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Being Aurovilian: Constructions of Self, Spirituality and India in an International Community

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Introduction

Auroville: an International Community

This article is based on my Masters thesis (Meier 2004) and its empirical data was obtained during six months of anthropological fieldwork conducted in Auroville from January to July 2002. Auroville is an international spiritual community located in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu, 160 km south of Chennai on the East Coast of India. It was inaugurated in 1968, and was planned to eventually accommodate 50.000 people. It is named after the Indian guru Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), and dedicated to his spiritual ideals and philosophy also referred to as the Integral Yoga. The founder of the Auroville project, Mira Alfassa also known as The Mother was a French occultist and devotee of Sri Aurobindo who gained guru status in her own right and foresaw Auroville's development until her death in 1973.

According to the Town Plan and Map of the Auroville Area, Auroville is a circular settlement with the Matrimandir, or Temple of the Mother, at its centre. The Matrimandir is surrounded by a garden referred to as the Peace Area. This garden contains an amphitheatre, and a huge and beautiful Banyan Tree. From the Matrimandir, described as and referred to in various publications and by Aurovilians as the Soul of Auroville, the city will spread into four zones: the residential, cultural, industrial and international. These zones will comprise the city, which is envisioned to be surrounded by a green belt.

Today, however, these plans are merely a vision of the future, presented in various publications, and their gradual implementation a topic of heated debate in the community. The Matrimandir is in the completing stage of construction, but all other Auroville buildings are scattered over the vast area, and to the newcomer Auroville appears to be a green and fertile, mainly forested rural area, a fact most Aurovilians

take great pride in. In 1968, before Auroville's inauguration, the site was declared wasteland, unsuitable for human habitation.

Looking at the map, Auroville seems very organised and easy to navigate, but Auroville only owns 83 % of the 19.63 square kilometres of land that on the map comprises the city area, and only 17 % of the land intended as Auroville's green belt. The puzzle revealed by a closer look is symbolic of the discrepancy in Auroville between the spiritual ideals and lived experience. Physically, Auroville is blending with rural Tamil Nadu, a fact that intensifies the effort towards a spiritual demarcation of the community. The area, which on Auroville's map comprises Auroville, includes six Tamil villages and three villages are just outside the map, but in reality they are within Auroville. The main street of the Tamil village of Kuilapalayam is for all intents and purposes the closest Auroville comes to having a centre. The villages in and around Auroville have a population of about 11.000 people, whereof about 5.000 are employed in Auroville.

Today there are 95 official residential communities in Auroville, ranging in size from three to eighty homes, and in style from modern and luxurious houses and apartments to basic bamboo capsules with thatched roofs. Apart from these official communities there are individual houses. Some are basic farms while others are futuristic mansions with all modern conveniences. The population has increased from 320 in 1972 to 676 in 1980, and today consists of approximately 1.700 people from 33 different countries. In the last ten years Indians have become the largest single nationality (approx. 550), whereas westerners were the vast majority before 1990. The biggest single western nationality is the French (approx. 300) closely followed by the Germans (approx. 250) (interview with Entry Group member, February 2002). There has been a considerable demographic shift in terms of the age of the population. Whereas the vast majority of the population in the first fifteen years were in their twenties now 41 % of the population is over forty (Master Plan Perspective 2025).

At present, the formal route to becoming an Aurovilian [1] requires the applicant to spend a period of time, usually some months, in the community. During this time it is expected that the applicant will have had time to familiarise him/herself with Auroville's spiritual ideals and general *raison d'être*. After this time the applicant is to arrange an interview with the community's Entry Group, which consists of approximately six Aurovilian volunteers. Officially, familiarity with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is not a formal requirement but "[g]ood will and the right spiritual attitude and willingness to let go of old patterns" is [2]. Once approved as a newcomer the applicant spends two years in the community while financially supporting him/herself. During the two-year newcomer period the aspirant is expected to find a place of work. After two years the Entry Group, based on voluntary feedback from the community at large, decides if the applicant can become an Aurovilian. The name of new Aurovilians is added to the Auroville Master list and the person is given status and visa (for foreign nationals) by the Indian Government as an Honorary Voluntary Worker. The Aurovilians who are working in the community services, or take on other work for the community are entitled to Auroville maintenance, a small grant to cover the basic needs in terms of food and clothing. Financially, the general framework of the Auroville economy is a Central Fund and a Maintenance Fund.

Aurovilians running businesses, referred to in Auroville as Units, take out their own salaries but are expected to contribute at least 15 % of their surplus to the Central Fund. Officially the internal economy is to be guided by a pooling together of resources, and all assets created by individuals, belong to the community as a whole. However, private property has historically been respected and the buying and selling of houses and businesses occur on a regular basis. Because of the lack of a clearly defined decision making process, and because authority in effect is constituted by the individuals own spiritual consciousness, the ideals are not enforced but left to individual morals.

Familiarity with Auroville's spiritual discourse, my data strongly suggests, is an invaluable cultural capital in the Auroville community. Authority lies with the individual in a personal orientation to the spiritual. Being seen as a "true Aurovilian" depends on ones ability to gain a feel for the game. In Auroville the game is spiritual and participation is signalled in a spiritualised language of commitment.

A Minefield of Meaning

My fieldwork revealed that a dominant spiritual discourse [3] pervades all aspects of public and communal life in Auroville and binds together a pluralist, dispersed and complex community. This socially powerful discourse pervades narrative constructions of self and community and provides a narrative framework within which Aurovilians render the problems and disputes encountered in their daily lives in a spiritual utopia meaningful. The article explores the way in which the community, which declares itself non-religious and non-political, draw on this syncretic spiritual discourse in the effort to create meaningful collective and personal identities. A pivotal point of reference and an important constituent of this spiritual discourse is the idea of India as an inherently spiritual World Guru. In the article I take a closer look at the way in which India is reified as a land of spiritual opportunity and examine the way in which my Aurovilian informants narratively construct spiritual selves by placing themselves, their community and Auroville within an interpretive framework of divine evolution.

As inhabitants of a multicultural and pluralist community, Aurovilians struggle to resolve the discrepancy between the spiritual ideals of Auroville and the real problems that diverse interpretations and individual internalisations of these ideals present for the actualisation of the community on a practical level. The dichotomy between the spiritual ideals and the practical reality underlies most aspects of daily life in Auroville. This dichotomy translates into an important narrative construction distinguishing between outer and inner realities. I will show how this narrative framework constructs the inner as supreme elevating ideals associated with the spiritual, to a position over and above practical realities, at the top of Auroville value hierarchy.

It is by drawing on the dominant spiritual discourse, rooted in and influenced by the inclusivist Neo-Advaitan discourse [4] that Aurovilians separate their spiritual orientations from religions, referred to in the plural as dogmatic, stagnated and outer expressions of the underlying true spirituality or universal religion which Auroville is

dedicated to. All Aurovilians I came across stressed the supremacy of inner discovery, self-development and spiritual growth as authority in the Auroville context. The focus on personal experience in the spiritual quest allows for a strong sense of community in spirit to override feelings of, and even make meaningful, the lack of practical community in every day life experience.

Bitter disputes within Auroville about the community's organisation, decision-making process, economy, town planning, housing policy, infrastructure, entry procedures and so forth, acutely highlight this discrepancy. A discrepancy which was alluded to, discussed, argued or stated in practically every setting in which I did participant observation throughout my fieldwork: as in meetings, interviews, and informal conversations. Aurovilians are acutely aware of this discrepancy and preoccupied with resolving it, both on a cognitive and practical level. In this process, the spiritual discourse is drawn upon in narrative constructions of self and community, and enacted to the extent that ultimately even the discrepancy between the real and the ideal is endowed with meaning.

The spiritual basis and ideals of the community allow members to, in Jerome Bruner's words, "be bound in a set of connecting stories" which allow members to narratively explicate even practical shortcomings and real-life difficulties experienced (Bruner, J. 1990, 96). The problems faced and the discrepancy between life in the community and the ideals of Auroville, are narrated by the members of the community as meaningful bumps on the divine road.

Theoretical Perspectives

Let me briefly outline my theoretical perspectives and use of key concepts. Firstly, I need to clarify the understanding that informs the concepts of religion and spirituality in this article, both in terms of how I use them theoretically, and how they are used and understood by the Aurovilians themselves. In my theoretical understanding of the concepts I follow Talal Asad (1993). He views systems of belief termed religions as the outcome of socio-historical processes and argues that a universal definition of religion is impossible since any such definition itself inevitably will be the historical product of discursive processes which are always saturated with ideological claims to power, authority and legitimacy.

I view the concept of the spiritual as a socio-historical product, appropriated by Aurovilians in their orientation to the world. The spiritual discourse in Auroville is, as I will show, religiously orientated and informed by both Sri Aurobindo's Vedantic philosophical system and reflects salience with wider New Age conceptions, which also partly have roots in a Neo-Advaitan discourse. I take on a phenomenological outlook, which allows me to explore the spiritual as a modality of experience evoked by Aurovilians in the process of constructing meaningful individual and collective identities and life worlds. It involves "placing in brackets" or "setting aside" questions concerning the rational, ontological, or objective status of ideas and beliefs in order to fully describe and do justice to the ways in which people actually live, experience and use them" (Jackson 1996, 10).

My concern is with the ways in which Aurovilians draw on spirituality and their idea of Auroville in their individual self-identities and the implications of this for communal practice. Csordas' (1994) approach to the social construction of the Self as sacred provides a useful way to view the way in which Aurovilians construct spiritual selves in dialogical negotiation with the idea of Auroville as a spiritual community. Notions of the spiritual or sacred in his terminology are an expression of "an existential encounter with Otherness that is the touchstone of our humanity." Csordas advocates a grounding of culture and the self in embodied perception. The self is the embodied locus of perception and practice. Csordas defines the self as

neither substance nor entity, but an indeterminate capacity to engage or become oriented in the world, characterized by effort and reflexivity. In this sense "Self" occurs as a conjunction of pre-reflective bodily experiences, culturally constituted world or milieu, and situational specificity or habitus. (Ibid.,5.)

I argue following Csordas that self-processes are orientational processes in which aspects of the world are thematized with the result that the self is objectified, most often as a person with identities. It is this human capacity for self-objectification and self-direction which allows us to imagine and create new ways of being, albeit always embedded collective meanings and social relations, and it is in this process that agency is subject to forces of domination while also offering possibilities for at least partial liberation from such forces (Holland et. al. 1998). This human capacity for self-objectification is a cognitive capacity and as such there is no clear boundary between cognition and personality (Strauss 1992, 15).

Cognitive theories developing in anthropology have contributed to an understanding of personhood and identity by focusing on self-in-practice. The cognitive approach attempts to understand the processes by which "ambiguous, conflicting, and potentially impotent social messages become a basis for someone's action" (ibid., 2). To understand that we have to look at how social messages are rendered meaningful: how they are internalised by social actors. A cognitive framework thus contributes to my analysis as it centres on how dominant social ideologies are connected to people's experiences and the implications of this for identity formation. The narrative theories and cognitive theories I draw on in this article take as a central premise the continuing adjusting, reorganisation of meaning, identity and positions within the "figured worlds" [5] people inhabit and within which the dialogical construction of self, identity and agency takes place (Holland et. al.1998, 49; Bruner, J. 1990, 2001; Freeman and Brockmeier 2001; Bruner E. et al. 1984).

These theories focus on the role of socio-historic processes in heuristic construction of identities and emphasise the dialogic development of "persons, cultural forms, and social positions in particular historical worlds" (Holland et al. 1998, 33). The cognitive approach suggests that discourse is a pivotal entry point into a figured world. Commitments are not just preference - they are ontology and as such guide desires and actions in the world. Such ontology is revealed in discourses. As Strauss claims,[p]eople's talk (as well as less spontaneous cultural texts) - is shaped

by a variety of considerations: not only the momentary conscious ones but also less conscious intuitions about what is interesting, funny, normal and right (Strauss 1997, 241).

This is very important as Auroville is a figured world where verbal discourse is highly valued. Following Hanks (1996) I view Auroville's spiritualised language as a social act, and utterances as performative, constitutive of identity. Language, Hanks argues, and the world of human experience, are interrelated. To speak is to "occupy the world, not only to represent it (ibid., 236)." In Hanks' practice theory of language the performative effectiveness of a speech act is a consequence of it being

an emergent feature of practice, an unavoidable part of talk under the conditions of differential power, authority and legitimacy authorised speakers make reality when they speak We all exercise this sort of power on a small scale repeatedly in our daily lives. (Ibid., 236 - 237).

The communicative power of Auroville's spiritualised language rests on Aurovilians' ability to orient themselves verbally, perceptually, and physically to each other and their social world. I follow Gergen (1994) in his view that "narratives of the self are not personal impulses made social, but social processes realised on the site of the personal" (1994, 210, quoted in Holland et al. 1998, 292). Narratives are expressive embodiments of human experience, a mode of communication and ultimately the medium within which we understand ourselves, the world and orient ourselves in it. The narrative approach to identity insists that identity formation is dialogical and it allows me to understand how Aurovilians, through their narratives, lend meaning to and position themselves within the "figured world" of Auroville, and it is therefore complementary to the cognitive approach to meaning (Freeman & Brockmeier 2001; Bruner 1990, 2001).

Syncretism at Work: the Dominant Spiritual Discourse

I want to take an excursion to introduce Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the spiritual philosophy to which Auroville is dedicated. A large number of Aurovilians and my informants have read biographies of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and identify strongly with them. Many narrate their own life turning points and connection to India in a way that reflects the life histories of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Further, this detour illuminates the syncretism of Auroville's spiritual discourse and places it in a broader historical frame. Examining the components of the spiritual discourse, which translates as dominant ideology in the Auroville context, is essential in understanding how India is reified by my informants as the spiritual motherland par excellence.

Sri Aurobindo and the Foundations of the Auroville Spirituality

Aurobindo Akroyd Ghose was born in India in 1872. At the age of seven his father sent him to England where he received a classical British education during which he was introduced to Indian religious thought and read the Upanishads in an English translation. Upon his return to India in 1893, he took up service under the Maharaja of Baroda where he studied Indian philosophy, Sanskrit and the Vedas – the scriptures of which he translated and reinterpreted.

He became a radical and outspoken Nationalist who based his political convictions on religious grounds, in effect rejecting the distinction between religious and secular as an artificial construct of western origin (Sri Aurobindo 1995 & 1997; Minor 1999, 20). Sri Aurobindo was jailed by the British in 1908 under the charge of terrorist activity. During his one-year imprisonment he claimed he had key spiritual experiences, which led him to realise and experience the truth of the Vedas, scriptures he believed he had previously only understood intellectually (Sri Aurobindo 1997; Minor 1999, 21). These experiences changed his approach to the nationalist cause. He withdrew from public life and took refuge in French Pondicherry where an ashram grew around him and where he developed his Integral Yoga. Behind this decision was what he experienced as a spiritual realisation and divine guidance towards “inner work,” which he believed capable of affecting external realities (ibid., 23). The Integral yoga, which Sri Aurobindo termed his system of spiritual philosophy, is in essence Vedantic but also integrates elements from Yoga, Tantra and Darwin’s theory of evolution (Sri Aurobindo 1997; Flood 1998, 270; Minor 1999) He described the Integral Yoga as an exercise in the systematic “evolution of consciousness” and was hence inscribing his thought into a popular trend of the time, that of applying Darwin’s theory of evolution to the spiritual realm (Herrick 2003, 120).

Sri Aurobindo’s thought adopts the rhetoric of India as an inherently spiritual Other to a materialist and rationalist west. In 1918 Sri Aurobindo wrote:

Either India will be rationalised out of all recognition and she will no longer be India or else she will be the leader in a new world-phase, aid by her example and cultural infiltration the new tendencies of the West and spiritualise the human race. (Sri Aurobindo, 1995, 10.)

For Sri Aurobindo, the true nationalist cause was spiritual in the sense that the true nationalist understood his role as a “divine instrument” (Minor 1999, 20).

The Indian religious thinker knows that all the highest eternal verities are truths of the spirit. The supreme truths are neither the rigid conclusions of logical reasoning nor the affirmations of creedal statement, but fruit of the soul’s inner experience. (Sri Aurobindo 1995, 124.)

In Sri Aurobindo’s nationalism the key to self-rule was a revival of Vedic truths. The emphasis on the soul’s inner experience and personal revelation presented in Sri Aurobindo’s thought, and echoed in my informants’ worldview, places them within the tradition of Advaita Vedanta through Ramakrishna [6] (1836 - 86) and particularly his disciple Swami Vivekananda [7] (1863–1902). Vedanta has been of great importance in the development of a modern dominant Neo Hindu self understanding and crucial in formulating the West’s view of Hinduism (Flood 1998, 256–259; Minor 1999, 21). The idea of Hinduism as an all encompassing and scientific religion led Aurobindo to envision the distinctions between religious, the secular, the political, social action and nationalist struggle as artificial illusions.

For Sri Aurobindo, behind the many different strands of Hindu thought and practice, and indeed all world religions, there is one eternal religion, the Sanatana Dharma. The longing for syncretism and the search for an underlying Truth uniting all religions is a

current running through various spiritual and religious movements, from renaissance Europe's Gnostic and Mystic movements to Theosophy and Vedanta. All see Divinity as diffused throughout the universe and all things as ultimately One (ibid., 45; Fontana 2003, 7–9; Ellwood 1979). In Sri Aurobindo's writings, the view of India and Hinduism is constantly in conversation and response to the writings of scholars such as G. W. H. Hegel (1770–1831) and Max Müller (1823–1900), who within the evolutionary framework of their day, put Hinduism and Eastern traditions in general on the scholarly map. Both have strongly influenced popular western conceptions of Hinduism. The writings of Sri Aurobindo echo a historical dialecticism and the vision of a universal cosmic process moving towards perfection. Sri Aurobindo's thought and system of spiritual philosophy draw on these intellectual legacies. This intellectual history is also part of the cultural baggage/history, which informs my informants' navigation in, and orientation towards, their conception of spiritual India.

The Mother

Mira Alfassa was, a native of France, was a devotee of Sri Aurobindo since first meeting him in Pondyicherry in 1914.

As soon as I saw Sri Aurobindo I recognised in him the well-known being whom I used to call Krishna my place and my work are near him, in India. (The Mother 1989, 22.)

In 1920 she settled in Sri Aurobindo's ashram and their relationship developed into a close collaboration. Sri Aurobindo came to see in Mira Alfassa, The Mother, an avatar of the divine power or divine consciousness and force (Shakti), for him identical to the guiding principle of the evolution of the universe (Sri Aurobindo 1928, 64).

Shakti is the energising power of deities that is marked as female and, reflecting the classical idea, in popular Hinduism the gods commonly require female consorts – their shaktis – in order to act. (Fuller 1992, 44.)

In Sri Aurobindo's thought, the Avatar has a two-fold mission and in the collaboration between The Mother and himself whom he declared were One, were dividing the mission. Outwardly, The Mother comes to lead humanity to a new social order, Auroville and eventually the world. Inwardly, he (Sri Aurobindo) fosters the ascent of the human soul to divinity. (Sri Aurobindo, 1997, 210). After the death of Sri Aurobindo The Mother became a guru in her own right and envisioned Auroville as a place dedicated to the living of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual philosophy. It is as seen to be embodying this divine force or power that her authority and influence on Auroville is meaningful to my informants.

It is also in the light of this tradition that Sri Aurobindo's declaration of Mira Alfassa as The Mother makes sense, and it is in the ascription of the goddess powers and qualities to her that the concept of The Mother is meaningful both to Aurovilians and to the many Hindus who worship her. The Auroville Mother is identified as a major character, the female goddess, in Hindu religious narrative and thereby become part of an unfolding story as she is inscribed in a bigger narrative. It is these references that

are central to the establishment of The Mother's authority in Auroville, and to her status as collectively held symbol of the earthly manifestation of the spiritual ideals.

The Idea of Auroville

Auroville as a Creation of Avatars

Fundamental to Auroville's spiritual ideals is a widely shared belief in an aspect of reality beyond, yet basic to, the ordinary existence and experience. This aspect is understood and referred indirectly to as an esoteric and occult dimension accessible to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. It is as avatars, seen as in-touch with this esoteric reality, that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have authority and function as collective symbols, drawn upon both by individuals and the community collectively. The texts of Sri Aurobindo and of The Mother in particular, function as formal scriptures in Auroville. They inform all guidelines, published and spoken, about life in the community, and in this sense, I argue, the spiritual discourse is religiously orientated. These scriptures along with various other publications of, and about, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, serve as literary points of reference in the dominant spiritual discourse. They are quoted widely in all public materials and discussions within the community.

In August 1954, four years after Sri Aurobindo's death, The Mother claimed to receive occult knowledge that

There should be somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world and obey one single authority, that of the supreme truth (Mother's Agenda 1988 [8].)

In the mid 1960's she declared that

India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth and it is in India that there be cure, and it is for that I had to create Auroville from the spiritual point of view, India is the foremost country of the world. Her mission is to set the example of spirituality. Sri Aurobindo came on earth to teach this to the world. (Master plan perspective 2005, 11.)

It was a project long underway. Not until 1968 was the project formally inaugurated. The invitation to Auroville's Inauguration Ceremony, held 28th of February 1968, read: "The whole world will play a part in laying the foundation stone of Auroville the town dedicated to the youth of the world in order to establish a union of comprehensive harmony within mankind [9]."

At the ceremony, young people from 124 countries and 23 Indian States and Union Territories placed earth from their native places in an urn at the site of the Matrimandir together with earth from the Ashram and from Auroville to symbolically enact the envisioned "union of comprehensive harmony" in mankind, a rhetoric which echoes the unity in diversity of the neo-Hindu position. A brick was laid in order to symbolise the beginning of construction of the township. A French architect, Roger

Anger, appointed by the Mother, developed a model, which is referred to as the Master Plan for the future city. The Master plan was envisioned as reflecting the spiritual ideals of Sri Aurobindo and in the futuristic vocabulary of utopia named the Galaxy Plan. Adherents of the Mother shared her belief that on an occult level Auroville was (is) the answer to the problems of the world, a “cradle for the evolution of man,” a place where mankind’s evolution towards perfection would be speeded up.

In the official rhetoric surrounding the inauguration and in the official documents this occult side was played down. In Mother’s Agenda, published in the 1970’s it is clearly an aim, and the Agenda describes how the Mother deliberately downplayed this aspect in order to get funding and support. The perceived occult purpose however, is an important aspect of the dominant spiritual discourse, although it is often not directly stated.

Auroville wasn’t preceded by any thought; as always it was simply a Force acting, like a sort of absolute manifesting, and it was so strong Even if you don’t believe in it, even if all the all circumstances appear to be quite unfavourable, I KNOW THAT AUROVILLE WILL BE (Mothers Agenda 1988).

One informant cryptically explained to me that “Auroville already exists. Or you might say, if you put it into spatial terms, Auroville is already here on a subtle level, and we are just the midwives to let it come down [10].” The gist of this comment was echoed and shared by many other informants. The mythical nature of both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s narratives lend force to both individual and collective identities and provide the background for narratives of justification and integrity.

The government of India officially approved the project, Indira Gandhi met and was photographed with foreign delegates arriving to attend the inauguration ceremony, and at a general conference in Paris, in October 1966, UNESCO endorsed Auroville as an experiment in Human Unity. The air of optimism surrounding the project could, to a contemporary onlooker, seem rather naive. However, the fact that India had only relatively recently gained independence and was celebrating Sri Aurobindo as a national hero, freedom fighter and acclaimed spokesperson for an independent India, together with the general rapidly changing and expanding climate of the 1960s, goes some way to explain the optimism and publicity with which the project was received. Until her death in 1973, the Mother guided the project from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, giving Darshans and advising Aurovilians. She personally foresaw the admissions of people to the project and allowed for a minimum level of rules and regulations. After her death, a bitter dispute developed between the majority of the Aurovilians and the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS). The SAS was initially set up as Auroville’s Financial Governing Board under the general framework of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry to foresee the fundraising for the Auroville project.

The SAS wanted to gain control of the Auroville project and the vast funds it attracted from the Indian Government and various organisations. They saw the project as too experimental and “hippie-like,” while the majority of Aurovilians wanted to break

free from what they experienced as a dogmatic religious organisation far in spirit from the ideals that had attracted them to the project.

A Spiritual Social Experiment?

In 1980 on request of a group of Aurovilians, the government passed The Auroville Emergency Provisions Act. This Act consolidated Auroville as a “social experiment dedicated to the promotion of international understanding and the realisation of an actual human unity.” The SAS argued in the Supreme Court that Auroville as a religious community was out of bounds of intervention from a secular state while Aurovilians argued that Auroville is based on the visions and spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga, it was argued, is a science, not a religion, because it is based on experience, not on religious beliefs. The verdict in favour of Auroville, with its acceptance of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga as a science reflects India’s ambiguous attempt to establish itself as a secular state. It also reflects that on an operational level the term secular in the Indian context historically translates as the all-inclusive Neo-Hindu position advocated politically as civic religion by the powerful Nehru-Gandhian political leaders. In Neo-Advaitan understandings, Hinduism is civic in the sense that it is seen to be religion in the singular and the essence of all religions (Minor 1999).

The meanings attached to the involvement of the Indian Government are, however, ambivalent and ambiguous. On one hand, the government’s rescue of Auroville from the Sri Aurobindo Society is narrated as testifying to the essential spiritual nature of India. On the other hand, many informants expressed the view that the government’s involvement forced Auroville to adapt a more bureaucratic organisational set-up, eroding the sense of community.

The battle and court case between Auroville and the SAS is interpreted and narrated by the majority of Aurovilians as potent with spiritual significance. Further, the conflict has been instrumental in creating the present organisational set-up of Auroville, and informs narratives of justification for the present situation. The “authoritative voice” in the community, the one responsible for liaison with the government, can draw on the narrative framework of the dominant spiritual discourse and construct the developments in the community as the result of an inevitable divine evolution. The “authoritative voice” can, by using the framework of the dominant spiritual discourse, construct narratives, which naturalise and de-politicise their official vision for the community’s development. Aurovilians, who were active in various working groups and involved in the organisational development of the community, generally adhered to this dominant position. They expressed the view that the Indian government forces Auroville, for better and worse, to get its act together and develop a more transparent organisational set-up. However, many informants who were not actively part of working groups and the administrative organisation of the community, expressed views echoing this one: “the sad thing about Auroville is always being at the mercy of the government and not being able to do what we want to” [11].

Others were more concerned that the Indian government, with the Foundation Act, laid the basis for a take-over. One key informant sarcastically said that the Indian government “let a bunch of crazy foreigners do the hard work in the boiling heat while they plan to take over the Matrimandir when it is finished [12].” However, it seems that the people who had this personal experience, found more salience in the government involvement and read it as supporting their Auroville identity, while the people not actively involved in this side of community life felt it to be a threat to their Auroville identity.

My informant’s stories of The Beginning, the struggle between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo society, always deployed a romantic framework. A morally superior hero (Auroville) fights a much stronger but morally inferior villain (the SAS) and is in the end vindicated by the courts of their true spiritual homeland - Mother India (Bharat Ma). These stories provide a collective narrative framework, which can be drawn on to lend meaning to current conflicts of interests. Further, it lends a strong sense of purpose (plot) to personal narratives.

The utopian aspect of the community coupled with the spiritual discourse draws legitimacy from inscribing Auroville’s story in a bigger narrative of spiritual evolution, thereby implicating Auroville and Aurovilians in a story with perceived significance for the world’s development. By linking narratives of personal spiritual quests to the Auroville project and its purpose of spiritual magnitude and importance, personal narratives can transcend the everyday quandaries of life and assume greater significance.

Reifications

India as World Guru and Auroville as the City the Earth Needs

As I have shown, the idea of independent India in the role of World Guru providing a spiritual dimension to the rational scene of world politics is an important part of Sri Aurobindo’s teachings and the ideals of Auroville. The dominant spiritual discourse in Auroville relies on, and reifies both the idea of India and Hinduism (in its true, Sri Aurobindonian form) as inherently spiritual - albeit its expression in contemporary Hindu culture is seen to have been corrupted; as well as a disenchanting view of western culture which is seen to have cultivated a material rationality at the expense of true spirituality. The location of Auroville in India, as a designated space for “living the Integral Yoga,” rests on the idea of community as the locus of this shared worldview, a community marking itself off as a symbolically constructed Other, distinct from reified constructions of the rational west and religious India. Many of my informants, who resisted being called religious, very much subscribed to this understanding.

This Neo-Advaitan, inclusivist spiritual discourse, of which Sri Aurobindo’s position, as I have shown, also forms part of, has the power to subordinate all positions into its own logic. Ironically, the intervention of the government in Auroville affairs, which allowed Auroville to separate legally from the SAS, symbolically reinforced and reified, in my informants view, the construction of India as a spiritual Other to a

material and rational West. To my informants India is the land of spiritual opportunity. They consider this proved and illustrated by the fact that the Government and the legal system took the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother seriously. In my informants' narratives these events are alluded to as testifying to the inherent spirituality of India, a country where judges in the Supreme Court discuss questions of yoga.

As this informant said: "The powerful part of India is a gift to the world. A deeply ingrained, much more complex idea of what is God or the divine, the Universe." [13] The idea of Auroville as drawing on India's true spirituality is an important aspect of my informants understanding of, and attraction to Auroville, and a vital element of their communal identity.

In the Master Plan Perspective published in 2002, the role of India as World Guru, and the firm belief in the universal importance of Auroville and the ideological content of the Auroville Charter, are still heralded as important guiding principles for the development of Auroville. The stress on the universal relevance of the Auroville project in realising human unity, and the role played by spiritual India in this realisation, is an important part of the self-representation of the community and lends meaning to individual narratives of belonging. Other cultures are, in the dominant Auroville spiritual discourse, portrayed in a reified and essentialised manner. My informants reified their Aurovilian-ness, Indian culture and western culture by drawing on the spiritual discourse in their continuous effort to produce meaningful identities.

The construction of Aurovilian-ness, even in its most individualised practices, also results from a validation of the past. Sri Aurobindo and The Mothers spiritual philosophy offers a Grand Narrative of meaning one that provided these informants with answers to ultimate concerns. The mythical genre of Sri Aurobindo's writings provides a narrative framework, which, by placing the Divine in the world in an unfolding evolutionary storyline naturalises history. The emphasis on experience and inner personal realisation provide adherents who follow his yoga with a strong sense of agency and meaning. If you "open yourself to the force" and "let the Divine force do its evolutionary work of transformation," your personal transformation will be linked to that of the cosmos. It is a spiritual philosophy, which allows the individual a sense of freedom as there is no authority apart from your own inner realisation, and progress is measured autonomously in your ability to surrender to a higher force. In this mythical narrative framework trials are reversed, lost strikes become victories and failure is only temporary and meaningful for the future.

"It is an Inner Discipline"

Religions are in Auroville generally regarded as expressions of closed institutionalised and dogmatic outer systems of ultimate concern, signifying the spiritual poverty and stagnation of the old world. Within Auroville's spiritual discourse, religious systems are deemed as belonging to a phase of mankind's evolution that must be surpassed if the human species is to evolve and realise its truly divine nature. The inherent principle of divine aspiration is considered spiritual and

the essence of human nature (inner). If consciously allowed to guide life, it is believed to help mankind accomplish the evolutionary leap towards realising the divine in life and in the material world. Aurovilians in general resist being called religious, and insistently refer to their idea of the sacred as spiritual. On the subject of religion a book of practical information about the community reads:

There are no religions in Auroville. While they are generally respected as chosen paths to the Divine for most people, they are seen as a source of division, and not conducive to the achievement of Auroville's prime aim, an actual unity in diversity. Aurovilians are instead expected to lead a spiritual life. (Auroville in a Nutshell 2002, 17.)

In the Auroville context, as I have shown in the previous section, the idea of the spiritual is very much informed by Vedanta, as can also be discerned from this quote on the spiritual life or practices expected of Aurovilians:

All Aurovilians are expected to live a spiritually based and motivated life, though this does not mean that they put into practice in any overt or obvious way e.g. collective meditations etc. It is an inner discipline, pursued by each individual according to his/her personal understanding, capacity and commitment. Most Aurovilians do their work in the spirit of karma Yoga, taking guidance from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. (Ibid., 19.)

The dominant spiritual discourse in Auroville, as the quotes above illustrate, relies on the commonplace conceptual divide between religious and spiritual. In the spiritualised language of my informants, this is also a rhetoric of outer and inner realities. In Auroville, the concept of spirituality translates as an individual inner orientation towards a sacred realm of existence, an orientation in the world towards the divine. In Auroville this sacred realm is communal in the sense that it is all-embracing and inclusive, but access to this realm is believed to be achieved through individual spiritual practice.

A Sacred Place of Meaning

Communal stories in Auroville draw on the spiritual discourse in order to construct Auroville as a sacred site: The City of Dawn. The name marks the landscape as a special spiritual place, and the stories attached to it make the site “resonate with history and experience” (Bruner & Gorfain 1984, 5). The permanence of the geographical site, despite its unclear boundaries becomes the anchor for the narratives of the spiritual discourse. Auroville becomes the site for Divine Evolution, a special place: the cradle of a new spiritual species. Most informants and Aurovilians I came across, except a handful of newcomers, subscribed to the view expressed in this informant's statement: “I believe that in Auroville there is a kind of force that is very creative energy [14].”

Anthropological approaches to narrative have emphasised the fact that narratives and stories are embedded – as identities are constructed – in particular places. “It is stories that connect the identity of people with the identity of places and spaces; in fact it is

here where the very sense of a local identity emerges and takes shape (Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001, 12).” The evolutionary master narrative of Auroville’s spiritual discourse links communal and personal identities by anchoring them in a place of meaning. Auroville stories and Aurovilians’ autobiographies intersect. All my informants were motivated in one way or another by the utopian dream and a moral desire to participate in the creation of a better world: a place where they could live their version of the good life. In their narratives they seek to construct salient self-images by establishing a narrative integrity between social (emplaced) identity and personal sense of a spiritual self.

The spiritual discourse with its ultimate value on the inner renders disputes, resulting from attempts to materially realise utopia, insignificant in the light of its own ideals. As Ricoeur puts it: “In utopia no goals conflict, all ends are compatible (1986, 307).” Auroville is, as an intentional community, an attempted spiritual Utopia. In the narrative framework of the spiritual discourse the figured world of Auroville is constructed as a special and sacred place. Keith Basso (1984) has shown how narratives transform geographical landscapes into moral ones, allowing the sharing of places and the stories attached to them to form the basis of communal attachments and personal experience and sentiments. Bruner and Gorfain (1984) also explore and emphasise the significant relationship between stories and place. They argue that shared stories are devices for fixing meaning in order to stabilise the fragile interpretive process.

Drawing on Ricoeur’s conception as laid out by Brockmeier, I understand narrative time as “the temporal order of meaning that emerges in the narrative process (Brockmeier 2001, 271).” It is, as I will now show, by connecting their personal autobiographical time with the ideal, moral time through place that almost all informants’ narratives I recorded and heard in the field established links between a protagonist’s sense of self and their sense of belonging to Auroville as a special place with a special communal identity.

The Mother: the Uniting Image of a Transcendent Community

Cohen (1985) argues that community is a symbol, which provides us with the capacity to create meaning. Social categories like community with elusive meanings are hedged around an ambiguous symbolism and exist largely in terms of their symbolic boundaries. Attempts to define them with precision almost inevitably fail and their expression takes form in a commonly accepted symbol, which can gloss over the range of different meanings adherents attach to it.

Aurovilians share the symbol of their spiritual community in the image of the Mother, but they do not uniformly share its meanings. The Mother, I argue, is the image of communality and her picture, words and guidelines are drawn on to create the feeling of communal belonging. As the symbolic image of community, the Mother allows Aurovilians to struggle and dispute over the practicalities of everyday life in the community, while still symbolically fighting under the same banner.

Probing for the reasons for and possible functions of displaying the Mother's picture everywhere in public, despite the fact that she had specifically said there was to be no public displays of herself and Sri Aurobindo, my informants' replies invariably led to responses drawing on the inner/outer dichotomy, rejecting community as an outer, artificial construction. As one informant put it, when I asked if the pictures of the Mother aimed at exhibiting unity:

It would be a very external bonding if that is all. You know, and then you might as well not have it. If it is this last fix, that's why I think it would be better to remove it. I am not publicly opposing it, because for many people it is okay, but I can well identify with people who come here and see all these huge pictures and wonder "who's that woman?" It creates a kind of imposition, which might even block the way to finding the true meaning behind it. We should be more conscious of it. We shouldn't hide it, but we also shouldn't force it on people. [15]

As this statement exemplifies, my informants constantly engage in, draw on and contend with the spiritual discourse. It provides an interpretive frame wherein these narratives are socially situated and hence rendered meaningful. As the quote above illustrates, my informants draw on this spiritual discourse to construct a narrative of justification. Community is something more than external bonding. By narratively drawing on the inner/outer dichotomy of the spiritual discourse my informants can communicate and construct a sense of belonging to the spiritual community and the true meaning behind it. This informant's narrative also highlights the existence of an authoritative voice, which he does not publicly oppose. In all my conversations and interviews in the field, this authoritative voice was either adhered to or opposed. Both sides understanding, but not necessarily agreeing, that as a true Aurovilian one should "look inside" rather than oppose others. Aurovilians behind the "authoritative voice" set the agenda in the public arena by their position of liaison with the government. The Aurovilians adhering to this authoritative voice rule by a powerful hegemonic discursive rendering of the ideals, communicated in the language of commitment of the dominant spiritual discourse. The authoritative voice sets the agenda for the practical development and organisation of the community. In other words, the spiritual discourse in Auroville is symbolic capital and the language in which identities and positions are navigated and accorded value.

Narrative Integrity: Anchoring Self and Community in Spiritual India

My informant's stories become extraordinary and worthy of attention by invoking a sense of inevitability. Drawing on a pre-determined logic things are narrated as happening despite themselves in the inevitable logic of divine evolution. Narrative integrity encompasses both aesthetics and ethics and therefore, following Freeman and Brockmeier, I consider it a dialectical structure of meaning-making. Personal and communal stories in Auroville showed a high degree of narrative integrity, despite various renderings of the ideals. The spiritual discourse offers a narrative framework and a shared spiritualised language of commitment, which allowed individual and collective stories to connect in spirit, and narratively if not practically, reconcile

disputes and unite in a “shared horizon” (Taylor 1989). In the next section I shall give examples of how this is done, using excerpts from interviews.

Bruner argues that by autobiographical convention the authoring self

must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. Now in order to do that, one needs a theory of growth or at least of transformation. (2001, 28.)

The spiritual discourse with its divine evolutionary framework is precisely that, as I have shown in previous chapters. It provides a canonical narrative teleology in which autobiographical turning points can be embedded and shared. Bruner argues:

there is one feature of western autobiography that needs special mention. It is the highlighting or “marking” of turning points. By “turning points” I mean those episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agents intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought. (Ibid., 31 - 32.)

As my informants’ narratives clearly show, turning points are quintessential for identity formation. Further, they are a way in which people “free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality (Ibid, 34).” However, as Freeman points out, even autobiographical narratives are never “our own.” They are, like all stories co-authored, socially, culturally and discursively situated, hence always dialogically formed (Freeman 2001, 287; Bruner & Gorfain 1984). As Bruner notes,

[w]hile Self is regarded (at least in Western ideology) as the most “private” aspect of our being, it turns out on close inspection to be highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one’s own reference group (2001, 34).

Many of my informants, and western Aurovilians in general came to Auroville as part of a pilgrimage to India. For many old timers meeting the Mother is narrated as the ultimate turning point in their lives. Many narratives also offered stories of the transformation of the land as a powerful metaphor for the underlying spiritual purpose and aim of Auroville. Often informants, western and Indian, in their narratives emphasized an identification with India as the spiritual Motherland both their personal one and also the world’s in general. Almost all narratives I heard and recorded in the field constructed Auroville as a special place of “Mother’s force” and a place of transformation of the self. The feeling of coming home when reaching India was a recurrent theme in my informant’s narratives as the following brief excerpt from another life history interview shows:

There is something, which Mother talked about, a psychic presence in India, which is very strong, and I can see that. You talk to Europeans, and Europeans are all in the head, yah. The whole gang is up here [gesture indicating “up”]. You go to India and you see another type of beauty. It is

completely different. I felt like homecoming when I first arrived. I automatically fused with this tremendous sweetness. [16]

As this narrative shows, the feeling of coming home when reaching India is explained by referring to the existence of a psychic presence in India. In his narrative he also draws on the often-used authenticating device of “Mother said.” The following quote, also an excerpt from a life history interview, similarly draws on the force of spiritual India in order to link a spiritual self-emerging in a teleological autobiographical narrative to the spiritual community and the force behind it. She said:

For me also the contact with India is important, the contact with the Mother goddess touched me very much. [...] I came to India because I was looking for something. And when I came here I realised that India is the Mother. It has that whole vibrant quality of the Mother, and then I met the Mother, and then I knew that this was what I was looking for. And I went out to Auroville, and I knew it was my place. It is so wide, there are no limitations. Even though I was not aware of just how at the time. [17]

These narratives highlight the important moral and ethical aspects of autobiographical stories. All the above narratives, which have a high degree of narrative integrity with others I heard in the field, locate the protagonist firmly within the worldview of the dominant spiritual discourse. The spiritual selves who emerge in these narratives are narratively linked to India and Auroville; as places of divine force. I argue that narrating their life stories in the spiritualised language of commitment – highlighting turning points of transcendence - and drawing on the narrative framework of the dominant spiritual discourse, provides Aurovilians with a way of cognitively linking self and communal identity. It is by embedding personal experience in the master narrative of the spiritual discourse and using this vocabulary that one becomes, to oneself and others, an Aurovilian.

Communal guidelines about spiritual orientation in Auroville are open enough as to include and guide Aurovilians towards a spiritual identity they consider true and meaningful while not imposing restrictions on individual autonomy. The spiritualised language of the dominant spiritual discourse places ultimate authority on the individual who – as long as he/she accepts and preferably shares the equation of community with the “underlying ideal of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s conception” – is free to be autonomous. The spiritualised language of commitment is a cultural tool with which Aurovilians can share in the collective symbol of spiritual community. Further, it allows them to communicate their position, commitment and belonging to a meaningful community in spirit, even if in their everyday practice, practical expressions of communality are minimal.

Endnotes

[1] “Aurovilian,” in this spelling, is the name given by the Mother to the residents of Auroville. To become an Aurovilian one has to formally apply to an Entry Group and pass a two-year newcomer period. Once accepted as a member of the community the name of the new Aurovilian is entered on the official master list of residents and given status, and in the case of foreign nationals, visa by the Indian government as Honary Voluntary worker.

[2] S, Swiss, interview June 16th 2002.

[3] I understand the concept of discourse as a system of meaning which actors engage in when formulating their view of the world. Discourses are always fields of competing rationales and voices. Discourses formulate terminologies and are appropriated as actors construct their subjectivities in practice. This definition is inspired by Holland et al. 1998.

[4] Based on the Veda’s: the earliest Hindu scriptures composed 1500–500 BCE. Advaita Vedanta: School of Vedanta based on non duality (Flood 1998).

[5] A “figured world” is an analytical abstraction, which connotes the view that a particular social world is formed and re-formed in relation to everyday activities, and events that ordain happenings within it (Holland et al. 1998, 53).

[6] Ramakrishna was a Hindu mystic and priest at the Kali Temple at Daksinesvar north of Calcutta. He was devoted to the Kali Goddess, an aspect of the Mother Goddess. Through the practice of meditation and the study of other religions such as Christianity and Islam he concluded that all religions are true paths to “One Eternal Religion” (Flood 1998, 257).

[7] In 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Vivekananda preached the doctrine of unity of all religions. He asserted that the diversity of religious expression should be seen as valuable expressions of the same underlying “Truth.” Swami Vivekananda travelled to the West to promote his ideas and to argue for Hinduism’s acknowledgement as a world religion. He was convinced, as was Sri Aurobindo, of the spiritual superiority of the East, while acknowledging the material superiority of the West, and his teachings provided a strong ideological link between Neo-Vedanta and Indian Nationalism, a strand taken up by Sri Aurobindo.

[8] Printed in “The Ideals of Auroville.” Pamphlet given to newcomers as part of “Joining Auroville” material.

[9] Invitation to Auroville’s inauguration, February 1968. Source: Auroville Archives. Printed at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

[10] Interview with Working Committee member, February 17th 2002.

[11] BI, Indian, informal chat, April 23rd 2002.

[12] P, French, informal conversation, March 17th 2002. This quote also reflects how irony and sarcasm is drawn upon as a mode of resistance.

[13] PA, German, interview April 17th 2002.

[14] RA, Indian, informal chat February 3rd 2002.

[15] FE, German, interview June 19th 2002.

[16] C, Dutch, interview April 23rd 2002.

[17] J, Swedish, interview June 21st 2002.

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