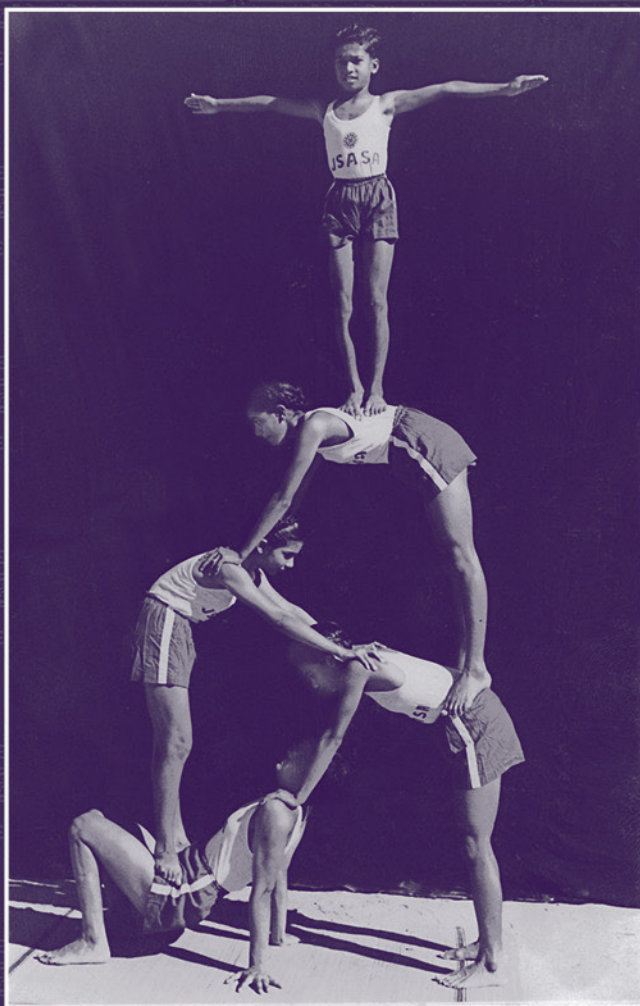


The

# Golden Chain

[www.goldenchain.in](http://www.goldenchain.in)

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS

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

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

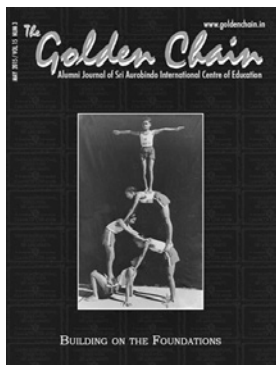
Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

# CONTENTS

VOL 15 NUM 3

MAY 2015

- 1 **THE EDITORS' PAGE**
- 2 **TALK SHOP: Above Hatred**  
Anurag '10 tells us about his novel.
- 4 **Sitar Star**  
Soham '06 answers.
- 6 **Studying Literature**  
Tirthankar '09 shares his passion for the subject.
- 10 **SCHOOL REPORT: Ashram's Solar Research Initiative**  
Brahmanand '79 provides an overview.
- 14 **PERSPECTIVE: Divine Dilemma**  
Yogamaya '95
- 16 **Friendship**  
Sunayana '79
- 19 **PONDY NOTES: The Pondicherry Heritage Festival**  
Bitasta '81 reports on the event.
- 22 **CULTURE CORNER: Staging Chekov**  
Gautam '76 shares his thoughts.
- 25 **MEMORIES: Childhood Memories of the Ashram**  
Parul '61 remembers.
- 32 **QUIZ TIME**



On the Cover:

A pyramid built by the small acrobatics group which the Mother named "Conquering the Impossible" in the early years of our School. In the background is the SAICE nameplate.

*The Golden Chain*

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Gopal '90

Some years ago we had a couple of group discussions among former students which we featured in *The Golden Chain*. The subject of the discussions was: as former students of SAICE, "How Different Are We Really?" from those who have grown up elsewhere. One of the answers that came up in the deliberations again and again was that, whether we choose to stay back in the Ashram or not, just by being part of the Ashram community in our formative years, we imbibe, to some extent at least, its ideals of a higher, deeper living; we create somewhere within us a link to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

The question that I ask myself sometimes is whether, over the years, students' exposure to the spiritual life of the Ashram is waning. Are today's graduating students less open to, less interested in the essential spirit of this place?

In an article that appears in this issue, Parul-di remembers her early years in the Ashram. She tells us how everything was centered around the Mother, how She encouraged and took interest in each one and each activity. From Parul-di's account we see what was then a very different student community — cocooned from the outside world, living and breathing the aspiration for a greater self-perfection, for the creation of a New World. Later in the article Parul-di writes how today the atmosphere has changed, people's outlook has changed.

No one will contest the fact that circumstances are very different from what they were in the 1950s. The Mother's physical Presence is not there. The Ashram is different. Parents are different. The world has changed. Children are growing up in an environment where they are likely to find it more and more difficult to relate to events and attitudes from more than half a century ago. They are constantly bombarded by images and values of the outside world through the internet and television. Typically they also spend their vacations outside Pondy. By and large students seem more outward-looking than ever. And this brings us back to the question — given the changed conditions, how far do students today feel part of the Ashram community? Do they feel in tune with its aims and its spirit? Does the spiritual life mean anything to them at all?

Naturally it is unwise to generalize and also, these are personal matters in which others are not in a position to judge. But the impression one gets from occasional conversations with students or recently-graduated students does not always inspire confidence.

There is no doubt that the spiritual life is not everyone's calling; it is also true that adolescence typically has other things on its mind. Maybe one also needs more life-experience, more maturity, even a stint in the outside world, before one appreciates the special atmosphere of the Ashram, before one rediscovers, for oneself, what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother can mean in one's life. But maybe we can at least ensure that the seeds are sown, so they can germinate when the time comes.

How does one ensure that? Brain-washing or insistence on conformism will not work, nor is it desirable. There is instead, a need to ignite the student's own deeper seeking for meaning, to awaken in him, or her, the urge to look beyond the superficiality of an ordinary existence, to open his or her highest aspiration to the Great Adventure.

There is also a need to create a new language that addresses modern children's psychological and intellectual needs while opening them to the all-embracing vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; a vision that can shed so much light on the modern world's complex social, political, cultural and environmental problems; a vision and a Grace that can guide and succour through life's vicissitudes.

More and more of the older generation who were personally guided by the Mother are passing on. Many of them embodied a simplicity and dedication to the ideal and carried the purer vibrations of an earlier era. Now the baton is gradually being passed on to a younger generation of teachers and captains. They have the immense challenge of opening today's students to a higher aim in life, of helping them create their own connection with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

SAICE has had a glorious past, guided by the Mother, suffused with Her radiant physical Presence. It will require a special dedication and sincerity to carry forward that spirit, to build on those foundations. ❧

# ABOVE HATRED

*Anurag Prasad '10 tells us about his self-published novel.*

***How did you get the idea to write this novel?***

History and political science have always been amongst my favorite subjects and I think that there is no conflict that is as complex and as destructive as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The scale of human suffering in that region probably has no parallel in the history of mankind. What I find most intriguing in the situation there is how tough it is to say who's right and who's wrong. Both sides voice a partial truth and it is extremely difficult to see how their opposite realities can ever be reconciled. Writing this novel was my way of providing a solution. I believe that the path of love and compassion is the only way forward for both sides and it is only the youth who can make the change happen. I put my trust in youth because the young are not held back by old and bitter experiences and prejudices. They want to create a new and better world for themselves.

***Since you have not been to Israel how did you manage to set your story there?***

It was quite a challenge! I spoke to a few Israelis and some friends who've been to Israel about the feel and ambiance of the place and, of course, I read lots of books, watched loads of movies and did a tremendous amount of research online. Any gaps there were filled in by my imagination!

***How could you get an insight into the psychology of people who are so different from you?***

Actually, I don't think people are very different in different parts of the world. They speak

different languages and grow up in different cultures but the basic things remain the same. Pain, loss, suffering, friendship, love... these are universal truths and once we become sensitive to them, it is not difficult to relate to people, no matter where they come from.

***Can you tell us something about the way this book has been published because the cover says that it is a self-published novel?***

Yes of course. A couple of years ago, I came across this amazing website, pothi.com. What this website offered was an opportunity to publish a book by sending it over to the pothi team. All the author had to do was write the book in a

format suggested by pothi, send it over and wait for the pothi team's approval. If the people at pothi thought the content and language were up to the mark, they would make the book available on their website both as an ebook and a print on demand paperback. Once an ISBN was obtained for the book, pothi would then make it available on other online platforms such as Amazon, Flipkart and Infibeam. This is what I did and I'm really glad I did it!

***What is the feedback you have received from your readers?***

The feedback has been absolutely overwhelming! I have received lots of encouragement including a pen sent to me by a Jordanian representative to the United Nations! I have also been invited to Israel by a family who read my book and would like to take me around the country.



## EXTRACT FROM *ABOVE HATRED*

Ali stood firm, ready for what had to come. He knew that he was innocent and he didn't care for the judgement of the tribe. Allah knew the Truth and Aisha knew the Truth and for Ali, that was more than enough. He opened his mouth without protest so that the rod could be placed on his tongue. When the metal touched him, it felt cool and harmless but a loud cry went up to the skies as Javed fell to his knees, his tongue burnt to ashes. The whole village watched in awe and fear as their leader fell writhing on the desert sand, inexplicably burnt by a rod he had placed on another's tongue.

Ali closed his eyes and silently thanked Allah for his grace and justice that had saved the day. After opening them, Ali searched for the person he wanted to see most but Aisha was nowhere to be seen. Ali started calling her name, softly at first and then more and more frantically. But, to his dismay, he heard no answering call. The whole village, now firmly on Ali's side, searched throughout the night but Aisha was not found. Ali, mad with grief and despair, ran around the desert shouting her name but to no avail. Some say she drowned in a well, others say she jumped off a cliff... no one can be sure. Her body was never found.



As for Ali, it is believed that he walks all over the desert even today, searching for Aisha. On quiet nights, you can still hear his voice, carried by the wind... moaning and sighing for his long lost love.

Then there have been extremely touching responses from my family, friends and teachers. I can't thank everyone enough for all the love and goodwill!

***What was the most difficult thing you encountered while writing your novel?***

The most difficult thing was also the most fun thing! Never having been to Israel meant that there was much that was left to the imagination and that's the way I like it!

***In what way has your upbringing at the Ashram contributed to the content of your novel?***

A million ways! While studying here, I was always encouraged to think originally and form my own opinions and that has been crucial for

writing this novel. My teachers deserve a lot of credit for my work and I just want them to know that I'm eternally grateful to them.

***Is there anything you would like to add?***

I have a message for all aspiring authors. If you have the time and inspiration, just write! Don't be lazy and leave it for later because, trust me, there will never be a later. Don't worry about how your work will be received because you write more for yourself than for others. What makes me happiest about my book being out there is the fact that I've been able to shape some of my hopes and beliefs and now they're out in the world and maybe someday they will inspire some small change in someone's life. That's always an author's ultimate dream! ☺

# SITAR STAR

*Soham Munim '06 answers*

## ***How did your interest in music start?***

I don't recollect the exact point when it all began. Moreover, I feel lucky to have been exposed to a lot of music at home which must have had an

Obviously not! So I proceeded then with a positive mind-set and embarked upon this journey of constantly trying to progress and leaving the rest in the hands of the Divine Will, as there weren't any alternatives. And one day it became a profession although it wasn't a decision I consciously took! Fortunately in following my passion I received ample support.

## ***What kind of music do you listen to when you are relaxing?***

As I enjoy listening to various genres, I must be relaxed most of the time!

## ***What were the difficulties you encountered when you took up music as a profession?***

There's no end to difficulties in this profession! Broadly speaking, I have found 3 categories of difficulties so far:

1. The simplest is about the betterment of your musical ability which boils down to practice, thinking, problem-solving etc. It is the most satisfying to overcome.

2. I came across the second one at a slightly later stage, when I had to understand and deal

impact on my outlook on music. So it could've been some moment in Olga's class when we'd try and sing along with the piano or it could've also been some instance when my dad would be driving in the Mumbai traffic giving us full scope of listening to some live concert recordings uninterrupted!

## ***When did you decide that you wanted to play music on a professional level?***

Frankly, I don't know so much about the 'professional' level as I see a huge spectrum in front of me!

Beginning to learn Sitar at the age of 17, I could never decide on ambitions like: someday I'll become a 'great' Sitar player. Others in this field might have started as early as 3, giving them a head-start of about 15 years! Every time these thoughts crept in, I needed to put things in perspective: Is the general audience going to take all these facts into account before judging me?



Soham, as a child, with Ustad Zakir Hussain



with certain management issues in this profession such as instrument repairs, sound, networking, recording, presentation etc. Just as it's important



In Basab-da's class

to deal with these appropriately, it's also important to learn from mistakes and move on and get detached from the end-result so as to focus better on one's music.

3. And the last category (so far!) is what I found to be a very dark and confused area! It involves the non-acceptance of merit, intentional hampering of progress, unfair criticism, politics etc. — negativity in short! But it exists in all walks of life, ranging from some games we play at school-level to “well-established” and “reputable” professions later, so why make a fuss?! Maybe it's better to focus on practice and try and “befriend the Asuras” rather than fight them!

***What kind of training have you had?***

I started (and continue!) learning the Sitar under Basab (da) Sen at SA-ICE. Post SAICE I went on to receive guidance from Pt. Kartick Kumar and Pt. Shyamal Chattopadhyay as well as some other musicians. Apart from that I had learned a few other instruments back in school whose training probably reflects in my approach.

And I can never boast of the number of hours I practiced as I never looked at the clock!

***Do you compose your own music?***

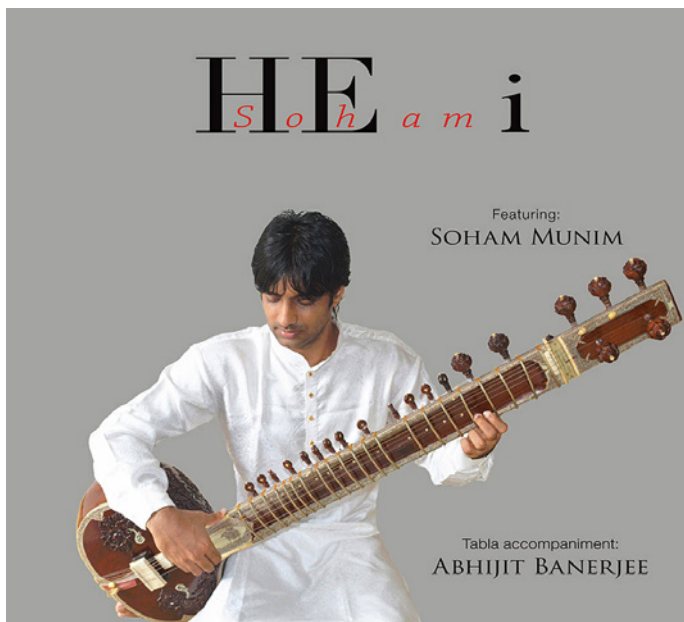
Yes, I do compose most of the “Gats” (compositions) that I perform or try and give a twist to an existing one as I feel it's important to add one's element, one's individuality to the presentation. From another perspective, considering the kind of improvisation required, we are actually composing on the spur of the moment throughout the length of the concert.

Apart from that, I also like to experiment and think of music beyond certain accepted barriers by trying to incorporate all that has touched me so far.

***Which kind of audience inspires you the most?***

Actually, I've grown up practicing in the solitude of my room, being inspired nonetheless! So it's hard to know which kind of audience inspires me in particular. Maybe the one that reduces in its “mass” during the course of the concert giving rise to a certain “class”! ☘

Soham's website: [www.sohammunim.com](http://www.sohammunim.com)



"He am I" — the music album.

# STUDYING LITERATURE

Thirthankar Chakraborty '09

I am currently in my third year as a PhD student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Kent. My research focuses on Samuel Beckett, a twentieth century Irish writer who wrote in French and English and who is mainly known for his dramatic works. More popularly now, a frequently misquoted passage from his novel *Worstward Ho*: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” is tattooed on Stan Wawrinka’s forearm (what with him competing against the likes of Federer, Djokovic, and Nadal), and there is also the Samuel Beckett bridge over River Liffey that connects the north to the south of Dublin.

I first read Beckett’s *Endgame* with Pavan in the first year of Knowledge and later studied *En Attendant Godot* with Bithi-di in the second year. During those initial encounters, his plays seemed highly absurd (and his works are in fact commonly categorized under what Martin Esslin designated ‘le théâtre de l’absurde’) and we spent several periods discussing the dialogues between his pseudo couples — Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell, Lucky and Pozzo. As I was then also studying Indian philosophy with Ranganath-da, Integral Psychology with Matthijs-bhai, and reading Sri Aurobindo’s philosophical writings, I found a lot of symbolic meanings behind the apparent everyday conversations and characterizations:

concepts of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, functions of the three *gunas*, the Buddhist nirvana, Shankara’s *neti neti*, etc.

I later discovered that Beckett had not much knowledge of Indian philosophy, other than through the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who in *The World as Will and Representation* makes several references to

the Upanishads and the Vedanta, and whom Beckett read intensely in his early years. He was more often associated with the Existentialists such as Camus and Sartre and more so since one of his short stories was published in *Les Temps modernes*, a journal edited by Simone de Beauvoir. Yet, for my Masters dissertation at Durham University (of around 13,000 words), I closely read Beckett’s first published novel *Murphy* and was surprised to find that he often resists Existentialism and instead makes several references to Indian culture and philosophy and speaks of *tat tvam asi* in one of his letters with reference to his novel. And so, a lot



After the graduation ceremony at Durham University

of what I studied with my teachers in Knowledge came in very handy as I read into these various allusions to Indian thought, although now for my doctorate I have modified my research topic, exploring Beckett’s reception in India and reconsidering his place as a figure of ‘world literature’.

World literature has grown to be a much-debated area of contemporary literary studies,



although Goethe first coined the term *Weltliteratur* in his letters to Eckermann sometime in the 19th century. Through my research I am hoping to establish some important features that require attention in this field. At first it might seem as though the term ‘world’ before ‘world literature’ is redundant, as one would suppose that the word literature already encompasses all literatures. However, since most literature courses (and libraries) around the world still focus on a European and American canon (a selection of permanently established literary works, e.g. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Racine, Shakespeare, etc.) and largely ignore literatures from other countries in their original language or in translation, the field of literature has been quite evidently one sided over the past couple of centuries. One tends to value the most predominant literary qualities and genres and ignore the rest. So I have decided to use Samuel Beckett as an established personality of world literature who has written across genres (plays, novels, short stories, poems, cinema scripts, etc.) and bilingually (in English and French), and analyse how his works have been received, translated, adapted, and appropriated by contemporary Indian novelists, dramatists, and cinematographers. This way, I would deracinate Beckett from his original context (European avant-garde modernist and a precursor of the post-modernist era), and relocate his works in a different culture with a distinct set of literary values (and here I recall all the wonderful discussions on Indian aesthetics with Kittu-da and Matri-bhai), the question being whether he functions well or not in a foreign milieu. The research would also allow me to review less widely known Indian novelists, playwrights, and cinematographers, while comparing and contrasting contemporary Eastern and Western literatures and drawing them closer together. This project is funded by the 50th anniversary scholarship at the University of Kent and I have presented papers about my on-going research at the Universities of Durham, London, East Anglia, Harvard, the International Federation for Theatre Research meeting in Barcelona, and I was awarded the Samuel Beckett Summer School’s international

bursary last year from Trinity College, Dublin.

Talking of world literature, I might add for people who might be interested, I attended the Institute of World Literature (IWL), which is a month long summer school organized by Harvard University and it takes place every summer in different cities. This year it is to be held in Lisbon and a couple of years ago it was at Harvard. I highly recommend this event as I found it immensely helpful and very inspiring. Practically, it is possible to receive a tuition waiver from Harvard to attend this school as long as one is able to phrase one’s passion for literature in a concise statement of purpose, and there are also several other sponsored places that one can apply for. I will be attending this year’s event at Lisbon after being awarded a scholarship from the British Centre for Literary Translation. Apart from reading and talking about plenty of literature within a month and meeting some delightful people from around the world who share a common zeal for literature, there will also be world renowned scholars, writers, and literary critics leading seminars and presenting lectures, such as Franco Moretti, David Damrosch and others. For anyone interested in living literature, this event is a must, especially next summer when it is to be held again in the historical city of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

My research aside, I also teach three modules at the Department of Comparative Literature: Childhood and Adolescence in Twentieth Century Literature, Classical Literature, and The Tale. For the first module we study texts from around the world, such as Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (which we had enjoyed reading with David in Knowledge along with the short stories about the fictional Glass family), Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* etc. and we discuss how childhood differs from one socio-cultural context to another, while close reading passages from the novels and considering the plots, themes, and characters. For Ancient Greek and Roman classical literature, we begin with the two brilliant epics of Homer (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), and also discuss Aesop’s fables, the three famous tragedians we studied with David in our

first year: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, a Greek comedy by Aristophanes, Virgil and Ovid's brilliant epics *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses* (parts of which I believe Nancy-di dramatized in 2004, with some captivating performances and an innovative stage setup) and end with the Roman playwright Seneca and poet Catullus. For The Tale seminar, we have a diverse set of primary texts, such as *Don Quixote* (which also Nancy-di dramatized and directed and I clearly remember Utpal and Shashwat brilliantly enacting the two central characters), *The Arabian Nights*, short stories by Maupassant, Borges (who has grown to be amongst my favourite authors), Cortázar, and others, some of whom we studied with David in the first year.

Teaching at the university is immensely enjoyable (apart from maybe correcting the few not-so-good essays at the end of each term) and very rewarding: it gives me a lot of scope to constantly grow and progress, not just from reading books, but also from interacting with undergraduate students who are mostly from the south of England. The professors, lecturers, colleagues and friends from around the world are always helpful and ever ready to converse about literature. As a matter of fact, we spent the last few days with Andrea, a friend and teacher from St. Gallen



Trinity College, Dublin, where Beckett studied

in Switzerland whom I had met at the IWL, and we trekked through the Alpstein range in Switzerland, talking about Tolkien, Byron, Marie Corelli, T. S. Eliot, Amitav Ghosh, Emerson, *Heidi*, Louisa May Alcott, and many other writers and literatures from around the globe. For me, one of the best parts about my subject is that it forever

remains inexhaustible, as there is so much to read and re-read, and when I am tired of reading I can always get down to writing the eighty plus thousand word thesis or just poems, travelogues, stories, and diaries. Literature has also made me appreciate and identify with different peoples and cultures from around the world by reading about them and their stories, which allows me to critically re-evaluate my own set of values periodically. As Robert Browning writes in one of his poems that I keep quoting to myself every now and then: 'Look at the end of work, contrast the petty done, the undone vast, this present of theirs with the hopeful past!'

Alongside my PhD and teaching, I am also studying a PGCE course at the University of Kent, which is a postgraduate degree in higher education. Whilst lectures regarding lecturing might at first seem rather superficial, I have learnt a lot about the English system of education over the last two years. I would like to believe that universities in the UK are very gradually (and far from fully) beginning to mirror our system of education at the Ashram. The ideal 'inclusive system' of education in England, questions the normalcy of students and starting with a student-centred method of teaching, it allows each student the freedom to find his full potential rather than force-feeding lessons for passing exams that manifest superficial results and expose meaningless rankings. Particularly in the humanities, there are not so many lectures as there are seminars (group discussions) and optional contact hours with professors who are there to help and guide rather than give out answers and solutions, much like Free Progress in our School.

There are very obvious problems at the crux of the system of course, which, unlike the Ashram, revolves around money, so much so that students are often labelled as customers and student satisfaction is valued more than anything else, as you might find out if you did a quick search through the Times Higher Education website amongst other pages on the internet. The fees are exorbitant, the scholarships are highly competitive, apprenticeships are hard to come by, and 'inclusivity' is corruptly used to reduce the funds required

to lend special assistance to students with ‘(dis)abilities’. Nonetheless, I find it much easier to cope with a PhD in England where I have barely one contact hour per month with my primary supervisor, Professor Shane Weller (a brilliant and greatly inspiring scholar), because of my education at S.A.I.C.E. where I was given the freedom to explore my natural inclination for the subject I love, and where, for example, Swadesh-da gave me a free period to write a poem because it was raining and I felt inspired by the dark grey sea.

My passion for literature grew while in the Free Progress in E.A.V.P. 5 (if not before), where I spent a lot of my time reading the Romantics, and Percy Bysshe Shelley in particular. I also pored through a lot of P. G. Wodehouse, James Herriot, Jerome K. Jerome, amongst many other writers and loved the idyllic life of the countryside and the English sense of humour, which on coming to England I realized is a lot drier and more sarcastic than in the books. In a way, I have always felt very much at home in England and I fondly recall the pleasure of being waved a ‘toodleoo’ by a tipsy English chap in the Shakespeare Pub at Durham, or walking through Canterbury after reading Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Virginia Woolf’s comment: ‘there is no lovelier place in the world than Canterbury’. Matri-bhai once read out passages from Eliot’s outstanding poem ‘Murder at the Cathedral’, which I have re-read several times since, and the Knights killed Thomas Becket (not Samuel Beckett with the double ‘t’, mind you!) at the very same Canterbury Cathedral following his conflict with King Henry II’s interests. There is even a small memorial commemorating the saint and once Archbishop of Canterbury, which I visit once in a while. Walking along the white cliffs of Dover, lines from Mathew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s ‘Break, break, break’ keep flooding back with each clashing wave on the shingles.

I am often reminded of all the wonderful classes with Gauri-di, Nandita-di and Priti-di in school, Babu-da (the dearest teacher and guide), Ravi-da, Jhumur-di, David, Pavan, Matri-bhai, Bithi-di, Lina-di, and everyone else in Knowledge with whom I got a chance to talk about



Durham Cathedral and River Wear

books and literature. In fact, while studying for my Masters at Durham University, right next to Durham Cathedral and Castle that reminds one of Hogwarts when traveling by train from London King’s Cross, there were times I felt that the names of several professors would melt into the background and get replaced by our teachers. Professor Michael O’Neil, for instance, with his soft corner for Shelley and the second-generation Romantics often reminded me a lot of Babu-da; with Professor Timothy Clark we studied short stories and often shared discussions much like with David; Dr Ulrika Maude made me think of Jhumur-di with her height and erudition. Sri Aurobindo’s *Future Poetry*, which we read with Babu-da was another major influence with regards to my love for literature, as the very title made me question what the future had in store for poetry and literature following Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual insights into the world’s literary past. It inspired me to be acquainted with what was written after the 1950s and find out the nature and characteristics of modern and contemporary literature.

I also feel very thankful to all my friends and classmates — Sujay and Yuyu in particular — with whom I was lucky to spend a lot of time discussing books, plays, poems, and often just song lyrics. From reading *The Lord of the Rings* in P.3 (with Jharna-di’s encouragement), to writing a play in verse in E.2 with Krishna-di, sharing notes on K.1, short story submissions in K.3, and analysing Leonard Cohen’s ‘Hallelujah’ and Pink Floyd’s ‘High Hopes’ on the school galleries

*Continued on page 15...*



# ASHRAM'S SOLAR RESEARCH INITIATIVE

*Brahmanand '79 tells us about the pioneering research work being done in the Ashram with the setting up of grid-tie rooftop solar power plants and group net-metering.*

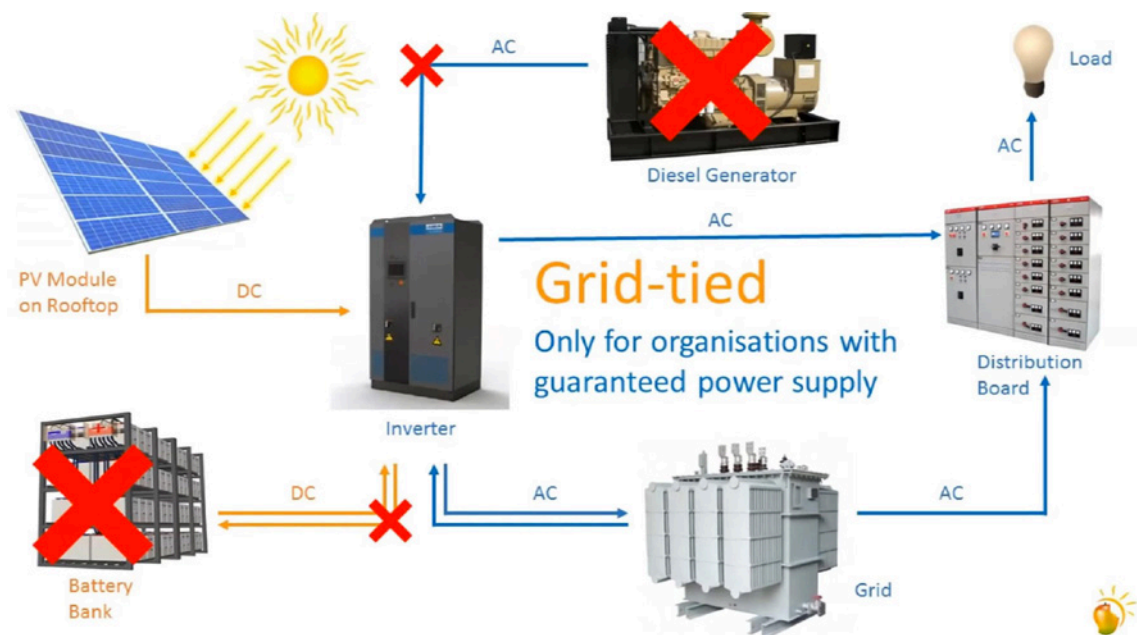
## PHASE 1: FROM 2012 TO 2014

A pilot research activity was undertaken by the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE) from 2012 to 2014 to demonstrate the feasibility of an electricity consumer achieving net-energy positive status by adopting measures to lower the energy demand through energy efficiency and conservation, and producing electricity using solar energy.

This research initiative was supported and recognized by the Government of Pondicherry as well as the Power Grid Corporation of India (PGCI) as part of the pioneering Smart Grid Pilot project being implemented for the first time in India. Smart Grid facilitates efficient, reliable and intelligent two-way electricity delivery system

through integration of renewable energy sources, smart transmission and distribution. Smart Grid technology brings efficiency and sustainability in meeting the growing electricity demand.

As a first step, the inefficient lamps, fans, air conditioners and computers of SAICE were substituted by more energy-efficient alternatives to lower the energy demand by more than 25% without compromising the quality and service. By the time the 17 kWp solar power plant was commissioned in September 2014, the status of SAICE had evolved from being an electricity consumer to a net-electricity producer. The net-meter installed by PGCI keeps track of the bi-directional electricity flow: excess electricity generated by the solar power plant flowing from SAICE towards



The above figure shows the schematic of a grid-tied solar power plant that is suited only for locations where the power supply is uninterrupted and reliable, which is generally the case in Pondicherry and unlike many other parts of India, including the neighboring Tamil Nadu. During sunshine hours, the solar power plant on SAICE rooftop produces more electricity than that is required by SAICE, thus the excess electricity generated during sunshine hours is fed into the grid. When the sun is not shining, the grid provides the electricity needed by the SAICE. However, because the electricity that the grid provides to the SAICE is less than the excess electricity that is fed into the grid during sunshine hours, the SAICE is considered as a net-energy positive building.



▲ A wide-angle photo of the solar panels installed on the rooftop of SAICE, taken from the top of Hall of Harmony

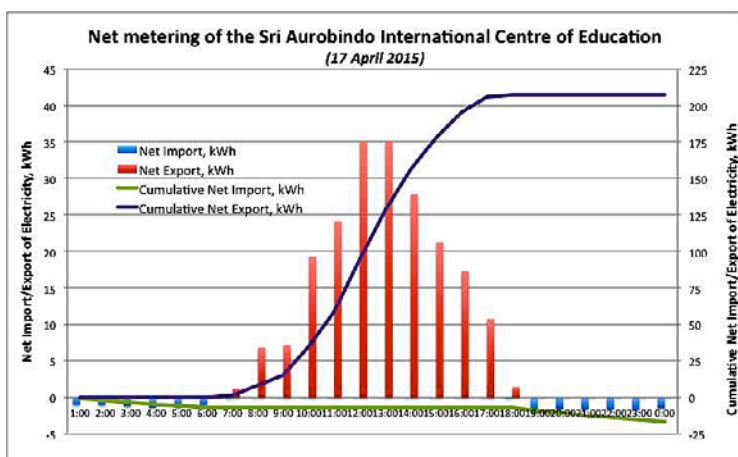
► The graph shows the net metering performance of SAICE on 17 April 2015, one of the sunniest days in the year. As one can see in the graph, 207 kWh of excess solar electricity is exported to the grid after meeting the needs of the school whereas only 17 kWh of electricity is imported by the school during non-sunshine hours. Hence the net cumulative electricity exported by SAICE to the grid amounts to 190 kWh.

the power grid during sunshine hours is greater than the electricity flowing from the grid to meet all electricity requirements of SAICE during the hours without sunshine. This is a huge step towards making the power grid smart.

The power supply system that was dependent on mega-size fossil-fuel based thermal power plants now has an option to integrate a large number of clean and benign (solar and wind) power generators distributed across the network and closer to the points of use, thus reducing the dependence on environmentally-polluting fossil fuels, eliminating the power transmission and distribution losses, and helping to avoid electricity outages by bridging the demand-supply gap.

## PHASE 2: INITIATED IN 2015

The experience and knowledge gained from the pilot research activity provided useful insight and contributed to the formulation of the grid-connected rooftop solar regulation by the Joint Electricity Regulatory Commission (JERC) for Goa and Union Territories of India, including the State of Pondicherry, in the later part of December 2014. This policy includes feed-in



tariff (produce and sell solar electricity to the power grid) and net-metering (to produce and exchange electricity with the power grid). An innovative feature of the new regulation is the group net-metering option that allows a consumer having more than one electricity connection to generate excess solar electricity at one connection point in order to offset the electricity consumed at other connection points. The Ashram being the owners of many buildings has the option to use the excess electricity generated by SAICE to lower the electricity consumption of another Ashram building (e.g. Ashram Press or Park Guest House) by an equivalent amount. An electricity consumer has thus the choice to install grid-tied solar power plants on building rooftops that are better suited for the purpose and meet the electricity of building(s) whose rooftop(s) may not be that favorable for installing the solar system and may not have reliable access to the power grid.

The Ashram has now taken up a new phase of





Rooftop solar power plants on Salle d'Art (top), Library (centre) and the Dining Room (right).

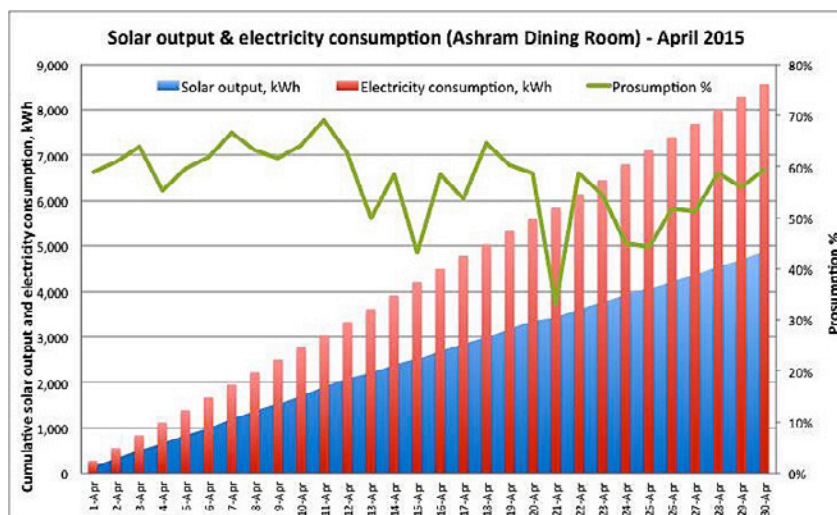


research to put the concept of group net metering into practice, in consultation with the local government and the power utility. This phase involves the installation of grid-tie solar power plants on the rooftop of 4 buildings (SAICE building, Salle d'Art, Library and the Dining Hall) with a cumulative capacity of around 130 kW. Along with the pilot solar installation on the rooftop of SAICE, these power plants are expected to generate around 220,000 kWh annually. The excess electricity generated every month from these 4 buildings will compensate for the electricity consump-

tion of some other Ashram buildings too. The Local Government and the Electricity Department of Pondicherry are fully supportive of the Ashram's research initiative with the understanding that the learning from this second phase of research will be useful for setting the benchmark of best practice for creating awareness and replicating the experience all over the Union Territory.

Thanks to the excellent support provided by the Sunlit Future team from Auroville, and active participation of volunteers from SAICE and Ashram Departments, the 4 solar power plants could be commissioned in a record time of less than 2 months.

Three out of the 4 Ashram buildings are producing more solar electricity than they can consume, the only exception being the Ashram Dining Room where the electricity consumption is high due to operation of some important equipment.



The above graph shows the net metering performance of the Ashram Dining Room in April 2015, one of the sunniest months in the year. In April 2015, the total electricity consumption of the Dining Room was 8,562 kWh and the electricity produced from the solar power plant amounted to 4,868 kWh. Thus the Dining Room was able to meet as much as 57% of its electricity requirements from the rooftop solar plant.



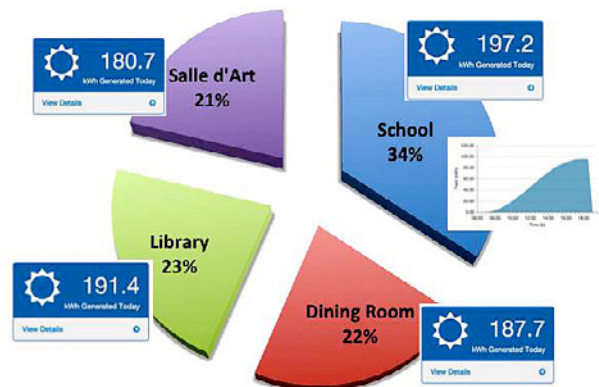
### Salient features of the project:

- Installed capacity of rooftop solar power plants in the Ashram up to March 2015: 150 kWp
- The amount of solar electricity generation estimated over 2 decades: 4,500 MWh
- The avoidance of coal to be burnt in thermal power plants (including the transmission and distribution losses): 3.3 million tons of coal
- Avoided Carbon dioxide emissions from the coal fired power plants: 3,600 tons

The performances of the 4 solar power plants are being tracked on-line using a remote monitoring system called “Wattmon” developed at Aurville. The “Wattmon” system provides remote access to all solar parameters from the 4 rooftop solar power plants anywhere in the world. It monitors voltage, current, power output, solar inverter efficiency, cumulative electricity produced at any time of the day, the money saved and the carbon dioxide avoided due to the production of solar electricity.

The rooftop solar plants commissioned so far on the rooftop of Ashram buildings will silently produce electricity from dawn to dusk, day after day, and year after year, for at least two decades, leading to win-win solutions at all levels:

Solar contribution (%) of the buildings of the Ashram (14 April 2015)



Using “Wattmon” intelligent remote monitoring system, one can assess the day-to-day performances of the solar power plants. The above graph shows the performance of the 4 systems on 14th April 2015.

- Apart from eliminating the need for hefty electricity bills every month, these installations will protect several Ashram buildings from all future electricity price hikes over the whole life of the solar power plants.
- The power utility will gain by meeting its Renewable Portfolio Obligation (RPO), avoiding the transmission and distribution losses, reducing the load on distribution transformers, and bridging the demand-supply gap especially during the peak electricity demand periods in the daytime.
- Burning of large amounts of fossil fuels can be avoided, thus helping to extend the availability of fossil fuels and reducing the adverse environmental impact of fossil fuel burning.
  - The country will gain higher energy independence and get better protected from unpredictable hikes in the price of fossil fuels due to geo-political reasons.
  - The global environment will improve by switching from high greenhouse gas emitting fuels to a clean and perennial source of energy. ☸

All photos (except the last one) in this article are taken by Kasper from Sunlit Future.

**An appeal to all: The cheapest and cleanest form of energy is the one that is not consumed. Hence let us all make efforts to avoid the energy demand through efficiency and conservation.**



Signing of group net-metering agreement between Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Electricity Department of Pondicherry, witnessed by the Chairman of the Joint Electricity Regulatory Commission for Goa and Union Territories: A truly historical moment for India.

# DIVINE DILEMNA

Yogamaya Patel '95

W e the children of the Mother have grown up in the Ashram atmosphere which is drenched in Her presence all the time. From jardin d'enfants we see photos little Mirra. We hear



music played by Her. Our loving teachers tell us about Douce Mère who loves us and is always with and around us. We see Her pictures everywhere, starting from our homes, where calendars received on the 1st of January are changed very punctually,

to welcome the "Bonne Année" with Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's messages and pictures.

Stories of Douce Mère are recounted to us by our parents and teachers. We grow up listening to what Douce Mère did when She was a child, when She travelled and Her spiritual experiences. Some of these anecdotes we can relate to and comprehend as per our age and understanding. But some of the spiritual and occult stories 'fly over our heads'; we hear them but can't always make full sense of them. Our parents and teachers do the best they can to bond us with this special Force. But do we?

We have extra school holidays on Douce Mère and Sri Aurobindo's birthdays and on other Darshan days. But do we know the significance of these special days? I used to get new clothes every Darshan, and that used to be something to look forward to. We used to have a day off from school and normal physical activities, and instead we would have a March Past which used to be very exciting. We would see the beautiful artwork done in Mother's room in the Playground and

meet up with friends. But the actual essence was missed out – that of feeling Douce Mère standing in front of the Indian map and saluting as we passed by. I would personally try and picture Her there, but for a child what does it mean to picture? It would be to concretely see someone there or in the imagination make a profile of Her.

As we grew older and went to Delafon, I remember we were taken to Sri Aurobindo's room and received a shoulder bag made of cloth with a pencil and eraser in it. This practice isn't followed anymore and I am not sure if it was there before our time. But I assume we were gifted the bag to start us off on our academic life, and we were to take it as 'prasad'. For 7-year old children it was more exciting to compare the colours of the bags and exchange them amongst ourselves. To us it was not Douce Mère in her physical body giving prasad, and therefore it didn't hold the deep thought and meaning that it should have.

Interestingly our days would begin with Mother's music and voice and I would try and match the voice to Her numerous photos, wondering if She had recited lines from *Savitri* wearing her beautiful sarees or elegant gowns. At least Her voice was something we could attach ourselves to and record in our system as something concrete.

Climbing up the academic echelons we were constantly in touch with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's literary work. We learnt simple poems by heart, read plays and even enacted some of them. Sadhaks and sadhikas who had actually interacted with Mother in Her physical form, recounted to us their first hand experiences and the lessons of life that they learnt. They told us of how the Grace has worked in their lives and how Mother had guided them at every step. They emphasised the importance of surrendering ourselves to Her and described to us how this could change our lives.

But for us teenagers did all this make any sense? What did surrendering mean? Did we physically give ourselves to Her? How was this possible? If not, then what in us did we need to surrender? Our emotions? Fears? Anger and uncertainties? It was quite confusing and seemed unrealistic.

There is absolutely no doubt that a lot of love and care was taken by all around us to make sure that we felt special being Her children and realised that She enveloped us in a cocoon. But for me as an individual it was a very vague connection. And the logical question that arose in my limited human mind was, did Mother know me as an individual? Or was I just a soul that chose to descend on earth in Her aura? Did She know me as the daughter of a sadhak and a sadhika? Or Mayu? These are questions that could arise in anyone who had not met Mother in person.

I was like a kite who knew I belonged to Her, but couldn't feel the tug of the string in Her strong hands, and kept floating around till She decided it was time that I did feel it. It happened when I had least expected it and yet it was inevitable because it was the darkest time in my life.

My dearest Papa is my pillar of strength. He has always been the perfect sadhak in every way for me. I recall him telling someone that for him duty to the Mother comes before everything else in life. I was a little girl of around 11, and recollect his words very clearly. He emphasized that his family took second place and serving the Divine was always a priority. I was hurt by those words

and despondent but little did I know that he had surrendered his family to the Divine also, and undoubtedly knew that Douce Mère would look after us. Circumstances in life had thrown our close knit family of three in different directions. Papa was physically away from me when I needed him most and it was because duty called! We were all in pain emotionally and I felt it was imperative that we be together. But Papa would not leave his duty of attending to a patient even though in his heart he wanted to stand by his daughter.

That's when the Divine came to our rescue in a very concrete way. Papa had a vision of the Mother and She said to him, "You do your duty and I will look after Mayu." From that instance it was as if a golden light had permeated our lives. For Papa the last wisp of uncertainty vanished and he knew that the Divine Mother would look after me. When he revealed the vision to me, I was elated! It felt like a search had come to an end, even though it was going to be a divine beginning for me.

The innumerable questions and doubts, the dilemma about the Divine knowing me as an individual disappeared. The kite that flitted and fluttered did so feeling a sturdy power grasping its strings. Today when my sons question me about Ma, I tell them with great certainty that Divine Ma knows them and will look after them all their lives. Even though we haven't been together on the physical plane, I know for sure that the Divine knows us, Her children, and protects us anywhere in the world. ❧

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...Continued from page 9

after completing Knowledge, we often exchanged views and were thrilled by various texts. Apart from all the fun we had in enacting Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* with Nancy-di in E.4, Priestley's *I Have Been Here Before* with Tossy-di and Nandita-di in E.5, I also fondly remember the time we spent in adapting P. G. Wodehouse's novel *The Code of the Woosters*, and with the help of Priti-di, we performed it on stage in E.6. Although I recently watched a brilliant production of *Jeeves and Wooster* at the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury starring Robert Webb, we laughed

a whole lot more during our rehearsals on the School stage and on the night of the performance, particularly when Bertie (Sujay) cracked a portrait on Spode (Ishit), and the brawny Spode's head popped right through the face of a feeble old woman from antiquity. Although some of these may not be part of mainstream literature, they all increased my love for the subject.

I hope I have been able to capture here a little bit of my life and research here at the University of Kent and how S.A.I.C.E. helped me discover myself in literature. ❧



# FRIENDSHIP

By Sunayana '79

**L**earning never ends nor does wisdom always come from books. We are constantly learning from whatever surrounds us. If we are open then anything or anyone can help us progress. It could be a member of our family or a stranger in a train or even a pet cat who can teach us something.

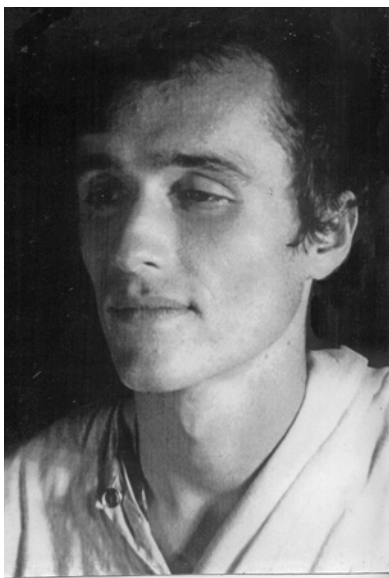
We are the sum of what we have received from others. Sometimes this realisation happens much later, when we understand in what way we have benefited from someone's presence in our lives. And then, at the same time, we realise how we too have unknowingly helped others. We ourselves don't know in what way we inspire and influence others.

We hear very often stories of how someone unknowingly harmed another person but we rarely hear the stories of how someone unknowingly made a great positive change in someone else's life. But they are there. Life is a relay race and we are here to pass on to others what we have learnt. So I am sharing this story of friendship with my readers.

Many years ago I was severely injured in a road accident and after that for several years I could not walk without feeling pain in my knee. My back too was in such a condition that there were many movements I could not do. The end result of this was that I couldn't walk or do exercises so I put on a lot of weight. This in turn made it difficult for me to walk. And the vicious circle went on.

At that time I was living in London. One day I received an e-mail from a friend I hadn't seen in 13 years. He was in Paris and had got my contact details from an e-mail sent to many people

by a common friend. After we had exchanged a few mails he announced that he was coming to London with his daughter and we could meet and catch up on all that we had missed out in each other's life. This was Geoffroy, affectionately called "Jeff" by all his friends. He was French and ten years older than me but I counted him among my closest friends.



Around the time I was in Knowledge I spent my free time with a group of adults, one of whom was Jeff. Although Jeff was neither a student nor a teacher in the School he used to spend a lot of time in the Free Progress section where Kake and Goupi, who were his friends, used to take classes. He was there in all of Cristof's plays and as he was in F group he was either on the field or a spectator on the gallery with us at the Sportsground. He was a part

of our joys and sorrows but the flow of time had taken him back to his native France.

The 1970s were exceptional years. All those who were young or growing up then will remember the strong winds of idealism that blew through the hearts and minds of the people. Our life in the Ashram was very different too. The student community was an integral part of the Ashram and there were strong bonds of friendship between students and sadhaks and devotees who lived here. Even those who were waiting to join either Auroville or the Ashram freely mixed with us. There was a sense of growing and evolving together.

I re-read Jeff's e-mail. At this point it struck me that he had seen me when I used to be a good gymnast and used to participate in all the programmes of classical ballet at the Theatre, and

here I was, unable to walk without wobbling or limping. I didn't want him to see me in this condition. The very next day I started with a very gentle version of my ballet exercises, just moving my legs a little and tightening a few muscles. It was difficult but not impossible. I hoped to lose a little bit of my weight and was convinced that even that would make a small difference.

It was only when I started doing low forward kicks to warm up that I realised something strange was happening. The big toe of my right foot in which I had lost sensation was slowly reviving after eight years! Something that had got caught between two small bones of my foot had got released and blood was flowing normally again. I couldn't believe it. But there it was, a little bit of sensation had come back. As I went on doing gentle stretches I could feel a little bit of strength coming back to my foot.

A month later Jeff arrived in London and we were overjoyed to see each other. Of course, by the time he came I had not lost even 10 grams but I had started my ballet exercises again and that slowly lead me to do very simple dance movements. For the next one year I practised regularly and choreographed several short pieces. The following year I was performing on the School courtyard stage in the Ashram. To me it was nothing short of a miracle. Of course, Jeff never knew what had happened and how his visit had changed so much for me.

Jeff's visit to London brought back so many memories. Our little group was made up of a couple of students, one or two young teachers and some others who were working in other departments. We did so many things together. I was the youngest in the group so I listened eagerly to everything that was being said. But I was all ears when Jeff spoke because he had a fantastic sense

of humour. There was something else that he had which no one else had. And that was his very keen aesthetic sense.

We did theatre together and went to various historical places together. But it was he who would point out when there was something of outstanding beauty before us. It was he who took photos and showed us a beautiful detail or an unusual angle of looking at a scene. Whenever there was a good film at the Playground our group would discuss it and he would talk of the scenes he found the most beautiful in terms of images or expression.

His house was full of art books, books of poetry and reproductions of paintings. That was how I discovered Gustave Moreau and Rilke. It was in his company that I learnt to observe pictures and understood the value of one

colour against another. I saw how the intensity of light determined the appearance of things. I understood the importance of composition. Just being in his company was being in an informal art class. It was in this way that he opened my eyes to beauty.

When we were going to see the film "Barry Lyndon" at the Playground he asked us to observe the cinematography. Ironically, although he was French he had already seen most of Satyajit Ray's films whereas we had only heard or read about them. His favourite Ray film was "Jalsaghar" and when it was shown in the Playground he had already told us beforehand the cinematic moments to look for.

There was something else for which I deeply admired him. It was the manner in which he had risen out of the pit into which life had thrown him. The way Jeff had landed up in the Ashram is a clear proof that there is something called Destiny. He was in his mid-twenties and living in Paris



On the stage as the narrator in *Love and Death*

but he was caught in the clutches of addiction to drugs. His father, who was desperately trying to pull him out of that hell, chanced to see a documentary on television on Auroville and thought that he could send his son there. Interestingly, his father had no idea about the Mother or Sri Aurobindo or the Ashram or anything connected with it. He bought him a ticket and asked Jeff to go to Pondicherry.

That was 1974. The Mother had left her body only a few months earlier. The Ashram was still struggling with the new situation of not having her around. But there was still something of that atmosphere of the early days in the air. While there was the Divine Grace on the one hand which pulled him to the Ashram there was also a great aspiration and receptivity in his heart that kept him here.

The transformation was miraculous. Having spent a few months in Pondicherry Jeff went back to France but came back soon after to live a life connected to the Ashram. He worked at the Ashram Press and joined F group. He was completely involved with the collective life. So much so that only a couple of years later he was given one of the main roles in the 1st December programme.

It was from him that I had learnt to call Sri Aurobindo as "The Master". This was the way he always referred to him. In fact, when he spoke in French he would say "Le Maître", which has the nuance of "the teacher" and therefore "the Guru". When he said "The Master" he put such a deep respect and devotion into those words that you almost felt like kneeling down in reverence. And this is what struck me the most. He had not grown up in the Ashram as we had but he had such a sincere aspiration in his heart that we felt as though he had always been with us.

After he got married to my friend Shantona he left Pondicherry but continued to be in touch with his friends from the Ashram. As time passed

life took us all in different directions so when he and I met in London after a gap of 13 years it was like going back to a past life. Only a few months after this meeting in London he wrote to me to say that he had been diagnosed with cancer of the liver. As his health got worse he wrote with a greater regularity to a few friends, because we

were his link to the Ashram and to India.

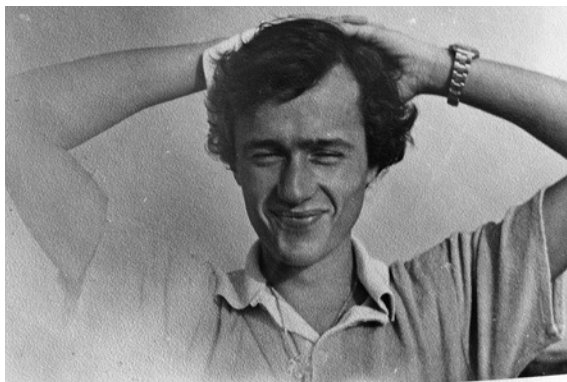
He wrote to us as if nothing had happened, his e-mails were full of funny observations and he kept asking for news of the Ashram. "If you have nothing to write, give me all the gossip," he wrote once. Days rolled by and he never

let me know how much he was suffering. As he lay dying in Paris he continued to write to his closest friends in the Ashram. He said that he wanted to be in the atmosphere of what was essential to him and with anything that could put him in contact with what had been the most important part of his life. "If the doctor allowed me to travel," he wrote, "I would take the first flight to Chennai."

Although we all knew that his days were numbered, even so, the news of his death, after an unsuccessful liver transplant, was a blow to us. Months later Shantona and children came to Pondicherry and according to his wishes his ashes were immersed in the Bay of Bengal, in the sea near the Tennis-ground. As we stood in silence on the rocks, the sun came up. Jeff had come home for good.

A thought crossed my mind at that moment. This man could so easily have died forty years earlier of a drug overdose. But he didn't. He took a decision to change his life. He came and lived in the Ashram and shared his beautiful mind and heart with us, inspired us and enriched our lives.

I am sending this story out into the world. Perhaps there is someone out there who will read this and understand that we are each an inspiration to someone else. ❧





# THE PONDICHERRY HERITAGE FESTIVAL

*Bitasta Samantaray '81*

A festival was held in Pondicherry during the last week of March to draw everyone's attention to the heritage buildings. It all started with the collapse of the Mairie, the Town Hall. The general public was shocked but could do nothing about it; the Mairie was gone forever.

That is when a small group of people led by Kakoli Bannerjee, who runs a guest house in the French Town, came up with the idea of hosting the "Heritage Festival" to make everyone, espe-

necessarily a specialist's knowledge. Talks and discussions were organised and were held within the various heritage buildings themselves, so that the participants and the listeners could see with their own eyes what they were talking about.

Dancers and musicians were invited to perform within these unique and well-maintained buildings, private houses or offices, which had never been open to the public before. This gave the audience a chance to see the interiors of these structures which they had seen only from out-

side. It was a treat for everyone to not only enjoy the cultural programmes but also to feel the ambience.

Our Ashram also participated. We have so many heritage buildings which belong to the Ashram and we have been maintaining them with love and care. There was a discussion meeting held in our beautiful Library in the morning. The subject of the discussion was the spiritual



The inauguration of the festival with the French Ambassador Mr. François Richier and local MLA Lakshminarayanan

cially those in the government, aware of our heritage here in Pondicherry. The event turned out to be a success beyond their expectations.

Held over a weekend, on the 27th, 28th and 29th of March, it brought together a large number of enthusiasts. INTACH participated in this effort and invited experts in the field of conservation who could give their advice to the general public, which has great intentions but not

heritage of Pondicherry. Jhumur-di spoke about the heritage seen in the light of the writings of Sri Aurobindo. Richard Hartz spoke of what Sri Aurobindo foresaw then as the clear and specific role of Pondicherry when it was still under French rule. It was interesting how Aurofilio spoke of the link between nature and spirituality and our natural heritage as different from the built up heritage. Aneesh, who has just finished his

studies, spoke on Sri Aurobindo and Subramaniam Bharati and their contact which lasted for 10 years while they were both living in Pondicherry. It is an important chapter of Pondicherry's history which remains unknown to everyone.

Experts like Prof. Vijay Venu-gopal and Tasneem Mehta and many others shared their views which opened our eyes. The discussions made us aware that people who plan to build new buildings should take care that the facade matches harmoniously with the surroundings. So many new buildings are eye-sores and are built in the place of beautiful old heritage houses which are pulled down to make place for them. INTACH is trying its best to promote conservation but sadly no strict rules are being imposed by the government. It is a pity that there is not enough documentation even to compare, since many buildings have undergone alterations and we don't know how they looked when they were first built.



Aneesh Raghavan dancing at the Cluny Embroidery centre

helps them out and the end result is a treat for the eyes.

The old method of building with lime and bricks only, without any cement or steel is almost lost. The people who knew the method are not here anymore. Even though it used to be a costly and lengthy process I know of two new houses that are coming up now using that building process.



Discussion at the French Institute with (L to R) K. T. Ravindran, P. T. Krishnan and Tara Murali

Fortunately, there are also some who have rebuilt houses in the French colonial style. INTACH

tre of the open courtyard make the house inviting and one feels that it must be lovely to sit there and

Heritage houses are not only the old colonial style houses but also the traditional Tamil houses. Fortunately, some of these are very well-maintained and have a typical atmosphere; when you enter you expect to be greeted with the aroma of sambar and the sound of Carnatic music in the background. The beautiful wooden pillars and the old tiles around the centre



watch the rain falling.

We who have grown up in the Ashram have almost taken for granted our School, Library, Playground, the Dining-Room etc. which are all heritage buildings. We are always within them but never give them a second thought. Truly, we have been so lucky. It is up to us now to see that the heritage buildings are preserved. We have to participate in this effort to bring back the beauty of Pondicherry, so our town can retain its unique quality, at least in the old French area.

This heritage festival has



Actress Revathy and Tourism Minister Rajavelu present at the ceremonial drum-beating to inaugurate the festival.



The night cycle-rickshaw heritage tour with Ashok Panda.

brought us, the different communities who share the space together, to work for Pondicherry. Pondicherry's heritage belongs to the local Tamil community as much as to the French who built the old French-style houses and to all those of us who have made it our home. There are many promises made by the government and the French representatives. A lot of positive and constructive efforts are going to be made.

The festival was such a success that it has been decided to hold it every year from now on. ❀

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## BEAUTY

*In the physical world, of all things it is beauty that expresses best the Divine. The physical world is the world of form and the perfection of form is beauty. Beauty interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal. Its role is to put all manifested nature in contact with the Eternal through the perfection of form, through harmony and a sense of the ideal which uplifts and leads towards something higher.*

The Mother (12: 232)



# STAGING CHEKHOV

*In April 2014 we watched a Bengali adaptation of Anton Chekhov's one-act play "The Bear" in the School Courtyard. The original play was written in Russian by Chekhov in 1866 but the English translation is included in many college textbooks in India and so generally known by the public. This Bengali adaptation was appreciated by all so we spoke to **Gautam Mitra '76**, the person behind the project of bringing the play to the stage. The cast had only three actors – Gautam Mitra himself, Sunayana Panda and Subir Chakrabarty, better known as Bablu in the Ashram. The play was translated by Debranjana-da, our Librarian.*

*The plot of the play revolves around a wealthy widow who lives alone, looked after by her man servant. She is very proud of her love for her dead husband even though he had not been very good to her. One day a man comes to collect the money that her husband had borrowed from him. A quarrel ensues and during the argument they also talk of true love. The man makes it clear that he thinks that women are incapable of true love and that is why he has decided that he will never get married. But as the argument continues, on seeing her strong nature, the man falls in love with her and ends up proposing marriage to her.*

## **How did you get the idea of presenting Chekhov's play "The Bear" in Bengali?**

I do not remember precisely how this play actually emerged. I was chatting with Debranjana-da at the Library one morning when he regretfully recounted how he had lost some scripts of plays he had written earlier. I began pestering him to write one for us. I however stressed the fact that I was no longer keen to perform either in English or in French. I was pleasantly surprised when he said that he too believed it was so much more natural and normal to understand and express emotions in one's own language and cultural milieu. He said Chekhov's "The Bear" was a 'One Act Play' with only three principal characters. Perfect! Getting hold of interested actors was such a frustrating task. He

admitted that he needed to be goaded to a point when he became inspired enough to shake off the shackles of indolence and put pen to paper. And lo and behold, "Shaand" came charging out!



## **What did this play bring to you as an actor?**

Every time you act in a play, one way or another, you grow as a person and obviously as an actor. Comedy demands more from you as an actor. One has to be proficient in one's craft to be able to carry off a comic character successfully.

This time I felt I was better able to understand and put together this farcical character.

I was more aware and in control of my voice, my expressions, the body language and above all the "sur"(melody) and "laya"(pace).

We actors are like the blank canvas of an artist. We coat ourselves in the myriad colours of the

diverse characters that we are given to portray. The more an artiste is skilled in other disciplines of life the larger his repertoire as a performer grows. As a matter of fact each and everyone of us is constantly performing. We are, all of us, performers. A gymnast executing a summersault on the carpet or doing cartwheel on the beam, is performing. The hawk-er selling fish, flowers and other wares is a master performer and so is the traffic policeman.

***This play was more or less self-directed by the cast. What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in this way?***

I have always believed that an actor has to be given the freedom to improvise. Then and only then can he or she fathom and gather the fragments of an otherwise elusive character and create the whole. Fortunately for us —Sunayana, Bablu and I — we have a number of years of experience as actors. Our approach was professional and mature. We respected different ideas and suggestions. I think that was the essential advantage. We were spared the usual pre-conceived characterisations that are normally thrust upon actors! Of course, it is helpful to have someone to assist you to put things together. Debranjanda was always around to lend his suggestions.

***What kind of feedback did you get?***

We first staged the play in the Ashram school. Adults and children alike enjoyed the performances of all the three characters. There were requests for a repeat show. Hopefully we will be able to do that in the near future. We then had a performance at Adishakti and another one at the Indianostrum Theatre. Interestingly enough, for the third show the audience consisted mainly of Europeans and yet we received resounding applause when the play concluded!

***Some decades ago Indian language plays used to be performed regularly in the Ashram. But now it has stopped. What are your thoughts on this situation and what can be done to bring a change?***

There were a handful of dedicated people who regularly presented plays in different Indian



languages. Like Gauri-di and Yamuna-di used to stage Tamil plays, Hero-di used to put on Hindi plays, there were many who staged Bengali plays. Once they withdrew, these plays dwindled. There has always been a tendency to perform mostly in French and English. This practice begins from the early years at the kindergarten level. There are also, since then, some damaging approaches to theatre itself. The natural instincts and intuitiveness of the bright, creative little cherubs are often nipped in the bud and they are taught to obey the commands of the adults. Not only the children, but also the child in all of us, needs to be nurtured with care and especially so in the case of performers. But unfortunately very early in our lives it begins to get smothered.

I am afraid it has become unfashionable to be Indian. This trend is most obvious in the student community and it is commonly they who form the majority of the cast of a play. It is a novelty today to put up a play in an Indian vernacular

language. Even during my last few years as a student I had felt this wave sweeping upon us. But hold on, I can smell a whiff of change in the air. Those of us who have woken up to its sad demise have to act – literally so!

Theatre is a beautifully satisfying performing art which needs the right environment to thrive. Over the years we have seen that dictatorial directions can cause serious damage to it and that if there is a negative approach it can be a major deterrent. We have to create an atmosphere wherein the participants can appreciate the fact that acting is creative and fun. It is not an elitist activity. It is not an ordeal or a boring task and especially more so when it's done in one's own vernacular tongue.

I would like to thank Leelamoyee-di for having given me a role in a play in my very first year in Pondy, Ajanta-di who first asked me to direct a play and Amita-di from whom I learnt a lot about theatre.

***Is there anything else that you would like to share with our readers?***

There once prevailed that very special period in our Ashram life when the Mother herself directed plays. I had once asked one of our teachers, an actor and a director himself, whether he had ever wondered why She had chosen to do so. He had looked at me blankly for awhile and then had answered in the negative. I have however pondered long hours over this and have rather



timidly arrived at one satisfying conclusion. We are here to discover and attain our true, inner self. The Mother was, I believe, painstakingly, with the means of theatre and other such cultural

activities, training us to delve deep into our subconscious and plunge into this marvellous adventure of self-discovery. And yet over the years this noble art-form with its numerous attributes and therapeutic qualities has degenerated into purposeless regimented drills, devoid of any emotion or feeling and many miles away from its true calling, that of self-discovery!

As for me, the search for a given character in a play is like a painstaking and ever-watchful walk down a long stretch of corridor flanked with rows of rooms. In each and everyone of them, I glimpse and gather different layers of my being.

Sri Aurobindo writes in the *National Value of Art* (p. 44) “....Between them music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious.” This then obviously implies that we should chart our course of life on this path that Sri Aurobindo has very specifically and purposefully laid out for us. Must we not then devote more and more of our time creatively, through music, art and poetry? Would it not be absolutely wonderful if we could organise our lives and especially the academic activities by means of music, art and poetry alone? ❧

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***In a general way, education, culture, refinement of the senses are the means of curing movements of crude instinct and desire and passion. To obliterate them is not curing them; instead they should be cultivated, intellectualised, refined. That is the surest way of curing them. To give them their maximum growth in view of the progress and development of consciousness, so that one may attain to a sense of harmony and exactitude of perception is a part of culture and education for the human being.***

**The Mother** (12: 120-121)



# CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF THE ASHRAM

*Parul Chakraborty '61 arrived in the Ashram in 1944 at the age of six. After more than 70 years here she is indefatigable even today in the execution of her responsibilities of Dortoir boarding in-charge and of B-Group captain. She recalls, in this article, her early formative years in the Ashram.*

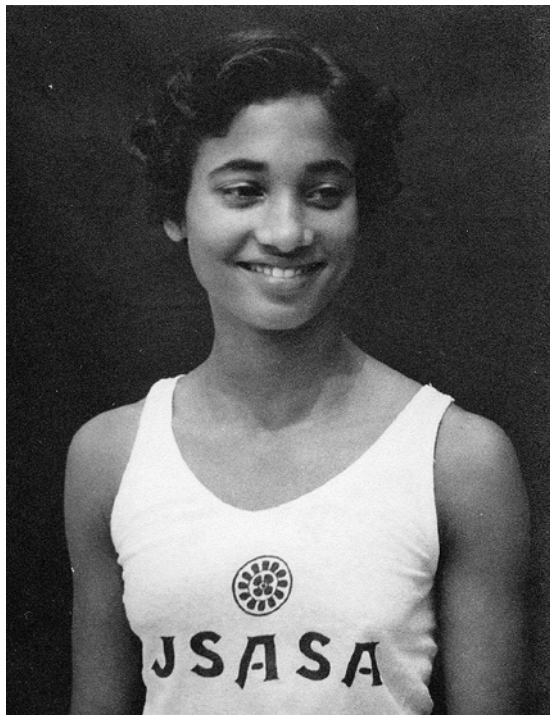
Sri Aurobindo was a well known figure in Bengal as a patriot and freedom fighter who wanted to liberate India from the clutches of the British. He wanted a united India and not the division. He wrote and delivered fiery speeches and put life and energy in the youth of Bengal.

My uncle Yogananda was born in 1898 in Mymensingh, East Bengal. He was a *sadhu* right from his early age and his Guru was Bharat Brahmachari Baba. His Guru spoke of Ma Kali who has descended on earth and is not black like the usual Kali but white in colour and that She is near the sea shore. She has come down on the earth for a great mission to help humanity. My uncle took leave of his Guru and went in search of the white Kali or the Mother. He walked along the shore



Bonne Fête a Badal: 07.12.1947

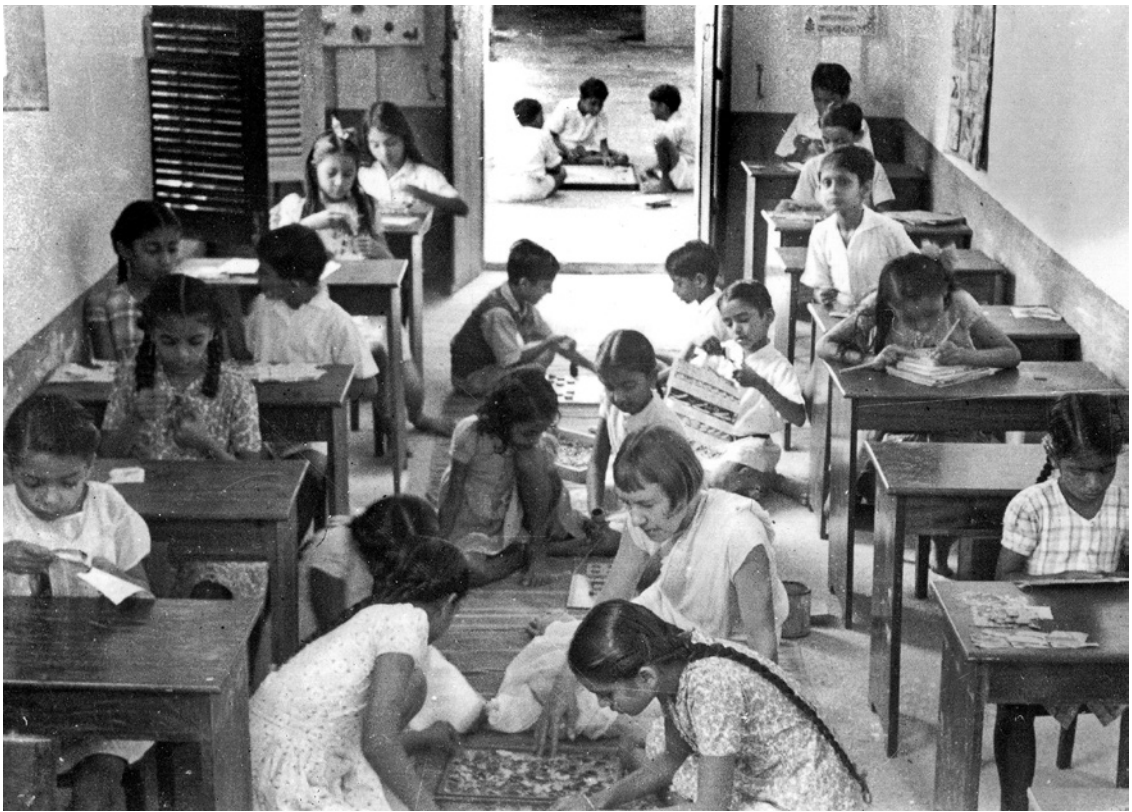
and went to Chittagong but found no Kali there. He walked back and went along the Coromandel Coast. Sometimes he took the train without



Happy young sportsgirl (1955)

a ticket and the ticket collector would ask him to get off the train. In 1932, he finally came to the South and through Sri Anil Baran came to communicate with Sri Aurobindo, and finally saw the white Kali – the Mother.

The Second World War broke out and Bengal was badly affected. My uncle Yogananda saw that some small children from Bengal were taken to the Ashram for protection and safety. My brother Badol and I came to the Ashram on 20.01.1944 with the Mother's gracious permission. My brother was four years old and I was six. My father brought us here along with my step-mother



Our classroom in the Playground premises (1943-44)

and two aunts. I lost my mother when I was two years of age and my brother was only eight months old. (My father remarried and Bokul is my half-brother.)

I think we were very fortunate to have received our education here from that tender age. Pavita, a British lady, was our teacher, friend and parent. Our school and group were in the Playground premises. (School was located at the present body-building gymnasium.)

Our school started on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1943, with a handful of children and we joined it in January 1944. The School grew and took shape and we grew up together under the Mother's supervision and care. At that time the Mother was not coming out every day as She did in later times; we went to Her. We had Her first darshan at the Balcony between 6 a.m. and 6.15 a.m. every day. Our school used to start at 8 a.m. with a prayer

which we all recited: "Douce Mère, Permetts que nous soyons dès maintenant et pour toujours simplement Tes petits enfants." – La Mère. From the School we went at 9.30 a.m. to the Ashram Meditation Hall to receive Her Blessings of flowers. She used to come for Window Darshan for the crow<sup>1</sup> at about 10 a.m. and for the Terrace Darshan, which I have sometimes seen after the school was over, at 11.30 a.m. She was under an umbrella held by Chinmayee (Dara's sister). She used to come for the Vegetable Darshan at about 1 p.m. On Sundays She saw the cows and bulls from the balcony at about 4 p.m.

I remember that after the morning session of the school was over at 11.30 a.m., we would head to the Ashram, go through the Meditation Hall staircase to the Darshan Room where Mother would come by 12 o'clock to see us. This went on from late 1945 to 1949. But then, because we

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1. The Mother used to come regularly to her window to feed a crow.



In front of Pavitra's room, Prosperity terrace

children made so much noise, and as Sri Aurobindo was in the adjacent room, this was discontinued. We were not conscious of the privilege we had and ended up depriving ourselves of it.

On the first of every month, the children of the Ashram used to assemble on the terrace in front of Pavitra-da's Room (the terrace we cross to get our birthday card from Janardan) to see the Mother going to the Prosperity Room to distribute the boxes to the Ashram members. This took place in the afternoon at 3 p.m.

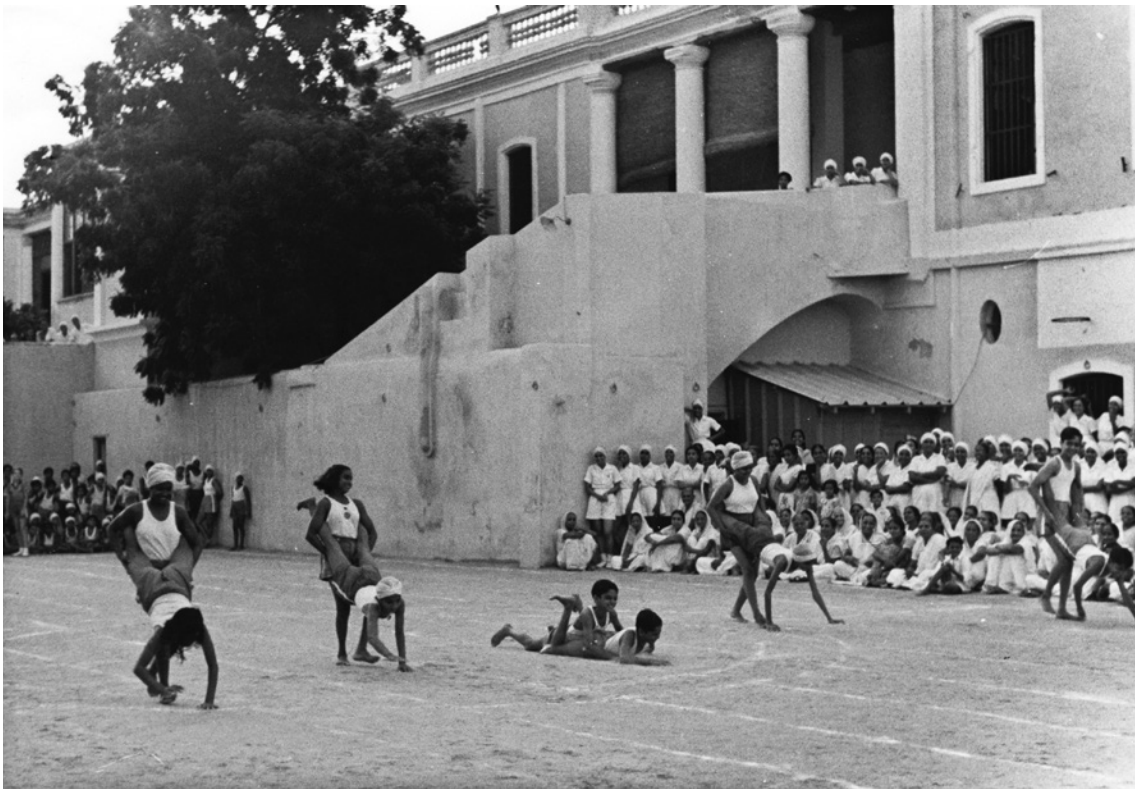
The Mother had the capacity to see, to know and to decide in every field of our action. What a mighty Mother of love and care! In the school if we wrote a good essay She would get to know about it because there was a direct communication with the teachers and She would be eager to read it. I have an essay written in French corrected by Mme Subrata which I had submitted to the Mother and Her Blessings are there at the end. We were filled with Her Presence and She responded

to our feelings and thoughts.

The children kept coming with their parents and some arrangements had to be made for them to stay when the parents left. The first boarding, Dortoir, was created in 1945 and was run by two Parsi sisters, Gulben and Shirinben, who were appointed by the Mother. Dortoir was adjacent to the Playground premises from 1945 to 1976. The old building was then demolished to make place for the present gymnasium.

After we came here in 1944 we lived with our aunts till 1949. In August 1949 my brother and I shifted to Dortoir. The girls stayed upstairs and were looked after by Anu-ben and Kusum-ben. The boys lived downstairs and were looked after by Chellamma. The rules and the regulations were made by the Mother and we observed them and lived by them. The effort was to change ourselves into better human beings. We knew only the Mother and we grew up under Her care, smile and protection. We learnt to be straight-forward,





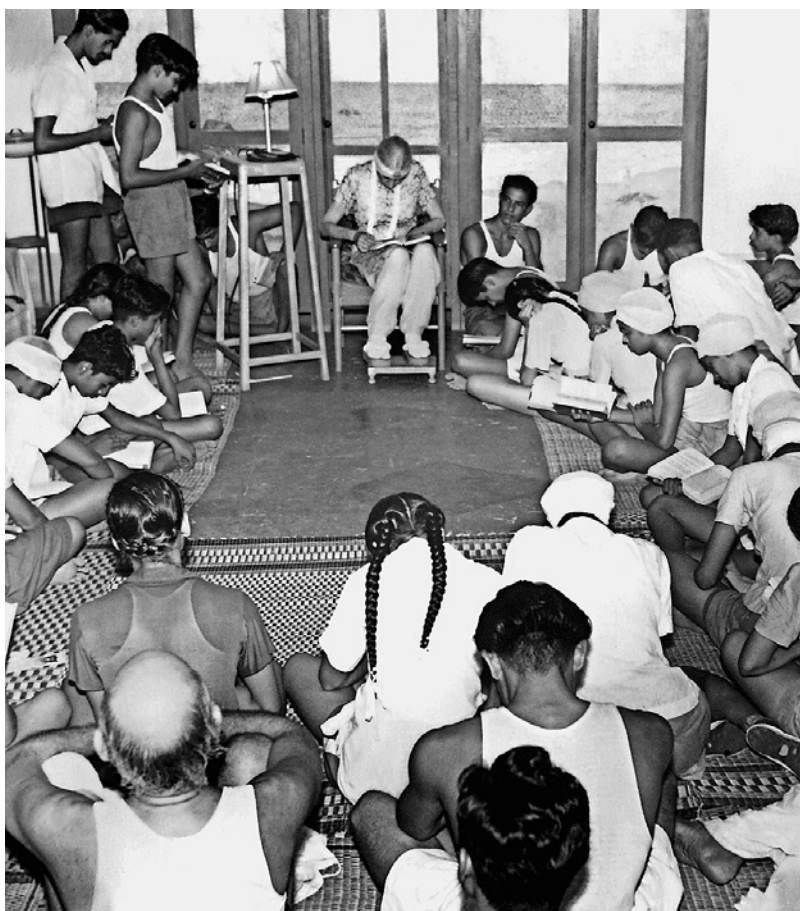
The Playground with Dortoir, the first boarding, in the background.

simple, sincere and have a positive attitude in our way of living. If we did anything wrong, we learnt to accept the mistake and correct ourselves and consciously remember not to repeat it. We were appreciated for our good behaviour and effort in the school and in group. We wanted to live and grow up according to the Mother's guidance, teaching and example. We were Mother's happy, simple children ready to be moulded by Her. We all loved Her with our mind, heart and soul. She was and is the only one taking care of us in our ups and downs of life. What a wonderful adorable Mother full of love, compassion, sweetness and intimacy!

I loved physical activities and also my studies in the school. My classmates were bright and more intelligent in grasping the lessons than I was and they helped me, especially in science and mathematics. Our class was a wonderful batch of students. Even the Mother commented on it and appreciated our group. Higher Course for three years started with our batch. We finished in the

year 1961 and the "Big Library" was to us what "Knowledge" is at present to the students. I put in a lot of sincere effort in the school and had a natural aptitude in the field of physical activities. I was swift, quick, agile and fast in running. These qualities of mine were appreciated and I was made a captain in training in the year 1950-1951 at the age of 13+.

On my birthday, on 09.01.1951, I went up to the Mother and She presented to me Her book *Prières et Méditations*, along with flowers. She asked me to read it and told me that if I did not understand something from the book then I should go to no one else but come to Her for clarification. I started reading the book and noted down what was not clear to my mind. After school was over at 11.30 a.m., I used to go to Her at the Ashram. I would stand quietly in the long corridor. The Mother used to be busy coming in and out of Her Salon and She would notice me waiting for Her. I got my turn in spite of the interviews She had with other people. But I felt



Wednesday Class in 1953

uneasy coming at this busy hour to the Mother. After a few days She saw me waiting so She came to me and said that I could bring my questions to Her in the Playground.

In the year 1950 Dada used to take exercises for the Captains' Group. The Mother used to sit and watch the exercising group. Tara, elderly ladies like Violette-ji, Gauri-di, Priti-di, Sutapa etc. and myself used to be present there. It is here that the Mother asked me to show my questions for explanation and clarification. This is how the Wednesday Class started with the book *Prières et Méditations* after the Playground activities were over, in May 1951, with a few of us, and it grew very fast to fill the Playground.

The Mother started the Green Group classes in 1950 before our Wednesday Class so that we

learnt the French language. She also took Translation classes for the elders in the Playground after She returned from Tennis.

The Mother was also busy with making sure that all the Ashram activities and the members too were well-organised and worked on time. She used to keep an eye on things down to the details. I always remember the four aspects of the Mother: She has the vastness, grandeur, beauty and the knowledge. She is tolerant, understanding, loving, caring – a beautiful, adorable Mother!

We respected discipline and order and grew up in the healthy atmosphere of the Ashram which grew and expanded with us. We learnt a lot from our elders who lived a dedicated and sincere life which was passed on to us. It was a congenial family living

close to and around the Mother.

Our life in Dortoir was wonderful, complete in the educational line. We studied, worked and helped wherever it was necessary. We played in the evening to build a beautiful strong physique which would keep us healthy in mind and body. This is how we served the Mother with a beautiful heart and a smiling face. In our student life we did not sleep at noon. We would relax for a while and from 1 to 2 was our working hour. Our afternoon classes were from 2.15 to 3.05 p.m. and 3.10 to 4.00 p.m.

The Mother distributed groundnuts in the Playground, so we had to fill the nuts in small bags. We helped in making envelopes from old used ones. Nothing was wasted as everything had its value.



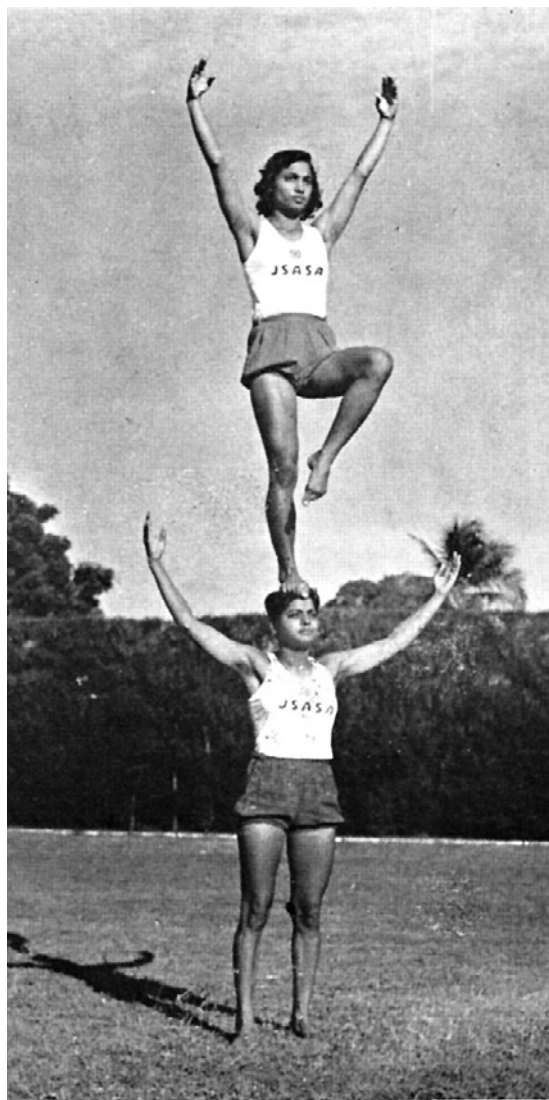


The pyramid team, Conquering the Impossible (l to r): Badol, Sumedha, Parul, Ravibala, Tara (1950)

I lived in Dortoir, so I had the privilege of waiting in the Playground till the Mother left for the Ashram after the Playground activities. During this short period some Dortoir children: Tara, Sumedha, Ravibala, Badol and I kept ourselves busy by building pyramids which we would show to the Mother when She came out of Her Playground room. Mother was full of encouragement and appreciation and this kept up our enthusiasm. We improved as the Mother gave us so much attention and suggestions for the pyramids. She named our small acrobatic group "Conquering the Impossible". We all felt so happy trying out different patterns and ways of forming the small pyramids for the Mother. It became a passion as the Mother was always eager to see our next formation. We all lived up to Her expectations and enjoyed growing up under Her guidance.

We finished the Higher Course in 1961 and I was sent to Harpagon to work with Udar-da. I learnt filing and typing and answered letters given by Udar-da. I enjoyed my work and learnt so much from Udar-da till 1963. In 1964 there was a reorganisation of boardings. Kireet-bhai was in charge and the girls were separated from the boys. Dortoir, Pragati Home, Jhun Jhun were near the Ashram for the girls. Boys lived in the far away boardings: Big Boys Home, New Home,

Ambabhikshu Home etc. I had to give up work at Harpagon and join Dortoir to look after girls aged 10 to 15. We were brought up with discipline, obedience, respect and love. I felt diffident to take up the work, for how could I infuse in them these virtues or qualities? I told the Mother of my incapacity to take up the task as I was still interested in participating in sports, ballet dance, embroidery etc. The Mother gave me the assurance that much more could be done when one organized one's time well and had goodwill. She infused in me the confidence to take up the



Performing an amazing acrobatic feat: Parul and Tara (1959)





Parul at the Meditation Hall Blessings at 9:30 am (1954)

responsibility and told me that I could approach Her at any time for help. She kindled in me the fire of action and that is why I tried to do my work in the most perfect and dedicated manner.

On my birthday on 09.01.1965 when I went up to Her she appreciated my work and encouraged me to continue and She enquired about the

Dortoir programme to be held on 15.01.1965. She looked and took interest in every detail of the work.

Seventy years back the children who joined our Ashram school were the children of the devotees. They were offered to the Mother for Her work and humility, respect, commitment were natural qualities for a higher purpose in life.

At present many parents are interested to put their children in our school as the expenses are minimal and because learning many languages can be useful for a career in the future. The real aim and purpose of the place, the values are often forgotten. Money is a power that is difficult to control. In our days money did not play a role. Simplicity and truthfulness took us along the path of progress. Now the idea of money has come in. We will have to work hard to maintain the real values of the place – peace, serenity, truthfulness, straight-forwardness etc. Money cannot buy respect, honesty, sincerity and truth. Let us always honestly “Cling to Truth”. I end with the message of the Mother which I cling to, in my path of progress:

“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 from you.” ❧



# QUIZ TIME!

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

1. How many stanzas are there in Sri Aurobindo's poem "A God's Labour"?
2. Which institution was given the date 23.4.56 for its inauguration by the Mother?
3. What programme was organised by the School on 7.7.1977?
4. Why is there a statue of Sri Aurobindo at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the flower of the brinjal (aubergine) plant?



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## ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE LAST ISSUE :

1. *Who is buried next to Amal Kiran at the Cazanove garden?*  
Nirod-da.
2. *Why did the Mother go to Karaikal during her first stay of one year in Pondicherry?*  
She accompanied Paul Richard who was going there for some work connected to the elections which were to be held in Pondicherry.
3. *Who was the last Prime Minister of India who visited the Ashram?*  
Dr. Manmohan Singh, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2012.
4. *Who represented the Ashram during the foundation ceremony of Auroville on 28th February 1968? They put the earth taken from the Ashram into the marble urn.*  
Kiran Poddar and Vijay Poddar.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of the magnolia flower?*  
Perfect Vigilance.

*Give all you have, this is the beginning.  
Give all you do, this is the way.  
Give all you are, this is the fulfilment.*

The Mother

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*We are not here to repeat what others have done, but to prepare ourselves for the blossoming of a new consciousness and a new life. That is why I address myself to you, the students, that is, to all who wish to learn, to learn always more and always better, so that one day you may be capable of opening yourselves to the new force and of giving it the possibility of manifesting on the physical plane. For that is our programme and we must not forget it. To understand the true reason why you are here, you must remember that we want to become instruments that are as perfect as possible, instruments that express the divine will in the world.*

**The Mother** (12: 72,73)

