

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



*Of Poetry &
Creative Writing*

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

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

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

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The Golden Chain
Alumni Journal of S.A.I.C.E.
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, INDIA.



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Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.
Mode of Donation: Donations can be made
by MO/DD/Cheque in favour of:
"The Golden Chain Fraternity".

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URL: www.goldenchain.in

IMPRINT:

Publisher:

Ramraj Sehgal

for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY, Pondy

Printer:

Swadhin Chatterjee,

SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM PRESS, Pondicherry.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana '79

Yes, it has been a long wait. We are bringing you a new issue after a long time. This is the May and August issues clubbed together into a double issue. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, it is difficult to get the magazine out on time. But we know that you will forgive us this long silence as we have packed this issue with interesting interviews and some surprises.

We have all grown up with some artistic activity or the other. Right from our childhood we have music, dancing, theatre and painting all around us and within easy reach, but as adults we slowly push all our creativity to the background as profession and families take over. All our time and attention is given to practical necessities. Barring those who have taken up their artistic activity as professions, the rest of us come back to our artistic pursuit only when there is some occasion or when there is nothing else to do.

Last year we organised an art exhibition and on a very short notice we received the creations of several former students. The exhibition turned out to be a success and we found out that there are many good artists within our alumni fraternity. A few months ago we announced that we were starting a poetry column in *The Golden Chain* magazine and within a couple of weeks we received several poems in one go.

This just leads us to the thought that there is a lot of hidden talent within our own circle of friends, waiting to be expressed, and we are ourselves not aware of it. We have seen that whenever there is a get together we easily find enough singers and dancers to put together an evening of performances. Now we think that there should also be a place where the alumni can share their creative writing skills.

With this issue we are starting a column for poetry and short stories. You can send us poems

and stories that you have already written or you can write specially for us. Do send them to us by email to office@goldenchainfraternity.org, keeping in mind that if it doesn't go into the issue we are preparing then it will go into the one after. For short stories a word count of up to 2000 is what we are looking for.

Writing is about the circulation of ideas and reflections. From one mind they reach many minds, from one geographical place they fly off to other places. We can never know in what way or how much they can touch and inspire others, but our words and thoughts can be just what someone is looking for. We grow in knowledge together and by writing and publishing we share that knowledge with many others.

We now live in a world that keeps changing every day, at a pace which is difficult to keep up with. Although outwardly almost everything is the same, inwardly nothing is as it was. We live simultaneously in various universes. Social media and the internet in general keep flooding us with information, often distracting us with trivialities. All this makes it harder to follow one's inner life. This is why we at *The Golden Chain* magazine make our best effort to bring to our readers the atmosphere and the fragrance of the Ashram and to draw our attention to our collective aspiration.

Many of our alumni members who don't live in Pondicherry have told me that *The Golden Chain* magazine is their lifeline connecting them to the Ashram, to the School and to their friends. So we invite you all to send us your essays, poems, short stories, memories, travel tales and experiences. Remember, you can also write in French. There are eager readers waiting to read what you write. And if you have not read the magazine for a few months or years you can catch up by reading our back issues online (<http://www.goldenchain.in/magazine/issues.php>) to get into the mood. ☿

GETTING COMPUTERS TO UNDERSTAND PEOPLE

Sujay Jauhar '09 is a PhD student in the Language Technologies Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, where he works on getting computers to understand people. He does this by developing models of language semantics that capture and express rich linguistic phenomena. Before this Sujay was at the University of Wolverhampton as well as at the Université de Franche-Comté. He plays the classical guitar, loves food tourism and the beach.

What led you to take a special interest in language technologies research?

My interests throughout Knowledge were quite eclectic: I enjoyed math and computer science as much as languages and literature. So after finishing, and during the “course shopping” process, — which a lot of ex-students are probably familiar with — I came across an Erasmus Mundus scholarship applications call for a Masters in language technologies. As a cross-disciplinary area of expertise it seemed to combine many of my academic interests. So I applied, and was fortunate enough to have been accepted. That was the start, I guess.

How easy or difficult was it to go out of our school and adapt to the American University system?

It wasn't easy at first. As much as I'm a proud and grateful SAICEan, our academic standard in a lot of areas (especially the sciences) is

significantly behind the curve compared to other elite institutions — and most of my peers in the US are from such institutions. Don't get me wrong, we have some of the most brilliant teachers, who'd compare favourably with any of the top professors at any institution. It's just that teaching at SAICE has a different goal altogether, which is inclusive and integral, rather than being exclusive and elitist.

Anyway, the two years I spent getting my Erasmus Mundus Masters before coming to the US certainly helped, but I came in knowing (what I felt was) a lot less than my peers. It didn't help that my university (Carnegie Mellon) has one of the most difficult and intense computer science programs in the world, or that our campus culture is notorious for engendering a sleep-deprived, overworked and highly stressed student body. Getting through the first semester was the hardest thing I've ever done.

But every semester since has gotten easier. You get used to the workload; you learn more in



With mom (Sujata Jauhar '84) on graduating from Carnegie Mellon University

less time; you adapt. And my SAICE education certainly had a big part to play in helping me do these things. Our education teaches us how to learn. To me that is the essence of Free Progress. It is also the essence of research.

What specific aspects of linguistics are relevant to your research?

Surprisingly little. Many popular human language technologies, such as Google translate and Siri know very little about language. To these technologies, language is simply a sequence of random symbols. It doesn't know anything about them; nor does it care to. It manipulates these symbols to do interesting things such as translate between languages, answer questions or create summaries by learning patterns and statistics over lots and lots of examples.

But over the last few years research in the field has seen an infusion of linguistics into our methods. Paying attention to morphology (such as prefixes and suffixes), syntax (how words are combined to form sentences) and semantics (what do words actually *mean*) are just some of the ways linguistics has helped create technologies that are more robust and that perform better.

Can machine translations ever go beyond basic sentences? Most people who translate literary texts feel that the skill of a translator is one part intelligence and one part intuition.

Certainly not in the near future. But more generally, if by “beyond basic sentences” you mean more complex language, almost certainly yes. It may not happen immediately but machines will get progressively better at handling more complex and difficult language.

Whether we'll actually be able to translate literary texts is a different question altogether. As you've said: that requires more than just intelligence (artificial or otherwise). Perhaps it will happen some day, in the very distant future.

If quantum computing becomes a practical reality what implications will it have on your work?

I'm no expert on quantum computing, so

what I give you is my layperson's understanding of the implications. Quantum computers potentially speed up certain operations by many orders of magnitude, compared to today's fastest supercomputers. I say potentially because, to really leverage the power of quantum computing, one needs to develop quantum algorithms. These algorithms are instruction sets that cleverly make use of properties of, or operations on, quantum computers to achieve their goal. Without such algorithms, your fancy quantum computer operates in much the same way your regular old computer does.

So to answer your question, in and of itself, I do not think quantum computing guarantees any giant advancements for AI.

Having said that, most applied fields develop methods and algorithms that are constrained by the hardware available at the time. If quantum computers were to become a reality, I'm sure the great minds of the future will quickly apply themselves to developing algorithms that fully leverage the newfound computing muscle-power. In that sense the advent of quantum computers will enable us to do things that we today consider possible but impractical, simply because our machines are not powerful enough.

Please share with us your experience of working as an intern at Google and Microsoft Research?

Both were incredibly fun, but in different ways.

At Google the perks are hard to beat: you're incredibly pampered. OMG free food! All meals! Every day! At over 25 gourmet cafeterias. I made it my summer's goal to visit all of them; and I did. Free bicycles for the summer, unlimited free snacks throughout the day, and tons of free swag (t-shirts, trinkets, tech stuff) are just some of the other things they spoil you with. On campus you have access to a *lot* of fun recreational activities when you get tired of working: bowling alley, ball pool, gyms, swimming treadmills, ping pong tables, board games and much much more. And in case you get tired of the campus, Google routinely organizes off campus trips. One time we had an entire amusement park booked for us.



As an intern at Google

Another, we were taken on a boat cruise. Obviously we never paid a cent. Ever.

The only thing better than all these perks was sharing office space with some of the greatest intellectual giants on the planet. My desk was literally a few meters away from one of the fathers of neural networks (Geoff Hinton), the guy who almost single-handedly took Google from a small search engine startup to a technological marvel (Jeff Dean), and other superstars.

Microsoft Research has much less of a Google-like behemoth-company-vibe, and is much more like academia, which I personally prefer. Consequently there's a lot more blue-sky research, rather than the more product focussed research at Google. They still treat their employees (yes, even interns) wonderfully, and the perks — while not over-the-top extravagant like Google — are certainly very sweet. For example, Microsoft in the US gives away free Xboxes to their interns. Sadly I interned in Bangalore so I didn't get one. What made my internship so much fun, though, was my research project. I worked on trying to use Pictionary to translate simple phrases between different languages. So I essentially spent the summer playing and organizing games of Pictionary. And getting paid to do that. Hard to beat, if you ask me.

What was it like to be an intern at the Allen Institute of Artificial Intelligence (AI2)? How far has research in artificial intelligence reached?

My internship experience at AI2 was very different from Google and Microsoft Research. As a relatively new venture, AI2 is more like a startup than anything else. I absolutely loved the small-team environment, and being on first-name basis with everybody (including the CEO). I also loved the fact that it's a non-profit organization. The perks were fewer compared to Google and Microsoft, but who cares when you're building artificial intelligence for the common good of humanity, right?

The way AI2 is going about this lofty endeavor is by proposing a very natural model. Let's teach computers how to learn like human school-going children. In practice, this is done by building systems that read and learn from textbooks, and then attempt to pass an (actual) school exam. You'd be amazed at how much complexity is involved in trying to get a computer — which knows and understands nothing — to pass a simple 4th grade exam (9-10 year age group).

Research in artificial intelligence has certainly come a long way, but I don't think we'll ever actually reach the goal. That's because I believe that AI is a vanishing horizon. We once thought that

a computer that would be capable of beating a human at chess would be truly intelligent. We've done that and discovered that it was actually really easy and that chess is not really a measure of human "intelligence", only one of its many many repercussions. Passing school exams is a worthy intelligence goal (for now), but once we succeed it'll be the same thing. We can only make incremental steps; and that's fine. Science and research, more often than not, work that way.

There is a general fear among non-technical people that one day humans will be controlled by computers. What do specialists like you think of this fear?

I think if they knew how sophisticated our systems really were, they'd have no fear. That's not to say it isn't possible, but we're very, very far away from anything like that happening.

I think a more pressing concern is the implications of the inexorable march of technology in replacing human labour. As machines learn to drive our cars, do our everyday chores, help us at the office and be our personal assistants, they're also putting a lot of people out of jobs. People are going to need to be increasingly proficient and skilled to make a living wage. I think this has already begun to happen, to some extent. There's a very real need to re-think how society, the economy and law would function around technology. Certainly it's more urgent than worrying about our future machine overlords.

Do you find any common thread between your research and Sri Aurobindo's philosophy?

While I was at AI2 I attended a talk by the

head of the Allen Institute for Brain Sciences (a sister organization of AI2). In that talk he spoke about the scientific basis for consciousness. I do not claim to have understood much, but from what I gathered, his hypothesis was essentially that a way of quantifying consciousness in a species is by investigating the inherent structural complexity of the underlying mechanism (i.e. the brain). This effectively ties consciousness to evolution, since it is through evolution that you see progressively more complex species. I thought that echoed Sri Aurobindo's twin vision of evolution and consciousness quite nicely, albeit from a very different point of view.

Obviously what I work on is artificial intel-



Hiking in the mountains

ligence, and not brain intelligence. But we've always drawn inspiration from how our brains function to teach our computers to mimic us. Perhaps, someday in the quest for artificial intelligence we'll also begin to develop artificial consciousness? For now, baby steps. ☘

OF JOURNALISM

Samarpan Dutta '94, who is Associate Editor of Business Today, shares with us his reflections and experience in his field of work.

“Never awake me when you have good news to announce, because with good news nothing presses; but when you have bad news, arouse me immediately, for then there is not an instant to be lost.”

— Napoleon Bonaparte

In the wrong hands, the pen inflicts more wounds than the sword. And, the more it bleeds, it leads.

The media frenzy around violence, corruption, conflicting and divisive ideologies, lies and half truths, and the sly behind news coverage have been criticised with equal zeal – on the streets, in Parliament, on social media, in living rooms and, of course, in newsrooms. If the fourth pillar of democracy was less about violence and more about nation building, it would, perhaps, not have grabbed enough eye balls. In other words, it would be an uninspiring medium to fan public opinion.

This takes me back to a not-so-important lesson I learnt very early on in my journalistic career. I was told: “*public ja khete chai tai dite habe* (give the masses what they want)”. This was in response to a query on why the English daily I was working for back then had done away with a one-page weekly section that published selected works of the likes of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, and a host of other spiritual luminaries from around the world. Despite protests from subscribers, the management felt it was a waste of newsprint because the section was not getting the much-needed advertisements.

This, and similar moves by most media organisations, announced the gradual decline in values across newsrooms. Editors became less relevant and the management (those who brought in the funds) wielded their sticks to have a greater say on the content. In fact, this was reflected in the sidelining of one of the most celebrated editors of our times, someone, who had once famously said that he “was the most powerful person after the prime minister”. And, as the monies started flowing, the profession witnessed the arrival of celebrity journalists — the star faces of news breaks, thriving on the hard work of people on the ground, unearthing the dark underbellies of our society. Till then, journalists had mostly remained anonymous so that they could reveal

more. However, to be fair, a few of them have had extensive experience as cub reporters and gone through the initial grind.

The emergence of the electronic media, or news channels, further aggravated the much-loved yet much-hated coverage around half truths, violence and divisive politics — hours of deliberations on the news-worthiness of a developing story gave way to split-second decisions that led to air-or-not-to-air-and-regret-later journalism, or the breaking news genre. The

once-forbidden deification and demonising of public figures and communities along religious and ethnic lines found roots in the sanctum sanctorum of print journalism — the Newsroom. It was also the harbinger of handout journalists, who churned news reports out of press releases from media cells of political parties and the

corporate-PR machinery. And, the deadly concoction of aligning with political ideologies (read vote-bank politics) and remunerative journalism gave rise to quid pro quo — “journalists” who would plant stories and go any distance to serve their political and corporate masters. Such vested interests further polarised the polity and the masses at large.

Soon, newsrooms were editorialising reports: from the much-appreciated he-said-they-said form of news reporting, which provided the reader with the “complete picture” (views of all parties concerned), to narrating just one side of the story perceived within the confines of the desk and then plugging in only relevant quotes to realign facts. The result was a journalist-politico-corporate nexus that went to the extent of even compromising national security – from the Radia Tapes to the Ishrat Jahan case, and now the AgustaWestland payoffs.

But, alongside the mayhem, a section of journalists held fort and toiled tirelessly 24x7 to dig out the truth — some of their efforts saw the light of day, while some were lost to the dark dungeons of the printing press. They had the domain knowledge and the conviction to not only stand up to

the higher-ups but even to the proprietor, and despite the run-ins, were respected, albeit with a nervous smile. They were people who swore to weed out corruption, take on the government in power and the opposition alike, report corporate malpractices and condemn some of their own.

Indian journalism has, of late, seen green-shoots of a clean-up that has long been due. The emerging media-versus-media war, many expect, will work towards strengthening the very foundation of the fourth estate, and in weeding out the corrupt. Among those who have taken up the mantle are a few disgruntled souls, some who are disillusioned and some with vested interests, but at the core of it all are well-meaning veterans wanting to clean up the media ecosystem.

The ink-slingers, who remain a minority but a powerful and influential coterie, are being forced to revisit their black-as-ink days to position themselves afresh — on social media, in interviews and on news portals. Because, some of their own are watching, and the more muck is out in the open the more irrelevant they become.

The pen once again will rule — not to inflict wounds, but to expose, to weed out the corrupt. And, the more it weeds, it leads! ❧

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

All this insistence upon action is absurd if one has not the light by which to act. Yoga must include life and not exclude it does not mean that we are bound to accept life as it is with all its stumbling ignorance and misery and the obscure confusion of human will and reason and impulse and instinct which it expresses. The advocates of action think that by human intellect and energy making an always new rush everything can be put right; the present state of the world after a development of the intellect and a stupendous output of energy for which there is no historical parallel is a signal proof of the illusion under which they labour. Yoga takes the stand that it is only by a change of consciousness that the true basis of life can be discovered; from within outward is indeed the rule. But within does not mean some quarter inch behind the surface. One must go deep and find the soul, the self, the Divine Reality within us and only then can life become a true expression of what we can be instead of a blind and always repeated confused blur of the inadequate and imperfect thing we were. The choice is between remaining in the old jumble and groping about in the hope of stumbling on some discovery or standing back and seeking the Light within till we discover and can build the godhead within and without us.

Sri Aurobindo (CWSA 28:444)

DIRECTING AD FILMS

Independent ad film maker, Saurabh Ghosh '95 shares his journey from his first job at Footcandles in Chennai to having the courage to set out on his own in Mumbai several years later. In this interview with Meera Guthi '95 he talks of the patience and resilience required and the need to constantly excel in his field.

Tell us how you started your journey to becoming an ad film maker.

I was always fascinated by the film making process. Growing up, I would watch movies, read



Saurabh, extreme left, in striped shirt.

about them, and try to understand the process. I knew I wanted to be a part of this world.

After completing my studies at SAICE, I did my Master's in Communication at the University of Hyderabad. Although the course was majorly on media studies, we did have a video production course. That was my starting point. Later, my internship with Channel V in Mumbai convinced me that this was my field.

A job at Footcandles Films, in Chennai, set me on my journey. Two tough years of doing every conceivable work on a production were eye opening. They taught me to be patient, resilient and never

give up. They also taught me the process itself, which was invaluable. It was the foundation that would allow me to go to Mumbai to further my experience.

It is never easy to come to Mumbai without a job. But I had to follow my dream and so I landed in this city. A chance meeting with a cameraman who I had worked with in Chennai, got me a job with Robert J Productions. Three years with Johny Pinto, the Director, really helped me hone my skills, understand the technicalities of the process and meet a lot of people from the advertising fraternity.

My final job was with Pradeep Sarkar at Apocalypse Filmworks. Dada, as he was fondly called, was an absolute workaholic. His insatiable energy meant there were no days off. We worked morning till night, completely immersed. Not that any of us complained. Working closely with him was invaluable — it gave me the opportunity to see everything first hand, take decisions on his behalf and have the confidence to handle every kind of stress. My stint with Dada gave me the courage to take the leap of faith and set out on my own.



A still from one of his ads



On the job.

How would you describe your work?

The process of Ad film making deals with converting a script into what you finally see on Television. The primary job of a Director lies in visualising the lines developed by the agency or client, and transferring that vision on screen. The process can be divided into three broad parts: Pre-Production (casting, story-boarding, location scouting, setting, styling), which happens before filming. It is also the most critical part of the process, and the more you are sorted in pre-production, the smoother the shoot. The shoot is where the vision actually takes shape, and is of course the most exciting and challenging part. The final part is post production (editing, grading, dubbing, music composition, mixing), where the rushes, or material, are given their final form.

As much as it is about creativity, the film making process is also about man management. The director is the captain of the ship, coordinating and guiding all the individuals and departments.

The learning process though never ceases. The more you work, the more you learn from your colleagues, technicians and the work that others do.

What are the challenges of working in a crowded and competitive market like India?

Ad film making is a very niche space. The quantum of work available is not very large and the competition is fierce. New production houses and directors come into the churn regularly, and older ones remain in the business for years too. Since creativity has no expiry date, as long as you do good work, you will keep getting opportunities. So the system works best for the established few who have a large body of work and excellent networking.

Opportunities though, are there for all, but the pitching process for work has become very cut throat. In our field, they say you are as good as your last film (read TVC — Television Commercial). Therefore it is imperative to keep improving on your work.



Another still from one of his ads

What have been some of your most memorable or challenging projects?

The path from an assistant director, doing the most menial of jobs to actually directing and being the captain of a ship on a TVC has been a fascinating journey.

I remember, when I was an assistant, we were shooting a TVC for Horlicks. We had cast a duplicate of Rajnikanth for the film. The night before the shoot, he called up in his high spirits and asked for 10 times the remuneration. We were too shocked to react. We knew it was impossible. So we looked for the next best candidate on the video

test, located the area he lived in from his introduction lines, and without any contact number, started looking for him house to house. Somewhere around 2am, we found him. That the director, on the next day, didn't react too unkindly, seeing a duplicate, meant we kept our jobs. But it was a night I will never forget.

The toughest of the shoots I have directed was a set of Britannia Films in Ooty. For three days we struggled to shoot in the mud, rain and fog. A complete antithesis to the controlled environment we generally have. At the mercy of nature, 12 kids and limited time, we were constantly swimming against the tide. We wrapped up at 1:30 am on the third night with a bunch of hard working and sleepy kids, an exhausted crew and a missing production manager, who had abandoned us for fear of the forest rangers confiscating our equipment — an unforgettable experience, which needed divine intervention for us to scrape through.



Saurabh, centre, during a shoot

Travelling across India and parts of the world on work is always exciting and interesting, as is working with some of my favourite actors, and



Working with Vidya Balan

seeing them perform at close quarters. Directing one of them, Vidya Balan was extra special. Her grace and professionalism are incomparable. It made all the hard work worthwhile.

What advice would you give to anyone interested in this field?

The media world offers numerous opportunities. Ad film production is only a small part of this bigger sphere. If you want to pursue it professionally, you have to be passionate and interested in the process. There is a lot of hard work, both physical and mental that goes into the making of a TVC. And you have to be sure you want to be a part of it before you start.

To begin, I would suggest doing a Master's degree, which is on offer at various Universities. It is important to learn and understand the wider field, before furthering your career. A degree will not guarantee you a job, but it will earn you respect. And that is always a good starting point.

Our field is not very structured when it comes to placements or jobs. So the first break may take time. But hard work and persistence always pay off. If you are honest in your work, passionate and diligent, you will surely succeed.

Any special memories of growing up in SAICE.

I think all of us who have studied in SAICE are extremely nostalgic and fond of our growing up years. The freedom, simplicity and beauty of that period are etched in my memory. The affection of the teachers and captains who groomed us,



Saurabh third from left during an ad shoot

our classmates and friends who have become an intrinsic part of our lives are all gifts of our time at SAICE.

It took very little to make us happy.... Doing well in class, or in the swimming competitions, or performing in a school programme.... The excitement of movies on Saturday night, or waiting to play football or the picnics we went out for. Sans the distraction of TV (well, maybe a little bit) or the Internet, we were happy to be studying and playing, sheltered, protected and nurtured by SAICE and the Ashram community.

I feel fortunate to have studied in SAICE, and the memories of the times spent here will never fade.

In what ways has SAICE shaped you?

What I am today is because of SAICE and

growing up in the Ashram community. From learning to appreciate life, to being grounded, to having the freedom to express yourself, the journey at SAICE moulds you as a person. Our system of education helps us discover the various aspects of our personality, be it a creative bent, physical skill or mental acumen.

The free-system gave me the opportunity for self-motivation and growth, for following my interests and enjoying doing what I wanted to

learn and do. That has been an invaluable part of my learning.

There is no greater learning though, than being guided by the value system that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have spoken about. And our school, SAICE, inculcates that in you and builds you to be a better human being, making you



Saurabh (fourth from left) with Vidya Balan (fourth from right).

conscious of a higher life and goal. And knowing and realising this has been key to shaping my life. ❧

A JOURNEY

Itishree Panda '81H (now Itishree Devi)

When I was five my mother admitted me in the Prarambhik section at the Kala Vikash Kendra, in Cuttack, the then premier institute for dance and music in Odisha. By doing so, my mother, soft spoken and timid by nature, had demonstrated extraordinary courage. This was in the late 1960s. Hailing from a Brahmin family, she was transgressing the social taboo against dance, dismissing the difficulty/risk of a 5 year old travelling 5 km by rickshaw to reach the institution and inviting the wrath of my father who, like most people of his time, considered any preoccupation other than studies an indulgence



Portraying Radha looking through the window

in frivolous distractions. All this because she herself had nurtured a passion for dance and music since childhood; a dream that she cherished and wished to fulfill through her youngest daughter. Even today, at 80, she never misses my performances at Bhubaneswar and remains my most honest critic.

As for me, the two-evening-a-week journey, learning the basics with 30 other toddlers and the ride back in a rickety old rickshaw was nothing short of an adventure. I used to often fall asleep on the way back and was carried to the doorstep by the old rickshaw puller Phagu. Was I talented? I can't say. All I remember is that I was a lanky little

ball of energy with an extremely supple body and no stage fear whatsoever. I loved to show off my little knowledge dressed in a frilled white frock; my prized possession. One of my doctor uncles professed that I had no bones and called me 'rubber doll'.

Thus began my journey of dance. My first major performance was as Sita in a school performance of Ramayana. That was a performance that my teachers remembered years after I had left school though all I remember was the scene in Ashoka Vatika where Sita was supposed to be lamenting the separation from Rama. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Whether it was my prowess in abhinaya or the fact that I had remained hungry for hours and the golden girdle around my waist was tied too tightly I am yet to figure out. Perhaps a little of both!

Soon after that I came to the Ashram. I was barely 8 years old. Of course, at that time there was no scope for learning Odissi in the Ashram. Odissi as we see it today was in the process of resurgence and had earned recognition as a classical form only in the early-fifties. I joined the Sunday classes, first learning the basics of Bharata Natyam with Jharna-di and then continuing with Anu-ben. I am grateful to both for nurturing my talent. I vaguely remember a visiting lady Kathak dancer also who took some classes. It was a kind of training in a medley of dance styles. Two performances stand out among many. A Saturday afternoon dance drama by Tagore "Kaashir Mohishi Koruna" in the Hall of Harmony, choreographed by Anu-ben, in the role of the queen Koruna. I don't know whether she remembers, but the person who was generous enough to lend her blue embroidered sari was Pallavi (Bashabjit-da's wife). My first childish audacious attempt at choreography was on Sumedha-ben's birthday in EAVP. Lipi (Das) sang while I danced to the famous song by Kobi Nishikanto-da—"Ekti Rongin Paakhi Shondhyakaashe".

The more memorable performance was as "Chandalini"; again a Tagore poem choreographed by Ira-di. In fact till she was alive Ira-di always remembered me as Chandalini whenever I met her. The booming voice of Gautam-da (Gautam Mitra) singing "Jalo dao amai jalo dao, Aami Shranta amai jalo dao?" reverberates in my mind even today. I also loved Shyama's wonderful rendering as the "Doi-vendor".

Ira-di with her sweet ways impressed me so much that I tried desperately to live up to the dignity of the character I was playing. I have an interesting confession to make. On the day of the performance Ira-di made me wear a glittering stone nose-ring hanging down from between the two nostrils touching the upper lip as is customary among village women. I found this not only uncomfortable but also certainly not to my liking as I thought I looked a typical *ganwar* (in Ashram parlance). I pleaded with Ira-di, with little effect. I went through my performance and somewhere towards the end I pulled out the nose-ring and dropped it on the stage. No one suspected anything. Later when everyone complimented me on

the role and observed how pretty I looked with the nose-ring I felt a pang of guilt so strong that it stays with me till today. I feel so relieved now that I write about it even though Ira-di is no more. I am sure she would have forgiven the stubborn whims of a teenager, having dealt with children all her life.

In 1977, half-way through my studies, I had to come back to Cuttack. Every student of the Ashram who is obliged to leave — especially as an overly sensitive teenager — would understand the trauma of adjusting to a life diametrically in

contrast with everything one was taught in the Ashram. Of course I started preparing for the matriculation exams and managed to pass with first class despite the short duration of study and an extensive and boring syllabus.

Dance became my solace. I went back to Kala Vikash Kendra (KVK). My old guru Shri Raghunath Dutta, who remembered me, was surprised that I picked up so

fast from where I had left. Within months I was asked to perform with students who were far ahead in training and seniority. Something very strange and almost uncanny was happening. At every performance, or during or after it, some accident or the other (though trivial) occurred. Once during a group folk dance I fell on stage and was dragged by the rest till everyone laughed at the comic situation. At another place I cut my finger badly just before the performance and at a third, on our way back, I fell in a 2 feet dark drain near a bus halt and had to literally take a bath while the others formed a circle around me. The best part was nothing serious happened. Much later (perhaps in 2006) I sprained my right foot after a bad fall



Dhira Samire from Gita Govinda

at Cottage Guest House 3 days before a performance in the Ashram school. Every medicine and treatment was administered — Allopathy, Ayurvedic, Homeopathy, Acupuncture & Reiki (this by Radhika Ranjan). The pain and the sinister looking black & blue swelling subsided but marginally. Yet I decided to perform (rain had forced shifting of the programme to the Hall of Harmony) and did so with the Mother's Photo behind me. Later Joj (Jyotsna Singh, a very close friend) observed this was perhaps one of the best performances I had given in the Ashram. I am

absolutely in no doubt that it was the Mother's infinite Grace that protected me.

The Divine Grace also saved me from many a near-disaster during performances, caused by my chronic absent-mindedness. I will come back to it more elaborately later. After matriculation I had enrolled in Intermediate Science at Ravenshaw College. I participated in every available extra-curricular activity offered. Besides dancing I played in the College Basketball team as captain, represented the college in Table tennis and joined the National Cadet Corps (NCC). I was the only cadet from Ravenshaw College to be selected for the Republic Day Camp at Delhi and was among the very few to participate in the Republic Day Parade and dance inside Raj Bhavan. I can never describe the pride and thrill one feels marching for the country on Rajpath. I was reliving the Ashram experience of marching in Sports Ground or Playground in front of the Mother's Symbol. In 1984 I received the Best All Round Girl Student Award.

What I would like to narrate is how the Grace of the Mother was behind whatever success I have achieved as a dancer and professionally. The world of art and artists, which one would expect to be at a higher level of consciousness, is actually full of cut-throat competition, envy, lobbying etc. — something I was neither familiar with then nor submit to even today. One day as I was leaving KVK a clerk who knew I spoke French asked me if I could be the interpreter for a French lady who was visiting the Institute the next day. The lady, Dr. Tara Michaël, both a scholar and an Odissi dancer herself learning at Kalakshetra in Madras, had come to select a senior dancer for the prestigious "Festival D'automne" at Paris of which she was India-coordinator.

It turned out that Tara could speak English fluently and my services were not needed. As I was not required to dance I sat watching all the senior dancers perform one by one. Suddenly Tara turned to me and asked whether I would like to dance a piece too. I was barely into the third year of training (interspersed by long breaks for college examinations) and hence very diffident. But I obliged. Tara asked me to meet her



Performing in Osaka, Japan

with my parents at 7 am the next morning at the Bhubaneswar State Guest House. My father and I took the 5 am train from Cuttack and the rest, as they say, is history.

What was this if not a miracle? In the 80s travelling abroad for a dance performance was a distant dream and before I had returned from the trip I had become a celebrity. Later I came to learn that there was tremendous pressure on Tara from the Chief Minister's office to promote another dancer. But she was stubborn. Overnight I had become the object of admiration as well as envy, though I myself was blissfully ignorant of it. Thank heavens social media was practically non-existent then. Or else I would have had a bloated head.

The tour de France in October 1981 was an experience by itself. I stayed at Kalakshetra in Madras for two months to practise with Guru Ramani

Ranjan Jena and renowned Bharatanatyam dancer of today Malavika Sarukkai, then learning Odissi, who were to perform with me. We first had 4 days of performance at the Chapelle inside Sorbonne University. Incidentally actress and Bharatanatyam dancer Vijayantimala Bali had just performed the day before our performance. I was thrilled to be in such august company.

I was extremely nervous. But once on stage I forgot everything and performed effortlessly. As soon as the first item was over, Malavika's mother who had accompanied us, came running backstage to tell me I had forgotten to wear my silver bangles. Ramani Sir gave me a stern glare and I was in panic. Thank God, nothing untoward happened and the performances went smoothly. Thereafter we performed all over France covering almost 20 towns and cities. This series of incidents of absent-minded negligence haunted me throughout. I would forget to paint my bindi on the forehead or tie my bells or maybe to put on lipstick. The most serious of them was during the next leg of our performance in Milan, Italy. To my utter dismay about 30 minutes before the performance I realised I had forgotten the chunri, to cover my front, at the hotel. Ramani Sir was livid with anger and refused to accompany me to the hotel. I had to rush back with a complete stranger (an Italian), to fetch it. But, as I said, all this happened just in time for me to correct the situation prior to the performance. I knew the Mother was my constant support. Sometimes I think I have taken Her help too much for granted. I have improved with age, but even today panic overtakes me every now and then before a performance.

Returning from France I had to appear for my BA exams, with English as my Honours subject. Exactly three days after my exams I was to appear for an interview for Senior National Scholarship in Dance offered by the HRD Ministry, Govt. of India. To make things worse, I was the first candidate to be called for the interview. A set of five eminent panelists including Scholars, Gurus and senior dancers fired me with questions on theory of dance. Since I was under no delusion of being selected over many a well-known competitor I frankly confessed that I had no time to study

as I was appearing for BA exams. So I was asked to give practical demonstration in dance. It was a grilling and exhaustive performance of 50 minutes including the entire repertoire. I was selected for the Scholarship.

In the meanwhile I had the good fortune to be introduced to the doyen of Odissi, Guru Shri Kelucharan Mohapatra. I went through rigorous training under his tutelage and began performing with his troupe. I have also danced in a few Odia films under Guruji's supervision. I think one of them — Odia 'Ramayan' — was shown in the Ashram. This training and Guru-Shishya association continued for more than two decades until he passed away in 2004.

What does one say about Guruji? The artist, the genius, and the human being! Guruji has played a vital role in the revival of Odissi and in shaping the repertoire. Recently at a Film Festival on Art and Artists, renowned Malayali producer-director Shri Adoor Gopalkrishnan



Another photo from the performance in Osaka

observed that the two most beautiful things that Odisha has produced are the Sun Temple of Konark and Guru Shri Kelucharan Mohapatra.

His canvas became his students in whom he painted the indelible art of movement — bhangis, mudras, footwork, facial expressions. He chose dances to suit the dancer who was to perform it, especially the abhinayas (expressional dance). The renowned dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi's height and imposing stage presence made her eminently suitable for majestic characters like Rama, Arjuna and other mythical male characters. Much as I loved doing male roles, I was mostly given the very feminine characters.



Performing in Paris

My studies went on simultaneously. After graduation (BA) in English Honours with Distinction and in my 1st year of MA, I was married. My only pre-condition to my husband was that I should be allowed to continue my studies as well as dance. I studied MA in English and continued practising with Guruji.

The summer classes with Guruji need special mention. This was a 2-months intensive course. The room was perhaps 20ft by 15 ft in dimension. More than 30 students, some from outside the state and even the country, practised together from 9 o'clock in the morning to 10 in the evening with a 2 hour break for lunch and rest. We were literally breathing and living dance oblivious of the world outside.

Upon my return from France, Guruji was directing a dance-drama on excerpts from

Tulsidas' *Ramayana*. Sanjukta Panigrahi was Rama and Kumkum Mohanty, Sita. I was to play the role of Bharata. Due to time constraints the Bharata episode had to be omitted and I was given the role of the Golden deer. Immediately he noticed the disappointment on my face though I did not say anything. He affectionately put his hand around me and said that a true artist must take even the smallest of roles as a challenge.

I was slim and tall with long legs, and he made me practise a ballet step (*Grand Jeté*) a thousand times to show the deer running in fright. This was his genius — a keen observation which picked up movements both from life and other dance forms — appropriating, sanitizing and blending them subtly into the Odissi dance style. I wore a lovely golden Odissi costume with a symbolic golden horn on the head. It was a 40 ft wide stage and I was literally flying on stage followed by Rama. The air resounded with thunderous applause. After the program a connoisseur exclaimed "Guruji, your deer killed it on stage today". Guruji looked at me as he broke into his inimitably candid smile. He had taught me the greatest lesson a true artist needs to possess of which he was the brightest example: *Namranti Phalino Vrikshya Namranti Gunino Janaa* (True great men bow down with humility like a tree laden with fruits).

We were to perform a dance drama on Radha and Krishna named "Champu". I as Radha, Guruji's son Ratikanta as Krishna and others were to perform at the World Trade Fair in Delhi on a chilly December evening. Meticulous about every detail he would forget food and rest. Rehearsals went on till the wee hours of the morning. Both Ratikant and I had to remain on a strict vegetarian diet. On the day of the performance he personally did my makeup, tied bells on my ankles. Once ready, he made us both stand together and before we knew it he touched our feet. Seeing his son and student visibly shocked and in discomfort he said "Forget who you are. Now you are only Radha & Krishna". I felt a shiver run down my spine as I entered on the stage almost in a state of trance. This was the great Guru before whom many a legendary dancer and musician like Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia, Pt. Shivkumar

Sharma, Ustad Zakir Hussain etc. bowed down with deep reverence.

Thereafter I performed extensively across the country both solo and in group performances. Odissi, though extremely graceful and lyrical, requires extraordinary balance, coordination and most importantly control in body movements. The movements are mostly circular and the dancer herself/himself is the best judge of positioning her/his limbs to attain a perfect posture. In a way you need to have a perfect knowledge of your body. As for grace, in some it is inborn while in others it is acquired. My strength I would like to believe lies particularly in the *abhinaya* aspect of dance wherein the intensity of a performance grows with maturity.

From 1984-1988 I completed my MA examinations, was appointed as a lecturer in English at a College and became a mother to my daughter. By then Guruji had moved to Bhubaneswar. I too settled there with my husband's extended family, including parents, brothers and sisters-in-law and their children. Dance became a remote possibility.

One day, after I had finished teaching, I was in a hurry to head home to my 18-month-old daughter. A senior professor called me back from the gate as an American Professor of History, Dr Klaus Kipphan, visiting the College wished to interact with faculty and students. With much reluctance I stayed back. Dr Kipphan was asking stereotypical questions pertaining to India's image in the West — on the social evils of the caste system, arranged marriage, dowry, conflict in the extended family etc. and inviting responses from faculty and students. Mine was the most vociferous voice of dissent as I, furiously patriotic by nature, was aggressively countering him with logical explanations. Later an amused Dr Kipphan (an exact picture of Einstein) admitted that he was deliberately playing the Devil's Advocate in an effort to understand this rich and ancient culture

ଶେଷରେ ମାନ ଭାଙ୍ଗିଲେ ରାଧା



Bhubaneswar newspaper clipping regarding a performance

and asked me whether I would be interested in teaching a team-taught course on "Contemporary Indian Civilization" as well as independently a course on "Indo-Anglian Literature" at his college in Pennsylvania, two years later. Two years was a long time. I was hardly 26 and deep down I had my doubts about his honesty. But I agreed.

This second miraculous Divine intervention was the beginning of a most wonderful association and chapter in my life. My knowledge of dance was an added boon. From 1991 to 1998 I had the opportunity to teach both courses at Juniata College, Pennsylvania for 6 alternate Spring Semesters as Visiting Lecturer and performed Odissi as Resident Artist. Other organisations also invited me to perform in places like New York & Williamsburg, Penn-state University etc. Later Dr Kipphan visited the Ashram twice with me on his visits to India. Some of my friends must surely remember seeing him. His vast knowledge of Indian culture and temple architecture would put many of us to shame.

On my way back from my visits to the USA I contacted friends from the Ashram and others for performances in several countries in Europe: Devdutt Lal, Ajit-da and Selvi-di in Paris, Dingle who arranged a dance tour of Italy, Kshem and Naina in Switzerland, Vilas Patel in England



Presentation: Indian Culture and Women - Sakai City, Japan

(forgive me if I am forgetting anyone). They were all generously obliging. My deep gratitude to all of them for the trouble they took to arrange these performances, the cordial hospitality and the enriching exposure I had.

After these visits I would be back again playing the role of daughter-in-law, mother at home and lecturer in English at the College. I had also enrolled and studied for a PhD in English. So dance in a way was relegated to the background except for occasional performances. In 2001 a chance encounter with an Odia gentleman from Sweden at a neighbour's house resulted in my applying for participation at the 4th IDEA Congress, an International Conference on Education and Drama to be held in July in Bergen, Norway. I was selected among 7 other Indians, presented a paper, conducted a workshop on "The Therapeutic Effect of Dance in Education" and performed in front of 500 delegates. From there I proceeded to Sweden.

Over the years, especially after the demise of Guruji, my performances have dwindled. My last performance with him was the Gita Govinda at Purana Killa in Delhi for the Ananya Festival in October 2003. On 7th April 2004 he left his body after a stroke. Every year some of us senior students perform to commemorate this day. Recently in June 2014 I was invited by the "Sakai International Interchange Association" to give a presentation on "Indian Culture and Women" followed by a dance performance at Sakai City in Osaka, Japan.

I had never wanted to take up dance as a profession as then the spontaneity and joy would have to be sacrificed at the altar of obligation and financial gains. The journey continues and the passion is as intense as ever. The heart continues to dance no matter what the music. Once a dancer forever a dancer. The one cannot be separated from the other whether you are physically performing or not. ❧

A PASSION FOR MUSIC

An interview with **Gautam Dey '79**

When did your passion for singing start?

To be very frank, I certainly was not a "catch them young" singer, neither was there anything like "morning shows the day" in me. It all started quite late sometime in the year 1973, and I was already fourteen or so by then. One fine morning Tapan-da (Choudhury), who was at that time a hero of sorts — at least in the eyes of the younger students of that period — asked me whether I would join the group in a chorus song to be

in inspiring the passion for singing in me. The effort, the time and the love she gave us cannot be measured by any yardstick. Mohan-bhai with his characteristic style and compositions too had a great influence on me, as he helped me appreciate and imbibe the love for *bhajans*. Even though I learnt classical music for more than 12 years, it was always *bhajans* which attracted me most.

The other teachers were: Ajanta-di, Runu-da, Nandita-di, Bokul-di (Nalini Sen-da's elder daughter), and last but not the least Sahana-di. Even though I had only a few sittings with her, it certainly was a very great privilege which I cherish very dearly.



Performing in Kolkata

sung for a Saturday programme (if I remember correctly). I distinctly remember the song to this day, 43 years down the line. It was "Anandaloke, mangalaloke", a Rabindra sangeet. I shyly told him, I could, but that I had never sung before, publicly that is. He said, "Never mind" and asked me to join the rehearsals. That was my initiation to singing.

Who were your teachers while you were in school?

I was then in the free section, in EAVP, with Chanda-di as our section head. We were then allowed to choose our subjects (to a great extent), so I chose music as one of my subjects and joined Shobha-di's class. Shobha-di was my first Guru you may say, and she was also the biggest influence

From whom did you learn after you left Pondicherry?

On returning to Calcutta in the month of March in 1980, I was a little confused. My elder brother was pressing me to join the family business and at the same time I was keen to pursue music. It was not very difficult though, finally, to make room for both. I joined my family business and at the same time started learning classical music. My first teacher in Calcutta was the renowned teacher of that time, Pandit Sukhendu Goswami of Bishnupur Gharana. It was not very difficult to adjust as the class was only once a week. During this period I started my day at four in the morning and practised for three and a half hours. I went to the office at 8.15, worked at the office till 4 in the evening and returned home to practise for another four hours into the night. For about one and half years I learnt from my first guru. During this period I used to be a frequent visitor to Sri Aurobindo Bhavan. During one such visit in the middle of 1983, it came to my knowledge that Pandit Prasun Banerjee and Smt Meera Banerjee, the most famous exponents of Patiala Gharana had in the meantime started teaching in "Ahana" the cultural section of the Bhavan, which was headed by Krishna-di (who

since has retired to the Ashram and works in some department in the Ashram Main Building). I immediately contacted Krishna-di, and was admitted to Guru-ji's (as we called him) class. Here too it was a weekly class. I was overawed by Guru-ji's style and within a very short period of time got the hang of his and the Patiala style. Guru-ji asked me to join classes at his house, in addition to the weekly class at the Bhavan. This was the period of intense musical *sadhana* under Guru-ji's guidance, Guruma (Meera-di) was also always there to correct our mistakes and to guide us. Within a couple of years they were no more my gurus and I their student — I became part of their family. There was no restriction to our coming and leaving, no restriction to the number of hours and days I spent with them.

I have not seen a person so engrossed in music, such a giant of a musician who at the same time was a *sadhak* for whom music was meditation. Can you believe that he never asked me for the *guru dakshina* (fees), not even once in the entire 10 years that I learnt from him? We used to put our fees in an envelope and tuck it under a book or something, on a table kept at the side of the room. It will not be out of place to say that his birthday too was on the 15th of August.

As a result, during the period between 1983 and 1988, I spent fewer hours at work, but luckily for me my brothers overlooked my frequent absence from the office. In the winter of 1988, I got married to Sumita, whom I had met at the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, where she was a student of Meera-di. We had our first child Auro, the next year. My responsibilities towards my family forced me during this period to change my priorities. It became the other way around — more hours spent in the office and less time for music. I continued to learn from Guru-ji for another three years and this was the time when my second child Rohit was born. I now had to take a final call, and I had no option but to be fully devoted to my business.

When did you first perform in public outside Pondicherry?

Between 1980 and 1990, I used to travel to

the various Sri Aurobindo centres in the districts of West Bengal and Odisha along with Biswanath-da (Roy), and Sudhir-da (Dewan). After the inspiring speeches on Mother and Sri Aurobindo by Biswanath-da and Sudhir-da, I used to sing Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's songs learnt in the Ashram. I must say that Biswanath-da's and Sudhir-da's speeches on the Master and the Mother were so inspiring that you had goose bumps when you heard them speak.

My first classical performance was when my Guru-ji asked me to sing along with him in the Kalamandir Auditorium in Kolkata. Subsequently I performed in many classical functions and competitions in Bengal. I was also summoned to Bombay for an audition by the T. Series Company in 1990. The judges comprised of Anuradha Paudwal among others. I was asked to stay back in Bombay. I had a family by then and chose not to take the chance.

I had during this period also sung for a few TV serials and programs. One that turned out to be a valuable experience was a programme composed and directed by the great Kathak exponent Rani Karnaa, who was also a teacher in "Ahana" then. Among other participants in this program was Ustad Shabir Khan on the tabla.

Can you share any memorable moments connected with your life as a singer?

Champaklal-ji had visited Kolkata on two or three occasions during this period and had stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Punjabi, Sangeeta's parents. It was my duty then to be stationed there and practically spend the day with Champaklal-ji singing the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's songs for him and also to be pampered by Sangeeta's mother with her delicacies. She had, in fact, called me her second son. On one such evening get-together in another devotee's residence, I was ending my singing with a very inspiring composition of Shobha-di's "Jayati Jayati Jaya Jaya Maa Meera". As you know, Champaklal-ji took a vow of silence some time after the Mother had left her body, and he wrote down whatever he wanted to communicate to others. As soon as I concluded my song and opened my eyes (I usually sing with my eyes

closed), Champaklal-ji burst into laughter. He went on laughing and laughing and finally when he stopped, every one present wanted to know the reason for his reaction. He wrote down on a piece of paper "I saw Mother standing there at the back".

There was another incident of which I came to know much later and this was narrated to me by Subash-da. I am mentioning this because it fills my heart with gratitude. A long, long time ago, I was participating in an evening programme in the Hall of Harmony. I was singing a Bengali *Kali bhajan* by Ramprasad.

Kailash-bhai had gone into a semi-meditative mood listening to the *Kali bhajan*, and suddenly he saw in that trance-like state a person with a long flowing beard and hair, clad in dhoti, stand up from among the audience, walk up to the Mother's photo and merge into her. He later told Subhas-da of this experience and suggested that he must have seen Ramprasad merging into Mother's photo.

How did your Ashram background help you in the field of music?

I really do not know whether my Ashram background has helped me in the field of music

in particular or not, but it surely has helped me in a big way in my life in general. At the end of the journey or near-about, I cannot but be grateful to the Mother for Her Grace, delivering me



Meeting Shobha-di in Pondicherry, with family

from very difficult situations in my life and giving me the mental and spiritual strength to overcome them.

Are there any audio CDs in the market that one can buy if one wants to listen to songs sung by you?

I don't think you will find any in the market. I had recorded two cassettes, in fact. One, a collection of Hindi *bhajans* and the second a collection of Rabindra Sangeet some thirty years back. I myself do not have any copy of those cassettes. I have left all that in the past. ❧

ERRATA

A short paragraph which was most important slipped out of the final text of the article on the Unesco experience which appeared in our last issue (pp 14-15, GC, Feb 2016):

"This offering at Unesco could not have happened without the unbelievably detailed professionalism, unwavering dedication and self-effacing discretion of our friend and pivot, Ashok Acharya."

I REMEMBER – 17TH NOVEMBER, 1973

Devendra Sureka '80

I can't imagine a life which is not in Pondy and not connected to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I came here when I was a little less than 3. I never left.... Studies in the SAICE made me an individual, and I love myself....

In 1962 the education system here was too modern for... let's say for Indian families. So my father was no doubt asked many questions in Calcutta about the Ashram. And "Ashram" as a word in India means going into a reclusive kind of life. My mom came along with us in 1962, while Dad continued his business in Calcutta. Dad visited us about 4 times a year and in November when we had our vacations he would always plan a big trip for the family.

I grew up practically in the Divine Mother's presence. And this is the year and day — 17/11/1973 — when I realised how much I loved Her.

We were vacationing in Kashmir, living in a house boat, cold as I had never felt before... happy, very happy.

It must have been after nearly five days that early in the morning my dad heard in the news on the radio that the Divine Mother had passed away. We confirmed it by calling somebody in the Ashram. My dad who could not take the shock, left for the airline office in his lungi and banian, in that cold weather, me trailing behind. The airline office was quite close, at a walkable distance, but Kashmir was torn in a communal riot and tense and agitated. We reached the office without incident. When we enquired about the tickets to Chennai, they said they could only confirm the tickets till New Delhi. Only in Delhi would they be able to confirm the onward journey to Chennai — Madras at that time. They asked us to come to the same office at 10 AM the next day, because we would be taken to the airport in a

military protected bus. Another problem facing us was that my dad was not prepared with so much money, to fly six of us all the way.

Even so, he was just short by Rs. 800. Six people flying the longest distance possible: Srinagar to Chennai. I can't remember the total figure but it was quite an amount. There in Kashmir, we had met a Gujarati family in common tours, maybe twice — I'm not revealing the name yet. So my dad approached them in their house boat. Because the family had not heard about the Ashram or the Mother, Dad explained his life and ours. The gentleman was practically in tears and said, "I know we don't know each other but I still want to help." The only problem, he said, was that he still had two more days in Kashmir and if he lent us the money he would have to also leave for Bombay. My father in that solemn moment said it was ok for the gentleman to go back, but he needed the money for his soul to have the last Darshan. So the gentleman, our very own Devendra-bhai, currently in the Ashram, father of Rajesh Relan in the Bakery, lent us the money¹.

So we came back to our houseboat and as time was short, we got some big gunny bags from the house boat family and practically dumped everything into those and tried in vain to get a cab to transport our baggage to the airline office. The bags were heavy and it was not possible to carry them and the strike was seriously picking up. Where there is devotion there is divine grace. One cab just stopped and was ready to take us that half kilometer for Rs.100/ (true cost Rs.10/). Dad had no hesitation and we travelled the distance. On the way we crossed two jeeps with people trying to enforce the strike. They gave us vicious looks, called some names to the driver and left. We entered the airline office unharmed, got

into a minivan and raced to the airport which was about 10 kilometers away. With some police escort and a lot of stone pelting we reached the airport, crossing an important bridge on the way. From the airport my dad insisted the airline try to get the onward journey from Delhi to Chennai also confirmed. But communication lines had also broken and we could not get the desired results. So we took off in a Caravelle, looking at the Himalayas from higher than the highest thing I had imagined — I was a first time flyer. As we were taking off we looked back at the city and saw the bridge we had crossed blown and smoking. Did I mention Grace? Ample examples of how the Grace works when there is a sincere appeal.

So we landed in Delhi. We had to catch a flight the next day, the 19th afternoon to Madras. We had many close relatives in Delhi but Dad would not leave the airport, so the sweet relatives brought everything to the airport lounge — there was some kind of a pass with which you could enter till the lobby. And our seats were still not confirmed. Every hour my father marched to the manager's cabin requesting him to give us the 6 seats for the sole (soul) reason. Finally the manager said, receiving the seat confirmation form, "There are exactly six seats remaining but they are for VIPs". At that moment my father took the printed booking page from the manager and told Bimla to write our names. And he declared to the manager, "For this flight there can be no other VIPs than us". We were not troubled by any VIP because my dad just kept his meditation on.

My family and I were as devoted as our dad, but on that day his was the beacon and we were behind him on his golden-lit path. The determination, the devotion, the unblinking faith in the Mother kept him pushing onward towards Pondy for the last Darshan. We reached Chennai and Dad had ordered a taxi to pick us up from the airport. It was standing waiting for my running Dad. As much as I can remember, of course it was an Ambassador car, we were already six with six bags. Maria had flown in with us and she asked for a lift and came with us.

We reached Pondy around seven. We were informed that the Mother's Darshan would be open

through the night. Of course the money for the cab was paid from the money left behind in the house. Mom made some tea and some biscuits as each took turns to have a long awaited bath. As we gathered around our central picture (Salute to the Advent of Truth) of the house to meditate and leave for the Darshan, my dad broke down. He could not imagine that the Mother was no more, no more there to guide us through our spiritual life. We helped him till the Ashram and brought him in front of the Bed in the meditation hall, where the Mother was laid for the last Darshan. We had told him it was not allowed to cry loudly in the Meditation Hall. But in moments we all fell to our knees and started to cry and cry. We were escorted out and told to control ourselves for that is what Mother would have wanted. We went back home broken, had our dinner and we returned individually for sitting in meditation around her Golden body.

I remember having fallen asleep with fatigue, can't remember what the others did. I left for the Samadhi at around 5 am on the 20th of November. I sat near the body and cried, tried to ask if I could be taken and She returned. Then at one point we were told to go and sit around the Samadhi as they prepared for Her Samadhi. The crowd had started swelling by the hour, devotees returning. I meditated and meditated because I don't remember what else I did. Thought about Her, dreamed of things with Her, cried, yes cried. I think they delayed the Samadhi by an hour, because a bus full of devotees was just arriving. They arrived for sure, about 80 to 90 people, and everybody had to move to accommodate them. And then it really happened. She was laid to rest along with Her Guru and of course ours too. We all knew what we would be missing. That Divine Love pouring down into us in nearly the form of Love Liquified till the moment we say *stop*.

Here I am. Yes, still in Pondy, still very much in love with Her.

A few years later when I was older and remembered this Experience, I asked Dad about that near-fanatic trip back from Srinagar. He thought just a little and said, "If I had not had the last Darshan my Soul would have had a black mark." ❀

1. He would then keep in touch with my dad, not for the money, because he got the money the moment he was in Bombay, but to try to understand the DEVOTION of my father. And as the old stories go: HOOK the first visit, LINE the second visit, SINKER he would eventually come over fully with his family.

WATER FESTIVAL 2016

Sunaina Mandeem '72

Considering how important water is to life, it is no surprise that it is often referred to as the *elixir of life*. Fresh water is vital for healthy ecosystems, human survival and health. The right to pollution-free water and the right of access to safe drinking water is part of the right to life given to us by the Constitution of India under article 21.



Some time in December 2015, eight different organisations in and around Pondicherry and Auroville, that have been working in various ways on issues of water and planning of the bio region, got together and decided to launch a

very ambitious celebration, a celebration of water through the "Water Festival 2016". It would start on February 2nd and would last seven weeks and end on March 22nd. All these individual



organisations came together under a single collective called **All For Water For All**, with support from the PWD and Tourism department of the Puducherry Government, the Science and Technology department of the French Embassy, AFD (Agence Française de Développement), Indo French Water Network, Centre for Science and Environment, and UNESCO.

It was a celebration spread across the entire bioregion comprising Pondicherry-Auroville-Villupuram-Cuddalore. This region, as shown in the map, was divided into 7 sub-regions with Cuddalore in the south, going on to Bahour, Pondicherry, Auroville, Villianur, Vanur and ending with Marakkanam in the north. At the inaugural function, not unlike the Olympic torch ceremony, a "Neer kudam" copper water pot, was flagged off and made its journey to each of these seven sub-regions every week, carrying water from one of the iconic water bodies in that sub-region, to empty it out into that of the next

region and so on, making a symbolic mixing and harmonising of water across the region.

The celebration in each of the regions during the 7 days ranged from visits to various schools in that region, each of which made elaborate preparations, limited only by the imagination of the enthusiastic teachers and students. It could be a puppet show on water and in forests, or a dance or drawings and paintings, collages, poems and essays, all on the theme of water, proudly displayed on the walls of the school and classrooms. The actual function that took place in each of the schools generally followed the same

pattern. Some speakers were invited from among the member organisations to speak about the im-



portance of water, and to get the children thinking about water, its importance to our lives, the

ALL BECAUSE OF WATER!

Quoted below is the background note from the announcement of the Water Festival:

How fortunate we are to inhabit this beautiful planet Earth, probably the only place where life exists, all because of WATER! Isn't it amazing that water occupies 70% of Earth's surface and yet only 2.5% of this is fresh water out of which less than 1% can be used for drinking, that the human body is made up of 66% of water? It is shocking that while there are 1.5 billion people in the world who do not have access to clean water and 80% of all illness in the developing world comes from water borne diseases, sale of water globally account for about \$80 billion each year. Water issues are global but at the same time inherently local. The recent Chennai Floods showed us how mismanagement of water resources can lead to a man-made disaster. It also awakened people to the meaning of citizenship and triggered a new sense of collective consciousness as volunteers cutting across petty boundaries, risked their lives to help others in distress.

Water is a miracle of life. To celebrate our deep connection with water, a Water Festival is being organized from 2nd Feb 2016 (World Wetland Day) to 22nd March (World Water Day).

threats to this precious resource, our responsibility to ensure its protection and care, and what

practical steps can be taken by each individual to ensure that this wonderful gift remains with us not just during our lifetime but for the lifetime of our children and their children. A water pledge, which was formulated by the organising group was then read out by one of the students or visiting speakers and repeated by the entire gathering, standing up holding their right hand to their heart. I participated in one such school event at a local girls' high school in Pondicherry and was quite amazed to see the engagement of the kids and the enthusiasm and dedication of their teachers. It happened

to be among the oldest schools in Pondicherry, established in 1866. They had a dedicated music

MEETING INDIA'S WATERMAN

Through these 7 weeks the water festival was celebrated in 39 schools over 9 sub-regions. Besides the inaugural and valedictory functions, there was a workshop, jointly organised with the Centre of Science and Environment, Delhi on "The states of Lakes and Waterbodies of Southern India: threats, challenges and opportunities". Experts and participants from all the Southern states discussed major areas of concern like urbanisation and encroachments of waterbodies ultimately causing flooding. India's waterman, recipient of the 2015 Stockholm Water Prize, Rajendra Singh spent half a day with us in the midst of his busy schedule. A visit to the lake, interacting with Atma's bird watchers and others under the tree at Basabjit and Pallavi's place, Bitasta's home made breakfast and a wonderful session at the Society's conference hall at Sharanam, where he shared his inspiring experience, were the highlights of this visit. Our attempt to bring people of this region to focus on water was encouraging and just the beginning.



the road from the Visitors' Centre to the Matrimandir in Auroville where the closing ceremony took place.

Other activities in each sub-region included the screening of films and documentaries on water, gathering around either a temple tank or a village tank and cleaning it, something that was done by the people of that area along with volunteers from among the organising groups, and others in the sub-region. The highlight was a journey through the wetlands to discover our natural and cultural heritage, on foot, or by cycle or even as a drive, along a pre-laid out beautiful route that most people didn't even know about. The journey invariably ended up in the group discovering some horrors but equally places of great beauty, thereby showing how by coming together to solve issues and force their solutions, the ills of negligence can be turned around into something that benefits us all. The tour ended in

teacher who had taught them all a wonderfully melodious song on forests and trees, which they sang so beautifully. At the end, all the children could have a go and express themselves through words or drawings on an almost unending length of "gada" cloth, about 1.5 metres wide. This roll was ultimately joined and reached about a kilometre by the 22nd of March; it was strung along

a village where the different groups gathered together to discuss the way forward and take some decisions on the actions they planned to take to safeguard their water bodies. There was sometimes a recounting and exchanging of simple stories, as most villages have their own tales and folklore of water protection and conservation. Also, solutions to specific issues were identified

and a commitment made on who will take what action, something each person was encouraged to do.

There are also fairs and markets, like the one we had in Pondicherry, around the time of Mother's birthday, a Water Sustainability and Fair Trade Market where people came from Pondicherry, Auroville and many other parts of India bringing goods and produce that were Fair Trade certified. This is one more step in trying to spread awareness about the efforts underway to make Pondicherry and Auroville the world's first Fair Trade Twin Towns, an initiative which was launched last November with the walk by campaigner Pushpanath from Pondicherry to Ooty.

The All for Water for All is an initiative to involve all stakeholders for an integrated water resource management in our bioregion based on the core principles of social and ecological justice, dignity, equity, transparency and accountability, interdependence and interconnectedness. The Water Festival 2016 was the first concrete step in building this widespread

network, in building collaboration across the bioregion and in coming together not just to work towards these objectives, but also in celebration of the gift of water. ❧

Based on an article which appeared in Sri Aurobindo's Action Journal (April 2016)

Here is the Water Pledge. I hope we can all take this pledge and try to remember it often and do our little bit towards ensuring that this miracle of life continues to perform its miracles always.

THE WATER PLEDGE

This I know – WATER is LIFE, its source and support.

It drops like blessings from the heavens,
Replenishes and purifies our water resources,
Flows joyfully on its journey sustaining life on earth,
Then evaporates, feeling accomplished, to restart its course.

I know that my body is made mostly of WATER,
That clean water is vital to my wellbeing & health.
It is the most precious and irreplaceable gift of Nature
Which I will ever treasure as WATER is WEALTH.

***I PLEDGE that I will treat water with love and compassion
Never waste or pollute it, or encroach on its space
I will never abuse it myself or allow others to do so
But strive to keep water clean, abundant and safe.***

Thank you wonderful WATER, I will be more conscious of you.
I will take care of you.



With this issue we start a new column for creative writers and poets. This issue features four poems and a short story. We hope they will encourage other alumni to share their writing with us.

AN IDYLIC EXPERIENCE

Anjan Sengupta '72

Embracing silence in moments rare
I lingered in its stillness there,
Encompassing within a fortress fence,
Whence all sound was still silence,
A vast universe's denial of strife
Honouring in equal measure death as life,
A stretch of sea and sky déjà vu
In imposing blue now seemingly new.

SURRENDER

Manas Ranjan Mishra '84

My mind is silent and with folded palms
I pray to the Mother for long spiritual calms.
Let there be a residual peace always
Within me Her face may I always see.

The mountains are for those others who run away,
Seclusion is a route of cowardly escape,
I want life as it is and things whatever be they
And accept everything as Her blessing and grace.

Let me learn the ways of complete surrender
And hand over all my problems unconditionally to Her.
Let there be nothing in me as my belonging,
Even my breath and life become to Her an offering.

Every moment lived is a moment of gratitude
And "Let Thy will prevail" is my only attitude.

UNKNOWN HEALER

Ekta Patel '09

He snores on a park bench, oblivious of the world around him. He has no commitments, nowhere to be at any time of day. He wakes up in the middle of the night, disturbed by a sudden breeze and stands up to go home. The park guards have long since ceased to harass him about his staying beyond closing hours. He lives in a tumbledown shack by the beach, half an hour's walk from the city, but spends most of his days at the park, watching people. He knows about all regulars of the park.

He knows the old man who comes round every day with a newspaper tucked under his arm, a wooden cane marking his pace, and sits on his favourite bench to spend the next hour in slow perusal of his paper, glancing up now and then to greet the people he knows.

He watches over the brooding teenager who stops by the park on her way home, now pinching a pimple, now looking to see if anyone's staring, now biting her fingers. She takes a book out and buries her head in it, crying behind her High School English Grammar. Yet always, when she shoves it back in her bag, there's a bounce in her step and a smile on her face, as she hums all the way home.

He sits out of earshot of the group he calls 'apron matrons', all young housewives with prams out on their daily gossip walk.

He feels for the boy barely taller than the six dogs he walks, all of varying sizes and discipline, barking, yelping, keeping him on his toes, running more than walking.

Every evening, he looks forward to the little girl with the darling pigtails who trails her doll behind her with one hand, clutching her

father's hand with the other, her chubby fingers holding on tight, while her mother walks beside her, beaming with love. She runs to the sand pit to join other children and her parents take rounds, checking on her, never straying far.

He often thinks fondly of the little old lady who would shuffle up to a bench, take out her knitting and darn socks and sweaters for grandchildren who come on short visits, giving her momentary bliss in her otherwise monotonous life at the old age home. Her softness and gentle smiles touch him always, and he remembers

how she would bring cookies and treats for him, offering them warmly, sitting by him as he ate. He sighs as he thinks of the last time he saw her, quietly knitting, shedding a silent tear. He sat beside her for long, without speaking, feeling her pain and helping her with his presence. She had passed away that night in her sleep, as he heard later from the little boy who lived on her road and frequented the park.

He can heal with his power to feel what others feel. He sits afar and senses when people are troubled. He looks at them long and sends his love and strength to them. They leave the park feeling prepared to face their problems, strengthened by something they cannot quite understand.

He trudges home in the dark, being honked at by drunken, irritable drivers.

His life is a series of park benches, each bench signifying a phase, a memorable conversation, a chance meeting or a comfortable routine, with people passing by, some for a moment, and others to stop awhile and listen and speak.

Once home, he goes back to sleep having lived another day, helped many anonymously and seen people who know nothing of him.



A WORLD TOO SMALL

Ishita Deshmukh Rao '04

I woke up terrified at 3 am from this very real nightmare. The irony was that the friends' faces or names I had heard, didn't even know each other. An unknown name "Raavir" had been a constant echo throughout the nightmare. As I tossed and turned, trying to calm the turbulent mind, I felt an urgent need to write down the whole story in free verse. I typed the gist on my phone and put it aside. Et voila! The next morning, this was my inspiration.

She screamed.
He held tighter.
Footsteps approached.
They swung into shadows.

*Raavir was furious.
Raavir was after them.
He would break their marriage.
He would kill them first.*

Minutes ticked into hours,
They huddled together.
Fear wracked their bodies.
The hearts remained firm.

*She'd begged him for mercy.
She'd pleaded to his conscience.
Raavir, the doting brother, had refused,
To break the shackles of convention.*

Darkness crept softly,
Unwilling to jolt them further,
The parking lot grew deserted,
Hope kindled again.

*They'd eloped, flown free,
Of the wary, accusing eyes.
Until he found them,
Nesting in an unchained world.*

Deep into the night came I,
In a shining black car,
To whisk them away
To give them some air.



*Raavir wouldn't accept
The escape that smacked of defeat,
The fall from the grace, nor
The whispered doubts of the clan.*

They rested on my land,
A little farm, tucked away by the lake.
Men were cautioned time and again.
Men were sworn to secrecy.

*He had destroyed their peace,
Poisoned their happiness,
But still Raavir could not rest
Until he made them pay.*

He had left her in my care,
She trembled as she let him go,
To scour the place on his own,
To find other hiding holes.

*The clan clamoured
In the name of blind obeisance,
Soon they found the scent.
The hunt was on.*

He'd promised to return that night.
He'd promised a better future.
For he did not hear the terrible news,
That reached us in time.

Three bodies were left lying
On the seashore of my town.
Murders in Raavir style, his signature,
A warning or a prophecy?

Perhaps the day would come,
When the end is near.
For isn't the world, too small,
For such a ruthless creature?

P.S.
I woke up in terror,
Fingers clutching my nightwear.
I knew I had seen friends' faces,
In the most terrifying nightmare.

FROM THE MOUNTAINS, WITH LOVE

Taarak Parashar '08

You never answer
the questions I ask.
You never say go, if
that's what your heart wants.
You never say yes, for
the love I ask of you.
You always look away
when I ask a hug from you.

Even then you smile
When I hold your hand,
You blush at the talks
We kiss in our thoughts,
You ask me about life
I answer with delight,
At the end of the day
You refuse to be my life.

You snatch from my lips
The coffee I was to sip,
You drag me through streets
without knowing where to be,
I follow you for I know
My life ends at you,
My smile is broader
When your head rests on my shoulder.

You care for me, and
You walk with me
You laugh with me.
But why then, when
I ask you to come
By my side, you say
I can't, I can't love you
And always look away.

GROWING UP IN THE ASHRAM

By Maria Jain '73

ARRIVAL

I was still a toddler when I was brought to Pondicherry by my parents. We arrived here on 13th April, 1953, which was a Punjabi New Year Day. My father, Ramkrishna Jain, planned the journey in such a way as to start his New Spiritual Life on a New Year's Day. I was only one and a half years old. I have no memory of our house in Ludhiana, Punjab. I did not know any of our relatives in Punjab, or in Delhi, until the age of 20, since my father never took us up north, as the Divine Mother did not like the children to go out during the holidays. Not that we really missed it, we had great fun here in the holidays. It was only in 1971 that he somehow agreed to let me visit Punjab, Delhi, etc. and then once again in 1973, as I had completed Knowledge — both the trips were disastrous. More about that later.

As my sister Arima was 4 when we came to Pondicherry she was admitted in the Ashram School that very year. In those days admission was granted at the age of 4, not 3.

Arima was very popular with all as she was very roly-poly and very simple. She was named 'Dara Singh' by Pranab-da, so the whole Ashram used to call her by that name. Ravindra-ji also gave her a similar name — "Pehelwan". Young friends would ask her to lie down and ask her to sit up without twisting or taking any help which she could not do. Hence she was the butt of a lot of ridicule, but in a nice way.

Arima was named by the Mother on her birthday, on 30.06.1953. She once asked the Mother, in a letter, what her name meant. The Mother replied that it was 'Mira' spelled backwards. Of course, we don't notice this because there is an A added to it at the end. My father said he was informed by Nolini-da that the Mother's maternal grandmother used to call her in this way as they

*Ton nom est le
même que Mira, mais
lu de haut en bas
au lieu d'être lu de
bas en haut. Il n'a
pas un sens particulier.*

Mes bénédiction
J.

shared the same name, Mirra.

When I was 4, in November 1955, the Mother admitted me in Her school. That was when the Mother gave me my name (my father had asked for a new name). I remember going to the Mother in the Playground with my father. The Mother used to sit on an armchair to the left side of the door of Her room there, right next to the door. Her chair is visible if you stand on the right of that door. She had written my new name in a copy of 'Belles Histoires' and She pronounced this name very sweetly while showing it to us from the first page of the open book, with an adorable smile.

However, when we came out and my father informed my mother about the new name, she could not help exclaiming, "A Christian name!" Before that I was called Arvindbala, or Aru, in short. In fact, She had given me one of Her own names. The name Mirra itself is a variation of Miriam which is the Hebrew for Mary or Maria.

Mother would often give Western names to

MY ONLY PHOTO WITH THE MOTHER

In those days all the competitions were held together, with all the groups together, and the Mother used to be always there for all the events — athletics, swimming, etc. The Mother used to participate fully, taking down the details (as in this photo) of the throw, or jump and holding the ribbon at the end of all the races. As all the groups were together, we would sometimes be competing with elderly people who were around 60 or 70 years old. It was real fun, being all together like this. Groupings were made not as per age, or sex, or any other way, except your capacity, or level. I remember once beating many senior people in the swimming competition!

We were with the Mother right from the morning at 6 am for the Balcony

Darshan till late evening in the Playground: seeing films with the Mother, receiving ground-nuts and toffees from the Mother (there was one toffee which we called "glass toffee" because it was a bit transparent), looking through the windows at the Mother taking classes, while we were playing outside, making noise and probably disturbing the classes.

When She came down the stairs in the afternoons, around 3 or 3.30 pm for tennis, there

were many of us waiting in two rows like a guard of honour, to greet Her with a "Bonsoir, Douce Mère!" She would reply with Her miraculous smile and get into the car, the door of which was held open by Pavitra-da. We would rush off to the Tennis Ground to witness the Divine Play



Maria (extreme left) during the competitions in the Mother's presence

in action. Dada was Her permanent partner and Pavitra-da Her fixed chauffeur. Although She did not move much Her strokes were indeed powerful (especially considering She was in her 80s at that time) and very graceful at the same time. From there She left for the Playground, with us always tagging along. Obviously I was not in the school yet, nor in Group, so I could only go around with some elders.

Those were the golden days!

Indians and vice versa. There are numerous examples: Hero, Espoir, Jacques, Maurice, Jules, Lumière etc. and Pavita, Narad, Mali, Ananta, Medhananda etc. This was another way she had of breaking barriers.

The very next month, in December 1955, I happily started going to our school. In those days the kindergarten was in the main school building, near the Teachers' room, in the room where Arati-di sits now. I have vivid memories of Kala-ben.

We joined Green Group, A5 straightaway and took part in all the activities such as the March Past and the competitions where the Mother would be present. I can remember several very amusing Novelty Races — like people racing with a lemon on a spoon in their mouth, or legs tied in a jute bag and trying to jump ahead — during which the Mother too laughed away merrily. Of course, A3, A4 and A5 group activities were over before the Mother's arrival from the Tennis



Arima with the Mother

Ground, and we were having a very good time in the Guest House courtyard, on the merry-go-around, slide and the jungle-gym. I had become a great expert in climbing on the jungle-gym and could move around most nimbly. But there were all kinds of races for us children during the competition seasons. There was the race as “avi-on”, kangaroo, rabbit, there was also the “chak-ka” (a metal hoop to be pushed around with a metal stick with a hook) race, a great favourite with me. The Mother enjoyed these thoroughly. In fact, She took so much interest and participated so fully that we believed She was really “enjoying” Herself — all part of the Divine Leela, I suppose. The older groups held gymnastics competitions. There was trampoline, vaulting, parallel bars, which we too watched from the Guest House. The Mother was always there, taking such

a keen interest in every single activity. She was so close and easily available, so actively participating in all the activities with us that it was difficult to see the bigger picture, that Infinity or Eternity resided in such a slender form!

On Saturdays, the film day, we watched films with the Mother. The screen was on the North side of the Playground, right opposite the Mother’s chair, in front of the map of India. We saw so many interesting films — Bhakta Prahlad, Bhakta Druv, Sati Savitri, Sati Anusuya, and also Sakshi Gopal, regarding which the Mother commented later that indeed Sri Krishna was present that day (I do not know if it was because of the excellent technique of the film which made it feel so real or due to the very strong story-line. I suppose the second would be nearer the truth.) There was a theme song in it which went like this: “Sri Krishna sharanam mama,” which our elders told us the Mother liked very much, hence the mantra “Sri Aravinda sharanam mama” came about. (Not absolutely sure, but definitely we all believed it.)

In those days (my favourite phrase in this piece!) as a general rule married couples who joined the Ashram did not live together, so parents of children who were in the Ashram didn’t live in the same house. And strangely at one point my father’s house was closer to the Ashram than ours, where we lived with our mother. He lived where Manoj Das lived later for several years, before moving to where he lives now. I remember Sandeep and his grandparents stayed in the same house. Our house was on the same street, but near Namita-di’s house (I think where Nallam Clinic is situated now). By the standards of those days, it was miles away from the Ashram for our tiny legs. Our father did come to pick us up on his cycle for the morning Balcony Darshan, and dropped us off sometimes. But I have a distinct memory of going back late at night in pouring rain, each sister clinging on to our mother’s hand. Our tears mingled with the rain water. This house was always crawling with all kinds of insects, and especially scorpions. My mom was kept rather busy killing them off with a broom as we watched in awe. One of the main reasons why my father had a house built for us was my mother’s ultimatum,



Arima (third from right) with the Mother during an exhibition

declaring that she would stay in Pondicherry only on condition that we had a new house.

EGGS IN A JAIN HOUSEHOLD

I was about 6 or 7 years old, when both my sister and I came down with mumps. Dr. Nripen-da informed the Mother that we were weak and recommended eggs for us. Dr. Nripen-da was a very loving doctor, especially with the children. When they were admitted in the Ashram Nursing Home, he would ask them what they wanted to eat. In those days the Nursing Home was situated on the same road as the Ashram (Chetty Street), after the Gandhi Street. And he would actually get ice-cream, idli, samosa or whatever the children asked for. Well, that evening in the Playground when it was my mum’s turn to get ground-nuts, or toffee, from the Mother she was given two eggs by the Divine Mother. My mum was flabbergasted! A Jain and eggs!! But my father told her, “It has been given by the Divine Mother, you can’t throw it as now it is a *Prasad*.” That was how eggs landed in a Jain household. The Mother would destroy all such

old traditions with a sweep of Her hand! Once Ravindra-ji recounted how to his horror She gave him a *sandesh* made in the form of a fish and made him eat it in Her Presence. There is that famous incident in one of Pranab-da’s books about how She gave Ravindra-ji some eggs to hold while Pranab-da and Pavitra-da were also present. The Mother was cooking some special dish, and when She asked Ravindra-ji to hold the eggs for a while, not having ever held or dealt with eggs before, he had no idea that they were brittle, and so he held them tightly. The eggs were naturally squashed, making a big mess. The Mother, Pavitra-da and Pranab-da were laughing merrily, while Ravindra-ji just stood there staring at his hands, embarrassed no end!

The Mother used to write people’s names on the egg-shells with a pencil. How much time She devoted to us! She would involve Herself in such small details! We were that close to Her. Some sadhaks were clever enough to preserve those egg-shells. Alas, we were not.

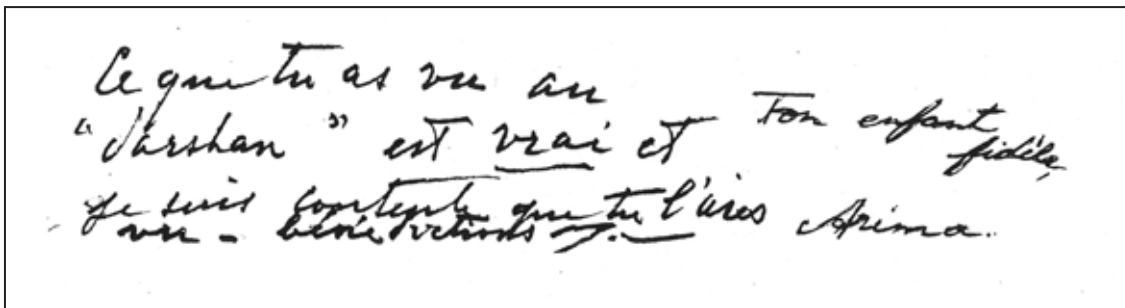
ARIMA’S VISION

(Mother speaks about the Balcony Darshan of 15th August, 1965)

On the 15th, at the balcony, Sri Aurobindo was there. He had come and he went out on the balcony with me. I didn’t say anything to anybody, not to anybody at all. And there is a little girl, about fifteen years old now, who is considered here as a bad pupil, erratic, *fanciful* (they had even talked of sending her away), but once I asked her to come for her birthday, and as for me, I found her a fine girl (!) And she wrote to me two or three days ago that on the 15th, at the Darshan, she saw Sri Aurobindo on my right. And she asked (*laughing*), “Is it true?”

It quite amused me. I said to myself, “So much for their moral judgments on the pupils here! That’s how it is.”

But nowadays I don’t see the children anymore; formerly I used to see them every day, or at any rate once a month regularly I would see them. When I went to the Playground, I saw them every day. But now I no longer do, except a few on their birthdays.



But I found this interesting. Maybe some others saw him too, but didn't tell me. But she wrote to me, "Well, I saw Sri Aurobindo standing beside you, is it true?"

(Mother's Agenda, Vol. 6, 1965, pp.223-24)
The story seen from another angle:

Well, Arima did see Sri Aurobindo on that day. She was waiting to have the Mother's Darshan with our father. After a few minutes, she remarked to my father, "Why didn't the Mother come today for Darshan?"

Our father was surprised. He asked, "What do you mean by 'Mother did not come'? She came for Darshan just now and went back."

"Oh, but I saw only Sri Aurobindo," Arima remarked.

Later, she wrote to the Mother regarding this incident and the Mother wrote at the bottom of her letter in reply, "I am happy that you saw him." (Je suis contente que tu l'aies vu.)

THE MOTHER'S LAST DARSHAN

In November 1973 I had gone with my father to my home-town Ludhiana, Punjab, having just completed the Higher Course studies. As 16th November was my father's birthday he left for Pondicherry before that date. Hence, I went to Ferozepur, to visit my mother's family, with many uncles and cousins. On the morning of 18th November one of my cousins woke me up to break the news of the Mother's passing away. I refused to believe the news, even scolded him for making a joke in such bad taste. He was carrying his transistor and the 8 am news bulletin confirmed it.

In a state of shock I at once left for Ludhiana accompanied by a cousin, as my uncle would not let me go alone. During the journey I was seeing

people going about their way so normally, I could not believe how the world could go on in its usual way when such a big EVENT had taken place.

In Ludhiana, as my father was not there, I took matters into my own hands and rushed off to my father's small firm/shop to get some cash, collected my luggage while another cousin was pressed into escorting me in the overnight train to New Delhi. We had no confirmed seat, forget about berth. We had to stay awake all night. In the train by "chance" I met one of my father's friends, Mr. Puri, who too was on his way to Pondicherry. Puri-ji gave his Delhi telephone number which I kept in my purse. He assured me that he would buy a ticket for me on the morning flight to Madras.



Arima (third from the left) with the Mother

I took an auto to my maternal uncle's house. I was in such a dazed condition that my purse fell on the way without my being aware of it. Fortunately I had kept my money in my pocket. My uncle's family insisted on making *paranthas* for



Arima (second from the left) with the Mother in the Sportsground

me for breakfast, wanting to be formal. I tried my best but could not make them hurry, with the result that I reached the Indian Airlines office on Connaught Place only after 10 am with my uncle. To my dismay the Airlines people informed me that the morning flight was scheduled for 10 am, but they added that on that day, on 19th November, since there was a strike by the pilots the plane could be delayed.

I then thought of contacting Puri-ji on the phone, but alas, the phone number, along with other papers, keys, etc. was in the lost purse. My uncle and I dashed off to the Palam airport on his scooter. We reached there after 11 am. I saw Puri-ji standing on the steps, at the entrance and rushed to him. He was holding a ticket and said, "I have been impatiently waiting for you, and had you not come within the next five minutes I would have sold your ticket." There were many devotees who could not get a ticket and who

would have willingly paid him even extra for a seat on that plane. With a thankful heart I boarded the plane, taking a flight for the first time in my life. The plane was full of Ashram devotees, it almost felt like being in the Ashram, the atmosphere was very strong. There I met the family of Kesarichand Sureka (Bimla's father) who had with great foresight booked a taxi in Madras by phone. They had been to Kashmir for the holidays and rushed from Srinagar to New Delhi.¹ The flight reached Madras at around 2.30 pm. Bimla's parents very kindly offered me a lift in their taxi, although their family consisted of six members (4 children and the parents) and there was not much spare space. We were all stuffed inside the taxi like sardines and sped towards Pondicherry. We reached Pondicherry in the evening, around 6 or 7 pm. Their house happened to be conveniently close to mine, where Executive Inn is today, so I was literally dropped off at my doorstep.

All this happened while I was in a state of stupor and had done everything in a daze. Only after the Darshan of the Mother's divine body I came out of that condition. Then the tears flowed. After Her Darshan I went to meet my father who was, as usual, in the Ashram with Ravindra-ji. They were sitting on the cement benches outside Ravindra-ji's room, so when I reached the top of the stairs I was spotted at once. My father was most surprised to see me and exclaimed, "How did you manage to come here?"

It was only Her Grace which brought me here in time on 19th evening. She gave me the will power and determination and resolved all the problems and removed all the hurdles very easily and smoothly.

And as if that much Grace was not enough more was to come. After one and a half months somebody living in the same colony as my uncle found my purse and returned it to my uncle whose address was in it.

I am so deeply grateful that I could reach Pondicherry before the Mother's Mahasamadhi. It was nothing short of a series of miracles! ❧

To be continued in our next issue...

1. See Devendra Sureka's article on page 22.

QUIZ TIME!

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

1. What work was given to Nirod-da when he joined the Ashram?
2. Why did the Mother stop the system of exams which were being held earlier?
3. In which year was the lotus pond in the School courtyard made?
4. What anniversary do we celebrate on 6th January?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the tulip?

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE FEB 2016 ISSUE

1. *The Mother studied the text of the Dhammapada in its French translation with her class of young students and her explanations were later published. Whose translation was it?*

The French translation was done by Bharati-di, whose real name was Suzanne Karpelès. She was a well-known Buddhist scholar. She lived in the Ashram for many years and worked as a French teacher.

2. *For many years the Mother used to give special blessings on puja days, such as Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Saraswati Puja etc. In which year did she stop this practice?*

The puja pranams stopped in 1952.

3. *Who used to make the Mother's sandals?*

Lakshmi-ben, the sister of Baba-bhai, Madhumalti-di, Ravibala-di and others, used to make them.

4. *Where did all the sadhaks and sadhikas eat before the Dining Room was created?*

They ate inside the Ashram main building, in a room which doesn't exist now.

5. *There is a flower to which the Mother has given the spiritual name of "Common Sense". What is its botanical name?*

Common sense – the flower of the tobacco plant!! Its botanical name is nicotiana glauca.

*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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*If you can always smile at life,
life also will always smile at you.*

The Mother



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Our human consciousness has windows that open on the Infinite but generally men keep these windows carefully shut. They have to be opened wide and allow the Infinite freely to enter into us and transform us.

The Mother

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The One Self

*All are deceived, do what the One Power dictates,
Yet each thinks his own will his nature moves;
The hater knows not 'tis himself he hates,
The lover knows not 'tis himself he loves.*

*In all is one being many bodies bear,
Here Krishna flutes upon the forest road,
Here Shiva sits ash-smeared, with matted hair.
But Shiva and Krishna are the single God.*

*In us too Krishna seeks for love and joy,
In us too Shiva struggles with the world's grief.
One Self in all of us endures annoy,
Cries in his pain and asks his fate's relief.*

*My rival's downfall is my own disgrace:
I look on my enemy and see Krishna's face.*

*Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA 2:626)*