

Relevance of Sri Aurobindo's Vision of *Rashtra*

Sudhir Kumar*

There are obvious reasons for the continuous and continuing marginalization of the Dharma-centric vision of Sri Aurobindo in independent India. Ever since India became politically free in 1947, the successive governments largely followed and implemented Western discourses in all aspects of national life – social, political, economic, cultural, legal, educational, etc. In other words, there was little hope for 'swaraj-in-ideas', or 'swaraj-in-cultural action'. So much so that India is still, almost uncritically, inscribed as a nation, nation-state, or state in the predominantly Western sense. Borrowing these, rather recent secularized Western concepts which took a concrete shape only in the late nineteenth century in Europe.

This unnatural but naturalized grafting of the West-centric notion of nationhood that primarily implies a commonality of race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, shared economic needs, territory, and governance, etc., facilitates the mutation of aggressive Western nationalism into two bloody World Wars, resulted into the perpetuation of cultural amnesia and a kind of deracination- especially among the educated Indians. Moreover, with the onset of the so-called (predominantly West-centric) economic globalization, the nation has been morphed into the so-called post-national or the global to continue to nurture and sustain the dominance of the West on the rest of the world with new fashionable theories. Not content with dissolving the national into the so-called post-national, the metropolitan Western world - thanks to its forays into the hitherto unthought-of application of 'artificial intelligence' to address all kinds of human problems seems to have declared that 'the human phase' of history is now all set to be taken over by 'the post-human'.

*Formerly Professor of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh. Can be reached at ksudhir62@gmail.com

A few examples may be cited to illustrate how the academic/cultural discourses in India have continued to ignore the dharma-centric Bharatiya worldviews (including the concept of *rashtra*) and imitate the Western notion of 'nation' and 'culture'. Recently published books such as *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies* (2015, edited by Gita Dharampal-Frick *et al*) have an entry each on 'Iman', 'Khalifa', 'Religion', 'Khalistan', 'Nationalism', 'Qawm', but surprisingly no entry exclusively on 'Dharma', 'Sanskriti', 'Rashtra'. Even the entry on 'Nationalism' proclaims that the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism' were first used in the latter half of the nineteenth century under British colonial rule. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (2012, Edited by Vasudha Dalmia *et al*) does not have a single entry on Sanskriti, Dharma, and Rashtra. The absence of the native, Bharatiya Dharma-centric world-views also marks the narrative of the recently published *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon For the 21st Century* (2020, Edited by Rukmini Bhaya Nayar and Peter Ronald deSouza) wherein once again notices the absence of core Bharatiya ideas of 'Rashtra' and 'Sanskriti'. This Government-assisted and approved discursive echolalia is a disturbing sign of mental dependence on the West. The NCERT, a Central Govt agency for school education in India, also approves and applies the Western discourses of 'nation' and 'nationalism' without any trace of Bharatiya dharma-centric notion of 'Rashtra' or 'Sanskriti'. One may peruse the entries on 'the nation-state', and 'nationalism' in a recent NCERT publication *Dictionary of History for Schools (Trilingual)* (2017) to ascertain the situation.

Moreover, the constant usage of the foreign concepts of 'secularism' and 'socialism' to define and validate the country as a 'nation' (in the Western sense again) by the important leaders holding high positions in the Government makes billions of Indians the victims of cultural amnesia. Most of the official policies/ programmes and discourses of education, administration,

judiciary, and culture are marked by a Western sense of 'governmentality'. Ignoring the silent but basic question: who are we, the Bharatiyas? And what are the sources that essentially and broadly define us as a civilization, as a *Rashtra*, not nation or nation-state in the Eurocentric sense?

The power structures in post-independence India continued and continue to evade these very fundamental questions. Hence, the self-conscious eschewal of the study of the Indian knowledge texts and the contribution of such great modern Indian thinkers such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Narayan Guru, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi, Savarkar and others, whose discourses and actions regarding the essential nature of Bharatiya Samskriti/Darshana, despite their differences, converge on "dharma-saapekshata" (dharma-centric nature) of Indian world-view.

Even the NEP-2020, despite its seemingly bold assertions of imparting value-centric education, surprisingly stops short of referring to 'Dharma' or 'Sanatan Dharma' as the core of the Bharatiya knowledge system or Bharatiya *jeevan-drishhti* and *darshana* to remain a politically correct narrative. The UGC (University Grants Commission) also published *Moolyaprawaha* (translated into English as 'Inclusion of Human Values and Professional Ethics in Higher Education Institutions') as a document to facilitate the implementation of value-centric learning methods in Indian schools, colleges, and universities. But the narrative is sanitized of any reference to 'Dharma' or 'Sanatan Dharma' as the source of these *moolyas* (values) to be inculcated into the minds of the young learners of Bharat.

Yet another error is to continue to project the typically Western idea that 'development' and 'progress' alone would ensure the welfare of the people, without even trying to combine the native concept of 'abhyudaya', the material well-being with the spiritual well-being 'nishreyas' at the center of all official policies.

Therefore, it is useful to revisit Sri Aurobindo's vision of the nation, *rashtra*: "Be very careful to follow my instructions in avoiding the old kind of politics. Spirituality (Adhyatma) is India's only politics; the fulfillment of Sanatan Dharma is its only Swaraj (true freedom)." (Sri Aurobindo: *Complete Works*, Vol, 36, pp. 170-71)

He emphasized that "Dharma is the Indian conception in which rights and duties lose their artificial antagonism ... and regain their eternal unity. Dharma is the basis of democracy which Asia must recognize, for in this lies the difference between the soul of Asia and the soul of Europe". (2018, Michel Danino, p.33). Cautioning the modern, English-educated Indians and social reformers who readily embraced the Euro-centric ideas, Sri

Aurobindo stated, in 1908, "If India follows the footsteps of Europe, accepts her political ideals, social system, economic principles, she will be overcome with the same maladies... If India becomes an intellectual province of Europe, she will never attain her natural greatness or fulfill the possibilities within her-'*paradharmo bhayaavaha*'- to accept the dharma (nature) of another is perilous; it deprives the (hu)man or the nation of its secrets of life and vitality and substitutes an unnatural and stunted growth for the free, large, and organic development of Nature" (Cited in Danino, p. 36).

Thus, due emphasis on the re-contextualization of the Dharma-centric vision of Bharat, together with the existential warning cited above, is the lowest common factor that connects the perennially relevant visions of Bharat put forth and practiced by such great thinkers and patriots as Bankim Chandra, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Gandhi despite their discursive differences. Even the so-called nationalist leaders who allowed themselves to be hypnotized by the Western modernity that enabled them, through their derivative Euro-centric nationalism, were trying to make India a province of modern Europe.

Sri Aurobindo stated, "British rule, British civilizing mission in India has been the record success in history in the hypnosis of a nation. It persuaded us to live in death of the will and its activities, taking a series of hallucinations for real things and creating in ourselves conditions of morbid weakness the hypnotist desired, until the Master of mightier hypnosis laid His finger on India's eyes and cried- 'Awake'. Then only the spell was broken, the slumbering mind realized itself and the dead soul lived again." (cited in Danino, p. 37). Again, in his *Uttarapara Speech*, Sri Aurobindo exhorted, "When, therefore, it is said that India shall rise, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall rise. When it is said that India shall be great, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall be great. When it is said that India shall expand and extend itself, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall expand and extend itself over the world. It is for the Dharma and by the Dharma that India exists." (Danino, p. 43).

The expansion and extension of Sanatan Dharma presupposes the ensuring of the welfare of all through ethical means and the continuous spread of love, harmony, and compassion without any desire for essential subjugation of others for any kind of economic and political gain. "Satya (Eternal Truth), Rtam (Cosmic Order), Brhma (the Supreme Reality), Deeksha (Pursuit of Knowledge), Tapas (Acceptance of Suffering or Austerities for the good of all), Yajna (Lokasamgraha or Performance of Ethical Deeds for the welfare of All) – these eternal values uphold this Earth.... This Earth, which is caused by the Supreme Reality and is pervaded

by Truth, may establish enlightenment and ethical power in our Rashtra... This sacred land is our mother, and we are the children of the Earth- which exists on the pillars of Dharma (Moral Law) ... On this Earth- which is protected by Dharma, no one should hate us. Our Earth, which nurtures and protects all the people who speak different languages, practice different customs and beliefs, and belong to different communities, should continue to enrich us in many ways." (*Vaidik Sukti Samgraha*, pp. 129-139).

One may now appreciate the rationale of Sri Aurobindo's enunciation of 'Sanatan Dharma' as nationalism. He generally used the term 'religion' to designate the essential nature of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) based on One True God, One Last Prophet, One True Holy Book, massive conversions and enslavement of people belonging to other faiths and the enactment of horrible genocides all over the world to dominate the world. Whenever he uses the term 'religion' to refer to Hindu or Sanatan Dharma, he does so with explanations:

"What is this religion which we call Sanatan, Eternal?... That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion because it is the universal religion that embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it is not eternal.... A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, or an exclusive religion can only live for a limited time and a limited purpose. This (Sanatan Dharma) is the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including and anticipating the discoveries of science and speculations of philosophy. It (Sanatan Dharma) is the one religion that shows the world what the world is, that it is the Lila of Vasudeva. It is the one religion that shows us how we can best play our part in that Lila, its subtlest laws, and its noblest rules. It is the one religion that which knows what immortality is ('Satyameva Jayate, Na-anritam/ Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya Mrtyormaamamritam Gamaya') and has utterly removed from us the reality of death" (Danino, p. 44). It is in this sense of Sanatan Dharma that Sri Aurobindo called Dharma as Indian Nationalism, "I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith: I say that it is the Sanatan Dharma that is nationalism. This is the message that I have to speak to you" (Danino, p. 44)

Not based on either the theological or theologically-inspired discourses of the nation (Islam or Christianity for example) or the modern Western notion of 'uniformity' (forced or induced) of race, class, language, religion, ethnicity, economic and political interests that drives or inspires a community to become a nation that frequently turns aggressive, and self-destructive institutions, the Dharma-centric view is based on 'unity'. It celebrates diverse manifestations of reality. To illustrate, Sri Aurobindo observed: "The task we set before us is not

mechanical but moral and spiritual. We aim not at the alteration of a form of government but at the building up of a Rashtra. Of that task, politics is a part, but only a part. We shall devote ourselves not to politics alone, nor social questions alone, nor theology or philosophy or literature or science by themselves, but we include all these in one entity which we believe to be all-important, the Dharma, the national religion which we believe to be universal. There is a mighty law of life, a great principle of human evolution, and a body of spiritual knowledge, an experience of which Indians have always been destined to be the guardian, the exemplar, and the missionary. This is Sanatan Dharma- the eternal religion" (Danino, pp. 46-48, emphasis added.).

It would have been fitting if Indian leaders and leading intellectuals could echo the sentiments of Sri Aurobindo: "The Mahomedans base their separateness and their refusal to regard themselves as Indians first and Mahomedans afterward on the existence of great Mahomedan nations to which they feel more akin, despite our common birth and blood than to us. Hindus have no such resource. For good or evil, they are bound to the soil and the soil (of India) alone. They can neither deny their mother nor can they mutilate her. Our ideal therefore is an Indian nationalism, largely Hindu in spirit and traditions, because the Hindu made the land and the people, and persists, by the greatness of the past, his civilization and his culture, and his invincible virility, in holding it, but wide enough also to include the Muslim and his culture and traditions and absorb them into itself." (Danino, pp. 58-59)

Hence, the *Yaksha Prashna*, the great question: Would the present-day politicians and academicians who have, for long, been making all kinds of opportunistic, politically expedient experiments would care to translate into reality the most beneficent vision of *Rashtra*, envisioned by Sri Aurobindo"? To accept and act upon the profound directives that our classic knowledge traditions offer for establishing true harmony, peace, progress, and prosperity on our planet?

References

- Dictionary of History for Schools (Trilingual)*, New Delhi, NCERT, 2017.
- Gita Dharamapal-Frick *et al* (Eds). *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*, New Delhi, OUP, 2015.
- Michel Danino (Ed.) *Sri Aurobindo and India's Rebirth*, New Delhi, Rupa.2018. Except one, all the quotations of Sri Aurobindo are from this edition of the book.
- Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Peter Ronald deSouza. *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon For the 21st Century*. London, Bloomsbury, 2020.

Sri Aurobindo, "Autobiographical Notes" in *Complete Works: Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 36, Puducherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2017, 170-71
Vaidik Sukti Samgraha, Gorakhpur, Gita Press, 2010.

Vishuddha Manusmriti (Prof Surendra Kumar, ed.) Delhi, Arsha Sahitya Prachar Trust, 1986.
Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds). *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*. New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2012.