Chapter VII: Deeper Fundamentals of National Education: A Quest Beyond Politics

The Karmayogin had, as mentioned above, a distinct trait; it not only commented on political issues of the day but began to gradually focus on topics such as philosophy, yoga, culture, art, literature and education. Sri Aurobindo, it will be seen, clearly toned down the political rhetoric during this phase perceiving that ‘the movement has drawn back to await a farther and truer impulse’ and that it would instead be worthwhile to focus on other issues of national importance that needed urgent attention and directional analysis. In this light one sees him producing a series ‘The Brain of India’ between October 9 and November 13, 1909. The objective was ‘to indicate the nature and psychological ideas of the old system and point out its essential relation of cause and effect to the splendid achievement of our ancestors.’\(^{508}\)

This effort was undertaken in order to perhaps instill the principles and spirit of ancient Indian education in the Indian mind and to perhaps also argue for their re-examination under the light of current educational problems and issues.

In the series Sri Aurobindo analyses the Indian practice of brahmacharya, its integrality in the scheme of ancient Indian education and relevance to the present. He also discusses the ancient educational discipline of Hinduism, its system of separating the constitution of man in ‘three principles of nature’ and of how the education system then, took into account all three and based its system of training on that consideration. In short,

\(^{508}\) CWSA vol.1, p. 378.
as he himself points out, he attempts to state as ‘succinctly as is consistent with clearness, the main psychological principles on which the ancient based their scheme of education’. It is part of our search to attempt to examine some of the classical concepts of Indian education as perhaps Sri Aurobindo saw them. The Brain of India series briefly offers us that opportunity.

**VII.1 The Brain of India: Psychological Principles of Ancient Indian Education**

The first installment of the series looks at the necessity of the Indian mind, especially the Bengali mind, of working towards a widening of its horizons. This is required, Sri Aurobindo avers, because the national as well as the Bengali mind finds itself surrounded by a ‘new set of circumstances’ the reaction to which is a perplexed one. What the new circumstances are is not stated, it may be an allusion to the stalemate and confusion that prevailed at that point of time in terms of the direction the nationalist movement would adopt or alternately it may have been a reference to the future, when the advent of self-determination would create entirely new requirements demanding new modes of thinking and functioning. For such an eventuality, Sri Aurobindo argued, the national mind had to begin preparing itself through a new system of training. Therefore, Sri Aurobindo suggests that for the ‘work of the present, and still more, for the work of

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509 *CWSA vol.1*, p. 376.
the future, it is imperatively necessary to create a centre of thought and knowledge which will revolutionise the brain of the nation…¹⁵¹⁰

This revolutionizing of the brain and the evolving of a new centre of thought required ‘a new centre of education.’ But under the present University system, Sri Aurobindo argues, such a hope is unrealisable. In a severe indictment of the University system as was his stance during the first phase of political action, he again criticizes the University system as one which:

‘ignores the psychology of man, loads the mind laboriously with numerous little packets of information carefully tied with red tape, and, by the methods used in this loading process, damages or atrophies the faculties and instruments by which man assimilates, creates and grows in intellect, manhood and energy.’⁵¹¹

Referring to the National Education experiment as inaugurated in Bengal Sri Aurobindo concedes that it did succeed to a certain extent in altering a number of these atrophying approaches and methods by seeking ‘to enlarge the field of knowledge to which the student was introduced’ by laying emphasis on ‘observation’ and ‘experiment’ and employing ‘the natural and easy instrument of the vernacular.’ It thus encouraged the habit of thought ‘on the subject of study.’⁵¹² These were certain essential features that were absent in the official system. But this new attempt too was not free from the taint of old habits and a number of ‘the vicious methods and ideas employed by the old system were faithfully cherished by the new’ because the new too came to be dominated by men

³¹⁰ CWSA vol.1, p. 367.
³¹¹ Ibid., p. 368.
³¹² Ibid.
who were ‘wedded to the old lines.’ This eventually cast ‘a most unfavourable effect on
the integrity of the system in its most progressive features.’ These new progressive
features thus, did not have scope of adequate expression.

Sri Aurobindo had by now begun to openly analyse the systemic defects in the
new educational attempt, his principal complaint against the entire effort was that those
leading it were still inspired by the officially constructed system and the one thing that
was ignored was the ‘psychology of the race’ – he perhaps qualifies this by saying that a
surface approach to educational reform would never be sufficient to engender into the
system an Indianness, ‘the mere inclusion of the matter of Indian thought and culture in
the field of knowledge does not make a system of education Indian,’ This was a
significant observation. A constant debate raged on what could make a system truly
Indian and national – in fact this remained a major challenge area for the Swadeshi
movement itself. According to Sri Aurobindo the approach had to be deeper but the
Bengal National College version of the system was, according to him, only ‘an improved
European system.’ Improved, perhaps because it did at least focus on Indian subjects
and issues, attempted to impart a certain moral-spiritual training and tried to perceive the
learner as a questing mind, instead of a mere receiver of information nuggets. But here
too Sri Aurobindo cautions against adopting extreme postures in reevaluating the
indigenous education system. The demand and seeking of an indigenous system of
education, the aspiration for a Swadeshi education should not give rise to an irrational
and retrogressive demand. Sri Aurobindo clarifies that this retrogression must definitely
not seek to revive the eighteenth century system of indigenous education in Bengal,

513 CWSA vol.1, p.368
514 Ibid.
515 Ibid.
which in any case he felt could not reflect the modern aspirations of a race and nation in
the throes of self-determination, he calls it an ‘error which has to be avoided’ and which
does attract ‘careless minds’. Terming the argument that ‘in order to be National,
education must reproduce the features of the old tol system of Bengal’ as a ‘reactionary
idea’ he clearly states that ‘it is not eighteenth century India, the India which by its moral
and intellectual deficiencies gave itself into the keeping of foreigners’ that is to be
revived but rather ‘the spirit, ideals and methods of the ancient and mightier India in a yet
more effective form and with a modern organization.’

516 CWSA vol.1, pp. 368-369. This was said against a tendency during the Swadeshi period that called for a
‘total rejection of the West’ and a complete fall back on the old ‘tol’ system complete with caste
distinction. [Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., p.155] Such calls were indeed made from time to time and Sri
Aurobindo, it appeared from his stand, had little consideration for its revival. It would be difficult though to
say that Sri Aurobindo would have condemned the system even in its pristine manifestation, his criticism
rather appears to be directed towards its later degenerative expression. His two contemporaries, whose
views we have decided to induct into our discussions at various turns in order to make the study broad
based and to give an idea of some of the dominant thoughts on the educational questions of the day, seem
to have some appreciation for the indigenous system especially evident in Bengal. Sister Nivedita, for
example, in her discussion on ‘The Mediaeval University of India’ talks of the ‘formal and absorbing’
organisation of ‘Tols or schools of Sanskrit ‘ with which ‘India was netted from end to end, and men
would come from the most distant parts to sit at the feet of some renowned teacher…’ In these centres of
learning, students were moved to work year after year ‘for pure love of knowledge.’ Nivedita indicated the
link that these centres had with the ancient Indian classical concept of education – that of perceiving
learning to be inspired by the pure and selfless seeking of knowledge and wisdom. She saw the ancient
university system of the fifteenth century ‘Nuddea’ [Nadia district of Bengal famous for its Sanskrit
teaching schools] come down in an intact form to the present day and extols its virtues as heard from an
‘older generation’. Nivedita sees the routine of the old Tols as revealing a ‘marvellously intense and earnest
life.’ A system, she describes, where the ‘college’ of a single teacher was made up of a household of ‘some
fifty or sixty students, distributed over a number of mud cottages arranged round a central tank.’ Describing
a Tol of ‘Vikrampore’ [Bikrampore, Dhaka, East Bengal] she says students from Maharashtra were
admitted indicating the pan-Indian recognition that these educational institutions of Bengal had earned –
the ‘fame of Bengal logic went far and wide, and all India knew the names of its best teachers.’ Unlike Sri
Aurobindo, who feels that these educational relics have no relevant role in the new nationalist educational
dispensation and does not study them in his discussion of the main psychological principles on which the
ancient based their educational scheme, Nivedita sees them as institutions where ‘was lived out the great
ideal of Brahmacharya – the celibate student dwelling as a son in his master’s house.’ [Complete Works of
Sister Nivedita (CWSN) Vol.2, ‘The Mediaeval University of India’ in Studies from an Eastern Home, 4th
imp., 1999, pp.341-42-43] Sri Aurobindo, when referring to the working out of the Brahmacharya, as we
shall see, seems to refer to an earlier period and has therefore no high regard for the efficacy and utility of
the Tol system. Both appealed to the nationalist mind, one saw in the preservation of the indigenous
system, as she witnessed it, the possibility of perpetuating certain fundamental Indian principles and the
other saw the working out of an entirely new system inspired by principles of the classical Indian education
principles as the way ahead for the national education discourse. The other contemporary mind who
gradually becomes part of our study is Ananda Coomaraswamy, who in his study of education in India,
Contemplating on the ancient Indian society’s capacity to create diversely, Sri Aurobindo wonders as to what could have pushed the race towards such massive and original creations which demonstrated a huge intellectual, physical and moral energy. What could have been the secret of this ‘gigantic intellectuality, spirituality and superhuman moral force’ that permeated the epics, the ancient philosophy, art, sculpture, architecture of ancient India. What driving energy and vision could be at the base of the ‘incomparable’ feats of ‘public works and engineering achievements’ the industries, scientific outputs, jurisprudence, logic, metaphysics and social structure? What was it that generated a ‘national vitality and endurance’, what was it that supported a civilisation that was unique in the ‘massiveness of its outlines’ and the ‘perfection of its details’?

Sri Aurobindo’s answer to the question is that there must have existed a wide and a deep support system of ‘a unique discipline involving a perfect education of the soul, mind.’ The absence of such a system would have made impossible the achievements of such

written around the same period (1909) identifies the disconnectedness of schools from the Indian life as the ‘great tragedy of the present situation.’ Schools, [in the colonial set] he argues, are not part of Indian life ‘as were the tols and maktabs of the past’ and instead were antagonistic to it. [Essays in National Idealism, op.cit., p.99] Implying that the tols of old, the indigenous system was much more connected, supportive, and formed an inseparable part of the Indian life system while the colonial system adopted an adverse stance. He does not extol on the virtues of the tol system but simply indicates that they were a part of the Indian life and thus easily adjusted to by the vast populace.

Sri Aurobindo was to deal extensively with this theme and question later during his early Pondicherry period in his series of essays on the Indian renaissance. He was to thoroughly refute the allegation of Indian civilisational incapacity in material creation and world understanding. Describing the European [read Western] narrative of Indian culture and civilisation as one that saw Indian civilisation as dominantly metaphysical with a distinct inclination towards the trait of ‘other worldliness’ Sri Aurobindo summed up Western reading of Indian capacities. The perception of India that this Western reading came to present, was of a civilisation with a controlling mind that was mainly ‘abstract’ ‘metaphysical’ and ‘religious’ ‘overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and action as Maya.’ A phase of Indian quiescence to this view, Sri Aurobindo argued, was followed by a realisation that though ‘spirituality [remained] the master-key of the Indian mind’ such a spiritual emphasis was not based in a void. The Indian civilisational view, Sri Aurobindo observed, was ‘alive to the greatness of material laws and forces’ and for an uninterrupted period of ‘three thousand years at least’ indeed much longer, India created ‘abundantly, incessantly, lavishly, with an inexhaustible many-sidedness’ creations that included republics, kingdoms, empires, temples, monuments, palaces, public works etc’. All of them empirical and unequivocal signs that the much misjudged Indic civilisation did possess a balanced measure of the metaphysical as well as the physical. [CWSA vol. 20, 1997, pp.6,7,8]

CWSA vol.1, Ibid., p.369.

Ibid.
immense dimensions. The key then was to look for the ‘principle and basis on which the details’ of such an education were founded. To look for the secret of the success of the ancient system in the details of the instructions in the old Ashrams and universities as they have percolated to the present age would be an ‘error’. He was clear that these ancient methods of instructions need not be replicated under modern conditions, what was far important for him were the principles and guiding ideals that formed the base of this grand educational edifice which generated such inexhaustible creativity.\textsuperscript{520}

Sri Aurobindo analyses next the ancient Indian discipline of Brahmacharya which, he argues, provided a strong foundation for ‘building up a great intellectual superstructure’, he analyses its importance and centrality in the ancient Indian educational system as one that preserved the creative energy in the individual and prevented its dissipation and dilution. It is in course of this discussion that one is exposed to his other insights on education.

Sri Aurobindo attacks the convoluted approach to education which believed that merely ‘supplying the student with a large or well selected mass of information on the various subjects which comprised the best part of human culture at the time’\textsuperscript{521} was sufficient to build a foundation. Such an approach did not take into account the student’s preparedness to absorb such a mass of information; it did not question whether the student has received an adequate training to be able to absorb this mass of information. The general formula that appears to emerge from such an approach and one that seems to be broadly followed was that the ‘school gives the materials, it is for the student to use

\textsuperscript{520} \textit{CWSA} vol.1, p.369.
\textsuperscript{521} Ibid.
such a formula did not seek to unveil before the student the path and method that could be taken to assimilate and put to effective use these materials. It did not question the very utility or usability of the materials given as part of the exercise of educating. Such a formula was based, Sri Aurobindo observes, on a ‘fundamental error’ - that of considering ‘information’ to be the ‘foundation of intelligence’. ‘Information’, he argues, ‘cannot be the foundation of intelligence, it can only be part of the material out of which the knower builds the knowledge, the starting-point, the nucleus of fresh discovery and enlarged creation.’

One may recall that the habit of believing information-imparting to be the sole aim of education developed with the growth of the centralized examination system and the over dependence on prescribed textbooks to pass those examinations – it was a system that was institutionalised by the colonial version of education followed in the country. An education that thus functions within the confines of the belief that information imparting is to be its principal aim is ‘no education’. It invariably fails to develop the ‘various faculties of memory, judgment, imagination, perception, reasoning, which build the edifice of thought and knowledge for the knower…’

Ancient Indian education, on the other hand, had deeper layers to its educational vision – it focused on man as a part of the universe and did not remain solely concerned with the development of his mind and his store of information. It sought rather to develop him as a greater receptacle [adhar] of the universal Energy. Sri Aurobindo terms it as an ‘infinite energy, Prakriti, Maya or Shakti [that] pervades the world, pours itself into every name and form, and the clod, the plant, the insect, the animal, the man’ in their phenomenal existence are ‘more or less efficient adharas of this Energy.’

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522 CWSA vol.1, p.369.
523 Ibid., pp.369, 370.
524 Ibid., p.370
ancient education system focused on increasing in man the capacity to store this energy because the continual improvement of the *adhara* and the increase in its capacity to hold the infinite Energy it believed to be the essential aim of evolution. And when the adhara was perfected and developed itself to the highest level to hold that Energy then was a man judged and recognized as a *siddha* – the perfected soul, the ‘fulfilled or perfect man’.

The aim of education then during the ancient epoch was the creation of the perfected man and in order to achieve that perfection, the storehouse of the infinite Energy had to be allowed greater uninterrupted flow in the individual himself and for this flow to remain perennial, obstructions in the channel of communication between the individual and the universal energy had to be cleared. Extrapolating from this point, Sri Aurobindo argues that if this theory of increasing capacity-building to hold the universal energy be correct then ‘the energy at the basis of the operation of intelligence must be’ in the individual too and must be ‘capable of greater expansion and richer use.’ And the perception that ‘the more we can increase and enrich the energy, the greater will be the potential range, power and activity of the functions of our mind and the consequent vigour of our intellectuality and the greatness of our achievement’ appears to be a sound principle. The ancient Indians thus based their education on this first principle and the ‘chief processes which they used for increasing storage of energy, was the practice of Brahmacharya.’

The ancient system designated the practice of Brahmacharya as the ‘first and most necessary condition of increasing the force within and turning it to such uses as may benefit the possessor or mankind.’ Brahmacharya thus was the cornerstone of the ancient...
educational discipline. Sri Aurobindo next places his analysis of the ancient Indian concept of the individual’s energy conservation and enhancement. The ancient Hindus,

A detailed scripture inspired study of the concept of Brahmacharya I shall not undertake here, a lack of proficiency being the simple reason. However a few collated thoughts on the term would put in perspective the centrality of the concept in the ancient Indian educational scheme. Brahmacharya was to be the life of abstinence and self control. It was not limited to physical self-control only but possessed a wider connotation that included other areas of human action and reaction that needed restraint and sublimation. It meant a complete control over all the senses, thus a wave of impure thought became ‘a breach of Brahmacharya’ as was a reaction engendered by a spark of anger; such was Mahatma Gandhi’s analysis of the term in the pages of his Harijan issue of 23rd July, 1938. According to Radha Kumud Mookerjee [himself an outstanding product of the national education movement who formed among the ‘core of the teaching staff’ and who had already begun making a name for himself through ‘research work in ancient Indian history and culture…’] (vide Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., p.168) It is perhaps this connection that has prompted me to consult his seminal Ancient Indian Education when discussing or seeking light on education in the ancient period.\[the system of education in ancient India was standardized and fixed based on certain ‘universally accepted ideals and practices connoted by the term Brahmacharya which formed the foundation of the entire structure of Hindu thought and life.’\] The system or framework of studenthip in ancient Indian educational system, observes Mookerjee, retained ‘universal validity’ it did not admit change according to ‘age’ or ‘clime’. [Ancient Indian Education, p. 67] The Atharva Veda ‘exalts’ ‘exalts’ and ‘expounds’ the fundamental principle system of the Brahmacharya.\[Ibid., p.67\] Discussing the Brahmanical system of education in ancient India Mookerjee describes how a student had to find his teacher and formally apply for being inducted as a pupil ‘I am come for the Brahmacharya, I desire to be a Brahmacarin.’ The teacher on his part as a sign of acceptance ‘ties the girdle around him [the pupil] gives him the staff into his hand, and explains to him the Brahmacharya (the rules of conduct of a religious student)’ in the following words: ‘Thou art a Brahmacarin; drink water; perform service; sleep not by day; study the Veda obediently to thy teacher.’\[Ibid., p.394\] Sri Aurobindo analyses the benefits of the discipline of Brahmacharya and how an adherence to the system expands the energy base of the individual, a brief survey of the material demands of the system also would be in order here. The ceremony of initiating the pupil – Upanayana – by his selected teacher - Acharya – into the world of knowledge and discipline of Brahmacharya culminated in the pupil having a second birth – a spiritual birth (dvija or twice born). This birth was a psychological transmutation, an unfolding ‘of the mind and soul.’ The teacher, as it were, while accepting the pupil, initiates the exercise of recreating/remoulding the pupil’s whole personality – ‘Acharyah antah vidyasarirasya madhye garbham krinute’ (Sayana) ‘the teacher recreates the pupil in a new body of learning’. The initiation of the pupil into Brahmacharya required him to follow a twofold discipline – external as well as internal. The external enjoined the following of certain specific physical acts and discipline, while the internal (inner) discipline required the pupil to practice and adhere to ‘Srama – self-restraint, Tapas – practice of penance, Diksha – consecration to a life of discipline through prescribed regulations…’ (Sayana).\[Ibid., p. 67\] Thus in the ‘The Scheme of Life and Education in Ancient India’ the period of Brahmacharya seems to possess a great centrality, it connoted the pupil’s emergence into self-reliance and self-discovery through a rigorous pursuit of knowledge and physical discipline. It was a period that generally lasted for twenty-five years and the pupil’s ‘life spent in his professor’s house [was designated as the] life of Brahmacharya.’ The period was a great leveler too, any distinction of class, caste and position was equalized, the newly accepted ‘student would be treated equally with his compers.’ The other positive social quality and perception that it evolved was self-reliance – through the process of bhiksha – respect for manual labour – by tilling the master’s fields, tending to his cattles, etc. The life of Brahmacharya does not appear to be solely an academic one that segregated the pupil from his surrounding life and environment but one dedicated to developing an integral and holistic perception of life. [vide Swami Ramakrishnananda, For Thinkers on Education, 1949, pp.3,4,5] Arguing against the perception of the teacher student relation as being monolithic and hierarchical in ancient India, and especially arguing against that perception during the Brahmacharya phase, Kireet Joshi, e.g., observes that the pupil during the Brahmacharya phase and in general was looked upon as a ‘seeker not to be silenced by any dogmatic answers, but to be lifted in higher processes of thought, meditation and direct
he wrote, clearly perceived that the ‘source of life and energy is not material but spiritual, [and that] the basis, the foundation on which the life and energy stand and work, is physical’ This distinction between the ‘karana’ and ‘pratistha’ – ‘[e]arth or gross matter is the pratistha, Brahman or spirit is the karana’ – was well recognized by the ancient educators who thus propounded the raising up of the physical to the spiritual as Brahmacharya. The interlacing of the two enables the energy ‘which starts from one and produces the other’ to enhance and fulfil itself. 527

The other fundamental view on which Hinduism based its educational discipline was the one which believed that ‘all knowledge is within and has to be evoked by education rather than instilled from outside.’ 528 The idea and practice of imposition was absent in ancient Hindu educational discourse. The teacher accepted his function as that of an ‘observer, helper [and] guide’. The taskmaster’s instructional approach was absent and he taught through the ‘example of his wisdom and character.’ 529 The other fundamental view of the Hindu system of education was that man’s constitution ‘consists experience or realization.’ The pupil, the brahmacharin was devoted to ‘self-control and askesis’, the discipline was not imposed and arbitrary, the brahmacharin obeyed the ‘command of the teacher, knowing very well that the teacher asked nothing arbitrary’ and instead directed the path through which ‘self-perfection’ was attainable. The pupil and teacher’s lives were intertwined, joint – it was a life of ‘joint prayer, joint endeavour, of joint conquest of knowledge.’ As the student sought for a teacher, so to the teacher sought pupils – the Taittiriya Upanishad thus portrays the teacher as saying – ‘May the Brahmacharins come unto me. From here and there, may the Brahmacharins come unto me.’ And in fact for the Brahmacharin ‘the home of the teacher represented the fabric of life’ which was subtly interlinked with the ‘educational process’ in a such a way that life itself was education and educational activities were not segregated from ‘life-experience’ [Kireet Joshi, Education at Crossroads, 2007, pp. 126, 127.] And so what emerges is the fact that the Brahmacharin’s – the pupil following the discipline of Brahmacharya – life was a multi-layered one, evolving and developing under a process of simultaneity. And throughout this phase the pupil is seen to be treated differently at two separate levels – at physical/material he is leveled, co-equalled with his peers from varying background and nature and at the psycho-spiritual level he is treated with a great finesse so as to assist in the sublimation of his nature and of his emotional being and in evolution of his spiritual being encouraging simultaneously a growth of a unitary perception and vision. 527 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., pp. 371-372. 528 Ibid., p.373. This formed the seed expression of what was to be later much discussed as his first principal of teaching (p.384) 529 Joshi, op. cit., (p.126).
of three principle of nature[ the three ‘gunas’] sattva\(^{530}\) (comprehensive), rajas (active), tamas (passive) which manifest, Sri Aurobindo observes, as ‘knowledge, passion, ignorance’\(^{531}\) and each of these gunas, influence, depending on their predominance, the thoughts and actions of the individual. Sri Aurobindo gives here a succinct description of the three principles: ‘Tamas is a constitutional dullness or passivity which obscures the knowledge within and creates ignorance, mental inertia, slowness, forgetfulness, disinclination to study, inability to grasp and distinguish\(^{532}\) while Rajas ‘is an undisciplined activity which obscures knowledge by passion, attachment, prejudgment, predilection and wrong ideas.’ Sattva ‘is an illumination which reveals the hidden knowledge and brings it to the surface where the observation can grasp and the memory record it.’ Adhering to this conception of the three composing principles of man the main task of the teacher in the education system was thus the ‘removal of tamas, the disciplining of rajas and the awakening of sattva.’\(^{533}\) The principle of rajas was disciplined through the adherence to ‘a strict moral discipline which induced a calm, clear, receptive state of mind free from intellectual self-will and pride’ and the obscure shadings of passion – it was this discipline followed by the brahmacarin which was the foundation of the morals and culture of ancient India.\(^{534}\) The ‘wrong ideas’ induced disturbances was attempted to be arrested by a ‘strict mental submission to the teacher

\(^{530}\) As per his various expressions of the three terms: sattva – clarity, principle of assimilation, equilibrium and harmony [which] translates in quality as good and harmony and happiness and light’, rajas – ‘force of kinesis, translates in quality as struggle and effort, passion and action’, tamas – ‘principle and power of inertia, translates in quality as obscurity and incapacity and inaction.’[M.P. Pandit edited Glossary of Sanskrit Terms in Sri Aurobindo’s Works, 2002, pp.53, 63, 64, 70.]

\(^{531}\) CWSA vol.1, op. cit., p.373.

\(^{532}\) The principles if understood by the present day tutor would further facilitate her/his understanding and appreciation of the learner and the difficulties, emotional, psychological, temperamental, nature induced hurdles that he faces while undergoing the academic discipline.

\(^{533}\) CWSA vol.1, op. cit., pp. 373, 374.

\(^{534}\) Ibid., p.374.
during the receptive period’ which designated the period when the ‘ascertained knowledge’ ‘right ideas’ already in collective and civilisational possession was ‘explained to him and committed to memory.’ Tamas was sought to be removed through the discipline of ‘moral purity’ and through tapasya (askesis, austerity of personal will, spiritual austerity). The system was thus trained to be a ‘reservoir of mental force and clarity.’

The teacher had one fundamental task – the training of the leaner to be ‘receptive of illumination from within’ – which he had to perform and which was believed to be the essential training in education of that age. The guiding belief thus was that knowledge lay within the individual and the right approach to education would be to liaise that source with the learner. The awakening or facilitating of this illumination was engineered through a well defined method – a ‘triple method of repetition, meditation and discussion.’ Avritti (repetition) ‘was meant to fill the recording part of the mind with sabda (word) so that the artha (meaning) might of itself rise from within.’

This probably deconstructs assumed theories of the prevalence of an entrenched tradition of rote learning in ancient Indian educational systems. The emphasis on the necessity of giving rise to the artha (meaning) is quite clear and repetition (avritti) was useful in

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535 CWSA vol.1, p.374.
536 The first principle of Sri Aurobindo’s formulation of education thus comes in here again as a relevant corollary. The idea that all knowledge is within and should be evoked through education forms one of the core formulations of his educational theorem and according to it the role of the teacher undergoes a thorough repositioning, as one who is less of an imparter and imposer and more of a helper and guide. Thus I wish to argue that in the formulation of his first educational principle – we shall not go into all the three principles (or seven as enumerated by Jugal Kishore Mukherjee in his ‘Principles and Goals of Integral Education, Pondicherry, 2008) at this juncture, Sri Aurobindo as evident from his earlier writings and interpretations in the Karmayogin (1909-10) was inspired by classical Indian educational formulations. This emerges especially from the treatment of the ancient discipline in the opuscule under discussion.
537 CWSA vol.1, p.374.
538 Ibid.
539 An aside here on the position of memory in the scheme of ancient Indian education would perhaps be relevant. In an analysis of the role of memory in the ancient scheme Ananda Coomaraswamy in his ‘Essays
only as much as it aided and promoted the rise and assimilation of that meaning. It was a concept quite different from the present method of rote learning and memorization in order to pass through a standardized system of examination.

Obvious similarities and inspirations are evident in Sri Aurobindo’s highlighting the triple method of the ancient system and the classical evidences of the same in ancient Indian educational discourse. The ancient Indian system it appears insisted on the leaner’s understanding the deeper underlying meaning of the text in order to complete the process of internalizing them. The first step thus was undoubtedly the committing of texts to memory, ‘there was a method by which the teacher recited the texts. He recited them in the form of Metres, pronouncing every letter, syllable, and word according to standardized rules regulating accent and stresses and giving scope to the vibrations of every sound so as to call up its inner sense’ The learner, initially, had to follow the method with ‘mechanical precision and monotonity, like a body of “croaking frogs.” But

*in National Idealism* argues that the role of repetition in the Indian educational scheme was not for mere memorizing but served several purposes and played several training roles. Coomaraswamy argues that repetition trained the concentration. By way of illustration he draws upon the learning of concentration in the ‘atmosphere of Hindu culture.’ ‘A part of the sandhya or daily prayer of the Hindus,’ he argues, ‘consists in the mental repetition of certain prayers (mantras) a certain number of times’ (108 times in many cases he says). Though this could easily convert itself into a ‘mind-deadening mechanical process’ a careful guard was taken against such degeneration and the exercise was turned instead into a ‘good practice in concentration.’ Counting was insisted upon for it was believed that ‘repetition without keeping count leads to mental vacuity’ and the keeping of count while repeating was itself a mental gymnastic of no mean measure. ‘Let anyone’, Coomaraswamy challenges his readers in support of the dexterity he says is needed to count and repeat, ‘try to repeat any two lines of poetry exactly 108 times, and see whether it does not require mental concentration to do it without failure.’ Counting along with repetition was not all that there was to the process, Coomaraswamy points out that certain ‘physical practices, especially that of breathing, retaining and expelling the breath, while prayers are repeated a certain number of times’ had to be simultaneously followed’ and this could certainly not be done ‘without intense attention.’ The aim was to throw the whole mind into the effort of worship and not approach the exercise in a ‘slovenly fashion’, there had to evolve a *sankalpa* (resolve) to perform the *sandhya* and on a ‘strong determination of the mental effort [depended] the efficacy of the worship.’ The repetition thus of the name during the prayer had to have the active mind behind it and if the ‘mind is not put into the act; it is done mechanically and loses half its value.’ [Ananda Coomaraswamy, op. cit., pp. 123, 124] Repetition thus was never an isolated process solely to serve the purpose of retention, in fact it may be argued that the concept of examination and testing itself was perhaps structurally and conceptually different in the ancient context and was nowhere similar to its modern colonially engineered counterpart.
the mastery of the texts was ‘only the first step of learning. The more important step was
the mastery of meaning’, mastery of text – ‘akshara-prapti’ had to be followed by ‘artha-
bodha’, perception of meaning. For one who was a ‘kevalapathaka’ (mere crammer) the
texts did indeed become a burden.\textsuperscript{540} Sri Aurobindo too emphasizes the point that a
‘mechanical repetition was not likely to produce’ the effect of the word gradually
becoming self-evident.\textsuperscript{541} The argument may of course be forwarded that the system
faced eventual erosion and deteriorated into a mechanical habit. But the following
argument – that the habit of memorizing without comprehensively internalising the
meaning was a unique contribution made to Indian society by the colonial system of
education – has its merits too. A centralized examination system required students to
‘rehearse endlessly the skills of reproduction from memory, summarizing, and essay-type
writing on any topic. Students were examined on their study of specific texts, not on their
understanding of concepts or problems.’\textsuperscript{542} The pressure of examinations – as we have
argued earlier – and the demands of meritoriously passing in them, eventually sidelined
the teacher, who became the mere executor of the textbook’s will. It vanquished the
teacher’s capacity to innovate, originate and enliven the process of learning.\textsuperscript{543} Thus
repetition in the classical Indian educational context had a much wider connotation and
did not appear to be the dominant element useful only for information storing but was
rather looked upon as an important aid towards evolving a genuine understanding of the
topic and the word discussed.

\textsuperscript{541} CWSA vol.1, op. cit., p.374.
\textsuperscript{542} Krishna Kumar, ‘Origins of the Textbook Culture’ in What is Worth Teaching, op.cit., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{543} For this argument see e.g. Krishna Kumar, Political Agenda of Education – A Study of Colonialist and
Nationalist Ideas, Sage, New Delhi, 2005.
And how would the focus, the contemplation on the word – that would eventually help in revealing the meaning – be effectuated? Along with the avritti of the sabda, dhyana (meditation) ‘that clear still receptivity and that waiting upon the word or thing with the contemplative part of the mind’ must also occur. This was emphasized by the ancient system too. Sri Aurobindo places here a concrete example of the effect of dhyana in the entire process of evoking the meaning, an observation that must have remained with him from the Baroda period when he spent long hours of study. ‘All of us have felt,’ he writes, ‘when studying a language, difficulties which seemed insoluble while grappling with a text, suddenly melt away and a clear understanding arise without assistance from book or teacher after putting away the book from our for a brief period.’ He extends the experience to learning of languages, ‘Many of us have experienced also, the strangeness of taking up a language or subject, after a brief discontinuance, to find that we understand it much better than when we took it up, know the meaning of words we had never met before and can explain sentences which, before we discontinued the study, would have baffled our understanding.’ Such a manifestation of understanding is possible, he observes, ‘because the jnata or knower within has had his attention called upon the source of knowledge within in connection with it.’ One whose sattwic element has been greatly aroused and trained is capable of such an experience. Thus adhering to his position that the ancient believed knowledge and illumination to be intrinsic, Sri

544 Or as Ananda Coomaraswamy lyrically puts it while discussing memory in education ‘…all knowledge is founded on knowledge of the self. How is this self to be controlled and focused? Only by the power of concentration, the capacity for fixing the attention of the whole mind for more than a brief moment upon a single aim or thought…’ as an example he points to the Mahabharata episode of Arjuna describing ‘a bird’s head, and in that head only the eye.’ (Op.cit., pp. 122, 123)

545 CWSA vol.1, op. cit., pp. 374, 375.
Aurobindo argues that they had also drawn up certain methods and practice which could empirically demonstrate the validity of that belief.

The ultimate expressions of an advanced *sattvic* development Sri Aurobindo concludes, is witnessed when the learner dispenses ‘often or habitually with outside aids, the teacher or the textbook, grammar and dictionary and learns a subject largely or wholly from within’ but such a possibility visited only the Yogin through a ‘successful prosecution of the discipline of Yoga.’ He was quite frank though that the majority was never expected to rise to this level of self-education.546 The result of this placing of energies at the ‘service of the brain’ Sri Aurobindo argues had far reaching results, the training of Brahmacharya ‘not only strengthened the *medha* or grasping power, the *dhi* or subtlety and swiftness of thought conception, the memory and creative intellectual force’ and made comprehensive and analytic the ‘triple force of memory, invention [and] judgment.’ The range of the mind was greatly enlarged as was strengthened its ‘absorbing, storing and generative mental activities.’ This enabled it to accomplish those extraordinary ‘feats of memory, various comprehension and versatility of creative work’ such as was achieved by only a few ‘extraordinary intellects’ in the West. In ancient India these achievements were common. Keeping in with the spirit of the age when a process of self-examination and re-evaluation was in progress inspired and expedited by the nationalist movement, Sri Aurobindo draws a parallel with Gladstone (1809-1989)547

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546 *CWSA vol.1*, op. cit., p. 375. Jugal Kishore Mukherjee cites this as one of the examples of evoking knowledge from within, he refers to this passage and indicates this to be the ‘beneficial result of the process’ of evocation. (Op.cit., p.12) What remains un-elucidated though is the actual process of evoking the knowledge within. Sri Aurobindo in the above read passage does indicate a certain outline of that process inspired from the classical Indian educational thought and method.

547 Homer seems to have been a constant inspiration for William Gladstone, four times British Prime Minister. In fact his political biographers have dwelt on this aspect of his life – a near inseparable link and association with the Homeric world. Amidst his political struggles he found time to dwell and contemplate on Homer, he was, writes Richard Shannon in his *Gladstone-II: 1865-1898*, 1999) ‘nursing a plan to
who ‘was considered to be the possessor of an astonishing memory because he could
repeat the whole of Homer’s Iliad, beginning from any passage suggested to him and
flowing on as long as required’ but such a capacity Sri Aurobindo argued was quite
commonplace in ancient India and would be considered by the Brahmin of old to be a
capacity ‘neither unusual nor astonishing, but rather petty and limited.’

The ordinary, general curriculum of that age had certain universality ‘it was for
every student and not for the exceptional few, and it implied, not a tasting of many
subjects after the modern plan, but a thorough mastery of all.’ Sri Aurobindo was to go
back to this theme of his in the series on education where he denounces the modern
practice of teaching by ‘snippets’. Further discussing the achievements of the Indian
mind and genius, which at that period was necessitated in order to reinstate the peoples’
faith in their intellectual prowess and performance – past and future – he talks of the
‘original achievements of a Kalidasa accomplishing the highest in every line of poetic
creation’ paralleled in the arena of philosophy by Shankara in a short life span of thirty-
two years’ and points to the ‘universal mastery of all possible spiritual knowledge and
experiences of Sri Ramakrishna’ and says that these were instances of pure creative
genius, examples of what the Indian mind, in its supreme capacity was essentially

produce a revised edition of his Studies on Homer of 1858.’ He started work on this plan in 1867 and
would eventually complete in 1869 his Juvenis Mundi, The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age. (p.44) In
fact such an obsession or release was Homer for Gladstone from his tedium of office, that he once
recorded, ‘worked 6 ¼ hours on Homeric primer. What a treat!’ (218) During most of Sri Aurobindo’s stay
in England Gladstone dominated the political scene as Prime Minister, his memory accomplishments must
have already started becoming part of the lore!

548 CWSA vol.1, pp. 376, 377.
549 ‘A remarkable feature of modern training which has,’ he castigates, ‘been subjected in India to a
reduction ad absurdum…A subject is taught a little at a time, in conjunction with a host of others, with the
result that what might be well learnt in a single year is badly learnt in seven and the boy goes out ill-
equipped, served with imperfect parcels of knowledge, master of none of the great departments of human
knowledge.’ In the same piece he accuses the National Council of heightening this practice by following
the method at start and the middle and then without sufficient preparation exposing the learner to
‘grandiose specialism at the top.’ (CWSA vol.1 op. cit., p. 393 (A System of National Education – Some
Preliminary Ideas)
capable of. Though these instances were not as ‘common as others’, in Europe such parallels were ‘with a single modern exception, non-existent.’ In Europe the excelling has been in ‘one field of a single intellectual province or at most in two’ whereas in India it is the ‘greatest who have been the most versatile and passed from one field of achievement to another’ with easy and unfaltering mastery. The many side genius of the Indian mind was made possible because of the practice of Brahmacharya which ‘developed sattva or inner illumination’. This inner illumination made the ‘acquisition of knowledge’ and all other intellectual operations and performances ‘easy, spontaneous, swift, decisive and comparatively unfatiguing to body or brain’ Thus, Sri Aurobindo argues in conclusion, that it was finally Brahmacharya and sattwic development that held the secret of ancient Indian ‘intellectual achievement’, it were these he argued, which in effect ‘created the brain of India’.

Having thus discussed the psychological principles Sri Aurobindo brings up current problems and questions of education and one sees that the issues remain contemporary even a hundred years later. He accepts the common complaint that students ‘are too heavily burdened with many subjects and the studying of many books’ but points towards what he perceives to be the other truth that the ‘range of studies is pitifully narrow and the books read miserably few.’ The reason for this paradox is that the creation of the base is neglected – the young mind exposed to ‘snippet’ education -, the foundation thus remains weak and is unable to bear even the ‘paltry and meager edifice of our imparted knowledge.’ And then follows, a severe indictment of the effects of a colonial education on the Indian mind which is ‘still in potentiality what it was’ but is being gradually ‘damaged, stunted and defaced.’ ‘The greatness of its innate possibilities is
hidden by the greatness of its surface deterioration."\textsuperscript{550} One of the chief causes of this deterioration and damage was – as the nationalist educators constantly argued and as Sri Aurobindo unceasingly reiterated – ‘study in a foreign language which was not even imperfectly mastered at a time when the student was called upon to learn in that impossible medium a variety of alien and unfamiliar subjects.’\textsuperscript{551} The vernacular versus foreign tongue evoked much emotion and debate, since the question was one of adequate self-expression and the medium of that self-expression was to be one that would facilitate and promote it. Sri Aurobindo was one among the prominent thought leaders to have dwelt on this aspect, his perception of this need and its importance in shaping the Indian mind had developed since his return to India.

\textsuperscript{550} CWSA vol.1, p. 377.

\textsuperscript{551} Sri Aurobindo, we have already seen, had been highlighting this issue since his early days in India. In his assessment of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay he emphasizes the imperativeness of an education that was rooted to the learners surrounding and of which his vernacular formed an integral part. He also spoke for it in a scheme of national education, insisting that ‘one who has mastered his own language, has one very necessity facility for mastering another’ [and] with the linguistic faculty unsatisfactorily developed in one’s own tongue, to master others is impossible’ and therefore the mother-tongue was the ‘proper medium of instruction’ and the child’s initial energies had to be directed towards its mastery. (CWSA vol.1, op. cit., p.394). He raised this issue as a vital component of the nationalist educational discourse. The continuity of his tilt and support for the vernacular is evident in his ‘Preface on National Education’ written decades later in 1920-21 where he supports the need for learning Sanskrit - he did not give up the language as impeding the growth of a scientific temper – through a method that was ‘most natural, efficient and stimulating to the mind’ there was no necessity to cling ‘to any past or present manner of teaching.’ But the vital question was, as he saw it, how were Sanskrit and other indigenous languages to be used to ‘get to the heart and intimate sense of our own culture and establish a vivid continuity between the still living power of our past and the yet uncreated power of our future.’ There was no segregation in the approach; it was neither a total reverting to the past nor a complete rupture with it. Instead, the use of indigenous tongues was to serve as a bridge. In a stance that indicated a greater global approach, an evolving internationalism in his thoughts that negated a narrow isolationist spirit. Sri Aurobindo also includes in the vital question the issue of the role that English or for that matter any other foreign language were to play in the new educational outlook. Training in these languages would enable one to ‘know helpfully the life, ideas and culture of other countries and establish our right relations with the world around us.’ He now saw national education as accepting the role of the foreign tongue, a tongue that would not dominate but would facilitate a cultural and ideational exchange. This was to be the principal and aim of a ‘true national education’ one that did not ignore, overlook or refuse ‘modern truth and knowledge’ while taking along one’s own ‘foundation’, ‘being’, ‘mind’ [and] ‘spirit’. [CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.421] The philosophical basis of the national education quest could perhaps be located in these lines, it came years after the storm of political activism had abated in Sri Aurobindo’s life.
The two contemporary minds with whom we are concerned because of their links to Sri Aurobindo, as argued earlier, also saw this necessity and were vocal in its promotion and realized its indispensability in re-creating the Indian mind. Coomaraswamy, for example, brings out a fundamental problem in education in India – though not referring directly in this instance to the medium of instruction through English – he however points towards a more deep-seated and connected or resultant problem, that of Indian students being instructed by Englishmen. Men, who, he argued could never really be ‘true educators of the Indian people’ because of their inability to not only, inherit Indian indigenous traditions but also to evolve a ‘spirit of perfect reverence for those traditions.’ He saw the necessity for English professors to undertake a rigorous, assiduous and ‘sympathetic study of Indian religious philosophy, Sanskrit or Pali, some vernacular language, Indian history, [including the period when the ‘ideals of Indian civilisation’ saw expression] art, music, literature and etiquette’ in order to enable himself to understand the problems of Indian education. Such a study, Coomaraswamy argued, would develop an understanding him and would make him less inclined to interfere in the Indian ideals ‘for he would either be Indianised at heart, or would have long realised the hopeless divergence between his own and Indian ideals.” 552 But the prevailing system did not encourage or allow the undertaking of such a study and English teachers, he lamented, ‘have neither the time nor the inclination to spend ten years, or even two, in such a study of Indian culture.’ The stark manifestations of such an omission are apparent when rapidly elevated to positions of power and eminence in the education system in India they doggedly attempt to apply solutions best suited to an English environment to

552 Essays in National Idealism, op. cit., p.100.
the Indian educational issues and problems.\footnote{Essays in National Idealism., p.101. Coomaraswamy thus saw quite early the imperativeness of taking control of the educational scheme if freedom in the actual sense of the term was to be achieved, ‘The control of Indian education,’ he foresaw, ‘is of so much importance that the necessity of gaining this would alone justify the present endeavours to attain political freedom.’(Op. cit., p.188) The basic argument in favour of control of the education by the nationalist leaders was with this objective – its control would in a sense provide an intellectual shape and direction to the movement.} Two contemporaries writing around the same time (1909) highlighted a crucial issue in the nationalist education debate and discussed it from two separate angles – one directly referring to the ineligibility of English as the predominant medium of educational instruction in a country where the vernacular continued to make sense to the vast majority and the other pointing to the disconnected Englishman as a teacher unsuccessfully trying communicate in and impose a foreign medium and system to vastly different Indian conditions and situations.

Sister Nivedita considered the language of a people to be their ‘highest and most spiritual’ creation. The deepest of a nation and race is expressed though it, ‘in this is expressed the soul of nations.’ The Indian thought-world, the Indian vision-world best expressed itself through the vernacular. She takes the debate to the ideational level and sees it as the best means to penetrate and assimilate Indian thought, philosophy and way of life. ‘As one studies an Indian vernacular,’ she observes, ‘the vastness and distinctiveness of the Indian dream-world continually grows on one. First there are the philosophical ideas which give its tone to dream. Then there is the great gallery of ideal characters of which every Indian child by birth is made a freeman…’\footnote{The Mediaeval University of India, op. cit., p.340.} It was this vast repository of traditional Indian knowledge that was missed out through a forced foreign medium. In her ‘Hints on National Education in India’, discussing ‘the Place of Foreign Culture in a True Education’, Nivedita appears to be quite categorical with the foreign instructional element. In her characteristically vigorous tone she observes that a mind at
an initiation stage fed on ‘foreign knowledge and ideas’ is not rooted upon and bound by a ‘sense of intimacy’ with its own surrounding, tradition and psyche and becomes like the ‘waif brought up in the stranger’s home. The waif may behave well and reward his benefactor’ but this would be forced from a mental sense of duty rather than love. Then in words strikingly similar to what Sri Aurobindo had expressed in the pages of the Karmayogin insisting that the child be engaged first with his surrounding and with the land and soil of his birth and growth, she observes that ‘In a true education the place of foreign culture is never at the beginning [and that] All true development must proceed from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the near to the far.’555 The learner thus was being disassociated from his life and moorings and therefore the nationalist demand for the vernacular as the best suited medium for the Indian student. In fact all three, though trained in the western educational pattern, felt the

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555 CWSN vol.4, ‘The Place of Foreign Culture in a True Education’ in Hints on National Education in India, pp.354-355. The similarity of approach to the problem is also evident in Sri Aurobindo, who, as discussed earlier, during the period of his educational writings had close interactions and coordination with Nivedita. Enunciating his third principle of education Sri Aurobindo felt the need to give the child a measured exposure, one that would be from the ‘near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be.’ The intrinsic relevance and inseparability in an individual’s pattern of growth of his surrounding, nationality, country, sustaining soil, the ‘air which he breathes, the sights, sounds [and] habits to which he is accustomed’ can never be brushed aside, they form a vital part of the child’s growth and mental evolution. (CWSA vol.1, op.cit.) Interestingly, Coomaraswamy in his essays during the period [discussed above] also refers to the same issue using similar expressions, stressing the point that a people’s intelligence could be developed ‘primarily only by means of education in the national culture’ he argues that it was essential that one understands first that ‘with which [one is] already familiar before it is possible to understand the unfamiliar, and relate it to one’s life.’ An imitation without understanding and without relating to one’s surrounding what one attempts to imitate results in vulgarity. (Essays in National Idealism, op. cit., p.193) The foreign medium of instruction and the practice of describing foreign scenes and subjects and the forced imitation it generated stunted free thinking and imagination and dislocated the young mind from his surroundings. Young Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), later to become the leader of the nationalist art movement in Bengal, recalled how in his childhood while being educated at home he was surrounded ‘with pictures of all kinds mostly Victorian’ and how his impression of ‘rustic cottages’ were engendered by English picture books. It was not until his first visit to rural Bengal, where he saw peasant dwellings ‘did he realise how different they were from the ones known to him.’ (Partha Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850-1922, 1994, p.272.) The colonial system through a foreign medium, expression and imagery sought to delink the Indian mind from his native life and living. This was the basic point that the three contemporaries under study, deeply concerned with the idea of a national education, were making.
overdose of the foreign exposure on the Indian mind. Especially perhaps, the bewildering impact it had on the young Indian unfamiliar with the urbanized surroundings and ways.

The primary concern was that the Indian mind, as Nivedita saw it, was losing its native land and this was mainly because of the ‘unprecedented influx of foreign knowledge and foreign criticism, from the early decades of the nineteenth century onwards’ an influx that Nivedita believed lost to the country ‘many a mind and many a character that should have been amongst the noblest of her sons.’\footnote{\textit{CWSN vol. 4}, op. cit., pp.358, 359.} The idea was to stem that ‘brain drain’ and recreate, reignite and reformulate that cultural identity which was essential to redefining the nation. An education in a foreign medium right from its early stages was seen as impeding this process. The essence of the issue was either the unwillingness or inability – both effects of a foreign medium – to develop a deep and intimate understanding of the Indian ethos and because the struggle was to create and weld a nation it was indispensible to train the Indian mind to at least know what is one’s own and for that the familiar, the known had to be first re-introduced in an education that called itself national. When she wrote that ‘In all directions we find that only when deeply rooted in the familiar, we may safely take up the unfamiliar [and] In proportion as we rightly analyse the known, rightly distinguishing, even in what is familiar, between the ideal expressed and the form assumed, in that proportion will it open for us the book of the whole world’ she was making a plain case not only for the promotion of the vernacular but at a deeper level for retraining the Indian mind to be at ease with the Indian traditions. Such a knowledge and training was an essential pre-requisite if the nation hoped to assume a certain position in the larger world community, an event that they felt freedom would eventually usher in. For such a co-equal status it was essential to
love what is one’s own and more importantly to actually know what is one’s own and one who is incapable of doing this or has neglected its practice ‘will never be received by any people as anything more than half a man.’

The Indian brain thus, to continue with Sri Aurobindo’s argument, ‘in this unnatural process’ [that of having to learn a wide variety of unfamiliar subjects in an ‘impossible medium’] was crippled by the disuse of judgment, observation, comprehension and creation’ thus developing a habit of un-thinking memorization. He terms it an ‘exclusive reliance on the deteriorating relics of the ancient Indian memory.’

It is to be noted that he criticizes whatever expressions remains of the ancient knowledge of using memory for education, a knowledge which by his time had perhaps begun losing or had lost all inner significance and focus. Finally, exposed to the methods of colonial education, the Indian mind was ‘beggared and degraded’ and had to contend with ‘snippets [a word that aptly describes the method followed by the colonial education system while imparting education and one which Sri Aurobindo repeatedly uses] and insufficient packets of information instead of being richly stored and powerfully equipped.’

The national education experiment in Bengal, Sri Aurobindo continues, tried to undo this degenerative evil ‘by employing the mother-tongue’, attempted to encourage and restore the intellectual functions and also tried to provide ‘a richer and more real equipment of information.’ But in this, it achieved limited success because the teachers and directors themselves of this new educational experiment were ‘minds already vitiated by the old system and not often with the best even of these.’ One more negative point

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557 CWSN vol. 4., p.357
being that the teachers ‘had themselves seldom a perfect grasp of the requirements of the new system.’ And the educational system itself, Sri Aurobindo complains, while terming itself national ‘neglected the very foundation of the great achievement of our forefathers and especially the perfection of the instrument of knowledge.’ But the observations come again with the clarification that the call for re-examining past educational principles did not mean ‘that the actual system of ancient instruction’ be restored in its outward features…Many of them are not suited to modern requirements.’ The argument is instead that the ancient system had certain fundamental principles that remain for all times and such a discipline could only be replaced by the ‘discovery of a still more effective discipline’ which western education was incapable of formulating. How the ideas or discipline of the ancient could be reapplied to the present Sri Aurobindo does not discuss, perhaps he intended doing it sometime in the future and would have done so had the exigencies of politics and yoga not taken him along a different and unchartered route.

He explains thus certain principles of the ancient Indian education system, as he perceived it, and analyses some of the system’s dominant psychological principles and practices which prepared the learner to excel and exceed assigning a wholly deeper meaning and significance to the term education. Such an education had the development and evolution of the individual at the centre of its schemes. The write-up was also basically a case for developing the people’s intelligence ‘through the medium of their own national culture.’ And in that national culture the ancient principles of education – and not their now near defunct forms – formed an important and intrinsic part. In a sense, the contestation covered above, was a call to recognize and reapply those principles to

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559 CWSA vol.1, op. cit., p.378.
560 Essays in National Idealism, op. cit., p. 106.
VII.2 On Restoring the Artistic Emotion: The Value of Art in a Scheme of National Education

The other vital subject that Sri Aurobindo addresses in the arena of education and one that falls within his non-political writings and discussion of the issue is that of art – a necessity of training in aesthetics and its centrality in a scheme of national education. The researcher undertaking a study of Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts and writings has to contend with the fact that Sri Aurobindo tackles a wide number of aspects even while dealing with the educational argument. One sees him dwelling on the political, technical, historical and philosophical as well as aesthetics of the discourse. A researcher attempting to study his arguments in these requires certain grounding in each of these fields and I must humbly confess my inability to be able to take up each of these in depth and to do justice. But nevertheless Sri Aurobindo’s observations on the necessity of an art-training, and of developing the aesthetical layer of the individual and placing this area of educational training in prominence in the national education scheme does deserve a reading however brief and cursory.

Sri Aurobindo’s commentaries on what he termed ‘The National Value of Art’ appeared in six installments in his newly created thought-vehicle ‘Karmayogin’ between November and December 1909. The Empire’s Asian capital, Calcutta, had by this time
emerged as the centre of the ‘Nationalist Art Movement’ and become a remarkable arena for the growth and evolution of an ‘ideology of Swadeshi art.’\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{561}}} It was but natural that Sri Aurobindo turned his attention to this important instrument of national growth and unity. He saw the insistence and inclusion of an art training in the national education curricula as essential for forging the ideational unity apart from sublimating and spiritualizing the individual’s inner and outer personalities. While the surface necessity was the regeneration of pride in the ever living Indian form of artistic expression then clouded by a plethora of dominant western artistic methods, techniques and manifestations; the inner much deeper objective was to re-establish a link with the soul of the nation. The medium of art was felt to be one of the most credible and reliable instrument towards reviving that link.

VII.3 The Need for an Art Movement and Education: Art as an Agent of National Unity and as a Restorer of the Racial Artistic Emotion

Sri Aurobindo participated in the art movement by speaking for and encouraging its alternative forms of expressions and supporting the Indian nationalist effort to reclaim the field. The other two minds – Nivedita and Coomaraswamy - whose ideas on the national education question we have begun examining intermittently at this stage were themselves vigorous participants in this nationalist art movement and were firm believers in art’s capacity of forging a new national mind and in the ineluctability of a training in art and aesthetics as part of the new national education.

\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{561}}} See e.g. Elleke Boehmer, \textit{Empire, the National and the Post-Colonial: 1890-1920-Resistance in Interaction}, 2002 and Partha Mitter, \textit{Art and Nationalism in Colonial India: 1850-1922}, op.cit.) for a detailed treatment of the nationalist art movement in India.
Sri Aurobindo had indicated earlier in the very pages of the *Karmayogin* that a ‘national awakening’ which works itself out within a narrow or single confine can never be ‘vital and enduring.’ His contention was that the awakening of the national soul would have manifold forms of expression, themselves the manifestation of the ‘strength and the delight of the expansive spirit within.’[^562] In recognition of that manifold expression he threw his weight behind the Indian nationalist art movement and also argued in favour of trying to encourage the growth of national aesthetics. His support for the new art movement was evident in the pages of the weekly where he highlighted not only its various facets and its place in the new awakening but also spoke in favour of those attempting to support and disseminate its ideas and expression. Sri Aurobindo saw this awakening of the national soul in religion as a precursor to the awakening in a wider sphere of intellectual and cultural activities. He saw the religious awakening taking place, as he lyrically put it while referring to Sri Ramakrishna, when “the flower of the educated youth of Calcutta bowed down at the feet of an illiterate Hindu ascetic, a self-illumined ecstatic and ‘mystic’ without a single trace or touch of the alien thought or education upon him” he saw this moment as announcing the triumph of the religious soul of India.[^563] It was this churning of the religious mind in a new direction which not only revived certain robustness in the faith but also encouraged a wider quest in other areas of national activity and expressions.

Referring to these other activities Sri Aurobindo saw the need of a religious and political life eventually remoulding the national life in all its spheres. He saw the influence already at work in the sphere of art and literature and sought to strengthen its

[^563]: *CWSA vol.8*, p. 62.
presence. In Bengal, *inter alia*, he saw the national spirit seeking to ‘satisfy itself in art, and for the first time since the decline of the Moguls, a new school of national art’ of which Abanindranath Tagore ‘is the founder and master’ developing itself. Though still influenced at times by foreign ‘though Asiatic’ elements the new school was trying to express and work on the basic tenet of Indian art, it was an effort to ‘express in form and limit something of that which is formless and illimitable.’

The pages of the *Karmayogin* also began carrying his appreciations of recent paintings and current techniques of expressions. At the same time appreciating the efforts of other nationalist journals in regularly doing the same Sri Aurobindo observed that by featuring prints of Indian paintings produced by the new school in Bengal and by others they were rendering a vital service to national regeneration. Talking of the efforts of the *Modern Review*, then just launched (1907) by the formidable Ramananda Chatterji (1865-1943) and ‘quickly

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564 CWSA vol.8, pp. 63, 64.  
565 See e.g. his write-ups on art and art appreciation in CWSA vol.1, op.cit., pp.455-464.  
566 Ramananda Chatterji, was closely associated with the nationalist and was at times called upon to preside over their public meetings. Chatterji presided over at least one large public meeting held on 13th June, 1909 at Beadon square in north-Calcutta. Keeping in mind that this was a phase when the revolutionary nationalists were facing severe administrative repression, Ramananda’s presence at the meeting was significant. Referring to his ceaseless promotion of Indianness Sri Aurobindo called him an ‘indefatigable literary and patriotic worker’ who was ‘well-known to the Bengali public as a clear-minded, sober and fearless political speaker and writer.’ Among the many services Ramananda was rendering to his nation his latest ‘introducing the masterpieces of the new school of Art to his readers’ was, Sri Aurobindo felt, a ‘yet more valuable and lasting service to his country.’ [CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.460] In fact Ramananda who had long been in search of an agent that would ‘bind the fissiparous languages and cultures of India’ saw art as ‘a universal language’ that offered him that opportunity. The binding through literature was hampered due to the inadequacy of translations and he saw the medium of visual arts as offering that scope. He saw in the revival of ‘artistic activity’ a ‘factor silently making for national unity.’ [Partha Mitter, op.cit., p.223] The championing thus of the new school assumed urgency and reproduction in the pages of his journal facilitated and encouraged that silent unifying factor. It can be said that Sri Aurobindo too saw this unifying utility of the art movement and thus threw his weight behind it. Interestingly, Nivedita, who now forms part of our discussion, had discussed in the pages of the *Modern Review* ‘The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality’ indicating her being in sync with its editor in trying to discover and project art as a unifying agent of nationality. ‘Art…is charged,’ she declared in the piece, ‘with a spiritual message, - in India today, the message of the Nationality.’ It had to be then pursued ‘like science, like education, like industry, like trade itself’ with the sole objective of “remaking of the Motherland” and for no other aim’. [CWSN vol.3, p.14.] Coomaraswamy was as categorical on the issue, ‘nations are made by artists and by poets, not by traders and politicians’ he declared and it was by becoming artists and poets and by beginning again to understand ‘our own art and poetry’ that one could attain the highest ideal of nationality…’ [Essays in
[to emerge] as a vital forum for the nationalist intelligentsia and its sister magazine the Bengali Prabasi; Sri Aurobindo observed that these reviews by reproducing every month some work of art by contemporary Indian painters and by bringing them to thousands who had no opportunity to see the original were ‘restoring the sense of beauty and artistic emotion inborn in our race but almost blotted out by the long reign in our lives of the influence of Anglo-Saxon vulgarity and crude tasteless commercialism.’ Implied in the statement was an attack on the official education system which seemed to encourage this tasteless commercialism. Most of the pictures, he saw reproduced belonged to the ‘new school of Bengali art’ which he saw as the only ‘living and original school now developing among us.’ Thus Sri Aurobindo’s interest in art training and his deliberations on its value in a national scheme of education does not seem to have suddenly cropped up nor was it isolated from his vision of national regeneration, it was part of the tradition that by then (1906-1909) had made a space for itself. In national regeneration, education was to play one of the most vital part, not only would it lead to liberation, it would prepare the race to organize that liberation and an important component of this regeneration was the restoration of the ‘sense of beauty and artistic emotion inborn in [the] race.’ This is perhaps what led Sri Aurobindo to elaborate his thoughts on training in aesthetics for the nation.

This demand for the inclusion of art in the education system had been taken up early by those very people who were directly involved in reviving the Indian art movement. One Shyamacharan Srimani had already set the pace by producing a slim

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568 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.455.
volume on ‘The Rise of the Fine Arts and the Artistic Skills of the Aryans’ (Suksasilper utpatti o aryajatir silpacaturi) as far back as 1874. The work was adjudged as an important ‘marker in the growth of cultural nationalism’, was the ‘first history of art written in Bengali’ and was looked upon as an early nationalist work.\footnote{569} In fact Srimani was closely associated with the Hindu Mela activities in Bengal started by Nabagopal Mitra and Rajnarayan Bose. Srimani taught at the national school, organised exhibitions of ‘Indian art ware at the Mela’ and gave lectures at the Mela forum in 1869 ‘on the glory of ancient Indian art’ and exhorted the youth ‘to revive that glory.’\footnote{570}

E.B.Havell (1861-1934), one of the leading lights and voices calling for an Indian art and on who also encouraged the young Abanindranath – soon to lead the nationalist art movement – in his turn towards the revival of Indian art forms had as early as 1901 urged the Congress leaders to ‘take a broader perspective and integrate art more fully into their national programme.’ Pursuing the same agenda he had published in 1903 an ‘Open Letter to Educated Indians’ castigating them ‘for their indifference to their own art.’ \footnote{571} He argued in his essays on ‘Art and Education in India’ (1901) that from a political standpoint it was not ‘a small thing that the artistic sentiment of the Indian peoples [was] being extinguished under our [British] rule.’ It was an argument that found echo in Sri Aurobindo’s writings as well. Havell wanted a whole people to be devoted to art but that possibility he saw being erased by colonial rule. The reading that ‘A people devoted to art are a happy and contented people [and] a people without art are restless and unhappy’\footnote{572} was perhaps what compelled him to take a hands-on approach to bring back the arts to the

\footnote{569} Partha Mitter, op.cit., p.224.
\footnote{570} Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ‘Recovering the Nation’s Art’ in Partha Chatterjee edited., Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal, 1995, p.73.
\footnote{571} Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ‘Recovering the Nation’s Art’, p. 251.
\footnote{572} E.B.Havell, ‘Art and Education in India’ in Indian Art, Industry an Education, 1901, p. 137.
race. Similar to what Sri Aurobindo perceived, Havell too saw India ‘as the only part of the British Empire where the aesthetic sense of the people, in spite of all that British philistinism has done to suppress it, strongly influences their everyday life.’ Therefore there had to be a national effort at restoring and preserving that sense. Sri Aurobindo stressed the necessity of this restoration too for he lamented that the age was ‘bent on depriving life of its meaning by turning earth into a sort of glorified antheap’ and that the value the ancients attached ‘to music, art and poetry has become almost unintelligible’ to it. The nationalist art movement attracted some of the most dynamic minds of the Swadeshi period. The triumvirate comprising of Havell, Nivedita and Coomaraswamy were the ideologues of the nationalist art movement with Havell furnishing the ‘aesthetic’, Nivedita providing the ‘moral’ and Coomaraswamy supplying the ‘metaphysical content’ to the Swadeshi doctrine of art. Sri Aurobindo by lending his moral support and authority to the aspiration gave it a greater fillip and sanction.

573 E.B.Havell, ‘Art and Education in India’ in Indian Art, Industry an Education, 1901, p. 91. Sri Aurobindo beginning his series on ‘The National Value of Art’ argues similarly that in modern times the tendency to ‘depreciate the value of the beautiful and overstress the value of the useful’ is corrected in India – a country and a people subjected to a ‘mercenary and soulless education’ that had cut it off from all its ‘ancient roots of culture and tradition’ – only by the temperament of the people in which the ‘stress of imagination, emotion and spiritual delicacy’ was ‘submerged but not yet destroyed.’ [CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.433] In his series on Indian art while defending Indian culture and discussing the Indian Renaissance much later, Sri Aurobindo refers to Mr. Havell and Dr. Coomaraswamy as among the eminent two who had already done a considerable amount of work to clear away the ‘misconceptions about Indian sculpture and painting.’ While accepting during this period that a change in perception of Indian art had set in, Sri Aurobindo felt that the change had not yet gone far enough to develop a ‘thorough appreciation of the deepest and most characteristic spirit and inspiration of Indian work’ [ and that] ‘an eye or an effort like Mr. Havell’s [was] still rare. [The Renaissance in India, op. cit., pp. 254, 260.] Sri Aurobindo held the ideologues of the nationalist art movement in great esteem and valued their pioneering service towards the awakening of the national soul.

574 CWSA vol.1,p.433., According to Coomaraswamy, who discerned the ‘essential error in modern Indian education as understood by Government…and Anglicised Indians, [the] refusal or inability to recognize any responsibility to the past’ this break ‘in the continuity of the historical tradition [and the inability to understand it anymore would prove to be] fatal to Indian culture.’ [Essays in National Idealism, op. cit., p.186]

575 Partha Mitter, op.cit., p.246.
Sri Aurobindo, as he indicated the issue, wished to work towards the restoration of the aesthetic and artistic emotion in the race. The age and education had nearly eradicated that emotion and sense. The education imparted – which was mainly looked upon as a ‘passport to jobs’ – had by its neglect of the art or refusal to recognize the possibilities of an Indian art had rather encouraged this non-comprehension of its national value. But in the onward march of the evolution of the collective existence Sri Aurobindo perceived that the ‘whole of humanity’ had reached a stage where it now demands ‘not merely the satisfaction of the body, the *anna*, but the satisfaction also of the *prana* and the *citta*, the vital and emotional desires.’ The new education had to recognize that urge and integrate the new schools of art so as to satisfy that larger demand. We shall not enter here into examining the detailed analysis that Sri Aurobindo undertakes in the series on the evolution of collectivities and their psychological and emotional yearnings and predilections; it would suffice, for our purpose to pick out the passages which highlight the need for an aesthetic training, though it is true that the issue cannot be subjected to a piecemeal treatment.

Sri Aurobindo identifies the ‘thought’ as the ‘highest that man has attained’ and it was through the power of thought that man sought to create a new situations and break the old society. He sees thought as having two discernable aspects, ‘two separate sides’ – ‘judgment or reason and imagination’ both of which were necessary to ‘perfect ideation.’ Each of these separate sides manifested a certain aspect of human sphere of activity – the former worked through the areas of science, philosophy and criticism; the other unveiled itself through art, poetry and idealism. Sri Aurobindo sees these as

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576 CWSA *vol.1*, op.cit., p.434.
577 Ibid., p. 436.
undermining the old state of humanity and laying the foundations for the new. While the contributions of science have been widely recognized by the mass of humanity the ‘more subtle and profound’ value of the other has been less recognized to mass of men because of the ‘less visible and sensational character of its working.’ It was this value that had to be stressed and upheld.\textsuperscript{578} An opening of these areas, Sri Aurobindo points out, would enable the mass-mind to undergo a process of \textit{cittasuddhi} ‘or purification of the \textit{citta}, the mind-stuff, from the \textit{prana} full of animal, vital and emotional disturbances.’ It was vital for Sri Aurobindo that the national education system direct its focus on the man making aspect. One does not see him getting into much of a discussion on the technicalities of the education system and the areas of reforms required. He was, during this period as to a large extent during others, concerned with its deeper psychological and emotional aspects. This is what leads him to enunciate the position that a cultivated eye without a cultivated spirit – by this he broadly meant the refining, sublimation and training of the emotional and sensational aspects of the personality – cannot make the ‘highest type of man.’ The cultivation of the spirit could be brought about precisely through the subjects of language, literature, the Arts, music, painting, sculpture or the study of philosophy, religion, history all converging on ‘ the study and understanding of man through his works and of Nature and man through the interpretative as well as through the analytical faculties.’ This was the goal of a Liberal Education.\textsuperscript{579}

The power of the arts to develop certain higher faculties, to cultivate the spirit was clearly recognized by the ideologues of the national education movement. They did discuss the issue vigorously and tired to give the subject a place of prominence in the new

\textsuperscript{578} CWSA vol., p. 437.
\textsuperscript{579} Ibid., p. 438.
educational scheme. Havell, invoking the Greek philosophers and the civilisation they ideated, pointed out that one must realise ‘that it is no real education which does not help to develop all the higher imaginative faculties.’ They were in agreement that this developing of the higher faculties was being impeded by the governmental education then imparted. ‘It is not education,’ Havell quite boldly remarked, ‘but the most pernicious pedantry, which uses Western culture to blind the eyes and stop the ears of Indian youth to all that the nature, the art, and the culture of their own country have to teach them.’

Coomaraswamy discussing ‘Music and Education in India’ where he touches upon the necessity and utility of an education in art and culture, similarly invoked Plato and the philosopher’s views on the utility and effectivity of music in education which ensured the entry of a harmony ‘in the strongest manner into the inward part of the soul.’ Coomaraswamy recognized like is other illustrious contemporaries and co-ideologues that ‘English education, as hitherto imparted and understood in India, has merely ignored the importance of music and art in education.’ Unfortunately there was no educational institution in the country under European guidance where ‘Indian music has any place whatever in the scheme of education.’ And there was no Indian University that recognized Indian music. 581 That was because, and as Nivedita quoted Havell, ‘we, aliens in race, thought and religion, have never taken anything but a dilettante archeological or commercial interest in [Indian art].’ And it’s deeper meanings therefore remain ‘hidden from us, and those spiritual longings and desires which come straight from the heart of a people, to find expression in their poetry, music, and their art, strike

580 Art and Education in India, op.cit., pp. 105-108.
All of them, Coomaraswamy, Havell, Nivedita and Sri Aurobindo were to continue to defend the need to re-discover and restate an Indian art and argue that India, especially Hindu and Buddhist traditions, did support art, had a magnificent tradition of art while emphasising the necessity of an art training. The activism and ideas were not confined simply to the political heyday; this was an interest that saw continuous expression.

There was thus an established effort and Sri Aurobindo being part of that age and one of the centre of the nationalist vortex naturally delved deep into the issue. A gleaning of some of his thoughts in the series provides an interesting insight into his thinking on the issue. Continuing with his discussing on the national value of an art training for the Indian mind one finds him aware of the tendency that ignores Art and poetry as mere luxuries of the ‘rich and leisurely’ with no relevance and necessity to the ‘mass of men or useful to life.’ Sri Aurobindo’s opinion is that such a tendency developed largely because the ‘luxurious’ few held these instruments and the world in their hands during a certain

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582 CWSN vol.3, op.cit., p.22. Nivedita, of course cautioned against the tendency to believe that merely because there still existed a living, traditional and national art’ in the Indian polity, that there could be the habit to hold on to ‘every chance thought and impulse that comes to us artistically, believing that we are divinely inspired in this matter…’ Just as in the art of logic so in the field of art, Nivedita advocated a stern and rigorous training in order to develop the right judgment and sense of appreciation. She saw the nation as going through the ‘least hopeful and most chaotic transition’ in the field of art. ‘European Commercialism’ had completely shaken to the roots the race’s ‘decorative faculty.’ If the Indian mind – she always referred to the issue as ‘we’ – were to emerge from this confusion a preparation must be initiated by ‘building up a great art on a basis of sincere admiration of the truly beautiful for true reasons.’ The nationalist art movement and its works such as Mr. Havell’s facilitated the growth of the mind’s capacity of admiration and of relating ‘itself to Indian art.’[Ibid.,] Nivedita was to remain ‘a mentor of the Bengali artist [ and one of the major moving force behind their efforts and the dissemination of their productions] until her early death in 1911.[Partha Mitter, op. cit., p.255]

583 Sri Aurobindo, writing later, devoted four chapters on Indian art in his essays on the Indian renaissance and Havell, in a later work, highlighted the ‘ancient ‘Universities of Northern India and their influence on Asiatic Art’ and discussed the art training given in these ancient institutions and argued that the ‘essential faculties of the artist, imagination and memory [given primacy in the Eastern universities] are those which are least considered in the curriculum of modern European academies, where the paraphernalia of the studio are used to make up for the deficiencies in the mental equipment of the student.’ [E.B.Havell, The Ideals of Indian Art, 1920, p.41] Naturally an art training that ignored the basic tenets of the Indian approach could never really restore the aesthetic emotions of the race, what was needed was a different kind of training inspired by the Indian traditions.
In a sense Sri Aurobindo makes here, a case for the subaltern voice! He realises their deprivation, recognizes their toil and struggle for existence and demands that they too must be capable of savouring the high tastes of subjects that may also in some measure mitigate their struggles, ennoble their existence and as a corollary elevate the national life in a general manner. It would perhaps be wrong to assume that Sri Aurobindo catered to a very exclusive circle, he was concerned and expressed in his own ways the plight of the masses and certainly wished to include them in a national educational progress. In the same argument he recognises that the ‘aesthetic faculties entering into the enjoyment of the world’ through the representations of the quotidian life such as ‘the beautiful in men and women, in food, in things, in articles of use and articles of pleasure’ have done an immense service to elevate man, ‘to refine and purge his passions, to ennoble his emotions’ and to lead him through the medium of the ‘heart and the imagination to the state of the intellectual man.’

And that which has elevated man to the intellectual level must be preserved so that there is no backward slide. The danger of an undeveloped heart and spirit was that it would make man – ‘intellectually developed, mighty in scientific knowledge and the mastery of gross and subtle nature, using the elements as his servants and the world as his footstool’ – an ‘inferior kind of Asura using the powers of a demigod to satisfy the nature of an animal.’ The necessity therefore, of an aesthetic training remained. Sri Aurobindo did not limit the evolution and inclusion of an art education as necessary solely for the strengthening of national unity he added to this his concern for the general, as he termed

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585 CWSA vol.1, p.439.
586 Ibid.,
it, ‘restoration’ of artistic emotions. He saw the Bengal art school as capable of creating and restoring this emotion to a great extent nationally.

Elaborating on this and discussing the role of music as part of an aesthetic training in a national system of education Coomaraswamy also expressed much the same aim. His point was that a ‘proper education in music’ has been generally accepted as ‘an invaluable aid in the training of character – [which is] the true aim of education.’ The arts therefore were to be indispensable aids in the training of character and the cultivation of the spirit. Coomaraswamy extrapolates the link further – and sets the perspective for a system of aesthetic training in a national education for self-reliance. He set the primary aim of education in India as the creation of ‘Indian citizens.’ The age demanded first a thorough training in Indian citizenship only then could follow the true citizenship of the world. An immersion in one’s roots had to precede any cosmopolitanism and in any case he felt it was ‘not the time for cosmopolitanism, it [was] the time when India herself needed Indian citizens’ and he saw education in Indian music [for our purposes read Indian art as] an essential part of education in Indian citizenship.587 Havell on his part, staunchly believing in the strength of art to reshape the Indian mind and nationality and seeing a larger role for it in education demanded that Indian art, hitherto stifled under official direction and patronage, be set free ‘to follow its natural channel’, and called for the removal of impediments that he saw being placed in its course. Once free, he argued, it [Indian art] can minister to the spiritual and intellectual needs of India and elevate the ‘moral and intellectual faculties’ of the Indian students588. It was of course too much to expect that a colonial education system would undertake such liberating and revamping.

588 Art and Education in India, op. cit., p. 108.
acts. The nationalists saw this as the task of the new education they were advocating and thus sought to enshrine art training as an important charter of the new system.

Taking the reader through a gradual analysis of the place and role of aesthetics in human evolution Sri Aurobindo indicates that one of the highest roles of the artistic sense was the ‘direct purifying of the emotions’ he links the process to that of the Greek katharsis. Sri Aurobindo argues that art and poetry had a ‘mighty utility’ in mitigating the ‘pressing claims of the animal in man’ and were fields where these claims could be excluded and the emotions, ‘working disinterestedly for the satisfaction of the heart and the imagination alone, [could] do the work of katharsis, emotional purification’ which in the Indian context was cittasuddhi, ‘the purification of the heart.’ It was through such purification that man arrived at a greater fulfillment. Sri Aurobindo argues that if it could be shown, as he tried through his series on the subject, that art and poetry were ‘agents’ and catalysts towards that end then their ‘supreme importance could be established.’ He concludes that these subjects just did that – purification of emotions – and much more and the habit of looking upon these as mere ornamentations of life reduced them to a secondary rank. Sri Aurobindo thus did not limit the utility of the subjects to the promotion of a national unity, he perceived in them a deeper role affecting human conduct and the general psychological, emotional and spiritual state of being.\footnote{CWSA vol.1, op.cit., pp. 444-445.} He perceived in them the capacity to generate a ‘sense of the beautiful’ in the national life.
VII.4 Call for a ‘Universal Proficiency’ in Art Training: The Democratization of Aesthetics

A detailed reading of each of the ideas on the subject that Sri Aurobindo discusses in the series will, in my opinion, not be necessary for our work here. Those which we require for our understanding and reading are the ones that provide fairly accurately his ideas on the place, utility and role of these subjects in education hence we have been selective in our approach while reading his art series.

Similar to Coomaraswamy’s advocacy of the subject, Sri Aurobindo discusses the role of music in the shaping of a national mentality. He invokes Plato and his Republic where the thinker ‘has dwelt with extraordinary emphasis on the importance of music in education’ especially its role in shaping the national character of a people – ‘as is the music to which a people is accustomed, so, he [Plato] says in effect, is the character of that people.’ And in the same manner Sri Aurobindo too sees the importance of painting and sculpture in education. He does not enter into polemics of colonial versus nationalist but simply provides the subjects importance in training the mind to be open to the law of beauty and harmony. The points he makes here are relevant for that matter to educational systems anywhere. The mind he says is ‘profoundly influenced by what it sees’ and a training of the eyes from childhood ‘to the contemplation and understanding of beauty, harmony and just arrangement in line and colour, the tastes, habits and character’ will capacitate the individual to follow even later in life as an adult a ‘similar

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590 *CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.447.*
law of beauty, harmony and just arrangement.’ Sri Aurobindo saw this insistence on developing a ‘universal proficiency’ in arts in societies such as ancient Greece, ‘in certain European ages, in Japan’ and in India of a better time. It was call for a re-look at this ancient tradition and for its revival in the present context. Sri Aurobindo argues that since ‘Art galleries could not be brought into every home’ it would serve the purpose of trying to restore the aesthetic emotion of the race if the ‘appointments of our life and furniture of our homes are things of taste and beauty’ such a situation would perhaps inevitably raise, ennoble, harmonise the habits, thoughts and feelings of the people.\textsuperscript{591} This ennobling and harmonization of emotions also happens through a regular study ‘of beautiful and noble art.’ Like poetry, which works towards purifying the heart, spoken of earlier as \textit{cittasuddhi}, painting and sculpture too do much the same thing in their own manner. It is interesting to read here Sri Aurobindo’s analysis of how art – painting, sculpture – train and elevate the emotion.\textsuperscript{592} Paintings and sculptures, though they did not possess the movement of poetry and were still, fixed and the expressions of only a given moment used these very attributes to gain a separate value altogether. While poetry ‘raises the emotions and gives each its separate delight. Art stills the emotions and teaches them the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction...Music deepens the emotions and harmonises them with each other.’\textsuperscript{593} Each component of an art and

\textsuperscript{591} CWSA \textit{vol.1}, op.cit. p.447.
\textsuperscript{592} An interesting reference may be given which reveals how Sri Aurobindo himself developed the artistic perspective. Assuaging the lamentations of a disciple much later he wrote with great humility, ‘Don’t be desperate about your incapacity as a connoisseur of painting. I was far worse in this respect: knew something about sculpture, but blind to painting. Suddenly one day in the Alipore jail while meditating I saw some pictures on the walls of the cell and lo and behold! the artistic eye in me opened and I knew all about painting except of course the more material side of technique. I don’t always know how to express though, because I lack the knowledge of the proper expressions, but that does not stand in the way of a keen and understanding appreciation.’ [Sri Aurobindo, \textit{On Himself}, pp.226, 227] The series on art was written a few months after release from prison.
\textsuperscript{593} CWSA \textit{vol.1}, op.cit., pp. 447, 448.
aesthetic education – music, art, poetry – contributes something distinctive to the development of individual – they are Sri Aurobindo observes, ‘a perfect education for the soul’, they keep the individual’s emotional tendencies ‘purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious.’ Sri Aurobindo saw these as powerful agents, great civilising, educating and ‘edifying forces’ if properly used and applied.594

Further analyzing the effects of an art training and to drive home his point of their efficacy Sri Aurobindo talks of the ‘double character of intellectual activity’ divided between the ‘imaginative, creative and sympathetic’ on the one side and the ‘critical, analytic and penetrative on the other.’ The latter he saw as ‘best trained’ through science, criticism and observation and the former ‘by art, poetry, music, literature and the sympathetic study of man and his creations.’595 He sees art as a ‘powerful stimulator of sympathetic insight’ because it raises images that have to be understood not by analysis but through ‘a self-identification with other minds.’ Art being ‘subtle and delicate’ makes the mind subtle and delicate too, it is ‘suggestive’ and thus a mind trained in the appreciation of art ‘is quick to catch suggestions’. It is an instrument that opens the individual to ways of deeper self-knowledge. It was this supreme value of art that was never sufficiently recognized by those who made language, poetry, history, philosophy instruments for training the imaginative, sympathetic and the creative side of intellectuality. They made these, Sri Aurobindo says, obligatory parts of a liberal education while the ‘immense educative force of music, painting and sculpture has not been duly recognised.’ They were treated, as he interestingly puts it, as ‘by-paths’ that have been treated as interesting and beautiful but not as essential for the vast majority and

594 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.48.
595 Ibid., p. 49.
thus to be confined to a limited few. Yet there persists an almost ‘universal impulse to enjoy the beauty and attractiveness of sound, to look at and live among pictures, colours [and] forms.’ But this impulse Sri Aurobindo sees as not being given adequate recognition and thus proper scope for a greater working. A national art training or education would thus base itself first on the recognition of the existence of that impulse.

Arguing that if art were to reach its highest expression the ‘Indian tendency’ must dominate, Sri Aurobindo briefly describes the Indian concept and practice of art as manifested in the race’s civilisational expressions. We see him expounding here like his contemporaries Coomaraswamy and Havell the metaphysical bases of Indian art as evident through the ages. He traces the noblest and higher uses of art as its ‘service to the growth of spirituality in the race.’ In Europe it was well recognised that there was this close connection of art with religion. The productions of art in Greece, [Renaissance] Italy and India have mostly given expressions to religious thoughts and have adorned temples and other such instruments of national religion. In the following paragraph he succinctly states the aims and ideals of the Indian art, dilates on what he means by a spiritual aspiration and growth and describes the qualities of art as an aid in that growth and quest. This perhaps requires quoting in extenso:

“This [art giving expression to religious thoughts] was not because Art is necessarily associated with the outwards forms of religion, but because it was in the religion that men’s spiritual aspirations centred themselves. Spirituality is a wider thing than formal religion and it is in the service of spirituality that Art reaches its highest self-expression.

Spirituality is a single word expressive of three lines of human aspiration towards divine

596 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., pp. 449, 450.
knowledge, divine love and joy, divine strength, and that will be the highest and most perfect Art which, while satisfying the physical requirements of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal beauty, the emotional demand of humanity, the portrayal of life and the outward reality [requirements satisfied by the best of European art productions] reaches beyond them and expresses inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world and its beauty and desirableness and the manifestation of divine force and energy in phenomenal creation. This is what Indian Art alone attempted thoroughly…

While doing this, Indian Art, Sri Aurobindo points out, often dispensed with the more material but not necessarily unimportant expressions that European Art focused upon. And it were these approaches to techniques and expressions of Art that has created the two divergent streams of European [read Western] and Asian art. This Asian tendency in art was for a long while imperfectly appreciated by the West and Sri Aurobindo, in keeping with his synthesizing tendencies of course hopes, that these two diverging streams would unite in future completing and develop in one ‘grandiose flood of artistic self-expression perfecting the aesthetic evolution of humanity.’

But why look at all at

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597 CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p. 450.
598 Ibid., p. 451. For a further discussion from the Aurobindonian perspective on the Indian tendency in art see e.g. Nolini Kanta Gupta’s ‘The Standpoint of Indian Art’ in Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta (CWNKG vol.1, 1989, pp. 175-180. There was this distinction made, Indian art did not go so much for naturalism, it attempted to portray something deeper apparently hidden to the common sight. As Gupta, close political, literary and spiritual associate of Sri Aurobindo analyses, the art of the East rejected the ‘scheme of sense-perceptions’. The artist within this fold first sought ‘to get a focus within the mind, to discover a psychological stand-point, and from there in accordance with…conventions of inner vision create a world…The aim was always to build from within, at the most, from within outwards, but not from without, not even from without inwards…” [CWNKG vol.1, p.175] The Indian point of view in art was a much discussed and debated issue of the period. What was it, how was it explained, Coomaraswamy delving on the same issue is rich and illustrative in his examples while trying to explain the inner vision of the Indian artist and his practice of contemplating on it. The analogy he draws is between the ‘methods of the Indian worshipper and the Indian artist.’ The true artist, for him, is one who ‘does not ‘compose’ (put-together) his picture but ‘sees’ it.’ And his desire is ‘to represent his vision in the material terms of light and colour,’ To great painters, says Coomaraswamy, these vision come crowding and in a continuous...
the Indian tendency in Art. It is because as Sri Aurobindo argues, this tendency was to dominate in the new training that the nationalist advocated. Without the dominance of this tendency in an Indian art training the whole exercise would never reflect the Indian ethos and psyche, it would be merely the developing of another technique devoid of the Indianness and incapable of expressing the Indian mind and emotions. Thus, Sri Aurobindo saw an enormous potential in Art as a medium of opening the national life to higher thoughts and expressions. The following observation, perhaps, best illustrates the reason for his deep concern with the subject, for if man is destined to a higher life in his individuality as well as collectivity then art could be a powerful aid to that quest for perfection:

stream and the painter has to possess the ability to still these, dwell on them and give them expression and it is here that his approach is like the worshipper. As the worshipper daily adoring his Ishta Devatā – ‘the special aspect of divinity that is to him all’ – first through the ‘recitation of the brief mnemonic mantram detailing His [Ishta Devatā’s] attributes, and then in silent concentration of thought upon the corresponding mental image.’ [Essays in National Idealism, op. cit., pp. 20, 21.] Similar is the mental images that the artist sees and process of visualization is the same. Invoking the sage Sukrācārya’s Sukranitisāra – which contains almost the ‘whole philosophy of Indian art’ - Coomaraswamy argues that the ‘method of visualization upon the imager’ was enjoined by this particular text which asked the creating artist/sculpture to ‘establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are objects of his devotion.’ It calls upon the artist to enter into a ‘dhyāna yoga (yoga of contemplation)’ and goes on to describe the method, elements and characteristics of the image.’ The objective of Indian art has never been ‘mere representation of nature.’ And no truly Indian sculpture can be said to have been created direct from living models. The inability of the West to appreciate and comprehend Indian art and the consequent criticism of its expressions, points out Coomaraswamy, stems from the habit of trying to look for ‘something to recognise’ in a work of art. And a failure to identify that something recognizable and if the ‘representation is of something they [the viewer] have not seen, or symbolizes some unfamiliar abstract idea’ it is seen as ‘untrue to nature’ and therefore self-condemned. [Ibid., p. 23.] The Indian tendency in art never had as its object the ‘reproductions of the external forms of nature’ in fact it [Indian art] ‘is essentially religious [and its] conscious aim is the intimation of Divinity’, it is an attempt at expressing these deeper truth though symbolism. Sukrācārya’s doctrine in this matter is quite explicit – ‘the aim of the highest art must always be the intimation of the Divinity behind all form, rather than the imitation of the form itself.’ Krishna’s play with the Gopis is a favourite depiction of Indian art panels but it is always done in ‘a spirit of religious idealism, [and] not for the sake of the sensuous imagery itself.’ [Ibid., pp. 23, 27, 31]. These are the basic issues that were highlighted in order to explain the uniqueness of the Indian approach to art, an approach that was, the ideologues felt, being systematically erased by the dominance of the Western perspective and understanding of art.
‘Art can express eternal truth, it is not limited to the expression of form and appearance. So wonderfully has God made the world that a man using a simple combination of lines, an unpretentious harmony of colours, can raise this apparently insignificant medium to suggest absolute and profound truths with a perfection which language labours with difficulty to reach. What Nature is, what God is, what man is can be triumphantly revealed in stone or on canvas…’

This perhaps best explains the Indian approach to art.

In the series Sri Aurobindo principally discusses the enormous value that Art has to human evolution. What then of its value ‘as a factor in education’? Sri Aurobindo’s stand is that no nation can afford to neglect ‘an element of such high importance’ an element that has great importance to the cultural life of the people and to the training of the ‘higher intellectual, moral and aesthetic faculties of the young.’ A system of education that recognises this importance and refuses to keep artistic training reserved for the specialist but introduces it ‘as a part of culture’ equally in importance as science or literature will have taken a major step forward in the ‘perfection of national education and the diffusion of a broad-based human culture.’

The approach that art and the training in its appreciation must be diffused and not limited to the privileged few is evident whenever he speaks of art in education. The demand was not that art education must be imparted in order to make every man an artist, the demand was rather for a general diffusion of the artistic impulse, it was that:

‘[every man should have] his artistic faculty developed, his taste trained, his sense of beauty and insight into form and colour, made habitually active, correct and sensitive. It

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\[600\] Ibid., p. 453.
is necessary that those who create, whether in great things or small, whether in the
unusual masterpieces of art and genius or in the small common things of use that
surround a man’s daily life, should be habituated to produce and the nation habituated to
expect the beautiful in preference to the ugly, the noble in preference to the vulgar, the
fine in preference to the crude, the harmonious in preference to the gaudy. A nation
surrounded daily by the beautiful, noble, fine and harmonious becomes that which it is
habituated to contemplate…

The point is self-evident; the reason for the demand and the demand’s goal is clearly
stated. Sri Aurobindo saw Art as having a fundamental service to render in a national
scheme of education and every man, and not the elite few, would be covered by its
sweep. It was a clear demand for the democratization of a very important aspect of
human development in education and it was made when the subaltern was as yet unable
to speak! It is interesting to note that the issue retains a great degree of contemporaneity,
whether or not a general effort has been made today towards achieving those ends is a
separate debate altogether.

Talking of the effort in this direction made by the national education system in
Bengal, Sri Aurobindo says that though a beginning was made in this direction by the
importance attached to ‘drawing and clay-modelling as elements of manual training’ the
‘artistic ideal’ was missing. The limited and misconception of the true aim of manual
training, lack of resources, the eventual dominance of the commercial aim in education,
of ‘English ideas, English methods and English predilections’ rendered the whole effort
ineffective. The formal and mechanical English method was useless to evoke and train an

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601 CWSA vol. 1, op.cit, p.453.
‘inward vision of the relation and truth of things, an eye quick to note and distinguish, sensitive to design and to harmony in colour’ all attributes that are essential manifestations of a sustained artistic training. Writing in 1909, Sri Aurobindo saw the revival of a ‘truly national Art’ as an already accomplished fact producing masterpieces that were comparable to the best work of other countries. He criticised, as unpardonable, the continued subsistence of the ‘crude formal teaching of English schools and the vulgar commercial aims and methods of the West.’ This subsistence was an indication that the country was ‘yet to evolve a system of education which shall be really national.’ For that task – as Sri Aurobindo saw them – yet remained to be accomplished: alien and unsuitable methods and the ‘taint of Occidental ideals’ had to be purged from the national mind and nowhere was it more urgent than in the field of education which must ultimately become the ‘foundation of intellectual and aesthetic renovation.’ It is in this task that the resuscitation of the spirit of old Indian Art must be accomplished, the ‘dexterity of the Indian hand and the intuitive gaze of the Indian eye must be recovered’ and then the whole nation would see an elevation to the ‘high level of the ancient culture’ and perhaps even surpass that some day.603

602 CWSA vol. 1, op.cit., p. 454.
603 Ibid.