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Hindu Nationalism in the Poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Aurobindo Ghose

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Abstract

The present paper reads the poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Aurobindo Ghose from postcolonial perspective. The present paper is a critique on the nationalist attitude in their poetry. It also deals with the notion of Islam phobia and Hindu fundamentalism. Derozio's engendering nation as a female is a patriarchal idea. Aurobindo sees nation as mother, which is also patriarchal ideology. Nationalism in him is a spiritual imperative. Derozio in 19th century begins to construct a national identity emphasizing on its cultural heritage. Aurobindo, in the beginning of the twentieth century gives that identity a more emphasizing form. For both of them nationalism is male-centric and nation is anti-muslim.

Keywords

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio; Aurobindo Ghose; Islam phobia, Hindu fundamentalism; Nationalism.

Introduction

A historical analysis of the emergence of nationalism in Indian context makes it amply clear that, there are many contradictory notions of national identity and alternative frameworks for its realisation. Multiple communitarian affiliations – caste, religious, regional, class and linguistic – of India deeply problematize the very idea of homogeneous nationhood since the moment of its birth. These nuances are evident in the English poems of both Derozio and Aurobindo.

Before discussing more on their ideas of nationalism, tracing the birth of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent is quite essential. The initiative of learning and reading English gives birth to the early nationalist consciousness when English educated Bengali elite began to question the colonial dominance. During the struggle for independence in India, these people used the English education, to overthrow the British rule and assert their national identity. Thus, nationalism in its root emerges as a derivative discourse.

The researcher proposes to trace some facets of nationalism in the poems of Derozio and Aurobindo: how the growing nationalist sentiment influences these two poets, dwellers of different socio-political arena.

Nationalism in the Poetry of Derozio

Derozio is a dedicated patriot. Patriotic impulse, which finds its ultimate fulfilment in 1905, is a direct consequence of English education in India and has found its expression in poetry as early as 1820, when Derozio publishes what is probably the first patriotic poem in praise of India. There is a slight difference between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism gives more importance to unity by a way of cultural background, often invoking particular political beliefs, but patriotism on the other hand, pertains to the love for a nation with more importance to values and beliefs. Postcolonial critics such as Rosinka Chaudhuri regard Derozio as a figure who played a significant role in some of the earliest attempts at the creation and definition of a modern Indian identity.

The first significant feature of Derozio's patriotic and nationalistic fervour is his profound love for India. In spite of being of 'Eurasian' origin, he always presents India as his 'native land' ("To India"). Prior to the first independence struggle of 1857, Derozio initiates struggle for freedom and envisages the conception of a single, united India.

Conception of past is a necessary condition to understand and shape the present. Being fully aware of the fact, he recapitulates the glorious past: "My country! in thy day of glory past/ A beauteous halo circled round thy brow"("To India"). To define Derozio's deep affection for his 'native land', citing Derozio, Pallab Sengupta writes: "I was born in India and have been bred here, I am proud to acknowledge my country and to do my best in her service" (qtd. in Sengupta 91). Derozio laments over the past glory of Indian nation when the harp of his country remains "unstrung forever", "neglected and mute and desolate" ("Harp of India"). Presenting national identity through an imaginary harp is the representation of the East-West cultural interface of the nineteenth century Bengal. Derozio's imaginary harp signifies a political picture of national deprivation. Rosinka Choudhury has remarked:

As a representative of the Indian modern, Derozio modelled himself as a self-consciously nationalist poet, addressing the all of India in his sonnets, imagining a nation into being in lines of Romantic poetry that spoke of national aspiration and endeavour. In his poetry, images of national greatness coexist with golden age mythology; the praise of mythical heroism or more general valour contributes to a definition of the qualities desired in a citizen of the nation; the vocabulary and iconography of patriotism constructs a notion of indigenusness that might have borrowed from Scott and Byron in its linguistic contours, but was often—and perhaps especially because of the distinctive nature of the borrowing—emphatically and unprecedentedly, Indian in its moorings. (Choudhury lxxx)

During the rising tide of British colonialism, Derozio also finds the radical and revolutionary ideas of the Romantics like Byron and Shelly, quite compatible with his own thinking. The anti-colonial nationalism which will be flourished in the nineteenth century nationalists like Aurobindo is in embryonic stage in Derozio's 'notes divine' which "may be by mortal wakened once again." ("Harp of India")

Derozio worships the nation as a 'deity' ("To India"). Long before the emergence of the concept of Bharat-Mata in Indian freedom struggle, Derozio, in 1827, imagines the nation as a female deity. It can be said that he is the precursor of the concept of engendering the nation. Derozio's formation of Mother-India becomes identical with the conception of Aurobindo's ideal. Sugata Bose, citing Tanika Sarkar interprets this concept of "the motherland – Deshmata" as a "cultural artefact" (Bose 54). Derozio's India is a gendered female who: "writhe in galling chains, /When her proud masters scourge her like a dog;" ("Golden Vase" 62-63).

Engendering the nation itself turns into a patriarchal idea in Derozio's poetry. Nineteenth century Indian society nourishes the idea of a housewife as the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, "by whose grace the extended family (and clan, and hence, by extending the sentiment, the nation, Bharat Lakshmi) lived and prospered" (Chakrabarty 236). Women are always weak and should honour the nation; men on the other hand, are expected to build up the Mother India and "should rush to her relief" ("Golden Vase"66).

A dash of Islam phobia in Derozio's mind sometimes comes out almost as the agenda of Hindu fundamentalism: "The Moslem is come down to spoil the land/ Which every god hath blest" ("Golden Vase" 13-14). Therefore, in spite of his role as a critic and reformer of orthodox Hinduism, he also becomes an exponent of Hindu nationalism. Derozio is writing in a period when the "newly rising class demanded a western learning that would at the same time be capable of upholding the orthodox Hindu social hierarchies" (Bagchi 148). Derozio's poems are fused with the images and symbols taken from Hindu mythology.

But what is unquestionable in Derozio, is his fervent love for the country. Long before the concept of India representing unity in diversity Derozio presents the nation as an imaginary whole: "...a soil/ So rich, so clad with beauty". When Derozio is writing these lines there are no patriotic poems or songs—he is the first to create a sense of nationalism. What is most remarkable for Derozio, is his teaching in Hindu college. He fosters patriotism in these "young flowers" whose minds are "Opening to the freshening April showers of early knowledge." Derozio's sole aim is to teach these "gentle minds" to attain "new perceptions" and worship "truth's omnipotence", so that a rational generation may evolve to bring fame in futurity ("Pupils of Hindu College").

Like a true patriot of the Indian soil he nourishes a concern for India's freedom. Long before the freedom struggle of India, Derozio writes:

Success attend the patriot sword,
That is unsheathed for thee,
And glory to the breast that bleeds,
Bleed nobly to be free! ("Freedom of Slave")

The lamp of freedom, which is burning in his heart shall not extinguish: "And shall thy light like this depart?/Away! It cannot be" ("Independence"). In Derozio's imagination nation comes as harp on lamp. Through the profound love for country, reformist zeal, he gives a shape to the idea of Indian nation at the very beginning. Fuller possibilities of the re-emergence of Indian nation are not available to the poet, yet there is a brave attempt to face the future with hope. It is this vision that makes Derozio to be aligned with the idea of nation.

Nationalism in the Poetry of Aurobindo

Aurobindo is a contradictory figure in the history of nation building project. His response to colonialism has a deep relation with his personal life. He is the product of English educated Indian culture, over whose upbringing, strict instructions were carried out to ensure that, he should receive an entirely European outfit and should not be allowed to make the acquaintance of any

Indian or undergo any Indian influence. This means the erasure of language & indigenous association—making the mind tabula rasa, but Aurobindo refused to bear this ideological baggage because of his national consciousness. He learnt “how to curse” like Caliban in the language of the master. It is interesting to know how and when did he discover his Indian moorings.

During his staying in England, Aurobindo is deeply moved by the Irish nationalist movement which has made him concern about his own country. Shyam Kumari rightly observes, “It is a sweet journey to follow in the footsteps of Sri Aurobindo’s early poetry and trace the first dawn of Indian spirit” (Kumari 54). In the poem, “Lines on Ireland” Aurobindo laments 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” (“Lines on Ireland” 16-18). The buds of fervent nationalism which are to blossom over the coming decades, are clearly echoed in his feelings for Ireland.

There is a clear emphatical note that Aurobindo is conscious about his colonised country when he is talking of Ireland. His identification with the Irish nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell and correlation of India with Ireland is distinctively clear in the lines: “Deliver lately hailed, since by our lords/Most feared, most hated, hated because feared,/Who smot’st them with an edge surpassing swords!” (“Parnell”). Aurobindo believes that it is necessary to emphasize on spiritual heritage and individuality, as these are the markers of national identity. It is this spirit that is echoed in his address to the great patriot of Ireland: “O pale and guiding light.../ Thou too wert then a child of tragic earth/ Since vainly filled the luminous doom of birth.” (“Parnell”). Even more explicitly and in fact foreshadowing in a manner, his future worship for Mother India is presented in the lines:

Patriots, behold your guerdon. This mom found
Erin, his mother, bleeding chastised bound
Naked to imputation, poor, denied,
While alien masters held her house of pride. (“Hic Jacet”)

Behind the guise of Ireland, Aurobindo reveals his concern for Mother India. Ireland acts as a surrogate nation to him, who “had to own up his Indianness to become his version of the authentic Indian” (Nandy 85). In the distant England, when Aurobindo is growing in entire ignorance of Indian people, religion, culture, then it is Ireland, which becomes the transferred epithet for his own Mother India. Like Derozio, Aurobindo also nourishes deep love for his country.

But as was in Derozio, Aurobindo’s conception of nationalism is also male-centric. This idea of nationalism is truly patriarchal which imagines the nation as an “archetypal female victim” as Sugata Bose asserts citing Tanika Sarkar (Bose 56). Men are supposed to raise the ‘Mother’ “from her forlorn life” (“Hic Jacet”).

What is most striking in Aurobindo’s idea of nationalism is his imagination of India as the Hindu goddess Bhawani. To describe Aurobindo’s conception of Mother Nation, Ashis Nandy quotes Aurobindo’s words: “I know my country as Mother. I offer my devotions, my worship. If a monster sets upon her breast and prepares to suck her blood, what does her child do? Does he quietly sit down to his meal...or rush to her relief...God has sent me to do this work” (Nandy 92). His conception is borrowed from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who has first introduced the theme of Mother India in the song “Bande Mataram”. Aurobindo, in the verse translation of Bankim’s song, praises the beauty of the Mother:

Mother I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving, Mother of Might,
Mother free... (“Bande Mataram”)

This is his conception of India as a living entity. Engendering the nation is a strikingly common idea both in Derozio and in Aurobindo. Ideology of Aurobindo’s ‘Bhawani-Bharati’ is built around the mythology of India as a

powerful mother, Shakti, who is now “chained” and should be rescued by his “seventy million” children. (“Bande Mataram”)

Much more problematic idea of Aurobindo’s nationalism is the question whether his concept has left any space for the religious diversity of Indian nation. To Aurobindo, India is “Bhawani Mahishasuramardini”. He addresses her: “Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,/With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen,/Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned...” (“Bande Mataram”). Concept of Hindu nationalism which has begun its journey from Derozio’s “The Golden Vase”, is now fully grown in Aurobindo’s poems. In “To the Ganges”, Aurobindo portrays a national identity which is based only on Hindu mythology. India for him is the land, where Ganges flows “from the feet of Hari”, “Shiva sits in breathless air”. India for him is the land where the ‘ideal’ king “Rama wondered”, “where the feet of Krishna came” (“To the Ganges”). He is constantly negating the Muslim community in his portrayal of national identity. So, it can be said that, Aurobindo’s nationalism is based on the precepts of Hinduism which draws references mostly from Hindu tradition that does not include the experiences of the subalterns in its grand narratives. Drawing the Mahakavya metaphor, he presents India as Mother Ganges whose son is the ideal protector of Mother: “Iron Bhisma was thy son/ Who against ten thousand rushing chariots could in war endure” (“To the Ganges”).

Nationalist leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, give the movement a religious slant and for them, India is mainly represented by Bengal. Aurobindo in a speech in 1907 epitomises Bengali Hindu Nationalism: “Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live” (*On Himself*. Vol.26). Aurobindo’s fervent creed for Hindu Nationalism is more evident in the lines:

Still, yet still the fire of Kali on her ancient altar burns
Smouldering under smoky pall,
And the deep heart of her peoples to their mighty mother turns

Listening for her Titan call. ("To the Ganges" 60-64).

This kind of Hinduism fundamentalism and constant exclusion of Muslims contributes to the doctrine of communalism which culminates in the partition of the country. Citing Chandra, Peter Heehs states: "Many of the Extremists (he cites in particular Aurobindo and Bipinchandra) identified nationalism with the revival of Hinduism and saw nationalism as a religion-which was invariably, in the nature of things." (Heehs108-109).

Aurobindo's rise as a national leader in the critical years (1905-1906) is meteoric. "Aurobindo's revolutionary politics ultimately landed him in jail and involved him in a prolonged, dramatic trial and charges of sedition" (Nandy 93). After his acquittal from the Alipore Bomb case in 1909, he suddenly becomes a condemner of militant nationalism. So in 1910, "On receiving orders 'from above' he moved to Pondicherry, then a French colony in India...he now sought *brahmatej*, brahmanic potency obtainable through asceticisms and penances, in the place of *ksatratej* or martial potency" (Nandy 94).

Poems written during his life in Pondicherry trace this attitude of Aurobindo. His reading of history of 1930s and 40s is presented through the allegory of tiger and deer, representing the rise of imperialism and colonialism. As a prophet of spiritual nationalism, he expresses a colonised person's dream: "But a day may come when the tiger crouches and leaps no more in the/
Dangerous heart at the forest,/As the mammoth shakes no more the pains of Asia" ("Tiger and Deer"). At the end of the poem he utters the universal truth as a spiritual nationalist: "The mighty perish in their might;/The slain survive the slayer." ("Tiger and Deer")

Therefore, Nationalism for Aurobindo is a spiritual imperative, a virtually religious practice. Partha Chatterjee has distinguished two domains of anti-colonial nationalism: the 'outer' and material and the "inner" and spiritual. It is this "true and essential" spiritual domain, unconstrained by colonial interference that the nation in its sovereign unfolds itself (Chatterjee 75). Aurobindo's cultural as well as spiritual nationalism can be seen as an attempt to find that

“true essential” spiritual domain, although it is flawed by essentiality and unsustainable claim of communalism.

Conclusion

Both Derozio and Aurobindo were anti-Muslim and their conception of Nationalism is male-centric. Both of them engendered Nation as feminine, especially as ‘mother’ which is a patriarchal notion constructed only to exploit women in the name of glorifying their motherhood. But there are some points where their ideas differ with each other. Derozio never actively participated in nationalist movement and was an agnostic throughout his life. Actually he was anti-normative whose religious belief can never be stabilized. Aurobindo, on the other hand, at first actively participated in extremist nationalist movement. After being imprisoned in Alipore bomb case, he had realised his ‘divine mission’ in the jail. So, he dissuaded himself from active movement and started propagating the philosophical concept. He was a strong believer in God. Besides, Aurobindo at first took Ireland as his “surrogate motherland”, where he differs from Derozio. Finally, it can be said that Derozio, the nineteenth century poet, begins to construct a national identity emphasizing on its cultural heritage, Aurobindo, in the beginning of the twentieth century gives that identity a more emphasizing form. According to Anderson, nation is an “imagined political community”. Although Anderson’s theorisation has been criticised, it can be said that literary tents do indeed construct the nation through imagination. Quoting Salman Rushdie, Pramod K. Nayar articulates this “imagination” of the very idea of a nation:

After all, in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly “free”. But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it, stand? (Nayar 176-77)

Both Derozio and Aurobindo doing the same task portray their idea of nationalism to fulfil the historical necessity of a colonised nation. But the question is which nation is this that Derozio and Aurobindo speak of in their poetry? Is it a “Hindu” nation that they speak of ignoring the people belonging to other religions? If it is so, then they polarize, and in a multi-religious country like India this kind of polarization can only beget communal disharmony.

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