

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education

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## MAN ON THE MOON "

How SAICE  
celebrated  
man's landing  
on the moon

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

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

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

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Replicas created as part of the Free Progress project to celebrate the lunar landing. In the background is the Saturn V rocket on its launching pad. In the foreground is the LEM (nicknamed Eagle) and an astronaut on the lunar surface.

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Alo Pal '92

A la rentrée nous sommes présentés un emploi du temps vierge”... frown... his head tilts a little towards me, eyebrows raised.... “C’est à dire, c’est à nous de le remplir selon notre choix”. The jaw drops ever so slightly... eyebrows rise a bit higher, the gentleman does not believe a word of what’s coming his way. I explain myself further, “C’est à dire, on étudie ce qu’on veut avec le professeur de notre choix, autant de périodes qu’on veut consacrer au sujet, à la profondeur de notre capacité”....

This is a short conversation I had with a guest at a dinner just outside Paris this November. As I spoke and explained to my new friend how important freedom is in our system, I realised how outlandish it must sound to him.... I also realised how much I loved to say what I did!

...“ni certificat, ni examen, ni notes”... yes, I was proud and grateful — utterly and totally, to be an alumna of SAICE.... “Au plus sept personnes par classe”... by now I had quite inadvertently pushed him into silence and contemplation.

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My little cousin has suddenly grown up — she was born the year I graduated and now I could hear her discuss with her mother — “We have the option, it is up to me to decide which system I choose”, to which my ever-prudent aunt replies, “I would rather you opt for the Fixed System. I don’t know if you can handle the freedom nor am I too sure you know what you want”. My cousin is a little pensive and decides to agree with her mother.

During the next vacation, mother and daughter have a second little talk. “Ma, I would rather opt for Free Progress in the coming session”. “Are you sure?” To which my cousin replies “Yes, Ma, you see I like to study, I know what I want to do, all the bright ones in my class are in the Free System and they are so happy and progressing well, I would like to be there too... to have the freedom to choose and decide”. Not only had my cousin grown, she was beginning to blossom.

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The year was 1981, my very first year in the “Big School” and what an indelible mark those first years in School left me! My time-table for the first two years read: Monday through Saturday — periods 1 and 2 class, 3 and 4 free. I was not the most brilliant, nor the most diligent. In fact I lagged woefully in many a subject. But while many completed as many as eight work books and several chapters of *Calcul Quotidien*, the system permitted me to sit by my teachers and gaze at a huge book I lugged from home called *The Marvels and Mysteries of the World Around Us*. Dear Asha-ben and Savitri-di spent many an hour answering my questions about history and geography and my nascent knowledge of politics and peoples... interests that have remained lifelong and continue to this day to shape my personality and thoughts.

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My uncle, I think, belonged to an era in our School where every day was an adventure. Countless evenings have passed with my sisters and I listening to him, wide-eyed, talk about his days in Tarun-da’s section. What hadn’t their batch attempted! What hadn’t their teachers tried with them! While it must have been a lot of fun, I see how those years marked him, shaped him. The system allowed him to develop a “spirit” that never left him.

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This issue reveals what our students came up with in the late 60s given the right system, setting, encouragement and guidance. The project, its execution, the motivation and the enthusiasm are an eye-opener to what a true spirit of Free Progress can bring out from young students. Attempts at implementing Free Progress have been many all along, some successful and some not, but blessed be our School that allows a walk on less beaten tracks, and nurtures the spirit of freedom and adventure in a domain that has alas become petrified and claustrophobic in the world around us. ☸



# A TRY-ATHLON IN LONDON

Ashika '02

One last lap. My legs are numb, drenched and cold and weigh a hundred odd kilos after the 20km cycling in the rain, up and downhill, and when I'm so tired, my brain functions differently, and I'm convinced of certain weird things. Firstly, if I bothered to look down, I would see half metre wide thighs. If I could only look down.

But no, I had other things on my mind. How much further exactly is the finish? Around that corner, and then around the other, then beyond the crowds, and then double all the way back this distance, and.... Ok, it's high time I stopped straining my grey cells and handed over the controls to the red blood cells. Speed up! Come on!

How was I here? And what was I up to? Well that's another story altogether. I could tell it to you, if you have time — all for a little laughter, and a few tears.

It all started with an email. "Are you ready for a Challenge in 2009?... Interested in having fun, team building, and raising funds for renewable energy projects in developing countries?" it said. Well yes. But a triathlon?...

A few months passed by before my bottled up spirits, threatened by a lack of activity, grabbed me by the collar and forced me to write an email to Koru Foundation, the charity that would sponsor me for a place on the international London Mazda Triathlon, on August 1st.

So there it was — *fait accompli* — I finally sent

an email with my application! And how that was to change things in my life for months to come...

Firstly, I had to be able to raise 250 Pounds for this venture, to support Koru's work. Secondly, I had to be careful I did prepare — enough to make it through to the finish line. And apart from this I also had to gear myself, in accordance with London triathlon rules, within my meager budget...

I am running still, soaked to the bone, as I pass the water sprinklers just around the last corner-but-one to the finish. It feels good. I don't miss taking a sip from every water station either. I can't imagine how different the experience is from the chilling cold I was dreading all along, while I was preparing for D-day. My body's just too heated up with the strain to notice it's raining mostly, and that at times you see vapour rise up from my pores, and I can't think of putting on the jacket I'd so carefully pinned up with my bib number and

tied around my shoulders.

I think of how just over an hour ago, I was reluctantly dipping myself into the icy cold water of the Thames, ready for the start of the race. It was unlike anything I had expected. Swarms of swimmers were soon surrounding me. The whistle blew within a minute of everyone having assembled at the imaginary and highly overcrowded start line. And that was it. They say nothing makes you forget one pain as well as another. As I felt the icy water seep through my wetsuit (which incidently



I realised I had got on front to back) and chill my spine, I felt an elbow jab me in the ribs. And then a foot, and then a hand reach out for my ankle. We were like fish swimming in an overcrowded fishing trawler's tank, one on top of the other! If it were allowed, I'd think trying to swim underwater all the way might have been a less stressful job. But no it's not allowed, and I wonder if wearing your wetsuit front to back is either. Certainly a good method for choking oneself, I gasp.

I am somehow at the finish of the swim distance (750m), after two stretches of flapping around up and down the Thames along the orange buoys. Why did I practise all those days of front crawl, I wonder, as mortal marine combat might have been more indispensable!

It's a run now, past the crowds of cheering onlookers and up the stairs to the bicycle hangar, all the way struggling to get out of my wetsuit. And oh, what a struggle. My wonderfully supportive husband Rosh is somewhere there in the crowd, and though I can't see him, he reminds me much later, laughing, how I probably took the longest time just stepping out of that wetsuit. We'd been warned to practise getting out of our suits earlier, as they shrink and stick to you when wet. But practice getting out of a suit that's worn the wrong way. I'm sure that's one thing they didn't think of. I glance at my new triathlon watch, with disappointment. I'm running a whole 9 minutes slower than I had expected. Hoping to finish the swim way below 20 minutes, I was now at a whole 25! I had to play catch-up on my bike now. "Run, run, hurry, good luck, yeah..." The crowd cheering all the participants sounded like a loud hum. People were waving big banners and balloons. I seemed to be in the middle of festivities, but not yet in a celebratory mood. I smile nonetheless for the camera.



Cycling was definitely the longest event, and one I'd practically not trained for. I had, in fact, picked up my bike a mere ten days before the event. And the only measured distance I'd covered was circling Regents Park (North London)'s circumference repeatedly, after navigating London roads all the way from Brockwell Lido (South London). Now I had a 20km cycling phase ahead, and I thought it was going to be a breeze. Till I saw women, young and old and all sizes whizz past me. I had to step on it....

The last time I had tried on my wetsuit was on the 28th of July, in the Serpentine Lido (Lidos are the equivalent of outdoor pools or ponds, not heated like the indoor swimming pools in London) in Hyde Park, wading through the mushy lake bottom (a deep layer of goose droppings I'm convinced) to test my ability to cover 800m in semi frozen state. Geese had merrily taken over the Lido at this off hour, and they flapped past, veering out of my way. This water, interestingly, was also the most famous spot for professional triathletes to train in central London. Getting my wetsuit had been one thing but swimming in it was a totally new experience: I felt happily buoyant yet, not so gladly, straitjacketed.

Buying my bicycle had been an adventure as well. I run weekend art groups — taking artists to paint at various locations in London. The day I was getting desperate about not yet having found a race bike to hire, I was in the middle of a flower market, called Columbia Road Flower Market, with a dozen artists, when Debbie, my friend and co-artist suggested we should go look for a bike for me in Brick Lane, the nearby second-hand goods market. And find one we did, the one and the only racer left. The gypsy woman who wouldn't reduce the price on her locks, succumbed to a

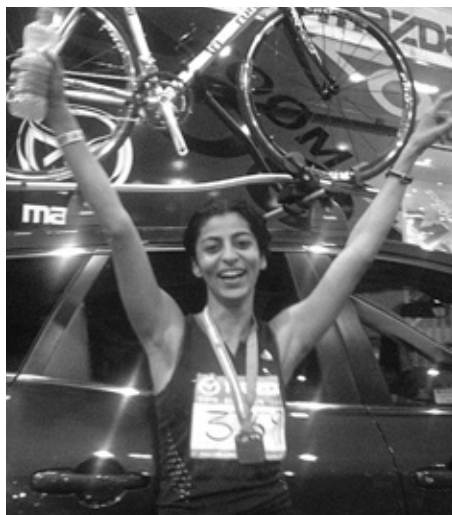
30 pound reduction on her bicycle price. Debbie watched, incredulous, witnessing the outcome of a quick, Indian-bazaar-style bargaining carried out on unsuspecting British soil.

Last but not the least, was my hunt for a wetsuit. Everywhere I enquired seemed to suggest wetsuits for triathlon had to be especially malleable and would not come into my reasonable budget. I started looking for on-hire ones, everywhere from regular sport shops to triathlon clubs. I also seemed to have inspiring meetings with triathletes in strange places — an Ironman triathlete from New Zealand when on a hiking trip, meeting Anna, the Australian triathlete, whom I saw at the Brockwell Lido make no bones of all her competition to glide to the finish first. It's just a pleasure to watch a beautiful performance. That's fortunately also how I meet my short-time triathlon coach, the very understated and polite Stuart Brown. And he's the one who lends me the wetsuit....

Now, before I reach the finish line, exhausted but jubilant, let me explain the workings of my sponsorship. I was running for my sponsor Koru, a foundation which works to provide alternative and cleaner energy options in third world countries. The irony of me as an Indian raising funds for a British charity to go back and help my country and its neighbours didn't escape me. I really wished there were some charity from back home that I could run for... maybe the next time.... But this was a good start — and so was the rate at which my fundraising page<sup>1</sup> was filling. A big

thank you for all of that goes to my lovely donors, friends both old and new, and family, young and old and gold that took a moment out to stop and think, and to help me achieve double the fundraising target.

I completed the triathlon in an hour and fifty four minutes, longer than my hour and a half target, but within my upper limit of two hours<sup>2</sup>. The mood at the finish was too exhilarating for me to mentally pause and rate how I was performing. It seemed heavenly to just reach that finish mark and all else was unimportant. My two most loyal friends — hubby Rosh and Betty from my art group, were way more overjoyed than me and the excitement in the air was infectious. All that was left now was to somehow collect the energy for the two hour hike home, and finally comply with gravity to hit the horizontal plane.



## EPILOGUE

By the time I wind up this article, I'm with eight other trekkers in the lake district of England, trudging over rock and stone in an expedition to test every muscle and bone, attempting the 3 highest peaks (the National 3 Peaks Challenge) in Great Britain. We just summited Ben Nevis in Scotland, Scafell Pike in England has been a bit more naughty and fogged herself up (but how greatly the mountain underestimates our "chhadbena" spirit), and tomorrow we're off to summit Snowdon in Wales. Another triple kind of challenge. Maybe it's a jinx. Or may be we just enjoy challenges so much. ☼

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1. <http://www.justgiving.com/ashikasharma/>

2. The breakdown: 750m Swim: 20.02min; Transition1: 6.58min, 20km Cycle: 50.51min; Transition2: 7.08min; 5km Run: 29.35min. I guess the most obvious self-feedback was I've been sleeping in the transitions! Apart from that, looking up some of my timings from C group days, I realised I performed just as well in my run as I did all those years back, coming first in our mini road race. Considering it was the last of three events, I'm relieved to know, in the competition with myself, at least, I'm winning!

# A TRYST WITH POVERTY AMONG PLENTY

## .... MY JOURNEY BEYOND THE HILLS

*Sharanya Nayak '92H on life among tribals and dalits in the rural hinterland*

I had a growing career as a journalist and was seemingly a very satisfied soul, except for the occasional patriarchal patronizing from male bosses which irked me no end. But all the while I was only trying to feel happy and I knew in my heart that I was not happy. Something was bothering me and I was beginning to feel out of place in the Indian Express office at Bhubaneswar. I used to write for the City pages and edit the State pages of the Bhubaneswar edition of the paper. And as I would read through stories of poverty and exploitation, misery and hunger deaths from different district correspondents I would feel restless and wanted to be out there in those villages trying to help. The injustice and inequality made me angry....

After an ugly spat with my male boss over his sexually-undertoned patronizing, I finally decided to call it quits. As I sat at home wondering what I wanted to do, I was clear I no more wanted to be a journalist. Thus a long-cherished dream now stood abandoned. I decided to work in villages about which I used to edit stories. But how would I do that? So I got in touch with a district



correspondent from Balangir district in Western Orissa who put me through to a person working in ActionAid. I had no idea about what this organization was. Anyway I met this guy and he gave me an assignment of writing a story on drought, migration and hunger and sent me off for a week to Balangir. As I visited village after village and met landless dalit and tribal families struggling to survive, I knew this was my calling. I was surprised at my comfort level communicating with them. I had never thought I could actually live in their village, eat their food and get myself understood!

The media report I published after this visit was well appreciated and after a three-round





interview I got through ActionAid and joined in May 1999 at Balangir. My *guru* for the next three years was a male boss, who was a total contrast to the patriarchal maniac I had at Indian Express. He encouraged me to rough it out in the villages of Balangir and my first fifteen days were spent with a dalit family. I got scorched in the heat of a summer that touched 48 degrees as I spent time understanding rural poverty. I got malaria but he



Kandha man in his village attire

refused to let me come back and I decided to give in my papers! But then I almost died of fever and was brought back to Balangir. I spent the next seven days in hospital flitting in and out of my senses. The fever got me back to my senses though.... I decided I would stay in Balangir. And since then I have been with ActionAid. What drives me to stay on in the hinterlands (while my colleagues who joined with me shifted base and some even rose to

be country directors of agencies) is the challenge to “walk the talk”. Nothing can deter me now.

Working in Balangir among dalit and tribal migrants made me realize that economic wellbeing is not what poverty alleviation is all about. Also that poverty is not an issue of “having and not having”. It is about the social and economic structures people operate in. Thus poverty is caused more from structural deprivation than economic deprivation. For example, dalits in Balangir are landless not because there is no land to till or purchase, but because the villages they live in are ruled by upper caste feudal landlords who don’t allow dalits to purchase land. So many families migrate to cities because the caste factor is blurred in urban centers where “earning and consuming” is above every social reality. Or girl

children are not sent to school, not because there is no money for education; but because the patriarchal families they live in do not deem it relevant for girls to gain education and knowledge. So all deprivations are manifestations of such structural inequities and maladies. There is more to this because when I say structure I do not mean social structures alone, but political and economic structures which include Governments, corporate agencies, media houses, etc which do not respond to needs of people living at different strata and are not accountable for their actions. Hence they create a structural gap. Those who have been denied education and life skills because they were socially subservient cannot negotiate this gap. This has become a vicious circle and for generations they have never been able to rise above this slavery!

It is these realities that shook me from within and drew me further into the tribal hinterlands of South Orissa in 2001. Ever since then I have stayed and worked here in Koraput and Malkangiri and tried to understand the tribal systems. More intriguing than dalit deprivation is tribal poverty. It is poverty among plenty. One has to understand that tribals in a way were more privileged than dalits because they were not untouchables; they traditionally ruled the areas they inhabited and they lived in homogenous contiguous areas physically inaccessible to non-tribals (upper caste feudal landlords and traders). So for a long time they remained untouched by complexities of caste, class and gender. But gradually as non-tribal monarchies laid claim to their territory in the garb of a *zamindari* system and British colonial rule in the garb of “tribal development”, adivasi communities began to disintegrate and, naturally, greater the heterogeneity, greater the identity



Bonda woman picking new paddy stalks for Pus Parab



and cultural crisis. Thus began a downward spiral for tribals of Dandakaranya plateau.

Many civil society activists and Governments all over the world committed to the tribal cause earnestly believe that tribals are backward and need “development”. Perhaps I would have succumbed to the same prejudice had I been sitting



Helping mother by washing utensils

in the Indian Express office at Bhubaneswar. I can only thank the Mother and Sri Aurobindo for guiding me to this Dandakaranya tribal heartland where I discovered life beyond the hills. I not only believe but have firsthand

knowledge that tribals are not backward — they are independent, vibrant communities/societies, not individuals, which, like all of us, are constantly adapting to a changing world. The main difference between tribals and us is that we take their lands and resources, and believe in the dishonest, even racist, claim that it’s for their own good. **It’s conquest, not development!** So what do we need



A tribal hut of mud and bricks

to do and believe in ? What I know and believe in is that we need to support tribal people defend their lives, protect their lands, learn to deal with outside threats and determine their own future.

But the destruction of tribal peoples in the name of “development” — invariably because outsiders want their lands and resources — continues to be the single most acute problem they face. Tribal development all over the globe has been characterized by a grossly insensitive schooling, a complete dependency on welfare programmes destroying self-sufficient livelihood systems. The resulting abject poverty has largely destroyed their way of life, their ingenuity, and demolished their self-esteem. Unable to fathom the changes and cope with the breakdown of their lives and livelihoods, they have become “imbalanced”. And because of this, domestic



Kandha girl in casual attire

violence, distress migration, homicide, etc have become their new characteristics. In fact some communities have the highest suicide rate in the world and every family knows at least one teenager who has killed herself or himself.

No community can be as enterprising and innovative as tribals and you will be surprised to know that one of the nine origins of rice was in the Jeypore tract of Central India (the place about which I am writing!). So tribal communities have given us almost 200 varieties of rice including the wild rice which is still cultivated by a few hill tribes here, 25 varieties of millet, niger, tomato, 12 varieties of maize and indigenous varieties of almost every vegetable you have tasted! And add to this the fact that the Paraja and Kandha tribals of Koraput are one of the best terrace cultivators [see photo on page 5]. Bondas and Didayis of Malkangiri practised most sustainable forms of shifting cultivation till it was condemned, punished and forced to vanish by obnoxious Forest Department officials. And all this comes not from

reading stories but experiencing firsthand. I myself have experienced their knowledge systems regarding weather forecasts which are infallible.

However, everything tribal is not as celebrated as their natural resource management. Women



Office and home demolished in Dantewada

in particular never enjoyed inheritance rights or property rights and were the harder workers while the men loved to laze around and baby sit the children rather than work in the fields. There were other denials like the right to participate in traditional meetings, the decision-making processes, the right to enter religious places; though they could worship there they could not enter the circle of stones placed around the deity's arena. All in all, despite few denials, tribal women enjoyed privileges which so called "modern", casteist and patriarchal societies do not allow — widows could always remarry, men paid bride-price rather than getting dowry and if there was a divorce then women got back bride-price or an equivalent amount, women had the right to choose partners and could not be forced into any marriage, etc. And even among some tribals, women ploughed the fields, which is till today an unimaginable freedom and responsibility given to women in non-tribal societies.

But the experiences that moved me most and strengthened further my resolve to continue working among the tribals of Dandakaranya was my association during the last two years with the internally displaced tribals of conflict zones in undivided Bastar of South Chhattisgarh and

tribals resisting corporate grab of their land and resources in undivided Koraput. In the last half a decade State repression of tribals in Koraput resisting land acquisition, mining and industrialization in their territory has risen manifold. And Governments all over have disposed off their socialist agenda on which they have won election after election to follow the routes tread by private capital. This is evident in the fact that each annual budget has reduced allocations for food, employment and social security as well as basic services and infrastructure.

While the tribals of Koraput faced the bayonets of corporate-backed police forces, the tribals of Bastar faced the bullets of central and state para-military forces at their worst. In Dantewada I visited villages which have been burned down more than 15 times because the Koya tribals here did not support the state sponsored "militia" called *Salwa Judum*. The *Salwa Judum*, a "peace" militia, was started in June 2005 as a people's response to growing Naxal violence. So about 50,000 tribal and non-tribal civilians of Bastar were armed and sheltered in 26 roadside camps of Bijapur and Dantewada subdivisions and a proxy war was launched. But who really was targeted by *Salwa Judum*? Not Naxals who were deft at guerrilla warfare and escaped the bullets of *Salwa Judum* and para-military forces. It was the tribals that were caught in the cross-fire. This resulted in a near civil war that has destroyed over 644 villages and displaced 3.5 lakh tribals in one way or the other. Government figures show 50,000 tribals in their camps.



Even the tube well is not spared

I have gone to several villages to understand the truth behind encounters, have interviewed dozens of tribal women gangraped or enslaved for months by *Salwa Judum* and para-military forces and witnessed the total demolition of the house and office premises of a human rights activist who dared expose these acts of violence

through several cases filed in the Chhattisgarh High Court. For how long are the tribals going to bear the brunt of a brutal and inhuman police force? For how long will middle class *bhadralok* remain silent spectators to the State's colonization of tribal territory to subsidize urban growth in the name of "tribal development"? I believe that some day the tribal spectre will rise and fall heavily on those who repress, loot and pauperize them.

All field experiences and ideological changes in the last ten years have helped me grow as a responsible individual. Initially when I left SAICE in EAVP 3 and came off to Orissa to continue my studies, I was not only very depressed but felt like a fish out of water. I went through severe cultural shocks. At the Ashram one was never aware of sex, gender, colour, caste, religion and definitely not of language differences. But as I joined college here in Orissa, at every step I was rudely reminded that I was a girl; had to abide by rules of gender-determined behaviour. I was from an upper caste and needed to maintain social divisions (the dalit girls in my college used to sit on the back benches!). I was a Hindu and should not trust Christians or Muslims... so on and so forth. I was flooded with a barrage of dos and donts the moment I stepped out of my home. I could not take it and gradually became a social recluse, developed a violent temperament and stopped talking to most people except for my mother. I put myself on a self-destructive gradient. Those were very difficult times.... those four years.

But as I went into graduate college and then on to university at Hyderabad, I began to read a lot of books on socio-political movements and issues affecting the poor as I was a student of Sociology. These books kind of laid the foundations for my political thoughts and career as a journalist because at that point of time I felt development journalism was the best profession for me. And it was also then that I had a great realization — Mother and Sri Aurobindo had something else planned for me and I had a greater responsibility ahead. Perhaps that is why I moved into this world of stark and grim realities. I analyzed my behaviour and thought processes and felt that maybe in the Ashram I had a very cocooned and idealistic

life and hence was unaware of many harsh realities. But facing the realities of this world outside, I developed a strong and courageous personality. And I also realized that the compassionate and sensitive side of me was a boon of my years in the Ashram spent among honest classmates, great teachers and disciplined hostel *didis*. To this day, Ira-di remains one of the greatest influences in my life, more than most of my family. In fact my family, except for my hardy and ever-sacrificing mother whom I love more than anyone else, hardly shaped the way I am today. I must add here that my mother sacrificed her career, her dreams and all of herself so that all three children of hers could go to the best schools in India.



Walking down the hill to weekly market

So half of me was shaped by my Ashram life and teachings of Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the other half came from my years of working with adivasis and dalits of Orissa's hinterland. And had it not been for my disciplined upbringing and spiritual orientation, I would never have remained grounded and true to myself. Today I realize that the day I left SAICE was the day the Mother and Sri Aurobindo sent me on a long mission to fulfill a task set for me — giving tribals I work with the dream of a new horizon and a new life where truth and courage pervade every aspect of life. And my greatest lesson learnt — to take truth for my force and truth for my refuge. But I also realize that *it is easier to fight for principles than to live up to them!* ❧



# IN THE STEPS OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

Alo Sud '92

It all began 20 years ago when the title of a novel riveted my attention in our school library and I just had to borrow it not knowing what the contents might be. *Lust for Life*, by Irving Stone, was the book and from then on has begun my journey into the life of a most passionate individual — Vincent Van Gogh.

Until then the only knowledge I had about him was a misconstrued tale that he had cut his ear off on the whimsical demand of a woman he loved who had challenged him to such an act. Misconstrued, misunderstood, ridiculed, dismissed, these are some characteristic words that would plague and mark the short life of this brilliant painter and personality.

From then on I started to complete my image of the man. The book was an excellent place to start: an amazing and moving account of a passionate and lonely genius as he tries in vain to establish his art and fit in a society that is incapable of accepting a person out of the beaten path. His letters to his brother Theo, who was probably the only individual who understood him and stood by him, give us a moving, authentic and incisive understanding of his soul. Vivid descriptions of his most famous paintings from the book lingered in my mind as I walked along the galleries of the impressionist and post-impressionist artists in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

My sister had read the book with me and was equally moved and it took me almost three years to convince her to come to Europe. "I can't possibly visit the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam without you!" was my way to tempt her... and she finally came! As we walked by canvas after

canvas reflecting Van Gogh's development as an artist right from his dark and sombre days of "The Potato Eater" to the bright, golden images of his stint at Arles to the more mellow yet furious output at Auvers-sur-Oise, his life, his passion, his convictions and his burning desire to express burst out of the frames and spoke to us... and then we stood quietly in front of one of his last paintings, "Les Corbeaux", the yellow wheat fields, the blue sky and the crows... we stood silently for many a moment and when we moved on we were both crying.

A year later my little family moved to a small village in the south-west of The Netherlands in the region of North Brabant... a special place! While all those I met often assumed that living in Holland was synonymous with Amsterdam, (much like Kolkata for all those who live in Bengal!) I was always quick to correct that it was NOT Am-

sterdam but Van Gogh's native province!

One Sunday afternoon while returning from Zundert my eye caught a sign that read "Auvers-sur-Oise: 396 kms" and since that moment I knew my image of the artist would not be complete until I visited this quiet sleepy French village where Van Gogh spent the last three richly productive months of his life and shot himself and died.

In Auvers-sur-Oise we first visited the inn at Auberge Ravoux where he had lived. While waiting for our guide to finish with the earlier group I picked up a French copy of the complete correspondence between Vincent and Theo. At first glance it was evident that this was no correspondence that one can flip through and assimilate but required calm and concentration. His writing



packed in as much passion, content and power as his canvases!

Slowly we climbed the creaking stairs of the inn and got into a tiny little room that was his till he breathed his last: a stark, bare, austere little room. The Authorities of the place wish to one day acquire an original canvas of the artist and hang it on one of the bare walls — an ambitious but fully justified aspiration.... Because he took his life the local church refused to give him a Christian burial and so he was inhumed in the local cemetery by his friends... and while the guide spoke, all I did was visualise and feel the artist living in this very room... and breathing his last.

Our next visit was to the house and garden of Dr. Pierre Gachet, a sympathetic doctor whose portrait by the artist would sell posthumously and hold the record of the highest selling painting for many a year! — An irony for one who managed to sell just the one canvas in his lifetime and lived a life of penury. And there it is, in his garden, the dark orange table at which one can visualise the doctor resting his head in his hand and a melancholy expression on his face — posing as the artist put colour on canvas.

As we looked around and walked in this picturesque village, we traced the routes of many a familiar path trodden by the artist that led us before long to the cemetery: a solemn quiet place with a steady trickle of visitors paying homage to their beloved artist. I stood in silence in front of the tombs of the brothers Vincent and Theo as they aptly rest side by side. With a knot in my heart, a prayer on my lips, I gently placed on their tombs the beautiful yellow roses I had got on the way. As I walked out of the cemetery not very far away I stood in the very lands that were the wheat fields of yore and at a distance I could see the panel depicting the “corbeaux”... here was the spot where Van Gogh, tormented by an intense inner turmoil, shot himself in the stomach; an act that would take his life....

I am not a connoisseur of art. I am not very familiar with what exact artistic movement one associates Van Gogh with. My writing cannot provide the reader any useful information

about his work nor his impact on subsequent generations of painters. But this much I know: to me Van Gogh is an artist in whose paintings I find a resonance, whose art touches me as much with its vibrancy as it does with its poignancy, a person who led his life with a singular sense of urgency — yes, a person whose sheer lust for life itself marked me forever.

Three years later my sister and I paid a visit to Auvers-sur-Oise and as she retraced Van Gogh's days here with the same admiration and love in her heart, I walked behind her, the lines of a song by Don Mclean called “Vincent” echoing in my head....

*[...]Now I understand what you tried to say to me,  
How you suffered for your sanity,  
How you tried to set them free.  
They would not listen, they did not know how.  
Perhaps they'll listen now.*

*For they could not love you,  
But still your love was true.  
And when no hope was left in sight  
On that starry, starry night,  
You took your life, as lovers often do.  
But I could have told you, Vincent,  
This world was never meant for one  
As beautiful as you. ☘*



# ASHRAM PREMIER LEAGUE!

*Arya Yuyutsu '09 on the new face of Ashram cricket*

Cricket uniforms! Coloured stumps! Laptop scoring! Green dugouts! Third umpire decisions! Cricket is no more what it used to be in the Ashram, and a few of the old-timers were incredulous and appalled at this new tournament. The APL (Ashram Premier League) was the topic of too many debates to keep count and D-Groupers used their rassemblements to deliberate on the strengths and weaknesses of L'Avenir Kings and All Stars. Before all this sounds at all relevant, it is necessary to rewind a few months.

Date and place: A random Sunday morning in March at Annexe Cricket Ground. A pitch has been laid out by all 14 players. Seven-a-side cricket has yet to be incorporated by the BCCI but here we are the trendsetters, as with T-20 cricket. People are wearing random trousers and crows have gathered after an arduous search for their breakfast to see a completely pointless match. The guys go in, get bat on ball, a few sixes disturb the crows and squirrels, and in the end it doesn't matter what happened or who did what. Every player's happiness depends on his having faced enough deliveries, bowled a few deliveries and fielded at any place other than fine leg or third man. The 14 pack up, still watched by the now bored and sleepy crows, and go home after yet another totally inconsequential day of cricket.

Date and place: A random Sunday morning in

July at Annexe Cricket Ground. A pitch has been laid out by a group of extremely enthusiastic youngsters who will probably not even be playing in today's matches (yes, there are two matches scheduled for the day). Green dugouts adorn the hockey-field as boys and girls (ah, yes, they too)



from each team are sitting watching the match. Ayan is picking off the singles as a laptop scoreboard keeps count and a big manual scoreboard displays the meaningful numbers. The teams are now distinguishable by more than just contrasting facial expres-

sions as coloured JSASA jerseys mark each team. A wide is now called by an official umpire (did we ever have them here?) wearing his own uniform, vintage JSASA again! Kushal steams in with the new white ball that's bouncing more than an overdrawn cheque, partly because that's what the white ball does and partly because of the well-rolled pitch. The players are giving it their all for every run and fielding attempt while their teammates cheer them on. The poor crows have been relegated to higher perches as spectators include proud fathers, concerned moms, chatty kids and some Ashramites, not to mention photographers and video cams. The match makes a difference to all the 100+ people who signed up for the second season of cricket, a.k.a. APL!

The contrast is stunning. Going through one of the weekly APL SportSpirit Newsletters, you'd





come across an interview with the man behind this idea, the man who refused to take “No” for an answer or even as an exclamation of disapproval: Praveen-bhai. He, in the first interview, expresses the reasons for such a tournament: waning interest in cricket, to generate interest in the game among girls so that the game can be renamed *gentleperson’s game*, and an effort to build a team as opposed to an amalgam of 11 people playing in 3 matches as in our games competitions. By the end of August, as Mihir and Co. were celebrating with the really cool wooden trophy while over 200 people, non-players, had gathered to see the proceedings, the results were there for only the severely blind and bafflingly retarded to miss. Most teams had formed a bond and L’Avenir Kings (Milan’s team) epitomized that; girls had already participated in an all girls’ match with Ayesha slamming two fours on her way to the highest score by a woman in the history of the Ashram; and the hundred odd entries as well as the numerous spectators were testimony enough to the resurgent interest in the game (fewer people turned up for a Ranji match twixt the then champions, Delhi and the favourites Mumbai!).

Apart from the obvious achievements of this tournament, there were many more positives. Personally, the intermixing of people from the

Ashram, young and less young, was the cherry on top of this — do I want to say cake? — event. As cherries go, this was quite the big and juicy one, without that oh-so-annoying seed. People got to know each other better and the priceless advice from the elders was, well, priceless.

Of course, there had to be those who criticized and no article on Oscar Wilde would be complete without the criticism heaped on him, be it relevant to his writing or not. As for the APL, it had more than its fair share of opposition, though I don’t quite know what a “fair share” is, to be honest. There were those who felt, however irrationally, that this tournament was contrary to the spirit of the Ashram (there are always those people, almost stubbornly against anything new and interesting). Others, and it might even include the aforementioned stubborn people, were critical of the show, what with all the food and spectator interest, and believed this was more of a party than a game. Then there was criticism regarding the level of cricket, remarks that were dispelled by the likes of Mihir, Kanav, Ayan, Tararak among others.

In the end, where there’s a pro, there’s always a con! That’s how the guy up there with a capital G made it. Some of the criticism did have a point and will be used to help improve the APL as it heads into season II, quite a pivotal season for the tournament. As for others, turning a couple of deaf ears and blind eyes to boot is often the best policy. The APL revolutionized the system of cricket here and also brought about a sense of belonging to a team, a first for many of us again.

Unintentionally, it also made us students feel like a part of the Ashram, a feeling we scarcely understood before, thanks to the exclusivity of our groupings and interactions. ❧



# TOWARDS A LUMINOUS FUTURE

## MUSICAL PROGRAMME ON THE OCCASION OF THE UNVEILING OF SRI AUROBINDO'S STATUE AT UNESCO

*Anurupa Naik '86*

S ometime in the 1st week of August, I got an urgent call from Shobha-di (Shobha Mitra '58) to come and meet her immediately. I wondered what the urgency was about, since no programme had been planned in the near future. When I went to see her she informed me that the Ashram trustees, on behalf of Dr. Karan Singh, President of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), had asked her to present a small musical composition on the occasion of the installation and unveiling of Sri Aurobindo's statue at UNESCO in Paris. Apparently Dr. Karan Singh had heard some of her earlier compositions on CD and had liked them.

I was aware that some statues of Sri Aurobindo had already been installed at other locations such as the Savitri Bhavan in Auroville, the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan in Kolkata and the Indian Parliament in New Delhi (see *TGC vol. 7, no. 1 of Nov. 2006*). But for a statue to be installed at UNESCO was a different matter altogether. That an international organisation should agree to have the statue of Sri Aurobindo, from among so many world personalities, was symbolically very significant especially since the theme of world unity was central to Sri Aurobindo's vision for the future of humanity.

I came to know later through Lalit '86 that

the statue destined for UNESCO had been kept in "cold" storage for close to four years since permission for the installation was not forthcoming. Then suddenly, days before the end of tenure of the then Director-General of UNESCO, the nod was given for the installation.

16th September 2009 was to be the day of the unveiling of the statue. Time was scarce. We would have to be ready in a month. Four of us were selected to participate: Maurice '75, Harinarayan '83, Joy Chowdhury '75 and myself.

It was decided to have a programme that would combine passages from Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's works with Sanskrit hymns taken mostly from the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. Maurice was to recite most of the passages while the three of us were to sing the hymns. Shobha-di, Ashok Acharya '80, Maurice and Cristof all got together to

work on the passages and hymns: selecting, editing and proofing. The programme was named "Towards a Luminous Future". The idea was to convey Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's vision for humanity's spiritual destiny. Since we were going to present the programme at an international organization located in Paris, it was decided to have some of the texts in English and others in French. It was also decided to prepare 2 brochures to be distributed to the audience



before the programme: a short biographical note on Sri Aurobindo, in English and French, keeping in mind a non-initiated audience and a brochure containing the complete text to be presented in the musical programme.

Since it was the first time that we were attempting a programme with recorded music but live voices, we needed to be sure of synchronizing the voices with the music and with each other. Rehearsals started in right earnest at the studio in Shobha-di's house. As the days flew past and after initial hiccups, the composition began gradually to take shape. The passages from the Master were the basis, while the hymns heightened and intensified the atmosphere. We realized that the programme could not be too long since this was the first time that an uninitiated audience at UNESCO would hear this type of music. After much editing, the duration was brought down to around 30 minutes. Shobha-di wanted the composition to end with Sunil-da's music, so that the strains of this music could spread into the hall of UNESCO for the very first time.

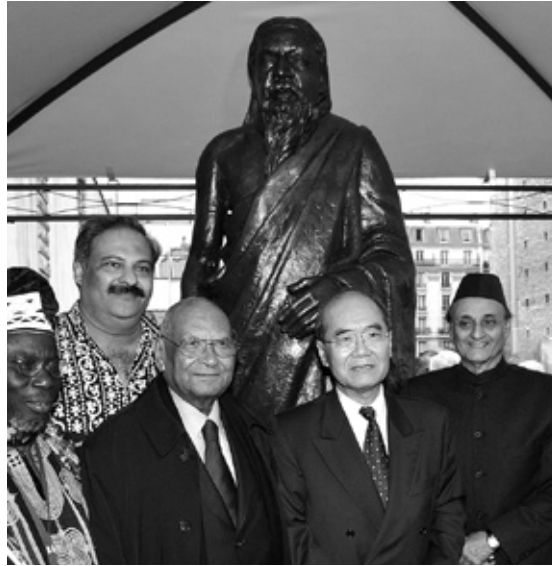
Another aspect that needed organizing was the trip to Paris itself: visas had to be obtained, tickets had to be booked, the logistics had to be coordinated with the ICCR which sent the flight-tickets, the Permanent Delegation of India at UNESCO which was organizing the ceremony and the Ashram which was a great source of comfort and strength in this planning. Maurice looked after all of this and ensured that the team had a smooth, comfortable and happy journey as well as stay in Paris. This thankfully made our focus total on the purpose for which we had been sent to Paris.

As the day of departure approached, we felt the need to rehearse in an auditorium with conditions similar to those we would face at UNESCO. So two rehearsals were arranged at the Sri Aurobindo auditorium at Bharat Nivas in Auroville. Thanks to these we learned to listen to the music and to ourselves on the monitor speakers, to get a feel of the spotlights pointing at us and experience the expanse and the acoustics of an auditorium.

On the eve of our departure we went to Sri Aurobindo's room. Some days earlier, during a rehearsal, Shobha-di had told us that in the context of a programme that she was preparing, she had asked the Mother, "Does Sri Aurobindo come when we call Him during our programmes?" The Mother had answered, "Yes, He does, if the call is sincere." So we went to Sri Aurobindo's room to call Him. We

knew in our heart that we had only to invoke the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's presence during the programme and that They would do the rest. When we came down from Sri Aurobindo's room, Ashok Acharya '80 was there. He informed us that the evening before, he had made 4 copies of the CD containing the recorded music for our programme which we were to carry to Paris. No sooner had the last CD been made than the computer power supply suddenly burnt out completely. This reassured us even more that They were looking after us and that we were in good Hands.

The day of departure arrived and we all left together for Paris. Jean, Joy's companion and former teacher at the Ashram school, also accompanied us. We were glad that he was there since



At the inauguration of the statue: His Excellency Mr Yai, chairman of the UNESCO Executive board, Lalit Verma, Mr Koichuro Matsuura, DG UNESCO, Dr Karan Singh, President, ICCR & Chairman Auroville Foundation



### MR. MATSUURA'S COMMENTS

Observing that the crises that the world is traversing are not only economic and financial, but moral, ethical, and spiritual, Mr Matsura, the Director General of UNESCO, said at the inauguration, "The teachings of Sri Aurobindo... resonate particularly strongly as we search for long-term solutions".

Jean has had a long experience with lighting at the Bharat Nivas auditorium and could help us coordinate better with UNESCO's sound and light technicians. In Paris, we all stayed together at a friend's place and cocooned in their warm hospitality, rehearsed a couple of times everyday, gradually strengthening our team spirit and preparing ourselves inwardly for the final day. On the 15th, i.e. the eve of the programme, we went to the UNESCO headquarters to see the hall and contact the sound and light technicians there. It was a beautiful, large hall for 1356 spectators. The stage was around 29 metres wide but not very deep at 10 metres. We came to know that it was principally used for conferences and seminars. We learned that the ceremony on the 16th would involve the following: The unveiling at 5.30 p.m. of the statue that had been installed at the entrance of the annexe building of UNESCO on Rue Bonvin. This would be followed by a reception in the main building of UNESCO behind the Place des Invalides where Napoleon is buried. Then the "cultural" programme would begin in the Salle 1. The programme would start with speeches from some of the dignitaries present on the occasion: Dr. Karan Singh, President of the ICCR, Ms. Bhaswati Mukherjee, India's ambassador to UNESCO, Mr Koïchiro Matsura, the then Director-General of UNESCO, and Dr. Kapila Vastyan, India's Representative to UNESCO's executive board. This would be followed by our programme and conclude with a Bharatnatyam recital by a renowned dancer from Chennai, Smt. Roja Kannan, accompanied by one of the country's senior-most gurus, Sri Adyar K Lakshmanan.

The momentous day arrived. Luckily for us,

UNESCO had agreed to give us some rehearsal time in the hall in the morning to test the sound system and lighting. In the evening we all went to the venue well in advance and changed in the green room. We, the ladies, were dressed in maroon silk sarees while the men, Maurice and Hari, wore cream sherwanis. We remained quiet and concentrated as we waited for the dignitaries' speeches to end. As we heard the fading lines of "Who" being recited by Dr Karan Singh, we knew that our turn was near. We held hands for a minute in the wings and called out to Them. Then Maurice went on to the stage to give a brief introduction. "Nous partageons avec vous en toute simplicité et humilité cet immense espoir que la vie et l'oeuvre de Sri Aurobindo nous inspirent. Vers un Avenir Lumineux : Une prière de la Terre." The next half hour passed in a trance. As the bright lights dimmed, blue and gold lights lit the stage. The music began. In the silence of the hall, as the prophetic passages from the Master and the Mother rang out intertwined with the soul-stirring Sanskrit hymns, they created a magical atmosphere, not only for the 600 to 700-strong audience, but also for us, the participants. The music and the voices seemed to be borne on wings, with the lights adding to the enchantment. For 30 minutes no one in the audience stirred. As the music neared the end and we sang our lines, "Leaving the past far behind us, let us run towards a luminous future", the golden lights brightened and flooded the stage. Shobha-di's music receded with those wonderful lines from Savitri, both in English and French: "I saw them cross the twilight of an age, the sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn" / "Je les ai vus traverser le crépuscule d'un âge, les enfants aux yeux de soleil d'une aube merveilleuse." As if to herald the marvellous dawn, the first strains of Sunil-da's 1972 music rose in the air and permeated the hall, carrying all of us to greater heights. As the music ended and the lights dimmed, I felt an immense sense of gratitude to Them for having given us this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be Their ambassadors in the world and to carry Their words to a wider audience. We had called Them and They had come. Our purpose had been served. ❧

# MAN ON THE MOON!

## HOW SAICE CELEBRATED MAN'S LANDING ON THE MOON

*Forty years ago, on July 20, 1969, the United States' Apollo 11 became the first manned mission to land on the moon. The achievement fascinated the world. SAICE too was part of the excitement and undertook a project in anticipation of and to celebrate the landing. The project was taken up by the then Free Progress classes led by Tanmaya-da, Guruprasad, etc. The amazing scope and depth of the landmark project and the intensity and passion with which it was executed by the students speak volumes about the possibilities of Free Progress. It remains even today an example we can seek to emulate. Arup Mitra '73, who was a student then and a part of the project, relives the experience.*

When Apollo 8 successfully orbited the moon around Christmas 1968, its astronauts had their first direct view of the lunar surface. Catching attention and triggering excitement, this landmark achievement presaged a mightier event.

As more and more questions about the lunar landing mission dawned on our minds, our teachers pleaded ignorance. But true to the spirit of *Libre Progrès*, they graciously welcomed us to explore the subject and find answers together. "Why not go a step farther and present the facts to the public?" they urged. To us, the prospects of a joint-exploration were as exhilarating as presenting the new knowledge to the public. For this, replica models

of the spacecraft would be built by hand, allowing a deep insight into their functioning.

### REPLICAS OF THE SPACECRAFT

Jean-Pierre Bunel, renamed Guruprasad by the Mother, and fondly nick-named Goupi by

his students, is a Frenchman now settled in Auroville. He was our teacher then and he gave us the lead, ably supported by Tanmaya-da and Krishna-bhai. As a result, French and American magazines started arriving, with *Paris Match* dominating. We voraciously



THE EAGLE HAS LANDED! The LEM (nicknamed Eagle), the astronauts and their scientific apparatus displayed on Tranquility Base.

pored over the material, noting down facts about the spacecraft.

While it was decided to build a model of the Saturn V rocket with its launching tower on a

smaller scale, replicas of all the other parts of the spacecraft would be created to incorporate details. These would include 1) the main capsule holding the three astronauts, to be powered by a battery-celled lamp to offer a view of the intricately-detailed inside, 2) a model of the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) and 3) another model of the capsule connected to the second and third stages of the rocket with the cone that would contain the LEM. Two large 3D maps of the moon and a lunar global atlas would also be constructed. One of the 3D maps would show Tranquility Base where



Measuring the Saturn V rocket. Tanmaya-da, Arup and Geeta Lall at work.

Apollo 11 was expected to land, and the other lightly-cratered landing site would be fabricated to scale with the LEM and the two moon-walkers.

Initially two groups of students were formed. One was to work at the technical lab that was housed within the single-storied building where Knowledge now stands. Its principal task was to recreate the launching tower. And the more populous other group functioning within the school premises would give shape to the parts of the rocket, the lunar map and the soil. The excitement and joy of working together to achieve such an ambitious goal were unparalleled.

The work began on a war footing towards the end of June 1969, merely a month before the scheduled lunar landing. At first, we worked only during school hours. But the yawning gap between our modest output and our ambitious target forced us to undertake additional work



Veena, Geeta, Vikram, Goupi and Ashwin holding a discussion.

after dinner, stretching up to 10-30 pm. When even that proved insufficient, the deadline was extended to 3 am, limiting our sleep to a meager four hours a day during the remaining three weeks! But the daytime's unsolved problems of size, shape and unsuitable material, kept haunting us even through that sparse stretch of sleep!

Led by Goupi and Krishna-bhai and ably assisted by Geeta Lall, Gita Dolia, Datta, Veena, Sumitra, Bhagavat, Vikram and Madhuri, four sub-teams were soon working tirelessly round the clock giving shape to the lunar maps, the landing site and the various spacecraft models. And while Touyamani was entirely crafting the LEM, I was erecting the Saturn V rocket single-handedly.



Rajanikant (extreme right) supervising the exhibition.

Goupi kept a loosely-narrated diary of the work advancing through the various stages. These write-ups in French as well as the photos

appearing in this issue were later incorporated in a handmade album that was presented on his birthday to Tanmaya-da, through the Mother.

*Dans un mois, deux hommes marcheront sur la lune !... Goupi wrote tersely. Trois hommes vont être lancés dans une aventure extraordinaire, pour l'esprit humain, et avec eux, des milliers d'autres qui ont préparé, rêvé, réalisé l'expérience lunaire....La faute n'est pas permise, l'imperfection non plus.*

Meanwhile, Ashwin Barai, known for his skills in carpentry, was deftly leading a team of devoted co-workers, namely, Vivek, Sundar, Rajanikant and several others, in building the launch tower. His task was not only elaborate but stupendous. While the upper tower had to be shaped with precision showing its various storeys, supply pipes and lifts, the lower portion composed of the four caterpillar-chained gigantic chariot had to be minutely carved out of wood — each caterpillar fashioned separately! Added to that were the hazards of working through the night with noisy tools like hammers, mallets and fretsaws. Luckily, the neighbours on Rue Saint Martin were very accommodating and showed an exemplary degree of tolerance.

*J -15 : Le temps s'est passé vite. Les lumières de l'atelier de menuiserie veillent tard...ou tôt ! Les marteaux résonnent encore dans le laboratoire alors que la ville dort déjà depuis longtemps. Dans le calme de l'atelier, on a peine à penser, en ouvrant la porte, qu'une dizaine d'étudiants s'active sur la réalisation de la grande tour de lancement, avec son massif chariot à chenilles.*

*Ce n'est pas le silence ! Marteaux, scies, rabots passent et repassent, sur les planches et les baguettes*

*de bois, les clous s'enfoncent dans un vacarme assourdissant, mais c'est le calme d'un travail collectif, ordonné, joyeux et volontaire. Chacun sait ce qu'il va faire, quand il va faire, les pièces s'emboîtent harmonieusement.... Dans la pièce à côté, penchés sur une multitude de minuscules plaquettes de bois fin, les garçons reconstituent les chenilles du chariot, deux cents petites pièces, de formes précises, à calculer, tracer, couper, coller, aussi fragiles que du verre.*

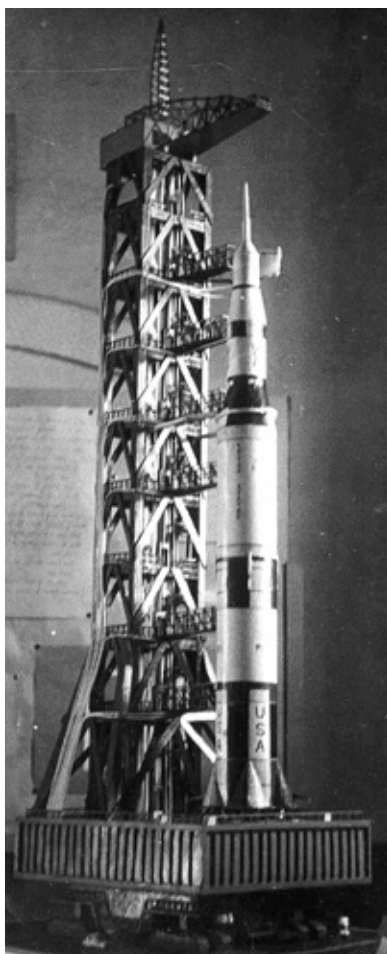
*Les yeux sont rouges quand minuit sonne, les voix s'animent, on combat la fatigue par une sorte d'agitation, surtout en paroles, des éclats de rire se prolongent, un peu nerveux. Il est temps de se coucher !*

While some empty tins of Bournvita recreated the rigid framework of the rocket, finding an apt cylinder to fit its narrower third stage proved harder. But what took the most time was fashioning the details of the escape tower, a tiny rocket fitted to the capsule where the astronauts would be huddled. In case of explosion or fire, this device would allow the astronauts to eject their capsule from the main rocket during liftoff.

*...L'élégante forme élan-  
cée de la fusée Saturne, a fait  
oublier l'empilement des boîtes  
de conserves qui lui ont donné*

*la rigidité de sa structure, travail d'attention ; elle doit être bien droite.*

But lengthy working hours were taking their toll on our nerves. We were all on edge. A small incident would illustrate this. As an artist, I was asked to paint the launching tower after it was ready. But as I undertook the work with my trademark meticulousness, it drew a sharp rebuke from Ashwin. "We don't have eternity," he warned curtly. "So speed up!"



The Saturn V rocket on its launching pad.





Tanmaya-da and Arup preparing the giant stencil from which the 3D lunar map would be made.

*Pendant ce temps, ici, depuis deux semaines, des dizaines de mains ont pétri de la colle, du papier réduit en bouillie, mélangé, pesé, testé. D'autres ont modelé, avec beaucoup de soin et de précision un sol lunaire réduit, réplique aussi exacte que possible du lieu réel d'atterrissage. Le soleil, un projecteur, projette d'impuissantes ombres de relief modelé.*

The repeated failures to obtain the desired texture of the lunar soil caused the work to be restarted a dozen times. It should be noted that our attempt to reconstruct this soil was in consonance to the then available scientific data, while the actual photos would only be published following the 20<sup>th</sup> July landing.

Ultimately, the day arrived when both our rocket and its launching tower were ready. And after transferring the tower from the technical laboratory to the School, the Saturn V rocket assumed its rightful place on top of its launching pad.

That magical sight took our breath away! The spectacle was so captivating that we were unable to turn our eyes away from it. A new wave of enthusiasm swept over us.

While the work of the LEM, the lunar maps and surface were progressing steadily, Touyamani brilliantly conceived the use of the metallic framework of an old umbrella to recreate the four foldable legs of the LEM: « *Tiens, si on utilisait cette baleine de parapluie !* »...« *Bravo ! Le L.E.M. aura des pieds articulés et...solides !* » Quand au cône de protection de ce L.E.M., il repose avec ses quatre pétales mobiles sur le troisième étage de la

*fusée. ... Le LEM sera même habité, ou plutôt accompagné par ses deux astronautes, fils de fer, papier mâché, étoffe et plexiglas. Les couturiers mettent la dernière main à leur combinaison spatiale.*

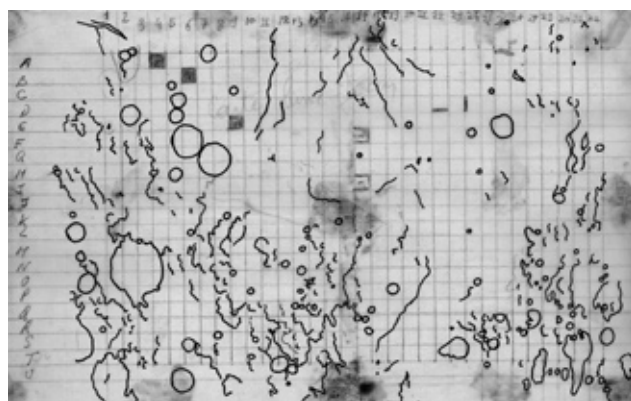
Krishna-bhai dexterously used the metallic top of a bulb as a male device that fitted into the female section of a bulb-holder, fitted at the base of the LEM. This allowed not only the two-portioned LEM to fit and unfit but also to dock with the capsule.

Eventually, all the models were lined up for admiration after the work was done.

*Ils sont prêts, comme pour la série, du plus petit jusqu'au plus grand, de la simple feuille d'aluminium jusqu'à la grande tour et sa fusée, et au sol de la lune, grand comme un lit. Toute la famille de la fusée, capsules Apollo et LEM s'aligne sagement, alors que le gros globe est maintenant figé dans une immobilité cosmique. Les petits cosmonautes de papiers et de toile sont pétrifiés, comme des statues de sel.*

## THE DEMONSTRATION

Our initial aim was to present the complex facts of the lunar mission to the Ashramites, preceding Apollo 11's celebrated landing on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1969. With that aim in sight, we arranged a programme in the school courtyard a couple of



Full view of the completed stencil.

days before the grand event. That was when our models would be displayed for the first time to

the public. An extraordinary turnout rewarded our sleepless nights.

But the joy was short-lived. The mikes started failing right from the start, depriving the big crowd from following the explanations. And we could feel their impatience mounting. Even then, the spectators showed remarkable restraint and kept silent — up to the point when Swadesh-da, impersonating a scientist at the Houston navigational control, yelled twice in quick succession: ‘We have landed on the moon! We have landed on the moon!’ Nothing could have dampened our spirits more than what followed next! As that sentence was the only one that everybody heard in a long while, a commotion ran through the restive crowd. Suddenly, a tall, bearded and pony-tailed American named Austin began clapping and yelling, giving vent to his scorn. As a result, instead of watching what was happening on the stage, people turned around in a body to catch a glimpse of that lone prankster!

We swallowed hard the portents of failure but somehow managed to finish the show. But deep inside we were feeling miserable. Fate had treacherously let us down!

However, a proposal from the electricians of the projector room led by Arun-bhai brought some cheer. He summarily convinced us to redo



Tanmaya-da, Jhumur-di and Lalit leading a group of students in the preparation of the lunar soil.

the squandering of the psychological impact we hoped to recreate ahead of NASA’s main event, the battle had already been lost. And that, alas, could not be undone.

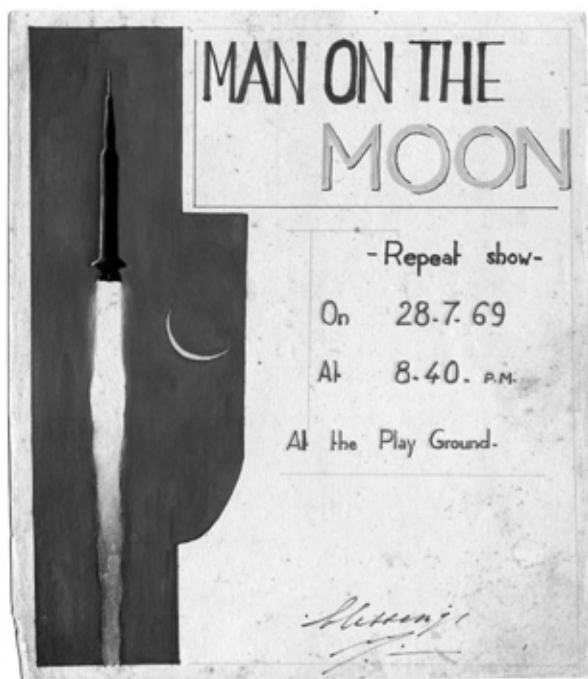
The next day Vijay-bhai (Poddar) came to meet us after school hours. Having understood the merits of our efforts, he wanted to lend his ideas to make the programme a success. ‘First and foremost,’ he advised confidently, ‘the rocket must be made to lift off spewing fire and smoke!’ We were flabbergasted. How on earth could that be possible without burning the rocket and the painstakingly assembled launching pad?

But our minds were racing ahead. After sticking fireproof asbestos paper under the fuselage of the Saturn V model, we mounted a couple of flower pots upside down. In order not to burn the wooden launch pad a way had to be devised to ignite the firework without singeing it. For this, a small table, on which the rocket and the launch pad were erected, was fitted with wheels that allowed it to be pulled away from below the rocket preceding ignition. This would have to be done stealthily, taking advantage of the general confusion in the minds of the spectators, as some special chemicals that Joshi-bhai gave us from the laboratory would start emitting a thick screen of smoke. Slowly at first, then picking up speed, the rocket, which would be attached from above, would be hauled up with the help of invisible nylon guts fitted to a pulley on the then existent G.I. framework that held the 16mm screen at the Playground.



View of the completed 3D lunar map in lengthening shadows.

the programme on another day. ‘This time we won’t fail!’ he assured us consolingly. But with



The poster signed by the Mother.

The programme was scheduled for 28<sup>th</sup> July 1969. When the poster signed by the Mother arrived, everyone pored over it. That brought us a lot of confidence.

Meanwhile, a team led by Rajanikant was rehearsing the throwing of the parachute carrying the capsule for the ultimate splashdown from the terrace of the dortoir. One false manoeuvre and the capsule would hurtle down and break without giving the parachute the time or wind required to open correctly. Simultaneously, another team was practising the meticulous lift off. One wrong step and the launching pad would catch fire and burn up completely.

D-day: everything was in place. The Playground was bursting with spectators and the programme set off with a bang!

*Et le compte à rebours commença, Tanmaya-da reminisced in an untitled essay. Dans le silence que les spectateurs observaient, une voix grave comptait lentement les secondes qui restaient pour que la fusée géante s'élève dans les ténèbres effrayantes de*

*l'espace. Il ne restait plus que quelques moments, quand soudain....! Un éblouissement! Avec son chariot, Saturne V venait d'être éclairée par un gros projecteur.*

*Un bruit sonore, éraillé, éclata dans la pureté de l'air. Tous les yeux se tournèrent vers la base de la fusée. Une flamme éblouissante en sortait et s'écrasait sur la plateforme. Le chariot, submergé par une épaisse fumée, était à peine visible. A l'issue de quelques fractions de seconde, toute la fusée trembla et commença de monter, d'abord lentement, puis se précipita vers le ciel nuageux.*

Even though it was all over within seconds, the thunderous applause that this event drew remains unparalleled in the history of the SAICE! Vijay-bhai's gamble had paid off.

*Ainsi commençait, dans notre « Play Ground », un voyage fantastique de quarante cinq minutes, pendant lesquelles des centaines de personnes se sentirent englouties dans des circonstances inconnues, exactement comme des astronautes.*

With the projection of images from books and magazines through an epidiascope, explanations began to pour out from the Houston master control about the different phases of the lunar mission, from the lift-off to the actual touchdown, culminating in the walk on the moon, achieving



A view of the demonstration at the playground.

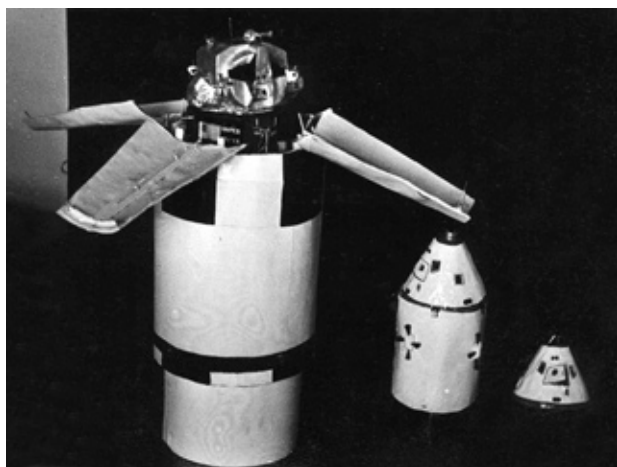
Neil Armstrong's oft quoted: "A small step for a man, but a giant leap for mankind".

Ultimately, when visuals of the splashdown



were being projected, another commotion ran through the audience. "Look up, look up!" the familiar voice of Tanmaya-da warned from Houston. And as everyone's head turned upwards, the spotlights caught a small familiar object descending from the night sky, under a beautifully spread parachute that gently landed on the stage in front of the 16mm screen. Thus, the presentation closed on a high note of success.

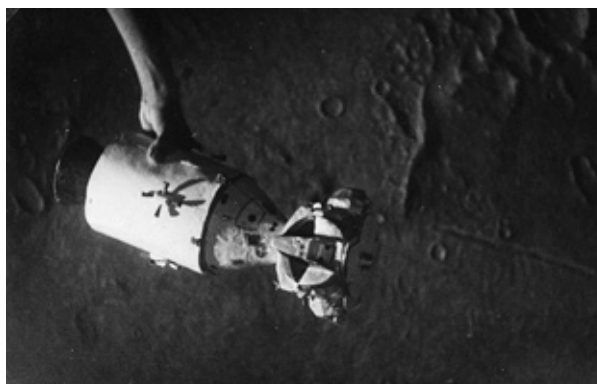
A huge crowd then mobbed us: *La marche lunaire accomplie et l'amerrissage réussi, tout le*



The third stage of the rocket showing the encased LEM, the fourth stage of the rocket, and the individual capsule.

*voyage fini, nous fûmes entourés de gens qui nous serraient la main.*

As a sidelight, a small but significant event gave us a touch of pride for our achievements. Our final presentation had enabled the composer, Sunil-da, to see the proceedings through a window of Gauri-di's room. And he took me aside the next time I dropped by to see him. "I say," he began eagerly, "that roar of the rocket engines was terrific! Would you mind giving me a copy of it?" Amused, I wondered aloud, "But what will you do with it?" He said, "I would like to keep the real noise of a rocket in my collection of sounds." This, no doubt was a hint that the roar would soon find its way into the cantos of Savitri that he then was composing. "Sunil-da," I explained hesitantly, "the roar was produced by a fan blowing into a microphone." This brought about his familiar shy smile. "That indeed was a wonderful

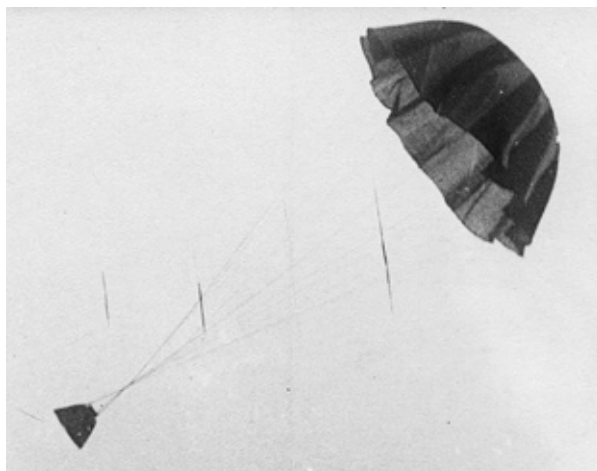


Fourth stage of the rocket docked to the LEM passing over the moon.

innovation!" he said.

But the real reward came a few months later in the form of a letter sent by none other than the secretary of Dr. Werner Von Braun, the real progenitor of the Saturn V vehicle. Earlier, Goupi had sent the photographs of our models to Dr. Von Braun for his comments. Unfortunately, the long passage of four decades has assured that the letter is lost, preventing me from quoting it. Hence, I am left with no other option than to refer to it from memory, which may not be exact but will not change the meaning of his note.

"Dr. Von Braun sends his greetings," the short note began. "He is deeply impressed by the resemblance that your models bear to the actual



The final splashdown.

objects they represent. He has asked me to convey his appreciation to you and to your team."

Thus, the ambitious project attained the climax that it deserved. ❧



# REMEMBERING SVETLANA

*Sunayana Panda '79 on Svetlana Pitoëff*

In the 1970s theatre was just a normal part of our lives. We watched one good play almost every month and everyone had, at one time or the other, been on stage. This is why most of us were in awe of Svetlana. Having been a student of Srimayi, her sister, I knew a bit about how their father, Georges Pitoëff, had been a famous actor and director in Paris. In fact, he was a man of many talents and contributed to every aspect of the plays he produced. Often when we were studying French theatre with Srimayi she would show us pictures of the stage sets that her father had designed when he had produced a certain play. Later, in Knowledge, I heard from Sébastien more about the entire family's involvement with theatre.

Not all learning is done sitting in classrooms. Especially in the Ashram, a lot is absorbed in an informal way and by following examples. Although I worked only in one play directed by Svetlana I learnt a lot about the craft of theatre from her. Looking at it after such a long passage of time I understand how life in the Ashram allowed a student to pick what he or she wanted from a common fund of knowledge and experience, brought to the community from all parts of the world and from different backgrounds.

When I was in Knowledge I joined a group of adults who had started a theatre group and got totally involved in it. Towards the end of the academic year of 1978 we were ready with our

full-length play. It was Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Realising that the subject of the play was not really suitable for the general Ashram audience we decided to hold the performance at the Library, in the verandah, only for our friends.

We were told by Swadhin-da who was the director of the play that each actor could invite five persons, as there was very little space for people to sit. My closest friends were already in the cast of the play so I decided to invite some of my teachers. In Knowledge Sébastien was my French teacher so I invited him, and then mustering enough courage I asked Svetlana if she would come.

I told her that I was playing the role of Nora, the heroine. At that Svetlana told me, "I have seen my mother play that role in Paris. So, I am really not keen on seeing anybody else play it. I hope you won't mind if I don't come." I understood very well what she meant. By then I knew that both her

parents had been famous personalities in the theatre world in Paris. They were known for having brought to the French public the works of non-French playwrights such as Shaw, Chekov, Pirandello, Ibsen and even Shakespeare. I had seen photos of her mother, Ludmilla Pitoëff, playing Joan of Arc in Shaw's 'Saint Joan' and other famous roles. I accepted Svetlana's decision and went home.

On the night of the performance, in the middle of the first scene, I looked in front of me and



saw Svetlana in the audience. After the play she came and told me how much she had enjoyed herself that evening and that she would have missed something if she hadn't come. "My memory of my mother playing Nora remains intact but I have enjoyed this performance too."

The very next month we started working on Sophocles' "Antigone". On the first day of rehearsal I came full of enthusiasm, having managed to learn the first few lines of my dialogue. It was in the old Hall of Harmony and I was standing at the back of the stage. "Walk and come forward as you say the first line," Svetlana instructed me. I did as I was told but hardly had I taken four or five steps when I heard her say "Stop, stop, stop!"

I couldn't understand why she wanted me to stop. "You can't walk like a dancer when you are supposed to be a woman in great distress," she said. That was my first lesson. We sat down and she explained to me that in trying to get into the skin of a character it was important to find the way he or she walks. She told me "Even if the audience can't hear a word you say they should be able to understand what is going on in your mind from the way you walk on stage." In the days that followed I learned many things from her and looked forward to the rehearsals.

A month after we had started working on this play I admitted to Svetlana that I had great difficulty in memorising my lines. The original text was in Greek but we were going to put up on stage a French version of it. I had to sometimes struggle with the meaning of the lines and also keep in mind the right pronunciation. Svetlana asked me to copy out all my lines on paper once every two or three days. She told me it was a technique she had learnt as a young actress. So, I copied out my

lines until I could write them without having to look at them anymore. Also, looking at the lines again and again helped me immensely in remembering the sequence. As my memory of sounds was stronger than my memory of images this method helped me to develop my visual memory too.

Many years passed and in 1995 I was putting on the Mother's play "Vers l'Avenir" on the School stage. I thought I would call Svetlana to watch the dress rehearsal so that I could get a proper feedback. As I was myself playing one of the roles on stage it was impossible for me to understand how the scenes looked from the audience's side. After the dress rehearsal I spoke to Svetlana and she told me what I could do to improve certain parts. Of course, she was full of praises too for all our hard work.

The next day was a day of rest and we were

only going to come back for the final performance. In the morning Svetlana went to Delafon to look for Anjana-ben, who was also in the play, to give her a message for me because she had suddenly thought of something. Anjana-ben and I were both very surprised that Svetlana had gone to such lengths, going up and down the stairs and looking into each room before she could find her, just to tell me to change a certain scene.

Almost at the beginning of the play "Vers l'Avenir", the hero hears the Clairvoyant singing and feels deeply attracted to her. I had had a bright idea when we were fixing the lights for this scene. I thought it would be visually very interesting to have the Clairvoyant, played by me, stand at the lovely balcony above the fish-pond, where Progrès classes are held, lit up from below, and have the hero, played by Debashish Halder, look at me from the stage. On the night of the dress-rehearsal we



did this and everybody said how beautiful the effect was, especially as the scene was accompanied by a song composed by one of the early Ashram musicians. I stood at the balcony softly singing it, actually doing lip-sync, while Madhulita sang it live off-stage on the microphone.

Svetlana had taken the trouble to get her message across to me, asking me not to stand at the balcony while the song was going on. She explained to me later that in the Mother's text the man does not see the woman when she is singing, he only hears her voice. The hero gets to see her only when she comes to his house later to ask for some help. The audience also gets to see her at that time. Svetlana felt that the playwright, in

this case the Mother, had a purpose in leaving the Clairvoyant out of sight during the song. There was a certain dramatic effect which was spoiled by having the man see the woman earlier than he was meant to. "You should respect the playwright's wishes," she explained. However much I was pleased at my own idea, I dropped it as I could see her point.

In Svetlana's passing we have lost a precious source of knowledge and experience. But this fact only makes us all the more conscious that the Mother has created such a wonderful structure where we can learn so much from so many people. We can blossom like lilies in a lake which is made from the water of many streams. ❧

## L'AMOUR POUR LA LANGUE FRANÇAISE

*Dimple Chatterjee '80*

**A** l'école, c'est Svetlana le metteur en scène que nous connaissons. Avec sa sœur Srimayi, elle réalisait des pièces de théâtre d'une grande qualité et nous attendions ces spectacles avec beaucoup d'anticipation.

Mais c'est à Knowledge que nous avons connu Svetlana, le professeur. Nous allions chez elle pour suivre ses cours de français. Généralement, ils avaient lieu à la deuxième période, deux fois par semaine et à l'époque, pour nous, c'était une sortie magique.

Il fallait traverser le parc pour arriver chez elle dans le quartier français. A l'intérieur, la magie continuait... Dans la salle réservée aux cours, nous nous asseyions par terre sur des coussins autour d'une table rectangulaire : Cristof au clavier de la machine à écrire et Sébastien sur le clavier de son orgue formaient la musique de fond tandis que nous nous plongeions dans les pièces du théâtre français.

Il est quasi impossible de me rappeler du programme que nous avons suivi mais ce qui me reste de cette période passée avec elle, c'est

l'amour pour la langue française qu'elle a réussi à nous inculquer. C'est avec elle que nous avons découvert les grands écrivains, la finesse de la langue, la profondeur des pensées.

Dans ce cadre à la fois strict et informel, le contact avec l'âme même de la langue était naturel. Elle nous accueillait avec un sourire, sym-



pathisant avec nous, mais une fois que la classe commençait, c'était du sérieux. À 9h30, elle devenait l'hôtesse parfaite et nous accompagnait jusqu'à l'escalier pour dire au revoir. ❧

# LUMIÈRE!

Cristof

A chaque instant, on pouvait faire un vœu. Quand passait l'étoile filante, entre deux rues, deux scènes, deux classes. « Madame Tout-de-suite », disait d'elle Prem Mallick. Car si l'acteur hésitait, temporisait, bredouillait : « J'essaierai la prochaine fois... », la réplique fusait de la salle : « Non, tout de suite ! »

Une façon, peut-être, d'être prêt à s'envoler à tout moment.

« Méfie-toi des écoles de théâtre », lui avait dit Georges, son père, lorsqu'elle partit à l'aventure en Amérique. « On y apprend souvent à ne plus être soi-même. Suis ton cœur. » Elle suivit ce conseil, et ne fut jamais d'aucune école. Toujours rebelle, détestant l'esprit de clocher, elle pouvait paraître injuste, parfois, dans son intransigeance, quand elle fustigeait la bêtise sous toutes ses formes, qui sont nombreuses. Mais elle voyait juste, tout de suite. Car si l'on attend demain pour avoir raison, on aura déjà tort. « Elle sait », avait un jour répondu Mère à quelque trouble-fête. Pour elle, le théâtre était une fête qu'il ne fallait pas troubler. La vie, une histoire dont chaque petit détail est important.

Mais elle aimait surtout se taire et faire, préférant jouer tous les rôles depuis la salle, et travailler dans les coulisses. Et une histoire mise en scène, vite, passer à la suivante.

Jamais elle n'évoqua, sauf en passant, la correspondance qu'elle eut avec Mère. De si belles lettres, découvertes après son départ. Comme le dit si joliment Persée au jeune prince Iolaus, à propos de sa sœur Andromède, enfant rêveuse

devenue soudain briseuse d'empires et de superstitions centenaires : connaissais-tu si mal celle que tu aimais tant ?

« Tu joueras Andromède », lui avait dit Mère. « Mais Mère, j'ai presque 50 ans ! » Et Mère lui parle alors de jeunesse éternelle... Que font 50 ans dans l'éternité ? L'étoile filante comprend que pour que le temps s'arrête, il ne faut pas s'arrêter.

Mais pour ceux qui ont pris l'habitude de marcher sur le sentier de tout à l'heure, il n'est pas toujours facile de suivre le sentier à toute allure...

Car il fallait vivre vite, avec Georges, toujours à la poursuite d'un nouveau rêve à mettre en scène, d'une nouvelle vision à mettre en lumière. Les pièces se suivent et ne se ressemblent jamais. Malgré les échecs, l'incompréhension, le manque d'argent, l'aventure se poursuit sans relâche. Car si la vieille garde renâcle parfois devant l'audace de Pitoëff, la jeunesse s'enthousiasme.

Mais la guerre éclate. Le rêve se brise. Et le cœur de l'ange des Mathurins. Il jouera une dernière fois *L'Ennemi du Peuple* de Ibsen, bien qu'on le supplie de ne plus monter sur scène.

Quand Georges meurt le 17 septembre 1939, le jour même de son anniversaire, Svetlana est auprès de lui. Depuis des mois, elle ne le quittait plus. Et ce jour-là, elle perd tout. Tout ce qui faisait la trame ténue, lumineuse de sa vie. La trame plus forte que tout que ces sept enfants fous avait tissée autour de Georges et Ludmilla.



Svetlana  
John Lumiere



Georges est parti. Elle ne peut y croire. Comment vivre sans lui, sans son théâtre magique ? Rideau. Heureusement il reste Ludmilla, sa lumière. Son étoile.

Mais le Paris des rêves sans fin de Georges paraît lui-même un rêve si lointain. Tant d'amis ont disparu, fuyant la pluie glacée de décembre,



fuyant les bombes, fuyant la nuit sans fin. Georges, lui aussi, s'en est allé, poursuivre ses mises en scène sous un ciel toujours pur, ouvert, immense, et finalement pas si loin de la terre. Mais comment le rejoindre ? Serait-ce encore possible ? Où ira-t-elle maintenant que tous les chemins se sont effacés ? L'autre amour de sa vie, ce beau comédien de vingt ans, vient de partir pour la guerre, rejoignant les forces alliées en Angleterre. Elle ne le reverra qu'à la fin du cauchemar.

Il faut vivre pourtant. Vivre à tout prix. Y

croire malgré tout. Mais comment ? Par quel miracle ?

En juin 1940, les Allemands entrent dans Paris. Svetlana attrape in extremis le dernier train pour la zone libre. Échappant à l'ultime contrôle d'identité, transie mais libre enfin, elle rejoint la troupe du Rideau Gris. De jeunes comédiens-écrivains qui pour continuer de vivre et d'espérer jouent la comédie devant des salles combles ou vides, mais presque toujours gelées. Eux-mêmes n'ont pas souvent de quoi manger, ou se chauffer. Du marché noir, ils croient rapporter, ce jour de Noël, un paquet de beurre ! Du beurre, miracle ! Mais c'est une brique. On les a roulés, en pleine fête. Adieu les derniers sous ! Et ils éclatent de rire.

Et puis les guerres finissent par finir. Les hommes se lassent de mourir. De voir leurs amis disparaître. De perdre tant d'Apollinaire et d'Alain-Fournier. On reconstruit ce qu'on a détruit.

On essaie de « refaire sa vie ». Mais cette vie-là n'est plus à refaire. Elle est à changer.

« Jolie Lumière », comme l'appelait Mère, un beau jour de 1965, change de vie.

Elle laisse tout derrière elle. Famille, projets, carrière.

Ludmilla rêvait parfois, elle aussi, entre deux rôles, de tout quitter, de partir dans les Himalayas. Ah ! Changer de vie ! Pour de vrai, pas seulement sur une scène de théâtre.

Srimayi suivra ce rêve jusqu'au bout. Et Svetlana aussi.

Dans les bras de Mère, « jolie lumière » retrouve le fil lumineux de la trame, pour tisser une autre vie.

Enfin, elle est arrivée, après tant de bonheur et tant de peine, aux pieds de Celle qui lui dit, avec un sourire si plein de tendresse :

« Je t'ai tenu la main tout le temps. »

Quelle chance nous avons eu, nous aussi, de tenir sa main dans la Sienne. ❧

## SVETLANA INTRODUCES A NOVICE TO THE PRESENTATION OF “PERSEUS THE DELIVERER” (1966)

*Kanu De '68*

*“To Zeus and great Athene build a temple  
Between your sky-topped hills and Ocean’s vasts:  
Her might shall guard your lives and save your  
land”.*

Perseus in Sri Aurobindo’s  
“Perseus the Deliverer”

It was 6.45 in the evening, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1966. Most of the actors of the cast were ready with the last details: dress, make-up etc. Some had withdrawn into their own silent worlds, to better concentrate, I suppose. In 15 minutes the curtain would rise.

As for me, the play had begun already, sometime ago. Walking up and down the corridor, beside the northern wings of the theatre I visualized myself in various moods and actions when a colleague came up to say, “Svetlana wants to see you. She is at the other corridor in front of the ladies’ dressing room.” I went over to meet her.

Svetlana, the director of the play, was also playing the role of the leading lady: Princess Andromeda.

As I approached her, she smiled and stretched out her hand. While shaking it, I felt the strength and controlled energy of this apparently frail lady. Dressed in a white gown, her ample hair combed neatly along her shoulders, she looked a decade younger than her years. “*Bon courage, Kanu!*” I looked into her intense eyes. They radiated a quiet re-assurance. “*Bon courage, Svetlana!*” With that we parted to play out our roles. She, as a flowery princess, and I, her tormentor — a power-hungry maniac — high-priest Polydaon at the temple of Poseidon in Hellenic times (Syria)....

### DIRECTOR AND APPRENTICE

Svetlana had put in considerable time and energy to give a form to the play “Perseus the Deliverer”. It was the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of SAICE.

Before this night, Svetlana had quietly trained me to play priest Polydaon for the past five

months. She had to work with a newcomer in the field. With no stage experience, I did not make her work easy. The play developed slowly in several stages and so did I learn a few things in this field, simultaneously.

Time and again over the days, she showed remarkable patience with my apprenticeship of stage work. While dealing with my lack of experience and other shortcomings, she never showed irritation — an uncommon trait. I know this from my experience with other directors in school plays and choruses in the lower and upper secondary grades. I had never before participated in a 1<sup>st</sup> December show — SAICE’s major stage presentation.

Svetlana had to get down to the very basics for my training. Patience and perseverance were her distinctive features. They would tell in the days ahead.

For me, there was the articulation of words to be learnt, the diction improved, the timing of the repartees regulated, the rhythm and the movement of the play to be felt. Above all the mood of the moment to be sensed and entered into. Finally all these elements had to be harmonized to create a clear picture of the purport of the play and make it living. This work was not going to be easy. It would take time, energy and endurance. Moreover at the beginning, I was shy, nervous, and ill at ease on the stage — a misfit.

Five months were hardly enough for a director to make an effective actor out of a novice. The day I accepted to play the role, after a brief audition following Arati-di’s proposal, I did not know what lay in store for me. Svetlana knew of course and guided me along steadily, on the long route — no super-highway.

(Stage 1) In the course of the training sessions from the first week of July 1966, I was quietly made aware by Svetlana of the need to persevere, to form the base first, consisting of clarity

of speech and proper diction, then to try to reach out to other objectives. A scene had to be played, over and over again, several times for many days, just to get the “feel” of the character, making oneself audible and intelligible at the same time.

(Stage 2) At this point, the actor had to form the character from that “feeling”. It was the contact between actor and character that was to be realized.

(Stage 3) We, the cast, were made to act, to re-enact the same scenes several times in the following months, to find our right contact in order to know intimately the character we were playing and also the characters with whom we played and so to develop the play in an exchange of ideas, emotions, impulses and information.

Svetlana on her part, never tired of showing us what to do and how to play a scene and finally let us perform on our own with our resources. She would intervene after each scene to make corrections and offer suggestions and would then ask us to repeat the scenes all over again to improve our performance with regard to the character interactions, the diction, mood, mode and spirit of the speeches as well as the synchronized gestures and body movements.

## POLYDAON

To play Polydaon I had to know him intimately. I found ambition would lead him to any lengths for the fulfillment of his wild dreams.

In the end, in the “grand finale” he was waiting for, the evil force that inhabited him departs, leaving him to his fate — a dying zombie.

The play is a vivid story of Perseus’ victory over evil forces, followed by the dawn of a new era in ancient Syria.

I would have to know and play the role of a raving, power-hungry, blood-thirsty mad-man with an insatiable lust for women. Good Lord! What a loathsome character! What a challenging role nonetheless! I had unwittingly entered the action-field of the dark forces. Now there could be no retreat. I would have to fight it out, all the while playing the character for the fun of it or for the hell of it! It was the Lord’s play after all. He was the great director, over-seeing the play unfold.

## IN SEARCH OF POLYDAON

Was this work enjoyable, in the formative stages? It was like a long trek through the desert in search of Polydaon, in the sand, the dust and the heat — a venture into the unknown, where one’s potential is put to the test.

We know the being as represented by Polydaon lives in all creatures, including man. It is also known to lie in wait in the human sub-conscious’ lower depths, hidden like Mr. Hyde, (*Ref.: R.L. Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*) to rise at an opportune moment....

The Lord, its creator, knows best what to do with it.

I, as an actor, was interested in tracking it down by the words it spoke, to isolate it for better observation and finally to reveal it in Sri Aurobindo’s play.

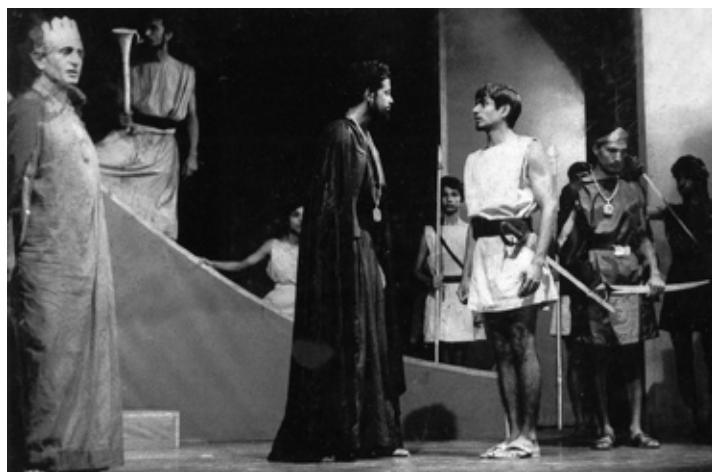
In my efforts to recreate the character, I had to live it out on the stage, necessitating the discharge of much of the body’s vital energy reserves, to express its thoughts and feelings.... After each run-through, (run-throughs of the play were held roughly once every tenth day for the last two months) my energy levels ran down. Sleepless nights followed for days and weeks in a chain. The nervous system was under stress. No doubt! My youth enabled me partly, to beat-off the building pressure and keep going till the first of December in one piece.

A few times during the fourth stage of the training, I would expect a small word of praise from Svetlana after a strenuous work-out, only to be told gently “Things are not in order yet, work remains to be done in some places, the speeches have to acquire meaning. Your outbursts have to be controlled and regulated effectively, to make the point in the context. The mere volume is not enough! You see what I mean?” I found there was method in Polydaon’s madness, as Polonius says of Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play.

I also found that despite my earnest efforts, I sounded a bit hollow at times as Svetlana remarked. This was a bitter pill and some more were to follow in the coming days. I swallowed them all quietly to be on the right track — Svetlana showed me — in my search and revelation of Polydaon,

following the words which Sri Aurobindo had used to characterize this nether being.

Despite her sharp remarks — at times — Svetlana was never short of encouraging the cast to get on with the work at hand. A tap on the shoulder and then a smile followed a mild rebuke and work resumed normally. Probably she knew that “things” would start brightening up at some



The author (in the centre in black) in a scene from the play

point, sometime in the future. I have never seen her in subdued spirits or in tantrums, during the entire production period of the play. “Come, let us get to work,” were all familiar words, I got used to hear. She was cool and balanced in her approach to work.

Svetlana was a professional, a demanding teacher. Her standards were high and she wanted her actors to come up to the level of her expectations. The work had to be done, sooner or later, however slow or inept the actors were. She was always ready to guide and show them the way, fair enough! But results come slowly.... One has to persevere unabated until the end of the road as Svetlana herself showed us by example. She delivered her speeches in a smooth spontaneous manner — a style acquired after years of training and practice.

### TO RICHARD FOR HELP

During the blank phases in the training period when all appeared a void, I would often flash-

back to the first production of the play directed by Norman Dowsett (Senior) for clues, to improve my own performance and also to review the actions in the play as an objective study.

As I lay in bed at night, the images of Richard Pearson often floated before my closed eyes.

Even as a boy of 10, I felt amazed at the happenings on the stage and wanted to play Polydaon's role someday. That night, the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1954, Richard had dominated the play. His clarity of speech and controlled actions were noteworthy even as he thundered around the stage in an awesome manner, electrifying the whole Playground with his performance as Polydaon.

Now twelve years later, at the age of 22, it was my turn to play the same role.... Providence had granted my wish but now with the onus on me, I wondered whether I would perform convincingly at least?

The standards of the dramatic art had already been raised high by our predecessors. We had learned lessons from their work surely!

Now, we the present cast, could not let it slip down. I felt our capabilities were in question and time was running out. I was getting a bit nervous. However, Richard's portrayal was the model which helped me shape my role as Polydaon, besides Svetlana's constant training.

### DEJECTION AND REVOLT

From a strictly dramatic point of view, Polydaon's portrayal would be central for the impact of the play.

I was aware of this and knew the load of responsibility it carried. Arati-di had cautioned me about it. Svetlana had put in a special effort to make me rise to the task.

Now at the end of October, after four months of work, the outcome was only fair, one would say. It did not make an impression as yet. The progress was still to show a rising trend but Svetlana at no point showed fatigue. In stage 4, she persisted



in her efforts to put “life” into the play even as I was still wandering in the desert, trying to find my way in empty space, just plodding along to an unknown destination, having made a few gains only along the way.... Polydaon, like a phantom, still eluded my grasp.

One day, at some point, feeling the load of responsibility too heavy for my shoulders, I paused and reflected. The long trudge and the physical strain were only draining me out. I had lost 12 pounds in 120 days. Tired, I could hardly carry on any longer in the same way. The strenuous work without results was disheartening.

Then in an impulse, I revolted against the whole idea of responsibility (self-imposed).

Success or failure, did it matter anyway? Not at the cost of my well-being and health. No! Absolutely not! So out it went! Hereafter I was going to play my part and that is all! With no worries anymore!

## **A RELIEF**

A while after this resolution, I began to feel de-stressed, to breathe freely again, to like gradually the experience of working on the stage.

Sensing my strained demeanor, Svetlana had told me many times to feel free within, to relax the body and the mind, even in stressful moments of the play to enable the physical and more subtle potentials to harmonize to create the required “effect”. She had even introduced me to some body movements to free me from stress.

However she never came to know my real problem, neither did I, at the time. I was straining too hard in the role, making it a burden rather than a means to creative expression. I myself realized this development late.

Now, after freeing myself of all self-imposed responsibility for the outcome of the play I began to feel free from within and from without. A heavy load was off my back at last! A sigh of relief followed.

(Stage 4) In due time, I realized, I could fit into the different moods of the character with more ease. Svetlana’s repeated advice “feel from within” now began to make sense. This was a relief and handy for the work.

## **A NEW LANDSCAPE**

By the 1<sup>st</sup> week of November, the structure of the play had been laid out; character inter-actions and choreography. The finer points and the dynamics of the aforesaid remained to be worked on and improved further.

Around 10 days later, sometime in the second week of November, there appeared signs of hope.

At last Svetlana arranged a solo training session for me at 5 p.m. We were all alone at the Theatre. After she had made some corrections in the previous night’s work, followed by a moment of concentration, I waited for her orders on the stage.

Standing some 10 meters away in the auditorium with note-book and pen in one hand, she told me to start off with the all important second monologue, an ascending moment in Polydaon’s rise to supreme power over the kingdom of King Cepheus.

That evening, in no hurry, with no worries and feeling free, I went into an easy flight with the speech.

On reaching a high point, I heard Svetlana’s encouraging words “good! good! carry on”, even as I was delivering my lines in a state of excitement. “Now repeat the same, this time walk across the stage and see the lilacs where the spectators will be seated! Go! Sustain the intensity! Sustain the intensity! Don’t drop!” said Svetlana excitedly, clenching her fists.

While I repeated the scene, following her revised choreography, I felt tingling sensations like electric currents rise from my abdomen and mount all the way up into my brain to explode into a thrilling joy. Once! Twice! Thrice! And on they went....

*“I am a god, a mighty dreadful god,  
The multitudinous mover in the sea,  
The shaker of the earth: I am Poseidon.  
Sit’st thou, my elder brother, charioted  
In clouds? Look down, O brother Zeus, and see  
My actions! They merit thy immortal gaze.”*

The contact with the character was made or was it; a touch from the creator of the character. It was a good “feeling”. The “magnificent thirst” was quenched.

That evening I walked into a new realm. No more did I see a void or feel the desert heat or its solitude.

In the middle of the arid waste, a spring had gushed forth in all its beauty and richness and a cool breeze blew over its green expanses, teeming with life, brimming with joy.

Svetlana had led me a long way, to discover a new landscape in self expression, a new art.

### A PIN DROP SILENCE

Coming back to the night of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1966, I went to meet Svetlana after the play. Several members of the cast surrounded her. They were all smiles and exchanged pleasantries in chuckles. Joining the merry group, I waited until she saw me. Then stretching my hand towards her, I noticed a glimmer of approbation in her eyes as we shook hands.

*“Et alors, ça allait Kanu?” “Ça allait il me semble”* I replied; looking at the contented members of the cast around her. We had all rallied round the director for a serious endeavour to make the play engaging and meaningful, hopefully with a measure of success also.

I cannot make a judgment on the end result of the play as I was a participant myself.

I will say this however; at the closing of the curtain, hundreds of spectators were still seated in their places. Hardly anyone had left the auditorium during the three hours of the play.

A deep pin-drop silence reigned over the area for a few seconds, before a general applause followed and slowly the curtain closed for the last time. It had been five months....

*Merci Svetlana! Merci mes collègues, le corps du théâtre!... Svetlana! On vous doit beaucoup pour toutes vos peines à l'égard du travail. C'était une bonne expérience... après tout. Adieu.*

### THE SHRINE

(Stage 5) In the final count after a lapse of 43 years, two points of the dramatic venture's balance sheet may be considered: the investment and the returns.

On the one hand, in order to play a high-

voltage character like Polydaon, there was five months of self-consuming work to be done, six days a week after school hours and group, with a time schedule from 08.00 to 10.00 in the evenings that gradually increased to past midnight in the last week or so. Also the hopeless unproductive initial phase of the training; the disappointments following long fruitless formative stages; the over-spending of vital energy, the physical stress, the numerous sleepless nights, all to play the character, Polydaon. It was a burn-out experience.

The sheer power and beauty of Sri Aurobindo's poetry kept me going and partly my own youth (22 years) till the deadline (1<sup>st</sup> December).

On the other hand, there are also a few precious memories to be cherished as returns.

In the course of the final week or so, a certain “presence” began to make itself felt in the auditorium, following the invocation of the gods for the past several months.

Day by day, as the play developed to take its final form, it appeared as though the “presence” grew stronger until it submerged the whole place in its sublime radiance. Moreover it stayed that way even as we, the actors, were leaving for home well past midnight, steeped in that ambience. We were as though leaving a hallowed place.

In the profound silence of the late November nights, one would muse: Had Zeus come down from the heavens to witness the play? Did Athene rain down her grace on Andromeda when she stood in tears, helpless, by the sea-shore?

In the ethereal atmosphere, the stage seemed transformed into a shrine of splendour where reigned mighty, serene, compassionate Mother Athene's aura.

*“Let Athene's name  
Spread all over the land and in men's hearts.  
Then shall a calm and mighty Will prevail  
And broader minds and kindlier manners reign  
And men grow human, mild and merciful.”*

Andromeda in  
Sri Aurobindo's **Perseus the Deliverer**

Om Namash-sharanam!  
We bow to Thee, O Lord! Our Refuge. ❧



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Rs. 18/-



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