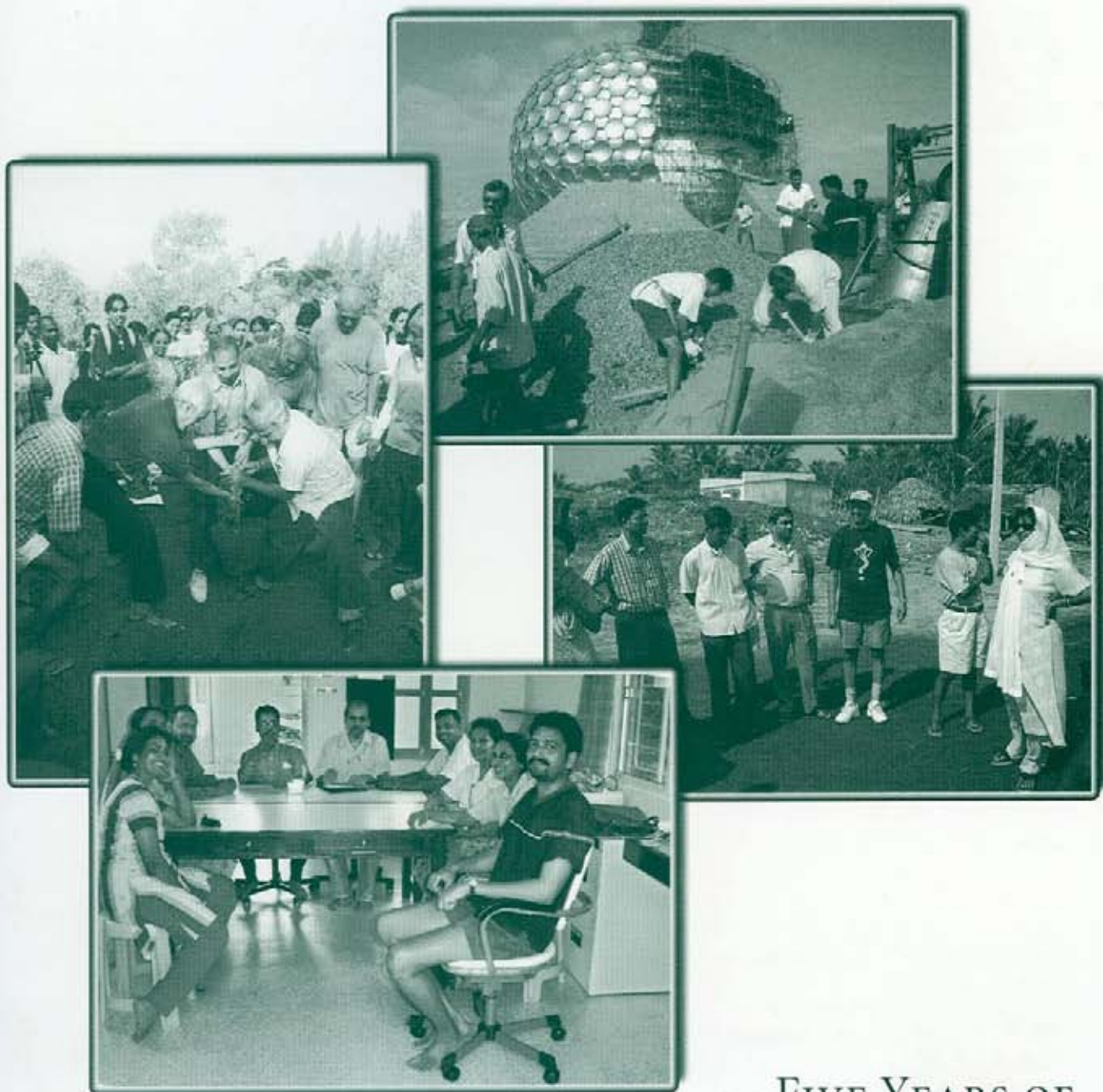


The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



FIVE YEARS OF
THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY

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

by Sunayana '79

The *Golden Chain* magazine was started in an informal way in the Golden Jubilee year of the School. For a few years it ran on the steam of goodwill and dreams. But just as a man cannot live on love and fresh air, so too a magazine cannot survive on enthusiasm alone. Money, which was dependent on erratically remitted subscriptions, and the lack of proper infrastructure were problems, and putting an issue together was an uphill task. However, after a few issues were out, everyone was aware that the editors were doing something really worthwhile because the need for communication between all former students became suddenly so evident. Obviously, it was an idea whose time had come.

By 1999 we had reached a crossroad. On the one hand it was clear that the magazine had to go on, on the other hand experience showed that work had to be better organised and finances strengthened. This is why during the get-together of the year 2000, steps were taken to register our Fraternity and make things official, so that we could receive donations and build up our own corpus fund. The first batch of trustees came together and decisions were taken collectively. Since then, our financial problems have been solved, and we have been sending a copy of the magazine freely to all former students.

The magazine was actually only the starting point. With time we have undertaken various other projects and activities. Now that five years have passed and we feel a little more established we thought we would inform all the former students about these activities so that those who wish to participate may join them. Specially those who live in Pondicherry and have a little time and energy to spare are most welcome.

It was only in the Golden Jubilee year that we became aware of ourselves as a group and understood that we all have the same need to be in touch. For those who live outside, the Ashram will

always be their “home” and there is a wish in every heart to be in contact with that home. Whether we are outside or in the Ashram, what binds us together is the common experience of having grown up in the very special atmosphere of the Ashram. And this sets us apart. Those who come to the path of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the middle of their lives, have already acquired a way of thinking. They come with a baggage of traditions and beliefs which have to be left behind to walk on this new path. So much has to be unlearned and undone before the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo can become a part of their lives. The students of the School come with a clean slate. We are brought here by our parents in our childhood or even infancy and we grow up knowing only this world. There are no old “samskaras” to be erased or any other values to be forgotten because this way of thinking is the only one we know.

What differentiates us then is this unusual path we have walked on. Unlike those who came from the outside to the inside, we started our journey from the inside, sometimes choosing to go into the outside world. Our experience therefore is unlike any other and needs to be shared and recorded. What a waste of all our capacities it would be if, after getting this fantastic head start, we did not come back to the base to take the Mother’s work forward in our own way. Being the “sun-eyed children” brings with it its own share of responsibility.

These last few months our team has been engaged in the rehabilitation work undertaken in the tsunami-affected villages. We have had a clear and visible proof that simply by pooling all our collective skills together we have been able to bring help and hope for a better life to those who have been less fortunate than us. We hope to be able to bring you more news of that front in our next issue. ❧

Many of us knew Chhote (Victor Jauhar) either as a friend or as a co-actor on stage if it wasn't as a coach. In 1969 Chhote asked the Mother to give him some work as he was not interested in sitting in a classroom and studying. The Mother knew about his interest in music so she asked him to work with Sunil-da. The actual recording of Sunil-da's music was done by others. Chhote's work was to make copies of these original tapes for the general public. He passed away in September 2004. Some friends remember him.

CHHOTE

Sunayana '79

We were preparing for the 1st December programme of 1993. The play which was chosen was *Perseus the Deliverer*. Our big problem was that there was no Perseus. The one who had been chosen to play the role of the hero had, after two weeks of rehearsals, announced that he didn't want to do the play. So, there we were all, one evening, sitting on the benches of the theatre, waiting for Cristof, the director, to come. We were wondering aloud what we would do. Our worries were growing bigger by the day because that was the Golden Jubilee year and we knew that the former students would come from all over the world to celebrate the School's anniversary. What would happen if we didn't find a hero for the annual programme? Cristof had even mentioned that if worse came to worst we would have to do *Perseus the Deliverer* without a Perseus! We would end the play before the appearance of the hero, which anyway is well after the middle, and have a narrator come and tell the end of the story. But Cristof had also told us not to lose hope and that he would keep trying to find someone.

"What a crisis," we were saying that evening "there are no heroes in the Ashram." Just then we saw Chhote come into the courtyard of the Theatre on his motorcycle. He walked up to where we were sitting and announced "I am the new Perseus." Then he turned to me and said "I hope you don't mind having me as the hero since you are doing the role of Andromeda."

We were so happy to get this news that we all got up and started talking all at once. So Cristof had managed to convince him. I told him that far from minding I was thrilled to get a chance to act with someone who had so much experience on stage. He was older than most of us in the cast but that did not stop him from being one of us.

From that day on our rehearsals took

another turn; everything started off on a completely different note. At last we felt that we were going somewhere. All those of us who were in the cast have beautiful memories of this play. A temporary structure was erected in the middle of the auditorium, in the shape of a boat and that was the main stage. The real stage was used only for entrances and exits and some minor scenes.



Chhote as Perseus

Many of the actors were very young, barely out of "Knowledge", and to them coming to the theatre was like coming for a get-together with their friends. Everybody sat in little groups and chatted before the rehearsals started. Sometimes, even while they were waiting for their turns in the wings they would whisper and laugh. But Chhote was never in those groups. And this was an invaluable lesson I learnt from him, his power of concentration. From the moment the rehearsals began he remained alone with his own thoughts, and until he went on stage he repeated his lines to himself in order to warm up his memory. In between scenes, in order to stay in the mood and to remain in character he would again keep repeating his lines softly to himself. Once the rehearsals were over then he would start cracking jokes and make us all laugh. Many of us would come to the theatre and then start learning our lines by heart. Unlike us, Chhote always came prepared. He had not only learnt his dialogues but often had checked the word meanings as well.

A couple of weeks before the programme he was given the brass shield and sword which he had to have in his hands in the scene where he fights with the sea-monster. The shield was obviously made for a previous presentation of *Perseus* and had Mother's symbol embossed on it, but it was very heavy. The next day when

SWEET CHHOTE

Siva Selvi Sarkar '65 shares two anecdotes

When I was in A1 Chhoté must have been in A5. I remember him very clearly in the Playground. I used to find him very sweet, always with his right thumb tucked in his mouth very comfortably. In spite of all the efforts from all sides, nothing could be done to undo this habit. Even while going to the Mother to receive the prize card, he would stretch his left hand as the right was occupied. Tara would tell him to remove his hand, only then would Mother give him the card. Obediently he would remove his hand, take the card with his right hand from the Mother, pass it on to his left hand, and tuck his right thumb back in its place. The Mother would follow him with her eyes and her face would light up with a sparkling smile, and all the people around her would also join in the laughter.



Prize-card given by the Mother to Chhote for managing to not put his thumb in his mouth anymore

Last year, Chhoté invited Ajit and myself to show his house. He received us with his usual childlike laugh. As soon as we entered, he began introducing Ajit to his son, Sujay. He told his son, "Do you know who this is? This is Ajit-da! Do you know what he taught me?" I was expecting him to continue with a reply like "gymnastics" or "sports". Instead this is what he came out with: "He taught me how to catch flies and how to kill mosquitoes!" We were all stunned for a while and then we burst out laughing. I thought he was joking. Then I realised that it was true. Thus I also learnt the techniques along with Sujay while Ajit and Chhote delighted in expounding the procedure to get over those little monsters.

we came to the Theatre we saw that Chhote had already come half an hour earlier than all of us and had been practicing the movements with his sword and shield. He wanted to have the feel of these heavy objects in his hands so he would not be uncomfortable on stage while saying his lines.

It was this quest for perfection that made him stand apart. He wanted every detail to be polished;

nothing was left to chance. The most extraordinary thing is that he did the hero's role with as much dedication as he had done the narrator's role the previous year in *Ilion*, or the soldier's role ten years earlier in *Antigone*. Everyone knew that he had a wonderful voice and a strong stage presence but probably no one knows what a perfectionist he was and how he put his heart and soul in whatever he took up. ❧

L'INCONNU

Cristof

En 1982, Victor avait mis longtemps avant d'accepter le rôle de Polydéeon, dans *Persée the Deliverer* de Sri Aurobindo, pour le programme du 1^{er} décembre. Car il n'entrait pas à moitié dans la peau de ses personnages. Il avait souhaité réfléchir avant d'entrer dans celle de ce prêtre fanatique. On le comprend.

En 1993, Victor mit plus longtemps encore à accepter le rôle de Persée que je lui proposais, dans cette même pièce. Il ne se sentait pas vraiment l'âme d'un héros de légende, aux pieds ailés. Heureusement qu'il accepta finalement de porter le bouclier d'Athéna — et le symbole de Mère gravé dans l'or.

Il avait donc incarné l'ombre, et la lumière.

Entre-temps, il avait aussi joué plusieurs rôles clairs-obscurs, mais toujours avec cette tendresse rêveuse, cette présence jamais tout à fait là, cette voix qui venait de plus loin.

Dans les années soixante, il paraît qu'il fut génial dans le rôle du serviteur demeuré de *La Grammaire* de Labiche.

Dans *Ilion*, il fut l'extraordinaire Narrateur qui voit s'effondrer Troie sous ses yeux effarés par la nuit qui vient de s'abattre sur le monde.

Peut-être en fut-il un peu de même pour lui, après la disparition de son bien-aimé Sunil-da ? Peut-être alors le monde a-t-il perdu pour lui un peu de sa lumière ?

Dans la vie, il était plus proche de l'Inconnu du *Grand Secret*, assis discrètement à l'arrière de la barque.

Sur le terrain de football aussi, il jouait à l'arrière. Mais le ballon, cette fois, il l'a envoyé encore plus loin, par-dessus la cage. Et nous l'avons vu filer dans les étoiles.

Victor a enlevé ses chaussures, et pieds nus sur l'herbe fraîche il est rentré chez lui, suivant l'allée des

flamboyants. Pour travailler son texte. Mais dans quelle pièce ?

Car il n'est plus Persée ni Polydéeon, ni Inconnu ni Narrateur. Il est lui-même. Il joue à l'avant et sa voix se confond avec le bleu du ciel et la musique des sphères suniliennes.... ❧



LIVING TRADITION

An interview with Veenapani Chawla

From time to time we make it a point to meet someone who, though not an ex-student, is part of the larger Aurobindonian family and has done significant work in his or her field. "Our Guest" this time is Veenapani Chawla, a renowned theatre personality who has researched traditional Indian performance arts and used them in her plays, which include A Greater Dawn (Savitri) (1992), Impressions of Bhima (1994), Khandava Prastha (1998), Brhannala (1998) and Ganapati (2000). She is known as someone who has always experimented, as someone who extends the boundaries and possibilities of theatre to the maximum. We met her at Adishakti, the theatre space and research centre she has created not far from Pondicherry.

A visit to Adishakti is in itself a revelation. The compound looks almost like a farm — there are many trees (those that help replenish ground-water were specifically chosen), there is a vegetable and flower patch, there are a couple of cows standing peacefully — and that is because the land itself helps sustain the members of Adishakti. The four or five buildings which are spread around the campus are strikingly beautiful and remind one vaguely of Kerala. Natural and traditional building materials have been used as far as possible: blocks of laterite or fossilized mud from Kerala for the walls of the theatre, finely finished varnished mud walls for the guest house, coconut shells in the ceiling of Veenapani's home. Everywhere one sees the intelligent use of appropriate traditional technologies to create something contemporary, elegant and practical. After having gone around the Adishakti campus we settle down to have a chat.

You used to be a teacher in Mumbai. What brought you into theatre in the first place?

In 1978 I came to the Ashram to stay for a year. At that time Mother wasn't here but Nolini-da was my guardian. I was in touch with him on a daily basis, and he encouraged me to read on theatre, on art, drama. And in one letter, which I wrote to him, I mentioned theatre and said, "I feel like doing this." He answered, "This is the thing to do." But I could not see how it would happen. Because I hadn't had any training in it and I was well past my post-graduation. But subsequently things just fell into place. I met a significant performer, an actor whom I was interviewing for *The Times of India*, (that was a freelance work I was doing). And I expressed some ideas I had about the interpretation of Oedipus, which I think I contextualized within Sri Aurobindo's

thought. He was very excited about that interpretation and asked me to direct him in that play. And of course because he was such a prominent figure, the whole thing got catapulted to the media's attention and in a sense it became easier for me thereafter to continue with this work.



What took you into traditional Indian performance arts?

You see I was born in 1947 and the Empire was still hanging over the minds of some of us who were children around that time. We were exposed only to western education, Euro-centric thought and western cultural expressions. I felt there was a dreadful secondary-ness about all this; the thinking was derivative, the forms were derivative. I wanted to know about our own tradition and thought. So I sought out traditional gurus to train with them in old performance forms.

TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE ARTS

Which performance arts did you pursue?

Kalaripayattu, which is a martial art from Kerala; Koodiyattam, which is the only surviv-



Adishakti's theatre. The walls are made from laterite — fossilized mud — blocks. Laterite combines the strength of stone and the cooling effects of mud, is aesthetically pleasing and its uneven perforated surface is good for acoustics.

A semi circular space in front of the theatre extends performance options. Here under a star-studded night sky, the theatre's frontage becomes the backdrop for martial arts or Mohiniyattam. Semi-circular grass-covered steps on the edge of the space serve as seating. An Imagination tree on the right side of the outdoor performance area is a reminder of the stage in our School.

ing form of classical Sanskrit theatre and also from Kerala; Chhau which is a performance form based on martial arts (this was the Mayurbhanj version which is from Orissa); and a little bit of Kathakali. I also explored Dhrupad singing. I had trained in piano and singing in the western classical tradition as a child and I needed to fill in the gaps in my knowledge with regard to Indian music.

Each time I explored and trained in these arts it was not to equip myself as a performer but to investigate these forms, to see if there was anything in them, which is relevant to contemporary reality and contemporary aesthetics. And I found that in all these, it was something behind the visible, something which was beyond the spectacle, an invisible element, which endured

and was still valid and relevant to our practice today. Even technically these forms often have a little-known knowledge which is well hidden and which if discovered would be a great contribution to our times. For example in Koodiyattam there is a technique by which different patterns of breathing generate different kinds of emotions.

Exactly what did you find out? For instance, how is breath used by an actor in Koodiyattam?

We are basing ourselves on the assumption that breath is the physical expression of thought and feeling. The way you breathe reflects the way you feel. You breathe differently when you feel surprise, or fear or anger. For instance you do "ah" [*demonstrates with short intake of breath*] with your breath when you are surprised. Fear stops breath for a few seconds. Your breath is shallow when you lose your temper and so you are told to breathe very deeply to calm down.



The theatre upon entering. Unconsciously inspired by Koothambalam, the traditional performance space of South Indian temples, it is designed in a way that the walls don't intrude. The central space, which "embraces" both performers and spectators, is appropriate for the audience to have a more focused, participatory and up-close viewership.

You just have to observe your breath in daily life and then reverse the process for performance

where you breathe in a specific way to generate a specific emotion. In Koodiyattam they have in fact codified nine patterns of breath according to the nine *bhavas*/emotions; and these are used for the generation of emotion, which is expressed in the face [*mukha abhinaya*] and through the eyes [*netra abhinaya*].

Was this documented? Or has it just survived from Guru to Shishya?

In fact it was almost lost. I was lucky to chance upon it because I was with Guru Amanur Mahdev Chakkyar, the last surviving guru to hold this knowledge. But he had decided not to pass this knowledge on to anyone till he found a worthy disciple. At the time that I was with him, when I asked him for it he said “It will die with me. You have to find it out for yourself.” And he gave me a theoretical indication about how I could find it for myself.

But this Guru did pass on that knowledge?

Yes, he did pass it on to a wonderful performer — Usha Nangiar, who I got in touch with later and learnt from.

The technique of using the breath to create an emotion is easier than Stanislavsky’s process of emotional recall, which is very cerebral. There the actor depends on an emotional memory relevant to his performance situation, to give truth and reality to his performance. But memory tends to get fainter with time and freshness and truth of emotion becomes a problem if you have to perform the same thing an endless number of times. But breath as a stimulant for emotion is never-failing because it’s a physical craft. How can a physical craft fail?

What is interesting is that breath has an impact on body dynamics and an impact on vocal expression also. It is also a significant tool in understanding how to speak text. The premise is that

one thought should be spoken on one breath — as one never breaks for breath mid-thought. In the tradition of Japanese Noh performance there are markers for breath in the text. And these markers are not the same as those for the grammatical pauses. These markers honor emotional expres-

sion or indicate one complete thought. I am told that the *yati* in Sanskrit poetry is a similar marker for breath. I would like to investigate this.

In your play Brhannala I believe this breath technique was demonstrated in some way.

By the time we started work on *Brhannala* we had discovered that all three performance expressions — psychological or *satvika*, vocal or *vachika* and bodily or *angika* expressions are indeed united by a common breath. That it is not merely a coincidence that the resonators of the voice, the centres of physical energy and the *charkas* or the psychological centres are

located in related regions of the body. Therefore a particular kind of breath to express one *bhava* in the face will express the same emotion in the voice, in the mind and in the body. And in *Brhannala* the actor Vinay Kumar was therefore able to creatively extend the breath patterns used in Koodiyattam for facial expression, into bodily and vocal expression.

Indeed the entire performance of *Brhannala* was informed by a technique of breath. Whether the performer was making a transition from one thought to another or was physically expressing something with his body or with his voice or imbuing a theatrical moment with an inner dimension — it was breath and its rhythms, which lay behind it all.

Vinay Kumar was able therefore to achieve a level of detail in his performance that he had not reached before. Handling detail in performance is important — for the number of things that a



Vinay Kumar in *Brhannala*. A reviewer wrote: “Kumar employs this [breathing techniques of Koodiyattam] to transform so completely in posture, expression and voice from moment to moment that he seems an animated character, only capable of existing on celluloid.”

performer can do per minute is what makes his/her performance energized, complex and layered. With the help of breath as a motivation, therefore, Vinay Kumar could employ his body, his mind, and his voice all at the same time, in a hitherto unprecedented way.

What about your play, Ganapati? It uses drumming as some kind of parallel narrative form, doesn't it?

The most striking element in Koodiyattam music is the rhythm. The breath that lies behind the expression in Koodiyattam, is one with this rhythm. If each *abhinaya* is expressed through a particular kind of breath, then each breath has its own patterns of rhythm on the percussion instruments. And just as the breath behind the *abhinaya* is the physical expression of thought and emotion, similarly the rhythm in Koodiyattam is behind the performer as an unwritten or unspoken text.

We therefore looked at rhythm as a text in Koodiyattam performance; and decided to create a new work where the signifier, or the means by which meaning is conveyed, would largely be rhythm. We wanted to increase the scope of theatre. To make it do anything and everything. And we believed that we could largely dispense with the spoken word and communicate narratives, emotions, concepts and ideas through aural images and emotional landscapes created by rhythms. We used the Koodiyattam rhythms, mixed them with some of our own creations, used other folk rhythms and some visual images created by the bodies of the performers, to act as signifiers of meaning.

That is how we created *Ganapati*.

You were never interested in Indian classical dance forms?

Our purpose is to create a new language of performance and classical dance already has a very defined language, which carries its own bag-

gage of associations. The invisible elements in these forms are in fact inspired by the martial arts, which are the neutral base for all Asian performance forms. I use the word neutral in juxtaposition to performative.

So we went directly to the martial arts for the creation of our performance language.

THE SPIRIT AND PURPOSE OF THEATRE

What are the failings of the conventional realistic form of theatre? Why the urge to experiment and create a different language?

The realistic or representational form of theatre comes to us from the West. It is not our convention. I don't want to reject it as such, but it loses ground in the age of cinema. In fact theatre is losing its validity today because cinema can do everything that representational theatre does and much better.

Theatre therefore has to reinvent itself and reinforce its validity. It can do that because it has an edge over cinema. While cinema can accommodate every other reality, it lacks the reality of the actor. On the other hand **Presence** is the only reality in theatre. Theatre's forte therefore, its inimitable strength, is the live, sensorial presence of the performer, which elevates the audience through a contagion of consciousness/energy. And it is around this strength that theatre must try to re-invent itself. It must try to evolve a performance language, which enhances this presence. This will ensure its continuing validity in the times of cinema.

Hence any performance language that we try to develop must be one which enhances the performer's energy and consciousness to the largest degree. The performance language performace will have to be one which does not use the language of daily behaviour, but one which employs an extravagant non-functional energy. There is in our tradition the distinction between *natya* and *lok dharmi*; the behaviour of performance and the behaviour of daily life. *Natya dharmi* uses non-



A scene from *Ganapati*

functional energy [as you see in all our dance and performance forms], *lok dharmi* uses functional and therefore little energy.

The problem with daily, functional behaviour



The Adishakti guest house. The inner walls are brick, the outer walls are of golden brown mud; traditional experts in this kind of construction were specially called, experiments made to check for strength before the technology was finally used. Interestingly a bushy plant which keeps snakes away (and is also an antidote) lines the entrance.

is that the use of the body occurs without reflection or choice. It is stereotyped and executed unconsciously. The more our actions are carried out spontaneously, without the least difficulty, the more can attention be directed to something else. But this spontaneity is a conditioned reflex and it does not encourage the performer to be present in every detail of her action when in performance.

If however one wants to free oneself from reflexive response, which is what *natya dharmi* demands, one must fight against the spontaneous and the natural in the body. One must initiate a process, which undermines automatisms, by using the body in a different way: by re-learning how to stand, by using a different balance axis, by moving according to rules which deny those of daily behaviour. This will call for a constant awareness in the body. Only by using the body in this non-functional way, is the consciousness in the body stimulated to take on a more active role, thus displacing automatisms.

This is what is demanded from performance

behaviour, which aims at enhancing the presence of the performer so as to lead an audience into an elevated experience.

I believe that our traditional forms employ these very methods too.

You have adapted these traditional forms for a contemporary audience. But even then your presentations need an initiated audience. Lay people like us often find them difficult to relate to as we are used to a more representative form of theatre.

There is one clarification I must make.

I have not adapted or simplified the traditional forms for contemporary audiences. What I have tried to do is to find resonances in them, which satisfy the contemporary mind. The result seems unfamiliar and therefore inaccessible.

Let me explain.

Theatre in India, was always a synaesthesia or confluence of all the arts: music, dance, gesture, mime... it was never just verbal theatre. Today I feel we've reached a time where the *Natyashastra*, which advocates this confluence as also the extravagant use of the body, is valid but not in the way it was interpreted so many years ago. Because we've developed since then, we're much more complex beings. Indeed what you see as experiment in my work is actually an attempt to put into practice what the *Natyashastra* advocates but with a contemporary sensibility.



Inside the guest house the mood is silent, meditative — inspired by Golconde. An open inner courtyard lights up the middle. The plant in the centre is "Light" instead of the usual Tulsi — "I think we can be at least that creative with tradition," Veenapani says characteristically.

And a contemporary sensibility is one, which can take in more viewpoints than one — even contrary ones — at the same time. It can see the same thing from all angles and distances. This gets reflected in performance when all the arts employed in theatre act as *signifiers*. In other words each one of them acts as a text or seeks to convey a meaning, *characteristic to its genius*. Each one of them, the word, the physical image, the sound, is sovereign in expressing a concept from a particular angle or a particular point of view, and each mode of expression has its own characteristic contribution to the unpacking of the central concept, which the other forms of expressions cannot replace.

While in the past, for instance in traditional dance, the gesture, movement and music illustrated the word, now each one of these arts evokes a different perspective of the central idea.

How do traditionalists of these art forms that you are using react to what you are doing with them? Do they like the fact that you are taking them out of their traditional contexts?

I believe that past disciplines need to be deliberately displaced from their own context in order to throw up a range of new elements within them, not formerly known or apprehended. I regard such disciplines as constitutively incomplete, and attribute, in part, some of their fading appeal, within their own spectator-communities, not so much to the corruption (through urbanization etc) of audience taste, but rather, to the historical attrition or paralysis of the forms themselves. Within this understanding, my position is that the contemporary performer is privileged as a critic whose task it is to reinterpret and, as it were, fill in the blanks within specific traditional forms. So, in my encounter with the traditional artist, I have endeavored, of course, to clarify my own formal and imaginative directions, but also, and equally, to stimulate the traditional artist to discover old forms anew. The encounter, thus, is premised upon a powerful recognition of mutual worth and capability.

What is the purpose of theatre? For instance we

are told Greek theatre attempted to make the audience go through a cathartic experience. In the Ashram we talk of raising the consciousness through art. Is that what the traditional forms used to want to do? And is that what your plays are trying to do?

Indeed the value of art lies in its ability to create an elevated state of consciousness. This power of art is inherent in its nature, for art is itself the expression of an elevated consciousness. If the creations of the artiste come from her highest states of consciousness they will impact the spectator through a contagion of consciousness.

You staged Savitri some years ago. Was that different from staging any other play?

Very different. It was like a watershed for me. Everything after *Savitri* changed.

Do you plan to take up any of Sri Aurobindo's plays?

I think I would go back to *Savitri*. Not in the way I did it earlier. There is always scope for improvement and change. I would not repeat what I have done. I would use minimal text so that the most significant lines would be there. Each line would stand out, pregnant and isolated, so that it could be received and meditated on.

How do you conceive of a project?

It's always a veiled intuitive thrill or sense of something which becomes clearer and clearer in the mind. It gathers momentum gradually. I don't interfere with the process too much in the beginning. I let it happen. As it builds I talk to the team and that feeds back into the idea. All kinds of things emerge — it's always a surprise. It seems like an accident.

CONTACT WITH THE MOTHER

When did you first come in contact with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother?

My parents came to the Ashram in 1944; and then almost every year until 1950. After that I think my father suffered huge business losses. And we shifted from Bombay and went further north. Then only in the 60s did they come again

once or twice. So the influence was there even before I came, which was in 1969 at the age of 22. I was then actually looking for something, someone, and my father suggested meeting the Mother. Frankly I was very skeptical and had very traditional notions about spiritual matters. I knew nothing about Her except through Her photographs, which were in the house and something from the books of Sri Aurobindo, which I couldn't understand. I told my father, "How will she help me? She's a French lady, she wears lipstick!" And then when I went to Her, everything changed.... It was difficult to go back. But I had to. From then on I was able to read Sri Aurobindo. And I started writing to Her.

Did you think of coming and staying here?

I did and I wrote to Her about it, in 1971 or was it 1972? I wanted to and I didn't want to also — knowing what the commitment involved. I think She responded to that little ambivalence in me. She said the time had not yet come. Then later when Mother was not there in Her physical body I felt that I would want to live near the Samadhi. In 1993 I came back to do that.

ADISHAKTI

And how did Adishakti, your theatre group, and this space you have created, come about?

I was really not prepared for all this. In 1993 the chapter on theatre seemed to have been closed. Yes, Vinay [*Adishakti's lead actor*] was here to do theatre at the Pondicherry University and get some knowledge from me. That's it. He came from a Marxist background and did not believe in anything spiritual. Before my eyes I saw him get ensnared by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo hopelessly and helplessly.... And he never wanted to go back. So as he was here and wanted to be gainfully engaged I started the research work with him. We were successful. Then one thing came out

of another, people came, the projects happened, this land came, the Centre grew... nothing was planned but it happened. But the work I was doing here was more professional, more interesting than what I had done in Bombay. I was thinking in a way I hadn't thought in Bombay.

Shifting to this site was very difficult for me, to begin with. For I had been within walking distance of the Samadhi. Leaving that was difficult. But I had to be here to take care of the work.

There is so much that needs to be done actively here. The creative work, the research work, the administration, the work to take the performances out, the writing of proposals for funding. We have to create new programs, diversify activities etc. We've also actually just finished construction. We still need to do many, many other things.



How much have you collaborated with artistes in the Ashram? For instance if teachers, former students, Ashramites, want to in some way be part of what you are doing here, is it possible?

I've always thought of Adishakti as a site that should be of use to the Ashram. I've always thought of myself as a part of the Ashram — personally as well as for Adishakti. Whether it is considered as part of the Ashram is a different matter. I have always made myself freely available for Ashram projects and programmes. The Ashram is the first community that I would like to serve.

At an individual level apart from the cultural interaction, there is the personal interaction I have with people from the Ashram. There are people whose advice I seek, whose goodwill is very important to me. I've never cared for social appreciation or what people say. But I must say the approval of some members, some people dear to me in the Ashram, has always been important to me, because of who they are and their connection with the Mother. ❧

THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING

May 4th 2005 marked the completion of five years of The Golden Chain Fraternity. On this occasion we review its history, structure, functioning and activities.

A BRIEF HISTORY

1993 marked the Golden Jubilee of SAICE. Eager to contribute to the celebrations planned by the School, a few former students of the class of 1990 thought of starting an ex-students' magazine. The School approved and funded the first issue. *The Golden Chain* was launched. A few years passed — the magazine gained in maturity and scope.



The first issue of *The Golden Chain*

Editors came and went. Among them: Desikan '90, Kavita '90, Auroskanda '94 and Alo '92. Over the years the magazine survived because of the goodwill of ex-students and some good Samaritans, but remained on shaky ground; it had no sure source of funds, not even the legal basis to accept long-term funding even if it was offered. It had

no office or regular staff. Issues continued to appear in fits and starts....

Meanwhile former students were growing increasingly conscious of a collective identity. Get-togethers had made them aware of the strength of their numbers and their diversity, but more importantly of the strength of their unity and common heritage. *The Golden Chain* served to keep this awareness alive. Another development was that an increasing number of alumni had be-

gun to return to settle in Pondicherry. The time was ripe for a structured integration, for a legally recognized ex-student body which could serve as the publisher of *The Golden Chain* and also allow ex-students to involve themselves collectively in a wider constructive action. SAICE alumni, products of the Ashram, could choose to further the work and ideals of its parent institution by using this body to coordinate and fund their activities.

In 2000, during the ex-student get-together held for the millennium, the proposal was mooted for the creation of such a body. The body was to start small. It was to keep the high aims of the parent institution before it and always work in harmony with the Ashram administration. It was to give an opportunity to a fresh crop of ex-students to manage its affairs at regular intervals.

THE LEGAL STRUCTURE

The trust deed that was formulated for The Golden Chain Fraternity sought to incorporate all the above mentioned concepts. A Trust was chosen as a structure (instead of an Association) to begin with, because of its smaller administrative requirements, its focus on fulfilling specific aims as against association for its own sake, and also its more seamless integration into the Ashram environment (an Association requires annual general body meetings and elections).

The broad aim of the Trust is the advancement of education and the faculties of life as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and includes the publication of journals, books, CDs and videos, the facilitating of research, the running of residential institutions and participating in selected

social causes, in the scope of its activities.

The Trust Deed also incorporates safeguards by allowing the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust to intercede and settle matters in the extreme event



The first trustees (Kiran Kakad '72, Vilas Patel '70, Hardie Mohanty '80, Jhumur Bhattacharya '61 and Punit Dhandhanania '89) with one of the editors (Gopal Naik '90)

of a serious conflict or financial irregularity in the Fraternity's functioning or the violation of the aims incorporated in the Trust Deed.

The Trust Board itself is to be constituted of between five and twelve trustees. To reflect the varied profile of the ex-student body, at least a third of all trustees are to be Ashramites and at least a third are to be non-Ashramites. Generally the attempt has also been to find trustees of different age-groups, including a senior Ashramite ex-student. To constantly ensure that new individuals with fresh ideas and energy, and committed to The Golden Chain Fraternity's aims have an opportunity to manage its affairs, all trustees have a tenure of five years. Under special circumstances, a trustee can have a second connective term of five years. No further extension is possible.

The Golden Chain Fraternity Trust was registered as a Public Charitable Trust on 4-5-2000. The first trustees were Jhumur Bhattacharya, Kiran Kakad, Vilas Patel, Har-

die Mohanty and Punit Dhandhanania. Since then Hardie and Punit have stepped down to give way to Gaurishankar Pattanaik and Mangal Kothari. Gopal Naik is now being inducted into the board and Vilas and Kiran will be stepping down shortly. Jhumur-di has been requested to continue for an additional term.

The Trust is registered under section 12A of the Income Tax Act and donations to it qualify for deduction as per 80G of the Income Tax Act.

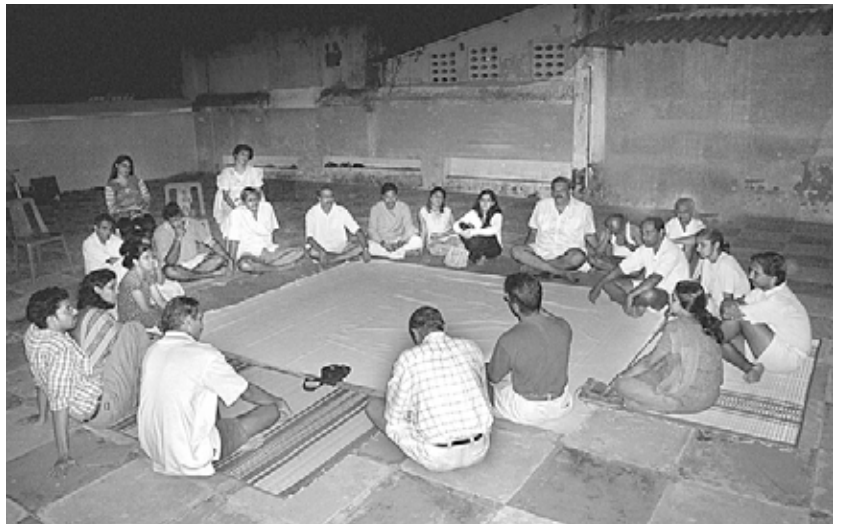
THE FUNCTIONING

Meetings

The Board of Trustees meets at least once a month to discuss the projects of the Fraternity and the new proposals before it. Decisions are taken and the minutes are noted down. Follow-up action is taken during the course of the month.

Regular working meetings of those involved in particular projects are held (e.g. editors of the magazine plan out forthcoming issues, Tsunami committee members meet to work out rehabilitation measures).

Every year, around the anniversary of the Trust, that is the 4th of May, there is a get-together



The 2005 annual get-together of The Golden Chain Fraternity volunteers

of all those who are involved in the various activities of the Fraternity. This is an occasion for giving the members a view of the larger picture, to

keep them informed of the progress made in the various projects and the proposed future course of action and for getting feedback from them.

Funds

Once the Trust was formed, one of its first aims was to make *The Golden Chain* magazine, then its only activity, financially stable. Since it was decided to send the magazine free to all alumni, enough corpus funds had to be collected to meet the printing and posting expenses from the accrued interest. And although the target amount was collected in the first year itself, bank interest rates dropped drastically, and renewed efforts had to be made to collect additional donations.

In the meanwhile, the establishment costs began going up considerably. Having an office meant paying the rent, the telephone, the maid-servant, the office supplies, computer maintenance etc. Today the basic expenses which include the printing and posting of the magazine as well as the running cost of the establishment come to around Rs 1.5 lakhs per year.

New activities and projects also incur expenses. Some of these, like the organizing of get-togethers, or helping with the archiving of Ashram songs, or the preparation of a video CD on the School and the 2003 get-together, are occasional but significant expenses. Others, like the Tsunami relief and rehabilitation efforts, have received separate funding.

As the Fraternity does not have any income-generating operations, it depends entirely on donations to sustain its activities and fund its projects. So donations are always welcome as they help improve the quality of work (the magazine

cover could be in colour for instance) and the scope of the Fraternity's activities. Donations can be sent preferably by draft or cheque favoring ***The Golden Chain Fraternity***. As mentioned earlier, the Fraternity is registered under 12A and has an 80G tax exemption certificate. Recognition for the purpose of section 80G has been extended up to 31.3.2006. Application formalities are also being



The office of The Golden Chain Fraternity opposite the Marbling Department.

completed to allow receipt of funds from abroad.

The Trust's accounts are filed and audited every year.

Office

When the Fraternity was first formed, there was no office and acquiring one became a priority. After three years of scouting for an appropriate site (as a temporary arrangement meetings were held in a downstairs room of Counouma's house) the present premises were finally located and the Ashram very kindly consented to let the Fraternity use the place as an office, on rent. This place in the Nanteuil compound, which was originally a garage used for keeping the Mother's car, was suitably reinforced and given a facelift to transform it into a proper office.

On December 27, 2003 the office was inaugurated. Its entrance is opposite the Marbling Dept. at No. 2 Bis, Rue de la Compagnie. The office telephone number is 2224140. It is open on all days from 10 am to 12 noon, except Sundays and Darshan days. Former students living in Pondy can collect the new issues of *The Golden Chain* from this office. Ex-students residing outside are also invited to visit the office during their trips to Pondy.

Staff

All the alumni working at The Golden Chain Fraternity are voluntary workers. As most of them also work full-time elsewhere, the work done at the Fraternity is in addition to their other responsibilities and done mostly after office hours. There is no full-time worker as yet. Any ex-student who would like to give some time to the work of the Fraternity is welcome to contact us at our office.

ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

Though the Fraternity began by focusing on bringing out *The Golden Chain* magazine regularly, we have over the past five years gradually taken up other activities. Some were pre-planned projects like the 2003 Alumni Reunion or helping the *Centre d'Etudes de Sri Aurobindo* in Paris to put up an exhibition on the photographs of Sri Aurobindo. Others, like the recent effort to render assistance to Tsunami victims, have been spontaneous responses to situations that arose. We have constantly been open to assisting or undertaking constructive projects, especially those which have a direct connection with our Centre of Education or the Ashram. And whenever we take up an important new activity, we try and keep the Ashram authorities informed and updated.

Some of the activities currently underway are:

The Magazine

One of the first priorities of the Fraternity was to see that *The Golden Chain* magazine is brought out regularly four times a year. With the formation of the Trust there was more help at hand and the various responsibilities of the magazine which were looked after by one or two individu-

als were better organized and distributed, so that the editors were freer to concentrate on content generation and presentation.

Content in the magazine encompasses many areas of interest to ex-students and these in turn form some of the regular columns of *The Golden Chain*: We are rooted in our common Ashram heritage, so the history and life of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, of old Ashram sadhaks, of the Ashram itself is a constantly recurring theme. The past and future of SAICE and its various departments is another subject that features regularly. Developments in Pondicherry, our home town, are also of interest to us. Interviews and articles by alumni about their life and work, about their memories of SAICE, about some important experience they have had, about ideas they have, always figure in the journal. Some of these subjects sometimes become our cover stories or form part of a special feature.

But sufficient and interesting content can be generated, and a magazine of this sort can thrive, only if all of you alumni actively participate in it. We need your contributions, either in the form of letters or as articles, so that we have a greater variety in the content. Your articles could be in English or in French. They should typically be 1200 words long (2 pages) and you should send us a photograph to go along with it. Also if you have any suggestions or feedback we will be happy to have it.

If you have any specific skills — writing, copy-editing, layout and graphic design — and would like to help, we will be only too glad

to take you on board. Help is also required with transcribing taped interviews and dispatching the issues.

The Golden Chain now appears four times a year: in February, May, August, and November. It is sent free of cost to all our alumni who have given us their addresses. Those who have not, are



An editor at work

requested to do so. We print about a thousand copies. On an average 160 copies are sent abroad, 250 posted to various places in India and the rest distributed in Pondicherry.

For more information regarding *The Golden Chain* magazine contact Gopal or Sunayana at: goldenchain@vsnl.net

Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation

Our previous issue covered at length the relief operations for the Tsunami-affected villages in and around Pondicherry conducted by The Golden Chain Fraternity. What began as a spontaneous desire by ex-students to help those affected by a calamity has now become a major project of the Fraternity. A significant inflow of funds for this effort (Tsunami fund-collection has since been closed) has meant that after the immediate relief operations, now a long-term

to make the best use of the funds received.

A village 8 kms from Mahabalipuram, called *Pattipulam Kuppam* has been chosen for imple-



Meeting the villagers of Pattipulam Kuppam to assess their long-term needs



Preparing the kits of essential items during the Relief Distribution phase.

rehabilitation project is being taken up. The project is to last a year and plans are being drawn up

menting some rehabilitation, infrastructure-improvement and skill-building schemes. This fishermen's village is in a nice, somewhat isolated setting and has a clearly demarcated boundary. More importantly the villagers here are united, co-operative and eager to do their bit. The Fraternity will be working here in co-ordination with other governmental and non-governmental agencies and is at this time finalizing the schemes that it will focus on. After interacting with the villagers and the local administration, our Tsunami team is considering: evening classes for children and adults; handicraft training (coir-mat-making and carpet-weaving) for women's self-help groups; improvement of telecom facilities (STD booth in the village, mobiles for fishermen out at sea); improvement of medical facilities and

some first aid training; creation of infrastructure like a small library and a children's playground; helping with Shuddham's (an NGO in which some ex-students are involved) effort of cleaning

tively involved in the realization of the dream of Auroville. It was felt that working for Matrimandir — something which older ex-students and Ashramites remember fondly — could be an appropriate and symbolic starting point.

This was organized a few months later. It is now just over a year that a group of ex-students, numbering between 15 and 30, is making regular trips to Matrimandir on alternate Sundays. The trip leaves from in front of Corner House at 6:30 am sharp. On reaching we get to meditate in the Matrimandir till 7:30 am after which we begin the work that is allotted to us. The work is manual: it could be the sandpapering and painting of scaffolding pipes, or the cleaning of gold disks, it could be the planting of Prayer bulbs or the sifting of sand. After a half-hour break at 9 am for breakfast, work resumes



Working in the Matrimandir gardens

and afforestation.

The possibility of offering some of the training and other schemes to fishermen communities in Pondicherry itself is being studied.

The Golden Chain Fraternity's Tsunami Rehabilitation Team functions from their office in the basement of Delhi House, 7 Rue Lally Tollendal. Volunteers are required for taking up specific schemes. For any information or suggestions contact Mangal at: tsunami@goldenchain.org

Auroville

During the get-together held in December 2003, a visit to Auroville was organized for the ex-students. In the interaction that took place with our hosts from Auroville, it was felt that it would be nice if ex-students collectively, as products of the Ashram, could be ac-

and continues till 10:30 am. Sometimes before returning we are shown some new development



Helping with the last concreting at Matrimandir

in Matrimandir or visit an exhibition elsewhere in Auroville. We are generally back by 11 am. For joining us on the trips contact Devendra or Munna(Gaurishankar).

Lake Land

You may remember the plot of land neighbouring the Lake Estate (Merveil) which we visited during the get-together in December 2003. Saplings were planted (one by each decade of ex-students) on this plot and a human chain was



The get-together in December 2003 on the Fraternity's land in the Lake area

formed to symbolize our unity. We had realized that to find such a plot in such natural surroundings and within commutable distance from Pondicherry is increasingly difficult. The fact that this land is next to Ashram and Ashram-connected property was an important bonus. So, shortly after the get-together on 19th April 2004, this approximately 2.5 acre piece of land was bought and registered in the name of The Golden Chain Fraternity.

Though we do have some proposals, a clear plan for the development of the land has still not been made. Any plan, though, will not only ensure that the natural environment which Project Eco-lake has been working for will not be disturbed, but will make the beauty and peace of the area the centre-piece of the project.

Also, the Mother had many dreams for the Lake Estate area and by having a presence in the vicinity the Fraternity has the possibility of making a contribution to realizing some of them.

If you have any ideas regarding the development of this plot of land or would like to help us develop it in any way please write to us.

Website

We realized fairly early that in today's wired world a Golden Chain Fraternity website can serve as an important linking medium for alumni around the world. This would create an online community: ex-students could share information, ideas, pictures and other files amongst themselves as well as access content — like the electronic version of *The Golden Chain's* issues, information about our activities — which we provide. For non-alumni, part of the site could also serve as a window into SAICE from those who have had a first-hand experience of this alternative education.

We are now in the process of creating this site in phases.

For suggestions regarding the website write to Gopal at: webmaster@goldenchain.org

SAICE alumni master database

In the year 2000, a directory was brought out listing all the ex-students and giving contact and other information on some of them. This was based on the School's records and information collected from ex-students at that point of time. The task of making this database as comprehensive and complete as possible, updating out-of-date information and migrating the database to a newer and more flexible software platform, is on. All those of you who have not filled in the form that is available at our office and which also appeared in the May 2004 issue of *The Golden Chain* are requested to do so. For an electronic version

of the form write to us at: goldenchain@vsnl.net. You can email the filled-in form back to us along with a digital version of your passport photo.

GC-CD Project

Some time ago The Golden Chain Fraternity initiated work on the GC-CD project. Work is progressing, but much slower than expected. The GC-CD is to be a multi-media CD that includes: 1) Write-ups and photographs of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, the Ashram, SAICE, Auroville; 2) A computer program that pops up a “message of the day” from Their writings; 3) Computer screen savers and wall-papers with Their photographs among others; 4) E-greeting cards; 5) an E-calendar; 6) some short pieces of Sunil-da’s music. The CD will have content that is characteristic of the Ashram and will be something alumni and other devotees will cherish wherever they are.

FINAL WORDS

This in brief has been the story so far of The Golden Chain Fraternity. We are still in the process of creating an organization, of creating its infrastructure, of responding to the opportunities and challenges that it throws up. For the

Fraternity to develop and strengthen, committed individuals will be needed. For it to grow into a movement, your whole-hearted participation will be required.

Five years is a very short time in the life of an organization and in many ways The Golden Chain Fraternity has still to clearly define its identity, its *raison d’être* and its mission. To do that, we have to better understand our identity as ex-students. That may not be so easy. We are a varied lot. We have amongst us scientists and artists, army-men and teachers, Ashramites and businessmen. But this diversity can be a great strength. There is a fund of knowledge and creativity, of financial resources and human energy that remains to be tapped. All we have to do is focus on our shared, unifying heritage — our faith in, and our love for, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, for SAICE and the Ashram, for Their Vision and Their larger work in the world. If we pursue projects and plans that promote Their work here and elsewhere in some way, we will be doing something worthwhile. We cannot be just an alumni organization like any other. As children of the Mother, as products of the Ashram, our coming together cannot be for our sake; it has to be for Theirs. ❧



AN EXHIBITION IN PARIS ON SRI AUROBINDO

Devdutt Lall '81

The photo exhibition on Sri Aurobindo which was held in August 2003 in Pondicherry, was brought to Paris and put up from 12th February 2005 to 24th April 2005 at the *Centre d'Etudes de Sri Aurobindo*.



The idea of putting it up was nurtured in February 2004 during my visit to Pondicherry when I met Kiran Kakad who mentioned that it would give an occasion to assemble ex-students and devotees of the Ashram and share a few moments together.

On my return to Paris I presented the idea to Janine Panier and Olivier Pironneau, who are the main persons to run the centre and they were very happy about it. This was going to be the first time such an exhibition was going to leave the Ashram and it was very important to obtain permission from all the concerned authorities. Everyone agreed and encouraged us in our endeavour and they emphasised that the exhibition should take place at the Centre.

The first steps were to see how best we could present the photos and transport them to Paris. I discussed this with many people here in

Paris and in Pondicherry. Bharati-ben Patel suggested that we could make plastic bags of a high quality which would protect them and would be light to transport. Next Amit Shah was contacted for the plastic bags as he knew the manufacturer in Pondicherry. We got a sample made and to our great disappointment the presentation wasn't looking good; we had to find another solution. The Archives team worked out a way of framing with lighter material and the photos looked very nice. Amit took charge of the packing.

During this time we in Paris decided that all the texts related to the photos should be translated in French and Janine very enthusiastically did the work.

Earlier there were only photos (54 of them) to be brought and Olivier volunteered to carry them in his luggage. Then the frames, even though light, when put all together became voluminous and heavy and therefore we had to find another

way to send them to Paris. Kiran contacted Punit Dhandhanias asking his advice to courier them



to Paris. It so happened that Punit had to come to Paris so he brought along the big boxes of photos.

VISITE DE L'AMBASSADEUR À L'EXPOSITION

Charles '73 et Konkona '72

Le Centre d'Etude de Sri Aurobindo, Paris, a pris l'initiative d'organiser une exposition de photographies de Sri Aurobindo. Devdutt Lall a pris toute l'organisation en main, aidé par quelques anciens élèves de l'Ashram résidant à Paris. Ils ont tous fait un travail remarquable.

L'inauguration de cette exposition s'est tenue le 12 février 2005 avec une méditation accompagnée de la voie de Douce Mère, avec quelques membres de l'association. Nous étions tous émus de parcourir cette exposition historique qui se déroulait en quatre étapes principales de la vie de Sri Aurobindo :

En commençant par son enfance en tant qu'étudiant en Angleterre, son retour en Inde où sa vie active professionnelle débuta à Baroda et prit ensuite un tournant décisif quand il s'engagea dans la lutte pour libérer l'Inde, la Mère patrie, et enfin la consécration du grand Maître à la vie spirituelle.



A cette occasion le Centre d'étude a invité Son Excellence l'Ambassadeur de l'Inde à Paris, Dilip Lahiri à l'exposition. L'Ambassadeur a accepté l'invitation et nous a rendu visite le vendredi 1^{er} avril 2005 à 18 heures.

Monsieur l'Ambassadeur a regardé chaque photographie avec beaucoup d'attention et de recueillement. La visite terminée nous avons eu une petite discussion tout à fait conviviale avec son Excellence qui a beaucoup admiré cette ex-

position sur Sri Aurobindo, qu'il connaît à travers ses œuvres. Il nous a avoué avoir été béni par Douce Mère il y a 40 ans et cela a donné un nouveau sens à sa vie. Nous remercions chaleureusement l'Ambassadeur de cette visite empreinte d'une certaine émotion.

Nous étions un petit groupe présent à cette occasion :

Ajit-da, Selvi-di, Olivier Pironneau, Annette, Konkona et Charles. Durant ces quelques jours l'atmosphère au Centre d'étude était extraordinaire ; nous avons tous senti la présence de la Mère et de Sri Aurobindo.

At each step we strongly felt that we were helped and guided with the right solutions.

Once we received the boxes we started to mount the photos as and when we had time with the help of ex-students (Jishnu Gupta, Deepti Datla, Phurbu Dolma, Vibha Uchgaonkar, Varsha Maru) and members (Olivier and Annette). Working together made us feel as though we were back in Pondy, and as Sri Aurobindo's photos were hung a beautiful atmosphere set in.

Due to everyone's effort and wonderful work we could begin the exhibition as per schedule

with a small meditation.

Some ex-students (Kiran Patel, Vilas Patel, Indira Patel, Nag Praveen and Raja) came from outside Paris especially for the exhibition. We also had the Indian Ambassador in Paris, Mr Dilip Lahiri come to see it.

Everyone liked the photos, felt the beautiful atmosphere, appreciated the rare collection and the effort put into the restoration by the Archives team. I am very grateful to Kiran Kakad to have encouraged and supported me through the whole project. ❧

Fifty years ago C. F. Baron, former Governor of Pondicherry (see our Nov 2004 issue for more details), spoke movingly at a conference at the Sorbonne in Paris about his contact with the Ashram, his meeting with Sri Aurobindo, and the significance of the Master's vision. We bring you the full text of his speech which was sent to us by Vilas' 70.

UNE RENCONTRE BOULEVERSANTE

Allocution de M. le Gouverneur C. F. Baron à la SÉANCE COMMÉMORATIVE

DE SRI AUROBINDO à la Sorbonne (Paris) le 5 décembre 1955

Monsieur le Président, Mesdames, Messieurs,

Lorsque je suis allé pour la première fois dans l'Inde, il y a de cela plus de vingt ans, ma sympathie pour ce grand pays était vive. Je l'imaginais à travers les livres de mon enfance : "La Maison à vapeur" de Jules Verne, les livres de Kipling, quelques poèmes de Tagore. Je pensais en ramener de somptueux souvenirs, quelques amitiés et une expérience humaine et intellectuelle enrichie.

Aujourd'hui, c'est un amour profond, un amour filial qui me font un devoir de vous exposer brièvement la merveilleuse aventure qu'elle propose aux esprits désorientés de notre temps. En effet, ce n'est pas avec une valise de documents que j'en suis revenu, mais les mains vides et le cœur plein d'un émerveillement intérieur. Peut-être, dans l'Orient fabuleux, avais-je trouvé la lampe d'Aladin ?...

En effet, après beaucoup d'autres et avant beaucoup d'autres, je l'espère, j'y ai fait une rencontre bouleversante et trouvé un enseignement. La rencontre fut celle de Sri Aurobindo, de Mère, de l'Ashram. L'enseignement, c'est leur exemple et leur œuvre.

Oh ! je sais, et c'est même l'une des premières choses que me dirent mes amis indiens, il n'est pas nécessaire d'aller dans l'Inde pour rencontrer des sages ou même de grands mystiques. Celui qui la cherche peut trouver la lumière n'importe où dans ce vaste monde, car si la vache entière est laitière bien qu'on ne tire du lait que de ses pis, de même le monde est producteur de sainteté, dit quelque part Simone Weil. Mais moi, qui étais venu dans l'Inde en fonctionnaire français un peu agnostique, je crois que l'Inde, accrochée au ven-

tre de l'Asie, est la mamelle du monde. Quelques gouttes de ce lait précieux et vous voilà pour toujours imprégné de ferveur.

Pondichéry est une ville émouvante et belle, posée au bord du Golfe du Bengale, sur la côte de Coromandel. Ses rues bien dessinées, ses palais un peu délabrés, ses hôtels du 18^e siècle aux larges portes, aux nobles façades, entrecoupés de jardins, en font une ville mélancolique, propice au recueillement. Imaginez un Versailles en miniature enfoui dans les bougainvillées et les palmiers et isolé dans cette Inde du Sud à l'architecture frénétique.

A cette époque, il y a vingt ans [1935], Sri Aurobindo et son Ashram n'avaient pas une très bonne presse; les fonctionnaires français voltairiens du Cercle de Pondichéry, quand ils en parlaient, confondaient facilement théosophie, spiritisme, cabale et même messe noire au besoin. Les Britanniques continuaient à considérer Sri Aurobindo comme un dangereux agitateur abritant des complices.

Une chose, quant à moi, m'intriguait : c'était de rencontrer le soir, à cette heure merveilleuse dans l'Inde du coucher du soleil, des hommes marchant seuls ou par petits groupes qui, bien qu'habillés comme tous les Indiens, ne ressemblaient dans leur comportement et leur allure qu'à eux seuls. Leurs vêtements étaient d'une éclatante propreté; leurs propos semblaient gais et sages ; on devinait en eux une bienveillance tranquille et le rayonnement d'une certaine joie. Un bonheur si palpable était intrigant.

Les Occidentaux, quand ils sont heureux, ne se remarquent guère. Peut-être se cachent-ils

selon le conseil de la sagesse populaire, mais dans l'Inde, on peut déceler un homme qui détient la sagesse et la paix.

Ma curiosité naquit très vite et je fis en sorte de rencontrer l'un d'eux. Celui-ci était un disciple de la première heure de Sri Aurobindo. C'était, et c'est toujours, un grand poète, un grand musicien bengali, élevé en Europe et parlant un excellent français [*Dilip Kumar Roy*].

J'allai chez lui ; il vint chez moi; nous parlions musique et poésie. Puis, prenant mon courage à deux mains je lui demandai naïvement le secret de sa joie tranquille.

Je ne puis vous évoquer, faute de temps, ces longues, lentes, pénétrantes conversations, riches par les silences comme par les paroles, dans la nuit tiède, étoilée, au bord de l'océan Indien. Mon ami posait sur moi un regard plein d'indulgence et d'amitié qui dépasse l'amitié, et ce sourire fraternel et généreux qui m'a toujours accueilli chez les hommes à la vie intérieure profonde.

J'avoue que j'ai posé des questions volontairement naïves : heureux de me dépouiller devant un homme de mon âge, de ce manteau intellectuel dont nous sommes si fiers de nous parer entre Français.

C'est ainsi qu'il m'expliqua que ce que nous appelons la foi — qui n'est pas donnée à tout le monde, lui disais-je, puisque la raison ne l'explique pas ou la trouve aveugle, — la foi pour un Hindou n'est que le témoignage essentiel de notre moi profond en faveur d'un certain bien non encore réalisé mais que nous sentons comme étant suprêmement digne d'être recherché et obtenu. C'est aussi le courage de l'esprit qui veut la preuve; c'est l'âme à sa recherche, qui sait, comme Christophe Colomb, qu'un continent existe

au-delà des mers. Mais il ajouta que les Hindous que nous disons si facilement mystiques sont beaucoup plus exigeants que l'Occidental ne le croit dans leurs rapports avec le Divin. "Nous ne croyons que ce que nous constatons par nous-mêmes et, si nous tenons compte du témoignage et du message que nous ont transmis tant de sages depuis 3000 ans, nous n'y adhérons pleinement qu'après avoir expérimenté et contrôlé les méthodes et les disciplines de ceux-ci.

"C'est pourquoi je ne puis que vous dire : j'ai fait telle chose qui m'a mené à tel point. Il se peut qu'en faisant de même vous arriviez au même but."

C'est alors qu'il m'expliqua que si le vrai bonheur, la recherche de la connaissance exige l'abandon, le détachement plus exactement, de beaucoup de petites satisfactions sensuelles, ce n'est pas par morale, mais simplement une question d'entraînement. Est péché tout ce qui nous éloigne, et vertu tout ce qui nous approche du Divin, de la suprême réalité.

Des athlètes qui veulent faire une bonne performance doivent suivre un régime rationnel. L'expérience démontre que pour avoir une conscience claire il vaut mieux ne pas être alcoolique ou débauché, et il ajouta :

"Pour Sri Aurobindo l'ascète qui nie la vie commet une erreur presque aussi dangereuse que le frénétique qui en abuse."

Je m'étonnais une autre fois du pouvoir extraordinaire que pouvaient avoir certains yogis.

Il me répondit : "Il est certain que quelques sages ayant atteint la supraconscience ont des pouvoirs supra-physiques. Ces pouvoirs occultes ne sont pas plus extraordinaires que le pouvoir d'écrire un grand poème ou de composer un chef-d'œuvre musical. Très peu d'hommes dans



le monde peuvent le faire, car la poésie et la musique viennent d'un génie intérieur, de notre être profond et, pour écrire ou composer un chef-d'œuvre il faut une collaboration de l'homme et du Divin, ce que vous appelez l'inspiration. C'est aussi l'origine des pouvoirs des yogis, seulement ceux-ci les utilisent sans ostentation, ambition ou orgueil, parce qu'ils n'ont aucune de ces aimables faiblesses."

Ces conversations assez légères, qui satisfaisaient mes réticences raisonnables, la lecture attentive puis fervente de l'œuvre de Sri Aurobindo, l'évident bonheur paisible de mon ami et des autres disciples, m'avaient conduit à une certitude, c'est qu'ils avaient choisi la meilleure part. La meilleure partie de moi-même les enviait et les approuvait; l'autre moitié, par moment, faisait valoir ses droits. Je savais qu'elle avait tort, mais j'avais et j'ai encore pour elle un peu d'indulgence, car il ne suffit pas d'aspirer, il faut aussi se maîtriser.

Après cette lente, amicale et passionnante approche, ce n'était plus par curiosité que je voulais connaître l'Ashram, c'était avec une bonne foi respectueuse, une sincérité profonde que je voulais en savoir et surtout en sentir davantage la lumière entrevue. Mon ami le fit savoir et j'y fus accueilli.

D'autres vous décriront la joie paisible de ces jardins remplis d'enfants, d'écureuils, de fleurs et de beaux vieillards sereins qui entourent la maison où vivait Sri Aurobindo. Moi je peux seulement témoigner de ma rencontre et d'une expérience.

J'ai vu Mère très souvent pour de longs entretiens et même pour travailler avec elle.

C'est la plus grande Dame que j'aie rencontrée dans ce monde.

J'ai eu le privilège de visiter Sri Aurobindo quelquefois. Je ne connais pas d'homme de quelque discipline intellectuelle qu'il se réclame, qui n'ait été ému en sa présence. La ferveur comme l'amour ne s'expliquent pas. Je ne peux rien en dire de plus.

Il importe maintenant que je vous expose brièvement ce qu'apportent l'enseignement et l'exemple de Sri Aurobindo, et pourquoi je le considère comme l'explication la plus pertinente et la plus consolante du monde et de la vie.

Il n'y a aucune doctrine d'autorité. Il n'est exigé aucun acte de foi gratuit dans la discipline que vous acceptez librement en entrant dans l'Ashram. On vous dit : l'expérience démontre qu'en faisant tel pas vous arrivez à tel point ; faites l'expérience avec bonne foi et n'acceptez comme vérité de votre vie intérieure que ce que vous avez constaté par vous-même.

"La preuve du pouding se fait en mangeant le pouding", dit un dicton anglais. La preuve d'une réalité supérieure, du bonheur ineffable, de la paix dans l'unité, se trouve dans l'exercice de la méditation au cours de laquelle il est possible de percevoir directement, avec une totale évidence, ces réalités jusque-là abstraites pour un esprit rationnel.

La méditation avec la connaissance intuitive est l'instrument de travail, la porte ouverte sur la réalité supérieure. L'erreur de l'Occident est de considérer l'intelligence rationnelle comme seul moyen de connaissance. C'est un bel outil essentiel à la marche de l'esprit humain, mais qui devient un obstacle parce que si elle déballe, classifie, compare, explique, elle est incapable de nous donner une réponse aux plus simples questions sur Dieu, l'univers et nous-mêmes. Or c'est cela la vraie connaissance et l'intelligence ne peut que s'agiter désespérément; quand nous demandons à notre cœur et à notre esprit de s'ouvrir à cette connaissance suprême, il faut lui dire de se taire un instant. C'est pourquoi le silence mental a tant d'importance dans la méditation.

Mais ce procès fait à l'intellect pur rentre dans l'explication de l'évolution du monde telle que la conçoit Sri Aurobindo. Le monde, l'ensemble de la création dans lequel le Divin est involué, évolue invisiblement vers une nouvelle étape. La science expérimentale se heurte à chaque instant à des contradictions irrationnelles parce que la raison veut des distinctions tranchantes. Or on nous dit aujourd'hui que l'espace matériel est fini mais sans limite, que la lumière est à la fois de nature ondulatoire et corpusculaire, que la matière inerte est de l'énergie latente, ce qui semble démontrer que la suprême énergie est involuée dans sa création.

Nous sommes simplement, dit Sri Aurobindo, à un moment, à une étape de notre évolution. Il

n'y a aucune raison pour que l'évolution s'arrête ici et que nous n'apparaissions pas à l'homme de demain aussi différents que nous le sommes de l'homme préhistorique. Celui-ci avait peu d'intelligence, beaucoup de muscles et de merveilleux instincts. Les instincts se sont affaiblis; les muscles aussi et c'est l'intelligence qui s'est développée.

L'homme de demain ne sera pas un surhomme d'aujourd'hui, cela n'en vaudrait pas la peine. Ce qui le caractérisera sera une nouvelle qualité de conscience, des facultés de l'esprit développées comme l'intuition. Ce ne sera pas un épanouissement de ses dons actuels, mais bien plutôt une remise en ordre, et la première place sera pour la plus haute, une supraconscience ; le supramental apparaîtra comme tout proche de ce que Bergson appelait "un bon sens supérieur" ; subconscient, conscient, supra-conscient, seront les étapes de notre évolution. C'est une certitude expérimentale pour Sri Aurobindo et tous ceux qui ont atteint et seulement même perçu la conscience supramentale.

L'œuvre écrite, la vigueur intellectuelle de Sri Aurobindo, a pour but de malmener l'intelligence raisonneuse et questionneuse et de la conduire, cette fameuse intelligence, une fois satisfaite, à accepter un monde de connaissances qui la dépassent.

En rendant hommage à Descartes, mais aprouvant Pascal, il nous démontre pourquoi la raison impuissante doit s'humilier si l'esprit veut aller plus loin, franchir le mur de l'absurde et connaître enfin que l'homme passe infiniment l'homme.

Mais j'ai parlé trop longtemps pour vous dire trop peu de choses. J'aurais aimé vous démontrer

que les hommes très sages et très avancés dans la connaissance ne sont pas des rêveurs mystiques. Ce sont les "commandos" de l'esprit ; ce sont les champions de la vraie liberté.

Certains Occidentaux qui sourient, sceptiques, quand ils en parlent, me paraissent aussi stupides qu'un moteur à explosion qui ne comprendrait pas pourquoi un moteur à réaction va plus vite.

L'essentiel de cet enseignement est basé sur la perfectibilité illimitée de l'homme. C'est une leçon inspirée d'optimisme.

En affirmant que l'homme importe, non pas par ce qu'il est mais par ce qu'il devient, qu'il est le fruit de vies passées et la fleur de vies futures, en assurant même qu'il est libre de son allure dans cette marche en avant, en lui donnant l'espoir et le moyen de l'augmenter expérimentalement et d'atteindre la suprême réalité qui est existence-conscience-félicité dont une infime parcelle est déjà en chacun d'entre nous, Sri Aurobindo annonce solennellement une nouvelle étape dans l'évolution de la race humaine.

Son rayonnement est démontré par votre présence ici. Sa lumière a traversé le rideau de soie, heureusement transparent, qui sépare encore l'Orient de l'Occident. De part et d'autre, les hommes sont malheureux parce que les uns et les autres se fourvoient. D'un côté fidèles à la terre mais peu fidèles à leur âme, ils mettent l'accent sur le bonheur matériel ; de l'autre, assoiffés d'éternité, ils négligent inconsidérément la condition humaine.

Il est temps de faire une synthèse et de nous sauver tous ensemble. ❧

Ce texte, réuni avec les autres allocutions en brochure, a été publié en 1969 par Sri Aurobindo Ashram - Pondichéry - Inde

Sri Aurobindo a écrit quelque part : notre yoga commence où les autres finissent. Généralement le yoga mène justement vers cette identification, cette union avec le Divin — c'est pour cela qu'on l'appelle le yoga. Et quand les gens sont arrivés là, eh bien, ils sont au bout de leur chemin et ils sont satisfaits. Mais Sri Aurobindo a écrit : nous commençons quand ils finissent ; vous avez trouvé le Divin, mais au lieu de vous asseoir en contemplation et d'attendre que le Divin vous sorte de votre corps qui est devenu inutile, au contraire avec cette conscience vous vous tournez vers le corps et vers la vie, et vous commencez le travail de la transformation — qui est un très dur labeur.

La Mère (Entretiens 1955: pp 403-404)

KRISHNALAL

Krishnalal was one of the foremost artists of the Ashram. He came here in 1933 and remained in the Ashram until he passed away in January 1990. We remember him in his centenary year which is being observed from July 2004 to July 2005.

If he had lived anywhere else his would have been a famous name and people would have queued up to see his paintings, but because he lived in the Ashram he remains unknown and his paintings lie in peace in the drawers of the Ashram's art gallery.

Krishnalal Bhatt was born on 1st July 1905, in Saurashtra in Gujarat, the eldest in a large family. He was still quite young when he joined the gymnasium (*akhada*) set up by A.B. Purani and his elder brother. These groups of young men were actually preparing for the revolution that they wanted to bring about to get freedom for India. In their struggle they were ready to use physical violence if the necessity arose. Several *akhadas* had actually been set up by the Purani brothers on Sri Aurobindo's own suggestion after Chhotubhai, the elder of the two, had met him at Baroda in 1908 and asked him what he could do to prepare the youth for fighting for the freedom of the country.

It was this contact with the Purani brothers that was to actually give Krishnalal the two most important pursuits of his life: art and yoga. It was Ambubhai Purani who noticed his skill in drawing and took him to the famous Gujarati artist Ravishankar Rawal who

then gave him his first formal training in art when he was 15 years old. Some years later, after he had finished his studies, he was sent by Rawal to learn under Pramode Kumar Chatterji who was then living in Baroda.

After this he spent a few years teaching art at Ahmedabad. In 1932, he took his next step in the quest of perfection and went to study at Shantiniketan. His years at Shantiniketan made a very strong impact on him. This great centre for learning and culture was still in its early years. The enthusiasm of the founder was behind every activity. It was there that Krishnalal studied art under the guidance of Nandalal Bose, the great artist. It was also here that he met and befriended Jayantilal who was a fellow student.

At this point, once again, A.B. Purani showed him the path his life was going to follow. By now Purani was living in the Ashram, having given up all revolutionary activities. In August 1933 Krishnalal visited the Ashram, invited by Purani, and was so charmed

by the life here that he wanted to live in this atmosphere for some time. But once he was accepted by the Mother he was so much involved in the life of the Ashram that he never went back.

He had not come with the intention of do-



Krishnalal in his youth

ing yoga; he had only come to visit. But Mother had her own ways of calling the souls who were destined to be part of her work. What attracted Krishnalal to the Ashram was the great freedom. Being an artist he found it very fulfilling to be able



The Golden Purusha

to live a life where the importance was laid on the beautiful and the refined and one could do away with all ordinariness of life. He knew that he had found his place. However in the early years there were moments when he felt that he had abandoned his family. As he was the eldest brother, under normal circumstances, it would have been his responsibility to look after everyone. Mother knew very well about this tussle in his heart, so she made him feel that she too needed him. She would ask him to paint something specific and when it was over she would give him something else so that his mind and heart and all his energies were concentrated on a specific work.

The painting of a wave which is behind the Mother's chair in Sri Aurobindo's room was one of those pictures that Mother had specifically asked him to do. She had said that during the Darshan when she and Sri Aurobindo sat in the little room at the far end she needed something beautiful to rest her eyes on when she wasn't looking at anybody. She told Krishnalal that she wanted something that would suggest a vast space. In the same way she wanted him to paint the reception room. There is a decorative border which runs along the

upper part of the wall. Mother had given him all instructions about the colours and form of what she wanted there. The panel which separates Sri Aurobindo's room from the entrance to the Mother's room on the first floor was also painted by him on Mother's instructions. We cross these panels when we enter Sri Aurobindo's room and we have seen the deer and the flowers so many times but we have rarely thought of the artist who actually sat down and painted them. Mother also asked him to paint the panels of her first floor room. These are only a few examples of the kind of work that Mother gave him.

Krishnalal often recalled a particular episode of his very first days in the Ashram. Soon after he came to Pondicherry Purani-ji told him that on certain days the Mother came and stood for some time on the terrace on top of Dyuman-bhai's room. A few people would gather in front of the boiler room where now incense and flowers are distributed. So he went with Vishnu-bhai and waited there for the Mother to appear. He later understood that she actually came and stood on that terrace on the days when she washed her hair so that she could dry it in the sun. That day as she came to that terrace, in a sari, with her long hair flying in the morning breeze, Krishnalal thought he was seeing the vision of a goddess. She smiled at him and threw a flower which was in her hand to him. The moment he caught the flower he knew that an inner contact had been made with the Mother.

Krishnalal had a correspondence, regarding his sadhana, with Sri Aurobindo who very much appreciated his paintings. He also gave in writing his comments on Krishnalal's famous painting *The Golden Purusha*, as well as for some other



View of the Mother's window from the courtyard. Painting done on post-card size paper

paintings. Once Mother asked Krishnalal to paint a set of 12 pictures on which days and dates could be attached so that it could be a desk calendar for Sri Aurobindo. Krishnalal chose the theme of cats



Sleeping cat (a painting from the cat series)

for this series. He has painted them in different positions with different emotions, in groups or alone. Sri Aurobindo liked this series a lot and told the Mother that the artist had caught something of the very nature of cats. This set is now preserved at the art gallery and is exhibited from time to time.

In the early days the Ashram did not have the means to give expensive materials to the artists, so the Ashram artists, Krishnalal, Jayantilal, Anil Kumar, and Sanjiban-da, used to paint on little cards. They would cycle out to the Lake or to the Red Hills where Auroville has now been built and paint the landscapes before them on little post-cards. That entire collection is something extraordinary. Not only do these cards show what Pondicherry and the surrounding areas looked like, but they also form a style which is a kind of modern miniature. It is watercolour on a piece of 6"x4" card paper. Had these works been done on normal scale, we would have been able to fully see their beauty. Many large paintings of Krishnalal were done on old bed sheets and even cloth cut out of discarded kurtas. Later paintings were done on handmade paper.

His style had always been meticulously realistic, done mostly in watercolour. What is striking in the whole body of his work is the tremendous range: there are insects and fishes, birds and animals, flowers and buildings, portraits of people in

the Ashram, landscapes and symbolic representations of his spiritual experiences. One finds a refined taste and a keen power of observation. He always maintained that in order to be a true artist, one must train one's eyes to observe before training the hand to hold a brush.

The art gallery was started in the early 60s and Krishnalal was given the work of looking after the paintings of all the artists of the Ashram as well as Mother's paintings. Along with his brother Vasudev he selected the pictures from this collection and put them up for display before every Darshan.

In the 50s he and Jayantilal also painted the backdrops for plays presented at the Ashram. Sometimes he painted entire curtains to show a garden or a part of a landscape where the scenes were set. This is the reason why he was in charge of all the curtains of the Theatre. He did all this along with his work of teaching drawing and painting to senior students of the School.

His last major work is the mural at Golconde which was completed and installed on 14th August 1984. He worked on it for three and a half years, in spite of his failing eyesight. He looked after the art gallery until he passed away on 5th January 1990. When

one sees the vast collection of paintings which were done by him, more than six hundred pictures, one more beautiful than the other, one is filled with admiration for him. But our admiration grows even more when we know that for him his inner sadhana was more important than his paintings — they were only the means to an end — and that he never lost sight of the real goals he had set before himself. ❧



Study of crows done on a post-card size paper

KRISHNALAL, THE ARTIST-SADHAK

Sunayana '79, who worked with him for two and a half years, tells us about her contact with the artist

In March 1982 Krishnalal asked me to help him to finish the Golconde mural. As I had been his student he knew that I had a basic understanding of painting and that he could guide me. Ideally he had wanted many artists to work together on the mural, but somehow this was not practically possible. After working on it for one year he realised that it was not going to be so easy for him to do everything alone. He was already in his late seventies and his eyes were quite weak, so he could not work for long stretches. Having started this project of so huge a proportion, he had to now complete it, in whatever way possible.

We know that there is no such thing as chance, but the way things happened, it was clearly one of those instances when the Mother gets her work done in her own inscrutable ways. On the same day, at the same time, both Krishnalal and I were on our way to see Ravindra-ji. I wanted him to give me some work other than what I had been doing and Krishnalal wanted to request him to give him a full-time worker for the art gallery who could also be an assistant to him for this specific work. We met at the entrance of the Ashram Main Building and realised that we had both found what we were looking for. Ravindra-ji agreed to both our requests and I started work the following week.

At first I thought that I was going to work with him but I soon realised that I was going to learn from him. It was like going back to school because everyday there was a new lesson to learn, a new aspect of painting that I had to master. More important than that was all that I heard from him about the early days of the Ashram and how the Mother guided the sadhaks in their inner work. Just being in his presence was enough to learn how to serve the Mother.

On the first day when I went to work at the art gallery he took me to where there was a message of the Mother which was framed and kept on a

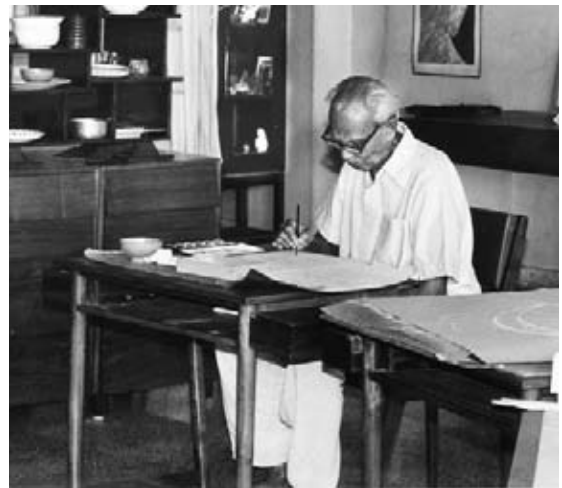
table. It said "On the physical plane it is in Beauty that the Divine expresses Himself."

"Before you start working here," he told me "I must initiate you." Pointing to the framed message he asked me to think over the meaning of that sentence.

"It means..." I started saying, but he cut me short and asked me to think about the real meaning for an entire day. I thought for a whole day about this idea and turned it round and round in my mind. The next day I told him what I had understood.

"I think it means that every time we see beauty we are actually looking at the Divine or at least at one of his faces."

He seemed pleased with that. He said "I am



Krishnalal in the studio of the art gallery

happy that you found that answer. We always think that the Divine is hidden from us and that we can only see him if we are spiritually very advanced. The truth is we can see him whenever we want to see him because he is making himself visible at every moment. If you look for Beauty you will find the Divine in the physical world." The initiation was over and after this he took me to that part of the art gallery which was the studio.

GOLCONDE MURAL

Behind the austere walls of Golconde there is a painting which was the last work of Krishnalal. As you enter, it is immediately to your right, covering the entire wall. It has been there only for the last twenty one years even though the building itself was constructed in the early 1940s. The architects of Golconde had planned to have the mural on that wall right from the beginning, but as the Second World War broke out it had to be abandoned. There was a purpose for having the mural there. It was so that people coming down the staircase could look at something beautiful, giving the illusion of space, rather than be in front of a blank wall. When the building had reached the finishing stage Mother asked the Ashram artists to think of a subject for the mural and to make

a sketch or a reduced scale painting to show to her. All of them submitted their work. Even François Sammer, who was involved in the construction as an assistant to the main architect, sent in his sketch. In the end Mother chose Krishnalal's idea. She even gave her own suggestion to improve the original sketch. But before any steps could be taken to begin work the War broke out and the architects left. Somehow the project was never discussed again. After the war, the life of the Ashram took a different turn and its financial situation wasn't so bright. In that context spending money to buy the materials needed to create the mural would have seemed an unnecessary luxury.

Krishnalal, however, did not forget the project. In the late 70's the conditions were right and there seemed to be hope to begin the work. The

colours were donated by a devotee and they came all the way from Amsterdam. In 1980 the work was started in the studio of the art gallery, on wooden panels which were mounted on a frame of iron pipes to hold them all in position. In 1984, when the work was finished, these panels were transferred to the wall in Golconde.

The picture shows the Mother blessing all the people who have come to her from all over the world. In front of her are those who were close to her: Nolini-da, Pranab-da, Champaklal-ji, Andre-da, Millie-di, Vasudha-ben, Udar-da and Mona and some others. Their faces are actually portraits done from photographs or from the



Golconde mural. Actual size approximately 9 and 1/2 feet in height and 24 feet in length.

sketches which the Mother had done of them. Behind her are those who had already passed away when this painting was started: Amrita-da, Pavitra-da, Purani-ji and Chandulal. The flowers were also chosen according to their spiritual significance and placed at appropriate places. Birds and animals appear at various places in the mural to show that Nature is participating in Mother's work.

Krishnalal deliberately painted people of different countries and different races to show that the whole world was coming to the Mother and asking to be blessed. Almost at the end of that stream of people he put himself. This self-portrait was placed in such a way that it came exactly behind a pillar, and so the artist remained present without drawing any attention to himself.

We worked for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon every day. Very often he painted only in the morning so that his eyes would not be strained. I sat on the floor and painted the flowers while he stood and did the portraits. My work was also to prepare the colours for him. I had to mix a little water with all the main colours and keep them in small jars before he started working. The acrylic paints had come from Holland and if they were not mixed with water regularly they tended to dry up in the heat of Pondicherry. I also had to clean the palettes and brushes when we had finished working.

It often struck me that this is how the old masters of Europe worked. They did the main work while their apprentices did all the minor details and in general helped the artist. When I would go to get a bowl of clean water or wash his brushes I always felt that I was the apprentice of a Master, and was participating in the very important work of helping him finish his masterpiece.

The great paintings of European Art were often ordered and commissioned by royalty. In our story too there was a queen. Every two or three months Krishnalal would invite Mona who was in charge of Golconde to come and see our progress. A couple of days before Mona's visit we would start tidying the already very tidy studio. As we hurried to put away the odd art book or the unused brushes we would whisper "Mona is coming, Mona is coming!" It was as if we were saying "The queen is coming, the queen is coming!" Mona, of course, was always happy to see that some parts of the painting were more complete than before. Of all her visits the one which we remembered the most was when she saw that we had put a bunch of daffodils right at the centre of the bottom part of the painting. She at once exclaimed: "Krishnalal, I am so glad so see the daffodils which represent my beloved England. I have to thank you

for including them in this beautiful painting."

Watching him paint was a joy. He was so deeply concentrated that nothing could distract him. The Art Gallery was a building whose entire roof was made of asbestos sheets and the sides were

made of large glass panes. In the afternoon the whole studio became a furnace. Krishnalal would be covered in sweat but he would be working very carefully on his portraits because they had to resemble the people he wanted to portray. Whenever I was going to start a new flower he would ask me to go and observe it in nature. It was common for him to come back from the Ashram and say "Go and see the pot of 'New Creation' near the Samadhi." Or, "Have you noticed the 'Boldness' near the reading room?" After working

with him for two years I understood that he had a "third eye" and that was his power of observation. In a glance he saw much more than what a common man could see and this is what made his paintings so alive.

Sometimes in the afternoons, when we used to finish working early, we would sit and talk about the Mother. One afternoon when he was about to paint the figure of the Mother on the mural I said that the position in which he had drawn her sitting seemed a bit strange to me. Krishnalal then explained to me that in the 1930s the Mother used to sit on a low chair and give blessings. Apparently she used to sit in that position, with only one foot visible so that people could touch it and do their pranams. Sometimes he would say what the Mother had said about art. He would often mention that the Mother had more than once said that the artist's hand could develop a consciousness of its own, independent of the general consciousness of the artist, just as musicians have a special consciousness in their hands. Somehow, in conversation or in thought, the Mother was always there.



Joy of Faithfulness

One morning, he came to paint a little later than usual, after finishing some other work. I had already started my own work and the whole studio was in a mess. All the brushes were scattered here and there, the little pots in which we kept the colours were not arranged on the table, some were on the floor. He looked at me questioningly, as if to say "What is all this?"

"I have heard," I said "that Raphael, the great artist, lived in utter disorder. In fact, I have read that all the Old Masters were messy." I thought I had given a very valid justification for my not having put things in their place. I thought he would mull over my unusual announcement. But he did not even pause for a second.

"Yes," he said calmly "it may be true. But if you are trying to say that because they lived in disorder that is why they were great artists then you are totally wrong. A lot of people in the world live in disorder but they are not all artists. Raphael was indeed a great artist but he did not have the good fortune you and I have of knowing what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have said about human nature. So, instead of following the examples of the Old Masters' disorderly lives, let us concentrate on what the Mother has said about always seeking beauty and harmony around us. Our aim is to go beyond creating a great painting; our aim is to make all the different parts of our being as perfect as possible. And now, you will please put back all the paint jars that we are not using."

That afternoon, as we sat at our little table, we spoke about the Old Masters. Krishnalal then told me that artists, whatever may be their field, open their vital being to many different influences. "The

artist lives in his vital, and that is the danger," he said "because when he opens himself, sometimes a lot of negative forces enter into his being. Most people are not conscious enough to take only the higher things. That is why many great artists used to lead lives where often there were excesses."

Around April 1984 we started putting the final touches to the mural, after which all the panels were dismantled and taken to Golconde. After they were installed on the wall, we had to once again touch them up. When the work was over, a

coat of special varnish was applied. This turned out to be a most unfortunate decision. Even though the colours were of very good quality, and could withstand changes in temperature, the varnish was not meant to be applied on a work of art. It was the kind of varnish which was then the latest product for finishing the polish on furniture. Being in a partially covered area, a part of the mural is exposed to sunlight and splashes of water in case of rain. In the last twenty years the varnish has started cracking all over but even more on the exposed side of the picture, and as it flakes off it pulls out bits of the paint along with it. Efforts are



A self-portrait

now being made to stop this deterioration.

When the mural was completed, Krishnalal heaved a sigh of relief, as we had managed to come to the end in spite of many obstacles. It had taken much longer than he had expected, but at least he had realised a long-cherished dream. Something which had been planned in the mid-40s was completed in the mid-80s, all because he had not given up hope. He believed that a work that had been given to him by the Mother had to be completed, even if it took him several decades. ❧

QUIZ TIME!

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

1. Who played the part of Perseus when Amita-di did the role of Andromeda?
 2. Who did the role of Vuthsa Udayan in the 1958 programme of *Vasavadutta*?
 3. Who played the roles of Priam, Achilles and Zeus in *Ilion* for the 1992 1st Dec programme?
 4. How many times has the play *Prince of Edur* been performed at the Ashram Theatre?
 5. What was the theme of the 1st December programme of 1972, Sri Aurobindo's centenary year, and what was so unusual about that programme?
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ANSWERS TO THE PREVIOUS ISSUE'S QUESTIONS:

Q: What was the Japanese name Mother gave to herself when she was living in Japan?

A: The Japanese name which Mother chose for herself was "Hoojiko". The name comes from the Japanese word for wisteria flowers which is "Hooji". The spiritual significance which she later gave to this flower is "Poet's ecstasy". This information, regarding the name, was given by Mother's Japanese friend, Mrs. Nobuko Kobayashi. (See the book *The Mother, The Story of Her Life* by Georges Van Vrekhem, page 178)

Q: What work was given to Tehmi-ben when she joined the Ashram?

A: When she joined the Ashram she worked in the carpentry department. She had to supervise the carpenters! She did this for two years, then she worked at the library for a while. She started teaching a little later. Along with her work at the school she worked at the Bulletin office and handled the subscriptions and the receipts. (See *The Golden Path* by Annie Nunnally.)

Q: What important event took place in Sri Aurobindo's life in Kashmir?

A: While walking on the ridge of the Takht-e-Suleiman (also known as "Shankaracharya Hill") in Kashmir Sri Aurobindo had the realization of the vacant Infinite. He considers this as one of the early spiritual experiences before he met Lele in 1908. (See *Sri Aurobindo On Himself*, Chapter: Life before Pondicherry.)

Q: Finish the quote "Une vie sans but"

A: "Une vie sans but est une vie sans joie." This sentence is in Mother's book *Education*.

Q: "Who was called "my little smile" by the Mother?

A: This special name was given to Vasudha-ben. She was known as "Akka" to many people. The Embroidery Department was under her charge and it was known as "Akka's Department" for a very long time.



Mother,

...I want my heart to open to You and to feel Your love there always. But if it is really closed, how can I open it? What must I do to open it? For I really do want it to open to You and I want to feel happy for ever.

My dear little smile,

I know of only one way: to give oneself a complete consecration to the Divine. The more one gives oneself, the more one opens; the more one opens, the more one receives; and in the intimacy of this self-giving one can become conscious of the inner Presence and the joy it brings.

Tender love from your mother.