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The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF
THE MOTHER'S FIRST ARRIVAL

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

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

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

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On the Cover:

The Guest House staircase at the top of which the Mother first saw Sri Aurobindo.

On the Back Cover:

The Guest House verandah where they first met.

The Golden Chain

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THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

Firstly, our apologies for not being able to bring out the May issue. We have put two issues together and made this August issue a double one. Circumstances made it difficult for us to keep our schedule, but we hope we can make up for this long silence by all the interesting articles which we bring to you in this one.

We are ourselves surprised that we have entered our 21st year of publication. Really, how time flies! It seems that it was only yesterday that we would just stop under a tree near the Ashram or the School to discuss what would go into the next issue. We have come a long way since then. The greatest joy is that now we have a readership which includes many Ashramites and devotees even though many young alumni members are still not on our mailing list. Perhaps they are among those who now read the magazine online, when it is put up on our website www.goldenchain.in.

Although the magazine was started for the benefit of the former students — to keep in touch with each other and with the Ashram — we have in the end shared our thoughts and experiences with a wide circle of seekers. What was discussed in our little groups is now accessible to everyone and in this way we have opened our doors to all. In this sense *The Golden Chain* is now much more than an alumni magazine.

This year being a special one we have had the joy of seeing many old and familiar faces back in Pondicherry and we have enjoyed together many gatherings. We had the rare privilege of having three Darshans with a gap of a month each: February 21st, March 29th and April 24th. So we have all been busy since 1st January in the preparation of or the celebration of these special dates. Concerts, dances, talks, and exhibitions have flowed one after the other.

But the former students are not the only ones to gather here. With direct train connections to cities like Bhubaneswar, Kolkata and New Delhi,

and better road connections to Chennai and Bangalore, Darshan days in Pondicherry are now packed with crowds. This year in February the Mother's room remained open until 9 pm. And some of the former students could not participate in the March Past on March 29th because the line to the Mother's room was still on at 6.30 pm and they were on duty to manage the queues. On 29th March many of the former students of the School also worked as volunteers at the Dining Room in order to keep pace with the exceptionally large number of people who came for their meals.

The March Past in the Playground on 29th March will remain a memorable one. Although the former students could not actually march, we were more than happy when we were told that we would stand along the wall of the gymnasium while the others marched. From that vantage point we could see all the groups. Our old teachers and captains were there to smile at us. After all, however grey-haired and wrinkled we may be today we are still children in their eyes. I became aware of how much time had elapsed since our student days when I saw that G-group, which we once jokingly called "Granny group", is now full of my own classmates!

Time, like a great river, keeps flowing and in that flow we find that many of the former students are drawn back to Pondicherry to start another phase of their lives here again. Something pulls us back here, into the Mother's world where we can once again serve her in some way. Many are now teaching at the School, and that is the best way in which we could have replaced the teachers who are no more.

With fresh and new energy, with new ideas and skills, with a different set of opinions, the new teachers are going to take the Centre of Education forward with a new elan.

A new cycle has surely begun. "The noons of the future" that Sri Aurobindo spoke about await us, let us not forget. ❧

A TRYST WITH IRELAND

Amrita Pai '10 answers our questions

When did you first realise you had this deep connection to Ireland?

I've been fascinated with Ireland and Irish folklore since I was nine, and by the time I was in EAVP6 my fascination had matured into a passion for all things Irish. But Ireland for me was and still is more than just a passion. I feel an inexplicable and deeper connection with the country, and the feeling has grown stronger after having lived there for two years. Even now, there's not one hour that passes without my thinking about Ireland.

An interesting incident occurred after I'd been in Ireland for more than a year. A friend of mine took me to attend a talk by a *Bean Feasa* (Irish wise woman and Shamanic practitioner) and healer who was also known for interpreting dreams and communing with spirits. It was a captivating talk about the ancient Celtic festival of *Samhain*. After the talk, I looked back at the *Bean Feasa*, who was already surrounded by a crowd of curious people who had enjoyed the talk. She looked straight back at me and said, "You have touched these shores before." I was amazed when I realised she was talking to me. I told her about my love for Ireland, and she smiled and told me that I would find what I was looking for in the West of Ireland, that it would come up through my feet, and that I would dance it. I still have no idea what she meant by that. When I

asked her how I would stay in the country or return after my visa expired, she simply said, "Your soul will find the way."

How and when did you decide to do go to Ireland to study?

I applied to a few universities in the UK and Ireland for a Masters in English literature, and since I believed that much of the best of English literature has been penned by Irish writers, University College Dublin was my first choice. And of course, it gave me a chance to go home to Ireland

at last. I say "home to Ireland" because from the time I was in my final year in School and especially in Knowledge I felt more and more as if Ireland was home, even though I'd never been there or met anyone Irish. I remember some of my friends in Knowledge laughing at me every time I told them I was feeling homesick for Ireland.



Amrita, cycling in Dublin

I believe along with your studies you also taught Sanskrit? Can you tell us something about both experiences?

I don't have much to say about my studies. I did a Masters in Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama. My course ended before I knew it (Sep 2011-Aug 2012). I only had one and a half hour classes three days a week and we were expected to work on our own the rest of the time. I was lucky to have had lecturers who are some of the world's leading experts in the field of Anglo-Irish

literature. Frank McGuinness, one of my professors, is a prominent modern Irish playwright. During my time at UCD, I met many of the authors I had read and got signed copies of some of their books. I was also very fortunate to have met the poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney a couple of times at poetry readings before he passed away last September.

After completing my Masters I taught part-time for a year in Dublin at the John Scottus Junior School, where Sanskrit is taught to all the children from the age of three/four. I worked mostly as an SNA (Special Needs Assistant), sitting in classrooms and giving special attention to a few students with learning disabilities. I helped teach English, Maths, Irish, and on my own I taught French and dance. I didn't teach much Sanskrit to the children in JSS. I did however sometimes help their teachers and did my best to answer their questions and allay their doubts. One of the teachers reminded me of Arya Vishnu in her dedication to Sanskrit and her love for the language. She does her best to make Sanskrit classes interesting for the students. I used to sit through some of her classes, and I must say I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and looked forward to attending them as much as the children did. This teacher could be very innovative in her methods, and she once asked me how I'd translate "hi-five" into Sanskrit. And now all the little children do their best in class so that the teacher will give them an "*uccha pancha*"!

Some of the Sanskrit teachers in JSS have come to our school in Pondicherry to learn Sanskrit and methods of teaching Sanskrit, especially from Narendra-arya. And so many of the songs and shlokas that the children are taught there are the ones I learned in School. Sometimes I would hear students' voices singing these familiar songs from my childhood days and forget where I was...

I taught evening Sanskrit classes to a group of adults once a week. They were all very dedicated to the subject, and one lady travelled two hours on the bus from Northern Ireland just for this class! Although I was at first reluctant to teach these classes, I am very glad that I did. It was an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

You travelled quite a bit in Ireland. Can you tell us how and where you travelled and the nature of the country and its people? Any interesting stories?

I travelled a lot in Ireland, especially along the west coast, and I was overwhelmed by the



At the John Scottus Junior School

way people went out of their way to help me. If I were to recount all the little stories of how I've been helped it would fill a whole book, so I'll only briefly relate a few anecdotes.

The day I decided to go to study in Ireland, my brother told me that somebody was going to give a talk in School about Sanskrit in Ireland. My brother used to keep teasing me about my passion for Ireland, so I thought he was only pulling my leg. Still, I went to check the noticeboard in Knowledge, and found that there actually was an Irishman called Vincent Wallace coming to talk about Sanskrit. I spoke to him after the talk. He was happy to hear I was going to Ireland in September, and told me to contact him if I needed any help. A few days later, he visited our home and assured my parents that I'd be well looked after in Ireland and promised to pick me up at the airport and settle me in UCD. I'll never forget the warmth with which I was received in Ireland. Vincent met me at the airport and played Sanskrit songs in his car on the way to his place. He and his wife had organised a small welcome dinner



Arranmore

for me and they also gave me a little present. The next day he helped me get settled in the accommodation I'd booked on campus in UCD, took me to a supermarket, and bought me a few little things I needed. He returned the following morning with a few pots and pans, plates, mugs, cutlery, handtowels and even a beautiful watercolour to hang up in my room.

I found the bus drivers in Dublin very kind and helpful in general, but I'll never forget the one who went as far as to issue me a free ticket when I had no change, and who dropped me off at another stop for the bus I needed to take, and returned fifteen minutes later with all the passengers (with their consent) because he realised he'd dropped me at the wrong stop.

Valerie Collins is one of the Sanskrit teachers at JSS, and I call her my Irish mammy (mother). I first met her in November 2011 at a Sanskrit Weekend organised by the Dublin School of Philosophy, after which she invited me to spend Christmas with her family. Christmas with the Collins family was an unforgettable experience, and I really felt like a part of the family. Valerie and her husband Michael came to drop me at UCD afterwards, but when they saw how quiet and empty the campus was, they insisted on taking me back home with them, and I stayed with them until the college reopened on the 4th of January.

I once asked a man for directions in Killarney. We ended up having a great little chat and before we parted ways, the gentleman gave me

his number and said I was welcome to stay in his house in Killarney anytime I wanted to. I took him up on his offer a month later, and he just handed me the keys to his house, saying he would be away working for two weeks and that I could drop the keys in the letterbox before leaving. Imagine giving your house keys to someone you only met once for five minutes! He also rang his sister-in-law to ask if she could lend me her bicycle for the weekend, and then took me to her house to get it.

On a weekend trip to Westport, I happened to meet Michael Ring, the Minister of State for Tourism and Sport. He gave me his number and e-mail, and asked me to ring him on Monday. The following Wednesday he treated me to dinner in the Dáil (Irish Parliament) and gave me a full tour of the place.

My work in the John Scottus School ended in June, and I decided to spend my last three months in Ireland gallivanting along the west coast of the country. I first went to Arranmore, an island off



After a winter swim in the Irish sea

the north-west coast, and ended up spending a month there. My idea was to spend the summer camping as I didn't have much money, but when I landed on the island, everything was magically taken care of. One of the two shops on the island was owned by an elderly couple who were related to one of the teachers I had worked with in Dublin. They were the first people I met on the island, and they looked after me from the minute I met them. Five minutes after I'd walked into their

shop, they invited me to join them for dinner. I helped them out in their pub later that evening. The next day they said I could eat at their place every day and spend the month in their son's holiday home, which happened to be one of the biggest and most beautiful houses on the island,



My accommodation in Arranmore

up at the top of a hill. It was in Arranmore that I spent my most memorable month in Ireland, teaching a few children (my hosts' grandson and his friends) to swim in the sea, exploring sea caves with them, walking for hours in the misty wilds of the island, footing turf out in the bogs, singing in the evening music sessions in the pub, painting, and dreaming. The sea was incredibly clear, and some friends I made on the island took me snorkelling in the evenings. I was even lucky enough to go scuba diving once. As a small "thank you" to the old couple for their hospitality, I painted a portrait of their daughter who had died of cancer three years earlier, and I did a small landscape of the island lighthouse for their son whose house I had stayed in.

Ethna Dorman was one of my Sanskrit students who also happens to be on the board of directors of the John Scottus School. When my father came to visit me, she drove us around Ireland. She's been like a fairy godmother to me, taking me out for meals and several cultural events. She did her utmost to find a way by

which I could stay on in Ireland after my student visa expired.

Do you see any similarity between the Irish and Indian cultures? Do you have any anecdotes from your stay in Ireland illustrating this?

My EAVP6 talk was about the links between the ancient Irish and Indian cultures. While working on this project, not only did I find several ancient associations between the two cultures, like the fact that Old Irish has its roots in Sanskrit, but also several more recent links. Living in Ireland, however, I experienced first-hand the cultural similarities between Ireland and India. Irish people are warm, welcoming, and family-oriented. Like us, they have holy springs, rivers, and hills. I remember being sick on Inis Oírr (smallest of the Aran islands) last September, and an old islander offered to bring me water from the island's holy well, saying it would cure me just as it had once cured his daughter's skin problems. Water from holy wells in Ireland seems to be analogous to our "Ganga water". Someone once told me that just like in India, the most-climbed hills in Ireland are the holiest, not the highest. Every year, hundreds of Irish people climb Croagh Patrick, considered the holiest mountain in Ireland, and many even climb it barefoot.



Arranmore

You also love adventure sports/activities. Can you share some of those experiences (caving, cliff jumping)?

I joined the Caving and Potholing Club in UCD (University College Dublin) and did as much caving as I could while I was in Ireland. The club organised several caving trips to different

parts of Ireland, mainly Co. Clare and Co. Fermanagh. Caving may not be everybody's idea of fun, but despite the many risks, dangers and discomforts involved in the sport, I absolutely love it. I have spent hours in caves, sometimes walking, sometimes swimming through freezing underground lakes, or crawling, wriggling and squeezing through boulder chokes. One of my favourite caves is one in which I abseiled beside a waterfall straight down a 50 metre pothole. Another favourite was a cave with beautiful geological formations in which we had to swim through four lakes. I've loved caving for many reasons. Caves



Shannon cave



Abseiling out of a cave

have a variety of beautiful geological formations, some of which are spectacular. They are full of ancient fossils. I loved the difficulties and dangers of caving, and the opportunity it gave me to challenge myself and handle fear. I learned to love the cool ancient smell of caves, the icy water, the cold hard rocks and the pure darkness. I discovered the thrill of going where few have been and exploring caves for new passages. I learned to calm down and breathe when I was stuck in the tightest of spaces, to accept the fact that I couldn't fight rock, to relax, laugh fear away, and somehow find a way out. I experienced the fear of death when I was stuck and then lost for six hours in a maze of dangerous underground passages with three



First caving trip

other lads, never losing the wild hope of finding a way out or being rescued, and finally the relief of emerging alive from a hole in the ground, shaking with cold and exhaustion. Even these terrifying experiences haven't deterred me from my love for caving, and I can't wait to be underground again.

I went cliff jumping (jumping off cliffs into the sea) a couple of times from heights of 10m and 8m. The second time I went cliff jumping, it was in a place called Howth, near Dublin, and a friend of mine filmed the whole thing and put it up on YouTube. The video was such a hit that in less than a week TV3 (a popular Irish TV channel) contacted my friend to ask if they could show his video on TV. A few months later, the same video happened to win the audience choice at the Wee Adventure Film Festival.

Last August I also participated in a 5 km sea swim to Arranmore, the island I mentioned earlier. Sometimes I went off cycling or walking on my own. I cycled from Killarney to Kenmare and back (70km) on one of the most scenic roads I've ever seen, and two weeks before I left Ireland last October, I did a 50 km walk from a town called Westport to Achill Island (connected to the mainland by a bridge).

You have had a really eventful stay in Ireland. You are now back in Pondy. Hope you get a chance to renew your tryst with that country soon.

Thank you. ☘

DRAWING WITH LIGHT

Chaitanya Deshpande '01 answers our questions regarding his passion for photography

How did you get interested in photography?

As far back as I can remember cameras fascinated me. I found it magical that real life could be



Breathtaking view of the Karst landscape at Xingping, Guangxi Province, China

imprinted on something (didn't know it was film when I was very young) and then "developed" and reproduced on paper (photo paper). The first time I really used a camera must have been in my early teens. I remember opening the back of the camera with the film roll still in it (yes, no digital cameras then) and, of course, I ruined all the images that my parents had taken. 36 was the magic number then — you could get 38 or even 40 photos if you were lucky sometimes.

The first photographs I took that I felt proud of were of the animals at the Bangalore zoo, in the early 90s.

Who are the people who influenced or inspired you?

When I got into photography there wasn't anyone specific I was inspired by — maybe it was a good thing, maybe it was a bad thing, I do not know.

I will mention however, that since the National Geographic magazine was the standard bearer in all things photography when we were young, Steve McCurry's images from around the world were fascinating. I was lucky to visit his photography exhibition when I was in Dubrovnik a couple

of years ago.

Pioneers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Ansel Adams, David Bailey, and more recently Sebastião Salgado are true masters and I admire their work.

As the years have gone by and the work of photographers has become more and more accessible, I have interacted with many photographers in the UK and am inspired by their work; there are too many to name.

What kind of subjects do you like to photograph and why?

I was quite open and liked to photograph all subjects; over the years, however, I found myself leaning more towards landscape photography.

I like the fact that there's a lot of planning that goes into landscape photography (including "seascapes" and "cityscapes"). To get the best out of a landscape shot you need to understand weather, seasons, nature and sometimes wildlife, light, location and the tide if the sea or river is involved; you need to think ahead and also have a sense of adventure.

There are few things that can top the feeling of being up before sunrise in order to travel to a particular location, waiting patiently for the right conditions to manifest and then find that your planning has been perfect.

I also have a keen interest in long exposure photography; the opportunities it provides are quite unique as one needs to be able to visualize beforehand how a frame will look as a long exposure.



'One Wall to Rule them all' - On The Great Wall, China



Early morning mist on the Dragon's Backbone rice terraces, Longsheng, Guangxi Province, China

Finally, I also like the emotional connection that portrait photography gives you and have started exploring this genre too.

My recent visit to China gave me an opportunity to practise my portrait skills; I returned very satisfied!

In which publications have your pictures appeared? What kind of recognition or appreciation have you received?

My images have been printed in the Lonely Planet magazine, the London Council calendar for 2014, the Richmond Park (London) 2015 calendar,



'The Old Man of Dazhai' - Guangxi Province, China

the BBC website, the CNN website and I am also a contributing photographer to Getty Images.

I won the Jet Airways international travel photographer competition last year which was a happy moment.

I have been on the final shortlists of the British Wildlife Photography Awards

(2013), Travel Photographer of the Year (2013) and most recently was picked as one the editors' favorite submissions for the National Geographic Traveler Photo Competition 2014 (results awaited).

How much time can you devote to this activity?

Most of my weekends are spent either in the field, reading about photography or going through the images I have taken.

Very often, to get the best light for a shoot, you have to be up well before sunrise and, in a country like the UK where the days in summer can be long, that can mean being up at 3am and/or returning after 11pm.



'Misty Wood' - at Wimbledon Common, my photography 'backyard'

I don't do it often if I can avoid it, but sometimes I have to head out very early for a shoot before going to work which takes a lot of effort and planning. Until I become a full-time photographer those days will not go away, but I am not complaining.

When on holiday, I try to plan so that I have enough time for taking photos and also leisure time to enjoy the place.

It can be very tiring but it is very rewarding when you capture the frame you had in mind.



Richmond Park in Autumn - my favourite park in the world

What advice would you give to those who would like to take up photography?

Like everything else, you have to be in it because you love it. In a way, because photography can be expensive and time-consuming, it makes you think twice before committing 100%. That is not to say that you need expensive gear for a good picture; you only need to be creative, unique, and 'plan' to be in the right place at the right time. Some of the best photos I have

seen were taken with a very basic camera or even with a phone.

Photography means 'Drawing with Light'. The better you understand light, the more chances you will have of creating a good photograph.

There are no barriers to the type of photography you can get into and certainly no barriers to creativity, so never stop exploring.

Finally, you are unique and your viewpoint is unique.



Long Exposure of the iconic Westminster Bridge and Big Ben



'There's a Storm Coming' - Brighton Seascape, UK

Never forget that and try and bring that to life with your images.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I have had numerous adventures, travelled to places I would never have otherwise seen and now I see the world around me differently, all through photography. It has been immensely rewarding and in the years to come I am looking forward to more adventures. ☼

CENTENARY OF A JOURNEY TO PONDICHERRY

One hundred years ago, on 29th March, 1914, the Mother first arrived in Pondicherry and met Sri Aurobindo. The centenary of that momentous day was commemorated in the Ashram. In the following pages we first bring you some images and quotes from the Mother's journey to Pondicherry based on the presentation made in the School and organised by **Hardie '80** to mark the occasion. We then cover some of the programmes that were held here to celebrate the event.



In 1914, at the age of 36, the Mother made her first journey to Pondicherry that would culminate in her momentous meeting with Sri Aurobindo. The journey was to take almost 3 weeks, from Marseille by ship, through the Suez Canal, down to Colombo and then by boat and train from there to Pondicherry. We briefly retrace that journey.

On 3rd March 1914, as the day of the Mother's departure for Pondicherry neared, she wrote in her diary (later published as *Prières et Meditations*):

“À mesure que le jour du départ approche, j’entre

dans une sorte de recueillement....

Dans une silencieuse adoration, je Te contemple.”



Eiffel Tower, 1914

On 6th March 1914, she was in Geneva. She writes:

“Ô Seigneur, permets
que toute cette beauté
d'affection et de tendresse
soit transformée en
glorieuse connaissance.

Permets que de toute
chose il sorte le meilleur,
et que Ta Paix heureuse
règne sur la terre.”



Geneva, 1914

She took a train to Marseille.

Marseille was the biggest French harbour on the Mediterranean.



Marseille - Le Quai de la Fraternité

KAGA MARU

Here on 7th March, she boarded a Japanese ship, the Kaga Maru. This ship had a tonnage of 6,000 and was introduced in 1901. It belonged to the Japan Mail Shipping Line or NYK Line, which is one of the largest shipping companies in the world.



On that day she wrote:

“Ce matin ma prière monte vers Toi dans une aspiration toujours identique: vivre Ton amour, rayonner Ton amour si puissamment, si efficacement que tous se sentent fortifiés, régénérés, illuminés à notre contact. Pouvoir guérir les maux, soulager les souffrances, faire naître la paix et la calme confiance, effacer les angoisses et les remplacer par la perception du bonheur véritable, celui qui réside en Toi et qui ne s’éteint jamais.... Ô Seigneur, merveilleux Ami, Maître



tout-puissant, pénètre tout notre
être et transfigure-le afin que Toi seul
vives en nous et par nous!”



And her inner voyage continued as we read what she has written (as translated by Sri Aurobindo) on March 9th, 1914:

“...The whole earth chants Thy praises; in spite of the obscurity, misery, ignorance, through it all, it is still the glory of Thy love which we perceive and with which we can commune ceaselessly everywhere.

“O Lord, my
sweet Master, all
this I constantly
experience on this
boat which seems
to me a marvellous
abode of peace, a
temple sailing in
Thy honour over the
waves of the subconscient passivity which we have to conquer
and awaken to the consciousness of Thy divine Presence.



The 'Kaga Maru'

“Blessed was the day when I came to know Thee, O Ineffable Eternity.”

SUEZ CANAL

The ship took the Suez Canal route which is an artificial sea-level waterway in Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

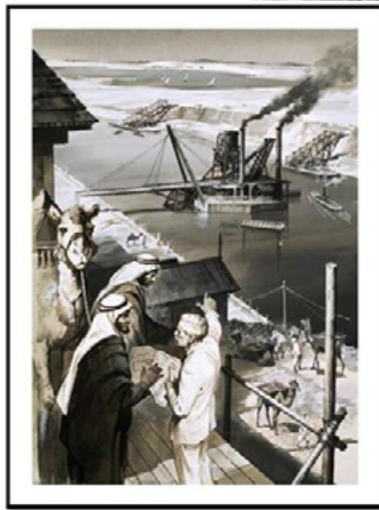
Opened in November 1869 after 10 years of construction work, it allows ship transport between Europe and eastern Asia without having to navigate around Africa.

Interestingly, the Mother's grandmother, Mirra Ismalun was invited to the opening by its builder, Ferdinand de Lesseps.

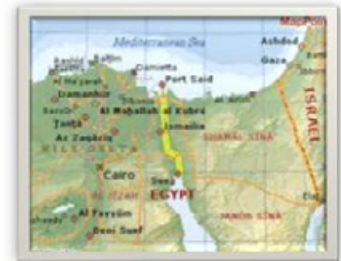
[We may note here that during the Mother's voyage to Japan in 1916, her ship could not go through this canal as it was closed due to the first World War.]



Mother's grandmother, Mirra Ismalun - a sketch done by the Mother



Construction of the Suez Canal



Map of the Canal

SAHARA DESERT

In the Mother's prayer of March 14th 1914 she speaks about the desert which she would have seen on her way to Cairo.

“Dans l'immuable solitude du désert il y a quelque chose de Ta majestueuse présence, et je comprends pourquoi un des meilleurs moyens de Te trouver a toujours été de se retirer dans ces immenses plaines de sable.”

CAIRO

Pourna-di writes that the Japanese ship made a stop in Egypt. Mother went ashore to Cairo and visited the museum. In one of the showcases of the museum there were the toiletries of a great Egyptian queen, Hatshepsut. There were a comb, hairpins, flacons for perfume....



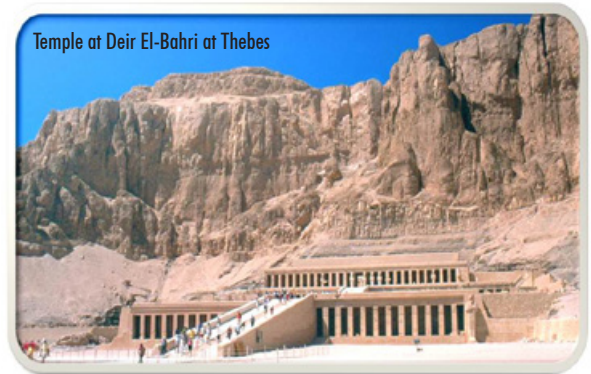
Exterior of Egyptian Museum, Cairo, 1914-1918



Seeing those objects, Mother exclaimed: "How badly arranged all this is! It was not at all like this that I arranged my things." In the car that took her back to the harbour after having left the museum, realising the experience she had just had, she knew that she had been that great Egyptian queen. Even in her earlier births, our Mother had been a leader, launching herself into unknown territories.

QUEEN HATSHEPSHUT

Queen Hatshepsut was born around 1508 B.C, and reigned over Egypt for more than 20 years. She is generally considered to be a pharaoh who inaugurated a long peaceful era during which the economy flourished, trade expanded and magnificent temples were built. The Deir-el-Bahari is one among them and is considered to be one of the "incomparable monuments of ancient Egypt".



Sands of the Sahara desert

MEETING A CLERGYMAN

Aboard the ship, somewhere in the Red Sea, Mother had an encounter with a clergyman. There were two clergymen among the passengers, an Anglican and a Presbyterian, on their way to convert the Chinese, and they had been on the verge of quarrelling about who would lead the Sunday service on board the ship. Afterwards the clergyman who had got the upper hand (the Mother did not remember which one) came to see her because she had not attended, but ere long it was the clergyman who was on the receiving end.

She said to him, 'Listen, even before your religion was born — not even two thousand years ago — the Chinese had a very high philosophy and knew a path leading them to the Divine, and when they think of Westerners, they think of them as barbarians. And you are going there to convert those who know more about it than you? What are you going to teach them? To be insincere, to perform hollow ceremonies instead of following a profound philosophy and a detachment from life which lead them to a more spiritual consciousness? I don't think it is a very good thing you are going to do.'

The clergyman, of course, was not convinced.



COLOMBO

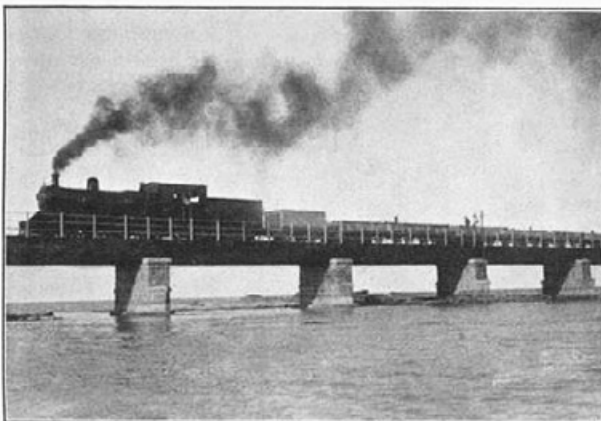
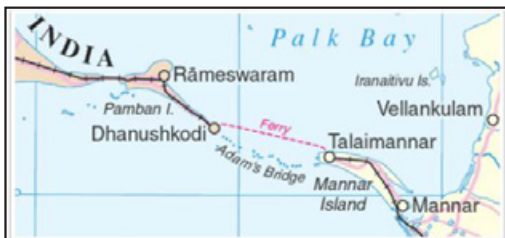
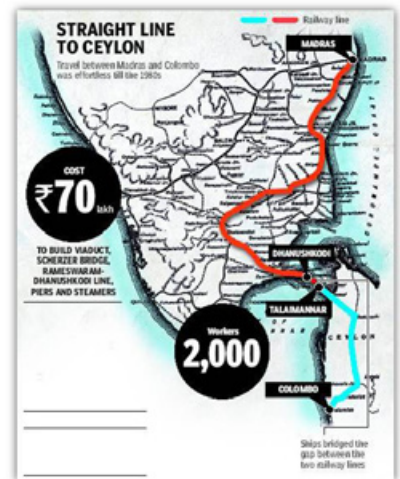
After a voyage of three weeks, she left the Kaga Maru at Colombo on 27th March. She remained in Colombo that day to visit a Buddhist monk who probably had been recommended to her by Alexandra David-Néel.

TALAIMANNAR TO DHANUSHKODI

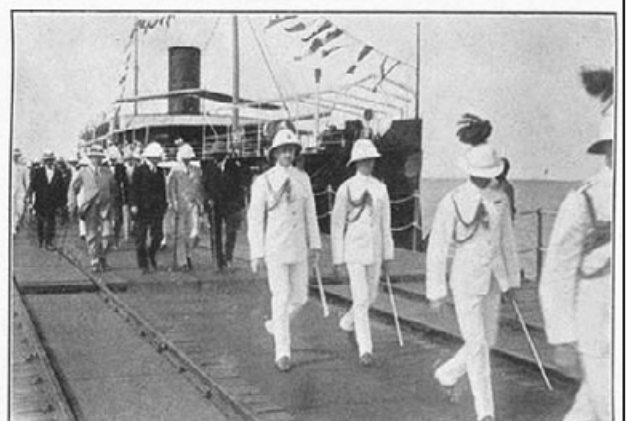
This is a map showing the straight link between Madras and Ceylon which was, incidentally, inaugurated on February 24th 1914.

She crossed the straits at Talaimannar, disembarked at Dhanushkodi. The distance between these two towns was only 31 kms. Talaimannar was the terminus of a ferry service to India across the very shallow Palk Bay.

The ferry service was part of the Indo-Lanka Railway service, where passengers were ferried between Talaimannar and Dhanushkodi on Rameswaram island in India.



Ballast Train Crossing the Pamban Viaduct.



At Dhanushkodi, after the arrival of the Guests from Ceylon.

Opening of the new route from Kalaimannar to Dhanushkodi on 24th February 1914

On 28th March the Mother writes :

“Il ne me semble à aucun moment vivre hors de Toi et jamais les horizons ne m’ont paru plus vastes et les profondeurs plus lumineuses et insondables en même temps. Permets, Ô Divin Instructeur, que nous puissions de mieux en mieux, de plus en plus, connaître et accomplir notre mission sur terre, que nous utilisions pleinement toutes les énergies qui sont en nous, et que Ta souveraine Présence devienne de plus en plus parfaitement manifestée dans les profondeurs silencieuses de notre âme, dans toutes nos pensées, tous nos sentiments, toutes nos actions.

Il me semble presque étrange de m’adresser à Toi, tant c’est Toi qui vis en moi, penses et aimes.”

PONDICHERRY

She boarded the Boat Mail train on 28th March, changed trains at Villupuram, and arrived in the morning of 29th March at Pondicherry , where she took a room at the Hotel de L’Europe on Rue Suffren, before going to meet Sri Aurobindo.



Pondicherry Station



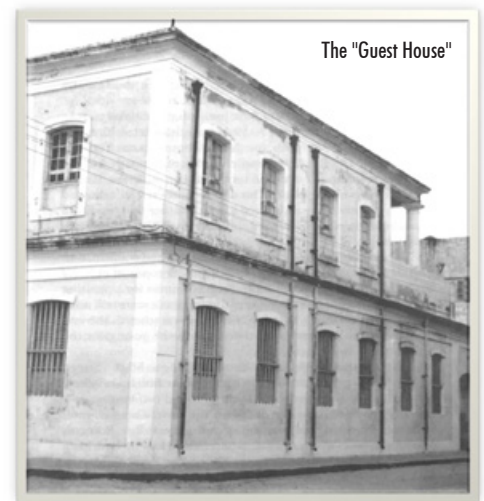
Grand Hotel de L'Europe

On 29th March she writes:

“Ô Toi que nous devons connaître, comprendre, réaliser, Conscience absolue, Loi éternelle, Toi qui nous guides et nous éclaires, nous détermènes et nous inspires, fais que ces âmes faibles soient fortifiées et que ces craintifs soient rassurés. À Toi je les confie, au même titre que je Te confie toute notre destinée.”

GUEST HOUSE

This coming was, of course, not unexpected. The house where Sri Aurobindo was staying with his young Bengali freedom-fighters (it is our Guest House where the green group children play) had been cleaned up a bit. Four electric lights had been put up (before there were only candles), the weeds in the courtyard had been pulled out, the house was now swept daily and acquired an ‘almost gay appearance’ because of these much-needed changes.



Guest House Courtyard

THE MEETING

The meeting between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother took place on Sunday 29th March, at 3:30 in the afternoon, at 41, Rue François Martin.

Later she said:

“Something in me wanted to meet Sri Aurobindo all alone the first time.... I had an appointment in the afternoon. He was living in the old Guest House. I climbed the staircase and he was standing there, waiting for me at the top of the stairs: exactly



Head of the staircase where the Mother first saw Sri Aurobindo



Guest House staircase

my vision!
Dressed the same way, in the same position, in profile, his head held high. He turned his head towards me and I saw in his eyes that it was He.”

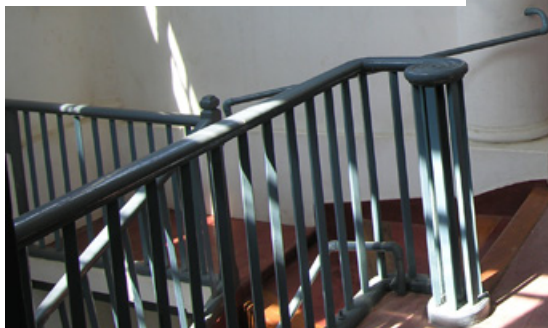
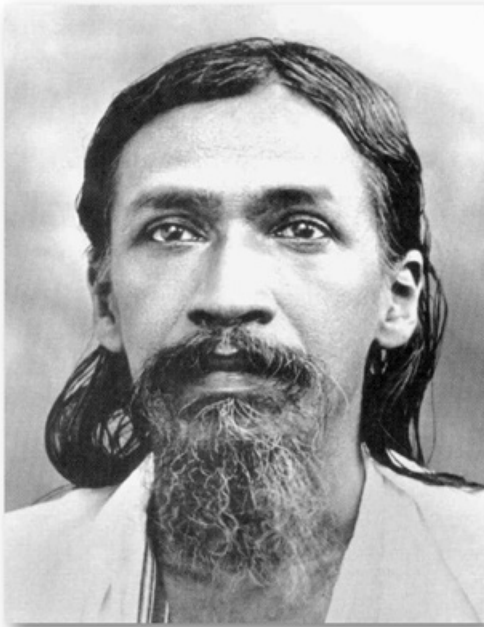
The next day, on 30 March 1914, Mother wrote in her diary:

“Petit à petit l’horizon se précise, la route s’éclaire, et c’est vers une certitude de plus en plus grande que nous nous avançons.

Peu importe qu’il y ait des milliers d’êtres plongés dans la plus épaisse ignorance, Celui que nous avons vu hier est sur terre; sa présence suffit à prouver qu’un jour viendra où l’ombre sera transformée en lumière, et où effectivement, Ton règne sera instauré sur la terre.

Ô Seigneur, Divin Constructeur de cette merveille, mon cœur déborde de reconnaissance et de joie lorsque je pense à elle et mon espoir est sans limite.

Mon adoration dépasse toute parole, mon respect est silencieux.” ✞



Guest House verandah

29TH MARCH 2014

CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF MOTHER'S FIRST ARRIVAL

This year the centenary of the Mother's first arrival in Pondicherry and her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo was celebrated in the Ashram. 29th March was observed as a regular Darshan day, with a meditation in the morning, a visit to the Mother's room and March Past in the evening. There was a screening of a video with images from the Mother's life and extracts of texts related to her work during the meditation after the March Past.

On 30th March, which was a Sunday, a special programme of chanting and recitations was held in the Playground during the meditation. Students, teachers as well as Ashramites participated, 187 voices in all.

The former students of the School were allowed to participate in the March Past in the Playground as had been done on 4th April 2010 when the centenary of Sri Aurobindo's arrival was

being celebrated. The men wore white shorts and T-shirts and the women wore white salwar-kameez or sari. However, due to the constraints of space the former students could only stand along the wall of the gymnasium instead of actually marching; later they sang Vande Mataram with the others.

A run was organised at 3.30 in the afternoon for those who wanted to participate. People gathered at the Ashram Theatre, as it is near the Pondicherry Railway Station where the Mother arrived in 1914, and the run ended at the Ashram Tennis Ground where the runners were given a commemorative medal. Many also walked the distance.

The Government of Pondicherry organised a series of music concerts as well as a classical dance performance at the Ashram Theatre. The general public was also invited to enjoy these performances. ☸

A MUSICAL COMMEMORATION

Sunaina Mandeem '73

The Mother has said "On the physical plane the Divine manifests himself as Beauty". She taught us the importance of manifesting beauty in our lives, and in everything we do. As dance and music express beauty, we thought we could end the celebration of the centenary of the Mother's arrival in Pondicherry with a series of concerts of classical dance and music which express beauty in a very concrete way.

In 2009, a year before the celebrations of the 100 years of Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry, the Government of Puducherry had created a steering committee under the chairmanship of the Lt. Governor to plan the centenary celebrations. The Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville, PondyCAN, INTACH, along with the

departments of Tourism and Art and Culture were members of this committee. PondyCAN and INTACH had prepared an extensive plan for a Renaissance of Pondicherry, mainly in the Boulevard town, and more specifically in the French Precinct, which was forwarded by the Government of Pondicherry to the Prime Minister for funding. In parallel, PondyCAN had gone to the Secretary (Government of India) for culture, with a proposal for the celebration. After this, funds were released both by the Ministry of Culture as well as the Tourism Ministry to the Government of Pondicherry for this celebration. The celebrations started with a three day music festival in March 2010, with a total of 6 concerts, all held at the Ashram Theatre, fully funded by the government.

The planning for the celebration of the centenary of the Mother's arrival began quite late, in January 2014. The Tourism director called the first meeting with the same group as in 2010 and included the French Consulate. Several ideas were discussed on programs to be carried out during the next 12 months. Our proposal to start the celebration with a three-day music festival was accepted by the government who once again took up the responsibility. The Lt. Governor, who was present at all three performances told us that it was an honour for Pondicherry to celebrate the happy occasion of the centenary of the Mother's arrival.

The first two programmes were at the Ashram Theatre. A big projection screen and chairs in the courtyard accommodated the spillover from the Theatre, just like in 2010.



Mahua Shankar, a student of Birju Maharaj, danced in the Kathak style. Her highly accomplished tabla accompanist Akram Khan, held the audience totally captivated with his fingers moving faster than the eye could see, as Mahua danced to that rhythm and pirouetted as many as twenty one times on one occasion. Her intricate footwork was as fascinating as the speed with

which she could say the *bols*. But most engaging were the conversations between the footwork and the tabla. The live accompaniment included the Sarangi of Murad Ali Khan and singing of Nupur Shankar and Shoheb Hassan.

The Lt. Governor of Puducherry inaugurated the festival at the Ashram Theatre, along with the Chief Minister and the Tourism Minister who along with his team had made the festival possible and helped in its organisation.

The Mandolin maestro U Srinivas, enthralled the 1200 plus audience for two hours on the sec-

ond day. He combined virtuosity with a depth in his music that touched the soul. A child prodigy, he gave his first concert at the age of 10. His music ranges from a very deep personal and spiritual experience, often drawing tears from the eyes of the listener, to crescendos of epiphany accompanied by the violin, the mridangam and the ghatam.



Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma's Santoor recital was the third programme held at the JIPMER auditorium on the final day. The launch of a book "Shiv Kumar Sharma – the Man and his Music" started the evening, and the first copy was given by the Lt. Governor to our Bryce, an accomplished flute player who teaches music at the School.

Pandit Shivkumar Sharma informed the audience that classical music was not entertainment but a spiritual experience. Shri Ramkumar Mishra accompanied him on the tabla and his Japanese disciple Takahiro Arai on the tanpura. It was heartening to see so many young people in the audience, all eager to be transported into the world of his heavenly music.

No one wanted to get up from their seats when it was over, and we clamoured for more but



he gently declined. And on that elevated level to which he transported us all, we ended the inaugural function of the celebration of the centenary of the Mother's arrival. ❧

OUR GRATITUDE

Shobha Mitra '58

Our Gratitude — indeed that was the title we had chosen for our musical offering to express our deep love and gratitude to our Douce Mère who has done so much for us. We wished to celebrate the hundredth year of the first meeting of the Mother with Sri Aurobindo which took place on 29th March 1914 by presenting a programme by the students and teachers of the vocal music section of the School. As the number of participants was likely to be large we proposed to stage it in the Playground. Mother had often watched children's programmes here after the Darshan March-Past.

We sent our proposal to the Trustees. They agreed and the day of the Programme was fixed for 29th March 2014 at 7.45 p.m. during the meditation-slot. We were not to exceed 30 minutes, the usual duration of the meditation in the Playground. But later, for technical reasons, we had to change the date of the Programme to Sunday, 30th March 2014 at 7.45 p.m.

The preparations began in earnest. We had to select the texts, set them to music, make a rough recording for the rehearsals and also arrange for teachers to teach the compositions to some 200 participants, most of them School students and adults of the vocal music section. Teaching such a large number of people was not easy, and we also had to arrange for combined practices and rehearsals at a later date.

It was not possible to take children of all age groups, so it was decided that students of vocal music from Progrès 3 upward could participate, if they wished to. Those who signed up were taught the compositions during school hours.

The texts chosen for the compositions were in English, French and Sanskrit. The fact that most of the compositions were written in Sanskrit was one more difficulty, since only a few of the participants knew Sanskrit well or were comfortable singing in it. We had to find teachers who knew Sanskrit well, mostly former students of our School. Classes to teach groups of adult students

were organised, mostly in the evenings, from September 2013, and regular practice began on 2nd January and continued until 30th March 2014.

Some who are not regular members of the vocal music section were keen to participate, and after their musical ability and their ability to sing in Sanskrit were verified, they were also included. A rough recording of the composition we had prepared was given to all those who wished to practise at home. Members from eleven Ashram departments participated and the general response was very good: the attitude was very sincere, and from January to March the practice-sessions went on regularly and with a lot of enthusiasm and sustained effort.

The long-awaited day finally arrived. On 30th March, at 7.30 p.m., all the 187 participants, dressed in white, assembled on the western side of the Playground. Uttam was designated to conduct the programme. The Playground was packed and charged with concentration. A wonderful peace prevailed. Lights were switched off except for one above the Mother's chair. Uttam entered quietly and stood in front of the choir of aspirants. The music began. It flowed and flowed. 187 voices blended together sounding like one.

Then finally Mother's recorded voice was heard:

Mes enfants,

Nous sommes unis dans un même but, pour un même accomplissement, une œuvre unique et nouvelle que la Grâce divine nous a donnée à accomplir. J'espère que de plus en plus vous comprendrez l'importance exceptionnelle de cette œuvre et que vous sentirez en vous une joie sublime qu'il vous ait été donné de l'accomplir.

La force divine est avec vous, sentez de plus en plus sa présence et soyez bien soigneux de ne jamais la trahir.

Sentez, voulez, faites que vous soyez des êtres nouveaux pour la réalisation d'un monde nouveau.

Et pour cela mes bénédictions seront toujours avec vous. ❀

DOLLY-DI

Sunayana '79

Dolly-di was known to everybody as she was the one who gave us notebooks when we needed new ones. She was loved by her colleagues in the Teachers' Room as well as the students; she always had a smile for everyone. She was not a teacher but in our minds she is associated forever with our school life.

We always saw her outside the school with her sister Bani-di. They were inseparable and probably this is why Dolly-di did not live much longer after Bani-di passed away. She was also always seen ei-



Dolly-di (centre) with her sisters, Bani-di (left) and Juthika-di

ther going into or coming out of Nirod-da's room. She used to look after her uncle and cook for him. Often when one went to see Nirod-da one would find her serving him her typically Bengali dishes. What most don't know is that she also looked after other members of her family. This was an important part of her life: caring for others.

One would imagine that she was tied up with cooking and cleaning and caring. But actually, she had a passion which she followed with regularity for a long time and that was dance. She was part of the very early group of dancers when dancing was started in the Ashram.

Whether she was good at it or not was not her worry. She loved dancing and she enjoyed doing it whenever she could. For many years she did not dance on stage, but when she turned sixty she decided to have a solo dance performance to mark this important milestone in her life. She made sure to invite friends and acquaintances and everyone made sure to go as they were carried away by her enthusiasm.

She did not give up her love of dance till the end of her life; when there was an outing for seniors at the Lake she decided to perform for all those who had come. Even when she was in the Nursing Home, undergoing treatment for cancer, she decided to have a dance program on Christmas Day at the Nursing Home itself. This was just a few months before she passed away.

When we think of Dolly-di the image that floats into the mind is a cheerful one. We will always remember Dolly-di in her beautiful saris, which she draped so gracefully, and her matching umbrellas. "I am the queen of umbrellas," she used to say. In fact these were colourful parasols which she always carried to protect herself from the sun. In the days when people walked to go to work, instead of dashing around on scooters,



A LETTER TO BUCKINGHAM PALACE

20 November 2007

[To]
Lady-in-Waiting to The Queen
Buckingham Palace
London
SWIAIAA

Dear Madam

Early this year I visited some friends in India, one of whom spoke to me at length of how she remembered, as a girl, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and how moved she was as she heard her young voice make her vow of dedication to serve her people. This lovely Indian lady has, since that time, been most interested in all news of the British Royal Family and asked me lots of questions about them and royal events in England, conscious that news in India of our royalty is sparse.

On my return home, I sent to her a local newspaper article about a lady (Sheila) in Bury who, every year, sends a birthday card to Her Majesty. I suggested that Dolly (my friend) may care to do this, as she is obviously so devoted to the Queen. I quote from her response to me:

“Perhaps in our past life Mrs. Sheila and I were sisters. We both loved dearly Her Highness Queen Elizabeth. I still love her. Not only her, her royal family too. I am sorry that I cannot send her a birthday card as Mrs. Sheila does. I am not used to writing letters. My English is very poor. But my love for her is always there in my heart. She is a loving



and beautiful Queen. She loves her country people very dearly.”

Dolly lives on in an Ashram in Pondicherry and has dedicated her life to working in the School

Teachers’ Library and to help others, especially caring for her parents and uncle (who are now dead) and latterly her sick brother.

It is beyond her wildest dreams to receive a communication from Buckingham Palace, that I write to ask if you would be so kind as to send a word of greeting to her which would make this lady so happy.

Dolly does not know that I am writing to you as I thought it would be such a lovely surprise if you are able to write to her some small message.

If you are able to do this, I can ensure correspondence reaches her as a mutual friend travels to the Ashram regularly. However, if you would prefer to write to her directly, her address is:

Dolly
Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education
Pondicherry — 605 002
India

Yours faithfully....

most of the Ashram ladies carried umbrellas to protect themselves from the blistering sun. Dolly-di made sure that she had parasols of many different colors so that they matched with any sari she wore.

For someone who was so particular about her appearance and good taste it is entirely consistent that she admired the most obvious example

of them all — the Queen of England herself. She admired her and kept track of all the events in the Queen’s life. Among all the people who visited Nirod-da there was also an English lady. She was so moved to see Dolly-di’s great love and admiration for the Queen that she wrote a letter to Buckingham Palace requesting the Queen to write to Dolly-di. Sure enough, some days later a

THE RESPONSE



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

6th December, 2007

Dear Miss Gurney,

The Queen wishes me to write and thank you for your letter in which you tell Her Majesty about your friend, Dolly.

The Queen thought it kind of you to pay so warm a tribute to Dolly, and would be glad if you would tell her that Her Majesty was pleased to know of the selfless way in which she has dedicated her life to the service of others.

The Queen was touched to know of your friend's loyal support for Her Majesty, and I am to thank you again for your thoughtfulness in writing as you did.

Yours sincerely,

Susan Hussey.

Lady-in-Waiting

letter arrived from Her Majesty's office, informing Dolly-di that the Queen was moved to know about her admiration for her.

Imagine Dolly-di's joy when she received that letter. She proudly showed it to all her friends and eventually framed it to keep in her room.

Her passing away was a shock to many. We had got so used to always seeing her, being greeted by her and being cheered up by her smile, we never realized one day it would come to an end. In her own way she inspired us and has left her stamp on all of us. ☘

JOYOUS EVER

Shubhankar Bhattacharya 'K1

"The purpose of our lives is to be happy."

-The Dalai Lama

Oftentimes life puts me into testing situations; the mind grows weaker, the smile becomes smaller, and the face becomes longer. Nevertheless, some memories archived in an exclusive corner of my heart cheer me up. Images of moments when happiness and delight walked by my side flash past my eyes. Many of those images are of joyous times with an old friend, a caring woman — the evergreen Dolly-di.

Dolly-di relished chapattis made by my mother. Almost every evening she would enjoy those chapattis with a daal from the Dining Room or with some vegetables that she would cook herself. Her little home of 'Felicity' being only a couple of steps from my house, I would cheerfully trot down the road to make the delivery. 'Ding Dong' and Dolly-di would walk up to me with a sweet smile on her face and welcome me into the kitchen. She would carefully fold each chapatti and place them into another container while asking me the usual questions about school and physical activities. Her voice brought out her love and compassion towards children, which I'm sure, was in abundance within her. Once the little interview came to an end, she would call me close to her and, with her soft hands, would place a piece of cake into my container and tell me "I received this cake this afternoon, but as I can't eat the entire cake, you eat a piece for me. That will satisfy my hunger." I would tell her "Merci" and smile shyly,

although I was elated within. A pat on the back from Dolly-di meant that it was time to scamper home and savour the prize with my parents. Every bite of that cake had sprinkles of her tenderness that fell upon the piece when she placed it into my container. My taste buds cannot forget the taste of the treat!

Sometimes it was a cake, sometimes it was a sweet, sometimes even a cup of ice-cream, but Dolly-di never failed to reward me for my hard work (which I considered a refreshing break from my homework time!). I would eagerly wait for the clock to strike eight in order to quickly put on a T-shirt, grab the chapattis and begin my two-minute journey towards paradise....

"I had hoped to build a rainbow bridge, Marrying the soil to the sky..." says Sri Aurobindo in his poem *A God's Labour*.

I believe this rainbow bridge exists, and that it has brushed Dolly-di, thus establishing the link between the heavens and the earth. She was rich in colours. Every inch an elegant woman, she was attired in a single colour from head to toe, and each day it was the turn of a new vibrant colour to drape her. Colours signify a certain enjoyment in life. They spread the message of how happy and lucky one is to be a part of the Divine Creation, and Dolly-di was the perfect ambassador of happiness. Her sweetness, her smile, her love and care, would never leave her, not even for a moment. I consider myself extremely privileged to have known an individual like Dolly-di, who I think was no ordinary human being, but a living example of one who was Ever Joyous. ☸



THE EVER SMILING ONE

Gaurishankar '80 (Munna) remembers

Whenever we came across Dolly-di, she always conveyed an atmosphere of fun, humour, *bhalo basha* and a sense of well-being.

While being quite carefree in her rapport with people, she also was meticulous with her attire and now, with her absence, the sight of her *sarees* and the matching umbrellas have become part of our memory.

Although I did not have a particularly close relationship with Dolly-di, I must have been one among the hundreds whom she made feel at ease with her smile and exuberance. I will try to recount an incident with her that made me realize the real *sadhika* behind this loveable extrovert personality.

It was the year 2003. The memories of the former students' get-together of 1993 and the spirit it had created were still fresh in our minds. The Golden Chain Fraternity had slowly started becoming a more formal setup. It was therefore decided to organize another former students' homecoming in December 2003 to celebrate the school's 60th anniversary.

Apart from getting together in various contexts, we decided to have a cultural evening in the School courtyard. I happened to be one of the organizers of this show. We wanted to start the program with a classical dance performance

but couldn't convince anyone among the former students to do so at such short notice. Finally just 2 days before the show, Anurekha of batch 1980 came forward and everything fell into place.

In the afternoon of the very day when we finalized the program with Anurekha, Dolly-di approached me with a proposal to stage a dance. While the dance issue was decided at the last



Dolly-di (right) and Bani-di with their uncle Nirod-da

moment, various other items were already lined up and we were clearly going beyond the time limit prescribed to us by the School authorities. I was quite embarrassed to say no to Dolly-di, especially seeing her spirit and sweetness. I begged her for some time and went back to the other organizers like Hardie and Sunayana, and discussed it with them, but finally conveyed to Dolly-di most apologetically that it would not be possible. She gave me once again one of her most radiating smiles and walked away wishing

DOLLY

Fanny

Qu'elle était drôle quand il lui fallait prendre un air sérieux . Elle se sentait obligée, elle croyait, et probablement avec raison, que c'était voulu d'elle, surtout au travail..., alors qu'elle était faite pour exprimer sa joie de vivre, exubérante en toutes circonstances, même inappropriées,... Elle aimait danser, elle était faite pour danser la vie,

et on la disait folle!

Qu'elle était jolie quand elle arrivait à l'école avec son parapluie/parasol toujours soigneusement assorti à son sari. C'était une artiste au-

thentique, authentique parce qu'elle ne pouvait faire autrement que de rechercher l'harmonie; non, elle ne la cherchait pas, elle l'incarnait, elle était l'harmonie même, avec le besoin de l'exprimer à temps complet...

et on la disait folle!

Quand elle me voyait arriver à l'école, elle venait vers moi d'un air malicieux et esquissait un pas de danse en cachette, comme une voleuse de joie, toute heureuse du brin de liberté qu'elle s'offrait, comme si la spontanéité du corps, ce n'était pas si essentiel pour épanouir la vie... hélas....

Dolly, tu me manques. ☘

me success for the program.

As it was a hurriedly put up show, I was running around like a mad cap, and just before the soirée began I suddenly heard someone calling me. I turned around and saw Dolly-di with a full-fledged make-up for the dance with a CD in her hand. Typically, in her own fashion, she said "I changed my mind. I have come all ready, in case there is time, you tell me and I will go on stage."

With due apologies to the departed soul, I felt a pressure at that moment that I could have well done without. I just said "yes" and disappeared.

An authorized duration of 90 minutes would at least cross 2 hours and we all knew it. As the program went on, with Sunayana's quiz on Ashram history, songs by veterans such as Gautams (Mitra and Dey), I was looking at my watch literally every 3 minutes and Dolly-di's face was growing bigger and bigger in my mind. It was close to 3 hours when the whole thing ended and obviously..... *Dolly Mashhi* (as she was fondly called by many) could not perform.

There was some amount of conventional success and some enthusiastic former students were

congratulating me. However, there was only one thing in my mind: Dolly-di. She was the one person on this earth I did not want to see at that moment, but I knew that I was already looking for her, even though the greenroom verandah was crowded with people.

I suddenly felt a tap on my back and when I turned, there she was, again with her illuminating smile dismissing the darkness of that winter night. I could feel the tears of embarrassment as she shook hands with me. "Superb program Munna, very good. As you said it was already so long. I understand, *aar tumi mon kharap korbé na* (and you, don't feel bad)." One more of those Dolly-di special smiles and she was gone.

All the effort, the sounds and the claps, and the music and the dance got relegated into the background in the face of the enormity of this simple experience. In a moment I realized how wonderfully enthusiasm and *samata* coexisted in her. The humility she had, even while being denied something, the *bhalo basha* she conveyed through her magical smile were that of a *sadhika*, at least that is how I would remember her for the rest of my life. ☘

DEBIPRASAD: MENTOR AND FRIEND

Giridhar '79

Reading the following piece, you may sometimes feel that it is more about me than about Debiprasad. This happens when two lives are fairly entwined: one finds it difficult to decipher where one ends and the other begins.

I have known Debiprasad since I was about 14 (i.e. 1973), when I started learning the Sarod from him. I cannot now recollect where I first heard him but I seem to have soon come under the spell of the tonality of the Sarod's sound.

Learning from him was a struggle. He was so full of natural talent that I suppose he found it difficult to come down to the level of the student, unless that person was also as naturally talented as he was. He would mostly teach me at the School, but sometimes would make the trip to the Boarding (I was staying at Tanga (Milli) Boarding at the time). The majority of classes were individual; however I do recollect some classes where Lipi Das and I learnt together.

My learning under his tutelage unfortunately came to an end in 1980 when I decided to move to Mumbai (Bombay at the time) after completing Knowledge. He guided me to learn under Pandit Karthik Kumar, a Sitar player, who would visit Pondicherry regularly. I learnt from Pandit Karthik Kumar for a couple of years until the time that we moved to Mysore in 1983. During this period, I would be in touch with Debiprasad mainly for updating him about the progress I was making, rather than learning from or playing with him.

I then lost touch with Debiprasad for a period of around 10 years till 1995. I took up several jobs overseas and had completely stopped playing the Sarod. I returned to India for good in 1995 and I re-established contact with him. He did not show any hesitation in accepting me as his *shishya* despite the long gap.

During this period, he had also travelled far and wide, both in India and abroad. After Pondicherry, the Indian cities that he liked the most were Bangalore and Goa. He would recount how

he spent several years in Bangalore and made many good friends there, both in the field of music and outside of it. He would visit Bangalore regularly till his last days to record at All India Radio where he was an A Grade Artiste and to catch up with friends. He liked the freedom and abandon of Goa which was very much in line with his own character.

Debiprasad would invite me to all his recording sessions at the All India Radio. I made it to the majority of them. It was always a beautiful musical experience. He

would chat with artistes in the corridors, then complete his recording mostly in one take. Usually we would then go out for lunch with his friend and Tabla player, Vishwanath Nakod, where we would chat on all matters sundry. Musicians are also after all human beings and cannot live in the rarified atmosphere of music all the time!

At this stage, it would be incorrect to term our relationship as a *guru shishya* relationship.



We were now more friends than Teacher and Student. He would lean on me (and on occasion, Jyotsna, my wife) to discuss personal matters as well, particularly health.

I also acted as Debiprasad's travel agent once travel booking on the Internet became common. When he wished to travel (and on occasion with his family), he would call me to assist him with the bookings. I remember one particular trip to Rajasthan that he and his family made which had several stops. He was very impressed that I had got everything right and that the trip rolled like clock-work.

On his return from Rajasthan, he recounted his interactions with Rajasthani folk singers — how natural their singing styles were and how they used many of the Classical Ragas to different effect. He also had the opportunity to play with them (it was fortunate that he had carried his Sarod with him as he had to play a concert at his cousin's place in Delhi) and seemed to have enjoyed the experience immensely.

Apart from the Sarod, the instrument that he liked the best was the Sarangi. He was distressed that there are so few Sarangi exponents today. He would not miss a Sarangi concert either in Pondicherry or Auroville. We attended one concert together in Auroville. At the end of the concert, he made it a point to go on stage to congratulate the artistes and to discuss a few musical nuances with them.

In my view, a true guru is one who can provide you the right guidance at the right time. Sometime in 2010, I was discussing with him how I could make faster progress on the Sarod. He told me: "Learn vocal music. It will help you enormously." This has proved to be so true!

He had obviously not thought about the

practical challenge of finding a teacher of Hindustani classical vocal in Chennai, the bastion of Carnatic music. I persisted in my search and it paid off. In January 2011, I started studying with C. Rajasekaran, a vocalist and violinist who is at ease with both the Carnatic and Hindustani musical forms.

Debiprasad was humility personified. Age did not matter. The only thing that mattered was good music. In August 2011, Rajasekar and I visited Pondicherry together to meet with Debiprasad. Rajasekar was

much younger at 35. However Debiprasad immediately put him at ease despite the large age difference and both of them started playing together. I introduced Rajasekar to Daniela who remarked: "How lucky for you to have both your gurus, side-by-side." I guess it is very difficult to ex-

perience this in these days of gurus with inflated egos!

Debiprasad would not dismiss any music outright. He would listen to and evaluate it carefully, then make a call if it was something that appealed to him or not. He particularly liked the Carnatic style and ragas. Among Carnatic ragas, he seemed to like *Charukesi* the most since he has ended up playing that raga numerous times. He would also take up Carnatic ragas that I have not heard other Hindustani musicians playing and render these in the Hindustani style. I can remember right away *Malaya Marutha* being one such raga.

His eagerness to learn was enormous. Rajasekar and I visited Pondicherry again together on Durgashtami and Navami (Saraswati Puja) 2013, which was only a few weeks before Debiprasad's passing away. On Durgashtami evening when Debiprasad and Rajasekar were playing together, Debiprasad was keen to learn new



Carnatic ragas. He was trying to understand the nuances of *Sunadavinodhini*, an uncommon raga.

Debiprasad had a mischievous and jovial side to him as well. The next day we went to the Durga Puja festivities organised by the Bengali Association in Pondicherry. Since Rajasekar was 38,

but unmarried, he took it upon himself to find a bride for him among the many Bengali girls at the Puja!

I continue on my musical journey on the Sarod and vocal. And every step of the way I remember my Mentor and Friend with gratitude for all that he gave me. ❧

MY SWEET BROTHER

Deepshikha remembers her brother, Debiprasad

“Where are you Chotu?” (I used to call Debi by his nickname). “Could you please sing some *sargams* and a few *taans* in *raga Puriya*, on your mobile? I need to sing this *raga* very soon.”

Never once did he fail to sing or demonstrate on the cell phone and guide me in the *vistaar* of the *raga* even during his busy schedule of the day. So sweet and sincere, always so very helpful and generous to others, I wonder why he could not save himself from that fatal fall that took him away so far that he can never again answer my calls!

Years back, in 1996, after going through a traumatic incident in Italy, when Chotu returned home he told me that he had seen through enough of life and human nature and that he had decided to dedicate his life to helping destitute children and helpless single mothers of the fishermen’s village in Kuruchikuppam. His heart went out to succour the needy who are pushed to the edge and exploited. Life had taught him to be selfless, noble and sharing.

I felt proud as a Didi for his noble ideals.

In spite of having no money or means at that time to launch his brave and inspiring proposal, he had willingly embarked on it in quite

stark contrast to his previous “laid back life”; lazy about exercising, lost in music and maths. I had advised him to tread cautiously on his new path for I was not very confident if he could take up a venture that required such hard work!

His Italian wife, Daniella, was with him in this venture and their joint efforts changed the destiny of scores of destitute little children and single mothers. In due course they were all housed in a



beautiful and spacious school called “Shanti Joy Nivas”, close to Solai Nagar, in the northern part of Puducherry.

Chotu’s enthusiasm and keenness to provide the children with a beautiful future, through education and some material help, gave them

REMEMBERING DEBIPRASAD

Manoj Das, in a letter to Gaurishankar (Munna), shares his memories of Debiprasad

Dear Gaurishankar,

I had been obliged to write several obituary-oriented pieces on people famous and not-too-famous — but all of them older than I or of nearer my age. I had not known, till I agreed at your loving insistence to write on Debiprasad, what an odd task it was to reminisce about somebody who belonged to the generation of my students.

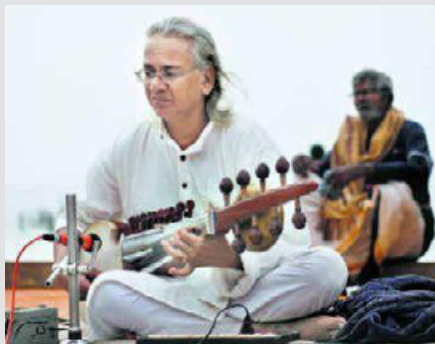
Towards the end of 1971 the Mother allotted Pratijna and I a large double-storied house that the Ashram retained on rent (9 Iswaran Koil Street, now a busy hotel or guest house) consisting of half a dozen rooms, hall-like space and a pair of terraces. We found it too big for us and with the sanction of the Mother, brought Minoti (Sports Star more than once) and Matriprasad (who, on his arrival in the Ashram in December 1963, had very clearly been directed by the Mother to be left with us in what was then known as the Orissa Boarding, a children's dwelling later transferred to a new building and named Home of Progress).

Pratijna wished Matriprasad to learn some musical instrument and one day, if I am not mistaken, she observed the boy listening to a

recorded piece of Sarod played by the maestro Nandalal Ghose with rapt attention. Nandalal's worthy son Debiprasad had unmistakably inherited his renowned father's talent and was already shining as a budding artiste. At our request he gladly agreed to impart lessons to Matriprasad. The two became friends and Matriprasad learnt the instrument with a rapidity that pleasantly surprised us. Once he was even persuaded to give a demonstration in the Hall of Harmony under his brilliant young teacher's encouragement and was warmly applauded. Although after his studies his responsibilities in the Ashram grew too heavy to let him keep up his practice, effect of that brief encounter remains green in him in his quiet connoisseurship of classical music.

We used to celebrate Debiprasad's birthday in a festive way. Once or twice his illustrious father

graced the occasion and played the instrument at our request. To listen to him was an enchanting experience. Once we tape-recorded his performance. I obtained his permission to try to release it through a recognised producer for wide circulation. He agreed. I handed over the tape to Viswam-ji of the Vijaya Vauhini Studios and the Chandamama Publications of Chennai. He passed it on to one of the premier houses in the business and their director, after listening to it along with his experts, reported to Viswam-ji,



self-confidence and cheer in their life. I wondered at the metamorphosis of my erstwhile merry-go-lucky brother, hardly industrious or even ambitious to push for name or fame even in music, which was, as if, in his genes! How did he manage to give himself to such a mission that required such an involved and dedicated life?

His eyes would often soften while speaking

to me about the children of his school. "Didi," he would say, "come and see the glint in their eyes, the ray of hope that shines in them!"

He and Daniella worked hard for the cause, and slowly money came and they could do what they had dreamt of....

On the other hand, he was known to his friends in the Ashram and outside as a brilliant

“Any music producer would be only too happy to commercially release it. Kindly help us regularise the contract. In fact, there are music-lovers who look for Nandalal Ghose’s cassettes.”

Delighted, I informed Debiprasad about the success of my mission. He carried what I thought to be a good tiding to his father, only to come back and inform me apologetically that the maestro was not in favour of the scheme; he had agreed to my suggestion out of courtesy and did not anticipate my truly taking any meaningful step in that direction!

I was mystified and absorbed it in my stock of knowledge on the conduct of mice and men.

Debiprasad, as I felt by and by, not only inherited his father’s talent, but also his inexplicable reticence — a trait that was unhelpful to the career of an artiste. Of course the father and son should know best what to do with their exceptional gift!

A well-known Bengali film-script writer and musicologist, Debanshu Babu, who spent his last years in the Ashram and worked for Sri Aurobindo Society, somehow found our house a congenial retreat and spent good many hours on our terrace sipping tea and narrating his reminiscences. It was while in conversation with him that Debiprasad’s wit would be tickled. Though I used to enjoy their dialogue unobserved, my memory of them is too

fragmentary to narrate any of them as an item. But I remember the septuagenarian Debanshu Babu, once an important denizen of Kolkata’s make-believe world, believed that science would come out with some miracle-lotion to help him safeguard and even multiply the lamentably few strands of hair on his head that had survived his untiring application of ever-new inventions in *hairology*. He urged Debiprasad

to be in track of it and Debiprasad, like a devoted researcher in the field, would pass on to him the progress of some appropriate panacea fast evolving towards its fruition at some remote corner of the world and Debiprasad would see to it that Debanshu Babu would be among its first beneficiaries and grow a spectacular crop of hair overnight.

Debanshu Babu would take him to task for pulling his legs, but would look relaxed. Of course he did not tarry in this world for that promise to

materialise.

Have I strayed into a lighter mood? Probably it is to skip the painful sentiment that would unavoidably invade this exercise. I’m sure you’ll understand. Debiprasad’s life inspires in my vision the picture of a half-bloomed lotus suddenly missing from a wonderful lake where Providence had placed it.

Dear Gaurishankar, please bear with my ending the letter rather abruptly.

With best wishes, Manoj Das



Sarod artiste of the Seniya gharana. It mattered little to him whether he played for the National program of music at AIR or at the Sangeet Sammelan in Gwalior or Dharwad or anywhere abroad or at home—concerts in Auroville; he always gave his best. He was known for his wonderful control, vibrant and in-depth handling of the

Raga and intense melody. His soft and humble temperament was primarily that of a true musician.

So warm, sweet and lovable was his presence that his absence has left a gnawing sadness in my life even though I know that Chotu is now playing for the Mother somewhere... up there.... ❧

SUNDAY MORNINGS IN THE ASHRAM GARDENS

A SCHOOL DIARY RE-OPENED — 1955-1960

By *Kanu De '68*

Pondicherry was a quiet little town from mid-1955 to 1960 — the time when this story unfolds.

The atmosphere of the place was more relaxed, the people more easy-going and the environment a lot freer from congestion and pollution.

Beyond the boulevards, the ring-roads that girdle the town, lay green spaces to the west, the north and south. (Needless to say all along the east-coast stretched the Bay of Bengal.)

Walking along in any direction from the centre of the town for fifteen or twenty minutes one could leave behind the movements of the town to enter into roads or lanes bordered by paddy fields, coconut groves and mango orchards — one was in the country-side with the fresh breeze blowing all over one's face and body. This was also the time of our boyhood, a time to roam and discover the areas around us.

We were a band of wanderers in the Ashram School, ten to fourteen years old, with lots of energy but far less wisdom to use it judiciously; little nomads, I would say.

What we wanted most of all was fun and the desire for action drove us. Football was our passion and so were the green spaces of the orchards and the countryside; their call was irresistible to us.

What follow are some incidents that occurred in the course of five years of playing and wandering. During this time we played a lot of football, met some interesting people and saw lovely sights of nature in varied forms and hues. We also tasted a variety of tropical fruits right off the trees. Like most children we had a great time.

Though not every outing was eventful, through observation and experience we learned some lessons about Nature and enjoyed each one of them as they brought about a good feeling.

These outings were our boyish adventures, but in the course of them we also gradually came of age and along with it, we began to understand that with growing up comes responsibility too.

OUR FREE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

On Sundays around 8.00 a.m. we school boys hurried to the Playground or to the Sportsground (Muthialpet); a game of football or an occasional cricket match was in the offing. We played football barefoot and kicked around a discarded tennis ball, but our interest remained undiminished despite the lack of proper gear and the burning heat of the sun. Above all, we loved to chase the ball, dribble it, pass it accurately and, with some luck, score a goal. That goal was rare, but we kept on trying and the joy that followed the goal was great. The joy after winning a game was unparalleled; it left us happy to the full.

Normally we played on until 9.30 or 10.00 a.m. when the sun's intense rays began to beat down and a time for rest was then called for; we'd had our fun for the day.

AMBABHIKSHU'S ORCHARD

Ambabhikshu's Orchard (now Ambabhikshu House) was the place we usually went to relax after the game. It was close enough to the Playground or Sportsground, had shady trees and about a six-metre-wide open well. This well, with its cool underground water, served as a huge bathtub into which we dived and splashed to refresh ourselves after the exhaustion of our football game.

The orchard was about half a kilometre north of the Playground. It took us ten to fifteen minutes to walk there. It was approximately a one acre plot with guava trees, mango trees, custard apple trees and pomegranate bushes, along with various flower plants and creepers. There was also a poultry farm on the northern side and a

ten-room apartment block at the centre that housed a few members of the Ashram. They were all nice people who never interfered with us, though I am not sure the same thing applied the other way round, because we were rather boisterous and some ruckus broke out every now and then when we played.

Stern in look and aloof in attitude was Ambabhikshu-bhai, the manager of the orchard. We normally saw him only at a distance, while he was occupied with supervising the garden work. At times we also saw him spinning thread from cotton wool with a hand-operated spindle as he watched over the field workers. As for us, he simply let us be.

Occasionally on Sundays we went to other Ashram estates for a picnic: Maret Garden, the poultry farm and places further away from the town proper. The common element in all these estates was their rich vegetation. This lent them an extraordinary charm and drew us to them. In their midst we felt the joy that is induced by green havens; at such places one feels at peace with oneself and with others too.

MARET GARDEN

A Sunday In May 1955

Eight of us go walking to Maret Garden in high spirits. It is mainly a coconut garden with a mango orchard. Located about two kilometres from the centre of Pondicherry, it takes us a good half hour of brisk walking to get there.

Opening the main door we see Autol-da, the manager, walking vigorously up and down the veranda of his bungalow. When he sees us approaching, he abruptly turns and goes into his living-room, closing the door behind him. Why? I wonder perplexed. His hasty departure strikes us as being more funny than rude. Moving along the mud pathway, we go to the backyard of the bungalow. There again is Autol-da walking up and down the rear veranda, exercising with even more vigour than when we first saw him. Seeing us he quickly slips away again into his living room with a grumpy look on his face and bolts the door with an audible rap, meant for our hearing. Autol-da's disapproval of our visit is obvious. His sudden



The Mother visiting the Poultry in 1957

jerky movements say as much. I can't hold back my muffled laughter — sorry for that!

For over an hour we roam the area. Huge jack-fruits hang from their tree trunks, clusters of coconuts lean down from tree tops and mango trees sag with the fruits on their branches. Nature's bounty is visible here all over the place. Along our way we pluck a few gooseberries, a few mangoes and, yes, a pineapple as a quick surreptitious snack. We sit beneath the shade of tall coconut trees and sprawling mango trees located at various points of the orchard. Munching the fruits we also feast our eyes on the beauty of the place. The verdant ground cover of ferns below and the green canopy of leaves above are mesmerizing in their rich, natural beauty. All this while, time flows by quietly and imperceptibly.

At 11.30 a.m. we leave the area reluctantly without any hard feelings towards our host, but with many sweet thoughts for the garden; its fruits were delicious with a pinch of salt and a sprinkling of chili powder.

Now in hindsight, Autol-da's reception does not seem as startling as it once appeared. With the trail of suspicious signs we had left behind on previous visits, he would have known the real motive of our visit to his place.

Yet he did not show us the door, nor did he spy on us, nor did he impose any restriction on our movements. He just went inside and kept away from us, expressing his displeasure at our arrival while tolerating it with inner grace. That was nice of him.

THE POULTRY FARM

September 1956

Tublu and I go to the Ashram poultry farm one Sunday morning — a first visit. What kind of reception awaits us here, I wonder. Opening the main door, we see a lane laid with red laterite, running deep inside the farm, with a variety of ornamental vegetation growing on either side. Above the ground cover stand coconut trees, mango trees and a lone tamarind. We move along slowly so that we are not mistaken for trespassers.

At the far end are some poultry pens and there stands Kamal Bhattacharya, the joint-manager of the place. Busy with the morning session of poultry feeding and filling the drinking troughs with water, he smiles at us. A welcome sign, and it reassures us. As we approach the pens Kamal-da says, “Come in here, both of you. Catch the chicks for me — one by one. They have to be vaccinated.” A few minutes later we begin the work. There are about a hundred chicks to do! Assisted by a farm worker, Tublu and I chase the birds and one by one we catch them. Holding each bird steady we enable Kamal-da to inject



Chicks at the Poultry (photo probably from the 1950s)

the vaccine fluid beneath the skin of its wing. The whole operation lasts about an hour in a cat and mouse chasing game — three men against one chick.

After the operation, the chicks seem shaken but are otherwise all right. Work done, Kamal-da says, “Thank you, boys! You may now carry

on with your walk” and he heads back to his bungalow. As for us, having experienced a new aspect of farm work, we resume our stroll and explore the seven acres of green farmland.

Near the first poultry pen is a 3 x 1½ metre plot of ball jasmines (Japanese snowball). A thousand or more flowers grow on it in a spectacular display of white floral glory, set off against a dense background of dark green foliage. The sight is a marvel and it holds us for a few minutes in rapt admiration; never before have I seen anything like this!

The cackling of layer birds wafts through the clean country air as we walk along leisurely on the winding lanes of the farm. On the far western border, weaver birds by the dozen roost on tall palm trees, bustling around, nursing their chicks and keeping their nests; they seem so gay and happy in their own world minding their own business. A wind-mill stands tall at the centre of the land. Its blades turn indolently in the azure sky as we complete a round of the area, stopping at places to look at the plants and colorful flowers: *Bougainvilleas* (Protection) hangs over the entire compound wall; *Plumerias* (Psychological Perfection) and *Alamandas* (Victory) sparkle on bushes and creepers all along the sides of the bungalow and leafy ferns line the path-ways on both sides¹. How soothing they all are to the senses.

At the end of an hour’s walk we head back to the bungalow located at the centre of the land. Its ornate facade in bas-relief is a testimony to the builder’s good taste and noble family lineage. Inside the bungalow we find Robi-da (Atindra-da’s youngest brother) in the kitchen, cutting onions into fine cross-sections.

“Hello Robi!” Tublu says. “We enjoyed our stroll. It is so green everywhere, so beautiful!” “Good!” says Robi-da. “Both of you were very helpful to Kamal-da it seems.... So now what’s next? Do you want to have lunch here?” After a moment of hesitation Tublu replies, “Yes, that would be nice”, looking at me with a contented smile, to which I respond with a happy nod. It is

1. Kamal-da informed me at a later date that the Mother had told him to take care of the artistic designs.

around 12.45 p.m. We are both quite hungry and the invitation is like a windfall.

A little later, the three of us sit at the dining table. Robi-da serves us Dining Room 'dal' and rice with sautéed diced potato as the main course, followed by papaya slices and Rastoli bananas for dessert. The papayas and Rastolis are some of the finest of their kind. Amidst the greenery, the peaceful atmosphere and Robi-da's cordial manners, the simple D.R. lunch tastes very good indeed!

After lunch we rest and relax. At 4.30 p.m. we join Robi-da in collecting eggs from the laying boxes inside the poultry houses. First we set the trapped fowls free, then pick up the warm eggs and put them in a basket for distribution the next day to members of the Ashram.

At 6.00 p.m., after a tea break, we thank Robi-da for the kind reception he has accorded us and head for home after a whole day of fun and farm work: chasing chicks, collecting eggs and just wandering around, carried away by the beauty of the place. This was Poultry in 1956 and we were both 12 years old.

AMBABHIKSHU'S ORCHARD AGAIN

Now back to Ambabhiikshu's orchard. This was the place we spent most of our Sundays during this five year period. Here, over the years, the plants and trees and creatures and people around us evoked ideas, induced feelings and made impressions that have helped in making the finer part of ourselves. Being exposed to nature at an early age we imbibed a love for it in all its aspects: flora, fauna and men also.

Right at the entrance of the garden shone a group of Divine Love flowers (*punica granatum*) like little lamps on a Christmas tree. Silently, they greeted one and all who opened the main door. Along the mud passage leading to the apartments ran an archway, overgrown with the creeper bearing 'Silence' flowers (*passiflora*). They seemed to peep at us mischievously as we walked beneath the creeper's shade. On either side of the lane



The Mother visiting the Poultry in 1957

grew bright crotons of many colors, enlivening the surrounding. To the east stretched the fruit orchard with its green canopy, keeping the area cool, shady and inviting the whole year round. To the south, in the centre, lay the large open well that served as our swimming pool. Every child should have a place like this for the healthy growth of body, mind and spirit.

Here amid the trees in the orchard we played hide and seek, here we plunged into the cool well water and swam, here we searched for ripe guavas on a particular tree and here we simply rested under the shade of the fruit trees and chit-chatted as we listened to the cooing, chirping and whistling of the birds. There were Mynas, Bulbuls, Warblers, Woodpeckers, Kingfishers and other birds too, who, in turns, cheered-up the quiet ambience of the place. The 'Bulbuls' were the finest singers amongst them and also the prettiest perhaps, although to be fair, all the birds that came to this place were cute creatures.

During the guava season, May to August, the branches of the trees carried the fruits in clusters of four or five. At first the fruits were dark green and hard, bitter in taste, and of little interest. It was the ripe fruits we were after, but they were rarely to be found, having been plucked before their time, usually by us, driven by curiosity or over-excitement.

But on rare occasions, a few fruits hidden inside the thick foliage went unnoticed. With time, they could grow to the size of tennis balls! Taut outside, soft inside, these honey-filled balls

simply melted in our mouths at the first crunch. Thus we were able to taste the delight of the sweet guava-flavored syrup in our mouths. Those were the fruits that we looked for.

A RACE FOR RIPE GUAVAS!

One Sunday morning in May 1958, after a game of football and a dip in the cool water of the well, four of us go in search of ripe guavas on our favourite tree. Soon the race is on to find the biggest ripe fruit.

A good grip on the branches and good body balance are required to keep one in place two to four metres above ground as well as sharp eyes to detect the ripe fruits hidden behind the leaves. In the midst of this game, all of a sudden, one of us whispers, “Hey! Ambabhikshu is here. He is looking at us!” “Oh no!” I mutter, caught off guard but it is too late to run and hide. Two of my comrades sheepishly come down from the tree, while the third friend and I freeze on the branches we are perched on. Standing ten metres from us Ambabhikshu-bhai looks at us for a while. He is clad in a white khadi kurta



Ambabhikshu-bhai

and dhoti, short in stature, bespectacled, mustached and with sharp eyes. At last, he declares in a loud and severe voice, “Now, listen all of you! This tree is yours! You may have all its fruits for yourselves. But do not pluck fruits from the other trees — they are meant for general dis-

tribution. Do you understand?”

So saying, he turns and walks away to attend more important work, leaving us alone. Now imagine this! For 13 and 14 year-old boys what a wonderful event this is. And this also shows the kind of men who ran the Ashram back then and even now, men who manage their affairs with utmost patience, tolerance, empathy and wisdom. Divine qualities! Wonderful men!

Autol-da, Kamal-da, Robi-da and Ambabhikshu-bhai — these are four men amongst the many I encountered during my school days. The impressions made by their quiet deeds when dealing with children are rich in my memory; they were well-balanced, measured and gracious to suit the situations in favour of all concerned.

After the gift of the guava tree by Ambabhikshu-bhai, all of us began to feel a gradual fondness for this elderly manager. He was not as stern as he looked, quite the contrary. And as a result, though several guavas hung from the branches of trees near our guava tree, we never breached the manager’s order thereafter.

This story is only one among many that occur frequently in all societies and communities around the world — I suppose. It is a small tribute to people, who care to help children live and grow in the best natural conditions they can create for them, by whatever means they can — tolerance, compliance, material provisions, guidance and above all empathy. All of these qualities we found in Ambabhikshu’s orchard and Autol-da’s garden, and Kamal-da’s poultry farm in one way or another.

Over the years, on many occasions, I have wondered: was it a casual gesture or a deliberate choice of Ambabhikshu-bhai to grow the Divine Love flower (*Punica granatum*) right at the entrance of his orchard? This was a place where many children came and spent happy carefree moments of their childhood in full freedom, under the blue of the sky, amid the green of the trees, amid tolerant and gentle and wise people. Here the Divine Love greeted one and all at the entrance. Here the Divine Love reigned all over this verdant children’s playground of SAICE.

EPILOGUE

Ambabhikshu’s orchard no longer exists in its full glory. Concrete apartments have now taken up much of the land. But our memories of the old times remain with all their sweetness. The bush carrying the *Punica Granatums* still stands at its place to this day. On it bloom the Divine Love flowers, as radiant as they were half a century ago. ❧

*Be simple,
Be happy,
Remain quiet,
Do your work as well as you can,
Keep yourself always open towards me —
This is all that is asked of you.*

The Mother

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A DIVINE DISPENSATION

The Mother is not a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. She has had the same realisation and experience as myself.

The Mother's sadhana started when she was very young. When she was twelve or thirteen, every evening many teachers came to her and taught her various spiritual disciplines.

Among them was a dark Asiatic figure. When we first met, she immediately recognised me as the dark Asiatic figure whom she used to see a long time ago. That she should come here and work with me for a common goal was, as it were, a divine dispensation.

The Mother was an adept in the Buddhist yoga and the yoga of the Gita even before she came to India. Her yoga was moving towards a grand synthesis. After this, it was natural that she should come here. She has helped and is helping to give a concrete form to my yoga. This would not have been possible without her co-operation.

One of the two great steps in this yoga is to take refuge in the Mother.

Sri Aurobindo (CWSA, 32: 36)