

A Revolutionary and a Sage: Sri Aurobindo at 150

Jawhar Sircar

Sri Aurobindo, the venerable sage of French Pondicherry, turned 75 on the very day British India – which he had quit after leading its first revolutionary war of liberation – attained Independence. The sheer coincidence was not lost then, though it is almost completely forgotten today, on the 150th anniversary of his birth.

After all, the regime of a party and parivar that had kept far away from the freedom struggle and had [severely castigated the choice of the tricolour as India's flag](#) is on an [overdrive](#) to utilise the 75th anniversary of India to appropriate that very flag and to obliterate its own shameful role in the national movement.

“August 15th is my own birthday,” Aurobindo had said from distant Pondicherry, “and it is naturally gratifying to me that it should have assumed this vast significance. I take this coincidence, not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force that guides my steps on the work with which I began life, the beginning of its full fruition.”

He had no premonition that his 150th birth anniversary would hardly be observed – not that he cared much about these gestures – and that the present dispensation would confine its observance to just a few token gestures. These would surely be focused on his ‘Hindu spiritualism’, not his path-breaking role as a hands-on revolutionary of the ‘extremist section’ of the Congress. After all, this government has roped in its usual suspects – user-friendly spiritualists like Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru Jaggi – to lead the way. These ‘spiritual’ leaders are, of course, more than successful in material prosperity as well.

Everything about Aurobindo Ghose was unusual, starting from the spelling of his name — Arvind, to the rest of India and Arobindo to Bengalis — where the ‘u’ enters without warning, as if it is to highlight some aura.

The third son of an Anglophile Edinburgh-trained civil surgeon in the service of the British Empire in India, he was taught to be steeped in

English and conversed with menials not in his native Bengali but in Hindustani, as the white man did. Packed off to England at seven years and brought up by a very Christian English family, he developed an adolescent antipathy to religion. Aurobindo was taught Greek and Latin, and French as well, while he could also read and write in German and Italian.

[Also read: Amidst the Euphoria of Independence, Is the Nation Ready to Converse With Sri Aurobindo?](#)

The scrawny young man was sent to the finest college in Cambridge, King's and qualified relatively easily for the Indian Civil Service. But by then, after 14 years in England, he had just had enough of the British and their "heartless rule" and was hell bent on not making it to the ICS – a path that his father had decided for him. The dilemma was similar to what Subhas Chandra Bose would suffer, at the same university for the same ICS, some 27 years later. Aurobindo managed to avoid the much-coveted ICS by failing in the compulsory horse-riding test and, at 21, he was free from his father's dream that he must serve the British in India, as part of its elite corps.



Sri Aurobindo in Baroda (January 1908). Photo: www.sriurobindoinstitute.org

He soon found employment under the Gaekwad of Baroda in 1893 and then began his “real discovery of India”. He learnt Sanskrit on his own, and made frequent trips to Bengal to master the language as well as soak in its culture – to make up for the lost years. At Baroda, he took an active interest in academics in addition to his administrative duties and started teaching at Baroda College (now Maharaja Sayajirao University), where he went on to become the vice principal.

Since government service rules, even in princely states, prohibited active involvement in politics, he mastered the art of living two lives – one as a civilian and an academic with his masterly English and French and his enlightened conversations in Indian languages like Hindustani, Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati, and the other as a staunch nationalist. The latter is clear from his writings in *Indu Prakash* the radical Anglo-Marathi journal.

His trips to Bengal convinced him that brutal British rule could not be overthrown by the three-piece-suited moderate ‘petitioning’ leaders of the Congress but by armed secret societies of young men who were determined to lay down their lives.

Aurobindo helped organise secret societies in Bengal like Anushilan and Jugantar but the revolutionaries did not reach out for popular support – lest their noble cause be compromised or the members betrayed. This phase of the Swadeshi movement was led by ‘upper’ caste, upper class Bengalis – partly to live down the constant taunt of being weak and of a non-martial race. Hindu idiom and lore were thus inextricably intertwined with nascent nationalism.

British rule was then at the height of its pomp and power and life was, indeed, very dangerous for Aurobindo when he was in his late 20s and early 30s. He received considerable encouragement from both the indomitable Bal Gangadhar Tilak and the irrepressible Sister Nivedita. But his espousal of violence could never be accepted by Rabindranath Tagore.



A frontpage of the ‘Bande Mataram’. Photo: www.sriurobindoinstitute.org

By the middle of the first decade of the 20th century, Aurobindo had settled in Kolkata and took full advantage of Curzon’s ‘Partition of Bengal’ – a measure that was as crafty as it was haughty – to popularise the national movement (and terrorism in Bengal) to the tens of thousands who vent their anger at British rule quite publicly. Even Tagore joined this mass upsurge and composed the soul-stirring [Amar Sonar Bangla](#) (My Golden Bengal) then, which would be adopted by Bangladesh as its national anthem.

The rest of India was, however, not quite convinced and unprepared to come to terms with the idea of a violent war on the British. As attacks on the establishment increased in Bengal, so did surveillance and the brutality of reprisal.

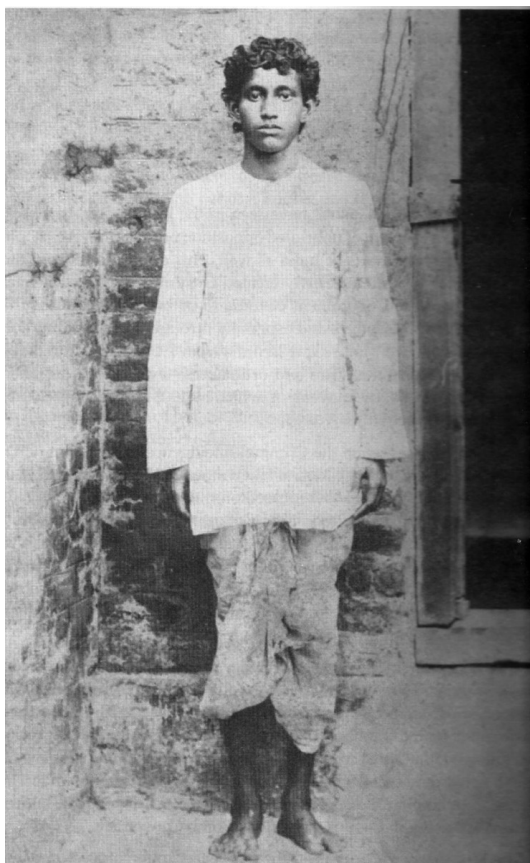
In 1906, Aurobindo joined the newly set up dream-college of nationalists, [the National Council of Education](#), the curriculum of which was altogether free from the biased and racially demeaning history, education and culture of the British. It was sponsored by Raja

Subodh Mallik and the nationalist segment of the gentry of Bengal and would blossom later into Jadavpur University.

Aurobindo became the first principal of the institution and among the teachers were luminaries like Tagore, Sir Gurudas Banerjee, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Ramendra Sundar Trivedi, Radha Kumud Mukherjee, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Sakharam Ganesh Deoskar and others.

Like other Congress leaders, his avowed public stance was that of passive resistance and non-violence, but Ghose contributed quite frequently to radical journals like *Karmayogin* and *Bande Mataram*.

This is when he dealt with arms and explosives and planned 'operations' against imperial targets. He was the first senior Congress leader to do so, but it was his younger brother Barin who carried out the actual operations.



Khudiram Bose in 1905. Photo: Public domain/Wikipedia

British police soon saw through Aurobindo Ghose's dual life and started charging him with heinous offences and terrorist attacks. When radicals set explosives to derail the train carrying lieutenant-governor Sir Andrew Fraser in December 1907 and Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki made an attempt on the life of the tyrannical presidency magistrate Douglas Kingsford in Muzaffarpur (killing British citizens

instead) in April 1908, Aurobindo was charged as the mastermind – in the epoch-making [Emperor vs Aurobindo Ghosh and others](#).

The legendary case was also known as the Alipore Bomb Case, the Muraripukur conspiracy, or the Manicktola bomb conspiracy and its high-profile trial was held at Alipore sessions court, Calcutta, between May 1908 and May 1909.

So charged was the public temperature and so dear was the Congress to the people that two undertrial radicals assassinated the prime approver and crown witness within the precincts of Presidency Jail, Kolkata, and paid the price for it. Chittaranjan Das made a historic defence in favour of Aurobindo and with no witness alive, the case collapsed during trial. His brother Barin and a number of others were convicted and faced varying jail terms, even life imprisonment.

It was in prison that Aurobindo passed through an intense process of inner churning, and this led to a major turning point in his life.

He delivered a speech at Uttarpara after his release from the jail on May 30, 1909, where he revealed the magical power of this turning point. The daredevil Aurobindo was not the same anymore and he claimed that during his solitary confinement, he had been in the constant company of Vasudeva and Sri Krishna beckoning him.

Aurobindo who had flashed like a fiery comet on the horizon for five years, inspiring thousands to rise against the unvanquished British colossus, was now a man of god. His scientist father had been a passionate believer in evolution and now his son moved from the political to the spiritual. Aurobindo appeared to be following the footsteps of his grandfather, the iconic litterateur and teacher, Rajnarain Basu, who had forsaken the glamour of Calcutta to teach in a *mufassil* college in Midnapore – contributing considerably from there – before quitting prematurely for the rustic setting of Deoghar. He was honoured with the title *rishi*, meaning ‘sage’.

Aurobindo, too, deserted Bengal to settle as a *rishi*, Sri Aurobindo, in Pondicherry – where British police could not fix him ever again. The ashram he set up gained worldwide fame and followers flocked to hear his talks on the Self, the *Gita* and Savitri and many other spiritual topics. He kept no contact with the revolutionaries he had inspired nor with the mainstream of India during the difficult decades towards independence.

Also read: [India Has Come a Long Way Since 1947, But Much Still Needs to Be Done](#)

While lakhs have deified Rishi Aurobindo, countless others have never forgiven him.

Subhas Chandra Bose called his mysticism ‘escapism’. Aurobindo retaliated through his disciple Dilip Kumar Roy. In his letter dated August 20, 1935 to Roy [\[PDF\]](#), Aurobindo said: “As for the desperate Subhas, why the deuce does he want every body to agree with him and follow his belief?”

He continued sardonically that gurus like him and even gods had lesser ambitions than Subhas. Aurobindo was critical of all politicians and said that Subhas was “a politician and the rationality of politicians has to perforce move within limits. If they allow themselves to be as clear minded as that then their occupation would be gone”. Subhas was more respectful but did not waver from his belief that gurus are humbugs. To which, Aurobindo replied through Dilip Roy: “What’s the use of running down faith, which, after all, gives something to hold on to among the contradictions of an enigmatic existence...Logic is just a measured dance of the mind, nothing else.”

Formidable but complex personalities continue to remain emphatic in what they believe is right, and Aurobindo will surely require more than just a cursory appraisal to be fully understood.

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