

**THE POLITICAL 'SAGE':
POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE, NATION, AND
CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SRI AUROBINDO**

Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut
for the award of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

JAYAPRAKASH A.

under the supervision of

DR. M.V. NARAYANAN
Professor, Department of English

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT**

JULY 2018

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **“The Political ‘Sage’: Postcolonial Critique, Nation, and Cultural Identity in Sri Aurobindo”** submitted to the University of Calicut for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is a record of bona fide research carried out by **Jayaprakash A.** at the Department of English, University of Calicut, under my guidance and supervision, and that no part of this thesis has been submitted earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or similar title or recognition.

Shimla,
19.07.2018.

Dr. M.V. Narayanan
Professor
Department of English
University of Calicut

Dr. M.V. NARAYANAN
Professor
Department of English
University of Calicut

No Correction Certificate

This is to certify that no corrections/suggestions were pointed out by the examiners in the thesis titled **“The Political ‘Sage’: Postcolonial Critique, Nation, and Cultural Identity in Sri Aurobindo”** submitted by **Jayaprakash A, Ph.D. Scholar.**

Soft copy attached is the same as that of the resubmitted copy.



C.U. Campus
Date: 10.03.2020

Dr. M.V. Narayanan
(Supervising Teacher)

DECLARATION

I, **Jayaprakash A.**, do hereby declare that the thesis entitled “**The Political ‘Sage’: Postcolonial Critique, Nation, and Cultural Identity in Sri Aurobindo**” submitted to the University of Calicut for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of bona fide research carried out by me at the Department of English, University of Calicut, under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. M.V. Narayanan**, Professor of English, and that no part of this thesis has previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or similar title or recognition.

C. U. Campus
25.07.2018

Jayaprakash A.

Acknowledgements

I express my heartfelt thanks to my Research Supervisor and Guide, Dr. M.V. Narayanan, for his sincere affection and patient guidance in seeing me through this long journey of research. The great care and immense interest with which he read the sketchiest of my drafts have always amazed me. His spending long hours with me without any regard for his health is a lesson for me in commitment to work. Without his guidance in every step that I took, this research work would have remained forever incomplete.

My sincere gratitude to the UGC for granting me the JRF which supported me during the initial years of my research. I thank the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, the Syndicate, the Directorate of Research, and the Doctoral Committee, Department of English, University of Calicut, for being kind enough to grant me an extension for submitting my dissertation. I am also grateful to the Directorate of Collegiate Education, Kerala, for granting me an NOC for continuing my research in part-time mode when I joined service.

I remember with gratitude my beloved teacher, Late Dr. T.K. Nandakumaran, who is a perennial source of inspiration to achieve excellence in every academic endeavour. To his lustrous memories I pay homage when I complete this research work which was begun during his lifetime.

I am grateful to Dr. Sankaran Ravindran, with whom I began this research work several years ago. I also thank the support of Dr. K.M. Sherrif, Head of the Department, the former and present faculty and office staff of the Department of English, University of Calicut, especially Dr. B. Sreedevi, Dr. Janaky Sreedharan, Mr. T.M.A. Jaleel and Mrs. Anitha. My thanks also to the staff of the Department Library as well as the CHMK Central Library for all the help that they provided.

I thank Dr. P. Madhavan and Dr. Rajiv C. Krishnan of CIEFL (presently EFLU) for their magnanimity in hosting me at Hyderabad with lot of love and care.

I remember with gratitude the fond guidance given by Dr. P. Marudanayagam, Former Professor and Head, Department of English, Pondicherry University, during my Preliminary Qualifying Examination.

I am grateful to Shri. V. Gopalakrishnan, former Chairman of the Pondicherry Chapter of Cost Accountants, for guiding me around in Pondicherry. My sincere thanks to Shri. G.P. Gupta, Director of the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Research in Social Sciences, Pondicherry for providing me access to their resources. I am also grateful to the authorities of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, their publication division SABDA, the Ashram library, and the New Guest House at Rue Romain Rolland, for the support extended to me during my two-week stay at Pondicherry. I am grateful to Dr. P.

Balaswami, Professor and Head, Department of English, Pondicherry University, and the staff of the Ananda Rangapillai Central Library for providing me access to books and journals.

I thank Dr. John Kuriakose, Al Baha University, Saudi Arabia, and Dr. Lakshmi S. of Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, for their painstaking efforts in going through my drafts and providing valuable suggestions.

Words of thanks wouldn't suffice for my bosom friend, Dr. Shinoj P.V. of the Kerala Kalamandalam Deemed University, who, in spite of his busy times provided scholarly insights as well as guidance in all matters related to my work. I am grateful to Mr. Muhammed Noufal K. of PSMO College, Tirurangadi for all the support that he extended to me at the University. I thank "Team English" for the fraternity and inspiration they provide, my teachers, colleagues, fellow researchers, friends, and students for their unstinted support in my research work.

Home, truly, is the place where not only did I gather grace, but also received the right ambience for writing this dissertation. I am grateful to Appa for the inspiration he provides, Amma for her gentle unassuming care, and my brother Dileep for his support and motivation. This dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.

A Note on the Text

For some of the primary sources which are listed below, the corresponding abbreviations have been used.

Title	Abbreviation
<i>Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest.</i>	<i>Auto</i>
<i>Early Cultural Writings.</i>	<i>Early</i>
<i>The Human Cycle: The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination.</i>	<i>Human Cycle</i>
<i>Letters on Himself and the Ashram.</i>	<i>Letters</i>
<i>The Renaissance in India with a Defence of Indian Culture.</i>	<i>Renaissance</i>

For citation and documentation, the Seventh Edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* has been followed in this thesis.

CONTENTS

Introduction		1 – 30
Chapter One	Formation of the Nation	31 – 98
Chapter Two	Strategies of Resistance	99 – 178
Chapter Three	Culture, Civilization and the Citizen	179 – 302
Chapter Four	Towards a World Union and a Universal Brotherhood	303 – 402
Conclusion		403 – 421
Works Cited		422 – 434

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo is better known to the world as a philosopher, mystic seer and a saint of high spiritual attainment. However, to realize the multifarious nature of his personality, one has to browse through his writings which fall in categories as diverse as politics, culture, religion, philosophy, literary criticism and creative writing. His complete works which run into thirty seven volumes — published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* — give an insight into the breadth and depth of his thought.

This research project attempts to explore the political and cultural thought of Aurobindo as reflected in his writings and speeches. During the early years of the twentieth century, Aurobindo was a key leader in the struggle for Indian independence. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), born Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose, was sent to England for his education at the age of seven, in 1879. He studied at the St. Paul's School in London and went on to King's College, Cambridge. After passing the written examination for the Indian Civil Service, and after two years of probation, he failed to appear for the riding examination and was disqualified from the service. Regarding the cause for deliberately absenting himself from the riding exam, Aurobindo once said that it was just that he “didn't want to be in the British Government Service” (Heehs, *Sri Aurobindo* 17). A chance connection with the Maharaja

of Baroda got him an appointment in the Baroda State Service, to join which he left England in 1893. Even as he was in England, Aurobindo's father used to send him the newspaper *The Bengalee* with passages marked which dealt with the mistreatment of Indians by the British. In his letters too, Aurobindo's father denounced the British government in India as a "heartless Government" (*Auto* 32). These experiences must have probably laid the seeds for the nationalist in Sri Aurobindo to germinate at a later stage.

Aurobindo worked for thirteen years, from 1893 to 1906, in the Baroda Service; first in the Revenue Department and the Maharaja's Secretariat, then as Professor of English, and finally as Vice-Principal of the Baroda College. At Baroda he learnt Sanskrit and several Indian languages, and educated himself on the rich culture and tradition of India. During the later years of his service, almost from 1902, Aurobindo was silently engaged in political activity, since his official capacity restricted him from coming out in the open. The partition of Bengal in 1905 prompted Aurobindo to give up the Baroda Service, and he went to Calcutta as Principal of the newly-founded Bengal National College. In 1906, he joined the New Party, which was actually a faction of the Indian National Congress. Aurobindo exhorted the leaders in Bengal to emerge as an all-India party putting forward Bal Gangadhar Tilak as its leader. This did not find favour with the Moderates, and thus the Nationalists started moving on their own path; and in a period of two years the vista of Indian politics was completely transformed (*Auto* 6).

During his brief spell as a radical activist, Aurobindo was arrested in 1908 in connection with what is now known as the “Alipore Bomb Case” (574). After spending one year in jail as an undertrial prisoner, he was released following lack of evidence against him. In the jail, Aurobindo claimed to have had some mystical experiences which prompted him to withdraw from active politics. He escaped to Pondicherry in 1910 where he spent the rest of his life until his passing in 1950 (*Auto* 8-9). In Pondicherry, Aurobindo grew in stature as a philosopher and spiritual leader. It needs to be emphasized that his movement from politics to spirituality did not mean a recantation or rejection of his earlier positions, but which he maintained to be still very valid even in his later years. The transformation that he underwent was merely personal. Regarding his withdrawal from active politics, Aurobindo later wrote in 1932:

I have cut connection entirely with politics, but before I did so I knew from within that the work I had begun there was destined to be carried forward, on lines I had foreseen, by others, and that the ultimate triumph of the movement I had initiated was sure without my personal action or presence. There was not the least motive of despair or sense of futility behind my withdrawal.
(Letters 26)

When India attained independence, Aurobindo had already become a spiritual sage of repute. Even Mahatma Gandhi used to refer to him as “The

sage of Pondicherry” (qtd. in Varma 175). Though he personally transformed himself into a ‘sage,’ it was not a shift which disowned his original nationalist aspirations. Significantly, as Aurobindo himself pointed out and noted with joy, India attained independence on his seventy-fifth birthday on 15th August, 1947. In a message broadcast through the All India Radio on that day, Aurobindo said:

August 15th is my own birthday 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. (*Auto* 478)

In 1914, Aurobindo started publishing his writings in a spiritual magazine titled *Arya*. His works like *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Isha Upanishad* etc. were serially published in the *Arya* before they appeared in book form. They represented the knowledge that Aurobindo gained through his practice of *yoga* (*Auto* 9). He went on to write about the well-springs of Indian civilization and culture in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. His interpretation of the Vedas came to be published as *The Secret of the Veda* and his theory of human evolution as *The Human Cycle*. Aurobindo explored the need and possibility of the unification of the human race in *The Ideal of Human Unity*. His deliberations on the nature and

evolution of poetry, *The Future Poetry*, is a significant work of literary criticism. He also wrote an epic poem *Savitri*, considered to be his masterpiece, which remained incomplete even as he spent thirty-five years of his life, from 1915 to 1950, working on it. Regarding his views on *Savitri*, Aurobindo wrote:

I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. . . . In fact *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. (*Savitri* 727)

Aurobindo's rather short stint in politics happened in an age when British colonialism had attained its highest watermark in the Indian subcontinent. At a time when even the Indian National Congress was satisfied with the petty concessions accorded to the Indian natives by the colonial regime, Aurobindo raised the movement for *Swaraj* or national self-governance. Aurobindo's political and cultural writings have generally been given lesser importance than his metaphysical thought, primarily because of the shift that he took from politics to spirituality quite early in his life. It is a fact that as he is an established spiritual leader, many other aspects of the

complex figure of Aurobindo are ignored. Even when those aspects are considered, they are made to subsume to the spiritual ideal he ‘represents.’ This thesis attempts to bring out the political elements such as postcoloniality, nation, and cultural identity in Aurobindo as evidenced in his thought and their contemporary significance. It attempts to prove how these elements of postcoloniality in his writings can be seen to be engaged in dismantling the colonial constructions of ‘reality.’ Aurobindo was not ‘Post-Colonial’ in the sense in which the term is applied to writers of post-independent nations. Most of his writings were accomplished when India was under the British rule. The term postcolonial may be attached to many elements in Aurobindo’s political and cultural writings, not least because his writings bear the impact of colonial experience and reflect his responses to colonialism. Nationalism and the idea of the nation are important elements in the political thought of Aurobindo. While he himself was aware of the numerous concepts that abound in the West of this basically Western notion, Aurobindo attempts to create an indigenous paradigm of the idea of the nation. He makes such an attempt largely because he was aware that the plurality of the Indian scenario would not yield to the Western ideas of common language, common culture or common ethnicity. Regarding the incongruity of the Western idea for the Indian scenario, Aurobindo wrote:

What is a nation? We have studied in the schools of the West and learned to ape the thoughts and language of the West

forgetting our own deeper ideas and truer speech, and to the West the nation is the country, so much land containing so many millions of men who speak one speech and live one political life. . . . (*Bande Mataram II* 1115)

Aurobindo did not think that the unification of peoples of different cultures would lead to dissolution of their cultural identities. Apart from providing a unique Indian ethos based on heterogeneity for the concept of the nation, Aurobindo also suggests taking the human community beyond the precincts of the nation-state to a larger world-union.

It has to be mentioned that from the time this research work began fifteen years ago in 2002, the political situation in India has drastically changed. With the fundamentalist forces in the right wing not only gaining strong ground but also power in governance, a re-reading of Aurobindo has only become all the more relevant, especially as Aurobindo has been critiqued for being one of the sources of the *Hindutva* ideology that rules the roost today (Heehs 152). In the nature of conceptual commonplaces, it is assumed that a person like Aurobindo whose discourse is largely spiritual in nature could have predilections towards the right-wing. This thesis is also an attempt to examine the validity of such an assessment of Aurobindo's thought.

The theory of postcolonialism, on which this analysis of Aurobindo is based, has also undergone a lot of changes and evolution in the past few

years. Today, postcolonialism is not just concerned with lands which were under colonial rule, but with all kinds of communities, social groups and nation-states; in short, all fields where power comes into play. Postcolonialism is a fast-growing field in which theoretical expressions far from remaining the same have grown to mean a lot through the explosive development of this area of study. It has not hesitated to borrow terms from subjects as varied as psychology, sociology, linguistics, politics, history, and anthropology. Every major postcolonial critic has introduced one expression or another into the ever-enlarging pool of theoretical terms. As Amina Kishore points out, the drastic movement in this field is “alarming”:

Labels are enterprising critics’ hobby horses: Postcolonialism, Neo-colonialism, feminist critiques, now lately patriarchal discourse etc. have been coined and justified in powerful arguments. The language of criticism has acquired a sophistication which is admirable. But the competitiveness in this field is showing an alarming tendency of each label getting an overnight replacement by a newer and more fascinating alternative. (18)

However, this “alarming” expansion in the field of postcolonialism is quite normal, since a postcolonial sensibility cannot be restricted by ages or even any direct experience of colonialism. In this thesis too, terms usually

identified as related to postcolonialism are used in a broader sense to accommodate the evolving concerns of discourses of politics and culture. Therefore, “postcolonial” is an umbrella term which, in Sara Suleri’s words, is “available for figurative deployment in any strategic redefinition of marginality” (337). Asif Dirlik distinguishes among three different ways in which the term “postcolonial” is used. The first is “a literal description of conditions in formerly colonial societies, in which case the term has concrete referents, as in postcolonial societies or postcolonial intellectuals. . . .” The second is “a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism, in which case the usage is somewhat more abstract and less concrete in reference, comparable in its vagueness to the earlier term *Third World*, for which it is intended as a substitute. . . .” The third sense in which the term is used is “as a description of a discourse on the above named conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions” (332). It is to the second and third descriptions of the term “postcolonial” that this thesis attempts to do justice. Since the ideas discussed are not limited to the “formerly colonial societies,” the first description of the term may not relate completely with this thesis. For instance, discussions on culture, nationalism, nation-state, modernity, risk of war etc. are deliberations on “global conditions,” which are not limited to the conditions of once-colonized societies.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Formation of the Nation,” deals with Aurobindo’s conception of the nation and the methods he proposes to make it a reality. Aurobindo’s ideas are placed in the context of the ideas of nation and nationalism as propounded by various writers like Ernest Geller, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee. It can be observed that there are some similarities in Aurobindo’s conception of the nation with Western ideas of the nation, though he depends heavily on indigenous terms as also quasi-spiritual metaphors. Meenakshi Sharma observes: “While nationalist leaders in the late nineteenth century identified themselves with the revival of genuine Indian values in reaction against excessive Westernization, the bulk of their aspirations for Indian society were often derived from their own Western training and education” (97). Obviously, having been educated in the West, Aurobindo must have been influenced by the ideas of nation and nationalism which were gaining popularity during that time.

Aurobindo was also influenced by the then popular nationalist leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and social reformers like Dayananda Saraswati. Their overarching influence on Aurobindo is evident in the booklet that he wrote titled *Bankim – Tilak – Dayananda*, published in 1940 by the Arya Publishing House, Calcutta (*Bande Mataram II* 1172). It was Tilak’s call for *Swaraj* that was taken up by Aurobindo when he stepped into the nationalist movement. Bankim’s song in *Anandmath* became the title of the newspaper *Bande Mataram* founded by

Bipin Chandra Pal, in which Aurobindo published many of his articles (1150). Aurobindo critiqued the Western idea of a nation based on territorial and linguistic divisions and brought to the fore cultural aspects which call for unification (1115).

This chapter also discusses the various stages of nation formation as envisaged by Aurobindo. In the first stage, Aurobindo sees the coming together of a common civilization to function as a framework for the nation. The second stage brings in a centralized control which shall hold the nation together as a single entity. The central control will evolve to a liberal third and final stage, which Aurobindo calls the stage of “free internal development” (*Human Cycle* 374). He discusses how villages could become building blocks of the nation rather than remaining self-contained units. Further, this chapter analyses how Aurobindo invokes the past of the Indian subcontinent for the genesis of nationalistic feelings. He exhorts to go to the roots of Indian civilization, which is spirituality, to counter the Western forces of materialism.

Aurobindo’s emphasis on national education as a means of achieving the same ends is also focussed upon in this chapter. He opined that mere preaching of patriotism would not suffice to invoke nationalistic feelings. He suggested that nationalism should be transmitted through education so that the larger idea of the nation is clearly imprinted upon the minds of the coming

generations (*Bande Mataram II* 455). He goes on to describe the manner in which various subjects could be taught in a different manner in national schools to evoke nationalistic spirit in children. Aurobindo's emphasis on vocational education and imparting education in the mother tongue is also discussed. Further, Aurobindo's idea of nationalism as religion is taken up. Here, the term "religion" does not correspond to the normally understood meaning of an institutionalized faith. Aurobindo's profuse dependence on Hindu religious symbolism is often misconstrued to represent him as a Hindu religious fanatic. However, the fact is that a spiritual discourse becomes necessary and available for Aurobindo to counter the Western imperialist discourse.

The chapter goes on to discuss the concept of *Swaraj*, self-governance, since this was an idea that differentiated the "moderates" in the Congress and the nationalists like Tilak and Aurobindo. Aurobindo considered *Swaraj* as the bedrock upon which the edifice of the nation could be constructed. He affirmed that the national struggle for *Swaraj* would require bringing together people from diverse occupations and cultural background and followers of different faiths. He urges for the creation of a national culture which shall hold the diverse cultures and peoples together into one unit. Different from the later denominations of majoritarian ultranationalism, Aurobindo proposed diversity as the criterion for the national cultural identity. The chapter concludes by hinting at Aurobindo's larger vision of human unity which goes

beyond the temporary exigency of construction of the nation. His utopian vision of a perfect and organized world union is a growth from nationalism to internationalism.

The second chapter titled “Strategies of Resistance” discusses the various methods employed by Aurobindo to resist the impact of colonialism. Such resistances are significant not least because Aurobindo was himself educated in the Western system. As Leela Gandhi observes: “There is a general consensus among liberal historians that the formative lessons of nationalism were literally acquired in the colonial classroom through the teaching and transmission of European national histories” (114). This is a “boomerang effect of colonization,” though not in the sense Aimé Césaire meant it. It is also reminiscent of Caliban’s response: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse” (Shakespeare, *Tempest* 1.2.363-64).

The chapter begins with a discussion of Aurobindo’s radical difference with the Congress which he expressed in the articles written in his twenties titled “New Lamps for Old.” These articles were published anonymously in a Bombay-based newspaper during 1893-94 (*Bande Mataram II* 1165). These writings are marked by scathing criticism targeted not only against the imperialism of the British but also at the mendicant policies of the Indian National Congress. The chapter describes Aurobindo’s views on British rule

in India, wherein he brings out the monstrosities of colonialism as opposed to the benign image of themselves that the British tried to project. He opined: “The English are not, as they are fond of representing themselves, a people panting to do justice to all whom they have to govern” (*Bande Mataram I* 8). Aurobindo delineates the manner in which British colonialism systematically plundered and brought about decadence in Indian society. He brings in historical examples like that of the system of slavery practiced by Romans, and maintains that the imperial rule of the British is very similar to that. He says that the freedom of speech granted by the British to the Indians is in effect censorship comparable to the Russian censorship of the nineteenth century (*Bande Mataram II* 970). Aurobindo, however, does not see the Mughal invasion to have been as destructive as British colonialism. Further, he criticizes the Indian bureaucrat who serves the British masters for furthering their colonialist agenda. By calling the British domination as a “rule of shopkeepers,” Aurobindo highlights the mercantile aspect of their colonialist enterprise (1014). He demands that the British quit the country irrespective of whether they present a good government or not since they are not in their proper place in India. It is also evidenced from Aurobindo’s writings that his view of colonialism was not just an inversion of Orientalism.

The colonial discourses on India and Aurobindo’s responses to them are analysed in the next section. Aurobindo calls for inculcating patriotic fervour among the people of India, which itself can dislodge colonialism from

the land. In his own words: “The moment the nation becomes politically self-conscious, the doom of the alien predominance is sealed” (*Bande Mataram I* 365). Aurobindo remarked that instead of requesting the British for petty favours, appealing the masses to rise would be the proper action to be taken. He exhorted that the working classes should be brought to the mainstream of the nationalist movement: “Theorist, and trifler though I may be called, I again assert as our first and holiest duty, the elevation and enlightenment of the proletariat . . .” (*Bande Mataram I* 51).

The next section of the chapter deals with Aurobindo’s eulogy of the Indian land and people. Though his statements are visibly ethnocentric, it could be argued that such essentialism springs as a response to the colonialist discourses on the natives at large. Rudyard Kipling is cited as an instance where the colonial “burden” is to civilize the natives who are “[h]alf-devil and half-child” (111). A couple of other examples are also discussed — that of Edward Thomson who wearies of the “double effort” of training Indians and Macaulay’s now infamous deprecation of Sanskrit literature. While Aurobindo agrees that India may need many social reform movements, such initiatives do not need to proceed from the British. Further, he considered social reforms secondary to political freedom of the nation. The manner in which Aurobindo brings out the deceit of British ideal of reform is also analysed. To the claim that imperial rule destroyed the age-old evil of casteism in India, Aurobindo responded: “Certainly, under foreign rule a

peculiar kind of uniformity of condition is attained. Brahmin and Sudra, aristocrat and peasant, Hindu and Mahomedan, all are brought to a certain level of equality by equal inferiority to the ruling class” (*Bande Mataram I* 373).

Then, the idea of *Swaraj* is taken up for discussion since it is a major strategy suggested by Aurobindo for resisting the colonizing project. Rather than just being one of the ideals of nationalism, Aurobindo considers it to be the key to achieve all other ideals. Further, Aurobindo’s concept of “passive resistance” is deliberated upon as the most suitable method in Indian conditions. However, it has to be noted that he was not against active armed resistance and even remarked that Mahatma Gandhi’s *ahimsa*¹ would not have been effective if it were attempted in some other situation. In a private conversation with his disciples in January 1939, Aurobindo said:

The trouble with Gandhi is that he had to deal only with the Englishmen, and the English want to have their conscience at ease. Besides, the Englishman wants to satisfy his self-esteem and wants world-esteem. But if Gandhi had had to deal with the Russians or the German Nazis, they would have long ago put him out of their way. (Institut 215)

1 Nonviolence

For Aurobindo, passive resistance was just a means and not an end in itself. Gandhi considered his *satyagraha* as “based on the inviolable relationship between means and end” and that “its essence lies in the purity of both” (Suhrod 77). However, Aurobindo was concerned only with the goal, and the means were but incidental. The goal was to resist colonialism and to overthrow it for which passive resistance was one that was suitable for the situation. Boycott and the *Swadeshi*² movement are discussed as different facets of the struggle of passive resistance. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his biography on Aurobindo notes: “But whereas Gandhiji maintained that violence was to be eschewed in all circumstances, Sri Aurobindo felt that passive and peaceful resistance was possible only so long as the actions of the bureaucracy were themselves ‘peaceful and within the rules of the fight’” (123). Aurobindo’s passive resistance consisted of two limbs — boycott and non-cooperation. However, he warns that once the methods of coercion of the colonialists become violent, passive resistance may have to transform itself into active resistance. This section also analyses how Aurobindo was influenced by the popular uprisings in Italy and China and the Irish Sinn Fein movement. Aurobindo argued that boycott and *Swadeshi* are mutually dependant and one is a natural concomitant of the other. He stressed the importance of strengthening national production and logistics so that the efforts of boycott and *Swadeshi* become successful. Aurobindo’s awareness of

the power of the media is evidenced in the manner he popularized his nationalist ideas through various newspapers, magazines and pamphlets.

The next section on national education focusses on Aurobindo's strategy for breaking free from the colonial system of education. He understood that unless the colonial system of education is replaced, lasting effects through nationalist enterprise cannot be made. He proposed to start national schools without any kind of affiliation with the colonial government. As observed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: "Education is perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals . . ." (425). Later in the chapter, the manner in which Aurobindo achieves a synergy of the East and the West is discussed. Thus, it is in the realization of the influence of the West, the attempt to break away from it, and then to go beyond all essentialism that postcolonialism becomes useful: "Postcolonialism, thus comes to represent a conflict within one's own self, a conflict through which the subject tries to step outside his colonial self, the western training, the history of the imperial phase and to approach his own past, history and reality from this position" (Jain and Singh 14). The synergy that Aurobindo achieves by virtue of his first hand experience of Western education as well as his in-depth knowledge of Indian culture is also discussed in the chapter. This syncretism is also palpable in the manner in which Aurobindo writes, where he can be seen to be at ease with imagery from both the East and the West. The chapter closes with Aurobindo's

observations on using spirituality as a tool for national emancipation. Aurobindo notes that understanding the spiritual greatness of India is significant for the growth and fruition of the nationalist movement. Such a reference to the glory of the past, especially a spiritual past, is a theme to which Aurobindo returns again and again in his writings. The value of such a reimagining of the past in the construction of the nation has been emphasized by writers like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon.

The third chapter “Culture, Civilization, and the Citizen” attempts to elucidate Aurobindo’s ideas of culture and civilization and the transformation he envisages for the individual in becoming a citizen. Aurobindo attempts to go to the roots of Indian culture and claims that it is spiritual in nature as opposed to the materiality of the West. Thus the native culture becomes a domain inaccessible to colonial definitions since it is beyond the reach of colonial invasion. As noted by Ranajit Guha: “There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past” (1). Partha Chatterjee too observed that “[t]he more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of ‘essential’ cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it” (*Nation* 26). There may be contradictions inherent in such a search for roots, but as Rosemary Jolly points out, it would still be a useful exercise: “If we can reach down to our roots — and not invented roots, *real*

roots — with all the tragedy of contradiction, the interest, the variety, the surprise that's involved in that, then I think that that will do more to destroy the domination of the oppressor than simply putting the oppressor up as a target all the time" (Jolly 377). As Aurobindo proclaims that the roots of Indian culture are basically spiritual, he also puts it in apposition to the materiality of the West. As Aurobindo was not generally given to an inversion of Orientalism and its binaries, the problematic nature of such black-and-white demarcations is also discussed in this section.

This chapter also deals with the impact of interaction with the West and the Indian attempt to create a syncretic culture. Aurobindo's responses indicate that he was aware of the nature of such an attack. It is seen that Aurobindo's call to a return to the past is not unconditional since he viewed such a return as neither necessary nor possible. He did not consider a qualified acceptance of Western concepts to be detrimental to the Indian nation. Aurobindo demonstrates how India has borrowed from a wide range of cultures with which it interacted during various points in history. Aurobindo is also seen to view the interaction with the colonial culture as markedly different from all other cultural interactions the Indian land previously experienced. Such a view is mainly due to the insidious and intense nature of this interaction rather than any unique violence involved. Aurobindo saw the colonization of India as a historical accident that happened when the Indian people were in "a state of ebb and weakness" (*Renaissance* 37).

Further, the discussion moves to Aurobindo's use of religious terms in his political discourse. It is argued that Aurobindo's attempt is not to spiritualize politics like Gandhi did. Such an observation is not to reduce the significance of Gandhi, for Gandhi's methodology was way different from that of Aurobindo. As Thomas Weber notes: "[T]he Mahatma did not compartmentalize his life. For him, economics together with politics, morality, and religion formed an indivisible whole" (141). Aurobindo's dependence on religious terms and spiritual metaphors are seen to be primarily means to convey his nationalist ideals in a language easily comprehensible to the common man.

The next section of the chapter analyses Aurobindo's commentary on Indian cultural production in the light of his responses to William Archer's criticism of Indian art, architecture and literature as evidences of "barbarism." Such an attack on native culture "is understood as including an 'epistemic' aspect, i.e. an attack on the culture, ideas and value systems of the colonized peoples" (Loomba 69). Though Aurobindo dismisses Archer's criticism with well-deserved contempt, he also establishes how futile and inane an attempt it would be to judge one culture in comparison to another. He opines that cultures are posited on differences and not on a question of pre-eminence. He cites examples of how the artistic and architectural productions of various cultural traditions in India bear the unique stamp of spiritual ideals characteristic of the land. Looking at it from an Indian perspective, Aurobindo

contends that similar allegations of “barbarism” could be made also of British cultural productions. He also takes issue with Archer’s reductionist comments on the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Aurobindo also notes that the Indian epics are not unique creations since different versions of the epics exist in various languages through the length and breadth of the country. Each of these versions has a local distinction that far surpasses that of the creations in the Sanskrit language.

Aurobindo also offered a critique of Indian polity, the drawbacks of which had been the cause not just of the success of the colonial enterprise but its prolonged continuance too. He observed that though the village had been a self-contained autonomous unit, it failed in forming collectivities with other villages of the land. Colonization could not have happened if the smaller kingdoms had come together to resist such aggressions. British colonialism proved the loose nature of the political structure of Indian society since the British conquest was not an organized attack like that of the Mughals. However, it was the British invasion that necessitated the formation of the nation since it was not just a change of regime as in the case of previous invasions. This section closes with Aurobindo’s discussions of such attempts to form a nation by localized groups like that of the Mahrattas and the Sikhs. He noted that such attempts, though unsuccessful, were significant in laying the foundations of nationalist feelings.

In the following section of this chapter, Aurobindo's ideas on casteism and his exhortations to do away with such degrading systems are considered. It is observed how colonialism complicated the already existing evils of caste system in India by introducing the economic aspect into the social structure. Aurobindo observed that the caste system was originally a segregation of duties similar to the class system in Britain, but it degenerated in time into a social privileging of "upper" castes over "lower." He emphasized that Hinduism does not recognize such differences and that Nationalism cannot proceed with such separatism. In one of the speeches written for the Maharaja of Baroda during 1901-02, Aurobindo wrote:

We have our "ancient régime" of custom and prejudice to overcome: let us meet them by a new Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; a Liberty of action, Equality of opportunity and the Fraternity of a great national ideal. Then you may hope to see India a nation again, with a national art and a national literature and a flourishing commerce, and then, but not till then, may you demand a national government. (*Early 720*)

Further in the chapter, Aurobindo's sarcastic description of the nature of the Indian bourgeois individual is discussed in detail. He lamented that instead of outgrowing the decayed social institutions like casteism, Indians have added to it the bourgeois outlook that is characteristic of the European

colonizers. More than being demeaning to the individual, Aurobindo saw this as a threat to the formation of the Indian nation. The individual becomes part of the bourgeoisie engaged in selfish pursuits instead of becoming a citizen contributing to national development. Aurobindo gives a vivid and sarcastic picture of the Indian bourgeois in a description spanning a length of several pages. His pronouncement of the bourgeois as “a man of facile sentiments and skindeep personality; generally ‘enlightened’ but not inconveniently illuminated” succinctly describes his lengthy argument (*Bande Mataram II* 1092). Aurobindo’s sketch of the bourgeois’s restriction to oneself and the family is also seen in the context of Jürgen Habermas’s depiction of the “public sphere” and the “private sphere.” Unless the bourgeois evolves to become a citizen committed to the society, nationalism cannot be successful.

The last section of this chapter discusses modernity, its impact on India, the attempts to create a modernity of one’s own, and the reflexive nature of such a modernity. Aurobindo brings out the Manichean nature of British narrations on India which looks at Indian writers as primitive and barbaric while depicting European ones as progressive. Aurobindo’s portrayal of the snobbery of the middle-class Indian who looks up towards Europe for models is also discussed. The Indian tradition, whether of education, of clothing, of housing, or of language is considered to be lacking in sophistication by the Indian middle-class (*Bande Mataram II* 1101). This, Aurobindo saw as the effect of the schooling that they received in colonial

modernity. Aurobindo opined that the colonial educational effort, far from enlightening the native, was designed to make the native a useful tool in the maintenance of imperial power. The implementation of this on a mass scale throughout India is described by him as “the hypnosis of a nation” (1104). Further, Aurobindo’s observations on the shift from humanism to capitalism in the context of modernity are also discussed. Capitalism, as it becomes a world religion, threatens the continued existence of human values. This in turn leads to increase in the risk of violence in societies. Aurobindo described European modernity as “a jerry-built skyscraper” which shall collapse under its own weight (*Early* 560). He suggests that progressive aspects of tradition as well as from European modernity should be accepted for the further progress of mankind. The similarity of such an approach with the “reflexive modernity” of Anthony Giddens is also discussed. Aurobindo hoped that in the synergy of cultures a “world-culture” would emerge which would ultimately make East and West meet (*Renaissance* 72).

The fourth chapter, “Towards a World Union and a Universal Brotherhood,” begins with Aurobindo’s discussions on human evolution. The enormous scope and implications of the changes brought in by modernity are discussed in relation with ideas on modernity stated by Giddens. Aurobindo noted how the various branches of knowledge ranging from History, Sociology, Politics, Economics and Science cease to provide any certitude of cognition. Aurobindo’s critique of Science as anti-humanistic is read along

with Giddens's description of the religious fervour with which Science is treated. Giddens observes that the fallibility of Science can only be recognized by pursuing it at a deeper level.

In the next section, Aurobindo's discussions on the nation and the nation-state throw light on how nationalism which created the nation takes a different form in the repressive structure of the State. As Partha Chatterjee observes, "Ironically, it became the historical task of nationalism, which insisted on its own marks of cultural difference with the West, to demand that there be no difference in the domain of the state" (*Nation* 10). If this was true in the historical context of colonialism, it is even truer in the context of the modern nation-state which attempts to homogenize itself by blurring away differences. It is also observed how the heterogeneous nature of traditional states provided a very fluid idea of boundaries even as they may have had solid walls for frontiers. The more the insistence on the "where" of such boundaries and the "who" of the people within it, the greater is the possibility for the emergence of sub-nationalisms. Catalonia's recent declaration of independence from Spain is discussed as a case in point. It can be seen that curtailing the freedom of the individual and vesting sovereignty entirely with the State could be the major causes of such sub-nationalisms. Assertions of essential differences are only an apparent reason since the State is in any case a conglomeration of plural entities on which commonality has been alleged.

Aurobindo observed how even democracy does not guarantee freedom of the individual. He called it the “tyranny of the majority” which infringes upon the freedom of the smaller units inside the nation-state (*Human Cycle* 508). The restrictive nature of citizen rights and the liberal nature of human rights are discussed in the light of the views expressed by Darren J. O’Byrne. Aurobindo commented that punishment as retribution for crime is a case of “mutual violence” (392). This section also observes how the State identity swallows the identity of the individual. Aurobindo noted that the regime of the State does not represent “the best mind of the nation or the noblest aims or its highest instincts” and that it “is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable (296, 298). The subordination of the individual is also analyzed in the light of Louis Althusser’s views on Ideology, where he remarks that the State is not the State of the citizens but “is the State of the ruling class . . .” (18). While discussing freedom of thought and speech in nation-states, Aurobindo observed that “the future has certain surprises for us in this direction” (*Human Cycle* 510). Such a visionary comment could be made only by someone who comprehends the intricate workings of the State.

The next section of the chapter focusses on Aurobindo’s deliberations on the rising risks to humanity because of war. He suggested that war needs to be eliminated if humanity should enjoy the prospect of a continued existence. The observations of Giddens on the enormity of the means of violence which

does not exclude any region or people from risk are also discussed. In the words of Giddens, it is “the world-wide extension of risk environments, rather than the intensification of risk” (126). Aurobindo observed that the institutions of modernity like capitalism or democracy have failed to curtail the incidence of wars. Instead, these institutions along with the advancements in science and technology have increased both the scope and intensity of war and its risks. Giddens called such risk “manufactured risk,” in the sense that it was created by human beings in full knowledge of its consequences (“Risk” 4). Aurobindo’s suggestions for the elimination of war are also discussed in this section. He maintained that psychological rather than physical methods should be used so that the mindset of peoples is so transformed to reject wars as primitive exercise.

The following section of this chapter discusses the ideal of world union envisioned by Aurobindo, which he hoped will safeguard the future of the human race. His idea of a world union is not just an enlargement of the nation-state, but a federal unification of the States into a state-nation. Such a union shall preserve the plurality of the constituent units, and shall not seek for any sort of centralized control. Such a conception of a world union was necessitated because of Aurobindo’s realization that the State has not been successful in delivering the promises on the basis of which it was instituted; rather it has gone diametrically against them in considering its citizens as “others” who are potential risks to the State. It can be seen that Aurobindo

acknowledges that such a world union may not be immediately realizable, but he sees no reason why it should not be ideated since even the concept of the nation was realized in a similar manner. O'Byrne's observations on globalization suggest that a world union though in a virtual manner is coming into place which, though, is not on the lines visualized by Aurobindo. Further, Aurobindo predicted the collapse of individual freedom under the control of the State. In the light of such a prediction becoming a reality, the importance of human rights vis-à-vis citizenship rights is also discussed. Aurobindo's idea of "human universalism" has parallels with the concept of "global citizenship" which is gaining ground these days. The need for sublimating the idea of nationalism for such a global perspective to emerge is also focussed upon.

Further, Aurobindo suggested the creation of a "religion of humanity," which is patently not related to the varied faiths known by the same term. The influence of Auguste Comte and his ideas of positivism and religion of humanity are also discussed. In such a religion of humanity, external differences only serve to increase the internal unity of mankind. Aurobindo's idea of such a religion of humanity is compared to the idea of undifferentiation or the state of being "non-different" (*abheda*) of Sri Narayana Guru who was a spiritual leader and social reformer from Kerala. Guru perceived *jati*, caste, as biological species and not as something that differentiates one human being from another. It is also noted that the

intellectual idea of “*advaita*” (monism) of Sri Sankara was brought to social practice by Guru. Aurobindo’s concept of the religion of humanity is seen as an attempt to bring a spiritual element into the world union that he envisages.

The next section is about Aurobindo’s idea of self-determination of the individual and Emmanuel Kant’s concept of enlightenment. Aurobindo saw individual ego as a hindrance to the proper blooming of self-determination. He observed that the ego may lead the individual to self-satisfaction than realization, often at the expense of others (*Human Cycle* 626-27). Such an idea of self-determination with consideration for the ‘other’ was taken to full bloom by Narayana Guru himself. Guru’s concepts of compassion and kindness are discussed in the context of Aurobindo exhorting mutual obligation among human beings of the international unity.

The final section of the chapter deals with the idea of brotherhood put forward by Aurobindo, which may be considered as the emotional quotient of his concept of world union. This corresponds also to Narayana Guru’s idea of undifferentiation where the ‘other’ is seen as no different from oneself. Guru’s undifferentiated others included not just human beings but all living beings. These ideas are also situated in the context of Bart van Steenberghe’s concept of “ecological citizenship” (Byrne 211). The idea of brotherhood of Aurobindo is seen also as related to what Giddens calls “life politics” or “politics of self-actualization” (*Consequences* 156).

Chapter One

Formation of the Nation

A proliferation of discourses have emerged on Nations and Nationalism in the twentieth century, among which some of the most discussed are those of Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee.

One of the earliest and most polemical pronouncements on nationalism was made by Ernest Gellner when he said that “[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (*Thought* 168). This opinion given by him in 1965 was later taken up for a detailed explanation in his 1983 work, *Nations and Nationalism*. He argued that the idea of nationalism was a result of modernity and industrial society and not the result of any inherent will of people or common culture (54). He wrote that “nationalism is *not* the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does indeed present itself” (48).

While Eric Hobsbawm agreed on “the element of artefact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations,” he felt that Gellner’s view of “modernization from above, makes it difficult to pay adequate attention to the view from below” (Hobsbawm 10-11). Hobsbawm observed that while the construction of the nation by governments or

institutionalized structures are obviously visible, the view of the common folk is extremely difficult to be understood. As M.V. Narayanan observed, “What he argues quite different from Ernest Gellner is that they must be looked at from the bottom up, not from top down” (n. pag.).

Anderson went a step further when he said that all communities are imagined and that they are to “be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 6). Similar was the position of Bhabha for whom nation is just a construct of narration, which is to say, if they are not narrated they do not exist. He remarked that “it is the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy . . . that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like the people, minorities, or ‘cultural difference’ that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation” (*Nation* 292).

However, Partha Chatterjee opined that “nationalist thought cannot remain only a negation; it is also a *positive* discourse which seek to replace the structure of colonial power with a new order, that of national power” (*Nation* 42). He saw nationalist movements as a means of resistance to colonial enterprises.

It is in the background of these varied comments on nationalism that the thought of Aurobindo needs to be situated. Aurobindo conceived the nation as the natural and organic coming into being of the idea of aggregation

of peoples. He defined the nation as “the outward expression of a community of sentiment, whether it be the sentiment of a common blood or the sentiment of a common religion or the sentiment of a common interest or any or all of these sentiments combined.” However, he emphasised that “the process, however rapid it may be, is one of growth and not of manufacture” (*Bande Mataram I* 367). Therefore, for Aurobindo, the nation was not an “invention” as Gellner looked at it or an “imagination” as Anderson suggested. Given the fact that the nation is a comparatively recent phenomenon, a subjective view that nations are natural or an objective view that nations are created cannot be uniquely true. Hobsbawm held that they are “dual phenomena” and should also be seen as something that came into being in the context of modernity (10).

Nation Engendered with Passion

There were three major influences on the concept of nationalism developed by Aurobindo. The first was the famous Bengali writer, Bankim Chandra Chatterji. Aurobindo called him a *Rishi*, a seer, who envisioned a reawakened India. Aurobindo was influenced greatly by his works *Devi Chaudhurani*, *Ananda Math*, *Krishnacharit* and *Dharmatattwa* (Early 637). The title of the song in *Ananda Math*, “*Bande Mataram*,” was given to the magazine in which Aurobindo published his articles. Aurobindo observed that there are three elements of moral strength suggested by Bankim for the liberation of the nation:

He perceived that the first element of the moral strength must be tyaga, complete self-sacrifice for the country and complete self-devotion to the work of liberation. . . . the second element of the moral strength needed must be self-discipline and organisation Lastly, he perceived that the third element of moral strength must be the infusion of religious feeling into patriotic work. The religion of patriotism, — this is the master idea of Bankim's writings. (*Early* 639)

Aurobindo believed that Bankim's view of the religion of patriotism could liberate the nation from foreign rule. Bankim argued that until the land is perceived as more than just a geographic stretch of territory, until there is the passion to serve the motherland, a nation cannot be born (*Early* 640).

The second major influence was the man with whom Aurobindo began his active political life: Bal Gangadhar Tilak. His call for *Swaraj* or self-government was considered by Aurobindo to be a major step in bringing the people of India together to eliminate foreign rule. He observed that though many other writers, thinkers and leaders had brought forward such views, it was Tilak who brought it into the actual field of national struggle (*Early* 645). The *Swadeshi* movement, National Education and Boycott were all implemented on a national scale under the leadership of Tilak and Aurobindo was closely associated with him.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, was the next major influence on Aurobindo's political thought. Dayananda's concept of the Vedas as the basis of existence is vouched by Aurobindo to be nothing fantastic. He felt that those ideas are an attempt to find the roots of the Indian spirit and would go a long way in the unification of the nation:

To be national is not to stand still. Rather, to seize on a vital thing out of the past and throw it into the stream of modern life, is really the most powerful means of renovation and new-creation. Dayananda's work brings back such a principle and spirit of the past to vivify a modern mould. And observe that in the work as in the life it is the past caught in the first jet of its virgin vigour, pure from its sources, near to its root principle and therefore to something eternal and always renewable. (*Early* 665)

The reclamation of the past is a strategy that Aurobindo goes on to use to attack the colonialist ideology, especially as it can help to create an identity divorced from colonial constructions. Rajnarayan Bose, who wrote *Se Kal ar E Kal*³, also happens to be the maternal grandfather of Aurobindo. Partha Chatterjee discusses this work by Bose in his talk titled *On Modernity* and comments that his observations are a proof that "there cannot be just one

modernity irrespective of geography, time, environment or social conditions” (8). Aurobindo writes that he “admired” his grandfather and “liked his writings ‘Hindu Dharmar [Sresthata] and ‘Se Kal ar E Kal’ . . .” (*Auto* 45).

Aurobindo also admired Bipin Chandra Pal, called him the prophet of nationalism and wrote, “Bipin Chandra stands before India as the exponent of the spiritual force of the movement, its pure “Indianness”, its high devotion to principle; this has been the kernel of his teaching, the secret of the almost miraculous force which often breathed from his eloquence” (*Bande Mataram II* 913-14).

Aurobindo felt that it was as necessary to collate a nation as it was to break free from the colonial empire. Empires are formed because of political exigencies and can fall apart because they are not living entities like a nation. Until we invent a better metaphor for human community, the idea of the nation remains an essential element for the society to draw sustenance for its maintenance. Comparing the concepts of the nation and the empire, Aurobindo wrote:

At the present stage of human progress the nation is the living collective unit of humanity. Empires exist, but they are as yet only political and not real units; they have no life from within and owe their continuance to a force imposed on their constituent elements or else to a political convenience felt or

acquiesced in by the constituents and favoured by the world outside. (*Human Cycle* 304)

As empires are external forces and have no “life from within” they are not “real units” like the nation. Here, he stresses the artificiality of the concept of the empire vis-à-vis that of the nation. The nation, therefore, is a real unit since it draws its sustenance from within and is not a matter of “political convenience” like the empire. In an unpublished manuscript⁴ written during 1907-08, Aurobindo defines his idea of a nation and the various aspects that make the body of the nation:

What is a nation? We have studied in the schools of the West and learned to ape the thoughts and language of the West forgetting our own deeper ideas and truer speech, and to the West the nation is the country, so much land containing so many millions of men who speak one speech and live one political life. . . . The Indian idea of nationality ought to be truer and deeper. The philosophy of our forefathers looked through the gross body of things and discovered a subtle body within. . . . What is true of the individual object, is true also of the general and universal. What is true of the man, is true also of the nation. The country, the land is only the outward body of the

4 Later collected and published after his passing.

nation, its annamaya kosh, or gross physical body; the mass of people, the life of millions who occupy and vivify the body of the nation with their presence, is the pranamaya kosh, the life-body of the nation. (*Bande Mataram II* 1115)

Aurobindo intended to resist the western concepts of the nation and to create an Indian concept of the nation. He says here that the Western idea of nation is to a large extent the physical and geographical aspects and a people who speak the same language. Aurobindo opines that the concept of the nation is not amenable to such watershed compartmentalisations. He brings in the mystical knowledge of the land to explicate his idea. The West sees land as an inorganic entity whereas the physical aspect is only external to the nation. Aurobindo compares the nation to an individual who has different layers of bodies varying in grossness. The gross outer body is the physical body represented by the geographical area, and the subtler inner body or soul is the people who form part of the nation. As pointed out by Som P. Ranchan and K.D. Gupta, “In place of ‘national egoism’ (as in the case of western political thought), Aurobindo refers to the ‘nation-soul’ which is characterised by love and veneration for the country” (69). In Aurobindo’s concept of the nation, it is the people who form the soul and give life to the nation. The reasons for Aurobindo bringing in mystical concepts can be understood in Frantz Fanon's vindication of such attempts: “[T]hey realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with

anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people” (*Wretched* 209-10). It is such a desperation that brings in the idea of creating an alternative definition for the nation.

The nation-state is a necessary evil needed to be ‘imagined’ by the community or communities for their survival. It is evil because, being a heterogeneous entity, the state will only inadequately, if at all, address the needs and issues of its citizens. Differentiating the nation and the nation-state, Aurobindo wrote:

The organised State is neither the best mind of the nation nor is it even the sum of the communal energies. It leaves out of its organised action and suppresses or unduly depresses the working force and thinking mind of important minorities, often of those which represent that which is best in the present and that which is developing for the future. It is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable.
(Human Cycle 298)

Aurobindo emphasises that the State can never be equated to the nation as it may not represent “the best of which the community is capable”. He was aware of the inherent drawbacks of randomly pulling together geographical entities to form a nation. Following this observation, Aurobindo gives the

example of Austria which was such an empire of “political convenience,” but which ceased to exist when the situations necessitating its origin changed (304). He calls the empire an “artificial political unity,” which is a forced combination of heterogeneous races, languages and cultures (314). However, in the particular case of India, no amount of disruptive forces has been able to affect the fabric of the national psyche. Aurobindo cites this as a historical case to prove that the integral concept of the nation has always been there even before it emerged into a nation:

The political history of India is the story of a succession of empires, indigenous and foreign, each of them destroyed by centrifugal forces, but each bringing the centripetal tendency nearer to its triumphant emergence. And it is a significant circumstance that the more foreign the rule, the greater has been its force for the unification of the subject people. (*Human Cycle* 308)

As Aurobindo clarifies, in the case of India, the nation-state will not become more dominant than the nation because the integrity of the culture, people and the land had long been established long before European modernity came up with the concept of the nation-state.

Stages of Nation Formation

Aurobindo puts forward the idea that there are several steps in the

formation of a nation. He broadly classifies these steps into three stages. He does not see the nation as a created object, but rather emphasizes on the organic aspect whose existence is or should be in a constant state of flux. In the *Ideal of Human Unity*, he writes:

In such a process there must be in the nature of things, first, some kind of looser yet sufficiently compelling order of society and common type of civilisation to serve as a framework or scaffolding within which the new edifice shall arise. Next, there must come naturally a period of stringent organisation directed towards unity and centrality of control and perhaps a general levelling and uniformity under that central direction. Last, if the new organism is not to fossilise and stereotype its life, if it is to be still a living and vigorous creation of Nature, there must come a period of free internal development as soon as the formation is assured and unity has become a mental and vital habit. (*Human Cycle* 374)

A nation cannot arise out of a vacuum. It is the result of a large number of factors coming into play, for which a common civilisation is seen by Aurobindo as just a framework. It is such a framework that was provided by the social hierarchy that was existent in most communities that went on to become nations. However, Aurobindo stresses that such a framework should

necessarily change to a unifying “centrality of control,” without which the framework cannot hold the entity of the nation. This analogy reminds of the physical existence of an individual, or any living being for that matter. There is a framework provided by the body which is hierarchical because of the differing functions of the various organs. However, the hierarchy should not lead to domination of one organ over another. Yet there is a central control which brings about the “uniformity” in the organism. Nations too are not much different, except that they are larger organisms, which require complex processes of coordination for their sustenance. Just as every organ in an organism grows, the nation also needs such a free internal development, all the centrality and control notwithstanding. It is such a delicate balance of the constituent units that Aurobindo suggests for the nation.

Therefore, in the second level of the formation of the nation, the social structure needs to be changed so that a central ruling authority can be created for purposes of administration. This was achieved in most medieval societies by the coming up of the monarchy into the role of shaping national life. Aurobindo, sometimes even felt that India had seen better times before it became part of the British Empire. The period of monarchy in Indian history is remembered nostalgically by Aurobindo:

Nor was any age in Asia so rich in energy, so well worth living in, so productive of the best and most enduring fruits as that

heroic period of India when she was divided into small kingdoms, many of them no larger than a modern district. Her most wonderful activities, her most vigorous and enduring work, that which, if we had to make a choice, we should keep at the sacrifice of all else, belonged to that period. . . . (*Human Cycle* 281-82)

Such a glorification of the past is critiqued by many historians for ignoring the fact that there were large masses within the population who were subjected to various degrees of oppression. Bipan Chandra notes that such claims of past glory cannot be sustained: “Whenever the lower castes become vocal and selfconscious they will rebel against any model of the Golden Age which is based upon caste hierarchy and domination. Nor will the tribal people relish it” (46). However, Aurobindo too acknowledges that such a control of kingdoms “is almost fatally attended with that suppression of the internal liberties of the people” (*Human Cycle* 380). Such an administration of the monarchy was more often than not marked by “absolutism and a certain foundation of uniformity,” which therefore was restrictive and led to “impose its will on the life and thought and conscience of the people” (380). In the third stage of the formation of the nation, the people break free from the stifling effects of monarchy or similar repressive structures. Then the State comes into being which is “. . . no longer monarchical, ecclesiastical, aristocratic but secular, democratic and socialistic . . .” (383). In this stage, the

people break free from all control and realize their purpose. Aurobindo describes it thus:

The nation-unit is not formed and does not exist merely for the sake of existing; its purpose is to provide a larger mould of human aggregation in which the race, and not only classes and individuals, may move towards its full human development. So long as the labour of formation continues, this larger development may be held back and authority and order be accepted as the first consideration, but not when the aggregate is sure of its existence and feels the need of an inner expansion. Then the old bonds have to be burst; the means of formation have to be discarded as obstacles to growth. Liberty then becomes the watchword of the race. (*Human Cycle* 382)

Here, when he mentions “the aggregate,” Aurobindo suggests that the nation already has a consciousness which aspires to develop into its fulfilment. The nation here becomes a platform for the individual members to take forward their aspirations for development. However, nations remain in the “labour of formation” and are unborn until the people are themselves convinced that they are one people. Then the shell of authority is broken open and the nation is born into freedom. There is no going back to absolute control as in the second stage or to a feudalistic reign as in the first stage, which would mean that the nation ceases to exist. As Ernest Renan opined:

A large aggregate of men . . . creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation. So long as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. (20)

Here, Renan too can be seen to view the nation as an “aggregate” of peoples rather than being limited by geographical boundaries or languages. Aurobindo remarks that the unification of India shall not destroy the native languages, cultures or traditions of the various regions. Rather, he foresees that it would be a rich cross-cultural union of realms forming a heterogeneous whole:

The nation-idea in India will realise itself, in all its departments, along what may be called federal lines, — it will be a union of different nationalities, each preserving its own specific elements both of organisation and ideal, each communicating to the others what they lack in either thought or character, and all moving together towards one universal end, both in civic and social life, progressively realising that end along its own historic and traditional lines, and thus indefinitely drawing near to each other, without, for an equally indefinite period, actually losing themselves in any one particular form of that life, whether old or new. (*Bande Mataram I* 169)

Aurobindo hopes that the heterogeneity of the Indian nation would help to mutually complement the social and cultural requirements of the different peoples who form the nation. The development of the nation should focus on human development beyond the individual or even a small regional community. Aurobindo opined that it should encompass all classes of people, irrespective of region, language or culture. He also emphasized the need for the nation to develop political and military strength as well as to excel in trade and commerce. Here, the nation becomes different from the individual who could afford to focus on any particular field for his/her development:

The nation or group is not like the individual who can specialise his development and throw all his energies into one line. The nation must develop military and political greatness and activity, intellectual and aesthetic greatness and activity, commercial greatness and activity, moral sanity and vigour; it cannot sacrifice any of these functions of the organism without making itself unfit for the struggle for life and finally succumbing and perishing under the pressure of more highly organised nations. (*Bande Mataram I* 363)

Yet, the nationalism that Aurobindo envisages is not xenophobic and demonstrates the progressive “intellectual” and “aesthetic” values which can place the nation stably in a comity of nations. The military strength is

balanced by “moral sanity and vigour” and the commercial relations that the nation may have with other nations.

Village as Problem and Solution

In his celebrated work, Benedict Anderson presents a case for why the nation is just an imagined entity and that there is nothing sacrosanct about it. He notes: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). However, Aurobindo would have responded that this is all the more reason why a nation is a stronger integer, because it exists in spite of the “fellow-members” not meeting or hearing each other. He would say that if at all the nation is an imagination, it is a necessary one at that. He presents reasons as to why such an argument is plausible:

Nations have that in a sort of collective national ego which persists through all vital changes. But this ego is not by any means self-existent and immortal; it supports itself on certain things with which it is identified. First, there is the geographical body, the country; secondly, the common interests of all who inhabit the same country, defence, economic well-being and progress, political liberty, etc.; thirdly, a common name, sentiment, culture. (*Human Cycle* 561-62)

While this may appear to be too far-fetched and “imagined,” again, such an imaginative strategy was necessary for the anti-colonial struggle. As for Anderson, the problem of the “fellow-members” not meeting or hearing each other would get solved in the system of the village, which Aurobindo saw as the “cell” of the nation (*Bande Mataram II* 1048). However, Aurobindo perceived the village system as not impeccable and opined that the enclosed village system was one of the reasons for the delay in the making of the Indian nation:

Wherever a nation has been formed, in the modern sense, it has been at the expense of smaller units. The whole history of national growth is the record of a long struggle to establish a central unity by subduing the tendency of smaller units to live to themselves. . . . Ancient India could not build itself into a single united nation, not because of caste or social differences as the European writers assert, — caste and class have existed in nations which achieved a faultless national unity, — but because the old polity of the Hindus allowed the village to live to itself, the clan to live to itself, the province or smaller race-unit to live to itself. (*Bande Mataram II* 908)

Aurobindo says that the village being a self-sustained unit, in most instances became a block to national development. He does not suggest that the village

system was not effective, but he remarked that the independent life of the village needs to “feel itself bound up with the life of its neighbouring units, living with them in a common group for common purposes” (*Bande Mataram II* 1048). Such a lack of interconnectedness aided the forces of colonialism establish their hegemony on the country at large. Aurobindo points out the different situation that was prevalent in other countries in comparison with India:

One cause perhaps more than any other contributed to the failure of the centripetal tendency to attain self-fulfilment, and that was the persistence of the village community which prevented the people, the real nation, from taking any part in the great struggles out of which a nation should have emerged. In other countries the people had to take part in the triumphs, disasters and failures of their rulers either as citizens or at least as soldiers, but in India they were left to their little isolated republics with no farther interest than the payment of a settled tax in return for protection by the supreme power. This was the true cause of the failure of India to achieve a distinct organized and self-conscious nationality. (*Bande Mataram II* 909)

The only solution to develop such a “self-conscious nationality” is to spread the awareness of the commonality of the values and culture of the land. As

Richard Allen remarked, it is only “by reclaiming its traditions and sense of community the colonized group reclaims its standing as a nation and uses this identity as a strength in its struggle against the colonizing power” (15).

However, Aurobindo had high regard for the simplicity of organization of the village. His appreciation of this aspect of the village was similar to that of Mahatma Gandhi who was also a “champion of simple village societies and economies where there should be sufficiency for all rather than great variations of wealth” (Brown 55). Such a view was also held by Aurobindo who felt that the village was a great leveller free from many of the evils of urban society. He wrote:

The old organization of the Indian village was self-sufficient, self-centred, autonomous and exclusive. These little units of life existed to themselves, each a miniature world of its own petty interests and activities, like a system of planets united to each other indeed by an unconscious force but each absorbed in its own life and careless of the other. It was a life beautifully simple, healthy, rounded and perfect, a delight to the poet and the lover of humanity. If perfect simplicity of life, freedom from economic evils, from moral degradation, from the strife, faction and fury of town populations, from revolution and turmoil, from vice and crime on a large scale are the objects of social

organization, then the village communities of India were ideal forms of social organization. (*Bande Mataram II* 907)

He goes on to say that the village should be maintained as the basic self-sufficient unit, while at the same time organizing the nation using the same villages as building blocks. However, when it remained isolated, it was an easy success for the colonial strategy of demolishing the already divided cultural elements and for using the village for their own ends. For instance, Ranajit Guha points out that during the First World War, villagers were forced into service by the colonizers “to rob the vast mass of the subaltern population of its manpower” (28). Aurobindo emphasizes that such an isolation of the village should not continue so as to avoid similar exploitations in the future:

[T]he old foundation of Indian life and secret of Indian vitality was the self-dependent and self-sufficient village organism. If we are to organize Swaraj we must base it on the village. But we must at the same time take care to avoid the mistake which did much in the past to retard our national growth. The village must not in our new national life be isolated as well as self-sufficient, but must feel itself bound up with the life of its neighbouring units, living with them in a common group for common purposes. Each group again must feel itself part of the

life of the district, living in the district unity, so each district must not be engrossed in its own separate existence but feel itself a subordinate part of the single life of the province, and the province in its turn of the single life of the country. Such is the plan of reconstruction we have taken in hand, but to make it a healthy growth and not an artificial construction we must begin at the bottom and work up to the apex. The village is the cell of the national body and the cell-life must be healthy and developed for the national body to be healthy and developed. Swaraj begins from the village. (*Bande Mataram II* 1048)

The “reconstruction” that Aurobindo refers to here is politically enabling the masses in the villages so that it can in time lead to a national renaissance. Fanon also put forth similar ideas when he said that the nation should be strengthened at grassroots level. He wrote: “So the necessity of creating a large number of well-informed nuclei at the bottom crops up again. Too often, in fact, we are content to establish national organizations at the top and always in the capital” (*Wretched* 195). Aurobindo’s idea of formation of the nation with the village as base is, as Fanon suggested, a bottom-up organization than a top-down one.

To the Past and to the Future

Aurobindo saw the colonial presence in India not as a threat but as a

challenge which gives impetus to the spirit of nationalism. He compared nationalist feelings to “explosives which need resistance in order to be effective; unresisted they explode harmlessly and mildly into the air, but resisted, repressed and confined they become devastating forces and annihilate the substance that resists and confines them” (*Bande Mataram II* 482). Colonialism thus functions as a catalyst to accelerate the nationalist movement to grow into a project that needs to be urgently completed.

Aurobindo was aware of the difficulties involved in bringing together the large masses of people who speak different languages and follow different cultural traditions. In spite of these diversities, Aurobindo remarked that it should be possible to invoke a unity in them. He also said that Indians should take pride in their national heritage, though we may have many shortcomings that are yet to be overcome:

Apart from the natural attachment which every man has to his country, its literature, its traditions, its customs and usages, patriotism has an additional stimulus in the acknowledged excellence of a national civilisation. If Britons love England with all her faults, why should we fail to love India whose faults were whittled down to an irreducible minimum till foreign conquests threw the whole society out of gear? (*Bande Mataram II* 511)

Here, Aurobindo comments on the devastating effect of colonization upon Indian society which had led to aggravate its “faults.” Aurobindo must have felt that a good method of privileging Indian culture over the colonial notion of superiority would be to highlight its spirituality. He was convinced of this because it was also the method used by Swami Vivekananda:

This was Swami Vivekananda’s plan of campaign. India can once more be made conscious of her greatness by an overmastering sense of the greatness of her spirituality. This sense of greatness is the main feeder of all patriotism. This only can put an end to all self-depreciation and generate a burning desire to recover the lost ground. (*Bande Mataram II* 513)

At the historical juncture when colonialism refers to the glory of the East in the past tense, it was significant to invoke the greatness in the present itself. This would help the natives to overcome the denigration of colonialism and invoke in them the spirit of patriotism. One of Aurobindo’s strategies to drive home his point is to resort to etymological discussion. He traces the root of the term ‘politics’ and describes it thus:

In one sense everything that concerns the welfare of the *polis*, the state or community, is political. Education, social reconstruction, sanitation, industrial expansion, all these are a necessary part of politics; but the most important part of all is

that to which the term politics is especially applied, the organisation of the state and its independence; for on these all the others depend. Just as an organism must first live and then attend to other wants and must therefore give the highest importance to the preservation of life, so also a state or nation must first win or maintain an organised independence, otherwise it will find itself baffled in all its attempts to satisfy its other wants. (*Bande Mataram II* 538)

Aurobindo attempts to make it clear that politics is not a pejorative term applied to activities involving squabbles for plums. It is an area of activity that concerns itself with the welfare of the people in the society. Therefore, its primary concern is freedom, since without the freedom of the collective, progress can never happen. Such a political movement is never isolated or focussed on any particular individual. It is a mass movement with a unity of aim and is thus a well-planned project moving towards its execution:

The working of the human mind, the correlation of causes and effects, the ups and downs in the life of a nation are never isolated phenomena defying the scientist's attempt to systematise, co-ordinate and generalise. The movement in India, like all other movements in history, has life and vitality in it and its root deep in the very nature of things and events. It is not

artificially got up, no movement of the kind can be; it has not been engineered by a Lajpat Rai or an Ajit Singh: it does not proceed from mere discontent or “disloyalty”: it is no aberration or monstrosity. It has the uniformity, the identity of manifestations in widely-separated regions, the similarity of thought, motive and expression which belong to great, sudden, spontaneous movements, to divine events.

India was a centre of human prosperity and a fountain of light when there was still darkness and savagery on the face of the major portion of the earth and she has not gone into an eternal eclipse. The over-shadowing influence cannot last for ever, it is a temporary obscuration from which the sun of her destiny is soon to emerge. (*Bande Mataram II 559*)

Aurobindo hopes that such a unified political movement would lead to restoration of power from colonial lands to the natives. He also remarks that India in the past was “a fountain of light” which is now obscured because of the effects of colonialism. The sun of nationalism would rise and the colonial period would then be a mere shadow which gets removed by its light.

Just as many schools in Indian philosophy believe that the human being is constituted of gross, subtle and causal bodies, Aurobindo says that the nation too is an organic being which has such bodies:

To think about our nation is first to think about our physical motherland. . . . This is the gross body of our nation. . . . Thirty-three crores of people live on this land with their joys and sorrows, their good and bad desires: they are all part of its subtle body. Then there are aspects of the country which may undergo changes in the course of time, yet always remain in the body, in seed-state, as permanent as the atom; they are always present there and, being the origin, it is out of them that the future takes shape. This is the causal body of the nation. But this is not enough. According to our scriptures, when we think of a man we think not only of his present condition but also of his past and future. The same is true of a country. When we speak of the rivers, mountains and cities of our country, we have in mind not only the present, not at all. What we speak of is a history of five thousand years. When we speak of Delhi and Agra, does not the image of Delhi as it was during Emperor Akbar's time stand before your mind's eye? That is why, in speaking of the nation, we should recall the great achievements of our ancestors; then Shivaji, Asoka and Akbar at once become an integral part of our nationhood. So too the ancient Rishis.

(Bande Mataram II 812-13)

Here, Aurobindo also emphasises the presentness of the past, by clarifying

how the past does not just remain a mute history, but actively discourses with the present. It was important for Aurobindo to invoke the metaphors of the ancient *Rishis*, the old rulers and the “great achievement” of the ancestors, because the colonial depiction of ‘reality’ was so compelling upon the land, simply because of their methods of systematically playing down the native repertoire of culture. As Fanon said: “Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. This cultural obliteration is made possible by the negation of national reality . . .” (*Wretched* 236). Aurobindo’s mention of the value of the attainments of ancestors is reminiscent of the words of Ernest Renan, “Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are” (19). Edward Said also points out that “[a]ppeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present” (*Culture* 3). The discussion is not just about the past as it was or as it could have been, but its continuation in different forms in the present and its repercussions for the future. Said goes on to quote T.S. Eliot who spoke about how the past is not just important for its “pastness” but its “presence” (4). Aurobindo tries to place the “pastness” of India in the “present” and plays down the “pastness” of the British vis-à-vis the Indian. This is a strategy which he employs to place his feet firmly on the ground to resist the onslaught of imperialism.

However, Aurobindo also took cognizance of the importance of the

present in the organization of the nation. He suggests appropriating the knowledge that becomes available from the colonized condition:

[S]tarting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation. Whoever wishes to cut off the nation from its past, is no friend of our national growth. Whoever fails to take advantage of the present is losing us the battle of life. We must therefore save for India all that she has stored up of knowledge, character and noble thought in her immemorial past. We must acquire for her the best knowledge that Europe can give her and assimilate it to her own peculiar type of national temperament.

(Bande Mataram II 895)

Partha Chatterjee opined that being bonded to the past is not a vice but a virtue and “is the driving force of our modernity.” It is not a retrogression but “it is our attachment to the past which gives birth to the feeling that the present needs to be changed, that it is our task to change it” (*On Modernity* 19-20). Aurobindo said that India would break off her present shackles and be reborn to a new day of renaissance. The bitter experiences that she underwent were just experiments to bring out the inner strength of the nation. Aurobindo envisioned a bright future which would bring prosperity to the land:

The long ages of discipline which India underwent, are now drawing to an end. A great light is dawning on the East, a light

whose first heralding glimpses are already seen on the horizon; a new day is about to break, so glorious that even the last of the avatars cannot be sufficient to explain it, although without him it would not have come. The perfect expression of Hindu spirituality was the signal for the resurgence of the East. . . . The East alone has some knowledge of the truth, the East alone can teach the West, the East alone can save mankind. . . . the grand workshop of spiritual experiment, the laboratory of the soul has been India, where thousands of great spirits have been born in every generation who were content to work quietly in their own souls, perfect their knowledge, hand down the results of their experiments to a few disciples and leave the rest to others to complete. (*Bande Mataram II* 978)

The description of the “great light,” the “new day,” and the repetitive glorification of “the East” and India may seem highly fantastic and utopian, but as Homi Bhabha says, though it “might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea . . .” (*Nation* 1). Aurobindo believed that the future of the world is linked with that of India. Such an ethnocentric narration should be seen just as an effort to resist the colonial othering of the East. He continues in a similar vein:

So with India rests the future of the world. Whenever she is aroused from her sleep, she gives forth some wonderful shining ray of light to the world which is enough to illuminate the nations. Others live for centuries on what is to her the thought of a moment. God gave to her the book of Ancient Wisdom and bade her keep it sealed in her heart, until the time should come for it to be opened. Sometimes a page or a chapter is revealed, sometimes only a single sentence. Such sentences have been the inspiration of ages and fed humanity for many hundreds of years. So too when India sleeps, materialism grows apace and the light is covered up in darkness. But when materialism thinks herself about to triumph, lo and behold! a light rushes out from the East and where is Materialism? Returned to her native night.

(Bande Mataram II 890)

Here, it can be observed that the language used by Aurobindo is more evocative than descriptive. Such a style of narration is obviously with an intention to generate patriotic spirit in the readers. As Paul Mundschenk points out, the language employed by Aurobindo “functions to arouse passion and feeling, to lift the heart in emotional dedication to the Indian nation . . . seen potentially as an embodiment of the Divine made manifest in the form of a spiritually-oriented sovereign state” (217). Aurobindo exhorted Indians to aspire for *Swaraj*:

India must have Swaraj in order to live; she must have Swaraj in order to live well and happily; she must have Swaraj in order to live for the world, not as a slave for the material and political benefit of a single purse-proud and selfish nation, but as a free people for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of the human race. (*Bande Mataram II* 572)

The idea of *Swaraj* for Aurobindo was of larger significance than the Western idea of sovereignty. As a sovereign nation, he wanted India to focus herself not just on the welfare of her own people, but on the welfare of the world at large. Until *Swaraj* is attained, Aurobindo suggests focusing on nothing else. He wrote, “The issue of freedom is therefore the only issue. All other issues are merely delusion and Maya, all other talk is the talk of men that sleep or are in intellectual and moral bondage” (*Bande Mataram II* 617).

Education for Freedom

Speaking to students of the Bengal National College on 23rd August 1907, Aurobindo said:

There are times in a nation’s history when Providence places before it one work, one aim, to which everything else, however high and noble in itself, has to be sacrificed. Such a time has now arrived for our motherland when nothing is dearer than her

service, when everything else is to be directed to that end.

(Bande Mataram II 656)

Aurobindo reminds the people of India that their moral obligation is not as citizens of the British, but as patriots of the nation. He wrote, “The members of a subject nation absolutely destitute of any inalienable rights cannot have any moral obligations as citizens. . . .” Aurobindo argues that when the natives do not have citizenship rights, “they can only have moral obligations as patriots and subject to their patriotic obligations, as members of a social order” (*Bande Mataram II 674*). After emphasising on the patriotic obligations of the people, Aurobindo goes on to describe the duty of the patriot:

He who seeks to fill India with the Nationalist faith must first recognise this supreme necessity of sacrifice. The truth that he inculcates has had its martyrs in every country of the world and it cannot be otherwise in India. Everything that he asks of the nation requires sacrifice, and in order that the nation that has been under subjection for centuries may awaken to the truth of his idea, to the greatness of his faith, he must be the first to set the example. (*Bande Mataram II 677*)

Here, Aurobindo can be seen to be inspired by the popular movements in other parts of the world for national emancipation. As Fanon says, “To fight

for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle” (*Wretched* 233).

Further, Aurobindo suggests education as the solution to purge the society from its evil of divisive feelings. Social reformation, in his opinion, needs to come from within the individual and this cannot be forced from without. For this purpose, he saw national education as a tool to bring in inner change in the individual:

Education on a national scale is an indispensable precondition of our social amelioration. And because such education is impossible except through the aid of state-finance, therefore, even if there were no other reason, the Nationalist must emphasise the immediate need of political freedom without which Indians cannot obtain the necessary control over their money. So long as we are under an alien bureaucracy, we cannot have the funds needed for the purpose of an adequate national education, and what little education we are given falls far short of the Nationalist ideal, being mainly concerned with the fostering of a spirit of sordid contentment with things that be. (*Bande Mataram II* 681)

The prevalent education system being under the control of the colonizers did not permit to convey the nationalist ideals. Aurobindo, here, emphasizes how even for national education to be successful, *Swaraj* is a precondition. Aurobindo felt that most of the social problems that Indian society faces could find solutions through education. Aurobindo emphasised the need to educate children and the necessity for developing patriotic thoughts in children. He wrote:

We have to fill the minds of our boys from childhood with the idea of the country, and present them with that idea at every turn and make their whole young life a lesson in the practice of the virtues which afterwards go to make the patriot and the citizen. If we do not attempt this, we may as well give up our desire to create an Indian nation altogether. . . . (*Bande Mataram II* 455)

Here, it becomes evident that Aurobindo was aware that the nation has to be constructed first in the minds of the people before it can become a physical reality. For this purpose he creates an imaginary of the nation by way of reference to an ancient past. Aurobindo celebrates the glory of the Indian nation in superlative terms and writes: “This great and ancient nation was once the fountain of human light, the apex of human civilisation, the exemplar of courage and humanity, the perfection of good government and settled society, the mother of all religions, the teacher of all wisdom and philosophy”

(*Bande Mataram II* 707). However, he was aware that preaching of nationalism alone would not suffice for the formation of the nation. The masses needed to be educated in a proper manner. As Fanon said:

A bourgeoisie that provides nationalism alone as food for the masses fails in its mission and gets caught up in a whole series of mishaps. But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley. (*Wretched* 204)

The humanistic aspect of nationalism took in its lead efforts to imbue the spirit of nationalism in plays, poems, songs and other forms of creative writing that were generated in different parts of the land. Aurobindo exposes the changes in outlook of the nation, which were reflected in the emerging tastes and trends in literature:

In the old days of a narrow life and confined aspirations, we were satisfied with the production of romantic poetry and novels varied by occasional excursions into academic philosophy and criticism. Nowadays the heart of the nation is rising to higher things; history, the patriotic dramas, political writings, songs of national aspiration, draughts from the fountain of our ancient living religion and thought are almost

the sole literature which command a hearing. . . . The new-born nation is eagerly seeking after its development and organization and anything which will help it and widen its sphere of useful knowledge, will deserve and gain its attention. (*Bande Mataram II* 710-11)

The change in movements of literature in favour of nationalism is seen by Aurobindo as a sign that the anti-colonial engagement is moving in the right direction. As Fanon remarked, “In fact, the progress of national consciousness among the people modifies and gives precision to the literary utterances of the native intellectual” (*Wretched* 239).

Aurobindo critiqued the outlook that holds that the unity of the nation precludes the presence of any differences. He opined that unity does not have a precondition of lack of differences:

There is a cant phrase which is always on our lips in season and out of season, and it is the cry for unity. We call it a cant phrase because those who use it, have not the slightest conception of what they mean when they use it, but simply employ it as an effective formula to discourage independence in thought and progressiveness in action. It is not the reality of united thought and action which they desire, it is merely the appearance of unity. “Do not let the Englishman think we are not entirely at

one on any and every question,” that is the bottom idea underlying this formula. It is a habit of mind born of the spirit of dependence and weakness. It is a fosterer of falsehood and encourages cowardice and insincerity. “Be your views what they may, suppress them, for they will spoil our unity; swallow your principles, they will spoil our unity; do not battle for what you think to be the right, it will spoil our unity; leave necessary things undone, for the attempt to do them will spoil our unity”; this is the cry. The prevalence of a dead and lifeless unity is the true index of national degradation, quite as much as the prevalence of a living unity is the index of national greatness.

(Bande Mataram II 720-21)

Aurobindo holds that diversities can be more unifying than similarities, and an enforced unity is ineffectual since it retards independent progressive thought. Aurobindo’s vision of the Indian nation is of communities of peoples who celebrate their differences. There may be local differences and changes in geography, culture, tradition and languages from place to place, but this does not in any way affect the unity of the nation. As pointed out by Alon Confino and Ajay Skaria:

This local already is India; it already is the national; it is the fact that makes India possible. On the other hand, there is also a gap

between this local and Bharat Mata; the two have to be constantly brought together in a fusion; the local has to realise itself as Bharat Mata, as the national. Much of the work that nationalist thought set itself involved bringing about this fusion; hence, of course, the repeated emphasis on building patriotism and national awareness. (8)

However, bringing the local to realize the nation does not mean erasing the differences that exist between them. The fusion has to be brought about by retaining these differences and at the same time moving ahead in progression.

Aurobindo envisioned significant changes in the methods of education to bring about nationalistic spirit in children. This would help them to understand the roots of the nation in which they live. He gives an example of how one particular subject gets taught in a school and what modifications could be made:

We shall take the simple subject of geography as an illustration. Imagine how this subject is presently taught in Government and private schools! The students are told about such-and-such a country with so many districts, with their District Officers and so forth; this is the kind of information imparted in geography classes. But how is it useful? When we teach geography in Bengal according to the ideas of National Education, we teach it

in a different way. First we tell the children that India is our Motherland; in this way we make them aware of the gross body of the nation. We tell them about our rivers, Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, etc., and what these rivers mean, not merely where they flow. In our national schools, when we teach the children about Maharashtra we describe the land in which Shivaji lived. Speaking about Punjab, we tell the children about the Punjab of Ranjit Singh. . . . In Government schools the degree-holders know what Schopenhauer has to say, but they have hardly any knowledge of the spiritual foundations of our own thought.

(Bande Mataram II 813-15)

Aurobindo's suggestions to refer to India as the "Motherland," to teach the "meaning" of the rivers, the emphasis on the great tradition of heroes, all indicate the spiritual fervour that he wished to endow education with. Here, again, the fusion of the local with the national is attempted by emphasising on the common spiritual bases of the land. Further, the national education would also provide the students practical training enabling them to earn a livelihood:

Yet in our programme of National Education we do impart practical knowledge to our students. In our schools the students learn about science in depth and not just superficially. And they are taught many vocational subjects, such as carpentry and

smithy, along with science. The result is that when a student comes out of our schools, he does not find it difficult to earn a monthly wage of twenty-five or thirty rupees. (*Bande Mataram II* 816)

It can be seen that the education envisaged by Aurobindo was not narrow but aimed at the all-round development of the individual. As M. K. Raina points out, “The idea is to provide facilities for varieties of faculties, varieties of subjects and various combinations of pursuits of knowledge, power, harmony and skill in work” (376).

Recognizing the importance of the mother tongue in shaping the intellect of students, Aurobindo proposed to impart education in the mother tongue:

In our schools we give education up to the fifth standard in the mother-tongue of the students; teaching the children through English is harmful. Some people object to the use of Indian languages, saying that our languages do not have an adequate vocabulary for teaching certain subjects. But our answer is simple: first experience it. The seventh standard in our national schools is equivalent to the intermediate courses conducted by the universities. In our colleges we conduct a four-year course. A college student usually studies a single subject and for that

purpose special emphasis is given to the use of the English language. In spite of that, English is not given primary importance in the syllabus of our system of National Education; it has the status of a second language. (*Bande Mataram II* 816)

In another context, giving vent to his ideas on education, Aurobindo emphasised that “[t]he mother-tongue is the proper medium of education and therefore the first energies of the child should be directed to the thorough mastering of the medium” (*Early* 394). Aurobindo seems to have been aware that such an emphasis on mother tongue would also address the plurality of the Indian nation which is home to many regional languages.

Nationalism as Religion

For Aurobindo, the Indian nation was not just a geographic entity peopled by diverse sects of human beings. In one of his earlier writings, he brings in several terms, which are specifically understood to be Hindu religious labels. However, the religion that Aurobindo expresses is not patently the religion practiced by a sect of people. In a pamphlet titled “Bhawani Mandir,” which was put in as evidence in the Alipore Bomb Case, Aurobindo wrote:

For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions

of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha-Mardini sprang into being from the Shaktis of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred millions of people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of *tamas*, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons. To get rid of *tamas* we have but to wake the Brahma within. (*Bande Mataram I* 83)

The use of religious metaphors like “*Shakti*” can be seen as an essentialist strategy to counter the colonialist forces. Whereas “*Shakti*” in Sanskrit basically only means ‘energy,’ in this context the repetitive use of “*Shakti*” along with the name of the goddess “*Bhawani Mahisha-Mardini*” assumes a special significance. As Fanon puts it, the “terms which are so profoundly ambivalent take on during the colonial epoch a sacramental signification” (*Wretched* 68). According to Fanon, it is the creation of meaning through the sacred. Such hallowed metaphors are frequently used by Aurobindo to emphasise the religious nature of the nationalism which he followed and recommended. However, it needs to be mentioned that it is not the religion in the sense of ‘faith.’ Because of the recurrent use of images from Hindu religious symbolism, it is easy to brand Aurobindo as a Hindu communalist. However, such a labelling would be highly reductionist and lopsided view of the broad spectrum of the thought of Aurobindo. Since he was a politician

who later went on to become a spiritual leader, the name of Aurobindo comes up whenever the question of religion and politics arises. Peter Heehs points out that both left-wing and right-wing thinkers have done equal disservice to Aurobindo with their comments. Heehs alleges that while the right-wing celebrate him as a “mascot” of the Hindu religion, the liberal-left treat him as a “whipping-boy” and condemn him as a communalist (152). Both are wrong, because Aurobindo was neither. Heehs observes that such comments are made by people who have no “adequate knowledge of Aurobindo’s oeuvre” and also without taking the historical and ideological background of his texts into consideration (153).

There are many examples which demonstrate that Aurobindo’s use of apparently religious metaphors was solely for the purpose of evoking nationalist spirit in the people. For instance, while Aurobindo elaborates on the various stages of nationalism, he uses mythical imagery from the story of Krishna to explicate his theory:

For all great movements, for all ideas that have a destiny before them, there are four seasons of life-development. There is first a season of secret or quasi-secret growth when the world knows nothing of this momentous birth which time has engendered. . . . Then there comes the leaping of the great name to light, the sudden coming from Gokul to Mathura, the amazement, alarm

and fury of the doomed powers and greatnesses. . . . This is the second period, of emergence, of the struggle of the idea to live, of furious persecution, of miraculous persistence and survival, when the old world looks with alarm and horror on this new and portentous force. . . . That is its third period, the season of triumph when the tyrant meets face to face the man of his own blood and sprung from seed of his own fostering who is to destroy him, and in the moment when he thinks to slay his enemy feels the grasp of the avenger on his hair and the sword of doom in his heart. Last is the season of rule and fulfilment, the life of Krishna at Dwaraka, when the victorious idea lives out its potent and unhindered existence, works its will with a world which has become in its hands as clay in the hands of the potter. . . . (*Bande Mataram II* 744-45)

To see this comparison of the myth of Krishna to the growth of nationalist movement as propaganda of the Hindu religion would be highly simplistic as the focus of the discourse of Aurobindo is on the nationalist movement and not on the religious idea. The metaphors of religion here, are mere vehicles to carry the idea of nationalism to the masses, deliberately avoiding motifs and themes of the colonialists. Partha Chatterjee points out that metaphoric polemics used by nationalists are not just “stylistic devices” but political statements:

The polemic is not a mere stylistic device which a dispassioned analyst can calmly separate out of a pure doctrine. It is part of the ideological content of nationalism which takes as its adversary a contrary discourse – the discourse of colonialism. Pitting itself against the reality of colonial rule – which appears before it as an existent, almost palpable, historical truth – nationalism seeks to assert the feasibility of entirely new political possibilities. These are its political claims which colonialist discourse haughtily denies. (*Nationalist* 40)

Such a political thesis becomes obvious when Aurobindo goes on to say that as per these stages common for nations, India was then in the second stage of its history (*Bande Mataram II* 747). Aurobindo carries forward the mythical metaphor of the story of Krishna as a tool of resistance to the colonial ploys for dominance:

As neither the milk of Putana nor the hoofs of the demon could destroy the infant Krishna, so neither Riponism nor Poona prosecutions could check the growth of Nationalism while yet it was an indistinct force; and as neither Kansa's wiles nor his vishakanyas nor his mad elephants nor his wrestlers could kill Krishna revealed in Mathura, so neither a revival of Riponism nor the poison of discord sown by bureaucratic allurements, nor

Fullerism plus hooliganism, nor prosecution under cover of legal statutes can slay Nationalism now that it has entered the arena. Nationalism is an avatara and cannot be slain. Nationalism is a divinely appointed shakti of the Eternal and must do its God-given work before it returns to the bosom of the Universal Energy from which it came. (*Bande Mataram II* 749-50)

Such comparisons of India to Krishna and the British to Putana and nationalist struggle to “shakti of the Eternal” have significance because the colonial narratives represented India as weak and puerile and the British as strong and powerful (Fabish 283). It became necessary for nationalists like Aurobindo to articulate with the help of an epistemology which will remain outside the purview of the western epistemology that always attempted to appropriate and control native voices. His knowledge of the *Puranas* and the *Vedanta* came in handy for Aurobindo to articulate his ideas in a diction which cannot be appropriated.

Aurobindo goes on to say that the nationalist movement can be successful only if the movement is participated in by people cutting across various classes in society. Aurobindo’s secular outlook with respect to his views on nationalism is evidenced by the following passage:

Nationalism depends for its success on the awakening and organizing of the whole strength of the nation; it is therefore vitally important for Nationalism that the politically backward classes should be awakened and brought into the current of political life; the great mass of orthodox Hinduism which was hardly even touched by the old Congress movement, the great slumbering mass of Islam which has remained politically inert throughout the last century, the shopkeepers, the artisan class, the immense body of illiterate and ignorant peasantry, the submerged classes, even the wild tribes and races still outside the pale of Hindu civilisation, Nationalism can afford to neglect and omit none. . . . It is not afraid of Pan-Islamism or of any signs of the growth of a separate Mahomedan self-consciousness but rather welcomes them. (*Bande Mataram II* 795-96)

This passage evidences that the nationalism that Aurobindo propounds is inclusive in nature and does not leave out any community from any part of the Indian subcontinent. He hopes to involve all these communities in the nationalist movement so that colonialism gives way to the formation of the Indian nation. Aurobindo holds that the nation is not an imagined entity as the British thought of the Indian nation, and which Anderson suggested many

decades later. In a speech that he delivered in Bombay in 1908, Aurobindo said:

According to their thinking, what we call a nation is an imaginary thing, not a reality. In India, they say, there are thousands of castes and subcastes, countless sects and subsects, and any number of religious creeds with differences of opinion and practice; in that case the use of the word “national” in the Indian situation becomes meaningless. But these people do not really understand what is meant by a nation. They suggest that a nation can only come into existence when these castes and creeds are abolished. But this line of argument — that we will have a nation only when everyone in the country has the same religion and there is only one caste — is a fallacious one, for religion and caste are not permanent aspects of a nation. Other people argue that although India is a vast country geographically, still it cannot be termed a nation. (*Bande Mataram II* 810-11)

Aurobindo argues that nation does not attempt to create ‘sameness,’ in language, religion, or any such social aspects. If it attempted sameness, the Indian nation would never be, since there are many faiths which are followed and numerous languages which are spoken.

For Aurobindo, nationalism is not just a political affair and therefore he blends it with religion making it an intense personal affair. However, to term it 'religious nationalism' would be erroneous. He emphasises "the religious spirit" in carrying out the ideals of nationalism and not any particular faith:

What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live. Let no man dare to call himself a Nationalist if he does so merely with a sort of intellectual pride, thinking that he is more patriotic, thinking that he is something higher than those who do not call themselves by that name. If you are going to be a Nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of Nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit. You must remember that you are the instrument of God for the salvation of your own country. You must live as the instruments of God. (*Bande Mataram II* 818)

Aurobindo can be seen to equate nationalism to religion and there is no attempt to link it to any particular religion. He calls for "religious spirit" in the work of nationalism for the "salvation" of the country, just as someone would follow a religion for their personal salvation. Aurobindo held that this religion is not just a matter of individual faith; it is a commitment to the society, the nation, and the world at large:

The ideal is that of humanity in God, of God in humanity, the ancient ideal of the sanatana dharma but applied as it has never been applied before to the problem of politics and the work of national revival. To realise that ideal, to impart it to the world is the mission of India. She has evolved a religion which embraces all that the heart, the brain, the practical faculty of man can desire but she has not yet applied it to the problems of modern politics. This therefore is the work which she has still to do before she can help humanity; the necessity of this mission is the justification for her resurgence. . . . (*Bande Mataram II* 1017)

When Aurobindo speaks about “*sanatana dharma*” in the context of nationalist movement, it is easy but erroneous to link it to religion as practiced by any particular sect of people. Since Aurobindo sees nationalism itself as religion, “such a view requires some reinterpretation of traditionally asocial and apolitical concerns such as *yoga*, *mokṣa*, *dharma*, etc., into distinctly social and political concepts” (Johnson, “Task” 508). His idea of *sanatana dharma* does not refer to Hinduism: “This *sanatana dharma* has many scriptures, Veda, Vedanta, Gita, Upanishad, Darshana, Purana, Tantra, nor could it reject the Bible or the Koran . . .” (*Karmayogin* 26). Aurobindo further avers that such a religion of nationalism, therefore requires moral fortitude and not just religious sentiments: “The qualities of courage,

frankness, love and justice are the stuff of which a Nationalist should be made” (*Bande Mataram II* 975). It is thus evident that Aurobindo was exhorting to bring in the passionate nature of religious feelings into the nationalist movement, rather than propagating any particular religion. Such an exhortation becomes necessary, since the task of the nationalist is to bring the body of segregated peoples together into a nation.

In the nationalist struggle, Aurobindo suggested passive resistance instead of an active armed resistance. He was against using violence in the nationalistic struggle not because of ethical reasons, but because physical fighting could not be recommended for the nationalists given their limited available resources:

The morality of the Kshatriya justifies violence in times of war, and boycott is a war. Nobody blames the Americans for throwing British tea into Boston harbour, nor can anybody blame similar action in India on moral grounds. It is reprehensible from the point of view of law, of social peace and order, not of political morality. It has been eschewed by us because it is unwise and carries the battle on to a ground where we are comparatively weak, from a ground where we are strong. (*Bande Mataram II* 1120-21)

Here, Aurobindo differs from Mahatma Gandhi who was against use of violence as a means of resistance. As Jonathan Hyslop observes: “For Gandhi, political means had always to be consistent with their ends, and the satyagrahi could thus never act in a violent manner” (44). However, Aurobindo makes it clear that the Nationalism that he propounds is not extremism:

Extremism in the sense of unreasoning violence of spirit and the preference of desperate methods, because they are desperate, is not the heart of Nationalism. The Nationalist is no advocate of lawlessness for its own sake, on the contrary he has a deeper respect for the essence of law than anyone else, because the building up of a nation is his objective and he knows well that without a profound reverence for law national life cannot persist and attain a sound and healthy development. (*Bande Mataram II* 1111)

At the same time Aurobindo justified employment of violent methods in the national struggle and said, “Politics is concerned with masses of mankind and not with individuals. To ask masses of mankind to act as saints, to rise to the height of divine love and practise it in relation to their adversaries or oppressors, is to ignore human nature” (*Bande Mataram II* 1117). He further clarifies his stance by saying that it should not be seen as violence but as a method of defence for safe-guarding oneself. As Viswanath Prasad Varma

points out, “Aurobindo is evolving Political Vedantism to support the thesis that at times armed revolt could become necessary against the constituted authority” (232). However, Aurobindo gives also the example of boycott, which, though a means of resistance is nevertheless non-violent:

But in reality the boycott is not an act of hate. It is an act of self-defence, of aggression for the sake of self-preservation. To call it an act of hate is to say that a man who is being slowly murdered, is not justified in striking out at his murderer. To tell that man that he must desist from using the first effective weapon that comes to his hand because the blow would be an act of hate, is precisely on a par with this deprecation of boycott. Doubtless the self-defender is not precisely actuated by feelings of holy sweetness towards his assailant, but to expect so much from human nature is impracticable. (*Bande Mataram II* 1118)

It can thus be seen that Aurobindo does not occlude violence or extremism as a means of national emancipation. As Fanon puts it, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (*Wretched* 35). However the violence involved in the decolonizing project need not always manifest as an external phenomenon.

Aurobindo paid flowery tributes to the reformers in the field of religion like Sri Ramakrishna, whose teachings, though apparently religious, have also

contributed to the development of the nation:

In Bengal there came a flood of religious truth. Certain men were born, men whom the educated world would not have recognised if that belief, if that God within them had not been there to open their eyes, men whose lives were very different from what our education, our Western education, taught us to admire. One of them, the man who had the greatest influence and has done the most to regenerate Bengal, could not read and write a single word. He was a man who had been what they call absolutely useless to the world. But he had this one divine faculty in him, that he had more than faith and had realised God. He was a man who lived what many would call the life of a madman, a man without intellectual training, a man without any outward sign of culture or civilisation, a man who lived on the alms of others, such a man as the English-educated Indian would ordinarily talk of as one useless to society; even if he does not call him a bane to society, he will call him useless to society. He will say, "This man is ignorant. What does he know? What can he teach me who have received from the West all that it can teach?" But God knew what he was doing. He sent that man to Bengal and set him in the temple of Dakshineswar in Calcutta, and from North and South and East and West, the

educated men, men who were the pride of the university, who had studied all that Europe can teach, came to fall at the feet of this ascetic. The work of salvation, the work of raising India was begun. (*Bande Mataram II* 821-22)

Partha Chatterjee makes a deep analysis of the influence of Ramakrishna upon the middle class of Bengal and writes that his teachings have created “a new religion for urban domestic life” (*Nation* 36). Popularizing such a figure who lives “the life of a madman” and is without any “culture or civilization” is part of the strategy of nationalists like Aurobindo to abrogate the western standards of sensibility, education, culture and civilization. Further, Aurobindo considered Sri Ramakrishna to be an *avatar*, a being who is born with godly powers:

Of all these souls Sri Ramakrishna was the last and greatest, for while others felt God in a single or limited aspect, he felt Him in His illimitable unity as the sum of an illimitable variety. In him the spiritual experiences of the millions of saints who had gone before were renewed and united. Sri Ramakrishna gave to India the final message of Hinduism to the world. A new era dates from his birth, an era in which the peoples of the earth will be lifted for a while into communion with God and spirituality become the dominant note of human life. What Christianity failed to do, what Mahomedanism strove to accomplish in times

as yet unripe, what Buddhism half-accomplished for a brief period and among a limited number of men, Hinduism as summed up in the life of Sri Ramakrishna has to attempt for all the world. This is the reason of India's resurgence, this is why God has breathed life into her once more, why great souls are at work to bring about her salvation, why a sudden change is coming over the hearts of her sons. The movement of which the first outbreak was political, will end in a spiritual consummation. (*Bande Mataram II* 979)

When Aurobindo invokes Ramakrishna in his nationalist discourse, it is significant because Ramakrishna was in no way involved in the anti-colonial movement. Yet, his contribution towards bringing the people together under his spiritual fold is perceived by Aurobindo as a precursor to national unification. Aurobindo accusations against religions like Christianity should be seen in the context of colonialism which justifies colonization in the name of religion. Moreover, the teachings of Ramakrishna are quite different from the ritualistic practices followed in the Hindu religion and are more spiritual than religious.

The Ideal of *Swaraj*

One of the major aims of the Nationalist movement was *Swaraj* or self-governance. Aurobindo clarified this in a speech that he gave in Nasik in 1908

and said: “Swaraj means administration of affairs in a country by her own people on their own strength in accordance with the welfare of the people without even nominal suzerainty, which is the object which we wish to attain” (*Bande Mataram II* 833). He goes on to use the Indian metaphor of *mukti* or liberation of the soul as an equivalent for *Swaraj*:

When we speak of Swaraj we mean the principle of national life independent of any form of government. The word Swaraj is not a new word but an old one. It is as old as literature and civilisation. The meaning of Swaraj, in our ancient literature, is the spiritual condition of the soul which attains to Mukti. When the soul is independent of everything but itself, when it exists in the joy of its light and greatness, when it is Mukta, that is Swaraj. (*Bande Mataram II* 840)

The freedom of the soul from bondage is compared by Aurobindo to the freedom of the land from external control. *Swaraj* was a term that found favour with Gandhi too, and he also used the term in both the mundane sense of self-government as well as in a spiritual sense. Anthony Parel observes that Gandhi envisioned “political swaraj in the sense of home rule for India and spiritual swaraj in the sense of inner ‘self-rule’ for Indians” (154). In an article on *Swaraj* published in 1908, Aurobindo establishes the preeminence of *Swaraj* above every other ideal:

Swaraj is the alchemic stone, the parash-pathar, and we have it in our hands. It will turn to gold everything we touch. Village samitis are good, not for the sake of village samitis but for the sake of Swaraj. Boycott is good, not for the sake of Boycott but for the sake of Swaraj. Swadeshi is good, not for the sake of Swadeshi but for the sake of Swaraj. Arbitration is good, not for the sake of arbitration but for the sake of Swaraj. If we forget Swaraj and win anything else we shall be like the seeker whose belt was turned indeed to gold but the stone of alchemy was lost to him for ever. (*Bande Mataram II 874*)

Aurobindo pinned high hopes on the role of India in the world: “India is the *guru* of the nations, the physician of the human soul in its profounder maladies; she is destined once more to new-mould the life of the world and restore the peace of the human spirit.” Yet he also believed that without attaining *Swaraj*, India would not be able to fulfil its role in the world and added: “But Swaraj is the necessary condition of her work and before she can do the work, she must fulfil the condition” (906).

In a speech that he delivered in Dhulia in 1908, Aurobindo highlighted the major elements in the nationalist struggle for freedom:

There are four subjects which usually form the subject matter of a Nationalist’s speech. They are, first, Swadeshi; second,

boycott; third, Swaraj; and fourth, national education. Swadeshi is the method, the way, the road by which the nation advances. Boycott is only the other side of Swadeshi, and both the Swadeshi and the boycott movements are actually encouraged in principle in the greater part of this country. National education is the training of the mind and heart of the younger generation. Swaraj is the goal of our national life. (*Bande Mataram II* 837)

Aurobindo acknowledges the active involvement of people from all walks of life who protested against the colonial policy of divide and rule. He gives the example of Maulavi Liakat Hussain, who, even as he knew very little Bengali led the movement in protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905:

The example of Maulavi Liakat Hussain is not the only one. There are many such examples. Maulavi Liakat Hussain does not even know Bengali properly. But the endeavours and self-sacrifice made by this brave and noble-minded person are indescribable! There are three prosecutions pending against him at present. He not only accepted with a smile three years' imprisonment recently inflicted on him, but expressed his obligation to the Magistrate for having afforded him an opportunity to serve his country! (*Bande Mataram II* 859)

Such open defiance, though it was not uncommon, serves to inspire people to join the nationalist movement since they are able to identify with these leaders. For Aurobindo, bringing people together for the national question was the urgent need for any success in this domain. The nation had to be organized before it could fight for its freedom:

If the country is to be free, it must first organize itself so as to be able to maintain its freedom. The winning of freedom is an easy task, the keeping of it is less easy. The first needs only one tremendous effort in which all the energies of the country must be concentrated; the second requires a united, organized and settled strength. If these two conditions are satisfied, nothing more is needed, for all else is detail and will inevitably follow.

(Bande Mataram II 939)

Here, Aurobindo emphasizes the urgency to form the nation which is as important as achieving independence. Unless the diverse people are able to adhere together as a nation, there is the risk of splintering even after freedom is won. Aurobindo said that people from different professions and trades, different communities and tribes, learned and the illiterate, followers of various religions have all to come together in the making of the nation:

The new overleaps every barrier; it calls to the clerk at his counter, the trader in his shop, the peasant at his plough; it

summons the Brahmin from his temple and takes the hand [of] the Chandala in his degradation; it seeks out the student in his College, the schoolboy at his books, it touches the very child in its mother's arms & the secluded zenana has thrilled to its voice; its eye searches the jungle for the Santal and travels the hills for the wild tribes of the mountains. It cares nothing for age or sex or caste or wealth or education or respectability; it mocks at the talk of a stake in the country; it spurns aside the demand for a property qualification or a certificate of literacy. It speaks to the illiterate or the man in the street in such rude vigorous language as he best understands, to youth & the enthusiast in accents of poetry, in language of fire, to the thinker in the terms of philosophy and logic, to the Hindu it repeats the name of Kali, to the Mahomedan it spurs to action for the glory of Islam. It cries to all to come forth, to help in God's work & remake a nation, each with what his creed or his culture, his strength, his manhood or his genius can give to the new nationality. (*Bande Mataram II* 1106)

Aurobindo's exhortation to join the nationalist movement is addressed to people from different communities, trades and religions. To Aurobindo, the responsibility to uphold the national culture did not belong to any particular

community. As a heterogeneous entity, nationalism is all inclusive and has the single aim of freeing the nation from colonial control. As Fanon said:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on. (*Wretched* 233).

Aurobindo in his writings attempted to bring together such a vast “body of efforts” of people from different parts of the land in the effort for the formation of the nation. Such a national culture, though obviously heterogeneous in nature, would serve to contribute to the perennial existence of the nation once it is formed.

Beyond the Nation

Aurobindo saw the development of the idea of the nation as a natural concomitant in the path of the growth of the community:

The family, the commune, the clan or tribe, the class, the city state or congeries of tribes, the nation, the empire are so many stages in this progress and constant enlargement. If the smaller aggregates were destroyed as soon as the larger are successfully formed, this graduation would result in no complexity; but Nature does not follow this course. (*Human Cycle* 285)

He does not see the idea of a nation as a threat to the subjective identity of the individuals who form part of the large community called the nation. Rather, he wants to see it growing beyond its boundaries to include all communities of human beings spread around the globe. He says, “It was the family, the tribe or the city, the *polis*; it became the clan, the caste and the class, the *kula*, the *gens*. It is now the nation. Tomorrow or the day after it may be all mankind” (*Human Cycle* 291).

The obsession for the nation has led the world into complications, which were possibly not expected during nationalist uprisings. Benedict Anderson points to this danger that seems to have plagued many nations:

And many ‘old nations,’ once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by ‘sub’-nationalisms within their borders – nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day. The reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism,’ so long prophesied, is not remotely in

sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. (3)

At a time when sub-nationalisms could not be imagined, Aurobindo realized that the idea of the nation is not the consummation of the aspirations of the people. He also did not see the concept of a nation as a culmination of his ideal of unification. He saw it only as a step leading to an even higher ideal of human unity. According to him, “The first principle of human unity, groupings being necessary, should be a system of free and natural groupings which would leave no room for internal discords, mutual incompatibilities and repression and revolt as between race and race or people and people” (*Human Cycle* 429). However, such a human unity should have the nation as its basic unit since that has been created as the basis by the natural evolution of the community (432). Aurobindo presents a clear idea of his dream of a human unity of a World-Union or a World-State:

The ultimate result must be the formation of a World-State and the most desirable form of it would be a federation of free nationalities in which all subjection or forced inequality and subordination of one to another would have disappeared and, though some might preserve a greater natural influence, all would have an equal status. A confederacy would give the greatest freedom to the nations constituting the World-State, but

this might give too much room for fissiparous or centrifugal tendencies to operate; a federal order would then be the most desirable. (594)

Aurobindo emphasizes that such a world union should be federal in character which would give complete freedom to the constituent nations. Otherwise it would be a mere magnification of the idea of the nation-state and the problems of the nation-state would reappear in an amplified form. Aurobindo expects detractors to such a utopian ideal and says that the fact that it is not practical in the present world situation is not reason enough for a summary dismissal of the concept:

We can find no safe conclusion upon the immediate impracticability of its creation or on the many difficulties which would stand in its way; for past experience shows that the argument of impracticability is of very little value. What the practical man of today denies as absurd and impracticable is often enough precisely the thing that future generations set about realising and eventually in some form or other succeed in bringing into effective existence. (*Human Cycle* 465)

Therefore, Aurobindo proposes the concept of “internationalism” not as against, but as beyond nationalism. He defines internationalism as “the attempt of the human mind and life to grow out of the national idea and form

and even in a way to destroy it in the interest of the larger synthesis of mankind” (548). He observes that cosmopolitan habits of life are quite common and that there are many people who are “as much or more citizens of the world as citizens of their own nation” (551). Though he is himself a spiritualist, he bemoans the fact that religion has contributed hardly anything to this ideal of unification. “Religion, which ought to have led the way, but owing to its greater dependence on its external parts and its infrarational rather than its spiritual impulses has been as much, or even more, a sower of discord as a teacher of unity . . .” (551).

Aurobindo argues that the reasoning that applied to the formation of the nation applies also to the International State. The present lack of coherence or felt need among various peoples across the world existed even in the formative stages of the nation:

For the nation too was at first more or less artificially formed out of incoherent elements actually brought together by the necessity of a subconscious idea, though apparently it was done only by physical force and the force of circumstances. As a national ego formed which identified itself with the geographical body of the nation and developed in it the psychological instinct of national unity and the need of its satisfaction, so a collective human ego will develop in the

international body and will evolve in it the psychological instinct of human unity and the need of its satisfaction. (*Human Cycle* 558)

Nevertheless, the internationalism envisaged by Aurobindo is not a dominant singular State of control, which would only be a mere replication of the Empire-State. His idea of human unity does not base itself on domination, but on free amalgamation:

There is likely to be either a centralised World-State or a looser world-union which may be either a close federation or a simple confederacy of the peoples for the common ends of mankind. The last form is the most desirable, because it gives sufficient scope for the principle of variation which is necessary for the free play of life and the healthy progress of the race. (574)

Such a dream of a federal State is what Aurobindo has for the future. He emphasises on the “principle of variation” and not on a unity that attempts to remove differences. He sees humanity as a single unit which shall progress, not in spite of, but because of its inherent differences.

Chapter Two

Strategies of Resistance

The responses of Aurobindo to the colonial experience were conditioned or determined by the awareness that the idea of the nation needs to be 'constructed' in the minds of people before there can be efforts for decolonization. Anti-colonial or postcolonial discourse is thus also a discourse on the making of a nation. The nation is not out there, it has to be made, it has to be constructed first in the minds of the people and then as a physical political entity.

The decolonizing project is marked by efforts on the part of the colonized to resist the colonizing mission with the help of various strategies ranging from open revolt and struggle to propaganda through literature and the arts. This chapter focuses on the various strategies that Aurobindo employed to resist the British colonialism, and the postcolonial characteristics of such resistances. For Aurobindo, the bases of his policy of resistance were *Swaraj*, *Swadeshi*, Boycott and National Education (*Bande Mataram II* 1157). However, these were just the superficial aspects of his declared methods of resistance. There were subtler aspects like language, identity, history, myths and syncretism which play their part in underlining the decolonizing project in the works of Aurobindo.

Beginning the Revolution

Aurobindo's writings and speeches during the period 1890 to 1908 have been compiled into two volumes with the title *Bande Mataram*. *Bande Mataram* was also the title of the nationalist newspaper in which most of these writings originally appeared. In what may be termed as the formative stages of the nationalist in Aurobindo, these writings throw light on the revolutionary nature of his thought. The significance of these writings is suitably highlighted by Prema Nandakumar: "Sri Aurobindo's *Bande Mataram* writings mark a page of golden fire in Indian prose in English. . . . It was he who transformed an English political journal into a 'war-cry' all over the subcontinent" (2).

Aurobindo returned to India in 1893 after his studies in England. He was frustrated with the prevailing nationalist movement under the leadership of the Indian National Congress and expressed his dissatisfaction in a series of articles titled "New Lamps for Old." These articles were originally published in *Indu Prakash*, a Bombay weekly newspaper in Marathi-English during 1893 and 1894. During that time, Aurobindo was working in the Baroda State Service. At that time, the policy of the National Congress was to request the British rulers for native representation in governance. Aurobindo did not believe that the mendicant policy of the Indian National Congress would bear any fruit and described the Congress leadership of the Indian masses as the

blind leading the blind. He realized that the Congress was becoming a comprador class serving the interests of the British, and it was time for an alternate force in place of the Congress, since it belied the expectations of the Indian people:

I say, of the Congress, then, this, — that its aims are mistaken, that the spirit in which it proceeds towards their accomplishment is not a spirit of sincerity and whole-heartedness, and that the methods it has chosen are not the right methods, and the leaders in whom it trusts, not the right sort of men to be leaders; — in brief, that we are at present the blind led, if not by the blind, at any rate by the one-eyed. (*Bande Mataram I 21*)

When using the metaphor from the New Testament of the blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14), Aurobindo uses his condition of synergy engendered by an English education to oppose both the colonizers and their comprador partners in the Congress. As Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, “Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia . . .” (149). Aurobindo’s efforts were to break free the national movement from the clutches of these ‘comprador intelligentsia’ and to take it to the masses. It was not an easy task, however, since at that time the Congress was the only formidable body claiming to represent the Indian

people. Nevertheless, Aurobindo held that the Congress represented only the new middle class of the Indian population. It had neither any contact nor any affiliation to the proletariat, who are the large mass of the Indian land. Just as the House of Commons represented just the English Aristocracy and the middle class of England, the Congress too represented only the Indian middle class, who were the privileged section of the native population:

For it is really from this class that the Congress movement draws its origin, its support and its most enthusiastic votaries. And if I were asked to describe their class by a single name, I should not hesitate to call it our new middle class. For here too English goods have driven out native goods: our society has lost its old landmarks and is being demarcated on the English model. (*Bande Mataram I 24*)

Aurobindo saw the Congress as incapable of producing a counter-discourse to fight the colonialist agenda. It must be remembered that the Congress was at that time the largest native force the British had to deal with. However, Aurobindo here points out that the Congress itself had been modified to become Euro-centric in its values and attitudes. Instead of countering the hegemonic machinations of the metropolis, they had succumbed to become a neo-colonialist native elite class to sustain the colonial domination. As Pathak observes, “[Aurobindo] was perhaps the first politician in India who had the

courage to declare that nothing short of absolute independence should be the goal of the nation. In this his views coincided with those of Lokamanya Tilak. He had no truck with the moderates and criticized even Gokhale” (2).

In 1909, the Indian National Congress planned to conduct one of its sessions in London to impress upon the British its demands. Aurobindo came down heavily upon such a plan and went to the extent of saying that the visit of a spiritual leader like Swami Vivekananda to the West has produced more outcome than such political sessions of the Congress planned in London could ever create:

In that respect the visit of Swami Vivekananda to America and the subsequent work of those who followed him did more for India than a hundred London Congresses could effect. That is the true way of awaking sympathy, — by showing ourselves to the nations as a people with a great past and ancient civilisation who still possess something of the genius and character of our forefathers, have still something to give the world and therefore deserve freedom, — by proof of our manliness and fitness, not by mendicancy. (*Karmayogin* 193)

Aurobindo found it immensely important to situate the Indian civilization as one which is live and vibrant and that which continues to contribute to the world. Such an emphasis of social identity and relevance vis-à-vis the West

was also the cornerstone of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda during his travels to the West. Hence, Aurobindo opined that the nationalist struggle should stop looking for guidance from the Congress, which has only policies of “mendicancy.” He observed that to do so would be like fetishising an institution and also would be equivalent to becoming slaves of our own machinery (*Bande Mataram* 12). Rather than holding on to the traditional systems and organizations for attaining self-governance, Aurobindo was for awakening the masses to the need of having a struggle. For this, he found it necessary to appeal to all classes of people to join in the national movement for liberation:

If certain classes are dominant and others depressed, the result is that the potential strength of the depressed classes is so much valuable force lost to the sum of national strength. The dominant classes may undoubtedly show a splendid development and may make the nation great and famous in history; but when all is said the strength of the nation is then only the sum of the strength of a few privileged classes. The great weakness of India in the past has been the political depression and nullity of the mass of the population. It was not from the people of India that India was won by Moghul or Briton, but from a small privileged class. On the other hand the strength and success of the Marathas and Sikhs in the eighteenth

century was due to the policy of Shivaji and Guru Govind which called the whole nation into the fighting line. (*Bande Mataram I* 365)

Aurobindo insisted on the strength of the plurality of the nation, which had seen the nation through tough times in the past. His reference to the success of the Marathas and Sikhs is a nativistic call to return to indigenous methods of resistance. Neither the Marathas nor the Sikhs were a formidable force to be considered 'national' in terms of the demography of India. Yet, they were able to garner the strength of the people for success in battles only because their policies were of inclusion and not of exclusion. It may appear that Aurobindo's reference here to the "great weakness of India in the past" contradicts his earlier statement that we are "a people with a great past" (*Karmayogin* 193). The contradiction is only an apparent one in the level of discourse. Whereas it is the strength of the past that enables the construction of the nation, it is the weakness of the past that calls for an unprecedented organization of the nation.

Aurobindo's reference to such regional successes in the Indian mainland is also a solicitation to bring the marginalized of the community into the mainstream. Aurobindo realized that the immediate need for the nation was to gather itself together, irrespective of profession, caste or creed. Referring to anti-British riotings held at Jamalpur, Aurobindo wrote:

They reveal to us, first and foremost, as many incidents of the Swadeshi movement have revealed to us, the great reservoir of potential strength which the Congress movement has for so long a time left untapped. The true policy of the Congress movement should have been from the beginning to gather together under its flag all the elements of strength that exist in this huge country. The Brahmin Pandit and the Mahomedan Maulavi, the caste organisation and the trade-union, the labourer and the artisan, the coolie at his work and the peasant in his field, none of these should have been left out of the sphere of our activities. For each is a strength, a unit of force; and in politics the victory is to the side which can marshal the largest and most closely serried number of such units and handle them most skilfully, not to those who can bring forward the best arguments or talk the most eloquently. (*Bande Mataram I* 126)

Aurobindo was aware that though there was strength in this country, it was dissipated due to various divisive forces, most of which was based on social hierarchy. The privileging of the intellectual class over the proletariat resulted in lesser effort for the colonial exercise for they needed to address only a benign comprador category and the larger mass remained out of the picture. Aurobindo intended to raise a formidable force in the large masses which

would be capable of intimidating the imperialists and felling them by their very roots.

Aurobindo's Views on British Rule in India

Aurobindo accused that the British regime in India had destroyed the land on many fronts. Apart from the physical damage done to the land by plundering of wealth, exploitation of labour and ingenuous trade, it was the degradation of the Indian individual and his loss of self-respect that was even more devastating:

This huge country, this mighty continent once full of the clash of tremendous forces, stirring with high exploits and gigantic ambitions, loud with the voices of the outside world, has become a petty parish; the palace of the Aryan Emperors is now the hut of a crouching slave, small in his ideas, mean in his aspirations, his head sunk, his eyes downcast, so that he cannot see the heavens above him or the magnificent earth around. If one speaks to him of his mighty possibilities, of great deeds that he yet shall do, or seeks to remind him that he is the descendant of kings, he takes the speaker for a madman talking vain things and a derisive smile of pity is his only reply. We hold it to be the greatest injury of all that England has done us, that she has

thus degraded our soul and dwarfed our imagination. (*Bande Mataram II* 988)

The “palace of the Aryan Emperors” and descendance from kings are questionable historically, especially when related to the status of the common man. However, the colonized “reconstructed their past for purposes opposed to those of their rulers and made it the ground for marking out their differences in cultural and political terms” (Guha 3). Even as the Indians had not been living in palaces before the coming in of the British, the difference engendered by colonization is so intense. The magnitude of the shock of being thrown out of one’s own land cannot be put in less powerful words. The very kings may have exploited the native citizen, but that is not comparable to the manipulation of the natives by the British. According to Césaire, “. . . no one colonizes innocently , that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization — and therefore force — is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased . . .” (39). Ranajit Guha accuses that the British augmented the feudal practices “under a government representing the authority of the world’s most advanced bourgeoisie” (26). Hence, Aurobindo calls the British ‘aliens’ who have no business to remain in India:

We believe that the rule of three hundred millions of Indians by an alien bureaucracy not responsible to the nation is a system

unnatural, intrinsically bad and inevitably oppressive, and we do not pretend that we can convince our people of its undesirability without irritating the bureaucracy on one side and generating a strong dislike of the existing system on the other. But our object is constructive and not destructive, to build up our own nation and not to destroy another. (*Bande Mataram II* 635)

In one of his first political articles, Aurobindo wrote that it is of no use requesting the British to offer us concessions and opined that “we must no longer hold out supplicating hands to the English Parliament, like an infant crying to its nurse for a toy. . . .” He also added that “every nation must beat out its own path to salvation with pain and difficulty, and not rely on the tutelage of another” (*Bande Mataram I* 10).

In spite of having been taught largely in the Western system of education, Aurobindo was not blind to the various tactics employed by the British to maintain their hegemony in the Indian land. Rather, because he had a European education, it was easy for Aurobindo to see through the veneer of civilization that the West flaunts. He wrote, “The Romans created a desert and called the result peace; the British in India have destroyed the spirit and manhood of the people and call the result law and order” (*Bande Mataram I* 219-20). Here, Aurobindo compares the British conquest of India to the Roman conquest of Britain. When he remembers the words of Tacitus

regarding the Roman conquest that they created a desert and called it peace, it is history repeating itself. Going forward, Aurobindo compares British colonial rule in India to the Roman slavery system:

The ancient Romans had a class of slaves born in the family and pampered in their childhood by their masters who were called *vernae* and enjoyed a peculiar position of mingled licence and subjection. They were allowed to speak with the most unbounded licence, to abuse their masters, to play tricks sometimes of a most injurious character and were yet indulged — so long as the master was in a good humour; let the master's temper turn sour or break into passion and the lash was called into requisition. The freedom of speech enjoyed by us under the bureaucratic rule has been precisely of this kind. It depended on the will of a despotic administration, and at any moment it could be withdrawn or abridged, at any moment the lash of the law could be brought down on the back of the critic. This freedom of speech was worse than the Russian censorship; for in Russia the editor laboured under no delusion, he knew that freedom of speech was not his, and if he wrote against the administration, it was at his own risk; there was no pretence, no dissimulation on either side. But our freedom of speech has demoralised us, fostered an ignoble mixture of servility and licence, of cringing

and impudence, which are the very temperament of the slave. We were extravagantly pleased with the slightest boons conceded to us and poured out our feelings with fulsome gratitude, or we grew furious at favours withheld and abused the withholders in the same key. (*Bande Mataram II* 970)

Aurobindo neatly depicts the conditional “freedom of speech” offered by the British to the Indian citizens. In the Roman analogy, the “vernae” slaves were given similar ‘freedom’ as long as it pleased the master, there is the constant fear of persecution which pervades. This difference of “persuasion” applied to metropolitan states and “coercion” applied to colonial states is explicated clearly by Ranajit Guha. He remarked that the metropolitan state was “based on a power relation in which the moment of persuasion outweighed that of coercion whereas the colonial state was non-hegemonic with persuasion outweighed by coercion in its structure of dominance” (xii). Aurobindo differentiates the (lack of) “freedom of speech” from the Russian censorship of the 19th century, which did not claim any doling out of freedom. However, the British pretend to be benign like the Roman masters and inflict the cruellest suffering upon the subject people. Here, Aurobindo sees colonialism in terms of a larger history and presents the Indian situation in view of the precedents of that history. The British in India feigned to be the trustees of the country conscientiously working to civilize the ‘uncivilized’ Indians while they were really sucking at the blood of Indian strength. Aurobindo

differentiates British colonialism from the Mughal conquest and says that “India under Mahomedan rule, though greatly disturbed and thrown into continual ferment and revolution, did not lose its power of organic readjustment and development” (*Bande Mataram I* 368). But British imperialism proved itself to be a “domination of a foreign body, foreign in blood, foreign in religion, foreign in interest.” Since it is “superimposed” on the native population, it doesn’t develop any roots in the soil (369). And in the manner of a parasite imposing itself on another body, it sucks the lifeblood of its host:

Consciously or unconsciously the tendency of the intruding body is to break down all the existing organs of national life and to engross all power in itself. The Moghul rule had not this tendency because it immediately naturalised itself in India. British rule has and is forced to have this tendency because it must persist in being an external and intruding presence encamped in the country and not belonging to it. It is doubtful whether there is any example in history of an alien domination which has been so monstrously ubiquitous, inquisitorial and intolerant of any centre of strength in the country other than itself as the British bureaucracy. (*Bande Mataram I* 374)

Aurobindo points out that the Mughal invasion was not as devastating as the British colonisation. The Mughals were settlers unlike the British and were

thus able to ‘naturalise’ themselves in the Indian subcontinent. As suggested by Meenakshi Sharma, “Although India had been invaded and conquered before, the establishment of British rule was unprecedented in terms of the distance between the culture and the worlds of the ruler and the ruled . . .” (28). Neither were the British able to ‘naturalise’ the natives in India as themselves since the colonial enterprise was non-hegemonic in character. As Guha comments, “. . . since it was nonhegemonic it was not possible for that state to assimilate the civil society of the colonized to itself” (vii).

Aurobindo comes down heavily upon the English self-notion of gentlemanliness. Having himself been educated in the Western system, he represented the synergy of cultures capable of valuing the worth of products of both cultures. As pointed out by Ashis Nandy, “He, after all, did not have to disown the West within him to become his version of an Indian” (85-86). Aurobindo criticized the British as being neither just nor moral. He calls them “sentimental” which is why they belie themselves and others to think that they are just and moral (*Bande Mataram I* 10). The Indian population were fooled into believing that the British existed for the development of India and the Indians. The Manicheanism of the British is exposed by Aurobindo when he attacks the ‘othering’ effected on the people of India by the colonial discourse. He says that the nation was hypnotized by the “civilizing mission” of the British rule in India. We were made to think and believe according to the suggestions given by the hypnotist represented by the British (*Bande*

Mataram II 1104). To maintain the spell that they cast they threw breadcrumbs at the ignorant masses duping them into believing that they have inherited heaven. Thus, the countrymen lost their capability to demand their rights and even the existent intellectual abilities got retarded:

Our race has grown just such an old man with stores of knowledge, with ability to feel and desire, but paralysed by simple sluggishness, senile timidity, senile feebleness. If India is to survive, she must be made young again. Rushing and billowing streams of energy must be poured into her; her soul must become, as it was in the old times, like the surges, vast, puissant, calm or turbulent at will, an ocean of action or of force. (*Bande Mataram I* 82)

Aurobindo's comparison of the nation to an old man whose marked feature is "senility" and the call to make the nation "young again" is to invent a modernity that can withstand the impact of Western modernity (Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* 9). Such a call to move towards "old times" to become "young again" may also sound like wild imagination. However, as Partha Chatterjee points out, "pasts are always imagined" and therefore the "old times" that Aurobindo speaks of need not necessarily refer to a historical past. "We construct it only to mark the difference posed by the present" (Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* 20). It must also be remembered that the "sluggishness," "senility,"

“timidity” and “feebleness” in the Indian population were induced by the effect of colonization. Fanon remarks that the colonized “people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” start feeling that they are inferior to the colonizer (*Black Skin* 9).

The colonial conditions were such that the native people were forced to turn towards the Empire for their identity as well as existence. Aurobindo said that the people of India were being fooled by the British who granted ‘rights,’ which were only petty concessions:

In fact the word “right” has no meaning in a subject country. A right can only be where the people are free, and signifies some inalienable incident of citizenship, the recognition of which is an absolute obligation on the Government. The things that masquerade in a country like India under the name of rights, are only concessions of might qualified by prudence and what is conceded in the prudential exercise of despotic power will be withdrawn out of the same consideration, the people remaining equally helpless before and after. (*Bande Mataram II* 554)

Here, Aurobindo’s idea of citizenship corresponds to the conception of a liberal democracy. As Ranajit Guha too points out, “A colonial subject is not a citizen, hence has no rights” (46). Therefore the so-called rights ‘granted’ to

Indians itself indicate the position of power from which the colonizer operates. Once the colonizer starts 'granting,' he can at any time whisk off the 'concessions' at his pleasure. The law was used by the British as a handy weapon to demoralize the people, to destroy the slightest rising of protest. The bureaucracy served as an agent for cramping the voices raised against the atrocities of the British regime. Indian civil officers were themselves used to trample the deliveries of dissension. It was doubly convenient for the British to employ such a comprador class for it would not only reduce the ire of the native against the imperialists, but it would also create dissonance among the native population, thus furthering the colonial interests. Not very strangely enough, the native bureaucrats turned out to be more oppressive than their colonial masters:

[F]or an Englishman serves the Government as a member of the same ruling race and can afford to be occasionally independent; but the Indian civilian is a serf masquerading as a heaven-born and can only deserve favour and promotion by his zeal in fastening the yoke heavier upon his fellow-countrymen. As a rule the foreign Government can rely on the "native" civilian to be more zealously oppressive than even the average Anglo-Indian official. (*Bande Mataram I 271*)

Here, the Indian bureaucrat has a double role; of being a master to the native and a servant to the colonizer. To retain longer his identity as a master, the

bureaucrat has to continuously perform his role of oppression of his fellow native. And the fellow natives also are forced to remain loyal to the dictates of the dual oppression. Fanon observes that the oppression of the native population in colonized countries is effected not just by the government. “It is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mold that its mind is set in” (*Wretched* 149). Aurobindo etymologically describes the meaning of ‘loyalty’ and says that the Indians have been loyal to the British only in the sense of abiders of law. There was no emotional submission to the British rule, or approbation of the British ideals:

Loyalty in the radical sense of the term, derived from *lex* — law, and meaning obedience to law — has always been a cordial characteristic of our people; and in this sense people have always been loyal in this country. This loyalty — this extreme regard for law of the Indian population — has been the strongest bulwark of the present foreign despotism in this country. We are still loyal, as we have been in the past, in the sense of law-abiding. Had we not been loyal in this, the truest sense of the term, the history of British administration in every part of India would have to be very differently written indeed. (*Bande Mataram I* 122)

Aurobindo points out that colonialism succeeded to establish itself only because power was conceded to the British by the indigenous population. Whenever there was any resistance to the colonial undertakings, it was put down with an iron hand. Aurobindo's writings were themselves the object of the bureaucracy's ire many times, because they were found highly unsuitable for the happy rule of the British. In his article published in the *Bande Mataram* on the 7th of April 1908, Aurobindo expresses his derision for the British administrative system:

The present domination is a rule of shopkeepers who are at the same time bureaucrats, a combination of the worst possible qualities for imperial Government. The shopkeeper rules by deceit, the bureaucrat by the use of red tape. The shopkeeper by melancholy meanness alienates the subject population, the bureaucrat by soulless rigidity deprives the administration of life and human sympathy. (*Bande Mataram II* 1014)

These words of Aurobindo remind of how a mercantile capitalism transformed itself into a colonialist enterprise in India. When Aurobindo describes the British as a blend of the unethical shopkeeper and the corrupt bureaucrat and calls it "a combination of the worst possible qualities for imperial Government," a question does arise whether it is possible to have a benign expression of imperialism. Aurobindo probably has in mind the

Mughal empire, which “immediately naturalised itself in India” (*Bande Mataram I* 374). However the British with its Western identity saw India as the non-West, and were bent on creating an other which is like it, but “not quite as human” as they were (Said *Orientalism* 108). The creation of a submissive middle class was strategic to the British’s now famous dictum of divide and rule:

The first result of the British occupation was to reduce to a nullity the supreme ruler, and this was often done, as in Bengal, by the help of the Zamindars. The next result was the disorganisation of the village community. The third was the steady breaking-up of the power of the Zamindars with the help of a new class which the foreigners created for their own purposes, — the bourgeois or middle class. (*Bande Mataram I* 374)

The replacement of the village system with the European model of bureaucracy had a devastating effect on the social fabric of the country. This is the reason that Aurobindo desired that the village should be re-established as the basis of the nation. He said that “[i]f we are to organize Swaraj we must base it on the village” (*Bande Mataram II* 1048). When efforts are made by the nationalists to make the natives aware of the demolition of the social structure, such writings are censored and leaders are charged with sedition.

Aurobindo lashes out against the colonialist methods of oppression whereby nationalist leaders were persecuted in the name of sedition. He makes it clear that the struggle for freedom need not be restricted to verbal demand:

To meet the peaceful instruments of Press and platform with imprisonment and persecution or with swords and guns, is a confession not merely of despotism but of weakness. It is a confession of guilt. . . . The battle of freedom begins with the pen and the tongue, but its instruments do not end with these two; and when has the coercing of pen and tongue ever put an end to the battle? Men can be depressed or subdued, but ideas cannot. (*Bande Mataram II 579*)

Such oppressions of “pen and tongue” stem from the colonizer’s awareness that their dominance in the alien land is being questioned. The colonizer’s answer to such questionings is only further repressions of the natives. Aurobindo warns the British that their repressive measures will only add to the power of the anti-colonial struggle:

Repressive measures will only add to our endeavours to serve the cause unmindful of consequences — trials and tortures will only make us firm in our determination. It is always darkest before dawn. And if we only persist, and now is the time for us to do so, the darkness that envelops the country now will in no

time disappear before the dawning day that will illumine not only India but the entire East. (*Bande Mataram II* 565)

The use of the metaphor of the illumination of the dawn removing the darkness brings in an intensity that appeals to the common people who may not be able to relate themselves to politics. As commented by David L. Johnson, “Aurobindo insists it is not merely a political necessity, it is an ontological necessity” (26). It is an ontological necessity because, on political freedom depends the resolution of the social and economic problems. Aurobindo insisted that the British were not in their proper place in India. It was of no concern to him whether they presented a good government or not. The fact that it is the British who rule India was reason enough for him to ask them to quit:

The new movement is not primarily a protest against bad Government, — it is a protest against the continuance of British control; whether that control is used well or ill, justly or unjustly, is a minor and unessential consideration. It is not born of a disappointed expectation of admission to British citizenship, — it is born of a conviction that the time has come when India can, should and will become a great, free and united nation. It is not a negative current of destruction, but a positive, constructive impulse towards the making of modern India. It is

not a cry of revolt and despair, but a gospel of national faith and hope. Its true description is not Extremism, but Democratic Nationalism. (*Bande Mataram I* 354-55)

However Aurobindo harboured no hatred towards the British. He writes further: “When natural relations have been restored, England and India may stand side by side as equals, comrades and allies in the world’s work . . .” (*Bande Mataram II* 628). He was not willing to remain a victim, and wished to create a new method of resistance by not appearing to be victimized. His was not just an inverse of Orientalism which saw “the colonizers as mere objects,” though the colonizers objectified him (Nandy 87). Aurobindo reveals his ideal of the “ultimate unity of mankind” in the following lines:

Our ideal of Swaraj involves no hatred of any other nation nor of the administration which is now established by law in this country. We find a bureaucratic administration, we wish to make it democratic; we find an alien government, we wish to make it indigenious; we find a foreign control, we wish to render it Indian. They lie who say that this aspiration necessitates hatred and violence. Our ideal of patriotism proceeds on the basis of love and brotherhood and it looks beyond the unity of the nation and envisages the ultimate unity of mankind. But it is a unity of brothers, equals and freemen that we seek, not the

unity of master and serf, of devourer and devoured.

(Karmayogin 152-53)

Aurobindo sees the unity of humanity as the goal for which the formation of the nation is just a primary stage. If the formation of the nation requires removal of the foreign power, even by violent means, it is not considered by him as an act of hate. After having made his stand clear on the foreign domination in India, Aurobindo calls upon his fellow countrymen to join hands with him in the struggle to liberate the nation.

Discourse of the Nation and Anti-Colonial Counter-discourse

It was possible for the foreign powers to establish their reign in India only because the large masses of population agreed to be subjected to an external power. Aurobindo notes that it was not the willing submission of the people at large to remain subjects, but the weakness of a few among them which led the entire population appear to have yielded to colonial machinations:

India was a huge country with a huge people strange and unknown to their rulers. To hold it for ever was then considered by most statesmen a chimerical idea; even to govern it and keep it tranquil for a time was not feasible without the sympathy and co-operation of the people themselves. It was therefore the potential strength of the people and not the wishes of a few

educated men, which was the true determining cause of the scanty political gains we so much delight in. (*Bande Mataram I* 174)

He observes that the foreign powers were able to establish their dominance upon the land only because it was in some sense 'permitted' by the native population. He wrote, "But incidents like these never happen to a brave, patriotic and self-respecting nation; they happen only to those who cower and fear and, by their character, justify men who think themselves entitled to treat them like slaves" (*Karmayogin* 411). It becomes necessary for the population to express their strength in so many different ways to immune itself to external attack. Aurobindo appealed to every Indian to awaken the power of patriotism which is latent in every person in the country. Such patriotism can generate necessary forces which will assist in uprooting the very foundations of the colonialist endeavour:

It is not till the mother-land reveals herself to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or a mass of individuals, it is not till she takes shape as a great Divine and Maternal Power in a form of beauty that can dominate the mind and seize the heart that these petty fears and hopes vanish in the all-absorbing passion for our mother and her service, and the patriotism that works miracles and saves a doomed nation is born. (*Bande Mataram I* 319)

Aurobindo's perception of the land as "Divine and Maternal Power" and not just "a stretch of land or a mass of individuals" points at a spiritualism which escapes the colonial intellect. Ashis Nandy observes that "Aurobindo's spiritualism can be seen as a way of handling a situation of cultural aggression and to that extent it was a language of defiance . . ." (85). However, these spiritual expressions of Aurobindo for the territory he identifies as 'Indian,' are only metaphors for the nationalism that he preaches. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, "The equation nation = state = people, and especially sovereign people, undoubtedly linked nation to territory, since structure and definition of states were now essentially territorial" (19).

On the other hand, Lisa Bernstein points out that such a "mothering" of the nation as a resistance to the colonial "othering" fails to bring out or even hides the contributions of women to the freedom movement (1). Anne McClintock also observes that "if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege" (385). Aurobindo's writings may not escape unscathed from such allegations, in instances as when he says that "[w]e do not want to develop a nation of women who know only how to suffer and not how to strike" (*Bande Mataram I* 296).

British colonialism had brought about a consolidation in the geographical entity of the Indian subcontinent by extending its dominion all

through the mainland. Aurobindo felt that it was the opportune moment for India to strike against colonialism and assert its unique national identity:

These things are therefore necessary to Indian nationality, geographical separateness, geographical compactness and a living national spirit. The first was always ours and made India a people apart from the earliest times. The second we have attained by British rule. The third has just sprung into existence.

(Karmayogin 305)

By taking “separateness” as a quality essential to the nation, and as something India has always had, Aurobindo is factoring in heterogeneity and plurality as a characteristic of the nation. This is quite contrary to the Western conception and experience of the nation, though it is this that probably worked as a model for Aurobindo. In the Western concept of the nation, it was the separateness that was used to divide and differentiate the nation from other nations. Hobsbawm observes that the reason why some groups of people become nations and others do not could have been “based on a single criteria such as language or ethnicity or a combination of criteria such as language, common territory, common history, cultural traits or whatever else” (5). Such a concept of the nation based on plurality put forward by Aurobindo is crucial, since this does not subscribe to a hegemonic communitarian concept of the nation that so defined the notions of the Indian nation put forth by right-wing politics. It

is also noteworthy that Aurobindo mentions that the “living national spirit” has “just sprung into existence.” It is evident that it was not “living” if it “just sprung” into being. Such a national spirit was created to counter the colonialist spirit. Therefore Aurobindo emphasises that the strength of India lies in her people and their ability to break free from the yoke of colonialism and merge together as a nation, self-sufficient and self-governing:

If India is to be India, if her civilisation is to retain its distinctive stamp and extend its spiritual conquests for the benefit of the world at large it must be propped up with the strength of her own people.

To include India in a federation of colonies and the motherland is madness without method. The patriotism that wishes the country to lose itself within an Empire which justifies its name by its conquest — the colonies being no portion of the Empire in its strict sense — is also madness without method. But to talk of absolute independence and autonomy — though this be madness, yet there is method in it. (*Bande Mataram I* 210)

Aurobindo’s continued use of the attribute of ‘madness’ is an echo from Hamlet in which Polonius comments in his aside about Hamlet’s peculiar behaviour: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (*Ham.* 2.2.205-6). While most anticolonial writings have been representations of the culture

which produced it, Aurobindo was able to enter the literary and cultural space of the colonizers, and speak in their language on an equal footing, crossing the linguistic and cultural barriers.

Since the nation had been under subjection for so long, it was natural that there should be an undue reliance upon the British, especially in matters of administration. It came forth from lack of confidence in ourselves rather than because of any trust in the colonialists. Therefore, Aurobindo called them “superstitions which have driven such deep root into the mind of our people that even where the new spirit is strongest, they still hold their own. One is the habit of appealing to British courts of justice; the other is the reliance upon the British executive for our protection” (*Bande Mataram I* 219). To break free from such “superstitions” requires a lot of effort, since it is easy to believe in them rather than to find the reality behind. Therefore, the people prefer to remain suffering instead of fighting for independence:

In a country where subjection has long become a habit of the public mind, there will always be a tendency to shrink from the realities of the position and to hunt for roundabout, safe and peaceful paths to national regeneration. Servitude is painful and intolerable, servitude is killing the nation by inches, servitude must be got rid of, true; but the pains and evils of servitude seem almost more tolerable to a good many people than the

sharp, salutary pangs of a resolute struggle for liberty. (*Bande Mataram I* 236)

Aurobindo asserted that the struggle against imperialism is handicapped by our lack of confidence in our strengths and our inability to remain united irrespective of our differences. He said, “Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism” (*Bande Mataram I* 18). Instead of requesting the British to offer us consideration, we should actually pool the resources of courage lying scattered in our vast masses. He suggested that our request should not be “to the British sense of justice, but to our own reviving sense of manhood, to our own sincere fellow-feeling — so far as it can be called sincere — with the silent and suffering people of India” (*Bande Mataram I* 19). India has its own role to play in the development of the world at large. According to Aurobindo, the role of India is one of unification, of harmony, and of peace for humanity at large:

India cannot perish, our race cannot become extinct, because among all the divisions of mankind it is to India that is reserved the highest and the most splendid destiny, the most essential to the future of the human race. It is she who must send forth from herself the future religion of the entire world, the Eternal religion which is to harmonise all religion, science and

philosophies and make mankind one soul. (*Bande Mataram I* 84)

While these statements are evidently ethnocentric, they can also be seen as an example of strategic essentialism to counter the colonial stand of superiority. When Aurobindo mentions “the Eternal religion,” he clearly is not promoting the Hindu religion, but refers to Indian spirituality which has the ability to accept and “harmonise all religions.” Here, he links the goal of national emancipation to the liberation of the soul. Viswanath Prasad Varma observes, “The Aurobindian notion of the fulfilment of God through the constellations of groups, associations and collectivities is a new note in Indian political thought. It definitely indicates the influence of Hegel’s political philosophy on Aurobindo” (35). It should also be noted that many of the Indian philosophers including Aurobindo thought of all religions as having a common spiritual base. As Varma comments, “Indian teachers like Vivekananda and Gandhi have claimed that they are going beyond the Western idea of tolerance which assumes an attitude of superiority of one’s own religion but condescends ‘to tolerate’ others” (121). Aurobindo too speaks of harmonizing religions and not of tolerating them. Though it can be conceded that these statements have clear ethnocentric echoes, they have to be read in the context in which Aurobindo wrote. Written in 1905, just a few years after Rudyard Kipling’s infamous “The White Man’s Burden” was

written in 1899, such eulogy for the Indian land and race should be seen as an instance of anticolonial counter-discourse. Kipling wrote:

Take up the White Man's burden –
 Send forth the best ye breed –
 Go, bind your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need;
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild –
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half-devil and half-child. (111)

In response, Aurobindo wrote that the British soldier believed that “as a white man, he has every right to assault the Indian who is, in the words of Kipling, the Banjo Bard of the Empire, no more than ‘half-devil, half-child,’” and such a preconceived notion of superiority gives the soldier “the power to take the law into his own hand when dealing with ‘natives’” (*Bande Mataram I* 390, 391). Ashis Nandy compares Kipling and Aurobindo and observes that while Kipling struggled to give up his “Indianness” to become a European, there was no such effort on the part of Aurobindo to “disown the West within him” (85). Aurobindo appropriated and blended the West with the East and this can be seen in the writings that he produced in the English language. It was not a notion of the superiority of the West that prevented Aurobindo from shaking

away their trappings. As Nandy points out, his was a larger design, that of human evolution (86). If at all, it was at least an effort to counter the West on its own ground.

To analyse another example of colonial discourse, Edward Thompson can be seen enumerating the efforts taken by the British to ‘train’ Indians:

The future historian will distinguish four stages in Britain’s work in India. The first, up to 1857, was the period of conquest and settlement. The second, which between 1895 and 1914 began to overlap the third, was the period of administration, when men did the job as it came to hand, without philosophy or overmuch co-operation and investigation. The third, which we see ending, was a double effort – to get at the sources of plague, poverty, famine, not merely to handle their acute phases; and to train Indians to take over their own government. (299)

Thompson does not clarify how Britain was competent to “train Indians” or what concern or pity prompted the British to take the “double effort” to save India from plague, poverty and famine. As Bal Gangadhar Tilak remarked: “Benevolence is used to sugar-coat the declarations of self-interest, and we were in those days deceived by the apparent benevolent intentions under which rampant self-interest was concealed . . .” (287). When Thompson says that they were ‘training’ Indians to take over their own government, he fails to

see that they were capable of managing themselves until power was snatched away from them. Thompson also says that the second period he refers to which ended in 1914 'overlapped' with the third; which is to say that the 'training' of the Indians took so many decades, obviously because they were stupid.

One of the most infamous comments on Indian literature and learning came from Thomas Babington Macaulay. Though too often quoted, it is worthwhile to consider one of his statements yet again. Of his statement that it is "no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England," whatever else one may say, lack of certitude is not one of its flaws (199). This certitude of the inferiority of the native springs from "a determination to objectify, to confine, to imprison, to harden. Phrases such as 'I know them,' 'that's the way they are,' show this maximum objectification successfully achieved" (Fanon, *Toward* 34-35). The desire of a colonialist author like Macaulay is "that the ancient indigenous cultures of the colonized should be demolished on intellectual and moral grounds, so that he could then go on to posit his own system into that vacancy" (Guha 78). Aurobindo's writings glorifying the land in superlative terms should be seen in the background of the writings of such colonial authors.

It may sound strange that a land with so many diverse cultures and traditions could come together as a nation. However, Aurobindo believed that the Indian nation could remain united in spite of all its visible differences. He considered social reforms secondary to political independence and wrote:

Those who say that caste and religious differences must first of all be destroyed before India can ever rise to the status of a nation, have very hazy and confused notions regarding the character and constitution of that nation. Our history has been different in many respects from the history of other peoples. The composition of the Indian people has been unique in all the world. Nations grew in the past by the accretion and assimilation of different tribes. This is an earlier process. But India has not been a mere meeting place of tribes, but a meeting place of grown up nations with developed social and religious lines of their own, and with original castes and types of cultures peculiar to them. The character and composition of the coming Indian nation, therefore, will differ very materially from those of the European nations, the process of unification among whom took place at a much earlier and comparatively more nebular stage of their growth. (*Bande Mataram I* 168)

While Aurobindo's claim of India having "original castes and types of cultures" is questionable, the statement that the process of unification of the

nation has taken place very early is an effort to emphasise that the British demographic consolidation had no role in the formation of the nation. Regarding social and religious issues, Aurobindo said that when the liberty of the nation itself is at stake, none of the other issues require immediate attention. He said that all efforts, even for societal reform, would be useless until the nation achieves independence:

Political freedom is the life-breath of a nation; to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is the very height of ignorance and futility. Such attempts are foredoomed to disappointment and failure; yet when the disappointment and failure come, we choose to attribute them to some radical defect in the national character, as if the nation were at fault and not its wise men who would not or could not understand the first elementary conditions of success. (*Bande Mataram I* 266)

The necessity for social, educational, industrial or moral reforms was itself a ploy introduced by the colonialist to put aside the claims of the native for freedom. As Homi Bhabha noted, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest . . .” (“Other Question” 41).

Aurobindo was aware of the necessity to exhort and educate the people of India on the importance of liberation from the clutches of the colonialists. While the colonialists would keep projecting the material benefits they brought to the subject nation, the aim of the nationalists should be to focus on the ability of the nation to become free and self-reliant. The claims of the benefits of colonization are a veil to hide the monstrosities that it perpetrated. The progress because of colonization is nothing compared to the destruction achieved in the native civilization. Hence, Aurobindo implored that freedom should be the first priority:

Those who would win freedom, must first imbue the people with an overpowering conviction that freedom is the one thing needful. Without a great ideal there can be no great movement. Small baits of material advantages will not nerve them to high endeavour and heroic self-sacrifice; it is only the idea of national freedom and national greatness that has that overmastering appeal. We must not bend the knee to others but try to be worthy of our past — here is an ideal which, if set forth with conviction and power, cannot fail to inspire self-sacrificing action. We need faith above all things, faith in ourselves, faith in the nation, faith in India's destiny. (*Bande Mataram I* 348)

Here and elsewhere, Aurobindo exhorts to look to the ideal of the past which is a strategy he employs to counter the materialist view of the present

projected by the colonialist ideology. He warns that there is no choice for the Indian nation on whether we should join the national movement. Our keeping aloof from the enterprise to gain freedom would mean destroying ourselves as a nation. He calls for the people to come together forgetting all differences:

Our immediate problem as a nation is not how to be intellectual and well-informed or how to be rich and industrious, but how to stave off imminent national death, how to put an end to the white peril, how to assert ourselves and live. It is for this reason that whatever minor differences there may be between different exponents of the new spirit, they are all agreed on 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 I 276*)

Aurobindo's reference to the "white peril" is indicative of the fear instilled in the native of the very presence of the colonizer. The image of the colonizer dominates and the effort is "to dispel — to reduce to size — this overwhelming presence of the oppressor" (Jolly 377). Regarding means of struggle for the nationalist movement, Aurobindo minced no words in arguing that the use of any method is valid so long as it is consistent with the aims of the movement:

Where the whole armoury of an absolute power is arrayed against him, the Judge a servant of his prosecutor, the law an instrument specially designed for his suppression, the wealth and power of a despotic executive and the activity of a not over-scrupulous police his pursuers, and his only supporters are his own patriotism and the sympathy of his people, the Nationalist is entitled to use any means for his own self-defence which will not be inconsistent with his mission nor injure his claim to national sympathy and support. He owes no moral obligation of quixotic candour to antagonists who themselves recognise no moral obligation in their struggle with him. (*Bande Mataram II* 693)

When he says that the nationalist “is entitled to use any means,” it is obvious that he does not leave out violence as one of the methods. However, he feels that violence is against his notions of morality. Probably, that is the reason he says that we need not be worried about moral obligation when the colonialists themselves are not. Aurobindo argues that the reasons cited by the British for not granting self-governance to India are malicious and without credence:

We freely admit that if we were given self-government we should commit mistakes which we would have to rectify, as has been done even by nations which were old in the exercise of

free and self-governing functions. We freely admit that the liberated nation would have to face many and most serious problems even as Turkey and Persia have to face such problems today, as Japan had to face them in the period of its own revolution. But to argue from these propositions to the refusal of self-government is to use a sophistry which can only impose on the minds of children. (*Karmayogin* 226-27)

It is not surprising that the colonizers use “sophistry” usually tried on children, since the colonial enterprise thinks of the natives as children and not adults. As Amar Acheraiou suggested: “Within global colonial politics and mythology, this design reflects the coloniser’s tendency to relegate the colonised to children or *in-fans*, which means lacking coherent speech, and thus unable to represent themselves and take charge of their countries” (70). The argument that if given self-government, the colonized lands will not be able to manage is but a hollow justification for retaining the colony. It is quite possible or even certain that these lands would have progressed even better had there been no colonization. As Aimé Césaire commented, “I maintain that colonialist Europe is dishonest in trying to justify its colonizing activity *a posteriori* by the obvious material progress that has been achieved in certain fields under the colonial regime . . .” (45). Césaire too gives the example of Japan which achieved remarkable material achievement though (or because) it

was not colonized. Aurobindo criticizes the patronising attitude of the British who think that the Indians are incapable to govern by themselves.

The Call for *Swaraj*

Aurobindo defined self-government or *Swaraj* as the “administration of affairs in a country by her own people on their own strength in accordance with the welfare of the people without even nominal suzerainty . . .” (*Bande Mataram II* 833). He goes on to give his own reasons for the claims for *Swaraj*:

The basis of our claim to *Swaraj* is not that the English bureaucracy is a bad or tyrannical Government; a bureaucracy is always inclined to be arrogant, self-sufficient, self-righteous and unsympathetic, to ignore the abuses with which it abounds, and a bureaucracy foreign and irresponsible to the people is likely to exhibit these characteristics in an exaggerated form.

(*Karmayogin* 408)

As the first step in liberating the nation, Aurobindo considered it important to expunge the British bureaucracy from India. His views were similar to that of Tilak who said that “[t]he point is to have the entire control in our hands. I want to have the key of my house, and not merely one stranger turned out of it” (288).

Aurobindo's idea of *Swaraj* is similar to the concept of "Sovereignty," which was the basis of Western revolutions, especially the French and American revolutions. In another instance, Aurobindo explicates this concept in significant detail:

Any power or privilege in order to deserve the title "free" must be based on the authority of an independent people possessing the supreme and ultimate power of control over its own government. It is this fundamental fact of self-government that must be their origin and sanction, and it is only in this sense that terms like "freedom of conscience" or "freedom of speech" are understood in the countries that actually enjoy them. Their "freedoms" are the concrete expressions, the sacred symbols of the popular will that has realised its sovereignty, and constitute the inviolable limitations under which the executive must work. They stand inaccessibly superior to the needs or wishes of those who actually carry on the government of the country, whose tenure of power primarily rests on their unquestioned submission to the sovereign will and freedom of the people as whose servants they administer. (*Bande Mataram II* 553)

It can be clearly seen from this passage that Aurobindo's idea of *Swaraj* and the Western idea of sovereignty have absolute power vested with the people

and the restrictions are upon those who govern. However, it has to be mentioned that Aurobindo's idea of *Swaraj* is not just a political agenda, it is a philosophical agenda. Therefore it is not a mere translation of the Western idea of sovereignty. It is also an attempt on the part of Aurobindo to accommodate the Western concept into the Indian canon.

For Aurobindo, *Swaraj* in its highest form goes beyond even self-government. He explains that “[w]hen we speak of *Swaraj* we mean the principle of national life independent of any form of government” (*Bande Mataram II* 840).

Aurobindo believed that the fortunes of India can be turned around once the people had self-rule or *Swaraj*:

Swaraj is the alchemic stone, the *parash-pathar*, and we have it in our hands. It will turn to gold everything we touch. Village samitis are good, not for the sake of village samitis but for the sake of *Swaraj*. Boycott is good, not for the sake of Boycott but for the sake of *Swaraj*. Swadeshi is good, not for the sake of Swadeshi but for the sake of *Swaraj*. Arbitration is good, not for the sake of arbitration but for the sake of *Swaraj*. If we forget *Swaraj* and win anything else we shall be like the seeker whose belt was turned indeed to gold but the stone of alchemy was lost to him for ever. (*Bande Mataram II* 874)

When Aurobindo calls *Swaraj* “the alchemic stone,” he suggests that all that we hope to achieve as a nation can be achieved by means of self-governance. Foreign rule would change to native rule, foreign goods to indigenous produce and litigation would give way to arbitration. Here, again, the Western idea of sovereignty is transformed into an idea of *Swaraj* which builds up from a local sovereignty, starting from the “village samitis” and then moving upwards. Thus, the focus of such a democratic centralization begins from the individual within the nation, and is not just an abstract reference to the masses.

The Passive Resistance

Aurobindo asserted that there are two limbs for his concept of peaceful methods for nationalist movement: one is self-help, and the other is passive resistance. He goes on to elaborate on his concept of passive resistance which is the second limb of his idea of peaceful means to achieve independence:

There is a second limb to that policy and it is passive resistance. Passive resistance means two things. It means first that in certain matters we shall not co-operate with the Government of this country until it gives us what we consider our rights. Secondly, if we are persecuted, if the plough of repression is passed over us, we shall meet it not by violence, but by

suffering, by passive resistance, by lawful means. (*Karmayogin* 124)

Such a concept of meeting violence by suffering is similar to the idea of *satyagraha*⁵, later implemented by Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for Indian independence. Aurobindo advocates passive resistance to fight the oppressive policies of British imperialism. He felt that given the circumstances prevalent in India, passive resistance was the most suitable method to achieve liberation from the British:

The present circumstances in India seem to point to passive resistance as our most natural and suitable weapon. We would not for a moment be understood to base this conclusion upon any condemnation of other methods as in all circumstances criminal and unjustifiable. It is the common habit of established Governments and especially those which are themselves oppressors, to brand all violent methods in subject peoples and communities as criminal and wicked. (*Bande Mataram I* 278)

However, Aurobindo said that if passive resistance is rendered impractical, he himself was not against active resistance, which is the way of resistance using weapons. He opined that the type of resistance will be determined by individual situations and not by a general rule:

5 A policy of passive political resistance.

Liberty is the life-breath of a nation; and when the life is attacked, when it is sought to suppress all chance of breathing by violent pressure, any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable, — just as it is lawful for a man who is being strangled to rid himself of the pressure on his throat by any means in his power. It is the nature of the pressure which determines the nature of the resistance. (*Bande Mataram* I 278)

By justifying the use of violent resistance for national emancipation “Aurobindo is evolving Political Vedantism to support the thesis that at times armed revolt could become necessary against the constituted authority” (Varma 232). Suppression of public sentiments by the colonial regime leads to violent struggle and even terrorism. However, Aurobindo stressed that he was against terrorism and differentiates between terrorism and open rebellion:

If our view of the question is right, it is evident that to paralyse public agitation is to foster Terrorism, and we can only suppose that the Government think Terrorism easier to deal with than public agitation. This seems to us a grievous error. If experience shows anything, it is that Terrorism is never extinguished except by the removal of its causes. The difference between Terrorism and open rebellion is that open rebellion often effects its object,

but can easily be crushed, while Terrorism does not effect its object, but cannot be crushed. (*Karmayogin* 423-24)

Aurobindo ingeniously argues that if the active resistance of the colonized subjects in India is seen by the British as terrorism of the whole Indian population, it makes it even more evident that the British are not in their proper place in India. He wrote, “If it had really been true that a whole nation approved of Terrorism and supported the assassin by secret or open sympathy, it would be a more damning indictment of British statesmanship in India than any seditious pen could have framed” (427).

The imperial rulers require cooperation from the colonial subjects to sustain their hegemony upon the people. When such cooperation is not forthcoming, it becomes difficult for the colonial enterprise to continue:

The first principle of passive resistance, therefore, which the new school have placed in the forefront of their programme, is to make administration under present conditions impossible by an organized refusal to do anything which shall help either British commerce in the exploitation of the country or British officialdom in the administration of it, — unless and until the conditions are changed in the manner and to the extent demanded by the people. This attitude is summed up in the one word, Boycott. (*Bande Mataram I* 281)

One of the major aspects of boycott and non-cooperation suggested by Aurobindo was to refuse to pay taxes imposed on the native population. He remarked that “[t]he refusal to pay taxes would, therefore, inevitably bring about the last desperate struggle between the forces of national aspiration and alien repression. It would be in the nature of an ultimatum from the people to the Government” (285). He wanted to take the movement ahead from just a boycott of taxes to a movement which resisted the very presence of the British in India:

The new politics, therefore, confines itself for the time to the policy of lawful abstention from any kind of co-operation with the Government, — the policy of boycott which is capable of gradual extension, leaving to the bureaucracy the onus of forcing on a more direct, sudden and dangerous struggle. Its principle at present is not “no representation, no taxation,” but “no control, no assistance.” (286)

Aurobindo aimed by this process, not to destroy the law or take law into his own hands, but to render the colonialist laws useless by offering no cooperation to them. He indicated that “passive resistance aims at making a law unworkable by general and organized disobedience and so procuring its recall; it does not try, like aggressive resistance, to destroy the law by destroying the power which made and supports the law” (290). Aurobindo

saw passive resistance as a movement to enable the native population to stand on their own feet and at the same time assert themselves before the colonialists:

The policy of passive resistance was evolved partly as the necessary complement of self-help, partly as a means of putting pressure on the Government. The essence of this policy is the refusal of co-operation so long as we are not admitted to a substantial share and an effective control in legislation, finance and administration. Just as “No representation, no taxation” was the watchword of American constitutional agitation in the eighteenth century, so “No control, no co-operation” should be the watchword of our lawful agitation — for constitution we have none, — in the twentieth. (*Karmayogin* 154)

Aurobindo borrows and adapts the slogan which was a key phrase in what led to the American Revolution in the eighteenth century. Passive resistance, nevertheless, is not a comprehensive solution to address the colonial question. It may sometimes be required to resort to active resistance:

There is a limit however to passive resistance. So long as the action of the executive is peaceful and within the rules of the fight, the passive resister scrupulously maintains his attitude of passivity, but he is not bound to do so a moment beyond. To

submit to illegal or violent methods of coercion, to accept outrage and hooliganism as part of the legal procedure of the country is to be guilty of cowardice, and, by dwarfing national manhood, to sin against the divinity within ourselves and the divinity in our motherland. The moment coercion of this kind is attempted, passive resistance ceases and active resistance becomes a duty. (*Bande Mataram I* 294)

Here, Aurobindo differed from Gandhi who wanted “the satyagrahi to be trained in self-discipline to accept such pains and not return violence with violence” (Terchek 119). Aurobindo warns that passive resistance is just a means and not an end in itself. The end that he has in mind is national freedom and sovereignty. Aurobindo felt that passive resistance and other useful methods are to be judiciously employed for the liberation of the nation from the colonial empire:

For ourselves we avow that we advocate passive resistance without wishing to make a dogma of it. In a subject nationality, to win liberty for one’s country is the first duty of all, by whatever means, at whatever sacrifice; and this duty must override all other considerations. The work of national emancipation is a great and holy *yajna* of which boycott, Swadeshi, national education and every other activity, great and

small, are only major or minor parts. Liberty is the fruit we seek from the sacrifice and the Motherland the goddess to whom we offer it; into the seven leaping tongues of the fire of the *yajna* we must offer all that we are and all that we have, feeding the fire even with our blood and the lives and happiness of our nearest and dearest; for the Motherland is a goddess who loves not a maimed and imperfect sacrifice, and freedom was never won from the gods by a grudging giver. (*Bande Mataram I* 301)

The image of the sacrificial fire is intended to give the colour of holiness to the nationalist movement. The use of Sanskrit terms like *yagna*⁶ and reference to the land as “Motherland” and “goddess” can be seen as a means of mythicizing ideas in order to resist the colonial interpretations of the ‘other’ represented by the colonized. It was not always necessary for the colonized to “try to correct or extend the Orientalists; in their own diffused way, they tried to create an alternative language of discourse. This was their anti-colonialism . . .” (Nandy xvii). The heavy dependence on mythology and Sanskrit helps the anti-colonial discourse in Aurobindo to maintain its identity within the realm of dominance of the colonial discursive practices.

The kind of struggle required for each subject nation may differ according to the severity of the yoke of colonialism experienced by the

6 Ceremonial sacrifice

people. Aurobindo opined that it will depend not least on the nature of subjection and the political situation prevalent in the land:

Our attitude is a political Vedantism. India, free, one and indivisible, is the divine realization to which we move, — emancipation our aim; to that end each nation must practise the political creed which is the most suited to its temperament and circumstances; for that is the best for it which leads most surely and completely to national liberty and national self-realization. But whatever leads only to continued subjection must be spewed out as mere vileness and impurity. Passive resistance may be the final method of salvation in our case or it may be only the preparation for the final *sadhan*. In either case, the sooner we put it into full and perfect practice, the nearer we shall be to national liberty. (*Bande Mataram I* 302-3)

Aurobindo must have felt that an active resistance with weapons may not be viable because of the superior position enjoyed by the British in terms of political control and access to arms and ammunition. That could also be the reason that he harped too often on spiritual metaphors like *sadhan*⁷ to get across his ideal of political liberation.

7 Spiritual practice

Boycott and the *Swadeshi* Movement

Aurobindo defined boycott as follows: “Boycott is an ideal, like freedom; it means independence in industry and commerce, as freedom means independence in administration, legislation and finance” (*Karmayogin* 396). He saw boycott as an expression of the nation’s liberty and not just as a means of economic self-dependence. He defined boycott as the “rediscovery of national self-respect, a declaration of national separateness: it is the first practical assertion of independence and has therefore in most of the national uprisings of modern times been the forerunner of the struggle for independence” (*Bande Mataram II* 638). Aurobindo gives references of boycotts which were successfully carried out in Italy, Ireland and China:

The Italian uprising of 1848 was heralded by the boycott of Austrian cigarettes and the tobacco riots in Milan. The boycott was the indispensable weapon of the Parnell movement in Ireland, and boycott and *Swadeshi* are the leading cries of Sinn Fein. The first practical effect of the resurgence of China was the boycott of American goods as an assertion of China’s long downtrodden self-respect against the brutal and insolent dealings of the Americans towards Chinese immigrants. In India also boycott began as an assertion of national self-respect, and continued as a declared and practical enforcement of national separateness, liberty, independence and self-dependence. (639)

It is significant to note that two of the three examples that Aurobindo cited are from Europe. The lessons that he picked up from his learning of European history have come in handy for Aurobindo to design counter-colonial strategies in his own homeland. Aurobindo demonstrates that in all these instances, boycott is a statement that it is possible to exist without depending on the foreign goods. Aurobindo argues why boycott is necessary as a tool for resisting colonialism:

It is very necessary to boycott English goods. Did not the English boycott your goods? A hundred years ago, your trades and industries were in a flourishing condition and your goods, after satisfying the demands of the whole of India, used to be exported to other countries. But by making all sorts of crooked laws, they managed to shut out your goods from our markets and, on the contrary, afforded all sorts of facilities enabling the foreign merchants to flood the market with their own goods.

(862)

When the native goods are not exported, the production is seriously affected. Later, the native population is forced to depend on the import of the same goods that they once exported. The reversal of situation that Aurobindo delineates is also vouched by Fanon when he remarked that the “colonies have become a market” and the colonized citizen is forced to become “a

customer who is ready to buy goods” (*Wretched* 65). While calling for boycotting English goods, Aurobindo questions the authority of the British in the Indian soil:

The English have long been boycotting us in our own country. They boycotted our industries out of existence, they boycotted our noblest capacities into atrophy by denying us any share in the higher activities of national life, they boycotted us in the management of our affairs, in the defence of our country, in the making of its laws. And India impoverished, degraded, demoralized, did not look with love upon the spoiler. Now the Boycott has commenced upon the other side, but it is not an act of retaliation merely; it is much more an unravelling of the English web, a retracing of the steps towards perdition which we were forced or induced to take. (*Bande Mataram II* 628)

Swadeshi is a natural concomitant of boycott and therefore these two methods of struggle are mutually dependant. There are two conditions that Aurobindo suggests for boycott to become successful:

The first condition of a successful boycott, therefore, is the organisation of national industry with a view, first, to the improvement and extension of that which exists, secondly, to the opening up of new lines of enterprise. . . . The second

condition of a successful boycott is the organisation of supply. It is not possible for everyone to hunt Swadeshi articles to their source and purchase them. (*Karmayogin* 398)

The British believed that as long as they ruled the country, the control of trade would remain with them. Such a belief is reflected in the words of J.R. Seeley when he said, “We have here a great foreign trade, which may grow to be enormous, and this trade is secured to us so long as we are masters of the Government of India” (248). However, he would not have thought of the reverse, that is, of what would happen if they are no longer masters of the trade. Such a mastery or control over the trade is what Aurobindo attempted through the method of *Swadeshi* and boycott. Aurobindo advocated that *Swadeshi* should be brought into areas which are crucial for control in trade and commerce:

When Srijut Chidambaram Pillai set himself to the task of establishing a Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company between Tuticorin and Colombo, he was taking a step which meant the beginning of the end for the British commercial monopoly in India. There are three departments of Swadeshi which have to be developed in order to make India commercially independent, first, the creation of manufactures, secondly, the retail supply, thirdly, the security of carriage from the place of manufacture to

the place of supply. . . . The only remedy for this state of things is for the people of the country to organize steamer services both by sea and by river, so that all carriage by water at least may be in their hands. The carriage by land cannot come into our hands without a political revolution, but if we hold the waterways, we shall not only hold an important part of the system of communications but be able to use our possession of it as a weapon against British trade if the railway is utilized against us. (*Bande Mataram II* 981-82)

The strategy that Aurobindo outlines here is ingenious and calculated. He planned to use waterways to manage the logistics of *Swadeshi* goods. While the railway was under the complete control of the British and land transport was risky because of the political situation, it was only apt to have attempted to capitalize on a *Swadeshi* steam navigation company for the transport of goods. While promoting *Swadeshi* and boycotting the goods produced by the colonial lands was an effective measure to curb the onslaught of economic colonization:

Wherever passive resistance has been accepted, the necessity of the social boycott has been recognized as its natural concomitant. “Boycott foreign goods and boycott those who use foreign goods,” — the advice of Mr. Subramaniya Aiyar to his

countrymen in Madras, — must be accepted by all who are in earnest. (*Bande Mataram I* 292)

Fanon also opined that nationalist movements could be successful only if the natives resort to such practices of boycotting foreign goods. According to him, “All these forms of action serve at one and the same time to bring pressure to bear on the forces of colonialism . . .” (*Wretched* 66). Possibly, Aurobindo also thought that an empire that established itself through trade and commerce can only be ousted by denying opportunity for carrying on with them. Aurobindo calls for the nation to boycott and experience freedom leading the nation itself to liberation:

We were not enslaved by Clive, for not even a thousand Clives could have had strength enough to enslave us, we were enslaved by our own delusions, by the false conviction of weakness. And the moment we get the full conviction of our strength, the conviction that we are for ever and inalienably free, and that nobody but ourselves can either take or keep from us that inalienable and priceless possession, from that moment freedom is assured. . . . Nationalism is the gospel of inalienable freedom, Boycott is the practice of freedom. (*Bande Mataram II* 618)

Aurobindo was glad that his call for struggle against the colonial enterprise was taken up by the masses. He found it encouraging that people turned up in

large numbers at the meetings called for by the new party under the leadership of Tilak:

The present Swadeshi agitation has, however, changed all this. We have called up the real nation out of its ancient slumber, and the masses have commenced to take a keen and possibly a more earnest interest in public questions than even the so-called educated classes. They have joined our meetings in their thousands and their tens of thousands, and have taken, during the last twelve months, an intelligent interest in our movements.

(Bande Mataram I 146)

While the people of India are just incidental for furthering the interests of the metropolis, the movement of *Swadeshi* could bring a turn-around, for then the colonial control is lost, at least to some extent. Aurobindo examined how the Indians, who are subjects and not citizens, would cease to be consumers of foreign goods and thus would stop feeding the colonial economy:

In India the individual, — for there is no citizen, — exists for the Government; and the object in preserving tranquillity is not the protection of the citizen but the security of the Government. The security of the individual, such as it is, is only a result and not an object. But the security of the Government, if by Government we understand the present irresponsible

bureaucratic control, is directly threatened by the Swadeshi movement; for the declared object of that movement is Swaraj, which means the entire elimination of that control. (221)

When the British realized that the *Swadeshi* movement can run retrograde to the colonial patronage, they started a programme giving employment to natives and it was called “Government Swadeshi.” Aurobindo brings out the ulterior motive of this enterprise: “This is precisely the meaning of Government Swadeshi — to provide a field for English capital, English skilled work in India and employ Indian labour, not out of desire for India’s good, but because it is cheap” (133). Aurobindo saw “Government Swadeshi” as a contradiction in terms since the government here is a colonial government for whom the Indian natives are no citizens but subjects. Therefore the expression “Government Swadeshi” is in effect an oxymoron intended to cheat the gullible natives.

Aurobindo expected the *Swadeshi* movement to offer a parallel leadership which would eventually turn the imperialist powers ineffectual. He hoped that a coordinated political power would come into being because of the Swadeshi movement:

Self-development of an independent nation is one thing; self-development from a state of servitude under an alien and despotic rule without the forcible or peaceful removal of that

rule as an indispensable preliminary, is quite another. No national self-development is possible without the support of rajshakti, organized political strength, commanding, and whenever necessary compelling general allegiance and obedience. A caste may develop, a particular community may develop by its own efforts supported by a strong social organization; a nation cannot. (*Bande Mataram I* 265)

Aurobindo describes the *Swadeshi* movement as a method to develop ourselves by our own efforts. Thus, we gain confidence in ourselves and slowly lose our dependence upon the colonialists. He called it “self-development by self-help.” Aurobindo saw it as the only way to save the nation from the calamitous dependence and incapacity engendered by over a century of British rule (268). He did not intend *Swadeshi* to remain limited to consumption of domestic goods and employment of domestic service, but to get control over running the nation as a whole. The correct method to be employed was not to waste time on trifles and to focus on the essentials, “finance and legislation,” which he considered to be the basis of self-rule and the preliminary move towards independence (158).

Aurobindo hoped that the emergence of *Swadeshi* newspapers in various parts of India would contribute to creating awareness among the people the necessity to offer their efforts in creation of a free nation:

The increase of Nationalist journals such as the *Balbharat* and *Andhra Keshari* in Madras, the *Aftab* in the North and ourselves in Calcutta, the appearance of local papers filled with the new spirit, the sudden popularity of a paper like the *Yugantar* and the extent to which the new ideas are infecting journals not avowedly of the new school, are indices of the rapidity with which Nationalism is formulating itself and taking possession of the country. (315)

Aurobindo had understood the power of the media in influencing the mind of the public much earlier, for he started publishing articles in the magazine *Indu Prakash*, before he started publishing in his own magazines. From the very year he landed in India in 1893 he started publishing and contributed nine articles for *Indu Prakash* under the title “New Lamps for Old” within a period of one year of his arrival in India (*Auto* 565). After some time, magazines like *Indu Prakash* stopped publishing strong nationalist writings like that of Aurobindo. Aurobindo realized that even among the so-called nationalist magazines, there were many who would not dare cross the limits dictated by the British regime:

For the statement of these plain and indisputable truths we must, forsooth, be dubbed “seditionists” and “extremists”, not only by Anglo-Indian papers for whose opinion we do not care a straw,

but by Indian journals professing to be nationalist. There could not be a greater evidence of the dull servility of attitude, the fear of truth and the unworthy timidity which has become ingrained in our habits of mind by long acquiescence in servitude. If these things are sedition, then we are undoubtedly seditious and will persist in our sedition till the end of the chapter. (*Bande Mataram I* 170)

Aurobindo specifies that the boycott of the British government involves many areas like education, judiciary, trade and commerce. In his own words, “We advocate the substitution of Indian agency and Indian energy in every department of life for our old state of dependency on foreign agency and energy” (179). Aurobindo intended boycott to encompass all aspects of national living:

We sum up this refusal of co-operation in the convenient word “Boycott”, refusal of co-operation in the industrial exploitation of our country, in education, in government, in judicial administration, in the details of official intercourse. Necessarily, we have not made that refusal of co-operation complete and uncompromising, but we hold it as a method to be enlarged and pushed farther according as the necessity for moral pressure becomes greater and more urgent. This is one aspect of the

policy. Another is the necessity of boycott to help our own nascent energies in the field of self-help. Boycott of foreign goods is a necessary condition for the encouragement of Swadeshi industries, boycott of Government schools is a necessary condition for the growth of national education, boycott of British courts is a necessary condition for the spread of arbitration. (*Karmayogin* 154)

As a tool of passive resistance, boycott has two-way benefits — it strikes at the source of feeding the foreign economy and at the same time encourages growth of national strength in various fields.

National Education

The English education system introduced in India produced a complex phenomenon which was not just an opposition of the colonizer and the colonized. As remarked by Meenakshi Sharma: “The cultural indoctrination of educated Indians and their consequent idealisation of England and Englishness resulted in a distinction between representations of British rule and representations of an Ideal England . . .” (300). Therefore, Aurobindo found it necessary to bring about a significant change in the understanding of Indian culture and ethos among the people of India. He accused the government schools established by the British to be “antinational” and engaged in “inculcation of loyalty” to the British (*Bande Mataram I* 282). To

change this situation, Aurobindo proposed to start national schools with no government affiliation:

National education cannot be defined briefly in one or two sentences, but we may describe it tentatively as the education which starting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation. Whoever wishes to cut off the nation from its past, is no friend of our national growth. Whoever fails to take advantage of the present is losing us the battle of life. We must therefore save for India all that she has stored up of knowledge, character and noble thought in her immemorial past. We must acquire for her the best knowledge that Europe can give her and assimilate it to her own peculiar type of national temperament. (*Bande Mataram II* 895)

Such an “assimilation” of the East and West could enrich the intellectual domain in India and it will no longer need to be restricted to the instruction provided by the colonial mindset. As Tagore too commented, “While depriving us of our opportunities and reducing our education to the minimum required for conducting a foreign government, this nation pacifies its conscience by calling us names. . . .” He also alleged that the British indulge in racism “by sedulously giving currency to the arrogant cynicism that the East is east and the West is west and never the twain shall meet” (269).

Aurobindo described the method of national education that he proposes with an example in a particular subject, viz. geography:

When we teach geography in Bengal according to the ideas of National Education, we teach it in a different way. First we tell the children that India is our Motherland; in this way we make them aware of the gross body of the nation. We tell them about our rivers, Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, etc., and what these rivers mean, not merely where they flow. In our national schools, when we teach the children about Maharashtra we describe the land in which Shivaji lived. Speaking about Punjab, we tell the children about the Punjab of Ranjit Singh. Speaking about the geography of the Himalayas, we teach them how the land of the Himalayas has become holy because of its Rishis. We also teach the geography of other nations, but what we impart to them is its importance in the context of our country. (*Bande Mataram II* 814)

By linking Maharashtra to Shivaji, Punjab to Ranjit Singh, and the Himalayas to the Rishis, Aurobindo achieves not just a blending of geography, history, myth and spirituality; he also attempts to ingrain a unique Indian ethos into the teaching that is provided in the national schools.

The Strength of Synergy

Aurobindo saw British colonialism in India as the opportune moment to turn it to the advantage of the natives by evolution of the national consciousness. Aurobindo understood that the colonized lands including India and other parts of Asia were ‘othered’ by the colonial discourse to remain outside the time frame of development. He, therefore, emphasised that we do not have to remain perpetually outside the tide of development. Aurobindo suggests seizing the time for the “resurgence” of Asia:

We believe, therefore, that Divine Power is behind the movement, that the *Zeitgeist*, the Time-Spirit, is at work to bring about a mighty movement of which the world at the present juncture has need, that that movement is the resurgence of Asia and that the resurgence of India is not only a necessary part of the larger movement but its central need, that India is the keystone of the arch, the chief inheritress of the common Asiatic destiny. (*Bande Mataram II* 471)

When he refers to India as “the chief inheritress of the common Asiatic destiny,” it is essentialist, doubtless, but it also serves to counter the colonialist view of the Empire as the inheritor of fortunes. Such a specificity of discourse is delivered by the colonial subject because “[c]oerced into a negative, generic subject-position, the oppressed individual responds by

transforming that position into a positive collective one” (JanMohamed and Lloyd 242).

Some of the observations of Aurobindo reminds of Foucault’s ideas in *Discipline and Punish*. In 1907, Aurobindo wrote, “In badly-governed countries like Russia, Turkey and India, the line of demarcation is very small between the police and the habitual criminal, the budmash, the hooligan whom it is their nominal duty to repress” (*Bande Mataram II* 712). In the context of prisons, Foucault also comments that “[t]he convicts are . . . another people within the same people; with its own habits, instincts, morals.’ We are still very close here to the ‘picturesque’ descriptions of the world of the malefactors . . .” (253). It was necessary for the colonialist to stamp the native as “criminal,” “budmash” and “hooligan” to distinguish themselves as different from these descriptions. It was as necessary also to “show the East to the West, and convince the West that the East has her contribution to make to the history of civilization. India is no beggar of the West” (Tagore 271).

Aurobindo was aware of the limitations imposed by the hybridity caused by his English education and acknowledges the difficulties involved:

I am addressing you in the English language. I am an Indian.
 You are all Indians. I am trying to preach to the nation certain ideas which will bring prosperity to our country. I got my education in England, and so I can express my thoughts best in

English. It shows how unnatural was our life which existed in the nineteenth century. When I speak in English, a foreign language, a certain number will understand me, a certain number will partly understand and a certain number will not understand at all. Those who speak in a foreign language, are not really able to throw themselves out in that language because that language is not their own. (*Bande Mataram II* 842-43)

The only reason that Aurobindo relates for continuing to write in English is that he could express himself best in that language. He does not feel it necessary to abandon that language and to start using Bengali. It may not have been even possible for him, for he had an English education even in India before he went to England for his higher studies. It was not necessary too, to abandon the English language as an anti-colonial statement. As remarked by Aijaz Ahmed, “One cannot reject English now, on the basis of its initially colonial insertion, any more than one can boycott the railways for that same reason” (77). Similar attitude to the use of the English language was also revealed by Chinua Achebe when he said, “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English . . .” (103). The Indian novelist, Raja Rao also opined that “[o]ne has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (296). His hybridity comes to Aurobindo’s aid when he compares the

persecutions of the nationalist movement by the colonial powers to mythologies from both the East and the West:

When Kansa heard that Krishna was to be born to slay him, he tried to prevent the fulfilment of God's will by killing His instrument, as if the power which warned him of approaching doom had not the strength to enforce the doom. So too, when the vague prophecies of a Messiah reached the ears of Herod and he heard that Christ was born in Bethlehem, the fear of his earthly dominion passing into the hands of another drove him to massacre all the children of the Jews in order to avoid his fancied doom. These examples are a parable of the eternal blindness of men when face to face with movements divinely inspired which threaten or seem to threaten their temporal dominion. (*Bande Mataram II* 980)

Aurobindo here suggests that the colonial project was undertaken to remove the threat that came in the form of developed Eastern nations. However, by curbing their development and destroying the civilizations, Europe was only destroying itself. In the words of Césaire, "They thought they were only slaughtering Indians, or Hindus, or South Sea Islanders, or Africans. They have in fact overthrown, one after another, the ramparts behind which European civilization could have developed freely" (75). Aurobindo

continues with his allegorical examples and says that despite the efforts to destroy, India shall revitalize itself and play a significant role in the progress of humanity:

Whenever the first play of energy is exhausted and earth grows old and weary, full of materialism, racked with problems she cannot solve, the function of India is to restore the youth of mankind and assure it of immortality. She sends forth a light from her bosom which floods the earth and the heavens, and mankind bathes in it like St. George in the well of life and recovers strength, hope and vitality for its long pilgrimage. Such a time is now at hand. The world needs India and needs her free. The work she has to do now is to organize life in the terms of Vedanta, and that is a work she cannot do while overshadowed by a foreign power and a foreign civilisation. She cannot do it without taking the management of her own life into her own hands. She must live her own life and not the life of a part or subordinate in a foreign Empire. (*Bande Mataram II* 1086)

Aurobindo likens India's resurgence from colonial control to the resurrection of St. George in the well of life. In the same breath, he speaks of Vedanta, thus demonstrating the deep impact of the synergy ingrained in his intellectual makeup. Aurobindo quotes an English poet, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, to

emphasize that the West has no wisdom at all and that India would regain all its lost glory:

The wisdom of the West is but a madness,
 The fret of shallow waters in their bed.
 Yours is the flow, the fulness of man's patience,
 The ocean of God's rest inherited.
 And thou, too, India, mourner of the nations,
 Though thou hast died today in all men's sight,
 And though upon thy cross with thieves thou hangest,
 Yet shall thy wrong be justified in right. (573)

By bringing in a quotation from an English author, Aurobindo points out how the people of England themselves are against the colonizing mission. Aurobindo continues with his tirade against the British and the Anglo-Indian media who support them. He writes:

But then the *Englishman* is so hard to please. If we differ among ourselves, he cries, 'Look, look, you cannot agree among yourselves, and yet you ask for self-government.' When we do agree among ourselves he shouts, 'Look, look, you cannot disagree among yourselves, and yet you ask for self-government.' It is a case of heads I win, tails you lose (540).

Aurobindo uses an idiom from the English language he appropriated to make

fun of the colonial views. The reference to the *Englishman* here is the newspaper then published from Calcutta.

Aurobindo did not deem it necessary to break away from everything Western for the resurgence of the spirit of India. In fact, he thought that it would be counter-productive to blindly follow all the ideals stamped as Indian. He wrote in *Karmayogin*, “Nationalism has been hitherto largely a revolt against the tendency to shape ourselves into the mould of Europe; but it must also be on its guard against any tendency to cling to every detail that has been Indian” (66). It may appear that Aurobindo’s ideas are similar to what Roger Griffin, in his famous work *The Nature of Fascism*, calls “palingenetic ultra-nationalism.” Griffin described palingenetic ultra-nationalism as the “fascist minimum”:

Just as the combination of two lenses in a telescope can bring a distinct object suddenly into focus, the binomial expression which they create defines a genus of political energy far more circumscribed than the vast areas of phenomena embraced by them separately, namely one whose mobilizing vision is that of *the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it.* (n. pag.)

Clearly, Aurobindo does not envision such a “rebirth” as he specifically says that the nationalist enterprise that he champions does not seek to revive

“every detail that has been Indian.” Such a liberal nature of Aurobindo’s thought rules out any possibility of revivalist ultra-nationalism emerging through his politics. What holds Aurobindo back from such an absolute return to the past is the fact that he was aware of the weaknesses of the past. His call for the revival of the Indian spirit is a means to counter the colonial oppression and to bring about the liberation of the land. It is the base on which he keeps his feet firm in the face of the intellectual onslaught of the British who constantly remind us of our own ‘inferiority.’ Such references to the past are not just glorifications, but are tempered by the awareness of the weaknesses. This becomes evident when he says that we should “guard against any tendency to cling to every detail that has been Indian” (*Karmayogin* 66).

Spirituality for National Emancipation

Aurobindo felt that it is necessary for India to tap its spiritual strength for the regeneration of the nation. He says that if we observe deep into the condition of the land, “we shall be convinced that the one thing wanting, which we must strive to acquire before all others, is strength — strength physical, strength mental, strength moral, but above all strength spiritual which is the one inexhaustible and imperishable source of all the others” (*Bande Mataram I* 82). In the context of nationalist struggle, such a recourse to spirituality was also necessary because spirituality transcended the concept

of religion. In a land like India, having followers of different faiths, it was significant to adopt a spiritual approach rather than a religious one. As Varma observed, the concept of equality of religions “was necessary for Indian nationalism which had to appeal to a population professing different creeds and cults” (121). Aurobindo noted that physical liberation is based on spiritual expansion, and hence, for India to become free it has to draw sustenance from its spiritual roots:

India can once more be made conscious of her greatness by an overmastering sense of the greatness of her spirituality. This sense of greatness is the main feeder of all patriotism. This only can put an end to all self-depreciation and generate a burning desire to recover the lost ground. (*Bande Mataram II* 513)

Partha Chatterjee remarks that Rajnarayan Bose’s work, *Se kal ar e kal* (Those Days and These Days), indicates the changes that happened with the introduction of European modernity into India (*Our Modernity* 4). While Bose spoke about ‘That Time and This Time’ and referred to a temporal difference, Aurobindo speaks about ‘That Land’ (Europe) and ‘This Land’ (India) and says that there is a spatial difference because the basis of European civilisation has been material and that of India has been spiritual:

The civilisation of Europe has always been preponderatingly material and the division of classes was material in its principles

and material in its objects, but our civilisation has always been preponderatingly spiritual and moral, and caste division in India had a spiritual object and a spiritual and moral basis. (*Bande Mataram II* 682)

Such a differentiation of the material and the spiritual is a “nationalist problematic” as observed by Partha Chatterjee. What Aurobindo attempts here is “the identification of an incompleteness in the claims of the modern West to a superior culture and asserting the sovereignty of the nation over the domain of spirituality” (*Nation* 48). Aurobindo criticizes the European notion that the Indian history till the European advent on this land is worthless. Indian spirituality and mysticism cannot be valued using the yardsticks of European systems, for they spring from totally different domains:

When confronted with the truths of Hinduism, the experience of deep thinkers and the choice spirits of the race through thousands of years, he shouts “Mysticism, mysticism!” and thinks he has conquered. To him there is order, development, progress, evolution, enlightenment in the history of Europe, but the past of India is an unsightly mass of superstition and ignorance best torn out of the book of human life. These thousands of years of our thought and aspiration are a period of the least importance to us and the true history of our progress

only begins with the advent of European education! The rest is a confused nightmare or a mere barren lapse of time preparing nothing and leading to nothing. (*Karmayogin* 94)

To slight the past of the colonized as superstition and ignorance is part of the project of colonialism. The attitude of the European colonizer is best depicted by Césaire, “That the West invented science. That the West alone knows how to think; that at the borders of the Western world there begins the shadowy realm of primitive thinking, which, dominated by the notion of participation, incapable of logic, is the very model of faulty thinking” (69). As Fanon points out: “By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (*Wretched* 210). Aurobindo brings in spirituality to argue for the revival of the nation:

For we in India who are enthusiasts for liberty, fight for no selfish lure, for no mere material freedom, for no mere economic predominance, but for our national right to that large freedom and noble life without which no spiritual emancipation is possible; for it is not among an enslaved, degraded and perishing people that the Rishis and great spirits can long continue to be born. And since the spiritual life of India is the first necessity of the world’s future, we fight not only for our own political and spiritual freedom but for the spiritual

emancipation of the human race. With such a glorious cause to battle for, there ought to be no craven weakness among us, no flinching, no cowardly evasion of the consequences of our action. It is a mistake to whine when we are smitten, as if we had hoped to achieve liberty without suffering. To meet persecution with indifference, to take punishment quietly as a matter of course, with erect head and undimmed eyes, this is the spirit in which we must conquer. (*Bande Mataram II* 611)

There is no point in remaining shocked at the monstrosities inflicted by the colonizing venture. In Fanon's words, "there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory, and solemnity." A return to a glorious cultural past "does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture" (*Wretched* 210). Fanon says that such an effort will have an immense psychological effect upon the native. Aurobindo laments that we are aware of philosophy from across the world, but are largely ignorant of our own lofty spiritual ideals. In a speech delivered in Bombay in 1908, he said, "In Government schools the degree-holders know what Schopenhauer has to say, but they have hardly any knowledge of the spiritual foundations of our own thought" (*Bande Mataram II* 814-15). There was this constant fear of loss of roots, the native philosophic and spiritual bases in his discourses. As Ashis Nandy says, Aurobindo's

spiritualism “was an interpersonal withdrawal to protect values which he would have had to give up in the light of conventional reason” (97).

Even the concept of self-governance or *Swaraj* is described by Aurobindo in terms of the spiritual: “The meaning of Swaraj, in our ancient literature, is the spiritual condition of the soul which attains to Mukti. When the soul is independent of everything but itself, when it exists in the joy of its light and greatness, when it is Mukta, that is Swaraj” (*Bande Mataram II* 840). Such a spiritual point of view is a method of confronting the West. As Nandy puts it, “Aurobindo's spiritualism can be seen as a way of handling a situation of cultural aggression and to that extent it was a language of defiance, seeking to make sense out of the West in Indian terms” (85).

On the one hand, Aurobindo speaks of certain values that are quintessentially ‘Indian.’ Yet, his political discourse is based upon certain universal values, which needs to be acknowledged to have been perforce derived from his English education. For instance, the ideas of freedom of speech and citizenship rights are not derived from any Indian discourse or Indian tradition. In the different strategies of resistance employed by Aurobindo, it could be observed that his syncretic outlook has led to the yoking of Eastern values and Western ideas of liberalism.

Chapter Three

Culture, Civilization, and the Citizen

One of the major impacts of the colonizing project upon the subject nation is the paradigmatic shifts created in the culture and civilization of the natives in terms of social values and relations. If culture is the outward expression of life of a people, civilization can be considered as the base from which culture manifests. However, neither of them is a static entity, for both evolve and change due to the influences of various factors. Raymond Williams notes that the early use of the term “culture” referred to “a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals” (87). Today, the term has come to denote a wide range of ideas including “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” or “particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general” or in the most common use as “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (90). Williams also observes that from the late eighteenth century, the term civilization stands for “a specific combination of the ideas of a process and an achieved condition. It has behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development.” He adds that more than as a “historical process” the term also “celebrated the associated sense of modernity: an achieved condition of refinement and order” (58). The term “citizen” is related to

civilization since it is “derived from *civis*” which later became “citizen, which is nearer our modern sense of a ‘national’” (56). The root word of civilization is “*civil*” derived from the Latin “*civilis*” and meant “of or belonging to citizens” (57).

This chapter focuses on Aurobindo’s idea of culture and civilization, his views on their contact with colonialism, and the methods and approaches he suggests to overcome or assimilate the consequences of this contact. It also brings to light the nature of the citizen he envisages for the Indian nation under construction.

Aurobindo defines culture as “the expression of a consciousness of life which formulates itself in three aspects.” He reckons that “[t]here is a side of thought, of ideal, of upward will and the soul’s aspiration; there is a side of creative self-expression and appreciative aesthesis, intelligence and imagination; and there is a side of practical and outward formulation” (*Renaissance* 106). Of the three elements, first he speaks of the spiritual aspect as he considers it to be the most important aspect of culture. The second aspect includes all types of creativity including art and literature and the third aspect includes all features of social existence. There have always been attempts to find uniform “expressions of consciousness” and to group people as belonging to different cultures and civilizations. Stuart Hall describes two different ways in which cultural identities are thought about:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (110-11)

While such a definition is fixative and positioning in nature, there is also another approach which sees cultural identity as dynamic. In this second approach, the individual is given the freedom to build upon the already inherited structure of the past. Thus, it becomes dynamic, making the individual move from the past to the present and then to the future. Hall continues with the description of the second approach to cultural identity:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities are from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is

historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (112)

Aurobindo can be seen to subscribe to this second approach to culture which does not remain immutably attached to the past. He says that “[t]he past has to be used and spent as mobile and current capital for some larger profit, acquisition and development of the future. . . .” However, he adds that “to gain we must release, we must part with something in order to grow and live more richly, — that is the universal law of existence” (*Renaissance* 75). Although he writes in ornate terms about the Indian cultural past, Aurobindo does not want to be thought of as advocating an absolute return to the past:

Our sense of the greatness of our past must not be made a fatally hypnotising lure to inertia; it should be rather an inspiration to renewed and greater achievement. But in our criticism of the present we must not be one-sided or condemn with a foolish impartiality all that we are or have done. Neither flattering or

glossing over our downfall nor fouling our nest to win the applause of the stranger, we have to note our actual weakness and its roots, but to fix too our eyes with a still firmer attention on our elements of strength, our abiding potentialities, our dynamic impulses of self-renewal. (*Renaissance* 87-88)

Here, Aurobindo stresses the importance of “becoming” in addition to the sense of “being” acquired from the past, as stated by Stuart Hall. Such a sense of “becoming” needed to be stressed in the context of colonialism which was slowly trying to appropriate the Indian past, after it had successfully established its dominion over the land and the people. Frantz Fanon also stated the need to be cautious when understanding one’s cultural identity in terms of the past:

We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. We must work and fight with the same rhythm as the people to construct the future and to prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already springing up. A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever- present

reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (*Wretched* 233)

Such a struggle for the future by emphasising the national culture assumes significance in the backdrop of colonialism. The site of colonialism is constantly assailed by the threat of destructions; not just of loss of lives or break down of physical structures and natural habitat but of identities, cultures and civilizations. Colonialism, in most of its manifestations in different parts of the world, endeavoured to classify the cultures and civilizations of the colonized as inferior to that of themselves. As Fanon observed, “Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his ‘nation’ . . .” (*Wretched* 236). If the colonized are successfully persuaded to “admit” their inferior status, it becomes easy for the colonizers to establish their hegemony upon them. The effort of nationalists like Aurobindo was to foreground the richness of the cultural and civilizational foundations of India and to “re-present” India to counter its representations in colonial discourses.

The Cultural Foundations of India

What Aurobindo attempted to do was to bring out the unique aspects of

Indian culture and civilization and posit them vis-à-vis the Western to demonstrate that the claims of superiority of the West are baseless. Though, in some instances Aurobindo does insist that the Indian culture and civilization is superior, in most arguments he emphasised on the essential differences of the East and the West which cannot and should not be judged on such arbitrary terms. He suggested that “a one-sided world would have been the poorer for its uniformity” (*Renaissance* 138-39). In some other instances, he even opined that none of the extant civilizations can be reckoned as sufficiently advanced to be considered “civilized”: “There is here no real question between barbarism and civilisation, for all masses of men are barbarians labouring to civilise themselves.” What actually exist are only “differences necessary for the completeness of the growing orb of human culture” (*Renaissance* 139). It is pertinent to note that he considered differences to be necessary for human progress.

Aurobindo opined that spirituality was the basis of Indian civilization, and that materiality assumed significance only in light of the spiritual:

Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it. India saw from the beginning, — and, even in her ages of reason and her age of increasing ignorance, she never lost hold of the insight, — that life cannot be rightly seen in the sole light, cannot be perfectly lived in the

sole power of its externalities. She was alive to the greatness of material laws and forces; she had a keen eye for the importance of the physical sciences; she knew how to organise the arts of ordinary life. But she saw that the physical does not get its full sense until it stands in right relation to the supra-physical. . . .

(Renaissance 6)

The relevance of spirituality in culture is that life cannot be comprehended just by the “sole power of its externalities.” Spirituality is the wellspring from which Indian culture draws its sustenance. When existential questions come up in various discourses, where reason fails to explicate, spirituality is summoned to provide insights. However, Aurobindo emphasised that this is not to ignore the material aspects of existence and he depicted the manner in which this is exemplified in Indian society:

The Rishi in ancient India was the outstanding figure with the hero just behind, while in later times the most striking feature is the long uninterrupted chain from Buddha and Mahavira to Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Nanak, Ramdas and Tukaram and beyond them to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and Dayananda. But there have been also the remarkable achievements of statesmen and rulers, from the first dawn of ascertainable history which comes in with the striking figures of

Chandragupta, Chanakya, Asoka, the Gupta emperors and goes down through the multitude of famous Hindu and Mahomedan figures of the middle age to quite modern times. (246)

Such a celebration of Indian social life may not stand exacting questions of historical validation, but the burden of nationalists like Aurobindo was to impress upon the natives the need to recognize their cultural heritage and more importantly, the need for a consequent creation of the nation. As Fanon observed:

[I]t was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. (*Wretched* 210)

When Aurobindo speaks of the unbroken line of religious leaders, diplomats and rulers, he stresses the versatility of Indian culture. He also sets it as different from the West because the Indian culture is lead by spirituality, represented by the *Rishi*⁸. The West also has its spirituality, but Aurobindo maintains that it is different from that in the East where spirituality is the very

base of existence:

The dignity given to human existence by the Vedantic thought and by the thought of the classical ages of Indian culture exceeded anything conceived by the Western idea of humanity. Man in the West has always been only an ephemeral creature of Nature or a soul manufactured at birth by an arbitrary breath of the whimsical Creator and set under impossible conditions to get salvation, but far more likely to be thrown away into the burning refuse-heap of Hell as a hopeless failure. At best he is exalted by a reasoning mind and will and an effort to be better than God or Nature made him. Far more ennobling, inspiring, filled with the motive-force of a great idea is the conception placed before us by Indian culture. Man in the Indian idea is a spirit veiled in the works of energy, moving to self-discovery, capable of Godhead. He is a soul that is growing through Nature to conscious self-hood; he is a divinity and an eternal existence; he is an ever-flowing wave of the God-ocean, an inextinguishable spark of the supreme Fire. (*Renaissance* 156)

The Indian spiritual concept is affirmed by Aurobindo to be more humanistic in approach since man is conceived as “divinity” and as “an eternal existence.” He sees the Western concept as theocentric, and the human being

is considered as “created” to achieve salvation. Hence, the spiritual element is really kept with God, and humans are just left with reason for assistance in leading his life. There is no need of a self-discovery, for the self has already been stated to be a product of the Creator. This view of Aurobindo cannot, however, be seen as a fair assessment of Western spirituality which is not limited to institutionalized Christianity. Aurobindo does not take into consideration here the pre-Christian spirituality of the West and parallel spiritual streams or the evils of the caste system of India. The ‘outcastes’ of India are equally “thrown away into the burning refuse-heap of Hell as a hopeless failure.” But it could be conceded that the focus of the Western society remained on the material aspect and its development. As Partha Chatterjee observed:

The superiority of the West was in the materiality of its culture. The West had achieved progress, prosperity and freedom because it had placed Reason at the heart of its culture. The distinctive culture of the West was its science, its technology and its love of progress. But culture did not consist only of the material aspect of life. There was the spiritual aspect too, and here the European Enlightenment had little to contribute. In the spiritual aspect of culture, the East was superior – and hence, undominated. (*Nationalist* 66)

Even where the West dealt with the spiritual, it was inadequate in that there was no attempt to blend the material to the spiritual. Aurobindo alleged that the West has for long depended on reason for what it considered to be spiritual realization, whereas Indian thought considered spirituality to be outside the purview of reason:

. . . Indian metaphysics are as far removed from the brilliant or the profound idea-spinning of the French or the German mind as from the broad intellectual generalising on the basis of the facts of physical science which for some time did duty for philosophy in modern Europe. It has always been in its essential parts an intellectual approach to spiritual realisation. (*Renaissance* 23)

Europe, fascinated by the achievements of modern science, looked towards it for a philosophical understanding of life, though it is beyond the purview of science. Philosophy or reason becomes less important than science. In another instance, Aurobindo portrayed the dangers of overdependence on science:

For this reason modern Science insists on all the premises being thoroughly proved before the vichar commences, and its method of proof is experiment. Modern European progress is an application of this principle of experiment to politics, society and every human belief and institution. This is a rather dangerous business. In the process of experiment you may get

an explosion which will blow society out of existence and bring a premature end to the experiment. Moreover, you may easily think a premise proved when it is not. Science has had to abandon notion after notion which it thought based on unshakably proven premises. (501)

The method of experiment, though useful in science, may not be applicable in all fields of knowledge. For instance, the proof of history is evidence while that of philosophy is argument and its logic. Therefore, Aurobindo saw the application of the principle of science to other disciplines as dangerous. Even in its own domain, science permits *vichar*, 'reason,' only after obtaining proof on the premises. Aurobindo objected to the predominance of science not because he was against science *per se*, but because he did not approve of taking science to realms where it had no concern or ability to negotiate. Aurobindo also said that it is a mistaken notion to think that progress is to speculate and generalize:

Yesterday's opinion is today exploded & discarded, new fireworks of theory, generalisation and speculation take the place of the old, and to this pyrotechnic rushing in a circle they give the name of progress. The possibility of a calm insight & wisdom seems to have departed from this brilliant mob of pushing, overactive intellects. Force there is, but force doomed

to a rapid dissolution, of which the signs are already not wanting. (*Early 559*)

Aurobindo laments that theoretical knowledge instead of understanding or applying it for human progress, becomes conceited and is easily misused. Aimé Césaire begins his *Discourse on Colonialism* by foregrounding the degeneration of the Western civilization which is unable to solve problems which are its own creation:

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization. (31)

With the mistaken notions of progress held by the West, Aurobindo felt it was all the more relevant to go to the roots of his national culture. Fanon too pointed out the necessity to identify the foundations of one's native culture and wrote:

[T]his passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they

realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hotheaded and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people. (*Wretched* 209-10)

While the West considered reason to be more important than the body, Indian philosophy held a more balanced view of all the elements that constitute life. While the basis of life was considered spiritual, it did not take away any importance for the human body:

*Śarīram khalu dharma -sādhanam*⁹ (sic), runs the old Sanskrit saying, the body too is our means for fulfilling the dharma, the Godward law of our being. The mental, the emotional, the aesthetic parts of us have to be developed, is the ordinary view, so that they may have a greater satisfaction, or because that is man's finer nature, because so he feels himself more alive and fulfilled. (*Renaissance* 35)

Since the human being has the body, s/he is able to carry on the activities prescribed by one's duty. Therefore, the body has to be protected and taken care of. The mind and emotions are housed inside the human body and their fitness would depend on the fitness of the body. Aurobindo maintains that

9 The original phrase goes: “*śarīramādyam khalu dharmasādhanam*” (Kalidasa 5.33).

Indian civilization has not limited its stream of thought to flow in just a few directions. There has been hardly any field of human thought and activity that has remained untouched by the Indian mind:

When we look at the past of India, what strikes us next is her stupendous vitality, her inexhaustible power of life and joy of life, her almost unimaginably prolific creativeness. For three thousand years at least, — it is indeed much longer, — she has been creating abundantly and incessantly, lavishly, with an inexhaustible many-sidedness, republics and kingdoms and empires, philosophies and cosmogonies and sciences and creeds and arts and poems and all kinds of monuments, palaces and temples and public works, communities and societies and religious orders, laws and codes and rituals, physical sciences, psychic sciences, systems of Yoga, systems of politics and administration, arts spiritual, arts worldly, trades, industries, fine crafts, — the list is endless and in each item there is almost a plethora of activity. (*Renaissance* 7-8)

As Aurobindo remembers the splendid past of India and describes it with a string of superlative descriptions like “stupendous,” “inexhaustible,” “prolific” etc., he is trying to bring the past to the pressing needs of the present of contesting the colonizing power. In Fanon’s words, such attempts

arise from the “hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation, and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (*Wretched* 210). Aurobindo stresses on the heterogeneity of the Indian society which was prolific in its interests and activities. He argues that the Indian culture was hinged upon the balance between the material and the spiritual, without compromising one for the other:

The classical period when India was full of life, activity, development, abounding vigour, defending herself successfully against the impact of the outer barbarian, was a period of frank and lavish enjoyment far more intellectual, artistic, perfect than anything Europe has ever been capable of, even at its best. In yet older literature we find the true spirit of India, a splendid capacity for bhoga and tyaga in their highest terms, the utter enjoyment of the householder, the utter renunciation of the sannyasin. To take the utmost joy of life, to be capable of the utmost renunciation of life, at one and the same time, in the same mind and body, to be master of both capacities and bound by neither, — this was the secret of India, the mighty discipline of which Janaka was the traditional exemplar. “Renounce all that thou mayest enjoy all,” — this is India’s characteristic message, — not Buddha’s absolute renunciation, not the

European's enslavement to his bodily, vital and intellectual desires and appetites. Tyaga within, bhoga without, — Ananda, the divine delight of the purified soul, embracing both. (*Karmayogin* 449-50)

By bringing together *tyaga*, 'sacrifice,' which is considered a spiritual aspect and *bhoga*, 'enjoyment,' a material aspect, Aurobindo stresses the balance achieved in Indian culture. This is in direct opposition to colonial narratives like that of William Archer which try to portray Indian culture as pessimistic. Archer wrote that "its deep-seated pessimism" was a "characteristic of Hindu thought" (73). Aurobindo's emphasis on the superiority of the Indian culture helps him to counter the colonialist forces of disintegration:

Ancient India as we know, was a sort of continent, made up of many great & civilised nations who were united very much like the nations of modern Europe by an essential similarity of religion and culture rising above & beyond their marked racial peculiarities; like the nations of Europe also they were continually going to war with each other; & yet had relations of occasional struggle, of action & reaction, with the other peoples of Asia whom they regarded as barbarous races outside the pale of the Aryan civilisation. Like the continent of Europe, the ancient continent of India was subject to two opposing forces,

one centripetal which was continually causing attempts at universal empire, another centrifugal which was continually impelling the empires once formed to break up again into their constituent parts: but both these forces were much stronger in their action than they have usually been in Europe. (*Early 292-93*)

When Aurobindo calls ancient India “a sort of continent,” he is trying to downplay the fact that they were independent kingdoms mostly at war with each other. By using the description “continent,” he tries to bring about an at-par status for India with Europe. The oppositional centrifugal and centripetal forces are also cited by Aurobindo as a reason for India not coming together as a nation. Yet, the balancing effect of these opposing forces also prevented the nation from withering away.

However, with the onslaught of colonialism, the comfortable balance of the Indian society and culture was disturbed. Aurobindo ascribes “anarchy” as the reason for such an attack upon the Indian civilization:

Undoubtedly there was a period, a brief but very disastrous period of the dwindling of that great fire of life, even a moment of incipient disintegration, marked politically by the anarchy which gave European adventure its chance, inwardly by an increasing torpor of the creative spirit in religion and art, —

science and philosophy and intellectual knowledge had long been dead or petrified into a mere scholastic Punditism, — all pointing to a nadir of setting energy, the evening-time from which according to the Indian idea of the cycles a new age has to start. It was that moment and the pressure of a superimposed European culture which followed it that made the reawakening necessary. (*Renaissance* 4-5)

European colonialism found its inroads into the Indian society while the native culture and civilization was at its weakest. There was no strong political power to resist the British and culturally too, the society was in a state of dormancy. It was easy for the European modernity which appeared as a cultural imposition to establish itself in India. As Partha Chatterjee points out, this was not due to some inherent weakness in the Indian civilization, but just a weak stage in the cycles of age:

Thus, the lack of modernity in colonial India had nothing to do with any essential cultural failings of Indian civilization. The particular historical conjuncture at which India had come under foreign subjugation was one where the European nations were forward-looking and dynamic while Indian society was in a stage of stultification. (*Nationalist* 137)

When the European cultural modernity came into contact with Indian culture

which was then in a static stage, it was inevitable that the native culture be agitated to the extent of alteration, if not damage. Fanon observes, “A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion” (*Wretched* 237). Aurobindo considered that only a renaissance in the social and cultural levels can liberate the nation from the clutches of colonialism:

This Renaissance, this new birth in India, if it is a fact, must become a thing of immense importance both to herself and the world, to herself because of all that is meant for her in the recovery or the change of her time-old spirit and national ideals, to the world because of the possibilities involved in the rearing of a force that is in many respects unlike any other and its genius very different from the mentality and spirit that have hitherto governed the modern idea in mankind, although not so far away perhaps from that which is preparing to govern the future. (*Renaissance* 3)

To awaken the dormant spirit and ideals of India would in turn influence the European culture which imposed itself on this land. Aurobindo considered these ideals to be very different from the “mentality and spirit” which were then prevalent not just in Europe but in humanity as a whole. He probably felt that the “difference” of the Indian culture can become a strong weapon to

combat colonialism. To emphasise this difference, Aurobindo goes on to say that the Renaissance to occur in India is patently not the Renaissance that happened in Europe:

The word carries the mind back to the turning-point of European culture to which it was first applied; that was not so much a reawakening as an overturn and reversal, a seizure of Christianised, Teutonised, feudalised Europe by the old Graeco-Latin spirit and form with all the complex and momentous results which came from it. That is certainly not a type of renaissance that is at all possible in India. There is a closer resemblance to the recent Celtic movement in Ireland, the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding: in Ireland this was discovered by a return to the Celtic spirit and culture after a long period of eclipsing English influences, and in India something of the same kind of movement is appearing and has especially taken a pronounced turn since the political outburst of 1905. But even here the analogy does not give the whole truth. (*Renaissance* 3-4)

Aurobindo considers the Renaissance in Europe to be a misnomer, since it was just a “reversal” and which involved no “reawakening.” He is careful to

give no appearance of bringing in ideas borrowed from European history. To mark this, Aurobindo first says that the European Renaissance was no reawakening at all. Then he says that if at all, that is not the kind of Renaissance which is needed in India. He would like to identify the Indian Renaissance with the Celtic movement in Ireland, thus clarifying the intention to a return to the ancient Indian ideals. Aurobindo brings in an epistemology that is characteristically Indian to explicate his concept of the Indian Renaissance:

On the whole what we see is a giant Shakti who awakening into a new world, a new and alien environment, finds herself shackled in all her limbs by a multitude of gross or minute bonds, bonds self-woven by her past, bonds recently imposed from outside, and is struggling to be free from them, to arise and proclaim herself, to cast abroad her spirit and set her seal on the world. We hear on every side a sound of the slow fraying of bonds, here and there a sharp tearing and snapping; but freedom of movement has not yet been attained. The eyes are not yet clear, the bud of the soul has only partly opened. The Titaness has not yet arisen. (*Renaissance* 4)

The image of the *Shakti* invoked by Aurobindo represents the Indian culture which tries to free itself from the shackles of the past to be reborn into the

future. Stephen Slemon observes that “. . . post-colonial texts position themselves upon the site of allegorical figuration in order to subvert the codes of recognition which colonial discourse has settled upon post-colonial cultures” (13). The coming together of the terms *Shakti* and Titaness in this depiction points to the hybridity in Aurobindo, which doubles also as his strength. There is also a change in the method of portrayal since it is more metaphorical and appealing more to emotion than reason. It is a peculiarity of Aurobindo’s language that he is able to shift from logic to passion with dextrous ease. It is also worth noting that even as he talked about an Indian renaissance, Aurobindo’s aims had been to create a nationalistic spirit in the people. He wrote: “To bring in the mass of the people, to found the greatness of the future on the greatness of the past, to infuse Indian politics with Indian religious fervour and spirituality are the indispensable conditions for a great and powerful political awakening in India” (*Early* 645). His liberal usage of religious and spiritual terms in his political discourse thus assisted in an easy identification with the masses.

Interaction with the West

British colonialism which began its liaison with India with trade interests transformed itself into domination of the Indian subcontinent, and in between, it passed through various steps. While the forces of the Empire fought with several kingdoms, it also maintained friendly and ambivalent

relations with several others. It was only with the ascent of the nationalist movement that a cultural revival was heralded under the guidance of leaders like Aurobindo. Jasbir Jain notes:

. . . [T]hen came a phase of nationalist upsurge which was an expression of disillusionment with western imperialism as well as positing of a cultural model. The leading figures of this phase are Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), Vivekanand (1863-1903) and Aurobindo (1872-1950). . . . (26-27)

The impact of the colonial culture was so strong that it was able to confuse the natives about their identity. It was true that by the effect of colonialism and its definition of the Indian society, Indians did try to live the description of them given by the colonial masters. The colonizers described India as “[a]n abstract, metaphysical, religious mind overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and action as Maya. . . .” Because of the influence of such a view held by the colonizers, “for a time Indians in this as in other matters submissively echoed their new Western teachers and masters” (Aurobindo, *Renaissance* 6). On the other hand, there were also attempts to mimic the colonizers as theirs was taken to be the superior culture. Aurobindo gives examples of some of the intellectuals of his time, who, because of their Western education started imitating the British:

They sought for a bare, simplified and rationalised religion, created a literature which imported very eagerly the forms, ideas and whole spirit of their English models, — the value of the other arts was almost entirely ignored, — put their political faith and hope in a wholesale assimilation or rather an exact imitation of the middle-class pseudo-democracy of nineteenth-century England. . . . (*Renaissance* 19)

In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, “[t]he ambivalence of mimicry - almost but not quite - suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal” (*Location* 91). However, it needs to be noted that the “imitation” mentioned by Aurobindo is not the same as the “mimicry” of Bhabha since there is no ambivalence involved. Aurobindo narrates the self-defeating nature of such an imitation of the colonizers:

A new activity came in, but this was at first crudely and confusedly imitative of the foreign culture. It was a crucial moment and an ordeal of perilous severity; a less vigorous energy of life might well have foundered and perished under the double weight of the deadening of its old innate motives and a servile imitation of alien ideas and habits. (*Renaissance* 15)

The native culture was too strong to be easily swept away by the “insurgent counter-appeal” of the colonial culture. Yet, there was an attempt by the

natives educated in the Western culture to imitate the colonizers. Since such a mimicry of the colonial culture verges on mockery, “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’, that which it disavows.” Even worse, this mockery turns into a “*menace* - a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha *Location* 91). Then, the venture of the colonist is made to appear like a farce by the colonial native.

Aurobindo argues that when the colonized realize the futility of mimicking the colonizer and stops fetishizing the colonial culture, they will turn to the native culture which constitutes the essence of their being:

The national mind turned a new eye on its past culture, reawoke to its sense and import, but also at the same time saw it in relation to modern knowledge and ideas. Out of this awakening vision and impulse the Indian renaissance is arising, and that must determine its future tendency. The recovery of the old spiritual knowledge and experience in all its splendour, depth and fullness is its first, most essential work; the flowing of this spirituality into new forms of philosophy, literature, art, science and critical knowledge is the second; an original dealing with modern problems in the light of the Indian spirit and the endeavour to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritualised society is the third and most difficult. Its success on these three

lines will be the measure of its help to the future of humanity.

(Renaissance 15)

Aurobindo does not suggest an unconditional return to the past, but to bring the past to the present and connect it with “modern knowledge and ideas.” As suggested by Debjani Ganguly, “A critique of the pervasiveness of colonial knowledge formations and political practice in the postcolonial world does not imply a wholesale rejection of all that is western” (60). Obviously, Aurobindo’s intent is to create a modernity parallel to that imposed upon by the British. As he wrote in another instance, “After all we live in the twentieth century and cannot revive the India of Chandragupta or Akbar. . . .” He added that it was required to “keep abreast with the march of truth and knowledge, fit ourselves for existence under actual circumstances, and our education must be therefore up to date in form and substance and modern in life and spirit” (*Early* 420). It would be unique since it is a plan to blend spirituality with the varied expressions of culture like philosophy, literature, art and science. The introduction of science is significant here because science is considered to be the typical vanguard of European modernity which bases itself on reason. As Partha Chatterjee, remarked, “Rationality becomes the normative principle of a certain way of life which is said to promote a certain way of thinking, namely, science” (*Nationalist* 16). Such an appropriation of a major signpost of Western culture was a seminal step in the direction of decolonization. Further, the renaissance of the nation had to reconcile in steps the culture

shocks engendered by the assault of the colonizers on the cultural landscape of the people:

The process which has led up to the renaissance now inevitable, may be analysed, both historically and logically, into three steps by which a transition is being managed, a complex breaking, reshaping and new building, with the final result yet distant in prospect, — though here and there the first bases may have been already laid, — a new age of an old culture transformed, not an affiliation of a new-born civilisation to one that is old and dead, but a true rebirth, a renascence. The first step was the reception of the European contact, a radical reconsideration of many of the prominent elements and some revolutionary denial of the very principles of the old culture. The second was a reaction of the Indian spirit upon the European influence, sometimes with a total denial of what it offered and a stressing both of the essential and the strict letter of the national past, which yet masked a movement of assimilation. The third, only now beginning or recently begun, is rather a process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea and form, but so transmutes and Indianises it, so absorbs and so transforms it

entirely into itself that its foreign character disappears and it becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India mastering and taking possession of the modern influence, no longer possessed or overcome by it. (*Renaissance* 17)

Aurobindo admits that when the native culture was threatened by the contact with the colonists, many aspects of the indigenous culture were questioned by the natives themselves. The “reaction” in the second stage takes place when the colonial cultural imposition is questioned and an indigenous culture is attempted to be revived or invented. Probably, that is the stage at which Aurobindo wrote, for he says that the third stage is “only now beginning.” He cites the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterji as exemplifying the spirit of this transition to the third stage (*Renaissance* 21). In the second stage, during the days of Bankim, apart from the passionate nationalist literature there were no “viable political means to actualize itself. Instead, it became a dream: a utopian political community in which the nation was the Mother, once resplendent in wealth and beauty, now in tatters” (Chatterji *Nationalist* 79). The mission of Aurobindo and other nationalists like him was to revive the characteristic morale of India, which is chiefly spiritual, and remove the mask worn in the form of the “foreign character” and regain its own identity and freedom from foreign rule. Yet, Aurobindo did not subscribe to a revival of the past as presently attempted by the

fundamentalist right-wing forces of the RSS—Shiv Sena—BJP combine. He clearly stated that “all attempts to revive the past must fail, in spite of the spiritual impetus and the democratic forces that assisted its inception” (*Renaissance* 443-44). Aurobindo’s references to the past or an ancient culture are meant only as a means to fight for decolonizing the Indian land. As Fanon said, “To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle” (*Wretched* 233). For Aurobindo, in the return of “the Shakti” after winning freedom, she should nevertheless wield the sword of modernity or “the modern influence,” because it is before this weapon that the natives surrendered in the first place:

Nationalist texts were addressed both to ‘the people’ who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned. To both, nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernize’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political

domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based. (Chatterjee *Nationalist* 30)

Aurobindo's rhetoric of possessing the modern influence without getting "possessed or overcome by it" is an urge to such a progressive change without sacrificing one's unique cultural identity. He exhorted that "it is not by abolishing ourselves, our own special temperament and power, that we can get at the living oneness, but by following it out and raising it to its highest possibilities of freedom and action" (*Renaissance* 44). The attempt to 'modernize,' as suggested by Chatterjee, is an effort to get rid of the 'backward' conditions which prohibit the native people from moving forward. For Aurobindo, retaining one's identity did not mean opposing everything that comes from the West:

India can best develop herself and serve humanity by being herself and following the law of her own nature. This does not mean, as some narrowly and blindly suppose, the rejection of everything new that comes to us in the stream of Time or happens to have been first developed or powerfully expressed by the West. Such an attitude would be intellectually absurd, physically impossible, and above all unspiritual; true spirituality rejects no new light, no added means or materials of our human self-development. (*Renaissance* 38)

It can be seen that the spirituality espoused by Aurobindo gives the highest regard for the well-being of the human individual and hence is a humanist spirituality, not a theocentric one. At the same time, he also warns that adopting some idea from the West should not be reduced to blind imitation:

We have, for instance, taken over in literature the form of the novel, the short story, the critical essay among a number of other adoptions, in science not only the discoveries and inventions, but the method and instrumentation of inductive research, in politics the press, the platform, the forms and habits of agitation, the public association. I do not suppose that anyone seriously thinks of renouncing or exiling these modern additions to our life, — though they are not all of them by any means unmixed blessings, — on the ground that they are foreign importations. But the question is what we do with them and whether we can bring them to be instruments and by some characteristic modification moulds of our own spirit. If so, there has been an acceptance and an assimilation; if not there has been merely a helpless imitation. (*Renaissance* 45-46)

Aurobindo does not have any issue with modernity so long as it doesn't remain an imported modernity, but has been assimilated into becoming our modernity. He explains it as “*ātmasātkarana*, an assimilative appropriation, a

making the thing settle into oneself and turn into characteristic form of our self-being” (*Renaissance* 48). He was aware that it was neither necessary nor possible to return to a pristine civilization in the past unaffected by the incursions of modernity:

Any attempt to remain exactly what we were before the European invasion or to ignore in future the claims of a modern environment and necessity is foredoomed to an obvious failure. However much we may deplore some of the characteristics of that intervening period in which we were dominated by the Western standpoint or move away from the standpoint back to our own characteristic way of seeing existence, we cannot get rid of a certain element of inevitable change it has produced upon us, any more than a man can go back in life to what he was some years ago and recover entire and unaffected a past mentality. (*Renaissance* 51)

During the time of colonialist activity, there were some writers who feared this inability to return and they advocated that any kind of acceptance from the West would “bring pouring in the rest of the occidental deluge” (43). However, Aurobindo did not subscribe to such a view and said that “[t]he undesirability of total rejection, even if it were entirely possible, arises from the fact that interchange with the environment is necessary to a healthy

persistence and growth. . . .” The problem that he saw with such a resistance to change was that “the living organism which rejects all such interchange, would speedily languish and die of lethargy and inanition” (48). What could be done was to correct “the undue preponderance” of the European mind and Western civilization and to bring about a balance where the Asiatic and other ignored civilizations can also assert themselves (51-52). Aurobindo did not consider an absolute return to the past as either necessary or possible. As pointed out by Aijaz Ahmed:

History is not really open to correction through a return passage to an imaginary point centuries ago, before the colonial deformation set in, or before the insertion of Islam before that, or, earlier still, before the invasion of what are generally called the 'Aryan' tribes. Indian civilizational ethos, if there is one, is in any case deeply marked by the processes of Indianization of idioms and instruments — even peoples, who were initially strangers, sometimes predators, in this land. (77)

Aurobindo too averred that Indian civilization has been a civilization developed by assimilation, long before the ingress of European colonization. While discussing Indo-Muslim architecture, Aurobindo points out how Indian architecture has freely borrowed elements from various cultures: “It seems to me that here the Indian mind has taken in much from the Arab and Persian

imagination and in certain mosques and tombs I seem to find an impress of the robust and bold Afghan and Mogul temperament . . .” (*Renaissance* 282). Indian civilization took no effort to retain anything as characteristically unique and welcomed foreign influences. It assimilated elements of different cultures which came into interaction with it:

But at no time did Indian culture exclude altogether external influences; on the contrary a very great power of selective assimilation, subordination and transformation of external elements was a characteristic of its processes; it protected itself from any considerable or overwhelming invasion, but laid hands on and included whatever struck or impressed it and in the act of inclusion subjected it to a characteristic change which harmonised the new element with the spirit of its own culture. But nowadays any such strong separative aloofness as distinguished the ancient civilisations, is no longer possible; the races of mankind have come too close to each other, are being thrown together in a certain unavoidable life unity. We are confronted with the more difficult problem of living in the full stress of this greater interaction and imposing on its impacts the law of our being. (*Renaissance* 50)

Aurobindo acknowledges that even without the impact of colonialism, it is not possible for civilizations to maintain an “aloofness” given the increasing

interactions of human societies in the light of modernity. When he accepts ideas that are typically Western, the basis for his consideration is not their Western origin, but their humanist orientations:

If I accept any of these ideas it is not because they are modern or European, which is in itself no recommendation, but because they are human, because they present fruitful view-points to the spirit, because they are things of the greatest importance in the future development of the life of man. What I mean by acceptance of the effective idea of democracy, — the thing itself, never fully worked out, was present as an element in ancient Indian as in ancient European polity and society, — is that I find its inclusion in our future way of living, in some shape, to be a necessity of our growth. (*Renaissance* 47)

According to Aurobindo, the renaissance of Indian culture should not attempt to exclude the present needs of human evolution while at the same time be unhesitating to abandon ideas irrelevant to the spirit of the age:

And the riper form of the return has taken as its principle a synthetical restatement; it has sought to arrive at the spirit of the ancient culture and, while respecting its forms and often preserving them to revivify, has yet not hesitated also to remould, to reject the outworn and to admit whatever new

motive seemed assimilable to the old spirituality or apt to widen the channel of its larger evolution. Of this freer dealing with past and present, this preservation by reconstruction Vivekananda was in his life-time the leading exemplar and the most powerful exponent. (*Renaissance* 21-22)

The synthesis that Aurobindo calls for is one of progression though he calls it a “return” as it is an effort to admit “new motives” and to “widen the channel” of evolution by linking the past and the present. He makes it clear that it is not a narrowing of perspective or reversal of ideas, but to retrieve the spirit of ancient Indian culture which never yielded to the aspirations of colonialism. As Ranajit Guha said: “There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past” (1). Regarding the efforts of social reform initiated by Vivekananda, it is worth remembering his critique of the Indian “fanaticism, which has driven religion entirely to the kitchen . . .” indicative of the revolutionary fervour required for such a renaissance (Vivekananda 66). Aurobindo appreciated Vivekananda for the audacious discourses that he provided on lands of the West though there were attempts by many others for the dissemination of Indian spiritual ideals. He wrote that the two major influences on the West were “. . . the Theosophical movement and the appearance of Swami Vivekananda at Chicago. For these two things showed the spiritual ideas for which India stands no longer on their defence but aggressive and invading the materialised mentality of the

Occident” (*Renaissance* 63). Aurobindo saw a lot of significance in these events because India no longer needed to defend her culture, but soon turned to a mode of aggression, a sign of the people becoming a nation.

By the effort of spiritual leaders like Vivekananda, Indian values were better understood by the West to the extent that they began questioning their own standards of culture. Nevertheless, Aurobindo expressed concern that at such a juncture when Europe itself started accepting thought from the East, Indians were eager to don the discarded trappings of the West:

But let us remember that Europe itself is labouring to outgrow the limitations of its own conceptions and precisely by a rapid infusion of the ideas of the East, — naturally, essential ideas and not the mere forms, — which have been first infiltrating and are now more freely streaming into Western thought, poetry, art, ideas of life, not to overturn its culture, but to transform, enlighten and aggrandise its best values and to add new elements which have too long been ignored or forgotten. It will be singular if while Europe is thus intelligently enlarging herself in the new light she has been able to seize and admitting the truths of the spirit and the aim at a divine change in man and his life, we in India are to take up the cast-off clothes of European thought and life and to straggle along in the old rut of her

wheels, always taking up today what she had cast off yesterday. We should not allow our cultural independence to be paralysed by the accident that at the moment Europe came in upon us, we were in a state of ebb and weakness, such as comes some day upon all civilisations. (*Renaissance* 37)

Aurobindo sees the European cultural invasion upon India as a historical accident which could not be avoided since the native people “were in a state of ebb and weakness.” Here, he is trying to suggest that colonialism was successful not because of any cultural merit of the Europeans, but because of a temporary weakness of the Indian people. As Partha Chatterjee comments:

There is nothing organic or essential in European civilization which has made it dynamic and powerful: it is just that at a certain point in history it suddenly found a new spirit, new sources of energy and creativity. And similarly, there is nothing organic or essential in Asian civilizations which has made them static and powerless: after a long period of magnificent growth, the old springs of vitality and innovation had gradually dried up. It was at this historical conjuncture that the clash had occurred between West and East: the West conquered, the East submitted. (*Nationalist* 137)

The moment of loss of vitality in the Indian civilization was capitalized upon

by the colonialists to further their imperialist designs. Therefore, the critical strategy would be to regain the lost vitality in the native population so as to drive colonialism out of the land. To bring about a renaissance in India, Aurobindo suggests adopting the religious ideas for political struggle and national emancipation:

All that is as yet clear is that the first period of a superficial assimilation and aping of European political ideas and methods is over. Another political spirit has awakened in the people under the shock of the movement of the last decade which, vehemently national in its motive, proclaimed a religion of Indian patriotism, applied the notions of the ancient religion and philosophy to politics, expressed the cult of the country as mother and Shakti and attempted to base the idea of democracy firmly on the spiritual thought and impulses native to the Indian mind. Crude often and uncertain in its self-expression, organising its effort for revolt against past and present conditions but not immediately successful in carrying forward its methods of constructive development, it still effectively aroused the people and gave a definite turn to its political thought and life, the outcome of which can only appear when the nation has found completely the will and gained sufficiently the power to determine its own evolution. (*Renaissance* 30)

Here, Aurobindo's endeavour does not seem to be to spiritualize politics like Mahatma Gandhi did, but to use the language of religion which is familiar to the Indian mind and is capable of arousing the people to action. Gandhi saw the daily religious practices of the individual "as essentially continuous with the remarkable political actions . . ." (Bilgrami 95). Whereas, what Aurobindo attempted to do was to create a religion out of nationalism. Aurobindo's idea of spirituality was heterogeneous and different from being a homogeneous exclusivist religion. He did not consider it proper or plausible to prescribe the principles of a specific religion for a land comprising people from multiple faiths:

Nor does spirituality mean the moulding of the whole type of the national being to suit the limited dogmas, forms, tenets of a particular religion, as was often enough attempted by the old societies, an idea which still persists in many minds by the power of old mental habit and association; clearly such an attempt would be impossible, even if it were desirable, in a country full of the most diverse religious opinions and harbouring too three such distinct general forms as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, to say nothing of the numerous special forms to which each of these has given birth. (*Renaissance* 33)

Aurobindo's purpose for bringing in religious epistemology into his nationalist discourse begins and ends with communicating with his fellow

beings his idea of political action and cultural renaissance and for fomenting in them a nationalist spirit akin to that of religion. That said, it has to be emphasised that Aurobindo considered spirituality to be the source of all external manifestations of the human mind and the body:

Religions, creeds and forms are only a characteristic outward sign of the spiritual impulsion and religion itself is the intensive action by which it tries to find its inward force. Its expansive movement comes in the thought which it throws out on life, the ideals which open up new horizons and which the intellect accepts and life labours to assimilate. (*Renaissance* 26)

Aurobindo propounds the idea that religion is an inward force which can propel the outward forces of physical and mental activity, but religion itself cannot be made into an external activity. Here, he again differs from Gandhi who “could never make sense of the notion of keeping religion sequestered from politics” (Bilgrami 95).

Re-Visions of Cultural Productions

In response to the criticisms of Indian culture and civilization made by the Scottish critic William Archer in his work *India and the Future*, Aurobindo wrote a series of articles defending Indian architecture, painting and literature, and even argued that they are superior to European

contributions. Aurobindo commented that Archer's criticism was uncalled for in an area of which he had neither any knowledge nor authority:

That well-known dramatic critic leaving his safe natural sphere for fields in which his chief claim to speak was a sublime and confident ignorance, assailed the whole life and culture of India and even lumped together all her greatest achievements, philosophy, religion, poetry, painting, sculpture, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana in one wholesale condemnation as a repulsive mass of unspeakable barbarism. (55)

The reason for Aurobindo's retort can only be understood if the sweeping condemnation of Archer is also considered; "Barbarian, barbarism, barbarous — I am sorry to harp so much on these words. But they express the essence of the situation. . . . the plain truth concerning the mass of the population — and not the poorer classes alone — is that they are *not civilized people*" (sic) (40). Further, Archer claimed that the British have come only to put the Indian house in order: "[The Briton] no more enters into the national life of the country than the plumber who puts in your water-pipes, or the electrician who 'wires' your house, becomes a member of your family. It is in this complete and deliberately cultivated externality that the wonder of British rule consists" (10). Archer probably could not have thought of a better understatement than the comparison of British rule to the service of the plumber and the

electrician. Aimé Césaire's words are relevant here: “. . . [N]o one colonizes innocently , that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization — and therefore force — is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased . . .” (39). Archer's comparison of Indian civilization to a house in bad state of repair can be best described in Césaire's term, “thingification” (9). Césaire argues that colonization is a systematic project to undermine the culture and civilization of the colonized:

I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about "achievements," diseases cured, improved standards of living.

I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out. (42-43)

To continue with Archer's metaphor, the attempt of “the wonder of British rule” is rather to shatter the water-pipes of native culture and to short-circuit the wires of Indian civilization. Aurobindo is quick to recognize that Archer's comments are politically motivated and not based on any objective evaluation of Indian culture. Aurobindo asks why Indian cultural production should base itself on “canons of a rationalistic and materialistic European civilisation”

(*Renaissance* 61). Césaire also attacked this demeaning aspect of colonization which sees the colonized as a lesser being:

[C]olonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal* accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization that I wanted to point out. (41)

When Archer called the Indian a barbarian and Indian culture and civilization as barbarism and barbarous, he was engaging in what Césaire calls the “dehumanization” of the native. This dehumanization aims at justifying the ruling over of the native by the colonizer. Aurobindo strongly condemned Archer’s criticism of Indian culture and civilization and compared him to Rudyard Kipling, who similarly depicted the East as the ‘other’ and wrote that “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet” (qtd. in Rooney and Nagai 2). Edward Said sees such descriptions as efforts to depict the East as stagnant as opposed to the vibrant nature of Occidental culture:

“The very possibility of development, transformation, human movement — in the deepest sense of the word — is denied the Orient and the Oriental” (*Orientalism* 208). Aurobindo suggested that it was not understanding but “antagonism” which prompted Archer to attempt such a criticism of Indian culture:

What we have before us are the ideas of an average and typical occidental mind on Indian culture, a man of sufficient education and wide reading, but no genius or exceptional capacity, rather an ordinary successful talent, no flexibility or broad sympathy of mind, but pronounced and rigid opinions which are backed up and given an appearance of weight by the habit of using to good effect a varied though not always sound information. This is in fact the mind and standpoint of an average Englishman of some ability formed in the habit of journalism. That is precisely the kind of thing we want in order to seize the nature of the antagonism which led Mr. Rudyard Kipling, — himself a super-journalist and “magnified non-natural” average man, the average lifted up, without ceasing to be itself, by the glare of a kind of crude and barbaric genius, — to affirm the eternal incompatibility of the East and the West. (*Renaissance* 105)

Placing the colonial subject as the incompatible ‘other’ is the nature of all Orientalist narratives. Each of these Manichean narratives, whether that of

Kipling or of Archer, invoke the ‘single shelf’ of Macaulay time and again to prove that the Orient has been wasting its time in the eons of history. Aurobindo sardonically remarked that Archer’s work was not criticism but “journalistic pugilism” and his only contribution through the book was “the cheery cocksureness of his secondhand opinions” (99). Aurobindo suggested that by discrediting the validity of Indian culture, the European did not prove anything except his lack of insight into the diversity of India:

The endless variety of Indian philosophy and religion seems to the European mind interminable, bewildering, wearisome, useless; it is unable to see the forest because of the richness and luxuriance of its vegetation; it misses the common spiritual life in the multitude of its forms. But this infinite variety is itself, as Vivekananda pertinently pointed out, a sign of a superior religious culture. (*Renaissance* 186)

Nevertheless, such a valuation of Archer’s work did not stop Aurobindo from responding to the critical remarks made by Archer in his book. Aurobindo suggested that a culture should be evaluated not in comparison with another culture, but on how it contributes to human development within the purview of its domain:

A true happiness in this world is the right terrestrial aim of man, and true happiness lies in the finding and maintenance of a

natural harmony of spirit, mind and body. A culture is to be valued to the extent to which it has discovered the right key of this harmony and organised its expressive motives and movements. And a civilisation must be judged by the manner in which all its principles, ideas, forms, ways of living work to bring that harmony out, manage its rhythmic play and secure its continuance or the development of its motives. A civilisation in pursuit of this aim may be predominantly material like modern European culture, predominantly mental and intellectual like the old Graeco-Roman or predominantly spiritual like the still persistent culture of India. (*Renaissance* 56)

The bases on which cultures build up may vary from civilization to civilization or even within a single civilization, but the humanistic aspect should be examined in the appraisal of each culture. Here, Aurobindo stresses again the spiritual aspect of Indian civilization as different from the European civilization which focuses on materiality, and the intellect-centred Greco-Roman civilization. Each of these civilizations has its place and the effort is never to homogenize them into any one common factor:

Each nation is a Shakti or power of the evolving spirit in humanity and lives by the principle which it embodies. India is the Bharata Shakti, the living energy of a great spiritual

conception, and fidelity to it is the very principle of her existence. For by its virtue alone she has been one of the immortal nations; this alone has been the secret of her amazing persistence and perpetual force of survival and revival. (57)

The importance that Aurobindo ascribes to the concept of nation is only inasmuch as it contributes to human evolution. The spiritual principle being the very base of Indian civilization, it cannot afford to be disturbed. However, the colonialist expansionist measures have attempted to homogenize the cultures under their dominion. Hence, it becomes necessary for Aurobindo and philosophers like him to lambast the occidentals with the idea that the question of culture is not a case of pre-eminence but one of difference:

India must defend herself by reshaping her cultural forms to express more powerfully, intimately and perfectly her ancient ideal. Her aggression must lead the waves of the light thus liberated in triumphant self-expanding rounds all over the world which it once possessed or at least enlightened in far-off ages. An appearance of conflict must be admitted for a time, for as long as the attack of an opposite culture continues. But since it will be in effect an assistance to all the best that is emerging from the advanced thought of the Occident, it will culminate in the beginning of concert on a higher plane and a preparation of oneness. (*Renaissance* 66)

Here, Aurobindo asserts that his approach is not one of confrontation, though it has “an appearance of conflict” which is only intended for the protection of the native culture. Further, he also says that the ultimate aim is to unite all the civilizations at a higher level, while retaining their differences at their respective bases. Regarding aggression of nationalist discourses, Partha Chatterjee said:

The polemic is not a mere stylistic device which a dispassioned analyst can calmly separate out of a pure doctrine. It is part of the ideological content of nationalism which takes as its adversary a contrary discourse – the discourse of colonialism. Pitting itself against the reality of colonial rule – which appears before it as an existent, almost palpable, historical truth – nationalism seeks to assert the feasibility of entirely new political possibilities. These are its political claims which colonialist discourse haughtily denies. (*Nationalist* 40)

Aurobindo’s aggressive rhetoric and deprecation of the West cannot, therefore, be seen just as an inverse of Orientalism. They are instances of assertion to retrieve the templates of identity snatched away by the colonialist enterprise.

William Archer comments that the architectural features of the temples of South India “are surely as senseless as anything in architecture” and are an

example of “gigantesque barbarism” (239). Of the Dilwarra Jain Temples at Mount Abu, he opines that it exemplifies “[t]he self-defeating wastefulness of Hindu architecture” (241). According to Homi Bhabha, the aim of colonialist discourse is “to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (“Other Question” 41). Aurobindo responds to Archer’s dismissive comments and cites Indian architecture as a suitable example of bearing the unique spiritual tradition of the land:

The secular buildings of ancient India, her palaces and places of assembly and civic edifices have not outlived the ravage of time; what remains to us is mostly something of the great mountain and cave temples, something too of the temples of her ancient cities of the plains, and for the rest we have the fanes and shrines of her later times, whether situated in temple cities and places of pilgrimage like Srirangam and Rameshwaram or in her great once regal towns like Madura, when the temple was the centre of life. It is then the most hieratic side of a hieratic art that remains to us. These sacred buildings are the signs, the architectural self-expression of an ancient spiritual and religious culture. (*Renaissance* 272)

The manner in which the temple becomes “the centre of life” is incomprehensible to someone like Archer for whom religious practice is

restricted to certain regularized performances. In another instance, Aurobindo sarcastically comments that the Indian condition would have appealed to Archer if Indian spiritual practice restricted itself “decorously to church attendance on Sundays and to marriage and funeral services and grace before meat . . .” (*Renaissance* 135). The temple is not just a place of worship but their physical structures are indicative of the “appeal and aspiration to the Infinite” (273). Archer also alleges that Indian art and architecture are at best “extravagance and excess” (197). If Archer condemns the abundance in Indian architecture as “gigantesque barbarism,” Aurobindo argues that such terms could also be applied to productions of European culture:

To condemn this abundance as barbarous is to apply a foreign standard. Where after all are we bound to draw the line? To the pure classical taste Shakespeare’s art once appeared great but barbarous for a similar reason, — one remembers the Gallic description of him as a drunken barbarian of genius, — his artistic unity non-existent or spoiled by crowding tropical vegetation of incident and character, his teeming imaginations violent, exaggerated, sometimes bizarre, monstrous, without symmetry, proportion and all the other lucid unities, lightnesses, graces loved by the classic mind. (*Renaissance* 279)

Aurobindo writes this in response to Archer’s complaint of “absence of anything like lightness and grace” that he finds in Indian temples of the South

as well as the North (Archer 240). While there is a lot of difference not only between South Indian and North Indian architecture, and even more among those in between these two ends, Archer's attempt is to stereotype Indian architecture as primitive. As Fanon points out, such remarks reveal the strategy of simplification of native culture: "There is on the one hand a culture in which qualities of dynamism, of growth, of depth can be recognized. As against this, we find characteristics, curiosities, things, never a structure" (*Toward* 35). Aurobindo goes on to say that the same Latin mind which abhorred Shakespeare went on to celebrate him as having "a greater intuitive unity than the formal unities of the classic aesthesis" (*Renaissance* 279). As the problem was not with Shakespeare and reform was required for the Latin mind to appreciate Shakespeare, so too, Archer's disparagement of Indian architecture as primitive shows the poverty of his sense of appreciation. Aurobindo attacks Archer for his attempt to homogenize Indian thought into one of anti-materialism:

To read these European comments one would imagine that in all Indian thought there was nothing but the nihilistic school of Buddhism and the monistic illusionism of Shankara and that all Indian art, literature and social thinking were nothing but the statement of their recoil from the falsehood and vanity of things. It does not follow that because these things are what the average European has heard about India or what most interests or strikes

the European scholar in her thought, therefore they are, however great may have been their influence, the whole of Indian thinking. The ancient civilisation of India founded itself very expressly upon four human interests; first, desire and enjoyment, next, material, economic and other aims and needs of the mind and body, thirdly, ethical conduct and the right law of individual and social life, and, lastly spiritual liberation; *kāma, artha, dharma, moksa.* (*Renaissance* 125)

Archer's attempt to summarize Indian thought to that of Buddha and Shankara and to describe it as "the whole of Indian thinking" is a desperate endeavour to negotiate an otherwise unwieldy conglomeration of diverse thoughts. Archer does not spare Mughal architecture too and avers that "[t]heir very perfection of detail is cloying. They suggest not only unbridled luxury, but effeminacy and decadence. If, however, we put aside fortuitous association and moral suggestion, and are content with visual, sensuous beauty. . . ." He also sarcastically describes the Taj Mahal as a "Fabric of enchantment, hewn / From lucent quarries of the moon . . ." (243). Aurobindo expresses surprise at Archer's flippant comments and explains how the Mughal creations become one of the most beautiful expressions of Indian architecture:

I do not demand "moral suggestions" from architecture, but is it true that there is nothing but a sensuous outward grace and

beauty and luxury in these Indo-Moslem buildings? It is not at all true of the characteristic greater work. The Taj is not merely a sensuous reminiscence of an imperial amour or a fairy enchantment hewn from the moon's lucent quarries, but the eternal dream of a love that survives death. The great mosques embody often a religious aspiration lifted to a noble austerity which supports and is not lessened by the subordinated ornament and grace. The tombs reach beyond death to the beauty and joy of Paradise. The buildings of Fatehpur-Sikri are not monuments of an effeminate luxurious decadence, — an absurd description for the mind of the time of Akbar, — but give form to a nobility, power and beauty which lay hold upon but do not wallow on the earth. (*Renaissance* 283-84)

Aurobindo stresses upon the heterogeneous nature of Indian architecture which imbibed influences from all the cultures that it came into contact with, and also transferred some of its essence into the other cultures. Further, in response to Archer's comment that Indian painting is undeveloped and inferior to its sculptures, Aurobindo counters by describing how systematic the technique of the Indian painter is:

The six limbs of his art, the *sadanga*, are common to all work in line and colour: they are the necessary elements and in their

elements the great arts are the same everywhere; the distinction of forms, *rūpabheda*, proportion, arrangement of line and mass, design, harmony, perspective, *pramāna*, the emotion or aesthetic feeling expressed by the form, *bhāva*, the seeking for beauty and charm for the satisfaction of the aesthetic spirit, *lāvanya*, truth of the form and its suggestion, *sādrśya*, the turn, combination, harmony of colours, *varnikābhanga*, are the first constituents to which every successful work of art reduces itself in analysis. (303)

Aurobindo peeps up his description with a liberal sprinkle of Sanskrit terms with accents, as Archer had once commented that such accented terms “convey no meaning except to Sanskrit scholars” (7). In another instance, Aurobindo denounces Western painting to be limited by imagination whereas Indian art goes beyond imagination to inspiration and thereafter to high spiritual realms:

Western painting starts from the eye or the imagination; its master word is either beauty or reality, and, according as he is the slave of his eye or the playfellow of his imagination, the painter produces a photograph or a poem. But, in painting, the European imagination seldom travels beyond an imaginative interpretation or variation of what the physical eye has seen. . . .

But the Indian artist has been taught by his philosophy and the spiritual discipline of his forefathers that the imagination is only a channel and an instrument of some source of knowledge and inspiration that is greater and higher; by meditation or by Yoga he seeks within himself that ultimate centre of knowledge where there is direct and utter vision of the thing that lies hidden in the forms of man, animal, tree, river, mountain. (*Early 464*)

Aurobindo states that the imagination of the Western artist is limited by the objective reality to which he tries to do justice in his painting. However, the Indian painter has no such limitations and seeks inspiration from his inner spiritual sources. Imagination is just a channel for the artist and it is the vision provided by the spiritual realm that gets translated into art. This may not correspond to the objective phenomena forming the subject of the painting, which obviously led to Archer's objections. In Aurobindo's own words, "Indian Art demands of the artist the power of communion with the soul of things, the sense of spiritual taking precedence of the sense of material beauty, and fidelity to the deeper vision within . . ." (*Early 467*).

Regarding the influence of the Indian epics upon her people, Archer reflects "I shall have to inquire whether the great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, are, in fact, wholesome mental sustenance for a people which aspires to play an independent part in the drama of the future . . ." (50).

Deprecating both the epics, he says, “The Mahabharata is in no way behind the Ramayana in crudity and extravagance” (229). For such disparaging remarks, Aurobindo replies with a detailed exposition of the concepts embodied in both the epics:

The Mahabharata especially is not only the story of the Bharatas, the epic of an early event which had become a national tradition but on a vast scale the epic of the soul and religious and ethical mind and social and political ideals and culture and life of India. It is said popularly of it and with a certain measure of truth that whatever is in India is in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is the creation and expression not of a single individual mind, but of the mind of a nation; it is the poem of itself written by a whole people. It would be vain to apply to it the canons of a poetical art applicable to an epic poem with a smaller and more restricted purpose, but still a great and quite conscious art has been expended both on its detail and its total structure. The whole poem has been built like a vast national temple unrolling slowly its immense and complex idea from chamber to chamber, crowded with significant groups and sculptures and inscriptions, the grouped figures carved in divine or semi-divine proportions, a humanity aggrandised and half uplifted to superhumanity and yet always

true to the human motive and idea and feeling, the strain of the real constantly raised by the tones of the ideal, the life of this world amply portrayed but subjected to the conscious influence and presence of the powers of the worlds behind it, and the whole unified by the long embodied procession of a consistent idea worked out in the wide steps of the poetic story.

(Renaissance 347)

Romila Thapar, a historian, also concurs that the *Mahabharatha* couldn't have been written by a single person, given the complex nature of its construction: "Its composition is traditionally ascribed to a brahman poet, Vyasa, but it is not the work of a single person, since it is no longer the story of the war, but has acquired a number of episodes . . . and a variety of interpolations, many of which are important in themselves" (32). However, Aijaz Ahmed takes issue with Aurobindo's exclusivity in glorification of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* among the vast body of indigenous literatures. He opines that such a selective celebration is tantamount to ignoring other literary creations sidelined by an elite culture:

Aurobindo's emphatic notion — stated at considerable length in his *The Foundations of Indian Culture* — that the *Mahabharata*, Valmiki's *Ramayana* and (much less so) the plays of Kalidasa sufficiently constitute the essence, the

difference and the achievement of Indian Literature presumes this narrowing of canonicity and the substantial overlap of the literary and the religious; apart from some general comments on narrative realism, what Aurobindo emphasizes most strongly, in the manner of a great many elite traditions, is precisely their metaphysical grandeur and spiritual timelessness. This then privileges certain kinds of readings and disallows others. (260)

While Ahmed's argument is true to a certain extent, Aurobindo's writings referred here are specifically in response to William Archer's comments on the Indian epics. It is not Aurobindo's intention to create a canon of Indian literature lead by texts like *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. Of the *Ramayana*, Archer dismisses it as just the story of vanquishing of a demon and writes, "The theme of the Ramayana, indeed, is nothing but the outwitting of a demon, Ravan . . ." (217). Aurobindo, in his rejoinder, protests that it is much more than just the victory over a demon:

The subject is the same as in the Mahabharata, the strife of the divine with the titanic forces in the life of the earth, but in more purely ideal forms, in frankly supernatural dimensions and an imaginative heightening of both the good and the evil in human character. On one side is portrayed an ideal manhood, a divine beauty of virtue and ethical order, a civilization founded on the

Dharma and realising an exaltation of the moral ideal which is presented with a singularly strong appeal of aesthetic grace and harmony and sweetness; on the other are wild and anarchic and almost amorphous forces of superhuman egoism and self-will and exultant violence, and the two ideas and powers of mental nature living and embodied are brought into conflict and led to a decisive issue of the victory of the divine man over the Rakshasa. (*Renaissance* 349-50)

The trouble with Archer is that he evaluates the epics as stories and comes to judgements by singular incidents in the narratives of the huge epics. For instance, about Yudhishthira losing his kingdom by gambling, Archer wrote, “Who can say how much the Indian passion for gambling has been fortified by this episode in the life of ‘the Hindu ideal of excellence — a pattern of justice, integrity, calm passionless composure, chivalrous honour and cold heroism?’” (222). The influence of the two epics upon the people of the Indian subcontinent can be comprehended by the numerous versions of these epics created in different languages around the country:

In Bengal there is the Mahabharata of Kashiram, the gist of the old epic simply retold in a lucid classical style, and the Ramayana of Krittibas, more near to the vigour of the soil, neither of them attaining to the epic manner but still written

with a simple poetic skill and a swift narrative force. Only two however of these later poets arrived at a vividly living recreation of the ancient story and succeeded in producing a supreme masterpiece, Kamban, the Tamil poet who makes of his subject a great original epic, and Tulsidas whose famed Hindi Ramayana combines with a singular mastery lyric intensity, romantic richness and the sublimity of the epic imagination and is at once a story of the divine Avatar and a long chant of religious devotion. (*Renaissance* 381)

One of the major peculiarities of these different versions of the epics that abound in various languages across the land is the difference in perspectives that depict a marked deviation from those visible in the Sanskrit texts. The effort of these writers has never been to be faithful to the original text. In Aurobindo's words, "I have insisted that uniformity is not a real but a dead unity: uniformity kills life while real unity, if well founded, becomes vigorous and fruitful by a rich energy of variation" (*Renaissance* 44). Of such diversity is the fabric of India woven that it is incomprehensible to the European mind which is used to evenness and homogeneity in its cultural productions.

A Critique of Indian Polity

Aurobindo traces the history of Indian social organization from the time the nomadic communities started settling in various parts of the Indian

subcontinent. The village system came into existence only when this roaming populace started settling down as different provinces:

It was a clan or tribal system, Kula, founded upon the equality of all the freemen of the clan or race; this was not at first firmly founded upon the territorial basis, the migratory tendency was still in evidence or recurred under pressure and the land was known by the name of the people who occupied it, the Kuru country or simply the Kurus, the Malava country or the Malavas. After the fixed settlement within determined boundaries the system of the clan or tribe continued, but found a basic unit or constituent atom in the settled village community. The meeting of the people, *viśah*, assembling for communal deliberation, for sacrifice and worship or as the host for war, remained for a long time the power-sign of the mass body and the agent of the active common life with the king as the head and representative, but long depending even after his position became hereditary on the assent of the people for his formal election or confirmation. (387)

Here, Aurobindo points to the purely arbitrary nature of attaching territory to a particular “race” of people since the land is “known by the name of the people who occupied it.” Whereas with the concept of the nation, the people

are known by the land they occupy, and consequently the land becomes more important than the citizens. In modern versions, right wing post-truth politics not only imposes obeisance upon the inanimate land by the animate citizen, but such performances also have to be repeated to retain the status of being a citizen. However, it must be emphasised that for nationalists like Aurobindo, patriotism was a polemic to oust colonialism from political and cultural spaces and not performances to be enacted on the social stage. Aurobindo affirmed that the ancient Indian polity, though it had the king as the supreme authority, was basically democratic in nature. He averred that the modern nation-state falls short in comparison with the ancient Indian social organization:

The one principle permanent at the base of construction throughout all the building and extension and rebuilding of the Indian polity was the principle of an organically self-determining communal life, — self-determining not only in the mass and by means of the machinery of the vote and a representative body erected on the surface, representative only of the political mind of a part of the nation, which is all that the modern system has been able to manage, but in every pulse of its life and in each separate member of its existence. A free synthetic communal order was its character, and the condition of liberty it aimed at was not so much an individual as a

communal freedom. In the beginning the problem was simple enough as only two kinds of communal unit had to be considered, the village and the clan, tribe or small regional people. The free organic life of the first was founded on the system of the self-governing village community and it was done with such sufficiency and solidity that it lasted down almost to our own days resisting all the wear and tear of time and the inroad of other systems and was only recently steam-rolled out of existence by the ruthless and lifeless machinery of the British bureaucratic system. The whole people living in its villages mostly on agriculture formed in the total a single religious, social, military and political body governing itself in its assembly, samiti, under the leadership of the king, as yet without any clear separation of functions or class division of labour. (*Renaissance* 408)

Aurobindo contended that the modern nation-state represents only a part of the nation, whereas the Indian village community was centred on the individual. In another instance, Aurobindo said that the nation-state “is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable” (*Human Cycle* 298). Since the village community was autonomous, the presence of other hierarchical structures like the clan, tribe and even the king at the top did not affect the “free organic life” of the village. However,

with the onslaught of colonialism, this system was disturbed by the colonial bureaucracy. It even affected the family which was the basic unit of the village, because “the social functions of the family household were being replaced by the bureaucratic state” (McClintock 56). When Aurobindo mentions the “free organic life” that existed in pre-colonial India, it is not the historical validity of his claims that require attention, but the humanistic view that he had and which he demanded of all social organizations.

Aurobindo observed that India would not have been colonized if the smaller kingdoms had come together and united before the onslaught of colonialism. He considered this as one of the major failures of pre-colonial Indian polity:

But there is another side of politics on which it may be said that the Indian political mind has registered nothing but failure. The organisation it developed may have been admirable for stability and effective administration and the securing of communal order and liberties and the well-being of the people under ancient conditions, but even if its many peoples were each of them separately self-governed, well governed and prosperous and the country at large assured in the steady functioning of a highly developed civilisation and culture, yet that organisation failed to serve for the national and political unification of India and failed in the end to secure it against foreign invasion, the

disruption of its institutions and an age-long servitude. The political system of a society has to be judged, no doubt first and foremost by the stability, prosperity, internal freedom and order it ensures to the people, but also it must be judged by the security it erects against other States, its unity and power of defence and aggression against external rivals and enemies.

(Renaissance 425-26)

Aurobindo said that it was the incapacity of the Indian mind to unite nationally and politically that made it succumb to foreign invasions: “India was for close on a thousand years swept by barbaric invasions and for almost another thousand years in servitude to successive foreign masters. It is clear therefore that judgment of political incapacity must be passed against the Indian people” (*Renaissance* 426). Thus, one of the major aims of Aurobindo in the construction of the nation is to physically defend the people from external aggressions. Such a framework of the nation was not required under ancient conditions, when such aggressions were less compared to modern situations when sovereignties of communities are threatened by political, cultural and capitalist aspirations that try to break in from outside.

Aurobindo opined that apart from the lack of political acumen, the cultural deterioration of the Indian people also contributed to the land yielding to external attacks:

The deterioration, held in abeyance by a religious spirit and high intelligence, did not come to a head till more than a thousand years afterwards and we only see it in its full force in the worst period of the decline when unrestrained mutual aggression, the unbridled egoism of princes and leaders, a total lack of political principle and capacity for effective union, the want of a common patriotism and the traditional indifference of the common people to a change of rulers gave the whole of the vast peninsula into the grasp of a handful of merchants from across the seas. (*Renaissance* 438)

When Aurobindo laments the lack of patriotism which led to external aggression, he sees patriotism as a nationalist ideology and not as an emotional display. As the common people were used to “change of rulers” due to the constant wars between kingdoms, they did not perceive “a handful of merchants from across the seas” as a threat to their solidarity. Among the various invasions that India had to face, Aurobindo considered the Mughal invasion as a pleasant turn in the pages of Indian history:

The Mogul empire was a great and magnificent construction and an immense amount of political genius and talent was employed in its creation and maintenance. It was as splendid, powerful and beneficent and, it may be added, in spite of Aurangzeb’s

fanatical zeal, infinitely more liberal and tolerant in religion than any mediaeval or contemporary European kingdom or empire and India under its rule stood high in military and political strength, economic opulence and the brilliance of its art and culture. (*Renaissance* 443)

Obviously, Aurobindo's sympathies for the Mughal Empire may not have been because he approved of their imperialist designs, but he disapproved of the British version more. Aurobindo was not a cultural purist to insist that Indian culture and civilization should remain a singular entity. On the contrary, he celebrates Indian plurality and welcomes the contributions of Mughal Empire to Indian culture and civilization. However, the political impacts of Mughal invasion were not without its casualties. In response, though there were some efforts locally in different parts of India for the consolidation into a nation, Aurobindo recounts that none of them were successful:

The Mahratta revival inspired by Ramdas's conception of the Maharashtra Dharma and cast into shape by Shivaji was an attempt to restore what could still be understood or remembered of the ancient form and spirit, but it failed, as all attempts to revive the past must fail, in spite of the spiritual impetus and the democratic forces that assisted its inception. The Peshwas for all

their genius lacked the vision of the founder and could only establish a military and political confederacy. And their endeavour to found an empire could not succeed because it was inspired by a regional patriotism that failed to enlarge itself beyond its own limits and awaken to the living ideal of a united India. The Sikh Khalsa on the other hand was an astonishingly original and novel creation and its face was turned not to the past but the future. Apart and singular in its theocratic head and democratic soul and structure, its profound spiritual beginning, its first attempt to combine the deepest elements of Islam and Vedanta, it was a premature drive towards an entrance into the third or spiritual stage of human society, but it could not create between the spirit and the external life the transmitting medium of a rich creative thought and culture. (*Renaissance* 443-44)

The failure of the Mahrattas and the Sikhs in constructing a nation needs to be understood in the background of Aurobindo's concept of the three stages of nation formation. The first stage consisted of recognition of a common culture and civilization, the second stage required a central control bringing about a political consolidation, and the third stage of a free internal development (*Human Cycle* 374). The Mahrattas perceived a common culture and civilization, but it was limited because of their "regional patriotism," which did not include the rest of India. The Sikhs, however, did not have this

drawback, but they circumvented the mandatory second stage of centrality of the nation and tried to create a spiritual unity which was possible only in the third stage of nation formation. Though the attempts of the Mahrattas and the Sikhs did not succeed in constructing the Indian nation, Aurobindo does not consider them as failures, but treated them as important steps in realization of the ideal of the nation. These statements of Aurobindo indicate the syncretic nature of his thought which endeavours to maintain and accentuate the plurality of Indian culture and civilization.

The Problem of Caste

Similar as it may seem, but an organism and a nation do not function in the same manner. The existence of a nation is constantly threatened by various forces, from within and without. Hence, the third stage of the free internal development within the nation envisaged by Aurobindo remains difficult to achieve in most practical situations. This happens largely because the uniformity that he speaks about is hardly achieved in national situations on account of the social orders that come into play. Such was the situation not only in Asia but in Europe too. Aurobindo commented:

The feudal period of Europe with its four orders of the clergy, the king and nobles, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has a sufficiently close resemblance to the Indian fourfold order of the sacerdotal, military and mercantile classes and the Shudras. The

Indian system took its characteristic stamp from a different order of ideas more prominently religious and ethical than political, social or economic; but still, practically, the dominant function of the system was social and economic and there seems at first sight to be no reason why it should not have followed, with whatever differences of detail, the common evolution.

(Human Cycle 375)

Aurobindo says that though there is some resemblance between the feudal system of Europe and the Indian caste system, the similarity is superficial. In this passage, he observes that such social divisions, known in India as *varnas*, were different from the social orders in Europe, where it was more political or economic than religious. Aurobindo's defensive should be seen in the light of the Orientalist views of the East as a primitive space. As Debjani Ganguly observed, "The notion of India as an entity in which retrogressive religious practices had overwhelmed its economic and political apparatuses has been the staple of Orientalist discourse" (34). Therefore, the privileging of the caste Hindus was a strategy of the colonialists to magnify the already extant caste system in the Indian society. Since the Indian society was mostly dominated by the priestly class, even as the major reason for the divisions was vocational, it became politicized. Aurobindo observes that "the social dominance of the sacerdotal class and the substitution of a common spiritual for a common political consciousness as the basis of the national feeling" in

medieval India has brought about the different result in India (*Human Cycle* 376). As noted by Ganguly, “. . . if caste is granted a foundational status in ethnosocial representations of India, one loses sight of the fact that it owes its emergence in its present form to a complex process of historical sedimentation” (60). Therefore, “the common evolution” did not materialize because of the privileging of one class over other. Thus, the people got stuck in the first stage of growth without being able to graduate into the successive stages of development of the nation.

The prevalent and already diabolic caste system was complicated by the arrival of British colonialism. As part of the colonialist agenda of mercantile capitalism, they introduced the economic aspect into the social structure of casteism. Except for the fact that societal relations changed because of this additional aspect, the caste system was an already existing reality and was not just an accusation upon the Indian society. As Arjun Appadurai points out, “Caste in India, even if it was itself a very complicated part of the Indian social imaginary and was refracted and reified in many ways through British techniques of observation and control, was nevertheless not a figment of the British political imagination.” He points out that the apparently opposing forces of colonialism and nationalism were seen to “share” the view that “certain groups” are locations of “difference” in society (119). This concept of difference, though articulated in a sanitized manner, is

also visible in Aurobindo's elaboration on how the Indian caste system came into being:

Caste was originally an arrangement for the distribution of functions in society, just as much as class in Europe, but the principle on which the distribution was based in India was peculiar to this country. The civilisation of Europe has always been preponderatingly material and the division of classes was material in its principles and material in its objects, but our civilisation has always been preponderatingly spiritual and moral, and caste division in India had a spiritual object and a spiritual and moral basis. The division of classes in Europe had its root in a distribution of powers and rights and developed and still develops through a struggle of conflicting interests; its aim was merely the organisation of society for its own sake and mainly indeed for its economic convenience. The division of castes in India was conceived as a distribution of duties. A man's caste depended on his dharma, his spiritual, moral and practical duties, and his dharma depended on his swabhava, his temperament and inborn nature. A Brahmin was a Brahmin not by mere birth, but because he discharged the duty of preserving the spiritual and intellectual elevation of the race, and he had to cultivate the spiritual temperament and acquire the spiritual

training which could alone qualify him for the task. (*Bande Mataram II* 682)

Aurobindo argued that the caste system in India was not similar to the class divisions in Europe, primarily because it is the “struggle of conflicting interests” in Europe, and in India, “it is a distribution of duties.” However, it needs to be mentioned that whether caste originated as a method of division of labour or not, origins do not entirely validate a system since what it evolves into is a major issue. Further, rather than differences in occupation leading to a state of belonging to separate castes, often such duties were so maintained to retain the superiority of the ‘upper’ castes. Edward B. Harper observes: “The relationships between castes requires that an occupational differentiation be maintained so that other castes may be more pure, so that these in turn can help still another caste to attain sufficient purity to purify the gods” (196). It could also be said that the caste system in its evil form in India was as much a British construct as it was an Indian one. Appadurai gives an example where caste is projected as an example for the “exotic” nature of India:

Specifically, it was argued in the 1872 report of the All -India Census for the North-West Provinces and Oudh that certain hypotheses about sex ratios in relation to female infanticide could only be explained by reference to caste. This concern with explaining and controlling exotic behaviors is a crucial piece of

evidence that empiricism and exoticization were not disconnected aspects of the colonial imaginary in India. (127-28)

Such explanations of the colonized is what Edward Said calls “coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (*Orientalism* 1). It is a typical feature of the colonial ethnographic practices to brand as exotic any social apparatus that does not yield to its analysis and understanding.

Aurobindo even speaks in defence of casteism, giving instances from history and mythology where the Brahmins, Sudras and Pariahs do not experience “inequality” in spite of the differences alleged upon them:

No doubt there was a gradation of social respect which placed the function of the Brahmin at the summit and the function of the Sudra at the base, but this inequality was accidental, external, vyavaharika. Essentially there was, between the devout Brahmin and the devout Sudra, no inequality in the single Virat Purusha of which each was a necessary part. Chokha Mela, the Maratha Pariah, became the guru of Brahmins proud of their caste purity; the Chandala taught Shankaracharya: for the Brahman was revealed in the body of the Pariah and in the

Chandala there was the utter presence of Shiva the Almighty.

(*Bande Mataram II* 683)

Aurobindo's vindication of the caste system is problematic, because the *Brahman*¹⁰ had to be "revealed in the body of the Pariah" for his acceptance, and the "presence" of *Shiva*¹¹ was necessary to be seen for them to rise above their otherwise 'lower' status. Aurobindo does not seem to be unaware of this contradiction, for he goes on to describe the various efforts, though unsuccessful, to liberate the masses of India from the evil hands of the caste system:

From the time of Buddha to that of the saints of Maharashtra every great religious awakening has sought to restore the ancient meaning of Hinduism and reduce caste to its original subordinate importance as a social convenience, to exorcise the spirit of caste pride and restore that of brotherhood and the eternal principles of love and justice in society. But the feudal spirit had taken possession of India and the feudal spirit is wedded to inequality and the pride of caste. (*Bande Mataram II* 930)

Here, Aurobindo suggests that the institution of caste, which was merely a matter of "convenience," was blown out of proportions and used as a

10 Hindu concept of the Ultimate

11 One among the Hindu Trinity

repressive mechanism. This brought about the degeneration of the caste system. However, it would seem that it was not just a paradigmatic change from division of labour into that of birth. The fact is that there is a ritual nature which got embedded into the caste system which made the 'lower' classes remain permanently repressed. As Harper notes, that the fact that "there are three states of ritual purity, that castes are grouped into a three-class system, and that there are three grades of supernaturals, is more than coincidental" (196). Rituals assume a significance and a being that is more than what an individual or a little community can challenge since it is directly related to the "supernaturals." Though it is often repeated that a *Brahmin* is not one by birth, he becomes one as a result of such a ritual status. Aurobindo does perceive the problematic nature of such a ritual status when he points out that such a change is against the religious principles, the very ones the caste system claims to base itself upon:

There is no doubt that the institution of caste degenerated. It ceased to be determined by spiritual qualifications which, once essential, have now come to be subordinate and even immaterial and is determined by the purely material tests of occupation and birth. By this change it has set itself against the fundamental tendency of Hinduism which is to insist on the spiritual and subordinate the material and thus lost most of its meaning. The spirit of caste arrogance, exclusiveness and superiority came to

dominate it instead of the spirit of duty, and the change weakened the nation and helped to reduce us to our present condition. (*Bande Mataram II* 684)

Aurobindo acknowledges that the system of caste has debilitated the nation, and for the resurgence of the nation it would be necessary to instil the “spirit of duty” instead of the “spirit of caste” in Hinduism. Yet, Aurobindo reasoned that the *Brahmins* enjoyed no political power though they considered themselves superior in the caste hierarchy: “The Brahmin legislated, but legislation was then a religious function which implied no political power or position, and the people at large exercised only an indirect control by the pressure of a public opinion which no ruler could afford to neglect” (*Bande Mataram II* 779). Aurobindo’s claim that the legislative power of the *Brahmin* did not also possess any political power does not, however, seem to be the fact. Though there was a demarcation of the religious and the political, where the religious was assigned to the Brahmin and the political to the *Kshatriya*, “. . . the secular or temporal authority of the king was subsumed under and subordinated to the spiritual authority of the Brahmins” (Ganguly 51). However, Aurobindo’s narration should not be construed as a justification for the evils perpetrated by casteism. He took up the issue of caste in his writings as one of the themes to be addressed for the unification of the nation. Ganguly observes that this was the pattern of nationalist historians who attempted to dissent to the Orientalist view of casteism:

The Indian nation began to be imagined in terms of a harmonious Hindu community, and the fourfold division of castes, or *varnashramadharmā*, was seen to integrate the parts into the whole. The notion of hierarchy was, however, abjured and discriminatory social practices criticized. (73)

Thus, Aurobindo's views could be seen more as an attempt of integration, rather than an affirmation of a social Darwinist perspective. He thought that a durable solution for the problem of caste would be possible only when the nation attains its sovereignty:

We have now in emergence an increasing sense of the necessity of a renovation of social ideas and expressive forms by the spirit of the nation awaking to the deeper yet unexpressed implications of its own culture, but as yet no sufficient will or means of execution. It is probable that only with the beginning of a freer national life will the powers of the renaissance take effective hold of the social mind and action of the awakened people. (*Renaissance* 31)

The question of differentiation would not have arisen if the people had remained separate as disjunct communities. Aurobindo sees the emergence of such concerns over the evils of casteism as a positive sign of the beginning of consolidation of the nation. Though Aurobindo's responses to casteism were

mixed, he was convinced that the evils of caste system led to the decadence of the Indian land, making it easy for the colonizers to establish their suzerainty here. Further, he said that the caste system is against the spirit of Hinduism and emphasised that Nationalism recognizes no such differences:

The baser ideas underlying the degenerate perversions of the original caste system, the mental attitude which bases them on a false foundation of caste, pride and arrogance, of a divinely ordained superiority depending on the accident of birth, of a fixed and intolerant inequality, are inconsistent with the supreme teaching, the basic spirit of Hinduism which sees the one invariable and indivisible Divinity in every individual being. Nationalism is simply the passionate aspiration for the realisation of that Divine Unity in the nation, a unity in which all the component individuals, however various and apparently unequal their functions as political, social or economic factors, are yet really and fundamentally one and equal. In the ideal of Nationalism which India will set before the world, there will be an essential equality between man and man, between caste and caste, between class and class, all being as Mr. Tilak has pointed out different but equal and united parts of the Virat Purusha as realised in the nation. (*Bande Mataram II 679*)

When Aurobindo mentions the Hindu idea of “the one invariable and

indivisible Divinity in every individual being,” it is essentially the *advaita*¹² principle of Sankara. Such an idea of spiritual monism is specifically Indian as noted by Chiara Robbiano: “Nondual is not a common adjective in Western philosophy; it is the English translation of the Sanskrit *advaita*, which is especially known as the qualification of Śankara’s philosophical current: Advaita Vedānta” (294). Aurobindo’s critique of casteism using the principle of *advaita* brings in an interesting aspect of modernity that he espouses. He uses an element of tradition itself to critique tradition and does not draw upon Western notions of reason, humanism or individual rights.

It was important for Aurobindo to emphasise the unity of the people of the land because the political juncture at which he spoke demanded it. Similar ideas were also voiced by Tagore when he said that “. . . India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which different peoples could be held together, while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences” (qtd. in Ganguly 73). However, Tagore differed from Aurobindo in that his call for unity was not for nationalist purposes but for social uplift. Aurobindo believed that the higher ideals of Nationalism can wipe out evils like class and caste from the society:

There are two methods of progress, two impelling motives from which great changes and far-reaching reforms can be effected.

One is the struggle of selfish interests between man and man, class and class, working out progress by ignoble strife, the forced compromise and convenient barter of the lower kind of politics. The other is the impulse and clash of mighty ideas, noble aspirations, great national or humanitarian aims, the things which inspire mankind in its upward march and create empires and nations. (*Karmayogin* 308-9)

When people come together to realize higher ideals like national liberation, lower constructions like that of casteism lose their importance. It is evident that Aurobindo is focussed on his nationalist intentions even as he speaks about casteism. Nevertheless, he felt that such a discrimination of man against man is an indication of the debasement of the society which indulges in it:

A social synthesis which can only live by making a permanent rule of the degradation of our fellowmen and countrymen stands condemned and foredoomed to decay and disturbance. The evil effects may be kept under for a long time and work only by the subtler unobserved action of the law of Karma; but once the light of Truth is let in on these dark spots, to perpetuate them is to maintain a seed of disruption and ruin our chances of eventual survival. (*Renaissance* 90)

Aurobindo urges the people of India to do away with the caste system which can disturb the society and even lead to complete decimation of the collective which produces it. Here, he echoes Mahatma Gandhi who said that “the untouchables needed to be brought back into the Hindu fold” and emphasised that “penance by caste Hindus would enable Hinduism to regain its spiritual power” (Ganguly 76). Aurobindo exhorted the people of India to remove such petty divisions of caste also in view of the larger ideal of national unity and the fight against colonialism:

India needs a great national movement in which each man will work for the nation and not for himself or for his caste, a movement carried out on common-sense lines. It does not mean that we are to adopt a brand-new system from Europe, but it does mean that we must borrow a little common-sense in our solutions of the problems of life. (*Early 720*)

Here, Aurobindo makes it clear that casteism has to go if the nationalist movement is to find success. He indicates that to stick to illusionary divisions of caste demonstrates a lack of common sense and not any lack of imported refinement from Europe.

The Bourgeois Dilemma

In a manuscript that Aurobindo wrote during 1907-08, titled “The Bourgeois and the Samurai”, he compared India and Japan, and contemplated

why Japan was able to metamorphose herself in the passage of history when India stagnated:

It is commonly said that this is because Japan has assimilated Western Science and organization and even in many respects excelled its teachers; India has failed in this all-important task of assimilation. If we go a step farther back and insist on asking why this is so, we shall be told it is because Japan has “reformed” herself and got rid of ideas & institutions unsuited to modern times; while India clings obstinately to so much that is outworn and effete. Even if we waive aside the question whether the old Indian ideals are unfit to survive or whether all our institutions are really bad in themselves or unadaptable to modern conditions, still the explanation itself has to be explained. Why has Japan so admirably transformed herself? Why has the attempt at transformation in India been a failure? The solution of problems of this kind has to be sought not in abstractions, not in machinery, but in men. It is the spirit in man which moulds his fate; it is the spirit of a nation which determines its history. (*Bande Mataram II* 1091)

Instead of sensibly assimilating the ideas and models of Western modernity, the Indian natives adopted them while rejecting the indigenous ones which

already existed. What Aurobindo lamented is that instead of rejecting “outworn and effete” aspects of the indigenous social institutions, the natives added to it the bourgeois outlook imported from Europe. While Japan actively resisted the onslaughts of colonialism, India passively subjected itself to all the machinations of colonial venture, and that led to the difference between the two Asian nations:

In Japan the dominant Japanese type had been moulded by the shaping processes of an admirable culture and when the Western impact came, Japan remained faithful to her ancient spirit; she merely took over certain forms of European social & political organization necessary to complete her culture under modern conditions and poured into these forms the old potent dynamic spirit of Japan, the spirit of the Samurai. It is the Samurai type which has been dominant in that country during the nineteenth century. In India the mass of the nation has remained dormant; European culture has had upon it a powerful disintegrating and destructive influence, but has been powerless to reconstruct or revivify. But in the upper strata a new type has been evolved to serve the necessities and interests of the foreign rulers, a type which is not Indian, but foreign — and in almost all our social, political, educational, literary & religious activities the spirit of this new & foreign graft has predominated

& determined the extent & quality of our progress. This type is the bourgeois. In India, the bourgeois, in Japan, the Samurai; in this single difference is comprised the whole contrasted histories of the two nations during the nineteenth century.

(Bande Mataram II 1092)

Aurobindo surmised that the bourgeois type had been created and nourished in the Indian society because of the dormancy of its people which yielded to imperialist machinations. He considered the creation of the bourgeois class in India to have contributed to the colonialist project of creating a comprador class. Such a fear of degradation was also mentioned by Frantz Fanon when he said that “the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mold that its mind is set in” can have disastrous consequences (*Wretched* 148). Ranajit Guha opined that the native bourgeoisie was “spawned and nurtured” by the colonialist version of it, which he called “the metropolitan bourgeoisie.” The native bourgeois thus created, was unable to accost the subversive strategies of the colonialist bourgeois on an equal footing (4, 5). After tracing the manner in which the bourgeois came into existence, Aurobindo goes on to give a vivid and detailed exposition on the nature of the Indian bourgeois and how it very aptly describes the average middle-class Indian and his general attitude to life. It is so incisive and pungent that it is worth quoting here in full though it runs into four pages. However, considering the length of the narration, it is being

examined here in several parts. Aurobindo begins with his definition of the bourgeois and gives a portrayal of the characteristics of the Indian version of the bourgeois:

What is the bourgeois? For the word is unknown in India, though the thing is so prominent. The bourgeois is the average contented middle class citizen who is in all countries much the same in his fundamental character & habits of thought, in spite of pronounced racial differences in temperament & self-expression. He is a man of facile sentiments and skindEEP personality; generally “enlightened” but not inconveniently illuminated. In love with his life, his ease and above all things his comforts, he prescribes the secure maintenance of these precious possessions as the first indispensable condition of all action in politics and society; whatever tends to disturb or destroy them, he condemns as foolish, harebrained, dangerous or fanatical, according to the degree of its intensity and is ready to repress by any means in his power. In the conduct of public movements he has an exaggerated worship for external order, moderation and decorum and hates over-earnestness and over-strenuousness. Not that he objects to plenty of mild & innocuous excitement; but it must be innocuous and calculated

not to have a disturbing effect on the things he most cherishes.

(Bande Mataram II 1092-93)

This worship of “moderation” by the bourgeoisie prevents them from active participation in the nationalist movement. Such was also the characteristic of the moderates within the Indian National Congress who referred to leaders like Aurobindo as extremists for demanding self-rule (*swaraj*) for India. Ranajit Guha accuses the indigenous bourgeoisie of never attempting to struggle against the colonial state. “They abjured and indeed resolutely opposed all forms of armed struggle against the raj, and settled for pressure politics as their main tactical means in bargaining for power” (5). Aurobindo’s description of the bourgeois is reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas’s description of the public sphere as a venue for the bourgeois’s recognition: “Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. In the competition among equals the best excelled and gained their essence — the immortality of fame” (4). What Aurobindo did was to delineate the consequences of such a divorce of private and public spheres to the extent of viewing the public sphere as just a means to meet the ends of the private:

He has ideals and likes to talk of justice, liberty, reform, enlightenment and all similar abstractions; he likes too to see them reigning and progressing around him decorously and with

their proper limitations. He wishes to have them maintained, if they already exist, but in moderation and with moderation; if they do not exist, the craving for them should be, in his opinion, a lively but still well-regulated fire, not permitted to interfere with the safety, comfort and decorum of life, — the means adopted towards acquiring them should be also moderate and decorous and as far as may be safe and comfortable. An occasional sacrifice of money, leisure and other precious things for their sake, he is always ready to meet; he has a keen zest for the reputation such sacrifices bring him and still more for the comfortable sense of personal righteousness which they foster.

(Bande Mataram II 1093)

The bourgeois, Aurobindo points out, limits discussions and social interactions to the minimum, for his ideals are not intended to find any practical reflection. Guha notes that “[c]ompromise and accommodation were equally characteristic of their attitude to the semi-feudal values and institutions entrenched in Indian society” (5). For the bourgeois, the fire of liberal ideals should be carefully contained so that they do not become a conflagration to affect the comfort of his private life. Habermas writes:

In the course of our century, the bourgeois forms of sociability have found substitutes that have one tendency in common

despite their regional and national diversity: abstinence from literary and political debate. On the new model the convivial discussion among individuals gave way to more or less noncommittal group activities. These too assumed fixed forms of informal sociability, yet they lacked that specific institutional power that had once ensured the interconnectedness of sociable contacts as the substratum of public communication — no public was formed around “group activities.” (Habermas 163)

The “group activities” of the bourgeoisie may appear to be functioning on the public sphere, but on observation it can be noticed that these activities are designed in such a manner that they carefully exclude the public. This is not to say that the bourgeois lacks character or doesn’t work in tandem with the aspirations of the society. His is a private self which keeps projecting itself from the private to the public sphere, though remaining rooted in the individual self. This private self of the bourgeois, as observed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, is a peculiar private self which is “always already” turned to an audience (35). Aurobindo said that the bourgeois did not want to be perceived as such, but was yet unwilling to go beyond certain restrictions which may jeopardize the comforts of his private status:

The bourgeois is the man of good sense and enlightenment, the man of moderation, the man of peace and orderliness, the man

in every way “respectable”, who is the mainstay of all well-ordered societies. As a private man he is respectable; that is to say, his character is generally good, and when his character is not, his reputation is; he is all decorous in his virtues, decent in the indulgence of his vices or at least in their concealment, often absolutely honest, almost always as honest as an enlightened self-interest will permit. His purse is well filled or at any rate not indecently empty; he is a good earner, a conscientious worker, a thoroughly safe & reliable citizen. (*Bande Mataram II* 1093)

The bourgeois is aware of the necessity of maintaining his “respectable” image in the public sphere. Inasmuch as is required, his private sphere is given publicity, which may not be truthful. All his dealings with the public sphere are based on the one common idea of profit — better reputation and a well-stacked purse. Character, virtues, thrift and citizenship become “respectable” aspects of performance of the private self in the public sphere. Resonances of such construction of the “respectable” self is only too obvious in the right wing activism gaining ground in the Indian subcontinent where the corporate lords who loot the public are respected and recognized as national icons of progress.

Aurobindo ridiculed the bourgeois who pretended to be a “reliable citizen”, but was unwilling to participate in the nationalist movement:

But this admirable creature has his defects and limitations. For great adventures, tremendous enterprises, lofty achievements, the storm and stress of mighty & eventful periods in national activity, he is unfit. These things are for the heroes, the martyrs, the criminals, the enthusiasts, the degenerates, geniuses, the men of exaggerated virtue, exaggerated ability, exaggerated ideas. He enjoys the fruit of their work when it is done, but while it is doing, he opposes and hinders more often than helps. For he looks on great ideals as dreams and on vehement enthusiasms as harebrained folly; he distrusts everything new & disturbing, everything that has not been done before or is not sanctioned by success & the accomplished fact; revolt is to him a madness & revolution a nightmare. Fiery self-annihilating enthusiasm, noble fanaticism, relentless & heroic pursuit of an object, the original brain that brings what is distant & ungrasped into the boundaries of reality, the dynamic Will and genius which makes the impossible possible; these things he understands as matters of history and honours them in the famous dead or in those who have succeeded; but in living & yet striving men they inspire him with distrust and repulsion. He will tell you that these things are not to be found in the present generation; but if confronted with the living originator, he will condemn him as a learned

idiot; face to face with the living hero, he will decry him as a dangerous madman, — unless & until he sees on the head of either the crown of success & assured reputation. (*Bande Mataram II* 1093-94)

The public sphere was there for the bourgeois to comment upon, but never to act upon. As Habermas noted, “The public sphere thus demoted to a ‘means of education’ counted no longer as a principle of enlightenment and . . . served only to integrate subjective opinions into the objectivity assumed by the spirit in the form of the state” (120). Guha also commented that the liberalism of the bourgeoisie “was never strong enough to exceed the limitations of the half-hearted initiatives for reform which issued from the colonial administration” (5). The bourgeois was satisfied with the perquisites that the colonialist may grant for the sake of perpetuity of the Empire. The bourgeois did not think on these lines, and the uses of the bourgeois intellect were limited to satisfying the needs of his private sphere. Aurobindo continues on the intellectual and artistic interests of the bourgeois:

He values also the things of the mind in a leisurely comfortable way as adorning and setting off his enlightened ease and competence. A little art, a little poetry, a little religion, a little scholarship, a little philosophy, all these are excellent ingredients in life, and give an air of decorous refinement to his

surroundings. They must not be carried too far or interfere with the great object of life which is to earn money, clothe and feed one's family, educate one's sons to the high pitch of the B.A. degree or the respectable eminence of the M.A., marry one's daughters decently, rank high in service or the professions, stand well in the eye of general opinion and live & die decorously, creditably and respectably. Anything disturbing to these high duties, anything exaggerated, intense, unusual is not palatable to the bourgeois. He shrugs his shoulders over it and brushes it aside with the one word, "mad", or eccentric.

(Such is the bourgeois and it was the bourgeois of the mildest & most inefficient type who reigned in India in the nineteenth century. It was the bourgeois which University education tended, perhaps sought to evolve; it was the bourgeois which the political social conditions moulded and brought to the front. In India the bourgeois; in Japan the Samurai, that one enormous difference explains the difference in the histories of the two countries during the second half of the last century.)
[parenthesis as in original] (*Bande Mataram II* 1094-95)

Aurobindo's mocks the bourgeois sense of duty which is limited to earning money, educating children and arranging their marriages. Interestingly, in his

preoccupation in lashing at the bourgeois, Aurobindo forgets to give any description of the Samurai. He also does not say how Japan was able to resist the impact of European modernity, except that “she merely took over certain forms of European social & political organization necessary to complete her culture under modern conditions and poured into these forms the old potent dynamic spirit of Japan, the spirit of the Samurai” (1092). Aurobindo’s descriptions of the bourgeois, again, find parallels in Habermas’s description of the bourgeois private sphere: “In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family privatized individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity — as persons capable of entering into ‘purely human’ relations with one another” (Habermas 48). The bourgeois has a dual role; as an authority in the private sphere of the family and as a conformist of the dictates of the State in the public sphere:

The ambivalence of the family as an agent of society yet simultaneously as the anticipated emancipation from society manifested itself in the situation of the family members: on the one hand, they were held together by patriarchal authority; on the other, they were bound to one another by human closeness. As a privatized individual, the bourgeois was two things in one: owner of goods and persons and one human being among others, i.e., *bourgeois* and *homme*. (Habermas 55)

Aurobindo perceived this retreat of the bourgeois into the private sphere with

the sole purpose of maintaining a family and protection of one's private property as a challenge for the anti-colonial struggle. As Habermas observed, "The bourgeoisie of the liberal era spent their private lives prototypically in occupation and family; the realm of commodity exchange and of social labour belonged to the private sphere as much as the 'household' relieved of any directly economic functions" (152). Traditional families used to be centred on production — largely agrarian — and therefore the relationship among its members was one of cooperation. However, with the separation of production from the family domain, it was not just the security of the family that was threatened, but that of the society itself:

In the same measure that the occupational sphere became independent, the family withdrew back upon itself. What has characterized the structural transformation of the family since the liberal era is less the loss of progressive disengagement from the functional complex of social labor in general. For even the patriarchal conjugal family of the bourgeois type had long ceased to be a community of production; nevertheless, it was based essentially upon family property that functioned capitalistically. Its maintenance, increase, and passing on was the task of the private person as both the owner of commodities and head of the family. The exchange relationships of bourgeois

society deeply influenced the personal relations between the members of the bourgeois family. (Habermas 154-55)

Aurobindo observed that the bourgeois was created in India as a combined result of colonial invasion and modernity. He wrote, “The bourgeois as a distinct & well-evolved entity is an entirely modern product in India, he is the creation of British policy, English education, Western civilization. Ancient India, mediaeval India were not a favourable soil for his growth” (*Bande Mataram II* 1095). Aurobindo goes on to analyse how the colonial enterprise was instrumental in the creation of the bourgeois in India:

British rule necessitated the growth of the bourgeois, British policy fostered it, and the plant grew so swiftly because a forcing-house had been created for his rapid cultivation and the soil was kept suitably shallow and the air made warm and humid for his needs. It was as in the ancient world when the nations accepted peace, civilisation and a common language at the cost of national decay, the death of their manhood and final extinction or a long slavery. The Pax Britannica was his parent and an easy servitude nursed him into maturity. (*Bande Mataram II* 1098)

Since the colonial conditions were marked by lack of citizenship, it was easy for the British to groom the “bourgeois plant” into any form that they desired.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty asserted, “That British rule put in place the practices, institutions, and discourse of bourgeois individualism in the Indian soil is undeniable.” It was ingrained upon the native people that “to be a ‘modern individual’ was to become a European” (33). The passivity of the indigenous bourgeois was such that not only did they yield to such torturous methods of the colonialist practices and institutions, they seemed to enjoy such a slow death. Aurobindo goes on to observe the conditions created by the metropolitan bourgeois for the growth of the breed of indigenous bourgeois:

For the first need of the bourgeois is a guaranteed and perfect security for his person, property and pursuits. Peace, comfort and safety are the very breath of his nostrils. But he gravitates to a peace for whose preservation he is not called on to wear armour and wield the sword, a comfort he has not to purchase by the discomfort of standing sentinel over his liberties, or a safety his own alertness and courage must protect from the resurgence of old dangers. The bourgeois in arms is not the true animal; the purity of his breed is sullied by something of the virtues and defects of the soldier. He must enjoy the fruits of peace and security he has not earned, without responsibility for their maintenance or fear of their loss. Such conditions he found in almost unparalleled perfection in British India. He was asked to stand as the head of a disarmed and dependent society,

secured from external disturbance & tied down to a rigid internal tranquillity by the deprivation of all functions except those of breadwinner and taxpayer and to vouch himself to the world by a respectable but not remarkable education and achievement as the visible proof of England's civilising mission in India. Such conditions were to the bourgeois as the moisture & warmth of the hothouse to the orchid. He grew in them, rank & luxurious. (*Bande Mataram II* 1098-99)

It never occurs to the bourgeois whether there is anything else to be done other than being a “breadwinner” in the private sphere of the family or a “taxpayer” in the public domain of society. As Guha commented, “for the indigenous bourgeoisie under colonial rule, state power and sovereign governmental authority were no more than aspects of an unrealized project, an aspiration yet to be fulfilled, a dream” (101). But to actualize the dream, the bourgeois would not take initiative because he did not wish to jeopardize his “peace, comfort, and safety.”

A Modernity of One's Own

The condition of coloniality also brought in European modernity along, which also was fertile soil for the growth of the bourgeois in India. Spiritual values that were characteristically Indian were frowned at, and capitalist values were put on the pedestal:

British education flung contempt on the Sannyasin as an idler and charlatan, and pointed with admiration to the strenuous seeker for worldly goods and success as the finest work of the creator. So Vyasa & Valmekie were forgotten for weavers of idle tales and Smiles and Sir Arthur Helps took their place as an instructor of youth, the gospel of Philistinism in its naked crudeness was beaten into the minds of our children when most malleable. Thus Ramdas was following Shivaji into the limbo of the unreturning past. And if God had not meant otherwise for our nation, the Sannyasin would have become an extinct type, Yoga been classed among dead superstitions with witchcraft & alchemy and Vedanta sent the way of Pythagoras & Plato. Nor was the old Vaishya type needed by the new dispensation. The Indian mechanic, engineer, architect, artist, craftsman got notice of dismissal; for to develop the industrial life of the country was no part of England's business in India. As she had taken the functions of government and war into her own hands, so she would take that of production. Whatever India needed, beneficent England with her generous system of free trade would supply and the Indian might sit at ease under his palm tree or, gladly singing, till his fields, rejoicing that Heaven had sent him a ruling nation so greedy to do him good. What was

wanted was not Indian artisans or Indian captains of industry, but plenty of small shopkeepers and big middlemen to help conquer & keep India as a milch cow for British trade & British capital. (*Bande Mataram II* 1099-100)

Aurobindo delineates the manner in which European modernity struck at the very foundations of spirituality in India. India was turned into a market for the goods manufactured by Britain and the values Indian culture stood for were attacked. Here, he brings out the Manicheanism of the West which endeavoured to emphasize the alterity of the colonized as reduced to the binary divisions of good and evil, civilized and barbarian. Therefore the *Sannyasin*¹³ represented failure and a propertied person represented success, Vyasa and Valmiki became primitive writers while Smiles and Sir Arthur represented progressive ideals. Here, Aurobindo does not seek to denigrate either the history of Europe or the prominent people recognized in their history. As Tagore pointed out, Europe's history could be its strength, but that cannot be transferred to India for the same purpose. He wrote, "We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life" (271). Yet, the colonizers' attempt was to systematically swap the rich cultural

13 A Hindu religious mendicant

significations of India with entities imported from Europe. As Césaire points out:

And I say that between *colonization* and *civilization* there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value. (34)

This mercantile colonialism of the British destroyed the workforce in India by the denial of opportunities for natives. This was the harbinger of a dangerous change in the Indian society — a change from a society based on production and human values to a consumption-based one. This change effected by colonial modernity also reflected in the value system of the individual. Aurobindo brings out the snobbery of the typical middle-class Indian which was one of such results:

An University degree, knowledge of English, possession of a post in Government service or a professional diploma, a Government title, European clothes or a sleek dress and appearance, a big house full of English furniture, these were the badges by which Society recognized its chosen. These signs were all purely conventional. The degree did not necessarily

denote a good education nor the knowledge of English a wide culture or successful living into new ideas, nor the Government post administrative capacity, nor the diploma special fitness for the profession, nor the title any merit in the holder, nor the big house or fine dress a mastery of the art of social life, nor the English clothes, European grit, science and enterprise. (*Bande Mataram II* 1101)

The schooling of colonial modernity made the colonial subject model himself upon the English masters. To speak like the English and to dress like them became the accepted norm of an average middle class individual. The degrees flaunted by these bourgeois individuals were culturally ineffectual, and in the government posts held by them, they demonstrated only their ineptitude. The mansions that they copied from the English were but poor artifices to hide the narrowness of their minds. Frantz Fanon observed that one of the reasons for the success of the imposition of colonial modernity upon the natives was the laziness engendered by their divorce from their cultural roots:

This traditional weakness, which is almost congenital to the national consciousness of underdeveloped countries, is not solely the result of the mutilation of the colonized people by the colonial regime. It is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the

profoundly cosmopolitan mold that its mind is set in. (*Wretched* 148)

This “intellectual laziness” coupled with the introduction of the colonial system of education had a debilitating effect on the cultural sensibility of middle class Indian. As Gauri Viswanathan observed, the British colonialists “discovered a wholly unexpected ally in English literature to maintain control of their subjects under the guise of a liberal education” (*Masks* 85). At the same time, Aurobindo lamented that the positive effects of modernity failed to touch India, and the educated Indian was marked by a general indifference to the happenings around the world:

Yet all the time India was as much & more outside the great life of the world than it was in the days of Mahomad Tughlak or Bahadur Shah. The number of men in educated India who had any vital conception or any real understanding & mastery of the great currents of life, thought & motive which sway the vast world outside, was always wonderfully small. It could not be otherwise; for the life of that world was not our life, nor was our life any part of the world's, any more than the days of a prisoner in a gaol or reformatory are part of the free activity of society. . . . We read & thought but did not live what we read & thought. So our existence grew ever more artificial and unreal. The

fighter and the thinker in us dwindled & the bourgeois flourished and grew. (*Bande Mataram II* 1102)

Aurobindo alleged that the colonial system of education was ineffective in bringing about a wider understanding in the educated men of the world around them. The English education aimed at convincing the natives that “European civilisation is the thing that we have to acquire and fit ourselves for, so only can we live and prosper and it is this that our education must do for us” (*Early* 421-22). Aurobindo attempted to challenge this assumption by the introduction of national education. He critiqued the prevalent imperial education which was unproductive and resulted in vain conceit among the middle class. This sharp appraisal is thought-provoking:

Our education too had just the same pride in a false show of breadth and the same confined and narrow scope. In our schools & colleges we were set to remember many things, but learned nothing. We had no real mastery of English literature, though we read Milton & Burke and quoted Byron & Shelley, nor of history though we talked about Magna Charta & Runnymede, nor of philosophy though we could mispronounce the names of most of the German philosophers, nor science though we used its name daily, nor even of our own thought & civilisation though its discussion filled columns of our periodicals. We

knew little & knew it badly. . . . Our brains were as full of liberty as our lives were empty of it. We read and talked so much of political rights that we never so much as realized that we had none to call our own. The very sights & sounds, the description of which formed the staple of our daily reading, were such as most of us would at no time see or hear. We learned science without observation of the objects of science, words & not the things which they symbolised, literature by rote, philosophy as a lesson to be got by heart, not as a guide to truth or a light shed on existence. We read of and believed in English economy, while we lived under Indian conditions, and worshipped the free trade which was starving us to death as a nation. We professed notions of equality, and separated ourselves from the people, of democracy, and were the servants of absolutism. We pattered off speeches & essays about social reform, yet had no idea of the nature of a society. (*Bande Mataram II* 1103)

Aurobindo depicts the manner in which education becomes blind in seeing the pitiable conditions inflicted by British colonialism. Learning happens on a superficial level and therefore is of no consequence. The ideas of democracy, liberty and rights have no relevance to Indians for they are not citizens in the first place. They never attempted to actualize the ideal of liberty by a

movement against colonialism. Aurobindo said that the education provided to the Indian people did not do any justice to the very purpose for which it was instituted:

Never was an education more remote from all that education truly denotes; instead of giving the keys to the vast mass of modern knowledge, or creating rich soil for the qualities that conquer circumstance & survive, they made the mind swallow a heterogeneous jumble of mainly useless information; trained a tame parrot to live in a cage & talk of the joys of the forest. British rule, Britain's civilizing mission in India has been the record success in history in the hypnosis of a nation. It persuaded us to live in a death of the will & its activities, taking a series of hallucinations for real things and creating in ourselves the condition of morbid weakness the hypnotist desired. . . . (*Bande Mataram II* 1104)

The colonial system of education was not intended to enlighten the native, but to mould the native so as to make him a cog in the wheel of the empire. Because it was done in a mass scale, Aurobindo called it the “hypnosis of a nation.” As Ania Loomba observed, “[T]he colonialist production of knowledge was not a simple process. It necessarily included a clash with and a marginalisation of the knowledge and belief systems of those who were

conquered, as also with some oppositional views at home” (*Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* 80).

Aurobindo also critiqued the pretensions of scholarship by the bourgeois Indian:

Deep scholarship would unfit him for his part in life, but if figuring in learned societies or writing a few articles and essays, an occasional book guiltless of uncomfortable originality, or a learned compilation prepared under his superintendence and issued in his name will make him a man of letters, he will court & prize that easily-earned reputation. The effort to remould society and rebuild the nation is too huge and perilous a task for a comfortable citizen, but he is quite prepared to condemn old & inconvenient institutions & superstitions and lend his hand to a few changes which will make social life more pleasant and comfortable. (*Bande Mataram II* 1105)

The colonial education became successful in moulding a bourgeois who would care more about building his reputation than about building the nation. Fanon also observed that “[t]he national bourgeoisie, since it is strung up to defend its immediate interests, and sees no further than the end of its nose, reveals itself incapable of simply bringing national unity into being, or of building up the nation on a stable and productive basis” (*Wretched* 158).

Aurobindo goes on to suggest that the middle class needs to take the lead if the people of this land were to unite as a nation: “For good or for evil the middle class now leads in India, and whatever saving impulse comes to the nation, must come from the middle class, whatever upward movement begins, it must initiate and lead” (*Bande Mataram II* 1107). The middle class needed to realize that the colonialist systems of knowledge production which had been of great influence in the Indian middle class were utilitarian in nature:

An ordered use of that knowledge for a progressive social efficiency and well-being, which will make his brief existence more efficient, more tolerable, more comfortable, happier, better appointed, more luxuriously enriched with the pleasures of the mind, life and body, is the only true art of life. All our philosophy, all our religion, — supposing religion has not been outgrown and rejected, — all our science, thought, art, social structure, law and institution must found itself upon this idea of existence and must serve this one aim and endeavour. This is the formula which European civilisation has accepted and is still labouring to bring into some kind of realisation. It is the formula of an intelligently mechanised civilisation supporting a rational and utilitarian culture. (Aurobindo, *Renaissance* 67)

Aurobindo alleged that European systems of knowledge production aimed at a comfortable existence for the individual which focuses on pleasures as the

only object of life. Such a utilitarian view automatically precludes the need for philosophy or religion and directs all social institutions towards the satisfaction of the individual self. The first casualty in such a process is humanism, which when affected also destroys the social fabric. Aurobindo argued that the civilization of the colonizer does not qualify to be imposed upon the natives just by virtue of their self-image:

If a man says, Alter your notions and habits on the lines of enlightened Europe, vichar answers, "Let me consider that. Why should I assume Europe to be enlightened, India barbarous? It is possible the people of Europe may be the real barbarians, Indian knowledge the true enlightenment. I must see." On the other hand if a man says, "Be an Indian and do as the Indians," vichar replies, "I am not sure that I ought to do as the Indians in order to be an Indian. It may be that the present men of the country have become something Indians were not intended to be. I must see what Indians have been in the various epochs of our civilisation and find out what is eternal in the civilisation and what is temporary. It may even be that the Europeans have certain things really Indian which we have lost." It is good to be Indian, but to be Indian because of knowledge, not because of prejudice. (*Early 500*)

Vichar in Sanskrit means “[r]eflection, deliberation, thought, consideration . . .” (Apte 508). It is such reflection and deliberation that helps the individual to understand the play of binarism and to consider whether the word of the European needs to be taken at its face value. Aurobindo highlighted the importance of counter-discourse in understanding the binary categorization of the colonialists. He brought out the ethnocentrism of the European discourses which insisted that they are a superior civilization. And he pointed out that such arbitrary claims could be made from any position with equal validity or lack of it. As Partha Chatterjee commented:

The radical assertion then is: the notion of rationality may not be cross-cultural; other cultures may have their own, and equally valid because incommensurable, standards of rationality. By trying to judge other cultures according to our criteria of rationality and pronouncing them irrational, we are being unjustifiably ethnocentric, because there is no single cross-culturally valid standard of rationality: rationality is relative. (*Nationalist* 13)

However, the polemic in anti-colonial discourses are essentially attempts to overcome the colonial discourses of suppression. Aurobindo portrays the movement from humanism to capitalism as seen in the development of modernity in Europe:

It is a very pleasant inferno they have created in Europe, a hell not of torments but of pleasures, of lights and carriages, of balls and dances and suppers, of theatres and cafés and music halls, of libraries and clubs and Academies, of National Galleries and Exhibitions, of factories, shops, banks and Stock Exchanges. But it is hell all the same, not the heaven of which the saints and the poets dreamed, the new Jerusalem, the golden city. London and New York are the holy cities of the new religion, Paris its golden Paradise of Pleasure. (*Early 546*)

When capitalism becomes the new religion, it is not just cities that get switched in importance, but value systems are also overturned. As Ania Loomba observes, “As capitalism advances, money and commodities increasingly displace, stand in for, and are mistaken for human values. Thus they become fetishised . . .” (45). Even worse, such a shift in values is considered as an evidence of becoming “modern.” Leela Gandhi remembers an incident when Mahatma Gandhi was asked by a journalist: “Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of modern civilization?” Gandhi is supposed to have replied, “I think it would be a very good idea” (22). Such a pithy reply, but it speaks volumes of Gandhi’s concept of growth and advancement. Obviously, Gandhi did not consider a society that is given to more and more mechanization and industrialization to be modern in the sense of ‘advanced.’ Rather, he considered such signs of ‘progress’ to be retrogressive to the

endeavour of developing social values. For Gandhi and for Aurobindo, progress is not defined in terms of external manifestations of development which are devoid of values. Referring to the French revolution, Aurobindo says that this loss of humanism is visible in post-revolutionary Europe, despite the fact that fraternity or brotherhood was one of the elements of the motto of the revolution:

And yet the true secret is ready to their hand in the formula of the great Revolution. Two ideas of that formula Europe has pursued with some eagerness, Liberty and Equality; but she has totally rejected the third and most necessary, Brotherhood. In its place she has erected the idol of her heart, Machinery, and called it Association; for Association without Brotherhood is merely Machinery. Yet what can be more evident than that the French thinkers were perfectly guided in their selection of the three things necessary for an ideal associated happiness? It is only Love that can prevent the misuse of Liberty; it is only Brotherhood which can make Equality tolerable. (*Early* 547-48)

The irony is that the motto of fraternity remained in the motto and was never attempted to be actualized. To his detractors who might comment that Aurobindo's rhetoric against European modernity was instigated by jingoism and excessive resentment against the British, he wrote:

No, it is not in the stress of an intolerant patriotism that I turn an eye of disparagement upon Europe. The immediate past of these Western peoples I can admire more than I admire the immediate past of our Indian nations. It is their present that shocks my aspirations for humanity. Europe is full of the noise and the apparel of life, of its luxurious trappings, of a myriad-footed material clang and tread, but of that which supports life she is growing more and more empty. When they had less information, her people had wiser and stronger souls. They had a literature, a creative intellectual force, a belief, a religion good or bad, a light that led onwards, a fixed path. Now they have only hungers, imaginations, sentiments & passions. (*Early 556*)

Aurobindo opined that the effect of modernity led to the loss of natural vitality in European life. They have more information, but less of wisdom and are left unguided in life. One of the major markers of European modernity is the huge buildings that adorn the cities. Of such structures Aurobindo wrote:

There are certain edifices, characteristic of European modernity, which lift a tremendous height and showy mass to the sky, — therefore they are called vulgarly skyscrapers, for are they not truly abhramliha¹⁴? — but some houses very showily built have an ugly habit of descending suddenly in ruin without any

previous warning either to their inmates or to the envious huggers of the plain in the vicinity. Then they are said to have been jerry-built. Now, modern European civilisation is just such a jerry-built skyscraper. (*Early 560*)

Aurobindo anticipates that European modernity will collapse under its own weight since it has been constructed without any thought of the people who would live in it. He also points out that the problem with Western modernity is that, in the pursuit of comforts associated with physical existence, it has lost more important elements which actually are the bases of human life:

Western civilisation is proud of its successful modernism. But there is much that it has lost in the eagerness of its gains and much which men of old strove towards that it has not even attempted to accomplish. There is much too that it has wilfully flung aside in impatience or scorn to its own great loss, to the injury of its life, to the imperfection of its culture. An ancient Greek of the time of Pericles or the philosophers suddenly transported in time to this century would be astonished by the immense gains of the intellect and the expansion of the mind, the modern many-sidedness of the reason and inexhaustible habit of inquiry, the power of endless generalisation and precise detail. He would admire without reserve the miraculous growth

of science and its giant discoveries, the abundant power, richness and minuteness of its instrumentation, the wonder-working force of its inventive genius. He would be overcome and stupefied rather than surprised and charmed by the enormous stir and pulsation of modern life. But at the same time he would draw back repelled from its unashamed mass of ugliness and vulgarity, its unchastened external utilitarianism, its vitalistic riot and the morbid exaggeration and unsoundness of many of its growths. (*Renaissance* 81-82)

Such a comparison of the ancient Greek time to the modern age which is now in shambles takes us back, again, to Rajnarayan Bose's *Se kal ar e kal* (Those Days and These Days). Partha Chatterjee considered Bose's work as a representative critique of colonial modernity (*Our Modernity* 4). It may apparently seem that the colonial modernity is in any case a better bargain with its "miraculous growth of science and its giant discoveries," but there are many subtler aspects which are left out. There is abundance, but it appears ugly; there is richness but it verges on vulgarity; there is the "stir and pulsation" of machine-driven urban life, but it runs riot; there is growth but it is morbid and cancerous. To cut Aurobindo's story short, modernity embellishes the human being externally, while at the same time removing humanism from within. In another instance, Aurobindo laments this loss of humanist feelings in the European:

Europe boasts of her science and its marvels. But an Indian cannot content himself with asking like Voltaire, as the supreme question, "What have you invented?" His glance is at the soul; it is that into which he is accustomed to inquire. To the braggart intellect of Europe he is bound to reply, "I am not interested in what you know, I am interested in what you are. With all your discoveries and inventions, what have you become? Your enlightenment is great, — but what are these strange creatures that move about in the electric light you have installed and imagine that they are human?" Is it a great gain for the human intellect to have grown more acute and discerning, if the human soul dwindles? (*Early 546*)

The science which was created by man recreated another man which became a robot-like creature sans human sentiments. Thus evolution becomes not a progressive but a retrograde process:

Man in Europe is descending steadily from the human level and approximating to the ant and the hornet. The process is not complete but it is progressing apace, and if nothing stops the debacle, we may hope to see its culmination in this twentieth century. After all our superstitions were better than this enlightenment, our social abuses less murderous to the hopes of the race than this social perfection. (*Early 546*)

However, Aurobindo does not consider a complete rejection of modernity as a solution and suggests that we have to move ahead and appreciate the spirit of progress in every culture:

That view opens out a prospect beyond the battle of cultures which is the immediate dangerous aspect of the meeting of East and West. The Spirit in man has one aim before it in all mankind; but different continents or peoples approach it from different sides, with different formulations and in a differing spirit. Not recognising the underlying unity of the ultimate divine motive, they give battle to each other and claim that theirs alone is the way for mankind. The one real and perfect civilisation is the one in which they happen to be born, all the rest must perish or go under. But the real and perfect civilisation yet waits to be discovered; for the life of mankind is still nine tenths of barbarism to one tenth of culture. (*Renaissance* 92)

Here, Aurobindo presents a humanistic view, looking at civilizations as a dynamic phenomenon, to be understood only by their motives, not presences. The “perfect civilization” is an ideal which mankind may never reach, but pursue relentlessly in all its ventures. Aurobindo remarked that culture exists for ennobling the human individual and not for its own sake:

On the contrary there is a full and frank recognition and examination of the whole of human existence in all its variety and range and power, there is a clear and wise and noble idea for its right government and there is an ideal tendency pointing it upward and a magnificent call to a highest possible perfection and greatness. These are the serious uses of culture, these are the things that raise the life of man above a crude, primitive barbarism. If a civilisation is to be judged by the power of its ideas, their power for these great uses, Indian civilisation was inferior to none. Certainly, it was not perfect or final or complete; for that can be alleged of no past or present cultural idea or system. (*Renaissance* 167)

Aurobindo rises above the ethnocentrism of William Archer when he says that Indian civilization was not perfect though it was “inferior to none.” Every culture and civilization is in a state of flux and does not settle somewhere to offer for its judgement. To think of civilization as a settled affair is to rest in our past laurels, vegetate and wither away:

For from the view of the evolutionary future European and Indian civilisation at their best have only been half achievements, infant dawns pointing to the mature sunlight that is to come. Neither Europe nor India nor any race, country or

continent of mankind has ever been fully civilised from this point of view; none has grasped the whole secret of a true and perfect human living. . . . (*Renaissance* 85-86)

A sense of achievement brings in stagnancy and retards progress. By marking both European and Indian civilization as “half achievements,” Aurobindo plugged the seeping in of any further Orientalist value judgements. He exhorted to appropriate and recreate European modernity by abrogating the European aspect in it:

It is the spirit, the living and vital issue that we have to do with, and there the question is not between modernism and antiquity, but between an imported civilisation and the greater possibilities of the Indian mind and nature, not between the present and the past, but between the present and the future. It is not a return to the fifth century but an initiation of the centuries to come, not a reversion but a break forward away from a present artificial falsity to her own greater innate potentialities that is demanded by the soul, by the Shakti of India. (*Early* 420)

Aurobindo suggested that by summoning our “innate potentialities,” it is possible for us to invent a modernity for ourselves within the civilization rather than import it from without. This creation of a modernity is done by keeping intact “the Shakti of India,” which is its essential spiritual base.

However, Aurobindo emphasised that it is not an unqualified return to the past, as the focus is more into the future. As Partha Chatterjee said:

The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the “inner” domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a “modern” national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.

(Nation 6)

According to Aurobindo, India’s “inner domain” is her spirituality and tapping into that spirituality Aurobindo planned to awaken the masses. He said, “To bring in the mass of the people, to found the greatness of the future on the greatness of the past, to infuse Indian politics with Indian religious fervour and spirituality are the indispensable conditions for a great and powerful political awakening in India” (*Early 645*). His stress on the spiritual heritage was essentially a strategy to counter the colonial discourse on a domain to which they had no access. Other than that, Aurobindo did not see the necessity to keep Indian culture immune to any external influence. He

went to the extent of saying that there is no point in holding to any particular civilization as unique:

Indeed, what is the need for the continuance of any distinctive Indian civilisation in the future? East and West will meet from two opposite sides and merge in each other and found in the life of a unified humanity a common world-culture. All previous or existing forms, systems, variations will fuse in this new amalgam and find their fulfilment. (*Renaissance* 72)

Aurobindo hoped that in the historical juncture of modernity that we live in, despite Kipling, it is possible that the East and the West will indeed meet and then neither will remain the same.

Chapter Four

Towards a World Union and a Universal Brotherhood

With the spread of modernity around the globe, the nation-state too became a global phenomenon, but not without its attendant problems. The process of modernity made nation-states out of societies and bourgeoisie out of individual humans. Aurobindo addressed this loss of humanism in the micro-world of the individual as well as in the macro-world of society. What he attempted to do is a post-colonial re-construction of the structures he encountered and not a post-modern de-construction of them. This chapter analyses these methods of transformation suggested by him to get over the stultifying effects of modernity.

While discussing the evolutionary theory put forward by the famous German historian, Karl Lamprecht, Aurobindo commented that evolution cannot be viewed as a smooth and continuous process:

The theorist, Lamprecht, basing himself on European and particularly on German history, supposed that human society progresses through certain distinct psychological stages which he terms respectively symbolic, typical and conventional, individualist and subjective. This development forms, then, a

sort of psychological cycle through which a nation or a civilisation is bound to proceed. Obviously, such classifications are likely to err by rigidity and to substitute a mental straight line for the coils and zigzags of Nature. The psychology of man and his societies is too complex, too synthetical of many-sided and intermixed tendencies to satisfy any such rigorous and formal analysis. Nor does this theory of a psychological cycle tell us what is the inner meaning of its successive phases or the necessity of their succession or the term and end towards which they are driving. But still to understand natural laws whether of Mind or Matter it is necessary to analyse their working into its discoverable elements, main constituents, dominant forces, though these may not actually be found anywhere in isolation.

(Human Cycle 6)

Here, Aurobindo points to the limitations of classifying human evolution into just four or five stages since the “synthetic” nature of evolution allows for overlaps of such stages. Therefore, though he begins his discussions with the ideas of stages propounded by Lamprecht, Aurobindo takes his discussion of human evolution on a different trajectory. Aurobindo argues that it may not be necessary that each of the stages follow the preceding one with clear-cut demarcations. Similar views were also held by Anthony Giddens who pointed out that “each stage in the ‘progressive epochs’ of human history both

includes the achievements of the one which went before and is yet discontinuous from the preceding stage” (*Contemporary* 75). Giddens called it “discontinuous” because, while the attainments of an era may lie embedded in the successive era, the new stage mostly appears completely different from the one that preceded it. He describes three features of the discontinuous aspect of modernity. The first one is “*pace of change*” which indicates that “the rapidity of change in conditions of modernity is extreme.” The second discontinuity is “*scope of change*” which is to say that “waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface.” The third discontinuity refers to the “*nature of modern institutions*” which has not been hitherto experienced in known history (*Consequences* 6). Giddens gives example of such discontinuity where “[t]he modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from *all* traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion” (4). Modernity may not have completely erased all remnants of the previous stage, but most of them are not immediately palpable or recognizable in the new form.

Giddens said that one of the major features of modernity is its “reflexivity,” which tends to be uncertain even as it validates the principles it propounds. As Giddens put it:

[T]he reflexivity of modernity actually subverts reason, at any rate where reason is understood as the gaining of certain

knowledge. Modernity is constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived. We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised. (*Consequences* 39)

It is not knowledge *per se* which is under question, but the “pace of change” which makes knowledge unstable. It is pertinent to note why this assumes importance in discourses of modernity. Beck, Bonss, and Lau pointed out that this reflexivity of modernity is the next stage of modernity, which they called “*the modernization of modern society*” (1). Aurobindo also said that after the predominance of reason, nothing seemed to be certain and that theories were created with a lot of labour but only to be soon thrown into the refuse heaps of time:

Sociology does not help us, for it only gives us the general story of the past and the external conditions under which communities have survived. History teaches us nothing; it is a confused torrent of events and personalities or a kaleidoscope of changing institutions. We do not seize the real sense of all this change and this continual streaming forward of human life in

the channels of Time. What we do seize are current or recurrent phenomena, facile generalisations, partial ideas. We talk of democracy, aristocracy and autocracy, collectivism and individualism, imperialism and nationalism, the State and the commune, capitalism and labour; we advance hasty generalisations and make absolute systems which are positively announced today only to be abandoned perforce tomorrow; we espouse causes and ardent enthusiasms whose triumph turns to an early disillusionment and then forsake them for others, perhaps for those that we have taken so much trouble to destroy. For a whole century mankind thirsts and battles after liberty and earns it with a bitter expense of toil, tears and blood; the century that enjoys without having fought for it turns away as from a puerile illusion and is ready to renounce the depreciated gain as the price of some new good. (*Human Cycle* 279-80)

When all theorizations of Sociology, History, the State or Capitalism become passé as soon as they come into discourse, it indicates that the “stable system of coordinates” of modernity has given way to conditions where such “system of coordinates is changing” (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2). This lack of stability is the cause for the lack of certitude in all such discourses. Such was also the case of science, which came to prominence, as Aurobindo described, because it fulfilled two requirements — “Truth” and “a principle of social order”:

They found and held it with enthusiasm in the discoveries of physical Science. The triumphant domination, the all-shattering and irresistible victory of Science in nineteenth-century Europe is explained by the absolute perfection with which it at least seemed for a time to satisfy these great psychological wants of the Western mind. Science seemed to it to fulfil impeccably its search for the two supreme desiderata of an individualistic age. Here at last was a truth of things which depended on no doubtful Scripture or fallible human authority but which Mother Nature herself had written in her eternal book for all to read who had patience to observe and intellectual honesty to judge. Here were laws, principles, fundamental facts of the world and of our being which all could verify at once for themselves and which must therefore satisfy and guide the free individual judgment, delivering it equally from alien compulsion and from erratic self-will. Here were laws and truths which justified and yet controlled the claims and desires of the individual human being; here a science which provided a standard, a norm of knowledge, a rational basis for life, a clear outline and sovereign means for the progress and perfection of the individual and the race. The attempt to govern and organise human life by verifiable Science, by a law, a truth of things, an

order and principles which all can observe and verify in their ground and fact and to which therefore all may freely and must rationally subscribe, is the culminating movement of European civilisation. It has been the fulfilment and triumph of the individualistic age of human society; it has seemed likely also to be its end, the cause of the death of individualism and its putting away and burial among the monuments of the past. (*Human Cycle* 20-21)

Here, Aurobindo points at the attempts to “govern and organize” using empirical knowledge which must fail because of the essential inequalities of power. Giddens points out: “The world is "one" in some senses, but radically riven by inequalities of power in others. And one of the most characteristic features of modernity is the discovery that the development of empirical knowledge does not in and of itself allow us to decide between different value positions” (*Consequences* 154). With the arrival of modernity, science no longer held the certitudes of Truth and even went against social order when it lost its humanism by focussing on the selfish interests of the individual:

The growth of modern Science has meanwhile created new ideas and tendencies, on one side an exaggerated individualism or rather vitalistic egoism, on the other the quite opposite ideal of collectivism. Science investigating life discovered that the

root nature of all living is a struggle to take the best advantage of the environment for self-preservation, self-fulfilment, self-aggrandisement. (*Human Cycle* 56)

This inability to balance the needs of the individual with that of the collective has been the cause of most of the frustrations of science. Giddens describes the manner in which science is taught in a religious manner as infallible knowledge:

What is conveyed to the child in the teaching of science is not just the content of technical findings but, more important for general social attitudes, an aura of respect for technical knowledge of all kinds. In most modern educational systems, the teaching of science always starts from “first principles,” knowledge regarded as more or less indubitable. Only if someone stays with science training for some while is she or he likely to be introduced to contentious issues or to become fully aware of the potential fallibility of all claims to knowledge in science. (*Consequences* 89)

Such a reverence is not very different from that commanded by religion in the past. While discussing the condition of post-modernity, Giddens also highlights this lack of certitude about knowledge in general:

[W]e have discovered that nothing can be known with any certainty, since all pre-existing "foundations" of epistemology have been shown to be unreliable; that "history" is devoid of teleology and consequently no version of "progress" can plausibly be defended; and that a new social and political agenda has come into being with the increasing prominence of ecological concerns and perhaps of new social movements generally. (*Consequences* 46)

As history is not teleological, the concept of "progress" can be linked to history only for specific events, and not history as such. Therefore, Giddens warns that "[h]istory must not be equated with 'historicity' . . ." since historicity is a useful tool to define and shape the present and future (50). He also observes that in modernity too, its discontinuous nature is not understood because of "the influence of social evolutionism." Even the theories which are aware of discontinuous changes "see human history as having an overall direction, governed by general dynamic principles" (5).

The Nation and the Nation-State

Anthony Giddens, in his work *The Nation-State and Violence*, brings out the differences in meaning among the terms nationalism, nation, and nation-state. He defined nationalism as a psychological phenomenon characterized by "the affiliation of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs

emphasizing communality among the members of a political order” whereas nation refers to the “collectivity” within an area subject to common governance (116). However, he saw nation-state as “a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory” (121). Darren J. O’Byrne succinctly described the transition of the idea of the nation to the nation-state: “Society became the nation. Government became the State. Citizenship became a tool for nation-building, a means of legitimizing the State via the idea of the nation” (121-22). Here, O’Byrne uses the term “Citizenship” not as a documented sanction accorded by the State, but as a psychological feeling which creates the nation and later the State. Aurobindo acknowledges the psychological nature of nationalism when he says, “Nationhood founds itself partly on this association, partly on others which accentuate it, common interests, community of language, community of culture, and all these in unison have evolved a psychological idea, a psychological unity, which finds expression in the idea of nationalism” (*Human Cycle* 534).

According to Aurobindo, while nation is a collectivity, it also attains an individuality which distinguishes it from other such collectives:

The nation or society, like the individual, has a body, an organic life, a moral and aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and a soul behind all these signs and powers for the sake of which

they exist. One may say even that, like the individual, it essentially is a soul rather than has one; it is a group-soul that, once having attained to a separate distinctness, must become more and more self-conscious and find itself more and more fully as it develops its corporate action and mentality and its organic self-expressive life. (*Human Cycle* 35)

The “group-soul” referred to by Aurobindo is the commonalities that are invented by nationalism for the creation of the nation. Here, Aurobindo seems to suggest that the idea of the nation thus becomes the created soul of the community which is the external visible aspect. When comparing the ideas of Giddens and Aurobindo, it would become necessary to situate the political contexts in which they wrote. It has to be acknowledged that Giddens theorized from what was the centre of the world and Aurobindo’s thought proceeded from the periphery. Aurobindo’s ideas of nation and nationalism have been forged in the context of an anticolonial struggle. The nationalism that was created in India of that period, hence, was radically different from Western nationalism. It was a resistant nationalism, whereas its Western counterpart was dominating and hegemonic.

Further, Aurobindo said that the nation too is a stage which will in turn lead to a larger unity of the world community at large:

We have already seen the inner justification of this great revolutionary movement. The nation-unit is not formed and does not exist merely for the sake of existing; its purpose is to provide a larger mould of human aggregation in which the race, and not only classes and individuals, may move towards its full human development. (*Human Cycle* 383)

But such a passage from nation to a larger “human aggregation” is not easy because of the institutionalized nature of the nation-state which has come into being as a result of a unique combination of capitalism and modernity. If such an aggregation becomes impossible, the nation shall remain the largest unit of the human collective:

The natural unit in such a grouping is the nation, because that is the basis natural evolution has firmly created and seems indeed to have provided with a view to the greater unity. Unless, therefore, unification is put off to a much later date of our history and in the meanwhile the national principle of aggregation loses its force and vitality and is dissolved in some other, the free and natural nation-unit and perhaps the nation-group would be the just and living support of a sound and harmonious world-system. (*Human Cycle* 432)

Aurobindo preferred to see the coming into being of the nation as a “natural

evolution,” though, as especially in the case of India, it mostly had been the result of colonialism and the process of modernity. However, he later conceded that the nation comes into being by “force of circumstances”:

The nation idea, on the contrary, did not arise from a primary vital need, but from a secondary or even tertiary necessity which resulted not from anything inherent in our vital nature, but from circumstances, from environmental evolution; it arose not from a vital, but from a geographical and historical necessity. And we notice that as one result it had to be created most commonly by force, force of circumstances partly, no doubt, but also by physical force, by the power of the king and the conquering tribe converted into a military and dominant State. Or else it came by a reaction against force, a revolt against conquest and domination that brought a slow or sudden compactness to peoples who, though geographically or even historically and culturally one, had lacked power of cohesion and remained too conscious of an original heterogeneity or of local and regional and other divisions. (*Human Cycle* 554-55)

Here, Aurobindo vindicates the necessity of the immediate rise of nationalism and the creation of the nation. He points out that the commonness of the peoples did not hitherto coagulate into a nation because of lack of “power of

cohesion” which seems at that moment to have been catalyzed by colonialism. To identify the commonness of the people and to coalesce them is the enterprise of anti-colonial nationalism. The validity of such an endeavour is seen clearly by Aurobindo in a historical manner. The impact of colonialism played the historical role of contributing towards the conception and construction of the nation as an institutionalized nation-state. Aurobindo argued that the nation as an organized entity may have arrived historically much later, but the commonalities that were to be discovered as that which constitutes the spirit of the nation were always there in the Indian psyche. For that matter, he considered that such a spirit of the nation had not yet found its full fruition and remained an incomplete project:

The beginnings of the centripetal tendency in India go back to the earliest times of which we have record and are typified in the ideal of the Samrat or Chakravarti Raja and the military and political use of the Aswamedha and Rajasuya sacrifices. The two great national epics might almost have been written to illustrate this theme; for the one recounts the establishment of a unifying *dharmarājya* or imperial reign of justice, the other starts with an idealised description of such a rule pictured as once existing in the ancient and sacred past of the country. The political history of India is the story of a succession of empires, indigenous and foreign, each of them destroyed by centrifugal

forces, but each bringing the centripetal tendency nearer to its triumphant emergence. And it is a significant circumstance that the more foreign the rule, the greater has been its force for the unification of the subject people. This is always a sure sign that the essential nation-unit is already there and that there is an indissoluble national vitality necessitating the inevitable emergence of the organised nation. In this instance, we see that the conversion of the psychological unity on which nationhood is based into the external organised unity by which it is perfectly realised, has taken a period of more than two thousand years and is not yet complete. (*Human Cycle* 308)

However, the expeditions of the kings accompanied by the sacrifices mentioned here were imperialist designs rather than indicating any nationalist aspirations. Aurobindo's claim of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as illustrations of "imperial rule of justice" may be questionable, but they were definitely indications of transitions in the nature of social governance. As Romila Thapar observes, such epic literature "is often the literature of the transitional phase of the declining of tribal society and the emergence of kingdoms" (*Ancient* 337). Aurobindo differentiated the idea of the nation and the state when he said that the state has no soul or a conscience, unlike a nation:

But the State is an entity which, with the greatest amount of power, is the least hampered by internal scruples or external checks. It has no soul or only a rudimentary one. It is a military, political and economic force; but it is only in a slight and undeveloped degree, if at all, an intellectual and ethical being. And unfortunately the chief use it makes of its undeveloped intellect is to blunt by fictions, catchwords and recently by State philosophies, its ill-developed ethical conscience. Man within the community is now at least a half-civilised creature, but his international existence is still primitive. (*Human Cycle* 298)

In the role of exercising force, the modern nation-state tries to homogenize the segments in its dominion, which is indicated by the “ill-developed ethical conscience” that Aurobindo refers to. However, Giddens observes that the traditional states were more heterogeneous, and therefore can be thought of as “composed of numerous societies” (*Nation-State* 53). An instance where the exclusive nature of the nation-state is demonstrated is in the manner borders are conceived. Giddens notes that the boundaries of traditional states are not comparable to the borders of modern states: “In non-modern states, walled boundaries remain frontiers, well outside the regularized control of the central authorities . . .” This was the case even when there were prominent physical barriers like the Great Wall of China. However, the imaginary borders of the modern nation-states are functionally very real since they “demarcate states’

sovereignty” (51). Emergence of sub-nationalisms is another phenomenon which the modern nation-state has to deal with. Aurobindo remarked that this may not materialize as the nation idea is strong enough to withstand it: “The Catalonian in Spain, the Breton and Provençal and Alsatian in France, the Welsh in England may cherish the signs of their separate existence; but the attraction of the greater living unity of the Spanish, the French, the British nation has been too powerful to be injured by these persistences” (*Human Cycle* 310). However, O’Byrne commented that such hopes no longer hold good: “Scottish or Welsh people, unhappy with being identified as citizens of the (Anglocentric) British nation-state, now have more possibilities for their respective sub-national identities to be recognized within the European Union” (221-22). He also added that it remains “true of residents of the Basque or Catalan regions of Spain” (222). This has been proved to be becoming a reality by the recent declaration of independence of Catalonia from Spain (“Catalan” n. pag.). As Partha Chatterjee observes:

But no matter how skilfully employed, modern statecraft and the application of technology cannot effectively suppress the very real tensions which remain unresolved. They are apparent in the political life of every post-colonial nationalist regime in the world. In numerous cases they appear as separatist movements based on ethnic identities, proofs of the incomplete resolution of ‘the national question’. More significantly, they

often appear as fervently anti-modern, anti-Western strands of politics, rejecting capitalism too for its association with modernism and the West and preaching either a fundamentalist cultural revival or a utopian millennialism. There too the fragility of the forced resolution by nationalism of the contradiction between capital and the people-nation is shown up. (*Nationalist* 169)

Chatterjee views such sub-nationalisms as exemplifying the idea that the establishment of the nation-state with its complex machinery has not been successful in integrating the people into a nation. The alienation of the people from such a State, Chatterjee points out, is the cause of rising fundamentalist movements. Aurobindo pointed out how the very nature of the nation-state prevents it from becoming democratic except in hypothetical terms:

But the innermost difficulty would not disappear even if the socialistic State became really democratic, really the expression of the free reasoned will of the majority in agreement. Any true development of that kind would be difficult indeed and has the appearance of a chimera: for collectivism pretends to regulate life not only in its few fundamental principles and its main lines, as every organised society must tend to do, but in its details, it aims at a thoroughgoing scientific regulation, and an agreement

of the free reasoned will of millions in all the lines and most of the details of life is a contradiction in terms. Whatever the perfection of the organised State, the suppression or oppression of individual freedom by the will of the majority or of a minority would still be there as a cardinal defect vitiating its very principle. (*Human Cycle* 213)

What Aurobindo foresaw as a danger to individual freedom has only accentuated in the later stage of the modernist stage. In the largely insecure international arena, “. . . all individuals and individual rights are transformed into a risk to the state” (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 18). Thus, in addition to being a citizen, every individual becomes a potential threat to the state. What is worse, the citizen is interpellated by various institutions of the State to keep such instances of potential threats under check. Aurobindo also ruminated on the disastrous consequences of mechanisation of life:

And there would be something infinitely worse. For a thoroughgoing scientific regulation of life can only be brought about by a thoroughgoing mechanisation of life. This tendency to mechanisation is the inherent defect of the State idea and its practice. Already that is the defect upon which both intellectual anarchistic thought and the insight of the spiritual thinker have begun to lay stress, and it must immensely increase as the State

idea rounds itself into a greater completeness in practice. It is indeed the inherent defect of reason when it turns to govern life and labours by quelling its natural tendencies to put it into some kind of rational order. (*Human Cycle* 213)

The mechanisation that Aurobindo talks about is the nature of the “reflexively monitored state system” that creates the “discontinuities that separate the modern world from the prior epochs” (Giddens, *Nation-State* 93). Aurobindo also discussed how the State becomes an absolutist institution which imposes itself on the citizen, for whose welfare it was created:

So the State is viewed in modern political thought as an entity in itself, as if it were something apart from the community and its individuals, something which has the right to impose itself on them and control them in the fulfilment of some idea of right, good or interest which is inflicted on them by a restraining and fashioning power rather than developed in them and by them as a thing towards which their self and nature are impelled to grow. (*Human Cycle* 58)

This danger of the attempt of the state to straitjacket the freedom of the individual is also pointed out by Giddens when he discusses the totalitarianism of the modern nation-state: “Totalitarianism is distinct from traditional despotism, but is all the more frightening as a result. Totalitarian

rule connects political, military, and ideological power in more concentrated form than was ever possible before the emergence of modern nation-states” (*Consequences* 8). Aurobindo said that even if the nation-state is democratic in character, that is no guarantee of the state being free from such totalitarian mechanisms:

Democracy is by no means a sure preservative of liberty; on the contrary, we see today the democratic system of government march steadily towards such an organised annihilation of individual liberty as could not have been dreamed of in the old aristocratic and monarchical systems. It may be that from the more violent and brutal forms of despotic oppression which were associated with those systems, democracy has indeed delivered those nations which have been fortunate enough to achieve liberal forms of government, and that is no doubt a great gain. It revives now only in periods of revolution and excitement, often in the form of mob tyranny or a savage revolutionary or reactionary repression. But there is a deprivation of liberty which is more respectable in appearance, more subtle and systematised, more mild in its method because it has a greater force at its back, but for that very reason more effective and pervading. The tyranny of the majority has become a familiar phrase and its deadening effects have been

depicted with a great force of resentment by certain of the modern intellectuals; but what the future promises us is something more formidable still, the tyranny of the whole, of the self-hypnotised mass over its constituent groups and units.

(Human Cycle 508-09)

The “tyranny of the majority” prophetically anticipated by Aurobindo is today becoming a reality especially with the right-wing forces taking positions in the administration of the nation. It would appear that Aurobindo speaks of the contemporary when he spells out certain phrases. For instance “deprivation of liberty which is more respectable in appearance” could easily remind us of the on-going debate on rising for National Anthem at cinema halls. His comment that this stranglehold of freedom is “more subtle and systematic” reminds us of the vigilante groups who decide on who are ‘anti-nationals,’ while the State pleads ignorance and absolves itself of all such monstrosities. These vigilante groups are powerful because the “greater force” of the State mutely upholds their actions. On the contemporary Indian situation, M.V. Narayanan observes that “. . . we are at the threshold of fascism, if not already within that. . . . in another forty or fifty years later, people will be looking back and deciphering and analyzing this period as a gestation period of fascism or probably the inaugural phase of fascism itself” (n. pag.). Aurobindo lamented that democracy had become more illiberal than the feudalistic and monarchic societies of the past. The restrictions to freedom of the individual in the

modern State are visible in its subtlety in everyday life as well as in the blatant denial of freedom in organized movements. Giddens notes: “But the ‘mere’ bourgeois freedoms of freedom of movement, formal equality before the law, and the right to organise politically have turned out to be very real freedoms in the light of the twentieth-century experience of totalitarian societies in which they are absent or radically curtailed” (*Contemporary* 173). If the regime is tyrannical in nature, Aurobindo opined that there is then no real difference between monarchy and democracy:

The tyranny of the absolute king over all and the tyranny of the majority over the individual — which really converts itself by the paradox of human nature into a hypnotised oppression and repression of the majority by itself — are forms of one and the same tendency. Each, when it declares itself to be the State with its absolute “*L’État, c’est moi*”¹⁵, is speaking a profound truth even while it bases that truth upon a falsehood. The truth is that each really is the self-expression of the State in its characteristic attempt to subordinate to itself the free will, the free action, the power, dignity and self-assertion of the individuals constituting it. (*Human Cycle* 293-94)

Even as the State grants rights to the citizens, it is conditional inasmuch as the

15 “I am the State,” a statement ascribed to Louis XIV of France.

State can withhold or restrict such rights at its pleasure. This is the difference, O'Byrne points out, between citizen rights and human rights:

[C]itizenship rights as alluded to in the discourse of the nation-state — at least as seen from the contractarian perspective — are in fact civil liberties, in that they are rights only so long as the nation-state allows them; they are granted-from-above. They form part of a reciprocal relationship between citizen and state, and are upheld or denied by positive law. They might also differ across space and time. Human rights, by contrast, come from below. They are taken to mean a set of ethical codes that ensure the equal worth of each individual life. They are universal and apply to all peoples at all times and in all places. (63)

O'Byrne's argument that citizenship rights are given from above clearly demonstrates the upper hand of the State upon the citizen. He goes on to say that human rights, however, are not "subject to the whims of any nation-state" since they are acquired merely by virtue of being a human being (63). This absolutism which denies human rights in various situations is a serious case in point against the nation-state. Aurobindo questioned the capacity of the nation-state to withdraw human rights in the form of punishments:

Crime with its penalties is always a kind of mutual violence, a kind of revolt and civil strife and even in the best-policed and

most law-abiding communities crime is still rampant. Even the organisation of crime is still possible although it cannot usually endure or fix its power because it has the whole vehement sentiment and effective organisation of the community against it. But what is more to the purpose, Law has not been able to prevent, although it has minimised, the possibility of civil strife and violent or armed discord within the organised nation.

(Human Cycle 392)

Aurobindo argues that the punishments imposed for crimes evidently do not work as deterrents for crime, since crimes continue to happen even in societies which impose severe punishments. Therefore, such penalties imposed on the crime-doer are at best only acts of vengeance. Law, thus, turns out to be another name for legalized crime. O'Byrne observes, "Moral arguments concerning retribution and justice clearly appeal to higher authorities than national laws. Few people question the right of governments to murder citizens if that citizen has (or is alleged to have) committed a crime for which execution is the 'appropriate' punishment" (67-68). O'Byrne said that such a right of the State to murder only demonstrates that even "right to life" is questionable within the jurisdiction of the State (68). Aurobindo also noted that the tyranny of the State demands extinction of the individual ego for the so-called larger interests of the nation:

The call of the State to the individual to immolate himself on its altar and to give up his free activities into an organised collective activity is therefore something quite different from the demand of our highest ideals. It amounts to the giving up of the present form of individual egoism into another, a collective form, larger but not superior, rather in many ways inferior to the best individual egoism. (*Human Cycle* 300)

Such a sacrifice of the individual self amounts to swallowing of the individual identity by the State. Aurobindo said: “But the deglutition of the free individual by a huge State machine is quite another consummation. The State is a convenience, and a rather clumsy convenience, for our common development; it ought never to be made an end in itself” (*Human Cycle* 300).

Aurobindo goes on to analyse the concept of the State and avers that it is inadequate for several reasons:

What, after all, is this State idea, this idea of the organised community to which the individual has to be immolated? Theoretically, it is the subordination of the individual to the good of all that is demanded; practically, it is his subordination to a collective egoism, political, military, economic, which seeks to satisfy certain collective aims and ambitions shaped and imposed on the great mass of the individuals by a smaller or

larger number of ruling persons who are supposed in some way to represent the community. It is immaterial whether these belong to a governing class or emerge as in modern States from the mass partly by force of character, but much more by force of circumstances; nor does it make any essential difference that their aims and ideals are imposed nowadays more by the hypnotism of verbal persuasion than by overt and actual force. In either case, there is no guarantee that this ruling class or ruling body represents the best mind of the nation or its noblest aims or its highest instincts. (296)

Here, Aurobindo delineates how the “ideological state apparatuses,” as Louis Althusser calls them, are more successful in establishing dominance than the repressive apparatuses. The “subordination of the individual” for the welfare of “all” is the ideology of the State; the “subordination to a collective egoism” of the ruling class is the violent repressive nature of the State. Althusser noted that “the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression . . .” (19). The State being a representative body of the whole mass of citizens under its dominion is already becoming a myth. As Althusser observed, State is not the State of the citizens but “is the State *of* the ruling class . . .” (18). Aurobindo goes on to discuss the nature of the State idea which perforce imposes itself on the individual:

The State is bound to act crudely and in the mass; it is incapable of that free, harmonious and intelligently or instinctively varied action which is proper to organic growth. For the State is not an organism; it is a machinery, and it works like a machine, without tact, taste, delicacy or intuition. It tries to manufacture, but what humanity is here to do is to grow and create. We see this flaw in State-governed education. It is right and necessary that education should be provided for all and in providing for it the State is eminently useful; but when it controls the education, it turns it into a routine, a mechanical system in which individual initiative, individual growth and true development as opposed to a routine instruction become impossible. The State tends always to uniformity, because uniformity is easy to it and natural variation is impossible to its essentially mechanical nature; but uniformity is death, not life. A national culture, a national religion, a national education may still be useful things provided they do not interfere with the growth of human solidarity on the one side and individual freedom of thought and conscience and development on the other; for they give form to the communal soul and help it to add its quota to the sum of human advancement; but a State education, a State religion, a State culture are unnatural violences. And the same rule holds

good in different ways and to a different extent in other directions of our communal life and its activities. (*Human Cycle* 301)

The State recognizes the importance of education for its sustenance of power as education is the feeder category for means of social reproduction. Althusser observed that “no other ideological State apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven” (30). The learning provided in the schools, “know-how” as Althusser called it, is only incidental whereas the transference of “the ruling ideology” is what is intentional. In the changed global scenario today, Darren J. O’Byrne suggested four areas that education needs to focus on for “practical awareness, critical understanding and post-national citizenship.” These areas are “information technology, environmental education, multicultural education, and human rights awareness and critique” (235). Such an awareness and understanding could bring in greater light on the restrictive nature of State citizenship.

Though the State came into being from the Nation, Aurobindo said that the State cannot be called representative of its citizens:

The organised State is neither the best mind of the nation nor is it even the sum of the communal energies. It leaves out of its

organised action and suppresses or unduly depresses the working force and thinking mind of important minorities, often of those which represent that which is best in the present and that which is developing for the future. It is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable.

(Human Cycle 298)

Instead of the State being representative of the subject citizens, the subjects are coerced to represent the ideologies of the State. This is achieved by various methods of surveillance which have become a common aspect of modern governmentality. Giddens observes: “The expansion of surveillance in the modern political order, in combination with the policing of ‘deviance’, radically transforms the relation between state authority and the governed population . . .” (*Nation-State* 309). The citizens of the State which represents them re-present the citizens as possible candidates for “deviance.” Aurobindo says that a similar claim of representation cannot be sustained also of the politician, who actually is one among the subject citizens:

Nothing of the kind can be asserted of the modern politician in any part of the world; he does not represent the soul of a people or its aspirations. What he does usually represent is all the average pettiness, selfishness, egoism, self-deception that is about him and these he represents well enough as well as a great

deal of mental incompetence and moral conventionality, timidity and pretence. (*Human Cycle* 296)

The politicians, who become representatives in the democracy, imagine that they would take decisions in the best interest of their fellow citizens. However, when they assume power, they turn out to be the subjects of the ruling class and not representatives of the citizens at large. On the question of representation, Narayanan observes:

Who represents the nation? What is interesting here is that even when we are addressed with such perorations as “*Pyare deshwasiyon*¹⁶,” we realize that we are not all *deshwasiyon*. There are some people who are more *deshwasiyon* than we are *deshwasiyon*. Some people who are more citizens than others are citizens. . . . The State has abrogated its power. It has stepped back. And by stepping back, what it has done is to enable these splinter vigilante groups to actually come up and do whatever they wish ‘in the name of the nation.’(n. pag.)

Thus, the modern politician creates ‘others’ within the nation and demonstrates his “pettiness, egoism and self-deception.” As Aurobindo pointed out, such an attitude reveals the politician’s “mental incompetence” in understanding the plurality of the society and “pretence” of serving the nation.

16 “Beloved countrymen”; an appellation used frequently by Narendra Modi in his speeches.

In many instances, the decisions that are thus taken and implemented by such ‘representatives’ not only do not reflect the interest of the citizens but even become violations of basic human rights. Darren J. O’Byrne remarked: “Such a trend clearly reinforces the claims already made about the decline in the legitimacy of nation-state politics” (203). These representatives who come to power after the formation of the nation, start representing power and not the people. Aurobindo commented that nothing changes except as a transition of the system from Monarchy to that of the State:

The Power they represent is another, a formless and bodiless entity, which has taken the place of monarch and aristocracy, that impersonal group-being which assumes some sort of outward form and body and conscious action in the huge mechanism of the modern State. Against this power the individual is much more helpless than he was against old oppressions. When he feels its pressure grinding him into its uniform moulds, he has no resource except either an impotent anarchism or else a retreat, still to some extent possible, into the freedom of his soul or the freedom of his intellectual being.

(Human Cycle 509)

Here, Aurobindo says that the “impersonal group-being” of the State is more monstrous in its tyranny because in previous systems there was an identifiable

malefactor. Here there is none, since the State functions through its various apparatuses. In “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Fanon points out this danger of the national bourgeoisie which “does not create a state that reassures the ordinary citizen, but rather one that rouses his anxiety” (*Wretched* 165). Giddens calls the modern nation-state “a power-container” which exercises its power within its territorial borders (*Nation-State* 172). Thus, the people’s representatives become impersonal elements that form this power-container. The oppressions that Aurobindo mentioned are caused by the various methods that the State employs like “surveillance,” which are called methods of “internal pacification” by Giddens (181).

Aurobindo expresses his concept of the ideal State which is non-impositional in nature. Instead of seeing the individual citizens as a potential threat, the State needs to view them as human assets which need to be grown and developed:

The ideal society or State is that in which respect for individual liberty and free growth of the personal being to his perfection is harmonised with respect for the needs, efficiency, solidarity, natural growth and organic perfection of the corporate being, the society or nation. In an ideal aggregate of all humanity, in the international society or State, national liberty and free national growth and self-realisation ought in the same way to be

progressively harmonised with the solidarity and unified growth and perfection of the human race. (*Human Cycle* 395-96)

Such a description of the ideal State demonstrates the humanist aspiration in Aurobindo's thought. It is significant to consider such a harmonious and natural condition that existed in traditional states where most of the citizens "did not know themselves to be 'citizens' of those states, nor did it matter particularly to the continuity of power within them" (Giddens *Nation-State* 210). Aurobindo viewed it as very strange that the very institutions formed to ensure the freedom of the individual are the ones which vie to snatch it away:

This is a very remarkable development, the more so as in the origins of the democratic movement individual freedom was the ideal which it set in front both in ancient and modern times. The Greeks associated democracy with two main ideas, first, an effective and personal share by each citizen in the actual government, legislation, administration of the community, secondly, a great freedom of individual temperament and action. (*Human Cycle* 509)

Power, because it restricts the freedom of the individual, is sometimes considered antithetical to freedom. However, Giddens observes: "Power and freedom in human society are not opposites; on the contrary, power is rooted in the very nature of human agency and thus in the 'freedom to act

otherwise” (*Contemporary* 4). Aurobindo said that freedom of the individual should not be limited by the State which was instituted by the collective of the individual for its well-being:

Freedom of thought and speech — the two necessarily go together, since there can be no real freedom of thought where a padlock is put upon freedom of speech — is not indeed complete without freedom of association; for free speech means free propagandism and propagandism only becomes effective by association for the realisation of its objects. This third liberty also exists with more or less of qualifying limitations or prudent safeguards in all democratic States. But it is a question whether these great fundamental liberties have been won by the race with an entire security, — apart from their occasional suspensions even in free nations and the considerable restrictions with which they are hedged in subject countries. It is possible that the future has certain surprises for us in this direction. (*Human Cycle* 510)

The surprises of the future are already here, since the freedom of speech and association are not unqualified and are often restrictive even in democratic States. So much so that they could be called restrictions of speech and association instead of freedoms. Such an oppression is effected also in the

name of nationalism and is therefore termed “ultranationalism” (Griffin n. pag.). Narayanan avers that “. . . that is how ultra-nationalism works; it is by entering into every little interstice of your personal life, invading it, conquering it, in such a way that you become a slave, either out of loyalty or out of fear, to the denomination that is already present [in power]” (n. pag.). As to freedom of thought, it gets designed by the ideological state apparatus of education. O’Byrne observes how the rights granted by the State to the citizen are conditional in nature:

Does the failure to perform a duty negate a right? We can use this argument to check or withhold certain rights, if we believe them to be harmful to the rights of others. Freedom of speech is an example of this: whereas a libertarian, individualist perspective might defend this right regardless, a more communitarian perspective would consider its consequences and deny the right if necessary. (65)

That granting of a right can negatively affect the rights of some other citizens is an argument raised to justify restrictions. In the sense that if the State feels so, and not necessarily because of any actual impingement on the rights of others. O’Byrne adds that human rights are superior since they “cannot be removed, and cannot be counterpoised with any duties which might challenge any assumption of their universality” (65). The State’s indulgence in such

illiberal methods is a going back to the same repressive practices of feudalism or the colonialist regime. Giddens observes:

Civil freedoms were essentially the end process in the dissolution of the remnants of feudal society. They were the necessary foundation for the emergence of political rights; for only if the individual is recognized as an autonomous agent does it become reasonable to regard that individual as politically responsible. (*Nation-State* 203)

Without the autonomy of the individual, s/he ceases to be a citizen with rights and remains a subject under control as the case was in the colonial period. The words of Jayaprakash Narayan about the Congress government in post-independence India is relevant here. He alleged that “it adopted without change the bureaucratic machine that had originally been designed by the colonial power for purposes of economic exploitation and suppression of dissent” (4). What Narayan calls “the bureaucratic machine” is the self-same “impersonal group-being” of the State referred to by Aurobindo. Narayan further says: “One of the more malignant features of that machine is its continued adherence to the British imperialist theory that it is the duty of the people to obey first and then to protest” (4-5).

Liberation from War

Aurobindo observed that in spite of witnessing many wars and their

devastating results, humanity had not woken up to the necessity of eliminating war. He warned that war would not disappear by itself and would require proactive steps for it to be removed:

The elimination of war is one of the cherished ideals and expectations of the age. But what lies at the root of this desire? A greater unity of heart, sympathy, understanding between men and nations, a settled will to get rid of national hatreds, greeds, ambitions, all the fertile seeds of strife and war? If so, it is well with us and success will surely crown our efforts. But of this deeper thing there may be something in sentiment, but there is still very little in action and dominant motive. For the masses of men the idea is rather to labour and produce and amass at ease and in security without the disturbance of war; for the statesmen and governing classes the idea is to have peace and security for the maintenance of past acquisitions and an untroubled domination and exploitation of the world by the great highly organised imperial and industrial nations without the perturbing appearance of new unsatisfied hungers and the peril of violent unrests, revolts, revolutions. War, it was hoped at one time, would eliminate itself by becoming impossible, but that delightfully easy solution no longer commands credit. (*Human Cycle* 600-601)

In the modern world, the fear of war is not just of individual extinction but that of the species as a whole. Giddens remarks: “The possibility of global calamity, whether by nuclear war or other means, prevents us from reassuring ourselves with the assumption that the life of the species inevitably surpasses that of the individual” (*Consequences* 146). Aurobindo too pointed out the risk of another world war which could destroy the whole species of human beings:

Two stupendous and world-devastating wars have swept over the globe and have been accompanied or followed by revolutions with far-reaching consequences which have altered the political map of the earth and the international balance, the once fairly stable equilibrium of five continents, and changed the whole future. A third still more disastrous war with a prospect of the use of weapons and other scientific means of destruction far more fatal and of wider reach than any ever yet invented, weapons whose far-spread use might bring down civilisation with a crash and whose effects might tend towards something like extermination on a large scale, looms in prospect . . . (*Human Cycle* 580)

The vast difference between the means of violence used in the two World Wars indicates the risk to humanity should another war take place. This is

another characteristic of the second stage of modernity that it would not matter which part of the world someone lives; the distribution of risk is even. As Giddens notes: “The fact that ‘Chernobyl is everywhere’ spells . . . the end of ‘others’ —boundaries between those who are privileged and those who are not. The global intensity of certain kinds of risk transcends all social and economic differentials” (*Consequences* 125). And this is also a peculiarity of the discontinuous aspect of modernity that the risk that looms large is not comparable to any previous recorded experience of the human race:

The threat of military violence remains part of the risk profile of modernity. However, its character has changed substantially, in conjunction with the altered nature of control of the means of violence in relation to war. We live today in a global military order in which, as a result of the industrialisation of war, the scale of the destructive power of the weaponry now diffused across the world is massively greater than has ever existed before. The possibility of nuclear conflict poses dangers no previous generations have had to face. (*Consequences* 110)

Giddens says that it is not just the risk of nuclear disaster, but the large numbers of armed conflicts that take place in different parts of the globe are in proportion many times more than that happened in previous centuries:

Not just the threat of nuclear confrontation, but the actuality of military conflict, form a basic part of the “dark side” of modernity in the current century. The twentieth century is the century of war, with the number of serious military engagements involving substantial loss of life being considerably higher than in either of the two preceding centuries. In the present century thus far, over 100 million people have been killed in wars, a higher proportion of the world's population than in the nineteenth century, even allowing for overall population increase. Should even a limited nuclear engagement be fought, the loss of life would be staggering, and a full superpower conflict might eradicate humanity altogether.

(Consequences 9-10)

Apart from the gravity of such risk of disasters, what is also significant is the all-encompassing impact of these risks. Giddens calls this “the world-wide extension of risk environments, rather than the intensification of risk” (126). In the face of such risks, the individual citizens of each State have no recourse except to resign to any such fate or to hope that such risks are not actualized. Giddens considers three alternative positions that individuals could take in the face of such extensive risks: “*fortuna*” or fate, “*sustained optimism*,” and “*radical engagement*.” He defines *fortuna* as a “A sense of ‘fate,’ whether positively or negatively tinged — a vague and generalised sense of trust in

distant events over which one has no control.” The second possible response is “*sustained optimism*, which is essentially the persistence of the attitudes of the Enlightenment, a continued faith in providential reason in spite of whatever dangers threaten at the current time.” The final possible stance is “*radical engagement*” by which Giddens means “an attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger. . . . Its prime vehicle is the social movement (133, 136, 137). Aurobindo seems to have taken the stance of “*radical engagement*” in confronting the risks of war. Aurobindo said that it is difficult to think about eliminating war with all nations creating huge cadres of military personnel and amassing more and more weapons:

War can only be abolished if national armies are abolished and even then with difficulty, by the development of some other machinery which humanity does not yet know how to form or, even if formed, will not for some time be able or willing perfectly to utilise. And there is no chance of national armies being abolished; for each nation distrusts all the others too much, has too many ambitions and hungers, needs to remain armed, if for nothing else, to guard its markets and keep down its dominions, colonies, subject peoples. (*Human Cycle* 389)

When Aurobindo mentions the negative attributes of the idea of the nation, he conditions his earlier aspirational notions of the nation and punctuates it with

a more realistic understanding of the workings of the State. Here, the State is being presented as an entity which is necessarily violent in nature. It is ironical that the trust of individuals in what Giddens calls “disembedding mechanisms” far surpasses their trust in other human beings. Giddens discusses two kinds of disembedding mechanisms — one he calls “*symbolic tokens*” and the other “*expert systems*”. He defines symbolic tokens as “media of interchange which can be ‘passed around’ without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture.” He gives money as an example for symbolic tokens (22). Expert systems are defined as “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today” (27). A car is an expert system which we use even when our knowledge of its working is minimal (28). The peculiarity of the trust reposed upon these disembedding mechanisms “rests upon faith in the correctness of principles of which one is ignorant, not upon faith in the ‘moral uprightness’ (good intentions) of others” (33-34). Aurobindo illustrated how the trust that capitalism would put an end to wars was in vain:

One of the illusions incidental to this great hope is the expectation of the passing of war. This grand event in human progress is always being confidently expected and since we are now all scientific minds and rational beings, we no longer expect it by a divine intervention, but assign sound physical and

economic reasons for the faith that is in us. The first form taken by this new gospel was the expectation and the prophecy that the extension of commerce would be the extinction of war. Commercialism was the natural enemy of militarism and would drive it from the face of the earth. The growing and universal lust of gold and the habit of comfort and the necessities of increased production and intricate interchange would crush out the lust of power and dominion and glory and battle. Gold-hunger or commodity-hunger would drive out earth-hunger, the dharma of the Vaishya would set its foot on the dharma of the Kshatriya and give it its painless quietus. The ironic reply of the gods has not been long in coming. Actually this very reign of commercialism, this increase of production and interchange, this desire for commodities and markets and this piling up of a huge burden of unnecessary necessities has been the cause of half the wars that have since afflicted the human race. (*Human Cycle* 607)

This hope that the risk of war will go away is either “*fortuna*” or “*sustained optimism*.” However, without any “*radical engagement*” war is not likely to disappear. Aurobindo said that commercialism instead of leading war to extinction made it worse. Giddens observed that “there are direct relations between military power and industrialism, one main expression of which is

the industrialisation of war.” Further, he also said that “clear connections may be established between industrialism and capitalism” (*Consequences* 60). Nevertheless, Giddens argued that the disembedding systems of capitalism have their “reembedding” features too: “The very means of transportation which help to dissolve the connection between locality and kinship provide the possibility for reembedding, by making it easy to visit "close" relatives who are far away” (142). However, Giddens chose to ignore that it was the disembedding systems which were responsible for keeping the “close” relatives “far.”

It was also thought that wars were caused by the acrimonious kings who wanted to perpetually extend their kingdoms. Therefore it was hoped that the coming in of democracy would put an end to wars. Aurobindo noted that such hope remained wishful thinking:

Another illusion was that the growth of democracy would mean the growth of pacifism and the end of war. It was fondly thought that wars are in their nature dynastic and aristocratic; greedy kings and martial nobles driven by earth-hunger and battle-hunger, diplomatists playing at chess with the lives of men and the fortunes of nations, these were the guilty causes of war who drove the unfortunate peoples to the battle-field like sheep to the shambles. (*Human Cycle* 607)

The feeling of helplessness of the common man in averting war is indicated by their being led to wars like “sheep to shambles.” The response of the common man in times of advanced modernity is even more complex. As Giddens observed: “Balanced against the deep anxieties which such circumstances must produce in virtually everyone is the psychological prop of the feeling that ‘there's nothing that I as an individual can do,’ and that at any rate the risk must be very slight” (*Consequences* 147). The individual is unable to measure the magnitude of the risk because that the nature of the expert systems s/he encounters requires no such knowledge. This is as true of interactions of daily routine as well as of matters of colossal proportions as such ignorance is a major requirement for modern existence: “Business-as-usual, as I have pointed out, is a prime element in the stabilising of trust and ontological security, and this no doubt applies in respect of high-consequence risks just as it does in other areas of trust relations” (147). Though an exposure to risk need not always create awareness of it, personal or reported experience of failure of expert systems can create panic.

The growth of science and technology contributed to the creation of a world population which lives in constant fear of not just widespread calamity but extinction. O’Byrne observed that “Concern for the global ecological balance might be read as the flip side of the increasing technological advances associated with modernity, and a critical theorist might understand it as an awareness of the consequences of science ‘out of control’, the onset of a ‘risk

society” (209). Giddens calls this “manufactured risk,” in the sense that it was created by human beings as opposed to natural calamities in the past causes of which could not be traced to humans. Giddens says: “Manufactured risk is risk created by the very progression of human development, especially by the progression of science and technology. Manufactured risk refers to new risk environments for which history provides us with very little previous experience” (“Risk” 4). What makes such risks problematic is that “[w]e often don’t really know what the risks are, let alone how to calculate them accurately in terms of probability tables” (4). Aurobindo said that it was even hoped that the development of Science would make wars a thing of the past:

Science was to bring war to an end by making it physically impossible. It was mathematically proved that with modern weapons two equal armies would fight each other to a standstill, attack would become impossible except by numbers thrice those of the defence and war therefore would bring no military decision but only an infructuous upheaval and disturbance of the organised life of the nations. (*Human Cycle* 609)

However, it remains a fact that instead of eliminating war, science brought into being new methods of war and developed deadly weapons of mass destruction. Aurobindo remarked that unless the State decide to give up and destroy arms and armaments, the threat of war will continue to loom large on the horizon:

For so long as strong national egoisms of any kind remained and along with them mutual distrust, the nations would not sacrifice their possession of an armed force on which they could rely for self-defence if their interests, or at least those that they considered essential to their prosperity and their existence, came to be threatened. Any distrust of the assured impartiality of the international government would operate in the same direction. Yet such a disarmament would be essential to the assured cessation of war — in the absence of some great and radical psychological and moral change. If national armies exist, the possibility, even the certainty of war will exist along with them.

(Human Cycle 483)

An elimination of weapons of mass destruction is no assurance of the end of the threat of war since the means to recreate them would still exist. Giddens suggested that the “continued fusion of science and weapons technology” can produce weapons which are as devastating as nuclear weaponry

(Consequences 172-73).

Aurobindo held the opinion that instead of exploring physical methods of eliminating war, there should be efforts to prevent wars by bringing about a change in the mindset of peoples:

So long as war does not become psychologically impossible, it will remain or, if banished for a while, return. War itself, it is hoped, will end war; the expense, the horror, the butchery, the disturbance of tranquil life, the whole confused sanguinary madness of the thing has reached or will reach such colossal proportions that the human race will fling the monstrosity behind it in weariness and disgust. (*Human Cycle* 610)

The two World Wars resulted in such a realization that war itself leads to more wars instead of anywhere near ending war. So it became necessary for humanity across nations to find out some means of getting rid of wars.

O'Byrne observes:

After the Second World War, I have argued, a new consciousness was emerging which was closely tied to changes in the political and economic system at the time. The threat of nuclear destruction, the emergence of ecological concern, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the general desire to rebuild the world in the form of a peaceful social order, all contributed to this consciousness. Globality — this awareness of the world as a site of social action and willingness to act upon it — is thus more than a simple world-view; it is a programme for action. (102)

The possibility of nuclear or ecological disasters is an eventuality for which nation-states have no defence against. Hence, this growing consciousness of “Globality” calls to look beyond nations and create a fraternity of human beings against war. Aurobindo observed that as long as the mindset of human beings across the globe remained belligerent, eliminating wars shall remain a mirage in spite of all physical efforts to avert them:

A long peace, even a certain organisation of peace may conceivably result, but so long as the heart of man remains what it is, the peace will come to an end, the organisation will break down under the stress of human passions. War is no longer, perhaps, a biological necessity, but it is still a psychological necessity; what is within us, must manifest itself outside.

(Human Cycle 611)

Giddens also observed that the necessity of wars was coming down given the global scenario of increasing military expenses and the futility of “territorial aggrandisement.” Therefore he expected that there must be “a strong element of realism in the anticipation of a world without war” and that “a world without war is clearly utopian, but is by no means wholly lacking in realism” (*Consequences 169*).

The Ideal of World Union

In the aftermath of the World Wars, there were attempts to bring

together nations into associations to avoid further conflicts, first in the form of the League of Nations and later as the United Nations Organization. Aurobindo observed that such organizations, even as they faltered, contributed to the possibility of thinking beyond the nation-state:

It was not happy in its conception, well-inspired in its formation or destined to any considerable longevity or a supremely successful career. But that such an organised endeavour should be launched at all and proceed on its way for some time without an early breakdown was in itself an event of capital importance and meant the initiation of a new era in world history; especially, it was an initiative which, even if it failed, could not be allowed to remain without a sequel but had to be taken up again until a successful solution has safeguarded the future of mankind, not only against continued disorder and lethal peril but against destructive possibilities which could easily prepare the collapse of civilisation and perhaps eventually something even that could be described as the suicide of the human race. Accordingly, the League of Nations disappeared but was replaced by the United Nations Organisation which now stands in the forefront of the world and struggles towards some kind of secure permanence and success in the great and far-reaching

endeavour on which depends the world's future. (*Human Cycle* 579)

The limitations of League of Nations in the past and the United Nations Organization today are that such organizations work within the ambit of the nation-states which are its members. O'Byrne remarked that such organizations do not consider that "that the nation-state system itself is not only largely redundant, but can be held responsible for many of the problems which are now of concern" (17). Aurobindo suggested that the institution of the Nation needs to modify itself so that a World Union can come in its place:

On the other hand, in a free world-union, though originally starting from the national basis, the national idea might be expected to undergo a radical transformation; it might even disappear into a new and less strenuously compact form and idea of group-aggregation which would not be separative in spirit, yet would preserve the necessary element of independence and variation needed by both individual and grouping for their full satisfaction and their healthy existence. Moreover, by emphasising the psychological quite as much as the political and mechanical idea and basis, it would give a freer and less artificial form and opportunity for the secure development of the necessary intellectual and psychological

change; for such an inner change could alone give some chance of durability to the unification. That change would be the growth of the living idea or religion of humanity; for only so could there come the psychological modification of life and feeling and outlook which would accustom both individual and group to live in their common humanity first and most, subduing their individual and group egoism, yet losing nothing of their individual or group power to develop and express in its own way the divinity in man which, once the race was assured of its material existence, would emerge as the true object of human existence. (*Human Cycle* 547)

Here, Aurobindo attempts to express his vision of a world union, though not modelled in the form of a nation-state. Rather, it could be called a state-nation, a loose conglomeration of States which have a free existence preserving their heterogeneity. Aurobindo commented that an aggregation vaster than a nation was always possible, but it got thwarted every time by possessive tendencies:

The central question is whether the nation, the largest natural unit which humanity has been able to create and maintain for its collective living, is also its last and ultimate unit or whether a greater aggregate can be formed which will englobe many and

even most nations and finally all in its united totality. The impulse to build more largely, the push towards the creation of considerable and even very vast supra-national aggregates has not been wanting; it has even been a permanent feature in the life-instincts of the race. But the form it took was the desire of a strong nation for mastery over others, permanent possession of their territories, subjugation of their peoples, exploitation of their resources: there was also an attempt at quasi-assimilation, an imposition of the culture of a dominant race and, in general, a system of absorption wholesale or as complete as possible.

(Human Cycle 587)

Here, Aurobindo accuses imperialist tendencies for having occluded the possibility of such a world union. After the decline of colonialism, such a world union is probable, especially in the light of the excessive parochialism of the nation-state. However, Giddens avers that such a World Union may not happen in the near future because of a variety of reasons:

As the European state system matures and later becomes a global nation-state system, patterns of inter-dependence become increasingly developed. These are not only expressed in the ties states form with one another in the international arena, but in the burgeoning of inter-governmental organisations. These

processes mark an overall movement towards “one world,” although they are continually fractured by war. Nation-states, it is held, are becoming progressively less sovereign than they used to be in terms of control over their own affairs — although few today anticipate in the near future the emergence of the “world-state” which many in the early part of this century foresaw as a real prospect. (*Consequences* 66)

Giddens goes on to add that “greater concentration of administrative power in nation-state” has not decreased its sovereignty, but rather increased it in most cases (66). Hence, it is somewhat far-fetched to expect that these nation-states would give up their sovereignties for a larger world unity. Aurobindo too acknowledges that such a transition may not be practicable at the moment, but that is not to say that it would never happen:

We can find no safe conclusion upon the immediate impracticability of its creation or on the many difficulties which would stand in its way; for past experience shows that the argument of impracticability is of very little value. What the practical man of today denies as absurd and impracticable is often enough precisely the thing that future generations set about realising and eventually in some form or other succeed in bringing into effective existence. (*Human Cycle* 465)

The concept of the nation too was an idea which was considered impracticable and even dangerous in the hey-day of colonialism. However, it was the same colonialism which necessitated and engendered the conception and formation of the nation. Aurobindo avers that just as the idea of the nation was perforce created into existence, a world union too can come into being when the necessary elements come together:

For the nation too was at first more or less artificially formed out of incoherent elements actually brought together by the necessity of a subconscious idea, though apparently it was done only by physical force and the force of circumstances. As a national ego formed which identified itself with the geographical body of the nation and developed in it the psychological instinct of national unity and the need of its satisfaction, so a collective human ego will develop in the international body and will evolve in it the psychological instinct of human unity and the need of its satisfaction. (*Human Cycle 558*)

Such a “collective human ego” suggested by Aurobindo has now developed in an abstract form because of the effects of globalisation. O’Byrne observes: “there has been a long-term evolution of global culture over the past few hundred years, and a major increase in global awareness during the past 25

years, which is linked specifically to the proliferation of communication; the ‘global village’” (70). Describing his concept of “time-space distancing,” Giddens says that “In the modern era, the level of time-space distancing is much higher than in any previous period, and the relations between local and distant social forms and events become correspondingly ‘stretched’” (*Consequences* 64). The famous media intellectual Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1962 that “[t]he new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village” (31). Today, the time-space distancing is even greater than the world gets recreated in the form of a global room. Though none of these were a possibility in Aurobindo’s times, similar ideas were voiced by him when he wrote about the coming together of cultures of the world:

The impact of different cultures upon each other has not ceased but has rather been accentuated by the conditions of the modern world. But the nature of the impact, the ends towards which it moves and the means by which the ends can most successfully be worked out, are profoundly altered. The earth is in travail now of one common, large and flexible civilisation for the whole human race into which each modern and ancient culture shall bring its contribution and each clearly defined human aggregate shall introduce its necessary element of variation. (*Human Cycle* 319)

Aurobindo says that bringing the different cultures of the world together would not destroy the “principle of variation” and make them a homogeneous whole. O’Byrne also noted: “Globalization, by its very nature, is pluralistic. Global exchanges may be unequal, but there is at least some reciprocity. The globalized world is not a world of homogeneity, but of difference” (126). Though such situation did not exist a few decades ago, it indicates the further probability of the World Union envisioned by Aurobindo. Aurobindo said that before such a human unity comes into existence, it is necessary to define the nature of such a unity:

The first question, then, that we have to consider is what this reality may be which it is intended to create in the form of a federal empire; and especially we have to consider whether it is to be merely an enlargement of the nation-type, the largest successful human aggregate yet evolved by Nature, or a new type of aggregate which is to exceed and must tend to supersede the nation, as that has replaced the tribe, the clan and the city or regional state. (*Human Cycle* 323)

O’Byrne noted that the idea of such a federal unification of the world could have been first suggested by Aristotle: “That this might have meant a world empire under Alexander does not detract from the possibility that Aristotle held a belief in what is now referred to as world federalism” (69). Aurobindo

goes on to suggest that the world union formed shall have such a federal character offering enough space for the free internal development of its constituent units:

The most natural simplification of the problem, though not one that looks now possible, would be the division of the world into a few imperial aggregates consisting partly of federal, partly of confederate commonwealths or empires. Although unrealisable with the present strength of national egoisms, the growth of ideas and the force of changing circumstances might some day bring about such a creation and this might lead to a closer confederacy. (*Human Cycle* 401)

O'Byrne agrees that such a federal union will have challenges as national identities may be so ingrained in cultures that they deny the possibility of a total global consciousness (70). However, Aurobindo did not suggest that the nation-states would cease to exist with the formation of such a federal union of the world. He envisioned that such a federal confederation would ensure "the preservation of the national basis and a greater or less freedom of national life, but the subordination of the separate national to the larger common interests and of full separate freedom to the greater international necessities" (575). O'Byrne's opinion also matches that of Aurobindo when he noted: "Such a view of the world order does not require the dismantling of

nation-states in favour of a world government, but of world governance based around the direct relationship between the individual and the globe, as well as between the individual and the nation-state” (70). Since the State idea has already demonstrated how the totalitarianism of the State imposes itself on the individual, Aurobindo warned that such a world unity should not be created on the lines of the nature of the State:

But, as far as all present appearances go to show, we are entering into a period in which the ideal of individual liberty is destined to an entire eclipse under the shadow of the State idea, if not to a sort of temporary death or at least of long stupor, coma and hibernation. The constriction and mechanisation of the unifying process is likely to coincide with a simultaneous process of constriction and mechanisation within each constituting unit. (*Human Cycle* 410)

The collapse of individual freedom of the citizen seems to have become complete now, with the authority of the nation-state reaching a state of saturation in the context of modernity. In the next stage of modernity, the concept of citizenship acquires new dimensions. As Gerard Delanty observes: “The concept of citizenship has been disembedded from national societies; it is no longer equated with the condition of nationality, that is, membership of a particular national polity, and may even be in tension with it” (x). However,

when Aurobindo wrote this a few decades ago, the nation-state had not begun to show signs of disintegration. Aurobindo considered freedom of the individual and freedom of the society to be mutually complementary so that restriction of one leads to an automatic decline of the other:

But freedom is as necessary to life as law and regime; diversity is as necessary as unity to our true completeness. Existence is one only in its essence and totality, in its play it is necessarily multiform. Absolute uniformity would mean the cessation of life, while on the other hand the vigour of the pulse of life may be measured by the richness of the diversities which it creates. At the same time, while diversity is essential for power and fruitfulness of life, unity is necessary for its order, arrangement and stability. Unity we must create, but not necessarily uniformity. If man could realise a perfect spiritual unity, no sort of uniformity would be necessary; for the utmost play of diversity would be securely possible on that foundation.

(Human Cycle 423)

Here, Aurobindo emphasises the need for maintaining the heterogeneous nature of society so that its progress is not stultified. A spiritual unity, as suggested by Aurobindo, demands no uniformity among mankind and respects differences. As observed by O'Byrne, "Human rights are required

because of the dangerous potential that exists for not respecting difference” (63). Thus, the world unity envisaged by Aurobindo is a free grouping without the dominance of any units which form the whole:

In principle, then, the ideal unification of mankind would be a system in which, as a first rule of common and harmonious life, the human peoples would be allowed to form their own groupings according to their natural divisions of locality, race, culture, economic convenience and not according to the more violent accidents of history or the egoistic will of powerful nations whose policy it must always be to compel the smaller or less timely organised to serve their interests as dependents or obey their commands as subjects. (*Human Cycle* 428)

However, according to O’Byrne, citizenship need not be territorially restricted and transnational citizenships have existed even before the formation of nation-states. O’Byrne calls it “non-modern citizenship” and says that such citizenship continue to exist parallel to modern citizenship of the nation-state (12). Aurobindo also points out the possibility of creation of such transnational identities, though he does not term it as citizenships: “A tendency to large homogeneous aggregations has shown itself recently in political thought, as in the dream of a Pan-Germanic empire, a great Russian and Pan-Slavic empire or the Pan-Islamic idea of a united Mahomedan world”

(*Human Cycle* 313). Aurobindo's suggestion to base such groupings on no considerations of "violent accidents of history" is obviously a reference to the impact of colonialism which contributed to the creation of the nation-state. Since the problems of the nation-state were already becoming visible, Aurobindo urged: "The first principle of human unity, groupings being necessary, should be a system of free and natural groupings which would leave no room for internal discords, mutual incompatibilities and repression and revolt as between race and race or people and people" (*Human Cycle* 429).

Aurobindo had seen nationalism as a major force towards the efforts of decolonization. It is significant that the later Aurobindo sees national and imperial ego to be a major hindrance towards the formation of the world unity:

National and imperial egoism is the first and most powerful of the contrary forces. To give up the instinct of domination and the desire still to be rulers and supreme where rule and supremacy have been the reward of past efforts, to sacrifice the advantages of a commercial exploitation of dependencies and colonies which can only be assured by the confirmation of dominance and supremacy, to face disinterestedly the emergence into free national activity of vigorous and sometimes enormous masses of men, once subjects and passive means of

self-enrichment but henceforth to be powerful equals and perhaps formidable rivals, is too great a demand upon egoistic human nature to be easily and spontaneously conceded where concession is not forced upon the mind by actual necessity or the hope of some great and palpable gain that will compensate the immediate and visible loss. There is, too, the claim of Europe, not yet renounced, to hold the rest of the world in the interests of civilisation, by which is meant European civilisation, and to insist upon its acceptance as a condition for the admission of Asiatic races to any kind of equality or freedom. This claim which is destined soon to lose all its force in Asia, has still a strong justification in the actual state of the African continent. (*Human Cycle* 435-36)

Here, Aurobindo does not reject the relevance of the nation; rather he conditionally accepts the idea of the nation in the prospect of a larger world-union. The distinction that Habermas made between “system” and “lifeworld” is relevant here. O’Byrne remarked: “The emergence and subsequent dominance of the nation-state system and its associated form of citizenship forms part of the former project, while the development of human rights is associated with the latter” (15). The “national and imperial egoism” referred to by Aurobindo would stand for the “system” and the world unity and the associated freedom of the individual would represent the “lifeworld.”

O'Byrne noted that "These two projects conflict, such that the very assertion that one can be a citizen of the world is necessarily a challenge to the hegemony of the system" (15). The change from the times of Aurobindo is that the "claim of Europe" has transformed to "claim of the nation-state" in the context of modernity. O'Byrne added that this "corresponds to what Habermas refers to as the 'colonization of the lifeworld' by the system" (15). Today, in the scenario of globalization, the more important hindrance towards such a world unity seems to be the increasing sovereignty of nation-states. Aurobindo's view of nationalism as detrimental to human unity has more to do with the changing nature of nationalism itself than with any essential change of thought in Aurobindo. As Partha Chatterjee observed:

In the 1950s and 1960s, nationalism was still regarded as a feature of the victorious anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa. . . . By the 1970s, nationalism had become a matter of ethnic politics, the reason why people in the Third World killed each other – sometimes in wars between regular armies, sometimes, more distressingly, in cruel and often protracted civil wars, and increasingly, it seemed, by technologically sophisticated and virtually unstoppable acts of terrorism.

(Nation 3)

Here, Chatterjee delineates the manner in which nationalism as an ideal against colonialism later deteriorated to all sorts of fundamentalism including

ethnic, religious, political, ideological and so on. It would not be an observation far off the mark if it is contended that terrorism, which is a matter of global concern today, has been begotten by nationalism. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar discuss whether this would threaten the continued existence of the nation-state:

The nation-state, while far from being in decline, is no longer the only principle of societal organization. Under the conditions of globalization there are many other contenders and challenges to national sovereignty other than the demands of other states. This has had a huge impact on nationalism, the resurgence of which can be linked to the turbulence of the nation-state and the ever-changing global context. Many kinds of nationalism are products of transnationalism. A particularly contemporary example of this is Islamic nationalism. In the countries where it has taken root it has been because of global forces. The political community in question is one shaped by the global imaginary of a trans-civilizational diaspora rather than by a particular aspiration for a bounded territorial state. It is a stateless kind of nationalism and indeed one that is often anti-statist. (2)

This “resurgence” of nationalisms in various forms would obviously affect the sovereignty of the nation-state. O’Byrne observed that after the Second World

War, the prominence of the nation-state had started to decline. This could have been largely because of the insecurity demonstrated by the war which contrasted with the ideal of security the nation-state stands for. O'Byrne said: "Post-war events have served to heighten our sense of globality — that is, our appreciation of, and relationship with, the world as a single place" (16). Aurobindo asserted that the subordination to the nation-state would eventually graduate to a universalism which would overcome the limitations imposed by the nation-state:

Modern collectivism derives its victorious strength from the impression made upon human thought by this opposite aspect of modern knowledge. We have seen how the German mind took up both these ideas and combined them on the basis of the present facts of human life: it affirmed the entire subordination of the individual to the community, nation or State; it affirmed, on the other hand, with equal force the egoistic self-assertion of the individual nation as against others or against any group or all the groups of nations which constitute the totality of the human race.

But behind this conflict between the idea of a nationalistic and imperialistic egoism and the old individualistic doctrine of individual and national liberty and separateness, there is striving to arise a new idea of human universalism or collectivism for

the race which, if it succeeds in becoming a power, is likely to overcome the ideal of national separatism and liberty as it has overcome within the society itself the ideal of individual freedom and separate self-fulfilment. This new idea demands of the nation that it shall subordinate, if not merge and sacrifice, its free separateness to the life of a larger collectivity, whether that of an imperialistic group or a continental or cultural unity, as in the idea of a united Europe, or the total united life of the human race. (*Human Cycle 57*)

O’Byrne’s concept of “Global Citizenship” is similar to Aurobindo’s idea of “human universalism or collectivism.” O’Byrne remarked that it is quite different from the nation-state idea in that “it is far removed from the contractarian assumptions of the nation- state model, but also distinct from the types of world citizenship which relied either upon abstract, ideal notions of human rights, or on the formation of a world federation” (112). In such a model of world federation, there is no subordination of the individual as there is no superordinating mechanism. However, Aurobindo felt that even if the nation-state yielded to an idea of a world union, nationalistic feelings would be the more difficult to overcome:

The present obstacle to any such extreme consummation is the still strong principle of nationalism, the sense of group

separateness, the instinct of collective independence, its pride, its pleasure in itself, its various sources of egoistic self-satisfaction, its insistence on the subordination of the human idea to the national idea. But we are supposing that the new-born idea of internationalism will grow apace, subject to itself the past idea and temper of nationalism, become dominant and take possession of the human mind. As the larger nation-group has subordinated to itself and tended to absorb all smaller clan, tribal and regional groups, as the larger empire-group now tends to subordinate and might, if allowed to develop, eventually absorb the smaller nation-groups, we are supposing that the complete human group of united mankind will subordinate to itself in the same way and eventually absorb all smaller groups of separated humanity. It is only by a growth of the international idea, the idea of a single humanity, that nationalism can disappear, if the old natural device of an external unification by conquest or other compulsive force continues to be no longer possible; for the methods of war have become too disastrous and no single empire has the means and the strength to overcome, whether rapidly or in the gradual Roman way, the rest of the world. Undoubtedly, nationalism is a more powerful obstacle to farther unification than was the separativeness of the

old pettier and less firmly self-conscious groupings which preceded the developed nation-State. It is still the most powerful sentiment in the collective human mind, still gives an indestructible vitality to the nation and is apt to reappear even where it seemed to have been abolished. But we cannot argue safely from the present balance of tendencies in the beginning of a great era of transitions. (*Human Cycle* 496)

When Aurobindo suggests that nationalism should “disappear,” it should not be construed as a call for the dissolution of the concept of the nation. Rather, Aurobindo envisaged the nation to be a constituent unit for the larger world unity for which the ideal of nationalism should create no barriers. O’Byrne observes: “Stereotypical assumptions of an ‘authentic’ national culture, which might have been held by previous generations, and which reflected the need for nation-building and national identity, are challenged by an appreciation for cultural diversity both between and within nation-states” (151). Aurobindo suggested that if nationalistic feelings can be transcended to a universalist feeling, a world union would not be impossible:

The problem would be simpler if we could suppose the difficulties created by conflicting national temperaments, interests and cultures to be either eliminated or successfully subordinated and minimised by the depression of separative nationalistic feeling and the growth of a cosmopolitan

internationalism. That solution is not altogether impossible in spite of the serious check to internationalism and the strong growth of nationalistic feeling developed by the world war. (*Human Cycle* 470)

Aurobindo here refers to the First World War which had accentuated nationalistic feelings primarily because of the hostility towards enemy nations. However the war had also made the destitute nations feel insecure in the institution of the State. So the war should not be a serious impediment towards the formation of a world unity.

Aurobindo emphasised that the world union should focus on liberty and heterogeneity in all its internal interactions:

But uniformity is not the law of life. Life exists by diversity; it insists that every group, every being shall be, even while one with all the rest in its universality, yet by some principle or ordered detail of variation unique. The over-centralisation which is the condition of a working uniformity, is not the healthy method of life. Order is indeed the law of life, but not an artificial regulation. The sound order is that which comes from within as the result of a nature that has discovered itself and found its own law and the law of its relations with others. Therefore the truest order is that which is founded on the

greatest possible liberty; for liberty is at once the condition of vigorous variation and the condition of self-finding. Nature secures variation by division into groups and insists on liberty by the force of individuality in the members of the group. Therefore the unity of the human race to be entirely sound and in consonance with the deepest laws of life must be founded on free groupings, and the groupings again must be the natural association of free individuals. (*Human Cycle* 513)

Here, Aurobindo urges to do away with any centralized agency which shall arbitrarily decide the nature of groupings in the world-union. The freedom for finding commonalities and to form associations shall be vested with the individual in the world-union. Aurobindo felt that the progress and development brought about by Western modernity, especially with the overarching influence of science would be helpful in forging an international union:

There are many conditions and tendencies in human life at present which are favourable to the progress of the internationalist idea. The strongest of these favourable forces is the constant drawing closer of the knots of international life, the multiplication of points of contact and threads of communication and an increasing community in thought, in

science and in knowledge. Science especially has been a great force in this direction; for science is a thing common to all men in its conclusions, open to all in its methods, available to all in its results: it is international in its very nature; there can be no such thing as a national science, but only the nations' contributions to the work and growth of science which are the indivisible inheritance of all humanity. Therefore it is easier for men of science or those strongly influenced by science to grow into the international spirit and all the world is now beginning to feel the scientific influence and to live in it. Science also has created that closer contact of every part of the world with every other part, out of which some sort of international mind is growing. (*Human Cycle* 550-51)

The “conditions and tendencies” which bring the world together that Aurobindo described many decades ago have today taken the form of globalization: “Globalized conditions allow for a delinking of system and lifeworld at various levels” (O’Byrne 122). The “system” described here corresponds to the nation-state and its machinery while the “lifeworld” describes the egreore of individuals spread across the world. O’Byrne clarifies it further: “At the macro-level, they make possible a separation of nation and state which allows for social and cultural identity to roam freely (or relatively freely) beyond the limitations imposed upon it by earlier

conditions dominated by nation-states” (122). Aurobindo exhorted that it was time that the spirit of nationalism modified and grew into internationalism. He defined internationalism as “the attempt of the human mind and life to grow out of the national idea and form and even in a way to destroy it in the interest of the larger synthesis of mankind” (*Human Cycle* 548).

The Religion of Humanity

When discussing nationalism, Aurobindo had called it a religion and exhorted the people of the land to follow it (*Bande Mataram II* 818). Later, as he attempted to transcend nationalism, he called this new spirit of internationalism “the religion of humanity”:

A religion of humanity may be either an intellectual and sentimental ideal, a living dogma with intellectual, psychological and practical effects, or else a spiritual aspiration and rule of living, partly the sign, partly the cause of a change of soul in humanity. The intellectual religion of humanity already to a certain extent exists, partly as a conscious creed in the minds of a few, partly as a potent shadow in the consciousness of the race. It is the shadow of a spirit that is yet unborn, but is preparing for its birth. (*Human Cycle* 564)

However, such a religion of humanity exists just as an intellectual idea and not as a practical reality. Aurobindo’s religion of humanity is similar to the

concept of world citizenship. O'Byrne calls world citizenship an "emancipatory political project" and describes it as follows:

A sense of world-belonging might be understood, from within an idealist perspective, as part of a process whereby a citizen, through interaction with citizens of other nations, peoples of other cultures, and so on, is able to achieve a fuller understanding of the social world, and from that attain self-actualization and emancipation. (59)

Aurobindo goes on to give a detailed description of his idea of the religion of humanity, which he considered to be above the institutions of Science or State:

Science even, though it is one of the chief modern idols, must not be allowed to make claims contrary to its ethical temperament and aim, for science is only valuable in so far as it helps and serves by knowledge and progress the religion of humanity. War, capital punishment, the taking of human life, cruelty of all kinds whether committed by the individual, the State or society, not only physical cruelty, but moral cruelty, the degradation of any human being or any class of human beings under whatever specious plea or in whatever interest, the oppression and exploitation of man by man, of class by class, of

nation by nation and all those habits of life and institutions of society of a similar kind which religion and ethics formerly tolerated or even favoured in practice, whatever they might do in their ideal rule or creed, are crimes against the religion of humanity, abominable to its ethical mind, forbidden by its primary tenets, to be fought against always, in no degree to be tolerated. Man must be sacred to man regardless of all distinctions of race, creed, colour, nationality, status, political or social advancement. The body of man is to be respected, made immune from violence and outrage, fortified by science against disease and preventable death. The life of man is to be held sacred, preserved, strengthened, ennobled, uplifted. The heart of man is to be held sacred also, given scope, protected from violation, from suppression, from mechanisation, freed from belittling influences. The mind of man is to be released from all bonds, allowed freedom and range and opportunity, given all its means of self-training and self-development and organised in the play of its powers for the service of humanity. And all this too is not to be held as an abstract or pious sentiment, but given full and practical recognition in the persons of men and nations and mankind. This, speaking largely, is the idea and spirit of the intellectual religion of humanity. (*Human Cycle* 565-66)

While speaking about such a religion of humanity, Aurobindo was probably influenced by the positivism and religion of humanity of Auguste Comte. Comte believed that humanity should take the central place in all discourses. As Andrew Wernick observes, “Comte's manner of deifying Humanity, together with his bio-social understanding of that category, redefined the transcendental signified at the centre of belief . . .” (210). Sri Aurobindo’s ideal of the religion of humanity resembles the teachings of the saint from Kerala, Sri Narayana Guru. In his brief treatise on casteism titled “*Jatinirnayam*,” Narayana Guru wrote: “ഒരു ജാതി ഒരു മതം ഒരു ദൈവം മനുഷ്യൻ / ഒരു യോനിയൊരാകാരമൊരു ഭേദവുമില്ലതിൽ” (*Sri Narayana* 403). One of his foremost disciples, Nataraja Guru translated it thus: “One in kind, one in faith, one in God is man, / Of one same womb, one same form, / Difference none there is at all” (4). Narayana Guru, in a sense, inaugurated Kerala modernity by breaking free from the traditional clutches of casteism and opening the knowledge of *Vedanta*¹⁷ to the common man. As Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella observed:

What was novel in early twentieth-century Kerala was Narayana Guru’s re-interpretation of *jati* as biological species and his appeal to rational scientific empiricism, using modernist frames

17 Hindu philosophy based on the doctrine of the Upanishads, especially in its monistic form.

of discourse which were becoming widespread through new forms of education and the huge expansion of print media. (224)

It is worthwhile to note that “[f]or Narayana Guru, the scientifically identifiable *jati* was *manushyajati*, the species of humankind, and no human being could be ‘other’ to another” (Osella and Osella 260). Guru’s efforts to bring about equality among people in society by fighting against casteism have direct relations with what Giddens calls “emancipatory politics” or “politics of inequality.” Giddens defines emancipatory politics as “radical engagements concerned with the liberation from inequality or servitude” (*Consequences* 156). Narayana Guru’s efforts in such emancipation was not only bolstered by his deep knowledge of *Vedanta*, but augmented too by his unique ability to simplify it for the easy comprehension of common people:

‘What we have to say is what Sankara said’, he once informed the writer, as if to guide him directly in his enquiries about the correct place of the Guru's teaching. In the Guru Narayana the same Advaita Vedanta is treated with a freshness often startlingly unique and simple, taking into its scope and purview more consciously and wakefully, not merely subjective idealistic verities, but also all those secondary implications that Vedanta has, or can have, bearing on such human topics as equality and justice. (Nataraja Guru 61)

Sri Narayana Guru's assertion that he preaches the same *Advaita*¹⁸ of Sri Sankara is a huge understatement that marks his humility of purporting no claims to novelty. When Sankara meant the absence of difference between the Ultimate essence and the human essence by his *Advaita*, Narayana Guru's *Advaita* was more humanist in nature proclaiming absence of difference between man and man:

ഗണനയിൽനിന്നു കവിഞ്ഞതൊന്നു സാധാ-
 രണമിവ രൂപമൊഴിഞ്ഞൊരനന്യരൂപം
 നിനവിലുമില്ലതു നിദ്രയിങ്കലും മേ-
 ലിനനഗരത്തിലുമെങ്ങുമില്ല നൂനം. (*Atmopadesa Satakam* 152)

Nataraja Guru brings out the idea of this verse in his biography of Narayana Guru:

Beyond all count is One -
 Then the common reality here.
 Than these two besides – no form
 There can be, nor in memory, in sleep,
 In that city on high,
 Nor anywhere else, indeed! (62)

In yet another verse in *Atmopadesa Satakam*, Narayana Guru introduces his

18 A Vedantic doctrine that identifies the individual self (atman) with the Ultimate (brahman).

idea of *Abheda*¹⁹, which is similar to Sankara's *Advaita*:

വെളിയിലിരുന്നു വിവർത്തമിങ്ങു കാണും
 വെളിമുതലായ വിഭൂതിയഞ്ചുമോർത്താൽ
 ജലനിധിതന്നിലുയർന്നീടും തരംഗാ-
 വലിയതുപോലെയാദേദമായ് വരണം. (24)

As we contemplate on the five elements
 Sitting and watching the created apparent
 Must be experienced as non-different
 As the waves rising continuous upon the sea. (my trans.)

Here, Guru says that though the waves of the sea may appear to be different from the sea, they are essentially no different from the sea. He calls for such an understanding of *Abheda*, non-difference, in the perception of all created things that we see around. Aurobindo's idea of the "religion of humanity" takes cognizance of such an idea of undifferentiation among peoples from different parts of the world. For Aurobindo, the religion of humanity does not strive to destroy the other religions, but demands of them that they too consider the divinity enshrined in the human being:

For that essentially must be the aim of the religion of humanity,
 as it must be the earthly aim of all human religion, love, mutual
 recognition of human brotherhood, a living sense of human

oneness and practice of human oneness in thought, feeling and life, the ideal which was expressed first some thousands of years ago in the ancient Vedic hymn and must always remain the highest injunction of the Spirit within us to human life upon earth. Till that is brought about, the religion of humanity remains unaccomplished. (*Human Cycle* 568)

As Narayana Guru said, “Whichever the religion, it suffices if it makes a better man” (Nataraja Guru 72). Aurobindo clarified that by the religion of humanity he did not intend to equate it to the numerous faiths that abound:

A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future. By this is not meant what is ordinarily called a universal religion, a system, a thing of creed and intellectual belief and dogma and outward rite. Mankind has tried unity by that means; it has failed and deserved to fail, because there can be no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. The inner spirit is indeed one, but more than any other the spiritual life insists on freedom and variation in its self-expression and means of development. A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are

the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here. It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and bring about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth. By its growth within us oneness with our fellow-men will become the leading principle of all our life, not merely a principle of cooperation but a deeper brotherhood, a real and an inner sense of unity and equality and a common life. There must be the realisation by the individual that only in the life of his fellow-men is his own life complete. (*Human Cycle* 577)

Giddens does not rule out the possibility of a revival of spiritual values in the light of time-space distancing of modernity: “Whether this would imply a resurgence of religion in some form or another is difficult to say, but there would presumably be a renewed fixity to certain aspects of life that would recall some features of tradition” (*Consequences* 178). The emphasis on “humanity,” “human race,” “fellow-men” etc. point to the humanist aspirations focussed by Aurobindo. Aurobindo observed that the French Revolution, though it had humanist bases, was limited in its achievements:

The aim of the religion of humanity was formulated in the eighteenth century by a sort of primal intuition; that aim was and it is still to re-create human society in the image of three kindred ideas, liberty, equality and fraternity. None of these has

really been won in spite of all the progress that has been achieved. The liberty that has been so loudly proclaimed as an essential of modern progress is an outward, mechanical and unreal liberty. The equality that has been so much sought after and battled for is equally an outward and mechanical and will turn out to be an unreal equality. Fraternity is not even claimed to be a practicable principle of the ordering of life and what is put forward as its substitute is the outward and mechanical principle of equal association or at the best a comradeship of labour. This is because the idea of humanity has been obliged in an intellectual age to mask its true character of a religion and a thing of the soul and the spirit and to appeal to the vital and physical mind of man rather than his inner being. (*Human Cycle* 568-69)

Aurobindo must have felt that the unity that he envisages by a world union would be more fragile than that achieved by construction of the nation. Therefore, he proposed a spiritual element into that union which shall hold the whole together:

In other words, — and this is the conclusion at which we arrive, — while it is possible to construct a precarious and quite mechanical unity by political and administrative means, the unity of the human race, even if achieved, can only be secured

and can only be made real if the religion of humanity, which is at present the highest active ideal of mankind, spiritualises itself and becomes the general inner law of human life. (*Human Cycle* 571)

Aurobindo detailed the conditions of such a spiritualized world union which shall bring the religion of humanity into a reality:

A state of things must be brought about in which mutual toleration is the law, an order in which many elements, racial, national, cultural, spiritual can exist side by side and form a multiple unity; in such an order all these antipathies, hostilities, distrusts would die from lack of nourishment. That would be a true state of perfectly developed human civilisation, a true basis for the higher progress of the race. In this new order India with her spiritual culture turned towards the highest aims of humanity would find her rightful place and would become one of the leaders of the human evolution by the greatness of her ideals and the capacity of her peoples for the spiritualisation of life. (685)

Aurobindo exhorted for encouraging plurality and a multicultural symbiosis in the world union that he propounded. He also felt that such an existence of mutual tolerance could be enhanced by a spiritual vision of life as a whole.

Enlightenment and Self-Determination

While going beyond the idea of the nation and not negating it still, Aurobindo emphasised on the importance of self-determination of the individual as the individual is the basic unit of society:

As yet we have not to deal with the race, with mankind as a unity; the nation is still our largest compact and living unit. And it is best to begin with the individual, both because of his nature we have a completer and nearer knowledge and experience than of the aggregate soul and life and because the society or nation is, even in its greater complexity, a larger, a composite individual, the collective Man. What we find valid of the former is therefore likely to be valid in its general principle of the larger entity. Moreover, the development of the free individual is, we have said, the first condition for the development of the perfect society. From the individual, therefore, we have to start; he is our index and our foundation. (*Human Cycle* 73)

These ideas have parallels in Emmanuel Kant who suggested that the individual has to come out of his “immaturity” by taking responsibilities for one’s own decisions and not depending on one’s “guardians.” Kant declared: “*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment” (58). While this led to a reason-centric age in place

of a theocentric era, it also put the onus of progress on the individual while taking it away from all social institutions. Aurobindo's views on self-determination can be perceived to be not very different from the concept of Enlightenment of Kant:

The principle of self-determination really means this that within every living human creature, man, woman and child, and equally within every distinct human collectivity growing or grown, half developed or adult there is a self, a being, which has the right to grow in its own way, to find itself, to make its life a full and a satisfied instrument and image of its being. (*Human Cycle* 626)

However, Aurobindo also said that the individual's self-determination should not however lead to a pampering of the individual ego: "The first danger of the principle of self-determination, as of all others, is that it may be interpreted, like most of the ideals of our human existence in the past, in the light of the ego, its interests and its will towards self-satisfaction" (*Human Cycle* 626-27). Sri Narayana Guru went further ahead from this ideal when he said: "അവനവനാത്മസുഖത്തിനാചരിക്കു- / നവയപരനു സുഖത്തിനായ് വരണം" (*Atmopadesa Satakam* 66). This roughly translates into the idea that what one observes for one's personal gratification should result also in the gratification of the "other." Aurobindo also expressed a similar idea when he said that self-determination is not independent of collective interest:

Self-determination is not a principle which can stand by itself and be made the one rule to be followed; no principle can rightly stand in that way isolated and solely dominant in the complicated web of life and, if we so treat it, it gets falsified in its meaning and loses much of its virtue. Moreover, individual self-determination must harmonise with a common self-determination, freedom must move in the frame of unity or towards the realisation of a free unity. (*Human Cycle* 603)

Aurobindo added that such an understanding of self-determination will “help to set us on the way to the discovery of this higher law. For we may note that this phrase self-determination reconciles and brings together in one complex notion the idea of liberty and the idea of law” (*Human Cycle* 628). For Aurobindo, the idea of morality should emanate from within the individual and not dictated from outside. Therefore, he said that “liberty should proceed by the development of the law of one’s own being determined from within, evolving out of oneself and not determined from outside by the idea and will of another” (629). Narayana Guru suggested that the thought of the self should be tempered with kindness and compassion for all creatures. In his “*Anukampa-Dasakam*” (“Ten Verses of Compassion”), Guru wrote:

ഒരു പീഡയെറുമിനും വരു-
 തരുതെന്നുള്ളനുകമ്പയും സദാ

കരുണാകര! നല്കുകുള്ളിൽ നിൻ-

തിരുമെയ് വിട്ടകലാതെ ചിന്തയും (Sri Narayana 424)

Here, Narayana Guru addresses God as *Karunakara*, “the embodiment of compassion,” and prays to grant him the compassion and kindness that he does not cause any pain to even an ant. Further beyond a compassion for fellow creatures, Guru’s concept is a basic ideal of responsible living leading to sustainability in nature. This is as O’Byrne suggested, “the idea of a duty towards society to be extended to include a duty towards nature” (211).

Self-determination is not an obsession with the self or an attitude of not excluding the “other” selves. Aurobindo explained:

A true principle of self-determination is not at all incompatible with international unity and mutual obligation, the two are rather indispensable complements, even as individual liberty in its right sense of a just and sufficient room for healthy self-development and self-determination is not at all incompatible with unity of spirit and mutual obligation between man and man. (*Human Cycle* 660)

It is the freedom of the individual which allows him/her to interact with other human beings and understand that there is an individual unity between them which could lead to such an “international unity.” Aurobindo said that the

individual needs to exercise the freedom to use his reason to understand and also extent the same freedom to others:

Thus the law for the individual is to perfect his individuality by free development from within, but to respect and to aid and be aided by the same free development in others. His law is to harmonise his life with the life of the social aggregate and to pour himself out as a force for growth and perfection on humanity. The law for the community or nation is equally to perfect its corporate existence by a free development from within, aiding and taking full advantage of that of the individual, but to respect and to aid and be aided by the same free development of other communities and nations. Its law is to harmonise its life with that of the human aggregate and to pour itself out as a force for growth and perfection on humanity. The law for humanity is to pursue its upward evolution towards the finding and expression of the Divine in the type of mankind, taking full advantage of the free development and gains of all individuals and nations and groupings of men, to work towards the day when mankind may be really and not only ideally one divine family, but even then, when it has succeeded in unifying itself, to respect, aid and be aided by the free growth and

activity of its individuals and constituent aggregates. (*Human Cycle 71*)

Such an emphasis on freedom was also made by Kant when he said that the “public” would attain enlightenment if only it was granted freedom to exercise its reason. However, Kant made a distinction between the “*public* use” of reason and the “*private* use” of reason (59). He gives the example of taxation, where speaking against taxation is the public use of reason which should be promoted, and not paying taxes is the private use of reason which at the same time is also against the “duty of a citizen” (60). It makes sense because to pay taxes is what the citizen decided and implemented after reasoning, though not directly. To demand that such reasoning should stop there and proceed no further is inane and preposterous. The same citizen can and should be given the space to deliberate whether such taxation should continue and bring about necessary changes. Otherwise, reason gets stultified, and enlightenment disappears, for it is not a permanent stage to be reached. Kant makes this point clear thus: “If it is asked “Do we now live in an *enlightened* age?” the answer is “No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*” (62). Enlightenment, therefore, should be seen as a continuing process and not a finished product. In the age of post-modernity that we live in, if the same question were to be asked, the answer would still be a “No,” but qualified by the clause: “but we are aware of our lack of enlightenment.”

To decide that enlightenment has happened is to arrest the freedom, again, for the individual to use the reason and to take one's own decisions.

The Brotherhood of Man

Aurobindo suggested that the ideal state of “intellectual anarchism” would help in creating cooperation and fraternity among human beings:

But it is at the same time clear that the more the outer law is replaced by an inner law, the nearer man will draw to his true and natural perfection. And the perfect social state must be one in which governmental compulsion is abolished and man is able to live with his fellow-man by free agreement and cooperation. But by what means is he to be made ready for this great and difficult consummation? Intellectual anarchism relies on two powers in the human being of which the first is the enlightenment of his reason; the mind of man, enlightened, will claim freedom for itself, but will equally recognise the same right in others. (*Human Cycle* 217)

The “intellectual anarchism” suggested by Aurobindo can be considered parallel to the idea of “enlightenment” suggested by Kant (58). The enlightened man needs no guidance from outside, and is self-regulated to give space for the ‘other.’ Aurobindo further suggested incorporating a feeling of

brotherhood which would bring in an emotional element of love for other human beings:

Anarchistic thought finds this power in a natural human sympathy which, if it is given free play under the right conditions, can be relied upon to ensure natural cooperation: the appeal is to what the American poet calls the love of comrades, to the principle of fraternity, the third and most neglected term of the famous revolutionary formula. A free equality founded upon spontaneous cooperation, not on governmental force and social compulsion, is the highest anarchistic ideal. (*Human Cycle* 218)

The “American poet” referred to is Walt Whitman, who in his work *Leaves of Grass* refers to the institution of “love of comrades” in one of his songs. The poet says that it has been alleged against him that he tries to “destroy institutions.” However, he says, he is “neither for or against institutions.” The only institution he wishes to build is “The institution of the dear love of comrades” (367-68). Aurobindo’s idea of brotherhood appears to be just a different term for the “love of comrades” of Whitman. He wrote further:

The solution lies not in the reason, but in the soul of man, in its spiritual tendencies. It is a spiritual, an inner freedom that can alone create a perfect human order. It is a spiritual, a greater

than the rational enlightenment that can alone illumine the vital nature of man and impose harmony on its self-seekings, antagonisms and discords. A deeper brotherhood, a yet unfound law of love is the only sure foundation possible for a perfect social evolution, no other can replace it. But this brotherhood and love will not proceed by the vital instincts or the reason where they can be met, baffled or deflected by opposite reasonings and other discordant instincts. Nor will it found itself in the natural heart of man where there are plenty of other passions to combat it. It is in the soul that it must find its roots; the love which is founded upon a deeper truth of our being, the brotherhood or, let us say, — for this is another feeling than any vital or mental sense of brotherhood, a calmer more durable motive-force, — the spiritual comradeship which is the expression of an inner realisation of oneness. For so only can egoism disappear and the true individualism of the unique godhead in each man found itself on the true communism of the equal godhead in the race; for the Spirit, the inmost self, the universal Godhead in every being is that whose very nature of diverse oneness it is to realise the perfection of its individual life and nature in the existence of all, in the universal life and nature. (*Human Cycle* 220)

The call of Sri Aurobindo to see “godhead in each man” finds parallels in the teachings of Sri Narayana Guru. In his much acclaimed work, *Atmopadesa Satakam*, Guru also said that what we know as “that man” and “this man” are but manifestations of the supreme original essence of God: “അവനിവനെന്തി യുന്നതൊക്കെയോർത്താ- / ലവനിയിലാദിമമായൊരാത്മരൂപം” (66). To understand the “other” as no different from oneself; no different not only from oneself but also from the primal unblemished Self — if this be not *Advaita*, what is? To consider the “other” as of the same essence as oneself is the practical application of the high philosophy of Advaita originally propounded by Sankara. In the Promethean spirit, Narayana Guru brought down Brahminical philosophy from roosting in the ivory towers of élitism and enlightened the minds and hearts of humanity without any discrimination whatsoever. While discussing the idea of self-determinism, Aurobindo said: “It signifies in fact the discovery of an inner and larger self other than the mere ego, in which our individual self-fulfilment no longer separates us from others but at each step of our growth calls for an increasing unity” (*Human Cycle* 630).

Aurobindo also said there is no God higher than mankind, and the service of the individual towards it are the means of worship:

The fundamental idea is that mankind is the godhead to be worshipped and served by man and that the respect, the service,

the progress of the human being and human life are the chief duty and the chief aim of the human spirit. No other idol, neither the nation, the State, the family nor anything else ought to take its place; they are only worthy of respect so far as they are images of the human spirit and enshrine its presence and aid its self-manifestation. (565)

Aurobindo's exhortion to "worship" the human being is not so much spiritualism as humanism. The human being is not worshipped in a religious manner, but given that respect and consideration which a religious person would have for God. As observed by O'Byrne, "The poor farmer in a country on the periphery, struggling to survive and under constant exploitation from the West, is nevertheless intricately interlinked with my own survival, and that of everyone else on the planet" (240). In the historical predicament that we live today, it does not require a spiritual vision to see that the predicament of ours and that of the "poor farmer" is the same because "we share a fragile planet in the midst of the risk society where he, like me, has a responsibility for his actions which bear a direct relationship with the world as a whole" (240). For Narayana Guru, brotherhood was not limited to human beings but to all created beings. In the "*Jeevakarunya-Panchakam*", Guru wrote:

എല്ലാവരുമാരും സഹോദരരെ-

നല്ല പരയേ തോർക്കുകിൽ നാം

കൊല്ലുന്നതുമെങ്ങനെ ജീവിക്കള-

ത്തെല്ലും കൃപയറ്റു ഭൃജിക്കയതും. (*Sri Narayana* 421)

Here, Guru asks that if we understand that all souls are bonded by brotherhood, how can we kill other beings, let alone eat. Such merciless killing and eating indicates lack of compassion and brotherhood. Guru's idea of inclusive brotherhood goes beyond global citizenship to "ecological citizenship," a concept propounded by Bart van Steenberg (qtd. in O'Byrne 211). The three main points of this idea of ecological citizenship are as follows:

1. Increasing inclusion, such as for animals.
2. Increasing responsibilities towards nature.
3. Increasing awareness of ecology as a global issue. (211)

O'Byrne argued that the inclusion of animals in ecological citizenship is significant because it recognizes "animal rights" as not different from the rights of a citizen. While discussing the nature of the individual man, Aurobindo wrote, "And even there is a part of him, the greatest, which is not limited by humanity; he belongs by it to God and to the world of all beings . . . (*Human Cycle* 69). O'Byrne argued that to exclude animals on grounds that they are not rational beings like humans is unjust: "The traditional exclusion of animals comes from their incapacity to act as thinking, rational creatures. However, this limits inclusion on the basis of

intelligence, itself as questionable as exclusion on the basis of skin colour or gender” (211). Aurobindo suggested that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity can be realized only by a practical application of the ideal of brotherhood:

Yet is brotherhood the real key to the triple gospel of the idea of humanity. The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood and it cannot be founded on anything else. But brotherhood exists only in the soul and by the soul; it can exist by nothing else. For this brotherhood is not a matter either of physical kinship or of vital association or of intellectual agreement. When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its self-development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being. When it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the same soul, the same godhead in all human beings. When it strives for brotherhood, it is founding that equal freedom of self-development on a common aim, a common life, a unity of mind and feeling founded upon the recognition of this inner spiritual unity. These three things are in fact the nature of the soul; for freedom, equality, unity are the eternal attributes of the Spirit. It is the practical recognition of this truth, it is the awakening of the soul in man and the attempt

to get him to live from his soul and not from his ego which is the inner meaning of religion, and it is that to which the religion of humanity also must arrive before it can fulfil itself in the life of the race. (*Human Cycle* 570)

Universal brotherhood was the theme of the conference that Narayana Guru conducted at Alwaye in Kerala. On top of the arch at the entry to the conference, he instructed that an inscription be written, “*Sahodaryam Sarvathra*,” meaning universal brotherhood (Nataraja Guru 13). In the conference, Narayana Guru said that “[s]peeches should not be made with a spirit of rivalry or hate” and that his purpose in speech was not for arguing and winning but was “for knowing and letting others know” (12). Aurobindo took this idea of brotherhood further ahead when he said that such a feeling should lead to thinking that the “other” is not separate from the individual’s own existence:

Only when man has developed not merely a fellow-feeling with all men, but a dominant sense of unity and commonalty, only when he is aware of them not merely as brothers, — that is a fragile bond, — but as parts of himself, only when he has learned to live not in his separate personal and communal ego-sense, but in a larger universal consciousness can the phenomenon of war, with whatever weapons, pass out of his life without the possibility of return. (*Human Cycle* 611)

Such a “fellow-feeling” is related to what Giddens calls “life politics” or “politics of self-actualization.” Giddens defined life politics as “radical engagements which seek to further the possibilities of a fulfilling and satisfying life for all, and in respect of which there are no ‘others’” (*Consequences* 156). Narayana Guru too stressed on living together in harmony without differences of religion or community and said:

Devoid of dividing walls
 Of caste or race
 Or hatred of rival faith,
 We all live here
 In Brotherhood.
 Such, know this place to be,
 This Model Foundation! (Nataraja Guru 24)

This message remains inscribed on a plaque in front of the *Shiva* temple consecrated by Narayana Guru at Aruvippuram in Thiruvananthapuram. Both Narayana Guru and Aurobindo exhort the bringing in of such an inclusive universal brotherhood. Such an idea becomes more and more relevant not just as a spiritual thought roaming in utopian realms. Giddens observes: “The routines which are integrated with abstract systems are central to ontological security in conditions of modernity.” However, such security also leads to new situations of being insecure. Giddens adds: “Yet, this situation also

creates novel forms of psychological vulnerability, and trust in abstract systems is not psychologically rewarding in the way in which trust in persons is” (*Consequences* 113). In a world driven by abstract systems, the human being receives trust in return not from those systems, but from the human being next to him/her.

Conclusion

The study on the work of a writer who wrote almost a century ago might raise questions of its relevance. Especially as Aurobindo was a person who led many ‘lives’; and probably because of which one of his recent biographies published in 2008 is titled *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. Among these “many lives,” his political life was rather short-lived and apparently ineffectual in the long-drawn struggle for Indian independence involving innumerable personalities vying for space. In the biography referred to above, the author Peter Heehs observes that most of the documents in public archives project Aurobindo as a political figure: “They confirmed that he had been an important figure in the Struggle for Freedom, but fell short of proving what his followers believed: that he was the major cause of its success” (xii). However, the contributions of Aurobindo towards political and cultural thought cannot be measured in terms of a banal description of success. As Partha Chatterjee comments:

The critical analysis of nationalist thought is also necessarily an intervention in a political discourse of our own time. Reflecting on the intellectual struggles of nationalist writers of a bygone era, we are made aware of the way in which we relate our own theory and practice; judging their assessment of political

possibilities, we begin to ponder the possibilities open to us today. Thus, analysis itself becomes politics; interpretation acquires the undertones of a polemic. (*Nationalist* 52)

Thus, Aurobindo's ideas of nationalism, culture, individual freedom, world union, and universal brotherhood probably have not been more relevant than in today's late postcolonial scenario when all these ideas have assumed different meanings through the passage of a century.

Peter Barry observes that there are three stages through which postcolonial literatures pass through — the phases of “*Adopt*,” “*Adapt*,” and “*Adept*” (189). In the “*Adopt*” phase the writer literally borrows the ideals which s/he picks up from the colonial discourses. In the “*Adapt*” phase, this native writer then understands those aspects to be alien and therefore abrogates their alien nature and transforms them suitably to the native culture and social milieu where s/he wishes to apply it. In the “*Adept*” phase, s/he becomes capable of ideating without any reference or dependence whatsoever on the colonial models.

Aurobindo's ideas of conception of the nation, thus, can be seen to be of the “*Adopt*” phase where he borrowed Western concepts of the nation. That Aurobindo himself was aware of such an adoption is evident in the differentiation he proposes in his conception of the Indian nation:

What is a nation? We have studied in the schools of the West and learned to ape the thoughts and language of the West forgetting our own deeper ideas and truer speech, and to the West the nation is the country, so much land containing so many millions of men who speak one speech and live one political life. . . . The Indian idea of nationality ought to be truer and deeper. (*Bande Mataram II* 1115)

Aurobindo's desire to transform the Western idea of the nation into an Indian discourse and to appropriate it is evident in his call for an indigenization of the land's outlook: "To recover Indian thought, Indian character, Indian perceptions, Indian energy, Indian greatness, and to solve the problems that perplex the world in an Indian spirit and from the Indian standpoint, this, in our view, is the mission of Nationalism" (*Karmayogin* 245). Evidently, Aurobindo's decolonizing project involved not just opposing the ideas and institutions of the West, but also creating something indigenous in place of them. As Partha Chatterjee notes: "Yet in its very constitution as a discourse of power, nationalist thought cannot remain only a negation; it is also a *positive* discourse which seek to replace the structure of colonial power with a new order, that of national power (*Nationalist* 42). His vision of the to-be nation as "*Bhawani Bharati*" is the "Adapt" phase where he transforms it in a metaphoric language which is culturally familiar to him and his fellow-countrymen:

For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation. . . . The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred millions of people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of *tamas*, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons. To get rid of *tamas* we have but to wake the Brahma within. (*Bande Mataram I* 83)

Here, Aurobindo's description of the nation gets transformed in a religious language marking the transition too, from "nation" to "mother-country" and finally to "*Bhawani Bharati*." He sees the land's colonized condition as not something imposed on it by an external power, but as a result of the weakening of its own internal energy.

Aurobindo also adapted the Western ideal of "Sovereignty" to the Indian term "*Swaraj*." The value that Aurobindo assigned to *Swaraj* can be gauged from his own words: "Swaraj is the alchemic stone, the *parash-pathar*, and we have it in our hands. It will turn to gold everything we touch. . . . If we forget *Swaraj* and win anything else we shall be like the seeker whose belt was turned indeed to gold but the stone of alchemy was lost to him for ever" (*Bande Mataram II* 874). He considered *Swaraj* as a primary condition for the achievement of all other nationalist objectives.

Aurobindo's ideal of a world union or international unity can be said to be of the "adept" phase where he conceived a religion of humanity and universal brotherhood beyond the institution of the Western nation-state. Aurobindo set great store by the concept of freedom in the world union that he envisaged: "The only means that readily suggests itself by which a necessary group-freedom can be preserved and yet the unification of the human race achieved, is to strive not towards a closely organised World-State, but towards a free, elastic and progressive world-union" (*Human Cycle* 523). The world union Aurobindo visualized may not happen in the lines that he foresaw, but it is a fact that there are already free universal associations that peoples identify more with than nation-states. As O'Byrne observes, "Global social movements such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and so on, are themselves representations of a collective will, and reflections of a shift in values" (134). A major difference from Aurobindo's concepts is that the genesis of such movements was necessitated by the awareness of risk to the continued existence of the human race and to the planet itself.

The ideas that Aurobindo put forward in pre-independent India are as relevant today, if not more, for their efficacy in portraying the human condition of being oppressed by various forces of domination. If the formation of the nation was the task of the people of Aurobindo's time, today the State attempts to hold the various elements of the nation together by the

sheer force of its machinery. One of the major reasons that necessitated his conception of a world union is the oppressive nature of the nation-state which he hoped to overcome wherewith. He said that even democracy, which is considered to safeguard the freedom of the individual, in most cases becomes “tyranny of the whole”:

The tyranny of the majority has become a familiar phrase and its deadening effects have been depicted with a great force of resentment by certain of the modern intellectuals; but what the future promises us is something more formidable still, the tyranny of the whole, of the self-hypnotised mass over its constituent groups and units. (*Human Cycle* 508-09)

It is significant that Aurobindo anticipated the tyrannical nature of democracy which is a matter of daily experience today. In another instance, Aurobindo said that “Parliamentarism means too, in practice, the rule and often the tyranny of a majority, even of a very small majority . . .” (*Human Cycle* 473). In the socio-political milieu that we live in, it becomes relevant and important to consider Aurobindo’s idea of the “tyranny of a majority” — the situation to which democracy has tumbled today, and which Aurobindo was able to foresee many decades ago. Chetan Bhatt notes that for contemporary *Hindutva*, “Hindu numerical majoritarianism was equivalent to both ‘secularism’ and ‘democracy’; that Indian Muslims (and Christians and

leftists) were internal enemies determined to destroy the integrity of the Hindu nation . . .” (147). Here, nationalism acquires a new meaning — that of exclusion — which could not be conceived in the times of Aurobindo. When we ask our own people, who are equal citizens, to go to Pakistan or China or Saudi Arabia, aren’t we committing the same mistake that the colonialists did when they created circumstances which partitioned the land — first in 1905 into the two Bengals and then in 1947 into India and Pakistan. Nationalism in its new avatar seems to be carrying forward the legacy of colonialism.

It makes sense to believe that there are different forms of nationalisms. Of them, seemingly innocuous, and yet the most dangerous, is the kind that Anderson calls “official nationalism”. In Anderson’s words, “The one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was, and is, that it is *official* – i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost” (159). The recent controversies on the national anthem played in cinema halls should be seen in the light of this definition of nationalism.

It seems to be the nature of nationalism to be pugilistic — once its fisticuffs was with the colonialists; now that they have gone, it invents new enemies from within the nation. To criticize the *Hindutva* ideology or the policies of the government, or to lampoon Narendra Modi are reasons enough in this nation to be branded as an anti-national. So much for the freedom of

speech guaranteed by the Indian constitution. Equal citizens, when they become representatives (not of the people, but of Power) in the State, somehow seem to become more equal than others that they pass indictment upon those whom they don't approve of as 'antinational.'

While discussing the freedom of speech granted by the British, Aurobindo compared it to the Russian censorship of the 19th century, and wrote:

It depended on the will of a despotic administration, and at any moment it could be withdrawn or abridged, at any moment the lash of the law could be brought down on the back of the critic. This freedom of speech was worse than the Russian censorship; for in Russia the editor laboured under no delusion, he knew that freedom of speech was not his, and if he wrote against the administration, it was at his own risk; there was no pretence, no dissimulation on either side. (*Bande Mataram II* 970)

If this passage were given undocumented to a contemporary citizen of the land, it would pass off as a live comment on the present situation in the land. The following passage written many decades ago indicates that Aurobindo had anticipated that the conditions of freedoms of thought and speech would come to such a pass:

But it is a question whether these great fundamental liberties have been won by the race with an entire security, — apart from their occasional suspensions even in free nations and the considerable restrictions with which they are hedged in subject countries. It is possible that the future has certain surprises for us in this direction” (*Human Cycle* 510).

The surprises of the future are today visible in the form of vigilante groups who decide the opinions we voice, the food we eat, the movies we watch and the attire we appear in. In such a scenario when an entire nation is held to ransom by fundamentalist forces, they are better called restrictions of thought and speech rather than freedoms. It is in the context of this restrictive nature of citizen’s rights that Aurobindo conceives of a world union and which assumes contemporary relevance.

Often, Aurobindo too has either been accused of proclivity towards the right-wing, or even appropriated by the right-wing *Hindutva* activists in India. However, that does not generally do justice to the liberal nature of Aurobindo’s thought. One of the causes of such conclusions is that his statements have been too often drawn out of context. Chetan Bhatt, for instance, alleges that nationalists like Aurobindo and Bipin Chandra Pal have tried to exclude Muslims from their conception of the Indian nation:

While accepting, like Bipinchandra Pal, *some* conception of a religiously composite Indian nationality, although one that was ‘largely Hindu in spirit’ . . . neither he [Aurobindo] nor Pal, who were both leading Congress activists and consecutive editors of the Bengal nationalist periodical, *Bande Mataram*, attempted to further Muslim inclusion in the national movement itself. (38)

Yet, Bhatt himself acknowledges that they had “*some* conception” of the plurality of Indian society. While such concerns of communal polarization are well founded, to trace its origins to Aurobindo, Vivekananda or Gandhi would only serve to vindicate the appropriation of these personalities by the right-wing. When nationalists like Aurobindo use the term “Hindu,” it may not be necessarily in the sense of referring to the followers of a particular religion. As Peter Heehs points out, “Both Aurobindo and Bipinchandra did, of course, frequently speak of Hinduism and things Hindu. Like many of their generation they often used the latter term in its old sense of ‘Indian’” (“Bengali” 129). The term “Hindu” has undergone a lot of transformation over several decades and today assumes an exclusivist sense when used by the RSS – Sangh Parivar forces. So is the case with “*Bande Mataram*.” The *Bande Mataram* slogan used by nationalists like Aurobindo, Bankim, Bipin Chandra Pal and a host of others was a means of national unification. The same slogan is today used by the *Hindutva* activists for the purpose of separatism. It is comparable to the cry of “*Allahu Akbar*” made by ISIS activists while

chopping off human heads. The original meaning and spirit of these terms and phrases have been lost and they have become mere shibboleths on the lips of these fundamentalist forces.

There are numerous instances where Aurobindo emphasizes on the necessity of the nationalist movement to become inclusive, not just of Muslims, but of people cutting across all classes and professions. Such a call for inclusion could be observed in the following passage:

The Brahmin Pandit and the Mahomedan Maulavi, the caste organisation and the trade-union, the labourer and the artisan, the coolie at his work and the peasant in his field, none of these should have been left out of the sphere of our activities. For each is a strength, a unit of force; and in politics the victory is to the side which can marshal the largest and most closely serried number of such units and handle them most skilfully, not to those who can bring forward the best arguments or talk the most eloquently. (*Bande Mataram I* 126)

In another instance he says: “Nationalism can afford to neglect and omit none. . . . It is not afraid of Pan-Islamism or of any signs of the growth of a separate Mahomedan self-consciousness but rather welcomes them” (*Bande Mataram II* 796). For Aurobindo, terminologies are but incidental to his larger project of nationalism. Describing the nature of communication of his nationalism,

Aurobindo said: “. . . to the Hindu it repeats the name of Kali, to the Mahomedan it spurs to action for the glory of Islam. It cries to all to come forth, to help in God’s work & remake a nation, each with what his creed or his culture, his strength, his manhood or his genius can give to the new nationality” (*Bande Mataram II* 1106). Such examples could be multiplied, but the point is that to allege Aurobindo of exclusivity is a rather simplistic and reductionist view of the inclusive ideals of nationalism that he preached.

However, it is a fact that Aurobindo does use Hindu religious symbolism to get across to people his ideas of nationalism. Peter Heehs argues that it would not be fair to critique Aurobindo for his use of Hindu religious terms:

Aurobindo's nationalism was religious in another sense as well: he sometimes used religious terms and symbols in speaking about it. For the most part he drew his symbols from the Hindu tradition, which he had embraced in his effort to renationalize himself after returning from England, where he had passed his childhood and youth. Aurobindo never defended his use of Hindu symbols. He had, after all, as much right to allude to the *Gītā* or *Caṇḍī* as Gladstone to the Bible or Homer. Bipinchandra, who also used Hindu symbols in his writings and speeches, did so within the framework of his theory of composite nationality. A popular movement like nationalism

had to be based on popular culture and not abstract universalism. (“Bengali” 121)

It has to be borne in mind that Aurobindo wrote in the context of anti-colonial struggle where he was addressing the masses. If his writings are looked at from that perspective, allegations that he was promoting a Hindu radicalization cannot be sustained, especially as he said that “we do not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions” (*Karmayogin* 304).

Peter Heehs points out that to accuse Aurobindo and others who made use of Hindu epistemology to be the originators of the Hindu fundamentalism of today would be preposterous:

To assert in spite of this that the Hindu Right descends directly from Bengali religious nationalism because some general notions of the RSS-VHP-BJP combine are found in the thought of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and others is to commit the genetic fallacy. Golwalkar is no more the direct descendent of Vivekananda than Mussolini is of Mazzini or Zhirinovskii of Khomiakov. (“Bengali” 137)

Chetan Bhatt also refers to Aurobindo’s statement equalizing nationalism to *sanatana dharma*²⁰ and says: “Just over a year later, Aurobindo

modified this: the advance and rise of India was the rise of *sanatan dharma*, a conception of Hinduism as a perennial religion. Nationalism was *sanatan dharma . . .*” (39). However, Aurobindo makes it clear that by *sanatana dharma* he does not mean Hinduism:

This *sanatana dharma* has many scriptures, Veda, Vedanta, Gita, Upanishad, Darshana, Purana, Tantra, nor could it reject the Bible or the Koran; but its real, most authoritative scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling. It is in our inner spiritual experiences that we shall find the proof and source of the world’s Scriptures, the law of knowledge, love and conduct, the basis and inspiration of Karmayoga. (*Karmayogin* 26)

And if his writings are carefully analyzed, it becomes evident that not only did he not sympathize with, but he was quite critical about such far-right and conservative ideas. He was to a certain extent aware of the implications of such ideas for the future too. The very fact that he could conceive of a world nation sets him apart from far right-wing thought. K.N. Panikkar observes that not only Aurobindo, but a host of Indian leaders including Gandhi are in the process of being appropriated by the right-wing:

Similarly, Hindu religious reformers of the 19th century, such as Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda and Aurobindo, who

gave much importance to the universalist spirit in all religions, are celebrated as the progenitors of Hindu nationalism. But their ideas of inclusive nationalism are completely overlooked. Vivekananda, for instance, had argued that the union of Hindu and Islamic civilisations offered an ideal solution for India's regeneration. Aurobindo's concept of nationalism was riven with contradictions and at any rate he did not subscribe to a Hindu denominational nationalism in which the followers of other faiths had no place. Even Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh are in the process of being co-opted into the Hindutva fold! ("In the Name" n. pag.)

Gandhi is being reduced to the image of his spectacles becoming a mascot of the "*Swachh Bharat*"²¹ project, a flagship programme of the BJP-led central government. Such efforts of projecting Gandhi on a singular theme systematically obliterate the major ideals of truth and non-violence for which Gandhi is remembered. Cleanliness was only one of the limbs of the two major social concerns of Gandhi — the widespread poverty and untouchability prevalent in Indian society. As Chitra Padmanabhan comments: "In the current scheme of cleanliness, addressing caste-based hierarchies does not seem to be an important aspect of the narrative. For Gandhi, the idea of cleaning the outside world was not possible without self-

introspection to clean the heart and mind of entrenched notions of purity and pollution” (n. pag.).

Aurobindo’s responses to European Manicheanism have been critiqued as essentialist especially in the glorification of the Indian past. However, for Aurobindo, it was a strategy that he employed as one of the means of national construction: “[S]tarting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation. . . . We must therefore save for India all that she has stored up of knowledge, character and noble thought in her immemorial past” (*Bande Mataram II* 895). Such a rooting in the native past is also considered as necessary for finding out one’s own identity in the context of colonialism.

Romila Thapar notes:

The glorification of the ancient past was legitimate to the extent that this is a characteristic of all national movements when there is a search for an identity in the indigenous tradition, and the indigenous tradition is usually taken to be the earliest recognisable historical culture. Where nationalism is coupled with colonialism and an anti-imperialist situation, then the glorification of the past serves as a kind of consolation for the humiliation of the present. (*Communalism* 5)

While celebrating the glorious past of Indian civilization, Aurobindo was not suggesting that the past has to be revived in the present. For him, the past was

a reference point and an inspiration to create the future. As he noted in another instance:

After all we live in the twentieth century and cannot revive the India of Chandragupta or Akbar; we must keep abreast with the march of truth and knowledge, fit ourselves for existence under actual circumstances, and our education must be therefore up to date in form and substance and modern in life and spirit. (*Early* 420)

What Aurobindo attempted to do was to walk a tightrope without an unquestionable acceptance of modernity or a blind continuance of tradition. His general opinion remained that human existence is still far from any idea of “progress.” On his idea of civilization, he wrote that progressive and regressive elements remain intermingled in the process of human evolution:

It is obvious that in a state of barbarism the rude beginnings of civilisation may exist; it is obvious too that in a civilised society a great mass of barbarism or numerous relics of it may exist. In that sense all societies are semi-civilised. How much of our present-day civilisation will be looked back upon with wonder and disgust by a more developed humanity as the superstitions and atrocities of an imperfectly civilised era! (*Human Cycle* 87)

For such a progress into a “developed humanity,” Aurobindo suggested the

ideal of the nation-state should give way to the ideal of world union and a religion of humanity. For that to become a reality, national egoisms have to be sublimated:

National egoism, the pride of domination and the desire of expansion still govern the mind of humanity, however modified they may now be in their methods by the first weak beginnings of higher motives and a better national morality, and until this spirit is radically changed, the union of the human race by a federation of free nations must remain a noble chimera. (*Human Cycle* 349)

Though Aurobindo vocalized his vision of a massive world union, he had no illusions that it would solve the problems engendered by modernity or by the nation-state:

It must be remembered that a greater social or political unity is not necessarily a boon in itself; it is only worth pursuing in so far as it provides a means and a framework for a better, richer, more happy and puissant individual and collective life. But hitherto the experience of mankind has not favoured the view that huge aggregations, closely united and strictly organised, are favourable to a rich and puissant human life. It would seem rather that collective life is more at ease with itself, more genial,

varied, fruitful when it can concentrate itself in small spaces and simpler organisms. (281)

Aurobindo here refers to the village system in India which is self-sufficient and simpler in its organization. Gandhi too was an exponent of empowering the villages and considered them to be the cornerstone of Indian social structure. As observed by Brown, “Gandhi’s embracing religious vision made him into a champion of simple village societies and economies where there should be sufficiency for all rather than great variations of wealth” (55).

Aurobindo perceived that the dangers of war could only be eliminated by bringing in a psychological change in humanity. Creation of the nation and evolving it later to a world union are but external steps, but the real change has to happen within the individual: “No system indeed by its own force can bring about the change that humanity really needs; for that can only come by its growth into the firmly realised possibilities of its own higher nature, and this growth depends on an inner and not an outer change (*Human Cycle* 661-62). The “brotherhood” of Aurobindo, the “*abheda*” of Narayana Guru and the “*advaita*” of Sankara turn out to be different terms for the same idea of a noble perceptual reality. The thought of these sages of times far different from ours thus assumes timeless significance and relevance.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975. Print.
- Acheraïou, Amar. *Rethinking Postcolonialism: Colonialist Discourse in Modern Literatures and the Legacy of Classical Writers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Ahmed, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Allen, Richard. "Literature and History". Allen and Trivedi 9-28.
- Allen, Richard, and Harish Trivedi, eds. *Literature and Nation: Britain and India 1800-1990*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Althusser, Louis. *Essays on Ideology*. Verso: London, 1993.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Appaiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.
- Apte, Vaman Shivram, ed. *The Student's Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1970. Print.

Archer, William. *India and the Future*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918. Print.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Aurobindo, Sri. *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*. Vol. 36. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006. 37 vols. Print.

---. *Bande Mataram I*. Vol. 6. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2002. 37 Vols. Print.

---. *Bande Mataram II*. Vol. 7. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2002. 37 Vols. Print.

---. *Early Cultural Writings*. Vol. 1. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003. 37 Vols. Print.

---. *The Human Cycle. The Ideal of Human Unity. War and Self-Determination*. Vol. 25. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997. 37 Vols. Print.

---. *Karmayogin*. Vol. 8. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997. 37 Vols. Print.

---. *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*. Vol. 35. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2011. 37 Vols. Print.

- . *The Renaissance in India with a Defence of Indian Culture..* Vol. 20. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997. 37 Vols. Print.
- . *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. Parts Two and Three. Vol. 34. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997. 37 Vols. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. New Delhi: Viva, 2010. Print.
- Beck, Ulrich, Wolfgang Bonss and Christoph Lau. "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization Problematic, Hypotheses and Research Programme." *Theory, Culture & Society* 20.2 (2003): 1-33. PDF file.
- Bernstein, Lisa. *(M)Othering the Nation: Constructing and Resisting National Allegories through the Maternal Body*. New Castle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi J. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- , ed. *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- . "The Other Question." *Mongia* 37-54.
- Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. Oxford: Berg, 2001. Print.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. "Gandhi's Religion and its Relation to his Politics." *Brown and Parel* 93-116.

Brown, Judith M. "Gandhi as Nationalist Leader, 1915-1948." Brown and Parel 51-68.

Brown, Judith M., and Anthony Parel, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print.

"Catalan parliament declares independence from Spain." *The Hindu.com*. The Hindu, 27 Oct. 2017. Web. 16 Nov. 2017.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review, 2000. Print.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.

Chandra, Bipan. "Historians of Modern India and Communalism." Thapar, Mukhia and Chandra 39-61.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

---. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. London: Zed Books, 1986. Print.

---. *Our Modernity*. Rotterdam: Saphis Codesria, 1997. Print.

Confino, Alon, and Ajay Skaria. "The Local Life of Nationhood." *National Identities* 4.1 (2002): 7-24. PDF file.

Delanty, Gerard. "Foreword." O'Byrne ix-x.

Delanty, Gerard, and Krishan Kumar. "Introduction." Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar 1-4.

- Delanty, Gerard, and Krishan Kumar. *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006. Print.
- Dharampal. *Civil Disobedience in Indian Tradition*. Vol. 2 of *Collected Writings*. Goa: Other India, 2000. PDF file.
- Dhawan, R. K., ed. *Postcolonial Discourse: A Study of Contemporary Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1997. Print.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20.2 (1994): 328-356. PDF file.
- Fabish, Rachael. "The Political Goddess: Aurobindo's Use of Bengali Śākta Tantrism to Justify Political Violence in the Indian Anti-Colonial Movement." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30.2 (2007): 269-92. PDF file.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.
- . *Toward the African Revolution*. New York: Grove, 1967. Print.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1963. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1998. Print.
- Ganguly, Debjani. *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Print.

---. *Thought and Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print.

Giddens, Anthony. *Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

Print.

---. *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Vol. 1. *Power, Property and the State*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1981.

---. *The Nation-State and Violence*. Vol. 2 of *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Cambridge: Polity, 1985.

---. "Risk and Responsibility." *The Modern Law Review* 62.1 (1999): 1-10.

PDF file.

Griffin, Roger. *The Nature of Fascism*. London: Routledge, 1991. EPUB file.

Guha, Ranajit. *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.

Guru, Nataraja. *The Word of the Guru: The Life and Teaching of Guru Narayana*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2003. Print.

Guru, Sri Narayana. *Atmopadesa Satakam*. [Hundred Verses of Self Instruction]. Ed. Swami Muktananda Yati. 5th ed. Ernakulam: One-World, 2014. Print.

---. *Sri Narayana Gurudeva Krithikal Sampoorana Vyakhyanam - Bhagam II*.

[Works of Sri Narayana Guru with Complete Interpretation - Part II].

- Ed. Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair. Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages, 2003. Print.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Mongia* 110-121.
- Harper, Edward B. "Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23 (1964): 151-97. PDF file.
- Heehs, Peter. "Bengali Religious Nationalism and Communalism." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1.1 (1997): 117-39. Print.
- . *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.
- . *Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Biography*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989.
- . "The Uses of Sri Aurobindo: Mascot, Whipping-boy, or What?" *Postcolonial Studies* 9.2 (2006): 151-64. Print.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1970: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.
- Hyslop, Jonathan. "Gandhi 1869–1915: The Transnational Emergence of a Public Figure." *Brown and Parel* 30-50.
- Institut de Recherches Évolutives, comp. *India's Rebirth: A Selection from Sri Aurobindo's Writings, Talks and Speeches*. 3rd ed. Mysore: Mira Aditi, 2000.
- Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. *Sri Aurobindo*. 2nd ed. Calcutta: Arya, 1950.

- Jain, Jasbir. "Postcoloniality, Literature and Politics." Jain and Singh 20-39.
- Jain, Jasbir and Veena Singh, eds. *Contesting Postcolonialisms*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2000. Print.
- JanMohamed, Abdul and David Lloyd. "Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What is to be Done?" Moore-Gilbert, Stanton and Maley 234-47.
- Johnson, David L. *The Religious Roots of Indian Nationalism: Aurobindo's Early Political Thought*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1974. Print.
- . "The Task of Relevance: Aurobindo's Synthesis of Religion and Politics." *Philosophy East and West* 23.4 (1973): 507-15. Print.
- Jolly, Rosemary. "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa." Mongia 365-82.
- Kalidasa. *Kumara Sambhavam*. Varanasi: Vidya Vilasa, 1951. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" Schmidt 58-64.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *100 Poems: Old and New*. Ed. Thomas Pinney. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.
- Kishore, Amina. "Postcolonial Discourse: Doing away with Labels." Dhawan 18-23.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2015. Print.

- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "On Education for India." Allen and Trivedi 198-205.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographical Man*. Canada: U of Toronto P, 1962. Print.
- Mongia, Padmini, ed. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley. *Postcolonial Criticism*. New York: Longman, 1997. Print.
- Mundschenk, Paul. Rev. of *The Quest for Political and Spiritual Liberation: A Study in the Thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghose*, by June O 'Connor. *Philosophy East and West*. 32.2 (1982): 217-218. PDF file.
- Nandakumar, Prema. "Sri Aurobindo as a Writer of English Prose." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 17.2 (1989): 1-7. Print.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Narayan, Jayaprakash. "Foreword." Dharampal 1-5.
- Narayanan, M.V. "Performing the Nation." Kerala Sahitya Academy Eric Hobsbawm Birth Centenary Lecture. District Library Hall, Palakkad, 12 Oct. 2017. Web. 20 Nov. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsHdWJETFu8>.

- The New Testament*. Madras: Gideons International, 1988. Authorized (King James) Vers. Print.
- O'Byrne, Darren J. *The Dimensions of Global Citizenship: Political Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. London: Frank Cass, 2003. PDF file.
- O'Connor, June. *The Quest for Political and Spiritual Liberation: A Study in the Thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghose*. New Jersey: Associated UP, 1977. Print.
- Osella, Filippo, and Caroline Osella. *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*. London: Pluto, 2000. PDF file.
- Padmanabhan, Chitra. "What Gandhi's Spectacles in the 'Swachh Bharat' Logo Really Seem to Show Us." *The Wire.in*. The Wire, 2 Oct. 2017. Web. 30 Nov. 2017.
- Panikkar, K.N. "In the Name of Nationalism." *Frontline* 21.6 (2004): n. pag. Web. 27 Nov 2017.
- Parel, Anthony. "Gandhi and the State." Brown and Parel 154-172.
- Pathak, G.S. "Sri Aurobindo's Vision of Free India." *Contemporary Relevance of Sri Aurobindo*. Ed. Kishore Gandhi. Delhi: Vivek, 1973. 1-5. Print.
- Raina, M.K. "Sri Aurobindo." *Prospects*. 32.3 (2002): 373-383. PDF file.
- Ranchan, Som. P, and K. D. Gupta. *Sri Aurobindo as a Political Thinker: An Interdisciplinary Study*. Delhi: Konark, 1998. Print.
- Rao, Raja. "Language and Spirit." Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 296-97.

- Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 8-22.
- Robbiano, Chiara. "Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's Nondual *Being* without Not-being." *Philosophy East and West*. 66.1 (2016): 290-327. PDF file.
- Rooney, Caroline and Kaori Nagai, eds. *Kipling and Beyond: Patriotism, Globalisation and Postcolonialism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Said, Edward. W. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- . *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Schmidt, James. *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996. Print.
- Seely, J.R. "From *The Expansion of England*." Allen and Trivedi 245-55.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. The Arden Edition. London: Methuen, 1982. Print.
- . *The Tempest*. ed. J.R. Sutherland. London: OUP, 1971. Print.
- Sharma, Meenakshi. *Postcolonial Indian Writing: Between Co-option and Resistance*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2003. Print.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing." *Kunapipi* 9:3 (1987): 1-16. PDF file.
- Suhrud, Tridip. "Gandhi's Key Writings: In Search of Unity." Brown and Parel 71-92.
- Suleri, Sara. "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." Mongia 335-46.

- Tagore, Rabindranath. "From *Nationalism*." Allen and Trivedi 268-78.
- Tercheck, Ronald J. "Conflict and Nonviolence." Brown and Parel 117-134.
- Thapar, Romila. *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978. Print.
- . "Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History." Thapar, Mukhia and Chandra 1-23.
- . *A History of India*. Vol.1. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- Thapar, Romila, Harbans Mukhia, and Bipan Chandra. *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969. Print.
- Thompson, Edward. "From *The Reconstruction of India*." Allen and Trivedi 294-99.
- Tilak, Bal Gangadhar. "Home Rule for India: Radical Ideas." Allen and Trivedi 286-88.
- Varma, Viswananth Prasad. *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*. 2nd rev. ed. Delhi: Motilal Benarsidas, 1976. Print.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.
- Vivekananda, Swami. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati Memorial ed. Vol.3. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989. 8 vols. Print.
- Weber, Thomas. "Gandhi's Moral Economics: The Sins of Wealth without Work and Commerce without Morality." Brown and Parel 135-53.

- Wernick, Andrew. *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. PDF file.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass, 1860*. Ed. Jason Stacy. The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2009. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. Ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1983. Print.