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Matrimandir

We are in India on a long, winding dirt road, in a line that is hundreds of people long. My father once observed, after spending eight hours in a Thai market, that crowds in the East are not the same as crowds in the West. Perhaps it is the lack of collective impatience (or self-consciousness) that breeds a benign and comfortable anonymity, as if you were one fish in a school of many, all heading somewhere, bumping gently against one another as you surrender to the greater, invisible tide that jostles you. It is as if your destination, instead of a pressing end in itself, becomes a small pulse in a larger force. I suppose the same could be said for queues of people where they occur; though, in my experience here in India, queues don't exist—not in the linear sense. More often, when buying tickets or boarding a train, we have encountered a boisterous, but penetrable, mob, which, upon closer inspection, is made up of a large portion of bystanders who may not have any interest in what is attainable at the front of the line. Yet the Indian style of “lining up” constitutes a kind of benign and unified co-existence of wills and tempers, rather than an orderly arrangement of exasperated suspension (the kind that descends into a hopeless counting of minutes and invariably makes me feel like I'm in purgatory, not living my life).

Despite their apparent scarcity, we now find ourselves in a long, orderly and slow moving line, in the countryside, a couple of kilometres from the Bay of Bengal. We wait, not with impatience but with a spirit of slowed-down anticipation, in the highest heat of April. Mercifully, the road is lined with trees and vegetation. This and the palest of breezes bring some respite. We have been asked to remain silent, to induce a contemplative and receptive state. The people in line with us are here from other places in India. There are also people from other parts of the world. Matrimandir is not even visible from

where we stand. But that is what we crane our necks to gain sight of. Seekers must be patient.

Many of the trees are in bloom. Frangipani blossoms waft divine fragrance. Huge tamarinds lean over us like protective bodies. The husks and black pits lay scattered on the ground, perhaps discarded by monkeys. Amongst them I spy a whole pod and though I sense that, given the solemnity of the walk, this might be an inappropriate thing to do, the animal scavenger in me picks it up anyway. I peel it apart and suck out the gorgeous sour, sweetness. Tamarind is the perfect antidote to heat.

Matrimandir means Temple of The Mother. In the teachings of Sri Arobindo, The Mother represents the great evolutionary, conscious and intelligent principle of life. The Universal Mother helps humanity move beyond its present limitations into the next step of its evolutionary adventure, the supramental consciousness. This is more or less what was written, as I have scrawled it in my journal, on the wall of the visitor's centre. Our tour of Auroville, the city of dawn, an international "city" that is an experiment in the evolution of human consciousness, ends with this optional pilgrimage to Matrimandir. We decide to come along. Others have come on buses. The numbers are shocking. We're not sure what this is all about. Touring this place, the roads winding through fields and lush forests with clusters of wonderful dwellings, the visitors' centre with quotes from the Mother including a long piece about how she hopes this place will never become a religion, the city plan laid out in the design of a galaxy spiralling around Matrimandir, and now this pilgrimage of sorts to the temple dedicated to the universal mother, we find ourselves drawn in. Being here is like an awakening, or like dreaming—I can't tell.

It is probably an hour before we see it. Matrimandir is a giant geodesic dome covered in gold discs that reflect the sun. The earth is dug away around it and it emerges out of the ground like a great growing sphere of light. There are twelve gardens surrounding the dome, named by the Mother: *Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Light, Life, Power, Wealth, Utility, Progress, Youth, Harmony, Perfection*. She has named the land surrounding Matrimandir, *Peace*. The Mother was a namer of things. The nearby city of Pondicherry, France's first and only colonial port in India, is deeply connected to Auroville. Many of the buildings around town bear small, unobtrusive marble plaques with names given by her. This was one of the first signs that I might be on a quest rather than a vacation; we wandered the colonial streets along the water and encountered engravings in hand script with words like, *Serenity, Contemplation, Solace*. I was intrigued by the idea of a woman called the Mother going around town naming buildings.

My companion and I have taken our walks through the streets of Pondicherry in early morning as the sun comes up on the bay or in late afternoon when the heat of the day begins to abate. On one morning, we meet a woman who invites us inside her home. She leads us down the hall to a sparsely furnished living room to meet her brother, sister and mother. We sip mildly spiced lemonade

as they tell us how they came here from the north to join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Her brother is an architect and an artist. She runs a farm and teaches boxing and swimming for the ashram. This project is separate from the city of Auroville, but dedicated to the philosophies of Sri Aurobindo. He begins to tell me a bit about Sri Aurobindo's teaching of yoga. I enthusiastically offer that I also practice yoga. *But this is yoga that you can do without moving*, he says.

The Mother was born, Mirra Alfassa, in Paris, of Egyptian and Turkish parents. She had been a spiritual seeker since childhood. When she met Sri Aurobindo in India she recognized him as the guide encountered in her visions. Sri Aurobindo's given name was Aravind Ghose. Born in Calcutta, his Western education in Darjeeling led him to English public school and Cambridge where he was a brilliant scholar. He abandoned England and his opportunity to work in the colonial administration. Upon returning home he became increasingly active in India's growing movement towards independence. When he was arrested by the British administration and detained for one year, he experienced spiritual revelations that led him to take refuge in the French colony of Pondicherry where he would develop his spiritual faculties and become a guru to many. The website of Auroville suggests that "the great originality of Sri Aurobindo is to have fused the modern scientific concept of evolution with the perennial gnostic experience of an all-pervading divine consciousness supporting all phenomenal existence. His synthesis was not a philosophic construct, but a realization stemming from direct spiritual experience." Sri Aurobindo believed India had the gift of spirituality to give to the world.

When Sri Aurobindo met the Mother he saw in her "an embodiment of the dynamic expressive aspect of evolutionary, creative Force." In India this elemental force is traditionally expressed and described as the "Supreme Mother." He called her the Mother because she represented an embodiment of an archetype, of a unifying force. The two worked together to find practical ways to realize his vision of human evolution. I try to think of a spiritual movement, a cult or a religion with a man and a woman, a mother and a father figure sharing positions of leadership, sharing voices of wisdom. They are equally quoted in all the panels I have seen. Though he was only a few years older, she far outlived him and it was her vision that guided the creation of Auroville, as it organized itself into a city, and the building of Matrimandir. She chose the spot on the map for the geographical centre of the town and when the architect drove to that spot he found a Banyan tree in an open field.

It is said that Buddha found enlightenment under a Banyan tree. I was a dedicated climber, sketcher and hugger of trees as a child and the Banyan tree is not like any other. The first one I saw was in Thailand on the property of a remote temple; people made pilgrimages there to touch the roots, to tie ribbons and garlands of flowers around the trunks of the sacred tree. The Banyan is in the fig family. It is unique because its branches form aerial roots that reach down into the earth and become new trees. Each of the new trees is physically connected to the mother tree. They are a family. When you walk

under a Banyan it is like you can see her children and grandchildren gathered around—taking life from her and supporting her at the same time.

While the others ahead of us file into Matrimandir we are ushered to the benches around the century-old Banyan to sit and wait. When it is our turn we approach the massive structure from a large ramp that actually leads down into the ground at the base of the dome. We take off our shoes and walk up a series of ramps that spiral towards the centre of the dome. It is cool inside and dim. Much of the inner dome is still under construction and there are building materials and scaffolding lying around below us. Twelve meditation rooms circle around the chamber. They are named for aspiring levels of consciousness and each represented by a different colour.

The Inner Chamber is the central space designed as a four-petal flower. We walk slowly up and up and then we are at the entrance to the room. It is roped off. We are not to go in, just look for a few seconds and move on. I have heard about pilgrimages like this. People journey for days in this country barefoot, on their knees, up hundreds of well worn stone steps, for a kiss, a hug, a touch from, a glimpse of, the guru. But there is no person here; it is a room. The Inner Chamber is huge. The dome soars above with twelve pillars supporting it. The room is completely white. White marble walls. White floor. In the centre is a crystal globe that suffuses sunlight, which falls in a single ray through an opening at the apex of the sphere. The Mother said, *The most important thing is this: the play of the sun on the centre. Because that becomes the symbol, the symbol of future realizations. There are no images, no organized meditations, no flowers, no incense, no religion or religious forms...* I lose my breath. Then I am asked to move along, keep walking.

A bus takes us back. My companion and I are set to leave Pondicherry tomorrow. I am distraught. I feel can't go yet. I am not done here. My sleep is restless that night and after breakfast I go to the Auroville information centre in town. I tell them I want to go back to Matrimandir again. I feel I have to go back. *Yes, they smile, many people feel that way.* They explain that once you have been to see Matrimandir you are allowed to go back for a meditation. You can spend an hour in the Inner Chamber. *If this is something you feel you need to do then we strongly encourage you to do it.* I explain our schedule, the bus tickets leaving today, our flight for Kerala leaving Munnar early the next morning. We must get to Munnar tonight. *There is always a way* one of the men in the office says. He makes a phone call, inquires about a hired car leaving from Auroville, driving to Munnar. It is one of the Ashram's cars and a reasonable price considering it's a two-hour trip. They make arrangements for us. That afternoon we check out of our hotel, put our bags in the car and drive back along the lush roads.

On the second visit to Matrimandir there is no line-up. It is one of the hours in the day set aside for public meditation. We must check in at the kiosk, situated at the beginning of the path we spent so long on yesterday. A woman writes down our names in the book and gives us each a card. I realize

as we set out again, this time on our own, walking along the tree-lined dirt road, that yesterday was the trial, the payment of dues. If one is still interested after two hours in the hot sun and a three-second glimpse at the room, then you have earned the right to come back and use the space as it was intended. Aurovilleans of all ages and descriptions are walking, some hurrying along on the path. This is a daily ritual for them, they are coming from their labour, their homes, their day of activity, to the temple. *Only for those*, said the Mother, *who are serious, sincere, who really want to learn to concentrate*. Some greet each other with waves as they arrive on the path.

We reach the dome. It is still massive and awesome, but this time everything seems different. It is less dreamlike, more real. We take off our shoes and walk up the ramp again. A man stands at the door. We show him our cards. He points me to a cushion on the floor. There are many people already sitting, spaced well apart and arranged in concentric circles around the crystal in the middle. The room is overwhelmingly white and enormous. The crystal is stunning. I can't think of another word. I feel stunned, small and completely awake. I sit down and close my eyes. I think that the top of my head is being ripped off. I try to focus on my breath. I am not experienced at meditation. My mind wanders. I try to savour this opportunity, to allow it to transform me in some way. I listen to my breathing. And then it comes. The music. There is a symphony that begins in my head. Beautiful, delightful music, like Handel or Schubert, but nothing I have ever heard before. It is there as my mind floats in and out of attention. It runs like a stream through my consciousness, until someone taps me on the shoulder and whispers that it is time to go.

We walk out along the path, unable to speak to each other, completely absorbed in our own perception. We get to the kiosk again. The taxi is there waiting for us. She takes my card, stamps it and hands it back to me. *This is your pass. Save this, for with it you can come back again, anytime*. I look at her black, glassy eyes and repeat her words back to her, *I can come back, anytime?* She moves her head slightly from side to side to indicate affirmation, looking straight at me, smiling knowingly, as a mother would smile when her child has just begun to learn something, something the mother has known for some time now, and she smiles, the mother, to see her small beloved in the dawn of her own understanding.