

[Exploring Sri Aurobindo, Seer of the Supermind](#)

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By Vinanti Sarkar

It was in February, 1982, that I was taken to Pondicherry by my Bombay host family who were avid devotees of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Unfortunately, though I grew up in a highly intellectual Bengali family--my aunts were principals of university colleges and my uncles worked as official administrators--strangely, no one ever spoke of Sri Aurobindo during my youth. This was not my first trip to the seaside resort of Pondicherry, home of the momentous "great experiment," Auroville. Earlier in 1973, I had been there working on a documentary film on "Rural Women of India" for the International Womens' Year 1975. That first visit was incredible. From a distance, I saw the Mother giving "darshan" to her followers. But I was so caught up in the worldly fascination of film-making, that the experience did not have a strong significance on me. On this second trip, 1982, I became a devotee, fascinated by the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and by Auroville itself. It was the most arresting part of my four months' journey in India in search of a spiritual guru. This quest took me to some of the greatest gurus and philosophers in India from Sai Baba to Krishnamurthy. I visited their ashrams, listened to their teachings and talked with their disciples, trying to find humility and peace for the soul. On the train to Pondicherry, I wondered who was Sri Aurobindo? When I was growing up in Delhi, I remembered overhearing whispers, "Wasn't he the religious Bengali man in Pondicherry living with that French woman?" That's what North Indians thought. My host, Lalbhai Mehta, enlightened me that Sri Aurobindo was a scholar, a poet, a political leader, a journalist, a philosopher, a dramatist, an Indologist, a literary critic, a yogi, a translator and an original interpreter of the Vedas, Upanishads and Gita. Though some even feel he was an avatar of Krishna, everyone at least agrees he was one of India's greatest spiritual geniuses. Lalbhai handed me some books of his to read. I could see his joy in living as a disciple. Atheist Father, British Education Earnestly, I dug into his life,

ultimately to learn more about my own. Sri Aurobindo was born on August 15, 1872, the third son of six children to Dr. Krishna Dhan, a surgeon, and Swarnalata Ghose. He hardly knew a sentence in Bengali for the first five years and spoke broken English and Hindustani to the butler and the nurse. All the children were educated at a Christian convent school in Darjeeling. I was repeatedly told that not much is known about his childhood, except his remark, "Everyone makes the forefathers of a great man very religious-minded, pious, etc. It is not true in my case at any rate. My father was a tremendous atheist and my mother suffered from insanity." At age 7, he was sent to England with two brothers for a full dousing of British education. It lasted fourteen years and culminated with five years at St. Paul's Cambridge University where he was registered as "Aravinda Ackroyd Ghose." His father carefully instructed his host family never to allow his sons to mix with other Indians or know anything about the Indian way of life. Young Aurobindo spent a great deal of time reading--from the Bible and Shakespeare to Shelley and Keats. He mastered Latin and Greek and won literature and history prizes. But poetry totally captivated him. At age eight, he was already writing poetry for Fox Family Magazine--"an awful imitation," he insisted. At 16, he began to write classical English poetry, an activity which he continued throughout his entire life. His suppressed Indian roots finally manifested in his late teens. He became a leading member of the "Indian Majlis," an association of Indian students, agitating the cause of India's independence. He also joined the "Lotus and Dagger" society, a secret society in which each member vowed to work for the liberation of the homeland. In 1893, Aurobindo returned to India, securing a job as revenues administrator in Baroda government service. In his spare time, he studied everything his father forbid--Sanskrit, modern Indian languages and a mass of Hindu scripture. Still fiercely politically active, he wrote articles for the Induprakash called "New Lamps for Old" advocating revolutionary ideas be adopted by the Indian National Congress.

He eventually moved up to Vice-Principal of Baroda College. Then in 1901, at age 28, he put an ad in a Calcutta paper that he wanted to marry "a Hindu girl according to Hindu rites" --greatly annoying his snobbish intellectual contemporaries who had "outgrown" Hinduism. He was introduced to an intelligent, pretty, 14-year-old religious girl, Mrinalaini Bose. At first sight, he accepted the proposal, and married her. Though now a householder, the lurking yogi inside him began to stir. One day trekking in Kashmir, he had a "realization of the vacant Infinite" and later, along the banks of the Narmada, experienced the "living presence of Goddess Kali." He began practicing a simple form of kundalini yoga, writing of it: "My own experience is that the brain becomes prakashmaya, full of light. When I was practicing pranayama at Baroda, I used to do it for 5 to 6 hours in a day. The mind worked with great illumination and power. At that time I used to write poetry. Usually I wrote five to eight or ten lines per day. After the pranayama, I could write two hundred lines a day. Formerly my memory was dull, but afterwards when the inspiration came, I could remember the lines in their order and write them down conveniently at any time. Along with this enhanced mental activity, I could see an electric energy all around the brain." In January 1908, he met a Maharasthrian yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who "showed me how to meditate," Aurobindo recounts. "He said, 'Do not think, look only at your mind; you

will see thoughts coming into it; before they can enter, throw these away from your mind 'till your mind is capable of entire silence.' "I had never heard before of thought coming visibly into the mind from outside, but I did not think either of questioning the truth or the possibility. I simply sat down and did it. In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit, and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside. I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain, and in three days I was free. From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a universal Mind, not limited to the narrow circle of personal thought as a laborer in a thought factory, but a receiver of knowledge from all the hundred realms of being, and free to choose what it willed in this vast sight-empire and thought empire." His political agitation became more serious, and in May, 1908, he was sent to jail for one year on revolutionary charges. In his mind, he decided the prison cell was a monastery cell. "I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva [Krishna] who surrounded me. I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers and, as I looked at them, I saw Vasudeva. I had the Gita and Upanishads with me. I practiced the yoga of the Gita and meditated with the help of the Upanishads. These were the only books from which I found guidance. The Vedas confirmed what experiences I already had. When released, he preoccupied himself with deeper yoga practices, irreparably estranging his faithful young bride who by this time had already gone back to her parents. Politically branded "the most dangerous man in India," Aurobindo then relocated to the French colony of Pondicherry, south of Madras. "I was asked to come to Pondicherry" by an inner command, he told others. During the first four years, he hardly saw anyone, fasted once for 23 days and spent most of that time in silent meditation. He wrote infrequent, but tender letters to Mrinalani. She continued to love him and accepted the pain of his absence. She spent hours each day doing puja and meditating. After ten years separation, in 1918, he suddenly wrote her: "My sadhana is over. I have achieved my object, siddhi. I have a lot of work to do for the world. You can come now and be my companion in this work." She was jubilant, but died of influenza on the way to the boat. Aurobindo cried when he heard. About his political turnabout, some people accused Aurobindo of giving up. He denied this: "I did not leave politics because I felt I could do nothing more there; such an idea was very far from me. I came away because I did not want anything to interfere with my yoga and because I got a very distinct adesh (intuition) in the matter. I have cut connections with politics, but before I did so I knew from within that the work I had begun there was destined to be carried forward, on lines I had foreseen, by others and that the ultimate triumph of the movement I initiated was sure without my personal action or presence. There was not the least motive of despair or sense of futility behind my withdrawal." "I'm a bramachari!" Sri Aurobindo had a simple mode of living, not at all fastidious in his tastes, whether food or dress, because he never attached importance to them. He never visited the market for clothes. At home, he wore a plain white sarada and dhoti and outside, invariably white drill suits. He slept on a bed of coconut fibers on which was spread a Malabar grass mat which served as a bedsheet. Asked why he used such a coarse and hard bed, he replied, "Don't you

know that I am a brahmachari? Our Shastras enjoin that a brahmachari should not use a soft bed."

He had a total absence of love for money. When he was employed and got his lump sum of 3 months' pay in a bag, he emptied it in a tray lying on his table, never bothering to keep it locked in a safe box. Nor did he keep an account of what he spent, saying, "Well, it is proof that we are living amidst honest and good people. It is God who keeps accounts for me. He gives me as much as I want and keeps the rest to Himself. At any rate, He does not keep me in want, then why should I worry?"

He did once worry that yoga required him to renounce the world just at the time he was knee-deep in politics. Then he learned that the force from tapasya could be used for anything: "So I thought, 'Why the devil should I not get the power and use it to liberate my country?' "

Mirra--Disciple, Mother, Collaborateur

On March 29, 1914 at 3:30 in the afternoon a 37-year-old psychic French woman of Egyptian ancestry, Mirra Alfassa, met Sri Aurobindo at No. 10 Rue Francois Martin. She had been married twice and studied the occult sciences in Algeria with Polish metaphysician Max Theon. She said of her first encounter with the ardent yogi, "As soon as I saw Sri Aurobindo, I recognized him as the well-known being whom I used to call Krishna. This is enough to explain why I am fully convinced that my place and my work are near him in India."

Of herself she says: "Between age 11 and 13, a series of psychic and spiritual experiences revealed to me not only the existence of God but man's possibility of meeting with Him, or revealing Him integrally in consciousness and action, of manifesting Him upon earth in a life divine. This, along with a practical discipline for its fulfillment, was given to me during my body's sleep by several teachers some of whom I met afterwards on the physical plane."

In the same year, 1914, Sri Aurobindo was persuaded to start a philosophical

magazine in order to share with the world his grand synthesis of knowledge and yoga experience in a rational exposition. The first issue of Arya appeared on August 15, 1914 on his birthday. In a letter he wrote: "Philosophy! Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never was a philosopher--although I have written philosophy which is another story altogether. I knew precious little about philosophy before I did the yoga and came to Pondicherry. I was a poet and a politician not a philosopher!"

The Arya office was in the house where the Mother was staying. Every day the Mother used to visit Sri Aurobindo's house between 4 and 4:30 pm and bring cocoa and sweets prepared from coconut.

In 1920, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The Guru of the world who is within us gave me the complete direction of my path, its full theory, the ten limbs of the body of the Yoga. These ten years He has been making me develop it in experience. But it is not yet finished." Then on November 4th, 1926, the 54-year-old Aurobindo records that his sadhana was crowned by a spiritual experience referred to as "the descent of the Godhead of the Overmind." At this highly mystical juncture, he outwardly turned over the spiritual and administrative control of the "ashram" budding up around him to Mirra, now called "The Mother." From this moment until his passing 24 years later in 1950, he inspired and guided from protracted near-silence, reserving his most visible and outward energies for composing his colossal yogic work, Savitri, and also deepening his own Self-Realization.

The Mother, after a five-year return to France occasioned by World War I, returned to India in 1920. By May of that year she began wearing a sari. The ashram grew and grew even after Sri Aurobindo's passing in 1950, guided by The Mother. In 1968, she announced her startling vision of Auroville (see sketch above and photos on page 28). On February 28th of that year, soil from 121 countries and 21 Indian states were sealed in a lotus-shaped marble urn, inaugurating an immense and exciting journey, unfolding the "City of Dawn."

Part II will feature the Ashram and Auroville with interviews, and also include a Western mystic's astral meeting with Sri Aurobindo.