

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



A Glimpse into
Sri Aurobindo's Life
in Calcutta – 1908

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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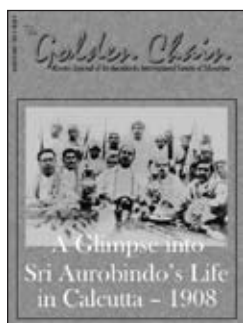
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A snap taken in Ramgarh.

The Golden Chain
Alumni Journal of S.A.I.C.E.
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, INDIA.



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Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.

Mode of Donation: Donations can be made
by MO/DD/Cheque in favour of "The Golden
Chain Fraternity".

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Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry 605002.

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Website: www.goldenchainfraternity.org

IMPRINT:

Publisher:

Jhumur Bhattacharya
for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY, Pondy

Printer:

A. R. Ganguli,
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM PRESS, Pondicherry.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Gopal Naik '90

1908 was a momentous year in the life of Sri Aurobindo. The two streams of revolutionary activity and spiritual experience were intensifying in force and would, in this period, come to a head. For some time past Sri Aurobindo had been open more and more to a higher force but this movement had been overshadowed by the pressing need to work for the liberation of Mother India. 1908 was to be the year when the Lord himself would ensure that Sri Aurobindo turned decisively to the path of Yoga.

The first indication of that came in January of that year when Sri Aurobindo met Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, a Maharashtrian yogi. Meditating with Lele, and in only three days, Sri Aurobindo established a complete silence of the mind. This was the realisation of the Silent Brahman. The experience remained with him ever since. With Lele's encouragement he began to rely entirely on the Guide within.

This was a time when political activities were in full swing. In the Congress, the Nationalists had just split from the Moderates and were a force to reckon with. The daily *Bande Mataram*, which Sri Aurobindo edited, was changing the political thought of India, rousing and inspiring people with its clear vision, penetrative analysis and fiery language. At this time Sri Aurobindo was also attending a political meeting every four days, delivering speeches at almost all of them. For the first few months of that year he remained in the middle of this whirl of political action.

On the evening of April 30th 1908, two members of Barindra's young revolutionary group, Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, attempted to assassinate magistrate Kingsford in Muzaffarpur, but their bombs killed two British ladies by mistake. The police immediately initiated a massive man-hunt to round up all those who were involved.

Two days later, early in the morning of May 2nd, Sri Aurobindo was arrested. This was not something he had expected. In his Uttarpara Speech he narrates, "When I was arrested [...] I faltered for a moment and cried out in my heart

to Him, 'What is this that has happened to me? I believed that I had a mission to work for the people of my country and until that work was done, I should have Thy protection. Why then am I here and on such a charge?'" But slowly things started becoming clear and then the Lord spoke to him and said, "The bonds you had not the strength to break, I have broken for you [...] I have had another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here [...]" The Lord had ensured that the pull of political activity did not get in the way of Sri Aurobindo's greater mission. The year of detention in Alipore jail was meant to be a year of seclusion and training, of closer communion with the Divine. In solitary confinement Sri Aurobindo read the Gita and the Upanishads and meditated. Here he had the realisation of the Cosmic Consciousness and of the Divine (Sri Krishna) in all. It was also at this time that he was inwardly guided by Swami Vivekananda. The stage was now set for the next phase in his sadhana.

Externally, events were taking their destined course. In October 1908, the Alipore Bomb Trial began at the Sessions Court — 49 people stood accused, 206 witnesses were called, around 400 documents were filed with the court and more than 5000 exhibits were produced including bombs, revolvers, and acids. This was the first State trial of any magnitude in British India and continued for a year. At the end of it a large number of the accused, including Barindra, were sentenced to life imprisonment in the Cellular Jail in the Andamans.

Sri Aurobindo, as we know, was acquitted. He would continue in public life for a year more. But the new inner direction had been set and he had also been inwardly assured that India would attain independence. It was now only a matter of time before his entire life was consecrated to his spiritual mission.

Today, a hundred years later, as we remember that period, we realise that we are the beneficiaries of both Sri Aurobindo's nationalist and spiritual legacies. How far are we living up to them? ❧



TANGA BOARDING

As soon as I opened *The Golden Chain* [Feb 08] and discovered that Tanga Boarding and Kiran-di have been featured, I was overjoyed. Leaving aside all other duties I sat down to read.

On going through Kim's version I came across an error which I would like to rectify. The first boarders were Siddhartha Bhabok, Kim Reddy, Vivek Rane, Anand Reddy, Kireet Patel (cousin of Ashok Patel), Shivaji, Nanda Reddy and Nupur. The founding guardians were Sarayu-ben (from Kenya) and Kiran-di. Later on Mohini-ben replaced Sarayu-ben.

Kiran-di, at the beginning, occupied the upper front Room overlooking the Entrance. Nanda and I occupied the room adjacent to Didi's on the left side. Nanda and I would watch the tall mango trees and delicious mangoes in summer from the large windows of our dressing room. We had separate study

tables and Nanda would sit and do her maths with a clove in her mouth. We were too young to appreciate the ambience — an ambience which is very rare now-a-days. I remember the spacious rooms, large doors and windows, and flower-bedecked gardens on all sides. A setting and a house like this would cost a few thousand rupees per day by present standards.

In the beginning food would come from Ganpatram's. I still remember Kireet Patel and a few others would opt for "Karak chapatti" which would be made by Didi and Mohini-ben on the kerosene stove. Didi, being an expert cook, would often make special dishes. I still remember she had made delicious khichdi with pure ghee on a Sunday. We were so overwhelmed by this simple dish that we decided to have it on the next Sunday also. Now there was no pure ghee on that Sunday. But we were all bent upon consuming the dish with pure ghee. It was decided that Nanda and I would go to Standard Stores for ghee. Though we knew that Standard Stores remained closed on Sundays, we ventured out with a can hoping against hope that the shop would be open. But alas, it was closed and we ate khichdi without ghee.

The walk through the Park to the School was a long one by old standards. It was common to say that so and so stays beyond the Park which is far away.

I remember I would accompany Kim and Vivek all the way to Damodar-da's place for a hair cut. We would walk down leisurely immersed in our childish talk.

Didi's love is unforgettable. She cared for all of us. I don't think anyone could say that Didi loved so and so more. You cannot think of Tanga Boarding House without thinking of Didi and her kindness.

Mohini-ben was also very popular. She would regale us as long as she stayed with us. Her company was fun. She would accompany us after group and serve hot dinner, after which we would sit down for studies.

Living patterns have drastically changed of late of course. Mother was there in her body and Ashram life was heavenly. I stayed in Tanga House from Dec. 1959 to Dec. 1960. On seeing the printed photograph of Sarayu-ben, Anand, Kim and Vivek in the issue, I remember they were about that old when I left the Ashram — a decision I repent even today. I convey my regards to all my old mates through this article. They will enjoy sharing these old memories with me.

Nupur '68H

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK.

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Published letters may be edited for reasons of space, clarity and civility.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Lopamudra '94

I return to Pondicherry as if after many years with a sense of having completed a certain picture. I have reached a secure perch in life, earned two instead of Shiva's one half moon ... under the eyes. It offers a privileged view in time; and if one can belong to a few distinct "outside" worlds for long enough, one gets a perspective in space. Some people literally need to stand aside to witness. It is six o'clock in the morning on Mother's birthday, year 2008. People from far-off cities stream in silence in the school's Prix d'Excellence room, the Hall of Harmony. Every inch of the Ashram main building is occupied by people, so is the school courtyard. Such a delight to see so much love for Douce Mère. I sit wide awake, awake as I have seldom been before.

From far I hear echoes of piping voices "tippy tippy tap tap, what colour do you choose?" Unwillingly the clock strikes ten and we sweaty children sit half-giggling under Bokul-da's prowling eye. The Hall of Harmony is narrower with large shuttered French windows. On the staircase of cement slabs outside, late-comers meditate. That was a slice from my childhood. When my teachers were prancing boys and girls they would have known what was before the lotus pond. And earlier some would have seen the building rise for a Frenchman perhaps, when this small fishing village was made a colonial spoil.

As I sit in the new Hall of Harmony of polished wood floor, I appease the puerile thought "you have demolished my past along with this staircase". I look at those dots, the stable points

which lend perspective to the image, and revel in the joy of discovering the third dimension. It is the same thrill that would have seized the Pahari painter who suddenly saw Krishna approach his *gopi* rather than look askance and miss her.

Following the pole star I reach the white chamber of the Matrimandir. A crystalline eye looks up at heaven watched by twelve towering figures. Like a pearl bathed in golden light tossed out by the ocean, a jeweled dream of You.



Lopamudra (left) at the Matrimandir

Mother had placed a finger on what seemed like a wound on the earth's body. People from around the world drawn magnetically to it enacted this primal act of sacrifice. Beads of sweat washed in cleansing rain. Dancing dust became fresh foliage. The Skeptic thought, "If this is possible what isn't?" ... and threw down walls. Forty years back a bus stood in front of the Playground after the film show and carried a merry crew to Auroville. All night they formed a human chain and cleaned the land. Now again a bus leaves from the same

place bearing a similar crew¹. They work on the same soil, now fertile, enjoy the cool breeze by the shade of Matrimandir, now complete. I return with an orange ambience in my eyes and a feeling of being safe, close to Her Heart. God's Labour goes on invisibly.

As a student often I felt restless about not knowing enough, living as I was then in the "inside" world. The picture of my understanding was too flat. There was this huge unknown land my ship had to discover and plant a flag. Now that unknown has been sailed on to, but the news, good or bad, is that there is a yet vaster unknown verging on the unknowable. I seem to get hints of insight, or perhaps it is another delusion, that having reached the territory of adulthood there isn't very much most adults know. For instance when one ponders about economics one feels nobody really has a handle on it. The assurance most people get is because the secret is not out. Imagine, it is such a slippery one that it was "solved" several times by war. Instinct says that doctors too safeguard a dire secret, the fact that a lot is unknown about the body and mind, that much of healing is time and faith. Globalisation of information and trade has unleashed enormous energies. We see its lashing tail but do we look into its face? In other pursuits too experts hide their doubt in brilliant masks. Growing in age is not the ticket to wisdom. When my petulant adolescent self asks, "So is that all you have to show me — a lot of closed doors?" I hasten to share a treasure. At least I know something for certain, a key does exist that will fit our particular lock. On this life-scape of shifting sand we are given a compass and a guiding star.

The poet was right when he said all the world's a stage and all men and women merely players. One day the flickering film will reach the end and all the people I know will reveal their real self and wave to the audience. Then the many relationships, the roles of love and apathy will become

spontaneous, simple, pure.

From the first whistle Mona-da blew to the last Bande Mataram, what a journey it was! Now that I stand as a peeping spectator to the March Past, without the sense of "getting late", I realise Pondicherry is not the place for a fresh start. Every corner is replete with memories, whispering shadows, symbol presences; specially now that I see them in 3D. Perhaps that's the crucial message. There isn't any fresh start, for me, for humanity, for the creation even perhaps. There is but to learn from the past and launch into the future.

Pondicherry, first harbour of life's odyssey —
Watching the moon drip tears of honey,
Collecting gently Kishore Kumar songs,
Listening like a pearl diver, breathlessly,
Giggling non-stop for no reason at all,
A cruel collage of hurt feelings,
Binding sweet nothings and letting them go,
Making Santa Claus steps with painted fist,
Splintered glass caught in a kaleidoscope,
Bathing in rain, breathing hot sand
Sleeping a child, waking in grown-up land.

As I connect the fixed points, patterns emerge. My teachers will fade in the history of the School, hundreds of "hamlogka zamana" will fall off the abacus of time, today's sweet voices will become silent. And the drama will go on. Somebody had gathered his dreams in the argent air, and that's where we stand — between the gold and the blue. The School is a crucible, so is our age, the creation of man, the experiment of life, the voyages of mind. I am struck by the gigantic significance of my insignificant self participating in such a Gnostic dream. We all are in it, the alumni, students, devotees and everybody else. Every age is more special than the rest because of the observer's presence. Each one in his own time and place is a unit in this game-plan; seen

1. For several years from the inception of Auroville, people from the Ashram went to work at the Matrimandir site after the Saturday film show. The collaboration began again in a small way in 2003 thanks to The Golden Chain Fraternity. These days the bus leaves from near the Playground every alternate Sunday morning at 6:30. A warm welcome is extended to all to participate in the work.

from below, responsible, seen from above, dispensable, seen laterally, it strikes the blind spot. So as we do the spade work let us keep in mind what gold we are digging, what secret we are hiding. Let us have a sense of balance, know the route to the middle path, use the right measuring rod, and sometimes try to sit back and enjoy the drama. At least it is good ego-reduction therapy. It makes you feel so small that humbleness becomes redundant. Next time when I come back with a few strands of white on the head, perhaps I may have a completely different story to narrate, a new perspective which invalidates or invigorates the old ones. Or better I would have little to say, for "I" would not matter, only "we" would. After all we are all part of a sacred Ideal,

an aeonic Dreamer's precious Dream. So precious that he has flung a spark of himself in us. And together we make a starry night bound by the invisible currents of His Love.

Who are you, O pilgrim from afar
A wisp of breath of a lonely star
Or a curve of wave now here, now gone?
Maybe a drop of a misty morn,
A comma in someone's manuscript,
An hour from some time-table slipped.
For a moment the bedrock of delight,
Catching a glimpse of a sacred sight.

When you have smiled the Buddha smile
Perhaps you can laugh with Bal Gopal? ❧

JE ME SOUVIENS

Jayasurya '80 (Jinoo)

The gigantic gate built of solid steel stands like a sentinel permitting one and all an outer view and preview of a gurukul. Giving it company is none other than the majestic tree of transformation to greet and welcome the ignorant.

We walk on the green carpet of grass spread over the old concrete courtyard. We see the Hall of Harmony extended for more harmony and we find the Sun dial missing with time, scrapped into timelessness. Maybe time dwarfs images and what seemed of immense magnitude as a child seems of no consequence to the eye of a grown-up.

Childhood does tend to magnify everything — loves, fears, dimensions.

Je me souviens de tout — from Delafon to EAVP to Knowledge, the step-up ladder of education and evolution — the way we were gracefully moulded with love and care by our loving teachers.

In our climb we reached a variety of sections where we witnessed the sweet smile of a 'di', the stern but soft look of a 'da', heard the black and white keys playing do-re-mi and at times en-

joyed the sight of dolphins sailing through the scintillating waves. From them we learnt about the works of Shakespeare, Molière, Nuffield, the great creations of painters, poets and musicians and, of course, the easy to remember *mantras* of our own Masters — the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

In between the books, notebooks and lectures, we had some fine treats of Mind and Matter.

There was a break for soup and vitamin D (for dispensary). They surely made an impact on our growth. Hopefully inner! We visited factories like that of True biscuit for a creamy treat, All India Press for a literary treat and a few more.

We had memorable moments. There was



Nolini-da, whose words filtered down through his elegant moustache, and those words were music to our ears. There were others whose thundering voices made characters literally walk out of their speeches. There were still others, namely Monsieur Derib (illustrator of Yakari), who gave a live demo of his “comical hand” — a reality show par excellence. Then there was a flower show, a visual treat. From hither and thither they came, dressed in colourful outfits and identifying themselves with spiritual names given by our Mother.

There was a Section of adventures and misadventures, where we gave shape (some practical, some impractical) to words and dreams which we had once glimpsed: “rocket”, “bats”, “venom”.... We experimented with a mixture of powders packed in a conical cylinder that would shoot up when ignited, like a missile. Due to official intervention the project got shelved and gathered dust, else, who knows, our misguided inquisitiveness might have led to some more noisy ventures. On another occasion we were the unwelcome guests of bats. Armed with a mask and a net we disturbed the peace-loving species. The result — the hunters became the hunted. To keep our spirits ignited, we turned instead to scorpions and their venom.

We had the privilege of accomplishing some noble deeds. We held the broom for *nettoyage* of our classrooms and the sickle for harvesting paddy. We cleared the debris of the old Gymnastics Hall and breathed the air of a new world on 28th Feb. 1968 at Auroville. We transformed cold

smiles into warm ones when receiving visitors at the Ashram gate. We took care in shifts of the old and the beautiful at JIPMER hospital and gave life to the tables and benches of Corner House with a fresh coat of paint. We also patrolled the streets (of Ashram localities) at night to keep the hostile forces at bay. But at times, we, the so-called nocturnal guardian angels, wore the gown of mischief and feasted on ice-cream on the terrace of the old cottage restaurant.

We had the lab to play (!) with pulleys and prisms. We had Knowledge where our loving teachers didn't teach but shared their experiences of knowledge and spoke from their heart. Yes, these are the teachings that we value the most.

And finally how can we forget Room no. 7, the Dark Room, Language Lab and the Silence Room where important rendezvous took place in a hush-hush tone!

Merci beaucoup for turning us into sterner stuff ready to face greater challenges and refining and re-opening our otherwise dormant senses towards beauty, art and culture. We grew up with a great sense of duty, responsibility and confidence.

On a lighter vein: On 31st Oct. 1980 during prize distribution, a teacher patted me on the back and congratulated me. I thought he was patting the wrong person. But he was right in his action. The *saabaashi* was meant for me — though for a greater reason — for passing out of Higher Course. Yes, this is the relationship we had, we have, we cherish, and we miss. ❧

THE STAIRS OF PROGRESS

Yogamaya '95 (Mayu)

When I was a little girl in Delafon, and we used to come occasionally to the Big School, I used to look at the different flights of stairs leading up to the next floor and wonder where these stairs ended. In Flower Room we had one winding stairway which led us to the next class, a row

of classrooms and a long passage which ended at the music room. But in Big School there were so many flights of stairs! When would I grow up and climb them and find out the mysterious rooms that these lead to? Three years flew by and soon I was in Big School.

To my utmost happiness we did climb up the

staircase which is just behind the school stage, which led to Salle de Progrès. This was a hall with many square windows and from one side you could see the Ashram building and from the other, through the branches of the Patience tree, the stage and the lush green lawn with a passage winding through it. The hall was also connected to other rooms and after crossing the first room there was another set of steps on the left! Going down these steps you came just behind the Soup serving counter. I hadn't noticed this one on our excursions to Big School. I wondered if there were more hidden stairs also.

On gradually discovering the different sections of the school I came across some more flights of steps and realised that they were leading to different levels of the academic ladder. After the Progrès section came the E.A.V.P. section and here, as you progressed from year to year, you moved from different classrooms and used different stairs to access them.

One set of stairs that doesn't exist anymore led to the front of the Hall of Harmony. I wondered if these stairs would one day lead me to play a small role on the stage, and indeed there were many opportunities when I climbed them, feeling nervous before a performance or excited to see my friends on stage.

Behind the aquarium section there was another flight of steps which led to the last classrooms of our academic career in School and which was also the end of the School building. Here were spent the final weeks of our Big School days and climbing this one we also went to collect

our prizes at the end of the academic year.

In Knowledge we had two parallel sets of steps which connected three floors. The one just as one entered the main gate of Knowledge was used more often than the other one. Thus, having climbed these steps so very often, we came to the end of our school years.

Now what? Where? The fun years at school were over, we grew up from toddlers to adults

in a protective environment and now we were facing a whole new life ahead of us. What was in store for us? Would we be climbing further? Or, in other words, would we progress in life? We had to — for as Mother says if we do *marquez-les-pas* in one place we are digging a hole for ourselves — so we had to march on. But again there was the fear... "What was at the top of the stairs?"

The long-awaited school holidays had come, but they didn't feel like the "vacances" any more, because now we were graduates and

would no more be going to school in the mornings. Days rolled by and it was 17th of November. In a pensive mood I joined the Darshan queue and was moving along, trying to keep my mind blank. Quietly through the Meditation hall and up the stairs, one step at a time, waiting for the person in front of me to take the next step. Finally I reached Mother's Room and saw Her smiling face. It dawned upon me that I had climbed all the stairs and my goal was reached. My uncertainties as to what lay at the top of the stairway dissolved completely. I had got my answer. ❧



One must learn always not only intellectually but also psychologically, one must progress in regard to character, one must cultivate the qualities and correct the defects; everything should be made an occasion to cure ourselves of ignorance and incapacity; life becomes then tremendously interesting and worth the trouble of living it.

The Mother (CWM, 1:124)

THE HOUSE ON SCOTT LANE IN CALCUTTA

Sunayana Panda '79

What's in a name? Whether you call it Calcutta or Kolkata it is still the same city. The morning haze of December slowly reveals to us its many facets. It is a city like no other. It is not just bricks and cement, nor is it just a mass of human beings. It is one big heart. The city is pulsating with emotions, even at that early hour of the day. It draws you into itself and it is difficult to understand where the city ends and where you begin.

This is the city of Sri Aurobindo's birth. Of all places on this entire earth he chose to be born here. It was the capital of British India then and surely looked a lot different than it does today. It was once known as the "City of Palaces" and was a culturally and commercially thriving place. No matter what anybody says in our modern times, no matter how often people have called it the city of poverty and squalor, it still remains a city which has something unique.

A couple of days after our arrival in Calcutta we decided to see some of the houses where Sri Aurobindo had lived and wanted to start from the house on 23 Scott Lane. Having read the Bengali book written by Sri Anshuman Bandhopadhyay we knew where the houses were. It is not only a well-written book but a highly informative one

too.¹ The taxi-driver was a bit puzzled when he saw us opening a map. In a while we had found the area where we wanted him to take us. We drove through streets lined with old and crumbling houses. Everything was covered in dust — the trees, the signboards and the electric wires. It was around nine o'clock in the morning but the day had already started for the small shops and the road-side vendors.

It was not so easy to find Scott Lane. After asking at several shops we finally came to a narrow lane which we would have easily missed had someone not shown it to us. A strange sight greeted our eyes. On the right side of the lane, stretching almost 100 metres, was a vegetable and fish market. A row of vendors were sitting behind little piles of spinach and gourds. They were rural faces, filled with the vigour and energy of those whose fates are tied to the fields and to their daily earnings.

A little further in, we saw large piles of river fish, their shiny scales glistening in the morning light. Their sellers were sitting behind big sharp blades, known in Bengali as *boti*, on which they were cutting the large fish with quick and practised gestures. In the little space that was left in the narrow lane there was a continuous flow of cycles, rickshaws, motor-cycles and pedestrians.



Sri Aurobindo in 1908

1. *Kolcatay Sri Aurobindo Smriti Tirtha* by Anshuman Bandopadhyay.

It took a while for our taxi to find a place to park. "We won't be long," I told him, "all we have to do now is to find the house number 23." Little did I realise that it was going to be one big adventure. We started walking following the numbers but after we had come to no.19 suddenly the numbers changed and we found ourselves at no.33. Obviously there was some mistake. So we decided to go till the end of the road to see if the numbering continued on the other side. The road suddenly turned and twisted and the numbers were sometimes hidden behind signboards or just not there. There were all sorts of shops, selling odds and ends. The more we walked into the nooks and corners of that road the more we had the feeling that we had entered an old black and white film, a place where time had not moved at all. We asked the people in the shops if they knew where the door no.23 was. The old shopkeepers looked at us in surprise. Obviously, no one had ever asked them this question.

"Who lives there?" asked one of the young men.

"I don't know who lives there now," I replied.

"If you can tell me whose house you are looking for then I can tell you where he lives."

What could I say to that? I repeated again that I was looking for the house number 23. He just turned around and got on with his work, convinced that I didn't know what I wanted. I too understood that North Calcutta was not London. Here you looked for a person and not a house.

Having reached the end we came to the conclusion that perhaps the numbering was done in the old fashioned way in which the numbers followed in a serial order and were not divided into odd and even digits. The only thing to do was to go back to the beginning. By now an entire hour had passed, so by the time we reached the taxi the driver was looking a bit upset. Clearly, he wanted to go. He said that he would go away unless we paid him for the waiting. At first we had imagined that the whole trip would be over in half an

hour so he had agreed to wait and take us back to South Calcutta.

After promising to pay him for the whole waiting time we again set off on our hunt. As we moved towards the entrance of the lane from where we had come in and from where the numbering started, we were absolutely amazed to see that there was no sign of the bustling vegetable market. There were no piles of fish, no *botis* and no shouting women in colourful cotton saris. Everything had vanished into thin air. I felt like a fool as I went up to a man ironing clothes on a cart and asked him, "Wasn't there a market here a little while ago?"



The connecting lane between the main Scott Lane and the back alley where the house is situated.

"They have all gone home," he replied. He explained to me that everyday the market gathered early in the morning and that at 11 o'clock they all left. Then I understood why these people held their market in that lane. On the right side of Scott Lane, up to almost the middle, there were no front doors. That entire side of the road had only three or four back doors of large gardens which were attached to houses whose front doors were on another street. This meant that no one used that part of the road and by sitting there they disturbed no one. Therefore there were no door numbers on that half of the road. Once again we followed the numbers and this time when we came to where the numbers broke off we found out that it was exactly where another little lane rambled off in a perpendicular way. We decided to follow that lane and to our surprise saw that

the numbering continued. Now it was clear that the house we were looking for was in this bylane. Once again the little lane went into another back alley and right at the end of that, in a cul-de-sac, was the door number 23.

We stood for a while, unsure as to whether this was indeed what we had been looking for. Could we have made a mistake? The house did not look that old. We kept looking at it from different angles and making sure that the number was correct. In the meantime we saw that two



The length of the back alley. The house is the last but one on the left.

young men, who were sitting in the front room and talking, were eyeing us suspiciously. Why were these two people looking so closely at their house? After all, there was no reason for anybody to stand in front of this perfectly ordinary house and stare at it.

Finally, one of them, rather on the heavy side and of very fair complexion, came out and stood at the door with a questioning look in his eyes.

"Is this where Sri Aurobindo once lived?" I ventured to ask.

He looked visibly relieved, obviously we were not thieves, and replied with an air of confidence, "Yes, indeed this is where Aurobindo lived." He said it in a tone as if he had himself collected the rent in 1908! He informed us that Sri Aurobindo had lived on both the first and second floors. This information seemed quite credible, considering that not only was the house small but also there were five of them living there: Sri Aurobindo, Mrinalini Devi, Sarojini Devi,

Abinash Bhattacharya and Sourin Bose (who was a cousin of Mrinalini Devi). Also, they must have needed a separate area where those who came to meet Sri Aurobindo could sit and discuss things. Obviously, the house had been renovated because the entire front part looked new.

We spent the next half hour taking pictures. "Look where we have reached!" I said to my husband. We were standing in the backstreet of a backstreet, at the bottom of a dead-end, with only a cat prowling silently over the boundary wall of the last

house. Not a soul was in sight. Only then did it strike us that this is indeed what Sri Aurobindo might have been looking for in 1908 when he moved into that house in the month of February. This is exactly the sort of hideout a revolutionary would look for.

1908. It was such a momentous year. The experience of achieving mental silence happened that year. It was also in that year that Sri Aurobindo was arrested and imprisoned. Three months of that year he spent in this house and another eight in Alipore jail. By the time he moved

into this house Sri Aurobindo had given up the post of the principal of the National College but there were many other things that he was doing simultaneously, the most prominent among them being the editorial work for the *Bande Mataram* and his own inner *sadhana*.

This house was taken on rent probably from the month of February of 1908 in that intense phase of the revolutionary work. The person who might have been instrumental in finding this house was Sri Girish Bose who established the Bangabashi College which is still there on Scott Lane and which we had crossed several times during our search that morning. Girish Bose was a friend of Mrinalini Devi's father. We later found out that the lane has now been renamed as 'Rajkumar Chakraborty Sarani'.

We get a glimpse of how Sri Aurobindo lived in that house from the account written by Abinash Bhattacharya. He was a member of the group of young revolutionaries who were secretly

carrying out their work. His job was to look after Sri Aurobindo's household and assist in any way he could. Barindra and the others were living at the Muraripukur garden house. There was a need for secrecy, although as Nolini-da writes in his *Reminiscences*, their secret society was secret only in name. There were spies who followed them wherever they went and this house too was under surveillance.

Today this lane has an air of tranquility that doesn't give away the slightest hint of any of the historic events that happened here. It is just after midday and a bored housewife is looking out of a balcony on the second floor of the house across the road. Soon a street-vendor makes his way here with a huge basket on his head. He announces his presence with his loud call, "Everything for ten rupees." The housewife calls him, and standing there on her balcony, chooses what she wants to buy, and then lowers a plastic basket tied to a long thin rope. The vendor fills it with some little objects after taking the money which the woman had placed at the bottom of the basket. The housewife then pulls her basket up and disappears, maybe to try out her new hairclips.

The humdrum pace of everyday life continues here. Only to us is this place so important. This is the house where Vishnu Bhaskar Lele spent a month with Sri Aurobindo. We read in the reminiscences of Abinash Bhat-tacharya that Lele came to this house along with a young disciple from Maharashtra. Sri Aurobindo had met Lele in the first week of the year 1908 while he was on his way back from the Surat Congress. This house was rented shortly after he returned from that journey and within a month of that Lele arrived in Calcutta on an invitation from Barindra.

Looking back at this story a hundred years later we have the advantage of seeing it in the context of what happened afterwards. According to Abinash, Lele started living in that house and wanted to continue to guide Sri Aurobindo. But here is where we see how this soft-spoken

gentleman who was so lost in his own world that he was as if cut off from the material reality around him — Abinash mentions that Sri Aurobindo did not even notice that his shoes had holes in them — decided to make it clear that he did not need any more guidance from Lele. When Lele asked him to meditate once in the morning and once in the evening Sri Aurobindo told him politely that he did not want to do it. Imagine Lele's surprise at that moment. Here was the man that he had himself initiated only in January of that year and by March the same man tells him that he doesn't need his guidance any more. Lele feared that the inner guide Sri Aurobindo spoke of was a hostile force. Sri Aurobindo, though, trusted his inner guide completely. But he did not want to tell Lele that he did not need a human guru and that he meditated continuously throughout the day while he was engaged in his outward activities. Lele lived in that house along with the members of Sri Aurobindo's family for a month or so. Barindra had also taken initiation from him, so he too spent some time with him.



The house referred to in the article is the one on the left of the photo. One can only see the door. The lane was too narrow for us to take a photo from the front.

Lele wasn't too pleased with the bomb-making which was going on in the Muraripukur house. He had sensed the kind of activity that the group was engaged in. Lele eventually left, seeing that his presence was not required anymore.

We have found in the vicinity an old house that must have been a magnificent abode of some rich man during the time that Sri Aurobindo was

living just down the lane. It is an exquisite combination of British style with Indian decorative features, all in bricks. This area must have seen better times and there must have been wealthy and educated people among the residents.

The lane where the house number 23 is situated is so narrow that we can't take any photos of the house from the front. So we take pictures of the lane itself. The people who cross us look at us with surprise. They even ask us why we are taking pictures of this utterly ordinary lane. We tell them that this is where Sri Aurobindo had lived and then they understand. Some of them are aware of this fact, but I wonder if they know how important this house is in the context of Indian history. It was here that Bal Gangadhar Tilak had come to meet Sri Aurobindo. The stalwarts, the two giants of the freedom movement, had discussed their strategies here.

This episode is recorded by Abinash Bhattacharya in his book. One afternoon while Sri Aurobindo was resting, an unknown person

one of the rooms of the house. Let us hear the story in Abinash's own words:

I requested him politely to come back in an hour. He was stubborn. "Well, let me sit here in the drawing-room and chat with you. An hour will pass quickly."

He said that so jovially that I could not refuse him. Helplessly I sat down and began to chat with him. Talking with him was really a pleasure. Barely fifteen minutes had passed before Aurobindo-babu slowly came down the stairs with his slippers on. Recognising the visitor from a distance he called out happily: "Tilak, it's you!" I gave a start. Balgangadhar Tilak! I bowed down at his feet and apologized. He took my hands close to his chest and said: "Forgive you for what? You haven't done anything wrong."

"Why didn't you tell me at once that you were Balgangadhar Tilak? I would have called him down."

*"I knew that. But I was aware that Aurobindo was resting."*²

Having taken a few pictures we head back to our taxi. As we get back to the main Scott Lane we decide to take a picture of the entrance of the back lane. On a pavement nearby an old man is sitting and reading a book by Swami Vivekananda which he puts back into a plastic wrapper and gets up to move aside as he sees us taking pictures. Only in Calcutta can one see this scene of a person reading Swami Vivekananda on the pavement.

Our taxi brings us back to our hotel which is in a street behind the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan. The drive back takes us through old parts of the city, crowds of people, the rush of traffic and here and there a dash of greenery. What a strange relationship Sri Aurobindo had with Calcutta! This is the city where he was born, but he spent barely four years of his adult life here, out of which one entire year was spent in prison. What he achieved in the



A closer shot of the entrance of the house. You can't see the door behind the brick-covered pillars.

of distinguished appearance came and asked to see him. Of course, Abinash says it was a *Marwari* but what he probably meant was that it was a Hindi-speaking person. As it was his duty, Abinash asked the gentleman to come back after an hour when Sri Aurobindo would have finished resting. But the man decided to sit and wait in

2. Quoted from *Sri Aurobindo and the Freedom of India* edited by Chanda Poddar, Mona Sarkar and Bob Zwicker.

political field was done mostly in those four years, in the middle of great hardship and danger. But it was enough to rock the boat of the British Raj. The capital of India was moved to Delhi in 1912. Bengal was probably considered too dangerous a place to continue to hold the seat of power. The date is suspiciously close to the Alipore Bomb trial to think that there was no connection.

It is easy to recreate in the mind the way Sri Aurobindo was surrounded by a group of daredevil young men, recruited by Barindra. On the other end were his associates like Raja Subodh Mullick, Bepin Chandra Pal, Rabin-dranath Tagore and others who represented the high culture and intellect of Bengal. The Bengali temperament hasn't changed much in a century. The people of Bengal are still the passionate type, sensitive and emotional. Their refinement is still intact in spite of globalisation and the culture of get-rich-quick of today's India.

As we left Calcutta a week later we silently thanked the late Mrs. Joya Mitter of Lakshmi's House who had taken the trouble of installing commemorative marble plaques in all the

houses where Sri Aurobindo had either lived or worked. Her hard work and foresight will make it possible for future generations to recognise these historical landmarks. And we know that at least in Calcutta, future generations will remember Sri Aurobindo because we can see that even today he is greatly revered there. People are still so proud of him and consider him as one of the greatest sons



An old house at the entrance of the back alley showing the style of the period. This house must have been there when S.A. was living in the vicinity.

of Bengal. We heard some people call him "Rishi Aurobindo". It has quite a special ring. And with that beautiful name still humming in our ears we made our way back to Pondicherry. ❧

One thing only we are sure of, and one thing we wear as a life-belt which will buoy us up on the waves of the chaos that is coming on the land. This is the fixed and unalterable faith in an over-ruling Purpose which is raising India once more from the dead, the fixed and unalterable intention to fight for the renovation of her ancient life and glory. Swaraj is the life-belt, Swaraj the pilot, Swaraj the star of guidance. If a great social revolution is necessary, it is because the ideal of Swaraj cannot be accomplished by a nation bound to forms which are no longer expressive of the ancient and immutable Self of India. She must change the rags of the past so that her beauty may be readorned. She must alter her bodily appearance so that her soul may be newly expressed. We need not fear that any change will turn her into a second-hand Europe. Her individuality is too mighty for such a degradation, her soul too calm and self-sufficient for such a surrender. If again an economical revolution is inevitable, it is because the fine but narrow edifice of her old industrial life will not allow of Swaraj in commerce and industry. The industrial energies of a free and perfect national life demand a mightier scope and wider channels. Neither need we fear that the economic revolution will land us in the same diseased and disordered state of society as now offends the nobler feelings of humanity in Europe. India can never so far forget the teaching which is her life and the secret of her immortality as to become a replica of the organised selfishness, cruelty and greed which is dignified in the West by the name of Industry. She will create her own conditions, find out the secret of order which Socialism in vain struggles to find and teach the peoples of the earth once more how to harmonise the world and the spirit.

Sri Aurobindo (*Bande Mataram*, March 5th 1908)

SISTER SCHOOLS

THE FUTURE FOUNDATION SCHOOL, KOLKATA

Started as a small nursery in 1972 and located within Lakshmi's House that houses Sri Aurobindo's relics, The Future Foundation School is today considered one of the premier schools of South Kolkata. In recent years the school has incorporated many innovative pedagogic methods based on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's principles of education. Shikha Guha, who is part of Lakshmi's House, tells us about this Sister School.

Where does one start? Ah! Well! Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. It was 1962. Smt. Lakshmi Devi Loyalka offered her residence to the Mother. Mother responded so beautifully to the offering: "We shall call it Lakshmi's House and it will be the Home of Grace."

In 1967, on Mahasaraswati Puja, there was the inaugural meditation of the Centre. Mother had taken care to earmark the meditation room, the library, the office, the residences. She had asked Shri Arunendra Nath Tagore, our Arunkaka, to be Her caretaker. In the initial years, it was left to Arunkaka to finance Lakshmi's House out of his earnings. Mother also asked Shri Pradyot Kumar Bhattacharya, our dear Daddy, whether it would be inconvenient for him to stay here instead of the Great Eastern Hotel during his trips to Kolkata on engineering consultancy work. "What divine humility!" Pradyotda would say. That way, he too started contributing to the upkeep of Lakshmi's House at the Mother's behest.

That was the beginning of Lakshmi House's long journey with its innumerable ups and downs — a journey more and more people from diverse backgrounds are undertaking willfully

and happily.

The same year, i.e. 1967, 'Shakti Centre', a centre for women, was started with the Mother's blessings.

In the initial years, thanks to Arunkaka, Lakshmi's House was the office of Sri Aurobindo Society, Sri Aurobindo Memorial Fund Society, and Auroville.

Arunkaka asked for Mother's permission to start a nursery school and on 4th September 1972, the Mother blessed the school and named it Arun Nursery, much to his embarrassment.

In 1975, Arunkaka died of cancer. On his death bed, he created the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture with Pradyotda as the Founder Chairman. It was left to him to chart the course of the institute. It was hard because his primary responsibility was with the Ashram in Pondicherry. One

remembers him one morning standing outside the main gate taking off the marble plaques that adorned the wall earlier and putting up a new one "Sri Aurobindo Ashram Centre". To him, Lakshmi's House was nothing less and nothing more than a campus of the Ashram, albeit outside Pondicherry. He asked many to take up the work. Joya Mitter, our dear Joyadi, volunteered. The ever-high-spirited lovely lady had taken the challenge head-on. That was the beginning of a



Main entrance to Lakshmi's House



Relics installation

long tryst of almost a quarter century, a quarter century of dedicated service at the Mother's feet.

In 1977, on 24th June, Sri Aurobindo's relics were installed in Lakshmi's House. There was immediately a noticeable difference. The Divine was physically there and in charge.

Meanwhile, the fledgling nursery school blossomed in its sylvan surroundings. Gradually demands for a high school began to reach a crescendo, mainly from the parents. Every year, a class was added. The Future Foundation School began functioning in the year 1981 but was named as such only in 1984.

Joyadi was no educationist in the accepted sense of the term. But she was a visionary with an indomitable spirit. Slowly but surely the school started to grow. In its growing phase, Shyamalda doubled up after office hours as an accountant poring over balance sheets trying to make ends meet. Joyadi spent hours in a well-known bookseller's shop patiently going through book lists of well known Council schools — it served as a guide for the new traveller.

Teachers were recruited at a very nominal salary. It is strange but true that good teachers began to join at regular intervals and never minded the pay.

I recall an incident... in '94 possibly. Joyadi, as was her wont, had returned to her office room after taking the morning assembly. Having just walked in, I found children going to their classrooms not quietly in a single file, but running up the stairs shouting and laughing amongst themselves. Joyadi, seated on her chair, was gazing at them from her window with a smile on her lips. Amazed, I asked, "Joyadi, after assembly should

children go to their classes like this? Can't you tell them anything?" To which the lady replied, "Let them be! Can't you see how happily they are going up?"... This was Joyadi.

To celebrate Sri Aurobindo's Birth Anniversary Joyadi initiated an Inter-School Competition keeping Sri Aurobindo, his life and work at the centre. What is encouraging is the fact that the number of participants is increasing over the years as is the effort put in by students of various schools and various hues. Who says our younger generation does not have its head and heart in the right place!

Joyadi had also started the annual pilgrimage to Pondicherry by students. The palpable Presence of The Lord and the Mother around the Samadhi, the food at the Dining Room (which the kids lap up), the meeting with 'Dada', Manojda, Sraddhalu, (Nirodda spoke to them every year till he was 99), watching the working of the Ashram Press, the Sri Smriti visit, Playground — all are etched in their minds. Their visit to the Theatre and the breathtaking display on 2nd December leave them clamouring for more visits. Quite a few decide to return with their parents. Our ex-students keep asking us to take them along one more time.

The school was granted affiliation to The Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations in the year 1988. The first batch of ten students appeared for ICSE in 1991 while the first batch of thirteen students appeared for ISC in 1993.

Being a person endowed with a strong aesthetic sense, it was Joyadi's dream to have an Art Gallery. Thus

was born 'Galerie La Mère' in 1995. There was a renewed awareness of the artistic genius of the Mother and artists marvelled at Her creations of art. Works of renowned and upcoming artists are showcased here on a regular basis. Not only do art-lovers benefit, but even children of the Future Foundation and Shakti Centre develop their



Joyadi



Galerie La Mère, the art gallery

appreciation of art, in all its efflorescence of colours, shades and hues.

Kolkata was celebrating its tercentenary. Joyadi wanted the city and its dwellers to know more about Sri Aurobindo and His contribution. Painstakingly, she ‘researched on foot’ and identified the places where Sri Aurobindo had lived and worked. It was her dream that the average pedestrian should pause and witness these hitherto unknown monuments of the revolutionary struggle. With the help of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, a ‘Sri Aurobindo and Calcutta Memorial Committee’ was set up. Marble plaques were installed at all the city sites charting out a route for Aurobindonian pilgrims for all time to come.

Joyadi had also heard that the Alipore Bomb Trial papers were lost to posterity. She searched high and low and finally located in an obscure trunk at Judges’ Court, Alipore, a vast amount of material related to the Trial. With the co-operation of some judges, she mooted the idea of converting the historic court-room to a museum commemorating the freedom struggle and, like every other endeavour she had undertaken, implemented it successfully.

In 1997 the ‘Sri Aurobindo Parichay Gallery’ brought a young Sri Aurobindo and his revolutionary associates so very close to us. This gallery boasts of a beautiful ‘son-et-lumière’ exposition on Sri Aurobindo’s early years with particular reference to the Indian freedom movement in the first decade of the 20th century. Replicas of his solitary cell at Presidency Jail, the Alipore court-room where He stood trial, and arms and ammunition used by the revolutionaries, transport

one to a different day and time. It is an experience that beggars description.

Joyadi passed away in July 1999. It was the demise of an institution. We were left rudderless — we depended on her for every little thing and she never hesitated in mothering us. Did we lap it up!

A place that belongs to the Mother can hardly remain in limbo. Ranjan, or Babua as he is commonly referred to in the Ashram, gave up his high profile corporate life to shoulder the onerous task. Bit by bit he soldiered on trying to fit into the new role. Under his stewardship, with able support from Shyamalda, Mr. D.P. Chatterjea and all of us, the school has gone from strength to strength.

When the school was started, it was important to induct students. In spite of one’s best intentions it was very difficult to move away from accepted norms of teaching — the traditional way. For one, parents would not have accepted. Awareness had not built up then, nor did we have resources. The primary aim was to get the school



Sri Aurobindo Parichay Gallery

up and running. The school started with 3 students in Nursery in 1972 and climbed up to more than 1100 at the start of the millennium.

Then we went ahead and did something unheard of. Where schools as a rule try everything possible to increase their student strength, The Future Foundation and Arun Nursery have had the courage to go ahead and reduce intake (The total student strength now stands at 925). Reason: a move away from traditional methods of teach-



Story telling in progress – Nursery

ing to ‘Theme Teaching’ and ‘Project Method’, or experiential learning which requires a lot of space (something in short supply). So at the cost of losing out on much needed ‘moolah’ we went ahead. The school at present has gone all out to implement Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s principles of Education.

Changing our pedagogy was not easy. The first problem was faced from the teachers. Having been accustomed to a set method over the years it was very difficult for them to accept the change. Numerous workshops later the tide began to turn and ere long we had teachers amazed to find how much capacity they had to think ‘out of the box’ and how beautifully it was percolating to the children. Taking parents along was the tougher part. With no books, especially in the first three years, parents were foxed — no books, no homework — what on earth was going on? They have come around so much so, that at times they are dumbstruck at their ward’s progress (with hardly any extra effort required at their end!). The flip side: “Children are asked to clean classrooms nowadays!” So much for teaching ‘life-skills’! Ah! Well! You can’t please everyone all the time.

The entire concept of having piecemeal education has been completely done away with from Nursery to Class 5. ‘Theme teaching’ has been introduced in Nursery and upto Class 2 while the ‘Project Method’ is followed in Classes 3-8. In spite of the constraints of the Board syllabus, innovative methods of teaching in the form of seminars, debates, role plays and other experiments are extensively used in the senior classes.

A topic is selected which is approached from

all angles — language development, numerical skills, social sciences, history, geography — as the focus has shifted to concept-building over content. Teachers plan out ways to develop skills and in the process also figure out ‘learning outcomes’. ‘Web plans’ are prepared which are not hard and fast and which teachers have the freedom to adjust if necessary.

Showcasing the work done by the children across the spectrum is done once a year — aptly termed ‘Learning Pageant.’ The concepts and skills developed till date are on display for parents, guardians and students and teachers of other schools. The Themes are wide-ranging — from colours to hot days, food, family, transport in Nursery and K.G. classes to ‘my school’, ‘good habits’ in Classes 1 and 2, to ‘names’, ‘books’, unique themes like ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘asking questions’ in 3 and 4 to Projects on the ‘sun’, ‘rhythm’, ‘colours’ in 5 and 6. It is interesting to see the growth of the children as they tackle the same topic (for example — colours) in different classes. Senior students work together subject-wise and not class-wise, so each one puts in his or her input in the topic he/she is interested in. Experiments are aplenty in the senior section.



Nature Club — environment awareness campaign

Some examples — emulating volcanic eruption (Chemistry), experiment with starch and BMI (Biology), baking cakes, making pastas and sandwiches (Life Skills). In the recent exhibition, students had prepared an audio-visual presentation on 60 years of Indian Independence. Thus freed from the shackles of ‘rote learning’, they let their imagination take wings.

In 'Life Skills' classes children are taught to wash, clean, tie shoelaces, make beds, and lay tables. They prepare salads, soups and quite obviously gobble up everything they prepare with relish. Learning by doing or 'experiential learning' has been our hallmark.

Ranks have been done away with and by default their appendage — prizes. Special 'Appreciation Cards' are handed out for neatness, punctuality, courtesy, helpfulness, politeness and the like. Report cards are a way to let parents know about the overall development of the child.

Sports and Games are also held though no prizes are awarded. In Nursery and K.G. each child is given a prize as everyone is a winner for having participated. For the rest, there are four Houses and each member who wins adds points to his team's kitty. This effectively helps them to bond and build team-spirit over and above personal laurels.

We have Nature Club, Interact Club, and Cultural Club. The first, as the name suggests, makes every effort to increase environmental awareness by recycling paper, vermicompost, and tackling use of plastics. We were the first school in Kolkata to start Rain Water Harvesting. The club has added a feather to its cap by winning the first prize of Rs. 50,000/- in a prestigious competition organized by the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and Industry termed 'Awareness Campaign to Keep Kolkata Clean and Environment-Friendly'. Students had to propose a garbage collection system for Kolkata, with the renewal, re-use and recycling of garbage and conservation of water and energy in everyday life, and prepare a PowerPoint presentation of their work.

Interact Club is into building social responsibility. They have adopted a slum where inmates are made aware of hygiene. Our students cajoled the local councillor to build a proper toilet for them. They also interact with an old-age home where they go and celebrate many a special day like 'Bijoya', 'Naba-barsha' with their grandmothers at the Home. The Cultural Club is involved in bringing in classical dancers, singers, folk dancers to perform in an effort to kindle an interest in our rich heritage in the present generation.

We have classes on Saturdays known as Saturday School. These classes are held for students of 3 to 9. They are allowed to choose from a variety of options like craft, quiz, western music, western dance (since most are quite adept at Indian forms of dance, it is not an option), chess, photography, clay modelling, karate, violin amongst others. Basketball coaching is also a part of Saturday school.

Career Counselling is offered to students to bring home the point that there is more to life than being an engineer or a doctor — by encouraging students to follow their natural bent and offering them a broad view of courses to suit their temperament.

Teacher training is a key area the school invests in. We have attempted to run study circles on Sri Aurobindo's *The System of National Education*. Each teacher attempts to translate his thoughts into practical classroom situations, and at the end of the day, a great amount of collective learning is achieved.

We have just started on our journey. Till such time that the powers that be become truly aware of the fact that 'nothing can be taught' and that each individual is a unique component in the entire firmament and hence 'the mind should be consulted in its growth', it will be very difficult to follow the 'free progress system' wholly outside the precincts of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. We live in hope that the day is not far off when examinations will be done away with and children will be free to progress according to their inherent capacity.

The school is ably complemented by the other facets of this unique institution: Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture, Shakti Centre, Health and Healing, the Research Centre and Galérie La Mère.

Shakti Centre continues to impart training in varied creative fields, namely: instrumental music, vocal music, and fine arts. The Centre now has a student strength that almost rivals that of the Future Foundation School.

Blessed is the child who has the privilege of growing up in environs like these at Lakshmi's House, that breathe the Relics of the Master, a temple of learning where 'all life is truly yoga'. ❧

AN INTERVIEW WITH RANJAN MITTER

Ranjan Mitter, who first met the Mother at the age of 11, is today looking after the Future Foundation School and the other activities of Lakshmi's House in Kolkata. His life's journey has been an eventful and interesting one.

Educated at St Xavier's, Kolkata, Ranjan Mitter went on to get a degree in civil engineering, a Master's in Project Engineering and an MBA from INSEAD in Fontainebleau. He started working with Philips International in Holland. He came to India to assist with the turn-around of Philips India, which he helped do successfully. He subsequently worked as Head of Marketing in Philips, Titan and Shaw Wallace.

He was Marketing Director of Polaroid, India, when he left the corporate world in 1999 to work at Lakshmi's House. He currently also teaches part-time at the Management Centre for Human Values at IIM Kolkata and is also called to lecture in India and abroad. **Alo '92** interviews him regarding Lakshmi's House and his other pursuits.

You had a high profile corporate career. Today you are Secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture and the Principal of the Future Foundation School in Kolkata. How and when did this shift take place?

The shift was a sudden one. My mother, who ran Lakshmi's House, expired in July '99, which is when I made the choice that I had to come, however briefly. I did not make a choice for life, to be very honest. I needed to make sure that the institution that she had built with so much love and care, something that we all cherished so much, did not suffer. Ideologically I was always aligned in this direction. I had always wanted to serve the Mother in some way or the other. Earlier the opportunity to do that was purely financial. That had never satisfied me. I always felt that financial contribution is not enough. I wanted to serve materially and concretely, so I thought this was the signal that the Mother had given that I should come and start working.

How soon did you realise that you could

contribute with your own inputs and innovate?

My mother had a good friend Mina (Kang). She said something very significant to me a few days after my mother passed away. She said, "Somebody as charismatic as her will not come

back again. And it is not even the call of the situation. What is required is that everybody together keeps the institution going and it is that sustained collaborative effort that will matter more than individual charisma".

So I first had to make sure that financially we could go on. There were around a hundred people working and their salaries were at stake. I had to make sure that every activity in Lakshmi's House

had a road map to it and on that road map something financially sustainable could be built. I had to make activities meaningful and aligned to the ideal, so that people would feel like contributing. That was probably my preoccupation for the first couple of years and thereafter I kept on drawing, redrawing the road map. Today we have about a hundred and seventy strong workforce and we can sustain that.



Ranjan Mitter conducting a workshop at IIM Kolkata

And the school sustains itself?

Everything sustains itself, including the Health and Healing unit; that is the beauty. But the effort to be self-sustaining had two connotations, not only to be financially self-sustaining but operationally also. There must be processes, systems, a natural renewal in place by which people can reinvent, renew themselves, renew the work etc. There should be a team of people who take own-



K.G. children enjoying a breakfast they helped prepare

ership, who consult and act. It should become a collective entity. So my second passion over the last eight years has been to keep myself as far as possible in the background. Basically at the end of the day no activity depends on any individual anymore. Perhaps the only thing I could say that has happened really in Lakshmi's House after my mother passed away is that it has become a sustainable process. I've tried to make that transition as smooth as possible. Now whoever comes and goes, the institution will not feel helpless like it did when my mother left the scene.

Your other activity is teaching at the Management Centre for Human Values at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. Could you please tell us what you have introduced there?

This Management Centre for Human Values is a pioneering effort to introduce ethics and values in management education. It was started in the seventies, it got a concrete physical shape in the nineties. Many Indian companies, both private sector and public sector, have come forward

to contribute financially and otherwise for the setting up of the Centre. It occupies prime land on Indian Institute of Management property, but all expenses are taken care of by the corpus organized by Dr. S.K. Chakraborty, the person who set up this centre. He was influenced very strongly by Sri Aurobindo's teachings and has therefore borrowed heavily from his writings to build the module on ethics and values. That is what attracted me to this place, and he was keen to take me on. I think my inputs have been valued. Over the years, I'm the only one of my kind, who is neither a permanent faculty nor full-time but is still allowed to teach, years on end. It's now eight years that I'm teaching in various courses, and I've introduced many new ones. I teach corporate people, students. I have some involvement in almost every academic programme.

Could you give us some examples of the works of Sri Aurobindo from which concepts are taken for the courses?

There is no particular book that one can talk about but there are various passages from Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*.

You see, management is outgrowing its traditional confines of the usual matrix of Production, Operations, Marketing, Finance. There is a movement to look at more enlightened leadership models. Increasingly in management education, one is looking at self-motivation and intuition etc... and Sri Aurobindo's works have extensively helped. His writings have been the foundation for a course on 'Managerial Effectiveness through Human Values' already taken by seven thousand corporate managers in India. But we don't ask them to read 30 books. There are different excerpts that have been compiled and put forward, for instance, his ideas from *The Essays on the Gita* on motivation in work. Passages on Ego, on Power.... Both are important management concepts. Also excerpts from the *Synthesis of Yoga*, the chapter on Money in Sri Aurobindo's *The Mother*, the story on *Virtues* by the Mother....

What are the changes you have introduced in the school? What are the constraints in trying to

implement what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have said about education? What has been the outcome of the changes introduced?

The constraint is simply that our children sit



An Exhibition-cum-Project display on 'Communication' at the Learning

for board exams. But the understanding that I have of the board's method of operation, is that it's only in the topmost classes. So we have the freedom upto class 8, which is quite a lot actually from age 3 to 13 years. One is free to do anything one likes as long as one dovetails that into the requirements at the board level. That is mandatory. We took a huge risk by bringing in Theme Teaching and the Project Method and not sticking to the standard curriculum, because the first question was: "Will our children then continue to do well in exams?" Our experience has been that we've seen absolutely no drop in grades; on the contrary we've seen a more holistic development in children, which is concrete.

So up to the age of 13, children do not have exams?

They start getting used to examinations in a much diluted form from age 11. There is continuous assessment along with projects and themes which starts at a very low level. When children reach 11 years, the duration or portion of the test is somewhat extended but still the weightage remains in the projects and in small assessments. It's a graduated development. What is very interesting is that we have become a model for other schools now.

In what way? Tell us more about how you and the activities of the school are impacting other schools and mindsets.

You see, West Bengal has the longest history of subjugation to the English and therefore to its education. Many of our elite schools are 150 to 200 years old. Although many of these institutions remain elite in public perception, some of their basic methods and practices have become archaic. The Teachers' Centre at Loreto House found our methods very interesting. They were excited with the variety and the depth of the work the children are doing and the fact that their basic understanding of the subjects is more thorough. They are highlighting some of our practices for member schools.

Moreover, for the last 7 years, I've been a member of the board itself. And therefore I am able to provide inputs when the policies of the board are framed. There I think the maximum contribution I've been able to make is in the area of teacher training. Finally it's a question of change of mindset. If we can mould teachers... it's the biggest thing one can do.



Opening of Annual Sports: March Past with school band by Senior School

But isn't educating parents in India, who are so success and marks-driven, an equal challenge?

Yes. I was faced with that right in the beginning in our school. Because I came from a different world, with different convictions, I had the blessing of ignorance. I tried things out and I put my own reputation on the block. Luckily for me, I had some foreign pedigree behind me at one point in time which the parents of the school knew. Therefore they lapped it up initially and

then they found it worked. So, I think we've been very lucky with the parents. Conviction comes after you try it out. Parents will not come forward and say, "Please introduce this". For parents and



Homage to Sri Aurobindo, a programme on 15th August at Alipore Court and Old Alipore Jail (Presidency Jail)

guardians, the annual exhibition called Learning Pageant that we organize for them, is the only occasion they have of seeing what their children have done, because the whole year they don't understand what they are up to. There's no homework, no pressure, they are smiling and playing. They wonder... what is happening?

At SAICE, it is obvious that there should be a commitment to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo when you admit the child. Is that also a pre-requisite for parents who want to admit their children to your school? Do you mention it in the prospectus itself? How do you gauge that?

The bulk of our admissions are at the 3 plus level. At that stage we examine the parents by actually setting them a kind of quiz. The father and mother have to sit separately, we advise them some reading material which is actually Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Education, the Ideal Child, books like these. So basically our logic is that they are coming or sending their children to a very different kind of school for which they ought to be mentally prepared. In the process they also get an exposure to what Sri Aurobindo's thoughts are on Education, his biography, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville, the Centre of Education.

As a result, once the children are admitted, they are introduced to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and their vision in an organic way?

As far as children go, in normal schools there is a subject called Moral Instruction. We don't have anything like that. We call our subject Ideals and Progress. It's a name we have borrowed from the Master, but it gives the connotation of a certain dynamism in values and ideals.

As far as the running of the Future Foundation School, is there any interaction that you have with SAICE? Or is it just the annual visits?

Basically when we started this journey, we asked Sraddhalu to come and do workshops with our teachers. Very soon after 3 or 4 workshops, we discovered of course that that is only a theoretical foundation. It's important, but one has to implement it. So whatever ideas we could get we got. And of course many of our teachers have visited Auroville and the Ashram and seen some of the work in the School because they've been visiting for many years. But thereafter I think we've done our own thing. And what we've also done is a concept of a study circle where for instance we take the *System of National Education* of Sri Aurobindo and ask the teachers to read a chapter,



Students at the Naini Peak during an adventure camp at Nainital

and then say how they will apply the concepts in the classroom, as simple as that. So then there's a constant touch of Sri Aurobindo himself.

And this is a regular session, the study circle?

Well, it's not every year. But off and on we've

done these things. And it's come up with remarkable insights. There's a chapter on the senses for instance in the book. So they look at the development of the sensory faculties and they see how for each age-group it can be implemented. They come up with remarkable insights and then they share that among themselves.

Any other way you and your activities have had a larger impact?

Today, you see I have these several hats. One hat is Secretary in the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture.

Second is Principal of the Future Foundation School. Third is teaching at the Indian Institute of Management in the Centre for Management and Human Values. Fourth is member of the Standing Committee on Examinations at the Council for Indian School Certificate Examinations, the Board. The next is my role as member of the Regional Advisory Committee of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, which is under the External Affairs Ministry of the Government of India, and last but not least I also work with NGOs in a big way, particularly in the area of organic farming and protection of crafts and artisanal capabilities. I help NGOs who work on that and who also export things. I am on the board of one, and I work closely with the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT). It's a fair trade movement.

And you personally, what has the entire experience given you? What motivates you?

Let me share an experience. This was when my mother was ill with cancer. After many years apart I spent almost a year with her when she was battling her illness. At that point, in Mumbai, I

lived practically in the same room with her and what I saw amazed me. The courage, poise, grace, the confidence and cheerfulness with which she braved the pain, braved the cancer, came as a revelation.

This was not the same lady I had known when I was growing up. She had metamorphosed into an altogether different person. I realised then that this was the result of a life of service offered to the Mother. She had worked tirelessly for the Mother, and it was Mother's way of ennobling her. This was the thing to aspire for, to

strive for. I thought that if I could be even a pale shade of that it would be worth it.

I first met the Mother at the age of 11 and I met her later a few times. I've had an exchange of letters. That has had a lasting and abiding impression on my life.

For the work, I don't know how much Lakshmi's House has benefited or will benefit from my stint here but I am sure I will have benefited enormously. It is an opportunity that Mother has given me to serve her so directly. ❧



School building and basketball court



SriAurobindo's Relics

THE WORLD VISION OF SRI AUROBINDO

Compiled and edited by Sachidananda Mohanty '75, Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader, was released on 17th April 2008 by Dr. Karan Singh in a ceremony jointly organised by Routledge Publishers and the Sahitya Akademi and held at the Delhi Ashram. This volume, which is available at Sabda, tries to present concisely Sri Aurobindo's social and political thought and his international vision to a larger readership.

Sri Aurobindo's voluminous writings have largely been confined to the circle of his devotees and even his writings on social evolution, psychology, literature and Indian culture have remained unknown to those who are not particularly interested in his spiritual thought. Clearly, there was a need for someone to present the writings in another format so that those who are not so conversant with the background of the subjects which are dealt with could be guided through that path of discovery.

Divided into distinct chapters, this book of less than 250 pages, takes up separately The Ideal of Human Unity, The Human Cycle, War and Self-Determination and The Foundations of Indian Culture. Each chapter has an introduction by Sachidananda as well as a general introduction at the beginning. This makes it easy for the new reader to get an idea about what he can expect to find as he goes through the book. Each extract taken from the original works also has a heading which again sums up the text. Every effort has been made to make the book readable and to make Sri Aurobindo the thinker accessible to everyone. Even though the extracts presented in the compilation are from works which were written almost a century ago, they touch upon points which are very valid today. Many of today's world situations become clearer to the 21st century reader when they are seen in the larger context outlined by Sri Aurobindo. His explanation of how societies have evolved through human history could be of great interest to students of sociology and to those who are trying to analyse the patterns of contemporary societies. It will appeal to all those educated people anywhere in the world who are looking for a solution to the problems which we are facing as a global community.

In fact, Sachidananda has helped us all by editing this book. Which alumni member has not gone through that moment when he is faced with the difficulty of having to explain Sri Aurobindo to a person who knows absolutely nothing about him? Or worse still, to someone who misunderstands him? It required someone like Sachi who has a foot in both the communities — the Ashram as well as the academic world — to acquaint the thinking minds of the country with some of the aspects of Sri Aurobindo's writings which would be of interest to them.

We share with you Sachidananda's answers to our questions about his experience of preparing this book.

Can you tell us something about how this book came to be written?

Over the years, there was a feeling in me that Sri Aurobindo's writings, especially his socio-political vision, were not reaching a wider academic audience. Consequently, many misperceptions and gross distortions of his views circulated in the public domain, especially in the academic world.

Secondly, there was also the need to present Sri Aurobindo's international vision in the light of some of the latest developments in theory and scholarship.

And finally, I thought it was important to underline the contemporary relevance of Sri Aurobindo. There are of course many sound reasons why Sri Aurobindo has been projected as futuristic: the Supermind and the future evolution of Man, the Auroville experiment, the change of human consciousness and the Gnostic Being — all carry annotations of the future. While these categories have great significance, it is equally true that Sri Aurobindo also makes a deep appeal to the contemporary Mind. Only, this may not be apparent to us given the chaos

and confusion of the present world order.

What were your main difficulties in putting this book together?

I had to bring together the historical and trans-historical or meta-historical aspects in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. How would I do this precisely? The British novelist E. M. Forster had aptly observed: "Only Connect!"

There were many voices that had to be carefully connected and integrated: Sri Aurobindo's own words, the views of our contemporary thinkers and finally my own comments and commentary as the editor that would provide the running thread to the narrative. And all these had to be accomplished within 250 pages at the most. My book was meant for a primarily secular audience in the outside world. My aim was to widen the constituency of readers.

What has been the general response?

The response so far has been very encouraging, from personal conversations to book reviews in the Ashram, Auroville and the outside world. The verdict has been, in the main, quite positive. I have also picked up many useful tips for future revisions of the volume. Admittedly one has to wait a little longer to find a more lasting judgment.

How different was the experience of working on this book compared to all the other books you have written?

Every single book of mine has been deeply influenced by my readings of Sri Aurobindo. There is no disputing that! However, the present volume has been a unique experiment. It sprang from the sense of a mission.

In your opinion, what has been the main reason for the way Sri Aurobindo remains relatively unknown in the world?

Sri Aurobindo never opted for the popular or the populist path. He set up his own standards and benchmarks. The nature of his endeavours has been truly Olympian. There are no easy short-cuts or palliatives in him. These being so,

only relatively smaller groups of aspirants could be expected to be drawn to him on a long term basis.

Secondly, I believe, not enough has been done by the followers of Sri Aurobindo to project his vision before the academic/intellectual audience. It is paradoxical that while at the mass level, Sri Aurobindo is a figure of great veneration, he has remained a somewhat distant figure to the University audience.



Book launch at Delhi (left to right): Sachidananda Mohanty, Dr Premananda Kumar, Dr Karan Singh and Professor Manoj Das.

Can you share with us any moment which has been particularly memorable in connection with the book?

Indeed, many moments have been truly inspirational! The extraordinary support I received from the three top editors of Routledge, the involved manner in which they worked on this book at every stage, from the editorial to the printing, the unstinted support I received from the Sri Aurobindo Archives and the Ashram authorities, especially Manoj-da (Das Gupta) and very timely help received from Kiran Kakkad and Siddhartha-da (Bhabock) have been truly memorable. All through, I have had a feeling of great elevation. There were times, when after a hard day's administrative work in my University as the Head of the Department, I found myself at

the computer till 1.00 pm at night. Words came spontaneously and miraculously.

It is true that the Mother has said that we should continue to read Sri Aurobindo's works even if we don't understand everything. But somehow, this has got misinterpreted as, "Don't even make an attempt at understanding him because you will never be able to understand Sri Aurobindo with your mind." Quite a lot of people read making no effort to understand. What do you say to that?

We tend to distort the Mother's words for the sake of our mental inertia and habitual thinking. While the Mind cannot give us the final answers, it is plainly absurd to suggest that there is justification for an anti-intellectual stance in the Mother's injunctions. What She suggests is that we must have the necessary humility and train the mind to open up to higher truths. An inner silence is always helpful in this regard, thereby making possible true understanding to dawn upon us.

What would be the best way of reading the political philosophy of Sri Aurobindo?

We must attune ourselves to the mood required of such an endeavour. We need to prepare ourselves by strengthening our background reading and engage actively with all the debates and

issues fore-grounded. Politics in the best sense envisages that power could be restructured in a radically new way so as to usher in a new way of acting and living. That is why a political reading of Sri Aurobindo is so important.

Do you feel that the world is ready to understand Sri Aurobindo?

Sri Aurobindo's life and teachings defy conventional wisdom. There is nothing more radical than to suggest a change of human consciousness. While a conceptual clarity about this integral philosophy is essential, of greater importance is to work on the warring parts of our being.

Sri Aurobindo's call is to the enlightened minority. The question is: are we ready to count ourselves as part of this minority?

Is there anything you would like to say to our alumni fraternity?

It has been a great privilege to have been brought up in the Ashram School. That is undoubtedly the best thing that has happened to us. If only we remembered this more often!

Sri Aurobindo's example is there for all to see. We do not need a better role model!

If we read Him more often and immersed ourselves in His Vision, our lives would be totally transformed. ❧

MONTHLY WORKING TRIP TO SWARNABHOOMI

Swarnabhoomi, at Lake, offers us the opportunity to work together in the midst of Nature. For those interested, The Golden Chain Fraternity organises once-in-a-month Sunday working trips to Swarnabhoomi (generally on the last Sunday of the month). We leave at 6:25 am from Corner House and return at around 11 am. Breakfast and transport are arranged. Join us. You can contact the GC office for details.



AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE DE RIVOYRE

The French author speaks to Sunayana Panda '79

When she first came to Pondicherry I was still a student in Knowledge and Archak-bhai had prepared us for her arrival by telling us a few things about her. Of course, the first thing he had told us was that she was a well-known writer in France. But when we met, all I could see was her friendship for Archak-bhai and through him, for all his friends. And that is the word that has connected us since then.

The fact that she was older than all of Archak-bhai's friends didn't seem to bother us because she was young at heart and soon became one of us, cracking her famous jokes. Word-plays and puns were generously sprinkled in our conversations and we never seemed to stop laughing in her company. Things were all the more enjoyable because she could glide from French to English and back again to her own language.

Christine the friend remained more in the forefront than Christine the writer. Her books came later. Discovering them one by one after knowing her personally made them even more interesting. Her writing has the stamp of her own special sense of humour, turning the most prosaic of things into something surreal and hilarious. Not only was she a French novelist but a witty woman novelist at that. What can be more unique, more worthy of admiration than that? But Christine has gone further; she has also won several literary awards and is herself on the jury of one. She won the Prix Interallié in 1968, which was followed by the Grand Prix Littéraire de la Ville de Bordeaux in 1973, then came the Prix Prince Albert de Monaco in 1982 and after that the Prix Paul Morand in 1984. She herself is on the jury of the Prix Médicis.

Her first visit to Pondicherry was followed by eight others during which she visited the different parts of India with Archak-bhai. But of course, her stay in Pondicherry remained at the heart of her journey. She always stayed in Golconde and from there observed the life of the Ashram, absorbing the atmosphere, the most beautiful part of her day being the time she spent sitting in the courtyard near the Samadhi. There were also the long walks by the beach and the occasional trip to Auroville.

After Archak-bhai's untimely death in 1996, Christine never came back to India, although she never stopped asking news of her friends from Golconde, who also sadly passed away one by one — Sutapa, Mona Pinto, Svetlana, Dimitri and Wil.

Somewhere during those afternoons when we had tea together or during those evenings when we chatted about this and that we became good friends. And I remained her point of contact with all her friends and all that she loved in India, in a way her heart's anchor to the Ashram and to Pondicherry.

In March 2007 her book on Archak-bhai came out and she was once again in the eye of the French media. I had always wondered what it must have been like for her to see these young Indians studying French literature and putting up French plays, what it must have been for her to see this world, not only of India but of the Ashram, which was so different from the one in which she lived. Since the French papers and the TV channels were asking her so many questions I thought I might also ask her a few of my own and share her answers with the readers of the The Golden Chain.

Christine did her higher studies in English and got her degree from the University of Sorbonne. She was also at Syracuse University in New York for some time. Before starting her career as a novelist she worked for almost a decade as a journalist in Paris.

When she is not in Paris she is in her beloved Landes, a region of sand dunes, ferns and plantations of pine trees in the Southwest of France on the Atlantic coast. There, in her country house, she is not only surrounded by her dogs and cat but there is also a horse at the bottom of the garden. Horses and dogs have been her passion.

When did you first come to India?

My very first trip to India took place at the end of 1978. Archaka had arrived in the Ashram

of Sri Aurobindo three years earlier and I was curious and eager to discover his new life. For three years he had remained so silent about it. The place

where he lived, the people he had met, what was asked to him, what his assignments were — all that was a mystery to me.

He suddenly wrote a letter and his first word was: “Come”. Please come. I was young at that time, at least I felt young, and immediately planned the trip that would lead me to him. I knew very little about India. I had heard the usual (and stupid) stories about the danger of visiting a very poor country where people were dying in



Christine de Rivoyre, with her book on Archak-bhai displayed in the showcase behind her.

the streets. I was not impatient to land and stay in such a country in spite of the beautiful landscapes and temples which I had also seen in pictures. To me human beings are more important than landscapes. I wanted to discover for myself if Archaka had made friends in the Ashram. I wanted to see their faces, talk with them. I get more from a brief conversation than from images, no matter how beautiful they are.

What were your first impressions of India?

My first impressions of India? Exactly the same that I carried away with me when I left in February 1996, knowing that I would never come back to India. Your country is over-crowded. In the streets, on the roads, around villages, in the towns, there are so many people swarming about. Crowds and crowds. But when I left I had managed, thanks to my nine visits to India, to remember and keep forever in my mind and heart a small but unforgettable group of faces and voices. And minds.

Another memory of India is also connected with people: I saw beautiful faces. Beautiful bodies, so slim and graceful. Especially on the roads where people were working in the fields. They (the ones I saw) would, when seeing the car I was in (with friends), look at us very calmly, cross the road and then, ignoring us, go back to the fields. It was like a ballet, their backs very straight. The women, specially the ones who walked bare-foot, looked like ballerinas. Around them children in rags. Their large dark eyes. Indian eyes are particularly beautiful.

What were you expecting to see before you arrived?

I was only expecting that Archaka was happy in his new surroundings. As you know, even if he was smiling continuously, he would hide part of his feelings. Even now, ten years after his death, I really don't know if India really brought him all that he was looking for in life. When going through his letters, I am sure that he found in Pondicherry, specially during the first ten years — 1975 to 1985 — something that looked like peace of heart. Meeting Nolini-da, changing his name from Alexandre to Archaka, meeting young students eager to learn, himself ready to answer all kinds of questions, all that put light into his days. He felt useful in India and that was his aim on earth.

May I confess that it is exactly the same thing for me. His India was mine and has remained that.

I don't have a religious mind. Archaka used to talk a lot about Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and

beliefs. I accepted them but just the way I accept what my parents and my educators taught me in my Western world. I am interested in all the explanations that I am given but I don't stand for any. In the Ashram what I loved was the tolerance. I didn't try to persuade myself that God was right or wrong as long as I saw him peaceful, and even better than that, full of joy and laughing like a child. To me the result was good. I was convinced that the Ashram was a blessing and that Archaka's friends were angels around him.

I shall never forget Sutapa, Mona Pinto, Krishnakumari-di, Peter and Anamika (from Auroville). Nor Sailesh and Dhir. And Maurice Shukla. Nor Mona-da and Chanda-di. Nor the Pitoeff family, Svetlana, Cristof and Seba.

What surprised you the most about life in India?

Of course what surprised me the most in India was the enormous difference between us and you concerning death. Death is the end of person in our Western world. It is sad, dramatic, you can only weep and if you are a Christian, wait for "La Résurrection des Morts". In India you believe in reincarnation. A soul drifts from one body to another trying to improve. Archaka was convinced of that. He used to describe his previous death. He never wept or felt sad when people he had known very well and who had been good to him suddenly died. He used to say, "Je n'ai aucune peur de la mort. Au contraire." And in several letters he wrote, he used to describe with the most beautiful words he could find to stay in what he called "la pré-naissance", a divine state in which a soul can just rest and wait for a new physical shape and surroundings.

Now that you haven't come to Pondicherry for more than ten years what do you remember most about it?

Everything I remember about Pondy is good.

Full of light and beauty. I was very happy in Golconde. What Mother said of that strange and super-comfortable house was right: a place where sadhaks could meditate and where all efforts had been made to combine beauty and silence. (And to fight the 35 or 40 degrees heat when it appears and changes people into melting things!)

What was the reaction when you spoke about Sri Aurobindo on French TV? Were they a bit surprised that it was coming from you?

There was no reaction when I spoke on TV. I am considered so far (after 40 years of work and 20 books or so) as a free mind. What I gave was an explanation for my 9 trips to India, and it was always the same: "Through Archaka, his friends and his books, India has become my second country. I shall never go back there but what I keep in my memory and soul is great."

In what way did your contact with the Ashram change your way of looking at life?

Meeting Archaka changed my life — visiting him in India has certainly created another Christine.

The French language is slowly changing. We were taught a very pure and elegant version of it in the Ashram School so it is very painful for us to hear the uncouth way a lot of people speak it in France even among the educated classes. What do you have to say about the degradation of this beautiful language?

Don't worry too much about the 'degradation' of our beautiful language. We still have beautiful writers. As for me, I refuse to hear or read the bad ones. Although I love the US and admire plenty of their writers, it is from them that stupid words have been adopted. They furnish 'l'écume (scum) de la langue'. And for the rest, the pure lovely French language flows, quite alive, believe me. ☘

It is France that can connect Europe with India. There are great spiritual possibilities for France. She will play a big part in spite of her present bad condition. It is through France that the spiritual message will reach Europe. That is why I chose France for my birth, although I am not French.

The Mother (CWM, 13: 387, 388)

CLASS C OF 1943

When our School started in 1943, it was called “Ecole de L’Ashram de Sri Aurobindo”. There were four batches out of which one was a group of kindergarten children and the other three were made up of older students. The batch of the oldest students was known as “Class C” and consisted of: Amita Sen, Arun Ganguly, Ashok Ganguly, Ashok Patel, Aster Patel, Bikash Mukherjee, Chhobi Ganguly, Debu Bhattacharya, Jayveer Agarwal, Sumitra Nahar, Suprabha Nahar. (Ashok, Arun and Chhobi Ganguly are no more).

The classes were held in a series of rooms which used to be where the body-building gymnasium and the new structures of the Playground are now. The children of the kindergarten had their classes in a room on the ground floor and played in a sandpit which was in front of it. The older students studied on the first floor.

Amita Sen who was in that batch says: “Right from the outset, it had been decided that our medium of instruction would be bilingual, that is to say History and Geography would be taught in English, while the medium of instruction for Maths and Science would be French, as we were following the same course as in France. A number of teachers were instrumental in laying the foundation of this education centre. Pranbhai, Manubhai and Pavita looked after the children. Ranidevi, Ranju Gupta, Satyen, Shanti Doshi, Madame Suvrata, Mme. Liliane Toussaint and at times Nolini Sen also, took up teaching of the middle age-group. The oldest students were taught by Pavitra, Sisir Mitra, Mouttayan, Tehmi-ben, Sunil Bhattacharya, Toussaint. Drawing was taught by Krishnalal, Jayantilal, Ventakesh and Millie-di. Sometimes French visitors who stayed for a few months in the Ashram (Pondicherry was then a French colony) also helped out at the school. Ila Sen, Prabhakar-da, Pujalal, Kunjabihari and others took charge of the Indian languages and Sanskrit. Pavitra-da was given the work of the director and Sisir-da was the principal.

“We are grateful to all these teachers who



Recent photo (l to r): Arun Ganguly, Suprabha Nahar, Aster Patel, Debu Bhattacharya, Amita Sen, Sumitra Nahar, Jayveer Agarwal, Ashok Patel.

offered their knowledge and energy to the first attempt to form a school under the aegis of the Ashram life. Some of the children used to work in departments also at the same time. And sometimes there were students who did not study all the subjects that were being taught.

“The Ashram was then quite an independent community of disciples who were mostly working in departments created by the Mother for the secure functioning of their *sadhana*. The School became another new department and the Mother went through the daily reports of each teacher so as to know how the work was taking shape.”

All those who were in the oldest batch of the school in 1943 (Class C) have contributed to the life of the Ashram. We would like to make a special mention of Jayveer Agarwal (who left quite early) who was awarded a Padma Bhushan in 2006 for his outstanding contribution to ophthalmology. He is the President of the All India Ophthalmological Society and has built a chain of eye-hospitals in the country. He has been a pioneer in several fields of ophthalmology and has been deeply committed to social ophthalmology. He has received several other awards, apart from the Padma Bhushan, including the Singapore National Eye Centre Award. ❧

MOHANLAL MATHURDAS MEHTA (1897 - 1986)

Raman Reddy '75 remembers

Mohanlal died long ago on 28 November 1986, without any fuss. But why do I still remember this simple neighbour of mine after such a long time? Because of a remark that he made one day while both of us were mounting the beautiful winding staircase of Subbu House, where my mother and I had been given an apartment in the early seventies. Dressed in long white drawers, with one arm going crossways and the other supporting his swaying body with the help of the wooden railing, he called me by my full name in his usual playful manner — he used to lengthen the vowels in a rather rustic fashion so that his words kept pace with his slow gait. Then, referring to another sadhak in the same house, who at that moment was shouting abuses at his maidservant, he shook his index finger disapprovingly and smirked, “In Ashram, no exaggerations!” He repeated my name as if it were a refrain, and quietly proceeded on his way. It never occurred to me that day that I would remember his words long after he would be dead and gone. The advice stuck somewhere deep in my heart, and to this day I have not forgotten the words of this simple-minded worker bee who arrived at the Ashram on 9 November 1928 from Kalol, Panchmahal, Gujarat.

But first let me give you the full context of the story. You would wonder what is so “exaggerated” about shouting at servants, because that is so common nowadays. The above-mentioned sadhak happened to be actually losing his balance. He had stopped going out of the house and could only be seen occasionally walking in a high state of nervousness (or elation) in the common passage of the building. A time came when he seldom stepped out of his room, though he made his presence felt by his violent outbursts at the maid, on whom he depended for his daily necessities.

One day he called me to his room for some work and, to my horror, I saw to what extent the bug of self-isolation had bitten him. He had set his table and chair on his bed with a mosquito net around it, so that he could study, sleep and eat on the cot, without having to change his place. I had never seen such eccentric behaviour all my life, and I stood speechless for a while. Things lay pell-mell on the floor, on the furniture and the window-sills; the room exuded a disagreeable odour and a weird atmosphere enveloped it. Needless to say, as soon as I recovered from the shock, I made myself scarce with the minimum exchange of words. Soon after, the gentleman left for his own state



Mohanlal (right of centre, holding a saw) with the carpenters.

taking all his belongings, and we never heard of him again. Alas, what a fall for such an intelligent and capable man! To think that the Mother at one point of time had been highly pleased with his work! I recalled how a few years earlier his room used to be filled with busy children doing hand work and elders learning how to type. I don't know exactly how and when that happy scene had transformed into its tragic opposite, but it is in this context that Mohanlal's remark made a lot of sense that day.

Mohanlal himself was pretty old by then,

having worked for over half a century at the Ashram. He was at that time wiping the staircase and walls of the Meditation Hall downstairs, being too old to go upstairs. According to Dyuman, he had been nicknamed “Shutters” because he used to clean the shutters of the Meditation Hall upstairs (the hall in front of the Darshan Room). When he arrived at the Ashram in 1928, he had joined the carpentry section of the Building Service. The story goes that he once left his work of supervision for a short while in order to see the Mother going out for a drive in the afternoon. The Mother sent him back to his work, obviously laying stress on work even at the expense of her Darshan. Mohanlal learnt his lesson¹ well, and he imparted the same to Mrityunjoy Mukherjee, a Bengali sadhak who arrived six months after him on 26 June 1929. Mohanlal accosted the latter on his very first day at the Ashram and told him straight in the face, “You see, the people of your province are good for nothing. Their sadhana is to read the *Arya* and other big books, to do painting, to sing, to compose music, to go for regular walks on the beach and to meditate, whereas we do the work in the Ashram. So they call us ‘Das’ (labour class). But I tell you, if you really want to know what the Mother is, you must work. Only then will you physically feel Her Shakti. Otherwise, you will miss the chance, however much you read and meditate.” Though it was rude of him to say so, he made a lasting impression on Mrityunjoy, who took it in the right spirit and immediately requested the Mother for work. Mrityunjoy soon became a busy assistant to Pavitra instead of coming under the influence of Barin Ghose, who left the Ashram for good that very year. He undertook all the electrical work in the Ashram and helped in the various technical services under Pavitra’s charge. Two years later, the desire

to be a literary man surfaced with the contact of an elderly visitor, who advised him to divide his time between work and study instead of working all day long. Though Mrityunjoy was not convinced, he mentioned it to Pavitra. When Pavitra conveyed it to the Mother, she spontaneously responded, “Yes, yes, otherwise how to become useless?” The following day, she jokingly asked Mrityunjoy, “So you are going to be a literary genius?” The latter felt very much ashamed and replied, “No, Mother.” He then recalled his young Gujarati friend’s warning on his very first day at the Ashram and remained ever grateful to him for his invaluable lesson. Later, when Mrityunjoy did develop literary talent, he recorded Mohanlal in his reminiscences² without mentioning his name.

Now Mohanlal did not attract much public attention. He worked hard, did not complain, had a few idiosyncrasies and did not seem to be well-read either. But you felt supremely comfortable with him. He never tried to run you down, or score points over you, as most of us are always doing with each other without even realising it. Neither did he exhort us to do yoga — he knew that was not his job. If you poked fun at him — and he was the butt of many jokes — you would think that he had not even understood. But he understood every word and yet remained totally untouched, so great was his inner contentment. The best time of the day to catch Mohanlal in this highly positive frame of mind was when, after a morning session of wiping and cleaning, he would take a refreshing bath and amble to the Dining Room, dressed in his white dhoti and kurta. People would greet him and whiz past on their cycles while he smiled beatifically with his arms swinging crossways. Mohanlal’s generation arrived at

continued on next page...

1. I have linked the lesson that Mother taught Mohanlal with the lesson that Mohanlal taught Mrityunjoy, because the chain of events and circumstances suggest so. There is no definite proof that the first event necessarily happened earlier than the second. Mother may have sent Mohanlal back to work any day before October 1931, when she stopped going out for her evening drives. Mohanlal may have also learnt that work is important in the Ashram in other circumstances, though this should have happened before the arrival of Mrityunjoy in June 1929.

2. *Breath of Grace* (1973), pp 55-77

ASHRAM TITBITS

This was the exchange of a few lines between Batti-da and Rajkumar regarding some maintenance work to be done on the Guest House gate and in the Guest House courtyard. Who says life's routine tasks need to be boring and prosaic?!

FROM BATTI-DA TO RAJKUMAR:

GUEST-HOUSE GATE

I am a Gate of great beauty, repute
Of that there is no dispute
But "With wind and weather beating round me...
Whose is the hand that has painted" — so slow?
My screws are loose, nuts broken;
So, to my distress-call do hearken.

GUEST-HOUSE COURTYARD

A sink in the South-West.
A stink in the South-West.
Who is the culprit?
Don't say, "Not I, not I."
That's not the spirit.

[...] I took recourse to this lengthy way of communication — knowing well that you are admirably organised — so a chit would find you where I failed.

Yours, Batti

FROM RAJKUMAR TO BATTI-DA:

O SWEET GATE

Sweet Gate of great beauty
I bow my head for neglecting duty
I surely must try to rescue "the damsel"
But the truth is, I myself am in a broken vessel

You are with loose screws and broken nuts
Hearing this, my heart has a thousand cuts
O my golden gate let there be a little sunshine
I'll wipe your tears with both these hands of mine
For you, I will turn the world upside down
If needed — for you I'll sacrifice my crown

O MY CHARMING GUEST-HOUSE COURTYARD

The history of your geography is really very bad
Knowing your condition my heart is very very sad
But who is to be blamed for this?
Somehow someone has made a bad miss
I cannot say "It is I, it is I"
I have not yet found my SELF under the sky
Anyhow be sure I'll bring the culprit to book
If he is a king I'll make him a D.R. cook

O GREAT BATTI-DA

I know our lives are full of sorrow and pain
But what can I do in this heavy rain?
O great Batti(da) forgive me for everything
As you know from the Divine I have become a king
(From Jagannath to Rajkumar)
I have no more the power to mend with my touch
Nowadays with limited power we cannot do much
But believe me next life I will try better than my best
I will do everything possible without taking rest.

Dear Batti-da,

Your poetical chit not only found me but
turned me into a beautiful poetical creature.

Not for Glory, Not for Fame,

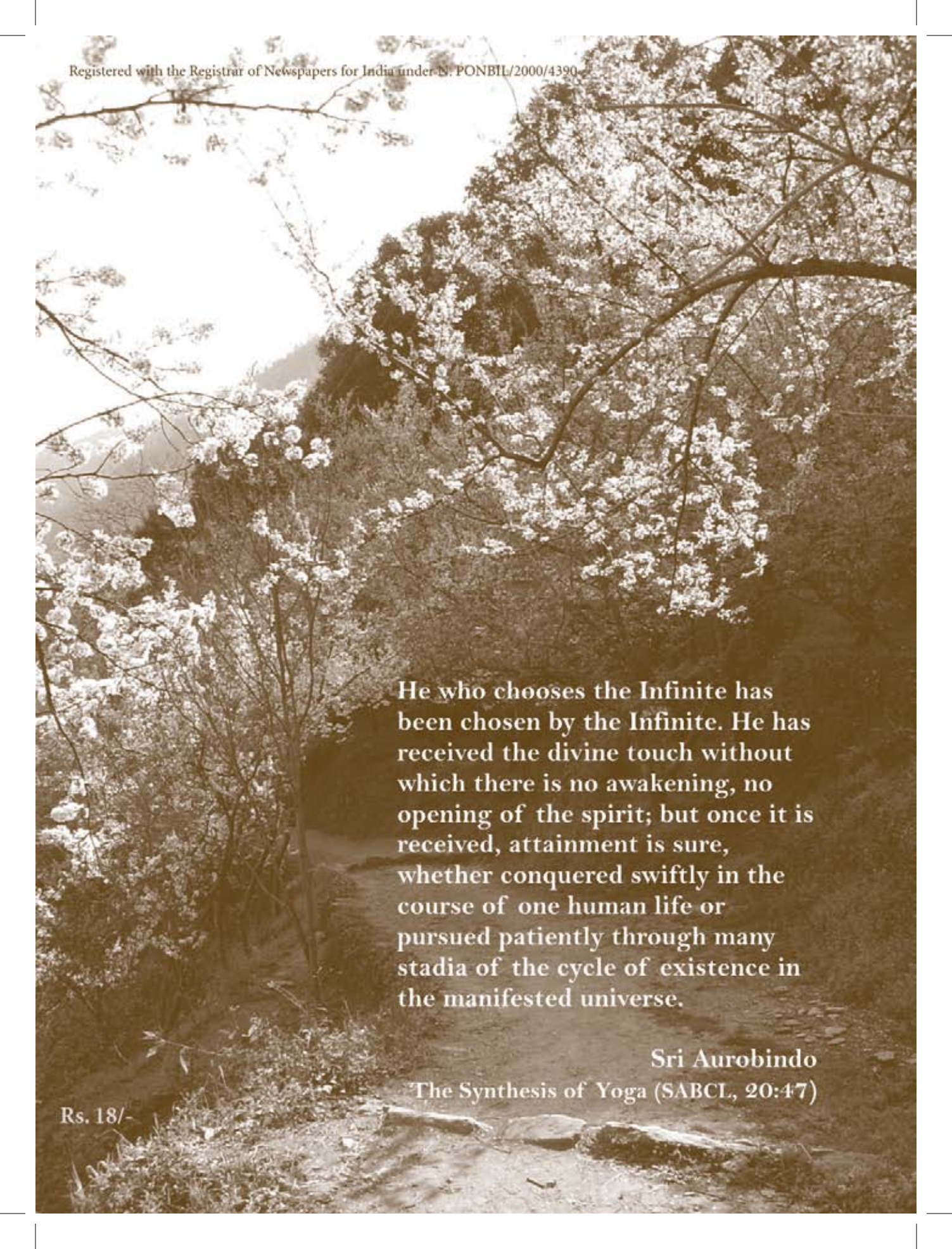
Only for memory, I'm signing my name.



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the Ashram during its early formative period and is now practically gone, except for a lone survivor or two at the Nursing Home. It has been replaced by a more down to earth generation, fast-moving and clever, though not as self-contented as him. When they were there, not many people bothered

about them, nor did they make many demands on others. They took everything in their stride — old age and physical hardship, falling standards and changing times — and silently lived an exemplary life of yoga, without any pretension. It is only in retrospect that we realise their true worth. ☸



He who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite. He has received the divine touch without which there is no awakening, no opening of the spirit; but once it is received, attainment is sure, whether conquered swiftly in the course of one human life or pursued patiently through many stadia of the cycle of existence in the manifested universe.

Sri Aurobindo

The Synthesis of Yoga (SABCL, 20:47)

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