

The Relevance of Aurobindo: Early Political Life & Teachings

Nadesan Satyendra

first published by Tamil International in January 1985

"Man's highest aspiration - his seeking for perfection, his longing for freedom and mastery, his search after pure truth and unmixed delight - is in flagrant contradiction with his present existence and normal experience. Such contradiction is part of Nature's general method; it is a sign that she is working towards a greater harmony. The reconciliation is achieved by an evolutionary progress..."*Evolution of Man - A Compendium of Aurobindo's Writings*

Introduction

The year was 1909. The long trial in Allipore jail in Bombay had reached its penultimate stages. The charge was conspiracy to murder a British judge. Defence Counsel, young Chitranjan Das, who was himself destined to play an important role in the Indian struggle for independence, had come to the end of his closing address. His words were prophetic:

"Long after this controversy is hushed in silence, long after this turmoil and this agitation have ceased, long after the man in the dock is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity: long after he is dead and gone his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands."

The man in the dock was Sri Aurobindo Ghose [OrObin´dO gOsh] . He was acquitted of the charge laid against him but his brother who was charged with him, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andaman Islands. Many years later, in 1951, Aurobindo passed away in Pondicherry. Today, the ashram in which he lived in Pondicherry, attracts thousands of visitors from all over the globe. Aurobindo's life and work continue to influence and direct and his words continue to echo and re echo, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands.

Student Days

Aurobindo was born in 1872 near Calcutta. He was educated in England from the early age of seven and returned to India in 1893, having passed with distinction the Classical Tripos examinations at Cambridge University. Though he had sat for the Indian Civil Service examination and passed it, he failed to turn up for the compulsory horse riding test. Even as a student at Cambridge, his thoughts had turned to India and the struggle for independence. In Aurobindo's earliest manuscripts, dated 1890-92, are these notes:

"The patriot who offers advice to a great nation in an era of change and turmoil, should be very confident that he has something worth saying before he ventures to speak; but if he can really put some new aspect on a momentous question or emphasise any side of it that has not been clearly understood, it is his bounden duty, however obscure he may be, to ventilate it."

Reformism of the Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 by a retired British civil servant, A.O.Hume and was following the path which had been set for it by its founder, who had declared:

"Every adherent of the Congress, however noisy in declamations, however bitter in speech, is safe from burning bungalows and murdering Europeans and the like. His hopes are based upon the British nation and he will do nothing to invalidate these hopes and anger that nation."

Hume was perceptive but not entirely original. Many years earlier, in 1835, the English poet and historian, Thomas B. Macaulay, who served as President of a Committee on Public Instruction in Bengal, recommended for India (in his Minute on Education), a thoroughly English educational system which 'would create a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in morals and in intellect' and it was through such a class that the British sought to perpetuate their rule. In a letter to his father in 1836, Macaulay added, "...It is my belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence. And this will be effected without any efforts to proselytize, without the smallest interference with religious liberty, by natural operation of knowledge and reflection. I heartily rejoice in the project."

But, Aurobindo Ghose, a Bengali, returning to India, after a 14 year education in England, first at St.Pauls, London and thereafter at Kings College, Cambridge University, quickly set about proving both Hume and Macaulay wrong.

Aurobindo's first political writing in 1893, was a sustained and reasoned attack on the reformism of the Congress leaders. It was a time when the educated youth of India were becoming increasingly restive at the failure of the path of petitioning and pleading as a way of achieving freedom. Education has a way of widening horizons which some teachers do not entirely anticipate. Aurobindo wrote in 1893 in the *Indu Prakash*:

"The Congress is altogether too unwieldy a body for any sort of executive work.. Not content with using a banner as a banner, we have actually caught up the staff of it with a view to breaking our enemy's heads..."

Popular orators, who carry the methods of the bar into politics, are very fond of telling people that the Congress has habituated us to act together. Well, that is not quite correct; there is not the slightest evidence to show that we have at all learned to act together; the one lesson we have learned is to talk together, and that is a rather different thing..

Our appeal, the appeal of every high souled and self respecting nation, ought not to be to the British sense of justice, but to our own reviving sense of manhood, to our own sincere fellow feeling - so far as it can be called sincere - with the silent suffering people of India. I am sure that eventually the nobler part of us will prevail, - that when we no longer obey the dictates of a veiled self interest, but return to the profession of

a large and genuine patriotism, when we cease to hanker after the soiled crumbs which England may cast to us from her table, then it will be to that sense of manhood, to that sincere fellow feeling that we shall finally and forcibly appeal."

And, Aurobindo concluded:

"I again call on those nobler spirits among us who are working erroneously, it may be, but with incipient or growing sincerity, to divert their strenuous effort from the promotion of narrow class interests, from silly squabbles about offices and salaried positions... into that vaster channel through which alone the healing waters may be conducted to the lips of their ailing and tortured country."

"Capital period of my intellectual development"

The years from 1892 onwards were years of much study and inward searching for Sri Aurobindo. He earned his living by working in the Baroda state service, initially in the revenue department and later as a teacher of English. They were years of preparation. He read voraciously. He learnt his mother tongue, Bengali, for the first time. He mastered Sanskrit so that he may read the Upanishads in the original. But many years later, he remarked:

"The capital period of my intellectual development was when I could see clearly that what the intellect said might be correct and not correct, that what the intellect justified was true and its opposite was also true. I never admitted a truth in the mind without simultaneously keeping it open to the contrary of it.. And the first result was that the prestige of the intellect was gone."

Aurobindo had reached the frontiers of the mind and was concerned with exploring that frontier. It was an evolutionary process which led him to the practise of yoga in the early 1900s. But he declared that a yoga which required him to give up the world was not for him. He was, as always, stubborn in his honesty:

"The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all... I felt that there must be a mighty truth somewhere in this yoga... So when I turned to the yoga and resolved to practise it and find out if my idea was right, I did it in this spirit and with this prayer to Him, 'If thou art, then Thou knowest my heart. Thou knowest that I do not ask for Mukti (liberation), I do not ask for anything which others ask for, I ask only for strength to uplift this nation, I ask only to be allowed to live and work for this people whom I love."

Aurobindo's involvement with the militant movement

Sri Aurobindo came to be increasingly involved in the freedom struggle. These were the years of the heavy handed approach of Lord Curzon who served as the Viceroy of British India. The Indian National Congress itself failed to provide effective leadership. It was torn between the so called 'moderates' who sought to persevere in the path of reformism, of discussion and dialogue, of pleading and

persuasion and the 'militants' to whom these were methods which merely perpetuated British rule.

And nowhere was the militancy greater than in Bengal which had a strong literary and university tradition. Aurobindo maintained contacts with many of the militants and his brother Barinda was engaged directly in revolutionary work. In 1903, at the instance of his brother, he wrote the pamphlet 'Bhavani Mandir'. It was meant to train people for revolutionary struggle. He wrote:

"Is it love, enthusiasm, Bhakthi that is wanting? These are ingrained in the Indian nature, but in the absence of Shakthi we cannot concentrate, we cannot direct...Bhakthi is the leaping flame, Shakthi is the fuel. If the fuel is scanty, how long can the flame endure?...Many of us, utterly overcome by Tamas, the dark and heavy demon of inertia, are saying nowadays that it is impossible, that India is decayed, bloodless and lifeless, too weak ever to recover. It is a foolish and idle saying. No man or nation need perish unless he deliberately chooses extinction... For what is a nation?...It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakthi composed of all the millions of units that make up the nation."

The British response to the rising militancy of the educated Hindus of Bengal was predictable. On the one hand they used the strong arm of the law but they attempted to avoid action which may lead to the birth of martyrs. They refrained from using the British army because that would easily lead to a confrontation between "them" and "us". They preferred to use the Police which was manned mainly by Indians themselves.

On the other hand the British sought to undermine the solidarity of the movement by re drawing the boundaries of Bengal and partitioning it in such a way that the Hindu Bengalis would not constitute a majority in either of the two new provinces. **In the words of Lord Curzon, 'Bengal divided, will fall'**. The partition was announced in 1904 and became a legal fact in 1905.

"I am a victim of three insanities"

In August 1905, Aurobindo set down some of his innermost thoughts in a letter to his wife. He wrote:

" Possibly by this time you have realised that the person with whom your lot is cast is a very peculiar gentleman...You know how people regard uncommon opinion, extraordinary attempts, and high aspirations. They call that madness...I am a victim of **three insanities**, if I may call them so.

My first insanity consists in my firm belief that the qualifications, higher education, learning and wealth that God has given me, all belong to Him. We have a right to spend only as much as is required for the upkeep of the family and is absolutely needed. What remains ought to be rendered back to God. If I spend all that I have on myself, for my pleasures, for luxury, then I am a veritable thief ...

The second madness that has taken hold of me is the determination, happen what may, to see God, face to face, whatever the means. I have determined to tread the path

that leads to God, however difficult it might be. The Hindu knows that path lies in one's own body, in one's own mind. Siddhi or fulfilment is bound to come to everyone who follows the path.....

My third madness is with regard to Mother India. I look upon India as my Mother, I am devoted to her, I worship her. If somebody mounts on the chest of his mother and to drink her blood, what does her son do? Does he sit down for meals and settle down with a calm and a quiet mind to enjoy life with his wife and children? Or does he run to the succour of his suffering mother?"

Violence and Non Violence

In early 1906, Aurobindo left Baroda for Calcutta and the following two years were years of intense political activity. His writings in the weekly 'Bande Mataram' captured the imagination of all India. The then British editor of the Statesman of Calcutta wrote many years later in 1950, in the Manchester Guardian:

"...It was in 1906, shortly after Curzon's retirement, that Sri Aurobindo and his friends started Bande Mataram...it was full of leading and special articles written in English with brilliance and pungency not hitherto attained in the Indian press. **It was the most effective voice of what we then called nationalist extremism..**"

The partition of Bengal did not resolve the problem created by a rising Bengali nationalism. The actions of the British escalated the confrontation between the ruler and the ruled. A swadeshi movement was launched coupled with a boycott of English textiles and this met with some initial success. Bande Mataram put before the nation a programme of boycott, swadeshi, national education and passive resistance. But to Aurobindo, that which he called 'passive resistance', was a method to be followed only if the circumstances were appropriate. He wrote:

"To the ideal we have at heart there are three paths, possible or impossible.

Petitioning which we have so long followed, we reject as impossible - the dream of timid experience, the teaching of false friends who hope to keep us in perpetual subjection, foolish to reason, false to experience.

Self development by self help which we now propose to follow, is a possible though uncertain path, never yet attempted under such difficulties, but one which must be attempted, if for nothing else yet to get free of the habit of dependence and helplessness...

Parallel to this attempt, the policy of organised resistance forms the old traditional way of nations which we must also tread. It is a vain dream to suppose that what other nations have won by struggle and battle, by suffering and tears of blood, we shall be allowed to accomplish easily, without terrible sacrifices, merely by spending the ink of the journalist and petition framer and the breath of the orator.

Petitioning will not bring us one yard nearer freedom; self development will not easily be suffered to advance to its goal. For self development spells the doom of the ruling despotism, which must therefore oppose our progress with all the art and force of

which it is the master; **without organised resistance we could not take more than a few faltering steps towards self emancipation.**

But resistance may be of many kinds - armed revolt, or aggressive resistance short of armed revolt, or defensive resistance whether passive or active; the circumstances of the country and the nature of the despotism from which it seeks to escape must determine what form of resistance is best justified and most likely to be effective. "

Aurobindo did not rule out violent resistance as a way of achieving freedom. He wrote:

"The present circumstances in India seem to point to passive resistance as our most natural and suitable weapon. We would not for a moment be understood to base this conclusion upon any condemnation of other methods as in all circumstances criminal and unjustifiable.

It is the common habit of established governments and especially those which are themselves oppressors, to brand all violent methods in subject peoples and communities as criminal and wicked. When you have disarmed your slaves and legalised the infliction of bonds, stripes, and death on any one of them who may dare to speak or act against you, it is natural and convenient to try and lay a moral as well as a legal ban on any attempt to answer violence by violence...

But no nation yet has listened to the cant of the oppressor when itself put to the test, and the general conscience of humanity approves the refusal...Liberty is the life breath of a nation; and when life is attacked, when it is sought to suppress all chance of breathing by violent pressure, then any and every means of self preservation becomes right and justifiable...**It is the nature of the pressure which determines the nature of the resistance.**"

At about this time, there were more than 40,000 unemployed graduates in Bengal and out of a number of organisations of young men arose the Bengali militant movements. They were inspired in particular by the exploits of the Italian national leader, Guiseppe Mazzini and some of them were sent to Europe to learn the art of making bombs. There were hundreds of cases of so called 'dacoity'. There were raids on banks and on armouries.

There were in existence several rival groups which were in conflict with each other. The British were compelled to move to suppress the movements by bringing to bear the full force of the state apparatus. At the same time the British were not unmindful that too heavy a hand may prove to be counter productive. Lord Minto who had succeeded Lord Curzon as Viceroy was addressed by Lord Morley, the then Secretary of State for India:

"I must confess to you that I am watching with the deepest concern and dismay the thundering sentences that are being passed for sedition etc. We must keep order, but excess of severity is not the path to order. On the contrary it is the path to the bomb."

The incalculable power of martyrdom

However, despite the concerns of Lord Morley, many of the leaders of the militant movement were killed and others were convicted and sentenced to prison. Martyrs were born. Aurobindo wrote of the power of martyrdom in *Bande Mataram* in 1907. The article was entitled, 'The Strength of an Idea' and his words continue to retain their eloquence, and their relevance today.

"...the physical power and organisation behind the insurgent idea are ridiculously small, the repressive force so overwhelmingly, impossibly strong that all reasonable prudent moderate minds see the utter folly of resistance and stigmatise the attempt of the idea to rise as an act of almost criminal insanity.

But the man with the idea is not reasonable, not prudent, not moderate. He is an extremist, a fanatic. He knows that in the fight with brute force the spirit is bound to conquer...He knows too that his own life and the lives of others are of no value, that they are mere dust in the balance compared with the life of his idea.

The idea or sentiment is at first confined to a few men whom their neighbours and fellow countrymen ridicule as lunatics or hare brained enthusiasts. But it spreads and gathers adherents who catch the fire of the first missionaries and creates its own preachers and then its workers who try to carry out its teachings in circumstances of almost paralysing difficulty. The attempt to work brings them into conflict with the established power which the idea threatens and there is persecution.

The idea creates its martyrs. And in martyrdom there is an incalculable spiritual magnetism which works miracles. A whole nation, a whole world catches the fire which burned in a few hearts; the soil which has drunk the blood of the martyr imbibes with it a sort of divine madness which it breathes into the heart of all its children, until there is but one overmastering idea, one imperishable resolution in the minds of all besides which all other hopes and interests fade into significance and until it is fulfilled, there can be no peace or rest for the land or its rulers.

It is at this moment that the idea creates its heroes and fighters, whose numbers and courage defeat only multiplies and confirms until the idea militant has become the idea triumphant. Such is the history of the idea, so invariable in its broad outlines that it is evidently the working of a natural law."

The British carrot and the British stick

The British combined the attack on the militants with the offer of some constitutional reforms. It was the usual mixture of carrot and stick. The Morley Minto proposals of 1907 constituted the carrot. It was a legal frame which sought to perpetuate colonial rule with the assistance of collaborators from the ruled. It was the tried and tested gambit of a colonial power when called upon to contend with a rising national consciousness - a gambit which is not without significance today. The Morley Minto reforms sought to set up provincial legislatures where the majority would be nominees of the British government and a central Council with a few Indians, again nominated by the British. Aurobindo's response was immediate and caustic. He wrote in *Bande Mataram* in June 1907, under the title 'Comic Opera Reforms':

"Mr. Morley has made his pronouncement and a long expectant world may now go about its ordinary business with the satisfactory conviction that the conditions of political life in India will be precisely the same as before... **We find it impossible to discuss Mr. Morley's reforms seriously, they are so impossibly burlesque and farcical.** Yet they have their serious aspect. They show that British despotism, like all despotisms in the same predicament, is making the time honoured, ineffectual effort to evade a settlement of the real question by throwing belated and now unacceptable sop to Demogorgon."

Aurobindo, did not shrink from attacking a sanctimonious morality which equated the violence of the oppressor with the violence of those who sought to escape from that oppression. In 1908 he wrote the article entitled 'The Morality of the Boycott':

"Ages ago there was a priest of Baal who thought himself commissioned by God to kill all who did not bow the knee to him. All men, terrified by the power and ferocity of the priest, bowed down before the idol and pretended to be his servants; and the few who refused had to take refuge in hills and deserts. At last, a deliverer came and slew the priest and the world had rest. The slayer was blamed by those who placed religion in quietude and put passivity forward as the ideal ethics, but the world looked upon him as an incarnation of God.

A certain class of mind shrinks from aggressiveness as if it were sin. Their temperament forbids them to feel the delight of battle and they look on what they cannot understand as something monstrous and sinful. 'Heal hate by love', 'drive out injustice by justice', 'slay sin by righteousness' is their cry. Love is a sacred name but it is easier to speak of love than to love. The love which drives out hate is a divine quality of which only one man in a thousand is capable. A saint full of love for all mankind possesses it... but the mass of mankind does not and cannot rise the height.

Politics is concerned with masses of mankind and not with individuals. To ask masses of mankind to act as saints, to rise to the height of divine love and practise it in relation to their adversaries or oppressors is to ignore human nature. It is to set a premium on injustice and violence by paralysing the hand of the deliverer when raised to strike. The Gita is the best answer to those who shrink from battle as a sin, and aggression as lowering morality...

Justice and righteousness are the atmosphere of political morality, but the justice and righteousness of a fighter, not of the priest. Aggression is unjust only when unprovoked; violence, unrighteous when used wantonly or for unrighteous ends. It is a barren philosophy which applies a mechanical rule to all actions, or takes a word and tries to fit all human life into it."

Aurobindo in Prison

These words were written for publication in the *Bande Mataram* but the manuscript was seized by the Police. The article was produced as an exhibit in the Alipore conspiracy case in May 1908. Sri Aurobindo together with about thirty others, including his brother, were charged with conspiracy to murder a British judge who had acquired notoriety for the manner in which he dealt with Indians who were brought before him. The bomb intended for the judge, killed instead, his wife and

child. Sri Aurobindo remained on remand for more than a year. It was a period of intense reflection and meditation. He said later:

"...What happened to me during that period I am not impelled to say, but only this that day after day He showed me his wonders and made me realise the utter truth of the Hindu religion. I had many doubts before that. I was brought up in England amongst foreign ideas and an atmosphere entirely foreign. About many things in Hinduism I had once been inclined to believe that they were imaginations... But now day after day, I realised in the mind, I realised in the heart, I realised in the body the truths of the Hindu religion. They became living experiences to me, and things were opened to me which no material science could explain."

Sri Aurobindo's stay in prison marked a turning point in his personal evolution. It also represented a turning point in the development of the Indian freedom struggle. After his acquittal he found that the British had successfully broken the back of the resistance movement. The path of 'passive resistance' coupled with a tacit acceptance (and justification) of direct violence had failed to mobilise a successful resistance movement. There was an inherent contradiction which dissipated strength.

The ink of the journalist had not proved to be much more effective than the pen of the petition drawer. The bomb in the hand of the militant had not proved much more effective than the breath of the orator.

The repressive power of the state prevailed over both. Almost all the leaders of the freedom movement were either in jail or in self imposed exile.

Famous Uttarpara speech after release from prison

Aurobindo expressed his feelings in the famous Uttarpara speech, soon after his release from prison:

"It is I, this time who have spent one year in seclusion, and now that I come out I find all changed. One who always sat by my side (Tilak) and was associated in my work is a prisoner in Burma; another is in the north rotting in detention... I looked around for those to whom I had been accustomed to look for counsel and inspiration. I did not find them. There was more than that.

When I went to jail the whole country was alive with the cry of Bande Mataram... when I came out of jail I listened for that cry, but there was instead a silence. a hush had fallen on the country and men seemed bewildered... No man seemed to know which way to move, and from all sides came the question, 'What shall we do next? What is there that we can do?' I too did not know which way to move, I too did not know what was next to be done."

Although, to use his own words, he 'did not know what was next to be done', he sought to somehow marry the larger vision that he had seen whilst in prison, with the desire that remained in him that he should participate in the struggle for Indian freedom. He ended his Uttarapara speech with these words:

"I spoke once before with this force in me and I said then that this movement is not a political movement and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the Sanatana Dharma which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the Sanatana Dharma, with it moves and with 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. This is the message that I have to speak to you."

For Aurobindo politics was too much - and too little

So it was that Aurobindo, on his return from prison, did not disengage himself from political activity. Though *Bande Mataram* had ceased publication, undeterred, Aurobindo started a new weekly called the *Karma Yogin*. The name was perhaps of some significance - it recognised that it was through the path of work that freedom for the individual and for India would be achieved.

He sought to resuscitate the flagging political zeal of those around him, but he did not succeed. Not surprisingly, the Congress moderates moved to accept the Morley Minto reforms as the only way out of the debacle and this further demoralised the political atmosphere. Many years later, whilst describing his experience of the ebb of political enthusiasm, Aurobindo remarked:

"Even when all the leaders were jailed and some deported, we continued to hold our political meetings at College Square. But in all there used to be about a hundred persons, and that too mostly passers by. And I had the honour to preside over several such meetings!"

Great expectations that are not fulfilled are usually followed by an even greater despondency and all that remained was a sullen silence.

Aurobindo had begun to see more clearly the direction ahead and in 1909, he wrote more positively about the path of non violence than he had done earlier:

"We have told the people that there is a peaceful means of achieving independence in whatever form we aspired to it. We have said that by self help, by passive resistance we can achieve it... Passive resistance means two things.

It means first that in certain matters we shall not cooperate with the government until it gives us what we consider our rights. Secondly if we are persecuted, if the plough of repression is passed over us, we shall meet it, not by violence, but by suffering, by passive resistance, by lawful means.

We have not said to our young men, 'when you are repressed, retaliate' - we have said 'suffer'... We are showing the people of this country, in passive resistance, the only way in which they can satisfy their legitimate aspiration without breaking the law and without resorting to violence."

But, Aurobindo did not see himself leading the Indian people along this path of non violence which he continued to describe as "**passive**" resistance. Aurobindo had sought to appeal to the 'reviving sense of manhood' of the Indian people and it was perhaps, not surprising that he found it difficult to identify himself with a path which he continued to perceive as 'passive'.

His involvement with the militant movement may have clouded his perception of the reality - that true non violence was not 'passive' at all but that it was resistance of the most active kind - resistance which demanded even greater courage and resoluteness than a violent struggle.

Again, it may well be that Aurobindo did not see himself as the person who was equipped to lead the struggle that was ahead. He had begun to look upon the Indian freedom struggle as a part of a wider struggle of man to know himself and become free and it was to this broader vision that he addressed himself in the years that followed. On the 30th of July 1909, Aurobindo wrote an open letter to his countrymen. He said:

"... all great movements wait for their God sent leader, the willing channel of His force and only when he comes, move forward triumphantly to their fulfillment ... therefore the nationalist party, the custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come."

It was Aurobindo's resignation from the political arena. In a way, as Dalton has remarked in a recent book, for Aurobindo, politics proved to be not enough - as well as too much.

The individual and the collective

The open letter heralded Aurobindo's move from British India to French Pondicherry in early 1910 and it was there that Aurobindo was to spend the remaining 40 years of his life in an inner exploration which sought to join the inner with the outer in an Integral Yoga. Every inside has an outside and every outside has an inside - and the relationship between the two is intrinsic and dynamic. He wrote:

"It is wrong to demand that the individual subordinate himself to the collectivity or merge in it because it is by its most advanced individuals that the collectivity progresses and they can really advance only if they are free. But it is true that as the individual advances spiritually, he finds himself more and more united with the collectivity and All."

Aurobindo sought the unity with the outer in the exploration of the inner and his epic poem **Savithri** expressed in blank verse, in language which captures our minds and lingers in our hearts, the path of that exploration. But to the end, he remained true to his statement that a yoga that secured a personal salvation was not for him.

Arrival of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

The Indian national movement did await the arrival of the man who would be the willing channel of the force that would lead the movement to its eventual triumph. A

few years later in 1916 that man came to India in the shape and form of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the force was the force of Ahimsa or Truth.

If Sri Aurobindo may be regarded as a raja yogi, then Mahatma Gandhi was the karma yogi par excellence. To Mahatma Gandhi, life was an experiment with truth. He sought everywhere a coincidence of word and deed

To Mahatma Gandhi non violence was not **passive** resistance. It was something very active. Non violence was not something that was useful and convenient in the situation that the Indian people found themselves - a tactic to be adopted if the circumstances were suitable. It was to him the only way. In South Africa, he had declared without equivocation: **'Yes, my friends, I too am prepared to die for a cause, but there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill.'**

Non violence was not something to be tried and if found wanting, given up. In a liberation struggle, violence does not come after non violence fails. True non violence requires greater courage and resolve than resort to arms. Non violence is not petitioning and pleading. The force of non violence springs from the sathyagrahi's stubborn willingness to suffer - it is this which serves to blunt the power that flows from the oppressor's gun.

Chitranjan Das and Subhas Chandra Bose

Aurobindo also inspired the young lawyer, Chitranjan Das who had defended him in the Alipore trial. Chitranjan Das, later known as Deshabandu became a fearless fighter for India's freedom and served as President of the Indian National Congress in 1920. Another young Bengalee, Subhas Chandra Bose followed Aurobindo's footsteps by spurning the Indian Civil Service after having passed the examination in 1920 from Fitzwilliam Hall in Cambridge University. Subhas wrote to his brother Sarat on 22 September 1920, in words reminiscent of Aurobindo:

"You will readily understand my mental condition as I stand on the threshold of what the man-in-the-street would call a promising career. There is much to be said in favour of such service. It solves once for all what is the paramount problem for each of us - the problem of bread and butter... But for a man of my temperament who has been feeding on ideas which might be called eccentric - the line of least resistance is not the best line to follow... it is not possible to serve one's country in the best and fullest manner if one is chained to the (Indian) Civil Service. In short, national and spiritual aspirations are not compatible with obedience to Civil Service conditions."

Subhas Chandra Bose wrote again to his brother on 23 February 1921:

"The principle of serving an alien bureaucracy is one to which I cannot reconcile myself. Besides the first step towards equipping oneself for public service is to sacrifice all worldly interests - to burn one's boats as it were - and devote oneself whole heartedly to the national cause... **The illustrious example of Aurobindo Ghosh looms large before my vision. I feel that I am ready to make the sacrifice which that example demands me.**"

Subhas Chandra Bose joined Deshabandu Chitranjan Das in India and in 1921-22 they were both imprisoned by the British in the same Alipore jail which had witnessed Aurobindo's trial some 12 years earlier.

"I had the privilege to be in the same jail with him (Deshabandu Chitranjan Das) for eight months in 1921-22. For a couple of months we were in the Presidency Jail occupying two adjacent cells, and the remaining six months we were in one big hall... in the Alipore Central Jail... That Swaraj in India meant primarily the uplift of the masses... was a matter of conviction with the Deshabandu... Ofcourse, thirty years ago Swami Vivekananda spoke in that vein in his book entitled 'Bartaman Bharat', but that message of Swamiji was never echoed from our political platforms...

....another reason for the extraordinary influence which he (Deshabandu) wielded... was (his) constant experience that through all his actions he had succeeded in establishing Vaishnavism which was very much part of his religious life. Thanks to a fine synthesis between his ideal and his practical life, his entire being was getting progressively saturated with this synthesis... As a result of inner purity, which follows the pursuit of action without caring for results, man loses the awareness of the ego. And when the ego is transcended he becomes an instrument for the expression of the Divine Will.." (*Subhas Chandra Bose, letter dated 20 February 1926 to Hemendra Nath Dasgupta - The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Edited by Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose, Oxford University Press, 1997*)

Sri Aurobindo, in a significant sense inspired both the spiritual and militant aspects of India's struggle for freedom. He was a worthy son of a Bengal which had also given birth to Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore - and that is not to mention Satyendranath Bose.

Relevance of Aurobindo's early political life

Sri Aurobindo's relatively short political life and his brilliant political writings exemplify a stage in the Indian freedom struggle - a stage that is common to many struggles of an oppressed people who seek to break the oppressive structures of their society.

It is a stage which reflects the reaction of a people who see the failure of the path of petitioning and pleading to achieve anything at all except a perpetuation of the rule by the established ruler.

In the physical sciences, Newton's third law declares that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. It would seem that this is a special instance of a law of more general applicability. Every action has a reaction and in the dynamic relation between action and reaction lies the elusive reality - as elusive as the reality that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle postulates.

The failure of pleading and petitioning leads a people to respond by embracing the path of violence. "There is no purpose in talking to our oppressors, we do not trust them - the only language that they will understand is the language of the gun." Initially the violence is sporadic and occurs where the oppression is felt most.

The subsequent course of the struggle depends as much on the response of the ruler as on the efforts of the leaders of the struggle. If the ruler seeks to crush the violence with even greater repression, he will find that violence begets further violence and that he is on a steep and slippery slope, without knowing when or how to stop.

The sporadic violence leads to organised resistance and may lead to a full fledged national liberation struggle. On the other hand if the leaders of the struggle fail to mobilise the broad support of the people who seek change, then such leaders will lack the strength to take the struggle forward - and the armed resistance may collapse.

Often, the ruler, seeks to temper the stick with the carrot. This comes in the form of so called "constitutional reforms" or greater popular participation in government. Again, the ruler may provide bread and rice in the belief that if the economic problems are addressed, discontent can be stifled.

It was perhaps, thinking not dissimilar to this which reportedly led Marie Antoinette to offer cake to the revolutionaries of Paris. **But the point of the story is that usually, there is not enough cake on offer to go around.** The ruler cannot change structures in such a way as to threaten the well being of his political supporters and erode his own power base. He cannot kick the ladder on which he climbed to power and this serves as a constraint on the carrots he can offer. His past moulds his present and influences his future.

The British in India were not unmindful of the dilemma that they faced. But, it was not always possible to maintain effective control of responses on the field of action.

Lord Morley in London was able to take a more detached view than Lord Minto who was the Viceroy on the spot, in more ways than one. In the end, the British did successfully handle the 'terrorist' response in Bengal, without allowing it to become a broad based armed struggle for independence.

Unlike the Dutch in Indonesia or the French in Indo China , the British did not use 'excessive' repression. They coupled the police action with an effort to secure the support of influential sections of the Indian middle-class including the wealthier peasants in the rural areas. **They recognised, as Gandhi too had seen, that India was rural India and that it was there that the struggle lay.**

Without Gandhi, the British may have found it increasingly difficult to prevent the rise of a violent struggle for independence on the lines of the freedom movements in Indonesia, China and some parts of Africa. Without Gandhi, the British may have found it difficult to resist a Subhas Chandra Bose.

At the same time, the British dependence on a calibrated response without excessive overt repression rendered it possible for Gandhi to mobilise the Indian people in the way that he did during the period from 1916 to 1947.

But having said that it is also necessary to recognise that Gandhi was not a convenient pragmatist engaged in the search for political power. To him, Ahimsa had a force which must prevail, whatever the circumstances. It was this that made Gandhi reiterate more than once that even against the worst type of oppression, non

violence will and must succeed. In the end, it was Gandhi who mobilised the Indian people on the lines that Aurobindo had sometimes written about:

"Man is of less terrestrial mould than some would have him to be. He has an element of the divine which the politician ignores. The practical politician looks to the position at the moment and imagines that he has taken everything into consideration. He has indeed studied the surface and the immediate surroundings, but he has missed what lies beyond material vision. He has left out of account the divine, the incalculable in man, that element which upsets the calculations of the schemer and disconcerts the wisdom of the diplomat."

India becomes free on Aurobindo's birthday

It was an independence struggle which culminated in 1947. Forty years earlier, in June 1907, Sri Aurobindo had written in *Bande Mataram*:

"...The idea of a free and united India has been born and arrived at full stature in the land of Rishis, and the spiritual force of a great civilisation of which the world has need is gathering at its back. Will England crush these ideas with ukases and coercion laws? Will she even kill them with maxims and siege guns? But the eyes of the wise men have been sealed so that they should not see and their minds bewildered so that they should not understand. Destiny will take its appointed course until the fated end..."

Destiny did take its appointed course until the fated end and in the moving words of Jawaharlal Nehru, India kept 'her tryst with destiny', on the 15th of August 1947 - and, appropriately enough it was the seventy fifth birthday of Sri Aurobindo. In the end, we are reminded again of the words of Chitranjan Das at the trial in Allipore Jail in 1909:

"Long after this controversy is hushed in silence, long after this turmoil and this agitation have ceased, long after the man in the dock is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity: long after he is dead and gone his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands."