

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



SISTER SCHOOL



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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Painting by Priti Ghosh '64

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THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Gopal '90

Many years ago when examinations used to be held in our Centre of Education a student was caught cheating in them. His case was put before the Mother. Mother didn't chuck the student out; She threw out the system of examinations!

Mother chose to do this because Her aims for the education here were entirely different from the ordinary aims of education. The purpose here was to "discover and encourage those in whom the need for progress has become conscious enough to orient their life". A New World was being born and the School was meant "to open the way of the Future to children who belong to the Future".

Mother could also do this because She had provided the necessary environment to make the growth of the New Education possible. She had created the alternative life of the Ashram and the Centre of Education was an integral part of it. The students were in the atmosphere and presence of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, in the midst of a community where sadhaks, including their teachers, were striving, in smaller or greater measure, to be conscious, to grow inwardly. There was, and is, no better environment for the New Education.

The educational aims, the principles and methods that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have enunciated remain an ideal still to be achieved and SAICE still remains a work-in-progress. But even in its present state and even from a surface estimation, SAICE evokes admiration. The learning is integral and holistic. In the span of one day the student might study French, Sanskrit, Computer Science, Sri Aurobindo's works, he might plant trees in Lake, play a game of football, and practice playing the piano.... Also there are no examinations! The atmosphere is relaxed. Teachers interact with students in small groups and generally very informally. There is a constant effort to give the student more freedom and make him responsible for his own progress. The list goes on. But underneath all this is the real uniqueness of SAICE, its inner dimension. This is a school where "to know oneself and to master oneself" is an ideal that is

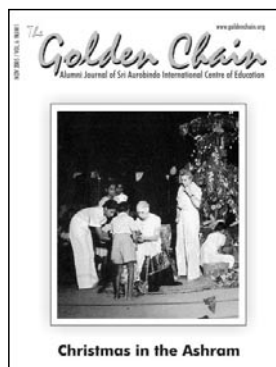
constantly put before the students, a school which talks about fostering psychic contact and spiritual growth.

Can the New Education be applied elsewhere? Can this SAICE experience be duplicated outside the Ashram? The world outside is intensely competitive. Education primarily serves to provide degrees which can help you to get jobs, pursue careers. Schools outside have to abide by a syllabus prescribed by the Government, prepare students for Board Examinations. Having small classes is often financially unviable for the school. Teachers and parents generally all have a value system that emphasizes the economic motive, that doesn't take inner development seriously.

But in spite of these difficulties, over the years there have been attempts by devotees — in Delhi, in many cities and towns of Orissa, in Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore, among other places in India, and now abroad in the US — to start schools which are inspired by the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. How have they fared? How far can the revolutionary ideas of this New Education be implemented outside? Do "Mother's School", "Sri Aurobindo School", "Integral School" remain mere labels? Are trends changing? Is SAICE the model to be followed?

To explore some of these issues we are starting a new column called Sister Schools. We are beginning this column in this issue by featuring the Delhi Ashram's "Mother's International School".

The Government's Education Department is surely aware of the distortions and stresses that the conventional system has created. But unlike the Mother, they cannot be expected to chuck it away altogether. They have to play it safe. It is for individuals to take the initiative in creating alternative holistic, child-centric schools with deeper values, to show that a different approach to education can work. Ex-students, having gone through the SAICE experience themselves, know better than most, the spirit, approach and methods of the New Education. They are uniquely equipped to play a role in this effort. ❧



MONA

I remember asking a few people about details of Mona's life during my second stay at Golconde in Nov '04. Now, a year later I was overjoyed to get to read the article on her at the centre here. Thanks.

I stayed in Pondy for 8 years but it had never occurred to me to step into the world of Golconde and I never knew that there was a lady called Mona Pinto at its helm who had been appointed by the Mother. It was only in Oct '03, when I was no longer in Pondicherry, that while reading something, this entity named Golconde literally kept hammering me to visit it. I had no other option than to write a letter addressed to the Mother (at the Golconde address) asking for permission to stay there for a few days. It was Mona who wrote back (it was very touching when I met her and saw that she was a 93 year-old woman but still so concerned about

Golconde visitors). I remember my first visit to her after I had just started basking in that wonderful atmosphere of Golconde: in those 45 minutes of our talk I felt that there was a wonderful inner communion apart from the external communication.

Your article rightly concludes with the phrase, "Mona, there will never be anyone quite like you." I agree with that completely.

Janak

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK.

Please send your correspondence to: The Golden Chain, Sri Aurobindo Ashram P.O., Pondicherry 605002 or email it to us at: goldenchain@vsnl.net
Published letters may be edited for reasons of space, clarity and civility.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

This year there were two Darshans in February as the fiftieth year of the Supramental descent was celebrated. Since this is not a leap year the golden jubilee was observed on the 28th of February.

We would like to inform all our readers that Jayanti-bhai, teacher of many years, passed away on 24th November 2005. If you would like to share your memories of him with everyone, please send in your write-up by April 2006.

There was a get-together of alumni members and their families in Delhi on 18th December 2005. We hope to be able to share with you their photos and an account of the reunion in the next issue.

Sumitra-di, who now lives in France, would like to add a few small details to our report (GC Nov. 2005) of the work done by Mona at Golconde. We had said that a team of young ladies were chosen by the Mother to work along with Mona to prepare the bed linen for the dormitory. Sumitra-di informs us that she too was one of the people working in this team even though she was only a teenager then. The designs for the cross-stitch embroidery were done mostly by Sanjiban-da and sometimes by Krishnalalji. These bed-covers have been looked after so carefully that they are still in good condition and are being used even today, after sixty years.

We are still looking for helping hands at The Golden Chain office to assist in the preparation of the magazine. If you are living in Pondicherry and you enjoy writing, typing, copy-editing or transcribing, then please get in touch with us.

OLD MEMORIES OF X'MAS

Tara Jauhar '61H

The earliest incident I can remember is when X'mas was held at the Red House where the Pinto family lived. It was not open to everyone and was on invitation. Since we were the only few boarding children of Dortoir at that time, we were all invited. When Mona would run short of gifts, Mother would open her almirahs and give things for children.

When I was 10 years old in 1946, I vividly remember the X'mas celebrations at the Red House. As X'mas gifts, I got two very pretty necklaces, one of prisms and the other of blue stones. I overheard Mona telling Anuben that both these necklaces were from the Mother's collection and that she had herself selected them for Tara saying "she is a pretty girl and these will suit her". I had these necklaces kept safely for a long time. Probably one of them is still with Lata didi.

The second memory of X'mas is probably of the year 1951 when my father came from Calcutta to Pondicherry and brought a big box of bakelite toys for X'mas. I carried them up to the Mother and offered them to her. She called Udar and told him that these could go to Mona for the X'mas distribution, but she would like to see the toys before they were sent. Besides animals, horses and elephants, cars and boats, there was also a bundle of dolls. She immediately pulled the dolls out and said, "I don't want my children to play with dolls. These should not be given." I don't know finally

what happened to the dolls but the rest of the toys were distributed at X'mas celebration.

The 3rd anecdote is of the year 1952. Nandalal Patel had left Pondicherry and gone to Singapore for business. Pondicherry being a free port, Nandalal-bhai sent crates of imported bakelite toys



Noël 1946 — waiting for the Mother at noon

for X'mas that year. Udar opened up these boxes and laid them in the long passage of the Mother's room for her to see. In those days six of us friends (Gauri, Chum, Jhumur, Bubu, Parul and myself) used to go to see the Mother before noon. She used to meet us in the passage. When we came there we were very excited seeing all those toys and while waiting for the Mother, we were debating on what we would like to have for X'mas. Mother appeared and watched us for a while and then she said, "I give you 15 minutes, I will do some other work and come. In the meantime each one of you can

pick up one toy that you like for yourself.” We started picking and choosing excitedly. I do not know what the others selected but I picked up a little cat in a tub which could be pressed down and would spring up with the sound of meow. 15 minutes later when the Mother returned, she asked us to show her what we had selected.

She saw all the toys but had a disappointed look on her face. And then she said to us, “Do you want to know what I would have selected?” She picked up a tray in which there were tiny little fishes and animals which would float on water. From all those little things she picked up a small size bakelite tortoise and she said, “If I were asked to select, I would have picked up this.” Then she went on to explain to us the reason for this. It was the symbol of immortality and the aim of our life. I do not remember the exact explanation that the Mother gave but what she meant was that at every moment we have to be conscious of what we want in our life and it is only then that we can follow the path of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga.

The 4th incident of X’mas was when it was being held in the Playground. Probably it was the first year that the X’mas celebration was shifted to

the Playground. I was in the Red Group then. I got a mechanical winding car and was rather disappointed with my gift. Krishna Kumar who lived in the same Dortoir as I, was dying to have a car. And so we agreed to exchange our gifts. He took the car and I took his game of skittles (9 pins). We were both very happy then. The X’mas distribution finished much earlier than expected and the Mother started looking around thinking of what she should do next as she did not want to go back to the Ashram that early. I was standing nearby with my bag of skittles. She came up to me and asked what I had got as gift in the distribution. When I showed her the skittles, she said, “How nice, come, let us play.” And so we placed the nine pins and the Mother took the two balls and rolled them towards the skittles. After her it was my turn and then one by one all those people who were in the Playground started playing skittles with her. And she stood there patiently watching everyone. When we had all finished our turn, she left the Playground. This set of skittles was later passed on to the indoor game section of the Physical Education Department and was slowly used and finished. I wish I had preserved it! ❧

MY BHAIYA NIRMAL

Manju ’72

I sit at my table and before me spreads the panoramic golden autumn landscape. The splendour becomes manifold as the sunset lights a gold fire along the wide horizon. The autumnal crisp wind breaks the silence of the misty meditative atmosphere as it gently touches the trees adorned with bright gold and red leaves with its magic wand and thousands of leaves rustle and teasingly whirl in the air. Some land on the ground, some do a few cartwheels, lift up and curl, only to fall again to pave a carpet of gold in the forests and winding paths.

I sit enchanted by Nature’s acrobatics... the perfume of the wind cleansed by the midday rain or scented with pine darts over my face, a few whirling leaves knock on my slightly open win-

dow and wake me up from my reverie....

These leaves are like the golden memories of my dear brother, my Bhaiya, which are constantly whirling around me. If Nirmal, my bhaiya was here, he would have immediately captured the mystic beauty of Autumn and frozen it in his camera. He was a passionate photographer.

He is no more. It is a little more than a year, on 19th August 2004 that he just left us all. We are still shocked. There is an emptiness within me without my sibling which I can now only fill with memories.

Our life started in Calcutta. As I walk down memory lane I find myself as a little girl running with him in the neighbourhood meadows. I remember how, with the wind and the weather

beating around us, we went to our hiding place in the fields to shelter ourselves till our mother's anger had subsided. And when we came home she was so concerned to see us both drenched that she forgot all about our mischief, wrapped us lovingly in towels and gave us a warm drink and a kiss. I could walk in the neighbouring monkey lane only accompanied by bhaiya as I was afraid that a monkey might jump on me. But in his company, I felt protected. He made me feel very special and beautiful. For him I was the best around.

In the early fifties, my father and bhaiya, then a boy of six or seven, were on a visit to the Ashram. Bhaiya chose to stay on at the Ashram. The Mother saw him at the tennis court and accepted him into the Ashram School, but the boarding houses were few and all of them were full. As the period of my father's stay at the Ashram was coming to an end, he went to Madhav Pandit a bit concerned about the arrangement for the child's stay. Pandit-ji's answer was brief but reassuring, "When Mother has admitted the child it is our responsibility to arrange accommodation for him. The Mother has told me not to mind the cost!" Shortly thereafter, he sent word that a new house had just been taken on rent by the Mother, and Nirmal was to be put there. It became the Michèle Boarding.

So started the little boy's adventure of consciousness.... When my father returned back to Calcutta without bhaiya I was in tears and ran to the meadows all alone.

Bhaiya was a very mischievous kid. So he soon became known as "Jerry" in the Ashram. His eyes were twinkling with laughter and even while sleeping a tender smile played on his face as if he was in a wonder dreamland.

I used to wait for his annual vacation in November when my father and I went to pick him up at the railway station. The train coach used to be full of Ashram kids coming to visit their parents. There he used to be, wildly waving his hand with

a wide grin enhanced by his two front teeth.

One vacation he came triumphantly with a beautiful *papier maché* golden duck which he got as a reward from the Mother for a swimming novelty race. The Mother had placed a duck in the pool and he was the first one to dive in and bring it to Her. He was an excellent swimmer and a good sportsman.

So the years passed. In the early sixties our family moved to Pondicherry and it was thrilling to have bhaiya again with us. All four siblings Bhaiya, Saphal, Chintan and I slept together in a big family bed. He would tell us stories and Saphal could not go to bed without hearing one, which was told with a lot of hand gesticulations. In the school days he was a boy full of fun and laughter and even a grave face mellowed down seeing his smile-brimming face.



Once Kishore-bhai was very worried about his New Age Association as it was going to be held for the first time in the Theatre and he was anxious that if the loud-speakers failed the audience would not be able to hear the speakers. He shared his anxiety with his class and Nirmal immediately got up and told him that he had a

solution. Kishore-bhai's eyebrows were raised as he inquired, "Nirmal, what can we do?" Nirmal stood for a while meditatively and then opened his eyes and said "ASPIRE".

Behind all this fun and laughter there was a depth in him which enfolded itself in the form of photography. Before he passed away he was preparing for the second international photographic exhibition. Though it remained an unfinished dream for him, he had succeeded in restarting the tradition of the annual photography exhibition.

But it is his mischievous smile, his unique and funny repartee and the ever-present playfulness that will stay with us in our memories.

It is past midnight. There is a bright star peeping from my window, almost peering into my papers... It must be bhaiya. ❧

REUNIONS

DUBAI REUNION

The Golden Chain community in the desert kingdoms of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is slowly expanding. As per available data, there are about 10 SAICE alumni members presently living in various emirates of UAE.

Recently, a small gathering of the former students living in UAE took place. Date: 17/11/2005. Venue: Safa Park, Dubai. Time: 18h30 to 21h00. Though some members could not join in, most others were present with their families. Some members from Pondicherry, visiting Dubai during the vacations, took this wonderful opportunity to meet old friends.

In one corner of the sprawling Safa Park, incredibly green in the middle of the desert, there is a small amphitheatre. It was decided to meet there. The evening started with a short meditation, not forgetting the significance of the date in the Ashram. People caught up with passed years. Some who had lost touch with the School refreshed their memories and updated their



Standing (l to r): Samir '78H, Arvind, Udayan '09H, Gauri Shankar '80, Satya'83H, Pavitra '79, Munmun, Chittaranjan '94, Manju.

Seated (l to r): Shubha '80, Anjalika(student), Debijoti '2000, Sangeeta, Subojit

knowledge about the Alma Mater. Most then got involved in a game of cricket to recreate the inevitable Indian flavour.

After spending some very friendly, relaxed and sweet moments, the meet ended around 21h30. Hopefully, the UAE chapter will grow and meet periodically. The agenda remains very clear: to remember our roots. ❀



Some of the participants (l to r): 1st row: Anil Rai, Sampat, Purushottam. 2nd row: Deepak Panda, Dillip Sajjan, Mangal, Shivang Gowda, Sunila. 3rd row: Jhumki (Anuradha's daughter), Hardie, Dimple, Anuradha. 4th row: Devendra, Gayatri Sahoo, Pallavi, Prabha, Gauri Shankar.

CLASS OF 80 SILVER JUBILEE REUNION

The batch of 1980 got together around Christmas 2005 to celebrate 25 years of their completion of Knowledge. A small cultural programme and lots of chat-time were organised in Basu's garden at the Lake on 24/12/05. Lamps floated into the lake added to the beauty of the evening. On 26/12/05, the batch also had a guided tour of the Matrimandir which is nearing completion. Many made a resolve to meet again to celebrate together 50 years of having completed Knowledge. ❀



A NEW YEAR BONANZA FOR THE SENIORS

Chamanlal

An event at once beautiful and heart-warming happened this morning, Sunday 8th January 2006, at *Avenir*, Lake land (Pallavi and Basu's farm near Lake Estate). The venue is not only beautiful but is also meant to be productive. It exports bio-nutrients to East Asia and grass tiles to West Asia, greening the landscape both to the west and east of India and earning foreign exchange in the process. Mother blessed the occasion with Her presence and good weather. Some enthusiastic ex-students initiated by Bharati made perfect arrangements. Bharati, one of the members of the team which facilitates the last worldly assignment of Ashramites, seems to have lowered her threshold and conceived the project of welcoming all seniors to a quiet picnic at this beautiful site on the shores of our Ousteri Lake. Many generations of seniors were present — from ailing seniors in their late

eighties in wheel-chairs to brave nonagenarians still marching by themselves and led by Manibhai of Aurofood (95+). There was no structured program. Seniors were left to have quiet strolls, explore the farm, do meditation, paint the picturesque nature with the water body all around, sing old tunes with enthusiasm, or just plain snooze on the *durree* laid on manicured lawns. The setting was perfect with water on three sides of this mini promontory. The hospitality was generous. We were welcomed with fresh, sweet, abundant coconut water followed by a delicious, well balanced and not too luxurious lunch (seniors still censure luxury in spite of enjoying it)! A hot cup of tea or coffee and a gift pack concluded the memorable Sunday!

This event could well be the end of the unwelcome mix of bewilderment of seniors and nonchalance of juniors and bring yet more sunshine into our special family with Mother as our centre. Thanks a lot to all of you Alumni. All of us enjoyed ourselves immensely! ✂

TEACHING INDIAN STUDIES IN AMERICA

By Sachidananda Mohanty '75

"And so, where is Rhode Island, the island you are heading for?" The young attendant at the check-in counter at Mumbai Airport asked me with a smile as she handed back my passport and waved me in. She was not being facetious.

"It's not an island," I replied. "It's a state on the east coast of the United States!"

She may not have been at fault. Ignorance is not the monopoly of any single culture, I realized.

Eighteen hours later across a continent as I stepped out of the Baggage Claim Area at Providence's T. F. Green airport on 18th January 2005, I wondered if I had done the right thing, coming. In 2004, after several rounds, I had been selected by the bi-national Fulbright Commission known as the U.S. Educational Foundation in India (USEFI). With the Fulbright award, I could have gone to any school in the U. S. that wanted me. And so, why Providence and Rhode Island College?

For me, however, the decision to teach at a smaller school in the U.S. rather than seek a more "coveted" brand name appeared almost natural. Although I teach at one of the best known universities in India, I have always been drawn to smaller places. The best of my years were spent at Pondicherry, whose small size rivals its international stature. I began my teaching career in an undergraduate college in 1980 in a temple town of Orissa, on the Eastern seaboard of India.

The Fulbright ideal, made into an Act by the U.S. Congress in 1945, urged scholars to promote mutual understanding through educational and cultural exchanges. In that sense, Rhode Island College, an institution supported by the Rhode Island State catering to middle and lower income groups, appeared to offer challenges. Teaching Indian literatures to such a body of students would be tough and rewarding. I could test my new scholarship evidenced by recent publication at

the international level. Besides, a former teacher, Professor Amritjit Singh, who teaches at R.I.C. had always been supportive. Amrit and his wife Prem treat me as their brother.

It was not scholarship that was uppermost in my mind on 18th January 2005. A huge and unprecedented snow storm, accompanied by biting, icy wind, was brewing as Daniel Scott, another R.I.C. colleague, received me at the "Baggage Claim" area of Providence airport. The situation was most unsettling. I came from the region of a country where we boasted three seasons: hot, hotter and hottest! Amrit was away in Germany and teaching would begin four days later. When I left India, my father was on his death bed at Pondicherry. He would pass away very soon on 4th February 2005. It was at his insistence that I had continued my journey to Providence. "Go ahead my son," he had urged me wisely from his hospital bed, "The college may not have a back-up plan!"

Initially staying with the host family of Subas and Jhuna Mohanty, first generation Indians from my province, Orissa, I soon moved to the Hillside Terrace Apartments on Fruit Hill Avenue, close to Rhode Island College. Here, from the quiet, residential neighbourhood, I would walk to the College and meet my students for the next five months. The stay stretched from the inhospitable cold winter, inexplicably described as Spring here, to a more pleasant weather that brought the rains.

All teaching of the cross-cultural context is exciting. And so, what is special about my Rhode Island experience?

I found my students interested, articulate, bright and observant, although somewhat insular. Classroom teaching was always accompanied by a barrage of questions about evils in India, real and imaginary: poverty, inequality, bride-burning, backwardness, caste system, tsunami....

I decided that at the first instance, I would do a quick history of the Indian subcontinent, narrating especially, the role of the British East India Company vis-à-vis India's struggle for independence.

In the 1956 classic, *Scratches on the Mind: American Images of India and China*, Harvard sociologist Harold Isaacs had attempted to find reasons as to why Americans tended to favour China over India. While both the eastern giants were inscrutable to the American mind, he reasoned that the Chinese under the rigours of Communist rule appeared to present a more stable and cohesive picture of themselves. More recently, seasoned critics like Dennis Kux and Selig Harrison have talked about the U.S.-India relationship as that of estranged friends or the "dialogue of the deaf."

The U. S. policy of "containment" of the Soviet Union, enunciated by the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the infamous "tilt" towards Pakistan during the Cold War and the East Pakistan Crisis in 1971, the Nehruvian policy of non-alignment and socialistic vision, both anathema to the U. S. administration during the Truman-Eisenhower-Nixon and Johnson era, have frequently eclipsed the more grounded affinities between the two great democracies.

There were good patches too: President F. D. Roosevelt's support for Indian independence in the face of Churchill's opposition, the inspiration that Mahatma Gandhi provided for the Civil Rights movement in the United States and to Martin Luther King in particular, the Kennedy administration's support to India during the Chinese aggression in 1962, the offer of American air cover to ward off the Chinese attack, the Indian ambassadorship of Harvard economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, and the equally empathetic Chester Bowles, in the sixties. There are many such instances. Then there are the common institutions binding the two nations: a free press, civil service, independent judiciary and constitutional governments. Regrettably again not enough is

known in the U. S. about how vibrant the Indian democracy is!

For my students, the course entitled "Early Women's Writing in India" under the non-Western literature rubric, came as an eye-opener. Consider the following facts:

Post-independence India has always had an orderly change of governments.

It is the **only** secular democracy in South Asia. It has all the major religions in the world, whose practitioners enjoy full constitutional rights



On a lecture assignment at Loyola University, Chicago.

to practice their faith. It has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. Members of the Indian minorities such as Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Sikhs have occupied many of the highest constitutional, political, bureaucratic, military and diplomatic positions in India.

India boasts independent constitutional mechanisms such as an independent election commission, universal franchise, an independent Union Public Service Commission, which selects candidates for the various organs of the government.

The affirmative action program in India catering to what are known as the scheduled castes (S.C.), scheduled tribes (S.T.) and other backward castes (O.B.C.), is second to none in the world. In addition, most Indian states have provision for the protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities. There are seats earmarked for women in many in-

stitutions including *panchayats* or village self-rule councils.

Higher education in India, particularly technical education, such as the engineering, management and business schools, are excellent. Nearly 50% of the graduates are women. The evidence of their success is seen in the trained technical man (woman) power that India regularly exports to the United States. According to *India Today* magazine: "in 2002-03, net profits of private companies in India rose by 202 percent." Today, some of the finest minds in the U. S. in industry, business and the academy are from the Indian subcontinent.

Indians are increasingly contributing to the American business and economy by the outsourced jobs in vital areas such as education, information technology and telecommunications.

At the same time, there are many things that the Indian side can learn from the U. S. experience.

As a Fulbright professor in Rhode Island, I was struck by the fact that young American students are juggling several responsibilities at the same time — jobs, home, studies and relationships — simultaneously and incredibly well.

The American work ethic and professionalism are aspects of U.S. life that I continue to marvel at. I would commend some of these to my countrymen. These aspects were visible in my classroom experience, and while carrying out shopping, travel and tourism. Assignments came neatly typed, queries were raised on the internet and help rendered gratefully acknowledged. I was deeply moved by a signed copy of the *Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* that my students gifted to me on the last day of classes.

I was impressed by the proverbial openness of the American system. The nation building exercise is clearly not over. Debates about race, gender, and ethnicity are openly staged in the classroom, media, popular forums and talk shows. It is true that in many quarters prejudice towards "outsiders" exists, but then which society is perfect?

Some of my students were shocked that I did

not own a car in the U. S. But all felt that through the course they took they made vital connections with an ancient civilization and an emerging power. The senior class took me for a dinner outing one day. For the students, this experience was a vital add-on to my classroom teaching on India.

Similarly, the English Department's "Brown Bag Seminar", where I shared my ongoing research, followed by dinner at another Indian res-



Faculty dinner at Rhode Island College, Providence

taurant, the "staff and faculty picnic" will remain most memorable. More poignant was the treatment I received at the time of my father's passing. Everyone I knew had a kind word and all lent their support. It made a real difference!

And so, what are my final thoughts and impressions?

I lectured and interacted with students and colleagues. My students reported that they "became more knowledgeable about India and its varied culture." I participated in the African and African American Studies Colloquium and watched films of the Harlem Renaissance. I attended the "Black Rep Poetry Night" at Providence's "Black Repertory Theatre". Over Mexican beer called "Negro Modelo" I recited Indian poetry and enjoyed the company of M.C. Chris Johnson.

I traveled within Rhode Island, visited the colonial mansions of Newport, and read about the legacy of Rhode Island Senator Aldrich and Governor T. F. Green (after whom the Providence airport has been named). I learnt about the history of

Providence Plantation from Rhode Island College anthropologist Richard Lobban, historians David Thomas, Peter Mendy and African-American Studies specialist Amritjit Singh, Maureen Reddy and Daniel Scott. I read of the colonial legacy of Mr. Brown, the founder of the celebrated Brown University, the efforts in reparation that Brown University is making by carrying out progressive pedagogic programs. I learnt from Social Work Professor Jayashree Nimmagadda that the health care system in the U.S is increasingly becoming community-based. Later, I traveled to other universities for lectures.

In all these, I realized yet again, the continued spell that American popular culture casts over the rest of the world. America itself is in a state of ferment: the problem of migrant workers, the Mid-East crisis, the hegemony of corporate America vis-à-vis the ordinary citizenry, the filibustering in the U. S. Congress over judicial appointments,

race relations, gay rights, pro-life issues and stem cell research — all form part of the bitter sweet reality in America. Americans themselves seem to take all these in their stride, wrestling with each issue on a daily basis.

Today, in an era of global independence, no culture can remain pure or perfect. We move increasingly and inevitably from national to global pathways. We share common cause and seek solutions to common problems. In the 21st century world, India and America need to rediscover their essence and chart out their common and individual destinies. Education through the Fulbright Program can play a vital role in furthering such goals.

As a former student of the SAICE, I always remember the vision Sri Aurobindo had seen for the future of humanity. It is by constantly recalling this vision and growing accordingly that we can truly become “citizens of the world.” ❧

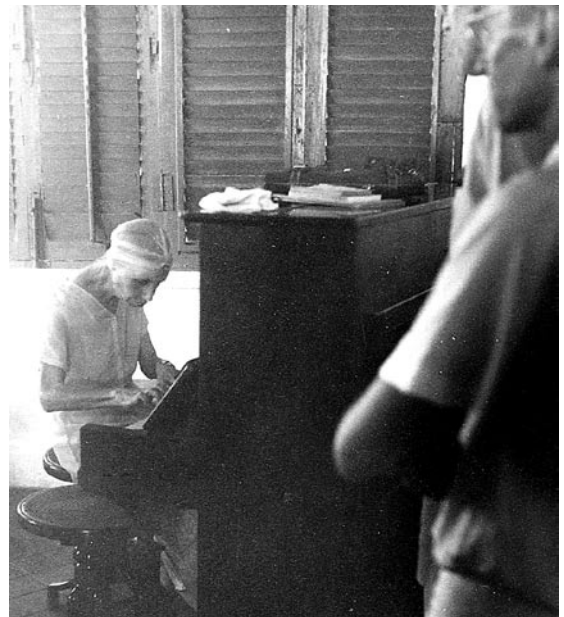
THE RESTORED PIANO

On 31st October 2005 the batch of 1980 completed 25 years of finishing the Higher Course. On this occasion, as a token of their gratitude, they collected and offered the sum of money required to repair and put back in good condition the Steinway piano on which Mother had once played.

This piano was brought to the Ashram most probably in the second half of 1933. It belonged to Lalita who had joined the Ashram along with her husband Amal Kiran in 1929. After living for a number of years in the Ashram she had asked her father to send her this piano from Bombay. As she was Parsi she had been brought up in the Western cultural ambience. In those days a piano was an inalienable part of every cultured British home and this tradition was probably adopted by Parsi families in Bombay too. In the early years of the twentieth century the Steinway company used to send the different parts of the pianos which were then assembled in Bombay.

There is a reference in the archival papers to a

concert held on the Christmas day of 1933 where the first item was a piano recital by Lalita. It could only have been this piano since we know that



there were no other pianos in the Ashram for a very long time. The next allusion can be found in a notice put up at the Ashram notice board in 1934 requesting people not to use the piano which was then kept in the Dining Room (Aroumé House) as a stand for umbrellas or books! This is how we know that this piano was kept for a long time in one of the rooms at the Dining Room.



A few years after the School opened, a French lady called Marie-Amélie used to teach singing to students and Ashramites, accompanying them on this piano. No one else was allowed to play on it except her. When the School building was inaugurated on 6th January 1952 this piano was kept in the room which is now the far end of the Hall of Harmony, which has not been renovated. While Mother was visiting the School building on that day, she stood beside the piano when Marie-Amélie requested her to play something. Most people remember that this was the only time Mother actually played on it. Fortunately there were several photographers taking pictures of the inauguration, following the Mother during her visit. This is how we have a photograph of her playing on this piano [see photo on previous page].

For some years afterwards, this Steinway was kept at Golconde; after which it was kept in the room where Olga used to teach children to sing. Olga used to play on a new piano while this one was kept on the opposite side of the room. Then it was brought back to the School and kept in the room which is immediately to the right of the South West gate, formerly known as Room no.1.

Over the years several other pianos were acquired by the School and kept at various places. When students began to learn playing the piano, this old Steinway was used by several of them. However for the last many years it had become so out of tune that no one could play on it anymore. It remained, covered up, in a corner, in the room near the soup verandah.

A couple of years ago it was decided to completely restore this Steinway piano. Parts were bought in the USA and brought over to Pondicherry. This work was not only time-consuming

but required great expertise too. Once all the parts had arrived an expert piano-tuner from Chennai was called who came along with his son and worked almost round the clock for two weeks to put it back in shape [see photo above]. The felt and all the leather and metal parts were carefully replaced, leaving the wooden parts intact. The outside is still the same old wooden case but practically everything else inside is new.

Richard Hartz of the Archives, and Suzanne, who is one of our music teachers, were most actively involved in rejuvenating this piano on which Mother had played. Not everyone is aware that the School now has over 70 students who are learning to play the piano. In this context one can see how helpful a small gesture like this can be to the School. ❧

MOTHER'S INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Sunayana Panda '79

With this issue we start a new series of reports on schools which are trying to follow the system of Integral Education. We hope to be able to draw the attention of the wider community of all those who are connected with the Ashram on this very important work which has been going on for a long time now. This new form of Education is an invaluable contribution to nation building. One can say that it is even going beyond that, to the preparation of a more conscious and refined humanity since Integral Education is being attempted in countries outside India such as the U.S.A. We begin with Mother's International School in Delhi since it is the oldest of such schools, opened when the Mother was still in her physical body, and which is celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year.

If there is a real success story then it is surely this one. While most of us have been pursuing our personal dreams, there is someone who has been working silently in Delhi for the last thirty years fulfilling a dream of the Mother and by doing so fulfilling the dreams of thousands of families who want an all-round education for their children. Yes, you have guessed right. It's Tara, steering the Mother's International School. Even though the founder and initiator was Surendranath Jauhar, Tara's father, it is Tara's dynamic presence that has taken the whole project on to another level.

It has been acknowledged as one of the best schools in Delhi and has figured among the top ten in the country in surveys carried out by leading national magazines. It wasn't without reason that the Indian Government chose it as the school to take visiting dignitaries to. And that is how some of us were happily surprised to open the newspaper one morning to see a picture of Cherie

Blair, wife of the British Prime Minister, visiting this school.

The prospectus clearly states that the school aims at giving an education which draws its in-



March Past at the School

spiration from the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. There is no ambiguity about it, nor are words being said for the sake of sounding grandiose. The words are there in black and white: "...to seek, to realize and spread as best as possible the Integral Education of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in its fivefold aspects: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual."

These are not empty words because there is a sincere attempt to make a programme as close as possible to the ideal form of an integral education. We cannot forget that this school which has 2250 students has to follow the official syllabus and prepare them for the class X and XII Board Examinations of the Central Board of Secondary Education.

If one is looking for luxury and expensive fittings then this is really not the place. Perhaps its simplicity is one of its strong points. The resources available are utilised for providing an education of a high quality. The science laboratories as well as the computer labs have the latest equipments, the buildings and structure are simple but beautiful. The focus is entirely on the work at hand — a value-based education. It is this one-pointed



Surendranath Jauhar, extreme right

attention that makes this school so attractive to the families who are keen to find a good school for their children. The school fees are affordable and within the means of middle-class families. No other amount is taken from the students. We all know that it is hard to get quality and quantity, but we also know that where there is a will there is always a way. It is this will which is so evident as you walk through the school. And this will is backed by a dedicated and harmonious team.

HISTORY

The school completes 50 years this year. But its story actually starts even before that day when half a century ago children came to study there. The piece of land on which the school stands was

bought by Surendranath Jauhar a very long time ago. In fact it was so far from the city then, that it was considered as agriculture land and there were



A view of the School building

only villages around. A point came when Tara's father wanted to sell it off because he could neither live on it nor could he look after it from his house in the city. A huge piece of land could also not be left abandoned in the middle of nowhere. Surendranath always took Mother's opinion in every decision that he took in life and this was no exception. To his surprise Mother asked him not to sell it. Soon after that she asked him to start a branch of the Ashram there. Very soon after that the school was started.

At first there were only a few sheds and the



The open-air stage

handful of children who came to learn were all from the nearby villages. In this very rudimentary form the school was started. It is important to

note that the date given by the Mother was 23rd April 1956. It was not a coincidence. She specifically told Surendranath that she wanted the school to be inaugurated on 23.4.56. The Mother also gave a special message for the opening of the school.

“A new Light has appeared upon earth. Let this new School opened today be guided by it.”

The message becomes clear when we see that it was given soon after the Supramental descent in 1956.

As the years passed the city of Delhi began to expand and soon a number of prestigious institutions came up along the road which connects the Ashram to the city. This 7kms long road is now known as Sri Aurobindo Marg (thanks again to the efforts of Surendranath Jauhar) and along it are situated the AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences), the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), the NCERT (National Centre for Education Research and Training) as well as JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The families connected with these institutions, themselves highly educated, began to send their children to the school. Not only did the number of children increase but also the background from which they came changed totally.

ORGANISATION

The kindergarten, known as the Mira Nursery School, housed in a separate building, is altogether a separate school. It has a harmonious surrounding and the children can see plants and flowers all around them. The main school, MIS, has a Primary section and a Middle school after which the children go on to Junior and Senior High School.

Apart from the usual subjects, physical education activities are woven into the school day. It is not unusual to see a whole class doing asanas while the others are doing maths or biology in the nearby rooms. There are several basket-ball and volley-ball courts on one side of the school building, while there is a football field on the other side encircled by a 400 metres long, six-laned running track. In the basement of the school there is a large room with 8 tables for table-tennis. Gymnastics

are taught at a basic level. The aim is to have every child — and there are over 2000 of them — reach a basic level in many disciplines rather than have a few who are highly advanced. On their annual day the entire school participates and there are as many as 200 to 400 children in each drill.

Just adjacent to the school is the open-air stage. Its design is done in such a way that the green-rooms are actually under the stage, giving it an uncluttered look. Performances are held here, mostly in daylight, and canopies are erected to protect the spectators from the sun. The area where the spectators sit is actually a large field and it can be used for other activities at other times. At the moment a new and modern auditorium is coming up which will have a seating capacity of 2000 people. What makes it easy for the staff to have a control over the entire establishment is that everything is within the same compound.

Music has a place of special importance in this



Sports at the School

school. Under the guidance of Pt. Barun Pal, disciple of Pt. Ravi Shankar and a noted musician himself, the children are given a thorough training in Indian classical music. When one enters a music class, the sight of thirty or so children, divided into smaller groups, each playing a different instrument, and playing in such synchronised harmony is truly impressive. The level of

THE DELHI ASHRAM A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Sachidananda Mohanty '75 who is a professor at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, writes about the Delhi Ashram and Mother's International School (MIS).

IT Kanpur's annual cultural festival called "Cul Fest" attracts one of the best gatherings of students in North India. In March 1986, I found myself acting as a judge in the poetry recitation in the festival. One student made a difference to the event. Sri Aurobindo's early poem "Who" seldom fails to inspire the audience. There was no exception here too. After the event, I went back stage. The participant, a girl, I learned, came from the Mother's International School (MIS), Delhi. I was not surprised. For many years, I had watched with admiration the functioning of this school as well as two others called "Meera Nursery" and "Mirambika," arguably among the best institutions in their category in the country.

For most of us visitors, the MIS is one of the successful units and the public face of an organization called "Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi branch." There is no doubt that the real credit for the success of the Delhi experiment in new education and community living of the spiritual kind goes to the late Surendranath Jauhar, the father of Tara-di, Kake, Lata-di, and late Chhote with whom we as children grew up at Pondicherry. It is

Surendranath-ji who practically single-handedly built up the whole institution from scratch. A chanced acquisition of a large piece of land in South Delhi came as a windfall after the Partition. Today, this land shares border with some of the best-known destinations in the field of education: IIT Delhi and the NCERT are important neighborhood landmarks.

I do not know in what circumstances the Mother lent the name "Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi branch" to this organization. Ideologically and conceptually, the founders of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram did not seem to have believed in the idea of a "branch." I do not wish to speculate on this matter. I have seen the name in Mother's own handwriting and I accept this fact as a settled one. There must have been some oc-

cult reason as to why the Mother made an exception in the case of the Delhi experiment. Significantly, over the years, this Ashram has played a pivotal and pioneering role in promoting quality education at the national level. It has been host to a number of seminars, workshops and conferences on future education. It has organized youth camps for education, physical culture and national integration in Delhi, Nainital and elsewhere in the country. It has financially supported the education of those who come from the weaker section of the society.

Tara-di's approach to the empowerment of the young is sound and is based on scientific and spiritual principles. Language plays an impor-



March Past in the early years

instrumental as well as vocal music is indeed very high, even among very young children.

Besides music and dramatics many other creative activities are offered to the students includ-

ing dancing, clay-modelling and painting. The striking point is that the number of children who participate in all these activities is so large and yet the level of achievement is so high.

tant role in personality development and confidence building. Therefore a great deal of stress is given at the Delhi Ashram to all newcomers, specially Vocational Trainees (V.T.s) coming from a regional background to a quick acquisition of Hindi and English. All students under this scheme are given equal opportunities in learning. They are provided with basic needs that include comfortable accommodation, wholesome nutritious food, medical facilities and other amenities. All free of cost. They can join classes in music and performing arts in the evening. The most noteworthy aspect is that education here is de-linked from commercialization. The money required for such ventures is raised with the help of government and private sector support.

All organizers have their own approach and their own view. Tara-di is basically a person of action. She does not think much of intellectuality per se. She is a little impatient with books. She abhors procrastination or delays arising out of the fondness of intellectuals to discuss and debate issues endlessly. What has to be stressed however is that Tara-di is tolerant and accommodative by nature. She likes to decentralize things while keeping a firm control over men and matters. Perhaps, this is how all good organizations are run. The presence of a leader who has a vision and ability to inspire the community is absolutely essential for all group functioning. The Delhi Ashram is no exception.



Annual Day demonstration

The MIS is clearly one of the best wings of the Delhi Ashram. It carries out innovative programs in all parts of integral education: physical, mental, vital, psychic and spiritual — commensurate with the needs of students, staff and parents who belong essentially to the “outside” world. The system at the MIS has, over the years, found acceptance and appreciation among parents, teachers and educationists. The *Outlook* magazine in a recent survey judged the MIS as the best school in its category in Delhi. Similarly, the school has attracted celebrities and

outstanding visitors due to its well earned reputation in the field.

Today, the vision of the founder of the Delhi experiment is being carried out by Tara-di, Anil Jauhar and others. Surendranath-ji was guided at every step by the Mother. The place is blessed by Her, and that more

than anything else, might account for the success of the experiment.

I regard the Delhi Ashram as an oasis in the commercial and bureaucratic heartland of the national capital. The Ashram with its sprawling green campus sits amidst a city dedicated to money making, power and hedonism. Here visitors find love, care and a welcome abode at a price incredibly low. Many of us have been beneficiaries of this wonderful place. We can therefore do no better than to wish and pray for its continued success and growth. May this abode continue to remain a beacon to the new world.

THE REASON BEHIND THE SUCCESS

The academic achievements are high. Since 1961, the year from which MIS students have started sitting for the Board Examinations, not

a single student has failed. Most of the students pass in the 1st Division, barring only a few who pass in the 2nd Division. The reasons for the high level of achievement in academic as well as

co-curricular activities are many, but foremost among them perhaps is the fact that the right environment has been created in which a child can



Cherie Booth (Blair) at the MIS

grow inwardly. The goals set before the children are also constantly kept in view by the teaching staff as well as the parents. The atmospheres of school-life and home-life remain on the same wave-length. Nothing is more harmful to the development of a child than going back from school and finding a totally disruptive environment. In order to maintain this continuity the parents are made aware, right from the beginning, about the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. In fact, both parents are thoroughly briefed about the system of education that is followed in the school so that they too actively participate in the education of their child. A large number of students are actually the children of former students of MIS who themselves valued the education they received. The academic success rate is high but, more importantly, the aim of passing on the ideals of a higher purpose of life is also achieved. The children who enter at the nursery level stay on until they complete Class XII. And this becomes an important factor in maintaining a high standard, because the values which are inculcated into the student have been there since his childhood. They become a natural part of his mental make-up and things do not have to be explained at a later stage.

The school is within the same campus as the Ashram itself. Although they are separate in their administration, the fact that there is such

an institution so close by, must make the students feel that they are a part of a larger community. The Ashram has at its centre the Shrine of Sri Aurobindo's relics which creates a very strong atmosphere which radiates throughout the campus.

TARA

Tara became actively involved in the school work in 1976. At first she had thought that she would be there only for six months and would eventually return to Pondicherry. But once she started working she was so wholly preoccupied that she decided that she would stay there for good. Her father had spent the greater part of the funds available to him on acquiring land for the school but once Tara joined him the real construction of the school buildings started. As Tara had been a captain here in the Ashram, she had all the necessary knowledge to reorganize and enlarge the sports facilities at Mother's International School. Her other special contribution has been



Tara, in front of the School

the outings, excursions and the camps. Every year the various classes go out to a different place and the children get to see and experience a variety of places throughout their school life. In this way every child gets an opportunity to visit Pondicherry too.

"I was at the Ashram when it was growing," says Tara "and when I came here I became a part of the growth of the school. So I have always been a part of a place which is growing."

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Mother's International School has been established and has been running for a long time. But this is only one of the many educational activities connected with the Ashram at Delhi. Another school which is within the same compound and which also merits a close look is

"Mirambika". Lesser-known and yet equally interesting to us is this little school where an attempt is being made to put into practice the principles of Free Progress. We will write about it in our next issue, giving you an account of how this new concept in education is finding roots in the capital. ❧

THE NEW EDUCATION

A teacher at SAICE of long standing, and someone who has seen and advised a number of "sister schools" outside the Ashram, Kittu Reddy '57 gives us his perspective on the New Education and its implementation.

Many schools in India connected with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and Mother are attempting to implement the Free Progress System. However, before trying to analyse the attempt at the implementation of the New Education in our Sister Schools and some other schools, it will be useful and quite relevant to identify first the basic principles of the New Education and the system that has been adopted for this purpose. Only then can we comment about the attempt to bring in the New Education in these schools. Let us then see the basic principles of education that have been laid down by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

The most important point lies in the *goal of education*. The goal here is to help the child to grow to the fullest development of his being according to his nature, *swadharma*. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

"The discovery that education must be a bringing out of the child's own intellectual and moral capacities to their highest possible value and must be based on the psychology of the child-nature was a step forward towards a more healthy because a more subjective system [...] But at least there was a glimmering of the realisation that each human being is a self-developing soul and that the business of both parent and teacher is to enable and to help the child to educate himself, to develop his own intellectual, moral, aesthetic and practical capacities and

to grow freely as an organic being, not to be kneaded and pressured into form like an inert plastic material. It is not yet realised what this soul is or that the true secret, whether with child or man, is to help him to find his deeper self, the real psychic entity within. That, if we ever give it a chance to come forward, and still more if we call it into the foreground as 'the leader of the march set in our front,' will itself take up most of the business of education out of our hands and develop the capacity of the psychological being towards a realisation of its potentialities." [SABCL 15: 27, 28]

In addition to this goal, there are a few principles that are the basis of this education.

The first principle is based on the oft quoted sentence of Sri Aurobindo that *the first principle of teaching is that nothing can be taught*. The implication is that all knowledge is already contained in the child and that the business of the teacher is only to help the child to draw it out from within himself.

The second principle is that *the child must be consulted in his growth*.

The third principle is that *in teaching we must proceed from the near to the far*.

The fourth principle is that *education must be integral*. This means that all the parts of the being have to be included in the process of education. These parts are the physical, the vital, the mind in all its contours and the soul.

APPLICATION AT SAICE

It is not the purpose of this article to see how successfully we have implemented these principles nor even to see what more needs to be done; what is relevant now is that an attempt has definitely been made and that a system has been worked out to carry out these ideals in practice.

Again, without going into detail, we shall try to point out some of the salient features of the system that is being practised in our Centre of Education.

Firstly, there is an elaborate physical educational programme. I will not say more except that it will be difficult to find any educational institution in India or even abroad that follows a programme of such a wide scope and range.

Regarding the education of the vital being, the two most important areas are the development of character and the aesthetic sense. Here too there is an attempt to expose the children to these aspects.

In the mental field, there is nothing strikingly different from what is being done all over the world except the exposure of the children to the writings of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

As regards the soul education, it is entirely based on the atmosphere created by the presence of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the awareness that comes in the child as a result of this exposure.

It will not be out of place to mention some very special elements in our system of education.

The first one is the great stress on the freedom given to students and teachers in the education system. The size of the school gives the possibility of a very close personal interaction between teacher and student.

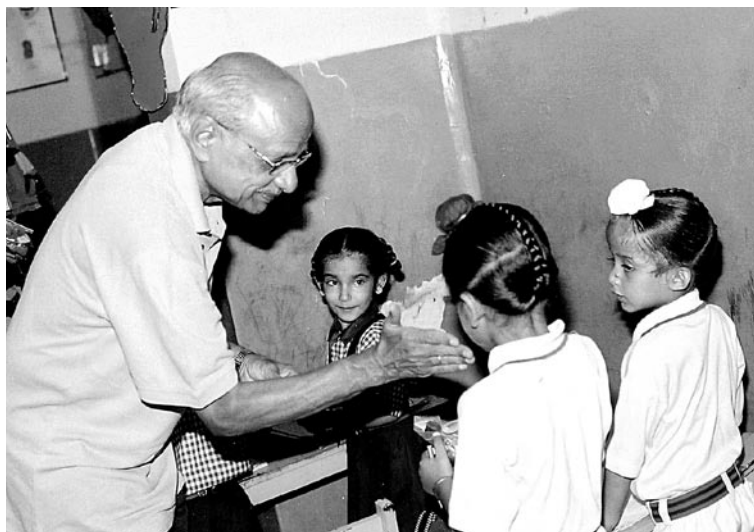
A second feature is the absence of examinations which determine the fate of the students. There is therefore no tension and the students are very relaxed.

A third feature is that the teachers of the Centre of Education have dedicated their lives to a higher goal and are not working for any kind of remuneration.

Finally, and most important, the students are encouraged to take up the responsibility of their education on themselves. If they do not study and take full advantage of the education given, it is they who are solely responsible for this.

APPLICATION OF THE SYSTEM IN SISTER SCHOOLS

Having said this, the whole question is whether such a system can be applied in the world outside where the whole psychological and social environment is markedly different.



Kittu-da visiting a school outside the Ashram

The aim of education in most schools is to prepare the children to become good citizens and to get a job so that they can pursue a career of their choice. And this is inevitable in the prevailing circumstances. What is true for the students is also true for the teachers, for they too have to earn their living and make both ends meet. Yet within this framework, sincere attempts are being made in many institutions, not only by those connected with Sri Aurobindo but even by enlightened principals who are keen on improving the education system. Undoubtedly, there is dissatisfaction with the prevailing system.

However, there are many other difficulties facing these schools. Here are some examples:

1. An organised physical education programme is very difficult to put in place because of the distances which students have to travel to come to school.

2. The classes are very big; no class has less than 25 students. Most classes have 45 students or more.

3. There are the Board examinations of class 10 and 12. These examinations are a period of great tension for the students; this tension leads to all kinds of problems and malpractices. These examinations are fiercely competitive and they have their natural fallout.

4. There is a syllabus which is set by the CBSE or ICS or by the State Government. This syllabus has to be followed. Both teachers and students feel handicapped by this imposed syllabus, giving them no academic freedom.

It is quite evident that to copy the system that is prevalent here cannot and will not be entirely successful unless the fundamental psychological base is created. One very important factor that has to be taken into account is the sense of security in the set-up here. This is often missing in the world outside.

It is very important to realise that the success of our system demands teachers who are in contact with their psychic being or at least on the way to this contact and students who have an aspiration for this contact. Mother has said that teachers must be Yogis. Evidently this is not easy and therefore one needs a lot of patience and determination. But this much can be said that at least an effort is being made. However one should be careful that we should not lapse into any kind of self-complacency and self-satisfaction. This is a danger which we must guard against with a constant vigilance.

Many principals and educationists in the outside world have commented that in the prevailing political and social conditions, our School cannot serve as a model. One of the main reasons for this is the size and the social environment. However, they are deeply appreciative of the effort that is being made here and are quite aware that the

future education lies in the application of these principles.

To close, we have always to be at the height of our consciousness in order to fulfil the demands of the new system of education.

Here is an extract from Sri Aurobindo:

“For the way that humanity deals with an ideal is to be satisfied with it as an aspiration which is for the most part left only as an aspiration, accepted only as a partial influence. The ideal is not allowed to mould the whole life, but only more or less to colour it; it is often used even as a cover and a plea for things that are diametrically opposed to its real spirit. Institutions are created which are supposed, but too lightly supposed to embody that spirit and the fact that the ideal is held, the fact that men live under its institutions is treated as sufficient. The holding of an ideal becomes almost an excuse for not living according to the ideal; the existence of its institutions is sufficient to abrogate the need of insisting on the spirit that made the institutions. But spirituality is in its very nature a thing subjective and not mechanical; it is nothing if it is not lived inwardly and if the outward life does not flow out of this inward living. Symbols, types, conventions, ideas are not sufficient. A spiritual symbol is only a meaningless ticket, unless the thing symbolised is realised in the spirit. A spiritual convention may lose or expel its spirit and become a falsehood. A spiritual type may be a temporary mould into which spiritual living may flow, but it is also a limitation and may become a prison in which it fossilises and perishes. A spiritual idea is a power, but only when it is both inwardly and outwardly creative. Here we have to enlarge and to deepen the pragmatic principle that truth is what we create, and in this sense first, that it is what we create within us, in other words, what we become. Undoubtedly, spiritual truth exists eternally beyond, independent of us in the heavens of the Spirit; but it is of no avail for humanity here, it does not become truth of earth, truth of life until it is lived. The divine perfection is always there above us; but for man to become divine in consciousness and act and to live inwardly and outwardly the divine life is what is meant by spirituality; all lesser meanings given to the word are inadequate fumbings or impostures.” [SABCL 15: 247] ❧

A GOD'S LABOUR

The team of last year's 1st December programme answers our questions

A very encouraging trend seen in the last two years has been the taking up of the programme of 1st December, which is the School's annual day, by the outgoing students of Knowledge. We asked Utpal '05, Bhaskar '05 and Tejas '05 of the team which produced last year's programme about the experience.

Did you know that it is exactly twenty years since "A God's Labour" was last performed for the 1st December? What made you choose this particular subject?

We were aware that it may have been done before. Among the short poems, the simplicity and grandeur of "A God's Labour" is magnetic and absorbing. We get in Sri Aurobindo's own words, a most beautiful and palpable poetic resume of his inner life, the battles in occult realms, the meaning of his work on earth, and the compassion and selfless sacrifice that he embodies. We were leafing through the collected poems one day, and as we came upon the poem "A God's Labour", Gaurav suggested we could choose this poem as a theme for our 1st December programme. And we just knew it was the right thing.

How did you adapt this long poem for the stage? What problems did you have to deal with when doing so?

There are different ways one can bring a theme to life on stage. One is to maintain a very close relation to the true sentiment of the central idea, without adding anything of one's own ideas, or expanding on any of the outer lines that follow from the implications of the theme. The other approach is a free expression of all that radiates from the central idea. This makes it more

complete, fuller in its depiction, but risks being partial and limited by the director's outlook. Our approach was the former, but with selected elaborations on particular scenes and moods. In short, adapting it to the stage meant translating key ideas and bringing them to life through music and movements, while attempting to retain their essence.

Oh, there was no shortage of problems, nor of their solutions.

Preparing for a 1st December programme is a big affair in the Ashram and requires quite a bit of management from everyone involved. What were the different elements you had to coordinate and who are the people who helped you to do so? What can you say about the collaboration of the different departments involved, as for example the Green Room, or the technicians? Any special details?

There was the idea, the music, and the movement; the idea was formed and visualised by a few of us and then we composed the music to its colour

and the movements were suggested and worked out by the participants. The set-up, that is the stage and costumes and the technical side, was of course dealt with by other teams and did not take up most of our energies.



Jhumur-di, Cristof and Shilpa-di guided us throughout, giving us a spontaneous support with their goodwill, encouragement, and experience. Mahi and Bokul-da's sound and lighting teams made a lot of things easier for us, with their expertise. Swadesh-da, Jasmin and Amit were extremely cooperative with the video projection, while Praful and Rakesh saw to the big task of building the stage. Not to forget Bina-ben who helped us with the costumes, Habul-da's help for the rock in the centre of the stage, and many other hands behind the scene. In short, there was a great response from all toward the making of the 1st December programme.

You must have had a certain image in your mind of what you wanted to realize when you started out. Did the finished product meet with your expectations?

The 'finished product' as you call it, or the child of our dreams, did not meet our initial expectations, but neither did it contradict the central idea. And in the end the result was surprisingly beautiful.

Now that you have led a team in producing a 1st December programme, and know intimately all the complications involved, what do you think can be improved in the whole set-up?

Talking about the set-up, however far-fetched it might seem, we actually considered rebuilding



the Theatre, realising the tremendous possibilities in expanding the hall. The whole idea of a theatre is to bring to the audience the experience of the idea in all its colour and vividness and proximity. This means a clear view, an interesting set, good acoustics, and a comfortable place to sit.



A clear view means a near view (most of the time). An interesting set means, one that has variations: in depth and in width, and height. To have a sense of depth on the stage, you build it deep, or starting close to the audience and ending far away from it, using the wings, differently coloured or decorated, to create for the eye a sense of depth. The set could also help in this purpose. For a sense of width, of expanse, it is necessary that everything that one sees on stage is NOT included in the little angle of the central vision of the eye. For if it is so, just like the present stage set-up in the Theatre, then the eyes are always fixed in that small angle, and that can get boring (it's like looking into a television box). If one has to move the head slightly to look, or if one is caught unawares by a sudden entry, as is possible in a larger set, then the whole thing can come alive to the viewer. Variations in height of course means a high ceiling and the possibility to build easily elevated structures with the help of the infrastructure on the stage. We didn't find shortcomings in the acoustics. A comfortable place to sit can be a highly debatable issue, but there is no doubt that seating and air circulation in our Theatre can be vastly improved. Many elderly people come to watch the programmes and the benches prove to be too narrow, and the gap between consecutive benches is rather trapping. Often one has to go for excursions to get some fresh air in the courtyard. And despite all this, the hall is full many times, and one has to stand outside and look around the pillars. All this may seem out of context, but the director risks all these inevitable problems, while putting on a show. Even if a programme is thrilling, the discomfort of the audience takes away from the fullness of the experience. With all this in mind,

A GOD'S LABOUR

Mita '84 reviews the 1st December programme

I have always been deeply stirred by this beautiful poem. It epitomises to my mind the whole drama of life — its enthralling beauty, its terror and sublimity. When I learnt that the outgoing Higher Course students were staging this for the 1st of December, I was intrigued. The last time “A God’s Labour” had been performed for the 1st December was in 1985, exactly 20 years ago.

Beautiful as the poem is, and filled with drama, it is not easily ‘stage-able’. The scenes range from heaven and earth to hell and back; there are goblins and dragons, all of which make for colourful story-telling, but the under-current of a whole world of experience is difficult to enact. How do you portray that

on stage? I knew, as I am sure many did, that the students had a very daunting task ahead of them.

I got to the Theatre. There was muted anticipation in the air. Finally the gong went, and we were off on a journey called “A God’s Labour”.

The scene opened with a slide of a meditating figure on the cyclorama. As the light deep-



ened to a soft blue wash on the stage, a series of subdued spots found a group of six girls in various poses. They gently swayed into motion with music, their movements as light and fluid as their garments.

The stage was bare of all props except for platforms at various levels, to depict heaven, earth, and hell. Visually, the fluidity of the dancing figures contrasted delightfully with the severe, geometric lines of the stage....

I have gathered my dreams in a silver air

Between the gold and the blue

The dancers moved in what seemed to be an etheric air of the Ideal. Floating lightly in this gossamer world, they embodied the dreams of the still unrealised future, “My jewelled dreams of you.” Below them Earth wheeled through space.

This world of dreams reached out to grasp Earth, to marry “the soil to the sky”; but Earth, the *dancing planet midge*, was unprepared, her outstretched arms too far. The dreams, too frail to be transplanted to her soil, faded from her horizon.

He who would bring the heavens here

Must descend himself into clay

A golden spot picked the figure of the Avatar,

we thought that it may be a great improvement if the hall were expanded to accommodate more people, more comfortable seating (and avoiding the tedious arrangement of chairs on the badminton courts). The slogans against this idea are, “Come early if you want a place,” or “If the hall is so big, it will never be (or seem) full” or “Is it worth spending so much just for a handful of programmes a year?”

If such an expansion were made, then there would be a far greater flexibility for building the set, because the resulting hall would be a semi-circular amphitheatre, giving a wide angle to

the audience, and a larger field to work on. (In this regard, we had a lot of problems extending the stage to where we did, because of shortage of seating area for the audience.) All this and much more would be the benefits of a new hall, larger, more comfortable and more beautiful. Whether it is worth the expenditure or not should not be a criteria in a place where progress and perfection are the leading principles of action.

People often speak of doing the 1st December programme as an offering to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Many have spoken of a heightened sensibility while performing, as though

standing on the higher platform, as if poised between heaven and earth. A column of white light moved with him as he slowly descended:

*Coercing my godhead I have come down
Here on the sordid earth,
Ignorant, labouring, hu-
man grown*

*Twixt the gates of death
and birth.*

His voice rang against the silence, firm, sincere... young. As he plunged deeper and deeper into "*Matter's night*," the darkness thickened around him, gathering into itself the hate of hell and human spite. The *grisly elf* slunk in the smouldering shadows, *enamoured of sorrow and sin*, moving and inciting men. They mocked and cursed the saviour hand of Grace. The closer he ventured to help them, the more fiercely they rejected him *and the curb of his wide white peace*.

Then... A voice cried "go where none have gone...."

Leaving the little scene of surface life, he plunged inwards, to delve into the very heart of life's mystery, *and knock at the keyless gate....*

*...He who I am was with me still,
All veils are breaking now*

The tides had turned. He had carried God's Light to the *grim foundation stone* of the incon-

scient. *The gulf twixt the depths and the heights was bridged*. The new world of the future was at our threshold, ready for manifestation.

We were again in a world of light and ideals, beauty and dreams, but there was the hint of a promise in the air, a promise of a future that fulfilled our most cherished dreams. *I shall leave my dreams in their argent air....*



I came away carrying a pleasant sense of surprise. I thought the students had been imaginative in their de-

piction of this difficult piece. The central figure of the Avatar had been played well by Gaurav, with a certain calm restraint and dignity. The stark simplicity of the costumes and stage decor had helped in concentrating the attention on the substance of the poem itself. And yet there had been a quiet elegance in the harmony of colours and forms. The music, mostly composed by the students themselves, understandably lacked the overwhelming amplitude of Sunil-da's music, but was still a strong element in supporting and sustaining the action of the narrative. They had created an atmosphere of tense drama, sometimes a little diluted maybe, yet riveting enough to hold the attention of the audience. Yes, I was very pleasantly surprised.

they were instruments in the hands of a greater Power. Did you experience such heightened moments that you would like to share?

Every time one steps on the Theatre stage there is a heightened sense, but it is of course best felt on the day of the final show. The interesting thing is: though done well, the performance did not seem extraordinary to us who were absorbed in our roles. Whereas what came through to the audience, as we learned from them, was something from Above, and from behind the little forms of our characters. That is the most remarkable thing of such a collective effort. ☼



MEDITATIONS AFTER THE SIDDHI DAY

Raman'75 continues his series on Collective Meditation in the Ashram

The Mother would now sit down daily for her meditations with all of us together, in the evening after nightfall. That was the beginning of collective meditation. She made a special arrangement for our seating. To her right would sit one group and to her left another, both arranged in rows. The right side of the Mother represented Light, on the left was Power. Each of us found a seat to her right or left according to the turn of the nature of our inner being. I was to her right, Amrita sat on her left.

A strange thing used to happen every day at these meditations. Purushottam was one of our number in those days. He used to sit directly in front of the Mother, a little apart from the rest of us. As soon as the meditation began, he would begin to sway his body and even move about with his eyes closed while still meditating. He would come and get hold of some of us, give them a thorough kneading and would not even hesitate to tear at the hair

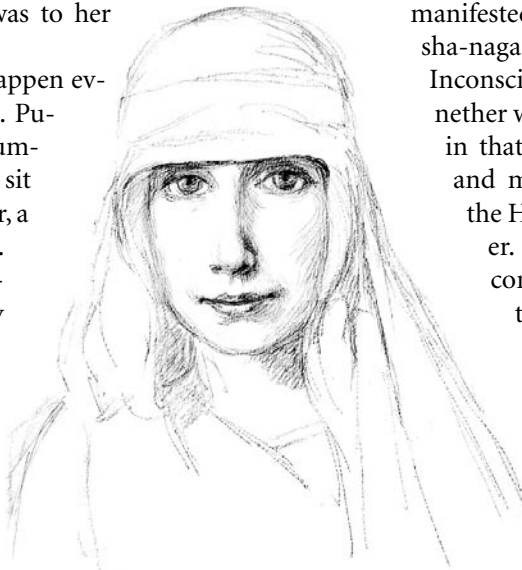
on their head or face. In those days, almost all of us sported a beard and a moustache and wore our hair long. He used to say that this was his allotted work, this work of purification and helping in the purification. Not only did no one ever raise an objection to this kind of molestation, it was accepted by all with perfect equanimity, with joy almost; it was considered to be a necessity, a sign of the Mother's Grace. But these attentions were reserved only for two or three people. During this process, the Mother of course remained silent and engrossed in meditation. All was done, no doubt,

under her control and guidance, but from an inner poise. One day, Purushottam proclaimed to the Mother in a loud voice, "Mother, I do not mean it as a boast, I mention this to you in utter humility: Mother, just as you are the highest Force of the Supreme, even so I am the lowest force of this earth-nature. You have given me the privilege of being a collaborator in your Work." He used

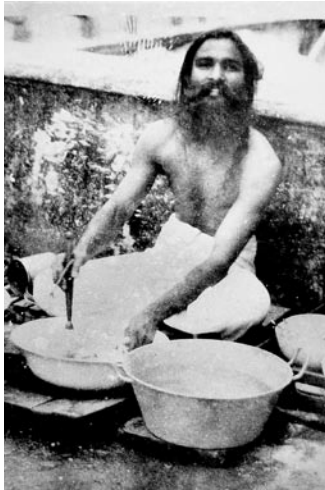
to say that Seshanaga, the primal energy that sustains the material world, had manifested in him, that he was Seshanaga itself. He was the spirit of Inconscience, of the Force in the nether world; his task was to work in that darkness, sweep it clean and make room for the Light, the Higher Forces of the Mother. This manner of working continued for some time; then it came to a halt, and we had only meditations.

The Mother's endeavour at that time was for a new creation, the creation here of a new inner world of the Divine Consciousness. She had

brought down the Higher Forces, the Gods, into the earth atmosphere, into our inner being and consciousness. A central feature of that endeavour was that she had placed each of us in touch with his inner godhead. Every individual has what may be described as his line of spiritual descent and also ascent; for into each individual consciousness has come down from the supreme Maha Shakti an individual divine being, a particular godhead following a particular line of manifestation of divine power, *vibhuti*. To bear inwardly the touch of this divinity and found it securely within oneself,



to concentrate on it and become one with it, to go on manifesting it in one's outer life, this was the aim of the *sadhana* at the time. This was a period of extreme concentration and one-pointedness, a "tortoise phase" of the *sadhana* one might call it. Like the tortoise one had to gather oneself in, limbs and all, and hide as in a shell by cutting oneself off



Champaklal

from all outward touches. This was a temporary necessity in order to maintain the consciousness of the individual and the collectivity always at a high level and keep it unsullied and unchanged. Our give and take with the outside world was very little indeed and it was carried on

under the strictest vigilance. All around us there had been fixed a cordon, an iron like curtain almost. Even among ourselves, personal contacts like meeting one another or the paying of visits had been reduced to the barest minimum. To use the poetic language of Tagore, we seemed to be blossoming forth

Like a flower in the air, stemless
And sufficient unto itself...

But after following out this line for some distance, the Mother could see that the new creation, even if it came about, would be something narrow and confined to a limited circle, and for the most part effective only for an inner action. But that has not been her aim. The new creation must embrace the entire human race, a new race of men must be created and not merely a small select group. And in that new creation must be included not only the inner being of man but also his vital and physical life. In other words, we have to come down to the lower levels and work for the purification there, in order to raise them

beyond themselves by the infusion of the higher consciousness and make them fit instruments for the higher things. We are still continuing with that work, through the "ups and downs of an uneven path".

Nolini Kanto Gupta

Collected Works, Vol. 8, pp. 204-206

Compiler's Notes

These early meditations with the Mother belong to what Sri Aurobindo called "the brightest period in the history of the Ashram".¹ This period represents an early and occult phase of *sadhana* in the Ashram which began shortly before the Siddhi Day and ended a few months after the descent of the Overmind on 24 November 1926. The Mother took up the responsibility of Sri Aurobindo's disciples and immediately "a very brilliant creation was worked out in extraordinary detail, with marvellous experiences, contacts with divine beings, and all kinds of manifestations which are considered miraculous".² Each one came in touch with the "inner godhead he represents". Nolini Kanto Gupta came in contact with the god Varuna³ who represents vastness and purity, Haradhan Bakshi with Twashtri, the Divine Fashioner, and Rajani Palit with Kubera, the God of Wealth. Purushottam identified himself in a state of trance with "Sesha-naga, the primal energy that sustains the material world" and became a means of the spiritual purification of others under the Mother's own supervision. This sometimes worked itself out in a rather unusual way at the physical level. Champaklal, for example, was pounded by him for almost an hour and the result was so beneficial that Sri Aurobindo remarked, "Champaklal has



Purushottam

become a demi-god”⁴ Similarly, he gave a twist to Barin Ghose’s throat and the latter found his “head shooting up and up until [he] was looking down on everybody from a great height”. Later, Purushottam was strongly discouraged by the Mother from such actions when the occult phase of the sadhana came to an end and a slow and difficult process of purification of the lower vital and physical began for the sadhaks and sadhikas of the Ashram.

Endnotes

1. *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, On Himself*, Volume 26, p 472.
2. *The Mother’s Collected Works*, Volume 9, p 148.
3. A copy of the first edition of Sri Aurobindo’s book *The Mother* found in Nolini Kanto Gupta’s papers is addressed “To Varuna” with the Mother’s signature below it.
4. See *Champaklal Speaks* (2002), p 71. ❧

BHARATI-DI

Prithwindra Mukherjee ’56

Depuis l’annonce officielle, fin 1951, qu’à Pondichéry la Mère inaugurerait un centre universitaire international dédié à la mémoire de Sri Aurobindo, de nombreuses personnalités indiennes et étrangères vinrent s’y installer, désireuses d’assister la Mère dans l’exécution de ce projet. Ainsi arriva Mademoiselle Suzanne Karpelès. Le bruit courait qu’en qualité de responsable de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, elle avait consacré des années de sa vie en Asie profonde et, spécialiste du bouddhisme, elle allait occuper la chaire de religions comparées au nouveau Centre universitaire. En attendant, elle accepta de diriger une classe de français : en l’occurrence la nôtre, de la promotion 1952. La Mère l’accueillit avec un nouveau nom : « Bhâratidi ».

Son originalité vestimentaire — une longue

robe ocre ressemblant à celle des derviches et une sorte de cape ocre — rehaussait ses traits : la tête haute couronnée d’un chignon, un front d’Athé-



na, de grands yeux tantôt scrutateurs et autoritaires, tantôt rieurs, un nez légèrement hautain, une bouche fine quelque peu moqueuse. Un documentaire tourné sur les activités de l’Ashram de Pondichéry à l’époque enregistrerait une séquence ludique improvisée lors d’une rencontre fortuite de Bhâratidi — dans une boutique d’artisanats — avec Crampton-Chalk, un aristocrate anglais (amateur de fox-trot), de passage : les pas, les gestes et le regard de la dame témoignaient le raffinement et l’humour de son appartenance et de ses fréquentations sociales.

Toute spécialiste du pâli qu’elle fût, afin de retenir nos prénoms, elle divulguait son système personnel : Brajkishore devrait répondre à l’appel de *Bras-qui-sort* ; de

même Jhumur devint *Joue mure* ; Prithwin = *Pris-du-vin* ; Rothin, « ah c'est simple : *Rotin* ! »... Au premier rapport trimestriel, ses annotations singulières firent sensation au milieu d'élèves : contre l'un, elle inscrivit *inconnu* ; contre tel autre, *mal élevé* ; une troisième, *renvoyée pour aller se reposer*. Elle-même, parfois elle donnait des signes de fatigue et en laissait des traces sous forme d'une petite dyslexie ou d'une impatience verbale du genre : « Ah non, pas de ces cochonneries ! » Ignares du verbe cru, voire primesautier, nous échangeions des coups d'oeil furtifs et amusés entre copains tandis que sa voix nous interpellait : « Arrêtez de vous regarder en chiens de faïence ! » Outré, un jour je marquai sur mon cahier : « Vocabulaire enrichi par de nouveaux mots aujourd'hui : *cochonnerie... chiens de faïence* ! »

Ayant pressenti que l'objectif visé était plus qu'atteint, le lendemain je préfèrai rester à la salle commune d'étude à l'heure fatidique. Un camarade, l'air mi-figue mi-raisin, vint me chercher : « Bhâratidi vous attend. Elle veut vous parler. » Pour vaincre ma réticence, il insista : « Venez donc, pourquoi rester ici ? » En toute connaissance de cause, je me rendis au 'tribunal'. A peine assis, j'entendis le ton aigret : « C'est ainsi qu'on invente de nouveaux mots ! » Je ripostai : « On n'invente rien ; on prend note de ce qu'on entend ! » Se tournant vers la classe, elle leva la voix : « *Qui*, parmi vous, avez *entendu* ces mots en classe ? » Les mots articulés (en italique) sautaient comme des balles de ping-pong jusqu'au milieu de l'octave supérieure. Vierges d'oreilles, tous et toutes prétendirent ne les avoir jamais entendus, ces mots-là ! Elle exigea alors qu'un camarade m'aidât à rayer ces notes dans mon cahier !

*

Peu de temps après, pour rattraper son comportement brusque et en guise de faire la paix, un jour, en toute innocence, elle demanda s'il y avait des poètes dans la classe ; le suffrage unanime l'ayant orientée vers moi, elle commanda : « Voici bientôt l'anniversaire de Mère ; Prithwin nous fera le plaisir de composer un poème que nous allons réciter devant elle, au terrain de jeu, lors de la fête du 21 février ! » Chose promise, chose

due, car j'aimais la poésie et j'adorais la Mère. Le lendemain, quelque peu méfiant, je lui confiai un poème dont la première strophe était :

*Bonne fête, Douce Mère, nous chantons
Gloire à ton divin calme,
Nous, tes enfants, t'adorons
Chantant : Bandé mâtaram !*

« Merveilleux ! » s'écria-t-elle d'une voix suraiguë, en se frottant les mains. Puis se tournant vers Jhumur, elle proposa : « Et votre oncle Sunil, ne voudra-t-il pas mettre ce beau poème en musique ? » Faute de grive, on mangea du merle : le jour venu, nous récitâmes — avec Bhâratidi comme chef d'orchestre — ces vers qui avaient l'air de plaire à qui de droit. La Mère m'en félicita. Bhâratidi la prévint : « L'an prochain, il nous traduira le chant bengali *Bandé mâtaram* pour fêter votre anniversaire. » Et, effectivement, j'allais honorer ce rendez-vous avec ma traduction.

*

« Qui est-ce qui connaît Lambaréné ? » s'enquit-elle un jour, en entrant dans la classe. Intéressé par les tournées de concerts d'orgue d'Albert Schweitzer, le nom ne m'était pas étranger. Devant le silence général, je répondis : « C'est là où exerce le Docteur Schweitzer ! » En frappant dans ses mains, elle reprit : « Bravo ! Et savez-vous que le Comité Nobel vient de lui décerner le prix de la Paix cette année ? » Pointant l'index vers moi, elle ordonna : « Prithwin, prenez votre stylo ! Nous allons lui adresser une lettre de félicitations ! » La douceur et la chaleur de sa voix semblaient murmurer, *Poète, prends ton luth* ! Et j'obtempérai, quoi que non sans pitié pour la douce folie, sans le moindre espoir que la lettre parvienne au destinataire.

A peine trois semaines plus tard, quelle fut notre surprise, de recevoir une réponse autographe de remerciements venant de Lambaréné, « à l'intention des élèves de Mademoiselle Karpeles », signée Albert Schweitzer.

*

Familière avec des travaux archéologiques effectués dans des sites au Vietnam et au Cambodge, une fois Bhâratidi voulut nous emmener en excursion à Mahâbalipuram pour nous révéler ce qui restait de la beauté de l'architecture

brahmanique de l'époque Pallava ; au moment d'obtenir l'accord de la Mère, elle la rassura que je serais avec elle dans la voiture de Gloria, fille du Docteur André (famille que la Mère connaissait bien). En cours de route, faussant compagnie aux autres qui se trouvaient dans un autocar avec leur pique-nique, elle chuchota à Gloria un mot complice et nous nous trouvâmes devant une gargote à Chinglepet, apparemment connue pour ses *dhosa* et *vadai* (crêpes et beignets salés) ; ce fut un régal que Bhâratidi semblait beaucoup apprécier. Depuis cette première visite à Mahâbalipuram — avant la restauration par les archéologues de l'Etat — je n'ai jamais pu oublier qu'il y avait un quelque chose de plus dans ces temples que les soins modernes n'avaient pas su conserver sur ces vénérables pierres.

Une douzaine d'années plus tard, j'ignore pourquoi, j'avais accompagné Bhâratidi pour une visite d'une journée en voiture à Chennai. À l'heure de déjeuner, elle nous convia à un festin dans un restaurant de qualité, avec des spécialités de grillades et des mets mughlai, tandis qu'elle-même, en mauvaise santé, se contenta d'une assiette de velouté de tomate avec des gressins et une variante de sole pochée.

*

Bhâratidi supportait mal la chaleur accablante de l'été pondichérien. C'était vers 11h00, un jour, lorsqu'on étouffait, on avait faim, on était distraits. Brusquement, soupe au lait, elle se rendit compte que nous ne l'écoutions plus, tandis qu'elle lisait à haute voix je ne sais quel conte d'Erckmann-Chatrian. « Si vous avez faim, partez, Prithwin ! » tonna sa voix. Je n'en demandais pas mieux. Je sortais, lorsqu'elle hurla brutalement, « La porte ! » J'obéis avec un zèle supplémentaire mais malicieux, dont elle ne soupçonnait pas la portée : en douce, je tirai le loquet de l'extérieur avant de disparaître.

La cloche sonna à 11h30, comme d'ordinaire. Soulagés, les uns et les autres s'emparèrent de leurs affaires. Impossible d'ouvrir la porte. La classe se trouvait au premier étage, perdue à l'extrémité d'une terrasse couverte. Vers midi, lasse d'attendre, Bhâratidi décida que c'était Rothin qui avait logiquement le devoir de payer pour le crime de

son frère d'aussi mauvais caractère : on hissa le pauvre jusqu'à un œil-de-bœuf pour qu'il sautât dehors avant de libérer les otages. Offusqué par ce récit, je dis à mon frère qu'il était trop affable devant un tel personnage, alors qu'il avait le choix de s'éclipser comme moi !

Ce fut peu de temps avant une nouvelle cure de Bhâratidi en Europe et — je m'en rendrais compte plus tard —, en un rien de temps, elle allait me faire une belle réputation : personne en France et en Navarre n'ignorait plus le prénom maudit d'un polisson de dix-sept ans.

*

Rentrée d'une courte visite au Japon, Bhâratidi me fit cadeau d'une belle flûte de bambou et d'un harmonica. Entre amis, j'organisai — pour la première et la dernière fois — un concert d'harmonicas lors d'une fête devant la Mère : ce fut pour moi l'occasion de lui montrer les beaux cadeaux japonais que j'avais reçus. Ravie, la Mère me fit part de la fierté de Bhâratidi du progrès que je faisais en rédaction française.

Le mois d'après, Bhâratidi me remit une jolie enveloppe venant de France : à l'intérieur se trouvait un exemplaire dédié par 'Amritâ' (Andrée, sa sœur aînée), de la traduction que celle-ci avait fait de *La poupée de fromage*, ouvrage d'Abanindranath Tagore, peintre et neveu du Poète bengali : ce fut le « Prix d'excellence pour correspondance en français ». Amritâ, avec son époux Hoggman, s'occupait d'une maison d'édition élégante. Peu à peu, j'appris par Bhâratidi que ses parents avaient été des amis des Tagore et ils s'étaient rendus en Inde depuis que les deux sœurs étaient encore enfants : des membres de la famille Tagore et d'autres savants indiens en visite en Europe séjournaient volontiers chez les Karpelès en France et les recevaient en Inde. Andrée avait occupé le poste de directrice de la section des femmes et aussi de l'école des beaux-arts à Santinikétan. Et que Bhâratidi, directrice de l'association des Amis du Bouddhisme, fondatrice secrétaire de la Société des Amis de l'Orient au Musée Guimet, a eu non seulement l'honneur de servir de secrétaire au Poète lors de ses séjours parisiens mais, de surcroît, elle fut parmi les organisateurs de la toute

première exposition de la peinture de Tagore, en Occident, en 1930.

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Pour faire une surprise à la Mère, Bhâratidi mit en scène, avec ses élèves, une représentation grandiose d'*Esther* de Jean Racine. Sortant du vedettariat local, elle imposa son propre casting : entre autres, sa découverte de Madanlâl (un homme silencieux qui travaillait à la boulangerie de l'Ashram) pour le rôle altier de Mardochée impressionna tous. Encore je crois entendre l'accent prophétique de cette voix rauque : « Vous périrez peut-être, et toute votre race ! » Et les répliques du superbe chœur. Surtout la simplicité et la beauté de l'habillage, souvent à partir d'une vulgaire ét-offe de jute ou de coton économique sublimée, et ce ton digne d'une tragédie biblique lui valurent une admiration de la Mère. C'était peu avant l'arrivée de Shrimayi (Varvara Pitoeff) et le début des cours dramatiques professionnels en 1958.

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Sensible à l'attention de la Mère pour que les élèves apprennent à s'exprimer en un français vivant et correct, Bhâratidi nous invitait en cercle d'intimes à un goûter français chez elle, dans son beau pavillon avec un jardin colonial : nous étions priés d'apporter chacun son gobelet. Du miel et des bonbons qu'elle faisait venir de France, du pain français qu'elle commandait à une boulangerie en ville (Pondichéry était encore la capitale des comptoirs français en Inde) — tout cela arrosé d'une savoureuse citronnade (dont elle recevait des flacons expédiés par ses cousins siciliens) — déliaient les langues dans une ambiance familiale. Le grand sourire de Krishnan, son homme à tout faire, devenu presque son fils adoptif, nous mettait à l'aise.

De temps en temps, Bhâratidi nous présentait

ses invités : Mademoiselle Suzanne Siauve, spécialiste de la philosophie védantique de Madhva, Monsieur Quiévreux, proviseur du lycée français voisin, Hélène Lachaux, professeur au même lycée (qui deviendra chercheur en Shivaïsme) venaient bavarder avec nous. Nous assistâmes aux fiançailles d'Hélène avec Monsieur Brunner. C'est là, pour la première fois, que nous fîmes la connaissance de Jean Filliozat et d'André Barreau, venus de Paris : l'un, Directeur de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, l'autre, grand spécialiste du bouddhisme, savants éminents. L'été suivant, en 1955, nous eûmes aussi la visite de Madame Anne Filliozat avec ses deux enfants, Pierre-Sylvain et Jacqueline. L'amitié des Filliozat me sera



Mother with children in the Playground. Bharati-di is seen at the top left hand corner.

précieuse pendant un demi siècle, surtout depuis mon arrivée en France, en 1966, tant sur le plan personnel que professionnel. La présence de Madame Filliozat me rappelait souvent celle de ma mère restée à Pondichéry.

Heureuse de son statut de benjamine derrière deux grands frères, Jacqueline apportait autour d'elle une fraîcheur et un sourire spontané ; après son année scolaire en France, été après été, assidûment, elle suivait stoïquement les cours au lycée français de Pondichéry. Je me suis toujours de-

mandé si ce n'est pas par l'inspiration de Bhâratidi qu'elle s'orienta vers les études bouddhiques pour y consacrer sa vie, à l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient de Paris, après avoir travaillé sur la littérature médiévale en *braj*.

Partagé entre sa passion pour la peinture et son rêve de faire des études approfondies en sanskrit, Pierre avait mon âge et, content de discuter avec moi de littérature française, il mit à jour mes lectures, grâce à sa familiarité avec les écrivains contemporains : Giraudoux, Anouilh, Valéry, Claudel, Gide, Camus — une formidable liste d'ouvrages — que je trouvais ensuite à la Bibliothèque publique, avec la complicité affectueuse de Madame Gaebelé, son illustre conservatrice. Durant le service militaire non loin de la frontière germano-française, Pierre m'envoyait de longues réflexions artistiques et quelques échos d'activités culturelles d'outre-rhin qui lui apportaient certaines distractions. Entré dans l'enseignement de langues et de littératures en 1955 à notre centre universitaire, je fus bientôt surnommé *Mr France*, à cause de mes conférences, mes articles consacrés à la littérature française et mes traductions d'auteurs français pas encore connus en Inde : Albert Camus, Saint-John Perse, René Char... C'est Jean Filliozat qui attira mon attention sur l'utilité de traduire des auteurs indiens en français et facilita mon contact avec l'Unesco.

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Dans ses pages de réminiscences publiées par l'hebdomadaire *Desh* de Kolkâtâ, l'auteur bengali Tapanmohan Chatterjee — petit-fils du frère aîné du poète Tagore et, également, descendant de Râmmohun Roy — venait d'écrire que lassé par les repas insipides à l'anglaise, pendant ses années d'études à Londres, il rendait visite aux Karpelès en France : Andrée et Suzanne étaient comme Lakshmi et Sarasvati, devenues presque ses sœurs. A la lecture de ce passage par ma traduction, émue par les souvenirs de ce bon vieux temps, Bhâratidi m'encouragea à lui adresser un mot. En réponse prompte, l'auteur, avec beaucoup de tendresse, exprimait son ignorance qu'elle se trouvât à Pondichéry et son envie de la revoir bientôt.

En 1961, à l'approche du centenaire de la

naissance du Poète Tagore, Bhâratidi me proposa de traduire *Nirvâna*, un précieux compte rendu des derniers jours du Poète, racontés par Pratimâ Tagore, sa bru et secrétaire littéraire : témoignage d'un cheminement lucide vers la Mort. Ceci me donna l'occasion de correspondre avec Pratimâ Tagore (elle-même amie et admiratrice des Karpelès) : aussitôt achevée, ma traduction reçut l'aval des experts de Visvabhârati en vue d'une publication. Malgré l'attente de Madame Tagore d'être publiée chez Albin Michel, malheureusement le texte n'était pas suffisamment long. Cependant, en qualité d'élève de l'amie Suzanne, je reçus l'invitation de Madame Tagore pour lui rendre visite à Santinikétan et, à mon grand bonheur, je le fis en janvier 1964 : que de souvenirs, que d'anecdotes, que de confidences autour des Karpelès, comme s'il s'agissait de parents proches.

Pour revenir au centenaire de Tagore, par mon intermédiaire, Bhâratidi réquisitionna le chanteur Tinkari Banerjee — que j'accompagnais avec une flûte — pour présenter des chants composés par Tagore, avec ma traduction française, dans plusieurs manifestations à Pondichéry. A cette occasion, elle rédigea avec enthousiasme un chapitre de mon recueil bengali, *Tagore vu par les Français*, enrichi d'anecdotes et de commentaires dans un style dont elle seule avait le secret.

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En réponse à une entente entre les gouvernements français et indien que Pondichéry restât une fenêtre ouverte sur la francophonie, afin de coordonner l'enseignement du français en Inde, Bhâratidi mit sur pied — à l'aide de ses élèves — un stage annuel à Pondichéry à l'intention des professeurs de français de différentes villes indiennes, considéré pendant des années à venir comme un rite de passage obligatoire et agréable de la part des intéressés. Depuis, des équipes de jeunes universitaires à New Delhi, à Kolkâtâ et dans d'autres villes ont mieux fait structurer le rapprochement dans ce sens mais, probablement avons-nous perdu de vue les efforts de ce trait d'union passionné — et méconnu — entre nos deux cultures complémentaires : française et indienne. ❧

QUIZ TIME!

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

1. In which book would you find a portrait of Wilfy done by the Mother?
2. Where was the second edition of *Prières et Méditations* printed? Clue: At that time the Ashram Press did not exist.
3. Who collaborated with Mother to write the role of the Industrialist in her play “Le Grand Secret”?
4. In which year was the Mother’s electric organ offered to her?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the common jasmine?

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE PREVIOUS ISSUE :

1. Which Indian city is Sri Aurobindo referring to in the following lines of the poem “Nirvana”?

*“The city, a shadow picture without tone,
Floats, quivers unreal; forms without relief
Flow, a cinema’s vacant shapes; like a reef
Floundering in shoreless gulfs the world is done.”*

This is a reference to Bombay (Mumbai). The word “cinema” was a giveaway! This poem is quoted in A.B. Purani’s *Life of Sri Aurobindo*. Here is what Sri Aurobindo said during the “Evening Talks” about the experience in Bombay, which is the subject of this poem.

“When I was in Bombay, from the balcony of a friend’s house I saw the whole busy movement of Bombay as a picture in a cinema show, all unreal and shadowy. Ever since I have maintained that poise of mind – never lost it even in the midst of difficulties.”

2. Arya, the monthly journal started by Sri Aurobindo was printed at the Modern Press in Pondicherry and published from 7, Dupleix Street, where the Mother was staying. If you walked into this house today what would you find there?

The Archives Department of the Ashram. “Dupleix Street” is the old name of “Nehru Street”.

3. “For such a long time I thought I knew what love was, and now that I no longer see anything that cannot be called love, I also no longer see anything that may specially be called love. And how can I be that which I can no longer define, that which I can no longer distinguish?”

In which book would you find these lines written by the Mother? Clue: This was written before 1920.

This passage is taken from the Mother’s *Prayers and Meditations*.

4. He joined the Ashram in 1929 when he was only nine years old. He was the first child, and for a long time the only one, in the Ashram. He was a poet and a musician. He played the sitar and performed on stage quite often. But to the students of the School he will be remembered as the librarian (of the little library which was in Room no. 7 of those days) who used to suggest to us what story-books to read. Who was he?

Romen-da, of course.

5. What is the spiritual significance of the flowers of the mango tree?

“Nature’s hope for realisation”. The mango fruits are called “Divine Knowledge”.



The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth 29 February 1956

This evening the Divine Presence, concrete and material, was there present amongst you. I had a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, and I was facing a huge and massive golden door which separated the world from the Divine.

As I looked at the door, I knew and willed, in a single movement of consciousness, that "*the time has come,*" and lifting with both hands a mighty golden hammer I struck one blow, one single blow on the door and the door was shattered to pieces.

Then the supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow.

The Mother (CWM, 15: 202)