

## **The Religious Roots of Indian Nationalism**

### **Sri Aurobindo Ghose and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad**

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**Abstract :** *The paper discusses the significance of religion and religious idioms in the formulation of nationalist ideas in India among the Hindus and Muslims. Since the Western impact became much a cultural and epistemological onslaught as it was political. The nationalist leaders in the early twentieth century made a judicious use of language, history and traditional spiritual values. They criticised the elitist leadership for being too meek and docile in their approach for not associating with the need of the common man. Religion acquires a 'functional character' in the interpretation of Nationalism. Both Sri Aurobindo and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad emphasised on the political freedom as the necessary condition for achieving the 'noble mission'-the spiritual freedom.*

**Key Words :** *Exploitative nature of colonial rule, resistance, use of religious idioms, history and culture, need for political freedom and spiritual freedom, advocates for popular politics.*

As Western Imperialism swept the sub-continent in the nineteenth century, eventually resulting in the introduction of new techniques of education, administration and social disciplining and economic innovations, it eroded the traditional Indian Societies. It was because of the intruding West that worked in unsettling the old way of Indian life. The Indian societies reached an 'acceleration of pace and scope' of cultural and economic transformations. Thus the Western impact became much a cultural and epistemological onslaught as it was political. In India, the new colonial state

since the early nineteenth century unleashed an era of oppressive rule. The trajectory of its oppression left a deep mark on the social, political and economic life of the Indians.

Nationalism in India and other colonies were imitative to the extent that 'they' accepted the 'value of the standards' set by the alien culture but 'they' formulated their paradigm of liberty as unique and different from the 'West'.<sup>1</sup> Since 'their' understanding of the concept of liberty was intellectually traced within the realm of tradition and culture of 'their' own. They traced the roots of 'their' nationalism in 'their' own intellectual past, history and tradition. A judicious use of language, history and traditional spiritual values eventually which built up Indian nationalism ultimately brought the colonial Britain to her knees. Therefore, religion in case of Indian nationalism acquired a 'functional character' in its interpretation.

As an alternative discourse on enlightenment, with its roots in religion, Indian nationalists worked on a new trajectory of nationalism. Religion, scripture and history were brought to play, formulating the knowledge of the past, in constructing notions pertaining to modernity such as democracy, popular participation, freedom of speech and thought. In his reading of Indian nationalism Peter van der Veer elucidates on the importance of cultural elements in the process of 'inventing and imagining' the nation.<sup>2</sup> As the nation was historically produce, each of its fragment worked within the realm of its own intellectual past to evoke the present, in the construction of the new discourse on nation. David L. Johnson reflects on the idea that "religion as ultimate concern assumes no clear distinction between sacred and secular: because religion is found not beside other cultural happenings, but, 'as it were, in, with and under' them".<sup>3</sup>

In his work on Aurobindo Ghose, Johnson elaborated on the idea that Ghose who was both a revolutionary and a contemplative, an activist and yogi, had beautifully syntheses in one life his concerns for modern nationalism and the need to rebuild traditional Indian spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Maulana Abul Kalam Azad with his sufi inherence and his erudition on Islamic theology, jurisprudence and Indian Islamic history, also reflected a similar syntheses of tradition with modern ideas of democracy, equality and freedom in his formulation as the ideologue of the Khilafat movement and the anti-

British uprising in India. His concern for modern democratic ideas and the urgency to recuperate the liberal, humanist and spiritual essence of Islam was well cognizance in his role as a journalist, a political thinker, an activist and an educationist. His variations of role existed in a perfect synchrony because of his understanding of religion as an integrated part of human existence.

Aurobindo Ghose's first nationalist writing appeared in *Indu Prakash* in Bombay. His series of articles entitled 'New Lamps for Old', between 1893-94 reflected a new understanding of religion and nationalism. The writings prior to 1910 reveal an intense concern for political liberation. In his innumerable articles Aurobindo reflected the subservient status of Indian nation. He saw the country in a virtual decadent, bereft of its intellectual, moral, economic and political independence. For Aurobindo, the misfortune for India was not only the loss of its political sovereignty but the 'unmindfulness' of its people for their own history, tradition and culture. Johnson reflects that the structure of Aurobindo Ghose's religious thought is revealed by his adroit synthesis of commonly disparate elements on two levels. He unites the spiritual goals of *Moksha* with the political goal of *Swaraj* at one level; and to support such a synthesis he joined two more disparate elements of traditional Indian thought: the Upanishadic ideal of the Absolute as the essence of man and nature with devotionism to the Mother as Kali, Durga, or Jagatdhatri thus combined national liberation with spiritual liberation.<sup>5</sup>

What is important to point out is the fact that Aurobindo in his postulation of the ancient and the past moves from the abstract to the concrete reality. For Aurobindo the clearest manifestation of India's slavish condition is found in the Indian National Congress itself. It was indeed an ironic assertion, since the Congress was intended by its members to manifest India's independent mind and will. But for Aurobindo, it represented the most degrading mark of servitude. The drawback he could see in the Congress at that time was its elitist character, represented by a body of aristocrats and elites who considered very little for the interest of the common man. Sri Aurobindo thus wrote in indignation:

Life being, as science tells us, an affection of one's self, any aggregate

mass of humanity must inevitably strive to engage and affirm its own essence, must by the law of its own nature aspire towards life, aspire towards expansion, aspire towards perfecting of its potential strength in the free air of political recognition and the full light of political predominance.<sup>6</sup>

Sri Aurobindo's formulation, therefore, are clear and candid. He points out that the assertion of individual and communities as the law of nature commands 'affirms its own essence', whether for survival or for perfecting political strength. Hence the essence of our own political life should emanate from the engagement with our own way of life – our tradition, our history and our culture. As political life is self assertion any foreign interpretation to it was not natural.

By asserting such an idea, Sri Aurobindo actually builds a critique of the then existing Congress policy of 'prayer and petition', against the injustice of colonial oppression. There were no political agitation which could revitalise the 'assertion of individual and community'. For Aurobindo, 'British rule and increasing poverty [stand] in a relation of cause and effect'.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore for Aurobindo, unlike the moderates like Surendra Nath Banerji, the removal of the effect must be done by removing the cause of it. Hence the eradication of the colonial rule was the need of the hour according to Aurobindo- since political subjection was the deep rooted cause of all evil in the society- the impulse for survival demands the end of colonial rule.

In *Bande Matram* Sri Aurobindo writes, 'Where the people have no voice in the administration of the country...where they are treated as mere children unable to think out their own good...the necessary first condition for turning our attention to the deep-rooted evils of society is wanting. Where the people have to commit their destinies to the aliens and cannot claim the legitimate and elementary right of governing themselves they can hardly be moved by any philanthropic and humanitarian impulse to their best to lessen the sufferings of their fellow beings. Subjection naturally makes them take a very poor view of life. It seldom occurs to a member of a subject race that he has a noble mission in life, that he belongs to a society with the well-being of which his own well-being is inseparably bound up, he never looks upon himself as part of an organic whole. In a subjected country society is deprived of its normal tendency towards progress'.<sup>8</sup>

As Sri Aurobindo elucidated in 1907, that nothing short of political freedom was the need of the hour, because the destinies of the people were tied to the whims of the alien rule. Above all he highlighted the 'noble mission', in the life of the individual, where he is the organic whole. Hence Sri Aurobindo postulated that political freedom was the necessary condition whereas he affirmed the *Upanishadic* ideals that the aim of human existence is the realization of *moksha* or the spiritual liberation through self-knowledge. This was the 'noble mission' ordained by God.

While Abul Kalam Azad wrote that very early in life he had set out in search of truth for himself – 'I was no longer tied to my inherited beliefs'.<sup>9</sup> As he moved from Lucknow to Amritsar, working for different journals as editors he arrived at certain decision which became crucial later when he came back to Calcutta on his father's death in 1908 and became involved in the politics in Calcutta. Similarly when Sri Aurobindo had left Baroda and came to Calcutta, his early writings in '*Indu Prakash*' were critical of the prevailing politics of elitism. In those days his '*Bande Matram*' had impressed upon the common man the importance of political participation. Abul Kalam Azad, whose association in those days was with a journal like '*Vakil*', which had anti-British in overtones, made him attracted to the arguments of Sri Aurobindo.<sup>10</sup> Though Azad joined the '*Jugantar*' or not, is debateable. But his ideas, one can argue reflected the thoughts of Aurobindo as well as Shibli Nomani, Muhammad Hussain Azad, Altaf Hussain Hali, Jamaluddin Afghani and Rashid Rida. When Azad wrote:

There is much to be said about the Muslim past struggles for progress. Unless the past mistakes are exposed it is not possible to avoid them in future. The leaders have forgotten that there is a mutual relation between religion and the mundane world. Now that much has been written on this issue during the past few years, it is pointless to repeat here that there is no division in Islam between religion and the mundane. Islam does not separate the two. But the reality is that our new leaders have been treating the religion and the mundane as two different spheres of activities. It is widening with time and there is no scope for reconciliation between the two. All the movements for reform and progress that they have launched have been kept separate by them from religion in such a way; that it did not reflect at

all that they were addressing the issues to the followers of Islam nor does it carry the slightest indication that they have anything to do with the community of Muslims. Their life, their actions, their tenor, their precedents, their examples, the models before them, rather all their activities and their character were completely devoid and bereft of Islam. There were from their inception cacophony to the understanding of religion.<sup>11</sup>

‘Religiously informed’ Azad made the Holy Book his sole guide in his new mission to direct the Muslim to formulate their future course of action in the most rational and pragmatic manner, with care, thoughtfulness and caution, where moderation and balancing should be the consideration. Maulana picking the clue from the injunction of the Qur’an points out that that guidance for the faithful is there in the Holy Book, to eradicate the evil and establish the right of the people against the wrong doers He wrote: If you have any course of political action in front of you there is no reason why the Qur’an should not provide you guidance on that. The Qur’an delivers man from the darkness of all errors and brings him under the light of guidance. We find that all our political errors are merely due to our failure to surrender ourselves to the guiding hands of the Qur’an. Otherwise there would find light all around instead of darkness.<sup>12</sup>

Azad formulated the modern political need of the Indian Muslim community as a ‘*mujaddith*’ of the twentieth century India. His solution to the political crisis of the Muslim society in India, were given in the light of the Holy Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition. That was in consonance to the tradition of the *Mujaddid*,<sup>13</sup> who should have the foresight of a pragmatic and a realistic but the conviction of a faithful. In the early years of the twentieth century, when the whole edifice of colonial states were shaken by the nationalists uprising, in every corners of the world, the Muslim colonies also put up their share of resistance. It was only the Indian Muslims who were kept in leash by the loyalist policy of the Muslim League, remained indifferent to the political crisis. In India the banner of revolt has been successfully raised by the Nationalist Hindu (Bengali revolutionaries), while those Muslim anti-British groups who, refused to be subservient to the League, had been organising resistance but they were very few in number,

and worked as isolated groups.

Azad was influenced by an Arab Christian, Jurji Zaidan—the editor of *Al Hilal* of Cairo, who preached a common cause against the alien ruler of Egypt. Azad realized that the political struggle against the colonial regime was the call for freedom, where the Muslims should make a common cause with the Hindus. Because freedom from the colonial rule was the greater cause that should be inspirational to the extent that it should dissolve all differences in the crucible in terms of community, sects and class. To convey the importance of participating in the freedom struggle Azad wrote for his co-religionists:

In the future history of Indian's freedom struggle—what will be written about the Muslims? When the final political revolution of India would take place and fetters of slavery would be torn apart. The new age of freedom will set in, suppose then the history of India's political development will be written. The Muslims will be described as a wretched community always acting as an obstacle in the progress of the people, as a malign influence over the country's salvation, a big obstruction on the road to freedom, a toy in the hand of the foreign ruler, a deep wound on India's forehead and a weapon in the hands of the government to crush the country's aspirations!<sup>14</sup> Those were the basic criticism of the Muslim League's policy, for which Azad held the Muslim community responsible. The mired situation in which the Muslim community had been dragged by the Muslim League because of its exclusive policy, was void of religious sanction argued by Azad. Because religion preaches unity of mankind, and the Prophet of Islam set the example of *Ummah –e Wahida* i.e one nation, irrespective of religious differences.

*Al Hilal* served a critique to the separatist policy of the Muslim League and its loyalty to the colonial government. By 1911 a group of young leaders from the Muslim League had become frustrated by the policy of prayer and petition, especially the younger and more volatile members of the Dacca coterie, and men like Abdullah Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq who had began, talking about emulating the eminently successful Hindu pattern of agitation.<sup>15</sup> At a meeting in Calcutta in January 1912 Suhrawardy first preached the idea of cooperating with the Hindu in opposing the colonial government.

But, such ideas were restricted in small circles of intellectuals. It goes to the credit of *Al Hilal* with a circulation of 25,000 among the different section of the population to actually popularize the idea. A report by the Police commissioner in Bengal, reflecting on the feeling among Muhammadan revealed that Azad's *Al Hilal* had been instrumental in precipitating anti-British feeling among the Calcutta Muslim at this time.

Maulana Azad with the rising of the New Moon (*Al Hilal*) inaugurated a new chapter in the history of Indian Muslims of the sub-continent. Azad used Qur'anic injunctions to strengthen his argument for popular democracy, religious tolerance and the struggle for freedom, as the sacred duty of a pious Muslim, from 1912 onwards. Azad stood for democracy, secularism, and Muslim participation in the struggle for freedom.

Abul Kalam Azad, argued that the politics of the Indian Muslims oath to be interpreted solely in terms of the essence of the Qur'an, 'al-amr bi'l ma'ruf wa -nahy 'bin munkar i.e., 'to establish the good and eradicate the evil' '. In Azad the concept of the 'noble mission' was well focused, where this injunction of the Qur'an was interpreted for liberating Mankind from all sorts of bondages-political freedom again plays the precondition for spiritual freedom.

As Partha Chatterjee rightly points out that the 'Eastern' nationalism has appeared among 'peoples recently drawn into a civilization hitherto alien to them, and whose ancestral cultures are not adapted to success and excellence by these cosmopolitan and increasingly dominant standards'. But what is distinctive here argues Chatterjee, is that 'they' are fundamentally aware that those standards have come from an alien culture. Religious nationalism, in the wake of the Partition agitation (1905), was basically the new political nationalism, as Peter Heehs reflected. Heehs pointed out that Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932), was the first politician to propose 'complete political autonomy as the goal of the national movement', while Sri Aurobindo Ghose, made efforts to achieve it, by organizing a radical movement. Heehs is of opinion that they were religious men so they used religious terminology and symbols, in their writings and speeches. But the radical nationalists appealed to religion because they wanted mass support so they appealed to the cultural and emotional base of the society i.e. religion. Bipin Chandra



Pal used Hindu symbols' within the framework of his theory of 'composite nationality',<sup>16</sup> for appealing the sentiments of the common man.

To the nationalists, in their imagination of the new nationhood 'religion' found a strong place in their political discourse, because it provided them with an identity for self-determination. As seen in Gandhiji and his genre of new political leadership, the discourse of anti-colonialism was always weaved out by the logical yarn of religious ethics, where the notions of democracy, humanity, rationality and justice embossed upon the religious morality.

#### Notes and References

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2. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996.
3. David L. Johnson, *The Religious Roots of Indian Nationalism: Aurobindo's Early Political Thought*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1974, p.13.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p.20.
6. Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo's Political Thought, 1893-1908 :New Lamps for Old*, SAPT, Calcutta, 1958, p.84.
7. *Bande Matram(BM)*, 26 12.06, Cited in Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo and the New Thought in Indian Poitics*, 1964.
8. Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *SAPT*, p.135, *Bande Madram*, 10.1.07.
9. Maulana Abul Kakam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1989.
10. In *India Wins freedom*, Azad writes, 'I remember I met Sri Arabindo Ghosh on two or three occasion. The result was that I was attracted to revolutionary politics and joined one of the groups'.
11. Abul Kalam Azad, *AlHilal*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 22 September, 1912, Urdu Academy, Lucknow, 2010.
12. For Afghani reform was necessary because it was the only way for Muslim World, to internally rebuild itself. For him, the multi dimensional revitalization of the Muslim World demands their unity, the only chance for regaining their independence. But his greatest contribution was that he re-introduced a broad notion of rationalism to the interpretation of Islamic sources, including the Quran. He also emphasized the importance for striving. He called such

- activity Islam's essence and asked Muslims to fight against the spirit of passivity and fatalism that had gained hold over their minds, soul and societies. Afghani was an inspiration for the later generation of intellectual and political thinkers, who took the thread of '*Ijtihad*' (independent interpretation of the Quran) to argue the case for freedom of thought.
13. *Al Hilal*. Vol.1. No. 9, 8 Sep. 1912.
  14. *Al Hilal*. Vol.1. No. 9, 8 Sep. 1912.
  15. *Al Hilal*, Vol. 1, No. 23, 18 Dec.1912.
  16. *Al Hilal*, Vol.1, No.9. Sep.1912.
  17. *Al Hilal*, Vol.1, No.9. Sep.1912.
  18. *Al Hilal*, Vol.1. No.23, 18th Dec 1912.
  19. K. Mepheron, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1974, p. 27.
  20. See *Al Hilal*, Vol. 1, No.15, 22nd Oct. 1912. Where Azad writes, it is pointless to repeat here that there is no division in Islam between religion and the mundane. Islam does not separate the two. But the reality is that our new leaders have been treating the religion and the mundane as two different spheres of activities. It is widening with time and there is no scope for reconciliation between the two. All the movements for reform and progress that they have launched, have been kept separate by them from religion in such a way, does it reflect at all that they were addressing the issues to the followers of Islam nor does it carry the slightest indication that they have anything to do with the community of Muslims. Their life, their actions, their tenor, their precedents, their examples, the models before them, rather all their manoeuvring and their character are completely devoid and bereft of Islam. There are from their inception cacophony to the understanding of religion.
  21. *Ibid*.
  22. Partha Chatterjee, *Ibid*.
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