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Sri Aurobindo, India, and ideological discourse

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Abstract

The first part of this essay considers Sri Aurobindo's nationalism and contextualizes it within the colonial-national interchange and the modern understanding of the nation. It then problematizes Hindutva's attempts to reductively appropriate Sri Aurobindo's pluralistic and evolutionary nationalism. In the second part, a close reading is conducted of a well-known nationalist speech of Sri Aurobindo, the Uttarpara Speech, to draw out the significance of his ideas of "nation soul". The third part applies the implications of this nationalism to a consideration of Sri Aurobindo's social ideas – concerning nations and communities in their modern and postmodern trajectories. The paper concludes by considering instances of spiritual communities such as the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville which exemplify the social context of the Integral Yoga in Sri Aurobindo's global vision of the future.

Sri Aurobindo's nationalism and the colonial-national interchange

"Congeries of religions"

To initiate our consideration of Sri Aurobindo's views on religion, we may look at 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…..

> 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 supraterrestrial 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, standardized 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

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discipline, endeavour, self-realization. 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 (Aurobindo 2001).

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". This implies a culture of seeking, not a religious doctrine with rigid boundaries. This passage comes from one of the six chapters Sri Aurobindo added to *The Life Divine* towards the end of his life. One may thus confidently treat it as Sri Aurobindo's comprehensive view of the field of religion in India.

Co-optation

This passage is important, because with time, Sri Aurobindo has been increasingly marginalized or co-opted by a variety of discourses. He has been appropriated, for instance, by the Hindu right, along with Vivekananda. Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo are now seen by many as the founding figures of Hindutva.[a] And along with this, happily accepting this identification, the Marxist left has turned on Sri Aurobindo as one of its "whipping boys", so that Sri Aurobindo has increasingly been reduced to a choice between these two images in modern and contemporary scholarship: either a "mascot" of Hindutva, or "the whipping boy" of Indian Marxism.[b]

Both of these are unfortunate reductions. Sri Aurobindo had, in fact, socialist leanings, though he was averse to ideological labeling. When necessary, he contested authoritarianism in the practice of socialism. He stood, for example, against both Stalinist Russia and Maoist China as regimes creating political conditions which stifled the freedom of individual growth (Aurobindo 1997a). Yet, he was emphatically against rampant capitalism, identifying it as "economic barbarism" (Aurobindo 1997b). There are strong grounds for constellating Sri Aurobindo with a number of socialist thinkers in terms of his political preference. As far as religion and spirituality are concerned, as clearly evidenced by the passage from *The Life Divine*, he was hardly a champion of any religious creed, attempting to cabin the Divine in sectarian boundaries or a certain national history. In the passage of our consideration, he clearly conceptualizes a field of plural religion and spiritual practice in premodern India.

Yet, his co-optation by the emergent field of Hindu politics has led to a perception of Sri Aurobindo as a champion or founder of a unitarian definition of Hinduism. This image has sought its support in certain texts of Sri Aurobindo. These are usually early nationalist texts which have been taken out of context and interpreted according to prevalent discourses of nationalistic religion. When we view these texts in their historical context we become aware of their complexity in the discourse to which they belong. It is crucial to acknowledge this historicity, because discourse is performative, our utterances enact positions in a cultural conversation; all we say belongs to an existing mindset, with a common language and a common understanding which allow for certain things to be said and certain things to be left unsaid.

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 move-ment. This movement was part of a larger rethinking of colonialism. Sri Aurobindo's writings at this point do not appear in a vacuum; they belong to a cultural conversation that has a regional history of close to a hundred years before him, in what is called the Bengal Renaissance. The cultural aspect of the Bengal Renaissance had been developing since the early 19th century and Sri Aurobindo entered its properly political phase in the first decade of the 20th c. He imbibed the norms of this discourse and participated in the existing richness of its language; and he provided his own answers to the internal conversation of the colonial-national interchange which framed that discourse.

In recent times, there have been attempts to analyze this colonial-national interchange. Among the breakthrough texts that initiated this thinking was Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978. 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 capacity. As a result, on the one hand, he is glorified, valorized as a "noble savage", and on the other, is thereby subordinated and suppressed, relegated to the preserve of those who can be dominated, or who exist for the museological and touristic pleasure of the Western consumer.

Of course, many decades have passed since the publication of *Orientalism*, and today it is considered an over-simplification. The chapter of colonization in world history has given way, successively, to the age of nationalism and now, the global age; and in all these, the legacy of post-Enlightenment Europe continues to unfold for better and for worse. As a result, contemporary scholars have a more nuanced view of Said's thesis. Today, in this more refined analysis, we may see four distinct discourses co-existing in the colonial national-interchange. These four acted both independently and in a braided fashion, sometimes as an amalgam. All these can be thought of as emerging from the European Enlightenment. I would give them the names of Enlightenment Positivism, Positivist Racism/Ethnocentrism, 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. Reason, the ordering and logical principle in the cosmos, or what may more properly be called the Logos, is God; and this divine rationality is ubiquitous among all human beings. There is no superior and inferior here, there may be variations in training, but if training in reason and culture is provided, all human beings would be equally "civilized". They would become what we could call "Enlightenment Men" today.

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 called "the white-man's burden", which it bears with missionary zeal to bring the light of civilization to the "brown, black, red and yellow" peoples of the world. But nevertheless its motive is the normalization of humanity in the name of rationality. This implies a hegemonic definition of Humanity. That which it considers human is what is normatively human; everything outside that is not properly human. What cannot fit its mold is exiled from the domain of the Human.

The second discourse is connected to the first. It may be called Positivist Racism. We should include ethnocentrism in this category, springing from a sense of civilizational superiority and an Enlightenment bred hubris of progress which construed a west/non-west axial divide in terms of civilization and barbarism. However, equally or perhaps more important to this category was racism, since in the intellectual history of Europe polygenist ideas of racial distinction were pervasive throughout the 18th and 19th c. and formed an important aspect of colonial thought and policy.[c] Positivist Racism/Ethnocentrism 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, non-western people, as racially and civilizationally different and inferior. Non-western people—we find here the invention of "the west" as a self-identifying civilizational essence tied to race and culture and differentiated from "the east" or "the Orient"—lack a sufficiency of that definitional property of Reason to the degree required for 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 (Bhabha 2005). 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 these discourses are with us today. They subtly underlie what is known as neoliberal globalization, and within that paradigm, they constitute some aspects of the behavior of the "first world" to the "third world". The third world retains the character of 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 and ethnocentrism has been displaced onto another discourse of subordination.

Along with these, as their necessary inverse, come two other discourses. They constitute the field of Orientalism. The first of these could be called Romantic Orientalism. This 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",—that is, 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 Orientalism is also conflicted. Just as the discourse of Positivism expresses itself as a binary, Orientalism carries an internal conflict which divides it into two discourses. One of these is mainstream Orientalism, that which was so well captured by Edward Said. This is what characterizes "Oriental" or "non-western" people as those who will remain and are meant to remain creatures of imagination and spirituality, not capable of political self-determination or rational epistemology. They are therefore, essentialized and subordinated; yet simultaneously 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.

The fourth discourse is a variant of Romantic Orientalism; it 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.

Natonalist discourses

These four discourses find apposite halves or counterparts in the national discourse. Nationalism develops out of what has been termed interpellation.[d] Interpellation refers to the way in which one's response is shaped by how one has been addressed. For instance, in being addressed as a "nigger", four options of response become available to the addressee. One is to turn one's back on the oppressor and refuse to answer. In such a case, one has targeted oneself for marginalization and extermination 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 submission. One becomes then the slave that s/he is being called. In our historical instance, by doing this one turns into a tamed subject of the ideological order of the Enlightenment, its world order. This is the world order determining our present epoch, the Modern. Ubiquitous to the modern world is the omnipresent temporal order of the Enlightenment, the most systematic overarching ideology to encircle the globe. By accepting its interpellation, one becomes an "Uncle Tom", [e] and eventually the subject-citizen of neoliberal globalization's "third world". In the colonial-national interchange, there will be nationalists happy to fulfill this role; they will struggle to free the nation to play its competitive part in the triumphal progress of Enlightenment Man and Technological World. A good example of a leader in Indian nationalism modeled after this discourse 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 mentioned 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 has its own response through interpellation. The exotic, primitive or romantic "savage" here becomes a caged object of display, prized for his or her alien fascination, in modernity's exhibitionary order.[f] Or, he bares his predictable teeth and fangs; that is, in our case, when the person referred to as "nigger" reacts with blind hostility. This defiance through aggression is an implied consent, an acceptance of interpellation, hand in glove, fitting 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 arisen 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. Here one counters the ideological

identification 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.

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",[g] 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 *svadharma*). The Extremists held all means, including violence to be legitimate to the attainment of independence, but more importantly, through their speeches and journalistic instruments, opened a critical dialogic space which penetrated into the roots of colonial hubris within the bastion of Enlightenment ideology. Sri Aurobindo himself was among those who helped to engineer a rupture at the historic Surat Congress of 1907, leading to a separation between the Moderates and the Extremists (Bose & Jalal 1998).

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 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", - a kind of strategy that has been called "strategic essentialism" by the postcolonial, feminist and subaltern theorist, Gayatri Spivak[h] - because of the vitality that came from the combined effort of these ideological positions; but he privileged 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 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 (Heidegger 1977) - 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 from *The Life Divine* slipped 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 difficult to see how the first of the two latter Nationalist discourses developed into the dominant idea of Hindutva. This construct seems to be sweeping across the Indian nation at present, posing as a majoritarian national identity; and its shadow also hangs over the ashram in Pondicherry founded by Sri Aurobindo. 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.

Hindutava's appropriation of Sri Aurobindo's pluralistic and evolutionary nationalism

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, a teleology. (Hegel 1988) 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 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 granted the lowest rungs of static existence to the "Oriental" peoples of India and China. In his description of these racial or national essences, Hegel used the term *Volksgeist*, spirit of the people. This can be seen as the root of the "nation soul" idea.[i] Johann Herder (1744–1803), another German thinker and senior contemporary of Hegel, is usually credited with this idea, (von Herder 1968) which goes to say that the idea of the nation soul arose in Germany as part of late Enlightenment metaphysics around the turn of the 18th/19th c. From here, it spread quickly throughout Europe and served to justify the race idea in colonialism.

As touched on earlier, 19th century Europe was pervaded with the polygenist idea of distinct races and a racial philosophy of history, which made it easy for the idea of racial essences to be accepted at large. Today we may find this difficult to believe - but 19th century Europe was shot through with the sense of racism. This wasn't exclusive to Germany; one found it all over Europe. Of course, race was conflated with culture, so that today it is difficult to separate the racial from the ethnocentric in thinking of that time. The "world" was imaged in terms of races/ethnicities arranged in a static classification represented in terms of a hierarchy of scale. It was this racial essence which stood largely behind the European subjective idea of the nation. This was part of the discourse of Positivist Racism and it formed a prominent aspect of colonialism.

Thus we can see how the idea of nation soul arose out of a racist discourse of the Enlightenment and its extension in colonialism. Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and other thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance also spoke of Bharat (India) as a nation with a soul. Their nationalistic rhetoric in this regard arose partly from an adaptation and extension of the Hindu idea of all living things being unique expressions of the One Being, Brahman; hence having "souls" (*atman*) with their own law of being and becoming (*svabhāva*/*svadharma*). But they were undoubtedly familiar with the European idea of the nation soul and their invocation of this category can also be seen as a strategic subversion of the Enlightenment discourse by inserting a neo-Vedāntic spiritual content into it. This is a dialogic response to the interpellation of racial colonialism, whether Positivist or Orientalist, an acceptance of the interpellated discourse which becomes transformed in the retelling. What was attempted by these Indian nationalist 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*. (Aurobindo 1997c) 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 not as static, but each evolving towards universality along a certain line or perspective of becoming.

Internal dialogue

In considering Sri Aurobindo's nationalism, the complex internal dialog between two forms of national discourse, the static and the transformative, we would do well to consider a passage from his celebrated *Uttarpara Speech*. (Aurobindo 1997d) This is one of the texts often quoted by proponents of Hindutva to demonstrate Sri Aurobindo's advocacy for a Hindu nation.[j] But such readings seldom look closely at the complexity of the text. The early nationalist tracts of Sri Aurobindo are particularly interesting due to their complexity and demand close reading. Only when read in its historicity and in comparison with his later texts, can we arrive at a clearer understanding of his position.

The Uttarpara Speech was delivered to a Hindu religious group in Bengal in 1909. I turn to the concluding paragraphs from it. Here Sri Aurobindo 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". (Aurobindo 1997e) The Society for the Protection of Religion—we see that the choice of the group to address is an acceptance of mainstream Hindu religion as part of a nationalistic response. Thus, Sri Aurobindo draws on the solidarity of people whose mission is to protect Hinduism, 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". (Aurobindo 1997e) This has the ring of a slogan, a collective mission.

But he immediately interposes a question to problematize this assertion and 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 (Aurobindo 1997e).

In other words, its identification with a subcontinental culture arises merely by dint of its regional evolution. This was its evolution's stage, just as the marsupial evolved in Australia. The isolation of the peninsula allowed this 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 (Aurobindo 1997e).

Here we find a change of tone, an appeal to the deep subjectivism of belonging. Of course, the use of the term "Aryan race" here should not be confused with its later pejorative racist sense, nor is there any special privilege attaching to the term. However, as explained above, this is an example of dialogic nationalist discourse, a strategic re-appropriation of the "nation soul". To understand better his use of the term "Aryan race", we should look at other synchronic or diachronic contexts where he has referred to it. A few years after this (1914), Sri Aurobindo started the journal *Arya* from Pondicherry, in which he published most of his major works. In the second issue (September 1914), he explained the significance of the journal's title. Here he made it explicit that the term stood for certain characteristics of self-culture which had been accepted by the Vedic people as their ideal: "…the word in its original use expressed not a difference of race, but a difference of culture. For in the Veda the Aryan peoples are those who had accepted a particular type of self-culture, of inward and outward practice, of ideality, of aspiration" (Aurobindo 1998). He also wrote his interpretations of the Vedas in this journal and along with these, his philological speculations on Vedic Sanskrit in an article titled "On the Origins of Aryan Speech". Here again, he disavows any racial essence to the term "Aryan", restricting its meaning to culture and language (Aurobindo 1995). Hence, "Aryan race" here should be taken as describing a people who share an evolving cultural history with its norms and virtues. Yet, befitting the nationalistic context, his language takes on a charged density. There are places in his texts where one witnesses such a crossover from one discourse to another. But immediately he 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 (Aurobindo 1997d).

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, just as the "Aryan race"

is no race per se, but a people who privilege a set of qualities. 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, unitive and pluralist 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 (Aurobindo 1997d).

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 the later formulation. Yet, if we did not conduct this 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 an apt illustration for a term that has entered contemporary Religious Studies - Inclusivism. Inclusivism in the modern academic context is an idea coined by Paul Hacker (1913–1978) (Hacker 1983), and further extended by his student, Wilhelm Halbfass (1940–2000) (Halbfass 1988). According to Hacker, Hinduism is the inclusivistic religion par excellence, because it assimilates other religions and speaks for them, co-opting and eradicating by inclusion rather than by exclusion. It claims to "include" Islam, Christianity, etc., in that whatever these religions may affirm as their exclusive standpoint, is preempted by Hinduism's claim of containment. In Hacker's opinion, Hinduism is even more pernicious than exclusivistic religions *because* it is inclusivistic, since it always already speaks for the "Other", muffling its otherness. Yet, Hacker's Inclusivism is a reductionist perspective on Hindu philosophy of religion. Though it may apply to a hegemonic Advaita Vedanta which erases all differences in a nameless and faceless Monism, this does not define or exhaust Hinduism, whose telos moves to a paradoxical and supramental affirmation of a simultaneity of realizations, without erasing any.

Sri Aurobindo's universalistic description of Hinduism is at the same time a pluralism and not an illustration of an inclusivism which swallows and erases other approaches to the Divine. It embraces all approaches without forcing a unitary definition on them. If it affirms a radical unity, this co-exists with its radical multiplicity and indicates the possibility of a supramental integrality which includes the two. One cannot ignore this complexity in Sri Aurobindo's affirmation of the Sanatan Dharma, particularly when one puts it beside the passage descriptive of the field of Indic spirituality from the *Life Divine*. Looked at in this light, we can say with confidence that what Sri Aurobindo holds out in the Uttarpara Speech, as in *The Life Divine*, is the image of a plural religion, a culture of illimitable seeking, a field of infinite approaches to the infinite 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 (Halbfass 1988).

As we have seen, Sri Aurobindo has defined Sanatan Dharma as something which cannot be contained or limited in a geographic region or a nation. We also saw that the Sanatan Dharma is not a Unitarian religion but a "congeries of religions", a field of plural approaches to the Divine, not static but open universally and perpetually. Yet he points to this unceasing cultural history of spiritual seeking as something that has developed in the Indian subcontinent, furthered and protected by its people. We saw how his reference to these people as "the Aryan race" is an inversion of the western race idea and points to an evolving set of cultural qualities. Finally, in this charged conclusion of his talk, he speaks of the "Hindu nation" and conflates it with the Sanatan Dharma, the plural field of spiritual culture. Like the "Aryan race", the "Hindu nation" needs to be understood in terms of Sri Aurobindo's definition of the "nation soul". For Sri Aurobindo, the idea of the nation soul, as we have seen, is a dialogic relation between the modern ordering devices of the West, and the notion of the spiritual destiny of humanity that he 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. It is true that Sri Aurobindo, here, is identifying the destiny of India and its people (the nation) as tied to the preservation and furtherance of the Sanatan Dharma. But the nuances of the speech tell us quite clearly that this nation is an evolving aspiration that is unpredictable, open to every approach to the Divine and marked by a culture of seeking that defines the "soul" of its people, not as a racial or ethnic essence but as a creative embrace bearing the trust of spiritual pluralism.

Implications of Sri Aurobindo's nationalism in relation to his social philosophy

Modernity and social discourse

If we wish to look deeper at Sri Aurobindo's discussions of nation soul, we must turn to his sociological texts, such as *The Human Cycle*. Here we find that nation soul as an

essence, as something unborn, which always exists, and is ahistorical in that sense, is brought into dialog with the idea of an evolving cultural psychology. The nation soul is not static, it is a cultural history evolving towards universality along with all other nations.[k] In his telling in *The Human Cycle*, 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 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, that of the confederation of nations. (Aurobindo 1997h) Of these, it is the plural idea - the confederation of nations - that he prefers, because it allows for the evolution of consciousness in a variety of ways towards that which is infinite. (Aurobindo 1997i) According to the Upanishads, Brahman is defined as the Infinite One. The Brahman is not the finite one, the one that can be put within walls. The Brahman is the One with infinite approaches, and infinite expressions. That can only be known and realized through a radical plurality.

The nation, then, becomes an entity that Sri Aurobindo hopes, will enter into a plural world confederation. This also implies that the nation, both objectively as a bounded, administered entity, and subjectively, as an evolving culture, cannot be thought of in isolation, but as part of a world family, based in identity but evolving plurally towards overlapping universalities. In terms of Sri Aurobindo's Neo-Vedāntic thought, this constitutes an affirmation of an integral Advaita which sees all as the Brahman, but acknowledges infinite possibilities of evolution and expression for Brahman in oneself and in others. This requires a praxis of political thinking which must simultaneously affirm three *mahāvākyas* of Vedānta without privileging any: (1) All this is the Brahman (*sarvam khaluvidam brahmā*); (2) I am That (*so' ham* or *aham brahmāsmi*); and (3) Thou are That (*tat tvam asi*). One can see here how the nation and its soul, as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo is to be conceived as a dialogic evolving entity that cannot be thought of except in relation to essentially identical but sensibly unique "others" in a world context.

But this thinking can further be applied to the nation itself – the nation is a plural state, its nation soul made up of a plurality of seeking, though united in a common historical conversation, evolving towards universality. This idea finds practical shape, in living social discourse, in the forms of community that Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (aka the Mother), envisaged and created. We should note that these forms, such as the ashram that grew up around Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in Pondicherry, South India, or the international habitus, Auroville, founded by the Mother, were not isolated social forms, founded for the development of an exclusive spiritual path, but also an embodied aspect of the nationalist (and larger post-Enlightenment) discourse.[l] This is the discourse of community, 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 of experimental ontology and selective interchange with modernity, what

we call *intentional communities* today. The idea of the intentional community as an alternate form to the homogenizing neo-liberal drive of modernity was part of the discourse of Indian nationalism, present before Sri Aurobindo and continuing after him. We see it in the intentional community of Universal Man-making, *Visva-Bharati*, that was fielded by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan, prior to the birth of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.[m] 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.[n] This idea takes its specific form with Sri Aurobindo, not a pre-modern form, but a postmodern one. It is the privileging of a communitarian social form, in a way which puts it in 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*.[o] But it also departs from many of the older precepts in response to modern needs. The tradition of the *gurukula*, was formed at least as far back as the 10th 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 following the ideology and praxis 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* (or ashram) 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 inevitable shadows – its "sheltering" aspect becoming an enablement for stagnation, mediocrity and corruption; its requirement of unconditional surrender to the guru, the basis of an authoritarian hierarchy; and its impedance of social and creative expression, a source of pathological behaviors. We may identify the primary cause for this in the norm of human equality and enhanced individual agency privileged by modernity, and its discontents in a premodern habitus.

Dialogic plural communities

In the history of the development of his spiritual community, Sri Aurobindo took a long time to overcome his ambivalence and discomfort with accepting the term "ashram" to characterize it.[p] 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 transaction between premodern Indian and postmodern (and/or posthuman/suprahuman) international and utopian ideals, such as those of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, espoused in the French Revolution (Aurobindo 1997j).

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 (Heehs 2008c). 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 embodied realization of full freedom and delight. (Aurobindo 1999) In terms of the social form, Sri Aurobindo's ideal, expressed in *The Human Cycle*, was one of a plural habitus

evolving in spiritual freedom to the point where no external authority was needed, a condition of "spiritual anarchy". (Aurobindo 1997k) 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 central to the discourse of the Ashram was the notion, dwelt on by both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, of the difference between a "passive" and an "active" surrender.[q] Surrender to the guru is the watchword of 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, actively and constantly renewed in the act of surrender. This becomes the indispensable key to the enablement rather than the crippling of the will, a central problem with many ashrams and intentional communities. The concept of an "active surrender" turns this hidden possibility conscious at the outset by requiring the agency of the disciple in his/her transpersonal growth facilitated by the guru. The field of relationships in such an ashram is meant to transform all exchanges into occasions for growth of consciousness, a flowering in a plural field, leading to states of increasing inner self-determination and spontaneous social harmony.

However, if the necessity for the "active surrender" is absent on either side, whether in the disciple or the guru, one arrives at a stagnation of dependency and/or authoritarian domination. When instead of evolving towards a greater freedom of individual and collective expression, a "passive surrender" in the disciples demands literal solutions to every mundane 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 erecting an unreachable icon and a cultic practice—all the better to bypass responsibility and demand boons of mundane satisfaction. 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 and dogma in place of the freedom and beauty of Love, the authoritarian sign of the Father, the superego, in place of the creative consciousness of the Teacher within, and the regime of a frozen Theology in the name of Knowledge.

Conclusion

Sri aurobindo ashram and auroville as experiments of intentional communities as embodying the social context of the integral yoga

It is useful to ponder these possibilities in the ideal and life of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, whose population increased hugely during the 1940s and began to be dominated by an increasing religious devotionalism. In 1968, the Mother took the ideal of the spiritual community a step closer to the world at large with the creation of Auroville, an international city with the aim of fostering world unity though spiritual growth in understanding and oneness. Among other things, the Mother may have responded to some of the shadows of the ashram idea in setting up this alternate social field for the practice of the same yoga. Here, she insisted, there was to be no religious worship and no hierarchic authority.[r] 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 post-modern 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.[s] This would be able to give renewed shape to Sri Aurobindo's "dialogic orientalism", and provide experimental cultures towards his political vision of a future world.

Unfortunately, both these organizations have had their share of difficulties, both individually and mutually, so that the possibility of that dialogue seems aborted and remains largely unexplored. If the Sri Aurobindo ashram has veered towards a religious "passive surrender", Auroville's failings and excesses have arisen from an inverse problematic – laxity of intent, the shapeless aerial miasma of the New Age.[t] Today, the rise of Hindutva as an identity construct in India combined with the reduction of the Integral Yoga to a Hindu devotional cult among many at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, threatens to define exclusivist 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 has inevitably intervened is a field of ambitious leaders, mass conditioning, cultic identity and majoritarian justice. This pessimistic though realistic scenario is not, however, without its silver lining – both the Sri Aurobindo ashram and Auroville continue to harbor personalities and possibilities capable of giving a positive expression to the social experiment that Sri Aurobindo conceived as part of his "dialogic orientalism" and articulated in his texts and practices, partnered by the Mother. It remains to be seen how the unstable forces in these two habitii interact and what sustained direction, whether in fulfillment or failure of their promise, they are able to manifest.

Endnotes

[a]Hindutva is a term coined by V.D. Sarvarkar (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.

[b]See (Heehs 2006).

[c]For an account of the polygenist/monogenist disputes, see, for example (Desmond & Moore 2009).

[d]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. See (Althusser & Althusser 1970).

[e]http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/ (last accessed 9/28/12).

[f]See (Mitchell 1992).

[g]For a short introduction to political Moderates and Extremists in Indian nationalism, see (Heehs 1988, 1994).

[h]"Strategic essentialism" is a term coined by literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to refer to a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves. This is 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 (Spivak 1985).

[i]See (Cheah 2003).

[j]For instance, one could 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". This was last accessed by me on 10/10/2011, though the site bharateeya.wordpress.con seems to have disappeared from the web at this time.

[k]"[I]t is a group-soul that, once having attained to a separate distinctness, must become more and more self-conscious" (Aurobindo 1997f). See also the chapter (Aurobindo 1997g).

[l]http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org; http://www.auroville.org (last accessed: 9/27/2012).

[m]http://www.santiniketan.com/ (last accessed: 9/27/2012).

[n]http://www.gandhiashram.org.in/ (last accessed: 9/27/2012).

[o]For an interesting study of the *guru-shishya* tradition and the *gurukula* in modern/nationalist contexts for South Indian classical music, see Chapter 6, (Weidman 2006).

[p]In 1926, speaking about their community to a group of young men who lived with him in Pondicherry and practiced his yoga, he refused to name it, saying the word "center" had "no meaning" in this context; and that "sangha" and "ashram" were even worse; both terms had been "misused for so long, that they ought to be withdrawn from circulation." (Heehs 2008a). In the late 1920s, he began using the word "ashram" for the community of disciples, "for want of a better word." (Heehs 2008b).

[q]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 lead to freedom and perfection." (Aurobindo 2012a). See also the earlier part of this section in (Aurobindo 2012b).

[r]See http://www.auroville.org/thecity/matrimandir/no_religion.htm (last accessed 9/26/2012).

[s]See (Sen & Psychology 1986).

[t]For a tragicomic account of Auroville's problematic, read (Jocelyn 2009).

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