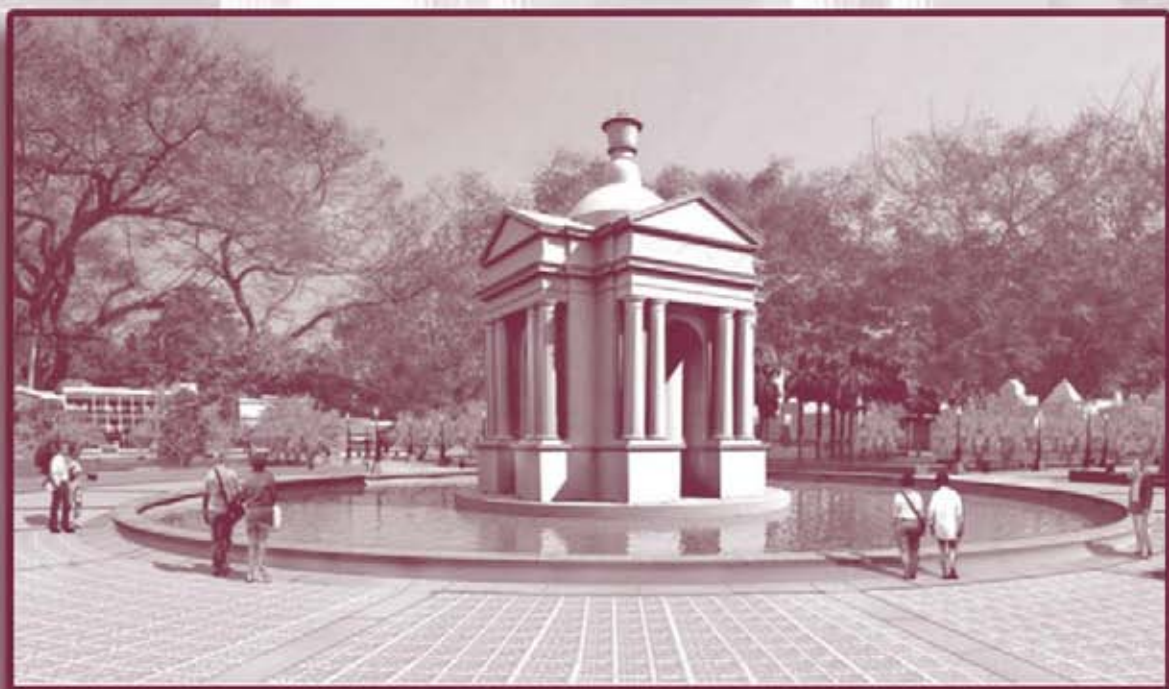


# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Pondicherry 1954 - 2004

Mother said many times: "Whoever gets my touch, whoever has a second of true aspiration, true love for me, he is finished for life, for all lives — he is bound to me. I have put a golden chain round his neck, his heart is bound eternally to me."

It is a thing nobody can see, you yourselves don't see; but it is a fact, it is there. The golden chain is there within your heart. Wherever you go, you drag that chain, it is a lengthening chain. However far you may go, it is an elastic chain, it goes on lengthening, but never snaps. In hours of difficulty, in hours of doubt and confusion in your life, you have that within you to support you. If you are conscious of it, so much the better; if you are not conscious, believe that it is there. The Mother's love, Her Presence is there always.

Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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Shortly after World War II, Prof Frederick Terman, dean of the engineering school at Stanford University, worked to set up an industrial park on 660 acres of Stanford's land. Electronics firms and other high technology companies came to the park to have access to the expertise at Stanford University. Stanford graduates and faculty were also encouraged to set up businesses there. The park slowly created an agglomeration in high tech industry. Today the area (now much extended) is well known as the Silicon Valley and is synonymous with information technology. Stanford had created a centre of knowledge and a conducive environment for the new technological age that was then emerging, and within 50 years it's efforts had borne fruit.

In a very different though not completely dissimilar way Sri Aurobindo and the Mother created a centre of the new Knowledge and new Consciousness here in Pondicherry. And in a little over 75 years it has spawned a "Spiritual Valley" of sorts, a concentration of communities and organizations dedicated to it. There is the Ashram, the parent community with its various departments; the School, that is constantly attempting to shape a fresh generation in its image; Auroville, a whole township dedicated to the Future; Sri Aurobindo Society with its various projects and wings; and more recently SACAR, dedicated to the study of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy; and The Golden Chain Fraternity, bringing Ashram Alumni together for constructive action. There are many other small and big organisations and new ones are born all the time as the Vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother continues to inspire and attract aspirants from all over the world.

The site of this "Spiritual Valley", Pondicherry, has not remained unaffected by it. This spiritual element has become part of Pondicherry's identity, part of its image. If Pondy can build on this identity – not simply as an image to be sold to the tourist – but as a self-image it believes in, it could become a city of the future. For spirituality, as we know, embraces all aspects of life, mak-

ing them more harmonious, more perfect. Like Auroville, Pondicherry could focus on the new and alternative knowledges and techniques of the future – it could become a pioneer in the use of alternative and sustainable energy sources, new environment-friendly construction techniques, and organic farming. It could create holistic health centres and centres for asanas, pranayama and meditation, centres of research in traditional Indian sciences and arts, and cultural centres that bring together cultures from all over the world.

But for that to happen Pondicherry will have to redraw plans that it has made of conventional development and industrialisation. It will have to change its mindset and focus on things other than trade and commerce. This seems very unlikely. Those who are here in Pondicherry for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo form a very small portion of the entire population of the town. And in a fast-growing Pondicherry the influence of this community is dwindling. It is also true that the Ashram community, given its inward focus, as such remains quite insulated from the town itself.

One group though which is part of the larger Ashram community and could help take Pondicherry in that direction is the ex-students. This is a group of people who have grown up in this "Spiritual Valley" and consider Pondicherry their home. Already through the Beach Restoration Project, heritage projects of INTACH, waste management through Shuddham, the various initiatives of the Asia Urbs Programme, and the streetscaping of certain areas, ex-students have been involved in influencing the development of the town. If their efforts are selfless and are seen to benefit the town, the goodwill it will generate will benefit the Ashram too.

On the occasion of the 50 years of the de facto merger of Pondicherry with the Indian Union on November 1<sup>st</sup>, we revisit the period when a proposal was made by the French to set up a University guided by Sri Aurobindo. We also meet some ex-students who are helping shape the town today. ❧



## SCIENCE AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT - II

*In the following pages we present the second and concluding part of an interview with **Binu Mukherjee** '58. In the first part of this interview published in our previous issue Binu-da told us about his memories of the Ashram School, his studies at St Andrews University in Scotland, his work as the head of the Physics Department at the Royal Military College of Canada and his research into piezoelectric materials and their interesting applications.*

*In the following pages Binu-da discusses the system of higher education in North America, the difference in work culture between Chinese and Indians, the importance of the mind in self-development and the possibility of receiving Mother's help while living outside.*

***Coming back to your teaching, have you tried to incorporate our way of learning, our attitude to education in your work as a teacher?***

Well first of all, particularly in North America one of the things I find is that students have absolutely no concept of human development as such. If you ask them why they come to university, they answer that it's to get a better job. Otherwise they will say, "Well that's what everybody is doing, so I'm following." So the first thing I like to do is to tell them a little bit about what I think. The purpose of a university is — the development of the human being himself. So I have to talk — I have to tell them that you don't come to university to study physics. Physics is just a kind of an exercise that you do to develop the mind. You can do it through any subject. I mean you can — and I give this example to my students — you can go to a gym and you can use a barbell to develop a muscle, you can use a dumbbell to develop the same muscle. Ultimately you can use the muscle every instant of your life. Similarly here the subject is less important. You are using the subject to develop your mind. That mind as it becomes richer, will give you a richer life at every instant of your life. Then at every instant your thought must be at a higher level, and that is the purpose of your study. And when you study like that, it shows. I tell them, "When you go back home after four years — most of these students have come away from home — you shouldn't really need to tell anybody

that you are a degree-holder. Anybody who talks to you for five minutes, if your education has been true, should understand that you have been educated. If you have not, if all you have done at university is only memorisation and reproducing in an exam, you'll not be able to do that and that's not what you call education."

And then I relate a bit to them this idea that I have (again, of course, Sri Aurobindo has written more extensively — but, you know, I can't quote Sri Aurobindo to them — it won't make much sense to them) but I tell them that I'm convinced that Evolution hasn't finished. So, the purpose of your studying is to help yourself develop and take part actively in the future evolution of the human being. To most students this does not carry much meaning. To some, I hope that it has some influence. And very occasionally I will get somebody who after 4 years will come and tell me, "Sir, I thank you for what you told me." And that gives me tremendous happiness, even if I can influence one or two people into studying like that.

There is not much difference between education in North America and education outside, in India. They are both very exam-oriented. North America has a semester system which means that every semester you have a course and at the end of the semester you write an exam on that course, and then you have nothing more on what you have studied — this allows for memorisation for exams. This is very different from the European

system. In Europe you do four years of studies and then you have 5 or 6 exams on 4 years of study. There you can't memorise 4 years of study in one go. So there you have to study differently — you have to understand, and in order to understand you have to use your mind, so the mind develops. But the Europeans too have started adopting the American approach, unfortunately.

So I tell them, "Forget the exam. Use your mind and try to master the subject. If you master a subject there is no way you can fail." Again 90 per cent of the students will not change, but if 10 per cent change or 5 per cent change, I feel happy about it.

If you look at the quality of education in North America from the point of view of human development, mental development, it's not very good. If you look at the research schools, first of all, you see that half the students are from China, about 25 per cent of the students are from India, the rest include the rest of the world, including America. So the students who are doing best are usually students whose first degree is not from the US. Secondly the reason why America has done very well is because they have monetary clout. They are continually offering higher salaries to people who have studied in Europe or in India or China and so on. They have to import the minds. In spite of that, if you look at the amount of research, except in information technology, America is not doing as well as it should. If you look for example in medicine — medicine is a very important field — you find that the British and the Swedes and so on are doing magnificently on much less research funds. Why? Because they have people with better minds in their research labs. And in the ultimate analysis where you're working at the frontiers of knowledge, when you're doing research, it is the mental development that counts.



Somebody has to present this properly to the public. In fact I would like to propound Sri Aurobindo's ideas in a way that these people would find acceptable. If I can show — not going into philosophy — that by following these principles you can really benefit, even economically, I'm sure

a case can be made. In due course I would like to do it. If they are convinced, they will follow it. Gradually the philosophy can be brought into it. But the economic side has to come first, for them to be interested. And you can show that in fact in order to generate money you need more people who are imaginative and productive and innovative. Their education system is not designed to produce that. Their education system is good for the average mind. So a much greater proportion of students get a university degree there than in Europe or anywhere else. It is less

elitist. But the best there are not as good as the best elsewhere.

### ***How is it that the Chinese are doing so well?***

It is not their education that is necessarily better. They are first of all, I find, a little more co-operative. Our fellows are extremely competitive. For instance when I spent a year at IIT Madras, I had a PhD student. I wanted to get her started quickly so I needed to borrow equipment. I found colleagues very reluctant. Then, even if I did get something, they would say, "Oh you are from Canada, so we're giving you!" And then I met other people who came from other universities and they said, "You're lucky you're in Madras; if you had been somewhere else it would have been worse." So it's this kind of attitude, you know, people who hang on to stuff, but do not use it, do not let anybody else use it — it's not a very co-operative atmosphere.

There are other problems — you see, life is

not very easy here. For instance, you may have to go to the bazaar in the morning, then you take your bath etc, then you have to get your children ready and drop them off to school and then you commute to work.... By the time you have finished all these activities and have come to work you are ready to start relaxing. You have to put a great deal of effort into life. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline after that to get to work and to put in any kind of intensity. So it helps to have a somewhat easier life....

Another advantage that the Chinese have is their moderate climate. In India I feel the heat also makes for laziness. You need a siesta. I remember when I was at IIT after a full thali meal I went to work under the fan and I couldn't keep myself awake. Finally, for myself, I decided to solve the problem by missing lunch. I used to go to my room and have some biscuits, drink some water and come back to work. But that's not what most people are doing. And then I suggested, "You see in this heat you should start college at 6 in the morning. Then you finish classes at 2 pm, then people have their rice (people take huge amounts of rice in India) and sambar and have a good sleep and come back to work at 6 or 7 in the evening. Again it starts getting cool, and it's a pleasant time to work." In Spain for instance they do it — they have a siesta gap. But nobody is going to take that initiative.

China has also organised its universities well (more recently) and the sheer number of students is so large. And of the very large number that go abroad to study, I think also that a lot more of them are going back to China than Indians are coming back to India. And then they establish these good labs and they keep in touch with the Americans.

Look, my lab is staffed almost entirely by Chinese. The only people that I have been able to find with some pre-experience in this field of work are Chinese. And the other thing is they are much harder workers than Indians. They will take all other aspects of life out of their mind. Now Indians normally have many more interests. I have many more interests. To me Physics is not an exclusive interest. It is not even my major in-

terest. My major interest, I've told you is human development. But these Chinese people can focus. And they will work day and night. When you have Indians working for you, you don't get that. They will want to watch cricket on the computer or do something else here and do something else there and so on. Yes, Indians can be very hard workers — but generally they are the very ambitious ones. Anyway, it's good to have varied interests. But when it comes to work everybody wants to employ the Chinese. You want the research to develop faster. Secondly I find that the Chinese are extremely well-behaved, extremely polite, very dedicated and devoted to me personally.

And of course if you have a North American it is the worst, because these fellows have even more interests and they have their girl-friends and they want to go for this and that.

So these Chinese are most wanted. A problem can crop up of course with security, but often there is no choice but to take them.

And China has developed in many ways. Although it is a communist country, at the lower levels they have given a lot of freedom. So foreign investment has gone to China in a big way. Nowadays it is hard to pick up anything in North America that is not made in China. Labour is so cheap and now they have developed quality. In India, government regulations and labour laws scare away investors. Anyway the Chinese system will not work in India. Indians, by nature are individualistic. Hinduism is very individualistic, and I think ultimately spiritual development is very individualistic. So we don't want a system like that. If it means that we are going to develop a little more slowly, then so be it.

### ***How is India doing in the area of research that you specialise in?***

India also has piezoelectric technology and they have developed it themselves for defence purposes. I do interact with them to some extent — not too closely because my funding comes from the US defence establishment. But I do help them in trying to locate equipment, to get equipment and locate manufacturers of piezoelectric ceramics elsewhere and make it easier for them

to get those materials and things like that. There is now significant defence interest and funding for smart structure applications, especially in aeronautics, largely centred in Bangalore. I am a life member of the Indian Institute for Smart Structures and Systems.

***Does the research work aid you in your quest for self-development?***

I think the most important reason for doing this is self-development. By pushing the mind to its limits one helps the mind to develop. And that is what we are here for, and that's the ideal with which I went from here. We know that the mind is not the ultimate. But nevertheless, the Mother gave a lot of importance to developing the mind. By keeping the mind active to its limits, one can develop it to the maximum possible. I don't care whether the results of my research are useful to other people or not, it is of benefit to my development.

There are other important things. A developed mind is automatically a modest mind. When you push your mind to the limits you find how pathetic the mind is. We do so much research in science. But what is science? Given the effort involved, the advance in knowledge that we make is really very small. And this gives you a tremendous feeling of humility. Even if you are completely in no contact with Sri Aurobindo it forces you to think that this cannot be the end of evolution. This is why, at the highest level, scientists have a great faith, because they come to a point where they realize that something farther has to come in nature's evolution.

In some ways the mind is splendid. It helps you to analyse, to characterise, and to subdivide and compare. In physics you try to reduce the number of laws by comparing things. But the mind is a totally useless synthetic tool. You can't

bring knowledge together, and this points to the move towards a faculty which can synthesize. So, the more science I do the more strengthened I am in my need for the kind of evolution that Sri Aurobindo has talked about. Thus, there is no contradiction between science and yoga.

Even when it comes to science I find that important ideas come to me when my mind is quiet, when part of my mind is involved in some routine activity and I am in a meditative state (in fact, all life can be a meditation). For instance I find that when I'm driving for a long distance on a highway and there isn't much traffic, I find it a tremendous opportunity to meditate. And the best ideas come while meditating and this shows that they come from a different consciousness.

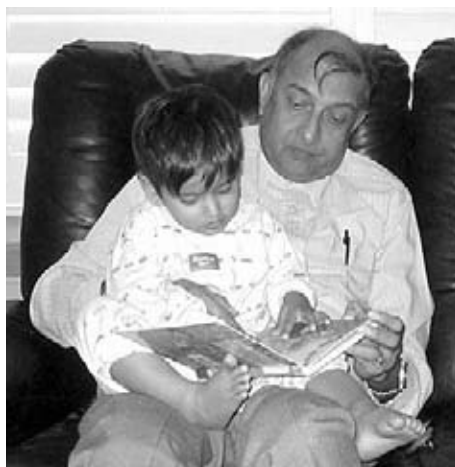
Another thing I have seen in my own experience is that a developed mind is a detached mind. The more detached you get the less attached you are to your work. You do your best and leave the rest to the Divine. And that's when you have the maximum success. This is my experience, for my lab is one of the best in its field in the world and

I've also developed a much greater degree of detachment where I can actually do my best and hand it over to the Mother. Ultimately it is all Mother's work and I can take no credit for it. But I can provide a field for Her to act upon.

In my own experience the developed mind has two other benefits. First, because it knows its own limitations, it becomes a willing partner in quietening itself, when you wish to meditate. Another important aspect

is that the developed mind does not find revealed knowledge to be strange at all — thus ensuring that there is no conflict, but rather a coming together and the mind can then give some limited but reasonably effective expression to revealed Truth.

*...continued on page 32*



A recent photograph of Binu-da with his grandson



# OUR LARGER FAMILY

*Devendra Sureka '80 became truly conscious of our larger Ashram family when his mother passed away*

If you knew her, then it must have been because she had cooked something special for you and fed you with so much love that you could feel the warm person that she was. Otherwise you might have seen her serving bread or sugar or bananas in the Ashram Dining Room and she might have asked you how you were, if she came to know that you were ill in some way. She was Savitri Devi Sureka.

I knew her as my Mom, who came from Calcutta all alone to Pondicherry, a strange land with a strange language and a very strange faith, to take care of her four children. And if you know me, then you know what she has gone through (I was the youngest of course, to be fair to myself). She toiled hard to give us comfort, so we could put our minds to studying, and I've still to eat better or tastier vegetarian food than what she cooked.

I'm not trying to introduce my Mom. I just want to recount an incident at the time of her passing away, to bring to light this Family called the Ashram and to show how lucky we are to be part of it.

On the 27th of April 2004, she had some chest pain, so all tests were done and the results were expected the next day. In the early morning of the 28th, around 4:30 am, she complained of chest pain again and asked Dad to rub her chest a little, like a massage. But as the pain became severe, she asked for Dr. Dutta to be called. Just before he came, she asked for a paper and pen and wrote in an unshaken handwriting that she had explained to Dad the previous night how she wanted all her belongings to be shared. She had also insisted that night that as they were both free on the 1st

of May, they could make their will on that day. When asked why the hurry, she had replied that nobody could predict when the body and soul might want to leave.

My dad called me around 6:15 am and asked me to come over, as Mom was very ill. I don't know why, but I collected my whole family in a hurry. I woke them up, asked them to get dressed and went over to find her just conscious enough to see me and my family for the last time. We tried hard to revive her, but the soul, hand in hand with the Divine Mother, was on its upward journey.

It happened so quickly and so suddenly that we (my father, brother, sister, sister-in-law,

nieces, wife and two sons) were in a daze, not realizing what had befallen us. But this is where the Family called the Ashram came in, and whatever followed happened so smoothly and so beautifully. Within half-an-hour of our losing Mom, Bimla's friends came over to take total control of the house and us. Then sometime in the early morning there was Autosiddhi who came to help us clean and dress my mother's body.

Mom's body was there the rest of the day, for all who loved her and wanted to pay their last respect. It was a day of meditation and peace, which comes with the sorrow. But here in the Ashram the meditation is to help the soul go happily on its journey. Arun-bhai Patel, a very close friend of our family who had come to meditate with us, said when he was leaving: "I saw your mother sitting with the Divine Mother and the atmosphere around them was like around the Samadhi."

*...continued on page 32*





## THE INDEPENDENCE OF PONDICHERRY— FROM THE PAGES OF ASHRAM HISTORY

*On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the de facto transfer of Pondicherry to the Indian Union, Sunayana Panda '79 revisits that period.*

**W**e have all read how Sri Aurobindo had clearly foreseen the freedom of India. There was not even the shadow of a doubt when he assured A.B.Purani of this future event nearly thirty years before it actually happened. So what an irony it must have been for him that when in August 1947 India got her freedom he himself was in a little town, which along with some other pockets of land, was still under the rule of another country. An even greater irony is that by the time Pondicherry became free and was a part of India he had already left his body. He who had struggled and fought and undergone the hardships of the life of a revolutionary himself did not breathe the air of free India in his lifetime. But then, he had attained a freedom far higher than political freedom, which is perhaps why this fact has never really struck us.

Even though he was not physically there when Pondicherry gained freedom he was in many ways linked to the efforts made by different people which led to the merger of Pondicherry with the rest of the country. After the British left India the French government began to feel the pressure of

events. There was a real fear that the newly independent Indian leaders might want to forcefully take over those pockets which were under French rule. Violence had to be avoided at any cost.

In September 1947, immediately after India became free from British rule, Maurice Schumann was sent by the French Government to speak to the leaders of India in order to establish a contact and to reassure them that the issue of handing over the territories which were under them would

be resolved amicably so that they would not resort to the use of force. He arrived in Pondicherry and met the leaders here as well. One of the important points on his agenda was his meeting with Sri Aurobindo. Maurice Schumann had been the spokesman of the Free French Forces in London during the Second World War. After that he became the Secre-

tary of State in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and later the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1969 to 1973. He was a member of the French Senate and of the Académie Française. He was also a writer and a philosopher. But he is best remembered as the initiator of the movement for the creation of the European Economic Community.

When Sri Aurobindo accepted to receive



Signing of papers during the De Facto Transfer ceremony.  
The documents were signed by Mr. Kewal Singh and Mr. Landy.

## A PROPOSAL FOR INTEGRATION

*Surendra Mohan Ghose reveals*

Almost immediately after India's independence on August 15, 1947, which coincided with Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday, I received at Calcutta a telegram from Sri Aurobindo signed for the first time with his own name. It asked me to come at once to Pondicherry.

I came. When I met him, he explained to me his ideas on the relationship to be brought about between independent India and the French possessions in the Indian subcontinent. Then he told me that the Governor-General of French India, Monsieur Baron, had already gone to Delhi to discuss a proposal for integration under certain significant conditions. Sri Aurobindo asked me to proceed to Delhi, meet M. Baron and take him to Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sar-

dar Patel and Maulana Azad.

I left for Delhi and met M. Baron. I took him to all the leaders above-named and explained to each of them the ideas of Sri Aurobindo.

Pandit Nehru called a meeting of the Working Committee and personally reported the talk he had held with M. Baron. The working Committee appreciated Sri Aurobindo's ideas and welcomed M. Baron's proposal.

Several factors intervened to prevent the successful carrying out of these ideas and that proposal. If the success had not been prevented, a New Age of internationalism both for India and the world would have dawned long ago.

I should like M. Baron to confirm this report of mine which is meant to provide an important piece of historical information.

*Courtesy Mother India, August 1976*

Maurice Schumann and François Baron, the last French Governor of Pondicherry in his room, it was a historic event. After 24th November 1926 he had withdrawn himself from the outside world and had broken this self-imposed seclusion only in very exceptional cases.

In his book *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* Nirod-da gives us a glimpse of how Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were preparing themselves for this meeting. He writes: "A prominent French politician Maurice Schumann was deputed by the French Government to see Sri Aurobindo and pay him homage from the French Government and to propose to set up at Pondicherry an institute for research and study of Indian and European cultures with Sri Aurobindo at its head.... The fact that it came on the heels of India's Independence pointed to her role as a dominant power in the comity of nations, as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. It seems Sri Aurobindo asked the Mother in what language he should speak to the delegates. The Mother replied, "Why, in French! You know French." Sri Aurobindo protested, "No, no! I can't speak in French." The Mother, Sri Aurobindo and French delegates were closeted in Sri Aurobindo's

room and we don't know what passed among them."

The project to which Nirod-da refers to as "an institute for research and study..." later came to be known as the University project. This was an idea which the French had come up with, thinking that when the French government would eventually hand over Pondicherry to India there should be something that would remain as a reminder of their country's presence in India for nearly three centuries. What better symbol of French culture could they leave behind than a full-fledged university?

In the Ashram this was seen as an initiative on the part of two individuals, Schumann and Baron, themselves great admirers of the Master, with the support of the French Government, wanting to set up a centre for learning which would be linked to the Ashram. *The Golden Chain* had brought out an issue (May 2001) in which we wrote in detail about the Convention which had taken place 50 years earlier. That the university never finally took off is another story. It is interesting to note that many of the ideas which were spoken of during the planning of the University,

## FUSION OF TWO CULTURES

*François Baron clarifies*

I agree with the above report [*Surendra Mohan Ghose's statement on previous page*]. But I should like to make some explanatory remarks.

I did not go to Delhi in my official capacity as Governor-General of French India. Although I held the highest Government post in the French colonies I was never imbued with the spirit of Colonialism. And I carried my proposal to Delhi in my strictly personal capacity as a representative of French Culture and Literature to which I had myself made some contribution. I also went as one who agreed with the vision of one of India's most luminous sons: Sri Aurobindo.

I was in favour of the ultimate establishment of India's sovereignty over the existing French possessions but the integration was essentially



to be of a cultural type and bring into close rapport the great liberal traditions of France and the great spiritual traditions of India. The important fusion in French India between the two cultures should continue and increase. Pondicherry and other prominent French places were to be windows of India upon France and windows of France upon India.

As a French patriot I would always fly the Tricolour over my residence in India but I would simultaneously raise over my residence the Indian flag. A double or multiple symbol of human culture would be my ideal.

After discussing my proposal with the Indian leaders, it was my plan to submit to the French Government the results of my unofficial talks and try and help the New Age for which Sri Aurobindo stood.

*Courtesy Mother India, August 1976*

such as the study of the different cultures of the world, eventually found a place in the activities of Auroville.

Between Schumann's visit and Pondicherry's actually gaining independence a good seven years had elapsed. During this time somehow the two sides could not come up with a solution to the problem that would suit both sides. Among published materials we can find some of the instances where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have done whatever they could so that Pondicherry could become a part of India. Much of it, however, is not so well-known. There is a letter published in *Sri Aurobindo On Himself* and dated 12.2.1950 which shows how closely Sri Aurobindo was following local politics and was aware of all that was going on even though he did not step out of his room and lived in his consciousness on a completely different plane. This letter was addressed to Sanat Kumar Banerji, who was then the Indian Consul General, representing India in the then

French territory. Evidently Sanat-da had written to Sri Aurobindo asking for his advice and comments on a document concerning the "Transfer of the French Settlements in India".

Here is an excerpt from the letter: "There is one point on which I would like to make an observation which I consider of primary importance. The French Government would naturally want the democratic rights it has conceded to the local Assembly and local bodies to continue in full and the India Government would also, no doubt, like this new Territory of its own to have a constitution as democratic as that of the other parts of India. But if nothing is changed in local conditions and freedom is left for a certain type of politicians and party leaders to make use of their opportunities to pervert everything to their own profit, how are they to be prevented from prolonging the old state of things, in which case the Territory would easily be turned into a sink of misgovernment and corruption and

things will become worse even than in the past. Only a strong control, a thorough purification of the administration and a period of political discipline in which the population could develop public spirit, the use and the right use of the powers and the democratic institutions placed at their disposal, could ensure a change for the better and even that only after a long lapse of time. It cannot be ensured by a paper constitution; the right type of men in the right place could alone ensure it.

“I would myself have thought it safer if the principle of the agreement between the two Governments and its main features had at first been agreed upon and the rest worked out afterwards by careful consideration and discussion. Otherwise there is a risk of disagreements and discord in the points of view arising and holding up or even endangering the successful working out of the agreement. But I understand that their position in this matter has obliged the Government in Paris to prefer the method actually taken. I hope that the advice you will give will help the India Government to make the best of things as they are.”

On her part, the Mother used her influence and contacts in France to bring about a change in the attitudes of the two governments. Madhav Pandit recounted this incident when he addressed a meeting on March 29th, 1989 which was held to commemorate 75 years of the Mother’s first ar-

rival in Pondicherry. In this speech he mentioned how Surendra Mohan Ghosh who was then deputy leader of the Congress party in Parliament and who was known to be a disciple of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, was sent by the Indian Government to do something so that the hard positions which the two countries, France and India, had been adopting, could be changed. Already, in the past, Sri Surendra Mohan had been called by Sri Aurobindo, just after India got her independence in 1947, to talk to the Indian leaders about the way Pondicherry could be integrated into the rest of the country. This time he was coming after 1950 and Sri Aurobindo was not there in his physical body. Surendra Mohan stopped at Madras where C. Rajagopalachari, who was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, also requested him to ask the Mother’s help to find a solution. In her usual way, she did not make a big announcement of it. The Mother got in touch with people known to her in France and who could help. Madhav Pandit says that shortly after that the situation resolved itself. The transfer happened in a way which suited both governments. This fact is not known to very many people.

By their very presence the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have made Pondicherry a special place. And because of them Pondicherry will always be a meeting point of the East and the West, of the past and the future, of the spiritual and the material.

## INTERVIEW WITH MAURICE SCHUMANN

*This interview was recorded by members of the “Auroville International, France” in December 1988 and was conducted in French. This English translation was done by Shraddavan and published in Mother India in December 1989. Schumann was sent specifically by the French Government to reassure the Indian leaders that the merger of Pondicherry with the rest of India was only a matter of time and a formality, and that the use of force or violence would be totally unnecessary. Even though the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were very open to the suggestions of M. Schumann it should not be assumed that they did not want the French to leave India.*

When I reached Pondicherry, I found as Governor there François Baron.... A disciple of Sri Aurobindo, steeped in Hindu mysticism but, above all, a former volunteer in the Free French Forces, linked to me by those ties of loyalty that

very rightly still connected, so shortly after the end of the war, all those who had made the right choice already in 1940 — and not just in 1942-3 or in 1944.

And François told me, “We’ll go straight away

to see the Mother of the Ashram, Mme Alfassa — an extraordinary woman I have often spoken about.”

Her patriotism and her mysticism went very well together. And she saw immediately that if Sri Aurobindo... — if I were received by Sri Aurobindo, whose presence sanctified the soil of Pondicherry, the Indian Government would avoid any show of force. That would be our starting-point.

So I spent an hour with Sri Aurobindo, who impressed me vividly by the tremendous radiance that flowed from him. I also noticed at once something that struck me several times in India, and that I have tried to explain in the chapter of my book that you mention: that the modern Hindu thinkers were essentially and initially marked by the West. In return they were to have an enormous influence upon the West, but it was from the West that they came. This struck me at the bedside of Gandhi, with whom I spent a whole day. I noticed, in particular, that he was reading the Bhagavad Gita in Matthew<sup>1</sup> Arnold’s English version. That struck me forcibly. Sri Aurobindo’s essential book is *The Life Divine*.

He also spoke excellent English, and if one closed one’s eyes one would have thought oneself in Oxford rather than in Pondicherry, listening to a man who had discovered Hindu mysticism through his Western culture. This impression was above all a physical one — I don’t want to make a doctrine or a theory out of it, much less a discovery.

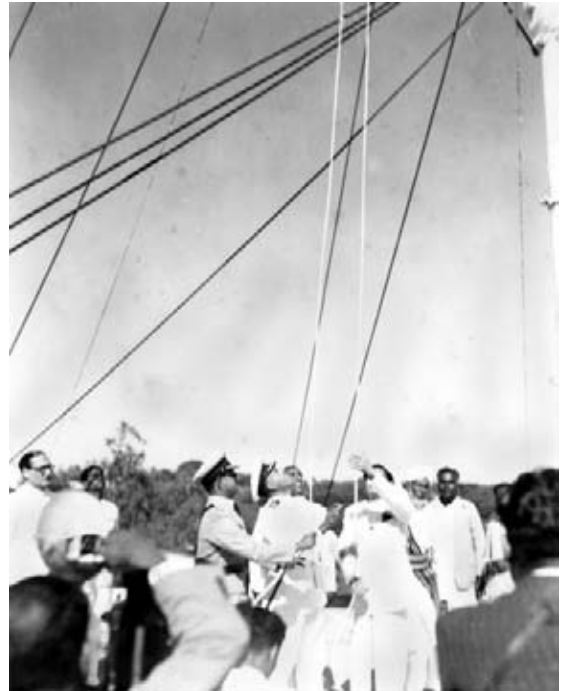
No mention was made of the threat to France’s possession of Pondicherry — none. But immediately, throughout India, the feeling was created that the game was won: the game we had come to play....We were not so foolish as to imagine that in the year 2000, in an India independent for 53 years, Pondicherry would still be French.

When I left Pondicherry, I was two people: the man charged with a mission; and the man who had practiced or taught philosophy all his life, and who was, naturally, enthralled by *The Life Divine*.

As I recount in the chapter of my book de-

voted to the death of Gandhi, Gandhi was at that time on a fast unto death in an attempt to halt the internal strife. Already he was grief-stricken at the partition of “Mother India” — and then the massacres...!

That was the atmosphere in India at that moment. Obviously it would have been only too easy to divert attention to Chandernagore. Gandhi simply said to me — it was the only reference



Flag hoisting during the De Facto Transfer ceremony

he made to it.... And in the presence of his attendants, so that it would be repeated — “So, you have met Sri Aurobindo!” this meant everything in the language of the period: Pondicherry was not to be touched for the time being.

And when I met Nehru, whom I knew before the war [...] He received me in silence and very coldly: I was presenting him with a fait accompli. Perhaps he would have been only too pleased to tell me, “Out of regard for France and her sufferings... I agree not to... you can tell Mr. Ramadier that he need not worry for the moment...” But

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1. Not Matthew but Edwin Arnold was the translator.

by the time I reached him, the game was already won, and political people don't like that!

He had an extraordinary power of silence.



Nehru's visit to Pondicherry in Jan 55 after its merger with the Indian Union.  
Above: at the Ashram Library. Right: on the street in front of the Ashram.

At that time the French Ambassador was Daniel Lévy, the son of Sylvain Lévy, and Nehru admired him very much, because of the respect he felt for the memory of his father, who had been the main one to introduce Hindu thought and Indology into France, and had held a Chair in the Collège de France. Nehru kept turning towards Daniel Lévy, as if to say, "I don't know why they have sent this young fellow (I was 35) when you, the accredited ambassador, the son of Sylvain Lévy, are handling everything perfectly well." So... he received me very coldly. Later on, relations became extremely cordial, and I was a friend of Indira.

That was the essence of our mission. So, first of all, I owe a political debt — to call things by their true names — to the memory of Sri Aurobindo. But since I had never gone any deeper into the superficial knowledge that I had about Hindu philosophy and thought, I felt myself carried several years back into the past as soon as I met Sri Aurobindo. Why? Well, because the Song of the Blessed Lord had been a real bedside book for me. And what interests me very much in the Bhagavad Gita is that it celebrates the resistance to evil, not non-resistance.... It is a gospel of commitment. The dialogue of Arjuna is some-

thing absolutely extraordinary.

The conversation with Sri Aurobindo was very short. The interview was long, and the conversation was very short: one has to know India to understand what that means. There one can remain together for I don't know how long, look at each other and not say anything. This was true, on the political plane, with Nehru; and it had been true with Sri Aurobindo, who cultivated silence and had lost the taste or feeling for conversation.

But at the beginning there was a very characteristic scene: François Baron, who was a disciple of his, knelt before him and expressed the emotion he felt at seeing him for the first time almost alone. And it started with a conversation, in which each spoke only a few words, about how François Baron's life had been transformed: brother of a surrealist poet, a Parisian of between the wars, that was François Baron... dreaming of writing (and he did write a novel, later); and he had been



transformed by two encounters; he had become a man of action because he met de Gaulle; and he

## SOME CLARIFICATIONS

*Nolini-da and Sanat-da explain*

*Seen from the twenty-first century this piece of information seems almost absurd. In the years that preceded the merger of Pondicherry with the rest of India many in the town believed that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were pro-French and that they did not want the French to leave India. The most probable reason for this wrong assumption could be the very warm and friendly relations which François Baron, the French Governor of Pondicherry, had with the Ashram. Being a literary-minded person, he had read Sri Aurobindo's works and had a very high regard for him. Also, Mother being a French citizen, it was assumed that she would want the French to rule Pondicherry. This rumour gained such an importance that Nolini-da had to make an official statement to the press on June 14th 1949, giving everyone a clear picture of the situation.*

*This statement was reported in Mother India, which was then a fortnightly and was published from Bombay, in its June 25th, 1949 issue. Here are some excerpts from that report:*

*"Sri Aurobindo in his own supreme Spiritual way strives for India's solidarity and greatness," Sjt. Nolini Kanta Gupta, the Secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, told the A.P.I. special representative on June 14.*

*"Sri Aurobindo feels certain and has expressed it more than once," the secretary said, "that the different parts of India, whoever may be their present rulers, are bound to join the*

*mother country, and that India, free and united, will become a dynamic spiritual force bringing peace and harmony to the war-scarred world and suffering humanity in general."*

*Asked whether this meant that Sri Aurobindo desired Chandernagore, Pondicherry, and other settlements in India to join India, the Secretary said: "Certainly so. He has prophesied that these small foreign pockets in India would sooner or later become one with India and India would become the spiritual leader of the world. Sri Aurobindo's great Yoga-Shakti is directed to that end.*

*"As a spiritual home, the Ashram as such adopts a neutral attitude towards the burning question of the day in Pondicherry, namely, the referendum to decide the future of the French settlements in India," the Secretary said. He, however, strongly refuted the notion in certain quarters that the Ashram is pro-French, and referred to one of his public statements wherein he had stated: "Nobody here (Ashram) is for the French rule in India."*

*Fortunately, there were a few people, living in Pondicherry, who knew the truth. Sanat Kumar Banerji, the then Indian Consul General posted in Pondicherry, wrote in one of his confidential notes to Delhi on 31.12.49 (six months after Nolini-da's statement was issued):*

*"We have insulted our countrymen by using useless slanders to be spread against the Ashram; we have looked askance at the motives of Sri Aurobindo who taught us the meaning of patriotism."*

became a mystic and thinker because he met Sri Aurobindo. He was dreaming of retiring to Pondicherry for the rest of his life.

### **And the political part?**

The political part? The political part was the simple fact of being received. And there was no need even to mention it. The papers had only to report, "M. Maurice Schumann, a deputy in the French Assembly, sent to India on an official mission by the Government of M. Paul Ramadier,

yesterday had a private interview of one hour with Sri Aurobindo." That was the political part.

I think I must have been the last person from outside the Ashram to have met Sri Aurobindo, and especially to have had such a long interview with him, because he was already very old. He even referred to his departure from the earth in the near future....

### **Do you remember what he said?**

No, no... It was quite commonplace, but clear:

"I who already no longer entirely belong here...."

***Did Mother take part in the conversation?***

At the beginning, to make introductions; after that she did not say a word. In 1947 she must have already been 70....

***She was born in 1878.***

In 1878? 1947... yes, she was 70. No need to tell that to me, who am 77 today, she seemed like a great-great-grandmother. How could anyone be



Nehru, during that same visit, at the Samadhi

70 years old? But she floored me, because, after the frugal evening meal, she asked me, "Wouldn't you like to play ping-pong? I've heard you know how to play...." And I replied, "Yes, I used to play well when I was 18, but now I have other things to do...." "But that makes no difference, come along, quick!" And then I saw this 70-year-old lady flying from one side of the table to the other... and she beat me hollow! (laughter)

***Did you discuss anything with her?***

She only asked me about France.

***About the political situation in France?***

About the political situation in France, how things were after the war, Alsace, etc. I told her, "You remind me of Marco Polo, who thought only of Venice... but he returned...." Well, that's what the Mother was interested in. She was completely

absorbed in Sri Aurobindo and his thought, and at the same time she remained, there where she was, totally French. She was completely... I don't want to say 'Hindu', but completely immersed in Hindu mysticism; and at the same time, totally connected with the land of her origin.

***Did you speak in English during your meeting?***

With Sri Aurobindo, yes, of course.

***One could almost say that it was that conversation with Sri Aurobindo about the Bhagavad Gita that 'saved' France at that moment....***

'Saved France' is saying too much; because the destiny of France was not dependent on her colonies for one thing, and even less on her commercial outposts. The aim was for India to maintain a display-window for France in India, and a window into India for France. What is the situation like today? I think there is still something special about Pondicherry.

***The French presence there is significant: first of all, there are several thousand Pondicherry Indians with French nationality; there is a French Lycée, an 'Alliance Française' with an educational centre, an Institute of Indology, a Consulate.... Many French people live in Pondicherry, and there are many in Auroville too — all that creates an ambience that is still quite French.***

So that was the aim! The aim was to give us time to set up that French window, which had not been done at all during the period of colonial domination... to give us time to establish it under the French Union, and later to keep it, by agreement with India. It is a model of intelligent decolonization.

For ten years I was President of the Commission on Foreign Affairs in the National Assembly, and for four years Minister of Foreign Affairs, and I have always taken an interest in Pondicherry, in memory of the mission of '47. ❧

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***Erratum:*** In our last issue (dated Aug 2004), on page 26, in the article titled "Darshan History", under the subheading "21 February 1927", the text should read "the Mother's 49th birthday on 21 February 1927" and not "the Mother's 39th birthday on 21 February 1927".



*After turning the pages of history in our quest to understand the period of Pondicherry's independence and Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's role in it, we now come back to the present. In the next few pages we report on some initiatives involving ex-students that are helping shape the town: we report on the Asia Urbs programme to preserve Pondicherry's architectural heritage and to improve its urban environment and we meet an entrepreneur who is creating jobs, and enterprises that are examples of excellence.*

*But first we start by trying to understand the real character of Pondicherry and its destiny.*

# DESTINY OF PONDICHERRY

*Asit Mitra '77 (Bulu) presents an abridged version of a presentation he made during the Pondicherry Heritage Summit on 21st of February, 2002 regarding the heritage and development of Pondicherry.*

**T**he heritage of a place is a living continuum connecting the past to the present and the future. It cannot be merely the conservation of a few historical monuments and buildings. The idea of heritage must admit of a broader and more inclusive definition, which encompasses art, culture, music and other living expressions of the culture unique to the place, as in the case of Pondicherry.

In my understanding, towns and cities, each are an expression of a collective being. Like human beings, they each have their unique character, their special personality that sets them apart and like all living things, they are born, they grow and they decay. History gives us innumerable examples of famous city-personalities, which have lighted or dominated a certain age: Thebes of ancient Egypt, Alexandria of Cleopatra, Athens of Pericles and Rome of Augustus, Hydruntum and Marcus Aurelius. In classical India, we have Pataliputra of the Nandas and the Mauryas, Takshashila and Nalanda, ancient centres of great learning, Vaishali of the early Buddhist era and further east Angkor Wat, the temple city of Cambodia and imperial Kyoto of Japan. The list is endless.

When we examine them carefully, we see that

they are all endowed with a strong personality. And this personality is an unfolding of the deeper idea or soul of the city, which manifests itself through its vital and physical expressions; the inner and deeper elements informing the outer. Unless we are in touch with that inner something, we are likely to fail in our endeavour to conserve our heritage.

Some here may think that I am indulging in pop metaphysics. How, they may ask, can one get in touch with the "soul" or the central idea of a place? Is it not better to confine ourselves to more practical things such as repairing heritage

buildings, instituting regulations or forming committees to encourage heritage tourism? We are always of the opinion that if we manage well the diurnal problems besetting us, the long-term perennial problems would automatically resolve themselves. But if we examine more

closely, we find the opposite to be true, that unless we tackle the perennial or the core issues first, we fail to resolve even the day-to-day problems conclusively.

In our particular case, how do we know what is the deeper Idea supporting Pondicherry? At first, it may seem like a daunting task, but if we persist, we see two themes repeatedly expressing



themselves here, historically and through its early myths. The first, is the idea of knowledge; it is not by chance that Pondicherry was called “Vedapuri” or the city of knowledge in ancient times. Traditions have it that Sage Agasthya of Vedic fame settled eventually in this town and carried out his major works. In recent times we have Sri Aurobindo who wrote out all his major works here. The same is the case with the famous poet Bharathidasan. Pondicherry has a University, two well-established engineering colleges<sup>1</sup>, JIPMER<sup>2</sup>, a large number of private and public schools of a very high standard. We have renowned research institutions such as the French Institute of Pondicherry, Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, and all this within the confines of a very small place. Even in terms of access to Information Technology, Pondicherry was amongst the first few small towns to get access to Internet connection (only a little behind the four metros). Thus we see here a consistent movement historically expressed towards the acquiring of knowledge. This is Pondicherry’s intrinsic disposition, a trend that it would follow naturally whether we like it or not. All we can do is to aid this process, which is already in progress, and redefine our development needs and activities in this light as also our movement for promotion of our heritage.

Forcing an alien direction, which goes against this town’s intrinsic nature, is bound to fail in the long run. This, we see well in Pondicherry’s attempt at industrialisation and the results are there for all to see; it has almost destroyed the essential character of the town without giving the much-promised benefits. Industrial houses come here to set up their factories not because they have any love for this place but because they make money; and money being the primary drive, they care for

little else. They destroy the landscape, they pollute the groundwater and what do we do? We bend backwards to give them subsidies, make a harbour and port for them so that they can unload their molasses and make the whole neighbourhood stink. In the process, the natural heritage and the beauty of our town disappear as does our beautiful beach.

Pondicherry should invest in greater knowledge. “Knowledge” in its widest sense should be the primary motive, the central focus of all our activities. We should work to make this town a centre of knowledge because this is its natural tendency. If we follow this trend faithfully, we will succeed in other spheres too: tourism, industry, in reclaiming our lost beach, in employment generation, in poverty alleviation, in the beautification of our town and even in maintaining law and order. This is perhaps the best approach for conservation of our heritage and a practical road map for the town’s true development.

The second theme, which is also an expression of the inner psyche of Pondicherry town, is that of a dynamic harmony in a cultural multiplicity. People from different nations and races have come here from time immemorial and lived and worked in harmony. This is well demonstrated at the Roman settlement in Arikamedu. The archaeological site shows mostly artefacts of trade and culture but little of weaponry. One can thus deduce that people of very different cultures lived and worked together peacefully. We see that character persisting in modern Pondicherry: the different *quartiers*, French, Tamil and Muslim living in great harmony with each other without ever losing their unique and individual character. More recently,



The float representing Pondicherry that was designed as per the Mother’s instructions. It shows a synthesis of East and West.

1. More are established now.
2. In total Pondicherry plans to have six medical colleges.

we see a great influx of peoples of different nations and cultures settling here. Most different cultures of this vast subcontinent are represented here as also most major world cultures both from the East and the West. It is this inherent tendency that found expression in the living experiment of Auroville, the City of Dawn where people of different nationalities and culture from the East and the West are attempting to live together in harmony, contributing what is unique in each to the whole. This by itself would mean little unless we see this leading us to a greater purpose. Pondicherry and now Auroville are living and vibrant laboratories working out, through a process of cultural synthesis and fusion, something richer and more complete, paving the way for a true world culture. This tendency is certainly a dominant part of Pondicherry's destiny in the future as it was in the past.

Supporting the heritage preservation of smaller towns and cities would be a very important movement in the coming years. In India as in the world, we see a flight of capital and human resource from the village to the town, from the town to the city, finally from the city to the megapolis. These mega-cities are huge black holes that absorb all these resources and implode under

their own weight snuffing out creativity and innovation, negating true growth. We have seen these processes at work in the collapse of ancient Rome. We see these processes manifest today in cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai; the general erosion of the quality of life, the decay of basic values, crumbling of institutions and infrastructure, and the omnipresent stress that grips the lives of its inhabitants both at the physical and at the psychological levels. Unless we resuscitate the smaller towns around these cities, to make them living and vibrant independent centres, interacting with larger metropolises but not existing merely to serve them, both the rural and urban existence in the near future would soon reach a stage of sterile entropy. Therefore, investing in the future of small towns is an imperative which cannot be neglected much longer, and it must form a central part of our national urban policy and our development strategy.

Working for the promotion of heritage in Pondicherry and its development then assumes a much greater significance for our common future. Its success would then open the way for other smaller towns to seek and find their true individuality and lead us all to live a richer, more creative, more balanced and meaningful life. ❧

## **INCOMES**

Hold your breath. The average income of people living in Pondicherry has been rising at the rate of 9.9 per cent a year in the past few years. And if the trend continues, the state's residents will be the richest in India, their incomes rising 550 per cent by 2020.

## **EDUCATION**

It is in the education sector that Pondicherry has really cashed in on its smallness. Perhaps it is the only state to provide not just free noon meals but also breakfast, textbooks, notebooks, slippers and even spectacles free of cost. It is also one of the few states offering English medium education in government schools from kindergarten to the higher secondary level. The little state has also five medical colleges (includ-

ing four in the private sector), five engineering colleges (four private) and a host of colleges including nursing, dental college, polytechnic and colleges of arts, science and commerce.

## **TOURISM**

Tourism has always been the high point in Pondicherry's agenda but it was only recently that the Government woke up to the importance of preserving its heritage. Old French and Franco-Tamil buildings are preserved with Government and international support. The tiny state may have woken up rather late to its potential to woo tourists but it wouldn't be wise to bet against Pondicherry pulling in as many tourists, if not more than some of its bigger southern neighbours.

**India Today** (August 16th, 2004)

# THE ASIA URBS PROGRAMME



*The Asia Urbs Programme is an initiative of the European Commission to develop decentralised partnership among European and Asian cities in order to promote good governance and sustainable urban development in Asia. In the case of Pondicherry, two European towns, Urbino in Italy and Villeneuve-sur-Lot in France, came forward to share their experiences and know-how. With the European Commission contributing up to 65 percent of the overall project cost, the three partner cities covered the remaining amount of the overall budget (Pondicherry, the beneficiary, contributed the most).*

*Though the period of interaction (2 years) and the total funding (2.5 crores) was not much, the Project became an occasion for the Pondicherry authorities to go through the rigorous processes of town planning — defining long term objectives and the methodology for achieving them, project conception, fostering public-private partnership, budgeting, scheduling, implementation monitoring, and evaluation of the results.*

*We spoke to **Brahmanand Mohanty '79** and **Ashok Panda '77** (of INTACH), who were involved with the Project, about its benefits and the activities (in the areas of heritage preservation and urban environment management) initiated with its funding. Though the initiatives themselves are more in the nature of pilot projects which need to be followed up with further action, it is hoped the experience changes certain mindsets about development, creates expertise in areas like heritage tourism and waste management, and develops in the administration skills that will stand them in good stead in the future.*

## MODEL STREET RESTORATION

Pondicherry has a rich and diverse architectural heritage. The former Tamil quarter of the city with its well-conceived houses characterised by their inner verandahs and street verandahs, gave a fine impression of collective culture. Sadly, there are very few streets left today that still retain the typical traditional streetscape. In the framework of the Asia Urbs project, a stretch of Vysial Street (between Mission and Gandhi Streets), with a well-preserved architectural streetscape and which is also on the Heritage Walk route, was selected.

Restoration work was carried out on the façades of about 20 heritage houses. The work comprised of repairing and painting the building façades as well as improving the general municipal services like relaying the road and providing suitable street lighting. Residents have become sensitive to the issue of heritage and some now want to restore the interior of their houses too.



Before Restoration



After Restoration



Vysial Street after restoration

## HERITAGE FUND

About 300 buildings in the French town and 900 buildings in the Tamil town have been identified by INTACH as heritage buildings. These buildings are regarded as valuable for understanding the architectural evolution of the town and should be preserved for posterity. The costs involved in maintaining and renovating such buildings is high and the building owners alone do not always have access to technologies or financial means to carry out the work on their own. In this context, following an important awareness-raising campaign on the issue of heritage, the Matching Grant scheme proposed under the Asia Urbs project is an integrated effort to preserve the urban heritage. Restoration of the façade and interiors of about 10 heritage buildings has been undertaken, associated with an overall improvement of the building environment and services.

To restore each building, a matching grant — an amount equal to that contributed by the owner — was allotted. Assistance was provided to the building owner in preparing the restoration scheme and estimates of the renovation work.

Based on the project experience, Pondicherry Tourism Department has now introduced a scheme to encourage the use of listed heritage properties as hotels, boutiques and other similar activities with a view to provide economic value to heritage.



Société Progressiste School before and after restoration

## HERITAGE WALK

A Heritage Walk along the interesting street stretches of a town is recognised worldwide as an effective way to highlight the rich heritage of the city to tourists. Such a heritage walk is currently

Heritage Walk along a pre-determined route everyday, starting from a particular place, the Mairie for example, and finish at the Manakula Vinayar Temple. This is essentially to create awareness about Pondicherry's heritage. Guides are being trained for this. Brochures on the Heritage Walk have also been printed showing the exact route, so that tourists, if they so wish, may go for the Walk on their own. Videos have also been prepared to highlight Pondicherry's heritage.



being offered to tourists as well as local residents interested in the Walk, who contact INTACH or the Government Tourism office. The Walk covers both the French and Tamil quarters within the Boulevards. Ultimately the aim is to have a guided

## HISTORIC CITY SIGNAGE SYSTEM

Thirty signboards containing information of historical relevance have been designed to guide the tourists and inhabitants to major heritage sites within the boulevard town.



## NON-POLLUTING TRANSPORTATION

The proliferation of pollution-free mass transportation in the form of Battery Operated Three-wheelers (BOT) is limited due to the lack of infrastructure. Unlike the petrol/diesel stations, there are no battery charging stations (BCS) in Pondicherry.

To overcome this barrier, funds have been mobilized from the Asia Urbs project to set up a BCS in the heart of the boulevard town. While the Municipality remains the owner, the BCS is given on lease to a trained local NGO with adequate



Battery Charging Station on Gingee Salai for Battery Operated Three-wheelers.



Battery Operated Vehicles for the Heritage Tour.

competence and experience to provide battery charging service to thirty BOTs.

Also two non-polluting vehicles have been acquired for transporting tourists who would like to take a ride and appreciate the rich heritage of the town within a limited time. The heritage tour is managed by INTACH in partnership with the local Tourism Authority.

The Municipality has also acquired two non-polluting three-wheeled utility vehicles that are used for the collection and disposal of household garbage in a specific heritage area of the boulevard town.

## SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

By early 2004, the old dump yard located near the New Lighthouse by the sea was entirely rehabilitated by the Public Works Department. There is a plan by the State Tourism Department to develop the area as a scenic beach for the locals and the tourists. A part of the rehabilitated land is dedicated to developing a vermi composting yard along with a nursery that will help to green the whole rehabilitated zone. Five of the fifteen tonnes of organic waste generated daily at the Grand Bazar are transported to the site for composting. Thanks to the financial support of the Asia Urbs project, infrastructure could be developed at the site, including construction of sheds, supply of materials and tools. A self-help group of 14 women trained initially by the project is managing the site and the income generated from



Site of vermi composting yard near the New Lighthouse.  
Inset: A self-help group of 14 women is managing the site.

the sale of the compost will cover the salaries of the self-help group as well as the operating and maintenance costs of the compost yard.

## URBAN GREENING AND BEAUTIFICATION

Considering the density of human influx within the boulevard town, the rather limited existing green areas are under severe stress. Under this sub-activity, schemes have been developed for soft and hard landscaping the grand canal that runs through the town, and upgrading some green spaces.

A revitalisation scheme has been prepared to make Pondicherry more attractive to its residents and to turn it into a tourist-friendly destination: pilot initiatives include the Bharathi Park, the Beach promenade and the Gandhi Thidal, which are the only available green public spaces in the old town. In the Park for instance, the four sections would be combined into one space, surrounded by a metal fence with entrance gates. Traffic around would be reorganised and the Ayi Mandapam in the centre of the Park would be surrounded by a shallow cascading pool to evoke the legend of Ayi. The project aims at making a ripple effect throughout the town, restoring heritage buildings, removing encroachments from the pavements, getting rid of blocked drains and providing aesthetic lighting. ❧



Photos from the top:  
Grass and trees have been planted on the sidewalks along the Electricity Department and Municipality Workshop; proposed pool surrounding the Ayi Mandapam; proposed east side entrance to the Bharati Park; proposed pedestrianisation of the Gandhi Thidal.



# A CHAT WITH DILIP KAPUR

*Dilip Kapur '68H is one of Pondicherry's best known and most successful entrepreneurs. Through Hidesign (his leather products business), Casablanca (his up-market store), and his hotels (including Le Dupleix, a heritage-designer hotel he set up) he is influencing the development and image of the town. We met him at his office at the Hidesign factory in Vilianur.*

**GC:** To begin with, how did your parents come to the Ashram?

**DK:** I think my father wanted to come from the age of 16 but only at the age of 39 did the Mother say, "Yes, you can come" and then we came. He was always interested.

**GC:** And how long were you in the Ashram School and what do you remember of those days?

**DK:** I was there from 1954 to 1964, so ten years — from the age of 6 years to 16. I remember my classes, my teachers, I remember the new free system that had started....

**GC:** We're told that you were one of those students who made good use of his time in the free system.

**DK:** Yes. Certainly I benefited in the sense I went from being a fairly average student before that and fairly bored by education, to suddenly finding life very nice because I could go at my own speed and do what I was interested in. I first focused on history, then on geography, then on English and I never had to do any homework. I was fast and I was interested so I started doing very well — certainly well enough to get admission in one of the best private schools in America, near Boston.

**GC:** So you went directly abroad to study further....

**DK:** Yes I went on to do a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Denver....

**GC:** And what brought you back to Pondicherry in '78?

**DK:** Hard to tell... maybe because there was this idea of Auroville, there was the excitement of building a new world. I was in Auroville for about 6 months, then I came back to Pondicherry. And I started the leather business, not very seriously,

almost as a hobby. At that time Auroville wasn't so clearly only in Auroville. A lot of Aurovilians were working and doing things in Pondicherry also. So I was like that and in '85 I went back to Auroville to live there permanently.

**GC:** Why did you take up the business of leather?

**DK:** Maybe it's in my genes, I don't know. My parents were actually refugees from Pakistan and my father had a shoe factory in Agra which I never saw. But what happened to me was when I was doing my Ph.D, I worked for nine months with a



company in America that had leather shops and a factory and in those nine months I learnt something. I got interested and enjoyed it.

**GC:** And how did your hobby of making leather products turn into something as big and serious as Hidesign?

**DK:** Well because it kept growing. It had its own life. As you get more orders you have to pro-



duce more and you spend more time on it. And slowly it takes more and more of your life. We were working from different houses but then at one point we decided to set up this factory here. We also have two other units in Pondicherry and a tannery in Chennai and we have 26 shops in In-



Above, right and right below: work in progress at the Hidesign factory

dia and a few abroad. In 1990 when Hidesign really began, we had about 300 workers. Now there are many more.

**GC:** What has made it grow so fast? What's special about your products?

**DK:** There is a uniqueness and what you could call an integrity of the product. Our methods of treating and finishing the leather are much more natural. For instance, we often use vegetable tanning. The grain is very natural. We also take special care, like double stitching certain parts, to ensure the product will stand the test of time. We also use solid brass buckles which we manufacture ourselves. And very importantly we make our own designs, in all types and ranges of leather goods.

**GC:** You personally design them?

**DK:** In the beginning I did. Now we have got our own designers working and we have a design house with which we work in Italy. And we have design people working in the UK.

**GC:** So Hidesign is a very big brand now?

**DK:** It's not a very big brand. It's an up-market brand, a niche brand. We now have shops in some of the poshest areas in some of the wealthiest cities in the world. The number of stores is also increasing. We began by having stores in

India and now we want to have them more and more abroad. There have been recent additions in Moscow, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur and South Africa. Some shops are franchises, some are ours and others are joint ventures.

**GC:** Is it true that your bag has appeared in a Hollywood film? In *Mission Impossible*?

**DK:** Yes, it has appeared in some movies. Spielberg uses it. He personally uses our product, likes it, and uses it in a lot of his movies. He sometimes asks for special leather bags, for instance a special one with longer straps, for different purposes. You can see our products in Hindi movies too.

**GC:** Is it also true that you have made the world's biggest leather bag?

**DK:** Yes. Nice publicity. It's pretty huge, tall as this room. We've even applied to include it as a Guinness record. But we haven't done much follow up on that.

**GC:** It's such an international business, how is



it you have still decided to base yourself in Pondicherry and Auroville?

**DK:** Because I like living here. I like Auroville, I like the Ashram, I like Pondicherry. I'm an Aurovilian and I stay there.

**GC:** You have had quite an influence on Pondicherry town itself — it started with Casablanca, the lifestyle store. What was your concept for that?

**DK:** Just something interesting, something exciting.... You know at one point we were asked to vacate the place where the old Hidesign shop is. So we got this new place and it was quite big. So we decided to make it a larger store — something different, something up-market. And it actually does very well.



**GC:** Most of the clientele is from outside Pondy?

**DK:** It depends on the months... mostly 40 to 60 per cent of the clientele is from outside. There is a lot of local clientele too, local French, Tamil people.

Pondicherry has grown. It's not a small town any more. And it's quite affluent too. And a number of people come from nearby: Cuddalore, Neyveli.... This is the place for them to shop.

**GC:** More recently you have opened this heritage hotel — Le Dupleix. Can you tell us about that?

**DK:** We set it up really for the pleasure of setting it up. We are not managing it. We are involved in the management only to get the quality right. But it's managed by an international group, Sarovar Park Plaza, in terms of cooking the food, hiring the people, the systems that they use. We set it up.

**GC:** A lot of wood has been used in the hotel and it seems some of it was from Dupleix' house...

**DK:** Yes, when Dupleix's house was torn down, we took all the woodwork out of there. But Le Dupleix is not really a heritage hotel, it's more of a boutique hotel. It's a very designer hotel.

**GC:** So what really interests you in a project like this is the creative, the design element or is it the challenge of doing something new?

**DK:** The aesthetic part is very important, the whole lifestyle part as well. What it represents, the quality of life it represents. And in that sense I think we've always driven Pondicherry up-market, to make it modern, sophisticated. Create nice shops, nice hotels.... When we started Hidesign originally some thought it would be a flop. It was

such a modern shop in Pondicherry. Then when we started Casablanca everybody told us it would be a flop. But that did not happen. So every step is like a push upwards. And Pondicherry has responded to that. It's a very sophisticated city for its size. You may not realize it, but Ashram is one reason for its sophistication, because Ashram attracts a certain type of educated crowd.

**GC:** Actually that was one of the things we were interested in. Pondicherry, because of the Ashram and Auroville, attracts a certain kind of visitor. In its eagerness to attract tourists of all kinds, Pondicherry could disturb the very assets that are already drawing in people. Basically what kind of tourism should we promote in Pondicherry?

**DK:** Maybe you shouldn't be asking me that, because I will always say "the up-market tourist". I think that cities get spoilt, get ruined by having mass tourism. Look at Mahabalipuram. You won't make any money out of tourists spending 50 or 100 rupees a day. It will end up costing you more: the infrastructure the city has to have, just the cleaning up after that, the pollution that it will create with buses all over the place, the parking spaces you will need to have, all this is much more



Above: the garments section of the Hidesign factory  
Top: solid brass buckles being made

expensive than anything that helps the city. So it's more in the direction that Kerala has done, where the educated, sophisticated tourist spends a lot of money.

**GC:** Kerala is attracting foreign tourists through the Ayurveda and health model. So in Pondicherry what should be the focus?

**DK:** Pondicherry is a combination: it is multi-cultural, has an element of spirituality and also a well preserved French culture....

**GC:** You also have a new hotel coming up near the old lighthouse.

**DK:** That's more for the business visitor. Le Dupleix is more leisure, more luxury. Dupleix will have only 14 rooms and the other is bigger with 38 rooms. It's a brand new building. But the whole building, the whole exterior has been done in consultation with INTACH. So, the windows, cornices and all that

conform to the old French architecture. Inside though it is very modern, with clean, sleek lines. Design-wise it's very different from Le Dupleix.

**GC:** In a sense, to round up, do you think looking back at the way you did business — doing things that interest you, doing things differently — that it had anything to do with those years you spent in the free system?

**DK:** Definitely, I think there is definitely a strong impact. It gives people the ability to think differently. I mean, Akash, my son, who has spent only a few years in the Ashram, has come back now. He says those few years in the Ashram and then Auroville have made him incapable of being

a normal man. He's a Harvard graduate, Rhodes Scholar, Ph.D. He could have been main stream, but he is not. It is difficult to be main stream once you've been in the Ashram and Auroville. But maybe I'm wrong, there are lots of Ashram students who are in America and have integrated very happily. It allows them to be at least multi-cultural then....

**GC:** You have strong links with Auroville. Do you maintain any links with the Ashram?

**DK:** Not formal links. My only strong link would be with Dr. Datta, because he is taking care of my mother. I have very strong feelings for the Ashram. I really like the Ashram; I'm very at-



tached to the Ashram in many ways, and in some ways I prefer it to Auroville. I don't know if I would have fitted in if I had come back. But I have nothing but great feelings for it. ❧

Photos on this page: the heritage-designer hotel Le Dupleix



# THE CLEAR RAY

*On the occasion of Amal Kiran's (K.D.Sethna) 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary we bring you excerpts from Light and Laughter, a book based on talks given by him and Nirod-da to the students of SAICE in 1970-71 (a new edition of the book has just been released). The following passages from Amal Kiran provide insights into his life, into life in the Ashram under the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's guidance, and on the Yoga. Moreover these revelations come to us with a generous helping of his inimitable humour.*

[...] I was educated from my very boyhood in the Western way. I was completely Westernised in thought. Indian philosophy and spirituality came to me at a late period and, before that, I had the typical Western-educated young man's attitude. I developed a keen analytic mind, an independence of temper, a certain intellectual pride and a strong individuality, an unbending individuality. Now, this kind of education does not easily lend itself to accepting supra-intellectual truths, still less to accepting humbly a spiritual Guru. But, thanks to my habit and practice of falling, without very much difficulty I was able to fall — at the feet of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. (*laughter*)

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[...] One day I went to a theosophical meeting. [...] Before I left, I was introduced to a South Indian who was a critic of painting. We became friends immediately and went out for a stroll. I spoke to him about myself and he kept asking me what I was looking for in life. I said: "I am interested in a host of subjects" — as my friend Nirod has told you, though I am not a master in each as he has said. (*laughter*) Then the art-critic remarked: "Well, for a chap like you who is quite a complexity, a knot of many strings, there is only one person who can help you and be your teacher." I asked who, and he said: "Sri Aurobindo." That was really revealing, coming from a theosophist.[...]



The name "Sri Aurobindo" remained in my mind. After some months I came across a booklet. I don't remember whose it was but the writer spoke about Sri Aurobindo, and two things struck me. One was that he could appear at several places at the same time (*laughter*) — and the other that he could speak half a dozen languages: Greek and Latin were at his fingertips, he was a scholar in French, he knew German and Italian and, of course, English, which went without saying. Out

of the two extraordinary achievements, the second struck me more, because if a man was a yogi I thought he would naturally have a faculty like appearing at several places at the same time; but that a yogi who is usually a renouncer of the world should know so many languages and be a master in them — this impressed me as very super-yogic. (*laughter*) So I said: "Sri Aurobindo is my man." But that was all. The seed had fallen inside and I thought now and then of him, but he was still

only a name and my search still went on. It led me to diverse places.

The most unexpected was a shop! One day I went to Bombay's popular Crawford Market to buy a pair of shoes. [...] The shoes were put in a box, and the box wrapped in a piece of newspaper. I carried the packet home. No sooner did I come home than I unwrapped my new possessions, and the moment I did so the sheet of newspaper fell back in front of me and I saw in a big headline:

“The Ashram of Aurobindo Ghose.” Somebody had been to the Ashram and written about it. At once I fell upon the article, read it most avidly and at the end of it I exclaimed: “I am going there! My mind is made up at last and I have found my goal, or at least the path to my goal.” And ultimately I came here, wearing the same shoes, which became the shoes of a real pilgrim!

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The Mother had engaged for me a house just opposite the Ashram: it was the house on rue François Martin [*Embroidery Department*], in which Vasudha has been staying for nearly four decades. I had the entire place for Rs. 12 a month! (*laughter*) In those days the room where Kamala now stays was the Mother’s store-room; and she used to come from her room every now and then to her store-room across the open passage on the first floor, and I used to see her from one of my windows. It went on like that and then I asked for an interview. She gave it to me. She sat on one side of a table and I sat on the other. She asked me: “What have you come here for?” I made a dramatic sweeping gesture with one hand and replied: “Mother, I have seen everything of life; (*laughter*) now I want nothing except God.” (*laughter*) She said: “Oh yes? How old are you?” I said I was 23. (*laughter*) “Oh, at 23 you have seen all of life? Don’t be in such a hurry, you must take your time. Stay here, look about, see how things are, see if they suit you and then take a decision.” I was much disappointed at this kind of cold water poured over my dramatic gesture. But I said: “All right.” When I was talking with her I felt as if from her face and eyes some silver radiance were coming out. I am very critical and sceptical, you know, but I could not make out how this was happening — nor could I doubt that it was happening. Apart from this impression of light, there was another — of something out of ancient Egypt.

After our brief talk, the Mother got up. “I am going,” she said and moved towards the



door. “No, please wait,” I urged. Then I started to indulge in my habit of falling. It was taking a new turn, for I was preparing to fall — as I have already told you — at her feet. She seemed a little surprised at a man clad in European clothes, with a necktie and so on, wanting to fall like that. Seeing the surprise on her face I made an explanation:

“You see, Mother, we Indians always do this to our spiritual Masters.” (*laughter*) I taught her what was the right thing to be done. Afterwards I learned that the Mother at that time couldn’t move from one room to another without 20 people falling at her feet! (*laughter*) When she found me determined she said: “All right” — and let me go down. Then she put her hand on my head and I got up. At home I thought I had done something very important: I had asserted my Indian-ness in spite

of those clothes, and I was sure the Mother must have appreciated it. It seems the Mother went and told Sri Aurobindo: “There is a young man here who came to see me and taught me how Indians do Pranam!” (*laughter*) Sri Aurobindo was much amused.

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Now in Pondicherry my first Darshan Day was approaching — it was the 21st of February, the Mother’s birthday.[...]

[...] The Darshan used to be in the long front room upstairs. I went in my turn — first, of course, to the Mother because Sri Aurobindo I didn’t know, while the Mother I had seen again and again. I knelt down at her feet, she blessed me; then I went to Sri Aurobindo’s feet and looked at him. My physical mind came right to the front: “What sort of a person is Sri Aurobindo? How does he look?” I saw him sitting very grandly, with an aquiline nose, smallish eyes, fine moustaches and a thin beard.... I was examining him thoroughly. At length I made my Pranam. He put both his hands on my head — that was his way — a most delightful way with his very soft palms.

I took my leave, looking at him again. I observed to myself: “Quite an impressive Guru: (*laughter*) he is very fine in appearance, very grand — I think I can accept him!” (*laughter*)

The next day I met the Mother and asked her: “Mother, did Sri Aurobindo say anything about me?” (*laughter*) She answered: “Well, he just said that you had a good face.” (*laughter*) Here was a piquant situation. When I was examining him, he was examining me — on the same level, it seems. (*laughter*) He had come down, as it were, to meet my physical mind. I didn’t think the compliment he had paid me was very satisfying or quite sufficient. Only a good face? Then I asked myself: “What did you require of Sri Aurobindo? That he should have a good face for you to accept him. Why shouldn’t he accept you for your good face if that’s the sole qualification you have got?” (*laughter*)

Round about this time I began writing to Sri Aurobindo. It was the start of a process that went on and on for years — sometimes two or three letters a day! Since he replied to everything, we never felt he had gone into retirement. [...] I wrote to him my first letter informing him of all my difficulties: I could not do this and I could not do that — how the devil was I to do his yoga? He wrote to me a long letter, very encouraging and helpful. It gave me a lot of hope that I would be able to do everything and go through if I rejected the lower forces, aspired after the light and surrendered to the Divine: a steady will to change and conquer was all he considered necessary to get me through the hard period. Strangely, he dated his letter 1998 instead of 1928! (*laughter*) I was set wondering whether it would take me so long. (*laughter*) Would all the things he spoke of happen after 1998? [...]

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I stayed on for about six and a half years at first, at one stroke. And during those years I asked Sri Aurobindo to give me a spiritual name. It seems



it was very difficult to find that name. Somebody else had asked for a spiritual name and that person had got it almost the next day, but I got it only after a year. I must have been quite a problem: how to pin down something for me? But after a year Sri Aurobindo did pin it down. He sent me the name, on a very small card, in Sanskrit, with the transliteration in English, followed by the translation. The name, as you know, was “Amal Kiran” — which means, as he says, “The clear ray”. It was a very tall order to live up to such a name. To be a clear ray when one is so full of confusion, and one is so dependent on one’s own intellectual capacity, to become really luminous was quite a job — and still is. But it’s very curious that this word “ray” should have come in, for it repeated itself a little later in a very important context. The very first time that I heard of *Savitri* from Sri Aurobindo was in connection with the mention of a ray. While critically commenting on a poem of mine, he referred to “the Ray from the transcendent penetrating through the mind’s passive neutral reflection of the supreme quietude of the silent Brahman”. To illustrate the point he cited two lines of poetry:

*Piercing the limitless Unknowable,  
Breaking the vacancy and voiceless peace.*

The reverberations of these lines shook me so much that I asked Sri Aurobindo where they had come from. The reply was: “*Savitri*.”

*Savitri* has been very closely linked with my life here, as you perhaps know. That is also why I have been quoting *Savitri* at the start of each talk. Naturally after those lines, I was goaded on to make more and more inquiries. And in the course of my poetic aspirations I was all agog to get the inspiration which Sri Aurobindo had called Overhead Poetry. Overhead Poetry is poetry which passes over everybody’s head! (*laughter*) But how is one to receive an inspiration entirely new which comes from the planes which Sri Aurobindo has distinguished as Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind? So I once got the idea to

make a very direct appeal to Sri Aurobindo[...]

“[...] why not be kind enough to grant this favour? If difficult metres could be illustrated on demand, is it impossible to illustrate in a satisfying measure something so naturally Aurobindonian as the Overmind? I am not asking for hundreds of lines — even eight will more than do — all pure gold to be treasured forever. So please...[...].”

The answer came the very next morning:

“I have to say Good Heavens again. Because difficult metres can be illustrated on demand, which is a matter of metrical skill, how does it follow that one can produce poetry from any blessed plane on demand? It would be easier to furnish you with hundreds of lines already written, out of which you could select for yourself anything Overmindish if it exists (which I doubt) rather than produce 8 lines of warranted Overmind manufacture to order. All I can do is to give you from time to time some lines from *Savitri*, on condition you keep them to yourself for the present. It may be a poor substitute for the Overmental, but if you like the sample, the opening lines, I can give you more hereafter — and occasionally better.”

And then with an “e.g.” there followed in his own fine and sensitive yet forceful hand 16 lines of the very first Canto of *Savitri* as it stood then:

*It was the hour before the Gods awake...*

Below the quotation were the words: “There! Promise fulfilled for a wonder.”

This day was October 25, 1936 — I would say one of the most important days, if not *the* most important, of my life here.

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Now, what else can the Mother make of one? A big shock came to me when I learnt that *Mother India*, of which I had been appointed Editor, was to be a semi-political paper. I writing on politics was something unthinkable! I told the Mother: “I have no grasp of politics, no interest in it.” She said: “Neither have I.” (*laughter*) I cried out: “What then shall we do about it?” She very calmly replied: “There is Sri Aurobindo. He will do everything.” And he jolly well did — because I began writing political articles as if I had done it

from my birth. I even came to be venerated as a political oracle. Every time I visited Pondy, people used to flock round me, asking my opinion on this event, that issue, the other situation. And I could deliver confident statements as though I were inevitably inspired. Within me I couldn’t help laughing.

★

[...] On September 17, 1934, after nearly seven years of attempt at Yoga I wrote to the Mother: “Pardon my writing to you without any specific reason; but I feel like telling you that you are extremely dear to me. In spite of my thousand and three imperfections, this one sense remains in me — that you are my Mother, that I am born from your heart. It is the only truth I seem to have realised in all these years. A very unfortunate thing, perhaps, that I have realised no other truth; but I deeply thank you that I have been enabled to feel this much at least.”

Sri Aurobindo replied something which all of us might remember. He said: “It is an excellent foundation for the other Truths that are to come — for they all result from it.” And the Mother wrote underneath: “My blessings are always with you.”

Well, I don’t know whether the other truths Sri Aurobindo refers to have resulted from what I realised over thirty-six years ago. But the foundational one still stands and I hope it always will. It is the only compliment I can have to give to myself.

★

[...] In that period [1928-33], I was a sort of Raphael and Rembrandt and Whistler rolled into one, because there were no real artists about, and the Mother somehow picked me out for drawing-jobs.[...]

Once I drew a series of somewhat irreverent sketches of people meditating.[...]

[...] I think Amrita heard about them and maybe he spoke of them to the Mother. He used to give her a lot of news. But the Mother never spoke to me about this adventure of mine. What she did was to ask me unexpectedly one day: “Will

you draw and paint the flowers I give all of you at Pranam?" I said: "How do you know that I can do such a thing?" She answered: "It is very easy. Hold up your right hand." I held it up. "There! you have the hand of an artist." Well, that was that. There was no question of disputing anything with her or of going against her wish.[...]

[...]As the only artist or the sole apology for one, I got many favours from the Mother. She heaped me with drawing materials. She brought out the sketching-pads she had collected in Japan from a stationer with that most musical of names: "Bumpodo." (*laughter*) I got paint-brushes and, I think, crayons too. Every morning, after the Pranam, I had to hurry home and paint my flower while it was fresh. Every week the Mother inspected my drawing-book. Then I discovered an important thing. I suppose all of you know that what we have to do here is Yoga first and Yoga again and Yoga always. [...] the Mother evaluates everything from the standpoint of Yoga. Of course she appreciates competent and skillful work of all kinds, but if she had to choose between great skill with no Yoga in it and smaller skill with a splash of the Yogic consciousness going with it, she would always tilt in favour of the latter. When she turned the pages of my drawing-book I found that she simply passed over paintings I had done with a great deal of cleverness but with a tinge of self-congratulation. But she paused and smiled and appreciated very much whatever I knew I had done with real remembrance of her and with an inner gesture of offering to her.[...]

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[...] Once a very funny thing happened during the Soup Distribution.

The Mother was in deep trance. We tried to imitate her by shutting our eyes tight. Now, a big rat decided to join the meditation. (*laughter*) But it had a rather original way of meditating. It ran to and fro amongst us — I'm sure with its eyes shut like ours, because otherwise one cannot explain what it ultimately did: it rushed right into Dara's dhoti! (*laughter*)

You can imagine poor Dara. He was in a terrible fix. Perhaps the word "fix" is not quite the

*mot juste*, for he was extremely mobile. (*laughter*) He jumped up on one side of his seat and jumped down on the other, he thrust out one leg, pulled in the other, and fumbled with both hands to catch the fellow within the folds of his dhoti. (*laughter*) At last the rat ran out, but there was such a commotion that the Mother opened her eyes and looked for an explanation. Then Pavitra, in what he believed was a voice suitable to the solemnity of the Soup Distribution, said in a low rumble: "It is a bandicoot!" (*laughter*)

The Mother was amazed at first and then amused. I was in such a state I had to exert supreme self-control in order not to explode into a most unspiritual Ananda. Well, I managed to bottle myself up for some time, until my turn came to go to the Mother. I went to her, knelt at her feet and, still holding myself tight, gave her my cup. She looked at me and smiled with a twinkle in her eyes. I just burst into laughter. I couldn't act the concentrated Yogi any longer. And she was quite a sport: she opened her eyes wide, smiled very broadly, filled my cup, took a sip from it as usual and, with a slight knowing push, gave it back to me.

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Now again in 1956 I had to go to Bombay at the end of February. As 1956 was a leap year, it was actually on February 29 that I left Pondicherry. I was to catch the morning train to Madras. So I met the Mother pretty early in the day. She said: "I don't want you to stay away long. Can you come back by the 29th of March?" Evidently she was expecting "great things" once more — the Supramental Manifestation, though she did not specify anything — and she was expecting it within a month's time, perhaps on the 29th of March itself, the date on which, 42 years earlier, she had first come to Pondicherry. I replied, "Mother, I shall surely be back by then." Then I left.

That very day, in the evening, the stupendous thing happened! If I had known, I would never have gone. But I had a strange experience the same night. I need not recount it in detail, for I have told it elsewhere. At Madras I had caught the night-train to Bombay. I was alone in my com-



partment and I soon fell asleep. Almost at once I had a dream. I saw a huge crowd in an open place — something like the Ashram Playground — and I was on the fringe of the crowd. The Mother was sitting somewhere inside the open place and everybody was going in to do Pranam to her. I also wanted to do it, but somehow I couldn't get the slipper off my left foot — the lame one, as you know. I was shaking the foot and trying to fling



away the blessed slipper. In the final jerk of that action I woke up. When my eyes opened, I saw the Mother standing in front of me in the compartment. I am a very sceptical fellow as a rule; so I thought I was imagining things. I shut my eyes; I opened them again, and there she still was. I shut my eyes once more and opened them. She was yet standing. This was too much. So I shut my eyes now for a long time. When I opened them, she was gone. Perhaps I should have kept looking and not allowed the sceptic in me to have play. I might have had a deeper experience. But the benefit now was that the sceptic got completely routed. And indelible wonder filled me. And the memory of that strange calm translucent figure has stayed for ever with me.

I wrote of the experience to the Mother, but received no reply. Only on my return to the Ashram she explained what had occurred. It sounds too self-glorifying to talk of it, but it was a very

glorious thing to hear from her. She said: "There were only five people who knew about the Supramental Manifestation — two in the Ashram and three outside." I blurted out: "Then what's the idea of staying in the Ashram?" (*laughter*) She said: "I don't mean that anybody actually knew the Supermind had manifested, but something extraordinary happened to some people. Among those three who were outside, I count you." Puzzled, I asked: "How's that?" She answered: "Didn't you write to me that on February 29 at night you had seen me in the railway compartment?" I said: "Yes, but what did happen?" She replied: "Do you remember I promised in 1938 to inform you? I came now to fulfil my promise." I was absolutely overwhelmed. My God! What Grace the Divine could give to a poor fool! I fell at the Mother's feet in deepest gratitude.

\*

[...] I shall go back to the meetings in the Prosperity Store-room. On one occasion the Mother asked us: "What is Yoga?" That's a good subject to end with; for, after all, we must know what we are trying to do. Several of us gave the Mother our definitions. [...]

Now the very last: "To feel a warmth and a glow in my heart in my relation with Mother."

This somewhat emotional-sounding expression comes — strange to say — from somebody who would be expected to use more brainy language. Instead of "a warmth and a glow in my heart", one would imagine him saying, "a heat and a light in my head." But actually he had lost his head over Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and that surely was the heart's doing — but for a long time he didn't know what had happened and felt a kindling and unkindling of the heart's love for the Divine — and was all agog to stop the latter and keep always the flame he knew in the Mother's presence. Poor chap, he is still trying to tend the sacred fire. We'll wish him a steady progress and as few stumbles as possible. (*laughter*) ❧

***Light and Laughter: Some Talks at Pondicherry***  
(2004 Edition. Pp: 4-5, 9-10, 11-12, 14-15, 32-34,  
48, 49, 52-61, 81-82, 89-90, 102-106)

...continued from page 5

### ***And you have felt Her presence and Her help...***

When I had the interview with Her where it became clear to me that I had to live outside, I was diffident because I had always assumed that after my studies I'll come back here. But in French She said something like, "I will come to you." And my wife and myself have always felt the Mother's

presence which has helped a great deal. The kind of work I do obviously helps the mind develop most of all but it also shows me, as I just said, the importance of other faculties. This is very consistent with what I learnt here. I think it is possible to pursue yoga anywhere although it may be more difficult, but then it gives you a greater satisfaction. Her help is always there in the most concrete way possible. ❧

...continued from page 6

Finally Behram-bhai came. He and his team make cremation and the whole ceremony so simple and easy.

This experience opened my eyes to many things: the first and foremost, as the Divine Mother has said, all souls of the Ashram have Sri Aurobindo's total care and protection. That I saw in the painless, easy and forewarned way my Mom left. The

second was the realisation of how lucky we are to have this huge Family called the Ashram. "Children, when you call your teachers and captains 'Di' and 'Da' or 'Bhai' and 'Ben', please feel consciously that it is not only an added word for respect. They are truly your elder brothers and sisters."

And to add one last word of advice "Value your parents and spend time with them, otherwise you will feel as miserable as I did afterwards." ❧

***Centres d'Etudes de Sri Aurobindo (Paris) along with the collaboration of The Golden Chain Fraternity will be hosting an exhibition titled:***

### **SRI AUROBINDO**

#### **An exhibition of his photographs**

*Days 12.2.2005 to 27.2.2005 \* Exhibition venue: Centre d'Etudes de Sri Aurobindo, 35, Rue de Bellefond, 75009, Paris \* Time: Monday to Friday: 19h - 21h, Saturday and Sunday: 14h - 19h. From 28.2.2005 to 30.3.2005 on rendez-vous via email: [dlal\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:dlal_2000@yahoo.com) (Devdutt Lall). You can also contact Devdutt on his cell phone at +33(0)672849733.*

### **WELCOMING THE INCOMING EX-STUDENTS**

On 31st October the outgoing students of "Knowledge" were invited to the GC office and formally welcomed into our fraternity, since they are going to become "ex-students" very soon. They were told about the activities of "The Golden Chain Fraternity" and in what way they could participate.



# QUIZ TIME!

*Here are the questions for this issue. Send us your answers by email...*

1. What was the name of the Mother's own mother?
  2. Finish this quote from the Mother "Il y a une grande beauté...."
  3. What is the spiritual significance given by the Mother to the flower which grows on the tree behind the school stage?
  4. Who has painted the very large picture of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo hanging on the Eastern wall of the Meditation Hall?
  5. What was the Mother's physical age when Auroville was inaugurated?
- 

## ANSWERS TO THE PREVIOUS ISSUE'S QUESTIONS:

- 1) The Ashram bakery used to be where there is the language lab in the school. The Bengali couple who worked there were sent to Calcutta to learn bread-making before the bakery was started. (see G.C. Nov. 2001-Feb.2002)
- 2) The Mother officially inaugurated the Dining Room on 4th January 1934. It means that this year, 2004, the D.R. has completed seventy years of its existence. At first the D.R. was just a room within the Ashram Main Building. (see G.C. Nov. 2002)
- 3) The Ashram Main Building, as we know it today is actually a combination of four separate buildings. The Mother and Sri Aurobindo moved from "Library House" (the Reception area) to the "Meditation House" (the Meditation Hall area) in February 1927. Sri Aurobindo lived in those same rooms from 1927 to 1950, that is 23 years.
- 4) The lady who first showed the Mother how to put on a sari was Mrinalini Chattopadhyay. She was the sister of Harindranath Chattopadhyay and Sarojini Naidu. (see G.C. Nov.2001-Feb. 2002).
- 5) Pavitra-da.
- 6) Jhunjhun Home. (see photo on page 25 of G.C. Feb-May 2003)
- 7) He was asked to look after the Timber Godown.
- 8) Sahana-di. (C.R. Das was her mother's brother).
- 9) Gayatri Devi's maternal grandfather was Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwar of Baroda, under whom Sri Aurobindo worked for many years. Gayatri Devi herself is the daughter of the Maharaja of Cooch Bihar. Sri Aurobindo's elder brother, Benoy Bhushan was employed by the Royal Family of Cooch Bihar. Dr. Karan Singh writes in his book (*Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, page 43) that the Maharaja of Baroda wanted Sri Aurobindo to tutor his three children. Sri Aurobindo did this for a very short while, then stopped because the children were too restless. This would mean that Gayatri Devi's mother was one of the children who was tutored by Sri Aurobindo.
- 10) These lines are taken from "Love and Death". This is the beginning of the famous speech where Madan introduces himself to Ruru.

# Class of 2004



Standing (4th Row): Pavak K. Mitra, Nema Shanker Singh, Devdip Ganguli, Ritam Roy, Amrit Arya, Maharshi Patel

Standing (3rd Row): Gauri Parashar, Indrani Dawn, Shantanu Verma, Sukrit Dhandaia, Arindam Biswas, Anup K. Singh, Parashmani Chandra

Sitting (2nd Row): Kirtu Reddy, Jugal Kishore Mukerjee, Nirodbaran, Manoj Das Gupta, Jhumur Bhattacharya, Arati Das Gupta, R. Haimavati

Sitting (1st Row): Tanushree Bhattacharjee, Ishita Deshmukh, Gilanjali Bhattacharjee, Shradhdha Mahapatra, Udit Bhabak, Riya Talreja, Suranjika Patnaik