



## Sri Aurobindo's Thesis on Resistance Passive or Active

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### Abstract:

*Theory regarding consciousness is a very debatable concept. In Western psychology, consciousness becomes similar with the mental side of consciousness, while in Indian psychology it seems equal to that of the soul. In sri aurobindian psychology I want to focus the entire discussion on whether consciousness is mental or spiritual in nature.*

**Key words:** Sri Aurobindo, theory of consciousness, mental consciousness, spiritual consciousness, the soul, the mind.

### Introduction

In the social-political theory of Sri Aurobindo swaraj seems to be the beginning of Life Divine and boycott as one of its important corollaries. In his spiritual dream of fulfilling the union with the Divine, he had taken the political path as he truly realized that for making our country wholly prepared for this spiritual destination, our first priority must be the attainment of its political freedom. Political liberty, in his opinion, serves as the gateway of achieving the spiritual liberty. He had a firm belief over India's spiritual excellence and for making our beloved mother-land as the spiritual guide of all other spiritually backward nations it has to be made free from the shackles of its political servitude. Boycott is actually treated as an excellent weapon in this regard. In this context the question of passive as well as active resistances arise instantly.

The concepts of passive and active resistances arise as the two important corollaries of the boycott agitation. Boycott movement is a tool whereas these two kinds of resistances are the means to achieve it. Passive resistance is a way approached by the Moderate Congress leaders, whereas active resistance is worshipped as the 'mantra' by the Nationalist leaders. In this regard let us quote Karan Singh's explanation of resistance as envisioned by Sri Aurobindo. According to Karan Singh 'Sri Aurobindo had no hesitation in using violent means to achieve his country's freedom from foreign oppression. He was, however, by no means an impractical dreamer. It appears he soon realized that an armed revolt at that stage of India's history was not feasible, and though he continued to support and guide the underground terrorist movement in the hope that it would demoralize British serving in India, he could have had no illusions as to the possibility of mere terrorism securing the country's freedom. In fact his writings make it clear that in the light of the massive upheaval of public protest as the result of the partition, he wished the national movement to be not merely an affair of secret societies and clandestine activities but a broad, open, sweeping movement which would enthuse and organize the vast Indian masses in an irresistible upsurge towards emancipation and independence. Thus, although violent methods may have their place in Sri Aurobindo's technique, but his vision and foresight led him to advocate an entirely different method which he rightly thought was the most natural and suitable weapon under the circumstances, whereby the nation could achieve its liberty – the method of passive resistance. In his writings he often calls it 'defensive resistance', but for the sake of clarity the former expression has been adhered in the following expression.'<sup>1</sup>

### **Resistance as Notion:**

The idea of Resistance, whether passive or active in nature, was greatly advocated by every nationalistic philosopher. Its aim is to convert the autocratic British bureaucracy into a democratic government of India by establishing its basis on the free constitution and democracy so that it may look after the general interest of the country and its country-men. However the political leaders of nineteenth

century preferred to accept servitude under British Raj, but not to indulge into a bloody fight for independence. Thus the idea of resistance, whether passive or active in nature, did not even dare to throw any challenge to the British Constituency, rather decided to rule within the secured boundary of it. Actual sense of passive resistance is not just showing peaceful demonstration, but to throw a threat towards the government. And active resistance has to include guerrilla warfare, secret societies, violent use of weapons and massive killing of the bureaucrats. We need the help of active resistance whenever seemed necessary.<sup>ii</sup>

Now let us concern with the etymological sense of resistance, passive resistance as well as active resistance. Resistance has several meanings – first, a quality of not yielding to force or external pressure; second, the power of a body which acts in opposition to the impulse or pressure of another or which prevents the effect of another power (the scientific meaning), e.g. the resistance of the air to a body passing through it; thirdly, a means or method of resisting, that which resists, whether individual or organization etc.<sup>iii</sup> From the Dictionary of Wikipedia, the political sense of passive resistance stands for – first, human effort of to imitate, alter or counteract the work of nature; secondly, to protest against oppressive government, organization or individuals by using violent methods.<sup>iv</sup> In the political sense, passive resistance stands for that type resistance where by nonviolent methods we can show protest against the government, or an occupying power, or specific dominative laws by demonstrating peacefully or using fasting as means.<sup>v</sup> Now these are the true meanings of resistance, passive and active resistances.

### **History of Resistance and its use:**

Actually, being wholly influenced by the English history of politics, the Indian political leaders of the nineteenth century accepted only two methods of organized resistance - the slow and steady method of agitation aiming at reformation of the existing governmental system; and the swift method of open struggle or armed revolt aiming at the development of its own free national government by destroying the existing one. The implication of this slow agitation method would be possible for

the native British country-men, because they got at least some power to raise their voice for their inborn rights in England; which is completely impossible for the British-dominated Indians. Thus the second kind of political method namely open revolt seems much more appealing than another and also very much applicable for the revival of the lost glory of ancient India. However Indian leaders never preferred the second one. And, according to Sri Aurobindo, the first type of agitation is inapplicable in Indian political context.<sup>1</sup> Hence he preferred the use of passive resistance as an immediate tool of boycott movement. It is really astonishing that even the nationalist leaders, who were known as the strong advocates of open revolt system, were in favor of accepting passive resistance as an essential part of their boycott agitation. However they were not at all in the mood of refuting the inherent necessity of the open struggle or armed revolt procedure.

In the west, actually the use of passive resistance was done by M.K. Gandhi at his staying in South Africa, which is amazingly quite later than the same was applied in India. Actually after 1905, the political turmoil of Bengal leads India towards the use of passive as well as active resistances. In South Africa, passive resistance doctrine was in discussion after the emergence of Gandhi on the political arena approximately at the same time (1905). In Johannesburg train incident, Gandhi's being a victim of racism commanded his inner self to take the help of passive resistance. He, being influenced by Ruskin and Tolstoy,<sup>vi</sup> involved common people of South India into boycotting the rule of imposing the poll tax on every *zulu* male. However Gandhi's this trial of resisting racism in South Africa helped him a lot to imply the same strategy in India against the British oppression.<sup>vii</sup> It's really an amazing fact how passive resistance theory was employed in two totally different parts of the World, one in India and one in Africa.

But in the case of active resistance, however India seemed much more forward than the West. In America, the open revolt movement started after 1955 approximately. In the American civil rights movement, the use of open revolt was accepted only after that certain time. The American civil right movement could be divided into two sections – the Montgomery

bus boycott in 1955-1960 and the 1960 student's lunch counter sit in.<sup>viii</sup> In the bold writings of Martin Luther King, we also discover the appraisal of the use of active resistance to preserve the national existence of the Black people in America. However in India, it was used much before times, perhaps for that reason not more politicians were able to identify the ultimate need of its usage in the political context. This open struggle or armed revolt procedure was used in the great Swadeshi movement after 1905 that gave splendid results at the time of Indian Independence. The cause behind the outbreak of such agitation remained hidden in Lord Curzon's sudden declaration regarding the notorious Bengal Partition in 1905. However for the attainment of our long-cherished dream about the Indian Independence, in Sri Aurobindo's opinion, we need to admit the necessity of both the methods. Our main aim was to gain the national liberty at any cost. And for doing this, the question of banning active resistance seems inappropriate to Sri Aurobindo.<sup>ix</sup> We have to gain complete freedom for India and in this endeavor active resistance has to be united as means along with its passive portion. Not a single one among both of them is unnecessary at all.

However it was commonly thought that the moderates were believers of passive resistance, whereas the nationalists preferred the active side of it. But it is certainly not that. Nationalists also accepted passive form of resistance, but not as the ultimate means of Indian freedom. They, actually, believed in the armed revolt, but not in the mood of using it at first hand. They prepared India for every kind of political turmoil, the means (whether passive or active) it does not matter at all.<sup>x</sup> Our main aim was to gain the national liberty at any cost. And for doing this, the question of banning active resistance seems inappropriate to Sri Aurobindo.<sup>xi</sup> We have to gain complete freedom for India and in this endeavor active resistance has to be used as means along with its passive portion. Agitation has to be done whole-heartedly by us and the question of means (passive or active kinds of resistances) is unnecessary in this regard. The political turmoil of India after 1905 and by taking this golden opportunity, we have to indulge into the movement for achieving India's political liberty. The moderate Congress leaders failed to accept the true demand of that crucial hour of Indian politics and thus, restricted themselves within the arena

of prayer and petition thesis. Even Gandhi, the so-called popular successor of moderates, also preached for this passive resistance theory and not anything else. In my observation, by passive resistance, we can only get the chance to show protests against them by peaceful demonstration or by using fasting as methods. In this endeavor, the British government had not been harmed at all. Only the peaceful atmosphere in the government has to be damaged and for whose disturbing existence, the foreign bureaucracy is partially disturbed to govern the subordinate country or colony peacefully. But this process is not at all sufficient to throw the foreign rule out of the border of the dominated colony. That actually happened in the case of India and, thus, the use of active resistance or armed revolt or aggressive resistance is mandatory in the Indian political arena from 1900 to 1947.

Political agitation has to be done wholeheartedly by our countrymen and the question of means (passive or active kinds of resistances) is necessary in this regard. The political turmoil is overwhelming in everywhere at that time after 1905, and by taking the help of this golden opportunity, we have to indulge into the warfare for achieving India's political liberty. The moderate Congress leaders failed to accept this demand of that crucial hour of Indian politics and thus limited themselves within the arena of prayer and petition theory towards the British administrators till the famous split of the Surat Congress, 1907.

### **Sri Aurobindo on Passive Resistance:**

Sri Aurobindo admitted the necessity of passive resistance by claiming it as 'the only effective means, except the actual armed revolt, by which the organized strength of the nation, gathering to a powerful central authority and guided by the principle of self-development and self-help, can wrest the control of our national life from the grip of an alien bureaucracy, and thus, developing into a free popular Government, naturally replace the bureaucracy it extrudes until the process culminates in a self-governed India, liberated from the foreign control'.<sup>xiii</sup> Even though both passive and active kind of resistances aim at national liberty, but they have an intrinsic difference in nature. The active resister tries to do

some permanent harm to the Government by violent means; whereas the passive resister actually abstracting himself from doing any help to the ruling Government and thus at the end also bringing harm to it. Actually, passive resistance, in Sri Aurobindo's view, will be much more applicable where the administration depends on the moral supports of the masses; but in a country like India where the British administration even do not dare to stop the voices of its country-men by violent tortures, there passive resistance seems not very much effective in nature. Hence the use of active resistance can seem mandatory in several extreme political phases. However Sri Aurobindo did not admit that in the arena of Indian politics active form of resistance theory is at all utilized.<sup>xiii</sup>

The passive resister in other countries could break the oppressive governmental laws and took essential steps for its prevention, e.g. the non-conformists in England refused to pay education tax or as Americans did by drowning the tea at the famous Boston dockyard.<sup>xiv</sup> The British officials in India never considered the lives of their Indian subordinates valuable at all. The common Indians, according to our foreign administrators, were spending their lives in within the boundary of extreme poverty and nastiness and thus could be slaughtered at any time whenever seemed necessary for the sustenance of the British government. Hence when the same Indian subjects of foreign bureaucracy tried hard to gather their all forces united together and to shout in protest, then the dynasty ruling over India never took it open-mindedly. They truly realized it as a sign of ending bell of their British dynasty in India. Scared by this fact, they consciously accepted the usage of passive resistance in Indian political arena, but not spared any little bit trial of using the active part of it.<sup>xv</sup> Sri Aurobindo also was in favor of using passive resistance as an important political doctrine in the nationalistic propaganda. He identified three necessities or canons of it. The first necessity is that, passive resistance aims at making a governmental law unworkable by general and organized disobedience. The aggressive type of resistance, instead of that, gives its full force on destroying the foreign administrative laws by using violent arms, like bombs, grenades etc. So the first canon of passive resistance is that it aims at breaking the unjust coercive laws by showing peaceful demonstration.<sup>xvi</sup> The second necessity of passive resistance is

acceptable to both the extremists and moderates that to resist the unjust coercive laws is not just justified in nature but is a sense of duty towards our motherland. Thus the inward sense of passive resistance in its second canon stands not as a demonstration, rather as an essential duty to the nation.<sup>xvii</sup> The third necessity is extremely important in nature in Sri Aurobindo's doctrine as well as in Indian political context. Here Sri Aurobindo explained the usefulness of social boycott in this regard. For the instant success of passive resistance agitation, we have to boycott not only foreign goods, but also the persons who used foreign goods. Simply by banning foreign goods we cannot stop its usage. For stopping its usage, we need to stop those people who are in favor of using it. If we ban the use of foreign goods in India, they will export these goods from abroad. So to stop the usage of foreign goods completely, we have to socially boycott these guilty and rich persons favoring the use of foreign goods from attending any social ceremony, rituals and meetings. Any kind of gatherings or bondings with them should be strictly banned. Even the shop-keepers have to refuse to supply them daily accommodations. In this regard we find out that, Sri Aurobindo tried to employ the strict sense of boycott here. Hence the third canon of passive resistance seems most important one among others.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Sri Aurobindo on Active Resistance:**

However Sri Aurobindo demonstrated the necessity of active resistance too, because it is the immediate means of attaining Indian freedom. Whenever the usage of passive resistance seems as a sign of cowardice on the behalf of our Indian counter-parts, the acceptance of active violence or open revolt process stands mandatory. In my opinion, if we used this tool efficiently at the time of Indian politics before 1947, then we did not need so long time to get independence. In *Kurukshetra*, Lord Krishna encouraged *Arjuna* to be indulged into the bloody war against his brothers.<sup>xix</sup> Therefore there should not arise any question regarding the necessity or usefulness of active violence thesis in the Indian political domain.

But our National leaders falsely accepted passive resistance as the only means of gaining Indian freedom, which



is certainly not so. A nation which shows some sign of freedom given to its people, where circumstances are not in so deteriorated state, there the use of passive resistance is useful. But in our nation where the oppression is so dominant, where no place even for freedom of thought remains alive, there the help of active resistance or armed revolt is completely urgent. Passive resistance is devoid of any course of constant and on-going struggle. For that above characteristics it attracts the Moderates of India. The method of the Moderates was 'Prayer, Petition and Protest', even though the method advocated by the Nationalists was well-known as Boycott. However there remains a basic similarity between both of these two corollaries of Indian National Congress, because both of them accepted Passive Resistance as a method of attaining the national liberty. In other countries like England, the followers of passive resistance wanted to break the unjust and oppressive laws ruling over the country through decades. However if their Indian counter-parts also tried to break on-going governmental rules by the non-payment of taxes as a sign of the economic boycott, then the same foreign government would consider it as a kind of continuously growing threat over the Indian judicial and administrative system. But in reality boycott seems to be the essential tool in the hands of our tortured and helpless countrymen, thus it should not be considered as a crime done against the ruling government in any ways. In passive resistance we can lead ourselves towards the general and organized disobedience, although active resistance or armed revolt aims at destruction of the oppressive governmental rules and regulations by using whatever violent means. Evaluating through this context, we may prefer passive resistance, rather than active resistance, as an immediate means for the attainment of our long cherished dream regarding India's national liberty by the help of non-violent means, even though this idea was certainly not accepted by Sri Aurobindo. The use of passive and active resistance is summed up by the extremists in the boycott movement after 1905 to 1947. Boycott is the extreme form of passive resistance, where we can passively demonstrate against the British bureaucracy. But it can also be used as a starting-point of active resistance or armed struggle whenever seemed necessary.

### **Need of Active Resistance as viewed by Sri Aurobindo:**

However in Sri Aurobindo's own opinion, when the passive resistance movement of India was not met with the barbarous tortures of the British administration, we, the Indian citizens passively, yet most reluctantly, accepted every legal action taken. When our political leaders are only restricted to make peaceful and armless meetings directed towards refuting the negligence's of British bureaucracy; we never felt any urge to use violent means against it. At that stage of protest, the use of passive resistance is completely admirable. But when our voices were stopped by using repressive methods, then the necessity of armed revolt felt deeply by the Indian masses.<sup>xx</sup> Actually Sri Aurobindo's theory of passive resistance is much more revolutionary in nature and is far ahead than his other contemporaries like Mahatma Gandhi.

### **Similarity and Dissimilarity between Gandhi and Aurobindo's Resistance:**

Now what are the basic criteria of a passive resister? A passive resister, as viewed by Sri Aurobindo, - 1) must be prepared to break an unjust law by taking any kind of legal action living within the boundary of governmental law and administration; 2) must be at once ready to disobey an unjust and coercive executive orders; 3) must be prepared to boycott socially all guilty persons of showing deliberate signs of disobedience to the nation which hampers the intrinsic integrity of India; and most importantly 4) he should be prepared to sacrifice even his own life for the sake of the mother-Nation.<sup>xxi</sup> In this context we can discover his similarity with that of Mahatma Gandhi.

But unlike Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo declared that, when the ultimate limits of pressures and coercions would be expanded in the devastating way which is enough capable to destroy our national life, then we have left no other option than to choose the path of active resistance; and it should be followed strictly as our only holy duty towards motherland. Till then the method of passive resistance is all okay. However, according to Sri Aurobindo, not only passive resistance, but also the active one may be sometimes considered as a form of defensive

resistance.<sup>xxii</sup> For example, when Indians took the path of revolution in the protest of the brutal murder of Lala Lajpat Rai and the Jalian Wala Bagh firing case, then their move must not be considered as a violent or offensive kind of resistance, rather an actual sign of self-defense; as it is not at all an offense to show the outrage of inner anger in this way. But the uncanny murder of some Mr. Rand and even the popular Mrs. & Ms. Kennedy Murder case (instead of tyrannical Lord Kingsford by Kshudiram and Praffula Chaki) should be referred as a proper instance of offensive resistance. Hence when our advocacy of passive resistance is understood as a symbol of our national cowardice by our opponents, then it will be much wise to take the way of active resistance. So preach for passive resistance is not at all unjust, but whenever we are dominated and our voices are choked by others, then we are completely free to use active resistance as a tool. Hence like Gandhi, he never considered passive resistance as the ultimate tool to bring Indian Independence.

### **Three paths towards Liberty:**

Hence three paths, left by our foreign outsiders for us to follow, seems essential for the resurgence of India – the ever most impossible looking path of Prayer and Petitioning; Self-development by Self-help which is another uncertain way of success; and the path of Organized Resistance effective to destroy the ongoing tyrannical British system. By the process of Petitioning we can never reach towards the attainment of Indian freedom; by Self-development method our goal of national liberty must not be obtained much easily. We should take the path of Organized Resistance without whose help our dream will remain only in the Utopian stage. But there may be many forms of revolt whose support could be taken by us – armed revolt or aggressive resistance and defensive resistance whether active or passive in nature.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The policy of Prayer and Petition had been accepted by the Indian National Congress even though it proved to be quite unsuccessful. Self-development process was partially accepted by our politicians. According to Sri Aurobindo, our policy must be Self-development along with the Defensive Resistance (may be Active or Passive). We, thus, have to buy not only Swadeshi

materials, but boycott the foreign goods; not only establish our own Swadeshi schools, but boycott governmental institutes; not only create our own arbitration courts, but boycott foreign courts; and last but not the least have to boycott government employees working under the head of the British administration. In this above stated way, Swadeshi and Boycott remain hand in hand in the arena of Indian politics.

### **True Nature of Passive and Active Resistances:**

Our defensive resistance at the very beginning remains passive in nature and whenever dominated by coercive rules, it immediately took the necessary forms of active resistance. Now the offensive kind of resistance could be considered as illegal by ruling government, but the defensive one, whether passive or active, must not be limited within the boundary of illegality. Because every person is allowed to protect or defend himself, the means, violent or non-violent, does not matter at all in this context. In Sri Aurobindo's view, our struggle should be confined within the level of Boycott. Non-payment of Taxes is its upper limit which must not be reached by us. Because it is quite illegal in spirit and leads us towards a direct face to face agitation with the British laws.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Our most sacred duty is to win over the liberty of our beloved country by whatever means we employ. And passive along with active resistance is one of these greatest means. The 'work of national emancipation is a great and holy *yajña*' of which Boycott, Swadeshi, and National Education are only major or minor parts. Our fight for national liberty is a great *yajña* and the foreigners are the rakshas as Passive Resistance may be known as an attempt to fight against such violent disturb-creators by the means of 'peaceful and self-contained *brahmatejas*'. But when the battle took a fierce form, then even the greatest Rishis has to take the help of 'the bow of the Kshatriya' This 'bow of the Kshatriya' may took the accurate form of Active Resistance, because Sri Aurobindo wrote, 'We should have the bow of the Kshatriya ready to use, though in the background'.<sup>xxv</sup> He himself said that we use Active Resistance as a quite effective means only when use of Passive Resistance seems the utmost failure. His original goal was to attain Indian independence (that actually been attained at Sri

Aurobindo's birthday on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947) and the tools used in this endeavor do not matter at all.

## Conclusion:

Sri Aurobindo's attitude was that of Political *Vedantism*, as 'Vedantism accepts no distinction of true or false religions, but consider only what will lead more or less surely, more or less quickly *mokṣa*, spiritual emancipation and the realisation of the Divinity within'.<sup>xxvi</sup> Freedom of indivisible India is the divine realization or the mostly desired spiritual emancipation. Passive and active, these both kinds of resistances have to be considered as either the final method of realization or only the way of preparation for the ultimate aim through *sādhana*. As sooner as we practice them, we may be capable to reach nearer to our inborn dream of collective salvation by making our Life Divine, by the means of attainment of national liberty. The most aspiring fact is that this endeavor is started since 1950 and as Sri Aurobindo believes we can soon be able to achieve the highest stage of Life Divine through the process of Ascent towards the *Sachchidananda*.

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<sup>i</sup> Singh, Karan, *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, p. 118-119.

<sup>ii</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, 'The Doctrine of Passive Resistance: Its Aim', p. 62

<sup>iii</sup> As found from the Wikipedia;

<http://www.google.co.ardictionary.com/resistance/4813>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Tolstoy's book that changed the whole life-structure of Gandhi is named as "*Unto the Last*" where he first became introduced with the idea of passive resistance thesis.

<sup>vii</sup>As found in the Wikipedia from Internet.  
<http://tonymac04.hubpages.com/hub/Gandhi-in-South-Africa-racism-and-non-violence>

<sup>ix</sup> As found in [http://www.academia.com/1254319/Body\\_From\\_Passive\\_Non-violence\\_to\\_Active\\_Non-violence\\_Martin\\_Luther\\_King\\_a\\_struggle](http://www.academia.com/1254319/Body_From_Passive_Non-violence_to_Active_Non-violence_Martin_Luther_King_a_struggle)

<sup>x</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance: Its Necessity", p.92

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, "Its Object", p. 92-94

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, "Its Necessity", p. 95

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, "Its Obligations", p. 116

xiv As found from Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonviolent\\_resistance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonviolent_resistance)

xv Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance: Its Obligations", p. 145

xvi Ibid, "Its Obligations", p. 147

xvii Ibid, p. 148

xviii Ibid, p. 149

xix Ibid, "Its Necessity", p. 135

xx Ibid, "Its Obligations", p. 147

xxi Ibid, "Conclusions", p. 152

xxii Ibid, "Its Necessities", p. 126

xxiii Ibid, "Its Obligations", p. 149

xxiv Ibid, p. 147

xxv Ibid, "Conclusions", p. 122

xxvi Ibid, p. 122

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