

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF  
CORNER HOUSE

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

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

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

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## The Golden Chain

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



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

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**Publisher:**  
Ramraj Sehgal  
for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY,  
2 Rangapillai St., Pondicherry.

**Printer:**  
Swadhin Chatterjee,  
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM PRESS,  
38 Goubert Avenue, Pondicherry.



## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana Panda '79

**O**n 11<sup>th</sup> June this year Corner House celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. All former students and their families were invited to a special dinner and a programme was held to remember its history.

Corner House has a very special place in the hearts of all the former students who have been in the School since 1967. During the late 1960s and 70s the majority of the students lived in the boardings and ate in Corner House. In those days our time was spent in the same spaces: the School, the Playground and the various other grounds, the boardings and Corner House. Corner House was the place where we were relaxed and free and could interact with students of all age groups. We ate together and it allowed us to know those who were older than us and also those who were younger than us. Also in 1972 the boardings were reorganised and boys and girls began to live separately. So, it was in Corner House that we found the atmosphere of a real home where boys and girls of different age groups could be together just as older and younger siblings gather together.

This was the wonderful arrangement that the Mother had made for us so that we could get the proper diet that was needed for our growing bodies. We could focus entirely on our studies, sports and artistic activities while meal times were brief. We ate what was given to us without being fussy or finicky. It taught us to regard food as a substance to nourish the body and not a matter that becomes an obsession, as it is with some people.

But there was a downside to this. We just never got to see how food was prepared for a meal. We rushed from the School and lunch was there, all steaming and delicious. We got back from Sportsground, had a wash and made a dash for

Corner House and there was dinner waiting for us. We had no clue as to how it appeared at the counter. We could sit and chat with friends, relaxed, catching up on the day's activities, without a thought about the laborious process that had gone into those meals.

When we finished Knowledge in 1979 Praveen Kapur gave a bit of his precious time to some of us, girls who had grown up in boardings, and taught us the basics of cooking. Learning this important skill proved extremely useful for us in the years that followed.

The time spent in Corner House will always be remembered among the happy moments of our growing up years and the laughter and the peaceful companionship will remain in our hearts. In retrospect we realise how fortunate we were that there was something of the atmosphere of the Ashram in Corner House even though we were not in the Dining Room itself. The great good fortune of eating with our teachers and captains brought us closer to them.

And that brings us to an important point: that particular phase of the history of SAICE was very special when most children did not live with their parents. We lived as if protected within a bubble and felt that we were a part of the Ashram. This experiment in Integral Education can never be replicated anywhere because all the adults we met were leading spiritual lives within the intense atmosphere of the Ashram and they transmitted to us a certain vibration of purity and inner aspiration. There is much more to education than academic learning even if it is supplemented with sports and cultural activities. Nothing can replace the learning that one gets by observing living examples and from the companionship of the enlightened. ❧

# BONJOUR UK!

*Jayasurya '80 (Jinoo)*

Cows in the barn, pigs in the sty, dogs in the kennel, no honking on the roads....

With the lush green grass grinning as the Saturday sun struck it, hedges leafing, windows winking with their lace curtains and window boxes with flowers in a multitude of colours, I found myself wandering alone in the empty streets of Cheltenham, a small town on the western side of England.

A few days earlier, we – a gang of 11 kids and 2 teachers – had landed at Heathrow on a 10-day student exchange program with Chosen Hill School at Gloucester.

The mural of the terminal welcomed us with smiling faces from five continents. So did the officers at the immigration counter verifying our documents and letting us into London. Thus began our 2 hour journey to Gloucester.

Some kids were dozing after being in the sky for 9 hours while others had their eyes glued to the small screen reading the missed messages from their near and dear ones. How I wished I could stop and stare at the dramatic dales with the picturesque landscape that looked like a patchwork quilt.

On the outskirts of Gloucester, the rolling hills were dotted with neatly painted farmhouses, white-washed fences that outlined the pastures, the sheep sleepily grazing and wind turbines turning to help harness power from nature.

It was 13° Celsius, a chill breeze was blowing as we arrived at the Chosen Hill School. Amanda, our host teacher, arrived along with the host families of our kids. With no time to spare, we all disappeared to different destinations.

Amanda drove me to Roger's, to his quaint

little cottage bordered by hedgerows and a pocket-sized garden gleaming with Morning Glory. A lovely couple, Roger and Pat opened the door and ushered me into what was going to be my abode for the next 7 days. I lived on the topmost floor – a cosy and cute attic – overlooking the lawn in the backyard.



Cottage in the Cotswolds

The sun set at 10 in the evening. On my first night in the UK, fatigue sucked me into the world of sleep. I slept like a log till Pat gave me a wake-up call the next morning.

The cool kitchen with a fireplace was turned into a wine cellar where on one wall gifts from various countries were hung, on the other were memories framed in black and white. The walls made me feel good. The couple was well-travelled and well-educated. Breakfast time meant sharing, learning and no comparing between cultures and civilizations. Brexit had just been voted in.

The school bell rang at 8:30. Children wearing blue and white uniforms started walking in along with our kids – Saioneers<sup>1</sup>. They were to shadow them during the school hours.

1. Students of SAI International School.

Teachers in Chosen Hill had assigned classrooms. The students moved as per their time table. The teaching and learning process proceeded. Questions were asked, relevant replies were given, doubts were cleared and topics were taught that

The not so spiritually-oriented were thrilled with the place where Harry Potter scenes had been shot.

After school hours, it was mostly bowling, snooker, videogames, eateries, dance floors and shopping for the Saioneers. Amanda drove me to Stratford-upon-Avon. The walkways were decked up with little flowers and the waterways upon Avon had canoes for the love-birds. Shakespeare's house, painted in brown and cream, sparkled. The Royal Shakespeare Company was staging 'Romeo and Juliet'. Before I could fall in love with the place we had to move on.

The Cotswolds hit me like a bolt. Cute cottages covered with creepers, flowers blooming on them and streams trickling between them like silver threads. People strolled at a leisurely pace, leaving the hustle and bustle of London behind. Shoppers merrily shopped in the souvenir shops. Spotless side streets were dotted with tiny tables and chairs for the foodies.

Cheltenham was charming with elegant shops selling well-known brands like St Laurent, Louis Vuitton etc., a grand golf course, a big park for parking oneself after a hectic day's work and a pedestrian area between the brands and boutiques where wooden benches comforted the old and the young alike, some engrossed in their books,



Christ Church college, Oxford

matched the need of the job market. Teachers were passionate and dedicated, students smarter than the smart classes. Lessons were innovative and much out of syllabus.

On a visit to Churchdown Village Infant school, we experienced experimental learning with Grade III pupils running out with a teacher, wearing their raincoats, to feel the English rains, reflect, then write about it once they were back inside. On one occasion, Grade II came out of the room with buckets full of water and measuring cups to learn fractions on a football field. The schools had space – for the thoughts to flow in and out freely.

One fine morning, we set off in a school van to Oxford with Amanda at the wheel, our guide for the day. There were arches, architecture, space, lawns, libraries, dorms, desks, benches, long tables with fine cutlery and bone china waiting for the 300 inmates – all so typical of Oxford University. It rekindled and re-energised our dormant academic senses as we discovered different sections of Christ Church College.

The next day, the sincerest of prayers were offered in the Gloucester Cathedral. Murals on the ceilings, stained glass windows permitting the light to filter in... we heard the sound of silence.



Shakespeare's house at Stratford-upon-Avon

others soaking in the spirit of sharing and caring. Trees, branches and leaves made a shelter for those who came to rest their legs.

One afternoon, Mr. Ken Joshua, a friendly



visiting teacher from Chosen Hill, guided me past Painswick to his hill-top home, a sweet home which opened out to the sweeping, ancient woodland, all green and serene. Pat, his wife, had prepared delicious dishes for dinner. After a cheerful chat and a meticulous plan for the onward journey with us to the city of London, he dropped me at Roger's.

The drive to London was loaded with magical memories of the wonderful time spent in the countryside with lovely people. London was hop on hop off on top of the Big Bus with Mr. Ken Joshua and the gang. Surfing the wave of people, we re-lived the pages of Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, Nelson's column at Trafalgar Square, the opening of Tower Bridge on the River Thames, the Palace of Westminster – the seat of power, Big Ben – the timekeeper of London, Hyde Park – hiding Londoners from the London traffic, the

change of guard at Buckingham Palace, then clicking selfies with Marilyn Monroe, Usain Bolt, Einstein and 300 incredibly lifelike figures at Madame Tussauds, after that whizzing underground on the Tube, stepping into the 135 m high London Eye, eyeing the icon from the sky and stepping out to board the boring Air India flight.

We bid Aurevoir to the unique, unforgettable, UK. Merci UK! ☘



At Madame Tussauds, with Marilyn Monroe!

## INTEGRAL EDUCATION

### AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FACULTIES OF THE MIND

**Suruchi Verma '03**, participated in a national seminar on Innovative Practices in Education organized by the Sri Aurobindo International School, Hyderabad, on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary [see box with Chhalamayi's background note]. We give here a summary of the interactive workshop she conducted, for people unfamiliar with Integral Education, on the occasion.

Suruchi has been working at our School for a little over 10 years now as a "facilitator". She prefers to be called a "facilitator" rather than a "teacher" because she sincerely feels that her work is to help the students to think, learn and grow independently. The subjects that she has been involved in are: French, Solar Science, Hindi, Math, Physics and Dance. The age-group she has worked with has ranged from children who are 3 years old to young adults of 21 years. She feels the exposure to varied age-groups and subjects has been a great learning process for her. Her participation at the seminar was in the section on Creative Pedagogy and child-centric learning and focused on the development of the mental faculties in the Integral Education system in the light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

#### INTRODUCTION

I am not officially representing the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, I am only sharing my experience: each of us at SAICE is free to explore his/her method of guiding/working with the students.

The whole ideal/principle at our Centre of Education is extremely broad and varied; thus to understand it in depth one needs to live in that atmosphere and experience that life itself because the



education at SAICE is concretely part of the life there. Therefore, instead of expressing it in its totality, I will try to focus on one aspect: 'becoming conscious'.

The Mother says: "We carry in ourselves an eternal consciousness and it is of this that one must become aware."

So let us take as a starting point the premise that one crucial aim of life is to become conscious of one's inner self and unite with it all the parts of our being.

What is meant by Integral Education?

"Education to be complete must have five principal aspects corresponding to the five principal activities of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual." – *The Mother*

And so these three instruments need to be perfected and brought under the direct influence of the psychic for us to become truly conscious. Then basically our whole life would be an education of these parts towards that movement. So that is what our Centre of Education aims to fulfill.

## APPLIED METHODS

Nothing is as interesting as practical application; so let us see how we can apply these theoretical principles and fulfill the aim of becoming conscious through education.

In my classes at standards 10, 11, 12, I have tried to cater to and experimented on three aspects in our education system:

- 1) Unifying subjects;
- 2) Independent learning;
- 3) Developing mental faculties as the primary focus.

1. In this approach (like in an interdisciplinary approach) the importance is given to a theme and all subjects that are taught focus on that theme. For example, let us take water. Now this can be looked at from various angles: biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, history, geography, political science, environment, engineering. And so students can be guided to choose themes they would like to explore and they can study it through a number of subjects.

## CHHALAMAYI '79 ON THE SEMINAR

To work for an institution, Institute of Human Study, which the Mother not only blessed but named and gave Her Gracious consent to be the President of is a unique privilege for which I feel specially blessed always.

Sri Aurobindo International School (also named by Her) was started in the year 1967 under the aegis of the Institute of Human Study which was founded by the sanction of the Mother in 1964. In celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> year the school organised a national seminar on Innovative Practices in Education on Dec 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> at Champak Hills (named after Shri Champaklal) Matridarshan Trust, Jan-gaon. New Creation, a free progress school, the residential branch of Sri Aurobindo International School, is running at the same site for the last two years. It was indeed an overwhelming experience to host Heads of institutions, Principals, teachers of 50 schools! It was a proud moment for us to share the vision of Integral Education of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Following my welcome speech, the keynote address was delivered by Anand-bhai. Other eminent speakers addressed the gathering of 200 participants.

The Symposium was a true *mélange* of a variety of viewpoints on education but harmoniously converging on several important issues of learning beyond the text book, project-based learning, enquiry-based learning, stimulating the child's interest in learning, self-study and integral development of the child etc... Over 30 speakers were requested to present their papers. Aurevan from Auroville and Suruchi from Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education also shared their thoughts and experience with regard to the unique practices of Integral Education.

2. Now we discuss the the aspect of independent learning. It is quite obvious that a child learns best when he is interested. So our role isn't to impart knowledge, rather to provide all

the necessary material and infrastructure so that gradually he is able to learn on his own.

What is the best way to educate a child?

Sri Aurobindo says:

“As in the education of the mind, so in the education of the heart, the best way is to put the child into the right road to his own perfection and encourage him to follow it, watching, suggesting, helping, but not interfering.”

We tap into the child’s inquisitiveness so that he further questions, wants to know more. For example, a topic in Maths – “permutations and combinations” – can be taught through various games and activities in groups and then the moment the students are curious about the concepts, we could provide structured material, videos, problems, etc for them to be able to study on their own. We could call this natural education where a holiday is less attractive than going to school. Also, not being judged, not being compared with other classmates, helps a child evolve in his own independent natural way. This also gradually helps the student in becoming conscious of himself, his passions and interests and somewhere also of an inner quiet guidance.

3. Now we come to the final aspect which I have delved into the most – direct development of the mental faculties. Sri Aurobindo has given us step by step guidelines for this and stressed its importance.

I have tried to work on activities that would enhance the students’ mental faculties, namely: a) curiosity; b) observation; c) imagination; d) analysis, judgment, logic. Let us now see how practically we could apply these and how they all lead up to our original aim of becoming conscious.

**a) Curiosity** – For science we could recount to the child an incident where a superhero (as the students are often fascinated by the ongoing series and movies of this genre) travels back in time. From there his mind will ask for more and gradually discover Einstein’s principles of rela-

tivity. Let him search within with philosophical questions such as why he exists, what is his purpose, his aim, his calling. This will make him conscious of himself and discover his passions.

**b) Observation** – These questions and others will in turn make him observant of his surroundings. The moment he is keen to observe externally we could lead him to observe himself, his thoughts, his attributes and flaws. He learns very young to discern and understand the difference between the ephemeral joys of life and the deeper happiness that life has to offer. This makes him conscious and focused.

**c) Imagination** – For imagination there is much scope for activities. Each child has a world of his own and an artist in him. One could appeal to his creativity. Or one could take a set of problems in India and see flaws in various political/social systems in other countries as well. They could figure out their own solutions. Then they themselves have to imagine and create an ideal society or system. This also helps them to become aware of the world and its systems of governments, its problems. One could have any other theme, like an ideal school, an ideal home. All this makes them conscious of their choices.

**d) Analysis, logic** – We all observe students arguing among themselves. So we could channelise this urge and help build their faculties by a step-by-step process of discussions and logical progression of thought. This broadens their perspectives, makes them learn to accept another’s point of view, understand their own limitations and surpass their boundaries, in the end enlarging their limited awareness.

## CONCLUSION

In all we do with the students if we learn with them and freely discuss with them the above reasons/methods, we thereby also make them more conscious and they in turn help us help them better. ❧

*Mother, would you please define in a few words what you mean essentially by “free progress”?*

A progress guided by the soul and not subjected to habits, conventions or preconceived ideas.

**The Mother** (CWM, 12:171)



# AN ENCOURAGING ALIBI FROM A MATHS TEACHER

*'A-musings' from a teacher taking his first Maths class at SAICE*

The following essay and poem were written by **Vikas Kothari '02** some years ago, in his first year as a teacher. It reflects the creativity and humour which teachers can bring to their interactions with students. He dedicates this piece to teachers of Mathematics who have brought a sense of wonder for Maths in their students.

**T**he Chambers dictionary defines the word *alibi* as: "the plea in a criminal charge of having been elsewhere at the material time: the fact of being elsewhere: an excuse for failure."

The technical definition of course doesn't hold in this case; we would rather take it to mean: "an excuse for being elsewhere". Nonetheless an alibi from a math teacher still seems out of place as it is generally we teachers who listen to a whole variety of alibis from students i.e.: 'I was not feeling well', 'I was having a (math) headache', 'I slept off', 'I got locked up in my house!' etc. Anyway on this rare occasion I did have to give one to my students and I gave it in verse form.



Before revealing the lines to you, let me begin by a disclaimer. I am not a poet and have no training in metre and rhythm. Least of all in French. However, many a teacher would have discovered that when the batches under his charge are particularly amusing, the Muse can inspire him to exceed his limits. So with only the ability to find

rhyming words, I ventured to write rhyming verses in French.

You are most welcome to correct my language poetically and grammatically:

*Mes chers grands gentils amis,  
Vous serez surveillés par mon esprit  
Car j'irai au lac aujourd'hui,  
Pour un pique-nique avec les petits.  
Ne sautez pas en criant 'youpi'!  
Car je verrai demain à midi,  
Tout le travail que vous avez fini.*

*Luttez toutes vos dispersions 'Ari',  
Franchissez vos limites Ishani,  
Car 'Dieu vous a très bien fourni',  
Avec les talents des Bengalis!  
M. Confiant tout sera accompli,  
En marchant sur la 'voie' réussie,  
Raisonnant comme dans la philosophie.  
Vous allez tous trouver 'Shruti',  
En ouvrant la 'divya drishti'.*

*Mira développez l'indépendance,  
Mirashree la persévérance,  
Andrej un peu plus de confiance,  
Soyez habile comme l'archet qui danse  
Sharanya soyez plus intense,  
Utilisez tous votre stock de bon sens,  
Pour ne pas sentir mon absence.*

I wrote the above lines on the blackboard in the class of my E.A.V.P 5 students, ten minutes before leaving for a picnic with my students of P3. Besides conveying to them my inability to take the class, they bring out some typical traits of the students along with the word meanings of their names.

For example ‘Ari’ is the alias for Aritra, which means *one who slays his enemies*. In the maths class the enemies are of course the various distractions i.e. the latest Sportstar with a cover story on football!

Apart from being another name for goddess Durga, Ishani means *one gifted by God*. This explains the two lines that follow her name:

*Franchissez vos limites Ishani,  
Car ‘Dieu vous a très bien fourni’,  
Avec les talents des Bengalis!*

The original intention to use the word ‘Bengalis’ was just to get the line to rhyme; however, I discovered to my happy surprise that it made a lot of sense as Bengalis are generally a very talented lot; their foremost talent, being their ability to talk for hours and strike a conversation with strangers on any topic under the sun! By the way in the poem, the word ‘Bengalis’ has to be pronounced as the French would: “Bon Gaalis!” and rightly so, as the Bengalis have unique ways of cursing! At a time when Ganguly (‘amader prince of Kolkata’) was having a very lean patch with his batting, they would ask you in a serious tone, “What is the similarity between a 100 m sprint and a Ganguly innings?”.... And after a long poignant pause they would answer ruefully, “They both last as long!”

Coming back to the poem, at first sight M. Confiant (read M. as Monsieur), might seem like a mystery man, but you can identify him easily if you know his confident temperament, his ready wit, and his affinity to philosophical reasoning. I wrote the word ‘voie’ in quotes because his name means *the Path*. A last hint about him is that he adores watching and playing football!

Many students pursuing maths often have a particularly gifted classmate who doesn’t like to work. Let’s call him ‘Mr. Lazy-Genius’. At some point most students of maths would have been amazed when their teachers or Mr. Lazy-Genius showed them a very simple approach to solve a particular problem. The ‘normal’ students would

have tried very hard, thinking in a ‘linear way’ and succeeded with a long and laborious method while the teacher or Mr. Lazy-Genius just gave them a nonchalant look (as if the problem was not worth all the effort) and showed them a different way of looking at the problem by thinking ‘laterally’. And lo! the solution emerges in a jiffy without any complicated derivations. It is these moments that bring out the wonder of mathematics in the simplicity and elegance of its methods.

The greater the frequency of these moments, the more the student begins to admire the teacher and Mr. Lazy-Genius for his ‘divya drishti’. The ‘divya-drishti’ can see through the problem and swoop down directly on the solution. At the end of the day, students want to acquire the same effortless ease, and aspire for that miraculous flash of intuition. It was keeping this experience in mind that I wrote the last two lines of the second stanza:

*Vous allez tous trouver ‘Shruti’,  
En ouvrant la ‘divya drishti’.*

In fact Shruti’s name fits perfectly as it means, *inspired revelation*.

The last stanza of course encourages the four students to work on the respective virtues.

As for Andrej the first picture that comes to my mind is that of a violin with the bow dancing away to a Vivaldi concerto. Hence the reference to the dancing *archet*.

I don’t know how effective the poem was in keeping the class quiet and concentrated since a soft-spoken colleague of mine (Amit) had to come and quieten them down.

Perhaps it would have created a novel way of filling a progress report, with a lot to be read in between the lines, transforming that unavoidable dutiful process into a creative experience! ☘

(P.S: My first maths students were: 1) Andrej; 2) Aritra; 3) Ayan; 4) Ishani; 5) Mira; 6) Mirashree; 7) Sharanya; and 8) Shruti).

# STUDYING SAICE

Some months ago, **Prapanna Smith** spoke to a small audience of former students and some teachers of SAICE and shared the experience of his doctoral dissertation research. The subject of his research was “**Psychosocial Learning Environments and the Mediating Effects of Personal Meaning upon Satisfaction with Education**”. Prapanna had earlier taught at SAICE for a few years and his research is based on his observation of Integral Education as practised at SAICE and at the Future Foundation School at Kolkata. The starting point of his research was the well-known sentence of the Mother: “An aimless life is always a miserable life.” He spoke to **Sunayana Panda** later about the background of this work.

## TEACHING IN THE ASHRAM SCHOOL

**Tell us a little about the background. When did you come to Pondicherry for the first time?**

The first time was in 1991, more than 25 years ago. Before coming to Pondy in 1991, I had had some correspondence with Babaji Maharaj, so after I came here, I got to spend some time with him and to know the Ashram community. When my son Mathew was admitted to the Ashram School in 1993, I accompanied him and spent a few months here. After Mathew started school, Babaji told me, ‘Go to Orissa’. So I went to Orissa with Prashant Parija, his great-nephew. We went to 12 relic-centres and all of them had schools. When I came back, I told Babaji, “There are two things going on in my consciousness. Firstly, I am leaving my son here in full faith, and secondly, I am saying to myself that I want a school like this in America.” I told him, “I want to start a school like this in America.” He said that it was a good idea but it was not the right time.

In 1995 or 1996, during my third visit to Pondy, Babaji said, “Now you can start the school.” But I didn’t think that I was ready then. I came back in 1998. I thought, “Before I start the school, I need to work on myself. I need to know more about the

system.” So I quit my teaching job in the United States, came here, volunteered and started working in Flower Room with Anjana-ben, Sumitra, and Uttama. At the same time when I arrived, Prakash, Lipi, Bharat Arya, Nancy, Datta and Cristof were starting a new experiment in Free Progress. I joined them and became the seventh teacher. We had seven students – Tanushree, Udit, Shraddha, Gauri, Amrit,



Prapanna at SAICE in 1998-99 with his Free Progress students

Sukrit and Arindam – and we called ourselves, ‘Arc-en-ciel’. During the 1998-1999 school year, I was part of that. At the same time, I felt that I was also a student because I was here to learn. I didn’t impose my ideas, even though I had many, having been a



teacher in the U.S.A., but I kept them to myself. I had never dealt with elementary education so Anjana-ben's class was really wonderful; and my work in the free progress was very rewarding for me as a teacher and as a student.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Free Progress I proposed to do some seminars. We had 27 to 30 students then. After some improvements and revisions, which included putting things in more Aurobindonian terms, the proposal was approved. So we divided the children into 4 groups of 6-7 and each group had to take up a chapter from the book, "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens", study it and present what they had learned to the others. There was one group that found it very difficult to put their ideas together and they asked me for my help. I told them, "Look guys, I am not here to tell you what to do. You have to find your own way." All the presentations were very good, but this group was particularly notable because they managed to get over their block.

In the year 2000 my grandmother was on her deathbed and I had to go, to be there beside her. While I was away in America for two months, the students prepared a programme on the "Seven Habits" led by Shivashankar, and when I returned it was presented on the stage. It was fantastic. It was very gratifying for me that they did some engaged and meaningful learning and the fact that they took it upon themselves to prepare an evening programme for the whole Ashram.

After that we decided to hold a big seminar involving students and teachers. Devdip was in-charge. It was set up something like a corporate boardroom and was a two-three days seminar. It was the students' own creation and it turned out really very well.

So after this stint at SAICE, by the time I left Pondicherry, I had an idea. I thought I was ready to go back to America and start the school.

## **RETURNING FOR RESEARCH**

*So, you came back a few years later to do this research and based your doctoral thesis on that. Is that right?*

Yes. I did it for the non-profit schools (preschool and elementary school), which I had set up by that time. I thought that if as a head of the schools, I

got a doctorate in educational leadership it would give the organization some legitimacy and carry the work forward. That was my primary motivation for doing the doctorate, which was a three-year programme. I put together the model and created a survey for the teachers and the students with open-ended questions. It was very important to catch the student-voice. I chose to put the questionnaire to the students and teachers of SAICE and the Future Foundation School (FFS), Kolkata. After the students took the survey I did the preliminary statistics, the quantitative analysis. Then I travelled to Kolkata to the FFS, shared some of the data with the focus groups there – teachers, administrators and others – and asked them, "Please help me understand this data. This is what the students are saying. Let's go deeper into this". The preliminary statistics had corresponded to, "What is happening?" and the second phase generated the qualitative data, "Why is that happening?" Then I came back to the Ashram and asked the same kind of questions of the teachers here.

***Was that in 2009?***

February and March, 2009.

***What was the reaction of the teachers and students to your research?***

The students only answered my questionnaire. The teachers were game. They provided really interesting and powerful statements. That effectively illuminated the quantitative analysis.

***Were the students ready to answer your questions?***

We had 267 students between the two schools, 88 here and the rest from the Future Foundation School. Here it was 88 students from EAVP 4, 5, 6 and Knowledge; it was something like almost two-thirds of the total number of students here. They came up with some really great answers. They demonstrated very powerfully that they really understood the content and context of the education they were getting, much more so than the teachers believed they did.

***What has this research brought to you on a personal level?***

I really enjoyed doing this research. I am not a mathematician. There was a professor who helped me and taught me how to do these statistics and

## **SOME FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH**

Findings indicate that the learning environment variables of Teacher Support, Task Orientation, Cooperation, Student Cohesiveness, Involvement and Equity were significantly correlated with student Satisfaction with Education and with Agentic Personal Meaning. Findings also provide evidence that existential meaning and life purpose mediates the relationships between the psychosocial learning environment variables of Teacher Support, Task Orientation and Cooperation and the outcome variable of student Satisfaction with Education.

structural equation modeling. I would get these long printouts with all the numbers and he told me how to look at the data. I found it very interesting to do the statistics. You push a button and they appear in front of you. The qualitative part was my toughest nut to crack. It was intimidating to go through all the conversations that I had and to convert to text, read it and code it, look for themes and strong quotes. Some of the themes were emergent and others were tied to the theoretical model. I got a rather extreme writer's block for the qualitative analysis, so I ended up going to the Lodi Ashram (a Sri Aurobindo centre in California) for a week, locked myself up in a room, stayed in there, and ended up writing 60 pages. That's how it got done. The only way to do it was to start it and not stop till it was done. Once that was finished I put the whole dissertation together. I was at Lodi in September or October and two months later, that is on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009, which is also my grandmother's birthday, I defended the dissertation.

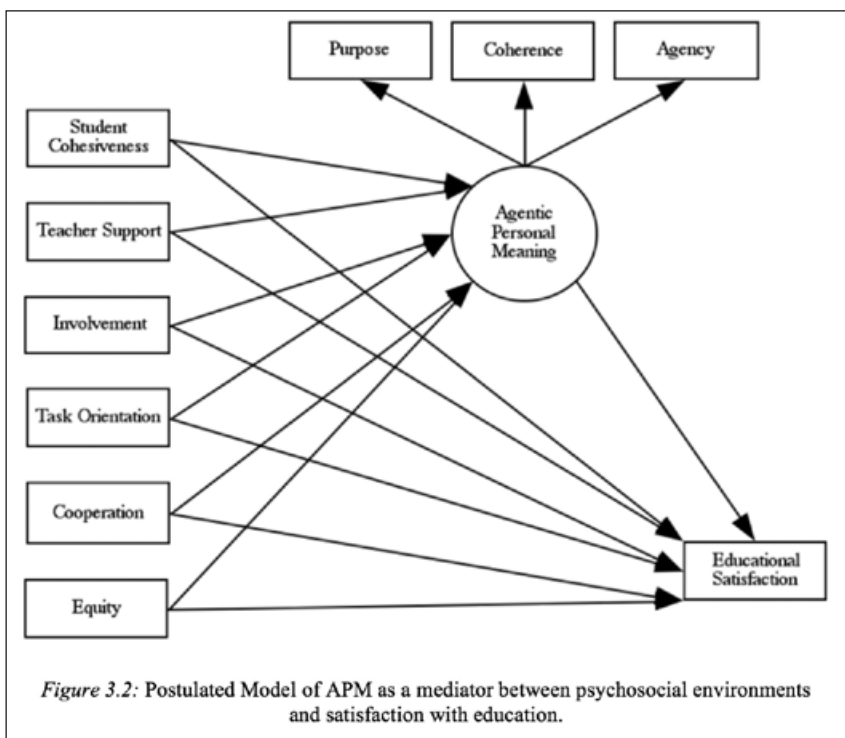
***What was the reaction when you proposed this subject for your thesis?***

The Professors' reaction? At first they told me that it was too risky. I told them that I wanted to do both quantitative and qualitative research. The methods are very different but I wanted to learn how to do both kinds of research. And I also wanted to explore more deeply the model that I had developed. On the very first day of class they

told us, "You have to build up your own annotated bibliography." We had to read hundreds and hundreds of articles and books and seminal works. The only way you can work with all that information is by keeping detailed records in an annotated bibliography. Later, when you need any information you can go back to it. We had to make our own summaries of the articles and the books that we read. By the end of the first year each of the students in our cohort had 60 or 70 annotated articles and books. This is how we discovered the topics of our interest. That was, for me, the most powerful tool that they gave us. All good research scholars do this. I then customized the annotated bibliography for my own work by pulling out all the quotes and the citations supporting the research, all in the proper APA (American Psychological Association) format. There is a format in which to structure your research. Basically, once I discovered my topic and knew what my model was going to be, I could write pages and pages of the dissertation even as I was reading the articles. So, later I was just cutting and pasting what I had in the annotated bibliography and modifying it in the body of the text. That facilitated the writing process immensely. I used the software called Tinderbox. That's how I could do that and write that big thick book. Otherwise it would have been impossible to keep all that information in my head. I loved doing the research. But the qualitative part was the most intimidating for me. It required really listening and paying attention to the teacher-voice and also the student-voice. Now I have an idea of what a good research looks like. There is a lot of bogus research out there and knowing what good research is, really helps.

***Why did you choose the Future Foundation School and not any other Integral Education school?***

For this kind of research one has to get the administration to allow one to do the research. Access is everything. I had about 6 to 8 schools on my list and I approached them all. Fortunately, when I was here in 1998-2001 I was invited by Vishwajit-da, known here by many as "Boxer", to Kolkata for his nephew's wedding. He had put me up at Lakshmi House, and while I was there



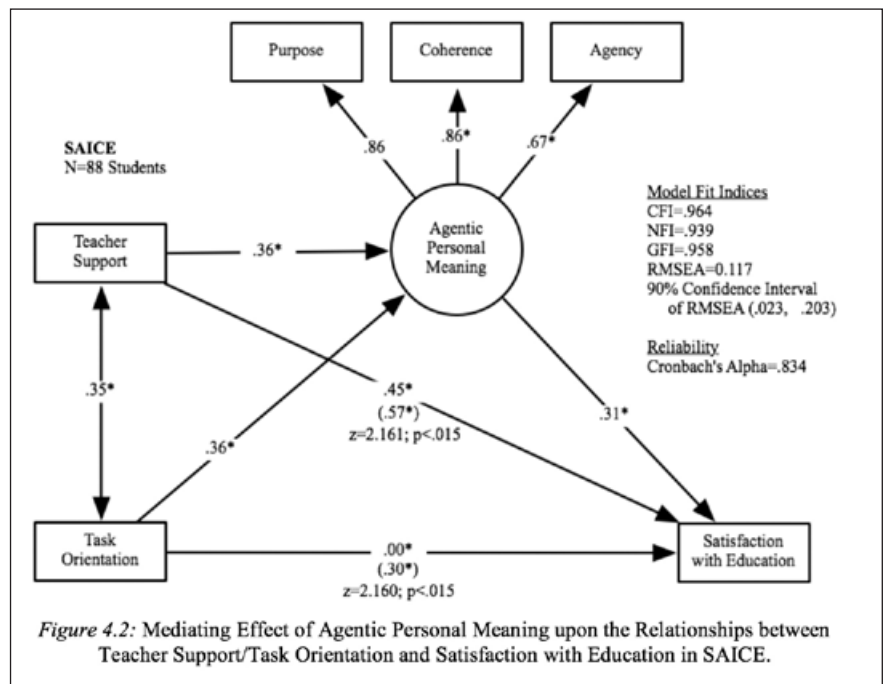
Philosophically they are the same. In spite of their dissimilarities, they have one thing in common – they inculcate a sense of purpose among the students. We know the famous quote from the Mother, “An aimless life is always a miserable life”. The big differences between the two schools is that, first, in the Ashram school the sadhak-teachers are not paid, they are not concerned with their livelihood, and second, most importantly, there are no standardized tests or Board Examinations here for the students. These differences were also reflected in the

I got to observe some of the classes of the Future Foundation School. I met Ranjan Mitter and all the teachers and became known to them. So when I asked for permission, they granted it. In fact, it was here at SAICE that it could have been more difficult. But as I had already taught here, they accepted my proposal. Devdip, who was a teacher by that time, facilitated that. Not only is Devdip brilliant, he is very sincere, and highly respected by his peers. He was instrumental in helping me with getting access for this project. I cannot even begin to tell you how much love, respect, and gratitude I have for Dev.

***These two schools that you chose, they are quite different, especially in their material organization.***

study.

In Kolkata, the parents need not necessarily



be devotees but most of them are. They have an Ashram-like environment there. They have the



## THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF EXAMS

An important difference between the schools is the fact that FFS participates in board examinations, while SAICE does not. The interviews related to board exams at FFS revealed that the examination regime is seen as a necessity imposed by the Indian educational system with which the teachers and students must cope, and do so with certain feelings of resignation...

The struggle of FFS in reconciling its philosophical education orientation towards meaning and meaningful learning in tension with the social and practical pressure on students to perform well on official board examinations highlights the perennial dichotomy between the freedom of the individual and the needs of the predominant social system. This particular finding suggests that excessive stress on academic achievement measured by high-stakes standardized exams may have a negative impact on learning by sapping the joy of learning from the environment and by imposing external standards in the assessment of learning that may be better served by measuring student achievement in areas where students show a natural inclination, commitment, and promise.

Interestingly, while this is the case in FFS, there is no sense among the teachers at SAICE that the board exams are necessary. They have found that their students can sit for entrance exams after completing their education in SAICE. For the teachers in this school, the philosophical imperative of giving each student the maximum freedom to find his or her “deepest self” and to “become master of his self” trumps the social norm of the country that confers public honors, and top university admission, upon the highest achievers on board exams. Indeed, a core understanding of the Integral Education philosophy is that the development of self-knowledge and self-awareness leads to self-mastery over the competing emotional and psychological demands that nature imposes on the human being, thus allowing the individual to tap into his or her most creative and productive avenues of expression, learning, and work. This view elevates self-discovery and self-mastery to the level of primary and ultimate concern, with the resulting academic, social, and cultural achievements being valuable by-products of such human development.

Relics in the premises and they follow the model of Integral Education as far as possible. So the underlying philosophy is the same. Most of the teachers are devotees but they are paid and the school also has the Board Exams, which completely changes the character of the Integral Education. One of the points thrown up by the statistics was that the students of the Ashram school were significantly more “satisfied with education” than the students of the Future Foundation School. So I asked teachers of the FFS, “Why is that? Why are the students of the Ashram School more satisfied? The Future Foundation School students are satisfied but not as much as the Ashram School students.”

In response, the FFS teachers said, “There are many reasons such as the environment, the society...” And then they started talking about the Board Exams. There is a whole part of my

dissertation where I have quotes from the Future Foundation School teachers on that point. And I can never forget the body language of the teachers when they spoke about it and their way of communicating. There was a sadness, a deep sadness. They said, “We have to ask them to do things that they don’t want to do. When they get to 12<sup>th</sup> standard, they drop their extra-curricular activities. They stop playing the sitar, they stop doing drama, they stop doing art, because they have so much pressure from the parents and society to perform well in the board exams.” One teacher even came to tears. I, as a researcher had to be objective, but even I had to hold back my own emotions, I felt so much compassion for them. I could see that they were very troubled. They were struggling with this reality that they live. There was a sense of resignation.

So much rides on those tests, whereas here, in

the Ashram, that is not there. Here we have much more freedom. That finding comes up in the statistics and in the qualitative comments from the teachers in both schools. Here the teachers said, "We don't do tests. We try to make teaching personalised, we try to understand the students, we have to find out what is in line with their being. If they are not good at maths and science, then they are good at poetry and art or sculpture, or looking after the aquarium." I thought that finding, that contrast between the two philosophically-aligned schools, makes such a difference in the results and the cognitive appraisals of the participants in those two schools. And it shows the error of education everywhere, where they put so much attention on the tests, rather than on the integral development of the being.

In the next study that I want to do, I want to focus on that question. What happens to students who are required to take tests, and what happens to the students who finished their education in the Ashram School? The most common questions I got from the families whom we were contacting to put their children in our school in America were, "What proof is there that this is a good education? What happens to students who have had this education?" And there are so few examples of this kind of school. This is a research project I want to do, in the next year or two and with your help. I want to send out e-mails to as many ex-students as I can and have them answer some on-line research questions, like the students did. We will go into the subject of what happened after they left the school and the sense of purpose after they left the school. How did that carry over in their lives, in their family lives, in their work lives, in their social lives and their spiritual lives, with each of these representing a part of their being? I know that the students are fine. The ones who didn't take any tests have done just as well, if not better, than the ones who were subjected to the tests.

If that message can be researched and fleshed out so that people may look at it, then maybe, just maybe, some researchers will re-consider this

testing regimen, this intense, stressful educational system all over the world, especially in Asia. So that to me was the most important aspect - that question, "How does the test affect education?" This is what came out of the data and I wasn't looking for it. That was emergent information. I was focusing on life purposes. And that is the fun with this kind of research, the qualitative part, things emerge from the comments that you didn't expect. You are looking at the experiences of the people; it's not quantitative, but phenomenological.

***What was the reaction when you defended your dissertation? Were they curious to know more?***

At the defense they were very supportive. One of the most constructively critical members of my committee remarked that, despite her doubts, I had pulled it off. Afterwards, my professors asked me to participate in a research competition among universities. So I participated in that state level competition. That showed that they had appreciated it. I did not win the competition, which is fine. But it was a good experience to go out of my university and present my findings. I rendered my quantitative study and the structural equation model into a journal article<sup>1</sup> for a Learning Environment Research Journal, which was the top journal that I had relied upon. Much of the cited research in my study came from that journal. I had to shorten the article to the length required and it appeared in the journal a year or so later.

***It is very surprising that our school has been around for 75 years and you are the first person who has come and done research for writing a thesis about this system of education.***

Actually I am not the first person. I believe I am the third person to do such a study. The first person was Chandrakant P. Patel whose study done in the 1950s or '60s was compiled as a book on Integral Education with the title "Study of the psychological foundation of the free progress system as evolved in Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education" and was last published in

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1. Now available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10984-013-9135-9>

1986. The second researcher was David Marshak. He compared Inayat Khan, Rudolf Steiner and the Integral Education. He interviewed the teachers and wrote his dissertation. Now David runs The Self-Design Graduate Institute in Bellingham, Washington, which offers a graduate level course for teachers and is exactly what they call it – a self-designed, customized learning, for the needs of their teacher-students. My study was the third one. There may be more, but that is all I am aware of.

## **CHANGED STUDENTS, UNCHANGED VALUES?**

*You were teaching from 1998 to 2001 and then you left. When you came back in 2009 to do your research, did you find the students in any way changed after 8 years had passed? Every decade has seen a change in the way the students think and feel. Did you see any difference in the students' mindset?*

I felt, when I was teaching here, that the students were amazing. They were conscious, dedicated, especially in the Free Progress System. Later, for my research, the response I got from the students who were junior to them was also amazing. That shows a certain consistency across time in the Ashram School, because of the philosophy, because of the environment. They are swimming in the Divine's atmosphere. The Samadhi is there across the street. That has a very powerful effect on the students. So I can't say that I noticed any difference between the students I had and the students who took the survey.

Obviously, the world has changed. We didn't have the internet before the '90s, and the addiction to social media. What I was looking for in my research was that sense of purpose, the sense that you are here for a reason, there is a global sense of meaning. Theoretically they call it, "the top down orientation", where you explore the givens of life and the deeper questions. When I was a teacher here, we often engaged the students in those deeper questions, "Why are you here?", "Do you want to be a doctor?", "Why do you want to be a



With his son Mathew, who studied at SAICE

doctor?" It is like Mother asking, "Do you want to do the Yoga? But why do you want to do the Yoga? You want to do it for power and fame? But that is not the right reason for doing yoga. You have to do it for the sake of the Divine."

Those kinds of conversations are taking place on a regular basis. They took place with the students I studied for my dissertation and those conversations took place while I was here earlier. That aspect of the Ashram School, I think, is a constant across time, across the generations. It is a very beautiful thing.

***What would you like to say in conclusion, to end this interview?***

It has been an honour to be associated with the Ashram School, and to have had my son, Mathew, here as a student. I just feel very, very blessed to have the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in my life, and in the life of my family. ❧





## PONDY, I MISS YOU SO MUCH

*By Krupa Shah '06*

Pondy, I miss you so much  
Your quaint dreaminess  
Your cobbled streets and the evening sepia lights  
The lighthouse and its stroboscopic beams  
That cut across my favourite spot on the terrace  
On a starry night.  
You have so much of my childhood in your sleepy streets,  
So many friendships tucked away in warm chatty corners,  
I miss the sea and the horizon with the sun tipping over  
The sea with its soft whispers that I can hear  
On a really quiet night from my room.  
A world peopled with love, heartbreak, adventure and home,  
Of siblings, neighbours and friends  
Pondy, like an island of hope  
You exist and I am the better for it.



# I WONDER IF THE FLOOR IS STILL RED

*By Anjan Sengupta '78H*

I wonder if the floor is still red  
Of your house near a waterhead,  
And birds still flock in meadows ahead  
There yellow flowers bloom widespread?

I hope the village-head has paved a way  
Where a rugged road from hilltop lay  
That the cattle herd climbed an easy bay  
The last little lamb did not stray.

Many years on I'm city bred  
My heart though is in my head  
I wish I'd stayed back instead  
In our little village aforesaid.

And though I don't know if you're living or dead  
I still wonder if the floor is red  
Of your house near a waterhead.



# 50 YEARS OF CORNER HOUSE

*On 11.6.2017 Corner House celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Praveen Kapur, who has been in charge of it since 1979, tells us about its early history, its development over the years, the current challenges and future plans for it.*



## RAISON D'ETRE & HISTORY

*Can you tell us a little about the early history of the Corner House? Why was it started? Where were children having their tiffin and meals before that?*

Earlier children too ate in the Dining Room. Then it was felt that the three meals served at the Dining Room were fine for Ashramites but were insufficient for young children who were fast growing up and participating in physical education [see box with Pranab-da's reminiscences on facing page]. Some light snacks of bread, butter, eggs etc. began to be provided to the children before their group activities from the Tiffin Room (which was in the Playground). Bishwajit-da (Boxer) used to be in charge of that.

Then the idea came to have a special dining room and kitchen for the growing youth, which would provide them nutritious and tasty food. Mother gave her full support and help and on 11. 6.1967 Corner House was opened.

*Initially the responsibility of the children's kitchen was given to the "Experimental Group" and a lot of research and effort went into setting up the Corner House. Can you tell us something about that?*

When the Corner House was being set up, a group called the Experimental Group (which was led by Chandubhai and included Ajit-da, Parikshit-da, etc.) was asked to take responsibility. This group was already experimenting with various menus in the Dining Room (Gujarati menu, Bengali menu etc.)

A great deal of research went into designing of every aspect of Corner House. I believe they visited the Army Canteen at the National Defence Academy at Khadakwas-



(Top) Flowers for the Inauguration

(Above) At the serving counter

la and the training ship Dufferin at Mazgaon in Bombay to study the processes. Based on all the study, our kitchen, stores, dining area, washing



## HOW THE CORNER HOUSE CAME TO BE

*Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya (from the book, I Remember)*

...Let me tell you that at the beginning of our physical Education activities, all the group members used to have the same three vegetarian meals a day that the other Ashramites had. My old teacher of physical Culture in Calcutta came to the Ashram at that time. He saw and remarked that for growing children, this kind of food was not enough.



Children sweeping the courtyard for the Inauguration on 11.6.1967

I reported it to Mother. She too said that she herself thought it insufficient for children; so from then on at 3:30 in the afternoon tiffin was arranged. After the group exercises, roasted groundnuts or coconut and jag-gery were distributed. From that time I started feeling the need for a separate kitchen and dining room for the young.

The Corner House used to be previously a godown and office of the Savanna Cloth Mill. Later a Marwari named Jaypuriya bought the house from the mill and later the mill as well. After that, its name was changed to Swadeshi Cotton Mill.

One day, when Mother was

passing that way, she said: "This house, Pranab, will be kept for your children's kitchen and dining room." At that time the house belonged to someone else. There was no hope of our getting it. And yet Mother said this. Before long, legal proceedings began between the Marwari and the French Company. In the end the house came up for auction and we got it for a rather low price. As the house was at the intersection of two roads and very near the Playground, Mother named it Corner House.

This Corner House became the kitchen and dining room for the children. Chandubhai, a Gujarati sadhak, was given charge. Needless to say, he was not for non-vegetarian food. He wrote to Mother to know what kind of food should be served at the Corner House. Would it be vegetarian or non-vegetarian? And who would eat there? He did not forget to mention that he preferred vegetarian food. Mother in reply told him: "Both kinds will be served. Every day there will be eggs and at least once a week some non-vegetarian dish should be served. Students, captains and teachers would be free to eat there."



Corner House - View from Nanteuil corner in 1967

and wiping section were designed. Each vessel, even the ladles etc. were specifically designed for Corner House [see sketches on page 22].

Joshi-bhai, with the help of others, designed the present work-flow of 1st washing, 2nd washing and wiping at the Corner House. He also



## CORNER HOUSE PROPOSAL LETTER

3rd Oct, 1967

Douce Mère,

We are forwarding with this letter our proposals for the children's kitchen at the Corner House. We have taken a long time for preparing this proposal as the work was new to us and we had to go through each and every item in detail.

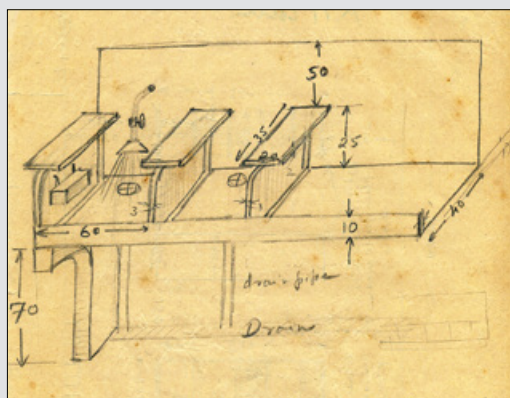
The proposal is based on our personal experience of cooking for the last two years, on what we have learnt from visiting other kitchens in India and on the information received from abroad.

The main feature of this proposal is that we have to build up our own equipment and follow our own methods of cooking at the same time taking whatever help we can from the experiences of other people in other circumstances.

The whole project has been divided into the following parts:

1. Building
2. Furniture and Equipment
3. Organisation
4. The Kitchen and some of its problems
5. Scientific aspect of food

At the present we are forwarding to you the first four parts of our projects and the last one is under preparation and may take some more time. We hope to complete it before starting the new kitchen.



Design of Washing Section [sketches were not part of this letter]

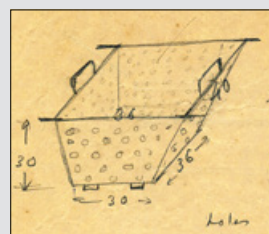
1. BUILDING: In order to transform the present building into a kitchen, a number of

alterations and new constructions are required such as constructing of water tanks, new windows and doors, floors, concrete roofs in place of broken tin-sheds etc. All details of the new construction and changes together with the cost estimates and necessary drawings are shown in this part of the project.

2. FURNITURE & EQUIPMENT : From the organization point of view the whole project is divided into the following sections:-

- a. Stores
- b. Procurements of Food Materials
- c. Kitchen
- d. Counter
- e. Washing
- f. Non-vegetarian section
- g. Dining-room
- h. Transport
- i. Menu

In the second part of our proposal we have given the detailed requirements of furniture and equipment together with the lay-out for each of the above



Design of vegetable washing bowl

sections. Necessary drawings for all the items designed by us have also been included.

The basic principle of our design has been to begin with what we can do in a simple way keeping in our mind what could be done ultimately to transform it into a real modern kitchen from all points of view.

3. ORGANISATION: The third part of our proposal deals with the constitution of the kitchen, the functions of various persons and their relations with each other. Here we propose and pray that the principle of work should be the freedom of the individual to experiment and progress but in harmony with the group so that there is a simultaneous progress of both the individual and the group.

4. THE KITCHEN & ITS PROBLEMS: In this section we have discussed some of the major problems and the difficulties that we have

come across during our cooking experiments at the central kitchen of the Ashram. We have also tried to suggest some ways and means to overcome these difficulties.

5. SCIENTIFIC ASPECT OF OUR FOOD: In this section we propose to give the nutritional values of various food items, the scientific way of cooking so that the maximum food values are preserved, the recipes of some dishes that could be prepared easily and the low cost of each meal served. This section is under preparation and we hope to make it ready before starting the new kitchen.

\*\*\*

It is proposed that the kitchen should start on the 16th of December, 1967. Taking into account the time that is available and the means that may be put at our disposal we propose the following alternatives...

To start the kitchen with the minimum requirements in the existing tiffin kitchen without making any major alterations in the building except a few windows here and there and the water tanks etc. Under these circumstances to provide for more than about 50 – 100 persons may not be possible. If the major alterations are not done now it may be inconvenient to carry out the work in the future when the kitchen will be already functioning.  
(or)

To start the new kitchen with standard equipment but on a limited scale. This requires for making most of the proposed alterations in the building but the equipment and the furniture can be reduced considerably. Under this alternative we can provide for about 200 persons and more, (or)

To start the kitchen only after all the alterations in the building are made and all the equipment and furniture proposed for 500 persons are ready. In that case the Mother has to decide the starting date of the kitchen.

We request the Mother to choose any of these alternatives or to suggest a new alternative and we are prepared to act accordingly. What we have proposed is a full scale kitchen catering for 500 persons.

As all of us are full time workers in different departments and some of us have many other extra duties, we request the Mother to put somebody or group of persons working full time in-charge of the kitchen so that the work may be started as soon as possible. We will be always there to give our help in whatever way it is acceptable.

Our joy is always to work in such a way that we may be able to carry out the will of the Mother in detail.

Guide us and help us so that we may become the true Divine workers.

With Pranams,

Thy loving children,  
The Dining Room Experimenting Group



Chandubhai

*The plan is excellent  
and deserves to be carried out  
in full - Now we have to  
find the means and the time  
for doing it -*

*Blessings*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'M.' or similar, with a flourish.



Corner House kitchen of the 1980s – women volunteers making aloo paranthas

designed the furniture. The overall designs for the modifications in the building were done by the Drawing Office of the Ashram under Vishwanath-da.

### ***Who was the first person in charge of the Corner House?***

Chandubhai was the first in-charge of Corner House when it was started in 1967.

### ***Who are some of the longest serving members at the Corner House?***

Shobha-di is the only member working at the Corner House since its inception in 1967. Bokul-da and I have worked for almost 43 years. I took charge on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1979 but have been working in Corner House since 1974. Gopal-da and Bharati-di have been working here for 36 years. Many others also have contributed and are contributing to its running and growth.

Currently we have in all 15 Ashramites, 12 Volunteers, and 10 paid workers (3 men and 7 women) working at Corner House. It can be hard work. Work in Corner House begins at 3.30 a.m. in the morning and goes on till about 9:30 at night.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

***What are some of the developments that have taken place in the Corner House over the years, in terms of infrastructure (bringing in new technology) and in terms of the diet***

### **Daily Food Requirements**

Food	Quantity	Comes from
Milk	120 litres	Ashram Farms
Bananas	300	
Rice	12 kgs	Poultry
Eggs	150	
Bread	60 loaves	Bakery

***based on new information and modern studies etc? Are students made aware of what they are eating and why?***

We are constantly trying to improve. There have been developments in the kitchen infrastructure over the years. Apart from gas cooking, steam cooking and induction cooking provisions have been added. A chimney was installed in 2006 to reduce the heat. We have introduced a Chapati machine, dough mixer, induction dosa plates and industrial toaster.

We were earlier using aluminum plates and bowls. Around 1980, Dada [Pranab-da] foresaw that Harpagon may stop producing their high quality stainless steel vessels very soon. He told me to get stainless steel plates and bowls from them



Kitchen before 2006 (left to right): Meghraj-ji, Prabhu-da, Prashant, Praveen-bhai, Juthi-di, Bishwajit-da, Anusree-di

immediately. We did. Shortly after that Harpagon stopped making these things. The stainless steel vessels we bought then are still in use today.





The serving counter in 1982

In the food menus also there have been many changes. We are constantly studying the menu as regards nutrition requirements and making adjustments. We also display nutrition details and the calorie break-up of the menu of the day so that the children can know what they are eating and make personal choices.



#### ***What are the special meals served at the Corner House?***

Special meals are as follows: puri, parothas and payasam twice a week, chips and ice-cream once in a week, chapati and toast twice a week, non-vegetarian food once in a fortnight. Whenever anybody offers any special meal, Corner House invariably arranges for it. Sometimes there are even 4 to 5 special meals a month.

#### ***What measures can be taken to improve the quality of food at the Corner House?***

As far as the nutritional value is

#### **Monthly Energy Consumption at the C.H**



concerned, Corner House provides almost 3500 calories per day on an average. The food is organic and healthy and cooked in hygienic conditions. As far as the taste is concerned it varies significantly from person to person. It is difficult to cater to individual tastes in a community. Corner House has about 120 menus which are rotated regularly and we try not to repeat the same menu in the same week. Moreover the availability of vegetables is limited. Also one cannot compare our food to the meals of a restaurant where the stress is more on taste rather than health.

#### ***What measures can be taken to improve the hygiene at the Corner House?***

We are introducing head caps for the cooks and we keep improving the general standard of cleanliness.



The children enjoying their meal in the present day big hall





The recent acquisition - the chappati maker (above) and an earlier addition, the steam cooker (left).



***How can Corner House become more eco-friendly and cut down its water and energy consumption?***

It can be only through efficient and water-saving modern taps in the washing areas and making everybody aware about the need to conserve water, in the way they do the first and second washing.

Energy consumption is already at its minimum and we can achieve about 20 percent more if we change the steam boiler which is already 17 years old.

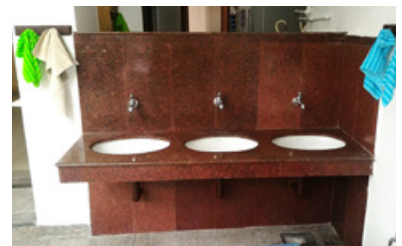
Not wasting food will go a very long way in saving all the water and energy used to grow and cook food.

***Corner House also became the centre for other PED-related activities — the Research centre, the audio-video production and screening section. Can you tell us something about that?***

Dada always had this idea of doing large-scale research on ageing. Some work began in 1987. Then Nikhil joined. He was the right person and the project was developed by him.

In 1990 Dada wanted to build residential rooms in Corner House. I proposed to him that we could also incorporate a computer room for the research. I also suggested that there could be a multi-purpose hall where children could play indoor games in all weather (not possible in the PED office) and which could also be used to screen and shoot videos. Devotees working

in Doordarshan were consulted and the hall was designed with a provision for special lighting etc. and a sound-proof recording room was also created. The new construction was done by Kanu Mistry. Recently in the Indoor Games Hall we have made a permanent arrangement for projection and set up a home theatre sound system.



The new hand-wash basins

## **CELEBRATING THE GOLDEN JUBILEE**

***Corner House celebrated its 50th anniversary in a grand way. It was kind of you to invite former students along with all PED members for dinner on this occasion. What prompted you to do so?***

I have seen over the years how ex-students, when they visit Corner House, feel a sense of nostalgia, how they sit around on the familiar benches and chat, reminiscing about old times. So when the golden jubilee approached I thought we should call former students too, for them to be able to relive their years in Corner House. Manoj-da also approved of the idea. I felt that the families of alumni who may never have eaten here should also get this opportunity to experience it. All group members were called so that it becomes an occasion for the entire Ashram to get together.

When the information was put up in ex-students' online groups etc. we got 357 former students who said they would come, who gave their entries... and almost all of them turned up on that day.



The decoration in the courtyard

***For the Golden Jubilee, some renovation was done to the Corner House courtyard etc. – can you tell us about that?***

As the Golden Jubilee approached Mangal and Satya came to meet me one day and said, “On its birthday Cor-



Gathering for the Golden Jubilee programme



New decorative panels on the courtyard wall

ner House should get a gift!” They suggested that ex-students could help renovate the courtyard and provide new fans and energy-saving LED lights for all the halls. We discussed it. We realised that the hand-wash basins also needed changing. And we also needed 700 small ice-cream bowls for larger occasions. Through The Golden Chain Fraternity, former students contributed for all that. Praful who had already taken up the painting of the entire Corner House took up the work in consultation with Gautam Chatterjee and Devashish

Patnaik for the beautification. It was a team effort which worked very well and the job was completed in just 18 days — in time for the celebration.

***What are some of the future plans? If you have the funds what would you change at the Corner House?***

The ice-cream machine, along with the freezer and food processing machine were purchased 2<sup>nd</sup> hand in 1968. They are still running with some repairs. We would like to improve upon our deep freezing systems, explore the possibility of a new ice-cream machine, and install a modern industrial food processor to be able to give salads regularly. All this would require approximately 20-25 lakhs.



The renovated courtyard





Praveen bhai in the Corner House kitchen

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

### *Personally what has it been like for you to run the Corner House for so many years?*

My years in the Corner House, especially since being put in charge in 1979, have been a period of great challenges and learning. From 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 1979 it was a baptism by fire. I was young – 29 – and raw. When I was made in-charge by Dada in place of Chandubhai, who had been in-charge of Corner House from the beginning and had made significant contributions to the setting up of this place, there was a strong reaction in the Ashram. Overnight I lost friends and faced hostility. Some of the Corner House staff left and the store was left empty. Dada called a meeting of all the Corner House workers. He first offered Mahendrabhai of the counter the opportunity to take charge. Mahendrabhai declined because of age. The workers then suggested my name because I knew all the work – from sweeping and washing to cooking and managing. Dada agreed to their request and handed over the keys to me. Dada gave me the confidence that things will settle down. He took the trouble of taking me to all

the Ashram department heads to introduce me, to help me settle in.

I had to constantly face challenges though. Fortunately, Dada was ready to understand my point of view and provide support. There was an occasion in the '80s when some students, who had been given the keys to the kitchen after volunteering in Playground, ate some old cream and fell sick. The issue became big with many voices taking the opportunity to complain about the food. Dada asked me about the issue. When he heard my side of the story he refused to allow the students who were complaining to eat in the Corner House. An enquiry was also held to study the practices we were following with regard to hygiene but no direct correlation was found.

There were other regular challenges. Dinner after the 2nd Dec programme was one such test. In the '80s along with the participants all the spectators were invited for dinner in the Sports-ground and the numbers went from 2000 to well over 3000. Part of the food was cooked in Corner House and part of it in the Dining Room. Once, as we were cooking for the post-programme dinner we ran out of cooking gas. In those days gas



Corner House on a special day

cylinders were not as easily and promptly available as they are now. I went to our gas agency for refills and the manager demanded passes for the programme. I asked Dada. He said that the 2<sup>nd</sup>

Dec Programme is a private function with only a few government officials invited. We cannot issue passes to such people who demand it. When they heard this, the gas agency said they cannot provide cylinders. We did not have a choice, so we changed the burners to kerosene and started cooking using the pump from one burner to the other. It was a slow and messy job and the cooking was not getting anywhere. My hands and arms dark with soot,



Special guests on a special day (right to left): Charupada- da (standing), Nolini-da, Amrita-da, Madhav Pandit, Narayan Prasad.



Pranab-da (Dada) in the center with children around him and Amulya-da to his right in the Corner House courtyard

and wearing shorts and banian, I landed up at the gas agency. I made such a scene that they finally relented. I had to arrange my own transport and was given 6 cylinders. It taught me that when you decide not to compromise on your values and keep the right attitude, something gets worked out.

I also remember in 1982, on 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec day, it was raining hard in the morning and so I went to Dada, unsure about whether we should start cooking for the evening programme. Dada asked me to wait till noon when he would tell me. At noon when I went to him it was still raining. Dada said, "I remember the Mother once told me, 'Nature

loves you very much.'" In a soft tone, as if speaking to himself he continued, "I don't think I have ever offended Nature. Go ahead... cook for all." By 2 pm the sky had cleared and the sun was shining!

Dada was always an inspiration. Once he told me that he wanted to know all that my work involves. So one day – I remember it was a Friday, a luchi day – he was with me throughout the day. He came when I started work at 4:30 am and was with me till 9:30 pm observing all that I do. That kind of support was what made it possible for me to take on any challenge in all these years at the Corner House. ❧

*Based on a chat with The Golden Chain and an interview by Vikas '02*



50 years ago...



# SRI AUROBINDO'S ACTION

*Sunaina Mandeem'73 tells us about genesis and work of this organisation. With this article we start a new column which will feature various initiatives – organisations, projects and activities – that seek to further the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in some way or other.*

In February 2008, when we registered the website for Sri Aurobindo's Action, [www.sri-aurobindosaction.org](http://www.sri-aurobindosaction.org) I asked Shyamsunder-ji to tell me about how it all started. He had already prepared the note below telling the story from the beginning, which now forms part of the website. In Shyamsunder-ji's own words:

On 5 June 1970 I was asked by Udar and Pradyot to get a new Society registered [under the Societies Registration Act] at Pondicherry as approved by Mother. She had given it an unusual name 'Sri Aurobindo's Action'. The drafting of the Memorandum of Association and Rules and the completion of formalities went fast and the Society stood registered on 17 June 1970.

Mother agreed to be the Permanent President and she nominated the Executive Committee consisting of Pradyot, Udar and myself

as Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer respectively.

Soon after Mother spoke to me about Sri Aurobindo's Action of which I made a note. The English translation is as follows:

*The only and unique aim of Sri Aurobindo's Action is the country – India.*

*India has to guard her independence. India has to defend herself. India has to reorganise herself.*

*The only solution of the country's problems is what Sri Aurobindo has given in His writings. He has replied to all questions, including capitalism, communism, political organisation. These are to be put together. And He wrote in English but as many Indians do not know English it is necessary to translate [his writing] in the languages which they understand. His message has to be spread all over the country,*



At the inauguration of Sri Aurobindo's Action

*His solutions are to be shown to all who wish to know.*

*The danger is serious, and there is only one solution, that given by Sri Aurobindo. The Action [required] is urgent. The work is to be accomplished during the two years before His centenary. A great force is there. One has to work without personal sentiments.*

*Sri Aurobindo Society and Sri Aurobindo's Action are two brothers. The Society will help Sri Aurobindo's Action with its centres which are already there. The Society will continue to be engaged with the philosophy and spiritual teachings of Sri Aurobindo.*

The note was read out to Mother in the evening and approved by her. Later, on 30.4.1971 when the note was to be printed for circulation, Mother wrote the following additional lines:

*The situation is serious.*

*It is only a strong and enlightened action that can pull the country out of it.*

Mother put her signature at the end and then wrote "Blessings" and again signed.

Earlier, on 29 June 1970, Mother had written a message:

*Sri Aurobindo's Action  
To speak well is good.  
To act well is better.  
Never let your actions be below your words.  
Blessings  
Mother*

*Sri Aurobindo's Action* was the name adopted for its journal as well. The first issue came out in October 1970 with Manoj Das as its editor. He continued till April 1973 and since then the work is being done by me.

Prapatti took up the journal in Odia, and gradually journals in Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali followed, all under the title *Sri Aurobindo Karmadhara*. All these journals in Indian languages were brought out by other



*Sri Aurobindo's Action - the journal*

organizations and had independent content. The Hindi journal continues to be brought out by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch.

At that time Kireet Joshi undertook the compilation of booklets. One booklet contained questions on current Indian problems some of which were put to Mother who answered giving the solutions. A number of booklets were printed in English and in Indian languages in editions of thousands and were well received. They have long been out of print.

To further the work of Sri Aurobindo's Action, lecture tours were held in many parts of the country where Kireet Joshi accompanied Udar. Prapatti toured throughout Orissa. There were meetings at Pondicherry. Some Youth Camps and Seminars were also held at Pondicherry.

In June 1971 Mother wrote a mantra which was printed and distributed at the Ashram with the introduction: "A mantra given by the Mother for all people in the country for

the present crisis.” The mantra is:

*Supreme Lord Eternal Truth  
Let us obey Thee alone and live according  
to Truth.*

Naturally this has been the mantra for Sri Aurobindo’s Action.

On 24 April 1972 there was a message from Mother:

*India shall take her true place in the world  
only when she will become integrally the mes-  
senger of the Divine Life.*

In 1972 a rumour circulated that Mother had said that as the crisis of which she spoke in June 1970 was over, Sri Aurobindo’s Action would stop in August 1972.

On 2 May 1972 Mother wrote:

*I never said to anybody nor wrote and never  
thought that Sri Aurobindo’s Action will stop in  
August 1972. Let Sri Aurobindo’s Action contin-  
ue its useful work in the world, with my bless-  
ings.*

This is the account of the early days which Shyamsunder-ji gave which is now on our website too.

My association with Sri Aurobindo’s Action began in 1970. Manju and I, who were then in the Higher Course, would go to the office on Nehru Street - now the Vodafone office - and help in the despatch work of the journal. Neither of us could have imagined that one day we would end up as co-editors of the journal and would carry on the work of its publication every month as intended by the Mother 47 years ago.

In 1971, I along with a few other higher course students, was inducted by Kireet Joshi and Udar as part of the youth camps that took place in Pondicherry. I cannot recall exactly how many camps there were, perhaps two or three all together. One of them took place from the 26<sup>th</sup> of September to the 9<sup>th</sup> of October and culminated with all the participants, including the students,

going for Mother’s darshan on 10<sup>th</sup> October. This is what I recollect as taking place during the youth camps, whose participants came primarily from Odisha and Gujarat, though there were some from other parts of the country too and possibly one or two from abroad. There were talks by Udar, Kireet Joshi, Arindam Basu, Aster and others held in the mornings in the big hall in Park Guest House. In those days, PGH was very different from what it is today. It consisted mainly of dormitories with a few rooms and a big hall. We used to go from Knowledge to PGH for this and one morning I remember Aster asking me for a lift. I was quite shocked thinking how I could possibly take this impeccably dressed (in a starched sari) lady, hurtling down Cours Chabrol on the back of my bicycle with perhaps a head wind to boot. But she was totally unflustered, and jumped up on the back of the bicycle with great ease and off we went.

The participants were introduced to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and also to the Ashram and Auroville. They were taken to several different departments in the Ashram and they put in a few hours of work there during the course of the camp. They also went to Auroville and worked there. The camp ended with a grand picnic at the Lake where everyone shared their experience and wondered how they would keep in touch with the Ashram and Pondicherry. It was interesting to note that some people ended up coming to live here right away and some later on. For many others, it was something they never forgot, and the ideals put before us by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have no doubt been guiding them through their lives. They kept visiting Pondicherry from time to time. There were also some who were never heard of again.

In 2007, when Shyam Sunderji took ill, he asked me to help him with the work that went into producing and despatching the journal each month. The process started with computerising the database of subscribers and printing the labels. He did everything himself, from writing the hallmark editorials, to editing the whole journal, having the layout done, proofreading it, having it printed, and having it despatched. Later on





The office of Sri Aurobindo's Action

when he could no longer use the computer and was bedridden, he would dictate the editorials to me and I would type them up; but till the end he continued to do the proof reading, while Manju helped him with the rest of the work. When he passed away in July 2011, Manju and I felt it was very important that the journal continue and we took up the editorship. Today we even have a Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/sri-aurobindosaction> created by one of our young contributors and managed by us.

There are many people, right here in Pondicherry, in our own Ashram community as well as amongst the alumni group who are not aware of the journal, *Sri Aurobindo's Action*. They don't know that it still exists and has been coming out non-stop since its inception in October 1970. The interview with Kireet Joshi, which was published in the *Golden Chain*, carried a comment by him on *Sri Aurobindo's Action* which emphasised the importance the Mother gave to it.

*Sri Aurobindo's Action* is something we are all a part of. Whenever we do anything that is in line with what the Mother wanted us to do, we are carrying out *Sri Aurobindo's Action*. She wanted this to be reflected in the journal, by writing

about it, by inspiring people to be a part of *Sri Aurobindo's Action* in the world, but more specifically in India: she called the journal 'the journal of India's Resurgence'. The answers to the issues and challenges we face today in our country can be found in the words of Sri Aurobindo. It is our endeavour to communicate this in the pages of the journal that Manju and I co-edit. Now we need to collaborate further on this and widen the circle. To start with, more writers from this golden chain of ours, many of whom are writers themselves, could contribute to the journal. The Mother wanted the words of Sri Aurobindo to reach everyone in India and was encouraging the translation of his writings into Indian languages.

Two of Sri Aurobindo's works which are most relevant to understanding our current situation and showing us a direct way forward are *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*. It would be very interesting if someone could take up some of the chapters from this book and extrapolate the ideas Sri Aurobindo set forth pointing out their relevance to today's world order. If more people join this circle, more ideas will be generated on how we can continue to be inspired, and inspire others, to do *Sri Aurobindo's Action*. ❧



## THE REAPPEARING BEACHES OF PONDY

*Aurofilio Schiavina '89 provides an update on the status of our beaches.*

While re-reading a piece that I had written for the Golden Chain in 2011, I was amused to find some statements that were made almost 6 years ago, which I reproduce here below:

“...attempts to restore and bring back the beaches makes a lot of sense. Like every man-made problem, this too has a man-made solution. And it is therefore up to every one of us to become aware of this and make a conscious effort, in whichever way – whether it is through an aspiration, a wish or an action – to look forward to a better world with a healthy coastline and natural beaches.

what will certainly bring the beaches back is the Will of the people, especially of those who want a better future.”

Six years later, it now seems that attempts to restore the beaches did make sense after all, the efforts were not in vain and there is certainly hope for a better future! And this is because in the month of March 2017 the Pondicherry Beach Restoration Project was formally inaugurated and the work is presently underway and is scheduled to be completed by the month of May next year. But if all goes as planned, by August or September this year, the citizens of Pondy should already be able to wet their toes on the small tracts

of the restored beach that would have started to form at some places along the beach promenade.

It may still be too early to celebrate or to plan a party on the Pondy beach, because as the saying goes, there can always be a slip between the cup and the lip, as the project to restore the beaches has some challenges ahead that still need to be overcome. But the fact is that we have never got this close to getting our beaches back and we have several good reasons to be



Dredger spewing sand towards the Pondy shore

“All the efforts that have gone into trying to get the beaches of Pondy back by some of us who have been actively concerned about this problem, may not have resulted in the return of the beaches as yet. But these efforts have certainly not been in vain, because further man-made destruction of the coast has certainly been prevented.

“... There is light at the end of the tunnel. But

optimistic.

First, in the year 2012 the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) agreed to take up the study and the design of a scheme to restore Pondy's beaches and also made a commitment to finance the entire scheme as a pilot project. This was a major breakthrough because until then neither the Government of Pondicherry nor the other



Pondy beach in the 1950s



Pondy shoreline in 2017

agencies that our group (PondyCAN) had been approaching had the means, especially financial, or the capability to take up a project like this one. It must be said that the commitment shown by the MoES all along has been exemplary.

Second, a detailed study was conducted and a design for a scheme to restore the Pondy beaches was prepared by reputed experts and organizations. The National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT, Chennai) which is an arm of the MoES conducted a reasonably extensive study of the Pondicherry coastal environment over two years, from 2012 to 2014. The experienced oceanographer of international repute, Kerry Black and his team, were hired by the NIOT to design the beach restoration scheme for Pondy.

Third, all the clearances and approvals that are required for executing the beach restoration project for Pondy have been obtained and the project was also inaugurated in March this year.

So far so good and the success of the beach restoration scheme now hinges entirely on the proper implementation of the project.

Simply put, the scheme for restoring Pondy's beaches consists of two major components. The first and most important component is what is called the nourishment of the beaches with sand. As the Pondy shoreline is presently devoid and, so to say, starved of sand, new sand will be brought and deposited along the shore to nourish and restore Pondy's beaches. The second component is the construction of two structures along the coast in the forms of submerged reefs. These structures

are designed to help the existing shoreline which has become unstable over the years to become stable and make it suitable for the formation of the restored beaches.

To better understand why this scheme is necessary it may help to briefly revisit the history of the disappearance of Pondy's beaches.

In 1986 when the Pondicherry harbour was built at the mouth of the Ariyankuppam river, which is about 1.5 km south of the Pondy town, the harbour started interfering with the natural movement of sand along the Pondy shoreline. The harbour started blocking the sand that naturally migrates from the south to the north along the seashore. Because of this artificial blockage of sand, the sand started to accumulate to the south of the harbour at first and then also inside the harbour itself, choking it completely. Because of this blockage, the sand from the beaches on the north of the harbour kept migrating northwards without being replenished by new sand that used to arrive from the south before the harbour was built. Thus, as the harbour had disturbed the balance of the natural migration of sand along the seashore, the beaches along the Pondy town started to disappear because they were being starved of the new sand, which was instead being held back by the harbour.

The beach nourishment that is being presently undertaken to restore the beaches of Pondy therefore involves the removal of all the excess sand that has been accumulating inside and on the south of the Pondy harbour and placing this



sand in front of the town. The removal of sand from the harbour is being done by a machine which is called a dredger. A dredger can be compared to a giant, floating vacuum cleaner which scoops out and sucks sand from the bottom of the sea or from the shore and then pumps it out at the other end of the machine into a pipe. The pipe is then taken to a location where the sand that has been sucked is discharged. The



Figure 1 - Beach Stabilization with artificial reefs

dredger is therefore presently located inside the Pondicherry harbour mouth where it is scooping and sucking all of the excess sand that has been accumulating there since the harbour was built. And from the other end of the dredger, a long pipeline, having a length of about 2.5 km runs all the way from the Pondy harbour till the Park Guest House where the sand is being discharged

Dredging (left) and pipeline depositing dredged sand near Park GH (below) resulting in Beach Nourishment.





on the shore [see photos on facing page]. A total of 4,50,000 cubic meters of sand, an equivalent of about 40 - 50,000 truckloads of sand, will be removed from the harbour and deposited in front of the town.

Because the Pondicherry shoreline has been eroding since decades and its natural alignment has been completely altered by the seawalls that were subsequently built with large, granite boulders, the experts suggested that in addition to the nourishment of the beaches, some structures along the coast should also be built to facilitate the realignment and restoration of the beaches. Therefore, two submerged reefs, one at the south and one at the north of the beach road have been designed for the purpose of stabilizing the disturbed shoreline and therefore facilitating the formation of the new beaches [see figure 1 on facing page]. The construction of a submerged reef on the northern end of the beach road located just at the southern tip of the Ashram Tennis Ground has now begun. This reef will be attached to the shore and penetrate into the sea for a distance of about 120 meters [see figure 2 above]. A second reef at the southern end of the beach road opposite the Ashram Nursing Home, located in the sea at a distance of about 200 meters from the shore has been planned. This second offshore reef is not being built presently because of a lack of funds. It also remains to be seen whether this second reef is necessary or not. [An illustration of the entire scheme is shown in figure 3 on page 38].

While our group (PondyCAN) was and is opposed to adding man-made structures along the shoreline, because of the interference these structures can cause along the seashore, the experts however presented several arguments in support of the construction of these reefs. As some of these arguments had some justifications, we finally accepted the inclusion of coastal structures in the Pondy beach restoration scheme as long as they were temporary and therefore removable if the need to remove them arises someday; and also as long as they caused minimal interference to the natural movement of sand along the shoreline, which in this case means that they have to be completely submerged. As these conditions could

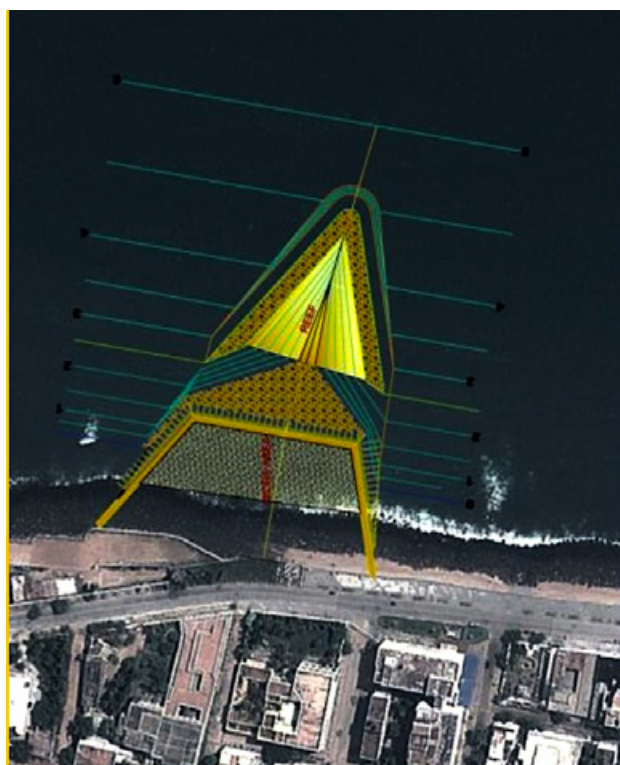
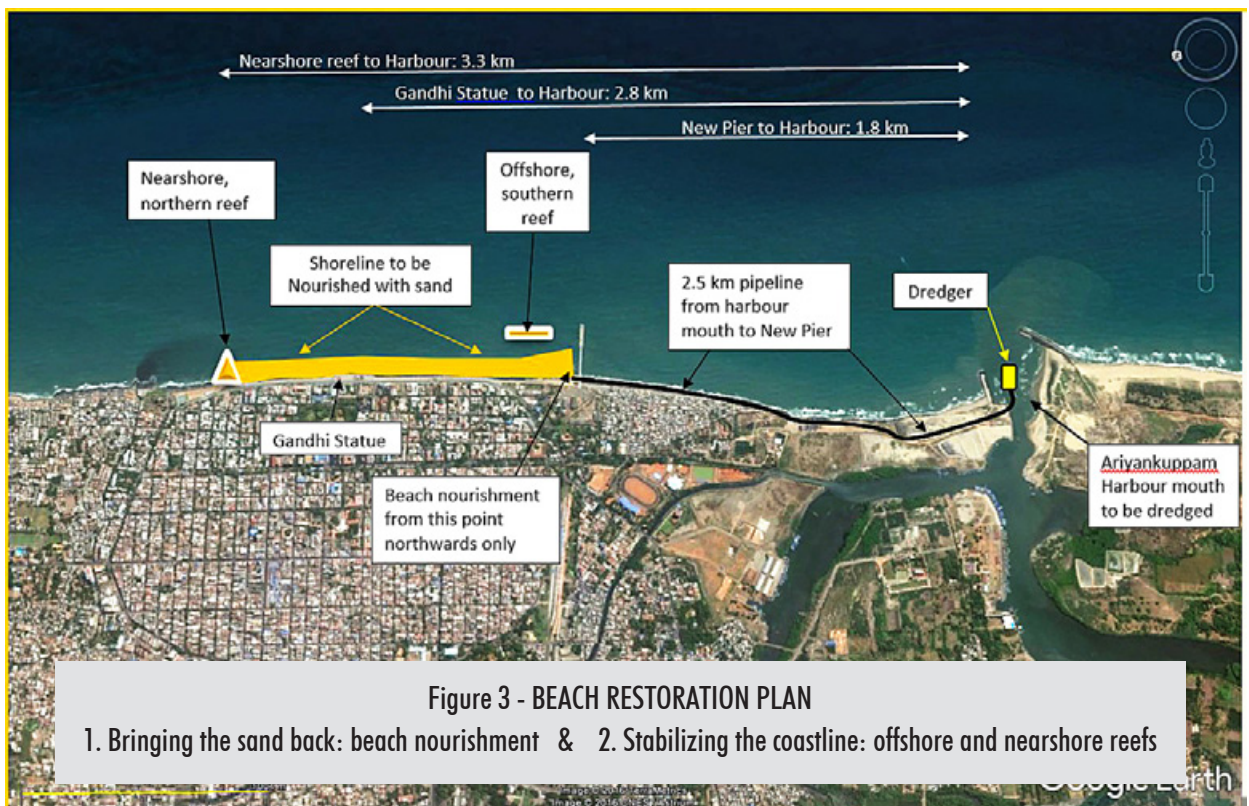


Figure 2 - Close-up of the near-shore wedge reef in front of the Secretariat

be fulfilled, the construction of reefs in a phased manner, was accepted by us. Moreover, as this is a pilot project that has never been tried out in India, there is room for a certain degree of experimentation so that one can learn from this experience and make adjustments accordingly.

The successful execution of this beach restoration scheme therefore largely depends on the entire 4,50,000 cubic meters of sand being deposited in front of the town so that the seashore gets the necessary nourishment of sand for the beaches to form once again. With the reefs in place (at least the northern one to begin with) a 15 to 30 meter wide beach is expected to form in most stretches along the beach road. It is now only a matter of time to see whether this scheme will be able to restore Pondy's beaches or not.

Due to technical, administrative and legal issues, presently only about 1 lakh cubic meters out of the intended 3 lakh cubic meters of sand has been used for nourishing the Pondy beaches. Efforts are underway to ensure that the remaining 2 lakh cubic meters of sand is dredged and helps nourish the beaches as soon as possible.



Additionally, there is 1.5 lakh cubic meters of sand that is lying on the land next to the harbour that also needs to be fed to the beaches in Pondy. The encouraging results of the little beach that has formed near the Tennis Ground gives us a glimpse of what could be achieved if the remaining 3.5 lakh cubic meters of sand is nourished on the Pondy beaches.

But despite all these efforts, it must be added that this is only the first step for getting back and restoring the beaches of Pondy. Because, as long as the Pondy harbour exists, the beaches in front of the town will always need to be artificially nourished and managed. The benefits of restoring the beaches far outweigh the

costs of losing the beaches. Restoring the beaches therefore makes a lot of sense. What remains to be determined is whether the Pondicherry harbour that keeps destabilizing the Pondy shoreline for as long as it exists is worth it or not. This is a question that we will hopefully and presumably revisit on another occasion. ❧





# ART FOR AUROVILLE LAND

*Sunayana Panda '79*

When Auroville was founded, the School (SAICE) was closely connected to it. Even the main inauguration ceremony on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1968 had large numbers of students from our school participating in it. A boy and a girl were chosen from the School to represent those countries which could not send their representatives. This is why I felt that we, the former students, should be involved in the effort to collect the funds required to buy the pieces of land that are urgently needed for Auroville.

In 2015 I spoke to my friend Mandakini Lucien-Brun, who is one of the main brains behind the drive for buying land for Auroville, about my idea for an art exhibition to raise funds for this project. At that time she was on a short visit to Pondicherry so we didn't have much time to go into the details. Mandakini had lived in the Ashram during the late 1970s and early 1980s and had received her name "Mandakini" from Nolini-da. She had also briefly taught at the School. Mandakini liked the idea and we started exchanging e-mails after her departure. I thought the artists among the former students should participate in the exhibition. I spoke to Dilip Patel who pointed out to me that an exhibition outside Pondicherry would involve large sums of money as we would

have to transport the paintings, hire a venue and pay for publicity. We had to find a way to have this exhibition without having to spend much.

In the meantime Mandakini communicated with the land fund group in Auroville and soon Jasmine was co-ordinating with various people and trying to work out the logistics of having the exhibition in Auroville itself. A small but enthusiastic group of Aurovilians worked tirelessly to turn this idea into a reality. Finally the announcement was made that an exhibition of art works donated by artists would be held at the Unity Pavilion and the sum received from the sale of these would be used for buying land for Auroville. The idea was taken a step further and it was decided that there would be an auction so that there was a possibility of raising the maximum possible funds from the sale.

In February 2016 the exhibition opened with paintings, sculptures, drawing, collage etc. donated by Aurovilians and former students of SAICE. There were almost 70 items

exhibited, which came as a surprise to the organisers, as everything had been done in such a hurry and with the hope that about 20 or 30 paintings would come in. The auction was a success and even if the money raised was small in comparison to what is needed, it was a significant start.





Encouraged by this result the 2017 exhibition was planned well in advance and with a greater focussing of energies and ideas. The format was changed by the organising team this year and it was decided that the exhibition would be open for the entire month of February. But the real brainwave was to have the auction online so that anyone from any corner of the world could participate in it and buy the artworks.

This year it was a grand event. More than 300 items were donated by artists out of which there were quite a few given by former students of the School. The on-line auction started within a few days of the inauguration of the exhibition at Unity Pavilion in the first week of February. The bids started coming in from various places across the world. On 25<sup>th</sup> February the actual auction took place with a gathering of those who wanted to buy the paintings. The amount raised was more than expected and was added to the other amounts of money brought in by the fundraising efforts during the week throughout Auroville. It was then decided that the unsold pieces would continue to remain on the website and the sale would continue. There are many ideas for taking this art project further

but we are not sure which ones will be finally chosen.

Among the creations donated for the auction by former students of the School were paintings, photos and prints of paintings. The paintings were donated not only by the artists but also by

people who owned these pieces of art and who wanted to donate them for a cause. Among the most significant pieces was a series of collage done by Dilip Patel using tiny pieces of metal that had come out from the Mother's travelling trunks. Other interesting contributions included paintings by Tehmi-ben and Usha-ben donated by Vilas. Established artists like Priti-di, Dilip Patel, Vishwajyoti and Kirti participated in this exhibition but there were also lesser-known ones like Uttama Dhandhanian, Seema (née



Agarwal) and myself. Aurovilian SAICEians like Hufreesh and Ange were also there. Among the photographers whose works were exhibited were Atma, Ritarpan, Jacques Dhandhanian, Taarak and Vandana Gupta with their nature photos.

The auction was a success but more importantly this exhibition was a meeting point for Auroville artists and artists connected with the Ashram. This in itself is a great achievement. ❧

As the capacity of understanding grows in the child, he should be taught, in the course of his education, to add artistic taste and refinement to power and precision. He should be shown, led to appreciate, taught to love beautiful, lofty, healthy and noble things, whether in Nature or in human creation. This should be a true aesthetic culture, which will protect him from degrading influences.

**The Mother** (CWM, 12:21)

# WHAT I LEARNT AT SAICE

*Mahesh Patel '73 shares some anecdotes of his student days*

What I learnt at SAICE? English, French, History, Geography, Maths, Science, Gujarati? I was not good at any of them except perhaps a little at Maths. There are some other things, though, that SAICE taught me....

Sudha-ben Sundaram was my Gujarati teacher. We were asked to write an essay. I do not remember the whole essay that I wrote, but a part of it went something like this:

*"...I was sitting at my table looking out of the window, expecting to get some ideas for my homework, from the open sky beyond. A small sparrow came fluttering and sat on the window sill.*

*- Hey, Mahesh! What are you doing?  
- Trying to finish my homework.  
- You can do that later. Come let us go and play.  
- No, I have to finish this essay and show it to my teacher tomorrow. She will scold me otherwise.  
- Tell her you were ill, and so couldn't finish the homework..."*

At this, Sudha-ben had put a remark in the margin: "Mahesh, it is we humans who tell lies. Birds and animals never lie."

Maths was the only subject I was a little good at. Yet I do not know why, but one year, I did not attend a single class of Maths. We had a small group. We did not attend many classes such as Painting, Embroidery etc., and instead played cards in Kake's and Bokul's room in the Guest-house, or stole mangoes and stored them in a hut at the foot of the great cotton tree (beside Dada's library). The next year I found my name struck off the list of Maths students. Amita-di (though she was not my teacher) called me and simply told me to go and tell Manoj-da (who was in charge of Maths classes) that I wanted to do Maths. Manoj-da asked me to meet my Maths teacher, Vijay-bhai. I met him. He asked me to

start coming to the class from that day itself. I was brought back on the right track.

One year Priti-di (Arati-di's elder sister) was my French teacher. It was not my subject. I did all sorts of things, everything except study. In those days we used fountain pens, not ball pens. I don't know what I was doing, but a spot of ink fell on my shirt. Panic-stricken I asked Priti-di for permission to go and wash it immediately, so that it did not leave a stain. She refused and asked me to sit down and study. In another minute I asked her permission to go and drink water. Again she refused and asked me to go to my seat and pay attention to my work. I was angry. Quietly I went behind her and emptied the remaining ink from the fountain pen on her saree.

The next day I came to her class, worried and ready to receive a good scolding. The class started, nothing happened. As time passed I started feeling relieved. Midway in the class I had to go to her table to show my notebook. I went to her table. She took my notebook, opened it, and then looking up at me straight, with a gentle voice told me (in Bengali) "Mahesh, was that the right thing to do?" I could not speak a word.

On the last day she called the whole class to her house in Nanteuil, served us lots of delicacies, including rosogullas. At the end, a few of us helped her to put back everything. At the door, we all had tears in our eyes. She too had tears in hers and said, "You are all such good children."

I think SAICE did not teach me much of subjects and languages. SAICE taught me to be Mother's child. ❧



Priti Das Gupta



# QUIZ TIME!

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

1. We have all seen the photos of the Mother inaugurating the School by cutting a ribbon. Why was the inauguration done from the South West gate and not from the gate opposite the Ashram Main Building?
2. In which year was the Dancing Hall built?
3. Sunil-da, the musician, was a teacher at the School before taking up music as his full time activity. What subject did he teach?
4. In which department of the Ashram was Kireet-bhai working before he became the registrar of the School?
5. What is the spiritual significance of the cherry blossom?

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## ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE FEB 2017 ISSUE

1. *In which year did the Mother first meet Rabindranath Tagore?*  
She met him in June 1917.
2. *Where was the soup verandah of the School in the 1960s and '70s?*  
It used to be where there is a little patch of plants in front of the aquariums now.
3. *In which poem of Sri Aurobindo would you find this line: "I am the wind's speed and the blazing star"?*  
This is the 4<sup>th</sup> line of the sonnet "Cosmic Consciousness".
4. *Who was Keshav-ji?*  
He was in charge of the Dining Room.
5. *What is the spiritual significance of grapes?*  
Divine Ananda.



*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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The body in its normal state, that is to say, when there is no intervention of mental notions or vital impulses, also knows very well what is good and necessary for it; but for this to be effective in practice, one must educate the child with care and teach him to distinguish his desires from his needs. He should be helped to develop a taste for food that is simple and healthy, substantial and appetising, but free from any useless complications. In his daily food, all that merely stuffs and causes heaviness should be avoided; and above all, he must be taught to eat according to his hunger, neither more nor less, and not to make his meals an occasion to satisfy his greed or gluttony. From one's very childhood, one should know that one eats in order to give strength and health to the body and not to enjoy the pleasures of the palate. Children should be given food that suits their temperament, prepared in a way that ensures hygiene and cleanliness, that is pleasant to the taste and yet very simple. This food should be chosen and apportioned according to the age of the child and his regular activities. It should contain all the chemical and dynamic elements that are necessary for his development and the balanced growth of every part of his body.

**The Mother**

CWM (12: 13-14)