



The Bhagavadgita, Pistol, and the Lone Bhadrak¹: Individual Spirituality, Masculinity, and Politics in the Nationalist Writings of Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950)

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This article examines the nationalist writings and agenda of the revolutionary turned monk Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), who consolidated the cult of the motherland with the politics of a virile masculine resistance to British colonialism. Aurobindo was the first significant political leader to formulate an agenda for direct political action on spiritual (Hindu) principles. The most portrayed and at times caricatured figure of the early twentieth century “Swadeshi” revolutionary was a young (upper-caste and middle-class) Hindu male who carries a pistol and a copy of the Bhagavadgita in his two pockets. And Aurobindo’s writings and speeches were the direct inspiration behind this figure. The extremists’ strong and addictive ideals of self-sacrifice (atmotsarga) and devotion towards nation (deshabhakti) retained their significance long after “armed struggle” declined in influence in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent “satyagraha.”

“Our history is the sacred biography of the Mother. Our philosophies are the revelations of the Mother’s mind. ... Our religion is the organized expression of the soul of the Mother. The outsider knows her as India.” Bipin Chandra Pal²

“Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you will have to live. ... Have you realised that you are merely the instruments of God, that your bodies are not your own? ... If you have realized that, then alone you will be able to restore this great nation.” Aurobindo Ghose³

This article explores the deployment of spirituality in Indian nationalist militancy in the first decade of the twentieth century. A strategic conflation of violence and spirituality took place in the figure of the “Indian Nationalist” at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1903-08) was the new formula’s first testing ground. The radical young “Swadeshi” leader was far removed from the self-scrutinizing

reformer, educator, and social activist of the nineteenth century; he (I use the pronoun consciously, as the leaders were almost exclusively male) had little interest in either social or economic reform. He was the prophet of a new religion: the worship and service of “motherland.” It was this new ideal that stormed and eventually overcame the Indian National Congress – established in 1885 and operating hitherto as a mirror to the British parliamentary process – and radicalized it into a fully functional and virile national party. The dramatic shift occurred in the (in)famous 1907 session of the Indian National Congress in Surat, when the incredibly Anglicized and “civil” proceedings headed by the elderly members of the Congress – including Pheroze Shah Mehta and Surendranath Bannerjee – was interrupted by a group of young radicals, and the Indian nationalist political stage was divided overnight into two camps: the “moderates” and the “extremists.” The extremists’ strong and addictive ideals of self-sacrifice (*atmotsarga*) and devotion towards nation (*deshabhakti*) retained their significance long after “armed struggle” declined in influence in the wake of Gandhi’s non-violent “*satyagraha*.” Focusing on the political writings and speeches of one of the pioneer “extremist” leaders – Aurobindo Ghose – I revisit the crucial turning point in Indian nationalism where the rhetoric of armed “revolution” and the requisite “self-sacrifice” began to be infused into the political language of the day, colored by the new religiosity of the motherland ideal. The Indian National Congress rebounded from its extremist zeal to “non-violence” under Gandhi’s leadership, and evolved past its short revolutionary phase into an organized mainstream political party capable of official bargain and campaign. In spite of this dramatic shift, the Congress retained the *Swadeshi* spiritual core of its political program, through its entire phase of civil disobedience. And besides the Congress, there were several noticeable parallel movements of active armed resistance, which were direct offshoots of the 1907 extremist movement. The most portrayed and at times caricatured figure of the early twentieth century “*Swadeshi*” revolutionary was a young (upper-caste and middle-class) Hindu male who carried a pistol and a copy of the *Bhagavadgita* in his two pockets.

Aurobindo Ghose’s writings and ideas played a key role in the radicalization of an entire gamut of nationalists, both “extremist” and “moderate.” In the sections that follow, I scrutinize the creative and intellectual processes in Aurobindo’s writings – in their historical context – that amalgamate a masculine spirituality, political action, and the imagination of a nation together into the new paradigm of pan-Indian nationalism. This paper does not present a comprehensive reading or critique of Aurobindo’s political philosophy; it introduces to the reader a crucial turning point in Indian political discourse in which Aurobindo played a significant role. The conflation of religiosity and political action continued to have a complex presence in Indian nationalist *milieus* throughout the twentieth century, and the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s has asserted the scholarly imperative of re-examining the roots of the above conflation. This article is an attempt in that direction.

Two Voyages and India’s Spiritual Revolution

In 1893 Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), a Hindu Sannyasin (monk) – then newly ordained as Swami Vivekananda – left India for the first time to participate in the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. His legendary uninvited appearance in the Parliament changed

the reception of Hinduism in the West, and made him a celebrity. Between 1893 and 1902 (the year of his premature death) Vivekananda spent most of his time and energy speaking to and interacting with an increasingly interested Western audience. In the year of Vivekananda's first voyage to the West, a twenty-one year old Indian named Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose, who had lived fourteen years in England, several of them as the houseguest and pupil of a Manchester clergyman, returned to India, never to leave again. Aurobindo Ghose had just prematurely opted out of the coveted Civil Services, and taken up employment with the Maharaja of Baroda, an independent state in Western India. From 1893 onwards until his official retirement from "politics" in 1910, Aurobindo integrated contemporary nationalist ideas into a movement; and along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipinchandra Pal among others, transformed the Indian National Congress from a discussion forum into a political party. Aurobindo became one of the key leaders who fused the diverse pockets of *bhadralok* dissent into a coherent resistance that would crystallize further into a national movement under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

I recall Vivekananda in this essay for a reason. In the history of early Indian nationalism, the two figures – Narendranath Datta, later known as Swami Vivekananda, and Aurobindo Ghose, later known as Sri Aurobindo – constitute an interesting complementary pair. While Vivekananda expanded spirituality out into a mission of selfless social service, Aurobindo withdrew from his public mission – after a stint at armed struggle – into a spiritual cocoon, never to emerge again. They both came from similar upper-caste upper-middle-class educated Calcutta families that thrived on the colonial bureaucratic structure. Narendranath, the son of a renowned Calcutta attorney, and Aurobindo, the son of a successful physician, faced none or very few of the hurdles and frustrating situations that, for instance, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) faced in his bureaucratic career. Narendranath could comfortably thrive in the already established Calcutta culture of liberal college scholarship, engaging in explorations of both Western philosophy and Indian spirituality, both of which he was obsessed with, from an early age. Aurobindo's childhood was especially distanced from the *bhadralok* struggles, as his father sent him to live with a cleric family in Manchester, England. His years away from India were significantly different from say, Mahatma Gandhi's years in South Africa. Having grown up sheltered from the political and economic realities of the colonial Indian middle class, Aurobindo expressed, on his return to India, a version of nationalism that was more distilled, theoretical, and spiritual than most of his contemporaries.

Aurobindo emerged, even in his early writings, as a macro-political strategist and thinker. As early as 1893, he could dissociate India's political future from its colonial present:

The simple truth of the matter is that we shall not get from the British Parliament anything better than nominal redress, or at the most a petty and tinkering legislation. ... If we are indeed to renovate our country, we must no longer hold out supplicating hands to the English Parliament, like an infant crying to its nurse for a toy, but must recognize the hard truth that every nation must bear out its own

path to salvation with pain and difficulty, and not rely on the tutelage of another. (Ghose, 1996, p. 8)

Earlier in the same article, he had pointed out the irreconcilability of England's colonial interest with justice to India:

The English are not, as they are fond of representing themselves, a people panting to do justice to all whom they govern. They are not an incarnation of justice, neither are they an embodiment of morality; but of all nations they are the most sentimental: hence it is that they like to think of themselves, and to be thought by others, a just people and a moral people. It is true that in the dull comedy, which we call English politics, Truth and Justice – written in large letters – cover the whole of the poster, but in the actual enactment of the play these characters have very little indeed to do. It was certainly not by appealing to the English sense of justice that the Irish people have come within reach of obtaining some measure of redress for their grievances. (Ghose, 1996, p. 6)

The Irish example, which Aurobindo continued to discuss in the essay, was significant, for this was the period which saw some extraordinary ideological collaboration between the Irish and the Indian nationalists. But first we must examine Aurobindo's militant nationalist agenda with specific focus on his characterization of India's spiritual identity. The Indian past that Aurobindo invoked repeatedly in his writings and speeches was an integral part of that spiritual identity, and I will compare his readings of the past with that of Vivekananda and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (henceforth referred to as Bankim).⁴ As I have mentioned above, Aurobindo's unusual childhood and adolescence (separated from his parents, native country, and native language) have to be taken into account in considering his entry into the Indian nationalist dialogue. In the last two years of his stay in England, Aurobindo chose to learn Sanskrit and Bengali – two languages he had never studied before. I will show how the idea of a "nation" that emerged in Aurobindo's writings not only exhibited a refinement of Bankim's pioneering concepts, in some sense it was also the product of a distancing effect, a view from top down, where the "signifiers" were so detached from their "signifieds" that they took on a life on their own. For example, the ease and force with which Aurobindo posited the mother-goddess-nation symbolism in his writings were remarkably absent from Bankim's novel *Anandamath*. The political life of *bhadraloks* was changing rapidly in the last decade of the nineteenth century, with increasing glossing over of the complexities, conflicts, and differences within the nation. Aurobindo's writings provide the most relevant case study for the above.

From Anandamath to Bhawani Mandir: Aurobindo's Deployment of the "Motherland Ideal"

In 1905, Aurobindo published a pamphlet named *Bhawani Mandir* that advanced the *Anandamath* idea of celibate muscular Hindus engaging in an armed struggle for the liberation of the motherland. The fact that *Bhawani Mandir* contains no direct reference to Bankim's novel suggests that Aurobindo perhaps presupposed the reader's familiarity

with the novel *Anandamath*. Bankim was the first thinker to collude – in the Bengali/Indian context – the concepts of mother-goddess and native land into “motherland,” and Aurobindo had hailed him as the seer and the first prophet of nationalism. Aurobindo adopted Bankim’s metaphor of the mother-goddess-land, and then sought to redefine and expand on the relationship between the mother-goddess and the motherland using classical Hindu motifs:

What is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha Mardini sprang into being from the Shakti of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred million people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of Tamas, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons. To get rid of Tamas we have but to wake the Brahma within. (Ghose, 1996, p. 69)

While the power that Bankim’s ‘santans’ – motherland’s (male) ‘children,’ in *Anandamath* – derived from their worship of the ‘mother-goddess-land’ was a physical militancy, Aurobindo spoke here of the power of spiritual and political regeneration. Western materialism could be countered and even superseded by the right application of spirituality in the political life of a nation. The political rise of Japan as a non-Western power drew admiration and a discernable envy from both Aurobindo and Vivekananda:

There is no instance in history of a more marvelous and sudden up-surfing of strength in a nation than modern Japan. All sorts of theories had been started to account for the uprising, but now the intellectual Japanese are telling us what were the fountains of that mighty awakening, the sources of that inexhaustible strength. They were drawn from religion. It was the Vedantic teachings of Oyomei and the recovery of Shintoism with its worship of the national Shakti in Japan in the image and person of the Mikado that enabled the little island empire to wield the stupendous weapons of Western knowledge and science as lightly and invincibly as Arjun wielded the Gandiv. (Ghose, 1996, pp. 71-2)

The attitude of both Vivekananda and Aurobindo to Japan’s modern-day “progress” has to be examined in the colonial perspective. First, from the point of view of the *bhadralok* intellectual, the rise of a “non-Western” imperialist power somehow challenged the seemingly permanent hegemony of Western colonialism. Secondly, the distinctness of the spiritual/religious “identity” of Japan (non-Christian and hence removed from the colonialist nexus) hinted at a possibility for other non-Christian spiritualities’ self-assertion. The Orientalist historiography of India could be readily used to re-affirm the immense spiritual strength inherent in India; all that was needed was a renewal of that strength. As Partha Chatterjee (1986) has so eloquently shown in his seminal work on nationalism, the inherent distinctness of the colonized was an integral part of the nascent

nationalist identity that kept it from being a simple derivative function of the European nationalisms. India's political destiny, as it appeared to the author of *Bhawani Mandir*, was inextricably tied to its spiritual destiny:

All great awakenings in India, all her periods of mightiest and most varied vigour have drawn their vitality from the fountainheads of some deep religious awakening. Wherever the religious awakening has been complete and grand, the national energy it has created has been gigantic and puissant; wherever the religious movement has been narrow or incomplete, the national movement has been broken, imperfect or temporary. *The persistence of this phenomenon is proof that it is ingrained in the temperament of the race.* (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 72, emphasis mine)

The last sentence in the quoted section echoed the familiar lore of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I explore this issue in greater detail in the next section, in conjunction with Aurobindo's preoccupation with history. The awakening of India that the author of *Bhawani Mandir* felt was imminent was part of a global vision, mythologized in the familiar trope of high Hinduism:

Wherever we turn our gaze, huge masses of strength rise before our vision, tremendous, swift and inexorable forces, gigantic figures of energy, terrible sweeping columns of force. ... The Shakti of War, the Shakti of Wealth, the Shakti of Science are tenfold more mighty and colossal, a hundredfold more fierce, rapid and busy in their activity, a thousandfold more prolific in resources, weapons and instruments than ever before in recorded history. Everywhere the Mother is at work; from Her mighty and shaping hands enormous forms of Rakshasas, Asuras, Devas, are leaping forth into the arena of the world. We have seen the slow but mighty rise of the great empires of the West, we have seen the swift, irresistible and impetuous bounding into life of Japan. Some are Mlechchha Shaktis clouded in their strength, black or blood-crimson with Tamas or Rajas, others are Arya Shaktis, bathed in the pure flame of renunciation and utter self-sacrifice: but all are the Mother in Her new phase, remoulding, creating. She is pouring Her spirit into the old; she is whirling into life the new. (Chatterjee, 1986, pp. 65-6)

The mother is not simply motherland *per se*; in segments like above she is History, performing a cosmic dance of revival. The metaphor of the "mother" shifts swiftly and confusingly throughout the text; and at times is so diffused that it seems like a parody of itself. I would like to point out in this context that the literary form of *Bhawani Mandir* is, as would be expected from such a text, that of a manifesto; it was probably, therefore, not meant to be analytical and logically coherent as much as it was meant to be persuasive and dogmatic. It is possible that Aurobindo intended to extend the metaphoric use of the mother-goddess deployed so effectively by Bankim in *Anandamath*. It is important to remember that while Bankim in *Anandamath* effectively crystallized the mother-goddess-land combine, he never rallied for a re-enactment of the santans' rebellion in the

contemporary political scene. Aurobindo's use of a literary motif to instigate a political arousal was therefore groundbreaking in its own way.

It is difficult to gauge the sincerity of belief in the "Shakti ideal" in both Bankim and Aurobindo's writings. Did they merely wish to formulate a rhetoric that was distinct from the mimic Anglo-Indian political speech or the no less mimic political jargon of the Bengal Renaissance? The historical and political analyses that both Bankim and Aurobindo published in times of complex political turmoil were reasonably astute, deep, and epistemologically aligned with the nineteenth century liberal Western ideals of which they were intellectual products. Did they actually find, in the upsurge of Shakti-worship in Bengal a possibility for an organic point of identification that would be more powerful even than any secular symbolism? The Bengali upper-caste *bhadraloks* were either Shakta or Vaishnav, but Shakti-worship came to dominate the public religious sphere in nineteenth century Bengal, when Durga Puja (worship of goddess Durga) was gradually emerging as the single most important annual festival. It is worthwhile to recall the ways in which the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore read and critiqued the new fascination with mother-worship of a community in which real women were relegated more and more to the newly formed prisons of bourgeois domesticity. However, Tagore's critique appears more complex in the light of the repeated and emphatic use of images of mother-worship in nationalistic songs, poems, and other writings by Tagore himself. The subject of Tagore's attack – the *bhadralok's* obsession with the mother-land ideal – was more complex than a simple nationalistic extension of the Shakta bent of mind. Even in *Anandamath*, Bankim had created a religious communion that was neither revivalist nor nativist, but tempered with nineteenth century modern European ideas of identity-formation. Shakta and Vaishnav ideals merged and shaped a nascent "Hindu" identity of Bankim's "santans" in a mode that had not existed prior to the hegemonic establishment of the colonialist historiography of India. The vague boundaries of a "Hindu" community that Bankim drew in his novels, *Anandamath*, *Debi Chaudhurani* and *Sitaram*, nevertheless grew steadfastly in the *bhadralok* imagination towards the end of the nineteenth century as a new hegemon. When Aurobindo in *Bhawani Mandir* extended the vague boundaries of religious rhetoric to the field of political action, he embarked on a discourse within the realm of the familiar. He projected political action onto the three individual ideals as outlined in the *Bhagavadgita*: Bhakti, Karma, and Jnana. This is one of the numerous instances in the Indian nationalist dialogue that ideas and passages from the *Bhagavadgita* would be taken out of the context of the epic *Mahabharata* and re-written into the bourgeois political ethos.

A text of visible political intent like *Bhawani Mandir* is probably easier to read and interpret in retrospect. The presence of the now familiar nationalistic motifs of sacrifice, cultivation of strength, and an active contemplation of development of national power make the text an interesting piece in the study of the Swadeshi ideology. The significance of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, historians have pointed out, lay not on the success or failure of its immediate political promises or programs, but in the creation of the historical momentum that made nationalism the only viable political alternative for both Bengali and Indian intellectuals. What can still be read in *Bhawani Mandir* is a frozen picture of the historical moment. Even if *Bhawani Mandir* took its inspiration from

Bankim's *Anandamath*, there was nothing of the political ambition and grandiloquence in Bankim's poetic rendering that is comparable with the last section of Aurobindo's pamphlet – titled "The Message of the Mother" – that has almost a biblical ring to it:

if you ask why we should erect a temple to Bhawani, the Mother, hear Her answer, "Because I have commanded it, and because by making a centre for the future religion you will be furthering the immediate will of the Eternal and storing up merit which will make you strong in this life and great in another. You will be helping to create a nation, to consolidate an age, to Aryanise a world. And that nation is your own, that age is the age of yourselves and your children, that world is no fragment of land bounded by seas and hills, but the whole earth with her teeming millions." (Chatterjee, 1986, p.75)

While Bankim's santans were unwilling participators in a violent struggle to liberate their homeland, Aurobindo's prospective followers were invited to engage in pre-emptive aggression. In its overt sponsorship of violence sanctioned by religiosity, *Bhawani Mandir* anticipated the chauvinistic Hindu nationalism of the most virulent kind. Even if it is possible to narrow down the emphasis – from the reader's point of view – on the poetic symbolism of a temple to the "mother" that dominates the first two-thirds of the text, it is impossible to ignore the more aggressively "Hindu nationalistic" suggestions and prescriptions of methods that form the Appendix. The Appendix has five short "work and rules" of the "new Order of Sannyasis": General Rules, Work for the People, Work for the Middle Class, Work with the Wealthy Classes, and General Work for the Country. It is impossible not to note the special status granted to the wealthy, as connoted by the phrase "work with" used in its case, as opposed to "work for" in all the other cases. The Sannyasis of the new order are given three distinct sets of instructions to deal with the three broad economic classes of the society. For the people, the Sannyasis have to effect, among other things, "lectures and demonstrations suited to an uneducated intelligence." The middle-class is accorded the least amount of attention: the Sannyasis are instructed to undertake "various works of public utility ... connected especially with the education and religious life of the middle classes" (Chatterjee, 1986, p.77). A cautious conservatism marks the attitude towards the Wealthy Classes, as the Sannyasis are told to approach

the zamindars, landholders and rich men generally, and endeavour -

1. To promote sympathy between the zamindars and the peasants and heal all discords.
2. To create the link of a single and living religious spirit and a common passion for one great ideal between all classes.
3. To turn the minds of rich men to works of public beneficence and charity to those in their neighbourhood independent of the hope of reward and official distinction. (Chatterjee, 1986, p.77)

The absolute refusal in this section on the author's part to tamper with social inequality recalls and repeats Bankim's desertion of the cause of the landless peasants in the latter's

1872 essay “Bengal’s Peasantry.” It is of enormous political significance that the socio-economic stratification imposed and implemented by the colonial administration was sanctioned by Aurobindo, who within only two years of the publication of this text, would emerge as the revolutionary leader of a new generation of nationalists.

However, there are certain striking ideological and methodological distinctions between Bankim’s 1872 essay and Aurobindo’s 1905 manifesto. Bankim’s essay embodied first, the limitations of the European Enlightenment’s promise of social justice and secondly, the colonial bourgeoisie’s inherent incapability to disown the privileges granted by the colonial rule. Contained within the limits of colonial discourse as it was, the epistemological failure of Bankim’s essay was simple: it lay in the absence, in the text, of a viable political solution to the prevailing social injustice and inequities. Nationalism did not – or rather could not – appear as a political option in the time of Bankim’s argument. However, by the time Aurobindo wrote his manifesto, nationalism had already become a dominant political imperative. I contend that because of this overwhelming background presence of the “nation” in Aurobindo’s discourse, his political sanctions and omissions must be examined in conjunction with the nationalist ideology they accentuate. If, in accordance with Aurobindo’s program, the poor “people” continued to live with their “uneducated intelligence” and the “discord” between the “zamindars” and the peasants were hoped to be “healed” without breaking the relationship of exploitation between them, what exactly was the nature of the revolution that Aurobindo hoped to incite with his manifesto? What significant changes, if any, in the political, economic, and social lives of the three broad economic classes (the people, the middle class, and the wealthy) were being signaled by his call to arms? A careful reading of the text reveals that the political program propounded by Aurobindo served more the cause of a cultural nationalism than that of a political revolution. One of the instructions to the Sannyasis in their “work with” the wealthy classes was “to create the link of a single and living religious spirit and a common passion for one great ideal between all classes.” What would be the epistemological identity of the “religious spirit” that a group of Brahmachari Sannyasis at the service of “Bhawani” would create and propagate? What would be the position of the “people” with their “uneducated intelligence” and women or other religious communities – neither of whom even figure in the manifesto – in the new ideal? If, in a country as demographically diverse as India, the “one great ideal” that would unite all classes is nationalism, what “single” religious spirit would be designated to guide it? These questions remained unanswered, not merely in Aurobindo’s revolutionary manifesto, but in most nationalist discourses of the Swadeshi era and the following two decades.

The limits of the political application of the symbolically powerful mother-goddess-nation conglomerate would be pointed out at great detail by Tagore in his novel *Ghare Baire* (1916). In Tagore’s novel, the fiercely aggressive ideology of a Hindu upper-caste extremist leader (similar to Aurobindo, though Tagore himself denied the connection) and his total commitment to the cult of mother-goddess-land are criticized because of their incapability for universal social representation. But universality is exactly what nationalism claimed for itself, during the crucial formative junctures of most nations. That bourgeois Indian nationalism continually subsumed other ideologies to emerge as the definitive hegemon during the Swadeshi era was not an isolated or unique historical accident. It is

interesting to see how the particular version of nationalism that became hegemonic in colonial India played out in relationship with the active agency of the *bhadralok* intellectuals. The continual discursive privileging of the motherland ideal by the dominant advocates of nationalism – the *bhadraloks* – overshadowed any question regarding the legitimacy of their representation of the entire nation. This is the single most significant leap of faith that the Indian colonial bourgeoisie demanded from the Indian masses and the colonial rulers alike; India spoke through them. Rarely speaking of their own subject positions or their complicity in the colonial exploitation of the masses, the *bhadraloks* theorized a nationalism that was more invested in projecting India's elusive past glory into an equally elusive future. The emphasis was on the historical inevitability of the nationalist future, not on the immediate or eventual resolution of the gross economic injustices that affected the greater population who had neither the leisure nor the opportunity to theorize their own positions. In the evocation of the glorious Hindu Indian pre-colonial past and in the anticipation of the moral supremacy of a future Indian nation, the rebellious landless peasants and the urban poor, the disenfranchised lower castes and the women could be safely bypassed, their problems seen as secondary to the more urgent task of nation-formation. Aurobindo was a practical political strategist; but even in his particular writings that were the most fraught with political urgency, history and all its symbolic trappings frequently dominated concrete plans for the present.

Nationalism and the Battleground of History

Bhawani Mandir was written and published before Aurobindo's literal entrance into the Indian political scene. Arguably, the text propagated a strong essentialist sentiment that Aurobindo as a public orator and politico would stop harping on from 1907 onwards, the stormy year that marked his role in the definition of nationalism as the ultimate creed for the Indian National Congress. The Surat confrontation had left its indelible mark, even though a power struggle continued between the Moderates and the Extremists over the tactical and official control of the Congress (Sarkar, 1983, p. 150). The extremist nationalist movement was far from a political monolith; it was non-linear in its progression, especially during the First World War. Sumit Sarkar refers to the mixed messages the nationalists sent to the British Government during the First World War:

In 1918 Tilak and Gandhi would even go to the extent of trying to raise money and men for the British through village tours – but with the hope that the rulers would grant major political reforms in return for such loyalty. 'Purchase war debentures, but look to them as title deeds of Home Rule,' was Tilak's plea in 1918. An objective basis thus emerged during the war years for a kind of joint platform of Moderates, Extremists, and the 'Young Party'- controlled Muslim League around a programme of putting constitutional but still quite intense pressure on the beleaguered British Government in return for war support. (Sarkar, 1983, p. 150)

The First World War years also saw the rise of several Home Rule Leagues, most notably under Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose activities "consisted in organizing discussion groups and reading-rooms in cities, mass scale pamphlets, and lecture tours –

no different in form from older Moderate politics, but significantly new so far as intensity and extent were concerned” (Sarkar, 1983, p. 151). The micropolitical concerns of the disparate groups were often different, but the hegemonic presence of the Indian nation in every political discourse was constant and unquestionable. And this is where I must refer to a key defining element in the imagination of the Indian nation: the presumed common Indian past. The future – that is, a postcolonial Indian nation – appeared vague and polymorphic even as early as the 1920s. Communalism – manifest in the Indian context in the form of Hindu-Muslim enmity – was becoming a political force in itself; and there were several organized ‘caste movements’ that vied with simplistic nationalism. To define British India as a prospective nation was difficult; but the other option – an admission of the impossibility of India as a nation – was politically inadmissible. Only a return to history could provide the wholeness that the checkered political landscape lacked. And hence Aurobindo’s writings, not unlike many of his contemporaries, emphasized the idea of the possibility of a future Indian greatness that would be a fulfillment of a great Indian past.

History has emerged repeatedly as “the theater of truth” in nationalist imaginings throughout the world, but especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when both conquest and resistance have acquired ideological significance.⁵ From scholarly musings like Ernest Renan’s early theorization of history as a collective memory of the people to Gandhi’s practical and strategic deployment of the mythical Ramrajya (reign of Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana) as a historical imperative in his mass-mobilizations, history has formed the core of nationalist formulations of identity. History was central to the late-nineteenth century nationalist formulation of “India” as a political entity. History was the field of discourse where the colonizer and the colonized wielded their perceptions of self and the other. Interestingly, however, if identity in the realm of nationalism sought roots in history, it was only in reaction to the colonizer’s denial of any history and identity of the colonized. The pre-colonial past rarely figured in the colonial discourses as a legitimate collective memory of the people. In Mill’s monumental work *History of British India*, for example, the pre-colonial Indians’ mentality was shaped by their inability to write history. The superior intelligence that was required to write history, to carve out a sense of the self from the collective memory and perception of a community, was, according to the colonizer, absent from the colonized (or colonizable) mind. Within the limits of colonial discourse and polity, this misconception perpetuated by the colonizer could be countered by an affirmation of the colonized identity deeply rooted in history. Indian nationalist historiography was thus the logical extension of nascent Indian nationalism. By the time the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, there were already several forms of national history being circulated, in genres ranging from serious analyses and dogmatic textbooks to populist kitsch versions.

History as an ideological battleground was thus firmly established in Aurobindo’s literary-political milieu. The finer points, the micropolitical concerns, could all be postponed in the anticipation of a unified Indian glory. Projected into the future, India became an idea, as it was an idea of the past to be fulfilled not so much in the material but in the spiritual realm. This was an extension of the “reversal of the Orientalist problematic” – as Partha Chatterjee explained – that defined Bankim’s politics:

Bankim ... seeks a specific subjectivity for the nation, but within an essential typology of cultures in which the specificity can never be truly historical. Within the domain of thought thus defined, however, it seems a valid answer. The West has a superior culture, but only partially; spiritually, the East is superior. What is needed, now, is the creation of a cultural ideal in which the industries and the sciences of the West can be learnt and emulated while retaining the spiritual greatness of Eastern culture. This is the national-cultural project at its moment of departure. (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 73)

I return to Bankim in this context to illustrate and emphasize the strong adherence and commitment to a cultural nationalism that bind the otherwise very different writings of Aurobindo and Bankim. The assertion that the inherent (spiritual) nature of the past Indian civilization needed to be transported to the future Indian nation at all costs recurred in nationalist discourse throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. I have shown earlier in this paper how in *Bhawani Mandir*, Aurobindo intertwined India's political and spiritual destinies. Vivekananda's pronouncement that it was India's destiny to lead the world spiritually was a reassertion of this as well. Tagore would propound the idea in a different form, where he would valorize the heterogeneity of India's cultural tradition as a function of India's inherent national temperament. In contrast with Tagore's, the writings of Aurobindo – along with Bankim, Vivekananda, and many others – would project the Muslim "invasion" and rule as a disruption in the "natural" flow of Indian history. A selectively macrocosmic view of India's pre-Islamic period is discernible in most Bengali cultural nationalists, but the most amount of emphasis on a crystallized Indian/Hindu spiritual identity based on Vedantic components is found prominently in Vivekananda and Aurobindo. The sweeping generalizations on Indian history and spirituality evidenced in the section quoted above are a characteristic feature of Aurobindo's writings. This is removed, not so much in time as in the timeline of nationalist development, from the meticulous historicity (however contrived) of Bankim's characterization of Krishna, for example.

Nationalist historiography (like any other historiography) bears the indelible mark of the historiographer; and it has been the continued concern of the students of Indian national history and polity to come to terms with the problem of the nineteenth century *bhadralok* agency. It is difficult to define the boundaries of elitism that shaped nationalist politics in late nineteenth century Bengal and India. It is important to remember that Aurobindo was one of the pioneers of a revolutionary anti-colonial nationalism that distinguished itself from the suppliant politics of the Indian National Congress. And political elitism was the primary point of contention between the radical revolutionaries and the pro-establishment Congress. As early as 1893, Aurobindo made the accusation that "by not transgressing the middle-class pale the Congress has condemned itself, as a saving power, to insignificance and ultimate sterility" (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 24). The Swadeshi movement in Bengal and the split that emerged during the Surat Congress Session between "moderates" and "extremists" marked the creation of a definitive form of Indian nationalism; the new nationalism was divorced almost completely from the colonially sanctioned path of mimic parliamentary process. Aurobindo, being one of the

chief leaders of the new revolutionary movement, emphasized the need for a sea-change in the essential attitude of the nationalists:

It is urgently necessary ... that we should shake off the superstitious habit of praying for protection to the British authorities and look for help to the only true, political divinity, the national strength that is within ourselves. If we are to do this effectually, we must organise physical education all over the country and train up the rising generation not only in the moral strength and courage for which Swadeshism has given us the materials, but in physical strength and courage and the habit of rising immediately and boldly to the height of even the greatest emergency. ... It is high time we abandoned the fat and comfortable selfish middle-class training we give to our youth and make a nearer approach to the physical and moral education of our old Kshatriyas or the Japanese Samurai. (Ghose, 1996, pp. 116-7)

The above articulates the familiar doctrine of militant nationalism that marked the dominant political climate in Bengal, Maharashtra and Punjab through the late nationalist period. It is necessary to note the context of this particular call for “Kshatriya bravado.” The above section appeared in an article written after the infamous Comilla riots, which was one in a series of clashes that occurred between disparate Hindu and Muslim groups, with or without police intervention, in Bengal in 1906-07. The specific riot took place in Comilla in March 1907, following a visit by Nawab Salimullah, a co-founder of the Muslim League. Aurobindo’s anger was directed not so much at the Muslim leaders and their rioting followers as it was against the British administration and Anglo-Indian newspapers that blamed mostly the nationalists for destabilizing the social structures in the villages, thus facilitating communal disturbances. Aurobindo, being a prominent nationalist leader at this time, stood in the eye of the political storm in Bengal more than any other Bengali intellectual of his time. His direct political involvement makes his writings during this time more liable to retrospective scrutiny.

The conflict of interest between the Hindu and the Muslim population in Bengal became a dominant political issue to the nationalists beginning in 1903-4, and reached its climax with Viceroy George Curzon’s official announcement of a partition of Bengal in July 1905. The proposed partition into a East Bengal of Muslim majority population and a West Bengal consisting of a Hindu majority was symptomatic of the British “divide and rule” political strategy, as substantiated by contemporary government documents such as Home Secretary H. H. Risley’s note – “Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. That is perfectly true and is one of the merits of the scheme” (Sarkar, 1983, p. 107). In a clever political move, Curzon’s administration tried to win Muslim support for the Partition by presenting it as a step toward political empowerment of the erstwhile disenfranchised Muslim population. Sumit Sarkar quotes from a public speech at Dacca in February 1904 in which Curzon advertised the partition to the Muslims of East Bengal as the prospective initiator of a “unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussulman viceroys and kings” (Sarkar, 1983, p. 107). In the broader context of Indian nationalism, the proposed partition had a more immediate effect, as the

unity between the Hindus and the Muslims became a part of the political program, thus siphoning off political energy away from anti-colonial resistance.

Sumit Sarkar (1973) in his detailed study of the Swadeshi Movement remarks that the riots of 1906-7 were crucially important “in the evolution of nationalist thought and practice.” Sarkar describes the varied reaction of nationalists to the recurring incidents of violence: “Moderate efforts to meet the challenge through talks with Muslim upper-class leaders obviously ignored the deeper roots of the problem, while their appeals to the government for strict enforcement of law and order sounded insufferably mendicant to the radical youth” (p. 461).

A radical article written by Aurobindo in 1907 during the height of the communal riots shows how transparent the British “divide and rule” policy was to at least a section of the Indian nationalists. The proposed partition of Bengal, with its outward rhetoric of equal religious representation and the barely hidden strategies of sabotaging any nationalist mobilization, in retrospect comes across clearly as a typical function of colonial politics, geared towards the preservation of the colony at the cost of the colonized. But even as early as in 1907, Aurobindo decried the British “attempt to make capital of the religious diversities of Indian society” and read the situation as a complex political problem: “In the new Legislative Councils the Mahomedans are to have representation not as children of the soil, an integral portion of one Indian people, but as a politically distinct and hostile interest which will, it is hoped, outweigh or at least nullify the Hindus” (Ghose, 1996, p. 244).

Considered in isolation, the above comment may be read as a complex assessment of a political problem that is yet to be solved, 100 years later, in the geopolitical context of the Indian subcontinent – the problem of equal representation in a heterogeneous community. The title of the essay, however, was “Caste and Representation,” and Aurobindo’s outcry was against anyone or anything standing in the path of the attainment of Indian sovereignty. If the (upper-caste) Hindus were leading in the movement for Indian independence, it was because they were in a position to lead. The Muslims, instead of complaining, should simply follow the program. They could be used by the British in their self-serving politics because they were oblivious to the political reality:

The Hindus have become self-conscious, they have heard a voice that cries to them, “Arise from the dead, live and follow me,” and they are irresistibly growing into a living and powerful force. Unless the Mahomedans can be built up also into a self-conscious, living and powerful political force, their assistance to the rulers will be a mere handful of dust in the balance. But the moment they become a living and self-conscious power the doom of the bureaucracy will be sealed. (Ghose, 1996, p. 244)

The condescension – I emphasize – runs deep and clear in the section. The self-righteous rhetoric of the *bhadralok* radical surfaces in another article written during the same period – “The Awakening of Gujerat” – though it is couched in a more carefully worded assimilationism:

Nationalism depends for its success on the awakening and organizing of the whole strength of the nation; it is therefore vitally important for Nationalism that the politically backward classes should be awakened and brought into the current of political life; the great mass of orthodox Hinduism which was hardly even touched by the Old Congress movement, the great slumbering mass of Islam which has remained politically inert throughout the last century, the shopkeepers, the artisan class, the immense body of illiterate and ignorant peasantry, the submerged classes, even the wild tribes and races still outside the pale of Hindu civilization, Nationalism can afford to neglect and omit none. (Ghose, 1996, p. 247)

Interestingly, Aurobindo's radical co-revolutionaries and followers did little to follow up on their grand promise of unity. For all their political radicalism, Aurobindo and his fellow ideologues failed to come to terms with the basic conflict of interest between two groups that could not be more different. The Hindu zamindars, moneylenders, and upper-caste educated *bhadraloks* had prospered under the British, and had gathered, over time, enough political clout to think, write, and speak against British colonialism. But there was also the vast Muslim peasantry that paid taxes to the mostly Hindu middlemen, and it was fairly easy for this second group to fall victim to anti-Hindu propaganda that came from self-serving Maulavis who preached their religious fundamentalism in the garb of class struggle. Aurobindo and his group had accused the Indian National Congress of ignoring the reality of the socio-economic issues that mattered to the common masses, but when the time of active struggle arrived, the radical critics of the old Congress politics themselves chose not to question their subject positions in the act of imagining a single community out of an entire subcontinent. Instead of questioning his prescribed method, Aurobindo along with numerous other radical leaders chose to treat inter-community strife as an inconvenient distraction from the ultimate goal of nationhood. Sumit Sarkar has emphasized that Rabindranath Tagore was one of the few voices of political sanity at that time, one whose voice was lost in the jingoist nationalistic fervor:

Rabindranath offered a far more profound analysis of the riots, and the rethinking they induced in him led the poet to make a decisive and final break with the traditionalist ideas which had swayed him for some time. But his call for building a mahajati [great people/nation] on the basis of a repudiation of all sectarian barriers and prejudices, however sacrosanct, and his appeals for patient constructive work in villages to bridge the gulf between the *bhadralok* and the masses, found little response from among his contemporaries. Far more attractive seemed the message of the *Bande Mataram* and the *Yugantar*, with its militancy and romantic appeal, its promise of a heroic and yet essentially simple road to freedom, and its assumption – so conveniently attuned to *bhadralok* preconceptions – that the rioters were mere hired agents, no more than “hooligans.”... *But “revolution” with the rural masses inert or hostile could mean in practice only action by an elite, and so extremism became transmuted into terrorism.* (Sarkar, 1973, p. 461, emphasis mine)

The 'essentially simple road to freedom' and the acceptance of freedom as the panacea to all intra-national problems became the center of Aurobindo's writings and speeches, especially following his 9-month prison term in 1908-9.

The Bhagavadgita, Pistol, and the Lone Bhadrak

Aurobindo's first contact with revolutionary ideas occurred as early as 1890, when he was in Cambridge, studying the classics and preparing for the Civil Service Examination. A recent volume by Elleke Boehmer (2002) details the influence of Irish nationalism on his thought, which would later intensify with his friendship with Margaret Noble, the Irish political activist who later came to be known as Nivedita, after she became Swami Vivekananda's disciple (pp. 34-124). Boehmer speaks of Aurobindo's continued support of armed revolutionary tactics that continued at least until his arrest in 1908. A significant current biographer of Aurobindo – Peter Heehs – has pointed out the lack of solid evidence for Aurobindo's involvement with terrorist groups, especially Maniktala Secret Society of which his brother Barin was the leader. However, Heehs concurs with Amales Tripathi in the view that Aurobindo's silences on the subject of his involvement spoke more than his non-admissions (Heehs, 1998, p. 43). It is significant that the Maniktala Secret Society grew out of the Calcutta Anushilan Samiti, an organization "founded in 1902 to promote physical, mental, and moral culture among Calcutta students" (Heehs, 1998, p. 18). The ideological blueprint for this society came from Aurobindo's *Bhawani Mandir*, or Bankim's *Anandamath*, or both. Aurobindo, however, did not admit to knowledge of or involvement in terrorist activities at his trial that followed a 12-month incarceration, and he was acquitted. A sea-change is discernible in his writings following his prison term and acquittal. His earlier speeches and writings, while replete with references to Hindu mythological figures and allegories, more often than not dealt with direct, immediate political issues and events. His post imprisonment writings are exceptionally vague and general in nature, the political astuteness of his earlier articles drowned here in spiritual overtones. In his first significant public appearance, he spoke of the epiphanies he had in prison, and ended his speech with a revision of a particularly poignant political point he had made a year and a half earlier. I will touch upon the relevant portions of the two speeches that speak clearly of the ideological shift that had taken place in the speaker's political stance.

In a speech he delivered before his arrest, to the National Union in Bombay, Aurobindo had drawn applause from the crowd by championing nationalism as the singular plan of action that remained for the virtuous to follow:

There is a creed in India today which calls itself Nationalism, a creed which has come to you from Bengal. ... What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live. (Ghose, 1996, p. 251)

The use of religion in the above section comes across as strategic, and typical of Aurobindo's fiery oratory style. The figure of Krishna as the visionary godhead partaking in

human affairs in the epic *Mahabharata* recurs in this speech, as in numerous other writings by Aurobindo.

I would digress a little to point towards the re-invention of the Krishna figure in Aurobindo's writings, along with a renewed interest in the *Bhagavadgita*. The re-invention of Krishna in colonial India began notably with Bankim's *Krishnacharitra*, a text that can be best described as a meticulous mixture of historical scholarship and literary criticism, coalesced with a revisionist sense of history and a nascent nationalism. Bankim found Krishna as capable of becoming the great unifying symbol for Indian culture and civilization, a flawless leading figure that could represent India in the sense that Christ represented Western civilization. But Krishna – as he was worshipped throughout India – was unacceptable to the revisionist nationalist historian whose role Bankim assumed for himself. Krishna had been, from at least the eleventh century onwards, a rustic figure approachable by the common populace through mystical devotion. Krishna was one of the few gods who became the focus of the Bhakti poets and saints who sang against the Brahminical control over the common people's spiritual lives through their control of the temples and the Sanskrit language. This Krishna, the "beloved" of numerous Bhakti poets and saints all over India (many of whom were influenced by the teachings of Sufi mystics) was a rustic flute-playing cowherd, interested more in love than in war. The Krishna that would become Bankim's "myth of praxis," had to be purged of the rusticity and eroticism that had accumulated over the dark centuries of emasculated Hinduism. Bankim's Krishna (the "original" Krishna, according to him) became a robust politico, a spiritual leader par excellence and most important – a mainstream Hindu god. The *Bhagavadgita* was rediscovered as a text that provided guidance in time of war; and the lonely figure of Arjuna who must fight the long arduous war for justice in spite of his reluctance to kill became the symbol for the *bhadralok* revolutionary who must participate in a violent struggle to forge a nation out of blood and sacrifice. The non-violent religious practices of Vaishnavs (who did not practice animal sacrifice, for example) could meet the violence associated with Shakta mother-worship (animal-worship was almost mandatory in Shakta festivals) under the aegis of a new Hindu "wartime" philosophy. The selfless action performed by Arjuna who was nothing but an instrument in the grand divine design of things (*nimitta*, as he is called by Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita*), was valorized *ad infinitum* by the nationalist leaders. The extremist leaders used the model for action strategically and mercilessly in their propaganda to draw ingenuous students who were trained for terrorist tasks. Even in his speech in 1907, Aurobindo used the rhetoric of the *Bhagavadgita* to sway his audience:

Have you realised that you are merely instruments of God, that your bodies are not your own? You are merely instruments of God for the work of the Almighty. ...If you have realised that, then you are truly Nationalists; then alone will you be able to restore this great nation. ...and this great nation will rise again and become once more what it was in the days of its spiritual greatness. (Ghose, 1996, p. 252)

Here, Aurobindo used the celebrated discourse from *Bhagavadgita* on the immortality of the soul, the mortal fragility of the body and the ease with which the virtuous abandon

their bodies for a just cause – in short, the ideal speech for the recruitment of prospective martyrs for the cause of the nation:

Sri Krishna cannot grow to manhood unless he is called upon to work for others, unless the Asuric forces of the world are about him and work against him and make him feel his strength. Therefore in Bengal there came a time, after the first outbreak of the triumphant hope, when all the material forces that can be brought to bear against Nationalism were gradually brought into play, and the question was asked of Bengal, 'Can you suffer? Can you survive?' The young men of Bengal who had rushed forward in the frenzy of the moment, in the inspiration of the new gospel they had received, rushed forward in the frenzy of the moment, in the inspiration of the new-found strength and expecting to bear down all obstacles that came in their way, and were now called upon to suffer. They were called upon to bear the crown, not of victory, but of martyrdom. They had to learn the real nature of their new strength. It was not their own strength, but it was the force which was working through them, and they had to learn to be the instruments of that force. (Ghose, 1996, p. 258)

It is worthwhile to remember, at this point, at least one young man – Khudiram Bose, who was hanged in 1910 for his attempt to kill Judge Douglas Kingsford – who probably received the instructions for the operation from Aurobindo, via middlemen. Heehs refers to a number of accounts by Aurobindo's co-revolutionaries that mention Aurobindo's direct involvement in terrorist activities, including the assassination attempt on Kingsford, in Muzaffarpur: "Jadugopal Mukherjee and Arun Chandra Guha write of Aurobindo not only as the founder of the revolutionary party but also as a member of a Russian-style 'revolutionary tribunal' that sentenced an unpopular judge to death. One writer goes so far as to have Aurobindo literally give his blessing to the young men chosen to carry out this mission."⁶ The files of the Home Department of the British Government also contained detailed reports on Aurobindo's presence at the top of the chain of command in many terrorist operations (Heehs, 1998, p. 51). Incidentally, while Aurobindo was represented by the notable attorney C. R. Das in his trial and was acquitted, Khudiram was left to take his chances with the justice system. Tagore in *Ghare Baire* (1916) wrote apprehensively of the revolutionary leader Sandip fleeing the scene of unrest to save his own skin while his young disciple Amulya got killed in action. A parallel is evident, though Khudiram was not the only 'soldier' abandoned by his celebrity leaders and Aurobindo was not the only leader who did not take the fall for his subordinates, and Tagore denied any connection between his fictional character and Aurobindo.

Partha Chatterjee, in his seminal work on Indian nationalism, found the nationalist thought that originated in Bankim and was inherited culturally by Aurobindo's generation was ideologically limited, as it was "born out of the encounter of a patriotic consciousness with the framework of knowledge imposed upon it by colonialism. It leads inevitably to an elitism of the intelligentsia, rooted in the vision of a radical regeneration of national culture"(Chatterjee, 1986, p. 79). Chatterjee had found it "not surprising that in the history of political movements in India, Bankim's direct disciples were the 'revolutionary

terrorists,' the small group of armed activists drawn from the Hindu middle classes, wedded to secret underground organization and planned assassination." Chatterjee and other Marxist historians of Indian nationalism have repeatedly pointed out the problems inherent in imposing a national idea on a vastly agrarian population, without interceding in the class relationships. Aurobindo had begun his political career by attacking the old guard of the Indian National Congress for their elitism and for their distance from the needs and condition of the "people." As the commander of an army of *bhadralok* revolutionaries, Aurobindo practiced a different form of elitism. And faced with physical persecution, he retreated, famously, into spirituality. The retreat began in his first celebrated public appearance, a lecture popularly known as the Uttarpara Speech, in which Aurobindo emerged as a man of god. He spoke of the epiphanies he had inside the prison, his dialogues with Krishna (the god), and concluded with a complete reversal of his past ideas:

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 sanatana dharma [Hinduism] which for us is Nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the sanatana dharma, with it it moves and with it it grows [*sic*]. Where the sanatana dharma declines, then the nation declines, and if the sanatana dharma were capable of perishing, with the sanatana dharma it would perish. The sanatana dharma, that is Nationalism. This is the message that I have to speak to you. (Ghose, 1996, p. 376)

Aurobindo left Bengal in April 1910 to avoid further persecution by the British, to live in Pondicherry under French jurisdiction, where he became a recluse and wrote many philosophical and theosophical volumes. The references to "sanatana dharma" and the *Bhagavadgita* would return in Indian politics with the most successful leader – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – who would manage to mobilize more sections of the common population than any leader who came before or after. The validity of Gandhi's theories and the eventual success of his version of nationalism, however, are still being debated.

The birth of the sovereign nation of India in August 15, 1947, coincided with Aurobindo's birthday. On the eve of the much awaited Independence Day, Aurobindo's message to his countrymen was broadcast by All India Radio. August 15 belonged to the bloodiest period in the history of the subcontinent, as at least 500,000 people died in the "partition riots" and many millions became official refugees. Punjab and Bengal, the two regions that were divided to give birth to Pakistan, were devastated by unprecedented violence – murder, rape, and arson.⁷ M. K. Gandhi was in East Bengal, trying to quell the riots, far from the regality of the Independence Celebrations in New Delhi. Aurobindo foresaw, in the event of the much awaited independence, neither the insurmountable challenges that faced the new leaders of a nation more diverse and heterogeneous than the entire continent of Europe, nor the absence of any revolutionary spirit of the people.

Aurobindo spoke, in his address, of the absurdity of the partition of India, and then looked forward to a globalization of culture, with an Indian hegemony:

an international spirit and outlook must grow up and international forms and institutions; even it may be such developments as dual or multilateral citizenship and a voluntary fusion of cultures may appear in the process of the change and the spirit of nationalism losing its militancy may find these things perfectly compatible with the integrity of its own outlook. A new spirit of oneness will take hold of the human race.

The spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India's spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever increasing measure. That movement will grow; amid the disasters of the time more and more eyes are turning towards her with hope and there is even an increasing resort not only to her teachings, but to her psychic and spiritual practice. (Ghose, 1996, pp. 538-9)

A similar hope for India's spiritual leadership of the world was predominant in Vivekananda's writings. But Aurobindo's choice of words came during a subcontinent-wide bloodbath, which followed closely the worst famines caused by the British hauling grains from India to feed the commonwealth's soldiers fighting World War II. His "prophesizing" – considering his political revolutionary past – makes us pause, and question the various ideologies of Indian nationalism that produced the "terrorist leader turned philosopher" Sri Aurobindo, and millions of dead and displaced subjects. Beyond the violence of the 1947 partition, the postcolonial nation-state of India has had a complex relationship with religious nationalism. A complex line-up of lenses stands between our mind's eyes and Aurobindo's cultural nationalism and philosophical optimism: Gandhi's murder in the hands of a Hindu nationalist in 1948 and the subsequent marginalizing of Hindu nationalism, five decades of state sponsored secularism punctuated by oppression of minorities, caste-based mobilizations and sporadic violence, the return of Hindu nationalism with a vengeance in the 1990s, and the constant ongoing negotiations of neo-liberal Hindu fundamentalism – both national and diasporic – with global capitalism, to mention a few. It would not be fair to consider Aurobindo complicit in the creation of an ideology by which more lives were destroyed than were built, but would it be fair to absolve him completely?

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Notes

¹ *Bhadralok* is a modern Bengali word, possibly meant for a Bengali equivalent of "gentleman." Its meaning evolved during the late nineteenth century to denote the specific class of upper-caste, (Western-) educated Hindu Bengali men who separated themselves from the poor masses, the lower-caste Hindus, and the non-Hindus.

² Quoted in Bose & Jalal (1997, p. 50).

³ "The Present Situation," a speech delivered in Bombay on 19 January 1907. Ghose (1999, pp. 18-19).

⁴ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) was the first significant novelist and essayist in the Bengali language. In addition to his vast range of contribution to the creation of a Bengali colonial *bhadralok* culture, Bankim's symbolic juxtaposition of the nation and the mother-goddess in his novel *Anandamath* (1882) created the image of "country as mother," that influenced most Indian nationalist imaginings that followed. His novels also marked the early consolidation of the "feeble domesticated woman" with the "mythically powerful mother-goddess," thus instituting both the gendered representation of the nation and the woman's position within that nation. Aurobindo Ghose hailed Bankim as the *Rshi* (seer) of Indian nationalism.

⁵ Shamita Basu (2002) has used the phrase "the theater of truth" convincingly in her important work on Vivekananda.

⁶ Heehs (1996) mentions several other revolutionaries' memoirs that refer to Aurobindo's involvement: "M. N. Roy, who as Narendranath Bhattacharya was active in Bengal between 1906 and 1915, commented that Aurobindo was 'the Supreme Commander of the Revolution.' Surendra Mohan Ghose, active from around 1908 (at which time he saw Aurobindo in Mymensingh district) and later one of the leaders of the Jugantar Party, stressed in a talk of 1971 that Aurobindo was 'the founder of the Indian revolutionary party.'" Jadugopal Mukherjee, active from 1905 and from around 1913 one of the principal leaders of the Jugantar Party, wrote in his memoirs that he learned some time after joining the party that Aurobindo was "the actual founder and leader of the new [that is, the revolutionary] party." He also noted in passing that there was a legend that Aurobindo and two others ordered that judge Douglas Kingsford should be killed. Arun Chandra

Guha, active from around 1908 and later an important member (and, still later, a historian) of the Jugantar Party, wrote that Jugantar was the “brain-child of Aurobindo.” Like Jadugopal he claimed that Aurobindo helped make the decision that Kingsford should be killed.

⁷ For a newly researched account of the partition, see Pandey (2002).

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