



## Aurobindo's Concept of Passive Resistance: A Technique for Social Change

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**Abstract:** Changeability is the rule of Nature and human society is not beyond to this rule. Human society is not static, rather dynamic and changeability is the religion of human society. Society means an extremely complex relationship and mutual interaction among man and this inter-human relationship among men is dynamic and changeable. Therefore society is also dynamic and changeable. Social change is the institutional and normative change of human society which changes the institutional and material pattern of human life. Through changes a new order of society came into existence in place of the old. But it should be remembered that every change need not be good and desirable. Some changes take place without any determined or purposeful attempt on the part of mankind and some changes may occur by social movement. There are many techniques used in various movements for the change of human society. It was Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) who used the theory of Passive Resistance as a technique for social change during the period of India's national liberation movement. Passive resistance was not only a movement in ordinary sense; it was a movement for Swadeshism which was, I think, necessarily used as a technique for socio-political change of contemporary India. Therefore, the foremost aim of this study is to analyse Sri Aurobindo's theory of passive resistance as a technique for social and political change. It will also examine why it is called a technique for social change and how far it is relevance to call such.

**Key Words:** Dynamic, Normative, Passive Resistance, Swadeshism, Technique.

### Objectives:

1. To understand the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's concept of passive resistance in the contemporary India's liberation movement.
2. To examine the role of passive resistance as social, political and economic struggle in the light of contemporary situation of India.
3. To study whether Sri Aurobindo's concept of Passive Resistance would unite the common people of India against the British colonial rule.
4. How far it is truthful to say that passive resistance is a reliable technique for social change also subject to examine.
5. If it is a technique for social change, then what method would it used for making this change also subject to identify.
6. To explain the factors influencing the success of passive resistance as a movement for social and political change.

### Methodology:

The method followed in the study will be chiefly historical and analytical. The study is based on secondary sources of data like Books, Published articles, Research papers, Research reports and relevant websites. It will also pay attention to the contextual and theoretical influences on shaping of Sri Aurobindo's thinking and development of ideas about passive resistance and its importance to the contemporary colonial India on the basis of obtainable written material explored.

### Introduction:

Sri Aurobindo who popularly acknowledged as the 'prophet of Indian nationalism' was one of the passionate believers in the final victory of the Indian national movement. During his early years, as a leader of revolutionary terrorism and a prominent figure of the Congress Extremist group, he published in the pages of *Bande Mataram* his 'Doctrine of Passive Resistance', his method of attaining national independence. The doctrine of passive resistance contained not only the method of Boycott of British goods, schools and administrative agencies, but also reflected a philosophy of self-development through national education, Swadeshi industries and so on. According to Sri Aurobindo development of this philosophy of self-development will only effectual within an organized national resistance and there is no matter whether it is passive or aggressive (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 96).

Sri Aurobindo was a great source of inspiration to the national freedom fighters in the early years of the twentieth century. He transformed the Congress organization into a nationalist one; replace the term '*Swaraj*' by independence and believed that political freedom constituted the fundamental core of a country and it could not be compromised for anything. During the anti-partition movement, following the decision of the British Government to partition Bengal in 1905, Sri Aurobindo gave clarion call to the people to resort to passive resistance, observe Swadeshi, adopt boycott, and not to cooperate with the Government by boycotting government services, the courts and the academic institutions run by the Government. Sri Aurobindo wanted to paralysed the British administration by creating favourable conditions



through Swadeshi and anti-partition movement. He asked people to sacrifice everything for the sake of the country. Nationalist movement sparked off by the Partition of Bengal was, in the opinion of Sri Aurobindo, a divinely inspired and guided movement. In his opinion, this nationalist movement was not guided by any political self interest, but it was a religious mission which the people were trying to fulfil. It was because of him the nationalist movement acquired a new image and gained much momentum. (K. S. Padhy, 2011, p. 158-159)

### Meaning of Passive Resistance:

The dictionary meaning of the term Passive Resistance is “a policy of unarmed and non-violent resistance to an occupying force, or government imposed by such force. It involves deliberate neglect of official and administrative functions, refusal to attend interrogations, non-participation in government activities, and so on” (Roger Scruton, 2007, p. 512). It is the political weapon of expediency and an active process to prevent unjust situation of society. In order to achieve its goal, passive resistance has continually embarrassed the opposition, either by physical forces or by violent forces. Though it is very hard to organize passive resistance as strategy against a tyrannical ruler, but it was not new in the page of history. During the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the strategy of passive resistance was advocated and pursued by many countries for their national liberation. National liberation movements of Ireland against the British colonial rule, Czechoslovakian movement against the Russian invasion in 1968 etc. are such examples of this. In India the strategy of passive resistance was first advocated and pursued by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, in opposition to the British imperialist government (A. K. Basu, 2009, p. 5). In the context of national liberation movement of India Sri Aurobindo used this technique for free India from British bondage.

The doctrine of passive resistance expresses Sri Aurobindo's deep concern for India's freedom. To him passive resistance “is the only effective means 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” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 95). Its final aim was to attain freedom of India. In *Bande Mataram*, Sri Aurobindo writes: “the immediate necessity of an organized national resistance to the state of things which is crushing us out of existence as a nation and on the one goal of that resistance, - freedom” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 96).

According to Sri Aurobindo, there are three principles of national resistance, whether directed against the system of Government as such or against some particular feature of it. First, to make existing administration impossible by an organised passive resistance which was first, according to Sri Aurobindo, initiated in Ireland by Charles Stuart Parnell, an Irish nationalist leader. Second, organised aggressive resistance, like riots, strikes and agrarian rising all over the country, for making impossible of existing administration. This type of national resistance, according to Sri Aurobindo, has been found in Russia. And the third principle, to Sri Aurobindo, “open to an oppressed nation is that of armed revolt, which instead of bringing existing conditions to an end by making their continuance impossible sweeps them bodily out of existence” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 97). After analysing the contemporary Indian situation Sri Aurobindo realised that “the present circumstances in India seem to point to passive resistance as our most natural and suitable weapon” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 98). For passive resistance it is necessary that all should share in the struggle and the privation and it respects life, liberty and property of individuals.

### Objective of Passive Resistance:

It was, however, in this period when nationalist leader of India search for an alternative movement against the colonial rule, Sri Aurobindo present his theory of passive resistance. As a true patriot and as a true worshiper of mother India, he was well aware of the fact that the method of prayer, petition and protest used by Indian National Congress, at that time, for the freedom of mother India was cannot possibly succeed. The policy of coercion of British Government during Anti-Partition movement of Bengal was feared Sri Aurobindo and he thought that the spirit of freedom movement will become slow and bewildered. For this very reason and in this situation Sri Aurobindo introduce his theory of passive resistance.

Theory of passive resistance, however, was one of the significant political philosophies of Sri Aurobindo. According to him it is an active weapon against unjust and exploitation and considering this weapon there is no necessity to take part in direct action against the oppressor. Sri Aurobindo thinks that by using this weapon one can make mentally weak the opposition and prevent the distress of oppressor. For this, to Sri Aurobindo, there is no place of any direct action in this theory. He used it against the British Government in place of petitioning principle of Indian National Congress. To him it is a positive prevent movement and only this movement can destroy and inactive the British Government.



Therefore, he uses this positive movement as a weapon for freedom of India from the alien rule.

Sri Aurobindo had a strong passion for individual liberty. He had a great contribution to the welfare of the mass people of India. He launched his theory of passive resistance for the active participation of the mass people of the country into their national liberation movement. It was Sri Aurobindo who has something in him that corresponded to the needs and aspirations of the masses. He wants to make national movement a mass movement and analyse the strategy and tactics of a mass movement in his theory of passive resistance. By following these tools and tactics, according to Sri Aurobindo, “a nation may develop her organised power against the foreign rule; may to assemble against a powerful central authority and may become self-develop by self-help” (A. K. Basu, 2009, p. 12). To him, “the primary requisite for national progress, national reform, is the free habit of free and healthy national thought and action which is impossible in a state of servitude” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 86). So he wants to free India from the British colonial rule for making India a healthy nation.

Sri Aurobindo was very much opposed to British commercial and industrial policy in India. He thought that if an alien rule were generous and beneficent, that could not be a substitute for a free and healthy national life. For this reason he introduced the idea of Swadeshi in order to boycotting all British goods in favour of the products of indigenous Indian industries. His final aim is to make free India from the British Government. For attaining the national independence of India, he used the method of his doctrine of passive resistance. In *Bande Mataram* Sri Aurobindo writes, “the aim of passive resistance was to make British administration impossible by an organized refusal to do anything which shall help the growth of British trade and commerce resulting in the exploitation of the country” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 270). Sri Aurobindo, however, wanted to utilise the doctrine of passive resistance as a positive method against the injustices and exploitation of the British Government. To him the goal of Indian nationalism is not just to acquire the political independence from the British Government, but it is a spiritual development that aims at growth of a moral collective personality. Sri Aurobindo, thus, considered that ‘nationalism is a spiritual worship’.

Sri Aurobindo’s theory of passive resistance was not only a narrow technique of movement; rather it was a united struggle of common people against the powerful colonial Government. Its primary aim was to organized common people, socially and politically, into one umbrella for national freedom. Sri Aurobindo believes that only an active

participation of common people can make sure to the achievement of freedom of a subject nation. So, for sowing seeds among the mass people into their desire of national freedom and for larger participation of people into freedom struggle Sri Aurobindo prepared his theory. And this is the uniqueness of this theory.

#### **Method of Passive Resistance:**

According to Sri Aurobindo there are two methods of passive resistance. One is ‘Boycott’ and the other is ‘Swadeshi’. Through Boycott Sri Aurobindo wanted to destroy British rule from India by boycotting the British goods from all sphere of human life. Through Swadeshi, on the other hand, he wanted to make the people conscious of socio-economic and political issues. The basic aim of both of these methods was to attain *Swaraj* or freedom of Indian. Sri Aurobindo wishes to India be free from politically, socially, spiritually and economically. To him by boycotting the British goods India become politically and economically independent and by adopting Swadeshi social and spiritual self-development came into existence among the Indians, which is very much necessary for social change. Therefore, it will be no exaggeration to say that the ultimate aim of Sri Aurobindo’s passive resistance was to change the society.

**Boycott:** Boycott movement was the supreme and elementary weapon of Sri Aurobindo’s doctrine of passive resistance. According to Sri Aurobindo, Boycott means apparent non-cooperation with British Government and refusal of British goods which, to him, certainly make the British Government weak as well as hindered their interest in India. In fact, Sri Aurobindo wanted to raise certain irresistible obstacle, by following the strategy of Boycott, in front of the British colonial Government to break their rule in India. He had a firm believe that the movement of Boycott will organise purely on non-violent and disarm basis to make the movement strong. From this perspective Sri Aurobindo identifies five different areas for the application of Boycott programme, which are: **I.** to boycott the British goods in place of the acceptance of indigenous Indian (Swadeshi) goods; **II.** to boycott schools and colleges established by the British Government in place of the acceptance of Swadeshi or national educational institution; **III.** to boycott legal institutions, more particularly judicial system, established by the British Government in place of the acceptance of Panchayats arbitration to solve the problem; **IV.** to boycott the betrayer and agents of the British Government; and **V.** social boycott. (K. K. Sarkar, 2014, p. 535). Below these areas are discussed in greater details.



**I. Economic Boycott:** Economic boycott was the first principle of Boycott movement. Sri Aurobindo, however, wanted to demolish the British Government economically. He knows that the primary aim of British rule was to make Indians economically weak. They come to India for commerce and economic profit was their basic objective. Economic boycott was a tool, to Sri Aurobindo, for creating pressure to the British Government. Sri Aurobindo warned Indians to buy the foreign goods and not to cooperate with the foreign ruler. After rejecting the commercial goods, he thinks, British Government will become weak and their commercial interest in India will be destroyed. In this way Sri Aurobindo wanted to close any kind of economic mistreatment to Indians. In *Bande Mataram* he writes: “we are dissatisfied with the fiscal and economical conditions of British rule in India, with the foreign exploitation of the country, the continual bleeding of its resources, the chronic famine and rapid impoverishment which result, the refusal of the Government to protect the people and their industries. Accordingly, we refuse to help the process of exploitation and impoverishment in our capacity as consumers; we refuse henceforth to purchase foreign and especially British goods or to condone their purchase by others. By an organised and relentless boycott of British goods, we propose to render the further exploitation of the country impossible” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 101-102). By the careful implementation of an organised and continuous economic boycott Sri Aurobindo wanted to draw the dead line of foreign exploitation in India.

**II. Educational Boycott:** As a useful organ of Boycott movement Sri Aurobindo call for education boycott to all Indians. He recommend to the people to boycott all the Government and Government-aided schools, colleges and other educational institutions. To Sri Aurobindo British education system was not perfect and he vehemently criticizes this education system. Insufficiency, aimless and against of patriotism character of British education system was rejected by Sri Aurobindo. To him the aim of this education was only to produce some clerk those who blindly support the British Government. For this reason Sri Aurobindo wanted to boycott the British education system. He writes: “we are dissatisfied also with the conditions under which education is imparted in this country, its calculated poverty and insufficiency, its antinational character, its subordination to the Government and the use made of that subordination for the discouragement of patriotism and the inculcation of loyalty. Accordingly we refuse to send our boys to Government schools or to schools aided and controlled by the Government; if this educational boycott is general and well-organised, the

educational administration of the country will be rendered impossible and the control of its youthful minds pass out of the hands of the foreigner” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 102).

**III. Judicial Boycott:** In the third stage of the Boycott movement Sri Aurobindo call for judicial boycott. To him British judicial institutions are mainly work for the preservation of British Government in India and made it obligatory to the Indian people under the British state system. He criticises the British judicial system for its partial, destructive and expensive character. British Court of Law, to him, is deeply responsible for the growth of British imperialism in India. In *Bande Mataram* Sri Aurobindo writes: “we are dissatisfied with the administration of justice, the ruinous costliness of the civil side, the brutal rigour of its criminal penalties and procedure, its partiality, its frequent subordination to political objects. We refuse accordingly to have any resort to the alien courts of justice, and by an organised judicial boycott propose to make the bureaucratic administration of justice impossible while these conditions continue”. (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 102). Therefore, Sri Aurobindo suggested to the people to boycott British judiciary and in place of this he recommended Panchayats arbitration to solve the problem.

**IV. Administrative Boycott:** The fourth stage of the Boycott movement was administrative boycott. According to Sri Aurobindo passive resistance and self-development are very important for *Swaraj* or freedom. Therefore he was trying to implement this two (passive resistance and self-development) in administrative level also. He was strictly criticises the British administration for its oppressive character. For willfulness of British administration, unhealthy interruption in public life and military oppression Sri Aurobindo reproach the British Government. So he refuses British administration from its root and at the same time invites all people to boycott the British administration. He said: “we disapprove of the executive administration, its arbitrariness, its meddling and inquisitorial character, its thoroughness of repression, its misuse of the police for the repression instead of the protection of the people. We refuse, accordingly, to go to the executive for help or advice or protection or to tolerate any paternal interference in our public activities, and by an organised boycott of the executive propose to reduce executive control and interference to a mere skeleton of its former self” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 102). Sri Aurobindo had a firm believe that if we non-cooperate and reject this foreign administration “the administration could not continue for a day” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 102). Refusal of taxes was, however, also an important tool for boycott movement. To Sri



Aurobindo “the refusal to pay taxes is a natural and logical result of the attitude of passive resistance” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 104).

**V. Social Boycott:** Sri Aurobindo was very careful to explain and implementation of his boycott theory. He does not disregard the importance of social boycott in his theory; rather accept it’s important. To him success of boycott movement was depends on social boycott. Social boycott may only imposed a total non-cooperation with a foreign Government and by this social boycott distraction and hatred of a subject nation may expose against the foreign rule. To Sri Aurobindo social boycott is the ultimate goal of passive resistance. In his own words: “wherever passive resistance has been accepted, the necessity of the social boycott has been recognised as its natural concomitant” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 112). No national authority can actively perform her role in the national liberation movement without the weapon of social boycott. Therefore social boycott was an important element of Sri Aurobindo’s political thought. Those who are not participated in the boycott movement, committed treason against the country and support the British Government against the national interest of the country social boycott was the punishable weapon against them. In *Karmayogin* Sri Aurobindo writes: “the social boycott is a weapon absolutely necessary for the enforcement of the popular will...” (Karmayogin, 1997, p. 172). He also writes: “without this boycott of persons the boycott of things cannot be effective; without the social boycott no national authority depending purely on moral pressure can get its decrees effectively executed” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 112).

**Swadeshi:** Literally Swadeshi means ‘of one’s own country’. It implied that people should use goods produced within India itself as this would promote Indian enterprise and industry and generate patriotism, thus strengthening the nation. It is the salvation of the country. Regarding Swadeshi, Lajpat Rai said, “I regard it as the salvation of my country. The Swadeshi movement ought to make us self-respecting, self-reliant, self-supporting and last, not least, manly. The Swadeshi movement ought to teach us how to organize our capital, our resources, our energies and our talents, to the greatest good of all Indians, irrespective of creed, colour or caste. It ought to unite us, our religious and denominational differences notwithstanding. In my opinion, Swadeshi ought to be the common religion of the united India”. (A. R. Desai, 2013, p. 310) Fulfillment of Swadeshi needed “self-help determination and sacrifice”.

According to Sri Aurobindo success of passive resistance depends on relationship between Swadeshi and boycott. He desire to boycott foreign

goods for the interest of freedom of India, but he did not forget about the utility of the same goods which were necessary for Indians. Because of this he highlights the importance of indigenous (Swadeshi) industry for produce home goods for the people. Success of boycott will depends on economic self-development. In his own words: “If we refuse to supply our needs from foreign sources, we must obviously supply them ourselves; we cannot have the industrial boycott without Swadeshi and the expansion of indigenous industries” (Bande Mataram, 1972, p. 103). From Sri Aurobindo’s view point boycott has two great objectives: one is to quake the base of the British Government; and the other one is to develop home industry for the economic development of nation. To him “boycott of foreign goods is a necessary condition for the encouragement of Swadeshi industries...” (A. K. Basu, 2009, p. 33). He believe that success of both will provide a political spirit to national liberation movement of India against foreign mastery.

The promotion of Swadeshi was accompanied by the advocacy of ‘Boycott’. The two were, according to Sri Aurobindo, the complementary to each other, two sides of the same coin. It was realized that by organizing the boycott of foreign goods, which were mainly British, Britain’s economic interests would be hurt and the British Government would be forced to concede to the Indian demands. These twin techniques led to heightening of political activities not only in Bengal but also all over India. Large amount of British cloth, sugar, and other goods were boycotted. Shops selling foreign goods were picketed. In many places, public burning of foreign cloth took place, which took revealed the intensity of popular feelings over the partition issue. School and college students played an important part in this movement. The traditionally home-centred women of the urban middle class too join in processions and picketing.

#### **Passive Resistance as a Technique for Social Change:**

Sri Aurobindo had a strong desire to see free India from the British regime and to him this could be achieved through passive resistance. His ultimate goal was to construct free united Indian society. As a creative and significant figure of Indian Renaissance movement and as an Extremist revolutionary nationalist leader, Sri Aurobindo wanted to rebirth Indian society even after independent. His doctrine of passive resistance is, therefore, rightly a technique for making a socio-political change of contemporary as well as the future India. According to Sri Aurobindo this technique is not only used against an oppressive colonial Government, but it has a larger scope. If



any government, whether it is national or foreign, has detached to perform duty properly and detached from responsibility, then people has the moral right to reject that government by following the doctrine of passive resistance. Moreover, it is not only used for national liberation, but for the objectives of to create an alternative government, to reject such objectionable entity from the customary system and to relief from certain special distraction the doctrine may be useful. Therefore, as a weapon of struggle the range and scope of passive resistance is rightly large.

The success of passive resistance is depends on its application followed by the methods of Boycott and Swadeshi (discuss earlier). If we gave our focus on the latter one, the method of Swadeshi, we have been found an inner cause of socio-political change of contemporary India. For Sri Aurobindo boycott was the preliminary stage for making an aggressive action against the British Government. The supreme principle for making social change is Swadeshi. Swadeshi means to encourage producing indigenous Indian goods. So, it may be said that, Sri Aurobindo encourages the indigenous people to accept Swadeshi goods for socio-political development of contemporary as well as future India. Historically it is prove that a large portion of people all over India has participated into this movement. They reject all kind of British goods from all sphere of life, whether it is economic, educational, administrative, judicial, and social. To the contrary, large numbers of national institution for education have been established. People

become united under the umbrella of Swadeshi and a national (Swadeshi) mind has well been developed among them. Success of any social movement depends on its utility on existing situation and on future course. Therefore, at the first sight the movement was fail, but it is not fail for its social and political participation of mass people of contemporary India. Thus, passive resistance paves a new way of national movement of future India.

#### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion we can easily conclude that Sri Aurobindo's theory of passive resistance was rightly a weapon of socio-political change of contemporary India. To given a fighting character of Indian national liberation movement Sri Aurobindo creates his philosophy of passive resistance. Passive resistance was necessarily a part of his overall political philosophy. A chief and an exceptional stature and character in the history of Indian renaissance and Indian nationalism, Sri Aurobindo's works revealed a new increasing soul of India and bring a spiritual message for humankind and passive resistance was a stage towards this message. It was undoubtedly a technique for changing the contemporary socio-economic, political condition of India. Through this theory Sri Aurobindo wanted to establish a democratic national government in place of oppressive British colonial Government. And finally, he was of the hope that by adopting Swadeshi, in far future, India will develop her socio-political condition.

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