Modern Intellectual History, 7, 2 (2010), pp. 319–334 © Cambridge University Press 2010
doi:10.1017/S1479244310000090

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF DUTY IN AUROBINDO'S *ESSAYS ON THE GITA*

ANDREW SARTORI
Department of History, New York University
E-mail: sartori.andrew@gmail.com

Aurobindo Ghose was a major nationalist intellectual of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who rose to prominence as one of the most radical leaders of the Swadeshi movement before retreating to the French colony of Pondicherry to dedicate his life to spiritual exercises and experiments. Aurobindo, like so many others of the nationalist period, produced a major commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. I will argue that his appeal to the Gita in the late 1910s represented, however, not a continuation of his nationalist project, but rather a radical reformulation of it in the wake of the defeat of the Swadeshi mobilization of 1905–8.

I

Aurobindo Ghose had spent his childhood in England safely insulated from Indian influences. There he had received a classical education, studied on scholarship at King's College, Cambridge, and gone on to stand for the Indian Civil Service examinations with great success—at least until the riding test, for which he failed to appear. Returning to India in 1893, he took up service under the Maharaja of Baroda, in western India, where he began to study Sanskrit and Bengali, and began his initial foray into anticolonial politics with the publication of a series of provocative essays in Bombay's *Indu Prakash* criticizing the Congress for its mendicant attitude towards the British rulers.

In 1905, India's first substantial attempt at mass mobilization emerged in response to the partitioning of Bengal into two separate provinces by the British. The ostensible reason for the partition was administrative convenience, but critics were quick to point out that there was no reason, other than divide-and-rule manipulation, not to have created new administrative units out of the large non-Bengali populations incorporated into the Bengal Presidency (in Bihar and Orissa) rather than splitting Bengal proper down the middle. The partition provoked a broad-based condemnation from all the major sections of the predominantly Hindu educated middle and upper classes of Bengali society, sparking calls for a boycott of British manufactures and concerted support for

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indigenous (*swadeshi*) products in their stead. Aurobindo responded to the Swadeshi crisis by returning to Calcutta, and emerged as a key organizer and articulate press publicist, both in Bengal and nationally, of the "Nationalist" or "Extremist" faction of the Swadeshi movement. Extremists went far beyond the call to abrogate the partition and promote indigenous industry, programs they shared with the older, "Moderate" leadership. Supported by fellow Extremists in Maharashtra and the Punjab, Aurobindo and his allies demanded a boycott of all British institutions with a view to immediate Indian self-rule (*swaraj*) that would establish the conditions for economic, social, political and spiritual autonomy for the nation. While formally and pragmatically committed to non-violent forms of "passive resistance," Aurobindo also became involved in the activities of secret societies dedicated to martial training and anti-British conspiracy—which in turn led to his arrest in 1908 on charges of planning and overseeing a terrorist attack on a British magistrate. Acquitted for want of evidence in 1909, but still the object of considerable legal attention, Aurobindo fled to the French territory of Pondicherry, south of Madras (Chennai), where he increasingly focused his attention on his spiritual practice, becoming the renowned "Yogi of Pondicherry."[1]

The Aurobindo Ghose who composed his long series of *Essays on the Gita* from 1916 to 1920 was thus in the process of re-creating himself—from radical nationalist to cosmopolitan guru. The essays were originally published in the *Arya*, a vehicle for his philosophical writings that he cofounded in 1914 at the suggestion and with the editorial cooperation of the minor French occultist, socialist, and pro-Swadeshist, Paul Richard, who had met Aurobindo on a trip to Pondicherry in 1910, and of Richard's mystic wife, Mirra Alfassa, the Parisian Bohemian daughter of Sephardic Jews with whom Richard had returned in 1914 to once again unsuccessfully seek election to the French Senate. Returning to Pondicherry permanently in 1920 after some intervening years in Japan, Alfassa would, as "The Mother" (a title bestowed on her by Aurobindo), gradually assume the leadership of the increasingly international Aurobindo Ashram, while Aurobindo himself mostly withdrew into seclusion from around 1926. Much later, in 1964, it was Alfassa who would conceive a plan for the radically cosmopolitan experimental city of Auroville. But already in 1914, the *Arya* was not only being launched on a national stage (predictably given Aurobindo's profile as a nationalist leader at this time), but it was to be published simultaneously in English and French editions, which, along with the discipleship of two Europeans,

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1 For a discussion of this phase of Aurobindo's career see Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

marked a decisive transition in Aurobindo's profile from nationalist politician to international spiritual guru.[2]

This essay is an attempt to make sense of the *Essays on the Gita* in intellectual-historical terms. The nationalist appeal to religious discourse has been commonly understood to be the result of the continued hold of traditional categories on an incompletely modernized ("transitional") society. Even a scholar as sophisticated as Sumit Sarkar could occasionally come close to implying such an approach, with both his attribution of an atavistic quality to the Swadeshi leadership's appeal to religion and his emphasis on its invocation of tropes of heteronomous subordination to divine will.[3] This old developmentalist argument, however, self-evidently stumbles in relation to Aurobindo himself, given that his highly anglicized father's efforts to remove him utterly from the sullying touch of India placed him at a substantial distance from the religious traditions in which he would subsequently immerse himself. Alternatively, the nationalist appeal to religious discourse is understood to be a means of mobilizing an incompletely modernized society. In this case, Aurobindo's appeal to religious discourse would not be understood to express directly a traditional attachment to Hinduism, but rather would be a function of a traditional*ism* that sought to utilize religious discourse as a means to appeal to others who remained subject to its appeal and its authority. These others are either the national-popular generally (to use Partha Chatterjee's Gramscian formulation), or the narrower stratum of the rural upper-caste gentry to whom the predominantly Shakta religious imagery (focused on the primal Mother as the incarnation of divine power) was more likely to appeal (in contrast to the largely Vaishnavite lower castes and the mass of Muslim cultivators in eastern Bengal).[4] But the authoritative appeal of the Bhagavad Gita as a master text of Swadeshi thought is harder to fit into this narrative: firstly, because it is clearly a Vaishnavite, not a Shakta text; and secondly, because even

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2 "Documents in the Life of Sri Aurobindo: Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and Paul Richard, 1911–1915," available at http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/research/show.php?set=doclife&id=29. See also Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 94–6; and Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 118–26.

3 Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), 107–8, 313–16.

4 Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *India's Fight for Freedom: Or the Swadeshi Movement, 1905–1906* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958); Barbara Southard, "The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh: The Utilization of Hindu Religious Symbolism and the Problem of Political Mobilization in Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 14/3 (1980), 353–76; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

within the domain of Bengali Vaishnavite religious discourse, the Gita, with its austere Krishna, was hardly a text with a great deal of established appeal in a regional tradition that privileged rather the Bhagavata Purana, with its more frolicsome Krishna.

Of course, we could also read Aurobindo's thought as actuated by the crisis of the colonial intellectual, who must authorize his own discourse by appealing to the very colonial authority that seems to de-authorize his right to speak. Aurobindo stands forth as an especially acute case of this kind of ego deformation, since he was an anglophone educated entirely in England, who had to embark on a deliberate program of language-learning to recuperate his nationality.[5] The larger question, however, is whether we are to understand the otherness appealed to as the standpoint of the anticolonial intellectual as internal to the problematics of colonial discourse (a projection of Orientalist discourse), or as a response to the actualities of an encounter with the non-West. From this latter perspective, Aurobindo might be treated as a philosopher or political theorist making substantive arguments in his own right.[6] But here we are clearly faced with a choice: either Aurobindo was someone who espoused certain truth-claims that we can respond to as if we were his contemporaries, or he was a figure who mediated between the European intellectual world he was educated in and the Indian textual traditions into which he came to immerse himself as part of a concerted effort to "create an alternative language of discourse."[7] If Aurobindo was turning to religious discourse as a means to articulate a response to the actuality of his experience of Indian difference, then we are left to ponder whether the formal content of anticolonial discourse merely expresses a simply descriptive or diagnostic response to the realities of Indian difference, in which case Aurobindo is to be treated as a philosopher to whose truth-claims we might respond as our postcolonialist contemporary. But if Aurobindo's encounter with the non-West assumed a structured set of meanings that were fully intelligible within the European intellectual context and yet nonetheless also generated in the non-Western context of colonial India, then we must understand Aurobindo as a *historical* figure responding to the specificity of his context—and we must give a *historical* account of the context to which he was responding in order to

[5] Leonard Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876–1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 85–100; and Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, chap. 2.

[6] Peter Heehs, "Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and Problems in Indian Historiography," *History and Theory* 42 (May 2003), 169–95; Sugata Bose, "The Spirit and Form of an Ethical Polity: A Meditation on Aurobindo's Thought," *Modern Intellectual History* 4/1 (2007), 129–44.

[7] Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, xvii.

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understand the meaning of the substantive claims he was making. From this perspective, we can only treat Aurobindo as a substantive intellectual by locating him within the historical context in response to which he was framing truth-claims that systematically elided the contextual specificity of their own reference.

It was this last approach that I elaborated in my recent book, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, and which I will also presume as the framing skeleton for the discussion that follows. This essay begins by positioning Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* in the larger context of the nationalist discourse that emerged, with the *Gita* as its self-declared bible, in the later nineteenth century in Bengal. The nationalist argument about religion actually rested on deeply anthropological and sociological premises that effectively nested the claims for Hindu India's privileged specificity within an essentially universalistic and entirely translatable set of problematics. I then go on to argue, however, that Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* in fact represented a subtle but profound *break* from this broadly Swadeshist national project in its assertion of a radically cosmopolitan and future-oriented spatio-temporal horizon, and I locate that break in the radical failure of the Swadeshi mobilization. The journey from nationalist to spiritual guru is thus read not as a transition from particularism to universalism, but as a movement from a construction of the primacy of national particularity out of fundamentally universalistic premises, to an emphasis on cosmopolitan universalism propelled by a regionally specific history.

II

It would be far too simple to narrate Aurobindo's career as a straightforward transition from narrow nationalism to cosmopolitan spiritualism. Aurobindo's own intellectual orientations were formed early during his youth in Britain, where he lived from the age of seven until he returned to India at the age of twenty-one. The broad currents of British romantic culture-criticism and British idealism clearly color his surviving juvenilia.[8] When Aurobindo discovered the Indian cause while a student at Cambridge, he would enter into a commitment to the "Extremist" brand of nationalism through a strikingly Arnoldian engagement with colonial issues, concerned above all with the constitution of an ethical, rather than merely mechanical, state, grounded in the life of the people.[9] And it was in following through this idealist train of thought that he would become ever more deeply entrenched in the discourse of Hegelianized Vedanta that emerged

[8] *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 1, *Early Cultural Writings* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2003), 3–85.

[9] I discuss his early essays, *New Lamps for Old*, in more detail in Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 139–42.

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to prominence in the pre-Swadeshi and the Swadeshi years. In other words, Aurobindo's Indianism and Asianism emerged from the very beginning out of markedly cosmopolitan intellectual contexts and concerns. In keeping with the general thrust of Swadeshi ideology, the very orientation to national particularity was constituted out of ideological themes that were far from peculiarly "Indian" in their provenance, and that were deeply universalistic in their conceptual foundations: an ethical critique of commercial and civil society, an idealist critique of materialism, and a historicist critique of abstraction.[10]

To understand this convergence of universalism and particularism, we might take a step back for a moment to consider the theological writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in the 1880s—most importantly, his *Dharmatattva: Anushilan* (The Essence of Dharma: Cultivation), his *Krishnacaritra* (The Character of Krishna) and his (unfinished) commentary on the *Bhagavadgita*—which were themselves important and recognized precursors to Swadeshi thought's ubiquitous preoccupation with the Gita. Bankim had sought to elaborate an emphatically theistic theology based on the solemn Krishna of the Gita rather than on the more frolicsome Krishna of the established Gauriya tradition of eastern India. But the foundation on which he had established this religion was a strikingly universalistic philosophical anthropology. In fact, so thoroughly anthropological was Bankim's conception of religion that he would declare that the

> dharma proclaimed by the Gita is for all men. It is the best dharma for him who believes in reincarnation just as well as for him who does not. It is the best dharma for him who is devoted to Krishna as well as for him who is not. It is the best dharma for him who believes in God, and also for him who does not.[11]

As such, this "dharma" (ethical obligation, rule of action, but also the standard modern Bengali translation for "religion"), grounded as it was in the very essence of humanity, "is eternal, and so is its connection with society. It can never be the intention of God that the dharma proclaimed by him is dharma only for some specific society or condition of society."[12] All human beings had as their dharma the harmonious cultivation of the totality of their innate faculties through the totality of dharmic works—encoded in a conception of the fourfold caste (*varna*) system liberally interpreted not in terms of an actual social arrangement but

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10 See Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, chap. 5; and Andrew Sartori, "Beyond Culture-Contact and Colonial Discourse: 'Germanism' in Colonial Bengal," *Modern Intellectual History* 4/1 (April 2007), 77–93.

11 Hans Harder, ed., *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's* Srimadbhagabadgita*: Translation and Analysis* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 60.

12 Ibid., 42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a typology of actions. Krishna represents the ultimate ideal for emulation through the practice of *bhakti* (devotion), through which all human works and thoughts are dedicated towards, and thus tend to move towards, his many-sided yet harmonious perfection. When the Gita taught *nishkama karma* (desireless action), it essentially intended that man should forgo the desire for the fruits of action (i.e. the desire for pleasure) in the name of the pure activity itself—understood as a form of *anushilan* (practice), through which human faculties were exercised and thereby cultivated in a manner that increased the individual's worldly agency, secured lasting happiness through the pure performance of the act itself, and at the very same time brought man closer to god.[13] Arjuna's duty to fight at Kurukshetra, despite his misgivings, stemmed from his dharma, which required him to overcome his laudable feelings of pity and revulsion to defend society from its dissolution into chaos:

> it is one's dharma to protect to the best of one's abilities one's right sanctioned by dharma . . . If people, self-interestedly depriving others of their rights, are allowed to freely rob and thereafter enjoy others' property, then society cannot last for even one day. In such a case all humans would suffer infinitely.[14]

And from this defense of property we move philosophically to an even more fundamental defense of society, which is "necessary for the practice of dharma," and without which "man is like an animal."[15] Since society provided the *condicio sine qua non* of the cultivation of humanity, the defense of society was a primary dharmic duty; and since the form that society took was the national organism, it followed that, "except for devotion to god, the love of one's country is the most compelling dharma of all."[16] Through devotion to one's country, one approached the highest form of freedom—a positive freedom grounded in individual worldly agency and in the collective self-determination of a cooperative and coordinated national life.[17]

Pursuing this argument even more radically, nationalists like the Aurobindo of the Swadeshi years would not only elaborate a commitment to the particularity of the nation as guarantor of human sociality, but would further push the commitment to the particularity of national traditions and national forms of life as individualized expressions of the universal. The particularity of the nation lay not just in the form of a rational social interest, as in Bankim,

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13 Ibid., 105.

14 Ibid., 37–8.

15 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Dharmatattva: Anushilan*, in *Bankim Racanabali: Sahitya Samagra*, ed. Bishnu Basu (Calcutta: Tuli-Kalam, b.s. 1393), 658.

16 *Bankim Racanabali*, 661.

17 Cf. Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, chap. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but at a deeply affective level of solidarity that preceded the individual and constituted individuality's condition of existence. The history of the nation became, from this perspective, the history of the objectification of Spirit. The self-positing activity of the divine assumed historically particular forms through the long process by which human collectivities had asserted their own subjective autonomy (culture, civilization) through a history of subordinating nature to human ends—of rendering the world more and more an expression of, rather than a reality antithetical to, Spirit. The result was a theological conception of a thoroughly immanentist monism formed from a synthesis of German idealism, *advaita* (monist) and *vishishtadvaita* (qualified monist) Vedanta, and Tantrism. To the abstraction of homogeneous empty time, Swadeshi discourse opposed the concretion of national histories. Against the unmediated relationship of individual to absolute, Swadeshi discourse emphasized the role of social and representational mediations. Against the individual pursuit of self-interest in civil society, Swadeshi discourse posited the self-sacrificing social being. Against the heteronomy of political-economic "laws" and imperial scales of economic interdependence, Swadeshi discourse opposed the national will expressed through the organic form of a strong autarchic national state. And finally, against the liberal commitment to abstract rights and private interests identified with the British and their anglicized babu epigones, Swadeshi discourse sought to pitch the power and energy of the people as a whole, drawing the idiom of its political voice from the latent immanent propensities of what it posited as the inner essence of the authentic-popular. Even as Swadeshists sought to emphasize the *deshi* (native), their commitment to the particularities of the nation remained deeply universalistic in impulse throughout this period—a deep cosmopolitanism indexed most clearly in the recurrent invocation throughout these years, in Aurobindo's political writings as much as in anyone's, of India's, or Asia's, emerging global destiny as salvational spiritual leader to a debasedly materialistic (Western) world.[18]

III

Now seen in the context of this history, what Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* read as is a sophisticated and self-conscious articulation of the theological underpinnings of the Swadeshist vision at their most fundamental. Aurobindo's commentary on the Gita proceeds first from a typical insistence, also fundamental in Bankim's commentary, that the text's importance lies not in a largely futile attempt to capture "its exact metaphysical connotation as it was understood by

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[18] Ibid., chap. 5.

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men of the time" when it was composed, but rather in the renewal of its relevance through the extraction of "the actual living truths it contains," shorn of the historical and metaphysical specificities in which it has been successively clothed by past generations; amplified through the allegorical recovery of anachronistic invocations of practices like sacrifice, the caste order, the doctrine of the historical avatar, and the subordination of women; and rendered "in the most natural and vital form and expression we can find that will be suitable to the mentality and helpful to the spiritual needs of our present-day humanity."[19] The Gita, however, represented not just one more philosophy among the many philosophies of ancient India, but rather the overcoming of the partial truth of each through a "wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience . . . It does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies" through a "universal comprehensiveness."[20] Aurobindo's elaboration of the text is thoroughly dialectical in presentation, seeking to systematically subsume the duality of *purusha* (self) and *prakriti* (matter, nature) from Sankhya philosophy, the realization of unity with the absolute from Yoga, the idea of sacrifice from Mimamsa, the idea of using the dualistic nature of reality as an approach to the absolute from Tantra, the ideal of the *boddhisattva*'s dedication to universal redemption from Mahayana Buddhism, and, overarching all of them, the monism of Advaita Vedanta. But in emphasizing this synthetic quality of the Gita's philosophy, he presents the text as the possible foundation not for a return to the ancient, but rather for a "new age of development" in which humanity would look to its "perfection and its highest spiritual welfare," building its spiritual life "out of our own being and potentialities" rather than the "being, knowledge and nature of . . . the men of the past":

> We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future . . . But just as the past syntheses have taken those which preceded them for their starting point, so also must that of the future . . . proceed from what the great bodies of realized spiritual thought and experience have given.[21]

The Gita was thus to be understood at once as itself a moment in which the philosophy of history had made itself felt in the history of Indian philosophy, and as the foundation for a present renewal of a philosophy of history whose

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[19] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1944), 5–8, 19–20; and cf. Harder, *Srimadbhagabadgita*, 41–2.

[20] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 10.

[21] Ibid., 13–14.

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future horizon was to be opened rather than limited by the recovery of that past moment.[22]

This assertion of the future was itself linked to another deeply Hegelian theme, the assertion of the radical freedom of human subjectivity, not as antithetical to objective circumstances, but rather as a project to be realized as lived reality through the ongoing transformation of objective circumstances into an expression of subjective freedom. Aurobindo articulated this through a discussion of two classical triads, each understood as a dialectical and subsumptive movement: the three qualities of *prakriti*—*tamas* (darkness, inertness, ignorance), *rajas* (activity, passion) and *sattva* (purity, reality)—and the three forms of *yoga*—*karma* (action), *jnan* (gnosis) and *bhakti* (devotion). Man begins in sensory ignorance, in which he is closest to the inertial state of the material world, passively taking the immediacy of experience—both in terms of the object world and in terms of the egotic self—for truth. Man then seeks to give expression to his capacity for will, desire and mastery, becoming an agent who acts upon the world and on others, subordinating *tamas* to *rajas*. And finally man seeks to know and understand the world and himself, seeking to subordinate both *tamas* and *rajas* to his *sattvik* qualities.

The intersection of *rajas* and *sattva* in turn sets man on the paths of *yoga*, through which man strives to achieve a unity with truth, having recognized that truth is not immediately identical with the phenomenally given, including the egotic self that both wills and seeks to know. "The Soul . . . is a spiritual being apparently subjected by ignorance to the outward workings of Prakriti and represented in her mobility as an acting, thinking, mutable personality, a creature of Nature, an ego."[23] At this stage, man becomes capable of *karmayoga*, the attempt to achieve union with God through the desireless performance of works as a sacrifice to the divine Self, whom he confronts as an external other to his egotic self just as Arjuna confronts Krishna in a conversation that allegorizes the internal drama of self-realization.[24]

> Next, when it gets behind all this action and motion, it finds its own higher reality to be an eternal and impersonal self and immutable spirit which has no other share in the action and movement than to support it by its presence and regard it as an undisturbed witness.[25]

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[22] Manu Goswami in currently working on an account of a major shift in temporal horizon in early twentieth-century India, in which the disjuncture between Bankim and Aurobindo could be readily subsumed.

[23] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: Second Series* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1942), 197.

[24] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 52–3.

[25] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: Second Series*, 197.

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Here man passes to *jnanyoga*, in which man renounces not only the fruit of works, but also the claim to be their doer. Man achieves something like a state of unhappy consciousness, in which the assertion of the transcendence of self over the world is achieved through the renunciation of worldly agency, and the relegation of the world to a state of absolute otherness to Self.[26] "And last, when it looks beyond these two opposite selves, it discovers a greater ineffable Reality from which both proceed, the Eternal who is Self of the self and the Master of all Nature and all action." Not only is this Eternal Self the master of nature, but it is also the origin and spiritual support of all nature, and hence "himself all energies and forces, all things and all beings."[27] "[T]he supreme Self has to be seen as the supreme Purusha governing this Prakriti, of whom the soul in Nature is a partial manifestation, and by whom all works are directed, in a perfect transcendence, through Nature."[28]

In this last step, devotion to the Supreme Self who is within all beings does not negate works or knowledge, but rather raises, vitalizes and fulfills the knowledge of the divine and then in turn unites this knowledge through devotion with works of which the egotic self is no longer the doer, but which are performed by man as a self-conscious and disinterested moment of the Supreme Self incarnated, as Prakriti, in concrete form. And once Nature itself is understood as Spirit, it itself can be understood doubly, as at once a lower form that is bound to *maya*, or the illusion of phenomenal multiplicity, and a higher form in which Prakriti is the dynamic expression of Purusha and as such must be recuperated to the spiritual autonomy of the Self.[29] This in turn sets in motion a distinctly evolutionary and progressive history, in which human life takes the necessary form of "a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives and what seeks to exist and live and between all that stands behind either."[30] This struggle of Self against ego, and of impersonal law against desirous will, not only sets in motion a movement from heteronomous individuality to an autonomous freedom that aligns man with history and sees man grow ever more proximate to divinity, but also sees the increasing realization of man's divinity not just in the sequestered domain of the otherworldly, but in a thoroughly this-worldly apotheosis—the practical rather than merely intellectual recognition of Nature *as* Prakriti *as* Purusha *as* Purushottama (the Supreme Self), and the dialectical unity of one's higher Self with both Brahman (the impersonal

[26] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 52–3.

[27] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: Second Series*, 197–8.

[28] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 52–3.

[29] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: Second Series*, 198.

[30] Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 58. For a discussion of the theme of ethical struggle in Aurobindo's post-Swadeshi writings, comparing Aurobindo's concept of *arya* to *jihad*, see Bose, "The Spirit and Form of an Ethical Polity."

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Absolute, eternal and unchanging) and Ishvar (the divine personality, endowed with will and agency). The result is a "higher Law by which the soul shall be free from this bondage of works" grounded in the conflicts and ignorance of ordinary human existence "and yet powerful to act and conquer in the vast liberty of its divine being."[31]

IV

Aurobindo had famously celebrated Bankim's genius on more than one occasion during his actively political period, hailing his contributions to national renewal in the 1890s, and going on to recognize his philosophical contributions to the nationalist cause in the Swadeshi years. Bankim had crucially recognized that national strength relied on moral strength, that moral strength relied on self-sacrifice, self-discipline and organization, and that these in turn depended ultimately on the infusion of "religious feeling into patriotic work . . . In *Dharmatattwa* the idea and in *Krishnacarit* the picture of a perfect and many-sided Karma Yoga is sketched, the crown of which shall be work for one's country and one's kind."[32] So it might come as something of a surprise to find that the one commentary to which Aurobindo explicitly contrasted his reading of the Gita in his own *Essays* was in fact Bankim's:

> The Gita can only be understood, like any great work of its kind, by studying it in its entirety and as a developing argument. But the modern interpreters, starting with the great writer Bankim Chandra Chatterji who first gave to the Gita this new sense of a Gospel of Duty, have laid an almost exclusive emphasis on the first three or four chapters,

especially their emphasis on the idea of equality, the necessity of acting, and the disinterestedness of action (*nishkama karma*):

> The rest of the eighteen chapters with their high philosophy are given a secondary importance . . . This is natural enough for the modern mind which is, or has been until yesterday, inclined to be impatient of metaphysical subtleties and far-off spiritual seekings, eager to get to work and, like Arjuna himself, mainly concerned for a workable law of works, a *dharma*. But it is the wrong way to handle this scripture.[33]

Aurobindo was certainly not suggesting that the Gita's emphasis on the centrality of works should be read allegorically as a reference to preparation for a renunciative, otherworldly spirituality.[34] In the end, Aurobindo firmly endorses, as the highest teaching of the Gita, worldly activity that is at once in accordance

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31 Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 39.

32 *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 91–119, 639–40.

33 Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 49–50.

34 Ibid., 41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the will of the divine and based on one's self-conscious identity with the divine—a return to action as a higher form of *karmayoga* that has subsumed both *jnanyoga* and *bhaktiyoga* into itself; or, more accurately, a form of *bhaktiyoga* whose vehicle is worldly action. And in practice, *karmayoga* meant the recognition that all forms of action—whether grounded in *tamas*, in *rajas* or in *sattva*—could become means to the immediate realization of the immanence of the divine. So whence his critique of Bankim's reading of the Gita as a doctrine of duty? Or, to put this another way, how had the Aurobindo of the post-Swadeshi period, at the same time as elaborating the conceptual impulses of Swadeshi thought, also broken with his own earlier nationalist commitments?

For Bankim, the dilemma that confronted Arjuna at Kurukshetra (the great battle between the rival cousins of the Mahabharata, before which Arjuna balked at the immanent slaughter of his kinsmen) was essentially one between *svadharma* (one's own particular obligations)—i.e. as a Kshatriya, engaging in a just war in defense of society and the dharmic order—and *adharma* (not-dharma)—i.e. giving in to the fear of causing his relatives' deaths. It is a dilemma of duty against sentiment, of self-sacrifice for the social good against the self-indulgence of personal attachments.[35] But for Aurobindo, Kurukshetra represented something much more profound indeed: "a practical crisis in the application of ethics and spirituality to human life." For at Kurukshetra, a man who is habituated to acting in accordance with the "Shastra, the moral and social code" of "*dharma*, that collective Indian conception of the religious, social and moral rule of conduct, and especially the rule of the station and function to which he belongs" as a member of the Kshatriya caste whose duty it is to uphold the law as worldly rulers, suddenly finds

> that it has led him to become the protagonist of a terrific and unparalleled slaughter, a monstrous civil war involving all the cultured Aryan nations which must lead to the complete destruction of the flower of their manhood and threatens their ordered civilization with chaos and collapse.[36]

It is, in other words, a scenario where a man

> hitherto satisfied with action and its current standards . . . finds himself cast by them into a hideous chaos where they are in violent conflict with each other and with themselves and there is no moral standing-ground left, nothing to lay hold of and walk by, no *dharma*.[37]

Arjuna "can find nowhere the *dharma*, nowhere the valid law of action." It is not Bankim's easier conflict of *svadharma* and *adharma* that he faced, but rather

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35 Harder, *Srimadbhagabadgita*, 76–7.

36 Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita: First Series*, 31.

37 Ibid., 34–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a conflict of *dharma* and *dharma*, where there is no ethical course of action available, and the only solution is in fact "to give up all *dharmas* except the one broad and vast rule of living consciously in the Divine and acting from that consciousness."[38] Arjuna was being thrust by his situation out of the realm of social values and into a necessary confrontation with the transcendent.

For Bankim, the devotion to god had as its necessary correlate a devotion to *dharma* and to patriotism, and this was certainly something that the Aurobindo of the Swadeshi era had had no hesitation in affirming. And nor surely would the post-Swadeshi Aurobindo simply renounce the nation-form as a medium of human progress. But the vision of Kurukshetra portrayed in the *Essays on the Gita* seems to present a vision of political action that only affirms the national in a strictly contingent manner—not as duty to the actual but as a moment in an unfolding of the universal. As a book of "spiritual life" rather than "practical ethics" that "replaces the conception of social duty by a divine obligation," the Gita does not call for the renunciation of duty, but rather calls on us to recognize that duty is a "relative term and depends upon our relations to others," whereas the divine law "depends on no social relation or conception of duty but on the awakened inner perception of man, the moral being."[39] Duty has its place in worldly affairs, but the divine should not be reduced to a merely social relation—on the contrary, the social relation should be raised to the divine. As such, Bankim's conception of devotion as bound to human happiness and social harmony was "to subordinate the higher plane to the lower."[40]

The very force of Bankim's theological argument was that human spirituality was immanent to ethical life and hence sociality, that devotion to Krishna as a many-sided ideal for emulation and devotion to society as the coordinated harmony of the totality of human action amounted to the same thing. This was surely what made Bankim such an icon in the Swadeshi era, however much various Swadeshists might demur from the letter of his theological and historical arguments. But the post-Swadeshi Aurobindo's juxtaposition of ethics and morality would seem to put the social at a crucial distance from the divine—not in an absolute sense of renunciation, but rather in the sense that the social was something that would have to be transformed by its subsumption to Spirit in ways hitherto unimagined within the merely national scale of life. The social and the spiritual had been torn asunder in a manner utterly incommensurable with the logic of Swadeshism, for which the new politics was itself to be an expression of socially immanent forms of ethical life that were at once universal in their human significance yet parochially national in their form of expression. Whereas

[38] Ibid., 36.

[39] Ibid., 47–49.

[40] Ibid., 48.

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for the Swadeshi Aurobindo national life provided an immanent foundation on which to build the future, for the post-Swadeshi Aurobindo national life could only be a medium to something greater and more encompassing of which it could not be the measure.

After his acquittal in the Alipore bomb case, Aurobindo would no longer participate in the national–political in the active way he had up through the Swadeshi years: "When he came out of jail [in 1909] Sri Aurobindo found the whole political aspect of the country altered," he would later recall in the third person; "most of the Nationalist leaders were in jail or in self-imposed exile and there was general discouragement and depression." Faced with the collapse of both the Swadeshi leadership and the social support that had buoyed it, he retreated to Pondicherry, absorbing himself in the

> practice of Yoga . . . He dropped all participation in any public political activity, refused more than one request to preside at sessions of the restored Indian National Congress and made a rule of abstention from any public utterance of any kind not connected with his spiritual activities.

His new work lay instead in the spiritual realm, whence, rather than renouncing his interest in India's or the world's fate, he would direct his energies beyond his own search for spiritual realization, using "spiritual force and silent spiritual action" to help lead "all life and all worldly activity into the scope of this spiritual consciousness and action and to base life on the Spirit and give it a spiritual meaning."[41]

The failure of Swadeshi was for Aurobindo a Kurukshetra, in which the social realm, national life, proved inadequate to ethical politics, leaving unmoored a Swadeshism grounded conceptually in the immanent ethical life of the popular. The forces of the popular were to be the spiritual arsenal with which the Swadeshi nationalist would battle Western materialism and its colonial manifestations. Despite the Swadeshi invocation of the national–popular as the standpoint for a critique of the Western propensity to privilege selfish interests over higher ethical and spiritual principles, the wider populace in Bengal appeared remarkably intent on pursuing precisely a politics of self-interest. They practically repudiated the politics of sacrifice endorsed by Swadeshists as both the foundation of their political practice and the ethical core of indigenous civilization that gave that politics its purchase—buying imported goods because they were cheaper, attending colonial educational institutions because they promised better prospects than their newly established nationalist alternatives, and, in the case of many Muslims and some members of the lower castes, repudiating the claims

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[41] *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, vol. 26, *On Himself, Compiled from Notes and Letters* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), 34–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the nationalist leadership to represent their interests and instead demanding minority representation and colonial policies that would promote their sectional interests against the wealthier and better-educated Hindu gentry of the region. This not only represented a practical threat to the viability of the Swadeshi political project; more fundamentally, it threatened to evacuate the popular of ethical significance, and thereby to destroy the very conceptual coherence of the Swadeshi political project. It was this peculiar moment of political isolation—an isolation not merely of failed hopes or of thinned ranks, but of diminished coherence, of a radical destabilization of the Swadeshist standpoint of critique—that marked the beginning of Aurobindo's launch into cosmopolitan gurudom, which is to say, his detachment of the categories of Swadeshi spiritualism from the immanence of the national–popular and its propulsion into the cosmic–futural. It was a moment of political failure, but also a spectacularly productive moment intellectually not just for Aurobindo himself, but for many of the Swadeshi Extremists.[42] But we must not understand this as a simple transition from nationalist particularism to cosmopolitan universalism. Rather we can trace a more complex shift from an ideological position whose orientation to particularism was grounded in universalistic principles to an ideological position whose orientation to universalism was contingently grounded in the particularity of the political history of early twentieth-century Bengal.

42 See Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, chap. 6.

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