Chapter VI: Political Delineation of a National Education for India: Through Writings, Speeches, Recollections

Let us continue with the exploration of national education as a political demand. Looking back at the year which gave him his first exposure to the national education issue in the province’s politics as witnessed at Barisal, Sri Aurobindo wrote a lengthy editorial ‘The Old Year’ in the Bande Mataram on the Bengali New Year’s day of 16th April, 1907 surveying major world events and indicating the lessons that the Indian struggle could take from them. Among the various developments the he tracked, the attempt at national education in other countries came in for scrutiny. He lyrically described the times as those when ‘The great Mother, the Adya Shakti, has resolved to take the nations into her hand and shape them anew. These [were] periods of destruction and energetic creation’ and that those participating in struggles for liberation and self-determination were ‘assisting...at the birth of a new Asia and the modernization of the East.’\(^{430}\) He particularly highlighted all attempts that were being made towards national modernization, development and unity and described efforts at creating a national system of education wherever he perceived such an effort to be in progress. Such a scrutiny also implied that this was an essential area of action that nations desirous of self-organisation took up in right earnest. Looking at the Far East in the last twelve months he describes the rapid progress China had made, ‘Within these twelve months China has been educating, training and arming herself with a speed of which the outside world has a very meager conception’ and among other things ‘she has pushed

forward the work of revolutionising her system of education and bringing it into line with modern requirements.\textsuperscript{431} The ‘most remarkable feature of the past year’ Sri Aurobindo observed as the ‘awakening of the Mahomedan world’ and he especially drew attention to the experiments in national development initiated by the Amir Habibullah Khan (1872-1919) and commented that the ‘inception of a great scheme of National Education’ would eventually ‘lay the basis of State, strong in itself, organised on modern lines and equipped with scientific knowledge and training.’\textsuperscript{432} The rapid growth of the Nationalist Party and its spread in other parts of the country was the other area of progress. The third satisfying feature of the year had ‘been the growth of National Education.’ The Bengal National College had become ‘an established fact’ and was ‘rapidly increasing in numbers and [had] begun to build the foundations of a better system of education.’ The ‘Barisal outrage’ had encouraged other schools to come up in quick succession in other districts and this appeared to be a ‘no mean record for a single year’ and ‘most of these schools have grown up in the great centre of Nationalism, East Bengal.’\textsuperscript{433} All in all the record of

\textsuperscript{431} Sri Aurobindo, April 16, 1907, Bande Mataram, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{432} Ibid., p. 261. Amir Habibullah who visited India in 1907 had initiated a grand programme of national modernization in Afghanistan and through it sought to bring about national unity in the country. His efforts covered all areas of national development including education. His attempts in the area of educational modernization laid ‘the foundation for Afghanistan’s modern education system. Habibya College, the first secondary school was founded in 1904--an all boys school. Initially, the school offered courses in mathematics, geography, callisthenic, English and Urdu’. To this were added courses in education, drawing, history, public health etc. The first public library in Afghanistan was also established around this time. Most of the teachers in the college were Muslims from India. At the time of Habibullah ascension to the throne the Afghan illiteracy rates were 98%. [Rameen Moshref, The Life and Times of Amir Habibullah Khan, accessed at: http://www.afghan-web.com/bios/detайл/dhabib.html on 3.10.2010] Sri Aurobindo’s mention of the Amir can be understood from the fact that his visit had caught the attention of the revolutionaries, this is evident from an article in the radically nationalist Yugantar, ‘Amirer Bharat Paridarshan’ [Amir’s India Visit], 17\textsuperscript{th} February, 1907. [Anshuman Bandyopadhyay ed. Agnijuger Agnikatha-’Jugantor’ 1906-1908, 2001] The paper was started by Barindra Kumar Ghose (1880-1959) and his group with the approval of Sri Aurobindo who ‘himself wrote some of the opening articles in the early numbers and …always exercised a general control’ over it. [On Himself, op. cit., p.24] The nationalists’ interest in Habibullah was because of his attempts to modernize his country educationally, socially, and militarily displaying a spirit of freedom and self-reliance, a spirit that the revolutionaries would have themselves preferred to emulate.

\textsuperscript{433} Sri Aurobindo, April 16, 1907, Bande Mataram., pp. 262, 262.
the nationalist advance was a satisfying one as Sri Aurobindo noted and one of the direct
call out of the rising nationalist tide was the founding of national schools in greater
numbers all over the province. The reaction was an emotional one, often these schools
were not on a sound fiscal footing but yet, so as not to detract these achievements, they
were projected as the first empirical signs of a revolt against a system of intellectual and
spiritual domination that had hitherto gone unchallenged or at best had been opposed
meekly or in a piecemeal fashion.

One of the principal jobs of National Education was to inculcate and develop a
spirit of self-reliance among the youth of the country; this is what appears to be Sri
Aurobindo’s stand on the issue. He spoke of it during one of his public talks on national
education and this is what perhaps impelled him to encourage and support the
establishment of national schools in greater numbers. A few incidents and recollections
go to illustrate to a certain extent Sri Aurobindo’s working within the structure of the
newly established national education machinery, apart from their sheer biographical
interest; it would be useful to have a look at them. One of his pupils at the national
college recalled his days in the College, ‘When I reached there [class]’ wrote one, ‘I saw
in the middle hall a young man of placid appearance. He was clad in a shirt and a chaddar
(upper cloth).’ On that day the Principal was addressing the students and the teacher alike
and the topic was not educational and pointed instead towards the need for developing a
spirit of self-reliance in youth which he believed was one of the primary tasks of national
education.

‘He [Sri Aurobindo] spoke of a sad accident that had happened. A student of the Calcutta
University had fallen from the verandah of the first floor of a University Building and
lost his consciousness. A crowd immediately collected there, but all it could do was to
look on helplessly and wringing their hands. None thought of rendering any active help. Just at that time, an Englishman was driving by. He noticed the boy, lying unconscious, picked him up in his car, and took him straight to the Campbell Medical College for first aid. Relating the accident, Sri Aurobindo compared the character of the Indians with that of the Europeans and observed that it was their devotion to duty which had made the Europeans masters of the world.’ The national character thus could achieve unbounded strength if could unite ‘that titanic power of practical work…with the spirituality of India.’

Perhaps that was to be the ultimate aim of national education as conceived by Sri Aurobindo. Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay (later Swami Pratyagatmananda) (1880-1973)\(^{435}\) Sri Aurobindo’s colleague in the National College and among the first group of scholars to join the institution has recorded his recollections of that period. The Swami provided an insight from his perception as a philosopher and metaphysician, recalling Sri Aurobindo at the National College he observed that ‘When he [Sri Aurobindo] started his work in the heaving politics of Bengal, it was the blazing, fiery aspect of Rudra that stood out in front. But those who associated with him in the National College saw his serene figure, glowing with a mellow luster. These two aspects were fused into one in Sri


\(^{435}\) A scholar and saint Swami Pratyagatmananda had a number of highly original works to his credit. In his long quest of over six decades he tried to work out a synthesis between science and spirituality. His well known works are *Approaches to Truth, Metaphysics of Physics, Science and Sadhana* (6 Vols.) etc. [*Samsad Bengali Biographical Dictionary, vol.1*, p. 297.] For a detailed analysis of one aspect of Swami Pratyagatmananda’s thought with that of Sri Aurobindo’s see e.g. Indrani Sanyal, ‘History as Applied Metaphysics’ in Indrani Sanyal and Krishna Roy eds. *Sri Aurobindo and His Contemporary Thinkers*, 2007, pp. 165-178.]

The ‘fiery aspect’ of the Principal’s national education activism became evident during his forceful protest against the Risley Circular of 1907 which prevented the students from even discussing issues that were political in nature. Sri Aurobindo attacked the arbitrary circular as preventing education from carrying out its sacred duty of inculcating the spirit of patriotism in young minds and showed how the Government was trying to meddle in educational issues so as to arrest the growing strength of the national education movement. The notorious circular proclaimed that ‘School students are not even to attend political meetings nor school teachers to teach them patriotism.’ This was done because ‘at that age the mind is soft and impressionable and what is seen and heard, sinks deep and tends to cristallyse not merely into fixed ideas, but into character.’ It was this that the colonial government, unnerved by the rapid growth of national educational institutions, wished to suppress. One sees through this article Sri Aurobindo’s perception of the importance and the method of developing certain universal qualities such as patriotism, benevolence, discipline, courage etc. which intrinsically link young minds with the soil of their birth. This remains a relevant issue even today when much division has arisen on the interpretation of this aspect of a general educational aim. Drawing a parallel with the earlier issued Carlyle Circular that forbade students from participating in political meetings that were especially linked to Swadeshi and Boycott, Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the former was a ‘local experiment hastily adopted to meet an urgent difficulty and dropped as soon as it was found difficult to work’ the

present circular was aimed at ‘striking at the very root of the Swadeshi movement.’

He saw the Circular as ‘a desperate attempt of the bureaucracy not only to recover and confirm its hold on the student population and through them on the future, but to make that hold far more stringent, rigid, ineffugable than it ever was in the past.’ The Government did not care ‘if certain academical ideas of liberalism or nationalism are imparted to the young by their teachers, but they desire to stop the active habit of patriotism in the young; for they know well that a mere intellectual habit untranslated into action is of no value in after life.’

Drawing an interesting parallel in the argument Sri Aurobindo refers to Bushido, the Japanese Samurai’s code of honour and morals.

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439 Ibid., pp. 378-79.
440 The Bushido code in Japan was a national symbol of a fierce spirit of independence as well as sacrifice. The following: rectitude, courage, benevolence, respect, honesty, honour, loyalty – where the seven principal virtues of this code and it is evident why a subject nation aspiring to selfhood would give a premium on these virtues in order to attract and prepare workers for political work and action. The Japanese diplomat and statesman Inazo Nitobe (1862-1933) popularized and breathed a certain degree of contemporaneity in the Bushido code through his widely read Bushido: The Soul of Japan (1899). Originally written in English for a Western audience it was the first major work on Japanese Culture with special reference to the Samurai Ethics. It is interesting to note that within six years of its first publication the book had got so popular that a tenth revised edition had to be launched in 1905. Writing a preface to that edition Inazo observed that the book had already been translated into Marathi, German, Bohemian, Polish, and the Norwegian, French and Chinese were in the process or being contemplated. Inazo was flattered that President Roosevelt had read the treatise and had distributed copies to his friends as well. It may be assumed that Sri Aurobindo and his revolutionary colleagues must have seen the book because of its popularity and its demand for translation it must have gained wide circulation among a certain section of the Indian public. Since it was basically a code for warriors we may also assume that Tilak, one of the proponents of action in Indian politics, may have encouraged its Marathi translation in order to ensure a wider dissemination. Stating his objective Inazo pointed out that his attempt was firstly to relate the ‘origin and sources of our chivalry; secondly, its character and teaching; thirdly, its influence among the masses; and, fourthly, the continuity and permanence of its influence.’ Among the sections he proposed to dwell at greatest length on the second aspect which he indicated would interest students of ‘International Ethics and Comparative Ethology’ in the Japanese way of thought and action. What is of interest to us is the term of Bushido as defined by Inazo which will also help us understand why such code attracted the early Indian political radicals, ‘Bu-shi-do means literally Military-Knight-Ways – the ways which fighting nobles should observe in their daily life as well as in their vocation; in a word, the “Precepts of Knighthood,” the noblesse oblige of the warrior class…Bushido, then, is the code of moral principles which the knights were required or instructed to observe. It is not a written code; at best it consists of a few maxims handed down from mouth to mouth or coming from the pen of some well-known warrior or savant. More frequently it is a code unuttered and unwritten, possessing all the more the powerful sanction of veritable deed, and of a law written on the fleshy tablets of the heart. It was founded not on the creation of one brain, however able, or on the life of a single personage, however renowned. It was an organic growth of decades and centuries of military career. It, perhaps, fills the same position in the history of ethics that the English Constitution
Referring to the Bushido as a living part of Japanese society Sri Aurobindo argues that when the Japanese teach Bushido to the boys they ‘do not rest content with lectures or a moral catechism; they make them practise Bushido and govern every thought and action of their life by the Bushido ideal.’ This practical way was the ‘only way of inculcating a quality into a nation, by instilling it practically into the minds of its youth at school and college until it becomes an ingrained, inherent, inherited national quality. This is what we have to do with the modern ideal of patriotism in India.’

The young minds would have to be filled from childhood ‘with the idea of the country, and present them with that idea at every turn and make their whole young life a lesson in the practice of the virtues which afterwards go to make the patriot and the citizen.’

The new education wished to make patriots and citizens, it therefore wanted to instill the vision of the nation in the young minds, it desired to concretize what was till then perhaps just a notion and if this concretization and identification was not attempted, the desire to create an ‘Indian nation’ might as well be given up. Without exposure to such a discipline ‘nationalism, patriotism, regeneration’ were to remain ‘mere words and ideas which can never become a part of the very soul of the nation and never therefore a great realised fact. Mere academical teaching of patriotism [was] of no avail.’

Therefore the students were welcomed to actively associate with political meetings, were encouraged to practice Swadeshi and engage in work and programme as volunteers and develop that deeper bond with the nation. To submit to restriction on this matter was, Sri Aurobindo cautioned, tantamount to submitting to restriction in political history…”

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441 Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, 1905, p. 10. Sri Aurobindo who supported the use of violence if necessitated by circumstances for national liberation had as one of his definite plan the organising of a nationwide armed insurrection after an extended period of preparation, [see e.g. *On Himself*, op. cit., pp. 21-22] the inculcation of the Bushido spirit and code therefore in young minds keeping that objective in focus would have, according to him, definitely assisted in that preparation.

442 *Bande Mataram*, p.379

Ibid.
to committing ‘national suicide’. The write-up may have today a topical relevance but yet one does not fail to note the following two points because of their striking contemporaneity. Referring to student’s participation in politics Sri Aurobindo suggests in the same article that when Indian nationality becomes a reality ‘and the present unnatural conditions have been remedied’ then the ‘active participation [of students in politics] may be brought under restriction and regulation; for then the inherited habit of patriotism, the atmosphere of a free country and the practice and teaching of the Bushido virtues within the limits of home and school life will be sufficient.\textsuperscript{443} The other aspect pertains to the teacher’s role in this whole exercise of identification and patriotism, ‘A teacher may by his personal influence and teachings so surround the minds of his students with the idea of the country, of work for the country, of living and dying for the country that this will become the dominant idea of their minds and, if associated with any kind of patriotic discipline or teaching in action, the dominant note in their character.’\textsuperscript{444} We still appear to be grappling with these two issues and continue to look for ways and methods to satisfactorily work them out. Developing of patriotism, heroic spirit and the spirit of sacrifice was in Sri Aurobindo’s vision one of the principal tasks of national education. The official system which tried to arrest this development was to be resisted. The fiery side of the Principal’s personality was thus seen when advocating such a stand.

Discussing the issue of ‘\textit{Swadeshi in Education}’ in an aside Sri Aurobindo indicated that the attempt to practise ‘Swadeshi Education under the official Universities’, as was being done then by some well-known institutions, was bound to fail and castigated the view that Swadeshi in Education could be realised as soon as one

\textsuperscript{443} \textit{Bande Mataram}, p. 380.

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid.
involved Indian teachers in the process without trying to alter the essential fact that the
institution still remained under the tutelage of the official University. His definition of the
term was clear:

‘Swadeshi in Education does not mean teaching by Indian professors only or even
management by Indians only. It means an education suited to the temperament and needs
of the people fitted to build up a nation equipped for life under modern conditions and
absolutely controlled by Indians.’\textsuperscript{445}

It will be observed that when talking of national education during this period (1906 to
1908) Sri Aurobindo invariably clubbed the issue with other agendas of the nationalist
programme and therefore one does not find a sustained attempt at developing its
philosophy and theme. His speeches and writings during this phase mostly dwelt on
political issues and through them he tried to popularize the new programmes and ideas of
the advanced nationalist group among the Indian masses. Nevertheless a few of these
writings and speeches do contain, as seen from the above study, passages and
observations that provide a window into Sri Aurobindo’s conception of national
education, its broad framework and mandate and its relevance to the nation. We continue
to read and sift these from his early political writings and speeches.

After the nationalist triumph at the Surat (Gujarat) session of the Congress in
1907 Sri Aurobindo toured the western Indian region of Maharashtra where the
nationalists had begun gaining grass-roots support. There was nothing preplanned about
these visits they organized spontaneously in places of nationalist strength on his way

back to Calcutta. At most of these places Sri Aurobindo spoke on the nationalist ideology, the then prevailing political climate of differences and division and more importantly for us on the concept and effort of national education especially undertaken in Bengal. This he projected as a major initiative of the newly formed nationalist bloc which was being initiated keeping in mind the future independent nation that would have to learn to handle Swaraj. It is during this period that we come across one of his public speech dealing exclusively with national education – his longest recorded oral exposition of the theme in public – delivered at Bombay on 15 January 1908. It is interesting to note that in this exposition Sri Aurobindo not only dwells briefly on the definition and philosophy of national education, wherein he also provides some rather stimulating and original thoughts on the concept of nation, nationality and its defining aspects as he saw them, but also provides examples on the way programmes of national education were being implemented in Bengal. One also perceives while going through this speech that the methods that some of the national schools worked out were indeed futuristic and revolutionary and were done with the aim of creating a cadre of dedicated citizens who would help sustain and organize freedom when it would eventually come.

Sri Aurobindo starts his public speech with accepting the fact that the concept of national education is yet to percolate widely in the areas of Bombay, whereas in Bengal it was taken as a ‘given fact’ though there may be people for and against such an idea and attempt. In Bengal the concept did not need to be explained and discussed in order to convince people.\(^{446}\) He also briefly dwells on the differences in perceptions of national

\(^{446}\) Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, op.cit., p.11. ‘The speech was delivered at on 15 January 1908 in Girgaum, Bombay. A translation in Marathi was published in the *Kesari* [B.G. Tilak’s celebrated nationalist paper] 21 January. This was retranslated into English by a police agent and published in the Bombay Native Paper
education between nationalists and moderates. The nationalists had, he insisted, expressly included the word ‘national’ in the resolutions that they had influenced and got passed in the Congress but the moderates failed to appreciate its import and changed the wording and talked instead of an ‘independent system of education’ so as not to offend official sensibilities, but this nomenclature, Sri Aurobindo says, does not convey what is meant by ‘national education’. This gave an idea of the political tussle over education, one position wanted a complete break with the official system of education and the other wanted the perpetuation of the official system and only a nominal indigenous attempt that would in no way challenge or oppose the former. The political dissections, though, were only limited to the first part of the speech, the rest deals with the experiment of national education as undertaken in Bengal. Sri Aurobindo then highlights the question asked by many, especially those who believe that India is not a nation, ‘why do we have to qualify the term “education” by calling it “national”? According to the thinking of these people, Sri Aurobindo observes, India is not a nation because of the existence of thousands castes and subcastes, sects and subsects ‘any number of religious creeds with differences of opinion and practice; [and thus] in that case the use of the word “national” in the Indian situation becomes meaningless.’ Sri Aurobindo counters that these ‘people do not really understand what is meant by a nation.’

Sri Aurobindo then defines the unity and being of a nation in his characteristic original way in order to establish first, that India is indeed a nation and second, as a result the term ‘national’ can indeed be applied to the new education system that was being envisaged. It is this definition of the term nation

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Report (a police intelligence report) in 1908.’ The text analysed here has been retranslated from a Marathi report by the editors of this edition of Sri Aurobindo’s speeches.


448 Ibid.
that could be said to belong to the new school of political as well as educational thought. Sri Aurobindo dismisses the argument that national unity shall be established once there is a single religion and a single caste; he does not recognize religion and caste as 'permanent aspects of a nation.' Others argue, Sri Aurobindo points out, that 'although India is a vast country geographically, still it cannot be termed a nation.' Here too Sri Aurobindo differs, to him instead, ‘by its very geography the country appears to be quite distinct from other countries, and that itself gives it a certain national character.’ He compares this physical structure to that of Italy, which was separate from its surrounding and in ‘thirty years became an independent nation.’ Then follows what may be termed as the nationalist educational perception and understanding of the nation, Sri Aurobindo observes that ‘the inner and outer body of India, the customs, culture and religion of its people, have an independent character different from those of the rest of the world. It has its foundations in the ancient past.’\(^4\) The unambiguous statement that he gives demonstrates what is implied by the imparting of national education, ‘it implies that we need not throw away our traditional background and introduce completely new ideas and ideals.’\(^5\) At an epoch when the nation’s cultural and spiritual moorings were being rediscovered and readapted to modern conditions, the nationalist adopted such a stance, which while welcoming the new educational ideas and techniques of the West yet attempted to base the national system’s basic philosophy and world view on an eclectic indigenous cultural and spiritual past.

Sri Aurobindo continues with the theme by stating that there existed a system of national education in the country at a certain period of its national development and that

\(^5\) Ibid., p.13.
such a system was based on a philosophy which saw the nation as a living and pulsating entity. The Indian perception was that what is in the ‘individual is also in the universal [and that] a nation is a living entity, full of consciousness; it is not something made up or fabricated.’ The theme is further elaborated from a distinctly metaphysical perspective and emphasised that the nation was something more than a mere inhabited landmass. This was, as observed earlier, the position the nationalists upheld and propagated in order to encourage the growth and spread of nationalism and in order to create a binding relationship between the nation’s physical persona and its constituent elements. Sri Aurobindo also felt that projecting such a perspective of the nation among young minds would encourage the growth of unity, self-reliance and fraternity and help develop a sense of compassion and eagerness for the nation. One of the central efforts of the national education movement thus was creating this sense of organic bonding with the nation which the leaders felt the official system deliberately discouraged. One has to keep this in mind while reading this speech of his, and especially in order to understand why he undertakes a metaphysical analysis at length on issues of nation and national unity providing a deeper perspective to these fundamental themes of the day. It would therefore be worthwhile to read this speech in some detail.

Sri Aurobindo draws a parallel between the nation and the individual. The individual, Sri Aurobindo observes, constitutes of three parts, he terms it as the ‘three types of body, gross, subtle and causal’ similarly the nation too has three bodies and according to Indian philosophy ‘it is not only the outward appearance, the gross body (sthula-sarira), that makes a complete man. All three bodies have to be taken into

451 Sri Aurobindo, Speeches, op.cit.
account’ only then is it possible to develop some understanding of the man. Such an approach is same for the nation and he goes on to first describe the physical form of the nation and describes the areas and features that help one to visualise the contours of the nation. ‘[To] think about our nation,’ says Sri Aurobindo:

‘…is first to think about our physical motherland. Stretching from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, its boundaries are formed by the seas on the east and west. Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, Krishna, Godavari, flow here [India] unceasingly; here are ancient cities, tall and imposing temples, artistically designed palatial homes. Such is the part of this earth we call India.’

Such is the picture that comes into one’s mind says Sri Aurobindo, while contemplating the physical form of India and this ‘is the gross body of our nation.’ The gross, the physical is followed by the ‘subtle’ (suksma-deha), Sri Aurobindo describes it interestingly, ‘[thirty-three] crores of people live on this land with their joys and sorrows, their good and bad desires: they are all part of its subtle body.’

Then referring to the causal body he says that there are also aspects of the country which ‘undergo changes in course of time’ and ‘yet they remain in the body, in seed-state, as permanent as the atom; they are always present there and, being the origin, it is out of them that the future takes shape. This is the causal body (karana-deha) of the nation.’ The last form would require a separate analysis and would perhaps expose us

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452 Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, op.cit., p.13
453 Ibid.
454 Ibid.
in a deeper manner to Sri Aurobindo’s views on the composition of the nation and its metaphysical basis.

Sri Aurobindo’s next argument under the same topic again continues with the comparison of the individual and the nation, when one thinks of an individual, Sri Aurobindo says, one does not simply think of his present condition but also of his past and his future, the same process applies to the country, ‘when we speak of the rivers, mountains and cities of our country, we have in mind not only the present’ what is spoken of ‘is a history of five thousand years.’ While graphically describing how the country’s past lights up the present imagination, Sri Aurobindo says that [when] ‘we speak of Delhi and Agra, does not the image of Delhi as it was during Emperor Akbar’s time [also] stand before your mind’s eye?’ Therefore while speaking of the nation he suggests one should also remember ‘our ancestors…then Shivaji, Asoka and Akbar at once become an integral part of our nationhood.’ And this is not limited to these conquesting historical figures but also to the esoteric wisdom imparting ancient Rishis. All past personalities and characters who have contributed to the national growth and unity ought to be recalled and integrated in an evolving national memory that would eventually facilitate the growth of a consolidated nationhood. This aspect was an extremely vital point in the course of national evolution during that early period of the national movement. And national education seriously looked at this aspect too. The new national schools imbued by the spirit of national education, Sri Aurobindo argues, attempted to work for this integration of the past with the nation’s present, this he perceives to be an essential prerequisite for national progress and united living. Sri Aurobindo mentions that the habit of remembering the national ancestors was an integral

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part of Japanese culture and society ‘the Japanese people never forget their ancestors who offered their lives as a sacrifice for the sake of their country. This sense of sacrifice was always present in the Japanese blood; they never neglected to remember the sacrifices their ancestors made for sake of country.\textsuperscript{457} It is this spirit of remembering and emulating

\textsuperscript{457} The Indian nationalist, especially the extremists during the first decade of the last century, continuously referred to the Japanese social, political and educational ways and methods. This was especially \textit{de rigueur} after the Russo-Japanese war between February 1904 and September 1905. Though a conflict forced by Imperial ambitions, the repeated Japanese victories against the established Czarist Empire pointed towards the tilting of balance in the Asian continent announcing the rise of an Asian power on the world scene. The Indian nationalists especially those of the advanced group led by Sri Aurobindo and others were deeply influenced by this emergence, it held to them future possibilities for themselves and for India. The nationalists, it appears, did not bother themselves with the fact that Japan’s challenge was itself the first manifestations of imperial and territorial ambitions – the bone of contention was expansionism in Manchuria and Korea - instead they perceived it as the rise of an Asian nation against the onslaught of an established Western – European empire. This they treated as a pointer for India and they believed that through the revolutionary movement they had initiated in the country similar preparation and result would be obtained. The Japanese, according to the Indian extremists, were to be emulated in all their national activities and systems. Hence one observes in Sri Aurobindo’s political speeches and his early political writings numerous references to the Japanese ways of living and action. The concept of ancestor – worship is an intrinsic part of Japanese life and society. It is one of those national ways that appears to bind and integrate the nation and through it the Japanese seem to keep alive a perennial source of national inspiration. Sri Aurobindo refers to this source of inspiration which in the Indian context, he may have felt, ought also to translate into the aspirations of unity and self-reliance. The preservation of a race memory through the possible initiation of a system of ancestor worship would perhaps generate a certain sense of collectivity in the race and direct its energies towards a collective national action. Nobushige Hozumi (1856-1926) Japanese statesman and legal expert of the Meiji period and sometime professor of German law and of comparative law at Tokyo Imperial University and one of those enlisted to draft Japan’s Civil Code of 1898, in his opus ‘Ancestor Worship & Japanese Law’ [ Tokyo, 1901] observes that ancestor worship ‘ was the primeval religion of the country from the earliest time of our history which dates back more than two thousand five hundred years; and it is universally practiced by the people at the present moment….neither the introduction of Chinese civilisation, the spread of Buddhism nor the influence of European civilisation have done anything to shake the firm-rooted custom of the people.’ The Chinese philosopher Shiu-Ki in his ‘ Book of House- Ceremonies’ speaking on the origins of ancestor-worship observes that ‘the object of worship is nothing else than performing all that is dictated by a feeling of true love and respect.’ Professor Kurita of the Tokyo Imperial University in his work ‘The Rituals of Worship’ makes the following observation, rather lyrically, on the essence of the ancestor – worship concept, ‘ Who, endowed with life in this world, has not a mind to honour his parents? Who, honouring his parents, does not reverence his ancestors? Who, honouring parents and reverencing ancestors, is not prompted to follow the dictates of affectionate sentiment by offering sacrifices to their spirits? This is the outcome of the faculty of intelligence that is implanted in human nature, and through it arose the ceremonies of offering sacrifices to the spirits from the Age of the Gods.’ Ancestor-worship formed an integral part of Japanese as well as Chinese society; Confucius in his ‘Book of Medium’ had indicated the way and the process’s integrality when he observed ‘it is the highest filial piety to serve the departed as they would serve the present.’ It would be interesting to delve briefly into certain concepts of the Japanese ancestor worship for the reason that Sri Aurobindo in the above speech lays special emphasis on this aspect and indicates its utility not only in a national system of education but also in the national life at that point of time. Three kinds of ancestor worship are followed, ‘ namely the worship of the First Imperial Ancestor by the people, the worship of the patron god of the locality which…is the remains of the clan-ancestors by clansmen, and the worship of family-ancestors by the members of the household.’ In every Shinto household is found a

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ones ancestors that Indians must evoke and thus give rise to unity and nationalism and
whatever one does today it must be with the spirit of repaying ones debt to ones
ancestors. The generations to come are also to be considered as ‘an organic component of
one’s nation’ and when the nationalist envisions an Indian nation it should be along these
lines. This would generate ‘a wide and engaging vision of our nation and nationalism.’

The new nationalism and vision of nation that national education was to propagate and
help instill in young minds was to be essentially an all encompassing and inclusive
nationalism. These two words ‘wide’ and ‘engaging’ fundamentally define the
nationalism that Sri Aurobindo stood for. It was only with such a vision of nation and
nationalism and a matching action that the nation would be capable of producing ‘great
philosophers, statesman, warriors and commanders’, it shall develop into a state of self-
reliance and self-respect. Thus, one may say that the system of national education sought
comprehensively and not selectively to reinterpret and present the Indian past in order to
instill a sense of nationalism that would at the same time be wide enough and bring about
the much required sense of national unity. And we are right in making this assumption
because Sri Aurobindo himself points out that in Bengal, where the national education
had caught the imagination of a section of society ‘we have kept before us this grand idea
of the nation’ while ‘formulating the concept of National Education.’

Next Sri Aurobindo– and this is perhaps the only record of his citing empirical
elements of the subject wise workings of the national education system – describes how

second ‘god-shelf or Kamidana, which is dedicated exclusively to the worship of the ancestors of the
house’ the first shelf is dedicated to the First Imperial Ancestor. On this second shelf ‘are placed cenotaphs
bearing the names of the ancestors, their ages, and the dates of their death. These memorial tablets are
called “Mitama-shiro” which means “representatives of souls,” and they are usually placed in small boxes
shaped like Shinto shrines. Offerings of rice, sake, fish, sakaki-tree and lamps are made on this second shelf
as on the first…’ [Hozumi, op. cit.]

459 Ibid.
this vision of nation and nationalism is imparted to learners. ‘Let us see’ he says, ‘how the details have been worked out in consonance with this lofty and noble concept’ of the nation. He takes up the ‘simple subject of geography as an illustration.’ The subject was being taught, he observed, in a mechanical and unimaginative manner in Government and private schools. The students are generally ‘told about such-and-such a country with so many districts, with their District Officers and so forth’. But in the Bengal national schools the approach itself was organic, there, while teaching geography according to the ideas of national education the children were first told ‘that India is our Motherland’ in this way they are made aware of the gross body of the nation. They are told about ‘our rivers, Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, etc., and what these rivers mean, not merely where they flow.’

This is an interesting point; an education does not become national merely by listing national rivers as opposed to those of a foreign land. In order to be truly different and relevant it has to demonstrate and elaborate the organic civilisational link that the river retains with the land, this link would do well to also include the mythical and metaphysical link these rivers have had over millennia with the land of their origin and flow. And when the ideas of the land are taught to the children in the national schools, when the children are taught for example about the western Indian region of Maharashtra ‘we describe the land in which Shivaji lived’, the organic link and past achievement is established in order to instill a connectivity with the national past and future, ‘speaking about Punjab, we tell the children about the Punjab of Ranjit Singh. Speaking about the geography of the Himalayas’ the children are taught about how the ‘land of the

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461 Ibid., p. 15.
Himalayas has become holy because of its Rishis. The whole attempt is to present the physical features of the nation as something more than a mere inert landmass and to establish a spiritual link between the land and the civilization that it supports. Geography of other nations is also taught by the national schools but what is imparted is ‘its importance in the context of our country.’ This too was an innovative approach of the national education system.

The teaching of history also attempts to strike an alternative path; the nationalist stand was that ‘true history’ could never really be taught following the Government’s method of teaching. It was not important in national schools to remember ‘how many kings have ruled the country, which king came to power in which year and how long his reign lasted or the date when the Battle of Plassey was fought’ in short the importance of dates and chronology was secondary what was of primary importance was the understanding of how the nation was formed, how the various people evolved a distinct identity and temperament. Philosophy is also taught keeping in mind the aim of the national education movement and the students are told of the greatness of the Indian systems of philosophy. Sri Aurobindo laments that in Government schools the ‘degree-

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462 Sri Aurobindo, Speeches, p.15.
463 Ibid.
464 It would be interesting to mention here an observation of the Mother made nearly five decades after this speech which, though made in a different context, elaborates in a sense Sri Aurobindo’s observation and the attempt of the national education system to impart the knowledge and awareness of the country in a national as well as international context. The Mother observed that, ‘In any country the best education that can be given to children consists in teaching them what the true nature of their country is and its own qualities, the mission their nation has to fulfil in the world and its true place in the terrestrial concert. To that should be added a wide understanding of the role of other nations, but without the spirit of imitation and without ever losing sight of the genius of one’s own country…’ [Message for the Inauguration of a French Institute at Pondicherry, Collected Works of the Mother, vol. 12, op.cit., p. 255.] The Mother’s statement can be said to be reflective not only of a particular subject as taught in the national education context but of the whole spirit and attempt of the national education movement. It would be relevant to mention here, just to set matters in perspective, that the Mother had no connection with the early nationalists’ education movement, though she would later be involved in an integral manner in establishing and furthering national education in a post-independent India.
holders know of what Schopenhauer has to say, but they have hardly any knowledge of the spiritual foundations of our own thought’ this blinkered condition the national system sought to reverse. But the greater and more relevant point that Sri Aurobindo makes is that whatever ‘philosophy the students learn in college, they should try to put into practice’ it should not be merely a rote and theoretical learning that can have no practical application to daily living and life situations.  The learning of philosophy in classrooms must have as one of its results also the amelioration of the individual and his collective activities and existences.

One of the basic aims of national education was to instill a sense of greatness in a subject nation; Sri Aurobindo observes that such a system was in place in ancient times, though he does not substantiate his statement, one may say that he is pointing at the ancient Indian system of education then prevalent all over the land, which had as its permanent feature the pupil living with the master and in the process imbibing knowledge from him through a steady and gradual process. The National Education programme discarded nothing useful or worthwhile, all past figures who contributed to the formation of the civilisation and identity have a permanent place in it and become integral aspects of national growth and consolidation. Then follows the essential issue that nationalist educators grappled with and Sri Aurobindo succinctly articulates it, the Government schools did not adopted an approach which would give rise to a sense of nation, unity and Indianness. ‘In those schools the tender minds of our students are overburdened with the European way of thinking. But European thought and European way of life are quite different from our thought and our way of life.’ This was one of the principal

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466 Ibid.
contentions of the new education leaders but here too Sri Aurobindo was very clear on the necessity of accepting certain aspects of modernity from the West for national progress, ‘It is true’, he observed ‘that when we speak of the development of our own country, we cannot ignore the progress of modern Europe. In our reform we must certainly include it; whatever is acceptable must be adapted suitably by us. But we have to guard against damaging our foundation in the process.’ The advances of Western science must be put to use, and here he again refers to the Japanese who implemented the ideas of Western science but were not ‘blind to the achievements of [their] forefathers.’ Sri Aurobindo refers to the ancient Indian Ayurvedic Science as an example; in Government medical colleges, he points out, ‘students remain unaware’ of this ancient science ‘though there are many occult and valuable truths behind it, to which the Western system has no access.’ That he himself was not blind to the deficiencies of the Indian systems and to the necessity of upgrading them with time and age is clear when he clarifies in the same breath that his assertion on the above count does not mean ‘that whatever is ours, is always the best.’

This probably sums up to a certain extent the overall attitude of the nationalist educators especially Sri Aurobindo to the issues of assimilation and rejection vis-à-vis Western methods and systems. Satish Chandra Mukherjee the other opinion-leader of national education, of whose ideas we have had occasion earlier to make a wide survey, was of a similar opinion when it came to these fundamental questions.

The one issue which in a sense gave a huge impetus to the organising of the national education movement were the circulars preventing students from participating in political activities, the national education leaders while opposing these dictates insisted

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467 Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, p.16.
that activities such as these give rise among the young minds a sense of participation in national growth and awakening and that they had to be an integral part of the new education. The Government obviously stamped such an attitude as seditious while another section of society perceived this as an interference with the academic growth and development of the learners. But Sri Aurobindo insists that in the ‘field of politics we have a lot to learn from the West’ especially the democratic system of government. And the National Education system does not isolate the students ‘from the political field; in fact we give them first-hand experience of the democratic system of government making them work alongside us.’

Referring to Vocational training Sri Aurobindo observes that it leads to a certain degree of self-reliance and is diligently imparted in national schools. These are taught along with science and the students when coming out of national schools do not find it difficult to earn a modest wage. The system was definitely not non-technical and did not possess an exclusionary nature. It successfully blended work and education, an aspect that faced eventual neglect with the gradual dissipation of the national education movement and the predominance of the official system.

The whole ‘special emphasis’ given in a national system of education is on ‘creating a future Indian nation’ the propelling thought that motivates the imparting of National Education, is, Sri Aurobindo articulates, ‘When will this Indian nation occupy a place in the company of other nations?’

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468 Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, p.16.
469 The work-education dilemma continues to exercise Indian education to this day; in fact ‘The exclusionary character of the education system in India is to a great extent founded on the artificially instituted dichotomy between work and knowledge (also reflected in the widening gap between school and society).’ Such a gap and dichotomy the national education movement in the first decade of the last century sought to successfully solve and bridge. For a detailed analysis of the continuing work-education dilemma in the present context see e.g. *Position Paper 3.7. National Focus Group on Work and Education*, (NCERT), 2007.
When will it be great among other nations in the world? Our learned and accomplished people must be great as people in other countries are great. These are the thoughts that impel to action.

Sri Aurobindo also supports the use of the mother-tongue, ‘In our schools’, he observes, ‘we give education up to fifth standard in the mother-tongue of the students; teaching the children through English is harmful.’ Sri Aurobindo also refers to the objections that some raise saying that the vernaculars ‘do not have an adequate vocabulary for teaching certain subjects’ but these people are generally asked to experience the method of instruction through the vernacular and then arrive at an adequate conclusion. Sri Aurobindo then describes briefly the system followed by the National College, ‘the seventh standard in our national schools is equivalent to the intermediate courses conducted by the universities. In our colleges we conduct a four-year course. A college student usually studies a single subject and for that purpose special emphasis is given to the use of the English language’ but English in the national education framework retained the status of a second language.

Self-reliance emerges as the motto of National Education; Sri Aurobindo concludes this rather long descriptive speech on the subject by stating this basic principle:

‘A student must be able to stand on his own. It is not the objective of National Education to make somebody else carry him on his shoulders. The student must support himself and not look helplessly to others. Self-reliance is the basic principle we diligently try to impart to a student. …We [in Bengal] have absolutely no expectation of help from the

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470 Sri Aurobindo, Speeches, op. cit., p. 17.
471 Ibid.
Government in our endeavour [of establishing national schools and colleges]. On the contrary, with Government support our nationalist enthusiasm will disappear.  

The inveterate nationalist in Sri Aurobindo asserts itself here when he argues, that official help will rob the movement of its vigour and originality and gradually stem the tide of bold thinking and experimentation. He was for charting a radically different and bold path for national education. Thus preparation of a self-reliant nation and people was the basic principle of national education. It was also the guiding force of the national movement rendering the educational aspect an integral part of the political demand too. Sri Aurobindo held the view that the national education movement had to be part of the greater Indian national movement for liberation so as to be able to derive continuous strength, replenishment and direction. A divorce from the latter would, he believed, definitely prove fatal to the former. In fact this was his argument throughout when he realised that the National Council was adopting a meek and imitative stance vis-à-vis the official system.

It is perhaps the right moment to put on record another speech on the need for national education delivered around the same time in the same geographical location by Sri Aurobindo’s close nationalist collaborator and host during these visits, Lokmanya Tilak. Tilak who had already made contributions to the national education movement in the Deccan broadly spoke along the lines developed by the national education movement. Speaking in 1908 to what appears to be a group of potential donors to the cause of national education, Tilak began his speech nearly in the same manner as his nationalist comrade in arms, he too thought the term ‘national education’ needed some explanation.

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Merely developing the capacity to read and write did not constitute education, instead that which gave a ‘knowledge of the experience of our ancestors is called education’ was how Tilak placed the issue before his listeners. Defending the need for religious education in a country like India, Tilak linked the absence of it to the growing influence of missionaries ‘all over our country’ and the lack of pride in one’s religion. It is evident that Tilak was much concerned on over the issue of religious education. This speech of his did not go into great detail about the system, spirit and method of national education it was more of a direct discussion of some of the issues and problems. The principal points that he raised in that public address was that the government was neglecting ‘scientific and mechanical education’ and was thus preventing by design the evolution of a self-reliant India, it was neglecting education in the villages thus obstructing the villager from training their children. The national education movement sought to address these, ‘in the end we have come to the conclusion that for proper education national schools must be started on all sides.’ The private schools that already functioned, Tilak argued, were unable to undertake a radical programme ‘owing to the fear of losing the grant-in-aid’ therefore an effort to start ‘our own schools’ must be made in a selfless manner.\textsuperscript{473} There were movements in this direction in other parts of the country already and Maharashtra [was as yet] a little backward. Tilak talked of the aspects that were to be given primacy in these nationalist institutions: (a) ‘religious education will first and foremost engage our attention’ – secular education was not sufficient to build up character, a religious education allowed the mind to dwell on high principles and kept ‘us away from evil pursuits. Conscious of the thought prevalent in certain quarters even then that an exposure to religion and religious education ‘begs quarrel’ Tilak clarified that it was

\textsuperscript{473} Bal Gangadhar Tilak, \textit{His Writings and Speeches}, revised ed., 1919, p. 84.
the Hindu religion which ‘advocates toleration of other religious beliefs and instructs one to stick to one’s own religion’ therefore the religious education that the nationalist schools proposed to impart would teach ‘Hinduism to the Hindu’, ‘Islamism to the Musalmans’ and would encourage ‘to forgive and forget the differences of other religions.’ (b) the national schools proposed to ‘lighten the load of the study of the foreign languages – the compulsion of learning through a foreign language unnecessarily lengthen the process, ‘We spend twenty-years or twenty-five years’, Tilak argued on this point [and as we shall see later Sri Aurobindo was to make the same point], ‘for the education which we can easily obtain in seven or eight years’ if it were acquired through the medium of the vernaculars. Tilak argues that one ‘who speaks good English is said, in these days, to have been educated. But a mere knowledge of the language is no true education.’ Even during the Mahomedan rule, he contended, there was a requirement to learn Persian but there was no compulsion to the requirement. Therefore to ‘save unnecessary waste of time [it was proposed in the national schools] to give education though our own vernaculars. (c) The national schools would promote ‘industrial education’ which would give training for the setting up and launching of indigenous industry. Ample scope and resources remained for the setting up of indigenous industries and the gap would be filled up by a well designed industrial training. The British government, Tilak pointed out, attended to the immediate needs of sick industries back home but failed to provide the same attention to languishing industrial ventures in India. A ‘large mechanical and scientific laboratory’ was in the pipeline and Tilak solicited funds for setting it up, the ‘educationists [were] helping with their learning and experience, and [it was upon the] well to do to help them with money. The objective was
to empower the future generations to be able to ‘earn their bread and be true citizens.’ In fact the national education movement had to continuously face this ‘earning bread issue’ in order to successfully contest against the official system and also to be able to reach out to a larger number. And his final plea was for the imparting of political education. The young learners had to be made aware of the drain that was being enforced on their country by the colonial master. ‘Every year’, Tilak contended, ‘some thirty or forty crores of rupees are drained out of India without any return. We have, therefore, fallen to a wretched state of poverty. These things, if understood in the prime of life, can make such a lasting impression over the hearts of our young men, as it would be impossible in an advanced age.’ Tilak’s concluding remarks pointed to a deeper truth of the whole movement and in a sense also its uniqueness. Because the sort of education aspired for was beyond reach ‘for want of self-Government’ Tilak argued, ‘we should not therefore await the coming of these rights, but we must get up and begin the work.’ A subject nation, denied a basic modicum of selfhood, in a state of servitude was already planning an independent system of education in line with its imagined future state of free existence. This was perhaps the uniqueness of the whole effort and one that made it stand out. Tilak, as was his wont, stated the underlying philosophy in terms that could be grasped by the masses.

Sri Aurobindo’s other speeches along the route mentioned do contain brief references to the issue of national education though the observations are rhetorical in nature yet they succinctly convey the objectives of national education as perceived by the nationalists. In his speech delivered at Dhulia on 26 January 1908 (a town in the

474 Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *His Writings and Speeches*, pp.84, 85, 86, 87.
475 Ibid., pp.86, 87.
Northwestern part of the state of Maharashtra) while speaking on ‘Swadeshi and Boycott’\textsuperscript{476} Sri Aurobindo refers to the issue first in purely political terms defining the grand objective of national education as the establishment of ‘self-government in India’.

The practice shall be to gradually give up ‘schools and colleges under foreign control’ because these institutions ‘give us an education which does not develop our intellectual capacity. Education in English schools colleges has cut us off from our ancient strength…The education we receive is narrow, meagre and incomplete.’ The objective of the movement was to establish an education ‘of our own in India’\textsuperscript{477} The educational aspect of the movement like its other counterpart is based on Swadeshi – and its aim was to prevent pecuniary, moral, intellectual and physical ruination of the nation for this the ancient Indian system became a natural fountain of inspiration and guidance.\textsuperscript{478}

Speaking to gathering of industrialists and merchants in Nagpur on 1 February 1908 on the topic of \textit{Commercial and Educational Swarajya}, Sri Aurobindo exhorts indigenous educational institutions to inculcate a spirit of self-reliance and faith in young minds the idea of achieving commercial swarajya – commercial and industrial self-sufficiency – must be impressed on young minds so that they prepare themselves accordingly. Sri Aurobindo accuses the ‘unnecessary parrot-like education’ of wasting away the ‘strength and intellect’ of the young. The education being imparted, he indicted as ‘poisonous’ having a ‘blighting effect on the ideas of political morality and national

\textsuperscript{476} Like most of Sri Aurobindo’s speeches even this one was noted down ‘on the spot by a police agent, who later had a fair copy typed.’ Though deficient in terms of English usage and grammar’ the type scripts as well as the first notes were produced as evidence in the Alipore Bomb Trial. [CWSA vol.7, Notes & Texts, p. 1175]

\textsuperscript{477} Sri Aurobindo, \textit{Speeches}, op.cit., p.43.

\textsuperscript{478} Ibid., What the ancient system was Sri Aurobindo has not elaborated at length even in his later writings on education but he does, like a number of other contemporary nationalist educationist of that and later period, point towards the \textit{guru-griha vasa} - living with the teacher – system which he observes was widely prevalent in India during the ancient and classical period. The concepts of education in ancient India would have to be looked at briefly later to assess certain fundamental aims of education in ancient India.
greatness by creating a hankering in them for the subordinate posts under the Government in order to earn their livelihood.\textsuperscript{479} Sri Aurobindo points to the limited and stunting objective of the official system of education which he felt deliberately generated in the beneficiaries, secondary aspirations, unrelated to national growth and self-reliance. The principal aim thus of national education, a truly national education, is to awaken in ‘one’s mind the highest ideas of national activity, which make one forget oneself and feel that he does not exist separately from his country’ a basic and binding sense of being part of the national process is what national education ought to aim at and for that it had to be along ‘national lines’ and under ‘national control’ the twin defining adage that the nationalists kept harping on and fought for inclusion into the Congress resolutions. As the gathering was a predominantly commercial Sri Aurobindo makes a direct appeal for their support, ‘It is not possible to have national education without the help of the rich and the learned men. If the money of the wealthy is utilised in this direction, it will be very well spent. All should work in order to secure a future generation that is sturdy – both physically and mentally.’ Commercial and educational Swarajya – will usher in the era of political Swarajya.\textsuperscript{480} It was these two activities that would eventually lay the foundations of a national future that would be self-reliant and self-sufficient.

Sri Aurobindo’s tour of the provinces of his emphasis on national education in his public speeches had definitely reinforced the demand and the need for it. The need was established in the nationalist political discourse of the day. Thus the Bengal Provincial Conference at Pabna (East Bengal) held in the second week of February 1908 saw an unambiguous resolution on national education being moved. Rabindranath Tagore, by

\textsuperscript{479} Sri Aurobindo, \textit{Speeches}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{480} Ibid., p. 65.
then having poetically articulated the liberty yearning aspirations of a rising nation, presided over the meet. According to observers and reports national education ‘received a further impetus’ and the ‘resolution adopted…has been a considerable advance upon those adopted at the previous years’ conferences by the addition of the phrase “to establish and maintain National Schools throughout the country.” The resolution moved by Sri Aurobindo said:

“That in the opinion of this conference steps should be taken for promoting a system of education, literary, scientific and technical, suited to the requirements of the country on national lines under national control and to establish and maintain national schools throughout the country.”

Satish Chandra Mukherjee’s ‘The Dawn and Dawn Society’s Magazine’ which as we had seen in earlier sections, spearheaded the national education debate reported the proceedings in its April 1908 issue, ‘in a short but inspiring speech’ the Principal of the Bengal National College ‘Srijukta Aurobindo Ghose, B.A. (Cantab)’ said:

‘…that national education was a work which had already been accomplished and was already visible in a concrete shape to the eyes of the people. There was the Bengal National College at Calcutta and there were about 25 secondary National Schools at work in the mofussil [rural areas] under the direction of the National Council of Education. There were besides some three hundred primary National Schools, all seeking the aid of

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the Council, which in turn should be more liberally supported by the whole of Bengal in order to enable it to do its sacred work. …’ 482

Sri Aurobindo appears to have also briefly criticized the University system in India in the same conference, the report continues, ‘Srijukta Aurobindo Ghose [further] pointed out that the University system was defective in its aims and methods intended only to serve the purposes of the Government, not requirements of the country. It turned out machines for administrative and professional work, not men.’ This was again one of the principal indictments by the nationalist educators of the official system. They accused the official system of denying in a premeditated manner, to the Indian learner, all that would help in crystallizing an identity and wider seeking. The ‘national system of education [on the other hand] intended to create a nation [and] produce men with all their faculties trained, full of patriotism, and mentally, morally, physically the equals of the men of any other nations.’ 483 The official education system taught subservience and the growing national one taught mastery of self and nation. The attitude of pontification is absent from these speeches, a direct appeal, simply explaining the necessity and the system of national education is made so that the masses may realise its relevance and rely on it as a genuine alternative to the governmental system. This manifested in a mushrooming of national schools, especially in the East Bengal districts where the nationalist organisations had created a remarkable network. But it must also be conceded, and as later events were to prove, that these institutions could never muster an adequate financial support base and thus failed to sustain themselves in the long run. The fund allocation from the central

482 Sri Aurobindo, Speeches, p.150.
483 Ibid., p. 151.
National Council at Calcutta did not follow a uniform pattern and the mofussil institutions faced neglect.

The idea of a National University was always being mooted from time to time. It would be interesting to revisit a debate around this time on the National University demand with Sri Aurobindo opposing the move to develop it with an external charter. Annie Besant who was active in the effort of national education from an early period and whose educational thought we have had occasion to examine in the earlier section reinitiated ‘a campaign in favour of national education and in a…speech outlined her idea of a National University.’ Discussing her demand in an editorial of the February 24th 1908, Bande Mataram, entitled ‘A National University’, Sri Aurobindo supported the idea, expressed his enthusiasm for the growth of the national education movement but opposed Besant’s demand that the Charter for the proposed National University be acquired from England.\(^{484}\) Sri Aurobindo exuded a great sense of optimism that the movement for a National University is growing and terms it ‘a seed which is sown and must come to its fruition, because the future demands and the heart of the nation is in accord with the demand…there may be many errors and false starts, but like a stream gathering volume as it flows, the movement will grow in force and certainty…’ At the time of writing the movement for establishing national schools was indeed growing but writing about a year later Sri Aurobindo was to also observe how the system having disjointed itself from the mainstream national movement – its original progenitor- lost its formative orientation and initial impetus. \(^{485}\) Anyway continuing with his discussion of

\(^{484}\) CW\(S\)A vol.7, op.cit., pp. 894.
\(^{485}\) See e.g. his article, entitled ‘National Education’ Karmayogin, 1, January, 1910. ‘It is now apparent,’ Sri Aurobindo argues in the article, ‘that it was the Nationalist element which by its energy, courage,
the attempt at forming national educational institutions Sri Aurobindo observes that the effort was a longstanding one, ‘there have been many attempts before the present movement to rescue education in India from subservience to foreign and petty ends, and to establish colleges and schools maintained and controlled by Indians which would give an education superior to the Government-controlled education.’ But the institutions which had started with such an aim in mind gradually became ‘monuments of a frustrated idea’ having ‘fallen to the state of ordinary institutions, replicas of the Government model, without a separate mission or nobler reason for existence.’ This happened he argues because the promoters of these institutions ‘could not understand or forgot that the first condition of success was independence – an independence jealously preserved and absolute. In other words there can be no national education without national control.’

This educational independence never manifested itself because the indigenous institutions were chronically dependent on Government largess. Referring to the Benares Hindu College and the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College, two institutions started by nationalists with India and her civilisation in focus, Sri Aurobindo points out that these institutions have secured a ‘certain measure of success’ they are ‘successful institutions, but isolated. They have not developed into centres of a network of schools affiliated to them and forming one corporate body. They have not in themselves the makings of Universities.’

Though they are different in one sense, in that ‘they give religious boldness of thought, readiness to accept the conditions of progress, gave the movement its force and vitality. Wherever that force has been withdrawn, the movement has collapsed.’ [p. 385]

486 CWSA vol. 7, op. cit., pp. 894-95.
487 Founded in Lahore in 1886 inspired by the ideal of Dayananada Saraswati (1824-1883).
488 Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) one of the stalwarts of the nationalist movement and a close collaborator of Sri Aurobindo ‘who raised the cry of “national education” in India as far back as 1883’ and who used the cry ‘rather effectively for enlisting sympathy and collecting funds for the various institutions’ that had begun from time to time imparting education along ‘nationalist’ lines’ makes similar observations on national education and nationalist education institutions in his seminal and now largely ignored ‘The
teaching’ which is a ‘wholesome departure from the barren official form of education’ but this [religious instruction] remains only ‘one part of education on national lines’ and just its inclusion does not wholly make a system national. Sri Aurobindo then attempts to briefly define national education and argues that such an aim can only come about
when the system is under national control. One sees in the definition an expression of the assimilative and futuristic approach that Sri Aurobindo felt a national system of education must possess, he tentatively describes ‘as the education which starting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation.’ The agenda cannot be that of a complete reversal to the past, as with his core philosophical formulation of integration and assimilation Sri Aurobindo makes the next point and it cannot but strike one with its continuing relevancy to the discourse today:

‘Whoever wishes to cut off the nation from its past, is no friend of our national growth. Whoever fails to take advantage of the present is losing us the battle of life. We must therefore save for India all that she has stored up of knowledge, character and noble thought in her immemorial past. We must acquire for her the best knowledge that Europe can give her and assimilate it to her own peculiar type of national temperament. We must introduce the best methods of teaching humanity has developed, whether modern or ancient. And all these must harmonise into a system which will be impregnated with the spirit of self-reliance so as to build up men and not machines – national men, able men, men fit to carve out a career for themselves by their own brain power and resource, fit to meet the shocks of life and breast the waves of adventure…’ And for national education to develop in such a manner it had to be ‘on national lines and under national control. This necessity is the very essence of its being.’

Then follows a purely nationalistic point of view and it may be said that such an opinion was limited to the phase when Sri Aurobindo wrote this and cannot be said to be his continuous opinion or perception as his later actions and life was to prove. While he

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490 CWSA vol. 7, op. cit, p. 895.
expresses his respect for this ‘great orator and organiser’ he points out that ‘a university organised by Mrs. Besant will not be a National University.’ Because in ‘the first place the future University must be one built up by the brain and organising power of India’s own sons…’ and ‘Secondly, Mrs. Besant has forgotten that the basis of a National University has already been laid. The National Council of Education in Bengal has already commenced the great work on lines which have only to be filled in.’\textsuperscript{491} Sri Aurobindo charges Mrs. Besant of ignoring the efforts of the Council and of being desirous of projecting the Benares Hindu College as ‘the basis of the National University’ and argues that the Benares College shall fail to be the foundation on which the edifice of a National University can be built up because it ‘has been obliged to rely on foreign funds and to court Government patronage.’ The Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College on this count is ‘a more robust growth’ for the Arya-Samaj has had a ‘munificent self-sacrifice’ in creating it. It was imperative to realise that no ‘institution which cannot rely on the people of India for its support and build itself up without official support or patronage, can be considered to have developed its capacity of developing into a National University.’\textsuperscript{492} The final attack is on the proposed importation of a Charter from England, ‘We are aware,’ writes Sri Aurobindo, ‘that she talks of organising the University with the help of Indian talent and keeping it as a preserve for Indian control, but when she asks for a Charter it is evident that she has not realised what national control implies.’ No Government would willingly confer a Charter ‘which excludes them from all control.’ In other words a Government Charter shall never allow complete autonomy and control to a National University and an institution that calls itself National must necessarily be under

\textsuperscript{491} CWSA vol.7, op. cit., p. 896.

\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
national control professing an ideal and aim that is national. A Charter would invariably introduce a possibility of control, once this is ‘allowed to overshadow the infant institution, goodbye to its utility, its greatness, its future. It will follow the way of other schools and colleges and become a fruitless idea, a monument of wasted energy and frustrated hopes.’ One notices here a no-holds-barred refutation of the idea of any kind of foreign or Governmental aid. Sri Aurobindo opposes the idea even though it originated from one who had by then [1908] made meaningful contributions to the development of national education in the country. Government aid or recognition in any kind and manner, as Sri Aurobindo perceived it, would have the built-in possibility of subverting any effort at national education and thus had to be meticulously avoided if the movement was to strike root and spread into a network, therefore his appeal to the commercial and industrial class for support and to the parent body – the National Council of Education – to pay greater attention to the far-flung fledgling national education institutions of the province.

One point however remained and it eventually came to confront the national education movement, it was the issue of Government recognition as a key to meaningful placement in society. The Government aided and controlled institutions did eventually surpass the indigenous institutions on this count. Sri Aurobindo was to again refute Mrs. Besant reiteration of the Charter demand which she argued was ‘a guarantee for the education which the University undertook to give’. Sri Aurobindo counterpoints that such a guarantee paves the way for ‘potential State control’ and this would in the case of the National Council make the institution lose its ‘principle of robust independence and faith in its own future…’ Politically on such an issue Sri Aurobindo adopted a radical stance as

493 CWSA vol.7, p.896.
his earlier editorial indicated, a new education system first \(^494\) meant liberation from bureaucratic control direct or implied, a compromise on this front would itself be a diluted beginning.

The survey of the political demand of education must necessarily conclude here with a few brief references to the demand that Sri Aurobindo made at a later period in 1909 and 1918. We adhere to the chronological method and one sees here a leap in terms of years and decades. Sri Aurobindo’s political career had a brief break of one year from May 1908 onwards; the period of incarceration was replete with spiritual experiences and is one of the most well known and widely discussed episodes of Sri Aurobindo’s life as a political leader. After his release Sri Aurobindo ‘determined to continue the struggle’ attempted to revive the suppressed spirit of nationalism and this is where he led again for a short while the nationalist forces in Bengal. During this period he was ‘not only the Extremists’ chief public spokesman but also their principal policy-maker and negotiator.’ \(^495\) In September 1909 he led the nationalist contingent at the Bengal Provincial Conference at Hooghly [West Bengal] considered then to be the ‘most important political meeting [of the year] in Bengal’ \(^496\) and appended his amendments on various issues to the draft resolutions drawn up by the Moderate Congress leaders. Of particular interest in our quest of trying to understand Sri Aurobindo’s political stand on the education question is resolution (X) Clause (a) of the draft, it gives an idea of the position he wished to be articulated on the issue. The Moderate resolution read:

\(^{494}\) CWSA vol.7, op. cit., pp. 932-934.
\(^{495}\) Peter Heehs, op. cit., p. 67.
\(^{496}\) Ibid.
'That this Conference urges the Government to take immediate action on their circular on free primary education issued about three years ago and invites their attention to the fact that the grants in aid of technical and scientific education are not at all commensurate with the needs of the country.' 497

The amendment as appended by Sri Aurobindo speaks for itself – the Government could not be urged to facilitate an alternative and responsive national education system. True to his policy of opposing the attitude of mendicancy in national politics he wrote:

‘That in the opinion of this Conference steps should be taken for promoting a system of education literary, technical and scientific suited to the requirements of the country on national lines and under national control and maintaining national schools throughout the country.’ 498

He made it a point to record that ‘Clause (a) is omitted.’ Clause (b) of the resolution remained unscathed, which it may be assumed thus to have received his assent; it urged the people inter alia to ‘take steps to establish educational institutions throughout the country on national lines and under national control.’ 499 That the national education movement had to be a people’s movement sustained and popularized by them was evident to Sri Aurobindo, only then could it have a long term impact and eventually pose an effective challenge to the official system.

497 CWSA vol.8, Karmayogin, op. cit., p.218.
498 Ibid.
499 Ibid., p. 219.
By 1909 Sri Aurobindo’s official connection with the National Council of Education had definitely ceased and being quite out of sympathy with its ways of functioning and with what he felt was its capitulation to and compromise with the official system he began speaking out on its deficiencies and shortcomings. He saw the Council’s isolation from the mainstream national movement and the nationalist movement’s weakening in general happen due to severe bureaucratic repression as factors that were affecting the process of strengthening the national education movement. He indicated as much in an article [discussed earlier] in the pages of the Karmayogin [January 1, 1910] and analysed the failure of the Council to chalk out an alternative educational route. That national education remained within the ambit of his considerations becomes evident when one sees that eight years into his retirement in Pondicherry (1918) Sri Aurobindo consented to give a message on national education at the request of Annie Besant. The message appeared in Besant’s journal New India on April 8, 1918 ‘under the heading: Messages from Sons of The Motherland to Their Brothers.’ Sri Aurobindo’s message was the longest among nine contributed by India’s ‘leading patriots.’ This too was a political message on education, ‘National Education is, next to Self-Government and along with it, the deepest and the most immediate need of the country…”

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500 Annie Besant launched two journals, the first Commonweal, a weekly review in 1914 to champion the Home Rule Movement. The ideal that the review set before itself and the issues that it decided to champion are best described in her words: ‘Religious Liberty, regarding all religions as ways to God; for National Education, “with an open path from primary schools to the Universities”; for Social Reform, including foreign travel, uplift of the submerged classes, abolition of child-marriage, seclusion of women, colour, bar and caste system.’ It was in the same year that she bought a Madras daily and rechristened it New India and utilized it to realize the same objectives, these two journals were to form the two weapons with which the battle for Home Rule was waged. They ‘bore aloft the banner of Home Rule through the years of the Great Agitation which ended in 1917, when Britain declared her goal to be the establishment of Self-Government in India.’ [Theodore Besterman, Annie Besant: A Modern Prophet, pp. 199-200, 2003.]


502 Ibid., p.411.
him. Supporting the Home Rule Movement that Mrs. Besant had initiated Sri Aurobindo
perceives the Movement and National Education as ‘two inseparable ideals’ and observes
that ‘none who follows the one, can fail the other, unless he is entirely wanting either in
sincerity or in vision.’ Home Rule would usher in the ‘power of self-determination’
which in turn would give, what Sri Aurobindo termed the ‘soul’ of the nation, the ‘space’
to grow, the ‘strength for the life to raise itself again from darkness and narrow scope into
light and nobility.’ In other words, Home Rule would strengthen the demand for self-
determination and pave the way for an effective and all round national self-expression.
But this self-expression could effectively come about only through a system of national
education, ‘But the full soul rich with the inheritance of the past, the widening gains of
the present, and the large potentiality of her future, can only come by a system of
National Education.’ This self-expression cannot come about through an imitation or
extension of the existing university system plagued by ‘radically false
principles…vicious mechanical methods…dead-alive routine tradition and its narrow and
sightless spirit…’ 503 both lines had to gain momentum simultaneously with each lending
strength to the other. Two points stand out here, Sri Aurobindo’s continuing radicalism
when it came to rejecting the official university system, it could not, and he was certain,
assist in creating a space for Indian self-expression. The other point that claims attention
is his acceptance of the three dimensions – of past, present and future. In his scheme of
educational policy or philosophy each phase contributed and gave force and stability to
the next. There was no dilemma about the past’s utility in evolving a future system of
education, he had indicated this in his series on ‘A System of National Education’ – the
only systematic written exposé of his basic educational thought – when he wrote that ‘the

past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit [and] Each must have its due and natural place in a national system of education.  

But in order to correct a possible over tipping Sri Aurobindo is also clear on the need of imbibing principles of the past rather than its structures; in his two part incomplete ‘Preface on National Education’ written for his philosophical journal Arya between November/December 1920 and January 1921 he argues that one ‘cannot be satisfied with a mere resuscitation of some past principle, method and system that may have happened to prevail at one time in India, however great it was or in consonance with our past civilisation and culture. Such a reversion even if contemplated ‘would be a sterile and impossible effort hopelessly inadequate to the pressing demands of the present and the far greater demands of the future.’

Thus one perceives throughout this consistency in Sri Aurobindo’s approach when the issue of past systems and principles and their applicability in the present context cropped up. Making an appeal in his message for the National Education Week, to rally behind the National Education effort just as the nation veered round to supporting the Home Rule movement he cautions however that much more than ‘intellectual sanction’ for the effort is needed. The support that is supposed to be given to the National Education effort must exceed and ‘be free from all taint of lip-service, passivity and lethargic inaction, evil habits born of long political servitude and inertia…’ Moral sympathy is not sufficient, ‘active support from every individual is needed. Workers for the cause, money and means for its sustenance, students for its schools and colleges, are what the movement needs that it may prosper.’

Regarding the first requirement – workers for the cause – he is certain they will keep emerging, the

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504 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.385.
505 Ibid., p. 418.
second requirement – money and means – would, he saw, also come because the ‘habit of
giving as well as self-giving for a great public cause is growing…’ but he expresses his
skepticism for the third – students for its [national education movement] schools and
colleges – he realizes that it has not been sufficiently satisfied from the beginning
because ‘habituated individually always to the customary groove, we prefer the safe and
prescribed path, even when it leads nowhere, to the great and effective way, and cannot
see our own interest because it presents itself in a new and untried form…’\[^{506}\] This was
perhaps the greatest bane of the national education movement, an inability to attract in a
sustained manner a continuous stream of learners who, reposing confidence in the
system, would integrate themselves with it. It was predominantly this issue, among a host
of others that ultimately led the movement then – in the first decade and even later – to
have a limited national impact. If this non-participation was induced by ‘material and
prudential considerations’ then, argues Sri Aurobindo, ‘let it be seen that, even in the
vocational sphere, the old system opens only the doors of a few offices and professions
overcrowded with applicants, whence the majority must go back disappointed and with
empty hands, or be satisfied with a dwarfed life and sordid pittance…’\[^{506}\] while this certainly
seems a right assessment of the then official employment system and opportunity (and
also seems to echo present national conditions) his next hope *vis-à-vis* the national
education system seems not have worked out later to proper capacity. The new education
he foresaw, as developing the capacity to ‘open careers which will be at once ways of
honourable sufficiency, dignity and affluence to the individual, and paths of service to the
country…’\[^{507}\] this one, may say, seems to have failed later to develop sufficiently or in

\[^{506}\] CWSA *vol.1*, op.cit., p. 412.
\[^{507}\] Ibid.
large measure. The official promise of gradual self-government given in 1918 may have
given hope for the growth of all national reconstruction activities – national education
being among them – that is why perhaps Sri Aurobindo placed such a high hope in the
movement’s eventual success and spread.