

# Sri Aurobindo, India and Ideological Discourse<sup>1</sup>

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In the first part of this talk, I consider Sri Aurobindo's nationalism and contextualize it within the colonial-national interchange and the modern understanding of the nation. This includes a consideration of the nation-soul idea. In the second part, I apply the implications of this nationalism to Sri Aurobindo's social ideas — concerning the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville and, in general, the social context of the Integral Yoga and his vision of the future, so as to engage reflection on the present.

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## I

### A Congeries of Religions

I would like to start our consideration with a reading from Sri Aurobindo, a passage from the Chapter “The Evolution of the Spiritual Man” in *The Life Divine*:

In India, we have seen, there has been a persistence of the original intuition and total movement of evolutionary Nature. For religion in India limited itself by no one creed or dogma; it not only admitted a vast number of different formulations, but contained successfully within itself all the elements that have grown up in the course of the evolution of religion and refused to ban or excise any: it developed occultism to its utmost limits, accepted spiritual philosophies of all kinds, followed to its highest, deepest or largest outcome every possible line of spiritual realisation, spiritual experience, spiritual self-discipline. Its method has been the method of evolutionary Nature herself, to allow all developments, all means of communication and action of the spirit upon the members, all ways of communion between man and the Supreme or Divine, to follow every possible way of advance to the goal and test it even to its extreme. All stages of spiritual evolution are there in man and each has to be allowed or provided with its means of approach to the spirit, an approach suited to its capacity, *adhikāra*. Even the primitive forms that survived were not banned but were lifted to a deeper significance, while still

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the term “discourse” here in the sense given by the contemporary French thinker Michel Foucault (1926-1984). According to Foucault, a discourse may be thought of as a “system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak.” (I. Lessa, 2006)

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there was the pressure to the highest spiritual pinnacles in the rarest supreme ether. Even the exclusive credal type of religion was not itself excluded; provided its affinity to the general aim and principle was clear, it was admitted into the infinite variety of the general order. But this plasticity sought to support itself on a fixed religio-social system, which it permeated with the principle of a graded working out of the human nature turned at its height towards a supreme spiritual endeavour; this social fixity, which was perhaps necessary at one time for unity of life if not also as a settled and secure basis for the spiritual freedom, has been on one side a power for preservation but also the one obstacle to the native spirit of entire catholicity, an element of excessive crystallisation and restriction. A fixed basis may be indispensable, but if settled in essence, this also must be in its forms capable of plasticity, evolutionary change; it must be an order, but a growing order.

Nevertheless, the principle of this great and many-sided religious and spiritual evolution was sound, and by taking up in itself the whole of life and of human nature, by encouraging the growth of intellect and never opposing it or putting bounds to its freedom, but rather calling it in to the aid of the spiritual seeking, it prevented the conflict or the undue predominance which in the Occident led to the restriction and drying up of the religious instinct and the plunge into pure materialism and secularism. A method of this plastic and universal kind, admitting but exceeding all creeds and forms and allowing every kind of element, may have numerous consequences which might be objected to by the purist, but its great justifying result has been an unexampled multitudinous richness and a more than millennial persistence and impregnable durability, generality, universality, height, subtlety and many-sided wideness of spiritual attainment and seeking and endeavour. It is indeed only by such a catholicity and plasticity that the wider aim of the evolution can work itself out with any fullness. The individual demands from religion a door of opening into spiritual experience or a means of turning towards it, a communion with God or a definite light of guidance on the way, a promise of the hereafter or a means of a happier supraterrrestrial future; these needs can be met on the narrower basis of credal belief and sectarian cult. But there is also the wider purpose of Nature to prepare and further the spiritual evolution in man and turn him into a spiritual being; religion serves her as a means for pointing his effort and his ideal in that direction and providing each one who is ready with the possibility of taking a step upon the way towards it. This end she serves by the immense variety of the cults she has created, some final, standardised and definitive, others more plastic, various and many-sided. A religion which is itself a congeries of religions and which at the same time provides each man with his own turn of inner experience, would be the most in consonance with this purpose of Nature: it would be a rich nursery of spiritual growth and flowering, a vast multiform school of the soul's discipline, endeavour, self-realisation. Whatever errors Religion has committed, this is her function and her great and indispensable utility and service,— the holding up of this growing light of guidance on our way through the mind's ignorance towards the Spirit's complete consciousness and self-knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

This passage deals with the life of religion in India as a plural field, as what Sri Aurobindo refers to as “a congeries of religions.” It is a culture of seeking, not a uniform religious body with fixed and rigid boundaries. Sri Aurobindo was writing this in the last years of his life. This passage comes from one of the six chapters added to

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<sup>2</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Chapter “The Evolution of the Spiritual Man,” *The Life Divine*, SABCL:19, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, pp. 872–874.

*The Life Divine* towards the end of his life. One may say that Sri Aurobindo, at this point, is expressing his most comprehensive view of the field of spirituality and religion in India.

### Co-optation

This passage is very important to acknowledge at the outset, because as time has passed, Sri Aurobindo has been increasingly marginalized or co-opted by a variety of mainstream discourses. He has been appropriated, for instance, by the Hindu right, along with Vivekananda. Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo are now seen as the founding figures of what is known as Hindutva<sup>3</sup> in India. And along with this, happily accepting this identification, the Marxist left has turned on Sri Aurobindo as one of its “whipping boys.” So Sri Aurobindo has increasingly been reduced to this image in modern and contemporary scholarship: either a champion, one of the founding figures or “mascots” of Hindutva, or “the whipping boy” of Indian Marxism.<sup>4</sup>

Now both of these are gross reductions. Sri Aurobindo in fact, had socialistic leanings, though he was generally averse to any ideological labeling. Thus, when necessary, he contested authoritarianism in the practice of Socialism. He stood against both Stalinism and Maoist China as regimes creating political conditions which stifled the freedom of individual growth. Yet, he was definitely not in favor of a rampant capitalism, identifying it as “economic barbarism.” So there are grounds for constellating Sri Aurobindo with certain socialistic thinkers in terms of his intellectual preferences. As far as religion and spirituality are concerned, as clearly evidenced by the passage from *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo was hardly a champion of any religious creed, attempting to cabin the approach to the Divine in terms of boundaries or a certain national history. In the passage of our consideration, he has very clearly conceptualized a field of plural religion and spiritual practice in premodern India.

However, he has been co-opted by the emergent political field of Hindutva in modern times. This has led to a certain perception of Sri Aurobindo in mainstream Indian discourse and among a large number of his Indian followers as the champion or founder of this unitarian definition of Hinduism.

This image has sought its support in certain texts of Sri Aurobindo. These are usually early nationalistic texts which have been taken out of context and interpreted in modern times according to prevalent discourses of nationalistic religion. But when we

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<sup>3</sup> Hindutva is a term coined by V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966) to refer to the ideology of Hindu nationalism. This ideology has been given a more concrete organized form in contemporary times by M.S. Golwalkar (1906–1973) and espoused by the “Sangh Parivar,” a family of socio-political organizations. In the public expression of its ideology, Hindutva claims to be based on “Integral Humanism” and “Cultural Nationalism,” following a unity-in-diversity idea. Such expressions however give the lie to its history of self-identification on the basis of a static understanding of Hinduism and religious opposition to non-Hindu sects, forms and practices.

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Heehs, “The Uses of Sri Aurobindo: Mascot, Whipping-Boy or What?,” *Postcolonial Studies* 9 (June 2006): 151–64.

view these very texts in their historical context we become aware of the discourse to which they belong. It is important to acknowledge that discourse, because discourse is performative, our utterances enact certain positions in a cultural conversation and everything that we say occurs in an existing mindset, with a common language and a common understanding of words and ideas which allow for certain things to be said and certain things not to be said.

## Colonial-National Interchange

In his early speeches and writings in India, Sri Aurobindo's texts are part of a discourse which is known today as the colonial-national interchange. We know that Sri Aurobindo returned to India from England in 1893 and soon launched into an anti-colonial movement. This movement was part of a larger rethinking of colonialism. Sri Aurobindo's writings do not appear out of the blue, he is not an isolated thinker. He enters into an existing cultural conversation that has a regional history of close to a hundred years before him, in what is today called the Bengal Renaissance. The cultural aspect of the Bengal Renaissance had been developing since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and Sri Aurobindo entered into it in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. He imbibed the discourse of the Bengal Renaissance and his language became part of its already existing rich language. And he provided his own answers to the internal conversation of the colonial-national interchange which framed that discourse.

In recent times, there has been an attempt to analyze this colonial-national interchange. Among the breakthrough texts that initiates this thinking is a book published in 1978 by Edward Said, a Palestinian writer, a text titled *Orientalism*. In this book, Said points out that the colonial gaze on colonized nations is one which construes the native as the "Other" of the materialist West, a romantic, spiritual, imagination-based being who cannot fully rise into intellectual discourse. As a result, on the one hand, he is glorified, valorized as a "noble savage," and on the other hand, is thereby subordinated and suppressed, into the preserve of somebody who can be dominated, or of somebody who exists for the museological and touristic pleasure of the Western consumer.

This discourse has been further refined over time. Today we can say more clearly that there existed in the colonial national interchange four distinct discourses. These four discourses acted independently and in a braided fashion together, sometimes as an amalgam. These four discourses can be thought of as emerging out of the European Enlightenment. I would give them the names of Enlightenment Positivism, Positivist Racism, Romantic Orientalism and Dialogic Orientalism.

The mainstream discourse of Positivism arising from Enlightenment Philosophy can be called Enlightenment Positivism. The faith at work here is that all human beings across the world are rational beings; that Reason, the ordering and logical principle in the cosmos, or what may more properly be called the Logos, is God; and that this divine rationality is ubiquitous among all human beings. There is no superior and inferior here, there may be variations in training, but if the training in reason and culture is provided, all human beings would become equally "civilized." They become what we

would today call “Enlightenment Men.”

This is the first overarching discourse of post-enlightenment colonialism. Positivism in this Enlightenment sense does not make any distinction between human beings, colonizer or colonized. It moves towards the equalization of the field. It is burdened by what it calls the “white-man’s burden,” which it bears to bring the light of civilization to the brown, black, red and yellow peoples of the world. But nevertheless its motive is the equalization of the field of humanity in the name of a divine rationality. At the same time, it is a hegemonic definition of the field of Humanity. That which it considers human is what is normatively human; everything outside that is somehow not properly human. That which cannot fit its mould is exiled from the domain of the Human.

The second discourse is connected to the first. It may be called Positivist Racism. Positivist Racism also starts with the precept that Reason is the primary defining attribute of human beings. In this sense, it is also definitional in its approach to Humanity, but it construes non-White people, non Western people, as racially different and inferior. Non-Western people — we find here the invention of “the West” as a self-identifying civilizational essence tied to race and differentiated from “the east” or “the Orient” — just don’t have that definitional property of Reason to the degree required to be given entry into the club of Humanity. That is, the brown, black, red and yellow peoples of the world are “not quite/not white,” in Homi Bhabha’s celebrated description of the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> In other words, this is the basis of Apartheid, of races that cannot sufficiently measure up to the norm of Humanity, which is the privilege of Western White man.

In some form, both of these discourses are with us even today. They form the basis of what is known as neoliberal globalization, and within that paradigm, they constitute the behavior of the “first world” to the “third world.” The third world retains the character of somehow being the zone of “raw” or “uncooked” civilization, the site for the exploitation of material and human resources, of raw materials, unskilled labor or subjugated skills, what are today called “the cyber coolies” of the first world. And on the other hand, it provides the dumping ground of the first world’s toxic wastes, because it never can measure up to the fullness of humanity. The discourse of racism has been displaced into another discourse of subordination.

Along with these, almost as their necessary inverse, come two other discourses. They constitute the field of Orientalism. The first of these could be called Romantic Orientalism. This discourse starts by acknowledging the “Enlightened West” to be defined by Materialism, and then projects its Other, the domain of Romanticism and Spirituality onto the “the Orient,” i.e. the colonized. The colonized is that Other because s/he fills the lack of Euro-America, its lost spirituality, rejected because not a part of its definition of the Human. Thus the fascination of the Other as the romantic, exotic, primitive, spiritual native (in our case, Indian) characterizes Orientalism. But Oriental-

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<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, Oxon and New York, 1994, 2005, 131.

ism is also conflicted. Just as the discourse of Positivism expresses itself as a binary, Orientalism also carries an internal conflict which divides it into two discourses. One of them is the mainstream Orientalist discourse, that so well brought out by Edward Said, which characterizes the Oriental or “non-Western” people as those who will remain and are meant to remain creatures of imagination and spirituality, never capable of political self-determination or rational epistemology. They are therefore, essentialized, subordinated, yet also therefore, always glorified, put on a pedestal, but only in a museological and touristic sense. They will thus remain the West’s living preserves of its own archaic race memory and anthropological proof of the evolutionary progress of its enlightened civilization, for the wonder, exploration, exploitation and enjoyment of its own citizens. So this is that third discourse, which I have termed Romantic Orientalism.

The fourth discourse is where some promise starts emerging. This is a variant of Romantic Orientalism, what may be termed Dialogic Orientalism. This is constituted by the awareness among those within the West who perceive the origin of the Other within their own culture, who believe that spirituality is part of the definition of the Human, which has been suppressed and neglected in the development of the progressive “logocentric” discourse of the Enlightenment. This anthropological deformation needs to be corrected. Engagement in dialogue with the living potential of that in non-Western cultures can transform and enrich the world, and create a new future.

### Nationalist Discourses

These four discourses find apposite halves or counterparts in the national discourse. Nationalism develops out of what has been termed interpellation.<sup>6</sup> Interpellation means that one’s response is determined by the way in which one has been addressed. If someone calls another a “nigger,” there are four options of response available to him. One is to turn one’s back on the person and refuse to give an answer, in which case, one has targeted oneself to be marginalized and exterminated by the hegemonic discourse. One is put into a reservation and starved of resources until he disappears from the earth.

The second option is to respond by acceptance, that is, one responds by submission. One becomes the slave that he is being called. In our historical instance, by doing this one becomes a tamed subject of the ideological order of the Enlightenment, its world order. This is the world order determining our present epoch, what may be called the Modern. Modernity is another name for the omnipresent temporal order of the Enlightenment, the most systematic overarching ideology that is today encircling the globe. By accepting its interpellation, one is tamed into its order; one becomes neoliberal globalization’s “third world.” In the colonial-national interchange, there will be nationalists happy to do exactly that, they will struggle to free the nation to play its competitive part in the triumphal progress of Enlightenment Man and Technological

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<sup>6</sup> I have adapted the term “interpellation” from the French Neo-Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1918-1990). Althusser uses the term to describe the process by which an ideology addresses an individual thus effectively producing him or her as its subject.

World. A good example of this kind of leader in Indian nationalism is Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who set the nation on its neoliberal track, the nation that must modernize itself by privileging technological progress, and become, though nonaligned, a model third world nation. Of course, in this nationalist approach, there is a struggle against the strictly racial identification, but as I said earlier, under opposition, the Positivist Enlightenment discourse is only too happy to hide and displace its racialism onto the idea of "the third world."

Romantic Orientalism is its own form of interpellation. The exotic, primitive or romantic "savage" here bares his predictable teeth and fangs, that is, in our case, when the person referred to as "nigger" reacts with blind hostility. He contests the identification through aggression. This defiance through aggression is also an acceptance of interpellation. In its reaction there is an implied consent, a wholesale acceptance of the term, hand in glove, inevitably fitting into the label that one chooses to oppose. This indeed, is one of the ways by which the contemporary nationalist construct of Hindutva has formed itself. It has formed itself out of historical precedents of aggression against colonial oppression in the name of an essentialized Orientalist identification of Hinduism as a construct of Otherness.

The fourth form of interpellation is that in the nationalist discourse, which corresponds to the Dialogic Orientalist in the colonizer. This is where one counters the identification as the "nigger," through a dialogic critique of its causes and implications. In seeking out such a critique, the nationalist deconstructs the interpellation to reveal the roots of suppressed otherness in the colonizer. The romantic, the spiritual, the primitive is shown to lurk within the colonizer, just as the rational is no less present in the colonized. But leveling the ground thus does not lead merely to an acknowledgment of "sameness," rather it opens up the possibility for alternate relations between what was privileged and what was subordinated in the psyche of the colonizer and the colonized, alternate forms of rationality and knowing, alternate notions of progress. It may also yield syncretic, hybrid or synthetic forms of culture, not merely cosmetic in scope but attesting to a transformed definition of Humanity. This mutually transformative dialogue leads to new possibilities for the future.

I would say that in early Indian nationalism, there occurred a bifurcation within the colonial-national interchange in which Sri Aurobindo found himself as a participant. This was a split between the first two and the latter two nationalist discourses, with each pair acting together in an amalgamated form. The first of these pairs became the political discourse of the Moderates, who accepted the colonial order and sought only constitutional change. The second pair operated as the Extremists, who openly declared the need for independence from the colonizer on the grounds of a cultural difference in being and becoming (*svabhāva* and *svadharmā*). The Extremists held all means, including violence to be legitimate to the attainment of this independence, but through their journalistic instruments, also opened a critical dialog which penetrated into the roots of colonial hubris within the bastion of Enlightenment ideology. Sri Aurobindo himself was among those who engineered this break, leading to a separation between the Moderates and the Extremists. He is one of the major figures who ensured

this bifurcation.

It is important to observe here that though it split away from the Moderates, the Extremist discourse combined in itself the violent assertion of Otherness and the dialogic critique of modernity which characterize the second pair of nationalistic responses. Sri Aurobindo, as part of this Extremist discourse, was well aware of this braided or amalgamated action, and supported both approaches as necessary to the time and the goal of independence. He may have seen the need to affiliate himself with a more essentialized discourse of “Hindu India,” (what is now being called a strategic essentialism)<sup>7</sup> because of the vitality that came from the combined effort of these two kinds of Nationalist discourse but he prioritized the critical approach, so that a dialogic understanding of cultural history and an acknowledgment of plurality were inserted into the identity of the emerging nation.

### Nation Souls and the Age of the World Picture

As may be expected, over time these two nationalist discourses have also bifurcated. This is an inevitable consequence of cultural historicity. Due to the ideological nature of modernity, its systemic ordering principle seeking to organize all humanity into a world schema — which is why Martin Heidegger refers to the modern age as the Age of the World Picture<sup>8</sup> — it exercises its rationality through its ability to classify the world in terms of center and periphery, using taxonomic schemes which can slot all entities as identifiable essences. The modern academy and the nation state become two of its principal administrative instruments for achieving this — the first through the creation of internal identity and conscience and the second through its social or ethnographic accounting and disciplinary mechanisms. The essentialized construct of Hinduism which Sri Aurobindo clearly eschewed in the passage we read from *The Life Divine* slips unnoticeably into the Hindu’s sense of personal identity through such reductionist means. Add to this the aggressive reaction to this insistent Orientalist Western interpellation, and it is not too difficult to see how the first of the two latter Nationalist discourses develops into the dominant idea of Hindutva. Unfortunately, this construct is what is sweeping across the Indian nation at present posing as a majoritarian national identity and its shadow also hangs over the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It is important to realize that this is hardly what Sri Aurobindo had in mind or what he opened up through his own nationalistic response to the interpellation of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>7</sup> Strategic essentialism is a term coined by literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivack to refer to a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves. It refers to the idea that it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily ‘essentialize’ themselves and bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals. Spivack, “Criticism, feminism, and the institution,” interview with Elizabeth Gross, *Thesis Eleven*, 10/11, November/March: 1984–5, pp. 175–87.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture” [1938] in William Lovitt (trans. & editor), *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper Torchbooks, 1977, pp. 115–154.

## II

G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) was among the most influential philosophers who gave the Western world the metaphysics of modernity, not merely as a conceptual scheme, a cosmology, but as a philosophy of history. In this philosophy of history, Rationality (which he identified as Consciousness) is immanent in Matter and “evolves” into more conscious forms of itself through time. Human history is marked by this evolution, which proceeds through dialectical experiments of synthesizing opposites from culture to culture, moving from lesser to grander expressions of individualized rational choice. The modern Age of Enlightenment is witness to the culminating stage of this evolution, when European White Man, or more specifically, German Protestant Man, has achieved the highest pinnacle of Rationality. The experiments leading to syntheses are carried out by the Time Spirit, *Zeitgeist*, which chooses different peoples to embody one of its experiments. Once an experiment is over, the “race” chosen for this task remains fixed in its cultural expression of this level of synthesis. In this “white mythology,” Hegel gave some of the lowest levels of static existence to the “Oriental” peoples of India and China. In his description of these racial or national essences, Hegel used the term *Volkgeist*, spirit of the people. This can be seen as the root of the nation soul idea. Johann Herder (1744–1803), another German thinker and senior contemporary of Hegel, is usually credited with this idea, which goes to say that this idea of the nation soul arose in Germany as part of late Enlightenment metaphysics around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> c. From here, it very quickly spread throughout Europe and served to justify the race idea in colonialism.

An important thing to bear in mind, is that 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was shot through and through with the idea of this racial philosophy of history. Today we may find it difficult to believe, but the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was pervaded by the sense of racism. It wasn’t something exclusive to Germany. It was in England, it was all over Europe. There was a sense that the world is made up of races, and these races can be arranged in a classification scheme which represents them eternally in their essential truth in terms of a hierarchy of scale. It was this racial essence which stood largely behind the European idea of the nation. This was the discourse of Racist Enlightenment and it was the predominant discourse of colonialism.

Thus we can see that the idea of nation soul arises out of the discourse of the Enlightenment and its extension in colonialism. Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and other thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance have subverted this colonial discourse by inserting a spiritual content into it. This is the dialogic response to the interpellation of racial colonialism, whether Positivist or Orientalist. This is the acceptance of the interpellated discourse which becomes transformed in the retelling. What was attempted by these Indian nationalist spiritual thinkers was the extension of an alternate discourse in the forms of the West. It appeared to be new, but it may be seen as a case of old wine in new bottles. It was the spiritual knowledge and experience of the colonized culture being crafted in the discourse of the colonizer. Along with a spiritual inflection to racial essence came a transformed content to the nation soul. Sri Aurobindo elaborated this content in many of his writings, but it found its fullest voice in the chapter titled

“True and False Subjectivism” in *The Human Cycle*. Here he pointed out that each nation soul, like a human soul, was a differentiation of One Reality and recognized other such nation souls to be unique differentiations of the Same. He also saw these souls as not static but each evolving towards universality along a certain line or perspective of becoming.<sup>9</sup>

## Internal Dialogue

In considering Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism, the complex internal dialog between two forms of national discourse, the static and the transformative, I wish to read a passage from the celebrated Uttarpara Speech. This is one of the texts oft quoted by proponents of Hindutva to demonstrate Sri Aurobindo’s advocacy for a Hindu nation.<sup>10</sup> But such readings seldom look closely at the complexity of the text. These early nationalist tracts of Sri Aurobindo are particularly interesting due to their complexity and demand close reading. Only when read in its own complexity and in comparison with later texts written by him, do we arrive at a clearer feel for his position.

The Uttarpara Speech was delivered to a Hindu religious group in Bengal in 1909. Let us consider the concluding paragraphs from it. He starts by acknowledging the nature of the group he is addressing. “This then is what I have to say to you. The name of your society is Society for the Protection of Religion.”<sup>11</sup> The Society for the Protection of Religion — even the choice of the group to address is an acceptance of mainstream Hindu religion as part of a nationalistic response. Thus, it draws on the solidarity of people who are trying to protect Hinduism as a religion, an essentialistic “Indian” identification, against its deformation or exclusion by the West.

Sri Aurobindo affirms the mission of this society: “Well, the protection of the religion, the protection and upraising before the world of the Hindu religion, that is the work before us.”<sup>12</sup> This has the ring of a slogan, a collective mission. But he immediately interposes a question to problematize this assertion, to make the mind dwell on its complexity. “But what is the Hindu religion?” he asks.

What is the Hindu religion? What is this religion which we call Sanatan Dharma? Sanatan, eternal. It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it. Because it is in this peninsula that it grew up in the seclusion of the sea and the Himalayas.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, its identification with a subcontinental culture arises merely by dint of the fact that it evolved here. This was its regional evolution’s stage, just as the

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<sup>9</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Chapter “True and False Subjectivism,” *The Human Cycle, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL:15, pp. 37–47.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, one may find a downloadable version of this text from the website “Hindutva Ebooks” (<http://bharateeya.wordpress.com/2009/07/12/uttarpara-speech-sri-aurobindo/>), where Sri Aurobindo is introduced as “a Hindu nationalist.”

<sup>11</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Uttarpara Speech [1909] in Karmayogin, *Political Writings and Speeches*, SABCL:2, pp. 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

marsupial evolved in Australia. The regional isolation of this peninsula allowed that cultural evolution a favorable site. He continues:

Because in this sacred and ancient land it was given as a charge to the Aryan race to preserve through the ages.<sup>14</sup>

Here we find a change of tone, an appeal to the deep subjectivism of belonging. The language takes on a charged density. These are places where one witnesses a crossover from one discourse to another. But once again, he immediately questions the separative or privileging impulse. This is ubiquitous in Sri Aurobindo's texts — no sooner does he allow a charged assertion to settle, than he turns to a different view, which may qualify or modify the assertion. He immediately disabuses the listener of the illusion of possession:

But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country. It does not belong peculiarly and forever to a bounded part of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, those who purport to protect this religion are reminded that it does not belong in any exclusive sense to them or their nation, but to the world. He goes on to describe the characteristics of this religion in terms that make it clear that it is not what one usually thinks of as a religion, but rather a non-sectarian, universal and unitive spirituality:

That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose. This is the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including and anticipating the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy. It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us, and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God.<sup>16</sup>

If we compare this passage with the one from the *Life Divine* with which we began our consideration, it is easy to see how this expands into that. Yet, if we did not conduct the kind of close reading of the rhetorical structure of the *Uttarpara Speech*, and we didn't have the more philosophical articulation of the *Life Divine*, it isn't difficult to see how this passage could be partially interpreted to be a definition of Hindutva.

It could also be taken to be the definition or apt illustration of a certain term that has entered contemporary Religious Studies — inclusivism. Inclusivism in the context of Indian studies is a term coined by Paul Hacker, and further extended by another modern Indologist, Wilhelm Halbfass, an erstwhile professor of Philosophy at the University of Philadelphia. According to Hacker, Hinduism is the inclusivistic religion par excellence, because it assimilates other religions and speaks for them. It co-opts and eradicates by inclusion rather than by exclusion. It claims to include Islam, include Christianity, etc. in that whatever these religions may affirm as their exclusive teaching, is preempted by Hinduism, which claims to already contain them. In Hacker's

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

opinion, Hinduism is even more pernicious than exclusivistic religions because it is inclusivistic, it always already speaks for the Other, it swallows all Others up.

Once again, due to the braided nature of discourse in the Uttarpara Speech, its universalistic description of Hinduism is liable to be taken as an illustration of inclusivism, were one to ignore its complexity or not put it beside the passage descriptive of the field of Indic spirituality from the *Life Divine*. In the latter instance, it is clear that what Sri Aurobindo refers to as the field of Hinduism is not an inclusivistic religion in this sense. Looked at in this light, in spite of his use of the phrase “including and anticipating” for the description of Hinduism in the Uttarpara Speech, we can say with confidence that what he holds out here as in *The Life Divine*, is the image of a plural religion, a culture of seeking, a culture of diverse approaches to the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo concludes the Uttarpara Speech by moving from his consideration of Hindu religion to talking about the nation, and to equating these two. Once more, the language gathers a charged density of mystic or prophetic emotion. He says:

This is the word that has been put into my mouth to speak to you today. What I had intended to speak has been put away from me, and beyond what is given to me I have nothing to say. It is only the word that is put into me that I can speak to you. The word is now finished. I spoke once before with this force in me, and I said then that this movement is not a political movement, and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the sanatan dharma, which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the sanatan dharma, with it it moves and with it it grows. When the sanatan dharma declines, then the nation declines. And if the sanatan dharma were capable of perishing, with the sanatan dharma it would perish. The sanatan dharma, that is nationalism.<sup>17</sup>

Here Sri Aurobindo can be seen conflating this plural field of spiritual culture, with the nation soul. The idea of the nation soul, as we have seen already, is a kind of marriage between the ordering devices of the West, and the notion of the spiritual destiny of humanity that Sri Aurobindo inserts into the discourse of the Enlightenment. In other words, Sri Aurobindo’s nation soul subverts the order of the Enlightenment by claiming an evolving spiritual essence which modifies and supersedes the static essence of rationality emerging in the Western discourse.

## Modernity and Social Discourse

If we wish to look deeper at Sri Aurobindo’s discussions of nation soul, we must turn to the *Ideal of Human Unity*. Here we find that nation soul as an essence, as something unborn, which always exists, which is ahistorical, is put side by side, and brought into contact, or into dialog with the idea of an evolving nation soul. The nation soul is not static, the nation soul is a cultural history evolving towards universality along with all other nations. In his telling in *The Ideal of Human Unity*, the nation soul emerges at a point of time through a variety of historical processes. These processes give full-blown form to an idea which backgrounds and characterizes the history of that emergence

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

and its further development.

In looking at evolving nation souls in this fashion, Sri Aurobindo also envisages the future. The future of the world, the ordering ideology of modernity, or its teleology, is what Sri Aurobindo addresses in his own way in *The Ideal of Human Unity*. Here he envisages the *telos*, the goal of the evolution towards unity, as World Union; and he proposes two possibilities. One is that of the World State, and the other is that of the confederation of nations. Of these, it is the plural idea, that of the confederation of nations, that he prefers, because this is the idea that allows for cultural histories, for the evolution of consciousness in a variety of ways towards that which is infinite.<sup>18</sup> The Infinite One, this is the definition of Spirit, Brahman. The Brahman is not the finite one, the one that can be put within walls. The Brahman implies the infinite approach to the One, and the infinite expression of the One. That can only be achieved through plurality.

The nation, then, becomes an entity that he hopes will enter into a plural confederation. But the nation itself is a plural state. Its soul is made up of a plurality of seeking, though united by some common concerns, and evolving towards universality. This idea again finds shape not in textual discourse, but in life, in living social discourse, in the social forms of community that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother envisaged and created. If we think of these forms, we realize that the forms Sri Aurobindo created, such as the ashram that grew up around him and the Mother, were not merely isolated social forms, founded for the development of his own spiritual path, but also part of the nationalist discourse. This national discourse, the discourse of community, is in its own way a challenge to or a part of the contention against modernity. Modernity with its homogenizing forces, with its ability to isolate and disperse populations across the globe is contested by alternate societies, alternate social forms, what today we call intentional communities. But the idea of the intentional community as an alternate form to the drive of modernity was part of the discourse of Indian nationalism, not only present before Sri Aurobindo but continuing after him. It is the idea of the spiritual community, the intentional community of Universal Man-making, *Visva-Bharati*, that was fielded by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan, for example, prior to the birth of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Again, it is the idea of a spiritual community dedicated to truth and a simple life of offering to the Divine that was privileged by Gandhi in his vision of the postcolonial village, and in his own ashram at Sabarmati. It is this idea of spiritual community that takes a certain form with Sri Aurobindo, which is not a pre-modern form, but a postmodern form. That is something important we need to realize. It is the privileging of a communitarian social form but in a way which puts it into dialogue with the forces of modernity.

Thus, when we consider the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, we see that it inherits its foundations from the premodern form of the *gurukula*. But it also departs from many of the precepts of the *gurukula*. The tradition of the *gurukula* was formed at least as far back as

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<sup>18</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Chapter "Summary and Conclusion," *The Ideal of Human Unity, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL:15, pp. 548-555.

the 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE in India, so as to afford the individual seeker a “shelter,” proximity to a realized teacher and a social habitus to pursue his or her spiritual journey under the ideology of the teaching. The collective life was structured to minimize social concerns and expression was kept to a minimum. Of course, as with all social structures, the *gurukula* has undergone various changes and variations through time and, in the form in which it comes to us in the modern era, is often marked by its shadows — its “sheltering” aspect becoming an enablement for stagnation, mediocrity and corruption, its requirement of unconditional surrender to the guru becoming the basis of an authoritarian hierarchy, and its discouragement of social and creative expression becoming a source of pathological behaviors.

### Dialogic Plural Communities

In the history of the development of his spiritual community, Sri Aurobindo took quite some time to overcome his ambivalence and discomfort with calling it an ashram. He finally settled for it because he could find no other extant term for what he wanted. But he tried in a variety of ways to redefine the social content and boundaries of the ashram idea for those who were interested in following his teachings or being the community’s members. As with his literary and polemical texts, the social text of his ashram must be understood as a dialogic form between premodern Indian and postmodern (even posthuman) international and utopian ideals, such as those of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, espoused in the French Revolution.

For one, the content he put into it made the idea of this new ashram into a field of expression in which all the activities of life could find representation. Again, though it stood, like a traditional *gurukula*, with a guru (or in this case, gurus) at its center, and as its center, this was understood as the foundation of a relationship in which the gurus existed to enable the freedom of their disciples at the Ashram. The law of the guru respected the law of becoming of the individual, helping him or her through guidance, encouragement, example and yogic force to grow into the realization of full freedom and delight which was the consciousness of the guru. In terms of the social form, Sri Aurobindo’s ideal, expressed in *The Human Cycle*, was one of a habitus marked by plurality evolving in spiritual freedom to the point where no external authority was needed, a condition of spiritual anarchy.<sup>19</sup> Translated to the ashram, this meant an evolution of the social consciousness to a point where the guru within was active in individuals who needed no external control to express a perfect life of creative freedom and social harmony.

But such an enablement of freedom could not be one sided. It required an equally active participation of the disciple in the will to freedom. This is why, key to the discourse of the Ashram, is the notion, introduced by Sri Aurobindo, of the difference between a passive and an active surrender.<sup>20</sup> Surrender to the guru is the keyword of

<sup>19</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Chapter “The Group and the Individual,” *The Human Cycle, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL:15, p. 274.

<sup>20</sup> For example: “Note that a tamasic surrender refusing to fulfill the conditions and calling on God to do everything and save one all the trouble and struggle is a deception and does not

any *gurukula*, it is the surrender to a figure who controls absolute power. But an active surrender implies a dialogic will, a conscious and dynamic acknowledgment of one's own will to freedom of consciousness, constantly renewed in the act of surrender. This becomes the indispensable key to the enablement rather than the crippling of the will. Indeed, a central problem with many ashrams, and many intentional communities is that they become sites for the crippling of the will. Instead, the idea of an active surrender is one in which there is to be an enabling of every aspect of the will in its surrender, in its transpersonal growth facilitated by the guru. Everything in such an ashram is treated as an exchange causing growth of consciousness, causing flowering in a plural field, leading to states of increasing inner self-determination and spontaneous social harmony.

But if the necessity for the active surrender or the exchange of consciousness is absent on either side, whether in the disciple or the guru, one arrives instead at a stagnation of dependency and/or authoritarian domination. When instead of evolving towards a greater freedom of collective expression arising from inner union, a passive surrender in the disciples demands literal solutions to every trivial concern, the ashram devolves into a religious order or cult. Instead of a plural field of becoming and embodiment, it begins to be dominated by parasitic forces who erect an unreachable icon and a cultic practice and demand boons of mundane satisfaction from it. On the other hand, what responds to them is no longer the guru but a number of intermediate authorities who rise to take advantage of the need for displaced or surrogate responsibility. The light that leaned down from Above recedes and what is left in its place is a ground reality of the rhetoric and politics of authorization, the control of substitute authorities in place of the freedom and beauty of Love, and the regime of Theology in the name of Knowledge.

It is important to ponder these possibilities in the ideal and life of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In the later years of her life, the Mother took this ideal a step closer to the world at large with the creation of Auroville. Among other things, the Mother may have responded to some of the shadows of the ashram idea in setting up an alternate social field for the practice of the same yoga. Here, she insisted, there was to be no religious worship and no hierarchic authority. It is the aspiration for Becoming, a growth of consciousness in individuals representing all forms of world culture, which alone would safeguard the progress to Unity and Harmony for this society. Thus, shorn of all premodern "Indian" formalisms, it represented a postmodern form, free of traditional commitments. But set up to be independent and in the proximity of the ashram, what Auroville also represented is an opportunity for a dialogue between premodern Indian forms of spiritual culture with a long cultural history and a new postmodern international form built purely on the foundation of a spiritual anthropology, an integral psychology for achieving the same goals. As we know from the history of these organizations, that dialogue was sundered and remains largely unexplored. Today, the rise of Hindutva as an identity construct in India combined with a religious

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lead to freedom and perfection." Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, SABCL:25, pg. 8. See also the earlier part of this section in *Op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

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interpretation of the Integral Yoga among many at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, threatens to define tight boundaries of belonging and normative behavior in the originating social context which was conceived by its founders as a laboratory representative of humanity and a world transforming practice. With the departure of the Masters and the early generations of disciples who lived in their atmosphere of plastic wideness, depth and height — a culture which enabled individual interpretation, practice, expression and an increasing inner growth into Oneness — what seems to be developing is a field of politics, group conditioning, cultic identity and majoritarian justice. Today the social habitus necessary to the flowering of the Integral Yoga may be in danger. It is time for all people of sincerity and aspiration, who have been touched by the light that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother brought to humankind, to introspect deeply and to rethink our choices, alignments, responsibilities and actions.