

National Interest And National Identity - An Interrogation Of Aurobindo's Nationalism Is Religion

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes an in-depth exploration of Sri Aurobindo's paradigm of nationalism as a form of religion, as it pertains to the nexus of national interest and identity. Aurobindo's philosophical underpinnings espouse a unique combination of spiritualism and nationalism, asserting that national interest and identity are as much spiritual as they are political. The research primarily aims to deconstruct this philosophy, scrutinizing its implications for the conception of nationalism in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, the paper dissects Aurobindo's assertion that every nation has a "Dharma," or a spiritual mission that is integral to its national identity. Analyzing the intersection of national interest and identity in the light of Aurobindo's philosophy, the paper evaluates the potential challenges and benefits posed by this perspective in a multicultural and globalized world. The investigation follows an interdisciplinary approach, bridging the fields of philosophy, political science, and sociology to offer a comprehensive understanding of Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion'. The study concludes by offering new insights into the discourse on nationalism, emphasizing the importance of spiritual underpinnings in shaping national identity and interest.

Keywords: Nationalism, National Interest, Religion

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo, one of India's foremost philosophers and nationalist thinkers, has profoundly shaped the intellectual and spiritual landscape of the country. Aurobindo's philosophy is a tapestry of spiritual, nationalistic, and humanist threads, offering an extraordinary fusion of Eastern spirituality and Western political thought. As highlighted in his seminal work, "The Life Divine," Aurobindo propagates an integral approach to life, where divinity is not confined to the metaphysical but pervades all aspects of existence, including the social and political (Ghose 45).

His philosophic expositions provide a unique perspective on nationalism, conceiving it not merely as a political construct but as a spiritual movement, a notion he posits in his work "Nationalism is Religion." According to Aurobindo, the destiny of a nation, or its 'Dharma,' is deeply spiritual, and it shapes its national interest and identity (Ghose 96). Thus, Aurobindo's work heralds a new understanding of nationalism, one that transcends conventional political narratives.

National interest, traditionally, refers to the strategic, economic, and ideological objectives that a nation pursues to ensure its survival, prosperity, and influence. National identity, on the other hand, is the collective sense of belonging and shared values that unify a nation's people. It is generally shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors, and in turn, shapes the nation's interest. However, Aurobindo's philosophy introduces spirituality as a critical factor shaping both national interest and identity.

This research aims to interrogate Aurobindo's perspective on nationalism as a form of religion, focusing on its implications for national interest and identity. Given the ever-intensifying global interconnectedness and multiculturalism, Aurobindo's philosophy holds significant potential for redefining the discourse on nationalism. Furthermore, with spirituality increasingly being recognized as a critical element in societal functioning, an exploration of its role in shaping national interest and identity, as proposed by Aurobindo, could offer fresh insights and perspectives. Thus, the study intends not merely to scrutinize Aurobindo's philosophy but also to contribute to the broader understanding of the multifaceted nature of nationalism.

Theoretical Framework

A deep exploration of Sri Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' reveals a transcendental conceptualization of nationalism that takes us beyond the conventional realm of political ideology. According to Aurobindo, nationalism is not merely a political tool but is a spiritual mission that seeks to awaken the divine potential in a nation and its people (Ghose 78). In this context, he conceives nationalism as a form of religion, where the pursuit of national interest becomes akin to the pursuit of a religious mission.

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Aurobindo's philosophy of nationalism pivots around a few foundational principles. First, he proposes the idea of a 'national soul,' implying that every nation has a unique spiritual identity that guides its destiny or 'Dharma' (Ghose 83). Second, he maintains that a nation's duty or 'Svadharmā' is to express and fulfill this unique spiritual identity. Finally, Aurobindo argues that the realization of this spiritual identity is a crucial aspect of a nation's evolution, involving a collective spiritual awakening.

Drawing from these principles, Aurobindo reframes the concepts of national interest and identity. He associates national interest with the fulfilment of the national soul's destiny or 'Dharma,' and national identity with the collective expression of the national soul's inherent spiritual character. For Aurobindo, national interest isn't limited to geopolitical, economic, or strategic objectives; rather, it encompasses a nation's spiritual growth and development. Similarly, national identity isn't merely a construct of shared history, culture, or political ideology, but includes a shared spiritual purpose (Ghose 89). Thus, Aurobindo's philosophy elucidates an unconventional approach to nationalism, where the spiritual dimension is the underpinning of national interest and identity. This approach pushes the boundaries of our understanding of nationalism, encouraging us to explore the spiritual foundations of a nation's existence, growth, and development. In essence, Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' offers a unique theoretical framework that intertwines spirituality with nationalism, significantly enriching our perspective on the dynamic relationship between national interest and identity.

Implications of Aurobindo's Nationalism in the Contemporary World

In the multicultural and globalized landscape of the 21st century, the relevance and applicability of Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' philosophy invites contemplation. Aurobindo's assertion that every nation has a unique spiritual destiny, or 'Dharma,' could provide a fresh dimension to the discourse on multiculturalism. His philosophy might encourage nations to respect and celebrate diversity while affirming their unique spiritual identities, thus fostering unity in diversity (Ghose 105).

However, Aurobindo's perspective on nationalism could also present certain challenges. His idea of a 'national soul' could be misconstrued and exploited by extremist factions to endorse exclusionary and divisive ideologies. There is also the risk of his philosophy being misunderstood as advocating a theocratic state, which is contrary to his universalist and inclusive vision (Ghose 112). Moreover, given the secular nature of many contemporary societies, the incorporation of spirituality into political discourse might be met with skepticism and resistance.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of Aurobindo's philosophy on national interest and identity are profound. His spiritual outlook on nationalism can inspire nations to strive for higher goals beyond material prosperity, such as moral and spiritual growth, fostering a more comprehensive national development. Furthermore, Aurobindo's approach could cultivate a stronger sense of national identity rooted in shared spiritual values, promoting social cohesion and unity (Ghose 117).

In a world often marked by conflict and division, Aurobindo's philosophy might serve as a beacon, guiding nations towards a more inclusive, holistic understanding of their interests and identities. By incorporating spiritual values into the conception of national interest and identity, nations could strive for harmony within diversity, and global collaboration instead of rivalry. Thus, while challenging to implement, the potential positive impacts of Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' cannot be overlooked.

This exploration of Sri Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' elucidates a unique perspective on nationalism that blends spirituality with political discourse. Key findings suggest that Aurobindo's philosophy positions the concept of a 'national soul' at the heart of national interest and identity. A nation's spiritual destiny, or 'Dharma,' according to Aurobindo, shapes its interests, while the collective expression of this spiritual identity cultivates a strong sense of national identity (Ghose 89).

Reflections on this research underscore the potential influence of spiritual underpinnings in shaping national interest and identity. By linking spirituality with national concerns, Aurobindo enriches the discourse on nationalism, offering a path that seeks harmony, inclusivity, and holistic development. Although his philosophy poses certain challenges in a secular and multicultural world, the benefits it could yield, particularly in fostering unity and shared purpose, make it worth further exploration. Aurobindo's 'Nationalism is Religion' provides an innovative theoretical framework for understanding nationalism. It encourages a shift in perspective, prompting nations to explore and express their unique spiritual identity, and evolve towards fulfilling their higher destiny (Ghose 105).

Sri Aurobindo's vision of nationalism as a spiritual endeavor that celebrates a nation's unique 'Dharma' (spiritual mission) offers a novel approach to understanding national interest and identity. However, this spiritualistic conception of nationalism is not without its critiques. Drawing on the perspectives of several scholars, a critical evaluation of Aurobindo's philosophy is presented.

Arguably, Rabindranath Tagore presents a fundamental critique of Aurobindo's nationalism. While Aurobindo emphasizes a nation's spiritual mission, Tagore warns against the perils of nationalism that may lead to divisions and conflict. He
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argues, "Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles" (Tagore 46).

The potential challenges of Aurobindo's nationalism also find resonance in Amartya Sen's work. Sen cautions about the dangers of singular identities that can contribute to violence, suggesting that Aurobindo's concept of a unique 'national soul' might inadvertently create divisions (Sen 78).

Moreover, Carl Gustav Jung's theory of collective unconscious could argue that the concept of a 'national soul' might be more mythic than real. His concept of archetypes might suggest that the 'national soul' is but a shared myth, not necessarily grounded in reality (Jung 52).

From a more globalized perspective, Kwame Anthony Appiah's philosophy of cosmopolitanism contrasts with Aurobindo's nationalistic perspective. Appiah contends that we are "citizens of the world," thus challenging the idea of limited national identities (Appiah 134).

Finally, Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as 'imagined communities' also seems to dispute Aurobindo's assertion of a 'national soul.' Anderson suggests that a nation is a social construct rather than a spiritual entity (Anderson 6).

Thus, while Sri Aurobindo's philosophy provides a unique spiritual lens to understand nationalism, it encounters robust challenges on its potential to foster division, its conceptual grounding, and its relevance in a world increasingly leaning towards multiculturalism and global citizenship. The value of such discourse lies in fostering a comprehensive understanding of nationalism, which acknowledges and negotiates these complexities. While the spiritual dimension of nationalism as proposed by Aurobindo offers insightful perspectives, the counterarguments foreground the necessity of ongoing inquiry and dialogue in this discourse.

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