

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



## First Flight

A SCIENCE EXHIBITION WITH A DIFFERENCE



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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*The Golden Chain*

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### On the Cover:

The science projects displayed by students during their  
exhibition titled First Flight.

## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana Panda '79

**1** 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013. Forty years ago on this date the Mother left her body.

I was a few weeks away from my fourteenth birthday. I was then living in Dortoir, the boarding which used to be within the Playground compound. Parul-di and Kokila-ben used to look after us. In those days children who lived in the boardings did not go back to their parents during the holidays. But that year quite a few had gone out. 18<sup>th</sup> November was a Sunday. My friend Bitasta and I had planned to go for Judo class at 7 o'clock in the morning. As we had a lot of free time during the holidays Josef, our Judo teacher, was holding classes on Sunday mornings. I had asked Koki (Kokila-ben) to wake me up at six.

I remember so clearly, being woken up from my sleep that Sunday morning. I opened my eyes and thought, "How I wish I had not joined the Sunday morning Judo classes. Now I have to get up and get ready." It being a November morning the air was quite chilly. I wanted to roll over and sleep a little more.

"Wake up, wake up," Koki was saying and she stood there until I got out of bed. Then she took my hand and led me to the verandah and asked me to wait there. A few minutes later she woke Bitasta up and brought her to the verandah. Sleepy-eyed, we looked at her. Why was she asking us to stand at the verandah when we were supposed to go for a Judo class? Then I looked at the clock under the window of the projector room. It was only half past five.

"There will be no judo class this morning," said Koki. "There is something I must tell you." There was a silence in which we looked at her in utter surprise. Koki put her arms around our shoulders and said in a gentle voice, "The Mother has left her body."

"What?" we asked, totally confused.

"The Mother has left her body. They have brought her down to the Meditation Hall so we will all go and do pranam to her for the last time." Koki's words didn't make any sense to me. "Since you are the two oldest girls I woke you up first. Go and get ready while I wake the others up."

I thought, "How can this be? This is impossible. Am I still sleeping and dreaming all this?"

In a short while all the girls got ready and we all walked down to the Ashram with Koki. There was already a long line which we joined and slowly moved closer to the Meditation Hall.

When I finally came close to the couch I saw the Mother but it wasn't at all the same person I used to see on my birthdays. It was just her outer body. The smile with which she always greeted us was not there. I had no desire to stand there and look at her, her eyes closed and her smile gone. This was not the Mother that I knew.

In the days that followed we lived in a strange atmosphere. Sorrow, confusion, a total change of our daily activities made us lose our usual balanced routine. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, I stood on the terrace in front of Navajat-ji's room, exactly opposite the Samadhi, and watched the whole ceremony. As rose petals were scattered by Nolini-da and André-da at the end I remember sobbing uncontrollably.

Since that November day we have learnt to find the Mother within our hearts. And every day we realize that we can never understand her fully. How she worked, who she really was, what she did for our little world and for the whole of humanity while she was in her human body, we will never fully grasp with the mind. In this issue we bring you some first-hand narrations which show us the depth and the breadth of her work.

All we can say is, "To Thee our infinite gratitude". ☸



# FIRST FLIGHT

*Vikas '02 tells us about a new kind of Science Exhibition organised by the students.*

The energy in the Hall of Harmony was palpable. The various project stations had become beehives of activity where students had something unique to share and learn. Young and old, all listened with rapt attention, joy and wonder as the various teams introduced their projects. The science exhibition, in the last week of September this year, was the culmination of a two month-long process in which science projects were conceived, discussed, designed, made, tested, fine-tuned, beautified and finally demonstrated in action.

Aptly named “First Flight”, this exhibition was unique in many ways. It was a students’ initiative, with teachers playing the role of facilitators and mentors. It began, when some students felt a lacuna in the way science was being studied at SAICE. They wanted to go beyond the regular teacher-guided experiments to a more hands-on approach where they could create projects of their choice in different fields of science. These when made to work, would spontaneously spark

the curiosity of anyone who saw them and demonstrate the principles of science in action going beyond what is normally covered in textbooks.

For the creators of the science projects it was an occasion to understand the theory behind the successful realization of their ideas, and allow them to explore in depth, branches of knowledge that don’t form a part of the ‘science course’. In the process of creating the projects they would also realize that many simplifying assumptions in science are good only at an introductory level and need to be reconsidered because there are various engineering challenges that have to be overcome so that projects work in the real world.

To catalyse innovative thinking the organisers urged their fellow students to not simply ‘cut, copy and paste’ a science project from the internet and follow a step-by-step approach to complete it. While they could be inspired by ideas they had to bring in some original thinking, work within the available resources and materials and



Vibrant Hall of Harmony

document the process so that important lessons learnt are recorded for future reference. At the end of the exhibition out of 14 team projects, 7 achieved their objectives, 4 worked out partially and 3 didn't work out or reach a presentable state due to conceptual deficiency, and resource unavailability.

What follows is a brief description of the projects, along with the Eureka moment and the most fun moment for each project.

## MODEL AIRCRAFT

**1. Gyrocopter:** Suman, Karthik, Maya and Tharan built a prototype Gyrocopter, which is essentially a flying machine without wings, with freely rotating horizontal helicopter-like blades shaped into an aerofoil and a propeller at the back. As the gyrocopter moves forward, the wind striking the blades makes them rotate and generates a lift on each of the three blades. The rotor is not motorized.



Visitors step aside as Suman initiates the maiden flight of the Gyrocopter

*Eureka Moment:* The first trial run of the gyrocopter. They had no clue about the tremendous thrust generated by the motor. In trying to control the gyrocopter Suman cut his finger.

*Fun Moment:* Bringing the whole science exhibition to a standstill during the trial runs across the Hall of Harmony.



▲ Manoj-da feels the lift force generated by the quadcopter. ► The 'Ostrich' sits on the galleries as it waits for its turn to fly.



**2. Quad Copter:** An autonomous four-rotor aircraft. It is a popular Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) used by the Army for surveillance. Also featured in the movie *Three Idiots*. This aircraft, in the shape of a cross with rotors at the four ends, was a beautiful structure of complex circuitry controlled by the Arduino micro-controller — a favourite among electronics hobbyists. The programming of the Arduino chip was done by Pranav while the body frame and electronic circuit was assembled by the rest of the team — Sayan, Snehankit, Chinmay and Shreyas.

*Eureka Moment:* After months of relentless efforts, the first test flight of the quad-copter was most memorable. Anxious and excited, the team gathered on the School's lawn for the tense moment of truth. A crowd of curious onlookers had gathered when the aircraft was powered on. The propellers gradually gained speed and after a breathless pause, the copter shot up in the air and was restrained from its skyward flight thanks to Pranav's timely reaction.

*Fun Moment:* While contemplating a suitable name for their quad-copter, after long moments of futile brainstorming one of the teammates, alluding to the fact that their aircraft had not yet taken off, exclaimed, let's call it "Ostrich — the flightless bird!"



## THE JOY OF CREATING

*The organisers of the "Science Fair", Mukunda, Pranav, Suman & Vinay share their experience.*

The young mind holds the power to change the future. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, began working on it at 18. Louis Braille began working on his alphabet at 16. Thomas Edison sparked off his work on the light bulb at 14. Hence, to encourage the students to make something, to unleash the inventor in each one, and for the sheer joy of creating, a "Science Fair" was organized this year.

It all began thus:

Eager to build something, some of us approached our teachers and conveyed to them our long cherished wish of working on science-oriented projects. The proposal was whole-heartedly welcomed and we were asked to go ahead with the idea.

Unlike other science fairs, here the focus was on creating and innovating rather than demonstrating concepts of physics or chemistry. Nevertheless, this was a great opportunity to apply what we had learnt and learn what we hadn't.

We were hoping that at least 20 odd students would sign up. But when we introduced the Science Fair to the students of EAVP4, 5 and 6 and

asked whether anyone would like to join, the number surpassed our expectation. More than 50 hands shot up in the air!

The four of us who had taken the initiative, along with a number of teachers, began working on the structure of the Science Fair. This included deciding on the selection of projects, grouping the participants, contacting individuals who could be of help, coordinating with

Ashram departments, arranging for tools, materials and creating a space to work.

A bulletin board was set up where one could find the details and updates about the Fair, and read interesting articles pertaining to the activity from time to time. Students were asked to pin

up their project ideas on the board and include their names under the project that appealed to them. So every day, new project ideas appeared on the board and teams spontaneously formed around them.

A total of 14 heterogeneous teams worked on projects that were varied in nature and complexity. The projects were no doubt ambitious in nature. So much so that experts like Kalya (Aurelec) and Kumar exclaimed that we were attempting to complete two-year projects in



## ELECTRONICS

**3. Camera Trap:** A passionate wildlife enthusiast and photographer, Sanjay wanted to convert an ordinary point-and-shoot camera into a camera that captured an animal in

Sanjay rejoices after the first successful trial of the camera trap.

Nature after it was activated by a motion sensor. While the idea seemed simple, figuring out how to open the camera screws took 3 days! There were multiple points on the electronic circuits whose roles had to be figured out before the passive infra-red (PIR) motion sensor could be connected. Here Pranav, the electronics hobbyist, 'came into the picture'. He and Sanjay discovered that when a picture is taken, the camera has a default delay time before it is ready to take the next picture; this would mean that simultaneous pictures triggered by the multiple motions wouldn't be captured.

*Eureka Moment:* Figuring out the multiple

two months! Yet our teachers opted to give us a chance to get started with our projects and we were all confident about succeeding.

Working in the School in the evenings was a wonderful experience. The Old Hall of Harmony was converted into our headquarters and the teams worked in adjoining classrooms. There were days when several teams flocked in and intently worked on their projects. On such occasions, one could literally feel the intensity and the enthusiasm buzzing in the air.

Working on one's own has its advantages but working in a team is quite another story. Teamwork was an essential component of the Science Fair. A team is a coming together of capabilities, energies, intellects. But stronger the steed, harder it is to bridle it. As team leaders, keeping everyone focused and motivated all the time, was quite a challenge. This was part of the learning process and, of course, the fun in the Fair.

Having taken up challenging projects, our journey was not all rosy. Mistakes and difficulties were frequent companions. Hence, we had to constantly research, reason and resolve. We overcame frustration with patience, and fought

despair with our determination.

Besides learning practical skills and developing qualities, we progressed academically also. Here are some observations that show this: Students working on the gyrocopter and the quadcopter covered the basics of rotational dynamics with Jagdish-bhai (teacher in Knowledge) to better understand the functioning of their projects. Having thus seen a practical application of the concept, when they covered the same concept in their regular physics class, they

could grasp it much faster than the others. Sanjay, who is more inclined towards wild-life than towards the sciences, began taking active interest in electronics after making his "Camera Trap" in the Science Fair. Some students familiarized themselves with Gann



chart, flowchart and other tools for better time management.

Organizing and participating in the science fair was an unforgettable experience. Every little effort was worth the final outcome. There could be no greater reward than this joy of creating! We hope that this event is organized again in the coming years and continues to nurture creativity and love for science in students.

trigger points on the electronic circuit. This was the defining moment for it meant that the project was feasible.

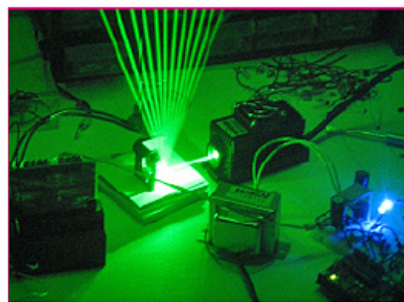
*Fun Moment:* Capturing unique expressions of visitors immediately after briefly electrocuting them!

**4. Laser Harp:** Pushan, Vinay, Priyanka and Rishav made an electronic musical instrument that combined sound and light to create stunning effects. It was basically an Arduino controlled 'harp' with LASER beams which when cut with a reflective surface produced music..

*Eureka Moment:* When they succeeded in pro-

ducing sound for the first time while cutting the laser beam just two days before the exhibition.

*Fun Moment:* Randomly playing music on the laser harp after the Eureka moment.



Inside the Laser Harp



The Bat-pod

**5. Athletics Timer:** Smaran and Mudit had the idea of creating an automatic timing system for races wherein a radio transmitter fixed on the chest of a runner triggers a microwave receiver at the finish line and the timing is fed into a computer. Because of the inability to adequately shield the microwaves, they couldn't complete the project.

**6. Basketball Digital Scoreboard:** Sandeepan, Aniket, Surya and Rajaxmi worked hard on designing a digital Basketball scoreboard with LEDs conceived to improve the visibility of the score after dark. While they got it to work in a simulation software, they couldn't create a working model because of the unavailability of certain chips. Sandeepan hopes to work on an Arduino-based version of it in the next Science Exhibition.

**7. Maglev Train Model:** Narottam, Mira, Nishtha, Utsarg M and Kedar, who intended to create a model of a magnetically levitating train, worked on experiments in electromagnetic levitation but couldn't create a large model, because of unavailability of specialized magnetic materials.

## MECHANICAL

**8. Bat-pod:** Sukrut, Suman and Vinay were inspired to create a working wooden replica of Batman's impressive motorcycle. The unique feature about this vehicle was that its front wheel and fork together were part of a sphere. The front wheel rotated both forward, backward while the fork rotated laterally by a motorized mechanism. Thus the bat-pod could move forward, backwards, sideways or rotate on the spot. Most of the work on this project was done during free periods, Sundays and between 4 and 5 before group at the Carpentry section.

*Eureka Moment:* Seeing it work for the first time after a whole afternoon spent on assembling it at the Carpentry section.

*Fun Moment:* Laughing at the accidental mistakes while making the Bat-Pod i.e. force drilling with a blunt drill-bit and burning the wood instead of drilling it!

Watching the kids maneuvering the Bat-pod across the Hall of Harmony.

**9. Rolling Ball Clock:** Saptarshi, Shubhanekar, Praktan, Shubhangini and Vikas worked on this project which was inspired by the amazing mechanical masterpiece that kept time in the Ashram Library. The big difference however was



Sunlit Rolling Ball Clock standing tall at 6 feet



## A NEW BEGINNING

*Purushottam Agarwal '80 who was closely involved in the Science Exhibition shares his thoughts.*

For the participants, as well as for the viewers, the 'Science Fair' was an enlightening and fulfilling experience. Many who came to see were curious to know how the idea was set rolling.

Initially some students just wanted to make something they had long dreamt of doing but never had the opportunity. They termed it a 'science fair' and presented the idea to Manojda. The school welcomed the proposal and fully supported this wave of enthusiasm. The students were provided with the necessary resources and every effort was made by the teachers to create a conducive environment.

This science fair project was conceptualized and organized by the students themselves. About 45 students from E4, E5, E6 and *Knowledge* participated. The students worked in teams, a few worked independently and some even participated in more than one project. There were a total of 14 projects. They covered the fields of chemistry, physics, electronics, computer programming, engineering and renewable energy. This activity was carried out in their free time and at off-school hours. The students, all along, coped well and did not compromise with their regular classes, home-work and sports.

This venture, initially envisaged to last for a month, was later extended. Finally, the projects were presented in the Hall of Harmony in a two-day exhibition.

A core group of students, apart from working on their individual projects, had to visualise, organize and coordinate the event. They had to look into the infrastructural requirements, purchases, procurement of parts, and contact experts in different fields who could be of help. They took an active interest and in the process developed leadership qualities and learnt about organizing an event.

A few of the projects undertaken by the students turned out to be difficult in nature. But this only compelled them to study and research. Some of the projects are normally studied at higher levels — in college or university.

As students of various age groups were teamed together, this posed certain challenges for the projects. Some team leaders often had to study in advance and learn new concepts and principles pertaining to their project before explaining them to the others. It was a delight to witness these intense theoretical sessions between the team leaders and the other team mates.

Once the practical work started, time and again the students faced problems that were overlooked earlier or not anticipated. In spite of facing all sorts of difficulties, they, with their passion and will to succeed, perseverance, common sense, gut feeling and trial-and-error approach, paved the road ahead.

A suggested list of skill-sets and qualities was put up on the *bulletin board*, with the view that students may, with conscious effort, acquire these during the process. From the list, a few skill-sets highlighted were flow charting, breaking activities in parts, prioritizing tasks and time management. Some of the qualities aimed for were patience, concentration, team-work and leadership. And indeed, one could see that some dedicated students succeeded in acquiring some of these qualities.

The 'Science Fair' experiment shows that the knowledge and experience gained through such projects can be complementary to the regular academic studies. Moreover, it could inspire many youngsters to take interest in science subjects and come up with innovative ideas.

While thoroughly enjoying the projects, the methodology adopted and skills acquired by the students could become a foundation for their future studies and growth.



that instead of using steel balls that rolled down wooden ramps, this unconventional clock used tennis balls that rolled down PVC rails and resulted in a final structure that was an impressive 4 feet long, 2 feet wide and 6 feet tall!

*Eureka Moment:* After the assembly of the 17 metres of double PVC rails, using about 35 metres of PVC pipes (length of our Swimming Pool!) when they successfully tested the rolling of the tennis balls from the highest level to the bottom-most level for the first time.

*Fun Moment:* Looking at the wide-eyed amazement and disbelief in the eyes of 7-year old Sudhanshu from Avenir as he followed the rolling tennis balls. At the end of it he simply gasped as he could not contain his joy!

## RENEWABLE ENERGY

**10. Waste Plastic Pyrolysis:** Kunal, Lalatika, Anwasha, and Arundhati worked on increasingly complex pyrolysis experiments which converted waste plastic into fuel by thermochemical decomposition.

*Eureka and Fun Moment:* Getting the first drops of oil.

**11. Wind Turbine:** Praveen, Pratik, Sanchari &



▲ Kunal explains the process of pyrolysis. ▼ The majestic wind turbine in action



◀ Portable Bio-gas Plant.  
▲ Akshay explains how his biogas plant is supposed to work!

Akanksha, began with the idea of harnessing the wind that blows on

Knowledge terrace to charge a UPS battery. However, they had to scale down their project and created an impressive wind turbine that powered LEDs.

*Eureka Moment:* Seeing the wind turbine spin really fast when they blasted it with wind, blown from a giant Almonaro Fan.

*Fun Moment:* Holding and controlling the wind turbine under the ceiling fan like a Sudarshan chakra!

**12. Bio-Gas Plant:** Akshay worked on this small-scale bio-gas digester that converted kitchen waste and cow-dung into a kitchen resource by bacteria in the waste. He sportingly stuck on to his project till the end even though he was always at the receiving end of jokes from young and old alike.

*Eureka Moment:* The last 10 seconds of the exhibition, late in the afternoon, Akshay produced flammable gas for the first time! Before that in the language of the students his bio-gas plant was only 'gassing' i.e. not working.

*Most Fun Moment (for others!):* Watching Akshay clean the school terrace after all the fermented gobar flew out due to the immense pressure of the gas inside the tank!



## WATER

**13. Rope Washer Pump:** Mukunda, Dibya, Debika made this simple home-made mechanism to lift 10 litres of water to a height of 3 metres in a minute by using a rope fixed with plastic bottle necks. They were originally inspired by the need of the aquarium section which requires fresh sea-water every 6 weeks. This kind of low-cost device is used for drawing water from wells in some developing countries.

*Eureka Moment:* Having a sudden shower under the pipe spout after pulling the rope a few rounds without any apparent sign of water actually being lifted.

*Fun Moment:* Watching the Avenir and Progrès children gleefully pulling the rope and pumping out water.



◀ Close fitting cut bottle necks passed through a pipe via a water container to lift water. ▼ Rope-washer pumpers enjoy the moment as they succeed in lifting water for the first time.



Debika working on and demonstrating the self-watering pot.

**14. Self-watering Plant:** Debika converted an ordinary paint bucket to a pot that watered the plant inside by capillary action. An efficient method of watering plants where the water is introduced from the bottom, allowing the water to soak upwards to the plant through capillary action.

*Eureka Moment:* The entire work process was most enjoyable as she learnt to handle tools for the first time.

While science projects are often judged by how successfully they work, the real intangible benefits lie in how they promote aspects of project management in the students and qualities such as patience, perseverance, determination and cheerfulness in the face of failure. In this respect the Science Exhibition was a success and also brought great joy and nostalgia among the older generations of visitors and sparked an interest in science and inspired the future.

From a teacher's perspective, the science exhibition refreshed our work skills and made us experience ignorance, like a student encountering a subject for the first time. It also widened the scope of the subject beyond the regular course and provided yet another informal setting during the day to interact with the students. ☼



# THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT

The President of India visited Sri Aurobindo Ashram on September 25, 2013. He was received at the Ashram by Manoj-da and the other trustees. After paying floral tributes at the Samadhi, the President visited Sri Aurobindo's room.

Thereafter at about 4.30 p.m., he addressed the students and teachers of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE).

In welcoming the President, Manoj-da remarked about his distinguished career that had gained the respect and admiration of all and thanked him for having taken the time out from his busy schedule to visit the Ashram. He then requested him to address the students and teachers of SAICE.

The President in his speech highlighted how Sri Aurobindo stands as an example of national and international harmony because of which visitors come to this place in quest of peace and knowledge. He said he hoped both the public and the administration would do everything possible to safeguard the special ambience and inner tranquility of this distinctive place. He further recognized that Sri Aurobindo's vision was full of hope, as according to him, man's ignorance will change into knowledge and his weakness will be metamorphosed into strength.

Prof. Manoj Das proposed the vote of thanks and mentioned about the President's political stature which enabled him to play a key role in many aspects of government and political life and also the fact that he had been voted the best Finance Minister in the world in 1984.

The function at the school started and ended with all the students and teachers singing the

National Anthem to the accompaniment of the Ashram's brass band.

The President was accompanied during his visit to the Ashram and the School by the Hon'ble Union Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office, Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Thiru V. Narayanasamy, Chief Minister of Puducherry Thiru N. Rangasamy and Member of Rajya Sabha Thiru P. Kannan.

A programme of songs, organized by Ratnadi, was performed but as there was very little time these songs were sung after the President had left.

The President also attended the Convocation ceremony at the Pondicherry University where three of our former students received gold medals. It is a matter of great pride for us that

Priyobroto Shoo ('09) received two gold medals from the President's hands: one for his MA degree in French (translation and interpretation) and the other for being the best Post Graduate student of the Pondicherry University. The other two students who received medals from the VC on the same day were Shammi Sen '09 for Sanskrit and Abhijit Biswas '09 for International Studies.

The President stayed overnight at the Raj Nivas. Before dinner a cultural programme was presented which was attended by many eminent citizens of Pondicherry. Lalit Verma had organized it and he had chosen the theme Dravida-Utkala-Banga. At the beginning there was a Bharat Natyam performance. This was followed by an Odissi dance performance by Sangeeta Dash and her student. At the end there were songs in the Baul style sung by Lakshman Das Baul.



## THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

It is a joy for me to be here — the confluence of an extra-ordinary past, a promising present and a significant future. Ancient Puducherry is believed to have been the abode of Sage Agastya who, coming from the North made the South his abode, thereby symbolising the unity of India's quest for the purpose of life.

If that is the glorious past, at present, Puducherry is a wonderful example of cultural assimilation. Apart from its efforts to preserve elements of French culture, language and architecture amidst rapid growth, this city is home to people from almost every state of India and many foreign countries. This has been possible to a large extent because of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram which stands as an example of national and international harmony.

This city also hosts an ever-growing number of visitors. I say visitors instead of tourists because a great number of them come here with a purpose, more serious than simply enjoying a holiday. They come in quest of both peace and knowledge from the spiritual ambience of the place.

This is the place where Sri Aurobindo visualised the future of man. The first phase of the life of this great Master was devoted to the liberation of our Motherland from the British. The second phase of his life was devoted to the liberation of humanity from its enslavement to ignorance.

Just as Sri Aurobindo realised that India's liberation was a certainty he was also confident of mankind's liberation. He further recognized that liberation need not be an escape of the soul from this physical world. Instead, it can be an active life free from all imperfections that affect us. In his view, this world we live in is not a thing to be spurned but to be transformed through our collective aspiration.

Sri Aurobindo believed that man as he is today, full of conflicting traits, steeped in ignorance, often unpredictable in his conduct and even a stranger to himself, is not the last achievement of the process of evolution. There is a much brighter tomorrow awaiting the world. Man will evolve into a new being; his ignorance will change



into knowledge and his weaknesses will be metamorphosed into strength.

Among the sad maladies of our time are cynicism and despair. They lead to insincerity in whatever work one does. And insincerity is the mother of numerous other ills. I hope those like you who are followers of Sri Aurobindo will contribute towards the materialisation of a better future through your attitude and your action.

I am happy to learn that the students of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education learn from a very small age a set of languages comprised of English, French and Sanskrit apart from your mother-tongues. You succeed in learning even more languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Odia, and Gujarati spontaneously because of your living, studying and playing together. Further, some of you also choose to learn foreign languages such as German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian!

You children and your teachers — who I believe are all inmates of the Ashram — are to be congratulated for proving that a child has unlimited capacity for imbibing languages and that too without tears if taught in a loving atmosphere and by dedicated teachers. This is indeed a testimony to the international character of this institution and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. This liberality of approach and vision so unique to Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram stands as a symbol of hope for our conflict-ridden world and must be preserved and protected.

The system of your education, as has been put into practice by the Mother based on the Master's vision, the Integral Education, calls for a balanced emphasis on all aspects of the human personality — the physical, the mental, the vital and the spiritual. As a nation, we should aspire to follow this ideal. And you, as forerunners, must pave the way.

The youth of our country are not lagging behind any other in matters of intelligence or talent; but what our country needs is sincerity and dedication. It is only a broad outlook, unhampered by regionalism, unencumbered by parochialism, unhindered by prejudices that can make this nation great and ideal enough to lead the world. It is this role which Sri Aurobindo expected India to play during both the phases of his life.

Today mankind is facing a multitude of crises. What all human beings need are a world safe from violence and a world where one can pursue one's legitimate dreams. If there is no dispute over this common goal, why should so much conflict, so much hatred and intolerance continue?

The real malady seems to lie at some deeper level. Sri Aurobindo diagnoses it as an Evolutionary Crisis. On one hand mankind is in command of colossal technological, scientific and other material powers, but on the other hand, he is not in full command of his own consciousness. There are elements of inconscience deep within him which distort and even pervert all his fine intentions.

However, Sri Aurobindo also assures us that the solution to the crisis remains hidden in the crisis itself. We have to discover and develop the secret splendours of our consciousness, we have to call down and activate a transforming power which he terms the Supramental.

We must be increasingly mindful of the sensitivities of those around us and how they may be affected by our words and deeds. While we endeavour to eliminate the problems that distort our social development, and as we address imbalances, we must collectively identify the values that have over the centuries, served to safeguard the pluralistic and secular fabric of our society. And we must reinforce these ethics so that as we go forth into a globalised world, we as Indians remain faithful to these unique traditions. Similarly, we must strive to continuously generate greater tolerance and understanding among all sections of our democratic society.

As Sri Aurobindo once said and I quote and conclude, "An aimless life is always a troubled life. Every individual should have an aim. But not to forget that on the quality of your aim will depend the quality of your life. Your aim should be high and wide, generous and disinterested; this will make your life precious to yourself and to others. Whatever your ideal, it cannot be perfectly realized unless you have realized perfection in yourself"<sup>1</sup>.

Let us hope that man will not fail to stand up to the Master's expectation; man need not be surpassed; he will be transformed.

My best wishes are with you.

Thank you. Jai Hind. ❧

## PICO SOLAR LAMPS FOR LAKE ESTATE

As the electric supply from TNEB is extremely erratic, Lake Estate has progressively installed some battery back-up to tide over hours of power cuts. However there are still some houses occupied by a few families who oversee the labour which do not have any back-up. They use kerosene lamps, candles or torch lights to go around in the dark to look after the plots which are being spoilt by peacocks or porcupines. In addition during long power cuts, the mobile phones get discharged resulting in inability to be in touch with the staff over the large area.

Our alumnus, Brahmanand Mohanty<sup>79</sup>, suggested a practical and environment-friendly solution to these problems — the Pico Solar Home System (PSHS). Based on his personal experience while overseeing the implementation of PSHS in remote villages in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal and the Philippines in the past 3 years, he suggested that we introduce these at Lake Estate as they are much better than using batteries, candles or kerosene lamps.

Each housing unit accommodating a PSHS would be capable of handling one or two lamps every evening, and charging the torch light that

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1. Actually this refers to a quote from the Mother (CWM, 12:3)



## PICO SOLAR HOME SYSTEM (PSHS)

### *A first step towards energy sustainability*

*Brahmanand Mohanty '79*

The path of energy sustainability consists of three sequential steps: *sufficiency, efficiency and substitution of fossil fuels by renewable energy.*

Hundreds of millions of people around the world do not have access to grid electricity and depend on kerosene lamps or candles to light up their lives when the sun sets. Kerosene is a very inefficient source of lighting and creates indoor air pollution. Moreover, the lighting from kerosene does not

provide visual comfort. Thanks to the progress of technology, it is now possible for a tiny Light Emitting Diode (LED) consuming 1 Watt or less of electricity to provide adequate lighting for visual comfort, thus meeting the “sufficiency” objective. This LED is powered by an efficient lithium-ion battery pack that is lightweight and long-lasting, as proven by its widespread use in mobile telephones. Both LED and the battery pack meet the “efficiency” objective, thus ensuring adequate lighting for longer hours with the use of a limited amount of energy stored in the battery pack. Finally these battery packs are charged by very small solar panels, typically in the range of 1 to 5 Watts only, thus meeting the objective of “substituting fossil fuel by renewable energy”.



You may be questioning how solar energy can be affordable to the rural population at the “base of the pyramid” while the urbanites find it expensive to use in their homes. Interestingly, the poor rural families find it more affordable than using kerosene lamps or disposable batteries. How is that?

Well, it is simple. A rural person not having access to electricity purchases 2 disposable bat-

teries of very poor quality at a cost between Rs 20 to 30. These batteries store only around 3 Wh of energy (each 1.5 Volt battery has around 1,000 mAh or less energy). If 3 Wh in the battery costs a minimum of Rs 20, then a kWh (or 1,000 Wh) of energy stored in

batteries would have a value of more than Rs 6,000!

We in the cities complain every time the price of electricity is increased (depending on the state of India where we live, the typical cost of a unit or a kWh of electricity can be in the range of Rs 3 to 6 only) whereas the poor pay as much as 1,000 times more for the same amount of electricity. The only difference is that these poor can only pay a small amount of money at a time. This is the reason why the Pico-solar solution matches their needs very well. Since the poor can only pay a small amount of money at a time, new business models are being tested to provide them with such PSHS systems whose capital cost can be recovered in instalments well within the system lifetime.

can be used outdoors and the mobile phone which is essential to remain in contact with Pradeep Lall at the main office.

The Golden Chain Fraternity was pleased to be able to assist in the implementation of this

scheme with help from Auroville Energy Products. We hope that we shall get more opportunities to participate in the long term energy sustainability plan of the SAAT and other projects as they arise. ❧

# IN THE MOTHER'S PRESENCE

*Shobha Mitra '56 has been the head of the Indian music section for decades and every student who has passed through SAICE has had some contact with her. She has put down her memories in a book, originally published in Bengali, the English translation of which has just come out. To her great surprise this book, Sri Mayer Dibya Saniddhye, was sold out within a year of its printing. Not only that, she was awarded the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar for it. The Governor of West Bengal handed over the award and the citation to the person who received it on her behalf in the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata. This award is given every year on 15<sup>th</sup> August and it is given to those who have achieved excellence in a work in English, Bengali or Sanskrit.*

*This book, titled Living in The Presence in English (translated by Maurice Shukla '75), is filled with episodes where we see how the Mother worked and guided those souls who had come drawn to her. There are also letters in Mother's handwriting showing how she was involved in the smallest details of everyone's lives. Through Shobha-di's words we get a picture of the life of the Ashram of those days. The book was written over several years by putting down a few pages at a time, in the middle of her hectic schedule in the Music Section.*

*Sunayana '79 spoke to Shobha-di about her book, the music section and other subjects.*

## WRITING A MEMOIR

**SUNAYANA:** Shobha-di, it has been a while since your book came out and now the English translation is being printed. It should be available in SABDA and at the Library by the time this interview is read by people. How did you get the idea of writing this book?

**SHOBHA-DI:** I had the habit of narrating my small incidents with the Mother to my students and to others whenever the occasion arose. This was my old habit and I used to enjoy it. Once, Dilip Mehtani, Sumitra and Uttama called me to the Flower Room to narrate some anecdotes to the children. I did it. On another occasion "The Continuing Education" group requested me to tell them something about my contact with the Mother. Then again, Anand and Deepshikha called me to talk about my reminiscences about the Mother. Like that, for some years, these occasional meetings kept taking place. There was always a suggestion from the listeners that I should preserve these stories in book form. But I did not pay much attention to that. I used to feel that there were more able people who could write about their reminiscences as Priti-di (Dasgupta), Mona (Sarkar) and Tara (Jauhar) have done.

One day Maurice came to me for some work. We were discussing about the School and the Ashram. Spontaneously I spoke to him about something that the Mother had told me. He was so moved to hear the Mother's comment that he said to me, "Shobha-di, why don't you write these things down? These incidents will be lost if you don't do it." I said, "Maurice, I am not a writer. Moreover, I can express my deepest thoughts and feelings only in Bengali. How many will be able to read it?" He replied, "Never mind about that. I will translate the book. You just write." Maybe that was the day I took the final decision to write the book. I started to gather the material which would be of common interest to everybody. Some very personal things I have not published. But I took the courage to include some things to show the way the Mother worked on us. Sometimes a blow from Her worked like a miracle. At other times Her invaluable touch of grace uplifted us, encouraged us to walk on the path we have chosen.

**SU:** Did you feel any hesitation about talking of these extraordinary experiences?

**SH:** Extraordinary, that's the word. There are certain experiences during programmes which if

they had not happened in my own life I would not have perhaps believed them. Like the time when I had two big boils and I told the Mother that I would not be able to dance and She said, "Don't worry, dance. You will be able to dance." And She did make me dance. This is extraordinary. If it had not happened in my own life I would have doubted it.

**SU:** Perhaps you would have believed it with your mind but not with your heart.

**SH:** For example the Mahakali dance that I have written about in my book. She said, "You have invoked the spirit of Mahakali." This is extraordinary. This happened in the Ashram, with us.

**SU:** People of your generation know about these things because they happened in front of them. They know the story of the Mahakali dance. But the younger generation would not have known about it had it not been published. It would have been known only by a small number of people.

**SH:** I have never spoken about these extraordinary things. These are things you cannot tell everybody. You can only speak about these things to very close and intimate friends. It is true that the people of my generation saw the programmes about which I speak in the book. But they did not know about the Mother's comments on the programmes because I had never spoken to anyone about them except to very few. Some of the Mother's comments are very personal. They should not be told to anyone. But, this time, I felt that it was the Mother who was important, not I. So, I have published certain things only to show the Mother's working on us. I had to make a huge effort to get rid of my idea of not publishing them.

**SU:** How long did it take to write this book?

**SH:** A very long time!



Shobha-di before the Mother

**SU:** Did you sit down and write regularly?

**SH:** At the beginning, no. Because of my other responsibilities I could not sit down regularly to write. I could not give much time. My one big difficulty was that I was never quiet enough to sit down and write. How could I concentrate? I had to think deeply because, first of all, these things happened a long time ago, years ago. Years have passed. What I had in my notebook were just Mother's answers. Not incidents. At that time I

did not have the time to write down everything and I never thought it would be very important. But if you have heard something from the Mother, when you recall it, the whole incident comes back. It is a wonderful thing because Mother's words are so precious to us. So later on when I decided to

write, I started recollecting the incidents. Then I wrote down the incidents one by one, with the answers. That took me quite a few years. Four or five years.

**SU:** What was the reaction of your readers?

**SH:** The reaction was mainly from Kolkata. The response was very good. Truly speaking, it was quite unexpected. Sometimes there was so much appreciation that I was asking myself jokingly, "What has happened with my book? Has the Mother created some wonder?" Really, it was beyond my expectations! In the Ashram, people of my age-group kept mostly silent except a few. My students liked the book. Many Ashramites, the parents of the children and some devotees liked the book. One thing, I have noticed that my questions in general and the Mother's answers have helped many. They have spoken to me about this.

**SU:** What about the older students of the School?

**SH:** I don't think they have read it.



## A QUESTION ABOUT THE 1ST DECEMBER PROGRAMME

This happened in July 1954. The Mother had returned from Her game of tennis to the Playground. She had gone into Her room for a few minutes. After that She would head for the interview room. I was standing on Her way to the interview room because I wanted to ask Her a question. She came towards me. I went close to Her and said:

I – Mother, You remember you had told me about a subject for my dance?

Mother – Yes, my child. You had given me a wonderful idea. In the beginning, everything was fine. Then came the fall. That fall in the middle is not necessary. Why do we need a fall there? No, that is not needed. There is no need to show that all over again. Enough of all that. (*The Mother looked at me intently*) Take a simple subject and prepare a dance on it. In the beginning, show your devotion, turn that

devotion towards the Divine. Gather the different parts of your being (*the Mother showed me with both her hands this idea of gathering oneself*), slowly open yourself, open yourself to the Divine. Awaken that aspiration within you. Call out to the Divine to come close to you, keep calling the Divine to take up your responsibility, take up responsibility for your entire being. (*Once again looking intently at me*) Don't make the dance unnecessarily long. Keep it short. Say only what you want to say. The other day, your dance was very beautiful. I liked it very much because there was nothing superfluous in it, nothing that was not necessary. The entire dance was compact and focused. Your bodily movements were very graceful. I really liked the dance. I even told Charupada that your dance was very graceful. I have told Sunil about composing some music for your dance. See you then, my child, Aurevoir!

(An excerpt from Shobha-di's book, pp. 68-69)

SU: I think people don't read as much these days.

SH: Yes, nowadays I see that the students don't read much. When we were students we used to read a lot. Perhaps they read things on the internet and don't feel the necessity to read books. We used to also write a lot. I don't know if students write anything for pleasure. Communicating on the internet has its own importance no doubt, but I feel they are missing something.

SU: Absolutely.

SH: What did you think of my book?

SU: I really enjoyed it because it is full of unknown facts.

I felt that somehow, over the years, nobody thought of noting down these stories, noting down the details of how the Mother interacted with the younger people of the Ashram, or of the School. Most of us know about the letters that were exchanged by the elderly sadhaks with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. But we don't know how the Mother was involved in the day-to-day details of the life of the Ashram. It is not your story, it is about the Mother.

## MUSIC

SU: Can you tell us something about your training in music.

SH: I started learning music when I was a small girl. I used to go to learn music in a very well-known school of North Calcutta. The school was a big one. The music classes started with children aged 6 years. The students continued their training up to the level of Sangeet Visharad in classical music and they completed a course in Sugam Sangeet. That is to say, the school prepared a course where they introduced other musicians like Rabindranath, Nazrul etc. I was doing both — the course in classical music as well as the course in Sugam Sangeet when I was at Calcutta. I was also learning from Pankaj Mullick privately. But I came away to the Ashram when I was seventeen. I could not finish the course. Here, I learnt classical music from Moni Bishnu-da, the father of Arun Bishnu, and also from Shireen-ben, devotional and other kinds of music from Dilip-da (Dilip Kumar Roy) and Sahana-di (Sahana Devi). That was all.

When I started working in the Music Section

it was the Mother who helped me all through! After taking up the work of music training I realized that my training in that music school in Calcutta had created a very deep feeling and impression. Those teachers were very serious, dedicated to music and the method they adopted was very systematic. They were very disciplined. That methodical training helped me a lot to build up the section here.

**SU:** You mentioned you had some training from Pankaj Mullick?

**SH:** He used to come to my house. He was a friend of my brother's. When he heard me singing he said, "Shobha, I will teach you singing." When Pankaj-da came to know that I had some problems about going out of the house he himself offered to come and teach me at home.

**SU:** And what about dance?

**SH:** I learnt from a student of Shambhu Maharaj, one of his best disciples. He opened a school in Calcutta. My family was very orthodox. My father would not have allowed me to go out to learn dancing. So when he saw that I was really very keen to learn dancing, he asked Gopal Maharaj (that was his name) to come to our house and teach me.

**SU:** I have seen many photos of you here in the Ashram where you are dancing in a very free style, like Anu-ben used to.

**SH:** One thing which I noticed about the Mother was that She always wanted us to do something which would be a new creation. When I told the Mother, "I want to learn classical music."

She asked, "Why?"

I said, "Mother, I like classical music very much."

She kept quiet. And after some time She said, "You know, we don't have anyone to teach here. You have to learn classical music from a good teacher." Then She said — and this was Mother — "The whole of India is full of classical music. I want from you your own music." I was only 17 or 18. Mother was talking to me then about this. I couldn't understand what She was telling me. "Your own music." What is my own music? I didn't understand. But I didn't have the guts to ask the Mother. Much, much later I realized why

She said this. Whatever musical capacity I have has all come from Her.

**SU:** Mother always wanted us to be creative, to do something new and not to go back to the old things. How far do you think we have succeeded in this, in the field of music in the Ashram?

**SH:** Except for Sunil-da, and Sahana-di to some extent, none of us have gone very far.

**SU:** Sunil-da was the highest we reached.

**SH:** Yes, Sunil-da was the highest. I think, if Mother had not wanted Sunil-da to create that kind of music, he would not have succeeded in creating those compositions. It is something that surpasses human capacity, what he has left us. It was the Mother's grace which gave him that capacity. This is my personal opinion. I have great regard for Sunil-da. His creations do not belong to this world. At that time this sort of music was something exceptional. Now people in the world are trying out fusion music, and many are trying out new things.

## **ADULT EDUCATION**

**SU:** There is another subject I would like to talk to you about. You are the person behind the adult education classes in the Ashram. I would like you to tell us how you started it.

**SH:** I think it was in the year 1999 when we started the adult classes. A few years before that I had had a dream of the Mother where She told me that it was very important to start classes so that everyone would be able to continue their education to help prepare them to study and understand Sri Aurobindo's teachings. She also told me that if this was not done the Ashram would face serious consequences.

My mother was very ill at that time and I couldn't take any step in that direction immediately. However, in 1998, when several of us formed a small informal group to plan to usher in the new millennium I put forward the idea of Adult Education and it started taking shape. From 1999 we were able to start several classes on the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

We also started classes in painting and several languages like English, French, Tamil, Sanskrit, Hindi and Bengali. I got in touch with many

## ABOUT THE 'ASPIRATION' DANCE

21st August, 1954. The person who had had the interview with the Mother came out of the room. I quickly got in. I noticed the Mother was already on Her feet, in order to come out. I asked Her,

I – Mother, have You decided anything for the 1st December programme?

Mother – No, nothing yet. I know only two things so far. (*the Mother was arranging the flowers on a tray*) I don't want a lengthy programme. Last year it had become far too long. I just want two or three dances, one recitation and in the end, two plays.

I – Mother, You had asked me to dance. Shall I dance?

Mother – Yes, I have kept your dance.

I – How much time can I have?

Mother – I can't tell you the exact time, now. I have to first check how much time all the other items are going to take, how long the entire programme will be.

I have already told you and I am repeating it once again: I did not know how to talk to the Mother. I would talk to Her in a very stupid way, ask Her very stupid questions. However, the Mother in Her infinite compassion, always tolerated all this and forgave.

I – In order to express 'Aspiration' what kind of movement would be appropriate: slow or fast?

Mother – Why don't you find all this out yourself? This is not my work. Normally people lift their hands like this or like that. (*Saying this, the Mother moved Her hands in different ways.*)

I – Mother, people normally do it in this way, but what is the true way to represent 'Aspiration'? What do You expect from me?

Mother – I don't quite know. I have never taught dance. You can ask somebody. I don't

know who can show you the appropriate style for this. (*At this point the Mother looked at me very intently.*) Why don't you try yourself to create new movements? (*Then, She remained once again silent, as if in deep thought.*) You know, it is not important whether your movements are in slow or fast speed, or whether your bodily movements go up like this or come down like that. You have to invoke the force of aspiration, call it down. Keep calling, calling and praying to it. This prayerful attitude must go on. Let a deep aspiration rise from deep within your inmost being and come into the outer being and suffuse all your bodily movements. Let this aspiration flow in you, in the smallest atom and particle of your being. Let it flow... That is what I want. My child, this thing is within you (*looking at me meaningfully*). You will be able to do it. You will. Keep praying, just keep praying. You will succeed.

The Mother stood in front of Her chair and I was standing in front. A great restlessness stirred within me because I felt that all the advice the Mother had given me, I had not been following. I started feeling quite a worthless child of the Mother. Feeling guilty, I bowed down at Her feet. I spread my arms on either side of Her feet and looking up at Her, implored,

I – O Mother! Here I am, surrendering myself to You. Make of me Your worthy child.

The Mother blessed me. She placed Her right hand on my left shoulder and looked into my eyes intently. It is impossible for me to express in words my experience of that day. After that intent look of the Mother, She smiled sweetly and said,

Mother – Aurevoir, then. I need to go now. It's time for the March-past.

(*An excerpt from Shobha-di's book, pp. 69-70*)

Ashram departments to let them know that we were starting the "Continuing Education classes" and gave the over-all responsibility to Ashok Acharya. He is still looking after this work. A large number of people joined these classes and

continued for the first ten years or so. Not many join nowadays. Very few want to study.

**SU:** Were there classes for adults when the Mother was there?

**SH:** At that time most people came with



some education and the Mother always arranged for them to continue to learn, sometimes in the school, sometimes with other adults. For example when I came I was doing my I.A. The Mother arranged for my further studies. I joined the School from the following year.

## MUSIC SECTION

**SU:** Let's come back to the School. Now there are so many students who learn music. When I was a student hardly anyone learnt to play a musical instrument. Many went to some singing class on Sunday. So, what do you feel about the teaching of music in our school now?

**SH:** It has improved quite a lot. I see it in a global way, because I heard that from the Mother. The Mother had said, "I want all my children to learn music." And now I can see how She has made it possible. It is not only vocal music, but many other types of music. She has provided all these. Now Ladzo has come, Suzanne is there, for piano Richard is there. I mean for Western music. When we were young there was hardly anybody. There was only a lady called Marie Amélie who used to teach Western vocal music. Later Narad came and then Alek for some time.

**SU:** And what about Indian music?

**SH:** We have quite a few good teachers now for Indian music, for the Shastriya and Sugam Sangeet in the Vocal Music Section. Vishnu-da's contribution to the section is most outstanding. Then we have Basab (Basab Sen) who teaches sitar, Debiprasad occasionally helped us with sarod playing, Bryce teaches the flute and Tarun's contribution to the tabla classes is unique. There are quite a few former students and singers who have joined the Vocal Music Section. Many school students and Ashramites are learning music. The Mother wanted all the students to learn music, music of some sort. Today, I see that she herself has made it possible!

**SU:** It's not so much for producing singers or musicians but if the school can educate students to be able to appreciate music that itself would be a big thing.

**SH:** That's what Mother had said. She said, "I want all my children to learn music, not because



The Mother watching Shobha-di's dance

they will all become musicians, but because they will learn to appreciate music." These are Mother's words. This is very important. She also said, "You should never present any music that is light because true music comes from a higher world. Never allow them to disrespect music."

## MOTHER'S PRESENCE

**SU:** How did you feel when the Mother left her body and was not there physically anymore? Those of you who were so close to her, how did you adapt to this new situation? What difference was there for you in your mind?

**SH:** As far as I am concerned, from my very young age, She made me conscious that I must not depend on Her physical presence. I was very fond of the Mother and I used to be very jealous of those who used to go to Her very often. All these problems were there and sometimes I expressed it to the Mother and She used to say things to me. So She made me very conscious that I must not depend on Her physical presence. And this hammering, this insistence, "You must find me here (pointing to the heart)." She used to tap my heart and say this, "You must see me there, you must find me there." I don't remember my feelings on the day She left her body, but this much I remember that there wasn't an absolute gap in my life. I never felt that I had lost

something. I don't remember ever having felt that I did not have Her. I have always felt that I can concentrate and pray to Her and She helps. But if I am not getting the help it means I am not sincere, that I have not been able to make the contact. This was always my feeling. If I am all the time distracted then that contact cannot be established and I cannot ask the Mother to come and help me. I am not open myself.

## PROGRAMMES

**SU:** In the past you used to always organise some programmes before Darshan. It used to mark the beginning of Darshan time and help us to create the Darshan atmosphere. Now it has stopped completely.

**SH:** People come and tell me that. And request me to put up those programmes even now.

**SU:** Can't anyone do it in your place? Is there no one to take up the responsibility? Is it because we do not have singers to participate?

**SH:** This responsibility cannot be given to anyone as a duty. One has to feel it from within, to do it with inner feeling. You are talking of singers. All those with whom I worked and offered those programmes are still there! Very much there! Only I have withdrawn, withdrawn consciously! You know, Suni, this has to come from within.

How can I put this? One thing is certain, nobody ever asked me to do all those programmes. It came from my heart. I could do many other programmes. I had the possibility and things were in my hands. Not that I am criticising anybody, I am sharing with you an observation. All those programmes that I did on Mother and Sri Aurobindo, it was out of my choice, my effort, my prayer, my aspiration. And whatever people remember, it was because something came out of my heart, I was not conscious of it myself. I used to do those programmes as I loved doing them. There was probably something in me which expressed itself. I am telling you frankly. It should come spontaneously from others. Why is it not coming? Why has it stopped? Nobody has asked them not to do it. Just as nobody had asked me to do it, in the same way nobody is asking them *not* to do it. Can you push anyone to do such a programme? The

person has to feel. Slowly, slowly, with the disappearance of that kind of programme which I used to do, some other kind of programmes have started coming in.

## SRI AUROBINDO PURASKAR

**SU:** What was your reaction when you came to know that your book had received an award?

**SH:** I could not believe my ears when Biswajit Ganguli phoned from the Bhavan in Kolkata on 15<sup>th</sup> August evening! I asked him to repeat what he had just said. He said that my book had got the *Sri Aurobindo Puraskar*. This *Puraskar* was presented by the governor in Sri Aurobindo Bhavan and Biswajit received it on my behalf. You know, Suni, from the time my book was published I had my doubts about how the book would be received by



Shobha-di with the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar award

the devotees, especially by the Mother's beloved children! The *Sri Aurobindo Puraskar* was indeed a blessing for me from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I did not expect such a grace. With deep gratitude I repeated silently this prayer which the Mother gave me on one of my birthdays and asked me to repeat every morning:

Je te salue, O Mère,  
dans une gratitude intense  
que, dans ma vie, rayonne ton  
Unique Présence.

[I salute you, O Mother,  
In gratitude intense.  
May my life become radiant  
With your peerless Presence.] ❧

# A SOLDIER'S VOYAGE

*An interview with Major General K. K. Tewari*

**T**hose who were in the School in the 1970s will remember how much we looked forward to the talks given by General Tewari. In fact, he used to come regularly for several years and speak to the students about his life in the Indian army, recounting to the young audience his very unusual experiences during the two major wars (Indo-China and Bangladesh) in which he had participated. A whole generation grew up inspired by him. In 2012 he turned 90 and coincidentally it was also the 50<sup>th</sup> year since the Indo-China war of 1962.

We decided to speak to him to find out what his feelings were looking back on his life in the army and particularly about his contact with the Mother. **Prasanna '09** and I [**Sunayana '79**] took a car and drove down to Auroville where he lives. We were absolutely taken aback to see that he and his wife, Kamla Tewari, who

had been an Army doctor, were living alone in this house surrounded by trees and which, by urban standards, was quite isolated. For a man who is 90, he is amazingly fit. He had kept a pot of tea ready for us and came out to receive us. Everything was perfectly organized and in its place. Once a soldier always a soldier as one says.

For those who don't know him here is a brief introduction. Major General K. K. Tewari (P.V.S.M., A.V.S.M) was born in undivided Punjab, in pre-independent India. He joined the British-Indian Army in 1942. He was involved in active opera-

tions in Burma against the Japanese during World War II. In 1962, during the war with China, he was taken a prisoner. When the Indian Army started its operation to liberate Bangladesh, he was Chief Signal Officer and was involved in the planning and execution of that war for which he was awarded Ati Visishth Sewa Medal. On his retirement in 1976 he was awarded the Param Visishth Sewa Medal.

It was during the Bangladesh War that he came in contact with the Mother and this changed his life completely. After he retired he moved to Pondicherry with his wife and daughters. Many remem-

ber seeing him and his family regularly at the Playground meditations. After this he moved to Auroville and built a house in Auro-model. His daughter Shubha was in SAICE and later two of his grandsons also studied at the School.

When he first came to Pondicherry he used to be invited by the teachers to speak

to the students about his life. To most of us it was a revelation to know how the army functioned but also to know that there was a connection between the Mother and the army. Even after settling down in Auroville he continued to come to speak to the students.

He is one of the veterans of Auroville, having been there from the time when it was going through the difficult times. He has been working in the Auroville Archives and continues to do so even after turning 90. His daughters are also in Auroville and the Tewari family is well-known in the community.



Gen Tewari with wife, Maj Kamla and daughter, Lt Uma at Udhampur just before retirement.



*His wife Kamla Tewari has been in the Health Service for many years and is loved and respected for her work.*

*In the interview General Tewari has recounted many episodes briefly but one can read everything in detail in his book: A Soldier's Voyage of Self Discovery. First published in 1995, it has been re-printed 6 times since then. He has generously offered a few copies of the book to The Golden Chain. Anyone interested can borrow a copy from our office. The most interesting part of this volume, of course, is the part where he narrates the way he discovered the Ashram and his deep attraction for the Mother.*

*The conflict with China in 1962 will always remain a subject of heated discussion and a great deal was revealed in the media in 2012 when the 50<sup>th</sup> year was being commemorated. It was this subject which first made us think of interviewing General Tewari, but eventually it was the joy of reconnecting with someone who had been a part of our growing up years that made the trip so memorable.*

## **EARLY YEARS IN THE ARMY**

**Sunayana:** How did your Army life start?

**General:** You need to know about my background. I am going to be 91 soon. 91 years young, not old. I was a very sickly child. When I was 19 years old, India had started 'The Quit India Movement'. There was a possibility of the British imposing their rule more ruthlessly. My father was a health officer in Jalandhar, my city, and he had a friend in the army. He came one day to my father and said, "I want that two of your sons should join the army." World War II had started in 1939. My father called me and said, "I want you to join the army." Although I was not in very good health, he said, "You will be all right if you join the army." I couldn't believe this. So I went to my grandfather who was an advisor to the Maharaja of Kashmir in 1939. I had great respect for him. I told him, "I have a great problem. I don't know what to do." He said, "You must join the army." He said it so emphatically. I was taken aback. I had thought he would endorse my idea of not joining. He said, "Join the army. Do well. Learn as much as you can. We are going to be independent very soon." That's how I joined the army.

My elder brother and I joined the Officers' Training School and we were sent to Bangalore. We did our training together in the same platoon, same section. We were commissioned and sent to the Armoured Corps. I went to signals and it took longer. But I always remembered the words, "You must learn." That was one of my biggest advantages. I went into war straight away. I was posted at Trichinopoly. I came all the way to the South. I had never come to the South. I was given jungle training and sent off to Burma. The Japanese had started coming in and we started throwing them back. We had solid training right in our young age. My best friend was my wife's brother Somnath Sharma. He was two years senior to me. We were great friends. He was posted in Delhi at the time of the partition. I was also posted in Delhi, as a Captain, then as a Major. It was amazing. Five years service in the British-Indian Army and we had learned so much. He was decorated. So was I. We were together when suddenly the Pakistanis came into Kashmir. He had an arm in plaster. He said, "Up to now I had fought for the British. Now I have a chance to fight for my country. Who is going to stop me?"

I said, "I am going to stop you. You are unfit for war. How will you fight with one hand?" But he left for Kashmir. He spent the night before with me in the Queen Victoria room of the Officers' Mess. We were talking till 2 o'clock in the morning. I said, "Somi, you better go and sleep now. You have to go at 5 o'clock in the morning."

He said, "Don't worry, I am going alone."

So I said, "I will also come along."

He said, "Give me some memento."

I said, "This is all I have, you can take whatever you want." Then he took the German pistol I had.

He flew with his company and saved Kashmir. They had to defend the airfield. At the cost of his life, he saved Kashmir. You can imagine, I had the shock of my life when I was rung up by the Military Secretary who said that there was some unfortunate news. I asked, "Sir, what has happened?"

The answer was, "Somnath is no more." He was a General, I was only a Major. I had the unfortunate job of breaking this news to his family.

The bomb had fallen on him and he had been blown to pieces. They couldn't recognize him. The only thing by which they could recognize him was my German pistol which he had taken when he flew to Kashmir that day. He had a premonition that he was going to be killed and that is how his body was recognized. He used to carry

great believer in it and there is no doubt about his idealism. But he was a non-practical type, too much of idealism and he was bluffed by Chou En-Lai and Mao Tse-Tung (Zedong). These people had been quietly preparing and they came so well-prepared.

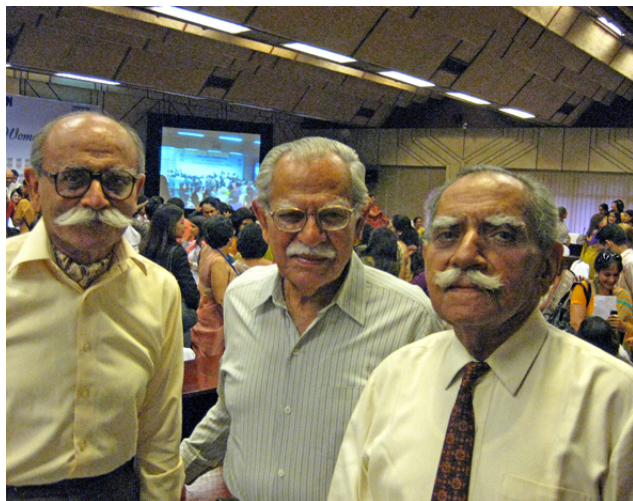
We, on the other hand, were so ill-prepared. I had gone forward to meet my boys in a two-seater helicopter. I landed up in the forward area and each unit had two of my men who had gone through such difficulties. I went to see them. All their radio sets and batteries had to be carried by porters because they had to carry their own kit, ammunition and everything and we had hired the porters.

When my radio sets arrived the charging engine did not arrive and we discovered the batteries were all empty, the acid must have fallen out. The next day I managed to get the charging engine in a pilot friend's plane. I then asked him, "Can you carry the acid in the plane?"

He said, "Sir, I will get court-martialed for this. Petrol I can carry, but acid is not to be carried in a plane." So I decided to fly with him. I had a jar of acid, marked 'Rum for the troops'. I flew with Vinod. There was another kit bag with me, with

a roast pig for my regiment because my people were starving. There was no rations, no air dropping. It is amazing how ill-prepared we were.

When I was taken prisoner, many were killed and I was left alone with my two men. They started checking all the bunkers where I was staying for the night. And in each bunker they were throwing grenades and firing into it. They fired into the bunker in which I was staying with my two men. Both my men were riddled with bullets and I could see the blood spurting out and I held myself like this (gesture). They jumped in and beat me up so mercilessly. They recognized that I was an officer and they said, "You bloody, bloody, bloody" because they knew very few English words. I was beaten up with a rifle butt and I was taken where there were a few other Indian prisoners. There was a gurkha, his intestines were out and he was unconscious. He must have just



Gen. Tewari with his brothers

a copy of the Gita in his pocket. So they found pages of the Gita, torn, all around.

This was the start of my service, actually, for Free India and it is amazing how the Divine.... One of my greatest regrets is that when I came for training in 1942 November to Trichinopoly I never came to meet him (Sri Aurobindo). This is my biggest regret. It was only later during the Bangladesh War that I came to know about him.

## INDO-CHINA WAR

S: Can you tell us something about the Indo-China War?

G: Krishna Menon was the Defence Minister and we had an amazing chap who suddenly became the Corps Commander, General Kaul, a Kashmiri, who was very close to Nehru. Those days Chou En-Lai had come and the 'Hindi Chini bhai-bhai' slogan was going on. Panditji was a

## **EXCERPTS FROM A SOLDIER'S VOY- AGE OF SELF DISCOVERY**

I did not accept the suggestion [of writing to the Mother] immediately.... But on deeper reflection, a brief letter was sent to the Mother seeking Her blessings for my (unspecified) work. In a few days a blessings packet was received from Her. Unknown to others, that same officer had gone around to almost all the top brass of the HQ Eastern Command, from the Army Commander on down to the other heads of staff, and Arms and Services like me, and we had all received the Mother's blessings. And it was amazing how the problems began to get resolved in a strange and inexplicable way. What appeared at first to be hurdles, would clear up somehow.

[...]

It is not my intention to write about the military operations — neither the plans, nor their execution, but a few aspects need to be highlighted to illustrate my view that some unknown 'force' or 'intervention' was at work on the scene in the Eastern Command. In hindsight, a lot of reasons could be advanced to explain the successes achieved. But to my mind, in

1971 a series of miracles took place that helped the Indian Army achieve a unique military distinction — to retrieve its 'loss of face' after the debacle against the Chinese in 1962.

For the first time in its long history, a regular, well organized and a much better equipped army laid down arms before the Indian Army, in an unconditional surrender on 16 December 1971 in Dhaka. There were nearly 95000 fully armed Pakistani soldiers under their Commander in Chief, Lt. Gen. Niazi who formally surrendered to Lt. Gen. Aurora. I believe it was an external latent 'force' which came into action for India's help; I prefer to refer to it as the 'Divine' intervention.

I have mentioned the word 'miracle' earlier. What prevented the Chinese from exploiting the situation and activating the northern borders to help ease the pressure on the Pakistani army fighting against the Indian Army? It was not as if the Chinese had started making overtures to India for friendship. At that time, their attitude towards India was still quite belligerent.

The American Seventh Fleet with its nuclear powered ship USS Enterprise had steamed into

regained his consciousness and he saw me coming in, an officer, and immediately said, "Saab, paani." I immediately stood up and this fellow behind me, the Chinese, he kicked me from behind and said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "He is dying, he wants water."

He said, "We know, we know, shut up, shut up or we will kill you." It was amazing, the boy must have died. There was a doctor. He said, "Shut up, don't speak again." I had my introduction right at the first stop. They were ruthless.

We had to march over the Thagla Ridge. I don't know how I survived with cotton clothes. The only thing I had was a parachute jacket on me, which is a wind-cheater and not a warm clothing. And none of my troops had been issued clothing for winter. Warm clothings were issued in mid-October and extra clothes were issued in November. It's amazing that Krishna

Menon wanted to throw the Chinese out. They came down like white ants.

I was talking, one day, to the Division Commander. He started talking to the General over the radio and he said, "Look, we are in a suicide pit. I must move to a defensive position." He must have been told, "No, carry out the orders."

So he said, "If you don't believe me, sir, your Commander Signals is here, you better talk to him." He gave me the mike.

I said, "Sir, what he told you is more than 100% correct. I can see them coming down the Thagla Ridge. They are not coming for a bloody picnic. They mean business." I was told to mind my own business.

They tried to break us, our spirit. It's amazing how well-prepared they were. They had interpreters for every language. Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, anything. So they could understand



the Bay of Bengal. There must have been some purpose in the show of force in support of their ally Pakistan, but why did they remain inactive and silent spectators after the initial, highly provocative act of sailing into the Bay of Bengal? It required some strength of character and leadership from our Prime Minister, the late Shrimati Indira Gandhi, not to be intimidated by this provocation. She too was very close to the Mother and it is known that she was in touch with Her at the time.

Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the man who had been elected by East Pakistan to give it an independent status as Bangla Desh, was in jail in West Pakistan. He was scheduled to be hanged and yet his life was spared. It was not as if the rulers there had suddenly become soft!

Lt. Gen. Niazi surrendered his well equipped army of nearly one lakh troops and in the process disobeyed his own President, Gen. Yahya Khan; not that he had no means or manpower left to fight on. There were enough fully armed troops available with him, with ample stocks of ammunition and other supplies. But what made him give up so suddenly, after the initial

few days of bitter fighting?

The start of the war had been delayed until 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1971. Pakistan started it all by making pre-emptive air attacks on all the air bases in India that day. We in India [...] actually did get more time to prepare and redeploy and reorganize the available meager resources. Yet, we did not have to 'start' the war.

The Mukti Bahini Force, raised from among millions of refugees who had fled to India, had time to train, to organize themselves and to infiltrate into East Pakistan, to disrupt the communications and harass the Pakistani forces from behind while they were engaged in the front by the Indian Army.

These few facts are mentioned just to illustrate the point that, even allowing for the fact that it was the superior military genius of Field Marshal Manekshaw, India's Chief of Army staff, or of the Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Aurora and other senior Corps and Divisional Commanders in the field, that had won the war, yet on deeper reflection one would have to admit that there was some other 'force' at work too.

what we were saying between us. There was a chap who used to come and listen to us. We were put into cubicles, 8 feet x 8 feet - lama houses. The windows had been removed. We were shivering. There was a Lt. Col. at that time with me. He was wounded badly. I used to nurse him. I used to cover him in that parachute. I used to carry him in the parachute which had been picked up on the way. One day we saw some husk and I asked one of the guards, "Can we have some of this?" Actually that's what saved my life. I used it as a mattress.

We were miserable, it was a humiliating experience. But our jawans stood up very well. So that was that war and we haven't learnt our lessons as yet but I think what we did in Ladakh recently was some sort of assertion. I hope there is more to it than we have read. We confronted them and they realized that they must go back.

**Prasanna:** It is often said nowadays that Pakistan is not our biggest enemy but the Chinese are. Do you believe that?

**G:** No, I don't believe in that.

**P:** Why?

**G:** We mustn't think of enemies. But we must be prepared. Why call them the enemy before they attack us? Yes, they were our enemies at that time, because we were ill-prepared. We must get ready now.

## **BANGLADESH WAR**

**S:** You say in your book that you had a contact with the Mother during the Bangladesh War.

**G:** This happened before the actual war started, just a few days before. One of my officers was an old devotee. I had no idea about the Ashram. He came to me one day when I knew the top secret plan and he said, "Sir, you are very pensive

these days.” He used the word ‘pensive’.

I said, “Chum, you would be more bloody pensive if you knew what I know. I can’t share this with you because it is a top secret.”

He had come prepared. He said, “Whatever your problem, write to the Mother.”

Then I said, “*Kiski maa ko chitthi likhun?* Which Mother are you talking about?” When he mentioned Sri Aurobindo Ashram, I asked, “Who is she?”

He said, “A French lady.”

“There are top secret plans and you want me to write to her, a foreigner?” For three days I did not write. Then I wrote and I was sent the blessings packet which I carry in my pocket and also I had received a little booklet, *Sri Aurobindo and Bangladesh*. I have included this at the end of my book. I was told, “Sri Aurobindo is already in Dhaka.”

So it is amazing in two weeks time, they surrendered, General Niazi with 95,000 regular soldiers.

After the surrender we were sitting in the mess and he offered us a drink, they had plenty of whisky and there was another Division Commander, a Brigadier and he and myself we had been together at OTS at Bangalore before partition.

The same day my brother, who was in the Bangladesh War, Minto Tewari (his full name was also K.K. Tewari), a Brigadier, and this officer who surrendered to him, had been together at the Officers Training School at Bangalore and even shared a room. And when he came to surrender to him at Khulna, after the official surrender of General Niazi at Dhaka, he said, “Hello brother, I surrender to you.” You can read the details in my book, very precious details.

Another Divisional Commander was there also at the Mess and this chap was also there and so was Niazi. And the Indian Commander was pulling his leg. He said, “What kind of training did you get during the training? There were 95,000 regular soldiers so fully armed, I have seen

your depot also, so much ammunition you have. What are you going to do?” He suddenly became very serious.

He said, “I don’t know.”

So I asked him, “General, you disobeyed your own Commander-in-Chief. What kind of training did you get in OTS in Bangalore?” Yahya Khan was the President of Pakistan.

And he said, “I don’t know.” I believe the Mother and Sri Aurobindo influenced him to



General Tewari in his house in Auroville

surrender. I call it ‘Divine intervention in war’.

S: You said that you were told that Sri Aurobindo was already in Dhaka. How did that happen?

G: That is, we were told verbally. It was not in writing.... I still have the blessings packet. It is amazing how quickly they surrendered: in two weeks’ time. The war was finished on 16th of December. It is amazing how everything happened to our benefit....

The surrender took place in December 1971. In early January I was sitting with the Army Commander Jagjit Singh Aurora and General Jacob, the No. 2 man. I asked, “Sir, do you mind if I take a few days’ leave. We have had a lot of work to do.”

“Krishan, how can you ask for leave? We haven’t evacuated Dhaka yet. All this has to be

sorted out and you are the Communication Chief of my command." So no question was asked. In early February I caught him again in a nice mood. Some good news had come. So I got three days' leave.

He said, "It's the second time you are asking me, what is worrying you?"

I just said, "I want to go to Pondicherry to meet the Mother." Now Aurora had also received the Mother's blessings and also Jacob.

**S:** How did he get it?

**G:** Same source. The same man who had spoken to me had gone and said the same things to all the officers and got them the blessings packets.

One day I was travelling in the helicopter with Gen. Aurora before the cease fire. He was lying down on the seat behind me. I used the same language. I said, "Sir, you are looking very pensive this morning."

He sat up and said, "Krishan-ji, you haven't done your homework." Just as he was coming in, the message had been handed over to him by one of my officers: intercept. The Chinese had started moving to the border.

So I said, "Sir, oh no, we can't cope with it. I don't think I can do it, Sir. I can't face two fronts."

He said, "Don't worry, write to the Mother." That's how I discovered that he had also received the blessings! I thought, "You too!"

One of my biggest worries, as I was in charge of the whole area, was 'if the Chinese come from the north, we won't be able to face two forces'. But they didn't come.

**S:** When you asked Aurora that you needed three days of leave to go to Pondicherry, what did he tell you?

**G:** Again the Divine came in. The National Defense College in Delhi had been stopped. And some of the senior officers had all been posted to the Eastern Army to help us. One of the Brigadiers who later became a senior Officer-in-Chief, Vijay Khanna, was sent to assist me. So when I asked the second time, I said, "Khanna is there. He is a Brigadier, same rank as me. He is fully in

the picture." That did the trick. So Aurora said, "Jacob, we must let Krishan go for three days." My wife was looking after wounded Pakistani prisoners of war in a hospital. Her leave was a problem. But ultimately we came with three of our daughters, Deepti, Abha and Shubha, who is in the US now. All five of us came down on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February. We had no idea that it was the Mother's birthday on 21<sup>st</sup>. We had our Darshan on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, we saw her on the 21<sup>st</sup> also. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> we were told that the foundation stone of Matrimandir was going to be laid. We had never heard of Auroville before. Kamla, my wife, and I came early in the morning and we saw the laying of the foundation stone of the Matrimandir. It was a beautiful sight. We too laid small stones. Both of us participated and laid a stone each. What a grace! On the 22<sup>nd</sup> morning we had an interview with the Mother. We saw her one by one. Madhav Pandit had organized our meeting with the Mother. He had told me, "One by one, go and sit at her feet. You first and look into her eyes." I sat there. We were told before going in by Roger Anger, "General, when you go in, look at the Mother and think of all the things you want in life. She will grant them, you don't have to speak." So I looked into her eyes, put my head on her feet and she kept looking into my eyes. Then I got up and Kamla sat. Like this one by one we went, all five of us. When we came out, we took an immediate decision: we want to live here. When I met Roger Anger I suddenly felt very bad. Mother must have thought, "What a stupid idiot of a general!" because my mind went blank and I didn't think of anything.

**S:** That was a common experience. The mind went blank.

**P:** Did you have any conversation with the Mother that day?

**G:** Absolutely not. I went a second time alone. My second daughter Deepti came one year ahead of us to Auroville. She had met the Mother. She is a great devotee. My other daughter Uma, who was also in the army is here now. So that's how it was. ❧



# LE JUDOKA MÉLOMANE

*Cristof*

**U**n homme droit, au regard bleu ciel qui rappelait celui de son ami Pavitra.

De Pavitra, il avait reçu le premier conseil, dès son arrivée à l'Ashram en 1958.

« Ne t'occupe pas de ce que font les autres. »

Cette belle et utile maxime, Monsieur en fera sa devise. Les autres, étant en général plus nombreux que nous, font et disent beaucoup de choses, et si nous devons nous en occuper constamment, cela prendrait tout notre propre temps, qui est déjà suffisamment court.

Monsieur réfléchit donc, et se dit avec raison qu'il aurait intérêt à faire sa sadhana plutôt que de passer son temps à regarder par la fenêtre du voisin, ou par le trou de sa serrure. Et c'est ce qu'il fit.

Car Josef était un homme discipliné. Il avait fait la guerre d'Indochine, puis celle d'Algérie, aussi pires l'une que l'autre....

Il en avait vu assez pour toute une vie. Aussi Mère et

Sri Aurobindo vinrent le trouver et l'appelèrent à Pondichéry pour qu'il apprenne à leurs jeunes « guerriers héroïques » l'art de tomber sans se faire mal.

Mère nous avait dit un jour, en parlant du judo que nous pratiquions à Aspiration avec Jean-Pierre (Bhagavandas) : « La première chose, c'est d'apprendre à tomber. »

Josef, ceinture noire et mélomane, avait tenu bon face aux assauts de l'ennemi sur le champ de bataille, dans la légion étrangère. Mais sous les

assauts de Mozart ou de Mahler, il succombait. Le kimono s'entrouvrait, et son cœur tombait à la renverse. Mais à peine redressé, Josef allait mettre une nouvelle affiche à l'Ashram pour la prochaine séance, avec la régularité d'un métro-nome autrichien. Quand il tomba malade, il me confia qu'il avait des affiches prêtes pour les six mois à venir.

Car Monsieur avait été Autrichien. Des neiges d'antan il avait gardé la fraîcheur enfantine et parfois, le regard à pic. Un homme solitaire, et pourtant solidaire, à sa manière. Un homme qui faisait son travail sans s'occuper des pailles

et des poutres dans les yeux des autres. Pourquoi jeter des ordures chez les autres, quand on a tant à nettoyer chez soi ?

Moi qui ne lui avais pas adressé plus de cent cinquante mots en 40 ans, je l'ai accompagné pour son dernier combat. Et il montrait une telle gratitude pour le peu que je faisais pour lui. Il m'appelait souvent, de plus en

plus souvent. C'était parfois irritant. Car quand j'accourais à Dojo, je le trouvais en pleine forme, dans son fauteuil. Or il ne l'était pas, mais je ne pouvais croire qu'une ceinture noire puisse s'avouer vaincue. Quand il me répétait qu'il était « très fatigué » j'avais peine à y croire, car après avoir serré sa main, j'essayais de sentir la mienne qui, elle, était vraiment très fatiguée.

On regrette toujours trop tard de n'avoir rien compris à rien ni à personne.

Je revois ce jour où, au Nursing Home, je le



## OUR DEAR JUDO MASTER

*Bitasta '81*

Memories of 'Monsieur', our judo master, take me back to my Green Group days in A1, because that was the level we had to reach to join judo classes which I did in 1972.

I approached this sport, judo, with some awe and Monsieur was looked at with mixed feelings — fear, love, respect and uncertainty. He used to be very choosy about his students. Out of 30 boys and girls only 15 were chosen. We all stood in a line and he chose the ones he wanted just by looking at their faces. I still don't know how he made his choice without even interacting with us. Though I know he tended to choose a larger number of girls which he explained by saying that the girls were more serious.

On the first day he drilled discipline into our heads: "No talking", "No extra movement", "no looking here and there". The kimono was to be worn in a particular manner, the belt tied in a certain kind of knot very neatly, not too tight, not too loose. The feet had to be washed and powdered so that the mat would not be spoiled and all this was done in total silence under his keen supervision. Saying "Aurevoir" to him before one left was a must. He would answer each one with his strange accent.

As a child I always wondered if he had any friends, as he kept aloof and was so different

from other teachers and captains. He stayed all alone in one corner of Dojo and I had never seen anyone visit him. He would cycle around with many bags and cans to get his lunch from the dining room. He would jump on his pedal, make a neat "sparrow" and sit on the seat. It was spectacular.

"A mysterious man, maybe a great yogi", I used to think. After all the discipline and perseverance it takes to get a black belt, I am sure it changes you within into an extraordinary person. And that is what our Monsieur was, I think.

Now let me tell you that he had a lot of affection for me, which made me pursue judo for eight years. In these eight years I came to know Monsieur better. He was no

more the hard unemotional man. He loved Western classical music which he played in the Library on Wednesdays. He also selected passages from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's works and hand-wrote them to put them up on the Ashram notice board. Sometimes he made me do some art work around the passages. This showed that he read extensively and was a lover of beauty.

Our mysterious Monsieur taught judo to so many students including my two daughters, without any break or change, over so many years. His loving memory will always bring a smile to my lips.... Aurevoir, Monsieur.



trouvai debout, désespéré. Il venait d'apprendre qu'il avait le cancer. C'était un homme brisé. Il ne comprenait plus. Lui qui avait passé toute sa vie à être en bonne santé, il était frappé en traître, dans le dos.

Je lui dis, sans réfléchir, que je ne le laisserai

pas tomber. Je savais bien, quelque part, ce que cela voulait dire. Lui aussi. Il me serra la main, et sourit. Sous les muscles d'acier battait un cœur d'or.

« Pourquoi ? » me demandait-il souvent. Et j'essayais de lui donner confiance, de l'assurer

## MONSIEUR

*Deeptendu 'HC2*

J'ai connu un homme hyper sympa, avec une discipline qui, je pense, manque même à la Nature. Un homme toujours souriant et heureux sur son vélo, avec son chapeau et ses lunettes de soleil. Un homme âgé mais avec une force que même les plus jeunes aspirent à avoir. Sa présence bien sûr me manque. Ses saluts le matin semblent avoir disparu avec le vent, mais ils restent dans ma mémoire. Il était un homme qui vivait dans la réalité du monde, pas comme nous qui flottons dans les misérables illusions que nous croyons être la vie. Il nous a appris comment avoir la joie, même en se bagarrant et comment s'aider l'un l'autre à se battre.

qu'il s'en sortirait.

Il s'en est sorti. Après un an de combat, très vite, en quelques jours, il est parti. Encore maintenant, je ne comprends pas comment il a fait pour s'en aller si vite.

J'ai allumé son bûcher, moi qui l'ai à peine connu, moi qui étais l'être le plus diamétralement opposé que Dieu puisse imaginer. Mystérieuses destinées, rencontres plus mystérieuses encore.

Déjà, les jours font leur travail, ils passent leur époque sur notre mémoire.

Mais la poignée de main du judoka mélomane, et son regard bleu tendresse, je les cache au temps qui passe. Lui qui servait dans la Légion, il mérite bien la légion d'honneur.

# JOSEF — THE EARLY YEARS

*A look back at Josef's life before he came to the Ashram in a historical perspective*

On 16<sup>th</sup> July 2013 Josef Szarka, after 55 years of living and working in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, left his body in the Ashram Nursing Home. He was 84 years old. He was one of the senior Captains at the Physical Education Department, the Dojo's Guardian, Judo Teacher and a longstanding Librarian of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library.

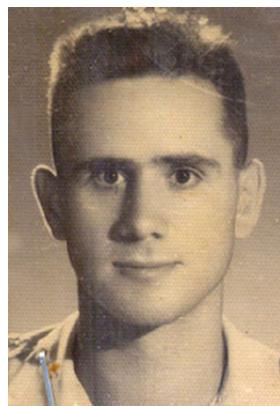
The following is as an attempt to review Josef's life in the perspective of the places and times he lived in, which set the stage for his development, and the experiences that prepared him for the later work in the Ashram. It is based on a few personal details gathered from him during his last months, a perusal of his personal papers and resources from the internet.

Josef was born on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1929, in Zillingdorf Bergwerk, a small market town (with 2015 inhabitants today) in lower Austria close to the Czech and Slovakian border. He was the only child of Josef and Maria Szarka, who were of Hungarian stock, of Roman Catholic faith, and had themselves grown up in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Josef's father worked as a miner in the local brown coal mine of Zillingdorf Bergwerk, so we may assume that the family lived in simple, humble conditions and in all likelihood could offer the son at home only meager fare, intellectually and otherwise.

Nine years later, on March 12 1938, things changed drastically. The short independent existence of a democratic Austrian Republic came to an end. Hitler who had come to power in neighbouring Germany annexed Austria — after a well prepared *coup d'état* by the Austrian National Socialist Workers Party — and incorporated it into the larger national socialist German Third Reich as 'Ostmark', Eastern Province.

For young people like Josef this meant they would have to join the Hitler Youth Movement from the age of 10 (compulsory from 1939). A





## EXTRACT FROM A LETTER

...In the last 3 months of World War II even I had to join in the *Arbeitsdienst* [the compulsory Labour Service for all young people in Hitler's Germany as well as Austria which had been annexed]. I was not yet 16 when the War ended. In 1947 I lost my mother. I was the only child.

1949. There were still ruins in Vienna. The four Allied Occupation Powers were still there. I was very much interested in Yoga and wanted to go to India as soon as possible. I decided to use the *Légion Étrangère* of the French Army as a springboard. At that time all legionnaires had to go by ship to French Indochina for 2 years. I was not yet 21. I planned to go with them till the stop-over in Colombo, Ceylon and then flee

to India. However things did not go according to plan. Nobody was allowed to go ashore in Colombo and the ship was strictly guarded (because several *légionnaires* had fled the previous ship!) In this way I came to the Foreign Legion and remained there for 5 years. I was offered an extension. That was out of the question, since my aim was the Yoga in India.

As you know, I am now in the Ashram of Sri Aurobindo for the past 43 years, and have never left India and even Pondicherry (except many years ago, when I had to go for reasons of my health to Madras).

This in a few words is my story.

(Translated extract from a letter written by Josef Szarka to the Austrian ambassador on 12.08.2000 regarding his Austrian citizenship)

German boy of this generation became first, for four years, a member of the *Deutsche Jungvolk* (German Young Folk) and then at 14-15 would have to join the Hitler Youth. The *Hitlerjugend* movement put more emphasis on physical and military training than on academic study. Through a program of outdoor activities combining scout adventure, songs, parades, physical education and sports, the young members were formed in body and attitude and indoctrinated in the tenets of the Nazi ideology.

When Josef was 10, in September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, World War II began. Basic pre-military preparation of the youth increased after 1939; by the end of 1940, *Deutsche Jungvolk* (DJ) members were required to be trained in target shooting with small-bore rifles and to take part in "terrain manoeuvres". In addition to their pre-military training, the DJ contributed to the war effort by collecting recyclable materials such as paper and scrap metal, and by acting as messengers for the civil defense organizations.

Austria did not become an actual war zone for the first three years. From 1943 onwards, however, Allied bombers regularly attacked Austrian industrial and transportation centers and intensified the air campaign in the winter of 1944-45.

In March 1945, Germany's Armed Forces' Chief ordered the mobilization of all reserve powers as a last measure for the defense of the crumbling Eastern Front. Josef, at just 15 years, was amongst the young boys who were now conscripted in Austria to the *Reichs Labour Service* (*Reichs Arbeits Dienst*) a paramilitary auxiliary formation providing support to Germany's Armed Forces in the fight against the Russians.

The Soviet Union's Red Army entered Austria on March 30, 1945. After two weeks of urban warfare, terrible losses against heavy resistance from regular German Army troops and ad hoc defenders, the Russians captured Vienna on April 13<sup>th</sup>. The morale and discipline of the victorious Soviet forces was very low and its soldiers, motivated largely by revenge and suffering from atrocities inflicted on their own country, indulged in large scale pillaging, rape and senseless destruction.

Josef and some of his comrades were taken prisoner of war during these riots and spent the last weeks, up to the official end of WW II on May 8, 1945, in Soviet captivity. Released, they managed somehow to struggle through all the devastation back home into the arms of their overjoyed mothers.

Austria's beautiful towns lay in ruins, its economy, its agriculture, its administrative

## BENEFIT OF DOUBT

*Bhrata '83*

I remember this clearly as it had a great impact on me: One day Monsieur came to us with some small bamboo mats about 6 inches long, 3 inches wide and about 2 inches high. He told us these were Zen meditation mats. He explained that we should lay them on the ground, in this case it was the judo mat, and sit on them in such a way that the surfaces of our left and right palms and feet touched each other as completely as possible. He explained further that juxtaposing these surfaces ensured that the energy that is released from our palms and feet is circulated in our bodies instead of

being released out into the environment. The Zen practitioners found that this resulted in a better meditation or meditative state. To this we said something like, "OK, whatever you say". In response Monsieur said something like: "If I gave you a pen and told you it was wonderful etc what would you do? You would probably take it, try it out and say either yes, it's wonderful or no, I don't think it is wonderful etc. However when it comes to non-physical, metaphysical things why do you say 'OK whatever'?" This really made me think about why I was so ready to write-off metaphysical things without actually sincerely trying and then deciding whether they worked for me or not. It made me progress!

infrastructure, all were in shambles and recovery was slow. The years 1946 and 1947 were characterized by near starvation, hunger riots, drought and increasing Cold War mentality between the Allies. The Western Allies finally included Austria in their Marshall Plan aid program infusing capital for economic reconstruction. The Eastern Russian zone of Austria however received very little of it.

In the midst of all this devastation of the war and the Occupation years, very little is known of Josef's own experiences and activities. All Nazi organizations including the Hitler Youth were forbidden and they disappeared. By the end of the war, Josef had passed 8 years of schooling up to medium level. Due to financial constraints he had to switch in 1945-46 to an École Supérieure du Commerce Pratique in Wiener Neustadt (a town 50 km south of Vienna) for a profession that would enable him to earn his 'bread' quickly. After two years he received his Commerce diploma. He continued with Baccalaureat studies in 1947-48 in a Private Matura School in Vienna (probably while working somewhere side by side). In 1947 at the age of 17, he suffered the sudden loss of his mother. She was 45.

While in Vienna, Josef was already part of a Judo club and developed simultaneously a serious interest in Yoga. His dream was to go to India but it was not realizable as he had no funds for

the journey. At the same time he was also a member of a club of Nature Friends and a supporter of the United Nations.

Meanwhile at the age of 18, in 1947, after a short stay in Zillingdorf with his father, Josef left Austria, never to return. He signed a 5-year contract with France's Légion Étrangère, a professional fighting unit of the French army composed entirely of foreign volunteers of any nationality, race, creed, origin.

All légionnaire recruits were sent first for two years to Vietnam — the Far-Eastern French Indochina war theatre. Joseph's military duties in Vietnam did not take him to the frontlines and direct contact with enemy forces. He was probably involved mainly with supply lines, in charge of maintenance, handing out materials etc. He managed to continue with Judo training there, and to keep away from drinking, smoking and disease. All in all he did not regret having gone there in spite of hardships. In retrospect he found Vietnam and its people likeable.

The same could not be said of his next 3 years in Algeria where he was stationed until the end of his Foreign Legion contract.

Algeria had become a French military colony in 1834 after a violent brutal conquest and was administered as an integral part of France. In 1951 (Josef's time there) colonial French rule in Algeria was increasingly challenged by competing

*à Joseph  
pour l'aider dans sa sashana*

- 1/ *ne pas être despotique dans le travail.  
Chacun porte en lui la loi de son  
être qui est l'expression de la Présence  
Divine en lui, et cette loi doit être  
respectée.*
- 2/ *Ne jamais oublier que les fautes  
qui nous irritent le plus chez  
les autres, sont justement celles  
que nous portons en nous-mêmes  
et nous devons commencer par  
les corriger en nous-mêmes avant  
de s'attacher à ce que les autres  
les corrigent.*
- 3/ *Cultiver l'égalité d'âme en  
toute circonstance, en se souvenant  
que tout ce qui arrive est  
l'expression de la Volonté Divine*
- 4/ *Faire une règle d'être généralement  
silencieux autant qu'il est possible,  
et en tout cas ne jamais parler quand  
on n'est pas calé et maître de soi.*

Algerian nationalist groups, but also a movement within a wider Arab nationalism. The ensuing conflict was characterized by guerilla warfare, terrorism against civilians, and the use of torture and counter-terrorism operations on both sides.

Josef could not relate well to what he perceived as the "harsh and arrogant mentality of the Arabs", their openly aggressive attitude. He decided not to continue with the French Foreign Legion and quit as Corporal in 1954 despite the offer to continue as an officer.

He remained, nevertheless, in Algeria for another 2 years working in the capital Algiers as a salaried commercial clerk for a local French Cotton Export Company. During this time he also continued

his physical training-education under a well known Judo (or maybe Aikido) master.

Josef had already written in 1952 (or 1949?) to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He had entered the Foreign Legion service apparently with the idea of using it as a springboard to reach India (see his letter to the Austrian embassy of 2000). He wrote again in 1957 (1954?). The correspondence was with Pavitra-da. In 1957, at last — while in Algeria — he got the Mother's consent and permission to come. With his savings he was now able to finance his voyage to India. He had learned to speak French, progressed in Judo, gone through harsh life experiences, grown into a strong young man of great will power, great discipline and physical stamina, ready to dedicate his life to the cause of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's work.

He came by sea — leaving from Marseille — arriving in autumn 1957 at Pondicherry. He met the Mother and became a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. His unfailing aspiration and determination and the Grace led him here — his dream had come true! ❀





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