

A French University for Pondicherry

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Ever since the time of Alexander Indian mystics have aroused the curiosity and admiration of the outside world, and seemingly incredible stories about them have always been current. Sri Aurobindo perhaps the best known of them in modern India, has already become a figure of myth, and it is commonly said that for years he has neither slept, not moved. Even so, there may be exaggeration in the report that he recently broke a 19 years' silence to discuss with French MRP leader, Mr. Schumann, the scheme of an international university at Pondicherry. The fact is that Sri Aurobindo does not normally receive visitors.

Thus wrote a journalist of the Hindustan Standard a few days after Sri Aurobindo had granted an audience to Mr. Maurice Schumann, the special Envoy of the French Prime Minister, Mr. Ramadier.

On September 27, 1947, the day of the meeting, Agence France- Presse published more sober communiqué, stating the same facts in some more details:

Sri Aurobindo, the most powerful Indian thinker, interrupted his confinement which started 21 years ago to receive Governor Baron and Mr. Maurice Schumann.

Now 75 year-old, Sri Aurobindo took part in the first revolutionary national movement [for Indian independence]. He then took refuge at Chandernagore, and later in Pondicherry in 1926¹ where he began to live a 'mystic' life. He has today,

¹ In fact it was 1910.

several thousands of disciples. An ashram, planned on the [concept of] ancient pythagorician schools, has gathered more than 600 hundreds of his followers.

Once only, 19 years ago, Sri Aurobindo interrupted his confinement to talk with the poet Rabindranath Tagore. He had with Governor Baron and Mr. Schumann a 45 minute-meeting, during which he declared: "France, after India is the country for which I have the most fondness and respect. Your idea to have Pondicherry as a permanent meeting place between France and India will have my full support."

He then suggested the establishment of a sort of residential university where students from different nations would live and study the Dravidian and Aryan civilization.

"This cultural centre could become a centre for the synthesis between the East and the West" he concluded.

It is very doubtful that Sri Aurobindo made a distinction between the Aryan and Dravidian civilization. Was he not the first to point out at the beginning of the 20th century, in the *Review Arya* that the civilizations of the sub-continent do not originate from two different roots, but belong to one and the same family?

Anyhow, the subject of our interest is the concept of an international university put forward by Sri Aurobindo. It was the first time² that this vision of Sri Aurobindo became public.

Though Schumann's mission in India in September 1947 was termed as 'cultural' by the Indian press, it was in fact purely political. If one believes Maurice Schumann, the French Premier Ramadier wanted: "to convince the first government of independent India, not to renounce

² With the visit of the man who had been the spokesperson of General De Gaulle during the World War II.

the merger of the five French territories, but not to proceed immediately with the merger and not to use force³." The President of the French Republic [René Coty] told himself Schumann before he left for India: "I am very sorry that you have been given this mission. I am afraid that it will be a lost mission." ⁴

We should mention that after meeting Sri Aurobindo and visiting Pondicherry, Schumann traveled to Chandernagore (in the present state of West Bengal) to observe by himself the situation of the most 'threatened' French settlement. He then continued to Calcutta to meet Gandhi who was then fasting⁵ to stop to the communal riots in Bengal. Schumann informed the Indian leader about the object of his mission: "We are ready to go, but give us the time to do so."

Without refereeing the matter to Nehru (Schumann was scheduled to meet him a few days later in Delhi⁶), Gandhi agreed.

³ Interview with the magazine Auroville Today, Auroville, 1988.

⁴ It is a great pity that we have not been able to find archival documents, apart from some newspaper clippings, on Maurice Schumann's visit to Pondicherry. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Schumann was not delegated by one of the two ministries looking after the French settlements' issue (but directly by the Prime Minister), or because Schumann was too much interested by the philosophy of the country; whatever it be the report of his mission in India was not accessible at the French Archives. It would undoubtedly have thrown a new light on the failure of the French authorities to transfer power to the Indian dominion in a smooth and swift manner.

⁵ We would like to thank Ambassador Lewin for referring two books to us in which Mr. Maurice Schumann relates his mission to India: Maurice Schumann, *La Mort née de leur propre Vie*. Péguy, Simone Weil, Gandhi, (Paris : Fayard éditeur, 1974) and Maurice Schumann, *Les Grandes Conférences du Figaro*, (Paris, éditions 1, 1998).

⁶ For Schumann (or those who arranged his schedule), it was without doubt a great 'diplomatic' faux-pas to have met first Sri Aurobindo, then Gandhi and finally Nehru. Our studies in the files of the National Archives of India as well as other archival materials make us think that this early error of judgment probably delayed for several years the possibility of a negotiated solution for the French Settlements in

But let us come back to the university project. Though, it was the first time that the matter had become public, the topic had already been discussed at the highest level with the Indian government a few months before the departure of the British from the subcontinent. In May 1947, Governor Baron and Henri Roux, the French Chargé d’Affaires in Delhi had asked Nehru, the head of the Interim Government for a meeting. They wanted to discuss the future relations between France and the new dominion.

Towards the end of the talk, Baron made the proposal which according to him could accelerate the process of solving the problem of the French settlements: the French would leave the territory, but would leave behind an important university where French culture would have a predominant place. It was Sri Aurobindo’s concept that Baron was presenting to the Indian Prime Minister.⁷

The minutes of the meeting as taken by Nehru’s Secretary inform us⁸ :

The Governor spoke about the French Government’s desire to develop cultural institutions in Pondicherry and a kind of a university. The idea was that this university should serve India by bringing French culture to the French [nationals]. He added that the French Government wanted to know our reactions to this before they started on this scheme. He referred to political developments in India, which would inevitably affect Pondicherry. In Pondicherry there were two sentiments; the

India. Furthermore, Schumann belonged to none of the two ministries in charge of the Settlements.

⁷ Of the Interim Government.

⁸ Record of Nehru’s interview with M. Baron, Governor of French India, and M. Henry-Paul Roux, French chargé d’affaires in India, at New Delhi on 27 May 1947, National Archives of India, Files No. 215-PS/46-PMS. Also in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru (or SWJN), Series II, Vol. 2, p. 571.

sentiment of India as a motherland to which they were attracted, and another sentiment of attachment to France as a result of many hundreds of years of union with France and French culture. While there was a desire for union with India, there was also a desire to continue this cultural attachment with France. He suggested that Pondicherry (and presumably Chandernagore, etc.) might become parts of the Union of Free India, but at the same time there might be a kind of dual nationality for the people there so that they might be both citizens of the Indian Union and for some purposes citizens of France.

Obviously Nehru did not like either of the proposals: the University and the double nationality scheme. He informed Baron and Roux that he would ask his relevant ministries to look into the matter, which in Indian bureaucratic language, meant that the proposal was shelved. Nehru did tell his interlocutors that he wanted a 'united' India; in his mind, culture was secondary to his primary objective.

I said I appreciated what he had said about the dual sentiment among the people of Pondicherry. So far as we were concerned we naturally wanted a united India without any foreign bases or extra-territorial rights. We would like French possessions in India to be absorbed in the India Union, not by compulsion but because we felt that the people there would naturally desire this to be done. We would like this to be left to the decision of the people.

He added: "The other proposal about a dual nationality was a novel one which required full examination as to how far it was practicable." Without commenting directly on the University scheme, he did not oppose some cultural links with France. Was it not him who a year earlier had spoken of Pondicherry as a "window opened on France"?

Nehru tried to reassure the French diplomats, by telling them: "We would certainly like Pondicherry with its long past of French culture to continue its cultural attachment to France. Possibly some means would be devised to maintain this or some similar connection, which would not come in the way of Pondicherry being a full member of the Indian Union."

Before the meeting ended, Nehru made a strange declaration which seems to be in complete contradiction with what he had said earlier. It is ironic that his concept was similar to the direction that the French Ministry of External Affairs would work on during the following months and years⁹. According to the minutes, these are the words of the Indian Prime Minister:

I further pointed out that a free India would be a federation of autonomous units. It was possible that even within a federating unit there might be smaller autonomous areas forming cultural or linguistic units. While we desired to maintain the unity of India and a strong Central Government, we were anxious not to come in the way of the variety of India and the cultural autonomy of its different regions.

We should not forget that these words were pronounced in May 1947. India never went along these lines. Too many uncertain consequences could have resulted for the Indian Union. One can imagine that many small princely States would have been delighted to become 'autonomous units' in association with the Indian dominion. Fortunately, this was not the vision of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the

⁹ The French diplomacy worked on a scheme providing a large internal autonomy for the French Settlements, eventually resulting in a status known as Free Cities (Villes Libres). These entities could eventually form a condominium between the French Union and the Indian Dominion.

Deputy Prime Minister who was in charge of the Indian States. The 'autonomy' scheme would have, undoubtedly, brought up an unmanageable federation.¹⁰

The talks ended by Nehru stating: "On the whole Mon. Barron agreed with what I said. I reminded him of what he had stated on a previous occasion about the people of Pondicherry being free to join the Union of India if they so chose."

Baron may have thought of this answer, but other people and ministries were thinking differently. There were already too many players in the game to find a smooth solution to the issue. In the months to come, things worsened.

Two other indirect accounts of this meeting tend to prove that Nehru was very unhappy about the French proposals¹¹.

Satprem, who at that time was the Governor's Private Secretary, writes in his Memoirs that Baron came out livid from the talks.¹²

We find a further confirmation in Nehru's remarks to Field Marshall Montgomery who visited the Prime Minister a week later. Montgomery noted:

He alluded to the French and Portuguese colonies in India which, he said, would inevitably come into the Indian Union sooner or

¹⁰ But in some ways, it is unfortunate that only the second part of the proposal will be implemented: a strong Centre. In the first months after independence, it was thought that the Centre would only look after External Affairs, Defense and Communications. All other matters would have been the responsibility of the States. Anyway one can understand that the Indian government could not accept the principle of a condominium for the French Establishments, though Paris went through very detailed studies of this option. It would have created too many other problems.

¹¹ At least about the proposal to set up a University with a strong French cultural participation.

¹² Satprem, *Lettres d'un insoumis*, (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1994), Vol. 1, p. 45.

later. He spoke of Mr. Baron's 'strange' proposal that France should continue to exercise some sort of cultural control in the French colonies [through the University].¹³

During the following 3 years, the idea to set up a university in Pondicherry with a strong French component sank into oblivion. Nehru was much too preoccupied with the Kashmir issue and other internal problems of the new dominion. France was not too sure about its policy regarding its settlements as it could create a precedent for the other colonies.

In Paris, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have the same compulsions and interests than the Ministry of Overseas Territories which was directly administering the French territories (through the Governor and later the Commissar of the Republic).¹⁴

This conflict of interests did not help to find a solution agreeable to all. And let us not forget that the 4th Republic in France witnessed quick and regular changes of governments. For whoever was in power in Paris, Pondicherry and the other 4 settlements in India were clearly not a priority (at least as long it did not interfere in other 'colonial' policies).

Whatever might have been the reasons on both sides, at the end of 1950 the situation was rather hazy and no solution was in sight.¹⁵

¹³ SWJN, Series II, Vol. 3, p. 300.

¹⁴ For more details, see, Arpi Claude, *La politique française de Nehru, la fin des comptoirs français en Inde, 1947-54* (Auroville, Pavillon de France, 2002).

¹⁵ At that time, if India had accepted to go for a referendum for the French Establishments (as required by the French Constitution for handling over French territories) it would have sparked off serious repercussions for the Kashmir problem. Let us not forget that this issue was before the UN Security Council and the modalities of a plebiscite for the maharaja's state were being discussed since the Resolution of January 1949.

At this particular point in time, two of the greatest sons of Mother India left this world. Sri Aurobindo departed on December 5 and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel passed away ten days later. Though at different levels, one can say that India never fully recovered from these events of December 1950.

Soon after Sri Aurobindo's departure, several eminent Indian personalities decided to create an institution to help the survival and the propagation of Sri Aurobindo's vision and work. Amongst them were many ministers of the Central Government. One should particularly name Dr. K.M. Munshi, who had been a student of Sri Aurobindo during his Baroda's days¹⁶, and Chief Ministers, Pt. G. B. Pant (Uttar Pradesh), M.K. Vellodi (Hyderabad), N.K. Chaudhuri (Orissa) and Dr Gopichand Bhargava (Punjab).

To realize their objectives, these politicians and bureaucrats set up a charitable Institution called the Sri Aurobindo Memorial. Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee was made the first President of the Provisional Committee of the Memorial. One recalls that this former minister of Nehru's first Cabinet had recently resigned over the massacres of Hindus in Eastern Pakistan¹⁷. He was also the leader of the Hindu opposition in the Parliament.

France, on her part, was not too keen to create a precedent for her other colonies, particularly for Indochina where Ho Chi Minh was bound to ask for the same treatment as Pondicherry.

¹⁶ Later on, he created an institution called Bharatya Vidya Bhavan which published, amongst other things, an authoritative history of India in collaboration with the great historian Dr. R.C. Majumdar. A masterly history of the Indian freedom movement has also been edited by the Bhavan. He also authored several books including the delightful series "Krishnavatara".

¹⁷ Today the Bangladesh.

During our research in the archives of Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund in Delhi, we came across some private papers of Mookerjee, amongst which we found a file containing the correspondence on setting up of the Sri Aurobindo Memorial and Mookerjee's visit to Pondicherry. A letter dated April 1, 1951, addressed to The Mother is particularly interesting for the subject concerning us: the future university. This letter describes in detail the objectives of the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Committee. We shall cite the letter in extenso:

Respected Mother,

I am taking the liberty to address this letter to you directly. When the Memorial Committee was appointed provisionally it was our general desire to do what we can to help in the continuation of the work started by Sri Aurobindo. Naturally discussions arose as regards the shape which the Memorial can and should take. We felt that the best memorial would be to establish an International University at Pondicherry which would be an embodiment of all the special features of Sri Aurobindo's life and achievement. We were told that this was his idea also and you had already started working on this line. The proposal was also made that some suitable memorial should be established in Calcutta, which was not only his birth-place but also a scene of some of his manifold activities, political and spiritual.

I was greatly disappointed that I could not come to Pondicherry due to sudden illness. The proposal to have a convention at Pondicherry appeals to all of us. Although our first impulse was that the convention might be called by me on behalf of the Provisional Memorial Committee, we now feel that taking all things into consideration the convention may be called by you

yourself. The main purpose of the convention will be to interest people from different parts of the country and also outside, if possible, in the activities of the Ashram and to devise ways and means for raising funds for the establishment of the University. Naturally the entire scheme will have to originate from you and the responsibility for giving effect to it will also largely rest on you. If the invitation is issued from you directly, it will have a very favourable reaction on all concerned. I have discussed this matter with a number of friends including Surendra Nath [Jauhar] and they also agree that this will be the most desirable proposal to follow.

This does not mean that we will not do anything. Of course, all arrangements for calling the convention etc. will be our responsibility. The invitation letters will be issued by us for you and on your behalf. We are preparing a list of the invitees. If you suggest any particular names, we will include them in our list. The expenses for calling the convention will be borne by some friends, as originally proposed.

I shall separately call a meeting of the Provisional Memorial Committee to be held at Pondicherry at the same time. The future work of the Memorial Committee will also be decided after discussions with you. I shall issue a personal letter to the members of the committee and other guests requesting them to attend the convention which is being called by you.

As regards the date it is to be considered whether 24th and 25th April will not be too early. The convention may meet some time in the middle of May if you think it desirable. Some feel that the convention should be on a big scale and 15th August may be the most suitable date. Of course this means postponement by four

months, which may not be desirable from some points of view. It is for you to decide what will be the best course to adopt. We will promptly act in accordance with your instructions.

I hope you will forgive me for writing to you directly on this matter. Whatever I can do for helping the cause will be done as a matter of pleasure and duty.

With deep regards,

Yours respectfully,

Shyama Prasad Mookerjee

This letter is of interest because it shows that some of the most eminent political and intellectual Indian personalities were backing the creation of an international university as the best homage to be offered to Sri Aurobindo's memory.

However, it should also be noted that the element of strong French involvement in the University scheme had been dropped, as was the earlier-mentioned possibility to amicably settle the problems of the French possessions in India through this cultural venture.

The political situation in India had made Nehru suspicious of the events in French India. With the Kashmir issue remaining unsolved and the invasion of Tibet by Communist China in October 1950, Nehru could even see some parallels in these 3 affairs.¹⁸

¹⁸ In Nehru's correspondence we saw a very curious cable addressed to Panikkar, India's Ambassador to China, in which Nehru draws a parallel between the Chinese invasion of Tibet (which had not yet been officially announced) and the take-over of Pondicherry and Goa. Nehru wrote: "We might remind you of our position in regard to French and Portuguese possessions in India. Their legal position is, we know, different from that of Tibet, but, to the world at large, Tibetan autonomy is a reality not to be swept aside by force of arms. We are convinced that Goa and Pondicherry must come to us and it is easy for us to seize them by military means. But we have deliberately refrained from doing so because of larger considerations. We do not

Anyhow, after a lot correspondence with different Indian leaders and a great deal of organizational work, a Convention of the Sri Aurobindo Memorial was summoned by the Mother on April 24 and 25, 1951. Presided over by Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, the Convention passed several resolutions, amongst them one about the setting up of an international university centre:

One of the most recent forms under which Sri Aurobindo conceived of the development of his work was to establish at Pondicherry an International University centre open to students from all over the world.

It is considered that the most fitting memorial to his name would be to found this University now so as to give concrete expression of the fact that his work continues with unabated vigour.

Obviously, there was no longer any question of the French government's participation or even keeping a special place for the French culture. Politically, the relations between France and India were quite tense. And Mookerjee and his colleagues knew too well Nehru's exasperation with the French (in reference to the unfinished task of uniting Mother India), to even think about it. One should add that the French government had not shown a great enthusiasm to preserve its own culture on the Pondicherian soil. It was most probably not part of the 'culture' of the Ministry of the Overseas Territories to export French 'culture'.¹⁹

understand the occasion for urgency and immediate military action in Tibet, when international situation is so delicate and no harm can result by delay in an attempt to seek settlement by negotiation". See SWJN, Series 2, Vol. 15 (1), (New Delhi, October 22, 1950)." p. 437

¹⁹ French 'spirit' which was flowing in Pondicherry and the other settlements was not a cultural 'spirit', but a more liquid one.

The attitude of the French Ministry of External Affairs was not very different.

However, the international character of the project was still being highlighted. The Mother opened the Convention with these words:

Sri Aurobindo is present in our midst, and with all the power of his creative genius he presides over the formation of the University centre which for years he considered as one of the best means of preparing the future humanity to receive the supramental light that will transform the elite of today into a new race manifesting upon earth the new light and force and life.

In his name I open today this convention meeting here with the purpose of realizing one of his most cherished ideals.

In its inaugural speech, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee defined the broad lines of the concept which was based on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of evolution of mankind towards a more harmonious future:

It is thus that the establishment of a University where the eternal varieties of life will be taught and re-taught to a stricken people becomes supremely relevant. This is the task of an international University and it is in the fitness of things that the University should be dedicated to the sacred memory of Sri Aurobindo. It is in the fitness of things that along with its sister University at Santiniketan, named after another great Indian, this University should also be located in India where so many peoples and so many cultural have met and found their home. The Upanishads have expressed this synthesis and harmony by the three words:

Santan, Sivam, Adwaitam.

Sri Aurobindo had also taught us the same truth. He even goes further and says that this synthetic turn of India's spiritual vision "is not peculiar to the mystics or the literate or the thinkers, nourished on the high sublimities of the Veda and the Vedanta, but permeates even the popular mind". It is here, on the sacred soil of India, where the call for synthesis first went out to the world and it is here that at the proposed University, scholars from the different parts of the world would assemble and inaugurate a new era of cultural renaissance for India and the world.

I have so far dwelt on the spiritual call of Indian culture, even though the call may be going unheeded today. As Sri Aurobindo says, it is a spiritual, an inner freedom, that can alone create a perfect human order. But this freedom does not ignore, cannot ignore, the evolution of man's lower, physical, vital and mental nature. Progress to the age of the spirit must pass through the three conceptions

Annam brahma, pranam brahma, mano brahma [The Divine in Matter, the Divine in the Vital, the Divine in the Mind], each regarded as Reality, the third leading to the subjective ...mankind. We cannot skip over any of the intermediate steps without peril to mankind, though such an adventure may succeed in the case of particular individuals. Body, life and mind, all these must assume significance in Man's adventure of the spirit. The highest achievements may yet elude all except a few. But the disciplines they indicate are meant for the upliftment of mankind as a whole, ascent from the ignorant nature with the spiritual existence. This great adventure is characteristically typified in the life of Sri Aurobindo. It began in an urge for the

political liberation of India. It paved the path for a miracle, the great revelation that came to him in 1909 in his prison. The window that had been closed flew open and the Divine stood revealed before him. With the same abandon with which he had struggled for India's political freedom, he began his long and patient quest for the freedom of the Spirit. The two Aurobindos merged each other, the political fighter and the yogi. Even then his earlier patriotism was tinged with a spiritual penumbra. He was thus a true Indian. When we read [of] his books, he seems to appear out of the pages of our ancient sacred lore the representative of all their wisdom made dynamic by an awareness of the present spiritual crisis. I am sure the proposed University will symbolize the world's urge for a new spiritual rebirth; it will stand out as an oasis amidst the barren tracts that breed jealousies, suspicion and petty conflicts.

The foundations of the future university were thus laid, though for it would materialize only in a restricted manner under the shape of the University centre of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The political situation did not allow its complete realization at that point in time.

A communiqué from the AFP dated 27 April 1951 announced:

A Convention, with delegates coming from the different parts of India and abroad was held in Pondicherry on 24 and 25 April to laid the foundation in this city [Pondicherry] of a private international university centre, of a new type, where 1500 students, free from all material worries, will receive the teaching of the yogi philosopher Sri Aurobindo who passed away in December 1950.

The principle of an international fund [souscription] for the setting up of this university has been adopted.

One can note that the communiqué speaks of a 'private' scheme. The fund raising campaign was to be done through a 'souscription' which is an appeal whereby different parties commit themselves to certain amounts.

The following months saw rapid progresses and in its January 1952 issue, the Review "France-Asie" published a more detailed article titled "The Foundation in Pondicherry of a Sri Aurobindo University centre".

Sri Aurobindo's view on education have been frequently exposed in his own work and sufficient elaborated to make it possible to give the scheme a concrete shape as he wanted it. The International University centre should be open to students of the around the world.

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry is the first nucleus of the envisioned realization, as it gathers together several hundreds of disciples, some with their family, living here in accordance with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo. Moreover, the Ashram has many guest houses to receive a large number of temporary visitors. They can be used while waiting for the permanent buildings for the students and the teachers.

Lastly, a school is already working for the children of the disciples living in the Ashram. Schooling starts from the primary level and goes to the baccalauréat.

The leader of the Ashram is a French lady, Madame Mira Alfassa, known in India as 'The Mother'. Her spiritual power is said to be the same as Sri Aurobindo's himself. The role of The Mother has been pointed out by Dr. Mukherjee [Mookerjee], the President of the Convention in his inaugural speech. He has stated that he could perceive the light of Sri Aurobindo's teachings behind all the activities of the Ashram. The Mother is the organizer

[animatrice] and her action provides order, precision, efficiency and smooth functioning. The unique perfection of the leadership of the Ashram by The Mother is the best guarantee of success of the proposed University.

The first practical realization will be the construction of a two-storey building of an area of 840 m². The ground floor will be able to receive 750 children and youngsters who will receive an education from kindergarten to the baccalauréat.

The lay out of the first floor will be fitted to receive between 750 to 900 students who will have completed the baccalauréat level and have the required capacity to receive the teaching of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

Later on the future developments will include:

- First, some buildings to accommodate the literature and language courses in order to provide for more place for the art and philosophy classes.
- Then, the extension of the living quarters for the students and the teachers in order to gather, as far as possible people of the same nationality. Hence it is proposed to have an American quarter, a British and a German one.
- Thirdly, a large library with a reading hall which could accommodate between 2000 to 2500 people.

The essence of the Sri Aurobindo's teaching is that it should be free of cost and that the requirement for admission of the students will be based on their capacity to receive the teachings and benefit from it.

Consequently, the University center will function as a charitable institution, necessary funds will come from voluntary contributions and grants from official organizations. The

teachers, as well as the students, will be looked after by the Center without receiving any monetary compensation.

Already letters from France, America, England, Germany, Egypt, Africa and Japan have been received: some from students, other from teachers, asking to be admitted in the new university.

Another event which most probably helped the project to progress is the visit to Pondicherry of Dr. K.M. Munshi on March 12, 1952. We have already mentioned that Munshi was one of the most eminent members of the Preparatory Committee of the Memorial. He had recently taken the post of Governor of the State of Uttar Pradesh, the largest and most populous state of the new dominion. We shall deal elsewhere with the first visit of Munshi to Pondicherry. But second trip here (he had come to meet Sri Aurobindo in April 1950) must have convinced the great scholar of the worth of the University project.

A few months later, he wrote to the Indian Prime Minister²⁰ requesting a special exemption to allow The Mother to sell her jewellery at a public auction in India for the benefit of the University.

We should remember that Pondicherry was then still part of the French territory: Indian laws were not applicable in the French Settlements and vice-versa. The Ashram needed this special dispensation to bring back the proceeds of the sales to the French territory.²¹

As an answer to Munshi's request, Nehru dictated the following note:

²⁰ Note to the Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs, December 13 1952. National Archives of India, file No. 2(587)151-PMS. Also in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series II, Vol. 20, On Exemptions to Aurobindo Ashram, (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund), pp 530-531.

²¹ It should be noted that it was the time when India decided to begin an economic blockade of Pondicherry. The government of India was hoping that this pressure would force Paris to negotiate without further delay the fate of its Settlements.

I have considered this matter carefully and am of opinion that the concession²² asked for by the authorities of Sri Aurobindo's Ashram in Pondicherry should not be granted. We should advise accordingly the Ministries concerned here, presumably, the Ministries of Finance and Commerce and Industry.

2. In view of our difficult relations with the French establishments in India, any such concessions is undesirable, more especially because this means Indian currency going into Pondicherry.

3. The attitude of the Ashram has hardly ever been favourable to India and sometimes, it has been definitely hostile. Sri Aurobindo was undoubtedly a great man and we should welcome any proper memorial to him, more especially a new educational centre. But Sri Aurobindo is no more and it is not quite clear how the Ashram is going to run in future. Such accounts as we had are not favourable and we have even heard that there are internal conflicts there. Most of the property there stands personally in the name of Madame Alphonse,²³ otherwise known as the 'Mother'. So does the jewellery. It would be extraordinary for us to give this concession to a private individual.

4. So far as the University centre is concerned, a number of prominent men in India have commended it, but I have failed to find out under whose auspices it will run and who will be

²² On 13 December 1952, K.M. Munshi, the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, wrote to the Prime Minister and the Commerce Minister, regarding a request by the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry for permission to sell by public auction in India the jewellery of the Mother of the Ashram in the last week of December 1952.

²³ When she was living in France, The Mother was known under the name of Mirra Alfassa or Mirra Richard, also sometimes Mirra Alphonse.

responsible for it. To take some steps to support a University of this type, about which we know nothing, except that it is a memorial to Sri Aurobindo, is obviously not desirable.

5. I am rather surprised to know that monies donated to this University centre have been exempted from payment of Indian income-tax. This might be enquired into and the Finance Ministry might be informed that we see no reason for this exemption. It will merely encourage people in India to transfer their funds to Pondicherry.

6. I am clear, therefore, that this concession or exemption should not be granted. The Ministries of Finance and Commerce and Industry should be informed of this.

A few days later, Nehru wrote another note entitled "State of Affairs at the Aurobindo Ashram²⁴" which makes interesting reading and confirms the Prime Minister's state of mind vis-à-vis the Ashram and The Mother. It partially explains Nehru's refusal to help the noble project of the University which was supported by so many of his eminent countrymen. He wrote:

I had a visit from Shri Dilip Kumar Roy²⁵ of Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. He was much concerned at the State of the Ashram, which according to him consists of 800 persons now. He complained about the "Mother". He said that while the Ashramites were almost all in favour of merger of Pondicherry with India, the Mother was very French in her outlook.

²⁴ Note to the Secretary General; MEA, 22 December 1952. File No. 2(587)151-PMS.

²⁵ According to the SWJN Dilip Kumar Roy (1897-1980) was "a renowned poet, vocalist and writer; specialised in Hindustani classical music and devotional songs; inmate of the Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1928-1950; elected Fellow, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1965; author of *Among The Great* (1940), *Eyes of Light* (1945)". He had been very close to Sri Aurobindo and wrote "Sri Aurobindo came to me".

2. He also complained of the way the Mother controlled everything autocratically and dealt with all the moneys of the Ashram as if they were her private property. She gave no account of these public funds. She takes nobody in her confidence. There is no trust or committee to deal with the moneys or other matters of the Ashram.
3. Then he referred to the University. He said that there is no University, but it has been declared that this has been started and money is being collected. Why is this money collected? He expressed his gratification at the fact that we refused to allow a concession to the Mother to sell her jewellery without payment of customs dues.
4. Shri Dilip Kumar Roy wanted us to bring some pressure on the Mother or on the French Government in regard to the Ashram and in regard to the so-called University. In particular, he said that we should try to stop Indian currency from going to Pondicherry.
5. I am putting down this note for record to indicate the State of affairs at Pondicherry and how some important members of the Ashram think about it. It is obvious that most of these members are so much under the influence of the Mother that they dare not do or say anything against her wishes. I told Shri Dilip Kumar Roy that we cannot interfere with the Ashram or the University, but we had no desire to encourage either.
6. Some time ago I had heard that our Finance Ministry had exempted from Income-tax moneys given to this so-called University at Pondicherry. Could you please find out if this is a fact? If so, it might be pointed out to the Finance Ministry that it is not desirable to encourage something that does not exist.

We shall not waste time on the accusations of Dilip Kumar Roy²⁶ who knew very well that Sri Aurobindo, his guru had entrusted the entire administration (spiritual and material) of the Ashram to the Mother and this since 1926.

However, it is a fact that after Sri Aurobindo's the passing away, some disciples close to the Master refused to accept The Mother as his successor. Dilip Kumar was one of them, though he made amends a few years later and eventually came back to the Ashram. But in between, the harm was done and Nehru was only too happy to have a reason or a pretext to confirm his decision not to help the new university.

With or without the Government of India's support, preparations continued and funds were collected for the University, henceforth called the "University Centre" [Centre universitaire de l'Ashram de Sri Aurobindo]. However the international aspect of the Center was temporarily put aside. The main reason for this was the political difficulties between France and India and also the attitude of Nehru vis-à-vis the Ashram. One should add that France (as well as other western nations) were not enthusiastic to land in the Pondicherian quagmire. Kashmir and other such issues were enough. It will not be for this time.

The larger concept of an international university not, however, dead and gone. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother knew too well that everything comes in its own time. Mostly probably to prepare the future, The

²⁶ One must nevertheless mention that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother had declared publicly (and privately) several times since India's independence that Pondicherry had to come back under the wings of Mother-India. On August 15, 1947, they hoisted the Indian flag in the Ashram.

Mother began to write a series of articles in the quarterly magazine of the Ashram: The Bulletin of Physical Education.

Most of these articles on the University, published between April 1952 and end of 1953, under the heading "An international university center" describe the concept of Auroville, the International city which will take birth in February 1968,

Even today, in most presentations on Auroville, these fifty year-old texts are used. One of the best examples is the first of the series in which The Mother describes the future international zone of Auroville which just begins to materialize today.

... the cultures of the different regions of the earth will be represented here in such a way as to be accessible to all, not merely intellectually, in ideas, theories, principles and languages, but also vitally, in habits and customs, in art under all forms - painting, sculpture, music, architecture, decoration - and physically too through natural scenery, dress, games, sport, industries and food. A kind of world-exhibition has to be organised in which all the countries will be represented in a concrete and living manner; the ideal would be that every nation with a very definite culture would have a pavilion representing that culture, built on a model that most displays the habits of products, natural as well as manufactured, products that best express its intellectual and artistic genius and its spiritual tendencies. Each nation would thus find a practical and concrete interest in the cultural synthesis and collaborate in the work by taking over the charge of the pavilion that represents it. A lodging house also could be attached, large or small according to the need, where students of the same nationality would be accommodated...

And we should not forget the 'Dream' published in 1954 in the same *Bulletin*, which along with the Charter of Auroville forms the base for the lives of some 1800 members of Auroville who have come from 35 nations of the world to live this 'Dream'. Young and old, all have been attracted to the heat and dust of South India by this powerful Vision. After reading this Dream, they came to try to live this new utopia, a material utopia and eventually to build a new city. Their road map is contained in these few lines:

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; a place of peace, concord and harmony where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his sufferings and miseries, to surmount his weakness and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the concerns for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment.

The University Centre of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram continued its work as a pioneer in the research of a new system of education, not blindly based on the western patterns, but using the deeper knowledge of Ancient India. This was also part of the realisation of Sri Aurobindo's Vision.

But the international aspect of this vision which is mentioned in all these documents took birth only in February 1968 on the barren plateau of red laterite when 5000 young people assembled to inaugurate the Dream.

Today, Auroville is far from being a University. However in 1988, an Auroville Foundation Act was enacted by the Parliament of India. On January 29, 1991, the Auroville Foundation was notified as a statutory (autonomous) body under the administrative control of Ministry of Human Resource Development.

These words of the Mother in the Charter of Auroville remain a guide for most of the Auroville members:

Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages...

Should this not be in the Charter of each university in India?

The Central Pondicherry University

Another important development occurred in 1985.

The Pondicherry University Act ((No. 53 of 1985) was passed by the Indian Parliament. It was stated in the Preamble: "There shall be established a University by the name of 'Pondicherry University'."

According to its own statuses, the Central University was to study the vast philosophy of Sri Aurobindo as well as the local culture:

The University shall also establish a School for studies in Eastern and Western Thought to be known as "**Sri Aurobindo School of Eastern and Western Thought**" and another School for studies in Tamil language and literature to be known as "**Subramania Bharati School of Tamil Language and Literature**".

The reasons for setting up this University were interesting:

The objects of the University shall be to disseminate and advance knowledge by providing instructional and research facilities in such branches of learning as it may deem fit ...to make special provisions for studies in French and for integrated

courses for Humanities and Science in the educational programmes of the University and to take appropriate measures for promoting inter-disciplinary studies and research in the University.

The orientation was clear, the University had “to make special provisions for studies in French”. It was indeed great news.

Unfortunately, the direction soon changed and has gone further and further away under the successive vice-chancellors who never had the vision of the true specificity of this educational institution.

Immediately after its creation, the University took a so-called more ‘modern’ orientation.

One can only hope that one day a Vice-Chancellor will be appointed with a solid background in French culture. It should be the USP of Pondicherry University as the demand for French culture and language is bound to grow as the Indo-French relations grow closer.