

AUG 2009 / VOL 9 NUM 4

www.goldenchain.in

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



**WINNING
PUBLIC RECOGNITION**



ଶ୍ରୀ ଅରବିନ୍ଦ
ଆନ୍ତର୍ଜାତୀୟ
ଶିକ୍ଷା କେନ୍ଦ୍ର

ବିଦ୍ୟା ବିକାଶ ଓ
ସାମାଜିକ ସେବା

ତଥାଗତ ସତ୍ୟଧାରୀ

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)

CONTENTS

VOL 9 NUM 4

AUG 2009

1 THE EDITORS' PAGE

2 TALK SHOP: 1) "Politics is About Loving People"

Tathagata Satpathy '77H shares his vision of politics.

3) "Talk Less, Listen More"

Debashish Samantaray '82 on his political life.

8 TÊTE A TÊTE: Meeting Prithwindra Mukherjee

Sunayana Panda '79 interviews Prithwindra Mukherjee '58

18 PONDY NOTES: Yes, We CAN!

Probir Banerjee '78H about the work being done by PondyCAN.

23 A Proposal for a Homecoming Meet

Plan for a Reunion to celebrate the Centenary of Sri Aurobindo's arrival.

24 REPORT: Building a "Shelter" at Swarnabhoomi

Devashish Patnaik '82 and Dilip Patel '76H on the Lake land construction.

Celebrating the Centenary of Sri Aurobindo's Release from Alipore Jail

Mukti Das '76 recounts.

28 BOARDING LIFE: Nice Home

Sachidananda Mohanty '75 remembers.

30 IN THE SPOTLIGHT: The Sundial in the School

Narottam and Gopal Dalmia '81H find out about the old landmark.

32 MEMORIES: My Friend, Subhash

Anjan Sengupta '79H remembers.



On the Cover:

Some alumni who have won public recognition (l to r):

Probir Banerjee '78H, Debashish Samantaray '82,

Prithwindra Mukherjee '58 and Tathagata Satpathy '77H.

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of S.A.I.C.E.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, INDIA.



EDITORIAL TEAM:

Gopal '90, Sunayana '79, Alo '92

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:

Anurupa '86, Raman '75, Suruchi '03,
Gaurishankar '80, Puru '83,
Ishita '04, Anubha '00

LAYOUT & ART DESIGN:

Somdutt '90

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:

Kiran '72, Swadhin '70, Pranati '83,
Chidananda '83, Chaitanya '95

Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.

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

Address for correspondence: The Golden Chain,
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry 605002.

Phone: 91-413-2233683

e-mail: office@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 Sunayana Panda '79

To a community of sports-lovers like ours the Beijing Olympic Games were really a spectacular show. Everyone must have been stuck to the TV and remembering their own sporting days. So, I can assume that everyone saw that heart-stopping moment on the screen. It was during the 4x100m women's relay races when the British and the Jamaican runners failed to pass on the baton. They were among the best runners of the world and yet they had goofed up such a critical movement. There was a collective gasp, I am sure, that went up all across the world when that passing of the baton did not happen and the two runners were caught on cameras with that look of utter shock and dismay.

To me that image is something of a metaphor. Our civilisation is built on this act of passing on the baton of knowledge to others who come after us. If that baton falls to the ground or remains "unpassed", then that knowledge, that experience stops there. The others may reach the future with nothing in their hands. This is true in the context of the human race. This is also true of our life in the Ashram, our lives as followers of the path shown by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. And it is especially true for those of us who grew up in the Ashram. We seem to be still walking around with that baton in our hands.

There is so much we have learnt that is beyond the academic, so much that cannot even be defined in words. If that knowledge, that way of looking at life is not communicated to others then its value remains limited and may even be lost. There are millions who remain in ignorance, who think that this world cannot be changed and that we should just accept all its imperfections and live within those limitations. We were fortunate enough to have grown up in an atmosphere where the Mother's words of assurance were everywhere, reminding us that we have come together to do something new, something that others don't even know is possible.

Changing, improving, creating more order and harmony seemed to be the most natural thing to do. "Transformation" was the key word. Everyone seemed to be preparing themselves for a new world that was about to be born.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother worked against all odds to bring down a new force into the earth consciousness. What they brought down was for the whole world, it was not for us alone. All too often we forget that. Of course, the world will change, even if we do nothing. However, we are the ones who are most prepared to become those elements that trigger off the change because we have been brought up to believe that change is inevitable. After all, the greatest stumbling block of progress is the mindset that is convinced that it is a waste of time and energy to try and change what we don't like.

In this issue we have spoken to some of those among our alumni fraternity who are actively engaged in passing on this belief that we can create a better world. At last, after so many years, those who were nurtured in this institution are making a mark in the national and international scene. We are indeed proud of them. While Debashish Samantaray and Tathagata Satpathy have been working in the political field, Probir Banerjee has been appreciated for his social work and for having brought to the notice of the whole nation the environmental problems around us. At the same time Prithwindra Mukherjee has been honoured by the French Government for his contribution to the field of culture. This recognition has brought to people's attention the fact that it is entirely possible to bring together the culture of the East and that of the West. In fact, the future of the world lies in this synthesis.

These former students of our school are sources of inspiration to a larger circle of people in the world. This time there should be a gasp of admiration as we see the baton of inspiration being passed on and we become a part of that race towards a more perfect world. ❧

“POLITICS IS ABOUT LOVING PEOPLE”

Tathagata Satpathy '77H comes from a family which is deeply connected to politics and literature. His mother, Nandini Satpathy, was the Chief Minister of Orissa and his father, Devendra Satpathy, was an MP from Dhenkanal. His grandfather, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, was a very well-known Oriya writer. Tathagata was in our School for a few years during the 1970s. He is now the MP from Dhenkanal as well as the editor of the Oriya newspaper “Dharitri”.

Politics is a lot about service but also essentially about power. What attracted you to join the field?

For me, politics is all about watching, learning and loving people. It may sound pompous or false but if you cannot love people and love being with them, they immediately sense it and trash you like toilet paper.

Yes, power is a fallout. Since my family and especially my Ma had seen a lot of power, it showed me the amount of toil, the motivation and determination that was always in the background. I saw from close quarters her interaction with people and how she was able to help most, if not all, the people who sought succour from her. Although that kind of selfless attitude has faded out of modern politics, yet you can contribute whatever little bit only if you are part of the process. Criticising and condemning from the sidelines is easy but I prefer taking challenges head on.

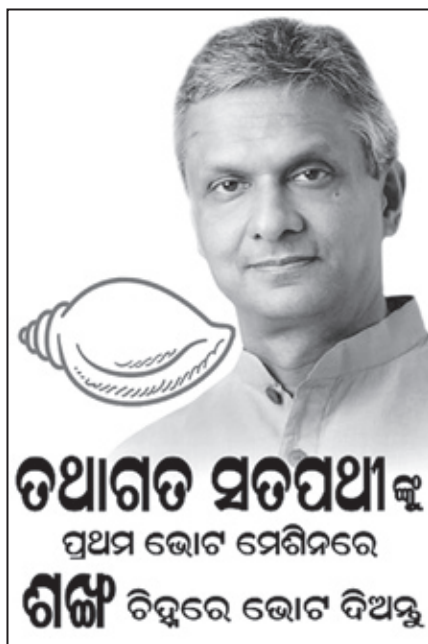
What were the criteria for pledging your political alliance to the BJD?

My party Biju Janata Dal is the downstream culmination of the Janata Dal movement which started in 1977. I was never a great admirer of

Jay Prakash Narayan but I firmly believe no one family and its descendants alone have the panacea to all evils that plague a billion plus people. My parents had been with the Congress. Yet I opposed Indira Gandhi and her Emergency. In some ways it harmed my Ma's political life as she was Chief Minister during that period. Interestingly,

she also opposed the idea of dictatorship and being a true democrat she supported my organising the youth and students against the Emergency. That triggered my interest in politics. Since long I have believed that regional aspirations can best be addressed by regional parties. India was politically never one 'Kashmir to Kanyakumari' till 1947. It is a conglomeration of people of different kinds. Each section deserves a sincere representation. This is only possible with regional parties which focus more on the development of that region for their own survival. Unlike in National parties, in Regional parties you do not

need to kowtow or be a *chamcha* of hundreds of party bosses. To be able to work one needs to vibe well with 1 or 2 persons only. Naveen Patnaik is a thorough gentleman and understands the problems of the underprivileged. These and many such reasons attracted me to the BJD.



Election poster featuring Tathagata Satpathy

Do you have a vision or a goal that you would like to implement?

Not a vision. Visions. The whole world is realising the need to increase food supply and smaller industries. India, aping the Western thinking of the 1950s and 60s, is moving away from agriculture which should be its mainstay. It could easily become the Food Basket of the globe. Unfortunately huge patches of agricultural land are being sacrificed for reckless industrialisation leaving thousands homeless and without work while giving employment to a couple of hundreds and polluting the area. Reversing this is a vision. Protecting natural resources so that they last for future generations. We are not the last in line. Similarly, vigorously but without compulsion, to make an all out effort at creating awareness and understanding amongst the people of the benefits of having smaller families. We can take care to ensure equitable graded growth amongst all sections to retain the vibrant society that is Hindoostan. India is loaded with resources, but for a smaller population. Say 3/4th of a billion. Create genuine infrastructure such as permitting regrowth of natural forests, hold back small quantities of rain water from going to the rivers by creating millions of ponds all over the subcontinent, put industries in medium-sized clusters with a clear relief and rehabilitation program for the displaced that gets implemented in full prior to acquisition of land. Bureaucracy to be more accountable by creating a feedback system from the people on their performance. These are a few of the visions.

Politics is also unfortunately synonymous with corruption, nepotism and sycophancy. Do you think this is an exaggerated generalisation which comes from the masses who still struggle for basic needs, and politics and politicians are the most convenient scapegoats?

Why only politics? Every sphere of human life is ridden with these ailments. Politicians are

mere mirrors of society. In a democracy, a politician has to revert back to people at fixed intervals and get scanned. On the other hand bureaucracy, judiciary and business do not require people's direct approval to hold on. The very fact that Parliamentary proceedings are telecast live in India everyday shows exemplary transparency. This



During a meal with his son — as usual on the phone

must be emulated by other power blocs who are rarely evaluated publicly.

Admittedly, for the layman the bureaucracy is probably as corrupt and non-functional as the political system. As a politician how do you perceive the bureaucracy?

Even today, the training system of the Indian bureaucracy is such that it seems ordained to suppress people. The way it is perverting the Right to Information law is hilarious. Bureaucrats are permanent for at least 35 years unless caught doing something really terrible. Politicos for them are temporary. And people stupid subjects.

How much actual power does a politician have to move, change, and improve things? Resistance comes from which quarters? How do you, in real terms, handle non-compliance? Please give us an example.

Actual power is people's faith that is reflected

through the mandate. In reality, every one is limited by the system. It may sound funny but I believe in the DM-CM-PM theory. The District Magistrate in his district, the Chief Minister in his state and the Prime Minister in the country have true “power” to change and improve things. The rest are just connecting dots. If you try to change things, resistance could come from anywhere. Humans normally disapprove of change. In an

Guevara. His love for freedom for all and fighting spirit was awesome. I have named my only son Aaryl Che. Mohandas Gandhi is also admirable. He understood the mind of his people and therefore knew violence was not a strength of Indians who are intrinsically a disobedient lot. Hence he used non-violence and non-cooperation to befuddle the disciplined western mind.



At home with family

indisciplined nation like India, “compliance” is a nebulous word unless you have the power to punish. When faced with non-compliance I get down on my knees.

What is your method of staying connected to the people? How do you gauge the pulse of the masses?

I stay connected by regularly visiting my constituency and taking calls on my two handphones that have slowly started frying my brains. But then what’s a little brain-fry when it comes to staying connected!

Do you have idols in politics whom you would like to emulate? If so who are they and why do you think they are worth emulating?

Not an idol but I admire Ernesto (Che)

What are the qualities essential to make a good and effective politician?

One should be able to love people and adore being with them without expecting returns. Votes in return are a boon. One should have the patience to listen to them and their never-ending personal problems, the willingness to sacrifice privacy and family life, the calmness in front of extremely irrational and irritating situations, the ability to keep pecking away at insurmountable difficulties.... All these and many more.

Did the prospect of defeat ever loom large? What does a losing candidate do till the next elections? Are alternate career options essential?

I have had the good fortune of being a loser also. Initially it bothered me. Later, I went back to my profession of journalism with gusto while still keeping in touch with the constituency and my supporters. I sincerely believe a politician must have an original career where she/he must have succeeded. Only when you achieve success in your personal life can you distribute the dream of success to others. I still keep writing even when occupying an elected post. Win or lose, once you are in, you always remain a public person.

Is there any particular view, writing, passage from Sri Aurobindo that serves you as guide in this field?

One message that I had read long ago on the School notice board and that has stuck was from Sri Aurobindo. The gist was: “Enjoy when you are the instrument of the Divine. Accept with

happiness when the Divine needs you no more or rejects you.”

What, in your opinion, is the biggest strength of Indian democracy and what is its greatest weakness?

Democracy in our country is marvellously maturing in a very diverse style of representation. That I assume is the biggest strength. Even the so-called flag bearer of democracy, the US of A, has only two parties to choose from. India on the other hand, as a true democracy, has as many parties as thought processes. Our democracy has no weaknesses. It's only the human element in the system that brings in the rotten aspects.

Do you have any future plans to enter the arena of national politics?

I am in national politics. As an MP one not only represents the constituency and State but also the nation in totality.

Education, eradication of poverty, communal harmony, security, infrastructure, economic growth, in your heart which issue takes precedence over the others?

All these have to happen in tandem and none of these can be isolated. The governance system has to prioritise the budgeting setup.

Apparently, you have said that the first reason of your success was “matrushaktira ashirbada”. Were you referring to the Mother, Douce Mère? Do you usually talk of your personal faith in a public context?

Yes, I have publicly said that whatever I have been able to do has been solely due to Mother's blessings. The Mother, as you and I know, Douce Mère, never stood for any religion. For me, She was the epitome of perfect love. I am genuinely

amazed at the way She makes miracles happen all around me. Earlier I could not comprehend these strange coincidences. Gradually, when it dawned that the regularity was too much for just chance, I started accepting Her handiwork as Her love for me.

What aspects of the education at the Ashram have helped you most in your life as a politician?

Without having to think about exams I learnt to be conscious of my performance at all times. I also got the opportunity to think for myself and take decisions and stand up for consequences. As a politician you must be social and yet be independent. The Ashram school taught me to be both.

When you went back to Orissa after having lived in Pondicherry for several years what did you miss most?

Meeting and talking to the Mother every Sunday. In those days I was probably the only student She saw every week.

What are your most vivid memories from your years at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education?

Learning to swim in the large pool. The curd and brown bread of Corner House and also learning how to eat socially and wash my dishes. Daily Group and weekend movies. Comfort Home. I remember Lata-di who made me appreciate French, Kittu-da who probably thought I could understand *The Human Cycle*, Mamata-di made me grasp English and Vijayendra-da put in some sense about basics of science. (Though I strongly suspect my former teachers may not have very fond memories about me and my behaviour). Also my pals Choubey, Shubhangam, Saphal, Shanti and Siddhartha. ❧

Want to search through and download back issues of *The Golden Chain*?

Visit our website: www.goldenchain.in

“TALK LESS, LISTEN MORE”

Debashish Samantaray '82 answers

How long have you been in the political arena and what have you already done?

I have been in direct politics since 2000. I represented a coastal constituency of Orissa in Jagatsinghpur District called Tirtol. I got elected just after the Super Cyclone which had devastated coastal Orissa, and Jagatsinghpur district was the worst hit. Therefore my first challenge was restoration of roads, breaches in river embankments, removal of thousands of uprooted trees, rebuilding destroyed houses, schools, Government establishments etc.

What are the changes that you would like to bring about?

Firstly, the attitude of people in India. We generally have the habit of blaming everything on somebody. So, the first to be blamed are the politicians, then the bureaucrats, then the police and

into politics from all walks of life. And gradually we are finding a lot of young, educated achievers being elected to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.



Listening to people's woes



On the dais with Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik

so forth. I don't say we all are saints, but in India around 50% of the urban elite do not vote, but they criticise. We need better people to enter

What made you join the B.J.D. and what were the main reasons of your success in the elections?

Mr. Naveen Patnaik had formed the Biju Janata Dal in December 1997. It was basically Mr. Patnaik the leader who attracted me. That's how I joined the B.J.D. The single credit for my success in the elections goes to him.

Is there an idea or a line from the Mother or Sri Aurobindo that really guides you in this work?

There is no one line or any one idea. They are my greatest strength, my guiding force.

Who is your idol? Is there anyone whose example you would like to follow?

There are many who are my idols. I can't specify any one of them. And I never follow anyone.

Which elements of our education in the Ashram have helped you in your life as a politician?

The Ashram education and living the Ashram



A tour of the constituency

life for many years as a student, and above all living there while the Mother was physically present, has given me everything in life, as a businessman and of course as a politician.

How far can you follow your inner faith while living the life of a politician?

Our inner faith should guide us in any profession we are in. It depends on how strongly dedicated and determined we are. The same stands for the profession of politics too. I am still trying my level best to follow my inner faith. I am not successful all the time.

What are your fondest memories of your student life?

There are many fond memories, but if I have to single them out, they are the occasions when I was in the presence of the Divine.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to enter the political field?

First of all I would congratulate him for having taken a bold step, and secondly advise him to talk less and listen more to the people of our society.

Have you ever had an experience where you could feel the help of a Higher Force? Can you tell us something about it?

The Mother has always appeared in my worst situations and she just pulls me out of them and puts me back in a place of safety. I have made grave mistakes in business and politics. I would have been absolutely nowhere without Her Divine intervention. ❧



Addressing a gathering of ladies

Want to download musical compositions by Ashram artistes?

Visit our website: www.goldenchain.in

MEETING PRITHWINDRA MUKHERJEE

Article and interview by Sunayana Panda '79

There are awards and awards, but when one is named “Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres” it is a sign that one has reached a summit. Recently this high civilian honour of France was conferred on Prithwindra Mukherjee '58, better known to us in the Ashram as Prithwin-da, and we felt that this would be the right occasion for us to know him a little better. This is perhaps the highest decoration that a member of our fraternity has received.

Prithwin-da's story is remarkable not because of what he has achieved but the odds against which he has achieved it. He was a victim of the

environment that encourages intellectual growth but let us not forget that moving to France forty years ago could not have been the smooth ride it is today for students and research scholars. But we are running away with our story. The right place to start from would be the beginning.

Prithwin-da's connection with the Ashram is directly linked to the fact that he is the grandson of the heroic Bagha Jatin, who at the height of the revolutionary movement in Bengal was closely associated with Sri Aurobindo. Prithwin-da's parents had visited the Ashram earlier, as Sri Aurobindo's guests. Then, in 1948, along with his mother and two brothers, Prithwin-da came to Pondicherry. His father, known to us as Tejen-da or Bod-da, continued to go back and forth between Kolkata and Pondicherry until the Mother hinted that it was time he too settled down to the regular life of the Ashram. This was the Mother's way of showing her love and concern. Prithwin-da reminds us that the Mother was particularly generous in her hospitality to the members of the families of those who had been a part of the political life of Sri Aurobindo and had participated in his work. This is the way she had opened her arms to Sahana-di and her sisters because they were the nieces of Chittaranjan Das, who had so ably defended Sri Aurobindo in the Alipore Bomb Case. This is the way the Mother had also been full of solicitude for Sudhir Sarkar and his family.

Growing up in the Ashram of the post-War years was an experience that clearly marked and moulded Prithwin-da. Already he had had an inner contact with the Mother before coming to Pondicherry. One day, when he was still a child, he had fallen down and broken his arm in several places and was in excruciating pain. While his mother had gone to fetch him a glass of water, he was looking at a picture of the Mother when he



Prithwindra Mukherjee at his home in Paris

polio virus and from his early childhood had to walk with the help of crutches. He has faced outer as well as inner difficulties and has achieved something that people even in normal circumstances would find hard to attain. True, he has lived in an advanced country like France and worked in an

saw her coming down a stair of light and coming towards him. When his mother came back she found him fast asleep.

Once they settled down in Pondicherry the Mother took a special interest in him. The Mother had often said that many human difficulties were present in the Ashram in a symbolic way and by working on them here she could transform them on a larger scale. Prithwin-da's physical infirmity was also, in her eyes, one of those difficulties and by healing him she would win a battle against the force of inertia in the material physical and would be able to extend the limits of consciousness. With this work in mind she asked Pranab-da to help Prithwin-da. So Pranab-da set aside two hours three times a week to massage Prithwin-da's leg and to make him do exercises. A chart was made and a programme strictly adhered to. The Mother followed very keenly even his smallest progress. To extend her help on a subtle level she gave him flowers with special significances such as "Perseverance" and "Concentration". When he was leaving for Paris, many years later, the Mother reminded him that there were excellent surgeons in France.

Prithwin-da's life had many restrictions because of his physical handicap but the life of the Ashram gave him the opportunity to interact with many extraordinary people. The Ashram was in full phase of growth and in this creative and warm atmosphere he could cultivate two interests which have finally become his field of expression and research. One was literature and the other was music. Because of his contact with Pranab-da he started working in the library that the Physical Education department was starting. Pranab-da took out subscriptions for four magazines from Kolkata for young readers. Prithwin-da's first attempt at writing for publication was made when, at the age of thirteen, he sent a story

to one of them. It was accepted and appeared in one of the issues. Prithwin-da recounts how he took the five rupees he was paid for this to the Mother as if it had been five lakhs and how the Mother accepted it with great joy.

Even before he finished his studies he taught English, French and Bengali at the School.



With the Mother at "Vegetable Darshan", 1950

Encouraged by Bharati-di (Suzanne Karpeles), he started translating original works of well-known writers from Bengali into French. He also wrote his own prose and poetical creations at the same time. He participated in the Ashram band and wrote musical notations of Indian pieces as well as original compositions for them.

Around the time he turned thirty, he felt that literary success had come quite easily to him, and now he wanted to make an attempt to test his boundaries. As he was equally interested in music and literature, he could have gone into either field. The first possibility which opened itself was at the Juilliard School in the United States. He was accepted. However, the Mother cautioned him against this choice, saying that she could see a dark cloud over that course of action. She also assured him that a better opportunity would come his way. Soon after that, he received a scholarship from the French Government to write a thesis at the Sorbonne University.

Arriving in France in the mid-1960s he was helped by friends to make the transition. It was a transition which must have been difficult though, considering that neither communication nor travel were as easy then as they are now, and the gap between the life of the East and the life of the West was a wide one then. However, he continued to keep in touch with the Mother and kept his goal very clearly in front of him. Among others there was André Morisset who looked after him. He came back regularly to India and kept in touch with his roots.

Prithwin-da started writing from a very early age and was published in reviews and magazines, not only of the Ashram but also those which had a national circulation. He wrote poetry in both English and Bengali and was even included in anthologies of Indian poets. In France his first years were consecrated to his thesis on Sri Aurobindo after which he taught Indian Civilisation at University level. He was granted a Fulbright Scholarship which enabled him to do further research in the United States. Then he took up his thesis on the Pre-Gandhian Freedom Movement, for which he was conferred a PhD (Docteur d'Etat) by the French Government. After this he worked as a researcher in the CNRS which is France's national centre for scientific research. Although he has now retired he continues his literary career.

What makes Prithwin-da such an exceptional writer is that he writes in three different languages. There are many in the world who can speak several languages and quite a few who read more than one language, but rare are those who can express their abstract thoughts in more than one language in writing. Even in India, where there are so many official languages, urban Indians have great difficulty in writing even one Indian language correctly. In such a context Prithwin-da's language skills are remarkable. He can not only read several regional Indian languages but knows Sanskrit too.



In Pondicherry, 1948

One of the first translations he did for the UNESCO series was of a collection of three short stories by Sharat Chandra into French. He is one of those very rare translators who go directly from Bengali to French. He also translates in the other direction, that is, from French into Bengali. He has translated authors like Albert Camus, Saint-John Perse and Rene Char into Bengali. He has created links between the two languages, which is invaluable to both cultures. He points out that curiously enough the Bengalis are more eager about knowing French writers than the French are about Bengali ones. When he had first arrived in France the main focus of attention was Rabindranath Tagore since he was the only Indian writer who was known in the West. Now people prefer to read the new writers who write directly in English and who are instantly

translated from the English original into French.

His original creations cover a wide range. He has written poetry and prose, fiction as well as non-fiction. He has written on philosophy, musicology, history and Indian culture. His most noteworthy contribution to the world of literature is his biography of Sri Aurobindo written in French and published in 2000. This French biography has very clearly his own reflections in his characteristic sensitive style. He has himself translated Sri Aurobindo's original Bengali texts directly into French. He has also produced programmes for Radio France and made a couple of documentary films. His poem "Danse Cosmique" on Shiva Nataraja has been set to music by Henry Dutilleux, senior composer, and included in performances all over the world.

The French national award of "Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres" is not his first. He has received several awards and honours in India and in France before this. He has also been honoured with the Sri Aurobindo Award in Kolkata in the year 2003. This is an annual award given to anyone who has made a significant contribution

in fields related to Sri Aurobindo and is organised by the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan and the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture. This recent award has been given to him by the French Minister of Culture for his contribution to the cultural life of France, for the whole body of his work and for bringing a knowledge of India to France and vice-versa. Usually this award is given to French citizens only after the age of thirty but it has been given to many non-Francophone writers, artists and actors as well.

Prithwin-da has answered our questions and shared his experiences as well as his views on life.

How was the passage from the Ashram to life in Paris?

First of all, the geographical contrast comes to my mind. My father used to name the three seasons prevailing in Pondicherry as: (a) hot; (b) hotter; (c) hottest. I reached Paris on 9th November 1966, when autumn was turning into rainy winter.

Invited by a friend to my first dinner in Paris, I chose for dessert an ice-cream! A cheerful inner attitude helped me enjoy with precaution every bit of legitimate experience that life here had to offer. Vegetarian on the whole, I discovered that the main courses at the university canteen mostly consisted of meat: I started selecting before tasting anything out of curiosity. In Pondicherry I did not know the market. With eyes wide open like those of Prince Siddhartha, while crossing streets in Paris, the sight of an entire cow neatly peeled and hanging in front of the butchers' shops left me giddy. For weeks together I could not eat. Worried, I went to consult Dr Deniau, a homoeopath near our hostel. He advised me: "Young man, you are running a low pressure; eat as the Romans do as long as you are in Rome. Or go back to the place you have come from." On entering his chamber, I had noticed behind the

doctor's seat a shelf packed with Sri Aurobindo's books. I told him where I came from. Just upstairs lived Samuel Beckett. One day, leaving Jean-Louis Barrault at Théâtre Récamier, Beckett was driving me to a friend's house, where we were invited to lunch. On the way he stopped to pick up a packet, with the comment: "I live here." I told him that I often went there to see Deniau. Glad to hear that, Beckett replied, "I too am Deniau's patient."

The second point was handling of money. In the Ashram I had no contact whatsoever with money. The French Government scholarship allotted me 480 Francs per month. I rented my room at the hostel for 125 per month. The ticket at the canteen was 1.20 per meal, as far as I remember. We paid 5 francs for a simple cut at the barber's shop, or a film in a normal cinema. In certain theatres we had concessional cinema tickets for 1.50. It was the glorious epoch of the New Wave French films, along with the experimental



Reciting Nishikanta's Bengali poem on 1 Dec 1950

Italian and Swedish masters: each film brought me a new impetus. The evening paper *Le Monde* was sold for 30 cents. For a local telephone call we had to introduce two coins of 20 cents into the slot. Some friends even found out how to recover the coins after the conversation was over. The transport — metro and bus — was pretty cheap. As suggested by the Mother, André Morisset had appointed François Chan and Georges Gambelon to look after me. Grandson of a great literary figure, François helped me as a secretary. Gambelon had had correspondence with Sri Aurobindo. A bachelor, proprietor of real estate, he used to let out flats and consecrated all his income to the service of the Mother. As such, he took me out every Saturday afternoon shopping at the departmental store Belle Jardinière to purchase whatever I needed: toothpaste, stockings, shirts, underwear, for everyday use. At five o'clock, on

the river side, we took our wafers with hot chocolate. A fine connoisseur of art, Gambelon made me discover the major museums. A Picasso exhibition simultaneously at the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais struck me with the tremendous creative vital and the masterly craft that animated this artist's vision. Gambelon paid my railway trip back from St Paul de Vence when friends drove me to the Riviera to meet Picasso. Himself a musician, Gambelon offered me a sophisticated transistor to listen to good music. In addition to a costly overcoat, Paolo brought me elegant suits, neckties, pullovers regularly from Rome. His friend, the fabulous tailor Roberto Capucci was to take us around Rome (in his Rolls Royce) and even to visit Assisi, haloed by the presence of Saint Francis. The Mother had promised me to be constantly present: I never suffered from the lack of a single franc; nor did I save a single franc throughout my life in Paris.

The third point was politics: though we had faint ideas about the leading figures of India and of the world, as Ashramites we had other topics of interest than politics. In Paris, everything seemed to depend on the political options each individual had. We were not far from the Students' agitation of May 1968, when politics stormed through the university gates.

What were your plans at that time and did you fulfil them?

My main objective was to write a thesis on the transition between Sri Aurobindo, the radical nationalist leader, and the dreamer of World Union. In 1970, I successfully defended it at the Old Sorbonne. The president of the Jury, Jean Filliozat (holding the Chair of Indian studies at the Collège de France), suggested that if I stayed on, it would be useful for studies on India, and it would do me good too. In 1955, I had started my research on the pre-Gandhian freedom fight launched by Sri Aurobindo and pursued by my grandfather; in 1965, over several months, I had serialised my findings in a Calcutta weekly. I waited for an opportunity to start my second thesis — for the coveted Doctorat d'Etat — on the intellectual roots of India's freedom movement (1893-1918).

At last in 1974, on examining my documents, the renowned historian Raymond Aron declared my choice of these twenty-five years to be the missing link in contemporary history. He gladly accepted to supervise my thesis: he had never believed that it could be possible for a man coming from South Africa in 1915 to ask a people — under bondage for centuries — to stand up and join a non-violent mass movement. For Aron, my grandfather (Jatin Mukherjee) was the thinker in Action. In 1981, Aron obtained for me a Fulbright scholarship to explore American archives from coast to coast. When I came back with more than 8000 pages of notes, Aron thanked me: "What a gift for French researchers!" By the time I completed the thesis and Aron started constituting the jury, in 1983, he passed away accidentally. After more than two



In 1952

years of desperate attempts to defend it, at last I met Le Roy Ladurie (Professor at the Collège de France, a disciple of Aron and Fernand Braudel, and Father of the New School of History in France): he remembered that Aron had wished him to participate in my jury; so did Jean Naudou, specialist on India, François Bourricaud and Annie Kriegel, two eminent professors. I defended the thesis, and it was welcomed unanimously by the jury as "most honourable".

With my knowledge of French and Bengali, I had wished, however, to be of use in teaching Bengali which, normally — like many modern Indian languages — should enjoy the status of a major world language. Appointed for several years as a lecturer by University Paris III-Inalco (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales), I was proposed as candidate for the Chair of Bengali which was going to be created

with a special fund. On enquiring with competent authorities — viz. the then Ambassador of India (a relative of Rabindranath Tagore), Collège de France (Filliozat), Sorbonne (Etiemble, Father of Comparative Literature in France) and UNESCO (Roger Cailliois) — the President of the Institut, René Sieffert, was convinced about my profile as the ideal candidate. The National Professor Sunitikumar Chatterjee, on hearing about this proposal, committed himself to back my candidature. Unfortunately, local politics did not permit the Chair to exist. Fed up, I joined University Paris XII where a special course on Indian Philosophy was created to welcome me. Then, in 1981, I joined the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (Department of Ethnomusicology) till I retired in 2003.

How did you keep your contact with the Mother in the beginning?

I wrote regularly to the Mother as well as to Dada (Pranab), Pavitra-da, Nolini-da, Amrita-da and my parents. Punctually the Mother herself replied to all my letters and Pavitra-da sent them with a covering personal word, by registered airmail. Gambelon grumbled at times: “It seems the Mother does not write herself any more!” Once the Mother was not pleased with the construction of one of my sentences and did not hide it when she wrote me back; it amused me because that sort of construction had become quite in vogue, whereas in the Mother’s time it was not.

With reliable friends, I used to send small jars of rose-petal jam made in Greece: it was very close to the Indian *gulkand* that the Mother seemed to like. In 1972, as a guest of the Hebrew University for lecturing on *Savitri*, I made the acquaintance of Yehuda Hanegby, editor of the monthly *Ariel*. As if he had been waiting for my visit, all of a sudden, Yehuda decided to leave for Pondicherry, to meet the Mother. What could he take as offering? I suggested honey, made in the kibbutzim. Madame Themanlys, commissioned to interview me for Kol Israel, the official radio, revealed her identity as the daughter-in-law of a personal friend that the Mother had in Paris, belonging to Max Théon’s group.

What were the lessons learnt in the Ashram that helped you most in your work and in your life in Paris ?

The greatest and the most concrete lesson learnt in the Ashram is the alert attitude towards the body: however limited be its capacity, the body has always agreed to collaborate in the teeth of hard circumstances. It allowed me to spin through four continents. Next comes obviously the use of languages. Quite a few items from *What a Sadhak should always remember* kept on prompting my decisions. An endless optimism and cool thinking has been of a great help in the midst of crucial tests. I often remembered an incident: one day, an infuriated man at the Ashram gate had taken to insulting Nolini-da vehemently; instead of commanding one of the young men to drive the fellow out, Nolini-da stood there for a few seconds, still like a steadfast flame, before stepping back and going his way silently, without a single reaction on his face.

In the core of my being I bear what the Mother told us: “The best gift that you can make to the Divine is gratitude!” A Bengali song has for refrain, *tumi dhanya, dhanya hé!*

You have written so much. Which particular writing gave you the most happiness?

I had long been waiting to write Sri Aurobindo’s biography for French readers. Since the limited edition of Monod-Herzen’s book published in the ’40s, people had been looking for a complete biography. When the Director of the series ‘Biographies’ published by the prestigious French firm Desclée de Brouwer invited me to write a volume on Sri Aurobindo, I felt really grateful to the Mother for having given me this chance. Every page I wrote was for me a communion with what the Mother called the psychic being. When the Ambassador of India released it officially, it was for me a fulfilment.

There were other occasions. For instance, in the United States, I used to hear about Eleanor Rosch and the theory of categories in cognitive studies. While working on the scales of Hindustani and Carnatic Music at the C.N.R.S., suddenly I made a rapprochement between those

CHEVALIER DANS L'ORDRE DES ARTS ET DES LETTRES

In a ceremony held on 24th June 2009 at the Maison de l'Inde in Paris, Dr. Prithwindra Mukherjee was honoured as a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. The date was selected to coincide with the birth centenary of his father Tejendranath Mukherjee. The ceremony was attended by 200 people including eminent members of his field as well as dignitaries such as His Excellency Sri Ranjan Mathai, India's Ambassador to France. The president of the ceremony was Jaques Attali, the renowned economist, scholar and author whose recorded video message was played at the beginning since he could not be present that day. Attali called Prithwindra "a man of Franco-Indian Renaissance" in his moving tribute.



At the ceremony (left to right): Swami Veetamohananda (President of the Vedanta Centre in France), H.E. Ranjan Mathai (India's Ambassador in France), Henri Dutilleux (senior-most Western composer), Prithwindra Mukherjee, Gérard Pédraglio (Representing the Republic), Professor Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat (Member of the Institute), Dr Bikas Sanyal (Director Maison de l'Inde, Chevalier de Légion d'Honneur)

categories and our age-old system of seventy-two *mélakartās*. Very happy to declare this identity, I was greeted with a cold shower accompanied by an increasing animosity from the guardians of the temple called cognitive research, for mixing up [human and social] science with fiction; my career came to a standstill for seven years; while I felt more and more convinced, my promotion remained desperately immobile. Making use of an international congress of linguists at Paris, I presented a paper on my topic: as it was appreciated by a few specialists, favourable echoes came from professors working on Indian music in European and American universities. I went a step forward by conceiving two electronic gadgets:

one, for singling out the successive degrees of any of the *mélakartās*; the other one, for situating the height of the twenty-two microtones (*shrutis*) used in Indian music. Once they materialise, these two diapasons may bring about a very modest revolution in the world of composition, as I have hinted in my book published by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, with a foreword by Pandit Ravi Shankar. The CNRS authorities chose to recognise my discovery with a bronze medal. My happiness welled from the fact that the Mother had led me to detect some truth and, with perseverance, I saw it conquer all hostility.

How did you feel when you came to know that you were being given this award?

Excepting the Sri Aurobindo Award that came to me from India and the medal from the Society of Encouragement to Progress

at UNESCO, I have had two CNRS medals in my professional life. Busy executing plan after plan, I have had little leisure to stop and stare at awards. Recently, on his receiving the Légion d'Honneur, a friend of mine told me that he had been wondering why, in spite of all I have published and accomplished, there has been no official recognition. The way he posed the problem betrayed his intention to enquire further into the matter. When I received the letter of appointment from the Minister, I thanked the Mother who has been guiding me since I left Pondicherry physically. On seeing the joy it has caused around me, I try to convince myself about its importance.

How do you see the future of the world?

The Vision that Sri Aurobindo has revealed concerning the future of the world and of mankind is infallible, however long it may take to be realised. A few pioneering personalities I have occasion to meet here are aware of Sri Aurobindo's prediction: some of them have already started thinking in terms of a World Government. In spite of a shy way of acknowledging man's debt to Sri Aurobindo, in spite of our worshipping spurious idols, the Truth shall prevail. Our conviction is our strength.

What are your most cherished memories?

At the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, after a series of wonderful adventures, Dorothy disappointed the Mother by proclaiming, "There is no place like home!" Then the Mother gave a meaning to "home": it was this physical world, the field of all realisations. In the Bâul tradition, they believe that even the gods wait for their turn to receive the boon of an earthly life, in order to progress in their spiritual quest. The medieval Bengali poet sang: *janama abadhi ham rūpa nêhârinu/nayana nâ tirapita bhêla* ("Since my birth I have contemplated Beauty, and mine eyes are not yet satiated"): quite a crowd of cherished memories run rioting in a flash.

In 1950, the Mother reserved the Mani House, 3 Easwaran Koil Street, for us (my parents and three brothers). She insisted on the fact that the house belonged to her and she knew perfectly all its nooks. We had no more to budge an inch. At times, in my adolescent years, desiring to live on my own, whenever I approached the Mother, she reminded me: "Do you forget who Tejen is? Who Usha is? Are there many children as fortunate as you are, to have them as parents? You have so much to learn from them! And that house is your field of realisations!" Indeed it was. The entrance was made of traditionally carved solid wooden doors. There were two small rooms leading to a large hall. From the walls, Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's portraits seemed to hold us in their arms. A store-room opened on a kitchen, followed by the dining space with one of the first specimens of a large mosaic table made in the Ashram.

My mother wrought her everyday miracles in the kitchen: like my grandfather, my father had been used to sharing his meals with friends; and my mother served us all varieties of tasty dishes and sweets. Usually the Mother and Sri Aurobindo did not partake of milk or its derivatives. Sri Aurobindo, however, was glad to make exceptions with *pântuâ*, and the Mother seemed to be fond of *chhânâr pâyés* prepared by my mother.

Upstairs was an open terrace on the South, full of rose plants. As Sunil-da's student, I had



Receiving the honour

spent nights together there, observing the positions of the constellations season after season. There was a covered L-shaped verandah where, on a cot, slept my elder brother Rothin and, perpendicularly, my mother's cot. Then there was a large hall with three beds. I slept on the left, my father in the middle, and Togo, by the side of two windows receiving the sea-breeze. This was the haven where the Mother accommodated our souls. Wherever I go, down the years, this is the nest I long for.

Who influenced you most during your growing up years in the Ashram?

The Ashram in our childhood was a rendezvous of great minds. Philosophers, musicians, poets, painters were ready to be of help to us, as a service to the Mother. Precocious and curious, by the age of fourteen I enjoyed the "friendship"

of veterans like Pavitra-da, Nolini-da, Sahana-di, Dilipkumar Roy, Nishikanta, Amal Kiran (K.D. Sethna). But, for a very special reason, it was Dada (Pranabkumar) whose overall influence enriched me the most.

The Mother seemed to gather around her at the Ashram representatives of particular problems that required her force to be rectified, transformed from the spiritual point of view. The virus of polio had caused the loss of my lower limbs at the age of five. Busy extending the territory of Consciousness by conquering inertia, the Mother had proposed me her help, provided I collaborated willingly. In the process of that unwritten pact,



With Dada, 1956

Dada had stepped forward to execute her will. Muscle by muscle, in the Mother's presence, he defined the nature of his intervention. He typed out two big charts and pasted them on cardboard: one, for active home exercises that I followed every day; the Mother had asked Rishabhchand to devise a solid bench specially for the purpose. The other chart was for passive exercises that Dada gave me along with an oil massage during two hours, three mornings every week, at the tennis ground, on the verandah separating the two apartments that housed Wilfy and Raju Garu; it was followed by bathing in the sea. Whenever there loomed a new response from a muscle, Dada invited the Mother to appraise it.

Enjoying Dada's company, I asked the Mother whether I could assist him — by the side of Tara — in cataloguing valuable books and magazines on physical culture that his library contained. It

was at the tail end of 1949, as far as I remember. Rajen-da's nephew Hiren Ganguli used to come regularly for Darshan and, as an active businessman, he had a portable typewriter with him. On Dada's request, Hiru-Kaku agreed to teach Tara and myself efficient typewriting. Very soon I was to learn from Sanat-da shorthand, too. On retro reflection, I discovered that my grandfather had been a professional stenotypist. Dada since his school days had been in contact with revolutionaries directly brought up by my grandfather and, as such, held my grandfather in high esteem. As a student of history, he encouraged me in my research on our freedom movement.

During the gymnastic marching at the Play Ground, at times Dada improvised melodies by whistling on the microphone: they seemed to rush down from another world. On noticing my interest in music, Dada offered me the first bamboo flute of my life. He had received a clarinet as a gift from the Mother, to learn both European and Indian music. He noted down in a fat register whatever ragas he learnt from Ardhendu-da and made it accessible to me; soon I started taking lessons of Esraj with Ardhendu-da. When the Ashram brass band reached its final shape with brand new instruments from Paris, I picked the piccolo for my instrument. In addition to whatever the bandmaster taught, Dada offered me a book with solo notations for piccolo. While I practised, amused by the tunes, he started supplying words — often humorous verses in Bengali — and sang heartily. I still remember his parody of *Auprès de ma blonde*, *London Bridge* and a more serious poem on the melody of *The Bluebell of Scotland*. He was sincerely pleased with my compositions for the band and ordered me to write the Mass Drill music for the annual function of 2 December 1957 and 1958.

Dada got me subscribed to four juvenile Bengali magazines. On noticing my intention to write for them, he mentioned it to the Mother; she liked the idea and, out of the four, she chose *Shishu-sâthi* — the most rigorous one — to begin with. Once a week, the Mother used to tell stories to the children. I started rewriting them for my Bengali readers. Ignorant of my age, the editor

went on publishing me religiously every alternate month and also invited my contribution for the special Pûja annual: impressed by its attractive layout, Dada called it “ice-cream sandesh”, a Bengali delicacy.

After composing the Mass Drill music for the annual function of 2 December 1957 and 1958, my score for 1959 was ready; now let me tell you why it was not played. We were no angels and we did not necessarily live on honey-dew. The Mother warned us against the churning of the inner ocean under the action of her Light. Even Dada for a time became subject to bouts of an opaque depression; it could be accompanied by a slap or a blow meant for activating recalcitrant elements. Though we were not indifferent to his suffering, some of us humorously called it the “Mahakali Spark”... One day the Mother declared that she had conquered the Asura of Despondency. Dada was no more gloomy. Soon the Mother stopped coming to the Play Ground. During the rehearsal of the 1959 Mass Drill music, some members of our JSASA brass band — out of quite a comprehensible human reaction — refused to play my composition. It was rather an unexpected blow as much for me as for Dada. When I turned towards him, with a broken voice he advised me to withdraw my score. It was not an easy matter. Forty double sheets of staff notation, some representing individually the Eb instruments; others transposed to Bb; a group playing the melodic parts; another — complex — with the counterpoints : months of labour for me and for the Band Master who had copied out my notation in his professional calligraphy !

At this juncture, my publisher Prafulla Chandra Das of Cuttack — as one of the organisers of the All India Writers’ Conference — sent me an invitation with a first class train ticket, hotel reservation and participation to read my poems;

Jawaharlal Nehru was to preside over this session. Prafulla Babu brought out even a bunch of my selected poems on this occasion to be annexed to the Souvenir. Finding it to be a delicate matter to disturb the Mother for her permission during her illness, I decided not to attend the Conference. Nolinida’s messenger asked me to go and see him. Nolinida was waiting for me with two messages. First of all, he told me that the Mother was pleased to hear about my discreet decision. Secondly, his personal counsel: the less I frequent such gatherings, the deeper will grow people’s esteem for me.

Is there anything you would like to say to our readers?

The Golden Chain teaches us to remain attentive to the blossoming of the Mother-inspiration in ever so many forms and hues and perfumes. It is a centripetal reminder that our journey’s end is where it began: at the feet of the Mother. It took



With the JSASA Band, 1957

me more than sixty years to forget the dictates of my ego and appreciate the experiments that the Mother had begun with me. The complicity of a young physiotherapist permits me to keep on trying humbly to extend the Mother’s Consciousness up to the senescent or inert cells of my limbs. It is never too late. ❧

YES, WE CAN!

We speak to **Probir Banerjee '78H**, the president of PondyCAN (Pondy Citizens' Action Network), promoting a holistic development of this region. He recently won an award for "Excellence in Social Service".

Tell us about how you got interested and involved in environmental and developmental issues and the genesis of PondyCAN.

In 1993, I joined the Rotary, a worldwide organisation of business and professional leaders that provides humanitarian service, encourages high ethical standards in all vocations and helps build goodwill and peace in the world.

In 2002, a few of us who were concerned about the deteriorating situation of garbage in Pondicherry, got together and started "Shuddham — rediscovering harmony", a non-profit, non-government organisation. Waste management is

of Pondicherry's coastline in a span of 10 years right in front of our eyes. The deep water port in Pondicherry will not only have severe environmental, social and economic impacts but will completely destroy the character of this beautiful heritage town [see our May '08 issue]. This had all the indications of a major land scam; some politicians and a private developer were pushing this project against the wishes of the people and the administration. PondyCAN (Pondy Citizens' Action Network), a non-profit, non-government organisation was started with a view to protecting the Pondicherry-Tamilnadu coastline.



Shuddham being inaugurated by the then Lt Gov. Rajani Rai and the then Chief Minister N. Rangaswamy

possible only through people's participation so we launched a movement "**Beautiful India — collaboration to keep our surroundings clean**".

In February 2007, we came to know about the Pondicherry Government's proposal to build a "Deep Water Port". The small commercial harbour built in 1989 has severely eroded 8 kms

Which are the principal issues taken up by your organisation?

PondyCAN's Objective: Building collaboration to create a "New Development Model" which has as its focus the happiness and well being of the people; harmonising economic prosperity with preservation and enhancement of our spiritual, cultural, and natural heritage.

The principal issues we are working on now:

- i) An Integrated and Holistic Development Plan for the Pondicherry-Auroville-Villupuram-Cuddalore Region
- ii) Protecting and Conserving the Water Bodies of this region
- iii) Restoration and Protection of the Pondicherry-Tamil Nadu Coastline
- iv) Pondicherry — a Model Eco-town
- v) Renaissance of Pondicherry to commemorate the centenary of Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry.

Those who are interested can get more details on our website **www.pondycan.org** or get in touch with us.



The Pondy beach before (above) and after the erosion caused by the harbour

In most developmental activities that have resulted in an environmental disaster there are some who benefit by the development all the same. When you tackle such issues is the onus on your organisation to propose alternatives to the beneficiaries?

Our view is that development and environment are not mutually exclusive. I read a quotation, "When the last tree is cut, the last river is polluted and the last fish is caught we will realise we cannot eat money". We forget that we are a part of the environment. This planet is finite and cannot sustain our wasteful society. It is just a question of proper planning and reducing our needs and greed. We always propose alternatives but they fall on deaf ears as the beneficiaries usually have a vested interest and their ultimate aim is profiteering and not sustainable development.

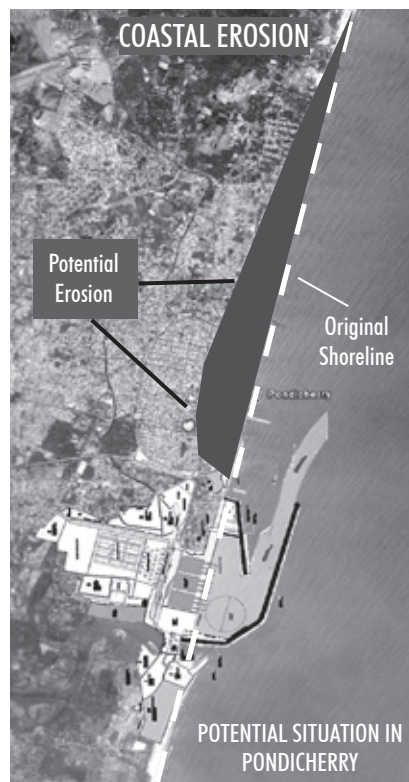
We must stop aping the western model of development, as all current models seem to have failed. In fact the world is looking towards India

for a new development model and many believe Pondicherry/Auroville has to take the lead. Let us all work towards this.

With the example of the erosion of the Pondicherry beaches, can you give us an example of the comprehensive approach you have to take in tackling the erosion and presenting alternatives to those who have benefited from the harbour?

The present harbour is a commercial-cum-fishing harbour. The commercial harbour has been a total failure and the benefit to the 150 fishing vessels is debatable as the harbour mouth is choked most of the time. We need to look at the cost-benefit ratio of the harbour — i.e. cost of damages in terms of homes and livelihoods of 10 fishing villages, ground water turning saline, agricultural lands turning into wasteland, loss of land due to erosion, loss of revenue to the tourism industry, the cost of dumping millions of lorry loads of rocks on the beach and the destruction of the surrounding mountains as against the benefit to these 150 fishing families. The question most people ask is, "Why don't we blow up the harbour and find alternative livelihood for those 150 fishermen?"

The phenomenon of littoral drift (sand movement along the coast) was known and a sand by-pass system was designed



The potential erosion we could be faced with if the Deep Sea Port is built



The damage caused by man-made erosion

as an integral part of the harbour but this has to run perpetually to do what nature does for free. Unfortunately the government seldom activated it with the excuse that it was expensive but spent higher amounts dumping rocks on the beach front. This seems to have become a permanent source of income for those in power as the rocks sink and fresh contracts are issued every year.

People from around the world come to Pondicherry to experience its “unique character” and “special ambience” so this is what we need to preserve not only for our quality of life but for our economic prosperity. The proposed port will create traffic congestion, pollution, become a dumping yard for waste from the ships and require huge quantities of our already depleted fresh water and therefore has no place in the vision of a “Peaceful Pondicherry”. The 153 acres of port land and the adjoining lagoon should be turned into a marina-cum-park as recreation space and for promoting eco-tourism. This will not only create more local employment but preserve our natural heritage and decongest the town.

All activities require funding. How do you organise funds? Is there a way by which those interested can donate to PandyCAN?

Our activities are mainly awareness campaigns, workshops, research and advocacy (locally and at New Delhi). So far we are self-funded and sometimes receive donations from friends. We would deeply appreciate if more people get involved by giving time, money or both as there is really a lot

to be done if we want to save our planet for ourselves and for our future generations.

In the process of highlighting these issues you have had a taste of handling the Indian political as well as bureaucratic systems. Could you describe to us your experience?

There are essentially three problems:

- i) Lack of vision and will
- ii) Vested interests / corruption
- iii) Bureaucracy

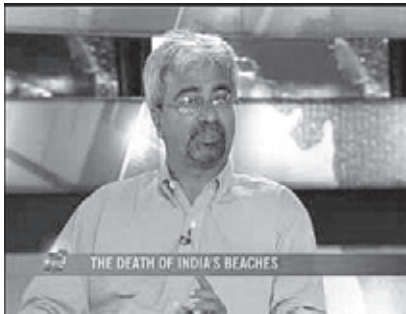
The present government setup is like a huge junked-out machine, which has a million things that can go wrong and usually needs “greasing” to make things move. Visit any government office and you will know. Even an ordinary clerk can derail your efforts but I must admit we have come across excellent officers. There has to be a quantum change in the governing system and till then you need patience, perseverance, a positive attitude and Divine Grace.



Rocks now need to be constantly dumped to keep the sea at bay

Prominent channels like NDTV and Rediff have featured the issue of the dying beaches of India. How far does exposure on this kind of platform go in actually changing the ground realities?

It makes a huge difference, as the only thing which will work is pressure. The media creates awareness among the public who then start supporting your cause because they understand the problem and its magnitude. The decision makers are under pressure to act responsibly as they have



Probir (left) being interviewed by Prannoy Roy (right) on the NDTV programme to save India's beaches

been enlightened about the ground realities and are be-

ing watched by the whole nation. It gives us ammunition to talk to the authorities by presenting it as a national problem. After seeing the NDTV show many international newspapers have contacted us, as they are concerned about the dying beaches of India. Hopefully now an international pressure will gradually build up. I hope you have all signed the NDTV campaign.

What is your future plan?

Saving India's coastline: When we realised that our voice against the Pondy port was not strong enough to make an impact on the decision makers in Delhi and realising that the construction of ports and harbours has already destroyed 25% of India's coastline we decided to take up the campaign at a National level:

1. We discussed the matter with Prannoy Roy (NDTV 24x7) who promised to keep highlighting the issue of coastal destruction until something is done by the Centre. NDTV has already done 20 episodes.

2. We met the Minister of Environment, Shri Jairam Ramesh who, as per our appeal, has issued a notification on moratorium on expansion of existing ports and all new port projects until studies are conducted to assess the cumulative impacts of ports and the carrying capacity of India's coastline. *Regarding Pondicherry's coastline he promised us to fund the restoration of the beach.*

3. We are part of NCPC (National Campaign for the Protection of the Coast), an association of organisations of all the coastal states of India working on social/environmental issues, and have mounted a massive campaign to protect the coast.

Celebrating 100 years of Sri Aurobindo's presence in Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo wanted Pondicherry to *"...become a powerful centre of*

intellectual development and interchange and a meeting place of European and Asiatic culture and a spiritual factor of the world unification...."

We have discussed the matter with the Secretary of Culture in New Delhi and Dr Karan Singh. We have submitted a detailed proposal to the Govt for a "Renaissance of Pondicherry" making it a model of holistic development, clean, harmonious, beautiful and peaceful; a unique destination for culture, knowledge and spirituality.



Working towards an Integrated and Holistic Development Plan for the Pondicherry-Auroville-Villupuram-Cuddalore Region

You never mince your words when you mention the vested interests that stand to gain and the corruption in the system. First, congratulations on your honesty and second, does this not pose problems in approaching those in power?

If people can be shamelessly corrupt why should we be ashamed to talk openly about it? Being honest, straightforward and fearless is what we have imbibed from our system of education



Plastic waste overflows landfills like this one on the outskirts of Pondy and is dumped indiscriminately

here. I am always inspired by the prayer “Make of us the hero warriors we aspire to become...” and have to live up to my name, which means “the best warrior”. Initially those in power used to accuse us of being anti-development and problematic people but soon realised that we are genuinely concerned about Pondicherry and in fact get overwhelmed by our larger vision and our optimism.

Banning the use of plastic bags is a proposal you are looking into. This is a colossal task and demands a change of habits by the population at large. How are you going about this campaign?

The Pondicherry Cabinet has taken a decision to ban plastics and the Govt. of Pondicherry has issued a notification inviting the public to give their views. We, along with many other organisations, have submitted our response supporting the decision. We also attended the consultation meet where they had invited officials from Delhi and Maharashtra where they have already banned plastics. The Govt seems to be going slow on this due to the pressure from the plastics lobby. Efforts are on and we will win eventually.



Receiving the award from the Lt. Governor

Pondicherry is rapidly becoming a crowded, busy tourist town. What are your proposals to the Govt. to proactively design infrastructure and development so that we are not left with disasters to tackle once the damage is done?

Our fourth activity “Pondicherry — a Model Eco-town” is essentially to preserve and enhance the character of Pondicherry. We have proposed to take up the boulevard town as a pilot project where all the issues of garbage, sewage, congestion, preservation of heritage buildings, use of alternative energy, water harvesting, proper infrastructure etc will be taken up. A Boulevard Eco-town Forum has been formed which meets regularly to discuss these issues. The Government is very interested and the process of signing an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) is in progress.

You were given an award this January on Republic Day. Could you please tell us how this came about?

The late Lt. Governor Shri Govind Singh Gurjar was not only a great administrator but one of the finest human beings I have met. We

met him for several issues:

i) Inaugurating “Parivartan”, Shuddham’s recycling centre in New Paddy Land, ii) Restoration of the eroded beach, iii) Integrated Planning of Pondicherry, Auroville, Villupuram and Cuddalore Region, iv) Solid waste management for the entire town, v) Celebrating the centenary year of Sri Aurobindo’s arrival in Pondicherry and vi) “Human Unity Park”. He had devel-

oped a strong trust in us and on each one of the issues he took immediate action. On 24th January, my birthday, I was informed that the Lt. Governor would be giving me an award for “Excellence in Social Service” during the Republic Day parade for the good work being done by Shuddham and PondyCAN. ❧

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF SRI AUROBINDO'S ARRIVAL IN PONDICHERRY – 04/04/2010



PROPOSAL FOR A “HOMECOMING MEET”

In a spirit of offering and gratitude, The Golden Chain Fraternity (GCF) proposes to have a **“homecoming meet”** on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry on 04/04/2010:

- The Ashram authorities have decided to celebrate this day as a Darshan day.
- GCF approached Pranab-da to allow the former students to participate in the March Past to be held in the Playground. Considering the space constraint in the Playground, Dada has said that alumni will be allowed to participate but will not be able to march. They will have to stand in “garde-à-vous” in a block in the space allotted. Their uniform will be all white. Men: Shirt or T-Shirt and Trousers. Women: Saree or Salwar-Kameez.
- GCF is considering having an Asana/Pranayama week early in the morning from Monday, March 29th to Saturday 3rd April. The venue is still to be worked out.
- On the 3rd of April, GCF also proposes to have a gathering in the Tennis Ground (subject to Dada's permission) between 4 pm and 5 pm for a concentration and other activities relevant to Sri Aurobindo's arrival (24 hours later, a hundred years earlier) on the Pondicherry coast. A final decision from Dada is awaited.
- The construction of the “Shelter” building at Swarnabhoomi (the GCF land at Lake) is also expected to be completed around this time. Hence a formal inauguration of the same is being scheduled for 29.03.2010, on the anniversary of Mother's arrival.
- Apart from the above, exhibitions on Sri Aurobindo's arrival and a heritage walk to all houses in which Sri Aurobindo stayed are also being planned.

We welcome your suggestions to make the week more meaningful.

BUILDING A “SHELTER” AT SWARNABHOOMI

Devashish Patnaik '82 and Dilip Patel '76H, who are responsible for the construction, share their thoughts about the building coming up on our Lake land.

There is a consciousness in each physical thing with which one can communicate. Everything has an individuality of a certain kind, houses, cars, furniture etc. The ancient peoples knew that and so they saw a spirit or “genius” in every physical thing.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 23:717)

A house is a protection against heat, monsoon rain, cyclonic weather, termites, animals and other creatures including man! A house should also be technically sound, economically viable and environmentally sensitive. We must also remember that a house is not merely a place to sleep, eat and



Dilip Patel and Devashish Patnaik (DP and DP!) oversee the construction

take our shoes off and be comfortable in, but a place that can have an atmosphere of beauty, repose and charm... a quality that belongs to the spirit. What makes us “feel” at home, rather than the size, is most important.

“Shelter”, the building that is coming up in



The arch at the entrance

Swarnabhoomi, our Lake land, is set amongst mature mango and cashew trees and this makes it a unique environment to live in and take in the orchard ambience. Even in the driest days of summer there is plenty of greenery. The building can provide a base for early morning or late evening walks in the beautiful natural surroundings.



View from above gives an idea of the building layout



The porch-like front space with its circles and arch

Merveille is right alongside, the lake is not too far away and one wakes up to the morning chorus of the varied birdlife (some 250 species recorded here).

Appropriate construction materials and eco-friendly climate-responsive design, comfort and convenience were kept in mind whilst designing the building. The idea has been to create a structure that is beautiful and blends with its environment. Simplicity is also an important aspect of the design: less is more.

Keeping all this in view, first of all we decided to minimise the use of cement and steel:

- No use of concrete in the foundation. We used appropriate red soil from near the site. (In doing so we also created a big pond near the house.) We mixed sand and cement in appropriate proportion to the red

soil with water and this mixture was then rammed into the foundation pits.

- No concrete slab for the roof. There will be a sloping roof of terracotta tiles (which also provides a large collecting area for rainwater harvesting).

- No plastering of walls. Wire-cut red bricks have been used that can remain exposed.

- No concrete slab for the 1st floor. There is an area of mezzanine flooring which will be

taken care of by black cuddappa slabs supported by concrete beams.

- No concrete pillars. Antique granite columns have been used.

The materials used ensure that the building is visually in harmony with its environment:

- The exposed red brickwork blends in with the red soil of the area.
- So does the sloping roof of terracotta tiles.

Where possible an attempt has been made to reuse building features:

- The teakwood windows are from an old demolished Tamil Chettiar house from the Madurai region.
- The same goes for the granite columns for supporting the verandah.

No concrete mixers or large mechanical devices have been used, so as to minimise reliance on non-green technology and to disturb the land as little as possible.

Any new building construction in a rural setting has often an adverse impact on the site: trees are uprooted, land levelled from natural contours, materials used are not in keeping with the surroundings, the water table is exploited, views altered, any wildlife disturbed. At Swarnabhoomi the impact, it is hoped, has been least in these areas.

Our attempt is to ensure that the house we are constructing is, in every way, in harmony with the natural setting of the Lake area. ❧



The steps have the imprint of leaves engraved into them



The building as it stood at the end of August 09

CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF SRI AUROBINDO'S RELEASE FROM ALIPORE JAIL

By *Mukti Das '76*

On 6th May 2009, Ruby Roy, Indrani Basu Roy and myself, Mukti, visited the cell in the Presidency Jail, from where Sri Aurobindo was released on that very day, exactly a century ago. On reaching the main entrance of the jail premises (which still houses prisoners), we found ourselves among 20 other local devotees who had also come to pay homage. We waited under the shade of a huge mango tree for Tapan Mandal of Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata, who is familiar with the jail authorities and who had taken care of the many formalities and the permission required from the Secretariat for such a visit. Once inside the main

jail, due to security reasons, we stood in a line while three or four officials counted us forward and backwards a few times. Then we were given a token number which we were told not to lose as without the

were escorted by security personnel to the cell.

In front of the cell, a bust of Sri Aurobindo has been erected. We offered flowers and agarbatties around it. We then entered the cell, no, it was more a temple. A divine ambience prevailed in this small room. We meditated for a few minutes and then returned with the security guards.



The house (above) in which Sri Aurobindo lived after his release from jail and the memorial plaque before it (right).

token we would not be let out of the jail later. Soon through a small iron gate we entered another section of the jail. From there we



The Sri Aurobindo Pathamandir centre (right)



At the Pathamandir entrance: Gautam, Indrani, Nabarun, Mukti, Ruby

Again we were counted forward and backwards and after returning our tokens we were all let out.

Once we were outside Tapan accompanied the three of us to Sri Aurobindo Pathamandir, a centre of the Ashram in north Kolkata. Very close by, there were many devotees whom we joined to



Alumni sing Vande Mataram (left to right): Ruby, Rintu, Krishna, Indrani, Gautam, Ritam, Nabarun, Tanmay, Jaidev

gather in front of a two-storied house. This was where Sri Aurobindo had put up for a few days immediately after his release from jail, and it was from this house that he secretly left for Chander nagore. In front of the house, on the footpath,

We then went back to Pathamandir where the commemoration of Sri Aurobindo's release from jail was organised. With the initiative of Tapan we former SAICE students gathered and decided to take part by singing "Vande Mataram".



The gathering at Pathamandir

Gautam Dey was our lead singer with Nabarun, Ritam, Tanmay, Jaidev, Ruby, Indrani, Anuradha (Rintoo), Krishna, and I as the support singers. It was a privilege and an honour to have been given the opportunity to be a part of such a special occasion. Our song was followed by inspiring speeches by some senior as well as some young college-going devotees. There were recitations and songs by local devotees and the programme ended with Prasad distribution.

there was a small memorial to which we paid our homage. We were told that this small but significant memorial was built against all odds.

It gives me great joy to invite all former SAICE students residing in Kolkata to come forward and join us so that we can rise to such occasions whenever they come. Our contact number is available with Tapan Mandal at Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata. ❧

OLGA PASSES AWAY

We would like to inform our readers that our well-loved music teacher Olga is no more. She passed away on 27th July 2009. Those of you who would like to share your memories of her, kindly send us your articles at the earliest.

NICE HOME

By Sachidananda Mohanty '75

As boardings go, “Nice Home” clearly did not match the fame and reputation of its better known counterparts in the Ashram. Its origin has been generally unknown and its residents (five at the peak) lived in relative privacy.

My sister Minoti and I joined the Ashram School in 1966. For several years, we lived in “The Home of Progress”, more popularly known as “The Orissa Boarding”.

Around the early seventies, a decision was taken to restructure the boardings. As a result, several boardings such as “The Home of Progress”, ceased to exist in the manner in which they were created to function. The boarders of the “Home of Progress”, especially the senior ones, males and females, separately joined one of the existing boardings. I was asked to join a residence called “Nice Home”.

To call “Nice Home” a boarding is to stretch the definition of a hostel a bit too far! Two small rooms with a kitchen, an attached bath and a toilet were all that the place boasted. Ideally meant for a couple or a small family, the place became a make-shift boarding for four to five adolescent/adult males.

“Nice Home” was part of a two storey building with four flats. Named “Solace”, the place lay close to the house of Anil Banerjee. Diagonally opposite lay a multipurpose public place where occasional political meetings were held. In the evenings one saw the retired French pensioners play *Boules*. Across the ground, there was the imposing ‘Orissa Guest House’.

Currently there is a fish and vegetable market next to the open ground. In the mid-eighties, across “Solace”, a working women’s hostel had come up. A marriage hall, close by, added to the existing din and bustle.

When we lived at “Nice Home”, there was a lot of open space in the area. Opposite our flat lived the family of Subir Kanti, Rita and Gouranga Nath. Their mother whom I called “Mashima” was an extremely affectionate woman who alas, kept indifferent health.

Subir’s father stayed in Calcutta for business (brick kiln I was told) and visited his family at regular intervals. Above Subir’s flat stayed the newly married Kalu-da and Anjana-ben. The flat opposite theirs was kept empty. It was used by



Fellow-residents of Nice Home (l to r): Surendra, Shaupon, Debabrata and Siddhartha

the owner of the building when he visited Pondicherry from time to time. Madan-da who worked in the playground was the official caretaker of the building. An extremely loving and caring person, he would invite us boarders to meet the house owner over ‘Luchi’ and ‘Alur Dam’. We looked forward to these meetings with eagerness. We celebrated when Sameer was born and shared the joy of Kalu-da and Anjana-ben.

“Solace” had a small garage where we parked our cycles and Kalu-da his Honda two wheeler, a beauty from Singapore. The garage too had a character of its own. The timing of the entry into the garage also signaled to ‘Mashima’ whether we were good boys or bad boys: Shaupon (Boshu) who generally returned late, happened to come early one day and ‘Mashima’ said, “Shaupon Tumi Ajke Bhala Chhela Hoigachho” (“Shaupon, you have become a good boy today!”) Siddhartha-da (Bhabock) recalled: “Shaupon was none too pleased at such remarks!”

When I lived in “Nice Home”, I had Siddhartha-da, Shaupon, Debabrata-da and Surendra Chauhan as companions. The pride of place was the single room and this place was occupied by Debabrata-da. A servant came twice a day to clean up the place and wash our clothes. We had our meals in the “Corner House”.

Looking back, I feel the whole set up was rather small and claustrophobic for four to five persons. To make matters worse, we did not have any fans then. Residents had to be very careful not to disturb one another, especially because their timings of work and rest did not match. We learned to adjust.

“Nice Home” came into existence on 28th February 1970. Inaugurated by Nolini-da, the boarding was meant to primarily cater to those who had opted not to stay in the “Big Boys Boarding”. In fact, Siddhartha-da recalls, they were scouting around for a suitable place which was close to the Ashram and would be affordable. “Solace” came handy. Kireet-bhai was approached and that is how the boarding was started.

In course of time, Surendra Chauhan left for the outside world and so did Debabrata-da to study management at IIM, Ahmedabad. Currently there are three boarders: Siddhartha-da, Shaupon and Anup. The place is no longer a boarding.

Rita’s family in the eighties moved to their new house close to the beach road and Kalu-da to their new place. Madan-da has long since passed away. We cherish his memories and affection and that of Kalu-da, Anjana-ben and Subir’s family.

Despite the narrow space at “Nice Home”, we boarders had our quota of fun. Shaupon kept

teasing me regarding my newly acquired vocabulary. Debabrata-da began his management lessons with our servant. Siddhartha-da, in the late afternoons would announce loudly, “Cold papaya available!” with an exaggerated stress on the last word. And we would troop into the small kitchen for a generous helping.

But nights were most insufferable. The Tamil Rickshaw Puller’s daily drunken bouts of fighting with his wife would compete with the oppressive heat and the mosquitoes. At such times, Kalu-da would come down to teach a lesson to the drunk, while Anjana ben pleaded, “Kalu Jeyona!” (“Kalu don’t go!”). Or



A recent photograph of ‘Solace’ with the author in front

there were hilarious times when Shaupon threw buckets of cold water on drunken men.

At “Nice Home” I cherished the nights when groups of revelers went past, their songs announcing the arrival of Christmas and the New Year! Their presence and their songs have become for me metaphors of my *rite de passage* from adolescence to adulthood.

This period saw a difficult phase of my life. My illness coincided with my mother’s serious malady. 1975 was fast approaching. I’d soon graduate. What would I do? Would I stay in the Ashram or go out? Would I be happy to work in the “Corner House”, to which I was assigned by Ravindra-ji? How would I fulfill my academic aspirations?... It was in “Nice Home” that in 1973 we came to know the passing away of the Mother.

Today, when I cycle past “Nice Home”, I glance at the closed windows and recollect the times spent there. In terms of events and excitement, there was perhaps less compared to other places, but “Nice Home” provided a unique experience at a significant stage of the boarders’ lives. With it, we came of age! ☼

THE SUNDIAL IN THE SCHOOL

Narottam, a student, and his father Gopal Dalmia '81H, trace the origins of the Sundial that stood in the School courtyard for many years. This write-up has been put together after speaking to Batti-da and Kittu-da and corresponding with Pratip-da, Prabir-da and Binu-da, all part of the batch of students which set up the Sundial.

There once stood a sundial in our School, around 15m west of the present-day Aquarium Section.

It all started in Sunil-da's astronomy class. Sunil-da is known to the younger generation only for the music we hear regularly, but his students found him to be the best teacher they studied under. He taught different subjects of science including Botany, Geography, Maths and Astronomy.

The practicals of his astronomy classes were held in the Play Ground premises, on the terrace, east of the Projector Room. In one of his classes the students were: Batti-da (Prabhakar R.), Kittu-da (Reddy), Binu-da (Mukherjee), Prabir-da (Nahar) and Pratip-da (Nahar).

As a project to observe the night sky, they had made theodolites out of tin cylinders used to hold incense sticks. It involved a lot of calculations in Trigonometry to enable the monitoring of star positions in local coordinates. Later, when they observed the sun's path over Pondicherry, as a natural sequel, the idea of setting up a sundial came up.

Now, the question was, where to put it up? The obvious answer was somewhere in the School where it would not be obstructed from sunlight and would be most visible.

They approached Sisir-da and then Pavitra-da. With their approval, the idea was presented to the Mother. She readily poured Her encouragement and blessings on the group and they started to work.

After choosing the site, the design was to be made. Batti-da made one and Sanjeevan-da (the artist) made another. Both were sent to the Mother. Mother chose Batti-da's design. Batti-da's design was simpler whereas Sanjeevan-da's design was more classical with decorative embellishments on top. Batti-da's design was a simple square pillar with a 1m by 1m cube on top. It stood 3m high on a two-stepped circular pedestal.

Once the site was chosen and the design finalised, the calculations were to be done independently and compared among the students. To cross-check, they were done again by everyone together as they were very intricate and extensive.



The Sundial that stood in the School courtyard



On 6th January 1956, on a visit to the School, the Mother inspected the almost-complete Sundial

Next was the erection work. The construction started with the assistance and guidance of an experienced old mason from the Building Service.

When the work was close to completion, the Mother visited the School one afternoon to watch a programme performed by Tulsa, Mina, Hema, Prema, Dipu and others (Chiman-bhai Patel's class), on 6-1-1956, the anniversary of the School Building. Just before the programme, the Mother saw the almost complete Sundial in the presence of Sunil-da and the class, with Pavitra-da, Sisir-da and others in attendance.

Later, in 1977-78, the School underwent many modifications in which the permanent stage was added, the lily pond was constructed in place of the two staircases that divided the "Progrès"

section (old Bakery house) and the "Teachers' Room". Also, the pergola and the Sundial were pulled down to expand the audience area and the space turned into a garden.

Those who have fond memories of the Sundial have mixed feelings about it being pulled down. Many have nostalgic feelings and a sense of lost heritage. Others feel that it was necessary to make place for the audience for which the sacrifice of the Sundial was unavoidable.

In retrospect, the whole class, which took immense interest in the project, found it a memorable experience. As put simply in Binu-da's words: "I must say that it was a remarkable group under a splendid leader/teacher and the whole experience was quite wonderful." ❧

MY FRIEND, SUBHASH

By Anjan Sengupta '79H

Subhash Lall's life was an experience of being one with people. The meaning of his existence was to help people. So often many of us have sought his help in matters not related to his profession and sometimes not even in his field but almost always he has been able to resolve the problem with help from his many friends. That list was long and included scientists and servants, builders and masons, goldsmiths and carpenters, captains and sailors, businessmen and entrepreneurs, IGs and constables... and there were so many more — from the top of the social order to the bottom. I have always felt that honesty was his forte and integrity a motto in his business of 'Investment Services', a sector plagued globally by scams and manipulations. That he did well for himself was because people had immense faith in him and he lived up to their expectations, even more than they could imagine. He gave each one equal priority in his professional dealing and never as a client but always a friend. I remember having visited him in his office a few years ago without prior notice to discuss an insurance package for the family. I had to wait for a considerable time until he had finished with a local farmer, Mr. Pasha, who had come to invest, within his limited means, Rs 80/- a month to insure a life. I do not just speak of equality towards all, but of a quiet quest, a goal that Subhash had set for himself of insuring lives of the common man.

Subhash was from a vanishing breed of men

in whom sincerity and commitment ran high. He never forgot to wish his many friends on eventful dates such as birthdays or anniversaries and would sometimes visit them in person with a bouquet of flowers or a small memento to mark the occasion. The best I have in my collection from him is a smoked-glass frame with the inscription in gold "Om namo bhagavate Sri Aurobindaya" signed by the Mother. The help he rendered to old people was remarkable, even while

having to himself undergo dialysis three times a week. Many mourned his death as a loss of their own son.

The love and affection, respect and admiration that Subhash drew from all was visible from the invitations he received to attend social functions and parties all through the year. The point I am making here is not the number of invitations but the fact that he never turned down any despite his vulnerable health. He himself was never malingering, or making too much of his illness, and was courageous in

eating small quantities of salt-free food and kept the hosts always happy with his total participation. I, for one, always teased him that in his last life he must have been the king in that fable who had exiled his queen because she had proclaimed that her love for him was akin to salt, and so in atonement Subhash should eat salt-free food in this life. And Subhash would chuckle in the manner he always did at the humorous side of life. In contrast, on 9.4.2009 as I watched Subhash in

continued on next page...



ASHRAM TITBITS

FATHER DIED

The father of one of the A5 captains passed away. So she took a few days off from group. When she came back to group one child came up to her and asked her innocently, “Your father has died?” Hearing this, tears welled up in her eyes.

Immediately the kind-hearted child felt bad and replied, “Never mind, your father has gone to Douce Mère but you can have my father instead.”

Hearing this, the captain was very touched.

KARGIL

It was during the Kargil war in May 2001 and

all the children were full of it. So, one morning, the teachers of Delafon, 1st year just had to let them out with it. All of them sat down to draw — that’s their best medium of expression. One little girl asked, “But what is Kargil?”

Before the teacher could answer, a delicate girl got up and very confidently said, “Je vais te dire ce que c’est Kargil. Il faut prendre de l’eau chaude, mettre du sel là-dedans et faire ‘a-a-a-a’ — ça c’est GARGIL!” (“I’ll tell you what is Kargil. You take some hot water, put a little salt in it and do ‘a-a-a-a’ — that is GARGIL!”). ❧

continued from previous page...

his last sublime sleep, memories came gushing in and my eyes brimmed with tears. I did not suppress my emotions and wept bitterly, though we know here about the soul’s progress through various stages, and its unification with its source. But in remembrance of a famous philosopher’s quote “...tenderness in all its earnestness is the most manly of emotions,” I felt somewhat reassured that my experience was after all only manly.

Obviously I was hit very hard by Subhash’s death, as we all were, each in his or her own measure, but since I was alone at home during that period due to unavoidable circumstances, his thoughts occupied my mind all through the day. I was thus inspired to write a poem in his memory. Some lines from the poem:

Kaleidoscope Calling

Memories of a close friend dead
Shake me hard, toe to head
Assuming a bigger stature than
The thought of him can,
At dawn my moist quiet cry
Of a bleeding heart no eyes will pry
Like morning’s soft solitary dew
Cold with east winds that blew.

MY EXPERIENCE OF SUBHASH-DA

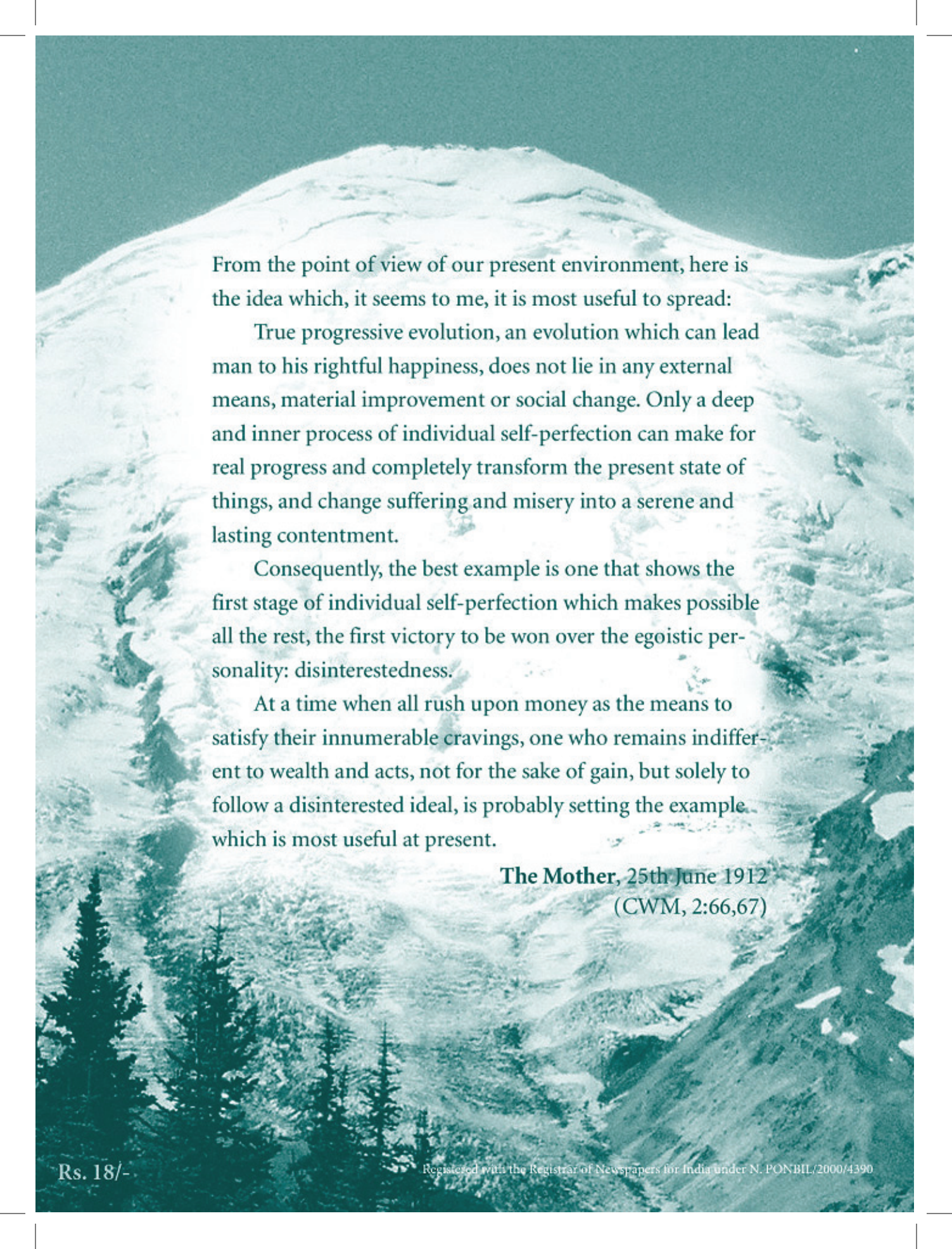
By Gaurav Dave ’K2

Subhash-da was an icon and an inspiration in my life. What inspired me most about him was his attitude towards life. His greatest joy was to share his knowledge with the people around him. He always answered my questions with infinite patience and a smile on his face. He never left any room for doubt in my mind.

When he returned from the hospital, I asked him, “How are you?” His answer was, “I am still fighting.” And he indeed fought to the very end and won the battle.

In my memory he will always be a man who never gave up. He will always occupy a very special place in my heart.

Afternoon’s kaleidoscope has little scope
To shunt me from togetherness and hope
Of friendship, reunion and coffee time
Words of joy pitching bells to chime.
Evening arrives with the shrill whistle
Of a distant train into a station’s bustle
Millions form a crowd of outstretched hands —
I grope for his, but missed commands.... ❧



From the point of view of our present environment, here is the idea which, it seems to me, it is most useful to spread:

True progressive evolution, an evolution which can lead man to his rightful happiness, does not lie in any external means, material improvement or social change. Only a deep and inner process of individual self-perfection can make for real progress and completely transform the present state of things, and change suffering and misery into a serene and lasting contentment.

Consequently, the best example is one that shows the first stage of individual self-perfection which makes possible all the rest, the first victory to be won over the egoistic personality: disinterestedness.

At a time when all rush upon money as the means to satisfy their innumerable cravings, one who remains indifferent to wealth and acts, not for the sake of gain, but solely to follow a disinterested ideal, is probably setting the example which is most useful at present.

The Mother, 25th June 1912
(CWM, 2:66,67)