

# Patriotic Streaks in Indian English Poetry: A Special reference to the Poetry of Sri Aurobindo

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## ABSTRACT

Literature has played an important role in history. It has been used and is still being used as a tool of propaganda. At the same time, it would be safe to say that literature has played a huge role pretty much in every major revolution in history.

India is no exception. As we celebrate 71 years of Independence, it would behoove us to remember the role of pre-Independence literature in our freedom struggle.

Unlike other poets that appeared during this period, the poets like Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu wrote with an intense awareness of not only the country's socio-political needs, but also its spiritual needs. Sri Aurobindo Ghose, the happy synthesis of the East and the West, was the master who imbibed styles and techniques of the western masters like Spenser, Milton, English romantics, Dante and the Greek and Latin masters and grew to spiritual heights, drawing heavily from his spiritual resources. Fired with religious fervor he preached Nationalism as a religion and he, the prophet of this new religion, infused by his precept and example the courage and strength into every one that came into touch with him. His emergence in Indian politics was as sudden as it was unexpected. Of him it may be truly said that he awoke one morning and found himself famous or that he came, he saw, and he conquered. He rose like a meteor and vanished like it – from the political atmosphere; but unlike the meteor, the dazzling light he shed on Indian politics did not vanish with him. The torch which he lighted continued to illumine Indian politics till it passed into the hands of worthy successors who led it to its distant goal."

This paper is an attempt to highlight the role of Sri Aurobindo in the Indian Freedom Movement.

Poetry is the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery among the magic islands of form and name in these inner and outer worlds.

Sri Aurobindo

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Unlike other poets that appeared during this period, the poets like Sri Aurobindo (born Aurobindo Ghose), Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu wrote with an intense awareness of not only the country's socio-political needs, but also its spiritual needs. It is no exaggeration to say that Aurobindo Ghose is one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century. Aurobindo the mahayogi, Aurobindo the philosopher, Aurobindo the poet, Aurobindo the interpreter of Indian thought, Aurobindo the critic and Aurobindo the radical politician—all these hats fit him Sri Aurobindo, the happy synthesis of the East and the West, was the master who imbibed styles and techniques of the western masters like Spenser, Milton, English romantics, Dante and the Greek and Latin masters and grew to spiritual heights, drawing heavily

from his spiritual resources. Fired with religious fervor he preached Nationalism as a religion and he, the prophet of this new religion, infused by his precept and example the courage and strength into every one that came into touch with him.

Sri Aurobindo took to writing in a period when the colonial India, probably, could not have even thought of an effort of decolonizing English literature, as it is today. But this enlightened yogi of India though attained a very high watermark of excellence in European thought and means of expression, did not compromise with his Indianness. The entire literary oeuvre of Sri Aurobindo is often misunderstood and misinterpreted as a testimony to his spiritual epiphany and hence, the political vision that the poems envisaged is often ignored and subsided. Aurobindo's works recognize in them the production of a counter-discourse to the prevalent modes of cultural domination as practiced by Orientalism, a resistance which demarcated the political ideology of the author. Rabindranath Tagore is reported to have told Aurobindo "You have the word and we are waiting to accept it from you. India will speak through your voice to the world". So very clearly, his poems are not merely the chants of an Indian ascetic but as those endowed with a political vision that tried to map the cultural foundation of a captive nation intensely engrossed in repelling the cultural dominion of the British imperialists.

In his poem, "Lines on Ireland", composed in 1896, Sri Aurobindo exclaims at the fall of Ireland:

How changed, how fallen from her ancient spirit!  
She that was Ireland, Ireland now no more,  
In beggar's weeds behold at England's door ..."

Behind the guise of Ireland, Sri Aurobindo revealed his concern for his own country. The mask, however, lies uncovered, though in a different context altogether, in the poem "Night by the Sea":

In thy bosom's snow white walls  
Softly and supremely housed  
Shut my heart up; keep it closed  
Like a rose of Indian grain ,"

It is this spirit that is echoed in the celebration of the sacrifice of the Irish nationalist, Charles Stewart Parnell. In his short poem with the same title (1891):

O pale and guiding light...  
Thou too wert then a child of tragic earth,  
Since vainly filled the luminous doom of birth.

Sri Aurobindo's identification with Parnell and correlation of India with Ireland is distinctly clear in the following lines from the same poem again:

Deliverer lately hailed, since by our lords  
Most feared, most hated, hated because feared,  
Who smot'st them with an edge surpassing swords!

Having resurrected the faith in his roots he became acutely conscious as he expresses in his poem "Love in Sorrow" of how he "had wronged" his "youth and nobler powers" by "weak attempts, small failures, wasted hours". The call for homeland and its freedom is distinct and resonant in this poem.

The seeds of fervent nationalism or patriotism, which were to blossom over the coming decades, could be traced to his poem on Ireland. Sri Aurobindo's prescription for Irish redemption, was not a military strategy but a return to its roots, self-introspection, deeper spiritual communion, revival of its past glory and distinctive cultural identity. For the subjugation and subservience of Ireland, he doesn't accuse the alien power but blames the enslaved state:

But thou to thine own self disloyal, hast  
Renounced the help divine, turning thy past  
To idle legends and fierce tales of blood,  
Mere violent wrath with no proposed good.

The poet's attack culminates in the line which emphatically asserts:

How fallen art thou being ruled by these!

Sri Aurobindo was influenced by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who fused spirituality with nationalism in Anandamath. He advocated a confrontational path for the sanyasis as their means of liberation or nirvana.

Patriotism or nationalism is not alienated from spirituality. Cultural self-discovery, especially the rekindling of inherent tradition and heritage, has a sacramental dimension. The sanctity of the latter has to be preserved against all odds. This is at the root of the spiritual resilience of a nation against external subjugation. It is this spiritual empathy that Sri Aurobindo celebrated when he described the novelist in his poem entitled "Bankim Chandra Chatterji" as "The sweetest voice that ever spoke in prose." In his obituary lyric "Saraswati with the Lotus", he evokes the muse of learning and bemoans the sad demise of the author:

Thy tears fall fast, O Mother, on its bloom,  
O white-armed mother, like honey fall thy tears;  
Yet even their sweetness can no more relume  
The golden light, the fragrance heaven rears,  
The fragrance and the light for ever shed  
Upon his lips immortal who is dead.

CR Das once described Sri Aurobindo as "the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity". Among the poems that express his sense of nationalism and quest for liberty, the most notable is "Baji Prabhu", a long narrative poem that eulogises the fortitude and valour of the Maratha warrior against the Mughals.

Descending stooped, towards the vesper verge  
He gazed and cried: "make iron of your souls.  
Yet if Bhavani wills, strength and the sword  
Can stay our nation's future from o'erthrow  
Till victory with Shivaji return."

And then again:

Inflicted. And from time to time the gaze  
Of Baji sought the ever-sinking sun.  
Men fixed their eyes on him and in his firm  
Expression lived. So the slow minutes passed.

The poem marks a remarkable blend of form and content Sri Aurobindo's poem "Vadula", that was first published under the title "The Mother to her Son", also explores the theme of valour and courage. The following extract echoes the clarion call of Mother India to her children:

Shrink not from a noble action, stoop not to unworthy deed!

Vile are they who stoop, they gain not Heaven's doors,  
nor here succeed When thou winnest difficult victory from the  
clutch of fearful strife, I shall know thou art my offspring and  
shall love my son indeed."

Sri Aurobindo's entrapment in an alien culture did not impede his quest for search of the traditional roots of Indian heritage. His stress was on spiritual regeneration and rediscovery of the cultural roots for an emphatic assertion of nationalist identity.

Spiritual heritage and individuality are intrinsic to national identity. Sri Aurobindo started from this point and made spirituality and nationalism concomitant like a glorious and

invincible union of the Ganga and Jamuna, thereby upholding the sacred past and the "mighty godhead of Sanatana Dharma".

These early poems testify that Sri Aurobindo was searching for an apt metaphor for his own Mother India. The general refrain in most of these lyrics is a clarion call to regain the lost pride and glory, which would pave the path for liberation from alien rule.

Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya in his book '(The History of the Indian National Congress)' has said, "Aurobindo's genius shot up like a meteor. He was on the high skies only for a time. He flooded the land from Cape to Mount with the effulgence of his light." Subhash Chandra Bose '(An Indian Pilgrim)' has said, "On the Congress platform he had stood up as a champion of left-wing thought and a fearless advocate of independence at a time when most of the leaders, with their tongues in their cheeks, would talk only of colonial self government. He had undergone incarnation with perfect equanimity..... When I came to Calcutta in 1913, Aurobindo was already a legendary figure. Rarely have I seen people speak of a leader with such rapturous enthusiasm and many were the anecdotes of this great man, some of them probably true, which travelled from mouth to mouth." Sri Aurobindo in 'Savitri' Book III wrote –

'As yet thought only same high spirits' dream  
Or a vexed illusion in man's toiling mind,

A new creation from the old shall rise,  
A Knowledge inarticulate find speech,  
Beauty suppressed burst into paradise bloom,  
Pleasure and pain dive into absolute bliss.  
A tongueless oracle shall speak at last,  
The Superconscient conscious grow on earth,  
The eternal's wonders join the dance of Time.

Sri Aurobindo's merit as a poet has largely been debated upon. It is an irony that Sri Aurobindo who saw himself first and foremost as a poet was not well recognized as a poet par excellence by a number of critics including the English critic and poet Kathleen Raine, Keke Daruwalia, Alphonso-Karkala and Nissim Ezekiel. However, Sri Aurobindo's poetic output which includes two epics, narratives, various short and long poems and sonnets cannot be undermined.

The words of defense lawyer Chittaranjan Das that he uttered to describe the accused, Aurobindo Ghose in the Alipore bomb trial of 1909, are perhaps the best way to describe Sri Aurobindo the nationalist poet leader:

"Long after this controversy is hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, this agitation ceases, long after he 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."