to religion and politics, in the neighbouring countries their influence assumed a more closed and univocal approach. In the history of modern India, both religion and politics, as two powerful institutions that determine peoples' life and destiny, were instruments of national integration and political achievements. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that, in recent decades, their influence, even in India, assumed a new perspective: what one sees is a sort of growing religious fundamentalism, a mixing up of religion and politics with hidden agendas and selfish motives. In this context, this article tries to draw on Sri Aurobindo's political thought to reconstruct a religio-political vision in view of Indian national integration.

2. Aurobindo and His Philosophical Vision

Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) can be considered the greatest among the Indian thinkers that India has produced after the classical period of Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and so on. He is a prolific writer and a seminal thinker, whose interests encompass all the areas that the human

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mind is interested in and carefully follows. Moreover, he is a world renowned Yogi, a poet-metaphysician, and a psychologist. In spite of his mystical philosophy, no one can deny his commitment to social philosophy and political thought. Aurobindo, in fact, is not just a political thinker but was a vibrant political activist. No historian of Indian nationalism can ignore his role in the freedom movement. He is also a great figure in the Indian renaissance movement. He is considered to have attained the “highest synthesis of the genius of Europe and the genius of Asia.”¹ Further, he is “revered as the messiah of a new, inspired and fervent nationalism,” who “preached the sanctification of patriotism as the dedicated worship of India personified as the Great Mother.”² He, in fact, had the “moral courage to champion the creed of Absolute Swaraj for India as early as 1907.”³

2.1. The Spiritual Absolute

A sound metaphysical backing is a *sine qua non* for the success of any scientific treatise or any systematic thought, for it necessarily demands a human response to life and reality, particularly a response to Spirit, Nature, and Human Being. It is equally applicable to one’s socio-religious and political thought as well. On the other hand, it can be added that any metaphysics without a proper socio-political bearing is powerless and inadequate. What we see in Aurobindo is a careful blending of the above two aspects.

Aurobindo’s metaphysics is deeply rooted in the Vedanta tradition. However, his merit is that he thoroughly reviews it and gives a contemporary and meaningful interpretation to the Vedic wisdom in the light of contemporary Eastern and Western philosophy. His fundamental assumption, in the light of Vedic Wisdom, is that the world is the manifestation of the Absolute. However, in contrast to some of the Vedanta schools which advocate a static and immutable self-existence, Aurobindo follows a dynamic understanding of the Absolute. This Absolute, *Saccidānanda*, is pure existence, pure consciousness, and pure bliss or *ānanda*. Everything in the universe is nothing but a manifestation of this dynamic and active consciousness. Matter, life, and mind and even

¹Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1960, ix.

²Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, ix-x.

³Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, x.

time and space are taken to be the self-expression of this Spiritual Absolute.

Aurobindo recognises a double process in the Absolute, which he designates as involution and evolution. The involution or the descent of the Absolute is the condition for the evolution of the world. Thus, the world movement is a downward and upward movement of the Supreme Existence. In Aurobindo's own words, involution “is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is the descent of God into that divine birth of the human being into which we mortal creatures must climb...”⁴ “Involution consists in the descent of the Infinite ... into the cosmic world or reality through the medium of the Supermind. Evolution, on the other hand, is the reverse process of involution, and it consists in the ascent of the Spirit from matter through the medium of the Supermind back to its original nature.”⁵ These explain the core of the becoming of *Saccidānanda* and the evolution of the universe along with the great role of the Supermind. The law of involution is characterized as a “law of unity in multiplicity” where “the different beings that emerge from Brahman's Self-manifestation have their being and origin in the Divine.”⁶ Therefore, for Aurobindo, whatever takes place in the universe and human life is that which takes place in the plan and providence of God.

The self-manifestation of *Saccidānanda* takes place in a threefold movement of ‘descent’, ‘emergence’, and ‘release’. In the first movement of the Spirit, it descends itself to the ‘Inconscient’. The self-absorption of the Spirit in the Inconscient is to enjoy the self-delight in the finite variation. In the second move, the Spirit assumes the form or emerges into the triple world of Matter, Life, and Mind and this process culminates in the rational animal, human being. In the third and the final move, the Spirit releases itself from the limitations of spatio-temporal dimensions and realises itself as the One and Infinite. The realism of Aurobindo with regard to life and reality is only a corollary to his basic assumption that the world is a manifestation of the Absolute.

⁴Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on Gita*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2000, 157.

⁵Amalraj Susai, *The Neo-Hindu Concept of Man in the Light of Sri Aurobindo's Evolutionary Vision*, Delhi: Intercultural Publication, 1993, 49.

⁶Susai, *The Neo-Hindu Concept of Man*, 50.

2.2. Illusionism versus Realism

Aurobindo could accept a philosophy of social and political change only because the world is real. What he aimed at was a “larger and complete affirmation” of both matter and spirit.⁷ What he advocates is that we should give proper attention to the great Vedantic formulations such as “one without a second” and “all this is Brahman” (MU 2,7). He was critical of two views that were prevalent in India, namely the “refusal of the ascetic” or the Supra-cosmic view which accepts only the Supreme Reality as real and the “denial of the materialist” or the Cosmic-terrestrial view which corresponds to the pure materialism of the West. For Aurobindo, “the world is real precisely because it exists only in consciousness; for it is a conscious Energy, one with Being that creates it... [The] world lives by That; That does not live by the world.”⁸ Matter and Spirit are considered to be the lowest and highest terms of existence. Aurobindo’s synthetic approach to matter and spirit explicates further his realism. For Aurobindo, creation has to be understood in the sense that the *Saccidānanda* “manifests what is in itself, in its own essence.” One can speak of creation only in the sense of “Being becoming in form and movement what is already is in substance and status.”⁹

[T]he universe is real. If it does not reveal to us in its forms and powers the Reality that it is, if it seems only a persistent and yet changing movement in Space and Time, this must be not because it is unreal or because it is not at all That, but because it is a progressive self-expression, a manifestation, an evolving self-development of That in Time which our consciousness cannot yet see in its total or its essential significance.¹⁰

Philosophy, for Aurobindo, “shows the achievement of India at its height and this philosophy was not primarily dialectical metaphysical system building but represented the intellectual generalisation of profound cosmic experiences of life and the Spirit.”¹¹ He repudiates the long standing allegation of Sankarites that the world is unreal or mere illusion. If the world is unreal and a mere illusion all claims and suggestions with regard to political change and transformation become meaningless.

⁷Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 24.

⁸Aurobindo. *The Life Divine*, 22.

⁹Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 333.

¹⁰Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 464-65.

¹¹Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 71.

Aurobindo, on the basis of his own fundamental principle that the world is the manifestation of the Absolute, advocates the true reality of the phenomenal world.¹²

2.3. Spiritual Determinism

Aurobindo advocates a kind of spiritual determinism in history. For him, history is the fulfilment of God. It can be observed that Aurobindo's political thought is structured on three foundations, namely, (1) the dynamic *Saccidānanda*, (2) Supermind, the Creative principle of *Saccidānanda*, and (3) the Evolutionary ascent of the created universe. As already stated, the evolutionary ascent of the created universe depends on the involutory descent of the Absolute.¹³ Aurobindo claims that this Omnipresent Being or Existence “fulfils itself in the world and the individual and the group with an impartial regard for all as equal powers of its self-manifestation.”¹⁴ In *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Aurobindo argues that to recognise an “inevitable will in nature” is a mark and sign of political wisdom.¹⁵ Those who are familiar with the western philosophy may trace a Hegelian influence too in the spiritual dialectics of Aurobindo. However, it has to be said that for those who are rooted in the Upani•adic/Advaita philosophy, the notion of the spiritual dialectics is not something novel, for it is an original idea of the Vedanta philosophy itself. Aurobindo conceives history as the revelation and manifestation of the Spirit. “The history of the cycles of man is a progress towards the unveiling of the Godhead in the soul and life of humanity; each high event and stage of it is a divine manifestation.”¹⁶ The sociological and political implication of the faith in a spiritual Absolute as the sole reality was manifested in the Eastern culture in and through the sentiments of solidarity, unity and mutuality, something which is absent in the predominant secular culture.¹⁷

¹²Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 31-33. Varma gives a detailed description of the refutation of Illusionism by Aurobindo.

¹³Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 33.

¹⁴Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle: The Psychology of Social Development*, Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 1999, 7.

¹⁵Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 1999, 353.

¹⁶Cited in *Sri Aurobindo Mandira Annual*, 1942, 172-73.

¹⁷Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 65.

Aurobindo maintains that the Western culture characterised by mechanistic and secularistic overtones and marked by “imperialism, materialism and rationalistic science” could not crush Indian culture in spite of various invasions because “in India there is a spiritual link and continuity with the most ancient Vedic traditions which emphasized the realization of the values of freedom, bliss and immortality. Because of the inexhaustible resources of the Spirit, the soul of India was not crushed in spite of the ravages of numerous foreign hordes and invaders.”¹⁸

2.4. Aurobindo’s Philosophy of History

Aurobindo’s philosophy of history is characterised by a fundamental causal motivation of historical events. This causal motivation in history, for Aurobindo, is the manifestation of the Spirit in the created universe and reciprocally the realisation of the Absolute by the created world through an evolutionary ascent. Therefore, whatever takes place in the created universe happens in the eternal Wisdom of the Absolute. It can be observed that Aurobindo applied his spiritual philosophy of history mainly in four areas of Indian life, namely, intellectual culture, politics, society, and art. The claim of Aurobindo is not only that the Indian culture and intellectual life manifest “the spiritual soul of India” but also that the trend dominated by the spiritual impulse has led India to “great and powerful creative accomplishments.” Since Aurobindo recognises in philosophy of history a cosmic manifestation of the dynamics of the Transcendental Absolute, the construction of proper political and social aims and objectives are only a necessary condition for the historical realization of this world movement. This is also the rationale behind Aurobindo’s critique of the world negating philosophies, such as some forms of Vedantism and Buddhism. What Aurobindo advocates is a fullness of social and individual living which should be manifested in a dynamic human existence, leading to the establishment of the gnostic community, something yet to be realised.

3. Contemporary Challenges to Indian Nationalism

India has achieved marvellous and envious growth in various spheres of life in recent decades. She shows steady economic growth; she has significant achievements in science and technology; in international politics and relationship, people await her voice; she is the largest democratic country in the world; so goes, briefly, the list of her

¹⁸Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 66.

achievements. However, she faces various threats both from external and internal forces. Externally, she is a victim of international terrorism. However, I would say that her greatest threat is from her own sons and daughters, such as growing religious fundamentalism, communal violence, mistaken secularism, challenged minorities, etc.

3.1. Religious Fundamentalism

The greatest threat that India faces today is the growing fundamentalism of a religious nature. As India celebrated 60th anniversary of its independence, in one of the interviews, Khushwant Singh was asked the question as to what worries him the most? The reply was short and clear: “the growing religious fundamentalism.”¹⁹ Indeed, religious fundamentalism is what threatens India the most. What has become more dangerous is that it has assumed a more devilish face when the politicians mixed religion and politics with clear political agendas. The fundamentalists and their activities received a new turn ever since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. One could list a number of cases of the same sort after this tragic event. The Hindutva movement led by the Sangh Parivar epitomizes the most dangerous form of religious fundamentalism that the independent India has ever seen.

3.2. Hindutva and Hinduism in the Name of Nationalism

One of the often cited phraseologies in India’s socio-political scenario is ‘Hindutva’, which literally means ‘the quality of being Hindu’.²⁰ But it is difficult to define it properly. One cannot define but can only try to describe what it is. The votaries of Hindutva are generally classified as “the promoters of a narrowly Hindu view of Indian civilization...”²¹ It is argued that Hindutva is “an ideology of reaction and conservatism, thrown up today against the chaotic threats to dominant groups... [It] articulates religious meanings and emotions that live in everyday social power relations... Moreover, it is conceived as “the populist ideology of India’s religious right.”²² According to V. D. Savarkar, the progenitor of the concept, Hindutva “is so varied and so rich, so powerful and so subtle, so

¹⁹*The Week* (Independence Day Special), August 19, 2007, 82.

²⁰Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005, 51.

²¹Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, ix-x.

²²David Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1997, 22-23.

elusive and yet so vivid” that it defies all attempts at analysis. Describing its relationship to Hinduism he stated: “Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva.” For him, the “failure to distinguish between Hindutva and Hinduism has given rise to much misunderstanding and mutual suspicion between some of those sister communities that have inherited this inestimable and common treasure of our Hindu civilization... Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole being of our Hindu race.”²³ The essentials of Hindutva, according to Savarkar, are a common nation, a common race, and a common civilization. The Hindutva movement has entered another stage when the Hindu ideologues such as M. S. Golwalker elaborated this idea to exclude all non-Hindus from the ambit of the nation. Thus, it can be safely said that “Hindutva serves as an ideological justification for the construction of India as a Hindu nation.”²⁴

3.3. Cultural Nationalism

What the Hindu ideologues represent today in the light of Hindutva movement is a cultural nationalism, where we have the primordial emphasis of religion and culture over politics. The attempt of these ideologues is to foist a new ideology on Hindus. However, this move envisions a false representation of the nature of national identity.²⁵ In fact, their attempt is to give a new interpretation to culture for their own political advantage. For them, “culture is but a product of our all-comprehensive religion, a part of its body and not indistinguishable from it.” This would naturally imply an identification of national culture with Hindu religious culture. K. N. Panikkar observes that in this respect, cultural nationalism embodies “a euphemism invoked in order to mask the creation of a state with Hindu religious identity.” This goal of the Hindutva people was very well expressed by Golwalker: “In Hindustan, the land of the Hindus, lives and should live the Hindu nation... Consequently, only those movements are truly ‘national’ as aim at rebuilding, revitalising, and emancipating from the present stupor, the Hindu Nation.”²⁶

²³V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu* (An Ideological Pamphlet Published in 1923).

²⁴K. N. Panikkar, “In the Name of Nationalism,” *Frontline*, March 26, 2004, 5.

²⁵Panikkar, “In the Name of Nationalism,” 5.

²⁶Golwalker, *Hindu Rashtra*, 1939, 43-44, cited in Panikkar, “In the Name of Nationalism,” 7.

The new project of ‘cultural nationalism’ encoded in the slogan “nationalise and spiritualise” has a twofold objective: (1) to retrieve and disseminate the cultural tradition of the golden Hindu past, and (2) to eliminate all accretions that had become part of the heritage.²⁷ Only in this light one can see the education policy adumbrated by the BJP-led government. The censorship of history books by National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was part of Hindutva education project. It is observed that ‘the objectionable’ portions were at odds with Hindutva’s brahminical version of history which glorifies India’s past, and presents it as a series of Hindu achievements. By this what is aimed at is the elimination of ideas of pluralism and tolerance from Indian culture. Precisely, the Hindutva advocates want to rewrite Indian history for their advantage erasing the age-old cultural tradition of India, which advocated a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious character. In this regard, Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate, writes: “it is futile to try to understand Indian art, literature, music, food or politics without seeing the extensive interactions across barriers of religious communities. These include, Hindus and Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees, Christians ... Jews, and even atheists and agnostics...”²⁸

The politics of Hindutva is promoted by a “family of Hindu political organizations” such as (1) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the official political arm of the Sangh Parivar, (2) Sangh Parivar, led by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which supplies the ideological backup as well as the functional activities in the promotion of Hindutva, (3) Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the World Council of Hindus, committed not primarily to religion but to religious politics, (4) Sewa Bharti, dedicated to welfare programmes linked with Hindutva movement, and (5) the Bajrang Dal, the violently energetic youth wing of VHP, which has been accused both by the International Human Rights Watch and by the Indian Human Rights Commission, for their involvement in Gujarat riots in 2002.²⁹ There are a number new political and religious organizations which support Hindutva ideology, namely, Sri Rama Sena, Lingayat religious teachers in

²⁷Panikkar, “In the Name of Nationalism,” 8.

²⁸Amartya Sen and Colleen Taylor, *Food Culture in India*, Amazon, 2004, xvii; also see Praful Bidwai, “Hindutva Ire,” *Frontline*, December 21, 2001, 112-114, 112.

²⁹Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 52.

north Karnataka, and religious heads such as the Tejawar Swami in the District of Dakshina Kannada, etc.³⁰

3.4. Communal Violence

One can only count the growing number of communal violence in different parts of the country as part of the fundamentalist agenda. In fact, communal violence has become a world phenomenon. Communalism is generally described as “collective antagonism organized around religious, linguistic, and/or ethnic identities.”³¹ It is observed that “since the late 1970s, nationalist movements based on the assertion that one majority ethnic or religious group defines a nation have emerged with new force and creativity – with new rituals and spectacles, including televised violence...”³² Some other western media occasionally cover the news with the title, “Holy War in India.”³³ India has been a victim of communal violence ever since the partition. However, in the recent decades its mode, nature, and number have drastically changed. It is noted that the communal violence in Gujarat and Orissa were masterminded by political motives and is counted as part of the political project of the Sangh Parivar. After Gujarat and Orissa, now a southern state Karnataka has become the new laboratory of Hindutva experiments and communal violence. What is more alarming is the great support these communal extremist elements receive from the political leaders and the ineffectiveness and the self-imposed silence of the security personnel at the face of extreme violence.

The first incident that triggered communal violence in the country, in recent decades that saw the impact of politics of religion, was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, on December 6, 1992, by the *Kar Sevaks*. The West sees it as a prototype of the world conflict: they see “Ayodhya as a window on a world of conflict that developed inside nationalism...,”³⁴ which helps see the incidents that followed in India and around the world. David Ludden gives the following version of the incident which also points to the intricacies involved in it:

Holy men declared Sunday, December 6, 1992, auspicious, and more than 300,000 people gathered that day in Ayodhya... At midday, a vanguard among them broke down police barricades around a

³⁰Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, “Divide and Rule,” *Frontline*, June 20, 2008, 13-15.

³¹Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 12.

³²Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 2.

³³Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 3.

³⁴Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 1-2.

mosque called the Babri Masjid built in 1528... Cheering men swarmed the domes of the old Mosque and in five hours they hammered and axed it to the ground... Hindu leaders who had mobilized for this event since 1984 watched with satisfaction... The construction of new Rama temple was begun that evening... Supporters justify the action at Ayodhya as the liberation of a Hindu sacred space to unify the Indian nation. Critics call it violence against Muslims; they decry such communalism ... as an attack on Indian civil society.³⁵

Some trace the roots of the 1993 Bombay blasts, the 2002 Gujarat riots, and the Akshardham temple siege the same year, to this unfortunate event.³⁶ Moreover, the Godhra train carnage, in which fifty-nine people, majority of them Hindu *Kar Sevaks*, were charred to death on February 27, 2002, allegedly by a Muslim mob. This was followed by one of the worst communal riots in the history of Independent India which claimed more than 1000 lives. The next was State of Orissa. Here the communal violence broke out following the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati and four of his disciples on August 23, 2008. The communal violence that followed saw a focused attack on Christians and claimed about 30 lives and thousands were made homeless. The country saw last of the communal violence in the state of Karnataka where many of the Christian churches were targeted and other minority groups were attacked. Many connect the rise of the BJP into power and the increase of violence in the state. It seems that the Hindutva movement has seen a fertile land in the State. The Sangh Parivar leaders have recently claimed that they would turn the ‘Bababudangiri shrine’, dedicated to the Sufi saint and located in the hills of the Chickmangalur district, into the Ayodhya of the South. What is alarmingly clear is that India is becoming a slave to certain ideologies which very often threaten its secular nature and communal harmony. It is observed that “ideology often becomes blinkers and makes its believer ignore complex realities and hence she/he becomes victim of her/his own ideological beliefs... Ideology always creates certain simplistic beliefs and divides the world in black and white ignoring all in between shades.”³⁷

³⁵Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 1.

³⁶*The Week*, August 19, 2007, 30.

³⁷Asghar Ali Engineer, “Jinnah: Secular or Communal,” *Indian Currents*, 3 July 2005, 14-15.

3.5. Mistaken Secularism

What we have already described with regard to growing fundamentalism, communalism, etc., amounts finally to endanger national integration by a mistaken understanding of its secular nature. The preamble of Indian Constitution states that the people of India have solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic... Article 25 affirms the Right to Freedom of Religion, i.e., with regard to “Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion ... [A]ll persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience, and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion.” Delineating the fundamental duties of every citizen, the Constitution, Article 51, division 5, vows to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic, regional, or sectional diversities...”³⁸ However, what the Hindutva ideologues advocate and practise, what the progenitors of communalism envision and those who threaten religious freedom in the country are acting just counter to the spirit of Indian Constitution. What is at stake is the secular character of India. Moreover, these ideologues try to give a mistaken interpretation to Indian secularism. For example, Ganesh Yaji, media-in-charge of the BJP in Karnataka, in spite of his direct connection and link to Hindutva ideologists, recently stated: “The BJP is the most secular party in the State and it has grown in the State because of its struggles and agitations for the people and continued efforts to improve its organization at the grassroots.”³⁹

Another instance of a ‘mistaken secularism’ is the State of Kerala, which has the highest literacy rate within the country. The ruling government led by the Marxist Party, known for its atheistic and anti-religious propaganda, is trying to give a ‘secular face’ to the party and government policies while trying to implement their anti-religious agenda through the educational reform and textbook revision. It seems that the party leaders are trying to interpret Indian secularism as if it means ‘having no religion’.

What went wrong is that in the name of mistaken secularism we refuse to listen to the pregnant and vital messages imparted by various sacred scriptures which “teach inner purification of our life and thereby

³⁸Binay Chakrabarti, *The Constitution and Constitutional Law of India*, Calcutta: New Central Book Agency, 1988.

³⁹Sayed, “Divide and Rule,” 15.

aim to sanctify the structure even of the social and historical universe.”⁴⁰ The beauty of Indian nationalism was its openness towards plurality of religion, culture, language, race, or creed. The identity of being Indian cannot be and should not be restricted to any particular collectivity.⁴¹ India has assumed a secular identity or a pluralistic identity, epitomizing the sense of openness to all religions and cultures.

3.6. Minority Rights Challenged

The Constitution of India gives adequate space to ensure rights of the minorities, especially their religious freedom and freedom to run educational institutions. However, growing fundamentalism and communal violence threaten these rights of the minorities. When the majoritarian movement led by the Hindus try to define Indian nation on the basis of an ‘imposed’ univocal culture and “seeks to displace and remove alternative, pluralistic definitions”⁴² and understanding even the very existence of religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians are at stake. They are even strategically branded as ‘foreigners’ by some of the fundamentalist groups. The majoritarian movement, in its attempt to define national identity on the basis of a very restricted understanding of a religious identity, reduces Indian identity to an exclusive religio-cultural identity. The identity of any nation should take into account perspectives of history, anthropology, political science, art, literature, religious diversity, cultural diversity, etc. Moreover, when an exclusive cultural or religious identity becomes the defining mark of a national identity, there is always the danger of religious fanaticism, and even the threat of reducing it to a theocracy. With regard to the protection of minorities, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *Young India*, on May 15, 1930:

The history of India and of the many countries of Europe has demonstrated that there can be no stable equilibrium in any country so long as an attempt is made to crush a minority or force it to conform to the ways of the majority... Therefore, we in India must make it clear to all that our policy is based on granting this freedom to the minorities and that under no circumstance will any coercion or repression of them be tolerated... We can also lay down, as our

⁴⁰Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 123.

⁴¹M. V. Nadkarni, A. S. Seetharamu, and Abdul Aziz, eds., *India: The Emerging Challenges*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991, 354.

⁴²Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu*, 14.

deliberate policy, that there shall be no unfair treatment of any minority.⁴³

One of the distinctive features of Indian identity was its pluriform nature in culture and religion. What is suggested is a comprehensive catholicity towards other religions and cultures. The majority's approach towards the other should not adapt itself to a Hegelian 'self-mediating culture' which is marked by a 'totalizing wholeness' in which the voice of the other is muffled down. The danger of Hegelian self-mediation is that "it risks reducing the plurality of forms of mediation to one essential form that encompasses the others." Here all otherness is reduced into "putative primacy of the self-mediation." What is advisable is that the dialectical self-mediation should be open to intermediation between thought and what is other to thought, precisely the other as other.⁴⁴ The minority communities in India are worried about their future in India as well as the future of communal harmony in India. Joseph Powathil expresses his concern and dismay in this regard as follows:

Our nation currently is passing through a phase of absolutist and fascist trends. A virulent section of the majority community is giving orders, rather warning, to the minorities to restructure their community as per their diktats. They are asking the Church leaders and believers to 'Indianise' their religions and to disassociate with their legitimate authorities. What they are aiming at is a monolithic structure and culture, which is fundamentally against the chief trait of India's culture – unity in diversity. The main victims of these absolutist ideas are the minority communities. The fabric of democracy is so thin that it cannot withstand even a small attack from any corner. It is the duty of the minorities to be ever vigilant against the covert attempts of a few to capture or cancel their constitutional rights. A liberal democracy would succeed only when the minorities are safe from the dominance of the majority.⁴⁵

In a multi-cultural and multi-religious situation, more than mere tolerance what is needed is openness towards the other. Whereas tolerance bears with it a sort of superiority, openness includes an attitude of reverence as

⁴³Cited in the forthcoming book of Joseph Powathil, *Journey with the Church*.

⁴⁴William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others: Ways of Being and Mind*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990, 4-5.

⁴⁵Powathil, *Journey with the Church*.

well.⁴⁶ Aurobindo maintains that “uniformity is not a real but a dead unity: uniformity kills life while real unity, if well founded, becomes vigorous and fruitful by a rich energy of variation.”⁴⁷ In this context, it is fitting to quote Sardar Patel, who tabling the report of the Advisory Committee in the Constituent Assembly on May 25, 1949, said: “Our general approach to the whole problem of the minorities is that the state should be so run that they should stop feeling oppressed by the mere fact that they are minorities and that, on the contrary, they should feel that they have as honourable a part to play in the national life as any other section of the community.”⁴⁸ Unless one learns to respect and honour the other as other, it will be very difficult to be mindful of the individuality of the other.

4. Religion and National Integration

After having seen the foundations and the distinctive nature of Aurobindo’s socio-political philosophy in the first part, we focused, in the second part, on the contemporary socio-political situation of India. In the light of what we have already seen, this section aims at articulating what Aurobindo could offer to the contemporary India, with his integral approach to life and reality centred on a religious metaphysics. In fact, it is hoped that such an integral path would enable us to find a viable means to solve the current socio-political and religious enigma that threatens Indian national integration.

4.1. Aurobindo’s Understanding of Religion

It is unfortunate to see that some sympathizers of Hindutva movement, in view of appropriating a cultural tradition for their political gain, interpret even Aurobindo for their advantage. What I have in mind is the move of the Hindutva people who make India’s renaissance leaders to be the icons of Hindu nationalism. In reality, they were charismatic advocates of a universal religion, based on the unity of humankind.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is deemed necessary first to see how Aurobindo perceived religion and its role in socio-political life. For Aurobindo, “Religion is the seeking after the spiritual...”⁵⁰ In another place, Aurobindo describes religion as “that

⁴⁶Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 121.

⁴⁷Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998; 4th ed., 436.

⁴⁸Cited in the forthcoming book of Powathil, *Journey with the Church*.

⁴⁹Panikkar, “In the Name of Nationalism,” 8.

⁵⁰Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 127.

instinct, idea, activity, discipline in man which aims directly at the Divine...”⁵¹ What is highlighted in these descriptions is the intimate relation between religion and transcendence: in the first, reference is to “spiritual and the supramental” and, in the second, it “aims directly at the Divine” or the Transcendent. Religion as the seeking after the spiritual raises further questions concerning the meaning of what is spiritual. By the spiritual Aurobindo means that which is supra-rational, that which is beyond or higher than the realm of reason. Without advocating fideism, Aurobindo informs us of the dangers of someone following the decrees of religion without thinking. In fact, he records well the past atrocities that have taken place in history in the name of religion and faith.⁵²

A question as to the legitimacy of the complementarity of the religious and the philosophical is quite natural. For the East, the complementarity of the two is not illegitimate. The argument is that while philosophy supplies the theoretical part by providing authentic knowledge of the ultimate Reality, Yoga, the practical or the religious part provides the means to attain the realisation of the ultimate Reality. In other words, “philosophy discovers the final end or goal of man; having discovered it, it hands it over to Yoga that it may devise means of practically realizing it.” In the Indian tradition, from the point of personal realization, religion is nothing but Yoga.⁵³

4.2. Religion and Freedom

For Aurobindo, the synthetic approach towards philosophy and religion is intimately connected to true spirituality and freedom. For, true spirituality itself is an outcome of the enjoyment of true freedom. True freedom finds its deepest manifestation in its power to expand itself and grow towards perfection by the law of one’s own nature, dharma. His argument is that true spirituality respects the freedom of the soul that is not just confined to the walls of any particular creed or sect; nor is it confined to any particular dimension of human existence. True spirituality is open to philosophy and science, and this liberty extends even to the point of freedom to deny the spirit. Aurobindo maintains that it was this freedom, which different

⁵¹Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 162.

⁵²Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 165.

⁵³S. K. Maitra, *The Meeting of the East and the West in Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1956, 14.

religions enjoyed in ancient India, which is being questioned today by the fundamentalists.⁵⁴

According to Aurobindo the religious instinct in man is the “one instinct ... that cannot be killed; it only changes its form.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he maintains that true religious spirit demands a sound philosophical and theological basis. For him, “a religion that is not the expression of philosophic truth degenerates into superstition and obscurantism, and a philosophy which does not dynamise itself with the religious spirit is a barren light, for it cannot get itself practised.”⁵⁶ However, religion itself has to be very vigilant that it does not cross the boundary of its own domain. Thus, Aurobindo warns even those who are religious:

We see too that a narrow religious spirit often oppresses and impoverishes the joy and beauty of life, either from an intolerant asceticism or, as the Puritans attempted it, because they could not see that religious austerity is not the whole of religion, though it may be an important side of it, is not the sole ethico-religious approach to God, since love, charity, gentleness, tolerance, kindness are also and even more divine, and they forgot or never knew that God is love and beauty as well as purity.⁵⁷

Aurobindo does not hesitate to affirm that religion does not stand for a “false theocracy, forgetting that true theocracy is the kingdom of God in man.” For him, true religion should be “a seeking after God, the cult of spirituality, the opening of the deepest life of the soul to the indwelling Godhead, the eternal Omnipresence.”⁵⁸

4.3. Religion versus Religionism

Aurobindo maintains that the ‘Soul of India is spirituality’. India could withstand the foreign invasion only because of its spiritual thrust.⁵⁹ In contrast to the western culture, characterised predominantly by a materialistic culture, “there is a dominant notion of the spiritual transcendental infinite.” What is more relevant in our present discussion is

⁵⁴Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 170.

⁵⁵Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 163.

⁵⁶Arya, August 15, 1915, cited in S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967, 578.

⁵⁷Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 165.

⁵⁸Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 166.

⁵⁹Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 66.

the sociological implications of this spiritual thrust, namely, “the stress in Indian and Eastern culture on the sentiments of solidarity, unity, and mutuality of all beings in the spirit.”⁶⁰ The Asiatic culture and civilizations could prevail because it was well-founded on a moral and religious framework which was also foundational to construct a socio-political order. This religious sense, sweetened and made tolerable by a strong communal feeling, made possible a living humanity generous in human equality and closeness.

What India lacks today is this true religious sense. We mistake religionism for true religion. Aurobindo is critical of the former. What he advocates is a religion of the Spirit. He makes a distinction between true religion and religionism.

True religion is spiritual religion, that which seeks to live in the spirit, in what is beyond the intellect, beyond the aesthetic and ethical and practical being of man... Religionism, on the contrary, entrenches itself in some narrow pietistic exaltation of the lower members or lays exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system.⁶¹

While religionism focuses on “credal ceremonialities,” true religion “brings down the powers of God, to transform mankind, to profess equality of all human beings.”⁶² No true religious person can agree with what the Hindu *Kar Sevaks* have done in Ayodhya. They fought a “holy war” in the name of religion and God. Certainly, they have mistaken religionism and religious fundamentalism for true religion.

Every religion is characterised by code, creed, and cult; they constitute the body and mind of religion. Unless members of religion rise above all these to the soul of religion, they will not live true religion. Only the ‘soul of religion’ will take one to the eternal values such as truth, love, peace, service, etc., where different religions are not competitors but complimenting companions, where religion itself as a concept is a living tradition perpetually open to creative transformation. Then we would become true advocates of the ‘religion of the Spirit’ something for which Aurobindo firmly stood. Socio-political structuring in the ancient India, according to him, was characterised by a free and synthetic communal

⁶⁰Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 65.

⁶¹Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 166-67.

⁶²Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 220.

order which aimed not at individual liberty, but communal freedom. In fact, only a religion which advocates true communal freedom can contribute toward national integration in the context of growing fundamentalism, communalism, and sectarianism.

4.4. Religion and National Integration: A Religion of Humanity

It is true that in the contemporary culture religion is retreating to the inner world. Aurobindo, however, believed in the greater power and potentiality of religion for social transformation and national integration. What can be articulated from his works, as a viable means to overcome the contemporary socio-political crisis and in view of proposing religion as a means for national integration, is the need for a Religion of Humanity. It is an undeniable fact that he was deeply rooted in the Vedic tradition and has well appreciated the Hindu culture and tradition. He, however, never attached himself to the exclusive views of any specific historical religion or a monolithic culture or tradition.⁶³ He proposed a scheme of political unity and national integrity based on the idealistic-religious metaphysics.

For Aurobindo, human egoism is the principal cause of all kinds of discord, be they religious, cultural, national, or international. Therefore, this egoism has to be replaced by love and universal brotherhood. Only a religion of humanity can achieve this end. It would mean “the clear recognition by man in all his thoughts and life of a single soul in humanity of which each man and each people is an incarnation and soul form.”⁶⁴ The religion of humanity has to be more powerful than the nationalist creed advocated by some religions of the country.

India has never been in her history a victim of religio-political polarization than today. Even the ‘holy men and women’ and military officers are victims of this polarization (recent incidents substantiate this claim). What is advisable is the reconstruction of our socio-political structure in the light of religious ideals. Aurobindo believes that only a religion of humanity can supply the moral power for such a reconstruction.

I am reminded of S. Radhakrishnan speaking in 1942 on the topic “religion and politics” in Calcutta. He proposes that we have to leave behind all kinds of provincialism and cultivate true nationalism, as nationalism is not a natural instinct.

⁶³Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 263.

⁶⁴Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, 360, cited in Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 259.

Nationalism is not a natural instinct. It is an acquired artificial emotion. Love of one's native soil [and] loyalty to regional traditions do not mean violent hostility to one's neighbours. If today the feeling of national pride is intense, it only shows the prodigious capacity of human nature for self-deception.⁶⁵

Aurobindo is fully aware of the moral ambivalence of religion today. We need solitary and contemplative individuals intoxicated by the spirit of true religion so that religion and religious can be sources of socio-political transformation.

5. Conclusion

In the present context of Indian political and religious scenario Aurobindo's emphasis on moral purification for political action is very significant.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the major difficulty in this regard is to determine the right relation between political process and religious values. Moreover, for too many people their national identity and loyalty are being overshadowed by narrower perspectives of communal and religious identity and loyalty. However, in this context, a separation of the two will not be the ideal, rather "the proper integration between a higher religious perspective and a politics devoted to the welfare of all."⁶⁷ Then religion will attain the very ideal it represents: religion – its Latin root *religare* means to relate, tie up, or bind together.

However, to achieve this noble cause one has to transcend egoistic mentalities and sectarian ideologies. A communal religion should give way to a rational religion or, as Aurobindo suggests, ordinary religion should be transformed into a religion of humanity. Only rational religions can be agents of such transformation that nurtures the fermentation of the ideals of civilization such as truth, beauty, adventure, art, peace, etc. In fact, what Aurobindo aims at is a spiritual transmutation of human powers. It is a task and responsibility that each one has to fulfil by translating the classical Vedic invocation into a reality:

Asato ma sad gamaya
Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya
Mrtyo ma amrtam gamaya
Om |anti! |anti! |anti!

⁶⁵S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1947, 14.

⁶⁶Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, xi.

⁶⁷Paulos M. Gregorios, *Religion and Dialogue*, Kottayam: Mar Gregorios Foundation, 2000, 94.