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Violence in Modern Indian Thought in the Mirror of World War II

ABSTRACT: The turmoil at the end of the long 19th century and the aftermath of the World War I inspired many Indian political thinkers to reflect upon violence as a means of attaining statehood. Revolutionary violence brought about abrupt social transformation in Russia, while the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire enabled the formation of several new states. Meanwhile, Germany, the other major European power, was reduced to shambles. The contradictory possibilities which the above developments proffered to the cause of India's independence shaped Indian debates on violence during the interwar period, finding their most acute expression in references to the emerging developments of the World War II. Focusing on Indian responses to the violence of the World War II, this paper analyses writings of some nationalist figures—primarily Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar—to examine how different philosophies such as non-violence, revolutionary struggle, and Hindu nationalism intersected with European wartime developments. These perspectives are framed as tensions between spiritual morality and pragmatic realpolitik.

KEYWORDS: Aurobindo Ghosh, Central Europe, M.K. Gandhi, M.S. Golwalkar, World War II

I.

As the system of multilateral institutions established in the wake of the World War II and reinforced after the end of the Cold War is crumbling in front of our eyes, we are entering a gloomy period of multipolar antagonisms. With this prospect at hand, it makes sense to revisit analogous intervals in modern history, i.e., the final years of La Belle Époque in the run up to the World War I and the two decades of the interwar period. Viewed together, these two periods are what Kris Manjapra described with regard to global transmission of ideas between India and Europe (in fact, mostly Bengal and Germany) as the Age of Entanglement (Manjapra 2014). Similarly, Benjamin Zachariah, looking at the period 1917–1939, speaks of The Internationalist Moment of an intense, intercontinental cross-fertilisation between ideologically opposing discourses including fascism, communism, and Islamism (Raza, Roy and Zachariah 2015). Other recent contributions to understanding violence in modern Indian political thought focus on critical evaluation of "Indian ideology" (Anderson 2021) and the intimacy of violence (Kapila 2021), both highlighting the consequentiality of older ideas on violence for the future.

Never losing the view of contemporary relevance, the focus of this paper will be the reflections, in the period leading up to the World War II, on violence by some of the foremost Indian nationalist leaders including Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar. This selection, limited as it may be, covers a broad spectrum of approaches to the central theme of violence, from non-violence to revolutionary violence, and then to Hindu nationalism, and is largely based on explicit references that the selected authors made to the violent war-time developments in Europe, particularly in Central Europe. This specific focus has driven the selection of authors and the analysed sources.

I shall argue that regardless of what position on this spectrum an assessment of the situation in Europe was taken from, it has always expressed a tension between a spiritually sanctioned moral philosophy on one side and political expediency based on realpolitik on the other.

These two poles are further embedded within a more profound opposition that Partha Chatterjee in his analysis of the concluding moments of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's seminal 1882 novel *Anandamath*[1] theorised as the inner and the outer domain, the former pertaining to the realm of the spiritual, cultural, and feminine, the later to the material, political and masculine (Chatterjee 1994). However, the aim of this paper is twofold. On one hand, I want to demonstrate how the notion of violence is reflected in the mirror of the World War II by the selected authors and what this reflection may reveal about how the notion of violence operates in modern Indian thought more broadly. On the other hand, I want to mirror that reflection back into the contemporary European discourse in the precise moment of disintegration of the global liberal order, geopolitical restructuring, and concomitant military conflicts, when values and interests are becoming increasingly dichotomous.

There is yet another reason why attention to modern Indian discourse on violence is relevant. Since 2014, the BJP government has made a concerted, though not always entirely successful, effort to appropriate cultic figures of the 20th-century independence struggle into a single narrative of past achievements and future promises out of which India under the incumbent leadership is to emerge as the integrator of past divisions and the fulfiller of aspirations, with the rising middle class at the centre of those expectations. In order to make this ideological movement successful, divergent promises of a future inherited from the past need to be redefined or purpose-rebuilt to fit into a more centralised vision of India's aspirational new global role. The statue of Sardar Patel, the tallest of its kind in the world, near the Sardar Sarovar dam, on the very site which was contested by the Narmada Bachao movement against tribal displacement, perhaps epitomises this drive most forcefully. But architectural incursions into the

[1] Dubbed the "father of the Indian novel", Bankimchandra Chatterjee (also spelled Chatterji or Chattopadhyay) wrote his most famous prose as a narrative template for a religiously inspired nationalist struggle led by an ascetic order devoted to Mother India. For an English translation with an extensive introduction and commentary by Julius Lipner, see Chatterji (2005).

old Varanasi (Lazzaretti 2021; Kanungo 2022), into Lutyens' imperial New Delhi[2], the modernist utopia of Jawaharlal Nehru University campus[3], Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram (Shah et al. 2021), or into the forests around the Aurobindo ashram (Ellis-Petersen 2022; Landrin 2024), may be viewed as purportedly reconstructive activities that bear witness to violent engagements with the received past.

II.

Speaking about the notion of violence in Indian context inevitably calls for scaling the wall of non-violence personified by the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi. His greater than life stature is such that it is almost impossible to dissociate his actual life and work from the afterlife of his persona as expressed in the ongoing discourses. Gandhi is indeed unique in his global outreach and in his resilience as a fresh source of inspiration for emancipatory movements in each generation, most recently the Extinction Rebellion (Grossman 2020). He was also able to reinvent himself several times and to communicate different personae as the need demanded—with respect to violence—from an organiser of non-combat military units of Indians in South Africa in support of the British army to an extreme proponent of non-violence and one of Empire's most vocal critics.

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[2] The so-called "Central Vista Redevelopment Project" (see the official website of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affaires at https://centralvista.gov.in/) will result in major spatial redefinition of the New Delhi's administrative district built in late 1920's.

[3] The JNU campus designed by C.P. Kukreja, then a young architect of thirty-two, was conceived in 1969 after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru as an utopian metonymy for an inclusive, secular Indian nation (Datta and Sharma 2021). Similar "utopian" campuses were founded in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe, Africa, and North America. As the most secular, left-leaning, and academically successful university in India it has become a prime target of the Hindu right wing as well as a crucial node of resistance to it since 2014. This struggle involved episodes of overt violence in 2016 and 2021 (see, e.g., Singh and Dasgupta 2019) as well as symbolic incursions (e.g., Jha 2017).

The extreme nature of his stance regarding non-violence had become most evident at the time of the outbreak of the World War II.

In October 1938, in the wake of the Munich Agreement of September 30, 1938, which dismembered Czechoslovakia, Mahatma Gandhi was touring the Pashtun borderlands of British India with Ghaffar Khan, the leader of Khudai Khidmatgars—a regional Anti-British Pashtun Muslim movement. While on this trip he wrote an article "If I Were a Czech" that appeared the very same month on the pages of his English language weekly Harijan. This article reflected Gandhi's thoughts on non-violent resistance and his perspective on how the Czech people should, in his view, respond to the aggression by Nazi Germany. He argued that even in the face of an overwhelming military force, non-violent resistance could be a powerful tool for defending national dignity and moral integrity. Let me quote his less-known message to the Czechs at some length:

> I want to speak to the Czechs because their plight moved me to the point of physical and mental distress … It is clear that the small nations must either come or be ready to come under the protection of the dictators or be a constant menace to the peace of Europe. In spite of all the goodwill in the world, England and France cannot save them. Their intervention can only mean bloodshed and destruction such as has never been seen before. If I were a Czech, therefore, I would free these two nations from the obligation to defend my country. … History has no record of a nation having adopted non-violent resistance. If Hitler is unaffected by my suffering, it does not matter. For I shall have lost nothing worth. My honour is the only thing worth preserving. That is independent of Hitler's pity. But as a believer in non-violence I may not limit its possibilities. Hitherto he and his likes have built upon their invariable experience that men yield to force. Unarmed men, women and children offering non-violent resistance without any bitterness in them will be a novel experience for them. Who can dare say it is not in their nature to respond to the higher and finer forces? They have the same soul that I have. (Gandhi 1938; originally written on October 6 and published in Harijan on October 15)

Gandhi, under the impact of his ongoing trip to the North-Western frontier, offers Czechs the example of Abdul Gaffar Khan, "sitting in front of me as I pen these lines," who, Gandhi says, "has made several thousand of people throw down their arms" in a "honest attempt", which might fail or not since those not so peaceful Pathan warriors might give up their trust in their leader and take back to arms, if they feel the non-violence imperative has degenerated into cowardice. Eventually, Gandhi presents "Dr. Benes" (i.e., Edvard Beneš, the President of Czechoslovakia at the time of the Munich Agreement) "with a weapon not of the weak but of the brave. There is no bravery greater than a resolute refusal to bend the knee to an earthly power, no matter how great, and that without bitterness of spirit in the fullness of faith that the spirit alone lives, nothing else does" (ibid.).

Clearly, Gandhi's primary goal was to promote the philosophy of non-violence as a viable and morally superior alternative to any kind of armed resistance to the point that even in the face of a seemingly invincible enemy like Nazi Germany, non-violent resistance could be a powerful tool for defending national sovereignty and human dignity and that the Czech people could resist the occupation through non-cooperation and civil disobedience, even if it meant enduring great suffering. Secondly, Gandhi strived to make the point that non-violence was not just a strategy for India's independence but a universal principle that could be applied in any context, including the defence of Czechoslovakia, as non-violent resistance and the suffering it would bring could inspire global sympathy and, presumably, support for the Czech cause. The developments in far-away Czechoslovakia thus served him as a projection screen to hammer down the point that non-violence was, indeed, a global agenda relevant for the current times at large. Furthermore, Gandhi tacitly criticised the policy of appeasement pursued by Britain and France by expressing his "physical and mental distress". This referral to his subjective internalization of the plight of the Czech people was juxtaposed in the same piece with an objectivised assessment of global affairs that acknowledged the constrains of democracies vis-à-vis dictatorial regimes: "Science of war leads one to dictatorship pure and simple. Science of non-violence

can alone lead one to pure democracy. England, France and America have to make their choice. That is the challenge of the two dictators" (ibid.). On another occasion however, he seemed to support Chamberlain's policy of appeasement in the vain hope that it would "open Herr Hitler's eyes and disarm him."[4]

In perhaps still more controversial a proposition published in Harijan a month later in November 1938, Gandhi suggested that Jews in Nazi Germany should espouse Satyagraha (Fischer 1950: 374–375), advice he had earlier for the Abyssinians when they were facing Italian invasion. Moreover, Gandhi apparently did not backtrack from such extreme moral claim of non-violence even as the World War II progressed. In 1940 he urged the British "to lay down the arms" and vacate their homes if Nazi Germany and fascist Italy demanded it (Wolpert 2001: 196–197). Still more shockingly, as late as 1946, he claimed that "Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife" because "It would have aroused the world and the people of Germany," while "As it is they succumbed anyway in their millions" (Fischer 1950: 376). Furthermore, after the World War II he held the view that Roosvelt and Churchill were "no less war criminals than Hitler and Mussolini" (quoted in Wolpert 2001: 213). While the anger vented towards Churchill may be perfectly understandable as a reaction to the man-made Bengal famine of 1943 caused by the British military machinery, the overall moral equation of the Axis and Allied powers as equally guilty of the conflagration of the World War II has remained an overlooked radical view, yet one periodically rejuvenated in analogous contexts.[5]

This continuity of moral reasoning, however, did not prevent the Indian National Congress (thereafter, INC) leadership and Gandhi personally from launching the Quit India Movement in August 1942 to coincide with the first phase of the Battle of Stalingrad (July 1942—February 1943) when the Axis forces seemed to be coming out victorious.

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4 Interview with the *New York Times*, March 23, 1939, cited in Wolpert (2001: 189).

5 See also the chapter "Hitler's Conversion" in Faisal Devji's *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Devji 2012: 119–150).

Despite the fact that the fall of Burma and the threat of a Japanese invasion were more immediate triggers, the timing was strategic, as it placed additional pressure on the British, already heavily burdened with managing the war effort, to address Indian demands. Indian leaders, including Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel, saw this as an opportune moment to demand independence (see, e.g., Bhattacharya 2002, Khan 2015). The aspiration of the moral philosophy of non-violence at global outreach thus did not prevent the INC from pursuing a realpolitik based on lessons drawn from changing geopolitical circumstances.

This tension between a spiritually sanctioned moral philosophy and realpolitik is evident from numerous challenges posed by radical revolutionaries to the mainstream INC in the two decades preceding the World War II. Gandhi's insistence on extreme non-violence led repeatedly to the creation of splinter parties. The Chauri Chaura incident of February 1922, when a police station was burnt in response to the police firing at the protesting farmers, made Gandhi call off the Non-cooperation movement. As a consequence, the more radical elements within the INC formed the Swaraj Party under the leadership of Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru to pursue a policy of engagement and sabotage within the structures of the Empire. Still more radical revolutionaries established in 1924 the Hindustan Republican Association, renamed the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in 1928. The latter group distributed a Manifesto at the Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress in December 1929, which directly challenged Gandhi's moral philosophy of "utopian non-violence" in the name of realpolitik:

> It has become a fashion these days to indulge in wild and meaningless talk of non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi is great and we mean no disrespect to him if we express our emphatic disapproval of the methods advocated by him for our country's emancipation. … But to us the Mahatma is an impossible visionary. Nonviolence may be a noble ideal, but is a thing of the morrow. We can, situated as we are, never hope to win our freedom by mere non-violence. The world is armed to the very teeth. And the world is too much with us. All talk of peace may be sincere, but such false

> ideology. What logic, we ask, is there in asking the country to traverse a non-violent path when the world atmosphere is surcharged with violence and exploitation of the weak? (cited in Sharma 1987: 231)

Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), a prominent leader of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, and his comrades were involved in violent resistance such as the killing of the British police officer J. P. Saunders in December 1927[6] and the Central Assembly bomb incident in 1929. They were eventually arrested and executed which immediately turned them into iconic figures of nationalist struggle. Mahatma Gandhi's reaction to the hanging of Bhagat Singh on March 23, 1931, has been a subject of significant academic and public debate. As in the case of posturing in the face of the Nazi aggression seven years later, Gandhi's stance on Bhagat Singh's execution reflected the complexities of his philosophy of non-violence and his political strategies during India's struggle for independence. He viewed Bhagat Singh's methods of revolutionary violence as not only immoral but also counterproductive to the nationalist cause.

Nevertheless, Gandhi attempted to intervene on behalf of Bhagat Singh and his associates during the Gandhi-Irwin Pact[7] negotiations in March 1931. Gandhi's failure to secure clemency for Bhagat Singh led to widespread criticism, particularly from revolutionary groups which accused Gandhi of prioritizing the Gandhi-Irwin Pact over the lives of the revolutionaries. Critics argued that Gandhi's non-violent approach was inadequate in the face of British repression and that revolutionary methods like those of Bhagat Singh were necessary to challenge the colonial rule.[8]

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[6] The goal of the attack was to avenge the death of Lala Lajpat Rai who died of police brutality in November 1928. It was the widow of the late Chittranjan Das, leader of the Swaraj Party, Basanti Devi, who instigated the young radicals to pursue revenge against British officers responsible for it (Moffat 2019).

[7] An agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin of March 5, 1931, on the basis of which the *satyagraha* was ended.

[8] Scholars such as Bipan Chandra et al. (1989) have critiqued Gandhi's non-violence as being overly idealistic and insufficient to address the harsh realities of colonial rule. They argue that Gandhi's inability to save Bhagat Singh exposed the

Gandhi strove to discipline the INC and distance the party from revolutionary radicals but as Kama Maclean amply demonstrates, there was a rather thin line between the two camps and more radical politics were gradually absorbed into the mainstream (Maclean et al. 2017). Bhagat Singh's execution turned him into a martyr and a symbol of resistance, while Gandhi's role in the episode became a source of controversy and debate that have had a lasting impact on public memory in India and continues up to the present day as evident from numerous opinion pieces published in recent years across a wide spectrum of Indian media outlets (e.g., Sharma 2019; Harshvardhan 2022; Saket 2023).

Another great challenge to Gandhi's moral philosophy as a guiding principle of political action came two years later in the form of the Bose–Patel Manifesto. The immediate impetus for this challenge was the decision of Gandhi, then still in jail, to suspend civil disobedience movement in May 1933, yet again in fear that it could turn violent. But beyond this direct trigger, larger geopolitical context should not be overlooked: Subhas Chandra Bose, officially convalescing in European climate, and the exiled Vithalbhai Patel drafted the manifesto sitting in Vienna just four months after Hitler's ascent to power:

> The events of the last thirteen years have demonstrated that a political warfare based on the principle of maximum suffering for ourselves and minimum suffering for our opponents cannot possibly lead to success. It is futile to expect that we can ever bring about a change of heart in our rulers merely through our own suffering or by trying to love them.

limitations of his approach and alienated revolutionary factions within the independence movement. Others like A. G. Noorani (2001) have questioned whether Gandhi could have done more to pressurise the British government, suggesting that his negotiations with Irwin were not tenacious enough. S. R. Bakshi (1982), Judith Brown (1989) and Ramachandra Guha (2013) on the other hand argued that Gandhi operated within the constraints of the political situation as his primary goal was to achieve independence through non-violent means and that he could not risk derailing the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, which he viewed as a significant step toward self-rule.

> …Non-cooperation cannot be given up but the form of Non-cooperation will have to be changed into a more militant one and the fight for freedom to be waged on all fronts.[9] (Bose 1964: 357)

Reference to "all fronts" effectively meant not in India alone and from her own inner resources but also by actively engaging and collaborating with the external forces. Subhas Chandra, in particular, was willing to engage with the external domain in more than one sense.

The launch of the Quit India movement at a time when the Axis forces seemed to have gained a decisive momentum is, therefore, neither an instance of backsliding of non-violence nor a case of circumspect opportunism, but a logical result of two decades of hybridisation and cross-fertilisation between the two poles of Indian politics—the Gandhian moral maxim located ultimately in the religious domain on one side and the appreciation of the realpolitik of global affairs on the other. Both Gandhi and his opponents operated within this spectrum and judged their course of action according to 'felicity conditions'[10] of invoking either pole, the internal pole of religious morality or the external pole of worldly affaires and political expediency.

Gandhi's South African séjour provides ample evidence of his pragmatic, and retrospectively controversial, politics involving adoption of colonial racial bias towards the Zulu "Kaffirs" and a classist bias towards the indentured Indians as opposed to the free-moving migrant Indians, often businessmen whose interests he primarily defended (Desai and Vahed 2016). While the choice of words and arguments in this agitation can be partly explained as a tactical manoeuvring vis-à-vis the colonial power, his inherent social conservativism and prejudices ensuing thereof are rooted in the former pole of religious morality. In a 1917 article for his Harijan magazine, Gandhi made extremely

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9 Dated May 9, 1933.

10 The term 'felicity conditions' that I use throughout this paper originates in language pragmatics, refering to conditions which determine success of an utterance. Outside of evaluation of effectivenees of speech performance, the term was employed by anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour to denote modalities of discourse.

disparaging comments about orphans born out of illegitimate relations, i.e., outside of marriage, comparing them to "vermin" that ought not be saved in the name of humanism (Kishwar 1985b: 1757). Gandhi's religious morality, a Hindu religious morality more broadly, is not universalist in its claims, even though its appeal may be universal. This fact is often overlooked in the Western reception of Gandhi's thought. Therefore, non-violence too cannot be taken as a universal principle, as it floats around a more substantial ontological category of Hindu religious morality, that of purity, a relative quality a degree of which can be attained through iterative acts of cleansing. On Gandhi's ideological plane, the felicity conditions for invoking either violence in a biological metaphor of vermin or extreme non-violence by claiming that whole nations should let themselves be slaughtered in the name of a higher moral principle, are determined by a consideration of what course of action in a particular, given context might best contribute to keeping or increasing the purity of the collective social body.

III.

At about the same time when Gandhi effectively suggested to the Czechs that they commit collective suicide, the second Supreme Leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973), took up the example of Czechoslovakia in his foundational text of Hindutva ideology *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) in the context of a yet completely different argument. He stated that a nation must be based on a shared culture, religion, and ethnicity to remain strong and unified and was highly critical of multinational states like Czechoslovakia. He saw such newly created states as inherently unstable due to their lack of cultural and ethnic homogeneity—in fact an echo of the Weimar Republic's revisionist critique of the post-Versailles Conference European order in general. At the same time, the division of German "race" into different states in his view (consistent with that of the official German discourse of the time) had inherently harboured the conflagration of the World War II.

The reference to Czechoslovakia thus served Golwalkar to reinforce his larger argument that cultural and religious diversity is a source of weakness and that a nation must be united under a single identity to survive and thrive. Again, let us quote Golwalkar at some length:

> We shall take only one more example, that of Czechoslovakia, as it is very instructive to us. This was a state formed after the Great War, of portions of Germany, Austria, Hungary and Poland, joined to the Czech rule, to serve as a buffer state against Germany. The League of Nations adjusted and balanced the rights of the Nation—the Czech with those of the minorities, among them the Sudeten Germans. Under the direct supervision of the League was made this distinction within the state, of the Nation supreme in the state and minorities living under the protection of the Nation and owing a number of duties to it, in return for the right of the state citizenship. … Here was implicitly an avowal by the League of Nations, that Nation' and 'State' are not synonymous, that in the 'State', the 'Nation' should be supreme and its components Country, Race, Religion, Culture and Language should be respected and where possible followed by all the foreign races living in the state as minorities. And yet in spite of the most scrupulous care taken, to bring about harmony, in spite of the vigilance of the League, all unnational elements in the Czech state have fallen out and justified the fears of many political scholars, regarding the wisdom of heaping together in one State, elements conflicting with the National life. (Golwalkar 1939: 90–91)

Essentially, Golwalkar sees Czechoslovakia as a case of failed multiculturalism under the auspices of the League of Nations.[11] The alternative to this failure, he believes, is the dissolution of the state or else, and that is what he actually advocates with India's future in view, a stronger majoritarian hegemony of the dominant nation and its culture and religion where minorities are forced to assimilate. He also uses the example of Czechoslovakia to warn against the influence of foreign

[11] Strangely enough, his argument aligns with an influential post-Cold War and American-penned historical narrative of Czechoslovakia as a failed state (Heimann 2009).

ideologies and minority groups that he believes undermine national unity. The fate of Czechoslovakia during the World War II thus serves him as a warning to Indians lest their fatherland also be divided.

While Gandhi attributes passive agency of suffering to the "Czech people" in an aggressor-victim like scenario, thereby claiming a higher moral ground for a victim who refuses to fight back, Golwalkar views violence and conflict as the natural consequence of external forces establishing a culturally heterogenous state comprising antagonistic entities. In order for those antagonistic entities to avoid becoming victims of violence of external forces, even if this violence is only implicit, one must boldly rise and achieve a hegemony over the other. Furthermore, "spiritual awakening" is in his reasoning intimately linked to "national race spirit". While in this specific passage Golwalkar particularly praises Shri Aurobindo for "brooding deep over the spiritual awakening" (Golwalkar 1939: 131), it is clear from the earlier part of his book on European theories of nationalism that he places greater emphasis on conceptions dealing with national spirit as opposed to those that rely more on worldly bonds, such as shared language, social setup, and confluence of interests.

The Bengali polyglot sociologist Benay Kumar Sarkar, who taught extensively around Europe, was another Indian admirer of Germany and its rise, first under Bismarck and later under Hitler. He had a more symmetrical assessment of European nations and their struggles for national becoming when he claimed that "Young India is exhibiting not only the nationalistic animus of the Poles, Czechs, Serbs, and Irish but also the Herderian and Fichtean romanticism for the linguistic or cultural soul, Volksseele, Volksgeist, etc." (Sarkar 1937: 502). Sarkar's attitude—notwithstanding the emphasis on Herderian romanticism in nation formation—was generally more secular and rationalist (or "positivist" as he would often term it) than that of Gandhi and Golwalkar, who both despite their hugely opposing ideologies and approaches to politics deemed the material as being inferior to the spiritual, or the internal as being inferior to the external, since the former animates the latter. It is within the parameters of this dynamism that political expediency is to be judged.

IV.

However, it is often Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950), one of the early proponents of revolutionary violence in Indian anti-British struggle in the first decade of the 20th century who is invoked in juxtaposition to Gandhi (e.g., Giri 2021). Although he renounced terrorism soon, partly on the grounds that it was futile to confront the military might of the Empire with such asymmetrical means as erratic homemade bombs, but more substantially on religious grounds as he embarked on a journey of a spiritual guruship after moving to Pondichéry in 1910. Nevertheless, even thereafter he never fully endorsed Gandhi's approach to non-violence as a political principle, once describing it as "getting beaten with joy" (see Heehs 2008: 326).

His transformation from a revolutionary to a yogic guru had happened, significantly for the British Indian context, in prison: Aurobindo's imprisonment in 1908 was a turning point. During this period he experienced a profound spiritual awakening which led him to integrate his political activism with his spiritual beliefs. Significantly, the motif of the colonial Gaol as a privileged site of spiritual visitation and a subsequent awakening had remained significant in testimonies of the confined Indian nationalists (for Aurobindo see Wolfers 2016: 3).

In Pondichéry, Aurobindo developed the philosophy of Integral Yoga at the core of which is the idea of an evolving universe, where consciousness is the driving force behind material and spiritual evolution. Deeply influenced by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, particularly its teachings on the nature of action, duty, and the battle between the higher and lower selves, he interpreted the *Gītā*'s call to action as a metaphor for the inner struggle that every seeker must undertake (Aurobindo 1997 [1928]). The *Gītā*'s emphasis on *niṣkāma karma* (selfless action) underscores the means by which the ego can be dismantled, enabling the seeker to act in accordance with the divine will. This process is not limited to individual transformation but also has profound implications for the collective evolution of consciousness. Aurobindo envisioned a future in which humanity as a whole would transcend its current limitations of ignorance, fragmentation, and false perceptions of reality

realising a higher, divine consciousness, which he termed the "Supermind." However, this evolutionary leap requires that old structures of ignorance, inequality, and conflict be dismantled to make way for a new order. This is not violence in the conventional sense, implying harm or destruction, but rather a dynamic and intense process of inner purification and collective transformation. Unlike traditional yoga systems that emphasise renunciation and withdrawal from the world, Integral Yoga advocates for the transformation of all aspects of life, thereby creating a smooth passage between the inner world of yogic spiritual struggle and the outer realm of the social and the political. (Aurobindo 1997 [1949]).

Elaborating on Aurobindo's life, first as a revolutionary and later as a saintly figure, and looking for connections between these phases of his life, Wolfers in one short piece terms Aurobindo's emphasis on inner struggle and transformation as "spiritual violence" or "divine violence" (Wolfers 2015). This is an interesting proposition albeit perhaps an exaggerated one as Aurobindo himself never used the term "spiritual violence". On the contrary, he emphasised that transformatory force was not about physical aggression or harm, but rather an assertion of truth and justice as true revolutionaries must be guided by a higher spiritual purpose, rather than mere political or material goals. Such inner revolution was essential for any meaningful social and political change. Nevertheless, this attempt at semantic reconciliation of the revolutionary and the guru does have the merit of revealing the contextual situatedness of violence and non-violence in modern Indian political thought.

The process of transformation of humanity is most intensely dealt with in Aurobindo's *The Human Cycle* (Aurobindo 1997 [1949]), penned originally over several years during the World War I and republished in the book form just after the World War II.[12] It is one

[12] *The Human Cycle* first appeared on monthly basis in the journal *Arya* from August 1916 to July 1918 under the title *The Psychology of Social Development*. It was revised into a manuscript in the late 1930's (hence the implicit references to the events preceding the World War II) and in a yet slightly amended version it came out in a book form in 1949.

of Aurobindo's major philosophical works, in which he analyses the stages of human development, the challenges faced by modern civilization, and the potential for a future spiritual transformation. The age of the individualisation of reason will be followed by the subjective age where humanity shifts its focus from external achievements to inner growth and self-realization. In this stage, individuals and societies will seek to understand and express their deeper spiritual nature, leading to a more harmonious and integrated way of life (ibid.: 15–34).

Like many of his compatriots, Aurobindo critiques modern civilisation for its materialism and loss of spiritual values, for the overemphasis on reason, science, and technology that has led to a crisis of meaning and purpose, and warns that without a spiritual foundation modern societies risk collapse or degeneration. Furthermore, he believes that India has a unique role in the spiritual evolution of humanity: India's ancient spiritual traditions, with their capacity for synthesis and adaptation, could contribute to the emergence of a new, spiritually integrated world order. In his critique of both individualism (the selfish pursuit of personal goals) and collectivism (the suppression of individual freedom), he often draws comparisons with Germany and German nationalist politics in the first half of the 20th century. This trope finds a particularly strong echo in the chapter on "True and false subjectivism" of *The Human Cycle*, where German subjectivism is evaluated as an honest attempt that, however, eventually leads to false subjectivism. It does so because it views "the greater human collectivity" as "an inchoate and unorganised existence", the growth of which

> can best be developed by the better development of the most efficient organised collective life already existing; practically, then, by the growth, perfection and domination of the most advanced nations, or possibly of the one most advanced nation, the collective ego which has best realised the purpose of Nature and whose victory and rule is therefore the will of God. … To fulfil then the collective German ego and secure its growth and domination was at once the right law of reason, the supreme good of humanity and the mission of the great and supreme Teutonic race. (Aurobindo 1997 [1949]: 48–49)

Such a construction of a collective subjecthood, held together and enforced by the apparatus of the modern state, however, leads to the warfare between collective national egos: "War then is the whole business of the State in its relation to other States, a war of arms, a war of commerce, a war of ideas and cultures, a war of collective personalities each seeking to possess the world or at least to dominate and be first in the world" (ibid.: 50). The core idea of *The Human Cycle* is that human development transitions from an objective to a subjective stage, whereby individuals and societies seek deeper self-knowledge and begin to live from within rather than relying on external conventions. While this shift is beneficial, it carries risks of error, particularly when subjectivity is misinterpreted or misapplied. Aurobindo argues that true subjectivism must recognise the divine self within individuals and their solidarity with others, rather than fostering egoistic nationalism or state worship. The German experiment with subjectivism, rooted in materialistic science and metaphysical logic, led to a "bastard creed" that distorted the true purpose of the Subjective Age.

Interestingly, Aurobindo distinguishes internal and external aspects of German subjectivism, the former expressing itself in the importance attributed to the state and national efficiency that led to the suppression of individual freedom and the elevation of the collective will, i.e., the rise of authoritarianism, and the later in Germany's aggressive militarism and pursuit of power and dominance, justified as the survival of the fittest:

> The German gospel has evidently two sides, the internal and the external, the cult of the State, nation or community and the cult of international egoism. In the first, Germany, even if for a time entirely crushed in the battle-field, seems to have already secured the victory in the moral sense of the human race. … War is a dangerous teacher and physical victory leads often to a moral defeat. Germany, defeated in the war, has won in the after war; the German gospel rearisen in a sterner and fiercer avatar threatens to sweep over all Europe. (ibid.: 52)

Not only does Aurobindo employ imagery of the internal and the external in a hierarchical sense in his vision of the evolution of human

consciousness, he also uses it to evaluate the morality of German imperial exploits. This is by no means a coincidence. Even as humanity is about to pass from a stage obsessed with individuality and "objective" external reality to a higher stage of the Subjective Age, in which the spiritually transformed subjectivity can, from its internal resources, transform the society out there, there are obstacles to this transition, including the trap of "false subjectivism" as seen in the German construction of nationhood and its application to the national life. Nevertheless, Aurobindo acknowledges the honesty of German Romanticism in its the attempt to arrive at an inner transformation, despite the disastrous "international egotism" that it eventually led to in the realm of the external. The moral ambivalence expressed in the quoted passage can only be understood within the logic of the internal being inherently superior to the external.

V.

While many of the quoted passages bear witness to the wide range of reception of European ideas about the nation and the nation state across the Indian intellectual spectrum, these received ideas are intertwined with Hindu notions of religious morality refashioned for the modern age. The opposition between the internal and the external domains is a crucial notion that can be observed at work in all the texts considered in this study despite the ideological divergences of their authors.

Is national spirit (and its aggrandization) intrinsic to moral and spiritual awakening so that the inner domain can take over the outer, as the Seer in the concluding part of Bankimchandra Chaterjee's novel envisaged, or does it rather lead to a false subjectivism? Or, in other words, should modern collective identities be imagined as caste-like, i.e., ontologically given to individuals and determining their respective dharma, or as an imposition of the external domain that needs to be overcome by the inward looking spiritual introspection to achieve actual truth and freedom? The apparent dichotomy between violence and non-violence should not be judged according to the Aristotelian excluded middle

principle. Rather, it is the felicity conditions of the enactment of either of the two ensuing from one's individual or collective situatedness that determines which course of action is to be judged as violent or otherwise. The need of practical politics may have been more constraining than the flow of creative ideas about the state, sovereignty, nation, and violence in the interwar India, however, these deliberations set the parameters for understanding the course of political action.

Unlike the psychological interpretations of violence in India that emphasise the intimacy with rather than othering of the victims by the perpetrators (Nandy 1983; Kakar 1995), but also see the potential for fraternity that the violence can be reverted to (Kapila 2021), this study aimed at uncovering underlying discursive patterns related to violence behind the references to the events of the World War II in Central Europe, made by a few selected prominent personalities of the Indian independence struggle who adhered to incompatible ideologies. Yet, all of them strove to set the border between the inner and the outer vis-à-vis the national consciousness and neither, including Gandhi, was a universalist regarding non/violence, as the setting of the former informed the felicity conditions in which a certain action would be deemed violent or not. The entire discourse on violence and non-violence thus can be interpreted as a projective exploration of what the *dharma* of the nation-in-becoming should be.

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