

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



**WORKING FOR THE
UNITED NATIONS**

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

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

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

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EDITORIAL TEAM:

Gopal '90, Sunayana '79, Alo '92

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:

Anurupa '86, Suruchi '03, Claire,
Gaurishankar '80, Savita '75,
Shyama '85, Ishita '04, Anubha '00

ART DESIGN:

Saroj Kumar Panigrahi, Somdutt '90

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:

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

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

Phone: 91-413-2233683

e-mail: office@goldenchainfraternity.org

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Have you ever been asked — “What does the word ‘International’ in Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education signify?” Does it imply that we have, or should have, students from all over the world? Or does it simply reflect our culture, our outlook, the exposure we receive to languages and civilizations, art and music from around the world? Certainly nobody will deny that the content of our education is very “international” and that SAICE makes us more suited than most to be global citizens.

And whether we like it or not, today’s world is global. For instance we take for granted that our gadgets may be manufactured in China or Korea, that the food we consume may be from South America or Europe, that the fuel we consume might be from Iran, that the TV programming and media we watch may be from the US.

Goods, services, financial capital, human capital all move across countries. People regularly zip across continents for work or leisure. In India the change has been particularly rapid. Families which, one or two generations ago, had not ventured outside their village, today have members in different continents of the globe.

Most of all, as we know, what has brought us closer than ever, is the communication and information technology revolution. We are constantly in touch with our friends, family and colleagues wherever they may be. We watch news of events happening in distant countries in real time. The internet has brought information from all over the world at our fingertips. This massive sharing of thought and experience is certainly shaping our global culture. It is also ensuring that ideas and social, political and cultural movements spread quickly across countries and regions.

Naturally globalization brings its complications. Interlinked economies mean that a recession or a banking collapse in one country can trigger financial problems in another. Terror is also global and one’s security environment can be hostage to what is happening in another country. Our natural environment and climate are

dependent on the lifestyles of people thousands of miles away. Clearly our fates are inextricably linked to the fate of everybody else on the planet.

Those who decry globalization often bring up two issues. First, this globalization is dominated by the West — economically, politically, militarily and culturally. Second, the global is perceived to be a threat to the local, to the national, to the regional. The sovereignty and individuality of smaller units is seen to be at stake leading to insecurity and talk of a clash of civilizations. It cannot be denied that there is an inexorable drive towards a uniformity of lifestyles, habits, outlook, culture (at least of popular, consumerist culture), and a loss of knowledge-systems and languages (e.g. a fourth of India’s spoken languages are threatened by extinction). Our cultural diversity may be even more threatened than our biodiversity.

The solutions to these global issues — political, economic, environmental, cultural — can come only from a deeper vision and higher consciousness, one that looks forward to the global human family (*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*), that understands its inner, spiritual unity, while valuing in the deepest possible way the genius of each individual nation, each tradition, each culture. This is the kind of vision that is provided to us by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Unlike traditional yogas which confine themselves to individual liberation, Sri Aurobindo puts forward a vision of divinization, not just of the individual seeker, but of mankind as a whole. His social and political thought reveals to us the evolution of human society and its strong trend towards a global unity. The Mother took the vision forward with an actual experiment in international living in the shape of Auroville.

This grand vision is part of our heritage. We have grown up in an environment which is “international” in its outlook and its culture, which envisages a harmonious united future for mankind. In the current scenario it is the United Nations that is the steward of this future. In this issue we speak to some of our alumni who work for agencies of the United Nations. ❧

AN UNUSUAL STORY

*The story of how **Pragna Amin (née Patel)** '80 came to the Ashram, as recounted by **Sunayana** '79*

Sometimes there are true stories one hears which are so intriguing and fascinating that they remain on our minds for a long time. One such is the story of how Pragna Patel, now known as Pragna Amin, came to the Ashram. Now she is a mother of grown-up daughters, busy looking after her home and finding her work-life balance harmoniously. But her story goes back to her early childhood. She has chosen only now to speak about her experience.

Pragna's parents were then living in East Africa with their three little children. Pragna was a vivacious child until she was three and a half. Then, one fine day, she suddenly stopped talking. Much to her parents' astonishment, the little girl who couldn't stop chatting endlessly was now absolutely silent. When they tried to find out if something was wrong she finally told them that she could see a white lady in a sari who was calling her, a figure that the others couldn't see. The parents, in their anxiety, asked their relatives what they should do. The elder ones among them started to believe that Pragna was possessed by a spirit so they called someone to exorcise her. When the exorcist left everyone heaved a sigh of relief thinking now all would be well.

But they soon found out that it hadn't changed anything because Pragna continued to be silent. When her parents asked her again about her difficulty she told them that she could still see the white lady. Finally her father asked the person he was working for, one of their relatives, for help. This gentleman had heard about the Mother and

Sri Aurobindo and had even visited Pondicherry. He gave them a photo of the Mother, the one where she is distributing flowers from a plate, and asked Pragna's parents to show that photo to their daughter. Pragna told her mother in sign language that she was indeed the person that she could see.

When Pragna first started seeing the Mother she told her little sister about it but her sister told her that she thought Pragna was lying as she herself could not see anyone. The fact that her own sister disbelieved her made Pragna keep quiet and not talk to anyone at all. Her teacher in her school started call-

ing her "the mute girl" which hurt her parents as they knew that Pragna had no speech disability. As time passed Pragna found it hard to go to sleep because she knew that when she opened her eyes in the morning, when it was still dark, she would once again see the white lady calling her. She began to fear this vision of an unknown person and



Pragna as a child in East Africa



L to R: Bitasta, Pragna, Arati & Sanjukta. Photo taken on Pragna's birthday.

would remain very close to her mother.

As advised by their relative who was a devotee of the Mother, and who had given them the photograph to show to Pragna, her parents wrote to the Mother. The answer they received from her really surprised them. The Mother wrote to say that she had been waiting for Pragna and that she wanted her to come as soon as she could to Pondicherry. It was 1965 and Pragna had not been in very good health so her parents waited for her to recover before they could make travel arrangements to go to India. A year later they wrote once again to the Mother and asked her if they could bring Pragna. The Mother answered that they could come and see her and after seeing Pragna she would tell them what they should do next.

Tickets were bought for the ship on which they were to come to Bombay in the middle of 1966. But the ship was delayed and they reached India two days later than planned. This meant that their train tickets had to be bought again. This was done with great difficulty as tickets were not available on such short notice. After finally managing to travel to Madras, as Chennai was

called in those days, they found themselves on the station platform and did not know how to get to Pondicherry. They did not know a word of Tamil and the local people at the station could not speak any other language. Finally they managed to get tickets to come to Pondicherry. Once they reached Pondicherry they waited on the platform wondering how to find the Ashram when an English-speaking person came towards them and helped them. Pondicherry had not yet become the tourist destination that it is today and even though they took a rickshaw they still had to ask for directions from people on the way. It took them a while before they finally managed to reach their destination. Pragna's parents recall even today how the entire journey had been an ordeal from the beginning to the end.

Eventually, when Pragna went to see the Mother with her parents, she recognised her as the white lady she had been seeing. The Mother asked her parents to leave Pragna in the Ashram. As it was the middle of the year and there was no place in the boardings the Mother asked Pragna to live with Moon-di's family until the new session of the School started in December. Once she had reached Pondicherry, Pragna felt that she had come home and she completely opened up and made friends with those who were around her.

She clearly recalls that in those days Pondicherry was very silent and one could hear the sound of the waves breaking when one was not far from the Beach Road. She enjoyed hearing that sound. She even remembers that within a couple of days of being



Pragna as she is today

in Pondicherry she was taken for sea-swimming with a group of children, led by Norman. She felt so much at home that she was totally unperturbed when she was told that her parents were going back to Africa.

When the School reopened after the November break, Pragna went to live in Millie's Home (Tanga Boarding) run by Kiran-di. A year went by and her relatives in Gujarat came to know that she was living in Pondicherry and wrote to Kiran-di informing her that they wanted to take her to Gujarat during the school holidays. Kiran-di did as all those in charge of boardings did in those days. She wrote to the Mother asking for her permission. The Mother clearly said that she did not want Pragna to go out of the Ashram. As it often happened, the relatives insisted that they wanted to take her and spend some time with her. And as it also often happened, the Mother relented.

When Pragna came back after the holidays the Mother said that all the work that she had done on her consciousness had been undone by that trip to the outside world. She made it clear that she did not want Pragna to go out of Pondicherry during the holidays again. And indeed Pragna did not go out of Pondicherry for the next 10 years. When she finished Knowledge her parents had settled down in London. She left Pondicherry and joined them there and has been living there since then.

One wonders how Pragna could see the Mother without knowing who she was. Or did she know her from another life? Or else how does one explain the fact that she felt so much at home when she reached Pondicherry? There must be many such souls who have come back to the Ashram although they were born elsewhere. How wonderful were the parents who could bring these children back to their true Mother! ❧

PROTECTED BY HER ALONE

Deepshikha and Aloka Ghosh '72

After attending Ananda Reddy's study-camp at Nainital, the six of us — we three sisters (Aloka, Deepshikha, Ela), Ananda, Bokul and Gauranga (from the Chandannagar Centre) started on our three dham yatra to Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. We reached Sri Aurobindo Yoga Mandir at Haridwar and after a comfortable stay for a night, started for Rishikesh on the 10th of June and from there left for Uttarkashi.

We were delighted on the way to Uttarkashi, when we made our first halt at Hotel Devansh, right on the turbulent Bhagirathi. The setting was amazingly beautiful — the winding paths on the mountains, the beautiful waterfalls, thick forests with tall, stately trees, so green and vibrant, so huge and formidable. None of us had ever been in such mountains — so wide and yet so high that we felt dizzy looking at them! We took in everything — the tiny villages beside the river

in the valleys, their terrace-gardens, their simple life-style....

On the 11th we visited Gangotri, the source of the Ganges (very close to Gomukh). Since it was tourism season, the traffic was heavy and the journey slow. After walking a kilometer and a half, we reached the temple on the bank of the Ganges. People were bathing in the freezing water of the Ganges whereas we could hardly hold it in our palms. Everywhere the lines were quite long, but we made it to the temple of Ma Ganga. Enjoying the whole ambience deeply, we returned to Devansh hotel by the evening little knowing that the lovely verandah we were enjoying on the Bhagirathi would have no existence a week hence! It seems many of those beautiful hotels were illegal constructions.

The next morning, we headed towards Kedarnath which was our highest and coldest destination at around 3600 mtrs. We had to travel

the whole day upward in the mountains till Guptakashi, a small town nestled in a strategic place giving us a view of the faraway snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas. On reaching Hotel Bhagirathi, we switched on the TV and saw that on the 12th, just the day after we had had our darshan, the road to Gangotri was completely damaged due to severe landslides. Repair was impossible in the days to come and there was deep concern about the pilgrims who got stuck there. We had barely escaped the tragedy!

The next day, on the 13th, we started for the Kedarnath temple where we had decided to stay for two days. From Guptakashi it took us five to



Kedarnath Temple on 14th Morning

six hours to reach Gaurikund with all the traffic jams. It was heavily crowded, much more than Gangotri. Here for the first time we had a look at the steep climb of 14 kms on that dangerous, narrow, stone-cobbled road! Bokul, Gauranga and I opted to trek up. Ela, Didi and Ananda took ponies to reach Kedarnath.

It was an amazing scene on the narrow 12 to 15 ft road. Ponies were climbing or descending, palquis were being carried both ways by four people on their shoulders, dolis were there, heavy loads of construction material or food were being transported on the mules up to Kedarnath along with hundreds of pedestrians. But, we were surprised to see the harmony in all this pell-mell; no one complained, no one shouted, no fights, no arguments despite the slippery and soggy road, smelly horse-dung and constant push and pull of ponies and mules. What a steadfast devotion to see the Lord! We took nine and a half hours to reach the top. All of us were lodged at the Punjab-Sindh Awas very close to the main temple. It was very very cold and for electricity we had the generator working only for two hours at night and in the early morning.

Just in front of the temple there was a market-line with lots of eateries and many stalls selling pooja materials. The temple was beautifully lit and hundreds of devotees were on that road. On the 14th morning, we visited the temple and saw



Ela, Bokul, Ananda, Aloka, and Deepshikha at Kedarnath Hotel

Lord Shiva inside, neither a Linga nor a Moorti but a sheer piece of rough rock, shaped like a hunch back, being worshipped by lakhs of devotees since thousands of years. Darshan finished within four hours and after lunch we enjoyed the snow-clad mountains around us. As it had been constantly raining (except when we were in the line for one and a half kilometers) we couldn't go out much. It rained heavily the whole night. On the 15th morning, we returned to Guptakashi. In the rain, on that risky road, we all took ponies and



Sitapur Parking Area

descended to Gaurikund by lunch time. There on our way back, in Rampur, we came to know that a parking area at Sitapur with thirty odd buses and vans had got washed away by the fury of the Mandakini very close to Rudraprayag. In the Himalayas, the Ganges is called by different names in different places like Mandakini or Bhagirathi or Alakananda etc.

On 16th morning we started very early for the Badrinath darshan. We barely went till Gochar where we were stopped by the police as the road to Badrinath had got severely damaged. We were almost ordered to turn back to Rishikesh. We felt sad but the situation was getting worse. We had to accept it.

We got stuck at Gochar itself for three to four hours. We managed to get some lunch there. Food was always hot and fresh — rice or chapatties, mostly potato or bhindi vegetable. Water was always from the mountain-streams, very sweet and tasty. The journey back to Rishikesh was not too long, but we were moving very slowly owing to the roads having been damaged by landslides. JPCs and lorries were at work all the time but it takes time to repair mountain roads. It was there on the next bend that we saw two vans being smashed by falling rocks killing all sitting inside.

That night we were supposed to halt at Srinagar, a comparatively large town on the mountain. By midnight we came to know that half of Srinagar town had come under water. Our driver then headed towards another small town called Kirtinagar along with a thousand others. That midnight when we reached Kirtinagar, all small shops were made to open. They sold all they had — still, most went hungry. Hotels were all filled beyond capacity and charging what they wanted. We had to curl up in the car that night.

We ran out of water. Rain water was being used. The next day by late afternoon we reached Kaudilya for lunch. Alakananda there was in a tremendous rage and now we saw several household items, gas cylinders, furniture, light roofs floating on the river. Our driver was very tense, constantly telling us to watch for any boulder rolling down. It was at Kaudilya that we came to know that the Alakananda had flooded the road at one point and it could take three days for the 12 feet of water to subside. That night too we had to spend in the van. We prayed hard to Ma as she had been saving us from each disaster.

On 17th morning we came to know about the deluge and total destruction at Kedarnath. Huge mountain parts falling down due to heavy cloud burst and the bursting of the Sarabari lake 6000



At Biasi where the Ganges had flooded the road

mtrs above. The slush and mud and rocks falling in an incredible speed with the massive force of water had buried thousands of pilgrims and a huge number of livestock. The whole of Kedarnath town, down to the 14 kms mountain-path

from Rambada to Gaurikund — everything had turned into a debris-graveyard just within minutes! Barely twenty-four hours earlier we had seen Kedarnath shining with light and laughter!

We became numb and stone-silent. None of us could speak. On the 18th morning, at day-break we came to know that miraculously the Alakananda had receded at night and the long stretch of damaged road would take six to seven hours to be repaired. The place was called Biasi, and was 34 kms from Rishikesh. That was the greatest miracle for us because experienced locals were expecting it to take no less than three days for the river to recede. Later, after returning, Didi saw a dream in which she vividly saw the Mother standing in her salwar-kameez on the very bank of that roaring, flooding and uncontrollable Ganges! She looked up and waved at us.

We all believe that without Her direct intervention this miracle would have been impossible. By now we saw how death and destruction had been chasing us hard on our heels and how we were being protected all through by Her hand alone! We were silent on the way back to Rishikesh. Haridwar and Rishikesh had been flooded just two days before destroying parts of the towns. The Yamuna had risen above the danger-mark in Delhi and many trains had been cancelled. Fortunately, our midnight train to Delhi was the first one to resume, and we reached Delhi on 19th early morning, carried by Her Grace and Light and Love! ❀

*Let us give ourselves entirely and sincerely to the Divine
and we shall enjoy His protection.*

*

*Physical protection is possible only with a total surrender to the Divine
and the absence of all desires.*

*

*Concentrate more constantly on the Divine Presence
and the protection will be more spontaneous.*

The Mother (CWM, 15: 51,52)

EXPLORING HARAPPAN CITIES

Pranjal Garg '08 visited the Khirsara and Dholavira sites as part of his doctoral research.

I had never thought that my love for Indian culture, tremendously inspired by Sri Aurobindo's *Foundations of Indian Culture* and Hriday-da's enlightening classes, would one day lead me to a new dimension of discovering a culture: Archaeology. It is one of the social sciences that is methodically scientific in its techniques and yet procures social, cultural and historical data.

of the region is arid and one sees more wind-mills than agricultural plantations. My area for the field-work was the Kutch region. The site I was going to visit was around 100kms from Bhuj, and then 20kms off the main road near the village of Khirsara. The village falls exactly on the tropic of Cancer. This is where some 4500 years ago you could hear the chisels of craftsmen, the wheels of potters that swirled to make artistic ceramics. The nearby river carried the boats full of goods for import and export, the sentry towers continuously kept watch on the carts entering the city and the chiefs in their high citadel proudly looked down over their plebs in the flourishing marketplace. Here is where a pocket of the first



A street in Dholavira. All photos in this article are from the Dholavira site.

After my recent participation in an excavation of a Chalcolithic¹ culture site at Udaipur, I was rather excited about my upcoming trip where I would be witnessing an excavation of a Harappan site in Gujarat. April was the month that I chose for this visit. Apparently a foolish decision considering the climatic conditions and the weather in that month, but the excavation is at its 'best' then. Usually excavations start with the winters setting in, as that reduces the struggle against the weather and instead lets you toil better in your efforts to enter into a silent past.

It was a great pleasure to visit Gujarat for the first time; a hardy but prosperous state, and its people kind and gentle. In north Gujarat, much



Ramp for carts to fetch water from the reservoir.

civilization of the Indian subcontinent once lived, today known by the names: Harappa Culture,

1. Chalcolithic age is a technological age/era. The earliest civilisations like Harappan, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian etc. belong to this age.

Harappan Civilization or Indus-Saraswati Civilization. The area of the city periphery has been estimated to be about 4-6 ha, which is likely to increase as further excavations and surveys are carried out in the adjoining private agricultural lands. The urban Harappans flourished between 4600 and 3900 years ago.



Original Harappan staircase to what could be a washing/bathing place

The excavation was being conducted by the Baroda excavation branch, which falls under ASI, i.e. the Archaeological Survey of India. Shri Jitendra Nath ji was the excavation director, who lived at the site in the camp along with some assistant archaeologists, and had been conducting this excavation since the last four seasons, i.e. the last four years.

I reached the site in the middle of the afternoon, after lunch hour. I approached a trench crossing over a little mound line a few meters off the pathway. My eyes shone with excitement while I looked around in wonder. Just then an Assistant Archaeologist called out, "You entered from the eastern gateway of this Harappan city, welcome to Khirsara." My delight doubled with his warm welcome and the 5 meter deep trench in front of me with Harappan walls going criss-cross. It was a magnificent view, as if a photograph from an

encyclopaedia had come alive suddenly in front of my eyes.

I spent a few days there mostly observing and also helping in the excavation. They had found three arms of the city fortification wall and had discovered several residential structures within the city, probably belonging to different classes. My primary project was to study the ceramics of the area, which is part of my doctorate program.

Soon I went around the site to understand its character and the prominent discoveries of that season. The rule has it that whatever is excavated should be refilled and closed again with proper



A well-carved pillar base at the eastern entrance



Drainage system from a well for the washing/bathing place

techniques and formalities for the protection and possible re-excavation of the site. Large sheets of plastic are spread on the excavated level and then the sand is filled again in the trenches. So I missed several interesting structures of earlier digs (of course only walls and floors), but still I was lucky

to get this season's special features. Some of the interesting ones were:

1. They found a storage pit/granary. There was a ramp going down from the ground level towards a big platform of approximately 10m² made of baked mud bricks. The granary had 14 rows separated by walls about 5-6 feet high. These walls were almost a meter thick which was also the width of the storage rows between them.



The rock-cut reservoirs

2. This site has yielded the biggest and the only fully intact standing kilns ever found at Harappan sites. The kilns were glazed from inside (probably a natural consequence of firing). I witnessed two of them among many that had been traced and are yet to be opened.
3. The number of divisional fortifications in the city were unique in their kind. The Citadel or Acropolis was divided from the craftsmen's area by a wall and also additionally had a fortification around itself.
4. The ceramics assemblage was an amalgamation of the Bronze Age (Chalcolithic) people of Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan which makes it a meeting point of regional culture variation.
5. Any cultural settlement is divided into three phases: Early, Mature and Late in respect of their development and advancement, though a settlement need not necessarily



Going down the northern side towards open ground

have all three phases. Khirasara is found to be exclusively a Mature Harappan site. This makes its artefacts and other archaeological findings regionally typological. Of course a deeper and technical insight reveals three more phases within the 'Mature period'.

6. The entrance gateways were heavily guarded as is evident by the bastions on either side of every gateway. It intrigues an archaeologist and makes him wonder who they could have been defending themselves against. My next destination was my biggest surprise.



At the Acropolis

A wonder in itself, a great feat of ancient engineering and architecture that raises the status of Harappan civilization to at least equal if not greater than other contemporary civilizations like the Egyptian and Mesopotamian.

I was on my way to Dholavira, the biggest

excavated Harappan site after Mohenjo Daro. It is located on an island called Khadir and was excavated for 10 years by famous archaeologist Dr. R.S. Bisht of the Archaeological Survey of India between 1991 and 2000. It is sad that almost no updated knowledge of our own civilization is in-



The largest rock-cut reservoir of Dholavira

corporated in the books of general reading and most importantly the textbooks. Apart from the 'Great Bath', 'the Priest's torso', the bronze 'Dancing girl', a few seals and the architectural city planning featuring perpendicular grid alignment, nothing much is known to most people about Harappan civilization. Several factors are responsible for this piteous and unfortunate condition.

There are numerous reasons why Dholavira is unique and deserves chief importance in the entire Harappan civilization. The extent and excellence of its urban engineering is unparalleled and magnificent. The location of the settlement is, unbelievably, in one of the most remote and arid regions of the subcontinent where the scarcity of water has become an accepted phenomenon. We have always heard that settlements in ancient times invariably developed near a river or any other fresh water body. But the people of Dholavira, because of unknown reasons, had decided to establish such a vast township in a challenging terrain. This region's geo-morphology was no better then than today, which is clear by the importance given to giant water storage systems

most technically engineered. The water scarcity always haunted the Harappan settlement, but the extent of the site (100 ha) shows that they could hold back enough water to support a population greater than that which lives there today. In fact, I was surprised to see that in spite of the hardy conditions there were some luxurious bathing systems at the acropolis of Dholavira. There is no end to the magnificence of this archaeological site that, through its crumbling ruins, takes us into the past. The greatest attraction of our country lies unvisited, lonely in a remote place in Kutch, Gujarat, some 30 kms away from Sindh in Pakistan, where once lay the other half of its civilization.

Even today when you reach Dholavira and catch the stupendous view, you can feel the seamless breadth of the Harappan civilization. The ancient city seems to come alive in front of your eyes, just as it does in movies. You walk through the market place seeing the remains of little shops around, with broken jars and pots lying, half sunk in the mud, which have survived the hardships of



Sun rising at the Dholavira site

nature and man for the past 5000 years. You feel a glory and a pride mixed with a feeling of immense joy as you breathe it all in. And then you look up to see the vast stretch of the Rann, white as if heavenly nymphs were gathered there to sing the glories of the people of Dholavira. This was a glimpse of my experience when the scorching sun felt cool and I had set off on a new journey to ancient lands in modern times. ❧

KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH UNESCO

*An interview with **Indrajit Banerjee '85**, who is director of UNESCO's Information Society Division.*

FURTHER STUDIES

You completed Higher Course in 1985. You went on to get a Master of Arts degree from JNU and a doctorate from the Sorbonne University, Paris. Can you tell us about the experience of further studies and your area of specialization?

After completing Higher Course in 1985, I got admission both in CIEFL in Hyderabad and JNU and opted for the latter because of its reputation and its location in the capital city of New Delhi. Taking up further studies in JNU was an extremely enriching experience both because of the academic environment as well as the social life the campus offered. I got to meet people from all over India and from a variety of disciplines and my interactions with all these diverse people provided me with a new understanding of various academic disciplines as well as people from different parts of India. After having been so comfortable in Pondicherry and the relaxed and cordial atmosphere of the Ashram, life in JNU was very different. I had to make decisions on all aspects of my academic and personal life without any guidance from anyone as was the case in Pondicherry.

After completing my Master's degree in JNU, I received the University Grants Commission (UGC) Fellowship which was awarded after a national selection process and which would cover all my education and living expenses as well as

offer me the recognition of being a UGC scholar. Soon after receiving the UGC grant, I appeared for the French Government scholarship interview and was fortunate to be selected as one of the two candidates from India to undertake my M.Phil. degree in France at the Sorbonne. I joined the Sorbonne University in October 1989 and studying in France was a very different experience from the one I had undergone in JNU. The academic programme was much more research-

oriented with fewer exams and assignments and the main challenge was not the courses and the exams but the M. Phil dissertation that I had to submit at the end of the year. I completed my M.Phil in 1990 and due to my performance, I was selected to join the Ph.D. programme in communications at the Sorbonne. This was the beginning of a four year marathon and luckily for me, although my scholarship had expired, the French government extended the scholarship for

three years which permitted me to complete my doctoral degree in 1994 with distinction.

My area of specialization for my Ph.D. thesis was the internationalization of television and the problems of intercultural communication and the focus of my research was to examine how cultural diversity affected trans-border flows of television programmes and channels. This was at the time a very timely and relevant topic as Europe had just authorized the internationalization of television



channels and programmes were no longer restricted to national territories.

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

You are an internationally recognized media and communications scholar and have edited ten books, published articles and also presented papers at a large number of international conferences around the world. Can you tell us about some of the important themes in this field that interest you?

After my doctoral studies in France, I moved to Canada where I undertook post-doctoral research at the University of Quebec in Montreal in the field of information and communication technologies. I also began my teaching career at the university and after completing my post-doctoral project, I moved for one year to the University of Ottawa where I taught several courses in the area of communications. This was the beginning of more than fifteen years of life as a university faculty member which took me from Canada to Malaysia and then on to Singapore before I joined UNESCO in 2009.

Through these years, I developed a very strong interest in the social impact of information and communication technologies. I conducted extensive research, for example, on the impact of the Internet on democracy and governance in Asia to highlight how these new technologies provided great new opportunities for political participation, democratic discourse and public accountability. I also studied the impact of the Internet and other technologies on cultural industries and the flow of cultural goods across the world with significant implications for national cultural policy and the de-territorialization of culture and identity. This research work offered me great opportunities to publish books and articles and



present my research findings at over 50 international conferences throughout my stint as an academic. It also gave me the possibility of interacting with many of the most renowned scholars in the field and gain insights on the latest research trends, methodologies and perspectives.

SOCIAL IMPACT

In the past few decades there has been a huge revolution and an explosion in media and communication technologies and reach. Can you tell us a little about the nature of the social impact this has had? People talk of the Digital Divide – the gap between those who have access to the Internet and information and communication technologies and the opportunities they bring and those who don't. Can this divide be bridged and can technology serve to bring equitability, equal opportunities and a level playing field?

The digital revolution has brought about unprecedented transformations in our lives. These technologies have essentially helped to overcome barriers to social and economic opportunity, provided new tools for the empowerment of people through a more vibrant public sphere and enhanced participation of citizens in governance. In every sphere of our lives, information and communication technologies are making a

difference in the way we live, work and use our leisure time. The world is a more connected place than ever before with over 5 billion mobile phone subscriptions and almost 3 billion Internet users. This connectivity and access to information and knowledge for people in the most remote parts of the planet has created a more level playing field and dramatically reduced barriers of time and space while increasing social mobility.

The digital divide of course continues to be a challenge with information haves and have-nots. However, with the rapid expansion of access to the Internet and digital technologies and reducing costs of access, I believe that more and more people will be able to enjoy access to information and knowledge in the years to come. Governments will however have to strive to ensure that the right policy mechanisms are put in place to enhance access to disadvantaged and remote populations as well as create conducive and enabling environments which will reduce costs of access to technologies and services.

UNESCO

You have been Chief of Section, ICT in Education, Science and Culture at the Communication and Information sector of UNESCO and then Director of UNESCO's Information Societies Division. Can you tell us what you do?

As the Director of the Knowledge Societies Division of UNESCO, my task is to leverage information and communication technologies to enhance universal access to information and knowledge in our core areas of competence which are education, science, culture and communication and information. My Division deals with very specific areas and issues such as Open Access to Scientific Knowledge and Repositories, Open Educational Resources, Digital Preservation of Documentary Heritage, Multilingualism in Cyberspace and enhancing access to information for persons with disabilities. In all these areas, we work with Governments and Member States to develop policy guidelines and promote capacity building and training. For example, recently, we have produced policy guidelines for Open Access and Open Educational Resources

which our Member States are examining in order to adopt them within national legal and policy frameworks.

LOOKING BACK

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were visionaries who saw the need for human unity and foresaw a greater future for the human race. Given your experience in a United Nations agency how do you look back at that vision today? How does it shape your own conception of collective international action?

My education in the Ashram is extremely relevant for my work in the United Nations and UNESCO in particular. This is because the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's core political philosophy revolved around Human Unity and UNESCO's core mandate is to build peace and unity. Both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo also highlighted the key role of education in human development and as UNESCO is the lead UN agency dealing with education, there is a direct linkage between my work and the spiritual and educational philosophy I grew up with in the Ashram.

How do you think SAICE can make the most of the information and communication technologies that are available today?

SAICE is an excellent educational institution by any standard. However, my personal opinion is that we should not get complacent and should take advantage of all the excellent educational resources which are available today. We need to constantly upgrade our curriculum and pedagogical and educational resources which has not been the case in recent years. SAICE, as an educational institution should also establish connections with centres of academic excellence in India and abroad. As the Mother and Sri Aurobindo always said, we must never relinquish our pursuit for excellence and therefore we must make a particular effort to keep up to date with current academic standards, materials and methodologies. In my view also, the Ashram should make an effort to engage ex-students to participate and contribute to SAICE when they come to Pondicherry on holidays and benefit from their rich experiences and knowledge in their respective fields of specialization. ❧

WITH THE UNDP IN AFGHANISTAN

Shraddhaa '04 tells us about development work and life in today's Afghanistan

INITIAL YEARS

You graduated in 2004. How and when did you join the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Delhi?

I completed my Post Graduate Degree in Mumbai in 2006-2007 in social communications. I developed a keen interest in good governance, political economy, social human development and poverty reduction. I decided to join UNDP and applied for the United Nations Volunteer Position in UNDP India. As a UNV you are full time UNDP staff but receive a monthly salary that is modest. I started my career in the UNDP in July 2007 at the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) office and worked in the UNDP Governance Unit and in close collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of Afghanistan.

You went on to work for UNDP in the larger South Asia region in the area of human trafficking. Can you tell us about that experience?

I worked as a UNV for a year and was then promoted as the NREGA specialist and worked with UNDP till Feb 2009. I then applied for the position of Communications Advisor at the Regional Office for South Asia of the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime. I travelled to the South Asian countries where UNODC

implemented programmes like Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, interacting with stakeholders who worked for the prevention of drug trafficking, human trafficking and migrant smuggling, arms dealing, illegal mobility and corruption. I would interview drug users, convicts, people living with HIV, illegal migrants, human traffickers to understand what contributes to these crimes and how UNODC helps address these challenges both from the human develop-

ment and legal angles. I would write stories and interviews which were published twice every week and can be found on the South Asia UNODC website.

UNODC's key objective is to promote effective responses to transnational organized crime, illicit trafficking and illicit drug trafficking by facilitating the implementation of the relevant United Nations conventions at the normative and operational levels. UNODC takes up the above challenges by encouraging Governments to ratify the international drug control conventions and the United Nations Convention against

Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto. It also improves the national capacity for the enactment of domestic legislation and the capacity of national criminal justice systems to implement the provisions of the international conventions.



At the Kandahar US Airforce Base

AFGHANISTAN AND AID WORK

You chose to then be posted in Afghanistan, which is essentially a war zone. Any particular reason why you chose that? What were your first impressions on reaching there?

For development practitioners like me Afghanistan is currently the playground of the world and has taken centre stage for military, political, socio-economic reasons. Since my area of expertise has been in the realm of public policy, governance and political economy, the next step forward had to be Afghanistan. I joined UNDP Afghanistan in September 2010 working in the State Building, Aid Coordination and Political Economy section.

The view of Afghanistan from the Indian Airlines Flight IC 814 (the same flight that was hijacked from Nepal to Kandahar) is of an arid land surrounded by majestic snow-capped mountains. One sees only men on the roads dressed in salwar-kameez wearing the unmistakable turban that we see the Taliban sport and the long beard. A few women are seen completely covered from head to toe in pleated shiny blue Burkhas with a netted mesh over the eyes. Buildings are old and filled with bullet marks and one sees NATO and American tanks with armed soldiers rolling through the streets. A frequent sight is of a lot of barbed wire, AK-47s and boom-guard barricades. But the people of Afghanistan are majestic like the mountains, kind, large-hearted and follow the code of the Pashtun Walli — if you are their guest in their country, they will give their life to protect yours. (I have come to fully believe in that and that alone says a lot about them.)

This is a place that is both exciting and terrifying. Exciting because Afghanistan is a fragile country, where the legitimacy of the government has yet to be established, based on the state's ability to rule and provide basic service delivery to its people. This means that organizations like UNDP can play a role in the field of policy making, defining strategic frameworks for both poverty reduction and good governance and building sustainable institutions. It can also help to improve local-level participation and the decision making by provincial authorities at the sub-national level

so that local priorities are not ignored. On the other hand the place can be terrifying because the country stands deeply divided on ethnic lines and this is a driver of conflict and instability. Adding to this are, of course, the Taliban and insurgents who are constantly undertaking complex attacks and embedding Very Big Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED) in Kabul and the provinces. As a UNDP staff I travel in a fully armoured PRADO land cruiser whose single door weighs 150 Kg. I have to wear a 5 Kg Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). In spite of this, if this car rolls over a hidden VBIED, it will crush the vehicle like it was made of paper. So one lives in constant fear.

Can you tell us something about Afghanistan — the country and the people? In other words the different ethnic communities, the various players in today's scenario — the Government, the Taliban, the aid community, the NATO forces, who controls what areas....

The world leaders gathered in Chicago for the NATO summit of May 2012 to discuss what will be the political imperatives and logistics of troop withdrawals from Afghanistan.

An estimated 130,000 NATO troops from 50 contributing countries are scheduled to leave the landlocked country — most of them US troops — by 2014. But what kind of country will the troops be leaving behind and what will be the development and humanitarian consequences of their departure? This is a key question that organizations like UNDP are grappling with.

High on the agenda of the International Community, of which UNDP is a part, are the exit strategies and the buzz words "security transition" are often linked to this. Few are likely to be paying attention to the humanitarian consequences of troop withdrawal or addressing the human cost of their departure. Since the fall of the Taliban there have undoubtedly been enormous gains: improvement in education, job creation, infrastructure and access to basic healthcare.

But with the withdrawal of the troops, the Afghan Police, crippled in capacity to face the Taliban and insurgents, are in much need of organization and leadership. This will negatively impact the progress already achieved and

the humanitarian situation is already beginning to deteriorate. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that internal displacement has risen sharply over the past years. Women in public life have been increasingly threatened or attacked. Over 100 schools in eastern Afghanistan's Ghazni province alone have been shut down in recent weeks and in some Taliban-controlled areas "underground" schools have re-emerged — the only way girls can be educated. Many educated Afghans, the brightest hopes for the future of the country, are considering their own exit strategies.

Although the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) continues its efforts to bolster Afghan forces and gain some ground before leaving, it is hardly certain that Afghan forces will be able to hold those gains or deliver security. Just 6% of the Afghan National Army battalions are currently able to operate independently, and even these have the assistance of international advisors. The US has already announced that military funding will substantially decrease in 2015, and the possibility of the Afghan security forces fracturing is very real. Accountability also remains a key concern, particularly with regard to human rights violations, but is being ignored as ISAF seeks to hand over responsibility and withdraw.

There is also the risk of political fragmentation. The next round of presidential elections scheduled for 2014 will be critical, yet this is a largely neglected aspect of 'transition'. It is by no means clear who might replace President Hamid Karzai, and still less clear how to prevent a recurrence of the fraud and violence that marred the 2009 elections. The people of Afghanistan are tired of a military-driven development agenda and wish to graduate towards a good governance

and humanitarian-driven agenda. However, a long-term diplomatic and developmental commitment from the international community is essential if the hard-won gains of the past decade are not to be surrendered. This looks dismal, especially with the global economic crisis and global reduction in Official Development Assistance (ODA). The last thing Afghans want is for the world to forget about them once again and push the country to the brink of a doomsday scenario.

What has been the thrust of UNDP's work there? What is your role in it?

The thrust of UNDP's work rests on the New Deal (2012) and Paris Declaration frameworks focusing on statebuilding, peace building, poverty reduction, rule of law and sub-national gov-



At work in UNDP Kabul

ernance. I am a Coordination Expert for Policy and Strategy focusing mainly on Governance and Politics, Statebuilding, Aid Coordination, and Public Financial Management and Development Economics.

My key areas of work are:

Write policy and discussion papers on development assistance in Afghanistan explaining the linkages between development assistance and economic growth. I also socialize these ideas with key interest groups and stakeholders on how the international community's long term engagement

is instrumental for reconstruction and poverty reduction in Afghanistan.

I write policy and strategy papers that may help in the sustainable institutional development of key ministries drawing on the concept of just-enough governance. I analyse main trends in the provision of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan and how aid can be more effectively utilized.

I also assess the extent to which the Paris Accord, Accra Agenda for Action, Busan New Deal are being implemented and can become part of the existing national policies and strategies.

What are the most encouraging and frustrating aspects of the work?

I feel privileged to be contributing in a small way to the positive transition of a country moving from fragility to reconstruction. For me, if one wants to influence long term development, one has to be part of an area of work that brings about systemic change. Being a part of policy formulation that will improve the quality of life of people for many years to come, gives me the drive to keep going.

Security is a huge challenge and is both emotionally and physically draining. Frequent lock downs, bunker rooms, lack of movement and a sense of underlying fear of an imminent attack that never leaves you, can take a major toll on your mental health. Additionally, widespread corruption in government institutions, a patronage system and a constantly changing political and aid landscape make work very challenging. Another frustrating aspect is that though huge amounts of money are pumped into the country one is yet to see basic service delivery and tangible results.

You have been there for some time. What have you learnt about the problems of aid-driven development? Or the attempt by external agencies to reshape a country?

I have informal data for 2012 but I would



Chinook we traveled in to Kandahar

prefer to use data of 2008 to explain aid flows. Although 2008 is quite far back, aid levels have remained largely the same and if at all have increased marginally.

In 2008 — the most recent year for which complete records are publicly available — Afghanistan received USD 4.87 billion in development assistance, an amount approximately equivalent to the total received by Afghanistan in 2002, 2003 and 2004 combined, according to the OECD. Utilising OECD data, Afghanistan received 3.78% of official assistance provided to all developing countries throughout the world in 2008. In other words, Afghanistan received, on a per capita basis, nearly 10 times as much aid as the average developing country in 2008. Moreover, according to the OECD database, much of this aid was provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and Canada, with countries such as Turkey and Australia also becoming increasingly engaged in providing development assistance.

Afghanistan is completely “aid dependent” where individuals, institutions and entire states have come to rely upon external donor funding for basic needs and day-to-day operations. Aid dependence is calculated as the level of “country programmable aid” (CPA) — that which makes its way to projects or government budgets in the recipient country — as a proportion of the

country's gross national income (GNI). In Afghanistan, calculations show that aid dependency is upwards of 10% which is not a good sign as the country needs to build its own sustainable fiscal base generating sufficient revenues to take control of its affairs.

Aid has never been the solution to fixing a country. It can contribute towards rebuilding a country but cannot be the panacea. Aid money will dry up some day, and the country should be ready by then to stand up and take control. If not, it will descend once again into chaos. And UNDP works to make sure the country is ready to perform its role and responsibilities as the fiscal climate deteriorates.

How do you see the future unfolding for Afghanistan? What is the best case scenario that people in your position would like to see?



On the US military flight to Kandahar

I would like to see a just-enough governance approach applied to rebuild key line ministries to ensure that basic service delivery to the people is not discontinued. Rather than rebuilding the whole of the country by applying external, simplistic solutions of the west to an internally complex environment like Afghanistan, the focus can be to engage the people of Afghanistan in rebuilding key areas. These areas in my view would be similar to the New Deal Peace building and State building Goals (PSGs): inclusive and legitimate policy, justice for all, building economic foundations, strengthening revenue and services and improving security. The people of Afghanistan would like to see 5 key sectors operating as they are intrinsically linked to all aspects of basic service delivery and establishing a stable, reliable and legitimate government.

LIFE IN AFGHANISTAN

You had a close shave once when you were travelling undercover. Can you describe for us what happened? Any other similar moments of danger?

I was travelling from Takhar to Kunduz in a white non-armored corolla car to monitor and assess one of our projects. I had decided not to travel in a white armored car that is part of a convoy which is so much more conspicuous. Big mistake. I was wearing jeans, a white long sleeved T-Shirt and shoes as I had to walk long distances while on a field visit. I had slipped the blue pleated burkha over me and sat at the back. On the border of Kunduz which is Taliban-controlled, a group of armed insurgents stopped the car and ordered us in Dari (the official language of Afghanistan) to get out of the car. I understand and speak the language fluently. I did as requested. They shoved the AK-47 on my back and told me to move towards the field on the side of the road. They asked me to kneel at which point I did. I was crying silently and my heart was ready to explode. I had seen countless videos and read so many stories of public execution and I never thought this would happen to me. I was praying to the Mother and I just hoped if this was the end, let it be painless. However, they started an interrogation process. I was fluent in Dari and they were confused if I was an expatriate or an Afghan. The insurgents' and the Taliban's policy is to rid their country of foreigners. They said they hated foreigners and we should leave their country alone. Western culture has permeated their virgin society soiling all that was pure and holy. While the insurgents ranted all I could do was hope they would think I was Afghan and let me go. It would help that men in Afghan cultures are forbidden to peek inside the Burkha of a woman that does not belong to them. My Nike sneakers however gave me away. They asked me to make a final phone call. There was no signal but I started to pretend and fumble. Suddenly and out of nowhere, an IASF and NATO troop with tanks was passing by. They started to shoot up in the air to scare the insurgents away at which point one of them grabbed my purse and they all ran into their car and sped. I was rescued

by the troops and reached the town of Kunduz sitting on top of one of the tanks. I will never forget that moment and how I was saved because the Divine Mother is always and truly looking after us at every second.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Do you feel this quite unique environment has changed you? What is the growth you see in yourself and in the way you understand the world?

I have grown very compassionate towards the people of Afghanistan who have to struggle every day just to live. The everyday things we take for granted hold immense value for them since they come at a high price — their life. I have also professionally understood that while development goals like human equality, human rights and dignity for all, social and economic development and poverty reduction are inspiring they are not easy to achieve at all and often organizations miss the mark completely. While one alone cannot change things, one can do one's part to the best of one's ability and hope this contributes to the effort of all those who want to truly make change. I believe

the rich countries have an obligation to help the poorer ones have access to basic services and redistribute the wealth equitably so that every child has food on his plate, every household is lit by



Alongside the armoured PRADO landcruiser at the UN camp in Kabul

electricity, that a pregnant mother chooses to keep her girl child because she believes the world is a safer and better place to raise her daughter. But this takes time and progress is slow and one is discouraged, but one keeps going and every drop will make an ocean someday. ☼

Today the ideal of human unity is more or less vaguely making its way to the front of our consciousness. The emergence of an ideal in human thought is always the sign of an intention in Nature, but not always of an intention to accomplish; sometimes it indicates only an attempt which is predestined to temporary failure. For Nature is slow and patient in her methods. She takes up ideas and half carries them out, then drops them by the wayside to resume them in some future era with a better combination. She tempts humanity, her thinking instrument, and tests how far it is ready for the harmony she has imagined; she allows and incites man to attempt and fail, so that he may learn and succeed better another time. Still the ideal, having once made its way to the front of thought, must certainly be attempted, and this ideal of human unity is likely to figure largely among the determining forces of the future; for the intellectual and material circumstances of the age have prepared and almost impose it, especially the scientific discoveries which have made our earth so small that its vastest kingdoms seem now no more than the provinces of a single country.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 15: 262)

LIFE IN A UN MISSION

Babru Patnaik '86, a welfare officer posted in a UN mission in Sudan, answers our questions.

Can you describe the nature of the UN mandate and the UN missions in conflict zones?

UN peacekeeping operations are deployed on the basis of mandates from the United Nations Security Council. Their tasks differ from situation to situation, depending on the nature of the conflict and the specific challenges it presents. The nature of the peacekeeping mandate is constantly changing in keeping with the situation on the ground. Presently there are serious problems in Africa and the Arab world where UN will be opening peacekeeping missions. At present, around 8,000 Indian UN peacekeepers are deployed in nine missions across the globe including Congo, South Sudan, Liberia, UNDOF, Haiti, Lebanon, Abeyi, and Cyprus, and Côte d'Ivoire. India is one of the top troop contributing countries to the UN.

So UN workers are typically forced to work in very hostile territory.

All peacekeeping missions are situated in hostile territories where UN presence is required at all cost to save the lives of the innocent who are getting killed. UN staff, particularly civilians, during recruitment are provided a full picture of the environment, the lifestyle, the constraints, risks and threats from hostile political environments, natural disasters, etc. that they will be living with. They are made aware of every known and foreseeable circumstance that they might come across. It requires mental toughness to persevere through difficult circumstances.

Can you describe the nature of the various kinds of dangers and stress one lives with?

The security situation in these territories is not very good, so kidnapping, carjacking, hijacking,

theft, ambushes, etc are always a possibility. This stress-related work sometimes leads to violence among UN staff. Therefore, there are very strict rules on curfew hours and social gathering. All UN staff are escorted with military and police contingents while venturing out after curfew hours.

In the peacekeeping missions there is a section which is known as Staff Counselling where the Staff Counsellors attend to those who are stressed out due to various reasons. Stress relief is done through different means like healthy living, inner peace, lifestyle balance and happiness. This varies from person to person based on the nature of stress.



UN Peacekeepers in Africa

I have had an experience of theft in Sudan where I was seriously injured and was hospitalized as I took the fight in my own hands to save myself. I was also confronted by another person

in Cameroon but the situation came under control after speaking things out. Many of our UN colleagues, particularly military and police, have had the experience of being kidnapped, hijacked, etc. during patrolling.

Can you tell us a little about the nature of your job? Have you had any training for that role? And how have your years in the Ashram and the value-system here helped you in your work and to cope with your own levels of stress?

First and foremost, I owe my sincere gratitude to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, without whom I wouldn't have survived here. Though I am in an environment of danger, I am always enveloped by Mother's Grace, and no danger has ever come close to me. At the same time I am very much aware that being a product of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, I must be an example to others. The Ashram has developed a different attitude and outlook towards everything we venture into. We need to carry out and implement whatever we have learnt in the Ashram as everyone does not get such opportunities. During my three years tenure in Congo and South Sudan the management has appreciated the discipline, sincerity and honesty that I have shown through my work. We deal with employees of 100 nationalities in the mission and satisfying them is a tough assignment. I personally take this as the Mother's organization and not the UN, and perform accordingly.

My experience in travel and tourism, hotels, leisure and recreation has given me an opportunity to be recruited as a Welfare Officer where I am involved in decreasing stress levels of 18000 UN employees by conducting various evening programs, managing the gym, conducting fitness sessions, conducting tours to nearby places, etc. As these places do not have any entertainment outlet, no shopping malls or cinema halls, etc,

people need to relax through the various activities conducted by us. I am happy to see many smiling faces which is an achievement for me, but the entire credit goes to Mother and Sri Aurobindo.



Juba, Sudan: Indian United Nations (UN) peacekeepers carry the coffin of one of the five Indian peacekeepers killed during an ambush in the troubled eastern region of Jonglei, on April 10, 2013 during a funeral ceremony.

On the whole what is life like in a UN mission in conflict zones? Does it give you a sense of satisfaction?

Working and living conditions in the field vary from one location to another. All peacekeeping missions that we work in are likely to be emerging from conflict or an emergency situation. The conditions are arduous, the infrastructure is weak and electricity and clean water are often in short supply. In addition, most peace-keeping missions are categorized as "non-family", which means that family members can't join the staff member at the location. Service in the cause of peace demands both personal dedication and sacrifice but at the same time it offers real opportunities to help people and countries recover from conflict, rebuild their societies, and enjoy the benefits of peace. ❧

If man is intended to survive and carry forward the evolution of which he is at present the head and, to some extent, a half-conscious leader of its march, he must come out of his present chaotic international life and arrive at a beginning of organised united action; some kind of World-State, unitary or federal, or a confederacy or a coalition he must arrive at in the end; no smaller or looser expedient would adequately serve the purpose.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 15: 562)

J.S.A.S.A. — A WAY OF LIFE

Jayasurya Das (Jinoo) '80

The moment we pick up our Prize placed on the white soft silk, we feel a sense of pride — pride to have become a graduate of J.S.A.S.A. As we walk back, a tinge of “tristesse” prevails upon us. “Tristesse” because now the time has come to step out of the grand grounds, shelve our uniforms, say adieu to our captains. These are captains who moulded us, took care of us by not only coaching us but making us learn to love sports and play it by the rules.

We gradually changed colours from Green to Red to Blue to Khaki. We reached higher, became stronger and moved faster. As we were ushered in by the Guest house gate we were greeted by a puzzle in steel. With time the jungle gym made us tiny Tarzans. The pit beneath was a place where our imagination played with sand. Come April the crystal pool, the concrete courts, the cinder track, the lush green fields transformed into a competitive arena. The otherwise sleeping galleries reverberated with cheers and shouts not for the winners alone but for the other participants as well. The gymnasium displayed discipline of a different kind. With twists and turns and going head over heels, the gymnast created art in the air. The rhythm of one's performance on various apparatus ending with a perfect dismount showed mastery over one's body.

There were many other memorable experiences and settings. The dojo — where punctuality and perfection were the passwords; the swimming pool — a pool to test our instinct to fight, to survive and overcome the fear factor; the sea — the taste of salt and the kiss of jelly fish couldn't discourage us from leaving the luxury of the Bay of Bengal; the Road Race — the sweltering heat, a wet sponge on the face, a pinch of glucose, and an applauding cheerleader refreshed us on the road.

The shrill whistle, the thundering voice calling ‘Rassemblement’, ‘Tête gauche’, ‘Garde à vous’ and ‘Au repos’; the fluttering sound of the wind in the flag, our march beating the track with the

men in white playing the “Bridge on the River Kwai” still echoes and re-echoes in the mind.

Then the finale as the curtain comes down with drills and dances on the grass shining green for the ‘soirée spéciale’ of 2nd December.

We remember the weekends when the make-shift screen (now wall) spoke at intervals (due to censoring). The sand pricked us, the sky played spoil-sport, but nevertheless we waited anxiously for the Saturday night show. Mind you, we were blessed not to have the indulgence of cable connections then. When the show was over, finding the night still young, we ventured into the darkness to be with the stars, moon, tea & bread. The Second River and the Lake Estate loved playing host to us. The water whispered, the constellations blinked, we heard the sound of silence. Before the break of dawn we sneaked back to the real world.

Come Sundays and holidays, we literally mobbed Dada's Library. The hottest item was table-football. Those who could not show their might on the football field took thrill in not leaving the table for the juniors looking on; it was the same with all the board games. In the Playground, childhood games like marbles, hide and seek, seven stones and croquet could be challenging and mentally stimulating.

We celebrated events like the football World Cup, tennis Grand Slams and the Olympics by cutting and pasting posters of the champions on the soft board in the School.

Post 2nd December all roads led to the Gingee fort. It was Picnic time.

How unaware we were of our being nurtured in a divine cocoon! Crawling out we come to realize the strength and love of that protection. Now as we play the game of life, whether we win or lose, we know that Her protection is with us.

We let go of all egoism, play calmly and get in touch with the more tangible sense of the inner self. *So friends — let's go play! ☘*



NORMANDIE REUNION

Vilas '70 tells us about the alumni get-together at Tapovan, Normandie on 13-14 July 2013.

Yogi said: "It was the best few days of my stay in France". That sums it all up.

The first ones to arrive (as always!) was the group from London. Next we picked up Yogi who had travelled all the way from Toulouse. That evening Devdutt and Varsha came with Vibha and her sons, and Anil Sharma who had just arrived from Pondy that morning. Next came Amal and Alo with little Aurelie, the youngest amongst us. And so on, until by Saturday lunch-time we were all together, a group of about 20 — a smaller group this time than usual, because apparently a lot of people didn't get my mail in time, or at all — my apologies for that!

Being a small group, we were able to pile into the few cars available and go out for several outings — to nearby Chateau de Cany, and then for a picnic to Etretat with its breathtaking cliffs; the other breath-taking thing was





enjoying frozen mango juice... all the way from Pondy to Etretat, courtesy of Amal.

For me, it was an absolute delight to watch Yogi and Aurelie together; she constantly clung to him, as though they were old long-lost friends. Yogi was infinite patience, infinite love, ever ready to play with her, to tease her, teach her, entertain her, ready with new games and new tricks, to such an extent that I warned him "If anyone is looking for a new A5 captain, they know whom to catch."

On the first evening, Kiran Vyas had organised a musical performance in the Salle Menuhin by Marianne, a folk singer from Belgium. The next evening there was a guitar performance by Djeya. After that, late at night, we had a group meditation with a projection by Devdutt of Sudha Sundaram's DVD "106 photos of the Mother", ending with "Gloire à Toi" in the Mother's voice.

Some of us participated briefly in the "Semaine enfants" preparatory to the next week's event at Tapovan, answering questions from the participating parents, animateurs and students about the unique education system in the Ashram school.



Kiran had several other surprises in stock for us. The first was that he had found perfectly-named roses for us to plant in memory of our *rencontre*. In one corner of Tapovan, he has created le Jardin Mandala – planted in the shape of the Mother’s symbol. At the centre is a sculpture of a stylised lotus. In the 16 petals, different flowers are planted creating a riot of colours and fragrances. That is where, in the 4 petals, Kiran Vyas, Mounnou, Kusum and I planted a deep red rose, appropriately named: “Dame de Coeur” and in the 12 petals, the others planted a rose called “Golden Shower”, to represent the Golden Chain. Kiran Vyas read out Sri Aurobindo’s poem: “Rose of God” and we all read together the poem “Invitation”.

The other surprise was a huge magnificent bonfire. This time, we didn’t have slokas or dancing or Ashram songs, but just stood around enjoying the beauty of the flames rising high in the night.

Merci to “l’équipe Tapovan” — ever-smiling, ever-busy and ever-helpful — who gave us all such a wonderful time.

I end with Kiran Vyas’s gracious words: “For the Tapovan team, the presence of the Ashram students was a gift from the Mother.”



Nous sommes tous réunis autour du symbole et nous avons planté des rosiers à chaque pétale du symbole de Douce Mère.

Parmi nous, il y avait Kiran bhai, Vilas, Mounnou, Kusum, Indira, Vibha et ses enfants, Malavika, Dharmistha, Chikubhai, Anil, Nagapraveen, Samarth, Aurobrata, Chaitanya, Yogendra, Rahul, Amal, Alo, Aurélie, Devdutt, Varsha et moi-même.

Nous étions comme des fleurs de toutes les couleurs dans le jardin de Tapovan. Le soleil était au rendez-vous, le ciel nous enveloppait dans sa voile bleu-azur.

À la tombée du jour, nous avons assisté à un gigantesque feu du Seigneur (Homa) venu de l'époque védique, qui nous a transporté des milliers d'années en arrière au temps des Védas.

Shantona '78



ROMEO AND JULIET – A REVIEW

Shyama '85

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare's best known tragedies but its plot is often only vaguely known. The details of the story are as follows: Two prominent families of a small city who don't see eye to eye on matters and who would draw daggers at the slightest provocation, have the misfortune of two of their children, one from either house, fall in love with each other. This creates sparks of hope in the heart of those (including a kindly friar) who wish to see an antagonism of long standing come to an end. But life, which is a big gamble, would



Romeo and Juliet in love

have it otherwise. The uncle of the girl in love seeks to murder her lover. The latter, not believing in his intent, refuses to defend himself and thereby forces his friend, a member of a very noble and influential family of the city, to fight in defense of his honor and his person. He is on the point of killing the uncle when the protagonist intervenes. Consequence — the friend dies, the lover challenges the uncle and kills him and gets banished from the city, turning matters from bad to worse.

The well-meaning friar asks the protagonist to accept his banishment so that in future he may reunite with his love. The young man leaves the city. His lover, in despair, goes to the friar seeking help for a reunion with her beloved. The friar has a brilliant plan. He asks the young maiden to take a potion which will put her to sleep and let

her family believe that she was dead. The friar's plan is that when her "dead" body is taken to the family tomb he will send word to her lover asking him to meet her there, so that he himself could unite them in a holy union.

But as life's irony would have it, the friar's

message does not reach the young man, instead the news of the death of his beloved reaches him. He rushes to the tomb to verify the news, and reaches there before the girl wakes up, or the friar's coming. Seeing his loved one dead, he kills himself. The damsel waking finds her lover dead, and sees no reason to live any longer, therefore she kills herself. The friar finds out that his message



Mercutio dies



Opening of the play

has failed to reach the young man, and he rushes to the tomb only to find the two lovers dead. The

PARTICIPANTS SPEAK

This was the first time I acted in a big play. It was great fun to work with different people of different ages and different talents, seeing them as people I know along with seeing them as characters from the play. The play became so much a part of me that during and even after practice, I would keep saying some of the lines in my head or reliving a scene. — **Meera**.

Romeo and Juliet was, in one word, an opportunity — one that I welcomed and was grateful for. I have always marvelled at the prospect of playing somebody other than myself, and my first experience of it happened to find me in the shoes of a rather important character in one of the most well-known classical stories ever. Well, I enjoyed ferreting out the emotions in me that best clothed this briefly borrowed body. — **Priyanka**



To participate in a play that is well known around the world is exciting for any actor. From day one of production, *Romeo and Juliet* has been a learning experience for me. From learn-

ing by heart massive passages to exploring intense emotions. I have felt it's a play that has helped me understand myself better. Every play leaves an impression on every actor and that can have a positive or negative reaction within him or her. For me it has had an effect on both levels, pushing me a step higher as I

have better understood the difference between lust, love and similar emotions. It has also pulled me a step lower as I explored a darker side of me to express intense emotions. All in all, I have enjoyed the whole process and am eagerly waiting for the next production by Nancy-di. — **Shubham**

friar reveals to both the families the truth of the tragedy. The elders of both the families realize that such a misfortune would never have crossed their path had they put aside their antagonism and not opposed the two lovers.

A story that tells us that enmity most often brings more harm than good to people. It blinds us, drives us to desperate deeds, and turns our reason away from foresight, patience and wisdom.

The other aspect of the story is the emphasis on fate, destiny, or call it by any name, and its role in our lives. However much man thinks or plans his life, there are unseen forces that overrule it.



Friar with Romeo and Juliet

Over the ages men have given these forces varied names, but the simple truth is that man is not in control of his life.

Quite frankly, this play did take me a little by surprise. I had no prior experience in acting, nor did I have any intention of joining this play. But I ended up having a wonderful experience as I stepped into the shoes of Mercutio. I felt that he was the only character who had the capacity to bring a spirit of liveliness to a rather intense story.

All in all, despite all the drawbacks and delays the crew faced, I can say that I am very satisfied with the play that was put up.

I am glad that I took part in this great adventure, and I am convinced that memories will stay with me forever. — **Mritunjay**.

The entire journey through the play enriched my life not only as an actor but as a person too. Shakespeare's language is so beautiful and some lines are so true even today that it's a pleasure learning them by 'heart'. — **Brihas**

Romeo and Juliet is perhaps the most widely known play in the world. It has been performed in vastly different cultures often, as we did in

the local dress. The widespread fascination for it may lie in the fact that in every culture there are rival factions whose discord taints or even destroys the purity of the harmony and love in the community. This strikes a deep chord in many of us.

Developing this play was a wonderful and challenging experience as have all the plays I have done, each in its own way. I have great admiration for the many people who made the play possible, from the actors to the musicians to those working on the set and costumes, to the light and sound people, to all those who accommodated me in so many ways in the practical necessities of such a venture. Such good

will and helpfulness are very moving to me. I believe that all the effort makes for an integral education for the students, involving the mind, the vital, the physical and for some the element of offering to the Divine. This and the working contact with such wonderful people is the reason that I continue to love playing my part in the adventure. — **Nancy (Director)**



Nurse, Juliet and Lady Capulet



Feud between Lord Montague and Lord Capulet

Such a story could have taken place anywhere and in any age. This is the beauty of a universal story and this is the story of *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, a dramatist who tackles through his plots the play of the forces of life. No wonder that Sri Aurobindo put him on the list of seers along with Valmiki, Bankim, Goethe and others. This year Nancy worked on *Romeo and Juliet* with the children and presented it on June 24th and 26th.

In the play she experimented with very contemporary costumes for the characters. I mention this aspect of the show in particular as it helped the children to be at ease on stage, an ease tending towards being casual on stage, and this is not easy to achieve. The other advantage of

Here is a list of the cast and other participants.

Cast and Helpers of *Romeo and Juliet*

Kripanshu	-	Prince
Anshul	-	Paris
Pushan	-	Lord Montague
Arjun	-	Lord Capulet
Shubham	-	Romeo
Auopraveen	-	Tybalt
Mritunjoy	-	Mercutio
Deeptendu	-	Benvolio
Brihas	-	Friar Lawrence
Maya	-	Lady Montague
Sudipta	-	Lady Capulet
Priyanka	-	Juliet
Meera	-	Nurse

Costumes

Auoposée

Musicians

Basab-da and Latzo

Shreyas, Sayan, Shubhankar

Sanjana, Eshna, Mritunjoy, Utsarg, Tvara, Sanchari

Fight scenes choreographed by

Suman, Sukrut



Behind the scenes



Mercutio

this experiment was that we saw Shakespeare as the universal story-teller, or as Sri Aurobindo puts it, the

A very enjoyable drama. On the whole the students as amateur actors were good. I end by summing up the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in one line from Savitri : "Trampled by the violent misdeeds of time." ❧

seer. I think it helped the audience to grow. Any piece of good art or cultural activity should make us grow. This experiment leads us towards appreciating something by breaking our usual boundaries, which is a growth.






Musicians and dancers at the ball



QUIZ TIME!



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

1. In which volume of the Collected Works of the Mother would you find her speak about the phenomenon of several people simultaneously receiving the same thought without having any connection with each other? 
2. From which French city did the Mother take the ship to come to India in 1914? 
3. In which year was the Ashram Theatre inaugurated?
4. Who was chosen by the Mother to be the director of the School when she started it? 
5. What is the spiritual significance of the button-like red flower which grows on a thorny bush?
Clue 1 – It has only two petals.
Clue 2 – You will find a variety of these bushes near the gate of the Ashram Main Building.

ADVERTISEMENT RATES FOR *THE GOLDEN CHAIN*

In an effort to make *The Golden Chain* magazine more economically sustainable we have, for the past two years, been taking advertisements. We invite and request all those who are in a position to put their companies' ads in *The Golden Chain* to come forward and help us in this manner.

The format of the ads is the same as those in the Bulletin — a quote from the Mother or Sri Aurobindo at the top and the company's logo and other information below.

Our advertisement rates are as follows:

FULL PAGE FOR ONE YEAR (FOUR INSERTIONS): RS 6000

HALF PAGE FOR ONE YEAR (FOUR INSERTIONS): RS 3000

Devotion is not utterly fulfilled till it becomes action and knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo



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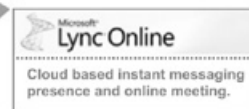
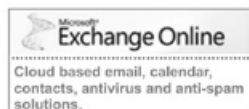
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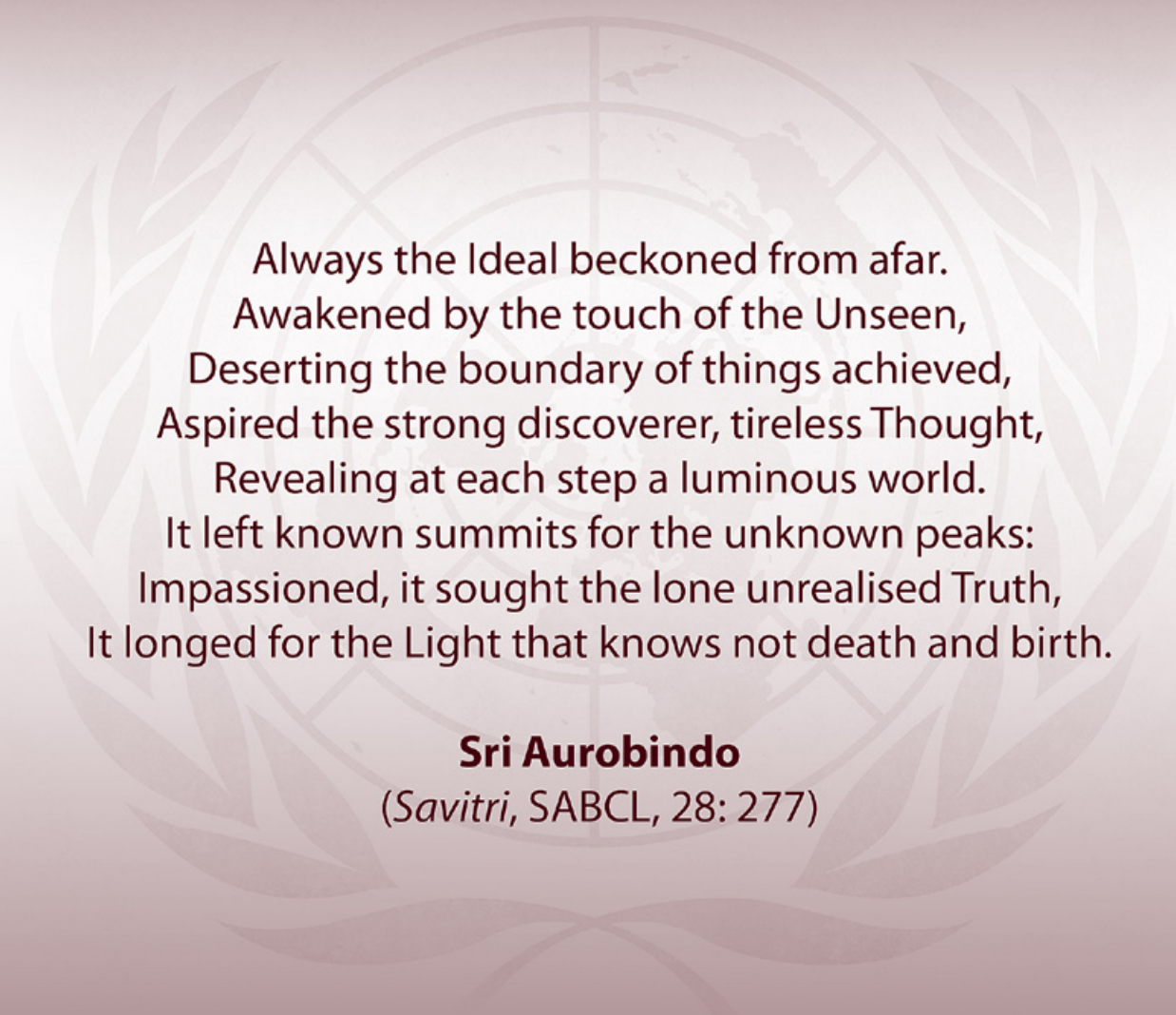
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Always the Ideal beckoned from afar.
Awakened by the touch of the Unseen,
Deserting the boundary of things achieved,
Aspired the strong discoverer, tireless Thought,
Revealing at each step a luminous world.
It left known summits for the unknown peaks:
Impassioned, it sought the lone unrealised Truth,
It longed for the Light that knows not death and birth.

Sri Aurobindo
(*Savitri*, SABCL, 28: 277)