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)
The points that Sri Aurobindo raises in his preface are those which activated the leading minds of the national education movement and perhaps generate an implicit sense of questioning even in the present times. Nivedita perhaps summed up best the whole predicament when she wrote, ‘It follows that in national reconstruction (sic) there is no other factor so important as education.’ The issue then was to define and ideate that education, ‘How is this to be made national and nationalising? What is a national education? And conversely, what is un-national? And further what kind of education offers the best preparation for the attempt to solve the national problems? What type of education would be not only national, but also nation-making?’

She thus articulated the entire gamut of the dilemma that opinion leaders of national education had to continuously grapple with. In our survey of the quest we have come across such questions have also found answers at times comprehensive, at times partial to these fundamental question of the movement.

Sri Aurobindo, also, in retrospect handles some of these fundamental questions while writing his preface. His 1918 message makes it clear that he considered education to be a principal factor in national reconstruction. He begins thus by placing the central problematic of the thought of national education, a problematic that faced its leaders and the institutions they supported and founded. While the ‘necessity and unmixed good of universal education’ was recognised and accepted what seem to confound thinkers and knot the debate was the very concept and definition of education itself – there did not seem to be, Sri Aurobindo observed, an agreement ‘ on what education is or practically or

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616 CWSN vol. 4, op.cit., p. 352.
ideally should be.’ And in a country like India where the spirit of independence was awakening and where a long political subjection had ‘left the decisive shaping and supreme control of education in the hands of foreigners’ if one were to add to this uncertainty – of what education is or practically should be – the demand for a national type of education, one was certain to enter into an ‘atmosphere of great and disconcerting confusion.’\textsuperscript{617} There seems to be an even greater uncertainty on ‘what [is] meant by national education. The only points of unanimity on the issue, Sri Aurobindo argues, are the following observations now universally acceded to in nationalist circles that the education imparted in ‘existing schools and universities has been bad in kind and in addition denationalizing, degrading and impoverishing to the national mind, soul and character because it is overshadowed by a foreign hand and foreign in aim, method, substance and spirit.’\textsuperscript{618} This purely negative agreement prevailed especially during the heyday of the movement but it did not seem to go further or proffer clearer directions. In absence of such a direction it was not sufficient - as most experiments have done – to tag the nomenclature ‘national’ onto a school or college and hand it over to an ‘indigenous agency’ comprising, ironically, of men trained in the very system that was being denounced and by modifying the existing curriculum and by adding to it a technical aspect believing that the problem was solved and the cause of national education served. Such an approach was delusional and did not promote the cause of a truly national education. Sri Aurobindo seems to clearly refer to the past experiments of national education as he had witnessed it. He does not dispute its capacity to impart education but

\textsuperscript{617} CWSA vol.1, op.cit., p.417.
\textsuperscript{618} Ibid.
he is unsure as to what makes its ‘more national.’ 619 This was the main problem of national education clearly stated, it was one of ‘surpassing difficulty and it was not easy to discover from what point of thought or of practice one has to begin’.620 The quest was to be to try and evolve an education that was ‘proper to the ‘Indian soul and need and temperament and culture.’ It was not to something merely faithful to some past principle but would have to take into account more importantly the future need of India.621

Sri Aurobindo tackles some of the basic objections against National education, objections that further confused the general understanding of the term. National education as he foresaw it did not mean an ‘obscurantist retrogression to the past forms that were once a living frame of our culture but are now dead or dying things.’ And in fact he is explicit on this question when he says:

‘The living spirit of the demand for national education no more requires a return to the astronomy and mathematics of Bhaskara or the forms of the system of Nalanda than the living spirit of Swadeshi a return from railway and motor traction to the ancient chariot and the bullock-cart.’622

And without condoning, what he terms the prevalence of ‘plenty of retrogressive sentimentalism’ he actually places the perspective of the past and the future vis-à-vis national education:

620 Ibid.
621 Ibid., pp. 418-419.
‘...It is the spirit, the living and vital issue [of past civilisational achievements] that we have to do with, and there the question is not between modernism and antiquity, but between an imported civilisation and the greater possibilities of the Indian mind and nature, not between the present and the past, but between the present and the future. It is not a return to the fifth century but an initiation of the centuries to come, not a reversion but a break forward...’

This perhaps settles the debate between modernity and past forms in education. Sri Aurobindo supports the retention of past principles which defined education and gave it a distinct Indic flavour. His call was not for the revival of ancient educational structures but rather the understanding and reapplication of some of India’s fundamental educational understandings. These were as we have discussed in the work, the teacher-learner relationship, the view that the acquiring of self-knowledge was also of unique importance and that education was not mere information gathering, that the pupil’s self-nature (svabhava) and (svadharma) had to be taken into account by the education system before devising a method or framework, that the pupil, the learner, was not a mere automaton to be filled in with information but rather an aspiring soul with a special and pre-determined object to fulfill in the course of his life – to modern conditions and demands. This argument also settles by demolishing the position which talks of Sri Aurobindo being a revivalist. Any talk of re-examining and reapplying past determining civilisational principles to modern needs is seen through the glasses of revivalism, Sri Aurobindo it is evident was quite clear on what he meant national education to be vis-à-vis the nation’s past and her future. His philosophy of national education gave space to the past – not in its forms but in its principles and fundamentals.

623 CWSA vol.1, p. 420.
Sri Aurobindo also opposes the view that one can only live and prosper once the European [read Western] civilisation is acquired and that the role of education must be to render the race fit for the acquisition. Sri Aurobindo argues that Europe herself built up her civilisation acquiring directions and light from various sources at various epochs and gave each of the major acquisitions a new turn and shape suited to her native temperament and spirit – which he identifies as the Teutonic, Latin, Celtic and Slavic. Similarly the nations of Asia were not ‘bound to accept’ [Western civilisation in toto without examination] and would rather take over ‘whatever new knowledge or just ideas [it] has to offer, to assimilate them to their [the nations’] own knowledge and culture, their own native temperament and spirit, mind and social genius and out of that create the civilisation of the future.  

National education as seen by Sri Aurobindo negates the implicit idea, ‘that the mind is same everywhere and [thus] can everywhere be passed through the same machine and uniformly constructed to order.’ It was an idea which had to be challenged and renounced. For the reason that it had to be recognised that there were several variations: the individual’s mind and soul had infinite variations – due to its connectedness and link with the mind of the nation and the soul of the people it belonged to or was part of. These uniquenesses and variations had to be taken into account by an education which did not

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624 CWSA vol., p. 422. Perhaps he was anticipating here the whole debate surrounding the issue of cultural subjection. A subjection that comes not merely through the assimilation of an alien culture but rather when through a bounden sense one allows ‘one’s traditional cast of ideas and sentiments [to be] superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost.’ [Swaraj in Ideas, op. cit., p. 13] National education as Sri Aurobindo saw it opposed the belief that supported unconditional acceptance of Western civilisation and the shaping of the national life to fit into that mould.
wish to become a ‘machine-made fabric’. It was an argument against the mechanization, standardisation or commoditisation of education. It was a plea for the recognition that the learner’s mind had its own demands, needs and idiosyncrasies and could not be put through the rut of uniformity. He had already stated this issue while describing his third principle of education (writing in 1910) where he emphasised the recognition of heredity, surrounding, nationality, country, sustaining soil and air, familiar sights, sounds and habits as powerful moulding factors which have to be recognised and be made the starting point of education. An education that truly seeks to mould the individual and develop the powers of his mind and nature ought to take into serious conditions these vital formative factors. And a national education concerned with developing the powers of the individual should be not only aware of these traits but should seek ways and methods to actualize them.

But even the clearing of the objections is not enough because the problem of formulating what the idea of national education means and ‘the principle and the form that national education must take in India’ remains and Sri Aurobindo recognises that it does present a formidable difficulty. And he sees here maximum confusion and failure because he sees the national mind having lost hold of the ‘national spirit and idea’ in the field of education, in the nation’s cultural life and as well as in other areas. This has prevented the development of a clear understanding of the national temperament and needs. Therefore the first necessity was to develop a clear understanding of education – it could perhaps be termed as the national education definition of education:

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625 CWSA vol.1., pp. 422-23.
626 Ibid., pp. 384-85.
‘...There are three things which have to be taken into account in a true and living education, the man, the individual in his commonness and in his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity. It follows that that alone will be a true and living education which helps to bring out to full advantage, makes ready for the full purpose and scope of human life all that is in the individual man, and which at the same time helps him enter into his right relation with the life, mind and soul of the people to which he belongs and with that great total life, mind and soul of humanity of which he himself is a unit and his people or nation a living, a separate and yet inseparable member.'

I perceive in the above definition a clear preparation and call for, to use a current term, – education for international living and education for greater harmony. It is also to be an education that strives to enable the learner to enter into a balanced and synchronized relation with his surroundings, with his national life and mind. This is perhaps a vital indicator in terms of developing a deeper raison d'être that ought to inspire any effort at developing a system of national education. The propensity of not heeding to such a perception while evolving a system, plan or method of education increases the deeper malaise and intensifies the prevalent disharmony in the nation’s collective life. In fact the majority education system today does not appear to be able to help the individual to really enter into a right relation with the three determining factors of the nation’s collective life. The imparting of a civic education is found to be sufficient for the learner to develop a bond and a link with the collectivity of which he is a part. A method, an approach that shall truly develop a living link with the collectivity still seems to elude our

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627 CWSA vol. 1, p. 425.
systems. Sri Aurobindo also does not disconnect the individual from larger humanity. This in fact, is stated to be the true aim of an Indian national education. This, I believe to be a central truth not only of the definition of national education that Sri Aurobindo sought to evolve but of his entire philosophy of education. This assumes greater relevance and contemporaneity in a world that is increasingly getting globalised. And inconsonance with the Indian worldview as inspired by her civilisational experience evolving this sense of being connected to the global collectivity can be nurtured and evolved.

The following two concluding observations in his incomplete preface, on the conception and view of man in the Indian tradition provide a defining insight into Sri Aurobindo’s formulation of a national education and also show the difference in his approach to the entire concept. The difference was in perceiving the individual. The thought of India saw man differently; it did not see him solely or exclusively as a reasoning animal developed by physical Nature to simply satisfy his ego and vital existence. It did not perceive his education to be just the culture of his mental capacities and a training ‘that will fit him to be an efficient, productive and well disciplined member of the society and State.’ Though these were given prominence they were not considered to be the ultimate aim, the end. Instead its true vision of the individual was that of:

‘…a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit. Always she has distinguished and cultivated in him a mental, an intellectual, an ethical, dynamic and practical, an aesthetic and hedonistic, a vital and
physical being, but all these have been seen as powers of a soul that manifests through them and grows with their growth…” 628

The adoption of this vision of man can then never lead him to be treated as a machine to be fed with uniform packets of information and then to be hammered into some pre-determined shape and hue. Sri Aurobindo’s call was for national education to base itself on this vision of man and thus adopt a radically different stance from the usual routine system of education. It must encourage and facilitate this growth of the soul. He called for a radical shift in the perception of man and therefore in his education. This shift was based entirely on the Indian spiritual and civilisational experience, Sri Aurobindo while re-stating it, was in fact calling for a new Indian education system to build its superstructure on this unique conception and vision of man. Only then could a radical transformation occur in the vision of education. A system of national education for India, if ever it develops, or if at all there are efforts in that direction must begin with this root vision and inspiration at its inception. A unique perception of man can help evolve a newer vision for his growth and unfolding.

In the same vein Indian thought perceived the nation not merely as an armed, efficient and organized state but rather a ‘great communal soul and life that has appeared in the whole and has manifested a nature of its own…” 629 Sri Aurobindo thus brings up the issue of the cultural conception of humanity which too must be in accordance with the thought of India:

629 CWSA vol.1., p. 426.
‘...our cultural conception of humanity must be in accordance with her ancient vision of the universal manifesting in the human race, evolving through life and mind but with a high ultimate spiritual aim, - it must be the idea of the spirit, the soul of humanity advancing through struggle and concert towards oneness, increasing its experience and maintaining a needed diversity through the varied culture and life motives of its many peoples, searching for perfection through the development of the powers of the individual and his progress towards a diviner being and life, but feeling out too though more slowly after a similar perfectibility in the life of the race.  

A true education will be that which recognises this spiritual aim of a movement towards oneness and will make itself an instrument to work out this spiritual aim in the individual and in the collectivity.

‘...It must be an education that for the individual will make its one central object the growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities, for the nation will keep first in view the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the nation-soul and its Dharma and raise both into powers of the life and ascending mind and soul of humanity. And at no time will it lose sight of man’s highest object, the awakening and development of his spiritual being.’

Thus ends in an incomplete manner his preface on national education. There is no further empirical direction given for the carrying out of this agenda. It may have been that the

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630 Ibid., pp. 426-27. This passage is of course packed with possibilities. Sri Aurobindo anticipated by decades the whole globalization versus national culture debate. While recognizing the fact that there is an inevitable movement towards greater interaction, unity and thus enculturation between nations and races Sri Aurobindo makes it a point to also stresses the issue of ‘maintaining a needed diversity’. This could come through the recognition of the uniqueness and propensities of the national mind and the national soul. Sri Aurobindo repeatedly goes over this aspect in his essays on the Indian renaissance and culture.

631 CWSA vol.1., p. 427.
preface formulating the philosophical base of a national system of education would have been followed by greater details of implementation and in its absence one may at best interpret these ideas and develop an individual perception and understanding. Perhaps these words did not percolate sufficiently in the psyche and mind of a nation then in the throes of a mass struggles to gain political liberation first. And in this struggle for liberation from a foreign political yoke the deeper issues of subjections could not continuously remain on the surface for a sustained debate and discourse to develop. The efforts towards developing a national education became mostly individual sagas and rarely did the momentum of the first decade revive in a concerted manner. Whether independent India focused its attention towards developing a national system of education inspired by the Indian spiritual civilisational experience and fundamentals and whether it tried to transform the colonial education structure and dissolve the aims of an alien education system is an open question. A separate thesis would be required to effectively deal with these questions.

However, the early nationalist education discourse was in a sense successful in generating a quest for a philosophy of national education. Even though it did not evolve a concerted philosophy or system of education the quest it did throw up crucial ideas, thoughts, revelations and formulations on the theme. All of them were to remain pointers that would at least keep the issue alive and the quest ongoing. ‘National education was an idea’ it was a search ‘for an alternative to the colonial educational system, an alternative to be created by Indian agency from out of elements constituting Indian civilisation’ and much more. As Sri Aurobindo saw it, it had to be base itself entirely on the spiritual

632 Educating the Nation, op. cit., p.xxiii.
conception of man and on the spiritual vision of life. It was that alone which could bring about an integral transmutation of our whole understanding of education and inspires to seek and evolve new formulations and methods. This vision of the great purpose of education being that of helping the ‘soul to come forward, to assert its mastery over its instruments, gain experience and grow, and eventually manifest the powers it has set forth in life’ was perhaps the uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo’s vision of education then and its relevance now. Its capacity to generate debate still holds.

It is thus in the realm of ideas that the entire quest for a philosophy of national education must be truly judged and not so much in terms of its physical and institutional manifestations.

Sri Aurobindo on his part enriched the discourse and highlighted its centrality in the Indian quest for selfhood by his continuous attention to it, by his discussion of its principal aspects, by providing a certain undeniably deeper philosophical and spiritual base to the whole discourse and tried, as he perhaps himself would have said, ‘to get into the mind of the people a settled will’ in support of the need for a national education paving the way towards a freedom of the mind, of thoughts and of ideas.

The quest generated ideas, it inspired a philosophy, it cannot be said that it succeeded in codifying and systemizing that philosophy – in a sense the quest itself, the ideas it

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634 Autobiographical Notes, op.cit., p. 255.
generated where itself the philosophy and it is these that perhaps continue to live and inspire.

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