On July 19, 1969 man landed on the moon. I was then teaching at the Regional Engineering College in Trichy. A holiday was declared for the REC on that day hailing the moon landing as the biggest engineering feat and the greatest scientific achievement of mankind. When I came home during that Pooja holidays, in front of the temple there was a board maintained by the local youth wing of the political group which stubbornly believed in the dialectical materialism. What was written on the board caught my attention. It declared “In these days when men land on the moon, only the unintelligent superstitious fools will believe in God and worship the inert stones in the temple. Awake, arise and be progressive and join the struggle for liberation and freedom from exploitation”. Four decades have passed and those who wrote that piece on the board are now office bearers of the local temple committee. Since 1969 many more breathtaking scientific and technological feats were performed by humankind. But old temples got renovated and new ones were constructed; faith in God remains unchanged. If at all there is any change, it is that more people now throng in the temples, churches and mosques. Explanations based on psychological factors like social inequalities, insecurity complex, greed, loss of moral values etc. have been offered. But is it not worth pondering over this question with an impartial mind?

To me it appears that over the decades people have become wiser and more mature in their deep seated ideas and perspectives regarding our world, human beings and their relation to an all embracing God. They clearly know the scope, range and limitations of science and its teachings and where it is relevant and where it is useless. They are absolutely unwilling to alter their perspectives on God and His creations or incarnations irrespective of the spectacular progress of science and technology. The common man certainly knows the utility and pragmatic value of scientific and technological wonders; but such gizmos are absolutely unable to overturn his religious outlook and the spiritual inclinations. The tools and toys of science and technology are useful, no doubt; but they are simply unable to provide the answers to the basic and fundamental questions, originally posed by the Vedic seers. These have remained unchanged over the centuries and very little have been found to be added to the original answers provided by them and hence we call them as sanathana values.
Last year we celebrated the 150th year of Charles Darwin’s theory of Evolution. In the western world his famous book the ‘Origin of Species’ made a great impact in the scientific and intellectual circles. This was quite natural as the westerners believed in line with the biblical teaching that man was created along with all other things in the world by the God in his own image in the not too distant past. This picture received a shattering blow with the theory of evolution. The theory of evolution hardly created any ripple in the eastern mind as everyone over here has heard about the story of ‘Dasavatharas’ in the puranas which is nothing but another form of theory of evolution. Thus there was nothing so revolutionary for us in Darwin’s theory of Evolution enunciated just 150 years ago. We also knew that a blind and mechanical biological evolution driven by survival of the fittest is simply insufficient to explain the infinite and splendidous diversity in nature and the occurrence of the human beings with his indomitable spirit, wisdom and intelligence. It is abundantly evident that there is a clear and definite path and direction for the evolutionary process and those aspects are part of the grand design in evolution. Almost a hundred years ago the great Indian sage Sri Aurobindo discussed these topics elaborately in a lucid and rational style and brought out unseen vistas of evolutionary process in nature (see his book ‘Life Divine’).

According to Sri Aurobindo, biological evolution might have stopped with the human being, mental, spiritual and intellectual evolutions have got to continue. A fully evolved mind is all comprehensive and it is in union with the God and all His creations. In fact we have several examples of such great ‘human beings’, in the past as well as present, whose mental levels have reached the ‘super conscient’ all comprehensive state. He also gives a graphic account of how inconscient matter in the universe evolves to attain ‘supramental’ state. In fact the very purpose of human existence is to evolve oneself into the super conscient state. According to Aurobindo an innate spirit which is omnipresent, drives the evolutionary process in that specific direction. Aurobindo does not discard science nor does he disown it; he even anticipates some of the modern developments. He declares that the truths revealed by science are the valuable but they are only the ‘outward realities’ of the universe and of our existence. In contrast, much more meaningful and delightful are the ‘inward realities’ which every one of us has got to strive to attain and understand. The latter realities lead to the spiritual enlightenment and once we begin to appreciate them, we are weaned away from our superficial existence in this world and life becomes full of meaning and ‘Ananda’. This is the same blissful state of ‘Satchitananda’ on which the sages of the yore spoke about when they tried to indicate the state of such a fully bloomed mind through the hymns and sukhas of the Vedas and Upanishads. Aurobindo inspires us to discard our outward superficial existence in this world and to look deep within into the core of the human being where he can find the eternal peace and happiness and the immortal soul within.

Of late the famous Cambridge Physicist, Prof. Stephen Hawking declared that God did not create the Universe which came into being all by itself. Though a great scientist, we need to take Hawking’s statement only with a pinch of salt as he is not free from his tunnel vision which is
conditioned by a rather narrow outlook which we call ‘scientific’. In the case of such scientists their perspectives will be limited, although their science might be right and they will see only what they want to see viz., the Universe evolving according to some mathematical equations in this case. Hawking is unable to enjoy the beauty and thrill of a larger picture in which the inconscient matter evolves into the fully conscient human being doing cosmology! He is totally oblivious to the idea that we are ultimately spiritual beings encased in a material body rather than the reverse. He is unable to escape from the overpowering ego which reduces the entire Universe into some of his fancy equations. These intricate and complex equations are so irrelevant and far removed from the commonsense (which of course is no sure guide to reality!) so that the man in the street is totally unconcerned about them. But at the same time the common educated lay man is able to appreciate the bigger picture which is superbly amazing and awe inspiring with the infinite intelligence overflowing from every speck of matter and bit of space.

Here also Aurobindo comes to our rescue and enlightens us of the common pitfalls and shortcomings exhibited by scientists. He says that man is endowed with seven types of ignorance. First of them is the cosmic ignorance as we are totally in the dark about the origin, becoming and purpose of our existence and of the Universe. We are ignorant of the absolute which is the source of all being and becoming. We are ignorant of the spaceless timeless and immortal self. Hence we have the egotistic ignorance (Hawking is the best example!). We exist in a miniscule pretty short duration in infinite time. We are ignorant of our eternal becoming in time; that is the fourth temporal ignorance. The fifth is the psychological ignorance which prevents us from knowing who we really are. We are also totally ignorant of the true constitution of our becoming; that is the sixth constitutional ignorance. And finally because of our greedy and self centred life we are subject to the practical ignorance forcing us to do blunders at every moment of our life. Overcoming these seven types ignorance may take more than one lifetime. In fact the ultimate goal of human efforts and cosmic endeavor is to attain an integral knowledge needed for true liberation and enlightenment. In this context religion is to be seen as a tool and not an end in itself. This could be the reason why religion does not die in India in the 21st century.
The picture shows part of the distant Universe as revealed by Hubble Space Telescope.
One can see thousands of galaxies containing millions of stars