

## THE GLOBAL CONTOURS OF SPIRITUAL INDIA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY AMONG WESTERN 'SPIRITUAL SEEKERS' IN INDIA

**Tuhina Ganguly**

Department of Anthropology  
School of Languages, Social and Political Sciences  
University of Canterbury, New Zealand  
[tuhina.ganguly@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tuhina.ganguly@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

### ABSTRACT

*This essay looks at the ways in which 'Spiritual India' is actively imagined and constructed outside its geo-political boundaries. Focusing on Westerners who went to India for an alternative lifestyle at the height of the counter-culture movement in America and Europe, this essay explores the contours of 'spiritual India' - where does 'spiritual India' begin, where are its boundaries, how far does it extend? Based on fieldwork in Puducherry, India – specifically Sri Aurobindo Ashram - the essay argues that the counter-culture movement across North America and Western Europe lent itself to certain experiences and imaginaries of India. By extension, the space of 'spiritual India' is conceptualized in multiple locations. The local, then, may be understood as that which is synchronous with the global for its boundaries spread beyond its geo-political mapping. As a corollary, the global is as much centred as the local is ex-centric. Auroville, a 'global city', twelve kilometres from Puducherry is used as an example to substantiate the local nature of the global. Influenced by contemporary spatial theories, both the local and the global are seen to be simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal. Thus, 'spiritual India' is located within the trajectories of the local and the global.*

**Keywords:** *Ashram, Auroville, counterculture movement.*

---

### 1. The Global Contours of Spiritual India: An Anthropological Study among Western 'Spiritual Seekers' in India

Lima is celebrating a holy day commemorating *SanChristobal*. Walking bare feet on the paved streets of downtown Lima, with a Peruvian friend, we come across artists sketching images of Christ, the Virgin and baby Jesus on one of the market streets, with chalks and powdered colours...the sketches are beautiful and vibrant. We stop to admire one of the sketches –Mary with demure, downcast eyes and the infant Jesus clinging to her breast. I notice the street artist is wearing sandalwood beads, he is clearly a *HareKrishna* and only a few hours earlier I had caught strains of a Krishna *bhajan*<sup>1</sup> wafting from a location I could not identify. Lima, I figure, has a noticeable population of *HareKrishnas*. The street artist looks at me, smiles excitedly, and asks if I am Indian?! I am delighted as most times people in Lima have mistaken me for being Spanish. 'How did he know?' I ask my friend who translates it to the artist in Spanish. The artist says because of my eyes. He tells me (in Spanish, translation provided by my friend!) that it is his dream to go to India (he has never been there yet), the birth place of Krishna. He has been a believer of Krishna for a long time now and observes various fasts in deference of Krishna and his own faith in Krishna. He says he is almost 50 years old and I am extremely surprised to hear this for he looks at least 20

---

<sup>1</sup>Devotional song

years younger. This too, he says, is a result of his fasting, his belief in Krishna...the power it has over his soul. More than a year later, the memory of the artist – the artist with sandalwood beads, devotee of Krishna sketching the image of Virgin Mary on a Lima street with a dream to visit India – stays with me (28 October 2012)

These are part of my notes from the first ‘field’ trip to Puducherry in 2012. Perhaps while talking to someone in Puducherry or a meandering thought while walking down its streets made me realise that my interest in my current research topic, the imaginaries and (re)productions of ‘spiritual India’, and in some ways the preparation for it – call it fieldwork if you will – had begun the previous year in Lima. I had gone to Lima as a participant in an academic workshop wholly unconnected to my subsequent PhD research. However, my experience with a Krishna devotee in Lima, one April evening, who had never travelled to India, for whom I represented a tiny slice of the birth place of Krishna, nudged me to explore the spatial contours of ‘spiritual India’.

In *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement*, Tulasi Srinivas critiques the (mis)understanding of globalization as the movement from the “West to rest” (2010, p. 29). Even while acknowledging the flows of power and economic dominance from the West to the non-West, Srinivas argues, “whereas globalization was incontrovertibly dominated by Western economic and ideological structures, in actuality the data suggested that India had “emitted” cultural goods, ideologies, and ways of being regularly into the network– that cultural goods, services and ideas flowed *out* of India...’ (2010, p. 29) Elsewhere, Doreen Massey (2005) makes a powerful case for studying the local and the global in terms of their mutual constitution. Massey argues that the global is as much implicated in the local as vice-versa. Thus, both Srinivas and Massey exhort that the local and the global be (re)thought of in terms of their inter-connections. Influenced by these contemporary theories of spatialization and globalization which emphasise networks of movement, in this essay I attempt to trace the space of ‘spiritual India’ through networks of movement cutting across and through India and the West.

Where does ‘spiritual India’ begin? What are its boundaries? How far does it extend? I shall try to show through three interconnected sections that ‘spiritual India’ extends far beyond its geo-political boundaries insofar as space is not that which is bound in itself but that which is constantly unfolding. In tracing these unfoldings, one comes to realise the interconnections, and the global networks of travel and movement through which ‘spiritual India’ is constantly made and remade. The *opening* section gives a brief background of Puducherry, my main ‘field’ site, in India. I situate Puducherry within networks of travel and movement to emphasise the “itinerant dimensions of place” (Bremer, 2006, p. 28) which sets the tone for the following sections in which the spatial contours of India are dis-located in that imaginaries of India are seen to exist beyond its geo-political boundaries. The *second* section looks at what I call *arrival narratives* which are narratives of how and why people went to India from the West. Many Westerners I interviewed in Puducherry, went to India between the 1960s-1980s when ‘hitting the road’ was part of the counterculture movement when Indian or Eastern spirituality became more accessible through popular culture. Thus, ‘spiritual India’ travelled to the West through ideas, images and the physical movement of gurus to the West even as people travelled from the West to India. The arrival narratives also demonstrate the ways in which ‘spiritual India’ is available throughout the West, for example through meditation retreat centres, yoga centres, music, novels et cetera. The *third* section discusses the inception and growth of Auroville, a global city twelve kilometres from

Puducherry. If the local is made through the global – global imaginaries and discourses – then the global is also made through the local as in the case of Auroville, a township that purports to collapse within itself a wide range of nations/nationalities. The *concluding* section ties together the three sections which reflect on newer conceptualisations of space itself, and the implications of such conceptualizations for a better, more nuanced understanding of the local and the global. Spiritual India is seen to be located within the dynamic trajectories of the local and the global, and their interstices.

## 2. The ‘Field’: A Brief Background

My primary ‘field’ site was the city of Puducherry, a small city on the Eastern coastline of the Indian peninsula. My first visit to Puducherry was between Oct-Nov. 2012; then a week in January 2013 and subsequently for 4 months from Nov. 2013-March 2014<sup>2</sup>. Earlier known as Pondicherry, it was under the rule of the French from about the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards until 1962 when it got independence, fifteen years after the rest of India got independence from British rule. Vestiges of the French colonial rule are more than evident in the architecture especially within the ‘French quarter’ of the city, the street names in French, hordes of French tourists, the red capped policemen et cetera. Within Puducherry, *Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (hermitage) is both, a popular draw for tourists and for devotees of Sri Aurobindo and the French lady, Mira Alfassa (later Richard) who is popularly called the Mother. The *Ashram* was founded in 1926 on the philosophical and spiritual tenets of Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) and the Mother (1878-1973). Both, the *Ashram* and the city of Puducherry are mobile spaces in that they are a part of networks of travel and movement. Each year the *Ashram* and the city in general receive visitors from various parts of the country and the world. During the five months of my stay in Puducherry, I met and interacted with people from India, Germany, France, Italy, Kazakhstan, America, Hungary, Russia, Sweden et cetera. Apart from the temporary visitors who may be visiting the *Ashram* for a few weeks or a couple of months, there’s a regular stream of international devotees who come to the *Ashram* every year for a few months. The *Ashram* however has about 1500 formal members called the *Ashramites*, and the *Ashramite* population too is diverse in that it has a mix of Indians and non-Indian members. The arrival narratives of the people I engaged with are narratives of journeying through different places through India and abroad before reaching the *Ashram* in Puducherry. A big chunk of the participant population of this research comprises those who ‘hit the road’ between the 1960s to the 1980s. Many of them travelled extensively in Asia, often travelling inland through Iran, Afghanistan et cetera before reaching India. “Streams of young European, Australian, and American low-budget travelers took advantage of cheap charter air fares or meandered overland from Istanbul through Iran, Afghanistan, and the Kyber Pass. Katmandu (with its pagodas and Himalayan views), the ancient holy city of Benares (temples and holy men), and Goa (with its palm lined beaches) became a kind of “golden triangle of hippiedom””(Reck, 1985, p. 92). India, Nepal and Thailand were particularly influential in New Age circuits and often people from the West travelled to these countries (Heelas, 1996, p. 10). Thus, Jed<sup>3</sup>, for instance, an Australian who has been living in Puducherry for more three decades now said that he left his job in 1978 and started travelling to India. He first reached Bali from where he travelled overland through Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand before reaching Nepal. There he trekked in the Himalayas, spent time in the Annapurna Sanctuary and lived in a Buddhist monastery for some time. In India, he first went up North and spent some time in an *Ashram* in Manali, and

---

<sup>2</sup> I shall return there in the end of 2014 to resume field work

<sup>3</sup> Name changed

reached Puducherry only in 1979. Many others, like Jed travelled through Asia and India before reaching Puducherry and deciding to make it their home. Others continue to travel to different *Ashrams* and monasteries in India while being based in Puducherry; still others pass through Puducherry as part of their travel itinerary in India; yet others were associated with *Ashrams* and Meditation Centres in the West before going to India and ‘found’ their guru through such centres in the West. Thus, even though most participants asserted that *Ashrams* are specific to India and contribute to its long spiritual tradition, yet *Ashrams* and Indian spirituality itself is implicated in global discourses and practices of spirituality such that meditation centres, yoga retreats, Western satellites of Indian *Ashrams* et cetera are available throughout the West. Interestingly, Jed decided to go to India after a vision he had of India while still living in Australia. One day, just out of the blue, he saw India in a dream-like state although he was wide awake. How did he know it was India, I ask him. He’s not sure anymore but he saw mountains which he knew were the Himalayas and elephants and an Indian man. This example is not meant to trivialise Jed’s experience of the vision. Rather, it’s meant to show that imaginaries of places/countries often make them available and accessible in certain ways – through associations with particular icons or symbols associated with that place for instance - to people elsewhere. Popular images and associations, clearly then, make India available thousands of kilometres away from its geo-political terrain. The following pages explore the production of India – the local – through its availability, interpretations and conceptualizations globally; and the making of the global through a localized site, Auroville, twelve kilometres from Puducherry.

### **3. Spiritual India: Unravelling the local**

Historical exchanges between India and the West channelling cross-cultural religio-spiritual traditions is too wide to enable a detailed discussion here. For the purposes of this essay, I shall focus on the counterculture movement in America and Europe in the 1960s and ‘70s<sup>4</sup> since many of the people I engaged with travelled to India as part of that very movement in search of an alternative lifestyle. ‘The American counterculture movement of the 1960s, fueled by an international cultural need to find in Indian spirituality an opposition to Western rationality and greed, led to a spiritual seeking in India as an expression of zeitgeist’ (Srinivas, 2010, p. 11). This is when gurus, meditation centres, yoga retreats et cetera particularly gained currency in the West although the movement of Indian gurus to the West started much before around 1893 with Swami Vivekananda’s trip to the US<sup>5</sup>. During the 1960s and ‘70s, “hundreds if not thousands of young Americans and Europeans came to India to find *their* guru” (ibid). However, even as many people physically travelled to India for spirituality, there were others who during their travels ‘found’ Indian spirituality in other parts of the West. There are yet others who did not physically travel to India or the East within this period but instead were introduced to Indian spirituality or a particular Indian guru in their own country in the West. I shall discuss these different aspects through the arrival narratives which refer to both, “cultures of travel” (Srinivas, 2010, p. 93) i.e. the

---

<sup>4</sup> The counterculture movement was the direct successor of the beat movement of the 1950s, “the progression from beat to hip is a fairly obvious one; the beats of the 1950s advocated dropping out of society, promoted new forms of art and literature, smoked marijuana, listened to unorthodox music (jazz), rejected traditional sexual norms, and even popularized the word “hip”....The connection between beat and hip was perhaps best enshrined by the name of the preeminent hip band, the Beatles” (Miller, 2011, p. xvi). However, I shall focus on the counterculture movement in this essay for its relevance to this project in that many of the participants travelled to India during the 1960s and ‘70s.

<sup>5</sup> Images of Indian ascetics were of course a part of Western imaginaries of India since much before that. Colonialism especially propelled such images (See Narayan, 1993)

physical journeys of people situated within particular contexts, and “traveling cultures” (Clifford, 1997, p. 17) i.e. situating cultures within networks of movement such that cultures are seen to be mobile, accessible across the world and always a work-in-progress.

In December 2013, I met and regularly interacted with a West European lady, Sally<sup>6</sup>, in Puducherry who has been living there since the late 1980s. She has received formal initiation, *mantradiksha*, from her Indian guru, *Swami Prakashananda*<sup>7</sup>. Over cups of tea on the terrace of her house, a gorgeous French architecture heritage building, she recounted to me how and why she came to India:

Well we had links to India because my father ran something called... don't know what it was called actually. It was a propaganda film unit during the war, here in Bombay....And my godmother was a Hindu. But I didn't come for that reason. I came because it was the end of the 60s. We had an outbreak in the '60s as you know, our generation of people thought we had already arrived in a new world. So after that, there were basically three possibilities, one was going to communal whales to grow potatoes, one was to find a way to going back to finding a job and everything, and the other was to hit the road. So, we hit the road...I hit the road...and of course looking for spiritual but at that point looking for anything, looking for adventure, *a new way of life*, place, people. It was no longer possible to be where we had been... (Personal communication, 23 December 2013, emphasis added)

What has been variously called the counterculture or the sixties revolution was meant to be precisely that, ‘a new way of life’, a challenge to the world as it was. In the now classic, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1968), Roszak articulates the sense of resentment and disenchantment that the youth at this time, in America and Europe<sup>8</sup>, felt in a society that was experienced as closed, totalitarian, and unresponsive to the emotional and spiritual needs of its people. He refers to the prevailing conditions in American society as technocratic totalitarianism,

...technocracy...is the ideal men usually have in mind when they speak of modernizing, updating, rationalizing, planning. Drawing upon such unquestionable imperatives as the demand for efficiency, for social security, for large-scale co-ordination of men and resources, for ever higher levels of affluence and ever more impressive manifestations of collective human power, the technocracy works to knit together the anachronistic gaps and fissures of the industrial society (Roszak, 1968, p. 5)

The entire picture is thus of a highly mechanistic and mechanical society where individuals are governed solely by reason, rationality, efficiency and such like at the cost of freedom, imagination, and ultimately peace since the technocratic society with its emphasis on cold blooded rationalization and efficiency enables genocide and “thermonuclear annihilation” (Roszak, 1968, p. 47). The turn toward spirituality especially Eastern religious and/or spiritual traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism (Zen Buddhism in particular), Taoism et cetera can be placed within this context of spiralling disenchantment and the deeply felt

---

<sup>6</sup>Name changed

<sup>7</sup>See Narayan, 1989 on Swami Prakashananda.

<sup>8</sup> While India did not witness a youth movement that can be considered a parallel to the counterculture, nevertheless, the *Naxalite* movement in certain parts of India especially Bengal did express similar feelings of extreme discontent and disenchantment in the urban youth. In a significant departure from the counterculture though, the *Naxalite* movement was violent, and in Bengal ended with a bloody and brutal reprisal from the state government. For a detailed discussion of the Naxalite movement and feelings of disenchantment in the youth of the time, see Ray 1988.

existential need to live an alternative lifestyle. As most of the Westerners I engaged with reiterated, India and the non-West in general appeared to provide some relief by way of an alternative insofar as its religions and religious-spiritual teachings were seen to be syncretistic (Miller, 2011, pp. xxv-xxvii) and a lot more open than monotheistic religions especially Christianity with its emphasis on sin, purgatory or hell, and high degree of institutionalization in terms of making it almost mandatory to go to the church and so on. The works of beat poets, writers and travellers – which were subsequently incorporated into the '60s counterculture – exemplifies this popular turn Eastward. Thus, Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen* (1957), Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* (1958), Alex Ginsberg's poems "*Wichitra Vortex Sutra* (1966) or *Strotas to Kali Destroyer of Illusions* (1961) reflect this interest" (Reck, 1985, p. 91). Given the sense of discontent and unrest that many young Americans and Europeans felt, as Sally puts it, it was no longer possible for them to be where they had been. Robbie<sup>9</sup> is an American *Ashramite* in Puducherry who's been in the *Ashram* for close to four decades now. Recalling his travel to India, he says in 1971 he was a twenty five year old "dreamy, bright eyed, tall young man who had just got off drugs". Disgruntled and disenchanted with his life in America and the general state of affairs ("I became a very passionate and bitter young man"), he began travelling. "I travelled a lot...read a lot of books and for the first time in my life, became a serious student. But I had serious questions...eventually it pushed me toward the East" (Robbie, personal communication, 9 November 2012). He travelled overland for seven months through Morocco, Algiers, Italy, Greece and Iran to reach India. Robbie was one of many Westerners<sup>10</sup> I met in Puducherry who first came to India in search of an alternative lifestyle in which spirituality often figured centrally.

Of the people I engaged with, those who had travelled to India between the sixties and seventies, some had travelled extensively through Asia before coming to India which was just one of the many places they wished to visit but then realised that India had the answers they were looking for; some had no intention at all of coming to India but came here rather by accident and to their own surprise felt 'at home' in India; yet others specifically intended to come to India on a spiritual journey and once here visited different (a few or many) *Ashrams*, gurus and monasteries to figure out which one suited them best. Sally narrated how once she had done the customary round of Goa, we wanted to find an *Ashram* or something, I went to Rishikesh, there was... (I prompt, 'to *SivanandaAshram*?')...Yeah but he was already out of the body. He was already gone and...he hadn't been gone very long. And there were like 3 foreigners there in the summer. And that was very nice, people were very kind, we asked what do we do and there was this swami (says a name, '...or something'). We did our thing, we had *darshan*, there was one *Narayananda* who was very big in Scandinavia and Denmark, and he was there with one of his disciples and it was very nice....and then we came down...and we were looking, looking... (Personal communication, 23 December 2013).

Eventually, Sally found her first Indian guru, Swami Prakashananda in Nasik. It is interesting to note her comment about meeting Swami Narayananda, "who was very big in Scandinavia and Denmark". Just as Westerners travelled from the West to India to find gurus, the reverse movement of gurus travelling from India to the West was also common at least since 1893

---

<sup>9</sup>Name changed

<sup>10</sup>"The Indian pilgrimage soon became an obligatory rite-of-passage as streams of young European, Australian, and American low-budget travelers took advantage of cheap charter air fares or meandered overland from Istanbul through Iran, Afghanistan, and the Khyber Pass" (Reck, 1985, p. 92).

when Swami Vivekananda travelled to the US. As Mlecko (1982) argues, “Vivekananda did not convert vast numbers of Americans, but he did occupy an important historical position as the first guru to accept Western disciples, thus inaugurating a reverse transcultural religious flow” (as cited in Narayan, 1993, p. 493). However, the more contemporary familiarity with gurus and *Ashrams* as Cox (1977) and Ellwood (1987) point out was bolstered by the “1965 amendment to the 1917 immigration act” which ‘lifted quotas blocking immigration from Asia, allowing Hindu gurus to come to the United States even as American youth were seeking out new forms of knowledge in the social and political turmoil of the times’ (as cited in Narayan, 1993, p. 495). Maharishi Mahesh Yogi popularized by the Beatles; Rajneesh or Osho; the rise of the Hare Krishnas et cetera are only a few examples of the ways in which India and Hindu or Indian spirituality, so to speak, was being mapped in multiple locations simultaneously. As mentioned already, not everyone met their guru or encountered India within the geo-political boundaries of India. Larry, an American devotee of Sri Aurobindo whom I met in Puducherry in 2013 was introduced to Sri Aurobindo in his junior year of college in 1976 by an Indian roommate who had pictures of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on his book shelf. Subsequently, Larry became involved with various Sri Aurobindo centres in the US and travelled to India for the first time only in 2000. Interestingly, Larry says that he didn’t feel the need to physically travel to India in all those years for he was quite content being involved with the centres in the US. In *My Life in an Ashram*, Edward Bruner (1996) speaks of his experiences at the Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. He says, “I propose to describe my experiences at the institute in Honesdale...as an ethnographer interested in understanding *transplanted traditions*...” (1996, p. 301, emphasis added). I suggest that these movements whereby India becomes available elsewhere, as in Larry’s case, must be understood not as the transplantation of traditions – for that leaves unchallenged the image of a static place producing a static tradition that can then be transplanted – but as the very condition of the production of the space which is India.

Kiran<sup>11</sup>, an American lady who has now been in India for more than twenty years, recounted to me her feelings of disillusionment with American society from a very young age, “The value system just made no sense to me because life’s just about running around, stressing themselves out to make a lot of money, to have a big house, to have a big car, have a family and then die and I thought (laughing), what?!!!” (Personal communication, 21 Nov. 2013) By the beginning of the seventies when it seemed clear that many of those who had rebelled against the system in the sixties were actually going on to join it, and the counterculture was waning, disillusioned even more by the state of society, Kiran left America to go to Tanzania first. However, the first time Kiran went to India she didn’t go to any *Ashram* because,

I didn’t trust gurus and *Ashrams*, I thought who knows, I don’t want to get involved with a cult. I was always very individualistic so I followed my own, inner guidance. Anyway, it wasn’t until quite a bit later...Africa, Europe, then Asia, it was a seven year period that I worked my way around the world, so a few years in Africa, few years in Europe, few years in Asia, India, Malaysia, and I ended up in Australia...New Zealand for a year... New Zealand was the place where I did my first meditation retreat and where I first encountered alternative communities... The first retreat I think was in South Island, near Nelson, so that was a wonderful year for me where my inner path started to connect with some kind of outer, outer guidance. That first Buddhist retreat I did...it was very good, I trusted the...it was a Buddhist

---

<sup>11</sup>Name changed

monk who kind of guided me and I trusted her and so after my year in NZ, my visa expired and I went to Australia. By the time I got to Australia, this focus on spiritual life was so strong in me (Personal communication, 21 Nov. 2013)

Kiran stayed in an *Ashram* in Australia for six years where she herself became a *swami*. However, subsequently she left the *Ashram* in Australia and came to India where she did a *vipasana*<sup>12</sup> retreat. This retreat had a big meditation centre in England and she stayed for about a year at the English centre. One evening at the centre in England,

I was going in for an interview one time and I saw a photograph of *Ramana Maharishi* and I was just, I was transfixed. You know that picture of him and I just felt this is somebody who knows the truth. And the teacher was so sweet for the interview, she was waiting and waiting and she saw there I was just staring at the photo and she said 'come in, I have an address for you'. There is someone in India still living who was with him when he was alive. So she sent me back to India to *Papaji*...

That was Kiran's circuitous journey to India in 1991 where she joined the Advaita guru *Poonja ji*, more popularly known as *Papa ji*, in Lucknow. The arrival narratives are thus not as much about arriving *at* as they are about arriving *to(ward)*, that is a journey that unfolds in the process of approaching the destination. With regard to Sathya Sai Baba's *Ashram*, Prashanthi Nilayam, in his hometown Puttuparthi in India, Srinivas argues, "the city of Puttuparthi becomes *the* crucible where Sai devotional identity is forged and emplaced, where the matrix of possible meanings is visibly interpreted" (2010, p. 95, emphasis in original). While it's certainly true that particular spaces such as *Ashrams* or even the broader category of India can be understood as the ground on which "devotional identities" and practices of faith are realised, yet I argue that these spaces are *conceptualized* in multiple locations. Thus, for instance, the counterculture movement enabled particular experiences and imaginaries of India for people in the West even before they set foot on its physical land. Particular spaces, then, or the *local* is constituted with and through the *global* insofar as various interpretations, imaginaries and experiences of the local occur and emerge in spaces outside its immediate geo-political boundaries. Massey argues for the simultaneous reading of the local and the global through a rethinking of place or space<sup>13</sup>,

Instead...of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local (1994, pp. 154-55)

---

<sup>12</sup>A specific kind of meditation.

<sup>13</sup> Place is often used in opposition to space, where space refers to the vast, open and processual expanse of possibilities, place often refers to the circumscribed, limited and immediate. Space, in this schema, often is associated with the global whereas place is associated with the local (Massey, 2005). Massey destabilises these oppositions in arguing that space and place be understood in terms of their interrelations not opposition. In keeping with this approach, I have used the terms space and place interchangeable in this essay although fully aware of the different connotations that space and place have.



Extending Massey's and Srinivas's argument then, the space of India *and* the meanings associated with it – which constitutes its spatial imaginaries – have multiple loci. Further, the space of India stretches as far as its imaginaries or conceptualisations stretch in faraway continents, through collective states of anxiety and disenchantment, or chance encounters with gurus through photos and Indian dorm-mates, and so on. But even as India becomes available in and through multiple loci, even as the counter culture movement reached its peak and started to fade out in the seventies (although it continued to have a strong influence on the youth at the time), plans for building a global city were set afoot by the Mother of Sri Aurobindo *Ashram*.

#### **4. Auroville: The Making of the Global (City)**

The Mother of Sri Aurobindo *Ashram* envisaged something on the lines of a universal township since the 1910s (Jouhki, 2006). In 1954, she wrote a text which captured the 'Dream' which would be realised in the shape of Auroville,

A Dream: There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of good will, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth (Auroville, 2010, p. 2)

Although this text was written originally for Sri Aurobindo *Ashram*, by 1965, the Mother decided to establish her ideas of a universal township more concretely and the "French architect, Roger Anger, was given the responsibility of preparing the initial town lay-out, and he worked on it with his colleagues in Paris" (Auroville, 2010, p. 8). Auroville was eventually inaugurated in 1968<sup>14</sup> some twelve kilometres away from the main city of Puducherry. On 28 February 1968, Auroville was officially inaugurated and the ideal of "global human unity" (Auroville, 2010, p. 8) was symbolised through a lotus-bud shaped urn in which the soil from different parts of India and around 124 countries was placed. The ideal behind Auroville was the establishment of a society where people of different nationalities, creed, religion et cetera would live together bound by the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Although the Mother envisioned Auroville long before, nevertheless the coinciding of its material realisation in the sixties with aspirations of many Westerners to look toward the East for an alternative lifestyle is important for the ways in which the global and the local can be thought of through each other. "As early as 1950, *Ashramites* remember the Mother talking about the need to expand the ideas of the *Ashram* into a larger community that could concern itself with issues outside of the intense study of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy...Auroville was...promoted as an experiment as well as a shelter for those looking to escape the modern realities of the Cold War, of widening economic inequalities, and polarizing political ideologies" (Namakkal, 2012, p. 65). Certainly, interpretations of Auroville and its significance married individual spiritual aspirations with the wider discourse of change and counter-culture of which the discourse of spirituality (as a concept different from religion), to quite an extent, is also a significant part. Paul Heelas describes Auroville as, "one of the best-known of New Age centres" (1996, p. 43). "In the 1960s and '70s new Aurovillians were mostly young explorers who sought to broaden their

---

<sup>14</sup>After Mother's death on 17 November 1973, there was much fracas over Auroville's management and organization. Eventually, Auroville came under the aegis of the Indian government with the Auroville Foundation Act 1988. For a detailed discussion on Auroville and how it came to be regulated by the Auroville Foundation Act, see Minor, 1999

minds and follow a more liberal, tolerant and untraditional lifestyle beyond the conventional norms of society. Hippie culture seemed to fit very well with these ideals emphasizing cultural understanding and human unity” (Jouhki, 2006, p.110). One of the closest disciples of the Mother, a French man who went by the name of Satprem wrote in 1969, on the “Answer to Why Auroville”,

This is the time of the great sense. We look to the right or left, we build theories, reform our Churches, invent super-machines... The Great Sense, the True Sense, tells us that man is not the final goal. It is not the triumph of man that we want, not an improved version of an intelligent dwarf – it is another being on earth, another race amongst us. Sri Aurobindo has said: ‘Man is a transitional being’. We are right in the middle of this transition, it is cracking from all sides: in Biafra, in Israel, in China, on Boul’ mich (Auroville, 2010, p. 3)

The footnote, interestingly, informs us that Boul’ mich was “the boulevard in front of the Sorbonne in Paris, France, where in May 1968 a student revolt broke out” (Auroville, 2010, p. 3). Auroville, then, is squarely located within the realities of political unrest and youth disillusionment.

Quite a few Westerners I engaged with in Puducherry said that they came to India or to Puducherry first precisely because of Auroville. The idea/ideal of a universal township seemed particularly attractive to them at the height of the movement rooted in collective sentiments of disintegration and disillusionment. Thus, for instance, Wolf who often travels to India from his country Germany says he came to India for the first time in March 1973, “I was on my Grand Tour” as the British used to say. “In those days it was the hippie trail”. He says he had already heard of Auroville and he wanted to come to India to see Auroville. He had heard of it and read about it as a young college student. Auroville had been inaugurated a few years back and in 1973 it was still very new. He wanted to “see the beginning of Auroville”. At that time, “it was a makeshift colony”. It was bare, with almost no vegetation and navigating your way inside it was very easy contrary to now when it is full of trees and you can easily lose your way. The birth of Auroville was a time of great excitement and the young men and women at the time, ‘the children of the sixties’, were enthusiastic collaborators in its conception and development. Pierre<sup>15</sup> came from France to Puducherry around 1969 to visit his mother who used to live in the *Ashram* in Puducherry. What was supposed to be a temporary visit turned into a permanent stay when Pierre tore up his return ticket to France on the day of his departure and stayed on in the *Ashram*. His brother followed shortly and came in the caravan that came inland from France to Auroville in ’69, and they lived in the residential quarter called Aspiration in Auroville. Both, Pierre and his brother worked in Auroville, and Pierre says he loved working in the *Matrimandir* (Mother’s temple, it’s the centre of Auroville). It’s been about forty five years since then, and Pierre and his brother are still in Puducherry. Pierre’s narrative here might seem to focus on the static, the state of dwelling for his story is that of not leaving India, of the end of travelling. Often, it is only the global which is thought of as dynamic and changing while the local is understood as static, the exact opposite of the global. Anna Tsing argues against such tendencies,

We...need to redefine the common distinction between the “local” and the “global”. Most commonly, globalist thinkers imagine the local as the stopping point of global circulations. It is the place where global flows are consumed, incorporated, and resisted...But if flow itself

---

<sup>15</sup>Name changed

always involves making terrain, there can be no territorial distinctions between the “global” transcending of place and the “local” making of places. Instead, there is place making – and travel – all around, from New York to New Guinea’ (Tsing, 2000, p. 338)

The previous section spoke of movement that is the journeys people undertook to reach India such that the boundaries of India spill over its political circumference, and the implications this has for imagining the local as that which is co-constituted with the global. This section, as a corollary, looks at the construction of the global within the local space of Auroville, an international township that seeks to base itself on the principle of human unity that at once embraces and transcends national boundaries and in that sense represents the ideal<sup>16</sup> of a truly global unity. Following Tsing, Pierre’s case I suggest, exemplifies the making of the global where Pierre’s story is the story of his contribution to the collective project of Auroville that localizes the global insofar as people of various nationalities live within the radius of Auroville, but also insofar as its underlying principle and discourse is that of a common aspiration toward humanity and ‘the Divine Consciousness’. Thus, while the global makes the local available and accessible elsewhere, the global too is made available in and reconstituted through the space of the local.

Today as one enters the Visitors Centre in Auroville, one is met by a colourful cornucopia of banners suspended from a make-shift tent. One of them explains the Mother’s vision and dream of Auroville, some others highlight the activities taking place in Auroville and many of these represent the characteristics of different nations represented in the population of Auroville. Within Auroville, some national pavilions have been set up where each pavilion is dedicated to a particular nation and seeks to highlight “‘the soul” of each nation” (Auroville, 2010, p. 15). As the Mother envisaged it,

India’s role is to be the spiritual heart of the terrestrial body just as, for example, the role of Germany is to express skill, or that of Russia the brotherhood of man, or that of the United States enthusiasm for adventure and practical organisation, or that of France generosity of sentiment, newness and boldness of ideas and chivalry in action (Auroville, 2010, p. 16)

About Auroville, Heelas says, “This experiment in a community beyond tradition has not worked as well as expected. But at least Auroville still exists: which is more than can be said about virtually all the communes which sprang up during the 1960s Age of Aquarius” (1996, p. 208). Other scholars have pointed out the fault lines, so to speak, within Auroville which underscore the internal contradictions and conflicts (Jouhki 2006, Namakkal 2012). Despite the thwarted realisation of its spiritual aspirations, and factionalism within Auroville, its population does comprise of a global mix: in 2009, within a population of approximately 2200 Aurovillians, 40% are Indians, the rest are from different countries like France, Germany, Italy et cetera (Auroville, 2010, p. 8). However, for the purposes of this essay, what’s relevant is precisely the constant enveloping of the local and the global which can be seen here in the associations of Germany with skills or of India with spirituality within a township that strives to be a global community by transcending these very national boundaries. A closer examination of discourses of the global and globalisation reveals that the global – to be the global- presupposes the local, the transgression of national boundaries requires those national boundaries in the first place (Massey 2005). Airports, for example,

---

<sup>16</sup> Various scholars have pointed out the problems in realising this ideal in practice particularly in the hierarchical relations between the Western Aurovillians and the local Tamil population in the surrounding villages (see Jouhki 2006 and Namakkal 2012).

those open, global spaces of dizzying interconnectivity are strictly regulated by the immigration laws of that particular country; global corporate houses thrive on cheap labour in specific countries which are then made available to middle class homes in most nations around the world which in turn become nodal points of consumer items from across the globe. Thus, where the local unravels into its global trajectories, the global implodes into its local nodes.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay has been concerned primarily with the constructions of the space that is ‘spiritual India’. I have tried to show through the various sections that spatial imaginaries of India transgress its geo-political boundaries. “A location”, as Clifford states so eloquently, “is an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations” (1997, p. 11). I have further suggested that these encounters and translations have multiple loci themselves as in the case of the counter-culture movement across North America and Western Europe lending itself to certain experiences and imaginaries of India. By extension, any and every space is conceptualized in multiple locations. The local, then, may be understood as that which is synchronous with the global for its boundaries spread beyond its geo-political mapping. As a corollary, the global is as much centred as the local is ex-centric. The example of Auroville shows how a global community (or aspiring to be a global community, at any rate) is rooted in a specific location in India following the ideal of global human unity nonetheless emphasizing the specific values or characteristics associated with a specific nation which are seen to best exemplify the spirit of that country. Thus, the local and the global are not in opposition to each other where the former represents the unchanging and the particular while the latter represents the forever-changing, dynamic realm. Rather, the local and the global are best seen as mutually constituting each other. It is then no surprise that the contours of ‘spiritual India’ are malleable and shifting, extending as far as Lima in South America or attracting caravans from France to it. This is not to suggest that India, therefore, cannot be viewed with any degree of coherence. Instead, the attempt is to read coherence differently, to acknowledge that multiplicity and fluidity in conceptualizing spaces does not lead to an inchoate understanding of it. Quite the contrary, space is freed of “*closure and stasis....in order to set it into other chains (...openness, and heterogeneity, and liveliness)*” where it can have a new and more productive life” (Massey, 2005, p. 19, emphasis in original)

## References:

- Auroville (2010) *Auroville: A dream takes shape*. Auroville: India
- Bremer, T.S. (2006). Sacred spaces and tourist plaes. In D.J. Timothy and D.H.Olsen.(Eds.), *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys* (pp. 25-35). London and New York: Routledge
- Bruner, E. M. (1996). My life in an ashram. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(3), 300-319.
- Clifford, J (1997). *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Heelas, P. (1996). *The new age movement*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

- Jouhki, J. (2006). *Imagining the other: Orientalism and Occidentalism in Tamil-European relations in South India* (PhD thesis, University of Jyväskylä, Finland). Retrieved from <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/bitstream/handle/123456789/13431/9513925277.pdf?sequence=1>
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, place and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Miller, T. (2011) *The hippies and American values* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press
- Minor, R.N. (1999). *The religious, the spiritual, and the secular: Auroville and secular India*. New York: State University of New York Press
- Namakkal, J. (2012). European dreams, Tamil land: Auroville and the paradox of a postcolonial utopia. *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6(1): 59-88
- Narayan, K. (1989). *Storytellers, saints and scoundrels: folk narrative in Hindu religious teaching*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Narayan, K. (1993). *Refractions of the field at home: American representations of Hindu holy men in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*. *Cultural Anthropology* 8(4): 476-509
- Ray, R. (1988). *The Naxalites and their ideology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press
- Reck, D.R. (1985). Beatles Orientalis: Influences from Asia in a popular song tradition. *Asian Music* 16(1): 83-149
- Roszak, T. (1970). *The making of a counter culture: Reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition*. London: Faber and Faber
- Srinivas, T. (2010). *Winged faith: Rethinking globalization and religious movements through the Sathya Sai movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tsing, A. (2000). The global situation. *Cultural Anthropology* 15(3): 327-60