Aurovilian Thiru Mahalingam turns 100 years old!

Mahalingam at 89 - by Rakhal

Thiru S. Mahalingam became Auroville’s oldest member as he turned 100 on July 2nd - joining the “Centurion Club” of two of Sri Aurobindo’s close disciples, Nirodbaran and K.D. Sethna, who both lived past 100 years. Mahalingam’s life has been rich, productive, and meaningful. During India’s struggle for Independence, he was a freedom fighter for a time and an active member of the Congress Party. As a spiritual seeker, he met Swami Sivananda and then had the Darshan of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. As an Ashramite and then an Aurovilian, he was a teacher and translator (he rendered over 14,000 pages of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother’s works into Tamil). It was also Thiru S. Mahalingam who, as the senior Aurovilian, represented the elder generation and did the honors of inaugurating the launch of the Acres for Auroville land campaign on August 15, 2014.

LFAU-A4A’s Aryadeep rightly spoke of Mahalingam’s “example, inspiration, kindness, dedication, sincerity, sweetness, self-effacement, serenity and smile ... in short his beauty of soul”. Sending warm congratulations on Mahalingam’s birth centenary, Dr. Karan Singh wrote “May Lord Shiva grant him many more years of health and happiness.”

In this article, we pay warm tribute to Mahalingam’s life and contributions with a varied bouquet of articles, film and radio interviews, along with a chronology of photos. We are gratified to honor Thiru S. Mahalingam in this compendium and sincerely thank all the contributors.

SUMMARY of the links and articles

1. Films and radio interviews
2. Mahalingam’s Story - in honor of his 99th birthday in 2019 by Ashwini
3. In His Own Words – interview in « Vaasal Magazine » in 2017
1. Films and radio interviews

1. « Yes, She Knew Me Well » - film interview with Thiru Mahalingam » Filmed on 20 April 2009 by François Gautier & Rakhal for AuroImage (on Mahalingam's contacts with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and his life in the Ashram) - 10 minutes 4 seconds
   https://vimeo.com/350276858/55ba8d6e6e

2. « Mahalingam’s 99th Birthday - An Aurovillian Entering 100 Years »
   clip by Auroras Eye Films made for Auroville Outreach – 2 minutes 30 seconds
   https://youtu.be/APcxqOK_4XA

3. « Interview with Mahalingam, the oldest Aurovilian »
   18 July 2018 on Auroville Radio by Thambidurai with photos by Dev - 10 minutes 22 seconds
   https://www.aurovilleradio.org/interview-with-mahalingam-the-oldest-aurovilian/

94 years-young, at A4A's Inauguration in 2014, by Ireno
2. Mahalingam’s story by Ashwini - in honor of his 99th birthday in 2019

It was the year 1920. In the early hours of the morning of July 1 the faint cry of a newborn child was heard in a small village Thoothukudi district. Though the father was not educated he sent Mahalingam and his two elder brothers to an elementary school in the village. Those were the days when very few districts had colleges. He later joined Xavier's college in Palayamkottai in 1936. He was the first to attend College from his village and the surrounding ones. Not only was he always first in academics but also good at sports.

1939 was a time when there were disturbances everywhere because of the beginning of World War Two. The British army was constantly seeking for Indian soldiers. In 1940, Mahalingam joined the army as a lieutenant because of his great desire to see France. As he was one of the few who knew English his main work was to bring ammunition from factories in Punjab. There was a constant disturbance in those areas: people who were protesting against the government tried putting bombs on the tracks to stop the ammunition from reaching the army. Mahalingam’s job was at the railway security, where he had twenty soldiers under him: their main job was to avoid any disturbances caused by protesters in the area.

Being truly patriotic, he was also a part of the National Congress Party in 1944. Leaders were often seen going to jail, usually because of their anti-war speeches. The party was against giving any help to the British when it came to the war. That was considered an anti-Indian act. Pandit Nehru’s speeches against Indian soldiers serving under the British army led to him being condemned to serve a jail term of nine years. This incident created a deep impact on Mahalingam. He had been only twenty months in the army but he decided to follow Nehru and opt out of it. Instead he joined the Quit India Movement’s struggle for Indian independence, which led to him staying at Nehru’s home in Allahabad for some weeks and also meeting Gandhiji, once at his ashram and another time at Madras. He even landed in jail for two weeks due to his participation in the Quit India Movement.

In 1942, after gaining a BA Degree, he opted for teacher’s training in English and Mathematics. During this time he came across the writings of Swami Sivananda and became his disciple. He visited his ashram in Rishikesh in the Himalayas, where his mornings began by taking a dip in the holy river Ganga. There he thought that at last he had reached his home, but then there was a constant sharp voice within him which repeatedly told him to leave that place. After two weeks he had to give in to that voice even though Swamiji and the ashram disciples were very kind to him and he loved the Himalayan mountains and the melting snow water of the Ganges. Soon Mahalingam was on his way towards Tirunelveli. When he got down from the train he met a friend who was holding a book named “Conversations with the Mother”. His friend gave it to him. The moment he began reading that book, he knew he had at last reached where the place he was destined for and that he had at last found his way.

From 1945 to 1950 Mahalingam stayed in the home of Siva Subramaniam, a devotee of the Mother, in Madras. He wrote to the ashram requesting permission to receive darshan of Sri Aurobindo. The first time when he went upstairs for the darshan on the first floor of the ashram he tried catching a glimpse of Sri Aurobindo from where he stood in the queue and felt that Sri Aurobindo looked at him and smiled. Mahalingam felt very happy to have received a smile from Sri Aurobindo and felt a sudden calmness within him.

From then onwards until Sri Aurobindo’s passing in December 1950 Mahalingam visited the Ashram in Pondicherry regularly for the Darshan of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The Mother gave him permission to join and serve the Ashram where he worked in the bakery and the laundry till 1958. She even sent some money when Mahalingam was undergoing some medical treatment. A beautiful change had overtaken him which made him go one step beyond religion. He continued his profession as a teacher, and before retirement he taught in 25 schools.
After his retirement, he moved to Auroville in the early 1970s. At first for six years he taught Tamil in Udavi and Transition. Then Mary Kapoor, in charge of Transition, requested him to focus on translating the Mother’s books from English to Tamil instead. She felt the need for it was more important. Mahalingam took up this work. Since then he has translated more than 14,000 pages of the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s Works such as The Mother, Bases of Yoga, Lights on Yoga, More Lights on Yoga, two volumes of Sri Aurobindo’s Letters on Yoga as well as all 16 volumes of the Collected Works of the Mother. He has also written Life of Sri Aurobindo in Tamil, and has translated into Tamil the concluding paragraphs of each chapter of Sri Aurobindo’s books The Life Divine and The Synthesis of Yoga, in addition to gathering and writing articles for the Tamil monthly magazine ‘Vaigarai’ published by the Ashram.

For many years Mahalingam spent most of his time giving talks on these books and distributing Mother’s autographed books at study centers. More recently he has been quietly residing in the Auroville community of Fraternity, where he loves spending his evenings sitting near the basketball ground watching the young children play. He has completed 99 years on this earth on July 1st 2019.

*by Ashwini in 2019, reprinted with gratitude*

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**Mahalingam in his own words, published in Vaasal Magazine in 2017**

“I was born in 1920 in a small village in Tuticorin district. I had my elementary education there and went to high school in the next village, which was a little bigger than mine. I went to college in 1936 to St Xaviers College, Palayamkottai, in a college run by Jesuit priests. Today they have a schools in Madurai, Trichy, Madras. In those days, many districts in Tamil Nadu had no colleges at all, but ours had four! Education was very important.

My father was not educated. He was a business man, a kalkandu (sugar candy) merchant. I was the first to go to college in that area from the surrounding villages. Maths and physics were my subjects, but before I could finish my studies, I joined the army. It was the time of World War Two, the newspapers were full of stories about the British Expeditionary Force landing in France where they were welcomed. I thought if I join the Army, then I could also go to France. So i joined up in 1940.
Because I could speak English, I was given work to bring ammunition from the factories in Punjab. My battalion was in Alipore, Kolkata. I was on railway security duty – there were people working against the government, putting bombs on the track and breaking the tracks to stop the ammunition being brought in. I was in charge of twenty soldiers, going to all the stations see if there is was trouble in that area, and trying to help them if there was. I travelled to most places in North India, from Bombay to Punjab to Delhi and beyond.

I was a member of the Congress Party – the original Congress Party that fought for independence against the British. Nehru was arrested and imprisoned for nine years for an anti-war speech, so the Congress were against joining the war effort. They didn't want to help the British to strengthen the Empire, so by some trick I got out of the army – I was there for only twenty months.

In 1942 I received training to become a teacher – mostly in English and Mathematics – and over the years I have taught in twenty-five schools. I remember in one of my first jobs, the school manager lived a few kilometres away in the next village. On my first payday, he insisted I come to his house to get paid. I told him, when I work in your cowshed, you can pay me there, but since am not working in your cowshed, you should pay me in the school. I did not stay there long.

It was during my teacher training that I first read the complete works of Swami Sivananda. I was looking for a guru, a living guru, so I became his disciple. I went to Rishikesh in the Himalayas, taking a bath every day in the river, but even with the kindness of all the brother disciples, I couldn’t stay there for long. I heard a voice – go away from here. Two weeks later I left, and when I got down from the train, I saw a friend of mine was holding a book of Conversations with Mother in Tamil. He was not interested but he knew that I was, so he gave it straight to me. As soon as I read it, I knew that this is my way. So in 1944 I wrote to the Ashram for Sri Aurobindo’s darshan.

I went to the house of one of Mother’s devotees, Siva Subramaniam, and stayed with him in Madras, and then from 1945-1950 I came to the Ashram each year for darshan.

It took place in his meditation room, on the first floor. The first time I went, there was a queue some of three or four people in front of me, and I peeked around the queue. He looked up at me and smiled. I was struck by his colour, like the colour of the setting sun, shining. I went every year until he left his body.

Mother gave me permission to join the Ashram, so I stayed there until 1958 when I came to Auroville.

In the Ashram I worked in the bakery and in the laundry. Very few people from Tamil Nadu joined the Ashram back then, even today our number is very few.

By the time I came to the Ashram, my parents had died, even my brothers were not there, only their children, and they were intersted in religion rather than spirituality.

The whole of India are more interested in religion than spirituality: they just follow the traditional ways with their kriyas and poojas. When you find spirituality, naturally religion will get left behind.

In Auroville, I came to work in the school as as a Tamil teacher, but only for six years. Then Mary was in charge of the school, and she considered my translation work to be so important that she asked me to do it full time. So I spent my time in the school mostly working on translating from English into Tamil, and each time, before starting, I would pray to Mother that I could be open to her words.
Much work had been done translating spiritual teachers like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda into Tamil, so the spiritual vocabulary in Tamil was there. I did have to coin some words, like *adimanam*.

I have translated the Collected Works of the Mother, all of her works. And all of Sri Aurobindo’s letters and his research on Yoga. The Life Divine and the Synthesis of Yoga are more difficult, there I have only translated some of the concluding chapters, and the parts dealing with Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga.

My work was mostly publishing in Vaigarai, a Tamil magazine published by the Ashram, with about three thousand subscribers. The whole magazine was written by me, along with one lady from Madras. Afterwards my work was issued in books.

I lived in Pitchandikulam Forest, I was very happy there. I used to walk twelve kilometres every day – I had fifteen routes across Auroville, even down to Bommayapalayam. There were three of us in Auroville who wore dhotis – me, Shankar and Subbash – but they only wore it sometimes, whereas I never wore anything else. So everyone in Auroville knew me as the man in the dhoti.”

*With thanks to Lourdes Epinal* - reprinted with gratitude from


*Mahalingam on his 99th birthday, by Alan*

*Happy 100th birthday dear Thiru Mahalingam!* -