

"We are definitely not changing the basic principles of Sri Aurobindo's yoga"

The interview with Debashish Banerji in our previous issue on the topic of fundamentalism and the yoga has led to many responses. Many fully support his views, others disagree with him. Here Mr. Raman Reddy, who works in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, gives his view.

Auroville Today: What are the roots of fundamentalism?

Debashish: It may be through innocent and unthinking means that the apparatus of fundamentalism gets established. For me, it begins with how identity constructs build up unconsciously. Often people pin their sense of self on a group identity. As a group develops, things may get done at certain times in certain ways and over time these characteristics get fixed in the minds of that group as defining that group's reality. This reality is reinforced by a theology or ideology – the fundamental yet invisible pillars around which identity is built – as well as parables, metaphors and stories, mythologies, which make the members of the group identify with the ideology at the personal, core level.

This can hardly apply to the Ashram where the "identity construct" (which is not the word to use here) was not built "unconsciously" but by very conscious spiritual seekers who came to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to practise yoga under their direct guidance. They were even restricted from coming if they were not ready for it. So if the Ashram community acquired a certain homogeneity of temperament, what is wrong? It is actually a healthy sign for a growing collectivity and shows that there are plenty of reasons to come together instead of having always ideological differences and never being able to unite to do some practical work. From this point of view, one should condemn all collectivities because they mostly have differences of opinion with other collectivities. It means that the ideal collectivity, which Debashish has in mind, should allow everybody from all spheres. What a wonderful potpourri will Auroville be if it follows his advice? It only shows that he has never worked in a collectivity where certain rules have to be followed voluntarily, and if you don't, you are supposed to make a voluntary and gentlemanly exit.

Auroville Today: How would you characterize those traits?

Debashish: In the Peter Heehs' case there was outrage not only that somebody could have written such a book but also because he was 'one of us'. So, evidently, the identity construct among those who took action against Peter is very strong: there is a notion that certain tenets are held in common and that these tenets have been violated. And then, of course, the whole thing is about God, the Infinite. This is another aspect of fundamentalism; the group identity stretches to colonize the invisible, the universal, it assumes this tremendous transcendental quality and literalises it in a set of tenets which have to be obeyed.

Another indication that Debashish has never lived in a big group. Incompatibility with the collective aim is one thing and "colonising the invisible and universal" is another; there is a huge difference between theory and practice. Theories about accepting everybody always sound very convincing in conference halls, but in practice any group has to guard itself from being hijacked by the wrong persons.

Nobody has claimed to have achieved a final framework of ideals with their corresponding set of basic rules for life, not even Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The Mother in the *Agenda* says that

she would have preferred to have no rules at all with regard to the Ashram, but she was forced to have the bare minimum of rules so that people don't misuse the institution. As for the present, I don't see what is so wrong about taking the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as the basic framework of reference in order to make collective operations possible. No intellectual framework at all with only discussion about going beyond religions will lead us nowhere, neither in the Ashram nor Auroville. In order to see the sense of my argument, I would suggest a very simple experiment: join a spiritual community.

Auroville Today: Did these tendencies already exist before the present controversy?

Debashish: I think the roots can be traced back to the early 1940s when there was an explosion of numbers in the Ashram. So long as the Ashram had been a small community there was a sense of freedom and the inmates and the gurus were interacting with each other; there was a sense of intimacy. But the increase in scale changed the situation and, for example, certain types of quasi-rituals started establishing themselves.

If the roots of fundamentalism "can be traced to the early 1940s", then Debashish should familiarise himself with Ashram history. The forties was one of the most splendid periods of the Ashram with both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother running its administration. All the activities of the Ashram were organised by the Mother and all these were daily reported by the Mother to Sri Aurobindo who gave them his full approval.

Debashish: Take the images. In the early years, sadhaks had photographs of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in their own homes, but there were very few photographs in public places. Some people were in the habit of putting flowers in front of one such public photograph of Sri Aurobindo, but Sri Aurobindo cautioned his disciples in letters against this, saying he did not want any public display of this kind.

In the early years when Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were themselves physically present, they would have naturally discouraged putting up their photographs in public places. The situation changed with their passing away and now you can naturally expect more photographs of them in public places. Moreover, why should putting up their photographs in institutions dedicated to their spiritual aim be necessarily detrimental to Yoga when it is done in a genuine way? When you have no objection to putting up their photographs in a private room, why raise such a hue and cry over the placing of their photographs in meditation halls or conference chambers? As long as our actions haven't become mere rituals, there is always scope for the right expression of our feelings, especially in the midst of other like-minded people.

Let us not forget that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother gave their photographs to disciples for their spiritual help. Sri Aurobindo's photograph was displayed in the Reception Room even in the thirties. It is in fact this photograph that Debashish is referring to, in front of which the sadhak was told not to put flowers. This should be understood in the sense that there should not be too much decoration around it to attract

unnecessary public attention and not in the sense that the offering of flowers itself was considered as an unwanted religious ritual. The same kind of instructions were given by the Mother with regard to Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi. Flowers on it were changed every day and a minimum of incense sticks lit, but coconut breaking was firmly disallowed. There is always a balance which the Mother struck between the external act and the inner spirit, which has actually been misinterpreted by both religious and anti-religious groups.

The anti-religious groups have sometimes taken the extreme attitude of disallowing all photographs in order to avoid ritualism, as if that would be more conducive to the inner life. In fact, one can argue that the worship of the formless can be as ritualistic as image worship. From a certain point of view, concentration in the Matrimandir can also be considered as a symbolic worship of the Divine, which in the future can become a ritual of its own kind. Personally I have nothing but admiration for the Matrimandir and have passed some of the most delectable moments of my life in its meditation chamber. It is the spirit behind the outward act that finally distinguishes what is true from what has become a mere ritual.

Debashish: Today, there is a certain kind of closed mind-set that has developed at large among many in the Sri Aurobindo community, a sense that they are the real repositories of the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and that they are the ones who define what it is all about and how it should be done. In fact the situation today, as far as I can see it, is that some people are redefining the yoga and to do this they need occasions like the one offered by the publication of Peter Heehs' book.

I do not see how those who have "a closed mind-set that has developed among many in the Sri Aurobindo community" are "redefining the Yoga". I think we only insist upon time-tested methods of surrender, opening to the divine consciousness, not denigrating the Guru etc., and definitely not changing the very basic principles of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga.

Debashish: And then, as far as Peter Heehs is concerned, there's a long history. For many years he has been investigating Ashram mythologies – like the one which says that the Ashram is on the site of Rishi Agastya's Ashram. And each time he has shown that a mythology is doubtful, he has punctured a little hole in the self-confidence of the group ego and so voices have been raised against him...I remember asking Nirodbaran about Peter and the Agastya issue and he said that there is a need for people like Peter in any spiritual community, because over time it is inevitable that mythologies will grow, people will create these increasingly exaggerated images of the divine guru, and some people have to keep this tendency in check.

The Agastya issue, by the way, was brought up by a French archaeologist called Jouveau Dubreuil, and not by devotees of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He came to the conclusion that Pondicherry was a centre of Vedic learning and that Rishi Agastya was associated with it. The evidence is necessarily sparse because it relates to Agastya's coming to the south of India, the

date of which is unfixable, but like many Indian myths, could have a corresponding historical reality. It was Jouveau Dubreuil who told Nolini Kanto Gupta (he was a close friend) that Agastya's Ashram was on the very site of the present Ashram main building. Nolini Kanto Gupta merely repeated the story in an article and the story naturally caught on, given the association of Agastya's Vedic learning with that of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga.

Debashish: Regarding the larger issue, I believe that both Sri Aurobindo and The Mother foresaw what is happening now in the Ashram. Towards the end of her life, Mother put a lot of attention on Auroville and perhaps one of the reasons why she insisted there should be no religion, no religious observances, in this new community is that she saw the cascading religiosity among many at the Ashram and she didn't want the same mistake to be repeated in Auroville.

The Mother did not put a lot of attention on Auroville because she had lost hope regarding the Ashramites, though it is true that many of them could not rise up to her expectations. For that matter, Mother was also critical of the Aurovilians in the early seventies. It only means that most of us are full of defects. Debashish is trying to pit Auroville against the Ashram, which is plain divisive politics. The truth is that both are creations of the Mother (with Sri Aurobindo's force behind it) and both have their respective roles to play. I quote from the Mother:

What is the difference between the Ashram and Auroville?

The Ashram will retain its true role of pioneer, inspirer and guide. Auroville is the attempt towards collective realisation.

June 1968 (CWM, Volume 13, p 196)

Auroville Today: Are there tendencies to religiosity in Auroville as well?

Debashish: Yes, in certain areas this is happening. But these tendencies are still fluid, they are not grounded in the consciousness of the community in the same way as the insistence upon no religions. But when these tendencies are noticed, it's important that they are brought to the front and dialogued about. Devotional attitudes and practices can very well be a part of spiritual practice, so long as they make no claim for exclusivity, or an attempt to define the yoga. An active field of dialogue can keep plural approaches to the same goal alive.

No religion or going beyond religion should not mean in the end no Yoga at all. But I suppose only time and experience will show what is right and what is wrong. In any case, Yoga is not done through the dialogue of the ignorant but following rather the principles and methods of those who have attained the higher consciousness. For the present, it would be safer to found ourselves on the spiritual framework given to us by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which is sufficiently wide to prevent rigidity, than break in a fit of intellectual stupidity the very foundation that they have laid for us with so much difficulty.

The full version of the response is available at <http://www.thelivesofsriurobindo.com>

Debashish responds:



The impression being given in this response to my interview is that conscious sadhaks in a glorious period of the Ashram, directed by Mother and Sri Aurobindo, created the identity construct which accounts for the "homogeneity" of the present Ashram. This view is quite incorrect.

In the 1940s, there was a large influx of people into the Ashram, allowed because they sought protection from the war. Most of these were not admitted because they came for sadhana. The Mother makes a tripartite division of sadhaks, workers and those supporting with money as constituting the post-40s Ashram community. In recent times, there have been more incursions of people who have come to settle in the Ashram environs with little intent of doing the integral yoga, but of being part of the "homogeneous" devotional community. This majority is in the process of redefining the yoga in its practical and theoretical foundations so as to turn it into a religion, a development which the Mother foresaw and warned against.

Predictably, leaders of this inchoate mass have appeared, so as to give voice to their narrow interests. These leaders use events such as the publication of Peter Heehs' book as occasions to set themselves up in positions of power.

Moreover, homogeneity is the very antithesis of the Integral Yoga. Rather, it is the basis of what could properly be called Totalitarian Religion. What I have said in my interview is that devotion can very well be a part of the Integral Yoga but an integral yoga community, which was set up to be representative of world humanity, must have the openness to allow different approaches to the yoga. It should not turn into a homogeneous mass of narrow traits, beliefs and practices which responds with aggression – in Peter's case, court action, arrest warrants and deportation – to "cleanse" itself through extermination of whatever escapes the limits of its small and ignorant interpretation.

Religion exists almost exclusively in its forms, its cults, in a certain set of ideas, and it

becomes great only through the spirituality of a few exceptional individuals, whereas true spiritual life, and above all what the supramental realisation will be, is independent of every precise, intellectual form, every limited form of life. It embraces all possibilities and manifestations and makes them the expression, the vehicle of a higher and more universal truth.

A new religion would not only be useless but very harmful. It is a new life which must be created; it is a new consciousness which must be expressed. This is something beyond intellectual limits and mental formulae. It is a living truth which must manifest.

Everything in its essence and its truth should be included in this realisation. This realisation must be an expression as total, as complete, as universal as possible of the divine reality. Only that can save humanity and the world. That is the great spiritual revolution of which Sri Aurobindo speaks. And this is what he wanted us to realise.

(The Mother, MCW 9, 78)

Eds: This discussion is now closed in Auroville Today. Those who wish to continue dialoguing can do so on the websites already discussing the issue.