

Debashish Banerji is a former president of the East-West Cultural Centre and Sri Aurobindo Centre, Los Angeles and a teacher of Asian Art History and Indian Spiritual Culture at the University of Philosophical Research. He is also a founder and administrator of the blog-zine Science, Culture, Integral Yoga (www.sciy.org). Last September he was one of the organizers of a conference in San Francisco on 'Fundamentalism and the Future'. More recently he took part in a conference in Auroville on 'Spirituality beyond Religions'. *Auroville Today* took the opportunity to ask his views on the disturbing trends of fundamentalism among those who profess to do Sri Aurobindo's yoga.

What are the roots of fundamentalism?

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. Finally certain people start authorizing these characteristics as defining a movement and rigidly controlling what can or cannot be done or believed. As the characteristics of identity crystallize in a group, people seeking power gravitate inevitably to set themselves up as self-appointed controllers of the boundaries of the group.

The need for a clear self-identity is also fostered by 'othering', the feeling that "I am who I am because you are not who I am." In its most extreme form, the members of the group may see outsiders as evil, as not worthy of a place in this world.

All this may crystallize in what I call fundamentalism.

If we look at the Aurobindonian movement, do you see evidence of fundamentalism?

Absolutely, and that was partly the motivation behind the San Francisco conference. Some of us had been concerned and in dialogue about it for some time before the 'Molotov cocktail' created around Peter Heehs' book, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, exploded and everything erupted out of that. It takes events like this to make something which already exists actually articulated or voiced. This is how something that never had the intention of becoming a fundamentalist movement became one or, at least, acquired fundamentalist traits.

How would you characterize those traits?

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.

Fundamentalism and the yoga



Debashish Banerji in discussion with Alan of *Auroville Today*

Did these tendencies already exist before the present controversy?

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.

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.

These are the subtle ways in which something which is an inner practice becomes a public ritual. Over time these displays of public devotion grew and this other construct, this second-order reality which tends to religiosity and centres on certain ritual events, replaced the inner relationship. Of course, this is not to say that events like playground meditations, pranams and darshans were meant to be religious rituals when instituted by the founders. They were meant to be a means of spiritual exchange. But once Sri Aurobindo and The Mother left their bodies, for many these rituals took on a memorial quality. The exchange gave way to a living in the past or a living in the image of piety, an unchanging memorial structure with a fear of loss associated with it. And given this ritualistic structure and the power vacuum behind it, the people who wanted control necessarily came in.

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. It's not only a knowledge but also a power event because it tries to establish a new definition of the yoga and to set up a new leadership in the Ashram, challenging the established one of the Trustees. Here, it is important to acknowledge that this representation of power has been admirably resisted by the Trustees of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, particu-

larly the Managing Trustee, who has taken a clear anti-fundamentalist and progressive stance in the matter.

However, there are many ways of doing the yoga and you don't necessarily have to sign up for the tenets which these people are promulgating. Take the issue of the *avatar*, for example, the tenet that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother are the *avatars* of the modern age. I asked one of Sri Aurobindo's attendants, Nirodbaran about this towards the end of his life. Earlier he had written many letters to Sri Aurobindo asking for clarification on this point, but now he said the whole question of whether or not Sri Aurobindo and The Mother were *avatars* is "irrelevant" for those wishing to practice the yoga. In other words, it's not for someone to say but for one to experience. If you have that experience, fine, but if you don't it makes no sense to discuss it. It's certainly not a tenet of faith that you have to sign up for.

For those who want to redefine the yoga, the control of information is central to their purpose. Today the main body concerned with information – the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives – is partially staffed by foreigners, and there is a feeling among these people that the foreigner inhabits our secret domains and he is unqualified to do that, so he needs to be pushed out. 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. It is especially necessary in this yoga because here we are talking about human beings treading the path to a new consciousness and the experiments towards this represented by the lives of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother are the only ones we have at present to learn from. So it's really precious to retain the factual reality of how those steps were taken, to prevent it being lost under devotional mythology. This is what Peter has tried to do.

So what do you see as the way forward?

People may choose to follow Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, may see them as the embodiments of the spiritual goal, but the practice of the yoga should not be made into a dogmatic formula.

One can question what someone writes, but the questioning has to be at the level of dialogue, and not through attempts at ostracism, exclusion or eviction from the Ashram and from India, which is being perpetrated by some prominent spokespersons of the yoga today and which smacks of absurd fundamentalism.

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.

So I think one of the ways ahead is continuous engagement with the idea of a spirituality beyond religions.

Are there tendencies to religiosity in Auroville as well?

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.

I think that dialogue is the hope for the future because dialogue with other seekers, even with non-seekers, prevents the creation of an exclusionary reality. For example, what Rich Carlson and I have been trying to do with the Science, Culture and Integral Yoga online forum is to push the boundaries of the yoga through dialogue with, for example, postmodernism. I think these kinds of dialogues, where you don't privilege the yoga and where you don't hold on to dogmatic positions, can help in mutual transformation.

Do you also see dialogue between the Ashram and Auroville as being a way forward?

I think that if the present Ashram mindset could come into contact with the way that the yoga is done in Auroville as well as in the outer world – including those people who are outside the Aurobindonian community but who may be approaching the same yoga – if dialogues could be opened up and new perspectives could percolate into the mindset of the Ashram, we would see change happening there. Auroville could also play an important role in making this possible. To some extent, this was started in the 1980s, with invitations to people like Champaklal, Nirodbaran, and Mangesh Nadkarni to meet and interact with Aurovilians. This movement has not grown in any creative sense. Today, the Ashramites who are invited to speak at Auroville are mostly restricted to those who represent the dogma of Aurobindonian identity politics. There are many others at the Ashram who are less prominent but much richer in their thought and consciousness. An active seeking and engagement proceeding from some discrimination on the part of Aurovilians could help this process a lot.

Are you optimistic that change will happen in the Ashram?

I don't know. Being Indian by birth and by culture, I have connections with lots of Indian people in the Ashram. I think the problem is many people there are concerned about the larger issue of religiosity but the systems for open discussion don't exist. For example, the higher education section of the Ashram school could have played a very important role in the present controversy, they could have initiated interviews, debates, conferences, etc. but they chose to close their eyes to the entire issue.

There are tremendous difficulties with the Ashram at present but I wouldn't say that the consciousness is not there or that it is incapable of change. At the same time, I'm not one of these people who hold that the Ashram is a 'destined' place of some kind. What happens to any institution rests largely on the consciousness of its members. On the other hand, I am optimistic about Auroville, not because of any great maturity of consciousness which it expresses, but simply because of the open-endedness one experiences here.

There are some people who hold The Mother was at least partially responsible for the growth of what you call religiosity in the Ashram. They feel she could have done more to prevent it.

I know a number of people who came to the Ashram fully prepared to stay after reading Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, but after one week of experiencing life there they fled and they've held it against The Mother ever since. However, I don't think The Mother was responsible for the religiosity or the fundamentalism. I believe that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother knew very well what was coming. And that, perhaps, opening the floodgates in the 1940s was an embrace of these very forces. They left it to humanity to engage with these forces, to understand and come to grips with them, as part of its growth in consciousness.

Today we don't know how it will all turn out. Maybe in the future we will say that we've learned a lot from all this and have emerged purified from dogma. Of course, for Peter at the moment it is very painful and completely unwarranted. The bid to evict him from the Ashram and the country is a sign of the depths to which the dogmatism of religious distortion has sunk at this time.

From an interview by Alan and Carel