

# The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE ASHRAM

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

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## THE EDITORS' PAGE

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by Sunayana Panda '79

Now that we are entering the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of SAICE we can look back and see how it grew from a little school to the organised institution it now is. Often people say that there should be more such schools. But this school, we have realised, cannot be recreated in all its details for many reasons. One of the important reasons is that it is quasi impossible to have the kind of comprehensive physical education programme we have here. It is not the range and personal attention but the attitude in which physical education is carried out that will be hard to duplicate.

Who can ever forget the Mother's message which used to be played after the March Past during the competition season? The purpose of engaging in sports was to participate in the Divine's work, to prepare the body to be more perfect an instrument for a greater goal than just winning a race. Physical education helped us to acquire psychological traits like endurance, a strong will power, equanimity in defeat and a sense of fair play, but above all understanding the importance of discipline in one's life. Our captains and coaches were always there to encourage us to progress, surrounding us with their goodwill and affection.

We former students know only the period during which we were at school. Very few among us know the whole story of how this entire organisation grew from its humble beginnings. But to help us fill up the gaps in our knowledge we can now read about it in the new book which has recently been published. The history of physical education in the Ashram has been compiled and narrated by Namita-di. It is a treat to see the old photographs and to peep into the past, to see the Mother in the middle of all the activities, old

familiar faces as they were in their youth and the transformation of the places that we know so well. In this issue we bring you a review of the book as well as an interview with Namita-di.

The momentum is building up for the celebration of this 75<sup>th</sup> year. The big news that many were waiting for is the announcement that we can all participate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> December programme at the Sportsground in 2018. A number of other events are also likely to be held during the year. An art exhibition by former students is being planned for August. A musical offering is also being prepared for August. But more about all that, and in more detail, in our future issues.

From our side, at the magazine, we would like to include, in the four issues of the year, articles on the teachers who were instrumental in making SAICE what it is. We request our alumni to write about their most memorable experience with any teacher who "opened their eyes" (*chakshur unmeelitam yena*) because it is the human effort to faithfully implement what the Mother wanted that has made our institution what it became. The Free Progress section brought in many teachers who were ready for an adventure and who were prepared to create a new path for others to follow. Their way of working could be an inspiration for other teachers. Much more than what they taught us in our classrooms our teachers taught us by their example, by being who they were, by showing us it was indeed possible to live that higher life of which the Mother spoke.

We look forward to contributions from former students of all age-groups. Do share your experiences, your reflections, your memories and your ideas for the future. We take this opportunity to wish everyone a "Bonne Année" for 2018! ❧

# MY DAYS AT THE CORNER HOUSE

## A COMMUNITY KITCHEN CAN TRANSFORM YOU FOREVER

*By Sachidananda Mohanty '75*

**B**y October end 1975, I had passed out of the Higher Course of the SAICE and had the invitation from the Ashram Trust to join the community as a probationer-in-mate. I was asked to meet Ravindra-ji in his upstairs office in the Ashram Main Building. Given my academic bent of mind and performance in studies, I was hoping to join the Ashram School.

Ravindra-ji seemed to have other ideas for our batch of probationers. "The Mother had said that one should not have any preference for work," he said. "Whatever work is assigned ought to be carried out willingly. I have decided that you will work in the 'Accounts Department.'" When he heard me murmur that I had no calling for

finance or accounts, he said, "Well then, you will work at the Corner House", with his characteristic laughter, with a sense of finality.

I came out of his room somewhat dazed and crestfallen. I had no experience of cooking or working in a community kitchen. Like all boarding students, food came to me automatically and easily four times a day at the Home of Progress, Dining Room, or the Corner House. One of course knew that there was an army of men and women who toiled hard every day to keep us well fed and healthy, but clearly, this was an unseen labour, invisible and unrecognized.

I knew that 'Swabhava' and 'Swadharma' were important considerations in the teaching of the



Corner House anniversary: Pranab-da in the queue (extreme left). Mahendra-bhai, Gautam, Sachidananda at the serving counter.





Window painting: Sachidananda

I worked at the unique kitchen for more than a year; it was as true an initiation rite for a radically new life as I would ever encounter. I joined the Corner House in December 1975 and left it for higher study in April 1977. While it lasted, it was invigorating and arduous; full of challenges, both physical and psychological. When it ended, it had completely changed me, my perspective of the world, my outlook towards life, my self-image, my views of professions, my understanding of physical work and the dignity of labour. Physical work at the kitchen, day after day, I learned, was very different from the exhilarating sports and games one went through at the end of the day.

Bhagavad Gita and Sri Aurobindo. One's innate temperament ought to be a factor in deciding a workplace, but then I thought Ravindra-ji's decision was the Mother's desire. I kept my counsel to myself and decided to join the Corner House.

Corner House welcomed me with open arms. There was the benign presence of Chandu-bhai, the Head, and his very able team: Subir-da, Sameer-da, Mahendra-bhai, Pushpa, Saket-bhai, Bharati-ben, Pravin, (and others whose names slip my mind) as well as ladies at the vegetable section -- Shobha, Mrs Sanyal, Mrs Ghosh (Deepshikha-di's mother). "Shochi, kemon achho," Mrs Sanyal would ask me with motherly love. Special tea sessions were attended by Madan-da, Ramakant-bhai, Akki-bhai and others.

Pravin was, for the most part, my working partner. He was both a trainer and a hard task master. He worked with a messianic zeal that I found hard to catch up with. My tasks included boiling milk, stirring huge pots of *dal*, vegetables and *kheer*, serving food at the counter, washing utensils, taps and wash basins, cleaning the gents' lavatory areas with the help of servants, and procuring rice regularly in huge containers in the tri-cycle from the Dining Room around 11 a.m. every day.

I found the pace of work rather hectic and overpowering. I had recently recovered from ill health. While I had a resolute will to continue I was also deterred by the intense heat of the kitchen area and the demand on the body that such work entailed day after day. Above all, I found such compulsive work a big blow to my intellectual ego, my self-image as a scholar.

This was a far cry from the week-end escapades into Maret Garden or the Lake Estate. At the Corner House I had no company of books, teachers and students, no lecture or discussion at the School and 'Knowledge'. It was not easy to attend evening programs at the School courtyard. I began to watch teachers and students with a sense of envy since one of my batch-mates who was posted elsewhere, had managed to get an entry into the School. (Talk of influence peddling!) While serving at the counter was fun, back-room work was rather hard and tedious. And then, there was Pravin who was the first to rise from the afternoon siesta (we were given a room for resting on the ground floor); he put me to shame!

At the Corner House, I began to look at our own behaviour with a more critical eye. Why must food stuff be dumped in the washing area and not in the designated dustbin? Why must



Window painting by Sachidananda and Pravin

quietly beneath the towering tree with hanging branches. I had dinner with soft breeze, rustling leaves and lengthening shadows for company. Outside the exit door, there were the receding footfalls, children returning from the Playground to their respective boardings and the sound of the distant sea.

There was a wonderful flipside to all this work. I began to live virtually inside the Corner House and seldom went to my room at 'Nice Home' at the 'Solace'. The ancient building of the Corner House acquired a character of its own, and gradually became part of myself. Early mornings and late nights were special as I sat

the toilets not be flushed properly after use? Why must our students be so callous and indifferent? While I washed, rinsed, painted and served, I was also getting somewhat concerned about my future. Could I sustain all this for years together, for an indefinite future?

My moments of gloom and despair were relieved by one person, namely Chandu-bhai. It was he who understood what I was missing, what my real temperament was. He was full of sympathy even while he gave me instruction for the daily quota of work. Besides, he also joined us in carrying out different tasks. I always looked up to him, given his qualities of the head and the heart. I never experienced a single instance of misbehaviour or rudeness from his side. I found in him an ideal boss, a rare thing in life!

Towards the end of 1976, I got the news that my mother was ailing at Bhubaneswar. By January 1977 she was no more. It was time to think hard about my future and take an honest decision. Higher education and a career would be the next step in my life, I decided.

In April 1977, I received a call-letter from the University of Hyderabad for the entrance examination to the M.A. Course in English. I faced a

small crisis. How do I travel without money; the money order that my father had sent had not arrived. I was too reluctant to reveal the news to Chandu-bhai. He was short of hands, how would he run the show if I were to go away?

Chandu-bhai took me completely by surprise. He pulled out 500 rupees from his pocket and handed them to me. "Take it", he said to me gently, "It's Mother's money, meant for your use. You can return it at your convenience".

My eyes become moist. I had just lost my mother, my father was far away and here was an extraordinary gesture of love and understanding from this man, my superior.

As it happened, I stood first in the entrance examination, joined the University of Hyderabad and began a new chapter of my life in 1977.

Corner House was a *rite de passage* for me. It transformed me from a callow student to an adult. I learned to go beyond my cocoon of scholarly life and understood for the first time the value of physical labour. I may not have graduated into a Chef but I began to have greater respect for cooking.

Thank you Chandu-bhai! You were indeed a rare boss! ❀

# ON THE WAY TO SELF-DISCOVERY

Ajit Panda '76

**M**y father, Sri Ramnath Panda, passed away on the 15th of August, 2004. All our relatives gathered one by one at our residence in Bhubaneswar. All had gathered to observe the twelve days' rites in the tradition of a Brahmin family. On one of



Sri Ramnath Panda

those days my uncle had gone to the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan at Bhubaneswar. There he met Smt. Chandrika Mohapatra, a close friend of our family and editor of an Odiya magazine named *Savitri*, based on the spiritual teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Jyotsna Mohanty who is a teacher in S.A.I.C.E., Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, was a regular contributor to that magazine. Smt. Chandrika Mohapatra told my uncle that she had conveyed the message of the demise of my father to Jyotsna Mohanty by telephone on the 15th of August, the day my father had passed away. Receiving the message Jyotsna Mohanty replied with surprise that she had seen my father in Sri Aurobindo's Room that very day in the queue of the devotees who had come for the Darshan. I felt myself blessed to be the son of such a soul which took refuge at the feet of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother immediately after leaving the body. At the end of the twelve days' rites I pondered over the development of the events prior to the passing of my father. I realized that the psychic being had already decided to leave the body and accordingly had followed a swift strategy and it all happened

before anyone could ever think of the possibility of the end.

As a result of all these happenings, I got more and more interested in the subject of rebirth. During my school days I had come across the book *The Problem of Rebirth* by Sri Aurobindo several times but it seemed like it was meant for those who are new to the spiritual thoughts of Sri Aurobindo and those who don't know about rebirth. So I never cared to open the book. But now as I came across the book and opened it, it took on a new significance because it fulfilled my immediate need and resonated with my psychological and spiritual state of being. As I went through the text, one aspiration seemed to rise from the depths of my being. I aspired to prepare myself for my next life. I aspired to connect my entire being (my mental, vital and physical beings) to my psychic being at each moment of my life. I aspired that all my day-to-day activities should be directed by the psychic being. I aspired to be conscious of each decision taken by the psychic being in regard to the other parts of my being and my life in general.

This I felt strongly as I recollected my father's last days. On 13th August 2004, my father sat almost the entire afternoon with my daughter discussing with her his then state of mind and body. He expressed his inability to understand why his ill-health had occurred which had forced him to cancel the train ticket booked for his journey to Pondicherry for the Darshan on 15th August. Only now I understand that his psychic being had taken a specific decision



Ajit Panda

regarding the immediate course of its spiritual life. But unfortunately my father's outer being could not perceive this secret design of his psychic being. Therefore he was unable to understand, as he himself expressed to my daughter, the turn his physical ill-health was taking. The question that came to me was: "Can't we be aware of all the designs of our psychic being at each moment of our life? Can't we be aware of the *raison d'être* of our psychic being in its present birth?" In other words, "can't we be aware of the *raison d'être* of our present life?"

We have the assurance of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo that we can. But how? We can read the books of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, preferably with the guidance of a sadhak in the Ashram or elsewhere. As I mentioned, I had already started reading *The Problem of Rebirth*. While I was reading it I found another book which I was sure would be of great help to me: *The Practice of the Integral Yoga*. The writer is none other than the much respected sadhak Jugal Kishore Mukherjee of the Ashram, our dear Jugal-da of 'Knowledge'. The author writes in the book, "During more than thirty years... many of the students of the Higher Course of SAICE... have studied under the guidance of the author various books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.... But a common complaint with many of these students has been that... even after going through the hundreds of pages of many of the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother... they somehow lack in the comprehension, that precision and clarity which are very much needed for putting the principles into actual practice." This is so because as A. S. Dalal points out in his 'Foreword' to this book "...Unlike most other spiritual paths and disciplines, Integral Yoga does not prescribe any set of concrete practices such as *asana*, *pranayama*, *japa* and the like to be followed by all its practitioners. Nor does it formulate a set of ethical norms and principles, dos and don'ts... as part of its core discipline..." Therefore this handbook of Jugal-da's becomes a very valuable guide for us.

We have all lived in the Ashram for a number of years. Whether we remain in the Ashram or go out after the completion of the three years in

'Knowledge', we have to experiment with Life. At least that has been my outlook till today. In fact, I decided to go out taking this as my outlook to life. When we go out we carry within us all that we have learnt and absorbed in the unique atmosphere of the Ashram. Wherever we are, and in whatever field of life we find ourselves, we must always let this spiritual inheritance in us come out and create an atmosphere similar to the one in which we have lived during our stay in the Ashram. Our surroundings may not always be favourable, they may even be adverse. We have to face them and work in them. These adverse social surroundings may impede our effort to live according to our inner spiritual aspirations. How to keep a smooth liaison between the two?

At one point of my life I was face to face with such an adverse situation. In my over-enthusiasm to establish a spiritual harmony between myself and my surroundings, between myself and the individuals around me, I forgot to maintain the strength within me. Instead I got desperate and frustrated. I forgot to accept the things which cannot be changed, which is, in fact, a sign of strength and wisdom in an individual. A severe depression seemed to devour me. And this spell of depression left me more and more weak, both mentally and physically. I was so weak that I was almost bed-ridden. I had to take the help of medicines to regain my strength. One day my father called an astrologer from the village of a well-wisher of our family. The astrologer came and after a discussion with my father, advised me to read the Bhagavat Gita every day in the morning and visit the Temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri once every month. Noticing the deep concern on the face of my father, he had to reassure him that I was out of danger of physical annihilation, i.e. Death.

When I began reading the Bhagavat Gita, one day I came across the chapter where Arjun finds himself facing the army of Kauravas before the war of Kurukshetra begins. Realising that he has to fight his own relatives, his own Guru, his kith and kin, he leaves his bow, Gandiva, and starts trembling. While I was reading this part of the Bhagavat Gita and this description I realised that



my own experience was somewhat the same. This was during the years 1997-1998.

Since then I have improved a lot. I am almost ninety per cent out of the pit of depression. I thought I have had a very great experience in my life and that I need not have a similar experience in the future. But I realised that I was wrong. Again as a result of some friction with some individuals around me, I felt a renewed pull downward. But this time I was well-armed with my previous experience, and with regained strength and will power which shall not fail me again at any point of my life. I now had this belief in myself and in the Mother whose protection I have felt during all those years of trials and tribulations in my life. In spite of this deep belief, I must always be on my guard.

Yes, none of us is as yet a perfect instrument of the Mother. All of us still have many weaknesses through which the adverse forces can enter into our being at any time and create havoc inside and around us. Then we may ask, "Till when shall this struggle continue? Till when shall the fight between the Divine Force and Adverse Force, between Truth and Falsehood, between Light and Darkness continue?" The answer to these questions may be, "This struggle shall continue till the process of involution, which has been already completed, culminates in the highest possibility of the process of Evolution. Till recently Man was the highest achievement of Nature. But then Sri

Aurobindo and the Mother came and as a result of their sadhana for years together the Supramental Light has manifested on earth. This unique event in the history of the world is the harbinger of the transformation of Man into Superman which is according to Sri Aurobindo the next step in the process of Evolution. In the Supramental Consciousness there is no more the struggle of the human mind. The Supramental Consciousness is the Truth-Consciousness which is harmonious and integral. Here there is no more the discord of the human mind. The transformation of Man into Superman has not yet been possible. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are still working for this Great Possibility though this has been partly possible, in the sense that some of the sadhaks are ready to be transformed. She has once said that if there were only fifty human beings ready to be transformed Her work could have been facilitated. That is still not to be."

Though the Master and the Mother are not present among us in their physical body, they are carrying on this work in the subtle world and they have left behind them enough guidance for us to continue our sadhana. Their guidance is available in their correspondence and their conversations with sadhaks, their writings and above all in their own lives which are living examples for us. So let us try to be open to them and give our consent to be transformed. This is the minimum effort that they want from us. Can't we do this much? ❧

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*Fear and anxiety are perverse forms of will. What thou fearest and ponderest over, striking that note repeatedly in thy mind, thou helpst to bring about; for, if thy will above the surface of waking repels it, it is yet what thy mind underneath is all along willing, and the subconscious mind is mightier, wider, better equipped to fulfil than thy waking force and intellect. But the spirit is stronger than both together; from fear and hope take refuge in the grandiose calm and careless mastery of the spirit.*

**Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 17: 124)**

# MY DAYS IN THE ASHRAM

Ashok Kumar Basu '74H

I came to the Ashram in 1960 when I was about seven years old. My cousin brothers were already studying there and I was the last to join them. My grandfather, the late Surendranath Basu, was a resident of the Ashram though he was not an Ashramite. He spent the last thirty years of his life there engrossed in translating Sri Aurobindo's works into Bengali. It was because of him that we came to know about the Ashram and eventually landed there.

We were staying with our family members and my mother was also with us. My father, Sunirmal Basu, joined us later and became a teacher of Rabindra Sangit in the Music section of the School.

I got admitted in class I and Pramila-di (then in-charge of Jhun Jhun Boarding) took me to the class the first day. She was our French teacher. She was well connected with our family and I got much help from her then and in later life. Soon I got to meet the Mother personally very briefly. The Mother used to appear for Darshan every morning at six o'clock on the first floor balcony at the back of the Ashram building. Later her Darshans became fewer in number.

I was in the Ashram for a brief period from 1960 to 1964. I came back to Kolkata with my cousins due to some unavoidable reasons. But the bond has been very strong and I have countless memories of the Ashram and its people.

I remember so many people and incidents that happened during my stay there. Pramila-di used to come to our house sometimes and we used to visit her boarding occasionally. At that time some children, both boys and girls, used to stay there and they became our friends.

In the school Sisir-da was the Headmaster and Kirit-bhai was the Registrar. School was fun and among my classmates were Arup Mitra, Rajnikant, Ramakant, Milan, Kabul, Aswin and others. Anirban came later and joined us.

In physical education I was in the junior

group and initially we were under the supervision of Bor-da and thoroughly enjoyed playing on the jungle gym, merry-go-round and the sand pit. There was a table-tennis table also. Bor-da used to tell us fascinating tales of wildlife and hunting and we used to listen to him all thrilled. He was such a jovial person and was ideal for the



children. Since my name was Ashok he used to call me Samrat Ashok. Then we graduated to the Playground proper. I have pleasant memories of the Playground, Tennis Ground and the Sports-ground. We played all sorts of games. I was hefty and so not good at gymnastics and athletics but swimming was my favourite sport and I won several prizes. I could float on the water without

moving my limbs and that was a feat I would often flaunt before others. I was also lucky to get some birthday cards with a message and the signature of the Mother on each of them. I still have those cards with me.

I was more interested in extra-curricular activities, especially dramatics. Lila-moyee-di used to guide us and I participated in different skits during that time. I had a special ability to make people laugh and that endeared me to young and old alike. My 'Jungle dance' was an attraction and Dinesh-da used to encourage me a lot.

Our excursions to the Lake Estate were very exciting and the short trek, boating and rowing were real attractions. Sunday was a holiday but it was full of activities which we enjoyed. We, four brothers, used to go to the swimming pool in the morning and have a whale of a time. I also used to go to the Playground to assist Biswajit-da with the washing and cleaning of utensils. He used to take me to the Dining Hall on his cycle van to bring provisions and sang and joked on the way. He was a funny person. Once during the washing he covered my face with foam and even took a photo of mine in that state. Another time he cropped my hair (without notice) and said it was Italian style.

Every evening after sports I went to the Ashram to touch the Samadhi and pray, and every time I picked up a *tulsi* leaf from the platter full of water and put it in my mouth. It had a wonderful taste.

The library was a favourite haunt, specially the children's section. We used to pore over Tintin comics and used to discuss his adventures and escapades. On Saturday evenings there used to be a film show and we used to flock to the Playground for many wonderful English, Hindi and Bengali movies. I still remember some classic war movies which I saw there.

Although I studied in Kolkata for many years thereafter and then got a job, I didn't forget the Ashram (How could I?). I went back to the Ashram after completing my M.A. in English and met Nolini-da. When I told him about my M.A. degree he asked me how far I had studied in the Ashram. When I told him it was till class IV, he said that that was a greater qualification. Since then I have been visiting the Ashram almost every year.

Now when I visit the Ashram I spend some time near the Samadhi and the Meditation Hall. I wander around the Ashram building, stroll down the streets, watch people going about their activities – some of them I know, some I do not. I stand in front of the building where we used to stay with our family long back and old memories come rushing back. The building (then called Radha house) is on the Ashram road just across the canal. I drop by at the School and the Playground and attend some functions and lecture classes.

When I go to the Ashram I meet Manoj-da, some of my friends like Arup Mitra, Ramakant, Rajnikant and Baby (Jhun Jhun Boarding). Unfortunately Milan passed away a few years back which was a rude shock to me. Manoj-da once arranged for me to visit the Lake after so many years and I was delighted. Once I also joined a group of ex-students on a visit to Swarnabhoomi where I met many friends and senior people. Apart from my yearly visits I get a copy of *The Golden Chain* periodically which keeps me updated and enchaines me to the Ashram and its wonderful people.

I am over sixty years old now (not old by Ashram standards) and have retired from regular service. I spend time doing odd jobs and reading books. Through joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, I strongly feel Mother's force guiding me and leading me towards a life divine. ❧

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*I am not a Jnani, for I have no knowledge except what God gives me for His work. How am I to know whether what I see be reason or folly? Nay, it is neither; for the thing seen is simply true and neither folly nor reason.*

**Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 17: 79)**

# TRANSFORMATION

*Sunayana Panda '79*

This happened in 1973. I was thirteen years old then. The organisation of the School was quite different in those days. The students of our age-group had to work in one of the departments of the Ashram one morning in a week. This allowed us to be in touch with the Ashram itself and to know how the departments worked. It also gave us the opportunity to know the sadhaks and sadhikas of the Ashram a little better. I had chosen to work in Senteurs, the department which produces perfumes.



Every Tuesday my friend Gita Patel and I used to go and work in Senteurs in the morning. Once I started working I found out that in fact the department had been started to make perfumes and skin-fresheners, shampoos and other such items for the Mother's use. Later, the Mother wanted these products to be made and sold to the public and in this way it became a commercial unit of the Ashram.

Kusum-ben, the department head, asked us to help her when she made a perfume or an Eau de Cologne. Being young girls we were a bit disappointed that it wasn't what we had imagined it to be. It was a work, like any other - pouring this, mixing that, measuring this and weighing that. "Making perfumes" has that aura of mystery and magic, with all sorts of enchanting smells floating through the air but the actual work requires concentration and precision and is as stressful as any work of precision. In spite of this initial disappointment, we were quite happy that we were out of our classrooms for a day and at the same time learning something new.

One day Kusum-ben told us that she was going to make a new perfume for the Mother for her birthday. We were thrilled. It was Kusum-ben's own formula. She was going to make her own

blend of essential oils which she would then dilute with alcohol. We helped her with the minute measurements of the liquids. Kusum-ben told us that she was going to take it to the Mother just before the February Darshan. Since it was going to be for the Mother's birthday Kusum-ben had given the name "Fête" to this new perfume.

One Tuesday soon after, when we had finished our work, Kusum-ben told us, "I will go to the Mother with this perfume a few days before her birthday. I will see if it is possible to take both of you with me. But I don't promise anything. If the Mother allows me to take you along then you can come." My friend and I were quite sure that it would not be possible because in February of 1973 the Mother was very busy and wasn't too well. In fact, I had not been able to go and see her in her room on my birthday the two previous years because she had been unwell.

In those days we had dance classes in the morning during school hours, because it was considered a subject like any other. So, on 18<sup>th</sup> February I had just come back from my ballet class, sweaty and tired. I clearly remember that I was tracing a map for the geography class when someone came to tell me that Kusum-ben had sent word that Gita and I had been given permission to go to the Mother with her. I couldn't believe my ears.

"Don't forget to wash your hair," said the person who had brought the message. "When the Mother places her hand on your head it shouldn't get dirty with oil and dirt," she explained. I ran to my boarding (hostel) and had a good wash and carefully washed my hair too because it was full of sweat after my ballet class. I put on an ironed dress and ran to the Ashram. I went to the terrace outside the Mother's room. Kusum-ben was already there. So was my friend Gita. I sat with them, silently.

After a while we were called. When we entered the Mother's room Vasudha-ben asked Gita and me to sit a little to a side while Kusum-ben spoke



to the Mother. Kusum-ben and the Mother spoke to each other for a long time. Actually, the Mother had some difficulty in speaking and sometimes there were words that I couldn't understand at all. But Kusum-ben, being used to speaking to the Mother, could understand what she was saying. Then Kusum-ben applied the perfume on the Mother's hand and she smelt it. The Mother even gave her some advice about how to improve it. I was very moved to see how Kusum-ben and the Mother shared such a close and personal bond, like two old friends.

Once they had finished their conversation, Gita and I were told that we could do our *pranams* to the Mother. When I put my head on the Mother's feet she blessed me by placing her hand on my head. When I sat up she smiled and gave me a single 'Transformation' flower. Kusum-ben did her *pranam* and the Mother gave her a bouquet with many flowers. Then the three of us came down.

When I came home I realised that it was the first time in three years that I had actually sat in the Mother's room, in her presence, for such a long time. It must have been a good twenty minutes. But I looked at that 'Transformation' flower and felt a bit disappointed. It was a small flower and that too white! For a young girl like me it was a bit too simple.

At the end of that year the Mother left her body. That is when it struck me that the meeting with her in February was my last personal meeting with the Mother. If Kusum-ben hadn't taken me along with her this meeting would never have happened. For this I am eternally grateful to her. I worked in Senteurs for two years after I finished my studies. When that work was given to me I agreed because I already had a connection with that department and because of this last meeting with the Mother.

Many years passed. It was my birthday and I had turned 35. In the morning I was on my way to Sri Aurobindo's room. On the way, I stopped in front of a Transformation tree growing beside the road. It was in full bloom as it was the month of December. In fact, this is the background perfume of my memories of my birthdays because the Transformation trees flower from September to

February-March in Pondicherry. I got off my scooter and started picking up a few freshly-fallen flowers.

Holding that bunch in my hand I bent my head down to smell that lovely perfume. All of a sudden the memory of that single Transformation flower given to me by the Mother wafted into my mind. I re-

realised what a marvellous gift it was. It suddenly struck me that it was not just a flower but a coded message. She was trying to tell me that the most important thing to do was to transform. It could have meant 'transform yourself' or it could also have meant 'transform things around you'.

"Good Lord!" I said to myself, "How could I have missed it? Transformation! That's a clear instruction."

I will not say that from that day onwards I began transforming everything I could lay my hands on, but I can say that I support any effort towards change. I don't hesitate to try and change what looks imperfect to me. To me 'Transformation' means 'change for the better'.

In my growing up years the word "transformation" was in the air. Everyone spoke of it, more in the context of the physical transformation that the Mother was attempting than in any other sense. So getting back this much-loved word into my consciousness is a happy state of things. But more than that, I have the feeling of carrying out a secret instruction from the Mother. I am convinced that it was a coded message that she gave me through a flower. What an artistic way of doing things! But this had always been her method, only I had forgotten about it. In our last meeting, which took place in unusual circumstances, she had actually given me a message for life.

There is a strange coincidence I noticed. Just above the main door of Senteurs there is a decorative motif on the wall (see photo above). And at the centre of it is a transformation flower! I have never seen this anywhere else, in any other house in Pondicherry. ❧



A new book, **Memorable Years with the Mother — The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram** has just been published. Brought out with the support of the Ashram's Physical Education Department, the Ashram Archives and others, the book captures — through striking photographs, a simple narrative and interesting documents and sketches — a golden period in the Ashram's life. The book, which is in two beautifully produced volumes, has been published by The Golden Chain Fraternity and can be purchased from our office. In the following pages we get to know more about the publication. **Bulu (Ashit Kumar Mitra) '77** reviews the book and **Namita Sarkar '61**, who has written and compiled the volumes, answers our questions.

# PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE ASHRAM

## AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT

*Bulu (Ashit Kumar Mitra) '77*

**M**emorable Years with the Mother: The Growth of Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram is a true labour of love. The narrative is simple and unhurried, evoking memories of yester years when the Mother's physical presence permeated every single activity in the Ashram.

Namita Sarkar or Namita-di, as we all know her, came to the Ashram in January 1944. At a very early age the Mother appointed her a captain of one of the green groups in the Physical Education Department in which capacity she continues to serve today. Having lived through these exciting times, she is eminently equipped to write this book which gives us

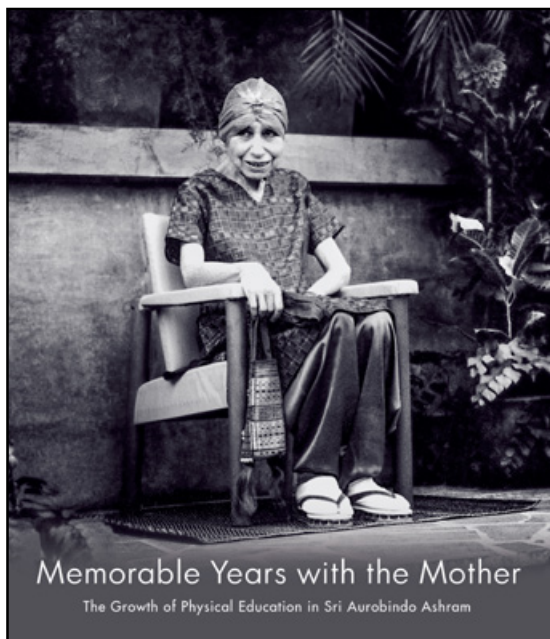
a ringside account of the events as they unfolded.

The book is a popular narrative account of the history of physical education in the Ashram,

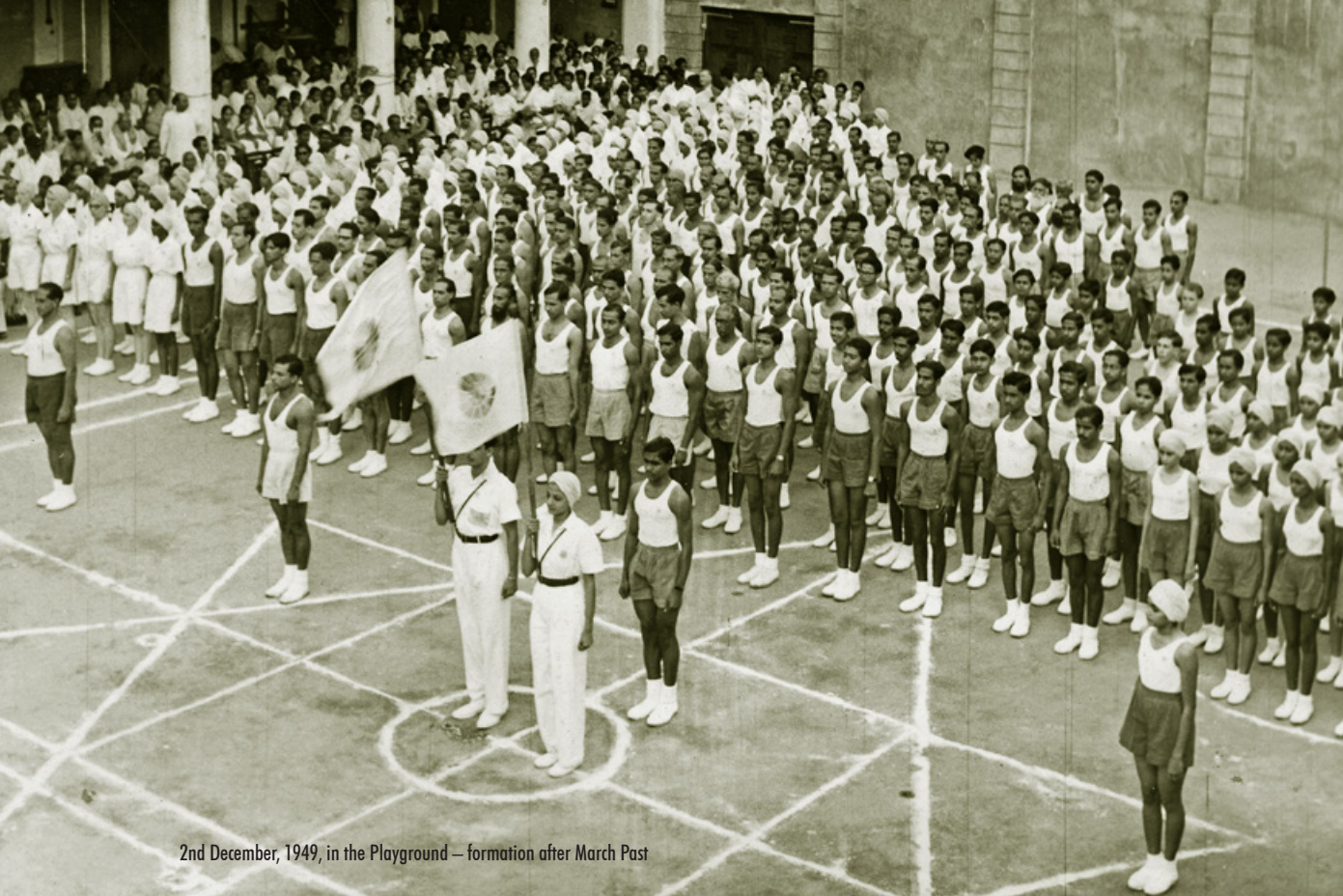
from its genesis with the admission of children during the Second World War, to its unfolding evolution over the years with the arrival of Udar-da, Pranab-da, Biren-da and many others who contributed in realising the Mother's vision.

The book is organised into thirty-three chapters spanning two volumes. It fills an important lacuna in the narrative history of the Ashram, for this is the first comprehensive description of its physical education programme

and the Mother's work with the children at that time. What Namita-di has achieved at present







2nd December, 1949, in the Playground – formation after March Past

was perhaps not possible earlier due to paucity of data. Later, even when a larger body of information became available, it was generally in fragmented forms, often subtexts of a larger storyline. She has managed to collate data from diverse sources and cobble up a narrative that gives us a bird's-eye view of the physical education praxis with a brief summary of every section. Her diligent research has also thrown up a lot of new material which is being published for the first time here, especially from the rich archives of the Physical Education Department. She covers significant historical events such as the acquisition of land and construction of the Playground, the Tennis Ground and the Sports Ground. Likewise she covers the building of the swimming pool and the new gymnasium.

The architectural layout of the book calls for special mention; it is done with meticulous care, educating a great sense of beauty and space, almost Golcondesque, where the space speaks to us in silence as much as the text. The isometric drawings help to bring the narrative to life. Just flicking

## THE BADGE & THE ASHRAM FLAG

*An extract from the book*

This symbol [*Mother's symbol*] was used as a badge for the first time in 1948. At that time it was printed on sky blue paper and pinned to the group shirt.... The badge has always been an integral part of the group uniform on special occasions.

The first time the cloth badges were issued they were pinned on the shirt of each recipient by the Mother in the Playground....

Regarding the flag with the Mother's symbol, Sri Aurobindo has said: "The blue of the flag is meant to be the colour of Krishna and so represents the spiritual or Divine Consciousness which it is her work to establish so that it may reign upon earth. This is the meaning of the flag being used as the Ashram flag, that our work is to bring down this consciousness and make it the leader of the world's life."

*Extract from Vol 1, p 91*

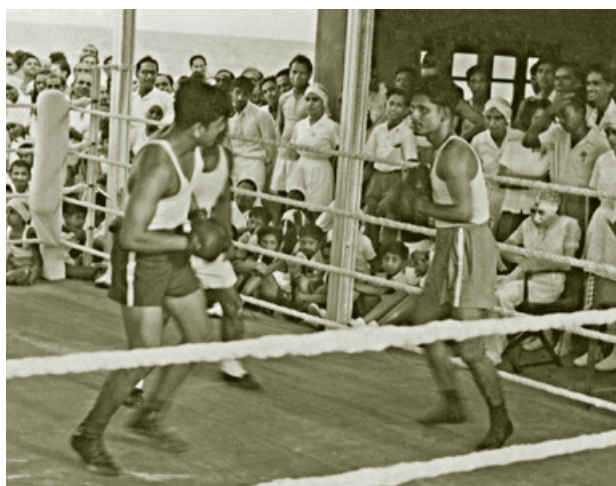
through the pages gives such a deep joy but also a lump-in-the-throat nostalgia for a time gone by...

"A picture is worth a thousand words" they say, but here each photograph is a veritable encyclopedia; the photos are indeed the life-breath of this book. What words can describe Nolini-da's Herculean leap into the long-jump pit, his face knit in strenuous concentration? Parul-di's Amazonian beauty and strength in the wrestling pit? Chitra-di's calm dignity and pride as a young captain, marching past the Mother? The children's cries of joy suspended for ever in time? The Mother taking the salute at the Sports Ground witnessed by a myriad swaying palms? The arrested dynamism of a road race in the '70s? Gripping too are the photographs of July 1947, where girls in white trousers and shirts prepare themselves to march and paint the town red; or the women kettle-drummers, their instruments tastefully draped with the Mother's symbol, proudly filing past the Mother, shoulder to shoulder, with their men colleagues! What a psychological tsunami the Mother must have provoked in those early days! What a din, what an uproar, what a thunderous crash of shackles of the uber-conventional past! What a revolution!



Running competition in 1950 at the Tennis Ground: Nolini-da and Pavitra-da.

Transcending the narrow format of sports and pastime, the true value of these volumes is perhaps in the strong underlying emphasis laid on the concept of an all-round physical education.



Demonstration of boxing in front of the Mother — 21st Feb, 1952

The Ashram's connection with sports had its beginning when Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry. In his *Reminiscences*, Nolini-da talks about playing football regularly for *Cercle Sportif de Pondichéry*, a local club, along with Moni-da, Bejoy-da and Purnachandra Pakre; but that was dedication to sports, not focus on physical education. With the Mother founding the Department of Physical Education in 1945, the concept of sports underwent a sea change transmuting itself from mere leisure and recreation to a sadhana of the body and an inseparable part of Purna Yoga. Explaining the need for an integral development and perfection of the body and its consciousness, Sri Aurobindo wrote, "If our seeking is for a total perfection of the being, the physical part of it cannot be left aside; for the body is the material basis, the body is the instrument which we have to use. *Sariram khalu dharmasadhanam*, says the old Sanskrit adage, — the body is the means of fulfillment of dharma."

Finally, it is not mere historicity that attracts us to the book. As we recall the delicate fragrance of a jasmine upon seeing its image, so we draw from the dark recesses of our brains, as we turn the pages, long forgotten memories of sunlit days and app-free joys. For those of us who have lived through this history and breathed its shared values, this book will always hold a special place in our hearts. ❧



# RELIVING A GOLDEN PERIOD

*Namita Sarkar '61, who has written and compiled the book, answers our questions.*

***In this book you have documented the development of physical education in the Ashram. You are well qualified to take up this project as you've been a captain for many decades and you also helped in the PED administration in the early years. Can you tell us about your association with physical education here and what it means for you?***

The Ashram school was started by the Mother on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1943. I came here a month later in January 1944. At the time there was no physical education as such. It was only after Pranab-da's (Dada's) arrival in 1945 that physical education started to be organised for the older boys and girls. Sometime later Biren-da, who had been Dada's coach and mentor in Calcutta, came to the Ashram. He started to teach us kids songs and dances. I was so fascinated that I still remember some of these songs and dances and I have been teaching them to my group children through the years.

Soon the two switched places — Biren-da took charge of the older boys and girls and Dada took the small children. I was never an outstanding sportsperson, but I was serious and conscientious. Whatever I was asked to do, I tried to do to the best of my ability. With time the number of students increased and more groups had to be added. There were two groups of small children then, A1 and A2. A1 consisted of the youngest children and A2 of the slightly older ones. I was in group A2.

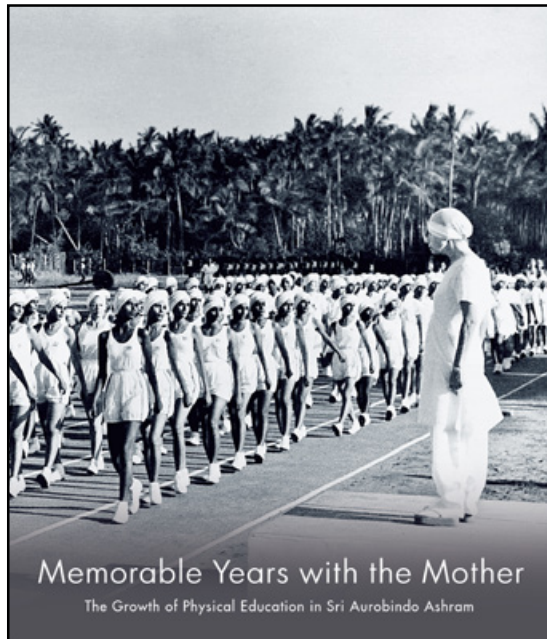
One day in 1953, I was told by Dada that there would be a third green group instead of two, and that I was to head the new group. I was only 13 years old then. Perhaps he had seen some leadership quality in me — I don't know. Dada taught me the different activities I had to do with the children. He said a captain should know the functioning of the human body, so he gave me books to read. Then he put questions to me

and I had to write the answers. Patiently he corrected my answers and explained what I did not understand. He also gave me books on physical education from other countries. This is how I discovered new games and activities.

Dada inculcated in me the qualities that a good captain should have. He guided me at every stage and encouraged me in all that I did.

There wasn't much age difference between the first batch of chil-

dren and me. At times they used to bully me. I would then refer it to Dada or the Mother. They advised me on how to deal with the children. Often, when the Mother came back from her game of tennis, She would stand at the door of her room in the Playground and see what I was doing with the children. The Mother and Dada always encouraged me in whatever I did. The first time I composed a drill for the children, they made me feel on top of the world, as though I had done something remarkable. This really gave me confidence. I tried to do better and better.



Being with the children all these years has kept me young at heart. This has helped me to understand the problems of the children with the changing times. I can relate to them even now and I try to make them conscious of the aims and values that the Mother had set before us.

***Tracing Ashram history, delving into old records, putting together many people's memories, is not an easy task. What were the sources you consulted? Who were the people you spoke to?***

First, I started to write whatever I remembered myself. Soon I realised that my memory could falter and was incomplete. So I started speaking to

my elders and they gave me some very interesting details. In the *SportSpirit* magazine, many of our elders have written their reminiscences. I got a lot of information from their articles. I also got information from the *Bulletin*. Finally, I got help from the Physical Education Department. I delved into the PED files and found plenty of Mother's messages and documents written in Her own hand.

***The book has many rare photos, facsimiles of Mother's instructions, old documents and records, and some drawings of the buildings that show us how they used to be. All of them come together to bring alive an era that was a***



The band presenting a concert for the Mother in the Playground - 21st Feb, 1951



## THE SPORTS GROUND

*An extract from the book*

On this land [Jalad's Fodder Land — four acres of land beyond the town's boulevard which had been bought by the Ashram for Rs 4000 a little earlier] were grown not only cattle fodder but also sweet potatoes, groundnuts and jasmine flowers; the water was drawn from three wells located on the property. Members of the Ashram helped to clear the vegetation and turn it into a Sports Ground. The students were very



Students taking part in the Sports Ground work - 1951



Sports Ground work in progress, with students helping in the work - 1951

enthusiastic and would go to help on Sundays. Ravindra from the Dining Room used to carry lunch for everyone. Of course there were also paid labourers to do most of the work.

Udar was in charge of the work. "Udar worked out the whole layout and made the cinder running tracks, long jump and high jump runs, shot put and hammer rings etc. according to the Olympic specifications after obtaining the same from the International Olympic Committee."

*Extract from Vol 1, p 171*

### ***golden period in the life of the Ashram. Where did all this material come from?***

Most of the photos I got from the Archives; I also got some from the PED and personal collections. Most of the documents and records came from the files of the PED. They have a very nice filing system, where I could easily access the information I needed. The drawings of the buildings were made available by the Ashram Drawing office.

***Such a monumental effort must have taken time. Can you tell us how the project developed.***

In 2012, I was in-charge of the 2<sup>nd</sup> December programme. When I started to think of a theme,

it occurred to me that the present generation of students might be interested in knowing how physical education and PED developed over the years, under the Mother's guidance. So, I started to write a short history – that was the beginning. To make it living, I thought some photos would help. I went to the Archives for the old photos. One day one of our former students working there told me, "Namita-di, after your generation, nobody will know what the Mother did with the children when She was coming to the Playground. Why don't you document all that?" I thought it was a wonderful idea and I started to write more. I was encouraged by my colleagues and friends and



March Past in the Ashram - 24th April, 1949. The women's group is on its way upstairs to pass before Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

they gave valuable suggestions. Help came from unexpected quarters. Many people went all out to help me in this project. Without their assistance it would not be what it is today. I am so grateful for the help and support of those around me.

***The book captures the spirit of life in the Ashram — the period when the Mother was active amongst the children. What do you feel is the essence of the book? What do you hope readers will get from it?***

I have tried to capture the atmosphere and spirit of life in the Ashram when the Mother was active amongst us. She was giving a concrete form to the true meaning of physical education and she was helping us to become fit instruments for Her work. My hope is that readers will be able to relive those wonderful years.

***Ex-students will particularly connect with***

***the book and be able to relive their moments in the School and the Ashram. Is there anything you would like to tell them about the book or bring to their notice?***

I am sure many ex-students will be able to connect with that golden period of the Ashram, so full of Her Presence, and realise how lucky they were to have been a part of it. I feel they will be nostalgic about those bygone days. And I hope that the efforts of the lucky ones will inspire the students of today, who in their own way are lucky to be a part of the process.

***What is clear from your book is that over the years there have been many dedicated people – captains, administrators, builders – who have contributed to make the PED what it is now. Do you see that same spirit of dedication***

*Continued on page 22...*



## WHITE SHORTS, WHITE SHIRTS AND KITTY-CAPS FOR THE GIRLS

*An extract from the book*

One day in 1948, one of the girls, while doing her exercises in pyjamas in the Playground, fell down and got hurt. “When the Mother was told about it, she listened quietly. After a couple of days, she called Bratati (Millie Bhattacharya), one of the sadhikas, and said, ‘I have solved the problem of the uniform. The girls will put on white shorts, a white shirt and a kitty-cap on the head for their hair. Prepare them and try them on yourself. Pyjamas are unwieldy. When you are ready, let me know about it.’”

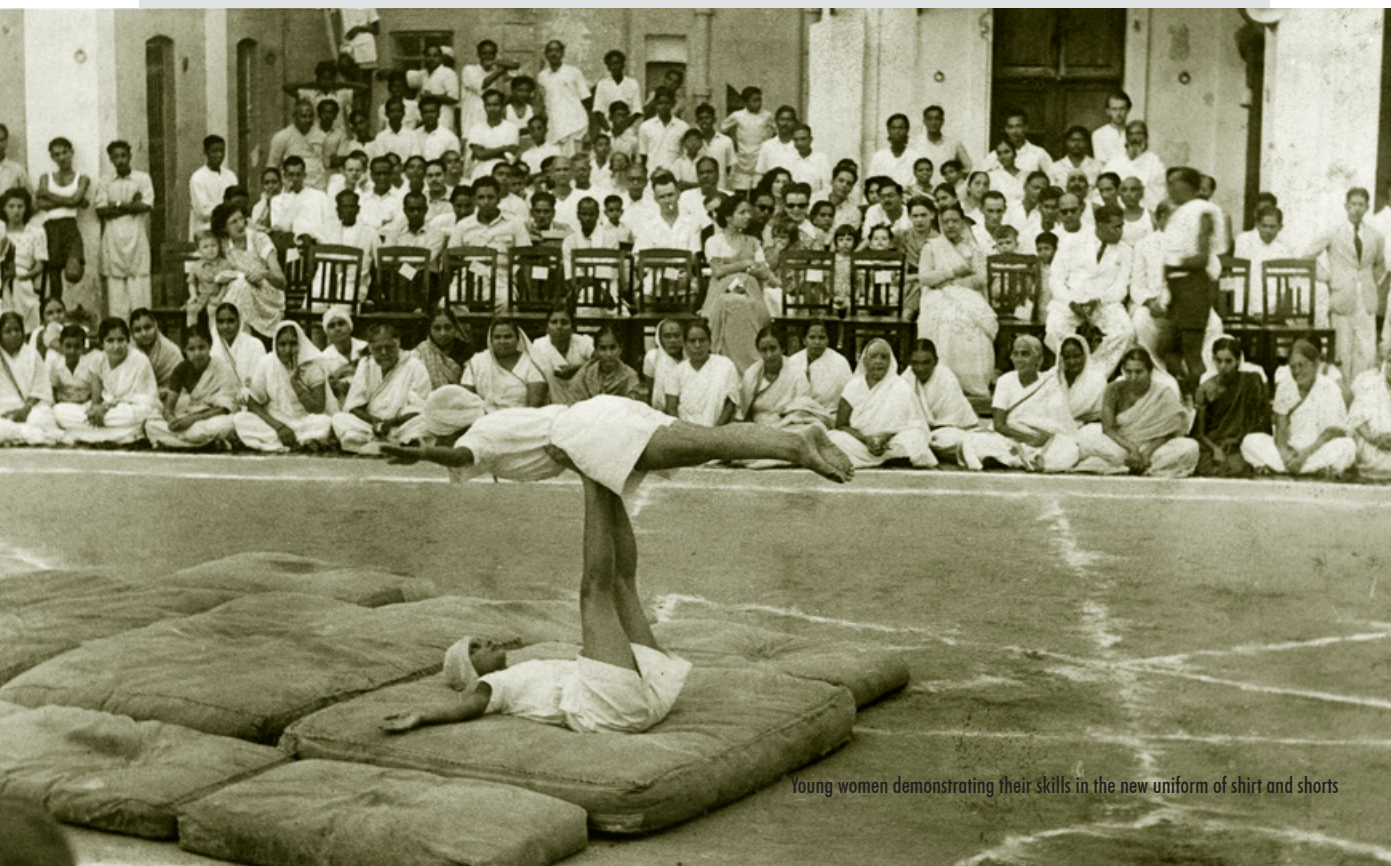
The Mother Herself designed the kitty-cap so that the long hair of the girls did not inconvenience them during their activities. The first kitty-caps were made of khaki-coloured mosquito-net cloth. Later white net cloth was used because it is cooler.

As Nirodbaran recounts, “Millie borrowed a pair of shorts from a male relative and pulled out a shirt from her husband’s wardrobe. She realized that the shirt was far too big for her as

her husband was a big man, so she stitched it by hand on both sides to make it narrower. When the Mother came to the Playground She asked that the gates be kept shut. (There is an internal gate which connects the Playground to the house where Millie and her family lived.) Wearing her borrowed shorts and shirt she came to the Playground by that gate and stood in front of the Mother.... The Mother looked at her and was satisfied.”

“Calling the girls together she gave a short impressive talk on the new experiment and the necessity for trying it. They at once fell in with the proposal and adopted the new uniform. But what was the reaction to this drastic step? Some, particularly old people, were shocked to see their daughters scantily dressed and doing exercises jointly with boys; a few conservative guardians were planning to take their wards away from such a modernized Ashram.”

*Extract from Vol 1, p 93*



*Young women demonstrating their skills in the new uniform of shirt and shorts*

## THE MOTHER AND EXERCISE

*An extract from the book*

From 1948 to 1958 She regularly played tennis every afternoon. Sometimes after Her game of tennis, Pranab would ask the Mother to walk with him in the Tennis Ground.

On some days the Mother did other activities also. Priti Das Gupta writes: "One day we collected some tennis balls. There used to be a wall between the Playground and the Guest House then. A basket was put up on this wall and then the game began. Effortlessly the Mother kept shooting each and every ball into

the basket. And we had to do the same! Nobody managed to shoot all the six balls into the basket. Minnie-di, Milli-di, Gauri, myself, Sutapa, Violette, we all kept practising every day. Violette could put in three or sometimes four balls. The Mother congratulated Violette. Sutapa managed sometimes to get one or two. But the Mother managed to put in all six each and every time. Her attitude and concentration were incredible. She stood immobile and totally one-pointed as She put one ball after another into the basket."

*Extract from Vol 1, p 145*

*...continued from page 20*

***today? What do you see as the main challenges for the future?***

I really must say that the same spirit of dedication is still there in many people; that is how this institution is still continuing. It is true when the Mother was physically present to guide us, it

was much easier, but now we must continue to be true to our work and continue to serve the Mother to the best of our ability.

***After all the research, were there aspects of Ashram life that came as a revelation for you? From a personal point of view, what has this***





## MEMORABLE YEARS

*Bob Zwicker of the Ashram Archives*

Working with Namita on her book has been a great joy for me. Clear mind, warm heart, loves to laugh — I could work with her. With boundless energy and persistent dedication, she put countless hours into this book and got it done.

Namita has managed to bring a whole era to life — the 1940s and '50s when the Mother spent hours a day with the children, teaching them, guiding them, filling them with love. For Namita and others, these were the golden years of the Ashram, and through her efforts we can share the joy.

I recommend this book to all.

### *project given you?*

First, I have been overwhelmed while working on this project. I thought to myself, how lucky I

was to be around during those formative years, surrounded by so many dedicated people. They all were a part of my growing-up years; at the time I took them for granted, but these are the people who helped the Mother to build this wonderful place.

I also realised how much sincerity we had while trying to make the Mother's work in the physical a reality. As a teacher and a captain, I try to make the students conscious of the great opportunity they have been given and not to waste it. We must continue to strive to achieve what the Mother expected of us. ❧

## Memorable Years with the Mother

*The Growth of Physical Education  
in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*

— Namita Sarkar

Publisher: The Golden Chain Fraternity

432 pp in 2 Volumes, ISBN 978-93-87175-00-6

Size: 22.5x26, Binding: Hardcover, Rs 1450



Start of the Road Race from the Sports Ground

## DEAR PEN

*By Thirthankar Chakraborty '09*

Dear Pen  
That writes no more, but lies dormant in the bag's top pocket  
Deleted  
From the realm of words that fail thought and feeling  
No more  
Wasted on the bark of stillborn trees and drained of blue blood  
But haunting  
These spaces of white, fed by ten-fingered taps  
Evoke  
The night's ink as it smears the moon's white face  
And shade  
Street lights that cocoon the last weary bustles of day

These sounds  
Trip over signs of blacklit symbols, and with stolen grammar  
They fall  
Upon perennial myths and legends of kingdoms in peace and war  
Slipping  
Through nets of glistening webs hung in doorless caverns  
They rest  
On the timeless couch, hooded by an aura of eternal silence  
And sleep  
On the name that forms the snake with the five speckled heads  
And dream  
Of that coiled body that spirals the world and its ages.







## THE STARK SIDE OF THE MOON

*By Anjan Sengupta '78H*

Copious in talking of the full moon in the sky  
Poets' failed words were still old tricks for a try —  
Stirring not enough to make her laugh or cry  
All had been said already in praise of the moon much high!  
Behind a sheath of clouds that drifted by  
A hiding moon was therefore more sad than shy,  
In indifference or fallen pride, who would know?  
A few scars for long had not healed though,  
Until someone said "nice" of her scars, not "scary",  
To pierce through clouds she emerged fiery,  
For a lasting love of moonlight's infinite gush  
Staying awake into the night you'd surely catch her blush!

# TRANSITIONS

*By Soma Kundu '94*

I walk alone in this storm.  
Raging wind and creaking trees  
tell me stories of angels and demons.  
Ahead, a squashed hedgehog on the wet road.  
Perhaps it was just trying to leap across and reach  
the other side to safety and home and a good, long sleep.  
Now it lies there cold and torn and very dead.  
Above me gnarled fingers of branches fight  
the blustery wind, desperately trying  
to hold on to their last golden leaves.  
A large orange sun hangs low over the horizon.  
Thoughts swirl, ebb and flow  
like the great, billowing clouds racing across the sky,  
smashing silently together, striving  
to keep the fiery sun from sinking  
into the sodden earth.  
The cold wind and rain creeps under my coat collar.  
Thoughts borne of reality are sometimes dark.  
The autumn wind screams of things  
better left unsaid.  
Changes can be fast and furious.  
But soon the fury will transition  
into hushed and deep meditations of snowy winter.  
I walk alone, master of all I see before me.



# HOME OF PROGRESS FINDS A NEW HOME

*Aravinda Pentela 'K2*

“Home of Progress”, popularly known as “Shekhar-da’s Boarding” was situated where Gandhi street meets Chetty street. It was constructed in the mid-1960s. There was an empty plot in that place which belonged to the Ashram. Sanyal-da, the Ashram doctor, wanted to build a nursing home there. The permission was granted by the Mother and the construction began, but after a while he was not happy with it, so everything was demolished.

Then there was a plan to build a hostel for the students. That building was constructed with funds donated by the Odisha government as it was going to be a hostel for the students coming from that state.

The construction was completed in early 1966 and Manoj Das and Pratigna-di moved into it along with the children they were already looking after. In December 1966, a new batch of children from Odisha arrived, taking the number of boarders to twenty.

The group of students in this house comprised of both boys and girls. Pratigna-di and Manoj Das looked after this hostel until 1972 when the boardings were re-organised and were divided into all-boys or all-girls boardings. At that point it became an all-girls boarding and Jaywanta-ben was given the charge. But it was relatively far from the School the girls soon moved to the boarding which is diagonally across the Ashram Main Building. “Home of Progress” then became an







all-boys boarding. For a short period the boys' boarding was looked after by Awadh Kishore and Krishna Sen. After that Shekhar-da was handed over the responsibility. Since then he has been looking after the young boys. As it has always been with boardings,

the group of boys who lived there continually changed every year when some left at the end of the year and some new boys came with the new batch. For the past twenty years or so it has been a boarding for boys of age seventeen and above.

In May 2017 "Home of Progress" moved to a new location which was acquired by the Ashram at the beginning of the year. This house, which is opposite the Kindergarten, was renovated after which the entire boarding shifted there. Believe it or not this house is situated where an earlier boarding known as "Children's Home" used to be. The "Children's Home" was a typical French house with a small garden. It was demolished and a new building arose in its place which was a family residence. But now once again it has become a boarding.

The "Children's Home" was under the care of Michèle, and of course some helpers were sent to her so that the daily chores of the house could be done smoothly. Most of them didn't stay for long that is why Mother herself chose Urmila Pandya to assist Michèle. As Michèle was a professionally trained nurse, she always kept the boarding as clean and hygienic as an operation theatre. The children were very much loved by both the Didis.

This boarding was initially started with two children and later the number rose to seven. The children who were too difficult to handle elsewhere were sent to Michèle. Right from the beginning she didn't want it to be a "boarding". She wanted it to be a home and therefore it was

named "Children's Home."

Among the many rules in this boarding, Mother had insisted on one which was that the children had to speak French at home not only with Michèle but also amongst themselves. This helped the children's expression at school.

Similarly, in the present "Home of Progress" which stands now in its place, most students try and speak in Sanskrit with Shekhar-da. Speaking with him in Sanskrit has personally helped my oral skills.

In 1965 Michèle left the boarding because of ill health. Soon after, the owner of the house took back his property and the boarding was shifted elsewhere and was looked after by Vimal-ben and Appa-ji. After a span of fifty plus years "Home of Progress" is situated where the old "Children's Home" stood, a boarding in the place of an earlier boarding.

It was a big change for all the boarders to live in such a peaceful atmosphere after having lived in the heart of the town with its bustling traffic. Unlike in the old building with its more dormitory style accommodation, in this house only two students share each room with an attached bathroom and nice and spacious cupboards. In total, we are twelve students living in this house. This building seems to me more like a home. It is a complete luxury to live in such a house.

The house has currently two names, "Home of Progress" and "Maison des Petits". The southern entrance has the name "Home of Progress" and is situated on Rangapillai Street and the eastern entrance has the name "La Maison Des Petits" and is situated on Saint Martin street. ❧





# LIGHTING THE WAY

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WALL LANTERNS PUT UP AROUND THE ASHRAM

*Kiran Kakad '72*

In 2005 there was suddenly an exponential increase in incidents of chain snatching, harassment of women and senior citizens, as well as nefarious activities by anti-social elements especially at night, taking advantage of the darkness all along the roads. Many street lights were not working and several others had their light blocked by the branches of trees planted along the roads making it an ideal haven for trouble-makers. Several representations to the electricity department yielded little result and the Forest Department also did little to prune the offending branches.

It was obvious that if the government could ensure that all the street lights were working and the overgrown branches pruned, the problem could be greatly minimised. In order to address the worsening situation, a representation was once again made in late 2005 to some of the ministers in the Pondicherry Government with the help of the local MLA to provide proper low-level lamp posts under the trees and this request was followed up patiently several times over the next five years on different occasions. But again nothing came of the meetings or letter writing.

When trying to find a viable solution, it occurred to me that why not put some beautiful heritage lanterns with LED lamps on the walls of the Ashram buildings. Not only would it be cost effective by eliminating the costly lampposts and digging of the footpaths and all other time consuming formalities but we could easily do it ourselves the way we wanted it. Besides, since many of the important buildings in the Ashram have connection to a standby generator, we would have roads well-lit even when there is a power

failure all around. As for the electricity consumption, it would be minimal – almost one tenth of a regular incandescent lamp since we would use LED bulbs. It was a win-win situation.



In 2010, I approached Manoj-da (our Ashram managing trustee) with the above idea drawing his attention to the worsening law and order situation and offering him the above solution which would minimise the ongoing problems by installing the energy efficient wall lanterns around the Ashram. I also had a short discussion with heads of various electricity departments in the Ashram as well as other competent individuals about this issue and its feasibility. They all agreed that it was a good idea, easily feasible and they would all help in installing the required lamps and electronic timers.

Based on the various discussions and the feasibility study a written request was submitted to the board of trustees of the Ashram who kindly consented to fund the first five lamps on



the Eastern wall of the Ashram School as a pilot project. Since the anti-social activities were assuming alarming proportions, it was also agreed that if the project was successful

more lanterns would be installed wherever necessary with funds either from the Ashram or from private parties.

Thus in May 2011, the first five lanterns which I purchased for the pilot project off the shelf from a shop in Pondicherry were in place on the Eastern wall of the School. That night the whole place immediately stood out so beautifully and was so well lighted that it was not only much appreciated but requests for more such lamps in some of the dark areas started pouring in.

In December 2013, based on the experience and success of the pilot project, funds were requested for the second phase for installing heavy duty good quality lanterns with an antique look around the School, the Ashram building and in front of the Laboratory. About fifty such lanterns with shatter proof long life UV coated Polycarbonate transparent plastic were manufactured with the help of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) with whom I worked out the design. The installation for the first few was done by INTACH and for the rest by the Ashram's Electricity Department. As for the funding, Ashram paid 50% of the cost and the other 50% was donated by a former student through INTACH. As a result of the installation of these fifty lanterns, the whole area was lighted so beautifully

that once again more requests for such lamps in some dark streets of the Ashram area started coming in. Therefore in July 2015, an additional 50 antique-look lamps were installed when some former students came forward and donated funds and INTACH also chipped in. Some more were also installed when some devotees residing in nearby buildings, the *Tresor Nursing Home* and *Desirée Home*, also agreed to fund the lamps to be installed at their place.

Since there were still a few areas remaining and funds were limited, an additional 50 simple and less expensive "Ball Lanterns" were designed and installed in July 2016 with the balance fund coming from well-wishers. Altogether we have so far installed about 165 lanterns. Some function through electronic timers, others are switched on and off manually.

Those antique style lanterns on the Ashram buildings belong to the Ashram and for the rest they belong to those who paid for them. At the moment the maintenance and care is on a private basis with technical assistance from one of

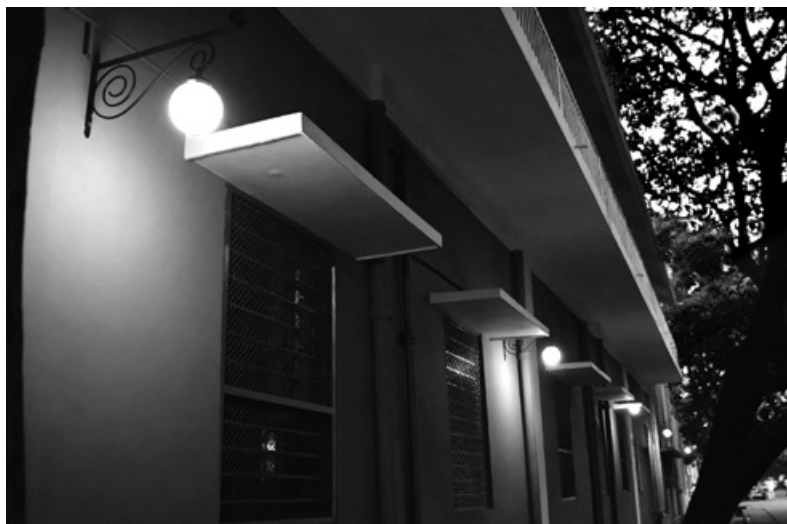


our Ashram Departments but eventually I hope to put in place an efficient quick response team which will make sure that all the lights we have installed are working without a glitch and faults attended to without delay.

It is rare that any new initiative works out smoothly without any hiccups. It was no different for the Lantern Project. There were arguments made as to why we should be putting up the lights when it is the Government's duty to do so. While this may be a valid point, one can't just sit and do nothing while anti-social elements take full advantage of the dark streets to engage in chain snatching and harassing people year after year. Something had to be done. Then there was also the apprehension that the lamps would be the target of mob fury during one of the agitations or the street urchins might indulge in target practice. In fact, about a year back during a political demonstration several individuals did throw stones to break the lanterns. But since these were made of shatter-proof material, they only had minor scratches and withstood the wrath of the mob.

Providing the lanterns has fortunately proved to be a beneficial exercise in all respects. The nuisance of the anti-social elements has come down drastically as roads are well lit. Women and senior people feel much safer to come out at night. Besides, the whole lighted area looks so beautiful. It was a risk worth taking.

All the lighting arrangements on this scale would not have been possible without the generous support of Sri Aurobindo Ashram and IN-TACH, not to mention all those unnamed individuals who made their quiet contribution in one



way or another.

You will also be happy to learn that after seeing the beautiful lighting arrangement in the Ashram area, many commercial establishments and residents in the southern part of the White Town have paid and installed similar lanterns on their walls and if all goes according to plan, IN-TACH, which has obtained the necessary funding from the Central Government will be installing similar lanterns all over the white town and many other streets beyond the canal as well. Hopefully, we should have beautifully illuminated streets by the end of 2018. These will be a unique gift on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of our Centre of Education and Golden Jubilee of Auroville, both organizations which have quietly played a major role of late in the area of energy-efficient aesthetic public lighting and the solar energy sector of Pondicherry. ❧

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*Machinery is necessary to modern humanity because of our incurable barbarism. If we must encase ourselves in a bewildering multitude of comforts and trappings, we must needs do without Art and its methods; for to dispense with simplicity and freedom is to dispense with beauty. The luxury of our ancestors was rich and even gorgeous, but never encumbered.*

**Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 17: 125)**



# SAICEIANS' ANNUAL PICNIC IN LONDON

*Sunayana Panda '79*

London has a large number of former students of our School and that too since the 1970s. Those who moved here 40 years ago were in close contact with each other but over the years there has been a steady trickle of young SAICEians moving to this city who have not even heard of the older ones. London being a big city, even for those who know each other it is not that easy to meet up. This means that there are still many who don't know each other.

In 2007 a blue plaque was put up on the house where Sri Aurobindo had lived in his school days. Although many of our former students were aware of this fact they had never actually seen it. So from 2010 I have been organising an annual get together in summer which fulfils both the needs – we get to see each other and everyone gets to see the famous house.

In the story of Sri Aurobindo's life, this house is inevitably connected to his school. It was taken on rent in the vicinity by old Mrs. Drewett so that Sri Aurobindo and his brother could go to St. Paul's School. The visit to the house would not be complete without visiting the site of the old St. Paul's School. The school moved from that site to its present one in 1968 and the old school was demolished. Now there is a block of flats there but fortunately a small part of what used to be the courtyard at the entrance is still as it used to be. Now it is a little park and it is called "St. Paul's Open Space".

This small park was our inevitable choice for the meeting place and picnic. It gives us a place to sit down and relax and chat with each other before we go to the house. Picnics used to be an important part of life in SAICE so we are all

happy to relive those moments of fun. The only problem is the weather. Very often the weather is cloudy and sometimes the summer rains threaten to come down on us. But in all these years only once have we had to get up and run for shelter. Each one brings something and the shared lunch



is always delicious with a mixture of Indian and English food.

The picnic time is also when we get to know each other. The group is always a different one with only a few who are regulars in every get-together picnic. Sitting down together with our friends and families we have the time to introduce ourselves and make new contacts. While the adults chat the children can play in the open space under the trees. Unfortunately, we never manage to have everybody and those SAICEians who live in the UK but not in London can rarely join us.

With every picnic we improve as we learn from our mistakes. I remember the first picnic we had when I had thought of everything from the food to the plates and glasses but had forgotten to

take a cloth to put the food on. That year Shubha Roy was in London and had joined us. Fortunately, she had had the practical sense to bring a large sheet which became the “nappe”. Since then I remember to pack a sheet into the picnic bag and also several smaller plastic sheets for us to sit on.

In fact, the park is not the only place that is still there from the old school. There is also the splendid Highmaster’s House which is now renovated and turned into a hotel. We usually take the time to walk around it and admire it. We know that when Sri Aurobindo was a pupil at St. Paul’s the Highmaster used to give private lessons to weak students. When Sri Aurobindo first joined the school he was given extra lessons in Greek by the Highmaster because at that time he was weak in that subject. Those sessions of extra lessons could have been held at the school in the Highmaster’s office but they could have also taken place in his house. During the first few picnics we have seen this house when it was abandoned and covered in ivy, the windows boarded up. Now we see it beautifully restored and furnished.

When the picnic is over we walk to the house where Sri Aurobindo used to live which is about twenty minutes from the park on foot. In the latter part of the 19th century this distance would have been considered normal for a young boy to walk as walking to places was a part of life. And Sri Aurobindo would have covered this distance twice every day to go and come back from his school. As we walk down to the house we generally form smaller groups and continue our conversations. We have the chance to give all the latest news of the Ashram to those who haven’t visited Pondicherry in a long time.

When we reach the house I usually give the

group some information on how blue plaques are installed and what the rules and regulations are about who is eligible for it. I also narrate some of the incidents that happened when Sri Aurobindo and his brothers were living there. After that we have the customary group photo session. As the road is a quiet one we have all the space to ourselves and rarely has anyone come out of the house when we are there.

Then we walk back to the Hammersmith tube station. The road from the house to the tube station has changed bit by bit over the last seven years. Now there are a few cafes and an ice-cream shop. This year we found that a new cafe called “Chai Naasto” has opened and it sells Indian snacks, as the name suggests. So it looks like there will be a stop on the return path between the house and the tube station next year. This year we made a halt at the ice-cream shop.

We always say goodbye at the Hammersmith tube station which is also our starting point where every year we meet at the same cafe at the



same time. London has changed a lot since Sri Aurobindo lived here but once a year we have the opportunity to remember that time in the company of those who love him. ❧

## VASANT-BHAI

*Ramakant Navalkar*

**S**hri Vasant Kulkarni, who was an inmate of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry for 6 decades, passed away on 13th July, 2017. He had joined the Ashram at the age of 28.

He was born in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India, in a Maharashtrian family on 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1929. How and why he left his family and came at the feet of the Mother is not known to me.

He was given work in Ashram's medical service to assist Dr. Nripen-da. He worked as a compounder of medicines; he also maintained accounts, managed the ordering and purchasing of medicines etc. In the Ashram community he was known for his loving and warm personality. He welcomed all and always strived to serve all.

I came to know him in the year 1960 when I visited the Ashram for the first time. Five years later I joined the Ashram and my friendship with Vasant-bhai became more intimate. When he was 66 years of age and I was 63, we were both having some health-related difficulties. He used to come cycling for work from his house which was about a kilometer away. Although my house was relatively closer to my work-place (Drawing Office), as my room was on the second floor, I had to climb steep staircases. I was suffering from dizziness and sometimes vertigo.

A room was unoccupied in the house behind the Ashram. Vasant-bhai and myself approached the trustees of the Ashram for getting that room, separately and unknown to each other. Vasant-bhai had approached Harikant-bhai, while I had approached Albert-bhai.

Harikant-bhai (the Managing Trustee) did not know that I had approached Albert-bhai for the room. Harikant-bhai allotted the room to Vasant-bhai, while Albert-bhai informed me that I could get that room, after the repair work was over. One day, both Vasant-bhai and myself went to see the progress of the repair work. We were surprised to meet each other there. I was wondering, who would get that room? Two claimants for the same room!

One fine morning, Harikant-bhai called me and gave me the key of the room. It was in the year 1995. He told me that Vasant-bhai had met him and requested him to give the room to me, as my problem of dizziness was more serious than his problem then. What a magnanimity of character!

The Divine Mother who was smilingly watching from above, soon arranged that a good room was made available for Vasant-bhai, very near my room and the Ashram. ❧







# QUIZ TIME!

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

1. In which year was the computer centre started in SAICE?
2. Who taught classical ballet to the students of SAICE in the 1960s and 70s?
3. What activities were organised to keep the students engaged during the school holidays before 1973?
4. Who played the role of Aslaug in the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1975 performance of Sri Aurobindo's play *Eric*?
5. What is the Mother's significance of begonia flowers?

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## ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF THE MAY-AUG 2017 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?*

At that time (1952) the School building consisted only of what is now the southern side. The entire northern part which faces the Ashram Main Building was a residence for Ashramites. The main entrance of the School was the South-Western gate.

2. *In which year was the Dancing Hall built?*

Probably in 1960. We know that the drawings for the construction were made in 1959.

3. *Sunil-da, the musician, was a teacher at the School before taking up music as his full time activity. What subjects did he teach?*

He taught Botany, Mathematics and Astronomy.

4. *In which department of the Ashram was Kireet-bhai working before he became the registrar of the School?*

The Ashram Library.

5. *What is the spiritual significance of the cherry blossom?*

Smile of Beauty.



# CLASS OF 2017



Back Row (L to R): Srimukunda Bandreddi, Mrityunjay Sathyanarayanan, Sandeepan Sharma, Suryaprakash, Ajit Kumar Datta, Vigneshkrishnan, Anshul Sinha, Rishav Ghosh, Kripanshu Vora, Aniket Rath  
 Third Row (L to R): Vinay Khare, Hari Ramakant Sharma, Utsarga Mondal, Anwesha Behera, Prakatan Panti, Dibya Dutta, Debayan Bhattacharjee, Argha Kumar Biswas  
 Second Row (L to R): Priyanka Bardhan, Ashish Garg, Kittu Reddy, Jhumur Bhattacharya, Manoj Das Gupta, Arati Das Gupta, Swadesh Chatterji, Dilip Mahtani, Poojarani Sahoo  
 Front Row (L to R): Pavitra Ellappane, Meera Chikermane, Rimita Roy, Shubhangini Ghosh Dasidar, Susmita Bhattacharjee, Kousiki Lalitika Patnaik, Sanjana Banik, Nihadlini Kumar, Maya Mima