

## Ascetics and Revolutionaries: The “Political Sannyasi” in Indian Nationalistic Discourse

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### **Abstract**

Aurobindo Ghose, identified as a revolutionary, a contemplative, and a Yogin; synthesized the spheres of political nationalism and Indian spirituality. The proposition delineated in this essay sets down as a stipulation, an assumption for an assessment of Aurobindo's notions and discloses the implications of those principles for both political and religious functions. This inquiry would focus upon that phase of his life in which importance for both extremist political action and spirituality were held at the same time. Some of his writings and speeches, for instance, the well-known nationalist speech, the Uttarpara Speech, illustrate the significance of his ideas of “nation soul” are discussed. This phase covers the years from 1893 until 1910; the time he landed in India after being educated in Britain until he withdrew to experience a complete contemplative life at Pondicherry. The essay concludes by considering instances of aspects, viz. the spiritual religio-politics transfused with the general contrasting notions and values, which in turn provide an explanation for a spiritual nation.

**Keywords:** Ascetic Ideals, Indian Nationalistic Discourse, Political Sannyasi, Hindu Asceticism

### **Introduction**

The ascetic ideal, closely associated with the notions of discipline, devotion and duty, were supposedly drawn from transcendence, but, in actual terms, were immanently political in that they were religious, but also strategic. The religio-ascetic features observed by Aurobindo taken up in this essay depict that the ascetic and nationalistic features were synthesized and with time influenced each other and have become indistinguishable. The marriage of ascesis and

nationalism was a strategy for some to popularize patriotism, while Aurobindo, as corroborated by his writings, seems to have actually believed in it, though with contradictory compulsions for our contemporary lives.

In this essay, I have attempted to discuss the central importance of Aurobindo Ghose, in particular, who, wittingly or not, was a major influence in synthesising, if not in systemisation, of ascetic principles with Indian nationalism. Aurobindo Ghose's primary intention was to spiritualize politics. His process, the amalgamation of politics and spirituality through religio-asceticism and reliance on discipline, devotion and duty vividly contrasted with the other Indian nationalist ideologues of his time in British India. In his own individual perspective, Aurobindo regarded politico-nationalist manoeuvres as emblems of spiritual consciousness – a path directing towards divine perception. Aurobindo conceptualized religion as experiential, paving ways for understanding politics as religious duty. In addition, he engaged with certain outlooks, viz. the transfusion of religion with politics and a constant exploration of the idea of religio-political nationalism. Aurobindo appeared as if he was not purely Hindu-oriented in that he tried to influence the adherents of Hinduism to observe the “true spirit”, though he helped in concretizing discourses on spiritual life as fundamental to nationalistic thought.

#### **Aurobindo: The Political Sannyasi**

Aurobindo, influenced by the spiritual preceptors, embellished by Bankimchandra, propelled the Indian populace to refigure nationalist thought by giving a spiritual dimension to it and proclaimed that it is “not a mere political movement”. He advocated that nationalism is “a religion, a creed” coming from God and India is in need of its own schema of nationalism. He preached that the failure to procure desired results by the nineteenth century social reform movements was due to a blind imitation of western ideas and trying to build national ideals on rationalist basis. Instead, he suggests that an emotional approach modelled on religious ideas, by dismantling conventional religion, would raise the spirit of nationalism to religio-patriotism.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* powerfully influenced Aurobindo's thoughts from 1893 until 1910. Aurobindo believed that “Of the new spirit which is leading the nation to resurgence and independence, he is the inspirer and political guru.” He considered Vivekananda as his preceptor, responsible for a spiritual awakening in him. Aurobindo was keen about regenerating the motherland through sacrifice and *Anusilan*. These ideas are found to be having close affinities with traditional Hindu spiritual rhetoric. The idea of spiritual leadership was

envisioned in a novel manner. The ascetic subject became a protagonist and was further designed as a functionary who would lead a religio-spiritual organizational authority. The “ascetic” is transfused with ideas, viz. nationalism, religion in general, and cultural regeneration. These ideas were not supposed to be limited to a limited coterie of followers; their ecumenical applicability was meant to reach out towards people of all broader cross-sections of religion, caste and class.

Aurobindo denounced the British policies. He preached a religion, and that religion is the “nationalist religion”. This was a religio-political ideology designed for promoting the idea of serving the motherland. It was “espoused with the intensity and fervour befitting a religious frenzy” (Aurobindo, *Nationalism* 201). Aurobindo reformulated the entire direction of nationalist idea by proclaiming that nationalism “is not a mere political programme”, and gave a religio-spiritual dimension to the nationalist principles by calling nationalism “a religion that has come from God. Nationalism is a creed in which you have to live” (203). Moreover, he maintained that by pursuing the path shown by God, the religion of nationalism does not bring personal salvation, rather the nationalist becomes the “instrument of God for the salvation of your own country” (204).

The roots of Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose’s political career are found to have taken shape before he came to India. He was drawn to Irish nationalists. While in Cambridge, Aurobindo was dissatisfied with the ways of the British institutions towards India. He felt that India’s political aspirations are to be taken up by Indians. This appears to have driven him to take up membership in a revolutionary society – “The Lotus and Dagger”. By 1891-92, Aurobindo had become clear in his thoughts about employing the mechanics; duty, devotion in politics. He jots down in a notebook that

“The patriot who passes judgement on a great movement in an era of change and turmoil, should be very confident that he has something worth saying before he ventures to speak; but if he can really put some new aspect on a momentous question or emphasize any side of it that has not been clearly understood, it [is] his bounden duty however obscure he may be to ventilate [it]... It is time that an Indian who has devoted his best thoughts and aspirations to the service of his country, should have in his turn a patient hearing....” (Aurobindo 6:3)

On 6 February 1893, Aurobindo’s landing in Bombay – after a fourteen-year stay in London – is noted to have made him feel a spiritual experience; “a vast calm which descended

upon him at the moment when he stepped first on Indian soil after his long absence... (this calm surrounded him and remained for long months afterwards)” (36:110). After two days, he is found to have left to Baroda for the next thirteen years of service under the Maharaja of Baroda. Here, his connections especially with Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav, Khasirao Jadhav and Keshavrao G. Deshpande developed and assisted him to enter the active political arena. Aurobindo’s stay for about thirteen years in Baroda seems to have made him realise that spirituality would come to his aid for disciplining the common people.

His belief grew stronger that freedom to India can be attained from the clutches of the imperial rule by constitutionalizing “docile bodies” and setting up a total revolution. During this period, the search, practice and experience of Aurobindo signify his goal, to attain a politico-spiritual freedom for India – an attempt to be undertaken through the synthesization of the aspects; discipline, devotion and duty with Indian nationalism.

Aurobindo appears to have identified an apparatus that would develop and preserve the exercise of power within the social entity. This knowledge structure – was codified into a three-sided activity. First, a mechanism of power was to be strategically regulated for the exercise of a secret revolutionary organisation – a system whose chief objective was the drilling of an armed opposition intended to overthrow authority. Second, the organisation of space in the public sphere for generating a productive idea – the ideal of nation’s independence. Third, a movement by the people to take on a united body politic resistance of the imperial rule through strengthening disobedience and passive fighting.

During the last years of his stay at Baroda, Aurobindo is found to be striving for self-realisation – involved with his position and behaviour – so as to be capable to undergo a radical change of himself, “in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Vintges 102). The concept of spirituality was affiliated to the concept of self and was identified with true religion by Aurobindo. His process of self-transformation through the mechanics of asceticism looked as if – should be involved with one’s own technique of life. During this period, Aurobindo’s contacts, his lifestyle and literature appear to have made him to draw a structure indicating the knowledge of the self – “an autonomous dimension of life”. Here it can be said that the self-practice of Aurobindo is “not something invented by the individual himself, but a model that is found in one’s own culture, society, and social group” (104).

During this period, Aurobindo tried completely to get acquainted himself with Indian culture and heritage. This he did through reading extensively about Indian literature. He started to get in touch with the radical political movements in Bengal and later took membership in the *Anushilan Samiti*. Gradually, his political strategies were being rooted into the stream of spiritual dimension. Before leaving Baroda, Aurobindo started off to organize Hindu religious issues, which were to become important instruments to politically mobilize the masses for the nationalist movement. In addition, he instigated a theory of spiritual ideology, which was to be synthesized with national politics to gain political support from the masses. This theory of Aurobindo was much derived from his admiration towards the nationalist ideologues; Swami Vivekananda and Bankimchandra Chatterji, who before him had extensively propagated and amalgamated Hinduism and Indian nationalism through their rhetoric and writings.

### **Ascetics and Revolutionaries**

The novel *Anandamath* by Bankimchandra Chatterji played a major influence on Aurobindo. The novel gave a foundation for the “Mother” figure. The Indian sub-continent took over the call “*Bande Mataram*”, (Hail to the Motherland) – a symbolic call created out of the image of the Goddess *Kali*. The historical fiction further gave scope for Aurobindo to formulate an idea – the formation of a militant ascetic revolutionary group. In 1905, through a pamphlet entitled, “*Bhawani Mandir*”, he confesses his political spirituality, which was circulated among the secret societies. Barbara Southard emphasizes that

“Aurobindo referred to his nationalist ideology as “political Vedantism”. Aurobindo’s political *Vedanta* was quite similar to Vivekananda’s practical *Vedanta* except that his philosophy was much more explicitly applied to political action. Aurobindo developed Vivekananda’s Neo-*Vedanta* concept that God is the sum total of all human souls into a more elaborate theory that God is incarnated in individuals, in humanity in general, and in communities of humanity. Thus, he advanced the concept that the nation itself is an incarnation of God which he identified with the goddess *Kali*. In *Bhawani Mandir* (Temple of the Mother), pamphlet written in 1905 and widely distributed among secret societies, Aurobindo and his brother, Barindra, wrote that each human soul contains the divine *Sakti* and the nation is a mighty *Sakti* composed of the combined *Saktis* of its people. The great *Sakti* which is the nation is identified with the

Goddess Kali, and in this pamphlet Aurobindo called for a new order of *sannyasins* ready to die for the goddess in her modern incarnation as the nation.” (364)

The Indian nationalist movement was considered as *Vedantic* nationalist movement and it had a spiritual purpose. Aurobindo shows his spiritual purview by beginning the pamphlet “*Bhawani Mandir*” with an invocation to the *Sakta* cult goddess *Chandikayai*. It looks as if the pamphlet is the summary of the political fiction, *Anandamath*. The main aspects of the novel are taken and are culminated into the form of a pamphlet for a political uprising – a *sanatana* revolution to be taken up by the countrymen. In the pamphlet, Aurobindo states that “to get strength, one must adore the mother of strength” and believe that religion is the true path to be followed for acquiring spiritual national mind.

There are three fundamental laws that he wants every Indian to possess. They are; Devotion – should be retained through the worship of the Mother. Duty – performed by “men who have renounced all in order to work for the Mother. Some may, if they choose be complete Sannyasins, most will be Brahmacharins who will return to the *grihasthasram* when their allotted work is finished; but all must accept renunciation” (Aurobindo 6:88), and Knowledge – on which devotion and duty are to be based upon. The pamphlet constructs rules that are to be followed by the “new Order of Sannyasis” (6:90), the essential ones being the observation of *brahmacharya*, maintaining strict discipline and rules.

Aurobindo was encompassing the technologies of ascetic to design a spiritual politics. These mechanics he felt would govern the behaviour of the body politic, and induce them to make significant sacrifices for the “Motherland”. The technologies of the ascetic were exercised as discursive resources. These ascetic ideals were to produce docile subjects – understood as discursive constructions – and institutionalize a regime of practice. The nationalist ideology was engraved with traditional Hindu religious symbolism. To an extent, though not secular in its own terms, this ideology propagated that duty towards motherland should be reflective and a voluntary practice. The sons of the Mother were to set themselves rules of conduct, transform and restructure themselves into a disciplined organization.

Devotion, an ingrained nature, a mechanism – “a leaping flame”, cannot sustain without *Shakti*. Bhawani, the mother, “sometimes She is Knowledge, sometimes renunciation, and Infinite Energy. She also is Durga, Kali, manifested as the mother of Strength. She is pure

Shakti” (6:79). Aurobindo considers that devotionism has to continue through prayer and *bhakti* and moreover manifests that

“the energy of creation at the level of material nature is *sakti*, the divine mother. As the mother of all things of nature, she is also the mother of India’s resurgence. The Mother awakens India. Therefore, devotion to the Mother is implied; and the awakening of India is the awakening of the realisation of the ‘self of selves,’ ‘the God within us,’ ‘the Eternal, Timeless, Absolute.’ Nationalism is tied to the metaphysics of traditional Indian religious thought, and work for national freedom receives spiritual valuation.” (Johnson 510)

Aurobindo exercises the reconceptualization of freedom in terms of political spirituality, which becomes a creative production of national identity. It confirms the objective of life that is absolutely the cultivation of highest manhood. He exemplifies that “the Nation or the mother-country is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha-Mardini sprang into being from the Shaktis of all the million 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.” (Aurobindo 6:83)

Aurobindo saw that his theory of nationalism would bring freedom to India, not through the practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments and enhancing one’s intellectual capacity, but through devotion and strict spiritual discipline. Even though the traditions of past might be great – repeating it is no concern. However, he had set out to achieve the “recapturing, amplifying and re-living the eternal truths of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Gita” (Iyengar 61). Aurobindo had become well aware with the changes that had been taking with his physical and mental states – the initiation of *pranayama* practice and yoga.

The issue of partition of Bengal in 1905 created a massive stir and it became an “approaching Hour of God” (195). The new “Order of sannyasis” were to take up education and political revolution into the country. A spiritual feeling and regeneration were infused within the patriotic work. Aurobindo in one of his letters mentions about his spiritual approach to Indian nationalism and his own inner life. He indicates,

“Firstly, it is my faith that whatever virtue, talent, the higher education and knowledge, and the wealth which God has given me belong to him....

The second folly has recently taken hold of me; it is this: by whatever means I must get the direct realization of the Lord. The religion of today consists in repeating the name of God every now and then, in praying to him in the presence of everybody and in showing to people how religious one is; I do not want it. If the divine is there, then there must be a way of explaining His existence, of realizing His presence. However hard the path, I have taken a firm resolution to follow it....

The third folly is this: whereas others regard the country as an inert object, and know it as the plains, the fields, the forests, the mountains, and rivers I look upon my country as the mother, I worship her and adore her as the mother.... I know I have the strength to up-lift this fallen race.... This is not a new feeling within me, it is not of a recent origin, I was born with it, it is in my very marrow, God sent me to the earth to accomplish this great mission.” (Mc Dermott 17)

Aurobindo through his exercise of yoga and other ascetical practices started to realize that the “body” should be standardized and executed for the sake of the “Mother”. A consideration for the body among the “body politic” was to be manifested by exercise, *lathi*-play and maintaining celibacy. These were to be treated as strategies that symbolize a transformation of the self.

Aurobindo was keen about persuading the masses to take up spiritual disciplinary training in the midst of a political ground. He inclined that we are “Hindus and naturally spiritual in our temperament, because the work which we have to do for humanity is a work which no other nation can accomplish, the spiritualisation of the race; so, the men whom we worship are those who have helped the spiritual progress of mankind” (Aurobindo 7:977). The representation of traditional culture as national culture by Aurobindo shows that a national identity was being constructed. The narration of hero-worship and great men – who “insisted only on self-discipline, self-communion, self-realisation as the only way to escape from the entanglement of the intellect and the senses” (7:977) – became rationales for courses of duty and devotion.

As an acclaimed nationalist leader by 1906, Aurobindo became keen in pursuing the youth of the country towards a militant ascetic ideal, which was slowly followed by the aspects; *Swaraj*, boycott and passive resistance. There was a mixture of the Eastern and Western ideas in



the gospel of Aurobindo's nationalism and had a "cosmopolitan character." It has been noted that "when he refers to passive resistance, to arbitration in place of the British judicial courts, and to boycott, he is referring to familiar techniques in European political history" (Varma 240). Aurobindo became more concerned with the idea of self-help, rather than becoming angry on the British. He criticized that our enemy is "our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism" (Heehs, *The Lives* 39). He articulated at his best, for attaining complete independence. Swaraj, became "self-rule" and was thoroughly systematized with the concerns and values of the society.

Political freedom was the first priority on which the other contemplations were based upon. So, Aurobindo took upon the significant duty of amalgamating the traditional spiritual goal, the aspect of *moksha* with *Swaraj*, a political goal. The idea of Swaraj was a process to gain complete freedom from the imperial rule. Swaraj for Aurobindo was something that had a profound spiritual undertone and had its base in ancient Hindu tradition. It was a spiritual discipline and a qualification to be attained, an ascetical practice – a self-control activity. Aurobindo asserts that Swaraj should not be a sort of European ideal, instead should bring the ancient traditions of India under modern conditions and resume once again its role as "teacher and guide, self-liberation of the people for the final fulfilment of the Vedantic ideal in politics, this is the true Swaraj for India" (Brown 431).

The strategy for reconstituting and rebirth of national life in India became the chief concern of Aurobindo's essays. Here, the stance and description of a religious dimension is revealed. The constitution of his spiritual reflection in politics is publicized, which can be regarded as his practical production of the regular contrasting fundamentals. He fuses the spiritual objective of *moksha* with the political aspiration of swaraj and "to support such a synthesis he joins two more disparate elements of traditional Indian thought: the Upanishadic ideal of the Absolute as the essence of man and nature with devotionism to the mother as Kali, Durga, or Jagatdhatri" (Johnson 20). The term Swaraj, is structured and entangled with the aspect politico-spirituality. It becomes an aim for the masses – to be comprehended from both the political and spiritual angles. The nationalist's duty was to be devoted to the vedantic ideal – restructure the Indian nation appropriating it to a spiritual model.

Aurobindo felt that Passive resistance and boycott were subordinate means. However, they were to be marked to produce a social ardent effectiveness of grounding active forms of

revolt. The principle for the moment was to present “no control, no assistance” and the “method proposed was practical, – boycott” (6:286). Aurobindo wanted to constitute subjects in accordance to the social structure with an interpretation that involved an emotional narrative. In his *Doctrine of Passive Resistance* he manifests that passive resistance should aspire to make a rule ineffectual by a common structured defiance and subsequently secure its call.

“It is therefore the first canon of passive resistance that to break an unjust coercive law is not only justifiable but, under given circumstances, a duty.... The second canon of the doctrine of passive resistance has therefore been accepted by politicians of both schools – that to resist an unjust coercive order or interference is not only justifiable but, under given circumstances, a duty.” (Aurobindo 6:290-91)

The third canon of the movement, social boycott was – “rightful and essential as against persons guilty of treason to the nation.” Passive resistance becomes a politico-spiritual duty. Aurobindo describes that passive resistance should have a purpose that holds unity and improvement among the masses and the acceptance of the limits of human condition. However, passive resistance has its limits at the hands of Aurobindo. He declares that as

“long as the action of the executive is peaceful and within the rules of the fight, the passive resister scrupulously maintains his attitude of passivity, but he is not bound to do so a moment beyond. To submit to illegal or violent methods of coercion, to accept outrage and hooliganism as part of the legal procedure of the country is to be guilty of cowardice, and, by dwarfing national manhood, to sin against the divinity within ourselves and the divinity in our motherland. The moment coercion of this kind is attempted, passive resistance ceases and active resistance becomes a duty.” (6:294)

He exercised for a social-change, which he considered would become possible through generating the act of rethinking in the individual and a re-description of the social order. The doctrines, viz. passive resistance, boycott and Swaraj were stylized to represent the culture – fundamentally “political”, because they were related with the power that produced a type of indigenous knowledge and identity.

Passive resistance finally became a method of salvation and the only grounding for the ultimate *sadhana*. The aspect of boycott also was framed according to – keeping the concepts of justice and righteousness in view, which in turn were accordant to the Hindu epics and historical incidents.

“The sword of the warrior is as necessary to the fulfilment of justice and righteousness as the holiness of the saint. Ramdas is not complete without Shivaji. To maintain justice and prevent the strong from despoiling and the weak from being oppressed is the function for which the Kshatriya was created. Therefore, says Sri Krishna in the Mahabharat, God created battle and armour, the sword, the bow and the dagger.” (7:1121)

Spirituality is found to be slowly plastering the idea of nation. Nationalism becomes an *Avatar*, and emancipating it “is a great and holy *yajna*”. The aspects, “Boycott, Swadeshi, National Education and all other activities become major or minor parts” (6:302) in front of the act of freeing the Motherland from the foreign rule. Aurobindo propagated that Vedantism will show the path to spiritual liberty and the realization of spirituality within one’s own self. In addition, he says that nationalism was – to be taken up by the people as – a new religion and its purpose was to bring the people to their Mother – Bhawani Bharati. Srinivasa Iyengar highlights that Aurobindo was systematizing the aspect of national identity through assembling the divine and political in relation to asceticism – religion of patriotism. He notes that “To strive for the country, for India, was work for the Divine, and the Divine would give one the necessary strength to fight on, to persevere, even to sacrifice one’s life if that should become necessary” (235).

Aurobindo tries to raise the contemporary history to the level of myth – the Hindu mythological characters are paraphrased for institutionalising the attitude of political Vedantism among the masses. The aspects of mythology are sophisticatedly interwoven into the “narration” of nation building and for achieving liberty. It is as if the supreme heroes – the hyper-male – are enlightening the masses on the issue of liberty, which “is the life-breath of a nation”. *The Life of Nationalism* is entangled with the seasons of life-development of Krishna at Gokul-Kansa-Mathura and finally at Dwaraka. He advocates that “Nationalism is a divinely appointed *shakti* of the Eternal and must do its God-given work before it returns to the bosom of the Universal Energy from which it came” (Aurobindo 7:750). In addition, he manifests that the concept of Swaraj comes down from ages and should be carried on further and

“nothing should be allowed to distract us from the mighty ideal of Swaraj, national and pan-Indian. This is no alien or exotic ideal, it is merely the conscious attempt to fulfil the great centripetal tendency which has pervaded the grandiose

millenniums of her history, to complete the work which Srikrishna began, which Chandragupta and Asoka and the Gupta Kings continued, which Akbar almost brought to realisation, for which Shivaji was born and Bajirao fought and planned.... We must make the nation what the village community was of old, self-sufficient, self-centred, autonomous and exclusive – the ideal of national Swaraj.” (7:910)

To live Swaraj, according to Aurobindo, is to abandon the idea of the self and replace it by the idea of the nation. It should be like as

“Chaitanya ceased to be Nimai Pandit and became Krishna, became Radha, became Balaram, so every one of us must cease to cherish his separate life and live in the nation. The hope of national regeneration must absorb our minds as the idea of salvation absorbs the minds of the *mumukshu*. Our *tyaga* must be as complete as the *tyaga* of the nameless ascetic. Our passion to see the face of our free and glorified Mother must be as devouring a madness as the passion of Chaitanya to see the face of Sri Krishna. Our sacrifice for the country must be as enthusiastic and complete as that of Jagai and Madhai who left the rule of a kingdom to follow the *sankirtan* of Gauranga.” (7:1031)

The comparison of Rakshasas with the British – in a symbolic manner is very subtle. The Hindu epic characters, the supreme heroes manifest themselves, in the narratives of Aurobindo, as the leaders, who are guiding the people to think about the emancipation of the Mother.

Aurobindo was keen about pursuing a national character – which is possible only through the act of unifying the western nation’s notion of power of organisation, practical work, and the emancipated, transforming and indigenous spirituality of India. Aurobindo has grasped a prophetic accent that had the power to raise the call to action. His art of speaking and the use of figurative language – “was like raining hammer-blow on hammer-blow” with ample effective illustrations from – Vedanta, American Revolution, French Monarchism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and so on – structured “the whole Aurobindonian thesis, a unique amalgam of patriotic fervour and Vedantic idealism” (Iyengar 239). One of the foremost steps essential, according to Aurobindo, for spiritual evolution was to liberate oneself from the slavish simulation of the Western ways. India was asked to look back at the lost Aryan spiritual way of life, which was abolished by the British with the crafty systematization of utilitarian and materialistic ways. Aurobindo believed that the “restoration and resurgence of the Aryan way of

life by replacing the English was, for Aurobindo, an important constituent of nationalism and national identity” (Gowda 125-26).

The mechanics of disciplining – formulated in the science of Yoga – oneself had become an important exercise to be recognized and made as a habitual agent, was poured into the minds of the body politic. The “Mother of Strength” was to be drawn into oneself and made secure. This according to Aurobindo could be achieved through an awakening of the religio-spiritual. The race should be infused with a spirit for striding forward into the future. He manifests that a new heart and brain to work with thoroughness for the “Mother” will ensure fulfilment and a modern organization of the old ideals of ancient India would be effective for the cause of the nation building. An intellectual devotion for India and a superhuman discipline of soul and mind, encountered by Aurobindo in Mahabharata, Ramayana, in ancient philosophy, poetry, art, sculpture and architecture were to be revived and structuralized. The secret of the principle on which it was based upon was to be identified. The human psychology was one aspect where he searched for the answer.

Aurobindo bases and necessitates the all-important ascetic ideal; disciplining Brahmacharya, “for the building up of a great intellectual superstructure.” Brahmacharya is one of the chief processes, used for storing energy. Aurobindo opines that “the practice of Brahmacharya is the first and most necessary condition of increasing the force within and turning it to such uses as may benefit the possessor or mankind” (Aurobindo 1:372). Moreover, Brahmacharya was considered to raise the physical to the spiritual. However, he postulates that all human energy has a physical basis and further says that

“the source of life and energy is not material but spiritual, but the basis, the foundation on which the life and energy stand and work, is physical. The ancient Hindus clearly recognised this distinction between *karana* and *pratistha*, the north pole and the south pole of being. Earth or gross matter is the *pratistha*, Brahman or spirit is the *karana*. To raise up the physical to the spiritual is Brahmacharya, for by the meeting of the two the energy which starts from one and produces the other is enhanced and fulfils itself.” (1:372)

Brahmacharya was appropriated as a source that would perfect the mechanisms of knowledge. It heightens and guides the *sattwic* elements in human nature to ultimate perfection. However, Aurobindo was careful in adding, “this is only possible to the Yogin by a successful

prosecution of the discipline of Yoga” (1:375), and is found to have been dependent on the prior existence of discursive subject positions.

Aurobindo's politico-spiritual narratives in the *Yugantar*, *Bande Mataram*, and *Karmayogin* are found to be strongly manifesting the premeditated fusion of violence and spirituality. These narratives strived to institutionalize the Indian militant ascetic nationalist ideal. The writings mainly undertake the effort of combining, the identity of the nation with the “Mother” figure, the politics with a virile masculine resistance, and spirituality. Moreover, Aurobindo attempts to deconstruct the colonizer's grip, the imperial attempt in disfiguring, distorting and destroying of the indigenous past and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. The reconstruction of an indigenous identity through a *re-telling* of the past is confronted with images, indigenous myths, icons and symbols.

The ascetic ideals as “technologies of the self” were promulgated for systematizing a reunification of the cultural identity. These technologies permitted the “docile body” to “perform certain operations on their own bodies, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, or perfection.” Aurobindo, far from binding the ascetic model in the past, subjects it through rhetoric – in a sense to make the indigenous individual to attain specific attitudes – to a constant participation during the times of the imperial rule in India. The disposing and a constant practice of the ascetic principles were thought would produce a politico-spiritual transformation. It has been observed that Aurobindo claimed to have “reconciled the divergent trends of Indian ascetic acosmic transcendental idealism and Western secularistic materialism” (Varma 236). The religious contemplation for the nation, was visualized by Aurobindo, would indeed proliferate the mechanics; duty, discipline and devotion, and thus, the political action and spiritual contemplation could be linked. A symbolic journey into one's own self and simultaneously identifying oneself with the Mother-nation-land were re-framed as the instantaneous principles of action.

Aurobindo's idea of ascesis seems to be a situational and structuralized progression. It had to be confronted through the disciplinization of one's body; through a rigorous training, sexual abstinence, physical hardship and devotion towards the motherland. A religious intensity was brought into the Indian nationalistic discourse. Peter Heehs notes the charge made by Romila Thapar that Aurobindo's “use of religious symbolism gave rise to a nationalism based on

religious identities. It is undeniable that their allusions to Krishna and the Mother-goddess give some of their utterances a decidedly Hindu air – what Chandra calls the “Hindu tinge” (*Nationalism* 110).

Aurobindo quite well seems to have known that it is difficult for the Mother-nation to dominate the imperial rule – the political sphere, so he is found to have set off with the cultural and spiritual dimensions. He takes the ascetic “ideal” notions, which were culturally and traditionally constructed as outside the public sphere aspects. Aurobindo, until a particular phase, felt that the only method to break the backbone of the imperialist ideology was – to shape a spiritually dominated revolution – to coalesce the militant aspect with that of the ascetic model. The mythical character, Krishna becomes the man of the people – a nation-builder. Nationalism is manifested as a religion that has come from God and so possesses the strength of God, and so cannot be crushed. It is coloured with immortality and is portrayed as God and cannot die – cannot be killed – cannot be sent to jail. This he thought would crystallize the aspect of “national consciousness” among the body politic.

Aurobindo fastened the idea of nationalism to the traditional Hindu religious notion, and delineated that the struggle for nation’s liberation would facilitate one in acquiring spiritual benefit. The struggle for national liberty was to be accompanied by the religio-spiritual aspect – sannyasis following brahmacharya and to be dedicated for the service of “Bhawani”. However, it should be noted that the question of women and other religious communities are not figured in most of his writings, which is still left unanswered. The nationalist intelligentsia were adhered to the religious traditions, as it became essential to oppose the imperialist.

It looks as if the task of nation-formation dominated all the other problems, which were safely bypassed. This circumventing act with the employment of “political *Vedanta* idiom combined with lack of attention to secular issues appealing to the rural masses, created a situation conducive to counter-mobilization among Muslims and some lower caste Hindus” (Southard 376).

The ascetic features in Indian nationalistic discourse are often understood as something, which are everything, but nothing at the same time. However, it should be remembered that the nineteenth century India witnessed the reconfiguration of the “ascetic” as someone who involves in political actions as well. The act of spiritualizing patriotism was affiliated with ascetic features, namely, the disciplining one’s “self” and the formulation of a devotion to the mother-

nation with a duty mindedness. The synthesis of a twofold ideology – religio-politics, was initiated with the help of ascetic practices. This fusion, it was thought, would generate a bond between the self and nation-formation, further, it was considered that it would “renew one’s potency”. The devotion towards mother-nation, it was thought, would engage in constructing the male self.

While the “Indian (Hindu) nationalist” thought reorganised the ascetic subject to produce an idealized masculine iconic hero, it also led to the construction of internal “Others”, whereby non-Hindus were emphasized as “internal enemies”. Often this attitude was justified as nationalist and counter-imperialist in intention. But the politicization of the religio-ascetic is undergoing a paradigm shift in the recent socio-political landscape of independent India, with the Hindutva movement crystallising into a Hindu majoritarian politics, necessitating a re-reading of the nineteenth century reconfiguration of the ascetic figure. Some aspects of Hindu nationalism have been manipulated to promote and organize culture, leading to friction in Hindu-Muslim relations, already fraught with the trauma of partition.

### **Conclusion**

In this work, I have tried to delineate the ascetic subject in its transition by the Indian nationalist ideologue(s) – Aurobindo Ghose, a politico-spiritual figure. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that the ascetic subject is a reconstructed and reconfigured authoritative figure who intervenes in immanent life of the nation, a translation effected during the nineteenth century India. The ascetic subject was thereafter reinterpreted as an ideal who no more espoused renunciation as the sole and prime objective. Rather, the ascetic became involved in almost all socio-cultural issues. In general, therefore, it seems that a conscious schematization to metamorphose the ascetic subject was part of the nationalist agenda in India of the nineteenth century.

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