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Aurobindo Ghose’s Early Approaches to Hindu-Muslim Relations (1906–1909)\(^1\)

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Abstract

With the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent decades, Aurobindo Ghose has received attention as a progenitor of the movement. This paper investigates the issue by focusing on the period, 1906-1909, when Aurobindo was active in Bengal’s svadeśī movement, and the British administration issued the Minto-Morley reforms. During this period, Aurobindo supported a pluralistic vision of India’s past and future. Yet, that vision did not address the concrete Hindu-Muslim issues that arose in the svadeśī movement. After the demise of the svadeśī movement, Aurobindo continued to develop his approach towards India’s Muslim populations in an affirming manner. Yet, alarmed at the 1909 Minto-Morley reforms, which established reserved seats and a separate electorate for Muslims, Aurobindo articulated a Hindu primacy. Still, he continued to insist through 1909 that Muslims have an essential place in India’s national identity.

In 1992, a Hindu mob made international news by destroying the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. In the wake of this destruction, international tensions in South Asia increased and thousands were killed in rioting. Since the destruction of the masjid, Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) has become a name invoked and discussed in conjunction with the current political and religious situation.\(^2\) Hindu nationalists, for instance, tend to hold him in high regard for his vision of a relationship between the modern Indian nation and India’s historic Hindu spirituality. Corresponding to that, many Indian academics believe that Aurobindo contributed to today’s aggressive Hindu nationalism. For instance, the political scientist, Jyotirmaya Sharma, writes that “Aurobindo’s contribution to the rise of political Hindutva is second to none.”\(^3\)

To see Aurobindo’s name linked to communal strife would surprise a great number of his admirers in the West. Through his writings from 1914 to 1921, he gained a worldwide reputation as a spiritual thinker. These writings have a modern, enlightened, and universalistic feel. For instance, biological evolution figures prominently in his central work, The Life Divine. Furthermore, Aurobindo was influenced by Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity” and pioneered a spirituality beyond religion. Additionally, he wrote about a

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Godhead that lies behind all the different religions. Lastly, there is a long history of interest in Aurobindo among those involved with Hindu-Christian dialogue. A relatively recent attempt to cull insight from Aurobindo’s thought for the sake of interreligious harmony is Richard Hartz’s *The Clasp of Civilizations*, a play on Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*.

One of Hartz’s colleagues at the Aurobindo Archives in Pondicherry, Peter Heehs, traces in “Uses of Sri Aurobindo” how Aurobindo gained a reputation as a father of today’s Hindu nationalism. To begin, during the time of his involvement in the protests against British rule in the 1900s, Aurobindo fused some classic Hindu themes with the politics of revolution. The British authorities regarded fusions of religion and politics as dangerous. The British considered Aurobindo as a potentially dangerous figure, but according to Heehs, his “Indian contemporaries regarded him as a religious man as well as a politician, but few saw this as cause for concern... no important Indian writer condemned him as a ‘religious nationalist’ before the 1920s.”

A key change in the Indian assessment of Aurobindo was M. N. Roy’s 1922 work, *India in Transition*. Roy identified Aurobindo as “the philosopher of aggressive nationalism,... who adapted the teachings of Vivekananda to political purposes.” In the 1930s, this aggressive nationalism came to be considered as alienating to Muslims because of its Hindu character. For instance, K. R. Kripalani wrote that “the glory” that the new, nationalistic spirit promoted and the passion that it awakened were “so intensely Hindu that the Muslims were automatically left out. Not that they were deliberately excluded. But, at the very best, the Muslims were advised to adopt the Mother which the Hindus claimed as their own by ties infinitely more sacred... It left the Muslims cold.” In the 1960s and 1970s, Amales Tripathi, Sumit Sarkar, Romila Thapar, and Bipan Chandra continued that same evaluation.

In the 2000s, in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Hindu nationalist uses of Aurobindo’s name, Bhikhu Parekh and Jyotirmaya Sharma capped off the developing trend by considering him as a progenitor of today’s Hindu nationalism. According to Sharma, Aurobindo viewed Hinduism and Islam as irreconcilable and advocated a lawless warfare against the latter. Sharma wrote that “absent” from Aurobindo’s thought in his later years was “any idea of a liberal democratic nation, based on an impersonal and formal notion of rule of law, respect for plurality and ensuring a minimum amount of liberty for all. Rather, it was a war of incommensurable ideas of identity politics masquerading as rival notions of morality.”

Heehs wrote a series of studies criticizing conflations, in both political and academic contexts, of Aurobindo’s thought with Hindu nationalism. This article will consider two of Heehs’s studies: “The Uses of Sri Aurobindo” and “Bengali Religious Nationalism and Communalism.” The first is the historiographical study, cited above, showing how Aurobindo acquired a reputation as a progenitor of today’s political Hindutva. Heehs criticizes that history of scholarship by observing that the claim that Aurobindo’s use of Hindu themes was alienating to Muslims is a claim made repeatedly without proof, scholars “simply” disseminating “the opinions of their predecessors.” Furthermore, Heehs notes, “many of the writers used the proof-text style
of citation and argument, not even trying to arrive at a contextual understanding” of Aurobindo’s writings.14

In “Bengali Religious Nationalism,” Heehs distinguished Aurobindo’s nationalism from later Hindu nationalism. According to him, a key feature of the former is inclusivity, and a key feature of the latter is exclusivity. Heehs concludes the article by stating, “to assert that... the Hindu Right descends directly from Bengali religious nationalism because some general notions of the RSS-VHP-BJP combine are found in the thought of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and others is to commit the genetic fallacy. Golwalkar is no more the direct descendent of Vivekananda than Mussolini is of Mazzini or Zhirinovskii of Khomiakov.”15

In addition to Heehs’s corpus, Hartz made a critique in Clasp of Civilizations of Sharma’s ideas.16 However, Heehs and Hartz are relatively lone voices of scholarship against a dominant trend of conflating Aurobindo and Hindutva. Thus, the issue needs more research. Aurobindo’s writings are complex and voluminous, and his thought went through many different phases. Furthermore, as Heehs noted, studies on Aurobindo and Hindu nationalism have generally dipped into his writings without attention to context. Therefore, this article will examine only the period 1906–1909, paying careful attention to Aurobindo’s words, their context, and the progression in his thought. These years were the critical period of Aurobindo’s involvement in politics. This study will reinforce Heehs’s point that Aurobindo’s nationalism and later Hindu nationalism are distinct.

In terms of Aurobindo’s writings, this study will rely mainly on two periodicals that Aurobindo edited: Bande Mataram (1906–1908) and Karmayogin (1909–1910).17 The study will also dialogue with Heehs’s “Uses of Sri Aurobindo” and “Bengali Religious Nationalism,” Kripalani’s “Fifty Years,” and Chandra’s History of Modern India. It will also dialogue with David Johnson’s The Religious Roots of Indian Nationalism and Rini Bhattacharya Mehta’s “The Bhagavadgita, Pistol, and the Lone Bhadralok.”18 It will not cover Sharma’s influential study, Hindutva, nor Hartz’s response, as these lie outside the period of time covered in this paper.

The Svadeśī Movement and a Pluralistic Approach

Aurobindo was born in 1872 in Bengal. He belonged to an emerging middle class known as the “bhadralok,” which consisted of Hindu Bengalis with a Western education. The bhadralok had new financial resources and many other opportunities, and they contributed to a period of cultural flourishing. Also, there was a new political awareness and consciousness among some of the bhadralok, which they expressed through the activities of the Indian National Congress. Aurobindo belonged to this privileged class. His father was a medical doctor, he was educated in the West, and he spent thirteen years in the employ of the princely ruler of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwar III.

While in England, where he was primarily raised, Aurobindo developed an interest in revolutionary politics. Those interests later found expression in the wake of the partition of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal. There were several reasons for the new arrangement. These included making the region more governable, weakening the growing power of the bhadralok by making them a minority, and
giving more opportunities to the Muslims of East Bengal and Assam, many of whom were materially poor. Not surprisingly, many Bengalis were outraged by the partition. They held protest meetings, boycotted British goods, and patronized indigenous goods. These activities constituted the classic “svadeśī movement.”

Partition and svadeśī generated considerable controversy in the Indian National Congress. Established in 1885 as a parliamentary body, its main activity was passing resolutions and forwarding them to the British, advising them on their rule. With the svadeśī movement underway, a young group in the Congress expressed impatience with its traditional approach. Rather than petitioning the British they believed Indians should thoroughly boycott all British institutions, making British rule impossible. Their aim went far beyond the repeal of the partition to “svarāj,” political independence. That group became known as the “Extremists” and those opposed, which consisted of much of the traditional leadership, were the “Moderates.”

In 1905, Aurobindo began to become involved in the svadeśī movement, and in 1906, he became the chief editor of the revolutionary newspaper, Bande Mataram. In addition to waging a war of ideas with the Moderates, Aurobindo used his editorials to try to inspire the populace of India with the goal of svarāj and to steel them for a long and difficult struggle. To accomplish these ends, he and other Extremists sometimes drew upon Hindu religious themes. For instance, in the much discussed 1905 pamphlet, “Bhawani Mandir,” Aurobindo conceived of the people of India as a vast goddess: “The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred millions of people.”

Later, in Bande Mataram, he attempted to channel the religiosity of Hindus along patriotic lines: “True patriotism... sees God as the Mother in our country, God as Shakti in the mass of our countrymen, and religiously devotes itself to their service and their liberation from present sufferings and servitude.” As seen, in 1936, Kripalani wrote that this was alienating to the Muslims.

Aurobindo also drew upon heroic themes from the Mahabharata. He was skeptical that India could gain independence without an armed struggle, so he addressed religious scruples against violence by writing that “politics is the work of the Kshatriya and it is the virtues of the Kshatriya we must develop if we are to be morally fit for freedom. But the first virtue of the Kshatriya is not to bow his neck to an unjust yoke but to protect his weak and suffering countrymen.” However, it is important to realize that the use of religious themes in Bande Mataram was often utilitarian, for Aurobindo’s father was an atheist, and he grew up as an agnostic. Aurobindo said of his revolutionary days that he had had no interest in spirituality and little faith in Hindu beliefs.

Though drawing on Hindu themes, Aurobindo did not intend the svadeśī movement to be an essentially Hindu movement. In September 1906, after the first month of being an editor, he wrote “Last Friday’s Folly,” an article in which he indicated that India’s different religions all have contributions to make to the greater whole. An independent India would be “a union of different nationalities, each preserving its own specific elements both of organisation and ideal, each communicating to the others what they lack in either thought or character.... The Mahomedan,
the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Christian in India will not have to cease to be Mahomedan, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian, in any sense of the term.” Aurobindo based this vision on the fact of India’s historic interreligious harmony, writing that a part of India’s uniqueness was that it was not merely a “meeting place of tribes” but of “grown up nations with developed social and religious lines of their own.” Bipan Chandra Pal, another major Extremist leader and the founder of Bande Mataram, had a similar model. Although their visions of interreligious cooperation were commendable, Heehs points out that Aurobindo and Pal had no active program of outreach to Muslims to include them in the svadesi movement.

Aurobindo’s model of interreligious cooperation can be referred to as “pluralistic.” This is because it elevates and privileges no particular religion, regarding all of them as significant. Yet, it is somewhat awkward to apply that label, for the general concern in the theology of religions, to which the terminology of “pluralism,” “inclusivism,” and “exclusivism” belongs, to routes to divine reality. However, Aurobindo’s concern at that time was not with divine reality but with practical, political concerns.

The pluralistic models of Aurobindo and Pal were admirable, but they seem like ineffectual flags and banners next to a grave crisis of early 1907. There was significant Muslim participation in the svadesi movement, especially in the beginning. However, on the whole, Muslims stayed out of the movement. Apparently, they did not feel that they had anything to gain from the patronage of svadesi goods, the repeal of partition, or national independence. This was especially true in East Bengal, where many Muslims were peasants renting from Hindu landlords. Muslim peasants tended to be reluctant to pay higher prices for svadesi goods and the Hindu landlords could be coercive in their approach. Not surprisingly, in March 1907, Hindu-Muslim riots emerged in East Bengal.

The causes of the rioting are debatable, and one can question whether the svadesi movement was a cause. In Aurobindo’s time, Indian nationalists and British officials had different explanations for it. The nationalists focused on the anti-Hindu preaching which had contributed to the riots, believing that the British had manipulated the Nawab of Dacca, Salimulla Khan, in such a way that he encouraged this preaching. The British, however, focused on coercive actions by svadesi landlords and the enthusiasm generated by svadesi leadership that they believed caused disturbance. Aurobindo placed blame squarely on the British and on “rowdy elements of the Mahomedan population.” In fact, he considered the riots not as “a fight between Hindus and Mahomedans but between the [British] bureaucrats and Swadeshists.”

Considering the riots as a proxy conflict with the British, Aurobindo suggested that the riots would continue spreading, that “sparks of the growing conflagration would set fire to Western Bengal,” and that a war between the British and the Indians would emerge. Accordingly, he advised svadesi protestors that, although they should not initiate violence, they should be prepared to respond to violence with violence. For instance, he stated, “The right of self-defence entitles us not merely to defend our heads but to retaliate on those of the head-breakers.” Also, he considered those Indians who did not cooperate with the boycott of
British goods as traitors to the nation and wrote that they must be socially boycotted.\(^{35}\)

How did Aurobindo feel about the Muslims in the wake of this crisis? To begin, as seen, he placed blame for the riots on the British, not the Muslims, excepting for a “rowdy” element among them.\(^{36}\) Aurobindo thus remained positive about Islam and Hindu-Muslim relations.\(^{37}\) This is clear in two editorials written during the period of the riots, both entitled “Shall India Be Free?” in which he discussed Mughal rule in a positive light. Aurobindo stated that the Mughals became insiders to India, that they did not fundamentally alter all of the preexisting power dynamics, and that they did not consolidate all power in themselves.\(^{38}\) Furthermore, he wrote of the historic conflicts not in terms of an inherent opposition between Hinduism and Islam but in more general terms as an inevitable clash between “the religion of the” conquered “people” and “the religion of their rulers.” In those conflicts, “India..., did not lose its power of organic readjustment and development.”\(^{39}\) Finally, in an article written a year later, he attributed current Hindu-Muslim strife to the British policy of divide and rule, and argued that constructive efforts to develop the villages could be a powerful means to a renewed Hindu-Muslim amity.\(^{40}\)

Aurobindo’s ongoing confidence in Hindu-Muslim relations, during a dark period, is commendable and significant. Yet, there was a problematic aspect to it. He was confident, in part, because he primarily blamed the British for the riots, not the Muslims. Regardless of whatever truth lie in that assignment of blame, it overlooks the fact that many Muslims might have had legitimate problems with the svadesī movement, which historians like Sarkar argued they did.\(^{41}\) Before the riots, Aurobindo proposed his pluralistic model of interreligious cooperation, but it was not equal to the challenges of the times. Although all the players in that model, including Christianity and Islam, were conceived as being on a level playing field, in reality, the field was not level. How can there be genuine cooperation when there are disparities of power, resources, and influence between the different players?\(^{42}\)

Given the tensions surrounding the svadesī movement, it will not surprise the reader to know that, in 1907, the svadesī movement was declining and that it died out in 1908. Sarkar claimed it failed because it did not “draw in the peasant masses and... bridge the gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims.”\(^{43}\) The conjunction of religion and politics in the svadesī movement is often regarded as a main culprit in the movement’s demise.\(^{44}\) In particular, as seen, Kripalani’s 1936 article singled out the imagery of divine motherhood.\(^{45}\) In later decades, Chandra and Johnson echoed Kripalani’s complaint.\(^{46}\) Heehs pointed out that the complaint is generally recycled over and over, with no supporting evidence.\(^{47}\) That is true of Chandra’s History of Modern India and Johnson’s Religious Roots. However, Johnson made a further, related point that will be explored in the next section of this paper.

Mehta also raised the issue of Aurobindo’s use of the theme of divine motherhood, but made an innovative move. Rather than directly discussing Muslim alienation, she discussed the attempt of the nationalists to be spokespeople for the nation. By using the inclusive imagery of motherhood, they were projecting themselves onto the nation: “The continual discursive privileging of the motherland ideal
by the dominant advocates of nationalism—the bhadraloks—overshadowed any question regarding the legitimacy of their representation of the entire nation.... India spoke through them.... The emphasis was on the historical inevitability of the nationalist future, not on the immediate or eventual resolution of the gross economic injustices that affected the greater population who had neither the leisure nor the opportunity to theorize their own positions.”

Though not specifically discussing the Muslim population, Mehta’s general point seems an apt characterization of Aurobindo’s response to the 1907 East Bengal riots. As Mehta also stated, “Instead of questioning his prescribed method, Aurobindo... chose to treat inter-community strife as an inconvenient distraction from the ultimate goal of nationhood.”

**Imprisonment and an Inclusivistic Approach**

As the svadesī movement declined, terrorism took the stage. Sarkar considered the rise of terrorism as a response to the failure of the svadesī movement to rouse the masses: terrorism was a form of elite action which took the place of mass action. There are contradictory reports about Aurobindo’s stance towards the terrorism and his level of involvement. However, after the famous Muzaffarpur bombing in spring 1908, he and a coterie of conspirators, which included his younger brother, Barin, were arrested.

Aurobindo’s imprisonment could only have made a profound impression on him. He was no stranger to hardship for he and his elder brothers had undergone a period of abandonment and severe poverty as youths in England. Yet, Aurobindo belonged to the bhadralok, he was the employ of the ruler of Baroda for thirteen years, and he gained much attention and esteem as a svadesī leader. In prison, he was torn from that life as he suffered solitary confinement and numerous other hardships and indignities. Also, this privileged man was with the “peasants, ironmonger, potter, the doms and the bagdis,” going through the same experiences as they. Those experiences led Aurobindo, according to Alex Wolfers, to develop “an insurrectionary and universalist Hindu metaphysics in which divinity intervened in human history on the side of the oppressed.”

This study will now turn to an aspect of Wolfers’s findings. To begin, in the months prior to his imprisonment, under the direction of a yogī, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, Aurobindo had some Advaitic experiences. In prison, his spiritual experiences continued. There, he no longer had “the pull of a thousand worldly desires” nor the “attachment towards numerous activities,” but was alone with the divine. Aurobindo claimed he came to see God in all things, including “the tree in front of my cell.... the bars of my cell,” and in the “grating that did duty for a door.” In fact, “it was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me.”

Thus, after his imprisonment Aurobindo, said that “I realised in the mind, I realised in the heart,... the truths of the Hindu religion. They became living experiences to me.”

Furthermore, the “thieves and dacoits” made a deep impression on Aurobindo by putting him “to shame by their sympathy, their kindness, the humanity triumphant over such adverse circumstances.” There was also a “Mohammedan convict” who “used to love the accused” conspirators “like his own children.” Accordingly, Aurobindo came to believe that “the Lord... dwells in every body.”
Furthermore, “the Lord comes to” those who offer their lives in “the service of the Lord” and sees him “in all men, in all nations, in his own land, in the miserable, the poor, the fallen and the sinner.” Consequently, “the hard cover of” Aurobindo’s life “opened up and a spring of love for all creatures gushed from within.”

In May 1909, acquitted and released from prison, Aurobindo resumed political activities by initiating the English and Bengali periodicals, Karmayogin and Dharma. In the first issue of Karmayogin, in the editorial “Swaraj and the Musulman,” Aurobindo discussed Hindu-Muslim relations. An element appeared in this editorial that was missing from his earlier, pluralistic model of religion and his editorial on Hindu-Muslim relations. This new element was the approach of sympathetic understanding: “Hindu-Mahomedan unity... must be sought... in the heart and the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought. We shall do well in trying to solve the problem to remember that misunderstanding is the most fruitful cause of our differences, that love compels love and that strength conciliates the strong. We must strive to remove the causes of misunderstanding by a better mutual knowledge and sympathy.”

In accord with this new stance, Aurobindo wrote in the inaugural issue of Karmayogin that the journal will “make it a main part” of its “work to place Mahomed and Islam in a new light before our readers, to spread juster views of Mahomedan history and civilisation, to appreciate the Musulman’s place in our national development and the means of harmonising his communal life with our own.” Aurobindo wrote in the first issue of Karmayogin, in “Ourselves,” that the journal will explore the “knowledge” of what it means to be Indian, whether that knowledge be “the Vedanta or Sufism, the temple or the mosque... whatever national asset we have, indigenous or acclimatised, it [Karmayogin] will seek to make known, to put in its right place and appreciate.”

In “Swaraj and the Musulman,” Aurobindo founded his new approach of sympathy and listening on a religious inclusivism. Earlier, he had established his pluralistic model on the historic fact of Hindu-Muslim unity and the present need for political cooperation. Though previously interested mainly in politics, following his experiences in prison, spiritual interests became more central to Aurobindo. Accordingly, in Karmayogin, he affirmed Hindu-Muslim relations on an explicitly religious basis: “We must extend the unfaltering love of the patriot to our Musulman brother, remembering always that in him too Narayana dwells and to him too our Mother has given a permanent place in her bosom.”

Aurobindo’s inclusivism in “Swaraj and the Musulman,” which espouses love and empathetic understanding, is commendable. However, inclusivisms have a reverse side to them. They affirm another religion, but they do so on the terms of the religion of the inclusivist. An inclusivism maps other religions onto the religious world of the inclusivist and thereby subordinates them. For instance, with regard to Aurobindo, David Johnson pointed out that “to the Muslim, acceptance of his scheme of reconciliation is actually acceptance of another religious point of view.” This contributed, according to Johnson, to the alienation of the Muslims which Chandra and other scholars have commented on. Yet, although Heehs challenged the idea that Aurobindo’s political use of religion...
contributed to that alienation, Heehs nevertheless observed that his inclusivist affirmation of Islam did not draw Muslims in. “Few Muslims were comforted by” it, excepting “highly cultivated men like Abul Kalam Azad.”

Although Aurobindo’s new, inclusivistic approach in the first issue of Karmayogin had that limitation, one should not fault him over much on that issue. If one has a worldview, one is going to understand other people in terms of that worldview. For instance, the Freudian understands religious beliefs and practices in terms of frustrated desire, not in the terms by which the Christian or Muslim primarily understands himself or herself. The relevant question is the extent to which the inclusivist, while adhering to a particular worldview, can affirm another party and be open to him or her. In the first issue of Karmayogin, in intending to write about India’s Islamic heritage, Aurobindo was intending to stretch his limits and the limits of the journal’s readership. In endorsing an empathetic understanding, Aurobindo was making a step outside the elitism which Mehta accused him of.

The Minto-Morley Reforms and Hindu Primacy

Aurobindo intended, in Karmayogin, to instill a positive appreciation of Islam. However, in the ten months that the journal ran, he did not carry out this plant. Instead, in terms of Hindu-Muslim relations, a crisis occupied his attention. This was the Indian Councils Act of 1909, more commonly known as the Minto-Morley reforms. The act met some longstanding goals of the Indian National Congress by establishing a system of elections and expanding the number of Indian seats on the governing councils. On top of those changes, it reserved some seats for Muslims and established a separate, Muslim electorate.

The issue of reserved seats and a separate electorate had roots in the Simla Deputation of October 1906. While the Moderates and Extremists of the Congress were wrangling with each other over the svadesī movement, a circle of influential Muslims from Dacca, the Deccan, and Aligarh met with the Viceroy, Lord Minto. They did not feel that their best interests lie with either the Moderates or the Extremists. They believed that, in an electoral system, whether in a colonized India or an independent India, the Muslims would be dwarfed by the Hindus. These Muslim leaders thought that British rule was better for India than independence, for the British could guarantee the interests of the different segments of Indian society. Should an electoral system be established, they hoped that it would include reserved seats and a separate electorate for Muslims. Later that year, these leaders established the All-India Muslim League to advance their political interests.

In Bande Mataram and Karmayogin, Aurobindo wrote about the activities of the Muslim League. On the one hand, he did not believe that the British would grant reserved seats and a separate electorate, but on the other hand, he considered the activities of the Muslim League as healthy exercises that would contribute to Indian nationalism. Later, when the reforms were issued in November 1909, Aurobindo was shocked, considering them as a blow to Indian nationalism: “We will not for a moment accept separate electorates or separate representation, not because we are opposed to a large Mahomedan influence..., but because we will be no party to a distinction which recognises Hindu and Mahomedan as
permanently separate political units and thus precludes the growth of a single and indivisible Indian nation.” Also, he had earlier written that reserved seats and a separate electorate would be a new expression of the British policy of divide and rule, for a Muslim electorate loyal to Britain would be a counterweight to Hindu demands.74

Not surprisingly, with the release of the reforms there was an increase in Hindu-Muslim tension.75 In ominous language, probably referring to John Morley and Lord Minto, Aurobindo wrote that “the question of separate representation... is one of those momentous issues raised in haste by a statesman unable to appreciate the forces with which he is dealing, which bear fruit no man expected and least of all the ill-advised Frankenstein who was first responsible for its creation.”76 These forces included an emerging, reactionary Hindu nationalism which sought to advance the political interests of Hindus. Later this nationalism would give birth to the Hindu Mahasabha.

Just as Aurobindo expressed disapproval of the new reforms which divided Hindus and Muslims into separate political blocs, he also expressed disapproval in the editorial, “Hindu Sabha,” of the new Hindu nationalism. This nationalism would reinforce the political division by pitting “the mass and force of a united Hinduism against the intensity of a Mahomedan self-assertion.”77 A reason that such divisive nationalism must be avoided is that “under modern conditions India can only exist as a whole,” not as separate territories as in times past.78 Furthermore, India is “a country where Mahomedan and Hindu live intermingled and side by side,” so there is no “geographical base” for a “Hindu nationality.”79

Although eschewing Hindu nationalism, at the end of “Hindu Sabha,” Aurobindo took a different turn. He insisted that, in an Indian nationalism, Hinduism must have priority, although the Muslims are to be included: “Our ideal therefore is an Indian Nationalism, largely Hindu in its spirit and traditions,... but wide enough also to include the Moslem and his culture and traditions and absorb them into itself.”80 The reason for the Hindu priority is that, although the Muslim presence permeates India, Hindus are connected with the land in a way that Muslims are not: “The Hindu made the land and the people and persists, by the greatness of his past, his civilisation and his culture and his invincible virility, in holding it.” Furthermore, Aurobindo pointed out that the Muslim leaders based their separatist stance, in part, on loyalties that lie outside of India: “The Mahomedans base their separateness and their refusal to regard themselves as Indians first and Mahomedans afterwards on the existence of great Mahomedan nations to which they feel themselves more akin, in spite of our common birth and blood, to us. Hindus have no such resource. For good or evil, they are bound to the soil and to the soil alone.”81

With the shock of the Minto-Morley reforms, the subordinationist aspect of Aurobindo’s inclusivism came to the fore and the approach of sympathetic understanding receded. In “Hindu Sabha,” the Muslim appears as somewhat of an unruly outsider who must be subordinated to the whole.82 Just as Aurobindo earlier did not take into account Muslim concerns regarding the svadesī movement, neither did he take into account Muslim concerns about electoral politics. As Heehs pointed out, nationalists like Aurobindo “may
have been right in arguing that reservations tended to divide the nascent nation; but they had no viable alternatives to offer. Aurobindo remained opposed to special concessions to Muslims even when more practical politicians realized that they were necessary. Some positive political gesture was needed to demonstrate that the Hindu majority was not, ... ‘homogenizing difference’.”

Although asserting Hindu primacy, it must be kept in mind that Aurobindo eschewed Hindu nationalism itself. Furthermore, just as he had maintained faith in Hindu-Muslim relations in spite of the 1907 riots, he maintained faith in spite of the 1909 Minto-Morley reforms. As he wrote in “The Country and Nationalism,” in the month following the release of the reforms, “harmony will be achieved;... Brother is unable to understand brother, we do not sympathise with each other’s feelings, between heart and heart there are immense barriers. These have to be overcome with much effort. Yet one need not fear.” Also, without the Muslim component of the nation, “we shall... deprive ourselves of the full flowering of nationalism.”

Conclusion

In two main ways, Peter Heehs challenged the conflation of Aurobindo’s nationalism with today’s Hindu nationalism. The first was showing the distinctions between the two nationalisms. The second was illustrating the gradual genesis of the conflation. This paper confirms Heehs’s position that Aurobindo’s stance towards Muslims, at least during the period under consideration, 1906–1909, was positive and very different from today’s exclusivistic Hindu nationalism. Even more, Aurobindo maintained his positive stance in the face of the 1907 East Bengal riots and the tamer issue of the 1909 Minto-Morley reforms. Regarding Heehs’s second approach, an examination of Chandra’s History of Modern India and Johnson’s Religious Roots illustrate his point that not much historical evidence is given that Aurobindo’s political use of religious themes was alienating to Muslims.

Yet, the issue of Aurobindo’s stance towards the Muslims was complex. He affirmed that Muslims have an essential place in the Indian nation. Yet, he made that affirmation from a position of societal privilege. He was insensitive, for instance, to Muslim concerns about the svadesi movement and electoral politics. Muslims belong in India, but Hindus set the terms. Still, his experiences in prison put Aurobindo, at least temporarily, in more of a listening stance.

In 1910, Aurobindo left behind his political involvement, departing Bengal for Pondicherry. Over the next forty years, until his death in 1950, he acquired a worldwide reputation as a spiritual master. During those decades, his political interests and concerns stretched far beyond Indian nationalism to worldwide issues. Also, Aurobindo dropped the nationalistic appropriation of the theme of divine motherhood, the appropriation which many later found highly problematic. Also, he condemned religious persecution as being opposed to the new “religion of humanity,” which he was advocating.

During his forty decades in Pondicherry, Aurobindo rarely wrote about Islam. However, he and his disciples discussed Islam in conjunction with contemporary Indian politics. Mainly on the basis of extant discussions, Jyotirmaya Sharma concluded that Aurobindo was a progenitor of today’s
Still, what Aurobindo stated during those decades, both in writings and in conversations, merits careful study. His statements from those later decades, just as his earlier statements from 1906–1909, need to be examined in their historical context and in the context of his overall system of thought.

Notes

1 I thank Michael McLaughlin, a past president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and author of Knowledge, Consciousness and Religious Conversion in Lonergan and Aurobindo, for organizing the society’s 2020 panel on current politics and religion in India, which led to this paper. I am grateful to the reviewers for their valuable feedback. I also thank Faith Bonitz, whose work as a librarian during this time of pandemic was indispensable to the paper.


7 Ibid.


11 Ibid., 159–60.

12 Sharma, Hindutva, 82–83.


16 Hartz, The Clasp of Civilizations, 145.


20Ibid., 6:237.

21Kripalani, “Fifty Years of Growth,” 57.


25Ibid., 6:168.


32Ibid., 7:370. For some other discussions see also Ibid., 6:213–18, 7:482–85.

33Ibid., 6:314.

34Ibid., 6:294.


36Ibid., 6:217.

37In contrast to my findings, Andrew Sartori argues that, in conjunction with the *svadeshi* movement, Aurobindo came to fear Muslim power. See Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 211–15. His finding is based on a 1908 article, “Back to the Land,” in the 1972 edition of *Bande Mataram* in the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*. However, the original editors of *Bande Mataram* did not sign their names, and the editors at the Aurobindo Archives of the 2002 edition of *Bande Mataram* in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* did not include this article. For the principles which guided them in attributing editorials to Aurobindo, see Ghose, *Complete Works*, 7:1147–63. Although my study disagrees with Sartori, it will also show that in 1909, Aurobindo did become concerned about a growing Muslim power.


39Ibid., 6:368; see also ibid., 7:811–813, 815, 910, 1014, 20:442–43.

40Ibid., 8:1050–51. In this editorial, rather than the 1907 riots, Aurobindo had more in mind the growing tension over the coming Minto-Morley reforms which will be discussed later in this paper.

41Also, to use the language of treason, to prescribe shunning, and to counsel violence in the face of violence would not have helped to
resolve tensions. However, in his discussions of violence during the rioting, Aurobindo seemed more to have in mind future conflicts with the British than the riots at that time; on the whole, the thrust of the discussions was towards the future. See, for instance, Ghose, Complete Works, 6:294, 443–44.  

42For Sarkar’s critique of this model, see The Swadeshi Movement, 359–60.

43Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, 427. For an exploration of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that came in the wake of the riots, see Sartori, Bengal, 197–219.

44See, for instance, Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, 266–69.

45Kripalani, “Fifty Years of Growth,” 57.


49Ibid., 91.

50Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, 69, 391.

51For an assessment of the evidence, see Peter Heehs, “Aurobindo Ghose and Revolutionary Terrorism,” South Asia 15, no. 2 (1992), 47–69.


55Ghose, Bengali Writings, 261–62.

56Ghose, Complete Works, 8:6.

57Ibid., 8:9.

58Ibid., 8:7.

59Ghose, Bengali Writings, 329.

60Ibid., 277.

61Ibid., 278.

62Ibid., 295.

63Ghose, Complete Works, 8:31. See also ibid., 7:1050.

64Ibid., 8:31.

65Ibid., 8:20–21.

66Ibid., 8:31. See also ibid., 7:795–96, 1106; 8:11, 26, 70, 81–82.

67For instance, for two evaluations of Islam relative to Aurobindo’s understanding of Vedanta, see ibid., 7:929–30, 945–46.


69Ibid., 105–106.

70Heehs, The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, 190.

71For the only reference in Aurobindo’s editorials, at that time, to these events see Ghose, Complete Works, 6:211.

72Ibid., 7:778–79, 796, 1050; 8:30–31, 46.

73Ibid., 8:289. For further assessments of the reforms, with regard to Hindu-Muslim relations, see ibid., 8:322–26, 338–39, 356–61.

74Ibid., 7:778.

75For some accounts of tension during this general period see ibid., 8:205, 261–63, 294, 303, 403–407.

76Ibid., 8:287.

77Ibid., 8:303.

78Ibid., 8:304.

79Ibid., 8:305.

80Ibid.

81Ibid.

82See Heehs’s assessment in Ghose, Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond, 31–32. Heehs’s assessment of this editorial is milder than mine.

In this passage, Aurobindo was not referring to the tensions around the Minto-Morley reforms but to the lack of a common Indian language. Ghose, *Bengali Writings*, 224.


Ibid., 25:565.

His lengthiest discussion of Islam is found in ibid., 21:441–44.


**Acknowledgements**

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