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The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Boarding Life

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

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

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

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On the Cover:

Photo of Michèle's Boarding or Children's Home:

Back row (l to r): Michèle, Urmila

Third row (l to r): Upendra, Rashmi, Dilip

Second row (l to r): Gita, Prakash

Front row: Laxman

The Golden Chain

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THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

Some years ago we had announced that we would start a series of articles on the boardings of the School but somehow, though we did have the occasional article on boarding life, the project never quite took off because there was always something else that took precedence. Now, at last, we have decided to take up that idea and write about the various boardings which were started in the 1950s and 1960s.

Seen from a larger perspective this really is the story of our School and more than that it is the story of how the Mother organised things in such a way that the children fitted into the life of the Ashram in a natural way. From being the spiritual mother to ageing or middle-aged men and women in the 1930s, some of whom had been in the thick of the revolutionary movement, after the war she suddenly became the mother of little boys and girls and lanky teenagers.

From the mid-1950s onwards a new wave of students came to the Ashram, after the first onrush which took place during World War II. These young ones were brought to Pondicherry by their parents who continued to live outside, unlike the first batch most of whose parents also settled down in the Ashram. This brought the new problem of finding someone to look after them and a place where they could live together. This is how one by one the boardings were started and each one has an interesting story.

The point to note is that the children were put in the care of people who were already doing their *sadhana* in the Ashram. Looking after the children became a part of that same inner work. This was a win-win situation. What better arrangement can one have for children who were being given a spiritually inspired form of education than being taught how to live by those who were themselves seeking inner self-perfection and were living only for that?

As we collect the stories, one thing becomes clear — the Mother wanted to protect the children from anything that was uncouth and vulgar.

This was as important to her as their health and safety or their mental and physical development. It was for this reason that she had forbidden the students to go to the restaurants or cinemas in the town. She did not want them to pick up the unrefined vibrations of such places. The Mother did not even want the children to go out of Pondicherry to spend time with their parents during the school holidays. She felt that when they went out the inner work she did on the students got nearly undone in that month and a half. The Physical Education Department used to organise competitions during the month of November and students could give their names for participating in them. Not only were there a large number of indoor games but also activities such as painting, clay-modelling, embroidery and creative writing. One could win several prizes if one was good at more than one thing.

Creating that ring of protection around the students wasn't so difficult because nearly all of them lived in boardings and most others lived with their parents who were members of the Ashram. The students' lives revolved around the School, the playgrounds and the boardings. When Corner House was opened, that became another focal point but that happened much later. In all their interactions the students were in contact only with their teachers, captains and those who looked after the boardings and in this way remained at all times in touch with only those who were engaged in the life of the Ashram. There were no telephones, no TV sets and the internet hadn't even been dreamt of.

In a past issue we have already written about Cottage Boarding and in this issue we bring you an account of Children's Home which was then under the care of Michèle. Already under preparation is the story of Millie's Home, popularly known as "Tanga Boarding". We would love to hear your stories of boarding life, specially if you were a boarder when the Mother was still in her physical body. ❧



COINCIDENCES...

I spend a fair amount of time on the net searching for worthy contributors to *AntiMatters* (<http://anti-matters.org>), an open-access online journal addressing issues in science and the humanities from nonmaterialistic perspectives. *AntiMatters* is published quarterly by the SAICE, your Alma Mater, and I happen to be its managing editor.

The other day I invited Peter Kingsley (<http://peterkingsley.org>), author of *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* and *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, to contribute an article. In his reply he wrote:

"Sri Aurobindo is particularly important and dear to me, and has been for many years. My college (King's College) at Cambridge back in the 1970s was the same one that Aurobindo went to; and there was a secret little library at the back of the college which no one seemed to know

about, where I went to write and meditate. It had a beautiful large photo of Aurobindo in his old age, and it was as if he and I were alone there together."

The day after I got Peter's email, I went to pick up Vishwajyoti's copy of *The Golden Chain* and what was on the cover? King's College! I scanned the cover and emailed it to Peter, speculating that the secret little library at the back of the college was not the same as the library described in Sunayana's cover story, and wondering if it still exists. Peter was curious to read the whole article, so I scanned that too. His reply: "Part of me wishes I had been there to help guide the writer. You are right: the library described in the article is not the very private library I described to you, which I am sure is still there...."

This happened on the heels of another "coincidence". I had downloaded some of Peter's articles. In one ("Raven's appearance: the language of prophecy") he writes about a raven (yes, a raven) who spoke to him on September 8, 2001, saying "I have come here to tell you that there is about to be terrible death and destruction." When I looked at the calendar, it was September 11, 2007. You all know what happened on September 11, 2001.

Ulrich Mohrhoff
(Knowledge 1972-1974)

MENTION SOURCE

In the column titled "Ashram Titbits" (GC, Feb. 2007 and May 2007), there are incidents and conversations ascribed to some well-known and respected personalities like Nolini-da, Kobi Nishikanto and others. Often they are quoted verbatim but no sources are mentioned. This, I feel, is not a sound policy. While oral conversation can be casual, printed text owing to its wider circulation and a natural belief in its authenticity has to pass through some more rigorous tests before it comes out before the reader. Can the compiler of Ashram Titbits provide us with the source of this information even if it amounts to mentioning simply "as heard from" or "as narrated by"?

Further, all quotations and extracts taken from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's writings used in a given issue of the magazine should be provided with an exact reference to the book(s) or volume(s) including the page number(s) — such source material can be placed at the end of each issue of the magazine. This will help an interested reader locate the whole chapter(s) or book(s) to reveal the full context under which a given quotation or an extract is found.

Thank you for all your efforts to carry forward this publication.

Sudhakar Kamboj '89

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

After reading the article on Thyagarajan in *The Golden Chain*, a thought comes to me regarding the ceremony to honour him which was held on 2nd June 2007 and which we attended.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Hervé Morin, the newly appointed French Minister of Defence, was initially not supposed to attend the unveiling ceremony. Already the Indian Ambassador had declined, having more important things to do. Only the Indian Air Attaché was planning to come. But Mr. Hervé Morin hails from this Normandy area, he is an MP of the District and he is a personal friend of Mr. Claude Roussel

who, as a small kid, witnessed Tiger's fall and is currently the Mayor of La Lande. Therefore, when Mr. Claude Roussel heard that his friend, Hervé, had some business to attend to in his area during the ceremony's weekend, he asked him to honour the function by his presence. Hearing that the ceremony was to honour a fallen Indian Airman, having a wonderful memory of a backpack travel that he did in South India as a young student in the company of his "fiancée", Mr. Morin gladly jumped at the opportunity. Now, protocol requiring his presence, the Indian Ambassador could not decline any longer.

We know the impor-

tance that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo gave to good relations between India and France. It is noteworthy that for so humble a ceremony, Tiger Rajan succeeded in bringing together the newly appointed Indian Ambassador to France and the newly appointed French Minister of Defence, who could chat quietly, during an official but touching and rather intimate ceremony, in a relaxed and congenial atmosphere. Nobody knows what will be the outcome of their coming together but, sometimes, this kind of "chance encounters" are the seeds of world events.

Shankar (Patrice Ghirardi), Uma
(Devotees and ex-Aurovilians)

FOREIGN CONTRIBUTIONS

The Golden Chain Fraternity sustains itself and funds its activities from donations received from SAICE alumni and well wishers. This funding was so far sourced from India alone as it was not legally permissible for us to receive funds directly from abroad. This was because, as per government stipulation, such permission is only granted after proper scrutiny of the first three years' audited accounts and a thorough investigation into all the activities of the trust.

Since we had several requests from our alumni staying abroad to help them facilitate the direct donation to the GCF bank account, the Fraternity decided after due consideration to file the required application to the Ministry of Home affairs to enable the GCF to open an FCRA account to receive funds from foreign sources/in foreign exchange.

We are happy to inform you that in October 2007 this permission was finally granted and *The Golden Chain Fraternity* can now receive funds from abroad in foreign currencies.

Here are some of the ways by which the funds can be remitted:

- You can send us cheques or drafts in foreign currency favoring *The Golden Chain Fraternity FCRA A/c No. 005601028159*.
- Cash in foreign currencies.
- Electronic transfer to our FCRA account No 005601028159 with the ICICI bank, Mission St, Pondicherry, India. The SWIFT CODE of the Bank is ICICNBB0056.

Please note the above account is FOR FOREIGN FUNDS ONLY. In all the above cases, please remember that it is imperative that you furnish us your full name and address.

The GCF needs funds to sustain itself and implement its various projects (see our issue dated May 2005). Your participation, by financially supporting these activities or actually taking part in them, is most welcome.

80G TAX EXEMPTION

We would like to remind those in India that donations to *The Golden Chain Fraternity* continue to get tax exemption under section 80G.

SRI AUROBINDO'S CIRCLE

Sachidananda Mohanty '75

Mysticism and spirituality are associated from the earliest times with the notion of the Circle, the circle of devotees, disciples and followers. And thus, we speak of the Circle around the Buddha, Jesus, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Ramana Maharshi. We may in this sense speak of the Circle of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. A knowledge of the Circle is always regarded as an essential aid to the path of inner growth. It becomes a source of inspiration for fellow travellers. It exhorts us to be indrawn and to be dedicated to a life of inner peace, growth and tranquility as well as meaningful outer action.

An exposition of the Circle around a Prophet or an Avatara is always a paradoxical act. Spiritual knowledge always eludes mental comprehension. And yet, there remains a great deal in the domains of material world and experience that is of significance to the devout. It is therefore in a spirit of humility that we must approach the topic of the Circle of Sri Aurobindo. For my purpose, I shall focus on an earlier chapter of the Ashram's history.

Pondicherry's physical ambience is no longer the same as it was in 1910 when Sri Aurobindo set foot on this soil and took up his Yoga Sadhana. The earlier quietness and serenity of the Master's cave of *tapasya* is totally marred today by the invasion of Corporate India: pollution, crowding and tourism confront the spiritual visitor to the seat of Agastya.

Although many good biographies of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother exist and interested readers benefit from the accounts of A.B. Purani, Rishabhchand, Anil Baran Roy, Dilip Kumar Roy, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Prema Nanda Kumar, Peter Heehs and others, sufficient attention has not been paid to the early decades of Sri Aurobindo's life in Pondicherry. The time he spent from 1910

to 1920 remains extremely significant though. This is the period when he did intense Yoga and wrote many of his major works in the journal *Arya*. The earlier period was clearly a preparatory one: education at Baroda where he both taught in the college and learnt at home, 1905 and the Partition of Bengal Movement, editorship of *Bande Mataram* under the management of Bipin Chandra Pal, his arrest in May 1908 in the Alipore Bomb Case and his subsequent acquittal in May 1909. These are crucial events. Under observation of Police he founded the journals *Dharma* in Bengali and *Karmayogin* in English. During this period Sri Aurobindo stayed in the house of his maternal aunt and her husband Krishna Kumar Mitra. The place was known as the *Sanjivani* Office while Bijoy Nag, Suresh Chakraborty and Nolini Kanta Gupta lived in the *Dharma* Office.

In February 1910 there was news that the British Government had decided to arrest Sri Aurobindo. He listened in silence and said, "Come, let us move out just now." Various accounts of this event exist, recorded by Nolini Kanta Gupta and Suresh Chakraborty among others.

Sri Aurobindo's circle of admirers and disciples in the early days at Pondicherry played a noteworthy role. Some like Amrita and Nolini Kanta stayed on and developed into more experienced sadhaks in the later years. Some like Paul Richard departed. Others like Dilip Kumar Roy carried out the spiritual mission at the Ashram and in the outside world. And yet others, like Srinivasa Chari and Subramaniam Bharati and V.V.S. Iyer, as nationalist-spiritualists, lent vital assistance, and in turn, were themselves benefited. The accounts of their stay are remarkable for their sense of modesty, their great receptivity, their insightful observations, their early recognition of Sri Aurobindo as their Guru and the Prophet of the future.

In “Old Long Since,” Amrita recalls that, as a semi-literate boy, living in a village close to Pondicherry, within three days of Sri Aurobindo’s arrival in 1910, he had come to know of the significance of the event.¹ French India was not exactly hospitable. Sri Aurobindo had to get a good conduct certificate from five noble men of Pondicherry: Rassendran, Zir Naidu, Le Beau, Shankara Chettiar and Murugesh Chettiar. As Nolini-da was to recall later, “The names of these five should



Standing left to right: Nagen, Dumont (a Tamil Christian), Suresh Chakraborty
Seated left to right: Bijoy Nag, Sri Aurobindo, Nolini Kanta Gupta

be engraved in letters of gold. They had shown on this occasion truly remarkable courage and magnanimity. It was on the strength of their signatures that we could continue to stay here without too much trouble.”

Back in the village Amrita continues to long for a meeting with Sri Aurobindo. What could a

village lad do apart from trying to reach the door steps of the house of Shankar Chetty? He knows that Bharathi and Srinivasa Chari are regular visitors, after dark. They bring local news to Sri Aurobindo and in turn are benefited by their conversations with him. In course of time Amrita enters the house of Sri Aurobindo. The abode constantly offers surprises. One day it is suspected that the bakery boy steals money after lunch hours. An elaborate plan is hatched. He is caught and thrashed. And yet the pleasure of capturing the culprit is short lived. As Amrita recalls:

“Either on hearing the cry of the boy or for some other reason Sri Aurobindo came out of his room straight to the verandah and appeared before us. For a little while he stood without a word. On the face of the boy who had received the blows there shone the solace of having seen his Saviour. Our raised fists dropped down of themselves and we stood still as though we had been the culprits. Sri Aurobindo forbade us to take the five-rupee note away from him and when we heard the order we felt as if a sentence had been passed upon us.”²

Exciting events are ahead of them. With Srinivasa Chari, Ramaswami and Rangaswami, there are experiments in automatic writing, some of which were later published in *Yogic Sadhan*. Later at Mission Street, Amrita has regular Darshan of Sri Aurobindo.

Amrita’s spiritual association with Sri Aurobindo continued even as the latter shifted to 37, Rue Francois Martin. For the disciple, the house became an emblem of Divine joy and plenitude. Entry into this abode was always treated as a great privilege. This is how Amrita describes a particularly memorable Darshan of the Master which turned out to be apocalyptic:

“It was for the first time I got up to the first floor of Sri Aurobindo’s house. In the long verandah overlooking the wide courtyard below, there

1. See “Old Long Since” in *Reminiscences* by Nolini Kanta Gupta and K. Amrita, Pondicherry: Mother India, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1969, p.141. Nolini Kanta Gupta’s reminiscence has been translated from the Bengali and Amrita’s from Tamil.

2. Ibid, p.152

were big windows giving a wide view Southward... all the doors of all the rooms were open. Everywhere and on every thing there fell an all revealing light.... My heart too, unwittingly, with no doors to close or conceal anything, free of confusion or perplexity, wide open, soared up in sheer delight! I was in this state and Sri Aurobindo stood there, his eyes gazing Southwards.... His small feet appeared to my eyes as two red lotuses. His hair partly hung on his chest, partly on his back. It was still wet from his bath; water dripped from its ends. His bare broad chest shone in great beauty...."³

The actual meeting created a profound and overwhelming impact on the young follower.

Sri Aurobindo's meeting with Paul Richard in 1910, the French savant, turns out to be a significant event. Paul Richard and the Mother (then known only as Mirra Richard) themselves spiritual seekers were disciples of Max Théon, the great Occultist teacher in Algeria. Richard and Sri Aurobindo would soon collaborate after 1914 in starting the spiritual journal *Arya* and the Mother would actively assist them. This is how an eye-witness Srinivasa Chari records the meeting:

"At about 7 o'clock Paul Richard came and was received by Sri Aurobindo and after the usual introduction and preliminary talks they both began to exchange their ideas about mysticism. I do not remember all the subjects they conversed about at that time. As they finished their conversation and were coming out of the room, Paul Richard said that he now understood why he felt such a strong urge to come to Pondicherry... He said that the next time he comes back his wife, who is spiritually more advanced than himself, might accompany him to Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo also seemed to be greatly satisfied with the meeting. We came out of the room and they took leave of each other. Paul Richard left for Paris by the next steamer."⁴

The Richards' meeting with Sri Aurobindo takes place in 1914. The Mother records this experience as a profound one in her *Prayers and*

Meditations. Here the journal *Arya* begins its publication. The outbreak of the first World War however, led to Mirra and Richard's return to France. They were to travel to Japan and come in close contact with a set of very interesting people: intellectual, political and spiritual, including Tagore.

If Srinivasa Chari, Paul Richard and Amrita had their share of privileged meetings with Sri Aurobindo, Nolini's association would turn out to be the most providential and long lasting one. Born in Faridapore, Bengal, now located in Bangladesh, on 13 January 1889, Nolini Kanta Gupta became a close accomplice of Barin and Sri Aurobindo during the revolutionary days. He followed his leader to Pondicherry. In his *Reminiscences*, published by *Mother India* in 1969, Nolini-da captures the memories of the early days. These throw light on the spiritual growth and also reveal how the inner life of the Circle grew thanks to the grace, love and generosity of the Master. It is however, the arrival of the Mother that made a real difference to Sri Aurobindo's Circle.

The story of Sri Aurobindo's Circle does not get over in the early decades of the 20th century. Soon his Circle would expand and include the Mother's Circle. This Circle would grow and Sri Aurobindo would spend entire nights to answer queries of devotees and disciples: Amal Kiran, Arjava, Nirodbaran, Harendranath Chattopadhyaya, Dilip Kumar Roy and others. Of the earlier disciples, some would continue, others depart, some pass away, others like Amal Kiran and Nirodbaran would go on to be centenarians.

We celebrate the lives of those in Sri Aurobindo's Circle, for these members had the privilege of close contact with the Master. Their lives inspire us to remain steadfast in our goal for progress and perfection. And, in a deeper sense, many of us too have been a part of Sri Aurobindo's Circle. All those who have been fortunate enough to have had some contact with the Avatars when they were in their physical bodies could consider themselves as blessed: for indeed they too are members of the Circle. ❧

3. Ibid, p. 170-171

4. From Srinivasa Chari, *Documents in the life of Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*

AN EXHIBITION IN LONDON

Sunayana Panda '79

One often wonders about why Sri Aurobindo remains so unknown in the world. Even in India those who have heard of him only know him as a yogi and when people speak of the Freedom Movement he is rarely mentioned. Outside Pondicherry and Kolkata if you mention his name to anyone who was alive before the Independence of India you will get a response that sounds like, “Yes, but he left the scene, he abandoned the cause....” The idea of holding an exhibition on Sri Aurobindo in London was born from this desire to acquaint the world with the true role he played in Indian history.

The Nehru Centre, which is the cultural wing of the Indian High Commission, accepted the proposal and work started in right earnest when The Golden Chain Fraternity decided to financially support the project. Although it seemed like a fairly simple job at first, it turned out eventually to be quite a complicated affair. One thing however was perfect — the timing. We had the week of the August Darshan which was also the week of the Independence Day. It suited everyone fine; those connected with the Ashram were happy and so were those connected with the Indian High Commission.

The Indians of London had lined up an extraordinary array of cultural programmes and the city was buzzing with activities all summer to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Independence. Most activities of this festival however remained

in the field of dancing, music, cinema and cuisine. Fortunately the Indian High Commission had thought of holding a series of programmes to pay tribute to the great freedom fighters of our country during the month of August. In the preceding week there had been films on Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. This exhibition on Sri Aurobindo became a continuation of the same theme.



View of the first room where pictures of Sri Aurobindo's pre-Pondicherry days were displayed.

The preparations for this exhibition, which had already been shown in Paris some years ago, started right from January even though it was to be held in August 2007. The Golden Chain Fraternity took the responsibility of mounting the large photographic prints and sending them over to London. This exhibition gave me the occasion to contact and communicate with the various centres and come to know of their different activities.

Keeping in mind the High Commission's desire to also have a British speaker to promote Indo-British friendship, we had chosen Sonia Dyne who is a member of Auroville International and who had headed the Sri Aurobindo centre at Singapore for twenty years. We also worked in association with the Sri Aurobindo Society of London and they invited Gopal Bhattacharya as one of the speakers of the programme.

The day of the opening was a day of great stress because fifty pictures had to be hung in half a day. The fact that the work was finished an hour before the inauguration was in itself a miracle. The scheduled time of the opening was fixed for 6.15 p.m. but people started coming right from 5.30. There were devotees from the various centres of London as well as Indians who were curious to know more about Sri Aurobindo. It was wonderful to meet other former students who gathered in the hall with their friends and family.

The inauguration was done by Mrs. Monika Kapil Mohta who is the Director of the Nehru Centre and also the 'Minister for Culture' at the Indian High Commission. It was indeed a proud moment when she announced that the exhibition was being held in collaboration with The Golden Chain Fraternity which is the alumni organisation of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre



Photo taken during the inauguration ceremony. Left to right: Soumen Datta, Sunayana, Gopal Bhattacharya, Mrs Monika Kapil Mohta and Sonia Dyne.

of Education. The inaugural lamp was lit by Mrs. Mohta, Sonia Dyne, Gopal Bhattacharya, Soumen Datta (Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Society, London) and me.

The next part of the programme was held in the auditorium. There were two talks — the first, by Sonia Dyne, was on "The Concept of Freedom in Sri Aurobindo's Thought" and the second one was by Gopal Bhattacharya on "Sri Aurobindo's Contribution to the Political Freedom of India". Between the two talks there was a screening of the CD "The Genius of India" which is made by a team from Auroville. The three items were so different one from the other that it gave a variety to the evening's programme.

The stage where the talks took place had been decorated with a large bunch of flowers which was placed next to two photographs of Sri Aurobindo. The first one showed him as a boy when he was living in London and the second was the photograph taken in Pondicherry in 1950. We all felt that the evening was really very special because at last Sri Aurobindo was being celebrated in the city where he grew up. When you think of it, he was indeed a Londoner.

The next day we held a private and informal programme of poetry reading. It was truly an enjoyable afternoon as each one read out his or her favourite poem. We then read "A God's Labour" taking turns to read out a stanza each. We ended the session by reading from *Savitri*. As we were



View of the second room where the photos of Sri Aurobindo taken in Pondicherry were exhibited.

sitting in a circle we passed the same copy of the book and each one read until he or she came to a full stop.

Ironically, on the Darshan day the exhibition was closed because being the National Day all institutions and offices connected with the Indian Government were closed. This meant that effectively we had only three and half days of exhibition. The last day amply made up for the lost day as something totally unforeseen happened.

A few days before the opening of the exhibition I was told not to bring down the pictures on Friday 17th as planned earlier because there was going to be a talk at the Centre by Shashi Tharoor, formerly of the United Nations, on the soft powers of India. The talk was going to attract a lot of people and if the photos were still there, those who had started gathering in advance would have an opportunity to see them.

Shashi Tharoor's talk was held in the auditorium but while the people were waiting for the programme to begin, quite a few of them came in to see the exhibition. Among them were many young students studying in London and a large number of businessmen who had settled in London several decades ago. When the programme was over the VIPs were escorted into the exhibition hall where arrangements had been made for their dinner and the doors were shut.

Being a private dinner it actually became a private viewing of the exhibition for people like the Indian High Commissioner, Lord Meghnad Desai, Lord Malloch Brown (Minister for India, Africa and the UN) and Shashi Tharoor. I could only marvel at the way the Divine Grace works. However hard I had tried I would never have managed to get such important people to come to the exhibition, but as it happened not only did they all come but they spent several hours in that hall, and I was later told, some of them saw each and every picture.

Many came and expressed their appreciation of the overall beauty of the exhibition. The fact that the photos were all of the same size created a harmonious effect, also the black and white pictures, with so many tones of grey looked very artistic against the lavender background on which they were displayed. The captions were short which made it easy for everyone to read. The general public who had only heard of Sri Aurobindo did not even know that there were photos of him

in his youth. Many remarked how he had physically changed after he came to Pondicherry. And no one failed to notice how there was something striking about his eyes in all his photographs. "He seems to be looking into the future with his physical eyes," some people commented.

No account of this exhibition would be complete without a mention of the invaluable help given by Pragna '80 and her entire family. Every time a difficulty came up they extended a helping hand. Several former students gave their time and energy for the work of preparing the photos and the captions and in this way we found

an occasion to come together to do something constructive.

I can still remember how in 2001 Vilas and I were walking down Oxford Street in London and she suddenly said, "Come, I'll show you something interesting." We kept walking until we came to a very stately house. Vilas pushed the door a little and we both put our heads through the opening. "Look," she said, "there is a bust of Sri Aurobindo here." Indeed, it was such a joy to see that bronze bust after having walked through elegant shopping districts and a leafy park, all very English. That house was The Nehru Centre. As we walked away that day, making our way to the tube station, I would never have imagined that one day I would be standing inside the main hall, surrounded with photos of Sri Aurobindo. ❧



Bronze bust of Sri Aurobindo installed at the Nehru Centre during the tenure of Sri L. M. Singhvi as the Indian High Commissioner in the UK.

NORMANDIE REUNION 2007

Vilas Patel '70

This year, Kiran Vyas's invitation to Normandie was even more generous than in previous years. He had set aside six days for the GC meeting and his invitation in the April issue of *The Golden Chain* embraced not just the SAICE alumni and their family but also their friends. But somehow not many could attend and quite a few couldn't come until Saturday, so overall it was a small and intimate get-together.



I was among the eager early arrivals with Sumitra-di and Bernard but still Mohanbhai had beaten us to it.

Tapovan has expanded and grown more beautiful in the two years since we were there last. There are more flowers and fruit trees; several more build-

ings have been added. All the heating is through enormous solar-powered boilers — the first and largest solar heating to be installed in Normandie apparently. In almost all areas of Tapovan's functioning you see a decisive use of ecological alternatives — all food is organic, everything is fully re-cycled, there are solar-powered lights....

We had to wait until Saturday before everyone was there, for the heart of the meeting, which is always a meditation in the relics room. But first, we gathered in the garden where the sun shone down benevolently on us after quite a few days of rain. We stood in a circle and recited our school prayer: "Fais de nous les guerriers héroïques...", first in French then in English and we ended with another *prière* — "Gloire



Reunion Dates: 28th June to 2nd July

Those who attended: Bena, Manob, Mohan Mistry, Sumitra-di and Bernard, Kiran Patel; Jishnu and Priya, Konkona and Charles, Tapas, Gap, Fanny, Aprotim Sinha, Harsha and Suren Dalal; Aruna Sethna; Vibha, Jhumi and Probir, Ashok Panda, Indira Patel, Kusum Barai and Bhavisha.

à Toi, Seigneur”. Konkona or Mohan-bhai broke into “Bande Mataram” — the beautiful sound seemed to float on the air for long afterwards.

As we were a small group it was particularly fun to have the introduction session where everyone had their stories to tell of their time in Pondy or their contact with Mother. Probir told us about



how the Mother had performed the thread ceremony for him and his brothers! Aruna remembered with great emotion how much love

and attention Mother gave to her right from when she was born, sending Datta (Dorothy Hodgson) to check on her when she was a baby and later getting regular reports from Ganpatram-ji when she was put in his boarding.

After lunch there was the usual walk to the *falaises*, a few kilometers away, but some of us piled into two cars and drove a bit further afield, to a delightfully pretty little town called Veules-Roses, where we discovered, amazingly, a Café whose owner had been to Pondichery; she had given exotic names, like Bangalore, Madras, Calcutta to all the tables.

The cultural treat this time was an unforgettable recital by Ustad Osman Khan who, accompanied by Prakash from Malaysia, enthralled us with his rendering of Raga Kirvani in the Salle Menuhin.

Probir and Ashok gave us most interesting slide presentations on development projects planned for



Pondy. The first, about the proposed container port with all its disastrous implications, was a rather disquieting one. Ashok’s presentation was luckily more heartening, with plans for the beautification of the Park and Cours Chabrol area. At the end we watched a DVD of the exhibition on Udar-da that Gauri-di had put together.

Of course we had a bonfire this year too, this time with fewer Sanskrit hymns and more Bengali songs — including the beautiful poem by Nishikanto to Sri Aurobindo.



On the last day, Koni, Charles, Tapas, Manob, Priya, Jishnu and I went for a special drive — to see where Thyagarajan Duraiswamy had been buried, in whose honour a plaque had been unveiled just a few weeks earlier. It was a very moving moment for all of us to stand before the inscription — “Om Namo Bhagavate”.

Merci Beaucoup yet again to Kiran and his entire team for giving us this unique venue for our get-together and for receiving us with so much warmth. ❧

MICHÈLE'S "CHILDREN'S HOME"

Sunayana Panda '79

When Michèle joined the Ashram in 1955 the School was in a phase of expansion. The new children who were being brought by their parents to join the School had to be looked after by the Ashram, but at that time there were hardly any arrangements for them. Michèle was already working in the School and was helping Dr. Sanjal at his clinic. She often had to give night duty and remain by the bedside of patients who had been operated. One day the Mother asked her if she could look after some children whose parents were not living in Pondicherry. In fact, she was asking Michèle to help another young woman to whom she wanted to give this work. The young woman in question was finding it difficult to stick to any work in the Ashram. The only thing that interested her was to look after little children, but the Mother knew that she would find it difficult to actually take any responsibility. This is why she wanted Michèle to be present in the boarding. As it happened, the young woman soon left the Ashram and the children were eventually under the care of Michèle. Of course, some helpers were sent to her so that the day to day running of the house could be done smoothly. Most of them did not stay for long until the Mother herself chose Urmila Pandya to assist Michèle. Urmila turned out to be a great help.

The first thing in Michèle's mind was that she didn't want the place to be a "boarding" at all. She wanted it to be a home and this is why the boarding was simply known as "Children's Home". The house which had been rented for this home was the one in front of the present Kindergarten. Michèle was at first given the care of two little children and later the number rose to seven. The group comprised of both boys and girls. The Mother had full confidence in her ability and did not feel it necessary to give her any

specific instruction about how the children were to be looked after. The group was not always the same. Some children left after a brief stay, some were asked to leave because they were simply unmanageable. Often the children who were too difficult to handle elsewhere were sent to Michèle. At a certain point, there was so much indiscipline that the Mother wanted a number of rules to be set down. The Mother showed these rules to Pavitra-da and remarked that Michèle was being too lenient, that it would be better if he could make the rules a little more firm. One of the rules that the Mother had insisted on was that the children had to speak in French at home, not only with Michèle



Michèle (seated, back row, second from right) and Urmila (standing, third from left) with children of the boarding.

but also between themselves. This helped the children to progress in their expression at school.

In those days there wasn't any special arrangement for children's food. When the first boarding, "Dortoir", was opened, food was brought from the Dining Room and some other items were prepared for the children in the kitchen of the

boarding. But by the time Michèle took charge of the Children's Home there was already another boarding which was being looked after by Ganpatram-ji and where the food for the children was cooked along with the food for the restaurant. For Michèle's children also the Mother instructed that food should be sent over from Ganpatramji's.

Other than just looking after the organisation of their lives, Michèle also thought of various activities that could make the children feel that they were living in a home. She involved the children in decorating the house. They planned together where they would put the various pieces of furniture and how they would add a few elements of beauty. A special occasion was Christmas when they would make special stencil cut-outs to paste on the glass-panes to get the effect of stained-glass windows. Another important moment in their life at home was when, once a week, Michèle told them a story. She chose tales which were inspiring and could show the children the ideals which they could keep before their eyes. This was a sort of reward which they were given if they had been good. They knew that there would be no stories if they quarrelled.

As time passed, more children were being admitted to the School and the difficulty of finding accommodation for them was also growing. However Michèle insisted that she absolutely could not take any more children. She explained to the Mother that the main difficulty came from the fact that there was only one bathroom for all of them. The problem was really acute because the toilet was inside this bathroom. This meant that the children had to take turns and use the bathroom. This made things difficult for them to get ready and go to school on time. There was also a problem with the water supply. The Mother had visited the boarding and seen for herself that there was indeed a problem where convenience was concerned, so Michèle knew that she would accept this reason as a valid one. To her surprise the Mother informed Michèle a few days later that she had decided to have another toilet built so that some more children could be accommodated into the boarding. The Mother got water-tanks dug in the courtyard and had a pump fitted. This

decision came as a big surprise to Michèle because the house was rented and had a short lease. Building a toilet meant spending a considerable sum of money at a time when the Ashram was still not free from financial problems. It showed how far the Mother was ready to go in order to make it possible for children to grow up in the atmosphere of the Ashram, how important the School was in her scheme of things.

While the Mother was in her physical body she strongly discouraged children from going out during the holidays. She felt that when a child went out, even in those six weeks, he or she lost a large part of the inner progress. The family which lived in a completely different atmosphere, in spite of being loving and caring, maybe unknowingly put into the child's mind notions which were totally alien to the Ashram upbringing and, as the Mother said, it took several months to undo the damage that had been done in a few weeks. Inevitably, at the end of October, Michèle would inform the Mother that a certain child in her care was asking for permission to go and spend the holidays with the family living outside Pondicherry. The Mother always wanted Michèle to find out if the child himself wanted to go or whether it was the family which was asking him to come. Generally, if the decision came from the child she did not stop him from going, but if she felt that it was the family which was pushing the child to go, then she made it clear that she would be happier if he did not go. The Mother pointed out that often children unconsciously absorbed the vibrations of the milieu into which they entered when they left the Ashram.

Among the many memories of Michèle, there is one that stands out — the way the Mother encouraged Upendra to paint and draw. Michèle accompanied the children when they went to see the Mother on their birthdays so she has witnessed how she interacted with them. Upendra was only a teenager when the Mother asked him to illustrate her book *Les Belles Histoires*. Once a month Upendra used to take his drawings and go to see the Mother. She used to correct his drawings and give him suggestions and tell him how he could improve. In order to get Upendra to finish his

drawings, Michèle used to make him sit in her own room and work. Very often she missed her afternoon nap because Upi was only looking for a chance to run away.

No story of Michèle's work in the boarding can be complete without talking about Fidèle. One Christmas, when the celebrations were taking place in the Playground, as Michèle was waiting to go to the Mother and receive her present, she saw a life-size stuffed toy dog. He was so life-like and so sweet that Michèle was hoping that it would not be given to anyone and that he would stay with the Mother. It was kept as a lottery present and when the distribution was over Michèle noticed that indeed no one had won it. The Mother caressed it as she was leaving the Playground. Later that evening the dog was sent by the Mother to Michèle's boarding. She asked the Mother to give it a name and the Mother decided that he

would be called "Fidèle". The toy dog became the "pet" of the children in the boarding and when any child fell ill and had to stay in bed, spending long hours alone while the others were at school, he was allowed to keep Fidèle near his bedside to keep him company. Even those children who lived in other boardings remember that the children of Michèle's boarding had the joy of being comforted by Fidèle when they were ill. The good news is that Fidèle still "lives" with Michèle, although he is a bit faded and has lost a bit of his sheen.

In 1965 Michèle left the boarding because of ill-health. Soon after that the owner of the house took back his property and the boarding had to move. Later it was Vimal-ben and Appa-ji who looked after "Children's Home". The house where Michèle had looked after the children doesn't exist any more. It has long been demolished and a new house has been built in its place. ❧

MY EARLY YEARS IN THE "CHILDREN'S HOME"

Dilip Mahtani '71

INTRODUCTION

I came to the Ashram in December '59. I was put in the "Children's Home" or "Maison des Petits" also called "Michèle Boarding" unofficially.

Coming from a big city like Bombay (now Mumbai), I found Pondy to be a small, quiet place — it seemed to me a new world, quite different from the old one — almost like a whole, new separate universe.

THE PLACE

The "Children's Home" was situated at the opposite corner of our present K.G. and is now Praveen's (of Corner House) family residence. Of course it has changed a lot from what it was then.

It was a typical French house, very spacious, with a garden in front. On the eastern side there were two mango trees and on the west one guava tree and a well. (This part has not changed much.) In the afternoons or on holidays we would spend hours batting — hitting a cricket ball in a sock hanging from a guava branch, or sometimes climb the trees.

Next came a long spacious verandah, extending over the whole width of the house. It had half a dozen low cane chairs with cushions. This area was meant to receive visitors. Outsiders were not supposed to go in any farther. (I still have one of those cane chairs — a memento of those early years.)

Inside was a large central hall with a shiny red-oxide floor. All the windows in the house were rather large compared to those in other Indian houses. In the four corners of the hall were the beds for the children. (I was the only new child that year.) Then there were two rooms on each side of the central hall, one each for the Didis, one was vacant and one for the clothes almirah etc. Beyond the main hall was the dining-cum-study-room.

The boarding was maintained spotlessly clean at all times thanks to the watchful supervision of the Didis.

OUR DIDIS

First, Michèle, the senior Didi. She was a French lady, a professionally-trained nurse. Then, in the boarding, as now at her residence, everything was

as clean as in an Operation Theatre — not a speck of dust on the window sills or on the photos.

She being the older Didi and also being French, we were not as intimate with her as with Urmila — (we never called her Urmila-ben). Michèle also used to work in Sanyal-da's clinic. Both the Didis were firm about discipline, but Michèle played more the role of the strict father figure. In spite of



Clockwise round the table: Bharat Mistry, Prakash Mahtani, Dilip Mahtani, Urmila Pandya, Vishnu Roch, Michèle, Shernaz, Laxman Mahtani, Gita Pandya

this external demand of discipline — and today we are all grateful for it — she loved all of us very much. This was seen when she took infinite pains to get Upi (Upendra Ratra) to do his art work for the *Belles Histoires* or when she would make a pudding or a sweet dish for me daily when I was quarantined with measles, or got Shernaz special shoes more suitable for her feet.

The year I came, there were too many new children to be accommodated in the regular green group. (Sumitra, C group captain, also joined that year.) As a result, a separate group, called “Non Group”, was started for us. (Later it was called the “New Group”.) But this did not get organised right away. So, for many months, when the other children had gone off to their group activities, I was alone in the boarding. Although I felt rather lonely and left out at first, it actually proved to be a blessing in disguise. Michèle or Urmila would take me out for a walk every evening. We would

go by the sea-front to the Ashram to deposit the fruit basket and then return. During these walks, I learnt excellent spoken French from Michèle — she would not speak in English if she could help it — and from Urmila I learnt about life in the Ashram.

Our younger Didi, Urmila had come to the Ashram in 1950 at the age of ten. She grew up in the “Dortoir” boarding which was closely supervised by Mother herself. In those years of the early and mid-50s Mother used to be personally involved in all the activities of the Ashram. In fact, the inmates and even the children had the privilege to go to see Mother whenever they needed to. The whole life of the Ashram was centered around Her. From Urmila I came to know about these golden years, and very soon, from being a new-comer and outsider, I came to feel the Ashram as my true home and Mother as a very personal and human mother.

THE BOARDERS

The oldest among us and our leader was Upi (mentioned earlier). He was, from a very young age, a talented artist. Mother was shown some of his work and She encouraged him to illustrate the stories of the *Belles Histoires* (*Tales of All Times*). Mother would see his work once a month, make some corrections and teach him a few things about perspective. Back in the boarding, had Michèle not been after Upi with infinite patience and prodding, nothing would have been done. After doing the illustrations for *Belles Histoires* he did two beautiful “vitraux” (stained-glass art) for the two large pane-glass windows of the hall. Here, Upi did the drawings and Michèle helped with the cutting work and pasting of the coloured cellophane-like paper. In order to show the work to Mother upstairs, Jayantilal-da had asked our Harpagon workshop to prepare a special wooden frame on which the art-work was arranged (a sort of portable window). The whole thing is now preserved in our “Studio” collection with Samata. Upi was also a good sportsman, an excellent boxer and wrestler and on the whole a very adventurous, mischievous fellow, full of fun. Prithwiraj, smart and intelligent, was also very good company. Raju

(Rajnikant Naik), was the youngest of us four, simple of heart, also a good sportsman known later as 'Surti', wicket-keeper in the Ashram first division cricket team.

Later, we were joined by Urmila's younger sisters, Rashmi and Gita. They knew only Gujarati — I picked up the language from them and Urmila.

Then came Vishnu and Shernaz and my brothers Prakash and Laxman. Shernaz being a Parsi girl, would tie a sacred thread round her waist and placing a handkerchief on the head recite her prayers every night. We used to tease her for that. But it was all childish fun. Last came Bharat and his younger sister Praveena. They were the youngest and sweetest of the lot. On the whole it was an interesting, varied family.

And, yes, of course, myself. When I came, I was a thin, rickety fellow with all my ribs showing and a rather weak body. In a year's time, with proper feeding and some regular exercise I was on my way to becoming, in fact, plump. The plus point of my Bombay Convent education had been that I knew English better than my own mother tongue — and that helped me with my French; the minus point was that I was nowhere near my mates in sports. In the city, there was not much open place, so we played in the balconies and the terraces when I had no tuitions in the evenings. Very fortunately, in the Ashram, everything is given its proper value and neither I nor my less academic mates developed any strong complexes. It is the effort and the progress that were and still are recognised and very much encouraged here.

I must say that the above-mentioned boarders did not all live in the boarding at the same time. As the younger ones came, the older ones left. Upi and Prithwiraj joined the Big Boys Boarding and Raju his parents. We were never more than seven at a time together, five in the big hall and two girls in the side room.

THE TRAINING

Between 5 and 5:15 a.m. Urmila would come out of her room and walk past all the beds while snapping her fingers — signal to get up and get ready. We had to hurry up and be at the Balcony for Mother's darshan by 6 a.m.

Right from learning how to take a proper bath to arranging our clothes in the shelves, making our own beds, washing our clothes (when the servants were absent), to lighting the stove and making tea or an omelette, sewing our own buttons,

we learnt everything from our Didis: cleanliness, discipline, good manners. One important point: at home, I would often tell my mother or one of my cousin sisters to fetch me a glass of water. Girls were implicitly considered (and still are, to a happily decreasing extent) to be some sort of second class people, whose role was to serve the men and the boys. Here, this did not apply. Right from day one whether girls or boys, all were absolutely equal. Also, there was no segregation at all whether in school, group or in the boarding. For me, this was a shocking but very healthy



Some early boarders with Michèle.

change from the past. One day, when I asked the maid to fetch me a glass of water, I was told by Urmila to go fetch it myself and not to order anybody about.

In the boarding, everything was perfectly organised: you had your fixed place at the dinner table, your own drinking glass, your shelf, drawer etc. Things had to be used with respect, taken care of and put back in their proper places. "Une place pour chaque chose, chaque chose à sa place."

For meals, we sat erect on stools, only the wrists resting on the table — no sprawling. Our food came from Ganpatram-ji's Cottage restaurant as arranged by Mother. One had to finish everything served by the Didis on one's dish, the amount being decided by them according to one's age. It was good, wholesome food, but very plain on most

days. The food was to be taken for the body and not the palate, we were explained — it was, in fact, to be taken as prasad. Also, no wasting. Michèle had lived through World War II and in fact one day insisted that what I had been unable to finish for lunch I should finish first at dinner.

In the evening, once a week, Michèle or Urmila would tell or read us a story. We cannot forget Columbus' voyage to America on the Santa Maria, his loss of faith in himself and his conviction, the night of depressing doubt and darkness through which he had to pass towards the end of the voyage. We were deeply moved by the numberless sacrifices of the Buddha in his past animal incarnations as narrated in the Jataka tales. The Indian fairy tales transported us to lands of wonder and magic. At the end of the day, we used to recite a small prayer standing near a round table with a small photo of the Mother. Then we were tucked into bed by Urmila at 8:30 p.m. sharp with a "Bonne Nuit!"

SOME MEMORABLE INCIDENTS

Cyclones were common in those years. One morning, Upi got up and looked out at the cloud-covered sky. The whole night it had rained and the weather had been very stormy. He woke all of us up saying it was time to get up and get ready — sometimes Urmila was a bit late in waking us. We all felt that it was too early, but one could not tell the time by looking at the sky and nobody could argue with Upi anyway. So we did get ready and went off for "Balcony". At the Balcony there was no one. We came to the Ashram main gate, that too was closed — it was not even 4 a.m. All of us shouted at Upi but he merely said, "If you people were so sure why did you not say so at the boarding?" There was no use arguing. We headed back. At the Guest House, Kanaklata-di was standing in the small terrace upstairs holding an umbrella in the rain. She asked us :

"Hey! What are you fellows doing, out at this hour?"

"We came for the Balcony darshan."

"You know what time it is? It is not even 4 o'clock."

"Yes, now we know. Even the Ashram is closed. But why are you out Kanaklata-di?"

"My roof is leaking and it is raining everywhere in my room; so I am waiting here for the morning. Now, you boys better go straight back to the boarding and to bed. And don't you ever come out so early again!"

Next day, Urmila informed Mother about the incident. Mother sent us a new alarm clock.

* * *

I mentioned earlier that when I came I was very thin and weak. One evening, Urmila had her group in the Sports Ground. She took me along. We walked and walked and walked till I could go no further. At about 150 m. from the Sports Ground — there used to be an Ashram garden there — I simply refused to take one more step. I sat down exhausted. I had not managed to walk one mile at a stretch.

* * *

Once in a while, on a 1st or on a Sunday, Subodh-da or Dinesh-da (Urmila's group mates in the B-group and also captains) would take us out. (In those days, there was no separate Captains' Group or Captains' uniform.) A few months later, Dinesh-da offered to take us to Rizière. So Urmila prepared the usual bread and cocoa sweet, we took some bananas and we pushed off. This time too, we walked and walked and walked and Dinesh-da kept saying, "We have almost arrived, just a little more. We are almost at Rizière." But the journey was absolutely endless. Finally, after a lot of plodding and panting and prodding, we did arrive... at the Lake. Yes, at the Lake Estate! You can well imagine, the way back was absolutely killing. (I was only 10 and there were no local buses around.) I lagged far behind the others with Jagadish, Urmila's younger brother — he was 5-6 years older than us — encouraging me on all the time. That day my male-ego got a thorough bashing! Urmila's two sisters, Rashmi and even Gita, two years younger than me, were far ahead of me and managing quite well. On the other hand I must say, and on the positive side, a weakling like me who had not made it to the Sports Ground about a year earlier, had somehow managed to walk to the Lake and back — this was indeed a tremendous personal achievement! Of course, in later years, I have walked and cycled to Gingee

a couple of times, like most members of group B and upwards. This is one of the innumerable good things that life in the Ashram has done to all of us — it has toughened us up.

FUN AND MISCHIEF

The story would not be complete if I did not share with you incidents of fun, innocence and mischief. Here are a few.

At night, after 8:30 p.m. when we were all tucked away safely in bed, the Didis would go to the Ashram. In the years before I came, I had heard of the children switching on the lights and playing ‘hockey’ in the hall. A scout was posted at the garden gate keeping an eye on the street for the returning Didis. The moment he heard or saw a Didi he would rush in to inform the others and they would straight away dive into their beds. The following story though happened after I joined.

One summer night, a cat was miauling away for all it was worth. Upi shouted a few times from inside the hall but to no effect. We others, more resigned than he, just pressed our pillows over our heads and tried to go off to sleep. The cat just went on. Then Upi got his mosquito-net stick out and told us not to make any noise. We opened the door and he stealthily crept out into the verandah. He slowly went towards the cat, sitting in the garden. When he was close enough he ran after it, chasing it up the stairs leading to the terrace. On the stairs he got close enough and gave such a mighty whack that he broke the stick in two, missing the cat by a whisker! The cat though got the fear of its life and stopped troubling us for some time. But Upi was full of regrets for the terrible miss. He strung up one end of the mosquito-net to the window bar and we all went off to sleep. Next day, he quietly took the stick to Prem-bhai’s carpentry section, stuck a few nails into it and brought it back whole. That night or the night after, Michèle noticed the

oddly bent stick and he was caught. When cornered, he told her the truth and got the deserved scolding; then Michèle got him a new mosquito-net stick..

* * *

On another occasion, Upi got a tall glass jar from somewhere to be used as an aquarium. He got a few common guppies too. It was just fantastic for all of us and got us all excited. He said the fish should be given very little food otherwise they would die. So, from the next day each one of us would quietly go to the aquarium in the verandah and breaking crumbs from a small piece of bread — that is all we had by way of fish-food — feed the fish with much wonder and delight. Three days later though, the water was white as snow and all the

fish were dead. Upi was again furious with everybody. We had all understood that each one could give them a small piece of bread. But after that no more aquariums.

* * *

My father was posted at Madras (Chennai now) and had brought his company’s car down to Pondy for a few days with the family. After group, around 6 p.m. in the evenings, the boarding children would take mini trips in

the car. We were ravingly happy during these sorties. Of course we would call out to all and sundry in our excitement. One day during one of these trips, Laxman had his head out of the window and was looking around for people when suddenly, near the Governor’s house, he saw Leena, Norman-da’s wife walking ahead. Either he did not know her name or had forgotten it, I don’t remember. The fact is he shouted loudly, “Wife! Wife!” Leena looked aghast, shocked by this insolence, till we pulled him in and all ducked in the car, not wanting to be recognised by her.

* * *

One evening, while returning from Group, someone had a bright idea. There used to be a small bakery near Grinde’s called “Bharat Bakery”.



Upendra Ratra, Rajnikant Naik, Prithwiraj.

We asked little Bharat to read the name of the shop. He deciphered:

“B H A R A T B A K E R Y”.

“Do you know what that means?” someone asked.

“No,” said Bharat.

“It means this is your shop. Your father lives in Nairobi, so he has built this shop for you here. If you go in and ask the shopkeeper anything, he will surely give it to you.”

At first Bharat was not convinced. But with a lot of coaxing and encouragement from us he agreed to go in.

Bharat walked into the shop. We moved a few steps ahead on the opposite side of the road so that we would not be seen. We waited for a few minutes, expecting Bharat to be driven out any moment with a good scolding. Bharat did come out — but with a beaming face and a handful of

warm, large, round biscuits. Our jaws dropped, our mouths watered.

“What happened?”

“I went in and told the man: ‘My name is Bharat. Please give me some biscuits,’ and he gave them to me.”

We had to coax him to share the biscuits with us, and he did.

* * *

Today, all of us children who have grown up in the Ashram, are what we are, not because of some individuals only but because here, in a very small way, is a completely new world in the making. All these people have been instruments in helping us grow in the right way, on the right Path and to them we are ever grateful; they have become in fact a part of us. But our entire gratitude goes up to Mother and the Lord, Architects and Creators of our world’s Luminous Future. ❧

L’EMPEREUR, ARBRE (9.12.1950 – 20.11.1973)

Partout où je me rends, à Paris, à Pampelune ou à Prague,
Mes perceptions se promènent avec l’Empereur des Arbres,
Plié sous son feuillage toujours vert d’avril et donneur d’ombre,
Il héberge le repos intemporel d’un divin Amour.

Celle qui enfanta des myriades de voies lactées et de planètes
Emprunta la forme d’une Grâce radieuse
Pour rencontrer sur terre telle une mortelle en quête de son Prince,
Le Feu qui va consumer la transformation terrestre.

Feu, certes, tout... sauf ses yeux de lotus
Capables d’arracher au cœur de l’Inconscient
Les splendeurs secrètes dérobées au diamant solaire,
Provoquant une explosion nucléaire de Conscience.

Il naviguait vers les profondeurs inconnues au Ciel...
Lors d’une lune de miel par-delà un tourbillon de l’Oubli,
Ils embrasèrent un firmament de Mémoire transfigurée,
Miroirs dans le bas-fond... les étangs où se pâment les Déeses.

Partout où je me rends, à Lausanne, à Morangis ou à Naples,
Au sommet des Alpes ou dans une Grotte d’Azur de rêves,
Tel un schizophrène, transplantant l’Empereur des Arbres
J’abrite le sommeil intemporel de mon divin Amour.

Prithwindra Mukherjee ’58

DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

Namita Sarkar '61

About two years ago there was a notice on the School board saying that copies of a few books were available. Any teacher interested could collect them. Books have always interested me, and as I was looking through them, I saw "Demeter and Persephone" by Tehmi-ben. I was pleasantly surprised, as I did not know that Tehmi-ben had ever written a play. She was my teacher during my student days, and I knew she wrote poetry. But this was something new. So out of curiosity I took the book.

A few days later, I read it. And I was so taken by it that I thought, "Here is something I would like to stage." I knew it would mean a tremendous amount of work and the cooperation of many people, but that did not deter me.

I was so involved that I could almost visualise the different scenes. It so happened that my eldest brother, Ranajit Sarkar, was here at the time on his annual visit. I went to him and asked him to help me edit the play, as it was much too long to be staged in its entirety. He helped me with the first draft. And then I read and re-read it and made additions and alterations according to my vision of the play. When I thought it was more or less fine, I asked Ravi to go through it once more. He too gave some suggestions. And finally when we started

work with the children, Amita-di and I made a few more changes.

Here I must share something with all of you. After I had started work on the play, some very close friends of Tehmi-ben told me that it was her wish that some day this should be staged, and that gave me an added impetus, as I have always had a great respect for her.

STAGE DÉCOR

When I decide to put up something on stage, I generally take my time. I let it grow in me. Slowly, it takes form, and with it come the ideas of the stage décor and the sequence of the scenes



that I would like to present. The décor, according to me, should be simple but suggestive and beautiful. Aesthetics plays a very important role for me in the décor and that is what I always aim for.

In this case, even before I finalised the stage décor, I



wonderful understanding and have been working together over the years for all my plays. The students also did as much as possible to help.

discussed with Mahi (Projector Room) about the lighting. I feel that it is a very important aspect of the play; it helps to create the proper atmosphere. All this happened almost a year ago. The execution of the stage décor was done by Habul and Mahesh Poddar. We have a

THE MUSIC

Music played a very important role in this production. It was one of the first aspects on which we started work once I had made up my mind to stage the play. And Astrid was my choice, for I felt very strongly that she was the right person for it. Most of the music was composed or chosen by her. She was so meticulous in her approach and so full of enthusiasm. It was always a joy when I heard the music that she had composed for she had managed to capture the spirit of the song.

Tehmi-ben had written the words — they were in the play. So these had to be put to music and sung. All the singing was done by the students, some former students and a few ashramites whose voices I liked very much. From the beginning I was moved by so much goodwill from all the participants and from different individuals. A few others also helped in the music and the



DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE – A REVIEW

Savita Srivastava '75

On 13th August 2007, on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's birth anniversary, Tehmi-ben's play "Demeter and Persephone" was staged in the Ashram Theatre for the first time. The cast involved was considerable and for months we kept hearing about this grand project undertaken by Namita-di. As we waited in the Theatre Hall for the play to begin the air was charged with expectation. I went over the story of the play in my head. It was still fresh in my mind from the last reading just a couple of days ago.

Tehmi-ben has written this play using the traditional dramatic blank verse. The story is based on the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. Persephone is the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. She is carried off by Pluto, God of the Underworld, with Zeus' consent when she goes to pluck the fragrant narcissus specially grown for the occasion by Gaia, the Earth Goddess, again at the behest of Zeus in order to fulfil his plan. As Persephone, intoxicated by the sweet smell, plucks the narcissus and swoons, the ground below opens up and Pluto who has been waiting for her carries her off to his kingdom. He makes her his queen but imprisons her in his dark cavern.

Demeter, though aware of Zeus' plan to let Pluto take away Persephone, is plunged in deep sorrow at this inevitable separation.

Time passes and the Earth is transformed by the presence of Persephone. From bare rock and water, it has been changed into a haven of beauty full of myriad flowers, fruit and trees and "heroic men great of heart and mind". However, the forces of falsehood and beings of darkness still persist and stalk the Earth. To liberate the Earth from these forces, Gaia turns to Zeus for help. The latter sends forth Demeter to fight the forces of darkness and bring back Persephone who yearns to return home to her mother. Demeter descends on the Earth in search of her daughter, defeats the forces of darkness and finally delivers Persephone and returns with her to Mt. Olympus — the abode of the Gods. In the process,

Pluto too regains his divinity.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone is symbolic of the separation of the soul from its Divine Consciousness and its descent into matter. Pluto, Lord of the Underworld is the entire material Nature which im-

prisons the soul until the Divine Consciousness descends and redeems it and all Nature with it. In its essence the play depicts what Mother and Sri Aurobindo have revealed to us about the journey of the soul through matter. It is strongly reminiscent of Sri Aurobindo's poem "A God's Labour". In the foreword, Tehmi-ben tells us, "Sri Aurobindo's vision and the knowledge



chanting. It is interesting to note that Tehmi-ben herself had suggested the name of one of the musical pieces in her book, which, of course we incorporated.

I must not forget Ashok Acharya without

whose help it would be almost impossible to have such good quality of recording. He was always recording and re-recording without ever complaining, sometimes at very short notice.

Here I would like to relate a very interesting in-

given to us by him and the Mother stand behind the substance of this play, and those who know their works well may find several echoes from them here.”

The waiting was at last over. The curtain went up and for the next two and a half hours we were treated to the most delightful lines of poetry and scenes crowded with majestic gods and goddesses, beautiful lythe nymphs and dark creatures from the underworld. The costumes were quite fascinating and spoke of the sartorial skills and care that must have gone into their creation. The wings of the little Iris matched Tehmi-ben’s description of them as “shimmering rainbow wings”. Some of the costumes, such as that of Aphrodite, had a distinct Greek touch and the colours were faithfully recreated from the author’s detailed description of them.

It was pleasant and refreshing to watch youngsters perform so well. All the roles, with the exception of Zeus, Demeter and Metaneira, were played by our school children ranging from 8 year old Satya from Avenir to the students of Knowledge. Hats off to Namita-di for her organisational skills required to coordinate such a large heterogeneous group of about 50 people. Hats off also to the team of technicians, directors, musicians, choreographers, stage hands and others — invisible to the audience but without whose expertise, patience and untiring efforts no stage performance can succeed. Apart from gods and goddesses, the play is full



of interesting characters like nymphs, goblins, titans, beings and creatures. All of these came alive with the agility and suppleness of their movements further enhanced by the costumes, lighting, music and chanting. The ensemble made a fitting tribute to the unique concept of the play.

Maurice and Shilpa with their long standing stage experience seemed to glide effortlessly into the roles of Zeus and Demeter. The character of Pluto which required the same maturity as those of Zeus and Demeter, was superbly played by Sujay, displaying poise and traits of a seasoned actor. The innocence and sweetness of Persephone, the loveliness of the helpful Cyane — the river nymph and the playfulness of Spry — the naughty imp and spy, all these added to the refreshing variety and upheld the play.

The show, though a bit long was a great success with the audience. No doubt shortening it further would have been very difficult as it consists of numerous short scenes. Perhaps the frequent breaks between the scenes when the lights went out for a change of props, especially towards the second half, could have been enlivened with music.

On the whole, it was a wonderful show, a faithful rendering which clearly highlighted the symbolism of the spiritual theme with ease and elegance. It was truly a memorable tribute to Tehmi-ben and a fitting offering to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

cident. It was about a week before the programme, and we realised that there was a very important link that was missing for a better understanding of the play. We knew what to do, but we needed the right music for it. Time was running short.

Then the help came. I remember it was a Wednesday and I had a class in the first period. As all of you know, every morning a short piece of music is played in the School so that the teachers and students may concentrate together before beginning



their work. It so happened that on that particular day the short piece was from Sunil-da's composition for *Savitri* — "The Book of Fate". As soon as I heard it, I knew that this

is what I had been looking for. This is just to say, how at every stage Mother has helped and guided me.



THE COSTUMES

The costumes are very important in a play, especially one which is based on a Greek legend. My main aim was to have Greek costumes — more or less for the main characters. So I started leafing through various books of Greek art and sculpture. And just then a friend of mine from Auroville offered some costumes which had been stitched for one of the productions there. This was wonderful. After getting Manoj-da's permission I accepted the offer. She also designed a few more costumes specially for this play and so did Cristof. Two of our former students, Manisha and Anjali, who have their own tailoring units, very kindly offered to do all the stitching. Help came from different



quarters in different ways. One morning, when I was at one of these tailoring units trying to figure out what I should do to improve a certain costume, there walked in a French gentleman whom I did not even know, and asked me if I was getting costumes stitched for a theatre. He looked at the costume and at once took a piece of cloth and showed me what should be done. I was quite impressed and thanked him. He then told me that he had worked as a costume designer for theatres for a long time.



THE CHOREOGRAPHY

This was done by Amita-di and myself. Sometimes we also had suggestions from the participants themselves. We were always open to suggestions and always gave them due importance to



see if they could make the production better. But the final decision was always left to me. We really worked in perfect harmony and joy.

We all had so much to learn from Amita-di. Her commitment and involvement in the play was unbelievable. For example, when she was training, say Demeter, Persephone, Gaia, Athene or Aphrodite, she would read up about them, so that she could tell them exactly what they should try and portray, what it was they should try to convey. And the participants themselves did a lot.



We had told them that they should try and identify with the characters and be as natural as possible. We did not want to show them the movements and the postures they should take. It had to be spontaneous, in other words, they should live the characters.

The dance choreography was done by Sukshma Poddar with Amita-di's help.

THE CAST

I had no hesitation or second thought as far as the casting was concerned. From the very beginning I was very clear about whom I would like

to have for which major role. Being a teacher and a captain for so many years helped me to choose the cast, as I knew the potential of most of the students and former students. All the students who participated were willing, so there was absolutely no problem. I chose their roles according to what I felt each would do justice to. We had a wonderful rapport with each of them and we really enjoyed every moment of our practice.



CONCLUSION

I must say, I was extremely happy at the final outcome and was overwhelmed at the response from everybody who saw it—be it young or old. Looking back, I don't think I would like to have worked differently, but there is always scope for improvement. I enjoyed every moment of this collective work. Every single person put in his/her best and progressed in some way or other.

There were of course moments of despair and discouragement but I always knew that we would overcome them by Mother's Grace, which we did. And finally I really believe Mother did the magic, for She was there amongst us, helping and guiding us throughout. ❧



EVENING MEDITATIONS

FROM 1932 TO 1946

Raman '75 continues his series on Collective Meditation in the Ashram from the Feb '07 issue.

EVENING MEDITATION FROM THE TERRACE, 1932-1934

After the Mother recuperated from her illness in October 1931, she started coming out on the terrace¹ to take a walk in the evening. Soon this became an occasion for the sadhaks to see her and meditate and for the Mother to concentrate on them (see box on Evening Meditation, 1932-1934). By January 1934, the Mother's evening walk was followed by a regular meditation from the terrace and Shankara Rama

Iyer, a Tamil sadhak from Kallakuruchi, noted it down in his daily routine:

8.15 to 9.45 [a.m.] — Meditation in the meditation hall [downstairs]

5.45 to 6.15 [p.m.] — Going to the Dining Room [Aroumé]

6.15 to 7 p.m. — Terrace Darshan of Thyself and meditation.

7 to 8.30 p.m. — No work

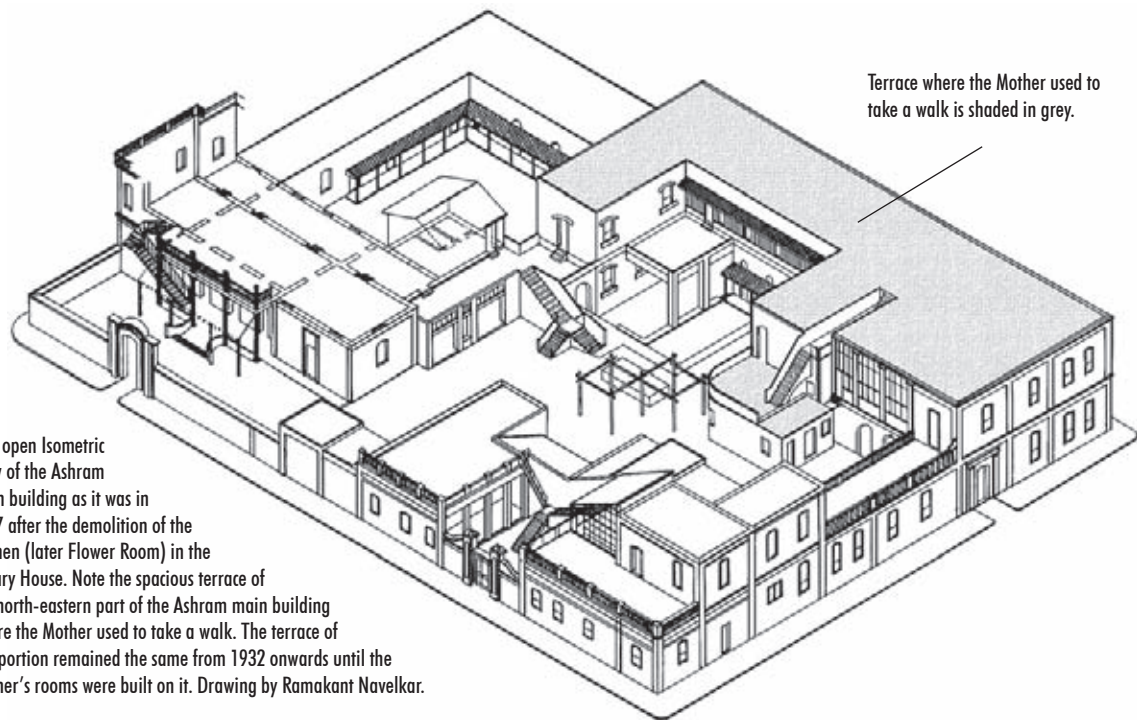
8.30 or 9 [p.m.] — I go to bed



View of the Ashram main building from the south as it was between 1932 and 1942. Note the staircase starting from the terrace above Dyuman's room and Madhav Pandit's office. The Mother had to use this staircase in order to go and take a walk on the roof of the first floor. The tiled roof of the Kitchen (later Flower Room) in the Rosary House can be seen in the centre. This was demolished at the end of 1942.

¹ The terrace or the roof, as is often mentioned in the correspondence of the Ashram sadhaks, is most likely the roof of the north-eastern part of the present Ashram main building minus the Mother's rooms on the second floor, which were built much later. The terrace above Dyuman's room and M. P. Pandit's office should also be included in the possible area of the Mother's walk, because that was from where she could access the staircase leading to the roof of the second floor (see illustrations). The staircase was later redesigned to start from the southern end of the Salon. According to the descriptions of sadhaks,

Part open Isometric
View of the Ashram
main building as it was in
1947 after the demolition of the
Kitchen (later Flower Room) in the
Rosary House. Note the spacious terrace of
the north-eastern part of the Ashram main building
where the Mother used to take a walk. The terrace of
this portion remained the same from 1932 onwards until the
Mother's rooms were built on it. Drawing by Ramakant Navelkar.



Terrace where the Mother used to
take a walk is shaded in grey.

EVENING MEDITATION (1932-1934)

Sahana: Recently I notice that before the Mother comes down from the terrace in the evening she stands there for a long time. I feel that at that time she gives us something specially, so I concentrate to receive and feel what she gives. But this evening suddenly I saw (when I was concentrating by looking at her) that her physical body disappeared, — there was no sign of her body, as if she were not there. Then after a few seconds her figure reappeared. I felt at that moment that she mixed with the ether and became one with all things. Why did I see like this?

Sri Aurobindo: The Mother makes an invocation or aspiration and stands till the movement is over. Yesterday she passed for some time beyond the sense of the body and it is perhaps

this that made you see in that way.

29 August 1932(SABCL, Volume 25, p 91)

Dr. Naik: Lalita informed me that Mother meditates after coming from the roof and all were there. It was very good of her to have told me; otherwise I would never have known it.... I found a deep peace and purity in the atmosphere at the time of meditation.

3 December 1933

Manodhar: When the Mother comes down on the roof and concentrates upon us every day I feel the pressure of a descent of forces; actually they begin to descend as soon as you appear. I feel they come directly from you. Is it not so?

Sri Aurobindo: Yes.

23 December 1933

when the Mother walked on the roof, people on the road could see her just as she could see the houses across the street. There is also mention of the Mother coming down from the roof to concentrate on her disciples who were standing in the courtyard below. This suggests that the Mother stood on the terrace above Dyuman's room and M.P. Pandit's office, from where the Mother actually gave evening meditation from 1942 to 1946. But the possibility of her standing for meditation on the roof of the second floor cannot be excluded, especially in the beginning, when her evening walks had not yet turned into regular collective meditations.



Present-day photograph of the Meditation Hall downstairs taken from the east. The Mother used to stand for meditation “in the middle of the lower part of the staircase”, which is now behind the big photograph of the Mother distributing blessings. The Mother stood facing east on this staircase, conducting collective meditations in the evening from the years 1934 to 1942.

EVENING MEDITATION FROM THE STAIRCASE IN THE MEDITATION HALL, 1934-1942

On 24 July 1934, Dyuman wrote to the Mother after it rained during the evening meditation from the terrace,

When it rains like this, all can quietly gather in the Pranam Hall. You can stand on the staircase, you need not come down. Give the Darshan and the meditation, and return to your room. I leave it to you, Mother.

Mother found Dyuman’s suggestion “a very good idea”, but it was not until 28 October 1934 that she started conducting the evening meditation in the Meditation Hall downstairs. I quote below the diary notations of Rajangam and Kapali Shastri for that date:

We had evening meditation, 15 to 20 minutes,

at the Meditation House verandah, with everybody sitting and Mother on the steps.

Rajangam

Longer meditation in the evening begins regularly.²

Kapali Shastri

It is this evening meditation that is described by Surendra-nath Jauhar (see box on Evening Meditation, 1934-1942). More details can be added from other sources. According to Nirodbaran, the Mother used to stand “in the middle of the lower part of the staircase” and give “a silent meditation to all sitting below for about half an hour”. Other disciples report that the Mother stood facing east, a few steps from the bottom landing, on that part of the staircase behind the big photograph of the

Mother distributing blessings, which is at present kept there. The timing of the meditation from the staircase seems to have varied between 7 and 8 p.m. during the long period that the Mother conducted it, from 1934 to 1942.

Meanwhile, the Mother continued to walk on the terrace though she stopped giving meditation from there. The sadhaks were henceforth discouraged from looking at her and disturbing her concentration while she was taking her walk. The following is a letter written by Sri Aurobindo to a sadhika in 1935:

Mother prefers that when she walks on the terrace people should not be looking at her because it is the only time when she can concentrate a little on herself — apart from the necessity of taking some fresh air and movement for the health of the body.³

² Kapali Shastri, *Collected Works, Volume 3*, p 71

³ SABCL, *Volume 25*, p 279.

EVENING MEDITATION (1934-1942)

As directed, we reached the Meditation Hall at about 7 p.m. A few scores of men and women were already seated there with their eyes closed, lips virtually sealed and heads bowed. All the lights had been put out and in that near total darkness there was just a glimmering of light. It was so quiet and calm! The atmosphere of meditation was infectious and I felt a strong prompting to join it and close my eyes. But I wanted to see what was to happen, hence I kept watching intently.

Now there was a complete hush. But lo! My eyes suddenly beheld something which looked so utterly superb but dream-like. A slender lady, draped in light and wearing a gold *mukut* on her forehead, was coming down, stepping lightly on the heavily carpeted curved staircase. In her gait there was a majesty, on her face glowing grace and her eyes flashed gleams that pierced the darkness below and around. My gaze was fixed on that fairy-like figure whose calm and beautiful face was radiating light and making the whole atmosphere so supernatural that she looked every inch an angel descending from Heaven.

She now stopped and stood on the landing of the staircase, her wide eyes surveying the scene from one end of the hall to the other. In a few moments, she went into trance which made her look even more rapturous. While she stood there statue-like, I felt as if she was suddenly soaring above. Though her eyelids were now locked in embrace, yet I almost saw them passing sweet messages and exchanging glances with something or somebody that was not perceptible. All her limbs seemed blended in harmony and her entire figure was wrapped in ecstasy. The halo

of serenity and divinity around her was like a circular rainbow in the multi-colours of which my eyes perceived visionary images and indications.

And now suddenly a smile dawned on her lips and with the speed of lightning it stole across her cheeks, eyes, the whole face. The smile blossomed into a flower and then the petals of blessings and grace showered down on the entranced devotees, who, in deep gratitude uplifted their eyes, only to behold that she suddenly turned to return to her abode. Her departure was as blissful and mysterious as her advent and my racing gaze in a few moments lost the heavenly track on which trod that divine figure. As the congregation dispersed, we learnt that she was the Mother....

That night, in Pondicherry as I lay asleep, I underwent strange but sweet experiences. A train of dreams ran on the rails of mind. That majestic personification of grace and beauty, of love and life, appeared on the screen of my mind like a continuously running film. I woke up so light in body as if I had lost some part of it and yet the loss seemed so sweet and exhilarating. There were some peculiar sensations brewing within my heart which I could not fathom. Something had happened though I knew not what it was.

When we left the town, the morning after that fateful and momentous evening, I could clearly see that my destiny had been decided and that the die had been cast. I knew that I was leaving only to return and return again and again. As the train steamed out homewards, I felt as if I had found my real home.

December 1939

Surendranath Jauhar

His Life, Work and Thought, pp 79-80

The evening meditation and the morning Pranam were the two main collective programmes of the Mother in the thirties up to Sri Aurobindo's accident on 24 November 1938. There was however a small interruption at the end of January 1937 when the Mother underwent severe physical strain

and had a minor ailment of the eye. The morning Pranam was at first replaced by and later alternated with meditation only, so that the Mother could be spared the physical exertion of blessing all her disciples. But the evening meditation was resumed on 2 February 1937 without any change and continued



Close-up of the terrace, south of the Salon and above Dyuman's room and Madhav Pandit's office from where the Mother gave meditation to the disciples standing in the courtyard below in the years 1942-1946, and perhaps also earlier in the years 1932-1934.

the purchase of the Ford V8, which arrived on 22 January 1947. The Humber arrived two months later with Pavitra himself driving it down from Madras on 18 March 1947.

The first well-recorded visit of the Mother during this period is to the Playground on 2 December 1946, though she did go out earlier on at least one occasion to attend to some official work at Vanur. There was again a lapse of a few weeks until the arrival of the Ford V8 in January 1947. The Mother then started coming out daily and visited the farms and departments of the Ashram and houses of her disciples. She attended football matches of the Ashram team at the Military Ground, played Table Tennis and, shortly afterwards, Tennis at the age of seventy-one. She occupied herself with the education of the Ashram school children, especially their physical education, and spent much of her precious time with them. Dilip Kumar Roy, a disciple who had joined the Ashram in 1928, dashed off a couple of letters to Sri Aurobindo in 1948 expressing his deep concern at this apparent transformation of the Ashram into a Playground. Sri Aurobindo wrote back a long letter to Dilip allaying his fears and assuring him that the Mother would not be at all displeased if he did not join

the activities in the Playground. One would now be amused at Dilip's protests to his Master but, at that point of time, it made a big difference to the older generation of sadhaks, who were more used to a life of dedicated work and meditation. When the Mother introduced physical education in the Ashram with the help of Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, not only the children grew up in a healthy environment of sports and physical exercise but even the older disciples began participating in it. Physical education henceforth became an integral part of Ashram life. At the same time, the restricted framework of Ashram life widened to incorporate a school for children who eventually could choose to lead or not to lead a life of sadhana after the completion of their studies, unlike the previous generation which came exclusively for yoga. The Mother's action seems to have always gone out in widening circles throughout the history of the Ashram and what commenced towards the end of 1946 was definitely one such dynamic expansion. ❧

Any feedback is welcome, especially from sadhaks and former students who came to the Ashram in the forties.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Purushottam Kothari '83

There is an old saying in Hindi "*Chor ki dadhi mein tinka*". Once a zamindar lined up his servants and asked them who had climbed into his room from the tree and stolen his jewelry. None of the servants admitted to the theft. Unfortunately the servant who stole had a tiny leaf stuck in his beard from the very tree he had climbed and therefore was caught. Based on a similar theory we have an anecdote of our own brand.

On one of his trips to India, Dingle (Rashmi) invited Habul-da (Abhijit) to Mahabaleshwar as part of his *gurudakshina*. While they were enjoying a relaxing boat ride, suddenly they noticed a motorboat named "Rajalakshmi" pass by.

The name Rajalakshmi reminded Dingle of a childhood prank and he burst out laughing. Habul-da was a little surprised to see Dingle suddenly laugh just like that and asked him what the reason was. Dingle said that once many years ago, he had been to the Ashram Library for a recorded Western music concert at night and while returning, as it was raining heavily he just flicked an umbrella from the umbrella stand and brought it home. The next morning on closer inspection he found the name Rajalakshmi written on it and as he didn't know any Rajalakshmi in the Ashram, he was left with no choice but to quietly usurp it. "Goods once picked on the sly will not be returned or exchanged", seemed to be the bottom-line.

On hearing the story Habul-da gave Dingle a couple of hard *gattas* and said that Rajalakshmi was none other than his own

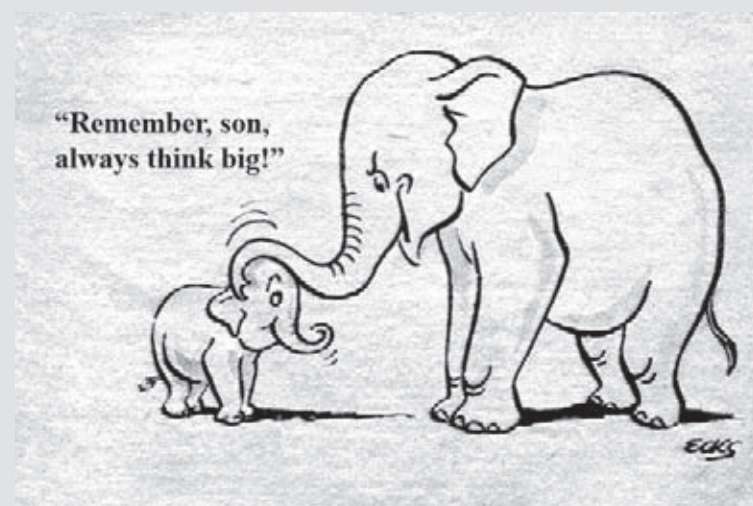
mother (Dolly-di) and that one evening Bulu (Habul-da's brother) had lost her umbrella in the Library. Whether Dingle was more shocked or embarrassed is anybody's guess and went on stuttering, "but your mother's name is Dol...Dol...Dolly-di, isn't it? I had pinched Rajalakshmi's umbrella." "Well, you had your chance to pinch and now it is my turn to pinch you," said Habul-da pinching him. This is how Rashmi alias Dingle was caught by Abhijit alias Habul-da after 10 long years for stealing Rajalakshmi alias Dolly-di's umbrella left by Asit alias Bulu!

After returning to Pondy, Dingle promptly went to Dolly-di with a new imported umbrella as *Prayashchit* (atonement of sin). Dolly-di being who she is embraced him and all was forgotten in a second.

So now Dingle who steals the show with his tabla, has to be shown how to steal. ☸

Disclaimer: The anecdotes in this column are generally based on orally transmitted accounts. No uncoloured authenticity is claimed.

CARTOON SEEN BY THE MOTHER





QUIZ TIME!



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

1. In which part of the Ashram Main Building was Sri Aurobindo residing on 24th November 1926 (the Siddhi day)?
2. “My aim is to create a centre of spiritual life which shall serve as a means of bringing down the higher consciousness and making it a power not merely for ‘salvation’ but for a divine life upon earth. It is with this object that I have withdrawn from public life and founded this Ashram...”
These lines are taken from a letter written by Sri Aurobindo. To whom did he write it?
3. Who had lived in Japan with the Mother and also lived in the Ashram for many years?
4. “Mute stands she, lonely on the topmost stair...”
This is a line from one of Sri Aurobindo’s poems. Who is this “she”?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the white lotus?

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE LAST ISSUE :

1. *On 15th August 1947 what was Sri Aurobindo’s age?*
15th August 1947, when India gained Independence, was not only Sri Aurobindo’s birthday but it was his 75th birthday.
2. *Where did Nolini-da first see and speak to Sri Aurobindo?*
They met for the first time in the palatial mansion of Raja Subodh Mullick.
3. *When Sri Aurobindo went to Surat to attend the annual session of the Indian National Congress in 1907 who went with him as an attendant and a bodyguard?*
Sudhir Sarkar went with him. He was one of the accused in the Alipore Bomb Case and was deported to the Andaman Islands. He was released after 9 years of imprisonment. He joined the Ashram in 1943 and lived here until he passed away in 1974. He is better known to us as Mona-da’s father. (See *Sri Aurobindo and the Freedom of India*.)
4. *Whose words are these?*
“...The illustrious example of Arabindo Ghose looms large before my vision. I feel that I am ready to make the sacrifice which that example demands of me.”
These words were written by Subhash Chandra Bose. (See *Sri Aurobindo and the Freedom of India*.)
5. *From which poem written by Sri Aurobindo are these lines taken?*
“Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern seas”
These lines are from “Envoi”. The poem is dated 1890-1892. This corresponds to Sri Aurobindo’s years at Cambridge and the few months he spent in London after he left the University. The lines presumably refer to his return to India after spending his early life in England.

Class of 2007

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Standing (Fourth Row left to right): Udipta Datta, Achal Kumar Singh, Debabrata Sahoo, Abhijit Baliarsingh, Dibyangshu Mukherjee, Chinmoypritam Muduli, Matiriprasad Parija
 Standing (Third Row): Unmukta Sinha, Abhinav Agarwal, Ritarpan Bhattacharya, Jerry Silvester Vincent, Ishit Kuberkar, Anjas Srivastava, Siddhartha Das, Rahul Chowdhury,
 Vandana Gupta.

Sitting (Second Row): Shubham Joshi, Kittu Reddy, Jhumur Bhattacharya, Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, Manoj Das Gupta, Swadesh Chatterji, Arati Das Gupta, Dilip Mahtani, T S Divya
 Sitting (Front Row): Sumati Kalidindi, Madhumayee Basak, Aparajita Baliarsingh, Debamitra Ghosh, Oeendril Guha, Dhiwya Jayaprakash, Prashanta Patil, Amrita Bhadra,
 Hita Luhar, Sukshma Vedere