

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



GROWING UP
IN IRA'S HOME

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

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

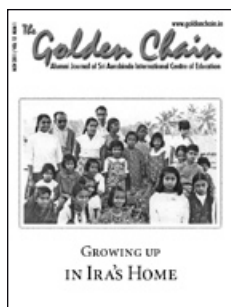
Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

CONTENTS

VOL 12 NUM 1

NOV 2011

- 1 **THE EDITORS' PAGE**
- 2 **EXPERIENCE: My Relationship with the Mother**
Satya Dayanand '83H.
- 4 **The Professional Divine**
Lalit N. Modi recounts.
- 7 **Alexandra David Néel**
An introduction with extracts from the Mother.
- 11 **OUR GUEST: Playing Alexandra**
Dominique Blanc answers Sunayana Panda '79.
- 14 **CULTURE CORNER: Staging "Prince of Edur"**
Priti Ghosh '64 answers. Shyama '85 reviews.
- 17 **BOARDINGS: Ira's Home**
Anjan '72, Anurekha '80, Prabha '80, Shyama '85 remember.
Ira-di and Kavita-di speak to us.
- 30 **QUIZ TIME**



On the Cover:

Children and guardians of Ira's Home. Back row (l to r): Aruna-di, a tailor, Kavita-di, Brajkishore-da, Marie-France (the maid), another maid, Bhartrihari. Middle row: Sutapa, Prabha, Lopita, Debashri, Chhallamayai, Sunayana, Ira-di, Ashit, Uma. Front row: Anurekha, Rajani, Sarvari, Maitreyi, Savitri Reddy, Rohini.

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



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Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.

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

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Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry 605002.

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IMPRINT:

Publisher:

Jhumur Bhattacharya
for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY, Pondy

Printer:

Swadhin Chatterjee,
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM PRESS, Pondicherry.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

Many years ago there used to be a Realisation tree right in the middle of the School courtyard. Most of my evenings were spent sitting under that tree, watching performances which were held on the School stage. Actually, there wasn't even a permanent stage in the School courtyard. A makeshift stage would be assembled with wooden planks under the Patience tree and it would be dismantled the next day and put away.

There was something or the other almost every evening of the week and we got to watch a play almost once a month. The ones I liked the best were those put on by Cristof. He wrote his own plays, produced and directed them and quite often acted in them too. Although Cristof was never officially my teacher, I know that I learnt more by watching his plays than by sitting in many of my classes. In fact, the place under the branches of the Realisation tree was my favourite classroom.

The Realisation tree is not there any more and neither are there very many plays on the stage in the School courtyard. What killed off theatre in the Ashram? Was it the presence of 24-hour TV channels, or was it the DVD player? Or could it be the internet? Or was it the hectic social life of everyone in Pondicherry? Perhaps all of the above. And many other factors too.

Theatre isn't all about people dressing up and pretending to be someone else. There is a deeper dimension to it which is not easily grasped. The artist has his brush and his paints and the musician has his instrument. What does the actor have? His body, mind and heart. He expresses himself with his whole being. Theatre demands an awareness of oneself as few other art forms do.

In the integral education there is a place for artistic activities. Vital education is as important as mental and physical education and is very close to spiritual education. Without it our emotional and aesthetic being remains untrained and

unrefined. Theatre and all other performing arts are a part of our student life because they constitute our vital education. The Mother ensured that we had access to a large number of artistic activities but she also wanted us to experiment and do something new.

We were once the avant-garde. What we did very few could even imagine. Sadly, now we sit and watch dance performances that are as traditional as possible, with full costume and accessories. What happened to our creativity? Shouldn't our performances reflect our ideals? And what about plays? We get to see one or two in the year. They require too much time and effort and they call for a variety of skills which we don't have any more. Theatre requires a certain discipline and somehow the word "discipline" has acquired a negative connotation.

In this context it was such a joy to watch a play written by Sri Aurobindo and performed by the students. In this issue we bring you a report on it. We have something else which is very special too. One of the leading actresses of France, Dominique Blanc, was in Pondicherry in January this year to shoot for a film based on the life of Alexandra David-Néel. She is not only a well-known film actress but also a stage actress of renown. Dominique Blanc spoke to us about her work in general but also about her work on the stage and how she prepares herself for a performance. It is a rare privilege indeed to get a peep into the mind of so highly-acclaimed an actress.

True, the Realisation tree isn't there anymore but a certain realisation has dawned in my mind. Here at the Ashram we are surrounded by things, people, activities and ideas which are truly out of the ordinary. There is so much to learn from this spiritual and cultural context in which we live, not only for the students but for the grown-ups too.

We know that all the world's a stage but all the world's a classroom too when we want to learn. ❧

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MOTHER

Satya Dayanand '83H

I came here to the Ashram at the age of 2 back in 1965 and spent the next 12 years of my life in an environment of such carefree joy that I find it hard to describe.

Our family was blessed in getting a Darshan every Sunday with the Mother in Her room and I have been told that instead of sitting quietly I was more keen to wander around. It seems the Mother laughed and asked my mother to leave me alone and to allow me to play around in the room. Then one day, after a couple of visits, I suddenly rushed from my regular routine of looking around to place my head at Mother's Feet and was very smilingly and fondly blessed by Her. Ever since, this life has been in Her hands and I truly have been carried through life joyously.

I think the first time I knew there was something more to routine things was the manner in which a plant, Divine Presence, that my father grew at our home those days delivered flowers exactly in time for us to take to Her Sunday after Sunday; it was truly magical and it filled my young mind with awe and glee to see it happen week after week after week.

Another distinct memory from those innocent days was of my parents eagerly writing down a dream of mine as I recounted it to them and sending it to the Mother and my receiving a precious response from Her which I must keep private. The reason I recount this is to highlight how She got the time from the countless activities that kept Her occupied in this world and others to read and respond in Her own hand to a child's

dream with such tenderness and love.

Soon enough for reasons best known to the Mother, I left the School here in 1977 after the equivalent of the 10th standard. I did my usual exams and college, etc. During this period, I was struck by a rather serious illness and was bed-ridden for the better part of a year and even at this time, I do not remember any feeling of actually "being ill".... Time just went by and by Her Grace I grew well again.

Back on my feet, it was time to do my Chartered Accountancy. This was a period of rapid growing up — being sent alone at the age of 20 to audit companies and rather wise adults who were probably delighted to see a green junior coming to audit them. There's nothing like being

thrown in the deep end to learn rapidly and adapt and more than hold your own. The Internship was also a great morale booster to us young chaps as we went around seeing various qualified CAs and gaining confidence that if those people could pass, so could we! The problem was that in those days less than 5% of those who sat for the CA final exams passed.... Anyway, the hurdle was crossed and how! This whole short history is only to highlight again how Mother got me through! The finals those days consisted of 2 groups of 4 papers each and one needed to get at least 40 marks in each paper and at least 50% aggregate overall in each group to pass. I had taken both groups together and was truly blessed to find that I had been awarded 40 marks in a paper in 1 group and had got 50% overall marks in the other



In the Kindergarten

group! So even 1 mark in a single paper across 5 papers could have resulted in problems for me! I also highlight this because ultimately, in the long run, as we have been told here, exams and marks count for nothing and in life once you are on the job, it is the contribution that matters and not how much you scored in the exams which unfortunately most parents outside the Ashram system seem to forget. Many years later, working in the Gulf, I found myself on a par with an individual who had been my senior-in-charge and was a 'top 3' ranker in the intermediate, final of both the CA and CWA courses. Such was the continued Grace carrying me through life that it enabled me to become, at the age of 39, the Chief Financial Officer of a bank in the Middle East with a balance sheet of a considerable figure across multiple countries and counting some 1500 staff, which, by the time I resigned to return home to the Ashram, had grown even more.

In between I was with a bank in Bahrain and enjoying an extremely comfortable lifestyle for about 5 years with no real motivation to move. For those who are not aware of it, the lifestyle in the Gulf is extremely comfortable and Bahrain offers some of the best in creature comforts. One could almost describe it as a "slow" quicksand and it sucks one in without one realizing it. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, matters came to a head between the Chief Executive Officer and me and as happens in such events, there can be only one winner and I was forced to move on. When this happened, there was a lot of uncertainty and I think, being only human, I was quite upset about the turn of events.

However, as they say, when the Lord closes one door, He opens another and I got the position in the bank I remained with till recently where I was treated with much respect and which valued my contributions. But more interesting than that was that within 18 months of my departure from Bahrain, the bank I was in got into some serious difficulties and many of my senior colleagues found themselves in all kinds of terrible circumstances which I do not need to go into for the purpose of this narrative. My senior colleagues there are still unable to leave the country and are continually



The Banker

harassed with court visits, etc. That's when I realised how true were Mother's words when She said that often one is very upset at the turn of events and it is only much later, when one looks back on one's life one realises what Grace was bestowed in those circumstances. Had the Grace not pulled me out despite my protestations, I may well have been in the same position as my colleagues still stuck in Bahrain!

It had been an interesting journey but I had been developing a strong urge to return home. However, when one gets used to a nice salary at the end of each month, it is not the easiest of decisions to take to leave and return. Many of my colleagues and friends thought I had lost it when I mentioned what I wanted to do for the rest of my life! I had worked on myself over the past few years and prayed regularly and sincerely that it would become possible — and sure enough, things worked out as they always do and here I am by the Grace of the Mother!

As you can see from what I have just said, the attitude I have tried to adopt is that of the baby cat; for those of you who remember the Mother's recounting of Sri Ramakrishna's description of



Back in Pondy

the paths — you can either be the baby monkey and hold on tight to your mother or be the baby cat and be carried by your mother without worry. However, as She has also clearly said, being the baby cat does not mean that personal effort is not

required since we are humans and not baby cats — so it is a daily challenge to honestly analyse one's thoughts and behaviour and have the courage to place sincerely everything before Them so that one may progress in one's sadhana with their Grace and Blessings. As Sri Aurobindo has said it is up to the sadhak to analyse and place his faults consciously at the feet of the Guru and not for the Guru to change everything since He knows what is wrong with the disciple.

At the end I would like to quote from some letters of Sri Aurobindo on the book *The Mother*.

This is from the section “True Relation with the Mother”:

TRUE INNER RELATION WITH THE MOTHER

An inner (soul) relation means that one feels the Mother's presence, is turned to her at all times, is aware of her force moving, guiding, helping, is full of love for her and always feels a great nearness whether one is physically near her or not. This relation takes up the mind, vital and inner physical till one feels one's mind close to the Mother's mind, one's vital in harmony with hers, one's very physical consciousness full of her. These are all the elements of the inner union, not only in the spirit and self but in the nature.

THE MOTHER'S LOVE

You are the Mother's child and the Mother's love to her children is without limit and she bears patiently with the defects of their nature. Try to be the true child of the Mother: it is there within you, but your outward mind is occupied by little futile things and too often in a violent fuss over them. You must not only see the Mother in dream but learn to see and feel her with you and within you at all times. Then you will find it easier to control yourself and change, — for She being there would be able to do it for you. ❧

Based on a talk given in the Hall of Harmony

THE PROFESSIONAL DIVINE

Lalit N. Modi is auditor and tax consultant to a number of Ashram-connected individuals and organisations. He shares here a professional experience influenced uniquely by the Ashram environment.

Though it was a bright and glorious Pondicherry morning I got up with a dreary and gloomy mind frame. This contrast was perhaps due to the fact that I allowed professional life to trespass into the territory of personal life and donned my professional cap even at home. I literally got up with a pessimist's exclamation of “Good God, morning!!” Though all four sides of the bed are alike, one refers to this situation as getting down the wrong side of the bed. When the mind and heart

are ‘sunny’, getting down from any side of the bed, even though followed by a bump on the head, will still be the ‘right side’. Alas! It was not so.

Morning ablutions did no good. The indulgence at the breakfast table was brief. The dialogue with the Divine was scattered and delivered in bits and pieces. The mind weighed by the task to be accomplished in the morning, refused to co-ordinate with the body.

On my way to the homeopath's clinic I almost crashed into the poor cyclist who was perhaps on

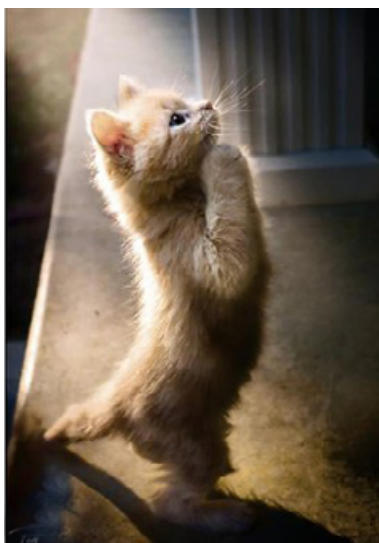
his way to meet his girl-friend. He did not seem to mind the close shave, because, like my mind, his mind was also elsewhere, maybe in the labyrinth of love and romance as against mine which was in my office files.

Debuda, the friendly homeopath, observed my mile-long face, tried to make small talk, wrote down the prescription and handed it over to me with his warm and formidable handshake. He was treating me for spondylitis – a stress-related ailment of which I was a victim. The handshake was accompanied by a concerned look and a take care caution.

The dispensing and administration of the medicine is done by Premaben, a very tranquil, sobre and serious-faced sadhak. A person of few words, she did her work with unique devotion and dedication. She carried herself with a calm, graceful dignity. Her serenity in the midst of a turbulent world was captivating and soothing. She was simply an embodiment of simplicity and hardly drew anybody's attention.

While handing over my medicines Premaben remarked that I did not appear to be in my element. The soft spoken observation left me aghast. I never thought my visage reflected my inner apprehensions so vividly. Her mild concern was so overwhelming that I could not lie to her to prove her conjecture untrue. I told her that I had a very complicated professional case in hand and despite my best preparation I was worried about its outcome. The presentation of the case with its ample pile of documents was to be heard by a very strict officer of the tax department in another two hours. The case had multifold complications and required tremendous patience, persuasion and aggressive presentation. All this and more I explained to her and she heard me out patiently. Having finished my monologue, she gazed at me and asked why I was perturbed

over such a simple matter. I could only look at her, bewildered and dumbfounded. Then, just as naturally as handing over the homeopathy pills to me, she said simply without any elaboration — “Why don't you call the Mother?” I just stared at her in disbelief and mumbled something and said that ‘I would!’ She then smiled and said that ‘I should!’ and went back to her work and I left the dispensary in a trance. Like a drowning man clutching at a straw, soon after I emerged from the dispensary, I looked upward and around me and not knowing how to call the Divine Mother I just looked towards the sky and asked Her to accompany me to the tax department. The only way I knew to invoke Her!



It can work for anyone!

By 11 am, I was sitting before the tax officer with a thick bunch of papers and submissions and three boxes of files and books to substantiate the submissions. The solemn-faced bureaucrat received the bouquet of papers with a smile, slightly astonished by its size and quantum. He went through the wad of papers carefully and I geared myself up for the barrage of queries and the debate that would ensue. And all the time I was ensuring that the communication with the Divine remained intact! The interrogation commenced with some

simple queries like the preliminary questions in Kaun Banega Crorepati. These were met by me with curt responses without any difficulty. The seventh, or maybe the eighth query, was the dreaded anticipated million dollar question and I immediately opted for “phone a friend option” and mentally called the Divine. After the initial hiccups, I found myself on the highway of an elaborate explanation till the destination of Q.E.D. was reached. To date I have no inkling of what I narrated to the knowledgeable official. The only thing I know was that it was not I presenting the case before the authority. My body

was only a medium of communication — gathering and transmitting wireless information in an audible form to the presiding officer. To my astonishment I found that there was a remarkable lucidity in the delivery of my monologue. I have never been so articulate about my thoughts in the past. Words and ideas flowed like the river Ganges, crystal clear and unambiguous. It was indeed the Divine representing the case.

As soon as the soliloquy was over I found the officer looking at the chair beside me and nodding in agreement. I too gazed at the chair and apparently nobody was there. Or was there? Shifting his attention back to the sheaf of papers, he made some notes on the top sheet and said that he was satisfied with the presentation of the case and that he was granting the necessary relief in respect of the case heard.

The case related to the grant of exemption to a Trust formed by an ardent devotee of the Mother for the propagation of the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It was a rendition of the Divine, by the Divine and for the Divine — a case won by the Divine hands down. A Professional Divine indeed!

Within half an hour I was out of the chamber, delighted and relieved, literally looking hither and thither to thank the Divine for Her gracious presence and transforming the so-called ordeal into a pleasant journey.

After a few days I met Premaben and narrated the miraculous episode to her and thanked her profusely for showing the way. The sparkle in her eyes said it all. “You had worked sincerely on the case and the Divine held your hand,” was her down-to-earth response.

Two important realities of life strike us here. First and foremost is the power of prayer, in whatever form it may be. It is up to us to reach out to the Divine. He is always there omnipresent and omniscient with His/Her hand extended towards us. His Grace is always shining above us like the sunlight. It is up to us to take the necessary effort to bask in the glory of that Divine sunlight. All our calls would be attended to with no room for missed calls, provided the number is dialed with unmitigated, unqualified and total faith

emerging from the soul. Each human being can access the Divine in his or her own subtle way. Treat the Divine like a friend; speak your heart out to Him. Do not be afraid to share all that’s in your mind. Weep before Him; fight with Him; His compassion is endless and inexhaustible. He has to respond; He will respond; provided you put the maximum effort into whatever you do. The surrender must be total.

The other reality that strikes me from the Premaben episode is about the wonderful role all of us can play in life — the role of a signboard. Just imagine ourselves driving down the road to go to a town or village we have never visited before and need to reach there quickly and safely. All the time, till we reach the destination, we anxiously look for the majestic signboard if we are on an expressway and the stunted signpost if we are driving down the single roads, by-roads, lanes and avenues. How relieved we feel when we cross every signpost being assured that we are on the right path. Particularly when there are several roads and by-passes crisscrossing, our anxiety to reach the next signpost becomes more intense. And imagine when we have to come to a grinding halt in a remote place with four roads crisscrossing and no signpost around. Our eyes immediately thirst for the sight of a human being who can show us the way further. And lo! When we see a diminutive old man around, we approach him with all veneration seeking his guidance. And after reaching our destination, how we sigh in relief and inwardly thank the signposts and men we met on the way who were instrumental in enabling us to reach our destination without much ado.

Superimposing this analogy onto our lives, can’t we too emulate the signboards and signposts and guide our fellow beings in the course of their journey of life? We are all social beings and at every step of our lives we meet people of different walks of life. And every person we encounter is constantly looking for something and if we are in a position to help, if we can point a finger and show them the direction, would not the world be a better place to live in?

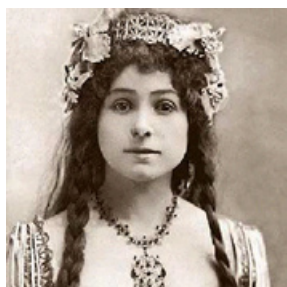
What the man-made signboard can do, God-made man can do better. ❧

ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL

A film is being made on the life of Alexandra David-Néel who, as we know, was a friend of the Mother. In January 2011 the cast and crew were in Pondicherry after they had shot many scenes in Sikkim. We thought it would be interesting, before the film comes out, for us to know a little more about Alexandra, to read what the Mother has said about her as well as what Alexandra wrote about her meeting with Sri Aurobindo in 1911. We also include an interview with the actress, Dominique Blanc, who plays the role of Alexandra.

AN INTRODUCTION

Born in France in 1868, Alexandra David-Néel was a renowned explorer, scholar and writer. Even today she remains an iconic figure and is admired by people across the world for her courage as an explorer who undertook dangerous journeys, risking her life. She is still remembered as the first European woman who entered



As a teenager

Lhasa when foreigners were forbidden to enter the city, and for having made Eastern mysticism comprehensible to the Western world. Rarely has anyone gone through so much physical hardship in order to gain more knowledge and to discover another culture.

From her early youth she was attracted to the philosophy of the East and attended classes at the Sorbonne University as well as at the Collège de France. She also joined the Theosophical Society and had a special attraction for Buddhism. She was probably also a member of the group of seekers who used to meet in the Mother's house in Paris. Even though she was ten years older than the Mother, they were close friends and met regularly.

In 1890 Alexandra inherited some money from a relative and with that she fulfilled her wish to travel to India. At the end of the 19th century, a European woman travelling alone in Asia for pleasure was unheard of.

Her passion for discovering new places led her to North Africa where she met Philippe Néel, a railway engineer working in Tunis and they were married in 1904. Alexandra was not the type to settle down to happy domestic life and once again

she wanted to go to Asia. In 1911 she set out again, thinking that she would be back in 18 months. But, in fact, she kept extending that journey and came back only 14 years later.

She shared a very unusual relationship with her husband Philippe. Right from the year of their marriage until his death in 1941, a period spanning about 37 years, she wrote to him regularly, describing the details of her travels and her life. In fact, they spent only a brief period together and lived all their lives apart, connected only through these letters. However, from what she writes it is evident that she shared a deep friendship with him.

Until now it was believed that Mr. Néel financed all these journeys, but now it has become clear that she had her own finances which consisted of what she received as an inheritance from her father as well as what she earned from the publication of her books and articles in various newspapers and magazines. Over and above these, her travels were funded by various ministries of the French Government.

She came to India in 1911 and travelled to Calcutta where she stayed for a while and learned Sanskrit. From there she went to Sikkim and met the young Prince of the Himalayan kingdom. He made arrangements so that she could meet the 13th Dalai Lama and ask him whatever questions



During her travels

THE TROUBLESOME MAHATMA

The Mother recounts an anecdote about Alexandra David-Néel.

I don't know if you have heard of Madame David-Néel who went to Tibet and has written books on Tibet, and who was a Buddhist; and Buddhists — Buddhists of the strictest tradition — do not believe in the Divine, do not believe in his Eternity and do not believe in gods who are truly divine, but they know admirably how to use the mental domain; and Buddhist discipline makes you a good master of the mental instrument and mental domain.

We used to discuss many things and once she told me: "Listen, I made an experiment." (She had studied a bit of theosophy also.) She said: "I formed a *mahatma*; with my thought I formed a *mahatma*." And she knew (this has been proved) that at a given moment mental formations acquire a personal life independent of the fashioner — though they are linked with him — but independent, in the sense that they can have their own will. And so she told me: "Just imagine, I had made my *mahatma* so well

that he became a personality independent of me and constantly came to trouble me! He used to come, scold me for one thing, give me advice for another, and he wanted to direct my life; and I could not succeed in getting rid of him. It was extremely difficult, and I don't know what to do!"

So I asked her how she had tried. She told me how. She said, "He troubles me a lot, my *mahatma* is very troublesome. He does not leave me in peace. He disturbs my meditations, he hinders me from working; and yet I know quite well that it is I who created him, and I can't get rid of him!" Then I said, "That's because you don't have the 'trick'..." (*Mother laughs*) and I explained to her what she should do. And the next day — I used to see her almost every day in those days, you see — the next day she came and told me, "Ah, I am freed from my *mahatma*!" (*Laughter*) She had not *cut* the connection because that's of no use. One must know how to *re-absorb* one's creation, that is the only way. To swallow up again one's formations.

The Mother (CWM, 6:277-78)

she had about Buddhism. During her travels she also learnt the Tibetan language.

It was in Sikkim that Alexandra hired a young boy called Aphur Yongden as her errand boy and helper. Eventually he accompanied her through all her difficult journeys. When she entered Lhasa disguised as a beggar woman, Yongden did all the talking and negotiating. Later she adopted him and took him to France when she returned to her country.

Alexandra David-Néel was a prolific writer and it is through her books that she has won the hearts of millions. She had a style which was at the same time very elegant as well as very readable. To her descriptions she added her personal reflections and this gives us an insight into her mind which was quite exceptional. Her travels through India, China,

Tibet, Japan and Korea come alive in their interesting details through the pages of her books.

After several journeys to Asia, Alexandra finally settled down in Digne, in the South of France. Unfortunately Yongden died much before her and she spent her last days in the company of her secretary who still looks after her house which has become a museum. She never lost her spirit of adventure and the story goes that she sent her passport for renewal at the age of 100. She died in 1969 at the age of 101.

During her brief stay in Pondicherry in 1911, Alexandra was very keen to meet Sri Aurobindo because she had heard about him from Paul Richard and the Mother. She mentions this fact in a letter to her husband. In 1910 Paul Richard came to Pondicherry in connection with some political work. When he expressed a



With her adopted son Aphur Yongden

A BUDDHIST STORY

The following incident from Alexandra David-Néel's travels was told by the Mother during one of the Friday classes, generally reserved for readings to the children.

As I am still unable to read to you this evening, I am going to tell you a story. It is a Buddhist story which perhaps you know, it is modern but has the merit of being authentic. I heard it from Madame Z who, as you probably know, is a well-known Buddhist, especially as she was the first European woman to enter Lhasa. Her journey to Tibet was very perilous and thrilling and she narrated one of the incidents of this journey to me, which I am going to tell you this evening.

She was with a certain number of fellow travellers forming a sort of caravan, and as the approach to Tibet was relatively easier through Indo-China, they were going from that side. Indo-China is covered with large forests, and these forests are infested with tigers, some of which become man-eaters... and when that happens they are called: "Mr. Tiger."

Late one evening, when they were in the thick of the forest — a forest they had to cross in order to be able to camp safely — Madame Z realised that it was her meditation hour. Now, she used to meditate at fixed times, very regularly, without ever missing one and as it was time for her meditation she told her companions, "Continue the journey, I shall sit here and do my meditation, and when I have finished I shall join you; meanwhile, go on to the next stage and prepare the camp." One of the coolies told her, "Oh! no, Madam, this is impossible, quite impossible" — he spoke in his own language, naturally, but I must tell you Madame Z knew Tibetan like a Tibetan — "it is quite impossible, Mr. Tiger is in the forest and now is just the time for him to come and look for his dinner.



We can't leave you and you can't stop here!" She answered that it did not bother her at all, that the meditation was much more important than safety, that they could all withdraw and that she would stay there alone.

Very reluctantly they started off, for it was impossible to reason with her — when she had decided to do something nothing could prevent her from doing it. They went away and she sat down comfortably at the foot of a tree and entered into meditation. After a while she felt a rather unpleasant presence. She opened her eyes to see what it was... and three or four steps away, right in front of her was Mr. Tiger! — with eyes full of greed. So, like a good Buddhist, she

said, "Well, if this is the way by which I shall attain Nirvana, very good. I have only to prepare to leave my body in a suitable way, in the proper spirit." And without moving, without even the least quiver, she closed her eyes again and entered once more into meditation; a somewhat deeper, more intense meditation,

detaching herself completely from the illusion of the world, ready to pass into Nirvana.... Five minutes went by, ten minutes, half an hour — nothing happened. Then as it was time for the meditation to be over, she opened her eyes... and there was no tiger! Undoubtedly, seeing such a motionless body it must have thought it was not fit for eating! For tigers, like all wild animals, except the hyena, do not attack and eat a dead body. Impressed probably by this immobility — I dare not say by the intensity of the meditation! — it had withdrawn and she found herself quite alone and out of danger. She calmly went her way and on reaching camp said, "Here I am."

That's my story. Now we are going to meditate like her, not to prepare ourselves for Nirvana (*laughter*), but to heighten our consciousness!

The Mother (CWM, 9:52,53)

RENCONTRE AVEC SRI AUROBINDO

Correspondance d'Alexandra avec son mari

D'abord j'ai été à Pondichéry. Là aussi j'ai eu la saveur de Versailles. Une ville morte qui a été "quelque chose" et s'en souvient, roidie dans sa dignité, propre, irréprochable, cachant sous des badigeons impeccables les lézardes des vieilles murailles. Mon hôtel arborait, lui aussi, un superbe badigeon sur sa façade, mais l'intérieur aurait eu besoin d'un sérieux coup de balai. J'ai passé la nuit dans un taudis infect ; des rats parcourant la chambre qui, le lendemain, était jonchée de leurs excréments. Le temps a heureusement été très beau et j'ai pu me promener tout l'après-midi dans une sorte d'engin préhistorique sans nom, poussé par quatre Noirs. J'en ai pris la photographie et je te l'enverrai sitôt que j'en aurai l'épreuve.

Le soir j'ai eu entretien avec un hindou¹ dont je ne crois pas t'avoir jamais parlé car nous ne sommes pas en correspondance et je ne le connaissais que par les éloges que m'en avaient fait des amis². J'ai passé deux heures très belles à remuer les antiques idées philosophiques de l'Inde avec un interlocuteur d'une rare intelligence appartenant à cette race peu commune, et qui a toute ma sympathie, des mystiques raisonnables. Je suis vraiment reconnaissante aux amis qui m'ont conseillé d'aller voir cet homme. Il pense avec tant de netteté, il y a une

1. Sri Aurobindo

2. *The Mother and Paul Richard*

telle lucidité dans son raisonnement, un tel rayonnement dans son regard qu'il vous laisse l'impression d'avoir contemplé le génie de l'Inde tel qu'on le rêve après la lecture des plus hautes pages de la philosophie hindoue.

Je savais que ce philosophe avait eu une attitude politique qui avait déplu aux Anglais, mais naturellement, par discrétion, je ne lui ai pas parlé de cela et, d'ailleurs, nous planions trop au-dessus de la politique. Cependant, tandis que nous planions, d'autres se contentaient de rester sur le sol... ces autres étaient la police anglaise. A mon arrivée à Madras j'étais attendue par le chef de la sûreté en personne qui, très correct et poli, du reste, me demandait ce que j'avais été faire à Pondichéry chez ce monsieur suspect. Je n'ai pas été étonnée, je prévoyais que ma visite serait connue. Je ne l'avais du reste guère cachée.

Ah! Grands dieux que cela paraît mesquin chétif toute leur agitation, leur frousse, leur douleur! Et quelle autre atmosphère il y avait dans la maison silencieuse de Pondichéry où passait le souffle des choses éternelles, ou dans le soir paisible, près de la fenêtre ouverte sur les jardins, un peu funéraires, de cette ville déchue, nous regardions par-delà la vie et la mort... Et comme il semble les contempler avec mépris superbe le lit ascétique des sages qui m'invite, en ce moment, comme il promet d'autres rêves que ceux qui hantent les pauvres cerveaux enfiévrés de ces fous!...

Alexandra David-Néel – Correspondance avec son mari, Plon 2000, pp. 94-95

ALEXANDRA ON THE MOTHER

"We spent marvellous evenings together with friends, believing in a great future. At times we went to the Bois de Boulogne gardens, and watched the grasshopper-like early aeroplanes take off. I remember her elegance, her accomplishments, her intellect endowed with mystical tendencies. In spite of her great love and sweetness, in spite even of her inherent ease of making herself forgotten after achieving some noble deed, she couldn't manage to hide very well the tremendous force she bore within herself."

On the Mother (1994) by K R Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 29

wish to see a yogi his friends gave him Sri Aurobindo's address. He met Sri Aurobindo in Shankar Chetty House and had a long conversation with him. On his return to France he obviously spoke about him to his friends, especially to the spiritual seekers who met once a week in the Mother's house which probably included Alexandra. So, when Alexandra came to Pondicherry she naturally wanted to see Sri Aurobindo. It is ironical that though Alexandra had heard about Sri Aurobindo from the Mother she actually met him before the Mother did. ❧

PLAYING ALEXANDRA

Dominique Blanc is a French actress who acts in films as well as on stage. She has received the prestigious César award for cinema four times. She was also awarded the Prix Molière, which is the French national theatre award, in 1998 and 2010.

When she was offered the role of Alexandra David-Néel, as a seasoned actress she went through her own research and found out all she could about the character she was going to play.

*She spoke to **Sunayana Panda** about her work in this film as well as about her work in general.*

What was your reaction when you were offered this role?

My reaction was immediate and very spontaneous and extremely happy. In fact, I knew about Alexandra David-Néel from my grandmother, who read a lot and had a great fascination for Alexandra David-Néel. And she had all her books.

When I was approached, at first I thought it was a joke, a bit crazy, unreal and utopic. And then I met the director, and I realised that this script had been in preparation for a long time, more than 25 years. He had this proposition from ARTE channel who wanted to work with him again and he said, "If I am going to work on this film I would like it to be with Dominique." I felt that I was a part of the director's dream. As he has a very thorough knowledge of India as well as of Alexandra David-Néel, and as he is also familiar with the religions of these areas, I knew that I was on very sure ground and in good hands.

How did you prepare yourself for this role, other than turning vegetarian?

Firstly I read most of Alexandra's books. I didn't read everything but I read a lot. Whenever

I do a role of a real person who existed, I like reading up biographies of that person. I read three different biographies. And the one thing I read, which was by far the most interesting, was Alexandra David-Néel's correspondence with her husband. This correspondence was published in its entirety only recently. And the last preparation I did was to go on a lightning trip along with the director of the film to the museum in Digne. And there we met Alexandra David-Néel's personal attendant and companion, called Marie-Madeleine Peyrronet.

What about other kinds of preparation?

I did a lot of yoga with my sister. I can't do it as well as she does, but I do a lot. I did a lot of breathing exercises. I can't meditate, but I read a lot about Buddhism and other religions. This is the first time that I am going to do the role of someone who had a spiritual seeking, which is so fascinating. This is also probably the first

time that I am going to play the role of someone who had so much physical courage and an extraordinary intelligence.

You act on stage as well as in cinema. Which of



the two do you enjoy more?

In fact I started by acting in theatre, and I only wanted to act on stage. I didn't at all think of cinema. In fact, I come from Lyon, and this city has always been a city of theatre. Even Molière lived there for a while. When I was a little girl, I had the opportunity to see not only classical theatre, but also a lot of contemporary theatre. My dream was to get up on the stage, to be up there. Cinema came quite by chance.

I acted in a play with Michel Piccoli and when he does something on stage the whole French cinema turns up to see what is happening. That is how I was approached by a film director who was looking for a young woman to play the role of an alcoholic, who at the end of the film commits suicide. This is how cinema entered my life in an accidental way. I have enjoyed doing both, even though I don't think it is the same work. I did not want to choose but I have managed to have a foot on both sides. Cinema offers me roles that theatre cannot and vice versa. And this is how I could get hold of roles which were totally different one from the other. And I hope it continues. Cinema, as you know, is a cruel industry for women who are getting old.

How is the work on stage different from the work in cinema for an actor?

Theatre is very fulfilling for the soul because you work intensely for 2-3 hours every evening, in a state of potential uncertainty. It is physically and psychologically much more tiring, but the communion with the audience is something extraordinary. I think it is something unique. It has been there since time immemorial. Men have always come together to tell each other stories. Cinema is more about details. The camera is more interested in my face. I can act by just raising an eyebrow or by quivering a nostril.

When you play the role of a character who is noble, courageous, in every way higher than the

normal human being, then it enriches you and you grow personally. How do you manage to play characters who are suicidal or addicts or in some way self-destructive? What happens within you when you play such roles? And you are known for playing these kinds of difficult roles.

It is true. For a long time I have been attracted to very dramatic roles. Unfortunately, I tended

to identify myself completely with these roles and this affected me physically and psychologically. Those who are close to me were really afraid that I would lose my balance. Then I felt that there was an alarm sign and so I have decided to stop doing such roles and to take up only positive ones or roles which are really villainous. And this is also very enjoyable because you can let yourself go and take out all that is horrible inside you. It is very liberating. It is fun, even though people look at you as if you were a mon-

ster. And this role of Alexandra — it is the first time I am playing a character which has given me so much inner strength and inner poise. And now I don't think I can any more play roles of characters who are so deeply unhappy. I don't know my limits and I often take their suffering on myself, and all their unease, and in the end it destroys me. My children tell me, "Enough!"

How do you prepare yourself for your performance on stage? What are the qualities that are required to perform well in theatre?

In theatre, the most important thing is concentration. I come very early to the theatre, in the afternoon itself. I spend the morning going through my text, because, in theatre, memory is essential. Your memorisation must be up to the mark. You have to sleep well and eat well because above all, theatre is physically very demanding. After that when I have repeated my lines several times, I get to the theatre by 4 or 5 o'clock. I have to be in the area because I am afraid that I will be late. Anything could happen, the car could have an accident, the metro might not work, any little



thing could happen and I could get late and that could throw me off balance completely. In order not to have stage fright, I have a cup of coffee, I chat with the costume ladies, I talk to the director, and I am at home. Then, an hour before the show, I do my make-up myself, something which I don't do in cinema, but in theatre it helps me to calm my anxiety, and helps me to get over my stage fright. I put on my make-up, and my costume, then I shut myself in my dressing room, and then in order to concentrate, I look at photos, I re-read books and newspapers, about actors and actresses and this inspires me. I scribble little notes in my notebook. So, as the time approaches, I feel stronger inside. If you are acting alone, then there is a certain preparation, but when I am acting with others, I open the door of my dressing room and let the others come in and we discuss. You mustn't isolate yourself for too long. When you act with others it is not good to do that. And after that I take the plunge. When you go on stage it's like jumping off with a parachute on your back.

Of all the roles you have played, which one did you enjoy the most?

In theatre, I loved acting in "A Doll's House". I got a chance of playing in "A Doll's House" because Isabelle Huppert was pregnant and I replaced her. I played Nora who leaves her husband and children in order to be free. This role left a deep impression on me. The other role that left a mark on me, and I actually fell ill, was the role of Phèdre. She is the woman in love with a capital L. She is in love with someone who doesn't love her and she lets herself die for love. However, she wants, for one last time, to express this love. And then it is a tragic end.

...Continued from page 16

Can you sum up your feelings as we end this interview?

This is the play, in all these years, through which I have really seasoned as a director, thanks to the different kinds of experiences that I had to go through. I had to keep my cool. From the time I started working on the play until the end... I

What advice would you give to a young person who is starting out in life and who wants to become an actor or an actress?

To a young actress I would say that you need a lot of courage but you have to also let yourself go and you have to persevere. I can only recommend this job because it is the best job in the world. In theatre as well as in cinema and television you have the opportunity to feel extraordinary emotions. It is a fantastic life because you live several lives in one life. This is how I have already died several times. I have a large number of children and husbands. It is incredible. When I was 18, I would never have imagined that I would live such a rich life.

Another thing that cinema has given me that theatre doesn't give me any more is that I have travelled a lot because of my work. It becomes very expensive to travel with theatre but for film shoots I have been to beautiful countries and been in contact with cultures which are very different from my own. But I haven't been there as a tourist, a bit like here. When you come to India as a tourist, you get to know an India which is not the real India, it is something made up for the tourists. When you work with people here, as we did in Lachen, in -10°C in the snow from Gangtok, you know that the people who are in front of you are real people and the best way to know people is to work with them. I had the good fortune of travelling a lot and working a lot and I hope it continues. I travelled a lot when I was 18-20 years old by hitch hiking, and I loved doing that. I think it is an extraordinary opportunity to know the rest of humanity by travelling and to know cultures which are so different. ☘

worked tirelessly but there was no sense of jubilation. After the play was over I said to myself, "The play was supposed to be done, and it was done very well." And that was that.

This interview would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the bountiful and unstinted help I got from Amita-di, Cristof, Sunila (specially for her innovative costumes), Bina Dharod, Mina, Habul, Arijoy and Basab. ☘

STAGING “PRINCE OF EDUR”

Shyama '85 spoke to Priti Ghosh '64 about her experience of directing this play on the School stage

How did this project (Prince of Edur) start? Who initiated it?

Some boys from EAVP 5 approached me and said that they wanted to do a play and wanted me to direct it. We tried to find the right play and finally settled on “Prince of Edur”.

We started work in the month of May. The first month we worked on getting their diction right. In June we made some efforts to go on the stage, but they had still not learnt their lines. Then some dance programme, which was supposed to be held at the Theatre, suddenly cropped up, to be staged in the School. When that happened, it absolutely upset our schedule. We postponed the play and in the process a kind of fatigue and laxity set in. The children came for rehearsals at 8 p.m. and we were always under pressure to leave the stage by 9 o'clock so that the dancers could practise. So, this proved to be disastrous for us. That is how the work kept prolonging.

Were all the participants from EAVP 5?

Yes, the main actors invited all their friends from EAVP 5. But we fell short of three actors, and finally three students from Knowledge joined the cast: Smaran, Adeeba and Jaishankar. The boy who was playing the leader of the Bhils, Praveen, one of our star actors, hurt his knee while doing the play, three times in a row. The third time it was really very serious. We had only four days left before the final day. So my first choice for the replacement was Jaishankar from the Higher Course. He readily agreed and learnt his lines in four days flat. He did exceedingly well on the final day.

What was the method you used for training the actors, after working on the diction?

I insisted on the body language. I asked them to interact, after delivering the lines they had to remember to react. The most important instruction I gave them was to make an effort to throw their voices.

After all the hard work, what was the final day like?

As you know, whenever there is a performance, on the last day it is the Mother's day. The Mother takes over the whole thing and then she gives the magic touch. The end result is beyond our expectations. The same thing happened this time too. We were all very collected. We went to Sri Aurobindo's room, which we had not expected and the students were unusually poised.

You have been working with young students for so many years. Don't you feel that children these days are more and more gifted and developed, academically as well as in their extra-curricular activities?

That is very true. Specially with this batch I found that each one was so gifted. But I also find, on the whole, there is a kind of dissipation. They are gifted but somehow they are not channelising all their capacities and their energies into something very, very definite, which would help them to mature faster and to give it their best. It is a very sad thing. I have discussed it with the younger teachers and they too find that there is a general lack of interest for anything. And discipline is so very lacking.

Why don't you take up some dramatics classes? There used to be regular classes where



Udit as Bappa and Sudipta as Comol Cumary

PRINCE OF EDUR - A REVIEW

Shyama '85

When we think of Sri Aurobindo's play "Prince of Edur", the words "delightful" and "charming" come to mind. These two words suggest life, mirth, joyousness, humour and romance. The performance which was staged on 30th August in the School courtyard had all these elements to a large extent, mainly because it was presented by capable youngsters who were mostly from EAVP 5.

This performance was brought to the stage by none other than Priti-di, who has directed plays for many years now. We spoke to her one evening and in this review and report we will try to remain in the mood of that conversation.

On the whole, the play was a remarkable feat considering that our students are not used to being on stage, nor are they exposed to good stage performances by seasoned actors, nor do they have any dramatics classes as part of their extra-curricular activities. Given these factors, we have to admit that they showed a lot of potential. Most of them were free on stage and the youngster who took us by surprise was the one who played Canaca, the jester.

The cast was well chosen, although it seemed some roles could have been interchanged. We know from Priti-di that there were some last minute changes in the cast and the actors adapted themselves quite well. There were places where it seemed that the scenes could have been interpreted slightly differently. For example, towards the end when Bappa and the princess are together in a playful and romantic mood, there could have been a little more playfulness.

Since the play was staged in the School courtyard, the tree behind the stage became a part of the scenes which take place in the forest

and created the right ambience. However, for the palace scenes, the use of space and props left something to be desired. The young actors could perhaps have spent a little more time and effort in creating the props and the sets. Considering that this project was taken up on their initiative, it was up to them to have looked into these details. Perhaps they could have made use of the side stage and the lower level of the main stage as well.



Jaishankar as Kodai

As regards the text and its delivery, Priti-di informs us that she devoted the entire first month to diction and pronunciation. Indeed the results were evident. However, at times the dialogue could not be heard either because the microphones were ineffective or because of the students' lack of experience in the use of the mikes. This was a pity because the play abounds in poetic passages and witty exchanges.

Much labour seems to have gone into the preparation of the costumes. The materials, the colours, the designs, all seemed good, but it seemed as if there was a bit too much of it. The characters who were living in the hills could have been much more simply dressed.

What carried the play through was the positive energy on the part of the actors and the joy of watching a play by Sri Aurobindo in the audience. The last time this play was performed was ten years ago, and many now are not familiar with the text of the play.

Our admiration goes out to Priti-di who took up such a difficult work and did it to the best of her capacity. We know that once a work of Sri Aurobindo is taken up it can not be done half-heartedly or shabbily. The whole project was a beautiful gift to the students in general for whom this was an occasion to know and understand a well-loved work of the Master.

we were taught all the skills needed for performing on stage but now children don't have the opportunity to learn acting.

The fact is that students don't have any time these days. When they were doing this play at least they were oriented. They knew they had to come on time and they knew they had to rehearse, so they were relatively diligent about it. But if I started a dramatics class.... I have my apprehensions about its outcome. Firstly, I can't because I have not enough energy — I have so many obligations at home. But I would be very happy if some others such as you Shyama, or Amita-di or Maurice or Sunayana could take up this responsibility and give them some basic guidance because they are very, very eager to do this kind of work, putting on a play etc. The feedback I got from certain students was that they were so happy to be reciting Sri Aurobindo's lines every day. That they could recite properly, with the right diction, that they could act convincingly has given them a sense of confidence, has helped them to develop their personality. Amita-di has proposed that if some students wanted to take up this kind of training she would help.

There used to be a lot of plays on the school stage in the past. There are not that many now. How does that affect the life of the students, in your opinion?

It is a lamentable fact that there has been a dearth of stage plays in our School for a few years now. Performing in a play brings several positive factors into a child's life — the infusion of self-confidence, exposure to a certain playwright's literary style, the historical background of the play, be it Indian or Greek. This is an added bonus to a child's academic education here. I believe that Radhikaranjan has done a commendable job on this score, making children enact any number of

stories from our mythologies and occasionally sketches from Sri Aurobindo's life.

Acting in any one of Sri Aurobindo's plays is a constant breathing in of His Consciousness, consciously or unconsciously.

Which of the students, during these months of work, really flowered and came up with a performance beyond your expectations?

Most of them did. I will start with Adeeba. She was wonderful. I did not expect that she would do so well. She was really so regal. Then there was Sudipta. She is a very shy and retiring girl. The way she came on stage and threw off her shyness, it was really surprising. There was another girl called Chaiti. She has a very bright personality and she portrayed that very well in her role. In fact, all the girls — Eshna, Esha — acted well. Among the boys, especially Roshan seems to be a born actor. He stole the show, as you saw.



Roshan as Canaca and Arjun as Toraman

There was a shy boy called Arjun in the cast. His English was very faulty in the beginning. But he was so one-pointed in his efforts, he said, "If my friends can act so well, so can I." He would ask me if he could come and practise at any hour of the day. I accepted and told him at what times I was free and he came for extra practice. Shubham and Arabind, I never expected that they would do so well. In the mornings, when I saw them passing by my classroom they were so happy, they had a song on their lips. This play had helped them to flower. The nuances that Shubham brought out in his acting which were missing in the initial days of the work — the way he raised an eyebrow or gave an indulgent romantic smile — I was just captivated. He worked a lot on his diction. All of them acted well and with so much verve — Udit, Brihas, Deeptendu, Pushan, Anant. They took me by surprise.

Continued on page 13...

IRA'S HOME

In the 1960s many parents were keen to send their children to our School even though they were themselves living elsewhere in India. It was around this time that many new hostels were started. One of these was started in 1965 and Ira-di was given the responsibility of looking after it. Many former students have very fond memories of this boarding because it became in time the home of the smallest children.

At the beginning the boarding was located where the Delhi House is now. Corner House had not yet been opened and food came from Cottage. Some of the cooking was also done by Ira-di. When Corner House opened the children walked down for dinner and back every evening, escorted by one of the adults. In the mornings they went alone for breakfast and then they went to school.

In 1985 the house had to be given up and the children had to move out. At this point the girls and the boys were separated. The little girls went to where Pradyot-da used to live, near Delafon and Corner House. Ira-di took charge of the girls while Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di went with the boys to a new structure that had been built behind Parul-di's Dortoir, diagonally opposite the Ashram Main Building.

One of the things that all those who have grown up in Ira-di's boarding remember vividly is the way all the children were taken for the Playground meditation on Thursdays and Sundays. In fact, they all used to fall asleep while listening to the Mother's voice or her music.

Another memorable activity that everyone remembers is the way they were taught to slowly relax before falling asleep. The bedtime ritual was a remarkable one. Once everybody had gone inside their mosquito nets, Kavita-di walked through the rooms and slowly recited the sentences from "The Ideal Child" and the children repeated them after her. She asked the children, in a very slow tone, to relax the different parts of their bodies. After this the children fell asleep within no time.

Every morning, the children used to sit in the little open space in the ground floor and massage their arms and legs with mustard oil before walking down to the Tennis Ground in their swimming costumes. Once there, they used to do some wrestling and after that have a swim in the sea.

We have focused on the early years of the boarding and bring to you the memories of some former boarders as well as a conversation with Ira-di and Kavita-di.



IN IRA'S HOME (1965 – 1969)

Anjan Sengupta '72

December 1965 heralded a few new beginnings in my life. I was eight. The Mother had wished me to join Her school after looking at my photo-

graph. I am deeply grateful to Her Divine force and grace for selecting me. I arrived in Pondicherry with my parents on the 9th of December, 1965. This was the first time I had travelled such a

long distance from home and spent two nights in a train. The bus journey from Madras to Pondy in the midst of strange fellow travellers with a different culture and speaking an unknown language put me in a sombre mood and the cloudy weather added to my gloom; I felt more and more apprehensive at being so far away from home. But as soon as we reached Pondicherry, there was bright sunshine and the entire atmosphere in and around the Ashram premises had such a soothing effect on my mind that it instantly cleared all dim forebodings. By the time I was taken to Ira-di's boarding and met her there I had forgotten all my vulnerability at being separated from my parents. Ira-di lifted me lovingly in her arms and told me to feel at home. Thus Ira Home became my home.

Ira-di's home started with fourteen of us children in the age group of 6 to 10 years. Initially, the fourteen of us included Anurekha, Sarvari, Maitreyi, Anjula, Anila Patel, Vikram Patel, Atul, Savitri Reddy, Uttam, Sagar, Raja Nemani, Rajesh Rane, Debashish Lahiri and myself. In subsequent years some left and others filled their place and amongst those who joined later were Prabha, Chhalamayee, Sutopa, Lopita, Shibankur, Subir Basu Roy and the French siblings, Kartik and Sushama. Besides Ira-di, we also had Kavita-di, Brajkishore-da and Aruna (Nandy)-di as our guardians.

As I recall my experiences from so long ago, parts of my reminiscences may appear to be somewhat non-linear in narration, but they form the essence of my childhood while at Ira-di's home, from December 1965 to October 1969.

My first memory of Ira Home is its location close to the Tennis Ground by the sea and the old distillery that brewed up a strong smell in the air that combined with the smell of the ocean. Today, strangely I miss that odd redolence as part of my lost childhood. The closeness to the ocean allowed us to spend long hours in its waters each Sunday morning. I have attempted to capture that feeling of living near the sea in my own verse:

Strokes of waves came easy as one flow
In several shades of azure, high or low,
At Ira-di's Home within ocean's view

My young imagination took wings and flew
Over yonder mid-sea I drew sailing ships
Engrossed, still unaware of my biting lips,
Now I wish all of you could have a look
But alas, I've lost that drawing note-book....

During the early part of 1966, Ira-di cooked for us and though the food was wonderful, both in terms of quality and variety, this practice soon ended and we had to eat thrice a day in the Dining Room until Corner House came into existence in 1967 to cater to students and teachers/captains of SAICE. During meals at the CH, I often sat with my friend, Pavitra Roy, his elder sister, Mira-di and some others, to enjoy the engrossing stories recounted by Bhaduri-da, who had a distinct style of story-telling. The episodes of Dracula would begin on a Monday, continue over lunches and dinners through the week, and end by Sunday. This would make the food, then quite simple, more palatable.

The majority of children at Ira Home were girls. So, their hobbies and interests such as singing and dancing became a part of our curriculum. Many of us boys even enrolled ourselves in Anu-ben's dance classes along with the girls. We were encouraged to operate as a team, whether for indoor or outdoor pursuits. Ira-di inculcated in us very early in our childhood a musical sense and sensibility. My mother had taught me the Tagore song, 'Phule phule dole dole' but Ira-di added finesse to the song. There are infinite memories of our regular practice sessions for enacting dance-dramas on a makeshift stage in the Home. Through her effort my love for Tagore's songs intensified and even today I know their lyrics which I learnt more than 40 years ago from Ira-di. I can sing them as confidently today as I would chant 'Vande Mataram' at the end of our 'March Past' event.

Through the close ties that Sarvari/Maitreyi's and Anurekha's parents had developed with mine, I was automatically drawn into their friends circle. As each of us had a different nature and came from a different background, each one of us was dealt with quite differently. Sarvari was disciplined and organized and her strong persona had an aura of a regimental leader. Ira-di had therefore

chosen Sarvari to be the 'captain' amongst us for vigilance and maintaining a certain decorum when she was not in. I was just the opposite: shy and a slowpoke, a carefree dreamer who faced the wrath of Sarvari. As was the rule set by Ira-di, during our time the 'captain' had every right to deduct points for our 'faux pas' and needless to say I lost many. The ultimate penalty of losing too many points was to receive fewer and fewer of the foreign chocolates that Mukul-da or Mrinmoy-da, Ira-di's brothers, would bring for us from overseas. Anurekha always came in as my saviour and I ended up consolidating some of my points through her help. As little children, we were unaffected by the gender difference. We always hung out together so that for a long time people in the Ashram tended to believe that Anurekha and I were siblings. I remember Maitreyi being well-versed in the English language even at that tender age, through her earlier background of having gone to a convent school at Dibrugarh in Assam. She was a voracious reader of English story-books and I know, consciously or unconsciously, Maitreyi must have ignited my passion for books; my admiration for her capacity to read must have lead me to read my first book of Enid Blyton's mystery series.

Savitri Reddy once sang a Bengali song to perfection, tutored by Ira-di, in one of the year-end programmes and won accolades from all, including my parents. Debashish Lahiri was quiet but always up to some mischief or the other to keep us in good humour. Being naive, I always landed into trouble for all the pranks he played on people. I would be left stranded on the road and made to take the blame, while he would quietly slip away. On this note, let me tell you an amusing story:

Suren-da was an Ashramite and lived at Rue Belcombe not far from Ira Home. He was known for his rather erratic behaviour. On a certain Darshan day, Suren-da had apparently sprained his leg and found it difficult to walk. It was therefore decided that a vehicle from Atelier would be sent up to his house early in the morning to drive him to the Ashram. When the transport did not reach him on time, he impatiently walked up to Atelier and ordered a vehicle to pick him up within 10 minutes of his getting back home! After this



Back row (l to r): Aruna-di, Ira-di, Kavita-di. Front row: Maitreyi, Rajesh Rane, Anila, Savitri, Sarvari, Anjula, Atul, Vikram, Sagar (at the back), Debashish Lahiri, Anjan, Anurekha

peculiar incident, he had acquired the name of 'Pagla Suren'. This, of course, annoyed him very much. Soon people found him to be an easy target to tease and he lived up to his acquired name by becoming outrageously mad at anyone who dared to go after him. One fateful evening, while returning from group, I had the worst encounter with Suren-da, all because of Deba. Suren-da was passing alongside us on the same street. We were within 50 metres of our home, when Debashish suddenly blurted out loudly in Bengali, "Amaar naam Pagla Suren, short e bole P.S." (My name is Pagla Suren, its short form is P.S.) and made a dash for home. I was caught unawares and in

my confusion did not manage to escape in time. Pagla Suren grabbed my collar and looked at me menacingly with bulging eyes. Somehow I wriggled out of his clutch and ran for dear life.

The layout of rooms at Ira-di's home, as it existed then, is still vivid in my memory. On the first floor on the western front facing Rue François Martin was a big hall flanked by two rooms each in the north and south wings. The staircase rose from the east of the building, and more than midway its steps bifurcated. One flight of stairs, which went straight up, led us to the north wing; the other took a left bend and connected the south wing. Ira-di's was the first room in the north wing. Her room was always neatly done, decorative pieces such as porcelain-figurines or antique curios in her showcase added a touch of class to it. Other important things were a harmonium, a few more musical instruments, piles of books stacked in her bookshelf, a mat spread out on the floor, a cot, a study table with a chair and also a reclining chair. Some things have a telling effect on the mind of a child and Ira-di's room captured mine. The open verandah in the north-easterly direction, overlooking the sea, is where I spent much of my time drawing and colouring waves of the ocean. The attic room, located in the south-easterly direction, was atop the one-and-a-half storeyed level and cut off from the rest of the rooms. Aruna-di who was much senior to us and our half-didi (assistant boarding-in-charge) stayed here as a single occupant. My parents from Calcutta had got me subscribed to two very well known children's magazines, 'Shuktara' and 'Sandesh' to encourage and cultivate in me the habit of reading in Bengali, my mother tongue. These magazines regularly arrived at the Ashram post-office. Aruna-di was amongst the first ones to inform me of their arrival and in her eagerness to be able to read them first herself, she often collected the magazines on my behalf from the post-office. It gave me immense pleasure that I could share my books with her and I felt proud and thrilled that Aruna-di and I had similar tastes in reading.

Kavita-di was in-charge of collecting the fruit-bag from the Ashram and flowers from Flower Room quite early in the morning. Some of the

girls accompanied her. She was the one who taught me the names given by the Mother to the flowers, both common and rare. Kavita-di was also my mentor in teaching me the prayer from the Mother's *Prières et Méditations*, "Comme une flamme qui brûle silencieusement, comme un parfum qui monte tout droit...." that I had once recited in one of the programmes. She helped me improve my pronunciation to a great extent.

In the early days, Brajkishore-da was not a part of our home. But during the 1967-68 session, more boys such as Shibankur Roy Chowdhury, Subir Basu Roy and Kartik (name given by the Mother) joined the home. Before they joined we used to all live on the first floor, the boys in one room, the girls in another. After the number of boys increased, all of us boys were shifted to the ground floor of the building and Brajkishore-da along with Kavita-di, took charge of us. The first room on entering the ground floor facing Rue François Martin was taken by Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di, the room next to theirs became our study and an adjoining third room was where we slept. Brajkishore-da was very particular about our discipline. Ceiling fans were considered inessential and luxurious goods. We had to train our body and mind to be free of such comforts. Early to bed and early to rise was no longer a proverb but became a regular practice for us. Besides going to the Ashram to pray each morning before school, he also developed in us the habit of going for meditations, and what seemed like an imposition then turned out to be the most desirable behavioural aspect of our adult lives later on, to seek a calmer mind. Clean habits, sound morals and a day set by the clock's timings, have done us a world of good and shaped us well. Brajkishore-da's ultimate aim to foster a sound mind in a sound body has helped many in the long run!

The separation of boys from girls in the same building reduced our interaction. On the positive side we received more personal attention from Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di with the increase in the ratio of guardians to children. On the negative side it reduced the feeling of togetherness amongst boys and girls. In the year 1968 an attack

of chickenpox among many children at Ira Home came as a blessing in disguise to bridge this gap for some time. We were quarantined at home for a fortnight on medical grounds. During this period we again mingled like before. We exchanged story books and comic strips amongst ourselves. Towards the fag end of our fortnight's exile, we got permission from Nripen-da (the Ashram doctor) to take a stroll outside but as far as possible out of reach of human contact. Escorted by Brajkishore-da, Ira-di and Kavita-di, we ventured out beyond the boulevard and hit the coastal lines of the fishermen's cove where Kuruchikuppam is today. But for a few ramshackle dwellings, it was bereft of buildings and very thinly populated. I remember that evening to be very special. We collected sea-shells, played hide and seek and subtle and refreshing mind games. It amuses me to reflect that the place where I live now is the same place where we came together so happily more than forty years ago.

The month of October was very special. It had a spate of birthdays amongst us. Starting with Debashish Lahiri's on the 9th, Brajkishore-da's on the 26th, Prabha and Sarvari's on the 27th, mine on the 28th, it finally ended with Subir's on the 30th. Thus October was indeed a month of celebrations and called for cakes made at home by Ira-di. October of the years 1966 to 1969 has remained very special in my life because I visited the Mother in each of those years on my birthday. As with most of us who joined the Ashram School before 1971-72, I have in my prized possession birthday cards from the Mother, handwritten prominently by Her with a sketch pen, "Bonne Fête à Anjan.... avec mes bénédictions" and finally signed by Her.

My first Christmas Eve at Ira-di's home in 1966 was filled with a new excitement. It was an event I had never experienced before in life. The arrival of Father Christmas after midnight during our sleep, to fill our stockings with numerous gifts, was the main cause of this excitement. The suspense and expectations were amazingly high in all of us. Being little children, our feet were small and hence the size of our socks too.

We were afraid our socks would hold very little but Father Christmas very thoughtfully laid large bags filled with gifts on the roof of our mosquito-nets. Through pictorial illustrations and stories heard from Ira-di, the existence of this amiable bearded old man in his red attire with a sack full of gifts from a faraway land of snow had been firmly established in our minds. One year later I was devastated to discover that the Christmas Father was none other than Ira-di! Such is the painful process of growing up.

By the end of 1969, with teenage knocking loud at our doors, we came to the painful realization that we had attained the age when by common rule many of us would have to leave Ira Home. The session of 1970 would get us transferred to various other boardings. There comes a time in your life, when you are past your middle age, when you are able to assess the important events in each decade of your life and pick your gains from them. In my case my stay at Ira-di's home was the greatest learning process ever and laid a strong foundation to understanding tradition, culture and inculcating values in life.

I now draw my story to a close but not to its central characters, namely Ira-di, Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di. Their sincere aspiration and enduring commitment have no end. Ira-di, over the years, has written her own lyrics and set them to tune, and her efforts are still on. Brajkishore-da may be an octogenarian but still participated in the last Auroville Marathon despite all his multiple disabilities, which just goes to show the undying spirit of the man. (At the time of writing this article he is in the Nursing Home. I sincerely wish him an early recovery and good health for the future.) Kavita-di has the same zeal for athletics today as she had way back in 1969, when on the recommendation of Dick Hawk (known for tennis in the Ashram), she started running races, competing with men in the long runs for so many years.

All three of them have set their own standards of perfection and have tried to improve with every performance. They have indeed the Grace of the Mother. Victoire à la Douce Mère. ❧

A FLASH-BACK

Prabha '80

The little meek girl I used to be,
Out of the veiled past, came to me.
Hand in hand, we travelled back in memory,
And reached 'Ira Home' whence began our journey.

Kind faces emerge, smiling affably,
Who took care of us and loved us dearly.
Other companions were there with me,
Count I have lost, but we were many.

Often we laughed and joked and played merrily,
We quarrelled and fought at times, but forgot easily.
Little girls and boys together in harmony,
Happily lived like one big family.

All were not angels — there was variety:
Some were coy and obedient, others wild and free,
Some stubborn, some curious and naughty,
Some threw tantrums, lost temper and were haughty.

Just as a mother raises her children tenderly,
All things were taught to us ever so methodically:
From brushing our teeth and bathing twice daily,
To combing our hair and dressing up properly.

Also, to keep everything neat and tidy,
To eat nutritious food, not waste any;
Before sleep, to say our prayers earnestly,
And relax our mind and body completely.

Our day would begin with singing sweet melody,
And end with stories of great men and their bravery.
They who looked after us, tried in all sincerity,
To bring out the best in our personality.

To each they gave his due, cared & chided accordingly.
Honest and frank we strove to be, ne'er mean & petty.
For our misconduct, we were punished justly,
And rewarded, when we proved ourselves worthy.

Importance was given to sports and study,
For they build our character, mind and body.
We were encouraged to make efforts persistently.
We grew up candid, confident and carefree.

On holidays, we were up and off to the sea,
To its ceaseless call, we were pulled irresistibly;
It scared us at times, at times 'twas friendly.
We learnt not to fear the magnanimous sea.

For picnics and outings we went out regularly,
And our souls revelled in Nature's beauty,
We went boating in the Lake, climbed hill and tree,
These trips were full of adventure and mystery.

Years rolled by and we grew in wisdom and energy,
Our mind, body and spirit were nurtured consciously.
Forty five years later, we look back nostalgically,
We have each come a long way, led by destiny.



At the top (l to r): Bhartrihari and Sutapa. Back row: Kavita-di, Brajkishore-da, Ira-di. Middle row: Debashri, Sarvari, Prabha, Maitreyi, Sunayana, Lopita. Front row: Ashit, Uma

Our eyes grow dim and fill momentarily,
As we pay our respects to Aruna-di.
Ira-di maintains her role of 'didi';
She still looks after girls, ever so caringlly.

As for dear Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di,
They take care of little boys, — quite unwieldy.
To instill discipline, they persevere patiently,
And determinedly, they go about their duty.

We, in turn, will raise our children worthily,
Same values to implant, we'll endeavor humbly.

IRA-DI'S BOARDING

Shyama '85

Let's all close our eyes and watch with our mind's eye these scenes. The first one: little children, aged between 5 and 10, well-oiled bodies, in their underwear, with a *gamchha* (a very thin and soft towel) around their necks, bare feet, running from Ira Boarding to the Tennis Ground followed by three adults at a short distance. What time is it? 6 o'clock in the morning.

The next picture. Noon! A hot sun beating down on the roofs, roads, trees, stray dogs and the pigs (if one recalls Pondy had quite a population of pigs then). The same set of children running out of Corner House calling out to each other, "Hey, don't go fast", "Wait for me" and "There is papaya and chikoo in the fruit bag". Mind you, they had just finished their lunch and if one could have seen their stomachs! Quite a bulge!

Our following canvas is this: a furious sun beating down on the pitch roads, not a soul in sight but at their boarding doorstep some of our young ones sitting elbows on knees and chin resting in the cup of their palms, half-dozing. And who but Ira-di standing on the balcony right above their heads, holding out their clothes and calling out to them.

Our last frame: the time — 7.30 pm. The little group is a bit scattered on rue Francois Martin, walking northwards to their boarding at a brisk pace, about to cross the Dispensary. Then someone calls out, "Hey, today is Mahabharat day!", "I sit to the right of Ira-di", "I to the left", "Today I will sit in front", then suddenly one from the lot calls out "Pavita". The next instant the whole company breaks into a run and within a few seconds the door opens and a short English lady, famous for driving away the rickshaw-pullers from her door by gracing them with some hot water on their heads and for her quick and magnificent temper, steps out.

We shall follow up these images with some commentaries to give substance to these frozen

frames and tableaux and to finish the viewing of this small exposition. I do consider myself very fortunate to have been one of these youngsters who spent some years in Ira Boarding.

Children in Ira Boarding were looked after by three guardians: Ira-di, Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di. Each one of them had a very specific role to play in our growth: For aesthetic and artistic development it was Ira-di, for a genuine love of learning, be it at School or the P.E.D., it was Brajkishore-da. Kavita-di had a very supportive role, for she was there at all times for any help we needed. In hindsight one realises the importance of such a presence.

This is the usual sequence of events that took place in the lives of the little children we have just seen in our series of images:

Wake up at 5.30 am, drink two glasses of water, go to the toilet, brush your teeth, massage the gums with oil and salt and off to Tennis Ground (this was the first image we evoked). Either wrestle or run on the beach, followed by a swim of 20 minutes in the Bay of Bengal, back to the boarding, have a shower and gather in Ira-di's room for a 20 minute singing session with her.

This was followed by breakfast, school, lunch then the great rush to consume the fruits given to us from the fruit room (this was the second image).

Then a short nap of 15 minutes and if one was unfortunate enough to be caught talking or playing pranks during this period one was asked to sit at the door. Often we walked out in indoor attire. The duration of the chastisement was entirely Brajkishore-da's decision. Even as little kids we felt embarrassed sitting there in our inner chemise, but the help came from Ira-di who dropped our clothes from the first floor balcony (our third image). After that the rest went down to the ground floor for homework or to play ping-pong against the wall. If anyone chose to visit us after 1 p.m. these are the sights and sounds that

usually greeted them: In one corner Kobi Nishikanto-da sitting and talking to Ira-di, children reading aloud their texts, a loud gargling noise “hrrrrrrr.... hr...” we were busy practising how to roll the ‘R’ in French in front of Brajkishore-da.



Brajkishore-da with the children during a picnic

This drill was most emphatically applied to the R in Bhrrrajkishore-da’s name. No word gave us more pleasure to rehearse than his name. The last sound in the list “Pong Tik Tak, Pong Tik Tak”. Well, that was the practice for table tennis against the wall.

Then off to afternoon classes, 4 pm snacks, then group. After 45 minutes of games in the Guest House, we returned to the boarding at 6.30 pm. Then we danced for 30 minutes on our terrace every day. This was followed by a wash and dinner.

Post dinner activities: one day of listening to Ramayana, two days of Mahabharata read aloud by Ira-di (this is the 4th clip, on our way to the boarding), one day in the week we heard French stories told by Brajkishore-da, on two days we went for meditation in the Playground and last but not least, there was the Saturday movie.

These activities brought us to our bed-time which consisted of saying prayers aloud together, then stretching out on our beds to be massaged, followed by a session of relaxation by Brajkishore-da and Kavita-di every day of the week.

Here ends our small exposition, but only with the knowledge of the external disciplinary aspect. To give life to it, I will blow some breath of emotions into it.

As we were pretty young when we got admitted to the School it was natural for us to miss our parents quite a bit, so Brajkishore-da would sit by us during meals, make small balls of rice, dal and vegetable in our dish, and this is what he would tell us while feeding them: “This is for your mother, this is for your father, this for your sister, this for Ira-di, this for Kavita-di” and the list went on till the food was over and it did get over much faster than if we had been left to ourselves.

Every Sunday either we went on foot for a swim in the pool in the Sports Ground and the highlight of the activity — eating raw *karela*

organically grown in the Ashram garden that we passed on our way, or we went to some Ashram garden for a picnic, on foot again.

But the gesture which reaches the heart beyond all limits of surprise is this — week after week, month after month and year after year, we were taken to the meditation in the Playground on Thursdays and Sundays, knowing fully well that as soon as the lights went off we would lie down on our mats and fall asleep. When the meditation got over, we were carried home like babies sleeping in their arms and yet we were NEVER asked not to come to the meditation during those seven years of stay.

When I try to sum up my feeling about my stay in Ira Boarding here is what I would like to say: “Merci beaucoup, Ira-di, Brajkishore-da et Kavita-di. I do not think that such care and learning could have come my way even from my own parents, but a special ‘merci’ to Brajkishore-da, even if I seem partial, for sowing the seeds of the ‘love of learning’ in all of us and also for introducing us at such an impressionable age to the true spirit of Ashram life.” ❧

A CONVERSATION WITH IRA-DI AND KAVITA-DI

How did the boarding start?

Ira-di: When I was in the Higher Course I told the Mother that I wanted to do some work in my free time. When she asked me what work I wanted to do I said that I wanted to work in a boarding. The Mother asked me to wait for a while. In that waiting period she told me that a boarding was being constructed. Jagdish-bhai told me that he was constructing something. They were actually making an extension to the old house where Jhunjhun Boarding is now. So, in my mind I believed that when it would be ready I would be



Back row (l to r): Maitreyi, Ira-di, Anjula, Anurekha. Front row: Sarvari, Atul, Vikram, Anjan

asked to look after that boarding. No one knew what was there in the Mother's plans. Then one day Nolini-da called me and told me that a person was needed in Tanga Boarding and the Mother wanted to know if I would go and help Kiran-di. I said, "If the Mother wants it, there is no question of my not going there. I will surely go and work there." In Tanga Boarding there were about fifteen children, boys and girls. It was very difficult work. There was a sikh boy whose long hair I had to tie every morning and he would start running and I had to chase him to tie his hair. In all this I had to leave my singing classes with Sahana-di. In the evenings, on alternate days, I had to fetch fifteen children from the Guest House after group, and walk across the park. And at night some boys used to wait on the stairs when I went up to my room

to frighten me. In the kitchen also there was a lot of work. Some days later I wrote a letter to the Mother telling her that I couldn't cope with the boys' indiscipline. The Mother replied by chiding me and said, "Ce n'est pas toi qui travaille, c'est le Divin qui travaille." After a few days I felt that I couldn't somehow work in harmony with Didi because of the generation gap and differences of opinion. Then I again wrote to the Mother saying that I couldn't adjust with Didi and asked her if I could work separately.

It was then, in 1965, that Kireet-bhai came and told me that a house had been taken for a new boarding and I could choose a helper. At that time Brajkishore was looking after Big Boys' Boarding. As Kavita was very close to him, we decided that we would, all three, work together. Aruna Nandi (later Mitra) was a boarder in Tanga Boarding and as she was very attached to me, she also wanted to come away with me.

How was that house chosen?

Ira-di: The house which became our boarding belonged to Chitra Jauhar. Kireet-bhai told us that rooms and bathrooms had been added to the existing house in such a way that four families could live in it independently. That house used to be known as "Chitra House" and there were already tenants living there before Kireet-bhai took it for making it into a boarding. People continued to call it "Chitra House" even after it became our boarding and we started living there. The Mother gave the name "Ira's Boarding" — I have it in writing — and it was later changed to "Ira's Home".

Nripen-da (the Ashram doctor) used to send soup for the boarding and once he told me that he wrote a note to the Mother on which he marked, "The children of Chitra House will be sent such and such items." The Mother crossed out "Chitra House" and instead wrote "Ira's Boarding".

When was the birthday of the boarding?

Ira-di: The birthday of the boarding was on

19th December and every year we used to take the children to the Mother on that day. When we took the children to the Mother, she used to ask me, “Ils sont gentils?”

All the children with whom the boarding started had been newly admitted to the school — Anurekha was the first to come — and the Mother assured me that they were all very nice.

Kavita-di: One year I had taught Anjan a prayer from *Prières et Méditations* and he recited it in front of the Mother.

Ira-di: Although initially all boardings had boys and girls together, at some point they were separated. Ours was the only boarding where boys and girls continued to stay together until we moved out of that building. We never had any problems.

What advice did the Mother give you about bringing up the children?

Ira-di: There was one thing that the Mother asked us to do but which I did not follow then and which in hindsight I feel was a big mistake. She had asked us to allow the parents to meet the children only once a week and that too at a fixed time. But I thought that the children would feel bad if I didn't let them see their parents more often. Now I realize that the Mother surely loved the children more than we did and what she wanted was for their own good. Now when I see that the parents come at any odd time, be it during their sleeping hours or their study time I feel that it disturbs our work. Now I think, “Can anybody love the children more than the Mother herself?” She had made this rule so that we could do our work well. She knew what was best for the children. If only I had implemented that rule.

Did you ask her for advice when you faced any problems with the children? Did you write to her?

Ira-di: I used to write to the Mother very often. I used to write in French and Brajkishore used to correct the mistakes. Suresh Joshi used to take the notebook to the Mother and bring back her answer. When I was a student, many of my friends used to send a notebook to the Mother in which they wrote whatever they felt like telling her. The

Mother would then return these notebooks after reading them. I too felt like sending her a notebook with my thoughts. I sent my notebook but the Mother did not return it. After a lapse of ten or twelve years when this boarding was started, one day she sent this notebook back through Amrita-da. When I opened it I found that she had written, “Now you will need this”.

I used to write about the children's illnesses. This reminds me of something. There was a girl called Savitri Reddy. Once she had a little boil on her forehead, near the hairline. A few days later some more little boils came up around it and it looked like a flower. As you know, Brajkishore and Kavita believe strongly in homoeopathy, so they took her to Dr. Hazari. Then some more boils started coming. There were more and more. One day there was a birthday party in the boarding and while everybody was eating, some child unintentionally hit Savitri on the head, right where the boils were. They burst and she started bleeding and her face and clothes were full of blood. There was so much blood that we got scared. Kavita and Brajkishore took her to Dr. Hazari and he put a plaster on the forehead. Then I wrote to the Mother about the whole incident. She replied immediately saying that Savitri had to be taken as soon as possible to Dr. Vyas.

When we took her to him, the doctor said that the plaster should not have been put and that she would have bled to death. He asked us to take the child immediately to a barber and to get her head shaved. Savitri started screaming and said she did not want us to cut her hair. We got a rickshaw and took her to the market and got her head shaved. We also got a scarf for her. We took her back to Dr. Vyas, who operated on her, while she kept screaming. I was so scared that I was trembling. After forty-five minutes the operation was over and the doctor gave us some instructions. Within a very short time the boils cleared up and you couldn't see any marks.

Generally, when children fell ill I took them to Nripen-da and I sent them to the Nursing Home if they had fever. Kavita and Brajkishore thought that it was better to keep them at home. I didn't want the tension of keeping a sick child at home.

ANUREKHA REMEMBERS

As told to Sunayana

I was among the first batch of children with whom the boarding was started. I clearly remember how each child came with his trunk or suitcase in hand, accompanied by one or both parents. Living in a boarding was a new experience for all of us. When we came we all spoke different languages — Gujarati, Telegu, and Bengali. Within a short time we all became friends and managed to communicate with each other, mainly in Ashram Hindi.

Every evening Ira-di would take out the clothes we were going to wear the next day and keep them ready for us. Every morning we would get ready and stand in a line while Brajkishore-da would check our posture. Those who had knock-knees had to do some exercises. Those who had stooping shoulders had to learn to stand straight.

In the very first year we did a little programme in the boarding. This was held in the biggest room where we joined two beds to make a stage. One by one we got up on it and either danced or sang or recited something. The next year Ira-di taught us some songs and dances. In fact, we used to learn to sing in the boarding. Twice a week, before going to school, we would

sit in Ira-di's room and learn some songs. She also taught us dances in the boarding.

Kavita-di taught us the Mother's significance of flowers. She also made cards which we took to the Mother on the birthday of our boarding. At regular intervals Ira-di used to give us prizes for being neat and tidy and for being well-behaved. A card used to come from the Mother for those who received the prizes as well as a bouquet.

Every year on Nolini-da's birthday we would have a little performance in the Dancing Hall. Ira-di used to choreograph dances set to songs which were written by Kobi Nishikanto. Sometimes there were songs written by other Ashram poets. Kobi Nishikanto came often to our boarding. In this way we were familiar with the works of the poets and musicians of the Ashram.

When we started eating in the Corner House we all had to sit together in one room so that Ira-di and Brajkishore-da could supervise us.

On Sundays we used to go for sea-swimming. Norman used to be with us and teach us. On some Sundays we used to go for picnics, but on foot. We walked to Nandanam and once we were taken on a walk along the four boulevards.

The most wonderful part of life in Ira-di's boarding was that singing, dancing and poetry were a part of our daily life.

Sometimes I took the children to Sudhir-da, Mona-da's father. He used to give homoeopathic medicine and he was such a loving man.

Brajkishore-da was a teacher in the school. Were you and Kavita-di full time boarding didis or did you have any other work?

Ira-di: Kavita also had a few classes. I was actually a green group captain, but I stopped because I couldn't go at 4 pm every day. Later I coached green group children in wrestling for many years. But I stopped that too.

In which year did the original boarding get divided into two separate boardings, and why?

Ira-di: It was in 1985. The house had to be given up. We had been in that house for twenty

years. The boys and girls were separated because there was no space for so many children and three adults in the new place that was being given to us. Kavita and Brajkishore chose to look after the boys and I decided to keep the girls. At the beginning there were twenty children, then it came down to twelve. When I moved to this new place I kept only ten children. The number of children in the boardings in general came down because many parents started settling down in Pondicherry. There are fewer children now and we keep the youngest ones.

How was that decision taken that you will keep only the youngest ones?

Ira-di: That was decided by Kireet-bhai long ago.

Did you cook a lot in the early years of the boarding?

Ira-di Yes. Food used to come from Dining Room and we used to cook another additional vegetable dish. On birthdays there was a lot of cooking. When Corner House was opened we started eating there. After some days the children said they wanted to eat in the boarding as before. So I wrote to Mother and she said, "I am sure it will suit you all very well to eat in the Corner House."

So at least for two or three years you cooked in the boarding?

Ira-di: Actually, we did not start going to the Corner House as soon as it opened. We went there after a few years. For some reason Chandu-bhai did not want us to go there. Children from many boardings started eating in the Corner House several years later. For example, children from Minku-di's boarding went there many years later and those from Pramila-di's boarding never went there. But for us, the Mother insisted that we go there. She said, "It will be good, you should go there."

Did you have to quarantine all the children when anyone had chickenpox or measles? Many boardings had to go through that.

Ira-di: Oh yes. Nripen-da insisted and even though we were not very keen we had to keep all the children at home. For fifteen days no one was allowed to go out of the house. There was no

space for the children to play, so they used to play on the terrace. The parapets of the terrace were very low and when the children played there we were terrified that they would fall down. So we had to sit there. It was a real torture. It was horrible to be blocked at home for fifteen days. Even

if one child had chickenpox everyone had to stay at home. Sometimes we would have just come out that another child would fall ill and everybody had to go back in. Luckily, Dilip-da does not follow this method. He says that it is not necessary, just as people continue their normal lives when a child falls ill in a family.



Back row (l to r): Ira-di, Kavita-di, Jita (Mahashweta). Front row (sitting): Ira-di's sister-in-law, Andreas, Iradi's niece, Hira, Arunima, Gopa (Nivedita), Brajkishore-da

After the Mother left her body did you feel that you had no one to turn to? Did you

think, "Oh, I could have asked the Mother for an answer and her guidance", whenever there was a problem?

Ira-di: That I feel even today. When the Mother was there she used to ask us, "Have you got any questions?" and we used to sit in silence. Now if Mother were to be before us I think I would not make the mistake of remaining silent. Of course, the Mother used to tell us, "Everything has been said." It is true — all her answers have been published. One has only to read to know her thoughts on everything.

How did you resolve children's quarrels?

Ira-di: That I couldn't. Even now I can't solve their quarrels. In the past I would take the

children who had an argument to Dada. Now I take them to Manoj-da.

How do children accept the Mother? Those of us who had seen her knew her as a person. How do children who come now perceive the Mother and Sri Aurobindo?

Kavita-di: It all depends on the way the family prepares the child. I will give you an example. There was a little boy and he was playing with his friends in the Tennis Ground. One of the girls lost her hairclip. So the boy said, "Call the Mother and she will give you your clip." You see, that child had such a strong faith. This must of course come from the way the family teaches the child from its infancy, or from what a child picks up by seeing the adults around him.

When a child is very young he accepts more easily what he is told. The difficulty comes when they become older. Since you have the youngest children you have quite a responsibility of guiding them. Children mature very quickly these days. Even though you have children of the same age group as you did thirty years ago, perhaps the work is not the same.

Ira-di: I feel that the teachers of Delafon do a very good job. They insist a lot on the messages of the Mother and they constantly keep talking about "Douce Mère". Even little children can recite short passages from *Prayers and Meditations*. Just because they have not seen her it does not mean that they don't believe in her.

Kavita-di: Sometimes when there are older boys with the little boys, they start questioning.

When they come to you they are at least six years old.

Kavita-di: Yes, but some part of their personality is already formed. I am told that the core personality is formed in the first couple of years after birth.

They come to you after Kindergarten, so it is

still quite early.

Kavita-di: When they come from the Kindergarten there is a preparation. But when they come to the boarding from outside then it is very difficult. Sometimes, even when they come from outside they have a certain information. For example, there was a boy who was walking back from the meditation with me and I asked him if he remembered what we had heard that evening. And as soon as I said one line he recited the sentences that followed. I asked him how he knew that and he told me that his grandmother used to read aloud from "The Mother". Some children know a few things but that doesn't mean that there is an inner acceptance.

What else did the Mother ask you to do or not to do?

Ira-di: There are so many things. I used to insist that all the girls keep their hair short. There was one girl whose grandmother told me that she wanted her granddaughter to have long hair because in their family they wanted girls to have long hair. I wrote about this to the Mother asking her what I should do. The Mother replied that if the family wanted it then I should respect their wish and allow the girl to keep her hair long.

Kavita-di: Once I had written to the Mother telling her that the girls were very keen to tie their hair in fancy ways and to wear showy hair-clips. The Mother wrote back saying that I should let them do what they wanted. She did not want us to impose too many things on the children.

In fact, when I was myself a child we were living in Dortoir and I remember we were so free. We lived without any restrictions. We were not being told all the time what to do and what not to do.

Kavita-di, do you have anything to add?

Kavita-di: I remember that when I started working in the boarding, the Mother said it was a good thing, that it was a good work. She said, "C'est beau." That was very precious for me. It was something important to me. ❧



QUIZ TIME!



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



1. When was “Corner House” opened?
2. What was so special about the decade 1950 to 1960 in the history of the Ashram?
3. Why is the house where the primary classes are held also known as “Flower Room”?
4. Here is a message the Mother gave to a group of people who were visiting the Ashram in April 1956. Who were they?
“We salute you, brothers, already on the way to the physical perfection for which we all aspire here....We feel sure that today one step more is taken towards unity of the great human family.”
5. What is the spiritual significance of the white flower which grows on the bush just behind the place where incense and flowers are distributed near the Samadhi? It has an extraordinary perfume.

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE LAST 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.”
This is an extract from a letter to Barindra Kumar, Sri Aurobindo’s younger brother.
2. *Who was the daughter of A. B. Purani (freedom fighter and biographer of Sri Aurobindo)? Clue – she was the dance teacher at the school.*
Anuben. She was the head of the dancing section. The Mother had asked her to create a new form of dance which would be free from all the old and classical forms. Her choreography was very free and original.
3. *“No one I am, I who am all that is.” This is the last line of which poem by Sri Aurobindo?*
This is the last line of the sonnet “Liberation”. As there are two sonnets with the title “Liberation” this one is known as “Liberation (1)”.
4. In which year did Sri Aurobindo and the Mother move to the house which is now known as the Ashram Main Building?
They moved to this house towards the end of 1922.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of the small variety of the Canna flower? It is usually red or orange in colour.*
Friendship with the Divine. What better relationship can one have with the Divine?

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In order that the GCF be able to maintain better contact with the alumni, we have created a self-service webpage at:

<http://members.goldenchain.in/>

You are requested to kindly visit the webpage and update your contact details — this won't take you more than 5 minutes. If any of the information provided changes after input, please update it again at your convenience.

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A high proximity to Truth and God.

Sri Aurobindo

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