

# Wrestling for the Humankind of the Future: Aurobindo Ghose's and Mirra Alfassa's Politics of Physical Education in Pondicherry<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the scheme of physical education established by Aurobindo Ghose and Mirra Alfassa at their ashram in Pondicherry. I argue that this scheme was tied to an agenda that was both nationalist and internationalist, and that it was the result of a dialogue between the ashram heads, even though Aurobindo personally showed little passion for sports. The central, and decidedly utopian, aim of physical education of the ashram was to help prepare the emergence of a future humankind in which sexual differences and the need to procreate would disappear – a lofty agenda ultimately complicated by students' resistance as well as the contradictions in the ashram's notion of gender.

**Keywords:** Aurobindo Ghose; Mira Alfassa; physical education; Indian nationalism; wrestling; Pondicherry

## Introduction

Surrounded by a group of children, two students of the International Centre of Education at Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, wrestle with each other in a wrestling pit in the summer of 1959. The smell of the wrestlers' sweat is counteracted by other, more pleasant odors, as the soil of the wrestling pit is mixed with fragrant herbs and essences: turmeric, neem, and sandal powder.<sup>2</sup> The wrestlers do not let themselves get carried away by these fragrances. They are focused

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<sup>2</sup> Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, *I Remember...* (Calcutta: Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, 1993), 251–252, cited after; Namita Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (Puducherry: Golden Chain Fraternity, 2017), 188.

on the fight. The one currently dominating the scene is pressing their opponent towards the ground, stretching their left arm, and wrapping their right arm around their waist.<sup>3</sup> Wrestling, as Joseph Alter has shown, had been central to Hindu nationalists' attempts at strengthening a Hindu masculinity so belittled in British colonial discourse.<sup>4</sup> In this, it equaled the resurgence of Sumo wrestling in Meiji Japan, equally intended to bolster masculinity in Japan's struggle against Western imperialism.<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, however, the image from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, titled "Wrestling / La lutte indienne", shows two young women in combat. As this chapter argues, wrestling was just one discipline among many taught at the ashram, all of which were taught to boys and girls alike. Why, then, were sports so central to an educational institution founded by a self-styled ascetic withdrawn from the world and any kind of physical activity? And what was the role of gender in this context?

Sri Aurobindo Ashram had come into being after Aurobindo Ghose's escape to Pondicherry, then a French colony, following his detention for his connection to an attempt on the life of a British official in Muzaffarpore. According to his biographers, Ghose distanced himself from politics in Pondicherry, instead turning to meditation. A group of former collaborators and disciples assembled around him. First, they lived together informally.

In 1914, Aurobindo met Mirra Richard née Alfassa, a French citizen who had been born to a wealthy Turkish-Egyptian Jewish couple in France. Alfassa, a trained artist who had turned to occultism and became interested in India around 1905, had traveled to Pondicherry in 1914 as the wife of a French politician. Like her husband, she was in sympathy with the Indian independence movement, yet had also come to India in her own spiritual quest. Soon after their meeting Alfassa became Aurobindo's disciple. Together with her guru and her then husband, she co-edited the journal *Arya: A Philosophical Review*, published between 1914 and 1920 which featured articles by Sri Aurobindo. Like many other Hindu nationalists, Aurobindo sought to revive the idea of Aryanism, arguing that humankind could only spiritually evolve if it returned to moral, spiritual, and bodily purity.<sup>6</sup> Whereas

<sup>3</sup> "Wrestling / La Lutte Indienne," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 3 (1959): IV.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph S. Alter, "Somatic Nationalism: Indian Wrestling and Militant Hinduism," *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 3 (1994): 557–588. On the belittling of Hindu masculinity in British colonial discourse, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity. The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> R. Kenji Tierney, "From Popular Performance to National Sport: The 'Nationalization' of Sumo," *This Sporting Life* 1 (2007): 67–90.

<sup>6</sup> On the emergence of Aryanism as a trope in the course of the colonial encounter in India, see Romila Thapar, "The Historiography of the Concept of 'Aryan'," in *India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of the Aryan*, ed. Ead., et al. (Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006), 1–40; *The Penguin History of Early*

Aryanism was generally tied to anti-Semitism in Europe, this was not necessarily the case in Hindu nationalism, where the demonized Other tended to be Muslim and lower caste rather than Jewish. Consequently, Aurobindo's notion of Aryanism was not offensive to Alfassa, who, in any case, placed little emphasis on her Jewish identity. After spending much of the First World War with her husband in Japan, Alfassa returned to Pondicherry, separating from her husband and living permanently in the community from 1920 until her death in 1973.<sup>7</sup>

In 1926, and against the resistance of several members of the ashram, Aurobindo elevated Alfassa, never enthusiastic about biological motherhood, to the spiritual mother of the ashram as well as of the future humankind he hoped to work for spiritually, thus acknowledging her spiritual parity and entrusting her with the organization of daily life inside the ashram. Aurobindo, by contrast, worked on his spiritual enlightenment until his death or *mahasamadhi* (grand spiritual enlightenment) as the ashram members referred to it, in 1950.<sup>8</sup> While this sounds like a rigid division of tasks, Aurobindo continually stressed that he and Alfassa were working on the same aspects, and that they depended on each other to do so—not physically, since Aurobindo rejected physical closeness (an alleged obstacle to spiritual progress) as did Alfassa, but in spirit.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the ashram grew slowly. From the Second World War onwards, it attracted a far greater number of men and women, now encompassing not only *sadhaks* (ashram members) but also their children.<sup>10</sup> Most *sadhaks* came from different parts of India, with Bengali speakers a clear majority.<sup>11</sup> After 1945,

*India: From the Origins to Ad 1300* (London: Penguin, 2002), 12–15; Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 134–157; Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Der Gurukul-Kangri oder die Erfindung der Arya-Nation. Kolonialismus, Hindureform und 'nationale Bildung' in Britisch-Indien (1897–1922)*, Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung / Südasiens-Institut Heidelberg; 194 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003), 237–328. On the European discourse, see Léon Poliakov, *Le mythe aryen: essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> On the history of the ashram, see Peter Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram, 1910–2010: An Unfinished History,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 19, no. 1 (2015): 65–86.

<sup>8</sup> Id., “Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram, 1910–2010: An Unfinished History,” 66; Id., *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 326–327, 343–344, 354; Georges van Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000), 227.

<sup>9</sup> Nika Kuchuk, “The Life Incarnate and the Life Divine: Spiritual Evolution, Androgyny and the Grace of the Goddess in the Teachings of Mirra Alfassa, the Mother of Integral Yoga,” *Studies in Religion* 52, no. 1 (2023): 48–66. On Aurobindo's views of sex as an obstacle of spiritual progress and, ultimately, the progress of humanity, see, for instance, Sri Aurobindo, “The Divine Body,” in *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga. Shorter Works 1910–1950*, ed. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*; 13 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1998), 536–557.

<sup>10</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 327, 393; Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 275, 341–355.

<sup>11</sup> “Report on the Quarter,” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 152–156.

the community also attracted a few European members, particularly French, American, and German academics, some of them rising to influential positions inside the organization and receiving Indian names.<sup>12</sup> In 1943, the year of the Bengal Famine, Alfassa opened a school for the ashram children. Soon, she would stress the importance of physical education for the children's mental and physical development. Although Alfassa retired into meditation in 1958, she continued to be the central authority of the ashram and school, named the Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education in 1959, until her death in 1973.<sup>13</sup>

The school's name already hints at its purpose. Internationalism, at least in name, was central to it. As Aurobindo had argued in his essay on the "Ideal of Human Unity", first published in *Arya* from 1915 to 1918 and revised on the eve of the Second World War, humankind could only evolve further if greater unity between nations and cultures was achieved. While national governments ought to be abolished in the long run in favor of an overarching world government, national cultures would continue to exist, but needed to be brought into dialogue.<sup>14</sup> At the ashram school, students would be exposed to all cultures of the world, not just because it was open to anyone regardless of nation or religion but

...because an attempt is made to represent here the cultures of the different regions of the world in such a way as to be accessible to all, not merely intellectually, in ideas, theories, principles and languages, but also vitally in habits and customs, in art under all forms [...] and physically too through dress, games, sports, industries, food and even reconstruction of natural scenery.<sup>15</sup>

Neither teaching nor the composition of its student body—at least during Alfassa's lifetime—lived up to this ideal entirely. While Ancient Egypt, Asia, Europe, and the United States were represented in the curriculum, significant parts of the world, i.e.,

<sup>12</sup> Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 173; 220; 439.

<sup>13</sup> Id., *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 341–355.

<sup>14</sup> Sri Aurobindo, "The Ideal of Human Unity," in *The Human Cycle. The Ideal of Human Unity. War and Self-Determination*, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo; 25 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1997), 279–681.

<sup>15</sup> "Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 134–162. In this regard, Aurobindo's and Alfassa's enterprise resembled another renowned institution in India, Rabindranath Tagore's Vishwa Bharati University at Shantiniketan. However, it differed from the former by its strong emphasis on physical education. On Tagore's institution at Shantiniketan, see H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness. A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Routledge India, 2020). Moreover, as Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné point out, Tagore's establishment stood out above all by its Pan-Asianism. Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (Ca. 1905–1940)," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 1 (2012): 65–92.

Africa apart from Egypt, Arab/Islamic cultures, and South America—did not play a role at all. Also, most students were Indian and Hindu.<sup>16</sup> Aurobindo's concept of Aryanism would hardly have been attractive to non-Hindu, particularly Muslim and Dalit, students. Nonetheless, the school combined nationalism and internationalism in a way reminiscent of India's politics of non-alignment, entertaining contacts both to Western countries like France and the United States, but also to Russia.

Aurobindo's and Alfassa's lives have been the subject of inevitably hagiographic in-house publications.<sup>17</sup> Researchers likewise have mainly focused on the tangibly spiritual aspects in the ashram.<sup>18</sup> It is only recently that the political dimensions of Alfassa's work have been examined. Most scholars view her as a Western ally of the anti-colonial movement in India without taking into account her hybrid identity or her sympathies towards French colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Only Jessica Namakkal's recent study stresses the ashram's entanglement with French colonial structures and its sense of superiority and civilizing mission towards its Tamil environment.<sup>20</sup> All in all, publications on the Pondicherry ashram are highly focused on the personalities and spiritual agendas of its founders. By contrast, the school and its agenda of

<sup>16</sup> According to a 1959 report, the school had 363 students, of whom 138 were native speakers of Bengali, 95 of Gujarati, 70 of Hindi, 21 of Tamil, 12 of Telugu, 21 of Kannada, Marathi, and Singhalese, and only 6 foreigners. "Report on the Quarter." *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 162–178.

<sup>17</sup> N. Das, *Glimpses of the Mother* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1980); S. Nahar, *Mother's Chronicles* (Auroville: Mira Aditi Centre, 1985); P. Nandakumar, *The Mother (of Sri Aurobindo Ashram)* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1977); Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972); H. Wilfried, *The Mother: A Short Biography* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1986); Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*; Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*; Narayan Prasad, *Life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> David Brème, «La figure de la mère, Mirra Alfassa (1878–1973). Une analyse des hybridations culturelles de ses représentations» (Université de Québec à Montréal, 2018); Marie Horassius, «Rituels et foi au cœur d'une utopie: oscillations et négociations autour des pratiques croyantes à Auroville,» in *Regards sur le mouvement spirituel fondé par Sri Aurobindo et la Mère*, ed. Patrick Beldio, David Brème, and Marie Horassius, *Cahiers de l'institut religioscope*; 15 (Fribourg: Institut Religioscope, 2018); Patrick Beldio, «Le yoga artistique de la mère à l'ashram de Sri Aurobindo,» in *Regards sur le mouvement spirituel fondé par Sri Aurobindo et la Mère*, ed. Patrick Beldio, David Brème, and Marie Horassius, *Cahiers de l'institut religioscope*; 15 (Fribourg: Institut religioscope, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 207–217; Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 118–126; Ravi Bajpai and Swati Parashar, "Worlding Encounters: Indian Spirituality and Anti-Colonialism in the Life and Thoughts of 'the Mother' (Mirra Alfassa)," *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad014>

<sup>20</sup> Jessica Namakkal, *Unsettling Utopia. The Making and Unmaking of French India*, Columbia Studies in International and Global History (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021).

physical education, although very much connected to the ashram's spiritual aims as we shall see, have hardly been examined to date.

This is astonishing since the connection of sports, nationalism, and colonialism has received much attention both with regards to India and other parts of the world during the last decades.<sup>21</sup> More to the point, scholars have also pointed to Aurobindo's role in this context.<sup>22</sup> However, since the ashram school was founded after his withdrawal from politics, it has not been connected to Aurobindo's or Alfassa's political visions. This article hopes to make an initial and necessarily incomplete contribution to these aspects while also pointing towards another neglected phenomenon. Most studies on sports and anti-colonialism in India have highlighted the prominent role of notions of masculinity.<sup>23</sup> This chapter, by contrast,

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires. Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Svenja Goltermann, *Körper der Nation. Habitusformierung und die Politik des Turnens 1860–1890*, Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998); Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*, Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Hong Fan and Fan Hong, eds., *Sport, Nationalism and Orientalism: The Asian Games*, Sport in the Global Society (London: Routledge, 2007); Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, Routledge Jewish Studies Series (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2007); David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: Norton, 2007); Alain Derlon, *Sport, nationalisme français et régénération de la "race"; 1880–1914* (Paris: Harmattan, 2008); Hans Bonde, *Masculinity, Sport, Politics – Nationalism, Regionalism, Globalization. The World, Europe and Danish Association and Disassociation* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2009); Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity (1870–1940)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Tim Harte, *Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades! Sports, Art, and Ideology in Late Russian and Early Soviet Culture* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); Harald Fischer-Tiné and Stefan Huebner, "The Rise and Growth of a Global "Moral Empire": The YMCA and YWCA During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Spreading Protestant Modernity: Global Perspectives on the Work of the YMCA and the YWCA, 1889–1970*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné, Stefan Huebner, and Ian Tyrrell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva. Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), 60–64. Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal. The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 32–35.

<sup>23</sup> Indra Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); John Rosselli, "The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal," *Past & Present* 86 (1980): 121–148; Alter, "Somatic Nationalism: Indian Wrestling and Militant Hinduism" 557–588; Id., "Kabaddi, a National Sports of India: The Internationalism of Nationalism and the Foreignness of Indianness," in *Games, Sports and Cultures*, ed. N. Dyck (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 83–114; Id., "Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 3 (2004): 497–534; Id., "Yoga at the Fin De Siècle: Muscular Christianity with a "Hindu" Twist," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 23, no. 5 (2006): 759–776; Arafat A. Valiani, *Militant Publics in India: Physical Culture and Violence in the Making of a Modern Polity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Abhijit Gupta, "Cultures of the Body in Colonial Bengal: The Career of Gobor Guha," *The International*

aims at showing that female protagonists likewise played a role in the debate and that, at least on a discursive level, the concepts advocated went well beyond a binary model of gender.

The article relies on a number of published sources: the *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education* (first published in 1949 as a bilingual journal in English and French, the languages of the former colonizers of the subcontinent, and continued up to the present),<sup>24</sup> various publications by Aurobindo Ghose and Mirra Alfassa as well as publications and memoirs by ashram members such as Nolini Kanta Gupta or Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, the director of physical education at the ashram school.<sup>25</sup> While these sources allow a detailed insight into the normative aspects of physical education at the ashram school, they need to be read against the grain for any conclusions as to breaks and ruptures in the school's ambitious agenda and its ambivalences.<sup>26</sup>

After surveying the disciplines in physical education at the ashram school, I argue that sports were central to its concept of education, and that the curriculum represented an agenda of Olympic breadth. I then examine Ghose's and Alfassa's views on sports, arguing that the ashram school curriculum reflected their personal as well as political positions on sports. I go on to show that physical education at the ashram was seen as crucial to the development of a new humankind—a humankind that would shrug off the limitations imposed by sexual differences. In practice, however, gender and sexual differences continued to be central to sports at the ashram.

*Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 12 (2012): 1687–1700; Harald Fischer-Tiné, "Fitness for Modernity? The YMCA and Physical-Education Schemes in Late-Colonial South Asia (Circa 1900–40)," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2018): 512–559; Carey Watt, "Physical Culture and the Body in Colonial India, c.1800–1947," in *Routledge Handbook of the History of Colonialism in South Asia*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Maria Framke (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021), 345–358. The only study focusing on women so far is Elena Valdameri, "Training Female Bodies for New India: Women's Physical Education between Global Trends and Local Politics in Colonial South Asia, c. 1900–1939," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 39, no. 11 (2022): 1240–1264.

<sup>24</sup> I consulted the volumes up to 1973, the year of Mirra Alfassa's death, to gain an impression of her role in shaping the curriculum.

<sup>25</sup> Nolini Kanta Gupta and K. Amrita, *Reminiscences* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1969); Bhattacharya, *I Remember*...

<sup>26</sup> In-person research at the ashram was not possible, as I did not obtain a research visa and representatives of the ashram did not respond to my request for visiting the archives. It might be of interest to scholars based in India that the ashram does indeed have copious archives on its sports activities as is evident from the following publication: Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother: The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*.

## A Panoply of Sports

Sports was a prominent part of education at the ashram. From the 1950s onwards, the curriculum encompassed a dazzling array of sports of Western and Asian origin alike. Each term had a specific focus, with athletics, games, gymnastics, and combative sports taught in different parts of the year. Athletics included swimming, throwing of the discus and mallet, high and long jump, and running.<sup>27</sup> In terms of games, students engaged in tug-of-war, cricket, basketball, volleyball, softball, hockey, kabaddi, and Alfassa's favorite game: tennis.<sup>28</sup> From the 1970s onwards, table tennis was also taught at the ashram.<sup>29</sup> From the beginning, gymnastics included "Indian exercises on the Malkham pole and cane" as well as hatha yoga asanas.<sup>30</sup> A specialty of the ashram was "gymnastic marching", a type of mass drill accompanied by drums intended to bring together "exercises from different parts of the world".<sup>31</sup> The principal occasion for this type of marching was the annual *darshan* of the ashram founders and, later, of Mirra Alfassa alone.<sup>32</sup> On this day, very much opposed to Aurobindo's rejection of formal rituals that Peter Heehs ascribes to him, students would march past their balcony in neatly organized formations. Images of these events strike the researcher as reminiscent of the mass gymnastic displays in 1920s Russia documented by Aleksandr Rodchenko, of Nazi sports events such as the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936—or indeed of the marches of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. In later years, the ceremony was merely dubbed "the march past".<sup>33</sup> Students would also engage in acrobatics. Photos of displays on festive days showed them forming figures or symbols such as the symbols of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, sometimes at night with burning torches.<sup>34</sup> Gymnastics included body building, with the weight-lifting section of the gymnasium inaugurated in 1952.

<sup>27</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 3, no. 3 (1951): 36–42.

<sup>28</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 2 (1950): 18; "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 19, no. 1 (1967): 90–100.

<sup>29</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 23, no. 2 (1971): 104–114.

<sup>30</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 1 (1950): 24–26.

<sup>31</sup> Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, *Gymnastic Marching* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1956).

<sup>32</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 6, no. 2 (1955): 54.

<sup>33</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 3, no. 3 (1951): 36–42.

<sup>34</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 1 (1950): 24–26.

The ashram was repeatedly visited by body building champions such as Parimal Roy, who had won the title of Mr Asia,<sup>35</sup> or Kamal Bhandari, who had won the title of *Bharat Sri*, Mr India.<sup>36</sup> The *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education* published photos of these muscular, well-oiled athletes, some of them posing at the seashore, others grouped in *tableaux vivants* reminiscent of the works of Roman and Greek antiquity and classical works of European art such as Michelangelo's *Pietà*.<sup>37</sup> Combative sports, finally, encompassed Judo,<sup>38</sup> Wrestling, Boxing,<sup>39</sup> Fencing,<sup>40</sup> Lathi,<sup>41</sup> and later Jiu Jitsu.<sup>42</sup>

Mirra Alfassa or The Mother, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual companion who was in sole charge of the ashram from 1926, is generally characterized as the main architect of the ashram curriculum which included physical education.<sup>43</sup> Alfassa spent many hours in the sports ground initially, dressed in white and often seated in an armchair placed in front of the flag of India adorned with her symbol, the twelve-petalled lotus (distantly reminiscent of the charkha). Nonetheless, she was not solely responsible for the ashram's physical education scheme. Other members of the ashram supported her in designing the curriculum. The first members of the sports team came from the anti-colonial sports scene of Aurobindo's city of origin, Calcutta. Chief among them was Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya from Calcutta, a former member of the Calcutta Boxing Club who was also familiar with weight training, wrestling, hatha yoga, folk dances, and drills. From 1945 onwards, Bhattacharya, a tall, muscular man dressed in a khaki uniform with shorts, was employed as Alfassa's personal attendant and the director of the Physical Education

<sup>35</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 4, no. 3 (1952): 90–92.

<sup>36</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 10, no. 2 (1958): 126–128; "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 13, no. 1 (1960): 168–174.

<sup>37</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 2 (1950): 18–19. These types of references had already been central to visual representations of the YMCA in South Asia as well as that of athletes in Europe and the United States. Fischer-Tiné, "Fitness for Modernity? The YMCA and Physical-Education Schemes in Late-Colonial South Asia (Circa 1900–40)," 40.

<sup>38</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 162–178.

<sup>39</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 4, no. 3 (1952): 90–92.

<sup>40</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 5, no. 3 (1954): 118–120.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Report on the Quarter," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 23, no. 2 (1971): 104–114.

<sup>43</sup> Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 342.

Department. Soon, Biren Chunder, his former coach at the Calcutta Boxing Club and known as the “Knockout King”, joined him in coordinating the lessons. In 1946, regular medical checkups for students were introduced: boys and girls were weighed, measured, and examined, with results documented comparatively.<sup>44</sup> Sports facilities soon included a physiotherapy department.<sup>45</sup> From 1949 onwards, the ashram published a *Bulletin of Physical Education* featuring articles by the ashram founders and other contributors on physical education, spirituality, and didactics as well as annual reports. Finally, further teachers and external coaches, including champions from Europe, the United States and Russia were invited or hired. Particularly gifted students, known as group captains, supported the teachers.<sup>46</sup> Classes started with fourteen boys in 1945. Soon these were extended to more boys and then girls, with male and female students training separately in the beginning.<sup>47</sup> Initially, boys and girls were dressed quite differently, boys wearing tank tops and shorts, while girls were dressed in saris or salwar kameez. In 1949, however, girls received their own uniform consisting of white shorts and tank tops in the same color.<sup>48</sup> Both the co-educational training as well as the girls’ shorts were a source of controversy within and outside the ashram in the first years, but both prevailed.<sup>49</sup>

Before the inauguration of Auroville, the ashram’s sports facilities were the main reason for its expansion and its ensuing colonization of its environment.<sup>50</sup> In 1948, the ashram acquired land described as uncultivated and badly maintained for the tennis ground from the Pondicherry Government with which it continued to entertain close relations until the end of French rule.<sup>51</sup> In 1951, a new sports ground outside the former premises was inaugurated. The sports ground was adorned with a relief showing a spiritual map of India. It was in front of this relief where Alfassa would be seated when watching lessons, contests, and other events in the sports ground. In 1952, the sports facilities saw a further expansion when a boxing ring, wrestling pit, football ground, weight-lifting area and gymnasium, the latter

<sup>44</sup> Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 379–384.

<sup>45</sup> Id., *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 412.

<sup>46</sup> Id., *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 355–374.

<sup>47</sup> Id., *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 21–24.

<sup>48</sup> Id., *Memorable Years with the Mother. The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 96.

<sup>49</sup> Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 345.

<sup>50</sup> Namakkal, *Unsettling Utopia: The Making and Unmaking of French India*.

<sup>51</sup> Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother: The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*.

inaugurated on the birthday of the increasingly infirm woman head of the ashram, were added. In the late 1950s, a swimming pool, a dojo (judo building), and finally a further annex were opened. By the mid-1950s, the sports ground had room for more than 1,500 spectators.<sup>52</sup> When important guests such as the Director of the UNESCO Division of Cultural Cooperation, Prime Minister Nehru and his daughter Indira or M.S. Golwalkar, the leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, visited the ashram, it was in the sports ground that they were received.<sup>53</sup>

As is evident from this brief overview, the ashram trained its students as well as the adults living there in a wide variety of sportive disciplines.<sup>54</sup> Regularly, champions and coaches from India, Western Europe, Russia, and the United States visited the ashram to give courses to its members. Next to bodybuilding champions Parimal Roy and Kamal Bhandari, gymnasts from the Soviet Union, tennis stars from Denmark, and, finally, various alumni and alumnae of the *Sporthochschule* in Cologne, Germany, were among those visitors.<sup>55</sup> One alumnus of the Cologne institution, Werner Haubrich, even stayed for a prolonged period, becoming a member of the teaching body and being named Saumitra by Alfassa.<sup>56</sup> Some of these coaches also introduced innovations in the curriculum. From 1963 onwards, the students were subject to physical fitness tests after the model of the “Navy Standard Physical Fitness Tests” of the USA<sup>57</sup> While students were normally grouped and trained according to age and gender, those who did not pass the test

<sup>52</sup> “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 6, no. 1 (1955): 132.

<sup>53</sup> “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 6, no. 1 (1955): 136–138; “Report on the Quarter,” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 21, no. 2 (1969): 104–110.

<sup>54</sup> As Joseph Alter and others have stressed, this neat division of Indian vs. Western sports was already obsolete in late nineteenth-/early twentieth century India, as exercise and related bodily practices were profoundly influenced by Western notions of physical culture. Alter, “Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity.”; Fischer-Tiné, “Fitness for Modernity? The YMCA and Physical-Education Schemes in Late-Colonial South Asia (Circa 1900–40).”; Watt, “Physical Culture and the Body in Colonial India, C.1800–1947.”

<sup>55</sup> Gupta and Amrita, *Reminiscences*, 97–105; “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 2 (1959): 126; “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 10, no. 2 (1958): 126–128. In return, some ashram students went on to attend the *Sporthochschule* in Cologne. “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 21, no. 1 (1969): 116–124.

<sup>56</sup> “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 10, no. 2 (1958): 126–128; “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 168; Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother: The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 312–319.

<sup>57</sup> “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 15, no. 1 (1963): 106.

were not included in these groups, but instead lumped together in a unit referred to as the “non-group”, receiving special training as a consequence.<sup>58</sup> Students were also regularly weighed, measured, and evaluated. This stood in marked contrast to the ideal of the school not to give certificates or break records.<sup>59</sup> As one quarterly report stressed somewhat ambivalently,

We are not out to break records but nevertheless it is gratifying to compare our performances with that of athletes in other parts of the world and to know that very soon, with the children, we will be able to break, unofficially of course, national and other records.<sup>60</sup>

Given these high-flying aims, the broad variety of sports, with at least four major events per year representing the panoply of sportive disciplines taught at the school, and its internationalist outlook, physical education at the ashram may be said to have been influenced by the modern concept of the Olympics in its approach.<sup>61</sup> It brought together, and regularly displayed to the public, a wide array of sportive disciplines that had originated in different parts of the world. Students were trained by an international teaching body. Due to the anti-British sympathies of its founders, it never included British members of staff. By contrast, the ashram did have some French members such as Philippe Barbier Saint-Hilaire, an engineer and former military official.<sup>62</sup> The curriculum aimed at promoting the unity and peace of humankind, but also competition. Yet there was one major difference to the Olympics, and similar concepts, in the twentieth century: participants were almost exclusively citizens of newly independent India. While the Olympic Games had already served as an inspiration to the Asian Games, a festival first promoted by the YMCA, yet turned into an anti-colonial event during the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>63</sup> the Pondicherry Ashram promoted only one nation as the representative and forerunner of all nations: India.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 13, no. 2 (1960): 172–176.

<sup>59</sup> “Why Are Not Diplomas and Certificates Given to the Students of the Centre of Education?,” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 12, no. 2 (1960): 143–145; “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 21, no. 1 (1969): 118.

<sup>60</sup> “Report on the Quarter.” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 3, no. 4 (1951): 34–38.

<sup>61</sup> Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 7–20.

<sup>62</sup> Vrekhem, *The Mother*, 220.

<sup>63</sup> Stefan Huebner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

## Sports and the Spiritual Evolution of Humankind

At a first glance, it may seem unusual for an ashram to place such an emphasis on sports including Western disciplines, all the more so since Sri Aurobindo, according to his biographer Peter Heehs, was never a passionate sportsman himself. Even though he praised the sports facilities at Cambridge University in retrospect, stressing that they turned any student “in three years from a boy into a man”,<sup>64</sup> he showed little interest in games during his time at university.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, failing the riding test, he did not pass the entry exam into the Indian Civil Service.<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, Aurobindo was hardly someone who rejected physical exercise. Indeed, he was convinced that India had to become strong to overcome British colonial rule—a conviction that was not unique to Aurobindo but shared by virtually all protagonists in the nationalist movement. The British, after all, had claimed that they were entitled to rule the subcontinent because of Hindu men’s alleged physical weakness.<sup>67</sup> Government colleges, the Boy Scouts, and the YMCA aimed at training the supposedly defective male Indian body.<sup>68</sup>

As John Rosselli and Indira Chowdhury have shown, members of the Hindu elite adopted the stereotype of male Hindu fragility.<sup>69</sup> Strengthening the male Hindu body, therefore, was central to the emerging nationalist movement since the second half of the nineteenth century and would continue to be so in the twentieth century.<sup>70</sup> One way of doing so, as Parama Roy, Utsa Ray, Samiparna Samanta, and others have shown, was through diet, with protagonists arguing that Indian men either needed to consume meat, indeed even beef, to build muscle, or alternatively

<sup>64</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Address at the Baroda College Social Gathering*, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*; 1: Early Cultural Writings (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2002), 353–356.

<sup>65</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Id., *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity. The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>68</sup> Satadru Sen, “Schools, Athletes and Confrontation: The Student Body in Colonial India,” in *Confronting the Body. The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, ed. James H. Mills and Satadru Sen (London: Anthem, 2004); Fischer-Tiné, “Fitness for Modernity? The YMCA and Physical-Education Schemes in Late-Colonial South Asia (Circa 1900–40),” 512–559; Carey Watt, “‘No Showy Muscles’: The Scouting Frontiers: The Boy Scouts and the Global Dimension of Physical Culture and Bodily Health in Britain and Colonial India,” in *Youth and the Scout Movement’s First Century*, ed. Nelson R. Block and Tammy M. Proctor (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publications, 1999), 121–142.

<sup>69</sup> Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” 121–148; Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*.

<sup>70</sup> Watt, “Physical Culture and the Body in Colonial India, C.1800–1947,” 345–358.

needed to embrace fasting and vegetarianism to develop their will and moral purity.<sup>71</sup>

Just as important as diet was exercise; in fact, both often went hand in hand. In Bengal, a nationalist society founded by Aurobindo's grandfather, Rajnarayan Basu, worked along these lines, as did emerging secret nationalist societies.<sup>72</sup> Members of the Tagore family organized the *Hindu mela* (Hindu fair), an annual event meant to celebrate Hindu Bengali prowess, inter alia by means of martial arts and acrobatics. In the Punjab, organizations like the Arya Samaj and associations founded by it, such as the Punjab Vegetarian Society, placed a premium on exercise. The *akhara* (open-air gymnasium), therefore, became a central site of the anti-colonial struggle.<sup>73</sup> Indian nationalists claimed that physical education would inculcate stamina and courage in young men and embolden them to rise against the British. While Arya Samaj schools such as the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and, later, the Gurukul Kangri, taught gymnastics, cricket and other games, the Punjab Vegetarian Society celebrated its anniversaries with *lathi* (stave) fights.<sup>74</sup> Even for Gandhi's agenda of nonviolent resistance, exercise was central.<sup>75</sup>

Aurobindo rejected the idea of nonviolence, in fact arguing that it had led to India's downfall; yet, he shared the view that Hindu men needed to engage in exercise in order to become more virile.<sup>76</sup> In his opinion, India could only rise to greatness again if "the Vedic institution of the fourfold order, *chaturvarna*", was

<sup>71</sup> Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts. Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); Id., "A Dietetics of Virile Emergency," *Women's Studies International Forum* 14, no. 4 (2014): 255–265; Utsa Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jayanta Sengupta, "Nation on a Platter: The Culture and Politics of Food and Cuisine in Colonial Bengal," in *Curried Cultures. Globalization, Food, and South Asia*, ed. Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2012), 73–87; Samiparna Samanta, *Meat, Mercy, and Morality: Animals and Humanitarianism in Colonial Bengal, 1850–1920* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021), 133–205; Hauser, Julia. *A Taste for Purity. An Entangled History of Vegetarianism*. Columbia Studies in International and Global History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, 38–71.

<sup>72</sup> Valiani, *Militant Publics in India. Physical Culture and Violence in the Making of a Modern Polity*, 36; Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2010), 98–106.

<sup>74</sup> Fischer-Tiné, *Der Gurukul-Kangri oder die Erfindung der Arya-Nation*, 208–211; „Punjab Vegetarian Society," *The Harbinger* IV, no. 22 (1894): 207.

<sup>75</sup> Valiani, *Militant Publics in India: Physical Culture and Violence in the Making of a Modern Polity*, 12. Gandhi attached particular importance to walking. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *A Guide to Health* (Triplicane; Madras: Ganesan, 1923), 59–64.

<sup>76</sup> Sharma, *Hindutva. Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, 56–83; R. N. Minor, "Sri Aurobindo's Dismissal of Gandhi and His Nonviolence," in *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, ed. H. Coward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 87–105.

revived. This concept accorded different roles to the four castes, with the Brahmin being assigned to the spiritual realm while the Kshatriya represented masculinity, physical vigor, and political power.<sup>77</sup> As the founder of the Anushilan Samiti, a bodybuilding club and secret society aiming at overthrowing British rule by means of violence that was inspired by the ideas of Giuseppe Mazzini and the Japanese nationalist Kakuzo Okakura, he advocated exercise as a means of preparing young Hindu men for the anti-colonial struggle.<sup>78</sup> The Anushilan Samiti taught its members various sports of Western and Indian provenance, inter alia cycling, horse-riding, drill, boxing, and fighting with the lathi, which the samiti used in marches and show fights.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, Aurobindo co-operated with two female activists, Sarala Devi and Irish-born Margaret Noble, in his quest for strengthening the male Hindu body through exercise.<sup>80</sup> However, the Anushilan Samiti did not yet have female members.<sup>81</sup>

Aurobindo's writings do not permit any conclusions as to whether or not he joined this kind of training; more likely, he took a different route: that of disciplining mind, body, and emotions by means of yoga, which he defined as "the realization of one's capacity of harmony, communion or union with God."<sup>82</sup> However, Aurobindo had little sympathy for hatha yoga, considered inferior to other forms of yoga centering on the spiritual dimension.<sup>83</sup> Characterizing it as a

<sup>77</sup> Sharma, *Hindutva. Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, 60–64.

<sup>78</sup> Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910*, 32–35.

<sup>79</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Right of Association (Speech)*, 27 June 1909, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*; 8: Karmayogin. *Political Writings and Speeches, 1909–1910* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2002), 67–83; Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910*, 33; Rosselli, "The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal," 130. Later, the lathi would assume a prominent role in the daily rituals of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a paramilitary Hindu nationalist youth organization. Valiani, *Militant Publics in India: Physical Culture and Violence in the Making of a Modern Polity*, 156–161. While Valiani rejects this perspective, scholars like Maria Framke have shown that the RSS was very much shaped by the Hitler Youth of Nazi Germany. Maria Framke, *Delhi—Rom—Berlin. Die indische Wahrnehmung von Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus 1922–1939*, Veröffentlichungen der Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg der Universität Stuttgart; 21 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013), 89–96.

<sup>80</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, 99–100; Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910*, 30–31; Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial (1890–1920). Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79–124.

<sup>81</sup> According to Sanchari Ray, girls and women only joined radical nationalist organizations from the 1920s onwards. Sanchari Ray, "Women in the Frontline: Radical Protest in Post Swadeshi Days," *Journal of People's History and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2020): 10–22.

<sup>82</sup> Aurobindo, *Hathayoga*, 503.

<sup>83</sup> In this, Aurobindo agreed with Swami Vivekananda, who had postulated a hierarchy between a yoga focused on the mind and one of the body. James Mallinson, "Hatha Yoga," in *Brill's Encyclopedia*

practice eminently suitable for men, he argued that it could help men “outdo the feats of Hercules”, rendering them more masculine by “drawing the whole virile force into the brain”.<sup>84</sup> Yet while it helped practitioners to obtain an “extraordinary power” and “knowledge transcending the ordinary human bonds”, it could also generate in them a “colossal egotism”.<sup>85</sup> Hatha yoga, as a consequence, needed to be combined with other forms of yoga focused on the heart (*bhakti yoga*) and mind (*jnana yoga*), as Aurobindo also argued in his later work *Synthesis of Yoga* (1948).<sup>86</sup>

Yet, strikingly, while his notion of yoga was not centered around the body, he claimed that practicing yoga had induced in him certain physical changes. Already when he started taking up yoga in 1905, his health improved, his skin became smoother and fairer, and his mental and physical energy increased.<sup>87</sup> Aurobindo described these processes as changes that he had been able to effectuate by his sheer spiritual force. After his time in prison, he continued working on what he described as his physical perfection, eventually being able to take on any position for any length of time, and feeling physical bliss and ecstasy (*ananda*) without touch.<sup>88</sup> His associates remarked that his skin had become radiant, indeed golden.<sup>89</sup>

In his later writings on yoga, however, Aurobindo stressed the necessity of overcoming the body in order to achieve *samadhi* (spiritual enlightenment), arguing that one needed to detach oneself from the body and, while not neglecting it, become indifferent towards its needs.<sup>90</sup> Bodily inaction could be helpful on the way, yet should not give rise to *tamas* (inertia), the lowest of the three *guṇas* and hence opposed to the aim of enlightenment.<sup>91</sup> Physical needs, sexuality, and emotions needed to be regarded with indifference. Eventually, the “purified heart” would experience “a universal love”.<sup>92</sup>

*of Hinduism. Volume Iii: Religious Specialists—Religious Traditions—Philosophy*, ed. Knut A. Jacobson, et al. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 770.

<sup>84</sup> Aurobindo, *Hathayoga*, 504. This idea ultimately derived from Patanjali, who had argued in his Yoga Sutras that semen, considered the male life force, was a non-renewable source located in the brain, from where it dripped down into the body. Postures like the headstand were supposed to slow down this process, thus increasing a yogi's lifespan. Mallinson, “Haṭha Yoga,” 770.

<sup>85</sup> Aurobindo, *Hathayoga*, 506.

<sup>86</sup> Id., *Synthesis of Yoga*, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo; 23/24 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1999).

<sup>87</sup> Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo. Volume 1* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), 107.

<sup>88</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 311.

<sup>89</sup> Id., *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 330.

<sup>90</sup> Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, 345–346.

<sup>91</sup> Id., *Synthesis of Yoga*, 347–348. On the concept of the three *guṇas*, see Angelika Malinar, “Guṇa,” in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Volume II*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, et al. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 758–762.

<sup>92</sup> Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, 661.

In contrast to Sri Aurobindo, Mirra Alfassa was a dedicated sportswoman. A feeble child frequently succumbing to disease, her first tennis lesson at the age of eight, in 1886, introduced her to what would become a lifelong “passion”.<sup>93</sup> Like many other girls and women at the time, young Mirra was carried away by the sense of freedom tennis gave to her. Tennis allowed for less restrictive dress and encouraged running, jumping, and reacting forcefully and quickly—capacities very much opposed to the quiet demeanor expected of middle-class girls in the late nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> Alfassa’s devotion to tennis, therefore, can be interpreted as transgressing gendered boundaries. Even after her turn to the occult, she continued to play tennis.<sup>95</sup> At the ashram, she continued her practice, famously captured by Henri Cartier-Bresson in the tennis court.<sup>96</sup> Photos rarely show her in long dresses. Alfassa seems to have preferred wearing white trousers and kurtas: practical items of dress allowing a quick match on the court each afternoon. Rather than covering her hair and chest with a dupatta as conservative local notions of decency would have required, she generally wore a white cap. She only stopped playing tennis at the age of eighty in 1958.<sup>97</sup>

Much more so than Aurobindo, Alfassa rejected the idea that the body needed to be given up in favor of the spirit. Indeed, she believed that sport was crucial to the development of a new humankind as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. According to him, man was a “transitional being” likely to evolve first into overman, then into superman.<sup>98</sup> While Alfassa accepted his view, she accorded a far greater role to the body in this process. In her view, the individual needed to achieve perfection to be fit to encounter the Divine. Only then could the human race evolve further.<sup>99</sup> Perfection, or so Alfassa argued, ought to be attained by various means. Next to “psychic discipline” and “mental development”, physical education was inevitable, the aim being to push the body to its limits and beyond.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>93</sup> La Mère, *Entretiens 1950–51* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2009), 49.

<sup>94</sup> Robert J. Lake, *A Social History of Tennis in Britain* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 29–38.

<sup>95</sup> A photo taken in 1912 by an unknown photographer shows her playing tennis in a long skirt at the age of 34. The Mother in France, Venice, and Algeria (up to 1912). *A Collection of Photographs of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo*. Compiled and preserved by Tara Jauhar. [http://saaonline.net.in/samo\\_gallery/album.cfm?refid=5#prettyPhoto\[gallery1\]/18/](http://saaonline.net.in/samo_gallery/album.cfm?refid=5#prettyPhoto[gallery1]/18/) (last accessed 1 March 2023).

<sup>96</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Mother playing tennis, 24 April 1950 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mother\\_tennis2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mother_tennis2.jpg) (last accessed 1 March 2023).

<sup>97</sup> Vrekhem, *The Mother. The Story of Her Life*, 430.

<sup>98</sup> Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 275.

<sup>99</sup> The Mother, “Tournaments,” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 2 (1950): 17.

<sup>100</sup> Id., “The Science of Living,” *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 3 (1950): 15–25.

In order to achieve all-round physical perfection, students needed to be trained in all sportive disciplines, even if not everyone could be a champion. Even though India was already coming into being as an independent nation by the time the ashram started its physical education scheme, exercise was evidently also connected to nation building. This, at any rate, can be inferred from the fact that the *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education* discussed the development of gymnastics with regards to nationalism, stressing the important role of educators such as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in Germany or Peer Henrik Ling in Sweden, both of whom had argued that their respective nations could only become strong if their male inhabitants did as well.<sup>101</sup> However, it was not only Europe that was identified as a model in this regard. Other articles discussed the development of physical education in ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, or indeed in ancient India. The latter article characterized the development of physical education as a history of decline, attesting a particularly negative role to the emergence of Buddhism as well as the Mughal and British invasions.<sup>102</sup> At present, the article implied, India could only regain physical greatness if it embraced both its history and support from the West. It was not only the idea of a unity of humankind, but also this agenda of nation building that accounted for the panoply of sports taught at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram—a programme of Olympic breadth, taught by an international teaching body, yet implemented by an almost entirely Indian student body.

The body of the individual took center stage in this process of re-building humanity and the national body politic. In Alfassa's view, the aim of physical education was to build in oneself "total harmony", so that eventually, perfect beauty could express itself through the body. To reach this goal, students had to be taught to be in command of their bodies down to "each of the body cells".<sup>103</sup> Rather than an outward sign of a brilliant mind, illness was a symptom of a body out of balance, indeed of weakness.<sup>104</sup> It could only be cured through a heightened body

<sup>101</sup> "The Development and Methods of Educational Gymnastics," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 4 (1959): 100–144. Jahn's political views were decidedly anti-Semitic and anti-French—views Alfassa would hardly have shared. Werner Bergmann, „Jahn, Friedrich Ludwig," in *Handbuch des Antisemitismus: Personen A—K*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 403–406. The fact that one of the leading ashram members praised him hints at political divergences and conflicts within the ashram which had already come to the fore when Alfassa and Aurobindo took a stance against the Nazi government during World War Two. Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, 385.

<sup>102</sup> "Physical Education in Ancient India," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 15, no. 2 (1963): 92–106.

<sup>103</sup> "Specialisation or All-Round Training?," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 2 (1959): 108–120.

<sup>104</sup> Mother, The. "Physical Education." *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 12, no. 2 (1960): 105–115. In this, Alfassa's notion of disease resembled that embraced both by Ayurveda and

consciousness.<sup>105</sup> Small wonder, then, that none of the photos of physical education at the ashram showed photos of disabled or overweight children, adolescents or adults.

It was not just illness that Alfassa perceived as a form of divergence. To her, even sexual difference was an aberration of nature that would eventually disappear. Even before it did, boys and girls needed to receive the same kind of physical education. Drawing attention to historical figures like the Rani of Jhansi or Jeanne d'Arc as well as recent scientific studies, an article in the *Bulletin* argued that women could attain what was considered the gold standard—"male standards of fitness"—indeed become stronger than "ninety-nine percent of all men" if they took up regular training.<sup>106</sup> Eventually, this would help sexual differences disappear. As long as they continued to exist, men and women would be slaves to desire and hence to each other. But in the course of spiritual evolution, sexual impulses as well as sexual organs would finally vanish. Alfassa's take on spiritual revolution, therefore, was even more radical than the positions of the Theosophical Society, one of the first groups to coin this concept. Whereas the Theosophists merely claimed that humans had to suppress their alleged "animal" instincts, they never bothered about the body parts involved in the process. Alfassa, by contrast, wished to eliminate both. From this point onwards, procreation would neither be possible nor necessary.<sup>107</sup> India, or so both Alfassa and Aurobindo implied, might well have a special role to play in the emergence of this new, "unsexed" humankind which would finally culminate in the descent of a superior instance referred to by Aurobindo as "supermind" on earth.<sup>108</sup>

*unani tibb*, the Muslim-Arab development of ancient Greek medicine. As Harald Fischer-Tiné has argued, all these branches of medicine, including modern Western medicine, influenced each other in colonial India. Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Pidgin-Knowledge: Wissen und Kolonialismus*. Zürich: Diaphanes, 2013.

<sup>105</sup> The Mother, "Illness, the Cause and the Remedy," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 6, no. 3 (1955): 79–97.

<sup>106</sup> "The Same Programme of Physical Education for Boys and Girls," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 11, no. 1 (1959): 112–132.

<sup>107</sup> The Mother, "The Problem of Woman," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 6, no. 2 (1955): 43–51; Id., "Some Experiences of Body Consciousness," *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 5, no. 3 (1954): 111. On this aspect, see also Kuchuk, "The Life Incarnate and the Life Divine: Spiritual Evolution, Androgyny and the Grace of the Goddess in the Teachings of Mirra Alfassa, the Mother of Integral Yoga," 48–66.

<sup>108</sup> Mother, "The Problem of Woman," 51. Interestingly, neither Alfassa nor Aurobindo referred to existing transgender traditions in the subcontinent where individuals of a third gender had long been an accepted part of society, most likely as they had been disrupted by British colonial rule. Serena Nanda, "Hijrās," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, et al. (2018). Print edition: online on 2 April 2023 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019\\_BEH\\_COM\\_9000000015](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_BEH_COM_9000000015)>

## The Limits of Utopia

In practice, however, physical education at the ashram, although producing impressive results, lagged behind this utopian agenda. First, a significant part of the sadhaks were as irritated by the central role of sports in what was to be a contemplative community, as by the fact that this agenda had been initiated by its foreign woman head whom some did not accept in her role as “mother” and Sri Aurobindo’s shakti, i.e., divine power.<sup>109</sup> Numerous letters addressed to Sri Aurobindo between 1946 and 1950 testify to this sense of irritation, indeed of a certain resistance. In his replies, Aurobindo oscillated between supporting Alfassa and distancing himself from her ambitious agenda of physical education, stating that supermind would hardly “descend into the playground”, as he himself would be the last to meet the physical requirements for an encounter of this sort.<sup>110</sup> Undoubtedly, however, the ashram’s agenda of physical education was not merely Alfassa’s brainchild. The same androgynous concept of future humankind may also be found in Aurobindo’s works.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, Aurobindo himself had stressed the role of physical education in the anti-colonial and nationalist struggle in his earlier years, when the Anushilan Samiti had trained its members in both “local” and “Western” sports disciplines.<sup>112</sup>

Aurobindo’s and Alfassa’s notion of future humankind notwithstanding, gender differences continued to be central to physical education at the ashram as well. Even though girls were allowed to wear shorts and tank tops from 1949 onwards, and sports did in no way aim at preparing them for a future life of motherhood as would have been typical of Indian physical education up to the Second World War according to Elena Valdameri,<sup>113</sup> they continued to be easily recognizable by the caps they were obliged to wear to protect their hair. Only the group captains who were praised as “true candidates for supermanhood” in the licenses handed out to them wore gender-neutral uniforms, i.e., women’s uniforms were modeled on men’s.<sup>114</sup> It was not just male uniforms that served as models to female ashram members. The male body likewise constituted the ideal when measuring students’ strength

<sup>109</sup> Sthaneshwar Timalsina, “Śakti.” In *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Vol. 2: Sacred Texts and Languages, Ritual Traditions, Arts, Concepts*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, Angelika Malinar, Jayaprakash Narayan and Helene Basu. Leiden: Brill, 2018, 843–847.

<sup>110</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Life and Death in the Ashram*, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2002), 780.

<sup>111</sup> Id., “The Divine Body,” 555.

<sup>112</sup> Alter, “Somatic Nationalism: Indian Wrestling and Militant Hinduism”.

<sup>113</sup> Valdameri, “Training Female Bodies for New India”. See also the contribution to this volume by the same author.

<sup>114</sup> Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother*, 367.

and endurance.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, it was only the male body that was idealized, such as in the portraits of Indian bodybuilders arranged according to classical works of European art. At least during the period under review, girls did not participate in international exchanges such as with the *Sporthochschule* in Cologne. There are also very few photographs showing female ashram members weightlifting. If they did practice it, their bodies markedly diverged from the ideal of the slim, fit body preached at the institution.<sup>116</sup>

In the light of the curriculum of the Anushilan Samiti as well as in that of the ashram, Joseph Alter's distinction between the allegedly non-communist tradition of wrestling and practices such as lathi fights and drill embraced by Hindu nationalist organizations appears somewhat questionable. Rather, the organizations founded by Aurobindo show that wrestling could be very much part of an aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda—and that this agenda in turn might well go hand in hand with embracing internationalism.

Moreover, even though the ashram took a clear stand against Nazism during the Second World War, its sports events echoed the role of sports in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Indeed, these were more than echoes, as the ashram did not only entertain exchanges with athletes from Soviet Russia, but also with an institution exhibiting clear continuities to the Nazi regime. The director of the *Sporthochschule* in Cologne, Carl Diem, still in office during the 1950s, had been one of the central sports functionaries in Nazi Germany, organizing such major events as the Berlin Olympics of 1936.<sup>117</sup> Students likewise complained about the military character of sports at the ashram, at least in retrospect. After Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya's death in 2010, some alumni compared the former director of physical education at the ashram to Stalin or Hitler.<sup>118</sup> While Aurobindo and Alfassa hoped to contribute to India's liberation and independence as well as to the spiritual liberation of the sadhaks, their physical liberation was clearly caught in ambivalence.

<sup>115</sup> See, for instance, "Report on the Quarter." *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education* 2, no. 2 (1950): 18.

<sup>116</sup> Sarkar, *Memorable Years with the Mother*, 201.

<sup>117</sup> Ralf Schäfer, "Verdrängen und Erinnern – Probleme im Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit des Sports am Beispiel von Carl Diem," in *Die Spiele gehen weiter. Profile und Perspektiven der Sportgeschichte*, ed. Frank Becker and Ralf Schäfer (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2014), 143–170.

<sup>118</sup> Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya (Dada) 18 October 1923–8 January 2010. The Light of the Supreme. <http://savitri.in/blogs/light-of-supreme/pranab-kumar-bhattacharya-dada-18-october-1923-8-january-2010> (last accessed 1 March 2023).

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