INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on Sri Aurobindo the revolutionary nationalist and on Sri Aurobindo the revolutionary philosopher. In this thesis I have taken a different line of exploration or revisiting, it may be termed – in keeping with the current parlance – an intellectual history approach to my subject Sri Aurobindo, who during the period I have covered 1893-1910 was still the controversial Aurobindo Ghose – the firebrand political ideologue had not yet metamorphosed into the unconventional philosopher-seer. I have attempted to explore Sri Aurobindo or Aurobindo Ghose the educationist, the education activist, the educationist politician. Much has also been written on and commented upon Sri Aurobindo’s theory, vision and philosophy of education; what I have tried to do here is to mainly revisit and meditate upon his educational activism as it began immediately after his return from the West (1893), continuing throughout his nationalist phase and ending only with his retirement from active politics. Keeping Sri Aurobindo as the central figure of the whole effort I have also examined the educational thought and vision of a number of his nationalist and religious contemporaries or near contemporaries. In short, I have revisited the educational ideas that these thought-leaders presented before the people – then in their first visible stirring for self-determination – in their quest of trying to formulate a philosophy and a system of a national education. I have done this through a narrative of their ideas and of the age in which they evolved. This is where I see this approach as an intellectual history approach. It attempts to draw, through an exploration of ideas, a canvas of the age when
Sri Aurobindo actively championed the cause of national education and emerged as one of the advanced thought-leaders in that field. In that sense there is perhaps no central thesis for this work – it is just that it undertakes a tour d’horizon of the educational thought of some of the nationalist thinkers who were Sri Aurobindo’s political collaborators, and attempts to define the nationalist education discourse of that period with Sri Aurobindo as the central figure. It examines in some detail Sri Aurobindo’s demand for national education through a study of his early educational writings (as e.g. during his period at Baroda between 1893-1906), it examines his political writings on education through a detailed survey of his writings in the nationalist daily Bande Mataram, it analyses his speeches on the subject and also briefly looks at his later writings, i.e. post 1908, up until 1918.

It does not examine separately, in sequence of chapters, his educational writings in the Karmayogin (1909) which is where most of his educational formulations appeared, but rather weaves the major ideas expressed therein within the principal narrative itself. It may appear odd that I have not examined these separately, or that I have not tried to formulate a philosophy of national education through a study of these. I have not done this, first, because such an examination has already been undertaken in the past by many able intellectuals and practitioners of the Integral Education and Yoga, e.g. Pavitra (P.B.Saint-Hilaire), Nolini Kanta Gupta, Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, Norman Dowsett, Pranab K. Bhattacharya, Madhav Pandit, Kireet Joshi, all of whom had either a direct access to Sri Aurobindo himself or had been closely involved in assisting his spiritual collaborator, The Mother, in implementing the principles of his educational philosophy at the Centre of Education at Pondicherry which bears his name. A re-examination of these
explorations, therefore, would not be something different but a mere restating of stated positions. Second, I have never been a student of philosophy in the strict sense of the term and therefore found it difficult to attempt to coalesce and synthesize Sri Aurobindo’s philosophical perspectives with other formulations and positions, and third, I have undertaken this approach because I realised that the period under discussion (1893-1910) with Sri Aurobindo as the central figure has never been explored in the past through an examination of principal educational ideas. Sri Aurobindo’s national education activism found place – often a brief one at that – in most works on his life, his politics or even his educational vision. But there has never been an examination of the ideas, of the debate, of the positions on national education at the time when Sri Aurobindo was active as an advanced leader of the nationalist party in Indian politics. I of course admit that it is a rather feeble attempt to do what ‘The Origins of the National Education Movement’ did by keeping Acharya Satish Chandra Mukherjee as the central figure. I have tried to weave the narrative of this quest for a philosophy of national education keeping Sri Aurobindo at the centre or as a point of reference. Perhaps in that this approach is new and can shed some more light on the period under study.

The narrative also makes a detailed survey of Sri Aurobindo’s stated positions on the educational demand. And I have also therefore focused in some detail on his Baroda period in order to show that his educational formulations found first expressions in that clime and period and have argued that throughout his professional stay in that princely state Sri Aurobindo was preoccupied with the educational question as much as he was with the political. Such a collection has, to the best of my knowledge, not been made in the past. In my work I have, in a sense, focused mainly on Sri Aurobindo the politician-
educationist rather than Sri Aurobindo the philosopher-educationist. For perhaps politics, like spirituality formed an integral part of his life and action. He seemed to have never given up the former, albeit his forms and manners of expressions of it kept altering from period to period.

Among Sri Aurobindo’s other writings on education that I have attempted to study and analyse are two of his opuscules, ‘The Brain of India’ and ‘The National Value of Art’. Both were written during the same period as a series in the Karmayogin around 1909. These texts have never really been taken as part of the exploration of the national education movement. Jugal Kishore Mukherjee discussed the Brain of India to a certain extent in order to widen Sri Aurobindo’s education principles1 and though excerpts from these articles have been used in the past they do not seem to have been studied as part of the quest for formulating a philosophy of national education. I have stated separate positions based on these opuscules and have linked them to this quest. Through both Sri Aurobindo added different dimensions to the nationalist education debate. In the Brain of India he discusses the classical Indian perception of education – the past conceptions and theories of education in Hindu thought. A study of these enable us to understand Sri Aurobindo’s position vis-à-vis the classical or ancient Indian educational thought and to also see at what levels his formulations blends or differs from it. In it he discusses in detail the concept of Brahmacharya and its past application and present relevance. This lead me automatically to discuss and examine some past concept of education in India and a discussion through Coomaraswamy and Nivedita enhanced the exploration of this facet. I have e.g. looked at the concept of memory in the past, understanding of learning, the role of meditation etc. A study of these has revealed that the nationalist thought-

1 Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, Principles and Goals of Integral Education, 2006.
leaders made a constant and continuous effort to absorb India’s educational past in its spirit, ideas and essence and tried to work them out in their present. While rejecting past forms, they sought to revive the spirit of Indian education – the essence of learning, the method of approaching knowledge, concept of education and of being learned and a whole gamut of other issues. The *Dawn Magazine* regularly carried articles on ancient Indian education thought and principles demonstrating the urge to re-examine India’s past educational experience and to try and look for some direction from it for the present.

In the ‘National Value of Art’ Sri Aurobindo essentially makes a case for the democratisation of art education in the country. He discusses why art and aesthetic education is necessary for the people and dwells on its indispensability in a national scheme of education. I thought it proper to go into some detail here into the nationalist art movement, also called the Swadeshi art movement, and to examine the art in education debate then going on. Some of the central figures in this debate Nivedita and Coomaraswamy were already part of my exploration and in order to broaden it I included E.B.Havell, one of the most vigorous supporters of the Swadeshi art movement and Abanindranath Tagore, who embodied the expressions of that movement. In this too I sought to keep Sri Aurobindo as one of the key figures of the debate and have argued that it was through his series on the national value of art that Sri Aurobindo expressed support for the effort of re-discovering and re-stating a technique of Indian art. I have also argued that in his demand for an aesthetic and art education Sri Aurobindo did not set limits but called for the training in aesthetic for the entire ‘race’ – terms such as race were then used frequently mainly to denote the collectivity and obviously not in a pejorative sense – it was such a training alone that could really, argued Sri Aurobindo, restore the sense of
harmony and beauty in the nation as a whole. The linking of these articles on art with the broader Swadeshi art movement have not been done, at least in the context of Sri Aurobindo. This is an addition to that study.

Among some of the thinkers that I have covered are those who were once decisive opinion makers in the field of culture and education but are today facing near oblivion or have been confined to a limited discourse and circle. I have selected them, as I have stated above, because of their nearness in time to Sri Aurobindo and at times because of their direct involvement with his nationalist activities. The selection has definitely not been made at random or without method. In this category falls Bipin Chandra Pal, once considered by Sri Aurobindo to be one of the most original thinkers of the Swadeshi age. A study of Pal’s educational series in his *New India* weekly makes a fascinating study even today more than a century after he had first written them. Some of the ideas Pal stated in them are striking for their contemporaneity. So does Sister Nivedita’s educational ideas. I have examined Nivedita’s educational ideas and found striking parallels to Sri Aurobindo’s early formulation of a system of national education. This is explained because of her close collaboration with Sri Aurobindo during the nationalist phase and especially during the period when his last series on education appeared in the *Karmayogin* which she was entrusted to edit. It was a period when great minds did think alike and concentrated their energies to further an integral quest for national self-renewal and in that the educational question and quest saw one of the keenest and most dynamic focuses. I also chose to include Ananda Coomaraswamy, art historian, critic and philosopher, whose masterly understanding and appreciation of Indian culture and art Sri

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Aurobindo appears to have greatly admired.\(^3\) Coomaraswamy too was actively involved for a while during the Swadeshi movement and was one of the pillars of the nationalist art movement during that period.\(^4\) He too was greatly moved by the educational question and richly contributed to the debate on national education. A contemporary of Sri Aurobindo, Coomaraswamy also visited the National College in order to address the students.\(^5\) The other thinker that I have included in my exploration, and because in her own way she had a contribution to the metaphysical-philosophical studies in her adopted land of India, is Annie Besant, theosophist, Indian nationalist and educationist. It is perhaps interesting to note that in his political heydays Sri Aurobindo had taken on Besant when she formulated and publicly presented the idea of forming a national university. Sri Aurobindo had then demanded greater clarity, greater radicalization, greater originality and innovativeness in the scheme. He had argued that a true proposition for a national university in India must originate from an Indian mind and that a proposed Indian national university would serve no purpose if it chose to merely function as an appendage to a mother-organisation in England.\(^6\) One of Sri Aurobindo’s last public messages on national education was given at the behest of Besant in 1918 for a national education week that she had nationally organised. Satish Chandra Mukherjee, one of the most self-effacing originator and sustainer of the national education movement has also been included in the narrative. The richness and variety of his educational positions remain strikingly relevant today and his Dawn Magazine continues to be a repository of educational thoughts and ideas that can still provide direction to the various facets of current educational debates in India. In fact,

\(^6\) CWSA vol.6, 2002.
it was a detailed survey of the educational articles that appeared in the Dawn Magazine volumes, carefully reprinted and preserved for posterity by Jadavpur University and the National Council of Education, that enabled me to form a concrete idea of the educational debate of the period under examination (1893-1910) and also gave me a first hand insight into the minds of some of the thought-leaders I chose to include. I have also included the Tagore-Brahmabandhab educational experiment. This was because it gave an insight into Tagore’s early educational experiment and also an opportunity to revisit and record the educational observations of one of the fieriest rhetorician of the Swadeshi age, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. Since Upadhyay played a dynamic role in formulating public opinion during the Swadeshi period, was a nationalist collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, and was himself a scholar and died as a symbol of defiance to colonial rule, a survey of his educational thought appeared to me to be relevant in this study.

What prompted me to undertake this exploration is an observation Sri Aurobindo made on his past participation in and future hope for the attempt of a national education in India. The passage needs to be quoted in its entirety as it forms the basis of my exploration of his quest for a philosophy of national education. In short, it was this passage that gave rise to the urge to take an alternative approach in exploring national education and Sri Aurobindo

‘…National education was another item [in the nationalist scheme of revolution and national regeneration] to which Sri Aurobindo attached much importance. He had been disgusted with the education given by the British system in the schools and colleges and universities, a system of which as a professor in the Baroda College he had full experience. He felt that it tended to dull and impoverish and
tie up the naturally quick and brilliant and supple Indian intelligence, to teach it bad intellectual habits and spoil by narrow information and mechanical instruction its originality and productivity. The movement began well and many national schools were established in Bengal [and in other provinces as well] and many able men became teachers, but still the development was insufficient and the economical position of the schools precarious. *Sri Aurobindo had decided to take up the movement personally and see whether it could not be given a greater expansion and a stronger foundation, but his departure from Bengal cut short this plan.* [Italics mine] In the repression and the general depression caused by it, most of the schools failed to survive. The idea lived on and it may be hoped that it will one day find an adequate form and body…’

I found this passage to be of great import by indicating a deeper essential truth of the quest for a philosophy of national education centering around, in this case, the central figure of Sri Aurobindo. Otherwise a small part of a rather long note, I saw in the passage Sri Aurobindo’s personal acceptance of responsibility for the national education movement, for developing its potential, giving it a solid foundation and making it the base on which a future superstructure of a national education in the country could be really created. And this appeared to be significant. For a leader known to be reticent and usually impersonal these words expressed and exuded a sense of personal involvement with a crucial aspect of the movement even after a hiatus of three odd decades. The passage was part of a note he dictated on his political life decades after he had retired from it. Sri Aurobindo, it appeared to me from the above note, never really disassociated himself from the national education effort or ceased to be preoccupied with it – this even

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7 Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, 2006.
after the movement had itself ceased to be a major stream uniting with and strengthening the Indian national movement for self determination. This is what prompted me to undertake an exploration of the national education effort and in order to take it up from a different dimension I made it into a narrative giving a wide overview of the age and of the debate itself. I have tried to essentially understand how Sri Aurobindo tried to organise the movement or make his contribution to the effort and to the debate and of how those around him also made their contribution to the quest. These are, to begin with, the essential fundamentals that came to my mind while revisiting this particular statement of his.

Does a particular philosophy then of national education emerge from this? Did the quest for a philosophy of national education finally culminate into some distinguishable or definable physical or intellectual manifestation? These are some of the essential questions that perhaps arise. I have chosen to name the study the quest for a philosophy of national education essentially because, as I saw it, the accumulated effort of the leading thought-leaders of the period under study was towards trying to evolve or formulate a system and a philosophy of national education. Their quest was essentially one which tried to define an ideational base to what they hoped would be an eventual national system of education. In the process there came a spurt of ideas on a new education in India, there was a virtual explosion of educational ideas as well as experiments. The goal of national education thus began to assume a certain centrality it hitherto lacked and it became one of the symbolizing pillars of one of the largest mass movements against colonial rule in the world. In course of my study it clearly appeared to me that the quest for a philosophy of national education did never really culminate – each
phase was followed by another and the debate too did not die out. At times, e.g. during the phase under examination here, it assumed a central focus and other times e.g. later in 1920s and beyond it was side tracked and manifested mainly through selected educational experiments, e.g. as I have mentioned in the work, during the phase that Mahatma Gandhi assumed leadership of the national movement. The first phase of the quest did not succeed in making a long lasting physical impact, as stated by Sri Aurobindo in the above cited passage, mainly due to a precarious economic base and also due to the unwillingness of large number of students to switch systems because of a perceived uncertain future. Sri Aurobindo saw another reason for the failure of the first phase and especially for its limited impact and I have discussed it in the study. He saw it happen, as he said, because the new education institutions chose to steer away from the larger national movement at a given point of time. This was done mainly in order to avoid administrative wrath and for survival. Though the reasons may be varied this was one of the principal reason for failure as Sri Aurobindo saw it. His observation that the ‘idea lived on’ itself shows and as I have argued that the quest was an ongoing one and the thinking on an education system for an independent India was also a continuous process with many a leaders later. It did never really cease to exercise the minds of the leaders who followed the pioneers of national education in the first phase. Therefore, if not in terms of physical manifestation, the impact of the early national education quest did leave behind a lasting impression in terms of ideas and influences. The philosophy kept being re-formulated, re-defined, re-stated, and revisited and it is through such a framework that the quest ought to be perhaps judged and studied. Its greatest impact eventually came through the ideas that it succeeded in disseminating and it was through this dissemination...
that it saw a certain perpetuation of the quest. Sri Aurobindo’s outer role in the movement perhaps ended with his resignation as principal of the National College but I have also tried to argue that his intellectual and spiritual involvement with the movement continued, in a sense till his last year when in 1949 he penned a series of articles on the importance of the body and issued a message on the role of physical education in a national scheme of education for his Ashram’s newly created department of physical education. It is also clear from his writings during his second political phase in 1909 that he had a drastically different plan for national education work than that followed by the National Council of Education. But, as I have pointed out, he did not have sufficient time and support for carrying these out. My discussion has not been so much on the physical and statistical aspects of the education system then prevalent, although I have included a section which surveys the Indian education scenario sometime prior to and during the Curzonian era but as that would be entering into the history of Indian education and would basically be a repetition of an analysis of educational statistics I have kept it short and quite shorn of statistics. I have made a point though on how India had a widespread network of an indigenous education system and on how it gradually withered under the colonial set-up.

Why, some do and may wonder, have I insisted on discussing ideas that were actually debated a century ago. How does it serve to remember and revisit these, or for that matter what is the relevance or purpose of such an exercise today in an age that is drastically and radically different from that age when the prospect of freedom itself was seen by the majority as a vain chimera. In an age that is dazzled by glamour and swashbuckling success my thinkers of the past may appear to be an incongruent lot
running after a pipe dream or perhaps demanding too much tapas and sacrifice from their countrymen! What attracted me however to them and their educational thought and vision and especially to Sri Aurobindo’s early observations and speeches on education was their continued relevance to the educational debate today. Their ideas, their arguments, their examination and lamentations appear to be still shedding light on current educational problems in either diagnosing its various maladies or in acting as signposts on the way forward towards possible solutions. In short their vibrancy remains, and therefore as a sequel one could perhaps take up a study of past Indian educational thought in the current national education context. The other significant aspect that attracted me was the sheer sweep and depth of the whole debate, the indomitable urge to undertake fresh experiments while attacking the old system, and the effort that they (the thinkers) made to apply themselves to a very crucial aspect of national reconstruction. Their preoccupation and concern with a future education system for a free country was by itself inspiring. To gradually absorb the fact that Sri Aurobindo was actually deeply involved with the movement and attempted to take it to masses was by itself a remarkable understanding. In fact the colonial intelligence had noted with alacrity his educational activism and his personal initiative in forming national schools all over the province. He was, apart from being recognised as the principal ideologue of the nationalist party, also seen as one of the pillars of the national education movement. While initially going through the material I felt that these could very well be revisited and the whole effort narrated so as to bring the spotlight back on the effort of developing a national system of education for India. The other aspect that fascinated me was the fact that even when the cry for complete freedom was not yet widely accepted and was yet to percolate deep within the masses

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some of these leaders and thinkers were attempting to plan an education for a free India – an India, that they saw, which would draw inspiration from her past civilisational experience and resolutely deal with the present while aspiring towards a dynamic future.

The thinkers were quite certain, as Sri Aurobindo put it, that the national education effort was not a ‘return to the fifth century but an initiation of the centuries to come’, it was not to ‘ignore modern truth and knowledge, but to take our foundation on our own being, our own mind, our own spirit.’

The gradually evolving national movement was preparing the possibilities of just such a foundation and national education formed an intrinsic part of it.

On their part these thinkers were creating the edifice of a future India – many of the ideas or observations that they had then disseminated, e.g. overburdening the learner with too many subjects and with the pressures of a mechanical examination system, the erasing from the teacher’s personality her aptitude for taking initiative and the learning by rote without entering into the deeper meaning of the subject or the topic, are some issues that even today generate much debate and heat. It is also perhaps in that, that the narrative here may be useful. As far as my principal protagonist was concerned he too, in his inimitable ardour and manner, was assisting in shaping the mighty chariot of nationhood and in that he perceived the national education effort to be one of the chief wheels. He was, as his wont, constantly leaping towards the future, and after a while what kept preoccupying him was the thought of how best to preserve freedom having wrested liberation. For this he saw as imperative the need to develop a national system of education for India.

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9 CWSA vol. I, op.cit.
This narrative then basically looks at the concerted effort made at developing a philosophy of national education in the early decade of the last century in India. Centering itself on Sri Aurobindo, it makes an effort to study some of the most dynamic minds of our national history during that period and seeks to highlight the contemporaneity of their thoughts and hopes. And in that it seeks its continued relevance, its deeper utility and contemporary resonance.