MAIN ISSUE: Inspired by Sri Aurobindo's vision

Religious nationalism and beyond

Sri Aurobindo's political writings have attracted admirers as well as critics. Many seem to be more interested in the use they can put his writings to, than in understanding what he really meant.

At the beginning of February 1910, Sri Aurobindo was the only important leader of the "Extremist" or Nationalist party still active after years of government repression. British officials called him "the most dangerous man in India", and were trying to get rid of him by appealing his acquittal in a capital case, or by prosecuting him for sedition or, if all else failed, by deporting him without trial. Thousands of young men looked to him for direction and inspiration. His articles were read by people in all parts of the country, and commented on abroad. Two weeks later, he left Calcutta and in April sailed secretly to Pondicherry. Cutting off all connections with his party and his newspaper, he devoted himself to yogic sadhana. Aurobindo Ghose the firebrand prophet of freedom was soon forgotten, replaced in public perception by Sri Aurobindo, the prophet of divine life.

Aurobindo's political career lasted just four years, from February 1906 to February 1910. During this period he changed the course of Indian politics. Before he began to publish his views, the Indian National Congress was an annual debating society, controlled by men who believed that a few tepid resolutions were going to sway imperial statesmen in London and Calcutta. By the time he left the field, the ideal of political independence had been hammered into the mind of a generation. Nineteen years later it became the official creed of the Congress. Aurobindo was not alone in bringing about this change. Lokmanya Tilak declared that *swaraj* was his birthright; Bipin Chandra Pal demanded "complete autonomy" from Britain. But no one went as far as Aurobindo in enunciating the legitimacy and necessity of political independence:

Traditionally, the August issue of Auroville Today has one or more topics specifically dedicated to Sri Aurobindo, whose birthday on August 15th coincided with India's Independence Day. In this issue, we publish articles of contemporary interest in the light of Sri Aurobindo and Mother's vision and thought. These are on the topics of nationalism, religions and democracy.

"Political freedom is the life-breath of a nation; to attempt social reform, educational reform, industrial expansion, the moral improvement of the race without aiming first and foremost at political freedom, is the very height of ignorance and futility. . . The primary requisite for national progress, national reform, is the free habit of free and healthy national thought and action which is impossible in a state of servitude."

Aurobindo became convinced that India had to be free while still a student in England. A decade of observing British politics at close range convinced him that his country had little to hope from Parliament. His models of political transformation were the French and American revolutions and the Italian Risorgimento. The language of his political writings echoes Jefferson's and Rousseau's: India based its claim to freedom on "the inalienable right of the nation to independence". His study of classical and European history had shown him that colonial rulers do not surrender their possessions on request. They had to be shown the door. Passive resistance – boycott of the rulers' schools, businesses and courts – was an important instrument in the revolutionary's toolkit; but active resistance, including armed revolt, was usually needed as well. With this in mind he spent four years setting up proto-revolutionary groups before he entered politics. The idea was for them to become a disciplined armed force that eventually would engage in guerrilla warfare.

Aurobindo entered the public political field when he saw that the agitation against the partition of Bengal had gathered enough force to propel Extremist politicians like Tilak and Pal into the leadership of the Congress, transforming that do-nothing body into a centre of anti-British activism. Keeping himself in the background, he wrote articles for Bande Mataram, a newspaper of Calcutta that set a new standard for English-language journalism in India. Most of his pieces highlight the failure of the "mendicant" programme of the then-dominant Moderate party. He also criticised the British government and its leaders, but avoided the stridently xenophobic language of the popular Bengali press. He "based his claim for freedom for India on the inherent right to freedom, not on any charge of misgovernment or oppression", he later wrote. "If he attacked persons even violently, it was for their views or political action, not from any other motive."

Aurobindo believed that India had to be free because Britain was sucking out its life, just as Rome had done to its imperial possessions two thousand years earlier. He was well acquainted with European culture and found little in it to be emulated. A decade before the outbreak of World War I, he prophesised that Europe's greed and competition were pushing it towards destruction. India, on the other hand, though fallen into weakness, possessed things that had to be preserved: arts, languages, literatures, philosophies, religions and, most important, a system of spiritual discipline that allowed men and women to realise the truths behind the philosophies and religions.

Aurobindo began the practice of yoga in 1905, not as a means of escaping from life and action, but as a way of getting the strength he needed to succeed in his political mission. In 1908, a temporary guru gave him an opening into the experience of the inner Self. This marked a major turning point in his life. From this point on his outlook was fundamentally spiritual even when he was engaged in political work. He began to regard himself as an instrument in the hands of the Divine and encouraged others to do the same: "Have you got a real faith?" he asked at a political rally in 1908. "Or is it merely a political aspiration? Is it merely a larger kind of selfishness?" The only "political creed" that could liberate India was one that came from a "higher source". Those who lived this creed felt that they were "instruments of God to save the light, to save the spirit of India from lasting obscuration and abasement".

Aurobindo called this creed the "religion of nationalism". This is the most misunderstood term in his political vocabulary. The passage in which he introduced this idea has been quoted again and again, by his admirers as well as his detractors: "Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God." This, say his admirers, shows that Aurobindo sought his inspiration in India's ancient religious tradition, *sanatana dharma*. The same passage, say his critics, shows that he was trying to turn the national movement into a movement of Hindu revival, with the inevitable consequence that India's Muslims became antagonised and partition became inevitable. As a historian I feel obliged to show the falsity of both these readings. To begin with, Aurobindo did not connect his "religion of nationalism" with Hinduism. Rather it was a movement in which "the name of the motherland was invested with divine sacredness and her service espoused with religious fervour and enthusiasm". It was the British who "menaced the insurgent religion of patriotism" by raising Muslim prejudices against what they

"declared to be an essentially Hindu movement". In a speech of 1909, delivered at the invitation of a Hindu group in Uttarpara, he did connect his religion of nationalism with the *sanatana dharma*; but he made it clear that he did not mean by this any sectarian religion, but the "eternal religion" that underlay all limited systems of belief. "A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can only live for a limited time and a limited purpose." The eternal religion would live forever because it was based on the realisation that God "is in all men and all things".

In contemporary India, political parties with different programmes claim to be inspired by Sri Aurobindo. One of them places out-of-context quotations from his works in its manifesto; another says it will put his ideals into practice once it comes to power. A religio-political pressure group features him prominently on its website, while a journalist asserts that he "was second to none" in promoting religion-tainted politics. None of these

exploiters or critics of his legacy show much familiarity with his works.

The journalist for example draws most of his quotations from edited compilations. Mining them for texts that seem to support his notion that Aurobindo was responsible for the rise of communalism, he concludes with this anachronistic howler: "The Maharshi [Aurobindo] has turned into a pamphleteer of the Hindu rashtra concept without being conscious of it." It certainly is regrettable that proponents of a Hindu theocratic state should appropriate Aurobindo's works – particularly since he explicitly stated that he was opposed to the very idea. "We do not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions", he wrote in 1909. "Under modern conditions India can only exist as a whole." It is equally regrettable that opponents of Hindu nationalism should combine out-of-context snippets from Aurobindo's works in a distorted presentation that excludes key portions of his thought.

Frontpage of the magazine Bande Mataram, carrying a picture of Sri Aurobindo made in September 1907, just after his acquittal in the Bande Mataram Sedition Case.

PHOTO COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM ARCHIVES

Sri Aurobindo on Islam and other religions

"A great thing would be done if all these God-visions could embrace and cast themselves into each other; but intellectual dogma and cult egoism stand in the way."

The Mogul empire was a great and magnificent construction and an immense amount of political genius and talent was employed in its creation and maintenance. It was as splendid, powerful and beneficent and, it may be added, in spite of Aurangzeb's fanatical zeal, infinitely more liberal and tolerant in religion than any mediaeval or contemporary European kingdom or empire and India under its rule stood high in military and political strength, economic opulence and the brilliance of its art and culture.

The Renaissance in India, p.443)

The Rajputs maintained their independence until the time of Akbar and his successors and it was in the end partly with the aid of Rajput princes acting as their generals and ministers that the Moguls completed their sway over the east and the south. And this was again possible because a fact too often forgotten – the Mussulman domination ceased very rapidly to be a foreign rule. The vast mass of the Mussulmans in the country were and are Indians by race, only a very small admixture of Pathan, Turkish and Mogul blood took place, and even the foreign kings and nobles became almost immediately wholly Indian in mind, life and interest.

(The Renaissance in India, p.441)

[We] do not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions. Hindu nationalism had a meaning in the time of Shivaji and Ramdas, when the object of national revival was to overthrow a Mahomedan domination which, once tending to Indian unity and toleration, had become oppressive and disruptive. . . . But under modern conditions India can only exist as a whole.

(Karmayogin, 1997 edition, p.304)

…a word too may be said about Indo-Muslim architecture. I am not concerned to defend any claim for the purely indigenous origin of its features. It seems to me that here the Indian mind has taken in much from the Arab and Persian imagination and in certain mosques and tombs I seem to find an impress of the robust and bold Afghan and Moghul temperament.; but it remains clear enough that it is still on the whole a typically Indian creation with the peculiar Indian gift. The richness of

PHOTO OLIVIER BAROT
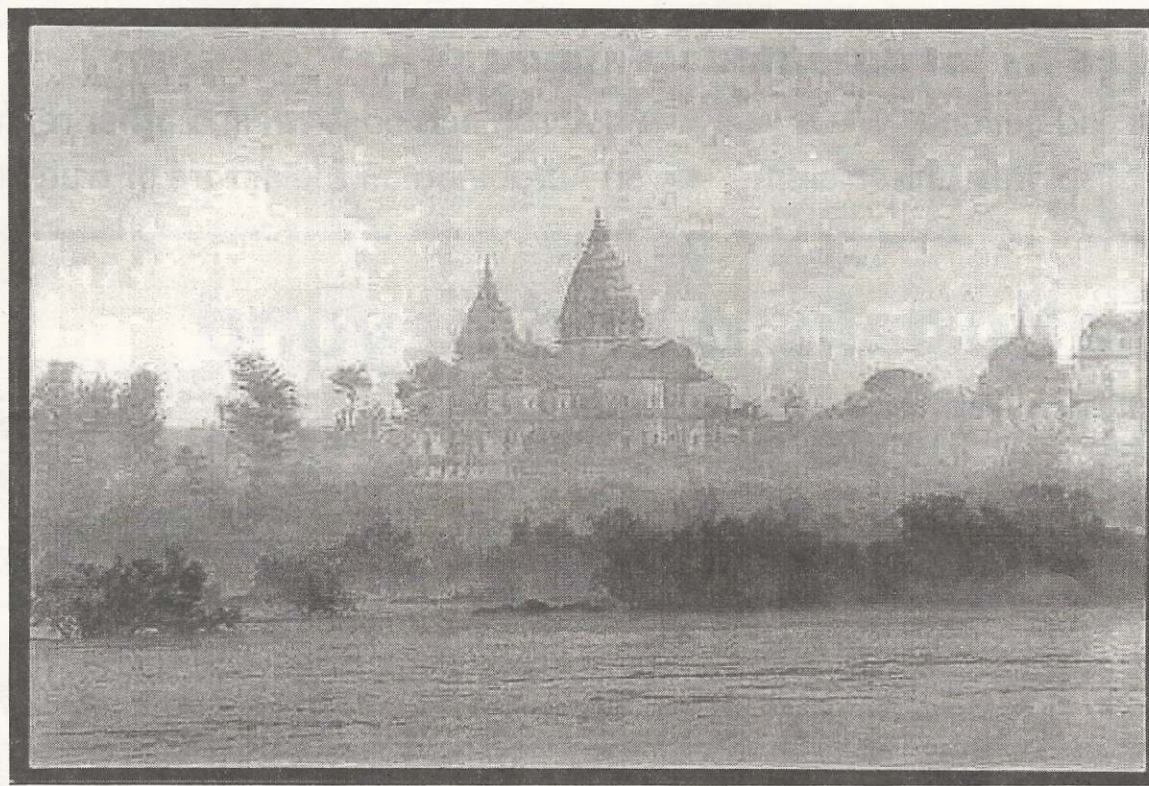
Temples in Orchha, Madhya Pradesh, built during the Bundela dynasty in an attempt to create a synthesis between Hindu and Muslim cultures.

decorative skill and imagination has been turned to the uses of another style, but it is the same skill which we find in the northern Hindu temples, and in the ground we see, however toned down, something sometimes of the old epic mass and power, but more often that lyric grace which we see developing before the Mahomedan advent in the indigenous sculpture.

(The Renaissance in India, p.282)

Mahomed's mission was necessary, else we might have ended by thinking, in the exaggeration of our efforts at self-purification, that earth was meant only for the monk and the city created as a vestibule for the desert.

(Essays Divine and Human, p.444)

It became . . . an established rule for the learner to observe strict reserve as to the inner experiences of Yoga and for the developed Yogin as far as possible to conceal himself. This has not prevented treatises and manuals from being published dealing with the physical or with the moral and intellectual sides of Yoga. Nor has it prevented great spirits who have gained their Yoga not by the ordinary careful and scientific methods but by their own strength and the special grace of God, from revealing

themselves and their spiritual knowledge to mankind and in their intense love for humanity imparting something of their power to the world. Such were Buddha, Christ, Mahomed, Chaitanya, such have been Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

(Essays in Philosophy and Yoga, p.13-14)

Each religion has helped mankind. Paganism increased in man the light of beauty, the largeness and height of his life, his aim at a many-sided perfection; Christianity gave him some vision of divine love and charity; Buddhism has shown him a noble way to be wiser, gentler, purer; Judaism and Islam how to be religiously faithful in action and zealously devoted to God; Hinduism has opened to him the largest and profoundest spiritual possibilities. A great thing would be done if all these God-visions could embrace and cast themselves into each other; but intellectual dogma and cult egoism stand in the way.

(Essays in Philosophy and Yoga, p.211)

All fanaticism is false, because it is a contradiction of the very nature of God and of Truth. Truth cannot be shut up in a single book, Bible or

Veda or Koran, or in a single religion. The Divine Being is eternal and universal and infinite and cannot be the sole property of the Mussulmans or of the Semitic religions only, – those that happened to be in a line from the Bible and to have Jewish or Arabian prophets for their founders. Hindus and Confucians and Taoists and all others have as much right to enter into relation with God and find the Truth in their own way. All religions have some truth in them, but none has the whole truth; all are created in time and finally decline and perish. Mahomed himself never pretended that the Koran was the last message of God and there would be no other. God and Truth outlast these religions and manifest themselves anew in whatever way or form the Divine Wisdom chooses.

(On Himself, p.483.)

. . . Nor does spirituality mean the moulding of the whole type of the national being to suit the limited dogmas, forms, tenets of a particular religion, as was often enough attempted by the old societies, an idea which still persists in many minds by the power of old mental habit and association; clearly such an attempt would be impossible,

even if it were desirable, in a country full of the most diverse religious opinions and harbouring too three such distinct general forms as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, to say nothing of the numerous special forms to which each of these has given birth. Spirituality is much wider than any particular religion, and in the larger ideas of it that are now coming on us even the greatest religion becomes no more than a broad sect or branch of the one universal religion, by which we shall understand in the future man's seeking for the eternal, the divine, the greater self, the source of unity and his attempt to arrive at some equation, some increasing approximation of the values of human life with the eternal and the divine values.

(The Renaissance in India, p.33.)

If we are to make our society perfect and the nation is to live again, then we must revert to the earlier and fuller truth. We must not make life a waiting for renunciation, but renunciation a preparation for life; instead of running from God in the town to God in the forest, we must rather plunge into the mountain solitude in our own souls for knowledge & joy & spiritual energy to sustain any part that may be given to us by the master of the Lila. If we get that strength, any society we build up must be full of the instinct of immortal life and move inevitably towards perfection. As to the precise way in which society will be reconstructed, we have hardly yet knowledge enough to solve the problem. We ought to know before we act, but we are rather eager to act violently in the light of any dim ray of knowledge that may surprise our unreflecting intellects, and although God often uses our haste for great and beneficial purposes, yet that way of doing things is not the best either for a man or a nation. One thing seems to me clear that the future will deny that principle of individual selfishness and collective self-interest on which European society has hitherto been based and our renovated systems will be based on the renunciation of individual selfishness and the organisation of brotherhood, – principles common to Christianity, Mahomedanism and Hinduism.

(Essays Divine and Human, p. 58.)

Religious nationalism and beyond

On his seventy-fifth birthday, Sri Aurobindo sketched the five "world-movements" he had hoped to see fulfilled in his lifetime. During his youth, they had seemed to be "impracticable dreams". Now they were "on their way to achievement". The first of these dreams was "a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India". This (he was speaking on 15 August 1947) was now a reality. But his hopes for a more equitable international order extended beyond the borders of his own country. He dreamed also of "the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia", and of "a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind". His nationalism, even while he was active in Indian politics, was not coloured by that smug self-flattery that characterises most modern

"patriotism". He noted as early as 1919 that Indians had to have "the courage to defend our culture against ignorant occidental criticism and to maintain it against the gigantic modern pressure", but that they also had to have the "courage to admit not from any European standpoint but from our own outlook the errors of our culture". Pride in the accomplishments of one's motherland should not take the form of an "unthinking cultural Chauvinism which holds that whatever we have is good for us because it is Indian or even that whatever is in India is best, because it is the creation of the Rishis". What India needed was not an isolated self-glorification, but "a unity with the rest of mankind, in which we shall maintain our spiritual and our outer independence". He stressed this point in an interview of 1915: "We Indians should begin to think seriously what part Indian

thought, Indian intellect, Indian nationhood, Indian spirituality, Indian culture have to fulfil in the general life of humanity. That humanity is bound to grow increasingly one. We must necessarily be in it and of it. Not a spirit of aloofness or of jealous self-defence, but of generous emulation and brotherhood with all men and all nations, justified by a sense of conscious strength, a great destiny, a large place in the human future – this should be the Indian spirit."

Sri Aurobindo's fourth and fifth dreams stretched beyond national and international politics into the realms of cultural and spiritual development. During the national movement he often said that one of the reasons India had to be free was to enable it to transmit its literary, artistic, and spiritual gifts to the rest of the world. This, he was happy to report in 1947, was happening more

and more. "Amid the disasters of the time more and more eyes are turning towards [India] with hope", resorting not only "to her teachings," but to her "psychic and spiritual practice" as well. His final dream was of another order: "a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin the solution of the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society". It was to help fulfil this visionary dream that he retired from politics in February 1910.

Peter Heehs

This article first appeared, in a slightly different form, in Life Positive Plus (April-June 2004). Reproduced with the kind permission of the editors of Life Positive Plus.

footnotes

1 Bande Mataram (2002 edition) 266.
2 On Himself (1972 edition) 45.
3 On Himself 44.
4 Bande Mataram 819-20.
5 Bande Mataram 818.
6 Bande Mataram 220.
7 Karmayogin (1997 edition) 11.
8 Jyotirmaya Sharma, Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism (New Delhi: Viking, 2003), 69.
9 Ibid.
10 Karmayogin 304.
11 On Himself 404-5.
12 The Renaissance in India (1997 edition), 89.
13 The Renaissance in India 75.
14 The Renaissance in India 93.
15 The Hindu, 4 January 1914.
16 On Himself, 406.

Aurore takes home the prestigious Ashden Award for sustainable energy

Aurore wins the £30,000 Ashden Award for Enterprise for its triumph in acting as a catalyst for small-scale solar businesses across India. In the words of one of the judges: "These are the guys who make solar happen."

PHOTO COURTESY ASHDEN AWARDS

HRH The Prince of Wales congratulates Hemant Lamba

London – 24 June 2004
The international winners of the prestigious Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy 2004 were announced at the Ashden annual awards ceremony in London. The Awards, hosted by John Humphrys, saw finalists gather at the Royal Geographical Society, London with guest speakers Sir David Attenborough, Jonathon Porritt, chair of the UK government's Sustainable Development Commission, and Andrew Simms, Policy Director of the New Economics Foundation. Sir David Attenborough, who presented the prizes, commented: "I have found this evening both humbling and inspirational. We have much to learn from these remarkable award winners. I would like to thank the Ashden Awards for bringing our attention to this groundbreaking work."

The Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy, now in their fourth year, reward inspirational and innovative renewable energy projects which both provide social and economic benefits to local communities and contribute towards protecting the environment by curbing deforestation and reducing our dependence on fossil fuels – thereby helping tackle climate change.

Three Awards were given in recognition of the way in which renewable energy has been used to improve access to food and to light, and to promote enterprise. In addition, a Fourth Award, Climate Care, was given to a project with the potential to play a significant role in offsetting the carbon emissions which drive climate change.

The finalists were also personally congratulated by HRH The Prince of Wales at a separate ceremony.

Sir David Attenborough congratulates Hemant

Auroville Today reported on Aurore and its activities in its issues of September 2001 # 152, December 2002 # 167, and May 2004 #184.

The typical electricity scenario in India is that of a deficient supply leading to frequent power-cuts. Those who can afford to do so purchase diesel or petrol-powered generators to provide back-up power; the poor go for cheaper options (which are, relatively, still expensive: many poor families spend up to 30% of their gross income on energy) or simply endure the power – cuts and the consequences they have in terms of reduced employment and educational opportunities.

Traditionally, poverty-alleviation has been linked to schemes offering food, clothing and shelter. There is a growing understanding, however, that poverty can also be alleviated or even eradicated by providing better and more dependable energy, specifically energy provided from renewable sources. Renewable energy (RE) systems in India tend to be expensive, not widely available and, where basic maintenance is neglected, often unreliable. Nevertheless, a growing number of people are convinced that renewable energy is the way not only for the future but also for the present: that not only is it by far the best option environmentally, but also that it can be a powerful tool for social uplift if creative ways can be found to provide it reliably and relatively cheaply to disadvantaged sectors of the population. As RE systems tend to be gender-friendly – as easy to operate by women as by men – they also contribute to female empowerment.

Aurore was founded in 1998. The promoters passionately believe that renewable energy represents the future. Over the years the team and its collaborators came to understand that one of the best ways of disseminating RE more widely was for them to become an Energy Service Provider which promotes and networks with locally-based RE enterprises. Some of the advantages of local energy production over traditional centralized power generation is that it provides employment to people from the local community while being sensitive to their specific needs for power.

Aurore sees itself as the hub of a networked organization with its various partners as the nodes. At present it has four partners and it has executed, or assisted in the execution of, RE projects in twelve Indian States. Specifically, Aurore has developed expertise in procuring RE systems and optimizing their integration, promoting and incubating new enterprises and obtaining subsidies, credit and soft loans for end-users at both micro-credit and institutional levels.

The projects it has been involved with, either directly or in a support capacity, include the installation of over 1,025 solar PV pumping systems in 11 states of India working with network partners Sahjeevan and SELCO and suppliers like Tata-BP Solar and BHEL; project coordination for installation of 8,700 solar home systems; the distribution of 6,000 solar lanterns in Ladakh for

Tata-BP Solar, a leading solar company in India; and the hiring out of solar-powered lanterns to small trades people with SunMin, a enterprise promoted on Chennai beach. The latter is a good example of how an RE project can generate both profit and employment. The trades people benefit because they pay less for their power now, because it is more reliable and the better quality of light provided attracts more customers, while the hiring out and maintenance of the lanterns generates employment for five youngsters who are also stake-holders in the company.

Another project where an innovative approach has brought the benefits of RE systems to the disadvantaged is based in rural Gujarat. Here people living on scattered communities have to pay up to Rs150 a month just to obtain drinking water, while the local farmers were barely able to eke out a living. Working with a local NGO Sahjeevan, Aurore helped to provide technical and management support obtain the financing to install solar PV street lights, home-lighting kits and pumps. The solar pumps were hired out to the farmers at less than 30% of the annual cost they incurred for running their diesel pump-sets. The result is that the community now has an assured supply of good drinking water, small farming has become viable again because of the saving in costs, and better home lighting has resulted in extended working hours leading to a richer cultural life and increased income opportunities.

"It's clear that India and the world need to take big steps to effect a radical change in energy use," remarks Hemant Lamba, the executive of Aurore. "Our way of contributing to this is by taking many small steps-like the setting up local energy enterprises – which will increase the penetration of RE in India and prepare it for the big change. After only six years, we are already seeing the fruits of such an approach."

Hemant moved to Auroville in 1991 from Delhi. He had completed graduate studies in Economics and Entrepreneurship and Small Business from Delhi University, but what drew him to the community was the wish to "participate in an adventure." In those days he knew little about renewable energy, but the first enterprise he worked with in the community was designing and assembling RE system components.

"The biggest motivation for me to get involved in promoting renewable energy is not only just good ecological and scientific reasons for doing so but that there are deep spiritual reasons for changing our energy use. The Mother pointed out that the present form of energy, which is drawn from beneath the Earth, is not an elevated form of energy, and that the future lies in drawing energy from above. This remains my guiding belief."

Alan

Sri Aurobindo's vision of spiritual universalism

If India is to seek a resurgence of its spiritual values and play a leading role in manifesting a divine life on earth, it must preserve the plurality of its spiritual traditions that by and large have thrived in harmony.

India, as a geographical country and as an ideological concept, has been defined and redefined over millennia by its inhabitants, by foreigners, and by shifting political borders. Home to one of the most ancient civilizations of the world, India is characterized by the antiquity, the continuity and the diversity of her cultures. Hinduism, which is etymologically identified with the country, is its dominant religion, and has its roots in the ancient Vedic civilization, is often evoked to give Indians a national identity. However, the task of satisfactorily establishing a common Indian identity, acceptable to all, has always proved to be Herculean given the bewildering profusion of India's regional groups with their differing languages, religions, spiritual traditions, cultural practices and economic levels.

I study Sri Aurobindo's thought in the context of his own spiritual development from an active political writer to a yogi who both envisioned and embodied a profound transformation for humankind. Writing as he did, in the wake of the Bengal nationalist and religious revival movements of the late 19the century, Sri Aurobindo, more than any other modern thinker, has passionately defined India in spiritual terms and eloquently described the conditions of its resurgence. Unfortunately, in contemporary times, Sri Aurobindo's writings on the resurgence of India have been compartmentalized and appropriated by religious fundamentalists. This in turn has elicited even greater criticism by secular and Marxist writers. Sri Aurobindo's singular definition of *sanatana dharma* and his privileging of India as "the spiritual leader of humanity" are not ethnocentric, as assumed by many. Such concepts need to be studied in the complete context of Sri Aurobindo's vision for a supramentalized world. Sri Aurobin-do's work, I believe, cannot be fully grasped by the divisive consciousness of the mind but can only be understood and progressively embodied in the light of a higher and more integral consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo's visionary legacy to India and the world is in danger of being jeopardized by opposing groups who emphasize only sections of his work to serve their own ends. This can only be remedied by putting into practice, the discipline of Integral Yoga and recognizing how in a supramental vision of the world, the spiritual greatness of India can blossom in a pluralist and intercultural framework where all individuals, cultures and races can freely evolve at their own pace and in accordance with their nature.

The need for religions

Before we can speak of going beyond creeds and religions, we need to understand the crucial role religion has played and still plays in the evolution of the human consciousness. Documenting the eternal search of the human being for the Divine, Sri Aurobindo points out that "while it is difficult for man to believe in something unseen within himself, it is easy for him to believe in something which he can image as extraneous to himself. The spiritual progress of most human beings demands an extraneous support, an object of faith outside us"(1). All religions and creeds of the world are born form this intense inner need of the human being in her precipitous climb toward the Godhead. They are then collectively shaped into rites, rituals and creeds by the needs of time and of the society. Consequently, all religions are marked by an eternal aspect and a temporal aspect. The eternal aspect of a religion embodies the aspiration of the individual and represents a living universal Truth of the Divine, while the

temporal aspect formalizes the collective aspiration of a society by formulating codes and conducts, and rites and rituals of worship. The eternal or universal aspect of a religion comprises the mystical or psycho-spiritual experiences of the individual seeker. The temporal aspect of a religion results in a social organization – a practical, ethical, and legal framework – for its practitioners.

Adhyatma-vidya (inner science) in Indic religions

The proportion between the eternal aspect and the temporal aspect of a religion varies in different religions and within creeds of the same religion. In a classification I find useful in the study of religion, Rajiv Malhotra, a student of Indology, points out that certain religions, namely the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, have "historicized divine intervention and viewed it as the primary mode of knowing about spiritual truth"(2). Thus, in these religions, the religious text and the utterances of the prophet or the founder of the religions have sole and absolute spiritual authority. The mystical aspects of these religions that value experience over historical narratives survive, but are often marginalized and persecuted. On the other hand, certain other religions, namely the various diverse creeds and spiritual traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, privileges *adhyatma-vidya* (inner science or esoteric processes) for arriving at universal spiritual truths. These religions, says Malhotra, are ahistorical for, while they acknowledge the authority of certain religious texts or the utterances of certain historical figures, they do not proclaim that a historic text or a historic prophet is the sole way of arriving at spiritual truth. The religious texts themselves are open to multiple interpretations. Historic religions give more value to "insight received through esoteric methodologies of transformation of consciousness"(3). Upholding this, Peter Heehs, in his anthology of Indian religions, says that most indigenous spiritual traditions of India see the "ulti-

mate goal of spiritual practice as a subjective or experiential state, to be obtained through individual effort or devotion"(4). Thus when we speak of going beyond creedal religions, we essentially speak of breaking free from the temporal norms and holds of religion and to be subjectively guided by the eternal and universal Spirit within the individual. And in this context, I see Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, validating as it does individual experience, as the consummating glory of a long, unbroken spiritual tradition of *adhyatma-vidya* in India.

The plurality of India

India deserves special attention in our study for it is the only country that has emphasized on *adhyatma-vidya* as a means to arrive at spiritual truth. Perhaps because it has kept alive in a continuous tradition the subjective psycho-spiritual aspect of religion, India has been regarded by both native and foreign scholars as being pre-eminently spiritual.

The interior of the Moti Masjid or Pearl Mosque at Agra with its lofty arches, 17th century.

Because Sri Aurobindo and The Mother believed India to be guided by a national-soul that was "the living energy of a great spiritual conception," they chose it as the ground for their work in manifesting the new, evolutionary principle of Supermind on earth(5). I also believe that the unique social and religious characteristics of India hold a clue to the Supramental manifestation that Sri Aurobindo speaks about.

The trend of *adhyatma-vidya* dates back, estimating conservatively, to the Vedic civilization of 3,000 BCE. Says Sri Aurobindo, "the sages of the Veda and Vedantata relied entirely upon intuition and spiritual experience"(6). Later, "the age of intuitive knowledge, represented by the early Vedantic thinking of the Upanishads, had to give place to the age of rational knowledge; inspired Scripture made room for metaphysical philosophy, even as afterwards metaphysical philosophy had to give place to experimental Science"(7). Also over the years, Vedic-Vedantic spirituality got codified into religious edicts. But even so, in most spiritual

traditions derived from the Vedas, a form of *adhyatma-vidya* remained. It is this reliance on experience that has made the Indian mind extremely catholic and receptive to foreign ideas. The affirmation of a spiritual truth is based not on an outer religious construct or reasoning of the mind, but on insights and the inner experience. It is necessary to emphasize on this point for what India exhibits in terms of receptivity and acceptance of other forms of worship goes beyond religious tolerance. Tolerance of other religions is a mental concept, where the mind, rationally and ethically accepts the validity of other concepts. But in India, particularly in Hinduism(8), the concept of a single Divine Power expressed in innumerable forms was an intuitive insight and not a mental construct. Generally speaking, Hinduism believes that while the Godhead can be experienced in many different ways, it cannot be rigidly defined in verbal terms. Thus, Hinduism encompasses a bewildering array of opposing doctrines, cults, rites and rituals, and Hindus distinguish themselves from other religions (or even from other cults within Hinduism) on the basis of ritualistic practices rather than on the basis of doctrinal beliefs.

This plurality of spiritual traditions is also matched by the diversity of India, geographically (by its varied climatic zones), demographically (by the mix of the races of its peoples), and historically (by its acceptance of different cultures). India is characterized by a diversity that is perhaps unsurpassed by any other country.
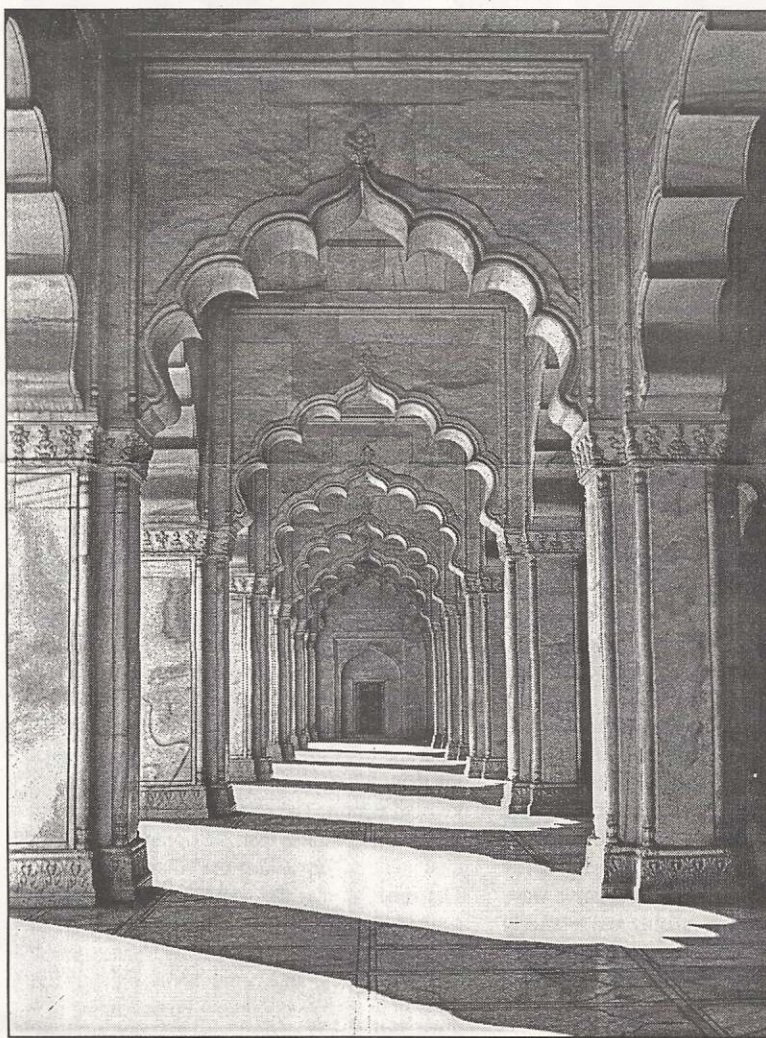
Later, India was influenced by the Mogul culture for several centuries following the stages spelled out by Toynbee of recoil, acceptance and synthesis. The British colonization brought rational, scientific approach of the West to modernize India, a process that is still continuing.

In short, because of all these conquests, trade and transmission of ideas, today, there is "hardly a major school of thought in the world with which Indian thought has not entered into a dialogue at one time or the other, directly or indirectly"(9). It is a sad fact that many glorify their Vedic heritage and believe that the purity of their ancient values has been sullied by successive invasions of their civilization, first by the Muslims and later by the Europeans. Such a view of India is simplistic. It ignores the facts that Buddhism was a tour de force in the subcontinent for 1,600 years and that Islam spread primarily not by the power of the sword, but by the greater spiritual power of the Sufi saints. A study of India's religious history shows that India's philosophy has always been enriched through dialogue and assimilation of the major religions and spiritual traditions of the world. Jainism and Buddhism, which share certain similar philosophical concepts, arose partly in revolt to the Vedic orthodoxy. At the beginning of the common era, the philosophical schools of Vedic Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism all had a contemporaneous origin. Consequently, metaphysical formulations of the Hindu schools of Sankhya and Yoga are found in Jaina and Buddhist texts, and, Jainism particularly bears a striking resemblance to Sankhya. In a later period, Mahayana Buddhism in India is believed to have come into being due to the religious influence of Persia. And, from circa 500 CE, the devotional aspect in Mahayana Buddhism and the devotional Hindu cult of the Puranas (Bhagavatas) seem to have mutually influenced each other. Similarly Vajrayana Buddhism or Tantric

Buddhism shows remarkable similarities with the Hindu tantric traditions. In its heydays from 800-1300 CE, Tantrism also shaped Jain rituals to a certain extent. Advaita Vedanta that arose in 700 CE owes a great deal to the Madyamika and Vijnanavada Buddhism. Later, in circa 850 CE, non-dual Shaivism arose in Kashmir due to the influence of Mahayana Buddhism and the Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya in that region. With the Muslim conquests leading to the establishment of a Muslim kingdom in the thirteenth century, Islam came to India, primarily in the form of Sufism – a mystical Islamic tradition that was influenced by the monistic disciplines of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta.

In the period from 10th to the 17th century, there developed and flourished along with Sufism, important mystic regional tantric traditions, namely the Shaiva siddhas of Tamil Nadu, the Nath yogis of Maharashtra, the Vaishnava sahajiyas and the bauls of Bengal. As all these traditions, including other contemporaneous traditions such as Vajrayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, gave primary importance to psycho-spiritual experiences and to union with the godhead within, they were open to exchanging knowledge and learning from one another. In the same token, the Bhakti movement from the sixth century onwards, regardless of religious or regional variances, shows certain universal aspects that span different traditions. Sikhism has its roots in the Bhakti movement and its holy book, the Adi Granth contains songs from many Sufi saints. Evaluating India's social and religious history, somewhat hyperbolically, E.P. Thompson writes, "All the convergent influences of the world run through this (Indian) society…there is not a thought that is being thought in the West or East that is not active in some Indian mind"(10). The deeper reason for this social and religious pluralism of India perhaps lies in the fact that the Divine, as described by Sri Aurobindo, has infinite potentiality and thus manifests itself in infinite forms, each of which, through the process of evolution, try to express their essential Divine character. Says Sri Aurobindo, "This mutuality founded in unity is the whole secret of the divine existence in its perfect manifestation; it must be the basis of anything to which we can give the name of a divine life"(11). Also, I believe that India's rich and diverse spiritual traditions each show a path to the Godhead and as Sri Aurobindo says, in Integral Yoga, we must, in essence, take up all these paths, to know the Divine integrally. Thus if India is to seek a resurgence of its spiritual values and play a leading role in manifesting a divine life on earth, it must preserve the plurality of its spiritual traditions that by and large have thrived in harmony.

Bindu

Bibliography:

1.) The Synthesis of Yoga. 1972: pg.64; 2.) Untitled essay on religions received over e-mail; 3.) Ibid; 4.) Indian Religions: The spiritual Traditions of South Asia. 2002: pg.4; 5.) Social scientists would undoubtedly see Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's statements as "truth-claims." But I accept their statements to be facts; 6.) Life Divine (LD). 1972: pg.69; 7.) Ibid. pg.68; 8.) The term "Hinduism" is controversial. It has been deconstructed by social scientists as being a term imposed by orientalists. The term however has wide acceptance in referring to a group of beliefs and practices that originated and are widely practiced in India. The Vedas are generally claimed as the fount of Hinduism though in reality most Hindu practices and beliefs evolved centuries after the Vedic era; 9.) Singhal, D.: India and World Civilization. 1972: pg.xvi;10.) qtd. In India: pg.8; 11.) LD: pg. 372

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Sri Aurobindo on the nature of true democracy

There are two striking examples of democracy in its pure form: that of ancient India, which streamed from the intuitive plane and originated from the Rig Veda; and that of Pericles' Athens, which emanated from the sattvic plane of clear reason. The following essay deals first with the Indian and then with the Western development of democracy.

Sri Aurobindo saw history as unfolding cycles. The earliest age, religious-spiritual, was essentially symbolic, imaginative and intuitive. God, the deities and other numinous principles were experienced as omnipresent; the institutions, religious or social, were symbols of this mode of consciousness to which ethical, psychological and economic factors were subordinated. The symbolic age was succeeded by the typal, a fixed though not yet rigid social order. Predominantly psychological and ethical, it nurtured great social ideals; the ideal of social honour remains its main legacy. The conventional age followed, based upon unquestionable authorities and hierarchies. The interdependence between the ethical and social functions vanished, being replaced by order of birth and heredity, determining the function, family customs and rituals. Thus, the caste system was born.

Ancient India considered individuals not as social, but as spiritual beings undergoing an evolutionary process. This is the key to that dharma-based society, for which its unique form of democracy streamed from the high planes of the intuitive mind. The symbolic age corresponded to that of the Vedas. Its fourfold order of society, *caturvarnya*, was comprised of the head (the *brahmana*, being of knowledge and spirituality), the arms (the *ksatriya*, being of honour and power), the thighs (the *vaisya*, being of trade and production) and the feet (the *sudra*, being of dedication and service). They constituted the four limbs of the *virat purusa* or *purusasukta*, the Rig Veda's Cosmic Being.

The ethical age that followed corresponded to that of the Upanishads. An age of bold seeking, it gave birth to grand philosophical systems and versatile literature, marking the inception of art as well as science. Complex social systems, large kingdoms and empires were its feature. No longer reserved for initiates, the quest for the One in its myriad of aspects took the popular form of the Divine dwelling in the secret heart of every being, *hradye guhayam*. Even outcasts had saints revered by all.

Society as quest for self-perfection

The evolutionary principle of the *sanatana dharma* fashioned the whole Indian civilisation for two millennia. Polity and society, art and philosophy, science and mathematics, surgery and astronomy, economics and the military rule, all fields of knowledge and investigation, all activities and aspects of life revolved around the *dharma* or law of ideal living – embracing yet going beyond all religions. The rishis translated the sacrosanct *dharma* into *shastras* – authoritative codes encompassing the whole of life, determining both the highest order of life and particulars with the same care. The law and custom of society were thus sanctioned by the rishis and the gods. Belonging to any of the *varnas*, the rishi or Vedic seer was often the advisor and preceptor of the king. The monarch and emperor, the people, the larger and lesser polities were all bound to maintain the *dharma*, preserving both the right law of human existence and the universal one. The aim of life was the pursuit of perfection, intellectual and physical, ethical and aesthetic, empirical and spiritual, social and political. The broad lines were universal but each human conglomerate as well as each individual was considered to have a nature and a law, a *svabhava* and a *svadharma* of its own, to which corresponded detailed rules, as outlined in the *shastras*, leading to perfection via the various disciplines.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, one canon of the Upanishadic age, the system of *caturvarnya* corresponded to a divine power. The four *varnas*, each endowed with its own ethical discipline or *svadharma*, determined the social functions on the basis of one's nature (*svabhava*), temperament and inner predisposition (*adhikara*). The three gunas: *sattva* (clarity); *rajas* (dynamism); *tamas* (inertia) are the primal qualities of being. Not only society was to be constituted by all the four types, but individual perfection demanded integration of each of the four *varnas*. This was intended to be a process of self-development within one's single soul; the predominant *varna* leading the others. The hereditary principle was recognized, but character and capacity were the real basis of social organisation. All action was determined from within; if this was in harmony with the truth of one's being, *svadharma*, to serve society was a means to attain to self-perfection, turning life into a sacrifice of works and worshipping the Divine with all of one's inner and outer activities. Society provided the framework for one's integral fulfillment and was instrumental to attaining *moksha*: liberation in life and serving one's fellow beings. This was the one aim and foundation of society, its *dharma*. The aim was the same regardless of one's *varna* or *ashrama* (period of life): *brahmacarya* (student), *grahastha* (householder), *vanaprasta* (forest-dweller), *sannyasa* (wandering ascetic or recluse). By embracing the *dharma* of one's social type the individual also surrendered to the collective self. Transcending even the supreme social law of the *sanatana dharma*, he grew into the Spirit's freedom, the ultimate *dharma*.

The binding role of Dharma in self-governed polities

Ancient India was the repository of the highest form of democracy: the Sacred determined the political and social order. The Vedic age saw the people (*visah*) sitting in urban councils, empowered to impose their will even on the monarch. This continued in successive ages, down to the time of the larger kingdoms and empires. *Dharma* commanded respect for the autonomy and self-determination of the villages, city-states, republics and constitutional kingdoms; a true unity in diversity of a multitude of ethnicities and people. The villages and townships were neither mere geographical units nor conglomerates for electoral, administrative or other purposes, but real communities functioning on their own power and will, constituting the most stable foundation of the collective being.

The villages were governed by their elected panchayats and officers. Self-sufficient, they were autonomous, self-governing units managing their own education, tribunals, police, economic and other needs. Thus were the townships ruled by their own assemblies and committees by the force of an elective system, which included voting so as to register the common will of the people. Metropolitan governments administered police and the magistrature, public works, registration, collection of municipal taxes, trade and industry, the management of sacred and public places and so on. The villages and townships sent their representatives to the kingdom's general assembly. The village communities were like small village republics and the townships, larger urban republics. The guild governments and the metropolitan polities even enjoyed the astounding privilege of striking coins, customarily exercised only by the king or the republics.

Heredity instead of merit

The set-up of the monarchic institution evoked the constitutional monarchy. The king's executive powers rested upon his respect for the *dharma*, of which he was the executor and servant; depending on the assent of the people, he was not allowed autocratic interferences. If he betrayed his royal *svadharma*, Manu's law acknowledged the people's right of insurrection and regicide. Through conquest or coalition a kingdom of confederated republics later evolved. Before the sixth century B.C there were republican states as well, contemporary to the Greek city-states; those with a strong organisation lasted until the beginning of the Christian era. Afterwards these too were replaced by the monarchical state. In the simpler as in the complex polities none of the social orders was predominant; nor was uniformity needed. The social, political and economic *dharma* and its *artha shastra* harmonised the pre-existent patterns with newly evolved ones. The State stood for co-ordination, with no right of infringing on the autonomous functioning of the *varnas* (social classes), *kulas* (clan families), *sanghas* (spiritual communities) or any polity. From king to servant, all were bound to maintain the *dharma*.

At a latter stage the rishis envisaged a unifying political rule by a universal emperor (*cakravartin*), yet without destroying the self-governance of the autonomous polities; although there is no evidence of its application. *Caturvarnya*, the fourfold order of the vedic age, continued throughout the ethical-philosophical upanishadic age; it began to vanish during the conventional age, replaced by the caste-system established on heredity rather than individual merit. Also, the empire and the imperial monarchy tended to undermine the autonomy of the lesser polities, turning them into factors of division. The decline of a society that had lost the thread of life – and with it, of renewal – had commenced. Intellectual and artistic pursuit, the scientific and critical intelligence, creativity and intuition were numbed. Social functions became artificial, and the *dharma* so strict that it hampered the freedom of the spiritual quest; *moksha* (liberation) was sought in opposition to the sacredness of life. Partial truths were enhanced, others denied, the grand spiritual synthesis waned. When the British Empire took over not much was left of a society run for two millennia on the basis of intuitive democracy and self-government as *dharma*, intended as the quest for self-perfection of all the classes of society. The gates to foreign invasion were fully open.

The Western way: from the infra-rational to the rational age

Sri Aurobindo introduced a major distinction between the infrarational and rational ages. In the former the people acted out of instinct, obeying tradition mechanically. Although crude, this age had elements of reason and spirituality and could soar to lofty ideals, as in the early Greek civilisation and prehistoric, mystic India; the masses, however, remained infra-rational and infra-spiritual. As reason and spirituality expanded, the solitary avant-gardes were replaced by legions of thinkers, writers, poets, scientific enquirers, etc. In Europe this was the age of the Greek sophists, contemporary with Socrates and Plato. In India, it corresponded to the Upanishadic age with its philosopher-mystics; opening to the masses, the barriers between initiates and lay people collapsed and society as a whole searched for enlightenment.

Reason was developed first by exceptional individuals in exceptional communities or nations. Greece and Rome led in Europe; India, China and Persia in Asia. But civilisation is not safe if limited to a small minority; the Greco-Roman civilisation was undermined by inner causes as severely as by outer ones; surrounded by infrarational multitudes, the other civilisations perished as well. Moreover, the ruling classes were obliged to cast religion and spirituality into moulds acceptable to the masses, diluting their original force. When intellectual or spiritual movements rose in reaction to fossilized habits, the rational age was born, at first as individualism. It was a typically European phenomenon, a questioning and rejection of dogmas and conventions, of unmovable privileges, authorities and theocratic hierarchies. Popes and kings responded with crusades, massacres and the stake; knowledge and science were repressed. The religious-heretical drive led first, the socio-political followed; atheism was the final outcome. In the East this movement, socially and politically divested of iconoclastic significance, produced religious reformers, new creeds and philosophies.

Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry around 1917

PHOTO COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM ARCHIVES

There are two striking examples of democracy in its pure form. One is that of ancient India's, which streamed from the intuitive plane and originated from the Rig Veda – the first *sruti* or directly revealed scripture received by seers in a state of divine consciousness, around the sixth millennium BCE. The other is that of Pericles' Athens, which emanated from the sattvic plane of clear reason, and is the lighthouse of Western democracy. Both types nurtured character building, beauty and refinement, pursuit of an ideal of which all individuals were the indispensable cells. Thus the body politic was built involving self-government of both the individual and collective being. The democracy of ancient India was prevalently intuitive and spiritual, while Athens's was rational and aesthetic.

Dawn in Buddha's garden

Summer mornings of a teenager's choice

The first thing that confronts my eye is the notice board: June 25, finish pumpkin bed, pick rosella, finish potting and plant beans, make chocolate malt milkshakes, (this last, on anxious enquiry, was sadly found to be someone's wishful addition to the days plan).

After a quick gulp of water in the kitchen, and depositing my sunglasses on the back-carrier of my bicycle, I make my way past the tool shed towards the pumpkin patch. En route I encounter a fellow enthusiast shovelling compost, and am cordially invited to participate. Twigs fly, and before long we are manoeuvring our way through the chicken ranch and angling our barrow between the corn plantation, to arrive finally at destination pumpkin.

I began work at Buddha Garden at the end of May, one week after the summer holidays began. My reasons for working there were simple enough: for some time I had wanted to work on a farm, and the arrival of summer with time lazily sprawled before me seemed like the ideal opportunity. The execution of this forethought proved to be slightly more tricky. When you're used to regarding 5:45 am as still insteeped in the hours of darkness, there is somewhat of a reluctance within the body to consider it one's regular hour of awakening. Or is there? Well as it turns out, change isn't always as arduous as one imagines. I quite shocked myself by not only (reasonably) quickly adjusting to the rude awakening screech of my alarm clock, but also developing such a deep appreciation for the wonderful crisp freshness of the early hours that I (spurred on by the good examples of others) decided to cycle to work in the mornings.

By 6:35am the main contingent of our workforce is assembled: some stumble bleary-eyed from their capsules, and some like me dribble in ones and twos from their various homes in Auroville. All however are united in cheeriness, and it is with a feeling of unity that we file towards the tool shed to arm ourselves with mumpties, gloves, or armfuls of plant protectors resembling miniature umbrellas, depending on the day's agenda.

On this particular Friday morning, the first aim is to finish off the job which the chickens unobligingly sniffed at, namely clearing the pumpkin bed of unwanted weedlife.

Time flies as does the dirt, and there is little sign of early-morning doldrums amongst our reddening crew as light-hearted joviality, the exchange of opinions, political debate and off-tune attempts at constructing songs which harmonise with the mumpti's clash with earth, all feature as conversational repartee. I have found myself surprised at how little constraint there is amongst the recruits, and how enthusiastically and smoothly the work rumbles along. Further thought considers whether this is because there is no competitive goal: everyone works voluntarily, not for money or personal advancement, and this in turn breeds no rivalry or bitterness. Work unites the workers in the common wish to execute a job worth doing.

Come 9 o'clock and the bell is accompanied by a hearty yell: "Breakfast!". Hungry faces rise in unison, and a sweaty group of people traipse towards the wash basin, gathering in stray tools on the way.

Roughly synchronised is the sigh of contentment from the happy munchers, and as I sit myself down in my customary position in the hammock, a quarter past nine and a plate in my lap of steaming rice with fresh fried veggies from the garden, I reflect on how good it was to start the day outdoors – pottering about, weeding, chatting, digging, planting…there's a cosmic sense of satisfaction in having completed something, and yet still having the day stretching out practically untouched before you.
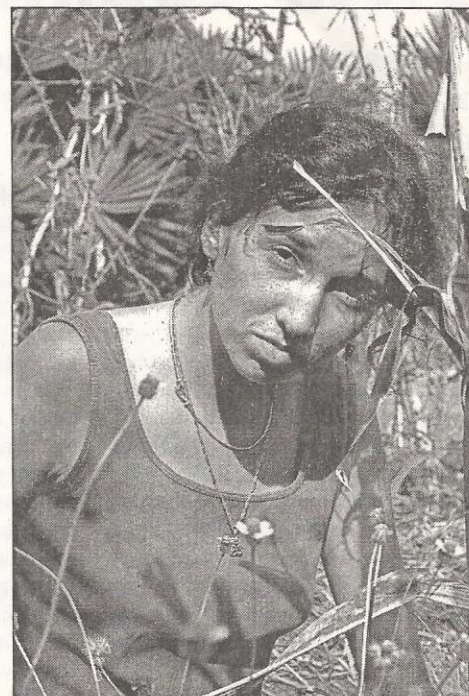
Impi

17 years old Impi Is studies at Future School in Auroville

Sri Aurobindo on the nature of true democracy

Philosophy and ethics, science and art, politics and economics are the ordering principles of homo sapiens, the mental being. Instead of rising above all contraries where all is one, reason deals in opposites. Sri Aurobindo stressed the necessity, though, of a temporary reign of the critical reason by avant-gardes questioning everything – affirming and simultaneously denying; setting a rule, disposing of it. By this evolutionary drive progress unfolds. Intelligence has to be turned inward and upward, attaining knowledge, albeit indirect, of the universal principles of existence, where knowledge and freedom are one. Great idea-forces such as liberty, equality and fraternity, a religion of humanity, were given form. This will reach fruition only when the masses too learn to use their intelligence; until then society is a mixture and often infrarational forces takes over. It ensues that universal education is an utmost necessity; in terms of mental, but also ethical and aesthetic capacity. This implies a return to the Hellenic ideal, although there is an emphasis on utilitarianism – as is typical of the contemporary age – rather than the search for beauty and ethical refinement.

Reason as social creator

Democratic freedom and equality are inborn in small communities, where all take an active part. Among history's most fruitful periods are the Greek, Roman and Italian Renaissance city-states. The civic and cultural participation of the Greek cities is the foundation for the political ideals of modern Europe as well as its intellectual, philosophical and artistic ideals. The Athens of Pericles, where living itself was education, was the summit. The Roman Empire, with its momentous organization, enjoying both peace and prosperity, gave to Europe its political and military science, along with the notion of empire and colonization. As in Europe, India's most creative age had also been that of small kingdoms, republics and city-states: free societies whose democratic self-governance survived even under the bureaucracies of the great monarchies and empires.

Moulded by Hellenism and Christianity, sharpened by free thinking and science, the Western mind has elaborated an ideal of human progress revolving around both intellectual and material freedom, equality and comradeship. In Sri Aurobindo's vision real democracy depends on three postulates: universal education, transition from infrarational to rational and character building. If any of the three is lacking the true democratic order cannot manifest. To rationalize human society through universal education seems to be the ideal remedy; yet because of the system's intrinsic contradiction this too may fail. Sri Aurobindo warned:

"But a rational education means necessarily three things, first, to teach men how to observe and know rightly the facts on which they have to form a judgment; secondly, to train them to think fruitfully and soundly; thirdly, to fit them to use their knowledge and their thought effectively for their own and the common good. Capacity of observation and knowledge, capacity of intelligence and judgment, capacity of action and high character are required for the citizenship of a rational order of society; a general deficiency in any of these difficult requisites is a sure source of failure. Unfortunately, – even if we suppose that training made available to the millions can ever be of this rare character, – the actual education given in the most advanced countries has not had the least relation to these necessities" (The Human Cycle, p.198)

A religion of humanity

One idea-force of democracy, accepted by all progressive nations, is the political equality of all citizens in ordering government and society. In socialism, equality is social too. Democratic nations, organised into a body politic truly representing all tendencies of

PHOTO COURTESY ROGER

RELIGION DE L'HUMANITE

Façade of the house of the 19th century social philosopher Auguste Compte in Paris, France. Sri Aurobindo adopted his term 'The Religion of Humanity' in his book 'The Ideal of Human Unity'.

society, determine their *dharma* through the reason and will of all individuals. If not we regress to the irrational age, which is ruled by a dominant class. In Greece, along with great personal freedom and all-encompassing education, the democratic ideal stood for all citizens sharing in the government, legislation and administration of the community's affairs. In contemporary democracy, run by party government, this no longer happens; although in the United States the tendency survived for some time. Freedom and equality, if solely political as in the Western concept of democracy, are unable to eliminate clashing ideologies and vested interests, ruthless economical struggles, the ceaseless war of classes.

The age of individualism commenced as a revolt of reason and culminated with the triumph of science; gifting society with that Sri Aurobindo called a 'religion of humanity'. Politically, it is the advent of 'reason as a social creator', unfolding, according to him, in three stages that he foresaw as democracy, socialism (followed eventually by 'governmental communism') and anarchism. The transition from the infrarational (to which all the past political orders belong) to the rational age is thus complete, heralding the transition from the objective to the subjective, spiritual age. Then only the ideal of communistic anarchism can reach its full status: not just an ethical but also a spiritual perfection and the end of the quest. Yet democracy remains the starting point.

God in Humanity: Humanity in God

In humanity's evolution towards the ideal society the democratic order of ancient India, run on the principle of autonomous, self-governed polities, stands as an experiment splendid and unique. Sri Aurobindo considered *caturvarna* to be a socialistic institution; inequality was external and accidental. He wrote that socialism (the solution to the economic impasse designed to concentrate on the inner progress of individuals) is essentially Asiatic and particularly Indian, and that democracy will never be fulfilled without it. Sri Aurobindo trusted that, by rediscovering the way to attune the world to Spirit, India will find the secret order for which socialism struggles. Turning humanity's most precious energies to its highest development, each member of the community exists for the welfare of all. *Sanatana dharma* is the creed, God in humanity, humanity in God. He asked for 'the eternal religion' to be applied to contemporary politics, reshaping them into an ethical and spiritual pursuit.

Humanity's inner being toils towards a higher life through the varied cultures of its people. While insisting on the democratic distribution of functions at which socialism aims, Sri Aurobindo called for the advent of divine unity where all individuals are one and equal. He called for breaking of the half-theocratic, half-aristocratic feudalism of the age, so as to realize the democratic spirit of Vedanta and, from within its inner law, a new social and political organization. He wished for an assimilation of Europe's democratic principle – while eliminating its shadow components, individualism and materialism – calling for a true spiritualisation of the irresistible urge for liberty, equality and brotherhood. He called for a remoulding of society into the Vedantin gospel of equality that recognizes the Divine in every being, in the true spirit of the sanatana dharma irrespective of birth, class, creed or country. The Self in one creature is identical to the Self of all; God is the sum of this illimitable variety.

Vedantin oneness

A fundamental postulate of Western democracy is the equal right of freedom and mutual respect of all individuals, living a liberal and rationalised existence. This leads to a profounder truth, repressed in the past or limited to the spiritual domain, the right to live according to one's own reason and will. Freedom of thought and consciousness, space for the individual soul is, in Sri Aurobindo's vision, the most powerful idea-force of the rational age. In harmony with the Asiatic experience, it has a prominent role in shaping the future. This is where East and West ultimately meet. Millennial experiences, at times apparently antithetic, ultimately lead to the *satyayuga* or golden age that is the crown of the human cycle; the harvesting of unity in diversity. Through endless experimentations this leads to the ultimate consummation, the ideal society of the Gnostic being.

The Lord's supreme teaching in the Bhagavad Gita rises beyond nationalism and cosmopolitanism, beyond humanitarianism and collectivism, beyond service to society, even beyond a religion of humanity – these are preliminary stages only – to divinised human beings who, having lost the smaller self, have found the greater self. Unity with all beings is the all-embracing Vedantin oneness – and *dharma*, the uplifting of the whole community into Brahmic consciousness. The supreme power of knowledge and action is God-love – and humanity the real *sangha* or spiritual fellowship, towards which all beings on earth move according to their evolutionary capacity. In the golden age or *satyayuga* there is no need for an external government: the self-determining individual and community live spontaneously according to their free, divine *svadharma*. This is the ultimate condition.

Paulette

The roof-maker

Aurovilian roof-maker Jean-Marc talks of his trade

Jean-Marc first came to Auroville for a visit in 1986, attracted by the ideals of human unity. "I came on a quest, I was looking for something else," he remembers, "and from the beginning, from the very first time I came, I knew I would eventually come back and settle here." It was twelve years later however, that Jean-Marc, after a number of regular visits, finally moved to Auroville.

After his baccalaureate in 1978, Jean-Marc decided he wanted to become more independent and start to earn his living. Advised by an uncle who was a 'Compagnon', *(see article elsewhere on this page)* he joined the centre of the 'Compagnons du Devoir' in Toulouse. Jean-Marc was most drawn to the trade of roof-making; his apprenticeship lasted two years. After his apprenticeship was completed, however, Jean-Marc decided to leave the Compagnons and he went to Paris. Over the years, he worked for various well-known companies specialized in the restoration of historical monuments, such as the Opéra de Paris and the Théatre of the Odéon, in which he got involved.

After Paris, Jean-Marc worked in Switzerland for some time, and then eventually returned to France and was employed by a company in the town of Angers, where he further studied at the 'Ecole Superieur de Couverture' (higher school for roof-making). Then, in 1991, a small team, of which he was part, was sent by the company to the French West Indies, to take up the restoration of the islands' historical architectural heritage. "I stayed there for a period of seven years," recounts Jean-Marc, who was during that time responsible for the department. "We worked on the restoration and renovation of historical monuments, most of which dated back to the colonial times: forts, castles, old colonial houses of sugarcane plantation owners, windmills, churches…" Then at one point, the budget for the restoration of historical monuments was greatly reduced by the French Government. There were also a lot of strikes in the French West Indies at that time, and all the material for restoration, which was received from France, was often blocked at the customs. "We were under a lot of pressure," explains Jean-Marc. "And there and then I decided that it was the right time for me to move to Auroville."

When Jean-Marc speaks of roof-making, his trade, it is with a lot of enthusiasm and his eyes light up. "Being up there, at such great heights, gives us roof-makers a sense of great freedom, like that of birds in flight. We are free because hardly anybody comes to bother us up there, not even the architects. When you are working on a big building site, it can get very crowded and unorganized, as everybody comes and does his job and there are hundreds of people around. It's sometimes really quite a mess down there, and we are then happy to have space and be alone on top of our roof."

Jean-Marc also stresses that the job of roof-making involves a lot of risks. "To be able to work at great heights, one needs physical equilibrium, a good balance, and that is extremely important, as the job is dangerous. I myself feel that this physical balance helps me achieve inner balance, mental equilibrium and helps me find my centre. Also, if for example one is not focused, one has negative thoughts, or one hasn't slept well the night before, it is very difficult to find physical equilibrium, and one doesn't feel very confident or assured up there. So physical equilibrium gives you inner balance, and vice versa, inner balance gives you physical equilibrium."

"Another aspect which makes our trade so interesting," he continues, "is that we work with so many different materials: different types of metal (copper, aluminum, zinc), stone (slate), clay (tiles), different woods, vegetation (thatch)…and the list goes on."

Since he settled in Auroville, Jean-Marc has built a number of roofs, most of which are in aluminum, as nobody else really had the expertise to work with this material in the area. He built the roofs of three houses in the Auromodèle community, one in Two Banyans, one in Prarthna, and one in Vikas. He also worked on renovating the Pyramids Art Centre and built the roofs of the Solar Café and the American Pavilion.

In the beginning, work was quite a challenge in Auroville as the necessary tools weren't available. "At one point, as I didn't have any work here, my unit took up a work on a site in Hyderabad. The money earned there was invested in new tools, material and machinery, to be able to work more efficiently." Now Jean-Marc and his team (which consists of two local workers: Kumar and Raja) are well equipped. "It's always so much more of a pleasure, to work with good tools," he smiles.

In the beginning of the year, Jean-Marc had a lot of work on his hands and was desperate to find somebody to share the work load. As he didn't succeed in finding anybody, he left for France. There he met the person in charge of international placements for young 'Aspirants Compagnons' under training. He told him he was looking for somebody to work with, and an appeal was posted, to which three young 'Aspirant Compagnon' roof-makers replied. Thomas Demelle was one of them, and as Jean-Marc liked his letter of motivation, he chose him. Since a couple of months now, Thomas is in Auroville, assisting Jean-Marc with his work and learning more about the trade. At present they are working on the roof of the Lumière unit in Fraternity.

"I work a lot," admits Jean-Marc. "But I feel that work, whatever one's job, contains everything. I am happy to work eight hours a day, just so I can experience a few moments of total communion with my work, of total joy. Some days one doesn't experience those moments at all, when nothing works out, everything goes wrong. But at other times, those moments can last a few hours: A few intense hours of total communion with ones work, of deep concentration, of great joy, when time stops, and nothing else exists anymore."

Emmanuelle

Roof-maker Jean-Marc on the site.
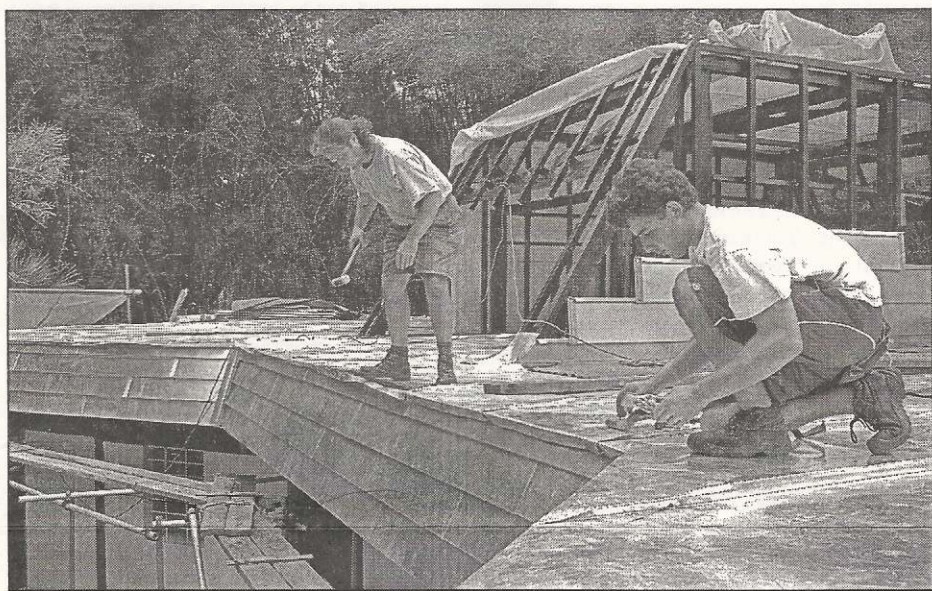
Jean-Marc and Thomas working on the roof of Lumiere in Fraternity.

An 'aspirant compagnon'

Thomas Demelle has come to train under roof-maker Jean-Marc

Legend has it that "Compagnonage" originated during the construction of King Solomon's temple in Babylon. King Solomon himself, as well as his two foremen Father Soubise and Master Jacques are considered to be its founding fathers. Historically, the origin of the 'Compagnons du Devoir' goes back to the middle ages and the construction of the Cathedrals of Europe. At those times, when serfdom was the norm, the mastery of the 'compagnons' had over their trade made them free men, and they moved from one building site to another, welcoming young apprentices to whom they transmitted their knowledge and their skill.

In 1901, the French "Association Ouvrière des Compagnons du Devoir" was created, bringing together twenty three trades, and was recognized as being of public utility.

Today, 'Compagnonage', one of the world's oldest associations and the largest in France, has evolved in many ways, while at the same time retaining many of its traditions and its secular mission, which is: 'to make it possible for man to fulfill himself in and through his trade.' The association today accommodates more than 8,500 youths in training in twenty three different trades. Its structure makes it possible for the associations to have centres of apprenticeship and training in numerous towns throughout France, but also outside in more than twenty five different countries.

Nineteen year old Thomas Demelle, who has been in Auroville for the past few months working and training under roof-maker Jean-Marc, is an 'Aspirant Compagnon Couvreur' (aspiring compagnon roof-maker). Thomas entered the association of the 'Compagnons du Devoir' at the age of fifteen, after having passed his 'brevet' (O levels). "I wanted to learn how to work with my hands," he explains, "And when I found out about 'Compagnonage', its mission, its history, and what it offered nowadays, I decided it was the perfect solution for me, because it made it possible for me to learn a skill, a trade, while at the same time travelling, learning a lot about life and maturing."

After having tried his hand at a few other trades that were being offered, he decided to take up roof-making, which, in his own words, is "the most beautiful trade in the world."

During the first two years, Thomas was an apprentice in roof-making. Half of that period he spent working on building sites, the other half in a centre of training and apprenticeship, where he was taught the trade's theory and practice. After those two years of apprenticeship were completed, he passed two exams (BEP and CAP, certificate of professional studies and certificate of professional aptitude), and then made his request to start on his 'Tour de France' as a trainee.

The individual who enters 'Compagnonage' has to go through a number of stages. After the apprenticeship, which lasts two years and where one is taught the basics of the trade, is completed, the youth becomes a trainee. At that point, the trainee has to show what he has learned in his chosen trade by working on the conceptualization, drawing, analysis and building of a model. And then, according to the trainee's capacities and aptitudes in his trade, he is welcomed and adopted into the community of the 'Aspirants Compagnons'. During the 'ceremony of adoption', the trainee becomes an 'Aspirant', and is given his 'colour' (a scarf, the colour of which depends on the trade – the colour of roof-makers is white), with the emblems of 'Compagnonage' and of the trade, as well as a walking stick (in the past, the 'Tour de France' was made by foot; nowadays, however, mostly public transport is used.)

After the adoption, the 'Aspirant Compagnon' can start on his 'Tour de France', where, depending on his trade, he will spend six months to a year in each town, working in different companies while still studying the theory of the trade in the evenings. Generally, three to four years are spent touring France while undergoing training. (Nowadays, as part of the 'Tour de France', 'Aspirants Compagnons' can also undergo part of their training outside the country.)

Then, when the 'anciens Compagnons' feel the 'Aspirant' is ready, once he has acquired a certain maturity as well as a certain mastery and knowledge of his trade, he works on the conception, drawings, plans and construction of a second model. Then, once the model has been accepted by the 'Compagnons', the 'Aspirant' starts work on the actual execution of his 'masterpiece'. Those 'masterpieces' usually take around three to six months to complete, after which they are judged by the 'ancients Compagnons'.

And that is when the 'Ceremony of Reception', where the 'Aspirant' finally becomes 'Compagnon', takes place. During the ceremony, a new 'Canne de Compagnon' (walking stick of the 'compagnon') is received, and new emblems are added to the scarf.

Now, the 'Compagnon' continues on his 'Tour de France' for another three years, spending a year in each town. There, while working in a company at the same time, he will be able to transmit whatever has been taught to him during his 'Tour de France'. For this is the duty of the 'Compagnon', to transmit his knowledge and skill, to retransmit what he has learned of his trade to the younger 'Aspirants Compagnons'. After that period of 'Duty', the 'Compagnon' will eventually settle down in a town and find a permanent job.

Thomas, who is an 'Apirant Compagnon' in his second year, still has quite a long way to go in his evolution as a 'Compagnon'. Once he completes his year of training under Jean-Marc in Auroville, he will return to continue on his 'Tour de France'.

When Thomas talks of 'Compagnonage', it is with a strong sense of belonging. "To belong to the 'Compagnons du Devoir' is really to belong to a big community," he explains. "We all live together in the different centres or 'houses of the Compagnons', we have our meals together, we each have different chores in the house, and there is a chart or set of guidelines, which we follow. Compagnonage is really like a great big family. There is a 'Mother' in each house, who organises everything and advises us. Then there are the older 'Compagnons', who also advise, guide and teach us, and our fellow 'Aspirants Compagnons', our brothers. We are all linked by 'Compagnonage', and by the same sense of trade and of duty. Each year, we have reunions and have discussions, in which all of us, young and old, of all ranks and of all trades, take part. We also have different ceremonies, in which all take part, and celebrations, such as those in honour of the patron Saints of each trade. There is really a strong bonding between us all, a sense of brotherhood."

Thomas, who is the first young 'Aspirant Compagnon' to come to Auroville for his training, believes he will probably not be the last. "A number of unit holders have expressed an interest in receiving young 'Aspirant Compagnons' trainees in Auroville," he explains, "And then there are a few young Aurovilians interested in learning a manual trade who are contemplating joining the 'Compagnons du Devoir'."

Emmanuelle

Waves of energy

Surfers on the search for swells

Sanjay

It's been summer time and though the Auroville beach seems relatively empty compared to the tourist season, those who remain behind to face the heat frequent the sands to relax and cool off in the rolling waters. Amongst these are the surfers. Some days there is only one waiting patiently on his board for a wave to ride. Other days, you can see many. "For a non-surfer it must look kind of strange" expresses Sanjay who declares himself a relatively new surfer in Auroville, "just a bunch of guys sitting in the water, bobbing up and down, waiting." But, for those who have a passion for this sport, the perspective is very different.

Sanjay has been in Auroville for over ten years but started surfing only three years ago. "I started body surfing in Australia as a little kid. When there were decent sized waves, it was so good just to be in them, riding them as one with

the water. But, here the waves aren't big enough for me to enjoy body surfing in the same way, so I started using a board so that I could stand up and get a ride. Surfing in Repos and in Pondy has been going on since the beginning of Auroville. The first board arrived in the late 60's and is still here for us to use today."

Boards are not easily available in India. Many of the boards that have been collected over the years come from 'long time' surfers, who have carried them in from abroad and later passed them down to anxious learners. Another possibility is to get one from Sri Lanka where a regular 'surfing scene' has existed for more than forty years. Occasionally, as Auroville draws many visitors, boards are left behind when people return to their respective countries. "Because of the difficulties of getting boards," explains Sanjay, "we are putting energy into our store room in Repos where we can repair the boards we have. Although we can't get board wax here, we can get fiberglass, cloth and resin for repairing. Getting boards made in India is not a possibility because we can't find the correct foam."

But the boards (wet suits are not mandatory in these warm waters) are just part of the technical side of surfing. What about the experiential side? "Physically I think it is excellent. For the climate we live in, I think it is the best form of exercise. What I found with different sports I have done in India, is that your body often overheats and your muscles start to burn but while you're surfing, you don't feel like that. It's much more soothing. Sometimes, when you jump into the water, you're just waiting for that first wave to break on your back because it is such a nice feeling."

The history of surfing indicates a lot of travel in search of the 'perfect wave'. Do the local surfers of Auroville go elsewhere with their boards? "Some go to Sri Lanka or places like the Andamans to catch better waves. We also have a plan of travelling around India. This is the spirit of surfing also – the search. To look for the wave, to find that wave, to find the point. It's like a focal point of energy. You can travel thousands of kilometers to find that one point where everything comes together and you get that perfect wave. With the internet these days, you can go onto sites where there are swell predictions given by satellites. So, surfers can tap into that and get wave models so that they can more easily predict where the swells are going to happen. There are many different variables that have to coincide to create that wave. And of course in India, you have to look at monsoon times. But, we know our trip will happen. We just need to get a vehicle, the time and a few surfers who are ready for the adventure."

And how does it feel when you are actually out there? "You're in this water element which is somehow alien for a lot of us," said Sanjay. "It is very peaceful. You have this horizon with a whole different perspective on the world. You're in the ocean looking back at the land, at
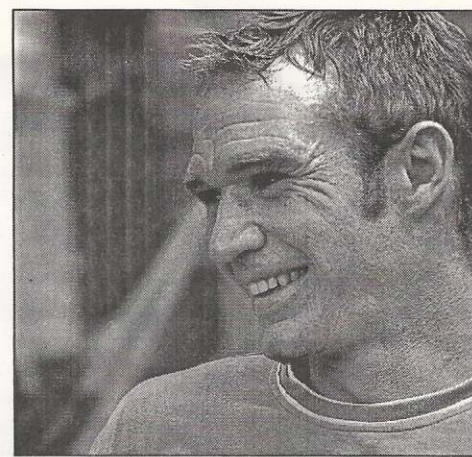
the people. It's calming…you have dolphins and fish swimming about…and the wave, when you catch that wave, it's something you…hard to explain…definitely a powerful experience. A form of energy flowing through a medium where you can actually feel it, experience it. Bands of energy transferring through the water and you can feel it and how it is connected with everything."

To an onlooker it can seem a wonder sometimes how the local surfers can find much joy in the often seemingly small swells that rise and fall, sometimes not breaking at all. Can it be frustrating? "One of the things I find most special about surfing is that it is nothing you can buy, sell, possess…it is a gift basically. You cannot demand the waves to arrive. It is something that you have to continually respect in the elements. It has nothing to do with you. The sand, the wind, the swell…it can get frustrating when it is not going as you would like but you continue to confirm that respect for nature. We have a lot of flat periods, but at the same time with those flat periods, when the waves finally do come, you appreciate them even more."

Sunaura

Sporting dreams

Rugby has taken flight in Auroville

Over the last few months, rugby has been a more common topic of conversation than ever before in Auroville. The game which is of course not new to the world, has been inspiring individuals to get together regularly on the hot sands of Auroville's beach, and sweat through a rigorous workout of learning and practicing this 'hands on' game. "We always talked about rugby without really starting it," explained Nico who has been playing the game since he was 12 and has lived in Auroville for the past three years with his partner, Jitta, who grew up here, and their two young children. "But it was difficult because we never managed to get balls which are of a very specific kind. Then we got a lead when we were given the card to contact Patrick Davenport, an American who has lived in Chennai for the last eight years and is in charge of all the rugby competitions in South India. We went to one of their fundraising meetings in Chennai and he gave us the boost to get started."

And so two months ago a determined group (who are now receiving

balls from the South Indian Rugby Union), began meeting thrice a week for a two-hour practice. "Pretty soon," Nico says enthusiastically, "we are going to get some time at the stadium in Pondy. Usually you play rugby on grass. To practice on the sand is good for two reasons: It protects you from getting hurt as there is a lot of tackling in this sport, and it gives your muscles a great workout. If you can run one hour on the sand, it means you can run twice as long on grass."

Rugby's introduction to the local area is building momentum as one can see its popularity rising amongst the players as well as the viewers. Yet are there enough dedicated individuals? "In rugby there are fifteen people on the field for each team", explains Nico. "So, basically you need 30 players to have one team which includes substitutes and everything. At the moment, I think we have around 12 serious players who come regularly for training. We also have some men joining from neighbouring villages like Kalapet.

Nico, explaining the game

And we have some players from Pondy. I think in the end it won't just be an Auroville team. We need a minimum of 22 players who can always be there. If we manage to get a team here then we can have competitions in Chennai, Bangalore and elsewhere. At the moment, it is not such a common sport here with India ranking around 95 amongst the rugby playing countries in the world. But I think that with India having one billion people, it has the largest potential!"

Last month this newly organized rugby team went to Chennai for their first match and though they did not win, the spirit of the team and enthusiasm for the sport was enhanced. "On the 24th of July, we participated in a five-day tournament in Chennai. It was an All South India tournament and the four best teams will go to Calcutta for the All India Tournament. And out of that they will choose the players for the International team. We did not make it to the top four but placed 8th in South

India and are one step further along in experience. Our strong point is that we have six players who have played rugby before in Europe or New Zealand and this is a big advantage compared to the Indian teams because most of them only started two years ago. It was great fun to go to this first match. We rented a bus and the social aspect of rugby was really there with singing and making jokes together. The spirit is not something we are missing. What we need are more players."

Rugby is a tackling sport and naturally attracts more men then women but the first women's rugby team has started in Chennai recently and the West has a growing popularity for women's rugby. "I think it is less common for women to want to play this sport because of the roughness, possible black eyes and all. But I would really like to get a girls' rugby team started in Auroville and we also want to start a rugby school for children over the age of seven. What is great is that anyone

can play rugby. You can be short, tall, fat, or thin. Depending on your physique, you will have a specific position on the field."

So what are the future goals for Nico and his fellow teammates? "We want to form one team that would include Aurovilians, people from Pondy and the villages around us. And then we want to get a second team in Pondy so we can have matches every weekend." The team is looking for sponsors so they can get stadium time in Pondy as well as being able to afford needed equipment such as rugby shoes (which cost around 75 Euro), and tackling bags used for training. Having opened an account in Pour Tous, they hope to gain the financial support needed. "My main goal over the next two years," concludes Nico "is to get one of our players in the National Rugby Team. That would really be an achievement for all of us."

Sunaura