

## [Sri Aurobindo Ashram](#)

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# Sri Aurobindo Ashram

What began as a few cohorts living together with their political mentor suddenly metamorphosed into an ashram. In the early 20's, Sri Aurobindo suddenly shed his cocoon-like cloak of political agitation and emerged a spiritual butterfly. The dramatic transformation surprised him as much as those around him. He explained, "I have been given a new mission by God; I will proceed as guided."

It was only in 1967, sixteen years after Aurobindo's passing, that the giant Auroville "spiritual experiment" was begun by the Mother. Where the Ashram maintained over the years a predominantly Indian population and Hindu character, Auroville with its non-sectarian, "supramental" orientation attracted more Westerners and took on a more cosmopolitan character. Though the two communities have squabbled at times, distracted by matters of basic humanness--money, land, rights, reputation, etc.--their relationship has always, at heart, been that of siblings, not rivals. Both are determined to flower the seeds planted by the seer Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual colleague The Mother--the quest for higher consciousness.

"In the half-century since its founding, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram has grown into a diversified spiritual community with over 1,800 members," an Ashram brochure states. "All regions of India and many countries of Asia, Europe and America are represented. Members are of both sexes and of all ages, creed and national origin. 'The Ashram has been created with another object than that ordinarily common to such institutions,' stated Sri Aurobindo, 'not for the renunciation of the world, but as a center and field of practice for the evolution of another kind of life and embody a greater life of the Spirit.' As in all spiritual communities, life in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram is centered around the practice of a discipline for the attainment of the goal common to all yogas and religion--Spirit, Self, God, Divinity. But in the Ashram, the discipline does not follow any fixed method, but is "an inner practice conducted under the spiritual influence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. There are three prohibitions--no smoking/drinking or drugs, no sex and no politics.

"At the common kitchen, food for 2,500 is prepared daily. Rice, vegetables and fruits are grown on Ashram farms. Books are printed at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press since 1945. Small-scale industries include: woodworking, stainless steel fabrication and cottage industries producing handicrafts, incense, hard-marbling silk fabrics, embroidered goods, perfume, pottery and batik work." "We do not want to exclude any of the world's activities," Aurobindo directed. All basic living necessities are provided for all Ashram residents.

Part Three will feature a close-up look at the

Auroville community of 800 residents. **Sidebar: The School**

In 1952, the Mother established the International Center of Education--a radical departure from the standard Indian education formula of rote memorization, straightjacketed by a ruthlessly competitive exams system. To her, education should encompass the "whole being." Old systems that forced children to parrot facts from memory did little to evolve the individual, much less better a nation.

She called her approach a "free progressive system--a progress guided by the soul, not subject to habits, conventions or preconceived ideas." The Ashram's brochure adds, "The student is encouraged to learn by himself, choose his own subjects of study, progress at a pace suited to his own needs and ultimately to take charge over his development. The teacher is more an adviser and source of information than an instructor. The Center awards no diplomas since it seeks to awaken the joy of learning and aspiration for progress in the student independent of outer motives."

The school spans kindergarten to university level with "standard" courses in: the humanities, languages, fine arts, sciences, engineering, technology and vocational training. It offers well-equipped classrooms, large libraries, reading rooms, laboratories, workshops, a theater and studios for dance, music and painting. Physical development was stressed by both the Mother and Aurobindo as a foundation for all yogas. Thus, all students take part in a vigorous daily sports program. Facilities include a swimming pool, tennis courts, sports arena, gymnasium and a judo hall. The school has swollen to over 900 students with 200

teachers, all Ashram members. Teacher/ student relationships, though not informal per se, carry a family-like feeling that, according to students, instills a joyous atmosphere. An overriding awareness that "we are all doing yoga here together " pervades. Many students successfully go on to become professionals such engineers and other occupations. **Sidebar: Student Voices**

In July, Latha Ravi of Madras visited the Ashram's school in Pondicherry and interviewed several students for Hinduism Today about their unique educational experience.

Hinduism Today: How has your yoga practice here at school helped you?

Several students: Yoga has given us self-discipline. It has made us realize that nothing can be done without seeing God's presence in every form. We are all staunch believers of Hindu religion and believe in the various customary traditions and practices of our religion.

HT: Do you have a desire for wealth like other youth? What are your ambitions?

Students: Money cannot get you everything in life. Most of us are from the surrounding villages. We have all been given an opportunity to get a complete training in yoga as well as in dance. We would like to utilize our talents in training other students from our villages. While we are learning yoga and dance, we are able to achieve control over things like anger, passion, jealousy, coveteousness and greed. We consider this as a great achievement not only for ourselves, but we consider that it would be helpful to our community as a whole.

HT: Has hatha yoga contributed to your excelling in your Bharata Natyam?

Students: Yes, we are able to perform various asanas without any difficulty. Thus, the most difficult dance mudras and other postures are achieved with ease. We are

also able to bring out depth and pathos in our dance which we attribute to our yoga training. Sidebar: My Golden Years

By Kusum Gheewala

I went to the Ashram in 1968. I was only 12. I remained there until 1973. The Mother would look at the photo of the person applying and decide. What I am today is the product of the Ashram. How can I relate what I have gained during my time there? It is an inner experience. I used to ask my teachers, "What is the aim of life?" The teachers are all sadhaks; teaching is their sadhana. Sri Aurobindo explained, "nothing can be taught"--knowledge is within each individual and the task of the teacher is to help bring this out. However, before I digress any further, my teachers would guide me to study books on different religions, different philosophies, different psychologies, different systems of yoga and works of Sri Aurobindo. One day in my chemistry lesson, secretly reading Synthesis of Yoga, the answer to my question dawned on me. It was an experience, and I continue to carry it with me. This truth cannot be revealed in words but has to be lived.