

Sri Aurobindo: High Priest of Terror or Poppy Merchant?

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Before his elevation to the status of "the greatest mystic-philosopher of present-day India," Sri Aurobindo was among India's most radical Nationalist leaders. Indeed, according to the Home Office in Whitehall, he was the *dada* (lit. "elder brother") of Bengali extremism and "terrorism." Today he might be referred to as the "godfather" of the Bengali extremists, but since he was only 32 years old when the British referred to him as the *dada* of radical Nationalism, "elder brother" is arguably more apt.

Arabinda Akroyd Ghose, third son of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose, an Edinburgh-trained surgeon in the Indian Civil Service and rabid Anglophile, was born on 15 August 1872. His fine intellect was "colonized" as follows. From the age of 5 until that of 7 he was educated by the nuns of the Loretto Convent School in Darjeeling. In his 7th year, together with his younger brother, Barindra, he was given into the stringent care of the Reverend William H. Drewitt, a Methodist minister in an exurb of Manchester, England. The instructions given Drewitt by Dr. Ghose comprised two conditions: (1) that the brothers be prepared for entry into the Indian Civil Service, then the primary means of access to power for the Indian middle classes under the Raj; and (2) that they be completely insulated from the taint of anything 'Indian.'

Ghose excelled in school and at the age of 12 matriculated at the St. Paul's School in London where he demonstrated superior potential in languages and in classical studies. In 1890 Ghose went up to Kings' College in Cambridge University and received a first in "classical tripos" in 1892. After coming down from university, he twice sat for and failed the qualifying examinations for entry into the Indian Civil Service. To be more accurate, it would be better to note that he twice "rode for" qualification, failing the equestrian examination. Having closed off his only access to the imperial bureaucracy in India, Ghose then returned to India in late 1892 to become the private secretary to the Maharajah of Baroda and a teacher of classical and modern European languages in a local college.

Apart from the symbolic act of divesting himself of that most Victorian of names, Akroyd, and his likely participation in the Indian *majlis* at Cambridge, virtually everything in Ghose's first 20 years seems calculated to have produced the ideal colonial subject, "a man just like us in everything but colour" (as Macauley put it). No political leader in the Indian freedom movement, bar none, had been so completely socialized into the elitist strata of the Victorian intellectual traditions, and, not surprisingly, none proved so radical. In 1893-94, in a series of articles in a Bombay weekly, *Indu Prakash*, young Ghose reflected upon the ironies of European education for Indians. The excerpt is taken from an article dated 5 February 1894:

It was foreign energy that had pushed aside the old, outworn machinery; it was an alien government that had by policy and self-will hurried us into a new and quite unfamiliar world...No doubt Anglo-Indians have very little right to speak of us as bitterly as they are in a habit of doing. By setting

themselves to compel our social elements into a state of fluidity...they in fact made themselves responsible for us and lost the right to blame anyone but themselves for what might ensue. They are in the unlucky position of responsibility for a state of things which they abhor and certainly had no intention of bringing about. The force which they had in mind was to construct a body of grave, loyal and conservative citizens, educated but without ideas, a body created by and having a stake in the present order, for permanence, not a power for disturbance and unrest. In such an enterprise they were bound to fail and they failed egregiously (Ghose, 1973:50).

Ghose at the age of 22 and but three months returned from 13 years of exile in England, adumbrated many of the contradictions embedded in the dialectics of imperialism, while stating very clearly the unintended dilemma of the Raj and its inevitable outcome.

In this series of 9 brief articles, "New Lamps for Old," there can be no question of where the young editorialist stood...as was irrefutably shown by the abrupt end of his budding journalistic career. Urged on by Ranade and other leaders of the Indian National Congress, the British authorities forced the publishers of *Indu Prakash* to discontinue Ghose's "seditious" commentaries. "New Lamps for Old" was a slashing, politically astute and critical attack on the Indian National Congress which had been established only 8 years earlier. Unlike Tilak and other leaders of the right-wing Nationalist movement who criticized the Congress primarily on the grounds of its hererodoxy regarding Hindu social and religious institutions such as child-marriage, caste, and traditional education, Ghose openly attacked the Congress (and obliquely the Raj) for its sycophancy, elitism, mendicancy, hypocrisy, ignorance, philistinism and utter irrelevance to the real, material conditions of the Indian people in the last decade of the 19th century...and all those accusatorial terms are Ghose's. In short, it might be said that Ghose roundly condemned the Congress for having so admirably fulfilled the role the Raj had in mind when Allan Hume 'midwifed' the Congress in 1885. Hume referred to the proposed Indian Congress in private correspondence as merely "a safety valve" that would let off rhetorical and ideological steam.

Noting that India "cannot afford to raise any institution to the rank of a fetisch" (Ghose, 1973: 6) — a quip with a virtual infinity of targets — Ghose boldly stated the following:

Our actual enemy is not any force exterior to ourselves, but our own crying weaknesses, our cowardice, our selfishness, our hypocrisy, our purblind sentimentalism. I cannot really see why we should rage so furiously against the Anglo-Indians and call them all manner of approbrious epithets. I grant that they are rude and arrogant, that they govern badly, that they are devoid of any great or generous emotions, that their conduct is that of a small coterie of masters surrounded by a nation of Helots. But to say that is simply to say that they are very commonplace men put into a quite unique position...They are really very ordinary men — and not only ordinary men, but ordinary Englishmen — types of the middle class or Philistines, in the graphic English phrase, with the narrow hearts and the commercial habit of mind peculiar to that sort of people (Ghose, 1973: 12 f.).

To the Congress Loyalists and Moderates who advocated the historical development of the British political system as the exemplar for a new Indian political economy, Ghose laconically wrote that "the seven centuries from Runnymede [in 1215 C.E.] to the Hull riots have done less to change partially the political and social exterior of England than 5 short years to change entirely the political and social exterior of her immediate neighbor" (Ghose, 1973: 22). Noting that the first step of the French toward social freedom "was not through any decent and orderly expansion, but through purification of blood and fire" (ibid.), Ghose concluded that it was not "a convocation of respectable

citizens [like the Congress 'burgesses'], but the vast and ignorant proletariat, that emerged from a prolonged and almost co-eval apathy and blotted out in five terrible years the accumulated oppression of thirteen centuries" (ibid.).

However, despite this prefiguration of the Jacobinic role he would later play to Morley's "Burke," Ghose found as little worthy of emulation in the French example as he had in the British. He argued that they merely represented "two principles of motion distinct in nature and adverse in event, the trend of whose divergences may be roundly expressed as advance in one direction through political methods and in another...through social methods" (Ghose, 1973: 27). For Ghose the problem with the British model was simply that "the middle class have the sole enjoyment of profit accruing from the change, as it is always to the middle-class alone that any profit accrues from the elimination of merely political inequality" (Ghose, 1973: 35). The French model, on the other hand, despite a remarkable degree of social levelling as a result of the revolution and the reign of terror, "is no less weak in the sphere of England's strength. Along with and militating against her social happiness, we have to reckon constant political disorder and instability, an alarming defect of expansive vigour, and entire failure in the handling of general politics" (Ghose, 1973: 38).

These perceived truths regarding the two major post-Enlightenment tendencies in European social and political practice had, for Ghose, "an ominous connection...with the actual conditions of politics and society in India" (ibid.), albeit a connection not as one familiar with the ideologies and practices of a Ranade, Gokhale, or Gandhi might suppose. Those moderates resisted most change because it would result in transforming the cultural terrain of India, a terrain that they uncritically assumed had once been untrammelled or unified. Their common objection to the influx of European culture was that it would irremediably change India. Ghose, however, argued that Indian culture should be "occidentalized," that India should actively seek "the influx of Occidentalism" in order to create political and economic autonomy.

However, unlike his ideological opponents within the freedom movement, Ghose, with an unerring political sense virtually unburdened by cultural nostalgia, did not hesitate to criticize and contextualize the European social and political experiments that his opponents found most worthy of emulation. Noting that there was value for Indian self-rule in both the French and English experiments, and openly acknowledging that it is "expedient to select the very best that is thought and known in Europe," Ghose repeatedly insisted that even the European "best" had to be adjusted to "our diverse conditions." To do otherwise would necessarily result in "chaos annexed to chaos, the vices and calamities of the West superimposed on the vices and calamities of the East" (Ghose, 1973: 38). Noting that the English had ignored "social development and set small store by the discrete management of her masses" and that France "has failed in her choice of apparatus and courted political insecurity and disaster," Ghose then dispenses sardonically with the Congress' mindless mimicry:

There are limits even to human fallibility and to combine two errors so distinct would be, one imagines, a miracle of incompetence. Facts, however, are always giving the lie to our imaginations; and it is a fact that [the Congress] by a combination of errors so eccentric as almost to savour of felicity, are achieving this prodigious tour de force (Ghose, 1973: 41).

For the young critic, the Indian "burgesses" that dominated the Congress had shown themselves to be "totally deficient in sincerity, power and judgement" in failing to see that it is only with a "proletariate...sunk in ignorance and distress [that] resides, whether we like it or not, our sole assurance of hope, our sole chance in the future" (Ghose, 1973: 44). Fourteen years later a more radical Arabinda Ghose would proclaim: "Let there be only one dictator — the People" (Ghose, 1973: 249).

Unfortunately one can merely speculate regarding Ghose's further reflections on "the actual conditions of politics and society in India" in the decade following 1894 since he was cut-off, censored and silenced in mid-polemic. One cannot know, for example,

whether his analysis of the Indian condition as primarily a struggle between Indian labour and British capital would have resulted in a full-blown Marxist critique that might even have been critical of Marx's "Orientalism." The possibility of Ghose's going beyond Marx was, given a careful selection of texts from his (Ghose's) writings prior to 1908, not unfeasible; but in 1894 it could have been argued that the young Ghose owed as much or more to Mazzini, Cavour, Morris, Ruskin and Arnold as he did to Engels and Marx. However, one shouldn't too readily set aside the persistence of Ghose's claim that the struggle between Indian labor and British capital was the key to Indian autonomy.

From February 1894 until March 1906, the shadowy, marginal presence of Arabinda Ghose was occasionally glimpsed on the fringes of the Nationalist movement led in western India by B.G. Tilak. Throughout this period Home Department papers construe a relation between Ghose and sedition — a relation that is as yet unsubstantiated. In early 1906, however, Ghose re-emerged as an articulate, critical voice and presence in the Nationalist movement. He resigned his posts in Baroda and went "home" to Bengal where he assumed the post of the first principal of the Bengal National College in Calcutta. More importantly, however, he became the de facto editor of *Bande Mataram*, a radical, left-wing Nationalist daily/weekly founded a short time before by Bepin Pal. From July 1906 until May Day 1908 (when he was arrested and imprisoned "under trial" as an alleged conspirator in the Alipur bombing case), Ghose wrote literally hundreds of articles in *Bande Mataram*, quickly becoming established as the leading voice of Bengali extremism. Fifty years later the critically attuned doyen of Indian historians, R.C. Majumdar, would label Ghose "the high priest of Indian extremism." Arguably even more apt was the Home Department's allusion to Ghose as "a dangerous character" whose influence on "impressionable youths" threatened public order. This arguably classical allusion would likely have been taken by Ghose as high praise.

From the outset of his renewed career as an editorialist Ghose focused on two inter-related issues that were exacerbated by the Partition of Bengal in 1905: (1) the "constitutional cretinism" of the Loyalist and Moderate factions of the Congress; and (2) the dialectics of self-rule and self-reliance. With scathing wit, intimate knowledge of the embedded contradictions of liberal/democratic imperialism, an unerring view of the complicity of the subjected colonial and rhetorically sustained by the allusive breadth of his Cantab education, Ghose gave no quarter. Repeatedly he showed that classism and racialism, Indian and British, informed and legitimated all practices of dominance in the Raj. He argued that the hope invested in the Liberal government of Asquith (after December 1905) by Gokhale, Ranade and other moderates was fatuous in the extreme; that the mendicant practices of the Loyalists and Moderates could only support and prolong the Raj. To quote Ghose: "Destroy or thou shalt be destroyed."

However, unlike contemporary revolutionaries like Savarkar who advocated only violence as an appropriate tactic, Ghose recognized that "the choice of a subject nation of the means it will use for vindicating its liberty is best determined by the conditions of its servitude" (Ghose, 1973: 97). He also argued that just as the terrorism exercised by the oppressor can take many forms, so too that of the oppressed. In his occasional and occasional reflections upon the most effective means toward self-rule, Ghose always kept the dialectics of India's conditions of servitude and the conditions of possibility for imperial rule in mind, and in print. As early as 1893 Ghose had written that the Indian people were complicitous in their own servitude. For Ghose, they not only sustained their own oppression, but also actively supported their oppressors. Ghose adumbrated Memmi, Fanon, Pitt-Rivers, Mason and Retamar when he wrote in November 1907 that:

Nowhere in the world has an absolutism been so helplessly dependent on the loyalty and co-operation of those over whom it is set. The day that co-operation comes to a stop, the English cease to be [the] rulers of this country. The position of the Indian government...is much less secure than that of any government in the world (Ghose, 1973: 580).

Six months earlier, in a series of articles entitled "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance," Ghose proposed a four-pronged strategy calculated to "stave off imminent national death [and] put an end to the white peril" (Ghose, 1973: 96). The weapons he proposed for defensive or passive resistance, then a revolutionary method for denying support to the oppressor, were: (1) boycott, i.e., the refusal to purchase goods made in Britain; (2) national education to counteract "the poison of state-controlled education"; (3) arbitration to blunt the effects of a politicized judiciary and communalism; and (4) self-determination in the face of an executive that colludes with divisive, reactionary and anti-Swaraj elements in India and in England.

However, in advocating "passive resistance as [the] most natural and suitable weapon against oppression" in India, Ghose made it clear that he did not base his conclusion upon any condemnation of other methods as...criminal or unjustifiable.

Under certain circumstances a civil struggle becomes in reality a battle, and the morality of war is different from the morality of peace. To shrink from bloodshed and violence under such circumstances is a weakness. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation; and when that life is attacked, every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable (Ghose, 1973: 98).

Unlike the tactics of his Loyalist and Moderate opponents, Ghose's doctrine of passive resistance was a calculated political program. Unlike Ranade, Gokhale, Gandhi, and even Tilak, Ghose did not mystify or obscure his political agenda behind smokescreens of moralism, religiosity, cultural nostalgia or superiority. For Ghose, in 1907, such tactics were not only reactionary but useless. He unequivocally rejected tactics that involved "trying fresh and big doses of poppy on [the Indian] people" (Ghose, 1973: 206) — most specifically those tactics that invoked the mystique of martyrdom.

The new politics, therefore, while it favours passive resistance does not include weak submission to illegal outrage under that term. It has no intention of stressing passivity at the expense of resistance. Nor is it inclined to be hysterical over a few broken heads or exalt so simple a matter as a bloody coxcomb into the crown of martyrdom (Ghose, 1973: 115).

Chief among those whom he condemned for flaunting martyrdom and giving ever larger doses of opium to the people was M.K. Gandhi (at that time the leading strategist of the British Indian Association in the Transvaal). Ghose condemned the Transvaal Indians for their mendicancy, hypocrisy and collusion with the forces of racialist oppression in southern Africa. He wrote that he could not regret the disillusionment of the British Indians in the Transvaal:

who seek escape from the oppression they suffer under...by ignoble methods similar in spirit to those practiced by the [Loyalists] in this country. The more the Transvaal Indians are kicked and insulted, the more loyal they seem to become. After their splendid services in [the Boer War] had been rewarded by the grossest ingratitude, they had no business to offer their services again in the recent [Zulu] rebellion. By their act they associated themselves with the colonists in their oppression of the natives of that country, and have only themselves to thank if they are oppressed by the same narrow and arrogant colonial spirit (Ghose, 1973, 136).

"Even Homer nods and even Mahatmas are at times too slow to understand the significance of events" (Ghose, 1973:345)!

Although it is clear that Ghose had a critical grasp of the issues and potential solutions relevant to the fact of British political dominance in India and its economic base — Ghose once wrote that "great issues of economics wear the guise of a political conflict" (Ghose, 1973: 727) — he failed completely to see the hidden agenda of British hegemony, its *violencia blanca*, if you will. Above I construed a Home Office reference

to Ghose as being an allusion to Ghose as a *figura* of Socrates...now for the hemlock, also self-inflicted.

The relevant facts are clear. In late 1907, shortly before the aborted Congress conference in Surat (aborted following an unseemly brawl between the moderate and extremist factions of the Nationalist wing), Ghose's discourse in *Bande Mataram* underwent a marked shift. Until that time it had been predominantly political, focusing primarily upon the struggle between British capitalism and Indian labor. When references to religion and spirituality occurred, they were invariably metaphorical, not metaphysical or triumphalist. In late 1907, his discourse rapidly became increasingly moralistic, religious, "traditional" (in incorporating cultural values widely believed to be specifically Indian), and comparative, particularly concerning the contrast between "East" and "West." This shift was proclaimed by Ghose as evidence for his "renationalization," as the reappropriation of the values of the Indian golden age which he had come to consider as fully consonant with the extremist quest for political, social and economic self-determination. This discourse was also triumphalistic, reminiscent of Vivekenanda and adumbrative of Gandhi. It had become a discourse that affirmed without qualification India's moral and spiritual superiority over European "materialism." It is almost as if Ghose had turned Marx on his head and rediscovered Hegel! It is also a discourse in which Orientalism, together with Imperialism a master discourse of the 19th century, surfaces.

Some of the contradictions displayed in Ghose's discursive turn can be noted. On 5 April 1907 he attacked the ideas of Gokhale, Gandhi and other moderate mendicants that political and economic freedom from the Raj was "only possible when [Indians] have become morally and religiously fit" for self-rule. Ghose cast this idea aside as but one of the "many delusions" that delay freedom and reinforce the oppressive grip of the Raj. Two months later he wrote that "the force which has swept [India] forward is a force which no man has created and which no man can control. As well ask a man who has become an adult to return to the age of childhood as ask India to go back to the standpoint it has irrevocably left behind" (Ghose, 1973: 418).

However, in March 1908, Ghose triumphantly proclaimed that "not only are Hindus naturally spiritual in temperament" and that the "work they have to do for humanity is a work which no other nation can accomplish, the spiritualization of the [human] race." He also wrote that "the East alone has some knowledge of the truth, the East alone can teach the West, the East alone can save mankind" (Ghose, 1973: 799). From metaphor to metaphysics; from the White Man's Burden to the Brown Man's Burden! And, directly reversing himself regarding India's retrogression to its "childhood," two months later he wrote that "a sort of atavism is at work in the Indian consciousness...which is drawing it back to the spirit of the fathers of the race who laid the foundations of our being thousands of years ago. A reversion such as this is the sole cure for national decay" (Ghose, 1973: 880). As implied above, the ideology that informed much of Ghose's virulent polemic against both the British and their Indian collaborators was one that clearly opposed all forms of "Darwinism." Whatever the reasons for Ghose's discursive turn, a turn that clearly occurred prior to his incarceration in May 1908, Ghose had become a triumphalistic metaphysical, moral and spiritual "Darwinist"; and was no less convinced than Spencer that progress should and would result in "the ultimate development of the ideal man," to quote Spencer.

It is also important to begin to see clearly some of the other telling ironies in Ghose's discursive turn. Who in fact were "the fathers of the race who laid the foundations of [Indian] being thousands of years ago"? R. Schwab, in his brilliant but too little known *The Oriental Renaissance*, contrasts the "first" and "second" renaissances of culture in Europe. He notes that whereas the pre-Enlightenment Renaissance and the Age of Discovery resulted in an initial hardening of and reaffirmation of "European" values, the later, the "Oriental renaissance," was "altogether novel [in] that the discovery of the Different introduced a therapy of the

Different" (Schwab, 1984: 406). This "discovery of the Different," initially believed to be the "discovery" of classical Indian culture, was in fact the construction of an Indian golden age accomplished by neo-classical and romantic scholars such as Jones, Schlegel, et al. In short, the cultural foundations of "India's being" to which Ghose turned for his "renaturalization," India's revitalization and the salvation of the human race, were produced in Europe, quite literally for European consumption, for the "therapy of the Different" as a cure for what was perceived by both neo-classicists and romantics as a pan-European cultural pathology.

B.G. Tilak, in many ways a mentor to the young Ghose, once wrote in *Kesari* that "it was the articles of Europeans who studied our ancient books which made them attractive to our own people...In short, we began to recognize the importance of our own home only after the foreigners showed us these contents." Nor should it be necessary to note that the selection of materials, the structuring of texts, the contextualization of artifacts, the translations, etc. that came to constitute the cultural contents of the putative golden age of Indian culture resulted from a massive European endeavor that cannot be separated from the imperialist practices that provided its real conditions of possibility. The Indian golden age itself is inseparable from the hegemony of the European idea and inseparable from Orientalism and Imperialism, arguably the two master discourses of the 19th century.

On his way to becoming Sri Aurobindo, "the greatest mystic-philosopher of present-day India" (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957: 575), Arabinda Ghose ironically discovered the therapeutic Other in a European construction of what Europeans imagined to have been India's golden age. He willingly orientalized himself and, neglecting to boycott shabby scholarly goods made in Oxbridge, Heidelberg and Paris, became the most important poppy pusher in 20th century India.

References

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