

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



## Working in the Larger Community



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

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

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

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## The Golden Chain

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana Panda '79

Everybody has his or her own idea about which years can be called the “golden period” of the Ashram. Some feel that the best years were when the Mother came out after 1950 and participated in all the activities of the Ashram. People were in direct contact with her as she visited the various departments, went to the Sports Ground, watched the performances at the Playground or the Theatre and was at the centre of all activities. Many others feel that the real “golden period” was in the 60s when the School suddenly expanded at a speed which was a bit overwhelming. There were 800 students, more than a dozen boardings and bright young teachers most of whom had practically grown up under the Mother’s gaze. The School was humming with new ideas, experiments and innovations. There are some people who believe that actually the “golden period” happened much before the children came along and diluted the intense atmosphere in which the sadhana was being done in the 1930s. Personally, however, I have a niggling feeling that the “golden period” is happening right now.

Never before have there been so many people in the world who have turned to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s writings in an effort to find real answers to their real questions. This large and expanded community of fellow-seekers makes us feel “the Ashram” wherever we may be. At the centre, as a shining nucleus, is the geographical point which is the Ashram in Pondicherry. Radiating out from it there is a very wide community, scattered across the globe but attached to it emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

Why this present moment? Because suddenly the world has changed and we are living the kind of life that would have seemed straight out of a science fiction novel only a couple of decades ago. Today we live in more than one reality. Technology, which in the minds of many is somehow unspiritual, has made it possible for us to live in a virtual world while we continue to live in this

physical world. With the help of mobile phones, satellite television and the internet we can simultaneously be in various dimensions. The man who lives in New York can be more a part of your life than the man who lives down the road. All this allows us to be psychologically together, all those of us who are seeking the same truth. Today the family which thinks together and alike stays together, more than the family which eats together or plays together.

Many are perhaps unaware of the great change that is taking place because they were probably waiting for something to happen locally. In reality, it’s happening on a global scale. Fifty years after the first Golden Day one can see that really something extraordinary did happen. The signs of a new kind of world emerging are everywhere. Didn’t the Mother tell us that the more intensely the Forces of Light work the more violently the Forces of Darkness rise up in revolt? If we see mass hatred, terrorism and bloodshed it is a proof that the new Force is at work. The problems whose existence we did not even want to acknowledge are jumping out at us and are asking to be resolved.

In this issue we bring you stories of how people are coming out of their little world and participating in a larger context. The Golden Chain Fraternity’s Tsunami relief work has come to an end and we would like to share with everyone this experience which widened our own horizons and brought us harmoniously closer to those among whom we live. Matri Karuna Vidyalaya in Delhi is making it possible for the children of the daily wage earners to have an access to education because the more lamps we light the more light there will be for everyone. And if a larger than life statue of Sri Aurobindo has been installed in the Parliament House, it is a sign that the country is ready to understand the power of spiritual leadership.

Suddenly the horizon seems to be widening. Let us rejoice that we are alive at this moment and can see it happen. ❧



## RECREATING THE MASTER'S PRESENCE

*Sunayana '79 interviews Lalit Verma '86*

Lalit Verma '86, who owns an art gallery in Pondicherry, was involved with a project of national importance. He was given the work of creating a larger than life bronze statue of Sri Aurobindo which was installed, along with a statue of Swami Vivekananda, in the Parliament House on 23rd August 2006. Although there was already a bust of Sri Aurobindo there, this new statue shows Sri Aurobindo standing and as he was in the later years of his life. The difficulty of the work that Lalit undertook was that there are no photos taken during that phase of his life which show the Master standing. The photos taken by Cartier-Bresson in April 1950 show him in a sitting position. The people engaged in this work had to therefore create the image by inferring how he would have looked if he had stood up. The Herculean task was not only of creating a physical resemblance but also of bringing into it something of his presence. The entire process was done in several steps. First of all drawings had to be made from which a clay model was developed and finally the metal statue was cast from this model. A copy of this statue has also been installed in the gardens of the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata. We spoke to Lalit about this experience of the actual work and, after his return from Delhi, about the unveiling ceremony itself.

### **How did such a big project come to you?**

Jayantilal-da had once asked me to make a bust of Sri Aurobindo. This was then made by us, by Aurodhan. I was completely involved in that

project and I made a bust which went to Nehru Centre in London and another to King's College, in Cambridge where Sri Aurobindo had studied, and to many other places. We made almost 7 or 8 of them. Some copies of the bust might have gone to the people who were connected to the Indian Parliament and it was they who asked me if I would make Sri Aurobindo's statue. First and foremost I wasn't really sure if this was an idea that is accepted, what Mother thought about it.

Then somebody told me that the Mother used to dissuade people from making statues. So I told them "Sorry, I will not be interested in making it." Then some senior sadhak said "Lalit, if you don't make it somebody else will make it and it's better that you do it." I said "Let anybody do whatever they want to do. I would like to just follow Mother's wishes as much as I can." Of course, I was tempted because I was told that several copies of the statues would be made and sent to various important places in the world. Then I came to know of an instance where Mother had actually appreciated one of the statues. She had not

been completely against it. It depended on who was making the statue, how it was done and for what. So, I just thought, let me see spontaneously what I feel like doing, and so when they called me again to ask if I could take up this project, I said, "I'll take up the project but you'll have to give me complete freedom because in case I find that it is not Sri Aurobindo, then I'll stop and you'll just



The finished statue as it was kept in the place where it was made.

waste your time.” And they agreed because they could see that I really wanted to do my best. So this is what I did — I sat with a team of people, I chose a lot of photographs of Sri Aurobindo in his young age and tried to imagine how he would look in his Cartier-Bresson pictures where he is much older, because his body was different, his face was different, his eyes were different. So, do I use the face from that photograph to make him stand up? Luckily I got from an old sadhak of the Ashram all the dimensions of Sri Aurobindo’s body at a later age, the face, the hands, the legs, the stomach and everything. I’m sure it wasn’t a tailor, it was one of the sadhaks who must have done it out of whatever feelings and I tried to follow those proportions keeping in mind that the statue is going to be made out of metal, going to be in bronze. So, I cannot have silky hair. To create that image of the silky hair in metal, or of thin muslin cloth which is draped around the body is not an easy thing. So, first after 8 or 9 months we arrived at a drawing which was Sri Aurobindo standing and which I was satisfied with. In a sense I knew that now I could start. So, when I sent this drawing to the concerned people in the Parliament, one of them said that he went into a trance seeing the statue and he was sure that I should go ahead. So, after that we made around 8 clay models with different artists. And somehow nothing satisfied me until I came across one team to whom I said, “Let us try and if it is not Sri Aurobindo then, you know, we will just stop it and you should not have any ego problems.” This was the final group. They said “Sri Aurobindo is a great man and we would like to try it. At the end if it is not Sri Aurobindo, we won’t mind if you destroy the statue.” And for the first time I could feel a group of artists.... There were two, Vipulendu Pathak and Akhil Chandra Das, along with others. They made me the team leader so that at every stage I was spending probably the maximum time with it and at each stage we were checking and finally they made the big mould all in clay. And I invited people who had seen Sri Aurobindo. Also, I had the good fortune of being able to invite Nirod-da who had been with Sri Aurobindo for several years. Everybody liked it, but for me Nirod-da was the ultimate test, because he

was the one who had been so close to him. So, when I took Nirod-da to see the statue and when he turned and looked at it, his eyes became big and his mouth opened and he said, “*Kono shandeho nei eta Sri Aurobindo*” [There is no doubt this is Sri Aurobindo]. And I recorded that on my camera so that it is recorded for the future and after that I knew, I was confident, that this was fine. Of course, I showed it to many others who had seen Sri Aurobindo. Everybody had their own opinion and they were all positive, but Nirod-da said that there was no doubt that it was Sri Aurobindo. Then I phoned and informed the people from Delhi, who came, saw it and approved. Then we started making the metal statue.

***The clay version was made by one team and the metal was done by another?***

Actually, this whole process was done as a team by around 3 or 4 people — Akhil Chandra Das,



The sculptors working on the metal statue.

Vipulendu Pathak and some people who helped us do the drawings. I was the team leader trying to see at every stage that things were going as they should. In fact, all the computer work, all the drawings I did first on the computer myself because they were sometimes a little stiff. We wanted Sri Aurobindo to look real, as if he was there — as if, if you take one step towards him he’ll take ten steps towards you. That momentum we wanted. The whole attitude behind creating the statue for me was that first and foremost it should have a remarkable resemblance. That’s what they wanted. Second, it should have a very strong presence. These two should be matched with full sincerity in the execution, in using proper materials, and

showing full respect through all the stages, even when there were different pieces that had to be joined together later. So, the whole process was carried out with a lot of respect and love, and a lot of time was spent to see that Sri Aurobindo's presence came through.

***Although the statue was made in Pondicherry, where did the team which worked on it come from?***

It was very interesting. We had a Muslim who helped us. We had Bengalis from Calcutta. People who helped us came from different parts of the country. There were times when we had 25 to 30 people working together. We had to make numbers and everything was created in Kuruchikuppam in Pondicherry. So, the team, I would say, basically was from Bengal. Among the three main sculptors there was a Muslim, a Christian and a Hindu.

***You were the main person behind but these people were actually executing it. So, what attitude did they have towards the whole work because they were not as familiar with Sri Aurobindo as you were?***

You see, my task and Shernaz's task was of seeing that at every stage the right thing happened the first time. When these people started working we didn't want the area to be misused. You know, because artists are artists. We made sure that we were there almost throughout when they were making the statue. And they would have probably copied a photograph, but we created a studio of huge blow-ups of Sri Aurobindo and they were surrounded by these pictures that they were creating. And we put Mother's music to create the right kind of atmosphere. Sometimes we would talk to them about Sri Aurobindo just to instill in them the sense that they also have a great opportunity and they as craftsmen and artists are in the process of creating something which will have a very strong impact. So, our work was of team-leaders who would coordinate and put in our artistic elements, in the way an architect guides the execution.

***How much time did it take from the beginning to the end?***

My memory fails me but I think it took us

around 2 years. We could have done it faster but it took us 2 years because the people in the Parliament House were also very slow, dilly-dallying, you know. But by the time they finally took the decision, we had already done a lot of work. We already had all the sketches. If we have to do another statue of Sri Aurobindo now, sitting or in any other pose, we should be able to do it in 6 months.

***Can you tell us some memorable moments in the process of creation?***

There were lots of fascinating experiences and I will be happy to share some of them with *The Golden Chain* since it is a private audience. There were two incidents in particular. It started raining heavily when we were to make the statue. The clay work was done. I had a keet hut where this work was going on and there were holes everywhere, you know, and when it started raining the whole place started leaking. Even if a single drop had fallen on the clay it would have made a mark. But somehow where they made Sri Aurobindo's statue, not a drop of water fell. And in the morning when I went they said "You know, we were all laughing because we would have to work extra to put it all back." But there was no need, because not a drop fell on Sri Aurobindo. In fact the workers had to all vacate and go into other rooms.

The other incident was that one day I wanted to clean the area, so I took the mould of the statue and put it in the garden. I chose a special spot because I have coconut trees in the garden, lots of coconut trees. So, I put it in a place where coconuts wouldn't fall. No coconuts fell on it, but within 10 minutes, an entire long coconut tree from the adjacent compound fell right at Sri Aurobindo's feet. Just the leaves were touching his feet. It was amazing. I called some of my friends to see it and I have even taken a picture of that scene.

***Anything that you would like to say, Lalit? Anything that I've not asked and you would like to share with us?***

This is something very, very personal but I don't mind sharing it. Once when I was doing 2<sup>nd</sup> December I was asked to hold a ladder for a formation which Batti-da had composed, you know. I don't know what they call it, everybody comes inside and the kids also come at the end.

**“Au revoir.”**

It was “Au revoir” or “Welcome” maybe. And somehow, because I am strong of build, I had to hold that ladder with both my hands. There were other people holding it but in the end they just gave it to me to hold it, the ladder going right up to the sky. And I felt very good that day. It was fantastic, I mean I’m not that sensitive a person to catch a lot of things, but that day I had a tremendous experience, a personal experience. But to tell you the coinciding story.... Mona-da afterwards usually calls everyone and narrates a story. He said “You know, Mother had a vision once. She said that she was coming to us from one level of consciousness to another. In fact she came from the sky and she came right down to where the Playground was. And everyone was there, doing their exercises and there was even a ladder there, somewhere in a corner, but nobody gave her that ladder so that she could come down....” I was hardly listening to the story, but then I realized that I was the one who had been holding up the ladder actually, as a part of the formation in that drill.

And this thought came to me exactly when this statue was actually there, and when I went for the unveiling ceremony. I remembered this story. At that time I was about 18 or so, I don’t even remember how old I was. And now there was this opportunity to become some kind of instrument, to hold the ladder. So, you know, that’s just a beautiful thing which was very personal to me and which I have not told anyone.

\*\*\*

*Lalit tells us that the statue’s unveiling ceremony in Parliament was a short but memorable one. Here is the text that Lalit read out during the ceremony:*

Sri Aurobindo wrote the following in 1949, two years after independence:

“By following certain tempting directions (India) may conceivably become a nation like many others evolving an opulent industry and commerce, a powerful organization of social and

political life, an immense military strength, power-politics with a high degree of success, guarding and extending zealously her gains and her interests, dominating even a large part of the world, but in this apparently magnificent progression forfeiting its swadharma, losing its soul. Then ancient India and her spirit might disappear altogether and we would have only one more nation like others and that would be a real gain neither to the world nor to us.”



Lalit (second from left) with the dignitaries who attended the unveiling ceremony.

And he adds:

“It would be a tragic irony of fate if India were to throw away her spiritual heritage at the very moment when in the rest of the world there is more and more a turning towards her for spiritual help and a saving light. This must not and will surely not happen.”

*The ceremony, which did not last longer than an hour in all, was attended by a large gathering of dignitaries. The unveiling was done by the Speaker Mr. Somnath Chatterji in the presence of the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Mr. L.K. Advani and others. Lalit was struck by how such a ceremony had united even politicians who are usually seen in opposing camps. Many among those who attended had read Sri Aurobindo and had great respect for him. A decision was apparently taken that no more statues would be installed in the Parliament House after this. ❧*



# TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

*Ishita Deshmukh '04 reports on The Golden Chain Fraternity's Rehabilitation Programmes for the Tsunami-affected people in the nearby local communities. This work which had been going on for over a year is now complete.*

**O**n the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2004, disaster struck the eastern coastal region of India, especially Tamil Nadu. The devastating Tsunami took countless lives and destroyed innumerable homes. Though Pondicherry town was more or less unharmed, adjoining fishing communities faced loss of property and a complete disruption of their livelihood. In the midst of this confusion and terror The Golden Chain Fraternity stepped forward to distribute immediate relief materials to the nearby affected villages. Contributions for this work came in from ex-students and others from the world over — there was an overwhelming response. In all, over a few months, about twenty-six lakh rupees were collected. While some of the funds collected initially were used in the distribution of relief materials (see details in our issue dated February 2005), the larger part of the resources remained.

At this point, The Golden Chain Fraternity (GCF) considered its next step. Those most affected by the Tsunami were the fishermen and women, who repeatedly risk their lives to fish in the deep seas. This was their trade and their only skill. GCF therefore decided to use the remain-

ing funds to train the villagers for other vocations, which could be a second source of income in the future. Additionally, GCF resolved to help renovate some of the public spaces and facilities in these villages according to the Mother's guidelines on village improvement. [see box]

The 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Programme started in May 2005. The core team members working on this project were Mangal Kothari '80, Ajit Reddy '76 and Bhupendra (Bhupi) Maru '86H. They were helped by a number of ex-students and others. The team

approached the panchayat of four villages, Kurusu-kuppam, Vaithikuppam, Solainagar North and Solainagar South, offering to train men and women who were willing to learn a new skill. These villages were chosen because these are communities that Ashram people constantly interact with. As and when the projects were thought of and the

## PROGRAMME FOR VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT

*(Notes for a project to improve the living conditions in villages around Pondicherry, written probably in the mid-1950s when Pondicherry became a territory of the Indian Union)*

1. Hygiene, sanitation, cleanliness.
2. Health, physical education, games.
3. Technical training for all local works (farming, crafts, etc)

Choose a man in each village who can teach privately the children of the village reading, writing, easy calculation.

For grown-ups easy teaching on cultivation and crafts.

Elementaries of social life — each one must give some of his time for collective work.

Some very simple and short quotations that can serve as mottos, from Sri Aurobindo's and my writings.

**The Mother** (*Bulletin*, Nov 2002, p. 37)

trainers arranged, the panchayat announced the proposal and those who were enthusiastic, volunteered. Many women also came forward from the Self Help Groups in these villages. These women's groups are very active in these parts and want to take responsibility for improving their situation.





Women learning Carpet Weaving

The Tsunami team also approached several small companies who were willing to teach these villagers, and who would in turn profit from the schemes by getting skilled labour. These companies were either known to the members of the team or were chosen because they were situated near or in these four villages. GCF paid for the training and some of these companies offered jobs to those they instructed. Hence it was a win-win situation for both the parties involved. The skills taught ranged from carpet weaving and tailoring to driving and computer programming. Overall GCF coached about 215 villagers.

### WOVEN PLEASURES:

Twelve women were trained for a year in the art of hand-woven carpets by *Auro Supreme Women Welfare Society*, a registered organisation, training



A donor looks at the Knitted Products

and employing the women of Vaithikuppam and the neighbouring villages for more than twenty years. Their main occupation is weaving carpets of different sizes and selling them all over India.



Learning to Embroider

The members of GCF are unofficially trying to sell the products made during the training period, so that the venture becomes self-sustaining. Moreover, GCF bore the training costs and gave a monthly stipend to the trainees. After the training, all twelve women were hired by *Auro Supreme Women Welfare Society*.

### STITCH WELL:

For the embroidery and knitting courses, 20 women (10 in each course), were schooled for 8 months by *Etcaetera Designs* (Pondicherry) in Solainagar South. Devanand Nayak '89, an ex-student and the owner of *Etcaetera Designs*, coordinated this programme. GCF provided the space and the training materials, as well as a monthly stipend for each student. Some of these women have already got jobs.

### ESSENCE OF LIFE:

*Deepam Candles* trained 11 ladies in the manufacturing of incense sticks for 2 months. A monthly stipend was paid to the trainees to encourage them to learn this skill. Moreover, the Fraternity



Making Agarbatties

paid for the trainer's fees, the raw materials and any other relevant expenses. *Deepam Candles* now provides these women with orders for agarbatties, which they complete from their homes.



Some members of the GC Fraternity team visit the Tailoring Course venue

### STITCH IN TIME:

Tailoring courses were held in 3 villages, Solainagar North (18 women trained), Solainagar South (24 women) and Vaithikuppam (20 women). *Anim Art Prints*, owned by Durga Prasad Pradhan '96, trained the women of Solainagar North and Vaithikuppam. Devanand (*Etcaetera Designs*) was responsible for those from Solainagar South. A temporary training area, a monthly stipend, the trainer's fees, the tailoring machines as well as the necessary furniture were provided by GCF. Now these women have begun taking small tailoring jobs, working from their homes. They are to get regular government work contracts.

### LIGHT & SHADE

*Le Prince Crafts* taught 5 women how to make lampshades. GCF, as always, provided for the trainer's fees, the raw materials, the monthly stipend and any other essential requisites. After the



Learning to make Lampshades



Spoken English

training period of three months, *Le Prince Crafts* employed all 5 women.



### SPOKEN ENGLISH

Apart from providing lessons for manual skills, GCF arranged classes for spoken English in collaboration with Arunima Chowdhury '90, and her language-learning institute, *Emanci*, in the village of Solainagar South. Forty-three students of various age groups were taught for 216 hours spread over 6 months. This programme has not only improved the job opportunities for these students, but has also given them the self-confidence to express themselves without hesitation.

### NETWORKING:

Fifteen boys and girls from the Tsunami-affected villages were trained in diverse computer software programs by *CSC Computers* (Pondicherry). Chaitanya Swain '95 interviewed several youths and finally chose these 15 people. The duration of the classes varied from 3 months to 1 year, depending on the nature of the course. For this programme, the students bore 10% of the training fees while GCF paid the rest.

### COMPUTER CARE

*Brightech Institute* (Pondicherry) trained about 15 boys and girls in different courses such as Computer Hardware, Call Centre Training and Spoken English. For this programme too,





Computer Software Training

Chaitanya chose the candidates. To assure the students' attendance and to motivate them, the trainees were asked to pay 10% of the fees, whereas GCF paid the remaining amount.

### MOVING AHEAD

In some of the Tsunami-affected villages, there were several boys who were partially educated and did not want to take up the family trade — fishing. For 30 such boys, GCF initiated a Driver's Training program. This course would provide them with jobs as drivers in various organisations. The boys gave 10% of the training charges and license fees, while GCF paid the rest.

Along with teaching some new skills to the villagers, the Golden Chain Fraternity created public assets by developing playgrounds on panchayat



Car Driving Course

land. The choice of playgrounds was very appropriate considering the importance we give in the Ashram to physical education.



### PLAYGROUND — KURUSUKUPPAM

GCF developed a plot of land which belonged to the panchayat of Kurusukuppam and which had remained a debris dump for many years. After leveling the place, the GC Fraternity built a volleyball court, left some space for those wanting to play boule and incorporated swings, a sandpit, a miniature slide and a merry-go-round for the children.



Kurusukuppam Playground — Before



Kurusukuppam Playground — After



Vaithikuppam Playground — Before

### PLAYGROUND — VAITHIKUPPAM

This ground, which had been a place for collecting waste, was cleared and smoothened. There is now a volleyball court for the youth, and a pair of swings, and a merry-go-round for the children of that village. Additionally, a small storeroom was built to store volleyballs and other equipment. The villagers also use the volleyball court to play shuttle-badminton.

### PLAYGROUND — PONDICHERRY COUNCIL FOR CHILD WELFARE

This is basically a crèche and many children from the Tsunami-affected villages come to play here. The courtyard in the front of the building had remained undeveloped. GCF laid a lawn, put in a pair of swings, planted some trees and used coconut-tree logs as rustic seats. The whole place has now become much more attractive for the children.



PCCW Playground — Before



Vaithikuppam Playground — After

### DONATION OF GYM MATERIALS

GCF donated some gym materials such as a dumb-bell stand, a bench press stand and dumb-bells to the Youth Association of Kurusukuppam. Young boys of that area exercise there daily.



Bench Press Stand

In Mother's guidelines for village improvement, physical hygiene and the cleanliness of our surroundings are listed as important priorities and necessary for maintaining good health. These also happen to be weak points in Indian civic society and GCF sought to address these issues.



PCCW Playground — After





Toilet Renovation — Before (above) and After

## RENOVATION OF PUBLIC TOILETS

In Kurusukuppam, the public toilets were in a bad condition. The GC Fraternity renovated them completely by tiling the walls and the floor of the toilets and the bathrooms and providing new WCs. It built a compound wall around the lavatories, and on the walls some large paintings were made, depicting the right way to use them and in general how to maintain good sanitation. This project took 2 months to complete and was one of GCF's first village development projects.

## BEAUTIFUL INDIA

In some areas of Kurusukuppam and Vaithikuppam, solid waste was being dumped on the streets and even into open canals, choking their flow. Functioning through Shuddham, an organization run by SAICE alumni and working for the proper management of waste (segregating at source, recycling), GCF took up the task of cleaning up and setting up a waste management network. The project was implemented with the participation of local residents and in association with the Pondicherry municipality. The canals were cleared and efforts are being made to get them covered. In some areas residents volunteered to segregate their household waste at source into recyclable (plastic and paper waste) and organic waste. A temporary shed was built as a waste collection centre, a tricycle was purchased and two people (a man and a woman) were employed for the gathering of waste. The salary of



these employees was paid by the Fraternity for one year. Now the movement is sustained by the local residents and Shuddham itself.

## PATTIPULAM WATER PROJECT

Salvanakuppam, a village under the panchayat of Pattipulam, is 52 kms from Chennai (near Mahabalipuram) on the Bay of Bengal coast. 135 families here were affected by the Tsunami. The village pond that met their fresh water needs was in bad shape and their drinking water was contaminated. Working through Shuddham, GCF helped clean the pond and constructed proper boundary walls to prevent future contamination. This was the only major project taken up outside the Pondicherry area.



Beautiful India Programme — Segregated Waste Collection

These were the various projects of the Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Programme. The project team members learnt enormously from this endeavour. At first the villagers were reluctant to accept The Golden Chain Fraternity's help, because they felt as if they were being offered charity. But once the members asked for their advice and took into account their wishes, the villagers felt that they were a part of the team and cooperated wholeheartedly.

As most people in these local communities do not understand the distinction between The Golden Chain Fraternity and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, GCF's aid has created a lot of goodwill in the hearts of the villagers for the Ashram. This again reminds us of the responsibility we bear as ex-students, as we are so often seen to represent

the Ashram even if we are not conscious of it.

Many NGOs and other organisations have poured in money for those affected by the Tsunami, but most of the money has not created any long-term benefits. The Golden Chain Fraternity's training programs and village development schemes were very much appreciated, because they were well thought out, were carefully followed up and directly affected the lives of the inhabitants of those villages. Actually, everyone who was part of this project benefited from the experience; some got a chance to improve their means, while others learnt to be sensitive to the cause of the city they live in. Ultimately, a disaster led to a greater understanding and concord between the members of the Golden Chain Fraternity (the Ashram) and its neighbours. ❧

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## LE CHEF

*Voici une histoire racontée par la Mère lors d'un cours de français pour les enfants. Il est évident, et nous le comprenons maintenant, que l'évènement dont elle parle était un tsunami. Tara, qui était la monitrice de la classe, avait rédigée cette histoire dans son cahier. La Mère avait lu et corrigé ce texte.*

**I**l y avait au Japon un petit village qui se trouvait au bord de la mer. Des deux côtés de ce village il y avait deux collines. Sur une de ces collines on voyait un temple Shinto, et sur l'autre la maison de Hama-Guchi-Gohé, le chef du village.

Hama-Guchi-Gohé était aimé par les gens du village pour sa sagesse, ses services, sa générosité et sa bonne attitude envers eux. C'était un riche cultivateur mais maintenant qu'il était devenu vieux, car il avait plus de cent ans, lui même ne pouvait plus travailler, mais son fils travaillait dans ses champs. Hama-Guchi-Gohé était aimé et respecté par les gens du village qui voyaient en lui leur grand chef, et venaient à lui pour être conseillés.

Dans ce petit village vivaient presque cinquante personnes, qui étaient simples et honnêtes. Leur principale occupation était de pêcher dans la mer ou de cultiver.

Un jour qui était jour de fête de leur religion Shinto, tous les gens du village étaient occupés à décorer le village et le temple. Ils décoraient leurs

maisons avec des lampions colorés et dans les rues ils pendaient des séries de lampions sur des bambous.

Le vieux Hama-Guchi-Gohé qui ne pouvait pas descendre la colline s'assit dans la véranda de sa maison avec son petit-fils Choshiro pour voir tout ce que les gens du village faisaient en bas; et il pensait à son enfance. Toutes les autres personnes de sa maison étaient parties au village pour prendre part à la cérémonie.

Soudain Hama-Guchi-Gohé s'aperçut que la mer s'éloignait vers l'horizon. Tous les gens du village, en voyant cela, étaient tout étonnés et amusés; et comme des fous ils coururent vers la mer. En cinq minutes il n'y avait plus personne dans le village. Tout le monde était parti vers la mer qui s'était éloignée presque de trois kilomètres.

Hama-Guchi-Gohé se souvint de ce que son grand-père lui avait raconté: c'était quelque chose de semblable et cela s'était terminé par une catastrophe.

"Je n'ai pas beaucoup de temps", pensa-t-il. "Il

faut que j'appelle tout le monde sur la colline. Si j'envoie mon petit-fils, cela lui prendra beaucoup de temps pour aller les appeler. Et si je l'envoie sonner la grande cloche du temple, tout le monde reviendra; mais Choshiro prendra longtemps pour descendre la colline et aller sonner la grande cloche."

Ah! Soudain il eut une idée. Il envoya Choshiro chercher une torche.

Au Japon les gens gardaient avec eux toujours des torches prêtes; parce que de temps en temps venait un orage, un typhon, et à ce moment toutes les lumières s'éteignaient et on pouvait seulement allumer ces torches.

Choshiro apporta une de ces grandes torches. Hama-Guchi-Gohé alluma la torche et alla derrière la maison où il y avait une grande quantité de riz entassé. Ce riz était produit en une année par ses champs. Avec la torche il commença à mettre feu au tas de riz.

En voyant cela Choshiro se mit à pleurer et à crier que son grand-père était devenu fou; mais tout de même Hama-Guchi-Gohé était calme et continua à enflammer les tas de riz l'un après l'autre jusqu'à ce que tous les tas se mettent à flamber.

Quand il eut fini il se retourna vers la mer et regarda avec intérêt tout ce qui se passait.

Le feu brûlait violemment et les flammes bondissaient vers le ciel.

Les gens du village en voyant le feu commencèrent à retourner vers le village pour sauver la maison de leur cher chef.

En voyant le feu les prêtres qui étaient dans le temple sur l'autre colline, sonnèrent la grande cloche, et tout le monde commença à courir.

Les premiers à venir furent les hommes forts du village qui montèrent la colline et immédiatement voulurent éteindre le feu. Mais Hama-Guchi-Gohé le leur défendit et leur demanda d'attendre un peu. Les hommes furent très étonnés, mais parce qu'ils respectaient leur chef, ils restèrent silencieux. Choshiro, le petit-fils continuait encore à pleurer, et il raconta à ces gens tout ce qui était arrivé; il leur dit que son grand-père était devenu fou.

Maintenant on voyait les enfants qui montaient la colline pour aider les grands comme ils le pouvaient. Enfin vinrent les femmes et les

vieillards du village pour savoir la cause du feu dans la maison de leur chef.

"Tout le monde est-il venu? Personne n'est resté en bas?" demanda Hama-Guchi-Gohé leur chef.

"Tout le monde est venu," fut la réponse.

Alors Hama-Guchi-Gohé montra la mer avec son doigt et dit, "Voyez, pourquoi j'ai mis le feu à mon riz".

Tous les yeux se tournèrent vers l'horizon. La mer qui s'était éloignée, revenait avec une force terrible et un grand bruit. La première vague entra dans le village et détruisit toutes les maisons et tout ce qui se trouvait dans le village. Elle avait tant de force qu'avec un grand bruit elle se heurta contre la colline et un peu d'eau éclaboussa les gens qui étaient en haut. La deuxième et la troisième vagues emmenèrent avec elles tout ce que la première avait détruit. Après ça, la mer se calma lentement. À la place du village il restait seulement un grand espace vide. Tout le village était détruit mais tous les gens étaient sauvés, grâce à la sagesse de Hama-Guchi-Gohé.

Les gens du village le remercièrent beaucoup. Mais il était devenu pauvre. Tous ses trésors étaient brûlés. Les gens voulaient l'aider mais ils ne le pouvaient pas, parce que tout ce qu'ils avaient, était détruit par la mer.

Hama-Guchi-Gohé était très content parce qu'il avait sauvé la vie de cinq cents personnes.

Quelques jours plus tard quand le gouvernement sut la condition du village, il donna l'aide nécessaire pour rebâtir le village.

Les gens du village n'oublièrent pas ce que Hama-Guchi-Gohé avait fait pour eux. Et maintenant encore, les grands-pères racontent à leurs petits-fils l'histoire de Hama-Guchi-Gohé et comment il a sauvé la vie de leurs ancêtres.

Ce n'est pas facile de devenir un chef. Un vrai chef est toujours occupé du bien-être de ses concitoyens. Il donne son temps précieux, sacrifie son confort personnel et sa satisfaction, tire à lui tous les dangers et toutes les difficultés, utilise ses richesses pour le bien des autres, et même est prêt à sacrifier sa vie pour le bonheur de ceux qu'il gouverne. Son seul plaisir est d'aider et de servir tous ceux qui dépendent de lui comme Hama-Guchi-Gohé avait fait pour ses cinq cents compatriotes. ❧

# MIRAMBIKA FREE PROGRESS SCHOOL

*There are many schools in the country inspired by the vision of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but Mirambika is one of the very few to actually try to implement the radical principles and methods of Free Progress. Gopal '90 presents an in-depth feature on Mirambika in this, its silver jubilee year.*

As I enter the school building I am struck by its open plan: walls don't go up to the ceiling, there are no doors, passages interconnect all the spaces, lots of courtyards which invite you to come out into the sunshine. In fact the building and garden come together in a way that allows a constant relationship with the trees, with the breeze and the light, the sounds of the birds, the wideness of the sky.... Then I see the children. First some of the younger ones: it's a batch of eight or ten with their teacher, learning some steps put to music. They are brightly dressed — no uniforms here — and seem happy, energetic, intimate with their teacher, completely at home in school. For a moment I feel like I am visiting Delafon.... But no, this is not SAICE. I am in Mirambika, the Free Progress school located in the campus of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch, in South Delhi.

### HISTORY

The story of Mirambika began in October 1980 when a conference on education was held in the Delhi Ashram in which all the Sri Aurobindo schools from all over the country — about 100 of them at that time — participated. Among the

people who attended were Prapatti-ji, Chhote Narayan Sharma and Madhusudan Reddy. Tanmaya-da was also present. The conference turned out to be very inspiring and it was strongly felt that if the integral education as envisaged by the Mother

and Sri Aurobindo is to be realized, it will need teachers who understand the principles on which this education is based and are able to implement the challenging and much talked about concept of Free Progress. It was decided that an institution for training such teachers should be started. The natural choice for locating such a

teacher training programme was Pondicherry — in the proximity of the Ashram and SAICE, with all its human resources and experience in the field. This was not possible however and so the Delhi Ashram, which had a large available campus, became the venue. The teaching could not be merely theoretical, the teachers needed to actually see Free Progress in action, actually practice it — a Free Progress school had to be created.

Neeltje, a Dutch woman with a background in education and psychology who lived in the Delhi Ashram at that time, was asked to start it. It was not going to be easy. Just the practical difficulties were daunting. A building had to come up in a few



The Inner Courtyard



months and cement was in short supply in Delhi at the time. Skeptics felt it would be impossible



Celebrating the Silver Jubilee

to get students — no Delhi parent would be willing to risk putting their child in an experimental school which still didn't exist and which would have no affiliation to CBSC or any Government Board and would provide no certificate. Incredibly one after the other things fell into place. Just enough cement came and a beautiful building-garden supervised by Mathijs, Neeltje's husband, came up. Neeltje, with only the help of a brochure, was able to convince some young parents, whose heart broke at the thought of their children's beautiful inner world being crushed by formal education, that they should enroll their children. The time for a Free Progress school had arrived. Remembers Neeltje, "We were ourselves very surprised, it was really Mother's Force at work, and that is why I took it up. Also I meditated on it and twice Pavitra-da came in my dream telling me I had to do this. Then I was sure." So in July 1981, that is 25 years ago, Mirambika opened with fifty-seven children and ten teacher-trainees who had come from Sri Aurobindo schools, mainly from Orissa.

Within a year of the inspiring conference everything had worked out. Tanmaya-da, who had been a guiding force, came for two months and took classes for the trainees every day. He was excellent at inspiring people and conveying the essence of Free Progress. Very soon Mirambika

grew in scope and confidence. Today, although having just about 140 students (from Nursery (age 3½ +) to Class VIII (age 13½)) and 24 teacher-trainees, Mirambika has made its mark as a very significant experiment in Free Progress Education.

## PRINCIPLES

The aims of Free Progress Education are completely different from those of formal education. Instead of attempting to train the student in certain skills and cram certain information into him to make him fit for a job, it believes that the principle goal of education — and of life — is the growth of consciousness. It provides an environment for a natural flowering of the child's entire personality and especially for the awakening and coming forward of the psychic being.

Mirambika believes that every child has innate knowledge. Just as every infant has the capacity to walk but initially his legs don't have the strength to obey him, so too in other fields the child has the potential, and has to develop his instruments, in his unique way, and learn to express it. The curriculum offers a wide variety of possibilities and



Learning to Meditate

activities so that the uniqueness of each child can be nurtured. In this way Mirambika facilitates learning that is self-motivated and self-directed, and from a young age the child learns to make choices and be responsible for them. Through creating activities by which the child discovers

# A Parent Speaks

*Mirambika demands a conscious involvement from the parent in the learning process. In a Free Progress context in particular, tactful nurturing by parents can spell the difference between “success” and “failure”. What is endeavoured in school has to be reaffirmed at home and vice versa. Gautam Chikermane, a journalist, and father of 8 year-old Meera who studies in Mirambika, chatted with us about raising a child the Free Progress way.*

## CHOOSING MIRAMBIKA

We were looking for schools which are gentle on the child. We didn't know about Mirambika. It so happened that one rainy day my wife gave a lift to Partho, who used to be principal of Mirambika then, and our neighbour. While talking he mentioned the school and said, “why don't you come and have a look”. We went around Mirambika and fell in love with it — the ideology, the place, the people. We decided that this is where we wanted Meera to study, this is where she belonged and through her where we belonged.

Six months later we were given a kind of test to check whether we were suited for Mirambika.

We were quite nervous taking the test. It consisted of all kinds of existential questions. For instance: “If you had all the money in the world what would you be doing?” Each parent had to give the test individually. Fortunately, we cleared the test and Meera got admission. In the next three years we read a lot of books written by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo about education, the mind, psychology, life itself, and our conviction that we had made the right choice grew.

Mirambika is not an easy school to live with. You need to have an absolute conviction about its philosophy, its spiritual and material base, you need to be in harmony with Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's views, particularly on educa-

tion — that it is from near to far, from inside to outside. To derive the best out of Mirambika, parents themselves have to become children, students. Mirambika encourages you to go deeper within yourself and find that child laughing delightfully within you. It spills over into all aspects of your life, including the



Mirambika Free Progress School Building

way you want to raise your child — it tells you for instance that “your child will become who you are, not what you want him to be”.

Not many parents can last this — this choice of embracing uncertainty as a way of life. Either

the ability to become inwardly quiet, a process of self-discovery and self-evaluation begins. This self-awareness opens up the quest for the true aim and significance of human life as a lasting source of inspiration.

## PRACTICE

A school day in Mirambika starts at 8:15 am and continues till 3:45 pm. The younger children start with a collective breakfast. For the children of eight years and above the morning begins with

sports. Children are all on the field doing vigorous exercises followed by a different sport each day. At 9 am everybody returns indoors and the next half hour is spent dusting, mopping, tidying and beautifying the classrooms. (Sports, having a proper meal, cleaning one's surroundings are maybe the only things which are mandatory in Mirambika.) At 9:30 am there is a short concentration, consciously connecting the inner and the outer life, setting the pace for the day. After this concentration it is project time.

the uncertainty goes or the parents go! For us it was not a question of courage. There was also no moral high. It was the natural course of things. And now the school has become a natural extension of the house and the house a natural extension of the school.

### PARENT-TEACHER INTERACTION

In many ways the education is not just for children but also for parents. Especially for the first three years there was a lot of interaction with the school. We were to become familiar with the philosophy of the education. There were workshops, discussions with other parents. Every quarter there would be teacher-student meetings. Parents, sub-divided into four or five groups, would speak on physical, vital, mental education. The *diyas* (teachers) work extremely hard and that comes from something deep within them.

Every year the curriculum is fixed after discussions with parents to find out what the child needs. But the school does such a thorough job that we are not really needed so much. In every meeting with the *diyas*, after discussing this, that and the other, we tell them, that just the fact that Meera is flowering so beautifully shows that we are indeed blessed, that there is nothing we can give to her but a Mirambika-like atmosphere.

Picture a group of 20 little children in a circle with their teacher and two young teacher trainees. Maybe a child brings up the subject of his pet dog or the teacher raises a topic and introduces it in all its aspects. In the hours that follow teachers and children discuss the subject, play, work and learn together. There are various activities which might be incorporated. The children choose what they want to do — it could be drawing or hand-work, or doing a science experiment, learning mathematics on the abacus, reading books in the

### MORE COMPLETE EDUCATION

I'm not worried about how Meera will fare after Mirambika. I think statistically Mirambika students do academically as well or as badly as students from other good schools. But they are more happy, contented. Their skills are more rounded, more in tune with what is needed in the real world. They learn to learn — the most critical thing in today's Knowledge Economy. They are not like so many products of the traditional education — people with great minds and weak bodies, people with great IQs and low EQs, having learnt one aspect of a subject but without having learnt to constantly learn which, as I mentioned, is the need of

the hour, given that knowledge in all fields is changing so fast.

Today I find Meera very happy and self-confident. There is a sense of the spirit, the depth of the soul. Most important, she loves Mirambika, she loves going to school so much. She can't even conceive of moving to any other school — not even your Ashram School in Pondy. I sincerely hope and pray that Mirambika which so far is only till the 8th standard goes higher, till at least the 12th standard — if not college and university. This is a unique school, it must be nurtured, must be studied. The world needs millions of Mirambikas today.



Physical Demonstration

library, or baking cookies, or carpentry, or singing or dancing. The little ones may want to go into the garden to catch and feed the rabbits or watch the ducks in the pond.

As the children grow older they take more responsibility. They can organize their day as they wish to. They can work alone, or in a group. They often work on individual projects that they have chosen for themselves and planned together with a teacher. For two hours at a stretch they are engrossed in discussing, researching, creating....



As a former student remembers<sup>1</sup>: “We studied by doing projects on our own, using teachers as resource persons. These projects could be on ab-



Lunch Time

solutely anything! That was entirely the students’ discretion. I have done projects on bizarre things like Monsters! Rocks! Food! Movies! Houses! And it was the teacher’s job to chalk out a curriculum in the purview of this topic.... So, in the ‘monsters project’ I ended up reading a lot of legendary stories of different cultures. I learnt the art technique of papier maché, and by the end of it I had a very well-formed opinion of my own on monsters! I was all of ten! Similarly, in ‘rocks’ we ended up building a rock garden, with a slide made of cement (which we hand-crafted ourselves). In ‘food’ we had different people each day coming and teaching us to cook food of different ethnicities!”

Many of the projects entail interesting field trips. For instance the children have been to Safdarjung Airport when studying planes, to the Egyptian embassy while researching the pyramids, or to a stud farm to know about horses.

The Project Method may be a fun way to learn but at the end of the given period (it could be a week or two) the child has to write out what he has learnt, what he has experienced. After all the activities, the field trips, the collecting of information from the well-equipped Resource Centre, the library and the Internet, he has to give in a decent report. Sometimes a collective project-work done

in depth can lead to something more. To quote the former student once again: “We once did a play on the Mughals and the Delhi Sultanate, because for weeks we had been doing a project on Medieval Delhi. My medieval history is so good thanks to the fun way of learning that made me remember each detail.”

While the children are bubbling with energy there are also moments of quiet poise, whether it is concentrating with Mother’s music or chanting OM or doing yogasanas. There are other moments of silent interaction with nature or of listening to a beautiful story or of having a personal chat with the teacher to analyse a fight with another child.

Before lunch children evaluate their morning’s work and attitude. At twelve, everybody heads to the dining hall for a wholesome meal. After lunch they wash up, Corner-House-style. In the afternoon the programme is a little more structured, specially for children in the last two years of Mirambika who must learn the facts and figures that will equip them to enter the “real world”.



A Class Room

This “training time” is devoted to subject-specific learning like English, Hindi and Mathematics. Science textbooks are also introduced in later stages.

At the end of the day there is again a concentration and in silence all go within, integrating their experiences of the day. Before going home the children have a glass of juice with a snack, happily chatting together in a circle under the trees. In this way they are ready for the transition to their homes.

1. Quoted from “A Tribute to Mirambika on its 25th anniversary” by Sarandha which appeared in *The Awakening Ray*.



## TEACHER RAPPORT

Like SAICE, Mirambika has created a happy, loving environment for children. The fact that the school is small, that there are not more than 18 children per class with three teachers, and that the teachers remain with them continuously for most



Cultural Programme

of the day (and through the year) makes it almost like a family.

Remembers the former student, “On birthdays, the whole school would be wishing the birthday child! If some kid made the grave mistake of bringing chaat-masala to school, the whole school would end up running after her/him!” “Classes” were very informal: “We sat on the floor, in a circle, not in rows and columns.” About their teachers, *diyas* as they are called (amalgam of *dis* and *bhaiyas*) she says, “they were our friends, we joked with them, ate with them, played football with them, went to their houses, they came to ours. They were one of us.”

*Diyas*, who have a constant and close interaction with the children and have to constantly seek to understand them and involve themselves in their pursuits, have to be “there” 100% of the time. Remembers a parent: “I’ve seen a patient *diya* stay with a child for a long time, encouraging him to get over the fear of climbing a tree.”

## DISCIPLINE

The question of discipline is always crucial in any learning context, much more so in Free Progress. In this education there is no externally imposed discipline, no coercion, scolding or

punishments. These are replaced by a constant encouragement to develop an inner self-discipline, in other words a growing sense of responsibility, sensitivity and maturity, a persistent effort to master oneself.

The idea is that there is a basic goodness in every child and that freedom develops the power of discrimination and ability to act upon it. Learning to discriminate, understanding our nature, becoming sincere, is a process from within to without, and cannot be imposed from outside. Learning to discriminate means to be able to say “no” to indulgence, “yes” to beauty, “no” to carelessness, “yes” to courage. By being sincere is meant the constant effort to act from our highest level. When a child realises that he is responsible for his own progress and learning, he begins to act out of conviction and not compulsion, creating an “individual” in the true sense of the word.

There are times when freedom turns to licence — often because part of the child wants to revolt, either because of an earlier suppression or as a cry for attention. Maybe sometimes experimenting with darkness is necessary for ultimately consciously choosing and owning the light. Almost always though, the individual realises that he is paying a price for indulgence and aggression by a loss of inner and outer harmony. Children, while



Celebrating the Silver Jubilee

being given a choice, have to be constantly monitored, made aware of their actions and their motives, shown better alternatives — a process that demands the constant and ongoing involvement of parents and teachers.

## EVALUATION

Mirambika does not conduct conventional tests or exams at any stage. Evaluation is continuous and non-judgmental, as much from the heart as from the head, and meant as a feedback system mainly for the child's own use and as a pointer to the teachers and parents for further planning.



Rappeling down a steep wall

In his individual meetings with the teacher, the child assesses his own work and attitude; there is also self-evaluation on completing a project and regular goal setting. Twice a year, the progress and growth of the child in all the aspects of his being (physical, vital...), and in the group context, is sent to the parents who are then invited for

detailed discussion. The progress report, which is descriptive, personalized, and sometimes very informal, also mentions what the child has studied.

Educators know that evaluation techniques strongly influence the process of education. For Mirambika the stress has been shifted from children competing among themselves, to each child understanding and addressing his own inadequacies, capacities and qualities. Because, for Mirambika, the child is not an object to be labelled and graded, but a living soul to be guided.

## AFTER MIRAMBIKA

Mirambika stops at the 8<sup>th</sup> standard when the child is about 13 or 14. The student is then given a transfer certificate and shifts to another school. While the ability to adjust to formal education and the examination system varies from child to child, it is never very easy. These days to address this difficulty, Mirambika is incorporating more curricular inputs in the last two years

and towards the end, the parents are also starting tuitions at home so that the children catch up on their studies.

And how do Mirambika children compare to children from ordinary schools? A study by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the highest educational policy-making body in the country, came up with interesting observations.

Mirambika children, it concluded, are armed with confidence, they come forward to do what they want without peer pressure, accept responsibility for their own decisions and analyse their own actions. They are frank, generally don't fib or lie, are optimistic, adventurous, resourceful, practical and dynamic (because Mirambika provides enough space to the child to experiment and learn from mistakes). They have leadership qualities and are good at group work. They are very open to sharing notes etc. and they influence others in the class. Mirambikans are independent learners with broad perspectives — used to seeing things from different angles through projects related to real life experiences. They are thinking individuals with good reasoning and grasping power and original ideas. They enjoy learning, are information seekers and prefer to clear a concept before moving further — they are in no unnecessary hurry. They are friendly and cooperative, lively, like to interact, are sensitive, honest and down to earth — with a respect for manual labour (due to experiences in cleaning, sweeping, washing their utensils).

On the other hand some teachers don't appreciate their non-conformist, outspoken ways, finding them over-confident and rude, "They don't have respect for their teachers, and they say whatever they feel like."

When it comes to academics, with a year of preparation and orientation for transition from Mirambika to the traditional teaching-learning-evaluation system, the students are able to adapt. Whatever weakness there is, especially in Hindi, Sanskrit and written work, and in the ability to take tests and prepare for exams, is gradually taken care of. Says Tara, "People know we don't have

*continued on page 22...*

## TEACHER TRAINING

Mirambika was first conceived as a training ground for teachers to understand and practice the methods of Free Progress education. Today the teacher training programme remains an essential part of Mirambika's functioning. Radically different from a formal training set-up, the Mirambika Teacher Education Institute as it is called, provides an environment where trainees can themselves develop integrally and where, from the very start, theory and practice are fully integrated. The trainees apprentice at the Mirambika school, helping the senior teachers and learning to become Free Progress teachers themselves.

The teacher-training courses include teaching of arts and crafts, games and exercises, puppetry, school management, integral education, self-development and child-psychology. The theory is taken up in seminars, group discussions and workshops. The learning methodologies aim at all round development, self-awareness, and learning to learn. The Teacher's Training Wing also runs short duration courses for in-service-training of teachers. During the holidays Mirambika sends teachers to schools in Orissa and elsewhere to provide training.

The Institute's courses are recognized by the National Council for Teacher Education, but in order to maintain independence in selection of candidates and course material, there is no affiliation to any board.

The Institute takes a maximum of eight new teacher-trainees a year. At any given time there are not more than 24 trainees. They live on the Delhi Ashram's campus, have their meals there, and are completely involved in its activities starting early in the morning and sometimes going on till late at night. Physical education and *Shramdan* are compulsory. They also help

in organizing the many functions held in the campus. Mirambika itself demands a complete commitment and a willingness to be constantly innovative and creative. Says Tara, "They really pick up a lot and they learn to work hard."

Because of this they are in demand when the course ends. At that point, administrators from other schools come to make them offers which they often accept happily.

Running the training programme, though, has not been without difficulties. Teaching as such does not attract the best talent, and because the course is so demanding it has been doubly difficult to find candidates with suitable academic credentials, though the quality of candidates is gradually improving. Mirambika is always on the look-out for suitable candidates and any like-minded young person interested in the course can contact the Delhi Ashram directly.

The other problem is that as there are not many opportunities to implement Free Progress elsewhere and as the pay is better in conventional educational institutions, after their training a good number of the teachers end up joining these schools.

In spite of the problems, for Mirambika the teacher training programme is essential. For though the senior teachers are long-time Ashramites and give the school its direction, and though the many volunteers who help are often well-qualified, intelligent people bringing in specialized skills, it is the fact that there is a committed team of 24 teacher-trainees (not paid teachers) that makes Mirambika organisationally and financially viable. Without it a teacher-student ratio of around six to one would be impossible. What is needed now is more innovative schools (some are coming up) where these teachers can go on to do their work, that of passing on the way of Free Progress.



A cycle trip for the Mirambika teacher trainees

exams, but Mirambika students are taken like that [*snaps fingers*]. Those who joined Mother's International School (MIS) last year are doing outstandingly well. I can say that there are hardly any failures as far as Mirambika is concerned."

On the whole, say MIS teachers, Mirambika children immediately stand out as different. It is also interesting that they seem to share many character traits with SAICE children and like us have a fierce loyalty and love for their school even after they have left it.

## RESEARCH

As a pioneer in the field of education, it is important for Mirambika to analyse and document its work so that it can learn from its past, and others in the field can benefit from its experience.

To address this need Mirambika has a Research & Resource Wing which accumulates the expertise of successive generations of teachers and trainees, helps develop new methods for integral learning and produces models for training teachers. It is also an exchange centre for ideas, techniques and materials. The Research wing has also developed a database that keeps track of what each child has studied by monitoring the projects children undertake.

An independent appraisal of Mirambika has also been done. The NCERT gave a scholarship to a researcher, Anjum Sibia, who spent 2 years documenting the work being done in Mirambika for her doctoral thesis. Her research report is now being published by the NCERT as *Life in Mirambika Free Progress School* and will be released on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

## AND FINALLY

How has Mirambika succeeded where others have failed or not even dared to try? How has Mirambika been able to remain financially viable with a ratio of six students to one teacher? How has Mirambika found parents willing to put their children in an experimental school that is not affiliated to the CBSC or any of the boards? How has Mirambika been able to maintain a spiritual ideal and create an environment for inner growth in a metropolis like Delhi? The answer to many of

these questions lies in the fact that Mirambika is located in the Delhi Ashram.

Mirambika is financially viable because its main teachers are Ashramites, because it has teacher-trainees whose boarding and lodging is taken care of by the Ashram and because it has many volunteers. Says Tara, "We can do it only because of the Ashram — just as SAICE is possible because of the Ashram. Otherwise when you pay teachers government grades you need at least 30 to 35 students per teacher to make it viable. That is why it is so difficult to duplicate this. People start with a lot of enthusiasm and then they have to increase the number of students in a class and things start getting diluted and then they are nowhere.... Creating something like Mirambika would be possible in a similar community — like Auroville."

The other important factor that makes Mirambika what it is, is the idealism behind it. Mirambika is able to create an environment for



With the Prime Minister

inner growth because the teachers are sadhaks; all are basically spiritually inclined, all have studied Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The trainees also may not all have a very high intellectual level but the devotion is there and they read, they meditate. Even volunteers have a basic understanding.

But Mirambika still feels the need of greater and better human resources. Mirambika lacks enough people with the intellectual understanding, the vision, to be able to constantly take the experiment forward. Admits Neeltje, "The depth you have in SAICE is difficult to get elsewhere." It would help if SAICE can share its wealth of



experience. As Tara says: "If teachers from SAICE came to Mirambika they would have so much to give us — I'm sure of that. And at Mirambika they are very eager to learn, very open. And also if people at SAICE are open, there would be things we could give. There are areas in which we excel also."

Another problem area is the Government's regulatory framework. Though people in the CBSC and ISCS recognize the wonderful work done by Mirambika and show readiness to be as flexible as required to give it affiliation in its present state, the basic rigidity of the system prevents any such exceptions from being made. This prevents Mirambika from going up to class X.

In spite of the many challenges, Mirambika has made a significant mark on the educational landscape of India. A lot of people have come to

know of Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's ideas of education because of Mirambika. Many educationists have come and studied what Mirambika is doing. And though it can still be considered a "work in progress", many innovative schools have come up based on it.

What this clearly indicates is that there is a place, even in this commercialised world, for an education that gives primary importance to the growth of consciousness — a growth made in freedom with a higher ideal to guide it. In fact the need for a radical change in education is being felt by many: teachers, parents, educationists. Mirambika has answered that need. But Mirambika was meant as a pilot project, an indication and guidance for the future. What now remains is for more Free Progress schools to emerge, inspired by what Mirambika has achieved. ❧



"The Sunlit Path" leading to Mirambika

## ERRATA

There were some errors in our previous issue:

1. The Principle of Uncertainty is applicable at the atomic level to all elementary particles, not only to "some of them" as mentioned on the Editors' Page.

2. As a caption to the cover and the photo on page 10 we had mentioned that the bulb comes on because of electricity in the body. This is wrong. Actually the current goes from an external 12 V supply through the body to a transistor. Thus the body's role is in completing the circuit by conducting a small current that does not give an electrical shock to the person. After receiving the small current, the transistor amplifies it so that it is sufficiently large to activate a relay. A relay is an electromagnetic switch which in this case completes another independent circuit where the normal 220 V are supplied to the incandescent light bulb so as to light it up. The

spectator of course comes under the illusion that his brain is charged!

3. Finally, in the caption to the photo of the science teachers on page 17 we did not mention the year in which Sujata-di passed out of the Higher Course like we normally do for ex-students. Sujata-di came directly to the Higher Course and completed her studies in 1973.

## NAME FOR LAKE LAND

As our readers may recall, The Golden Chain Fraternity has about 10 acres of land near the Ashram's Lake Estate (adjacent to Merveille). Keeping in mind the Mother's vision for the area, GCF is planning to create there a very beautifully landscaped meditative environment with facilities for studies, research and development.

We need an appropriate name for this place and invite your suggestions. Possibilities include: *Swarnabhumi, Chidavas, Hemakundam....*

# MATRI KARUNA VIDYALAYA

by *Sunayana Panda '79*

Every teacher in the world knows that the real sense of achievement comes not when one has helped a bright student to do exceptionally well but when one child who is unable to learn has been helped to make even a small progress. For Sri Aurobindo Education Society, the education wing of the



A Class in Session

Delhi Ashram, their project “Matri Karuna Vidyalaya”, started in April 1999, is their way of helping the weaker section of society take a small step forward. And this achievement is as important as all their long established schools.

Looking at the whole endeavour as it is now, it seems almost the most common sense thing to do. Mira Nursery School, within the campus of the Ashram, closes at noon and all the children go home. After this, normally the school would have remained empty for the rest of the day and night. But in reality, within an hour another set of children come and occupy the same premises, starting their school day at 1 pm and ending at 5 pm. The same class-rooms are used for running two different schools! In the morning it is Mira Nursery School and in the afternoon it becomes Matri Karuna Vidyalaya.

These other children who come in the afternoon pay a fee of rupees 25 per month. This

covers the cost of two sets of winter uniforms and two sets of summer uniforms, a pair of shoes and socks, text-books, stationery and tuition fee. Coming from families where the parents are often labourers who are themselves uneducated, under normal circumstances these little ones would never have seen the inside of a school. But since the opening of Matri Karuna Vidyalaya, not only do they have a place in the peaceful atmosphere of the Ashram but they also have access to all the facilities that are given to the children who learn in the same rooms in the morning.

One can imagine how difficult it must have been to bring in these children who are used to filth and aggressive behaviour and to make them sit quietly and listen to their teacher. But over the years, with loving care and a lot of patience, this school has taken a harmonious shape. Every effort has been made so that learning is fun for these little ones. They too learn through games, music, images, theatre, and sports. They too get dressed up and perform on stage, they too learn to use computers.

A special mention has to be made about their music classes. Every child, from class II onwards



The Matri Karuna Vidyalaya Orchestra

learns to play a musical instrument — either a violin, or a flute, or a guitar or tabla. They are all taught the basics of Indian classical music. These children,



Vaulting on Sports Day

whose parents are daily wage earners, and whose surroundings are far removed from any refinement, get a chance to develop their sensibilities in

a way that very few children, even from affluent families, ever do. They learn to play together as an orchestra, without a musical notation sheet before them. They are guided only by their eyes and ears. This is a wonderful way of training their power of concentration as well as their sense of harmonious togetherness. Most people underestimate the extent to which a musical training can develop the various faculties of the mind.

An interesting innovation was made in Matri Karuna Vidyalaya in order to give a wider opening to the tiny tots when class XII students of Mother's International School, which is within the same campus, were asked to spend time with them. Interacting with adults is one thing, but interacting with other children, although older than them, is quite another experience. It has benefited both groups of children. While it teaches the older ones to be more socially responsible, it gives the little ones a direct contact with children who can be their role models.

Such children, for whom just being clean requires great effort, need a specialised kind of teaching. The teachers undergo special training and regularly attend workshops to improve their teaching skills. They have to be constantly vigilant and infinitely patient. At the same time they have to use their imagination to make learning a creative process so that the little ones enjoy what they are doing.

Once the Matri Karuna Vidyalaya children finish class V they are helped to join a normal school. A link is already made by following the text-books which are used in other schools so that they can integrate more easily. Over the years this process of crossing over from one school to another, from

a school where their shortcomings are taken into account to a school where they will be treated as any other child, has become easier than it used to be in the initial years.

By running this school the Ashram at Delhi is not only opening up a new path for these underprivileged children but is also reaching out to the parents. Through their children, they too have a chance to experience an opening to higher values. It is an opportunity for them to come out of their little lives and feel that they are a part of a greater entity, which is the nation. By taking one child off the street and teaching him, we touch the lives of many, and in many intangible ways it brings about a change in the general level of consciousness.

For centuries, only the very privileged few received an education. Today it has become clear that if we want to ensure a better future for the whole country it is essential that every child gets at least a basic education. What is the use of having a few brilliant minds if there are millions of ignorant people who will drag the country backwards? The results at Matri Karuna Vidyalaya have shown that one can do much even with very



A trip to Rashtrapati Bhavan

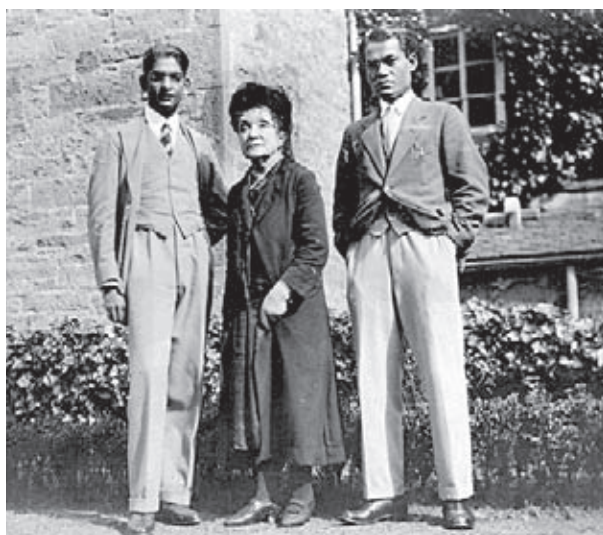
little material resources. Everyone is not born equal but every child deserves an equal opportunity. There must be a wonderful sense of achievement in the hearts of the teachers knowing that they have not only helped a child from a difficult background to take a step forward but they have also helped the country to move ahead. ❧



# REMEMBERING NIROD-DA

*A biographical note by Sunayana Panda '79.*

Nirod-da was born into a Buddhist family in Chittagong on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1903. He spent his boyhood in a small town but after passing his matriculation he left for Kolkata. While he was studying there he joined the Non-Cooperation Movement and was sentenced to seven months' imprisonment which was later reduced to two months. His involvement with this movement is barely known



Nirod-da (right) with a friend and landlady in Scotland

or even the fact that due to these activities, in his student days, the police kept a watchful eye on him for a long time, even jeopardizing his medical career. Nirod-da himself never made much of it, perhaps because it was quite common among the educated youth of that period to be in some way associated with the Non-Cooperation Movement and also perhaps because here, in the Ashram, he was in the company of those who had been real heroes in this field.

After he was released he stayed for a while in Kolkata then returned to Chittagong where

he passed his Intermediate examination (I.A.). He had lost his father in his childhood and was brought up mainly by his mother. Speaking of his early life, he once said to his students that he had spent a very carefree childhood and had not given much importance to his studies until he passed his I.A. After that things took quite a swift and unexpected turn. The decision to go to Edinburgh for his study was taken at a very short notice. His first decision had actually been to study Law but that too was suddenly changed to Medicine.

In 1924 he sailed to Britain, knowing that he would be there for the next six years. Studying in Britain eighty years ago was not at all like going to university in Britain now. The sense of alienation must have been considerable, going from Chittagong to Edinburgh. Hardly a handful of Indians were then studying in the Scottish capital and they met quite often since the British did not mix much with them. One of the things which he enjoyed during that period of his life was going for long walking tours through the Scottish countryside. He had once commented, with a smile, that he had one thing in common with Sri Aurobindo's father: they had both studied medicine in Scotland. The only difference was that Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose had gone for his studies to Aberdeen in the north and Nirod-da had studied in Edinburgh.

It would seem that he also travelled a bit in Europe because he mentions in one of his books that it was in Paris that he met Dilip Kumar Roy and heard of Sri Aurobindo for the first time. Upon his return to India, after getting his medical degree, this contact with Dilip Kumar and the keen interest that his niece had in spiritual life brought him to Pondicherry in 1930. Even though this first brief visit went off very well and he had some unusual experiences, he was not really attracted to a spiritual life.



Shortly later, however, he came back to spend an entire month in the Ashram. At the end of that stay he wrote to Sri Aurobindo that he preferred to go out and do Karmayoga because he felt that he was not ready for a spiritual life. Sri Aurobindo wrote back saying it was a good decision and would be a good preparation if he wanted to take up a spiritual life later on. It is amazing to think that this fantastic Guru-Shishya relation which produced so magnificent a correspondence almost didn't happen.

Writing about this phase of his life Nirod-da says in his typically frank manner that after that he spent a most unspiritual life. He moved to Rangoon where he had a very good position. He says: "A fixed income and some private practice made life smooth and promising, if not affluent. Gradually, I drifted into the hybrid Rangoon atmosphere which was, in one word, philistine. People knew only position and money. I fell into step with them and forgot that I had visited Pondicherry. Karmayoga was a far cry and *bhoga* became more insistent." Now we know why his letters have that clear stamp of the voice of Everyman.

A year later, the Police searched his house. Obviously, they had not lost sight of him. Soon after that he lost his job and things went from bad to worse. Two more years later, after many changes and upheavals, often managing to step out of sordid situations in the nick of time, he made up his mind to come to the Ashram. He was granted the permission to come but the matter of staying permanently was not yet decided. That permission was enough for him and one day, even without telling his mother, he left for Pondicherry — putting an end to that part of his life forever.



Nirod-da in Edinburgh

He was back in the Ashram exactly three years after he had returned to Chittagong, thinking that a spiritual life was not his cup of tea. When he asked Sri Aurobindo if he could become a member of the Ashram the Guru replied "Before deciding forever, we can fix a period of time and see — say till August." He was being given a six-month trial period. But at the end of those six months he was not asked anything and he just continued to stay. All his fears about not being accepted were laid aside because neither the Mother nor Sri Aurobindo thought it necessary to even bring up the subject.

At first he was asked to work in the House Building Department, then in the House Painting Department and after that he was sent to the Timber Godown. One day he made a remark in his letter to Sri Aurobindo that the amount of money spent on his medical studies had been totally wasted since now he was doing the work of supervising carpenters. Sri Aurobindo answered that he and the Mother had been under the impression that he was not keen on doing any medical work. Soon after that he became the Ashram doctor. Of course, Sri Aurobindo did not miss the opportunity of joking about how Nirod-da had written "lovingly and hungrily" about those 20,000 rupees spent on his studies.



In his room in the Ashram

His famous correspondence with the Master had started from the beginning of his stay but the letters get really interesting after Nirod-da took charge of the dispensary. Guru and Shishya go back and forth between subjects as varied as medical cases, yoga, poetry and life in the Ashram. They go from the impersonal to the personal, from the sublime to the ridiculous and from the universal to the local. At a certain point in the correspondence Nirod-da says that perhaps he should stop writing letters for a while considering that Sri Aurobindo has such a heavy load of correspondence already with the other sadhaks. Sri Aurobindo replied that he could continue to write because his letters were actually a relief. And that is most revelatory. To Sri Aurobindo these letters actually brought some moments of light-heartedness. Nirod-da and Sri Aurobindo were not only Master and disciple, they were also two Bengalis who had lived and studied in Britain. They understood each other's sense of humour and had a common vocabulary. Nirod-da was the only person, other than Dilip Kumar Roy probably, to whom Sri Aurobindo could write "Rubbish!" or "Great Scot!" or even "Knock him off, man, knock him off!" without getting a reaction of shock or incomprehension. If one reads through these two volumes of correspondence a couple of times one can see how much fun both of them were having.

That everything was predestined is something that struck Nirod-da much later. Why had he been pushed to study medicine for which he had no attraction earlier and why did he suddenly decide to go off to distant Britain even though financially it was not going to be easy? He writes in one of his books: "I must have been born under a medical star whose influence ceased only after it had led me to serve Sri Aurobindo as a doctor." In 1938 when Sri Aurobindo fell and broke his leg he needed constant care and attention and Nirod-da was one of the attendants chosen for this work. He has recorded that experience in his book *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* in so vivid a way that the reader has

the feeling of having lived it too along with him. It was during this period that he became the scribe, writing down the lines of *Savitri* as they were being dictated to him by Sri Aurobindo. Once again we see the importance of his background. We know that till the end Sri Aurobindo spoke English with a distinctly English accent and Nirod-da was one of the very few persons among those who were close to him who would have followed his dictation. The Guru had already prepared him by opening up the world of poetic inspiration some years earlier. Being already familiar with poetry he became the right instrument for carrying out the work of a scribe.

When Sri Aurobindo left his body it must have been a terrible blow to Nirod-da, as if the very anchor of his life had been pulled out. The Mother, in her usual compassionate way, allowed him to continue to sleep in one of the small rooms adjacent to Sri Aurobindo's room and to do his writing work there as well. From this point onwards his life took another turn altogether when he was



At the Samadhi

asked by the Mother to teach in the School. For the next fifty years he was associated with the School, teaching French, English and Bengali.

His life as a teacher spanned longer than his life as a doctor in the Ashram, but not much of it is known to the general public except the very early phase when he consulted the Mother for his French classes, since he has written about it. He

## OUR TEACHER, NIROD-DA

*Indrani (Basu Roy) Brahma '77.*

That was the year 1967-68; my 1<sup>st</sup> year in the Ashram. Nirod-da used to take our Bengali class and to be honest we were all scared of him, excepting Ruby (Roy) who would nonchalantly question him. He would enter the class clad in very loose pyjamas, and only a button holding his shirt in place! Seated, he would observe us for a few moments before opening a book! He used to give us rather difficult topics (ouff!) to write essays on and would never allow us to fantasize! Our writing had to be very down to earth, and yet it had to be very pleasant and appealing to the reader. How, we had no idea, but we could never muster enough courage to ask him. Obviously we struggled to match his expectation.... But slowly we learnt to be precise and to write to the point, avoiding flowery language altogether in his class. Eventually I came to know that he was a doctor by profession — that may explain his analytical approach to literature.

Bengali classes were taken in the last period



of the day and since we had to rush to Corner House to grab a bite before leaving for our Group, we used to usually push the chairs and the desks noisily back to make our way to the staircase, never really sparing a thought about the untidy classroom left behind. Soon a notice was served and we had to put the chairs on the desks before leaving the room for the day! So we would start chanting as soon as the bell rang, “Chair *taulo*, chair *taulo*.” One day Nirod-da heard us and immediately asked us to write a poem on that line for the next class! We fell absolutely silent, looking at each other in sheer disbelief. But that was the punishment we got for being too noisy.

Today as I hold *The Golden Chain* in my hand and look at Nirod-da’s photo I feel as if it was only the other day.... He was very strict but would praise anyone who wrote a nice essay! I remember he once liked a particular essay of mine so much that he declared he could see a future author in the making! Well I haven’t lived up to his expectation yet. But who knows, someday.... ❧

taught English and American literature to the students of the Higher Course for many years. One of the benefits that his students enjoyed was the way Nirod-da would point out what Sri Aurobindo had said about a particular writer or a certain literary movement or even about a period in world history in which a piece of writing was set.

There were two things about Nirod-da that evoked a sense of admiration in people. The first was his physical fitness almost until the day he turned a hundred years old. The second was his lack of any arrogance for having been so great a *sadhak*. It was amazing to see Nirod-da cycling to the Sportsground and doing his round of jogging when he was almost ninety years old or more. He went to the Playground regularly on H group’s

“compulsory” day and did his Gymnastic Marching until he was in his mid-90s. He was not only physically young but he remained mentally young too. He took interest in the new activities that were going on, whether it was in the Ashram or in Auroville or in the lives of the people he knew. And all this he did without any self-importance. He behaved as if he was one among many, and was an elder brother and a friend to everyone.

This was possibly his greatest quality. He could strike up a friendship with anyone, starting from the Divine to the visitor from Kolkata. Everyone had a place in his heart, the scholars, the old-timers of the Ashram, Aurovilians, anyone who had once been his student and anyone who showed even a little love for his Guru. ❧



# NIROD-DA

by R. Prabhakar (Batti) '58

*God's finger touched him and he slept.*

Author unknown

This happened on the evening of 17th July 2006 and to us Nirod-da was no more. He shed his earthly shackles and woke up Elsewhere. That same God leaned down and drew him to Himself. A parting more than half a century ago, which was never a parting, ended that evening.

I write this as homage to a man who was to me at first a Mystery-Man, then a Poet and Teacher and then a Friend (chronological reckoning).

## THE MYSTERY-MAN

That was long ago. I was young, and he was for me, at that time, “old”. Our paths hardly ever crossed. I had glimpses of him from afar. The period was 1945-50. I never gave much thought as to who he was, what he did, etc. I heard that he spent much of his time with Sri Aurobindo! This did impress me (us) to a certain extent.

1950 — after the Mahasamadhi of Sri Aurobindo I saw more of him — for he came “down” and “out” of the Ashram building. We (not only I) “clashed” with him physically and mentally.

## PHYSICAL

He, I found out, was not so old. Even the physical appearance was younger than the impression I carried. This continued to be so for the next 45-50 years! I have played football with him, against him! He played tennis too and joined the Athletics Competitions. His hair, skin and muscle tone, all spoke of youth. Even when he stopped playing these games, his interest never waned. He would take time out to sit, far into the night, in front of a TV set to see Wimbledon or World Cup (soccer) till well past 95 years. A young friend was his escort and co-conspirator, for he had to sneak out sometimes.

## MENTAL

Nirod-da started taking classes — poetry and later French. As luck would have it, ours was one of the first classes he started with. He tried hard to teach us, I am sure harder than we tried to learn (probably a hallmark of any good teacher). We argued with him on many a point (some silly ones). He was game enough. His humour stood him in good stead in his efforts to keep us in line. We were five of us in his French class, amongst others. Because of the unified front that we presented to him we were referred to as the “Big 5”. Then one day one of us 5 could not stay within the bounds of his tolerance. The boy made too many mistakes. There was more red ink than blue.



Participating in the Long Jump Competition

Nirod-da had no option — he wrote in large red letters, “Monsieur, il faut crier ‘HALTE’ maintenant!” (Sir I have to cry “HALT” now!). The fellow was already a part-time worker of Atelier. So he left the class — to his own great relief! We were then known as the “Big 4”!

French is a difficult language — too many grammar rules, conjugations of verbs and varying



spellings according to genders. I normally did a sort of mental toss to decide if a noun (table, class) was feminine or masculine and filled in the rest relying on the toss. There was a 50-50 chance of hitting it right. But, alas! One day the system failed. Nirod-da came back with the corrected note book and a remark, “Quoi monsieur, vous êtes un grand yogi — pas de sexe pour vous!” (What sir, you are a great yogi — no sex for you!) Through all this we did manage to learn something — I am thankful to him (and of course to many more whose duty it was to put some learning across to us). I was not a good student of literature — they, the teachers, (Nirod-da, Tehminen) must have thought so too, yet never did they complain. It was a new day everyday.

What now follow are Nirod-da’s achievements in the so called “Higher” fields.

## POET

Everyone who knows Nirod-da knows about his poetry. Most have read his poetry. They know who moulded him. What can I say or what need I say on this aspect of Nirod-da? He had the greatest Guru and he was a most willing “Shishya”. Can I elaborate or comment knowing well my feeble efforts and achievements in these fields?

Sri Aurobindo took him so close and poured so much into him — call it Grace, Blessings, Boons and plain comradeship and everything else, peppering all with that irrepressible humour. They parried and thrust at each other like two swordsmen, all the time knowing well who would win. God! It nearly chokes me with envy and happiness.

To conclude I would dwell on Nirod-da’s greatest achievement and fortune. All else is eclipsed or is a prelude, so to say, to that final episode — SAVITRI. Nirod-da had that most exacting but joyful job of being the scribe to his Guru. Nirod-da took down on paper as his Guru (dictated) brought down the Epic torrent of SAVITRI. A Bhagiratha-like endeavour. Seen, with the mind’s eye, an immense, austere Lord SHIVA standing with his matted locks, and Ganga, the heavenly torrent rushing down on to those matted locks, tamed and flowing down on the Earth for Bhagiratha to slowly lead it on for men to wash off their sins.

With this ancient, eternal image I would end my humble, happy homage to an old teacher and friend who shared with us the Sun and Earth for the last 103 years and has left now for newer, sunnier worlds. ❧

*This article first appeared in Shraddha, the journal published by Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata.*

# MEMORIES OF NIROD-DA

*Amita Sen ’55 remembers some stray incidents from the 40s and 50s.*

## CHARANAMRITA

We had come here to Pondicherry for the August Darshan in 1940 — my parents, Nolini Sen and Ila Sen, my sister Chitra and I. Nirod-da was then the doctor-in-charge (as the *Evening Talks* tell us) and was consulted in the inner room of the Dispensary.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August everything around was filled with a certain glow of silence. All present were only thinking of the Darshan! A couple of hours before the Darshan was to begin we went to the dispensary. Nirod-da was seated in the inner room when I entered — a child of seven or so. He

said, “This is *charanamrita*. If you believe in it, you can have it.” Then I put my hands forward and he poured one table-spoon of that special water into them. I did as my parents had done before me: drank it and put the wet palms on my head. But what happened to me was not an imitation: the whole body seemed to become very calm, fresh and cool — I can’t find the right word — it was, as if bathed from inside.

\*

Note: On Darshan days, Nirod-da collected the water after washing Sri Aurobindo’s feet and that water was known as *charanamrita*.

## DARSHAN

During Darshan that year we were told to turn to the Mother first and then to Sri Aurobindo, after the Mother would sign to us to say that She had seen us....

Nirod-da used to stand behind the sofa on one side with the traditional “chamor” (fly-whisk) — for, there were no fans at that time here in Pondicherry.

Everything was done in sacred silence....

\*

We have in the *Evening Talks* often the question: “How was Darshan this time?” — and something about the general progress of the sadhaks would sometimes be mentioned. There is an interesting comment about Leelavati Dutt and Charu Dutt who had also come for Darshan that year. “I had a good look at Leelavati but Charu Dutt didn’t allow me to.” Afterwards we heard that Charu Dutt (Dadoo, as we called him) had a vision of his own “Ishta Devata” Sri Krishna, when he looked at Sri Aurobindo — that year.

## PANCH PHORAN

In those days the soup was prepared and distributed from the Dispensary. Ila-di, my mother, who was a very good cook, used to help the lady who prepared the soup and started making some special broth for the patients who were unable to digest the regular Dining Room food. All this was tasty and did not need many additional ingredients.

Sometimes, Ila-di used to heat up the vegetables from the Dining Room for Nirod-da whose timings for “coming down” from “upstairs” would vary according to the day’s work in Sri Aurobindo’s rooms. This was usually done with a dash of the Bengali spice known as *panch phoran* (five spices together). And Nirod-da used to say, “Whenever Ila-di reforms the Dining Room vegetables, it is always delicious!” The Mother also had said to me once (much later, in 1952, I think) “Whenever your mother cooks something, it is a delicacy.” Actually, in answer to Nirod-da’s pleasant remark, I remember Ila-di saying with a little self-conscious smile, “Oh, it’s nothing. I just put a little *panch phoran* before heating!”

## FRENCH TEACHER

More than a decade after 1940, Nirod-da became our French teacher, for the language paper. With Counoumaji we did “History of French Literature” and with Satprem modern literature. Every week Nirod-da used to read out to the Mother two dictations from the Baccalauréat question-paper book and Mother would choose the one he had to dictate to the class. This was done for a few weeks only, perhaps to help him understand what type of text to choose from there. We knew also that he could ask Sri Aurobindo some questions regarding French literature, and that year, for the better understanding of the poetic language, we guessed he had a few guidelines for Baudelaire’s “Le Flacon” and Lamartine’s “Le Lac”.

## CONNOISSEUR OF TEA

Nirod-da used to be fond of tea and was quite a connoisseur, though not as subtle as Kalyan-da. He would sometimes say to his tea-time companion, between sips, “Real Orange Pekoe flavour, Kalyan, isn’t it?” Before we were settled here I had overheard my parents say that they must not forget to take the packets of special tea for some special people in the Ashram. (This happened all through 1940 to 1946.)

## “IT HAS CAUGHT YOU”

Nirod-da used to come off and on to have a cup of tea with Nolini Sen and Ila-di towards 6 pm or so and generally sat in the courtyard near the entrance to Girod House. One evening as I was entering the house after Group activities, quite unaware of the adults who were sitting a little away from the gate, Nirod-da heard me reciting aloud a few lines from Baudelaire: “à la très belle, à la très bonne, à la très chère...” etc. He laughed aloud and said, “So, it has caught you!”

I stood struck dumb, looked at them in surprise and turned and crossed the verandah! On a similar occasion Nirod-da got up one day and while going out touched a “Supramental Sachidananda” flower near the gate and said, “I like this flower very much.” ❧

# THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

*This extract is from Nirod-da's Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo as it appears in the book Divinity's Comrade. It gives us a glimpse into the day to day life of Sri Aurobindo as observed by him.*

Let us then begin from the very break of day. The sun's rays came in by the eastern window; he was awake and the exercises started in bed, prescribed by Manilal. By 6.30 a.m. he sat up to receive the Mother who on her way to the Balcony Darshan visited him to have his darshan. Sri Aurobindo gave us definite instructions to wake him up before the Mother's arrival. On the other hand, the Mother wanted us not to disturb his sleep. So at times we found ourselves in a quandary. Champaklal's devotional nature would not interrupt his sweet nap after the exercises, while I, when alone, would try by all sorts of devices to wake him up. Sometimes he himself would wake up only to learn that the Mother had come and gone! Then she would come back after the darshan and begin her day with his blessings, just as we did after her darshan. This was followed by his reading *The Hindu*. Between 9.00 a.m. and 10.00 a.m. the Mother came to comb his hair, apply a lotion and plait it. Most often she finished some business during this period. When a sadhak translated the Mother's *Prayers and Meditations* into English and wanted her approval, she had it read out before Sri Aurobindo and both of them made the necessary changes. She sometimes talked of private matters, and when her voice sank low, we took the hint and withdrew discreetly. She believed more in subtle methods than in open expressions. The gesture, the look, the smile, the fugitive glance, the silence, a thousand are her ways of communication to the soul! After the Mother had left, there started the routine of washing the face and mouth. Here a small detail calls for mention by its unusualness. When

he had finished using Neem paste for his teeth and the mouth-wash (*Vademecum*), he massaged his gums with a little bit of Oriental Balm.

After this, till 3 or 4 p.m. Sri Aurobindo was all alone. Then his first meal would come; in between he sometimes took a glass of plain water. Now, what could he be doing at this time wrapped in a most mysterious silence? None except the Mother could throw any precise light on it. We were only told that he had a special work to do and must be left alone unless, of course, some



This photo of Sri Aurobindo's room (taken by Tara in the late 1960s) shows how Nirod-da used to sit to write down the lines of *Savitri* as they were being dictated by Sri Aurobindo. Champaklal-ji is also seen in the picture.

very urgent business needed his attention. All that was visible to our naked eye was that he sat silently in his bed, afterwards in the capacious arm-chair, with his eyes wide open just as any other person would. Only he passed hours and hours



thus, changing his position at times and making himself comfortable; the eyes moving a little, and though usually gazing at the wall in front, never fixed *trātak*-like at any particular point. Sometimes the face would beam with a bright smile without any apparent reason, much to our amusement, as a child smiles in sleep. Only it was a waking sleep, for as we passed across the room, there was a dim recognition of our shadow-like movements. Occasionally he would look towards the door. That was when he heard some sound which might indicate the Mother's coming. But his external consciousness would certainly not be obliterated. When he wanted something, his voice seemed to come from a distant cave; rarely did we find him plunged within, with his eyes closed. If at that time, the Mother happened to come for some urgent work or with a glass of water, finding him thus indrawn, she would wait, usually by the bedside till he opened his eyes. Then seeing her waiting, he would exclaim "Oh!" and the Mother's lips would part into an exquisite smile. He had told us that he was in the habit of meditating with open eyes. We kept ourselves ready for the call, sitting behind the bed at our assigned places or someone cleaning the furniture or doing other work in the room. One regular call was for a peppermint lozenge which he took some time before his meal. If the meal was late in coming he would ask for a second one. When our chatting became too animated and made us feel uneasy, one better informed would exclaim, "Do you think he is disturbed by such petty bubbles? He must be soaring in a consciousness where I wonder if even a bomb explosion would make any impression." At other relaxed moments he would take cognizance of incidental noises.

What could he be doing then with so much God-like ease and natural mastery? He once wrote to me that when he had some special work to do he had to concentrate. This, I think, gives the clue. For his cosmic work, this was the only tie he had to himself. Whether to bring down the Supramental Light, or to dive deep into the nether Hell, to send his force for some world purpose, the war in Spain, World War II, helping the Allies or to solve some difficulties of the Ashram, even

of individuals, must have been the nature of his special work. One day, after his concentration, I remember him saying, apropos of nothing, "I was seeing how Nishikanto was." At that time Nishikanto was not keeping well. I shall not speculate further on this intricate problem, lest I hear his taunting voice, "Nirod is weaving his romantic fancy!" How he was performing all these operations is beyond my grey matter!

There were occasions, though rare, when we had to intrude upon his strict privacy. An urgent call from the Ashram Press about some proof corrections of his book demanded his immediate attention. I cautiously approached from behind and stood near him. He asked without turning my way, in an impersonal tone, "What is it?" A moment's ripple in the vast even ocean of silence. The Mother always felt that pervasive silence whenever she entered the room. I informed him of the queries from the Press. There were some proof-readers who had the Johnsonian mind; they could not accept Sri Aurobindo's flexible use of prepositions or some new turns of phrases. Either they thought these were due to oversight or was it their grammarian pedantry that made them wiser than he? At last he had to remark, "Let them not interfere with my English!" His admonitions were always gentle. When the Mother heard about it, she observed, "How do they dare correct his English? Sri Aurobindo is a gentleman; he won't say anything that might hurt — I am not a gentleman." We understood very well what the Mother meant.[...]

The long stretch of silence ceased only with the arrival of his first and principal meal of the day. Still we hardly ever heard him express that his "stomach was getting unsteady". The day's second meal, supper, had to be quite light. Let me stress one thing at the very outset: in his whole tenor of life, he followed the rule laid down by the Gita, moderation in everything. This was his teaching as well as his practice. To look at the outward commonplaceness of his life, eating, sleeping, joking, etc., and to make a leaping statement that here was another man like oneself, would be logical, but not true. Similarly in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, even a high experience must not disturb the

normal rhythm of life. Naturally, I was extremely curious, and so were the others, I believe, to see what kind of food he took; had he any preference for a particular dish and how much had he in common with our taste? We had to wait a long time before he regained his health, and could sit up and “enjoy” a proper meal. As soon as people learnt about it, dishes from various sadhikas be-



L to R: Kantilal, Dr. Satyendra, Dr. Becharlal, Nirod-da, Champaklal-ji, Purani-ji. All except Kantilal were Sri Aurobindo's attendants.

gan to pour in as for the Deity in the temple. And just as the Deity does, so did he, or rather the Mother did on his behalf: only a little from a dish was offered to him and all the rest was sent back as *prasad*. For his regular meal, there were a few devotees like Amiya, Nolina and Mridu selected by the Mother for their good cooking, which Sri Aurobindo specially liked. Mridu was a simple Bengali village widow. She, like other ladies here, called Sri Aurobindo her father, and took great pride in cooking for him. Her “father” liked her *luchis* very much, she would boast, and these creations of hers have been immortalised by him in one of his letters to her. She was given to maniacal fits of threatening suicide, and Sri Aurobindo would console her with, “If you commit suicide, who will cook *luchis* for me?” Her cooking got such wide publicity that the house she lived in was named *Prasad*. Food from the devotees, though tasty, was sometimes too greasy or spicy, and once it did not agree with him. So a separate kitchen, known as the Mother’s Kitchen, was started for

preparing only the Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s food. It was done under the most perfect hygienic conditions following the Mother’s own special instructions. Her insistence is always on cleanliness. (She said in a recent message: Cleanliness is the first indispensable step towards the supramental manifestation...) I questioned Sri Aurobindo about this: “I wonder why the Divine is so particular about contagion, infection, etc. is he vulnerable to the virus and the microbe?” He replied, “And why on earth should you expect the Divine to feed himself on germs and bacilli and poisons of all kinds? Singular theology, yours!”

At the beginning all of us would make it a point to be present during his meal and watch the function as well as the Mother’s part in it. When the time was announced, water was brought for Sri Aurobindo to wash his hands, then he started eating with a spoon and rarely with knife and fork. He would take off his ring, place it in Champaklal’s hand and wash. Champaklal would put it back on his finger afterwards. Sometimes when he forgot to take off the ring, Champaklal caught hold of the hand before it was dipped in the water. Then the Mother would come, prepare and lay the table, push it herself up to Sri Aurobindo and arrange the various foods in bowls or glass tumblers, — in the order of savouries, sweets and fruit juices — everything having an atmosphere of cleanliness, purity and beauty. Then she would offer, one by one, the dishes to the silent Deity who would take them slowly and silently as if the eating was not for the satisfaction of the palate but an act of self-offering. Steadiness and silence were the characteristic stamps of Sri Aurobindo. *Dhira*, according to him, was the ideal of Aryan culture. Hurry and hustle were words not found in his dictionary. Be it eating, drinking, walking or talking — he did it always in a slow and measured rhythm, giving the impression that every movement was conscious and consecrated. The Mother would punctuate the silence with queries like, “How do you like that dish?” or such remarks as, “This mushroom is grown here, this is special brinjal sent from Benares, this is

butterfruit.” To all, Sri Aurobindo’s reply would be, “Oh, I see! Quite good!” Typically English in manner and tone! His silence or laconic praise made us wonder if he had not lost all distinction in taste! Did *rasagolla*, bread and brinjal have the same taste in the Divine sense-experience? Making this vital point clear, he wrote in a letter: “Distinction is never lost, bread cannot be as tasty as a *luchi*, but a yogi can enjoy bread with as much rasa as a *luchi* — which is quite a different thing.” He had a liking for sweets, particularly for *rasagolla*, *sandesh* and *pantua*. We could see that clearly: after the Mother had banned all sweets from his menu for medical reasons, one day some *pantua* found their way in by chance. The Mother could not send them back from the table. She asked him if he would take some. He replied, “If it is *pantua*, I can try.” Since then this became a spicy joke with all of us. He enjoyed, as a matter of fact, all kinds of good dishes, European or Indian. But whatever was not to his taste, he would just touch and put away. The pungent preparations of the South could not, however, receive his blessings, except the *rasam*<sup>1</sup>. When on his arrival in Pondicherry he was given *rasam*, he enjoyed it very much and said in our talks, “It has a celestial taste!” He was neither a puritan god nor an epicure; only, he had no hankering or attachment for anything. His meal ended with a big tumbler of orange juice which he sipped slowly, looking after each sip to see how much was left, and keeping a small quantity as *Prasad*. Once the entire juice had slightly fermented and after one or two sips he left it at the

Mother’s prompting. We conspired to make good use of it as *Prasad*, but Sri Aurobindo got the scent of our secret design and forewarned us! We had to check our temptation.

One thing that we noticed was that unless the Mother served him in this way, he would lose all distinction between different preparations and would not know which to take first and in which order. Very probably he would have gone half-fed. On one occasion we saw him eating a whole cooked green chilly before we could cry halt! Of course, what was one chilly for him who is said in the old days to have taken a lump of opium with impunity! We have also seen him finishing his meal somehow, if for some reason the Mother could not be present and Champaklal had to serve instead. The story goes that once Mridu’s dish went back without being touched by Sri Aurobindo, and she raised a storm. Sri Aurobindo had to quiet her with the plea that the Mother being absent he did not know what he had taken or what he had not. On another occasion Sri Aurobindo’s meal being over earlier than usual, Mridu’s dish arrived late and was left untouched. As soon as she heard about it she began to wail “like a new-born babe” as if she would bring down the whole Ashram by her lamentations. Dr. Manilal reported the fact to Sri Aurobindo and he asked, “How did she know about it?” I replied apologetically, “I told her.” He said softly, “These things should not be said” then he added with a smile, “but it is I who ought to lament for having missed her fine dish.” We all had a good laugh. ❧

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1. A kind of pepper water with tamarind juice.

## TITBITS

In Nirod-da’s memorable *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, there is an occasion when Sri Aurobindo, in response to Nirod-da’s being unaware of certain bizarre incidents in the Ashram, jokes: “We shall have to publish an ‘Ashram News and Titbits’ for your benefit.” While Ashram news circulates today more widely and faster than ever, and needs no publication to help it along, we feel a column called Titbits, capturing amusing (delightful and sometimes insightful) anecdotes of School and Ashram life would be a happy addition to the fare provided in *The Golden Chain*. Those who have such an interesting or amusing story to share can contact us or Puru ’83 (Kothari) who is compiling the column.





# QUIZ TIME!



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

1. In which year was the computer section started in the School?
2. In which year was the Kindergarten opened?
3. The first Annual Programme held at the Theatre Hall was on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1956. Which plays were performed on the stage that year?
4. Before the Knowledge building was constructed there was an empty plot of land with a few small rooms. What was it used for before the construction started?
5. There is a creeper which grows on the railing above the pond which is near the School stage. Its white flowers hang down beautifully and look specially lovely against the dark green leaves. What is the spiritual name of these white flowers? (There is also a light blue/mauve variety.)

## ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE PREVIOUS ISSUE :

1. *What is the name of Ashwapati's wife in Sri Aurobindo's epic poem "Savitri"?*  
In Sri Aurobindo's "Savitri" no name is given to her. She is simply called "The Queen".
2. *"It is perfect love that is the key to a perfect knowledge." In which book written by Sri Aurobindo would you find this sentence?*  
This sentence is taken from the last chapter of "Essays on the Gita".
3. *Where would you find these words engraved in marble: "To Thee our infinite gratitude"?*  
These are the last words of the inscription on the Samadhi. Here is the whole prayer:  
To Thee who hast been the material envelope of our Master, to Thee our infinite gratitude. Before Thee who hast done so much for us, who hast worked, struggled, suffered, hoped, endured so much, before Thee who hast willed all, attempted all, prepared, achieved all for us, before Thee we bow down and implore that we may never forget, even for a moment, all we owe to Thee.  
9<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1950 (CWM:13, 7)  
This was among the first prayers that we had to learn by heart as children. How many of us can remember it in its entirety now? Although we all know it from childhood it sometimes takes us several decades to understand how true the words really are.
4. *Which sadhak of the early period of the Ashram lived in the room which is just opposite Madhav Pandit's office inside the Ashram Main Building?*  
A.B. Purani used to live in that room. Today he is primarily remembered as the writer of one of the earliest biographies of Sri Aurobindo. He gave up his activities as a revolutionary in Gujarat and joined the Ashram when Sri Aurobindo assured him that there was no need for a violent revolution since India was going to gain her freedom without it.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of the white trumpet-shaped flowers which grow on a big bush near the verandah where notices are put up in the Ashram Main Building?*  
This white flower with a very subtle perfume is called "Joy of Faithfulness". There is another flower, which grows in bunches, in various shades of pink, which is called "Faithfulness". Note the subtle shade of difference in significance, like the subtle perfume of the trumpet-shaped flowers.

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