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The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



SAVITRI BHAVAN

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.

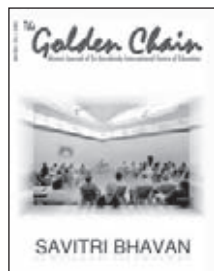
Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

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On the Cover:
Jhumur-di taking a class at the Savitri Bhavan.

On the Back Cover:
"Valley of Flowers" in the Garhwal Himalayas.

The Golden Chain

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THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana '79

Even though Auroville has been around for nearly forty years now there are still a lot of wrong ideas in the minds of people about it. A lot of people, specially in the big cities of India, think that Auroville is a crafts village. Others think it is a centre for experimenting in architecture. Still others imagine that the whole purpose of Auroville is to promote ecology and reforestation. All those who are connected with tourism are convinced that it is a fantastic destination for sight seeing. Hardly anybody seems to be aware that the aims of Auroville are spiritual and that it is an experiment in human unity.

Walking through the many quiet and leafy communities it is impossible to imagine that before 1968 it was one big dusty cluster of fields. The first years of Auroville — when there were no roads, no telephones and no connections to electricity — were spent in building the infrastructure and putting in place the organization that was necessary for community living. Only when the material base was created could the Aurovilians think of higher things such as cultural and intellectual activities. In Auroville, as in the Ashram, things have evolved in an organic way, as and when the need was felt to start something. This is how Savitri Bhavan came into existence, born out of a real need for spiritual knowledge and the desire for a collective intellectual life.

For all those who want to begin reading and understanding Sri Aurobindo's thought, *Savitri* is surely the best work to study. One can read it on many levels: for the beauty of the poetry, for the high thought and also, if one can decode it, as a road map to the spiritual realms. The Mother has said that one can read it even if one does not un-

derstand a single word, for the mantric power of the lines. Many feel that they don't have the mental preparation to read Sri Aurobindo's books. For them *Savitri* is a great help. This is the book that can best prepare the mind to understand the complex ideas as one can take up and understand one line at a time. This path is the easiest to walk as the domain of poetry lies somewhere between the heart and the mind, and becomes a bridge to go from Bhakti to Jnana.

The foundation stone for Savitri Bhavan was laid by Nirod-da several years ago. Since then it has grown not only in its physical size but also in the variety of activities it conducts. From being a place for the study of *Savitri*, it has included over the years the study of the other works of Sri Aurobindo as well, and it has now started collecting all material connected with the Epic. Savitri Bhavan organises exhibitions, lectures and classes and continues to widen its horizons. To keep all well-wishers informed of its activities a magazine called *Invocation* is brought out periodically.

Shraddhavan, who is an English sadhika, radiating gentleness and poise, has been on this path of this yoga for a very long time and has seen the Mother in her physical body, in her room. She has had a long association with Amal Kiran and *Mother India* and many of our readers may have read her poetry. We invite you to "listen" to her account of the genesis and the future of Savitri Bhavan in this issue.

It is heartening to know that there are so many people doing so much work and so quietly. But often one group doesn't know what the others are attempting and achieving. It is our aim to focus on such groups so that everyone becomes aware of these golden points on the globe. ❧

POST BOX



ETERNALLY BOUND

On a recent visit to Mumbai, Pavitra presented me with a copy of *The Golden Chain*. On returning home that night, though it was quite late and I

was feeling a bit tired, I could not wait till the morning to read it. I read the journal in the silence of the night.

I wish to share with you that I thoroughly enjoyed reading the journal, and though I have had my education in Mumbai, I felt myself as part of the fraternity. The Mother's golden words stand testimony to this feeling. "Whoever gets my touch [...] I have put a golden chain round his neck, his heart is bound eternally to me." I have had a very vivid vision of these golden words in one of my meditations in the hall outside Nolini-da's

room around the year 1981.

I have been given to understand from Pavitra that subscriptions to the journal are restricted to ex-students only. However, if you happen to extend the subscriptions to devotees, I would like to subscribe to your very beautiful journal.

Preetham Shetty

Please note that non-alumni-devotees can receive copies of The Golden Chain. If they are in India they have to make a supporting donation of Rs. 300 to receive the journal for three years.
— Editors

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THE MOTHER'S MIRACLE

Ajay Mehta '79

A year is nearly over and every single day of this past year I have thanked the Divine Mother for looking after me. I would like to share with you how the Divine Mother helped me overcome a major illness at the right time.

I recall very clearly: it was 4th December 2004 and like always in Bombay, there were lots of marriages going on. I too had gone to a marriage and thereafter had to attend another party. My wife Rina, was in a great hurry to leave the wedding as we had to reach the suburbs thereafter, but I was very hungry and insisted on having dinner at the wedding. As I was eating, one of our friends, who is a neurosurgeon, walked in with his wife. We had not met him for the last 6-8 months and so my wife stopped him to talk with him. Soon he came up to me and shook hands with me. He just held my hand for a few seconds, looked at me, took my other hand, looked it over — and all the while did not say anything. He then took Rina aside and asked her to get me to his clinic for a check up. My wife did not think anything was seriously wrong and thought that he was just calling us for a friendly visit.

Unknown to us, Dr Ashish Mehta had already diagnosed what was wrong with me, but thought it prudent not to alarm me until he had medical tests to prove my illness.

After a week my wife happened to SMS him for a chat and that's when he fixed up an appointment for me on the 14th of January. After that things just moved so fast that I don't yet understand how

everything happened — it was as if I was destined to go through the operation immediately. On 15th January I went through my MRI and blood tests. It was immediately confirmed that I had a tumour in my pituitary gland. I had an excess of growth hormone due to which the muscles in my body were thickening. What I took for a muscular and fit body was actually an ill body. The tumour was about 1 cm big and had just reached my optic nerves. My external muscles had already thickened and if left unattended the internal organs too would follow. In the next 24 hours we consulted at least 5 doctors to find out if there was any medication that would help. My reports were sent to Europe too for consultation. Everyone had only one thing to say — no medication would help, surgery was the only way out. One thing I learnt in those 24 hours was that I was one of those rare cases which was diagnosed at quite an early stage. One out of 10,000 cases

of acromegaly is detected at a stage where it can be helped — most of the cases come in only after some important organ has been damaged.

My family was totally shaken at the news of my illness. On consulting some very senior European doctors, I was told that the person who spotted my illness had to be an extremely clever and sharp doctor.

This was what really started us thinking — how did the doctor meet us, how did we happen to bump into each other after so long, what instincts prompted him to be so concerned about me? By now Rina was absolutely convinced that this was



no ordinary happening in my life. Dr Ashish was sent as some kind of a miracle to show us the way out of my problem. She moved very fast and along with the support of the rest of my family the operation date was set for the 21st of January.

My surgery lasted for 10-11 hours and, can you believe it, I was home after three days. During those ten days from 14th to 24th it was as if we were being steered by some Divine Grace. It was as if my life was set a direction and my family, the doctor and the rest of my well wishers were just playing their role as set up by Someone. Today as the year has passed by I am totally fit; I don't need to take any medication at all. All the fears that we had about the risk of a hormonal imbalance, or

the optic nerve getting damaged, or of my needing radiation — have totally disappeared.

For me, it was a storm in my life and the Mother came and steered my life to safety. She guided my wife and my family into taking the right decisions. Without my realising it, She took over completely, brought my life back on the right track and showed me the way.

This is when we realized for the first time, miracles do happen in life. Mother always looks after Her children and does Her best for us. Miracles do not come with loud bangs or claps of thunder, but they come in like the doctor who shook my hand — and for others in different ways. Mother's Grace is everywhere and all the time with us. ❧

SHARING THE VISION

Lopamudra '94

It was very nice to read about Mother's vision of Education being propagated in various schools around the world [GC Feb 06]. I want to share something about education in the un-organized sector. I was reading the Bhagavad Gita and reveling in its riches. It was unfair not to share it with anyone. I went back to rediscover the shlokas taught in School, and added some more gems from the Sri Aurobindo Upanishad, the Upanishads, the mantras of the Vedas, and Sanskrit books from the Sanskrit Karyalaya and the Sri Aurobindo Society. All this enormous wealth of Knowledge just waiting to be discovered, this language that puts the Spirit in touch with its Source, the sacred Devabhasha — they wanted to be released. So I put some advertisements in Indian grocery stores and restaurants around where I live, in northern California. It offered Sanskrit classes through hymns, shlokas and the Gita. If some responded who knew Sanskrit, we could hold study circles. If they did not know much, I would love to give them a wake-up call.

Many adults responded who wanted to learn.

The impression I get from interacting with them is that Sanskrit is not compulsory in India, and those who do take it up, don't learn its spiritual aspect. And here is where I am continuously marveling at the education in the Ashram. Like an arrow it aims at the highest Truth.

I started teaching on the floor of my apartment. One hour became two, one evening became two, and the enthusiasm is growing. Something seems to have changed in their lives, so they say. As for me, so much has changed. I am reaching out to learn more, and stumbling upon so many truths. And how can I express the magnitude of the inner guidance that I get, in meticulous detail? How do word meanings suggest themselves, how do correct shlokas stare out from a page, how do the lessons get structured automatically? I realize that there is something extremely precious in our education system at the Ashram. Again and again the students asked me how I acquired this ability of showing something they had missed. I painted images of our School.

It was Sri Aurobindo's dream for India to be the Spiritual Leader of the world. We are the

ambassadors for that mission. He empowers us beyond our imagination, He breathes force into us, He holds our hands. Indeed he speaks with our mouths and wields our minds. I urge all students and ex-students and those who have come in touch with Their teaching to be the sparks that will set the woods on fire. The world is waiting to learn. Inwardly there is a vacuum. The experiment of materialism is over. It is time India takes on the lead. And we are the standard bearers. It is no more with wind and the weather beating against us, He is waiting to help us. Just begin, if you have not already, interacting with people in the realm of literature, physics, French, painting, Sanskrit, anything. His Spirit will shine forth from your body, heart and mind, and touch others. What other joy can there be than being His instrument?

The other day Chandresh '79 gave a wonderful talk on Money Power. As a game we discussed what we would do if we had a lot of money. I was reading about the golden age of the Vedic period, where Sri Aurobindo recreates an image of magnificence "the sages sitting in their groves ready to test and teach the comer, princes and learned Brahmins and great landed nobles going about in

search of Knowledge, ... the Ashramas, the courts of kings, who were also spiritual discoverers and thinkers, the great sacrificial assemblies where the sages met and compared their knowledge". I would create a Gurukul ashrama, where teachers and students would live like one family breathing in their daily acts Unity and Knowledge. Their lives would be simple, maybe living in *keet* huts and growing their own grains and vegetables. They would have a cow for milk, and the river for water. I remember Prakash-bhai was showing me a plot of land in Lake that the Golden Chain Fraternity acquired. He also said it was Mother's wish to have a University Centre. In our School, when I was growing up in the boarding, there was hardly any "outside" influence. We ate alongside our teachers and ran the 100 meters race with them, then watched films together. Isn't this like a gurukul? If the insulation is not complete any more in Pondicherry, it can be made so in Lake. And those who will participate will do it of their own calling — maybe for short periods of time, or maybe long. This is an Idea I wanted to share with the Golden Chain Fraternity. It would be a great privilege to be a *ritwik*, a priest, of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. ❧

The ancient and classical creations of the Sanskrit tongue both in quality and in body and abundance of excellence, in their potent originality and force and beauty, in their substance and art and structure, in grandeur and justice and charm of speech and in the height and width of the reach of their spirit stand very evidently in the front rank among the world's great literatures. The language itself, as has been universally recognised by those competent to form a judgment, is one of the most magnificent, the most perfect and wonderfully sufficient literary instruments developed by the human mind, at once majestic and sweet and flexible, strong and clearly-formed and full and vibrant and subtle, and its quality and character would be of itself a sufficient evidence of the character and quality of the race whose mind it expressed and the culture of which it was the reflecting medium. The great and noble use made of it by poet and thinker did not fall below the splendour of its capacities.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 14: 255)

We had promised to bring you a feature on Mirambika, Delhi, in this issue under our Sister Schools series. Unfortunately we have not been able to get the material ready in time. We are working on this article and will be bringing it to you as soon as it is ready. — *Editors*

AN UNFORGETTABLE TRIP

In September last year a small all-women group of ex-students made a trip into the Garhwal Himalayas. Savita Srivastava '75 recounts.

1^{7th} Sept. 2005, (Ghangharia). It was dusk and getting dark and cold very quickly. I was pacing up and down in the verandah outside our 8-bed dorm of the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN) guest house. I kept looking up at the mud track running through this tiny hamlet, waiting for the arrival of the others. Bithi and I had arrived earlier on mule back and had no trouble finding the guest house as all buildings stood either on this or that side of the track. In fact the *raison d'être* of this place was solely to serve the tourists and pilgrims bound for the Valley of Flowers and Himkund better known to Sikhs as Hemkund Saheb.

Standing there among the tall peaks, it seemed as though we had left home a long time ago. Actually it was only two days back on 15th morning that we had left Delhi. We were five women — Minoti '75, Chhalamayi '77, Bithi '86, Guddi (Chhala's friend) and myself along with a young turbaned driver in a Qualis. We spent the first night (15th) in Rishikesh. The next morning we

began the long journey to Joshimath. The route ran along the bank of Alaknanda which kept us company the whole day. It was getting dark as we



On the Bheempul across river Saraswati. L to R: Minoti, Savita, Guddi, Bithi and Gurudev, the driver. Chhalamayi is not in the picture.

reached Joshimath on the evening of the 16th; we experienced the first cold and heavy mist. The manager at the GMVN guest house informed us that the rains were back and there was a chance of landslides. Our spirits sank. But of course, there was no looking back and I knew from previous trips to Garhwal about the fickleness of the weather on the mountains. It was aptly described by one of the mule boys on a later trek when he told us that "There was nothing certain about the weather on the mountains which changes as fast as the fashions of Bombay."

As per our plan we woke up early this morning (17th) and started towards Govindghat. Wayside boulders and sign boards boldly proclaimed: "Valley of



The enchanting Valley of Flowers.

Gods". Indeed! Our first experience of entering into this Garhwal Himalayan Terrain took our breath away. We left the Qualis at Govindghat and began the trek to Ghangaria. The 14 km trek along the Laxman Ganga river is rocky and tough but very beautiful. The route was full of Sikh pilgrims bound for the holy shrine at Hemkund. It was dotted with mule droppings, the smell of which mingled with the inviting smell of food being cooked in the dhabas that line the two sides of the track, common to all the other pilgrim pathways.

18th Sept. (Hemkund). After the first and tiring trek to Ghangaria, we chose to climb up to Hemkund (height: 4320 mtrs, the highest point in our entire trip), on mules the next day. It was a steep climb. For some it was their first experience of getting on horse-back, and it was a scary one. One realizes truly the meaning of 'pilgrimage' as one constantly remembers and calls on the Supreme Saviour to protect one along the way.



The Valley of Flowers — another view.

19th Sept. (Valley of Flowers). The next day was sunny and beautiful and ideal for a picnic in the Valley of Flowers. Though we had missed the famous flowers by a month, some smaller varieties still lingered on and covered entire slopes. Our path was crisscrossed by streams flowing from the glacier at the far end of the valley. What a splendid sight. Heaven upon Earth. Miles of green undulating stretches, sapphire blue skies overhead and what a magnificent range of snow-clad peaks and total silence, with nobody around, except us.... It was a completely other worldly experience. Even without the flowers it was such a lovely place to be in, that we promised ourselves another visit during full bloom.

20th Sept (Badrinath). The next day we returned to Govindghat and drove to Badrinath. We spent the evening at Mana, the last Indian town this side of Chinese territory. We walked over the Bheempul, a bridge across the river Saraswati said to be constructed by Bheem in the post-Mahabharata-war days. In the evening we had darshan of the Badrinath temple, after an invigorating bath in the famous



Front view of the Badrinath temple.



A view of the Sangam of rivers Mandakini and Alakananda from our hotel balcony.

Rambada where we had the usual dhaba lunch. For the second half, most of us hopped on to our mules which was just as well since it began to drizzle and to get dark and cold very fast. As we dismounted our mules, our hands despite the woolen mittens were numb with the cold. This was perhaps the coldest part of our entire trip. The next morning the darshan was truly crowded and we somehow managed to complete the circle (*parikrama*) around Lord Shiva in the form

hot springs. Early the next morning, before leaving, we had the heavenly sight of the Neelkanth peak.

21st Sept. (*Joshimath*). We are back at Joshimath and on time to catch the cable car to Auli. The automatically controlled car glides smoothly, high over the green slopes which, during the winter months, are covered with snow and used for winter sports. The view of Nanda Devi and other peaks is marvellous and very clear today which, the car operator informs us, is not often the case.

22nd Sept. (*Kedarnath*). The Kedarnath trip was fun. The trek was long (19 kms) and steep but it was paved and broad most of the way. We walked half way up to a point called

of the hump of the bull. Outside the temple, the view was majestic with snow-capped peaks.

25th Sept. (*Gangotri*). I lie awake and look out from the window next to my bed. The moon is



The snow-covered mountain range around the temple (not visible) at Kedarnath.



The Ganga cascading over boulders at Gangotri.

shining, the sky is clear but it was not so when we arrived here this morning. We had hardly set foot on Gangotri when we heard rumours about landslides which dashed all our hopes of visiting Gomukh. We spent the morning at Gangotri visiting the temple on the river bank. Ganga flowed in torrents and just beside our lodging she cascaded with a terrific speed deafening our ears. It was a real marvel — to witness her flow from her origin and imagining her meandering through the northern Indian plains. After dinner, before returning to our room upstairs, I had discussed with the hotel manager the possibility of going to Gomukh and returning the same day. He hesitated, then added, “It is possible if you start very early, ride on mules and don’t waste time on the way.” I thought this was our only chance and I decided to take it. But when I returned upstairs everyone was tucked in warmly and there were no takers for Gomukh. I was disappointed and unable to sleep. My head was busy planning about the next day.

26th Sept. (Gomukh). I don’t know when I fell asleep. When I woke up it was already late. Remembering the planned trip to Gomukh, I jumped out of bed and started getting ready. Minoti woke up rather excited, wanting to tell me about her dream of Gomukh. Thanks to the dream she had changed her mind and joined me for the trip. The path was rocky and difficult and at a point we had to get off our mules to walk on the narrow

ledge on the mountain side. We reached Gomukh at about 1.30 pm. All along, the Ganga flowed below us and now we were at the point where the



The temple dedicated to Ganga at Gangotri. L to R: Guddi and Chhala.

river emerges from a cave in the rock wall. Generally the wall is covered with snow, but right then it was bare. The return journey was scary to say the least. At Gomukh (height: 3892m) there were

no trees but as we climbed down past Bhojbasa, the daylight vanished quickly plunging us in utter darkness made eerie by the tall surrounding trees. Tightening my grip on the reins I clung to the animal for dear life until we reached Gangotri.

28th Sept. (*Hanumanchatti*). Our next destination was Yamnotri. Private vehicles were allowed only up to Hanumanchatti. The journey there was precarious, the path narrow and full of curves and the condition of the road very bad. As we arrived at Hanumanchatti, there was no hotel in sight. All we could see were a few huts and dhabas. On our asking, someone

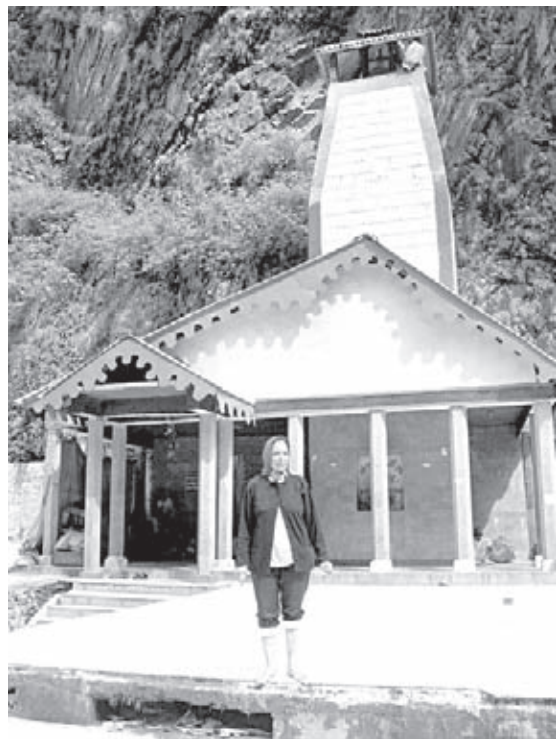


On the way to Yamnotri, along the Yamuna.

guided us through a narrow opening between two huts and down steep steps. There stood the hotel and next to the hotel terrace, the Yamuna hurtled down with a thundering sound, the spray hitting our faces as we approached.

29th Sept. (*Janakichatti*). Next morning we left the Qualis behind and got into a jeep to proceed to Janakichatti. The place was full of slush and mud. For a moment we were all dazed. After the silence of Hanumanchatti, this place seemed a tower of Babel. The place was teeming with tourists, mules, mule-boys, porters and palkiwallas. As we headed towards our hotel, a group of mule boys along with mules in tow followed us until we entered the hotel gate. The view from the hotel was breathtaking with the gorgeous snow-capped peaks glistening in the morning light and on our right the sloping woods hiding the river. The path was steep, dangerous and long but very beautiful. Since this was our last trek we decided to make to the top on foot. It was past noon when finally the temple was sighted. It was fun to boil rice in a cloth bundle dipped in the hot spring.

30th Sept. (*Mussoorie*). After Yamnotri, it was all the way down the mountains in the Qualis. Our last evening and night stop was Mussoorie. We had planned to spend the evening on the famous



A side view of the temple dedicated to goddess Yamuna at Yamnotri. Guddi in the foreground.

Mall Road but this was not possible as we actually ran into a landslide on the way. The mud and stones glided slowly down the slope and made a large enough heap to block our path. After an unnecessarily long wait we turned around and took a long detour to arrive at Mussoorie as the shops on Mall Road were closing down.

31st Sept. (Delhi). The next morning as we descended, we were slowly absorbed by the

humdrum of daily life on the plains — the dust, heat and traffic.

Now back home, we just need to shut our eyes to experience the cool invigorating mountain air, the snow-capped peaks blazing in the morning light and the dark green woods sloping down, vibrant with the murmur of hidden streams. None of us can forget this thrilling and awe-inspiring trip. ❧

DIVINE PLAN

Mangal '80, who is part of the ex-students' group which works at Matrimandir on alternate Sundays, writes about an interesting informal discussion they had with one of the coordinators there.

In an informal discussion during the Sunday Matrimandir work, Mr Victor, a gentleman from Russia and now a seeker in Auroville, told us an interesting finding with regard to Matrimandir.

Some time back, a well-known American architect who happened to have studied many of the religious symbols of the world, visited Matrimandir. He interacted with the team there and before leaving took some plans of Matrimandir along with him. After around six months of research he got back with his findings.

According to him, the Matrimandir structure has in it all the calculations of the “Canons of Golden Proportions” also seen in monuments and icons like the Nataraj, Buddha blessing with his hand, works of Leonardo Da Vinci and Vitruvius ... the list goes on. What's interesting is

that this is one single structure having the Golden Proportion calculations from various religions of the world.



Only one thing the American architect had not understood: the significance of the twelve pillars inside the meditation hall. One more set of plans was sent to him and after his research he felt that there is so much force generated in the meditation chamber that the human body will

not be able to bear it. The twelve pillars, according to him, break that force so that our bodies can sit and meditate there.

What's amazing is that all this was not done after specific planning by the team of architects. They had simply put on paper the Mother's Vision of Matrimandir. This is one of the examples of how the Divine PLANS without PLANNING! ❧

It is like the Force, the central Force of Auroville, the cohesive Force of Auroville.

The Mother (on Matrimandir)

SAVITRI BHAVAN

*Many of us don't know how much Auroville has grown. Some still imagine it as a cluster of huts in the middle of a few fields of red earth. Auroville is now a town with very dynamic activities in various fields such as commerce, education, ecology and culture. If you go up the road that goes from Matrimandir towards Bharat Nivas you will find to your right, behind the shady branches of tall trees, a new structure called Savitri Bhavan. It was started as a place where Aurovilians could meet and study Sri Aurobindo's works, specially Savitri. Over the years it has expanded and grown more complex. **Shraddhavan**, the English sadhika who looks after it, answered our questions about its beginning, its organisation and its various activities.*

How did the Savitri Bhavan start?

We go back to 1994. Suresh Dey, who is now at Pondicherry, was the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation at that time. He said, "As you know, as many people feel it, we should have more and more activities in Auroville focussed on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo." So he used the Darshan time as an opportunity to invite quite a lot of Aurovilians, and to suggest that we should start a study circle on *Savitri*. And some of us were quite happy to take up that suggestion.

I think *Savitri* has been read in Auroville since the very beginning. Some people received blessings from the Mother for reading aloud to groups, for example Narad, Shyam Sundar-ji.... But there had never really been a study-circle. I find that people are hesitant about studying *Savitri* because they feel that the power of *Savitri* is in the mantra, with the concentration on the vocalisation and trying to receive the vibration, that we should avoid too much mentalisation. That's a valid point of view and I hope we have avoided too much mentalisation, but we wanted to understand and appreciate better. So we started meeting on Sunday mornings in different places, wherever a room was available, and reading together, trying to understand as a study circle. We started inviting guests to speak to us: Nirod-da came, Sraddhalu came... other people who were

competent helped us.

One of the members of our study-circle, an old Aurovilian, Narayan (he and I used to meet in the Matrimandir chamber, because we were on the Matrimandir chamber duty together) one day expressed to me "It really would be wonderful if somewhere in Auroville there were a place where



Entrance gate of Savitri Bhavan

all different materials and activities connected with *Savitri* could be gathered in such a way that it would really breathe the atmosphere of *Savitri*, so that even a person who did not know anything about all that, who didn't know who is Sri Aurobindo and who didn't know what is *Savitri*,

if he stepped into that place, he would feel 'Oh, here is something special!' and might begin to be interested." I thought that it was a marvellous idea. Of course, we had in mind that Mother has recorded certain passages, Sunil-da has composed the music, we knew something about Huta's paintings. At that time I thought, "We can't dare to hope that Huta's paintings will come to us, but at least we could have a copy of the published reproductions." We shared this idea with the other members of the group and it was very enthusiastically taken up and in a very short time we were granted a wonderful piece of land for the project.

By the following November 24th, that is in 1995, a foundation ceremony was organised. Suresh De invited Nirod-da, and other people from the Ashram were invited also. And on that occasion, in his speech that day, Nirod-da gave a great importance to this project. I think much more than we ourselves had given. He didn't speak much but he said, "It is a unique idea." He said that it was the first time as far as he knew such a thing was being done anywhere, and that it was a very important work. He even spoke of Savitri Bhavan as a kind of twin of the Matrimandir. So he was seeing it as a place for Sri Aurobindo to be. And he read out some wonderful lines from *Savitri* and invoked the presence of the Master. And as he did so, several people felt, and personally I felt it very strongly, that something very special was coming down in response to Nirod-da's invocation. That intensified my interest in the project immensely.

After that we used to meet under the trees on the site, near to where the foundation stone is. There we had our Sunday gatherings.

The next stage was when another member of our group, Dr. Bina Naik (she is also Ashram-connected and lives in Auroville) suddenly got an inspiration. She said, "It's very important that by the year 2000 something of the Savitri Bhavan should be there." I don't know where she got it from. She told us that her family had experience in raising funds for the Red Cross in their native place in Gujarat. She said, "We can do it, we will organise something." Her parents agreed to help and indeed there was a function held in Navsari.

Hema Malini gave a performance for the benefit of Savitri Bhavan and through the efforts of Bina's family as well as some of the members of the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Navsari, and other well-wishers all over Gujarat, 6 lakhs were raised.

By that time our architect Helmut had given us quite a big plan, covering all the activities that we thought should be part of the place. The activities had been formulated by some of the members, Jai Singh, Lakshminarayan and others. They said, "We will need a place for works of art, we will need a small theatre for drama presentations, we will need a reading room, we will need rooms for re-

search, for classes. We will need a nice big hall for *Satsang*," and so on. Helmut had tried to incorporate all these different functions and proposed a concept, and made a model.

I think at that time the cost for the whole complex was estimated at about 60 lakhs. And the architect, from his experience, said, "If we have half the money then we can make a start." But we had only 6 lakhs. He said it was not enough to start the main complex. But in the plan there was this



Nirod-da (centre) during the foundation ceremony

smaller separate building which we had thought could one day be for a resident caretaker. He said, "Look, we can adapt this free-standing building. We can make it into a multipurpose first phase, then we will see what happens next." So we just set to work.

So the construction was started. And while four or five of us were at Navsari, for the fund-raising event, another part of the team had just put up our *keet* shelter. That came up while we were away. When we came back in June 1998, that was there. And the fact that it was there ... there were cupboards, there was an electricity connection ... made it possible to start the first evening classes. We already had our occasional guest speakers. We had already started our quarterly publication *Invocation*. And now there was a suggestion from some Aurovilians, "It would be so nice if we could study *The Life Divine*."

Wasn't there any place for the study of Sri Aurobindo's works before?

Not organised. Of course, people were reading individually, it is possible that people were meet-

ing guest speakers from the Ashram, after a long break. In Mother's time, She had been asked, I think in 1970, "Can't people come from the Ashram and help us?" And She had sent first of all M. P. Pandit, other people came also, Nirod-da came. But Madhav-ji was the one who came first and he continued right up to when it became impossible. And he helped many, many people. So this idea came again after a break of almost 30 years. Ananda Reddy responded. He said, "Yes, I have always had such a deep connection with Auroville." So he started coming for the *Life Divine* classes. And I started doing something I had tried out in a small group, long back in the 80s — to use *Savitri* as a way for people to learn English. You know, people are interested in *Savitri* but they need help with the language. We had found that it was a marvellous way to learn English, because if you have some opening, the whole richness of the English language is there. If you are open with your soul-opening, it goes very, very deep through the words. So I started doing it. Like that, we started our classes, in the *keet* hut at first. Then by August 1999 this building was completed, and Nirod-da inaugurated it.

Another person who used to come, who gave a lot of support from the very beginning, was Dr. Nadkarni. He was holding *Savitri* study-camps at the Sri Aurobindo Society Beach Office and some of our people used to go there because they enjoyed it so much. Nirod-da used to go there. So the idea came "Why don't we invite him? Can he come and speak to us once?" The first time he came and spoke to our small group. Then he suggested "Look, we do all the study camp there, and for the closing session, I can bring everybody out here." So we did it once, and it was such a huge success, everybody enjoyed



ing in small groups, but when we started *Savitri* activities we noticed that there was quite a lot of interest in Sri Aurobindo's works. And we were

it so much. They brought their own wonderful refreshments with them, then they went to the Matrimandir afterwards, whoever wanted to go. So

the next year we wanted to do it again. So as long as those study-camps continued, for the closing session, Dr. Nadkarni used to give a kind of summary of the whole course and all the people came here. Of course, we could not accommodate them all in any of our buildings so we did it in the garden. And of course Aurovilians came too. And like that we got known. From the very beginning we thought that this place should be open to the general public — that it is not just for Aurovilians but for whoever was interested in *Savitri*. So all those people who came, and whoever asked, we put them on our mailing list and then they got the magazine regularly.... (Actually nowadays we are bringing out two journals: *Invocation* is in English, and goes out all over the world; *Prarthana* is in Tamil and goes out to about 300 addresses in Tamil Nadu. Both of them are sent free on request.)

Which were the major works of Sri Aurobindo that have been studied here?

Well, originally it was Ananda who started with *The Life Divine* and he continued with that up to the middle of 2004. Then amongst ourselves we started *Essays on the Gita*. When we completed our reading of *Essays on the Gita*, we decided to start *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Then we invited Shraddhalu. For the last three years now he has been doing weekly classes on *The Synthesis of Yoga*, which are very, very much appreciated. We have also been studying *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* with Kittu Reddy. And for a time we had a study-circle on English poetry, following *The Future Poetry*.

Does it go in a sequence? If someone joins in the middle...

Of course, we have always done it in a sequence, but it should be possible for anybody to come and join. So these classes are open to every-

body to come and join. People benefit even if they come in the middle. With *Savitri* we started reading on 24th November 1994. And now we are at the third reading. We take time, we take our time. We go into details. It's completely different each time. Each reading has been different. And some



people, not many, have followed it all through, from the beginning to now.

So when you reach the end, you start reading from the beginning again? Surely it must happen that when you reread the same page a second or a third time, it has a different meaning.

Our capacity for understanding deepens.

So...

So then we had this building. Nirod-da inaugurated it in August 1999. By then we had started the first regular courses. In this building we also opened a Reading Room with a collection of books and journals.

This whole process very much interested Huta. I knew her because we used to meet at Amal's place. It was not a close contact, but at least we knew each other. I forget how it happened, but this contact became much closer. I had not realised that she was actually quite anxious about the future of the *Savitri* paintings. There are two series actually. The first one is the *Meditations on*

Savitri, which we have all heard in Mother's voice reading. This work was initiated by the Mother in late '61, and they went on until... I think, the series might have been complete by mid-'65. Mother published the first volumes of reproductions in the early '60s. Then, when they had finished the illustrations for the whole poem, She wanted to exhibit all the paintings in the Ashram Exhibition Hall. And before doing that, She made Huta show Her each one again. Many of them she was asked to retouch or redo. So what is published in those early books is not the final version of the paintings.

After the exhibition in the Ashram was over all those paintings were taken to Golconde and kept in cupboards. I think at first there was a possibility for people to view them. Later on, that wasn't so often, but from time to time Huta used to go over for cleaning, or whatever. She would show the paintings to certain people. And she had not only the actual paintings, she had the Mother's sketches. Mother was giving her sketches and detailed instructions.

One day Huta had said to the Mother, "The pictures are in Golconde, but one day *Savitri* must have her own place." And at that time she says that Mother really concentrated very much and then said, "It will be."

So when Huta heard about *Savitri Bhavan* coming up she felt, "Oh, perhaps this is the place."

Is there going to be a permanent exhibition of them?

That's one of the things that we hope to provide. We are preparing for it. Huta tells us that it was the Mother's wish that one day all the paintings should be on permanent display, in sequence. There are 470 paintings of the first series. And then after that, from '69, Huta had asked Mother to give explanations of the passages which She had read. And Mother said, "If I'm going to explain *Savitri* I want to start at the beginning and go through the whole thing. Not this way." The illustrations were just for selected passages, but She

said that if She was going to give explanations She would like to start at the beginning.

So a whole new set of recordings was done, and new paintings were made. This is the series *About Savitri*, with Mother's commentaries. That was started at the end of '69 and the work went on through 1970, and stopped in the middle of August '71. They reached the middle of Canto 4.

In 1972, for Sri Aurobindo's centenary, the Mother arranged for Her comments on Canto 1 to be published: the passages from *Savitri*, the Mother's explanations and Huta's paintings based on the Mother's comments. There are three more parts to that. It was in the year 2000 that Part Two was published and Parts Three and Four have just come out. As far as I can help Huta with all this work, I am doing it.



Shraddhavan at home

And Huta kept the Mother's sketches so wonderfully. When I saw them I absolutely couldn't believe that they were done 35 or 40 years ago. Huta has allowed us to make reproductions of them to go with the albums of photographs of the paintings. So that's one of the study resources that we have.

People have been very generous and responsive in entrusting materials to *Savitri Bhavan*. In this way we have been able to save certain materials. For example, Nirod-da's recorded reading of the whole of *Savitri*. He made that in the late '80s, early '90s, with Manindra of Gloria Farm.

They used to meet and Nirod-da used to read and Manindra had recorded it all onto audio-cassettes. We were able to digitise the whole set and present it to Nirod-da.

I have seen it on sale as well.

It's at VAK. For Nirod-da's centenary it was brought out as MP3 files on two CDs. But first we copied cassettes for him because he said, "I need cassettes for my classes." And he has the master set with him. The copyright belongs with the Ashram, and they are on sale at VAK.

Some other readings are also available. The whole of Udar's reading was made by the people close to him, and they gave us a set of the CDs. And for Amal's readings, the Projector Room has them, so we could also get that set for our collection.

Has Udar read the entire book?

Yes. He was reading every day for half an hour with a small group, so some of them took it upon themselves to record it.

So there are three recordings that are complete: Nirod, Amal, Udar. And there is an incomplete reading from Nolini. I don't know whether he did the whole thing, but it didn't seem to be with anybody. From here and there, we got bits of it. So this was also digitised, and it is in our collection.

Then for my students I wanted to do my own recording. All kinds of things came in between, but finally I did complete the reading and now it is available as a set of 2 CDs. And we also have short passages recorded by other people, like Norman Dowsett, Rod Hemsell and so on.

Is there any facility for somebody wanting to do research on Savitri, for research scholars to come here and work?

For the time being we try to help people at a distance, or they can use our Reading Room. But we can't give any scholarships or resident research



opportunities yet, although we hope to do it in the future.

Through *Invocation* we are in touch with people from all over the world who send questions which I try to answer, or to find answers to. For example, an Indian scholar in Mexico, who is writing his thesis in Spanish on *Savitri*. For that he had to make his own Spanish translation of some passages. Now that he has completed his dissertation he has been kind enough to send us a copy. Other people have also gifted us copies of their theses, or their translations. So gradually we are building up the collection of materials.

The work continues to grow richer and richer, and we feel that the Blessings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are with us, so long as we are sincere in our dedication. We are tremendously grateful for all the support and encouragement Savitri Bhavan is receiving from *Savitri*-lovers all over the world. ❧

GOLDEN JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS OF THE MOTHER'S INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL (23-4-1956 TO 23-4-2006)

Mother's International School (MIS, Delhi) which we featured in our last issue under the column "Sister Schools", celebrated its Golden Jubilee some days ago on 23rd April. Chamanlal-ji who was present at the celebrations gives us this brief report.

As is known, Mother's International School started with Mother's declaration "A new Light has appeared upon earth. Let this new School opened today be guided by it."

This was the first public announcement of the Supramental Light, which manifested on 29th February, 1956. Also the date 23456 was very significant numerologically.

The Golden Jubilee celebrations of MIS were on three days. On 22nd was the Annual Physical Demonstration: meticulous, impec-

cable and superb — very much a reminder of our 2nd December programme here. Chief Guest Soli Sorabjee was candid and scintillating in his remarks, full of insights.

23rd April being a Sunday, the program was for teachers in the meditation hall of the Ashram. Three ex-teachers along with Indu Didi (the longest serving Principal) and an ex-student Gaura narrated their reminiscences full of nostalgia and emotion.

The School had a photo exhibition "The Golden Years" which covered the developments and ac-



tivities throughout its five decades of growth. In the evening there was a unique program of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" in Mohiniyattam. The



choreography was breath-taking and the movements were as harmonious and swift as in ballet. The mother of one of the students was the main swan and her mother, Bharati Shivajee, was the queen, apart from being the choreographer. Swami Atma Priyananda-ji, Vice Chancellor of the newly started University at Ramakrishna Math, Belur, was the chief guest. He very ably outlined the special role of institutions such as these, founded on great spiritual Visions and



imbued with the force of their spiritual founders. **“These were bound to be beacons of India’s future resurgence.”**

The Darshan day program was in two parts. There was a dance offering on behalf of the parents by the famous dance couple Rama Rao and Vanashree Rao titled “Rhythm and Expression” It was sheer delight in spite of the stifling heat. It was followed by a grand finale: the lighting of lamps by Ashram inmates around the newly completed Ashram block’s fountain and around Sri Aurobindo’s shrine. It was so beautiful and evocative as to keep its memory and fragrance for years to come. The Presence and Grace of Sri Aurobindo and the

Mother were felt all through. In fact their tangible expression in Delhi has all along been the Delhi Branch of the Ashram and its primary educational outfit, the Mother’s International School. The life work of Sri Surendra Nath Jauhar and now his children Anil and Tara Jauhar along with their associates and team of dedicated teachers has been blessed and now starts afresh on the second half of its journey towards the centenary. The lighting of lamps was followed by Prasad distribution and community dinner. On the whole, it was a sweet and heart-warming occasion full of gratitude and joy. ❧



THE GARDEN

This article was sent to us by Jayasurya '80 (Jinu) about the first boarding where he stayed. We realised that for those who came to the Ashram after the 70s, it may be a little difficult to understand the context of the boarding life of those years. So here is a little introduction by Sunayana '79:

Until 1972 not only did boys and girls sometimes live together in the same boardings but also children of various age-groups lived together. In December 1966 a large group of children came from Orissa and were all put together in the "Home of Progress" which had just been inaugurated. This boarding, which is on Chetty Street, just after the Gandhi Street crossing, was then under the charge of Manoj Das and Pratijna-di who were assisted by Jyotsna-di (Mohanty). In all there were 20 children of all age-groups and apart from the seven or eight who had been at the School since 1964 all the others were new. On 16th December 1966, which was the birthday of the boarding (yes, in those days boardings also had birthdays!), all of us children went to see the Mother. The photo which accompanies this article was probably taken just after we had come back from the Mother's room.

In 1966 the children of the boardings still used to eat at the Dining Room as the Corner House had not yet been started. Food was brought from the Dining Room and some other dishes were cooked in the boarding, so we actually ate in the boarding. The Ashram Nursing Home used to be just next to this boarding and for some time Nripen-da, the Ashram doctor, used to send chicken soup for the children who were too thin! On the first of every month all the children would go to the P.E.D. (Physical Education Department) and get themselves weighed. The weight of each child would then be noted by Pratijna-di.

Growing up together in a boarding in those days meant spending a lot of time together. We ate together, walked together to School several times a day and walked back after group activities were over. We played and did homework together. We were all quarantined together when anyone had chicken-pox or mumps. All this meant that we really lived like brothers and sisters and each one felt that he was part of a family of twenty!

I was seven then. I was told by my parents that I would be visiting a garden of flowers — green grass, birds and fish pond. Of course there would be children playing. But when I got down from the rickshaw, to my utter disgust, I found a skyscraper staring at me. I noticed a few heads, barely popping out from as many balconies, placed one above the other. At least those twinkling eyes put a smile on my dampened face. Other ETs must have arrived earlier, I guessed!

I stepped into a new world. Within days I became a member of the family of 20. The hostel transformed into a Home, Home of Progress. How judiciously Mother had named it. We sure made progress — each in his own way.

The three floors having halls with three-sided walls and with windows and doors, offered lots of scope for the play of natural air and light. The grand terrace opening out to the sky pulled us closer to the constellations. "Progress" planted near the gate gave a welcoming ambience to the otherwise still concrete.

The kitchen/dining area on the ground floor was vital for some — the most attractive corner of the building. Apart from serving daily meals, it became an assembly for the thin ones and not-so-thin ones. To maintain a healthy balance, the former were compensated with an extra glass of milk which instead sadly flowed into the latter.

Birthdays had special evenings. They were celebrated with no studies, a game of Hide and



Front Row (left to right): Maurice Patnaik, Pratap, Jinu (Jayasurya), Sunayana Panda, Shiva and Radhikaranjan. Second Row: Niladri, Ashok Panda, Jhumi, Subash Lall (in front of Jhumi), Tuku (Satirtha), Bani Prasanna, Ajit Panda. Third Row: Sachidananda, Siddhartha Patnaik, Gita Lall, Matri Prasad. Back Row: Tejen, Sanjukta Lall, Minoti. Photo taken in December 1966.

Seek and a feast. Everything was done with grace. We the younger lot always waited anxiously for the arrival of Noël. Invariably the eve of Noël was thrilling. We longed for the gifts that would be showered by Papa Noël. However hard we tried to hold our eyes open, we missed the chance of meeting this great human being. But he had his own unique ways of filling the tops of our mosquito nets with the gifts of love. We were curious and mischievous and keen to explore. Home of Progress became the centre of my universe.

At night as the clock struck 9, our ears got attuned to the approaching sound of *khadams* (wooden sandals) beating the mosaic floor. It was the signal for us to leave the day there and then and take a dive into bed. We played dead for a minute. The cot too stopped creaking. Manoj Babu (Manoj Das) would come with his torch, and do his usual rounds. At times the minutes stretched longer and our eyelids, unable to strain anymore, closed for the day. His silence seemed to speak. The Ten Commandments of Dos and

Don'ts got engraved in our Self. We lived in the shadow of values and virtues.

For some of us, his room upstairs was a mystery. We were inquisitive about the stuff inside. There was a 'NO ENTRY' sign nailed in our minds. Later we came to know that the magic room was built with books, books, and books, and not bricks. And he was a writer of much repute. Good Heavens! How did he concentrate with all our antics?

Whereas Apa's (Pratijna-di's) room had action. It was a veritable courtroom. Complaints were heard from both the warring factions — solution applied on the Egos — case dismissed. Equality and Impartiality prevailed in her court. There was always a feeling of oneness. Gradually months became years. We had to move on.

As I look back I realise the Home was truly a beautiful Garden with plenty of plants nurtured with much love and compassion. It was the nursery of my learning, thanks to the 20 siblings. I bet we still carry that familiar flavour and fragrance. ☼

TEHMI-BEN

Sunayana Panda '79 presents a biographical note

Tehmi-ben was born on 17th January, 1917, in Bombay. Her parents, who belonged to the cultured Parsi community, were both doctors and were posted at Bhopal. In those days women had no opportunity to follow medical studies in India. Perhaps this is why Tehmi-ben's mother had studied and graduated in Ireland.

Tehmi-ben and her brother spent their early childhood in Bhopal but were later sent to Bombay so that they could go to good schools. Tehmi-ben went to Queen Mary School where she was taught by good English teachers. Needless to say, she was a very good pupil. The next important phase of her life was the time she spent at St. Xavier's College where she studied English Literature. There again she was taught by the Jesuit fathers. After she graduated she started teaching literature at Sophia College.

Although Tehmi-ben started her inner quest by reading books on or by various spiritual figures of India it took her several years before she found out about Sri Aurobindo. But once she started reading his books she was drawn toward the ideals of the Integral Yoga. She visited the Ashram a couple of times before she took the decision to give up her job and settle down here permanently in 1948.

After joining the Ashram she did not want to teach, as this is what she had been doing for many years already. Although she did not express this in words to the Mother it would seem that the Mother read her mind because the work which she was asked to do was to supervise the carpenters who worked for the Ashram. Tehmi-ben was very happy with this new work. It must have been a relief for her to get out of mental activities. After two years of this supervision work she was given some work at the Library. Some more time passed before she was finally asked by the Mother to teach at the School.

The School was still in its early years. As we know, nothing was pre-planned. Things just happened. The first batch of teachers were sadhaks who were also doing some other work in some other departments. Most of them had never taught before. Tehmi-ben was probably one of the early teachers who had some solid experience in the field of education. She brought a new style of teaching and her students considered it a great privilege to be taught by her. Many of her students became teachers in their turn and tried to implement some of her methods.

One of the many things that she put in place, and from which we have all benefited, is the study of Greek and Roman mythology. She insisted that every student should be familiar with these tales because they form the very basis of Western culture. Whether it is painting, sculpture or literature one can never understand the significance of any work of art unless one knows the story behind it.

Even while she was a full-time teacher she was given the charge of the *Bulletin* office where she looked after the accounts and the subscriptions. She continued to do this work until she could not come anymore to the office. It was a common sight to see her working at her desk when one went to the Ashram in the morning.

Another very important work given to her was the translation of texts from French into English. Tehmi-ben had done her B.A. in French literature so she had a certain mastery over the language. She is the one who translated the Mother's *Entretiens* into English. She also translated Satprem's *Sri Aurobindo or The Adventure of Consciousness*. This work of translation of various texts was of prime importance in a community like the Ashram which was living in a bilingual context. The Mother spoke in French while Sri Aurobindo wrote in English. Therefore there was a constant need to translate from one language into the other so that everyone understood everything. The

Bulletin, with which Tehmi-ben was associated, was a perfect example of this.

Her classes in the School changed over the years. Towards the end of the 25 years of teaching she was taking fewer classes of pure literature and more of Sri Aurobindo's works. In fact, most people remember her as the one with whom they studied *The Future Poetry* and *Savitri*. Those who had her as a teacher before going to the Higher Course will never forget how she insisted on their memorizing pages from *Savitri*. At that time they



all found it a difficult task but invariably everyone has thanked Tehmi-ben in their hearts afterwards because those lines learnt in the growing years have proved to be a treasure for the rest of their lives.

Besides teaching at the School she was also

a guide and a source of inspiration to a group of adults who wanted to study Sri Aurobindo's works. These classes for adults used to be held at Senteurs in the evening, after everyone had finished their day's work as well as the Playground activities. For a certain number of years she read the major works such as *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* with her adult students. But when she saw that these books were proving to be too difficult for them she switched over to *Savitri*. In fact, she went through *Savitri* several times over with them. From the time she joined the Ashram up to the day she passed away, Tehmi-ben lived at Golconde and in the later years her classes were held in her room.

Tehmi-ben was seen by all as a lady whose knowledge was deep and wide. Many also know that she wrote plays and poems but what they may not know is that she was also an artist. At the beginning of her stay at the Ashram she used to paint on the Mother's saris. She also painted, usually roses, on the special birthday cards which the Mother gave to the people who came to see her. She also had the gift of healing, since both her parents had been doctors and she must have imbibed some of their ideals. People often went to her to get biochemic or homoeopathic remedies.

The image of Tehmi-ben will always be stamped in everyone's minds: a slim lady who was always in a white sari worn in the Gujarati style. Her long black hair always hung in a single plait down her back. Her kind eyes behind her round glasses and her soft voice speaking in a measured pace will not be forgotten for a long time.

Once one of her students asked her "Tehmi-ben, don't you ever get bored wearing the same white saris without a border all through the year?"

"People think that white is not a colour." She replied, "For me white is actually a very bright colour."

That was Tehmi-ben! Her mind and her sensibility were a step ahead of others. But she was so self-effacing and discreet that we never knew when she had quietly left. She passed away on December 1st, 2004. ❧

TEHMI-BEN, THE WHITE FLAME OF INSPIRATION

Krishna Dundur '65

I've always admired Tehmi-ben, right from my childhood: the lady in white with her hair done neatly in one long dark plait. She seemed to me someone very in-drawn and intent. She was simple, self-effacing, almost shy, yet firm.

My glimpse of Tehmi-ben, as a teacher, was a strange one. It was like seeing her through a screen. That year, Babu-da, our English teacher (E8) told us that he had requested Tehmi-ben to set the question paper for our quarterly test. We had not had Tehmi-ben as a teacher but we had heard much about her and what an excellent teacher she was. So we felt honoured but apprehensive too.

As it turned out, we were flabbergasted when we saw the questions. I was barely fifteen and had not learnt to scale such lofty heights, nor dive into such fathomless depths! We were happy 'children' romping the colourful meadows of English

poetry, holding Babu-da's hand. But what was this? How should we answer these questions?

After all these years I can't quite remember the questions, but I still remember the impact they had on us. We managed to answer most of them except for the last one. It was a quotation from *The Future Poetry* (I am sorry I can't recall which one) which we had to explain and elucidate with examples. It was beyond us.

We were given a second chance. We were shown the footholds to help us climb such peaks (we were allowed to consult the poetry books) only then did we dare to answer the question. "So this is Tehmi-ben, the teacher," I thought to myself.

Later when we met Tehmi-ben as our own teacher, she told us in her sweet but almost reproachful manner, "You children have softened me down."

She too had not expected that we would refuse to answer that question.



OPENING DOORS

Aniruddha Sircar '56 (*Babu-da*)

While I am on the subject of my teachers, I must mention the teacher par excellence to whom I am indebted for my deep love and whatever little I know of English poetry. An excellent teacher and a strict taskmistress, Tehmi-ben taught us with utmost diligence. Herself a brilliant scholar and a perfectionist in everything that she did (her poems and paintings bear witness to that) she insisted on perfection in our work. And most of her students, including the habitual shirker that was me, strove hard to come up to her expectations. Whether she taught us Shakespeare or Shelley, Francis Thompson or A.E., she could generate such an enthusiasm in us that I for one learnt great swaths of poetry by heart. The subjects that she chose for our essay

writing were always so challenging that many of us burnt the midnight oil and worked for hours on end to produce our masterpieces. Oh, how proudly we would announce to the world that we were Tehmi-ben's students! And when she introduced us to Sri Aurobindo's poetry – the shorter and longer ones to start with, culminating in *Savitri* –

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.*

More than for everything else that I received from her, I shall be eternally grateful to her for opening this particular door to me,

*Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams afar on mystery's verge.*

Courtesy *Mother India*

Now that the ice was broken and our rebellious spirit tamed, we were prepared to launch our boat on more perilous seas with their ever receding horizon. But we were not lost, we had Tehmi-ben to steer us along.

I remember one instance when our creativity was sorely challenged. We were studying "Narrative Poetry". At the end of the discussions she read to us "Christabel", Coleridge's poem which gripped us with its eerie atmosphere and suspense. After that, very unexpectedly she began to tell us a story, "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame," by Anatole France. We were thrilled by this treat. Little did we expect what was coming. She finished the story, waited for a while to let its beauty sink into us, watched us quietly and then said, "Now, you'll write the story in verse form."

We stared at her in sheer disbelief. But very firmly she told us, "I know you can do it. Just try." She was pure, unyielding steel behind her frail appearance.

Well, I wrote a poem that filled three fourths of my note-book. Tehmi-ben was pleased with my efforts. She even read it out to the class. She always told us to be bold and to dare. I did so and wasn't I happy!

I keep that advice in my heart and now in my turn, I try to inspire my students to try, to dare, and I have often shown their efforts to Tehmi-ben. Today, I miss her and the quiet support she always extended to me.

Tehmi-ben has not only inspired me in School but otherwise too: to be bold, to dare, to look for the 'soul-value' of things. ❧

A Mighty Guidance leads us still through all.

Sri Aurobindo

THE TEHMI-BEN I KNEW

by Sachidananda Mohanty '75

She might have been somewhat frail. But there was no mistaking her will-power and strong resolve. Her smile, her spectacled face and the spotlessly white cotton saree,

worn in a typically Gujarati style, lent character to her personality. Tehmi-ben exuded peace and love around her. Shy, modest and somewhat withdrawn, she was a poet of great mystical mould and charm. During 1973-75 I was her student. We had a small class and we met in her office room, next to Nirod-da's in the Ashram building.

By the time we came under her care and spell, Tehmi-ben had gone beyond the study of English literature of the traditional kind. But her love of great literature or poetry was never in doubt. Together, we read Sri Aurobindo's sonnets, *Savitri* and *The Future Poetry*. She read out the lines with feeling and fervour. Her recitation reminded you of the Vedic lyrics or Upanishadic utterances.

As a person, Tehmi-ben was imbued with a strong ethical sense. Not morality as traditionally understood, the rigid distinction between right and wrong, but ethics based on a deeper aesthetic and spiritual view of life. She spoke of the need to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility no less than a disciplined approach to life. About her personal life, especially her career in Bombay, we knew very little. She herself did not speak much.

It was hard to determine where Tehmi-ben's teaching ended and other responsibilities began. Visits to her room, (a rare privilege) in "Golconde" Guest House revealed another dimension



of her personality, that of a Physician. She herself was a firm believer in homeopathy and biochemistry. At "Golconde", one saw her spartan life style and

RISHABHCHAND

A Biographical Note

Rishabhchand Samsukha was born in Jiaganj in West Bengal on 3rd December 1900. He was born into a Jain family and his father was known for the books he wrote on Jainism. Rishabhchand was still studying at the Presidency College when he began to get drawn to the non-cooperation movement. Although he was a brilliant student he left the Presidency College because he did not want to be a part of the British establishment and joined the Krishnanath College at Berhampur and finished his studies in English literature there.

There were, by now, many different lines of thought growing within his mind. Already he had joined the non-cooperation movement and it was in this spirit of wanting to make his countrymen turn to what India herself produced that he thought of starting a business in hand-woven silks of the region. He was very soon entirely in the mesh of the responsibilities of a business and also of raising a family and his outer life seemed full. But his inner life was now looking for a new path that would satisfy his spiritual needs. In the course of his quest he came across the books of Sri Aurobindo and when the book *The Mother* was published, he bought a copy. After a whole day's work he and his close friend Parichand sat up all night reading the entire book and discussing it. This was the turning point of his life and at that moment he knew that he had found what he had been looking for.

After contacting the Ashram and writing to Sri Aurobindo, he made up his mind to leave his established business and his family and join the Ashram. At first he was given the charge of the House Maintenance Service and afterwards

of the Furniture Service. Among the sadhaks he was known as someone who had a clear understanding of the books of Sri Aurobindo and many turned to him when they wanted a point to be clarified. Perhaps it was from this practice of explaining the fine points of the Master's writing that the idea of writing his book *The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo* was born. This book fulfilled the need of those who were looking for a guide to help them better understand and put into practice this new Yoga.

The work for which he is remembered, however, is the biography of Sri Aurobindo which he wrote over a period of ten years. He did not start this work on his own initiative; he was asked by the Mother to write the story of Sri Aurobindo's outer life. Rishabhchand did his own research about the various aspects of the work Sri Aurobindo did in the political field and his participation in the Freedom Movement. This biography appeared in the *Bulletin* in serialized form from 1960 to 1971. Later it was brought out as a book with a new title: *Sri Aurobindo — His Life Unique*.

In the early hours of 25th April 1970 he was found lifeless, on the beach near the Tennis Ground. It was generally assumed that he had committed suicide. What is not generally known is that the Mother had categorically said that this was not true. We bring you here an extract from the *Agenda* where the Mother not only speaks of what really happened but also of a most unusual experience which She Herself went through. We also bring you the text of a talk on Rishabhchand given some time ago by Mounnou, his grand-daughter, and a letter written to her by him. ❧

RISHABHCHAND, MY GRANDFATHER

Mounnou '69

Mounnou came to the Ashram in 1952 at the age of two and a half. She was brought by her parents to see her paternal grandfather Rishabhchand, but the Mother wanted her to stay on. Her grandfather wrote regular letters to her mother to give her news of Mounnou. In one of these letters he wrote about how both grandfather and granddaughter used to go together to the Mother's classes in the Playground and that perhaps it was the only class in the world where such a thing could happen. Mounnou remembers that she was then a little child and while her grandfather attended the translation class, she used to sit on one side and copy a text which the Mother had given her to improve her handwriting.

In this talk that she gave in December 2000 at the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata, on the occasion of Rishabhchand's centenary, Mounnou shares some reminiscences about her grandfather.

As a child, I used to be in awe of my grandfather. As an adult, I am still in awe of him — in fact more so, as I understand him better.

For most people who knew him or came in contact with him, he seemed larger than life; someone you looked up to, someone you followed blindly, such was the implicit trust he inspired. He seemed to tower over people. I don't mean in the physical sense, but mentally and spiritually.

Today, I would like to share with you a few personal reminiscences of my grandfather. My recollections of him go back almost to the time when I first went to the Ashram at the age of two and a half, and when, holding my hand, he took me to see the Mother.

One of my most vivid memories, one that is etched indelibly in my mind, is the Mother's radiant smile when my grandfather went for pranam on his birthdays. This had become a family event, when all present would accompany him to the Darshan Room for pranams. The Mother's smile was all Love, all Grace and would last several minutes. Indeed, my grandfather was most fortunate to have had the Mother's Blessings showered upon him.

His physical traits of cleanliness, method, punctuality meant that everything in his room had a place and each thing was kept in its place.



Rishabhchand with Mounnou (behind him), Astha and their mother

There was the first part of the room, as you entered through the door, which had a table and a

A LETTER FROM RISHABHCHAND TO HIS GRANDDAUGHTER, MOUNNOU

Just as you left here, your childhood flashed before my eyes in a series of pictures. You have forgotten but I remember how we used to play together on the long terrace in front of my room, which has now become a room. We had so much fun, and hilarious laughter, so many jokes and pranks. Then the scene shifted, you grew older and I began to make you learn Sanskrit shlokas by heart so that you might grow wiser. And sometimes little French and later a little English added variety to our entertainments. It was all a heart-warming and for you a mind-developing play. Life was so simple, so innocent, so superbly sunny! The scenes shifted in succession, bringing in their train new openings, new desires, new developments and complex experiences. Childhood melted into adolescence. The wonder, the thrills and the bubbling gaiety of the child-heart gave place to the many branching interests and duties and inclinations of a consciousness coming into a closer contact with the world around. The mind developed its thoughts and the heart its feelings and emotions and the success became more wide ranging and acute. And thus, through a gradual flowering of the being and its faculties, adolescence passed into youth and you know where you are now.



Rishabhchand and Mounnou

But for me you are still the three and a half year old child whose soul shone through her eyes. I shall never forget the radiant smile you gave me when I feigned defeat in your play.

Don't forget, my child, that you are chosen by the Divine. The Divine has called you and the Divine has brought you up and nourished your soul. Not for the life of the moment, the life of desires and frustrations, of fleeting pleasures and recurring griefs and sorrows; but the life eternal, the Life Divine. Not for you the blind wandering in the darkness of the night, but a determined march towards the Light and Love, Purity and Peace and Freedom of the Divine. The glitter and glamour of the worldly life cannot hold the soul that has once been touched by the Divine's Love. You have to discover

your soul, discover the Master and Lover of your soul and pass out of the kingdom of darkness and suffering and death forever. Remember the Mother and your spiritual destiny. Remember and repeat the immortal words of Maitreyi.

येनाहं नामृता स्याम् किमहं तेन कुर्याम्

(what shall I do with that which will not make me immortal?)

So, Aurevoir, my child,
Love and blessings.

November 1967

chair in the middle, surrounded with cupboards filled with books. Books that he read and re-read and used as reference for his writings. For this reason, he didn't like lending books to anyone, but instead asked that they should read them in his room. The second part had a bed next to the window, a cupboard with his clothes and a tiny cupboard for food. The taste of toast that he made

on his small, simple electric two-bar heater with butter and sugar still lingers in my mouth! And if he was eating, it had to be 11.30 a.m.!

I often used to go for walks with him in the evenings. As he got ready, I would sit on his bed and watch him. What I found fascinating was the precise number of times he would run the comb through his hair. Was it necessary to comb thin-

ning hair that many times? I sometimes asked him; he would simply smile in answer. I also remember his sense of humour. One year, Gandhiji's statue was put up on the sea front. Looking at the portly statue, my grandfather remarked that it must be the Pondicherry Government's ploy to advertise the clean, fresh air of its town which helped people to gain weight.

I mentioned earlier his great love of books. He liked me to read them too. Every afternoon, I would sit in front of him and read a story book. When I came across a word I didn't understand, I had to look it up in the dictionary, write down the meaning in my notebook, then carry on with the story. At the time, I found this rather irritating. Looking back now, I can see in this his traits of precision and perfection.

When he walked, he walked straight. When he sat, he sat upright. What he wrote was concise and to the point. There was no *à peu près* in any of his actions. Everything was executed to perfection. Another example in point is when he taught me shlokas on Sunday afternoons. I first had to recite all the old ones I had learnt previously and then learn one new shloka for that week.

There were lighter moments too, when Astha and I played ball games with him on the terrace. It was thanks to my mother's unfailing love and devotion that Astha and I saw another side of my grandfather's nature. He called me Munni and so my mother taught me to call him Dadamunni.

My grandfather had always led by example. His entire life had been a shining beacon. His single minded integrity in the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, coupled with his steadfast sincerity meant that he wasn't afraid to tread where others had not trod before him.

We human beings have a tendency to class as mysterious and irrational anything for which the mind fails to find a logical explanation. Be that as it may. We have the ultimate knowledge imparted by the Mother that my grandfather's soul is with Her. It could not have been any other way.

I would like to end with an aspiration and a prayer from all the family. With deep gratitude in our hearts, we thank you Dadamunni, for showing us the way and leading us on the path of the Light and the Truth. May we be worthy of the Mother's Guidance and may Her Grace and Protection be with us for ever. ❧

“IT WAS ALL GUIDED”

Relevant extracts from the Agenda, 29th April 1970, regarding Rishabhchand's passing.

You know that in the night that followed the Darshan, they found Rishabhchand... For almost a year he had asked me to leave. So, when he asked me to leave (he asked quite in earnest: he was suffering a lot, quite miserable) I did what I always do, I presented his request to the Supreme Lord and said to Him... And then, he didn't leave. He recovered. He recovered and for some time he was much better. But his will to go remained. So then on the day of the Darshan (I think he saw me, I don't know), he disappeared from his room, and they found his body partly on the shore, partly in the water. As it was a public place, the police asked for an autopsy, and it was done: there wasn't

a drop of water in his stomach, which means he didn't drown. And it does seem, according to what people say, that he didn't drown (but I didn't see the body, so I am not absolutely sure), but one thing is sure, it's that he left his body, and another thing is sure, it's that he didn't kill himself... He went out before four in the morning (they don't know at what time — sometime in the night). At four they realised he had gone out. No one heard him leave. And he died, obviously he did not kill himself. So what happened?... He had a bump at the forehead : he fell down.

But he didn't drown, I am sure of that. It's a so-called “accident”, which means he left... You understand, he was really imploring to go, and he

went out — he must have been guided where he had to go.

They told me that Rishabhchand had “committed suicide”. There was in me a categorical NO... I didn’t say it.... Then they told me that the police had demanded the body, and later on they said, “Well, the police found there wasn’t a drop of water in his stomach.” So he didn’t throw himself into the water. And it was the only thing he could have done.

I comforted the little one (Astha) because they came, and Mounnou [the elder granddaughter] asked me... no, she didn’t ask me anything, but there was a question in her eyes, so I told her, “He is all right, my child, don’t worry.” Then she questioned me, and I said, “He’s quite all right, he didn’t kill himself.” — I am sure of that.

But I found it was... it was all guided so wonderfully! It was ...(how can I put it?), to make myself understood, I prayed: I prayed that if it were really possible, well, let him be helped to leave. And that’s what was done (but I had done it the previous time).

It came at the right time.

He had completed his work; you see, the first time when he asked to leave, he hadn’t completed his *Life* of Sri Aurobindo, while this time he had completed it — he had nothing more to say.

He had seen me on the Darshan day. He didn’t choose any other day.

Just when he left, I had...(I didn’t know anything about it, I was in my bed — I don’t sleep, of course), but I had a strange vision. I was someone (and afterwards I thought it was he, I was with him — I say “I” because that’s how it presented itself in the night, but I knew it wasn’t me: I knew it was someone else). The Lord had asked me to come and meet Him atop a mountain; so I went there,

but I didn’t want others to know... (let me add one thing: it was in the night, just when the thing was taking place, which means that even physically, materially I didn’t know anything). I went to the meeting place but I didn’t want the others to see me, so I went to the top of the mountain and... I couldn’t see the Lord. I said “How? He is

there and I don’t see Him, how? He is hiding well.”

And finally: “Now it’s time and I can no longer see Him...” And I went back down — I went back down. I met people and didn’t want them to stop me; then I had some difficulties. I saw people and I felt as if those people, the mountain and everything...were fading away, fading away more and more. And then when the thing had faded away, it was time for me to get up, which means it was 4.30.

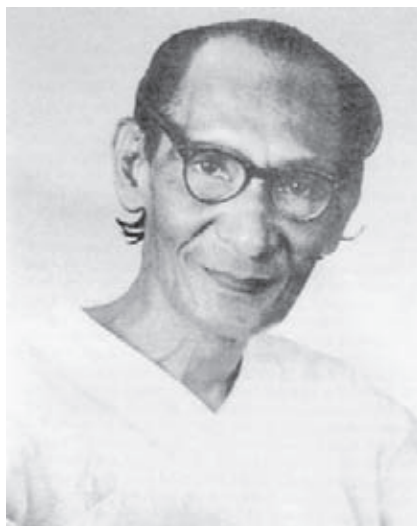
I was very preoccupied by that vision. Preoccupied, I wondered, “What can it

be? What can it be? Someone whom the Lord had asked to come and meet Him but who could not see Him?...”

Then I understood. I understood that the Lord had asked him to come and meet Him... (*Mother gestures as if leading Rishabhchand by the hand*), had him leave his house. But in his physical consciousness (my “dream” must have stopped at the point where he physically lost consciousness), in his PHYSICAL consciousness he could not see Him. Then it became clear!

I had that experience and when I got up in the morning, I wondered, “What on earth can it mean?...” [...] “The Lord asked me to come and meet Him, I went to meet Him and I could not see Him...” — his body left and he saw Him.

And I was identified with his physical consciousness, I felt the anguish he must have felt.... ❧





QUIZ TIME!



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

1. Why was Rabindranath Tagore so upset when he saw the review of his newly published novel "Home and the World" in one of the leading newspapers of Calcutta?
2. Sri Aurobindo was arrested from the house where he was staying on Grey Street. The street has since been renamed. What is it called now?
3. Shortly after he arrived in Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of short stories which were all based on some occult phenomena. This collection of short stories never got published. What happened to the manuscripts?
4. How are Sri Aurobindo's and Shakespeare's names inseparably linked?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the marigold flower which is so commonly seen in all religious ceremonies in India?

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE PREVIOUS ISSUE :

1. *In which book would you find a portrait of Wilfy done by the Mother?*
This portrait, along with many others, is printed in the book of Mother's paintings and drawings. This book was published in 1992 and copies are still available.
2. *Where was the second edition of Prières et Méditations printed? Clue: At that time the Ashram Press did not exist.*
This edition was printed at Hyderabad. The man who ran the press where the printing was done later came to Pondicherry and helped in setting up the Ashram Press.
3. *Who collaborated with Mother to write the role of the Industrialist in her play "Le Grand Secret"?*
It was André Morisset, Mother's son, who collaborated with her to write the long monologue of the industrialist.
4. *In which year was the Mother's electric organ offered to her?*
The first time that Mother played for everyone on her new electric organ was on 29th February 1960, the first anniversary of the Supramental Descent. The first recording of trial pieces was done on 7th February 1960. This means that the organ was received shortly before this.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of the common jasmine?*
The spiritual significance of all varieties of jasmine, in general, is "Purity". There are variations of this name for the different types of jasmines.

A new creation from the old shall rise,
A Knowledge inarticulate find speech,
Beauty suppressed burst into paradise bloom,
Pleasure and pain dive into absolute bliss.
A tongueless oracle shall speak at last,
The Superconscient conscious grow on earth,
The Eternal's wonders join the dance of Time.

Sri Aurobindo
(*Savitri*, SABCL: 28: 330)

