

**COMMERCIALISM AND CONSUMERISM IN  
TODAY'S INDIA: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS IN  
THE LIGHT OF SRI AUROBINDO'S THOUGHT**

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I lived in the US for about fourteen and a half years. Around December 15, 2006 in an email I sent to Dr. Ananda Reddy I wrote that I was about to complete my 14 years of "vanavasa." I used this term vanavasa or "living in a jungle" not without reason because I felt that the idea of jungle was very much a part of the American experience. The so-called "American Dream" is a dream of middle-class comfort provided by a 2000-square-foot house in the suburbia, two cars (if one of them is a gas-guzzling SUV, even better), new living room furniture every few years, premium membership at some 24/7 wholesale shopping club, packaged vacation every year and an every-night-entertainment-loaded luxury cruise every few years, and several other "items" like these ready for purchase. When every American runs and runs around chasing this American Dream, the view is not much different from animals running in a jungle in search of food.

For several decades now efforts are in full swing in the global marketplace to sell versions of this kind of dream to pretty much all of the world. So The Modern Indian Dream may be just a tad different from The American Dream, as suggested by slightly smaller sizes of the shopping malls or supermarkets that are frequently cropping up all over the urban landscape in India, but the essential stuff of which these dreams sold in these malls are made of is not much different.

Now I certainly didn't have or couldn't afford all of what this American Dream sells nor did I have interest in all or many of these parts of the American dream. At the same time I would be less than sincere if I were to say that I or so many other Indian-Americans didn't or don't buy some of this dream. In fact I think many of us constituting the middle and upper-classes of India will be less than sincere if we don't admit that we do buy—to various degrees—some of this dream of consumerist heaven where we live a materially rich and comfortable life with all the gadgets of comfort around us. And sincerity, as Mother reminds us over and over, is the most essential quality we need to develop if we want to even take the most initial step in our inner journey.

We are living in an age dictated by commerce, flashy commercials, and consumerist mindset. In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "Commercialism is a modern sociological phenomenon; one might almost say, that is the whole phenomenon of modern society." (CWSA, vol 25, p. 485) Companies are busy not only producing and selling products but also producing and selling

desires. And so many of us, the citizens of so-called India Shining are busy buying what is being sold, from mixer-grinders to MP3 players, from DVD players to AC cars, from stocks to first-six-month-interest-free home loans. We keep on buying and buying so that the newspapers can keep selling to the world India's double-digit growth story! The newly emerging identity of 'Indian consumer' is indeed egalitarian because the urge to enjoy and possess as many 'products' as possible is above and beyond any caste, creed or religion. So in a certain strange way, the shopping malls of today help us get rid of some of our social divisions and prejudices, of course at the same time creating new divisions (e.g. between those who own a designer brand limited edition wrist watch and those who don't!)



*Photo by Abhishek (removing.blogspot.com)*

If the outside is a reflection of what we are on the inside, then perhaps this age and time is a reflection of the level of vital and mental consciousness of present humanity. When we look around in the modern-day India, we don't see the India that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo speak of, the India that many other spiritual masters in different times have spoken of. We see people chasing after newer models of cell phones, branded jeans, designer saris and all the luxuries of material life. We see people glued to TV advertisements to stay up to date with new marketing gimmicks and sales. These middle-class and upper-class lifestyle aspirations create another whole set of problems for very large sections of Indian society which are unable to afford these comforts. Crime and all of the social problems increase manifold. Commercialization is running rampant. Capitalism and all its attendants – social, economic, cultural, political – are coming in from every open door and window they can find in the modern-day, liberal, open-economy India.

What is the true nature of this commercialism, how does it colour different areas of life, and what, if any, is the way out of this? For some answers to

these questions, let us now turn to Sri Aurobindo, the great social thinker and philosopher, the visionary par excellence.

Acknowledging that “the economic part of life is always important to an organised community and even fundamental” he reminds us that in former times however this aspect of life “was simply the first need, it was not that which occupied the thoughts of men, [or] gave the whole tone to the social life, ... The economic impulses of the group were worked out as a mechanical necessity, a strong desire in the vital being rather than a leading thought in the mind.” (CWSA, vol 25, p. 485) Looking around us it may be quite fair to say that today it is however the minds of most of us which have become preoccupied with the economic part of our lives. And as we know, the stuff occupying our mind is more subtle and hence more difficult to get rid of or transform. We have—knowingly or unknowingly—most likely unknowingly, become victims of this predominant thought in the mind.

Speaking of older times, Sri Aurobindo continues,

“The economic man held an honourable, but still a comparatively low position in the society; he was only the third caste or class, the Vaishya. The lead was in the hands of the intellectual and political classes, - the Brahmin, thinker, scholar, philosopher and priest, the Kshatriya, ruler and warrior. It was their thoughts and preoccupations that gave the tone to society, determined its conscious drift and action, coloured most powerfully all its motives.” (CWSA, vol 25, pp. 485-486).

Everything now is changed, he says.

“The phenomenon of modern social development is the decline of the Brahmin and Kshatriya...and the rise to power or predominance of the commercial and industrial classes, Vaishya and Shudra, Capital and Labour.... At present, however, it is the Vaishya who still predominates and his stamp on the world is commercialism, the predominance of the economic man, the universality of the commercial value or the utilitarian and materially efficient and productive value for everything in human life. Even in the outlook on knowledge, thought, science, art, poetry and religion the economic conception of life overrides all others.” (ibid, p. 486)

How does this predominance of the economic conception of life work in other area such as culture, education, religion and science? Let us again hear from Sri Aurobindo:

“For the modern economic view of life, culture and its products have chiefly a decorative value; they are costly and desirable luxuries, not at all indispensable necessities. Religion is in this view a by-product of the human mind with a very restricted utility—if indeed it is not a waste and a hindrance. Education has a recognised importance but its object and form are no longer so much cultural as scientific, utilitarian and economic, its value the preparation of the efficient individual unit to take his place in the body of the economic organism. Science is of immense importance not because it discovers the secrets of Nature for the advancement of knowledge, but because it utilises

them for the creation of machinery and develops and organises the economic resources of the community. The thought-power of the society, almost its soul-power—if it has any longer so unsubstantial and unproductive a thing as a soul—is not in its religion or its literature, although the former drags on a feeble existence and the latter teems and spawns, but in the daily Press primarily an instrument of commercialism and governed by the political and commercial spirit and not like literature a direct instrument of culture. Politics, government itself are becoming more and more a machinery for the development of an industrialised society... Free thought and culture remain on the surface of this great increasing mass of commercialism and influence and modify it, but are themselves more and more influenced, penetrated, coloured, subjugated by the economic, commercial and industrial view of human life." (ibid, p. 487)

While Sri Aurobindo wrote the above passage during the period of First World War, it is very clear that these words speak perfectly of a trend that has indeed been the most dominant one for several decades since then, both on the global scene as well as in India. It seems that we haven't yet exhausted this tendency. In India today we see our national political leadership driven almost exclusively by economic interests. Our education system at every level is strongly guided by the changing career markets. The "elite" stature of our premier institutions of higher education is ranked according to the number of industry leaders, successful entrepreneurs, or high-level executives they have produced. Newspapers and television with their glossy and eye-catching commercials are the primary instruments for promoting a consumption oriented lifestyle. Big money is spent for figuring out innovative ways to advertise for products in films, television dramas and musical shows. Pretty much all aspects of culture—from films, theatre, performing arts, creative and visual arts—have borne strong impact of commercialism. While there are a few signs and efforts going on at present that suggest some movement away from this through and through commercial mindset, the predominant outlook on the collective level still remains very much based on an economic view of life.

One is indeed absolutely awed by the keen insight and prophetic vision of Sri Aurobindo when one reads something like the following statement - "This great change (that is the change called commercialism) has affected profoundly the character of international relations in the past and is likely to affect them still more openly and powerfully in the future." (ibid, p. 487) How precisely this has come true today! Our international relations are now all driven by commercial interests, Foreign Direct Investments, potential markets for our exports, etc etc. Nations have been reduced to sellers and buyers, buyers and sellers. India is important for the global economy because her huge population provides a huge market to dump huge stocks of consumer products – essential and non-essential, mostly non-essential—that huge companies in the so-called developed nations produce. And huge consumer

market also means huge business for advertisers and all those associated with the business of buying and selling, consuming and investing, and the result is a big growth in India's GNP! Of course, as a little look at the widening economic and social disparities around us tells us that a rise in Gross National Product does not necessarily lead to corresponding increase in General National Prosperity.

Is there a way out of this gross commercial and consumerist mindset that has become the dominant discourse of today? What is the future? Sri Aurobindo tells us, and we also see signs like these today – “The end of commercialism can only come about either by some unexpected development of commercialism itself or through a reawakening of spirituality in the race and its coming to its own by the subordination of the political and economic motives of life to the spiritual motive.” (ibid, p. 488) He then speaks of certain signs which are thought to point in this direction, particularly mentioning the revival of the religious spirit and idealism in the secular thought of mankind. But he clearly tells us that all this is as yet slight and superficial; “the body of thought and practice, the effective motive, the propelling impulsion remain untouched and unchanged. That impulsion is still towards the industrialising of the human race and the perfection of the life of society as an economic and productive organism. Nor is this spirit likely to die as yet by exhaustion, for it has not yet fulfilled itself and is growing, not declining in force.” (ibid, p. 488)

It may be safely said that till today the spirit of commercialism is not yet fulfilled and in fact is growing. I think we can generally agree to this based on our observation as well. What then is the solution? What can you or I do individually to grow beyond our identities as consumers and commercial beings? I am reminded of a statement I read a few years ago—“Capitalism can only *utilize* certain feelings for its own purposes; it cannot create them.” (V. P. Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 1960, p. 192) When I first read it, I said to myself — how simply he presents a really deep and complex idea! We generally like to blame American or Western style capitalism—I have done it so many times myself—for many of the economic woes of developing countries like India. But then the very human feelings (frailties is a much better word, perhaps) of possession, acquisition, greed for wealth, power to exploit and extract from those that are weaker than us, etc. are so easily ignored in our incomplete analysis of how to make the world better. We don't want to objectively examine and accept these frailties and work towards a deeper transformation of our individual nature. Why? Because that is such a hard work, it almost seems impossible. But then a part of us always knows that nothing else would ever work, it hasn't. And this is true for everyone, everywhere. And it is also true that this transformation – in individual and society – doesn't come without many initial hardships, even failures, without taking many wrong steps. The path is not linear and straight, the curves, detours, spirals, layovers, even fallbacks are pretty much on every turn. It

will be well worth reminding ourselves of these words of Sri Aurobindo that are meant to guide us through these wrong steps and detours, and also inspire us to search for the soul of India that is leading her to her unique mission in the world. "Behind the waverings and strivings of our twilit surface minds the soul of India knows no doubt what it intends and is moving us to great fulfilments. But it is well also for us to ponder and inquire what it is the national soul and the soul of humanity demand from us and on what paths we are most likely to give our energies and efforts the maximum power and serviceableness to the great age of mankind and of India on which we are entering. For at such a moment there are usually many false starts and many misdirected aims and by seeing our way and our goal more clearly we may better be able to avoid the waste of energy, talent and even genius to which they give rise." (CWSA, vol 12, p. 399) As India slowly recovers after the global economic meltdown of last couple of years, it is perhaps the most appropriate time for Indians, particularly the political and economic leadership, to reflect if a new direction may be needed for the nation's economic progress, a direction more in line with India's inherent talent and genius.

What may also be needed is to look beyond the surface moves and turns. I would like us to recall Sri Aurobindo's words from *The Synthesis of Yoga* – "But all life, when we look behind its appearances, is a vast Yoga of Nature who attempts in the conscious and the subconscious to realise her perfection in an ever-increasing expression of her yet unrealised potentialities and to unite herself with her own divine reality." (CWSA, vol 23, p. 6) So it is highly likely, perhaps even more than likely that underneath all the craze for camera cell phones, fancy outfits, expensive cars, film stars' endorsements, slogans of 'India Shining' etc.—all of which is highly visible in the modern urban India—if there is an underlying, mostly hidden and sometimes revealing itself, spirit of an evolution of consciousness—from tamasic to rajasic—and both individual and collective, all the rest is an outer appearance—not to be dismissed, but to be seen in its right spirit as a temporary necessity, even if it may be a hard reality to face and accept, and gradually and consciously perfected as the individuals and society slowly ascend on the path of transformation. Nature uses all possible means to accomplish its task. Perhaps it may be argued that even the unbridled commercialization of individual and collective mindset may serve its own special purpose in the individual's and society's ascent to a transformed outer if not necessarily an inner life. And for a nation that has been devastatingly poor for centuries, the transformed outer shell may provide essential outer growth and rejuvenation necessary for its people's inward journey. After all, you can't preach spirituality to a starving person, as it is said.

Perhaps this Rajasic wave that India is going through at present is a much needed stage in the waking up of this giant nation. Perhaps we need to possess something first to realize that the thing has actually possessed us.

Perhaps we need to believe in India Shining so that it can one day really and truly begin to shine. And that shine and sheen will be not only of luxury cars on the roads and silver-nano-technology washing machines in our homes, but also of the luminosity of our souls, hearts and minds.

A few questions begin to emerge now for further reflection. Does the present direction of Indian economic growth model—that is, free markets, capitalism, consumerism, etc.—carries in its womb any hope for the kind of prosperity that is consistent with India’s role as a spiritual guru of the world. What new directions might be necessary for Indian education if it is to be a conscious participant in the evolution of a new Indian society beyond mindless consumerism and commercialism? Or is it that all the change and effort that needs to happen must first happen at the level of the individual—whether it is about making choices such as about one’s education, consumption patterns, involvement in social/community-level/national politics, or about one’s inner/spiritual growth? Is a combination of individual and social evolution possible or needed for India to work towards fulfilling her true mission in the world?

Perhaps it is only after experiencing the dark side of the modernity (including democracy, freedom, rationality, equality, consumerism, individualism, etc.) that we in India will come back to, in a new way, the eternal truths that are the foundation of our culture. These are important cycles of growth that the Indian society may have to go through even if it doesn’t seem like a true growth in a deeper sense. We can’t go back to the past however great it was. We have to advance towards future, and for that we have to weigh all that the present offers, test it out and keep what is worth keeping and integrate it with the eternal ideals of our glorious past and work towards new possibilities for a more glorious future.

Sri Aurobindo once said that it has been a special feature of India that “she has to contain in her life all the most diverse elements and assimilate them. This renders her problem most intricate.” (A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 2007, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 294) The growing commercial and consumerist mindset that has taken over a big chunk of Indian collective psyche is perhaps another important element that has to be carefully assimilated and integrated so that in due time a new view of life touched by the light of Indian Spirit may emerge. At the same time we must pay full attention to the note of caution as well as a sense of optimism for the future in these words of Sri Aurobindo—“In a commercial age with its ideal, vulgar and barbarous, of success, vitalistic satisfaction, productiveness and possession the soul of man may linger a while for certain gains and experiences, but cannot permanently rest. If it persisted too long, Life would become clogged and perish of its own plethora or burst in its straining to a gross expansion.” (CWSA, vol 25, pp. 80-81)

In one of his speeches in 1908, Sri Aurobindo spoke of a nation as a living entity, full of consciousness. “[A nation] is not something made up or fabricated. A living nation is always growing; it must grow, it must attain

its loftier heights. This may happen after a thousand years or in the next twenty years, but happen it must" (CWSA, vol 6-7, p. 812). We don't have to wait thousand years or twenty years, we can start today to get in touch with the living entity that is called India. But the pre-condition may be to dig a little deeper and behind the flashy slogans of Indian Markets Shining, Indian Shopping Malls Growing. And the pre-condition also includes each one of us being fully sincere with ourselves that we are being driven by a vital desire or a mental thought of possession next time we step into a mall and buy that one more pair of Nike shoes which we don't really need or spend 2000 rupees on a pair of branded sunglasses. Let us each one of us look deep into ourselves and determine how much are we responsible for this rampant commercialism and consumerist culture, how much do we want to move beyond this age, and what, if anything, are we doing in that direction. This is the only way out.

This brings us to an important, perhaps the most important, issue—how should we deal with our desires to possess and acquire material things. This, in turn, also compels us to examine the difference between material needs and desires. Mother has explained this point beautifully in one of her talks in 1951. If one is in a state of total indifference or detachment about what one has and doesn't have, and if one is quite sincere, that which is a need will be automatically fulfilled. At a second level we see situations when "one is preoccupied with one's needs, if one thinks of them, tells oneself, "Truly I must have this", it is not often that it comes to you; so you are obliged to do something to satisfy yourself and, if you have the means, to go and buy the thing." But the problem begins to get serious because there are people, forming the great majority, "who always take their desires for their needs....They are convinced that without this or that one cannot live..." (CWM, vol 4, p. 383)

The Mother has given us a very simple experiment as an exercise to help us understand the hold of such desires on our minds. She tells us, "The first step for these people is to try a small experiment (if they are sincere): "Well, I won't have this thing and we are going to see what happens." This is a very interesting experiment. And I can guarantee that 999 times out of a thousand, after a few days one asks oneself, "But why the devil did I think I had such a great need of this thing, I can do without it very well!" There you are. And like this, little by little, one makes progress." (CWM, vol 4, p. 384) She further adds, "It is a question of training—educating oneself. The sooner one begins, the easier it is. When one begins very young, it becomes very easy, for one gets accustomed to one's inner reactions and so can act with wisdom and discernment—whereas for those who are accustomed from their childhood to take all their desires for needs or necessities, and have rushed into them with passionate zeal, the road is much more difficult, because first they must acquire discernment and distinguish a desire from what it is not; and sometimes this is very difficult, it is so mixed up that it can hardly be perceived." (ibid)



We live in an age predominantly occupied with material progress and satisfaction, so any time we hear such advice about educating oneself about developing a sense of discernment regarding one's needs and desires, a follow-up question may naturally arise: "What will be the overall gain even if I or a few other like-minded people like myself are actually able to gain self-mastery over our desires? Will it make any noticeable impact or change when the majority of people are still occupied with this impulse to live for fulfilling all their desires, an urge to possess and acquire, consume and consume more?" In fact, this very question was asked of the Mother on May 3, 1951, "*Does an individual mastery over desire suffice or is a general, collective mastery necessary?*"

Here is what the Mother replied:

"Ah! There we are.... Is it possible to attain a total personal transformation without there being at least a correspondence in the collectivity?... This does not seem possible to me. There is such an interdependence between the individual and the collectivity that, unless one does what the ascetics have preached, that is, escapes from the world, goes out of it completely, leaves it where it is and runs away selfishly leaving all the work to others, unless one does that.... And even so I have my doubts. Is it possible to accomplish a total transformation of one's being so long as the collectivity has not reached at least a certain degree of transformation? I don't think so. Human nature remains what it is—one can attain a great change of consciousness, that yes, one can purify one's consciousness, but the total conquest, the material transformation depends definitely to a large extent, on a certain degree of progress in the collectivity. Buddha said with reason that as long as you have in you a vibration of desire, this vibration will spread in the world and all those who are ready to receive it will receive it. In the same way, if you have in you the least receptivity to a vibration of desire, you will be open to all the vibrations of desire which circulate constantly in the world. And that is why he concluded: Get out of this illusion, withdraw entirely and you will be free. I find this relatively very selfish, but after all, that was the only way he had foreseen. There is another: to identify oneself so well with the divine Power as to be able to act constantly and consciously upon all vibrations circulating through the world. Then the undesirable vibrations no longer have any effect upon you, but you have an effect upon them, that is, instead of an undesirable vibration entering into you without being perceived and doing its work there, it is perceived and immediately on its arrival you act upon it to transform it, and it goes back into the world transformed, to do its beneficent work and prepare others for the same realisation." (CWM, vol 4, pp. 381-382)

We see from these words that any sincere attempt toward transformation and self-mastery at either individual or collective levels works in its own way to bring positive change in the world. Sri Aurobindo's social philosophy tells us that a spiritualized society is the future direction for humanity. The road to a spiritualized society goes through the present evolutionary crisis humanity is facing, this crisis is partly caused by the "commercial age with its ideal, vulgar and barbarous, of success, vitalistic satisfaction, productiveness and possession." (CWSA, vol 25, pp. 80-81) Human society, in its present nature—with all its pleasures and pains, abilities and limits, gains and losses, convergences and conflicts, peace and war—is a creation of human consciousness that is in its turn limited by and subject to its present nature. As long as this consciousness remains, all adjustments and re-adjustments, all revolutions and re-organizations, re-thinking and re-planning in the society and its structures—political, economic, cultural—will be devised by the same consciousness that created the earlier structures, and are therefore bound to solve problems only for a short period of time, if at all they are able to solve any. Only a new consciousness that is wider, higher, and deeper has the key to the present crisis that has emerged out of this discontent. Some encouraging signs are already visible. Increasing number of people are waking up today to the need for a more holistic view on life, for grasping the true nature of reality, and for an inner quest for meaning and purpose of all that exists. We see increasing popularity of "new age" spirituality among people all over the world. Having enjoyed all that the age of reason and technological advancement has been able to provide in terms of material comfort and security, more and more people are seeking something deeper and higher. In this self-unfolding process these people's lives are becoming richer with more and more moments of inner joy and contentment and their hardened ego-selves begin to slowly crack making room for greater light and truth. A quick mention may be made here of Auroville which is already a shining example of practically living, to whatever extent possible, the vision of a future society given by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

In such a future society built around individuals' quest for a deeper self, people will gradually realize the inherent ideal purpose of their work. Education would not be a business, and businesses would be managed through



*Photo credit: www.auroville.org*

human-centered and consciousness-based approaches. Business leaders would worry less about the balance in their bank accounts but more about the balance in their junior-most employee's retirement accounts. Wealth-generation as an important social activity would have regained its heart and would realize its purpose in creating a warm luxurious reign of beauty, harmony, comfort and contentment for all. The weakest and poorest sections of the society would be looked after by an enlightened socialistic economic setup where individual freedom and enterprise is just as valued and encouraged as state-run programs and enterprises. A spiritualized ethic of compassion and caring for all creation would guide social action.

In this future society, instead of globalized corporations and marketplaces driven entirely by commercial interests and profiteering, we may find small, sufficiently self-reliant economic and social aggregates that are freely formed by individuals, who even though belonging to varied backgrounds, have come together because of common interests, aims and aspirations. These aggregates would encourage people to practice the kind of work that is deeply meaningful and fulfilling, but in the name of self-reliance and self-sufficiency there will be no pressure to cover all needed areas of economic activity. The sphere of economic activity will be determined by the creative potential of the people in a community, and the availability of natural and other resources available to them where they are based. Reasonably regulated exchange of goods and services among the aggregates will be preferred without encouraging mass and unlimited production of goods and services that could lead to unbridled commercialism, industrialism, and rule of the market. Such a socio-economic setup may surely provide the necessary "turn in a new direction in the...future." (Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, vol 25, p. 487)

To answer the doubting mind whether such a direction is indeed possible, let us find comfort in these inspiring words of The Mother—"Our hopes are never too great for manifestation. We cannot conceive of any thing that cannot be." (CWSA, vol 14, p. 174) So to conclude, if "India as the spiritual leader of the world" is an idea that cannot be, it would never have been conceived. So commercialism or not, consumerism or not, India Shining or not, the spirit of India, the spiritual India will continue to wait for its golden moment to appear on the surface and conquer all and everything. We have to first become ready for it, each one of us who cares for India—regardless of where one is born or where one lives. The Indian soul comes in many different forms of many different nationalities, we become Indian not because we live in India or are born here, but when we recognize that even in today's overly commercial age our lives are not only about buying and selling of products and desires but about something deeper, about taking that leap of faith and going inward where we may find answers to all our individual and social problems.

Our call is to young India. It is the young who must be the builders of the new world,—not those who accept the competitive individualism, the capitalism or the materialistic communism of the West as India's future ideal, not those who are enslaved to old religious formulas and cannot believe in the acceptance and transformation of life by the spirit, but all who are free in mind and heart to accept a completer truth and labour for a greater ideal.... It is with a confident trust in the spirit that inspires us that we take our place among the standard-bearers of the new humanity that is struggling to be born amidst the chaos of a world in dissolution, and of the future India, the greater India of the rebirth that is to rejuvenate the mighty outworn body of the ancient Mother.

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(SABCL, vol 16, p. 331)*