

Other Scenes

John Wilcock

PONDICHERRY, India—The heart and soul of Pondicherry is the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, focal point for pilgrims not only from India but from all parts of the world. It is an unusual ashram in the sense that its buildings are spread all over the town and some of its businesses provide employment and services for other residents of Pondicherry.

It includes, for example, its own laundry, perfumery, printing press and travel agency as well as bakery, tailors, furniture factory, oil mill and handmade paper workshop.

Right on the town's major square is a building containing the ashram's central kitchen and there each day almost everybody who wants a meal can drop by between 11:15 am and 12:30 pm and line up for a simple vegetarian lunch sitting crosslegged on the floor to eat stainless steel bowls full of rice, curry, yoghurt, bread and fruit. Theoretically non-members are supposed to contribute but nobody presses for the donation.

Sri Aurobindo, born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872 (a Leo) was educated at Cambridge, England, and as a writer and revolutionary became involved in the extremist wing of the Indian Independence Movement early in the century. Jailed by the British for his involvement in a bomb plot (1908) he studied yoga and meditation during his year in prison and by 1910 was in Pondicherry continuing his silent divinations and rejecting political overtures from the increasingly active independence parties.

Four years later a remarkable French woman arrived in this little, French town just south of Madras on India's east coast and fell immediately under his spell. She returned to France later in the year but came back to Pondicherry in 1920, married Aurobindo and since 1926 has been in complete charge of the ashram and all its activities under the name of "the Mother."

Everybody connected with the ashram in any way, and many of the other people in the town, refer to her reverently in this way and in so far as any problems or doubts arise it is confidently assumed by all that "the Mother" will solve them.

In the ashram's main building, on Rue d'Orleans, which also houses the reception center, is Sri Aurobindo's grave, always covered with flowers and surrounded by meditative disciples, and a framed portrait of both himself and the Mother, both looking about 40 years old and wearing halos.

Sri Aurobindo, after a productive life of writing and inspiration, died on Dec. 5, 1950; the Mother, who lives more or less in seclusion, is now 91 having been born (a Pisces!) on Feb. 21, 1878.

Four times each year—on Feb. 21, April 24, Aug. 15, and Nov. 24—the Mother appears on her balcony and gives general darshen (a sort of papal blessing) to the assembled crowds, who come from all over the world for the occasion. The rest of the time she utters her pronouncements and preferences indirectly, preferring to make her decisions on new applicants, appointments, etc. by studying photographs of would-be adherents. Theoretically ashram members are entitled to a personal audience with the Mother on their individual birthdays.

Membership in the ashram is currently about 1500 including a couple of hundred foreigners, and some of them—an Austrian hotel chef, a former soap company executive, a one-time Madison Avenue designer—were extremely successful in their earlier careers. One wealthy ex-Bostonian now occupies a remote island off the Coromandel Coast growing and processing the ashram's coconut crop.

Ensnconced in the biggest of the ashram's numerous guesthouses at any given time are several score international hippies of all ages, some wearing the gaudy regalia and beads of Haight-Ashbury, others with shoulder length hair and ankle-clinging dhoti.

With the success of its experiment in international harmony assured, the Sri Aurobindo ashram began to think in more ambitious terms of an international city in which people of all races could live and work together. Such a city—Auroville (“City of Dawn”)—is now planned for a 10,000 acre site three or four miles northwest of Pondicherry stretching inland from the coast to three inland lakes.

On the city's master plan in the ashram's office it looks like a galaxy of stars swirling around a central plaza.

Auroville's planners talk ambitiously of such projects as monorails, moving sidewalks and closed-circuit TV channels which are hard to visualize in the context of the site's present condition: scattered patches of scrub and palm trees sprinkled across the red soil plains.

Instead of building the community's core and spreading out from there, Auroville is being constructed randomly at several different points within the 15-mile perimeter, to allow maximum potential for individual effort and different ideas.

Within ten years, it is hoped, people from all over the world will have added their contributions to the site including trade or display pavilions from different nations and Indian states. Many kinds of light industry and manufacturing are planned or anticipated—flour and cattle food plants, electronics, leather goods, carpets, canning factory, etc. and a university is also scheduled.

Despite these far reaching plans for an industrial estate it is hoped to maintain “a close harmony with nature” so that the community will also be basically rural with orchards, dairy and such crops as rice, groundnuts, mangoes, olives, grapes, dates, soybean and avocados.

The Indian newspapers have referred to the project as “the first world city” which, when completed within ten years, will have a population of 50,000.

The principles of Auroville will be those that guide the ashram: integrated living and working together of people who seek “a higher consciousness.” Although all are welcome, with the proviso that “endurance and perseverance are essential,” it is felt by the community's planners that “only those who feel they can work in a spirit of self-dedication can successfully confront the inner and outer problems which at every stop appear at the personal and collective level.”

But perhaps a much quoted aphorism of the Mother puts it more succinctly: “You are richer with the wealth you give than with the wealth you keep in your possession.”

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