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# *The Golden Chain*

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



## Mother and Japan - II

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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Cherry blossoms in a temple in Fukuoka, Japan.  
Photo by Giles Herdman

## The Golden Chain

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana Panda '79

Some days back I was trying to remember who my history teachers had been at school. Strange, I could not recall a single history class. Vaguely, Vimla-ben's stories of the Mughal emperors trickled back to my memory. But in that memory there was more of how we fought to sit next to her rather than which emperor came after which one. Then something about the French revolution rang a bell somewhere. I must have fallen through the net and somehow never really had a proper history class at all.

Strangely enough, today I know every detail of the history of the Tudor dynasty in England and can tell you the story of Henry VIII backwards. How did that happen? When I was in red group one Saturday there was a film on the life of Mary Queen of Scots. It was such a powerful film with such good actresses playing the main roles that I couldn't sleep all night. On my own I read up all the books I could lay my hands on to know what really happened between Elizabeth and Mary, the two queens, and by trying to understand their stories I found out all about Henry VIII. Ironically, all my knowledge of history can be traced back to some work of fiction. *Gone with the Wind* led me to the history of the American Civil War and Satyajit Ray's film *The Chess Players* pushed me to know more about the British Raj in India. All I know about the European Renaissance was triggered off by *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, a fictionalised account of the life of Michelangelo. I found out on my own about how the world was transformed after the two World Wars as well as about the Civil Rights movement in America. No one had explained to me who the Jews were or how the Protestants were different from the Catholics or what was behind the movement of colonisation of the different parts of the world. My own curiosity led me from one book to the other.

While others in my batch were reading *The*

*Ideal of Human Unity* I was reading *Gone with the Wind* and I didn't bother about the raised eyebrows either. But let me tell you that I am reading *The Ideal of Human Unity* now and it reads like a racy bestseller. Or almost. Every sentence is packed with meaning because I have reflected on those issues already on my own. While I was reading about the abolition of slavery or the speeches of Martin Luther King or watching on television the religious fanatics and their violence, the question of human unity had been turning like a Buddhist prayer-wheel in my mind. Clearly, if you want to understand Sri Aurobindo's writings you have to do your homework first and learn about the world. Without knowing the history of the world, without knowing human psychology, without a knowledge of the broad lines of science and technology, without knowing about the different paths of self-knowledge one can read Sri Aurobindo's books, but probably not be able to go beyond the dictionary meaning of the words.

I remember that when I was in green group, on our gymnastics day I would beg Richard to let me go and drink water because after half an hour of vaulting and parallel bars I would be tremendously thirsty. "Only three sips," I would promise Richard and run to the drinking water place in the Guest House. I can still remember the smell of that brass tap because at that moment it was the most precious thing in the whole world. It was not the water which came out of the tap that made the experience so intense. It was my own thirst.

Knowledge is everywhere but we seek it only when the mind is thirsty. While we need to widen the mind to understand Sri Aurobindo we have to refine our thoughts to understand the Mother. He is somewhere in the galaxies while she is within a single cherry blossom. And it is because they have urged us on that when we understand the hidden reality behind something it is like quenching a deep inner thirst. ❧

## WORKING THE LAND

*Just a little beyond the Lake, away from the main road, you will find Gloria Land. There, under the spreading branches of the Banyan tree you can see **Glory '91** (obviously named after the land) working alongside the farm-hands. After driving through the chaotic traffic of Pondicherry and the ugliness of haphazard constructions on the way, you have finally reached a place which is a part of a completely different world.*

*We thought we should find out what it feels like for a former student to be working in a farm of the Ashram, far from the familiar surroundings of Pondicherry, far from the companionship of the old-timers and familiar faces.*

***How did you get involved in the work in Gloria Land? Did you always want to do this work or did you take this decision when you finished***



Line planting: winter paddy 2007-2008

***your studies? What has this work brought to you on a personal level?***

As a child, working with my father in Gloria Land was the only reality for me, but somewhere during my teens I got distracted and lost the passion.

In Oct 1991, my last month in Knowledge, we had problems in Gloria: a wind/rain storm had destroyed our entire banana crop and our previous accountant had secretly connived with our workers to form a union. We had labour unrest followed by a strike. We paid huge sums in arrears and the good relationship of faith and trust was twisted and made to appear like exploitation. At

that point I wrote a letter to my father asking him to get rid of the old accountant and told him that I would work in Gloria and do the accounts.

The real involvement came only after I lost my father. Till then I was doing all the boring clerical jobs and never took responsibility. When there is somebody else doing the entire hard work one can afford to be lazy. Maybe I needed this shock and extreme pain to jolt me out of my complacency and it is only now that I feel there is a direction in my life.



Glory with her parents (l to r): Maya, Glory, Manindra

***How many workers are there directly under your charge and what are your guiding principles for dealing with workers?***

Today we have only 15 workers in our pay book distributed essentially in the dairy, kitchen and workshop. The agriculture part is done entirely by daily wagers. Depending on the season (paddy/groundnut) we have upto 50 to 60





Super Ponni rice: panicles in abundance

women working everyday and as few as 3 women out of season.

I read a little booklet which was a compilation of what Srma has said about how one should treat workers. I realise now that my father's gentle but firm way of treating them was right, although then, when I was solely the accountant and always counting money and the number of hours worked, his kindness used to infuriate me.

I am still very calculating in my dealing with workers but I do feel this surge of gratitude when I see our women transplanting paddy in pouring rains with only a plastic bag tied as raincoat. In time I am certain I will improve.

***What were the difficulties you faced in this line of work and how did you overcome them?***

It never ceases to amaze me how in agriculture/dairy we are always fighting against odds. When we need rains the clouds vanish, when the paddy is mature and ready to be harvested it rains and the entire crop is lying flat. When you are drying the grains a sudden shower will drench it all. In peak summer the submersible pump-set will get burnt and you won't have water to keep the grass beds alive. Just when you think, "Oh finally the milk yield is going up!" the herd will be affected

by FMD (Foot and Mouth Disease). The moment you feel comfortable and see the health of cows improving, the price of cow-feed sky-rockets and messes up your budget. As you transplant *bajra* there will be a power outage. When you pre-plan your irrigation program, you wake up to find that the electrical cable has been stolen. When you have the funds and the water and the weather is co-operating no labour turns up. In season and out of it the tractors seem to break down all the time. And to add to all this there are local villagers who come to steal just about anything, be it grass, seasonal fruits, coconuts, groundnuts... you name it, they steal it.

I have to add that there are lengthy phases when everything is perfect, but I seem to forget about them.

I remember as a student making frantic calls to my father when there had been unexpected rains

during harvest asking him how much damage had occurred. I can still hear his optimistic voice quoting with a slight Bengali accent, "All is always for the best, but sometimes from the external point of view it is an awkward best." And that is my abiding principle in facing difficulties.

***Was there any special quality that you had picked up as a student of the School that helped you in your work?***

I was a bad student but SAICE for me is a way of life and it is a blessing that Srma thought I was worthy of this place. Maybe my commitment to Gloria grew through the immense respect and love I have for my father and the pioneering work



Healthy Jowar



Farm Road

# A LIFE OF DEDICATION

*Glory remembers her father, Manindra Pal (SAICE 1959-1962)*

My father knew nothing of farming when he joined Gloria Land. He learnt all agriculture operations from Mr. Sheshadri (ex-deputy director of agriculture for Tamil Nadu) including the usage of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

It is when he himself fell sick after spraying pesticides and saw fish die in the canal where he bathed that he realised this could not be the right method of farming. He tried cultivating experimental plots organically with promising results and from then on never looked back.

Gloria Land was an arid piece of land, an agriculturist's nightmare. Mammoth hard work and dedication transformed it into the fertile earth it is today. My father worked and lived by the two quotes from Sri Aurobindo which appear on our letter head:

"If thy aim be great and thy means small, still act: for by action alone these can increase to thee."

"Care not for time and success. Act out thy part, whether it be to fail or to prosper."

Dyuman-bhai had told the following story to my father: the Mother used to drink tomato juice everyday and the tomatoes came from Bangalore. One day Srma refused to drink the tomato juice saying that it was not good for her because of the use of chemicals. Immediately Dyuman-bhai told her that Manindra was growing tomatoes without chemicals and she said, "Those I will take."

My father once told me that a particular

crop in the neighbour's field was attacked by pests and spread into our fields. Everyday he used to watch aghast as the pest attack spread, and toyed with the idea of using pesticides for the fear of losing everything. One such day he prayed to Srma and resolved that come what may he would not succumb. If we in the Ashram

cannot take the risk, then who ever will? The next day the pest attack stopped spreading. He continued to pray and miraculously the pest attack receded and vanished.

Science cannot explain this phenomenon but an unshakable faith can. This is the spirit of my father's method of organic farming which



Driving home at the end of a hard day

is in its essence spiritual.

In 1982 he attended an international workshop on organic farming in The Netherlands called Agriculture Man Ecology (AME). On being asked, he admitted to a journalist that he had learnt nothing from it. The organisers were furious with this Indian farmer who had the audacity to ridicule the workshop. But soon enough they realised his wealth of knowledge learnt from the soil and subsequently invited him as a professor!

From 1985 onwards these workshops funded by the Dutch were held annually in Gloria Land. Participants came from all over the world based entirely on the credibility of one Indian farmer whose strength was his faith in Srma.

Till his last breath he was Mother's valiant soldier and, without being subjective, my source of inspiration.

## ORGANIC FARMING

Organic farming is a form of agriculture which excludes the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, livestock feed additives, and genetically modified organisms. Organic farmers rely on crop rotation, green manure, compost and biological pest control to maintain soil productivity and control pests.

When the Mother was asked whether she approved of organic farming and the spread of its methods, she wrote:

*The organic manure is the only one  
to be used. Harish*

in organic farming that he has done — whatever the means, it helped in keeping me here and for that I am eternally grateful.

***Have you ever had an experience that made you feel that the Mother is helping you from a subtle/invisible plane?***

Srima is doing little miracles all the time. What otherwise seems like disaster later turns out to be Her grace. Last year due to a shortage of paddy seedlings we abandoned planting in a 5 acre patch. The rains had been fabulous and we felt bad not covering that area. Subsequently one submersible pumpset got burnt twice and we had precious little water to keep the crop alive once the rains receded. Had we transplanted in the 5-acre patch, the crop would have dried and died leaving us agonised and regretting the expense made on it. It is then that we were grateful to have fallen short of seedlings!

***What new elements have you introduced to Gloria Land?***

I am still learning about farming and dairying. For now if I can just do the work at hand as best as I can I will be happy.

***What do you appreciate about your work and which aspects do you find are the downside of living and working on a farm?***

I love every bit of the work except for the book keeping part and I am yet to find something that I would term as a downside to living and working on a farm... unless a pathetic internet connection and waging a war against white ants in the

residential block can be considered downsides.

***Do you have a dream plan, something that seems difficult or impossible today that you would like to see turn into reality?***

My father had a plan for our irrigation system. He was also aiming at self-sufficiency and was trying to make our dairy into a zero external input system so that our herd is fed only on organically grown produce. I would like to do these things if possible. I just know too little as of now.

I wish and hope for more involvement from inmates and devotees. We could have residential pockets in different corners of all the farms where inmates/devotees who love to be in nature could be living. A bus trip could be arranged to take them to town everyday and they could do their work in their respective departments, participate in group activities and finally return in the eve-



Glory in the heifer yard

ning. The inmates would have different days of the week off from town work which would mean that everyday a few would remain on the farm. For us it would mean a whole area protected and new ideas and life generated in an otherwise lonely place.

***Is there anything that you would like to tell our readers?***

All our Ashram farms are grossly understaffed.

I don't know about older statistics but from 1992 onwards Manish in Tapogiri and I in Gloria Land seem to be the only ex-students who have stuck it out on a farm!

I quote from our Master:

"...We must now turn to the one field of work in this direction which we have most neglected, the field of agriculture. The return to the land is

as essential to our salvation as the development of Swadeshi or the fight against famine.

"If we train our young men to go back to the fields... They will be able to become mentors, leaders and examples to the village population.... The problem is urgent in its call for a solution...."

Sri Aurobindo (March 6, 1908) ❧

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## L'OCÉAN DE LA GRÂCE RESPLENDIT À PERTE DE VUE

*Samarth Kothari '06*

Quand j'avais onze ans, mes yeux étaient affectés par une allergie. Elle causait des démangeaisons et des brûlures, ainsi que des douleurs et des envies de grattements. Les symptômes étaient: sensations de corps étranger dans l'œil, des larmoiements, et une vision floue temporaire.

Chaque nuit, je me frottais les yeux jusqu'à ce que mes avant-bras commencent à me faire mal. Cela entraînait une décharge de mucus, une rougeur, une enflure des paupières, et un nez bouché. Je respirais par la bouche. Mes paupières étaient toujours collées le matin. J'y appliquais ma salive pour que mes yeux s'ouvrent et que je puisse sortir de mon lit. Parfois, je ratais mon dîner car l'irritation devenait insupportable. Assister aux cours les après-midi, devenait de plus en plus difficile. Lorsque je parlais à quelqu'un, je ne pouvais jamais le regarder dans les yeux. La natation m'était interdite. Comme la situation s'était beaucoup dégradée, mon médecin me conseilla d'arrêter les sports. C'était l'enterrement de toutes mes espérances.

Aucun médicament ne me soulageait de ce fardeau. Seul le sommeil atténuait les symptômes. Mais la même histoire se répétait chaque soir. C'était la quadrature du cercle. Même les stéroïdes ne m'apportaient qu'un soulagement éphémère. Les docteurs avaient tout tenté, mais en vain. Ils me disaient qu'il fallait que je m'arme

de patience et de courage. Au fil des années, je commençais à m'adapter peu à peu. Je devais me débrouiller avec les moyens du bord. Mais à cet âge, lorsqu'on n'a pas mûri suffisamment, il est difficile d'aborder le problème. Je mésestimaient le sérieux de la situation et je prenais les choses à la légère.

Il m'a fallu cinq années pour développer « une maîtrise de soi » pour arrêter de me frotter les yeux violemment. Les symptômes s'affaiblissaient, et contre toute attente la situation s'améliorait. Les allergies étaient plus espacées et duraient moins longtemps.

Après une année, une maladie de la cornée qui prend progressivement la forme d'un cône, le kératocône, m'a été diagnostiquée. Les images m'apparaissaient déformées et il y avait une diminution de mon acuité visuelle.

Il n'y a pas de cause apparente pour cette maladie qui évolue par paliers. Un ensemble de facteurs justifie son apparition pendant l'adolescence. Mais les recherches indiquent que les personnes qui se frottent les yeux avec vigueur courent le risque d'avoir des ennuis. Je négligeais ces sages avertissements et j'avais lieu de m'en repentir. En fait, j'avais mis le doigt dans l'engrenage.

Au fil des mois, l'astigmatisme devenait de plus en plus marqué. L'amincissement de la cornée aggravait la situation. Le port de lentilles de contact dures améliorait l'acuité visuelle, mais causait



tout de même une douleur insupportable.

J'avais perdu quatre-vingt-dix pour cent de ma vision de l'œil gauche. Je voyais à travers un brouillard. Le ciel était nuageux à l'aube de ma vie. Je ratais les balles de tennis et je manquais largement ma cible.

La seule solution que m'offrait mon médecin était une greffe de cornée. C'était mon dernier recours. Cette révélation m'atteignait profondément. Mais le docteur me disait: « Si toutefois tu n'y vois pas d'inconvénient, tu peux te faire opérer. Rien ne te contraint de le faire tout de suite. Que tu le fasses aujourd'hui ou demain, c'est du pareil au même. » Je me cramponnais à cette idée comme un naufragé à une bouée. La patience de mon médecin ne connaissait pas de bornes. Il comprenait que c'était un sujet délicat qu'il me fallait approfondir petit à petit, et comme j'étais au printemps de ma jeunesse, faire du sport était capital pour moi.

J'ai rejeté a priori toute proposition d'une greffe de cornée, parce que c'était l'anéantissement de tous mes espoirs. Après une greffe de cornée certains sports sont interdits définitivement à cause du risque élevé de traumatisme. Je me berçais toujours de l'espérance que je me débrouillerais avec mon œil droit jusqu'à ce que j'achève mes études. Cette assertion n'avait pas de sens précis. Mais c'était une idée solidement ancrée. J'étais conscient du fait que ceci déplaçait le problème et ne le résolvait point.

Les lendemains étaient remplis d'incertitude. Je flottais dans l'indécision. J'étais tiraillé entre les solutions qui s'offraient à moi. Je regardais avec curiosité vers l'avenir inconnaissable, et j'étais balotté d'un propos à l'autre. Je sentais que je n'avais aucune prise sur les événements, et je me cabrais à l'idée de céder et de me faire opérer. Je me livrais à des conclusions hâtives, certain que

l'opération serait la fin de toute activité sportive. L'anxiété me tenait en haleine. Bien que plein d'espérance, l'attente devenait insupportable et renforçait mon angoisse.

Trois ans plus tard, après mûre réflexion, j'ai réalisé que j'abandonnais un avantage réel pour un profit illusoire et que mon entêtement n'aboutirait à rien. Comme je ne pouvais plus être équipé de lunettes ou de lentilles, j'évaluais les conséquences possibles, en pesant le pour et le contre. Cela a pris longtemps pour me défaire des blocages psychologiques.

Il y avait à peine quelques jours que j'étais plongé dans un abîme d'irrésolution, lorsque soudain, je me sentis d'attaque pour une greffe. J'avais changé d'avis du jour au lendemain. Le 28 février, lors de mon examen oculaire, j'ai dit à mon médecin que j'étais prêt pour me faire opérer. Il a mis mon nom sur la liste d'attente et m'a prévenu que cela prendrait envi-

ron trois mois pour trouver la cornée d'une jeune personne. Il m'a dit: « Je te tiendrai au courant. »

Le lendemain, c'était le 29 février. Je suis allé au *darshan* et j'ai dit à Mère: « Tu décides le moment propice pour mon opération. Je te fais entièrement confiance. » D'ores et déjà, le vent était à l'optimisme.

Comme le jour suivant était un congé, et alors que je rentrais fatigué à la maison après une heure de tennis et trois heures de cricket, mon père m'a dit: « Ton opération est prévue pour demain! » Le fil des événements dans ces brefs délais était inconcevable. Tout se passait comme par enchantement. Mère arrangeait tout pour moi. La crainte de l'insuccès ne m'effleurait plus.

La veille de mon opération j'ai lu le livre *Éducation* et j'ai écouté la musique de Sunil-da. J'ai passé ce petit fragment de ma vie dans le silence. Ce souvenir restera gravé dans ma mémoire.



Photo récente de Samarth à Paris où il poursuit ses études

Le lendemain après-midi, ma cornée malade a été remplacée par une cornée saine, prélevée sur un décédé. La suture de la cornée greffée est un travail long et minutieux. Comme il n'y a aucun vaisseau sanguin dans la cornée, la guérison est lente.

Je suis resté à la maison pendant une cinquantaine de jours. Ce temps d'attente me paraissait une éternité. Pendant les deux dernières années, je n'avais manqué aucun jour à l'école, et voilà que je me retrouvais isolé chez moi. Les premiers jours étaient franchement ennuyeux. L'inactivité aidant, je ne pouvais pas dormir. Tout ce que je mangeais me profitait. Je m'étais astreint à un régime intensif. J'avais envie de jouer, mais j'étais encore convalescent et il fallait que je me ménage.

Le premier livre que j'ai lu après mon opération était « Jours de Prison ». Cette lecture était fort attachante. Sri Aurobindo avait vécu dans une solitude inconcevable. Même dans la plus faible lueur d'espérance il trouvait une joie imprévue. Il cherchait à tourner les choses en dérision. Ce livre m'a changé les idées et m'a aidé à profiter de mon temps libre.

Je faisais des exercices d'assouplissement, je marchais sur ma terrasse, jouais du tabla et j'écoutais les entretiens de Mère. La fuite des jours était assez rapide.

Après deux mois, j'ai repris les activités de plein air. À l'école, les retrouvailles étaient touchantes.

Comme j'étais entiché de sport, j'ai lancé la recherche sur internet pour trouver un casque et des lunettes anti-reflet. J'ai apporté les impressions à mon médecin et je l'ai convaincu que je ne courrais aucun risque si je jouais avec ces équipements de protection. Le moindre faux pas pouvait tourner à la catastrophe. J'ai été surpris que mon médecin ait accepté d'emblée cette proposition.

Il y a des moments où notre destinée se détourne soudain de sa ligne première. La vie est pleine d'imprévus. Il faut juger à froid et agir à chaud. Se faire des cheveux blancs ne sert à rien.

Dans l'ensemble tout s'était bien passé. L'expérience était un bon tremplin pour apprendre à faire face aux circonstances et m'a redonné un souffle nouveau. Je me suis aussi forgé

une carapace qui m'aide à encaisser pas mal de choses.

C'est seulement lorsque nous affrontons une difficulté que nous trouvons le point d'appui, la prière. Quand rien n'entrave la vie, l'esprit a bien moins de raisons pour être conscient de la présence divine qui nous aide à chaque instant. C'est la foi qui nous donne l'élan qu'il faut pour avancer. Nous devons porter nos efforts sur ce point.

Il faut privilégier la pratique sur la théorie. Nous donnons des conseils, mais n'inspirons point de conduite.

En résumé, il n'y a qu'une seule chose à retenir. Surmonter les difficultés exige une soumission inconditionnelle à Mère et à Sri Aurobindo. Il faut que nous soyons immuables dans cette conviction. C'est un travail qui n'a l'air de rien, mais demande une foi inébranlable.

Aujourd'hui, la vie de tous les jours a repris avec ses journées de travail bien remplies. Le succès de la greffe de cornée à mon œil gauche a dépassé mon espérance. Rétrospectivement, c'était une décision pragmatique. J'avais perdu 90% de ma vision, mais j'en ai regagné 80%.

La santé est un des biens les plus précieux. Nous le réalisons seulement lorsque nous sommes entre le marteau et l'enclume. Ma maman me disait : « Il faut que tu te soignes. Que feras-tu si tu ne peux plus lire ? » J'avais répondu spontanément : « Je jouerai de la flûte et du tabla. »

Récemment, je me suis brusquement avisé d'une diminution de vision dans l'autre œil. Le kératocône est généralement bilatéral. La maladie n'est pas encore à un stade très avancé dans l'œil droit, mais l'espoir d'éviter une deuxième greffe de cornée est néanmoins mince. De toute façon, j'ai le ferme espoir que Mère comblera toutes mes espérances.

La vie est un éternel recommencement. Chaque instant est une opportunité pour faire un progrès. La citation, « Finally it is faith that cures », résonne à coups de cymbales.

En anglais on dit : « Man proposes and God disposes. » Je pense que c'est plutôt : « God proposes and man disposes. » Nous sommes souvent sourds aux leçons de la sagesse. ❧

# MOTHER AND JAPAN - II

*Sunayana Panda '79*

Going to a place a second time can never be like the first. The novelty of the first visit cannot be repeated because the first impressions have an intensity that one can never find again. A second visit to a well-loved place, on the other hand, is like meeting an old friend. We had made up our minds to go back to Japan as soon as we returned from our first trip. There were so many unfinished stories, so many unsolved mysteries and so many answers that had yet to be found. The next two years were spent in planning and reading up about Japan, and also learning to speak Japanese. Yes, this time my husband's practiced spoken Japanese made it easier for us to communicate.

Our trip had been planned in such a way that it would coincide with the Cherry Blossom Festival, but with something so closely linked to nature one can never be too sure. Fortunately for us, the day we arrived in Japan the trees in some parts of the country had started flowering. The very next day we headed for the famous Ueno Park in Tokyo. The trees were still covered in buds and there wasn't a single leaf on them. This meant that when they did flower there would be nothing

but flowers on the brown branches. The park workers were busy getting ready for the festival that was about to start, the moment the flowers appeared. There were large plastic bags upheld by metal frames which were meant for the disposal

of the rubbish. Each bag had a sign saying what had to be thrown into it, such as plastic bottles, metal cans, foodstuff, paper, plastic bags etc. I couldn't help remembering our friends from Shuddham back in Pondicherry. The aesthetic sense of the Japanese goes hand in hand with their practical sense.

The real focus of our trip this time is Kyoto, so after a journey to the southern tip of Japan, heading back towards the North, we reached this city of beauty. We had two things to do here: find the house where the Mother had lived and enquire at the Museum about where the photo in which the Mother is standing in front of a statue of the Buddha

had been taken. This time we know that there is a chance of finding the house because while we were in Tokyo a Japanese devotee gave us a clear indication and faxed us a hand-drawn map which we can follow.

The point to note about Kyoto is that it was not



The Mother with Mrs. Kobayashi in Kyoto



The Mother's house in Kyoto. Photo taken in March 2007

bombed during the Second World War, thanks to the decision taken by the American Secretary of War Henry Stimson. Apparently, Kyoto was on the first list drawn up for the targets of the atomic bombs but it was Stimson who ruled it out as he had visited the city many years ago and knew that it was really the cultural soul of Japan. What happened in Hiroshima could have happened in Kyoto but luckily didn't. There is therefore still a sense of the past, great palaces and temples and the famous Zen gardens, still alive with the serenity of the time when they were built.

Today Kyoto is known in the world as the place where the international protocol was signed for slowing down the emission of gases which are producing the greenhouse effect and bringing about climate change. It was in this same Kyoto that the Mother spent three years of her life. Somehow it seems in the fitness of things that this agreement, which hopes to save nature, was signed by so many international leaders in this

special city. Turn the pages of *Prayers and Meditations* and you will find the Mother's close contact with nature. She writes in her diary on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1917: "*At these blessed hours all earth sings a hymn of gladness, the grasses shudder with pleasure, the air is vibrant with the light, the trees lift towards heaven their most ardent prayers, the chant of the birds becomes a canticle, the waves of the sea billow with love, the smile of children tells of the infinite and the souls of men appear in their eyes.*"

It's a cold and cloudy morning but there are moments when the sun comes out. We get out of the station and following the hand-drawn map make our way towards the road where the house is located. Looking at all the beautiful sights on our way we take a wrong turning and find ourselves on a lane which leads us to a canal. The beauty of the flowering cherry trees along this canal is so captivating that we stop to admire it. The water is crystal clear and we can see the pebbles at the bottom. There are little bushes of camellias and wild flowers all along the bank. The Japanese families who live on this lane are going about their usual activities. To them this beauty is so normal, but to us all this is out of a dream world. Looking more



The canal close to the Mother's house in Kyoto

carefully at our map we realise that we are not so far from the place we are looking for.



Surprisingly it is a very narrow street and the house is not at all difficult to identify. We were told that it has a ground floor and a first floor and that the ground floor has a wall made of glass bricks which is a modern renovation on the old house. All these instructions make it easy to



The river behind the Mother's house in Kyoto

identify the house. The first floor looks as if it has not been touched at all except for the TV antenna which is attached to the top, over a tiled roof. We have no way of seeing the inside but we know that there used to be a backyard. We stand on the road for a while, thinking how the Mother must have walked down it so many times, in her kimono. That was in 1917 and this is 2007. In ninety years much of that traditional Japan in which the Mother lived has gone. Coming out of that lane we head towards the river.

We cross the bridge and notice how the water here too is shallow and clean. There is a heron sitting in the middle of the river, waiting to catch a fish. He is so still that he looks like a statue. From this side of the river we can now see the back of the little house where the Mother had lived. There is a large flat stone on which we can sit and peacefully observe the house. From the back it looks really small but it is amazing how close it is to the water. Was it like this in 1917? Was there a

stone wall already, supporting the bank? Did the Mother sit there and look at the river? Could she hear the sound of the water as she lay down to sleep? How lovely it must have been to be able to see a river and cherry trees along the water's edge from her window. Is this the house where those prayers were written which we can now read in *Prayers and Meditations*?

The beauty of Kyoto in this season of the cherry blossom is something so unreal, so out of the world of mundane details and disequilibrium, that one feels as if one is inside a Japanese painting. A few sentences spontaneously leap to my heart, "O Mother, now I see what you left behind to come and live with us! What loveliness surrounded you here in Kyoto which you put away to come back to Pondicherry where you have to look so hard to find a little beauty. What a sacrifice you made, you who

were a lover of beauty, so that you could live that destiny for which you had come to the world!"

We decided to just walk along the river up to the Shinto shrine which the Mother used to visit. We got more than what we had set out to discover as we followed this path that the Mother must have taken because we found ourselves in the Gion district which is one of the old traditional areas which has been carefully preserved. While we were peering through the narrow doorways and looking at the workshops which were producing the tatami mats that are used in every Japanese house we suddenly found ourselves at the back entrance of a temple. When we started walking towards the centre we realised how big it was. The ticket counters were crowded with tourists and we then understood that this was the oldest and the most important Zen temple in Kyoto, the Kennin-ji Temple. The interiors of the rooms were absolutely empty but there is something so concentrated in that emptiness that the few

brush-strokes of the wall paintings are profoundly eloquent. There is much to admire in the landscaping too. The inner courtyards are designed in such a way that the viewer feels as though the plants and the stones were there, in their natural condition, before the temple was built.



The Kennin-ji Zen temple in Kyoto

Coming out of the Zen monastery we continue to just walk ahead of us until we reach the Shinto temple, stumbling from one discovery to another without having planned anything. Beyond the courtyard of this temple, we find ourselves in a beautifully landscaped garden at the centre of which is a big old cherry tree, obviously trimmed by an expert gardener. There is a crowd standing in silent admiration around it, meditating on the beauty of the pink flowers against the gentle blue sky. The young as well as the old are gathered around this tree as if it was a work of art as well as a living being.

Here I would like to stop and say a few words about this phenomenon of the cherry blossom. The pages of the *Prayers and Meditations* are full of references to the cherry tree, but you understand why it is so significant only when you actually see this tree in full bloom in early spring. There is something about this Japanese love for the cherry blossom that goes beyond even the aesthetic pleasure and turns into something almost spiritual.

This festival is known as “hanami” which is composed of two words: ‘hana’ which means ‘flower’ and ‘mi’ which means ‘to see’, but the word has now come to mean the sighting of this particular flower of the cherry tree. Nowadays television channels start announcing the names of the cities where the flowers have started blooming and predict where the buds are going to open in the next few days. Where there are only buds on bare branches one can see only a couple of days later big bunches of fluffy pink or white flowers. The hillsides are dotted with these trees in bloom and the streets are lined with them. The delicate flowers, in colours that range from a dark pink to a bright white, stay on the trees at the most for ten days. So the preparation for this event is done well in advance. For centuries, as soon as the flowers begin to appear, people have been gathering under the trees to have a picnic.

People who work together often celebrate hanami together and families get together with their children and elders, but also sometimes one can find a couple sitting by themselves under a flowering tree. It is a common sight to see large plastic sheets spread out in the morning and someone sitting there just to reserve the place for a group. Many people come for the picnic in the evening and added to the beauty of the flowers is the loveliness of the paper lanterns hanging from the branches. But “hanami” is not all about picnics and groups. It is also about the silent admiration of something that is ephemeral. It is at the same time about how short-lived our joys are but also about the return and regeneration of everything in nature.

After looking at other shrines and gardens the next day we are back in the same area, to the Kyoto National Museum, which is not far from the house where the Mother had lived. The building itself is an imposing European styled structure. We have now understood that this is the place where we should ask about the statue of the Buddha in the photo where the Mother is seen with Rabindranath Tagore. Now I understand how much off the mark I was the last time in imagining that

the photo had been taken in Kamakura. Not only does the face of the Kamakura Buddha now look totally different from the face of the Buddha in the photo, after looking at it for almost two years, but also proportionately its height is such that if a group of people were to stand that close to it the head of the Buddha would not be in the photo at all. To make things easy we went to the museum with a copy of that photograph. After we explained the purpose of our visit we were told by the secretary that the curator was not free but that he wanted us to leave the photo at the office and to come back after two days so that he could consult the experts before giving us an answer.

There were a lot of things to do in the meantime and when we returned after two days the



Cherry tree in Kyoto temple garden

secretary told us that the curator had consulted three sculpture experts and they had come to the conclusion that this statue probably didn't exist any more and also that this photo had definitely not been taken in Kyoto but they could not say where it had been taken. So what had happened to the statue? Most probably it had been melted down during the war, as so many other statues of the Buddha, to make arms. How incredible! Imagine the statues of the Buddha being turned

into cannons and guns. We can actually believe it because we have already heard this story in Tokyo when we saw a shrine with only the head of the Buddha. A sign in English explained that the body had been melted during the Second World War to make arms. Seeing that we had not really got a clear answer to our question the curator asked us to leave our address so that he could contact us if he found anything more. In fact, he was himself interested in trying to find where this photo might have been taken because he could see Tagore in the picture and for him he was an important celebrity. The clue to the mystery, he said, was in the building on the extreme right side of the photo. It looked like a European style house and it could be in a city where there was a strong European presence.

The book that I carried with me during the first visit was *Prayers and Meditations* but during this second visit the text which is running endlessly in my head is Sri Aurobindo's "The Bourgeois and the Samurai". Japan is only a series of big and small islands and therefore has very little cultivable land. It is a land of volcanoes and earthquakes. And who can forget the horrors of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki? In spite of all this Japan became an economic power and the rest of the world has been looking upon it with awe and admiration. Sri Aurobindo wrote in his *Bande Mataram* days that it was their inner force and their sense of discipline which pulled the Japanese out of their difficulties. He compares the Indians to the Japanese and points out how the Indians are so content to remain mediocre, never aspiring to go beyond what they have achieved, so reluctant to suffer a little in order to have a better level of life later. Of course, a hundred years have passed since that piece was written in the *Bande Mataram*, and India has become economically a force to reckon with, but we have still a long way to go before we can have the quality of life that the Japanese enjoy.

On our list of places to visit this time were Yokohama and Kobe. When the Mother came to Japan her ship landed at Yokohama and after four years she left from the port at Kobe. We decided to go to Yokohama as a day visit because its limits

now touch Tokyo and it is almost an extension of the Japanese capital. This was the point of the Mother's first contact with Japan, her first view of Japanese life. Today one can see the old harbour where there is a replica of an ancient sailing ship to mark it as a historical site. The new harbour is a vast site with hi-tech machinery and modern structures. Not having much time we decided to visit the historic area of the old warehouses which had been built by the Dutch in an era when the European traders used to bring their goods and stock them here. These old warehouses have now been restored and turned into a large shopping complex with restaurants and cafes. Modern Yokohama has little to do with the old port town that it was a hundred years ago. Wherever you turn you feel as though you were looking at what the world will look like in the future. As evening falls these giant towers in abstract forms are lit up, their glass and steel surfaces glimmering against the purple spring sky.

Kobe is now famous for the terrible earthquake that shook it in 1995. The special quality of Kobe is that it is a city which has the sea to the east and the mountains to the west. You can move from the base of the mountains to the still waters of the port in a matter of twenty minutes in car. The modern port is now linked to two artificial islands that have been built to handle the enormous international cargo and the city has expanded so much that now its borders have touched the borders of the neighbouring city of Osaka. In fact, you can take a bullet train at Kobe station and be in Osaka in 15 minutes.

The four years that the Mother spent in Japan were actually not that peaceful because the British police were constantly keeping track of everything Paul Richard and she were doing. Through their Japanese friends they were in touch with Indian freedom fighters like Rash Behari Bose and others and were known to be their sympathizers. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes in his biography of the Mother that when she left Japan the British instructed their embassies along her route "to intern her on the slightest 'suspicion' of carrying messages for Sri Aurobindo sent by the exiled nationalists"<sup>1</sup>. It may even have been that this

harassment by the police eventually prompted her and Paul Richard to leave Japan.

Quite by chance, on the last day of our trip in Tokyo, we stumbled on something extraordinary. We were going to catch the train to go to finish some last minute work when we saw a large cherry tree. As it was growing at a height, we climbed the short flight of steps and went up. It was only then that we realised that we were actually in a cemetery. A narrow path lay before us with old carved graves on either side. The Buddhists don't bury their dead, rather they bury the bones after cremating them. So the stone graves were actually quite small. The picture before our eyes was enchanting. The daylight was turning soft as evening was falling. All around us were old, gnarled trees, their dark branches laden with the delicate white flowers whose petals were falling in a gentle shower over the centuries-old gravestones. Could there be a better metaphor for the transient nature of life? Petals of cherry blossoms silently falling over graves in the fading light of the evening. Some graves were ornate in a way that Japanese sensibility allows while others were austere in their beauty. As we walked further along the path we crossed a few people who were just taking a walk but they respected the atmosphere of the cemetery and were silent. What an idea, we thought at first, to go to a cemetery for an evening walk. But each step we took made us aware that this was a unique place, unlike anything we had seen. At the end of the little path we turned right and stood in utter surprise. Before us was an avenue which was so long that we could not even see its end and there were hundreds of old graves, some were overgrown with moss, others where lamps had been lit by family members in remembrance. What made us stand still, unable to go forward, was the beauty of those innumerable cherry trees in full bloom, on either side of the avenue or growing between the graves, and the deep silence in which, it seemed to us, they were meditating.

Here are the Mother's words from *Prayers and Meditations*, written on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1917, which came to mind in front of this scene.

*"Once more, everywhere I see cherry trees; Thou*



*hast put a magical power in these flowers: they seem to speak of thy sole Presence, they bring with them the smile of the Divine.”*

And again, a few days later, on the 7<sup>th</sup>:

*“A deep concentration seized on me, and I perceived that I was identifying myself with a single cherry-blossom, then through it with all cherry-blossoms, and as I descended deeper in the consciousness, following a stream of bluish force, I became suddenly the cherry tree itself, stretching towards the sky like so many arms its innumerable branches laden with their sacrifice of flowers. Then I heard distinctly this sentence:*

*‘Thus hast thou made thyself one with the soul of the cherry-trees and so thou canst take note that it is the Divine who makes the offering of this flower-prayer to heaven.’*

*When I had written it, all was effaced; but now the blood of the cherry-tree flows in my veins and with it flows an incomparable peace and force...”*<sup>2</sup>

This time on leaving Japan we had a sense of achievement. We had found the answers to our questions and much more than that. We felt triumphant that we had found the Mother’s house but there was an even greater joy in knowing that she was everywhere. She was there invisibly in our seeking. It was her hand that pointed out to us the beauty that we saw around us. It was her words which told us why it was worth seeing. It was she who had said that we can find the Divine in this physical material world because He is present in all that is beautiful. Her words reassure us that a quest for beauty is actually a quest for the Divine. Finding her house was out of historical interest but the real discovery was to find how present she is within our minds and hearts. ❧

*All photos accompanying this article, except those of the Mother, are by Giles Herdman.*



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#### End Notes:

1. *A Chronology of the Mother’s Life* by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 1994 ed., p. 854.
2. These portions quoted from *Prayers and Meditation* are among the few entries translated by Sri Aurobindo from the original French.

# WHAT THE PORT PORTENDS

*Aurofilio Schiavina (Filio) '89, who has studied coastal management, updates us on the beach erosion along our coast and shares his research on the possible effects of the proposed deep sea port at Pondicherry.*

## EROSION UPDATE

It is now a well established and accepted fact that the principal cause of erosion along the coastline of Pondicherry town is the breakwater system that was built for the harbour at the Ariyankuppam river mouth in 1986. No one disputes this anymore.

If one goes for a drive to the harbour mouth via the New Lighthouse one reaches the northern breakwater. Across the harbour entrance, the southern breakwater extends into the sea for about 250 meters, at an angle. Beyond and to the south of the southern breakwater towards Veerampattinam one can now spot a wide beach.

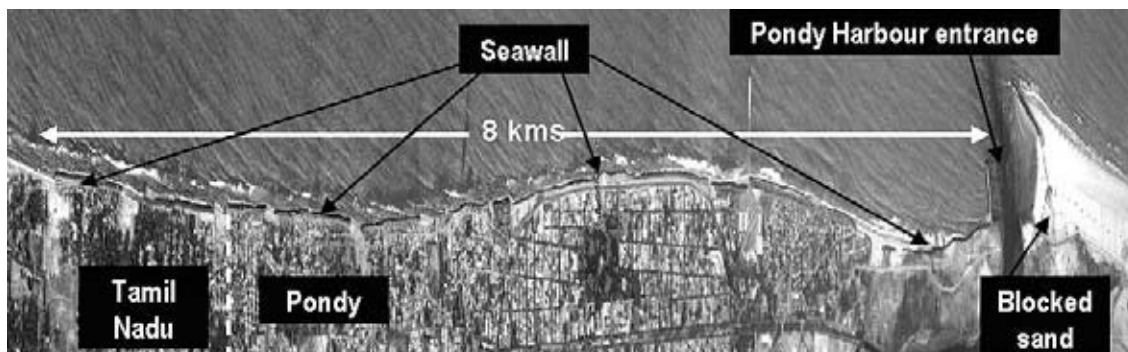
The Veerampattinam beach has been growing since the harbour was built in 1986 and is the first evidence that the harbour has interfered with the natural movement of sand along the shore (also known as the "littoral drift") and that it has caused sand to accumulate on one side of the harbour (accretion), and sand to get washed away on the other side (erosion).

Almost 20 years after the construction of the harbour, the Pondicherry Town has lost all of its beaches and an ugly seawall replaces them instead. Presently, the erosion has spilled over into Tamil Nadu and every year a new stretch of beach

further north is lost to the sea. Since 1986, all the beaches along 10 kms of the coastline have been completely washed away and seawalls have been built in those areas to protect the shore. Beaches along the following 20 kms of coastline are now showing visible signs of erosion. The erosion relentlessly advances to the north at a pace of at least a meter a day and continues to deepen the seabed in front of the town.

The only remedy to this man-made coastal tragedy is either the dismantling of the harbour (an unlikely proposition) or the revival of the sand by-pass system. For those who are not familiar with this system, it is the equipment that was put in place when the harbour was built in order to mechanically shift the sand that is piling up on one side of the harbour mouth over onto the other side. Because this sand by-pass system was seldom used the natural sand "balance" was upset. This natural equilibrium now needs to be restored.

Following several representations that were made to the concerned agencies, it would now seem that there is an interest among those agencies to restore the Pondicherry coastline to its original state. They have made certain commitments to undertake capital dredging and take care of the backlog by shifting all the sand that



The existing harbour has already destroyed 8 kms and has affected more than 20 kms of shoreline in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu. Satellite Image (2006)

is piled up on one side onto the eroded side, thereby gradually restoring the coastline. Furthermore, certain studies would also be carried out in order to determine the ways in which this disturbed coastline now needs to be properly managed. These promises have been made — whether they will be kept only time will tell.

### **PROPOSAL FOR A DEEP SEA PORT AT PONDY**

For those trying to save whatever is left of the coast and furthermore to restore it, the proposal for a deep sea water port is scary. If the existing small harbour has caused such widespread and extensive damage, imagine what a harbour 10 times the size would do.

A beach is not merely a heap of sand or only a playground for beach bums. First, a beach is an essential part of the coastal eco-system. It is the first line of defense and acts as a barrier against storms and the infrequent but devastating tsunamis. A beach consists of much more than what we see on the surface. What is visible is like the tip of the iceberg. There is also all the sand that is below the shallow coastal waters such as the sandbars that break the large and powerful waves or slow down a tsunami. The beach is also a natural barrier that prevents seawater from penetrating into the sweet groundwater.

For the people who depend on the sea for their livelihood, the beach is their work place. It is the place where they land and park their boats, repair their nets, dry the fish and also live.

For those who live along and visit the shores of this coast, the beach is a unique and exquisite recreational space that provides a contact with nature and a space for breathing some fresh air at any time of the day.

Thus, protecting our beaches and the coastal environment is in our own and everybody's best interest. And the proposed deep sea water port can seriously threaten just that.



The proposed construction for a new deep sea port (right) in comparison with the existing harbour (above)



The proposed deep sea water port is promoted by a private developer on a Build Own Operate Transfer (BOOT) basis. This means that the Pondy Govt. will lease the port lands and assets to the private company which the latter can then develop into a port.

The proposed large deep sea water port is supposed to handle about 20 million tonnes of cargo per year. Most of the cargo would be coal and iron ore. There would also be terminals to handle containers and cruise ships. To give you an idea of the scale, the existing harbour in Pondicherry was designed to handle 1.5 million tonnes of cargo, and the large Ennore Port in Chennai handles about 10 million tonnes of cargo per annum. So this new deep sea water port would be considerably larger.

According to the proposal, the deep sea water port would be an artificial harbour that would be built right into the sea. One long arm would jut out into the sea for almost a kilometer. Another one would wrap around the perimeter for a length of about 2.5 kms. In between these stony arms or breakwaters, the sea would be artificially deepened to a depth of 14 metres. This depth occurs naturally only at a distance of about 1.5 - 2 kms off-shore. A deep channel would also then have to be dug in the sea from the harbour all the way to the deep waters off-shore.



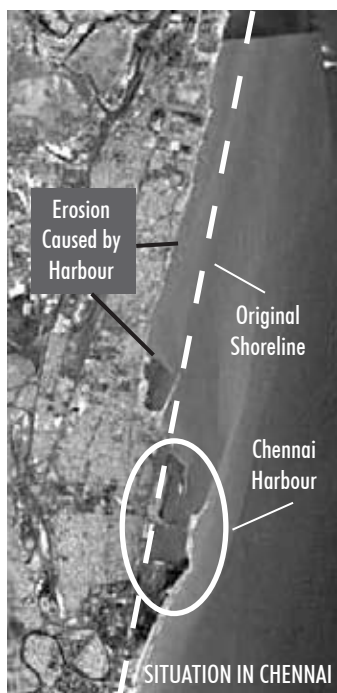
Most of the existing harbour would be dismantled as it is not suitable for the proposed deep sea port. Because there isn't enough land to build the deep sea water port, parts of the lagoon and the Ariyankuppam river would be filled up and reclaimed. The Port Department presently owns about 150 acres of land whereas the proposed deep sea water port needs a minimum of about 400 acres of land. In addition to land reclamation in the lagoon, a part of the sea would also be reclaimed. This would be done by using the sand that could eventually be returned to the eroded coastline along the town when a beach restoration programme is undertaken. Thus this deep sea port project would use up and deprive the town of the sand that is "due" to its shores.

Lastly, as land reclamation does not suffice, the lands owned by the already impoverished farmers would also be acquired.

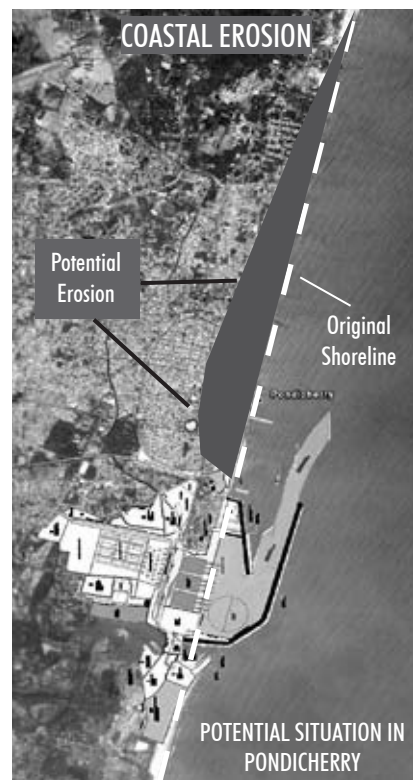
Thus if one takes into account the total area that is required both on land and in the sea for the proposed port, one finds that it occupies an area of about 800 acres. To put things into perspective, our quaint Boulevard Town barely covers an area of 500 acres. Therefore, our town would be dwarfed and greatly overshadowed by such a port.

### EFFECTS ON THE TOWN

The proposed deep sea water port poses several threats. First and foremost it will increase the threat of coastal erosion enormously and if mitigating measures are not implemented (just as they have not been during all these years), the erosion will severely damage the Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu coastlines and greatly aggravate the problem. One has to take a look at the coastline north of the Chennai harbour to see what we can expect to happen in Pondy. In Chennai the harbour has caused the recession of the shoreline to the north by about 500-600 m landwards. In Pondy such a



What the Chennai Port has done to the Chennai shoreline (above) and the potential erosion we could be faced with (right)

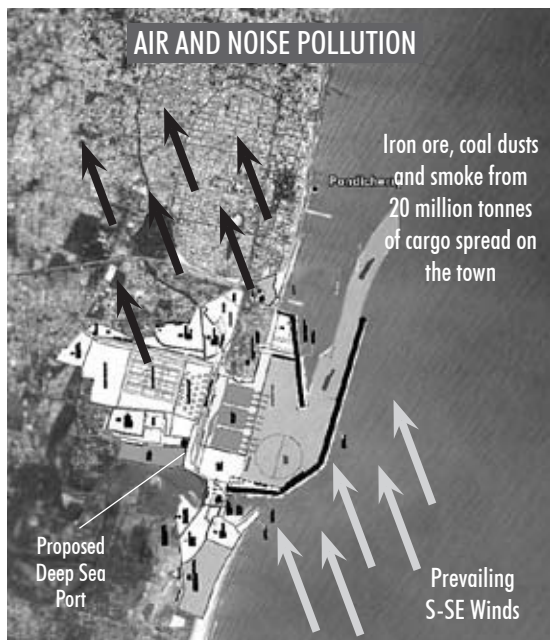


recession of the coastline would bring the sea all the way till about Mission-Gandhi street!

It can be supposed that it is unlikely that the concerned agencies will allow such a disaster to happen so easily, but to prevent this large scale erosion, the concerned agencies will have to mobilise equally large resources. In other words, the construction of such a harbour is an invitation to increased erosion, and to prevent such erosion a huge effort would have to be mounted against the relentless forces of the sea for as long as the harbour exists. Dumping of rocks along the shoreline will be routine work. If that effort fails, then the citizens of this town would be the obvious victims. And if the deep sea water port project fails, then the town of Pondicherry will have to carry this liability for as long as the harbour exists.

If the proposed harbour ever sees the light of day and if the expected volume of cargo lands at this port, then the amount of air pollution that will be generated will be equally phenomenal. First, the harbour is located a stone's throw away to the south of the town, upwind of the prevailing winds. Both iron ore and coal produce large amounts of dust that will be blown right onto





The prevailing S-SE winds would bring huge amounts of dust from the Port into town. Additionally, an estimated 420,000 lorry-loads per year would pass through town — that is 2 lorries per minute, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week!

the white town. We might then need to rename the “white town” as the “black town” for the dirty look the town will bear. The residents of Royapuram in Chennai just north of the harbour continuously complain about the dust and grime and the health problems that these cause. The same fate might await us.

In addition to the dust, it is estimated that about 420,000 trucks will have to call at the harbour in a year. This means that there will be a steady flow of trucks plying the streets of Pondy to and from the harbour, day and night for every day of the year (24 x 7 x 365) at a rate of about 2 trucks every minute. One can only imagine the air pollution and congestion such vehicular traffic will cause. For the sake of brevity I am ignoring a whole lot of other impacts of such vehicular movement.

The artificial deepening of the harbour so close to the shore will induce seawater intrusion into the aquifers. Moreover, contaminants from the harbour waters will leach out in the coastal water as well as the groundwater. Thus the quality of the fresh-water and sea-water is also likely to degrade.

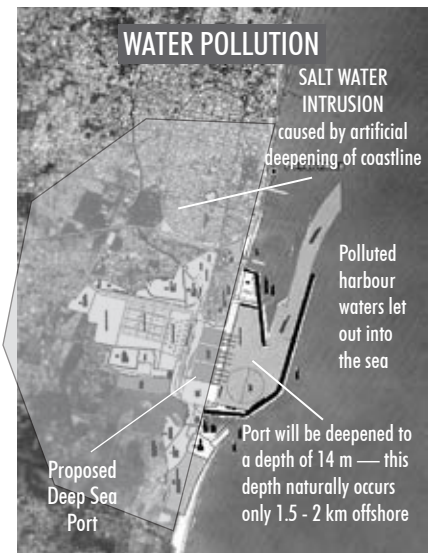
The filling up of the lagoon and river will

certainly affect the biodiversity of our only wetlands. Mangroves, the only trees that survive in seawater, had started to grow again in these lagoons, thanks in part to some local NGOs who had started planting them. These will be wiped out again.

Apart from the loss of flora and fauna, the filling of the lagoon and river beds will impact us in a much more direct manner. The Ariyankuppam lagoon and river are the recipients of much of the urban stormwater (excess rainwater that flows out from our drains). If these water bodies are filled up, where will the stormwater go? One can therefore expect water logging and flooding to become routine during every monsoon. Mumbai floods up every monsoon because it filled up and reclaimed its wetlands for urban development purposes. The same fate might await Pondy.

Essentially, the location of the proposed deep sea water port is completely wrong. There is now a logical trend in all major port cities such as Mumbai and Chennai to move the ports out of the cities

in order to free up the space in these areas, clean up the environment and reduce their impacts on people living there. In Pondicherry the proposed port defies this logic. **Everything about the location of this port is wrong: it is very close to residential areas, is upwind of the prevailing winds, and upstream of the ocean currents and the littoral drift. In its current location the proposed harbour is bound to have a very significant impact on this town.**



Along with salt water intrusion due to artificial deepening of the coastline, pollution from land-based activities will leach into the aquifers

## FINANCIAL VIABILITY

The biggest question mark that hangs on the proposed deep sea water port is the financial viability of the project. The National Institute of Port Management was given the task of evaluating the proposed project and they had serious doubts and so did the developer's consultant.

First, there is no real local demand for the goods that will be shipped to and from this port. Second, the Cuddalore port in the vicinity is better placed for commercial port activities and the Tamil Nadu Government is developing that port. Similarly the Karaikal port is under construction. So there is already competition in the neighborhood that makes the viability of the Pondy port even more unlikely. In fact many of these new ports depend in their turn on the Sethusamudram project which proposes to dredge a path for ships through the "Ram Sethu" between India and Sri Lanka and the future of that project itself is in doubt.

And last, the detailed project report of the proposed Pondy port states that in order to offset the probable losses incurred by the port activities, the private developer should take up real estate activities within the port to generate substantial profits. This is the strangest proposition, because what sense is there in making a port at all if at the end of the day the real business will be made from real estate development?

This has led inevitably to doubts being raised

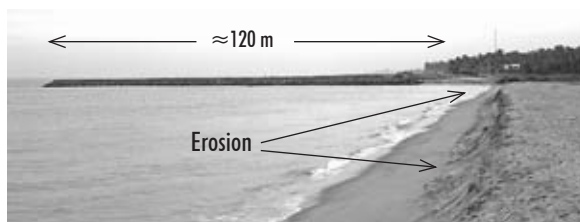
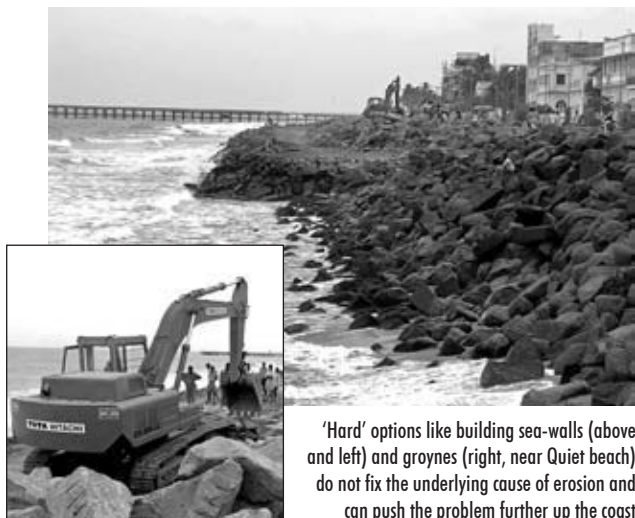
in the media (see *Down to Earth*, May '07, cover story) about the intentions behind the project.

## RESISTANCE TO THE PROJECT

Several citizens' groups have claimed that the required procedures were not properly followed on this project and therefore filed a Public Interest Litigation in the High Court of Chennai to stop it. As these groups felt that the High Court's ruling in August '06 was too ambiguous, they took up the matter with the Supreme Court of India. The matter at present is still unresolved as the case is in progress.

In the meantime however, several citizens of Pondicherry have voiced their concern about the environmental impacts the proposed harbour could cause and have approached the necessary agencies for redress. They are also of the opinion that the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report submitted by the private developer was inappropriate. These protests have obliged the Government to undertake a fresh EIA and a fresh report is now awaited.

However, it appears that the scope of the proposed harbour project is set to change. Because the nearby villagers protested against the forceful acquisition of their land, the Government decided not to proceed with land acquisition, at least for the time being. This means that the proposed port might be restricted to the available port lands. This will most certainly result in a revised proposal because the lack of land impacts the project in several important ways. So a new Detailed Project Report (DPR) is awaited. In fact, the whole process would have to start afresh with a new Feasibility Study (which was mysteriously omitted last time). And this time the whole process would be scrutinised much more attentively by those citizens who are concerned about any unjustified and inappropriate development.





Progressive erosion at Quiet Beach north of the groyne. The state of the beach in April 2007 (left) and June 2007 (right)

## LAST WORDS

First and foremost, the damage created by the existing harbour needs to be rectified. Therefore all efforts should be directed at immediately restoring the coastline and bringing back the beach. For this, dredging operations, both capital and maintenance dredging, should be undertaken.

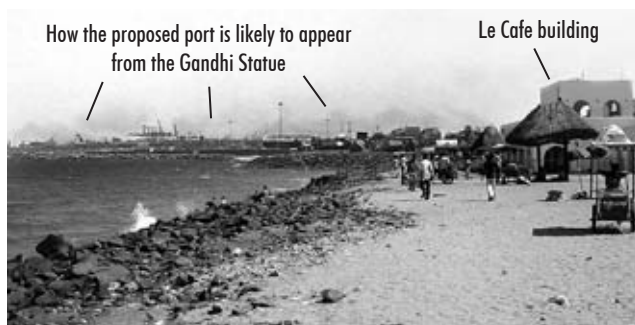
Then, before any further port development activities are allowed, one needs to first analyse the rationale of the existence and purpose of a port in Pondicherry. Does Pondy need a port? If so what kind of a port? One would then have to conduct a technical, economical, social and environmental study to evaluate the cost and benefits of such a proposition. Only then will all or most of the questions be answered.

There is no sense in replicating the same mistakes that were made some 20 years ago. The existing harbour was built in 1986 and designed to handle about 1.5 million tonnes per year. Since the existence of this port, only an average of 0.047 million tonnes per year or hardly 3% of the predicted volume was handled. And for several years not a single ship came to the Pondy port. The existing harbour has not contributed in any way to Pondicherry, instead it has cost the town hundreds

of crores both directly and indirectly due to the damage it has done to the coast and the town.

A detailed study of the existing and proposed harbour might just reveal that what the citizens of Pondicherry really need is an open space where they can go and breathe some fresh air. If it makes sense to retain the existing harbour, it could be converted into a marina for leisure boating activities. A part of the port land could be converted into parks. Other parts of the port lands could be converted into hotels and spaces for recreation. Such a proposition would provide plenty of employment opportunities that would benefit the citizens of this place. It would be a win-win situation for all, the Government as well as the citizens.

In fact if the existing harbour is dismantled because it is found to be redundant, then the beaches would come back on their own. If the harbour is retained, it could be re-designed in a manner to reduce its impact on the environment. And the sand by-pass system (both capital and maintenance dredging) would have to be operated and maintained so that the impacts caused by the harbour are mitigated and the coastline does not erode again. ☼



Artist's version of what the Pondy beach could become with the proposed deep sea port (left – dirty and polluted) and without it (right – peaceful and beautiful)

# THE BLUE PLAQUE IN LONDON FOR SRI AUROBINDO

*Sunayana Panda '79*

One of the most interesting anecdotes that one comes across while reading the first chapter of Sri Aurobindo's biography, is the one about old Mrs. Drewett. She was the mother of the Reverend Drewett in whose care Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose had left his three sons. After living in Manchester for five years Reverend Drewett and his wife left for Australia leaving the three brothers with this old lady. Old Mrs. Drewett moved to London and rented a house in Shepherd's Bush, not far from St. Paul's School where two of the brothers, Manmohan and young Aurobindo, were going to study.

She was a pious Christian and had regular readings from the Bible, as A.B. Purani tells us. One evening Manmohan told her that he thought it served old Moses right that his people had disobeyed him. Apparently, the old lady was so horrified when she heard this that she announced she would not live with such blasphemous people anymore as she was afraid that the wrath of God was going to strike the house down. Indeed, she left them soon after.

No, that house didn't fall down. What actually happened is that a hundred and twenty years after that incident a blue plaque was installed on its wall, with the words, "Sri Aurobindo, Indian Spiritual Leader, lived here — 1884-1887".

The city of London is a very old one and many famous people have lived here at some point in their lives. The practice of putting up commemorative plaques where famous people lived was started 140 years ago. It is a pleasure enjoyed by tourists as well as Londoners to stop and read the name and dates on a blue plaque when they see one, whether it is in a busy thoroughfare or a little lane. There are names of writers, artists, architects, music composers and actors. By now there are over 800 such plaques. They are installed only

in the names of people who have died at least twenty years earlier or have crossed the centenary of their birth.

When my husband Giles and I visited the house at 49 St. Stephen's Avenue in 2001, it was truly a moving experience for us. Looking at that house we understood with a striking clarity that Sri Aurobindo's extraordinary life had been lived in the middle of the most ordinary people, following a path we all do, of going through school, college, passing exams and so on. The Sri Aurobindo that we see in the photos, in his Himalayan grandeur, was once a schoolboy here in the city of London, the city of Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Park, Oxford Street and Buckingham Palace.

So often we had stood in admiration before the plaque for Bernard Shaw or D. H. Lawrence or even Newton. On that day we thought that Sri

Aurobindo should also be honoured in the city where he grew up. Giles sent the first letter to English Heritage, the organisation which is responsible for putting up the commemorative plaques, towards the end of 2001, and waited for an answer. English Heritage wrote back saying that he should write a two page life-sketch of Sri Aurobindo and say why he was famous. This in itself was a sort of

acknowledgement that it could be done. After the biographical essay was sent we were told that we now had to wait until the committee decided to shortlist it for taking it up in earnest, as hundreds of proposals come up every year. Finally, probably in 2003, a letter came informing Giles that Sri Aurobindo's name was on the short list but that they would ask their own historian to do his independent research about him. Anybody can propose a name but English Heritage must be convinced that the person deserves a plaque in his name and for this they have to themselves find out all they can about the person. After all, English Heritage is





sponsored by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport of the British Government. Some more months passed and after some more reminders the historian himself wrote back expressing how impressed he was by what he had discovered.

The work continued until it was time to decide which of the four existing houses where Sri Aurobindo had lived should be chosen for the plaque. After a short deliberation it was decided that it would be the one in Sheperd's Bush, the first house where he had lived in London. We had to wait some more time and finally, after the permission was taken from the owners of the house, which in this case is a housing association, it became clear that the installation of the plaque could take place in 2007. In September we were told that it could be done in December.

It was English Heritage which informed us that Sri Aurobindo was not the first Indian who would have a commemorative plaque. There were already a few names such as Nehru, Gandhi, Tilak, Sardar Patel among the nationalists and other great figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Tagore and Raja Ram Mohun Roy.

We chose the date 12<sup>th</sup> December because 12/12 seemed like an auspicious number. After that we had to choose someone to do the unveiling. The exhibition at the Nehru Centre [see our previous issue] had been a learning experience and one of the important lessons I had learnt was that when a dignitary is invited to such an event they want all the attention to be centred on them. I had been hugely relieved when a mayor who was to come eventually sent word that she wouldn't. The last thing we wanted was some minister or mayor coming for the unveiling and turning the whole thing into a social gathering where everyone would be talking and exchanging business cards and Sri Aurobindo would just be an excuse for this. We wanted things to be done in such a way that the entire focus would be on him and no one else.

We felt that we should choose such a person to do the unveiling who would actually be representing the Ashram. The only person that we knew of in London who had grown up in the Ashram and had had a close contact with the Mother was

Mounnou. Moreover she was the granddaughter of Rishabhchand who had been asked by the Mother to write Sri Aurobindo's biography.

In the meantime English Heritage wanted us to get an expert to make a short speech at the beginning of the ceremony. For this we asked Dr. Girija Shettar who has done her PhD from Cardiff University, having written her thesis on Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of psychology. When she agreed we felt that we were ready. We were also told that the house had been divided into three flats and the residents had to be informed about



People gathering in front of the house before the ceremony

the day and time when we wanted to hold our ceremony. We decided that 2.30 pm would be a good time because in winter it gets dark by 4 pm and we wanted to have a good light to take photos. The residents were duly informed and invited.

For a few days before the 12th it rained quite a lot, which is why it was such a relief when the sun came out on that day. It was as if someone had switched on a projector in the sky to light up the stage for our special event. One by one the people began to gather. There was at least one person from each of the six centres in London, including the Auroville centre. A few former students managed to come; some even took the day off from work, as it was a working day. In all there was a gathering of thirty-five people, which for London is a huge crowd.

There was a beautiful atmosphere when the ceremony started with a short speech by the English Heritage historian Howard Spencer who said, "Sri Aurobindo deserves to be better known." He also expressed his gratitude to the Archives at the Ashram as they had responded very quickly to all his queries. After that Girija spoke about Sri Aurobindo's life and there was a moving moment when she quoted the well-loved lines from "A God's Labour":

"He who would bring the heavens here  
Must descend himself into clay."

When the speeches were over Mounnou recited three stanzas from the *Guru Stotra*. And in the attentive silence that followed she pulled the string and unveiled the plaque.

We were still drinking in that moment of sheer joy, of that sense of achievement, when someone came and told us that the Caribbean lady who lived in the ground floor flat had kindly allowed us to go in. We all went into her living room and meditated for a short while. As we were leaving we gave her the big bunch of flowers that Ramesh-bhai had brought to add a touch of beauty to the ceremony.

Sonia Dyne took the opportunity of being there that day to collect a few spoonfuls of earth from the little grassy patch in the house. This was for the Unity Kolam ceremony for Auroville. People from all over the world were going to take a little bit of soil from their country for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in a kind of repetition of the inauguration ceremony of February '68. One of the places from where the soil will have come from Great Britain would be the house where Sri Aurobindo had lived.

2007 was the year of Sri Aurobindo in London. First there was an exhibition in August and then this commemorative plaque came just before the festive season of the year-end. Everyone associates Paris with the Mother but only a few think of London as Sri Aurobindo's city. 2007 seems to have established that contact once again.

This is a city which has suffered a great deal.

When the bombs went off in the underground trains in 2005 it seemed as if the forces of Ignorance had managed to break up the peaceful life of the city by dividing the people of different



Mounnou '69 unveiling the plaque

cultures and drawing up lines of hatred between them. It was time to add a healing touch and to remind everyone of someone who had harmonised the East and the West so beautifully in himself. Sri Aurobindo had not only proved to the world that it can be done but had so clearly said sixty years ago that the future of the world lies in harmony and unity.

"The unification of mankind is under way, though only in an imperfect initiative, organised but struggling against tremendous difficulties. But the momentum is there and, if the experience of history can be taken as a guide, it must inevitably increase until it conquers." This was written as a message for 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947<sup>1</sup> but how much more it seems to be a message for the divided and violent world in which we live today. As for multi-cultural Britain, these are words of reassurance and hope that it needs. ❧

Photos by Giles Herdman

1. Longer version of the message written for broadcast on All India Radio. See *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, page 476.

# THE ART-ROOM IN THE SCHOOL

*Some corners of our School building have changed considerably through the years. Certain activities have also evolved in unexpected ways at the same time. We follow in this issue one such story — the story of the Art-Room.*

*At first, there was only a terrace where the Art-Room now stands, which was built only in 1971. The first teachers who guided the activities there were Sanjeeban-da, Dhanvanti-ben, Arup and an American lady, Elizabeth Stiller. Mahesh Poddar started looking after the place and supplying the materials to the teachers and students who used the Art-Room. Amita-di supervised the activities and held art appreciation classes there for students of the Higher Course. Things happened in an informal way alongside the regular classes. The young students of the secondary section would drop in to paint or listen to a piece of music.*

*Sometimes special exhibitions were held there and artists like Sanjiban, Jean-Louis and Pierre Legrand put up their very unusual works which were real eye-openers. A few students who took up photography as a hobby could use the Art-Room to exhibit their work. Elizabeth Beck, a German lady and a very fine photographer, had also put up large pictures of Sanchi and Mahabalipuram with quotations from Sri Aurobindo. In the evening the room was used for dramatics.*

*In the following article **Amita Sen '55** tells us about the Art-Room and how it was organised. She specially remembers one of the early Ashram artists who taught there — Sanjeeban-da.*

## **A SPACE FOR ART**

The needs of the teachers in the line of drawing and painting increased through the years. This arrangement of the “Art-Room” came into being most naturally to meet their requirements. Any teacher could hold a class of drawing or painting or discuss the work of artists related to his or her history or language classes using the art books that were available there.

In those days drawing-class teachers always complained that the rooms allotted to them were too cramped. Especially those who taught children used to say, “No place to keep the material, no place for the half-finished pictures!” For, the children couldn’t always complete their work within the class-hours, so, there was always a demand for more cupboards, which was not going to make their rooms more spacious!

We started storing papers of all sizes in a small corridor where racks were specially kept for the purpose. It was adjacent to a small room where thrice a week western classical music used to be played for students who could come if they liked to listen to music or read story books or look at

pictures. Bruno, an Italian, teaching in our School, had offered to take the responsibility of playing the music and holding special coaching classes. With his help we arranged two or three exhibitions in the class-rooms. But it was not very convenient, for, regular classes were also held there.

There was, at that time, mostly just an open terrace where the Art-Room is now located. During the repair-work on the School building that year, I asked the supervisor-in-charge, Anil Banerjee, if it was possible to build a room in that area. The terrace level was lower than the rest of the building so he said, “We will need a lot of debris to raise the floor.” To simplify the problem I suggested that a few steps leading down to a lower verandah could allow us to build the room there itself. He liked the idea and the “Art-Room” was born. We decided to plaster the Northern wall in such a way that art-slides could be projected there directly. Much later, this was used for showing slides to the students of the Higher Course doing art appreciation (Egyptian art and Renaissance artists, especially Michelangelo and the Impressionists).

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The Mother (in 1952) standing in front of the smaller room which later became part of the Art-Room

The Art-Room was actually made up of two rooms. Dhanvanti, one of our art teachers, designed new cupboards specially to suit the requirements of these two new rooms.

The larger room, the main working room, had a floor arrangement with ten white inclined desks and a wall cupboard for storing whatever art students might need for all types of art activities. Their age ranged from 10 to 20, so we had to have bits of paper of all colours for collage, rags for wiping water-colour brushes, boards with clips for outdoor sketching, vases, shells and other objects used for still-life painting, and so on. One cupboard fitted to the wall, beautifully designed also by Dhanvanti for keeping brushes and paints, etc. was much appreciated by all the teachers.

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There was also a glass cupboard full of art books, classified according to subjects, including a whole set of books with an introduction to the art of different countries of the world published

by UNESCO. A smaller glass-case was given by Sisir-da, our principal specialising in history, with his collection of special books on art and culture. These books on art were used by older students and in language and literature classes. Any teacher who wanted information, pictures or special material on artists, mythological names or paintings could easily consult any book here. Occasionally, teachers borrowed a few pictures or books for their lesson-hour and returned them before 4 p.m. that very day.

Along the Northern wall there was a special cupboard for keeping full-size hand-made papers and hanging paintings for drying. It was quite an imaginative creation in wood. We kept the Mother's photograph there, specially signed by her for the Art-Room.

The smaller room had special arrangements for displaying pictures all along the walls on three sides. Small exhibitions were held on various topics like Greek art, the Bengal School, the Six Limbs of Art according to Chinese and Indian aesthetics with reference to Sri Aurobindo, apart from work done by students and artists of the Ashram. There was also a glass-case for statuettes or vases.

There were files with material on any school of art or interesting publication. This was expected to expand and be able to supply references for all the names mentioned in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. Some work in this line was started on "decorative art in India", Abanindranath Tagore and Leonardo da Vinci.

This room also had a collection of photographs of the School. These included pictures of the new wings added to the original House (East or West Wing, New Hall — afterwards Hall of Harmony, etc. ). Photographs of programmes, including the 1<sup>st</sup> December annual programme, were kept in well-organised files with the dates when the pictures were taken. Unfortunately many of these records have been lost.

### **SANJEEBAN-DA**

Sanjeeban-da, one of the artists who had worked with the Mother in the early 1940's, accepted to guide a few older students who were interested in art. He started coming thrice a week





Exterior view of the Art-Room and the verandah outside it

from 10 a.m. to 11.15 a.m. or so. One day he told me, "Every time I come here and cross that white-washed brick partition wall, I feel it is meant for painting." This was quite a novel idea! I said, "Why not try to do something with your own students." And he accepted.

Two of his students, Habul and Bokul, did everything under his guidance in order to do a mural. They scrubbed the white-wash to get the surface ready. Then, they prepared the colours with adequate amount of glue, and got the plan of the painting done on paper on which one-inch squares were lightly drawn in pencil. Then the actual work began, and, they did a mural. We all admired it. But, Sanjeeban-da said, "The viewing distance is too narrow. You cannot see the full picture as a whole." That was certainly true, but the place had suddenly come to life. Everyone was interested and was speaking about it! Children of other

classes came to see. Then, after a year or so, we thought it was time to change the scenery. So, they rubbed that picture out and did another on the same wall. The first was a scene of the red-hills near the lake area, and the other was a picture of huts and trees. Both were quite successful enlargements of original work done from nature by Sanjeeban-da himself on a postcard size paper. Mahesh, another student of his, did an enlarged picture of a Durga bas-relief from Mahabalipuram.

After 1975, I requested him to take up some still-life with the students. Busy as I was, with the children's classes, I could only drop in during the recess to see if everything was in order: paper, brushes, colours and all that. Sometimes, I would peep in once or twice to see what the students were working on. I loved to see a few older students, sitting on the floor, or at a table, sketching a still-life arrangement set on a high stool. Once it was



Interior of the Art-Room as it is today

a vase, a shell and a statue. Then, Sanjeeban-da added a coloured cloth behind this and it did look like a standard art-class subject! I assure you,

we were quite unaware about what would happen next! But Sanjeeban-da knew. They learnt water-colour and for a special effect were shown how to wet the paper for a better blending of colours. All this I noticed from far and enjoyed their classes.

They did a few copies of pictures from reproductions of paintings. I asked, "Why should they copy from books?" He explained that such exercise gave them an idea of composition and also helped them to learn the use of different shades in their own painting. After a few weeks, I said, "Why not landscapes from nature?" He said, "There is not much one can do from this closed room, you see." And he showed me how only two or three views could be done from there. But he also taught how to compose a picture seeing through a cut-out rectangle and his students did some sceneries around them in colour.

I then had an idea. "Would you like to take up oil-painting with them?" I asked one day and he agreed. I arranged for them to have all the necessary colours and brushes.

One day, after Sanjeeban-da had taught the students how to prepare a canvas for painting in oils, I got them special papers for oil-painting. It was more convenient and saved much time but the students learnt how precious this paper was and were taught to use just the size they would need for their work. During this time, I happened to notice in a book-shop a few workbooks for art students learning oil-painting and after much hesitation selected two of them for our School. Sanjeeban-da gave me a piece of his mind and said, "Why on earth did you have to get these for us?"

"Well, because I thought they will be useful for your classes!"

He shook his head as if to say, it was not necessary. But they were used by him all the same. For, it was easier to explain to the students how to lay the oil-paint after the white, one layer

after another. Their work became much more concentrated.

I used to go sometimes to the Ashram Art Gallery. I remember Krishnalal-ji telling me one day, "We too have art books, you know." He took me into the studio portion of the gallery and showed me their collection of books and also spoke to me of how difficult it was to protect all the original paintings offered to the Mother. He specially opened the drawer where he had kept Hu Shu's Chinese paintings. Then he gave me some bottles of half-used foreign water colours to be used by students in the Art-Room. He used to laugh when for two or three consecutive years I had been to the Ashram studio to ask him if there was any material I could add to my list to be purchased by the school for the Art-Room. For, evidently they could get everything they were in need of!

## TRAINING THE HAND

It will not be out of place to remember the importance of learning how to draw simply as part of general education. It not only increases the child's observation but helps him to learn to concentrate more fully on his work. These qualities help the child in other subjects like science, geography, literature, and so on. Here are Sri Aurobindo's own words on this subject:

"It is also very desirable that the hand should be capable of coming to the help of the eye in dealing with the multitudinous objects of its activity so as to ensure accuracy. This is of a use so obvious and imperatively needed, that it need not be dwelt on at length. The practice of imitation by the hand of the thing seen is of use both in detecting the lapses and inaccuracies of the mind, in noticing the objects of sense and in registering accuracy of observation. This is one of the first uses of drawing and it is sufficient in itself to make the teaching of this subject a necessary part of the training of the organs." (SABCL, 17: 221) ❧

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*Painting is not done to copy Nature, but to express an impression, a feeling, an emotion that we experience on seeing the beauty of Nature. It is this that is interesting and it is this that has to be expressed....*

**The Mother** (CWM, 12:238)

# MEDHANANDA

*A Biographical Note*



We have heard stories of Mother's children who have come to her from distant lands, drawn to Her and to Sri Aurobindo by an inner connection. Reading their lives one feels as if destiny was leading them on, preparing them, till they finally found their home at Her Feet. One such life was Medhananda's.

Medhananda (1908 -1994), whose 100th birth anniversary fell on April 28, 2008, was a multifaceted personality. Head of the Ashram's library for many years, he was also an author and editor and a researcher into the meanings of ancient symbols and myths. He combined a profound intellect with the sparkle of a psychic joy. In fact, the name given to him by the Mother contains the two distinctive characteristics that his friends recall about him: "medha" (mind) and "ananda" (delight, bliss).



In 1917, aged 9

Born in Pforzheim, Germany to a wealthy engineer and industrialist, he was named Fritz Winkelstroeter. With the first pocket-money he received, he bought a book on Hindu gods — to the great astonishment of his family. Despite his early interest in ancient cultures and their symbols and spirituality, he followed the wishes of his father and studied law at Munich, Heidelberg, and Paris. In 1934, although he was already launched on a promising legal career, he left Germany with his French wife to escape the rise of Nazism. They went to the other side of the globe, Tahiti, and then to its sister island Moorea, where they bought 200 hectares of virgin forest, built a small house, and established themselves as farmers, cultivating vanilla and coffee.

In Tahiti, where he spent sixteen years,

Medhananda found exceptionally favourable conditions for delving deeper into the inner and higher realms of his being. Solitude, peace, and an environment of paradisiacal beauty and harmony were naturally very congenial for his extended explorations of the vastnesses within, around, and beyond him. His was an entirely spontaneous yoga.

It was after the end of the Second World War that the only bookseller in Tahiti started receiving, along with the latest novels, works by or about Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sankaracharya, and a list of books by Sri Aurobindo. Medhananda plunged into Sri Aurobindo's books, saturated himself in them. When he was given Sri Aurobindo's book *The Mother* by a friend, it ignited a spiritual explosion in his well-prepared field of consciousness. He notes, "... just now when I opened that marvelous little book of Sri Aurobindo, when my eyes fell on the title "The Mother", She penetrated me like an arrow. I do not know when I shall be able to read this book coherently. I have hardly started, when the joy of his words prevents me from continuing."

Then Medhananda wrote to Sri Aurobindo, who sent a reply through Pavitra. One of the experiences that he recounts of that time testifies to the deep connection that he had already built with the Master.



On the beautiful island of Moorea, riding Fétia, the horse he caught and trained



One early morning in the busy marketplace in Tahiti, he suddenly became aware that his consciousness had left his body behind and was travelling through the intergalactic spaces. When he wanted to return to his body, he realised he could not find the way back to his mother planet, Earth. But then he remembered, "Oh, I came

from Sri Aurobindo's planet!"; and the contact with his body was re-established.

For several months the Ashram heard nothing from him, except orders for new books of Sri Aurobindo as they were published. Then, on 31 August 1951, after receiving a brochure from Pavitra, Medhananda wrote, "I am enthusiastic after reading the prospectus of the University Centre in Pondicherry. I send you my best wishes for an early start. At the same time, I renew my offer of unconditional service, from cleaning the rooms to collaboration in higher studies of comparative mysticism. Meanwhile I could help you lay bricks. All my aspiration lies behind these wishes. Please receive the expression of my total devotion." The Mother gave him permission to come to the Ashram. After travelling for two months, he reached his Mother's home on the 15th February 1952. The first interview given by the Mother to Medhananda was almost entirely silent. She told him "Since long I am following you." On the 26th of the same month she gave him his name "Medhananda".

Medhananda was put in charge of the Sri Aurobindo Library. He

also taught the History of Religions at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, a position he was well-qualified for by his lifelong interest in and study of the spiritual cultures of different ages and parts of the world. In 1965 he started editing the quarterly journal *Equals One*, for which he wrote numerous articles. *Equals One*, or "=1" as its cover would represent it, reflected Medhananda's original and insightful mind and his playful and poetic style. The journal's presentation too was innovative and unique. In 1978 he founded, together with his collaborator Yvonne Artaud, the Identity Research Institute, a non-profit foundation for psychological research. It was from about 1970 onwards that he started an in-depth exploration of the symbology of the hieroglyphs and pictorial imagery of ancient Egypt, using the psychological approach which Sri Aurobindo had initiated for the interpretation of the Vedas. Apart from his writings, there are also a large number of Medhananda's informal talks which have been recorded. Selections from these are the basis of two books, *With Medhananda on the shores of infinity* (autobiographical material) and *On the threshold of a new age with Medhananda* (overview of his thought). Over 400 hours of recorded talks in German are still in the process of being transcribed and edited.

One of the recurrent themes that runs through Medhananda's writings is the sense of the oneness of things, of the oneness of the universe. His years in Moorea in the lap of Nature no doubt contributed in making him keenly aware



Teaching Higher Course students in the Library



of this oneness, of the continuity of things and their interconnectedness, the warp and weft that is this universe. He recounts an experience that he had in Moorea of an identification with a big tree: “One day on our estate



on Moorea I was sitting beside a little stream, leaning against a tree....Then I felt a presence behind me. First I noticed the rough trunk I was leaning against; then the tree began to vibrate inaudibly, in a very special way, something a little like a cat purring: it was a slow vibration of contentment. This corresponded with a deep note inside me. Gradually I let myself be overcome by this

contentment, and a door opened. Soon the whole body was seized by this ananda and I found I had become a tree: I was a tree. I lost awareness of my human body. I remained a tree for a long time. I experienced the rhythmic pulsation of the sap being pumped upwards, the sparkling play of sunlight in the foliage, the vivid intimate presence of everything that lives in it, and all the little plants round about it. It was a real paradise for that tree, to have its

roots bathing in the coolness of the river. Its crown was very large and higher than the other treetops. It is very pleasant, soothing and enriching to be a tree. That species of tree is found in India too. The Mother called it ‘Health’.”

Along with his profound and wide knowledge, his friends and associates do not forget to mention his keen sense of humour. As Agnidhan recalls, “It was a great privilege to be with him, to breathe in his powerful, luminous atmosphere. Unforgettable are those beautiful hours in the afternoon when we, a small group of friends would meet in the Library garden, asking questions and listening in rapt self-forgetfulness to what he shared with us from his vast store of knowledge and experience. His remarks were often spiced with a trace of provocation, and there was always this wonderful sense of humour, of amusement, and the hilarious laughter, the playfulness. He did not take anything too seriously.”

Medhananda left his body on 26 May 1994. ❧

Material for the above article was sourced from the latest issue of Recent Publications, Sabda and the April '08 issue of Mother India. For more information visit [www.medhananda.com](http://www.medhananda.com)

## MEDHANANDA, PASSIONATE SEEKER OF KNOWLEDGE

*Debranjjan Chatterjee '61, who worked closely with Medhananda at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library for many years, remembers him.*

We often split a personality into two parts: the outer and the inner, the surface man and the subjective man. And yet this division cannot be exclusive. The outer may reflect something of the inner self as much as the inner may be built up of external acts. There are rare personalities who plunge deep within to discover the secret of the self. It is usually a strenuous uphill journey, and mostly hidden from others.

Medhananda was just such a seeker of his inner self. He came thousands of miles from Tahiti to Pondicherry to live under the spiritual light of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

How far he travelled in his inner quest will

remain hidden to us. But some rays of his inner light surely filtered through onto his external being. This added unforgettable charm to his personality. When I think of Medhananda,

the image that presses most clearly before me is a handsome man of a very robust physical stature, with penetrating eyes like crystals. He was very energetic, both physically and mentally. I





never saw any sign of lethargy in his mind; he was constantly alert, always bright and happy, never depressed or moody. A voracious reader, he was well chosen by the Mother to be our librarian. In fact, she often referred affectionately to him as Medhananda, the Librarian.

When I joined the work at the Ashram Library in the early 1960s, I was the youngest member on the staff. Even so, he treated me as he did the others, never interfering with any work he had assigned to me, but always stepping back and observing my work with a kindly attention — more like a benevolent father than a supervisor, or boss. It was this loving personality that endeared him to so many.

Medhananda was unique in that he combined a warm, expansive nature, inclined to hearty laughter and an amused perspective, with a keen intellect of the highest order. He believed fully in the education of the psychic and the higher emotions as an essential corollary to the development of the mental capacities, and he practiced this with the many students who came to him for studies as he had done with his own three children. Two of them, Vero and Jean-Pierre, had stayed in the Ashram for a few months on their way from France to Tahiti. After seeing them the Mother said to Medhananda, “You have educated your children well.”

The Ashram’s library used to be in the reading room inside the Ashram compound. And the Ashram school had its own library located on the landing at the top of the eastern staircase, which is where Medhananda worked. Books from both libraries were moved to the current location sometime in 1953-54, when the Ashram purchased the building from its owner, a French businessman who exported semi-precious stones. The Mother

once told Medhananda that in 1920, when she had stayed in Bayoud House, which is opposite the Library entrance, she had noticed this magnificent house across the street and thought it would make a fine library! So, when all was ready at the new Library, Medhananda also moved here and chose for himself a very small, unprepossessing room, with only a single window. One day the Mother came to visit and when she saw his room, decided it was too small. She toured the rest of the building and chose a larger, well-lit, better-ventilated room and provided a small kitchen and attached bath.

The Mother understood Medhananda’s cultured nature and often when she received beautiful or particularly interesting objects, she would send them to Medhananda for the Library. In this way, he gathered statues and vases and picture postcards to enhance the atmosphere. He also started music collections and held musical evenings there.

Everyone knows of his passionate interest in Egyptology and how he gave a totally new interpretation to Egyptian hieroglyphs in the light of Sri Aurobindo’s own studies of the Vedas. He knew Greek and Latin, in addition to French, and guided many serious students of the humanities in their studies of history, literature, philosophy, and comparative religions. He arranged small exhibitions at the Library on such subjects as the “oneness of the world”, using scientific and historical facts combined with visual stimuli, to interest and encourage people to explore these subjects. He also had a great love for animals, studied the behavioural patterns of monkeys, and made interesting discoveries in the field of animal psychology.



Although he was a master of erudition, a creative and original thinker, and an inspiring writer, he was above all a child of the Mother, with whom he had the most extraordinarily sweet relation. It is surely that sweetness that became the nectar of his life and drew so many friends to his side. ❧

*Courtesy Recent Publications, Sabda*

## ASHRAM TITBITS

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### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Muralidharji, once seeing me out of class during school hours asked: "Ah! You have taken French Leave?"

Me: (Not knowing) "What is French Leave?"

Just then Pavitra-da (Our Director of Education and Mother's Sarathi) was coming out of the Ashram Gate.

Muralidharji: "Go — ask him" (Pavitra-da).

I went up to Pavitra-da and asked: "What is French Leave?"

He smiled and said: "French Leave is what we (the French) call 'Congé à l'anglaise'" (French Leave is what we, the French, call English Leave!)

He then walked on leaving me on both sides of the Channel.

R. Prabhakar (Batti)

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*Anecdotes of our School's children collected by one of our teachers:*

### NEED HELP?

Children are very helpful by nature. At one time, the egg-distribution was at 7 p.m., just before the 7.15 March Past. One of the teachers was in the habit of collecting her eggs earlier, whenever she found the egg-room open. A child of Group A4, playing in the Guest House, had noticed her. One day, finding the door of the egg-room closed, she was coming away when this little boy came running and asked her, "Vous voulez des oeufs? Venez." (You want your eggs? Come.) And *before* she knew what this boy was up to, he ran to the

door and 'bang-bang-bang', he banged hard on the door with his little fists. Then saying, "Maintenant, on va ouvrir la porte," (Now they will open the door), he ran away to continue his play.

A simple, helpful solution, quite unaware of what the teacher would have to face, for the lady inside opened the door, came out quite angry, and said, "If you want eggs, just call me. Do not bang like that!"

Poor teacher, what could she tell her!

### PUCHI!

Lilies were brought to Delafon for the children to arrange in their classroom. Suddenly one boy jumped up and started crying out "Puchi! Puchi!" (Puchi is insect in Tamil). It was a caterpillar that must have been in one of the lilies. Another boy quickly stopped him from shouting and said, "You never know, it may be Douce Mère Herself in the form of a caterpillar!" So all the children stood and made way for the caterpillar to crawl out of the classroom. A guard of honour!

### CARTOON SEEN BY THE MOTHER

"I can't think too clearly today — I feel a bit woolly-headed!"



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**Errata:** The spiritual significance of the white lotus is "Aditi" and not "Avatar" as mistakenly mentioned in the "Quiz Time" section of our last issue.



## BEAUTY IN LIFE

Let beauty be your constant ideal.

Beauty of the soul,  
beauty of sentiments,  
beauty of thoughts,  
beauty of action,  
beauty in work,

so that nothing comes out of your hands  
which is not an expression  
of pure and harmonious beauty.

And the Divine help will be always with you.