

ri Aurobindo Movement and the Baha'i Faith

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Anil Sarwal

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Yet shall Truth grow and harmony increase

The day shall come when men feel close and one;

Meanwhile one forward step is something gained

Since little by little earth must open to heaven

Till her dim soul awakes into the light. [1]

-Sri Aurobindo

The yellow flowers were dropping from the huge tree spread like an umbrella over the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in Pondicherry as if in a shower of divine blessings. The residents of Sri Aurobindo Ashram and visitors poured in to pay their obeisance. After words, they settled down in the vicinity of the Samadhi for some time in a meditative mood. As I hastened to take my place on the ground I felt my innermost core touched by the aura of serenity that enveloped the place. I prayed for Divine Grace to know more about the spiritual association of the Ashram with the Bahá'í Faith.

The flow of my thoughts was interrupted when I met Uttama, a young Ashramite and a teacher at the Sri Aurobindo School, whom I had met earlier and talked about my purpose. She had remembered having read about the meetings between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Mother. Presently we had some discussion about the Bahá'í Temple at New Delhi and Uttama told me that most of the Ashramites had heard about the Temple and were impressed by its architectural design. She also said that most of the Ashramites were aware of the Bahá'í teachings and the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá because the Mother had spoken very highly of him. She recommended a few books on the subject and suggested that I look them up at the Ashram's Archives and library.

Pondicherry, which houses the World Headquarters of the Sri Aurobindo Movement, is a coastal town in the South of India, about 160 kilometres from Madras. It is the place which Sri Aurobindo, an Indian revolutionary-turned-spiritualist chose to carry forward his life's mission after he was forced to leave his home

town in West Bengal during the last years of India's freedom struggle (1910). He was joined in 1911 by a French lady, originally called Mirza (Alfassa) Richard who believed that she had been in spiritual communication with Sri Aurobindo before actually meeting him. Later she was known as 'The Mother'. Sri Aurobindo vested his full authority in her and it was she who looked after and furthered the affairs of the Ashram throughout his life and after words till her death in 1973. At present some 2700 Sadhaks and Sadhikas live and carry out their daily activities in the 400 buildings of the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo Society has now 400 centres in India and 30 abroad. The writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been published in 30 and 16 volumes respectively.

The division of Sri Aurobindo, which advocates spiritual enrichment of life on this planet, inspired the Mother to lay the foundation of an international city named Auroville 12 kilometres away from Pondicherry where people from some 55 nationalities are now permanently settled. Here the Mother also laid the foundation of a Temple in 1968 known as Matri Mandir (Mother Temple). In the foreground is the inaugural lotus shaped urn in which sand from many countries was poured at the time of the foundation laying ceremony. Many world languages are inscribed on its surface.

The Mother met Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1913 during his second visit to France.[2] This period according to her own testimony was the most important for her spiritual growth.[3] She attended many Bahá'í meetings held at the homes of Monsieur and Mme Dreyfus Barney, M. and Mme. Scott and Miss Edith Sanderson. These were the early French Bahá'ís and some of them had taken pilgrimage to Akká. They were the constant companions of Abdu'l-Bahá whenever he visited France. Hippolyte Dreyfus was the first Bahá'í of the France and he translated into French 'Some Answered Questions' compiled by the famous Laura Clifford Barney, his wife. The Mother in her 'Causeries' manuscripts mentions having met these friends and having attended these meetings. She sometimes spoke at these gatherings herself.

In one of her published talks, the Mother mentioned that one day 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked her to speak in his place because he was not well. She was 'startled', unprepared as she was to hear such a request, herself not being a Bahá'í. However after some persuasion she went and delivered a talk on living the life.[4] In this meeting on March 10, 1913, she thus spoke of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "But 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not content to give us this teaching, he is living it, and therein lies all his power of persuasion." And she continued, "Indeed who has seen 'Abdu'l-Bahá and not felt in his presence this perfect goodness, this sweet serenity, this peace emanating from his being.[5]

Needless to say that the Mother was greatly impressed by the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and though formally she was not a Bahá'í she had great faith in the things taught by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.[6] This is why she held long discussions with 'Abdu'l-Bahá on spiritual subjects. Perhaps one such meeting has been mentioned by Balyuzi in his book on 'Abdu'l-Bahá in these words: "That night (May 18, 1913) He ('Abdu'l-Bahá) sat up with M. and Mme Richard (the Mother and her husband) until midnight, talking about mysticism and Sufi tenets and

practices, in answer to their questions.[7]

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá took leave to them, she spoke movingly of him in a gathering on June 9, 1913 in these words: "Last Monday 'Abdu'l-Bahá took leave of us; in a very few days he will leave Paris and I know many hearts will feel a great void and will grieve, yet only the body is leaving us'. His thought will remain faithfully, with us, and his unchanging affection will enfold us, and his spiritual influence will always be the same, absolutely the same. Whether materially he is near or far matters little, for the divine forces elude completely the laws of the material world: they are omnipresent, always at work to satisfy every receptivity, every sincere aspiration.[8]

True indeed was the Mother of her words, for 38 years later she spoke of him in the Ashram at Pondicherry in India with the same reverences, "I knew 'Abdu'l-Bahá very well. He was the son of the famous Bahá'u'lláh who had been put into prison for spreading ideas that were more progressive and broad minded than those of the Sufis, and was resented by orthodox Muslims'. He ('Abdu'l-Bahá) had an excellent nature. I liked him very much'[9]

While the mother remembered 'Abdu'l-Bahá for his glorious life, she could never forget what he had told her of the sacrifices of the earlier believers in Persia. In one of her talks on sacrifice she refers to Sulayman Khan about whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself had told her. Giving out details of his persecution by fixing lighted candles in the holes made in his body she writes of his joyous feelings because he was being persecuted for his faith. "Suffer! It is one of the most beautiful hours of my life'." She says, he is reported to have said when someone spoke to him about his sufferings. The Mother concludes with the remarks that generally people who have "suffered tortures for their faith, that is, for their highest thought, their most sublime ideal, have always felt a kind of divine grace helping them and keeping them from suffering'.[10]

We also know that Sri Aurobindo himself had the knowledge of the mission of Bahá'u'lláh. Speaking to a disciple on March 7, 1924 who told him that there were indications that Muslim fanaticism might disintegrate he commented that it would not be sufficient to "change their whole outlook. What is wanted is some new religious movement among the Mohammedans which would remodel their religion and change the stamp of their temperament. For instance, Bahá'ism in Persia that has given quite a different stamp to their temperament." [11] Sri Aurobindo, though did not know very many details of the Bahá'í Faith, but he was aware of its growing influence in Europe and in the West.

On April 5, 1924, a letter from an American Bahá'í teacher was read out to him. A disciple asked him if he knew about the 'man' who started Bahá'ism. Sri Aurobindo began confessing his ignorance, but went on to give some details about Bahá'u'lláh saying that He "had a vital being which received the Light" Among the powers of Bahá'u'lláh, he describes His power of the word 'which is regarded as the sign of the prophet', remarkable power of telepathy', great power of Malediction', etc. He also knew of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets to the ruling monarchs of the time of his prison. He gives the number of Bahá'ís

at the time at " about eleven million of which two millions are in Europe.[12]

Talking of the religions in the United States of America, he says that Bahá'ís is just what suits the common mind. Talking of Islam, he emphasized that Mohammedans should turn towards the Bahá'í Faith: "If the Mohammedans get a religion of that sort it is much better than what they are having now.[13]

It may not be very difficult to presume that a major portion of what Sri Aurobindo knew of the Bahá'í Faith, he learnt it from the Mother. On the other hand, though, the Mother had first hand contacts with the Master, she was not deeply read in the Bahá'í scriptures and made many factual errors when speaking of 'Abdu'l-Bahá [14](this despite that fact that she had access to more that 30 Bahá'í books which are even now kept in the Ashram. Some of them are signed by one Dorothy Hodgson who was active in the Faith along with the Mother in Paris). The same is evident in some of Aurobindo's statements about Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. A careful study of the statements made by him, though very few in number, seems to convey the impression that he thought of Bahá'u'lláh as a Prophet of Muslims while he considered himself to be essentially a Hindu. [15]

In keeping with the Hindu tradition, Sri Aurobindo's work is naturally mystic in nature and as such is associated with the practice of Yoga.[16] His aim was to bring upon earth a Supramental Consciousness, a power through which all life will become "the expression, the flowering in forms of the Divine Unity manifesting in the world." [17] This dream of spiritualization is not much far removed from the Bahá'í ideals of world unity through a universal faith. The means, which appear more mystic in the case of Sri Aurobindo at first glance, are not very different either. For instance, giving out the goal of the Ashram which is meant to be the cradle of the new world, he says, "This Ashram has been created with another object than that ordinarily common to such institutions, not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and a field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life which would in the final end be moved be a higher spiritual consciousness and embody a great life of the spirit." [18] It is therefore not unnatural that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother commended the Bahá'í Cause, though in their own way and according to their limited understanding of its teachings.

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References and Notes

Sri Aurobindo by Navajata 1972, National Book Trust, India, p.122.

The Mother might have met `Abdu'l-Bahá in one of his earlier visit to Paris in 1911-12, but we don't have any record. However, we are sure of the 1913 meeting from the records at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

Sri Aurobindo –The Hope of Man, Keshavmirti, 1974, Pondicherry-2.

`Words of Long Ago', collected Works of Mother, Vol. II, p. 104.

Ibid, p.105.

Ibid, p.104.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, H.M. Balyuzi, George Ronald, London, 1971, p.394.

`Words of long Ago', Collected Works of the Mother, p.110.

Ibid, p.104.

`Questions and Answers' Collected Works of the Mother, Vol. IV 1972, pp 316-17

However, all the details given by the mother are not correct. For example, it is not likely that `Abdu'l-Bahá was present at the execution or that he talked to Sulayaman Khan.

`Evening Talks With Sri Aurobindo', recorded by A.B. Purani, 3rd edition, 1982, p.258.

Ibid, p.442 (may not be true).

Ibid.

For example, in the 4th volume of the collected Works of the Mother, she has quoted as having said of `Abdu'l-Bahá, "He was born in prison and lived in prison till he was forty, I believe. When he came out of prison, his father was dead...

"We are Hindus and naturally spiritual in our temperament, because the work which we have to do for humanity is a work which no other nation can accomplish, the spiritualization of the race" (Sri Aurobindo by Navajata, p.105)

Ibid, p.104.

Ibid, p.86.

Guide to Sri Aurobindo Ashram, back cover.

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