Chapter VIII: Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo’s Final Observations and Philosophical Hints on the Effort of National Education: An Assessment

These were perhaps one of the last utterances on the components of national education that Sri Aurobindo was to make before his sudden departure and retirement to a near unknown corner of the subcontinent. His final discussion on national education, as we shall see, was a severe indictment of the whole effort. The feverish activism on the education front had by 1910 been stymied by the education reform effort in the official university itself by its dynamic Vice-Chancellor Ashutosh Mukherjee (1864-1924). The introduction of a ‘compulsory paper in Bengali, the opening of postgraduate teaching departments, an imaginative emphasis on research’, the revision and expansion of subjects like history and the gathering of great talents addressed some of the basic criticisms that the nationalists leveled against the official system. The effort was a reformatory one and since it was official it did not of course take cognizance of the demand for a wholly new national education but it did serve to stem whatever little possibility remained of students opting for the alternate system. But our intention here, a stated earlier, is not to enter into a statistical analysis of the physical remnants of the national education movement but rather to look at its later intellectual understanding and assessment by those very leaders who where active in popularizing and planting the idea in the mass mind. This leads us to read Sri Aurobindo’s reassessment of the whole effort and of the idea of national education itself.

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In concluding his observation on the national education effort Sri Aurobindo wrote in January 1910 – making a final survey of its dilution and dissipation – that the Nationalist element by its energy, courage, ‘boldness of thought’ provided the movement its sustaining base, force and vitality. Its withdrawal led to the collapse of the movement, the distancing of the new education bodies from the nationalist movement. After such hectic efforts, such favourable enunciations of a national education system he saw it languish because of this artificial disassociation from its fecundating force. It still lingered because ‘certain amount of Nationalist self-devotion [had] entrenched itself in this last stronghold and holds it against great odds.’ Apart from pursuing the old method curriculum Sri Aurobindo counted the ‘financial problem’ as having created a ‘crushing difficulty’ The inability of the technical college that had separated from the main Council to really gather steam and resources was another pointer to the fact that people in general would not acquiesce to an education that was ‘divorced from [a] general humanistic training, which is essential to national culture.’

605 CWSA vol.8, op.cit., p.385.
606 Benoy Kumar Sarkar ‘s national educational experiments in Malda, North-Bengal was running successfully and a number of national schools were being established especially in the eastern districts of Bengal but were functioning under financial strain and fear of political persecution by the administration. Vide. Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., pp. 177-180.
607 CWSA vol.8, op.cit., pp. 387, 388.
608 Ibid., p. 386. The preventive motivation for the majority who did not finally opt for the national educational institution was the concern for a career. It would appear that the urge for a humanistic training that the national schools professed to offer was not sufficiently alluring or just that these did not have a sufficient period for consolidation. Though it is tempting to try and assess Sri Aurobindo’s reaction to the present trend of an increasing tilt in education, especially in this country, towards the technical often to the neglect of the humanistic. Most of the new universities that seem to come up, especially those under private initiative seem to be technically obsessed without allotting space to humanistic subjects (social sciences). The effects of such a blinkered approach to education will be perhaps felt a generation down the line when the peoples’ ability to generate new ideas shall again be severely challenged. Referring back to Sri Aurobindo’s observation that the technical college failed to gather momentum because of lack of support indicating that people in general did not accept a training divorced from humanistic aspects of education, some have argued that the technical institution in fact fared better than the main body of the National Council and instead demonstrated that people ‘were more eager for a practical training in technique, for real needs.’ The scheme of a wider education still continued to seem a distant ideal and technical education
appeared to Sri Aurobindo, was willing to grapple with only two problems, the first was ‘the problem of supporting National Education without incurring the wrath of the officials’ and secondly ‘the problem of evading the spirit of the clause which forbids it to subject itself to any form of Government control, while observing the letter so as to prevent the invalidation of its endowments.’ The reason for the movement and its physical manifestation, the Council, developing a staid status-quoist tendency was, Sri Aurobindo argued, because of the extrusion due to fear and other motives of those who through an ‘active enthusiasm and self-sacrifice created the movement’ and the abandoning of it by some who were disgusted to witness the movement degenerate in some incapable hands. Those who still continued with the effort found their chances of success weakened because of this confusion and incapacity at the head quarters. He believed the deeper psychological reason for the movement’s degeneration to be, and as mentioned above, it’s disconnecting itself from the larger nationalist movement which was basically its sustaining force. If the effort at remedying the situation, of restructuring the Council and of altering its character and of infusing the effort with ‘keener blood was seen to be impossible then argues Sri Aurobindo: ‘Some other centre of effort must be created,’ which will undertake to grapple with the problems of National Education, the supply of trained and self-devoted teachers and of books which will guide them in imparting of knowledge on new lines’, and work on the ‘reawakening of interest, hope and enthusiasm in the country’, arrange for ‘the provision of the necessary funds to

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609 CWSA vol.8, p. 388.
610 Ibid., p.386.
611 It was perhaps because when the time came the ‘National Council did not act with sufficient daring’ restrained by the ‘ultra-caution of the Moderates.’ The favourable momentum seemed to have passed and a refusal to flow with it had in a sense cause an irretrievable setback. [Susobhan Sarkar, op.cit., p.128] Sri Aurobindo’s argument too pointed at losing the advantage of the momentum.
the mofussil schools…’612 [and] shall also force the Council through pressure of public opinion to adopt a more ‘rational and national system of teaching. But the first condition of success in this work was the ‘reawakening of the national movement all along the line’ and this could only be done by reorganising and re-initiating of a ‘resolute activity of the Nationalist party’ one of whose principal programme was the shaping of a nationalist agenda of education.

But an alternate centre of educational effort which could guide the imparting of knowledge on new lines could not be created and the reawakening of the national movement could not immediately happen. The Nationalist party too, under severe repression was undergoing a period of reassessment and reinvention and therefore was not in a position to launch a nationwide movement or be the renewed spearhead of the national education movement.613 By April 1910 Sri Aurobindo himself would leave the shores of Bengal ceasing his direct and active participation with political activity of any kind and thus would not himself carry forward the new direction that he wished to give to the educational movement. It was clear that by 1910 the national education movement had lost momentum. True, but what then of its philosophy, were there some ideas, some retrospective thought of its leaders and organisers that could give a perspective to the direction this course had pursued or could really pursue again? Did the quest for a philosophy of national education cease altogether or did the ideas generated during this quest continue to inspire and generated debate? A comprehensive or detailed answer to all of these is difficult. But it can be quite certainly asserted that the future would not see again such a comprehensive and wide ranging debate on the issue of national education.

612 CWSA vol.8., pp.388, 389.
This quest even if it had failed to implement and bring out about lasting changes in the Indian education set-up had at least laid the intellectual and philosophical base for the quest. It had generated sufficient thought-power to sustain the movement at least in the national mind.

Some of the sternest critics of the national education movement were also some of its leading participants.\textsuperscript{614} In their quest of formulating a philosophy of national education the lead participants did not lose the habit of constantly engaging with the ideas that the movement based itself on or threw up at intervals of crisis and achievements. Sri Aurobindo too undertook such a retrospective assessment and reformulation of the nationalist education attempt. For a reading of that a decadal leap – exceeding our stated time-framework – will have to be taken to November-December 1920 and January 1921 the last days of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophical journal ‘Arya’. In the last two numbers of the journal Sri Aurobindo began a ‘Preface on National Education’ which gave insights into his rethinking of the theme of national education in India and its possible future manifestations. It does contain in a concise form hints on his perceptions of a philosophy of national education and interestingly, like most of his other writings discussed, these too remain incomplete. This is an aspect that has intrigued me, whenever Sri Aurobindo begins some serious exposition of the theme of national education he leaves it incomplete after a while. Though by the time the series were discontinued they had enumerated a number of key areas nevertheless it is interesting to observe this pattern. Anyway in what may appear to be a glaring omission I have deliberately left out of our discussion Sri Aurobindo’s major writings on ‘A System of National Education – some preliminary

\textsuperscript{614} Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, op.cit., p.xxiii.
ideas’ (written in the Karmayogin in 1910). In that sense strictly speaking these pieces were Sri Aurobindo’s final views on national education before retirement and instead of dwelling on them in detail I have dealt with some of the ideas developed in them, as evident from the entire discussion above, in comparison with similar strands of thoughts whenever I have encountered them in other minds of that age and in their arguments and perceptions of a national education for India. I have tried to portray a bit of the background of the age and time when Sri Aurobindo began his early ruminations on education. I have continued to trace Sri Aurobindo’s ideas on education, his actions in the field in support of the effort to evolve a national system of education and through it all I have attempted to sketch a certain intellectual background of the age. The idea has been to trace some key thoughts on national education of a few dominant minds of that age, thoughts that would provide insights into their philosophical approach to the issue of national education and would in general sketch an idea of the entire quest for the philosophy of national education. As argued in the introduction, Sri Aurobindo’s systematic writings on education which appeared first in the Karmayogin in 1910 and later reprinted in 1924 in an authorized version have been extensively studied, read, discussed and analysed by many in the last nearly five decades, especially since the inception of the Centre of Education bearing his name in Pondicherry. Therefore I have avoided re-reading them as I felt there would be really nothing innovative or original, anything that has not been already said that I would be capable of rediscovering and presenting. And in fact some of these treatises have been produced by stalwarts who had themselves been part of the educational experiment based on Sri Aurobindo’s educational vision. Hence, those looking for an exposition of Sri Aurobindo’s educational

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philosophy shall be severely disappointed by my approach which basically tries to study and collate a period of this quest for national education by placing Sri Aurobindo all around.

But it would be useful, in conclusion, to have a brief look at Sri Aurobindo’s reassessment and reformulation of national education and in these of his philosophical perspectives on the theme. The quest for a philosophy of national education, in a sense continues, and therefore Sri Aurobindo and his thoughts on the issue continue to remain relevant.

With the advantage of hindsight and uninterrupted literary and philosophical output Sri Aurobindo undertook a reassessment of the national education movement. Any renewed debate on the need for a national system of education in India may well take hints from these retrospective thoughts. One of the reasons for undertaking a broad based discussion of Sri Aurobindo thoughts on national education was also to argue that Sri Aurobindo – even though he produced mighty little on the topic – did preserve a continuous concern for the theme, idea and expression of national education. His efforts in the winter of 1920 – when he was more than a decade into political retirement – in writing a preface on national education amply proves that position. He must have continuously felt the imperativeness of a concerted definition and action on the national education issue if

freedom was to be truly attained and sustained. These sporadic later attempts were perhaps manifestations of that ceaseless concern.

A Postscript: Some Aspects of a Philosophy of ‘National Education’

(1920-21)