

OXFORD INDIA PAPERBACKS

THE STORY OF  
THE RED FORT

Folk Tales of  
West Bengal

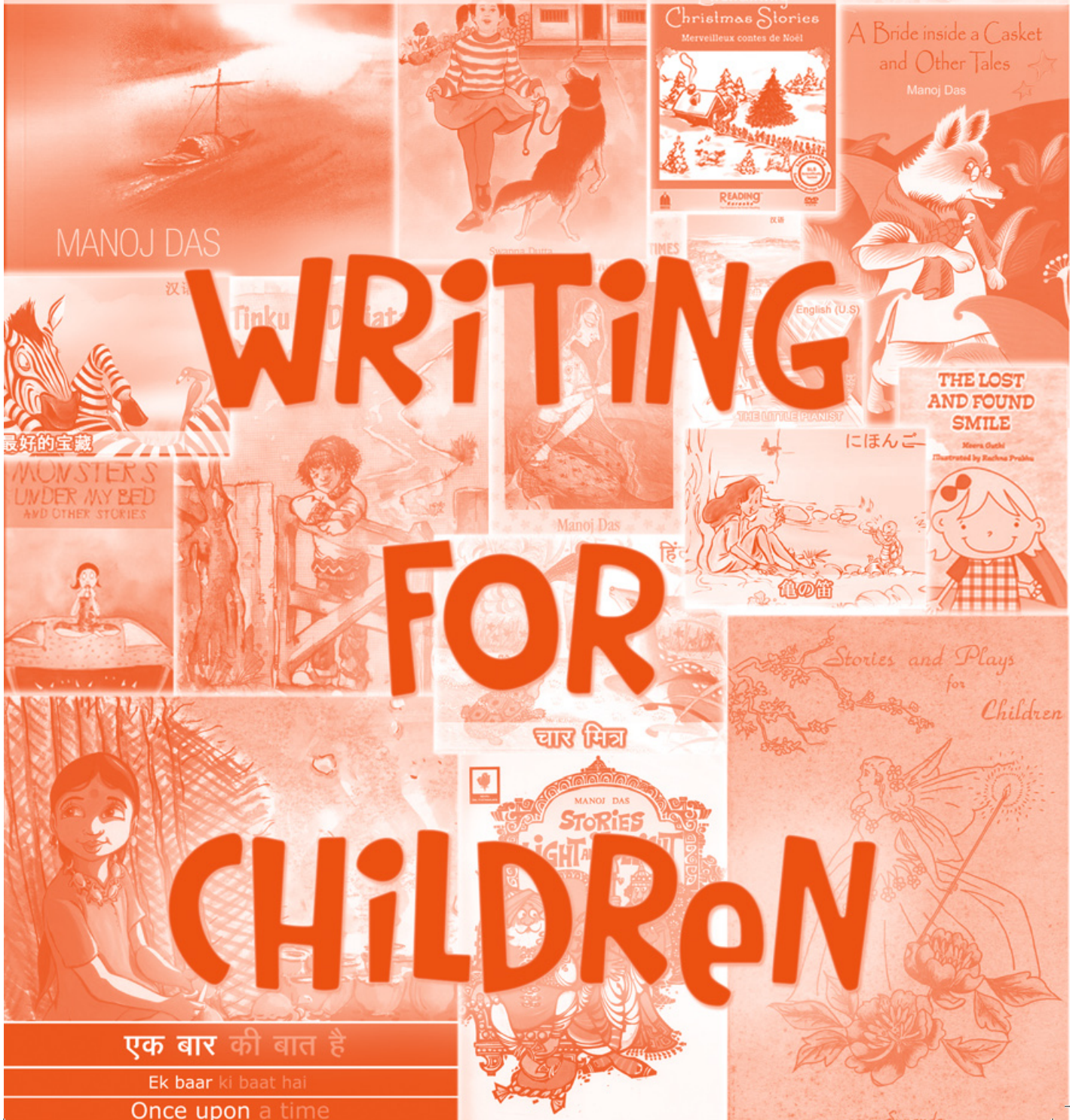
GOLDEN  
SET

AUG 2011 / VOL 11 NUM 4

[www.goldenchain.in](http://www.goldenchain.in)

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



एक बार की बात है

Ek baar ki baat hai

Once upon a time

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

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

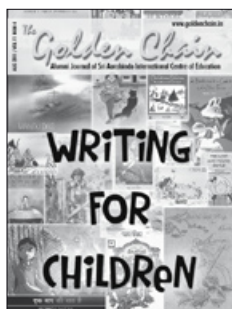
Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

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On the Cover: Book covers and Bookbox images of children's stories.

*The Golden Chain*

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Gopal '90

Once upon a time there lived a king named Harishchandra. He was a noble, just and caring ruler and always true to his word. It is said that once, the great sage Vishwamitra, invoking a promise Harishchandra had made to him in a dream, demanded his kingdom. Harishchandra did not hesitate; he donated his entire kingdom to the sage and walked away with his wife and son.

The king, now penniless, left for the holy town of Kashi. But the sage proclaimed that for an act of donation to be completed, an additional amount had to be paid as Dakshina. Harishchandra, with nothing to give, had to sell his wife and son to a Brahmin Grihastha and himself to a guard at the cremation ground, to pay for the Dakshina.

The king, his wife and son had to sustain tremendous hardships fulfilling their duties. Harishchandra helped the guard cremate the dead bodies, while his wife and son were used as household help at the house of the Brahmin.

One evening when Harishchandra's son was in the garden plucking flowers for his master's prayer, he was bitten by a snake. The young boy died within minutes. His mother, heart-broken, having nobody to help her, herself carried his body to the cremation grounds. Initially Harishchandra did not recognise his wife and son, and was shocked when he did. But Harishchandra was still duty-bound to perform the cremation only after the tax was paid. His wife then offered as tax, half of her lone possession, her saree....

As a very young child, I was lying in bed convalescing from an illness, when my mother was reading out the story of King Harishchandra to me. As the story progressed, it seems I became more and more silent and my mother more engrossed in telling the story. Suddenly she heard a stifled sound. She looked up from the Amar Chitra Katha and found me on the verge of tears.

Maybe it was my first encounter with a tragic story, with the terrible injustice of fate.... Whatever it was, it demonstrates just how deeply stories touch children when they are still sensitive and impressionable.

As children we live in a world of stories. Our parents recount stories, teachers tell us stories for special occasions (many still remember Amla-di's fairy tales or Vimal-ben's tales of Shivaji).

Stories move us, they fire our imagination. They also shape us. Their truths have a profound effect on us because they are presented, not as sermons, but through the consequences of actions in the outcome of a story. By living vicariously through the characters we learn about life and the forces at play in the world.

Since time immemorial, myths, legends, folk tales have served to explain the world around us, have moulded our reality. They have also been great preservers of the culture, thought and values of a people. It is fascinating to think that stories from the Mahabharata or the Ramayana have been told by Indian parents to their children from generation to generation, over centuries.

The insights contained in these myths — psychological, occult, or even spiritual — are frequently expressed through metaphors and symbols and reveal new meanings as we mature and develop a deeper awareness of ourselves.

If our epics and myths are part of our race memories, the bedtime stories we are told as children also surely have a subconscious influence on our individual identities, on the meaning we give the events and circumstances we encounter later in life, the narrative that we infuse into our own story. How important it is then to expose children to the right stories, to characters that epitomize courage, nobility, truthfulness, to personalities like King Harishchandra.

Fortunately, like most Indian stories, the story of Harishchandra ultimately ends happily. Just as Harishchandra's wife is about to give him half her saree as a fee for the cremation of their son, the Devas and sage Vishwamitra manifest on the scene, and praise Harishchandra for his steadfastness in holding on to truth. They bring his son back to life and offer Harishchandra and his wife a place in heaven where they 'live' happily ever after!

In this issue we present some of those who write stories for children. ❧

# ON ARCHITECTING KNOWLEDGE

*An interview with Arnab Bishnu Chowdhury '95*

***You were a key member for the creation of the multimedia film 'Evolution Fast-Forward' that was screened recently in the Hall of Harmony. Can you tell us something about that project? What does the film set out to do? What is the strength of multimedia in presenting what are essentially abstract concepts? How were you and your team at Ninād involved? What was the experience like?***

*Evolution Fast-Forward* innovatively uses the digital medium as contemporary computer-based cine art while presenting the science of Life that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have envisioned i.e. Integral Yoga. This opening episode is about the evolutionary crisis, the two negations and the synthesis of Consciousness and Force. We have leveraged certain universal symbols in multimedia to 'connect' to our target audience — an example being Rodin's *Le Penseur* to depict the evolutionary crisis, a symbol we all know from our PED competition cards. The challenge is in engaging the audience that broadly consists of two categories: a) those who are aware of the Aurobindonian world-view and b) those who haven't read or heard about Integral Yoga but are seekers in their own right. Another underlying challenge lay in creating a film that could proactively engage a young audience (say the 13+ YouTube or Facebook generation). Since our average attention span hovers around 20 odd minutes especially on the Internet, now you know why Episode 1 was kept at 22 minutes! What

is different about this film is that, unlike most other films, it doesn't look into the devotional (*bhakti*) aspect of Sri Aurobindo but directly presents Sri Aurobindo as a Life-Scientist resolving the evolutionary crisis.

I composed the music and sound design entirely on my laptop using software synthesizers and sound processing software with various musical genres — a challenge I gave myself. A 'summary' of this challenge and experience emerged in the form of an inspired prose-poem which is included in the dvd inlay. Additionally, I along with my team at Ninād, was involved in the smoothening and pacing of the script.

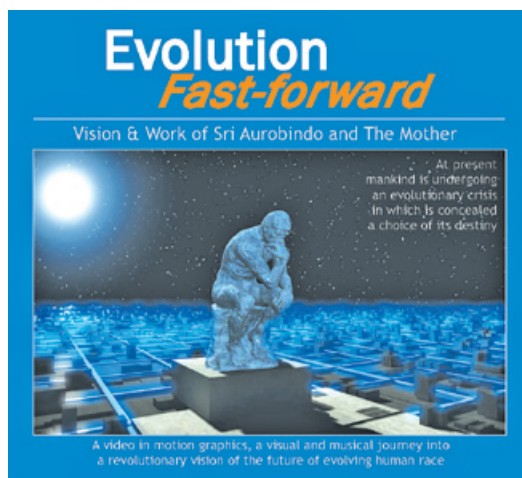
One particularly deep experience emerged when I had to compose the music for a long quotation from *Savitri's* Book VII, Canto IV ('I have mapped the heavens and analysed the stars ...'). Initially,

I was wondering how Sunil-da inspired himself over the years. I recall reading the passage aloud late one night and composing much of the musical motif in sleep. It was a moment of 'Aha' in the morning.

Overall, the experience was a fulfilling one that witnessed a seamless fusion of visual-word-music as a troika.

The film seems to have been well-received both in Auroville and Ashram

spaces. It was recently presented at the AUM conference at Lodi, California. There is also a YouTube channel where the film is available for free viewing in two parts and promotion of the DVDs is at [www.sopanam.org](http://www.sopanam.org).



**You are the founder of Ninād which “catalyses research-oriented and strategy consulting initiatives that have led to the Integrality Matrix™ — an organisational development and learning framework inspired by the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the teachings of the Bhagawad Gita”. Can you recount to us how you arrived at Integrality Matrix™ and how it is inspired by Integral Yoga? How do you apply it?**

Since adolescence, I was always fascinated by the notion of seeing myself as an ‘architect’ — whether with music as a composer or with words as writer/poet. In my professional life, I was on the same path with multimedia content and technology as a computer music researcher at XTCsound Lab in 1999 — a research lab from MIT Media Lab’s ‘Music, Mind and Machine Group’ and Analog Devices Inc. (a known



Arnab at the piano at SAICE

US-based semiconductor company). At XTCsound Lab, I got to explore how lateral connections work in the field of *cognition - music composition - interactive learning media - emotional perception - human factors - Indian Classical Ragas as design patterns - Artificial Intelligence*. I also got to collaborate with some of the world’s leading researchers in digital audio, music and media technology both in the academic world (MIT Media Lab, Princeton University, University of Bath, Israeli Institute of Technology) and corporate organizations (Denon, Harman). The technology we researched with was Csound — it became a parent technology component integrated into MPEG 4 Structured Audio, Taito Karaoke-on-Demand Machine and the One Laptop per Child’s (OLPC) XO Laptop. Interestingly all 3 projects are ranked among the top 25 products and platforms spun of MIT Media Lab research over the past 25 years. MPEG 4 is the leading format and standard for compressing and delivering digital media. Taito Karaoke-on-Demand Machine is a Karaoke system

wherein if you sing out of tune (*besur*) and tempo (*betaal*), the music automatically adjusts your voice output to a certain extent, making it *surila* ‘bathroom singing’! ☺

During this period, while collaborating (being managed and managing) with teams from various cultures across continents, I realized that the fountainhead we have here called Integral Yoga is a definitive Source for inspiration for developing an innovative and holistic management paradigm. Additionally, while consulting for Infosys Technol-

ogies, a meeting with Mr. Narayan Murthy (founder of Infosys Technologies and a man of humility and a strong sense of ethics) convinced me that Indian organizations need to tap into their ‘Indianness’ deeply and smartly instead of merely ‘photocopying’ existing management models coming from the West.

What emerged from all the experiences (both professional and spiritual) was Ninād ([www.ninad.in](http://www.ninad.in)) and the notion of Integrality which I take as *the motivation to see truth in all possible dimensions at all given times, to build a synapse between these and to discover truth patterns*. Additionally while observing dynamics within individuals (starting with myself), teams and organizations was a realization that one can only ‘do’ (*swadharma*) what one truly ‘is’ intrinsically (*swabhava*) — a key concept from the *Bhagavad Gita* — something I had imbibed in Hriday-da’s class in EAVP 3.

Integrality Matrix essentially is a framework of processes that helps an entrepreneur or a team to map its ‘swadharma’ according to its determined ‘swabhava’. Ninād is now a consultant in Knowledge Management; in terms of research and consulting, we often accompany the entrepreneurial/directorial team to ‘architect’ processes that could either determine a solution to a problem or to take a future directive that could involve ideating whether a new

product will work or not, or even ideating new ways to outreach/market a service holistically in a challenging business scenario. Over the years, we have researched and consulted for organizations such as UNESCO, University of Florence, Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, Institut Français de Pondichéry and social entrepreneurial adventures that include some of the Aurovillian units.

To share a concrete example of implementing aspects of Integrality Matrix:

In 2007, we were commissioned to moderate a Communities of Practice (CoP) under the Higher Education Division of UNESCO. It had focused themes and invited approximately 80 UNESCO Chair holders worldwide who were engaged in research in the domain of 'Culture of Peace'. A Communities of Practice (CoP) is simply a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. United Nations defines 'Culture of Peace' as 'a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations'. To technically facilitate this dialogue, UNESCO had built an Internet-based software. However, the challenges were obviously human or rather culture-specific. When you have strong-willed senior researchers from Israel facing their counterparts from the Arab world, how do you build a common framework for dialogue? We had to spawn themes that connected the researchers on the humanism front while facilitating the CoP group to see life, its motives and movements from 'near to far' (one of the 3 principles of education laid down by Sri Aurobindo) rather than finding faults with the apparent political enemy. More concretely, we started discussions — say after a bomb blast in Palestine, on the extent of violence in the physical and metaphysical realms starting with the victims, then its administrators including the perpetrators. Delving into violence in the metaphysical realm helped bring out some amazing insights from the researchers with their different inter-religious and intercultural upbringing, which finally led to the creation of a monograph.



Discussion on Auroville at "Dialogues en Humanité" — a conference at Lyon

***Before coming back to Pondy and founding Ninād, you were busy with software-digital music-multimedia in Bangalore. What was that period like? That was also when you designed 'Super Yuki' — an innovative e-Learning software suite for children to creatively learn and apply digital music and media which was influenced by your education at SAICE. Can you tell us something about that?***

From early 1996 till mid 2000, I was based in Bangalore, witnessing the boom and bust of the dotcom trajectory. The information technology industry was flowering up like the cottage industry. I worked in projects that included the development of computer games, simulations and later shifted to computer music research.

Yes, 'Super Yuki' was a special experience where I came in as a software designer combining my skills in software process design, game theory, basic Western classical music theory, media design and project management. The challenge lay in designing an innovative pedagogy to create digital music composition software for a rather challenging audience — Japanese primary school children. The client — NEC Corporation's educational systems division with their Japanese team of educational psychologists along with media and music software designers wanted an engaging way to let the children 'explore' and 'compose' music with staff notation software. I recall creating a digital musical learning process that lets the child 'paint' the notes on a free canvas without a given key and time signatures and



rules of the measure at the outset. My objective was to let the child explore, feel and play electronic music with little assistance from a trainer and then subsequently get to learn, read, and appreciate the Western notation system. The music composition tool — Super Yuki — combined the visual and musical intelligences, and the design was critically acclaimed by our Japanese counterparts. It also resonated with the core values of Shin'ichi Suzuki — the founder of the Suzuki method, a major influence in Japanese music teaching methodology.

More importantly, Super Yuki's pedagogy stemmed from my foundation in Integral Education that helped imagine-visualise-anticipate the experiential learning value both from a learner's and teacher's perspective.

***Today you are a member of the research group that creates the Ashram's Annual Report of Research Activities that gets submitted to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, under the Indian Ministry of Science and Technology. I believe your focus has been on SAICE. What are the challenges of presenting the work done at SAICE in its unique environment, in a language and form appropriate for formal research? Is there anything that needs to be done differently by the teachers (e.g. target-setting, detailed observation, documentation) so that the educational research becomes more rigorous? Would that benefit SAICE?***

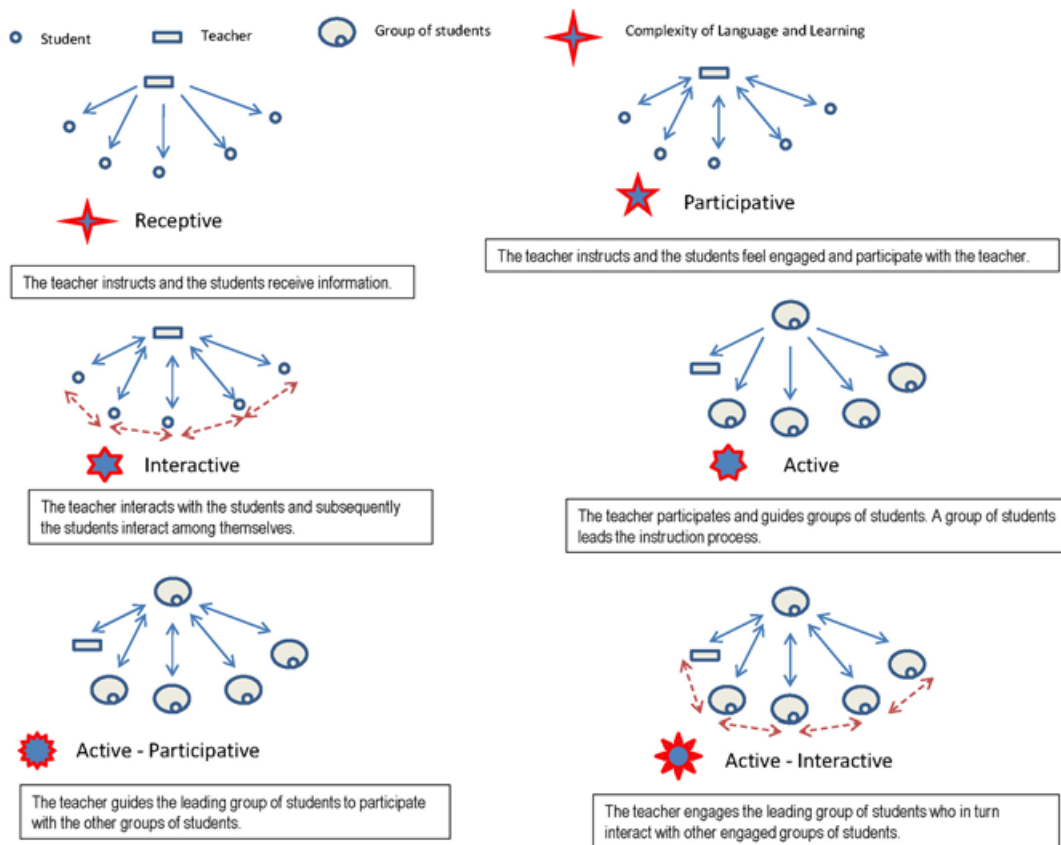
A few years ago, a senior manager at UNESCO upon hearing about our alma mater, asked me, "What is the induction program that new teachers have to undergo?" It wasn't the easiest question to answer — more of a googly actually. An induction program as understood by UNESCO and most of the educational institutions in the world is not something we really have. Yet we have a multi-layered 'induction' process that includes being a member of the Ashram community or being an ex-student, which certainly helps the 'candidate' to get a feel of the Spirit of SAICE, guidelines in the form of all the literature on Integral Education and the presence of senior teachers and sadhaks as guides.

Similarly, creating an engaging action-research report on SAICE with a scientific rigour for the Indian government has its 'googly' challenges. In the context of the annual research report on SAICE, the overall objective is to show that our alma mater helps to nurture an integral personality and not "educate" children in a way most other schools in India do.

I start with the following conviction: the core of SAICE founded several decades ago by the Mother is so innovative and revolutionary that we have an endless fountainhead of inspiration in the form of Integral Education.

There are a couple of issues one needs to acknowledge. I have to be cautious of which aspect of Integral Education-related taxonomy I convey to our well-respected audience — who are unlikely to be familiar with the intricacies of terms such as 'vital', say in the context of 'vital education'. The key is to define and explain contextually and use terms that our audience would relate to. Secondly, I need to adhere to the norms of 'action-research' as they would normally perceive, while providing evidence. Coming to evidence, since our educational institution (barring the PED) is not into quantitative assessment, the action-research cannot have quantitative evaluation outputs. Therefore innovation lies in coming up with interesting qualitative evaluation techniques and models to convey the output as insights, after carrying out research in the most unobtrusive, non-leading ways so as not to disturb or probe teachers. Most teachers have been very forthcoming and are very keen to discuss their painstaking experiments and experiences. So that has been very satisfying and a lot more is ready for discovery!

My approach has been to consciously 'feel' a specific theme that is directly aligned with the goals of Integral Education after interacting with different sets of teachers each year. Next, I place myself into that teacher's shoes and leverage my stint as a teacher in the Free Progress System (in EAVP 5 and 6, where I played the role of a pedagogical guide to students who conceived their own projects at their own pace). Additionally, I connect my professional experiences to come up with a suitable framework that adheres to



The visual mnemonics for qualitative evaluation

action-research. What follows this preparation mentioned above are several months of interaction with those teachers (related to the chosen theme) and their students to emerge with hands-on case studies that support the chosen theme and show how it develops a certain aspect of the student's personality and contributes to his integral growth.

For example, for the year 2010-11, the theme that emerged was 'Language as a medium of Discovery and Expression' that featured experiential case studies from different teachers teaching at different levels ranging from Kindergarten to EAVP 6. The report intended to show that teachers of SAICE use language to help students to correlate: 1. (i) discovering the world and (ii) discovering the experiences within themselves and 2. Expressing and articulating their experience with clarity and elegance.

As a research output, I conceived of a set of visual mnemonics that showcased the increasingly

rich interaction between teacher, students, peers and the complexity of learning that tend to indicate the development of an integral personality. In this edition of the report, the set of visual mnemonics became the qualitative model of evaluating Learning Modes as observed in the case studies.

What is quite interesting is the depth of mutual learning that actually takes place between teachers and students — at all levels. Perhaps that's the reason we have some teachers remaining so full of energy for so many decades! Formal research in education is perhaps not the mandate of teachers at SAICE but maybe a platform for sharing experiences could enrich and help teachers to help themselves and their students to become better co-students of Life.

*You have written for various journals and dailies in India and abroad (MIT Technology Review, Financial Times, La Revue Agir, Club*



*of Amsterdam Journal, Hindu Business Line, The New Indian Express, Mother India etc.) on quite a wide variety of subjects. Can you tell us something about your articles? How do you adjust to different readerships? Is there a common thread running through your writing?*

Pedagogy research, management, technology, sustainability, arts, culture and poetry are the domains I have delved into with Knowledge Management as a perspective and Integrality as axis — as two intertwined, common and continuous threads. So frankly speaking there is no adjustment required but perhaps a change in lingo much like the case of the action-research report on SAICE for the Indian government.

Self-Learning happens all the time at different levels. For example, recently while reviewing a book called 'Homi Bhabha and the Computer Revolution' for MIT Technology Review (May 2011), I discovered how spiritual Dr. Bhabha (the father of the Indian atomic programme and the force behind India's first computer) was and how he believed in 'increasing the intensity of consciousness of life'. I also learnt how he built research and development-oriented institutions around dedicated people with a belief that science should filter down to the *aam admi* and work to improve his life.

*Can we say that, while technology, multimedia, art, research, information management and knowledge systems are common themes that recur in all your projects, they have almost always been influenced and inspired by the larger vision of Sri Aurobindo and by your roots in the Ashram? There are surely others in academics, research, knowledge-based companies who have*

*been influenced by Sri Aurobindo's yoga in their personal lives, but few like you who attempt to marry knowledge to Knowledge. How fruitful has the effort been?*

For me, the apparently different domains you have enumerated have the same 'marma' or essence. This insight has stemmed from my pursuit of Integral Yoga.

I also owe credit to my genetics! My grandparents — Moni Bishnu Chowdhury, an Indian classical vocalist, who, after being an agnostic communist leader under Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, felt transformed when the Mother touched his head and Chabbi Bishnu Chowdhury, who comes from Sri Aurobindo's Ghose family — became Ashramites in the mid '50s. It was my grandfather who brought in Indian classical music in the Ashram in a major way. Shobha-di, Anjana-ben, Datta and Anurupa Naik have been some of his students! My father and his brother were both SAICE students. My father, Arun Bishnu (a gifted Indian classical vocalist), came back to teach music at SAICE. Unfortunately he is no more. Similarly I came back after my Bangalore stint and taught music and communication at SAICE. My sister Arjita too went through SAICE and her musical journey. So our bond with the Ashram and SAICE really runs deep. I am very grateful to my late father Arun for my music *tal-eem* which traces its roots back to Baba Allaudin Khan's Senia Maihar Gharana. He made me conscious about the lateral synapses between different domains with music as the lens.

Above all, with Faith and Gratitude in Sri Aurobindo and the Mother... marrying knowledge to Knowledge is not really an effort but the only viable truth-pattern for me. ❧

Visit [www.goldenchain.in/resources](http://www.goldenchain.in/resources)

to download music by

Shobha-di, Chinmayee-di, Vimal-ben and Mohan-bhai.

# WRITING FOR CHILDREN

Meera Guthi '95

There is a childhood memory etched in my mind: Sitting by our cool-marbled school pond, reading Ladybird books as small bees fuss around hanging flowers, squirrels scamper on the circular scaffolding and fish swim lazily in the dark waters. I would turn the pages and be drawn by the pictures and the stories. I loved the illustrations of the princess sleeping on 10 or was it 20 mattresses, and the hot porridge flowing across the town in one of the stories. Other story-telling memories now come rushing back: Us spellbound by Vasudev-ji's stories as we laboured through many tasteless meals in Corner House, Archak-bhai's Wednesday night stories on the terrace in Shernaz-di's boarding and Lipi-di's other-world transporting stories in EAVP between 11.30 and noon twice a week.

That was just the beginning. Our school encouraged us to read stories. I remember my favourite haunt: Room no.7. I would amble amidst the cupboards and twist my head sideways to read the titles of the books on the spines. And Romen-da's sweet voice with, "That cupboard is for when you grow older. Your stories are here." Then came sweet and bubbly Tossy-di, with her beautiful cursive writing. And then it was Indu-di's library that kept us company in EAVP 6 and the Knowledge years.

## MY JOURNEY STARTED HERE...SORT OF

When I was in my final year of Knowledge, like many students, I was unsure of what I wanted to do. Then Satyajit, my classmate, showed me an article that his elder sister Seema had written for one of the newspapers. It was a feature on rain. And I told myself, "That's what I want to do. I want to write."

After Knowledge, I studied journalism for a

year at XIC, Mumbai and then started my professional career as a writer for the web; and I've worked as a writer since. As part of one of my jobs, we were writing for a children's website. We had to write stories — unfinished ones, so that children could write their own endings. Unfor-



tunately the website was a victim of the dotcom bust. But for me it was the beginning of my writing career.

My boss in that company was very encouraging. She had worked for Deccan Herald for many years before joining this web company and she told me to send my stories to the paper's children's section 'Open Sesame'. I sent my first story called 'The Magic Finger' and the editor of the children's section wrote back, "We are going to publish it." The first print acceptance of any work

is pure joy. After that I wrote almost every week, not only stories but articles of various kinds. I would come up with ideas and bounce them off the editor and then get to work. This was aside from my regular job. But later, my children's writing took a backseat as I got more involved in my career.

### MY AWARD-WINNING STORIES

Between 2008 and 2010, I took a break from a full-time job to focus on my kids, and see if I could pursue writing a little more seriously. But

*"You must write for children the same way you write for adults, only better." - Maxim Gorky*

*"Writing for children is bloody difficult; books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts, and they should therefore be accorded the same respect." - Mark Haddon*

it's a tough profession; financial viability apart, it's hard to discipline yourself to write so regularly. Of course if you have a deal with a publisher, I guess some kind of discipline sets in, but otherwise, it's really hard.

I heard about the Unisun-Reliance Timeout<sup>1</sup> writing competition in 2008 through a friend and I submitted stories for it. My story 'Monsters Under my Bed' won the first prize. The following year it was published in the anthology 'Monsters Under my Bed and Other Stories' along with other winning stories.

In 2009, I submitted stories again for the competition. My story 'The Lost and Found Smile' was a co-winner for the children's category along with another story titled 'Maya Finds her Magic'. This time, because the story was extremely visual, the publishers printed it as a stand-alone copy with lots of illustrations.

In 2009, I also got an offer to write three stories for the idiscoveri's xceed reader program for Class 2, 3 and 5. These books are distributed through the NGO, idiscoveri ([www.xseed.idiscoveri.com](http://www.xseed.idiscoveri.com)) with their network of schools. My short stories also featured in the popular website, [www.asiawrites.org](http://www.asiawrites.org).<sup>2</sup>

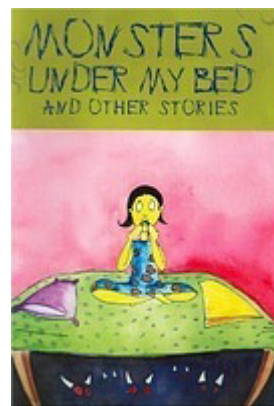
### "FROM WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?"

This is a question I get often. As you get deeper into your craft, you too start observing yourself. How are ideas born? How do they develop? How do they get translated into words? It's not something you can analyse easily.

My first award-winning story 'Monsters Under my Bed' was in my head for many years. I remember in Shernaz-di's boarding, my cot, despite being in the centre of the hall, used to terrify me! I would think of claws creeping from under the bed and catching hold of my leg! It's a common childhood fear. A story revolving around this was in my head for many years before I actually wrote it. I still remember struggling with the end; I scrapped many versions before I felt the ending was just right.

For the second award-winning story, 'The Lost and Found Smile', the idea came in a flash. I was sitting with my 5-year old daughter and she was glum for a reason I can't remember. And I asked her "Where's your smile? Ran away?" And then the idea of a naughty smile that runs away was born.

Stories and ideas are all around us. It's just that we have to be alert and train our mind to follow a



1. The Unisun-Reliance Timeout Competition is an annual competition in 3 categories: Short stories, Children's Fiction and Poetry. This India-wide competition attracted over 1,500 entries last year.

2. [www.asiawrites.org](http://www.asiawrites.org) is the biggest community of Asian writers with a wide network of writers from East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and West Asia. It has up to 3,000 daily page views and 9,000 web pages. You can visit the site at: [www.asiawrites.org](http://www.asiawrites.org).



thought and expand it and see if it's worth a story. An idea can mill in your head for many weeks before it's ready to be put into words. And even after that it has to possess your mind, as you think of how your story is going to develop, how the characters are going to react, etc, etc.

But an idea is just the 1 per cent, the 'Ah moment'; the other 99 per cent is pure labour, pure sweat. A journalism teacher once told us, "If you are serious about writing, you have to practise your craft. You have to write 1000 words every day!" I must confess I'm far from this number now. But when I was not in a full-time job, I did manage 500 words a day for several weeks.

### MY FUTURE PLANS

The children's writing industry in India is still very nascent. Unlike foreign countries where authors of children's stories are taken as seriously as those writing for adults, the market in India is yet to evolve. That apart, breaking into the publishing world is equally tough. The concept of hiring an agent is not yet viable, especially for this category. I guess you have to know a couple of people and have strong networks to get your break.

Many publishers are also into the 8 years+ category, but there are very few who work in the 3-8 years age-group. "There are lots of foreign books

that are beautifully illustrated, on lovely paper, in that category. Here to get that quality of illustrators, paper and printers and make profits is near impossible," confessed a publisher once.

The other aspect is marketing. In this day and age, marketing is king, not content necessarily. Unless you make a big announcement and a splash, there is little chance your work will be seen or heard. Nobody wants to invest in children's books with that mega-star publicity, it's not financially viable (unless it's Harry Potter of course). "We can help you publish your book, but you would have to market it yourself," said a publisher once. Unfortunately, I'm not the chest-beating, mega-phone wielding type. The very idea is alien to my personality. Maybe it's to do with my upbringing. We have such beautiful painters, dancers, poets, singers, writers, etc. in the Ashram. Had they been living 'outside', they would've been famous and made millions. And yet they go about their lives in quiet servitude, dedicating all their creative work to The Master and The Mother.

In that same spirit, when She wants, She will give me that platform. Until then, I will continue to send synopses and chapter samples to publishers and am quite happy with the 'struggling writer' tag — a tag that I wear proudly. ❧

## "WHATEVER HAS TO BE TOLD WILL COME TO YOU"

*Sunanda '55*

**M**y book of stories and plays began in a very unusual way. When I was sixteen and staying at Golconde, I would each night scribble some words and phrases on scraps of paper. These ideas for stories came to my consciousness without any mental activity or effort but just as if someone was telling me a story or describing a scene. I felt compelled to jot down whatever I received in this manner. The next morning I would tear up these pieces of paper and toss them into the trash. One day Mona, who was in charge of Golconde, asked me what I was doing with all those bits of

paper that filled the waste basket each morning. In those days, the early to mid-1950s, we were still conserving paper very carefully.

I was a bit upset at this apparent scolding and decided to "confess" to the Mother. While explaining to her what was happening at night in my room at Golconde, I asked her to help me to stop this activity. Then she told me that anything that comes like this is not my writing at all. I should continue to note down whatever came and bring everything to her. This was the beginning of my daily visits to her.

The Mother kept all the stories I brought to

her and never said anything to me. However, one evening in the Playground where I had gone as usual for prasad, she asked me to stay behind. She



made a sign to her attendant and then suddenly he came and put a book in her hand. She asked for a pen, opened the flyleaf, and put the date, 23.4.56, and her signature. She moved her finger over the date several times, as if to show me its importance. Then she handed me the book. To my surprise the book was called *Stories and Plays for Children* and my name was at the bottom of the cover. It took me quite some time to realise just what had happened.

I found out later from Nolini-da that the Mother had given him a stack of my papers, remarking that there seemed to be some good stories among them. She asked him to go through the pile and see what could be done. Nolini-da reported back that there were quite a few complete stories. Then it was decided to bring them out as a book. These stories and plays were written between 1952 and 1955.

During this time the Mother gave me the work of telling stories to young children (aged six to eight years). I asked her if I should tell them fairy tales that I had read and was still thoroughly enjoying even though no longer a child, or if I should read up and prepare stories from Indian mythology, of which I had very little knowledge. She replied, "None of those. You go to the class and wait, whatever has to be told will come to you."

Sometimes the children and I waited quite a while until something came! This was the beginning of my work with children which continued for many years.

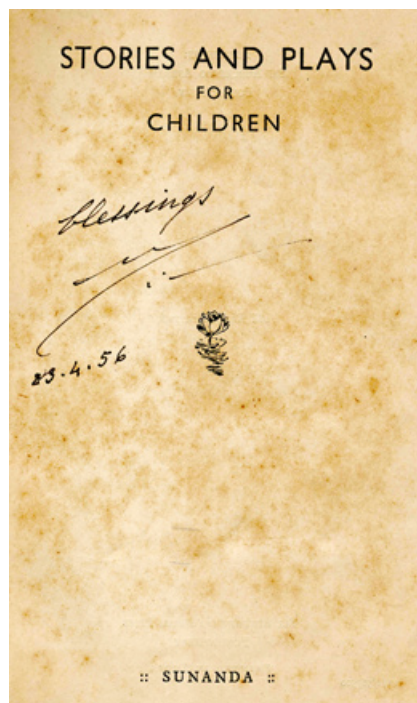
Even when she asked me to teach English to new children who had very little knowledge of the English language, she told me to use stories as a method to make the lessons more interesting.

Two of the plays in the book *Stories and Plays* were first written and enacted in the Playground in front of the Mother. She had liked the play "Riches" so much that she chose it to be part of the public school programme for which the Ashram school was requested to send some items.

I remember an interesting incident related to this public school programme. Millie-di (Jhumur's mother) was asked to accompany us to a ground near

the Botanical Gardens, where the stage was put up. We were given a small area behind the stage to wait our turn to perform. One little girl felt thirsty and asked me for water. I looked around and Millie-di asked me what the problem was. When I informed her, she quickly and very carefully opened a

bag she was carrying, poured out some water in a tumbler, covered the tumbler with a handkerchief, and gave it to me to pass on to the child. I was amazed at the meticulous care. Millie-di later told me that the Mother's instructions were to carry some emergency food (Ashram bread and bananas) and water, as no one was to take anything at all from outside! What care, what cleanliness, and what obedience. ❧



# A NEW WAY TO READ

*Brijmohan Kothari '83 tells us about the concept behind BookBox and how it is working out.*

## **How did the idea for BookBox come to you?**

Prior to BookBox my team and I at IIM Ahmedabad had already worked for seven years on another idea, Same Language Subtitling, or SLS. SLS is simply the idea of subtitling the lyrics of film songs (or music videos) in the 'same' language that they are sung in. It is a deceptively simple idea for what it achieves.

Several research studies have confirmed that SLS makes people read along, automatically and inescapably. Since 2002 we have been implementing SLS on 10 weekly TV programmes in as many Indian languages and this itself is giving regular reading practice to over 150 million people. BookBox builds on this core innovation and extends it to reading for children.

Most children in India, across 640,000 villages, learning one of 22 official languages, just don't have appropriate reading opportunities. The standard ideas of printing and distributing more children's books, or opening more village libraries, however necessary, are grossly inadequate to meet the need. The logic of publishing breaks down in the face of scale, language diversity, distribution challenges and affordability.

I was on a fellowship at Stanford to take SLS to digital platforms. Some students and I formed a team and took on the challenge of delivering 'Reading for every child in his/her language'. We entered a business plan competition for social enterprises at the university. Our company, we proposed, would create animated stories for children with SLS, or AniBooks. AniBooks could be adapted easily into any language by replacing the audio and the subtitles and could travel on any digital or electronic medium, including television, internet,

cell phones, hand-helds, and so on. BookBox was born with the potential to broadcast, or broadband, reading to masses of children across India, in their own language.

## **What were the difficulties you faced and how did you overcome them?**

BookBox ([www.bookbox.com](http://www.bookbox.com)) is a work in

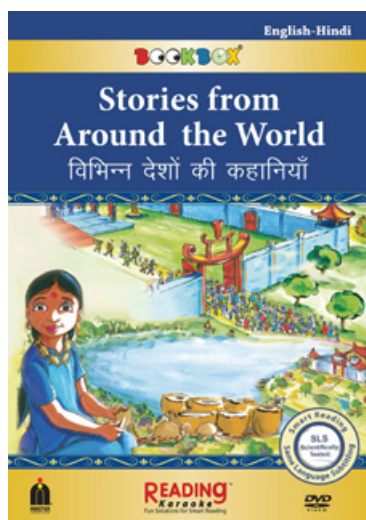
progress. We have around 40 AniBooks in a mix of 30 languages. Getting these AniBooks on different electronic and digital platforms has not been easy. For instance, we have been trying to get our AniBooks on TV or DTH platforms. We are realising how difficult it is to enter the broadcast medium with no prior relationships. However, we're also realising the power of platforms like YouTube which gives us direct access to viewers globally. With the rapid expansion of smart phones, increasingly our stories are being put

on YouTube and watched on cell phones. While this does not yet get reading to children in villages, what it is doing is bringing our content to the attention of broadcasters and publishers.

We recently introduced AniBooks on 'Legendary Lives' who are very much around to inspire us, such as, Abdul Kalam, Kiran Bedi and soon, Azim Premji. The idea is that children not only need to read more, they also need to find inspiration from our heroes. Through this series we are putting before children examples of ordinary people achieving extraordinary things. The underlying idea is, of course, it could be you!

## **What is the contribution of your Ashram background to this project?**

As a child growing up in the Ashram, one





assumes that everyone in the world must be learning and speaking four or more languages. That's the only reality we experience. Later we, and especially those who have spent any time in the US, realise that this is unusual. We not only speak several languages, the diversity within the Ashram has also taught us to speak every language in a variety of accents. We could even claim to have invented Ashram Hindi in a variety of flavours. Surely, the richness of my language experience in the Ashram is an important driver for BookBox.

A deeper contribution of the Ashram is perhaps the desire it creates to make a small positive change in this world. We all accept in our own way that our lives have a higher purpose and we do the best we can. Deep down we believe that we are foot soldiers in a larger transformation. If I am able to contribute to India's and global literacy in any meaningful way, I will be happy to have lived up to the ideals of my upbringing in the Ashram.



***How far have you been successful in what you set out to do?***

The problem with 'success' is that the more you succeed in a traditional sense, the more you realise how little you have achieved. I can say with some confidence that our SLS work has integrated reading into the lives of 150 million people in India. But I also know that we have barely scratched the surface of the SLS solution in India and, much less, globally.

I know we are sitting on a tremendously powerful solution but we daily confront people



in power who do not always share the same vision for India's progress. There is no shortage of 'what's in it for me' people. We try our best to overcome their resistance through scientific evidence and the support of well-respected personalities. We were delighted when former US President Bill Clinton endorsed our work by calling SLS, very publicly at the Clinton Global Initiative, "A small change that has a staggering impact on people's lives." This video on YouTube is now propelling our advance in policy but we are far from the finish line.

***What do you think is the biggest difficulty children face in today's world? How is childhood different today than it was, say, when you were growing up?***

This question probably deserves a book length response and I'm not sure I'm qualified. But I can speak for my children. The biggest challenge they face, in my view, is choice — they have too much of it and have to, therefore, keep their focus on what's important.

In Ganpatram boarding there was a tradition that for your birthday, you could put together a special meal, within limits, of course. As a child I felt so fortunate to be able to deviate from 'aloo paani' to 'sukhe aloo ki sabzi', never once pausing to think that it was still 'aloo' in the end. I can guarantee that that gave me more joy than the spread of chocolates that our children can choose from on any given day. For our children, happiness in simple things is increasingly harder to find. But it's not their fault. We complicated life for them by giving them too much... and thought it was love. ❧

# OF LIGHT AND DELIGHT

*Manoj Das, the master story-teller, answers our questions about his children's books.*

***Your first book for children was titled Legends of India's Temples. It was followed by Legends of India's Rivers, Tales from Many Lands and Persian Tales of Wit and Delight. Each one of them saw several reprints. You also contributed three or four scripts to the Amar Chitra Katha series. Can you tell us how you first started writing for children and about these first books?***

That was in the mid-sixties of the last century. Through the questions I put to my students in the class it became evident that most of them did not have much idea about the wonderful myths and legends behind India's premier monuments and natural splendours. I resided at Home of Progress. Once we were quarantined for a fortnight because of a bout of chicken-pox. I took advantage of the holidays imposed on us and wrote out the first book. I then felt that it could very well serve a larger circle of interested people. India Book House of Bombay (now Mumbai), then one of the premier publishing institutions in the country, had launched a series for the young and I thought that my tiny book could fit into it. I wrote to them. The series had an exceptionally brilliant editor, not only suave and courteous, but also one with a feel for the worthy stuff, Mrs. Neera Benegal, wife of Mr. Shyam Benegal — the latter yet to become a celebrity movie director. Neera-ji was already familiar with my writing, for I was then contributing to several periodicals and newspapers. She welcomed the project. As soon as the book was published she went on encouraging me to write another and yet another book. I must say I was also fascinated by our myths and I felt the urge to share them with the young. Just think of it: how was the river Narmada born?



Once while Lord Siva remained lost in meditation, the calm, the serenity, the splendid peace He radiated suddenly took the form of a damsel. She bowed to the Lord who blessed her and said, "My child, you have inspired in my heart a feeling of tenderness. Hence be known as *Narmada* (the giver of tenderness)."

Now, can we dream of any better poetry than this charming concept — the calm the Lord exuded taking a form? Well, since I began narrating the legend, let me finish it. The Lord offered her a boon. "Bless me that I will ever roam about free," she said. That was granted. But before long the gods spied upon this beautiful damsel fleeing about like a dream. They approached her and, as she remained elusive, chased her. At last one of them caught hold of her. At once she changed into water and slipped through his fingers and flowed on as a river.

The genesis of the Ganga is uniquely significant. But let me stop here. As the mutual trust between the IBH and me increased, I wrote several titles for them.

***Two of your children's books have been remarkably successful: Stories of Light and Delight which is probably India's largest selling children's story book during the past half century and Books Forever, a non-fiction work. Can you tell us how these two books came about? What was the intention of writing Books Forever?***

I do not know if my young friends like you would remember the unique journal called *Shankar's Weekly*. Edited by the doyen of India's cartoon culture, Shankar Pillai, it was an intellectual publication teeming with intelligent car-

toons and witty articles, a journal avidly read by Nehru, Mountbatten and all those who mattered apart from the general elite. In the sixties I was the only writer whose short stories found a place in that famous journal. Shankar founded the International Dolls Museum and published a monthly, *Children's World*.

Because of my association with them I wrote for the new magazine and my stories attracted the attention of the noted writer K.S. Duggal who was then the chief executive of the National Book Trust, India. He proposed to publish them as a book and I agreed happily. He commissioned the distinguished cartoonist Mario to illustrate the book. Shankar of course resented my decision when he came to know about it, for he wanted his Children's Book Trust to publish it. I had to request my friend Smt. Nandini Satpathy, then a minister at the Centre, to pacify him.

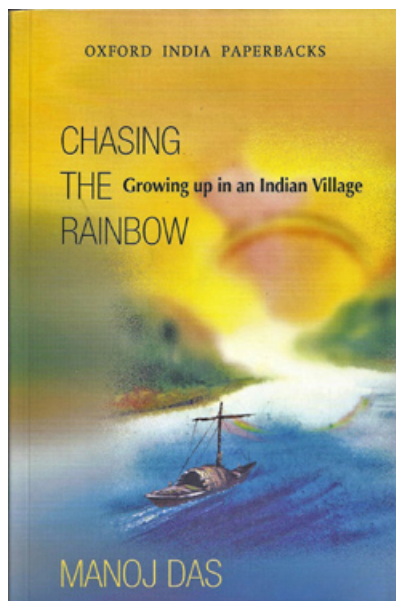
Yes, the book, *Stories of Light and Delight*, published in 1970, became a best-seller and it continues to be so over the decades, thousands of copies rolling out of the press in each reprint. Then the NBT asked me for another book and I suggested the theme for *Books Forever*, introducing to the children the great books of India's past, like the epics, the *Panchatantra*, the *Kathasaritsagara*, the *Thirukkural*, etc. That too has become equally popular and both the titles are available in most of our major languages, translated by distinguished writers like Kuvempu in Kannada and Leela Majumdar in Bengali.

Incidentally, many people think that the phenomenal popularity of these two books must have brought me a fortune in terms of royalty! Not so. I was paid only a one-time fee of a thousand rupees for each book. The amount was significant in the early seventies. Neither I nor the publishers expected the books to do so well. However, I

have no regret. The NBT is our national institution and I am happy that millions have enjoyed the books.

***Two of your novelettes, The Fourth Friend and The Legend of the Golden Valley are considered highly original contributions to children's literature. Can you tell us about these two stories?***

*The Fourth Friend*, like so many of my short stories, is an authentic picture of the typical Indian village life of yesteryear. The characters and incidents reflect much of my own experiences in the rural India of my childhood. Like the village in the story, my own elder sister's village used to become a complete island during floods. In fact I had for my pet a tiger-cub entrapped in that village — an episode I have narrated in my book of childhood reminiscences, *Chasing the Rainbow: Growing up in an*



*Indian Village*, brought out by the Oxford University Press. The tiger in the novelette of course is a grown up one; but I believe my feeling about the tiger as a creature is correct. By the way, our second home was in the Sundarbans, the abode of the Royal Bengal tiger, where my forefathers had acquired hundreds of acres of land including forests.

*The Legend of the Golden Valley* is an original fairytale — with an allegorical implication. Like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which could be appreciated both by children and grown-ups on two different planes, this novelette has proved to have exercised the same effect.

***How different is creating a fresh story from retelling a mythological or folk tale? Where did the inspiration for the latter category come from?***

Very different. You create a story out of your



own creative inspiration. You retell a mythological story or a folktale because you find it interesting or educative and feel the urge to convey a bit of the original author's inspiration to readers of your time. The original inspiration is not yours, yours is an exercise in appreciation of it. I have retold many such stories for children and a hundred stories under the title *Tales told by Mystics*, published by the Sahitya Akademi, for readers of all ages. That too is a best-selling Akademi publication.

I have also used old stories of all-time relevance to drive a point of contemporary relevance home. I have taken the end-point of a Panchatantra or a Jataka story and have built up on it. I have a collection of stories of this genre entitled *The Lady who died One and a Half Times and other Fantasies*. That, of course, is for adults.

***You have always been known as a wonderful story-teller. How different is writing a story for children from writing for adults? Do you just make it simpler? Or are there other factors you have to keep in mind?***

No doubt several other factors apart from the need for a simpler style. As some years ago the journalist Ann Landers, spearheading a movement to alert parents about the dangerous consequences of vulgarity and violence in the media, asked, "Would you allow your child to eat garbage? Why then let him put it in his head?" Adults choose what they would read; the children do not. It is not only the parents' responsibility to choose for them, but also the authors' responsibility to choose themes for them. Even when you retell an old story, which aspect of it you emphasize means much. A wrong emphasis to amuse the reader can cause a subtle damage.

***What role do stories play in shaping the child's***

***mind? In shaping his/her values? Does the retelling of mythological stories play an important role in this regard?***

All depends on the artistry and discernment of the re-teller. Mythology, the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in particular, had a perennial appeal for all, children not excluded. There was a young entrepreneur who loved to spend an hour with his little son when back from his office. "What did you learn today?" one evening the young man asked his child. "Our Didi (the lady teacher) told us a story called the *Ramayana*," informed the boy.

The father asked the child to narrate the story, but the boy was quite unwilling to oblige him, saying that he (the father) would not enjoy it. But as the father insisted on hearing it, he thought for a moment and narrated, rather reluctantly, "The hero and the

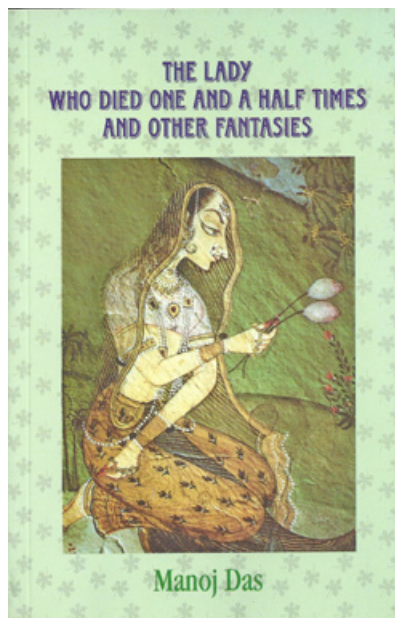
heroine went into the forest for a picnic. The villain kidnapped the heroine. The hero sent an SOS to his pals. They invaded the villain's den and rescued the lady."

"What?" asked the flabbergasted father, "Is this what your teacher told you as the *Ramayana*?"

Displaying an indulgent smile, said the boy, "Father, what she said was charming — simply wonderful. But you won't believe it!"

That is to say, the child had enjoyed the outline of the original epic; but he feared that his father, a newfangled materialistic fellow, would probably laugh at his teacher's naivety. Hence he edited her version for the sake of his father.

The epics have an inexplicable quality and charm and whatever elements of violence or grossness they seem to have, do not leave any adverse impact on the child when narrated in their context. The epics leave great scope for the narrator to prove his or her innovative and imaginative skill.



***You have also had a long association with Chandamama, the children's magazine, and have written stories for it. Can you tell us something about the association? What was your intention in being involved?***

It was a chance meeting with its manager at the residence of Shri V. Subramaniam, our S. Ravi's father, a devotee of the Mother and a top executive of the Higginbothams set-up. The manager introduced me to its publisher Viswam — Shri B. Viswanatha Reddy, the worthy son of its founder, the famous Nagi Reddy, Dadasasheeb Phalke Award winning producer. I have rarely come across a young man of Viswam's qualities, honest, upright and unassuming. In their dignified humility I saw in him and his wife Rani-ji a genuine younger brother and sister. Probably you know that Viswam also published *The Heritage*, which I edited for five years. That was the last literary-cultural English magazine in India, for today all such magazines have been swallowed by news-magazines — thanks to our demoniac hunger for sensations. *The Heritage* ran on loss — lakhs every year because we refused to publish advertisements that were not conducive to the character of the publication thereby hurting the ego of the advertisers.

Our first meeting itself made me interested in *Chandamama*, Asia's — or could it be the world's? — largest circulated Children's magazine, published in twelve languages including Sanskrit and Braille. Barring the English edition, all other editions had the same content. I helped in editing the English edition which commanded an international circulation. With perfect editorial collaboration between Viswam and me, its circulation went on increasing. I found it an unparalleled medium for carrying light and delight for children. It was an

adventure par excellence. Unfortunately a number of misfortunes befell the family of my publishers and the magazine was taken over by others. I do not know how it is faring now.

***The Harry Potter series, which is all about magic and occult worlds, seems to have renewed interest in reading among children. Have you read any book in the series? What is your impression? Where does the author draw her inspiration from? Would you recommend it as reading material for children?***

I attempted reading a couple of volumes, but could not proceed beyond some twenty pages. Too contrived, bereft of any genuine inspiration. Hence I do not qualify to answer your questions.

***What is your reaction to what you see of children's movies, cartoons and TV serials?***

I have hardly seen any. Sorry.

***Do you see any interesting or encouraging trends in Indian publishing for children? In English? In vernacular languages?***

Yes, encouraging surely — but relatively. Keeping in mind the vastness of the country and the rising population of literate children, we are lagging far behind the minimum need, both in content and form.

***Keeping in mind what the Mother has said regarding what the children should or should not be exposed to, what advice would you give someone who wants to write***

***stories for children?***

To remember the words of the Mother and look for inspiration from within and to remain alert about the responsibility that goes with one's right to speak to the vulnerable mind of the child. Thank you so much. ❧



# SWAPNA DUTTA ANSWERS

A prolific writer and translator based in Bangalore, **Swapna Dutta** has been engaged in creative writing for over four decades and has over 40 titles to her credit in a variety of literary genres. She is the author of children's books as diverse as *Four Stories from The Mahabharata* (2002), *Plays from India* (2003), *The Story of the Red Fort* (2002) as well as *Stories for a Winter's Night* (1996), *Teddy Comes to Stay* (1992), *A Dog named Rocky and Other Stories* (1994), not to forget her ever-popular *Juneli* series about a girl in a boarding school.

Some would remember Swapna Dutta for the tales of Vikram and Vetal that she wrote for Children's World magazine. Since then her stories have appeared in many newspapers and children's magazines in India and abroad. Apart from English, she also writes in Hindi and Bengali. She is the recipient of several awards for her contribution to children's literature, including an All India National Award and a National Fellowship.

Swapna Dutta's association with the Ashram goes back 51 years when she first visited the Ashram as a 17 year old girl and even attended a few classes in our school at the behest of Nolini-da. Since then she has been a regular visitor and considers herself very much a part of the larger Ashram family. All her books are available in the School Library. We asked her about her children's writing.



***You have been engaged in creative writing for more than two decades and have***

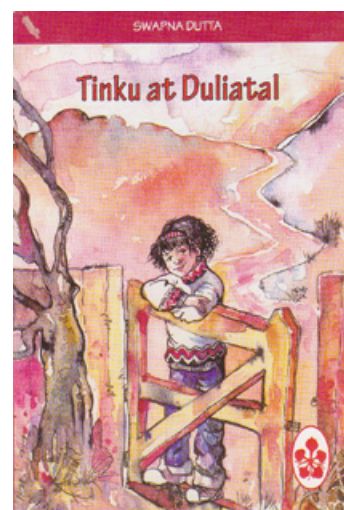
***written a number of books in various literary genres. What is different in writing for children? How do you put yourself in their shoes? Does that mean drawing from your own childhood memories?***

Actually I've been writing for over four decades now, for newspapers, magazines, publishers and the Net. This also includes translations. While my books have all been for children, nearly all my translated work has belonged to mainstream literature (Tagore, Premchand, Parashuram, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Suchitra Bhattacharya and the like). The features I write cover a wide range of subjects — history, literature, biography, travelogue, nature and so on. But all my original writings, even those meant for adults, are written in a way that can be read by children as well.

This brings me to the question put by you. I don't have to put myself in their shoes consciously because I have always belonged to that world,

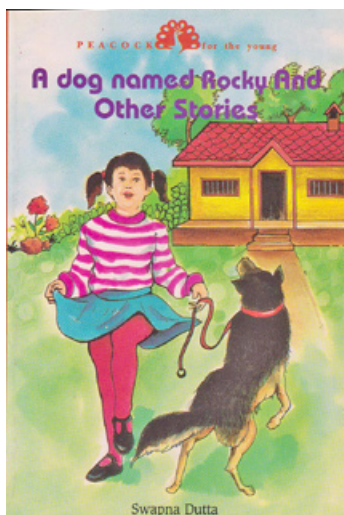
ever since I started writing! It is the same sensibility that works — whether I write for adults or for children. Only, when writing for children, I write about what they are likely to understand and enjoy.

All my original writing is largely based on my own experiences or of people I know closely. They are not just childhood memories. I feel most comfortable writing about the world I know first hand. That's why I've never tried my hand at writing fantasy.



***Can you tell us something about the process of writing itself? Where does the inspiration come from, especially for original stories? Do you first structure the whole book and then get into the details? Do the characters develop as you write?***





In my case, the inspiration comes from things that have moved my heart. They could be incidents, people or books I have loved.

No, I'm afraid I've never been able to structure a book or a story beforehand. I start a story from an idea and the characters and incidents develop as I write.

Sometimes I don't even know how the story is going to end!

***Are you, through your stories, trying primarily to interest and entertain children? Or is there a conscious attempt to pass on a message or inculcate certain values in them? The Mother speaks of the power of books to shape formative minds. Do you make it a point to keep out certain elements and focus on the positive and the beautiful?***

I have tried to interest and entertain my young readers, yes, but consciously or subconsciously I have always remembered the Mother's words about the power of books to shape formative minds. That is why it has always been my attempt to see that the stories somehow bring in and uphold what I understand to be the right values.

No, my stories are not only about the positive and the beautiful. I believe in being realistic. Many of them portray the darker side of life and how they affect children. I have written about broken homes and the insecurity faced by children, how wrong priorities or lack of principles in parents can devastate a child's world. But I have always tried to end on a positive note, showing how the child comes to terms with what he/she has to face and finally rise above the ugly side of life.

***A lot of Indian writing for children is a retelling of stories from our mythology and folk tales. How important a role do you think this plays***

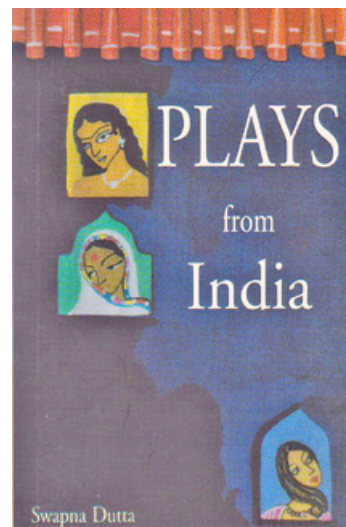
***in the passing on of our culture to the younger generation? What do you find are the special challenges of adapting/retelling these stories?***

Personally, I love our epics, mythology and folktales and have retold several myself. I know many children who still read and enjoy the Amar Chitra Katha series, which has played an important role in passing on our history and culture. But I feel that the stories (I'm not talking of comics like the ACK) have to be told differently now, in a language the children of today can relate to. I think herein lies the real challenge — to make the children of today realize that basic human values continue to remain the same, no matter what the era.

***Thirty years ago we grew up on a diet of Amar Chitra Kathas. Children today don't seem to be interested in that kind of story-telling. How have children changed in the last 20 years? How have you had to adapt your stories (both in terms of content and language) for today's generation of kids, especially young teenagers?***

Times have changed. We have become global, belonging to the Net n' Mobile era. So it's natural that this change should affect the children as well. But I feel that they still enjoy stories so long as they are not too long or verbose. What they primarily seem to want is *happenings* and *speed*!

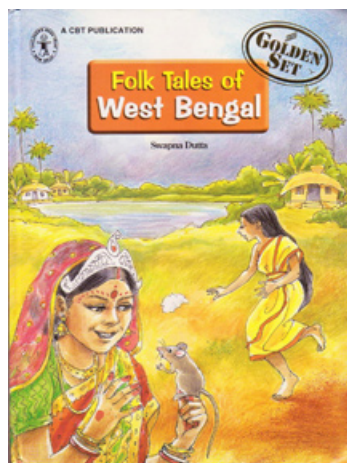
I haven't changed my content (except for writing about children as I see them today) or my language. But now I consciously try to condense the themes and hasten my pace of story telling, even when I'm retelling mythology. I guess it works not too badly, as I'm perpetually being asked to write for children's websites.



***Do urban Indian children (who read in English) tend to read books like the Harry Potter series or old favourites like Enid Blyton etc rather***

***than Indian authors with their Indian characters? Why do you think that is?***

***Where do you see Indian writing/publishing for children headed?***



Yes, Harry Potter is a prime favourite with most urban children. But the younger age group still read Enid Blyton. R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond are

popular too and are available everywhere. Children wouldn't mind reading other Indian authors but they are not readily available. You hardly get to see their books in bookshops and once-popular children's magazines like *Children's World* and *Target* (for which many of us wrote regularly) are either non-existent or hardly visible. Websites like [www.bolokids.com](http://www.bolokids.com) or [www.papertigers.com](http://www.papertigers.com) are widely visited but not everyone writes for websites as they are mostly non-paying.

Frankly, the order of the day seems to be advertisement and publicity more than merit and most publishers feel it's not paying to advertise children's books. It is therefore difficult to predict about the future of children's books!

***How satisfying has the experience of writing for children been? Any interesting feedback that you have received from children?***

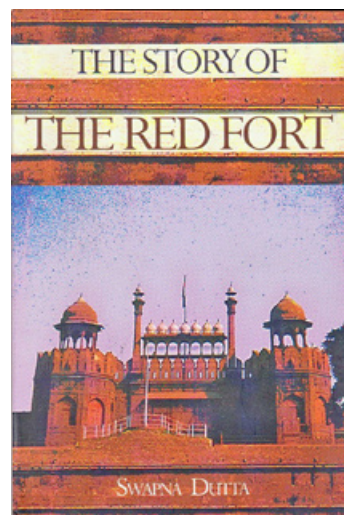
It has been a very satisfying experience even if I haven't been one of the commercially successful authors. I know that many of the children I wrote for enjoyed my books. Many of them who grew up reading my books are now lecturers, journalists or in services of various kinds. I often bump into them and when they seek me out to tell me (or write to me on FB) that they still

remember my stories, I feel that it has really been worthwhile writing for children. And it also gives me a sense of fulfilment. I feel happiest when they tell me that they'd like their children to read my books too and ask where they can be found. I think it is ultimately the dream of every writer to live in the hearts of his/her readers.

***What are your plans for the future? Any new ventures you would like to try — e.g. scripts for television or film? Anything else you would like to add?***

No, I am quite happy to be just an ordinary writer and would like to remain one as long as I can wield a pen!

I'd like to add that editors play a vital role in shaping and honing the talents of a writer. I hereby acknowledge my gratitude to the three who helped me most to evolve as a writer. The first is Mr. K. Ramakrishnan, who guided my first steps as I entered the field of writing and taught me to look around for subjects and realize the importance of condensing my thoughts within the required number of words. The second was the late Rosalind Wilson, who taught



me the importance of research and the need of being aware of one's limitations as a writer and making the most of what one could do. Lastly, it was Dr. Manoj Das (our Manoj-da) who instilled in me the love of history, something that was to become a permanent love of my life. He also encouraged me to turn to translations, which again has become a significant part of my existence as a writer. Whatever success has come my way has largely been because of these three wonderful editors. ☸

# NOMINATION FOR THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR SRI AUROBINDO

*Sunayana Panda '79 sheds light on the nomination made in 1949*

In India Sri Aurobindo still remains mainly known as a yogi but in the 1940s his fame in America was as a thinker and philosopher. It was his writings which caught the attention of those who were engaged with the intellectual life of the times. Soon there was a growing feeling that he deserved a wider and greater recognition from the world, and that gathered momentum until some people started suggesting that Sri Aurobindo be nominated for the Nobel Prize.

Although everyone has heard of the Nobel Prize, the details of how it is awarded are not so well-known. The prize was established by Alfred Nobel who invented, among other things, dynamite and other explosives. Since his wealth had come from armaments and explosives he decided to leave some of it for a humanitarian cause after his death. He therefore instituted this award which was to be given to those who have done something to benefit mankind in general. There are prizes for Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature and Peace. These prizes were first awarded

in 1901 and the Nobel Prize for Economics was added later and first awarded in 1969.

There are separate expert bodies which select and award the prizes for the different subjects. The prizes for sciences are decided by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the prize for medicine is decided by the Noble Assembly at the Kar-

olinska Institutet and the Nobel prize for literature is decided by the Swedish Academy. The Nobel Prize for Economics is decided by the Sveriges Riksbank. Only the Peace prize is awarded in Norway and it is the Norwegian Nobel Committee, appointed by the Norwegian Parliament, which decides who will be awarded the prize.



Sir Francis Younghusband

The first attempt of submitting a proposal for a Nobel Prize for Sri Aurobindo was made by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1943. This nomination was accepted by the Royal Swedish Academy but that year this prize for literature was not given to anybody. In fact, there were no prizes in literature during the years 1940 to 1943, the years during which the Second World War was on. No Nobel Prizes were awarded in any category from 1940 to 1942 because of the World War.

Sir Francis Younghusband was deeply impressed by *The Life Divine* because, having lived in India during the British rule, he was familiar with Eastern Philosophy. In his youth he had been an officer in the British Army and had led an expedition to Tibet which turned violent and led to the massacre of hundreds of Tibetans which he later regretted. He is also known as an explorer of the Himalayan region. Towards the end of his life he became more and more concerned with spirituality and occultism. Having been touched by mystical experiences himself he recognised the value of the content of *The Life Divine* as much as he admired the style in which it was written.

Sri Aurobindo's name was also once proposed for a Nobel Prize for Peace.

In 1949 a few people started discussing another nomination for the Nobel Prize for literature. This was made through the recommendation of some writers who were themselves Nobel Laureates and who were joined by other writers of renown. Generally the nominations are accompanied by recommendations made by those who have been awarded this prize earlier. In Sri Aurobindo's case the Nobel laureates who proposed his name were Gabriela Mistral and Pearl S. Buck.



Gabriela Mistral



Gabriela Mistral was a Chilean writer who had risen from a modest background and who perceived education as a means for humanity to get out of its difficulties. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945. She left Chile early in her career and lived in France, travelling frequently to lecture in the United States and South America. She represented her country as its consul in many countries and in this manner came in contact with many other intellectuals of her times. At the end of her life she lived in the USA and died there.

Pearl S. Buck, well known in the world of literature for her novel *The Good Earth*, was also a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature which she was awarded in 1938, becoming the first American woman to receive this prize. She too recommended Sri Aurobindo's name in 1949. She had grown up in China and knew Asian life from



Pearl S. Buck

inside and through her writings had made this knowledge known to Western readers. She also engaged in humanitarian works and used her fame for gathering support for these projects.

The other two famous personalities who had supported the proposal of Sri Aurobindo's name, but who were not

themselves Nobel laureates, were Aldous Huxley and Pitirim Sorokin. This just showed how the eminent minds of the West had recognised Sri Aurobindo's genius.

Pitirim Sorokin was a Russian who had emigrated to the United States. He is known, among other things, for having founded the Department of Sociology at Harvard University. He too had reflected on the future of humanity and on the possible ways in which human societies will evolve. He believed that there would be a decline in the technologically oriented society of the West and the emergence of an idealistic society.

Aldous Huxley was the most interesting of the writers who had an admiration for Sri Aurobindo's writing. British by birth, he had moved to America in 1937. His family background in itself is an indicator of his mental openness to new ideas. His grandfather was Thomas Henry Huxley who openly supported Charles Darwin's theory of evolution when it was being questioned and rejected by many. Aldous studied at Eton College and then at Oxford University and knew many writers of his generation such as D.H. Lawrence who was a close friend.

In his early youth Huxley suffered from an illness which left him nearly blind. Despite this physical handicap he went on to become a prolific writer. Through his various friends he came into contact with Eastern philosophy and mysticism. Many of his books bring in some philosophical elements with a particular emphasis on the concept of utopia. Aldous Huxley wrote several novels where he presented his ideas on the future of humanity through stories which were purely fiction. After moving to the United States he worked in Hollywood as a screen-writer, sometimes adapting works of other writers to the screen.

Although Sri Aurobindo's name was among those nominated in the year 1950 the whole question of his receiving the prize came to an end when he left his body in December as the Nobel Prize is never given posthumously. ❧



Pitirim Sorokin



Aldous Huxley

## **SRI AUROBINDO AND THE NOBEL PRIZE**

*(Sourced from Mother India, September 2, 1949)*

The name of Sri Aurobindo has been proposed for the award of Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950, by Madame Gabriela Mistral, the Nobel Laureate of Chile, and seconded by Miss Pearl S. Buck, the Nobel Laureate of the United States of America. A memorial supporting Sri Aurobindo's nomination has been signed by many leading citizens of our country and it is being submitted to the Swedish Academy.

TO THE PRESIDENT, SVENSKA AKADEMIEN, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

Dear Sir,

Sri Aurobindo is held in deep reverence in India and other parts of the world.[...] With his divine, cosmic vision and a life breathing forth the fragrance of holiness, Sri Aurobindo has given us a glimpse, unparalleled for its profundity and sublimity, of the occult significance of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Through his writings, he has revealed to us once again the pathway of experiencing the Real and the Eternal. This pathway is the Integral Yoga, the simultaneous divinisation of consciousness and matter in the various dimensions of the human personality. The story of the grand strategy of Evolution through which the Supreme Being fulfils Himself in the multifarious forms of manifestation constitutes the core of this universal drama of the Becoming. Poetry has become, in Sri Aurobindo's hands, an instrument of articulating the celestial music, the ecstasy of the Infinite[....]

Sri Aurobindo's profound and penetrating analysis of the fundamentals of Indian Culture [...] have awakened us to the opulent spiritual heritage that belongs to us and the part that India has to play in the destiny of mankind. We look up to Sri Aurobindo as belonging to the family of the Seers and Sages of the world whose line has never ended and whose majesty of the soul will continue to shed lustre on all parts of the world and at all times.

It is, therefore, a source of great pleasure to us to bring to your attention his contribution and to commend to your favourable consideration the proposal to award Nobel Prize in Literature to Sri Aurobindo.

Yours faithfully,

Hon. Mr. Gopalswami Ayyangar, Minister for Transport, Government of India.

Hon. Mr. N.V. Gadgil, Minister for Works, Mines and Power, Government of India.

Hon. Mr. Jairamdas Daulatram, Minister for Food and Agriculture, Government of India.

Hon. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerjee, Minister for Industry & Supply, Government of India.

Hon. Mr. K.C. Neogy, Minister for Commerce, Government of India.

His Excellency Shri. M.S. Aney, Governor of Bihar, Chancellor, Patna University.

Hon. Dr. S.K. Sinha, Premier, Bihar Government.

His Excellency Sir Chandulal Trivedi, Governor of East Punjab and Chancellor, East Punjab University.

Hon. Mr. Bhimsen Sachar, Premier, East Punjab Government.

His Excellency Shri. Mangaldas Pakvasa, Governor of Central Provinces and Chancellor of Nagpur University.

Hon. Mr. Harekrishna Mehtabji, Premier, Orissa Government.

Hon. Shri. Gobind Vallabh Pant, Premier, United Provinces Government.

His Highness the Maharaja of Gwalior, Rajpramukh of Madhyabharat Union.

His Highness the Maharaja of Patiala, Rajpramukh of East Punjab Union.

His Highness the Maharaja of Rewa, Rajpramukh of Vindhya Pradesh Union.

Dr. Asthana, Vice-Chancellor, Agra University.

*Continued on page 27...*

# HAND MADE PAPER FACTORY

*Togo Mukherjee '61 continues with the second part of his reminiscences.*

Kiran-da was an enterprising and innovative man but a maverick. He tried many things which interested me. Our friendship blossomed as I grew up. In the mid fifties, the Mother acquired a large coconut grove where the present Handmade Paper Factory and the New Creation buildings are located. Kiran-da shifted his department there. He continued the traditional method of making paper.

He also produced bricks, stone and shell lime. The bricks and the lime were mainly used for the construction of a portion of the big compound-wall of this grove. He undertook the dyeing of the cloth used for the shorts of the P.E.D. members and yarn for the Weaving Department.

In 1959, Udar obtained a substantial amount as grant and a near equal amount as loan from the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) to start a modern hand-made paper small scale unit under Kiran-da. The technology was also provided by KVIC.

In September 1959, Kiran-da invited me to collaborate with him in this venture. With the Mother's blessings I started working with him in October after finishing my first year Higher course. He was a hard and resourceful worker but lacked method and managerial skills. As a result, he passed on most of the responsibilities to me.

The construction of the factory shed and the office room were completed. A Vomiting Boiler, a medium-size electric Hollander Beater, a Hydraulic Press, an electric Calender, and a Vat for producing and manually lifting paper sheets were installed.

The Mother inaugurated the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Hand Made Paper Department [HMPD] on 9th December, 1959 at 4 p.m. The KVIC had provided temporarily one trained supervisor and three skilled workers, namely a Beater man,

a Lifter and a 'Jack of all trades'. Three local unskilled assistants were engaged to get trained under them. The factory started working for one shift of 8 hours.

Two days later, on my birthday, when I saw the Mother, She told me, "My child, it is good that you have started working in HMPD from its inception. I have many expectations from it. My blessings." She set two clear goals before me: (1) Make good quality paper; (2) Repay the loan in time. I knew very well how fond the Mother was of beautiful paper.

Udar continued all our correspondence from his office in Harpagon, assisted by Sutapa (Behram's aunty). He got us many contacts. He and Vishwanath-da planned all the engineering and building construction which was executed by Panou-da (Sarkar) of Harpagon and by Anil Banerjee of H.E.C. The electrical works were taken care of by Sitanganshu Chakraborty. Satinath-da (Chatterjee) trained me with the basics of book-keeping. Mr. Ramaswami Chettiar, a building contractor and a popular neighbour, offered to provide more workers whenever required.

Kiran-da began to have differences with Udar and Counouma. Around April 1960, one evening, he returned to the factory all agitated. He came to me and announced that he was quitting the Ashram immediately. I was taken aback by such a sudden and drastic decision of an old inmate. All attempts to pacify him were in vain. I was very unhappy and unprepared for such a shock.



Togo, 1964



He disappeared, leaving a void in me. Two years later, he renewed contact with me from a suburb of Chennai where he was making soap for his livelihood.

The whole responsibility of HMPD fell on me. Production of bricks and lime was stopped but the Dyeing Department continued. High grade dyes imported from Europe were offered to the Mother by her devotee, Hasmukhbhai, who had started the first Sri Aurobindo Centre in Ahmedabad. Now my main concern was to develop the hand-made paper department.

1960 was an eventful year. Harisadhan-da (Biswas) joined our office for keeping the accounts. At the end of the year, Sundar Dhir, a brilliant, promising youth, took charge of the correspondence and typing the weekly report prepared by me which I submitted to the Mother. Gautam Chawala used to visit us as a client. One day he expressed his wish to make stationery for the Mother, utilising handmade paper produced in HMPD. I got a room built for his activity adjacent to our office. He even persuaded Udar to construct a tiny table-top Beater. One fine morning he brought an inmate for the factory, an Alsatian pup. The Mother named her Fidèle. The KVIC sent us five permanent skilled workers from Tanjore and a Supervisor, all trained at its Pune Institute.

On my next birthday (11th December 1960), the Mother congratulated me, "My child, the Paper Factory is doing well. Continue to improve."

For more than a year we passed through a very critical teething period. The KVIC had financed and set up three hundred and odd such factories all over India. Most of them had failed. Making hand-made paper is a very lengthy and highly wasteful process in every respect. Break-downs, repairs and stoppage of production are very frequent. It is not a profit-making enterprise in normal conditions. Its products are costly and in no way can it compete with the paper-mills. Its market is very limited. We learnt all this the hard way. But the Mother had wished it success, and we endeavoured towards that goal. Panou-da's prompt help from Harpagon in repairing work was inestimable.

At the end of 1961, an unexpected happy coincidence took place. It was one of my most enriching experiences. Chimanbhai K. Patel, a prominent figure of Pondicherry commerce, informed me that the Southern Zone head office of the National Productivity Council in Trichy was to organize a three month Work-Study course on entrepreneurial management in Pondicherry. The subject was 'The Principles and Practical Application of Operational Analysis and Methods Improvement'. It was to be conducted by an eminent American Professor delegated by UNAID to the Indian Government. With the Mother's permission I availed of the opportunity. New possibilities opened up before me. The Professor taught us how to come out of the rut and solve problems, how to economise time, space, raw material and manpower, and how to motivate employees. I was now convinced that we had the possibility of making our factory viable.

The lessons learnt there were immediately implemented. Flow of movement was streamlined, wastage at every stage was recorded and minimised and time taken between different stages of production was reduced. Relations with employees were good and I received their cooperation. HMPD was on the way to becoming a profitable concern producing quality paper.

Our survey showed that we could make profits on Artists' Water Colour and Fancy papers. The best raw material required for that was cotton. There were many cottage and home industries all over South India manufacturing cotton hosiery. With the sincere, resourceful Asherbhai of Honesty [HEC], a devotee of the Mother, as my guide, I personally visited some of these to make contracts for their waste products. This was the first time that I went out of the Ashram. The Mother told me, "I will always be with you." Later I made two more such trips with one of our employees as my interpreter. We were on the right track.

From then on, Cotton Water Colour, Bond and Fancy papers were manufactured. The name given to this factory by the Mother clearly indicated that it was an Ashram Department, fully under the Mother's care, but with a difference. The loan had to be repaid and so it had to be run

commercially and therefore it was autonomous.

At one time, during this period, the authorities decided that the HMPD should remit all its income to the Ashram treasury and draw all its requirements from there. As a result of this decision, prompt, efficient and smooth operations became difficult.

There was a large number of workers. Most of them were on daily wages. On mutual agreement they were paid the weekly aggregate amount on Saturdays at 4 p.m. On one such Saturday, this amount did not reach me at the scheduled time of 1 p.m. I waited till 3.30 p.m. Then I rushed to the Ashram, ran up to the Mother on the first floor. The Mother asked me what the matter was. I told Her, "Mother, the daily wage-earners are to be paid now, today. These are needy people. The money has not arrived for their payment. They will not be able to feed their family. They work hard. If we fail them, can they have any more trust in us? Can we expect good relations and work from them?" She said something to Vasudhaben. Vasudhaben went to the adjacent room, fetched a purse and gave it to Her. The Mother asked me to write down the required amount and the purpose for which it was needed. She counted the money and gave it to me saying, "My child, I appreciate your sense of responsibility. I am giving this money to you from my own purse." I was very happy. Thereafter, once again, HMPD became autonomous.

The daily wage-earners were taken on the monthly salary list after they became skilled in their work and after a certain period, they were made permanent.

To give us a boost, the Mother instructed the Ashram Press to buy hand-made Bond paper for printing the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's books. By this time there were five Lifting Vats; thus the production had multiplied five times.

Around this time KVIC sent us blueprints of an innovated Lifting Vat with a pedal system. The Paper Mould was lifted out from the Vat by foot-pressure instead of the back-breaking and strenuous manual method. Udar and Vishwanath-da

got a prototype built in Harpagon. On trial, it was found to be very satisfactory and more were ordered. The yield per Vat increased.

Udar's good public relations were very helpful in promoting sales.

Right in the beginning, special papers were produced and supplied to Nasik Security Press for their Hundi (promissory) Notes with Charkha watermark and to some Universities for their Certificates and Degrees with their watermarked emblem. The Gita Press, Gorakhpur, had placed an order for white Bond Paper for their Delux Edition stressing that no product of animal origin was to be used in its manufacture. So instead of gelatine sizing, resin sizing was used. We received orders from Chimanlal Papers, a wholesaler of Mumbai. To the Vakils' enterprise of Mumbai we supplied deluxe deckle-edge stationery papers.



9th Dec. 1959. The Mother inaugurating the HMPD. Also seen (l to r) are: Nolini-da, Amrita-da, Kishorilal-ji, Pranab-da, Pavitra-da, Kiran Ch., Togo, Sudhir Sarkar.

In 1963, our Artists' Water Colour paper was rated in the American market as next to the best long-established papers. Orders started coming from abroad for Drawing, Bond, Fancy papers and stationery. In the meantime, the arduous, very slow process of rag-cutting by hand was replaced by an electric chopper, reducing the time and number of workers.

As the orders increased, the main shed was extended. Gradually the number of Vats increased from five to ten. The factory began to work in two

shifts. Eventually to meet the increasing demand, a third shift had to be added, making the factory work round the clock at full capacity. The total number of employees swelled from the initial seven to about one hundred and thirty. The production increased more than thirty-fold. I remained available twenty-four hours for all emergencies.

Salaries and wages were raised with the increase of production and sales. Surplus money was offered to the Mother. Even during great hardship the instalments of the loan were always paid on schedule. Excess expenditure in every respect was curbed. Perhaps by 1968 the loan was repaid.

A devotee of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, Rear Admiral of United States (Retired), Rutledge B. Tomkins was impressed on his visit to our HMPD and, after giving me some suggestions, he sent me books on Work-Study as a token of encouragement.

Sometime in 1962, Udar placed Tony Scott to assist Dhir. One afternoon, when I went to the Mother for an official matter, Tony wished to accompany me as it was his birthday. There the Mother gave him a Sanskrit name: Anurakta. In

the beginning of 1964, Reba joined the HMPD staff and I trained her in all aspects of the factory.

Further extension of the main factory shed was undertaken to install a larger Hollander Beater, some more Vats, a power Hydraulic Press and another Vomiting Boiler.

In the third quarter of 1964, to my great surprise, I was to learn that the National Productivity Council had selected me for a prestigious French scholarship to study Management in recognition of my outstanding achievement in HMPD. My first thought was that it might give me the opportunity to visit the world's renowned hand-made paper mills in France and in England and produce first grade papers in the Ashram. When I told the Mother about the offer, she simply asked me, "What about your responsibilities here?" Only that. Naturally I dropped the idea.

This is the story of HMPD as I knew it. As someone who was directly involved in its functioning between 1959-67 and on several occasions was directed and helped by the Mother herself, I thought it would be worth sharing my experiences with my friends. ❧

*...Continued from page 23*

Dr. D.R. Bhattacharya, Vice-Chancellor, Allahabad University.  
 Dr. C.R. Reddy, Vice-Chancellor, Andhra University.  
 Dr. Manvala Ramanujam, Vice-Chancellor, Annamalai University.  
 Dr. P. Parija, Vice-Chancellor, Benares Hindu University.  
 Dr. P.V. Kane, Vice-Chancellor, University of Bombay.  
 Dr. P.N. Bannerjee, Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University.  
 Mr. Reddy, Vice-Chancellor, University of Mysore.  
 Dr. Sir M. Bhawani Shankar Neogy, former Vice-Chancellor, Nagpur University.  
 Mr. Ali Yavar Jung, Vice-Chancellor, Osmania University.  
 Sir. C.P.N. Singh, Vice-Chancellor, Patna University.  
 Hon. Sir Teja Singh, Vice-Chancellor, East Punjab University.  
 Shri. C.N. Acharya, Vice-Chancellor, Utkal University.  
 Shri. A.S. Bharatan, General Manager, Press Trust of India.  
 Shri. Tushir Kanti Ghosh, Editor, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta.  
 Acharya J.B. Kripalani, Ex-President of the Indian National Congress.  
 Mrs. Clara Motwani, Principal, Buddhist Women's College, Colombo.  
 Shri. Jamshed Nusserwanjee, former Mayor, Karachi Municipality.  
 Dr. D.N. Wadia, Director, Bureau of Mines and Geological Adviser, Government of India.  
 Dr. Kewal Motwani, Visiting Lecturer to American, Indian and Far Eastern Universities.  
 Dr. James H. Cousins, Poet, Dramatist, Art-Critic.



# VISHWANATH-DA

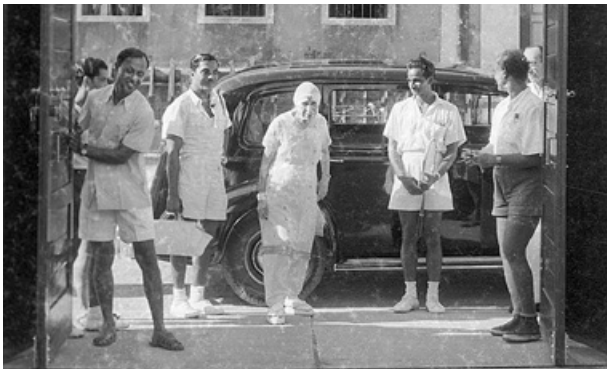
by Ramakant Navelkar

*“Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years.”*

— Isha Upanishad

Vishwanath-da lived for 99 years, out of which 60 years he spent at Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the service of the Divine Mother. Although he fell short by one year, the standard set by Isha Upanishad, it was compensated by the fact that he was used as an instrument by the Divine Mother in developing certain aspects of the Ashram.

Vishwanath Lahiri was born on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1909 and passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2008. He had studied Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at Benares Hindu University and



Vishwanath-da (left) opening the Harpagon gate for the Mother

was working in a builders' firm in Kolkata. His aunt — Rani-di — was already settled in the Ashram in Pondicherry. She was teaching English in the Ashram School. When he came to see the Ashram, he met Bula-da who had many responsibilities, including Ashram's Electrical Service. Bula-da was pleased to see Vishwanath-da. He advised Vishwanath-da to join the Ashram, which he did in 1948. He was 39 years old then. Since then, for the next 60 years, he served the Mother to his fullest capacity.

One of the first things he developed was the Projector Room in the Playground. He trained young men in handling projectors for showing

films in the Playground. The Mother's talks in the playground, later Her New Year Messages and the entire reading of *Savitri* were recorded by Vishwanath-da. He trained Arunkumar, Mahendra, Surendra and Nirmal in this work. The entire responsibility of the sound system for the 2<sup>nd</sup> December Programme every year was on this group, with Vishwanath-da personally supervising.

He was given the responsibility of the Drawing Office when Louis Allan (Olga's husband) took charge of the Lake Estate Property for its development. In the Drawing Office, Vishwanath-da had to get plans prepared for new Ashram buildings, get them approved by the Trustees, then get them approved by the Town Planning Authority, prepare estimates and guide the construction units by regular visits to the sites. I was part of this work for 42 years.

As he had knowledge of most of the branches of Engineering, he could help in setting up the cold-room for keeping fruits on the first floor in the Ashram and much later a cold-room for keeping all the documents and micro-films of the Archives Department. This he worked out in collaboration with an expert from Auroville. He trained Sukhendu to regularly monitor at different times the temperature and humidity of this cold-room.

Eckhardt, an authority on planning electrical requirements for international projects, was a devotee of the Mother. He came from Germany. Vishwanath-da and Eckhardt had long meetings in the Drawing Office for work as well as for loud sessions of laughter. Eckhardt had been coming to the Ashram for the last fifty years. He came mostly in the month of January and stayed



Vishwanath-da at the Drawing Office



Vishwanath-da with some of those he taught and trained

for a few weeks. He took Vishwanath-da twice to Germany to show him the advanced development there. Vishwanath-da was already 75 years old when he visited Germany.

Chamanlal (Dr. Chamanlal Gupta, an authority on Solar Energy) took Vishwanath-da to Ladakh to show him the solar energy project that he was getting done. Vishwanath-da was 72 years old then, but he withstood the extreme cold weather at night and extreme hot weather during the day. Vishwanath-da had no difficulty in breathing at that height. Chamanlal always admired him for his learning ability on any new subject. Chamanlal also gratefully recalls how Vishwanath-da provided space for him in the Drawing Office, when he was still looking for a proper office space.

Tejbabu (Shri Govind Tej), a close confidant of Pranab-da and a civil engineer who later left engineering and took to production of feature films, recalls how Vishwanath-da and he did the initial levelling and surveying work in Auroville when only a few lands were purchased. It is Tejbabu who has produced the new documentary

films on the Mother and the Ashram. Whenever he came on a visit to the Ashram, he inquired with me about Vishwanath-da.

Many early Aurovillians, particularly the Chief Architect Roger Anger, Nata and other technical staff came regularly to the Drawing Office to meet Vishwanath-da.

Mr. Arun Savardekar, who helped Ashram projects with regard to structural engineering, was an admirer of Vishwanath-da. Mr. Savardekar normally came for Darshans from Mumbai. He and Vishwanath-da always had warm meetings and fruitful discussions on latest techniques and theories in civil engineering.

Kumud-ben was one of the Ashram students whom Vishwanath-da taught civil engineering drawings at the Drawing Office. She later became the personal attendant of the Mother, and therefore left working with Vishwanath-da. But she helped him in organising his meals etc. In the last five years of Vishwanath-da's life, it was Kumud-ben and Dr. Vandana who helped him a lot, providing him with Ayurvedic medicines and Flower-Remedies. Incidentally, Kumud-ben is now the care-taker of the Mother's room and the Mother's personal things.

In one of the Mother's talks in the playground, she said, "There are honest people but they do not have the capacity to work. There are capable people but they are not honest in their work. When I find someone both honest and capable he becomes very precious." (CWM, 13: 167).

The Mother found in Vishwanath-da such a precious instrument. ❧

## OUR REVERED VISHWANATH-DA

*Srinivas Murthy '78*

**V**ishwanath-da was a Karmayogi. Work was yoga for him. The Mother did the *sadhana* for him. He was the loyal instrument of the Mother.

A few years back, we went to Annamalai University to study non-conventional energy. They showed us their project, producing electricity,

using partly Bio-gas as fuel. The Dean of the university was taken with Vishwanath-da. He was surprised with his physical fitness, his ability to walk long distances and take keen interest in their project. Vishwanath-da was then 93 years old. The dean asked Vishwanath-da, "Could you please let me know the secret of this?" To this, his advice

was, "Do yoga and exercises early in the morning. Eat food at fixed times. Have always positive thoughts. Go to bed early. This will keep you fit."

He told the students and us, "In the field of engineering, one should be industrious, intelligent and willing to work. You bear a high responsibility on your shoulders. Be punctual, honest and prompt."

Vishwanath-da was born on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1909. He studied Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at Benaras Hindu University. After his studies, he worked for a few years at Kolkata in a Construction firm.

He joined the Ashram in 1948. He worked for a few years at the Electric Service under Bula-da, who had many other responsibilities. Bula-da was pleased with Vishwanath-da's work. He stayed at Columbani house, which is, in front of the old District Court. Later, in 1954, he shifted to the first floor at Harpagon.

He took charge of the Drawing Office, when Louis settled at Lake Estate to develop the estate. It was here in this office that buildings were designed and detailed estimates prepared. The designs were sent to the Mother for Her approval and Blessings.

He was always dynamic, punctual and disciplined in his work. He himself set an example before he instructed others. He opened the office at 7:30 sharp in the morning. He left the office at 12 noon. He again opened it at 1:30 pm and worked late till 8:00 or 8:30pm at night. We could adjust our watch to his prompt punctuality. He kept himself busy in teaching and work. After 5 pm, he would prepare for the classes, design structures using the computer or spend time on research. After returning home, he would sit quietly and visualise the visions of his future works. He was ahead of our time.

In the year 1964, the Engineering curriculum

for the students was commenced. It consisted of branches in Mechanical, Civil and Electrical Engineering. Udar-da, Vishwanath-da, Nata, Shambu-da, Phoni-da and Joshi-bhai were the professors. The Engineering curriculum consisted

of 5 years of theory and practical subjects. Those who were interested only in practical subjects studied for 2 years.

I came in contact with Vishwanath-da in 1973. For us one year of pre-Engineering consisted of Mathematics and then five years of Engineering studies. All the branches



Vishwanath-da (right) explaining the working of the generator to the Mother

of Engineering had all the subjects in common for the first two years. Our classes were held at the Drawing Office, Laboratoire and at Knowledge.

Vishwanath-da gave much importance to the practical subjects. Under his guidance, we learnt at Knowledge the preliminaries such as cutting, chipping, filing of steel from a round bar to a rectangle with perfect right angles on all the sides and different operations on the lathe, drill and milling machines. He took keen interest in teaching and correcting our mistakes.

At the Drawing Office he taught us Engineering drawing consisting of Isometric, Geometric and Perspective. We specialised in our respective branches in the last three years. He taught the students subjects pertaining to Civil and Electrical Engineering. The notes which he gave us are precious and I refer to them at times. Gunther taught us Mechanical and Joshi-bhai Chemical Engineering.

In 1976, in November during our vacations, Vishwanath-da took us for an educational trip to Delhi and surrounding areas. He wanted us to get exposed to industries and architectural marvels. We visited industries, IIT, Jantar Mantar, Qutub Minar, Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri famous for Mogul architecture and gardens, BHEL at Haridwar, Chandigarh, the city de-



signed by Le Corbusier and the dam at Bhakra-Nangal. At Pondicherry, he took us to many of the industries and explained to us in detail all the operations.

Once, as students, we went to Kalpakkam to study the function of nuclear reactors with Vishwanath-da and Chamanlal-ji. The authorities explained to us the process in detail. Wherever we could not understand or they skipped some points, Vishwanath-da explained to us with ease; he knew the process in detail. Vishwanath-da and Chamanlal-ji returned by car. We returned by bus. We had to report to him after returning. He was very concerned about us.

After completing my studies, I worked with Vishwanath-da at the Drawing Office for thirty years in the design, construction and maintenance of Ashram buildings. Later, due to the increase of work in maintenance and construction, these were looked after by two new departments. House Maintenance by Praful and Building Construction by me. Vishwanath-da was in charge of both these departments.

He was also in charge of Refrigeration, Air-conditioning and the Projector Room (Recording and Projection Section). Arun-bhai, Mahi, Surendra, Nirmal and Gopi helped him at the Projector Room at Playground. Under his guidance, films were shown. Mother's talks, New Year messages and entire readings of Savitri were recorded by him. Now a well-equipped and designed recording room with proper sound insulation is functioning at Delafon.

We took him by van to various sites and houses which were under repair or construction. He explained to us in detail, important points to take care of and taught us how to supervise. Even at a late age, he would climb a ladder if required.

He always had the urge to learn more. He started learning to operate a computer and to use different software in his eighties. He drew Engineering drawings of Mechanical, Electrical and

Civil works in Autocad and Turbocad. He used Staad Pro for making structural calculations of the buildings. He has written a few programs using spreadsheets for the design of RCC beams and slabs.

Eckhart, a professional in Electrical designs for international projects comes every year from Germany to the Ashram in the month of January for his birthday. He and Vishwanath-da would have long conversations. The office would be vibrant with laughter. He would accompany Vishwanath-da to the farms and have a look at the projects in progress. At Knowledge, on the ground floor in Technical Lab, Vishwanath-da was doing research in the design of electric cars with the help of Eckhart. Eckhart with his team had designed a prototype plane using Hydrogen as fuel from Water, which they tried at the Ashram Theatre along with Vishwanath-da. Fifteen years back he went to Germany with Eckhart to study lighting systems for the Exhibition hall and also

to see the new techniques in construction technology. Age was no bar.

Savardekar-ji, structural engineer from Mumbai often comes to the Ashram. He helped Vishwanath-da in the Ashram projects.

We have many technical departments. Vishwanath-da trained many of the inmates in these various technical fields. Some of

the buildings constructed under his guidance are CARE, Papeterie, the eco-building at Lake Estate and the residential building at Vanur farm, etc.

His vision was to design and construct energy-efficient, eco-friendly and architecturally sound buildings. Now, residential quarters at Gloria land, at Matur Udyanam, at the Lake Estate and at Ambika House close to the Ashram have been designed, incorporating the above points.

He served the Mother for sixty years. He passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2008. He was a young man of 99 years. He was fit and worked till his last days. ❧



At the computer



# QUIZ TIME!



*Know the answers to the following questions? They will be printed in our next issue.*



1. Here is an extract from a letter written by Sri Aurobindo in 1920. To whom was this letter written?  
*"It is my belief that the main cause of India's weakness is not subjection, nor poverty, nor a lack of spirituality or religion, but a diminution of the power of thought, the spread of ignorance in the birthplace of knowledge."*
2. Who was the daughter of A. B. Purani (freedom fighter and biographer of Sri Aurobindo)? Clue — she was a dance teacher at the School.
3. "No one I am, I who am all that is." This is the last line of which poem by Sri Aurobindo?
4. In which year did Sri Aurobindo and the Mother move to the house which is now known as the Ashram Main Building?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the small variety of the Canna flower? It is usually red or orange in colour.




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## ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE LAST ISSUE :

1. *From which port in Japan did the Mother sail for India in 1920?*  
Kobe.
2. *Where was the kitchen where food used to be cooked for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the very early days of the Ashram? The Irish disciple known as Datta, who had been with the Mother when she was living in Japan, used to cook their food in those days.*  
It was in the house which is just after the Ashram Main Building on Rue de la Marine. It is the corner house where fabric painting is done these days.
3. *What was the reason for which the holidays of the School were fixed from 1<sup>st</sup> November to 15<sup>th</sup> December?*  
These dates were chosen so that the students and the teachers could be free to spend that time to rehearse for the annual programmes on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December.
4. *Complete this line from Sri Aurobindo: "Vision delightful....."*  
"Vision delightful alone on the hills whom the silences cover" — from the poem Ahana.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of the flowers of the coffee bush?*  
Perfect path. Very satisfying for all those who love coffee.

*Love work and you will be happy. Love to learn and you will progress.*

The Mother

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*One must be master of oneself in order to be a master of others.*

The Mother

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## READING

In order to learn you must read very carefully and choose with care what you read.

25 October 1934

In unformed minds what they read sinks in without any regard to its value and imprints itself as truth. It is advisable therefore to be careful about what one gives them to read and to see that only what is true and useful for their formation gets a place.

3 June 1939

There is a subtle world where you can see all possible subjects for paintings, novels, plays of all kinds, even the cinema.

It is from there that most authors receive their inspiration.

*(A teacher suggested that books dealing with subjects like crime, violence and licentiousness should not be available to young people.)*

It is not so much a question of subject-matter but of vulgarity of mind and narrowness and selfish common-sense in the conception of life, expressed in a form devoid of art, greatness or refinement, which must be carefully removed from the reading-matter of children both big and small. All that lowers and degrades the consciousness must be excluded.

1 November 1959

*I have been laying great stress on the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata and on the songs of Kabir, Mira, etc. Is it against your way to continue these old things?*

Not at all — it is the attitude that is important. The past must be a spring-board towards the future, not a chain preventing from advancing. As I said, all depends on the attitude towards the past.

**The Mother** (CWM, 12: 143-148)

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