

August 15, 1947

The saddest day in Pondicherry



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Background: India becomes Independent

On August 15, 1947 a momentous change occurred on the sub-continent: India became independent, though divided. Nehru, as the first Prime Minister uttered some words which have gone down in history:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.

A few years ago, I studied the correspondence between the British Consul General in Pondicherry, Col. E.W Fletcher¹ and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth during these very special times. Fletcher who was the Indian Government's informant in Pondicherry, still a French Colony, wrote to Delhi that the stroke of midnight did not change much in Pondicherry.

Though technically the British Colonel was not supposed to have direct relations with the Government of India anymore, he continued to write to the Indian officials in Delhi. His correspondence was not even renumbered. His Secret Letter dated August 17, 1947 bears the reference D.O. No. 176-II/14. Though he should have been dealing directly with the Foreign Office in London and not Delhi, his letter is the continuation of his previous letter (dated August 14, 1947, D.O. No. 175-II/14) addressed to Delhi. This is a just a detail of the prevailing confusion during those days.

¹ Edward Walter Fletcher (1899-1958); joined the Indian Political Service 1928; was the Consul General of Great Britain for French India between 1945 and August 1947.

In a strange diplomatic twist, he remained for some time the Agent of British India which did not exist anymore. Fletcher's letter of August 17 contains a translation of an 'official précis' of the speech that the French Governor François Baron delivered on the August 15, 1947 to the heads of departments of the French India Administration as well as leading notables and political leaders.

According to Fletcher, during his speech, Baron pledged on behalf of his Government to respect the wishes of the people of Pondicherry on two conditions: first that the Union of India should have its own Constitution and that it should be a fully sovereign State.

Reception at the British Consulate

On the 15th evening, the British Consul General held a reception at his Consulate to which more than a hundred people were invited. Amongst others there were Baron, French officials and the leading political leaders as well as members of the British and Indian communities. Fletcher made a short speech; he proposed a toast to "the happiness and prosperity of the Union of India and Pakistan and to their peoples and their continued friendship with Britain".

Fletcher took the opportunity to quote Lord Mountbatten's speech at Karachi on the August 14². The Governor-General of India had referred to "two new sovereign States" becoming members of the Commonwealth. To counter Baron, the Consul General explained to his audience that the Commonwealth was an association of free sovereign states. They were only linked together "by common interests with the Crown as a symbol." He clarified that each Member-State of the Commonwealth was entirely independent and sovereign; it was free to sign its own treaties; a Member State was not bound to declare war to a third nation, should Britain do so; and it was free

² Pakistan had become independent on August 14.

to frame its own fiscal and economic policies. He also added that any Commonwealth State was at any moment completely free to leave the Commonwealth, if it wished so. This was the most important point to be remembered, he emphasized. What the British had offered India and Pakistan was complete independence.

Fletcher regretted that India was now divided, but he hoped that the two parts would come together 'before long'. Finally he reaffirmed that the British policy's objective had always been India's complete autonomy. The only disagreement between London and the Indian leaders had been over the rate of progress towards that goal. He concluded that on that day no one could any longer doubt the sincere intentions of the British.

Fletcher said that he had purposely made these remarks on sovereignty to contradict Baron's morning speech and "to remove any misapprehension Barons's remarks might have created". He believed that the French were playing for time and wanted to remain in India: "Why else should they spend so much money on a territory [Pondicherry] which has only a sentimental value for them?"

The same question could have been asked to the British who fought against India's freedom movement for several decades before accepting to leave the sub-continent.

Fletcher reiterated that Paris feared repercussions for its other colonies (it was certainly true) and was keeping a foothold in India in case troubles developed. His question was: if these Settlements³ were only of sentimental value for France, why should they spend so much energy and resources to stay on?

The point so often repeated by Fletcher, that Baron believed in a disintegration of India, never appears in the French archives. In fact, since

³ Pondicherry, Karikal, Yanaon, Mahé and Chandernagore

1946 Baron had always pleaded with Paris to give French India, the largest possible autonomy.

Fletcher's conclusions were that only merger with India could satisfy the local population and that they "will not be put off by quibbling about constitution and sovereignty."

The British Consul remarked that the Archbishop of Pondicherry told him that he wished France was capable of making a gesture similar to the one made by the British of leaving the subcontinent 'gracefully'. Another French official, Raboul, who accompanied Baron to Paris, described by Fletcher as an intelligent and sensible young man, also thought that French India should merge with the Union of India. Raboul is supposed to have added that it was however unfortunate that other departments in France including the Ministry of Colonies, did not see the things in this light.

The British Position

The Consul believed that most of the French were thinking that way. He added: "The French are a proud race and the average Frenchman would rather that his country left in a dignified manner than be compelled to go." There is a lot of underlying bitterness in Fletcher's words. The British were leaving (or had left) and the French were hanging on.

In his letter, he informed Delhi that he had been told that the loges⁴ would be retroceded on the September 1. He ironically commented: "The

⁴ Loges were tiny French enclaves or 'factories'. There were 12 loges occupying a total of 4 km² with 2,000 inhabitants. One of the problems of these loges — located on the site of old factories with a free port status — was that the French Administration (as well as the British) in some cases did not know where they were located or their exact use (except smuggling!).

The situation became more ridiculous when in a magnanimous gesture the French Government ceded these parcels of French territory, in contradiction to the French Constitution which stipulates that for the cession of any territory, it is necessary to have the

graciousness of the gesture is somewhat impaired by the fact that the French are really giving back something over which their claims to sovereignty have never been recognized.”

The day after Independence, several private functions were held in Pondicherry. Fletcher reported the details to Delhi. One strange fact was that the French Government flew the flags of the Union of India and Pakistan. This did not amuse the Indian government: Rashid Ali Baig, the Indian Consul General soon complained to Delhi about what he perceived as a mischievous action. Baig wrote to Delhi:

Since August 15, it is the practice of the French to fly the Tricolor together with the flags of the Indian Union and of Pakistan on all government buildings every day. In my opinion this practice has certain objectionable features. In the first place, the impression created on the public is that India has been divided into two new Dominions. I believe this practice is carried out in order deliberately to create this impression since the French are very happy over the communal situation according to my information from Lt.-Col. Fletcher, Mr. Marsland, some inmates of the Ashram and others.

Baig continued:

The relations between India and Pakistan are the same as the relations between India and Australia, Canada or any other Dominion and if the French fly the Pakistan flag they might as well fly the other Dominion flags as well. But to fly the Pakistan flag alone together with the Indian flag is, I believe, mischievous and intended to confuse. I also object to

agreement of the concerned population and the assent of the National Parliament. Some of these loges, had only one inhabitant (a *'concierge'*) and it would have been the first referendum organised for only one voter! The worst was that by mistake (or ignorance), France offered all these loges to India, including a few located in Eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh). To date no complaint has been lodged by either the Pakistani or Bangladeshi authorities!

the flying of the Indian Flag even by itself beside the Tricolor. This practice is to give force to the 'dual nationality' theory under which the French hope to remain in India. The French propaganda line and policy is apparently to give the local population the impression that for all intents and purposes Pondicherry is already a part of India and the small vestige of French sovereignty is not worth bothering about. Thus they hope to lull the public into inaction and acceptance of the present situation.⁵

That day, the public buildings and the government House were illuminated. The British Consul said that he himself "put a good display of flags on the well illuminated Consulate."

It probably means that the Pakistan flag was also hoisted.

For this he received the help of the Electrical Engineer of the French Public Works Department, who participated "whole-heartedly into the arrangements".

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram also participated in the functions. They provided flour and bread free of cost for the refreshments "as there is a famine of these commodities here".

Later, Fletcher wrote officially to the Ashram to thank them and say that he considered it 'a gift to the Union of India'.

It is necessary to clarify here the position of Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram. Sri Aurobindo, who had been the first Indian leader to advocate purna swaraj (or complete independence) from the British in the early years of the 20th Century, had taken refuge in Pondicherry for his personal sadhana. However, he kept in close touch with the political development of India's political struggle. The best proof is his intervention when Sir Stafford Cripps

⁵ Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru,

visited India in 1942 with a proposal to give Dominion status to India. Sri Aurobindo thought it should immediately be accepted by the Congress leaders. Unfortunately, it was not to be so!

Sri Aurobindo always believed that Pondicherry was to return to the fold of Mother India, though he hoped the French could leave behind them a cultural institution such as a university to manifest "the window of French culture" mentioned by Nehru in 1946. The British were stiffly opposed to the scheme and they regularly politicized the issue to serve their personal agenda.

August 15 was also Sri Aurobindo's birthday. On the occasion, he published a message about five dreams he had for Mother India and the World:

The first of these dreams was a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India. India today is free but she has not achieved unity...

Another dream was for the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilisation...

The third dream was a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind...

Another dream, the spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India's spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever increasing measure....

The final dream was a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin the solution of the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society.

It has often been alleged that the Mother was a 'colonialist' for the simple reason that her brother Mateo Alfassa was a senior official in the Ministry of Colonies⁶, but nothing is further from the truth.

To come back to the Independence celebrations, Fletcher informed Delhi that many flags of the Union of India were flown in the town. Morning and evening processions were organised. In the evening, a demonstration jointly organized by the Congress and Communist parties counted a large number of women; the participants sang Indian patriotic songs and shouted slogans in honour of Nehru and other leaders. Some banners called the French "Imperialists" and asked them to leave India: "White man, get out".

The Mulshankar Incident

Fletcher reported that he had heard "rumours of a clash between the Socialists and some passers-by and that some of the Ashram buildings were stoned." He informed Delhi that one unconfirmed report mentioned that one member of the Ashram had died as a result of injury inflicted by a stone.

This incident is the most tragic of a day otherwise marked by joy and patriotic fervor. The death of Mulshankar, Sri Aurobindo's attendant deeply blurred the Independence Day celebrations.

Mulshankar, a young Gujarati had come to the Ashram in the thirties and soon started serving Sri Aurobindo as an attendant and a masseur. On that fateful day, Mulshankar was stabbed in the neck by local goondas; when he reached the Ashram main door, he was profusely bleeding, and ultimately, he could not be saved.

The press reported: "In the evening of 15 August 1947, the day of India's independence, armed rioters attacked the Ashram, killing one member and injuring several others."

⁶ He was at one point in time, the Governor of Congo.

Sri Chinmoy reminiscences

We have different reports of the incident given by persons who were then inmates of the Ashram and were present in Pondicherry on the fateful Independence Day.

First, let us have a look at Sri Chinmoy's reminiscences. Chinmoy who later left the Ashram and became known as a meditation master at the United Nations, recalled:

In 1947, while Sri Aurobindo was still alive, we had to defend the Ashram from goondas (hooligans). I was a member of the group of guards. It was a very bad year. Some Tamilians were displeased with us and so they threatened us. They were trying at random to kill some of the Ashramites.

The 'goondas' were in the pay of local Pondicherry politicians as we shall see later. Chinmoy said:

On the day that India was liberated from England – August 15th, which was also Sri Aurobindo's birthday – Mulshankar was assassinated. It happened in the street, only fifty metres away from the main entrance to the Ashram.

Mulshankar, [after his service] in Sri Aurobindo's room, was going home to take a shower [to] come back again to Sri Aurobindo. It was around 7:30 in the evening. Then some hooligans attacked him and stabbed him in his left side.

I was there when the Mother's driver, Pavitra [a French disciple and eminent engineer and right-hand man of the Mother], came and put him in the car to take him to the hospital. His wound was bleeding so profusely. He died either on the way to the hospital or shortly afterwards.

It was a terrible blow. [Mulshankar] was so close to Sri Aurobindo. He was only going home for a few minutes to take a shower and then go back. Look at this hostile force!

Then comes a very 'personal' description of the tragic event:

And I happened to be there, in exactly the same spot, not even two minutes before the assassination. Those hooligans perhaps were already at the end of the street when I passed by. It was a special celebration day. That is why I was walking in the evening. Some people had seen me there in the street, so when Mulshankar was stabbed, a rumour passed very quickly that it was me!

My aunt heard the rumour that I had been killed and she started crying and crying. Even afterwards, when she had seen me with her own eyes, she was still crying.

The people who attacked Mulshankar did not know who he was. They only knew that he was an Ashramite. When the police came, instead of arresting the Tamil hooligans, they began arresting some of the Ashramites! The police were so stupid!

For about a month, we had serious problems with these hooligans.

People were afraid of going from one place to another.

The sad state of affairs in Pondicherry was to continue for several days. It proves that the instigators had a strong political backup outside the French administration. Chinmoy continues:

Three or four days after Mulshankar had been stabbed, my eldest brother, Hriday, was attacked. He was two miles away from the Ashram in the late afternoon and five or six hooligans caught him. My brother was an expert on the Vedas and he started reciting the Vedas very loudly. The hooligans got frightened and went away; otherwise, he would definitely have been killed. Like my brother, many were attacked, but luckily, nobody else was killed.

Mulshankar was only 34 or 35 years old when he was killed. He was one of the real jewels of the Ashram. Simplicity, sincerity, purity – any divine quality you want to mention – could be found in him. He was a jewel in every respect. His was a great loss to the Ashram.

Chinmoy writes somewhere else: “There was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo named Mulshankar. He was a Gujarati man, about forty-five years old [this contradicts his earlier estimate]. I liked him very much. Mulshankar was a nurse, and he was also Sri Aurobindo’s attendant. He did everything that was needed for the Master. Mulshankar was a purity-flooded soul. Indeed, his entire being was flooded with purity.”

Chinmoy comes back to the background of the incident (let us not forget that it was India’s Independence Day):

In those days, the people of Pondicherry stood against the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. They were threatening to kill us, the residents of the Ashram. Many young, strong boys of the Ashram were stationed at different places. We were patrolling in various groups. We all had fixed hours and places where we were supposed to be. For an hour or so, five or six boys would walk along the street together. But while we were stationed at one particular place around the main building, we would be alone.

Chinmoy pretends again, without any proof, that he was targeted by the ‘goondas’; though this unsubstantiated detail is irrelevant to our narration, we shall quote it: “How the Supreme saved me! I was at a corner of the main building. Just one or two minutes before the incident took place, I went to respond to nature’s call. I went to the bathroom in the main building. Mulshankar happened to be standing at exactly the same corner where I had been standing. O God! He was stabbed! A man came with a big knife and stabbed Mulshankar in the back of his neck.”

Chinmoy continues with his 'personal' rendition of the incident: "Many, many Pondicherry police gathered in front of the main building. I was coming out of the building after using the men's room. The news spread that I had been killed. Nobody was giving the correct news that it was Mulshankar who was killed because I had been seen at exactly the spot where he was killed. My life was saved."

It is not clear why Chinmoy or his family should have been under attack by the political parties', but he says: "My sisters were so horrified when they heard about this incident. "Rakhe Krishna mare ke, mare Krishna rakhe ke." This Sanskrit verse means, "Whom Krishna saves, who can destroy? Whom Krishna destroys, who can save?" Mulshankar happened to be at the very spot where I was assigned. He was such a good and nice man. How pure he was! That was how his life ended."

The most important point to remember from this version of the events of August 15 is the description of terror on the territory of French India at the time of the transfer of power from British India to the governments of India and Pakistan. It is true that elsewhere the subcontinent was witnessing terrible communal riots and bloodshed, but one could have thought that it would have been different in sleepy old Pondicherry.

Nirodbharan's version

Nirodbaran was one of Sri Aurobindo's attendants. In his *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, he gave some more information on the tragic incident:

[Mulshankar] was the brother of Esculape, alias Dayashankar, at one time in charge of the Ashram Dispensary. He also worked as an assistant in the Dispensary after Esculape's retirement and came to serve Sri Aurobindo as a medical aid. He was no masseur and in fact knew nothing about it, but he picked it up from some casual lessons and was gifted with the natural lightness and suppleness of finger

movements ... What could be more heart-rending than that he lost his life at the hands of an assassin during the riot of 1947?

When the news was brought to Sri Aurobindo that he had been fatally stabbed, the room was filled with gloom and horror. Sri Aurobindo listened quietly and his face bore a grave and serious expression that we had not seen before."⁷

A few days after the incident, a newspaper reported: "In the evening of August 15th, 1947 when the whole of India was celebrating her Independence, the Ashram was attacked by a violent mob, instigated by a local political party. A disciple, Mulshankar was fatally stabbed. For a few days after this tragic incident, the Ashram was put on a state of alert". It appears that guidelines were put up on the Ashram Notice Board providing a conduct to the inmates: "Always to be calm, never to get excited, to behave in a dignified manner, to remain within the Ashram area and to have a companion while going anywhere; always to be conscious and be specially alert while turning a corner, etc..."

Sri Aurobindo, who had done so much for India's Independence, more than most of the leaders triumphantly parading in Delhi on that day, was subject to a siege from some local Pondicherian politicians who were keen to show their muscles. And nobody, neither the French Administration nor the Government of India was ready to defend 'the Prophet of Indian Nationalism'.

The Testimony of Chandrakant Patel

More interesting and faithful to the historical reality is perhaps the testimony of Chandrakant Patel, a young Gujarati who had started coming to the Ashram in the 1930's.

⁷ Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* p. 212-213.

In late June 1947, Mother decided to hold a special celebration for the Lord's birthday that 15 August, as that was to be the date of India's independence from Britain. Dyuman [Patel], who was involved in organising the celebrations, told the Mother that he needed someone to help with the arrangements for the Ashram main building. So it happened that on 1 July my father received a letter from Dyuman, in which he wrote that Mother had said, "Ask Chandrakant to come." The very next day I left Bombay for Pondicherry by train. When I arrived I met the Mother, who told me to work with Dyuman. I was asked to hang coloured electric lights on the trees inside the Ashram and to string coloured paper flags on the outer walls of the compound. I remember that Tulsibhai was in charge of setting up a big tent in the Playground to accommodate the visitors. Some bamboo and string cots were provided for sleeping, and mats as well.

Then, Chandrakant speaks of the "saddest events in the Ashram's history":

This day also saw one of the saddest events in the Ashram's history. Many people had come to the Ashram for the celebrations, but in the streets riots were started by those who were against the Ashram. It was the evening, it was dark, and most of us were inside the Ashram compound. Suddenly stones were being thrown over the wall at us and some people were getting injured. Purani was standing at the main gate. I insisted on going out to pick up some stones to use in our defence. Outside, I looked to my left and saw Mulshankar, who had been caught in the melee and stabbed. When I saw him, he was standing in the street near the Rosary Gate, beckoning for help. He had been attacked while returning to the Ashram after seeing a friend in the Playground where the tent was set up. I ran to help him. I tried to stop the bleeding by applying pressure with my left hand over the wound on the right side of his neck. As I could not lift him that way

and still plug the wound, I switched hands and wrapped my right arm around him, got a better grip, and then carried him towards the Ashram main gate. As we approached, those near the gate thought I had caught one of the local rioters, and they began shouting, "maaro, maaro! (hit him!)"

I cried out to them, 'Mulshankar! Mulshankar!' When they realised who it was, they immediately took him inside, to Dyuman's room. The Mother was informed. Pavitra-da [French disciple and Secretary of the Ashram] telephoned the French doctor. Then Mulshankar was carried to the garage and taken in the Mother's Ford car to the General Hospital, where he soon died. This tragedy came as a great shock to all of us.

It is how the 75th Anniversary of the 'Prophet of Indian Nationalism' ended, with a stabbing in the back of one of his closest associate.

Peter Heehs' take

Peter Heehs in his controversial "Lives of Sri Aurobindo" consecrates only a few lines to the incident:

[Sri Aurobindo's] message was broadcast by All India Radio in Tiruchirapalli and Madras on August 14, 1947. The next day was observed not only as Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday, but also as the first day of India's independence. In the evening the sadhaks assembled to listen to a concert of national songs in the ashram's courtyard. Without warning, the ashram was attacked by a band of armed rioters. Several ashramites were injured and one, Mulshankar Jani, was stabbed in the neck and killed. The rioters, mostly paid hooligans, had been instigated by groups that opposed the existence of the ashram, notably Communists and Tamil separatists.

Heehs adds: "One might almost suppose that this 'victory' was a reflection of the orgy of slaughter that was then sweeping across India. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were killed indiscriminately by their former neighbors. As many as a million people died, staining what ought to have been a joyous celebration of freedom."

It is a reductionist view, as the resentment from a fringe of the population of Pondicherry against the Ashram had nothing to do with communal tensions elsewhere in India. Some political parties were under the impression that the Ashram was against India's Independence and consequently resentful.

It was forgetting Sri Aurobindo's past as the first proponent of *Purna Swaraj*.

But the main issue was probably the nationality of The Mother. Time and again, the position of the Ashram was made clear.⁸ Though The Mother always abstained from commenting on political issues, particularly on the merger of the French settlements with the Union of India, the fact that she was French by birth was resented by many in Delhi as well as Pondicherry.

When in early 1948, P.A. Menon, the Joint Secretary in-charge of Pondicherry affairs⁹ in the Ministry of External Affairs came on a fact-finding mission to the capital of French India, he had a long interview with the Mother who first refused to speak about 'politics'. Finally, when she was pressed to give her opinion, Menon was quite flabbergasted to hear that she

⁸ On June 14, 1949, a few days before the Referendum in Chandernagore, Nolini Kanta Gupta told the A.P.I. (Associated Press of India) correspondent: "Sri Aurobindo feels certain and has expressed it more than once that the different parts of India, whoever may be their present rulers, are bound to join the mother country and that India, free and united, will become a dynamic spiritual force bringing peace and harmony to the war-scarred and suffering humanity in general."

When asked if this meant that Sri Aurobindo desired Chandernagore, Pondicherry and the other settlements in India to join India, Nolini said: "Certainly so. He has prophesied that these small foreign pockets in India would sooner or later become one with India and India would become the spiritual leader of the world."

⁹ The boss of Major Atta-ur-Rahman, Fletcher's correspondent in the Ministry.

thought that the French should leave ALL their colonies, including Vietnam. He had been receiving erroneous reports (mostly bazaar gossip) from his officials (particularly the first Indian Consul General, Rashid Ali Baig) to the contrary.

Why did the French Police not intervene?

One answer is that the police force in Pondicherry consisted mainly of local recruits and one can understand that during this volatile period, the French government did not want to antagonize the local population; let us not forget that riots were occurring everywhere in India. Further, the gendarmes available with the Governor's Administration were very few.

To better grasp the tense situation prevailing at that time in the French Settlements, the account of Maurice Schumann's visit to Pondicherry in September 1947 is eye-opening. Schumann, who was the spokesperson of General de Gaulle during WWII, came on an official mission to Pondicherry and Delhi.

Years later, he remembered:

India was only independent since a few days. I am just a Member of Parliament, not a Minister or a former Minister, but I am summoned by the Prime Minister Paul Ramadier at the Hotel Matignon¹⁰. Ramadier tells me (with the knowledge of Vincent Auriol, the President of the French Republic): "I want to ask you a service. As you know, we have five Establishments in India: Pondicherry, Chandernagore, Karikal, Yanaon and Mahé): it is the heritage of Dupleix. In 1815, the British ceded these territories to us. We have neither the right, nor the material possibility to assure the military defense of these territories. There are only a few gendarmes in each of the establishments. But

¹⁰ Office cum Residence of the French Prime Ministers.

France is passing through a difficult situation. The Constitution¹¹ has just been voted. What is in the balance is the French Union, we want to bring to an end direct administration, particularly there [Pondicherry], but we are dreaming of a French Commonwealth in which each member state would have its full independence and where the common powers will only be delegated for the foreign affairs on one hand and for the defense on another. But we have a very serious problem with Indochina... even if the five cities in India have a special status and represent a limited case [vis-à-vis the autonomy], it would be highly desirable that they not disappear from our maps. We are counting on you to try to convince the Indians, we know that you are already in contact with Nehru and his daughter."

This was Schumann's road map. Unfortunately, his mission would only be partially successful. The fact remains that it is not a few gendarmes which could have provided security and manage the law and order in the Settlements.

Sri Aurobindo's reaction

A few days later¹², Sri Aurobindo dictated to his secretary a letter to the Editor of *The Statesman* in Calcutta. Apparently, *The Statesman* had reported that some 'satyagraha' was going on in front of the Ashram. The letter, in which Sri Aurobindo gives the background of the incident, was signed by Nolini Kanta Gupta, the Ashram's Secretary:

There is no foundation [in] fact for the rumour which we understand has been published in your columns that Satyagraha has been offered before Sri Aurobindo Ashram. There was no Satyagraha of any kind.

There was an attack on the Ashram in which one member was stabbed

¹¹ The Constitution of the Fourth Republic.

¹² August 20, 1947.

to death and others injured and Ashram buildings stoned. This would surely be a curious and unprecedented form of Satyagraha. The attack took place on August the 15th some hours after the Darshan, which was very successful and attended by thousands of people, was over. The attackers were mostly professional goondas of the town hired and organised for the purpose.

We consider it as the result or culmination of a long campaign by a political party which has been making speeches and publishing articles and pamphlets against the Ashram and trying in all ways to damage it in the eyes of the public for the last two years. This was not on political grounds and the attack had nothing to do with the political question. The Ashram is a non-political body. But there are three sections of the people here who are violently opposed to the existence of the Ashram, the advocates of Dravidisthan, extreme Indian Catholics and the Communists.

Everybody in Pondicherry without exception supports the right of self-determination for the people of French India and Sri Aurobindo has always been a firm supporter of that right for all peoples everywhere. Nobody here is for the 'continuation of French rule', but the people were prepared to accept the French proposal of a free and completely autonomous French India within the French Union. It was only when it appeared that the reforms offered by the French Government would fall short of what was promised that the cry arose for the immediate transfer of power and the merging of French India in the Indian Union. Sri Aurobindo, not being a citizen of French India, made no public declaration of his views, but privately supported the views set forth in a manifesto of the French India Socialist party demanding the end of colonial rule and a complete autonomy within the French Union accompanied by a dual citizenship and a close association with the

Indian Union which should control Customs, Communications and a common system of Industry and Commerce. There was therefore no ground or cause for any Satyagraha. I am writing this as an official contradiction on behalf of the Ashram under the instructions and with the full authority of Sri Aurobindo.

Sri Aurobindo was not keen to speak about the 'merger' as he knew that it would be misinterpreted by political parties for their own ends.

On June 27 1949, speaking in the third person, he wrote through Nolini to Amal Kiran¹³, the Editor of *Mother India*, a biweekly published in Mumbai:

Sri Aurobindo doesn't want anything further to be written about his view on the French India question; what is done is done but in future he wishes to remain silent unless an imperative need arises for a statement. Just now Sri Aurobindo does not want strong attacks to be made on the policy of the Congress Government as by their action they have removed many of the difficulties of the Ashram and all that it needs for its institutions are coming in freely as a result of special orders given by the Madras Government so he does not want to figure as their enemy or opponent. Certain things in their attitude may seem doubtful but he does not want them too much stressed at present unless it becomes very necessary to do so.

About your Franco-India article, the main objection is that Mother does not want herself to be represented in that way (or in any way) and she objects to figuring in any special way as a representative of France or French culture. The article is inopportune at this moment. It contains many statements that would have to be modified or not put forward at all.

In February 1950, when Sri Aurobindo was requested to comment on a *projet de loi* (draft legislation) on the transfer of the French Settlement to

¹³ KD Sethna

the Union of India, the Master wrote about the situation in Pondicherry at that time:

But if nothing is changed in local conditions and freedom is left for a certain type of politicians and party leaders to make use of their opportunities to pervert everything to their own profit, how are they to be prevented from prolonging the old state of things, in which case the Territory would easily be turned into a sink of misgovernment and corruption and things will become worse even than in the past. Only a strong control, a thorough purification of the administration and a period of political discipline in which the population could develop public spirit, the use and the right use of the powers and the democratic institutions placed at their disposal, could ensure a change for the better and even that only after a long lapse of time. It cannot be ensured by a paper constitution; the right type of men in the right place could alone ensure it.

The tragic incident of August 15 was indeed a bad omen for the newly-born independent nation. Sixty-five years later, one can still dream of 'the right man at the right place'.

A Virulent Indian Consul General

A letter from Rashid Ali Baig, the Indian Consul General in Pondicherry helps to understand why the situation could deteriorate so badly. It also shows the profound bias of some senior officers in Nehru's Administration, at the time India was finally getting her Independence.

Baig, earlier posted in Goa directly reported the Mulshankar incident to the Prime Minister¹⁴:

The hostile demonstrations, culminating in the murder of an inmate, that took place on August 15 at the gates of the Ashram were directed

¹⁴ Also Minister of External Affairs and Commonwealth.

against her [The Mother] and not against Shri Aurobindo whom everybody seems to respect but pities for being 'hen-pecked' without the benefit of the matrimony.

Baig continued to feed the Prime Minister with gossip for a few years. This one is the first in a series of outrageous reports which the Consul General kept writing directly to Nehru. Baig was reprimanded more than once by Nehru himself who had to remind him that he was the Consul General of India and he should write in a dignified manner.

But one understands that the "Tamilian goondas' had the blessings of the representative of the Government of India to do what they did.

This is the tragedy.

This hatred against The Mother (and indirectly against Sri Aurobindo) continued for several years after the incident.

Here is an example of how Baig interfered in the local affairs of Pondicherry, which was still de facto and de jure a French territory.

In November 1947 Baig organized a public meeting in Pondicherry for Ravindra Varma, the All Indian Youth Congress President. Varma had lunch with Baig who dropped him in his official car to the venue the meeting.

Varma immediately began to badly swear, among others, against France, Governor Baron and Sri Aurobindo.

To give an idea of the violence of Varma's speech, he said:

- France is no longer a first-rate power; it is a rotten and degenerate nation. Its currency's value is zero; it is not an independent nation, but a lackey of the United States.
- I have seen their civilization on the Concorde Square in Paris; French were walking with their brain saturated with alcohol. Let us not speak of France and its culture any longer; because France is no longer a nation, it is dead.

Varma continued thus, once on Baron, once on Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram¹⁵, sometimes on the Socialist MP from Pondicherry, Lambert Saravane.

- Baron is trying to convince us that France is strong and the equal of India. Baron is like Jinnah, but crazier. Jinnah at least, called for a country with a separate status. What Baron wants, this 'cultural' enclave of France in India makes no sense.
- And he [Baron] wants to stay here just for 5000 rupees that France pays him every month here, I pity him. He will not benefit from this for long.

A report to Paris says that France made a formal complaint against Varma and Baig, but the Consul General nonetheless continued his violent diatribes against anyone wanting to stay on France's side.

Apart from these attacks, Baig was very jealous that many Indian personalities would visit Sri Aurobindo without coming to see him. He complained to Nehru about it.

As a diplomat, Rashid Ali Baig was extremely arrogant and gifted in antagonizing the people with whom he had to deal. He managed this in a record time in Pondicherry. The situation was so bad that the French government had to ask for his recall. But as he had direct access to the Prime Minister, he could escape any action.

On December 10, 1947, Nehru wrote to Baig:

I am not enamoured of the Ashram or of the mystery that surrounds it. But I think it would be a safe policy for you to adopt not to get entangled in its affairs or in any conflicts with it. Nor would I like you to function publicly or otherwise against the Ashram. I know that there is feeling against the Ashram in Pondicherry and I have no doubt that there is justification for it. But if you are involved in this matter, it

¹⁵ We do not have the exact words on Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram.

does not particular good and it might harm us a little in other parts of India. I should like you of course to continue to send us full reports about the Ashram and other activities in Pondicherry.

When Baig objected to Surendra Mohan Ghose, a prominent Congressman and member of the Constituent Assembly from West Bengal meeting the Governor and the Ministers in Pondicherry without his knowledge, Nehru answered:

We cannot enforce any rule of etiquette on non-officials. Therefore, we cannot ask any Indian, distinguished or not, who visits Pondicherry to call on the Consul-General or to seek the Consul-General's help in interviewing the Governor or ministers. Naturally it is desirable for Indians going to Pondicherry to call on the Consul-General and for him to help them in every way.

In fact, Baig's real objection was that S.M. Ghose had been for years very close to Sri Aurobindo, considering the latter as his guru. Ghose was one of the very few 'outsiders' that the Master would meet from time to time. This must have enraged Baig.

Nehru continued his lecture to his Consul General:

Apart from this general ruling it is to be remembered that the Ashram and its votaries cannot be judged by normal standards. You have compared them to the Vatican City. Many of these votaries have been regularly going to Pondicherry and in the course of their visit they have often called on the Governor. It must be a little difficult for them to get out of this habit and to realise that an Indian Consul-General is installed there. Previously, of course, there was a European and nobody wanted to call upon him.

The last words of Nehru were quite nasty to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother:

I shall suggest to him that when he goes to Pondicherry next to pay his respects to the deities there, he might see you also.

A month later, on Christmas Day 1947, Nehru wrote again to Baig.

The Prime Minister reiterated that Baig's work was appreciated: "In Goa the work you did was appreciated by us and that was the reason why we asked you to take charge of Pondicherry also."

Nehru does not condemn his Consul General, but does slightly reprimand him:

The information you are sending from Pondicherry is very helpful in understanding the situation there. I am not concerned with people's criticism of your work very much so long as that work does bear fruit but you are in a diplomatic position and diplomats have to act in a certain manner and as far as possible not get entangled in local disputes. It is for them to report everything fully; they cannot be in possession of all the facts which govern foreign policy.

The Prime Minister elaborates:

Take Pondicherry for instance. This is not merely a local matter but involves the relations of India with France. These relations, apart from Pondicherry, have been good and we have received help from France in the United Nations. France is technically still a great power and has prestige to keep up. We cannot deal with it casually. A new Ambassador has come from France.¹⁶ He has been chosen specially to please India. He is the son of Professor Sylvain Levi, the Indologist.

It is if as the Indian diplomat had no training at all in the art of diplomacy. It is astonishing that the Prime Minister¹⁷ of a country caught in millions of difficulties, (it is the week Nehru decided to refer the Kashmir issue to the United Nations), should explain to Baig the basics of his job. The lecture continues thus:

¹⁶ Daniel Levi.

¹⁷ He was also Foreign Minister.

I have no doubt that these questions of the French and Portuguese possessions in India will be solved in accordance with our wishes sooner or later ...we do not want to pick up a quarrel with France on this particular issue at the moment. Our representatives must realise this as well as many other factors, which go to govern our general policy.

Interestingly, Nehru clarifies that he has no problem with the proposed University in Pondicherry, with the condition that a political settlement is arrived with the French Government:

To the French, we have always said that politically it is inevitable that Pondicherry should form part of the Indian Union, we have no objection whatever to Pondicherry continuing to be a seat of French culture, university, etc. How all this can be adjusted is another matter but there is no point in telling them that we object to their university or to the French culture having a place in India. Indeed we do not object if this can be done in conformity with a political settlement.

For different reasons, mainly the instability of the successive French governments under the Fourth Republic as well as the precedent that it could create for its other colonies in Africa and Indochina, it would take 7 years for France to take the jump, but it is another story.

Dilip Kumar Roy and Nehru

Another issue was that within the Ashram, certain sadhaks had difficulties to accept The Mother's presence. One of them was Dilip Kumar Roy who had been very close to Sri Aurobindo.

In 1952, Nehru wrote a note addressed to the Secretary General in the Ministry of External Affairs. It is entitled 'State of Affairs at the Aurobindo Ashram'. It makes interesting reading and confirms Nehru'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. Nehru wrote¹⁸:

I had a visit from Shri Dilip Kumar Roy¹⁹ 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.

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 University²⁰. 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.

Roy went as far as to request the Prime Minister to block the International University planned in Pondicherry still in French territory.

¹⁸ Note to the Secretary General; MEA, 22 December 1952. File No. 2(587)151-PMS.

¹⁹ According to the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 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 Akdemi, 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*".

²⁰ See our research

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 need not waste time on the accusations of Dilip Kumar Roy 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, but the accusations show how difficult was the atmosphere in Pondicherry during those years of political uncertainty.

August 15 Message: the future

To come back to the Mulshankar tragedy and its inner implications, in April 1950, Sri Aurobindo answered a disciple who asked him about 'the present darkness' in India and the world:

You have expressed in one of your letters your sense of the present darkness in the world round us ...for myself, the dark conditions do not discourage me or convince me of the vanity of my will to 'help the

world', for I knew they had to come; they were there in the world nature and had to rise up so that they might be exhausted or expelled so that a better world freed from them might be there. After all, something has been done in the outer field and that may help or prepare for getting something done in the inner field also. For instance, India is free and her freedom was necessary if the divine work was to be done. The difficulties that surround her now and may increase for a time, especially with regard to the Pakistan imbroglio, were also things that had to come and to be cleared out.

This explains many things on a certain plan, however more than 60 years later, it appears that much negativity is still to be exhausted and finally 'expelled'. Let us only hope that it will not take too long.

In his August 15 message read on All India Radio, the morning Mulshankar was killed, the Prophet of Nationalism thus spoke:

August 15th is the birthday of free India. It marks for her the end of an old era, the beginning of a new age. But it has a significance not only for us, but for Asia and the whole world; for it signifies the entry into the comity of nations of a new power with untold potentialities which has a great part to play in determining the political, social, cultural and spiritual future of humanity. To me personally it must naturally be gratifying that this date which was notable only for me because it was my own birthday celebrated annually by those who have accepted my gospel of life, should have acquired this vast significance.

As a mystic, I take this identification, not as a coincidence or fortuitous accident, but as a sanction and seal of the Divine Power which guides my steps on the work with which I began life. Indeed almost all the world movements which I hoped to see fulfilled in my lifetime, though at that time they looked like impossible dreams, I can observe on this

day either approaching fruition or initiated and on the way to their achievement.

It is here that he listed his Five Dreams mentioned earlier.

Why a date of such vast significance was sullied by a heinous crime, is difficult to answer at an inner level, even if it can be understood at the political one.

First Steps out of India: A lengthy process

A few days before India's Independence, Henri Roux, the French Chargé d'Affaires in Delhi had informed Nehru of the decision of the French Government to hand over the loges on September 1. A letter to this effect was sent by the French Prime Minister (Président du Conseil) to his Indian counterpart on August 12. For some reason, the letter of George Bidault²¹ was misplaced and received by Nehru only on September 22. This delay is rather strange in view of the importance of the content.

The French said later that they had misplaced the letter; in any case the fate of the French Settlements was not the No. 1 priority of Delhi when North India was burning.

Nehru answered Bidault on 30 September 1947: "The Government of India welcome and accept the decision of the Government of the French Republic regarding the renunciation of the historic rights which France has exercised in the areas known as the French loges in India, in favour of the Dominion of India. Owing to the late receipt of your letter, it was not possible for the ceremony of the transfer to be held on the date you proposed. I am, however, arranging with your Embassy here for a convenient date in the immediate future."

Nehru, who had asked Paris for this first gesture of goodwill as early as April, expressed "on behalf of the Government of India my sincere appreciation of

²¹ File No.26(46)-X/47, M.E.A. & C.R., N.A.I.

this friendly gesture which will help to strengthen the cordial relations existing between the Governments of the French Republic and India.” Finally, the loges were formally ceded to the Indian Union on 6 October 1947.

It has already been pointed out that the cession of the French Settlements was not entirely according to the French law; legally the Government could not take such a decision without the assent of the Parliament. But it was more a symbolic gesture of friendship to put the relations between the two countries on a firmer base.

Pondicherry would take seven more years to witness the ‘de facto merger’, but it is another story.