



## **Literary Ambience of Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo School of Literature**

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Pondicherry has a great antiquity. A small town surrounded by countryside on the Bay of Bengal in the south-east coast of India, Pondicherry was the seat of Vedic teaching and learning founded by Rishi Agastya who arrived from North India before the birth of Jesus Christ; much before the advent of contesting colonial powers on its shore. It became a literary hub during the time Sri Aurobindo and his disciples were living here but it has not retained much of its aura now. Pondicherry now lies vibrant with its shops, tourists and entertainment industry (a city now, in terms of population) but in the literary sphere it seems to be an appendage of the metropolis (Chennai, erstwhile Madras city).

Hundreds of years passed while Portuguese, Dutch, French and the British competed for its occupation. Finally when the British occupied the whole of India, French settled in Pondicherry and three smaller coastal territories of South India in three far flung provinces of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and one on the Ganges in West Bengal while the Dutch was satisfied to keep its presence in Goa. French occupied Pondicherry for about 200 years before leaving it for good in 1954. However, it is still considered to be the French window of India, as Nehru opined, with its language, culture and heritage still lingering in the surroundings through some institutions and heritage buildings the benefit of which is reaped specially by Tourism Department.

While the British Government in India chased the freedom fighters and revolutionaries everywhere under its empire, some political firebrands from nearby Madras took shelter in Pondicherry under the French. Aurobindo Ghose from remote

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Calcutta arrived via Chandernagore, the French territory in Bengal, as it was called then, sailed in cognito in a Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) bound ship to reach silently the shore of Pondicherry on 4 April 1910.

He was a great savant, a poet, politician and journalist. Here he began his yogic life, away from the day-to-day humdrum society with political mix. Here came the French savant and writer Paul Richard and his wife Madam Mirra Richard. The three of them jointly founded the great philosophical quarterly review, *Arya* on 15 August 1915, on Sri Aurobindo's birthday. As the two French people were persecuted by the British power for their association with the revolutionary Aurobindo Ghose they had to leave India after about a year and then it was the sole responsibility of Sri Aurobindo to write almost the whole review, all by himself. All his philosophical and spiritual works filled its pages until its end in 1921. The poet and politician came to be known here as a philosopher and yogi. Great scholars and inquisitive readers in India awaited the appearance of each issue of the *Arya*. Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus, *The Life Divine*, and many other works were serialized here. In Pondicherry he continued to write and rewrite *Savitri*, a spiritual epic, the largest poem in English language and one of the largest in any language.

Mirra Richard came back imbibing some of the Japanese culture in 1920 and stayed on as a spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo and stayed even beyond his passing away in 1950. She remained on earth up to 1973 and enriched the Ashram circle and others outside with her literature, leadership and teachings, wrapping them with her spiritual opulence and protection. She became the Mother of the Ashram inmates and others, so called by Sri Aurobindo himself.

Among the political refugees who came from Madras was Subramania Bharati, a Tamil poet and author, editor and freedom fighter. Arriving in 1908 he remained in the town for some ten years. He was greatly influenced by Sri Aurobindo and wrote many patriotic and spiritual poems. Sri Aurobindo was also benefited by diving deeper in the sea of Tamil Literature through him mainly. He translated Sri Aurobindo in Tamil and

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the latter translated some classic from Tamil Literature into English, mainly by his help. Poet and critic K.R.S. Iyengar wrote that this period of Bharati's life in Pondicherry was considered to be the Bharati Age in Tamil Literature. Another poet of Pondicherry was Bharatidasan who too enriched the Tamil literature in many ways. V. Ramaswamy Iyengar, popularly known as Va. Ra. in the Tamil Literary World for his short stories, came to live with Sri Aurobindo sometime in 1911 and lived up to 1913. He too was deeply influenced by Sri Aurobindo.

The sphere of Sri Aurobindo's literary creations spread much beyond Pondicherry. It drew the attention of many Western critics and influenced many of them. While Yogi Sri Aurobindo with his path breaking spiritual achievement and contribution in the spiritual and literary fields, with his past fame as a revolutionary politician, with his new writings added to his journalistic works done earlier, came to be known throughout the world, many talented seekers, litterateurs, critics and musical artists and painters thronged around him, mostly as his disciples.

Along with some regional literatures like Bangla, Gujerati, Hindi, Oriya and Tamil, Indian English literature was created in a big way from Pondicherry though it was not so called at that time. Some of the authors, poets, fiction writers and essayists, who gathered round Sri Aurobindo about this time enriched the literature produced from Pondicherry thereby enriching the Sri Aurobindo School of literature. Their works reached many parts of the world in original and in translation. They were Nolini Kanta Gupta, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Dilip Kumar Roy, Sahana Devi, A. E. (George William Russel), Nishikanta, K. D. Sethna alias Amal Kiran and Nirodbaran. Among others who joined the lineage towards the end or shortly after this period were Satprem, T. V. Kapali Shastriar, M. P. Pandit, Nalini Kanta Sarkar, Tehmi, Pujalal, Sundaram, Rishavchand, Kireet Joshi, Dr. Arabinda Basu, Kamalakanta, Romen Palit, Narayan Prasad, Shyamsundar Jhunhunwala, Sujata Nahar, Manoj Das, Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, Samir Kanta Gupta, Kishore Gandhi, Shyam Kumari and others like young Mona Sarkar. All of them remained for a major or considerable part of their lives in Pondicherry,

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creating literature mainly in English but some in their mother tongues too. None of the writers who shared their works with Sri Aurobindo lives now. Some of the disciples stayed mostly outside but contributed in the same way like Dr. Sisir Kumar Ghose, Dr. Madhusudan Reddy, Dr. Karan Singh, Dr. K. R. S. Iyengar and Dr. Prema Nandakumar. Some of the magazines of Sri Aurobindo's time exist still with contributions from others but that is beyond the scope of this work. It is natural that some of the writers are still influenced by Sri Aurobindo and his line of creation, living in Pondicherry and outside. They all belong to the same school of thought and ideas. Sri Chinmoy, who became famous for his devotional songs and meditation centres throughout the world based in USA, created poems, songs, paintings and had shown extraordinary physical and other fitness. He was famous in the UNO circle and left the earth 13 October 2007. He lived in Pondicherry from his childhood as a disciple of the master and the Mother and carried their ideas in his heart.

Those who remained with or near Sri Aurobindo were saturated with his spiritual influence besides literature. Some of Sri Aurobindo's disciples wrote on yoga and spiritual subjects besides many of them creating essays and creative literature with a spiritual background. The idea was aptly expressed by a litterateur and serious sadhak or spiritual practitioner, Krishnaprem, alias Ronald Nixon. In his letter of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1934 to Dilip Kumar Roy, which was appreciated by Sri Aurobindo also, he wrote:

“In the last resort, this whole cosmos is but expression- Divine Expression, and in proportion as He. . . is able to manifest in us, we shall ourselves automatically become centres of expression. Till then, our productions whether in the realms of poetry, philosophy or art, are but the play of children, funerals where none is dead and marriage where there is no bride.”

The above is a general listing of poets and authors. The list is not exhaustive for there were more of them. We have not named most of the next generation litterateurs and other artists who came later and are still working. But it may be said that such names

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have become rare now which belongs to Sri Aurobindo School of writing, though writings continue.

Sri Aurobindo's massive literary works are supported by his profound knowledge of world language, literature, culture and philosophy. He wrote more than 50000 lines of poetry including the largest epic *Savitri* in English language; a poetic version of *The Life Divine*. His essays on social and cultural subjects, essays on yoga and spiritualism were the supporting documents of his thoughts and ideas though after a stage of his yogic maturity he hardly wrote thinking mentally. His short stories were forgotten by him, discovered after his demise. His dramas were written earlier and at the early period of Pondicherry period based on different countries; history, myth and romance. Some of them were enacted but not followed up by most others.

There were many followers of his poetry, mystic and spiritual poems, large numbers of sonnets, and among his essays; on Indian culture, ancient Indian history and social ideas and on his works on language and literature, on history, on scriptures like Vedas and Upanishads. Sri Aurobindo introduced Sanskrit, Greek and Latin rhyming patterns in English language. Among the things he received from the occult world there were some works in a language unknown before but it was not followed up to the end for any conclusion. Above all, what made him the centre of a literary school; he did not claim to be a founder of it, it came into being in the course of time, was the massive discussion on his poetry and some other works by himself. Some of his disciples were aptly trained in literature and were creator-critics. They constantly questioned him about different aspects of his writings including rhyming patterns and contents of his works and instead of being disturbed Sri Aurobindo answered his learned disciples even over the nights filling up hundreds of pages all of which may be taken as his literary theories based on his erudition and creative techniques and sources. So when it is said like Sri Aurobindean or Sri Aurobindonian literature it must be considered that it is backed by thousands of pages of his literature and their theoretical expositions. Sri Aurobindonian

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school of thought or philosophy or poetry or literature is not based on few pages of techniques and approbation by some critic friends.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram reproduces mainly Sri Aurobindo's and some of the Mother's works and publish works written on them mainly. Sri Aurobindo's literary and other works carry eternal values, specially those he wrote with yogic consciousness; his major works. There are and may be more publishers now publishing his works. Some of his works, it is said and found to have undergone some changes, some edited and presented differently in the course of publishing different editions which seem to be deviations from the established and expected norms for none who changed could claim to have done so with the same consciousness as of Sri Aurobindo. All lovers of literature with respect for Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual consciousness would like them to be retained as they were in the original. None has right to change a single word as used by a poet. Mother never agreed to any change in Sri Aurobind's works.

There were and are some local publishing establishments and local writers, writing in Tamil and English and occasionally in French or other languages from Pondicherry but such productions and their circulation seem not to have acquired much significance.

Among the English language dailies, The Hindu, The New Indian Express, Times of India and The Deccan Chronicle and two Tamil language dailies published from Chennai are available in the news stand which are very rare to find; few are easily located in the town. The weeklies published here thrive on and with matters of advertisements only. They are insignificant as media. They have no literary values. Few English language book shops thrive here. I think readers are quite few here than other types of men and women, whatever they are. Competition from visual media, mobile phones and other avenues of cheap entertainment are swallowing up even the genuine readers everywhere, at least in India.

Local literary merits may be hidden somewhere but rarely focused. No significant English language magazine or newspapers are published from Pondicherry. But in spite

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of all barriers some litterateurs have found their niche at the all India level and even beyond. There are windows for spiritual books and school, college books but they do not cover the main body of literature. Some Book Fairs are held in the UT from time to time and people visit and buy some books. But the particular literary flavour originating and spreading from here as during the period under discussion has stopped. These are not problems endemic to this area only but they apply more or less to many other towns too. Among the institutions Pondicherry University has sometimes encouraged local writers. And the French Institute is engaged on related research works.

On the whole, writing and publishing are not as strong activities here as some other activities like entertainment. Lack of verve keeps the unexplored areas silent. People live vibrantly with exhibitions, fairs, festivals, fashions and different types of entertainment including eating out. Common gay people throng the sea side and walk with mobile phones tucked to the ear.