

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



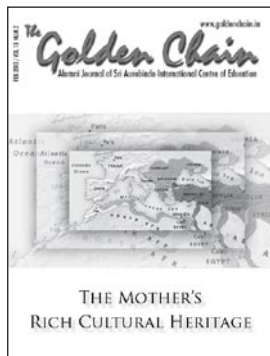
THE MOTHER'S  
RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE

*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.*

# CONTENTS

FEB 2013

**Prithwindra Mukherjee '58 remembers.**



The Golden Chain

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana '79

**I**n the month of the Mother's birth we think of her and meditate upon her. We have grown up, seeing her pictures everywhere and hearing people talk about her and she has become an indelible part of our lives. But when we think about the way in which she has influenced our outlook on life and the world, freeing us from the usual prejudices, we realise that there is so much we are unaware of.

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo both grew up in the West but lived and worked in the East. They both combined the best of both the worlds. What we receive from them has that beautiful synthesis.

Although we know about the spirituality of India somehow we have not had much exposure to the spiritual traditions of the West. There is still an impression in many people's minds that spirituality was born in India and developed here and here alone. But the human race has been connecting with the Creator right from the days when primitive men looked up at the starry sky and wondered if there wasn't a greater being out there, the source of all life. Even when humans were nomads, roaming the face of the earth, they had sensed that there was a presence which was constantly creating all that was around them.

We know so little about the mystics of Europe or the occult knowledge of those who follow the path of the Kabbalah among the Jewish people. Most of us have never even heard of the small or large groups who broke away from the Christian church and found their own path to seek the Divine while continuing to be within the larger Christian faith. And how many among us know anything about the ancient Greeks and their spiritual thought? Let us not forget that the whole of Western culture is based on the culture of the Greeks.

There have been spiritual revelations

everywhere in the world. The ancient Egyptians had seen some flashes of the Truth at a time when humans elsewhere were trying to understand the basics of agriculture in order to survive. For centuries Sufis have been following the path to God which passes through love. To them it was revealed that the Divine is the Beloved with whom the soul yearns to reunite. How much do we know about them?

I was myself amazed when I read the biography of Sir Stafford Cripps and understood that he had such a strong inner life. He believed that the kingdom of God has to be created here in this material world and not somewhere else in some immaterial plane. He was a politician, who could have become Prime Minister of Great Britain, and not a priest sitting in a church.

By the time the Mother came to Pondicherry to live here permanently in 1920 she was already 42 years old. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 42 was old age. In many countries of the world people were grandparents by the time they turned 40, particularly women. In fact, many did not hope to live beyond 50. So when we think of this fact, we realise that the Mother actually started her real work in the world, of being a spiritual guide and teacher, a guru to so many, when she was already well past her youth. She was at an age when most only dream of quietly spending their days in peaceful retirement. But there she was building a new world!

She spent the first half of her life gathering knowledge and experience in preparation for this great work for which she had come into the world. She brought to us the best elements of the West, from that part of the world about which we know only the most superficial facts. The East and the West are like yin and yang, two opposites which complement each other, and together they create a whole. ☸

# MY *LIFE OF PI* JOURNEY

*Samir Sarkar '94, whose film production company Magic Hour Films Pvt. Ltd. provided production support and consultancy to the Oscar winning feature film Life of Pi, shares his experience.*

The movie adaptation of Yann Martel's 2001 award-winning novel, *Life of Pi*, is not only a journey on screen but off screen too — a long and tortuous one. Over nine years, four directors were involved in its making: M. Night Shyamalan (*Sixth Sense*), Alfonso Cuarón (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), Jean Pierre Jeunet (*Amélie*, *Delicatessen*), and finally Ang Lee (*Brokeback Mountain*, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*) who finally brought this adventure to a fitting end.

The first part of the film is set in Pondicherry and has a strong reference to the Ashram. Though Pi the hero of our story lived in a zoo in Pondicherry and studied in a local school there, his uncle "Mamaji" taught him to swim in the Ashram swimming pool. Pi and Mamaji had a special connection and it was Mamaji who instilled the spiritual quest in Pi. Having been born and brought up in Pondicherry and being one of the few filmmakers to emerge from this charming little French colony — I seemed to be a natural choice when M. Night Shyamalan came here in 2004 to research and scout locations for a possible movie adaptation of the *Life of Pi*. That is where it all began. I had very little interaction with M. Night; he came and was soon gone. Two years went by and I read somewhere that he was no longer a part of the project; another director was now going to take in hand the responsibility of bringing *Life of Pi* to the screen.

In the winter of 2005, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, of whom I am a big fan, visited Pondicherry for an extensive scout with his remarkable Director of Photography, Bruno Delbonel. I remember we hired an autorickshaw, folded back its roof, and both director and DoP scouted locations standing inside this vehicle. It was quite a sight.

Soon after they left, I learnt that the idea of making *Life of Pi* into a movie had been abandoned. Reports said it was too expensive a movie to make or perhaps Fox did not quite subscribe to the vision of Jean-Pierre. I am really not sure.

In mid-2009, as the project was fading into a dim memory, I received a call requesting me to be available for a scout once again for the same project. This time though it was with Oscar winning director Ang Lee. I began to feel that I was going to meet all my favourite directors in Pondicherry because of this one movie! Ang was accompanied by his screenplay writer David Magee (*Finding Neverland*) and their researcher Jean Castelli (who would later write *The Making of the Life of Pi*).

I felt this trip and scout were among the most determining moments in the making of the film. The vision, the budget, the technology (3D / Special Effects), the authenticity of the script... every aspect of the movie was discussed, reviewed and gradually the concept began to take shape.

As I began spending more time with Ang,







With Ang Lee at the Matrimandir

I realised that though this was a movie set in a world of fantasy, the director wanted a remarkable sense of authenticity when it came to “facts” that were a part of this fantasy. For example, he wanted Pondicherry to feel exactly like it was in the late 1960s, he wanted his actors to speak English (and some French too) with the right regional Indian accent. This pursuit of authenticity was all-encompassing: using the kind of music that played on the radio at that time, including only those comic books that may have been available to a young Pi. He especially wanted to get right the spiritual seekings of a young Indian boy from Pondicherry with a connection to the Ashram. This learning would later save Pi’s life and make him (as well as us) believe in the unbelievable.

As I worked with him, I noticed Ang listened, absorbed and felt more than he spoke. His curiosity about every small detail was like a child’s and yet so pertinent.

We hired a van and, in the sweltering summer heat of Pondicherry, visited as many locations as possible that were mentioned in the book. The Botanical Gardens (where the zoo was set), temples, churches, mosques, schools, the Indian Coffee House, beaches, banyan trees.... We also visited the Sportsground to see the Ashram swimming pool and the Matrimandir which I felt left a deep impact on the crew. We made it a point to meet many local residents of Pondicherry and the Ashram. Though Pondicherry is enclosed by the much larger state of Tamil Nadu, Ang realised that the city had a unique culture and a distinct character which he wanted to project with authenticity in the movie. He did not want to ignore the spiritual atmosphere of the town that later made the greatest impact on Pi’s life.

Yes, *Life of Pi* is a story about faith but it is also

a story about water and its power. One morning as we walked passed Mona-da’s (Sarkar) house I thought I should introduce Ang to him. Strangely on meeting Mona-da, Ang turned to me and said “I think I have found Mamaji. This is exactly how I want Mamaji to be in character and in look but only a few years younger.” As things sometimes happen, Mona-da later mentioned that the Mother had spoken to him in depth about the spiritual significance of water and I believe that the passages he read to Ang were extremely revealing and significant.

Soon I found a place in the making of the movie. I knew I wanted to be a small part of Ang’s mind, his vision, philosophy and research — a consultant seemed to be the best description. And, indeed that is the title that finally appears next to my name as the film’s end credits roll.

Apart from being responsible for some logistics, I soon found my primary role was interacting closely with Ang, and helping him collect and put facts together, especially for the Indian chapter of the shoot. This included research concerning the various departments of the movie: locations, casting, costumes, music, etc.



The Pondicherry Botanical Gardens which featured in the film

During my research, I discovered many interesting facts, some that were even personal to me. For example I hear that author Yann Martel used to sometimes visit my “uncle” Chimanbhai Patel for his afternoon cup of “chai”. Mr. Patel was also known as Photo Patel, as he owned a famous photography studio next to the Indian Coffee House in Pondicherry (where I hear Yann Martel often sat and where he wrote a part of *Life of Pi*).

## LIFE OF PI ...

*Life of Pi* is a 2012 adventure drama film based on Yann Martel's 2001 award-winning and best-selling novel of the same name. Directed by Ang Lee, the film is based on an adapted screenplay by David Magee and stars Suraj Sharma, Irfan Khan, Gérard Depardieu, Tabu and Adil Hussain.

The film is a magical adventure story centering on Pi Patel, the precocious son of a zoo-keeper. Dwellers in Pondicherry, India, the family decides to move to Canada, hitching a ride on a huge freighter. After a shipwreck, Pi finds himself adrift in the Pacific Ocean on a 26-foot lifeboat with a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, all fighting for survival.

*Life of Pi* became the highest Hollywood grosser of 2012 in India. Its worldwide box office collection crossed US\$550 million (Rs. 3000 crores). Apart from being one of the most critically acclaimed movies of last year and winning many awards in the past months, *Life of Pi* won four Oscar awards including the one for Best Director.

It seems the Patel in the *Pi* emerged from these meetings.

After a year of "back and forths", one fine day in 2010 I heard that *Life of Pi* had got the go-ahead. The book was indeed going to be made into a movie.



Mona-da with Ang Lee

On their next scout in Pondicherry a month later, Ang brought along his main crew including Director of Photography Claudio Miranda (*Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *TRON: Legacy*), Production Designer David Gropman (*The Cider House*

*Rules*, *Chocolat*), Producers David Lee and David Womark, Special Effects Producer Susan MacLeod and the India Take One team that were to become the line producers for the shoot in India.

By this time there were a lot of elements that were already determined and an advanced ver-

sion of the script was ready. Ang knew he wanted to make the movie in 3D and Pondicherry was going to be a very important part of the film.

We revisited many of the identified locations from our first scout and some new ones and these were studied in great detail by the different department heads on the crew. It was obvious that the Pondicherry of today did not look anything like it did in the late 1960s and this is where special effects came into play. Susan MacLeod and her team started planning to take the existing elements of the town and modify them in a way that made them belong to that long gone era. Lamp posts and trees were to be removed, tar roads converted into mud roads and digitally generated animals placed in the botanical garden to create a fantastic zoo that never existed.

One afternoon, as we walked through the French Quarters of Pondicherry, I casually pointed out my grandparents' beautiful old house to Ang and David Gropman. The next thing I knew was that they wanted this



Pi's house at the Zoo

to be Pi's house in the zoo. We soon realised that the house was not big enough to fit the 3D equipment and its crew, therefore a decision was made to rebuild the house almost identically, including its furniture and plants, but on a larger scale in Taiwan. Even the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's



The water tank used for the shooting

symbols that featured on the porch of the house were included.

Similarly the Ashram swimming pool, where, in the story, Pi learns how to swim, has now been modernised and was restricted to filming. It was therefore decided to recreate it in Taiwan, almost identically to its 1960s look with the help of archival references, photographs and special effects. A few people noticed that in one of the frames, the Mother is seen sitting on Her chair in the background of the image.

At the same time Avy Kaufman (*Lincoln*, *Prometheus*, *Brokeback Mountain*) the Casting Director of the film was visiting many different cities in India to find the right cast for the film. She found Pi in Suraj Sharma, after auditioning almost 3000 other boys. Ironically Suraj had only accompanied his brother to the audition to lend moral support for which trouble his brother had promised a Subway sandwich. Look what he came back with!

For us, this intense scout was all about logistics by day and philosophy by night. At lunch we generally discussed the technical aspects of the film, locations, production, etc but at dinner the conversation focused more on thoughts and feelings and the recreation of a fantastic but believable Pondicherry environment.

The crew's next visit to town was going to be the shoot. Logistical preparations for the 14-day shoot in India began almost 2 months in advance.

This was meticulously undertaken by India Take One, (Indian line producers for Hollywood blockbusters *Slum Dog Millionaire*, *Mission Impossible 4*, *Marigold Exotic Hotel*, *Zero Dark Thirty*) who set up a fully equipped, three-storey production office on location. As the shoot date of 18th January, 2012 neared, the crew grew from 7 to 70 to almost 700. A lot of local crew was hired and soon the international crew arrived from Taiwan in a chartered Boeing 747. Almost every hotel room in Pondicherry was taken. A hundred vehicles zigzagged around, choking this little town. Pondicherry had never before hosted an event of this scale.

Many former students of SAICE became a part of the movie. They played different roles in the different departments of the unit. Some had no filmmaking background at all. But I must say thanks to our holistic education they integrated into the crew fantastically well, worked efficiently and I hear were very popular with the unit. Divya Goswami '92 (art consultant), Gaurav Bose '05 (set production assistant), Debabrata Sahoo '07 (production assistant), Bhaskar Patil '05 (post-production dept.), Shubham Joshi '07 (post-production dept.), Kanav Sud '00 (maths advisor), Dayanidhi (Terk) Patel '98 (chemistry advisor), Jagruti Shah '01 (French language advisor), Shoba Raghavan (artistic advisor), Dilip Patel '76H (actor), Gautam Mitra '76 (actor), Poojarini '00H (location)... (apologies if I have skipped any names).

During this hectic time, a strange personal situation arose that I would never have dreamt of. A period French feature film production — *Alexandra David-Néel – J'irai au pays des neiges* (I shall go to the land of snow) on the life of the French explorer Alexandra David-Néel (ADN) — that I was the Executive Producer of and that my company Magic Hour Films was line producing — had got delayed and because of unavoidable circumstances had to be filmed on exactly the same dates as *Pi* and in locations very close by. Apart from adding another crew of 100 and 20 more vehicles to the streets of Pondicherry, the situation promised to be a logistical nightmare for





A scene from *J'irai au pays des neiges*

me. Good planning and coordination seemed to be the only solution. As ADN was a much smaller project compared to the *Life of Pi* we all decided that the small would follow the big and crossing of paths was to be avoided as far as production went. Being the common factor between the two shoots (apart from a tiger that acted in both the movies!), I had to play a balancing act to make sure everything went harmoniously. I was on the sets of the *Life of Pi* every morning but during lunch breaks and after the day's shoot I would rush to my other set which, thanks to a very efficient crew, was managed without a hitch. Some of the crew from the two shoots shared the same hotels and this greatly helped with the coordination and the feeling of bonhomie between them.

Directed by Joel Farges and shot in Ladakh, Sikkim, Kalimpong and Pondicherry, *J'irai au pays des neiges* had, interestingly, an even deeper connection with the Ashram. Alexandra David-Néel heard about Sri Aurobindo from the Mother and Paul Richard in Paris. Since she traveled to Pondicherry in November 1911 she saw Sri Aurobindo before the Mother did. Alexandra David-Néel later became the first Westerner to ever set eyes on Lhasa. Sunayana Panda '79 and Datta Mukherjee '73 both played important acting roles in the film.

Both *Life of Pi* and *J'irai au pays des neiges* had scenes that were required to be shot around the main building of the Ashram. Realising that both the movies were showing the Ashram main building as itself (and not as any other beautiful street in the world), the authorities kindly granted us

permission for the same. Unfortunately the montage sequence from the *Life of Pi* that was shot in front of the SAICE and the Ashram gate and had Ashramites and students walking or heading to group in the 70s does not appear in the final edit of the film. I remember Namita-di (Sarkar) walking out of the Ashram main building after her daily visit and noticing that the "kitty caps" were wrongly worn by the actors before the shot. She immediately helped the costumes department correct their technique.

After the completion of filming of *Life of Pi*, my role as consultant continued during much of the post-production. This included research for the soundtrack, sound design and dubbing of the film.

Being on the sets with Ang Lee and interacting closely with him was not only a delight but a huge learning experience, both in technical as well as human terms. It was amazing to see how this genius of a man used his silent power to harmoniously and humbly guide his massive crew and production towards a common vision. I found his deep and genuine relationship with the craft truly moving and inspiring.

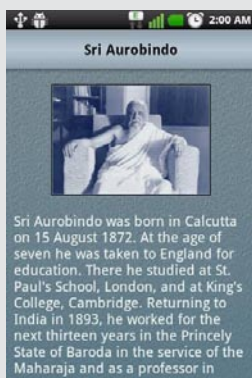
Then came the icing on the cake: attending the premier of the *Life of Pi* at the 50th New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center. These are some thoughts I shared after my first viewing experience of the film:

"Magical, soul-stirring, other worldly, positive, layered, ahead of its time, a 3D encounter you will have never experienced before. Ang Lee has brought about a cinematic revolution with this masterpiece. He has managed to build a subtle bridge between Asian philosophy and Hollywood cinema. Suraj is God-sent. The standing ovation at the end of the screening was a fitting tribute to a man whose journey in making this movie could have been as difficult as that of Pi — but at the end of the tunnel there was indeed Light. I am both humbled and proud to be a small part of Pi's journey and this stupendous work of art." ❧





## "SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM INFORMATION GUIDE" — A NEW ANDROID APP



tion that will run on any device — smartphone or tablet — that uses the Android platform.

The app takes advantage of the versatility of smartphones (which are interactive and can provide up-to-date content on the fly) to present information regarding the Ashram and its departments in a practical way.

Created by a former student as an offering to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the app can be useful not just for first-time guests or regular visitors, but also for all who are a part of the Ashram community. It can be downloaded free from Google Play.

1. The app provides an overview of:
  - Sri Aurobindo Ashram
  - Sri Aurobindo
  - The Mother
  - Integral Yoga
  - Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education
2. It provides information about:
  - Key places of the Ashram
  - Ashram Departments
  - List of Ashram Guest houses to stay
  - List of Departments from where one can

For visitors to the Ashram, there is a smart new way to have all the information they need at their fingertips. The "Sri Aurobindo Ashram Information Guide" is an Android applica-



3. The user can make a phone call, email, or locate (on Google Maps) any Ashram department or guest house from his/her current location and can get directions to reach there.
4. Provides a handy list of important dates (Darshan days etc.) in the Ashram with their significance.
5. Provides information about some publications of the Ashram.
6. Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) by visitors to the Ashram.



As of now there have been some 200 downloads with 100 active users of the app, including those from India, France, US, Singapore, UAE, Russia, Argentina, Belgium, etc.

For all those interested in downloading the app, here is the QR-Code for it. You can scan it using the barcode scanner from your Android phone to quickly access the URL.



Updates are planned every year. ☸

# IMPROVISATION IN LIFE

*A talk by Daniel Smith '77 given in the Hall of Harmony some time ago.*

Tonight I am going to talk about “Improvisation in life” and why improvisation has come to mean such a lot to me.

It was Cristof, who you probably know well (it’s hard not to know him!), who first introduced me to improvisation in acting and subsequently to the Stanislavski method of acting or “method acting”<sup>1</sup>. At the time, these were some of the things I didn’t think would be meaningful in my professional career. I am by no means an actor, but I enjoy acting and I enjoy making a fool of myself. But I think that what it is about is actually learning the lessons from improvisation and then discovering the changes they can bring to your life.

Improvisation is all about reacting. You don’t have a script. You throw away the notes and you just work with the audience. You might be working with somebody on stage and the two of you might have completely different ideas of what the theme is.... It’s being in the moment, and more often, it’s just “being”.

In fact, one of the things that comes out of improvisation is a deep concentration. When you have lines that are given to you — Shakespeare or any other play — you have those lines and you deliver those lines but it is very much about those lines. You are just the ve-

hicle. When you are improvising, you don’t have lines. You are in free fall and it is up to you to not fall splat on your face.

Now, by nature, I am a procrastinator. A procrastinator prides himself on his improvisational skills. I never used to like doing my homework. As the deadline approached, the pressure would really build and I would leave the work to absolutely the last minute. Why? Was it because I was lazy? No, not particularly. It was because I was al-

lowing things to coalesce in my mind. I wanted to assimilate as much as I could and then use that intense spirit of concentration to put it all together.

Anyway as I said before, improvisation is about reacting. So it can be about using your skills as an improviser in real life: as a negotiator. As an architect, in my field you negotiate with clients, with contractors, with people whom you may consider to be adversaries. It is about using your imagination. It liberates you from your preconceptions about what a building or project should be.

Improvisation also relies a lot on the power of analogy. Analogy is a powerful tool and oftentimes when you are designing something, you want to use an analogy, maybe a story, to communicate the concept for a project. One of the most famous examples of the use of



Using gibberish as an acting exercise

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1. Method Acting usually refers to the practice, pioneered by Constantin Stanislavski and advocated by Lee Strasberg, by which actors draw upon their own emotions and memories in their portrayals, aided by a set of exercises and practices including sense memory and affective memory.

analogy in acting was in the movie, *The Godfather*. Marlon Brando, who played the Godfather, used the analogy of a gorilla. He became this silverback gorilla and that was his means of getting into the role. As an architect designing a building you find other ways of getting into the role. You find other ways of making your architecture relevant to your client or your stakeholder group.

But you know another big point in improvisation is about embracing risk. You take risks, you embrace them and you really get what I call “*le goût du risque*”, which is the taste for risk-taking. It is something that you can almost never rid yourself of. It becomes as natural as living and breathing. And in my case it’s been — one can obviously use the pun — a high-risk strategy, but it’s also been a useful way of liberating myself from my preconceptions. Taking things with the faith that it will all be okay in the end, that there is a method to the madness, that there is not necessarily just one solution to a problem, that there are probably a hundred different paths that you could take to solve these particular constraints. The acknowledgement that if I wasn’t given the commission someone else would design it in a completely different way and people might enjoy his or her building more than my building, or equally. All this means that in a way you have to think about ridding yourself of your ego and ridding yourself of the sense that it all has to go according to a predetermined plan. The corollary of that is that you also accept that you yourself might change.

Well change is the only constant in my life. I can honestly say that. Oftentimes it’s frightening, often you wonder “why? why me?” It can be stressful. However in hindsight, you realize that it was inevitable and that it was necessary, so why fight change? This table here, for instance, it has a wood grain on it. I might start sawing this way against the grain without looking. But if I look closer and I see that actually the grain is the other

way and change direction, my job is going to be a lot easier. All of you who took carpentry class will know that’s part and parcel of carpentry. When you are given a challenge, you don’t know which way the grain is going to lie. You have to change your approach according to the grain.

Some examples of improvisation from my own life come from my experience as an architect. When I got into architecture school I didn’t plan it. I heard about the architecture school in



the morning and I got enrolled in the afternoon. It was a complete serendipity, fluke, you could call it Mother’s will, but it wasn’t planned and in the end it worked out very well. I enjoyed my experience at that university and then I went to the next architecture programme two years later. And it was planned when I went to grad school at Berkeley, after the University of Texas. But about Texas I hadn’t even known the programme existed in the morning and I was enrolled in the afternoon because my uncle introduced me to one of his colleagues at the college in San Antonio where he was a professor of biology.

Another time, it was a hotel project. There was a big misunderstanding. I had just arrived in London. I was working out of my flat and there was just me, no staff. This lawyer who I met through a client was asked by another client: I am looking



for a young aggressive architect. And guess what — he thought of me! The client had told him he wanted somebody to add some rooms to his hotel. So he thought, “Oh, Daniel can add some rooms to his hotel.” This lawyer and I had met just once. I was in London, I had been there not

that started me off on my way to many other projects with this man’s company.

Now another point that is part and parcel of this whole process is to be willing to accept the potential for failure. It is a high-risk strategy and you are going to test your limits so you may fail. I am here to tell you that failure is something that we in the Ashram are rather shielded from. It is a very protected environment. Out there in the wider world, if you want to rise to the top of your profession you have to strive really hard, whether you want to be a concert violinist or an architect or a master chef. You will ultimately need to test your limits by failure. I have found that failure is actually a means to an ultimate victory. You look at the failure, dissect it, analyze it, and with that knowledge you move ahead.

That’s one of the things our teachers do teach us. I am still finding the time to do this for myself. Earlier this year, for instance, I did screen acting for the first time. That was quite an experience because it’s almost like an x-ray into your very soul. You see yourself in close up and everything that you were doing when you were acting on-stage looks impossibly big and gauche and awful. When you look at yourself in a tight close up — onscreen — it’s a tough job just to keep your head from bobbing out of the frame all the time. If anybody wants to see just how bad I was, you can see it on YouTube, there is a 2½ minute show reel of mine.

Another of the techniques that I think is extremely powerful in improvisation is the use of gibberish. I don’t know if any of you have ever done this but when you use language, it is very limiting and it immediately limits both the performer and the audience. The minute you use the word “desk”, it is dead. Everybody has a preconception. I have a preconception of a desk, you have a preconception of a desk. If the desk is actually on its side it makes it a little more interesting (*turns desk on its side*). In this exercise, I wouldn’t be able to use the word desk. Using gibberish, I would have to be very expressive to convey to you that this desk was on its side. I would be trying to get somebody to help me to right this desk, using gesture and gibberish. It’s fascinating. And my



very long at all. So I go along to a meeting with this very tall Scotsman and within two minutes I realized that I was probably not the right man for the job. He had just fired a firm that had 150 people working in it. He was dissatisfied with their performance. But, thanks to Cristof, I was never one to walk away from a challenge. The client had mountains of boxes and files and I just picked out some of them. I said let me take these home and I will come back to you with a solution in three days. That’s what I told them. Three days — solution. Back home I studied the papers. I wondered what was in the other boxes but I had what I had. I came up with a solution. And then it occurred to me, what if he takes my scheme to another bigger firm? So when I went there I said to him I haven’t had time to make a copy. I just showed him the original. It was on a piece of tracing paper. He liked it and his team liked it and I got the job. For this project, I hired a young graduate and the two of us managed to do all the work. You know that was a complete building. It was a twelve-storey hotel with five basements. And it was the project



Mirroring

partner could use some of my gibberish to respond to me and together we would try to right this desk and put it back up where it was supposed to be.

Another technique which is very interesting is mirroring. Mirroring is about responding to somebody who could be your adversary, your client or somebody who just doesn't get you at all. By taking on some of the mannerisms based upon their behavior, it helps them to see you are actually responding to them. You have to do this in a clever way so they don't think that you are playing the fool. Nevertheless it's an interesting technique which enables one to actually get to know oneself and the other person better.

Another technique which is not related to improvisation, but more to what I do as an architect, is what I call filling the canvas. You start a project, or a blank canvas. Initially, you get scared by the blank canvas or by the blank paper. You know if you are writing a story, the very first words of the story, you might scratch them out a million times on the paper. Same with the canvas, drawing something on it and erasing it. So the technique is to fill the canvas, start putting down the paint liberally. That in itself is a way of improvising because as the paint goes on, your wrist frees up and you start to get a certain tonal value. When you are drawing your dainty stuff in the corner, the danger is that it may not fit the overall picture that's to come and you may only discover this two weeks later when you finish the painting. You realize that the thing that you started with is looking really out of place. So you build the painting up in layers. You have this ability to free yourself and let go of your preconceptions. So you slap on the paint or you start writing the

story from the middle rather than trying to have the perfect beginning to the story. It is so much easier to start in the middle of the story than at the beginning. Just look at somebody like George Lucas, he started Star Wars in the middle. As he is writing his story, it is going backwards rather than forwards in time.

One of the problems with method acting, as opposed to improvisation, is that it is all about coming from within and emoting. It is about oneself and there are certain actors from that school of acting who have become rather boring. For instance, someone else who was very good in the Godfather, Al Pacino, has now become almost a caricature of himself because he continues with his method acting and bringing back Al Pacino in every time. Meisner<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, says just



be, be in the moment. Be able to be shaped by the moment.

As an architect, as somebody who is trying to

2. The Meisner technique of acting emphasizes "moment-to-moment" spontaneity through communication with other actors in order to generate behavior that is truthful within imagined, fictional circumstances.

work with people whose words are important, those words have a resonance that you need to listen to. You have to respond. Your client's taste may be nouveau riche – they may want a Palladian mansion<sup>3</sup>. In order to create it, you might have to flatten the site, chop down most of the trees, and plant some new ones elsewhere. As an architect, this may go against your vision. Now how do you use improvisation to actually work with these people? Well, by being in the moment, by listening to them first and finding

out what they want. In that context you hear that the lady really would love to have a red door handle, the husband would really love to have, say, a Jacuzzi, with a view of the stream. You hear those important bits and pieces because you are listening to them and you are not just dwelling on your own vision. You incorporate their ideas into your design. Maybe you do two designs. One is the Palladian mansion, and one is yours. They recognise that you have listened. They see the red door handle, they see the Jacuzzi and they see some other things besides. They see maybe that there are fewer trees that have to be destroyed in the non-Palladian scheme. They see maybe that it costs less money because you do not have to flatten the whole site. The process of engagement, the process of mirroring, the process of actually being a good listener and being able to just be in

the moment with these people, will enable you to design something that is not only specific to the site and your vision, but specific to these people. It will increase your chances of success.

Just to finish off, I would like to explain where this relates to all of you. Not many of you are

architects, but many of you are teachers and I think that being able to improvise in the context of the classroom is very important. I think the process of learning is enriched when you are willing to go off-track.

The curricu-

lum is just an overall structure which is like an Indian raga. You have a basic format but then, as in a piece of jazz, you can improvise. You can come up with different things. The student may respond with something that sounds like he wasn't even listening, but actually there is a reason for it. Maybe it seems far-fetched but maybe there is a breakthrough to be made. Engage with your class, engage with the people that you are with.

Ultimately what it all boils down to is that by being in the moment and by being humble in the moment and trying to liberate yourself from your preconceptions you can ultimately perhaps be the instrument for a higher power to manifest itself in some small way or in some great way. The fact of the matter is that it's by being willing to accept that you may not be successful that you may actually get somewhere. ☞




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3. Palladian mansion – Palladian architecture is a European style of building derived from designs of the Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). The term “Palladian” normally refers to buildings which are strongly based on the symmetry, perspective and values of the formal classical temple architecture of the ancient Greeks and Romans.



# WINGS OF GOLD

*A poem by Yamuna Siva '61, written  
on 30.10.2013, for the outgoing students.  
(See photo on backcover.)*

On the tree of Knowledge,  
On its very crest, —  
Multi-coloured birds  
Lived in a single nest!

A few will now take off  
Leaving behind the rest.  
Fliers two and twenty,  
In fine feathers dress'd,

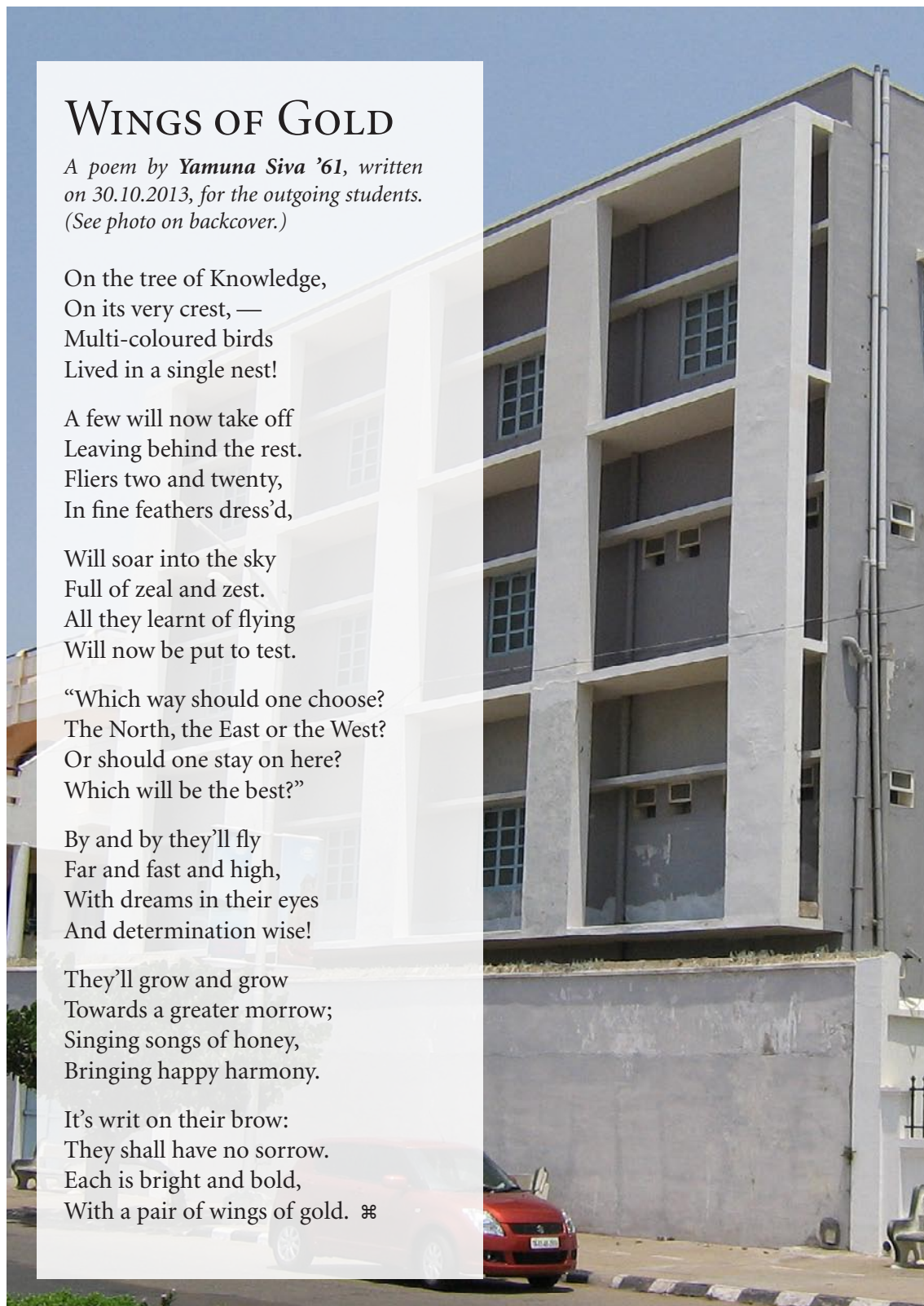
Will soar into the sky  
Full of zeal and zest.  
All they learnt of flying  
Will now be put to test.

“Which way should one choose?  
The North, the East or the West?  
Or should one stay on here?  
Which will be the best?”

By and by they'll fly  
Far and fast and high,  
With dreams in their eyes  
And determination wise!

They'll grow and grow  
Towards a greater morrow;  
Singing songs of honey,  
Bringing happy harmony.

It's writ on their brow:  
They shall have no sorrow.  
Each is bright and bold,  
With a pair of wings of gold. ✽



# THE MOTHER'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE

by *Sunayana Panda* '79

Those of us who grew up in the Ashram lived in an atmosphere which was so suffused with the Mother's presence that she was a part of all the activities of our everyday life. Some aspects of the life of that community become clear only now, in retrospect and in comparison to the cultural narrowness in various parts of India and the world which we now witness when we go out. This cultural openness of the Ashram has much to do with the culturally rich background of the Mother's own life. She came to us with a great preparation, having lived a life so varied and intense, gathering within herself so many rich strands of thought and experience that she could pass on this inner wealth just by being present in our midst. We absorbed all this without realising how fortunate we were. In fact, this was all part of the bigger destiny, of the Divine Mother's work in this incarnation.

We have all been told that the Mother was French and we have accepted it without asking ourselves too many questions about it. However, when one looks at her name, "Mirra Alfassa", it doesn't sound very typically French. "Mirra" isn't like "Sophie" or "Jeanne", and "Alfassa" isn't like "Dupont" or "Dubois". The fact is that the Mother's family was originally not French; they came

across it in any books, novels or stories as we studied French literature or history. Of course, we never saw it because it isn't a French name at all. A quick search will show us that it literally means "From Fez", the city in Morocco, and that this is a common surname among the Jews who belong to the Sephardic branch. The Jews have been, through the ages, scattered in many parts of the world. The Sephardic Jews are the ones who used to live in Spain or Portugal. This means that the paternal ancestors of the Mother were Jews who had once lived in Fez and in Spain or Portugal.

The Jewish faith is an old one and predates Christianity and Islam, both of which developed from it. If one has read the Old Testament one can see how Christianity emerged from a Jewish background. The origins of the Islamic faith are traditionally traced to the Jewish prophet Abraham. Judaism believes in one single Divine Being, as it is in Christianity and Islam, who is the creator of the world, and whose laws have to be followed by the Jews. There are many rules which are more cultural and others are more moral in their essence. The God of the Jews is formless. This is why we do not see any representation of him, either in synagogues or in art. In fact, he is considered so much above human comprehension that even his name is not pronounced out of respect.

The Jewish people have a long history of persecution and of migration, and tracing their journeys is like re-reading world history. The Jews, who began as a number of tribes in the Middle East, lived for several centuries in Egypt as slaves and were eventually led out of that land by Moses and came to settle in the region where modern Israel is located. Around the beginning of the Christian Era the Jews were forced out of their land by the Romans and since then they have been scattered across various parts of the world, often being persecuted by others. Among the Jews who settled in Europe, those who were in Spain and Portugal, speaking Ladino Spanish, were known as "Sephardic" and those who were in other parts,



Paris at the end of the 19th century

to live in France only a year before she was born. Her parents had been living in Alexandria in Egypt before moving to Paris.

And the name "Alfassa"? We have never come

especially Russia, Germany and Northern Europe, were called “Ashkenazi” and they spoke Yiddish, a German dialect.

The Sephardic Jews who lived in Spain were driven out of that country a few years after the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 by the Catholic rulers Isabella and Ferdinand. Many of those Jews migrated to various parts of the Ottoman Empire and some went to various parts of what is now Italy. Those who have studied English literature will remember Shylock in Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” and how he was seen by the local Venetians.

Those who went to live in the Ottoman Empire were actually welcomed there because the Jews are traditionally considered to be very capable of managing money. They were hard working and became an important part of the economy of a community as they were money-lenders. Their religion did not forbid them from earning money by lending money. In Islam this is not allowed. So, when Jews came to live in that part of the world they fulfilled an important role. A point to note is that Jews ensured that their children were literate and could count. This made them valuable members of society. The Ottoman Empire was a powerful one. Founded by Osman I in 1299, this empire lasted for over 600 years and is among the largest and longest-lasting in the history of the world. The power centre of this empire was the land which is now Turkey. From there the Sultan controlled much of Southern Europe, Northern Africa and Western Asia. The shores along much of the Mediterranean basin were part of this territory and became a sort of connection between the East and the West.

The Jews who lived in the Ottoman Empire could easily move from any part of the empire to another. This is how the Mother’s ancestors, who were all Jewish, from her father’s side as well as her mother’s side, lived within the same empire even though they moved from one country to another. The Mother’s maternal grandmother, Mirra Ismailun, writes in her unpublished memoirs that her father’s family was called Pinto and they had at one time lived in Ancona in Italy. They migrated from Italy to Alexandria. The Mother’s father,



The Suez Canal

Maurice Alfassa, was born in Edirne (Adrianople) in Turkey where his family had been established from at least two generations but he was educated in Vienna which was then the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Before moving to Turkey the Alfassa family had probably lived in Italy. The city of Edirne was founded by the Roman emperor Hadrian and is named after him. Its borders are close to Greece and Bulgaria and it is in Europe even though it is in Turkey.

At the time the Suez Canal was being dug Maurice Alfassa went to Egypt and worked in a bank there. The Suez Canal is an artificial canal which was created so that ships which were going from Europe to Asia would not have to go around Africa and could go through this shortcut, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. This grand project and the vast amounts of money that were invested in it could have attracted many people to Egypt. The canal was inaugurated in 1869.

Maurice Alfassa’s mother died when he was very young and his father remarried and had two sons and two daughters. Maurice had an older brother called Samuel. One of the half-brothers of Maurice, called Leon Alfassa, married a lady from the Camondo family which was at that time one of the wealthiest Jewish families of the Ottoman Empire. As they were themselves bankers, it could be that some members of the Camondo family found a job in a bank for Maurice in Egypt. It could also have been through these family connections and through the Jewish banking community in Egypt that Maurice Alfassa had come into contact with the Ismailun family before his marriage was arranged with Mathilde.



The history of the Camondo family has been well-documented and from the movements of that family it is easy to understand the way the Alfassa family must have migrated. The Camondos were living in Spain from where they moved to Istanbul after the inquisition and later to Venice. They were very prominent citizens there and had contributed significantly to the public life of this independent state which was not a part of Italy then. After that they moved back to Istanbul where they were bankers. They financed many of the projects of the Ottoman Empire.

The marriage of Maurice and Mathilde Alfassa took place in Alexandria where her paternal family had been living for a long time. Many



The famous lighthouse of Alexandria

are not familiar with the background of this famous city so a few words about it may not be out of place here. Founded by Alexander the Great, as the name suggests, Alexandria stood at a crossroad of history. Ancient Egypt had a civilisation which was rich

in knowledge of the material world and the invisible one too. Arts, sciences, technology, governance and the mysteries of the occult world were within the easy grasp of the ancient Egyptians while a great part of the human population was still living in primitive conditions. To such a land came Alexander the Great and in founding this city brought the wealth of the Greco-Roman culture to Egypt. Alexandria became the capital of Egypt and remained so for a thousand years, an extraordinary thing in itself. This was the city where Cleopatra ruled over her subjects as well as over the hearts of such leaders of men as Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony. We have all read of the opulence of that reign. Alexandria is famous for its great library, which was destroyed by fire. This

library attracted many learned scholars and seekers of knowledge. The city was also famous for its lighthouse, an architectural marvel and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

With the dramatic suicide of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony the royal line of the Pharaohs ended and Egypt became a part of the Roman Empire. In the 7th century Egypt became a part of the Byzantine Empire whose centre was in Constantinople, modern day Istanbul. Later the Muslims conquered Egypt and ruled it from far away Baghdad. Already within the first century of the Christian era Christianity had entered Egypt. Thus there was a time when Jews, Christians, Muslims, and followers of other cults mixed and lived side by side in this ancient city. At that time this was the city with the largest Jewish population in the world.

Soon after their marriage the Mother's parents sailed for Edirne in Turkey, probably to meet his family. While they were still there they had a first child, Max Nissim, who died in his infancy. The Mother mentions this in one of her conversations saying that it was due to a vaccination. Her parents moved back to Alexandria where Matteo, her brother, was born in July 1876. It was only in 1877 that the family moved to Paris. There could have been many reasons for this move. Many members of their extended family, including the Camondo family, had started moving to the French capital perhaps because the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, or perhaps because France was fast becoming a cultural and economic centre in Europe.

The Alfassa family entered France with Italian passports since some of the ancestors of the Mother's family on both sides had lived in Italy. As long as they were in Egypt they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire and did not need any travel document to travel within it but once they wanted to travel outside the empire they needed travel documents. This means that although they had lived in Alexandria and Edirne in Turkey neither was Mathilde Alfassa an Egyptian woman nor Maurice Alfassa Turkish. They were purely of Jewish blood and both their families had migrated from country to country through the generations.



Ismail Pasha

There is a general belief that the Mother was related to the royal family of Egypt. This is factually incorrect as there was no royal family in Alexandria after the death of Cleopatra. Egypt came under the rule of the Roman Empire first and after that it was ruled by various

Muslim governors and viceroys of the successive dynasties and empires. The Mother's great-grandparents lived in a country administered by the Egyptian viceroy, known as the Khediv. Mirra Ismalun's husband, Matteo Ismalun, had lent money to the man who ruled Egypt, the Khediv, Ismail Pasha, and that is how there was a connection between their family and the ruler. In fact, the Khediv never returned the money lent to him. So, although Matteo Ismalun had been close to the ruler later the relations were strained with him.

The Mother was born a year after her parents moved to Paris. By the time she was 8 years old her father had lost the little fortune he had come to France with and their life changed considerably. In 1889, a hundred years after the French Revolution, the French parliament passed a law which allowed any person born on French soil to acquire French nationality. In the meantime the Mother's father had already applied for French nationality and in the year 1890 this was accorded to the whole Alfassa family. When the Mother says that she is "French by birth and early education" it is true to the letter. She had a right to have French nationality because she was born in France.

She was named "Mirra", following the Jewish tradition of naming children after their ancestors. Among the Sephardic Jews it is common to name children after a living relative and in the Mother's case she was named after her maternal grandmother who was a loving and supportive presence in her childhood and early youth. The Mother was close to her, and there is even a portrait of her grandmother, Mirra Ismalun, drawn by her. The name "Mirra" could be derived from

"Miriam" which is a name connected with the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt as Miriam was the sister of Moses.

The Mother's upbringing was very special. In common with many among the Sephardic Jewish diaspora, her family was remarkably cosmopolitan, having connections throughout the entire Mediterranean, with its diversity of cultures. Some of her close relatives were among the wealthiest in France and she must have gone to visit or play with her cousins who lived in the middle of great opulence and beauty. She had uncles and aunts who were from various parts of Europe and who had received high education and were themselves brought up in cultured circles. The mansion built by Abraham Camondo was magnificent by any standard. It was filled with priceless art objects and decorations. In fact, the wealthy Jewish banking families such as the Camondos and the Ephrussis patronised the leading artists of the day, including the great Gustave Moreau and mixed freely with them.

Although the Mother's parents were not practising Jews, the fact that they belonged to this social group must have given her access to the Jewish traditions and philosophy. This could only have added to her field of experience.

The Mother was not only the spiritual guide of those who lived in the Ashram but also a mother and a teacher. The wealth of knowledge that she brought to this little community of seekers, and which she transmitted to others through her own example, was gathered by her throughout her life. Her family background and all that she had imbibed from her earliest years, together with her innate wisdom and refinement, became an essential part of her personality. And it was through this extraordinarily rich personality that she could manifest her transforming spiritual influence and teaching. ❧



Mirra Ismalun - the Mother's grandmother

# 1<sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER PROGRAMME, 2012

*Mahashweta (Poupée) '12 shares her experience*

***What made you choose this play for the annual programme?***

Well, from the very start I thought of putting on something by the Mother in French for the annual programme. As I was leafing through some of Her works, I came across the play “L’Ascension vers la Vérité” and I thought it would be great to stage it as it had not been done for decades at the Theatre Hall.

***How did you get the idea of adding an extra scene in the beginning?***

All the credit goes to our genius Cristof, who got this brilliant idea of adding an extra scene before the prologue. In the prologue Mother says, “*Evening, at night-fall; the end of a meeting held by a small group of people united in a common aspi-*

*ration to find the Truth.*” In order to show that it was the end of a meeting, Cristof thought it would be great to add a portion of the actual meeting held by these individuals who discuss their different paths in life. This addition was put in with the idea of making the play more continuous and as a build up for the end of the meeting.

***Can you tell us something about how the set was created?***

As soon as the idea of staging this play was approved, I asked the cast if they wanted to take up any particular task. Dheeraj and Utsarg promptly stepped forward to be in charge of the set. As early as the month of April we met Devashish-da

and asked him for his help to create a beautiful set. Almost every Sunday we would meet in Park Guest House in the afternoons and brainstorm to create the set. Several models were made and remade, until we were satisfied. We would come up with various ideas about the structures which seemed pretty simple to build in our heads but as soon as we tried to replicate them in reality, we realised that we had missed out on so many factors that had to be considered on the practical level. The idea of a spiral appealed to us and we also tried to keep a few arches so that there could be a play of light and gradually we started finalising the different stages on the set. It took us about three months to get to a final model which we could hand over to Prafulla-da. In the month of October we gave the plans to Prafulla-da’s construction department and within two weeks the entire structure was up. The next step was to cover the structure in order to give it a mountain like feel, so we approached Habul-da and a few



The discoveries of the Artist



Last lines of the added scene before the Prologue

students to make this happen. Long white plastic sheets were painted in different shades of brown



and ochre as cliffs, and other sheets were stuffed with cardboard and thermocol to give them the shape of rocks. It was a tedious job but thanks to Habul-da, Sampat-bhai, Suman, Maya, Pushan, Rohan and Shubhankar and other helpers, it was possible to give the set the real feel of a mountainous setting.

As we were brainstorming on how to embellish the setting, Dheeraj came up with the idea of having a waterfall. It was a brilliant idea but we were told that it was very dangerous as any leakage of water could damage the wooden stage. So with much precaution, research and trials, and with the help of Praful-da's construction department and Devashish-da's practical advice, we were able to put up a small waterfall on the stage, which fell from a long metal plate and was circulated by two pumps. To accumulate the water, some of the students made a reservoir by using hollow blocks and covering them meticulously with plastic sheets and cloth so that there was no



▲ The exhausted students nearing their journey. The waterfall is in the foreground.  
► The reservoir created for the waterfall (seen here off stage).



leakage. At first a trial of the final model of the waterfall was done off-stage and once we were sure there was no leakage, it was brought up on the stage. Every day, Dheeraj, Utsarg and Pushan would see to it that the reservoir was well covered by checking each corner.

Right next to the stage, on the right hand side,

was the Atelier of the artist. We kept its design simple. Six wooden platforms were placed in the shape of a rectangle and on top of that we kept a few chairs, stools, tables, and a canvas on an easel. This was surrounded by bamboo plants and beautiful soft lamps so that it gave the feel of an artist's studio in the Japanese style. At the end of the play we used lamps to create the new world. These lamps were made by the students. Shubhankar had found a video on how to make lamps out of thread, so in the beginning of November we went ahead and tried to make one. First we dipped a roll of white cotton thread in a bowl of Maida mixed with Fevicol. Next we blew a balloon and tied it when it seemed more or less like a sphere and we coated it with powder. Subsequently we took the roll of dipped thread and covered the entire balloon with it. Then we kept it for drying and if we were lucky enough the next day we would find a sturdy thread globe where the balloon had deflated. We made around 10 such globes and Jaishankar and Praveen added the led lamps inside, and voilà the beautiful thread lamps were ready.



Thread lamps in the making

***Can you tell us something about how you rehearsed?***

For the first 10 days everybody came for practice in the morning from 9:30 upto 11 and in the evenings from 8 to 9. As the roles and positions on the stage began getting more or less finalised we started keeping practices according to scenes and gave each participant their time slots at night and in the morning. By the middle of the month we started keeping a run-through of the entire programme either at night or in the morning. Depending on when the run-through was taking place, the other rehearsal time was reserved for individual scene corrections. By the end we started doing a run-through at night as well as in the morning.

***What were your biggest difficulties?***

I think one of the biggest challenges was for the actors to really get into their respective roles.

## L'ASCENSION VERS LA VÉRITÉ – A REVIEW

Subrat'11

The final year Knowledge students took up the annual 1st December programme for the eighth consecutive year.

This time around the organisers decided to put on stage a French play written by Douce Mère — “L’ascension vers la Vérité”.

The fact that the programme was in French divided the audience in two discrete categories. The first comprised of people who did not understand French. They witnessed a visual journey, where a group of people trudged towards a distant peak in search of Truth.

They were awestruck by both the grandeur and the detail of the set. Dheeraj with the help of Habul-da, Debashish-da, Pushan, Utsarg, Maya, Suman and Shubhankar set out to construct one of the most elaborate sets. In less than two months, they erected a **twelve-foot** high rock-faced mountain with a winding path leading to its summit. They also installed a wa-



The renunciation of the Ascetic

This play did not have much action taking place therefore in order to really put up a good show and for the audience to distinguish one character from another, the only solution was for the actors to become their roles, to really interiorize them. To capture the essence and the truth of a scien-

terfall, which gave a sense of motion to the inanimate mount bringing it to life. In front of that, an artist's studio that seemed very appropriate except that it may have been a tad too simple.

The second group who knew the language and most of who had read the play, were supposed to be in an advantageous position, as, added to the elaborate set, they had dialogues guiding them.

The play started at the artist's studio. Regardless of the medium in which the actors performed the audience started on the same footing. The chronic microphone glitches plagued the scenes intermittently. The Prologue where the plot and characters were established was all

but lost in silence. A promising recording seemed to change the tone. The voice was clear and the French seemed refreshingly crisp. But the mikes remained defiant. The introduction of the characters was only heard by the few eager spectators who sat in the first few rows. The audience was left in the dark with only the neat brochures in hand to identify the characters on stage.

As the play progressed the actors failed to fully convey the emotions of the characters. The mikes were uncharacteristically well-behaved for the



The Lovers find solace in each other

tist, artist, lover, ascetic, philanthropist, aspirant, student, pessimist was pretty tough and required a lot of concentration.

Another difficulty was to get people to come on time. I guess that's an age-old problem that will always occur....



The leap into the unknown

rest of the hour but I felt none of the characters really came to life. It was an adequate performance by students we have known and loved, delivering a set of dialogues — but playing themselves.

As the actors climbed the cliff, one by one, they opted out of the mission. The change of lighting at every juncture of the play reminded the audience of the awesome structure.

The choreography by Datta-di (Mukherjee), Smita and Bishwajit was fitting. The execution of the artist's spirit was a graceful freestyle and the duet of the lovers' spirits was well composed but lacked chemistry and the execution reflected the need for more practice.

Gradually as most of the characters abandoned the search only two

reached the peak. They recited their dialogues and the audience gasped as they leaped fearlessly off the cliff. This was a stroke of brilliance on the part of the directors. It took the audience by surprise, but before they could recover a string of actors with white rotund lamps walked between the packed spectators as they made their way up the mountain. The lights went off and the lamps were lit one after another. Pearly orbs floated in mid-air forming fine lines demarcating the ascension of the small group of people. The audience was left with the surreal image and a silence to match.

The younger generations keep contributing with a refreshing artistic flair to the scripts that the older generations have mastered. This was a wonderful attempt by the budding group of actors in the short duration at their disposal.

But a section of the audience who looks for unparalleled perfection in the 1st December programmes might prefer a group of seasoned actors over a group of students comprising of amateur actors with barely a month to put on a one-hour show.



The new world

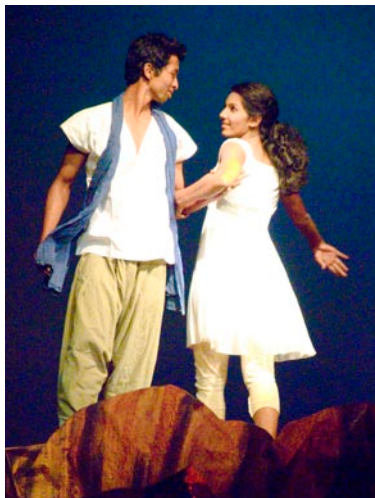
***What does it mean to outgoing students of Knowledge to participate in the 1st Dec. programme?***

It means having one of the most beautiful experiences in their lives. Even though at first the programme does not seem to be going anywhere,

gradually everything falls into place and the atmosphere that we so long to create, is realised on the last day, like magic, and each one is transported to another world altogether.

***What did this programme personally mean to you?***





The dance of the Lovers.

It was an occasion for me to learn to organise a programme on a large scale. I learnt to be responsible, manage time, handle different people and take care of the various tasks that went to create this programme. At first I was not very sure if I

would be able to manage a programme on such a grand scale but by taking it up, I gained in confidence and it made me realise that I can do things I thought I would never be capable of doing. It was a wonderful experience working with Cristof who was always brimming with new ideas, and I really learnt a lot by seeing how he directed — the different ways of saying a line, the movements, the posture required in different roles, the frame of mind required for various scenes, and above

all I learnt that in order to put on any play one must be flexible in the mind to accept changes and to ready to experiment and incorporate different ideas. I also learnt a great deal from Habul-da, Cristof, Devashish-da, Mahi-da, Bokul-da, Abhi-ben, Prafulla-da, Rakesh-da, and

the light crew regarding what “true dedication” means and how to really put your heart into what you do. It was amazing to see how everything I needed or wanted was right there next to me — the Ashram felt like a big family ready to go to any extent to help me overcome all the obstacles that came on my way. I chose to put on this play because I wanted to give back to the Ashram whatever it had given me, as an offering for the immense privilege that I had been given to be a part of this exceptional place. ❀



The grace of the Artist's spirit.



The entire team of the 1st December Programme, 2012

# POP MUSIC IN THE ASHRAM

*The 1960s was a period when the world was going through a process of change and it had an effect on Pondicherry too. The new youth movement which was sweeping through the world had touched the field of art and culture. As students in the School we were suddenly face to face with popular music coming from outside. Teenagers who were in the Ashram started playing this new kind of music. Today, decades later, we ask ourselves what the Mother thought of it. We spoke to **Tapan Kumar Chowdhury '74**, one of the students who was most involved with modern music at that time.*

**Can you tell us something about the time when you created a rock band in the 1960s? How was that kind of music seen in the Ashram?**

This was way back in 1965 and there were many small groups among the students of the Ashram. We were a small group of friends: Charles, Konkona, Sangeeta (Ronit's sister) and myself. Charles used to play the piano and we used to listen to him. After a while, we started singing and Charles accompanied us on the piano. This became a regular and serious activity, almost four or five times a week, sometimes before group, sometimes after group. As we met regularly at Charles' house and sang and enjoyed ourselves, people came to know about it. One day, when we came to the Playground, all of us together, after a meeting at Charles' place, I remember how we were mocked. Everyone started calling us "Piano Party". It took us a while to understand what was happening. Boys and girls enjoying themselves together was not seen in a good light. But we were close friends and we

stuck together. With time our repertoire of music grew, so did our circle of friends and admirers.

The post-'Piano Party' era started with more participants in our group like Dilip Barai, Susan (Ange's elder sister), and even my cousin Joy and many others who hung around us. 'Piano Party' was forgotten and Charles' house became a musical hub. His parents

were so tolerant and encouraging! With the arrival of Dilip Barai came new instruments, a guitar, and a new instrument called 'the melodica', a small keyboard which produced sound by blowing like a recorder, but the sound was not like a recorder. I started learning to play Dilip's guitar and Dilip specialised on the melodica. We started giving small concerts and organising musical events which were held in the School, sometimes in class-

rooms, sometimes for Saturday Programmes and also in the Dancing Hall. But we were made to understand in many a subtle manner, that our independent ways were not appreciated.

There was another group made up of Norman,



Tapan Chowdhury (left) Rajan Sankpal (Center), Niladri Banerjee (on Guitar, partly seen) and Amitava Ghosh on drums (not seen) performing outdoors at the Kindergarten (1968).



Milan, Kake, Chhote, Ranajit (Jaga), and a few others. They also did a concert in the Hall of Harmony. Ranajit played the “Tea Chest Bass”, Milan played the bongos, and Norman, the harmonica.

I also started learning Indian music (singing) with Arun Bishnu. We would participate in programmes with Shobha-di and also with Arup-da, Bena-ben and their group and others. So I was involved with both kinds of music. This continued until 1967-68. By this time new talents surfaced, and we had two guitarists, Rajan and Niladri. They both appeared with beautiful electric guitars, something revolutionary for that era in the Ashram. They were followed by Runu, Tuku and Maurice Patnaik. So the ‘Piano Party’ started evolving into a tight band of popular music.

Thus was formed the first pop band in the Ashram with Charles at the piano and as the backbone along with Niladri, Rajan, Runu, Tuku, Maurice Patnaik and myself. Niladri used to sing Hindi film songs and I used to sing English songs. Shunu was the most enthusiastic of us all, always present and cheering. He was like the manager, and remained so until we formed a bigger group, called “Acetone”.

We continued playing regularly at Charles’ place. Once at the request of Niladri, who was a crazy fan of Hindi film music, and a big fan of Babita, we decided to do a concert, at the Hall of Harmony, of Hindi film songs and English songs. So we prepared a repertory of about 12 to 15 songs. On the day of the concert, the hall was jam-packed with all the students and teachers, some standing on the tables at the back. We set off on a festive tempo to the stomping of feet by the young generation. Everybody enjoyed themselves and went home happy. Thinking of it now, it was so spontaneous and so naïve.

### ***How did you turn to this music more seriously?***

Our group went on until 1969. We had programmes but we felt alienated. We were not appreciated. Then there was a music competition and although I was given the first prize, somebody else was also given a joint first prize. I was not too happy about that. Obviously, I was looking for music somewhere else. Then came the Beatles era — 1968.

That’s when Nalin, Upi (Upendra Shah) and some others joined the “gang” and Runu (Anirban Ghosh) joined us as a musician. I think Charles had left by this time. Our group used to meet everyday at the park. It was in the same year that the “hippies” landed in Goa. Some of them came to Pondicherry in their caravans. The Park was not closed like today, so they would park their caravans inside. It was quite an interesting sight to see them live in their caravans. These people would sit there at night, smoke marijuana and play the



Victor (on trumpet) and Rajan (on guitar) during a performance in the Kindergarten courtyard (1968)

guitar and sing songs — songs that were against the Vietnam War. This was early 1968, just during the birth of Auroville. We learnt about American folk music through songs of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Donovan and others. We also learnt about the hippy movement.

We used to go there, a whole lot of us and listen to them. That’s how we got interested. In this



## RAJAN REMEMBERS

I started playing with Tapan and Charles in 1968 when they were practising on the piano at Charles' house. My main interest at that time was to play western instrumental music, mainly tunes from the albums of The Ventures and The Shadows. Niladri joined later and played popular Hindi tunes. Amitabh played the drums. Chhote used to join us occasionally and play the trumpet. Soon our band became the talk of the Ashram. Some time that year we decided to put on a show in Olga's music room. In order to perform there we had to get permission from Kireet-bhai. Getting permission from him to play our kind of music there was not easy. I remember Niladri spent hours debating with him for getting permission to play.

Once our band was invited to play at



Rajan Sankpal '74 at the Cultural Festival – Southern Illinois (Carbondale Campus, 1979)

Auroville in 1969 and the next day we were all summoned to Kireet-bhai's office and we all had some explaining to do. Nonetheless, whenever we performed the audience loved us. The place was always packed. I really enjoyed playing and performing on stage. I miss those days and especially some band members who are no longer with us.

The Ashram band gave me a lot of joy and experience performing in front of a large audience. This allowed me to accept an opportunity to perform at the Indian cultural festival at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. I still have the guitar (Gibson Melodymaker 1970) which I used to play in Pondy and at the university. Nowadays I play occasionally at private parties. With modern technology I play my guitar with music backtracks and do not need a full fledged band.

way two years passed. Siddhartha Patnaik joined us a little later.

### *Did you have any formal training in music?*

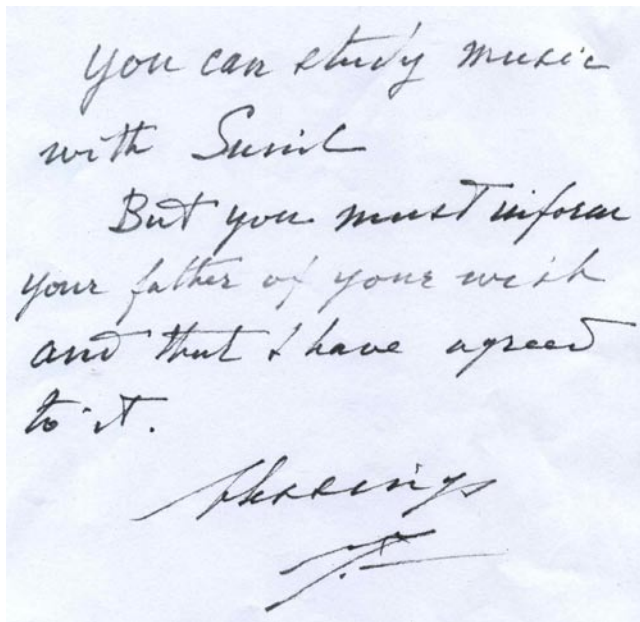
I started dreaming of becoming a musician. I wanted to study music to get a formal education. In 1969 I asked Kireet-bhai (Kireet Joshi) whether I could study music. He said, "No, [such] music is not in our curriculum." Then he spoke to me about Indian classical music. I was very depressed. So I wrote to the Mother that I wanted to study music with Sunil-da and study music in general. I still have that letter. The Mother said, "Ask your father." She added that if he was willing I could go and work with Sunil-da. We went up to see the Mother. My father was with me. So I became the first student to work with Sunil-da during school hours. Whenever I had a free period I went there. I am from the '74 batch but I continued to go there in '75 and I attended all his recordings.

Then I started learning piano from Richard Rigos, the dentist (his wife was the Mother's dentist). Richard was a concert pianist in Greece, if I am not mistaken. Sunil-da sent me to him. He had a beautiful piano. It was either a Gavo or a Playel. I took intensive formal training from him for two years or more until they left the Ashram. So I found myself without a piano teacher. I felt a bit lost. But I kept going to Sunil-da.

### *Was Chhote already working with Sunil-da?*

Yes, Chhote was already there. That reminds me that Chhote used to play the trumpet in the Ashram band. Then he got interested in our music. So he joined us and we had an Ashram group, with Niladri, Rajan, Charles, Chhote and Maurice Patnaik. Earlier we had performed in the Playground once and Chhote had played with us.

In those days there used to be music programmes in the Playground, next to the Store



The Mother responds to a letter from Tapan

Room because there was a piano there<sup>1</sup>. Once we did a programme for Dada's birthday. We had put up the stage diagonally across the window there and Charles was sitting inside and playing the piano. When I think of that music now I realise that it was so innocent.

That concert was a memorable one. We played for about an hour. The Playground was packed and Dada was present. He was sitting right in front, by the wall. I sang a Spanish song without even knowing what the words meant! But the song was beautiful for us because of its Latin elements and we enjoyed playing it. Steven (Seraphine's brother) had written out the words from a record. The name of the song was 'Besame Mucho'. A month or two before Dada passed away I had met him and he remembered the song I had sung for his birthday. He said, "Tapan, do you remember you had sung that Italian song for me?" I was so touched, I felt choked with tears. He still remembered that song after 40 years!

Then I got into rock music. This happened

because I met some local boys in the park. Around that time there was a German man who came to Pondicherry and he brought a lot of sophisticated equipment. He had heard about Sunil-da and heard his music. He brought his equipment and installed it in Sunil-da's studio and Sunil-da used the equipment for his recordings. This man used to play the base guitar and the lead guitar. But Sunil-da used him for playing the base guitar. I met him at Sunil-da's and he said that he had an old guitar to sell. It was a very beautiful black guitar — a jazz guitar. I asked him if he would sell it to me. He said "Yes, of course."

This man was staying in Auroville at Aspiration. So one day after group we went there, Runu, Shunu and I. We cycled up all the way. I asked my father's permission and he agreed to pay the Rs. 275 that the man was asking. So we got the guitar

and came back. This was my "Black Beauty" — the black electro-acoustic jazz guitar. I used to go with the guitar to the park. Then I learnt to play it. One day I met a local man and he told me that he used to play the drums. He invited me to his house and he said that he had a group with other musicians. And that's how I met a boy called Hemant. One day Hemant said, "Why don't we form a group?" He said that when he heard me singing, I impressed him with my rendering of the song 'Delilah' by Tom Jones. We then formed a group with him and another boy called Rory whose father was the captain of a ship. We called this group, the 'Acetone'.

In the Ashram we had a group with Niladri and Rajan. But when the new group formed I gradually moved over to that one. We, the Acetones, had a very big following in the Ashram as well as in the town locally. Some very young boys: Arindam, Ronit, Devdutt, Tuku and some others formed a band and started playing. We used to

1. The old structure of the Playground had a series of rooms to the East of the map of India. The first room on the eastern side was the store-room and there used to be a piano near the window which was used for movements with music for various groups. (See article on page 29)

practise in Runu's house and they used to come to practise with us. Sometimes we used to practise in Milan's house. We had some Ashram fans amongst the adults, like Bor-da (Tejen-da), Gautam Chawla, Pravin-bhai Nagda and a few others.

Once we decided to have a musical soirée at Milan's house, particularly for the young group of musicians — Arindam Sinha, Ronit, and others. We, the Acetone group were going to put in a guest appearance. That concert was packed with old Ashramites.

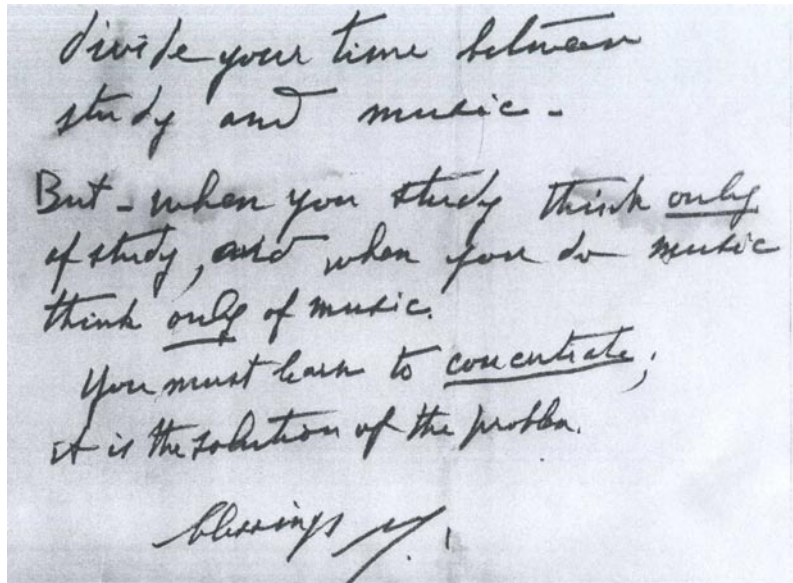
And that's when all the controversy started. People called me a bad boy. As we rebelled we attracted people's anger. Nobody could appreciate pop music in those days... Even the Beatles were considered terrible.

#### **What did the Mother say about the Beatles?**

Chhote had taken some songs of the Beatles to the Mother and when she heard them she said, "Ils savent mélanger leurs voix. (They know how to mix their voices)."

#### **Then what happened?**

Then Auroville happened in 1968. We continued in '69 and '70. We used to play outside, in hiding. By then I was totally involved. Then it went into hard rock. I was the singer, I used to play the rhythm guitar, Hemant was the lead guitarist, Runu was the drummer and Rory was the base guitarist. We were the first group but there was parallelly another group. They were known as "Les Daltons". We used to go regularly and play, never during school hours and never during group time. We always went in the evening to their house. And sometimes we would go and play outside. Then we got seriously involved and this went on for four years until '71. There was



The Mother answers another letter from Tapan

a rock show at Madras and it was called the JS Show. There were professionals from all over the country but we were very much appreciated for our music as we were the youngest group. All this was kept secret but now I can tell it! We continued to play here and there. We from the Ashram knew that the Mother was every moment with us, and protected us.

Then in February 1971 there was a celebration of Auroville's anniversary at Last School. It was not yet complete. There was a small amphitheatre with an elevated stage and a rough gallery around it. So we went there. And Debi (Debi Prasad) was also there. It was the high point of our musical career. There was Rajan, Niladri, Runu, Shunu, Maurice Patnaik, I and some others. We were about 12 of us. My friends from outside, the other group, had also come. In Auroville there were some Aurovilians who used to play rock and folk. There was a huge guy called Midge. It was something like a mini Woodstock. We started playing and Debi improvised on his sarod and suddenly... there was no power. It was clear that someone had sabotaged the show. We were all very disappointed.

The next day we were summoned to Kireet-bhai's office, all twelve of us. By that time I had



## THE MOTHER ON POPULAR MUSIC

A conversation of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1967

I have been asked questions about music: "What is it we should expect in music? How to judge the quality of a piece of music? What do you think of light music (cinema, jazz, etc.) which our children like very much?"

I replied this (it was yesterday):

*"The role of music lies in helping the consciousness to uplift itself towards the spiritual heights.*

*"All that lowers the consciousness, encourages desires and excites the passions runs counter to the true goal of music and ought to be avoided.*

*"It is not a question of designation but of inspiration..."*

Yes, because he says "light music", but I have heard light music that I found exceedingly lovely! even some pieces of film music that I have heard were magnificent, and on the other hand some "classical" pieces, oh, how, boring! So, ...

*"...and the spiritual consciousness alone can judge there."*

Because at the School they play music every Saturday. And they have begun quarrelling about the kind of music that should be played. Then one of the boys said, "As for me, I LOVE light music, I find it VERY enjoyable." (*Mother laughs*) so they looked down on him scornfully! And they wrote to ask me. So, that's what I replied!

"Light" music! Of course, jazz music... but even there, there are very nice passages, one can't say.

One can't say.

Ultimately, it doesn't at all depend on the musician's intention: it depends on the STATE he was in. If you feel very joyful and suddenly hear sounds expressing a very light, very free joy, and put it into music, it's marvellous. While, if you are grave, serious, see all the human misery, and put it into ponderous, thick sounds, and oh, if it is made into orchestral music, that bores you stiff... (*Mother laughs*).

already started working with Sunil-da. I remember we were all standing around Kireet-bhai's table. One of the senior teachers was there and she was very annoyed.

Kireet-bhai said, "The Mother has called you and Siddhartha Patnaik." We looked at each other and thought, "That's great, if Mother has called us personally." He told us that the next day we would have to go with him to the Mother. So we both wrote a letter each to the Mother. We prepared ourselves. We were sitting outside the Mother's room and Kireet-bhai was inside. We could hear Kireet-bhai reading out something to the Mother. And we could hear her saying "Quoi? Quoi?" I still remember Mother asking "C'est quoi le Pop?" I don't know what Kireet-bhai explained to the Mother.

Then we were asked to go in. The Mother had a big smile. So I told her that I wanted to play music and I asked her to guide me. She wrote an answer on my letter. She wrote, "Cette soi-disant musique pop va abîmer ton goût pour la musique

et t'empêchera de progresser." I got the message because I was going into hard rock. Hard rock, at least for those times, was nerve-wracking. And there was a lot of doping and all that. A lot of musicians who played that music in those days became junkies. I must say I never got into all that. Music was enough to give me a high.

### *What happened after that?*

Siddhartha and I came down. Mother gave us blessings and a big smile. At that very moment there was a transformation. I understood, maybe not mentally, but something changed. I never got that letter. And I forgot that that letter had never been given to me. But I continued playing music. And that's when I went into classical music very seriously. Sometimes, twelve hours a day. I prepared for exams and appeared for exams, locally. Fabricant, who was a very good jazz pianist, and Astrid were my teachers. What they have given me! I put my life into music. I did 7 years of solid music and worked with Sunil-da. And I was also

doing rock music. By 1973, one by one they were all gone. But I kept on working with some others.

Shivan, a local boy, had a group and we were competing with each other. The music scene in Pondicherry evolved and everybody started playing with everybody and there was a very good atmosphere. What happened is that some of that dark, hard rock didn't catch on. When the Mother told me what she thought of it, it broke my desire for it. The others also stopped, but rock continued. Rock means a lot of things. It's a genre that includes many things. A lot of new groups came up in Pondicherry. I studied music with some local teachers at Cluny. Gradually the rock scene faded away.

#### ***What were the Mother's views?***

Many people ask me this, "What did the Mother tell you?" What the Mother told me was a personal advice, it wasn't something general. It changed my life. I had forgotten about that letter. Actually, for a long time I thought that I had lost it. In 1989 I went to Italy and met Dingle there. He was one of my great fans. And he told me, "One of our teachers had said the Mother was asked what she thought about the music that you were playing and the Mother's reply was 'Find the source of their music.' That was all." But this was

never conveyed to us. This was said in the early 1970s but I learnt about it in '89.

***I heard that the Mother said that this new music is an attempt to break the old forms in music and we will pass through this until the new thing is found. What was the Mother's opinion about modern music in general?***

Many people went and played different music to her. She always appreciated. Even just a couple of weeks back I read something on the Library music board where the Mother was saying that the important thing is to find the source of inspiration. The important thing is where the inspiration comes from, the style is beside the point. I know rock musicians who meditate with rock. On the other hand a certain kind of rock can be physically very hard. Many rock musicians have been destroyed. They get addicted to drugs and then they destroy themselves. One has to divert that and make it bring on a positive effect.

***Konkona remembers that when some people complained to the Mother about your group she had said, "Leave them alone. They are good souls."***

Yes. She never said anything against us or our music. ❧

## THE PLAYGROUND PIANO

*Prithwindra Mukherjee '58*

**W**e were quite a few of Olga's piano students who joined her class on theory of Western music. Side by side, Dada (Pranab Bhattacharya) arranged with the British Council and the USIS libraries at Madras so that I could order from them and consult important works published in this area, by specialists like Leopold Stokowski, Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith. The period between 1957 and 1959 was particularly creative for me. I staged my Bengali play, *Yadukar* ("The Magician") with the participation of Barun Tagore, Subas, Giten and others, and learnt



that Mother was pleased by the powerful conception and direction. Then the Ashram brass band played my first composition on a morning

raga: Mother told me that she had been waiting to hear something like this. Soon after, Dada decided that I should compose the music for the Mass Drill on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1958; simultaneously, other group captains invited me to compose for their respective drills. For all these activities, once the piano came to the playground store room, Dada got a microphone fixed to it, for regular practices with the groups concerned. Except for a couple of hours in the afternoon, when the piano was required for other purposes, throughout the day till late in the evening I had the leisure of playing and composing. On certain afternoons, there was a group of students — probably Kiran Poddar, Mounnou, Gauri, Linda, Nupur, Shubhra, Tarun Vishnu, as far as I remember — who came to learn songs that I composed with my own words and music. One evening, when Mother was returning from the

Tennis Ground, she stopped behind the window, listening to one of my new songs:

*We are the Mother's children,  
Rowing to reach a new shore,  
We are the Mother's boatmen  
Now and for evermore.*

Dinesh with his improvised box base was accompanying us and Gangaram was clapping inside a bucketful of water to produce the rowing effect. Among guest artists, on some days, I had the luck of having Kanak-da with his electric guitar, Arunkant with his accordion, Behram with his saxo tenor, Ashok Ganguli with his violin.

On noticing a lull all around, I looked outside: Dada was making signs from behind the window, bidding me to come out. On seeing Mother standing there, I felt curious; with a broad smile, she told me that my music reminded her of songs by Volga boatmen. ❧

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*Knowledge shall bring into the aspirant Thought  
A high proximity to Truth and God.*

Sri Aurobindo

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Sri Aurobindo



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Keep yourself always open towards me —  
This is all that is asked of you.*

The Mother

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I, Ramraj Sehgal, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Date: March 2013

(Sd.) Ramraj Sehgal  
*Signature of Publisher*





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