The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum:
A Case Study of the Art of Living Foundation

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By

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled **"The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum: A Case Study of the Art of Living Foundation,"** submitted to Sikkim University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **"The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum: A Case Study of the Art of Living Foundation,"** submitted to Sikkim University for the partial fulfilment of the **Degree of Doctor of Philosophy** in the Department of Sociology, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Mr Shomit Chowdhury** under my guidance and supervision. He has duly acknowledged all assistance and help received during the course of the investigation.

No part of the thesis has been submitted for any Degree, Diploma, Association, or Fellowship. We recommend that the thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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"The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum: A Case Study of the Art of Living Foundation"

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Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying..

Simone de Beauvoir (The Ethics of Ambiguity, 1947)

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At times a journey may begin with a single unclear thought, but as one progresses in the path, the direction becomes clearer, gradually opening up the doors to the destination. Such clarification and 'opening' occurs as a result of guidance and support directly or indirectly derived from the people one meets on the way. Moreover, at a broader and deeper level, one's 'ability to undertake a journey' itself is an outcome of such support and guidance. Ultimately, human beings are 'social beings,' and none can take a step further without directly or indirectly relying on the other. In this regard, the present thesis is an outcome of several influences, support, and guidance.

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It seems the journey has just begun; there is a long way to go, as learning never ends as the sense of wonder remains…

I solely take responsibility for all the omissions in the present thesis.

Shomit Chowdhury

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Introduction

"To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on

the contrary, accept the task of realising it."

Simone de Beauvoir (1948)

1.1.The Realm of Spirituality:

The domain of social science is ever-expanding reflecting the changeable nature of social reality. The meaning-making process underlying the 'social' enables the researchers to venture into all kinds of areas, whether known or unknown, for their study. In this regard, Peter L Berger's "Invitation to Sociology" expresses the discipline's huge scope as he rightly claims, "everything that humans are and do, no matter how commonplace, can become significant for sociological research" (Berger, 1969: 188). However, certain areas of human activity deprive the researchers of just a positivist logic-centric outlook, an opportunity to explore and thoroughly understand social reality. Spirituality is one unusual area characterised by its immaterial and abstract nature, which leaves the scope open and highly challenging for a well-defined, clear-cut explanation. Nevertheless, the recent popularity of spiritual practices (like meditation, *yoga*, etc.) reflects a notable contemporary worldwide recognition opening the door to the fundamental question, "what it means to be a man [human] in a particular situation?" (ibid., 189).

Despite the criticism of the Indian government's initiative for the promotion of *yoga* as incorporating Hindu nationalistic elements in a secular state policy (Ahuja, 2015), the recent U.N. General Assembly's declaration of 21st June as International Yoga Day, along with gradual participation of people from nearly 192 countries on June 21st, 2015 in "some deep breathing and coordinated movements" for a healthy mind and

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body portrays a trend toward spirituality.[1] Indeed, Patricia Aburdene, in her book titled "Megatrends 2010: The Rise of Conscious Capitalism" opines that the "power of spirituality" is the most important megatrend[2] of the present time (Marianski and Wargacki, 2012: 23, Zinnbaur et al, 1999:891). Similarly, researchers like Paul Heelas (2007), Linda Woodhead, and David Tacey wrote about a "spiritual revolution" (Marianski and Wargacki, 2012:21, Flanagan and Jupp, 2007). Moreover, the Indian government's Tourism ministry had initiated a scheme, namely the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD), with an outlay of 100 crores for the infrastructural development of pilgrimage sites across the country to attract tourists and create job opportunities.[3] Indeed, Linda Woodhead citing from different sources (Gill, 1998; Roof, 1999; Woodhead and Heelas, 2005; Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Barker, 2002; 2004, etcetera), indicates that around 2-5 per cent of the population in Europe and America actively participates in spirituality; around 10-20 per cent claims to be "spiritual but not religious" and 20-40 per cent believe in "some sort of spirit or life force" or "God as something within each person rather than something out there" (Aupers and Houtman, 2010: 40-41).

These instances allure an academic pull to the question of the 'spiritual'. What significance do spiritual practices hold in the contemporary era as these are being globally recognised, celebrated, and implemented in government policies? Is this a

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[1] See *When Rajpath turned into 'Yogpath"*. Available at: When Rajpath turned into 'yogpath' - The Hindu (accessed 16th November 2022).

[2] Megatrends are the "most important transformational processes taking place in society". The metaphor of megatrends has been formulated by John Naisbitt in his popular book, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* published in 1982.

[3] See *Government launches Rs 500 crore scheme to rejuvenate 12 heritage cities.* Available at: http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-21/news/58305800_1_tourism-minister-cultural-heritage-sites-tourism-potential (accessed 21st January 2015).

consequence of secularisation in modern society, or is this a sign of the revival of the 'sacred' as a response to the misgivings of the modern age?

Consequently, some more related questions may arise: Why 'spirituality'? What kind of socio-cultural meaning does it convey? How are the 'spiritual' practices driving the socio-political and economic initiatives of the state? Addressing these questions calls for a historical analysis of the very concept of 'spirituality'.

The concept of 'spirituality' implies a sociological conundrum. It is highly ambiguous and attracts diverse interpretations. At times, the practices concerning animism, healing, magic, etc., are also associated with spirituality (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007). By its very nature, the term 'spiritual' evokes an immaterial, unseen, and very abstract dimension of social reality, which almost makes it impossible for academic researchers to delve into it. Nevertheless, the "outcomes and symptoms" (Holmes, 2007: 24) of spiritual practice and experience can be observed and interpreted to some extent. However, it is to be noted that spiritual practice is commonly observed in relation to religion or as a part of it, pointing towards an element of obscurity in this relationship. Kieran Flanagan, a sociologist, observed that the term spirituality is "most unlikely to be found in the index of sociological works, even those devoted to religion" (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007:1). Moreover, an individual-centric, mysterious and abstract subjective emphasis inherent in the nature of spirituality de-motivates an undertaking of a sociological study. However, despite this, a number of social scientific studies (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Giri, 2005; Flanagan and Jupp, 2007, Campbell 2007, MacKian 2011, Veer, 2009, etcetera) has been attempted to reflect on the idea and practice of spirituality.

The idea and practice of spirituality is widely dispersed in contemporary society extending its realm to the secular locations of health centres, educational institutions, workplaces, hotels, spas, and so on (Heelas, 2007). Thus, unlike Max Weber's (1930) vision of "disenchantment" and meaninglessness in modernity, is the dispersal of spirituality or spiritual practices a sign of re-enchantment of the contemporary world? Interestingly, in a paradoxical light, what is so striking about spirituality is that even a scholar claiming to be a Marxist, namely John Brentlinger suggests the Marxists to imbibe progressive spirituality as a basis for the struggle for a "post-capitalist" future (Brentlinger, 2000). Moreover, in the words of a researcher named Elaine Howard Ecklund, "some scientists see religion or spirituality enhancing their work. Propelled by recent public events, even those who previously had no interest in religion or spirituality are finding it necessary to involve students in discussions about these topics" (Ecklund, 2008:12). Indeed, spiritual practitioners, too make use of scientifically grounded latest state-of-the-art communication technology (inter-network system) to promote and indulge in spiritual pursuits. This, in turn, pushes a mind to reflect on the question of spirituality and religion on one hand and science, technology and spirituality on the other. Thus, spirituality extends its realm to the diverse sites of the contemporary world.

While on the one hand, spiritual practices, in general, are seen in a positive light leading to the health and overall well-being of one and all (Giri, 2010; Singh, 2010); on the other hand, payment for spiritual services opens up criticism toward its market-oriented approach (Carrette and King, 2005). So, is spirituality inherently positive for mankind, or is it just a market-oriented consumerist trend? Moreover, an interesting feature of contemporary spirituality is its absorption of people from diverse religious backgrounds. This limits the scope of any particular religion to dominate the sphere of

spirituality. At the same time, the individual-centric approach to spiritual life indicates an equal validation of the subjective lives of all portraying equality rather than hierarchy. This indicates a characteristic of spirituality different from organized religion. One can visibly see a commitment to the individualistic trait of the modern age in spiritual practices. Paradoxically, this individualistic trait of contemporary spirituality results in an implicit connection with all beings (Heelas, 2007; Sointu and Woodhead, 2008; Brentlinger, 2000; Hill, 2011). Is this the "cult of the individual" turning into the "cult of humanity" in modernity resulting from interdependence, as predicted by Emile Durkheim (Hill, 2011)? Moreover, this may raise a question of identity, i.e., how a person practising spirituality identifies oneself in religion? Do spiritual practices result in the redefinition of one's identity?

With the above background, the present study attempts to historically conceptualize and understand the realm of 'spirituality' in chapter two. It seeks to look for the answers to the questions mentioned above through a case study of the Art of Living Foundation (AoLF) since 1981 with a focus on its international headquarters in Bangaluru, India.

1.2.The Art of Living Foundation:

The Art of Living[4] (AoL) is a multi-faceted volunteer-based not-for-profit non-governmental organisation with local centres established across the world. It was founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in the year 1981, as a humanitarian and educational organisation engaged in stress management and social service initiatives through the projects carried on by its volunteers, aiming at conflict resolution, education for all, empowerment of women, sustainable rural development, prisoner rehabilitation, and

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[4] See About Us | The Art of Living India (accessed 16th November 2022).

environmental sustainability. The basis of all these activities or initiatives lies in the spiritual teachings of its founder, rooted in practices such as breathing techniques, meditation and *yoga*.

The structure of its organisation includes a board of trustees with a term of two years. There is a change of two-thirds of the trustees every two years. Teachers and previous trustees are allowed to nominate a new board. An advisory council is there to monitor and guide the functions of the organisation.

The organisation imparts spiritual knowledge and training through its publications and various courses like the Happiness Program, Art of Living Yoga, Sahaj Samadhi Meditation, etc. The primary vision of this foundation is to create a "stress-free and violence-free world" through the inculcation of spiritual training (based on meditation and *yoga*) and knowledge.

(Insights derived from the *Vedic texts* like *Upanishads*[5]) on its practitioners, which primarily include individuals from diverse socio-religious and national backgrounds. Its courses aim at individual personality development and societal transformation through the spread of human values. In short, its founder aims to create a "One-World Family" by instilling a sense of belongingness among the people of the world through the promotion of spirituality. Interestingly, in Ravi Shankar's own words, "To grow in unconditional love and beauty is spirituality". Making a distinction between religion and spirituality, he says, "Religion is the banana skin and spirituality is the banana. The misery in the world is because we throw away the banana and are holding on to the skin" (Shankar, 2007:46).

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[5] Upanishads constitute of literary commentaries and sub-commentaries collectively forming the concluding section of the *Vedas* known as *Vedanta*. In total there are 108 *Upanishads*. (See Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 120).

Such an abstract, nevertheless humanistic, and all-connecting conception of spirituality can be somewhat related to the holistic understanding of spirituality as discussed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) and also could be linked to the emancipatory understanding of spirituality as seen in the writings of John Brentlinger (2000), Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005), Karan Singh (2010), etc. Moreover, a non-dual and all-encompassing understanding of the divine in its understanding of spirituality reflects a touch of the ancient *Vedic* texts like the *Upanishads*. It focuses on the teachings and methods of Hindu classical texts for serenity in life (Jones and Ryan, 2007:45). Thereby, as David O Moberg found that most extensive studies on spirituality are done on Christian spirituality, AoLF provides an interesting case for a study on Hindu Spirituality adding to the stock of studies done on spirituality. However, it would be somewhat inappropriate to consider it a clear-cut case of Hindu spirituality because the organization "claims no religious affiliation" (ibid. 46) and one may not at all find any trace of religion in the major courses offered by it for stress-relief and individual growth. Moreover, one cannot even wholly deny the religious underpinning. Thus, the relationship between spirituality and religion is a major focus throughout the present study.

Operating globally in around 180 countries and almost in all states of India, touching the lives of 500 million people all over the world as it claims[6], the AoLF provides an appropriate case for the understanding of the functioning of contemporary spirituality.

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[6] See Yoga | Meditation | Sudarshan Kriya | The Art of Living India (accessed 20th November 2022).

1.3.Review of Literature:

The source of the term 'spirituality' can be etymologically rooted in the Latin word *spiritualitas* linked to its adjectival form *spiritualis,* meaning spiritual (Sheldrake, 2007:2; Marianski and Wargacki, 2012: 24). Janusz Marianski and Stanislaw Wargacki (2012) noticed the first written record of the noun form of the Latin word *spiritualis* in a letter assumed to be written by a saint called Jerome addressed to a newly baptised with a piece of advice: "So act that you progress in spirituality". Indeed, the word "spirit" inherently linked to the meaning of spirituality too is derived from the Latin word *spiritus* and the Greek word *pneuma.* And the corresponding words related to the terms "spirit" and "spirituality" in Polish, such as *duchowosc*, *duch, oddychac, dech* etc., are notably linked to breath or breathing essential for life (Marianski and Wargacki, 2012).

Social scientists started showing interest in the spiritual nature of men only in the late twentieth century, i.e., in the 1980s (Moberg, 2011:3). Studies on religion in the twentieth century have shown a decline of organised religious practices (Bruce, 2010; Wood, 2010; Heelas, 2006; MacKian, 2011) since the post-1950s, especially in the public sphere such as a fall in church attendance and membership etc., as a consequence of the process of modernisation, industrialisation and secularisation. In the 1980s and 1990s, Mathew Wood observed that a "reshaping of religion" had taken place (Turner, 2010: 268), resulting in a rise in the popularity of faith in spirituality as an alternative to traditional religious beliefs and practices (Zinnbaur et. al., 1999: 891). There was a shift in consciousness. Sociologists often study spirituality as a part of the 'New Age Movement'. Haanegraaff considers 'new age' or 'secular spiritualities' as based upon individual manipulation of religion as well as of non-religious symbolic systems (Wood, 2010: 274). Thomas Luckmann's study of 'modern society' encourages the

argument that secularization itself as a part of modernization led to the growth of spirituality (ibid., 269). However, Linda Woodhead refers to Leigh Schmidt (2005), who sees spirituality's origin in the 1830s as a progressive and emancipatory force aligning with feminism and against slavery. Simultaneously giving the example of the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, wherein people from different religions were given space for dialogic participation Woodhead indicates the influence of liberal Christianity in the rise of modern spirituality (Aupers and Houtman, 2010: 41).

Others like Kieran Flanagan, Celia Kouri etc., saw the rise of spirituality in the so-called post-modern era. 'Postmodernism' resists easy classification and definition. Especially, 'constructive postmodernism'[7] contributes to the upsurge of interest in spirituality (Kouri, 2006: 29-31). Flanagan points toward the traits of post-modernity, nihilism and cynicism that marked concerns in the 1990s have now encountered limits of disbelief; hence the turn to hope in spirituality. Varga considers that the de-rooted and deprived individuals from traditional culture and fragmented collective memory in the sphere of modernity and post-modernity look for a retrieve in spirituality.

Further, Ivan Varga, in his article "Georg Simmel: Religion and Spirituality", ingeniously shows how a purely sociological characterisation of spirituality can be found in Simmel's analysis of religion. Simmel envisages that in the sphere of modernity and postmodernity characterized by the growth of science and technology, the physical and mental creations of the subject become independent of the creator and

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[7] According to Griffin,1998, 'Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions' unlike deconstructive postmodernism which overcomes the modern world-view by an 'anti-world view', constructive postmodernism revises the modern premises and traditional concepts and emphasizes on inter-connectedness of life.

dominate her/him. The conflict between subjective and objective culture deepens in the postmodern era. There also arises a need to break away from the rigid dogmas of organised religion. Simmel, however, acknowledges that this polarity is an essential element for the progress of culture. His analysis of the possibilities of the individual's potential within the asymmetry of the objective and subjective culture can help one to understand the role of spirituality and its relation to church-oriented religion. (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007:145-158). However, diverse meanings and types are associated with the label "spirituality".

By re-visiting Emile Durkheim's conception of religious individualism, Michael Hill attempted to interpret New Age spirituality. Durkheim had predicted that in advanced modern societies, the complex division of labour and specialisation of work would lead to the interdependence of individuals. This interdependence would mark the basis for social solidarity. Moreover, "the supreme value placed on the dignity and right of individuals would take a religious form". There would thus emerge the "cult of the individual", which being shared by all, turns into "the cult of humanity". At the same time, Durkheim has also emphasised on the dual nature of human consciousness, i.e., one containing the consciousness of oneself and the other containing consciousness common to all (Hill, 2011).

Michael Hill has shown the relevance of Durkheim's idea of the "cult of humanity" and his concept of *homo duplex* in understanding the nature of New Age spirituality. The basis of social solidarity in increasingly differentiated societies lies in internalising the sacred in the idealised human individual. Moreover, a realisation of shared sacredness implies social connectedness. The sacred within men and a holistic approach to life characterised by syncretism and a degree of tolerance mark the very basis of New Age spirituality.

Matthew Guest uses the notion of 'spiritual capital' drawing from the works of Marx and Pierre Bourdieu in his conception of spirituality. Spirituality is seen by him in terms of 'spiritual capital', as subject to the acquisition, maintenance and transmission of cultural resources, nevertheless shaped by tradition and influenced by the existing structures of power. It articulates an institutional dimension of spirituality as contrasted to the individualised form. (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007: 191-198)

Kelly Besecke in her piece on "Speaking of Meaning in Modernity," uses Wade Clarke Roof's idea of "reflexive spirituality" as a language or cultural resource that bridges the gap created by meaninglessness in modernity. For her, "reflexive spirituality" provides meaning in modern life. Such a meaning relates one to the sphere of transcendence without disconnecting oneself from rationalist logic. (Besecke, 2001: 365-381)

Citing the concern of scholars like Anthony Giddens and Jurgen Habermas, etc. about the meaninglessness in modernity and, consequently, to create a shared meaningful context via communication, especially in the political sphere, Besecke sees such a language in religion which can create meaning via the use of metaphor, reflexivity in the context of pluralism and mysticism in modernity. She found that it is through the discussion and reflection on varied topics of significance, taking cues from diverse religions the participants of Common Ground (an education centre in the US) express reflexive spirituality. Reflexive spirituality enables one to critically understand modern rationality by combining the rational with the transcendental sphere of life. The term reflexive here indicates one's re-consideration of certain religious beliefs by reflecting on the knowledge gathered from different religious sources or texts (ibid.). Thus, Besecke's work sees the possibility of spirituality, especially "reflexive spirituality", to bring back transcendental meaning in this rational world without

moving away from the rationalist logic. However, though spirituality may bring in meaning in modernity, one may find different types of spirituality.

Quoting from Wade Clarke Roof (1993), Zinnbaur et al. refer to Judeo-Christian Spiritualities, Native American Spiritualities, Eastern Spiritualities, Feminist Spiritualities, Ecological Spiritualities, etc. (ibid.). In addition, David O Moberg, from a literature survey in his paper *Expanding Horizons of Spirituality Research,* discussed about active spirituality, embodied spirituality, holistic spirituality, scientific spirituality, secular spirituality, Christian spirituality, workplace spirituality and so on, each reflecting context-specific perspectives. Amongst these, he found Christian Spirituality as the most extensively studied type. Although there are attempts to formulate an "all-in-one spirituality" based on spiritual practices like meditation and prayer that connects all the above-discussed types, Moberg suggests the need for more intensive multi-disciplinary studies which would establish the connection with the real world (Moberg, 2011).

The studies on spirituality commonly indicate that the spiritual turn in the late 20th century reveals an individual-centric subjective meaning-making approach to faith and life. No longer does one have to follow the traditional path attached to orthodox religious practices in order to create or give broader meaning to one's life and for one's well-being. Nevertheless, spiritual practices are usually discussed in relation to religion.

Religion and spirituality share a contradictory relationship. While some see the decline of religious beliefs and practices resulting in a rise of a secular spirituality (Moberg, 2011: 6) opposed to religion (Marianski and Wargacki, 2012: 20, Flanagan and Jupp, 2007: 176), others see spirituality as re-sacralization and re-enchantment of society or as a transformation within traditional religion. There are also those like Paul

Heelas, who distinguishes between the spiritualities of life through religion and inner-life spirituality and argues that inner-life spirituality is on the rise in Northern Europe. By inner-life spirituality, Heelas means a sacralisation of subjective forms of life wherein God is seen as within oneself here and now and in all rather than as transcending this world as in theistic religion (Heelas 2007).

Conceptually, religion symbolises institutions, traditions, the public world and external authority and hierarchy. Spirituality, on the other hand, is conceptually characterised by flexibility in its orientation, i.e., not governed by rigid rituals, and depicts self-authority and concern with one's private life. In this regard, some scholars consider spirituality as an autonomous phenomenon, separate from religion, while others locate spirituality in religion itself.

Giuseppe Giordan views spirituality as attached to religion, but in an unofficial way (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007:16); Eileen Barker claims that spirituality involves belief in 'God within" and the celebration of individual choice. While Wuthnow believes that spirituality continues to take place within the institutional and, more broadly, communal contexts, on the other hand, Verter represents the position that institutions are largely irrelevant to spirituality (Turner, 2010:169). Further, Mathew Wood draws one's attention towards the emphasis on 'self-authority' in spirituality, unlike the external authority in organised religion (ibid., 270). However, the question is not of self-authority and external authority as such; rather, people also mutually constitute each other, as noted by Wood. Thus, men's social interaction and broader social contexts of one's life and biographies are to be taken into account by the sociologists of spirituality.

Zinnbaur et.al. argue that spirituality as separate from religion has taken into account many properties of the latter, especially concerning the matters of the sacred (Flanagan and Jupp, 2010:11). Central to the experience of both religion and spirituality is a sense of the sacred. Emile Durkheim, in his classical text, 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' (1912), maintains that it is the society that helps define things as sacred, and every society has sacred objects. In spirituality, though the sacred may be found within the self, it perceives a value independent of the self. The sacred and secular may operate together in present-day society. Unlike religion, spirituality gives more freedom to the individual to consider something as sacred. The communal interdictions and ritual practices with regard to the sacred are not applicable in the sphere of spirituality. In this manner, spirituality gives more chance to individual choice.

Quoting Paul Heelas (2002), Mathew J Guest writes, "The spiritual is associated with the personal, the intimate, the interior and the experiential, contrasted with 'religion', which is associated with the official, the external and the institutional, often picking up negative connotations of the hierarchical and patriarchal along the way" (Guest 2009). For Matthew Wood, the concept of "spirituality" with its subjective emphasis serves the sociologists to interpret and describe certain shifts leading to the waning of tradition, external authority, institutions, public life, etc., particularly occurring in contemporary Euro-American societies which the concept of "religion" fails to address. Wood, however, suggests the need to employ "three key sociological principles: the need to investigate the social practice, social interaction, and the broader social contexts of people's lives and biographies" for an adequate sociological inquiry (Turner, 2010: 267-83). Giordan, on the other hand, sees contemporary spirituality as an outcome of transformation resulting from a pre-modern to a modern and then to a post-modern historical shift. Rather than considering the 'spiritual turn' as opposed to

institutional religion, Giordan positively emphasises the ability of traditional churches to effectively respond to change in a given social and cultural milieu. Giordan considers a reformulation of traditional religious beliefs along with the rise of contemporary spirituality resulting in legitimisation of individual liberty as observed in Italian religiousness (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007:161-178).

Further, Linda Woodhead argues that "an opposition between religion and spirituality lies at the very origins of spirituality.." and sociologists of religion must become sensitive to this distinctive historical fact shared by religion and spirituality (Woodhead, 2010). Moreover, Peter van der Veer also sees a connection between the spiritual and secular. He argues, "Spiritual and secular are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalised religion in Euro-American modernity" (Veer, 2009).

Courtney Bender referring to the American context based on how a respondent identifies oneself, classifies the varying relationship of religion and spirituality in the following three ways: a) *spiritual but not religious* (emphasis is on the rejection of organised religion), b) *spirituality as the "Individual" part of religion* (close to above discussed Giordan's viewpoint where in religion is the context within which spirituality has to be located) and c) *spirituality as "More Than Religion"* (here religion is seen as secondary to universal and humanistic spirituality that connects all religions) (Bender, 2007). Such a universal connotation is implicit in Paul Heelas's conception of 'spirituality' which he readily identifies as "life itself, the "life force" or "energy" that sustains life in this world and what lies in the heart of subjective life-- the core of what is to be truly alive. It is part and parcel with authentic ways of being.." Referring to Charles Taylor's "subjective turn of modernity", Heelas argues that there is a growth of 'New Age" and "Holistic" spiritual practices and a simultaneous decline of orthodox

beliefs of the theistic church. He relates this growth and decline with the process of secularisation. Thus, the sacred is now inherent in one's inner subjective life. There is an emphasis on self-authority. However, this does not limit the possibility of a concern for a shared life for universal well-being. (Heelas, 2007) For Linda Woodhead, instead of defying spirituality as something "fuzzy", "precarious", and just concerned with the private life of men, one can constitute a clear operational definition of spirituality by identifying its commonly held characteristic dealing with the "sacred nature of the innermost subjective self" and holistic approach to life (Aupers and Houtman, 2010: 31-46). Thus, the relationship between spirituality and religion is not easy to comprehend in terms of whether the former is autonomous from the latter or rooted in the latter. However, unlike the differences, they share various common traits like the belief in the divine (sacred) or in terms of values or meanings they impart in human life.

The practice of spirituality, especially the Holistic type or subjective-life type or contemporary spirituality in general, enabled the sacred to enter into diverse "social locations". In the words of Linda Woodhead, "It is also worth pointing out that although less visible than purpose-built churches or synagogues, subjective-life spirituality has created its own physical spaces within society, often by colonising existing spaces – in homes, shops, medical centres, church halls and so on. In addition, it is rapidly creating its own designated spaces, including 'spiritual' bookshops, coffee shops, and centres which house many different activities and sell many different products.. It also locates itself, increasingly, within sites primarily dedicated to other functions, including parts of the beauty and leisure industries, the publishing industry, and the spheres of education (including primary education), and healthcare (such as nursing)" (ibid.). These observations of Linda Woodhead may raise one's curiosity to understand the

relationship between spirituality and the contemporary capitalist culture of consumerism. In this regard, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King consider the integration of "privatised spirituality" with the capitalist market. For them, in the 21st century, spirituality as a frontier of religion has been through individualisation and corporatisation, soaked in the ideologies of consumerism and corporate capitalism. The individual creates spiritual meaning through the consumption of commodities. Thereby, "silencing a concern with community, social justice and the extension of ethical ideal of selfless love and compassion towards others" (Carrette and King, 2005: 171). Rather, they seek "an alternative model of spirituality that pays attention to the politics of knowledge, community and questions of social justice" (ibid., 172). In their own words, "Ironically, the emergence of the contemporary concept of 'spirituality' as 'post-religious' may prove useful in reengaging with the transformative and revolutionary capacity of traditional religious teachings in a way that obviates Marx's basic criticism of the religions as modes of social control. In a context where 'the Market' has become the new God of our times, the emergence of socially oriented forms of 'spirituality', critically engaging with the wisdom of the world's 'religious' traditions, may yet have a key role to play in providing the means for resisting unrestrained consumerism and the commodification of life itself (ibid.).

Similar to Carrette and King's emancipatory view of the alternative model of spirituality, John Brentlinger, in his article titled "Revolutionizing Spirituality: Reflections on Marxism and Religion", suggests the Marxists to imbibe progressive spirituality as a basis for the struggle for a "post-capitalist" future. Reflecting upon the Sandinista Movement in Nicaragua in the 1980s, he sees the possibility of dialogue and unity among progressive religious enthusiasts and Marxists for a better future. Almost 50% of the priests in Nicaragua were not opposed to the revolutionary struggle against

the dictatorial Samoza regime. While most influential priests took part in the revolution, around 50 per cent of them belonging to higher levels of hierarchy, such as the Bishops, were against it. So, there was class division within the church itself. However, "the Marxism of believers and spirituality of Marxists" in Nicaragua led Brentlinger to conclude for a revision of religion and to see its revolutionary potential. Citing examples such as the opening up of the Cuban Communist Party for believers and an emerging dialogue between the Christian believers and Marxists in Togliatti in Italy, Garaudy in France and in East Germany, Poland etc., Brentlinger shows an opening up toward respect for ideological difference amongst the two. For Brentlinger, it is spirituality which he sees as an outcome of liberal theology, that marks the basis for unity between the progressive believers and Marxists (Brentlinger, 2000).

Basically, by providing a broad and all-inclusive understanding of spirituality as the basis for dialogue and human bonding with a sense of sharing and caring for others away from the emphasis of Enlightenment rationality focusing on self-interest, Brentlinger urges for the merge of Marxists and progressive believers of faith to move together for the creation of a better world beyond the exploitative nature of present-day capitalism.

Similar to the view of Brentlinger on spirituality, Ananta Kumar Giri, in a chapter on *The Call of Practical Spirituality,* expresses an emancipatory and all-pervasive non-dualistic understanding of spirituality. Practice here calls to go beyond the dichotomy of subject and object and realise the call to bring about a positive transformation in society. Such a transformation would indicate the meeting of ontology and epistemology, science and religion, self and society, material and spiritual, immanence and transcendence. Practical spirituality could be realised in everyday life, wherein one works and lives for a better world. It is a struggle for justice against oppression and

domination. It involves seeking truth or truths "as a landscape for meaning and co-realization". It realises the "brokenness of the world" and strives for "wholeness". It calls for the evolution of a universal human being to create a better world. Citing the examples of Habitat for Humanity, a movement within contemporary Christianity and Swadhyaya within Hinduism in India, Giri emphasises on God realisation through service for humanity and a call for multi-dimensional dialogue as a characteristic of practical spirituality (Giri, 2010: 238-54.)

Openness to dialogue and critical understanding makes people driven by practical spirituality participate in democracy and capture power for the "common good". Citing examples of Gandhi, Vivekanand, theologian Johannes B Metz, Buddha, Aurobindo, Sufism, etc., Giri hopes that the call of practical spirituality would create an atmosphere of growth and learning leading to a better world for all (ibid.).

In the words of Karan Singh, "If humanity is to survive in a global society that is sane, secure and sustainable, the present hyper-consumerist, ultra-promiscuous, and super-materialist lifestyle will have to yield way to a more holistic paradigm in which spirituality plays a pivotal role (Singh, 2010: 26). He basically reflects on the role of spirituality in this global world which he defines as "the attempt to attain the deepest and highest power, whether we call it God, the *Atman*, the Buddha, nature or by any other name, and whether we consider it to be within our deeper selves or outside of us. This yearning for unity with the divine is the essential feature of spirituality" (ibid. 31)

In relation to religion, he sees an emerging view that "religion can sometimes have negative and exclusivist connotations, whereas spirituality transcends barriers of race and religion, sex and sexual preference, language and nationality, and is, therefore, best suited for the emerging global world (ibid., 26). Without seeing religion as a hindrance

rather taking some insights from Hindu religion which he sees as the mother of spirituality Singh's view of new spirituality entails these three precepts: the essential harmony of religions, the world as a family (also includes care for nature) and the imperative of eradicating poverty. He sees the possibility in spirituality to deal with the present-day global challenges of fanaticism, fundamentalism and violence by taking the best from every religion going beyond the differences created by race, religion, language, nation, gender, etc. (ibid.)

Similarly, Jo O'Donovan reviewing Ursula King's book, "Women and Spirituality" (1989) refers to spirituality for King as "not confined to exclusively 'religious' or 'ascetic' stance as separate from the world rather "a universal code-word for a search for direction in our times; in secular society, it is a cipher for a lost direction…it is a search for unity in the midst of diversity of experiences" (Donovan, 1989: 651). For Ursula King, spirituality is the ability of women to open themselves to Goddess consciousness and live in holistic, relational terms where nothing is left out of the divine. Indeed, feminist spirituality calls for a consciousness of the historical experience of women as exploited, alienated and dominated and gradually moves beyond these by developing a vision for an alternative way of living unrestrained by the polarity created by sex/gender roles (Ibid., 653).

However, women may experience spirituality differently than men. These practices may open women to negotiate between their traditional and contemporary roles in expressing their authentic selves. Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, in their article "Spirituality, Gender and Expressive Selfhood", drew from and refined Charles Taylor's emphasis on the "expressive mode of modern selfhood". Citing examples from "The Kendal Project" (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) on spirituality and from a doctoral dissertation on "In Search of Wellbeing: Use of alternative and Complementary

Medicines" (Sointu, 2004) in the UK, they have shown how in the case of holistic spirituality a greater number of women are taking part because they in a way can relate their spiritual practice with their representation of femininity. While holistic spirituality legitimates the traditional role of women as caregivers, at the same time, it subverts such a role in the sense that women are now more concerned with caring for themselves for their well-being instead of getting suppressed by male dominance. The ability to express their selfhood by participating in and practising holistic spiritual activities like *yoga* and other therapies for personal well-being related to mind-body-spirit provides women with a sense of freedom in maintaining their authentic selves while in relation. In the words of Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, "whereas "private" patriarchy turns women into unpaid wives, mothers, and domestics, and "public" patriarchy turns women into sexed bodies available for male pleasure and symbolic capital, holistic spiritualities and health practices are more likely to be concerned with the cultivation of bodily well-being for the benefit of the woman herself, and through this personal well-being, for the benefit of her relations with those around her" (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008: 269). There is an equal worth for each individual; by caring for oneself, one can be more responsible toward others. For the authors, women can now, in this historical context, negotiate between "care for others" and "care for oneself" in expressing one's self-worth and selfhood (ibid.).

Vijaya Ramaswamy, too in her work, "Walking Naked: Women, Society and Spirituality in South India" (2007), draws one's attention to the relationship between women and spirituality but shows the difficulties women have to face on the path to the spiritual quest. In the patriarchal Hindu society dominated by the caste system, women were often kept away from attending their spiritual quests. Those who did were ridiculed and were seen as deviant to social behaviour. Such women are considered

mentally ill and likely to pollute the sacred sphere. The women renunciate since they refused to subscribe to the role model of mother and wife and are sometimes equated with prostitutes (Ramaswamy, 2007: 10). However, despite the hurdles of patriarchy, time and again, all spiritual women like Meera, Anandmayi, etc., shattered the social constructs and pursued their path. But they always remained loners and mostly could not find a place to return. Those men, who get into the spiritual path, may be easily accepted by their families if they return, but this may not be the same with women. Despite this, Ramaswamy found out that society has developed a respect for such rebellious women. Thus, one has to understand spirituality historically and contextually in relation to its impact on certain groups.

In a chapter on "the Spiritual Body", Peter van der Veer argues that one needs to understand modern Indian spirituality in connection with the genealogy of modernity itself. Modern-day spirituality in India is a response to the wider socio-political and economic changes taking place in the global world. Unlike seeing Indian spirituality as a transcendental phenomenon, the author sees a political underpinning. For him, although the Indian spiritual practices have an ancient root in the 5th century CE, there was a modern-day revival during the latter half of the 19th century as a response to the imperial state (Veer, 2014).

The Indian nationalists emphasised on the scientific nature of spirituality to contradict the western linkage of it to backwardness, especially in response to the Christian missionaries. Moreover, efforts of personalities like Swami Vivekananda played a major role in the spread of eastern spirituality as a moral (influenced by Victorian morality) force restraining sexual desire as something good for the mind and body. Even nationalists like Gandhi and Aurobindo were influenced by him. Gandhi emphasised on control of his own body and revival of Indian villages and Indian goods

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in response to the technocratic west guided by his spiritual practices. Moreover, in the 1950s and 60s, the practice of Transcendental Meditation by the Beatles made Indian spiritual practices widely popular in the West, wherein gradually, a trend emerged resulting in the consumption of spiritual products. In the present-day context in India, the Art of Living Foundation under the *Guru* Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is one of the most popular organisations spreading spiritual ideas and practices worldwide. Peter van der Veer sees the emergence of this foundation in consonance with the information technology (IT) revolution. His take on Art of Living shows it as an outcome of the requirement for soft skills like constant self-improvement and innovation required for the managerial practices of contemporary capitalist economies. It combines America's self-help and human resources literature essential for survival in today's global market. Thus, for Veer, contemporary spirituality in India responds to wider global capitalist demands. Indian spirituality has to be understood in relation to the wider socio-political and historical changes taking place in the world. There is always a political connotation in these spiritual practices connecting the national with the global (ibid.).

At the same time, Linda Woodhead's observation (spread of spirituality in multiple social locations) meets its relevance in the case of contemporary India, wherein one can find an awakened emphasis on spiritual practices, as could be noted in the present-day central government policy (PRASAD, Yoga Day) as already discussed above along with the publication of columns (The Speaking Tree[8]) in the national daily on spiritual awakening such as in the editorial coverage in "The Times of India" and "Hindustan Times". Moreover, an invitation to a meditation teacher at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur, emphasising stress-free healthy ways of life[9]

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[8] See Speaking Tree Blog - Times of India Blog (indiatimes.com) (accessed 17th November 2022).
[9] See *Brahmakumari Sister Shivani*. Available at:
http://www.cse.iitk.ac.in/users/gj/new/Events/Shivani.pdf (accessed 17th November 2022).

and a simultaneous organisation of academic seminars on the premises of IIT on the theme such as the "The Role of Spirituality in the Age of Science and Technology" reveals the growing importance emphasised upon the contemporary function of spiritual practices in the overall development of human personality, health and society. There is an explicit concern raised for the integration of science and spirituality for the well-being of mankind in the concept note of this seminar.[10] This provokes one to ponder upon the relationship spirituality shares with health, science and technology, as also pointed out in Peter van der Veer's work discussed above. Moreover, a humanistic concern for the betterment of the whole mankind (Brentlinger, 2000; Heelas, 2007; Giri, 2010; Singh, 2010) implicit in the practices of spirituality discussed above calls for a deeper reflection upon the function of contemporary spirituality. In addition, one also has to reflect upon the relationship between spirituality and the contemporary identity formation of spiritual practitioners. Do spiritual practices cutting across diverse religions (Heelas, 2007; Veer, 2009; Bender, 2007) lead to the formation of an all-pervading universal human identity cutting across caste, class and gender?

The relationship of spirituality with these multiple aspects (science, technology, identity formation, consumerist culture, etc.) of contemporary human life needs to be contextualised based on the awareness of the underlying socio-historical and political forces leading to it. Makarand Paranjape emphasises that the "issue of power cannot be ignored while exploring the science spirituality dialogue" (Paranjape, 2008:5). In this regard, Peter van der Veer's argument, "a central contradiction in the concept of spirituality is that it is at the same time seen as universal and as tied to conceptions of national identity. Moreover, while the concept travels globally, its trajectory differs

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[10] See *The Role of Spirituality in the Age of Science and Technology*. Available at: http://www.aissq.org/ (accessed in 2015).

from place to place as it is inserted in different historical developments" calls for a historically situated interactionist (global and national interaction) understanding of spirituality. Further, he sees Indian spirituality as formulated in interaction with colonial modernity (Veer 2009). Thus, any comprehension of spirituality would remain incomplete without a broader historical understanding of the interaction between the interconnected global and local socio-cultural, political and economic forces leading to it.

1.4. Statement of the Problem:

The aforementioned background on spirituality, as discussed in the existing literature, brings to light the diverse aspects and issues concerning its impact and functionality, i.e., whether with respect to religion, modernity, identity, consumerism, humanism and so on. While on the one hand, the literature shows different types of spirituality, such as Eastern spirituality, Christian spirituality, etc., on the other hand, it throws light on the universal nature of spirituality as all-encompassing, holistic and humanistic in nature. However, cutting across varying themes concerning spirituality is a fundamental basis that majorly attracts the attention of all scholars studying it is its relationship with religion. Despite all attention, even today, there lies an ambiguity, especially when distinguishing religion from spirituality and vice versa, especially in the case of *Guru*-led movements, which portrays an underlying play of the dynamics of tradition and modernity. In this regard, the widespread popularity of the practices such as *yoga* and meditation in the present-day context led by *Guru*-centric institutions in the name of spirituality other than religion adds further to this religio-spiritual ambiguity. Interestingly, on the one hand, the spread of spiritual practices associated with *yoga* and other breathing techniques and related discourse in the diverse realms of work, education, health care, bookstalls, and even in prisons shows their wide

acceptance in the secular realms of life associated with wellbeing; on the other hand, the closeness of the political elites with the same *gurus* whose teachings and *yogic* techniques are popularly followed and in turn the involvement of these *gurus* in the political affairs of the country (example, Ravi Shankar's involvement in the Ram Janmabhumi Ayodhya issue in India) raises suspicion and distrust of its secular and universal nature on the grounds of religion. Moreover, the popularity of the spirituality-based brand names (Patanjali, Sri Sri Tattva, etc.) and related products in the marketplace somewhat portrays a puzzling image of the spiritual movements, especially in the dominance of neo-liberal consumer-centric capitalism.

Thus, although there is no doubt that people from diverse religious, socio-economic and gender-based backgrounds take part in spirituality; moreover, the very celebration and promotion of spirituality in today's society portrays a positive acceptance but can we simply see spirituality in secular terms in the light of universality and promotion of the betterment of society in general? Spirituality's embeddedness in the hedonistic capitalist consumer culture and being backed by the state itself attracts attention. Moreover, its subjective, abstract and mystical nature in the sense of notions like God within and universal consciousness or connectedness somehow confuses more and limits observation, deeper penetration and expression, thereby making it difficult for a scientific understanding. Thus, the realm of spirituality, with all its complexities, is a sociological conundrum. But, the consequences of spiritual experience can still be reflexively interpreted. In this regard, the present study provides a historical understanding and interpretation of this complex and contextual cum global nature of contemporary spirituality by focusing on the Art of Living Foundation since its establishment in 1981. The Art of Living, through its volunteers, has led to the spread of spiritual practices to diverse social locations throughout the globe, cutting across the

differences created by religion, language, nation, gender, etc. Thus, it provides an ideal example for an understanding of contemporary spirituality.

1.5. Objectives of the Study:

There are four main objectives of the study which includes:

i) To historically contextualise and understand the 'spiritual turn' in society.

ii) To see whether a process of re-sacralization and revival of tradition is taking place in the name of spirituality.

iii) To see how the spiritual turn affects the socio-religious, economic and political aspects of contemporary social reality.

iv) To see how spirituality and related practices affect the functioning of the individual and society dynamics in the contemporary context.

1.6. Research Questions:

In accordance with the objectives mentioned above, the present study seeks to look for the answer to these four related questions as given below:

i) What is spirituality, and why is there a "spiritual turn" in society?

ii) Is 'spirituality' a consequence of secularisation in modern society, or is it a sign of the revival of the 'sacred' tradition in the modern context?

iii) How do we locate the functioning of spirituality within the socio-religious, economic and political context of present-day society?

iv) How to comprehend the functioning of the individual and society dynamics through spirituality?

1.7. Methodology:

On the basis of the above-mentioned objectives and research questions and at the same time considering the very nature of the subject of study, i.e., spirituality, which

deals with the subjective and inner-worldly aspect of life that connotes an abstract and unseen dimension of social reality; the present study relied on field-based qualitative research. It is primarily ethnographic in nature which focuses on a case study method with an emphasis on participation and observation.

While the case study method enabled the researcher to selectively focus and approach the functioning of one of the most active, extensive and popular representatives of contemporary spirituality, i.e., the Art of Living Foundation; ethnographic fieldwork provided the scope to access the people (spiritual practitioners) in their natural settings and make sense of how they live and see their world (Marvasti, 2004: 34-61; Berg, 2001: 225-235; Payne and Payne, 2004: 31-71). In this regard, primary data (field interviews, photographs, field notes) had been collected/gathered by staying, participating and observing several activities and events (including the programs, namely, The Happiness Program, Advance Course, Sahaj Samadhi Meditation, Vijnan Bhairav course and so on) in the Art of Living Ashram which is also its international headquarter, located in Bengaluru, Karnataka during the time periods; April to June 2017, December 2018 to May 2019. In his work, "Quantity and Quality in Social Research", relating to qualitative research, Alan Bryman writes, "The best-known of these methods is participant observation, which entails the sustained immersion of the researcher among those whom he or she seeks to study to generate a rounded, in-depth account of the group, organisation, or whatever" (Bryman, 2004: 45). Moreover, the extensive reach of the organisation with its local centres in different parts of India and abroad provided a scope to even participate in the local events and activities of AoL in Siliguri, West Bengal and Gangtok, Sikkim.

Along with participant observation, a qualitative interview method based on a semi-structured interview schedule was followed, keeping the research questions and

objectives in mind. In this regard, the focus was on in-depth interviewing based on an open-ended questions. Svend Brinkmann finds qualitative interviews most natural to the study of individual lived experience as it opens the scope to know how people experience a phenomenon (Brinkmann, 2013: 47). Few interviews also turned into narratives that added to the qualitative depth of the study. In addition to in-depth interviews and narratives, few responses to the questionnaire were collected through e-mail. This helped to conveniently access the AoL members situated outside the country and different regions such as, i.e., Canada, Vietnam, Jharkhand, etc. Further, the content analysis method (see Payne and Payne, 2004: 51-54) was utilised to qualitatively interpret the motivation, value and meaning behind certain word symbols and the overall content of a few AoL documents related to advertisement and promotion of its courses/programs. In addition to primary data, a large collection of secondary data sources, including books, journals, articles, newspapers, and other documents such as advertisements and talks, were also used extensively in the completion of the present study. In this regard, the Art of Living Foundation's publications were of huge help.

Considering the Art of Living Foundation as the universe, the present study primarily drew its respondents numbering 70 (seventy) based on snowball sampling. In this regard, it is to be noted that the sample size adequately met the research objectives in finding the answers to the research questions. Moreover, the present work also incorporates insights from the conversations (formal and informal) held with hundreds of AoL members during the research period. Respondents belonging to diverse backgrounds in terms of class, religion, class, country, age, gender, and educational background added depth to the quality of the study. Thus, the unit of analysis of the study primarily entails individual spiritual practitioners (AoL members) other than the

whole institution and its related activities, including the promotional advertisements of its programs and courses.

Conceptually, the present study shows that the dynamics of tradition and modernity provide an underlying basis (whether in latent or manifest terms) that runs throughout the discourse of the Art of Living version of spirituality. Thus, despite the unavoidable presence of the tradition/modernity dynamics running through all the chapters, chapter 3 of the present work focuses particularly on it. Moreover, Michel Foucault's understanding of "disciplinary power" has been considered relevant and applicable, especially with regard to the question of the body in relation to spirituality (as discussed in chapter 6 of the present study). For Foucault, disciplinary power entails those refined techniques of power that govern the conduct of individuals affecting all spheres of life, including families, hospitals, workplaces etc., since the seventh century (Foucault, 1991). In a basic Foucauldian sense, disciplinary power makes possible the control of the operations of the body, assuring its subjection through a relation of docility and utility (Foucault, 1991; 1979; 1980).

Nevertheless, it is to be noted that as an academic researcher, there is always an advantage in interpreting the data based on one's values and viewpoint. However, at the same time, Amita Baviskar has rightly pointed out that the "scholarly text is simply one representation among many. The people will also continually be represented by others" (Baviskar, 2012: 10-11). Indeed, the AoL practitioners themselves are in a position to represent their versions of reality as researchers and fellow beings.

1.8. Scope of the Study:

The present study is likely to add to the stock of literature concerning the functioning of contemporary spirituality. In this regard, it addresses the complex interconnection of the realm of spirituality with the socio-cultural, religious, political

and economic domains of life. Last but not least, the scope of the study majorly lies in its attempt to throw light on the present-day dynamics of the relationship between the individual and society through the lens of spirituality.

1.9. Limitations of the Study:

Considering the nature of the subject matter, which is highly subjective and diverse and cuts across all spheres of life, the present study limits itself to the limitations of the academic project especially in terms of its objectives. Few of the insights were not incorporated. It is beyond the scope of the work to provide a detailed analysis of each aspect crosscutting the spiritual, whether economic, cultural or political. Moreover, the experiential, inexpressible and abstract dimension of the nature of the area of study provides a challenge to the scope of the discipline of Sociology itself.

However, it also opens the door to a future study that would likely adopt an interdisciplinary and innovative approach.

1.10. Organisation of the Study:

On the basis of the major themes, the present study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, as "Introduction", introduces the whole work and provides the study's methodological background. Chapter 2, entitled "Conceptualising Spirituality: A attempt to Contextualise", contextualises the field of spirituality by pointing towards the historical trajectory of its development. Chapter 3, titled "Spirituality as Traditionalizing Modernity: Through Modernizing Tradition", throws light on the dynamics of the interplay of tradition and modernity that underlies and governs the functioning of spirituality. Chapter 4, with its title, "Socio-political dynamics of Identity Construction", deals with the intricacies of identifying spirituality as distinct from religion, especially with regard to the context of politics. Chapter 5 of the given study entitled "Spirituality and Religion: The Unsolved Certainty" provides an

understanding of the relationship between spirituality and religion based on the perspectives of the AoL members and its main discourse. Chapter 6, titled "Contemporary Spirituality: Traversing through the Known and Unknown", explores and explains the contemporary functioning of spirituality with regard to important themes such as *yoga*, gender, caste, class, consumerism, body and consciousness. And finally, chapter 7 marks the concluding observations concerning the overall findings and insights on the study.

Chapter- 2

Conceptualising Spirituality: An attempt to Contextualise

Discourse about human concerns should be posterior to a natural outgrowth of a prior conceptual understanding; it cannot by itself declare new forms of understanding into existence.

Akeel Bilgrami (2013)

2.1. Introduction:

The evolution of a society is marked by its members' ability to reflect on the experiences of life, which entails a process of conceptualisation through cognition and social interaction. The common experiences over time lead to the formation of concepts describing such experiences. The socio-intellectual capacity behind concept formation enables communication that, in turn, lies at the base of society's functioning and also relieves the universal quest to know. Imagine how lost we would be without the aid of concepts.

It is the element of meaning underlying any concept that marks its significance. It is the commonly shared meaning behind concepts that makes fruitful communication attainable. For instance, if we consider the word 'science', it carries a certain meaning that we all share, such as that of a systematic study. Likewise, the word 'religion' conveys a minimum common understanding based on an objective criterion such as that of a system of beliefs, practices and values related to the sacred. If we take the term 'modernity', despite its varying context-based experiences giving rise to 'alternative modernities' (Deshpande, 2003:25-47). It does convey a common way of seeing itself as either a historical stage of society marked by progress and reason or could be seen as a marker of the contemporary. However, linguistic variation amounts to using

different terms to convey the same concept in different languages while retaining more or less the same meaning. For instance, the same concept of science is conveyed by the term *vigyan* in Hindi and Bengali languages, and similarly, other terms are used for it in other languages but conveys the same meaning.

Also, a scope always remains open for any kind of modification to occur within a concept's meaning component over a period of time in different societal contexts as a consequence of new experiences. For example, if we take the word 'history', conceptually and commonly, it deals with the past and its interpretation, however now, the meaning of history, at least for the Historians, does not just simply indicate the knowledge of the past; rather one has to be cautious enough to be aware of who interprets the past as well (whether those in power or the commoners through their oral tradition) and when was it interpreted, as reflected in critical theory (Carr, 1990, Jenkins, 2003). 'History' also indicates the present and its reconstruction by different groups (ibid.). However, it is better to stop here and let the linguists handle the nuances of semantics and linguistics. But the point to be noted is that the experiential and expressive life of a concept which is inherently subjective in nature can simply reflect ambiguity in terms of meaning, making it too difficult to reach a common or coherent definition or understanding on a broader level in terms of any objective criteria. Such a concept may inherently remain open to interpretation, reflecting lexical ambiguity. In this regard, 'spirituality' is one such term that represents an ambiguous nature whose meaning varies not only cross-culturally or over a period of time but also from person to person within the same society/community or even it may differ among the members of the same family. The individualistic and subjective nature of spirituality makes it highly abstract and opens the space for multiple interpretations. Thus, spirituality for

Robert Wuthnow means diverse things i.e., "everything from mysticism to introspection to broader worldviews" (Wuthnow, 2003: 311).

Recently, a Greek researcher named Efthymios Tzounis in his short piece on "Constructing and Deconstructing the Terminology of Spirituality: A Journey Back to the Greek Roots" (2017), attempted to identify the root of the term 'spirituality' in the Greek word *pnuema* "which means spirit, mind, soul and breathing". Indeed, the Latin word *spiritualitas* (meaning "the breath of life") is derived from the noun *spiritus* which in turn is rooted in the Latin word *spirare* which means to breathe, to blow, or to live (Tzounis, 2017: 1-3). By considering breath as equal to life, Tzounis attempted to link the meaning of spirituality to the thought of an ancient Greek Philosopher Anaximenes (585-528 B.C.E), who considered "air as the source of all things" and attributed to it a divine source (ibid.). In this regard, it is to be noted that even in the present case study of the Art of Living Foundation (AoLF), emphasis on breath and breathing techniques lies at the heart of spiritual practices. However, moving back to the Greek connection, it has been found that even Michel Foucault, in his Lectures at the College de France (1981-82), published as a book titled "Hermeneutics of the Subject", has traced the link of spirituality to the antiquity of the Greek age by connecting it not directly to breath but to the *Delphic* notion of *epimeleia houteau* which means 'care of oneself' (Foucault, 2005).

Interestingly, Foucault sees spirituality as "the search, practice and experience (which may include renunciations, ascetic experiences, purifications, etc.) through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth" (Foucault, 2005: 15; Vintges, 2012: 99-110). Philosophically the

idea of truth (though it may differ from Foucault's notion[11]) embodies a fundamental part of the general discourse of AoL. Ravi Shankar says, "At the heart of each person is a longing for truth, for love and spirituality is able to open the lid that has been blocked for so many years" (Shankar, 2008:21). Ravi Shankar as the 'guru' often seeks to remind that, "truth is that which does not change"[12]. And the devotees also believe in the guru or master as the one who knows the 'truth' as reflected in these words of a devotee, "One may have all the scriptural knowledge in the world, but only a master can translate it into an experience that leads one towards the truth" (Narasimhan, 2018).

Moreover, even an attempt at transformation or simply transformation as a consequence of spirituality is very much visible in AoL. As Michael Fischman (President of AoLF in the U.S.) writes, "Eventually I would come to the realisation that, for me, love – unconditional love – was more fulfilling and transforming than finding truth" (Fischman, 2013: 4). Thus, spirituality may indeed indicate the ambiguous though fulfilling and transforming experiential dimension in the form of 'love' which itself is difficult to define other than an emotion stretching beyond the realm of religion or materiality. Nevertheless, in general, the search for 'truth'[13] occupies a prior concern in the lives of advance spiritual seekers.

The word 'spirituality' was first used in Christianity, as opposed to 'fleshly' or 'worldly', which are contrary to God's spirit (Sheldrake, 2012: 2-6). Then, during the Middle Ages, a sharp "distinction between spiritual and bodily" emerged. It was only at the end of the 19th century the English translation of the word 'spirituality' appeared

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[11] Foucault's idea of 'truth' is rooted in the activism of the notion of *parrhesia* in which the speaker uses his freedom to maintain moral integrity and say the truth instead of falsehood, choose frankness instead of persuasion, moral duty instead of self-interest, criticism instead of flattery and so on. (See Vintges, 2012: 99-110)

[12] See *Truth*. Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/wisdom/knowledge-sheets/truth (accessed 21th November 2021).

[13] Truth in the spiritual path usually indicates a broader philosophical question concerning the ultimate purpose and meaning with regard to life and death and also about questions such as, who am I?

from a French term in reference to "the spiritual life" (ibid.). The spiritual life, in turn, indicates multiple rather ceaseless interpretations. Since ages, the term 'spirituality' and its related words such as 'spirit', 'spiritual', and 'spiritualism' has been used to refer to diverse non-material phenomena related to the religious, paranormal, mystical, mysterious, occult and other-worldly aspects of human life. As Emile Durkheim writes in his classic work, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (1912), "now, invisibility is widely regarded as one among the signs of spiritualness" indicating afterlife entity perceived through "miraculous vision", the term 'spirit' or 'spiritual' in this sociological and social-anthropological *magnum opus* has been referred majorly to certain other-worldly entities of religious significance related to the core of tribal societal formation in the form of totemic beliefs and practices concerning ancestral spirits (Durkheim, 1995: 242-299). These spirits, even though have control over individual lives, they also have a power of their own that goes beyond the individual existence and unites the tribal society as a whole in the form of belief (ibid.). Also, beliefs concerning spirit-possession and the related practice of exorcism may indicate a link to the spiritual. Similarly, the occult practices associated with '*tantric*'[14] practices are indeed spiritual for some, if not for others.

However, contemporary spirituality as practised within modern organisational structures such as the AoLF refers to a complex amalgam of practices and belief systems providing scope for practitioners belonging to diverse backgrounds (in the sense of region, religion, language, nationality, etc.) to perceive, follow and apply it in their own lives. While on the one hand, spirituality here applies as a practical technique to deal with the stress and tension of everyday life. On the other hand, there are the non-

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[14] Tantric practices include mantras, elaborate rituals related to *Shakti* worship (see Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 141), miracle worship (see Rinehart 2004: 185).

material elements of mystery, miracles and mysticism attuned to the AoL version of spirituality. The experiential consequence of some of these non-material aspects, which are even usually held to be 'irrational' (like miracles) by those who are 'modern' and scientifically inclined, may actually affect the daily life practices of the believers who have their own rational way of seeing these aspects. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear the AoL members speaking of experiencing miracles and miraculous healings in their lives, a common subjective experience of many in AoL. Interestingly, there is an AoL program known as Blessing Program that guides the participants to provide effective blessings. Indeed, it is quite usual for the members to seek blessings from those who do the program and interestingly, the blessing works for the individual seekers who are found to be willingly sharing their subjective miraculous experiences.[15]

As expressed by Charles Taylor, there lies the subjective and expressive dimension of human life with its individualistic nature that has gradually taken a noticeable turn, especially with the coming of the age of modernity (Taylor, 2001). This subjective dimension, in turn, reflects an ambiguous nature of modern-day spirituality, which shares an unclear or rather perplexing relationship with religion, leading to re-enchantment on the one hand, contrary to Weberian view of disenchantment, and on the other hand, also provides a rational way of dealing with the misgivings of modernity as a consequence of de-rootedness and meaninglessness. Thus, while there are authors like Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen, who considers AoL as "one of the world's largest contemporary New Religious Movements" (Tøllefsen, 2011: 255); other researchers on AoL like Nandini Gooptu, prefers to regard AoL as a form of "New Spirituality" (Gooptu, 2016). Thereby, it is important to first understand the very concept of

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[15] See *Blessing program.* Available at: Blessings Program | The Art of Living India (accessed 20th November 2022).

spirituality. In this regard, the present chapter attempts to conceptualise spirituality by contextualising it within the broader socio-historical framework of modernity. Then, it draws a picture of contemporary spirituality as reflected by the AoLF by locating it within the context of Indian modernity. Basically, the present chapter attempts to answer the first two research questions related to the first two objectives of the study, i.e., what is spirituality, and why is there a 'spiritual turn' in society? Is 'spirituality' a consequence of secularisation in modern society, or is it a sign of the revival of the 'sacred' tradition in the modern context? However, the answer to these questions is not just limited to this chapter.

2.2. Contextualising Spirituality:

The various ideas and practices expressed by the term 'spirituality' in the contemporary era evolved gradually over a period of time within a broader socio-historical context. Despite the ambiguity in its nature indicating multifarious interpretations, the word 'spirituality' did and does reflect somewhat a common structure indicating certain defining elements as it became a popular term, especially during the 1960s in the Euro-American context. In the case of the US, the rise of spirituality is associated with the counter-cultural movements wherein the participants majorly belonged to the baby-boom generation (post-Second World War generation). In this regard, an important influence is that of the Eastern religious and spiritual personalities such as Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Bhaktivedanta, , and so on (McDermott 1975).

The appeal to spirituality was primarily an individual concern though driven by a dissatisfaction with the status quo, seeking certain inner goals or wants, whether religious or not, wherein the focus was laid on one's choice. Thereby, it was either a

consequence of the process of secularisation taking place in the age of modernity during the 19th and 20th centuries or a crucial shift in religious consciousness diverting from its orthodox beliefs and practices towards freedom for subjective choice and self-authority though not completely away from the secularising tendency as such. However, one cannot just stop at individual subjective orientation; rather, the realm of spirituality is a complex whole with varyingly connected elements manifesting the socio-psychological, politico-historical, economic and philosophical aspects (will be discussed in the later sections) gradually evolving within the broader context of modernity (or some may say post-modernity). In this regard, the present section attempts to interlink the broader socio-historical context to the contemporary idea and practice of spirituality as a reality in the lives of people in society today. Thus, it is an attempt to apply the "quality of mind" as laid out by Charles Wright Mills in his classic work, "The Sociological Imagination" (1959), in order to understand "the most intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (Mills, 1959: 15). Thereby, in this regard, the context of modernity provides the historical underpinning within which one has to locate the rise of contemporary spirituality.

2.2.1. Context of Modernity:

In general, the era of modernity is a historical stage that exhibited/exhibits specific characteristics that evolved as a progressive transformation of human society and mind. This progress is based on a dichotomy such as "modern and non-modern, West and non-West, rational and non-rational" (Mitchell, 2000: viii), wherein the former terms conventionally connote progress. The major historical events such as the Renaissance, which began in Italy in the 14th century and gradually spread over to all of Europe; the Protestant Reformation during the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe; the French Revolution of 1789; scientific revolution followed by the Enlightenment or Age of

Reason and the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, etc., signals the age of modernity in Europe.

Thus, the developments such as importance placed on human choice and the overall humanistic spirit of the age of Renaissance (see MacGregor, 2008); the rebellious nature of the Reformation that rejected the dominance of the middle-man (popes and church) and emphasis on this-worldly asceticism of individuals and on chance over providence (see Weber, 2001 [1905]); Bacon's inductive reasoning or Descartes' emphasis on thinking mind; the age of science that emphasised on experience and reason other than God's decrees (see Rothman, 2008) leading to various discoveries (Copernicus's Heliocentric or Galileo's use of the telescope to observe the stars) and inventions such as that of the spinning jenny, steam engine etc., as products of the faith on human mind and spirit consequently laying the road to industrialisation and urbanisation, development of communication and rise of the middle class laid the foundation of the modern age. In the words of Norman C Rothman, "the scientific revolution marked the transition of society from the Middle Ages to modern times". The period of Enlightenment that laid the foundation of science had shown the importance of "the natural rights of all human beings" (Rothman, 2008). During the "age of reason" or Enlightenment, well-known thinkers such as John Locke, Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Jean –Jacques Rousseau applied scientific understanding to the study of society and politics. Their emphasis was on reason, freedom and progress. They fought for individual rights and sovereignty, influencing the demands for liberty, equality and fraternity during the French Revolution of 1789 (ibid.).

These events mark a "periodic rupture" expressed by the idea that "the present is not determined by the past, especially by the recent past" (Delanty, 2015: 25-29).

Rather, the present is seen in terms of progress which indicates a kind of newness marked by a "faith in the capacity of human agency to shape society in light of guiding ideas and knowledge" (ibid.). Referring to Koselleck, who attributes the notion of progress to Immanuel Kant, Gerard Delanty points to the importance placed by his theory on the possibility of new expectations over limited previous experiences as a characteristic trait of the period 1750-1850 leading to the emergence of modernity in Europe (ibid.). There are certain interacting elements that, as a consequence of the above-mentioned events, gradually developed the modern consciousness.

The age of modernity is considered to have succeeded the medieval or Middle Ages evolutionarily. However, the Latin word "*modernus*" from which the English term 'modern' had been derived, was used for the first time in the late 5th century to distinguish the Christian present from the Roman or pagan past (Habermas, 1981:3). Jurgen Habermas has pointed out the fact that people had been considering themselves modern for ages, i.e., "during the period of Charles the Great, in the 12th century as well as in France of the late 17th century (ibid.). The word "modern" appeared during the new epochs in Europe when the present was distinguished in relation to the ancient (ibid., 3-4). This changed gradually during the period of Enlightenment which linked modernity to science, progress, and betterment historically distinct from the middle-ages. Then, from the midst of the 19th century onwards, modernity is perceived as free from its historical ties and marked by an abstract opposition between "tradition and present" (ibid.). Its emergence is, however popularly attached to the history of Europe. Modernity reflects a period of change, i.e., majorly evolutionary in nature, reflecting progress and growth.

For Emile Durkheim, a turn to modernity symbolises a movement of a primitive feudal society based on mechanical solidarity (characterised by collective resemblance

with regard to occupation, values, beliefs etc., and repressive law based on strong moral collective sentiments) to a society based on organic solidarity (marked by differences, a specialised division of labour, industrialism, individual autonomy yet interdependence and restitutive law based on contractual relationships) (Durkheim, 1984). Max Weber had dominantly associated modernity with social action driven majorly by a rational orientation, especially that of instrumental rationality that characterises the spirit of Capitalism and modern bureaucracy (Weber, 1978). Karl Marx, too had majorly associated modernity with the age of Capitalism and its characteristic traits such as reliance on big industries, trade, movable property, money economy, "pure private property", and universal competition (Marx, 1968[1932]). Similarly, for Georg Simmel, modern society is based on a money economy; in addition, city life presents the most pristine form of modern fragmentary and pluralistic culture (Kivisto, 2011: 137-139). Talcott Parsons associated certain dominant value orientations with modernity, such as universalism, achievement orientation, functional specificity and self-orientation. For him, money, market and bureaucracy are the universal institutional features of modern society (ibid.).

For contemporary thinkers like Anthony Giddens, one of the discontinuities that characterizes modernity is that "the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristics of prior periods" in terms of both scope and pace of change concerning global relations as well as that of most intimate relations (Giddens, 1991: 4). Time-space separation or distantiation (ability to connect activities of people who are distant), dis-embedding of social relations (i.e., 'lifting out' of social relations from their local contexts through expert systems and symbolic tokens such as money) and reflexivity (i.e., constantly reflecting on the present condition on the basis of new knowledge) are essential features of a modern industrial society

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characterised by surveillance and nation-state (ibid.). For Zygmunt Bauman, modernity is characterised by its fluid quality, i.e., by its dynamic and changing nature constrained neither by time nor by space. Thus, he prefers to call it "liquid modernity" driven by light travel, time-space separation etc., which has come into existence through the melting of solids such as traditional ties, and customs, etc. (Bauman, 2000: 2-15).

A review on the study of modernity can go on but what is crucial to note in this context is; what are the essential features of modernity that have influenced the growth of contemporary spirituality? In this regard, Gerard Delanty has pointed out a "cognitive order" from which one can derive certain essential ideas of modernity which are open-ended and can be interpreted differently in different societies. These are ideas of "freedom, equality, autonomy, justice, the individual and democracy" (Delanty, 2015: 28). In addition, most importantly, human reason is one essential idea of modernity. As we will proceed further in this work on spirituality, we will see that all these factors discussed so far that gave rise to modern consciousness, such as humanism, this-worldly asceticism, science, reason, and experience, also resonates as defining features of contemporary spirituality which is individualistic and subjective in nature and has spread far and wide especially amongst the middle classes through the aid of easy and highly advanced communication technology in the age of modernity.

Although these ideas of modernity are dominantly European in nature, modernity cannot be just limited to Europe as its defining context (Delanty 2015, Chatterjee 1997, Mitchell, 2000, Kaviraj, 2000 etc.). Rather different societies have responded to modernity based on their circumstances in a different manner generating their own mode of modernity (ibid.). In this regard, contemporary spirituality, as presented by the case of AoL in this study, although it reflects the ideas of modernity in general, which has western roots, also reflects certain contextual elements specifically concerning

Indian modernity and the East. Thus, in this regard, how India has responded to modernity is an important concern.

2.2.2. Modernity in India:

Modernity in India is majorly a consequence of a gradual historical process of interaction with the outside world, i.e., especially the British, as a consequence of the process of colonisation supported by industrialisation and capitalism. In the words of Yogendra Singh, "Initially, the contact [with the British] led to the growth of a modernising sub-culture or Little tradition of Westernization, especially during the seventeenth century in Bengal, Madras and Bombay, where a small nucleus of interpreters, trader-cum-middleman emerged who were slowly being socialised to Western ways; subsequently, there also emerged sects which emphasised assimilation of Western cultural norms, and Western modes of learning (e.g. Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, etc.,); these sects also ran a crusade against obscurantism in Hindu traditions. These movements, on the one hand, and the consolidation of the British power towards the middle of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, finally led to the institution of modernising Great tradition" (Singh, 2009 [1986]: 202- 03). The British East India Company gradually established its place in India by familiarising itself with its politico-economic potential through observation, cognitive mapping and making use of statistical data; and acquiring the rights to collect revenue. The Indian population comprised mainly of diverse castes, sub-castes and tribal groups without direct control of sovereign political authority or state made it easier for the British to establish its rule (Kaviraj, 2000). Indeed, the British government could be credited for the gradual creation of a sovereign state in India (ibid.) or rather the "institutions of the modern state" within colonial India, such as "trigonometrical survey, the separate

cemetery and competitive examinations for the Indian Civil Service" (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 83).

The British initiatives, especially in the area of communication, along with the spread of English education and learning, directly or indirectly facilitated the modernisation of India. For instance, the development of seaports in the three major cities of British power, i.e., Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, the development of the Grand Trunk Road during the 1830s linking Calcutta with the upper Ganges basin, the introduction of the telegraph line and the railways during the 1850s facilitated not only the movement of people and goods but also eased the spread of ideas in addition to the generation of employment opportunities (Killingley, 2003: 511). The widespread transmission of ideas was majorly the outcome of printing (since the late 16th century, pioneered by missionaries) in vernacular languages, Sanskrit and English (ibid.). Dermot Killingley emphasised on "communication with the past" as another important development (ibid.). The translation and printing of several historical accounts and ancient religious texts in vernacular languages and English made these accessible to a wider circle of people other than the Brahmins (the traditional literary group). The English scholars/European Indologists drew assistance from the Brahmins to translate and interpret the ancient Indian texts. In this regard, the Brahmins were also recruited as translators or teachers in educational institutes (such as in the Fort William College, Asiatic Society of Bengal etc.,) and with the establishment of the judicial structure on the English model in 1773; they were also consulted on questions of Hindu dharma (Ibid. 512). The collaboration of the English and native scholars or literates in the publication of diverse translated and interpreted literature on India's past and ancient texts instigated a certain critical reinterpretation of Hindu tradition, especially during the 19th century. This period is marked by the rise of several social reform

initiatives/movements questioning those traditional Hindu practices/beliefs which seemed unsuitable on rational and humanitarian ground. In this regard, some eminent English-speaking Western-influenced Indian historical personalities played a crucial role in questioning and reinterpreting Indian tradition attempting to generate a confluence of tradition and modernity. Ironically, the 19th century is the period in which, for the first time, the term Hinduism was used to denote "a single religious tradition" and the man who is often attributed to being the first to use this term was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Jacobs, 2010: 5-10, Killingley, 2003: 510-515).

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772- 1833), often referred to as the 'Father of Modern India', was one of the notable figures who founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828. He openly criticised the Hindu traditional practices concerning idol worship, polytheism, polygyny, the practice of renunciation, caste discrimination, etc. Roy was a man who could communicate in multiple languages like Bengali, Persian, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and English (Knott, 1998: 72). He sought to bring ancient Indian learning and western learning to terms by interpreting ancient Indian texts through a rational and scientific vision of modern India (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 86, Nehru, 1994: 315 [1945]). He extensively used the new communication facility of printing to propagate his ideas through newspapers and other publications. Roy preferred to move back to the *Vedas,*[16] especially the *Upanishads* to reform Hinduism by emphasising on the 'unity of God' or monotheism. His ideas were thus close to Christian deistic Unitarianism and

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[16] *Vedas* are earliest religious scriptures which forms the basis of Hinduism composed between 1500-600 B.C.E. in Sanskrit language although believed to have been initially divinely revealed to ancient sages while in a meditative state. The word *Veda* literally means knowledge and contains information concerning the performance of sacred fire rituals and other rituals, rules concerning their accurate recitations, meanings and purpose behind their performance other than providing guidance related to matters of daily life. Vedas primarily consist of four collections (Samhita) of ritual material namely; *Rig Veda, Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. Other additional texts included in the corpus of Vedas are the *Brahmanas, Arankayas* and *the Upanishads* which are the latest additions composed between 600 and 300 B.C.E. (For further details, see Shattuck, 1999: 18-28).

sympathetic to Islamic monotheism. He was not in favour of the elaborative practice of rituals in Hinduism which he saw as merely promoted by Brahmins for profit (Killingley, 2003: 515), thus unfit for his liberal interpretation of Hinduism based on 'improvement' and 'enlightenment' (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 86). In the domain of social reform, Roy considerably fought against the practice of *swamarana* or *suttee/sati* (a Hindu ritual of the immolation of a widow at the funeral pyre of the deceased husband) leading to the enactment of a law prohibiting the practice of *sati* in the year 1829. This law was an outcome of coming together of like-minded people from differently situated backgrounds (seemingly contradictory) but fighting for a common cause. For instance, the liberal and Utilitarian Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck, could pass the law with the support of reformists like Roy and another Hindu *pandit,* namely Mrityunjay Vidyalamkar and a notable Baptist missionary named William Carey (Killingley, 2003: 514). Thus, *sahamarana* as a practice appeared as a customary barrier and a barbarous act fit to be rooted out to liberals like Bentinck, who pushed for liberal ideals (despite the obvious reason of being a colonial representative); for Roy and Vidyalamkar this practice is not a marker of true Hinduism rather it was a social evil, and for Carey, *sahamarana* symbolised an evil Hindu practice that could justify the spread of Christianity (ibid.). Ram Mohun Roy also campaigned for women's education and was not in favour of child marriage. His reinterpretation of Hinduism based on moving back to Vedanta (while rejecting some of its central aspects (Hatcher, 2008: 24) with an emphasis on human faculty to recognise the unity of one formless God and humanitarian morality (a sense of duty towards fellow beings) (Hatcher, 2008: 23) challenging obscurantism and seemingly unwanted social practices befitted to the liberal western outlook symbolised a turn to modernity. This, in turn, interestingly redefined tradition on a liberal and rational basis. However, in that period,

there were also groups like the Dharma Sabha, which challenged the legal prohibition of *sati* despite promoting some of the same causes as Ram Mohun Roy, such as education in general and education for girls in particular. Another group, namely "Young Bengal", following an English teacher/enthusiast namely, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, associated with India's first English institute (1817), the Hindu College in Calcutta openly derided and also renounced Hinduism by eating beef and drinking whiskey; and few of its members also converting to Christianity (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 83. Killingley, 2003: 516).

Brahmo Samaj was later re-established by Debendranath Tagore (belonging to the influential Tagore family or Calcutta's *bhadarlok* community [Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 28]) who, through another society, namely, the Tattvabodhini Sabha begun managing the affairs of the Samaj in the 1840s (Hatcher, 2008: 21). Debendranath somehow reorganised the Samaj away from scriptural authority "in favour of the pure heart, filled with the light of intuitive knowledge" (Killingley, 2003: 517). Subsequently, with the appointment of Keshub Chandra Sen (a non-Brahmin) as a teacher of the Brahmo Samaj, it took new directions. It aimed to abolish caste distinctions by abandoning the sacred thread and promoting inter-caste marriage and inter-dining (ibid.). It also fought for women's issues like widow remarriage and against child marriage (Knott, 2008: 76). Sen went on tours within India and abroad and delivered talks in English focusing on divine revelation and spiritual awakening through individual intuition. Interestingly, his talks also touched upon the importance of the 'progress of nations', 'law and Parliament, 'modern science' and 'ancient wisdom from India' (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 114). Later on, in life, he became a follower of the sage Ramakrishna Paramhansa and gradually moved away from social reform and Brahmos towards worship and spiritual experience, leading him to form the

Church of the New Dispensation (ibid.). Nevertheless, Sen's tours influenced the formation of similar organisations like Brahmo Samaj aimed at reform (opposed early marriage of girls etc.), such as the Prarthana Samaj (1867) in Bombay (present-day Mumbai). Another similarly placed society that differed from the Brahmo Samaj was the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875.

The Arya Samaj, too, denounced the image-worship and elaborate rituals aiming at moving back to the authority of the *Vedas* as the highest form of knowledge. It promoted Sanskrit and *Vedic* studies. It denounced the superiority of Western science and missionary efforts of Christians and Muslims (Shattuck, 1999: 91). Dayanand preferred to maintain the four *varna* system but on the basis of examination rather than following a hereditary basis. He was, however conservative in not favouring inter-dining and intermarriage amongst these groups (Killingley, 2003: 520). With regard to social reform, he, too, emphasised on women's education, and widow remarriage and was not in favour of child marriage.

Another important figure of 19th-century India who attempted to bridge the gap between the East and West by interpreting the Hindu tradition in the light of modern rational thought was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). He was, however, critical of the revivalist social reform attempts during his time as he condemned them as elitist and alien. Rather he focused on "this-worldly type of religion" based on self-help and social service (Sarkar, 2014: 62). Vivekananda at the young age of 19 became a disciple of a Bengali saint/mystic namely Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) whom Jawaharlal Nehru described as "a remarkable man of saintly character" devoted to faith and service of humanity (Nehru, 1994 [1945]: 314). Ramakrishna was open to all faiths and believed that the end of each path is the same (Shattuck, 1999: 92-93). Vivekananda carried on the mission to spread Ramakrishna's message after his demise. He is well

known for his speech at the World's Parliament of Religion (an inter-faith meeting) held in Chicago in the year 1893. It is believed that his speech made a tremendous impact on the audience, and then on, he became a spokesman for *Advaita* Vedanta philosophy (Singh, 1993: 57-58). Vivekananda founded the Vedanta Society of New York in 1895 (Shattuck, 1999: 92-93). He believed in the essential unity of all religions. With a message that divinity exists in all despite caste, class, creed, and nation, he spread the message of *yoga*. He explained the four major types of *yoga,* namely Jnana *yoga*, Bhakti *yoga*, Karma *yoga* and Raja *yoga*. Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 on lines of Christian missionaries to aid people by providing all kinds of services by promoting education, health care, relief work, science etc., (Singh, 1993: 58, Shattuck, 1999: 93). It is also suggested that "modern Hindus derive their Knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda directly or indirectly" (Jacobs, 2010: 10-11), so does modern spirituality.

Indeed, the period from the late 18th century to the early 20th century could be considered as a period of Hindu renaissance or Neo-Hinduism[17] wherein Hinduism coalesced as a single religious community (ibid.). Moreover, it was also within this period, especially during the 19th century the seeds of national consciousness were planted and facilitated by the exposure to modern amenities/facilities (English education, printing press, railways, legal system, money etc.) and ideas (rationality, liberty etc.) enabling the formation of associational groups or a kind of "colonial civil society", initially limited to the elite few (Kaviraj, 2000: 150). In this regard, the influence of some remarkable men, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Swami Vivekananda, had been immense. They became an inspiration for the later prominent

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[17] Hinduism was reformed in the context of convergence of the east and the west, Vedic tradition and western rationality or modernity is termed as Neo-Hinduism by Paul Hacker, a German Indologist (See Copeland, 1967; Jacobs, 2010)

figures of Indian independence/nationalism, such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, amongst others.

While Gandhi was critical of "modern civilisation" based on a craze for machines like railways, English education, and specialised professions like doctors, lawyers etc., and was determined to create the idea of a nation on the basis of ancient Indian civilisation based on village life, ancient school system (*Ashramas*), and ideas like religious morality, duty etc., (Gandhi, 1938), Nehru majorly intended to follow the path of Enlightenment, modern science, technology and industrialisation. However, Gandhi was supportive and open to the principles leading to the "liberative contribution of modernity; civil liberties, religious tolerance, equality, poverty alleviation" (Heredia, 1999: 1501) and was equally critical of orthodox traditional practices concerning the caste system, Brahminic supremacy etc. Nehru, too, conveyed high regard for tradition as evident in his popular text, "Discovery of India" (1945), wherein he held it unfortunate to see the *Vedas* as scripture rather suggests to see it as "the unfolding of the human mind in the earliest stages of thought. And what a wonderful mind it was!" (Nehru [1945], 1994: 79). Moreover, what merges these prominent historical figures of modern India such as Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Nehru along with others like Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo etc., despite the differences, is their willingness to connect with the secular and humanistic universal consciousness (Nehru, 1994: 554-561, Heredia, 1999: 1497-1502, Nikhilananda, 1964: 73-75, Singh, 1993: 55-63). Thus, Western rationality and science have had an essential influence on eastern minds. At the same time, it is to be noted that these figures, especially Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore, argued in favour of the spirituality of the East that could bring "world peace and equal prosperity for all" in contrast to the materialism of the West leading to warfare and colonial exploitation (Veer, 2009: 15). Indeed, this kind of

understanding of Eastern spirituality indicating superiority to Western materialism gradually came to play an influential role in the West, especially during the post-World War II era (Principe, 1983). Thus, there has been a process leading to the convergence of the east and west, and such a process is very much reflected in the realm of spirituality which distinguishes itself from religion in a subtle and also direct manner. Thereby, contemporary spirituality could be seen as an offshoot of a secular and universal consciousness rooted in the dynamics of tradition and modernity imbibing science and religious spirituality along with a touch of humanism in terms of an interaction of the East and West which fits best to the present-day evolution of society (which will be discussed in the later parts of the present study).

Further, it is to be noted that modernity in India has been a consequence of a complex encounter with the colonial rule in relation to critical internal reflexivity. British rule in India has been a process of agreements and disagreements amongst the members of East India Company, government officials, journalists, missionaries, soldiers, businessmen, teachers, etc., on the one hand, and upper hand negotiations with the natives with diverse backgrounds and opinions on the other hand (Killingley, 2003: 510-11). The introduction of a new communication system based on advanced technological developments, English education, a modern legal system, and a money economy, despite certain liberal and religious intentions of a few English individuals such as Charles Trevelyan, Charles Grant etc., aimed majorly to advance the colonial control over India and its resources. However, as an indirect and unintended consequence, there emerged a class of English-speaking upper caste or middle-class Indians who questioned their own Hindu tradition and reinterpreted it in line with western ideas of liberty and rationality, as discussed above. These reformers themselves were criticised by other conservatives and radical groups, such as the Dharma Sabha

and the Young Bengal Group, effected differently by modern rationality. In addition, there were sanskritizing movements by non-Brahman groups such as those led by figures like Narayana Guru (1854-1928) in Kerala following *Advaita Vedanta* claiming caste as inessential (ibid. p 520); another non-Brahmin Maratha peasant namely Jyotiba Phule (1827-90) considering the Brahmins as oppressors attempted to raise the consciousness of the low castes to *Kshatriya* status (ibid. 522). M.N. Srinivas contended that "no analysis of modern Indian social life would be complete without a consideration of westernisation and interaction between it and Sanskritization" (Srinivas, 1956: 486).

By Sanskritization, Srinivas indicates a movement/attempt, especially within the middle regions of the caste hierarchy, to rise to a higher position by the low caste or tribal groups in a generation or two by adopting the customs, ideas, values, or the ways of life like teetotalism, vegetarianism of the higher or "twice born" castes (ibid. 481-96). The consolidation of the British increased the process of Sanskritization and also secularised the caste system. While the Brahmins followed westernisation by learning the English language, joining government jobs, moving to the cities, and gradually adopting the western dress-code, by making use of western technology and gadgets, the groups below them followed both the Brahmins and the English. The introduction of a money economy enabled the low-caste groups to avail new economic opportunities and gradually stake a claim to a higher status. Improved communication and transportation led to the spread of *Sanskritic* ideas, myths and stories, such as through *harikathas* during festivals like *Ganesh Chaturthi, Ramnavami, Dasera* etc., which could also adapt effectively with a local touch. With increased Sanskritization, the usage of *Sanskritic* terms like *karma, dharma, paap, punya, moksha* etc., becomes more frequent.

Moreover, westernisation had led to the secularisation of lifestyles by making the Brahmins discard their rigid rituals like sacred thread, wearing pure robes while eating etc., leading to a weakening of ritual purity (ibid.). However, Srinivas also mentioned about the possibility of westernisation without Sanskritization and also about de-Sanskritization. Overall, westernisation through modernisation did lead to the generation of critical and secular tendencies. One extreme example of this tendency could be the rise of E.V. Ramaswami Naickar (1879-1973), who had denounced the belief in God along with Brahmins and their texts and rituals (Killingley, 2003: 523).

Now, what is to be noted is that modernity in India is not simply a consequence of an intended or unintended positive influence of the process of modernisation through the establishment of a sovereign state, English education, industrialisation, urbanisation, capitalism or technological advancement under British rule. Neither can it be just confined to the critical reinterpretation of Indian tradition through individual initiatives and formation of societies aiming for social reform, revival and denunciation of tradition in the light of reason, liberal thought and progress gradually leading to nation-building and democracy. Voices of discomfort and challenge, too, had occurred from time to time against colonial expansion and westernisation even before, raised by the nationalists like Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru etc. Such voices took either the form of violent resistances (such as that of the Poligars of the south against the Company's forces during 1800-1 and that of the Bhils (1820s) and Santhals in 1855 to preserve their tribal ways (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006: 86) or the Revolt of 1857 or passive resistances expressed in writings and talks which contradicts and challenges the very idea of progressive rationality inherent in Western modernity. For instance, Rajnarayan Basu's 1873 text *She kal ar e kal* (Those Days and These Days) compares his present, i.e., modern days, with that of the past (before the introduction of English education)

by considering the past as had been favourable with regard to health, sociability, education, livelihood, religion, polity and virtue than his present days in which each aspect had deteriorated due to "environmental degradation, food shortages, illnesses caused by excessive labour and an uncoordinated and undisciplined way of life" under British rule (Chatterjee, 1997: 3-20). Even there were occasions when the educated Indians raised their voice against curbing their freedom to criticise the government within the legally formed learned societies, as exemplified by the heated exchange between an English teacher named D.L. Richardson and Tarachand Chakrabarti, a former student, both from Hindu College at a meeting of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge in 1843 at Calcutta (ibid., 14-15). This event was interpreted as a marker of the rise of early nationalistic sentiments, also, according to Partha Chatterjee, indicates a "defining moment of modernity" represented by a public realm of free discourse not to be governed by race or nationality. Thus, modernity in India is an expression of both acceptance and rejection of the ideals of western modernity. It cannot be simply modelled on the basis of European modernity, which is not uniform and cannot be blindly followed elsewhere (Chatterjee, 1997; Veer, 1998; Kaviraj, 2000; Chakraborty, 2011; Delanty, 2015). Rather, Indian modernity is rooted in its own history and particular societal conditions in relation to an interaction with western modernity, seemingly making it ambiguous.

Partha Chatterjee, in his lecture on *Our Modernity* (1997), points to the peculiar and ambiguous nature of Indian modernity by emphasising on the Indian case as that which may not accept what others think as modern; also, what is followed in India as modern may not be seen as so elsewhere (Chatterjee, 1997: 3). He had ingeniously shown with effective examples (already mentioned above) by criticising the application of Immanuel Kant's idea of Enlightenment in the case of India by showing how since

ages we have been critical of the present by attempting to escape from it by holding on to the past as "those days when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was above all, our own creation" (ibid., 3-20). At the same time, Chatterjee effectively shows that the establishment of the All India Ayurvedic Mahasammelan in 1907, seeking to reorganise the traditional indigenous medicines of *Ayurveda* and *Yunani* as a professional discipline based on universal science in the form of alternative science itself, constructs a modernity that is different (ibid.). Such a different version of modernity in India which attempts to bring back the past of one's own creation in order to fit in the present, is a product of colonial encounter marked by an awareness of its pros (already discussed) and cons (exploitative power, racism, militarism, denial and alienation). Thus, for Chatterjee, modernity in India reflects and also needs to reflect a voice of its own by a rejection of "the modernities established by others" with courage and inventiveness as attempted in the past (ibid., 20). Thereby, Indian modernity is a case of a process of reflexive experience and interpretation involving a co-influence of the governing structures and ideas of the dominant model of modernity and Indian society with its complex constitutive dimensions. This process efficiently negotiates with the past taking in whatever could fit the present and reflect the expected future. It keeps the door open for diverse interpretations of modernity, whether 'mistaken' (Gupta, 2011) or not, involving both acceptance and rejection. Howsoever, the influence of the ideas of rationality and liberty, along with the developments such as the spread of education, science, communication technology, industrialisation, urbanisation, money economy, political democratisation etc., has brought in tremendous changes in the society of India.

Now, similar to the case of modernity, contemporary spirituality as represented by the AoLF today includes a process of negotiation with the past (often with a direct claim

to the *Vedic* past) as well as it includes negotiation with the present (in relation to the past and future) in the sense that it critically interprets the life of the present by providing a mechanism to deal with the destructive consequences of alienation caused by modern life leading to meaninglessness and a 'stress'. It encompasses a re-interpretation of tradition in the light of secular notions of modern science, rationality and humanitarian morality. The roots of this form of spirituality could be traced to the nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements, which were driven by the "twin doctrines of reason and humanism" (Chandra, 2020: 230), often with an appeal to faith and past, however, by denying "the irrational and obscurantist elements in Indian religions" (ibid.). In this regard, it can be seen as an offshoot of negotiation with modernity rooted in India's social and religious reform and revival attempts during the 19th and 20th centuries, as discussed above. Thus, on the one hand, the constructive side of modernity opened a space for the celebration of the modern rational and liberal outlook to life and gave hope and possibility for science, humanism, freedom, pluralism and democracy (representing a space of criticality, flexibility and possibility); enabled pervasive individualisation and secularisation leading to a gradual process of 'subjectivisation' as evident in the contemporary practices of spirituality emphasising on inner freedom and personal experience. On the other hand, paradoxically, the exploitative and destructive side of modernity leads to alienation as a consequence of man's control over all forces of nature, including his own fellow beings, driven by his power-seeking nature and over-emphasis on instrumental rationality leading to the objectification of subjective life, subjectification of lives (Foucault, 1991), achievement-oriented competitive lifestyle, an attitude of profit-maximization and hyper-consumerist and technological culture led to the rise of contemporary spirituality

with all its diversifying tendencies leading to the spread of its own distinctive version of spiritual modernity or modern spirituality.

Wade Clarke Roof, in his piece on "Modernity, Religious and the Spiritual" (1998), referring to his own work, "A Generation of Spiritual Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generations" (1993) had similarly shown the influence of modernity on the emergence of contemporary spirituality as could be comprehended from these words, "I believe, however, that this quest (the spiritual quest for wholeness) involves nothing less than a radical protest against the values and outlook implicit in modernity---the post-Enlightenment, the highly rational and scientific world-view of the past several hundred years that has privileged mind over body, technology over nature, innovation over tradition, knowledge over experience, mastery over mystery" (Roof, 1998). Further, he wrote, "The impact of modernity is far from all negative, of course, even with respect to the wholeness of life. Modernity generates its own counter-responses, not the least of which is a revival of moral and religious orthodoxies. But the quest for wholeness manifests itself in other ways, too, namely, in new modes of consciousness associated with the rediscovery of spiritual roots" (ibid.). Moreover, there is an underlying post-modern touch within the present discourse of spirituality. In this regard, it also tends to go beyond reason and intellect to connect oneself to the realm of a mystical universe, including all beings through the medium of consciousness detached from the body yet through the body (will be discussed in chapter six). Thus, it represents a complex process of socio-historical, cultural, psychological, economic and political interplay. Thus, the relationship between spirituality and religion needs prior clarification. It is the change observed in the form of a shift, transformation or distinctiveness in this relation, especially within the context of modernity itself, that led to the emergence of contemporary spirituality, as will be elaborated in the next section.

2.3. Religion and Spirituality:

As already discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, it is understandable that religion and spirituality share a complex and ambiguous relationship. There are diverse ways of seeing and interpreting this relationship. However, no one can deny that the term 'spirituality' had historically emerged much later as a distinct and popular domain in the public consciousness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the elements, i.e., diverse meanings and interpretations one commonly associates with spirituality today, were absent in the earlier ages of human history. Rather, there was no attempt to separate the 'spiritual' from the religious until the 20th century. Indeed, according to Philip Sheldrake, "the word 'spirituality' originated in Christianity with the Latin adjective *spiritualis* or 'spiritual', which translated the Greek adjective *pneumatikos* as it appears in the New Testament" (Sheldrake, 2012: 4). Originally, a spiritual person was one who lived "under the influence of God" in contrast to a 'fleshly' or 'worldly' person who "was concerned primarily with personal satisfaction, comfort or success" (ibid.). Since the Middle Ages, the 'spiritual' is contrasted with the 'bodily'. The modern English word spirituality is an outcome of a translation of its French cognate *spirtitualité* at the end of the 19th century (Sheldrake, 2012: 5; Principe, 1983: 132-134).

Whether the spiritual is contrasted with the worldly or bodily, by its very nature, it indicates an abstract and intangible dimension of life. Since ages, such an immaterial aspect has been a part of all religions, often indicating a transcendental element in relation to 'God' and usually with a moral and humanistic touch. For instance, the idea and practice of 'prayer' as a recognisable component of contemporary spirituality (Wuthnow, 2007; Flanagan and Jupp, 2007) have been a part of different religious communities for ages and conveys a transcendental (transcends ordinary life by

developing a connection with a higher source such as God), often humanistic (praying for others other than just oneself) and a moral (a concern for something 'good') characteristic. Moreover, one of the most common traits of such a practice as prayer is the connection with the 'sacred' that characterises the transcendental dimension. "Transcendence" and "sacredness" have been understood by sociological studies as common to the experience of spirituality today; (Singleton, 2016: 39) and are recognised as important features of religion since ages. Similarly, the realm of spirituality itself has been an intimate part of religious discourse since it was found not earlier than the first part of the fifth century in its original Latin translation *spiritualitas* in a letter by an anonymous author. The letter was formerly ascribed to Jerome and then to Faustus of Riez, urging the addressed person: 'Age ut in spiritualitate proficias,' that is, "So act as to advance in spirituality" (Principe, 1983: 130). Referring to the meaning of the word spirituality in the above statement, Walter Principe concludes, "The context makes it clear that the author is urging a life according to the spirit of God" in the Pauline sense of *spiritus and spiriualis* (ibid.). With a little periodic variation in its meaning, especially during the 12th century, in which the spiritual was contrasted with bodily or material and during the 17th century, wherein it was also used pejoratively by authors such as Bossuet, Saint Simon and Voltaire to attack the spirituality of Madame Guyon and Fénélon and in between also represented ecclesiastical jurisdiction in contrast to civil jurisdiction by Kings/princes; the English word spirituality majorly continued to reflect a religious or devotional sense till the 19th century (ibid.). Then, Principe writes, "in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, a special interest of some in modern Hinduism and the resulting exchange between such Hindus as Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble) (1867-1911), Annie Beasant (1873-1933), and others with persons of Western culture

saw the frequent use of spirituality to designate what was considered to be the superiority of Indian religion to the so-called Western 'materialism'." (ibid., 133-34)

Peter Van Der Veer, in his working paper on *Spirituality in Modern Society* (2009), attributed the origins of modern spirituality to the second half of the 19th century in the West as a consequence of "wide-ranging transformation, a historical rupture" generated by a "thorough-going political, economic and cultural interaction of the world" in the form of globalisation (Veer 2009: 5-6). He argues that "the spiritual and the secular are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalised religion in Euro-American modernity" in mutual interaction; however, he gave ascendency to the latter (ibid. 5-7). In the 1850s, there emerged a number of Secular Societies in England influenced by George Holyoake (who attacked Christianity, considered it as "irrelevant speculation" and also introduced the term "secularism in 1846) interestingly combining the aspects of scientific inquiry, "anti-church attitudes, anti-establishment socialism and free-thinking with spiritual experimentation" (ibid., 8). Providing the examples of prominent figures like Annie Besant whose attitude reflected the aspects of Secular Society gradually leading to the formation of the Theosophical Society, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Whitman (influenced by Transcendentalist Movement) and Wassily Kandinsky (presented the spiritual transcendental aspects of modern abstract art) etc., Veer showed that universal spirituality emerged as an offshoot of spiritualism that emphasized on seeking truth in opposition to religious obscurantism and hierarchy driven by a secular and scientific understanding in relation to liberalism and socialism in the 19th century. Spirituality offered an alternative to religion and especially to its institutionalised nature.

Further, Veer has also pointed out about the influence of liberal Christianity that led to the inclusion of diverse religious traditions under the umbrella of universal

moralism, indicating the rise of universal spirituality in the 1890s. For instance, the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago represented a platform for diverse "world religions" other than Christianity, designating "religious traditions of high morality that could be treated as relatively equal" (ibid., 11). It is at this event in 1893 as aforementioned, Swami Vivekananda delivered his famous speech and became an influential representative of Hindu spirituality emphasising on tolerance and universal appeal of Hinduism. His construction of spirituality and the gradual initiative leading to the formation of the Vedanta Society of New York and Ramakrishna Order in India in the 1890s had an influential impact on the global understanding of 'spirituality' (ibid. 15). Although Vivekananda emphasised on the root of his spiritual or religious teaching to the soil of India and Hinduism in particular, his spiritual interpretation of religion had a global appeal. His call for a unity of all religions or "universal religion" and to see God and immortality within (Vivekananda, 2013) appears to have precedence over the subjective yet universal dimension of contemporary spirituality or modern yoga. Vivekananda is considered as one of the early examples of the modern and global guru who has been a public figure and a major influence behind modern yoga (Beckerlegge, 2004: 296; 2013: 444, Lucia, 2014: 224). This was supplemented by the foundation of a more occult aspect of yoga in the form of the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920 by Paramahansa Yogananda (McDermott, 1975: 215). The general attitude of the age was implicitly driven by an overarching tendency to hold Eastern spirituality as an antidote to the ill effects of Western rationality and materialism. This gradually came to play an important role in influencing the counter-cultural consciousness and New-Age movements in the West, especially since the 1950s.

The post-World War II era marks a watershed period in the development of the contemporary idea and practice of 'spirituality' (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998).

Especially as aforementioned, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Euro-American context witnessed an impactful change in the functioning of institutionalised religion to the extent of even leading to its breakdown. The change in the sphere of religion was indeed a consequence of a broader socio-historical change led by various inter-connecting factors. In the post-war period, attempts were made by the liberals to re-make the image of America by focusing on the "benefits of advanced technology, the economic relations of corporate capitalism and the separation of church and state" (Belgrade, 2008: 230). The image-remaking process was paradoxically governed by certain tendencies to suspicion and conservatism, especially with regard to ethnic belongingness, gender etc., with an emphasis on conformism in every sphere of life. This was a period of Cold War engulfed in suspicion and high-level competition with the Soviet Union, especially in showing one's military and technological might apart from checking the spread of the Red power (communism) within and out. The federal spending encouraging commercialization, along with the execution of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which restricted the power of the labour unions to strike a protest, led to mobilising the economy. While on the one hand, the funding of research and development led to the utilisation of technology for a fad on space exploration, on the other hand, subsidies were provided for the suburbanisation of America through affordable payment plans, as could be seen in the form of suburban "Levittowns" (ibid., 232). At the same time, large proportions of men were pulled into bureaucratically managed corporations which also incorporated blue-collar workers and created possibilities to move into white-collar jobs. Conformity to corporate and bureaucratic norms discouraged the free-will engagement and protest tendency; however, this led to the rise of the middle classes and a general affluent 'mass culture' (ibid.). The "highbrows" nevertheless maintained their cultural superiority and taste by

condemning poor reasoning and popular music and conformity of the "middlebrows" or the masses by sticking to its subtlety and securing academic positions (ibid., 235). This "cultural power struggle" intersected with the ethnic claim to authentic American in the form of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants who seem to be distinct from the outsiders, i.e., those belonging to immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italian Catholics as well as those belonging to the African-American community, etc.

This, in turn, crisscrossed with the anti-communist sentiments aggravated by the popular McCarthyism. Moreover, stereotypes prevailed over the idea of Native Americans and sexual minorities etc. While the former was regarded as "savages", and "bohemians", not adopting the universal "American way of life", the latter, i.e., those who were indulging in homosexuality, were considered criminals and sinners or seen as suffering from psychological illness (ibid., 237-40). These developments, along with the consistent emphasis on investment in defence equipment and the gradual participation in warfare such as that of the Vietnam War, overlooked its adverse effects that led to radio-active fallouts, mass loss of lives, re-awakening of the problem of poverty etc. These all attracted immense criticism from within and out. 'Ban the Bomb' marches of the late 1950s precede the era of protests and counter-cultural activities of the 1960s resulting from the accumulated disillusionment due to a culture of conformity.

Petra Goedde, in a chapter on the "Globalization of American Culture" (2008), writes, "The civil rights movement and the social upheavals of the 1960s challenged this myth of conformity. They put into sharper relief the cultural rifts and contradictions within American society and destroyed the image of a unified national culture that the American government cultivated meticulously throughout the World War II and into the Cold War" (Goedde, 2008: 247). In the words of Tor Egil Forland,

"Counterculture," the term fixed on the Sixties by Theodore Roszak in 1968, connotes several things: anti-authoritarianism; revulsion against bourgeois lifestyle; a fascination with (Far) Eastern religion and philosophy; a longing for a life in harmony with nature—for urban dwellers often symbolised by free-flowing long hair, loosely fitting clothes, and sandals—a proclivity for drug use; and a general preference for personal freedom. The Sixties counterculture was personified in the hippie, who embodied all these traits. In less extreme forms, the counterculture manifested all over the West, making it a conspicuous element of the Sixties (Forland, 2015: 127-28).

The disillusionment brought about by a culture of conformity to established authority and the bourgeois way of living merged well with the rise of the New Left. The New Left emphasised on alienation and the morally corrupting effects of modern capitalism. Unlike the workers who seemed to have become complacent with consumer capitalism by then, the New Leftists identified the students and academics as a kind of "intellectual proletariat" of late capitalism (ibid., 131). The protests took several forms in the 1960s ranging from peace activists against nuclear weapons and Vietnam War; voices were raised against the corporate-liberal establishments legitimising the "military-industrial-complex" to movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Movement, Black Power Movement, American Indian Movement, feminism, gay rights and environmentalism (Belgrade, 2008: 240-42). All these movements somewhat demanded recognition, rights and respect for the 'other' who had been deprived of the same. A very important component of these protests was the way they were expressed. The established culture was countered by adopting a new way of life apart from the usual protests in the form of marches, shouting slogans, showing placards and resorting to violent forms. In this regard, a way of life emphasising personal

freedom and expression through the very choices one makes evinced the spirit of the age.

The cultural genre of the mid-twentieth century manifested the spirit of the age through its music, art and literature. The rock and roll genre of music depicted a culture of "out of control" (ibid., 236-41). Similarly, the popular characters played by Hollywood icons such as Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe exhibited vulnerability and volatility (ibid.). Jeans and leather jackets were considered as dress-codes of the deviants. Stand-up comedies and comics such as the mad magazine somewhat satirically defied the self-satisfaction of Cold War America (ibid.). The Beat generation, or the bohemian subculture flourishing in the coffeehouses and jazz nightclubs as exemplified in the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, displayed a fascination for the cultures of the Black Americans, Latinos and Native Americans announcing the American multi-cultural sphere of existence. An inherent quest for individual freedom in an age of conformity added an existential touch to it, as hinted in the writings of J.D. Salinger, Saul Bellow etc. A tendency to experiment with drugs for spiritual insight was quite a common practice. In this regard, the Hippies belonging mainly to the baby-boom generation, following a fusion of "folk-rock" popularised by the Beatles and Bob Dylan, countered the dominant culture by making use of psychedelic drugs reflecting a culture of holism and romanticism with the slogans like "make love, not war", "flower power" etc. Interestingly, the baby-boom generation, including the musicians they listened to, like the Beatles, were popularly associated with the Transcendental Meditation movement, to which the founder of the Art of Living Foundation was himself associated before forming the organisation.

The Transcendental Movement formerly known as the Science of Creative Intelligence was founded by an Indian Guru namely, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, in the

1950s in the US which became popular during the Sixties and Seventies and provided an alternative space for self-exploration and inner-worldly quest that questioned the very foundation of the established religion or church, thus, suited well with the Beat generation who were disillusioned with all kinds of institutionalised establishments that demanded conformity. In this regard, gradually, the term 'spirituality' gained popularity which either expressed an individual dimension of religion seeking God within or was developing into a somewhat distinct dimension from religion, leading to the popularity of the phrase "spiritual but not religious". However, there exist diverse ways of understanding the relationship between religion and spirituality, which takes a very ambiguous turn, as mentioned before, but what is crucial to note is that a certain kind of flexibility has been achieved with regard to the interpretation of one's relationship to the sacred whether institutionalised to a certain degree or not. In this regard, the process of secularisation leading to the separation of religion from the state and also indicating a decline in the number of people participating in institutionalised religious practices in terms of church attendance, etc., has been crucial. For instance, Callum G Brown citing different sources from authors like Peter van Rooden and Hugh McLeod, shows that there was a decline in the proportion of Dutch claiming to belong to no church from 21 per cent in 1971 to almost 50 per cent in 1986 as a result of the cultural revolution of the 1960s (Brown, 2010: 470-72).

Similarly, Hugh McLeod's study shows a decline in Catholic mass attendees from 43 to 33 per cent in Belgium between 1967 and 1976, a decline from 23 to 17 per cent in France between 1966 and 1972; a 24 per cent decline in English Easter communicants and 11 per cent decline in Church of Scotland communicants (ibid.). Moreover, Brown further shows that during 1963-69 in Britain, there was a drop of 32 per cent in Anglican confirmations per head and a 25 per cent drop in ordinations, while

Methodist membership fell 24 per cent during 1960-75 (ibid.). Critiquing McLeod's major emphasis on internal religious reform and questioning as a result of liberal Christianity resulting in religious change and crisis of the 1960s, Callum G Brown indicates the impactful popular external challenge to Christian hegemony in the culture of many Western countries (Brown, 2010). Nevertheless, the quest for individual liberty as a result of disillusionment toward organised religion played quite a prominent role during the mid-twentieth century leading to a turn toward spirituality.

These words of Philip Sheldrake further reinforce and summarises the aforementioned turn to spirituality in a more precise manner, "The contemporary interest in spirituality is part of a broader process of cultural change during the late 20th century. After a century of world wars, the end of European empire plus a tide of social change in the Northern hemisphere regarding the equality of women and the status of ethnic minorities, inherited religious and social identities came to be seriously questioned. As a result, many people no longer see traditional religion as an adequate channel for their spiritual quest and look for new sources of self-orientation. Thus, spirituality has become an alternative way of exploring the deepest self and the ultimate purpose of life. Increasingly, the spiritual quest has moved away from outward-directed authority to inner-directed experience which is seen as more reliable. This subjective turn in Western culture has created a diverse approach to spiritual experience and practice" (Sheldrake, 2012: 6). The diverse approach to spiritual quest indicates a diverse way of seeing the relationship between religion and spirituality as it may differ in relation to different social settings and over time.

The term religion has been derived from the Latin word *religio* whose meaning has been traced by Platvoet from the third century B.C.E. to the modern mid-eighteenth century C.E. (Oman, 2015: 25-26). While during the time of Cicero (106-46 B.C.E.)

and over the next 15 centuries, *religio* denoted "state-supervised acts of public worship of the Roman Gods", from the 16th century onwards, despite variations, it widely stood for a specific "system of faith and worship and/or the human reverential recognition of higher and unseen power" (ibid.). Only during the 20th century did the meaning of religion acquire a restricted form, i.e., it started connoting "the organised and institutional components of faith tradition as opposed to the more inward and personal sides, often now referred to as *spirituality*" (ibid.). However, religion being seen as opposed to spirituality or vice versa is only one way of interpreting this relationship. Rather multiple ways are operating in this regard, indicating interchangeability, overlap and co-existence, as discussed in the introductory chapter.

Interestingly, William James, in his lectures on "The Varieties of Religious Experience: The Study of Human Nature" (1901-02), distinguishes "personal religion" (he gives the option to prefer it as conscience or morality if not religion) from organised religion in the form of institutions such as the Church by claiming, "In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at second hand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case; — so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete" (James, 1902: 35). Further, in his words, "Religion … shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude; so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (ibid., 36). Thereby, there is no doubt that William James' emphasis on individual/personal/ subjective experience makes his study a "central

referent point" for contemporary studies of spirituality although he himself was interested in religion and a variety of religious experience (Bender, 2007). Later on, Thomas Luckmann, in his work, "The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society" (1967), pointed out that the "social basis of the newly emerging religion is to be found in the private sphere" "determined by a radical transformation in the relation of the individual to the social order" (Luckmann, 1967: 107-14). The sacred cosmos is no longer the sole domain of traditional religion; rather, it is majorly governed by the private sphere of the individual who attains self-authority represented by "self-expression" and "self-realisation" without being restricted by organised religion, which becomes a secondary institution along with "syndicated advice columns, inspirational literature ranging from tracks on positive thinking to..Reader's Digest version of popular psychology.." (ibid., 104-14). The subjective dimension of modern life determines the themes of "ultimate significance" within the private sphere as a form of modern religious expression connecting it even to the secular dimension of life (ibid.). Though Thomas Luckmann uses the term "invisible religion" to represent the matters of ultimate significance concerning the sacred cosmos to be found in the private sphere of individual life in modernity, advocates of spirituality would rather see this as a shift to spirituality.

Similarly, Robert N Bellah et al.'s work, "Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life" (1985), discussed about "Sheilaism", a form of individual religiosity or privatised religion named after a nurse called Sheila Larson, who prefers to follow her "own little voice" in the matter of religion (Bellah et al., 1985). Though Sheila believes in God she prefers not to depend on organised religion to pursue her faith but rather relies on loving oneself and caring for others. This form

of privatised expression of religion consolidates well with an expression of modern-day spirituality with no obligation towards organised religion.

Courtney Bender, in her piece on "Religion and Spirituality: History, Discourse, Measurement" (2007), noted as mentioned in the Introduction section, three common discursive constructions of religion and spirituality. First, there are the "spiritual, but not religious" which connotes a preference for spirituality as pure relation to the divine and sacred without being sullied by the authoritarian and institutional characteristics of organised religion (Bender 2007). For instance, spiritually oriented feminists and environmentalists criticizes religion as a sign of patriarchy and materialism (ibid.). In this regard, spirituality provides an alternative space for voice and self-authority, closer to nature and self-reliance. Second, "spirituality, as the "Individual" part of religion", considers religion as the basis of tradition, community or group within which spirituality develops as its individualistic, personal and privatised expression. This allows individuals to express their religiosity and personal motivations and viewpoints within diverse religious and secular settings downplaying the communal aspects of religion and, thus, somewhat matches with Thomas Luckmann's notion of "Invisible religion" and Robert N Bellah and co-authors understanding of "Sheilaism".

Moreover, Historian Catharine Albanese's understanding of spirituality as a way of knowing the divine through personal experience located within the tradition of religion (Albanese 2001) merges well with the idea of spirituality as an individual part of religion. Third, "spirituality as "More Than" religion" privileges spiritual experiences as primary and sees religious traditions and institutions as second-order expressions as repositories governing spiritual inclinations (Bender 2007). Spirituality here indicates a propensity toward humanism and appeals to interfaith communication

(ibid.). Thus, Bender shows that the relationship between religion and spirituality implies contextual variations of which one need to be aware.

Nancy T Ammerman, in her article "Spiritual but not Religious?: Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion" (2013), identifies four "cultural packages" or ways in which spirituality is constructed in everyday life of the respondents, i.e., theistic, extra-theistic, ethical and belief and belonging spirituality. First, the "theistic package" is about spirituality which is based on one's relationship with God, involving all kinds of practices and mysterious or miraculous encounters resulting from this relationship (Ammerman, 2013: 13-34). More than specific belief systems organised around religious traditions, it is about calling out personal gods. For instance, Theresa Collins, a respondent, said, "I love to be on that boat on the ocean for the same reason I like to be in my garden, 'cause I feel close to the Lord and the beauty of the world" (ibid.). A believer may also refer to prayer and scriptures as sources that connect to God. Second, the "extra-theistic package" comprises those believers or non-believers "who speak of spirituality in terms of a different kind of transcendence, i.e., other than referring to a transcendental deity, they speak of transcendence felt simply beyond the ordinary in connection to work, art, nature, meaning and philosophies of life, etc. For instance, a respondent named Rebecca Klein said, "Every night we hear the ocean, and it puts us to sleep, and it's quite something. It is spiritual" (ibid.). Here, one's experience and self-authority count more than any supernatural transcendence, which remains anti-explanatory.

Moreover, inactive conservative Protestants are more likely to adhere to this spirituality than the active. Middle-aged group people belonging to the Baby boom generation are found to be the most likely users of this package. Third, "ethical spirituality" includes all those even the people belonging to the formerly two packages

of spirituality who believes that "real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterised by helping others, transcending one's selfish interests to seek what is right" in terms of morality and ethics (ibid.). Fourth, "belief and belonging spirituality" represents a "contestant category". Spirituality was expressed in terms of belief in God and also in terms of belonging to a religious tradition. The study found that those religiously inclined respondents held belief and belonging to spirituality in a positive light, while the secularists and non-religious people questioned its authenticity.

Moreover, within this category of spirituality lies the "spiritual but not religious". Although this group represented comparatively very few respondents, even out of which some were just neutral and inactive as religious practitioners. A respondent named Grace Shoemaker, who seems to fit this category, said, "I think of myself as spiritual. Because it doesn't matter what church I am in. I am who I am" (ibid., 29-30). What is crucial to note is that Ammerman pointed out that this group turns out to be a moral and political category. For instance, they see religion as "oppressive power depriving individuals of personal and political freedom"; in contrast, spirituality seems to fulfil what religion deprives (ibid., 30-31). Finally, Nancy T Ammerman, in this study, found that most of the respondents claimed to be both religious and spiritual. What is to be emphasised is that one has to go beyond the binaries to understand religion and spirituality, which share an overlap. To understand religion, spirituality has to be taken seriously and vice versa.

Walter Principe, in 1983, distinguished three different levels of spirituality. The first includes those who experience spirituality as lived in the concrete real or existential level. The second includes spirituality influenced by spiritually charismatic persons' teachings/preaching/writings. The third level concerns spirituality as a discipline of scientific study (Principe, 135: 36). Later on, Daniel A Helminiack (1996) added

another four levels: spirituality as the human spiritual nature comprising a striving for a connection, meaning and purpose in life, spirituality as a concern for transcendence moving beyond the here and now, spirituality as parapsychology and spirituality as spiritualism (Helminiack, 1996). Helminiack's understanding considers spirituality as inherent to human nature despite comprising both traditional and non-traditional aspects (ibid.).

Sandra Marie Schneiders at a lecture on *Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?* (2000) suggests three possible models for understanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality. Firstly, religion and spirituality are like strangers who never actually meet or converse. Adherents of this viewpoint consider the two as "separate enterprises with no necessary connection" (Schneiders, 2000: 2). Schneiders finds this view prevalent in contemporary western society where on the one hand, there are those who respect the religious involvements of others but simply not interested in taking part in them by themselves, on the other hand, there are those faithful religious practitioners who find it adequate without any need for spirituality. Secondly, some consider religion and spirituality as "conflicting realities" (ibid.). On the one hand, there are those who see religion as empty and hypocritical; on the other, those who seek religious authority and clerical mediation see spirituality as a threat to their path to conformity. Thirdly, some consider "religion and spirituality as two dimensions of a single enterprise, which like body and spirit, are often in tension but are essential to each other. In other words, they see the two as partners in search of God" (ibid.). Sandra Marie Schneiders acknowledges the priority given to spirituality in the contemporary western society wherein the phrase "I am spiritual but not religious" seem to be popular, especially among the youth. However, she suggests that religious tradition rather than institutionalised religion could provide the best platform

for realising spirituality, which could further lead to more effective inter-faith exchange (Schneiders 2000). However, in the words of Philip Sheldrake, "In the current global climate, the dialogue between the world religions is a vital development with wider relevance to issues of world peace, reconciliation, and social justice well beyond the boundaries of religions themselves (Sheldrake, 2012: 113). Sheldrake concludes his *Introduction to Spirituality* (2012) by summarising what he considers as three critical features of the concept of spirituality and "how and why it makes a difference to us both as individuals and as groups. First, spirituality expresses the reflective human quest for identity and meaning beyond a purely pragmatic approach to life. Second, it suggests that a full human life needs to move beyond self-absorption to a sense of the greater good and service of others. Finally, and vitally, spirituality relates to a process of unlocking the creativity and imagination that enables us to touch the edge of mystery" (ibid., 122). He ends by considering spirituality as seeking "wholeness and completeness" without having a desire to "accumulate more things", paradoxically countering the culture of consumption (ibid.). The quest for identity and meaning, a sense of greater good and service for others and mystery, apparently, all of these could be related to a religious way of life.

Thereby, on the one hand, it can be seen how spirituality as an expression of one's personal freedom and liberty emerged in response to the stifling institutional and organised authoritarian hold of the conservative socio-historical context of modernity, on the other hand, the relationship that spirituality shares with religion indicate a very complex yet overlapping tendency often seen as oppositional to each other, still merges. Also, the rise of Hindu spirituality in the 19th century, influenced by Eastern spiritual figures since the time of Swami Vivekananda, as pointed out by Peter van der Veer, offers an important matrix not only for the gradual evolution of Hindu spirituality in

the West but also led to the rise of spirituality in the East. For instance, Stephen Jacobs argues that "Vivekananda's presentation of Hinduism to a Western audience inevitably transformed it, and it was this transformed account that he imported back to India (Jacobs, 2015: 37). What is to be pointed out in this regard is that Vivekananda is one central figure whose spiritual and religious ideas based on *Vedas* immensely resonates in the gradual developments of the spirituality-based movements including that of the Art of Living Foundation (Jacobs, 2015). In this regard, an elaborative discussion on the background of the AoLF will add to further insights.

2.4. The Art of Living Foundation: Founder and Background:

The Art of Living Foundation as mentioned in the introductory section of the present study, is formally recognised and represented as a not-for-profit, non-governmental educational and humanitarian organisation. It was founded by Ravi Shankar in 1981. Today, the founder is popularly known as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or simply Sri Sri or *Guruji/Gurudev* to his followers. Thereby, the present work addresses the *guru* as either as Ravi Shankar, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or simply as Sri Sri (honorific title).

For Sri Sri, "The Art of Living is more of a principle, a philosophy of living life to its fullest. It is more a movement than an organisation. Its core value is to find peace within oneself and to unite people in our society- of different cultures, traditions, religions, nationalities; and thus, reminding us all that we have one goal to uplift human life everywhere"[18]. Thus, as it is declared in its official website, the main motto, as well as manifesto behind the programs/courses offered by this foundation, is to promote the vision of Sri Sri, i.e., "a stress-free mind and a violence-free society"[19] to achieve world

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[18] See *We serve society by strengthening the individual.* Available at: <u>About Us | The Art of Living India</u> (accessed 19th November 2022).
[19] Ibid.

peace. In the year 1997, Sri Sri co-founded the Geneva-based International Association for Human Values (IAHV), a sister organisation of AoL which focuses on revitalising and nurturing human values, coordinating projects concerning sustainable development, disaster relief and conflict resolution. AoL and IAHV have been accorded special consultative status by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. They have permanent representatives at the United Nations in New York, Vienna and Geneva. Keeping IAHV aside, the initiatives/development projects of AoL are managed by additional sister organisations or trusts, which include; Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth (VVMVP), Vyakti Vikas Kendra India (VVKI), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Vidya Mandir (SSRVM), Sri Sri Rural Development Programme (SSRDP), Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology Trust (SSIAST), and Sri Sri Publications Trust (SSPT). [20]

Today, AoL claims to have touched the lives of around 500 million people worldwide through its service initiatives/courses/programs operating in around 180 countries with its more than ten thousand centres. Organizationally, the international headquarters of the foundation in located in Bengaluru, India. The organisation also operates globally as The Art of Living Foundation established in the United States of America and Germany in 1989. Structurally, the organisation is managed by a board of trustees, two-thirds of which changes every two years. The nomination of the new board lies in the hands of previous trustees and AoL course teachers. There is also a provision for an advisory board that monitors and guides. As a non-profit organisation, it claims that "no trustee is entitled to benefits in terms of salary or benefits in terms of kind"[21]. Predominantly, as the AoLF claims, it is recognised as a volunteer-based organisation

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

guided by the vision of its founder to create "a stress-free and violence-free society"[22] by reawakening human values through various tools, techniques and initiatives aiming at personal and social transformation. However, from the perspective of the committed participants (including followers and devotees as volunteers), AoL and its sister organisations and initiatives are the outcomes of none other than the grace of their *guru*, whose extraordinary and divine presence exudes love, connection and healing. Indeed, the root source of the organisation, its emergence, expansion and operation around many countries in the world solely lies in the vision and initiative of its founder, the *guru* Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

The life and presence of Ravi Shankar as narrated by his followers and also as reflected in different books (Francois Gautier's "Guru of Joy", Bhanumati Narasimhan's "In the Plateau of the Peak", Michael Fishman's Stumbling into Infinity, etc.,) written on him and AoLF describes the *guru's* journey leading to the establishment of the foundation. While "one may become a guru by descent, by initiation, by designation of a former guru, be reborn as the incarnation of the former guru and so on", Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's *guru* status is largely legitimized by several factors which includes his extra-ordinary life as depicted in the biographies written on him published till date revolving around the notion of divinely gifted child, sharing the date of birth with prominent religious figures, prophesies by respected and well-known religious figures, his prolific command over ancient Hindu scriptures and their simple interpretation connecting with the praxis of daily life and science; his mystical discovery of the central breathing technique that forms the core of AoLF namely the *Sudarshan kriya* (a rhythmic breathing technique patented in his name) and his overall charismatic presence with an everlasting smile (which makes him known as the "Guru

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[22] Ibid.

of Joy" (Gautier, 2008) and the other-worldly touch as could be felt by the followers/believers/devotees. Thus, all these elements add to his guru status. Indeed, it has been observed that the way the AoL participants and members/teachers present or introduce Sri Sri to their family members, acquaintances and to the course participants plays an important role in forming an initial image of the guru. For instance, it has been observed that during a course, an image/photo of the guru is put on the front and is likely to be offered prayer by the teacher before starting a course. Also, a teacher is likely to introduce the *guru* by sharing her/his experience of the *guru's* exceptional, divinely healing and guiding touch in the form of stories during the courses.

Moreover, even the *guru's* celebrity status as partly gained from the popular media coverage of his talks on television and through online networks, along with the books he authored, which mainly deal with how to live daily life along with the coverage of issues concerning the everyday life of people in addition to the simple translation of ancient texts or scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali Yoga Sutras etc., with examples from everyday life adds to and also reinforces his status as a *guru* with majorly a positive connotation. However, from time to time, the media coverage may also lead to a reverse effect, as evident in the coverage of "The World Cultural Festival Event" organised by AoL in 2016, which attracted a lot of criticism for being organised on the banks of river Yamuna on environmental grounds (will be discussed in chapter three). In this regard, it would be better to focus first on what led to the formation of the Art of Living Foundation and what is the story behind its founder as written in a book on him by his own sister namely, Bhanumati Narasimhan (2018) and also partly covered in other texts like that of by Francois Gautier (2008).

Ravi Shankar was born on the 13th of May, 1956, at Papanasam, a village in Tamil Nadu. As the narrative goes, even before his birth, there were other-worldly signs

signalling the birth of a great soul. Bhanumati Narasimhan narrates, "Amma (Ravi Shankar's mother) used to say that one day she felt a beam of light entering her and she conceived soon...A few months into the pregnancy, while resting in the afternoon she heard the voice of the child calling out to her saying, Amma, are you fine?" (Narasimhan, 2018: 1-7). While Sri Sri's mother namely, Vishalakshi, deeply rooted in tradition, belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family, his father, R S V Ratnam (addressed as *Pitaji*) was a student of *Vedic* astrology, and *Ayurveda* yet was also western educated and a product of reformist thinking (Narasimhan, 2018: 4; Gautier 2008). The background in astrology enabled *Pitaji* to map out little baby Ravi's horoscope, revealing a unique exalted positioning of four planets hinting at an extraordinary path. Even Ravi Shankar's birth is known to have coincided with the birth anniversaries of two revered Hindu saints and reformers, Sri Adi Shankara and Sri Ramanujacharya. While both the saints are proponents of *Advaita* philosophy, the former belonged to its monistic school of thought, and the latter belonged to the Sri Vaishnava tradition and was a proponent of Vishishthadvaita philosophy (qualified monism). Indeed, as the story goes, Shankar was added to the name Ravi in reverence to the saint Adi Shankara (a prominent figure of the monistic *Advaita* school of thought). While the first name Ravi was given by Sri Sri's clairvoyant paternal grandmother, who had long before predicted that "he will bring light to the whole world", thereby naming him Ravi, which in Sanskrit means sun (Narasimhan, 2018: 5).

Since childhood, there were occasional visits and meetings of/with saints and astrologers, who had also prophesied Ravi Shankar's extraordinary future. Once, the Shankaracharya of Shivganga (a highly revered Hindu religious figure) visited their house in Karnataka and, after seeing a special mark on baby Ravi's back, joyfully said to Amma, "you are lucky and blessed to be his mother" and also surprisingly said to

have folded his hands before the baby in awe (ibid. p 6). Even the Shankaracharyas from Sringeri and Kanchi recognised the child's divine spark as observed by his mother (ibid.). At another time, when Amma took little Ravi to get the blessing from a saint from the tradition of Sri Muthuswami Dikshithar (an eighteenth-century saint, poet and Carnatic music maestro), being told that little Ravi often sit in meditation, the saint offered the boy a gift to choose from a collection of different objects spread before him. He chose an emerald Shiva lingam and a naga that led the priest to jump in excitement, saying, "I was waiting for this day". Seemingly, Sri Muthuswami Dishithar had prophesied that the one who would choose the lingam and the naga would "re-establish dharma in the world" (ibid., 11).

Much to the amazement of people, at the tender age of four Sri Sri started chanting and praying and could also recite the Bhagavad Gita (Vedic text) (Narasimhan, 2018, Fischman, 2013: 52). He grew up in a religious family background, hearing stories of saints and taking part in *puja* (Hindu religious rituals). His sister narrates that their favourite childhood pastime or recreational activities included visiting temples, playing games with spiritual qualities like praying, doing *pujas*, and playing the roles of saints, in addition to regular chanting and meditation. Later on, seeing the interest that little Ravi had in Vedas, Pt Sudhakar Chaturvedi, a Vedic scholar who had also taught Bhagavad Gita to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, imparted him the knowledge of the Vedas. Ravi Shankar's father was a Vedic scholar as well as a follower of Gandhi (Narasimhan, 2018). According to his sister, this all developed the love for Vedas in little Ravi, i.e., in her own words, "an inclination towards a formless, unmanifested divinity" (ibid., 17) that gradually became a central core of his later teachings.

Moreover, according to Bhanumati even Gandhi had a significant influence on their family. Their paternal grandfather lived with Gandhi in Sabarmati ashram for

twenty years, and their father was also a follower of Gandhi. And Gandhi himself followed the *Vedas*.

As written in his biography and also shared by followers, since childhood Ravi Shankar has been a sensitive and compassionate being reflecting a caring and sharing attitude towards not only his immediate family members but also, in general, all, including animals and plants (ibid., 26). Planting trees are a part of Art of Living service projects; also, the Guru is known to be close to other living creatures, occasionally engaged in feeding Maheshwara, his domesticated elephant and celebrating the birthday of a domesticated horse with a cake primarily made of hay. The *ashram* is also home to a *shankari* (a name given by Sri Sri himself) family of cats (ibid., 27) and other animal, birds and plant species. Encountering a passing-by snake species is not a matter of big surprise for the *ashramites*. Concerning people, even at the age of a year and a half little Ravi appeared very caring toward his baby sister (ibid., 9). One day, when little Ravi came to know that people die after they grow old, being close to their paternal grandmother Atthaiamma, he became more concerned thus, waking up at night he would for several months keep a check on her breath and belly movement for assurance.

Pitaji would recall walking with his grandmother at an early age as three little Ravi would say, "Grandma, you won't fall. I am holding your hand" (ibid., 28-31). Once told by his father, "God made people poor", little Ravi responded, "I will ask God not to create beggars (ibid., 26-31). Little Ravi also had a rebellious and reformist side to his nature, as reflected by his questioning of the practice of untouchability once prevailing at his home. Swaminathan, their caretaker of paddy fields, was not allowed inside their house only because he was a non-vegetarian. Ravi Shankar as a seven-year-old boy, questioned this discriminatory practice and gradually, after convincing his orthodox maternal grandmother, also went for a bicycle ride with Swaminathan sensationalising

his conservative neighbourhood. Seeing their household help's daughter not going to school, little questioned, "If Bhanu (his sister) can go to school, why can't she go too?". Today, the Art of Living is open to all, cutting across caste, class, race, gender, religion, nationality, etc. It also claims to run more than 500 to 700 free schools in around twenty states of India, imparting holistic education to underprivileged children, of which girls consist a huge number. Once seeing his mother concerned about his lack of interest in sports during school days, little Ravi said, "I never really enjoy winning. I am not happy to see someone else lose either…I am happy seeing others happy" (ibid., 33).

As a student at school, Ravi Shankar exuded extraordinary intelligence, which led to his double promotion from standard one to three (ibid., 33). He was also popular among his friends and teachers alike, who all surprisingly and ironically also went to him for solace and advice. Bhanumati Narasimhan writes, "At school, teachers and students came to my brother for advice and solace. They used to say, 'Somehow Ravi just dissolves our worries and problems. Being with him makes us feel light' (ibid.). Today, as a guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is commonly revered, loved and regarded as someone exuding divine grace that dissolves and heals, advises many. Somehow, Sri Sri could naturally connect to everybody since childhood (ibid. 37). Unlike other kids, young Ravi's interest was more about the meaning and purpose of life, God and the world than sports. It is a commonly known story among the close associates of Art of Living as also pointed out in his biography, that since childhood, he often used to have visions of seeing and meeting people in every country (ibid., 38). Even at school, he used to say that he has a family in different countries to other fellow students and finding that he does not they even used to tease him but now for his sister (Narasimhan, 2018) and followers seeing the Art of Living's spread to around 180 countries based on Sri Sri's vision of *Vasudeva Kutumbakam* (One-World Family) it was indeed Sri Sri's

divinely graced intuitive vision as believed by his followers that made him say or prophesize at that time. Nevertheless, Ravi Shankar completed his education with a Bachelor of Science degree in physics from Bangalore's St. Josephs College, which he says that he had acquired just to please his mother (ibid., 42; Gautier 2008; Fischman, 2013: 52). After this, he even went for a job interview at Delhi to a bank wherein he also ended up talking about meditation and the value of a calm mind with the interviewers. Though selected, he preferred visiting Rishikesh rather than joining it before returning to Bangalore (ibid.).

A major event that happened in Ravi Shankar's life was during his late teens while he was still in college. An advertisement about transcendental meditation attracted his attention. He decided to visit the organisers' office and was convinced to attend a programme. Subsequently, he went for a teacher's training programme and some other advanced programmes (sound similar to the programmes designed by the Art of Living Foundation today). Indeed, a turning point came when young Ravi got an opportunity to meet the Transcendental Meditation Movement's founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In his sister's words, "the excitement at the prospect of meeting him was palpable. We knew this meeting was important for young Ravi but were unprepared for what was to happen. Our lives were about to change completely" (ibid., 45).

Describing Maharishi, Ravi Shankar once said, "he never met anyone with as profound a mind as Maharishi's" (ibid., 52). Soon after his first meeting with Maharishi, young Ravi decided to accompany him to Switzerland as a student of Maharishi European Research University (MERU) (ibid., 46). He returned after almost two years, but he was no longer the same. In Bhanumati Narasimhan's words, "Although I wanted to believe that the person before me was my brother, many things had changed" (ibid., 47). A transformation was reflected in Ravi Shankar's whole personality. Similar to

Maharishi's choice of regular attire, Ravi Shankar started wearing just white robes and *dhoti*, which he continues and has become a kind of dress code for many of the Art of Living members, especially the *swamis* and *rishis*. Young Ravi also chose to keep long hair, followed by many AoL members today (Narasimhan, 2018).

Interestingly, during a question-and-answer session, the *guru* Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who is also known for his witty answers, was once asked, "These days most Gurus have long hair and long beard. Is it a dress code? He replied, "Yes, you can call it a dress code. The long hair is like an antenna to receive a message from God and the long beard is like an earthing to transmit these messages to the people"[23]. Concerning looks and dress code, one can also see a striking similarity between Sri Sri and Maharishi as also noticed by Michael Fischman who wrote, "..with his long hair and beard, he looked a lot like a young Maharishi" (Fischman, 2013: 52). Interestingly, as Ravi looked too young to be a meditation teacher, he had to grow a beard in order to look mature and gain easy acceptance (Narasimhan, 2018). There was also a change in his voice which became soft, gentle and seemingly slower. His overall presence seemed to have acquired and carried certain strength, "subtle authority", energy and charisma, reflecting a connection well beyond the limitations of a corporal body (ibid., 47-48). Even Ravi Shankar's mother Amma "experienced a special reverence for him" (ibid.).

Young Ravi continued his association with Maharishi and his Transcendental Meditation Movement. He was assigned diverse tasks. He had to tour several cities and countries and discuss the importance of meditation, science and *Vedas*. Meanwhile, Ravi Shankar's extraordinary skill and prowess in handling difficult challenges and also visibly impossible situations were demonstrated on several occasions. For instance, in

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[23]See <u>Knowledge feast by Sri Sri Ravishankar: Short Questions extracted and complied! | infinite knowledge (wordpress.com)</u>. (Accessed 19th November 2022).

1980, Ravi was assigned a task to organise a *yagna* (ancient *Vedic* ceremony) by Maharishi during a Vedic Science Conference held in New Delhi. However, Ravi Shankar had to accompany Maharishi to Switzerland just a few weeks before the event. On his return, he could see serious lapses in arrangements. Indeed, he realised that bribes/ kickbacks were received for recruitment; out of thousands of pundits recruited for the performance of *yagna* many were not fit for the job. Hearing that the conference organisers were about to discover what took place and since many of the pundits were from the state of Bihar, a rumour had spread that Ravi Shankar disliked Biharis resulting in chaos and agitation. Despite being warned of the risk and life threat, he took up the challenge to remedy the situation by convincing the leader to let him address the agitated/threatening mob shouting slogans against him for half an hour. Securing a reprieve, he greeted the mob with "Jai Guru Dev"[24] and clarified he had nothing against Biharis, but the *yagnas* are specific, highly powerful and rewarding if performed correctly. Otherwise, if done incorrectly, it would harm both the world and the performers. He assured those who could not perform it would be accommodated with other tasks. Thus, the conflict was resolved amicably (Gautier, 2008; Fischman, 2013: 35-39; Narasimhan, 2018: 56-57). In another instance, Maharishi wanted 600 pundits to be brought from Kashi to perform a special *puja* (ritual worship). Despite such a huge number and the pundits of Kashi being reluctant to leave their city, Young Ravi could bring them for the ritual at the appointed time (Narasimhan, 2018: 57). Ravi's dedication and prowess made him close to Maharishi.

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[24] "Jai Guru Dev" is a common phrase of salutation and greeting practiced in the Art of Living that conveniently replaces the phrases used for daily greeting such as 'good morning', good night, hello, hi etc. It could be literally translated as victory to the guru. However, in the Art of Living circles, rather than indicating a sign of a personality cult, the phrase 'Jai Guru Dev' conveys a secular meaning attached with a universal and self-oriented connotation. In the words of the Guru himself, it means "victory to the big mind" or "victory to the greatness in you". see *Big Mind*. Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/wisdom/knowledge-sheets/big-mind (accessed 22nd November 2021).

Moreover, when Ravi Shankar was once asked about their first meeting, he said, "I recognised him, and he recognised me" (ibid., p 49), hinting at a mutual recognition of an other-worldly mystical connection. Such a connection could be heard as quite usual in the case of many of the devotees of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. It is not uncommon for the followers to have a vision of their *guru*, while others speak of the mystical and miraculous experience of meeting their *guru* for the first time. For instance, Gopal, who looks after cows in the Bangalore *ashram,* recalls he was given a mantra to chant by a saint who visited the family he worked for. Then, one day while chanting, he felt a presence and could see a man's forehead. He saw a whole face. Gradually, the whole body was revealed to him. Later on, he moved to another family to work as a household help. One day, he went along with them to attend an Art of Living Basic course. Their teacher took out a framed picture from his bag before starting the course, and to Gopal's surprise; it was the same man he saw during the chanting session smiling at him, his "Gurudev" (Kashikar and Murarka, 2009: 110-11). Rishi Nitya Pragya (an Art of Living Senior teacher) recalls his first meeting with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in an interview in which the latter said, "So, you have come!" hinting a mystical connection being felt, indicating he knew the former would come. Indeed, Rishi Nitya Pragya was overwhelmed with amazing joy; energy and respect for Sri Sri that made him automatically bow down and touch his feet (a cultural sign showing respect and courtesy) even before knowing him, which he never did till then as he claimed (ibid.).

The decision to explore a new direction in life embarked with Ravi Shankar's own initiative to look after around 175 students of a *Vedic* school, that ultimately led to the creation of the Art of Living Foundation. Even this phase was filled with or could be interpreted as guided by mysterious or mystical elements in the form of visions and predictions. According to Bhanumati Narasimhan, "young Ravi ceaselessly travelled

across the globe with Maharishi. But his visions of people who were waiting for him continued and "were turning into regular reminders" (Narasimhan, 2018: 61). Ravi Shankar felt an intense calling for a new beginning. He then decided to meet a saint named Devraha Baba, who lived on the banks of the river Ganga, before taking any decision. The meeting with the Baba turned out quite unusual and unexpected as the saint was also waiting for his arrival. Seeing young Ravi, the saint greeted, "Oh my son, you have come!" Handing over a watermelon to Ravi (though the Baba usually gave sweets to visitors), Baba said, "Water has to flow. If it stops, it would stagnate. Satsang should also flow as it spreads grace across the world. Bring *satsang* all over the world". The message seemed to have indicated to Ravi that he had to start on his own (ibid., 62). The turning point came when Maharishi's organisation consolidated and relocated all the *Vedic* schools functioning under it to a place near Delhi. Around 175 students recruited by Ravi Shankar's father for one such school, located in Bangalore, had to shift to Delhi, but they could not adjust to the new place and decided to return. At this juncture, out of concern for the continuation of their education, Ravi Shankar decided to take over the school despite friction with Maharishi's organisation and the confusion that followed (ibid.). According to another story, Ravi Shankar was assigned the task by Maharishi to start this school, namely Ved Vigyan Vidya Peeth, along with other trustees, Justice V R Krishna Iyer, Laksman Rao (then Mayor of Bangalore) and Justice P N Bhagawati. And when the organisation decided to close it down at Bangalore, many of the parents did not agree to let their children go to Delhi. This could have led to court cases. Thus, Sri Sri decided to take responsibility (Gautier, 2008).

An interesting narrative about an event happened before the creation of Art of Living which is commonly known among the ardent followers of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as also included in his biography. Sri Sri narrated that Maharishi and other saints once

wanted him to take over the position of Shankaracharya of Puri at Orissa but he was reluctant as he thought he was too young for the position. Still, on their insistence, he visited Puri and could see that there were so much turmoil and pending court cases related to the position. Then, he visited a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali and sat for meditation. There, he had a vision of the goddess saying, "You are here for a bigger purpose. You are not here to take the position of Shankaracharya. So, no need to be sad. You have a lot of work to accomplish." Thus, Sri Sri rejected the honourable position offered to him by saying that he would simply prefer to do service for the society and went on instead to serve the villages of Karnataka. Then, as the narrative goes, one day, he was at Hubli/Hoogli railway station waiting for a train, but he was with tickets to two different destinations. While on the one hand, there was a train to Bangalore where the members of an established organisation led by Maharishi were waiting to take him to Delhi for a talk; on the other hand, there was a train to Solapur that would materialise his vision of meeting people all over the world. In his own words, he expressed, "I knew that if I took the train to Solapur, something new would begin. People were waiting for me all over the world and, therefore, I decided to take the train to Solapur" (Narasimhan, 2018: 62-3). This led to the birth of the Art of Living Foundation with Sri Sri's initiative to look after the 175 to 200 students leading to the beginning of the Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth[25], a public charitable trust under the aegis of the AoL that continues to promote and look after Vedic education and research initiatives along with other project works related to women development, rural development etc. It is located within the AoL Bangalore International headquarters/ashram campus.

Thus, the mystical and other-worldly motivation for this-worldly application characterises the vital decisions in the *guru's* journey as well as his decisions with

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[25] See *Welcome to VVMP.* Available at: http://www.vvmvp.org/ (accessed 21st November 2021).

regard to the as we could figure from the discussion so far. Such an other-worldly effect can be observed even concerning the core breathing technique patented in the name of AoL, i.e., *Sudarshan Kriya,* as well as while choosing the official logo of this organisation. It was during the period 1981-82; even though Sri Sri was occupied with teaching meditation he felt something amiss as he could see a mismatch between inner silence and outer expression of life amongst the participants. Thereby, he felt the need to develop a technique to make meditation easier for people. He decided to observe a period of silence at a farmhouse near Kengeri in Karnataka, wherein he lived for 21 days ending with the last ten days of silence. This aroused a spark for a new technique within him (ibid., 66). As the narrative goes, in March 1982, while meditating on the bank of river Bhadravati, near Shimoga in Karnataka; a delicate cosmic rhythm accompanying the chant of "So Ham" flowed through Sri Sri—"at first slow, then quicker, and then even more quickly" leading to the creation of "*Sudarshan Kriya*— 'Su' meaning proper and 'Darshan' meaning vision. Literally, it meant an action that enables proper vision.." (ibid., 66). The organisation has gradually patented this breathing technique, indicating a legal materialist stamp on a mystically found other-worldly dimension. Having asked in an interview in 2004 about what led to the patent of *Sudarshan Kriya* Sri Sri replied, "Because someone else was going to patent it. We patented it so we could teach. Otherwise, it would have become a commercial commodity in the US long ago. People started copying it and we stepped in... [*we started teaching it*] free of cost in prisons, free of cost in many places"[26].

Interestingly, the AoL official logo (see figure 2.1 in appendix II), which shows the rising sun between two swans too, has a mystical story behind it. Once Sri Sri was

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[26]See Kumar, Salil (2004) *If you want to make sense it has to come from silence*. Available at: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar speaks! - Rediff.com India News (accessed 19th November 2022).

travelling from Delhi to Varanasi on a train, a ticket examiner approached him and raised a concern about the rise of materialistic tendency in society while sharing a vision he had with Sri Sri in these words, "I see that the supreme lord has sent a person to this world. I see a sun with two swans in his either side. Wherever he goes, there will be an awakening, and he will bring solace to the minds of the people. God is not going to come wearing a crown; he would take the form of a saint. And only the lucky ones would be able to meet him" (ibid., 64). Thus, Ravi Shankar took a hint from the story shared by the ticket examiner and decided to have an official logo for AoL symbolised by a rising sun with two swans on each of its sides.

Thus, the biographical coverage of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar gives more of an impression of a hagiography that establishes the exceptional, extra-ordinary, mystical and other-worldly nature of the *guru* connoting the traits of an *avatar* as depicted by the anecdotes reflected by the narration since his birth which in turn somehow legitimises his present position to an extent. It establishes the divinely gifted nature of the guru who, since his childhood, could recite the *Vedas* and was also blessed by the revered saints. There is also an emphasis on the *guru's* caring, compassionate and open nature for which he is still known. However, the followers and believers do not have to read any such biography to keep their faith intact. Indeed, the biographies are later developments, i.e., in 2008 by Francois Gautier and in 2018 by Bhanumati Narasimhan. Indeed, very few may have actually read it. The point to be noted is that biography of the *guru,* even though it might seem like hagiography, is an important source of data for the researchers. Despite the language of a devotee marked by gratefulness and devotion as reflected in the way these biographies are written, the information contained is actually what Ravi Shankar's family have to say about his childhood and background and, thus, also covers an important part as a narrative of the history of AoLF. A

researcher has to be selective of the information but at the same time, the exaggerated and devotion-centric poetics of words of praise cannot be ignored either because the truth in these might not be the same as to a mindset adhered to a positivistic logic but nevertheless 'truth is multi-dimensional'. A devotee's perspective reflects a truth of its own which an open-minded researcher cannot ignore. For a devotee, the *guru's* presence is ever felt in the form of grace and guidance, which for her may be very much experiential. He no longer remains simply a body but rather becomes a source of energy or principle, i.e., all-pervading, attains a sacred divine quality. Thereby, the nature of the guru is "uncontainable" (Copeman and Ikegame: 2012). A *guru* can be in the form of a person, a leader or a founder of an organisation who could be described as a friend, father figure/ mother figure, teacher, guide etc., still, none contains a holistic and definite nature of the guru. This will be elaborated on and made clearer in the latter section of the work in chapter three. To continue further, we have seen how the journey of Ravi Shankar driven by mystical elements, led him to the initiation of the AoLF with the beginning of the *Vedic* school, its official logo and its core practice of *Sudarshan Kriya*. Every organisation needs a base for its location; traditionally, a *guru* is likely to have an *ashram*, "a secluded dwelling of a spiritual sage, a religious retreat" (Hodgkinson, 2014). The international headquarter of the AoLF today, from which all the activities of the foundation are centrally channelised along with other trusts, is located in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India which is known as *ashram* or Bangalore ashram (will be discussed in detail in chapter three). Along with it, there are several ashrams functioning in India and abroad dedicated to Ravi Shankar and his teachings, commonly referred to as AoL *ashram* or to be more specific, is addressed as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar ashram.

Now, a point to be noted is, despite whether one categorises the writings of Ravi Shankar's followers and sister as biography or hagiography, one cannot deny the narratives discussed with regard to his family background and upbringing in the absence of any critical published material contradicting the same. In this regard, returning back to the main issue concerning the relationship between religion and spirituality, one cannot ignore the significant influences of the *guru's* own childhood and his upbringing in the formation of the AoL. On the basis of the narratives and biographies about his childhood, one can deduce that while on the one hand, a liberal upbringing that also encouraged to develop elements of human values such an attitude driven by caring, sharing and compassion (other than these qualities being shown as part of his own nature) largely influenced Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's later life. For instance, whether on the question of untouchability raised by little Ravi as discussed above or as a narrative goes Ravi Shankar's mother's *Amma* having a vision of Jesus Christ after her first experience of *Sudarshan Kriya* (Narasimhan, 2018); or *Atthaiamma* (paternal grandmother) of being of a caring and sharing nature who would even distribute her own share of a chocolate with others and even *Pitaji* recognising and praising his son while remembering his son's concern for the poor; all of this indicates the environment in which Ravi Shankar was brought up during his childhood and these notions of caring, sharing, compassion, openness as morally and ethically driven human values etc., resonates very much in the discourse of the AoL version of spirituality as could be seen even led to the initiation of another sister organisation namely, the International Association of Human Values. On the other hand, Sri Sri's religious family background that socialised the children to listen to Vedic scriptures and stories based on the *Vedas*, their routine participation in prayers, meditation and also *satsang* along with temple

visits influenced the very basis of the discourse preached and practised in the Art of Living.

Moreover, the influence of Gandhi cannot be ignored either. In this regard, the subtle or manifested presence of the *Vedic* tradition of one specific school of Indian philosophy, i.e., of *Advaita,* in the whole discourse of AoL in relation to the sacred and secular dynamics of its practices, defines the very core of spirituality. These all will become clearer as we proceed on to the next section, that will explore the inner dynamics concerning the relation of religion and spirituality related to the case of the AoLF.

2.4.1. Locating the AoLF version of Spirituality:

Despite having its own distinctive context of development, AoL cannot be clearly set aside from the influence of its precedents. As discussed before, with an emphasis on the *Vedas*, AoL discourse reflecting the teachings of its founder clearly shows a continuation of the reformist spirit of the 19th century that led to the development of various organisations such as the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj etc., and also witnessed the rise of key figures like Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, etc. Indeed, as Stephen Jacobs notes Aghenanda Bharati, though with a token of exaggeration, asserts, "modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly" (Jacobs, 2016:36). The preaching or teaching of Vivekananda and similarly placed others were mainly linked to the selective revival of the Hindu culture by referring to the ancient scriptures such as that of *Vedas* (1500-1200 B.C.), *Brahmanas* (1000-800 B.C.E.), *Arankayas* (900-600 B.C.E.) mainly the *Upanishads* (600-300 B.C.E.), epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata which also includes the Bhagavad Gita and the other

texts like the *Sutras*[27] etc., in the light of modernity (Knott, 1998: 16, Shattuck 1999). While the Vedas (accounts of creation, rituals and prayers) and Upanishads (sacred scriptures taught by ancient sages which also embody the knowledge and explanation of the precious texts like *Vedas*, *Brahmanas*, *Arankayas*, etc.) are considered to be a part of *Shruti* literature which is believed to have been divinely revealed to the sages; the Epics, *Sutras* and *Puranas* are seen as part of *smriti* tradition that which is taught by sages; remembered and "handed-down" by disciples (ibid., 15)

The *Vedic* corpus was orally composed and transmitted in the early period (Witzel, 1997: 258-59). Gradually, a more or less fixed *Vedic* canon was recognised and quoted by the early grammarians like Panini (400B.C.) and Patanjali (150 B.C.) and was also detailed in the Pali canon (ibid.). The *Vedas* are divided into four main branches; *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* (ibid.). Today, a large section of the Hindus describes Hinduism as *Sanatana Dharma* or the "eternal tradition or religion" divinely revealed and passed down through the ages to the present in the form of Vedas (Knott, 1998: 5-6). The attempts made to revive Hinduism since the 19th century considered seeing the Vedic tradition as the "primeval eternal religion" or "sanatāna nityadharma" (Dimitrova, 2007: 89). In this regard, Sanatana Dharma includes the six "orthodox" schools or *astika* schools of Indian philosophy which accepts the authority of the Vedas i.e., *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṁkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mimāṃsa* or *Purva Mimamsa* and Uttara Mimamsa or *Vedānta.* [28]

In the case of the AoLF, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has continued to impart the message of the *Vedas* through this organisation and its related trusts and bodies, such as the

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[27] Sutras are literally translated as "threads' referring to texts containing aphorisms and statements focused on subjects such as *dharma*, *yoga* and *Vedanta*. These were composed around the period, 500 BCE to 100 CE in addition to *the Puranas* of the later period i.e., 300 to 900CE (see Knott, 1998). For further understanding on *shruti* and *smriti,* see Scharfe, (2002).
[28] For further details see Singh, 2016: 425-428 and Gupta, 2006: 20-21.

Vaidic Dharma Sansthan. In this regard, one can see the influence of the school of *Vedanta*. Vedanta is a philosophical system in which scholars have focused on the study of Vedic texts with an emphasis on the *Upanishads*, *Bhagvad-Gita* and the *Brahma-sutras* (Knott, 1998: 31). Sri Sri's own interpretation and commentary in terms of talks and books on a number of *Upanishads*, *Gita* and sutras are very much a part of the advance AoL discourse.[29] Three of the most influential scholars of *Vedanta* or *vedantin* scholars are Adi Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhava. While the former two, i.e., Adi-Shankara or Shankara (788-820 CE) and Ramanuja (1017 CE) belong to the tradition of *Advaita Vedanta,* which literally means "non-dual", Madhava (13th Century CE) was a scholar of the tradition of *Dvaita Vedanta* (Dualist). Views of these scholars vary on the basis of how each saw the relation of ultimate reality (*brahman*) and self (*atma*) (ibid.). While on one extreme, Shankara's understanding of *Advaita* sees no separation of the ultimate reality and self; thus, he considers the nature of ultimate truth as non-dual; on the other hand, Madhva's understanding of *Dvaita* or duality separates the ultimate reality or truth from the self (ibid.). Ramanuja although he followed *Advaita* his thoughts differed on the nature of self and truth; he differed from Shankara. Now, considering the case of the AoLF, one can clearly see the major influence of Shankara's school of *Advaita* on the practices and ideas followed by and also transmitted by it. The *guru* is often found to be referring to Adi-Shankara and also emphasising on the non-dual and unchanging nature of the ultimate *Advaitic* truth, i.e., seeing a single divine consciousness pervading all. In this regard, it is to be noted that there is an implicit belief shared by many AoL members that their *guru,* who shares his second name as well as whose birth anniversary coincides with Adi Shankara could be a reincarnation

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[29]See *Upanishads.* Available at: <u>Wisdom Commentary Upanishads | The Art of Living</u> (accessed 19th November 2022).

of the latter. However, the organisation also imparts the teachings of the *Puranas* (mythological texts often containing the stories of Gods and Goddesses like *Vishnu Purana*, *Shiva Purana* and so on.), sutras and *agamas* (tantric texts on rituals and doctrines translated into Tamil) through its trusts and bodies such as the Vaidic Dharma Sansthan along with the time-to-time discussion on Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and other texts. Most importantly, even AoLF and its *guru* consider the Vedas as divinely revealed to the ancient sages and sees them as the basis of the *Sanatana Dharma* or Hinduism and as ancient Indian culture.

However, historically speaking, at the very outset, it is to be made clear that the historical documentation of India began with the explanation and interpretation of its past by British colonial scholars (Thapar, 2012: 31-42). On initial investigation, they could find no sense of history in India, especially before the pre-Islamic period, i.e., before 1200 A.D. Thus, these scholars initiated a systematic investigation, although not without a colonial bias or intention to have more systematic control over the people, their knowledge system and territory through the writing on the history of India. James Mills' famous work, "A History of British India" (1819), divided Indian history into three periods, i.e., the Hindu Civilization, the Muslim Civilization and the British period, which later on was renamed by the Indian historians after independence on a secular basis as the Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods (ibid.). However, the religious basis of Mill's periodisation continued as Ancient History was equated with Hindu history and Medieval History was seen as Muslim history. This gradually became the basis of the history of communalism in India and is still emphasised on by the extreme rightist groups such as the Hindutva brigade (which will be discussed in chapter four) represented by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh Parivar) while pointing and claiming to the pristine Hindu origin of the country. However, it is to be

noted that the distinguished Historians of the country, like Romila Thapar and others disagree with such a notion of Hindu origin as factual claims do not back it. To have a utopian or romantic past is typical of all nationalisms, and India is not an exception (ibid.). Ancient India was "projected as a period of unchanging prosperity" since the *Vedic* age covering 1500 years till the "golden age" of the Guptas (ibid.). But the research conducted by historians in the 1960s and 1970s on ancient Indian society could find no clear-cut categorisation of the historical periods on the basis of religion. Claiming the Hindu period from 2700 BC to AD 1200 as unchanging is unreasonable. Rather, the Harappan culture's religion is unknown, and seeming artefacts and monuments of religious nature suggest varied localised religious practices (ibid).

The orientalists or the Western scholars of the nineteenth century who worked on ancient Asian texts considered India as a civilisation based on *Vedic Aryan* culture and a part of British territory characterised by Sanskrit language and Hindu religion (ibid.). They believed that the Aryans migrated and invaded India in about 1500 BC and conquered the existing race, and settled in India. Gradually, a strong belief system was established in the sub-continent, which regards the Aryans as indigenous to India. However, such theories on the Aryan settlement and indigeneity are unacceptable to most historians (ibid.). Historians observed that "beliefs and observances frequently overlapped across religions" and also "religion was fluid for most people" (ibid.). Indeed, even *Vedic* religion (based on texts derived through oral transmission) went through a change over a period of time. The earliest trace was that of *Vedic Brahmanism,* which was characterised by a ritual of animal sacrifice, the ritual of worship during the consumption of collected wealth and a complete absence of images (ibid.). The heterodox sects like the *nastikas* (non-believers or materialists) opposed the ritual of sacrifice and the caste system leading to the gradual decline of *Vedic*

Brahmanism and the rise of Jainism, Buddhism and Puranic Hinduism. Also, image worship and belief-system emerged surrounding the notion of karma and reincarnation, which differed from early *Vedic Brahmanism* (ibid.). Thus, seeing India on a religious basis with an ancient Hindu uniform past is problematic and questionable.

However, at the same time, Indian Sociologists like T.N. Madan questions those Historians who consider Hinduism as simply a fabrication of the nineteenth-century colonial enthusiasts, orientalists, Christian missionaries and would-be nationalists, thus denying its traditional basis (Madan, 2006: 218). In this regard, Madan specifically criticises Romila Thapar for just considering putting together diverse surviving Hindu sects over the centuries under a uniform name (ibid.). He referred to Alberuni's *Tarikh-ul-Hind* (1030 A.D.), where there is a mention of the Hindu conception of God, sacred texts, and mythologies and even compared the Hindu to a different socio-cultural and religious category than that of the Muslims. He also refers to a fourteenth-century chronicler who distinguished between the Hindu and Muslim people in his account of the victories of Sultans other than mentioning about Shivaji speaking of the Hindu *dharma* in the seventeenth century (ibid.). By referring to the work of Richard King (1999), T.N. Madan assumes Ram Mohun Roy to be the first Indian to use the term "Hindooism" in the early 19th century, i.e., in the year 1816 (ibid.). Madan also emphasised that for Ram Mohun Roy, the root of Hinduism was in *Vedanta,* and he was concerned about the neglect of ancient religion by the moderns (ibid.). Thus, the traditional cultural basis of Hinduism, whether one would consider it a religion or not (see Madan, 2006: 217-18), cannot be simply neglected.

Moreover, it was during the colonial context of the 19th century that Orientalist scholars (like Charles Wilkins, and William Jones) driven by a romantic inclination towards the Sanskrit language initiated the translation of *Vedic* texts such as

Upanishads and *Bhavagad Gita* into English (Jacobs, 2016: 29). Stephen Jacobs asserts, "The work of these early Orientalists scholars was not only significant in an academic context but also trickled into the popular imagination through the German Romantics, Theosophists and Transcendentalists" (ibid.). Now bringing our attention back to the context of AoL, as also noted by Jacobs (2016), on the one hand, the *guru's* knowledge of Sanskrit legitimises his interpretation and translation of the *Vedic* texts presented as ancient knowledge through AoL discourse, on the other hand, knowledge of English language opens its teaching to the global world. Moreover, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's knowledge of regional languages like Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu, as well as his witty and smart attempts to learn and communicate a few words through the use of region or country-specific language or dialect wherever he visits or whichever community he addresses immediately connects him to the people.

The German Romanticists like Friederich Schelling, and Arthur Schopenhaur, the Theosophists like Madam Blavatsky and the Transcendentalists like David Henry Thoreau commonly considered India as a source of wisdom (ibid., 30-60). While the German Romanticists saw India as a source of knowledge and lost wisdom of the past with a potential to transform society and counter the cold Enlightenment notion of progress and rationality, the Theosophists exploited the mystical dimension of the East and were instrumental in perpetuating the Hindu ideas of *karma, dharma,* reincarnation etc., and also attempted to present the Indian philosophy in scientific terms (ibid.). Moreover, Stephen Jacobs notes that according to Arthur Versluis (2014), the Transcendentalists were the precursors of "immediatism", connoting a direct, unmediated religio-spiritual spontaneous insight into reality (ibid.). Jacobs relates this insight to AoL's central practice of *Sudarshan Kriya* through which he sees that "one can have direct, unmediated access to one's true self", as suggested by the AoL

discourse (ibid.). However, the present study did not come across any such suggestion within the AoL discourse with regard to *Sudarshan Kriya*. Nevertheless, searching and experiencing the truth or the ultimate self is very much a part of AoL discourse based on the philosophy of *Advaita*. In general, all three groups discussed above were drawing meaning from the wisdom of the east as a response to western modernity.

The colonial context created a "new hermeneutic situation" (Halbfass, 1988) characterised by a re-appraisal of Hindu ideas in the light of modernity by individuals like Vivekananda and Yogananda, who also travelled to the west (Jacobs, 2016). The re-interpreted ideas of the *Vedas* presented as consistent with science, rationality and universalism appealed to the western minds and were brought back to India. This led to the convergence of the east and west (ibid.). Even in the case of AoL, as also observed by Jacobs, such a convergence is evident. During the 1960s counterculture in the west, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of the Transcendental Meditation Movement), amongst others, evolved somewhat as iconic figure representing the wisdom of the east to effectively deal with the seemingly stifling "technocratic culture" (ibid.). A common line of practice and idea shared by the countercultural movement and many of the saints and *swamis* preaching spirituality relates to the realm of consciousness and its transformation for the realisation of one's "authentic inner self" (ibid.). As also pointed out by Stephen Jacobs, the present study also notes that the AoL discourse aims to transform the world through a transformation of individual consciousness.

The gradual emergence of the New Age with no definite creed or organisation probably in the 1960s (Collins, 1998: 91-97) or 1970s (Jacobs, 2016: 60) but with a belief in the astrological shift from the Age of Piscean (characterised by violence) to the Age of Aquarius (characterised by peace and harmony) continued with the spirit of counterculture to a certain possible extent (Jacobs, 2016; Collins, 1998). The AoL

discourse shares commonalities to a certain degree with the New Age version of religiosity and spirituality. These include; a belief in the unity of the subject and object, a belief in all-pervasive God, nature and energy or seeing all three as the same, a belief in reincarnation, practice of meditation and *yoga* (Collins, 1998), an attempt in the transformation of individual consciousness and a belief in the concept of perennial wisdom (Jacobs, 2016). In addition, AoL, along with the New Age Movement, commonly shares and focuses on the usage of the terms such as "well-being"[30] and "healing" (Gautier and Gautier, 2010). Like the New Agers, the AoLF also emphasises on holistic healing rather than simply attempting to cure certain isolated symptoms through the medium of *Ayurveda*, meditation, and *yoga*.

However, despite the similarities as also observed by Stephen Jacobs in his study though AoL version of spirituality may see oneness in terms of values in all religions, but it is not eclectic like that of the new age that encourages "pick and choose" and is also open to the mixing of diverse available techniques and options (Jacobs, 2016; Collins, 1998). Moreover, AoL discourse is not driven by such astrological origins mentioned above. Thus, AoL cannot be simply categorised as another New Age Movement. However, despite differences, there is a major element of influence shared not just by AoL and the New Age Movement but all those spirituality-based movements is the focus on inner life driven by a subjective turn in modernity. This is the influence of the "psy disciplines", as observed by Stephen Jacobs (2016) in the case of AoL. Stephen Jacobs writes, "There are three important aspects of the psy discourses in the contemporary context that are important for our understanding of both the context for groups such as AoL, and AoL itself. These are the ideas of the autonomous individual, the idea that individuals have a mostly unrealised but vast inner being, and if one can

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tap into the inner life, you can realise your innate but primarily untapped potential" (Jacobs, 2016: 49). In this regard, he claims that there are two trajectories that are important for the understanding of AoL with regard to the inner life as a key to one's identity, these are: the "spiritualisation of psychology" and conversely the "psychologization of spirituality" (ibid.).

Spiritualisation of psychology emphasises on the shift from the focus on seeing the realm of 'unconsciousness' in terms of curing or understanding psychological disorder in the Freudian sense towards the Jungian understanding of "individuation as coming to selfhood or self-realisation" (Jacobs, 2016: 50). Jungian ideas also influenced the schools of humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology which indicates the process of spiritualisation. For instance, on the one hand, Abraham Maslow from the Humanistic school considers that once the basic physiological needs (food, water, shelter) and psychological needs (love, esteem) are fulfilled, individuals look for "self-actualisation", i.e., to reach one's "full potential" which may be characterised by "accepting one's own nature" and have "peak experience" characterised by wellbeing, intense joy and a sense of seeing the universe as a "unified whole" giving "a meaning to life itself", on the other hand, interpersonal psychology accepts and attempts to address the spiritual, religious and mystical experiences acknowledging that conscious control of breathing may lead to a deeper experience of the self in relation to healing and transformation etc., (ibid., 50-55). Psychologization of spirituality, on the other hand, refers to the utilisation of various techniques developed within the field of psychology for a spiritual purpose (ibid.). For instance, according to Stephen Jacobs, this could be derived from "two interrelated aspects of spirituality, i.e., the exaltation of individuality and an emphasis on experience" led by the subjective turn to modernity (ibid.). In this regard, Stephen Jacobs proposes "a type of experience, namely the

therapeutic", which leads to the experience of well-being. Thus, whether one considers the notion of self-realisation, acceptance of one's own nature, intense joy, seeing the universe as a unified whole, or one emphasises on experience, individuality and well-being, these all resonates in the AoL version of spirituality.

Thus, Stephen Jacobs claims, "AoL is, in many ways, a manifestation of the normalisation of individuation, the quest for meaning, the centrality of experience and the convergence of east and west" (Jacobs, 2016: 60). While he argues that "AoL emerges from the hermeneutic context formed by the various trajectories" he also emphasises that "it is important to understand AoL not simply as a product of previous trajectories but also as contributing to the hermeneutic context of the present." Thus, he sees "AoL not simply as an index of change" but also as "an agent of change" (ibid.).

2.5. Conclusion:

Henceforth, it is only within the broader context of modernity one can actually contextualise the emergence and nature of contemporary spirituality. Moreover, it is to be noted that it was only during the twentieth century that social scientists started showing interest in a separate field of spirituality (Moberg, 2011). Thus, a serious conceptualisation of spirituality as a distinct field of study began, especially during and after the 1950s and 60s, which witnessed the counter-cultural impact in the Euro-American context. A decline and reshaping of organised religion (Wood, 2010; Bruce, 2010; Turner, 2010) resulted in an opening up of an alternative space for spirituality characterised by a secular, liberal and subjective turn to meaning and wellbeing.

With regard to the question of AoL, the *guru*-centric nature of spirituality can be rooted in the hermeneutic context of 19th-century colonial modernity in India. Within this context, there were organised and systematic efforts at shaping the minds of people by the English-educated class of Indians who were also well-grounded in *Vedic*

tradition. Systematic efforts were put into the revival and re-interpretation of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* in the light of reason and humanism, while at the same time, they were critical of the instrumental rationality of colonial modernity and simultaneously attempting reforms by challenging obscurantism and discriminatory practices of the Hindu tradition, especially with regard to the question of women and caste.

Gradually, over a period of time, the new *guru*-led organisations of the twentieth century continued with similar efforts at reviving the *V*edic past in the light of reason and humanism that attracted a vast number of followers from India and abroad. These organisations basically attempt to deal fruitfully with modern-day life's individual concerns through techniques and discourse derived from the *Vedic* texts interpreted in consonance with modern science, reason and humanism. Thus, creates an alternative space for meaning and purpose away from the orthodoxy of religion and instrumental rationality of Enlightenment through negotiation with the past (tradition) and present (modernity) by bringing in the rationally applicable from both to make sense of the contemporary experience. AoL is one such *guru*-led organisation that sits on the confluence of tradition and modernity and finely balances both; traditionalises modernity and modernises tradition to effectively deal with and make sense of the praxis of the present.

Chapter- 3

Spirituality as Traditionalizing Modernity: Through Modernizing Tradition

"The relations between the traditional and the modern do not necessarily

involve displacement, conflict, or exclusiveness."

Joseph R. Gusfield (1967: 351)

3.1. Introduction:

Spirituality, as represented by the Art of Living Foundation, is contemporary in nature. Despite tracing its roots to the ancient *Vedic* texts and *guru* tradition, it finely balances with today's practices and exigencies of life. With a focus on a "stress-free and violence-free society," AoLF commits to alleviating the stress and tension of individuals by providing effective tools and techniques. While on the one hand, these tools and techniques are traditionally rooted in the ancient *Vedic* scriptures and philosophy, on the other hand, attempts are made to effectively explain them in terms of scientific logic and use them in dealing with practical concerns of the everyday life of individuals. The relationship that spirituality shares with science and everyday life issues within the discourse of AoL rooting itself simultaneously in tradition is intertwined in nature. This adds a nearly authentic and original touch to the whole discourse.

Nearly authentic and original touch because while it deals with the daily practical issues concerning the lives of the individuals of today, at the same time, an attempt to merge spirituality with science could be traced back to the times of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, and many others even though the spirituality of those days were spoken of more in terms of religion or the religious sphere. Gradually, in the twentieth century, the figures such as Swami Paramhansa Yogananda and, later on, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and others too approached the realm of spirituality through

science and rationality. Thus, the discourse carried on within AoLF is a kind of continuation of a tradition followed by the prior similarly situated organisations revolving around a *guru* or *guru*-like figures. But at the same time, dealing with the nature of the present-day issues does provide it with a touch of contemporary authenticity with its own way of dealing with it by making use of tools and techniques keeping in mind the nature of present-day social realities. For instance, the main teachings of the foundation are concerned with effectively dealing with the common issues faced by the individuals of today related to health and fitness, such as depression, stress, and tension. It promises happiness and health along with overall personality development and better life and relationships by simply employing certain practical and secular tools and techniques as taught and discussed during the AoL courses with the help of the latest technology and narratives of contemporary popular concerns such as gender issues, climate change, mental health and so on. In this regard, several courses have been designed on the basis of age groups, professions, gender, region, etc., in diverse languages. Interestingly, the Covid19 pandemic era has witnessed the most flexible and adaptable nature of contemporary techno-spirituality. The religious use of online technology made spirituality reach far and wide.

Despite the popularity and extensive reach of AoL, it is crucial to locate the common thread that holds the ideas and practices that drive its courses and overall discourse. In other words, the diverse practices and ideas associated with contemporary spirituality share a common source, which holds and directs it. Nevertheless, the common source does not carry a clear-cut single and definite basis; rather, it is in ideational form deriving its basis from the interplay and dynamics of tradition and modernity with occasional attempts to move beyond the dichotomy in the form of the

present praxis of the now indicating a higher realised being established in the *Advaitic* truth (see chapter eight of the present work).

With this brief background, the present chapter attempts to throw light on the nature of contemporary spirituality as popularly and publicly portrayed by organisations such as the AoLF. It emphasises on its common source and how the diverse ideas and practices that hold the AoL version of spirituality are linked to it. In this regard, this chapter focuses on the dynamics of tradition and modernity and sees it as providing the ideational basis of contemporary spirituality by elaborating on a few concepts determined by these dynamics. Thus, with a description of the concepts of the *guru* and related notions of the *ashram*, teachers, and volunteers, this chapter attempts to establish the foundational basis of the AoL version of spirituality.

3.2. Dynamics of Tradition and Modernity:

The very basis of the whole discourse of spirituality as propagated by and practised in the AoL and other similarly placed organisations of today like Isha Foundation, represented/founded by the *guru* known as Jaggi Vasudev or Sadhguru revolves around the dynamics of tradition and modernity centring around the notions of life and well-being of individuals who would contribute towards a better society. Unlike the argument put forward by Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers in their article entitled "The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition" (2007) that "detraditionalisation" stimulates the spread of post-Christian spirituality (a part of New Age Spirituality) in the Western context characterised by the weakening of the "external and authoritative sources of meaning and identity" which could now only be "discovered in the deeper layers of the self" rather than on religious faith, the current chapter argues that in the case of AoL, a return to tradition merged with a contemporary touch plays an effective guiding force for the very discovery of the sacred self, meaning and identity. Moreover,

Houtman and Aupers also noticed that relying on one's "inner voice," and "intuition" post-Christian spirituality not only rejects religious faith and tradition but also rejects scientific reason as a source of "truth" (Houtman and Aupers, 2007: 307). Unlike the understanding of post-Christian spirituality observed by Houtman and Aupers, the ideas and practices associated with the nature of spirituality as presented and represented by the AoLF neither denies religious faith nor rejects scientific reason, whether as a source of truth or as an approach to spirituality. Rather, the very spiritual basis of AoL draws both from tradition and modernity, faith and reason, and also attempts to finely balance the two to establish its ideas and related practices based on present-day context.

Historically, a major way of seeing and understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity has been through the prism of dichotomy, contrast, and opposition. Tradition (mainly in terms of religion) somehow began to lose its legitimacy since Western intellectual traditions such as empiricism and rationalism rose to prominence. While the empiricists such as Francis Bacon emphasised on the senses and observable facts for the establishment of any kind of certainty or truth, rationalists like Rene Descartes relied solely on the reason for the acceptance of any kind of knowledge or authority (Gross, 1992). Traditional values, beliefs, and authority lacked such a concrete factual or rational basis and were thus not wholly refuted but sidelined by empiricists and rationalists. It was majorly ever since the age of enlightenment, especially during the 18th century, anti-traditionalism became explicit (Yadgar, 2013; Gross, 1992). The gradual developments such as the spread of capitalism, the industrial revolution in England, and the French revolution of 1789 had a deep cultural impact on the intellectual tradition in Europe, resulting in the formulation of invidious and pervasive contrasts between the new and the old social order (Bendix, 1967: 324). While Max Weber and Werner Sombart noted that early Capitalism generated interest-

centric new kind of individuals who reorganised everything, even tradition on the basis of rational means-end-based calculation of relationships emphasising on the productivity, the industrial revolution led to the huge migration of people from villages to the cities seeking employment in the factories resulting in uprooting from old settings, a separation from traditions, habits, and customs and a loss of community-based solidarities (Gross, 1992). French revolution brought new hope for freedom, equality, and fraternity, challenging the shackles of traditional monarchic and religious authority and leading to a new epoch of modernity.

Thus, because of the developments mentioned above, tradition and modernity came to be seen in a mutually exclusive manner, in a contrasting light. While on the one hand, there were those who romanticised the traditional way of living, seeing the turn to modernity as leading to isolation and breakdown of community and society; on the other hand, the proponents of modernity driven by science and rationality looked down upon tradition and traditional way of living as a pull towards backwardness and stagnancy. For instance, living during the 18th century for both, i.e., Louis de Bonald, a philosopher in France, and Justus Moser, a publicist in Germany, "the traditional order" represented meaningful human relations, sociability, security, and other values to which the material achievements of industry and commerce cannot match (Bendix, 1967: 300). On the contrary, the past by modern standards as Jeremy Bentham put it in 1824 was "full of abuses and imperfections," "much inferior" to the present, thus, the modern conditions need to be preferred on its own values and prescriptions (Gross, 1992). The tendency to see tradition and modernity in terms of past and present, wherein the present is portrayed and seen as a progressive stage, gave rise to the evolutionary theory of social change, which became one of the dominant theories of the 19th century.

Whether to consider Auguste Comte's "law of three stages" (Comte, 2009) or Emile Durkheim's concepts of "mechanical and organic solidarity" (Durkheim, 1984), or even that of Karl Marx's theory of "historical materialism" or societal development (Marx and Engels, 1968), the evolutionary approach to social change is very much evident and visible. However, even though those in favour of returning to tradition cannot do away with or deny the development of the rational mindset and diverse technologies, which added more ease and comfort to human lives in the era of modernity, the adherents of modernity too, cannot simply be in denial of the tradition which continues to play an important role. Interestingly, the very concept of tradition, "its nature as well as binding power," acquired its prominence precisely in the light of modernity (Pieper, 1958: 465).

Tradition, in the words of Edward Shils, "means many things," but he clarifies that in "its most elementary sense.., it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (Shils, 1981:12). Shils further elaborates, "it (tradition) includes material objects and beliefs about all sort of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, and machines. It includes all that a society possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it and which is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity" (ibid.). Thus, that which is "handed down as tradition" includes both material and immaterial aspects of life like ideas, objects, practices, images, and institutions, etc., (ibid.). Similarly, in the words of David Gross, "the term 'tradition' refers to a set of practices, a constellation of beliefs or a mode of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past" (Gross, 1992: 8).

Interestingly, in the year 1997, a sociologist namely, Joseph A Soares, in his attempt to reformulate the concept of tradition, criticised the notion of tradition as conveyed by the previous works of Sociologists and Historians as either dismissive or indiscriminate (Soares 1997: 14-16). Such works, according to Soares, neglected the notion of tradition by reducing it to one of four things; "either ancestral restraints (Marx, Freud), immemorial habits (Weber), a ritual invention disguising upper-class power (Hobsbawm), or anything displaying continuity (Shils)" (ibid.). In contrast, Soares argues, "tradition is a cultural resource which patterns the responses of particular communities to contemporary challenges. A living social tradition requires a distinct social group with a common identity derived from an interpretation of its past, whose collective memories have some objective expression in the material environment and whose activities are guided by a spirit of continuity" (ibid.). Thus, a relevant question that needs to be addressed is; why these ideas, practices, images, and institutions are transmitted as a tradition at all? In other words, why tradition matters?

Tradition matters because it enables the present to have its own relevance by establishing a connection with the past, i.e., with the belief systems, values, customs, institutions, and practices associated with the socio-cultural, political, economic, and historical aspects of a given society which has been handed down from the past. Such a connection signals the contemporary relevance of such continuity. David Gross writes, "Its (tradition's) main function has been to provide the values, beliefs, and guidelines for conduct that have helped mould communities into organic wholes. It has also been the crucial force providing linkage from one generation to the next…; tradition has always been present as virtual second nature. Without it, there would have been no effective social integration, nor any connecting tissue holding together..." (Gross, 1992: 3). Moreover, the domain of tradition also acts as a source of legitimacy

to a given set of ideas, belief-system, values, and authority. Thus, considering these enabling tendencies in the nature and function of tradition, it would be erroneous to deny or overlook its contemporary relevance. Tradition not only makes the past relevant but also the present. In this regard, the dichotomies such as that of tradition and modernity become highly questionable.

Joseph R. Gusfield sees tradition and modernity as "misplaced polarities in the study of social change" (Gusfield, 1967). By presenting and discussing seven fallacies concerning the theory that holds tradition and modernity as polar opposites, Gusfield concludes that tradition and modernity do not necessarily present a conflictual and contradictory relationship, rather "..the quest for modernity depends upon and often finds support in the ideological upsurge of traditionalism" (ibid., 358). In a similar manner, Yaacov Yadgar, in his article entitled "Tradition" (2013), considers the well-established argument which pitches traditionalists or conservatives against the rationalists and secularists, representing modernity as polar opposites or exclusive to each other as far from the truth and regrettable. Such an argument sees tradition as an unchanging package from the past, putting a restraint on individual liberty and reflexivity (ibid., 454). Thus, in this regard, it acts as a barrier to 'progress.' However, Yadgar considers such a comprehension of tradition attuned to the Cartesian and Kantian epistemology as a misunderstanding (ibid., 454-55). He rather suggests an alternative understanding of tradition by emphasising on its "foundational, or constitutive nature," which considers tradition "as a rather dynamic meta-structure into which one is born and within which and through which one acquires her sense of agency, subjectivity, and self-hood: in short, her individuality" (ibid., 455-56). The dynamic nature of tradition is reflected by a continuous "reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past to suit the present reality (ibid.).

In order to capture the complex nature of tradition, Yadgar further presents three imageries/analogies; tradition as language, tradition as narrative, and tradition as a horizon (ibid.). Thus, tradition cannot be simply ruled out as obsolete or regressive in the secular and rational realm of modernity. Rather, tradition continues to play a crucial role in contemporary modern society; it is also recreated, reconstructed, and interpreted to suit the practices of the present and carry these further. Quoting from Edmund Burke, James Alexander reflects on the importance of tradition as "a partnership not only between those who are living but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born" (Alexander, 2016: 25). In the words of James Alexander himself, "tradition is our tribute to the dead and the unborn if we choose to make it" (ibid.). In other words, tradition and modernity share an accommodative relationship in the context of the present wherein approval, disapproval, and negotiations are very much a part of the living beings dealing with both to fit into the changing situations. In the next section, we will see how the dynamics of the interplay of tradition and modernity provide the very basis for the discourse of spirituality as practised and presented in the Art of Living Foundation.

3.3. Basis of the Discourse of Spirituality within AoL:

The Art of Living Foundation, founded in 1981, is a modern institution. It is legally registered as a non-governmental organisation. The term non-governmental organisation (NGO) was coined in the 1940s, referring to institutions run by like-minded people unaffiliated with the government, seeking to provide services to the community and people or to affect public policy (Irwin, 2015). However, even before the coinage of such a phrase or term, history has witnessed non-state bodies from the civil society functioning for the welfare of the people, community and society. For instance, in the case of India during the colonial period in the 19th century, the church,

with the assistance of missionaries, influenced the socio-religious life of the people by providing services related to health care, education, and social reform. Gradually, as discussed in chapter 2 (two), social reform-centric socio-cultural and socio-religious organisations such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, etc., emerged, functioning similarly like that to the NGOs of today. These organisations fought against sati, child-marriage and were vocal for widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage other than providing services concerning health and education.

Later, the anti-colonial aspirations also brought people together to work for society. In this regard, the Gandhian initiatives for self-rule, promotion of indigenous artefacts and rural industries, and spiritual well-being inspired the people to form civil society-based associations aiming at social service and mass welfare. After independence, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, at the peak of the upsurge of communist and socialist sentiments, several activists fought for justice, socio-economic equality, land reforms, minimum wages, and so on. Although the Gandhian-inspired initiatives got weakened by then, the socio-religious-based organisations unaffiliated with the government or state kept coming up (Sheth and Sethi, 1991). These very organisations focusing on social service and welfare somehow even carried on the Gandhian touch by emphasising on the elements concerning the ideas of *swadeshi, swarajya, Vedas, truth, and non-violence,* as is also reflected in the discourse of the AoLF that acts as a volunteer-based non-governmental organisation.

D.L. Sheth and Harsh Sethi, in their article on the NGO sector in India, wrote in the year 1991, "It is only with the growing centrality of the modern state that terms such as 'voluntary' and 'non-governmental' sectors came into prominence to describe those few welfares and developmental activities which originate outside the state structure and within society" (Sheth and Sethi, 1991:50). Thus, the emergence of the non-

governmental sector somehow indicates the failure of the agencies of the state or government to adequately address the issues of public concern like health, poverty, and inequality other than functioning as an alternative to state functionaries. However, the NGOs and the government bodies are also found to occasionally collaborating with each other to achieve certain ends related to developmental and public concern in this age of modernity or late modernity, as could also be observed in the case of AoL (will be discussed).

The Art of Living Foundation is, thus, a modern organisation; it addresses and presents itself as an educational and humanitarian foundation aiming at social service initiatives such as conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, women empowerment, prisoner rehabilitation, education for all for "the betterment of the world" as it claims.[31] It also "works in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations". The modern secular touch of the foundation is very much reflected in its claims such as; "The Art of Living serves society with a non-denominational, secular and holistic approach" and "we serve society by strengthening the individual".[32] The emphasis on the terms such as non-denominational, secular and individual visibly and readily portrays the dominating influence of the modern age and modernity on the discourse of AoL. Moreover, most importantly, the practices taught in the programs, workshops and various courses organised by AoL around the world are claimed to be very much scientific in nature. For instance, the use of phrases such as the "science of breath" is very common in AoL

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[31] See Biography | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar; About Us | The Art of Living India (accessed 27th November 2022).
[32] Ibid.

circles. Indeed, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar considers spirituality and science as "two sides of the same coin" through which fulfilment in life can be achieved (Shankar, 2006: 4).

Such claims have been made since the modern age and became loud, specifically in the 19th and 20th centuries in India and abroad as could be seen made by the similarly placed spiritual personas and organisations like AoL as discussed before, such as Swami Vivekananda and his teachings, Brahmo Samaj, Transcendental Meditation Movement of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of Swami Rama including other present-day spirituality related prominent organisations such as Isha Foundation of Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, Brahma Kumaris, Satya Sai Movement and so on.

According to Edward M Bruner, the ancient Indian traditional practices of *yoga* which have been transplanted to the US since 1893 in the name of spirituality, are "reinterpreted to fit to each historical era" (Bruner, 1996: 309). In this regard, the scientific basis of the ancient practices has been emphasised since the 1990s (ibid.). Claim for a scientific basis of/ spirituality and related practices enables establishing an authentic and legitimate touch to its whole discourse. Despite challenges and criticisms (see Feyerabend, 1975; Kuhn, 1996; Popper, 1963), science as a rationally and factually grounded objective source of knowledge readily dominate people's minds. However, interestingly the discourse of contemporary spirituality does not shy away from considering religious and cultural tradition as a simultaneous source of knowledge and a source of legitimacy along with its modern scientific basis. In this regard, the Vedic tradition, especially Adi Shankara's *Advaita*[33] tradition, plays a fundamental role in the construction of the discourse of spirituality as propagated by AoL and other similarly

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[33] Indeed, in guru's own name 'Shankar' was chosen by the family in reverence to Adi Shankara, the proponent of Advaita (monism) in Indian philosophy (Narasimhan, 2012)

placed organisations like Ramakrishna Mission, Vedanta Society of New York, and Vedanta Society of Southern California. For instance, quoting from the *Vedas,* especially from the *Upanishads* and other *Vedic* texts, while attempting to rationally and scientifically address the issues of contemporary concern is quite common in the AoL circles.

Moreover, AoL publications consist of a number of translations and interpretations of *Upanishads* like that of *Katha Upanishad, Kena Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita*, etc., by its founder through the light of science and rationality/reasoning offering a contemporary secular humanistic touch to deal with everyday issues. For instance, while translating a *shloka* from the *Kena Upanishad* in the English language which goes like this,

Iha cedadedid

atha satyamasti

Na cedihavedinmahati vinastih;

bhutesu bhutesu vicitya dhirah

pretyasmallokdamrta bhavanti.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar interpreted the fourth line in these words, "The really brave one sees that one consciousness, that divine consciousness, expressing itself in different forms in different ways" (Shankar, 2013: 61-66). Shankar interprets that it is in ignorance that people tend to project their anger on others and carry on complaining "that person said this thing to me…He is bad and so on. Thus, he suggests "hate the sin, not the sinner" and to move beyond and be brave enough to see through the differences of the undivided consciousness (ibid.). He finishes the chapter by mentioning about a documentary which he saw in America that gives the same message that "the whole

earth behaves like one organism", which leads him not only to appreciate the scientists who all came to such a conclusion based on their study that gives a broader picture of the universe but makes him also consider the scientists of today as that of the "*Rishis* of this age" confirming as per the sayings of the *Vedas,* i.e., "there have been *Rishis* in the past and will be in the future" (ibid.).

The merging of science/rationality and *Vedic* tradition is a continuous and consistent attempt reflected in the ideas and practices of AoL, as can be illustrated with numerous other examples creating their confluence in spirituality. The attempt is to bridge the gap between science/rationality and religion in order to bring tradition and modernity together to deal with the challenges of contemporary life through the medium of spirituality while also remaining critical of those past practices (such as restrictions based on caste and gender) that are considered irrational and not fitting in the present-day context and simultaneously establishing legitimacy[34] through the merge of *Vedas* and science. This all will become clearer as we address and illustrate through the ideas/practices concerning the notions of g*uru*, volunteers/teachers and *ashram* and its related activities and functionaries. For a simple initial understanding, while the three terms, i.e., *guru*, teachers and volunteers, symbolise certain roles played by individuals attached to a different position, the term "ashram" connotes a place of stay of these very individuals as *gurus*, spiritual seekers and followers.

3.3.1. Guru:

Derived from the Sanskrit language, the term 'guru' means both "dispeller of ignorance" and "heavy" or "weighty", which appeared as early as the first millennium BCE in the Indic tradition when attempts were made to consolidate the ancient Hindu

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[34] Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen too in her work (2011: 270) on the Art of Living Foundation considered the alignment of the traditional Hindu religious framework and modern science along with other factors such as the construction of Guru's hagiography and Guru's charisma as providing a source for legitimacy to the AoL discourse. (See Tøllefsen, 2011).

scriptures of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* into a written collection (Sears, 2008: 7). While during the earliest period *guru* represented an ascetic teacher of the priestly caste whose position was derived from the knowledge of the sacred scriptures, gradually over the centuries the figure of *guru* came to be "revered as a manifestation of divinity and a vehicle for liberation" (ibid.). Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame in the introduction of their edited book titled "The Guru in South Asia" (2012), wrote about "the multifarious guru" present in the contemporary modern context describing the multiple roles the *gurus* play in the various social contexts of today and also how one can interpret different types of *gurus* on the basis of the roles each play (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012: 1-38). Their work mentioned about the "cosmopolitan guru", "middle-class guru", "governing guru", "hyper guru", and "travelling guru", and so on, apart from which the generally known meaning of the term *guru* may convey as teachers or experts in the various fields, the "management guru" is one of the most popular categories of today's neo-liberal global era. Moreover, these scholars have also conceptually elaborated the notion of 'guru' by not simply restricting it to Hindu spiritual teachers or even to a position designated to a particular person but also by incorporating a book, a nation or a flag of an organisation to symbolise a *guru* (ibid.). For instance, *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy book of the Sikhs, is seen as the depersonalised "collective guru" of the Sikhs; for the members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, a rightist organisation founded in 1925), their saffron flag designates a *guru*; RSS itself acts as the allusive guru of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, a political party) of India; moreover, many of the Hindu rightwing activists consider India as "the spiritual guru of the world" (ibid.).

Copeman and Ikegame have also mentioned an example of a Delhi-based organisation, namely, Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti (Dadhichi Body Donation Society,

named after a sage known for his renouncement of the body for the creation of weapons), the members of which uses the language of asceticism to encourage people to donate their body for medical dissection and research assuring that their donated body would ultimately attain the sacred status of a *guru* for the students in the future (ibid.). Thus, the central point to be noted while discussing the term 'guru' today is that it represents multiple roles and is open to interpretations that go beyond the denominational sphere. These roles are functional in the practices of contemporary life. Interestingly, what is essential to note is Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame's emphasis on the concept of "uncontainability" which is the most common quality that the term *guru* suggests today, cutting across its manifold representations in the form of "individuals, institutions and logics" and is seen to be very much applicable and relevant in the case of the AoL and its founder.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a *guru* (see photograph 3.1 and 3.2. in appendix II), represents much beyond the name and person as a physical/bodily being. He is not simply the founder of the organisation who is popularly presented as "an ambassador of peace, a humanitarian leader and a spiritual teacher", but his presence as a *guru* is "uncontainable" and ever "expansible" (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012: 1-13). Uncontainable in the sense that the *guru*, despite being the common source which holds the whole organisation together, it becomes very difficult to fit him into any specific role. He plays multiple roles which could be seen as befitting according to time, need and context. While on the one hand, Ravi Shankar as a *guru* fits well with the notion of a Hindu *guru* as one who imparts the message of ancient religious scriptures, such as *Gita*, *Upanishads* or *Yoga Vasistha*, to his students or disciples; on the other hand, from time to time he dons the roles which extend much beyond what one may generally and conventionally relate to a traditional spiritual or religious guru. For instance, Ravi

Shankar is known to have played the role of a mediator/negotiator to resolve conflicts via peaceful dialogic means between groups in India and abroad, such as that between the Columbian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) (as will be discussed in the next chapter). His role as the government-appointed mediator in the Ayodhya conflict is another example. He is also occasionally invited to talk at several Universities and non-religious-based organisations. The topics he addresses at the conferences in different countries range from spirituality and inter-faith concerns, peace, ethics and reconciliation to wildlife conservation, leadership, sustainable seeds, technology, science, and ethics in business, and management, organised by departments at renowned institutes and bodies such as Indian Institute of Science (IISc, Bengaluru 2017), Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO, Ahmedabad 2017), National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS, Bengaluru 2017), Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI, Jaipur 2017), House of Commons, (United Kingdom, 2016), UNESCO Headquarters (France 2015), European Parliament (Brussels 2015), Stanford University (2014), World Economic Forum (Davos, Switzerland 2012), International Court of Justice (Hague, 2004), Millennium World Peace Summit, United Nations (2000) and so on.

Interestingly, Ravi Shankar has also been conferred the highest civilian awards, such as 'National Order of Merito de Comuneros' (2012) and 'Padma Vibhusan' (2016) by the respective governments of Paraguay and India, in addition to several honours bestowed by governments across the world. So, the figure of Ravi Shankar as a *guru* cannot be restricted to the stereotypical or conventional idea of a religious or spiritual teacher confined to one's religious or spiritual aspects but extends to all areas of life, including business, politics and education. Sri Sri brand of products in the name or

honorific title of the *Guru* are popular among the AoL members/participants, which range from food items to garments and ornaments to the Sri Sri University and schools. Thus, in contrast to addressing Ravi Shankar as a religious guru, his role could also be regarded by the critics and followers as a CEO of an organisation with its brand AoL containing the Sri Sri brand of products as well as the courses and programs.

Ravi Shankar is a renowned public figure who occasionally appears in national or private television shows and interviews. Though at times pejoratively or sarcastically addressed as 'baba' or 'godman' in the media, connoting a religious identity who may also seem to be a promoter of evangelical Hinduism (Gupta, 2011), Sri Sri's role as a guru, however, cannot be just confined to the domain of religion. Interestingly, during an interview on a television channel Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev was asked, is it fair for Godmen to enter politics. Sadhguru responded, expressing his disappointment over the usage of such terms as simply coined by media to depreciate culture. For him, there are no such Godmen. Rather men are revered for their contribution.[35] Moreover, Sadhguru's response also emphasised on the ordinariness of being a citizen as despite being religious figures/*yogis;* one has to carry an Aadhaar card (unique identification number for Indian citizens) and also fulfil the duties like paying taxes then, why not choose to join formal politics if one wishes to. In this regard, Ravi Shankar often encourages people to cast their votes and call out 'good people' to join politics instead of shying away from it.

Thus, as a *guru,* Sr Sri Ravi Shankar's identity can be boxed in any one of all the categories, i.e., of "cosmopolitan guru", "governing guru", "travelling guru", "hyper guru", "middle-class guru", and "management guru" (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012)

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[35] See (115) Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev Unplugged In People's Court | Does Politics Have A Place For Godmen? - YouTube (accessed 27th November 2022).

depending upon how one constructs it on the basis of what role one focuses on, but it cannot be limited to any. Similarly, the role of *guru* here is inclusive of all three types of *gurus,* i.e., type 1 (appeal depends on performing 'miracles'), type 2 (appeal depends on the exposition of Hindu philosophy, chiefly the Vedas) and type 3 (appeal depends on teaching *Yoga* or meditation) as categorised by Meera Nanda in 2009 and indeed, the role of a *guru* goes beyond these three thus, reflects "uncontainability" and also "expansibility" (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012: 3). There is also a mystical element strengthening the uncontainable aspect inherent in the figure of Sri Sri as a *guru*. Indeed, the mystical element is often decorated with narratives describing miracles, as could be seen behind the very start of the AoLF (as discussed in the second chapter).

For the devotees, the guru's presence is ever-felt as a guiding and protecting force in their lives. He is the continuous motivating and protecting force behind the volunteers' and teachers' faith and dedication towards the organisation and its initiatives.

In the words of a forty-year-old AoL faculty from Siliguri,

Just like a Coach is essential to learn and gain expertise in any sport. A doctor is essential for the recovery of illness of patients. Same way to learn and experience the higher realms of life, our existence needs an expert master for that and, i.e., "Guru". For me, the Presence of the Guru is an inspiration to experience the higher goals of life and experience life with a broader perspective; Gurudev's presence and teaching help in the dawning of the realisation of the ultimate truth and knowledge of one's self.

Reflecting on *guru*, a thirty-seven-year-old Dentist cum AoL teacher from Vietnam expressed,

Since I'm a human being, and I still want to see, observe, feel...with whole senses remembering the Guru even though he is just not a body or human being. The presence of Guru brings me and everything more and more to the present, making things beautiful and miraculous.

A twenty-three-year-old AoL volunteer said,

Guru is a blessing in my life; the connection and the link is divine.

Further, on the question of Guru, a forty-nine-year-old AoL full-time faculty from Siliguri responded,

Guru is that facilitator or an engineer who guides you to your inner Self. Surprisingly he makes us hollow and empty at first to help us overflow with the tunes of rhythms of well-being, meditation, devotion, sadhana, and thus being completely spiritual from our core and existence. He is just like the Compass showing us the right direction. With Gurudev around, I always feel protected and enveloped.

Thus, it can be said that as a guru, Ravi Shankar functions much beyond what is seen in the form of a body or multiple roles attached to the position for his followers. *Guru* rather symbolises a guiding and protecting mystical force in the day-to-day lives of the followers other than enabling them to know the inner self or life as a whole. In this regard, it has been observed that the followers are very much influenced by the practical guidance received from the *guru's* talks and books to deal rationally with the issues of daily concern apart from the breathing exercises offered in the courses and programs. They tend to seek an answer from the *guru* to the issues of their daily concern. The issues may range from the very personal such as concerning oneself, one's emotions and relationships or professional issues to that of science and the universe.

For instance, during a *satsang* session[36] at Bengaluru AoL International Ashram in May 2017 when a participant, "Gurudev asked the guru, how to be self-satisfied because I am not beautiful? I feel so sick at times looking at others" the Guru replied, "Beauty is just not in the features. Beauty is not just in the skin, colour, height or brain. Beauty is in the being. Go deep within and find out how beautiful you are." During another *satsang* session, Guru was asked, "Guruji, competition and comparison are two issues I am constantly facing at work. This gives rise to a lot of insecurity. How to deal with it? He replied, "Compete with yourself; see how well you did last year and how well you can do this year. Competition should be with yourself, okay. And comparison should always be with idols, great idols of the past and see how best you can do; you can achieve those targets. Comparison can inspire you to rise to greater heights. Don't compare yourself with your colleagues and the people around you. Compare with some great personalities, icons of the world, of the history that will keep you inspired."

Interestingly, if one observes the above shared two questions and the response of the *guru* carefully, one cannot ignore the touch and impact of modernity. The question of self-satisfaction, beauty, comparison, security and competition reached a specifically individualistic, self-centred touch in the modern techno-consumerist era. While the *guru's* response may seem to be addressing issues concerning specific individuals, it is also targeting the misgivings of the highly competitive and achievement-oriented nature of contemporary socio-economic life. Such competitions start from the very day a child embarks on her/his school life journey. Moreover, the *guru's* response calls for a journey within wherein lies the solution for security, beauty and self-satisfaction. The emphasis on knowing oneself, one's true nature or inner life

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[36] A regular group event filled with songs, music and interaction on daily basis in Bangalore ashram and usually on weekly basis in the local AoL centres participated by its followers and others often in the presence of guru in ashram.

marks the basis of AoL as it directs towards it; this could be achieved through the knowledge of the ancient wisdom from the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. In this regard, engaging oneself in *seva* (service), *sadhna* (meditation and other techniques) and *satsang* (good company or company of truth) is the most fundamentally emphasised on by the teachings of the *guru* and his foundation.

In the eyes of the followers, the Guru symbolises the confluence of the knowledge and wisdom of the past *Vedic* age and the present techno-scientific age. In this regard, tradition and modernity no longer act as opposites; rather, it goes like that of the famous/popular sayings of the AoL, i.e., "opposite values are complementary to each other". *Guru's* teachings enable the followers to deal with their issues of daily modern life by logically deriving solutions from the tradition of the *Vedic* past. This is very much reflected in the following words of a forty-one-year-old full-time AOL teacher from Canada on Guru,

> *Hundred percent ! I fell in love with the power of my Guru's love for me. I didn't get swayed away by the knowledge or techniques as much as the love, security, stability, warmth, strength, and more that my Guru brought into my life. To have his guidance at every step means everything to me. To understand the most powerful and ancient knowledge (referring to the Vedic scriptures) in a way where it is still useful, practical and applicable in my life, I absolutely needed a Guru. Or else, there could have been a huge room for misunderstanding it and the meaning of it getting lost in translation. This can lead to more harm than good.*

Interestingly, even going by the outward bodily appearance of the *Guru* with a long beard, long hair and clothed in white robes, white kurta, *pyjama* or *dhoti* readily and

stereo-typically symbolises an Indian saint-like figure or Baba in the popular North Indian tongue wearing traditional attire (however, seeking to know how traditional these attires are would actually require another attempt for/at research). On the other hand, Sri Sri also, at times, appears wearing modern sunglasses. He is quite active on the online platform with his own Twitter handle with around 4.2 million followers. His *satsang* sessions are shown Live through online streaming platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. It is also quite common to see him Live on AoL's YouTube channel taking meditation sessions or talking about *Vedic* texts, *Gita* and *Upanishads*. Naturally, the online Live sessions were more active during the Covid19 lockdown period. Thus, the confluence of tradition and modernity in the form of AoL version of spirituality is a continuous observable phenomenon. Indeed, the confluence of tradition and modernity is in no way a surprise if one considers Sri Sri's family and educational background based on the confluence of *Vedic* learning and modern science, as discussed in the previous chapter.

However, moving back to the notion of 'guru', Bhanumati Narasimhan narrates about a conversation with Sri Sri whom she addresses as Gurudev, "Many governments and leaders have honoured Gurudev. I feel proud looking at the work that he has done. And when I express this, he simply says, 'The world venerates wisdom.' Guru Tattva is the dawning of wisdom in our life. Gurudev says, 'Your own life is your guru. The Guru is not a school teacher from whom you learn something and then go away. Life and Guru are inseparable'." (Narasimhan, 2018)

Thus, the meaning of *guru* has been equated with life itself in the dawn of wisdom. Such an understanding of *guru* is philosophically deep and broad in the sense that when one becomes aware of one's inseparable and infinite existence beyond the name and form with no beginning nor an end, one attains oneness with the whole existence and

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thus, it changes one's very perspective of life and relations bringing in equanimity, openness, calmness and flexibility. This is what is referred to as wisdom that life itself brings in, or in other words, in the dawn of wisdom, life itself becomes a *guru*. Such an understanding of life is reflected in the *Advaita* school of Indian Philosophy to which Sri Sri adheres (will be discussed in chapter 6 of this work).

The guru's message and teachings (meditation and other *yogic* practices and discourses), rooted in the point of intersection of *Vedic* scriptural learnings and modern thought driven by rationality and science to deal with the praxis of daily life are carried forward and spread across the country and world through the medium of the agents known as volunteers or sevaks which is an umbrella term that includes all the followers, devotees or teachers.

A forty-nine-year-old full-time AOL teacher from Siliguri shared,

I think it is always the blessings of the Guru putting things for you when the right time comes. I got Sri Sri's blessings in 2004 to be a service provider or a teacher to spread the knowledge to more and more people and try to make their lives stress-free. And I am lucky to have been across India and its borders.

Another fifty-five-year-old AOL teacher from New Delhi expressed,

Whatever Guruji says always rings a bell. Neither at school nor at home are we taught to understand our emotions and, feelings, thoughts. He also talks about how spirituality is the core of our existence. In Gurudev, I see simplicity and truth, and he means it when he is giving wisdom. He is the eternal pull of my life itself. I have volunteered for some time. Then I came across a children's program of AoL that really appealed to me. Children really need to kindle the human and spiritual values in this day and age to live fulfilling and adventure-

filled lives. So, I recently took the training in 2021 and became a teacher with

Guruji's grace. It is the highest and most humbling responsibility.

Thus, for the followers' the *guru* is wisdom, truth, and an epitome of spiritual values much beyond the roles he plays as a founder of a modern organisation. Indeed, it is quite common amongst the followers to share the '*guru* stories' that incorporate the grace, blessings and even miracles they felt in the presence of the *guru*.

Moreover, resonating with the life of an ancient *guru* whose teachings were imparted to the *chelas*/students in the vicinity of an *ashram*, AoL too is symbolic of reviving the *ashrama* system and *guru* tradition but with a modern present-day twist as could be seen in the notion of "uncontainability" of the nature of *guru* and interestingly the *ashram* is also functioning as the international headquarters of the non-governmental organization, i.e., the Art of Living foundation.

3.3.2. Ashram:

The official website of the Art of Living Foundation welcomes all to its Bangalore Ashram in these words,

"Welcome to the Art of Living ashram. In Sanskrit, *shram* means effort, while ashram means a place where everything happens effortlessly. In our ashram, we follow one and only one *rule*: You can come here with innumerable concerns and botherations, but you cannot take them back with you! Ashram is a place you call home, for it

nourishes you and gives you the strength to face the unexpected and the extraordinary."[37]

The Sanskrit term *aśrama* anglicized as *ashrama* or *ashram,* refers to two dominant meanings, i.e., (i). a "hermitage" or an abode of an ascetic or a holy sage surrounded by disciples aiming for certain religious or spiritual goals and (ii). A distinct stage of life for twice-born (initiation into a tradition is regarded as second birth) males in Brahmanical Hinduism (Black, 2008: 48; Weckman, 2015: 94; Lochtefeld, 2002: 64). According to Stephen Jacobs, "the term ashram dates back to the Vedic period and signified a place where students reside with their guru to learn about the Vedas" (Jacobs, 2010: 42; 2016: 78). In the contemporary usage, the term *ashram* popularly indicates a place of stay wherein a community of disciples and devotees resides on a permanent, semi-permanent or temporary basis following and practising the teachings of a *guru* or a spiritual leader (most commonly influenced by Vedantic philosophy) through their involvement in diverse activities resembling that of the first meaning of the term ashram as discussed above (Black 2008: 48). The members of these ashrams stick to a disciplined routinised lifestyle adopting vegetarianism, and practising *yoga* and meditation. This may lead to the "maintenance, transmission, and transformation" (of certain aspects of a belief system or past practice in a new context) of *Vedantic* philosophy (Jacobs, 42: 2010). Several such ashrams emerged, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries in India, revolving around prominent personalities like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and so on (Black 2008: 48). In the present-day context, AoL ashrams are such variants with a more contemporary touch.

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[37] See *Art of Living International Centre, Bangalore.* Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/art-living-international-center-bangalore-0 (accessed 27th November 2022).

Apart from the main AoL *ashram*, which is also its international headquarters located in Bengaluru, India, three other international AoL ashrams are located respectively at Bad Antogast, Germany; in North Carolina, USA and in Quebec, Canada. AoL *ashrams* have also come up at other locations in the North, South, West and North-East of India.

Other than the *guru's* own occasional abode in his residence, namely Tripura in the Bangalore *ashram*, it provides a platform for spiritual seekers, spiritual tourists, course participants and all kinds of volunteers in addition to the general public to stay or visit based on majorly a purpose for spiritual or self-growth and development other than work or other activities. *Ashram* is a place which initially covered an area of around 65 acres of land located at 21 km southwest of Bengaluru at the top of Panchagiri Hills, Karnataka, India, today. This land was sanctioned in 1985 to Sri Sri's family to run a school. As the story goes, initially, the area covered by Bangalore *ashram* today was rocky with no water and electricity facility. Still, this place was chosen for the construction of the *ashram* because Sri Sri believed that the availability of diverse minerals at this place indicates that *yagnas* were performed by the *rishis* and saints here during a certain period of time in history (Gandhi, 2020).

Moreover, the story behind the finding of the source of water is no less mystical. Due to the non-availability of any source of water in the rocky terrain, boring was done at several places in the ashram compound with no result. Then, on a fine day, Ravi Shankar decided to take a walk all around the place; he stopped at a certain spot and asked to drill as he could feel the availability of water down there. The area was drilled to a few feet with no result, then further down on his insistence, still resulting in no trace of water. However, ultimately with further insistence, all were surprised to find

water gushing out at around 320 feet below the same spot chosen by the *guru* (ibid.). Then on, the rocky ashram land also started turning green and gradually got covered with so many species of flora as well as fauna over the years.

Bangalore ashram then gradually flourished with vibrant activities in quiet and silent surroundings. The activities mainly include meditation, *yoga* and scriptural discourses under the guidance of the *guru* in addition to the education imparted to the students of the *Vedic* school located within the *ashram* premise. The activities range from service offered in *Ayurveda* hospital and spa to the shop called Divine Stores selling AoL products to volunteers serving in the *ashram* kitchen. The *ashram* and the school were basically looked after by the *guru's* father (though under his supervision) in the initial years as he was travelling around the world taking courses. Then, the Vedic Science Research Institute was also set up there, claiming more than seventy-one scientific disciplines in the *Vedas* leading to the gradual recognition by the government, which was initially sceptical (Gautier, 2008).

Architecturally, the place is well-designed, symbolically indicating the conflation of the ancient and the modern. Initially, temporary buildings made of red earth mortar and bricks were set up to accommodate a number of people but with no electricity facility. More such temporary buildings came up after the first successful international conference held within the *ashram* premise in 1988, attended by around 80 participants (ibid.). Over the years, more people started joining and showing interest in contributing to donations and voluntary service. Even on several occasions, a wealthy family or an individual humbly offered to contribute to the construction of a fully developed *ashram*; however, as the narrative goes, Sri Sri was in favour of developing it over the years on the basis of service activities and contributions from common people.

The AoL Bangalore *ashram* has developed over the years, and now the area of the *ashram* itself is distinguished into the old *ashram* and new *ashram* by the *ashramites* or the members of the *ashram*. The members include long-term residents like the *swamis* and their family members, "*sewaks*" or other administrative staff members, *brahmacharis, rishis* and *Vedic* school students. In common terms, all of these people can be called volunteers. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, new buildings were constructed. Most of what is now generally accessible to the visitors and course participants falls into the new *ashram* area.

Broadly, the *ashram* area (see the map in figure 3.1. in appendix II) can be classified into four zones divided conveniently by 7 gates. The old *ashram* area, with entry gate number one from the highway, falls into the first zone. Functionally, a popular meditation spot known as the Sumeru Mantap and a hall known as Mahalakshmi Mantap utilised for private matrimonial ceremonies based on *Vedic* rituals, are located in this zone. In addition, there is the Narayana Meditation Hall, along with other buildings used by temporary residents and a few amenities, such as laundry and ATM (Automated Teller Machine), located in this zone. There are a few offices, such as the Public Charitable Trust, Vyakti Vikas Kendra (VVKI), Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology Trust and International Association of Human Values. These trustee bodies, with branches all over the country and abroad, organise and looks after various service projects related to education, poverty alleviation, stress relief and other relief works, natural farming, *Vedic* agriculture, education, and employment generation. In addition, this zone is also popular for having the *guru's* former residence, known as *Shakti Kutir,* as well as the old kitchen and old *chatravas* (students' place of stay). Entry to this area is somewhat restricted for the general visitors and course participants.

The second zone comprises the epicentre of the present-day *ashram* and all kinds of activities surrounding it. This is the most active, visible and accessible zone for the course participants and visitors. This zone consists of some major attractions of the ashram, including its "focal point," i.e., the popular meditation hall known as the Vishalakshi Mantap (see photograph 3.3 in appendix III) and other places actively used for meditation and *satsang*. Other prominent active spots or structures in this zone include the Amphitheatre opposite facing the Vishalakshi Mantap, Yagnashala, and Guru Paduka Vanam, which is especially used for organising big events. In addition, there are other halls used for courses, such as that Saraswati Hall and residences for temporary and long-term residents. The popular present-day three-storied ashram kitchen and dining known as the Annapoorna (see photograph 3.4. and 3.5 in appendix III), although it has a separate gate for entry but could also be located within the second zone as it is internally connected to it by an over-bridge through which it could be entered from the top. The top floor of the kitchen is also used for meditation and other practices at regular intervals. There are also several buildings constructed for the temporary stay of the course participants, such as the Aparna and New Aparna, buildings next to the kitchen, namely Adishesha, New Vasuki etc. A few major administrative buildings are located within this zone, i.e., the reception building near the main entry gate no. 5, there are one or two information desks for guidance and direction, information centre below the Amphitheatre, secretariat, and Gift a Smile desk nearby the Vishalakshi Mantap. Moreover, there are service complexes which include the services like Art of Living human resources-related service (for jobs, volunteering, etc.), ATM, cyber-café, travel services, Dharma Stambha Yojna (organises service projects related to education, environment, disaster relief, etc.), stores or shops known

as Divines Services selling mainly AoL products, Ayurvedic pharmacy or clinic, publications division, canteens and cafes, laundry etc.

The second zone is connected by gates nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Gate numbers 2 and 3 face the *ashram* kitchen and AoL housing society known as the Soudhamini Appartments, which is basically not a part of the *ashram* as the flats within it are owned by individuals. Still, all are members of the AoL community. The society itself is governed by the AoL norms such as that of *sattvic* living. Moreover, even the *guru's* present residence is located in this zone.

The third zone could be marked in terms of the whole area diametrically opposite to gate number 4 and 6 in addition to the area which could be described as diagonally opposite to the point that falls between gate number 3 and 4 facing the Panchakarma Ayurvedic Centre. These comprise of the Basava Bungalow, Baliga Quarters, Tripura building, Maitrayee Meditation Hall, Laxmi Garden and Gurukul on one side to Panchakarma (Ayurvedic Centre), Vyas Kutir, Chinese and Gopi Dormitory for students, Lake, Radhakunj Garden, Conference Hall, Krishna Hall, Gurukul Cottages, Vedic School (Veda Agama Samskruta Pathshala) to Goshala on the other side.

The fourth zone comprises the diverse constructions located away from the main site, including Ayurveda Hospital and College, free schools, and other offices and training centres like the Solar Training Centre, driving school, etc.

Art of Living's Bangalore *ashram* is now one of the major tourist destinations of the city of Bangalore. During normal circumstances, hundreds of visitors visit daily, and their number reaches thousands, especially during the weekends. The number of visitors varies on the basis of the *guru's* presence or absence and major events like the *guru's* birthday, *Shiv Ratri* festival, *Nav Ratri* festival and other occasions. Other than

the major occasions, certain spots in the *ashram* are even promoted as major attractions. For instance, the *ashram* bus tour is arranged at certain time intervals for the visitors on daily basis. This tour covers major attractions or places in the *ashram* (which now covers around 250 plus acre campus), including Vishalakshi Mantap, Radha Kunj Garden, Sri Sri Gurukul, Sri Sri Gaushala, Sri Sri Ayurveda Hospital, Sumeru Mantap, and Guru Paduka Vanam. The *ashram* tour attractions are also advertised on the Bangalore *ashram* website[38].

A special trait of the major attractions of the *ashram,* as could be said for *ashram* itself as a whole, is the tactful combination of the latest and the oldest. In other words, while the influence of modernity characterises the latest traits of today as well as those since the beginning of the modern age, the revival of tradition symbolises the oldest or rather formulates a combination of the perceived past in contemporaneity. Thus, a combination of the bi-polar attributes could be observed in the very features of the *ashram* campus and in the very ideas and practices of AoL. Such a conception of "bi-polar attributes" like that of small-large, homogeneous-heterogeneous, folk-urban was observed and used historically by famous anthropologists and sociologists such as Sir Henry Maine, Lewis Henry Morgan and Emile Durkheim in their studies (Singer, 1991: 87). In this regard, the subtle combination of tradition and modernity in the very discourse of spirituality practised in the AoLF occupies the foundational basis. Such a combination is also symbolised through the manifested architectural design of the *ashram* apart from its basic ideational nature.

Along with the actual workers and architects, the *guru* himself is popularly known to be the main guide or planner behind the design of the entire ashram complex. The

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[38] See The Art of Living International Center in Bangalore - Ashram tour (bangaloreashram.org) (accessed 7th February 2022).

well-planned architectural design has given a modern resort-like look with an essentially ancient traditional touch to the whole place in terms of design and nomenclature. Once during a *satsang* event in 2017, the *guru* was found to be welcoming the people by addressing the ashram as a resort with pride. The space has been utilised carefully to meet the functional aspects of the buildings, simultaneously retaining spaciousness and a touch of greenery. Describing about the *ashram*, a 43-year-old AoL follower and course participant who herself professionally belongs to the field of architecture and interior designing recollects,

> *Nestled amidst nature, the Art of Living centre Bangalore is a complete sustainable eco-system in itself with facilities like water & sewage treatment, milk production, vegetables & herbs, a large community kitchen, a hospital, school, houses for residents and more. The objective is self-sufficiency with little dependence on the outside world. I see the confluence of traditional practices with modern means in their entire ecosystem. Modern techniques & technology are readily adopted wherever necessary for health facilities, water recycling and natural energy. However, traditional practices of using herbs for healing, age-old ways of naadi pariksha, acupressure, and massages are traditionally done.*

Even if one focuses on a particular building, such as that of one of the main spots of attraction in the *ashram,* namely the Vishalakshi Mantap, the confluence of traditional and modern elements can hardly escape the vision of a keen observer.

3.3.2.1. Vishalakshi Mantap:

With a "wonderful blend of Vedic architecture and modern technology" Vishalakshi Mantap is described as the "focal point" of the *ashram* by the members of the AoLF (Jacobs, 2016: 79). An AoL follower once described the Vishalakshi Mantap

as a "fine confluence of tradition and modernity". The edifice is a five-storey lotus shaped 108 feet high structure supported by 81 pillars and two basements with a glass dome on top decorated with a 15 feet 3 inches high *kalash.* In the words of one of the key members of the team that worked on the construction of the structure namely Prashant Rajore, "kalashas are found in almost all ancient architectural structures in the world from mosques to gurudwaras and temples. It is said they absorb cosmic energy and transfer it into the building" (Vakkalanka, 2017). The advanced modern engineering technical expertise, with the help of around 55 agencies, added to the unique architectural feat based on months of calculation, leading to the shifting of the weight of the circular structure from the centre to the outside (ibid.).

Another important feature is represented by the symbols of the various faiths of the world engraved on the pillars of the main hall of the Vishalakshi Mantap. These symbols include the sign of Om on a pillar underneath, which is the Dharma Chakra of Buddhism, a second pillar with a Cross sign symbolising Christianity and a feather sign of the Native American religion, a hand sign of Jainism underneath which is the turban and sword sign of Sikhism on a third pillar, a pillar with a Conch and the disk sign of Vaishnovism, signs of Shintoism and Taoism on another pillar, then there is a sign of Islam and Ying and Yang (signs of other native religions) on another pillar, and finally, there is a sign of Judaism underneath which is a fire symbol of Zoroastrianism (Shankar, 2011: 24). Symbolically, the carving of these diverse signs of different religions of the world on these visibly highlighted interior pillars of the Mantap or building manifests the liberal and open nature of spirituality that is followed in the AoLF which embraces and welcomes people belonging to various religions and cultures. In other words, this shows the secular nature of spirituality. On the other hand, when the *guru,* considered as the main mind behind the design of this focal structure, was asked about the reason

behind the display of these religious symbols, he wittily replied, "they are on the pillars and not in the mind and heart. If someone says, he is a Hindu or a Jain etc.; we would tell them to hang it on the pillar and be free from within" (ibid.).

Functionally, the Vishalakshi Mantap is mainly used for meditation, *satsangs* and performance of *pujas* (*Vedic* worship rituals) as a part of the routine schedule other than functioning as a platform for occasional events/conferences concerning topics such as women's issues, organic farming and other secular or spiritual issues. Moreover, despite the fact that the Mantap is named after the *guru*'s mother, the image of Goddess Vishalakshi in the main hall along with the performance of *Vedic pujas,* does symbolise a certain tradition. Thereby, the design of the edifice, its name and its function that includes the practices or the signs and symbols all together signify the never-ending confluence of tradition and modernity.

Three other popular spots in the ashram that accommodates a medium to a large gathering with a capacity of around seven to thirty thousand people for a *satsang* event, talk or other cultural events, especially in the presence of the *guru,* are the Amphitheatre opposite to Vishalakshi Mantap, Yagyashala and Guru Paduka Vanam (also designed to look like an Amphitheatre).

Facing the Vishalakshi Mantap, there lies an amphitheatre-like designed (resembling the Amphitheaters of the Graco-Roman period) open-air semi-circled area used especially for evening *satsangs* and other cultural events in the presence of the *guru*. It has a round stage on the front, raised high from the ground, bordered with a number of white lotus petal-shaped structures. Well decorated and clothed sofa/chair with cushions and a bottle of water on a small tool is commonly arranged on the stage for the *guru* to sit and address the events and audience. Occasionally, sitting

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arrangements are also made for special guests and dignitaries whose position/role varies from that of chief ministers, government officials, sportsmen, and actors to saints and others. Also, the stage is used for various cultural performances. Interestingly, this very concretised stage also functions as a roof underneath which is a basement used for information-related work and for storing chairs. During the daytime, this amphitheatre, covered with grass and a few trees on the different grades of the sloping seating arrangements, is used as recreational space or for other course-related activities.

Not even at a walking distance of five to seven minutes from the Amphitheatre or Vishalakshi Mantap lies the Yagnashala (See photograph 3.6, in appendix III). It is a theatre-type auditorium that can accommodate around seven thousand participants. It is mainly used for events like *Navaratri* celebrations other than for occasional courses with large participants, as well as for other occasions like *guru's* birthday celebration and evening *satsangs* especially when a large group of people cannot be accommodated inside Vishalakshi Mantap or at the Amphitheatre opposite to it during bad weather conditions.

At a distance of a few metres or another five to seven minutes of walking distance from the Yagnashala lies another fascinating architectural feat known as the Guru Paduka Vanam. Indeed, this place falls next to the reception building, which is located on the right side at a distance of just a few metres from the new ashram area's main entry gate (Gate 5).

According to the official website of the AoL, Bangalore *ashram*, "the architecture of Guru Paduka Vanam is based on Vedic concepts of beautiful gardens (vanam), which

provide shelter and nourishment to a seeker on his spiritual journey."[39] This place is also designed as an open-air amphitheatre but in such a manner that its ariel view manifests the shape of a *paduka* which is literally translated as footwear. According to a cultural encyclopedia on feet and footwear, *paduka* is described as "a toe-knob sandal with an elevated sole, to protect feet from the hot ground' (DeMello, 2009: 76). Commonly, it is believed that such footwear were used especially during the *Vedic* period by the *rishis* and *sages* of India.

The footwear or paduka used by a *guru* has a special significance in the *Vedic* culture. It symbolises the "whole lineage of gurus"; and the sanctity, authority and a whole storehouse of knowledge enriched by masters of a whole tradition and, thereby, honoured significantly by the disciples and followers of a *guru* (Cornille, 1991). Thus, the name Guru Paduka Vanam holds a special meaning and functions as a place of cultural and spiritual retreat for the seekers and followers, which can accommodate thousands of people during special events organised in the *ashram* in the presence of the *guru* such as his birthday celebration, *Shiv Ratri* celebration and so on. Interestingly, the events are often broadcasted live on the online website such as Facebook and YouTube via the help of the latest technology and could also be accessed in the AoL applications (Apps) designed for android, apple and other software technologies. The *guru* himself usually asks and declares during the session about the number of online participants from different countries and also greets the online audience.

Three other establishments intended to revive, preserve and perpetuate tradition or *Vedic* culture initiated by the AoL foundation in its Bengaluru ashram or nearby deserve

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[39] See *The Art of Living International Centre.* Available at: https://bangaloreashram.org/ashram-tour/ (accessed 20th September 2021).

a special mention. These are; Veda Agama Samskrutha Maha Pathshala or Sri Sri Gurukulam, Ayurvedic Hospital and Gaushala.

3.3.2.2. Veda Agama Samskrutha Maha Pathshala/ Sri Sri Gurukulam:

The memory of a field visit to the Veda Agama Samskrutha Maha Pathshala or Sri Sri Gurukulam in AoL, Bengaluru *ashram*, during the period 2017-19 instantly brings to mind a serene and quiet environment in the midst of a well-designed and planned area surrounded by plants, trees, lake and even domesticated animals and birds. The pathway inside the campus is well-constructed with clay tiles flooring. The design of separate rectangular classrooms in the name of ancient *rishis* like Vashistha and Bharatwaja deserves special mention. Their double hip roofs with space for ventilation in between are covered with clay shingles or tiles, and the walls are made of transparent bamboo grills or nets attached to brick walls at the bottom. The interiors (see photograph 3.7 in appendix III), with around eight to ten rectangular desk-shaped boxes, parted on top to accommodate two students to keep a book each and to store the books inside the same box, parted with a lock on each part, are equally fascinating. In addition, there is a blackboard, a chair and a small tool or table for a teacher.

The overall impression of the place brings to mind the traditional touch of a place of learning in the *Vedic* era as generally described in scriptures, story books and popular television series of the 1980s and 1990s like that of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The distinguished presence of students wearing a white *dhoti*-clad (veshti), bare-chested sporting a scared thread; clean shaven or small hair with tuft and a three-striped marking on their four heads with ash further strongly adds to the impression. Interestingly, the students who were chanting *mantras* (sacred sounds) in Sanskrit could also speak fluent English. One of the students with an amiable demeanour shared that

he would become a priest or *pundit* like his father, who is serving at a temple in the United Kingdom, once the course gets over.

Veda Agama Samskrutha Mahapathshala or Sri Sri Gurukulam (under the umbrella of Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth, a charitable trust of AoL since 1981) was founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in the year 2002 but shifted to new *ashram* campus in the year 2006. Formally, Sri Sri Gurukulam is affiliated with the Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments Board, Government of Karnataka (with registration number: ADM-13/CR-144/03/04-28th June 2004); and is associated with the Sri Venkateswara Vedic University, Tirupati which is recognised by the University Grants Commission under the Government of India.[40]

Sri Sri Gurukulam aims to revive and promote the *Vedic guru-shisha* tradition of education. *Guru-shishya* tradition occupies a fundamental role in the transmission and development of Hinduism, tracing its roots back to the *Vedic* age wherein the students are believed to have lived in the presence of their guru/teacher in a hermitage (Raina, 2002: 173) to gain knowledge of the *Vedas*. *Gurukula* or *Gurukulam* refers to "a system of ancient education" (Cush et al., 2008: 280) or, in simple terms are "the schools where Hindu traditions and Sanskrit language are taught" (Nanda, 2015: 348), still in more general terms it refers to "the spiritual learning centre and residence" (Jones and Ryan, 2007: 44). The Art of Living official website describes the Gurukul as "heritage school" which aims at "rekindling ancient knowledge. It "aims to preserve the age-old rituals of temple worship as they were laid down in the ancients scriptures – the agama".[41] Interestingly, it describes the Agama Shastras or scriptures as "the scientific study of

conducting *poojas*, *homas* and other *Vedic* practices".[42] Such are held as having a profound effect on the environment leading to create vibrations of joy, peace and brotherhood. *Vedas* and *Agamas* are considered as "all-inclusive and non-divisive in nature" and thus, are highly applicable in the modern-day context.[43]

The heritage school started with a strength of just 20 students and 4 teachers. The strength of students has now reached around 250, supported by 16 teaching staff and 4 non-teaching staff.[44] Children or boys belonging to the age group of eight or nine years to eleven years from all backgrounds and different parts of the country can apply for admission to this school. However, children belonging to those families who are not aware of their association with any particular *Vedic* tradition, like Rig Veda etc., need to do the *upanayana* ceremony in order to get initiated into the *guru's* own family *Parampara* or tradition. Upanayana ceremony establishes and initiates the relationship of the *acharya* or teacher and the *brahmacharin* or the student (Cush et al., 2008: 4), wherein a sacred thread is provided to the latter who can now formally listen to and learn the *Vedas* (Scharfe, 2002: 72-86).

Interestingly, the AoL official website describes *upnayanan* as the 'sacred thread ceremony' that is performed to mark the commencement of formal education in the Vaidic tradition".[45] Then, they are trained in the *Shaivagama* tradition and rituals related to temple worship. The course duration is six years, with one year of basic education, including learning the Sanskrit language, which forms the basis of the medium of instruction and learning. Other subjects that are taught are; *Vedas*, *Itihasa*,

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] See *Upanayanam Samskara*. Available at: https://vaidicpujas.org/upanayanam/ (accessed 21st October 2021).

Puranas, *Dharmashastras*, *Jyotisham*, Computer and English language. Students are also imparted extra-curricular learning music, including physical training like martial arts and sports activities. The final year examination of the heritage school prepares the students for the Oriental title "Sivagama Vidhyanidhi" equivalent to Bachelor of Arts in *Shaivagama*.[46] Then, the graduate students can directly apply for a Master in Arts degree course for two more years. Once the course gets complete, the students are free to go anywhere, but they are expected to promote and spread the traditional knowledge of the *Sanatana Dharma* in the modern world.

In addition to Sri Sri Gurukulam, there are a number of educational institutions run under the umbrella of the charitable trust namely Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth. These institutions are Sri Sri University, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Vidya Mandir, Sri Sri College of Ayurveda and Medical Sciences, Sri Sri Yoga School and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Pre-University College. In addition to these educational institutes, the AoL foundation under another charitable trust, namely, Sri Sri Ravishankar Vidya Mandir runs several educational institutions such as; Sri Sri Centre for Media Studies, Sri Sri Institute of Management Studies, Sri Sri Institute of Computer Science, Sri Sri Academy, Bal mandir and Vidya Mandir. These institutions combine the AoL's vision to enhance human values and global consciousness though rooted in one's own culture, with spiritual strength to face the challenges of the modern world.[47] Further, AoL also claims that through its project "Gift a Smile- Care for Children," it is able to run 702 plus

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[46] See *Veda Agama Students Diary 2020-21.* Available at: https://www.vasmp.org/ved-agama-students-diary-2020-21/ (accessed 21st October 2021).
[47] See *About Us.* Available at: https://ssrvm.org/about-us/vision-mission/ (accessed 21st October 2021).

schools in around 22 states in India, providing free education, food, clothing and other essentials with a focus on the girl child.[48]

Interestingly, the Vaidic Dharma Sansthan, which has an office in the ashram campus, claims to be a "charitable religious, spiritual and educational trust under the guidance of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar"[49] that organises and conducts *homas* and *poojas* and also aims to organise "other religious rites and ceremonies and festivals of all religions" as one of its visions other than aiming at promoting the knowledge of *Vedas* and Indian culture in its official website[50]. The roots of such attempts at reviving and promoting the *Vedas* in the name of Indian culture through education could be traced to the Hindu religious reform attempts in the pre-independence period in India. Such attempts indirectly seek to claim the authenticity and relevance of one's own practices in the light of Western science and rationality. Another such attempt at revival is in the medical field under the nomenclature of *Ayurveda*.

3.3.2.3. Ayurveda:

The term *Ayurveda* is derived from two Sanskrit words, *ayus* meaning life and *veda* or *vidya,* meaning to know or knowledge (Mitra, 1968: 121; Berger, 2013: 25). For Dr Nisha Manikantan, Founding Director of Sri Sri Ayurveda, *Āyurveda* represents a system of knowledge that teaches how to promote longevity by maintaining and protecting health and curing diseases and thus, makes life free from diseases or obstacles (Manikantan, 2012:1).

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[48] See *The Art of Living Free Schools.* Available at: https://www.artoflivingschools.org/about-us/art-of-living/ (accessed 21st October 2021).
[49] See *About us.* Available at: https://vaidicpujas.org/our-vision/ (accessed 21st October 2021).
[50] Ibid.

While there is a reference to medicine and herbal preparations in *Rig Veda* (Manikantan, 2012:7; Berger, 2013; Mitra, 1968), describing *Ayurveda* as a "biomoral tradition" representing the oldest existing medical system in the South Asian subcontinent based on the interconnection of embodiment, ritual, cosmology and philosophy in Hindu thought Rachel Berger, a historian, traces the reference to its beginning to *Atharvaveda* wherein *Ayurveda* is considered as a secondary *Veda* or *Upaveda* that deals with medical practice (Berger, 2015: 16-18; Berger, 2013: 24-25). However, Berger links *Ayurveda's* origin to the composition of the *Shusruta* and *Charaka Samhitas* (classic texts on *Ayurveda*) in between the second and sixth centuries, during which the medical tradition was codified and expanded (Berger, 2015: 16-18). While Manikantan's book, "*Ayurveda Simplified*" adds *Āstanga Hridayam* as the third major classic text on *Ayurveda* (Manikantan, 2012:7), Jyotir Mitra includes *Kasyapa Samhita* as one of the three ancient *Samhitas* of *Ayurveda* (Mitra, 1968: 120). Even the Epic *Mahabharata,* along with the *Samhitas* mentions the term *Ayurveda* along with its eight-fold branches or schools, namely: *salya* or *salyatantra* (surgery); *salakya* (surgery of the eye, ear, nose and throat); *kayachikitsa* (internal medicine); *bhutavidya* (demonology or bacteriology or psychiatry); *kaumarabhrtya* (pediatrics or treatment of children); *agadatantra* (toxicology); *rasayana* (geriatrics or elixir) and *vajikarana* (aphrodisiac) (Obeyesekere, 1970:292; Mitra, 1968:120).

The roots of *Ayurveda* lie in the *Vedic* tradition. Its origin revolves around a well-known chapter of *Samudra Manthan* ("churning of the ocean"), discussed as part of mythological stories in the *Puranas* (Manikantan, 2012: 5-6). According to this episode, once the gods and the demons, despite enmity, collaborated to churn the ocean of milk with the medium of mountain *Mandara* (as churning rod) and serpent *Vasuki* (as cord) to derive and divide the treasures from the ocean amongst themselves (ibid.).

This resulted in the emergence and appearance of objects and beings such as the *kaustubhamani* ("a rare diamond"), the *kamadhenu* ("wish-fulfilling cow"), *kalpavriksham* ("wish-fulfilling tree") as well as the goddess of wealth and fortune namely Lakshmi devi (who reunited with Lord Vishnu after ages) and Lord Dhanvantari (an incarnation of Vishnu himself) with the "*amrita kalasha*" ("pot of divine nectar") (ibid.) Lord Dhanvantari, with the pot of nectar, provides relief to human suffering; thus, he is known as the "God of health, healing and cure" or simply as the presiding deity of *Ayurveda* (ibid.). In the spiritual sense, the story of *Samudra Manthan* symbolises a person's spiritual journey towards self-realisation through the control of senses, awareness and asceticism (ibid.).

However, in the contemporary world, rather than the mythological base of its origin, it emphasises the claim to its scientific basis through which *Ayurveda* and its practitioners and promoters attempt to attain legitimacy. Indeed, historically speaking, despite the recognition of *vaid* as an *Ayurvedic* physician for ages, *Ayurveda* was deemed too ritualised and unscientific in the dominance of the British colonial establishment of a singular biomedical practice (allopathy) in the nineteenth century (Berger, 2015: 16-18). However, it was during the interwar period in the twentieth century, with the advent of the dyarchic devolution of authority and power resulting in the shifting of the control over local medical practices from the central to the provincial governments; attention was put on *Ayurveda* and other pre-existing medical practices by these government bodies as they found the universal application of allopathy expensive (ibid.). This resulted in the institutionalisation and professionalisation of *Ayurveda* and other medical systems along the lines of techno-scientific practices (ibid.). Gradually, there was a simultaneous tendency to formulate a unitary system of *ayurvedic* knowledge based on classical texts, along with an attempt to secularise it and

adapt it to bio-medicine practice (Smith and Wujastyk, 2008: 1-28). Thus, modern *Ayurveda* was born which got integrated into the systematic curricula of the state-driven education system as a separate medical system from modern allopathic medicine. However, other than a claim to indigenous *Vedic* roots, it started competing with modern medicine on the same basis as a claim to science itself (see Chattopadhyaya, 1977).

Practitioners and supporters of *Ayurveda* tend to emphasise its uniquely rationalistic explanation based on systematic observation, experience and even its materialistic focus on the body and its functions to claim a scientific basis (see Engler, 2003; Chattopadhyaya, 1977). There is a reference to the common principles of *Ayurveda* in the modern texts (see Manikantan, 2012: 15-16; Satyavati, 1991: 74), such as *pancha bhuta* (the five elements; air, water, earth, fire and space that influences everything including the body), *tridoshas* (*vata, pitta, kapha*: (humour) or universal energies influenced by sun, moon and wind that effects all processes including the bodily), *mal*, *dhatu* (tissue elements), *ama* (toxins) (physiological concepts), *guna*, *rasa*, *veerya* (bodily fluid and qualities, also referred to in terms of energy) (ibid.). As a whole, *Ayurveda* as a medical system is regarded as a science that focuses on a holistic preventive cure that takes care to maintain an equilibrium in the mind-body-spirit dynamics (equilibrium of the *dosas*) by not only prescribing medicines but also by suggesting regulation of daily and seasonal routine based on nature and body types of the individuals. It is considered a science of medicine, and its practices are also seen as open to scientific medical research from other fields (Satyavati, 1991). These traits that link *Ayurveda* simultaneously to science and remote ancient *Vedic* origin that offers holistic preventive cures, typically a feature of India-based spirituality like that of AoL that has become global today and also regarded by some as New Age Ayurveda (Smith

and Wujastyk, 2008). Moreover, there is a huge global chain of pharmaceutical companies dealing with *ayurvedic* drug production and consumption. In this regard, Sri Sri *Ayurveda* and its products are highly popular, especially amongst its middle-class consumers.

During the Covid era, a combination of a few drugs, namely *kabasura kudineer*, *shakti* drops, *amruth* and *tulasi* were largely consumed and also recommended by AoL and its participants for immunity used as a preventive cure. In the words of a 42-year-old AoL full-time teacher from Siliguri,

> *Unlike allopathy, Ayurveda offers a holistic cure with no side effects. I am personally using Ayurvedic products for many years and find them very effective for my overall health. It is, after all, a science of medicine based on our ancient Vedic age.*

Such a confluence of tradition and modernity could also be observed in the continuation of the very practice of sheltering native cow breeds in the *ashram* Gaushala. In this regard, AoL aims to protect and preserve the indigenous cow breeds and as it claims, this model helps it to promote natural or organic farming practices apart from the cow products, especially milk which is considered a source of a number of vitamins, minerals, enzymes and salt.[51]

3.4. Conclusion:

Thus, rooted in the 19th-century context of colonial modernity wherein emerged several social-reform movements which attempted to revive the *Vedic* tradition while

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[51] See *Sri Sri Gaushala*. Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/environmental-sustainability/indigenous-species-protection (accessed 27th November 2022).

simultaneously being critical of the traditional practices such as *sati*, caste-based discrimination etc., that they considered irrational by adopting western science and rationality; AoL too is an example of the continuation of the same spirit of reform and transformation based on a confluence of a revived *Vedic* tradition with reason, rationality, liberty and humanistic traits of modern-day living. In this regard, even AoL is critical of caste and gender-based discrimination and is also open to all religions. Moreover, the revival of tradition here symbolises the utilisation and adoption of tradition as a living and dynamic cultural resource that enables one to make sense of not just the past and but also make the present relevant to its contemporary call in the light of science and modernity. This very confluence of *Vedic* knowledge and science provides the basis for its effective functioning in the present-day world to successfully equip individuals to handle their life most effectively. Moreover, the confluence of tradition and modernity as reflected in the notion of *guru*, *ashram*, and *Ayurveda* finely balances, fits in and continues the activities of the AoL by simultaneously traditionalising modernity and modernising tradition in the present-day society and also leaves the space open to ultimately go beyond this dichotomy (will be discussed in chapter 6 of the present work).

<center>**Chapter- 4**</center>

<center>**Socio-political Dynamics of Identity Construction**</center>

<center>"My identity always overflows, adds to, and transforms the social identities that are</center>

<center>attached to me."</center>

<center>Ian Craib (1998: 4)</center>

4.1. Introduction:

The question of identity is a major force that drives and defines the everyday functioning of human society. Indeed, technological advancement in the modern era has made it possible to even identify the sex of a fetus as early as the prenatal stage. Since birth, we automatically acquire a set of socially recognised identities: a girl/boy/other (based on sex and gender), a surname (based on family lineage and community, related to tribe, ethnicity, caste, etc.), religious identity, linguistic identity, regional identity, nationality and so on. Then, once a child starts growing owing to the process of socialisation through family, school, and other mediums, she learns to identify herself in accordance with societal expectations. In this regard, George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) offers a significant explanation of the development of a child from a "play stage" to a "game stage" (Ritzer, 2011: 355-68). While in the former stage, a child learns to imitate/take the attitude of a particular other, like that of her mother or father, in the later stage, she learns to take the role of the whole team that constitutes "everyone else involved in a game" such as football or a community in general(ibid.). Thereby, she learns how to function in an organised group by taking the attitude of the "generalised other," such as the attitude of the entire community, that significantly affects the creation of a definite personality (ibid.). In other words, the development of a definite personality involves one's identification with different roles performed as socially expected based on contextual significance

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related to different societies. The social recognition of such roles adds to their relevance, leading to the operation of multiple identities associated with a single individual. For instance, a person being male is identified as a brother or father; could be identified professionally as a school teacher, and at the same time, one may be socially recognised as a Hindu, *Kshatriya* (caste-based identity), a middle-class man, a Punjabi, a Naga, Indian, American, Pakistani, a customer in a bank, and so on. A person responds following the imbibed social expectations in relation to the context one is in. Thus, in his book on "Social Identity," Richard Jenkins argues "all human identities are by definition social identities. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation" (Jenkins, 2004: 4).

Ian Craib writes, "Social identities can come and go, but my identity goes on as something which unites all the social identities I ever had, have, or will have. My identity always overflows, adds to, and transforms the social identities that are attached to me" (Craib, 1998: 4). Citing Mead's work, Craib emphasises that we have to be both 'I' (the creative and innovative self) and 'Me' (the self that responds by recognising the social expectations) (ibid., 5). One's inner world, internal negotiations, and experience are crucial components of identity formation. However, so long one performs in concordance with what is socially expected from the role or set of roles attached to an identity she is identified with, the issue of identity plays a unifying and conforming function. But the moment discrepancy arises between the relation of the role as expected in a given society and the actual performance of that role, the identity attached to that role or a set of roles faces a crisis and confusion, leading to conflict. This applies equally to the roles of humans as well as non-human entities such as organisations and positions, anything and everything that involves humans because the notion of identity

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applies to the entire universe of creatures and things based on the criteria of "similarity and difference" that could be observed while classifying or could be simply determined by "reflexivity," i.e., how one prefers to identify oneself (Jenkins, 2004: 4). The crisis and confusion in the process of identification occur when in certain situations a person or an institution represented by that person based on a position that she/he holds is not readily accepted and thus, goes through a legitimacy crisis and attracts criticism in society as she/he ends up presenting herself/himself in contradiction to what is being expected from that position and its claims. For instance, in this regard, if we take the case of AoL, it is formally recognised as a legally registered non-governmental organisation committed to social service concerning a humanitarian and educational cause under the leadership of a spiritual leader who is also promoted or addressed by the official website of the foundation as a humanitarian, and an ambassador of peace. Thus, it is to be noted that despite the dynamics of tradition and modernity as the basis to which the functioning of the discourse of AoLF is rooted, as discussed in the previous chapter, officially, the AoLF is nowhere identified as a religious or even a political association in favour of any particular religion or a political ideology. Rather, it prefers to identify itself with spirituality which is portrayed as universal in nature and, thus, cuts across all divisions, including the political and religious ones, in order to further a secular humanitarian and educational concern aiming for a "stress-free and violence-free" world to promote peace and happiness. Henceforth, any activity of AoL or of its leadership suggesting a political or religious intention or connection amounts to not only diverting from its secular humanitarian concern but is also likely to make people suspicious of its very nature and thus, question the very basis of its identity.

With the background mentioned above, the present chapter attempts to deal with the complex identification process, especially concerning the field of politics. This

process entails how one identifies and presents oneself and how one is being identified. It is a process of negotiation and becoming. In this regard, there is always a scope for interpretation driven by one's interest-based logic. The chances are equally open to all stakeholders. Thus, there lies ambiguity as none of the interpretations may reflect a clearly defined phenomenon yet remain so concrete and clear for those who interpret. Thereby, the present chapter throws light on how the idea of spirituality, as reflected by the AoLF is presented to society and how it is being identified in turn. It shows with concrete examples how discrepancy occurs when the practice of AoL and its founder's action does not match with what is expected from a spiritual foundation and a spiritual leader or specifically from spirituality or spiritual life that includes the practitioners. Within this internal and external attempt at identification, there lies a subtle politics of identification with regard to how AoL presents itself and how it is perceived, especially in relation to the realm of religion. In this regard, on the one hand, the present chapter captures the subtle politics of claim to authenticity in terms of AoL's identity formation concerning the question of precedence (on the question of spirituality and religion). On the other hand, it seeks to understand the realm of spirituality by throwing light on the relationship of spirituality and organised politics through the lens of certain events and examples that indicates AoL and a right-wing nationalist political party's mutual support and closeness over issues that question the very secular spiritual base of AoL's identity. Thus, the present chapter is important as it seeks an understanding of the discrepancies concerning identifying the field of spirituality as resulting from and resulting into the politics of spirituality.

4.2. Politics of Spirituality:

Adrian Leftwich, in his edited work, "What is Politics: The Activity and its Study" (1984), acknowledges that there are diverse meanings associated with 'politics', and thereby it is a contested concept with no fixed meaning (Leftwich, 2004: 1-23). However, he makes three preliminary distinctions based on which the meaning of politics could be classified; they are: politics as an arena/site (limited or extensive), politics as a processual approach, and politics through a scientific or interpretive approach. Firstly, those who approach politics as an arena or site locate it within the public institutions of a state or a government that deals with the public policies and decision-making process; on the other hand, others who regard such an approach as not limited see politics as a much broader and a general process not confined to just certain institutional sites of a state rather sees it cutting across families, voluntary associations and other social arenas concerning power, resource allocation, decision making, and related activities. The "processual approach" connect politics to "all the activities involving conflict, negotiation and co-operation over the use and distribution of resources…within or beyond formal institutions within a global level or within a family involving two or more people" (ibid.). Secondly, the arena or site approach might also extend itself to include politics within, and between both public and private institutions extending beyond the national boundaries; on the other hand, authors like Bernard Crick had conceptualised politics as a process limited "to a certain kind of reasoned debate between a plurality of interests about public policy in which compromise is the likely outcome. In his view, war, revolutionary practices, and civil violence were outside of politics indicating its failure (ibid.). Finally, those who apply a scientific approach to politics look for a general pattern or regularities governing political processes; on the other hand, following the "interpretative approach", others may stress on the particular

and on the role of "accidents and agents" in history emphasising empathetic understanding. However, Adrian Leftwich acknowledges the combination of both the scientific and interpretative approaches to the study and understanding of politics (ibid.).

Akin to Adrian Leftwich but somewhat differently, Andrew Heywood, in his book, "Key Concepts in Politics" (2000), identified four different notions of politics: First, politics as confined to the activities of the government and the state similar to the Ancient Greek notion of *polis* referring to the city-state. Second, politics is traced back to Aristotle's idea of a political community within which the 'good life' can be lived. It concerns specifically public affairs in contrast to the private domain of life. Third, politics as a means for conflict resolution involving negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation other than force or military solutions. Fourth, politics as concerned with the production, distribution, and use of resources determined by power relations, i.e., "the ability to achieve the desired outcome" (Heywood, 2000). Andrew Heywood further noted that there could be a consensus or a conflict approach to understanding politics in terms of social order. While an emphasis on consensus or cooperation deals with how the social order is maintained through political decision-making, taking into account the common interests, the conflict approach emphasises on the understanding of the structural inequalities and injustices with regard to the distribution of power and resources as evident in the works of the Marxists and Feminists (ibid.).

With the background mentioned above on the notion of politics, the politics of spirituality in the present chapter portrays not only the collaboration of the AoL and the state on certain issues but also addresses a cross-cutting concern in relation to the understanding of politics in terms of conflict, interests, influence, authority, power, and also subtle public/private dynamics concerning decision making with regard to how

spirituality is presented to the world and how it is being conceived and interpreted in the society reflecting the traits of conflict, negotiation, and cooperation. In this regard, the functioning of the Art of Living Foundation and the major face behind it, i.e., of its founder as a figure of *guru,* aids in elaborating the subtle politics of spirituality.

4.3. Subtle Politics of Spirituality and Religion:

As we have already discussed in the previous chapters, despite the contestations, the term spirituality gained momentum only in the modern era with a shift towards the subjective dimension of human life. Meanings and connotations attached to spirituality have opened up an alternative as well as a differently related space in relation to religion for those who were no longer interested in associating themselves with or solely with organised religion but rather preferred to remain flexible with regard to their belief system concerning the other-world and self. However, in general, there is a subtle politics of representation and interpretation underpinning the very relationship of religion and spirituality wherein there is leverage on the part of the spiritual practitioners to put forward their practices in the light of secular notions of humanism, freedom, happiness, peace, individual rights and liberty unlike the restrictive nature of conservative religion. Still, at the same time, these very practitioners as per convenience may tend to get involved with the liberal religious in the garb of the former. In this regard, it has to be noted that AoL is anyway not anti-religious, rather, it welcomes people from all religious backgrounds. Also, it does not hide the *Vedic* influence of its *guru*-centric approach to spirituality. However, legally as well as formally, it does not claim to be religious on any ground. Moreover, even on the ground of actual practice, the initial entry-level programs hardly shows any sign of religion (apart from the symbolic *guru* and mention of *yoga,* especially over the last decade). For instance, in figure 4.1 shared below, the advertisement of the happiness program of AoL merges

the spiritual and the secular with a promise to deliver life-transforming techniques that would help to make life stress-free, healthy and happy.
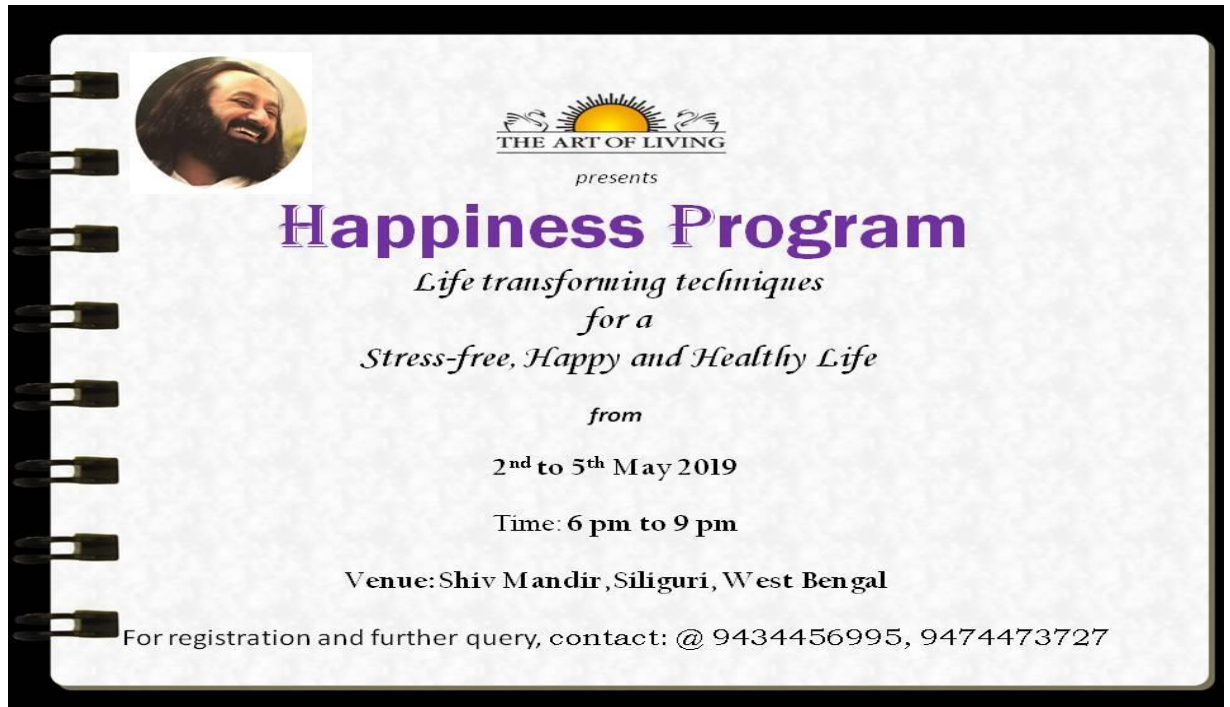

Figure: 4.1.

This very secular-spiritual combo aiming to uplift individual lives has successfully attracted millions of participants to join the foundation. AoL followers comprise of people belonging to various religions cutting across diverse boundaries created in the name of nation, region, gender and so on. However, despite this, if one goes to the history behind the creation of this foundation and also specifically its founder's own background, one cannot escape seeing an important role being played by ancient *Vedic* philosophy, especially that of Adi Shankaracharya's *Advaita* tradition as discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, even in this regard, the influences on Sri Sri Ravi Shankar by his family background and that of the similarly located institutions such as the Transcendental Meditation group of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi cannot be left behind.

Alexis Avdeeff, in her piece on "Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the Art of Spreading Awareness in the World", describes the influences on Ravi Shankar's AoLF. However, neither the *guru* nor his AoLF or ardent followers considers any sort of influence behind him, although they acknowledge the recognition of the great Hindu religious figures like Shankaracharyas and Ananda Moyi Maa and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, etc., of Ravi Shankar's extra-ordinary qualities. In a way, this adds to the guru's authenticity and legitimacy as well as his untouched divine touch as felt by his followers.

Avdeeff observes three major influences/inspirations behind Ravi Shankar and AoLF; these are the influence of Arya Samaj through Sudhakar Chaturvedi, his Sanskrit teacher, the influence of Transcendental Meditation (TM) Movement of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and influence of the tradition of *Vedic* masters (Avdeeff, 2004: 4-5).

Firstly, Avdeeff writes, "…like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, Ravi Shankar advocates monotheism, teaches the *Vedānta*, and denounces the caste system as that would lead to the wrong interpretation of the *Veda* instead, he uses the concepts of *dharma*, *karma* and *samsāra*[52] (ibid.) Secondly, Avdeeff observed the similarities between TM Movement and AoLF. Both are guru-centric movements based on spirituality denying itself the identity of a religious foundation claiming legitimacy through scientifically based *yogic* techniques taught by trained teachers. *Jai Guru Dev* is an expression commonly used in both in place of greetings such as "hello", "thank you", or "good-bye". Also, this salutation indicates a tribute to all holy masters, she notes. Indeed, Avdeeff also points to the strange resemblance of the name Art of Living to one of Maharishi's major writing, i.e., "The Science of Being and the Art of Living" (1963).

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[52] This philosophical complex of *dharma*, *karma* and *samsara* is discussed on chapter 6 of the present-study.

Moreover, as also revealed by a respondent in the current work and also in Avdeeff's study too, both *Sahaj Samadhi,* a meditation technique followed in AoL and TM's meditation technique being based on a support of a *mantra* shares a close resemblance (ibid.). In addition, both TM and AoL, if closely observed, follow not only similar strategies with regard to running their respective organisations and ways of recruiting members but also the *gurus* in white robes, long hair and beard speaking in English on meditation, happiness, awareness, consciousness, mind, science and world peace reflect immediate resemblance. Thirdly, Avdeeff links Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and his teachings to a combination of *Advaitic Vedanta* and *bhakti* traditions. A pictorial representation occurring on rare occasions on a platform next to Ravi Shankar depicts the *guru Parampara* (Guru tradition) about which he at times speaks; shows the face of the great masters of the *Advaita* tradition, i.e., from Narayana to Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (also known as Guru Dev) and Shankara and his followers. The depiction stops at Brahmananda Saraswati (addressed as *Gurudev*) without including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the former's disciple. However, Ravi Shankar's link to *Guru Dev* is through Maharishi, but he prefers to associate directly with the former without referring to the latter. Swami Brahmananda Saraswati was the *Shankaracharya* of Jyotirmath, and his teachings reflected both the tradition of *bhakti* (personal devotion to self and God) and *Advaita* (non-dual nature of reality) similar to that as reflected in the teachings of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (ibid.). But Ravi Shankar, as such, claims not to belong to any tradition, religious or otherwise (ibid.). This indicates a claim to a novel origin.

Thus, so far, the question of subtle politics is concerned with regard to spirituality; politics of spirituality underlies the very relationship of religion and spirituality in relation to AoL and its founder. Although the manner or even on legal terms in which

the AoLF and its founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, are presented or introduced to the world seems very secular and non-religious in nature as a spirituality-based foundation led by a spiritual and humanitarian leader, there lies an inherent religious basis as discussed in the previous chapters, guiding the very core of AoL or its founder's teaching. Despite not claiming to belong to any religious or traditional doctrine or philosophy as it portrays to be rather original and authentic at its root, the AoL and its founder does share a very close resemblance with the teachings of *Advaitic Vedic* tradition as well as to the teachings and goals of Maharishi's TM movement that itself follows *Advaitic* philosophy and other similarly placed institutions. Thus, there lies a subtle politics of representation and interpretation, whether fully intentional or not, in the very portrayal of AoLF and its leader as original with regard to the spread of its teachings, values, practices and services in terms of the contemporary practical exigencies backed by science and humanitarian concerns in alignment with the ideas of democracy, human values and universal peace addressing the diverse population bringing in easy legitimacy and widespread acceptance.

At the same time, it is to be noted that the politics is subtle because although AoL is presented to the world, not as a religious but rather as a spirituality-based humanitarian and educational non-governmental foundation aiming at a "stress-free and violence-free world", but at the same time, its emphasis on *yoga*, meditation and Guru's discourse on *Upanishads (Kena Upanishad, Katha Upanishad and so on)*, *Shiva Sutras*, *Bhakti Sutras*, *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* (these are readily available at several AoL stores as well as on the popular online YouTube platform) do not attempt to hide the religious orientation. Rather, it is interesting to note that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's interpretation of these classic *Vedic* Hindu or *Sanatan dharma* texts are regarded by his followers as the most authentic and genuine. Even the meaning conveyed by such

interpretation usually turns the once seemed religious into a more widely applicable and acceptable with a neutral and secular connotation. For instance, in general, the phrase *Om Namah Shivay*a is seen as a Hindu *mantra* (a word or phrase or syllables repeated, again and again, to aid in prayer and meditation associated with the Hindu or Buddhist religion); however, when asked during a *satsang* event at German *ashram* on August 2010 about the speciality of the phrase "Om Namah Shivaya", Sri Sri Ravi Shankar responded: "Yes! 'Om Namah Shivaya' is one of the very powerful mantras. Mantras are those energising sounds which help to uplift the consciousness, which helps to uplift the subtle. So 'Om Namah Shivaya', these words are very important because 'Na', 'Ma', 'Shi', 'Va', 'Ya', these five letters represent the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether. 'OM' is the sound of the universe; 'OM' is the symbol of life force. 'OM' means peace and love, so when there is peace, love and harmony in all the five elements, there is bliss, and there is joy. So, 'Om Namah Shivaya' indicates the transcendental universal one consciousness and energises that subtle aspect of the universe" (See Shankar, 2017: 20).

Thus, as one can see, even the term *mantra* has been interpreted in a non-religious (without any reference to God or religion) and in a universal manner with a humanitarian and individualistic implication. Moreover, when Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was asked at a *satsang* session about how he remembers all these scriptural texts, he said it comes to him naturally as he claims to have read none (*Satsang,* 2017). This, in turn, adds to a nuanced way of establishing and strengthening the *guru's* authenticity amongst his followers, indicating a mystical touch of divine revelation, positioning him at par with the ancient sages to whom knowledge of the *Vedas* was revealed (*Shruti*).

Now, if we look into the courses and programs offered by the AoLF, at present, there are a number of courses and programs targeting diverse sections of the population

in terms of region, nation, age, generation, profession, special events and so on. While it has been observed that it is majorly through the courses the participants are pulled into AoL via advertisements and promotions (as shared above) promising stress relief, happiness, personal growth, healthy mind and body, confidence-building and greater focus and creativity etc., a gradual and also simultaneous introduction to the traditional techniques and processes such as *Surya Namaskar* (*yogic* practice of sun salutation) as well as devotional or *bhakti* driven *bhajans* (devotional songs) is not unknown, but these are associated with such meanings given by the Guru that reflects a universally secular connotation. For instance, *surya namaskar* is considered a technique for a cardio-vascular workout that has an immensely positive impact on the mind and body.[53]

It has also been observed that the inclusion of the terms such as *yoga* and meditation in the promotional advertisements of the AoL courses, especially in the Indian context, became more prominent gradually after the worldwide recognition of the 21st of June as International Yoga Day in 2015. Even traditional-sounding names have been added to most of the courses, especially after this event. For instance, ART Excel (All Round Training for Excellence) course is now also known as *Utkarsha Yoga* for the age group 8-13; the Intuition course meant for the age group 5 to 17 has also been renamed as *Prajna Yoga*. Even the Art of Living Centers in India came to be known as J*nana Kshetras* (roughly translated as knowledge centres), otherwise called Temple of Knowledge, which was simply addressed as AoL centres before. Moreover, there is a routine observance and performance of *Devi Puja* (Goddess worship) on Thursdays and *Rudra Puja* (worship of the Sun God) on Mondays, apart from other traditional *Vaidic dharma-related* events and rituals such as *homas* (ritual conduct),

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[53] See <u>Surya Namaskar - How to do Sun Salutation with Steps | The Art of Living India</u> (accessed 24th November 2022).

japa (chants), *upanayama* (mantra-intiation)*,* and *guru puja* etc.,[54] at regular intervals at AoL Bengaluru Ashram and elsewhere, being specially organised by a trust related to AoL namely the Vaidic Dharma Sansthan under the guidance of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Interestingly, Vaidic Dharma Sansthan is presented on its official website as: "We are a public charitable, religious, spiritual and educational trust, inspired and guided by his Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The Vaidic Dharma Sansthan Trust works to advance religious and spiritual education, irrespective of caste, creed, language and religion. We also promote the Indian culture and educational heritage and undertake projects to promote the social, economic, cultural and spiritual development of people at large with a holistic approach."[55] Thus, although AoL is presented as a humanitarian and educational foundation, widely recognised as based on spirituality, a trust within it which organises and carries on several religious activities and programs like *pujas* (ritual workship)*, sanyasi* (ascetic/medicant) training, *homas*, learning of Vaidic chants etc., within its International Headquarters and other centres or people' homes is religious in nature. The name Vaidic Dharma Sansthan itself suggests a religious core. However, interestingly and with an element of surprise, its official website also advertises under its aims and objectives as one of its purposes, "To organise and conduct pujas and other religious rites, puja ceremonies and festivals of all religions". The phrase, "…of all religions.." somehow indicates an element contradicting the very name of the trust, which clearly conveys that it is mainly concerned with *Vaidic* or rather *Vedic* religion (dharma, also indicates duty, ethics etc.,) emphasising on "knowledge of *veda, yoga, vedanta, puranas, itihasas* and Sanskrit language" and in which is rooted the philosophical roots of the modern-day Hinduism. No other

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[54] See Pujas & Homa – Vaidic Dharma Sansthan (vaidicpujas.org) (accessed 24th November 2022).
[55] See About Us – Vaidic Dharma Sansthan (vaidicpujas.org) (accessed 24th November 2022).

organised religion claims a *Vedic* root or past other than Hinduism, or some may prefer to call *Sanatana Dharma*. Thus, a subtle politics of presentation, as well as representation, is very much indicated. Furthermore, the trust also aims for the "advancement of *Indian culture*" (emphasis added), which is done through the revival of *Vaidic* tradition by running a *Vedic* school within the premises of AoL Bengaluru Ashram. Thus, the nationalistic flavour is very much in tune with the religious tradition, which is an essential part of the foundation based on spirituality. A subtle look at this nationalistic flavour carries a more overwhelming identification of its traditional source in relation to Hinduism.

Moreover, on the question of religious conversion, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has a clear-cut take as he says, "conversions should not happen in any religion. There are many instances of conversion through allurements. That should also stop, and a law should be enacted for this purpose," he said at a press conference held at Mumbai in 2015.[56] Ravi Shankar's take on religious conversion somewhat reflects a strict no to it, suggesting a law to ban it also defies the democratic-liberal individualistic sense of freedom as the very idea of spirituality exudes. Moreover, on tour to Malaysia in 2015, the manager of the hotel in which Ravi Shankar was staying, received a warning letter from the Middle East militant groups like ISIS threatening to destroy the hotel and kill him "if he is allowed to carry out "Hindu activities" in the country". As reported in the Hindu (a National Daily English News Paper), "The threat letter alleged that the guru claims himself "as non-religious" person but his organisation, Art of Living, has been "converting Muslims in Iran and Iraq". "It is meddling in Islamic affairs", it said.[57] Because of this reason and also another threat from a Pakistan-based group, Ravi

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[56] See 'Ghar Wapsi' row: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for law banning conversion | The Financial Express (accessed 24th November 2022).

[57] See States told to provide security to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - The Hindu (accessed 24th November 2022).

Shankar's security was asked to be beefed up in the states he would visit by the Bharatiya Janata Party[58] (BJP) led central government in India in 2015. However, interestingly, Sri Sri pushes for an introduction of a multicultural and multi-religious element in education through which children can learn about a bit of all religion that would develop a sense of respect and belongingness towards all without resorting to fanaticism or conversion.[59] In his own words, "The notion that you will be closer to God by changing religion is baseless. You get closer to God by feeling connected internally. Inner transformation is real conversion. If you really want to convert, convert from violence and frustration to a loving and peaceful space within."[60]

So, on the one hand, the spiritual leader is sternly against religious conversion, which in other words means sticking to one's own religion as a matter of being born to a religious family is important for him. Still, at the same time, he advocates multi-religious education and an attitude of openness to all religions, on the other hand, his organisation, AoL is promoted as non-religious in nature. Paradoxically, as seen in the case of the death threat letter, AoL is alleged to be promoting religious conversion. Moreover, the BJP-led central government asking the states to provide extra security to the *guru* during his visits also somewhat gives a sign of his closeness to the Hindu right-wing, which he denies associating with. Openly associating itself with the BJP and its Hindutva[61] agenda may compromise AoL's secular basis of spirituality. However, there

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[58] James G. Lochtefeld's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism describes the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a "modern Indian political party with a strong Hindu nationalist (Hindutva[58]) orientation. The party was formed as the political wing of the Hindu nationalist organization known as Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and many of the BJP's leaders have been RSS members for decades. (See Lochtefeld, 2002: 104-105)

[59] See Real Conversion Is what happens within (speakingtree.in) (accessed 24th November 2022).

[60] Ibid.

[61] According to Christophe Jaffrelot, Hindutva "is a form of ethnoreligious nationalism that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came as a reaction to a perceived threat to the majority community, in the eyes of certain Hindu elites, and which was embodied by Christian missionaries and Muslims. Their majoritarian inferiority complex triggered an ideological construction process in which Hindus who felt vulnerable sought to emulate the cultural features they saw as contributing to the Others'

has been a gradual development of mutual closeness and exchange of gestures of mutual admiration between Ravi Shankar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the years. Such gestures are occasionally expressed on or through public forums and platforms, indicating mutual support between AoLF and BJP government. However, there is a subtle complexity in this relationship which needs to be discussed. In this regard, the next section of the chapter will look into the nature of the relationship between AoLF and BJP.

4.4. AoL and BJP since 2014:

During the 2014 general election in India, as per IndiaTV news report dated 9th of April 2014, the Congress candidate against BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi alleged that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Ramdev (a *yoga* guru) "have been using religious platforms to canvass for BJP and its prime ministerial candidate."[62] Another piece in the Economic Times (a daily newspaper) reported, "Art of Living Foundation chief Sri Sri Ravi Shankar….appeared to drop broad hints that he has a soft corner for BJP.[63] It further added, "The spiritual guru has praised BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi in the past and also defended him on the 2002 Gujarat riots".[64] However, when Sri Sri was once asked about dropping hints of supporting BJP, he said, "It is up to you to take hints... I have every right to speak about a party. But I don't want to take away the choice of the people. I want people to have their choice."[65] Indeed, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, on different occasions, hinted at a soft corner for BJP and its

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strength. This strategic emulation, combining stigmatization and mimicry, is typical of a variety of nationalism that is based on resentment. It confirms the malleability of identities when they become politicised. Hindutva values certain aspects of Hinduism at the expense of others.." (See Jaffrelot, 2021: 28).

[62] See Don't allow Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Ramdev events before polls: Mistry | India News – India TV (indiatvnews.com) (accessed 12th November 2021).

[63] See Congress: I never said I support BJP: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com) (accessed 12th November 2021).

[64] Ibid.; See 2002: Godhra riots - Frontline (thehindu.com) (accessed 24th November 2022).

[65] Ibid.

leadership. Occasionally, the guru has directly or indirectly publicly endorsed and praised the party, its policies and its leader, Modi. For instance, even before the 2014 general election in India, which resulted in the victory of the BJP, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was found to be indirectly supporting and promoting the BJP. For instance, anyone who follows Indian politics and is familiar with its context can get the right hint from these words of the *guru* during one of his *satsang* events held at the premises of AoL, Bangalore Ashram, in January, 2014 before the general election.

Sri Sri Ravi said, "First of all, there should be clean politics in the country. For this, you all come forward. See, we keep a security guard at home and to whom we assign 8 hours of duty, right? They get tired after 8 hours of duty. On a day, how many guards do we need? Three guards and they stay on duty for 8 hours each as they get tired after 8 hours of duty. In Delhi, many people keep guards at home. So, when we keep three guards at home and keep changing their duty, then keeping the same guard for the country for 10 years what will it turn into? Come on, he's tired; pulling one back to duty who claims to be tired would lead to injustice. This is against labour law. We need change. The country needs to experience change again and again. See, I am not in favour of any party. I am for everyone. A Supreme Court's justice does not belong to any party but rather belongs to everybody. So, does the President of the country works for a single party? No, he functions for all…In this manner, I am for all. So even I can speak out. Bring a change and to bring it is in your hand. Oh, change means what, can we just bring new and inexperienced people to lead us? So, we need to think about it. For instance, if we give a broom to someone to clean, we should ask him to clean the front first. Only then he can think of cleaning the inside of the house. Now, even if the floor is not being cleaned yet, he is asked to clean the inside; neither the front nor the inside will get cleaned. And always keep a watch on which hand is holding the broom.

You should not get misled; what you are trying to change may come again in a different form. So, you be aware of it and give stability to the country. Work towards stability. I am not talking in favour of any personality. Change is needed. The people who are working and getting tired, tell them to take rest for some days. If you keep working without rest, scam after scam, scam after scam, this will go on. Thus, we need to be careful in this regard. All should come forward for a change."[66] These words of the *guru* to his followers and audience were expressed with full humour and indirect reference. A person well aware of the political context of the country before the 2014 general elections can easily make out what he was actually suggesting.

The political situation of the country at that time was in favour of a change from the Congress-led government, which was in crisis after 10 years of rule, majorly due to rising cases of corruption against it. So, Ravi Shankar is suggesting people to bring a change as the guard (the Congress rule) after 10 years of duty has gotten tired. But at the same time, one needs to be careful not to choose an inexperienced party (indicating the newly formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) of New Delhi whose symbol is a broom). Indication to AAP seems quite clear with Ravi Shankar's example of selecting an inexperienced person to clean the inside with a broom may end up with no result. Further, he also specifically emphasised on to be aware of which hand is holding the broom. The hand is the political symbol of the Congress party. Further, the warning that one may end up bringing the same people she wants to change simply hints to be careful that Congress may come back with the support of the AAP. Thus, his advice is to bring stability as change with an experienced government indicates the BJP and its leader Narendra Modi. By saying that he is not talking about any party or personality,

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[66] See Sri Sri's candid views on 2014 elections (AAP, Congress & Modi) - YouTube (accessed 16th November 2021)

he is indeed doing the same in a very skilful and witty manner. Moreover, the way the listeners are listening and responding with an indication of enjoying the humour behind indirect reference yet being exactly able to know the advice symbolically affirms the *guru's* and his followers' support for BJP and Modi.

Also, Ravi Shankar once wrote a piece on his official website entitled "My first meeting with Narendra Modi" (2014).[67] As the title suggests, the piece describes his first meeting with Narendra Modi and as the story goes, it took place during the UN Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000, wherein Modi was introduced to him (a speaker for the event) as RSS *pracharak* (full-time organisers). Then, they met after the Gujrat riots during Modi's chief ministership. The overall narration of the piece, however, reveals an aggrandising tone in support of Modi and throws light on the bonhomie that gradually developed between Ravi Shankar and Modi. For instance, Ravi Shankar went on to the extent of even clearing Modi's post-Godhra riots infamous image with his own assurance, "I knew he (Modi) could not have played a role in the riots. Why would a chief minister paint his face black and destroy his own reputation?"[68]. Surprisingly, such an assurance is simply a result of a verbal exchange leading to Modi's confrontation with a direct question on his involvement in the riots by the *Guru*. To which Modi replied with moist eyes as narrated, "Guruji (Sri Sri), do you also believe in this propaganda?". This seemed enough for the *guru* to conclude "that the truth was on his (Modi's) side and one day the whole nation would recognise him." He ends the piece in a hopeful tone by expressing that "his (Modi's) next visit

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[67] See My First Meeting with Narendra Modi | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 13th November 2021).

[68] It is to be noted Narendra Modi was given a clean chit by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) in 2011 and gradually the Supreme Court of India too did uphold the SIT's decision. See https://www.outlookindia.com/national/pm-modi-gets-clean-chit-in-2002-gujarat-riots-case-a-timeline-of-events-news-204382 (accessed 26th November 2022).

(indicating a visit to the United States where he was not welcomed after Gujrat riots) might be as the head of the world's largest democracy."[69]

Subsequently, an invitation to Ravi Shankar from the winning government for Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony as the fourteenth prime minister of India and the former's presence on the day of the actual ceremony cleared out all speculations concerning his support for the BJP government. Then on, Ravi Shankar's presence in the political arena of the country has been often felt at regular intervals, especially in favour of or in relation to the affairs of the central government. During the field visit in 2019 a big hoarding on the main road to AoL Bengaluru *ashram* clearly portrayed Sri Sri's support for the government and vice versa (see photograph 4.1. in appendix III).

Whether Sri's Sri's in support of the step towards demonetization[70] in 2016 by BJP government or in his support of proposed law against Triple Talaq[71] (a form of divorce practiced by the Muslims, which was gradually passed as Triple Talaq Act in 2019); on the other hand, whether with regard to the controversial issues such as AoL's World Cultural Festival (WCF) (event attended and supported by PM Modi and his party BJP in 2016), Citizenship Amendment Act[72] of 2019-20, abrogation of article 370[73], Ayodhya issue 2019 or organizing workshops for CBI [74](Central Bureau of Investigation agency) officials in 2018 and merging with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) to provide NSDC certificate for vocational and skill

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[69] Ibid.

[70] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar roots for demonetisation, hails PM - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com) (accessed 14th November 2021).

[71] See Sr Sri Ravi Shankar supports legislation against triple talaq | Business Standard News (business-standard.com) (accessed 14th November 2021).

[72] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar hails CAA at Times Now Summit, says persecuted Pakistani Muslims should also be welcomed | India News (timesnownews.com) (accessed 14th November 2021).

[73] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: 'Sometimes firm steps have to be taken but with a flower in hand' | India News (republicworld.com) (accessed 14th November 2021).

[74] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's AoL organises 3-day workshop at CBI headquarters for enhancing synergy among officers | India News – India TV (indiatvnews.com) (accessed 15th November 2021).

development trainings provided by Art of Living's Sri Sri Rural Development Program[75]; either Ravi Shankar's direct active presence (and AoL's allusive presence) or in terms of his opinion on these critical issues were religiously covered by various print and electronic media houses and they continue to do so. However, amongst all these issues, the two most widely-covered controversial issues that raised serious questions on Ravi Shankar and AoLF in relation to BJP and Modi government are the World Cultural Festival organised by AoLF in 2016 and the Ayodhya issue in which Ravi Shankar initially offered to mediate and later on he was invited to do so.

4.4.1. World Cultural Festival:

Before the event, the World Cultural Festival (WCF) was described by the Art of Living Foundation in these words, "The World Cultural Festival 2016 is a celebration of the Art of Living's 35 years of service, humanity, spirituality and human values. It will take place on March 11-13, 2016, India. The festival will celebrate the diversity in cultures far across the world while simultaneously highlighting our unity as a human family."[76] After the event, a PDF on World Cultural Festival titled "Reflections" described it in the following words, "The World Culture Festival held in New Delhi, India, was a historic 3-day event from 11th to 13th March 2016 organised by the Art of Living to celebrate its 35 years of service, spirituality and humanity. Over 3.75 million people from 155 countries gathered to witness sterling performances by artists, musical renditions, and dance shows and to participate in the world's largest meditation. On a unique 7-acre stage, over 37,000 artists and 172 international dignitaries from the field of politics, religion, art, media, and business came together to share a resounding message of understanding and dialogue in difficult times and to celebrate the diversity

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[75] See Skill development | The Art of Living India(accessed 15th November 2021).
[76] See Art of Living London organises curtain raiser on World Culture Festival (asian-voice.com)
(accessed 24th November 2022).

in cultures from across the world while highlighting our unity as a human family. In these times of conflict and turmoil, the World Culture Festival has brought forth the message of peace and the unity in diversity of a One World Family beyond the narrow boundaries of religion, nationality, race and language."[77]

However, what is missing in this initial announcement, promotion and then the gradual declaration of the major highlights and achievements of the successful completion of the 2016 WCF event by the AoLF is the controversy and conflict which almost became a part of it. This major AoL-initiated event was in the news and public memory, especially because of the controversy surrounding its development and completion rather than its intended message of dialogue, peace and unity.

The root of the controversy lies in the impact on the venue i.e., Yamuna floodplain in Delhi chosen by AoLF for the WCF event. Just a month or so before the day of the event, a petition was filed before the National Green Tribunal (NGT) (a statutory body formed under the National Green Tribunal Act 2010, "equipped with the necessary expertise to handle environmental disputes" for the "effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation"[78] by a retired officer of the Indian Forest Service namely Manoj Mishra against the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the Art of Living Foundation and the Ministry of Environment and Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.[79] The application raised a concern regarding the environmental impact of WCF on the ecologically fragile riverbed and floodplain of Yamuna. The petitioners alleged that the preparations for holding the event had destroyed and degraded the floodplain, and thus, the event should not be

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[77] [77] See WCF-Reflections-2016.pdf (srisriravishankar.org) (accessed 24th November 2022).
[78] See National Green Tribunal (accessed 31st October 2021).
[79] See Case analysis of the Art of Living Foundation : environmental compensation - iPleaders (accessed 31st October 2021).

allowed to take place as it would lead to ecological disaster; rather, the organisers be fined.[80]

The NGT, headed by Justice Swatanter Kumar sought to know from the DDA who issued the permission to temporarily construct a pontoon bridge on the river for the event.[81] The DDA maintained that it was required to issue a no-objection certificate, while the Delhi government was to take the rest of the responsibility. The Ministry of Environment, on the other hand, on being questioned by NGT, simply chose to pass on the responsibility to the Ministry of Water Resources. The AoL maintained that they only initiated the works at the site after taking all requisite permissions.[82] Further, it claimed that the floodplains were already destroyed by the dumping of debris, agricultural and other activities. [83]After a few interim orders, the final judgement of the NGT on 7th December 2017 held the Art of Living Foundation liable for the damages caused to the Yamuna floodplains.[84] As compensation, the foundation was asked to deposit INR 5 crores which would be used for the restoration/rehabilitation of the floodplains[85] (Nath and Rosencranz, 2019). However, the initial estimate of the expert committee was INR 120 crores which was gradually reduced to INR 28.72 crores and finally to INR 5 crores, out of which INR 25 lakhs was required to deposit as a condition for the event to take place (Ibid.).

Interestingly, it was suggested that as WCF was attended by highly politically influential people, including the Prime Minister, the amount of compensation was substantially reduced due to political pressure (ibid.). However, Raghuveer Nath and

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[80] Ibid.

[81] See https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/Art-of-Living-event-Has-eco-impact-been-assessed-asks-green-tribunal/article60509311.ece (accessed 31st October 2021).

[82] Ibid.

[83] See https://blog.ipleaders.in/case-analysis-art-living-foundation-environmental-compensation/ (accessed 31st October 2021).

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

Dr Armin Rosencranz, in their co-authored article entitled "Determination of Environmental Compensation", criticised the NGT for lacking an "effective framework for determining compensation" (ibid.). They questioned the very scientific basis of the proceedings of the study conducted by the expert committee of the NGT. On the basis of certain examples and visual images, the authors argued that the NGT's Expert Committee's conclusion was unscientific in nature as it was drawn on the basis of a mere "visual assessment" of the event site without any baseline study prior to the event and thus, was denounced by the chairmen of the Expert Committee itself as "being unscientific" (ibid.). Moreover, there was damage already caused to the event site by the dumping of debris due to the construction works done by the Public Works Department (ibid.). Thus, the amount of compensation was merely decided on the basis of an "invisible loss" as the "ecological damage attributable to the Art of Living Foundation due to the WCF could not be ascertained" (ibid.). Moreover, other than levying INR 1 lakh as a penalty on the DDA, the authors have also questioned the failure of the NGT to hold the governmental authorities accountable (ibid.).

AoLF too, still maintains that "the World Cultural Festival did not damage or pollute the Yamuna floodplains. The claims that it did are based on a distortion of facts and unsupported by objective or scientific assessment."[86] It claims that only 1% of the large tracks of floodplains was used for the event after it received permission from the DDA and other relevant bodies of the state and central governments. Moreover, the land allocated was neither a reserved area nor a wildlife sanctuary and not even a protected or notified area. The AoLF rather claims to have cleaned truckloads of malba dumped by construction companies on the floodplains to make it usable. It questioned the criticism of the environmentalists and the media as "unjustified" as for AoLF; they

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[86] See https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/statement/wcf-2016 (accessed 31st October 2022).

have completely overlooked the "permanent structures, the unauthorised colonies and the huge construction dumps on the Yamuna which was already subjected to "unacceptable levels of pollution and damage long before the event" (ibid.). However, despite the legal battle and the hue and cry in the media and the criticism of environmentalists and activists, the AoLF received full support from the central government.

Indeed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the WCF event and also praised Ravi Shankar for "taking Indian culture to the world."[87] Further, referring to the WCF event as "the Kumbh Mela of culture" and emphasizing on the importance of taking pride in one's own cultural heritage, he praised the Art of Living Foundation for presenting a "diverse image of India to the world."[88] Similarly, the other members of his cabinet were in favour of AoLF and WCF. Former Parliamentary Affairs Minister M. Venkaiah Naidu backed the AoLF in the midst of criticism of WCF by stating, "It has become a fashion to criticise anything concerned with Hinduism."[89] The former Home Minister Rajnath Singh, in response to the critics and protests of the opposition over the event in the Rajya Sabha in parliament, said, "There is no controversy. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is known for resolving controversial issues" (ibid.). However, at the same time, the members of other political parties could not stop themselves from taking a stand against the event surrounded by such a controversy. Former Janata Dal (United) leader Sharad Yadav, supported by other opposition members, asked, "How can DDA give permission for such an event?" and had expressed for the cancellation of the event considering that otherwise, it would lead to ecologically disastrous effect.[90] Sitaram

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[87] See At Sri Sri event, Modi attacks critics of cultural heritage - The Hindu (accessed 31st October 2022).
[88] See Live: World Culture Festival is the Kumbh Mela of Culture: PM Modi (thequint.com) (accessed 31st October 2022).
[89] See At Sri Sri event, Modi attacks critics of cultural heritage - The Hindu (accessed 31st October 2022).
[90] See NGT allows Art of Living event, imposes Rs 5-cr fine - The Hindu BusinessLine (accessed 1st November 2021).

Yechury from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) regarded it "highly irregular" that the army had been deployed for the construction of a bridge for a private party.[91] Similarly, WCF in the midst of this controversy had been pulled down severely by critics, environmentalists and activists, especially because of its non-governmental and private nature despite being claimed to have been attended/participated by lakhs of people from several countries. However, interestingly the *Guru* responded tactfully to the critics by accepting their accusation of WCF being his private affair or "private party" as he claimed that he considers the whole world as his family.[92] Further, Venkaiah Naidu defended the AoLF on the question of the army being used for the construction works by saying, "Unnecessary fuss about army building pontoon bridge. In earlier regimes, several instances like Kumbh Mela, Sankranti in Nashik, Army did the same."[93] Ironically, he also tweeted on the popular social networking website, Twitter, "let's not politicise this".[94]

During the field visit in 2017 and while interacting with the participants, followers and supporters of AoLF, it was observed that, in general, they all go by what the *Guru* and the foundation have to say in its defence against the criticism of WCF being held on Yamuna floodplains as discussed above. However, there are four kinds of responses observed and heard concerning the WCF controversy. While there are those who were indifferent to the issue, simply stated, *this goes on, it is all about politics* as expected from some after a span of two years since the controversy, there are few respondents who expressed a sense of discomfort and reluctance when the question on WCF and

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[91] Ibid.

[92] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar baits critics, agrees World Culture Festival is his private party as 'entire world is my family'-India News , Firstpost (accessed 1st November 2021).

[93] See Venkaiah Naidu sides with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, says Art of Living event 'will bring glory to India' | India News,The Indian Express (accessed 1st November 2021).

[94] See https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/union-minister-venkaiah-naidu-backs-art-of-living-event-116031100207_1.html (accessed 1st November 2021).

similar controversial or critical issues concerning AoLF (Guru's comment on Peace Prize and Guru's role in Ayodhya issue) was raised. There is a tendency in some to take any criticism against the guru or the foundation as falling into the category of negativity and complaint, which goes against positivity and positive thoughts, which forms an integral part of the "guru of joy"[95] who emphasises on a 'smiling face and happiness'. Thus, they may simply ignore addressing such critical questions or also go to the extent of curbing one's critical query and focus on "positivity" with regard to the Guru or its foundation.[96]

However, it has been noted that all those who are known to be more spiritually advanced and evolved tend to be or are generally seen as open-minded, balanced and easily accessible. This may not necessarily have any direct relation in terms of the number of years one is associated with the AoLF or the number of years one is simply practising this path of spirituality. The *guru* himself suggests to the followers that instead of relying on positive thoughts, go deep and cleanse the very root of negativity through breath and meditation (Shankar, 2008: 50-51). Interestingly, a common response to the WCF controversy amongst the members of AoLF is that the controversy was intentionally instigated by those who see the *guru* and foundation as being supported by the Prime Minister and his ruling party, i.e., BJP. For instance, according to a well-experienced long-term AoL member who is also an *ashramite*,

WCF issue was totally farcical and unfair. We were targeted because so many leaders were coming to attend it from different countries. We were caught in between party politics. PM Modi attended it, he has been seen as communal, and

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[95] The French author Francois Gautier in his official autobiography of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar entitled "Guru of Joy: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Art of Living" (2008) describes him as ever-smiling, playful and childlike with a mission to put a smile on every person he meets conveying the meaning of spirituality as "being ever joyful. Thus, Gautier refers to Ravi Shankar as the "Guru of Joy".

[96] See https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/why-online-trolls-could-not-tolerate-my-interview-prominent-hindu-guru (accessed 16th November 2021).

he supports AoL. The person who lodged the complaint is backed by Congress. They did it intentionally to create an unnecessary ruckus and sabotage the event. We had to pay; it was like either you pay INR 5 crore or else we won't let you continue. It was a ransom. We will take it back anyway after we win the case. It is subjudiced now. Let the truth come out. The Congress still owns many media houses…We have been falsely targeted for no fault of ours. Indeed, we have made the place much more accommodating and green now. Whatever damage has been done to our reputation, the people will forget gradually. Indeed, earlier, that place used to stink. Nothing was there; now it is full of green. The expert committee has produced false reports. Even we have images of the event, taken before and after. Indeed, in some way, people can figure out that around so much ruckus and hue and cry, there also lies the truth. The truth will come out. On the better side, many people have come to know about AoL and those who have witnessed the event will appreciate it because it is not an easy task to bring people and leaders together from so many countries, religions, etc., for peace. Next, WCF will be organised in Australia, its Prime Minister has invited us to organise there after 5 years. We have also learned from this incident. A volunteer who went to represent us in media was a soft-spoken person and could not handle it properly. It was a PR agency which took care of the event. Our volunteers didn't directly manage the event.

Another thirty-four-year-old respondent, who is also a content writer, shared,

I was editing for WCF; it was a grand celebration. You know the other party (indicating the Congress Party) is very jealous. These people are unjust and unfair. Actually, earlier, there was no green nor there was any animal or marine

life. It is a total lie; it was a floating stage. The organisers have made sure to

clean everything, and it is green enough now, not like earlier.

Similar to the viewpoints of the two respondents shared above, blame on the Congress Party (a major national party which belongs to the opposition to the ruling party, BJP) and its members was clearly expressed by Gautam Vig, the Director of AoLF on a website of the right-wing based online magazine namely, Swarajya. For Vig, the AoLF being apolitical invited members of all political parties for the WCF event; however, Congress has shown its "prejudice" against the WCF.[97] Despite being invited, none of the Congress party and other opposition party members attended the event, which had indeed benefitted the BJP. Vig claimed that a few of the Congress party members rather tried to obstruct the event by bringing in "rowdy elements", supporting "tutored farmers" who owned no land on the event site to sit on "dharna" (protest) and by hiring a few autorickshaw drivers to create unnecessary chaos by faking malfunctions and traffic jams to prevent people from attending the event. For him, the Congress party has changed since the demise of Indira Gandhi (the then Prime Minister of India from Congress); its members are now indifferent to the *gurus*, saints and those who are on the spiritual path. He declared that even the legal team fighting against the AoL over the WCF event is backed by Congress. However, he concludes that it is possible that the "main target was the Prime Minister and his international reputation, not just the AoL" (ibid.). Interestingly, Vig thinks that it is the loss of Congress which missed out on an opportunity to be a part of an event which could bring millions of people together, which is possible only because of a divine blessing beyond politics.

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[97] See <u>Did Congress Try To Sabotage Art Of Living's World Culture Festival? (swarajyamag.com)</u> (accessed 3rd November 2022).

Thus, the controversy over the World Cultural Festival of the AoLF opens up the complex relationship the foundation ended up sharing, i.e., on the one hand with the organised politics of the country and, on the other hand, with religion, despite its secular, humanitarian and spiritual base with which it majorly claims to identify. Indeed, the controversy has made its very secular-humanitarian-spiritual base vulnerable to the wrath of the critics.[98] While on the one hand, AoLF and its founder are criticised for not being sensitive and responsible enough towards the environment and livelihood of the farmers who were using the floodplains to grow crops despite being a foundation which ironically teaches the "art of living"; on the other hand, the critics and the opposition party members were also provoked by the support shown by not only the ruling BJP party but also the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal (from an opposition party known as the Aam Aadmi Party) for AoL and its founder for organising WCF.[99]

However, on the inaugural day of the festival in March 2016, the *guru,* in an apparent reference to the critics and the legal tussle, said, "Many obstacles come when we want to do something great. But it only indicates that we have taken up something very significant."[100] He further encouraged his followers to face difficulties with courage affirming in an ironical manner, "let us care for the environment. We love nature. It is in our DNA", and also praised the farmers for their service to the country.[101] Interestingly, it has been observed that amongst the followers of AoL there are some who justified the very controversy as the *guru's* and the divine's own way of attracting

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[98]See AoL vs NGT: The Art of Living and Gassing (newslaundry.com); Sri Sri & the art of blundering (deccanchronicle.com) (accessed 3rd November 2021).

[99] See Hatred for Sri Sri grows. Political parties and journalists are editing videos to spread rumors (opindia.com) (accessed 3rd November 2021).

[100] See Obstacles come when something great is done: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com) (accessed 3rd November 2021).

[101] Ibid.

people's attention to this important issue of environment, especially on the river Yamuna which had been neglected for ages. In the eyes of such followers, such divine ways may be seen as controversial in the eyes of the people but are meant for a bigger cause for which even a bit of sacrifice can be justified. However, despite the controversy over WCF revolving around accusations, criticism and gradual defence against all criticism by the AoLF, the relationship that the foundation and its founder share with the ruling BJP government demands an elaborative understanding in order to know the intricate matrix of the politics of identity. In this regard, the Ayodhya issue would throw further light on the subtlety of politics surrounding the question of identity.

4.4.2. Ayodhya: Ramjanmabhoomi versus Babri Masjid issue:

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a spiritual leader's involvement in the resolution of the almost 134 years old longest running legal battle in India's history, i.e., reported being dating back to the year 1885, could be seen as a part of AoL's aim at conflict resolution and bringing in peace and harmony fitting well with spirituality. Publicly, the AoL leader's concern and association with this Mandir-Masjid issue at Ayodhya was broadcasted in 2003 in a national news channel viz. the NDTV 24X7's program called "Walk the Talk" hosted by a popular anchor, journalist, writer and columnist namely Shekhar Gupta.[102] In this interview of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, his viewpoint or rather a solution for the dispute over a claim towards the 2.77 acres of land at Ayodhya, on which whether a temple to be built or a mosque to be rebuilt was clearly laid down. His formula entailed an initial apology by the Hindus for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992; in turn, the Muslims as a symbol of goodwill could let the Hindus build a Ram Mandir on it as a matter of an out-of-court settlement. This very solution appears to be in favour of the

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[102] See (114) Walk The Talk: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Aired: May 2003) - YouTube (accessed 25th November 2022).

Hindu majority; Ravi Shankar's Hindu leaning readily attracted criticism calling him biased. Indeed, the recent inclusion of Ravi Shankar for Ayodhya issue mediation as one of the mediators out of the three members panel that included former Supreme Court judge F M Kalifulla and senior advocate Sriram Panchu ordered by the Supreme court's five members team headed by the former Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi resulted in congress party members targeting him as "government agent" (i.e., BJP's agent).[103]

It was not a smooth journey for the guru as it was then, almost after 13 years in 2017, he offered to mediate and solve the Ayodhya dispute. He, however, continued with the same proposal he stood for in 2003. For this purpose, he even met the Uttar Pradesh BJP-led Chief Minister Ajay Bisht, popularly known as Yogi Adityanath. Interestingly, the state government declared not to take any side but rather decided to welcome any settlements and decisions of the court in this matter. The case was gradually transferred to the Supreme Court of India after dissatisfaction on the part of the three litigants, namely, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Nirmohi Akhara and the Shia Waqf Board on the Allahabad High Court's decision in 2010 to equally divide the 2.77 acres of land between the three, allowing the Hindus to build a temple on the disputed region. After seven years, in 2017, when Ravi Shankar offered to mediate as also the Chief Justice of India, J S Khera called for a solution through mediation, he still had to get the acceptance of the three litigant parties. In this regard, the Shia Central Waqf Board chief Waseem Risvi sided with the *guru's* solution. However, the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board general secretary Maulana Wali Rehmani accused the *guru* of following a biased approach to the issue and did not recognise his offer for

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[103] See Ram temple: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar representing 'govt interests' in Ayodhya dispute: Congress - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com) (accessed 25th November 2022).

mediation. Gradually, when the *guru* was officially included in the panel for mediation by the Supreme Court in 2019, questions were still raised.

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen chief and Member of Parliament, Asaduddin Owaisi, had expressed his displeasure over Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's inclusion as the latter's standing on the issue did not sound neutral. Interestingly, in a piece published on March 2019 in OpIndia (a website dealing with news and current affairs), an author named Ashish Shukla expressed his rant and displeasure on two major national newspapers, namely, the Hindu and the Indian Express, which he declared as "big bosses" along with certain other "side kick" news media platforms like the Wire, the Quint, and the Scroll. Shukla could not resist calling them in unison the "commie rags" (indirect connotation indicating communist leaning), adding the National Herald too as his target. He particularly defended Ravi Shankar's inclusion in the mediation panel by the Supreme Court against the pieces published in the Hindu and Indian Express that expressed discontentment and disapproval over the same. While the piece in the Hindu considered the guru's inclusion as "controversial" because of his comment, "If Ram Mandir issue is not solved, we will have a *Syria* in India," which was interpreted by the critics as a threat and fear-mongering on behalf of the right-wing Hindus, the piece in the Indian Express condemned the guru's inclusion by considering him a religious figure who needs to be kept away from legally mediating a religious affair. In defence, the author accused the News agency of allowing bigotry and defended the *guru's* reputation as a "peace-maker" and his AoL as "not a religious discourse" by citing an example of his popular move to mediate for conflict resolution in the case of Columbia in 2015 resulting in conferring the *guru* with Columbia's highest civilian award.

Concerning the "Syria in India" controversial comment when in February 2020, in a popular TV program, namely "Aap Ki Adalat" hosted by a famous host, also the editor-in-chief of the same channel namely, Rajat Sharma of IndiaTV the *guru* was asked what made him say so, he corrected and defended his comment by saying, "My correct statement was that I don't want to see a Syria like situation in India. I wasn't predicting the future. I gave a warning. See what is happening now, a lot of mistrust among people. There is a lot of anger within. This should not happen; that is what was being hinted at because we are working in Syria. We have adopted 30,000 children from Syria within the Jordan and Lebanon group and are working on trauma relief. Thus, I saw, and I will say and issue a warning."[104]However, the mediation could not result in a final solution agreed upon by all parties. Thus, the Supreme Court itself delivered its final verdict on the Ayodhya issue resulting in giving away the disputed land in favour of the Hindus to build a Ram temple; on the other hand, the Sunni Central Wakf Board was given 5 acres of land to build a mosque. Despite rejecting the viewpoint that the Babri masjid was built by demolishing a pre-existing Ram temple and accepting that Hindutva groups illegally vandalised it in December 1992, the verdict delivered its judgement in favour of the Hindus, somehow reflecting what Ravi Shankar was suggesting as a solution.

Interestingly, when Rajat Sharma asked the *guru*, "You are able to solve the issues of other countries, but what about our own? You could not solve the Ayodhya Ramjanmabhoomi issue through mediation, to which the *guru* wittily responded with a counter question, "do you think so?", on being further asked, "then, why did we have to rely on Supreme Court's decision?", the *guru* continued, "see Supreme Court itself

[104] See *Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in Aap ki Adalat.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSKe_ZVtmQs (accessed 25th November 2022).

declared that mediation had played a major role. It is the coming together of mediation and judgement that resulted in such a good verdict. See, whatever people want to say, they can say; mediation never fails; it prepares the path, joins the heart of the people, and brings the people together. It may not matter whether the final verdict is completely based on mediation or not."[105]

Although Ravi Shankar welcomed the verdict as a "landmark decision or historic decision" bringing good for both communities, the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Waqf Board lawyer termed it "unjust".[106] According to an article published in the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, the author namely, Vidya Subramaniam, describing the moments just before the declaration of the verdict, writes, "as the hour drew close, however, there was panic in Muslim homes, particularly in the Hindi belt. Parents wanted their wards to be safe and preferably among Muslims. Many fervently prayed for the judgement not to be in favour of the mosque because the consequences of that would impact Muslims more than any joy they felt at winning back the mosque." After speaking to a group of youths belonging to the Muslim religion, the author concluded that "In majoritarian India, young Muslims had to reconcile to being second-class citizens".[107] However, the fact remains that there was neither a public demonstration of celebration of the verdict nor agitation against it. Although Vidya Subramaniam on the basis of speaking to a few young Muslims in the Hindi-belt, concluded, "young Muslims had to reconcile to being second-class citizens", such a generalisation is shaky and somewhat biased, reducing the whole issue to the leftist versus rightist conflict leaving aside a whole population that cuts across religion and

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[105] Ibid.
[106] See https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/sri-sri-ravi-shankar-praises-ayodhya-verdict-should-be-welcomed-by-all-2130045 (accessed 25th November 2022).
[107] See https://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/current-issues/article30024468.ece (accessed 25th November 2022).

choose to stay indifferent and focus on day to day life's intricacies or rather go beyond Mandir-Masjid or Hindu-Muslim and are in favour of a neutral solution to the issue in terms of land-use for public utility.

With no further diversion, moving back to the role of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar concerning the Ayodhya issue, the guru's neutral spiritual side seems to have somewhat got compromised in this regard. His proposal appears to be tilting towards the pro-Hindutva side. However, the followers deny any such match or connection and see the *guru's* role as pivotal in bringing a peaceful end to the Ayodhya conflict despite the pleas for reconsideration.

Thus, Ravi Shankar's sharing of a common platform, whether in the form of his physical presence at the swearing-in ceremony of PM Modi in 2014 or in terms of his support for: the law against triple talaq, the abrogation of article 370, CAA and mediating the Ayodhya issue seemingly in favour of the Hindu majority, and in turn the presence of Modi in the AoL's WCF event in 2016 who also defended the event in the midst of controversy makes it understandable that the exchange between Modi government and AoLF has been mutual. Indeed, an amicable gesture portrayed by occasional exchange of mutual greetings or congratulatory messages on the online public social media platform through their (Sri Sri's and Modi's) official Twitter handles is not uncommon[108]. Thereby, on this basis, can we now declare the AoLF, a Hindu right-wing foundation and its founder, a "Hindutva Baba"? Then, what about AoL's secular, liberal, non-discriminatory and democratic spirituality-based image? The next section of this chapter attempts to address and look for the answers to these

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[108]See https://www.dailyo.in/politics/modi-government-sri-sri-ravishankar-art-of-living hinduism/story/1/8213.html (accessed 11th November 2021).

important questions with an emphasis on understanding the nature of the basis of the AoLF-BJP bonhomie.

4.4.3. The Nature of the basis of Sri Sri (AoLF)-Modi (BJP) Relation:

Before moving on to the nature of the basis of the relationship between AoLF and BJP and their leadership, let us delve briefly into the response or reaction to this relation. In this regard, it has been observed that the mutual admiration and support of Ravi Shankar and Narendra Modi, as discussed earlier, has not been received in a positive light, especially outside the purview of the "Godi media".[109] This could be seen especially with regard to the media coverage of the AoL's WCF event and during the 2014 general election in India, as already discussed. In this regard, the critics went to the extent of even describing the events leading to the WCF as demonstrating the "rise of crony spiritualism",[110] indicating a phenomenon in which business, political and spiritual interests merge for political and business-centric gain. While Ravi Shankar his AoLF was seen as successful in materialising the event despite being engulfed in a controversy related to an environmental issue and could also get easy access to the ministry of defence for the assistance of the army in the construction of a pontoon bridge for the private event through the support of BJP, on the other hand, the BJP is seen by the critics as gaining from the support of AoL followers in Modi's election campaign.[111]

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[109] Basant Kumar Mohanty, a journalist, while reporting on the ongoing farmers protest (against three farm related acts passed by the parliament of India under the BJP government in September 2020), writes, "Godi media" is a term used by critics to refer to a brand of pliant journalism that has taken shape over the past few years, unquestioningly toeing the line of the government and running vitriolic campaigns against those who speak up against the administration" (Mohanty, 2020).The government here refers to the BJP-led NDA government since 2014.

[110] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and rise of India's crony spiritualism (dailyo.in) (accessed 16th November 2021).

[111] Ibid.

Moreover, Rajdeep Sardesai (a prominent Indian journalist, author and TV news presenter) reflecting majorly on the WCF event, recognising its high-profile attendees from the nation and abroad, including BJP's party President, finance minister, as well as chief minister of Delhi and Lok Sabha speaker declares that Ravi Shankar's status as "India's most well connected self-styled spiritual godmen" is confirmed.[112] While accepting the justification of the claims of Ravi Shankar's followers that a live web telecast of the event across 150 countries evidently portrays India's growing "soft power", Sardesai adds that despite the presence of few Gulf *sheikhs*, *maulvis*, and global members, it also symbolises the ascendance of "soft Hindu power" as the core group of the followers constitutes of Hindu middle class.[113] Thus, Sardesai states, "identifying with the activities of Sri Sri is a subtle attempt by the political class to cultivate a distinct Hindu vote bank in a relatively non-adversarial manner".[114] However, he is careful enough not to restrict Sri Sri's connection just with the BJP party.

Interestingly, unlike these criticisms on the closeness of Ravi Shankar and Modi amounting to the rise of "crony spiritualism" or "crony spirituality", M Rajaque Rahman (a former journalist and Art of Living's "spirituality-based workshops" facilitator) in a paradoxical manner considers the very nexus of spirituality and politics resulting from the mutual admiration of the spiritual guru and the prime minister as significant for "good governance" and for "must-needed reforms in Indian polity" (Rahman, 2016). Seeing spirituality and politics as sharing the same essence, i.e., to "care for people and their welfare" and emphasising on Ravi Shankar's push for "spiritualising politics" as essential for checking corruption; Rahman notes that it is due

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[112] See Art of Living and politicians: When loyalty trumps propriety - Hindustan Times (accessed 16th November 2021).
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.

to the lack of spirituality that leaders and governments tend to turn communal (ibid.). Thus, he welcomes Modi's "spiritual bent", which not only transformed Modi's image from a political pariah to an international icon but also could be utilised to develop a constructive political milieu (ibid.). By opening up the sphere of governance to non-official and politically neutral spiritual leaders like Ravi Shankar, who had been keen to engage with Naxal leaders, militants in the North-East and Pakistani High Commission in the past in order to help the government and ease the deadlocks, Rahman believes that the government can harness spirituality to solve issues like that of terrorism and Naxalism as well (ibid.). Lastly, he believes that the active role of spiritual leaders in the arena of politics would lead to instilling "values in politics and political leaders" and also promote a "universal spiritual code of co-existence" (ibid.).

With this brief account discussed so far on the relationship of AoL and BJP that developed since the 2014 general election of India, the present chapter will now attempt to throw light on three important factors that constitute or adds to the fundamental basis of their relationship. These factors are Hindu tradition, anti-Congress basis and the Modi factor as the connecting basis.

4.4.3.1. Hinduism as the Common Basis: The Point of Merge:

Arvind Sharma points out, "Hinduism is the name given to the most ancient and persistent religion on the Indian subcontinent, and Hindutva is the name by which the ideology of the Hindu right, represented by the political party Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party (BJP), is known" (Sharma, 2020). He further notes, "The close relationship of these two concepts of Hinduism and Hindutva may help us account for the paradox that those Indians, usually liberals, who stand by Hinduism (rather than Hindutva) regard Hindutva or political Hinduism as a subset that falls within the larger

set of Hinduism. Followers of Hindutva, on the other hand, prefer to see Hinduism as a subset of Hindutva (rather than the other way around) in the sense that a culture may contain many dimensions, including the religious, within it" (ibid.). The difference between Hinduism and Hindutva is an age-old and ongoing debate, especially in this era of BJP's dominance (see Sharma 2020). This often results in a total rejection of the Hindutva as a part of the former, if not concluding its existence as just a form of distorted Hinduism because of its discriminatory and exclusive extremist ideology based on the deployment of violence, hatred and division.

Conversely, Hinduism is characterised by openness, dialogue, diversity, and holism (see Tharoor, 2019). Even in the present-day context, a debate on Hinduism versus Hindutva has been sparked by a statement of the Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi when he emphasised on the difference stating, "Hinduism is not about killing individuals, but Hindutva is"[115]. Thus, he sees one as different from the other and ironically, the BJP countered him by calling him a Hindu hater. However, regardless of the difference with regard to how the followers of Hinduism and Hindutva attach a meaning to the word 'Hindu' or Hinduism, they do share a commonality in relation to the usage of this very word. Indeed, in a recent article, the authors, namely Sailaja Krishnamurti (an associate professor of Religious Studies and Gender and Women Studies) and Shana Sippy (an assistant professor of Religion), argued that "not all Hinduism is Hindutva, but Hindutva is in fact Hinduism".[116] Today, the term 'Hindu' majorly refers to a religious identity. However, historically this was not the case.[117]

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[115] See https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rahul-gandhi-hindutva-hinduism-congress-7619586/ (accessed 19th November 2021).

[116] See Krishnamurti and Sippy, 2021. *Counterview: Not All Hinduism Is Hindutva, But Hindutva Is In Fact Hinduism.* Available at: Counterview: Not All Hinduism Is Hindutva, But Hindutva Is In Fact Hinduism – MythBuster (wordpress.com) (accessed 25th November 2022).

[117] See Sharma, Arvind. 2002.

Even today, some groups and individuals prefer to primarily attach a cultural and national connotation to the Hindu identity on the basis of sharing a common tradition in the sense of living a certain way of life based on Hinduism.

According to James G. Lochtefeld's "Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism", the term "Hinduism" was coined by the British, referring to all forms of religions in India with diverse beliefs and practices ranging from nature worship to sophisticated schools of philosophy (Lochetefeld, 2002: vii-viii). Having "no founder, no definite scripture, no centralised authority, no single supreme god, no creed of essential beliefs and no heresy", Hinduism as a religious tradition encompasses multifarious and contradictory ideas and strands (ibid.). Thus, Amanda Lucia rightly notes, "Hinduism is so internally diverse that one can often find justifications for all sorts of beliefs and practices within its voluminous scriptures" (Lucia, 2014: 227). In this regard, whether one considers Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's version of Hinduism (universal, holistic and respects all faiths) or Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's idea of Hindutva or 'Hindu-ness' (applies to only those who are born in India and also who considers it as one's holy place, thus, excludes Muslims and Christians), though both would appear paradoxical to each other; both aroused as "a response to the attempted definitions of Hinduism" as distinct forms of Hinduism under the western influence within colonial modernity (Sharma, 2002: 20-22).

Similarly, despite one being a non-governmental organisation headed by a spiritual guru influenced by the *Vedas,* especially the school of *Advaita* (holistic and universal) and the other, a leading political party with a presiding Prime Minister driven by a Hindutva ideology; AoLF and BJP shares a common basis to a certain degree in relation to an influence and interest driven by Hinduism and Hindu tradition. Commonly shared

interest and goals concerning the Hindu population and their sentiments is one of the bases that bring Ravi Shankar and its foundation closer to Modi and the BJP party. For instance, in a piece titled "Time to rethink: Saffron surge and the Secular Debacle" (2014)[118], referring to the result of the 2014 general election and taking a jibe at the Congress party Ravi Shankar clearly appears to be siding with the BJP party on the question of Hindu majority. He asserts, "The UPA (referring to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance) also showed utter disregard for Indian ethos. India, where the cow has been considered sacred since time immemorial, silently became the number one exporter of beef. This notorious development came as a big jolt. Subsidies were liberally given to beef exporters while farmers were committing suicide." By comparing Narendra Modi to Rahul Gandhi (Modi's political opponent from the Congress party), he further states, "In sharp contrast, the conviction and confidence with which Narendra Modi spoke about development was just the change people were looking for. He proudly proclaimed his faith and expressed his commitment to the entire nation."[119] The point to be noted in this assertion is that the "Indian ethos" are equated with those who consider the cow as "sacred" for ages. Thus, there is a clear indication of a bent towards Hindu nationalism that tends to equate India with the Hindus and Hindu culture, which is very much an inseparable characteristic of the identity of the BJP.

Interestingly, a study by D.N. Jha, a food Historian, shows that beef-eating was commonly practised in the Vedic period but the Brahmins gradually gave up this

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[118] See Time to Rethink : Saffron Surge and the Secular Debacle | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 20th November 2021).
[119] Ibid.

practice (Rinehart, 2004: 26).[120] Jha considers that with the BJP's rise to power "beef has assumed unprecedented importance in Indian politics"[121].

Moreover, Ravi Shankar's mediation in the Ayodhya issue clearly indicates his bent towards majoritarian politics in India in favour of the Hindus, which the BJP commonly shares. Paradoxically, his role in this issue compromised his image of a neutral and secular spiritual leader with a universal vision leading to online critical posts even addressing him as "Hindutva Baba"[122] linking him to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Thus, Ravi Shankar seemed to have succumbed to the lure of identity politics. Interestingly, during an interview session in 2016, when the interviewer considered spirituality as about humanity and oneness and asked him about his take on the nation and national identity, he responded, "We all have several identities. First and foremost, we must know we are part of one light, one divinity – *Jeev*, *Brahm*, *Ishwar*, *Avinash*. We are part of one divine being. Second identity is that we are part of the human race on the planet. Then we belong to this country. Then gender identity – male or female – then this religion or that religion, this country or that country, this language or that language. All these identities are there. We need to prioritise. But first, we must remember we are part of one light — one human race. When this identity is sacrificed for smaller identities, then we have conflicts"[123]. Ravi Shankar's priority did seem to have shifted away from the "foremost" in the case of Ayodhya.

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[120] See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/the-interviews-blog/hindu-right-wrongly-says-muslims-brought-beef-eating-hindutva-history-is-a-mystery-d-n-jha (accessed 20th November 2021).
[121] Ibid.
[122] See https://sabrangindia.in/article/congress-falls-trap-supports-hindutva-baba-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-mediator-babri-dispute (accessed 20th November 2021).
[123] See https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/no-conflict-between-being-a-world-citizen-and-a-good-subject-of-your-state-sri-sri-ravi-shankar/ (accessed 25th November 2022).

On the other hand, reflecting on the politics that surrounded the Ayodhya issue Avijit Pathak, a Professor of Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, expressed, "*Yajnavalkya's* conversation with *Maitreyi* in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* helps me conceive the depths of spirituality, the quest for the Eternal, and also helps me see the ugliness in a doctrine that reduces religion into mere identity politics, or a weapon for intensifying the narcissistic ego of the 'Hindu nation' (Pathak, 2019). Pathak further points out, "I see the ethos of *niskam karma* (or the spirit of work as an offering without selfish interests) in Gandhi's politico-spiritual pilgrimage to Noakhali in 1946, not in the calculative Machiavellian urge to build a temple at Ayodhya at the demolished site of the Babri Masjid (ibid.). Thus, Professor Pathak's reflection or response with regard to the Ayodhya issue brings him closer to what Sri Sri Ravi Shankar actually preaches in the name of spirituality, such as to realise the universally applicable divinity within that cut across all identities. Instead, Ravi Shankar himself could be seen as getting closer to BJP and RSS, which prioritises the consolidation of majoritarian Hindu identity. In this regard, another important factor which brings them close to each other is their attitude towards the opposition party, i.e., the Congress.

4.4.3.2. Anti-Congress basis:

Ravi Shankar's support for the BJP government policies and its leadership goes along with his simultaneous criticism of the Congress government, which turned out very vocal and sharp, especially during the 2014 general election period. For instance, in the same piece shared above, i.e., "Time to rethink: Saffron and the Secular Debacle", Ravi Shankar outrightly blames the Congress in these words, "No doubt scams, price rise, all-pervading corruption, negative industrial growth (from +10% to -2.5%) and unemployment played a major role, but above all, it was the communal attitude of the

party and its overt tilt towards the Muslim minority that derailed the UPA."[124] To substantiate this point, Ravi Shankar raises the issue of scholarship and by referring to a book entitled "The Majority Report" (2013) by two retired IPS officers asserts that "In some states ruled by UPA allies, a child gets Rs. 30,000 just for being from the minority community. This created a wedge in the classroom psyche and caused heartburn to other poor students from the majority. However, no such facilities were extended to the Hindu minority in Jammu & Kashmir and the North East. Poverty and illiteracy have no religion – every religion has poor people. Giving benefits based on religion is unconstitutional, and such practices by political parties angered people." He further points out, "While minority religious leaders could be seen often with UPA leaders, Hindu saints were disregarded, if not hounded.

Moreover, the minorities had full freedom to run their places of worship, but the government controlled all major Hindu temples." Ironically, for Ravi Shankar, such discrimination took shape under the rule of a party which is considered secular. In addition, he also says that there were more communal clashes in states ruled by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) allies. On the other hand, he regards the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), despite being accused of communalism, as doing everything possible to get rid of this label. Henceforth, the common Hindu concern merges well with the anti-Congress element as one of the foundational bases of AoLF-BJP bonhomie.

Indeed, even during the fieldwork in the Bengaluru Ashram campus and elsewhere, it was not uncommon to find BJP supporters sharing anti-Congress sentiments, as already shared above while discussing the WCF event.

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[124] See Time to Rethink : Saffron Surge and the Secular Debacle | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 25th November 2022).

Moreover, a news piece reported in the year 2010 on India Today website entitled, "Sri Sri's College under CBI lens" brings to light that Sri Sri College of Ayurvedic Science and Research was under the Central Bureau of Investigation "scanner for running the institution allegedly without adequate faculty strength, infrastructure, and an attached hospital"[125]. It was during the rule of the Congress-led UPA government Sri Sri Ayurveda college had to go under a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) probe. Gradually, Ravi Shankar also took part in India Against Corruption Movement, which was a consequence of a number of scams and corruption issues that manifested during the UPA regime. The movement demanded the creation of the Jan Lokpal, an ombudsman or a public body that would have powers to charge and arrest corrupt government officials. On the other hand, even the Congress party members do not leave any chance to criticise Sri Sri over his comments[126] on social media and because of his participation in certain public-related affairs, especially in relation to BJP, as could be seen during the 2014 election and during the WCF event. Thus, the anti-Congress factor plays an important role in strengthening the base of the Sri Sri-Modi bond as well as in an understanding of the basis of this relationship. However, in this regard, one of the most important factors yet to be discussed is the Modi factor itself.

4.4.3.3. The Modi factor:

The Modi factor has been immensely influential in the development of AoL-BJP relationship. The 2014 general election not only turned out to be a historic win for BJP and NDA, securing 282 and 336 seats, respectively, out of 543 in the Lok Sabha (Lower

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[125] See https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/sri-sri-s-college-under-cbi-lens-87502-2010-12-22 (accessed 20th November 2021).
[126] See https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-kapil-sibal-slams-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-s-remarks-on-govt-schools-1665419 (accessed 20th November 2021).

House of the Indian parliament)[127], but also established its Prime Ministerial candidate, namely Narendra Damodardas Modi as one of the most popular and charismatic sought-after national and international political figure despite his past infamous post-Godhra Gujrat riot image (see Jaffrelot, 2021). Indeed, the general election in India in 2014 had turned out more like the US Presidential election with 'Modi Vs Who'; the weak opposition with no strong leadership could not connect with the masses, and this worked rather in favour of the Modi government which simply de-legitimised the opposition on several grounds (see Suri, 2021). No matter whether it was due to the growing anti-Congress sentiments or owing to the strategic use of mass media by the BJP, the "Modi Wave" successfully drew votes from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and the poor while retaining its support from the social conservatives and the economic right (Chibber and Verma, 2014). With the slogans like *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas* (together with all and development for all) appearing on the party's 2014 manifesto and *Acche Din Aane Wale Hai* (good days are coming) resonating in the popular periodicals and news channels on Television, Modi was advertised and presented as a strong leader with a message of "unity with inclusion" that cut across the lines of "caste, community, religion, language, region, village, city" emphasising specifically on "Hindu-Muslim" unity to fight poverty for the development, upliftment and progress of all.[128]

"Brand Modi" signifies a story of the rise of a man from a humble non-elitist background ("tea-seller") to the man behind the "vibrant Gujrat" model of development as the chief minister of Gujrat to one of the most popular Prime Ministers of the country.

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[127] See https://www.firstpost.com/politics/election-results-2014-historic-win-for-nda-with-336-seats-285-for-bjp-1526377.html (accessed 8th November 2021).
[128] See Sabka Saath, SabkaVikas : Collective Efforts Inclusive Growth (narendramodi.in) (accessed 8th November 2021).

Modi's popular image is based on the ideas commonly associated with his personality as a credible leader, and a selfless man of action (a workaholic motivated by the "India First" motto).[129] His oratory skills and ability to connect with dignitaries from diverse fields, national and international, is widely known. In this regard, even Sri Sri Ravi Shankar could not escape the Modi wave. This is evident from the piece shared by Ravi Shankar praising Modi and giving a clean chit to his infamous post-Godhra riots image during the 2014 general election, as discussed above. And since then, there have been occasional sharing of mutual encomium between the two leaders either on online or offline platforms. Whether Ravi Shankar openly considers Modi as a strong leader or with regard to extending support to the Modi government initiatives such as demonetisation, *Swaccha Bharat Abhiyan*, etc.; or Modi praising the *guru* and AoL for organising WCF and organising campaigns inspired by Swaccha Bharat Abhiyan like 'Swaccha hi Seva' and so on; in addition, the common interest and viewpoint shared by both that is over promoting and practising yoga, meditation and presenting these practices as part of holistic Indian culture plays an important factor in the gelling of AoL and BJP. Indeed, the declaration of the 21st of June as International Yoga Day in the year 2015 by the United Nations was credited to the Modi government's persuasion. Interestingly, it was during the Modi government's rule Ravi Shankar, and other spiritual leaders such as Jaggi Vasudev and Sri M were conferred with India's prestigious highest civilian award, such as Padma Vibhushan to the former two and Padma Bhushan to the latter.

Henceforth, the mutual connection and support between Ravi Shankar and the Modi government raise pertinent questions on the nature of their bond on the one hand

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[129] See PM Narendra Modi: Making of a political brand | Ahmedabad News - Times of India (indiatimes.com) (accessed 8th November 2021).

and, most crucially, on the nature of AoL version of spirituality on the other hand. Critics like Rajdeep Sardesai see the bonding with Ravi Shankar as an attempt of the BJP to utilise AoL for the Hindu vote bank, and in turn, the spiritual *gurus* like Sri Sri are seen as representing "crony spirituality". Harish Khare, Editor-in-Chief of the Tribune (a national English daily newspaper), reflecting on the recent rise in visibility of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev in the public arena and their open display of political connections and proximity with the state, argues that this is none other than signifying the rise of "crony Babas," who all have easy access to the powerful offices of the state. Addressing the Guru and the Baba as the new "*sarkari* sages" (sages of the government) or "political *swamis*" but with no claim to take the responsibility of a *rajguru* who could impose a moral authority over the ruler to follow the righteous conduct in the ancient days (Khare, 2016). Rather, the piece indicates that in the garb of spiritual welfare for all and cultural revival, the crony Babas are doing business by promoting themselves and their activities, such as the organisation of the WCF by Sri Sri as signifying India's "soft power" (ibid.). For Khera, they seek power, prominence and protection under the state's patronage. And the politicians, in return take the guru's refuge to regain their depleted moral authority. Thus, the rise of "crony Babaism" is viewed as an assault on the secular and republican ethos of the constitution. (ibid.)

Thereby, the critics' take on Sri Sri and his closeness to the government is attaching a very dubious attribute to the *guru's* identity and to the spiritual activities of his foundation, reducing it to merely a power and business-oriented religious entity. Thus, to what extent can we actually justify such a characterisation of AoL and its founder? Moreover, is the AoLF simply a Hindu right-wing foundation and its founder a "Hindutva Baba"? Then, what about its not-for-profit spirituality-based secular and humanitarian claim?

On the basis of the discussion so far, there is nothing left to speculate about the nature of the relationship between AoL and its founder and the Modi government. Modi and Ravi Shankar have been publicly vocal in support of each other's activities. However, with regard to the question of religion and spirituality, there is a distinction that requires clarification. While there is no doubt about Modi and Sri Sri's common concern with Hinduism, still equating the latter and his foundation with Hindutva is highly problematic. Painting the whole foundation and its leadership with a Hindutva brush merely on the basis of certain events that indicated a bent towards it is premature and biased. Indeed, despite the Ayodhya issue mediation wherein Sri Sri's mediation signified a lean towards majoritarianism, a closer look at his standpoint on the Ayodhya issue will reveal that even the Hindutva groups were questioning his presence as a mediator. For instance, along with S.Q.R. Ilyas, co-convener of the Babri Masjid Action Committee and All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), Asaduddin Owaisi, chief of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul even the right-wing organisation the Vishwa Hindu Parishad questioned Sri Sri's presence as a mediator.[130] The Hindu saint community of Ayodhya was also against the inclusion of Sri Sri in the mediation panel. While some considered Sri Sri an outsider, others wanted the inclusion of a saint from Ayodhya as a mediator.[131]

Moreover, Ravi Shankar's compromise formula does include a tone of request to the 'other' as a resolution for the Ayodhya issue, as discussed before, that at least entails the ideas of brotherhood, love and trust along with an indirect reference though yet a recognition of the wrong committed in the demolishment of Babri Masjid by the

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[130] See VHP distances itself from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's bid to mediate Ram temple dispute | Latest News India - Hindustan Times   (accessed 15th May 2022).
[131] See Saints oppose Sri Sri's name, Muslim litigants welcome SC's mediation move in Ayodhya dispute - Hindustan Times   (accessed 16th May 2022).

Hindutva fringe elements. For instance, considering that even if the court permits the Hindus to build Ram mandir on the disputed land on the basis of archaeological evidence, this will lead to further distrust between the communities, Sri Sri proposed an out-of-court settlement that wanted the Muslim body or the Sunni Waqf Board to gift 1 acre of land to the Hindus and in return, the Hindus would give 5 acres of land and also help in the construction of a mosque elsewhere in Ayodhya. Also, as a part of the resolution, it would be documented that the temple has been built through the cooperation of both Hindus and Muslims. The whole thing will be recognised as reconciliation wherein the Muslim body has to keep in mind and spirit that they are not surrendering the land to those who demolished the Babri Masjid or to any organisations. Rather, they are gifting it expressing their magnanimity, goodwill, broad-mindedness and benevolence. In this regard, Ravi Shankar requests all three stakeholders to put the nation first and emphasise on building love, trust and brotherhood between the two communities.[132] Moreover, a journalist named Shantanu Guha Ray hailing Sri Sri's effort that he considers having resonated in the final verdict of the apex court of India, holds that it is the higher spiritual knowledge that is common in all ancient cultures reflected in the message of Sri Sri which unifies and provides space for harmonious co-existence.[133]

Sri Sri's differences with the BJP government and other right-wing Hindutva groups are clearly indicated in his viewpoint on the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the BJP government in December 2019. Briefly, accordingly to this Act, the persecuted minorities or immigrants belonging to religious communities such as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Parsis in the

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[132] See Ram Janmabhoomi Babri Masjid issue: Out-of-court settlement is the best solution, Art of Living foun- The New Indian Express   (accessed 17th May 2022).
[133] See The Sri Sri hand in Ayodhya settlement (indiatimes.com) (accessed 17th May 2022).

Muslim-majority neighbourly countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan will be granted citizenship of India (excluding certain North-Eastern regions) provided they entered India before 31 December 2014.[134] Thus, there is a clearly visible religious basis that excludes the minorities belonging to the Muslim community that resulted in protests in the country. In this regard, Ravi Shankar though hailed the CAA and considered it necessary but at the same time, he regarded it as nothing wrong to give shelter to the persecuted Muslim minorities as well such as that of Ahmadiyas from Pakistan and also requested the central government to include the Tamilian refugees from Sri Lanka under CAA.[135]

On the question of Sri Sri's inclination towards the right wing, he himself, during an interaction with the media conveyed, clearly said that though during the general elections he had voiced for change and it may be a public perception that he is inclined towards the right-wing, but in reality, he is not inclined towards the right-wing or any particular political party.[136] Rather, in Odisha, he had worked with Biju Janta Dal, and in Kerela, he worked with the communist government, and in Karnataka, he had worked for river rejuvenation. He maintained that he is working for the welfare of all the people of the world.[137] Indeed, during the 2015 Delhi election that led to the victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government, Ravi Shankar did not refrain from taking a critical view of the BJP's loss. He writes, "AAP did a commendable job of getting rid of the baggage from last year and reconnecting with the voters. BJP, on the other hand, was complacent from a string of victories and paid the price. Congress, with this performance, has shown once again that it continues to live in its own world, completely

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[134] See What 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act says and why the outrage over it (theprint.in) (accessed 17th May 2022).
[135] Ibid.
[136] I am not inclined towards right wing: Ravi Shankar (freepressjournal.in) (accessed 18th May 2022).
[137] Ibid.

unwilling to make any effort to learn from the past...This was BJP's first shock after a dream run last year in both national and state elections. They have been humbled right under their nose, fair and square…AAP has proven to be an able contender, and this result will keep the BJP grounded."[138]

Moreover, occasionally Ravi Shankar's differences with the right-wing results in attracting severe criticism from the latter, especially when the former's activities tend to represent or signify a merge with the 'other'. For instance, it is quite usual to see Sri Sri Ravi Shankar wearing a Christmas hat and delivering a message of love and unity on Christmas and on Jesus Christ. Also, it is an annual routine affair for him to give a New Year message on New Year's Day. However, in 2021, Pramod Mutalik, founder of a right-wing organisation namely Sri Ram Sena Hindustan, criticised Ravi Shankar and asked him to apologise for wishing people and decorating the Ashram campus on New Year's Day as the former believes that such practices are western in nature and would influence the young to convert to Christianity.[139] Another event that portrayed the liberal side of the *guru,* which differs from the right wing, concerns Tipu Sultan, an eighteenth-century ruler from Mysore, Karnataka. While the congress-led government in Karnataka started celebrating Tipu Sultan's birth anniversary by recognising him as a freedom fighter who laid his life fighting the British, the right-wing groups vehemently opposed this celebration as, for them, Tipu was a barbaric ruler that encouraged forceful religious conversions.[140] In this regard, Ravi Shankar supported the celebration of Tipu Sultan Jayanti by urging the people to focus on his good deeds and acts.[141]

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[138] See A Capital Lesson | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 18th May 2022).
[139] See Ravishankar criticised - The Hindu (accessed 19th May 2022).
[140] See Tipu Sultan Jayanti in Karnataka Highlights: 150 BJP workers detained for protesting in Hubli | India News,The Indian Express (accessed 20th May 2022).
[141] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Backs Tipu Jayanti Celebrations (thequint.com) (accessed 20th May 2022).

What is at stake for the right wing is not the nature of a cultural expression but the expression of otherness through even if such a light and trivial practice reflects it. In this regard, AoL is open to all, irrespective of religion, caste, class, gender, nationality, etc. The *guru* has followers from diverse backgrounds cutting across all these categories of identity. With the spread of AoL in almost 180 countries today he is often seen travelling around the world, even visiting the churches and mosques spreading his message of unity in diversity, love and peace, meeting people including the leaders from varying fields and backgrounds including the Pope, *maulanas* and people of high-ranking positions from other faiths and fields. For instance, unlike the controversy, AoL's WCF event with the message of *Vasudeva Kutumbakam* (One World Family) to celebrate diversity and uniqueness as it claims[142] had indeed witnessed the presence of hundreds of people and leaders from across the world, such as that of Europe, America, Middle-East, Africa and so on. Interestingly, while it brought together the leaders from India's opposing political parties at one platform, i.e., Modi and others from BJP and Arvind Kejriwal from AAP as well as P.J. Kurien from Indian National Congress; one of its notable achievements is that of bringing together leaders from diverse faiths such as the Buddhist Master Kong Xin from China to Jewish Rabbis and Zoroastrian leaders, from Grand Mufti of Syria to representatives from the Vatican, from to Giani Gurbachan Singh, the former Jatedar of the Akal Takht to Jain Muni Tarun Sagar.[143] Interestingly and strikingly, in a country wherein celebrating or even publicly or socially praising Pakistan's victory in a cricket match, especially against India, may result in raised eyebrows in doubt and suspicion, if not sedition charges Sri Sri's event had made people witness and hear the slogan "Pakistan Zindabad" (Hail Pakistan) from

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[142] See World Culture Festival – Celebration of Diversity and Uniqueness | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 20th May 2022).
[143] The 10 things media won't shout about Sri Sri's World Culture Festival (opindia.com) (accessed 20th May 2022).

the mouth of a Pakistani religious cleric namely Mufti Mohammed Saeed Khan followed by *guru's* "Jai Hind" (Hail India or Hindustan) in bonhomie and in tune with the latter's belief that "the victory for one does not mean a loss for another".[144]

Indeed, most importantly, the event actually displayed a range of traditional art forms from the diverse cultures of India, such as *Bharatnatyam* from Tamil Nadu, *Mohiniyattam* from Kerala, *Garba* from Rajasthan and *Munda* from Jharkhand to *Bihu* from Assam to African dance and drum beats and many more. Thus, WCF's achievement lies in bringing people from diverse backgrounds together through the medium of cultural exchange and exhibition. As a consequence, world leaders hailed the AoL and its founder for organising such a mega event. For instance, Armin Laschet, the former parliamentarian and deputy chairman of Christian Democratic Party from Germany saw the WCF as an "Act of understanding".[145] Similarly, with his message that the AoL is promoting peace and understanding, the then Prime Minister of Britain, namely David Cameron invited Sri Sri to address the lower house of Parliament in Britain, i.e., the House of Commons.

Moreover, the then Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull ended up inviting Ravi Shankar to organise the next WCF event in Australia. Juan Manuel Santos, the former president of Columbia, praised AoL for promoting human values and life and hailed its leader for spreading and making people recognise happiness and peace within.[146] Indeed, Ravi Shankar's attempt at conflict resolution in Columbia makes him stand apart from the Hindutva-inclined image that the Ayodhya issue adds to him and his organisation.

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[144] Ibid.

[145] World Leaders Hail Sri Sri, Cameron Invites Him To House Of Commons (ndtv.com) (accessed 20th May 2022).

[146] Ibid.

4.5. Columbia Peace Agreement:

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the volunteers from AoL had played a pivotal role in bringing a rebel group in Columbia, namely the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia- the People's Army (FARC) under the Marxist rebel leader Rodrigo Londono alias Timochenko and Columbia's government under President Juan Manuel Santos together to sign a historic ceasefire agreement in 2016 to end a half a century old war that led to the loss of millions of lives.[147] Before Ravi Shankar's initiative for mediation, attempts by Norwegian, Spanish, Swiss and US peace delegations failed in convincing the FARC to agree to their proposals. According to Sri Sri, his involvement in this issue began when in the year 2013, a group of South Americans met him in Montreal and brought up this serious affair before him (Gurumurthy, 2016). According to another source, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was approached by a team of delegates from Columbia to become a part of the peace process in 2014. Then, the AoL volunteers worked towards developing contact with the FARC, which because of its Marxist leaning, offered initial resistance to anything spiritual or slightly religious. However, there was a gradual softening of their stance due to the consistent effort of the volunteers (ibid.).

Then, in June 2015, Ravi Shankar was invited and conferred the highest civilian award of Columbia, namely, the *Orden de la Democracia Simon Bolivar en el grado de cruz Caballero* by the House of Representatives for his and AoL's contribution to the service of the nation for several years. It was followed by a meeting with the then-president of Columbia, viz. Juan Manuel Santos, wherein concerns were raised about the serious crisis the country was facing in the past five decades; failure of the efforts at peace with the guerrillas was leaving behind just military action on the side of the

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[147] See https://swarajyamag.com/insta/how-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-played-a-key-role-in-ending-one-of-latin-americas-most-brutal-conflicts (accessed 25th November 2022).

President that would eventually lead to loss of thousands of lives. Thus, Ravi Shankar offered to mediate and subsequently went to meet the UN director and victims of the conflict in Bogota. Then, he travelled to Havana to have a dialogue with FARC Peace Delegation, which lasted for three days.

Within three days of the meeting of the guru and AoL's volunteers with the FARC peace delegates, the initial reluctant mindset of the FARC's key members opened up for reconciliation and peace agreement. Initially, on meeting the *guru* at a public event at the University of Havana, followed by a personal meeting on the next day, they were reluctant and considered it would be hypocritical on their path to adopt the Gandhian principle of non-violence as suggested by the *guru*, instead he was asked to convince the government to stop atrocities on revolutionaries and announce cease-fire (Gurumurthy, 2016). As reported, after the first-day meet, the *guru* was asked by the FARC member Tanja Nijmeijer: "Do you think spirituality is possible without social justice?" The guru replied: "No, social justice is the first step of spirituality."[148] According to Sri Sri, when they did a meditation together, they became happy. Then, he explained to them the futility of continuing the path of non-violence, expressing emphatically that he also understands that the rebels are the victims of the situation. Ravi Shankar's empathy made one of the FARC members remark that someone understood their position for the first time (Gurumurthy, 2016). The next day, the two most militant leaders of FARC participated in talks with the *guru*. Catatumbo declared, "we are not terrorists. We are not drug dealers. We are revolutionaries".[149] Soon after, the FARC group was invited by the *guru* to the Indian embassy in Havana, which led them to a session of guided meditation, in Sri Sri's own words, "and the next day, to

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[148] See https://www.artofliving.org/mediator (accessed 25th November 2022).
[149] Ibid.

our surprise, they came with me to the press conference and announced that they would follow the Gandhian principle of non-violence and declared a unilateral ceasefire" (Gurumurthy, 2016).

However, it took almost a month for the government to recognise the ceasefire. Initially, both the government and the press received the unilateral declaration of the cease-fire by the guerrillas with a tinge of sarcasm and disbelief. Also, the bombings continued for two weeks after its declaration. Then, again the *guru* had to intervene with a telephonic conversation with Ivan Marquez on the 9th of July 2015, requesting him to stop the violence for peace and also simultaneously appealed to the Columbian government to give time to the revolutionaries to communicate about a cease-fire with those operating in the remote areas. Even after the government recognised the unilateral cease-fire a month later, it took more than a year for both sides to jointly sign and officially declare the mutual peace agreement on 26th of September 2016. The President, Juan Manuel Santos and FARC invited Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to the ceremony. As reported President Santos thanked the *guru* for everything, he has done for the peace process, for his support and spiritual guidance.[150]

Ivan Marquez, the FARC leader too, in a YouTube video, said, "His [Ravi Shankar's] meeting[s] … motivated us to search for the path that would take Colombia to its encounter with the principles of non-violence".[151] However, despite the acknowledgement of Ravi Shankar's effort by both the main parties, i.e., from the Columbian government and FARC, a Norwegian government press released statement made no mention of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar rather claimed that the peace talks were a result of "painstaking efforts undertaken by a league of Western nations". This

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[150] See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/Sri-Sri-Ravi-Shankar-played-key-role-in-Colombian-peace-process/articleshow/54747177.cms (accessed 25th November 2022).
[151] https://www.artofliving.org/mediator (accessed 25th November 2022).

statement by Norway was alleged to have been influenced by the Vatican.[152] So, non-recognition of the AoL and its founder's role by the Norwegian government, whether influenced by the Vatican as alleged or not, does portray a kind of politics opening scope for the critics to point towards its Western bias and religious politics of not giving credit to Eastern spiritual leader.[153]

Thus, unlike the Ayodhya conflict resolution wherein Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and AoL's role seemed to have been more in favour of the rightist Hindutva stand, the Columbian peace agreement portrays AoL and its founder's role as an ambassador of peace reflecting the AoL's core spiritual basis that brought in the Columbian government and the extreme Leftist revolutionary group together. In the words of the *guru* himself, "But when we did a meditation together, they became happy and became interested in meditation." (Gurumurthy, 2016).

Further, when Sri Sri was asked, "How did you manage their (FARC members') anger and revenge mentality? Had they become fatigued with violence?" he said, "We went to them (the FARC members) and gave them a taste of meditation. You know, in one sitting of meditation, people could realize what it is to be peaceful, what it is to be happy… The clarity of mind comes, the emotions soften, old wounds get healed. That is what exactly happened. Subsequent to the three days of meditation, they did *pranayama*, *yoga* and *Sudarshan Kriya* and even underwent a three-day silence and advanced meditation programme. That really impacted their whole outlook towards life and society as well" (ibid.).

Interestingly, when further asked, "Did you expect the FARC to respond to your appeal and teachings to follow Gandhian principles of non-violence?" the *guru*

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[152] See https://swarajyamag.com/insta/how-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-played-a-key-role-in-ending-one-of-latin-americas-most-brutal-conflicts (accessed 25th November 2022).

[153] Ibid.

replied, "Yes, of course! Anything I do, I do with total conviction. I knew that they would change. After all, we are all human beings, and people are open to reason. I would have loved to do the same thing with ISIS. But there they have the religious indoctrination that anyone who doesn't subscribe to their definition of God has no right to exist" (ibid.). In a YouTube video, President Santos could be seen saying, "He [Ravi Shankar] urged them [the rebels] to follow the Gandhian principle of non-violence and cultivate the art of meditation and breathing."[154]

The guru's emphasis on reason seems to go well with his meditation programme and related practices, as mentioned, like *pranayama*, *yoga* and *Sudarshan Kriya* as a secular solution for a peaceful resolution that has the ability to bring clarity of mind and healing through spirituality though one cannot but still see a touch of tradition in its very root. The point to be noted here is that Sri Sri's emphasis on meditation and aforementioned related practices, which are a core part of AoL indicates its crucial role in enabling the FARC members towards a transformation that opened them up towards a peaceful resolution accepting the Gandhian non-violent way. Moreover, unlike the Leftists in India who regards Ravi Shankar and his organisation as the tool of the right wing or simply sharing the right-wing ideology, the FARC driven by a radical leftist ideology, welcomed Sri Sri and the AoL's practices and saw a friend in him who could convince its members to move towards non-violence and peace treaty with the government. So, AoL's religious attachment took a step backwards giving space to its secular and humanitarian face for peace as it is reflected in this Columbian conflict resolution case.

Sri Sri along with the AOL volunteers also attempted conflict resolution and peace in several other conflict zones in India and the world and sought to: transform the

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[154] See https://www.artofliving.org/mediator (accessed 25th November 2022).

Naxals in Naxalism-prone areas in India (transformed several Naxals), attempted to build trust in Kashmir, push for peace in Sri Lanka (especially during the LTTE crisis), West Asia (Israel and Palestine), Afghanistan, bridge the gap with Pakistan, tame ethnic conflicts in Kosovo, Chechnya and resolve issues in Africa (Gautier and Gautier, 2010). Even in the present days of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia War, volunteers from AoL and the International Association of Human Values are active in providing trauma relief, food and shelter for Ukranian refugees.[155] Sri Sri and several other spiritual leaders were also contacted by Prime Minister Modi's office requesting support for bringing back and providing shelter to Indian students stuck in the War zone in Ukraine, resulting in instant support from AoL.[156] Sri Sri himself could be seen travelling around Europe and spreading the message of peace, mutual harmony and dialogue with the launch of his campaign "I Stand for Peace" at the United Nations office in Geneva.[157] Moreover, the *guru* and AoL's effort for trauma relief and healing was equally visible at times of natural and other disasters, such as the earthquake in Pakistan and India in 2005, Hurricane Katrina in Southern Louisiana in U.S., earthquake and Tsunami across Asia in 2004, farmer suicides in Vidarbha, and flood in Bihar in 2008 and so on (Gautier and Gautier, 2010). Thus, seeing AoL and its Guru simply through the lens of religion is biased and problematic. Rather, spirituality enables the scope to engulf the diverse efforts and influence of AoL and its founder within its broad and inclusive purview. It cuts across the narrow dimensions of identity politics while retaining its bonding with politics in general. Nevertheless, the religious angle cannot be ignored either.

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[155]See Russia Ukraine Conflict – Relief Efforts by Art of Living and IAHV | Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (accessed 20th May 2022).

[156] See Sri Sri Ravi Shankar speaks on Russia-Ukraine War; assures safety of stranded Indians (republicworld.com) (accessed 20th May 2022).

[157] See ravi shankar: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar launches 'I Stand For Peace' campaign across Europe; thousands join the initiative | India News - Times of India (indiatimes.com) (accessed 20th May 2022).

4.6. Conclusion:

Henceforth, identifying the AoL version of spirituality involves a process that cuts across the aspects of representation, recognition, and negotiation, especially with regard to the sphere of religion in relation to how the foundation and the positions representing it is actually functioning in day-to-day life. In this regard, the present chapter shows while the foundation claims to be non-denominational, secular and humanitarian in nature and solely based on the spiritual teachings of its founder derived from an application of an ingenious combination of *Vedic* tradition and modern science to present-day living, there is a subtle politics underlying the discourse of AoL.

Alexis Avdeeff's work, as well as the present study, observed a lot of resemblance (combination of *Vedic* learning and science, patented *yogic* techniques, and so on) of the functioning of AoL with that of the former organization, i.e., TM movement of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with which Sri Sri Ravi Shankar himself was associated prior to the starting of AoL. However, though his association with Mahesh Yogi is not hidden as it is mentioned in his biography/hagiography (Narasimhan, 2018), and even the *guru* remembers and mentions about the former on rare occasions; there is an overwhelming touch of originality attached to the whole discourse presented as solely the authentic creation of the *guru* himself.

Moreover, though AoL is based on the interpretation and application of *Vedic* learning in modern life, it does not claim to be a religious foundation. In fact, even the introductory courses offered by AoL show no sign of religion in their actual practice, rather aiming to solve individual issues through a secular interpretation of meditation and *yogic* practices promising happiness and stress-free life and so on, as shown in figure 4.1. However, despite this, it has been observed that as one gets more and more involved with AoL, one cannot escape being introduced to all sorts of practices (such

as *puja* or ritual worship, *upanayanam* course, discourse on *Gita* or *Upanishads* and so on) majorly related to Hinduism being introduced in a secular light. In this regard, it has been observed that the religious turn of AoL started becoming more and more prominent, especially over the last decade, during which even the names such as *Gnana kshetra* for AoL centres (other than Temple of Knowledge which was also a later adoption), and the word *yoga* had been adopted for many courses along with the secular sounding English names as discussed before. For instance, *Utkarsh yoga* for Art Excel Program and so on. The simultaneous rising popularity of *yoga* over the years, along with the prominence of the right-wing Hindutva-based leadership, which does not shy away from promoting a particular religious culture, is not a mere coincidence.

Indeed, in the wider arena of organised politics, the mutual closeness and mutual support between AoL and its founder and BJP and its leadership, as shown on the basis of certain factors like Hinduism, anti-Congress base and the Modi-factor has most critically impacted the spiritual and secular identity of AoL. In this regard, Sri Sri's role in the Ayodhya issue and his strict no to religious conversion somehow shows a compromise of the secular and universal spiritual touch. However, one cannot ignore the conflicting dynamics of power relations involving multiple parties with conflicting interests targeting each other and the AoL as shown in the case of WCF that goes to the extent of even naming Sri Sri and his foundation as representing "Crony Babaism", "Sarkari Gurus or Saints" or "Crony Spirituality" and so on.

However, it is to be noted that unlike power relations and interest based-intentions of the multiple players taking part in conflict and negotiation, there is an underlying notion of spirituality within all these events or relations (such as the Ayodhya issue, WCF and Columbian conflict) which is dialogic, humanistic, unity-based, and non-violent in nature as reflected in Sri Sri's call for an apology on the part of the Hindus

to the Muslim community for the demolition of the Masjid; or as reflected in the *guru's* ability to resolve the Columbian conflict on the basis of dialogue and non-violence somehow resulting from a transformational touch after days of spiritual practices like meditation; or as reflected in the WCF itself which could actually bring not only diverse religious leaders belonging to different faiths in the same platform but also leaders from opposition parties along with the promotion of diverse cultures of different parts of the country and abroad. Interestingly, Sri Sri is in favour of conversion but as he says, it has to be from religion to spirituality (Shankar, 2008: 64). And identifying spirituality as it is represented by an institution and related position in the form of a charismatic personality majorly involves the task of distinguishing it from religion which itself amounts to attract a process of representation, recognition and negotiation resulting from and resulting in the socio-political dynamics of identity construction. However, it is to be kept in mind that the members of AoL belong to all religions, and there are also members who claim to be atheists. Not but not least, with regard to politics, reiterating the *Guru's* viewpoint, a forty-one-years-old full-time AoL teacher expressed,

> *As Gurudev says, we need to spiritualise politics. Back in the day, spirituality was the common thread between all of this. The purpose of politics is to serve, and one cannot truly, selflessly do that unless the core is spiritual. What makes politics dirty is when it loses its spiritual values.*

Thereby, identifying spirituality involves spiritualising identity that not only entails the socio-political, religious, economic and cultural but, in Ian Craib's sense, adds to and overflows.

Chapter-5

Spirituality and Religion: The Unresolved Certainty

"Doubt [uncertainty] is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one."

Voltaire (1919: 232)

5.1. Introduction:

Despite the diverse attempts at understanding the relationship between spirituality and religion for ages, as discussed in the initial chapters, this relationship is still marked by a trait of ambiguity. While there are those who belong to the "spiritual but not religious", there are also those who are driven by a general tendency to merge the two or still others who prefer to see the religious and spiritual as valid alternatives. In this regard, the case of AoL presents an opportunity to explore and add more insights into the dynamics of this relationship.

Thus, the present chapter seeks to throw light on the concept of spirituality substantiated by concrete examples from the present-day functioning of AoL derived from the experience of its actual practitioners. It focuses on its core beliefs and practices. It shows how these beliefs and practices are presented, imparted and actualised in the form of courses or programs through the medium of formally trained teachers. In turn, it shows how the AoL course participants receive these. The last part of the chapter throws light on the AoL experience of its members, followed by an account of their understanding of the relationship of spirituality and religion as practitioners contributing an experiential touch to its very understanding.

5.2. Realm of Spirituality: The Art of Living Version:

Spirituality, as the AoL version, is specifically related to the teachings and preaching of its founder, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. During an interview session in 2012,

Ravi Shankar was asked to reflect on spirituality and spiritual life. He replied, "Every person wants happiness, wants love. That is what spirituality provides. Spirituality is just living life to the fullest, living it as a celebration. Certain elements, if present, make life a fulfilling experience. Keeping healthy, knowing a little bit about oneself in some depth, spending some time with nature, living in harmony with it, caring for people around you, doing some service in whatever form, etc. We find that all these aspects are part of ancient cultures all over the world. You don't have to leave or sacrifice anything to have a spiritual life. You can be spiritually and materially abundant."[158] In a book entitled "Spirituality" (2008), he writes, "Life is made up of matter and spirit. Matter is amino acids, proteins, bones, blood, flesh and other things. The spirit is made up of enthusiasm, joy, love and beauty. You need food for the stomach, taste for the tongue, beauty for the eyes and fun and celebration. All these are part of one's own life, and spirituality is something that encompasses all these avenues: human values, compassion, caring, all are part of spirituality. Spirituality is not just sitting and doing some practice. It is a value system, a way of life…All spiritual practices lead one to a fulfilled and joyful life, more love and care" (Shankar, 2008:19).

Thus, from Sri Sri's perspective on 'spirituality' which also resonates with the viewpoint of many AoL members, one can infer that there are three essential aspects being addressed about its nature: Firstly, spirituality primarily indicates a 'way of life'. Secondly, this way of life is about knowing oneself and one's inner life on one hand, and on the other hand, this is about developing certain qualities driven by altruistic human values based on compassion, caring, sharing, joy and love towards oneself and others, including nature. Thus, spirituality is reflexive as well as both subjective and

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[158] See Shanker, S. and Prosser, Aaron. 2012. *A Spiritual Life: Exclusive Interview with HH Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.* Available at: https://www.fairobserver.com/culture/spiritual-life-exclusive-interview-hh-sri-sri-ravi-shankar/ (accessed 25th November 2021).

altruistic in nature. Thirdly, it is a value system that is common to/in all ancient cultures. Thereby, it is claimed to be traditional as well as universal in nature. Thereby, spirituality here denotes a way of life, based on a system of universal human values (compassion, love, caring and sharing) common to all cultural traditions that enable one to develop a sense of responsibility for one's own development as well as for developing a sense of belongingness with others and a social service-oriented life towards all which includes human beings, other living creatures, as well as nature. Thus, the nature of spirituality discussed so far on the basis of Sri Sri's viewpoint implies a value-based secular and humanistic way of living life with a sense of responsibility towards oneself and all that would lead to love, joy, care and a fulfilling life. On the basis of this understanding of the nature of spirituality, it is offered as a solution or a tool to address Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's philosophy of peace, i.e., "Unless we have a stress-free mind and violence-free society, we cannot achieve world peace" (Shankar, 2012). Thus, stress and violence are considered to be the two most pressing problems faced by society today that hamper world peace.

The concept of 'stress' and 'violence' has developed in the modern era. The term 'stress' is derived from an old French term *estrece* meaning "oppression" and from the Middle English word *stresse* meaning "hardship" (Chen, 2017). It was first used in the seventeenth century in the field of medicine to denote a cause of physical illness resulting from social pressure. It was during the 1950s, the term 'stress' entered into common usage when the Canadian biologist Hans Selye used it to adapt the application of the concept of strain on physical structure from engineering to understand the human condition under crisis (ibid.). The meaning of 'stress' may vary from it being used with a positive connotation as a form of "survival mechanism" that issues a stimulus for action at times of crisis to a cause of pressure and fatigue. In today's world, stress

majorly connotes a negative meaning associated with depression, tension, etc., in relation to mental illness. Indeed, in the modern era, the process of individualization, break-down of the joint family system, and loss of community along with other factors such as a highly-competitive consumer-centric neo-liberal market system, an achievement-oriented society dominated by the "iron-cage" of instrumental rationality (means-end oriented rational action), disenchantment from religion, high exposure to mass-media and consumerist aspirational culture; and the variable and relative factors like increase in population, migration, etc., have directly or indirectly increased the demand over resources leading to high-competition, work pressure and other contemporary issues majorly concerning big cities and urban life such as unemployment, trust in relationships, risks (see Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; 1996; Berger and Luckmann, 1995) and so on resulting in alienation, anxiety and loneliness. These all factors led to the declaration of the twentieth century by poets like W. H. Auden as the "age of anxiety" which further led to the opening up of a space for the wide publication and simultaneous popularity of self-help books on life, balance in life and so on (ibid.). Gradually in 1983, Time magazine in the US declared that era as the "age of stress" (ibid.). Thus, the emergence of AoL in the 1980s and its focus on stress and stress elimination resonates with the concerns of the history of the era.

In a book entitled, "The Art of Stress-free Living" (2011) Sri Sri Ravi Shankar with Regina Bönsel broadly refers to stress as "a state of inner tension" resulting from a lack of ability to meet the greater challenges in life due to anxiety or repression of feelings, time pressure, conflict or issues related to finance, family, health etc., (Shankar and Bönsel, 2017:45-50). Acknowledging that a certain degree of eustress or positive stress is important for life, the authors recognise distress or negative stress as the cause behind various health problems or psychosomatic diseases (ibid.). Interestingly, seeing stress

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as becoming fashionable in the modern industrialised society, almost as a "status symbol" wherein struggle is seen as necessary for success; the authors consider that the main cause behind stress is a dissonance of the inner and outer life of an individual leading to an imbalance between the right (creativity) and left (logic) brain (ibid.). Stress is also seen as a result of the mind getting stuck on thoughts related to the past or the future. Thus, the authors suggest bringing back the mind to the present (ibid.). Moreover, Ravi Shankar's understanding of stress as "too much to do, too little time and no energy"[159] indicates addressing a typical problem of the modern, fast-paced urban lifestyle.

On violence, on the other hand, Sylvia Walby asserts, "Violence matters. It wrecks and shortens lives, causes pain and suffering, and is often part of a rapid social change. The field of violence encompasses war, terrorism, securitisation, ethnic cleansing, domestic violence, violent crime and hate crime. It has increasingly become a matter for public debate and intervention by states and other actors" in this neo-liberal stage of modernity (Walby, 2012: 95). Considering the various forms of violence caused by terrorism, the incidence of shootings in the US, suicide, religious fanatism etc.,[160] Ravi Shankar sees the intention driven by the emotions such as anger, frustration, jealousy, hatred, lust, aggression etc., behind the act of violence as its basis (Shankar, 2016:16-18). For him, other than the act, it is the intention or attitude which determines violence or non-violence (ibid.). Thus, even charity can turn violent if it deprives one of self-esteem, and war can be non-violent if it is for the right cause and not driven by hatred, anger, and jealousy (ibid.). Ravi Shankar considers stress and tension as the

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[159] See *FAQs on how to deal with stress and its offsprings*. Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/wisdom/emotions/how-to-deal-with-stress (accessed 4th December 2021).
[160] See *I dream of a world without violence: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Available at:* https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/oct/02/i-dream-of-a-world-without-violence-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-1879706.html (accessed 26th November 2021).

fundamental factors causing violence, dejection, anger and other negative thought patterns (Shankar, 2008:50-51) due to inner wounds or scars. Thus, the solution suggested by AoL and its founder for both the related problems of stress and violence as well as for all individual and societal issues and problems is spiritual upliftment imbibing human values and a concern for social service that would lead to peace in the world (ibid.). Interestingly, human values and peace initiatives too are the products of modern-day society itself and are very much rooted in the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity that characterized the French revolution of 1789. However, these initiatives got widely recognised and valued only after decades of colonisation and modern warfare, such as the two World Wars. But the most fundamental questions remain: what does AoL actually offer in the name of spirituality in order to put a check on stress and violence? How can one develop oneself in spirituality? In this regard, AoL claims to "serve society by strengthening the individual".[161] The primary focus of AoL is on breathing and breathing patterns, along with a discourse on how to live life. Observing breath and practising certain patterned ways of breathing lie at the basis of the AoL version of spirituality. Breath is considered the most fundamental medium for releasing toxins from the body, energising it, and balancing the mind, body and spirit equation. In this regard, AoL offers "stress-elimination programs", which include *yoga*, meditation and other breathing techniques to get one's mind as well as a society free from stress and violence (Shankar and Bönsel, 2017; Shankar, 2016). There are a number of programs offered by AoL targeting specific groups, mainly on the basis of age. A few of the current introductory or entry-level programs are:

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[161] See *About Us: We Serve the Society by Strengthening the Individual.* Available at: https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/about-us (accessed 26th November 2021).

(a). The Happiness Program or Online Meditation and Breath Workshop:

This is for the 18-plus age group, advertised and promoted as "powerful breathing techniques that will transform your life" and "equip you with practical knowledge and technique to unlock your true potential and bring fullness to life". It also promises help; "to boost immunity and health, improve relationships, remove stress and help to live with purpose, clarity of mind, creativity, confidence and joy"[162](Shankar, 2012) (see photograph 5.1. taken during a Happiness Course session in Siliguri, in appendix III). Online Meditation and Breath Workshop is the nomenclature used today for the Happiness Program offered in online mode through the use of electronic inter-network service technology designed specifically for a world limited by Covid19 pandemic restrictions.

(b). The *Sahaj Samadhi* Meditation or *Dhyana Yoga*:

This yoga program is also for 18 years and above. This course claims certain benefits such as enhancing peace of mind, improving health, boosting mental clarity and unlocking intuitive skills within a 3 days workshop (2 hours per day).[163]

(c). *Sri Sri Yoga* Level 1: (for 18 years plus)

It is a 4 days yoga program for beginners that promises "better digestion and sleep, muscle toning, improved flexibility, and improved energy levels".[164]

(d). *Medha Yoga* Level 1 and level 2:

This program is meant for the age group 13-18 years old and claims that it will help to "handle anger and relieve stress, improve focus, handle peer pressure, hormones, competitions effectively".[165]

(e). *Prajna Yoga* or Intuition Process:

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[162] See https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/programs (accessed 26th November 2021)
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.

This program is for the age-group 5plus to 18 and 8plus to 18. It claims that it would help to develop "the inherent intuitive abilities of the mind" (Shankar, 2012).

(f). *Utkarsh Yoga*:

This program is for the age group 8 to 12 or 13 years old, and as it claims it "introduces children to spirituality, nurture human values, inculcates self-discipline", and develops a well-rounded personality (ibid.).

Other popular graduate or advanced AoL programs are the Advance Meditation Program, Dynamism for Self and Nation or *Divya Samaj Nirmaan* (DSN) program, blessing program, etc. There are also programs designed for specific groups, such as for the corporate sector, for government officials, women-specific programs, senior-citizen-specific programs, programs for prisoners, and so on. Through these programs, AoL proclaims to facilitate the development of an individual's full potential emphasising on self-development and holistic living by offering effective techniques to "overcome stress, depression and violent tendencies" (Shankar, 2012). A common basis for promoting all of these programs is a claim to science and the application of research-based tools and techniques. In this regard, the core breathing technique promoted as the trademark of the AoLF is *Sudarshan Kriya*. The foundation considers it as the cornerstone of all the courses and programs (ibid.).

Sudarshan Kriya is a cyclically patterned yogic breathing technique which includes three rounds of long, medium and fast breathing (Zope and Zope, 2013). The core of the technique is breath itself. Ravi Shankar writes, "If you attend to the breath, the root cause of any problem that the mind faces get eliminated" (Shankar, 2010:22). Indeed, breath is considered as the common link that has to be observed, witnessed and regulated in order to balance the dynamics of the mind, body and spirit (which includes feelings, emotions, etc.). Ravi Shankar emphasises that the practice of *Sudarshan Kriya*

revitalises and energises every cell of the body by releasing the negative emotions and toxins accumulated in it from the past times through the medium of breath (ibid.). Namrita Gautier (an AoL teacher) shares the following post-*Sudarshan kriya* experience of her course participants: "After the course, I feel a sense of inner harmony. I have settled in my being" (Gautier and Gautier, 2010: 31). Another participant shared, "I was blown away. Such intense energy! So much power! The feeling that I can do anything. So much love!" (ibid.). Indeed, it is common to find the participants sharing overwhelming post-*kriya* AoL course experiences. A change in oneself, one's way of seeing things, and a transformation in life in general with an overall feel-good experience is commonly shared by the AoL course participants. A twenty-eight-year-old AoL *yoga* teacher from Nepal shared,

> *After doing the course, I went through a huge transformation. My approach to life and way of thinking changed because of which my relationship with everyone else improved. I became more sensible, caring, loving, and courageous. Earlier I was unaware of the different dimensions of my existence. I used to think that I am just the body, but after doing Sudarshan Kriya I felt that a totally new dimension in me opened up.*

Another twenty-eight-year-old AoL volunteer from Jharkhand expressed,

> *I found Sudarshan Kriya very effective. The practices and techniques taught in the course are so relevant in actual life that whatever problems we face in life, the solution to each is there in the course. Doing kriya and listening to the knowledge points is very impactful. It brings effective changes in life.*

In addition to *Sudarshan Kriya*, the AOL courses consist of meditation and other *yogic* breathing techniques like *pranayama* (see Shankar, 2008:38), *bhrastika* (patterned three rounds of forceful *yogic* breathing technique)*,* and bodily stretches or

postural *yoga* techniques or *asanas* (see Shankar, 2008) such as *surya namaskar* (sun salutation) and knowledge points (tips for living life and handling one's mind and thought processes), etc. Indeed, as the name of its courses discussed above suggests, the various techniques could be constituted under the umbrella term *yoga* (which will be discussed in chapter 6). Even *Sudarshan Kriya* is otherwise known as *Sudarshan Kriya Yoga* (SKY).

An elaborative description of a typical process of functioning of AoL with an account of the organisation of its courses that results in the addition of new members in it will bring more clarity. This very process of functioning is more or less typical of all such similarly functioning spirituality-based institutions of today like that of the Isha Foundation of Sadhguru or Jaggi Vasudev, which even has its own trademark *yogic* breathing technique known as *Sambhavi Mahamudra* introduced in an Inner Engineering course (see Sadhguru, 2016).

A declaration of a course by AoL teachers begins with its promotion and advertisement in the following manner as described in the images shared below, shown in figures 5.1 to 5.3. These advertisements are shared offline with people and shared in the various online AoL-related group accounts on social networking websites and platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc., by the various Art of Living members to promote and attract participants for the diverse courses. However, it has been observed that one of the most prevalent ways in which new members come to know about AoL is through word of mouth. Most of them are somehow convinced or gradually get pulled into AoL by their own family members, relatives, and close friends who have experienced the benefits of being in AoL. For instance, more than 66 per cent of the respondents of the present study were convinced by their close friends or family members to join an AoL course. A common tendency observed even among most of

the first-time course participants is that they intend to somehow bring in their near and dear ones or even convince them to do an AoL course with a firm belief that the course would benefit them as well, somehow improve and make their life better even if they are not facing any problems in life. For instance, a Delhi-based businessman said,

The Art of Living course simply transformed my life by bringing positive changes. Thus, I convinced all my family members and made them do the course.

A middle-aged Maharashtra-based part-time AoL teacher shared,

The course overwhelmed me and brought a complete change in my life. I made my younger son and his father do the course.

However, this in no way suggests that the family members of the new AoL members readily get convinced by them. Rather, it may take a long time to convince the family members. Moreover, seeing a positive transformative effect on their own family members and other close associates after completing an AoL course is likely to function as a stimulative pull factor to get easily convinced. For instance, the Delhi-based businessman was himself influenced by his wife to join an AoL course. Seeing her more open, positive and happy in life after the completion of a course was a stimulating factor behind his gradual development of the association with AoL. Even the Maharashtra-based AoL teacher shared that she could see a drastic positive change in her elder son's behaviour and in his way of living, which motivated her to join an AoL course. Still, the present study does not and cannot generalise that the immediate family members of all AoL members are also into AoL. Though this may hold true in the case of many AoL members, especially for those who are very experienced or are full-time AoL staff members, teachers or *Swamis*, *Rishis* etc., who could successfully convince their immediate family members to do an AoL course over time. But still, the journey of an AoL teacher or volunteer may not be a rosy one, especially so with regard

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to dealing with relatives, immediate family members, peer groups and other associates in a given societal context. However, primarily what is important is to find out what actually brings people into AoL.

It has been observed that people are likely to join AoL depending on the present situation they are in. For instance, those who are going through a tough time or are into some sort of crisis in life are the ones most likely to join AoL provided an opportunity. Secondly, some members join or are made to do an AoL course simply for overall personal development. This is true mainly in the case of children, students or youths/teens. Thirdly, there are also those who are looking for a broader purpose or meaning in life, pulled by a metaphysical drive to join an AoL course resulting from a higher calling. And fourthly, there are also those AoL members who join AoL because of medical issues or health-related crises. In this regard, the present study's findings show that approximately 90 per cent of the respondents joined AoL due to some sort of crisis they were going through in life. Five of the respondents were primarily driven by an inner call for a metaphysical or spiritual search for a higher purpose in life. However, those looking for a higher purpose in life were also somehow in a personal crisis-like situation; thus, they can merge with the 90 per cent. For instance, they also wanted to break away from the monotony of everyday routine life.

Moreover, two of the respondents shared that they tried the course out of curiosity. Indeed, one of them intended to debunk the AoL and its *guru* as a preconceived notion drove him because he was suspicious of *gurus*. Unlike the main respondents, it has been observed that the children belonging to the age group of 8 to 13 are usually put into AoL courses by the parents for their overall personality development apart from an expectation that it would aid their study. Still, even in this regard, one cannot clearly do away with the notion of crisis-driven initiative on the part of their parents, who are

usually concerned for their children's behaviour and their academic performance in schools which they feel they themselves are unable to nurture fully in their homes. However, before moving further into what sort of AoL experiences the respondents went through, let us have a look at the advertisements of AoL courses, as shown in figures 5.1 to 5.3, to have an idea of how AoL promotes itself to pull in new members.

Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.3.

The selected advertisements (figs. 5.1. to 5.3.) provide a general idea of how its teachers and organisers promote AoL courses. Figure 1 is an advertisement promoting the most popular course, i.e., the Happiness Program, which was initially known as the Basic course or Phase I program designed for the 18 and above age group. As the name of the program suggests, which is also indicated by the three smiling faces in the background image of fig. 5.1, this course is about happiness. Daniel M Haybron, in his book, "Happiness: A Very Short Introduction" (2013), while being aware of the obscure nature of the term happiness that defies any definition, attempted to understand it as "a psychological matter" or a "state of mind" that leads to a good life by emphasising on the things that this term indicates in daily life (Haybron, 2013). In this regard, Haybron relates the state of happiness with a favourable or positive emotional condition characterised by feeling happy, calm, safe, secure, joyful, energised, and at peace, etcetera; being in a state of "positive balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience" driven by emotional well-being, and being satisfied in one's life (ibid.).

Moreover, Haybron considers that happiness also includes taking care of "non-conscious aspects of emotional condition" that may trigger one's mood (ibid.). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who is also known as the "Guru of Joy" because of his popular playful and smiling presence, as is also reflected in his images shown in figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3, considers that happiness is not just a psychological or physical phenomenon rather it manifests itself naturally when one is in her natural state of being free from within. [166] He considers happiness as an individual attitude and "personal ethic", which has to be skillfully cultivated even while going through the ups and downs in life by realising one's true nature. For this, one needs to learn how to manage negative thoughts and

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[166] For details, see Shankar, Ravi. 2021. Available at: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Happiness is an attitude to practise, a rule to follow (indiatoday.in) (accessed 6th November 2022).

circumstances by following a positive mindset by not letting oneself get stuck on anything. Rather, one has to take responsibility for the happiness of others as well.[167] Now, if we go back to figure 5.1. We will be able to make out that this advertisement is linking the notion of happiness to the expected program benefits mentioned as: "reduced stress levels, more self-confidence, increased energy levels, better inter-personal skills, peaceful minds, better relationships in addition to a greater sense of joy". These benefits could be received by removing negative emotions and toxins through breath by learning *Sudarshan Kriya*. This course also entails other breathing techniques like *pranayama*, *bhrastika*, guided meditation, group activities, discussion sessions and a bit of postural *yoga* conducted by a trained teacher, often assisted by one or two AoL members depending on the number of course participants.

Figure 5.2 portrays the promotion of Online Meditation and Breath Workshop, another name for the Happiness Program designed specifically for online participants during the current Covid19 pandemic phase. Interestingly, the first highlight of the course content within the rectangular box mentions "immunity boosting pranayama," reflecting the need of the times, if not simply a strategy to attract the participants' attention.

Figure 5.3 is also an advertisement for an online advanced meditation course designed during the Covid19 phase so that people could participate in it from the comfort of their homes. Only those who have learned *Sudarshan Kriya* through the basic programs like Happiness Course, Youth Leadership Training Program (YLTP), Student Excellence and Learning Program (SELP) and YES Plus course are eligible to participate in this course which is also known by other names like Advance Course, Art of Silence Course or simply known by Phase II more prominently in the initial days.

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[167] Ibid.

This workshop also more or less constitutes the same content as that of the Happiness Program. However, it aims to make the participants reflect or introspect deeper into themselves; into the workings of the mind, and into their thought patterns and life as a whole by observing a period of silence (no verbal or any sort of symbolic communication through sign language with the outside world is followed other than simply listening to the course instructor or teacher and responding to her mainly in sign language during the course).

These two courses discussed above lie at the core of AoL discourse. In a certain manner, these courses provide the platform for a group therapy session wherein, paradoxically, the primary focus is on individual participants' happiness, well-being and personal development. While on the one hand, the participants are guided and encouraged to reflect on the workings of their mind and thought processes and observe how they react or respond to the situations (whatever issues people are dealing with or deals with in daily life) they are in by cultivating a sense of self-awareness and conscious living by calming their mind and by living in the present; on the other hand, they are taught to see life and interpersonal relationships from a broader altruistic perspective by developing a sense of belongingness with everyone driven by human values based on empathy and a sense of responsibility towards oneself and others. The basic tools required to attain this state of being are *Sudarshan Kriya*, meditation, and *pranayama,* along with "knowledge points" (tips on living a healthy and happy life) that are typically derived from the *Guru's* teachings or, rather, Guru's unique translation and interpretation of *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, and other texts, etc., for managing the mind and emotions. Breath is considered as the medium through which the toxins such as stress and negative emotions are released. According to the AoL

discourse, attending to breathing in a conscious and guided manner also connects and balances the mind, body, and spirit equations.

When during a question/answer session, Ravi Shankar was asked, "I would like to know, what is the goal of exercising and practising these techniques?" (Shankar, 2012:35). He replied, "what is the goal of your life? To be joyful, to be loving, and to have such a joy which is not disturbed by anything else. These techniques help to stabilise in such a centred manner. You will not be shaken by anything. Even if you get shaken, you come back very quickly. They open up new dimensions, abilities, and potential within you." (ibid.). Indeed, these very techniques; and the overall AoL discourse are guided by three core practices related to the notions of *sadhana, seva,* and *satsang*.

Stephen Jacobs associates the AoL notion of *sadhana* with the realisation of one's self and stress reduction (Jacobs, 2016: 95). In general, *sadhana* refers to the spiritual practices (Shankar 2008) which embody meditation, *Sudarshan kriya*, *pranayama*, and other yogic techniques for self-realisation. In a broader sense, along with *yogic* techniques, the notions of *seva* and *satsang* could also be included in an understanding of *sadhana* (Jacobs 2016). *Seva* refers to service activities. Swami Vivekananda was one of the first ones to make *seva* a prominently visible part of spiritually-based social service activities especially guided by the notion of justice (ibid.). In the context of AoL, *seva* refers to selfless voluntary service which is driven by an intention to serve the people and society without expecting anything in return. Neither does it involve a feeling of doing a favour to another, nor is it done on the basis of convenience (Shankar, 2008: 108-13). Rather, the very goal of life is to be of service to others (ibid.). The service may range from providing a helping hand to one's mother in the kitchen, sharing one's skills and talents, and being a part of relief work in those areas affected by natural

disasters or man-made conflicts to whatever possible ways one can serve humanity. Thus, there has to be a shift from "what can I have?" to "what can I give?" or contribute, and for Sri Sri, such a shift automatically happens when one progresses in the spiritual path by following the spiritual practices (Shankar, 2010: 85-86). However, it is believed that even if one may not intend to gain anything in return, sincere *seva* attracts long-term merits (Shankar, 2008). A fifty-five-year-old mechanical engineer from Siliguri, West Bengal, with twenty-one years of association with AoL said,

> *Seva means service with no expectation for anything in return. Some people may do charity just to show off or in order to satisfy one's own ego. Then, that is not spirituality…It is about selfless service which drives away mental agitations, balances the mind, and prevents a person from getting driven by lust, illusions, and desires.*

The third core practice, i.e., *satsang,* is a combination of two Sanskrit terms, i.e., *sat,* which means "being", and *sanga* which refers to an "association" (Yogananda, 2017: 177). Stephen Jacobs could see the similarity of the word *sat* with the English word 'true' and suggests that *satsang* can also be translated as "true company" (Jacobs, 2016: 119-120). He identifies four interlocking meanings of the word *satsang*: the fellowship of the guru, the fellowship of other devotees, a congregational gathering and a community of shared belief (ibid.). In AoL, as Stephen Jacobs have also observed, *satsang* as a congregational gathering is a routine affair. Jacobs identified one essential component and two optional components of a *satsang* gathering. While the essential component includes *bhajans* or devotional songs and chanting of *mantras*, the optional components include some sort of teaching and guided meditation (ibid.). Indeed, it has been observed that *satsang* constitutes one of the essential practices of the Art of Living

discourse and of teachings of other similarly placed organisations, such as that of the Satsang Foundation of Sri M[168].

In the AoL circles, *satsangs* are a very common affair and are usually organised on a weekly basis in the local centres. New participants after finishing a course are encouraged to join *satsangs* and follow up session on weekly basis. *Satsang* events are also occasionally organised by the AoL members in their houses. In the AoL Bengaluru *ashram*, *satsang* is part and parcel of the daily routine of the *ashramites* (members of the *ashram*). It usually takes place in the evening at around 18:30 and goes on till 20:00 at a location decided and informed beforehand. In this regard, there are four usual locations wherein *satsang* takes place depending upon the expected number of participants and weather conditions, which are: inside the Vishalakshi Mantap (VM) hall (see photograph 5.2 in appendix III), at the outdoor location of the amphitheatre facing VM hall (see photograph 5.3. in appendix III), inside the Yagnashala hall and in the outdoor location of the Guru Paduka Vanam which can accommodate thousands of participants. The guru's presence attracts more participants in a *satsang* than in his absence.

According to the AoL discourse, the word *Satsang* means to be in "the company of truth".[169] It is an event filled with chants, music, songs, dance, occasional cultural performances, and a short talk or knowledge session on diverse topics related to daily life followed by a short question and answer session, especially in the presence of *guru*. In the local centres, a short talk by Ravi Shankar is occasionally played, followed by a short discussion. According to Ravi Shankar, *satsang* provides a possibility to blend the right and left hemispheres of the human brain, thereby combining and creating a balance

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168 See *Satsang with Sri M*. Available at Satsang with Sri M Archives - The Satsang Foundation (satsang-foundation.org) (accessed 7th November 2022).
169 See Satsang: A place to rejuvenate | Spiritual Gathering | The Art of Living India (accessed 22nd April 2022)

between reason and music or creativity.[170] Music and *bhajan* unite all traditions and cultures and brings the mind to the present moment. The word *bhaj* means to share everything that is divine, promising and positive. Sounds in harmony create music. Listening to ancient sounds, singing and chanting certain sounds or *mantras* together not only creates an atmosphere of celebration but also causes a calming and rejuvenating effect on the mind and nervous systems[171]. It has a soothing and energising effect on the body and spirit. This takes a person into a meditative state that, in turn, leads to a discovery of one's own inner-self, and experiences higher consciousness and oneness with all or divine consciousness. A twenty-ninety-year-old active AoL member from Siliguri said,

> *According to me, satsang means staying with the truth. When we do satsang we can connect with super-consciousness, and that is why we feel light, calm and happy. It has the power to bring a positive transformation in our lives.*

An AoL teacher from Siliguri shared her *satsang* experience in these words,

> *My experience is blissful. Sat means good, and sang means company. So being in any good company means to be in satsang from where you derive positive energy and uplifting vibrations, and what better way is there to do the same than being in the company of the divine.*

A sixty-years-old AoL teacher from Siliguri expressed:

> *The importance of satsang in one's life is to increase positive energy and vibrations in life and surroundings. In satsang, you chant, worship and meditate and all of this rejuvenates and energise our physical and mental system.*

A twenty-eight-year-old *yoga* teacher from AoL Bangalore ashram shared,

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[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid.

Satsang, for me, is to be in knowledge and wisdom, which glued me to the path of spirituality. It is an expression of gratitude to the divine. It makes life magnanimous and takes us closer to ourselves. When we sing in a group, expansion and upsurge of energy uplift our moods.

The above-shared words on *satsang* indicate a commonly shared experience of positive energy that uplifts and takes one into deeper self-realisation or simply experiences a divine presence. These sorts of experiences are not uncommon while attempting to understand spirituality. Moreover, interestingly, it is also common to hear from many participants that even participation in a *satsang* event is a sign of good *karma,* and it clears out past *karma* (See Vivekananda, 2004; Shankar, 2011: 169-178).

However, it has to be noted that all these three core practices of AoL are complementary to each other in the path of spirituality. For instance, it is believed that one who practices sincere *sadhana* on a daily basis, i.e., one who sincerely follows spiritual practices like meditation, *kriya* and other breathing techniques, automatically develops the spirit of *seva* (service) and one is not into *seva* then *sadhana* without *seva* and vice versa leads to no spiritual progress. Similarly, *sadhana* and *seva* without *satsang* inhibit smooth spiritual growth. These three core practices are an integral part of the lives of sincere AoL followers. In AoL Bangalore *ashram*, any normal day starts with morning group *sadhana* (yoga, *Sudarshan Kriya*, meditation, and other breathing techniques) followed by voluntary work/service or *seva* activities throughout the day and ends with *satsang* session in the evening before dinner. Indeed, an evening *satsang* that includes meditation, chants, songs, playing of instruments, dance, and a short discourse followed by a question-and-answer session may merge all three. As a whole, all these three core practices lead to spiritual upliftment and self-realisation, contributing toward one's inner peace and overall well-being. Addressing the relevance of *sadhana*,

seva and *satsang* in the path of spirituality, a fifty-five-year-old AoL teacher with more than twenty years of association with AoL from New Delhi shared,

> *Sadhana is the backbone which connects us to the inner strength and the inner joy that we are. It helps to lose the dust, dirt, and unwanted layers that stress brings. Seva is the core of existence because we are as connected to others as we are to ourselves. Seva is the expression of joy, care, and love that we are. And satsang is letting the world be as it is and bringing out mind back to its centred essence and devotion. It is to be again and again in the company of truth, love, and devotion that is our nature.*

Reflecting on the same, a fifty-year-old AoL volunteer from New Delhi expressed,

> *Sadhana brings unbelievable peace, stillness, and gratitude. Seva makes me feel grateful and satisfied. Satsang rejuvenates and brings joy, devotion and tears of love.*

On *sadhana*, *seva,* and *satsang*, a fifty-year-old AoL teacher from Uttar Pradesh claims:

One leads to another. When you are in gratitude, all three will happen.

A twenty-six-year-old civil service aspirant and AoL volunteer from Tamil Nadu shared,

> *When you do sadhana, then you feel that you can easily connect to people, seva happens automatically, and I never miss a satsang during Guruji's presence. Your own vibration changes in satsang with a group of people. It means sharing. You feel connected with every human being. Satsang develops a sense of belongingness. You feel like doing seva. These practices connect me with my own nature.*

Thus, these practices are ultimately addressing the immaterial yet profound aspects of the subjective life of the participants especially touching upon their emotional life and making them aware of the workings of the mind on the one hand, and providing a deeper realisation of the self on the other hand, and this results in an overall positive effect on their body, mind, daily life and relationships. However, it is to be noted that although *seva*, *sadhana,* and *satsang* are the core practices of AoL, the usage of these terms become most prominent and most evidently put into the minds of the practitioners, especially at the advanced course stage wherein a voluntary *seva* practice becomes an essential part of the course along with *sadhana*. With regard to *satsang*, while it is a regular part of AoL ashram members and all of its ardent followers in the sense of taking part in congregational gatherings over music, dance, and discourse in *ashram* on daily life (issues) or at least on a weekly basis in the local centres, *sadhana* in the sense of spiritual practices like *kriya* and meditation if not other yogic practices is a regular affair in the lives of the sincere AoL members. Indeed, interestingly, it is not uncommon to hear the AoL members appreciating or complimenting other enthusiastic members on the basis of seeing their bright, shiny, and smiling faces by attaching the whole credit on regular *sadhana,* the effect of which they believe also reflects on one's looks/appearance. After discussing what brings people to AoL, AoL courses, and content, let us now elaborate a bit more on the respondents' course experiences or AoL experience, followed by their views on spirituality and, as AoL members, how they see the relationship of spirituality and religion.

5.2.1. AoL Experience:

The respondents belonging to the age group 18 to 70, from different backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, profession, region, and country; however, sharing a common ground and basis as members of AoL have shared their experiences of being

in AoL. The diversity/quality of experience ranges from assigning a life-saving attribution to AoL (*Guru* and spiritual practices); realisation of self and oneness in life to gaining confidence and improving communication skills. A thirty-nine-year-old volunteer from Punjab who was contributing to kitchen *seva* in *ashram* narrated,

In 2011, I was going through a tragic and depressive phase in life. I felt suicidal. Then, what happened, I stumbled upon a live discourse of Guruji (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar) on TV. Knowledge points were being shared by him. Coincidently, he was speaking on the same issue. I remember he said, "during winter, if we take off the blanket, will it lead to more comfort or discomfort? This is what will happen if you commit suicide". It struck my attention. I felt the message was meant for me. Then, in the upcoming days, a basic course was organised in our village. I did the course and got a great relief. I was going through the death of the soul. I did not know what I received from the course, but I got the purpose of my life. A support in life. Earlier, nothing interested me. The kind of blessing I received from Guru and from doing regular sadhana was like a new birth for me. The same goes for my elder brother. He was a drug addict. He did a drug rehabilitation program organised by AoL on a well-wisher's recommendation. Gradually, he left drugs and other bad habits and also became an AoL teacher. He is a totally different person now. Earlier, people preferred to stay away from him. Now, they tell the addicts to learn from my brother.

A thirty-seven-year-old AoL volunteer from Assam who was working as a Club House in-charge in AoL's Soudhamini Apartments, next to Bengaluru *ashram*, shared,

I was sick for three years. I suffered from chronic jaundice followed by severe weakness and weight loss. Then, in 2010, a friend of mine insisted and somehow convinced me to join a YLTP (Youth Leadership and Training Program) course.

He himself paid the course fee on my behalf. I got registered, and they made us maintain a strict morning and day schedule wherein they made us do all kinds of physical exercises like pranayama, breathing techniques, and also Sudarshan Kriya. Initially, I thought of moving back, but on the third day, they made us run inside the hall itself. I observed that I wasn't getting tired anymore despite running for around 15 minutes. Then I decided whatever may happen, even if I die because of sickness/weakness here, I will continue and finish the course. I could see a lot of change and even my body was regaining strength. Whoever practices sadhana, and kriya with full sincerity gets a lot of benefits. If I would not have joined AoL in 2010, then I may not have been living in this world. I made many of my family members do the course.

In addition to these life-saving experiences, there are also those who attribute their recovery from severe illness and disease to AoL and its practices. While a thirty-year-old full-time AoL teacher from Laos considers that AoL practices led to the cure of asthma and sinusitis he once suffered from, a forty-six-year-old former journalist and a present full-time AoL teacher from Assam expressed,

I did my first AoL introductory program in the year 2000. I used to have migraine problem since childhood, but it used to be once a year. So, it didn't matter much, but in the year 2000, it suddenly became chronic, and at that time, I was working as a professional journalist. I started getting attacked twice a week or more than that. That had put a lot of pressure on my work front as well. Then, I went for all kinds of treatment; neurological, neuro-surgical, everything possible, and nothing was working. In the end, a doctor suggested AoL. He said many people had gotten relief after doing AoL practices. That is how I came in to try. Then you would not believe it, in the last seventeen years, I never had another attack of

migraine. So, that transformation, the relief it brought to me, which I only know. It was sudden and normally happened through Sudarshan Kriya.

Moreover, I got inspired by the knowledge points shared during the course. To live in the present moment and realizing that opposite values are complementary brought a lot of balance in the way I look at life. Overall, I felt that there is something beautiful that I want to share with the world. I started seeing life as something very beautiful with full of positivity. I was able to see life from depth. So, that inner inspiration made me quit my job and took up teaching this as a full-time profession. It was not a planned decision. It suddenly happened.

A thirty-two-year-old AoL volunteer from the Netherlands who was in charge of North-Eastern children[172] in *ashram* shared,

I did Sudarshan Kriya yoga, and it completely changed my life. My perspective to life changed after that. When I grew up, I was a very hyperactive kid, I was always a nuisance and a concern and worry for my parents. I would not sit still; I could not focus. I could not concentrate. I took medications. Drugs that are prescribed to suppress the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and make someone more able to cognise and concentrate. So, when I did kriya, I could harness that energy inside me and focus. Actually, my handicap became my advantage. I stopped my medications. And I felt much more alive, peaceful and, throughout the last 13 years I have been with AoL I have turned so much more peaceful, so much more dynamic, so much more giving in nature rather than taking in nature. Earlier I thought life is for enjoyment, I was on the receiving end

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[172] There were around 120 children both girls and boys from the North-East who were looked after and taken of in the ashram as a part of an AoL project work.

basically. I was living very worried. I thought joy is outside. When you learn kriya and experience states of meditation, you start feeling that joy is coming from inside. We can do everything happily.

A twenty-seven-year-old student cum AoL volunteer from Sikkim who was into depression shared,

In July 2019, when I was into depression, I felt the need to join the AoL happiness program at the insistence of an AoL teacher, and since then, I am a part of it. My first happiness program went well; it has a course of 5 days program. After a long time, I laughed from my heart. After the end of the program, I came out relaxed, and light, slept well and made new friends. Over a period of time, AoL completely changed me or I should say it helped me to change my thought process. It helped me to do away with my past, my regrets and my negative thought/visualisation pattern. It showed me how to live in the present and find happiness in small things. I feel like I am back to my body spiritually and in the best possible way. Today I am more focused, productive and healthy. I used to hide much from family and other people; only a few knew about my mood swings and anger. Yes, after this, they are happy to see me this way as I have created a positive environment and my bonding with the close ones is going strong because of the change.

Similarly, a thirty-five-year-old AoL volunteer from Kolkata conveyed her AoL experience in these words,

I have seen a huge change within myself. The spiritual practices bring more clarity in thoughts. And it helped to reduce anxiety, anger and depression in me. For me, value of life increased after this program. I was a reserved person earlier,

but now I communicate with everyone, that barrier, hesitation has gone. And association with AoL means association with many. So, sharing the same vision and happiness with many people is a joy. We all share the same happiness and joy. And in AoL we believe in One World Family. Life becomes tough when we cannot handle our own minds. Through spiritual practices, by washing out of negative emotions and with awareness, life becomes peaceful.

Likewise, there are a number of participants who all had gone through a life-changing experience or a certain transformation within and out after getting into AoL. For instance, a fifty-six years old government employee cum AoL teacher from Tripura shared,

I now find myself just the reverse of the past. I was rough, arrogant, and stone-hearted, and now I am the opposite. I am living a new life now. One of my friends met me after a long interval and commented on me – "You are an example of perfect transformation." Whatever is good in me now, the growth I see in me is due to this association with AoL.

A twenty-eight-year-old *yoga* teacher from AOL ashram expressed,

I went through a huge transformation after doing the course. My approach to life, way of thinking etc., changed because of which my relationship with everyone else improved. I became calmer, more loving and more relaxed. Before my association with the organisation, I was short-tempered and less sensitive. Also, my intelligence was not so evolved. Now I find myself in a far better state (360° transformation).

A thirty-two-year-old Government Officer and an atheist from Vietnam shared,

I found out my true self, which I was longing to find before. There is a feeling of liberation. Before, I was a person who was craving for love and attention from other people. After the course, I feel love is abundant everywhere, and I start giving love. The more I share my love and support for others, the more I feel happy and satisfied. I am now more positive and prefer to carry a smile. I am at peace. There is clarity in my mind.

A thirty-year-old AoL teacher from China reflecting on her AoL experience said,

As a child, I faced a lot of things that a child should not face. I was nervous and anxious. I used to compare myself with my colleagues in terms of salary, etc. Now I stopped comparing; I don't complain anymore. I positively handle situations. Now I am more grateful. I always try to bring myself back to the center whenever I feel low. I feel I am not a doer anymore. Now I have become more aware. Spirituality helped me to observe all my emotions and how to handle problems and easily come out of trouble. Quicker than before. Previously, I was disturbed by my troubles; I had no awareness. Now I can witness. I can easily come out of this now. So, this is a big change for me.

On a similar note, a forty-one-year-old AoL teacher from Canada shared,

I was introduced to AoL by my parents in 1999. Since I was a directionless 19-year-old, they thought attending this course might channel my life in a good direction. I attended unwillingly. Then, my entire life changed within a few months. I stopped drinking and smoking. I became vegetarian. I was leading a healthier lifestyle. This just made me a happier and much nicer person. I saw all my relationships transform and become sweeter without any effort. I started to make a real connection with people and just became more and more comfortable in my own skin. I started to not just accept others around me, but I think, for the

first time in my life, I really accepted myself for who I was. Life just suddenly went to a whole new level of happiness. I stopped getting nervous around people or when faced with challenging situations. I became more confident and friendly and found a great way to serve society, which was something I had always wanted to do.

A twenty-six-year-old volunteer from Tamil Nadu preparing for the Indian civil services exam shared,

I started my AoL journey in 2014-2015. The first course was organised by the MBA institute while I was in my first semester. After doing the course, I felt so amazing. I was preparing for CAT (Common Entrance Test) exam, and I was going through a lot of pressure leading to depression. So, once I completed the Yes Plus program, I observed a very nice change within myself. I felt so relaxed and gained confidence. Even my communication skills improved. I also gradually started volunteering for AoL. It gives you exposure to different cultures in society. You reach out to so many people. And it also helped me professionally.

Five of the respondents were driven by an inner call for something more or a quest for something higher. For instance, a forty-year-old full-time teacher from Siliguri shared,

I was in search of something higher than the mundane existence of life. After the AoL program, I experienced a lot of positive transformations in life. I am able to respect and honour life much more than before and appreciate the positive aspects of life, and not get bogged down by the negative aspects.

A thirty-four-year-old volunteer from Mauritius shared,

Since childhood, there was a quest, inner inquiry about what is the purpose of life.

Interestingly, AoL experience also constitutes of miracles and mystical aspects. For instance, a thirty-seven-year-old volunteer from Assam revealed,

> *If I continue practising sadhana and kriya, then I develop the ability to discern, to make out whether my work with the person I have to meet would fructify or not. If I go with such a mindset, my work will be done today. Then it will get done. Since the time I got involved with AoL, I didn't face any crises or difficulties in life. I do not realise how I got out of all difficulties. I know I am being taken care of.*

A twenty-nine-year-old AoL volunteer cum a Central government employee from Jharkhand shared,

> *I am a better being now. I know how to handle my mind, feelings and situations. Life is better. I am better. Grace is there in life. My life changed after joining Art of Living. It was the best thing I did. I see miracles.*

A twenty-eight-year-old AoL volunteer from Kerala shared,

> *The first course had a transformative effect on my personality. I became more open and extrovert. Sudarshan Kriya is very effective. Once you start doing seva, sadhana and satsang, everything starts falling into place. Indeed, after a sincere 40 days of Sudarshan Kriya, things start happening on their own, and your wishes start fulfilling. Guru knows everything. Guruji gives you a new birth! You become very positive in your approach to life.*

The experiences mentioned above, thus, portray a whole range of changes and transformations that the AoL members have gone through after adopting certain practices such as *Sudarshan Kriya* and *pranayama* and; by listening to the discourses and by participating in other practices of AoL. In addition to the inner quest, the

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mystical and miraculous experiences, while few experiences turned out life-saving for the participants, such as in the case of the members who felt suicidal; some members even believe that these practices worked as a cure for illnesses such as chronic migraine issue, sinusitis, severe body pain, bronchitis and so on. Moreover, many of the members also claim that they have come out of depression and other mental health issues; and also from disorders such as ADHD, resulting in stopping the intake of medicines. However, none of the members produced concrete scientific evidence to substantiate their claims. It is more of a matter of belief and subjective experience that cannot be, however, simply denied or marked as irrelevant, considering the very nature of the subject of study.

It has been observed that while a hundred per cent of the respondents had experienced some kind of positive changes in their life after adopting the AoL practices, such as a certain level of happiness and peace of mind; they have become more open, more social and are able to handle the issues in life (personal and relational aspects) in a better manner; more than forty-seven per cent of them expressed that they no longer face any anger issue that bothered them previously. More than forty-two per cent feels that they have become more responsible towards others. And more than twenty-six per cent expressed that they can feel a sense of belongingness with everybody. Interestingly, despite sharing their experience, around eight per cent of the respondents stopped sharing at a certain point as they could not express themselves further. They reached the limit of words to describe their experience. Indeed, the experience's extremely subjective nature restricts any generalisation.

It is to be noted that considering the nature of the questions being asked, which were majorly open-ended, the percentages shared above on certain types of experience cannot be taken as final. There is a probability and a possibility that a direct or close-

ended question on any of the indicators would have attracted a different calculation or percentages. For instance, if asked: did you become calmer after developing an association with AoL? Seeing the overall response, it can be predicted that the percentage would go much higher than forty-seven per cent. It may even reach a hundred per cent. Thus, the present study gives primacy to the qualitative nature of the analysis. The indicators mentioned above can be taken as a sign of a spiritually evolved being who is generally considered responsible, happy, calm, peaceful, open-minded, and a social being with no major anger issue; and expressing a sense of belongingness towards one and all other than experiences of self-realisation. Moreover, it is not unlikely to see people considered to be on the path of spirituality unable to express or explain their inner and deeper experiences in verbal terms. For instance, a fifty-six-year-old AoL teacher from Siliguri said,

When I did the basic course in July 2003, I received Sudarshan Kriya. I experienced something unique that cannot be shared as it was some sort of feeling.

Similarly, a fifty-year-old AoL teacher from Bengaluru shared,

The kind of experience I had with Sudarshan kriya cannot be expressed in words. I had an extraordinary experience. I could not believe that one could even have such a beautiful experience.

5.2.2. AoL Members on Spirituality and Religion:

The relationship between spirituality and religion as discussed so far in the previous chapters, indicate an ambiguous touch. Though there is no clear-cut distinction that could be generalised; however, as discussed before, several scholars have

attempted to understand and categorise the distinct relationship between the two (Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Bender, 2007). Still, considering spirituality's subjective and individualistic nature, the spiritual practitioners themselves can have the final say on the issue. In this regard, on the basis of how the spiritual practitioners from AoL have themselves reflected on the relationship between spirituality and religion, let us attempt to understand it. A fifty-three-year-old part-time AoL teacher who belonged to the very first batch of the Teachers Training Program of AoL shared,

Spirituality, for me, is not to hurt or harm anyone or anyone's feelings. Even in the sphere of religion, this is what is taught. None of the religions asks its followers to hurt or harm others. Thus, for me, spirituality is helping others and doing some service for the people and society to whatever possible extent. If you are educated, teach the underprivileged free of cost. If you have money, get food for the underprivileged. There is no difference between spirituality and religion.

On a similar tone, a sixty-five-year-old AoL teacher from Chandigarh sees spirituality as a way of life that has no difference from a religious way of life. For her, both religion and spirituality co-exist as two sides of the same coin. Likewise, a thirty-seven-year-old AoL volunteer from Punjab said,

Religion and spirituality are the same for me. They share the same values. All religions are paths to the same God, and spirituality is the core which makes no discrimination.

Extending the meaning of spirituality further yet seeing its relationship with religion in a somewhat different tone, a fifty-five-year-old AoL teacher from New Delhi said,

Spirituality is something that gives depth and vision to our lives. Spiritual practices such as Sudarshan Kriya and meditation take away the stress and makes me feel light, peaceful and clear. I regain the ability to smile and happily attend to my commitments with faith. Silence Program helps me to go deeper into silence and rejuvenate my inner being. On the other hand, religion is a set of practices that gives identity to a certain group of people. Spirituality transcends the limits of identity and celebrates the spirit that is the God and Godliness present in everyone and everywhere. Thus, I think it is important to see how we practice religion. Religion driven by human values and inner awareness leads to Spirituality. I think other than rejecting religion, we need to utilise it to bring out the truth or the essence, which is the celebration of the Spirit. AoL is fully expressing this beauty by celebrating diversities.

Similarly, a thirty-year-old AoL teacher from Jharkhand shared,

The spirit that runs within everyone is the same even though they may belong to different religions and spirituality is this very realisation.

A fifty-year-old AoL teacher from Kolkata expressed,

Spirituality is the ability to accept whatever situation one is in and stay happy in one's own being. To be spiritual is to be authentic, not to be driven by double standards. But to stand by the truth. With regard to religion, I agree with what Guruji says, i.e., religion is the banana peel, and spirituality is the fruit inside. So, spirituality is the core.

Likewise, a fifty-six-year-old government servant cum an AoL teacher from Tripura shared,

Spirituality is nothing but knowing ourselves better. If spirituality is the inner part of a fruit, religion is its outer skin. Spiritual practices are meant to know ourselves as the real goal of our life under the guidance of a Guru.

The viewpoint of the respondents on spirituality mentioned so far attaches a combination of certain traits to its very notion that includes an altruistic (service-oriented pull) and humanistic touch (concern for others); self-realisation (to know oneself, one's inner life), and also those traits that add to one's happiness, well-being and open-mindedness. With regard to the relationship between spirituality and religion, we can majorly note two ways of seeing this relation. On the one hand, there are those who see the two as having no difference and sharing the same values or realising the same spirit or God in oneself and all; on the other hand, spirituality is seen as the core of religion. Interestingly, spirituality is not only regarded as the core of religion but also that of science. In this respect, a thirty-nine-year-old, PhD in Physics and an AoL member who resides in Ashram with his family asserted,

Spirit is breath. It is the force that keeps the whole universe in balance; it balances the inner and outer domains of life. It harmonises the opposites. The element of religion is there in the spiritual path. We practice many rituals; even our daily life is ritualistic. So, religion comes in. Spirituality is the basis of both religion and science. Without spirituality, science and religion become distorted as it is the connecting force. It connects all despite religious affiliations and other differences. It is the inner quest that connects. The goal is spiritual. But we never reach the goal. Once one reaches, it is over. The path is beautiful. Here and now. The experience is beyond words. It makes you stable and responsible. Here, we have people from all religions.

Thus, the notion of spirituality somewhat conveys a reflexive being in the process of un-becoming and becoming.

A thirty-two-year-old AoL volunteer from the Netherlands residing and working in *ashram* majorly reiterating Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's viewpoint (on religion and spirituality) said,

I think spirituality is living with human values like friendliness, peace, compassion, caring and sharing for people and nature. And like we are made of matter, i.e., the body, bones, blood, and tissues, we are also made of spirit, and our spirit is consisting of all those values which makes our innate nature. It is not that someone is to be happy and friendly. We are born with that, but because of stress, tension, wrong education, and different impression from the mind, all these natural qualities that we have, get covered. Breathing techniques, meditation, and volunteering works are the means to uncover those values to bring us back to our nature. Like science is the knowledge of the universe and everything of matter, spirituality is the knowledge of our life, our being. It is the inner science.

Further on religion, he expressed,

Religion is about tradition. And every religion has good aspects, and I think we should honour those aspects. At the same time, I think spirituality is the mother of religion because every religion has those values. Every religion suggests you should not do such things to others that you would not want others to do to you. We need to focus on humanism that lies in spirituality.

However, there are those practitioners as well who see spirituality as beyond religion. For instance, a thirty-five-year-old AoL volunteer who was working as a content writer in *ashram* is of the viewpoint,

Religion is only a way. Spirituality is the right mode toward the truth. The truth is, even I am on the path. You know you may be in a happy spirit, enthusiastic spirit, etc. Spirituality is beyond religion and connects all. But religion is important too.

A forty-five-year-old AoL participant from Muscat, Oman, asserted,

Spirituality is the balance of everything. Though religion is important, spirituality is above religion. It unites the whole of humanity. I like its approach towards balancing mind and body.

Nevertheless, the present study found that most respondents, i.e., around 94 per cent, sees spirituality as something which connects all and hold that religion is not important in the spiritual journey. For instance, a seventy-year-old long-term volunteer from California expressed,

People can use the term spirituality to mean many different things in different parts of the world. To me, spirituality is something universal, something that applies to everything. Something that is immortal. Something that helps humans come to know their true nature. It is a level, something beyond the senses. Typically, religion provides no tools to experience immortality, universality and transcendence, whereas secular spirituality provides the tools to facilitate and go through those experiences. Tools like especially meditation. The tools can be a little different from one another, some of them complementary but not all. There is a universal decline of religion because people do not get the result just by visiting a church once a week for lectures or other sorts of participation. Also, there is always a battle between religions, and they cannot battle over anything

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universal or common values. I have not seen universality in any religion. Unlike religion, which divides people, spirituality is non-discriminatory is nature.

A twenty-nine-year-old Human Resourses (HR) professional cum AoL volunteer from Jharkhand who resides in Ashram shared,

Spirituality means being able to create a balance in life. I realised it is about balancing the material and immaterial aspects of life. Spirituality has no connection with religion. It is beyond religion. Still, the AoL version of spirituality is open to people belonging to all religions. AoL sees all religions as equal. Spirituality in the sense of daily spiritual practices such as meditation immensely helps in dealing with day-to-day practical aspects of life, such as in taking decisions, building healthy relationships, and everything we are part of.

On a similar note, a thirty-seven-year-old AoL teacher from Jharkhand shared,

Religion and spirituality are totally different. Spirituality is about knowing yourself. It is much beyond any religion. It is about connecting to your own self. Spirituality is about the connection between you and your own soul.

Likewise, a forty-one-years-old AoL teacher from Canada shared,

Spirituality is an outward expression of an inward journey. It is really getting to know myself and then relating to the rest of the world with that deep understanding of myself. Apart from being stress-free and calmer, a spiritual practitioner often finds it easier to navigate through the pressures of life. Spirituality enables one to make better decisions and generally have a more happy and more light presence. This presence is what seems to solve a lot of unwanted problems. I think spirituality can exist without religion, but religion cannot exist without spirituality.

Paradoxically, considering spirituality as a realisation of oneness with all and an inner recognition of a connection with a higher realm and religion as a simply man-made phenomenon that tends to divide people, a forty-two-year-old AoL participant from New Delhi holds that,

Religion and spirituality are not the same but are connected in the way that people understand spirituality through religion and discourses taught in religions. So, religion and spirituality might be combined depending on where the spiritual organisation is located. However, religions should not be brought as a separator between people.

On the contrary, there are also those whose experience of spirituality brought them closer to religion. For instance, a fifty-four-year-old English Teacher cum AoL part-time teacher from Sikkim revealed,

AoL is based on Advaita philosophy. It is connected with Hinduism, but there are two ways of seeing the same. One is the general idea of Hinduism related to image worship like that of Shiva, Ganesh etc. But the real thing or the essence is being in tune with all the energies, and being grateful. These are two distinct things, but people generally stick only to the surface, like temples and rituals, but it is deeper than that. There is respect for nature and respect for the environment. That is very beautiful, and that is why I feel so grateful to Guruji, you know, for making me realise the true essence of Hinduism and how it is so in tune with our lives. Earlier, doing pujas did not make much sense to me. But I love doing it now; it makes so much sense. And the idol is not just an idol. It is a manifestation of different kinds of energy that sustains this world. And I love this.

On the same note, however, conveying a subtle contradictory viewpoint on AoL being Hindu-driven, a forty-year-old full-time AoL teacher from Assam who is also a practicing Muslim when asked, "AoL and the question of Guru is generally seen as a Hindu establishment, and you belong to a different community. So, how would you like to respond? He replied in these words,

Yes, I would also admit that there was an initial fear in me. But when I actually came into practice, there was nothing that conflicted with my beliefs. And I realised after a point that the practices I was doing brought about a kind of calmness of the mind which led me deeper into my own religious practices. Earlier, I used to pray five times a day, and even now, I do, but when I used to pray earlier, the mind was not with the prayer because I had never learned how to calm the mind as the tendency of the mind is to run here and there. So, because of that, my prayer was not so deep, but after knowing the techniques of controlling the mind and stilling the mind, even my namaz prayers became much deeper. But of course, initially, there was a misconception that it is something to do with a particular religion. If you really understand and apply the knowledge that AoL gives you, you will come to know that it is universal. It is beyond religion and beyond culture.

Henceforth, the responses mentioned above indicate that the spiritual practitioners themselves approach the relationship of spirituality and religion in a diverse manner on the basis of their experience. While on the one hand, there are those who see no difference between spirituality and religion in terms of human values; on the other hand, there are those who see no connection at all between the two seeing the former as non-discriminatory and the latter as dividing people. In between, there are those who see spirituality as the core of religion; and also, there are others who see the possibility of

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accessing the realm of the spiritual through religion. Moreover, some give preference to spirituality over religion in the sense of seeing the former as beyond the latter but still holding the latter as important, too; others do not even consider religion as important. Paradoxically, there are also those (from different religious backgrounds) who claim to have come closer to their own religion and even started understanding it better only after joining the AoL.

5.3. Conclusion:

Thus, on the basis of understanding spirituality so far, including the AoL experience of the members, it can be said that the AoL version of spirituality is primarily secular and modern in nature. It basically seeks to address the concerns of daily life, especially those that become a matter of crisis for individuals. This is what is the main reason driving people to join AoL. Also, we have seen that the AoL course promises a stress-free life, happiness, peace, focus, health and so on. In this regard, it offers techniques such as meditation, *Sudarshan Kriya*, *pranayama* and other discourses and activities that enable the participants to become aware of and reflect on the functioning of their own mind and thought patterns, including the other six layers of existence, which includes breath, body, intellect, ego, memory and the self (Shankar, 2011: 41). Although the first impression of the name of these techniques indicates a religious basis, however, it has been observed that the way these techniques are interpreted and presented, i.e., on the basis of their utility, their experience-oriented nature, on the basis of science and reason, it hardly gives any space to religion in actuality. Rather, it keeps the scope open for diverse interpretations. Thereby, we can see people belonging to different religions and atheists as well, freely and willingly joining AoL and becoming AoL teachers. For instance, a twenty-four-year-old AoL member from China who is an atheist shared,

Spirituality is to doing something which enables you to not being controlled by thoughts. When you face some problems or obstacles, you can use the knowledge that Guruji gave, and you can solve or reduce a lot of it. It helps you to not get controlled by the mind. I have no idea about religion. Spirituality is different; you do not inherit it like religion.

Similarly, his sister, who is herself an atheist and an AoL teacher, shared,

Previously before joining AoL I had a lot of troubles, problems and confusion. Now I can observe these problems and troubles and easily come out of these. Now I have become more aware. I have become a witness. I am no longer bothered by nervousness and anxiety. I do not compare myself with anyone. Rather, my relations with people have become better.

Thus, as we can see from the experience of the respondents, spirituality acts as a tool to resolve the existential issues and troubles of daily life, whether personal or relational. AoL experience is filled with a realisation of transformation and change of individual life towards something better, such as that of achieving clarity in thoughts, becoming confident and developing an ability to focus in life, coming out of anxiety, depression or negativities and becoming more lively, happy, peaceful and calm to becoming more reflexive and aware of one's mind; and opening up and becoming more social and altruistic in nature. Indeed, some of them prefer to see and call AoL experience a new birth for themselves. Moreover, spirituality has been defined mainly in terms of knowing oneself, connecting to one's true self and others, not hurting others and being of service to others. Thus, it is about an inner-worldly or subjective journey on the one hand and an altruistic concern driven by human values such as love, compassion, happiness, care, empathy etc., on the other hand. Broadly, it is defined in terms of having a broader vision of life, valuing life more, balancing life and living life

to the fullest. Thus, the AoL version of spirituality is, first and foremost, about life itself. Ravi Shankar writes, "Caring for life, recognising life, uplifting life is spirituality.." (Shankar, 2008: 21). Spirituality attaches an intrinsic sacred value to life that has to be lived to the fullest in the here and now. Indeed, it enables us to see the sacred in the secular (see Mellor and Shilling, 2014).

In this regard, it does resonate with the elements of Paul Heelas's understanding of new age spiritualities as spiritualities of life itself which emphasises on a holistic understanding of self and others other than an emphasis on subjectivity, humanism, and sacredness of the self (Heelas, 2008; see Heelas and Woodhead, 2001: 43-72). However, AoL is markedly distinct from such new-age spiritualities because, unlike these spiritualities, which are not based on any religious tradition and also emphasises on self-authority, AoL discourse is based on Guru's teachings and his translation and interpretation of the *Upanishads* and other scriptural texts. Moreover, in AoL, along with the freedom of the individuals to decide on their spiritual life, the Guru's authority also plays an important role. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that in AoL there lies a subtlety that has to be taken into account while understanding the relationship between spirituality and religion. As we have already seen the response of the respondents and from which, we can make out that religion is not the primary force or concern for joining or being a part of AoL.

Moreover, the AoL respondents' accounts of religion and spirituality portray diverse viewpoints. However, despite the respondents who are very certain with their take on the religion and spirituality relationship, i.e., whether they see both as the same, similar, distinct or contradictory, the final standpoint on this relationship remains unresolved and subjective as it is the very nature of spirituality to remain open and democratic that gives it a non-discriminatory touch while opening up the space for self-

authority and interpretation. Thus, certainly, there is no final say that resolves the problem by clearly distinguishing the relationship of religion and spirituality, yet the individuals, whether religious, spiritual, atheist or belonging to none of these categories of identity, are certain on their own take on this relationship. Thus, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King write, "It is not possible to appeal to some immutable and universal meaning of terms like 'spirituality' or 'religion' (for instance, in arguing that 'real spirituality' is socially engaged) because meanings change over time and take on new resonances according to shifting power-relations within society" (Carrette and King, 2005: 172). Thus, the certainty on the part of individual practitioners regarding their take on spirituality and religion, given the changing nature of society and processual dynamics of social relationships and narratives, remains uncertain as spirituality itself is somewhat adhering to a process of becoming and unbecoming.

Chapter-6

Contemporary Spirituality: Traversing through the Known and Unknown

"We have never searched for ourselves---how should it then come to pass, that we

should ever find ourselves?"

Friedrich Nietzsche (2003:1)

6.1. Introduction:

On the basis of the discussion accomplished in the previous chapters, we can readily consider the Art of Living Foundation with its presence in around 180 countries and nearly in all the states of India, touching millions of lives under the leadership of a spiritual leader or a *guru* as a representation of the functioning of an existing spiritual movement. As discussed in chapter five, spiritual here signifies the non-material aspects connoting self-realisation or a certain level of subjective awareness leading to one's betterment resulting from a transformative process that affects one's way of seeing life as a whole. However, the concern for one's betterment develops in relational terms, driven by an altruistic sense of belongingness with others. This in no respect defies materialistic pursuits nor denies life's material or physical aspects. Rather, such a realisation becomes possible through the adoption of certain bodily practices; cognitive as well as physical such as that through exposure to AoL discourses, meditation, *Sudarshan Kriya,* and *pranayama,* which helps one to get rid of stress and other problematic issues of daily life, personal or relational leading to health, happiness and care for human values such as sharing and caring for oneself and all. This is very much inherent in the notion of *seva* or service. Thus, spirituality here emphasises not just on subjective well-being and individualistic journey but also on seeing the self in relational terms that, for psychoanalysts like Sudhir Kakar, typically reflect aspects of Indian and Chinese or Japanese culture (Kakar, 1991:116).

In a broader understanding, awareness of the self and even the body does not just connect to others (humans, other living creatures or things) but connects the self to the whole universe or macrocosm through the realisation of one consciousness that reflects the very core of *Advaita* philosophy. Thus, the inner journey is simultaneously subjective and relational, imminent and universal which sees not only the unity of mankind but also establishes its connection with nature, all beings and the cosmos. Interestingly, such a picture of the nature of contemporary spirituality was laid out by an author, namely Thomas Berry, in his piece entitled, "Contemporary Spirituality: The Journey of the Human Community", published in 1974 as a simultaneous journey towards the discovery of one's authentic inner self and a realisation of a broader communion with the larger human community, the divine and the cosmos (Berry, 1974: 172-83). Thus, themes like self, subjective life, inner-life journey, transformation, meditation, well-being, happiness, altruism, human values, body, consciousness and even transcendence are common to the idea and practices reflected by present-day spirituality. Moreover, as discussed in chapter three, spirituality today sees no conflict between tradition and modernity; rather, it roots its legitimacy in the dynamics of the interplay of the ancient and modern. This holds true of AoL and other similar spirituality-based guru-led non-governmental foundations.

With the background mentioned above, the present chapter attempts to look into the functioning and also the nature of present-day spirituality as presented by the existing practices of these spirituality-based guru-led organisations that cut across the above-mentioned common themes by emphasising on the one hand the broader, manifested and popular themes such as *yoga*, volunteerism, gender, caste, class, consumerism and the nationalist touch. On the other hand, it seeks to venture into the

unknown and majorly latent yet manifested to a certain extent through the question of body and consciousness.

6.2. Yoga:

Yoga, a term so widely popular today, especially in recognition of its contribution to the field of health and well-being, has led the United Nations to declare the 21st of June as International Yoga Day in the year 2015. Despite this, it has no definite date of its origin. Gerald Larson, a *yoga* expert, considers *yoga* as old as or even older than recorded history, with its origin majorly lost in the antiquity of Central, Western, and South Asia (De Michelis, 2008: 17). Archaeological findings suggest a figure seated in *yoga*-like posture depicted on a seal found while excavating the sites of the earliest cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa representing the cultural developments of the Indus Valley civilisation (2500 B.C.E.-1500 B.C.E.) (Shattuck, 1999: 17-18). David Gordon White, however, locates the earliest extant works on *yoga* philosophy on the cusp between scriptures based on *Samkhya* and Yoga schools of Indian philosophy which are discussed at some length in the *Katha Upanishad* dating 300-100 B.C.E. and are also referred to in the later scriptures like *Maitri Upanishad*, *Yoga Sutras*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* (White, 2014: 20-30). Cybelle Shattuck's work on Hinduism traces the first appearance of the word 'yoga' in the *Katha Upanishad*, in which it is portrayed as the "control of the senses" (ibid., 29). Etymologically, the word *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which means "to yoke, unite or control" and refers to the practice of asceticism and meditation that leads to a moral, physical and mental discipline essential for higher knowledge of the self (ibid.).

The religio-philosophical basis of the theoretical model depicting the interrelationship of the concepts of *karma, samsara and moksha* and their central relevance in the functioning and teachings of the major religions in South Asia,

especially Hinduism other than Buddhism etc., marks the importance of *yoga* (Shattuck, 1999; De Michelis, 2008). In simple terms, the *karma/samsara/moksha* philosophical complex is based on a belief system which sees human life as a consequence of continuing reincarnations (*samsara*), provided the current life experience is based essentially on the effects of past and present action (*karma)*, and coming out of this cycle is held as not only possible but also a sign of true liberation (*moksha*) and thus, desirable and is also the goal of many advanced seekers of truth in the religious and spiritual path (ibid.). *Yoga* or *yogic* teachings and practices act as the medium through which liberation or *moksha/nirvana* (salvation) can be attained (ibid.). There are four major forms of yoga or yogic paths in this regard. While out of the four, three are described in the most famous and commonly followed Hindu religious text, namely the Bhagavad Gita, as *karma yoga* (attainment of salvation through right action)*, bhakti yoga* (attainment of salvation through devotion to God or the ultimate) and *jnana yoga* (attainment of salvation through knowledge); Elizabeth De Michelis considers *tantra yoga* (that emphasises on techniques leading to the assimilation of the practitioner with various metaphysical entities or transcendence through the exploration of psycho-physical states) as the fourth form of yoga which became widespread, especially since the 6th century C.E. (De Michelis, 2008). However, in the popular domain other than the practice of *tantra,* which is anyway recognised as an esoteric/occult form of *yogic* practice, the fourth form of yoga is known as *raja yoga,* that had gained popularity after Swami Vivekananda's published book with the same title based on his reflection on the popular ancient text on *yoga* known as Patanjali Yoga Sutras.

Patanjali Yoga Sutras, dated 400 B.C.E.-500 C.E., is a classic text that comprises a collection of aphorisms in the Sanskrit language which describes the theory and practice of *yoga*. These *sutras* (aphorisms) are attributed to a sage named Patanjali.

Although Patanjali is not the only sage[173] with whom *yoga* is associated in the scriptures, nor his *yoga sutras* the only texts on *yoga* but the degree of relevance Patanjali's Yoga Sutras hold today with regard to the idea and practice of *yoga* has no precedence. Referring to the context of the United States, wherein millions of people go for yoga classes and considering that the instruction on Patanjali Yoga Sutra is often considered mandatory for the teacher training there in the US, David Gordon White writes, "Yoga Sutra is as relevant to yoga as it is taught and practised today as understanding the workings of a combustion engine is to driving a car" (White, 2014: 1). White asserts that since its composition the Yoga Sutras has been interpreted by three major groups: the classical Indian commentators, modern critical scholars and the modern *yoga* subcultural groups (White, 2014:1-30). In the 10th and 11th centuries, commentaries on this seminal *yoga* text were also written in Arabic and Old Javanese, and today it is available in many languages (ibid.). However, White also noted that most of the commentaries could be a "sub-commentary" of the earliest commentary on the original text by Vyasa based on *Samkhya* philosophy (ibid.).

White writes, "The classical Indian commentators viewed the *Yoga Sutra* as a philosophical work, an investigation of the relationship between spirit and matter; an account of the workings of the mind and ways of knowing what is true; a study of cause and effect in the workings of the universe; and a guide to salvation" (White, 2014: 18). The emphasis as well as the basis of *yoga sutras* which it commonly shares with other major schools of Indian philosophical thought, especially concerning the knowledge of the *Vedas* or *Upanishads* is the soteriological approach to life (White, 2014). A quest for salvation (soteriological basis) not only from the *samsara* (cycle of births) but also

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[173] Hiranyagarbha, Yajnavalkya and Kapila are the names of the ancient sages discussed in the scriptures like *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Mahabharata* in association with *Yoga*. (For details, see White 2014).

from the problems of daily life within the *samsara* (worldly life itself) could now be met by following the knowledge and practices of *yoga,* such as meditation, *asanas* (postures), discourses on yoga sutras and *Upanishads* and other breathing techniques. This coincided with the revival of Yoga Sutras, especially in the 19th-century South Asian context, which could be situated broadly within the context of the revival of *Vedic* Hinduism or Neo-Vedantic philosophy, in general, resulting from the development of a symbiotic relationship between Indian nationalism, western occultism and systems of modern physical culture (that influenced postural *yoga*) (De Michelis, 2008). These developments led to the rise of early modern *yoga,* which is being documented, represented and disseminated especially in the English language, which has a global appeal other than in regional languages (ibid.).

In the present-day context, *yoga* is not only highly popular but is also represented by diverse styles, techniques and practices cutting across nations and regions and has emerged as a secular aid in a modern lifestyle. The scope of research and academic interest in *yoga* and meditation is extending from religious studies, anthropology, and sociology to new fields such as political theory, critical and race studies and is also largely developing its own visibly distinct field of study, which is approached through transregional, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary perspectives in the 21st century (Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop, 2021: 4). It is popularly associated with bodily postures and breathing techniques for fitness and good health. This very association of *yoga* with fitness is particularly modern in origin[174]. Even the Patanjali Yoga Sutras do not emphasise much on postural *yogic* techniques for fitness (White, 2014).

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[174] Two of Aurobindo's contemporaries namely Swami Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda are considered as pioneers in the "medicalization" of *yoga* in India. Essential tenets of modern postural *yoga* that aids in the maintenance of good health are derived from their innovations. They were influenced by Swami Vivekananda's attempt at the scientific interpretation of *yoga*. (See White 2014: 185).

Mark Singleton, a *yoga* researcher, traces the first possible textual expression of modern *yoga* in Swami Vivekananda's 1896 book on *Raja Yoga* (ibid.). Modern *yoga* is a composite formation of a body of theory and practice resulting from the contact of English-educated urban Indians and western notions of science, rationality, humanistic psychology and so on during the mid to late nineteenth century (Cush et al., 2008: 1030-38). Vivekananda's *raja yoga* is an attempt at a selective interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* in the light of modernity (both challenged as well as got influenced by modernity as discussed in the previous chapters) with an attempt at rational explanation and practical application of the teachings for the benefit of the masses implying majorly a soteriological touch. In this regard, David Gordon White notes that Patanjali's *ashtanga yoga* (eight-part practice) or the step-by-step guidance for meditation and self-realisation plays a major role in the dissemination of the practices of modern *yoga* subculture (White, 2014:1-30).

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Regina Bönsel elaborates on Patanjali's *ashtanga yoga* which they describe as "eight limbs of yoga" which are: *yama*, *niyama*, *asanas*, *pranayama*, *pratayahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* (Shankar and Bönsel, 2017: 35-37). *Yama* includes "five social ethics: *ahimsa* (non-violence in action, speech and words), *satyam* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmachariya* (moderations in all pleasures) and *aparigraha* (not accumulating things unnecessarily and not desiring things belonging to others); *niyama* embodies five personal ethics which are: *saucha* (cleanliness of the body and mind), *santosha* (contentment), *tapas* (self-discipline), *swadhyaya* (study of the self) and *ishwarapranidhana* (honouring the divine); *asanas* refer to postures; *pranayama* constitutes of breathing techniques; *pratayahara* means taking the senses inwards; *dharana* refers to one-pointed focus; *dhyana* is translated as meditation and *samadhi* means merging with the self" (ibid.). According to Ravi

Shankar and Regina Bönsel, these eightfold paths of *yoga* are complementary to each other (ibid.). Referring to these eight-fold path as "eight different spiritual practices" Stephen Jacobs holds samadhi as "the final goal of yoga, in which all distinctions between the meditator, the act of meditation and the object of meditation collapse." (Jacobs, 2010: 52-53). Study of the self, self-discipline, a sense of contentment with what one has and in being in the present moment, meditation, a sense of control over the senses, emphasis on focus, and personal and social ethics are very much a part of the AoL discourse addressing individual issues, growth and development.

These spiritual practices indicate the very nature of the term spirituality followed and disseminated through *yoga* and discourses based on *Upanishads* and other texts by distinguishing itself from the strictly religious domain. As we can see here, the focus lies on the conduct of the individual who, in her own life, through awareness and control of the senses, body, breath and mind, attempts to enrich life itself. For instance, a webpage of the AoL official website shares, "*yoga* is a holistic package for happy living. It provides techniques to unite the body, mind and breath, and connect to the inner core of our being- the spiritual aspect of our lives".[175] Thus, describing the name *yoga* as connoting "a state of union of mind, body and spirit Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Regina Bönsel considers it as the basis of a "spiritual foundation for a more humane society" that focuses on inner peace and unity (Shankar and Bönsel, 2017: 35-37). Thereby, on this basis, the realm of spirituality as the AoL version, unlike the religious domain (wherein the institutional aspects such as norms driven by certain organised belief-system is seen as primarily driving the individual lives) first and foremost emphasises on the wellbeing of the individual by addressing the subjective and inner

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[175] See *Yoga and Spirituality: Exploring the Connect.* Available at: Yoga and Spirituality | Spiritual Essence of Yoga | The Art of Living India (accessed 9th April 2022).

dimension of life through the spread of awareness about the importance of becoming conscious of taking one's own responsibility driven by ethics and values, especially towards the secular and practical aspects of living daily life. This indicates an "ameliorative worldview" influenced by an individualistic and reflexive approach towards self and identity (De Michelis, 2008: 24). In this regard, individuals are given enough choice to deal with the sphere of the sacred in their own terms. Indeed, the self itself becomes sacred.

There are several other *guru*-led spirituality-based organisations along with AoL sharing and propagating the similar message of the *Upanishads*, *Gita*, *Puranas* and other scriptures through *yogic* practices (postural as well as based on breath control and meditational techniques) and discourses (translation and interpretation of the scriptures via print and electronic media). The most contemporary amongst these are Isha Foundation (1992), led by Jagadish or Jaggi Vasudev, popularly known as Sadhguru (1957-); other popular ones include the Transcendental Meditation Movement/Group of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; Sri Satya Sai International Organization (1965) based on the teachings of Satya Sai Baba (1926-2011); the Brahma Kumaris (1936) based on the teachings of Lekhraj Kripalani (1884-1969); Satsang Foundation of Sri M, Mata Amritanandamayi Math and so on. Common elements that characterise these organisations resonate with Elizabeth De Michelis' description of the modern *yoga* that embodies the processes of privatisation (individual authority, subjective belief-system is prioritised over questions of faith), commodification (influenced by the capitalist-driven consumerist trends these organisations have their own brand of products) and medicalisation (emphasis on health and fitness) (De Michelis, 2008). The influence of the modern self-help industry driven by motivational speakers and books parallels the modern-day *gurus* and their activities.

However, those traits which most fundamentally distinguish these organisations with a distinct identity of secular spirituality, simultaneously recognising their leaders as spiritual rather than religious leaders, are the main attractions of these foundations. Interestingly, these organisations maintain a subtle yet open approach to the question of religion without being directly identifying with it or denying it openly. Their foremost appeal is to address the immediate crisis faced by the individuals in their daily lives through the designed discourse as talks (concerning life and its common issues) circulated in social media and as a course equipped with *yogic* practices, breathing techniques and meditation. And through these individuals, they attempt to address society and social issues. In this regard, the distinction between religion and spirituality may end up showing in the very manner in which the whole discourse is being built, interpreted and presented, as well as received and further communicated by the receivers, as shown in chapters five and four.

Further, it is to be noted that the openness of these spirituality-based-organizations is not just restricted to the question of religion. Still, the open, liberal and democratic nature of modern-day spirituality cuts across the diverse identities determined by caste, class and gender or any other limiting identities. Thus, AoL membership is open to all and thereby, it is able to draw a large network of volunteers belonging to diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Along with the *guru* whose presence and guidance pre-dominates the very functioning of AoLF, the main role is played by the volunteers or *sevaks* as AoL is primarily a volunteer-based organisation that maintains a community-based thread which connects all its members.

6.3. Volunteerism:

Volunteers and volunteering activity marks the fundamental basis of the functioning and spread of the AoL networks. In a commonsensical understanding,

volunteering means participation in any social activity out of a free will that benefits someone else (community, people, animals) with no expectation or desire for anything in return in cash or kind. Resonating this viewpoint is the "dominant paradigm" of voluntary action as described by Rochester et al. (2010) which sees volunteering as an unpaid altruistic act of giving one's time to help those who are less fortunate such as those suffering from health issues, social exclusion and poverty through an association with a formal organisation (charitable foundations, hospitals and schools) that defines and manages the selection, training and role of the volunteers in advance (Rochester et al., 2010: 11). John Wilson notes that "volunteering is a part of a general cluster of helping activities" (Wilson, 2000: 216). Cnaan et al. note that volunteering is frequently taken as the "catch-all" term for a variety of non-salaried activities (Cnaan et al., 1996: 365). To a major extent, the ideal perspective of AoL on volunteering and volunteerism reflects the commonsensical or dominant paradigm.

Moreover, Snyder and Omoto's consideration of a volunteer as representing a formal organisation out of free choice with no expectation for a monetary benefit or any self-benefit but is driven by a will to benefit others (Stukas et al. 2014:4-5) comes closest to the AoL perspective. For instance, Sri Sri considers that a *sevak* or a volunteer is one who has to serve society or people selflessly in whatever possible manner without any need for anything in return (Shankar, 2017). For him, one's talents and qualities are for others and, thus, has to be put for the service of others without being asked through self-motivation, self-inspiration and spirituality, which brings integrity (Shankar and Bönsel, 2017:34; Shankar 2010).

A twenty-six-year-old PGT teacher and AoL volunteer shared,

I wanted to contribute to Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's vision to make a violence-free and stress-free society. So, I decided to become an Art of Living Teacher. An AoL volunteer/teacher is meant to be a self-inspired person who is always ready to contribute to people's life.

In the words of an AoL teacher from Siliguri,

An AoL volunteer is a person who experiences a change after an introduction to Art of Living tools and techniques and willingly joins the mission to share joy and happiness. Selfless seva/service broadens the vision and makes the person aware of social responsibility. He knows the importance of spiritual practices for success in material life and likes to share the same with the people around him.

While anyone can become an AoL volunteer, provided she is driven by an altruistic motive to serve society without expecting anything in return, Art of Living volunteers are expected to have done at least the basic course and has to be familiar with the *guru's* basic teachings. Moreover, AoL also has a structured way of recruiting volunteers through a Volunteer Training Program (VTP) (which is held as a pre-teacher training program) and Youth Leadership Training Program (YLTP). A prerequisite for joining in Teachers Training Program is one's commitment to AoL, which is measured through the number of initiatives taken by an individual in the direction of organising AoL courses through introductory talks; assisting teachers during AoL courses which adds to one's experience. The volunteers and program participants are encouraged to bring more people into AoL, and interestingly, this is also considered a part of *seva* or service. A young volunteer active in rural development work in Gujrat explains, "All volunteers involved in development work go to the villages to identify young men and women with leadership qualities. They then undergo the Youth Leadership Training

programme (YLTP), which incorporates traditional techniques of *yoga*, meditation and *pranayama*, along with training in communication skills, leadership and entrepreneurship. Once their training is over, the young '*Yuvacharyas*' become the agents of change in their communities" (Gautier and Gautier, 2010:12). Likewise, all the activities of the foundation spread across the country and beyond are systematically managed, organised and coordinated by the volunteers through different offices and centres located in different regions majorly through the direction provided by offices of the various departments (concerning different activities) located at the Bengaluru Ashram international headquarters of the foundation. However, AoL's ideal understanding of the notion of volunteering and voluntarism reflecting the commonsensical and dominant paradigm of volunteering misses out on its practical aspects.

Cnaan et al. consider that the volunteer community is not monolithic, and neither volunteering is a uniform act (Cnaan et al.,1996: 365). The United Nations State of World Volunteering Report 2022 defines volunteering according to the following five components, each of which represents a dimension of volunteer action; they are structure (whether volunteering activity is taking place within the ambit of a formal organisation or is simply informal participation); site (online or offline mode); intensity (whether the voluntary activity is regular or irregular in nature); aspiration (whether the voluntary activity driven by a concern for self-building or/and community building) and category (whether the voluntary activity is in the form of participation, service, mutual aid, leisure and campaigning or inclusive of all) (UNV Programme 2021). In addition to the "dominant paradigm", Rochester et al. also discuss two other perspectives/paradigms on volunteerism: "the civil-society paradigm" and volunteering as serious leisure (Rochester et al., 2010: 12-23). While the former nature of

volunteerism occurs in voluntary groups and self-help groups motivated by mutual-aid and self-help driven altruism revolving around environment and women issues and other social issues, volunteerism for serious leisure accounts for the voluntary participation motivated by intrinsic pursuits such as hobbies based on skills and enthusiasm in the form of performance in cultural functions, sports activities organised by organisations (ibid.).

Rochester et al., suggest the possibility of volunteering driven by a combination of all three of its forms, such as unpaid service or work, activism and leisure or in varying combinations (ibid.). In the sphere of the AoLF, while the guru and the followers emphasise on volunteerism in terms of altruistic, selfless service with no intention for any benefit in return; in actuality, volunteering activity in AoL takes all the three forms and their combinations, as discussed above in Rochester et. al. (2010). Volunteers are not simply driven by a selfless, altruistic drive but by diverse motivations and get certain gratification. For instance, for a twenty-year-old who lives with her brother in a recently shifted rented house in a new city, namely Siliguri in West Bengal, the contact with AoL not only resulted in rescuing her from personal trauma and issues (due to break-up and other familial issues) due to which she joined the AoL course but also provided her with a platform to develop a network with like-minded people who all occasionally meet for *satsangs*. She also voluntarily organises courses with others and, at the same time, occasionally sings songs and also deploys her artistic skills to decorate the AoL centres during events. Moreover, she also occasionally assists teachers in conducting courses and, at other times, moves out with other volunteers in the nearby villages to distribute stationery items, and food and also organises small workshops to interact and educate the children from less privileged families with their own pocket money. A twenty-six-years-old civil service aspirant from Tamil Nadu said,

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Once I completed the Yes Plus Program I observed a very nice change within myself. I felt so relaxed and gained confidence. Even my communication skills improved. I gradually started volunteering for AoL. It gives you exposure to different cultures. You reach out to so many people. And it also helped me professionally. As a human resource professional, you need to understand the psychology of people.

Thus, volunteering is not a simple unilateral process driven by selfless altruism. Rather, the volunteers are driven by different motivations. Activism is also very much a part of AoL volunteering. For instance, Choose to Vote for a better India[176] as a part of the Voter Awareness Campaign before the 2014 general elections in India and the recent 2021 Mission Zindagi[177], a Covid-relief volunteer-based drive, are two important initiatives of AoL in this regard.

Jacqueline Butcher and Christopher J. Einolf divide the causes that lead people to volunteer into three categories: motivations, resources and social networks (Butcher and Einolf, 2017: 10-11). The present study finds that these three causes behind volunteering are relevant even in the case of AoL. While the volunteers themselves are the resources for a volunteer-driven organisation, especially one that utilises their skills and talents, volunteering itself is a handy resource for the volunteers, which enables them to utilise skills and talents.

Volunteers are motivated by various manifest and latent factors. While the manifest factors include their motivation to contribute to society, the latent factors imply a sense of gratification they get from the volunteering activity. Also, volunteering enables the

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[176] See Choose to Vote for a Better India | The Art Of Living India (accessed 7th June 2022).
[177] See The Art of Living announces Mission Zindagi - A volunteer driven service initiative for COVID relief (aninews.in) (accessed 7th June 2022)

elderly, especially the retired, to stretch their productive life further, enabling them to make use of their free time. Moreover, the development of wider social networks enables the volunteers to beat societal isolation and widen their social base by developing a community of common identity based on trust and friendship. It also gives a sense of societal recognition and adds to the societal status of the participants. In this regard, considering the nature of their service that aims to provide relief from personal and daily life issues and with a general open-minded and friendly demeanour, the AoL teachers are well respected in society, and especially there is a tendency to develop their own circle of fan base constituting of their course participants. However, even the *guru* occasionally addresses and recognises the contribution of the teachers and volunteers; this becomes a crucial source of inspiration for them to be on this path.

Interestingly, the teachers even receive a certain basic percentage of return in monetary terms from the courses they conduct, including the travelling expenses. However, this does not devalue the position of a volunteer as the broader definition of a volunteer is inclusive in nature in the sense that they may receive a certain remuneration in return. Still, it is usually much lesser than the value of what they contribute voluntarily. Thus, they are also called "quasi-volunteers" (Wilson, 2000:216). Even though it has been observed as reflected in published works on volunteerism (Wilson, 2000; Son and Wilson, 2011; Studer and Schnurbein, 2013), organisational and familial socialisation also encourages and positively affects volunteer behaviour and motivation. For instance, it is not uncommon to find more people from the same family volunteering for AoL. However, in this regard, it has to be noted that family does not always play an encouraging role.

Nevertheless, interestingly, the AoL website promotes its volunteer training program as a modern-day personality development program that would benefit the

participants in enhancing their leadership, communication and teamwork skills and, thus, promises overall personal, professional and spiritual growth under the support of a community.[178] Henceforth, volunteering and volunteerism constitute a complex social process. However, what is crucial to note in this regard is that AoL is open to all, i.e., people belonging to any gender, caste and class or any other identifying mark based on religion, region and so on can become an AoL member, teacher or volunteer. In this regard, let us briefly discuss gender, caste and class.

6.4. Question of Gender:

Broadly speaking, the domain of contemporary spirituality has no place for gender discrimination as it is open to all. Unlike religion, which is criticised because of gender-based biases, spirituality is characterised by gender equality (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013: 6-24). However, provided the broader socio-historical and deeper roots of patriarchy within which our societal relations have developed and are developing, the Art of Living Foundation cannot be studied in isolation.

Vijaya Ramaswamy, in a chapter on "Gendered Spirituality: A South Indian Perspective" in her work entitled, "Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in India" (1997) while considers spirituality unlike religion (viewed as "established faith" linked to society, community, culture and the ritualistic domain) as essentially individualistic shows that throughout history spiritual journey of women has not been smooth (Ramaswamy, 2007). This is not to say that the spiritual path is easy for male ascetics and male spiritual seekers, who are also likely to experience familial disapproval and ridicule for escaping responsibilities, but male ascetics are gradually

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[178] See *Enhance your Leadership, teamwork and communication skills.* Available at: <u>Volunteer Training | The Art of Living India</u> (accessed 4th June 2022).

accepted, and even the spiritual path remains open to men. Indeed, traditionally, the spiritual quest/practice in the form of mysticism, monasticism and higher spiritual goals such as that of salvation and transcendence had been denied to women (ibid.). Thus, men clearly have an advantage over women with regard to social recognition in the spiritual path. All those women historical figures who followed their spiritual call, such as Meerabai of Rajasthan, Lalleshvari of Kashmir, and even Joan of Arc of France etc., had to face hostility, embarrassment and humiliation (ibid.).

Women had to violate the social norms either covertly by sticking to their domestic duties and simultaneously taking the spiritual call or by overtly challenging patriarchy through open defiance/deviance of established social norms. For instance, on the one hand, women saints/spiritual figures like Bahinabai (who chose to submit to ill-treatment by her husband and family) and Bhavatarini Ammal (who was deserted by her husband at an early age yet even looked after her husband's second wife's children) and Andavan Pichchi (who was sent back by her *guru* to fulfil her familial *karmic* responsibilities but was initially considered as mad and locked up in a room by her husband and later also faced family issues with husband due to her male followers) simultaneously pursued spiritual practice to heal others with both male and female following and looked after their families as pious housewives; female spiritual practitioners like Ramani from Ramanashramam (abode of Ramana Maharishi, a well-known spiritual *guru*) however chose to walk out of home ignoring even her dying husband's request to visit him (ibid.).

There are also saints like Anandamayi Ma, who was married but her marriage was not consummated, and others like Kanakamma from Ramanashram, who was forcibly married at a young age; however, even her marriage was never consummated; rather, she asked her husband to remarry as she herself decided to move in the spiritual path

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(ibid.). On the other hand, Akka Mahadevi (a 12th-century female bhakti saint from Karnataka) and Lalleshvari of Kashmir walked out of an oppressive marriage and pursued the ascetic path (ibid.). Lalleshvari and another saint from Karnataka, namely Akka Mahadevi, outrightly challenged patriarchy and defied social norms to pursue the spiritual by walking naked (ibid.). Even the *bhakti* saint Meera of Rajasthan openly defied social norms by dancing, wearing anklets, and moving around with spiritually inclined men (ibid.). Thus, female spirituality expresses its marginalised voice in varying forms of deviance or defiance in a patriarchal society.

Vijaya Ramaswamy's work rightly points to the male epistemological order within which one has to locate the marginalising role of women in general and women as spiritual seekers in particular. In patriarchy and in almost all major religions, women or the feminine principle are symbolically associated with sexuality and sexual desires (Ramaswamy 2007; Sachdeva and Chowdhury, 2018: 53). On the other hand, *purusha* or the male principle is considered asexual (ibid.). In Hindu philosophy, while *parama purusha* is known as the "ultimate principle" that transcends space, time and gender, *prakriti* or the feminine principle, is attached to creation, worldly and early elements (ibid.). Thus, transcendence is basically denied to women, and indeed, women are considered a threat to their male counterparts in the spiritual realm due to the notion of pollution attached to menstruation (ibid.). Thus, for Ramaswamy, the spiritual path indicates role reversal in the sense that here the hunter (man) becomes hunted when he falls for a woman (ibid.). Indeed, when a woman gets diverted from or challenges the pre-defined ideal roles attached to her in a patriarchal society, i.e., that of a selfless mother, dutiful daughter and a chastised wife, she ends up facing the censure of patriarchy that even tends to relegate her to a lower position conceived of as dangerous and deviant (ibid.). In this regard, the position of nuns, widows and prostitutes that has

no male owner or husband attached to it are clubbed together and socially "othered" (ibid.).

Even the institution of nunnery got social recognition very late in history. In Christianity, it was only in the 12th century "Poor Clares", the sister order of the Franciscan monks, was established (ibid.). The monastic orders of the Indian women missionaries made their appearance only in the nineteenth century in the context of colonial India (ibid.). In the context of Buddhism, only after several requests, including that of Prajapati Gautami or Mahāprajāpati (Buddha's foster mother), been denied and rejected by the Buddha, he gradually allowed the establishment of women's monastic order after the mediation of a male disciple namely Ananda (ibid.). However, the permission for nunnery was granted on the condition that the nuns must follow the eight fundamental rules (*guru-dharma*), which makes the nuns' order dependent upon the hierarchically placed superior monks' monastic order (Heirman, 2011: 606). Thus, women had to face a lot of hostility and opposition in order to make a place for themselves in the sphere of the sacred in a male-dominated and governed world of patriarchy.

Nevertheless, despite the struggle, contestations and hostility faced by spiritually driven women in a male-dominated world, it is the realm of spirituality that gave her voice. In the spiritual path, women could not only explore their inner life but could also liberate themselves to a major extent from the shackles of patriarchy either by sticking to the pre-defined roles of a pious wife yet by not keeping quiet or submitting to it fully rather simultaneously pursuing her spiritual calls like that of Andavan Picchi, Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) of the twentieth century and Ma Sharadamani Devi (1853-1920) of nineteenth-century or by simply tearing off and breaking through the boundaries of patriarchy by completely defying and rejecting its social norms by

walking naked by the female saints like Lalleshvari of Kashmir (1320-1392) and Akka Mahadevi of twelfth century Karnataka and by following the path of intense spiritual ascetic practices by popular Tamil women saints like Karraikal Ammaiyar of the fifth century that reduced her to a mere skeletal figure. All these women saints are revered figures. Indeed, Ma Sharadamani Devi and Anandamayi Ma were worshipped by their husbands, and their followers saw them as incarnations of the Goddess or *Avatarins* (Kripal, 1998: 133-36; Hallstrom, 1999).

Interestingly, in two of the ancient texts such as Yoga Vasishtha and Tripura Rahasya there is a story wherein the woman protagonist (queen Chudala in Yoga Vasishtha and princess Hemlekha in Tripura Rahasya) who, after attaining self-realisation plays the role of a *guru* to her husband (king Shikhidhvaja in Yoga Vasishtha and prince Hemchuda in Tripura Rahasya) by teaching him the spiritual principle to attain the highest self, compatible with the teachings of *Advaita Vedanta* (Penchilis, 2004:15-20). During the medieval period, women's spiritual journey was expressed majorly through two Indic traditions: *tantra* and *bhakti*. While Saint Lalleshvari or Lalla Ded of Kashmir represented the Shaiva tantra tradition whose poems expressed unity with the divine or ultimate self; Meerabai of Rajasthan became the voice of a women longing for the lord expressed through the medium of devotion or *bhakti*. Both these traditions embraced and justified the feminine principle of spirituality (Penchilis, 2004). Indeed, the *bhakti* tradition authenticates the feminine principle as a common mode of expression of devotion or longing for the ultimate divine or God for men as well as women (Penchilis, 2004; Ramaswamy, 1997). For instance, Kabir Das and Surdas both assumed the female poetic voice while expressing their devotion to God (ibid.). Here, the lord becomes the divine husband of all.

Indeed, in spirituality, the values commonly associated with the feminine or the feminine principle acquire a different dimension and meaning. For instance, as also been discussed and observed in the case of the Art of Living version of spirituality, the humanistic values such as love, compassion, caring, sharing and selfless service and even devotion which are traditionally associated with the feminine, become an integral part of the spiritual realm in contrast to the notions of appropriation, accumulation, hoarding and dominance that typically defines the patriarchal materialistic dimension (Ramaswamy, 1997:14-20). Thus, the spiritual realm is empowering for women, which not only gives high priority to the humanistic dimension but also provides space for women to express or voice themselves amid contestations in a patriarchal society (Ramaswamy, 1997; Penchilis, 2004).

Fatemah Mashael, a Turkish woman, was not only able to come out of depression but as well as experience oneness with others based on trust, love and connection, cutting across all identities as a consequence of an AoL course held in Abu Dhabi (Mashael, 2020: 1-20). She in her Master's thesis on women's involvement in New Age Spirituality which for her also includes the AoL movement argues that New Age Spirituality (interchangeably addresses it as contemporary or alternative spirituality) gives preference and voice to women's subjective experience and self-expression by providing a sense of inner-authority to her in the realm of the sacred and thus, promotes women's self-empowerment leading to a shift towards a "post-patriarchal paradigm" that gives precedence to feminine values and qualities such as caring, sharing, love, intuition and thereby, it is women-friendly in nature (ibid.).

The AoL version of spirituality does not discriminate on the basis of gender. There is a large number of women followers of AoL and its founder. They play different roles in the functioning of the organisation. In general, they could be called volunteers (cuts

across gender), which includes AoL teachers, amongst whom few are also practising *sadhvis* or nuns; there are women office bearers or staff members and even security guards. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's own immediate family member, i.e., his younger sister, namely Bhanumati Narasimhan too, is a highly reverential figure in AoL. She is presently the director of the Art of Living's Women and Child Welfare Programs and the chairperson of the AoL-initiated International Women's Conference, a bi-annual conference launched in 2005 to promote women as agents of peace, ethical leadership and development.[179]

During the eighth edition of the International Women's Conference organised by AoL, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar said, "Gender equality should be honoured in all countries..Do not listen to somebody saying that women cannot lead in the religious and spiritual areas. Assert gender equality. We must emphasise this. If religious leaders take up gender equality. I think it can be achieved very fast and very smooth."[180] On empowerment of women, he says, "In Indian mythology, the female energy is depicted as Shakti- the embodiment of strength against injustice combined with beauty, love and compassion. Shakti is also represented in the trinity of Durga, goddess of valour and vitality; *Lakhsmi*, goddess of wealth and well-being; and *Saraswati*, goddess of knowledge and art."[181] He declares, "Women are innately powerful, and they only need to realise this..In many facets of life the world over, the modern woman has epitomised this ideal of Shakti, using her innate strength to create a more humane and just social

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[179] See *About Us.* Available at: | The Art Of Living Global   (accessed 19th June 2022).

[180] See I Will Say Women Don t Go And Ask Someone To Empower You You Have All The Power Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - BW Businessworld   (accessed 19th June 2022).

[181] See Shankar, Ravi. *The Power of Women. Words of Wisdom.* Available at: ENGLISH SEVA TIMES MARCH FOR PRINT.pdf (artofliving.org) (accessed 16th July 2022).

order".[182] Sri Sri's commitment to or awareness of gender equality reflects in a large number of pro-women-empowerment social service initiatives of the AoL foundation.

AoL takes it as a challenge to fight gender inequality and traditional mindsets of the people (that attach restrictions, stigmas or taboos on women's voice and freedom) by galvanising people towards collective action against social ills like female foeticide, child-marriage and sensitises them for girls' education and also provides skill training to women through the medium of various projects.[183] In this regard, AoL claims to have sensitised more than one lakh people against gender tests in India and around one lakh and fifty thousand people in the state of Bihar alone against child marriage. For instance, Jaya, a thirteen-year-old student from a Government School in Yediyur Town, Karnataka, whose marriage was fixed with a twenty-five-year-old man by her family, could successfully continue her education as she desired without being dragged into child marriage after receiving counselling from her headmaster along with a team of AoL Girl Child Campaign volunteers who could then along with her headmaster convince her mother to change her mind. Through the Girl Child Pledge Campaign initiated by the AoL along with the partnership with United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund in 2013, it claims to have inspired nearly one million people to take a pledge to protect the girl child by addressing issues such as malnutrition, female foeticide, violence, abuse, education and child-marriage. [184]

AoL claims to have imparted vocational skill training to nearly one lakh of eleven thousand rural women.[185] For instance, while AoL's opening up of a jute bag-making

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[182] Ibid.
[183] See Women Empowerment | The Art of Living India (accessed 17th July 2022).
[184] See Protecting Our Daughters Through the Girl Child Pledge Campaign across India | The Art of Living India (accessed 17th July 2022).
[185] See Women Empowerment | The Art of Living India (accessed 17th July 2022).

unit in Koppola, twenty kilometres from Gadag town in Karnataka in 2010 positively transformed the lives of girls like a twelve-year-old Afroza who is a school dropout but being able to engage herself in the making of jute bags gained confidence and enthusiasm and others like *Lakhsmi* who lacked the zeal for life as she was affected by polio in her childhood but gained back her enthusiasm after joining the AoL and practicing *Sudarshan Kriya* and on her brother's insistence learned how to make jute bags and also started teaching others[186]; nearly 20,000 women participants and women leaders from around 300 villages in the Vellore district of Tamil Nadu participated in the Naganadhi River Rejuvenation Project launched by the AoL in 2014 that provided them a regular source of income and successfully rejuvenated the river that was dead for about 15 years resulting in the reclamation of nearly 9000 hectares of agricultural land and an astonishing rise of groundwater level up to 6 feet.[187] Overall, the AoL claims to have imparted vocational skill training to nearly 1,11,000 rural women in diverse arenas. [188]

Project Pavitra of the AoL challenges the taboos associated with menstruation and aims to spread and promote knowledge (that includes training on *yogic* and ayurvedic practices) and awareness of menstrual health and hygiene amongst adolescent girls through sensitisation programs in urban slums and rural areas.[189] In this regard, AoL claims to have trained more than 71,051 adolescent girls in menstrual health and hygiene.[190] Moreover, concerning women's health, AoL claims to have distributed nearly 110000 smokeless *chulhas* (kitchen stoves) through 62 women entrepreneurs

[186]See Weaving dreams in Jute, Gadag | The Art of Living India (accessed 17th July 2022).
[187] See Thoheja, Gurukar, 2019. *Gutsy Women of Vellore Revive a Dead River.* Available at: SEVA TIMES. November. ENGLISH.pdf (artofliving.org) (accessed 17th July 2022).
[188] See Women Empowerment | The Art of Living India (accessed 18th July 2022).
[189] See Project Pavitra - Spreading Menstrual Health and Hygiene amongst Adolescent Girls | The Art of Living India (17th July 2022).
[190] See Women Empowerment | The Art of Living India (accessed 18th July 2022).

and also conducts regular medical camps for sex workers Sonagachi (Asia's largest red light area).[191]

The very base of these pro-women empowerment projects of AoL is driven by the idea of *seva* or service that lies at the root of its version of spirituality. Moreover, even *sadhna* and *satsang* are very much part of the AoL projects as all the participants affected by the projects are first and foremost introduced to an AoL course that includes its discourse laden with its basic ideas and practices. With regard to the question of women, AoL is not just non-discriminatory, open and democratic but also rebellious to the earlier restrictions imposed by religious orthodoxy. For instance, as discussed above, while traditionally, women had to face a lot of hardship and discrimination in the spiritual path, *guru*-led spirituality-based modern organisations like AoL are well aware of the challenges faced by women; thus, they have opened their doors to women spiritual practitioners. Here, the womenfolk not only reap the benefits of the various projects but also lead them, teach the AoL courses, and pursue their own higher spiritual quest at par with their male counterparts. This also acts as a support to AoL legitimacy.

Similar to organisations like the Ramakrishna Mission or Vedanta Society initiated by Swami Vivekananda, AoL opened up its door to monkhood and nunnery. Unlike the traditional restrictions, women here have the freedom to perform *pujas* and rituals. For instance, it is common to see male or female teachers performing *guru puja* (*Vedic* traditional worship to one's *guru* and the *guru* tradition out of gratitude), which is auspicious. Moreover, women in AoL can also perform the "sacred thread ceremony" known as *Upanayanam,* which traditionally marks the initiation into *Vedic* chants and *mantras* (sacred sound), especially the sacred *Gayatri Mantra,* to mark the point at

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[191] Ibid.

which the children start their formal education in the Vedic tradition.[192] However, traditionally, this ceremony was restricted to the twice-born upper-caste Brahmin males. Spiritually, *Upanayanam* symbolises a higher spiritual journey towards the knowledge of the self.[193]

Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, in their article "Spirituality, Gender and Expressive Selfhood", drew from and, in turn, refined Charles Taylor's emphasis on the "expressive mode of modern selfhood" (Sointu, 2004). Citing examples from Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) "The Kendal Project" on spirituality and from a doctoral dissertation on "In Search of Wellbeing: Use of alternative and Complementary Medicines" (Sointu, 2004) in the UK, they have shown how in the case of holistic spirituality a greater number of women are taking part because they in a way they are able to relate their spiritual practice with their representation of femininity (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008). While holistic spirituality legitimates the traditional role of women as caregivers, at the same time, it subverts such a role in the sense that women are now more concerned with caring for themselves for their own wellbeing instead of getting suppressed by male dominance. The ability to express their selfhood by participating in/practising holistic spiritual activities like *yoga* and other therapies for personal wellbeing related to mind-body-spirit provides women with a sense of freedom in maintaining their authentic selves while staying in relationships (ibid.).

In the words of Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead, "whereas 'private' patriarchy turns women into unpaid wives, mothers, and domestics, and 'public' patriarchy turns women into sexed bodies available for male pleasure and symbolic capital, holistic

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[192] See Upanayanam at The Art of Living International Center Bengaluru (bangaloreashram.org) (accessed 18th July 2022).
[193] Ibid.

spiritualities and health practices are more likely to be concerned with the cultivation of bodily well-being for the benefit of the woman herself, and through this personal wellbeing, for the benefit of her relations with those around her" (ibid., 269). There is an equal worth for each individual. By caring for oneself one can be more responsible toward others. Thus, women can now in this historical context negotiate between "care for others" and "care for oneself" in expressing one's self-worth and selfhood (ibid.).

In the sphere of the AoLF, women's spiritual quest enables her to face and fight patriarchy and everyday life challenges by developing care for herself as well as gradually or simultaneously extending her responsibility toward others. For instance, a fifty-six-years-old Punjabi born AoL teacher from Maharashtra narrates,

I was in a terrible situation. I got separated from my husband as he was an alcoholic and violent as well as due to other complicated personal family issues. Condition of my health was terrible. Blood pressure used to be 40/60, and haemoglobin levels went down to 4 or 5. I was often admitted to the hospital. I was obsessed with my past; I was concerned for my husband's health. In order to raise my kids, I worked in a school as well as I got into telly-calling in Airtel for a while. In 2010, a friend of mine visited me along with a friend of hers who was an AoL teacher. He saw my condition and misery and recommended me to do an AoL course suggesting it as the only way for me. I was immediately ready and eager for it. In the very next month, I did a course in Nasik in 2010. From then on, there was no looking back. On the very second day, after doing Sudarshan Kriya I was just crying and crying. Tears of gratitude, love and happiness flowed through me as I felt that I had met somebody whom I was craving for. I realised I met somebody who would love me throughout my life. Immediately after kriya, I could connect with Gurudev; I didn't use any logic. I totally surrendered on day

one itself. After the kriya, I got overwhelmed. After the course got over, I continued doing kriya on a regular basis. Very soon, the condition of my health got improved. My mental health got better. Gradually, I could cut my medicine intake. I gained confidence and peace in heart. The past stopped bothering me. Only when you are stable, peaceful and confident, you can serve others and take care of your family. If you are yourself mentally scattered, how will you take care of anyone?

Another full-time forty-year-old travelling teacher from Siliguri shared that she was left with nothing to do after leaving her budding career in the fashion industry in Delhi as she had to shift with her husband to his native town as his business failed to take off. Reminiscing those days, she could remember how depressed and cut off from everything she was. However, on the recommendation of a close relative who was familiar with her state of mind and situation, she reluctantly joined an AoL course in 2001. On her first AoL course experience, she says,

After the AoL program, I experienced a huge positive transformation in life. I was able to respect and honour life much more than before and appreciate the positive aspects of life, and not get bogged down by the negative aspects. Learning the Art of Living is being able to live the human values; love, compassion, caring and sharing and celebrating life to its full potential.

Thus, the AoL course did not just bring back her enthusiasm for life, but it also provided a new beginning to her career as she chose to happily become a full-time travelling AoL teacher, which does not restrict her to one single place and, in her words, makes it possible to *lead a fulfilling life of service*.

Another twenty-four-year-old AoL teacher from Siliguri shared that when she first came to Siliguri from a remote village in Bangladesh with her elder brother to pursue her higher studies, she lacked confidence, and her daily activities were largely confined to college work and household chores. Moreover, she was also going through a relationship crisis in her life, and at the suggestion of a friend, she joined an AoL course organised nearby her house. The course had a therapeutic effect on her as she could feel relief from her mental trauma. At the same time, she gained confidence in life and also broadened her sphere of social life. Indeed, seeing her level of confidence, popularity and active life in AoL as she is behind various AoL initiatives in Siliguri that includes the organisation of AoL courses, taking the courses, singing songs during *satsang* sessions and other social service initiatives like distributing stationaries and food to the children of the underprivileged and so on one can hardly believe in her narrative about her past life before AoL.

Thus, in the AoL version of contemporary spirituality, women are not left out; rather, along with their male counterparts, they equally meet their everyday life challenges by utilising the therapeutic tools and spiritual practices provided by AoL discourse. Women actively participate in and teach the courses and pursue their higher spiritual quest through which they care for themselves and take the responsibility to share with others. A commonly shared spiritual experience includes the *Vedantic* truth of never-changing oneness or a realisation of a consciousness that cuts across gender.

Jo O'Donovan reviewing Ursula King's book on "Women and Spirituality", refers to spirituality for King as "not confined to exclusively 'religious' or 'ascetic' stance as separate from the world rather "a universal code-word for a search for direction in our times; in secular society, it is a cipher for a lost direction…it is a search for unity in the midst of diversity of experiences" (O'Donovan, 1989: 651). For Ursula King,

spirituality is the ability of women to open themselves to Goddess consciousness and live in holistic, relational terms wherein nothing is left out of the divine. Indeed, feminist spirituality calls for a consciousness of the historical experience of women as exploited, alienated and dominated and gradually moves beyond these by developing a vision for an alternative way of living unrestrained by the polarity created by sex/gender roles (ibid., 653). God consciousness sees androgyny as a welcoming call for King, which has the ability to transcend sex roles and connect all despite differences.

However, before moving on to the question of oneness and consciousness (which will be discussed in the last section of the present chapter), it has to be considered that the notion of gender cannot be simply restricted to the binary of male and female. Thus, with reference to the question of transcendence of gender role binary when during a *satsang* question and answer session in Bengaluru *ashram* in 2018, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was asked, "members of the transgender community go through hormone therapy and surgery to feel complete to be a person of the gender they identify with. Is this the way to address this condition? What else can be done? He replied, "they should first know that the spirit is beyond gender. Spirit is neither male nor female. So, honour the spirit and accept whatever naturally you have, what naturally has come to you. And if you want to go through medical counselling, that is your choice. Accept that you are spirit, you are bliss, and you are here in this planet for a short while to realise this. This will take you into meditation and will bring out the best in you". When further asked, "what can be done to develop more understanding in the society towards the transgender community? He replied, "you don't try to make anybody understand anything; it is happening naturally. I would say there is so much more awareness today than before that all gender are equal. Gender equality is the language that this century is talking. So, be confident that good times are coming where people are not discriminated on gender

basis." Thus, Sri Sri hailed the decriminalisation of the colonial law of that part of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises consensual unnatural sex that included LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex) rights of consent.[194]

Thus, the AoL version of spirituality, like other contemporary modern spirituality-based bodies such as the Ramakrishna Mission, Isha Foundation, Satya Sai Foundation and many others, makes no gender-discrimination and thus, portrays an open and democratic nature; even rebellious and gender-sensitive nature. However, interestingly and paradoxically, certain contradictory instances were also observed during the fieldwork that though negligible, yet indicate a slightly different story. For instance, the *Vedic* school run by AoL is for boys only. This indicates a sign of continuity with the traditional religious orthodoxy. Moreover, only recently, during the period since 2017, it was observed that occasionally sitting arrangements during *satsangs* and *puja* gatherings, especially inside the halls in the Bengaluru ashram, are organised on the basis of the gender binary (males and females). This somehow goes against the very open nature of spirituality that AoL preaches.

Further, most visibly, Sri Sri's take on the women's temple entry issue, especially that erupted with the controversial entry of two women inside the Sabarimala Temple in 2019 creates a discrepancy with regard to the AoL's democratic take on the gender issue discussed above. While on the one hand, Ravi Shankar considers that it is not via law but only through the religious leaders and devotees a change in tradition can be materialised and thus, one has to respect the tradition followed in the temples; on the other hand, he considers that women with menstrual cycles cannot observe the 41 days

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[194] See Honouring people's choices has strengthened our democracy: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar hails SC judgement on Sec 377 (dnaindia.com) (accessed 19th July 2022).

vratham (fasting) ritual. Moreover, it would be difficult for them to walk for many days, which is required during the ritual. Sri Sri's take on this issue becomes clear with what had been observed during the fieldwork. It was observed that even inside the premises of Bengaluru ashram during the *pujas* in his presence, women during their menstrual cycles are restricted from observing, following and taking part in these occasions.

Interestingly, the AoL women members do not see such restrictions as discriminatory as they believe in their *guru's* viewpoint that their presence on such occasions would indeed harm none other than women themselves as it may lead to energy imbalances in her body and moreover, this would lead her to bear unnecessary discomfort. Further, interestingly on the question of admission of girls in the AoL Vedic school when once during a *satsang* question and answer session during the 2018 fieldwork in Bengaluru ashram Sri Sri was asked when can one expect the intake of girls in these schools, he wittily replied that no one brings their girl child for admission. Thus, once people start bringing the girls for *Vedic* education, AoL would consider it. Nevertheless, there is a huge participation of women in the AoL movement expressing freedom and selfhood. Let us now see how open and democratic contemporary spirituality is in relation to the question of caste and class.

6.5. Caste and Class:

The question of caste and class holds an important dimension with regard to the nature of contemporary spirituality. Unlike religion, especially Hindu religion, which is on the receiving end of criticism from all corners due to the practice of caste that leads to hierarchy and discrimination, contemporary *guru*-led spiritual movements like AoL, Sai Foundation of Satya Sai Baba, Isha Foundation of Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev etcetera

are liberal, democratic and open by nature. Thus, these movements appeal to all sections of society, cutting across caste, class, gender and even religion.

The liberal approach of the present-day *guru*-led spiritual foundations towards caste could be traced back to the critical nineteenth-century social reform movements in India that targeted Hindu practices, as discussed in chapter 2. In the case of AoL, while it is against caste hierarchy and discrimination and similar to Swami Vivekananda (Shattuck, 1999) sees divinity within all despite of caste, class, gender and any other basis of identity; it is not specifically against the notion of caste. Ravi Shankar resonating with the viewpoints of Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) of Arya Samaj and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), justifies the scriptural caste-based division of society on the grounds that it was based on meritocracy/profession in relation to one's inherent nature (Ramachandran et al., 2001). Interestingly, as generally perceived, the very basis of discrimination or hierarchisation, i.e. the famous *Vedic* depiction of the four-fold division of castes in society, has been commonly compared with the different parts of the human body such as the *brahmins* representing the head or intellectuals; *kshatriyas* representing the shoulders/arms or the warriors; the *vaishyas* representing the thighs/belly region or the business community and the *shudras* representing the feet or the labour force is viewed in a positive light by the *guru* (ibid.). For him, as different parts of the body cannot be held as good or bad; similarly, the *Vedas* give equal status and honour to all the communities without labelling them on any hierarchical basis (ibid.). However, if someone failed in their duties from these caste groups, he was to isolate from society for a period of time without being disgraced (ibid.). Ravi Shankar does acknowledge that gradually, over a period of time, the caste system became rigid as those isolated were not allowed to be re-admitted, and they were turned into another

category, i.e., the *atishudras/nishadas* as those in power started to take advantage of the system for their own benefit (ibid.).

Thus, for Ravi Shankar, the *Vedic* scriptures by themselves neither sanctioned nor acknowledged caste-based discrimination (ibid). Rather, all caste groups were equally respected by the scriptures. Many of the *Rishis,* like Shaabara *rishi,* belonged to the lower castes, and *rishi* like Satyakam Jabala was born of a prostitute but was given a lot of respect at par with others (ibid.). Indeed, the very fact that Sri Krishna, who is considered to be the divine incarnation by all Hindus despite caste distinctions, belonged to the Yadava community, which today belongs to the Other backward classes or lower classes. So, for the *guru*, the caste system could not have been rigid initially (ibid.).

Interestingly, for Sri Sri, the term *shudra* in Sanskrit means who lives by habit. In this regard, he declares that all four castes exist in all families: "the child bound by its habits is the *shudra*, the youth concerned with gains and losses is the *Vaishya,* and the father being the provider and the protector in the family is the *kshatriya*. The mother in every family is the brahmin as…she puts her family's needs before her own" (ibid.). Thus, making the message of the *Upanishads* as its very own message that is "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam", indicating that the entire world is one's family, the AoL and its founder consider any sort of exclusion of people from the society as equivalent to bringing disgrace to the tradition (ibid.). AoL considers that spirituality and sincere spiritual engagement in *satsangs* ("spiritual assembly") by the entire society, apart from education and awareness, is the only solution to fight any discrimination against the Dalits (ibid.).

Thus, interestingly, in "The Heritage of the Dalits" (2001), an Art of Living Publication, the authors do not only clear off the ancient *Vedic* scriptures of any validation from its side to caste-discrimination but also mention about many of those ancient *rishis* or sages that belonged to the present Dalit community but were equally respected and at the same time showed that since ages, saints and sages stood by the Dalits (ibid.). Henceforth, for them, simply considering just B R Ambedkar as the only saviour of the Dalits will be a mistake (ibid.). Moreover, it urges the Dalits to claim their own heritage instead of changing religion or cutting off from one's own culture (ibid.).

In practice, it has been observed that AoL is open to people belonging to all caste groups. One can find AoL teachers from all castes. Caste does not play any criteria for its membership. Rather, AoL challenges orthodoxy and discrimination by taking a rebellious step of inclusion of people belonging to all caste groups into *Upanayanam* ceremonies wherein if a participant does not know one's *gotra* or family lineage, he or she can still be given a common *Shiva gotra* in order to successfully participate in the sacred thread ceremony for the initiation into *Gayatri mantra* chanting which was traditionally restricted only to the upper caste males. Moreover, the AoL also runs free schools for Dalit students and also provides special pandit training to them (ibid, vi), which could not have been even imagined in the past.

Herein, one can link the question of class. These very Dalit students whom the AoL service projects aim to educate belong to society's economically weak marginal sections. Likewise, through its diverse projects and social service activities, the AoLF aims to uplift the lives of the downtrodden or marginalised groups. Whether in terms of distributing free blankets to the poor during winter or distributing food and stationery items to the underprivileged village children nearby Siliguri town, or arranging free

AoL courses in the slums of Mumbai by the AoL volunteers other than providing free education to the underprivileged children and also basic skill-training to villagers from different parts of the country; and taking care of around sixty children (both girls and boys) from the poverty-stricken families from the interiors of North-East and providing them free-education, accommodation and all facilities in Bengaluru *ashram* till the twelfth standard of high-schooling; the value of service drives AoL, and its members work for the upliftment of the economically marginalised groups. Moreover, AoL also provides employment opportunities to those who prefer to work with it in the fields related to security or *Ayurvedic* spa treatment and various other service projects. Several people (both males and females) from the Northeast, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand and other states and countries work in these fields in Bengaluru *ashram*.

Thus, AoL's engagement with particularly the underprivileged or lower classes in society is mediated majorly through charity, and charity-related social service works. Other than this, the class basis of AoL composes mainly of middle- and upper-class people who can afford the course fees, which is interestingly collected in the name of contribution as a donation. The donation amount for a basic Online Meditation and Breath Workshop today is around INR 2000/- and for an Advanced Meditation Online Program is around INR 3000/. The offline course charges vary depending on rural, urban, semi-urban or metropolitan areas. Thus, the AoL courses normally can be afforded by only those who can afford the course fees. Moreover, registering for an AoL residential program in the Bengaluru *ashram* campus costs a minimum of around four to six thousand rupees for a stay of three to four days.

Apart from the course or program and the scenic beauty and its aesthetic value that attract the visitors, the *ashram,* along with several amenities such as ATM service, and shuttle service (for easy commutation within the *ashram* campus) and other amenities,

is also turning into a hub of consumerist attraction. As discussed before, the AoLF has its range of FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) products popularly known as Sri Sri Tattva Brand of products sold out, especially in the Sri Sri Tattva stores that includes products ranging from basic toiletry, grocery and stationery items such as malt drink, soaps, wheat flour, biscuits to garments and so on. Moreover, Sri Sri Ayurveda which was started in 2003, today competes with Baba Ramdev's Patanjali in the promotion, distribution and selling of a wide range of *ayurvedic* products and medicines in the offline stores known as Divine Stores and also in a shopping portal known as Sattva Stores emphasising on its authenticity, organic value and health benefits. A major part of AoL Ayurvedic products is made by Sumeru Ayurveda, a part of Sumeru group of companies led by Sri Sri's nephew, namely N Arvind Varchaswi. Several *ayurvedic* treatments are offered in the vicinity of the ashram, including a luxury *ayurvedic* spa service attached to which the Sri Tattva Panchamrut restaurant provides vegetarian food based on *ayurvedic* guidelines.

There is no question of availing these services by the people belonging to certain socially and economically underprivileged classes of society. Another popular restaurant located within the AoL main campus that provides space for relaxation over sumptuous meals to the well-off consumers is the Vishala Café, run by two popular AoL teachers known as Bawa and Dinesh. Interestingly, the consumerist touch of AoL does not stop here. The range of consumable services also includes matrimony services that allow the opportunity to marry at times in the presence of the *guru* himself. There is a certain fee for the wedding arranged by AoL matrimonial service. Sumeru Software solutions, on the other hand, provides information security as well as develops applications and services for political parties and retail stores, etcetera. There is also a realty service (provided by Sri Sumeru Realty Private Limited related to AoL), travel

(provided by Sumeru Travels) and other private educational initiatives such as Sri Sri Academy, Sri Sri University and so on. A visible example of AoL's consumer-driven culture could be traced from the manifested promotion and advertisement of its services and the diverse products, whether that of Sri Sri ghee (clarified butter), honey and other products, Ayurveda hospital, Byogi garments or its diverse courses especially during the major events that attract large gathering such Sri Sri's birthday, *Navratri* celebrations, etc. AoL's consumerist business-centric touch could be seen as reflected in the figures shared below (photographs taken during fieldwork by the researcher).

Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.2.
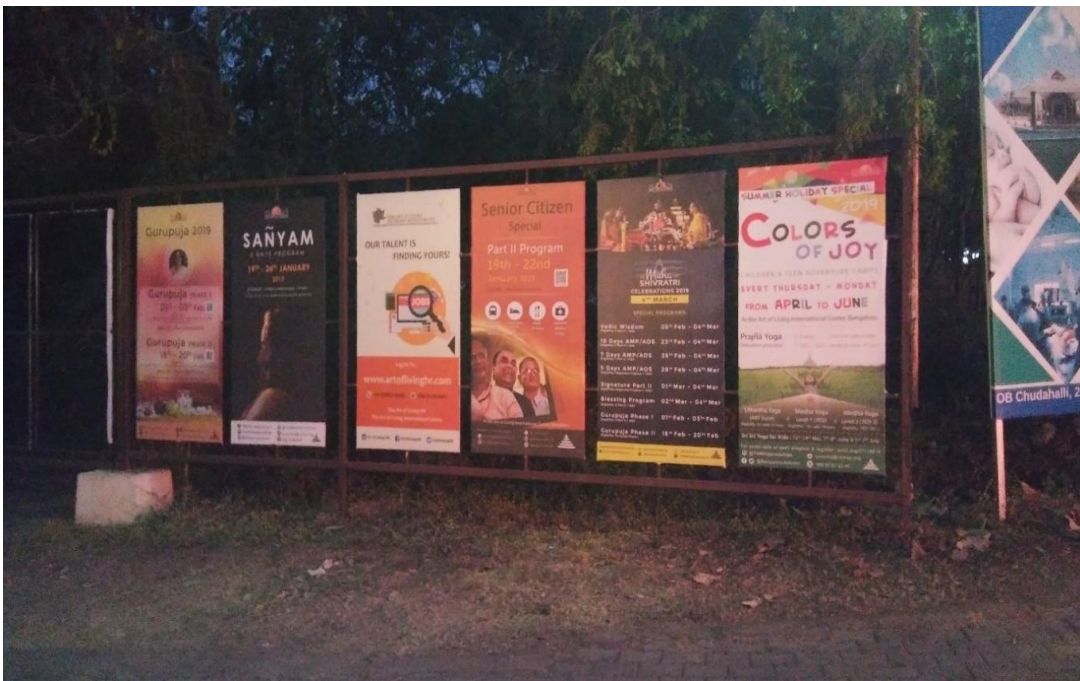
Figure 6.3.

Figure 6.5.

Figure 6.6. Outside Ashram Kitchen

Figure 6.7. Vishala Café

Thus, as one's attention gets driven towards the swarm of these advertisements and shopping stores on the way to the major locations within the ashram campus, a thinking mind would not escape the realisation of the lure of a shopping complex displaying attractive products other than *ashram* being an abode of those seeking high spiritual learnings. Moreover, the competition between the different departments of the *ashram* reveals its touch, especially during the *satsang* sessions when their representatives proudly announce their achievements in the presence of the *guru* and audience with regard to the launching of new products and so on.

Thus, Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen, in her article entitled "Art of Living: Religious Entrepreneurship and Legitimation Strategies" (2011), adopting the religious entrepreneurship model of a cult formation from the work of William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (1985) considers AoL a religious enterprise and its founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar a religious entrepreneur (Tøllefsen, 2011). Tøllefsen could find several similarities between AoL and the traits of the religious entrepreneurship model of cult

formation. For instance, she notes that one of the essential constituents of this model that most evidently applies to the case of AoL is that it considers cults as "business that provides products for their customers and receive payment in return" (ibid.). In this regard, she notes that AoL sells its courses and workshops as products in return for certain payments as they are not provided free (ibid.). Moreover, Tøllefsen's work recognises that AoL has made its presence felt as a distinctive brand with product differentiation providing services and products to the people on the basis of their needs as what Bainbridge and Stark would call a "complex package of compensators and rewards" wherein even the *guru*, *ashram*, the techniques like *Sudarshan Kriya* and the several products in the name of brand AoL becomes a potential compensator (ibid.). These rewards and compensators are in exchange for certain payments, such as course fees, time, and participation.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, in their work, "Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion" (2005), argues that in a society critical of religious orthodoxy, institutionalisation and authority; driven by a neo-liberal consumerist culture characterised by habituation to buying and selling, spirituality takes over religion as a suitable mode to establish individual goodwill, openness and thus, encourages commitment to the corporate houses and their ideology (Carrette and King, 2005). Thereby, spirituality is utilised to promote corporate culture and capitalism; thus, Carrette and King term it capitalist spirituality, a disguised form of capitalist religion wherein Capital become the God (ibid.). In this regard, the brand Sri Sri and AoL, with its consumerist business-centric touch, reveals the corporatisation of spirituality which in turn appeal to the consumers with a claim to authenticity on the basis of the revival of the authentic and organic religious tradition, especially in relation to the *Ayurveda*. Thus, AoL's consumerist appeal though reflects the neo-liberal touch of corporatisation,

yet it differs from Carrette and King's notion of capitalist religion that shows no return to tradition nor any attempt at a religious revival. Rather, AoL also indicates the very characteristic of "engaged spirituality", too which Carrette and King are indeed hopeful of as an alternative to capitalist spirituality as it is critical of the latter and engages with a concern for social justice (ibid.). For instance, AoL's openness to the question of caste and gender is indicative of its engaged spiritual touch. However, this does not deny the fact that AoL and its business-friendly activities are very much in favour of privatisation and corporatisation, showing no sign of a serious critique of Capitalism.

Interestingly, the following observation of M.N. Srinivas during an interview session by A.M. Shah on a query about the contemporary relevance of his concept of *Sanskritization* holds true even today, as also reflects in the case of the functioning of AoL:

"Once middle-class status is gained, those who have arrived try hard to maintain it and also to move up. This involves coping with new concerns and anxieties by visiting temples, going on pilgrimages, seeking out miracle-performing holy men, and consulting astrologers. Life-cycle rituals become more elaborate, and vegetarianism, yoga, and meditation become part of a Sanskritized lifestyle….On the secular front, getting children admitted to good schools, seeking admission to professional courses of study, and conspicuous consumerism becomes important goals." (Shah, 2000: 631).

Indeed interestingly, while on a popular Indian television show namely, "Aap Ki Adalat" (translated as *Your Court*) Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was asked that people are critical of him and AoL as they say that it is selling products and doing business in the

name of religion, why so?[195] In response, Sri Sri defended AoL by taking the side of the business, which he sees as employing a large number of youths. However, he denies being involved in business but agrees that AoL inspires people to do business, as *yoga* and industry have to go together. Moreover, he declares that India as a country lagged behind because people did not pay much heed to industry and business as they believed in charity. But Sri Sri notes that "charity cannot happen from an empty bowl"; thus, bowls have to be filled. He further justifies his point of view on business by wittily giving the example of the Hindu God Narayan (Supreme being or the preserver/protector), with whom stays the Goddess Lakhsmi (the Goddess of wealth), indicating that traditionally even the supreme Lord honours the value of wealth.[196] Thus, for Sri Sri, business and spirituality or religion share a complementary relationship. Reiterating the *guru's* viewpoint, the AoL members also see business as compatible with spirituality. Indeed, they see spirituality as essential for developing ethics in business and in terms of providing quality products. Moreover, regarding course fees, the respondents generally see it as a way to support the social-service projects of the foundation. For instance, on the question of business and spirituality, a thirty-nine-years-old AoL member from *ashram* shared,

> *Yes, in AoL business is promoted. We don't see business and money in a narrow sense. What is wrong with profit? Profit maximization is not the intention here. People with business ideas tell Guruji and start it, but we also care for the less privileged. We contribute a certain percentage for them, for social service. Business with ethics is promoted. AoL is running around 700 free schools all over the country. You need money for all the projects. Prison courses are free; you*

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[195] Available at: (64) Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in Aap Ki Adalat (Full Episode) - YouTube (accessed 1st October 2022).
[196] Ibid.

need money for the teachers who go there to take courses. For their stay and travelling, money is required. People are doing fair business here, meeting their livelihood needs, providing quality products and contributing to society.

On the question of course fees, he further expressed,

Everybody can contribute a minimum. Yes, we have different skill training courses for the below the poverty line. We need to take care of their basic economic needs first. There are various rural development-related programs. Even AoL is jointly working with Pradhan Mantri Gram Yojna. Prison courses are free. The donations go for service work and, thus, for the upliftment of society itself.

In this regard, the observation and viewpoint of Peter van der Veer on spirituality in modern society is worth consideration (Veer, 2009).

Peter van der Veer sees the growth of movements like that of AoL as an outcome of the liberalisation of the economy in the post-colonial period in which experiential-spirituality emerged as an alternative to the secular and the religious in the organisation of civil society, especially in effectively dealing with secular pursuits (Veer, 2009:1116). For instance, in the sphere of work, modern spirituality meets the demand of the modern industry and secular business units in effectively handling their professional workforce by addressing health concerns and a better lifestyle in the marketplace (ibid.). For Peter van der Veer, movements like AoL have become successful by catering to the needs of the mobile, highly-educated, transnational class of business entrepreneurs by marketing its spirituality for health and management practices, especially since the 1970s and 1980s when the educated middle class migrated to the US for medical and engineering jobs and were introduced to Indian spirituality (ibid. p1117). These spiritual practices not only help to address stress but

also makes the professionals uncritically accept the routine affairs of a company with comfort and obedience (Veer, 2009). Thus, modern spirituality supports, supplements, and complements the neo-liberal capitalist market system by making its functioning and spread more acceptable and smoother.

Thus, AoL's pro-corporatization and business-friendly attitude, as evident by its functioning, whether in the form of brand Sri Sri Tattva or private school or the specific courses catering to the IT sector and management professionals such as the Art of Living Corporate programs,[197] does not fall short in strengthening the roots of the capitalist advancement. However, AoL attempts to minus the touch of profit maximisation and fill it with the narratives of ethics and social service in this regard.

Interestingly, this relationship (of spirituality and business) is further mediated and marketed through the merge of the concepts of 'wisdom of the East in the form of *Ayurveda* and western modernity'. For instance, the logo of the company named Shankara under Sri Sri Tattva that deals with skin care products symbolising Lotus-Rose as the company claims that it represents "the blend of ancient *Ayurvedic* wisdom of the East with the modern science of actives and anti-oxidants of the West" to offer "pure, effective and transformational line of natural skin care products"[198] and successfully appeal to those minds who see tradition (whether invented or not) as pure, organic and authentic in comparison to the hybrid culture of today as well as simultaneously held science as sacrosanct. Thus, the blend of science and tradition appears most convincing.

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[197] See The Art of Living Corporate Programs | The Art Of Living Global (accessed 12th October 2022).

[198] See About Us | Ayurvedic Skin Care – Shankara India (accessed 14th October 2022).

The focus on Eastern wisdom provides an exotic touch to those in the West. Interestingly, such a romantic and exoticist take on the East reflects one of the age-old ways of seeing the East and specifically Indian intellectual tradition through the lens of Romanticists like Schlegel, Herder and Schopenhauer, whose view somehow corresponds to seeing India through the medium of spirituality and mysticism in contrast to the Western rationality whether in appreciating (Indian traditionalists who see spirituality as an answer to the lacks of Western 'iron cage' of modernity/rationality) or depreciating (colonial administrators/magistrates like James Mill and Macauley who see Indian tradition as highly primitive and irrational) terms (Sen, 2006: 139-160). For scholars like Amartya Sen, such a dichotomous view on the East and West on the basis of the question of science/rationality and spirituality, whose collaboration though AoL advertises and proposes while marketing its products even today, somehow marks the colonial hangover on Indian identity formation that is by focusing majorly on spirituality and religion leaves aside the multi-dimensional ways of seeing and studying India, Indian identity and culture (ibid.).

6.6. The Nationalist touch:

There is an underlying strong tendency in the discourse of AoL that implicitly draws as well as advances the idea of Indian culture as rooted in and represented by the *Vedic* civilisation. This very tendency is well-manifested on a time-to-time basis when the *guru* or the AoL teachers/swamis and practitioners talk with a specific emphasis on 'Our Culture' or 'Indian culture' with reference to *Vedic* texts, *Gita* and *Upanishads*. This is very much evident as one of the stated objectives of the *Vaidic Dharma Sansthan* (claimed to be a charitable, educational, religious and spiritual body that works under the guidance of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar) that promotes *Vedic* tradition as the promotion of

Indian culture and heritage.[199] This is indeed openly corroborated in the form of publications on India's identity and culture and other related concerns under the Sri Sri Publications Trust that endorses the question of Indian identity and identity of India as claimed to be rooted in the chronologically well-defined, orally-preserved, predominantly Sanskritic tradition and heritage of the Hindu civilisation. For instance, the books by D.K. Hari and D.K. Hema Hari on titles such as "Autobiography of India: Breaking the Myths about Identity" (2017), and other similar titles on Brand India and Indian society, culture especially attempting to establish the civilisational identity of India based on Hinduism (which they prefer to refer as *Sanatan Dharma* and also prefers the name *Bharat* for India on the basis of *Vaidic* reference) (Hari and Hari, 2017).

Romila Thapar, in her article entitled, *Imagined Religious Communities: Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity* (1989), argues about such a clearly defined Hindu community rooted in Hindu civilisation as "a part of a modern search for an imagined Hindu identity, from the past.." (Thapar, 1989: 210). Such modern search attempts at clear-cut identity constructions based on religion lack authentic factual evidence though they may serve the interest of the dominant groups. Interestingly, even in the sphere of business, authenticity and legitimacy is traced and promoted on the basis of the ancient civilisational past based on spiritual wisdom. Thus, business in the sphere of AoL does not simply portray the economic dimension that enhances the spread and smooth functioning of neo-liberalism but also promotes and accentuates spirituality based on Hinduism in relation to the *Vedic* philosophical thought directly or indirectly reflecting somewhat the majoritarian or Hindu-nationalist ideology as also

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[199] See Vaidic Dharma Sansthan – Reviving Traditions, Preserving Heritage (vaidicpujas.org) (accessed 13th October 2022).

shown by Peter van der Veer's work (Veer, 2014). Indeed, such attempts at promoting national products in the name of spirituality is not uncommon in the case of *Guru-*centric movements (see McKean, 1996).

However, this does not mean that the discourse of AoL is blind to the cultural diversities that define the Indian sub-continent. For instance, during an interview session, Sri Sri clearly reveals his awareness of the diversities pertaining to culture, race, language and religion in India and expresses the need to develop the ability to interact effectively with cultural diversities without any prejudice or discrimination (Tripathi, 2014:126-127). Nevertheless, still, there is an underlying yet manifested emphasis on the *Vedic* heritage or philosophy when referring to "our culture" or Indian culture or Indian tradition in his response to the interviewer (ibid.). For example, his reference to the *Upanishadic* idea of *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* (one-world family) and to pioneers of the *Advaitic* school like Adi-Shankaracharya and Indian spirituality (in terms of meditation, breathing exercises, etc.) while suggesting the importance of strengthening the roots of one's own culture or tradition other than learning from other cultures for successful leadership is evident in this regard (ibid.). Moreover, most strikingly, despite the rooting in *Advaita* that connotes a direct or indirect sacred touch, the AoL version of spirituality though immaterial and abstract at its core yet, functions through the medium of the body, attempting a balance of the sacred and the secular, material and the immaterial, individual and society simultaneously moving beyond all dichotomies and identities of caste, class, race, nation etc., towards a higher realisation in the sphere of consciousness.

6.7. Through the body yet beyond: Consciousness:

At least since the 1970s (Cregan, 2006) and especially with the publication of Bryan S Turner's "The Body and Society" (1984), there has been a growing interest and recognition of the importance of the embodied or the body as a field of study in the understanding of social reality (Cregan, 2006; Morgan and Scott, 1993). Chris Shilling, in his book, "The Body: A Very Short Introduction" (2016), emphasises on the importance of our embodied existence as a foundation for an empirically informed analysis of the history, culture and society as it is through the body people actually intervene in the social reality and in turn, affects their own lives and lives of the others (Shilling, 2016: 3). Similarly, defining embodiment as the "physical and mental experience of existence" Kate Cregan considers it as the prior condition of social existence similar to the ontological categories of space and time in relating to others and the world (Cregan, 2006: 2-3). Thus, seeing through the body is a crucial step for a deeper and broader understanding of a given social phenomenon[200] and particularly so when a given social entity, whether directly or indirectly, revolves around the very notion of the body (whether in the sense of disciplining, avoiding or sanctifying its very existence).

The notion of body is very much at the centre of the whole discourse of the AoL version of spirituality. Whether the tangible and visible manipulation of the bodily parts as a part of guided *yogic* exercises or stretches for a healthy living; or rather a simple focus on the organs of the body while sitting still in an upright position during a guided meditation or a *Yog Nidra*[201] session, the body plays a very relevant and 'all-

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[200] Michel Foucault's (1979) understanding of governmentality and bio-politics; and Mike Featherstone's (1991) work on consumerism is exceptional in this regard.

[201] Yogic sleep or power nap technique for a full body relaxation (see Shankar, 2013: 66-67).

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encompassing role' in spiritual discourse. Emphasising on the role of the body, a researcher named Agata Dziuban, in her article on "Spirituality and the Body in Late Modernity", argues that the body serves as "a crucial dimension of one's spiritual search and development" as its role is increasing in the process of identity creation and religious expression in late modernity (Dziuban, 2007: 479-497). Interestingly and paradoxically, the body plays an important role even with regard to the intangible soteriological sense addressing a higher calling towards renunciation or liberation from the 'worldly' or the 'fleshly'. This will become clear as we proceed further.

The body, as the medium of spirituality, plays a fundamentally paradoxical role. While on the one hand, it is through the disciplining and regulation of the body (especially the senses other than the corporeal practices) a certain equanimity of the mind-body-emotion has to be achieved for spiritual perfection; on the other hand, the body consciousness has to be withdrawn on a consistent routinely basis as a part of spiritual practice for a higher realisation of the indivisible ultimate self/God or infinite consciousness. In this regard, there is a manifest and expressive aspect of the body, whether tangible (corporeal) or intangible (discourse/symbolic), and an ambiguously abstract or latent aspect of the body in the form of higher consciousness. Such an understanding of the body is primarily drawn from the *Vedic* tradition and applied in the modern-day context by filtering through the rational scientific claims and interpretation of the *guru* to meet the needs of contemporary social reality. In this regard, it is to be noted that the needs of contemporary society are expressed through the functioning of AoL, addressing the individual concerns for health and well-being (and other personal issues) apart from its business and other social-service-oriented activities.

Thus, when a thirty-seven-year-old from Siliguri said,

I got into AoL through my family members, who believed that the course would open the door to possibilities in my life. They believed that it would lead to my better performance in school and give a sort of direction in life.

Similarly, a forty-one-year-old AoL teacher from Canada shared,

I was introduced to it by my parents in 1999, and since I was a directionless 19-year-old, they thought attending this course might channel my life in a good direction. I attended unwillingly.

On a different yet related note, when a sixty-year-old AoL teacher from Siliguri shared,

I lost the rhythm in life in 2000. Everything was very stale and monotonous. There seemed nothing fresh and new in life. Wake up in the morning, go to work. Return back, and then again, the same routine life continued. What else? Is this the purpose in life? When I did the basic course in July 2003, I received Sudarshan Kriya. I experienced something unique which cannot be shared as it was about some sort of feelings. And from that day onwards, it was a kind of re-birth for me. I took a new birth; I realised what is life.

On a related note, when a thirty-one-year-old Country Director cum Full-Time AoL teacher from Laos on joining AoL shared,

My life has much more meaning now.

Similarly, when a forty-two-year-old AoL participant from New Delhi expressed,

I wanted to escape to a place where I could spend time with myself. I went to ashram for that reason.

And a forty-year-old Full-time teacher from Siliguri shared,

I was in search of something higher than the mundane existence of life.

Thus, the concern of the parents to disengage their children from the overwhelming influence of technological devices such as mobile phones or tablets in relation to a specific concern for their performance/achievement in school or for their overall personality development. An adult (a parent himself or herself) looking for an escape from the monotony of routine work and family life in search of meaning, a higher purpose or for one's own self. Young teens are looking for an escape and relief from their relationship-related turmoil in the form of break-ups or adults seeking advice for familial or professional management and concerns. All these issues and experiences mentioned above, as shared by the respondents of the present study though, appear very personal or individual-oriented, but when observed closely, one can directly or indirectly relate towards a broader context of "public issue" (Mills, 1959) typical of a consequence of living in a modern society.

The concern for a loss and recovery of community is a modern-day crisis (Delanty, 2010), i.e., driven by and adds to uneasiness, indifference (Mills, 1959), meaninglessness, insecurity and risk (Beck, 1992) resulting from alienation and disorientation of people in a modern capitalist society characterised by structural differentiation and pluralism (Berger and Luckmann, 1995). Thus, there is an inner as well as outer search for meaning, rootedness, "ontological security", and trust in relationships in modern-day living (see Giddens, 1991; 1996). In this regard, it can be argued that AoL as a modern institution plays the role of an "expert system" (see Giddens, 1991: 18-19;1996) or an "intermediary institution" (see Berger and Luckmann, 1995) as a part of the civil society by addressing the personal issues of the

individuals by orienting their needs fruitfully to the functioning of the broader social reality. Development of a certain sense of reflexivity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; 1996) on the part of the AoL practitioners towards oneself and others in the course of living everyday life itself signifies an outcome of modern consciousness as reflected in these words of a twenty-four-year-old respondent from China:

Spirituality is to doing something which enables you to not being controlled by thoughts or mind bringing in a conscious way of living life to its fullest.

Now, returning back to the question of body, it is to be noted that the body itself becomes a reflexive project in modernity. Anthony Giddens writes, "Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, `How shall I live?' has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat -- and many other things -- as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991:14-15). Thus, in this regard, Giddens claim that the body itself is actively constructed, controlled and becomes a "reflexively mobilised" entity of options and choices (ibid., 7-9). Relating the notion of reflexivity to contemporary spirituality and its discourse of body and self is highly relevant.

However, in the case of AoL, the post-traditional modern order reflecting reflexivity is itself through a claim to tradition (whether invented or re-introduced). For instance, even the very surface-level most commonly manifested aspect of the body in the sense of appearance in a white robe and *dhoti* with long hair and a long beard look appears to resemble traditional Indian ethnic wear. This dress code is common among the AoL swamis, who even follow the *Guru's* usual wear and looks. Otherwise, the most preferred and popular dress code followed by AoL teachers while taking a course is a white or a bright coloured loose-fitted *kurta pyjama* for men or *kurti* or a *saree* for

women, which also popularly comes under the category of traditional Indian outfit. This is to be noted that while the common dress code in AoL suggests organisational socialisation and in-group adaptation but it also reflects choosing a particular way of life, defining a sense of self and identity. In other words, one's bodily appearance symbolises a way of presenting oneself in society (Goffman, 1959) that may distinguish itself from other ways of appearing. Thus, it becomes a medium of communication and a significant part of one's social experience (see Sanders, 2006).

Thereby, it is to be noted that the body becomes a medium of expression and impression governing social dynamics in the realm of spirituality to such an extent that in AoL, it is very common to consider bodily flexibility and expression of emotions such as a smiling and glowing face as a sign of spiritual evolution. It is not uncommon to hear people saying, *today; you are looking so bright and shining; your smile indicates that you are practising regular sadhana*. Moreover, a lasting smile is considered a sign of success by the *Guru* himself (Shankar, 2008: 21).

Moreover, the manifested traditional touch on the question of body is furthered through the *Guru's* interpretation of *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and so on. Whether with respect to the various forms of *asanas* (bodily postures) as a part of physical *yoga* or instructions for the regulation of the body and its functioning through the medium of discourse, *Guru's* teaching is majorly based on the translation, interpretation and application of the texts related to Eastern tradition or in other words, Indian philosophy in relation to contemporary social reality. For instance, a classification, description and understanding of the three *gunas* or qualities/properties (*sattva, rajas and tamas*) as forming an essential part in the functioning of nature, body, mind, thought, and behavioural pattern comprises a very important part of understanding life in the AoL version of spirituality.

Tamasic guna is characterised by lethargy, dullness, inertia, and sleep; the domination of *rajasic guna* symbolises activity, desire and restlessness; and *sattvic guna* signifies equilibrium, balance, alertness, joy and calmness. (Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 21; Rinehart, 2004: 166; Shankar, 2010).

The whole spiritual journey is about moving towards and establishing oneself in a *sattvic* way of life by following *sadhana*, *seva* and *satsang*; and becoming aware and reflexive/observant of the functioning of one's mind/body, speech and action through the guidance of knowledge derived from the *Guru's* teaching especially derived from *Advaita* philosophy and related *Vedic* texts. For instance, a description of the three *gunas* is mentioned in Ravi Shankar's interpretation of the aphorisms (*sutras*) given in *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* (see Shankar, 2010). Thus, there is a turn towards a subjective life based on inner calling and reflexivity, reflecting a fine balance of modernity and tradition. This very tradition-modernity dynamics also characterises the housing/residential complex of the AoL community living in the Soudhamini Apartments located next to the AoL Bangalore Ashram prefers to call itself a *sattvic* community that claims a holistic life for residents living in a studio, studio plus, 3BHK, duplex etc., based on ethics, harmony and care for environment derived from *seva*, *sadhana* and *satsang* along with state-of-the-art amenities such as gymnasium, badminton court, library, swimming pool and so on.[202]

Sattvik way of life also entails regulation of the body and mind, especially with regard to the controlling of the senses and diet or food habits. Such a way of life is often associated with saints and sages directed towards a higher goal in search of truth or God. In this regard, even Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's experiments on self-restraint

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[202] See *Soudhamini*. Available at: <u>Soudhamini – Sri Sumeru Realty</u> (accessed 12th November 2022).

and dietary control epitomize a movement towards higher spiritual self-realisation, truth or God (Gandhi, 1927/2008).

Indeed, at the very start of any AoL course, a basic instruction or rather a suggestion that all participants follow is with regard to diet control. Non-vegetarian food and, if possible, even onion and garlic (regarded as constituting low prana or energy in the spiritual realm), alcohol, tobacco or any addictive substance is to be avoided until the course ends. These food items are regarded as *tamasic* (non-vegetarian and alcohol) or *rajasic* (onion, garlic) in nature. Thus, they are not considered conducive to spiritual life. Thereby, along with *seva*, *sadhana, satsang* and other *yogic* exercises, AoL members need to follow a routinised bodily discipline through control over their dietary habits. Thus, while the adoption of a plant-based vegetarian diet and teetotalism indicates an induction into a *Sanskritic* way of life over a period of time (see Srinivas, 1956), and in this regard, even the *Upanayanam* course opens up the door to initiation into *gayatri mantra* and sacred thread (optional though) irrespective of whatsoever caste or gender one belongs to[203]; there is also an underlying disciplinary mechanism that runs through the whole discourse of AoL that directly or indirectly guides and governs the conduct of the individuals and influences them to follow a particular lifestyle adhering to the teachings of the *Guru*.

In this regard, the present study finds Michel Foucault's theory of "disciplinary power" highly applicable in understanding the disciplinary mechanism and techniques functioning in the AoL. It is to be noted that Foucault was engaged in the study of the refined and elaborate techniques of power in governing the conduct of the individuals

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[203] Interestingly, it has been observed that there are AoL followers who believe that the *Upanayanam* course would indeed initiate them into the *Guru's* lineage which they consider sacred and thereby, they would benefit by getting rid of their past *karma.*

in domains as diverse as the army, school, workshop, hospitals and families accompanying the development of industrial states since the seventh century (Foucault, 1991: 337-38; Foucault, 1980: 57-58). Disciplines include those methods "which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility and utility" (Foucault, 1991:181). Foucault asserts that "nothing is more material, physical and corporal than the exercise of power" (Foucault, 1980: 57-58). Disciplinary power affects and concerns individuals by targeting their bodies in order to make them more obedient and useful through an increase in their skills and aptitudes without letting them challenge the power of discipline (Hoffman, 2012: 27-39).

In the case of AoL, especially the life of the teachers entails consistent and routinised disciplining of everyday life in accordance with the *Guru's* teachings and instructions. Indeed, the very process of becoming a teacher requires a prior considerable period of living a consistent life of restraint and discipline with regard to food habits, speech, action and overall lifestyle that makes vegetarianism, teetotalism, regular practice of *Sudarshan Kriya*, *satsang* and other meditative practices and bodily *yogic* exercises part and parcel of one's everyday routine that includes time management. Moreover, one who aspires to become a teacher is also required to actively participate in several AoL basic and advanced courses and actively volunteer to organise such courses in their areas or wherever possible by delivering introductory talks, promoting the courses and bringing in participants. In this regard, assisting the other teachers in conducting their courses and participating in AoL activities is a common occurrence. Moreover, one is also required to fully imbibe and socialise oneself with *Guru's* teachings and AoL way of life by reading *Guru's* books/writings and listening to his talks, especially on the *Upanishads* and other scriptures.

However, it is to be noted that despite whatever one does with regard to the absorption, promotion and spread of AoL activities, two of the teachers' recommendation is also a requirement that has to be met while applying for a Teachers Training Program. This necessitates the functioning of a subtle monitoring mechanism on the part of the institution as well as on the part of the individual self, which even has to go through the nuance of "gazes" of subtle surveillance (seen as normal) especially functioning in the network of the other AoL members that makes the individual adhere strictly to the aspired lifestyle with no digression and make sure that it is visible to the others in the network for an uncritical in-group acceptance (ibid.).[204] This assures a place in the group of teachers after one successfully proves one's capability to become an obedient and committed teacher as well as AoL member after going through a thorough training and examination process during the Teachers Training Programs. In this regard, docility and utility go hand in hand; the more obedient one is to the teachings and instruction of AoL, the more she/he is utilised for the spread of its teachings and extends its boundary and vice versa.

Indeed, it has been observed that even questioning the *Guru* and his teachings amounts to negative criticism in the AoL inner circle that draws unwelcome gestures (a kind of punitive measure resulting from digression). Thus, a mind/body uncritical and obedient of and strictly committed to the spread of the organization's principles and teachings to the extent of even routinising the learned behaviour as a part of one's own spontaneous naturalised lifestyle calls for a subtle functioning and application of a

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[204] This also shows the functioning of a hierarchy in terms of experience and seniority that is one with experience can have a say on the capability of the new aspirants. Moreover, a subtle hierarchy even if not followed strictly yet functions in AoL as reflected in the distribution of titles such as *Swami*, *Rishi* and other teachers and participants other than majorly on the basis of seniority. For instance, a *swami* or a *rishi*'s presence somehow attracts subtle instant awe and respect in India as compared to other teachers who themselves carry certain respect for the former positions.

"disciplinary power" discussed in the works of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980, 1991; Hoffman, 2012). In this regard, it is to be noted that this very process of AoL socialisation constitutes a subtle ongoing simultaneous "subjectification of the object and, in turn, objectification of the subject" (ibid.). The subjects here are themselves the objects of power through which it runs. Moreover, the functioning of such an exercise of subtle power also takes the most visible form that openly keeps a check on the bodily movements and minds in the form of high-tech security cameras (CCTV) installed in the nook and corner of the Bangalore ashram, assuring the extension of the surveillance mechanism that ensures self-controlled bodily movements and activities even inside the *Ashram* campus that presents a particular way of living life homogenous in nature as shown in figure 6.8.

Figure 6.8.

However, despite the consistent and pervasive play of disciplinary power, there lie "an incompleteness" in its exercise (ibid., 35). Its hold is firm only on those whose membership is tight, regular and consistent. Moreover, Michel Foucault himself found the techniques of disciplinary power as different from asceticism, and the "monastic type disciplines whose function was to obtain renunciations rather than increases of utility" despite obedience to others is followed as their principal aim is a mastery of individual over one's own body (Foucault, 1991: 181). In this regard, it can be said that AoL does not endorse renunciation in the sense of completely leaving one's worldly life and familial responsibilities for the sake of a higher spiritual goal but it does provide space for the practice of higher spiritual pursuits for those who commit to *brahmacharya* (a state of mastery over one's body and sense organs) through the training of *swamis* and *sadhvis* (female renunciate or spiritual seeker). The AoL *swamis* and *sadhvis* are then sent to various parts of the region, country and even abroad to advance the teachings and workings of the organisation. In this regard, one may not actually fully escape the utility aspect of disciplinary power.

However, on the one hand, mastery over the body in the sense of awareness of the true self as the oneness that pervades the whole existence does have a potential to move beyond the grip of the disciplinary mechanisms in the sense that it makes one identify oneself beyond even AoL and its practices in the Advaitic sense and on the other hand, especially when such a realisation is aligned with the individual teachers who attains a kind of unique personality cult attracting followers of their own providing a space for improvisation. Moreover, the utility aspect also applies to how the participants, followers and practitioners themselves benefit from the organisation.

In this regard, many respondents have expressed that only their relationships with family, peer groups and others have improved after their association with AoL. They

are more respected, and their voices are heard now. The AoL teachers are well-respected by the participants. Interestingly, there is a qualitative difference in the respect attached to the position of an AoL teacher compared to the teachers in schools and related institutions. This difference is due to the fact that the nature of their occupation is voluntary and social service-oriented, with a major focus on the overall betterment of individual lives.

Moreover, the sacred touch that the followers feel from the presence of a *guru* behind this organisation cannot be underestimated.[205] Thus, whether to come out of a break-up phase, get rid of mental trauma and physical issues or disease; a concern for personality development or simply for leisurely rejuvenation; or serious pursuit of spiritual goals and guidance; the aspect of utility plays an important role as it is consistently met in the very process of participation and continuation in AoL that provides a sense of gratification. On top of this, a sense of belonging to a community holds the AoL community intact and keeps it going.

Moreover, AoL version of spirituality creates a space of oneness that goes even beyond the sense of community and disciplinary technicalities/ tendencies of its discourse and yet is not distinct from it as it is ultimately based on *Advaita* philosophy that emphasises on the "awareness" of "oneself" (Timalsina, 2009). Interestingly, the body plays an important role even in the pursuit of this awareness that equates itself with the ultimate truth or higher consciousness or in other words, the self.

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[205] Contradictorily, many of the AoL participants even have to face conflictual tendencies in their relations and families due to their association with AoL. For instance, it has been found that a sudden adoption of a vegetarian way of life by a single member of a family and also at times, too much involvement of a member of family in AoL activities may become a cause for a restraint and conflict in the families. In fact, an air of suspicion and distrust against guru centric organizations after the exposure and detainment of certain *gurus* like Asharam Bapu and Ram Rahim etc., owing to criminal charges does have an effect on the minds of the people and society.

Whether embodied or disembodied, the notion of body and bodily activities plays a crucial role in the discourse of spirituality. Sadhguru claims, "Yoga is essentially a way of re-creating the body so that it serves a higher purpose. The human body can function as a piece of flesh and blood or as the very source of creation" (Sadhguru, 2016:22). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar asserts, "The seed of this universe is deep inside you—the Self. In this human body, it is possible to realise it fully, to understand it. It is not difficult at all. In this very lifetime, it is possible.." (Shankar, 2010: 93). Such a realisation of the notion of self is possible only when the mind is cleansed of past impressions and thoughts while within the body and not outside of it, and this happens through the medium of breath (Shankar, 2008: 8; 2010: 21-24) that balances the *prana*[206] level. On the importance of the body in the spiritual path, a thirty-years-old full-time AoL teacher from Laos shared,

The human Body is a beautiful gift by nature to us. So that we can realise our true selves.

Reiterating the *Guru's* viewpoint mentioned above, a forty-years-old AoL teacher from Canada shared,

In my opinion, the body is there to do its dharma. To be of service. To uplift humanity and, in the process, get rid of its own past impressions and move towards freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

A twenty-eight-years-old yoga teacher from Nepal shared,

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[206] In the *Upanishads, prana* refers to a "significant ontological reality" or "root principle" behind the functioning of the universe and all the forms and forces manifesting in it including human body. (See Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 121-22).

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The human body has immense potential we need to keep it in good health by exercising regularly, and giving good and healthy food as it is the only way that can help a spiritual person realise his/ her goal i.e., union with the supreme consciousness.

Thus, in the realm of AoL version of spirituality, the body as a layer of existence is none other than an expression and creation of the consciousness (Shankar, 2010) which is the true nature of the self that is beyond time and space yet connects all. There is an emphasis on knowing the true self as an awareness of non-dual consciousness. Here, the true nature of the self is equated with the notion of *Brahman* and *Atman,*[207] as discussed in the *Upanishads* (Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018). This understanding of self is rooted in Adi Shankara's Advaitic philosophy of oneness and is also reflected in the text "Yoga Vashistha" (2017). While Shankara's *Advaita* focuses on an awareness of self as "the essence of all seen as pure consciousness which is non-dual in nature",; Yoga Vashistha emphasises on the awareness of *Brahman* (non-dual consciousness) as manifesting in various forms (Timalsina, 2009: xviii). Indeed, the various forms or the very existence is seen as the manifestation of the *Brahman* or self. Realisation and establishment in one's self or non-dual consciousness is the ultimate goal of AoL version of spirituality, and this very *Advaitic* goal could be attained through diverse techniques. There are multiple interpretations of *Advaita* and various starting points to reach the knowledge and awareness of the *Brahman* as all-embracing, including all individual selves that take one beyond all dualities of self and the other, beyond the senses and intellect yet through an experiential and logical basis (Timalsina, 2009).

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[207] The concepts of *Atma* and *Brahman* as discussed in the *Upanishads* refers and relates to the eternal and timeless reality beyond the senses, intellect and speech known through *sakshi bhava* or "witness consciousness". (See See Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 120-21).

Techniques for the attainment of self-realisation or for the attainment of transcendental consciousness include both absorbing the knowledge of the *Upanishads* and other texts through erudition (reading and listening to the *Guru's* discourses) and simultaneously experiencing the given techniques through meditation, *kriya* and other preparatory methods like *pranayama*, bodily stretches and exercises and so on. In this regard, along with a thorough understanding of the seven layers of existence (breath, ego, intellect, mind, self, body and memory) (Shankar, 2010), the very nature of existence or life itself is to be brought into introspection and reflected upon. And such a reflection is possible only when one is in the human body achieving which is itself considered a consequence of good *karma* or good fortune. A thirty-five-years-old AoL volunteer expressed,

> *The body has a vital role to play. After all, spiritual practices and understanding are possible only when we are in this human body.*

A forty-years-old full-time teacher from Siliguri shared,

> *The human body is the embodiment of the spirit.*

A thirty-years-old AoL volunteer asserted,

> *Without a body you cannot experience spirituality. A healthy body is instrumental in developing a higher level of consciousness.*

Rahul Banerjee and Amita Chatterjee, in their work entitled, "Indian Philosophy and Meditation: Perspectives on Consciousness," associates conscious with an experience of "an inner qualitative subjective state" or feeling (Banerjee and Chatterjee, 2018: 2). Referring to the *Mandukya Upanishad*, Banerjee and Chatterjee describe the four states of consciousness or self in Indian philosophy (ibid., 123). The first is the

waking state (*vaisvanara*) which leads to the experience of gross material objects. The second is the dream state (*taijasa*) that experiences "subtle internal objects". The third is the state of dreamless deep sleep. And the fourth is the state of *turiya* that is beyond explanation or cognition; the unmanifest transcendental experience of the non-dual consciousness (ibid.).

The AoL discourse often refers to these states of consciousness and also offers the techniques to realise or rather experience the state of *turiya* or supreme consciousness. In this regard, a particular course that is designed and offered by AoL and indeed conducted by the *guru* himself is known as "Vigyan Bhairav" which is titled in the English language as "unveiling infinity".[208] This course, as its English title suggests, is about experiencing the infinite and intangible nature of consciousness through several techniques out of the 112 techniques as discussed in the ancient text of "Vigyan Bhairava tantra"[209]. The manner of introducing this course by the *Guru* or AoL suggests the unveiling of one's true self ("expanded self", "higher knowledge", or "universal spirit") through the techniques of meditation and awareness that transcends the state of mind.[210] Interestingly, the techniques are regarded as scientific and experiential in nature that have the potential to elevate one's mind and body to heightened states of awareness, happiness, clarity of mind and action, equanimity and dynamism.[211] One such technique involves meditation into the syllable of AUM wherein there is a gradual movement from the first three letters identified with the first three states of consciousness discussed above towards the fourth state that takes one beyond the letters

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[208] See *Unveiling Infinity: Vigyan Bhairav.* Available at: Unveiling Infinity (Vigyan Bhairav) | The Art Of Living. (Accessed 15th November 2022).
[209] See Chaudhri, Ranjit. 2008. *112 Meditations for Self-Realization: Vigyan Bhairava Tantra*. India: Prakash Books Pvt. Ltd.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.

towards the realisation of a selfless self yet connected to all at once as the awareness of oneness as the pure consciousness. In other words, such a pure consciousness is addressed as *Brahman* or *Satchitananda,* which is identical to the true nature of the *Advaitic* sense of self as pure being *(sat),* awareness *(chit),* and bliss *(ananda).* Here lies the notion of happiness which, on the one hand, is achieved through the techniques provided by the AoL to get relief from the stress and tension of everyday life; on the other hand, ultimate happiness is significantly associated with the realisation of one's true nature, i.e., beyond all identities, dualities and events.

In this regard, it is to be noted that even the core of the teachings and practices concerning the three main areas, i.e., *seva* (service), *sadhana* (spiritual practices like meditation, other yogic exercises, etc.) and *satsang* (a spiritual, communal gathering sharing music, meditation and discussion of ancient texts and guru's teachings) is ultimately the techniques toward the inner realisation and awareness of the ultimate being or consciousness. And the very process towards this goal includes the creation of a fine balance and a state of equanimity within oneself and within one's mind and body by doing away from the stress and pressures of everyday life. Thus, a psycho-social therapeutic element plays an important role throughout the process (see Taylor, 2001; Jacobs, 2016). This process simultaneously involves becoming more aware and reflexive of the working of the mind, body, emotions and life as a whole. And at the same time, it also constitutes a subjectively reflexive process of unbecoming being aided through the scientifically claimed yet traditionally grounded techniques (combination of *seva*, *sadhana* and *satsang*) of self-creation. It is to be noted that though the self here symbolises the realisation of an individual of her true nature, at the same time, this very realisation is a consequence of as well as leads to a relational, dialogic and inter-subjective way of life rooted in the notion and practice of *seva* or service based

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on a sense of belongingness and oneness. This, in turn, adds a purpose and meaning to one's life.

Awareness or knowledge of oneness is realised through the medium of the techniques of the body yet, at the same time, takes one beyond the body away from the ignorance of the limited mind, unveiling the "unmanifested transcendental consciousness" (Shankar, 2008). Interestingly, this very realisation of oneness that identifies the self as non-dual, all-encompassing and all-pervasive sees itself as none other than God or the divine wherein one's body, mind and life or the realisation of the whole existence becomes sacred (ibid.). Thus, the whole idea of the distinction between the secular and sacred becomes ambiguous in the realm of heightened spiritual awareness or consciousness of one's own true nature. In this regard, one can relate to Swami Vivekananda's *Advaitic* assertion on man's true nature: "Assert your true nature, manifest it. Not to become pure, you are pure already. You are not to be perfect; you are that already. Nature is like the screen which is hiding the reality beyond. Every good thought that you think or act upon is simply tearing the veil, as it were, and the purity, the infinity, the God behind, manifests itself more and more." (Vivekananda, 1986). Traces of this assertion of Swami Vivekananda is reflected in the following responses of the respondents. A twenty-eight-years-old *yoga* teacher from Nepal shared on the question of the body,

> *Earlier I was unaware of the different dimensions of my existence. I used to think that I am just the body, but after doing Sudarshan Kriya I felt that a totally new dimension in me opened up. I became calmer, relaxed, loving and aware of life. Spirituality is helping me to realise my goal, i.e., to unite with the supreme consciousness.*

A forty-nine-years-old former journalist and a full-time AOL teacher shared,

The human body is the vehicle through which I can cross over to a higher state of being.

Another thirty-nine-years old volunteer in Ashram from Punjab expressed,

Earlier I used to get driven by so much ego I was not even able to take people addressing me by "oye, abe" (addressed in colloquial Hindi language). But now there is a lot of change in me, just as guruji says to think of yourself as light; I see myself in the same manner. Even if people say something bad, I just consider that he is pointing to my body, not me. Earlier I used to see people in terms of religion, but now I see them in their true identity. We all are the same."

A forty-seven-year-old swami cum *yoga*-meditation teacher shared,

I came to know the meaning of spirituality as how I am not limited to just body, thoughts, and emotions but spirit. By knowing all this and feeling of oneness and belonging with everyone, the way you see yours and other life and nature are totally different. It changes the way you see life. Quality of life becomes unimaginable. Now I can see the whole world as a family.

Indeed, this very sense of 'oneness' and all-encompassing sacredness within and out in the sense of God in one and all experienced at a heightened stage/state of spiritual awareness enables one to develop a sense of belongingness with all, including the very existence. For the feminists like Ursula King, it is the same God-consciousness that enables them to transcend sex roles and connect all despite differences (Donovan, 1989: 651). Thus, even the Marxists like John Brentlinger declare that "spirituality, in broad, inclusive terms, is the capacity to feel deeply bonded with all beings on this earth; to

acknowledge the deep, ultimate value of life and community, among ourselves and with nature. It is expressed by love and a sense of responsibility for others" (Brentlinger, 2000). Further, he goes to the extent of saying that "socialism without spirituality could be as empty and cruel as capitalism" (ibid.). Brentlinger's view echoes that of Ravi Shankar, who believes that one cannot be a communist without being spiritual as for him, spirituality develops values (caring, sharing) and a sense of belongingness with all (Shankar, 2008: 53). Advancing the message to see love and divinity in all Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a spiritual *guru* asks, wonders, and suggests, "why not wake up and see that all that exists in this world, from time immemorial, belongs to you? "I am not just from America, I am not a German, I am not just an Indian or an Asian or an African, but I am at home anywhere, everywhere, and with everybody. All the wealth of humanity belongs to me; whether it is the Gita or Koran or Bible or Sikhism or Jainism, all this wealth is mine" (Shankar, 2008: 40).

6.8. Conclusion:

Thus, despite of being engrossed in the socio-economic, cultural and political dimensions of life as has been observed in the present study and chapter especially with regard to the aspects of consumerism, gender, caste, class and nation showing majorly the signs of consumerism and class-based distinction marking the foundation within the very market-driven capitalist structure; the AoL version of spirituality is ultimately about an extension and spreading of the message of *Advaita* philosophy merged with traces of guru *bhakti* or devotion finely tuned with contemporary lifestyle that fruitfully addresses the diverse concerns of the individuals that often results in bringing them experientially out of their daily concerns into the unmanifested higher state of consciousness and self-realization through diverse techniques of the self and

body (known) yet beyond (unknown) it to connect with one and all (cutting across gender, caste, class, nationality) through the medium of *yoga* and related discourse.

Chapter- 7

Concluding Observations

"For the day that there will be a reading of the Oxford card, the one, and true reading,

will be the end of history."

Jacques Derrida (1987:115)

The unseen and the immaterial yet experienced through the subjective aspects of the self on the one hand and expressed through the inter-subjective and relational terms on the other hand; the *Advaitic* sense of spiritual and spirituality underlies at the base of the functioning of AoL. Here, the realm of spirituality entails both the latent inner dimension of life, reflexive and introspective of itself, and the manifested aspects of the outer world in which the self is expressed through the medium of the body in the form of spiritual practices which includes meditation, *kriya*, *pranayama,* and other *yogic* exercises as well as driven by the notion of *seva* or service and dialogue (question/answer session and sharing of views during *satsangs*, social service initiatives and otherwise) through interaction and communication. In this regard, along with the inner dimension, the institutionalized aspect of spirituality expressed through the medium of the discourse of AoL as propagated by the teachings of its founder cannot be underestimated as this is what provides the basis for its functioning, extension, and continuation.

The *guru-figure-led* nature of the non-governmental organization, which aims to serve the society through volunteers belonging to diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds cutting across the entities of caste, class, gender, region, and nation, shows the liberal, individualistic, democratic, and a humanistic touch of modernity on the one

hand; and the revival of a cultural tradition symbolized by the terms *guru* (founder), *ashram* (as its international headquarter) and spiritual practices related to *yoga* on the other hand. In this regard, the present study could trace the very root of the AoL in the context of the nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial modernity in India in which attempts were made to revive the *Vedic* tradition (also see Jacobs, 2016) as discussed in chapter 2 (two).

While modernity, in general, denotes a period of progress characterised by a rupture from the past especially breaking away from the shackles of religious orthodoxy and authority that dominated the human mind for ages till the Medieval period; modernity also provides a space for introspection to address the concerns of the present critically and reflexively guided by the ideals of human reason, liberty, equality, and humanistic morality. Different societies differently experience and respond to these ideals of modernity depending upon how modernity itself is introduced in a given context.

In the context of India, modernity was introduced through the prism of British colonialism (characterised by authoritarian and exploitative rule) and, thus, defied its core humanistic ideals behind its propagation. However, paradoxically, colonisation also led to the construction of roads, railways, and the establishment of other means of communication, like the printing press, simultaneously incorporating attempts at socialisation through English education. All these developments led to the growth and creation of a liberal and critical space within colonial modernity.

Within this liberal and critical space under colonial modernity, a class of mobile, English-educated yet traditionally grounded men (people) of reason emerged. While on the one hand, this class of people challenged the Brahminic orthodoxy, obscurantist and

discriminatory practices of the past that led to caste and gender discrimination, over-emphasis on rituals, and so on; on the other hand, they got into re-interpreting and reviving the insights of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* in the light of reason, science, and humanistic moralism. The attempts at *Vedic* revival, in turn, indicated a dissatisfaction and challenge to the hegemony of colonial Western modernity other than legitimising one's own tradition in the light of reason and science. These attempts were institutionalised through the formation of the societies like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Tattvabodhini Sabha, and Church of New Dispensation through the initiatives of prominent figures like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen and so on. Gradually, in the late 19th century, an eminent personality appeared in the scene who was indeed even critical of the elitist nature of the prior social reform movements, and that was Swami Vivekananda (Sarkar, 2014: 62).

Vivekananda's participation and delivery of a fiery speech in the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 at Chicago that expressed the liberal side of Hinduism and his gradual rise leading to the establishment of the Vedanta Society of New York in 1895 and Ramakrishna Mission in India in 1897 pioneered the gradual development of such foreign tours of Indian *gurus* spreading the message of *Advaita Vedanta* explained and interpreted through reason and its practical applicability in that given context. *Advaitic* message of unity of all religions and realisation of divinity within cutting across the notion of caste, class, and gender away from the religious orthodoxy gave a sense of meaning to the de-rooted and disenchanted world dominated by the instrumental rationality of western modernity. This message was/is delivered dialogically through the medium of *yoga* (discourse and practice), reason, and humanism, reflecting a

concern for service (*seva*) to humanity and, thus, appealed to the liberal minds in the western context and, in his return, also appealed to the liberal eastern minds.

It is within this nineteenth-century hermeneutic context of colonial modernity that attempted to re-interpret the past in the light of reason and see the present through it, simultaneously being critical of the obscurantist and discriminative practices of the past and creating an alternative liberal and reflexive space for meaning away from the 'iron-cage' of modernity in the present; one can locate the root of the contemporary spirituality-based movements such as that of the Art of Living. These movements are, thereby, rooted in the context that merged the wisdom of the east with western reason and humanism through a reflexive negotiation with both the past and present to effectively address the exigencies of the praxis of the present. In this regard, tradition and modernity are no longer seen in oppositional terms; rather, it is the confluence of the two through the lens of reason and humanism that marks the basis of the dynamics of the whole discourse of AoL as elaborated and explained in chapter 3 (three) of the present study.

Whether the notions of *guru*, *ashram*, *yoga,* or *Ayurveda* or the actual practices related to these ideas, the merge of the ideational and the practical in the realm of the experiential reveals a continuous and finely balanced confluence of tradition and modernity. The *Vedic* revival symbolises a living tradition that enlivens and enables the functioning of contemporary society, making sense of both the past and the present. Thus, tradition is not simply about the past but also the present. It fills the gaps and aids in the contemporary functioning of the world. Moreover, it is no longer a fixed entity but reflects dynamism in its present-day applicability. For instance, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a *guru* not only actualises the functioning of a traditional way of life reflecting the *guru-shishya* relation rooted in the *Vedic* past but also extends and adds

to the functioning of the role within and outside the modern non-governmental organisational structure of contemporary society. He dons multiple roles like that of a speaker in conferences at several secular locations such as academic institutes, parliament, government, and private offices and companies; he acts as a mediator to resolve conflicts, regional, national or international; he is also a name behind the Sri Sri Tattva brand of products if not simply the founder of a modern NGO presented as a humanitarian leader. Moreover, in the life of the followers who belong to diverse backgrounds (cutting across the religious, non-religious, gender, caste, and nation), the *guru* can act as a guiding force or energy or simply the divine power that provides "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991).

Thus, the term *guru* fits well with the functioning of the plural and differentiated modern-day world, indicating the "expansibility" and "uncontainability" of its very nature (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012). Thereby, there is a continuous underlying pattern of modernising tradition and traditionalising modernity running throughout the discourse of the AoL version of spirituality. Such a pattern reflects well and extends into the functioning of the *ashram* (also the international headquarter of the organisation), AoL programs, and the AoL way of life as a whole, as discussed in the present work.

Here, spirituality symbolises not only a humanitarian interpretation of the *Upanishads* applicable to modern life as discussed in the previous chapters but is also indicated by the secular touch of the signs and symbols of diverse religious traditions of the world other than the *Vedic* as has been put on the pillars inside the Vishalakshi Mantap (see photograph 7.1. in appendix III) and is also revealed by a statue of the Buddha (see photograph 7.2. in appendix III) located in the ashram premise. Thus, the nature of spirituality reflects a finely balanced secular and humanitarian touch giving a

message of unity and dialogue, taking one beyond religion, which the *guru* himself suggests to let stuck on the pillars like its symbols, not to be carried in the minds. However, similar to Linda Woodhead's observation that the opposition between spirituality and religion lies at the very nature of the origin of spirituality (Woodhead, 2010), the present study too observed a pattern of engagement, debate, and negotiation with the religious, taking place within the realm of spirituality. There is a tendency for this pattern to turn complex and conflictual, especially when interacting in the domains related to identity, politics, and business, as shown in chapter 4 (four) and in parts of chapter 6 (six) of the present study.

An underlying subtle politics has been observed, especially concerning the question of identity and representation of the AoL and its founder. While there is an overwhelming claim to originality through legitimacy based on the confluence of *Vedic* knowledge and science interpreted and fitted well in addressing the functioning of the present-day society through the *Guru's* teachings considered as new and authentic; similarity (also see Avdeeff, 2004) in the functioning of AoL and TM Group of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi to which Sri Sri himself was associated before the starting of AoL somehow even indicates AoL as simply an extension of the latter. Moreover, the present study also observed that although AoL as an organisation represents itself as non-denominational, secular, and humanitarian in nature which is indeed revealed in the very scientific and humanitarian manner in which even its patented focal practice of *Sudarshan Kriya* is presented; the discourse takes more of a seemingly 'religious turn' as one gets more involved. Moreover, a tendency towards the religious turn is happening gradually over a period of time, as revealed in the increase in activities concerning *pujas,* and the performance of *homas* in AoL centres around the country. In this regard, changing or adding programs or courses with new names reveals a

traditional touch. For instance, some courses today are identified with the tag of *Yoga*, and few are specifically designed to interpret and teach the scriptures like *Gita*, *Vigyan Bhairav Tantra,* etc. Interestingly, the AoL centres are also called by a Sanskrit name today, such as that of *Gnana Kshetras*[212] (though this may look more like a *sanskritizing* tendency). This subtle politics of presentation and representation takes a revealingly conflicting turn, especially when AoL fails to meet the people's expectations regarding its secular humanitarian basis.

Ravi Shankar and his foundation's closeness to the BJP government and its leadership which is considered a Hindutva-based political party especially came to light during the events such as the 2014 general election in India. The *guru's* support for BJP government policies, AoL's WCF event of 2015, and, majorly, the *guru's* role in the Ayodhya issue attracted harsh criticism that questioned its secular and humanitarian basis of functioning. "Crony Babaism," "Crony spirituality," "Sarkari Baba," or "Sarkari Saints," and "soft-Hindu power" were the several tags attached to the *guru* and his foundation by the critics (media, political parties, people in genral). This all indicates a continuous tension and conflict arising from the complex intertwining of the spiritual and the religious, especially when the spiritual seems to digress from and compromise its secular, humanitarian, liberal and universal basis by appearing to be engulfed by religious orthodoxy driven by interest-based logic serving particular identities. However, despite a certain compromise of the spiritual in terms of the right-wing leaning tendency of the *guru,* especially in the case of the Ayodhya issue, the present study could locate the nature of spirituality as subtly presented by AoL and its

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[212] Considered as "sacred space" where people are introduced to human values related to spirituality. See *About Gnana kshetra*. Available at: Gnana Kshetra | The Art of Living India (accessed 2022)

founder in the very manner of presentation, representation and negotiation of AoL during the course of the WCF, Ayodhya and all such conflicting issues.

The *guru's* solution to Ayodhya issue would include an apology from the Hindu community for the demolition of the Masjid and a requesting tone for a compromise; the participation of diverse members belonging to different faith groups, nations, and cultural and political backgrounds in a single platform during WCF and even emphasis on tools such as dialogue and non-violence as a part of the *guru's* solution for the Columbian conflict between the Columbian government and the revolutionaries (FARC) underlies the very secular and all-encompassing humanitarian touch of contemporary spirituality. Even concerning closeness with BJP, one cannot simply narrow down AoL into a Hindutva-based organisation because then can one apply the same logic when AoL works with the BJD in Orissa, the communist government in Kerela or with the AAP government of Delhi? Occasionally, the *guru* himself denies such connection with the Hindutva group and is also critical of the functioning of the BJP. In turn, even the Hindutva groups do not spare the leader and his foundation when they see it as celebrating and representing the 'other' as in the case of the New Year celebration in the AoL *ashram*. The participation of people belonging to diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds in AoL shows that the motivation behind joining this movement lies beyond the religious, majorly in dealing with the exigencies of the present affecting individual lives. Henceforth, there lies a certain dynamics of socio-political identity construction involving multiple actors (political parties, media, public, religious leaders as discussed in the cases of Ayodhya and WCF) revolving around a process of representation, recognition, and negotiation in situating the AoLF.

Moreover, it is to be noted that identifying spirituality, after all, involves a process of spiritualising identity that cuts across the socio-religious, economic, and political

domains in terms of reason, human values such as compassion, righteousness, dialogue, non-violence, and so on. On the question of spirituality and politics, an AoL *yoga* teacher from *ashram* shared,

Spirituality will eliminate the drawbacks in all possible ways if added to politics. A spiritual politician is more ethical, sensible, unbiased, and farsighted in his approach. Also, his/her decisions can be better in all possible ways than anyone else's as his/her decisions are taken with a calm, sensitive mind. Above all, a spiritual person can be more sincere, honest, and hardworking because, towards the end of the day, he/ she is answerable to herself.

A forty-two-years-old full-time AoL teacher expressed,

I find a close connection between spirituality and politics. The broader purpose of spirituality is to purify and add beauty to the thoughts and actions of all, along with the realisation of the purpose of life. When politics is done or practised by following ethics, it helps in the prosperity and happiness of all. Most of the problems of today`s world are the direct result of the absence of ethics in doing them. spirituality helps in developing ethics.

A forty-years-old AoL teacher from Canada said,

As Gurudev says, we need to spiritualise politics. The purpose of politics is to serve, and one cannot truly, selflessly do that unless the core is spiritual. What makes politics dirty is when it loses its spiritual values.

Thus, from these three responses, one can say that spirituality is about certain values concerning humanity, including ethics, honesty, sensitivity, caring, sharing, and responsibility. Thus, spiritualising identity entails living a life of values. Concerning politics and religion, Ravi Shankar himself feels the need for reform in both in the sense

that spiritualising politics would make the politicians more righteous and caring for the welfare of people, and spiritualising religion would make religion broader and inclusive of all wisdom in the world (Shankar, 2008: 267). In this regard, chapter 5 (five) of the present study shows what the AoL version of spirituality symbolises and how AoL and its members view and distinguish the relationship between spirituality and religion.

In brief, chapter 5 (five) throws light on the nature of spirituality based on how Sri Sri has discussed it in different texts, which also resonates with the viewpoint of many AoL members. It shows that, in sum, the *guru's* take on spirituality implies three essential aspects: Firstly, spirituality is a way of life. Secondly, it is about knowing oneself on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is driven by human values such as compassion, caring, sharing, and love for oneself and all. Thirdly, it is a common value system in ancient cultures. Thereby, it is claimed to be simultaneously traditional and universal in nature. Thus, spirituality denotes a way of life, based on a system of universal human values (compassion, love, caring, and sharing) which is regarded as common to all cultural traditions that makes one develop a service-oriented life towards one and all as well as become subjectively reflexive to reach one's full potential for wellbeing. Based on this understanding of the nature of spirituality, it is offered as a solution or a tool to reach Sri Sri's aim, i.e., to create a violence-free, stress-free and peaceful world. It is done through spiritual practices such as *Sudarshan Kriya*, *pranayama*, meditation, and other *yogic* practices and discourse as offered in the AoL courses, which aim to strengthen the individuals to deal effectively with their daily concerns and ultimately serve society through them.

About the question of religion and spirituality, the present study had observed a general tendency amongst the AoL members to agree and resonate with the *guru's* well-known take on this relationship which links religion to the banana skin and spirituality

to the fruit inside and, thereby, considers that there is misery in this world because people tend to throw away the fruit and stick to the skin. However, chapter five takes into account the diverse responses of the respondents on the relationship between religion and spirituality.

In general, responses indicate that the spiritual practitioners themselves approach the relationship of spirituality and religion in a varying manner on the basis of their experience. While on the one hand, there are those who see no difference between spirituality and religion in terms of human values; on the other hand, in constrast there are people who see no connection at all between the two seeing the former as non-discriminatory in nature and the latter as dividing people. In between these two positions, some see spirituality as the core of religion. Also, others see the possibility of accessing the realm of the spiritual through religion. Moreover, some prefer spirituality over religion by seeing the former as beyond the latter but still holding the latter as important. Others do not even consider religion as important. Paradoxically, there are also those (belonging to different religious backgrounds) who claim to have come closer to their religion (whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian) and even started understanding it better only after joining the AoL.

Despite diverse viewpoints, respondents are very certain of their take on religion and spirituality. However, whether they see both as the same, similar, distinct, or contradictory, the final standpoint on this relationship remains unresolved and relative in nature because of the subjective nature of the responses. After all, it is the very nature of spirituality to remain open and democratic, which gives it a non-discriminatory touch while opening up the space for reflexivity, self-authority, and interpretation compatible with altruism. Also, includes diverse elements within its ambit ranging from mysticism, mythology, miracles to a broader view of life as discussed in the given thesis. For

instance, it is not uncommon to hear those in the path of spirituality such sayings as one of the respondents expressed,

> *I feel blessed to be the chosen one. Through me the work is being done. Miracles are natural in this path. I feel protected.*

In this regard, one can recall the famous Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' words, "I have the feeling that my books get written through me and that once they have got across me, I feel empty and nothing is left" (Levi-Strauss, 2012: 1). Whether or not the AoL members feel empty once the work is done or Levi-Strauss feel blessed or experience miracles, there is a common element shared by both, i.e., the element of something being accomplished through them indicates a mystical element (or myths in Levi-Strauss' sense in his work) which is observed as playing an important of being spiritual. Interestingly, even the notion of emptiness which possibly in a different sense than Levi-Strauss' especially with regard to the practice of "Hollow and Empty Meditation" often practiced in AoL during which the *guru* guides the meditators to feel hollow and empty within resulting in merge with the vacant space as love and peace marks the mystical inner journey beyond the body towards higher consciousness. Chapter 6 (six) of the present study/work further provides an elaborative and deeper account of the contemporary functioning of the AoL version of spirituality.

Chapter 6 (six) discusses the AoL discourse through the prism of modern *yoga,* which is rooted in the revival of *Vedic* culture and *Upanishadic* learning in the 19th century by the urban-based English educated through the lens of western science and reason. Indeed, a researcher named Mark Singleton traces the possible initial theoretical expression of modern *yoga* in Swami Vivekananda's text on *Raja Yoga* (1896) (White, 2014). Sprouting from the cusp of *Yoga* and *Samkhya* schools of Indian philosophy

over the years, *yoga* has largely taken a secular turn which is primarily health-driven as it claims to provide a holistic approach to life addressing the concerns of the mind-body-spirit complex. It is about overall well-being, including control and balance of mind and senses, physical and emotional health, and fitness. In this regard, *yoga* addresses life's individualistic and subjective nature, including one's higher spiritual and philosophical call for self or God- realisation and liberation from the *karmic* cycle of life (*samsara*). For instance, interestingly, it is not uncommon to see the AoL members considering their association with AoL and its founder, their ability to volunteer, and their visit to the *ashram* as a sign of *karmic* cleansing or a consequence of their past good *karmas*. However, most importantly, it is to be considered that modern *yoga* is presented and practised majorly through the prism of health and fitness and, thus, is seen in a secular, liberal, democratic, and rational light. It cuts across gender, caste, class, and region or any such divisions sticking to its very root of meaning, i.e., to unite.

With regard to the question of caste, gender, and nation, the present study shows that despite discrepancies (menstruation and *puja* or temple entry issue, AoL as representing Indian culture), the AoL version of spirituality is open, liberal, and democratic in nature. It provides a space for reflexivity, self-expression, and dialogue to all despite belonging to any gender, caste, or nation. AoL, as an organisation, is sensitive to the issue of gender and caste. It organises diverse programs and projects concerning the abolition of caste-based discrimination[213], gender equality, women's employment, child marriage, and female foeticide. Defying the orthodoxies and

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[213] See 2007, *Leaders pledge to end caste discrimination*. Available at: Leaders pledge to end caste discrimination | The Art Of Living Global.

obscurantism of organised religion. AoL has opened up the sacred-thread initiation ceremony for all, despite caste and gender. It has also opened up the pundit training course and *Vedic* learning to all caste groups and also indicates a welcoming tone to girls for the formal pursuance of *Vedic* education.

Moreover, when observed through the lens of gender, the spiritual path indicates defiance of patriarchal stereotypes. In this path, even the menfolk are expected to reflect love, care, and empathy which are traditionally attached to the feminine. And developing a sense of control over the senses and especially the sexual urge for spiritual growth applies to all gender.

Overall, it has been observed that there is a large participation of womenfolk and people from diverse nationalities and castes participating and freely pursuing their subjective inner or practical call to meet the challenges of daily lives or even responding to a higher spiritual call in AoL. However, this study also found a predominance of the class factor as a characteristic of the AoL version of spirituality.

Although there are certain programs that it claims to offer free of costs, such as prison programs and those which are targeted for relief work for victims of natural disasters and other social calamities, AoL and its spiritual discourse with its patented technique of *Sudarshan Kriya* reaches the individuals mainly through the medium of paid courses or programs. Also, Sri Sri Tattva and other brands of products, such as Byogi, etc., target a certain section of people belonging to middle or upper-middle- or high-class groups, i.e., those who can afford the cost of the consumables, whether in the form of courses or FMCG products. Even to become an AoL teacher, one has to pay a considerable amount of money in the name of a donation. Thus, the class factor stands out as a manifested reality whether while visiting the resort-like *ashram* in

Bengaluru or even if one chooses to visit the AoL centres in Siliguri or Gangtok other than its shopping outlets, online or offline. However, the social-service-oriented projects or initiatives of AoL somehow balance the class discrepancy by targeting and reaching the groups below the poverty line by providing free education, employment opportunities, and at times affordable or free courses to the marginalised in the slums and other areas. In this regard, the course fee is considered a part of the donation fund for its service projects.

Moreover, AoL does not see the spiritual as contradictory to business; rather, it considers spirituality as essential for the maintenance of ethics in business. It is compatible with the consumerist trend of modernity. However, interestingly, it sees communism without spirituality as pseudo-communism because spirituality is considered as the epitome of values such as caring, sharing, and non-discriminatory nature.

The humanistic and altruistic characteristics of the values that distinguish modern-day spirituality could be paradoxically rooted in the notion of the 'care of oneself', which Michel Foucault links to the *Delphic* notion of *epimeleia houteau* (Foucault, 2005). It is through the care of oneself one develops care for others. In this regard, the question of the body becomes highly crucial. The realm of the body gradually takes one beyond gender, caste, class, and nation. Whether embodied or disembodied, latent or manifest, to be controlled or discarded, the body plays a fundamental role in the discourse of spirituality. The spiritual is no longer in opposition to the bodily or the corporeal dimension in life. Instead, it is through the body, yet one experiences the spiritual beyond it. In this regard, chapter 6 (six) shows that disciplining the body is essential to AoL discourse. Thus, Foucault's notion of "disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1991) has been applied to understand the very dynamics of body and consciousness.

The AoL discourse is about a way of life that governs the conduct of individuals of their own volition. Although there is no strict and readily visible imposition of any discipline, a sign of progress in the AoL path entails imbibing the teachings of the *guru,* i.e., bringing into routinised practice *seva*, *sadhana,* and *satsang*. In this regard, disciplining the body is a must. It includes getting into a routinised life which is most evident in the life in Bengaluru *ashram*.

A regular day in the *ashram* starts with the morning group *sadhana* (physical exercise and practice of *pranayama*, *Sudarshan Kriya,* and meditation) at 6:30 am (before which one is expected to take a bath though not a compulsion). Then, the kitchen door opens at around 8:00 am that serves a strictly vegetarian diet (which excludes onion, garlic, and even brinjal as these vegetables are not considered *sattvic* because, according to *ayurvedic* wisdom, their consumption would lower the *prana*/energy level). After breakfast, the volunteers are supposed to get into voluntary service, which includes anything and everything one is assigned to do if not professionally involved in any departments of the *ashram* like *yoga* school, *Ayurveda*, sattva stores, travel agency, etc. Interestingly, anything and everything done for the *ashram* or AoL is considered a *seva* or service. Even during working hours, the departments schedule a group meditation session followed by lunch in the afternoon. The working hours get over before evening *satsang* (*guru's* teaching is discussed clubbed with devotional songs and even dance moves in ecstasy), which starts around 6:30 pm, followed by dinner. And the volunteers are supposed to end their day by participating in a group session that includes a talk by the *guru* on the scriptures or any topic played on television or tape.

Thus, there is a continuous process of disciplining and controlling life itself through the medium of the body. Any attempt at digression from the pattern meets with an

immediate or gradual subtle form of coercion received through the relational sphere of life. For instance, a sense of 'watch' prevails over life in the *ashram*. Either through the immediate roommate who may wake one up for morning *sadhana* or through the peer groups at work, one is reminded and even advised not to skip daily spiritual practices. Moreover, even in the *satsangs,* one can often hear about the importance of inculcating the practices of *seva*, *sadhana,* and *satsang* in daily life.

Interestingly, even one's expression and moods are connected to spiritual practices. It is not uncommon to hear a compliment over a smiley and glowy face related to daily spiritual practices and vice versa. The most manifested aspect of the watch is the surveillance cameras attached to the different corners of the *ashram*. But still, the most profound manifestation of the 'watch' remains subjective in nature (self-watch), resulting from indoctrination or secondary socialisation. This turns into a naturalisation of the practices. For instance, there is a tendency observed in the AoL members who have successfully attuned their lifestyle to daily spiritual practices. This tendency shows even sudden mood swings are related to occasional diversion from the AoL way of life or seen as resulting from an inability to follow proper *sadhana* or *seva*.

Thus, adapting to AoL involves following a lifestyle characterised by daily spiritual practices (physical and non-physical), vegetarianism, teetotalism, and moderation of behaviour that excludes using slang or not being violent and even abstention from sensual or sexual urges, etcetera. For instance, like the *swamis* and *sadhvis* who chose to abstain from surrendering to sensual and sexual urges, the volunteers, too, in the context of the *ashram,* are separated and residentially accommodated based on gender. Thus, disciplining enters the intimate and highly personal.

Once one adapts and attunes to the AoL lifestyle, the docile self automatically gets directed and utilised to carry forward, introduce, promote and contribute to the foundation's projects as a volunteer doing *seva*. Thus, the volunteers are subjected to the AoL discourse and utilised as objects to carry it forward. Even listening and following the discourse of other *gurus* amounts to "spiritual shopping" in AoL, which paradoxically is seen in a negative light. There is a simultaneous subjectification of the object and objectification of the subject in the process of AoL socialisation. However, when observed closely, it is the utility factor itself that checks the disciplinary mechanism. It has been noted that it is not just AoL that utilises the volunteers; even the volunteers utilise the AoL to meet their own needs and purpose. In this regard, many of the reflexive selves stay aware of the disciplinary mechanism. This is ultimately realised in the awareness of the truth, self, or higher consciousness which merges one with the *Advaitic* sense of "oneness" that takes one beyond any limiting factor, which includes not limiting oneself even to the identity of AoL itself. For instance, a thirty-years-old regular practitioner of *Sudarshan Kriya* shared,

> *Spirituality, for me, is beyond any limitations. I practice Sudarshan kriya regularly because it refreshes me and enables me to get rid of toxins, including unwanted thought patterns. Thus, I can live fully in the present and now. But still, I am not a blind follower of AoL or its founder. I do respect him, but I have my own ability to think, and thereby I choose accordingly. I listen to other gurus as well. Better to take what is best and also contribute what is possible. I prefer to stay flexible, yet I see myself as even beyond this 'I,' connected to all, as the unchanging and ever-present consciousness. You know I experience it, and it is beyond expression.*

In this expression of the respondent in the form of the words shared above lies the subtleties of contemporary spirituality. While on the one hand, it symbolises the highly subjective, individualistic, reflexive, and experiential dimension of modern life, on the other hand, the terms/phrases such as "contribute" and "connected to all" also signify altruism, humanism, and universalism. Moreover, presenting oneself beyond the body consciousness[214] as the "unchanging and ever-present consciousness" reflects the *Advaitic* sense of the self and truth. However, there remains the state of "beyond expression" indicating the experiential and the mystical. This is where one can relate to what David Chalmers, an Australian philosopher and a cognitive scientist from New York University, calls "the hard problem of consciousness" (Chalmers, 2007). The hard problem of consciousness is the problem of subjective experience which cannot be merely reduced to the study of the structure and functioning of any observable physical entity (ibid.). It is about the intangible and ineffable conscious experience which escapes objective observation (ibid.). Moreover, people are usually left with no words to express the experience of being in a higher *Advaitic* state of consciousness, which claims to see just oneness. This subjective state of higher consciousness or oneness defies an objective sociological explanation.

Thus, the sociological conundrum lies at the pinnacle of the meeting point of the experiential and the non-expressible; a point in life wherein the whole existence becomes sacred and moves beyond the dichotomies of self and the other, imminent and the transcendent or even the traditional and the modern in the praxis of the now. Thereby, the meeting point or the point of a merge of the modern and the traditional, which

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[214] Interestingly, the present study had also observed a trend in the spirituality-based movements like AoL to relate its discourse with the science of quantum physics to see life beyond the body through the dimension of energy, vibrations (negative and positive) and feelings. See The Secret of Secrets | The Art of Living (accessed 2022).

actually makes a difference, is at the experiential level of the individuals through the spiritual practices imparted by the courses and the overall discourse of AoL. The experiential level provides a space for the defragmented and de-rooted selves of the contemporary era to not only find meaning in life and in their own self but also voluntarily connect and serve as a community based on the experience that helped them to deal effectively with their personal issues. At the highest point of self-realisation, it is about an awareness of the whole of existence in the *Advaitic* sense of oneness or *sat-chit-ananda* (infinite consciousness bliss) wherein one feels the connection with the whole beyond all identities. Thus, the sense of happiness that the discourse of AoL promises and attempts to bring in the life of its practitioners is not just about the happiness they derive from getting rid of their daily concerns but also realising one's own self in the form of the *Advaitic* oneness where there is no I neither the other, just the infinite consciousness bliss; a highly subjective experiential state of thoughtlessness, timelessness, simply being in the 'now.' Thus, in the realm of spirituality, the self itself becomes a reflexive project of becoming and unbecoming until it attains the truth or its true nature or simply the unchanging *Brahman*.

Thus, spirituality redefines the self as well as the individual-society dynamics on the basis of reflexive self-realisation, humanism, altruism, values such as love, a sense of belongingness, caring, sharing, and on a higher level; it is driven by a highly subjective and experiential basis related to higher consciousness. An attempt at objectively understanding this experiential and subjective basis gives rise to the "hard problem of consciousness" (Chalmers, 2007). Thus, spirituality becomes a sociological conundrum, especially when the experiential meets the inexpressible, which takes one beyond the 'social.'

Henceforth, the 'spiritual turn' in modernity plays an essential function as it creates a space for the de-rooted affected by meaninglessness and alienation caused by the overwhelming impact of instrumental rationality, specialisation, pluralism and differentiation on the one hand. On the other hand, it opens up the domain of reflexivity, subjectivity, choice, and freedom for those bogged down by the monotony of institutionalised religious authority. Interestingly, in this regard, though the domain of the subjective majorly drives it, it neither defies the institutionalised aspect nor restricts the relational aspect of life. Instead, it merges the subjective and the altruistic through the experiential basis of life toward well-being for one and all. In this regard, it guides and adds value to the secular socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of life but also faces a representational and identification crisis, especially in conflict with the religious in all of these aspects. Yet, at the highest level of spiritual realisation, the whole existence, including one's body, enters into the domain of the sacred wherein the self itself becomes sacred; the unchanging truth or the God. Here, the realm of spirituality redefines the individual and society dynamics as the individual, after overcoming personal challenges at the experiential level, driven by human values such as sharing, caring, compassion, etc., attempts to serve the society, which shows the possibility of moving beyond all identities, dichotomies, and individualised entities towards a realisation of oneness yet remaining 'relational', institutional, subjective, and even at times inexpressible, leaving the scope for interpretation widely open.

Thereby, the present study invites and keeps the door open for further research.

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Questionnaire

Name:

Sex/Gender:

Age:

Marital Status:

Educational Qualification:

Occupation:

Annual or Monthly Income:

Place of Residence:

Q.1. When and how did you come to know about the Art of Living Foundation (AoLF)?

Q.2. What brought you to Art of Living (AoL)? When and why did you decide to become an AoL member (volunteer/teacher/*swami*/*sadhvi* etc.)?

Q.3. How do you see your life after developing an association with AoL? Please share your experience.

Q.4. Did you experience any kind of changes with regard to how you identify yourself after joining the AoLF? If yes, then what sort of? How would you like to identify yourself now?

Q.5. Did you see any kind of change in terms of how your family, friends and society, in general, see you once you have become a member of AoL? If so, please share a few words about it.

Q.6. Have you been to AoL Bangalore ashram? If so, then please share few words about your ashram experience.

Q.8. What is spirituality? What is the relationship between religion and spirituality?

Q.9. How important is the presence of a *Guru* in one's spiritual journey?

Q.10. Is the spiritual path open to all despite caste, class, religion, gender or nation? Kindly elaborate with examples from your experience in AoLF,

Q.11. Being a woman, how do you see your life in the spiritual path compared to the religious path? (Applicable just for a female respondent)

Q.12. What role does the human body play in the spiritual path? Please elaborate.

Q.13. Being on the spiritual path, how do you see business and politics? Kindly elaborate with regard to the context of AoL (brand) and its leadership.

Q.14. Could you please reflect on spirituality and everyday life? Is there any difference in everyday life of a spiritual seeker than that of a common man who is not into spiritual practices like meditation, *yoga* etc.? If yes, kindly elaborate.

Q.15. Would you like to share any added information or experience? Then, kindly do.

(**Note:** Considering the nature of the subject-matter, the researcher preferred not to strictly stick to the sequence of the questions shared. Rather, maintained flexibility and open-ended approach during the actual offline interview sessions and made the respondents comfortably narrate their AoL experience and stories accordingly, keeping the conversation flow naturally. At times, even more questions added. However, this was not the case while gathering responses through email from around 10-14 respondents).

Appendix II

Figure 2.1. AoL Official Logo
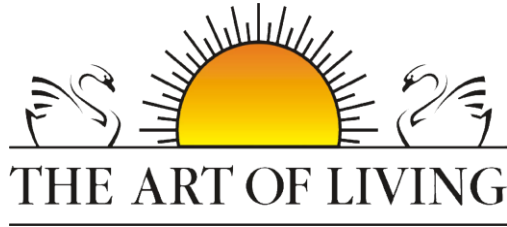
Photo 3.1. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Figure 3.1. Map of Ashram, Source: Maps – Ashrams of India

Photo. 3.2. Guru

Photo 3.3. Vishalakshi Mantap (VM)

Photo 3.4. Annapoorna Kitchen

Photo 3.5. Inside Kitchen

Photo 3.6. Yagnashala Hall

Photo 3.7. Gurukulum Classroom

Photo 4.1. AoL and Politics

Photo 5.1. Happiness Program Session
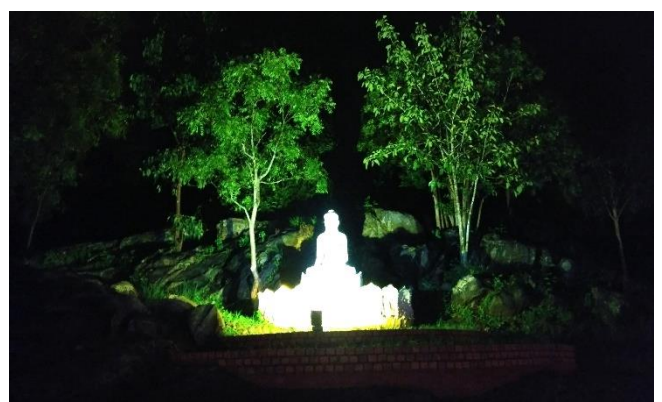

Siliguri

Photo 5.2. Satsang Session VM

Photo 5.3. Satsang Session

Photo 7.1. Symbols on VM pillars

Photo 7.2. Buddha Statue

To Whom It May Concern

This is to bring to your kind notice that the title of the thesis of PhD Scholar **Shomit Chowdhury** bearing roll no. 14PhD/SCG/05 , is **"The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum: A Case Study of *Art of Living Foundation*"**.

However, during the printing of the thesis it was observed that there has been a small typological error in the title on the cover page. The title now is **"The Realm of Spirituality as Sociological Conundrum: A Case Study of the *Art of Living Foundation*"**. The word 'the' has unknowingly been added in the title.

Swati A. Sachdeva 30.11.2022

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