Chapter IV

Research Findings

Between 1910 and 1950, there were in India sixty major political developments. Sri Aurobindo offered his reactions to almost fifty-seven developments. A few were noted by some active political leaders of the Congress but most were rejected. The three occasions he left out were the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy (1919), Bengal famine (1943) and the mutiny of Royal Indian Navy (1946) and surprisingly stayed away from sending any condolence message on the death of Rabindranath Tagore in 1941. He, however, gave his reactions on Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination by a Hindu fanatic in 1948. This thesis shows how Sri Aurobindo got engaged in everyday politics although it is commonly believed that he had quit practical politics after his departure from Bengal in 1910. In the thesis the word on Sri Aurobindo’s `engagement in politics’ has been consciously used instead of `involvement in politics’ to establish Sri Aurobindo’s extreme and unconscious love for politics.

Getting engaged in politics is devoid of responsibility while involvement means actively participating in it. Sri Aurobindo offered his comments, narrations, suggestions and observations on political
matters but never tried to become a party to the deals, except on three occasions.

The thesis gives examples how Sri Aurobindo emphatically tried to use Indian spirituality to define politics. Sri Aurobindo was not a political expert nor a political scientist. Therefore, it was only a weird and obscure effort.

Sri Aurobindo’s extreme love for politics tempted him to personally intervene on three occasions and send emissaries and representatives to influence political proceedings. On each occasion he failed miserably. He was the first leader to give the call for India’s complete political independence and frame the country’s secular and democratic principles. However, because of his voluntary detachment from practical politics his proposals were summarily rejected.

However, it did not stop Sri Aurobindo from getting engaged in political matters. He did it through dialogues and discourses within inmates and disciples of the Ashram, most of whom were politically novice. His devotees and followers try to paint him as an Avatar and a virtual god incarnate with supernatural powers solely devoted to the cause and quest for establishing a ‘spiritual life that would become
This thesis shows Sri Aurobindo as a political visionary alongside a spiritual preceptor who decided to lead and explain life in his very odd and esoteric ways while living in Pondicherry. Undoubtedly, in some aspects, he was a visionary. But again on many issues his views were outdated. It is certainly not true that Sri Aurobindo was a person who was beyond committing any error or away from taking any wrong decisions.

Sri Aurobindo had quit politics. The thesis shows it was only on the surface for men to see, but underneath he was a keen observer and a passionate follower of political developments.

Sri Aurobindo used Indian spirituality to explain these developments, thereby, at times, frustrating the views of his own comrades and accomplices. They found the endeavour to be a type of utopia. Barring very few, most comrades who came and stayed with him in Pondicherry from 1910 had either left him or broken connections with him by 1926. Sri Aurobindo went into recluse from 24 November
1926. In this thesis Sri Aurobindo is a critic and political narrator of socio-political developments. Limiting him only to a Yogi merely engaged in the pursuit of some divine light or divine consciousness and sitting in a chair to distribute ‘so called graces’ to devotees and disciples diminishes his image as a politico-social personality.

Sri Aurobindo understood spirituality as limited but humanity as unlimited. He, therefore, decided to redefine Indian politics.

His engagement with politics is palpable. According to historian Leonard Gordon, Sri Aurobindo’s escape from Bengal and turning away from practical politics could be ‘his witnessing of a failing movement that he created and the ineffectiveness of his own political work from May 1909 to February 1910. It was after that Sri Aurobindo might have turned to yoga and retired into silence and isolation. In his account Sri Aurobindo himself noted a number of occasions when ‘he drew back into silence or took refuge in silence’. 1

It could be Gordon’s superficial reading into Sri Aurobindo’s background and history. Sri Aurobindo had already come back from England in 1893 as a politico-spiritual person. He
understood that India’s umbilical chord was spirituality. Sri Aurobindo found the Indians to be "imitative and forgetful," 2

Therefore by using spirituality he tried to temper and redefine politics in a new fashion. He wanted to use politics for humanity. Till today, it has only remained an illusion.

The present research has revealed how Sri Aurobindo detested the existing pattern of politics. He never approached politics in the conventional pattern, but only wanted to use it as an instrument to establish harmony and freedom within human beings. Sri Aurobindo treated politics as a 'pleasure object' and never took it seriously. Therefore, he never felt burdened, with or without politics. He was comfortable in practical politics during his revolutionary days in Bengal. Sri Aurobindo was equally comfortable without practical politics in Pondicherry.

The present research points out that Sri Aurobindo’s attempt to re-interpret politics, while in Pondicherry, in a different light could also be a strategy as it kept him safe from the clutches of the British rulers.
In Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo received immense freedom and space to think together about politics and spirituality. He was a free-man and a free-thinker.

In course of this research it has been found that Sri Aurobindo was more interested in daily political issues than answering or dealing on spiritual subjects. Quite consciously, he was gradually shifting into a politico-cultural position and his spirituality being his very own, he never felt that it could be forcefully followed, pursued or foisted on a second entity. He termed it to be esoteric and individual.

Until today, people claim to practise Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga in their own and odd ways and there are no moral codes or maxims like those pursued by other religious and spiritual associations and organisations. To most of his devotees, Sri Aurobindo’s political and social views are relevant today. They are unwilling to accept that most of what Sri Aurobindo had claimed or said have changed in the outer form and there are very few who attach importance understand its inner meaning. Sri Aurobindo wanted an ideal political system of governance which would establish harmony among individuals.
Sri Aurobindo wanted to base his Integral Yoga basing on materio-spiritual qualities and relate it to politics, society, individual and community. 3

The core meaning of his philosophical system was "enhancement of common sense to move humanity and oneself." 4 The inner message of his political system had been "universal humanity or visvamanabata"

Sri Aurobindo understood and analyzed political events with the skill he learnt from his revolutionary days from 1893 to 1910. He was a classical scholar at Cambridge. With his masterly intellectual skill he interpolated world political events on the Indian political scene and thereby make things difficult for the oppressive British ruling class.

Going by the conventional religious and spiritual tradition of India, Sri Aurobindo was a genuine mismatch. He remained an atheist through out his life. But he was never a 'non-believer' of things.
He was a materialist of a different kind. His concept of god and divinity differed from that of most people. He was never a worshipper. He himself said, "I never visited a temple or bowed down to a transcendental deity." Sri Aurobindo was a free thinker and a child of European Enlightenment. But his ways of thinking were always European in form and Indian in spirit.

Sri Aurobindo creates the Vitreus merging matter and spirit. To scholars like Deutsch, Verma and Mehta, this syncretism of marrying Western science with Indian spirituality are remarkable. But this paper finds it to be only a part of his greater politics of humanity and harmony. It is really not known, what Sri Aurobindo would have done or thought if there were no French Enclaves in India. The British wanted to capture him. The French gave him the freedom to think and write. That was the only reason why he never returned to British India and preferred to remain throughout his life a 'fugitive' in the eyes of the British laws.
To Sri Aurobindo, spirituality was part of social relations and not an object beyond or above it.

Sri Aurobindo, always remained a player in the background and preferred to lead from the back. So he chose Pondicherry, which he named as his new ‘cave for tapasya’⁸. He wanted to view the world’s changing political events from this cave of tapasya or retreat.

He spun his own ideas and never allowed others to interfere in it. In that way he was somewhat an autocrat and a dictator. For each action he took in not favouring practical politics he justified with the abstract and very individualized concepts of inner visions, self, spirituality, legacies, consciousness and traditions.

He lost friends, but to him viewing politics from outside British India was the most friendly of all. He sacrificed everybody, only not to join practical politics and yet remain engaged in it from outside.

Sri Aurobindo till his last remained a literary revolutionary. He used Pondicherry as the base to pursue his political aims in the Indian way. He knew some day India would be free and he was confident that his ways of thinking would be appreciated. He never spelt it out.
He was always reticent. Most times his equivocality had been misunderstood by most scholars. Many times Sri Aurobindo had said many things which he had himself rejected later. One such example was his flip-flop on being a `poet and a politician and not being a poet and a politician’ and `refusing audience to Mahatma Gandhi for almost twenty years and then again accepting it just before the beginning of the Second World War in 1939’

Sri Aurobindo told his younger brother Barin that the ways the Indians had adopted to achieve political freedom through revolution was European in nature and imitative. Sri Aurobindo insisted that India’s Freedom Movement should be Indian and non-imitative. He, interfered in everyday politics as an outsider but kept offering his suggestions as if he was involved in it. Sri Aurobindo, however was cautious that the British rulers do not find opportunities to extradite and deport him. He remained in politics and politics remained with him.
The present research seeks to find out whether Sri Aurobindo was suffering from an assumed threat of deportation and solitary confinement that he experienced for one year in Alipore Jail in 1908-09. It is evident from some letters used in this thesis that this threat remained with him till the end of his life. While the British rulers feared on his return to India, similarly he was also afraid of British rule conspiring and pouncing on him anywhere and any time. It, of course, is true, although it cannot be proved that he carried latent "roots of fear" of getting deported any time. His younger brother and revolutionary Barindra Kumar Ghosh, however does not accept such an agreement. According to him, "fear is a thing unknown to him".
Endnotes (Chapter IV)

2. Aurobindo Sri, On Himself, SAAT, 1972
3. Aurobindo Sri, Record of Yoga, Volume. 1 and 2
4. Aurobindo Sri, The Human Cycle, SAAT
5. Heehs Peter, Sri Aurobindo and Hinduism, SAA Archives
6. Latin word meaning focal `transparent like glass'
7. Aurobindo Sri, On Himself
8. Ibid
8 - A. Aurobindo Sri, On Himself
8 - B. Mother India, May 1971, Sri Aurobindo, Biography and History, K R Srinivasa Iyengar, SAICE, 2006, p.702
9. GOI / FOR & Pol Dept, General Conference B, 1914, No 2, Life Sketch, Deposition of A C Banerjea in Sessions Court, Alipore Trial Records