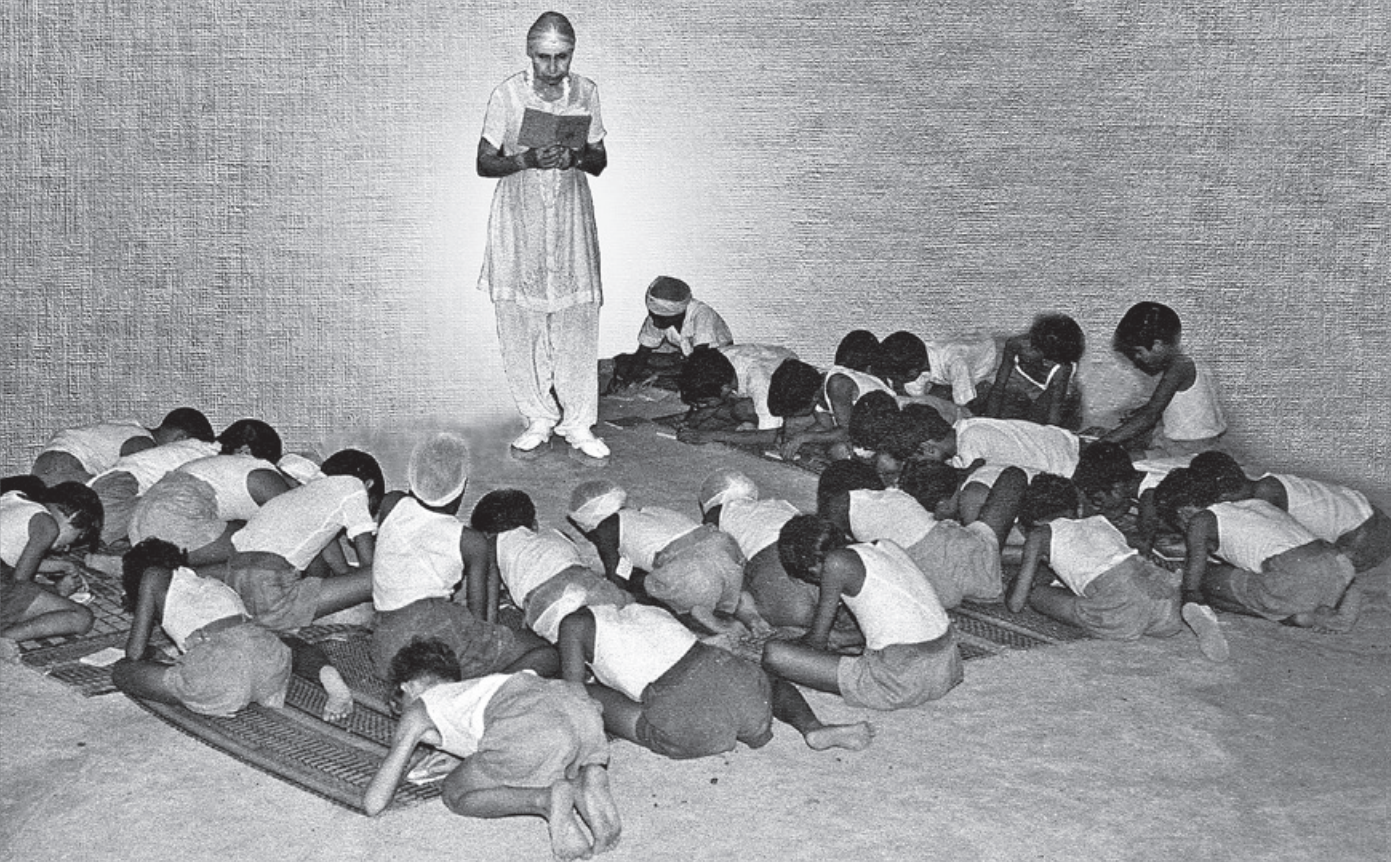


The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Learning with the Mother

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

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

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

CONTENTS

VOL 17 NUM 2

FEB 2017

3 THE EDITORS' PAGE

4 PERSPECTIVE: A Compassionate Ecosystem

Lopa Mukherjee '94 reflects.

8 CREATIVE CORNER

Devika '81, Milena '13 and Sandipan 'K3 share their poems.

10 COVER STORY: Learning with the Mother

Tara Jauhar '61H recounts

16 CULTURE VULTURE: Playing Vasavadutta

Tvara 'K2 and Sunayana '79 on the 1st December Programme, 2016.

21 MEMORIES: Tarun-da

Gopal Dalmia '80H, Venkatesh (K.V. Rao) '75 and Shashwat '93 remember.

33 QUIZ TIME

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EDITORIAL TEAM:

Gopal '90, Sunayana '79

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:

Anurupa '86, Claire,
Gaurishankar '80, Shyama '85,
Meera '95, Datta '85

ART DESIGN:

Saroj Kumar Panigrahi, Somdutt '90

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:

Pranati '83, Kiran '72,
Swadhin '70, Siva

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Address for correspondence: The Golden Chain,
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Phone: 91-413-2233683

e-mail: office@goldenchainfraternity.org

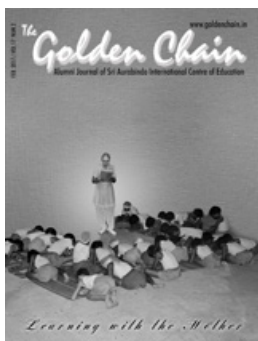
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On the Cover:

The Mother giving dictations to the Green Group children.

On the Back Cover:

Images from the Mother's classes.

The quotes were among those given by the Mother to
recite in her classes.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

In previous issues of our magazine we have seen the Mother as a healer and an artist, our cover story this time focuses on the Mother in her role as a teacher.

I was once in a conversation with a young former student of the School, who was at that time following a professional course in Bangalore. I asked him how he explained his Ashram background to those young men and women who were with him in the same class. He spoke at length about how difficult it was to explain to complete strangers what the Mother's true work was for the people who lived in the Ashram and for the world at large. He ended the conversation by referring to what a close friend of his had said in response to his explanation: "I have understood everything but what I still can't figure out is why she chose to be seen as everyone's 'mother'? Why didn't she say that she was everyone's 'teacher', for example?"

I was absolutely taken aback at that comment. But it set me thinking. I realised that perhaps the youth of today don't see a mother as a sacred being. With time a mother's place in a child's mind has changed in our country. A mum is now a friend who is there with you in good times and bad times. She is not always the object of the child's devotion and that aura of an ideal being radiating unconditional love has diminished. A mother has now many other identities to live, other than being the mother of her children. More often than not, by the time children reach adolescence, they are more informed about the world than their mothers and so a sense of equality is created in their relationship quite early on.

Seen from this perspective, why would a 25-year old of today's India want to see the Divine as a mother, particularly if his relationship with his own mother isn't that good? Now I find the young man's question as to why the Mother should not

be seen firstly as a teacher makes perfect sense. On the other hand, a Guru is indeed a teacher and the Mother has been, even from the days when the Ashram was not yet officially formed, a spiritual teacher to all. This much probably everyone knows but what most people don't know is that she was a class teacher too to the small children of the Green group. She gave dictations and poems to learn by heart. She corrected their mistakes and gave marks and told stories.

The Second World War brought the children to the Ashram and that sudden arrival created the need for a school. With that came the need for sports and all of a sudden children and adults were playing and doing exercises together. There was a great upsurge for learning and everyone participated in it. After Sri Aurobindo left his body the Mother came out and was present during the activities of the Ashram. She spent her evenings at the Playground and with time decided to teach French to children as well as to adults at the playground itself. The informality with which things just happened shows to what extent it was a real family that the Mother had created.

In this issue we bring you a review of Tara's book "Learning with the Mother" and an interview with her. The book reveals an aspect of the Mother that only a few have witnessed. I still cannot find a word to describe that feeling one has when one sees photos of the children reciting poems they have learnt by heart in front of her. One becomes aware of the closeness of that relationship between the Mother and her children. It is very moving to see the Mother teaching a language just as a real mother would.

Mother, Teacher, Friend.... By whatever name or relationship we know her, the Mother will always remain the one who opened our eyes to a greater reality. ❧

A COMPASSIONATE ECOSYSTEM

by Lopa Mukherjee '94

Once Mother was angry with a family that wanted to take their daughter away from the Ashram school. The child was growing up in a boarding and was having a good time. After not bothering about her for five years when her parents did show up, they did not find her warm enough towards them. So they wanted to exercise their rights and take her away. She was begging people in the Ashram to intervene. Mother brought out her Kali aspect, used strong words to condemn the parents, refused their donation. Sadly, she could not change the parents' selfish ideas of extracting love from a child they could not love enough themselves. Mother says there were other such cases. At times the children got so sick the doctor asked them to be sent back to the Ashram.

One of the challenges of growing up in the Ashram was balancing it with family life, unless one was lucky to be in a family that understood Mother's vision. The Ashram is an unconventional place, in

India especially, where family is important, and parents above all are expected to be worshipped as gods. In that milieu Mother spread the idea of a soul's relationship with the Divine above all. If this meant despite the family, so be it. In the Ashram the concept of the "outside" world is concrete and often acutely painful. During vacations,

I used to meet cousins who had certain standards of measuring people — like if you knew what LCM-GCD (least common multiple, greatest common divisor) was! I went dumb when I was asked this, because we learnt math in French. The other thing was about etiquette. One had to say a set phrase and do a set routine, like touching the feet of elders. I felt tongue-tied and clumsy.

It is not easy to create a non-judgmental environment, and I am not saying the Ashram was one. We had our own ways of judging people. Just walk out of a prize distribution after a competition season without a card in hand, and watch how you are stared at. What if you were always competing with better folk, like Mother played

tennis with someone better? No, you got no such leeway. No wonder, at intervals Mother had to bring out her Kali aspect. Yet, the Ashram was a protected nest, far safer than any other. As a child, I used to look forward to returning from vacations, back to my boarding. Mother did not like children leav-



ing Pondicherry. There were the December programs they could busy themselves with. Any outside influence was discouraged, like eating out at restaurants or watching movies in cinema halls. The films we were shown were sanitized by Ashram elders. At the onset of vacation, when leaving Pondicherry, one felt the protective cocoon's

effect diminishing with distance. I bumped against problems of adjustment, and within a month I used to fall sick, at heart at least. When it was mid-December and time to return Home, I was relieved.

The world is waking up to a new disease. They call it ACE, Adverse Childhood Experience. It is not a pathological disease, but the root cause of many such diseases. Children who experience insecure childhoods carry within their bodies the memory of dis-ease. Their immune system is compromised, their major organs function below par, they are more prone to get lung and heart diseases, and worse, they are prone to get addicted to alcohol, drugs, violence. The reason is simple. Our bodies are first of all survival machines. When children, or anyone for that matter, feel insecure, their brains pour out stress hormones. The flight, fight or freeze reactions kick in. The body does not then care about how well the heart is doing, how good is the breathing, how the organs are functioning. When this same reaction kicks in again and again it creates a behaviour pattern. The brain gets re-wired. Various triggers can put the body in flight-fight-freeze mode, including memories. War veterans experience post-traumatic stress disorders resulting from war memories. At one time people hoped a drug would be invented to wipe out painful memories. We did not know at that time how the brain stores long term memories. Now we do. It uses a distributed network, which means the same memory is broken up and stored in multiple places. No pill can wipe out a memory selectively. With a brain full of stress triggers, and nowhere to escape, a child stops trusting people and shuts down communication.

How do parents end up creating such an environment for their children? Ignorance and lack of empathy, most often. They do not know how to be compassionate, they are self-centered and want to get, but not give. Children are beaten or verbally abused. When these problems make them perform poorly at school, when they have attention deficiency disorders, they are scolded even more. The downward spiral accelerates. There are other reasons for cruelty or neglect towards children,

such as single parents struggling with money and relationships. Sometimes parents are fighting and children witness the nastiness. Sometimes they are on drugs or alcohol, or leave their children alone too often. Sometimes they are in and out of jail. Children are left at the mercy of social workers or uncaring relatives.

I first heard about this from a pediatrician working in a low-income neighborhood hospital in San Francisco. Her patients were from poor communities. She noticed they were sick with diseases that did not all stem from poor nutrition. She had recently read the research paper on ACEs and started asking her patients about their life. Slowly they opened up to her. They had not even had a compassionate listener. Their stories made her cry. She assured them the reason they were doing poorly in school was not because they were stupid, it was because they had to cope with trauma no child ought to have to cope with. The very realization that it wasn't them, made them feel relieved. With confidence they started working on their problems. It is not easy to remove the social factors that cause trauma in a child, but Dr. Nadine Burke Harris's programme trains the children to become resilient. And guess what they do? They learn pranayama and meditation.

But isn't it common sense that a brutal family experience will produce difficult children? Yes, every society knows it. But statistics has shown the extent of damage; how the number of ACEs relates to probability of diseases. Every ACE reduces one's life span by a few years. Individuals with high ACE count can get cancer at an early age. They will probably have asthma, heart diseases, psychological problems. Did we know about these long-term health effects? And when we see escalating gun violence, can we link it to individuals growing in unstable environments? And there was another number that was startling. American adults were asked about adverse experiences in their childhood. 67% of the population said they had at least one ACE when they were growing up. I can imagine a similar figure in other societies. We do not socialize our ACEs, we are ashamed of them. These are family secrets. But it turns out, two thirds of us already know about it.

To socialize the problem Dr. Harris never misses a chance to address audiences. She has a training program for adults too. Often parents are themselves victims of ACEs, but they need to make the effort to break the cycle. School teachers are taught to be compassionate and patient with their difficult students. They are encouraged to find out what is bothering the child. Is it by chance a family issue? This training is called *Vital Education* in Mother and Sri Aurobindo's language. The term that is popular in the outside world is *Emotional Intelligence*.

Mother was five years old when she started training herself in Emotional Intelligence. She was not fortunate enough to have parents to guide her, but she was an extraordinarily awakened child. After a quarrel with her friends, she used to sit on a stool alone in a room and ponder. She reasoned thus: "Why am I feeling bad? It was the others who were mean. It is they who should feel bad". And then she felt better. She had become so strong emotionally that when she forbade someone they obeyed her. She ordered her father to stop spanking her brother when she was just a child. Her father immediately stopped, and never again beat his son. In the same way she put school bullies in their place. She taught a boy who used to fly into a temper, that every time he had the urge, he should stuff his hands in his pockets and count to ten.

The act of being conscious of others around us, of being able to empathize with them, feeling part of a whole... were deeply ingrained in our traditions. In the Upanishads it is said you can be free of fear and delusion when you realize everything is You. You can truly love when you realize it's all the same Self. In other religions too there are variations of the Golden Rule and the parable of the Good Samaritan. In native American cultures there was no concept of private property. The pre-digital era had fables, fairy tales, panchatantras, puranas to teach Good and Evil to children. Imagine if these same tender brains are given war video games, what kind of monsters they will grow up to be! I am glad schools have an emotional literacy program, sometimes called Self-Awareness. Parents are also coached, which I

think is an important step. While growing up our handbook was Mother's *Ideal Child*. There is also an *Ideal Parent*.

Right from kindergarten in the Ashram school we are taught to share. So many of us huddled on a single bench, so many played with the same toys. I remember once Simi-ben cut a single toffee in small bits so that the entire class could get a piece. We never ate in front of others without sharing, which made travelling in trains quite awkward. Once I was treasuring a special toffee I had from a friend's birthday when a classmate of mine started coughing. The teacher asked if anyone had a toffee. I offered mine. I still remember that. It was more satisfying than having the toffee myself. When someone slipped and fell, of course we laughed. But a teacher stopped us and asked, "How would you feel if *you* fell and instead of asking if you were hurt, people laughed at you?" One second of stepping into someone else's shoes brought home the grave mistake we had made. Our coaches taught us to pass and play, even if your teammate is a weak player. Encourage her, instead of shouting at her. She will end up performing better. Fear will only make her do worse, and the bitterness will affect the rest of the team. Once we lost our way during a picnic. Ten of us shared the drops of a single lemon to quench our thirst. Of all the many happy picnics, I remember this trying one the best. After this I knew whom I could rely on, who caved in early, and most importantly what I had to learn myself. In Group it was drilled in us that we are not here to win a game, but to improve on our sportsman spirit. In school we were to develop our faculties, not score best in tests. On the jacket of each notebook we read that the Ashram school was founded to create living souls, not just good students. Such values make you think, as a child, and even now I ponder.

When eating in Corner House, weren't there times something had to be stuffed down the throat because someone put the effort to cook it, someone spent money and time to buy vegetables, someone grew the vegetables, so many people had nothing to eat, and food was for the body and not the tongue? All these packaged together

in the outside world is called *Ecological Intelligence*. Developing compassion for the Earth and its people is a training one has to take too. The utter waste of paper and pens in the US used to drive me crazy. But now a different mindset is at play. The other day we did a painting project at work. Someone suggested we pour out the paint in paper cups. This would mean a lot of wasted paint. Others decided we would dip the brush in the bottle and use only as much as we needed, because the extra would be donated to schools. Busi-



nesses are urging people to go paperless, to take public transportation and spare the air. People are volunteering their time ever more. Organizations like the Red Cross have more volunteers than employees, and have a world-wide impact. The Ashram has had a volunteer-friendly environment from the outset. People have found the secret to happiness - time spent in being compassionate is time spent in being happy. Corporate compassion has caught on too. Companies donate large sums to charity, give away products for free, let their employees have paid volunteer time-off.

One of my happiest moments growing up in the Ashram was Christmas. As a child I held my breath for the gift packet. When in Big School I still loved Christmas the most because the stuffed toys I was making would end up in a child's packet. When I was in Knowledge the happiest moment was Christmas again. I helped in making the chocolate cake and we had loads of fun doing

it together. I assembled gifts for children from toys that were donated throughout the year. Now too I like to volunteer my time. I interact with other volunteers, who are always fun people to be with. I teach for free, and also get taught for free. I give to people who need.

In those days, every little thing we got was valuable, because we did not get often. I had a treasure chest — an old metal box where I kept the cards and trinkets I collected. These days children can easily get spoilt. Worse, they will not value anything.

One should encourage these children to pass on their gifts to those not so privileged — maybe in another country, maybe in the shadows of their own neighborhood. Share the extra toys, pass on a book you have read. Books can be best friends. Good characters in books can become role models. Stories and films of revolutionaries, visionaries, adventurers are written so that some real person can become such a hero. When a child cries after reading a story or watching a film, it is a good sign. It means he or she is able to empathize. Reading books that discuss social issues allows one to walk in others' shoes. Future responsible world citizens are in the making. Sometimes, when one is lonely, a book's characters can come to life and become friends. When things have been given away, there is more to give. Give the gift of listening. Read a story aloud to someone. Hold an old person's hands. Create a happy memory. Be part of the Whole, and fulfil your Self. ❀

FROM SHADOW TO SUNLIGHT

by Devika Murthy '81

Great guile i used to stay from thee immune:
though with lambency thou sought to illumine,
i blithely eclipsed thee from me - to find
life is as parched as a bronzed desolate dune.

It's sadly stunning, but true that the more
thou seekest to embrace my inner core,
the farther i flee from thy felicity,
and apprehensively decline to adore.

I would my speech would be golden: i fain
would speak not with disdain, nor give least pain,
for once spoken in vain i couldn't recall,
those words can never be unspoken again.

Hymns of praise i should have offered to thee
died on my lips, while what came forth casually
in hasty, hectic and heedless abundance
priding as speech, too late now doth shame me.

When in quiescence i hear thy murmuring,
like an answering harp doth my spirit sing:
and my entranced being ecstasy-entwined
floats empyreally, for lo, it now has wings!

Rare hours there are when i in hushed solitude,
feel the urge to merge in thy Beatitude;
a mere speck am i... nay just an atom,
but i seek thee Lord in thy Infinitude.

Despite titanic toil i will not tire,
nor stop attempts to rise out of the mire,
slip or slide i may, flag or faint or fall,
but i'll blaze to thee like a spear of fire.



Though within me i may be sheltering night,
and all in my life might not be that bright,
i shall hold on to hope and walk serene,
a pilgrim soul in search of sublime heights.

I'll leave behind the valleys of Shadows,
and across rivers of Consciousness row,
to dazzling peaks climb of light Immaculate,
as step by step, i in awareness grow.

With my hand in thine, at any pinnacle
i shall surely arrive, for a miracle
lift me, as in life through death to rebirth,
matching thy pace i'll reach thy Tabernacle!

First published on 15th August 1997. Amal Kiran's comment: "It has invaluable substance and a fine command of expression. Eloquent in its mixed motifs, it is touching in its simplicity."

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

By Milena Paulini '13

Where silence is already music
And every moment plays once existing tunes,
Where hues depict utter emotions
And every tinge or nuance speaks truth,

Where forms are as fluid as water
And creation builds like a fast flowing stream,
Where wonders are nothing astounding
And magic guides mankind's routine,

Where light is the essential provision
And love plays the lead in each act,
Where time exhales free from extinction
And seconds carry life's complete thread,

To this place between dreaming and waking,
Where delusion is a far away void,
I long to escape and find freedom
from those mortal, insignificant bounds.



AND IT'S BEAUTIFUL

By Sandipan Chatterji 'K3

I can see dragons flying in the air,
I can see laughter rising in the sky,
I see my other self is smiling,
I see my mother singing
and it's beautiful,
What happened yesterday
is now just a memory,
Anguished thoughts are
now as light as my breath,
The tears I cried were a baby's dream,
Hush! For the night has fallen and it's beautiful,
A stream is flowing under the trees in the afternoon,
A warmth in the breeze tells me
I haven't been dreaming,

The summer is coming but
did I forget the spring,
I gather my child as I walk in the fields,
And rain comes embracing all that
I have and it's beautiful,
So many years have passed
and I'm still walking,
So many words were spoken
and we're still talking,
Lives have passed and new days were born
and we're still breathing,
Our struggles go on and it's still so beautiful.



LEARNING WITH THE MOTHER

Tara Jauhar '61H tells Sunayana Panda '79 about the years in the Ashram when the Mother took classes for the children

Learning with the Mother is a book by Tara which records the activities of the Mother's classes with the young children who were then in the Green Group. After their sports activities they waited until the Mother had finished watching the Playground activities and finished distributing groundnuts. Then, at the end of the day, they had their French lessons with the Mother.

Tara has gone to great lengths to gather all the material published in this book in which you will find the dictations given by the Mother, the poems she asked the children to learn by heart and the stories she told during these classes. Particularly interesting are the poems because they are short and aptly chosen for children. The children had to learn them by heart and recite them in front of the Mother for which they received points. Tara was the monitor of the class and kept a record of everything.

As Tara was herself a keen photographer she has given a special place of importance to the photos and included some rare pictures of the Mother's classes. If you can recognise the faces you may find our own teachers in those pictures and see how they looked when they were themselves children.

It is indeed very touching to see that these classes were held in the open; the children just sat on the floor and wrote in their notebooks on the floor. Above them was the open sky and before them was the Mother with a book in hand giving them a

dictation. When you want to teach, all you need is the will to do it. You see in the pictures the Mother's love for the children. You do not see a teacher who is teaching but a Mother who is helping her children to learn in the courtyard of their house.

Although the Mother had so much else to do she

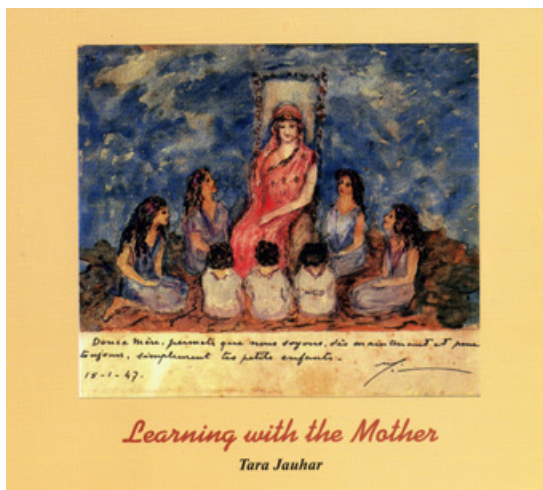
found the time to teach French to small children. This is a fact that many may not know. This book reveals that period in the life of the Ashram when things were still very fluid, rules were being tried out and changed and life was still very informal. Children were very close to the Mother even though they were living with their parents. We see the Mother's human

personality and her concern for the children. There is an intimacy and a loving bond that becomes visible as you go through the book.

Priced at Rs. 150 the book is affordable and should reach out to a large audience. It is on sale at SABDA. We spoke to Tara about how she put this book together.

How did the idea of making this compilation come to you? This whole work of collecting the dictations, poems, stories etc. must have been a tremendous job?

As I have already written in the introduction to the book, a part of this compilation had actually already come out in French. It's called "La Mère travaille avec les enfants" (*The Mother Works with*



the Children). Years ago I had done this work of compiling all the texts that I could collect at that time that the Mother had used in her French classes with children. The Mother gave it to André-da for making corrections, as it was in French. André-da took some time. After all, anyone would have needed time to make corrections of this kind. Then he sent it to the Press. The Press then took some time. In this way, finally the book came out in 1974 or 75 after the Mother had left her body. The title of the book, “La Mère travaille avec les enfants” was chosen by the Mother herself when I started work on it.

In 1976, when I went to Delhi, I thought The Mother’s International School should have that book so that they can use the texts in their classes. When I showed it to the teachers there they said that it had to be in English. So I started getting the book translated. Once I started, I wanted to add a lot of things that were missing. For example, I got stuck with the recitations which had been given by the Mother for learning by heart. I had all the dictations but I just couldn’t find the recitations because no records had been maintained. So I kept on trying. I had my own notebooks and when I would come to Pondicherry, I would take this person’s notebook then another one’s notebook. Mostly I contacted Chitra, Usha, Shanta, Ranganath and Namita because they were the seniors and the most regular and serious students in Mother’s classes. The Mother corrected their notebooks till the end, even when she could not correct everyone’s notebook because the group had grown too big.

I went on asking but no one remembered anything. They didn’t have it in writing. Every year I worked a little and then I stopped. Then after 2 or 3 years I started again. In this way I must have started at least 10 times.

Finally, this time I started and I said, “It’s my 80th birthday and I am going to finish this work, because I won’t remember anything afterwards.” So, whatever is there is there. The rest is forgotten. But the stories... I have a lot of records of what stories were told. Kake started collecting the



The children gathered around the Mother listening to a story

books also but he could not collect all the books.

Did the Mother read out stories from books?

Yes, she read them out from books. In those days there was only one bookshop which had a few French books. So, I bought books for Kake, like “Babar l’éléphant” or “Toutou le petit chien”, for his birthday. I gave them to the Mother to give them to Kake but before giving them to him she would read them out to the class. This way she got other books from other children also and sometimes from the Ashram and School Library.

Padma (a sadhika who had come from Switzerland) used to bring a lot of books. She gave the Mother a lot of material for her class.

As for the stories, Mrityunjoy-da had recorded many of them in his notes, which I got from the Archives. Sometimes he had written just the title, sometimes the whole story. And he actually brought out a book in Bengali with stories that were told by the Mother. The title of the book is “Shona Galpo Shunte Chao?”

How did Mrityunjoy-da know these stories which were told in your class? Was he there? Could anybody just come and sit there?

Not only Mrityunjoy-da but many other people used to come and sit around us with permission from the Mother. If you see the photos which are in the book you will see so many people.

Nirod-da is there in many photos.

Yes, Nirod-da, Pavitra-da, Amiyo-da... Dr. Nag

also used to be there. Many used to sit behind the class area.

The Green Group classes were held in the Guest House. Later, the classes were shifted to the Playground, but by then Mother was taking classes only on Fridays for the Green Group. When she shifted to the Playground, almost anyone could come and sit behind the classes. There were always people who just came to see the Mother but did not understand French. My father was one of them. He used to sit outside. He used to say to me, "Everybody understands what the Mother says, but you seem to be the only one who doesn't understand." Actually, it was because I was one of those few who asked the maximum questions.

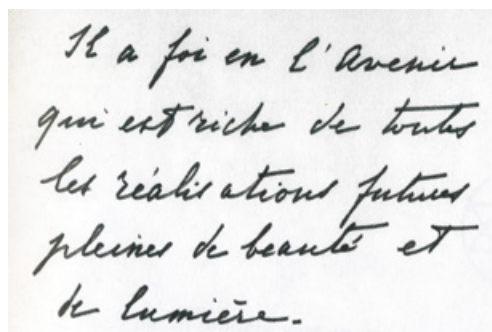
During the Friday classes of the Green Group Mrityunjy-da used to take notes but he used to doze off also. But there are many things that I have been able to trace and put in the right place thanks to Mrityunjy-da's notes.

Did the Mother never tell stories without reading out from a book, from her memory?

Yes, she did. She told stories of when she was in Japan and the things that she used to do when she was growing up. But sometimes instead of telling a story she did other things, like once she decided to calculate the total of the ages of all the children. She added up the age of all the children. That is there in the book. I have that because she wrote it down on a piece of paper. I was very young at that time, hardly 15 or 16. But the fact that I had kept all the records and papers is quite something. But I regret that I did not keep a proper record. Many people who were in that class have lost their notebooks which the Mother had corrected. Often after the class was over the notebooks would be lying around and I would pick them up and put them away safely. But whatever the Mother gave in writing in my notebooks is on record with me.

My other book (*Growing Up with the Mother*) came out much earlier because the contents of that book, the letters I wrote to the Mother, were written when I was much older. The Mother had stopped coming out in 1958 and I started sending my notebooks with questions in 1965 and by that

time I was old enough to understand the value of those letters to the Mother so I started keeping everything. But during the Green Group classes I was a young child. I was 20 years old when the Mother stopped the classes in the Guest House. In the last few years when the classes shifted to the Playground, everything was



A phrase from *The Ideal Child* in the Mother's handwriting

recorded and transcribed.

When the Mother gave a poem to learn by heart did she actually choose the poem from a collection. How did she choose the poems?

Padma gave her a beautiful folder with poems. The poems were printed on loose sheets. There was one poem per page. This folder was returned to Padma after Mother had used it fully.

Did Padma choose these poems then?

No, she brought this folder from Switzerland and gave it to the Mother. The sheets were numbered, if I am not mistaken and the Mother used all the poems. The entire folder was returned to Padma for using in her classes in the School.

When you had these French classes with the Mother in the Playground, did you also have a French teacher during the day?

By that time I had left the School.

You had left the School!

Yes, I left the School when I was 15 or 16. I started working in the Physical Education Department. I was already a captain and I was looking after the PED Library. Pranab-da was all the time attending to the Mother and did not have any time. He used to get up early in the morning and come down from the Mother's room, and do 2 or 3 hours of exercises. He did that because he felt that he had to reduce his weight. By the time

he came back and got ready it was already 10 in the morning. So we used to run the department.

Didn't the Mother say anything when you left the School?

She told me to continue my French classes and my English classes. But that too didn't happen. Actually, she started the French classes upstairs again for me – the translation of *Words of the Mother*. She did make an effort to see that I was learning. She gave me books from the Library. Premanandji, the Ashram librarian, was very strict. This was when the Library was in the Ashram Building. There was only one room. There was a very large collection of books of folk tales. There were folk tales from China, from France, from Germany, from India and so on. Mother made me read all these books. That improved my language and built up my vocabulary. I did whatever the Mother told me to do.

I used to work in the PED library. Pranab-da used to come at about 10 am but he had to leave at 11:30 because his duty was in the Mother's room. Then he would come back at 3.30 pm and by 4:30 it was time for the Playground activities. So he could devote very little time to the department. So, basically Ajit (Sarkar) and I ran the department full time. Namita and Parul also helped out later. Prithvin used to do a lot of the typing work. Gangaram joined later, much later, and he was older than us.

In 1958 when the groups and the sports activities were reorganised then we had to bring all the files from Udar-da. Actually Udar-da had a very big role in building up the organisation of the Physical Education Department and in its being so systematic. Starting with the grounds, the swimming pool, the gymnastics apparatus, all that was his work, everything was done by Udar-da. Organising the competitions, putting in place the system of points and noting down the marks, getting the results typed and the filing system — all this he used to do in Harpagon. Lilou and Parul were in charge, working for Udar-da. They used to do all the typing work over there.

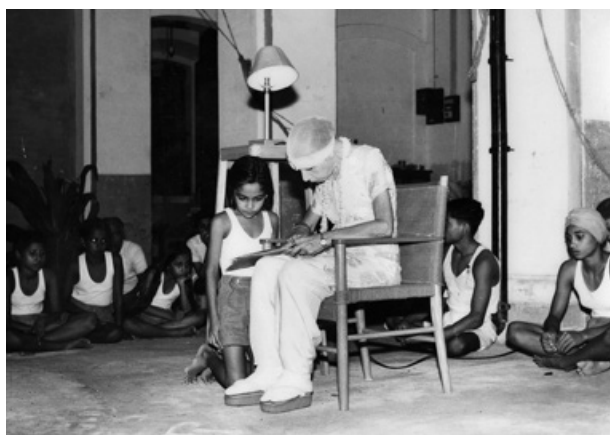
In 1958 when the groups were re-organised then all the files and the organization work were brought from Harpagon to PED and then we took over.

Coming back to the book, there is a photo in it where you are sitting, surrounded by some of the little children.

When the Mother was taking the French classes the children used to learn poems by heart. Many children couldn't even read the French poems. They were so small – Kake, Chhote, all the other little children who were three or four years old. So they used to come to the PED and I used to teach them. I used to help them to learn the poems by heart.

By the way, who took the photos? They are extraordinary.

Old photos are always extraordinary. Maybe it was Vishwajit or Pranab-da or Venkatesh or Vidyavrat. The photos of the Mother's classes are all taken by Pranab-da. I started photography much later.



The Mother correcting a child's notebook

When the children grew up and went to the next group did the classes change?

In the early years children remained in the same group. They grew up but they continued to be in the same group. If someone was in the A-group he remained in the A-group, if he was in the B-group then he continued to be in the B-group. When the Mother started taking classes the youngest children in the class were 3 years old and the oldest were 10 years old. Then when those children were 16 they continued to be with the same group of children. So, then it was necessary to change the groups, to divide them according to their age. When Pranab-da decided



The Mother telling a story in the Green Group class

to send the older children to the next group there was such a turmoil! Dolly cried so much because she didn't want to go to the next group. She was older than me but she was in my group. She held the Mother and cried and cried until the Mother's clothes were all wet. But Pranab-da was very firm. He said she had to go to C-group. Before this re-organisation C-group was the boys' group but after that it became the girls' group. The boys were very happy to go to the older groups but not the girls, probably because everybody would think that they have grown-up. That was the point when A group was divided into A1 and A2. And later into A1 to A5.

Many people don't know that the Mother used to actually teach little children, that she was actually a teacher. Your book, from that point of view, is a revelation.

Actually, there were three classes. There was the Green Group class. In the beginning this class was held every day. Then it was changed to three days a week: Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. So, three days a week the Mother had the Green Group class. Then there was the Wednesday class and then there was the class for adults. Lata-di, Urmila-di, Arati-di, Amita-di and many others of that age group, both men and women, were in that class which used to be held in a classroom

next to the Mother's resting room in the Playground.

In those days it was a regular class-room with chairs and tables. The adult classes started with Pavitra-da and others. If you see the photo taken by Cartier-Bresson you will see there were 4 or 5 ladies in that class. This class was shifted to a bigger room and the ladies – Lata-di, Chitra-di (Sen), Amita-di, Arati-di and many more young adults– joined that class. There the Mother mainly did translations.

[Lata-di comes into the room.]

Lata, can you tell us something about your class with the Mother?

Lata-di: Actually, the class used to be held once a week. And it was changed into a translation class because we didn't ask any questions.

Tara: Oh, that class was also stopped because you didn't ask any questions? The same thing that happened with us happened with them.

Lata-di: We were so nervous. It was our class but the Mother called everybody so they were all sitting around us and we were too nervous to ask questions. Actually, in the beginning there were not enough teachers for French so the Mother said, "I will teach". So, that is how it all started.

So, in fact, the Mother spent all her evenings taking these classes?

She used to go for tennis at 4:30 PM even in the hottest season. It didn't matter to her even if it was peak summer and those courts were concrete courts. She would play her full game. At 5.30 p.m. she would leave from there, the car would be waiting for her outside. So she would sit in the car and come to the Playground.

She would spend about half an hour in her rest-room and then take the adults' class or meet people for interviews on other days. Many people – Ashramites and visitors – used to take appointments in advance to be able to get her guidance for work or for their personal problems during this time.

Then around 6:30 she would stand for the

March Past and sit through the gymnastic marching exercises of the adults. After that she would distribute groundnuts to everybody, sometimes upto a thousand people and then take the Green Group or Red Group classes for four days a week, and meditation twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays.

Weren't the children tired at the end of the day?

Actually I used to often fall asleep leaning my head against the Mother's chair. At first the classes were held in the Guest House then it was inside her room. Then when the group became too big she came and sat outside the room in front of the map of India for the classes. As I was the monitor for both the Green Group and the Red Group classes, my place was always on the left side of her chair. It was very convenient because she had these armrests on her chair. In the Wednesday classes, I would often lean my head against the armrest, ask a question and fall asleep. While the older people used to do the marching, Pavitra-da and I used to go for competitive walking on the Beach Road. We would go to the end upto Parc-à-Charbon (now called Park Guest House) and come back within a very short time. So I would be tired and would go to sleep. Then one day I told the Mother when I went to see her in her room upstairs, "Mother, I often fall asleep during the classes." She said, "That is very good because I can do my work on you without any interference. It's all right if you fall asleep."

Yes, indeed, one can see in the photos that it is already night and the lights are on. This means the children are at the end of their day. You can see them sitting on the floor and writing, leaning over their notebooks.

And sometimes these classes used to go on for a long time when the Mother used to give long talks. And then there were questions. But often there were no questions. One day she said, "You people don't ask questions." And then she told us, "You see, you have to just ask me a question, even



Green Group class in the Guest House

the meaning of a word will do. Ask me anything and from there I will take it and tell whatever I want to tell you. Even the meaning of a word will do." So often I used to do just that. Even if I didn't have questions, I would ask her the meaning of a word and from there she would tell us whatever she wanted to say.

When did the Mother stop her classes?

The classes in the Guest House stopped in 1956 and shifted to the Playground, and finally the classes stopped in 1958 when the Mother had her first heart attack. Sanyal-da told her that she had to take rest for a few months. So she stopped coming out. Then, in 1961 or 62, she came for the 2nd December only. She also came for the March Past for the competition seasons.

After 1962 she did not come out at all. I told her many times, "Mother, you should start the classes again." But she did not say anything. I have written these things in my book *Growing Up with the Mother*. Then one day when I had gone up to her room and again requested her to start the classes, she caught my hands and said, "Nobody asked me questions. I was sitting there and asked each one of you to ask a question. But no one asked me anything." I started crying because I was among the few who used to ask questions during the classes.

So that was how it was. There were no classes after that.

Thank you, Tara, for sharing such interesting details of the children's classes with us. ❀

PLAYING VASAVADUTTA

*We talk to Tvara 'K2, who played the title role of Vasavadutta,
about the 1st December programme, 2016.*

How were you chosen for the role of Vasavadutta?

I didn't actually audition for the role when the auditions were held. In fact, I wasn't even planning to participate in the programme this year. My tickets had been booked for the first week of November. But my friend Ritika, who was one of the organisers, asked me to give it a try. She spoke to Cristof but he said that if I was going to be out during the first week of November then I could not be in the cast as that was a crucial week for the rehearsals. But Ritika insisted that I should at least be given a chance. So I went for an audition and Cristof decided right then that I would play Vasavadutta.

How did Mrityunjay get the role of Vuthsa?

Initially there was a possibility that Ritaj would play Vuthsa. But when I went for the audition Mrityunjay was also called. We auditioned together and Cristof thought this pairing worked. Mrityunjay had acted in a few plays with Nancy but he had never worked with Cristof.

How did they choose this play (Vasavadutta)?

The organisers were looking for a play that hadn't been performed too many times and which would look new to the audience. Also the main organisers, Narottam and Ritika, wanted to take a play which would have a lot of roles so that their classmates could be a part of it. I think they also wanted a play which hadn't been performed in a while because last year when they chose *Perseus* one of the things that everyone said was that it was a play which had been done and re-done

and re-redone. Actually, Cristof was very sceptical about taking up *Vasavadutta*. He said that



the last time it was done it was such a beautiful experience for him that he didn't want to take it up again. It really took a lot of convincing on the part of the organisers to get him to agree.

The last time it was performed was in 1981 so there can't be that many people who would have seen it. What kind of rehearsal schedules did you have?

In the beginning, when we would just read, it was every day. There were two or three nights when the whole cast came and we read the whole play. Then we took it up scene by scene. So if they took a scene to work on then they took the next scene also if the same actors were in it. After that they took the whole act and then they took the first half of the play and then the second half. Then we did the whole play. So it was done very systematically.

Did you start rehearsals after the holidays started or did you start earlier?

We started very early. We started in June or July. As I was going to be absent in the first week of the holidays Cristof was very worried about that. He wanted to get as much practice done as possible before that. He said, as he always does, "If you don't know your lines then there is no use coming for rehearsals. You can keep reading very well but the main thing is to say the lines without making it look like they are memorised." So we all knew our lines by heart. Actually, we had a lot of problems because some actors dropped out. The one who was supposed to play Gopalaca tore a ligament in September so we had to find someone to replace him. Chirag replaced him and we had to find someone to replace Chirag. So there were many changes in September. But after that we all knew our lines.

You said that you started reading in June-July. When did you actually start rehearsing on the stage at the Theatre?

We rehearsed in Knowledge for a while. Then we started rehearsals at the Theatre by August. We rehearsed at the Theatre until the Knowledge programme practice started.

Once you started practising at the Theatre did you then rehearse through the day?

No. As we had very elaborate ideas for the sets, up to mid-November we used to work on the sets from 9 am to almost 4 pm. I wasn't there for the



first week. Then our practice would start at 8 pm and go on till quite late. We were working on the sets a lot.

Did the actors also participate in making the sets?

They were not the only ones. There were a lot of people from the departments who helped a lot. But the whole cast was also very helpful with the sets. Narottam and Ritika had the ideas and they told the others, "If you are free and have the time please come and help." And every morning there would be at least five of them who would come and help. The main sets were done by Tania, the art teacher and the projections were done by Pushan and Mrityunjay.

Who chose the music?

Narottam and Cristof.

What was the most difficult thing for all of you?

Each one faced a different difficulty but for most of us it was the effort of getting into the role. For me it was getting into the character of Vasavadutta, because she keeps changing. One moment she is really happy, another moment she is confused, the next moment she is angry. Her emotions change very often. Somebody like Chirag, who hasn't really done a lot of theatre had to get into the character. And Mrityunjay, who had played more powerful roles before this, had to get into the role of Vuthsa who is boyish but at the same time powerful in a different way. Ritika worked a lot on her pronunciation and diction. Shivani, who



A REVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME

Sunayana Panda '79

There are very few joys equal to sitting in a hall packed with like-minded people and watching a play that you know almost by heart. That joy is redoubled when the play happens to be written by Sri Aurobindo and that experience is taken one level higher when the play is performed well. The annual programme on 1st December 2016 was one such deeply satisfying experience.

'Vasavadutta', which had not been performed since 1981, is not an easy play to work on. There are many characters and many subtleties of language in the dialogues. So much can be lost if the acting is not up to the mark or goes even a little bit away from the right direction. Naturally there was some scepticism in people's minds when they heard that this play had been chosen for the annual programme.

Vasavadutta was written by Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry in 1915 and revised later in 1916. This is the period when he was living with a few disciples who had followed him from his revolutionary days in the house which subsequently came to be known as "Guest House". To give it its proper context one may note that the Mother had already come to Pondicherry and left. The First World War was being fought and the world was undergoing a great change. The play was first published in 1957. It was performed in the 1950s when the

Mother chose Jhumur-di for the role of Vuthsa and Amita-di played Vasavadutta.

The 2016 production had a running time of 2 hours and 15 minutes. It was clear that a lot of work had gone into the making of the sets, the selection of music, getting the right audio visual material for the projections. A lot of attention was paid to the details of the elaborate costumes, the accessories and the hairstyles. All this, combined together, made this experience a visual feast.

As everyone knows, the dress rehearsal of the performance prepared for the 1st December takes place every year on 29th November. But probably only a few know that sometimes the actors give a better performance on the dress rehearsal day than on the 1st December. So I went on both days to the theatre so that I could see the play twice and get an overall

view of everyone's performance. This also allowed me to get all the fine points and catch up on anything I might have missed noticing on the first day.

Vuthsa Udayan was played to perfection by Mrityunjay. Boyish but mature, charming but filled with inner strength, Vuthsa is a combination of many qualities. Mrityunjay enacted this role with all the subtle nuances and was just as I had al-

ways imagined Vuthsa to be. It was as if Vuthsa had walked out of my imagination and stepped on to the stage.

Tvara, playing Vasavadutta, brought an



played Umba, and who had a relatively small role, told me how she had built a whole back story for Umba, of how she had probably grown up with Vasavadutta and had a special bond

with her which was different from Munjoolica's. Sanchari, who played Munjoolica, seemed to be the most comfortable of us all. She got into her role most naturally. Vignesh, who was playing

element of novelty as she had never been seen in a performance at the Theatre for the 1st December. Tvara's strong points were her fine stage presence and her diction. At times her body language and her intonation were a bit too modern and urban for a princess of the post Mahabharata period, but those details were only minor ones when seen in the larger context of the whole play. Tvara surprised the audience with her beautiful live singing on stage in one of the scenes.

The role of the old minister, Yougandharayan, was very well interpreted by Vignesh. His gait and the pace of his speech were just right. He was probably the one who was clearest in his diction. The performance of all the other actors, including those who played minor roles, was up to the mark. Narottam and Ritika, playing the king and the queen, could bring out the maturity required for the roles they were playing despite their youth in real life.

The play is set a hundred years after the events of the Mahabharata. This had to be kept in mind while preparing the sets and costumes as well as the music. The sets were made with care, showing the palace ramparts, the rooms within the palace, the gardens, the room where Vuthsa is held captive and also the forest. A lot of thought and skill had gone into creating the forest scene. Lights and video projections and the sound of crickets in the background very effectively brought to life the forest at night. This scene was particularly striking in its originality.

The costumes were crafted with care. The team which worked on the costumes spent some time researching the kind of clothes that would be appropriate not only for that historical

era but also for that region of India. The colour scheme was eye-catching. Vasavadutta, dressed in a pale turquoise ghagra, became a figure bathed in light, bringing out her youth and inner purity. The king and the queen had very regal colours.

The students are not professionals so we cannot expect a level of acting that is above their capacity. But what is important is that the work should be done in the right attitude. In the presentation of *Vasavadutta* one could feel the



sincerity with which the work was done. On the stage the actors become transparent and one can see if their effort has been wholehearted. When one decides to present on stage a play written by Sri Aurobindo one knows that it is a responsibility and it cannot be taken lightly. This year one could feel the intensity that comes from a collective aspiration of wanting to do the best possible.

It is true that the 1st December programme is held to celebrate the anniversary of the School but it is also an event that holds an important place in the life of the Ashram. It is not just a School programme being held at the Theatre. Now that we have better equipment, better microphones, better materials available for creating costumes and props, we should be able to do better than before, if the actors participate with true dedication.

Yougundharayan, would ask Cristof every time he didn't understand anything.

Did you have any difficulty getting into the story? It is set in a kingdom in the era of the

Mahabharata. The language used by Sri Aurobindo is not the modern English we speak. So was it difficult for the cast to get into that period?

Narottam and Ritika were very clear that



they wanted it to be true to the times - very, very authentic and not a modern adaptation.

What was the feeling on the day of the performance, on 1st December itself?

We were all very nervous because it is on such a large scale. It is not just a school programme. When you are on stage you are not representing yourself. You are representing your school, you are representing Sri Aurobindo. There is a lot of pressure. Usually when we are acting in a play we have nervousness but that is a personal nervousness. We think of ourselves. There is an element of ego. You think, "What will people think if I mess up?" For the 1st December programme if you mess up you are messing up the work of everybody else and more. I felt that there was a lot of pressure. You want to do well not only for yourself but for everyone else. So many people came from various departments. Everyone was saying that it

was a beautiful play. And Cristof was saying that he hadn't touched it for 30 years. There was that pressure also. Cristof initially didn't want to take up this play because he was sure that this version wouldn't match up to the experience of the one he had directed in 1981. So if you ruin it what would be his feelings?

Finally it all worked out. Partly because we, as



a team, really bonded very well. It was a support system. There was a lot of team work. ☸

END OF THE JOURNEY

Tarun Banerjee '65, whom many of us knew as a Tabla teacher, was actually a multifaceted personality who was also part of a Free Progress section from 1969. He passed away on 10.08.2014. In the following pages his students remember him.

In this first article, Tarun-da himself recalls his first visit to the Ashram. The experience he describes here was preceded by an early childhood in Calcutta which was privileged but which seemed to him dull and grey and where he did very well academically but which somehow left him disillusioned.

How did I come to our Ashram? Do I know the answer? I doubt! My parents brought me here. That's true. But to stop at that is to evade the issue. Was it my fate that compelled them to take the decision? Or was it my stars or... was it the hand of a greater power than fate or stars – hands that are unseen yet concrete – that guided me to this sanctuary? Neither is it wise nor safe to hazard guesses of determinations that can be perceived but faintly through a haze of multi-coloured mist of Truth and imagination, of conjectures and realities. Instead what I *can* say is not how I came to the Ashram but, after having arrived, why I couldn't leave the Ashram. With this I think I could be more cogent as well as truthful since there is no haze of imagination nor any mist of conjecture to cloud my thinking. I can see the whole thing so well, indeed as though it occurred just the other day ...I can see it clearly just round the corner. Ah! But that makes a neat little chapter of my days of yore....

Christmas, 1953... All the way from Villupuram it was raining fairly hard. Then came dad's announcement from the open doorway "We have almost arrived." I pushed up a window and put my head out and there... there was my first sight of the platform; it approached us slowly, not we approaching it. It was a small ordinary platform like the inconspicuous countryside ones with the few orange-yellow bulbs flickering here and there. Not a soul moved on it; I think I saw no

porter. At its centre stood only one man – my grandfather. With his umbrella unfurled he stood alone. His face was bright, his dress was bright, his silver beard was bright. As was his body so was his stance, a rock like stability, the very definition

of poise and nobility that radiated the assurance that we were welcome, that we had arrived, that our journey had ended.

Brevity in speech was my grandfather's characteristic. When the train stopped he came close to our compartment with a benignant smile and without a word of greeting came to the point:

"We shall go home, change, then go the Playground. Mother has arrived. Christmas distribution must have started by now."

Mother? Playground? Many a time I had heard these words from my parents but then... they were mere words. But were they going to be realities now? Really? Strange, strange indeed!

Today as I sit on my typewriter in a recollecting mood of gratitude, I am moved to tell how privileged I felt.

From thence everything that happened is sheer nostalgia, a wistful longing for the moments that are lost forever.

At Calcutta every morning in the first two weeks of October dad used to take us to Dakshineswar, the abode of Sri Ramkrishna. I remember how often he would turn the steering wheel fast as we broke off from Barackpore trunk road to the narrow Dakshineswar lane. Then,



when at Dakshineswar, we would bathe, often swim in the broad and holy Ganga before entering the room of Sri Ramkrishna. How cool I used to feel, how refreshed as the cool breeze blew over our heads from the River of eternity, when we sat in his room.

And on this night of Christmas when I boarded the rickshaw at the station the rain had abated to a drizzle but enough to soak me through and through; this time it was not the holy water of Ganga I bathed in but in the 'gentle rain that droppeth from heaven' of the Holy City. Once more how cool, how refreshing it all seemed to me. I had the feeling that dad had turned once more the steering wheel and we had entered the lane to the abode of peace, the dream Ashram of yore, and that I was once more on a sacred journey. It seemed I had lived that moment many times before.

Pondicherry of those days was not the Pondicherry of today. The streets were neither as broad nor as brightly lighted. A few bulbs cast some orange glow – a far cry from today's vapour lamps. And yet, yes, yet, how befitting! A 'mystic voyage of self-discovery' through a mystically lighted pathway. A gentle rain soaked my shoes and as our rickety rickshaws moved on jingling their battered music, clink-clank...clink-clank...clink-clank, I had the constant sense of a sacred journey.

As planned we first entered grandfather's room and I felt strongly that this entry was a continuation of my sacred journey. For the room was filled with peace. Later I came to know that Sri Aurobindo had lived in this room on His first arrival at Pondicherry and later it was He again who asked the organisers to make this room available for my grandfather and his sister to stay in.

Playground. Due to rain the Christmas tree was deserted. It stood forlornly in the middle of the Playground, the snow-cottons washed out, the trinkets dripping miserably, the gift bags removed in hurry. Did I say forlorn? Ah! Yes, I did. But that was only for the Christmas tree, not for the Playground itself. For indeed the Playground was a fountain-head of happiness.

The Green group children were filing in a queue in a side room and the Red group members

were awaiting their turn. A cool and watery gust of wind blew across the field and a girl in the 'B' group file, wet through and through, shivered. She held her hands tightly to her sides and hopped on her toes looking down at her feet watching keenly the hole she was making in the muddy sand. A boy standing next to her wielded an imaginary cricket bat as he jumped forward to execute a perfect cover drive. Another removed a small harmonica from his pocket and blew at it with gusto gathering a small group of admirers around him.

But I, in the very act of soaking this happiness in, was pensive. "How can everyone be happy?" I asked myself. "Surely everyone cannot have stood first, second or third in the school exam." I knew and knew it for certain that not an academic success nor any worldly possession like a model aircraft or a cricket bat was the source of this overflowing gaiety. "What is it, what is it," I asked myself again and again, "that is filling them and filling me as well with this plenitude, with this deep satisfaction, with this joyous serenity?" I didn't know then that I was only a few minutes away from the Source of this delight and the answer to my enigma.

The wind renewed its gusts and renewed was the height the girl achieved in her hops and bigger became the muddy spot. The boy jumped back this time achieving a delightful late-cut. And the mouth-organ? No doubt it sounded louder. A boy, drenched from head to toe, was running with a namesake umbrella and was being chased by another who wanted to see just how it felt like standing below an umbrella that had no top. But the Chinese puzzle of happiness? Who would solve it for me?

There was a class room adjacent to the Mother's room (and is no more there now). It was a class room where the Mother worked on French translations twice a week with Her senior students. On this occasion all the desks were pushed close together and I could see through the open door the prize bags – in those days they were made of crepe papers of various colours – neatly arranged upon them. First the group members and then the Ashramites filed into the room from

the right of the door and made their exit by its left, each holding a colourful bag in his hand. Some, the children in particular, opened their bags before they were out of the room and peered into them with eager eyes and fished out their magic possessions. Others showed greater dignity and held their curiosity in check. I was a visitor and I had to follow the queue after the Ashramites.

As we were getting closer to the class room I was becoming aware, at first tentatively then absolutely, that She was in there. The atmosphere was becoming fragrant, the noise quieter, the light took a brighter orange hue for those who had the eye to see. The more I approached the more I was forced to imagine what She would look like. I imagined She would be seated at the centre of the room, Indian style, on a velvet carpet. Her eyes, I imagined, would be serenely closed, Her body immobile and rock-like, immovable and radiating light like a massive chunk of shining gold. On entering the room therefore I first looked at the centre. To my surprise she was not there. For a moment or two I stood still at the doorway taking a quick topography of the situation. I noticed that the queue was going round the whole room along its walls. Thinking that She would be at the end of the line I leaned forward and looked left. Once more She was not there. In the meantime my brother who was in front of me had jumped down from the doorway inside the room and turned right. Before I followed suit I quickly let my eyes follow the queue backward, clockwise. She was not to be seen anywhere. My brother in the meantime had disappeared to the right. So I jumped down on to the floor of the room and quickly turned right and ... Oh, there was She, my Divine Mother!

It is not what She was but the impact She created in me, it is not what I saw of Her but what remained unseen... wasn't that the crux? I wonder... A simple mind might assume that She who was at the centre of this delight, the hub of this radiance would Herself be a *similarly* joyous person. Not so. Indeed, not so. On the other hand a sophisticated mind could assume Her to be a serenely poised meditating centre – physically immobile yet effecting mobility by Her radiance

alone. Again, not so, indeed, not so. The sun which upholds all life and every is neither itself life as we understand life to be nor energy as we understand every to be. The radiant Alchemy is, and is not all that, at the same time.

She was sitting at the north-west corner. Indian style? No. On a chair. Eyes closed? No. Eyes open. Her body immobile? No. How could that be? She was distributing gifts. Her body radiating golden light? No. There was no gold that I saw around Her. And Yet ... how to put it? The impact She created upon me far exceeded my anticipation. I wanted to be impressed and from my experience of Ma Anandamoyee I thought She would be impressive only if She held postures like Ma Anandamoyee – Indian seat with eyes closed, total immobility of the body, and a radiance. My little mind therefore was overpowered, almost overwhelmed when it experienced a greater intensity of impact from a totally different physical stance. At that sight suddenly a heavy stone was lifted from my chest. I became lighter and in that lightness I saw all around me what I was vainly looking for in the class room and the streets of Calcutta – the freedom of my spirit, not in the dusty road of academic success but in a translucence in which all things bathed in happiness, me not the least. At last was my moment of fulfilment.

I have said that we being visitors had to join the queue at the end, with the senior men. But Mother knew Her rules. As soon as my brother reached Her She stopped short the distribution and asked someone standing by the side to give Her two bigger bags, the ones that were meant for children. She took both the bags together and kept them on Her lap. I thought She waited for a moment, just a moment before lifting one bag from Her lap to give to my brother. Then came my turn. Again She waited, I thought for a fraction longer. Then, slowly, very slowly, She raised Her hand with the second gift bag and held it on top of my open palms. Then? That's all. The Hand that held the bag didn't come down – She had gone into a trance.

Indeed that was the Christmas night – birth of the new Light.

Didn't I want to see Her immobile? Here She



Tarun-da's grandmother, grandfather, aunt and mother with the Mother

was – the very essence of immobility. Didn't I want to see Her with eyes shut? Here was She with vision indrawn – the very essence of shut eyes. Didn't I want to see a radiance around Her body? Here was She enveloping me in Her aura of bliss – the very essence of radiance.

My journey had ended. She didn't smile, She didn't speak; nothing was needed; I was full; I

stood in another dimension and I knew I had arrived.

That night or perhaps a few nights later I opened my Bata shoes, I opened my tailored trousers, I opened my Poplin shirt, put them in a Britannia biscuit tin and told my parents to take them back to Calcutta. I had seen everyone using Prosperity-given simple shorts and shirts and easy sandals so... I had no writer in me then or else I would have held the biscuit tin in front of them and would have perhaps blurted out *tucchyam, ati tucchyam* (useless, so useless...).

Today, decades after my first sight of that Hand of power and that invisible radiance I can say in confidence and confidently that when I thought my journey had ended I hadn't the least idea that "The Mother is the goal, everything is in her; if she is attained, all is attained. If you dwell in her consciousness, everything else unfolds of itself." ❧

REMEMBERING TARUN-DA

Gopal Dalmia '80H, a student in Tarun-da's Free Progress section, profiles this unique teacher.

STUDENT DAYS

Though his grandfather, Dr. Upendranath Banerjee (referred to by Sri Aurobindo as "Mother's Doctor") and his great aunt Jayadevi began coming to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in 1925, it was only on 25th December 1953 that Tarun-da himself came to join the School as a 12 year old child. "Along with his grandfather, great aunt and elder brother Arun, Tarun-da lived for some time in the same room at Shankar Chetty's house where Sri Aurobindo had once lived in hiding," recalls Arup Tagore. His great aunt was very beautiful and we used to call her Sundori Masi, recalls Parul-di.

While Tarun-da was a student he lost his eyesight altogether. The condition was probably building up but the actual loss of eyesight was

triggered by an injury that occurred during long jump competition. After he became blind, he stopped going to school and was taken to Calcutta for treatment. His hopes were dashed as the doctors there said nothing much could be done and he returned to the Ashram. Very soon he was getting bored as there was nothing to do all day long. It is learnt that he sent word to the Mother about getting bored and asked Her what he should do. It seems the Mother said, "Why should he get bored, he should do Yoga," recalls Krishna Kumar.

There are some indications of his efforts in that line. He would sit in one position for hours with open eyes, without being bothered by what went on around him. Whenever he was asked, he shared very little of the experiences he had during the period of total blindness or his sadhana. A

few months before he died in 2014, he shared a little in an interview with Narad [see interview of Tarun-da by Narad - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/kewmu4RELzM>]

One day his prayers were answered by the Mother in the form of regaining partial sight in one eye. He had been sitting and meditating and then, as he recounted to me later, “One morning, I saw golden light! The vision in one eye was re-tuning slowly. After sometime I could make out that it was the sunlight that was reflected from a polished bronze plate kept in the courtyard to dry.”

After that, Mother allowed him to sit in the classes, right upto Higher Course. He depended very much on his hearing. Once his English teacher encouraged him to give a talk like the rest of the class. As his turn approached to give a talk, he went about rehearsing on the terrace every evening as he paced the length of terrace with measured strides. Not only did he memorise this speech, he practised pronunciation, diction, adding emotion and stress and flavour. Finally, when he spoke, his delivery was outstanding. His teacher praised this quality for years to come. Much later when he was a teacher, his students enjoyed the manner in which he recounted stories. He commanded a spell-bound audience of the entire Section whenever he told a story. He had developed a style of storytelling of his own. Perhaps it was so because he would add the details of sound and light in the situation, and the thought-process in the mind of the characters in the story. Later he also wrote some stories which were broadcast by BBC Radio.

MUSIC AND TABLA

Music assumed a special place in his life when his eyesight failed. One could call it his sadhana in the physical, mental, as well as in the deeper and higher realms. “He learned Tabla under the most renowned *tabalchi* in Calcutta at that time, Ustad Karamatullah Khan,” recalls Arup Tagore. Tabla and Sitar are the instruments we have seen him play in the class. It is said that his sense of rhythm was perfected to a very high degree, something he had achieved by practising for long

hours with a metronome. Since Tabla is rarely performed solo, he would play on the Sitar for his students to practise accompaniment. Sometimes he would request Debiprasad ’71 to play Sarod with the students. Some of his Tabla students were always sought-after as accompanying musicians on the stage.



Tarun-da with his Tabla guru, Ustad Karamatullah Khan

ASSISTING RISHABCHAND

When Tarun-da completed the Higher Course, Mother assigned him to assist Rishabchand-da who was in charge of the Publication Department and was writing the book *Sri Aurobindo, his Life Unique*, on Mother’s asking. Nolini-da informed Rishabchand-da that Tarun was to assist him. It seems he asked, “Has Tarun studied *The Synthesis of Yoga* in detail?” Since that was the pre-requisite, Tarun-da went about studying it all over again. He would cycle to some lonely location, carry with him some sandwiches, the sacred volume and read under the shade of a tree. After having studied it in some detail, he presented himself before Rishabchand-da. From 1965 to 1969 he assisted him in every way.

FREE PROGRESS AND PROJECTS

In 1969 Krishna Kumar Pandya ’62 was asked by Tanmaya-da to start a new sub-section of the New System of Education (later known as “Vers la Perfection” (VLP)). Krishna Kumar approached Tarun-da and Srikant ’70 to assist him. This sub-section of VLP was called “Âme ascendante”. The four subjects Tarun-da taught were English, Biology, Geography and Music.

The youngest batch of Free Progress students aged between 12 and 16 was in this section of VLP. Students given full freedom at this age are very difficult to manage. In addition the mixed age group and mixed level of comprehension, industry and interest were a challenge. Through Tara, the Mother was informed of this difficulty and asked about how to handle it. The Mother replied, "We are not here for easy things", recalls Krishna Kumar.

Tarun-da's ability to keep the entire section of three class levels generally engaged in some project or other needs special mention here. He would come up with schemes that needed group effort. Intrinsic aptitude had to be discovered within themselves by the students wanting to be a part of the project. Soon the entire section would be involved in some way. Some would accept to read and research, others would develop special skills like carpentry, tinkering, minor smithy, mechanics, painting, puncture repair, animal husbandry, hand work, etc. while still others would come up with innovative ideas to develop the tooling and instruments to give effect to the general objective of the project.

A number of unusual projects were taken up or attempted. One of them involved extracting the poison from scorpions. Chandrakantbhai Patel of Engine Maintenance Service caught the scorpions as they emerged from an anthill in the Cazanove Garden and put them in the special boxes. Momentum built-up within a few hours. Everyone came to see the specimen caught for milking. Hectic activity was seen in the section for preparing the instruments and tooling for the operation. The room was cleared of all furniture but for a lone table that stood centre-stage. Tarun-da put a glass sheet on the table and explained that this would prevent the scorpion from walking, as the glass is smooth. Then he chose the operating team. Criteria for qualification were, first and foremost that they should be above the age of 12. Then they must be adventurous, bold and fearless. A dozen volunteers lined up. Half a dozen were chosen for the first trial. Three students were handed out glass rods to hold the specimen down on the glass. While the fourth would

hold the tail in position, the fifth would position the dangerous poison sack with a small spatula. The sixth would align the sting into the hole of a new ink dropper meant to receive the poison. Everything went as planned but the scorpion refused to part with a single drop voluntarily. Ultimately it took the mild shock of a cycle dynamo to milk the scorpions.

At one time, a mini zoo for the section (which housed rabbits, white mice, Guinea pigs, parakeets, pigeons, doves, a snake, a puppy, and a civet cat) came into existence more by chance than by design. The animals were much loved but eventually the project had to be given up and all the animals were dispersed in some way except the civet cat. No one was ready to keep this somewhat wild species. Tarun-da took it home and cared for it for a long time.

"Some time in the mid-sixties, Arun and Tarun, the two brothers, had made a rocket. It was tested in the Tennis Ground. Our professor emeritus Sunil-da had come to witness the rocket launch," recalls Arup Tagore. So, it was but natural that a larger experiment should be attempted with the students. Once again, the entire section was involved. Tarun-da's brother Arun was summoned from Calcutta with a 2 kg consignment of Potassium Nitrate. The whole section was busy making very fine charcoal power. The carbon powder was flying all over. Students looked like coal miners. A one millimetre thick steel sheet was rolled to make the 15 inch fuselage. Three fins were welded to guide the rocket along a straight path. It was when the solid fuel mixture was to be filled that the Police CID came to know of the project and informed the Lieutenant Governor of Pondicherry of the students' rocket experiment and the danger of explosion associated with it.



The first rocket launch

The countdown had to be stopped and the mission aborted. All the students were disheartened and Arun-da returned to Calcutta.

Tarun-da also once tried his hand at aero-modelling. He made an ornithopter with a wingspan of 3 metres. He learned to use a power hand tool jigsaw machine only for this purpose. His work was exhibited alongside the aeroplanes built by the aeromodelling students.

Tarun-da's unique way of approaching his classes was reflected in the manner in which he gave assignments at the end of the class. He used to write four instructions on the board: something to think about, something to write about, something to hunt for and something to do. Some of these assignments were long term while others were to be completed before the next class.

Another feature of the section was the Salle de Silence that was inaugurated on his birthday, on 18-05-1971. This facility was available to the students for many years.

Tarun-da's manner of instilling good habits in his students was by setting a good example himself. He was very regular and punctual. In fact he would arrive a few minutes in advance. He always carried a handkerchief. He ate his meals very patiently.

INTEREST IN FILMS

Another of Tarun-da's interests was films. There was a 16mm film roll shot in 1950 by Dakhinath-da (Pranab-da's father). The film was important because 40% of the roll had been shot when Sri Aurobindo's body was kept in state. This was the only movie footage of that time, apart from the one by the Government of India's Film Division - News Review. The film roll was not developed at that time. Later, no one was ready to take the risk. Tarun-da volunteered to get it done in Calcutta. He succeeded in getting the rare footage of Sri Aurobindo developed. It was a miracle that the film could be retrieved 22 years after it was shot.

Much later he directed and produced a film "Able Mr. Pebble". Krishna kumar was his cameraman and aide. The two went to Calcutta to find a suitable 16mm camera. Later, when the film was

developed, they wanted to add sound which was proving to be difficult. Tarun-da sought the advice of the famous director Satyajit Ray over the telephone, who told him that once he had started he had to face all the difficulties along the way. The difficulty was overcome by playing the tape recorder and the projector together. The final product was shown to Pranab-da in this manner. Krishna kumar recalls that he was constantly trying to match the sound with the projection. Pranab-da appreciated the production, recalls Krishna kumar.

There were times when the class room was transformed into a film projection hall. Tarun-da would say something about the film before the show and Srikant-bhai would then project the film.

ADVENTUROUS SPIRIT

In his later years, his eye was operated upon at Arvind Eye Hospital, Madurai and his eyesight improved considerably. Soon thereafter he learnt to ride a motorcycle and got a driving licence in 1995 at the age of 54 years. He enjoyed wandering off on his Hero Street motorcycle. Rajendra '86 recalls that he once agreed to accompany Tarun-da as a pillion rider. A thick fog lingered that morning on the highway to Tindivanam. Tarun-da could not judge where the tarmac ended and fell off the road's edge. Both



were hurt, Tarun-da more than Rajendra. The Mother's grace came in the form of an SAICE alumnus in a car. He was taken to the Govt hospital at Tindivanam, from where he was brought back to Pondy. Thereafter, no one was ready to go with him, but that did not dampen his spirit. "Jodi tor dak sune keo na ashe, tobe ekla cholo re." He continued riding to his heart's content for several years. That perhaps symbolizes the unique and multifaceted personality of Tarun-da – someone who was driven by his own interests and lived by his own values. ❧

TARUN-DA

Venkatesh (K.V.Rao) '75

Tak, Tak, Tak.... It's 1.15 pm.... Pondicherry is at its sunniest and it's time for Tabla Class. At the appointed time, thrice a week, I had to go and give only 3 knocks with the iron handle on an old Tamil carved wooden door, and Tarun-da would amble along in a few minutes to open the door. Thus would begin the legendary private Tabla class which I had with him from 1968 till sometime in 1975... It would begin by first drawing water from an old well in the backyard of the house and washing my hands thoroughly with Ashram soap and walking into his room quietly and drawing out the Tabla. Touching the Tabla without washing hands with soap, and talking to him until he opened his mouth would draw a punishment for sure! I had the distinction of receiving a "gatta" on the head only once in all the years I trained under him. Tarun-da was also very particular about time and the only-3-knocks rule on the door. I never had a watch then and for the love of Tabla I would arrive a few minutes early to his room (which was on Sri Aurobindo Street just before Bharati Street) and wait outside and ask every passer-by who had a watch "Time Enna...?" till it was precisely 1.15 pm and then go Tak, Tak, Tak.... That was discipline, Tarun-da style.

Well it all started when I was in Progrès, and Krishnakumari-di was the teacher. I could never stop tapping rhythms on the tables. I had an uncontrollable desire and love for drums since early childhood. I was told Tarunda used to teach Tabla but stopped doing so for some years due to a lack of serious students who were disciplined enough. So Krishnakumari-di went to speak to him about me and

my love for Tabla. She later took me to him and he peered into my eyes, and asked if I was serious. I was barely 7 years old and it hit me like a brick. He told me he would stop teaching if I ever missed a class. That is how I took upon myself the duty to present myself at his doorstep on fiery afternoons at 1.15pm, three times a week. That was serious for sure.

As I would enter the old Tamil house, an old Ashramite who lived on the first floor would be playing the Esraj and I could hear wonderful strains of Alap. As I would settle into Tarun-da's room, he would teach one-on-one for an hour or more depending on his mood. His technique, precision and discipline on how to place one's fingers and exactly tap the Tabla for various notes, instilled what is called a good fingering regime, which is so vital for Tabla players. It continued with my maturing as a student and he would play the Sitar and get me to accompany him. He was patient, encouraging, and delightful once he had enough assurance that I was serious and disciplined. Over the years he taught me many variations, and bols (rhythmic patterns), and perhaps I was one of his long-standing students.

His curiosity and interests were myriad. He could get intensely interested in many things at the same time. He was a great experimenter too. He did not have a metronome initially and he found a unique way to ensure you followed the beat – he would sit back to back with me, and for every beat he would simply swing his back, to hit mine, and I had to do the same with a push! Post a metronome's arrival, my back was less sore. I distinctly remember once sitting with him and experimenting "mind



reading”. He asked me to intensely think of something and he sat with his eyes shut and tried to read my mind! He was a passionate story teller. He related to me how he would take the Mother’s permission and would go to Calcutta to learn Tabla from the great Ustad Karamatullah Khan every year for a few months. His loyalty to and his understanding of the Farukhabadi Gharana was intense and deep.

After I left the Ashram School I continued learning Tabla for a few years outside. He would take a very keen interest in my progress, and would sit with me and have long conversations to learn all about what I was doing. Once I started my career and spent less time on Tabla, he was certainly not too happy with it. But he would have a good laugh about it. Some years later, my two sons were growing up in Singapore and we got them to learn Tabla in a music school. When I took the two young boys to him and told him about their learning Tabla, he pulled out Tablas and all four of us played together. He took great pleasure listening to the young boys, and demonstrated his characteristic Uttans, Kaydas and Peshkaras... my young little boys, then, were immensely thrilled.

He had many interesting aspects, and some queer facets too, of his personality. One such interesting aspect that I remember is that he would vigorously swish (gargle) water in his mouth after a meal, and then with full control of his mouth would build pressure to push it out with so much force that water jets would spray out from the small gaps between the teeth! That needed some mastery, and as a young kid it fascinated me so



much that I would go home and try it all evening, and fail, for there were no such gaps in my teeth in the first place!

In later years, I could see that his eyesight was diminishing, but he would still recognise and remember me very well and talk to me no matter how many years had elapsed in between. His love for me was instant, palpable and so very genuine.

Tarun-da is a legend who taught several generations of Ashram students to play Tabla. Though I never carried through as a Tabla player beyond the initial years of training, I enjoy the instrument whenever I get to play it even today – and more importantly, he opened the door in me to the appreciation of Hindustani Classical music, which is so much an integral part of my life today. When I reflect on it, I feel good to see Dingle (Rashmi) becoming a serious full time musician today. I had canvassed for him to be accepted by Tarun-da in the days when he abstained from teaching non-serious students. Munna, Raja, Taposh, Deepak, Japa and others would later become my cohort.

Tak Tak Tak.... Tarun-da, you live in our hearts and I treasure all the wonderful moments and memories of you, forever. ❧

MY UNIQUE TABLA TEACHER

Shashwat '93 remembers

Can you tell us something about your interaction with Tarun-da?

I don’t really remember ever wanting to play the tabla. I do remember the day that a big parcel was waiting for me at Ira-di’s boarding when I came back from lunch in Corner House. I almost felt guilty as everyone in the boarding hovered wide-eyed around me while I opened the box. It

was a small pair of tablas that my father had had shipped from Calcutta.

I guess Ira-di must have been thrilled as there would finally be someone in the boarding who could provide accompaniment during her singing classes and programmes. But that would have to wait as there was still the minor detail that I didn’t know jack about tabla playing.

TRAIN JOURNEY ON THE TABLA

Gopal Dalmia '80H

One of the popular Tabla program items performed by Tarun-da's students was the **Train Journey on the Tabla**. Once I requested Tarun-da to play that item on the stage to commemorate the 120th anniversary of Railways in Pondicherry. The stage was set on platform No.1 at the Station. He agreed and asked the help of Arup Tagore to mimic the sound of a locomotive horn with a synthesizer. On 15th December 1999 Tarun-da asked all spectators to board an imaginary train. When the station-master gave the signal, Arup-da blew the horn and Tarun-da began to play on the Tabla. As his fingers drummed on the tabla, the typical sound of the wheels on rails was re-created. At first slow, the train gradually picked up speed. Then it went over a short bridge at medium speed. Then it went through a tunnel. Then over a long old bridge at very slow speed. The train went through forest and open paddy fields and desert and along a stone cut pass. Passed a wayside station at medium speed. Through a town it chugged along and Arup-da blew the horn every time Tarun-da would signal him to do so. A live commentary from Tarun-da kept the audience stuck on their seats irrespective of



Preparing for the Tabla Concert, 1989

the speed of his Tabla Train journey which he covered in 20 minutes, with subtle differences of sound that everyone was familiar with, but no one took notice of during the journeys they undertook in the past. Finally he brought everyone back to Pondicherry as the imaginary train pulled in. The audience was awestruck. Mesmerized would be more appropriate. The Tabla Train journey had arrived at its destination but no one was ready to get off the train. Long after Tarun-da withdrew from the stage, the audience slowly returned to their surroundings. A journey they will never forget. It was one of the rare solo public performances of the tabla master, probably the last one.

Hard to say whether it was Ira-di who spoke to Tarun-da or whether I approached him on my own, but one minute I was overhearing my seniors talk about learning 3 lessons in a day (and me wondering what's so great about that, I could teach them a lesson or two myself), and the next I was actually learning those very lessons myself. The term "lesson" was probably coined by Tarun-da to just mean one of the preliminary exercise pieces, and not the lesson my vivid imagination had visualised.

I was about 8 years old then, and very much in Delafon, and I didn't know back then that Tarun-da had a self-imposed rule, not to start teaching tabla until Big School. Maybe that was the reason why he would personally pick me up from

Ira boarding (now Delhi House) every Sunday morning and would take me to his place, which used to be at the end of Eswaran Koil Street (now 'Esparan Heritage'). I would sit on the back of his bicycle legs stretched out a mile on either side, with very strict instructions from Ira-di to keep my feet clear of the wheel. It was more of an ordeal to get to Tarun-da's place and back than to sit and play the tabla.

I started learning to play the tabla right-handed, given that I had not really seen that many people play the tabla and the few that I had, anyway played it that way. But I remember it was quite a struggle to play anything decently. When I was old enough to officially join the tabla class, a few years later, Dingle (Rashmi) became my teacher,

and I was mesmerized by how beautifully he played the tabla, with his long, tapered fingers.

But what intrigued me even more was that this lanky guy in the class, much older and taller than me, had swapped the tabla and the banya and was actually playing amazingly well in spite of that. So I asked Dingle how come he was allowed to play like that and he told me, “Who? Sathi? He is left-handed, how else will he play”? I said, well I was left-handed too. So he asked me in shock why I hadn't said so right from the start.

And just like that, I had to start tabla-playing right from the very beginning, all over again. It was much easier the second time around as I knew the bols by heart, but still it felt terrible that all the people I had “beaten” in the past few years were now way ahead of me.

As luck would have it, Dingle finished Knowledge soon after, and I was transferred back to Tarun-da. And I don't know why, but he felt I had picked up all the wrong habits, now that I was playing with my left hand, so I was pushed back to lesson one — *a third time!*

I probably should have quit tabla then. The unfairness of it was totally lost on a 12 year old kid. So I continued learning from Tarun-da, all through School and Knowledge. And for many many years after.

What was his approach to music and to teaching?

I think his approach changed several times over the years that I knew him. Maybe when I started learning, he was still in the phase where he felt perfect technique and discipline were essential to learning music. He had developed a fairly effective course that comprised of three sets of compositions, ranging from Peshkars and Kaidas, all the way up to Relas and Tukdas, with very strict rules as to how you could move from one set to the next. It took many students till Knowledge 3rd year to complete all three sets; most would probably never finish. He would pull me up for the slightest deviation in tonal quality.

And I am eternally grateful for that, no matter how frustrating it was at the time, considering how that changed for later students.

Over the years, he came to realize that many more children could benefit from learning music and that it wasn't as essential to achieve perfection, as much as it was for them to get a sense of musicality. And he changed his approach completely.

I saw him move forward with many students, who really had terrible technique and whom he had repeatedly failed only a few years earlier.

When I pointed this out to him, he told me that his ideas about teaching the tabla had completely changed. He saw many students start learning to play, struggle for a few years

with the absolute basics, and then leave. And in no way did those years of learning the tabla enrich their experience of music later on in life.

I didn't agree with him entirely, in that I still believe that learning correct technique can only deepen our love and respect of a craft, but I did see his point. A few months after Sunil-da passed away, in 1998, and I was kind of left with no department to work in, or no one to report to, Tarun-da recounted to me a story that clarifies this point completely.

Tarun-da was once asked to take maths classes in the School. Not knowing where to start he went to Sunil-da and asked him what he should do. For those who don't know him, Sunil-da was probably the best maths teacher our School has ever had. Or so I was told by his students, who later became my teachers. Apparently Sunil-da told him it was unimportant whether they learnt maths or not, what was important was for them to learn to think like mathematicians.

I still remember this story today, because that, in a way, also changed the way I started teaching. It is really not important at all if a student becomes a great tabla player, or a programmer, or a photographer or whatever it is that he or she takes up. Can the students be encouraged to start seeing the world with a new pair of eyes? Hear



Tarun-da and Shashwat

things differently? Think different? If they can do that with a heightened sense of perfection and technique, then fantastic; but what is technique if all there is, is that?

I remember one more quote I often heard Tarun-da say “Doomed is the artist, whose technique surpasses his skill”...

Can you tell us something about his unique tabla programmes?

In a way the programmes were really an attempt to engage all those students he began signing up for the classes. I don't know the exact number but I think he managed to put 60 odd students on the stage one year, in one capacity or the other.

The programmes were really an extension of how he conducted his classes. “Bird can get out now, Buddha enter from the left”. It was as much a hilarious ensemble of children he embarrassed in public as it was charming in the way the audience was required to let go of any notion of what a well-polished public presentation should be.

But I think it really encouraged a lot of students to take up table-playing and most students really looked forward to taking part in his programmes. I personally detested going out there only to make a fool of myself.

What is it that struck you about his personality? His attitude to life and sadhana?

I have yet to find a more gifted story-teller. Birthdays were all the more special if they were on a tabla-class day, because we got to hear his masterful recounting of movies he had seen. “Stalag 17” was so much better the way he narrated it to us, than when I finally got to see the movie for myself.

I have spent many hours with him discussing music and life. He was someone with extreme opinions about most things. Any raga with a *komal re* sounded terrible and out of tune to him. So he effectively hated all morning ragas. He didn't think Zakir Hussain had any skills at all.

I on the other hand believe the exact opposite. There is an introspective depth that *komal re* brings with it, that it is completely absurd to think of it as being out of tune. And how do you praise a phenomenon like Zakir Hussain? But this is what gave Tarun-da such a delightfully

eccentric side to him.

Many years later when I started hearing recordings of Ustaad Karamatullah Khan Saheb, from whom Tarun-da had learnt, I did get a sense of what he was suggesting. There is a certain restraint and depth in the performances of the great artists of the past, that is often overshadowed by the flamboyance and showmanship of an incredibly talented musician such as Zakir Hussain. His charisma doesn't take away from the fact that he is probably the greatest tabla player ever. But for many, his charisma blinds them from searching deeper, to experience the sheer breadth of his technical prowess.

I was at a Dover Lane Music Conference in Calcutta several years ago, when Zakir-ji played alongside his father and guru, Ustaad Allarakha Khan Saheb. The exact same bols. There was hardly one person in the audience applauding when Allarakha Khan Saheb played, and yet the same audience was going berserk each time Zakir Hussain finished his play. I felt a little sorry that the audience, even in such a prestigious gathering as the Dover Lane, couldn't get past the theatricality of it. My father showed me a newspaper clipping the next day that said the exact same thing. Probably Tarun-da was onto something with his out-of-the-blue comments. Perhaps I am just reading more into the things he said... But I wasn't there sitting in front of Karamatullah Khan Saheb when he performed so I don't really know. I can only imagine what it must have been sitting in front of such a great master and learning first-hand even if it was the simplest of bols.




I don't know if Tarun-da was depressed towards the end, or what he thought about *sadhana*, or in fact what he was thinking about all the time. I know that a part of him died ever since he stopped directing his atrocious but so highly anticipated yearly tabla programmes. He would be seated outside Nolini da's room for hours on end, and look up at the Mother's room. I kept thinking he was plotting his comeback programme, that he would some day unleash upon us all...

Each time we crossed he smiled. Each time I thought there were less teeth in there than the last time.... ☞



QUIZ TIME!

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

- 
1. In which year did the Mother first meet Rabindranath Tagore?
 2. Where was the soup verandah of the School in the 1960s and 70s?
 3. In which poem of Sri Aurobindo would you find this line: "I am the wind's speed and the blazing star"?
 4. Who was Keshav-ji?
 5. What is the spiritual significance of grapes?
- 
- 

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE NOV 2016 ISSUE

1. *In which year was the new Hall of Harmony inaugurated?*

An opening was formally held on 24th April 1998 when the basement and the ground floor structures were ready for use. But the main hall was first used for the prize distribution of the same year on October 31st. When the new academic session started on 16th December 1998 a meditation was held in the new Hall of Harmony at 6 am.

2. *Who was in charge of the Big Boys' Home in the 60s and 70s?*

Subash-da.

3. *Who was the main person who did the typing work required for the School in the 1970s? There were several people but who was the main one?*

Sutapa (Behram-bhai's aunt).

4. *How was Sanjiban-da connected to the School?*

He was one of the main art teachers. In the early days of the Ashram he used to draw the designs which were embroidered on the Mother's saris.

5. *What is the spiritual significance of the bright red variety of the "Silence" flower? (It can be found in Auroville)*

Power aspiring to become an instrument for the divine work.

*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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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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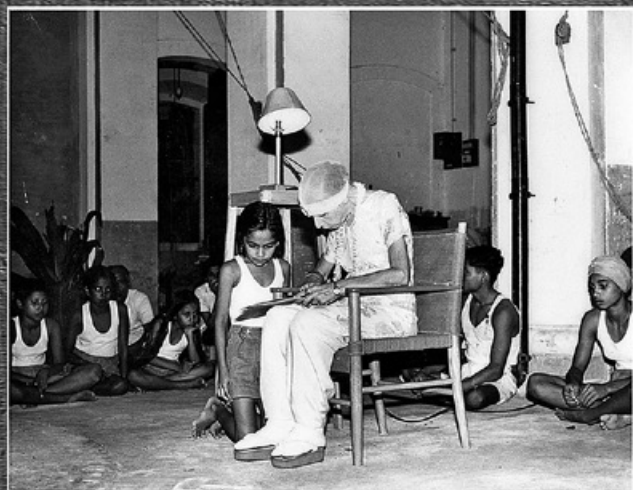


*The power of
human intelligence
is boundless;
it increases
by concentration;
such is the secret.*

(Vivekananda)

*Seek for a guide
who can lead you
to the gates of knowledge
where shines the light
free of all darkness.*

(Dhammapada)



*Happy is he who
nourishes himself
with the words
of a sage
and seals them
in his heart.*

(Ecclesiasticus)

