

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



MY UNFORGETTABLE TEACHER

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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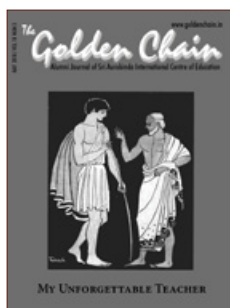
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On the Cover:

A depiction of Telemachus and Mentor in the Odyssey.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

The School was opened in 1943 and the Mother left her body in 1973. For exactly thirty years she guided its every activity in every detail. The very first teachers were chosen among the sadhaks who were already there. As time went by some others who joined the Ashram were given the work of teaching at the school and there were also those who finished their studies and became teachers. Some, like Padma who came from Switzerland, trained the younger lot who were starting out and others developed their own method of doing things in the new path that the Mother was charting out.

The teachers, with their sincerity, were the instruments that were needed to put the theories and ideas of integral education into practice. Whether they were good as teachers or not is not the point. The most important point is that they were doing their sadhana and were working on themselves towards a greater perfection. Having chosen the path of inner self-perfection they were already out of the ordinary and that itself gave a special dimension to their work and that again created a special relationship between teacher and student.

Much of our personality is formed in childhood and teenage years. And those who are around us at that time fill up our minds and hearts. In this way they make us who we become. When we are children and teenagers our faculty of intuition is keenly awake. We “catch” things, “pick up” vibrations and absorb unspoken information that is around us. In the Ashram it was this intuitive way of learning, by absorbing the vibrations from the people who surrounded us, that enriched us.

Gauri-di was my teacher when I was 10 years old. In fact, she kept the same group for two consecutive years. I cannot remember any particular grammar rule she taught me or any particular poem or story. But I can so clearly remember her beautiful saris and the jasmine she wore every day

in her hair. But most of all I remember her kindness and her deep attraction to beauty. Just being with her for those two years we learned the value of kindness and also the value of beauty.

I also remember that she used to ask us to go and wash our mouth every time we uttered a “bad” word. How bad can a “bad” word be when you are 10 or 11? Even so, we had to wash our tongue at the little wash basin near the Art Room where older students washed their brushes. This made us understand that bad language is as dirty as physical dirt. It made me sensitive to the fact that words carry vibrations which can change the atmosphere around you. Nearly 50 years have passed since then but the lesson remains engraved in my mind.

We all have some special moments, some life lessons that we absorbed from an unforgettable teacher. These become the lessons that we then pass on to others who are younger than us. And in this way one teacher's influence can go very far.

We had requested our friends to write about their “most unforgettable teachers”. A few people have sent us their memories and we have published them this time. We are renewing this request because we would like to continue this series all through this anniversary year.

SAICE in its essence is the philosophy of life that the Integral Education prepares us for. Every element of this school can be replicated elsewhere (yes, in theory even the physical education programme we have can be recreated elsewhere in today's world) except the immersion in a spiritual community that SAICE is privileged to have. And that is what makes this centre of education so special. It is the teachers and the captains who become the bridges between the Ashram and the students.

With the passing of Arati-di in June this year we feel that one of those bridges has gone away forever. It has taken away a point of connection we had to the times when the Mother was present among us in her physical body. ❧

A GAP IN MY EDUCATION

*Based on her current training and her personal experience during her school years, **Lopa Mukherjee '94** makes the case for a students' counsellor and training in child psychology and emotional empathy for teachers.*

Like all of us, I studied in the Ashram school in Pondicherry, one of the best schools in the world. Our subjects included the usual ones offered by other schools, plus more, such as how to care for fish in an aquarium. Our sports facilities were approaching Olympic standard. In addition, we had all sorts of extra-curricular activities we could pursue, from music and dancing to stage lighting and architecture drawing. The only obstacles were one's interest and time — not money, or family constraints. There was even an option for a student to drop out of academics and become, say, a car mechanic. This spread of opportunities is unthinkable in any other institution, but was possible in our school as it is an integral part of the Ashram community. Students could join any department if they wanted to learn vocational skills.

These facilities were not all. There was an underlying philosophy that education was for the sake of the joy it brings. And that we were here to develop our faculties, not learn formulae. We never had to learn anything by rote just to pass exams. Once you know how to think rationally, and have understood the principles, you can derive the formulae. In physical education too, we were trained to develop our muscles, become conscious of the body, treat it respectfully. We were not playing games to beat one another, but to nurture a sportsman spirit. When we were injured, doctors cared for us. We did not have to worry about money for health needs, and for most other needs.

It was almost heaven, yet not free of suffering

— the suffering that comes from inter-personal relations, from misaligned expectations, from our imperfect state. All the pain points crowded around the emotional being. This part is hardest to tame, but the greatest ally once it cooperates. There should have been some vital education, along with mental and physical. There were some unstructured instructions we picked up as we grew. But a lot of learning came the hard way. It was like having to figure out calculus when all you were taught was algebra. As I look back, more than a couple of decades after completing school, I see some gaps in my upbringing. I would like to share them, not to critique, but because I think these can be easily bridged. And also, because I care deeply for the Ashram community, which I call home, where I return regularly and join in its activities. If these are gaps in the Ashram school, we can be certain they are in most other schools.

In my “outside” life, I have gone through some courses on social psychology, behaviour management, and other related “soft skills”. I have worked in volunteer organizations, including healing groups. I have interacted with counsellors and am training in psychology. These have given me material I want to take back home, to the Ashram school and community. But these observations are relevant for any group of people. The aim is to make our collective life a happy and progressive enterprise.

Let's admit we cannot escape people. We all go through phases where we would love to live completely isolated from any human interaction, and thus save us a lot of pain. But that simply cannot last. To satisfy our basic material needs we need



to interact with people. Then there are emotional needs and the exchange of energy between people that neither television characters, nor a robot can satisfy. To add to it, Integral Yoga urges us to bring down all the good things we discovered above into our outer life. If we don't, the very first person we meet will test our newly learned yogic poise. So, the descent follows the ascent and we need to carry society along with us. In turn we are carried along, by those who are marching ahead, maybe in another direction. Jugal-da (Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, the former head of Knowledge) wrote a book on education, *Principles and Goals of Integral Education*. Its foundation is Sri Aurobindo's seven principles of education, one of which is vital education. Jugal-da says, "Yet it is an axiomatic truth that the education of the intellect divorced from the perfection of the moral and emotional nature is patently injurious to human progress".

There were moments, especially when I was a teenager, when I did not have anyone I could talk to about problems I was going through. I heard that when the Ashram was small, children and teachers wrote to the Mother and she helped them. We can read her answers, and so we did. We listened to her recorded conversations. But when it is not your current problem, the lessons often do not get internalized. The community certainly had wise and kind people, but at the time I did

not know them. Those I interacted with most did not evoke trust, because I heard them pass judgmental comments, or draw conclusions without investigating. When you are sure a person will not belittle you, nor spread your secret, you can trust them. If they have also proven to be wise, you can seek their advice. In some schools, at least in the West, there is a counselling psychologist who plays this role. The counsellor's profession demands that they treat every person with respect and not share anything told to them in confidence. The counsellor works with the student, over many sessions if needed, and has a profound impact on the student's entire life and thinking. The coming of age years are crucial in forming the personality.

We had a wonderful children's library full of books from the Golden Age of children's literature. These books had role model characters. Even the young heroes felt deeply and took us along in their emotional journeys. They dealt with difficult people and situations and triumphed over evil with their power of goodness. The films we were shown were thoughtfully chosen to keep us morally upright. We did not mingle with people outside the community, nor did we go to public places outside. Those were early days of television, so entertainment was scant, and that too well censored.

But we did interact with each other, with teachers, guardians and the community at large. Some interpersonal interactions brought pain. Maybe the perpetrator had no idea how much it hurt the victim. If a child hears, "You are stupid" from a teacher, it stays with her for a long time, way beyond childhood. When a teacher is labelled "bad", students get prejudiced by it. There was, I feel, this tyranny of labels in our small community. Which was a big reason we never sought out psychological help. What if our secrets are spilled and we get taunted for being "weird"? I remember the "mad" label being used casually, as if it was a joke, like calling someone "lazy" or "rude".

A rational person can try to be unbiased, but there is no guarantee he will succeed. This is because of the way our mind works. It is not a pure instrument. It goes by hunches and filters out

data that disproves these hunches. Say you think someone is arrogant. You will interpret the way she looks, the way she talks, the way she smiles as arrogant. If her movements were watched by someone who thought her to be kind, the very same gestures would seem compassionate to them. So, to be second-chance givers, we have to be vigilant about our own biases. One way to do it is to imagine you were the counsellor. You would need to be non-judgemental to start with. It is a great way to practise equality. Then you would need to be encouraging. Positive thoughts increase well-being, just as negative thoughts decrease it. I have some memories of being ill-treated by my male peers, and having no teacher I felt I could take refuge in. I felt some would not believe me because they had a different impression of these boys. If there had been a safe place for me to seek help, I would have felt so much better. These childhood insecurities stayed with me for decades, or perhaps even now my subconscious responses stem from those experiences.

When I stepped into the outside world, one of the first things I noticed was how well I was being spoken to by my peers. At first, I felt confused, wondering what I had done to merit it. Then I realized this is how people spoke. We grew up speaking rudely to each other. Even teachers sometimes did not get respect. I was myself guilty of it. I want to believe we did not do it out of malice. It was just that nobody took us aside and taught us polite speech. Since many adults spoke bluntly, we thought it was the norm. Of course, it is better to speak the truth than be sweet liars. But it is better still to speak it sweetly. I cannot say we were honest all the time and spoke the truth. However, I think whatever many of us spoke came out bluntly. By the time we were young adults, some had become thick skinned, and some suffered quietly. There were also some bullies, who did not get scolded. The victims sometimes did not have anybody who would stand up for them. I felt there were times when teachers and captains got bullied too, and perhaps passed it down sometimes.

Some of us close friends discussed our problems, guardedly though. I can say for certain many

students I knew would have profited greatly if we had a counsellor. As I interact with students now, I feel the problem has only become more acute. Children these days have to deal with much more than us because of the electronic revolution. Censorship hardly exists. Films, serials, news media are everywhere – violent, graphic, demanding attention. Consequently, the human being has become more complex, which means interpersonal relations are more challenging. Communication channels have multiplied and money plays a bigger role. Old and young, both are inundated with outside world influences.

In my day, and perhaps now too, older people expected to be respected by younger folk. I agree, youngsters should talk to them politely, behave respectfully, help them physically when required. But older adults should also be vigilant not to impose their own opinions as this gives students no latitude to differ, to have some other outlook on life. This hierarchy of age is more common in Eastern societies. It hurts a growing child who wants to experiment with ideas. It defeats diversity. It creates a compliant new generation that cannot innovate. This is what Sri Aurobindo lamented as India's *tamas*. To defeat this, I would suggest a training programme for adults. Ashram has adult classes, which is already a progressive step. Emotional training would just be one more class. And when offered in the Ashram, it would be aligned with spiritual values and goals.

One may think, unless a person goes through a troubled situation in life, emotional training will be theoretical. It is true you can start practising a solution immediately that fixes your current problem. To set in a new behavioural pattern you need to practise it. Changing one's behaviour is not easy. Many researchers spend their entire life coming up with solutions. For example, a person was belittled. He then meets a counsellor to find out the truth of that criticism. As a result of analysing the situation, he is taught to develop self-esteem and put others' comments in the right place. Practice changes behaviours, ways of thinking, and even one's outlook on life. But we have latent problems that are now our second nature. We may not even acknowledge they exist in

us. But when we shine the light of knowledge on them, we will discover their hiding places. Then we will want to work on them, immediately. We all have these – problems of insecurity, lack of surrender, of love, of accepting others, and so on.

Knowledge is power. Some basic psychological training is very helpful for all situations. We can make better choices in life if we have these tips handy. In the long run, we can become better persons, and choose our friends wisely. For example, suppose you were told that there were three types of people in the world – givers, takers and matchers. Let us see how it would change you. Givers are people who help others without expecting anything in return. Volunteers are givers. I have worked in volunteering organizations, and I can say it is a pleasure being with them. They have a kind heart, are full of enthusiasm to serve, and you can soak in their surplus energy. Takers are the opposite. They ask for help shamelessly, but never return it. They are people who suck your energy, are seldom grateful for the help they get, complain and find fault. The matchers are those who keep a balance sheet. They make sure they return a favour, and if they have helped, they expect you to return the favour. These are the ones who will sniff out a taker and avoid them. If an organization has more takers than the rest, it is doomed to fail. The more givers there are the better. So, after this training, would you not want to consciously observe your interactions with people and make a shift to becoming a giver?

Another way of slicing people is as multipliers or diminishers. Multipliers are those who

enable others to progress. They encourage, they give materials you can use, suggestions you can consider. They don't push their ideas onto you, they give you space and time to grow. Diminishers demotivate you, withhold information, show that they are superior to you. There are accidental diminishers – those who don't know they are

discouraging people around them. These can be over-enthusiastic people, full of ideas that stifle your independent thinking, giving so much help you feel smothered. If you knew these behavioural pitfalls would you not save yourself from falling into them? Mother has asked all to be optimists. You create an atmosphere around yourself, in which you are steeped and others can bask in it. If you walk into the aura of a pessimist you would suddenly feel defeated, full of hate for people.

Another way of classifying people is as introverts and extroverts.

There is nothing right or wrong about these two. But many societies are prejudiced against introverts. Since these are people who have secrets, extroverts feel uncomfortable with them. But if you have an inner life, you will have moments of introversion. Suppose you went through a training that discussed personality types in an unbiased way, would you value extroverts over introverts? Knowledge is the key to a better life. And if a society has knowledge resources, these should be shared to benefit all. Luckily the Ashram community has resources to facilitate classes – teachers, classrooms, and recording devices and websites to reach those who cannot make it to the classes.

If my friends and I had to acknowledge a



counsellor in our youth, it would be Kishor Kumar, Rafi, Hemanta... or more aptly, their songwriters. The singer empathized with us when we were hurt. He told us the exact thing we wanted to hear when we were misunderstood – “*Kuchh to log kahenge...* don’t take to heart what people say, even Sita was criticized by them”. We consoled each other with “*Yeh kya hua...* don’t worry about it; it was made of glass, surely it wouldn’t last”. When needing some spirit-lifting we sang, “*Zindagi ek safar hai suhana...* life is a beautiful journey”.

Having a human mentor, though, who is willing to listen and be non-judgemental can make a huge difference. When one of my classmates started performing badly at school all of a sudden, whisperers said she was becoming lazy, keeping wrong company and so on. She did not trust any teacher to whom she could explain her situation. Only after many humiliations did she tell her close friend there was a family crisis. Why didn’t a teacher ask her what was bothering her? Elders are sometimes ready to pronounce a person aberrant, but who would help a child if not them? Their superficial comments hurt the child. It makes children ashamed of themselves and diminishes their self-confidence. If we look under the hood, we find human goodness has many

faces, not all of them recognized by society, which is dominated by group-think. It is always the individual that leads society. Often he feels “social drag” that hampers his march ahead. He may have become a new person, but society hangs on to his past image.

Teachers and parents who, through training, better understand different personality types, better understand child psychology, are much better placed to help children. The mistaken belittling and labelling will not occur. Thousands of inter-personal conflicts can be resolved. Many adults will not carry childhood wounds.

Back in the days there was a hesitation about seeing a counsellor, but that was when society passed snap judgements on mental issues. Now, it is indispensable for a healthy collective living. It is also a responsible habit to be informed about such matters before interacting with people. If you have made contact with your inner guide, it is teaching you these facts. You don’t need anybody else’s training or advice to behave the right way at all times. You become a source of healing to others who interact with you. But for the rest, who are still suffering and unknowingly making others suffer, these two additions in life would mean much – a counsellor and a training programme. ❧

VITAL EDUCATION – FIRST STEPS

To become conscious of the various movements in oneself and be aware of what one does and why one does it, is the indispensable starting-point. The child must be taught to observe, to note his reactions and impulses and their causes, to become a discerning witness of his desires, his movements of violence and passion, his instincts of possession and appropriation and domination and the background of vanity which supports them, together with their counterparts of weakness, discouragement, depression and despair.

Evidently, for this process to be useful, along with the growth of the power of observation the will for progress and perfection must also grow. This will should be instilled into the child as soon as he is capable of having a will, that is to say, at a much earlier age than is usually believed.

In order to awaken this will to surmount and conquer, different methods are appropriate in different cases; with certain individuals rational arguments are effective, for others their feelings and goodwill should be brought into play, with yet others the sense of dignity and self-respect. For all, the most powerful method is example constantly and sincerely shown.

The Mother (CWM, 12: 21-22)

HEART QUAKE

Ishita Deshmukh '04 tells us about her debut novel

Heart Quake is your debut novel. Can you tell us a little what it is about and how you began writing it?

It's a love story situated during the Bhuji earthquake in 2001. That year, I was in E.A.V.P. 6, in the Free Progress section and was taking a one-on-one creative writing class with Priti-di. A few months after the disaster (which had struck on 26th January 2001), she asked me to write a love story (short story) with the earthquake as the backdrop. So, in truth, I did not have much of a choice about the subject. However, having said that, the setting is the most unique feature. In general, most love stories are set in a political crisis: war, terrorism, partition. In my story, the background is a natural disaster, one of the biggest in Indian history.

Anyway, years later, sometime in 2006-2007, while rummaging through my files, I found a printed copy of the assignment and decided to turn it into a novel.

How much has it changed since the first short story you wrote in class? How has your personal

growth over the years changed the novel?

It has completely changed. The short story was just the skeleton and as the years went by, I have been adding layers and layers, often a reflection of the shifts in my perspective, glimpses of my experiences while living alone in Chennai and of course my increased maturity.

My style was verbose, I loved to use several adjectives to describe a single object. I still do. But now, I feel, I am subtler and try to play with nuances. I am also more confident to write about many subjects that earlier I would not openly discuss.

The protagonist of the story is a strong woman. Was that a conscious choice?

Yes, it was. When I wrote the short story, I did not think about the central characters in this way, or if I did, I do not remember. But

while turning it into a novel, I made a conscious choice. I was very sure, I wanted the protagonist to be the woman and not the man. The emphasis would be on her journey, her choices and finally her decision.

I have always felt like that, perhaps because



A LUCID AND VIVID ACCOUNT

Swapna Dutta, well-known children's writer and regular visitor to the Ashram, reviews Heart Quake.

I was really happy when Ishita asked me to review this book because in a way I have been involved with it right from the time she told me about it and showed me the first few pages of her first draft. I liked the central idea, the unusual backdrop of the story and her way of telling it and felt sure that it would be a promising novel. I was interested – right from Ishita's publisher-and-agent-hunting stage up to the final editing – and kept tabs on her progress throughout the journey. Being an author myself, I could empathize with her initial nervousness, hope, moments of despair and the dizzy delight of the final stage of publication because I had gone through all of it myself. Although my books have been for children, the journey is the same.



I did not know the theme of the story because I had only read the first few pages but I enjoyed reading the book and felt it was a neat and well done job for a first-time author. The central theme of two people coming together, parting in anger, being estranged for years and then coming together once again is not a new idea, perhaps. But what makes the story stand out is the way it has been told, the backdrop which comes graphically alive and the many parallel themes that run side by side, giving it a completeness which is satisfying.

The story starts with the utter chaos in Bhuj caused by one of the deadliest earthquakes in Indian history. As the author puts it, "Without warning, the earth had staggered in a drunken stupor to shatter millions of lives.... family members, neighbours and friends scavenged with make-shift tools to save their loved ones, struggling to breathe under piles of debris."

I was never a meek, submissive person. At that time (2006-2007) there weren't many love stories written mainly from the woman's perspective, especially in India. This was a different, quite unique approach. I am also lucky that nowadays so many women-centric stories are being written and published, so I am not out of fashion.

As you have mentioned, your novel is set in Bhuj (Gujarat) after the massive earthquake in 2001. As your characters are doctors and nurses helping out in those circumstances, there are a lot of medical terms used. What kind of research did all this require?

Firstly, turning a short story into a novel is easier than writing a new one as the storyline is already set. But I needed much more information, many more characters and a longer story arc. So, I googled for articles in the leading newspapers which covered the disaster, choosing some incidents to include to retain some authenticity.

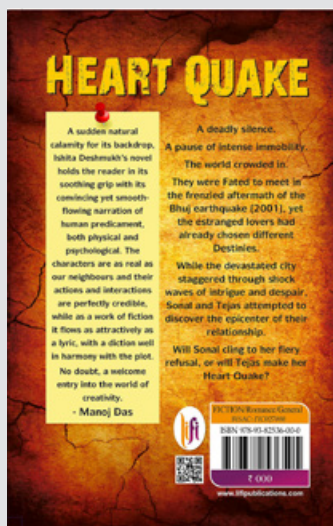
For the medical cases, I contacted a good friend, who is a paediatrician. He had gone to many camps, and his father owned a small medical centre in Uttar Pradesh. He helped me design cases and wrote down the treatments. I have detailed documents on all my research and have tracked where I used which information.

The world had come forward to lend a helping hand, setting up makeshift medical camps wherever possible, to help the injured and the dying. Amidst all this, the main characters of the story – a team of doctors, Vivek, Brijesh and Nilkant, and nurses, Sonal, Neelam and Pooja – pitch in to do their utmost to provide relief. Apart from offering her service Sonal has also come to look for her best friend Smita who used to live here. Things begin to happen when Tejas, another young doctor, joins the team. Sonal and Tejas, who had once been very close, had parted in anger 10 years ago and this meeting is a total accident.

In this devastated land and under the gruelling pressure of work the characters fight for the helpless and dying crowd as well as their own destiny. Will the one time ardour between Sonal and Tejas stand the test of time? Will they accept this unexpected meeting as a second chance and come together

once again? Apart from human involvements there is the shameful scam of spurious medicines causing havoc with human life. Will the perpetrator – who has sold his soul for money – be nailed? And will Sonal, hunting desperately in every camp, succeed in finding her friend?

What makes the book special is the lucid style of the author who shuttles between past and present, the grim setting and the characters with admirable ease and aplomb. The characters and the incidents are well developed, realistic and as vivid as if they were right before our eyes. I wish Ishita all success and a wonderful future!



Title of the book: Heart Quake

Author: Ishita Deshmukh

Publisher: LIFI Publications Pvt. Ltd.

No of pages: 255

Price: Rs. 295

While the book has a romantic theme, it makes the effort of going beyond the ordinary and finding some depth. Did your years in the Ashram influence you in this? Did you make any conscious effort to integrate something of the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's deeper understanding of things?

I had not incorporated it in my earlier drafts. But while talking to a few friends in Pondicherry, they suggested it, for like you mentioned, it would add greater depth. It is also something very unique to us, SAICE alumni and devotees. It could differentiate my book from the others.

So, I went back to my story-line, and chose

the places I felt needed an additional layer, a different perspective. I read up on death, power of detachment, positive thinking and other topics. Then I incorporated what the Mother has said in very simple basic terms, mostly through conversations.

It is said that an intense experience or something that touches deeply is what inspires writers. What is it that makes you feel like writing?

Any incident that triggers a memory, or catches my attention, however briefly, makes me feel like writing. Although, I have not been writing very regularly, I often feel the urge to do so,

but soon the moment passes and I get busy with my daily routine (I am too lazy to keep a diary, but that's my new resolution). I still remember this incident when I was travelling by bus in Singapore. I saw an abandoned trolley near a bus-stand, an unusual sight here, for the citizens are governed by numerous laws and they are too afraid to break them. Instantly, I wondered who had left it, and why. Was there an emergency? Did he live nearby? Would he come back to collect it? Was it forgotten because of an accident? And so on... It could very well have become a short story. This is just an example of how ordinary, often innocuous things constantly inspire me to write.

What have been the most challenging and satisfying aspects of the whole journey? What advice would you give budding first-time authors?

I believe the most challenging part of the journey has been finding a publisher and getting the novel published. The whole process is very arduous and time-consuming, especially for newcomers. The entire industry is extremely competitive, and with the emergence of digital platforms, enticing readers to walk into book stores (or to

online marketplaces) to buy paperbacks is hard. Young readers prefer Kindle (cheaper too), and so the printing industry has slowed down.

As opposed to the commercial aspects, the most satisfying bit has been writing the story, seeing it develop into something I would not have thought I could create.

I am a first-time author, so I cannot give any advice. But I can share that like all other professions this one requires patience and perseverance. Maybe a little more so. It is not enough to be creative or artistic, one also needs to understand the industry, learn its ways and then try to make one's mark. I am still learning and have a long, long way to go.

Your book launch took place on 6th June. Where is the book available now?

It is available on Amazon.in and Flipkart. We are trying to see if we can place them in book-stores too in future.

What are your plans for your next novel?

Currently, I am planning my next novel, which is a humourous take on several real-life incidents in my family history. ☼

THE INDIAN VISION

India has seen always in man the individual a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit. Always she has distinguished and cultivated in him a mental, an intellectual, an ethical, dynamic and practical, an aesthetic and hedonistic, a vital and physical being, but all these have been seen as powers of a soul that manifests through them and grows with their growth, and yet they are not all the soul, because at the summit of its ascent it arises to something greater than them all, into a spiritual being, and it is in this that she has found the supreme manifestation of the soul of man and his ultimate divine manhood, his paramārtha and highest puruṣārtha.

Sri Aurobindo, *A Preface on National Education* (SABCL, 17: 199)

SRI AUROBINDO... SRI AUROBINDO... SRI AUROBINDO...

Sunanda Poddar '55H remembers

Sri Aurobindo... Sri Aurobindo... Sri Aurobindo... With these words the whole huge hall of the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore vibrated with a special resonance.

It was 1985. SABDA had participated in the International Book Fair at Singapore. The fair was over, and the organisers gave me two passes to attend the banquet given in honour of all the participants.

Our practice at such fairs was to wind up the stall on the final day and leave for home. So I told those from the Singapore Sri Aurobindo Society who had helped me during the fair, "You can take the passes as I don't attend these parties."



I then went to spend my last day at my niece's house. When I told my niece about the passes for the banquet and how I had given them to my friends from the Society centre, she asked me where the banquet was to be held. "Some Shangri-la Hotel," I replied. Now she knew that all my time in Singapore until that day has passed at the venue of the book fair and I had not done any sightseeing or visited any special places. I was leaving Singapore the very next day. "Aunty," she said, "You must go to this banquet. The Shangri-La is a very special hotel and only grand events are hosted there. If for nothing else, go a bit early and see the water garden. It is unique, and as you love gardens, this is a God-sent chance."

So I decided to go, and my friends, who had the passes and were waiting for me outside the hotel, had procured another pass for me. As soon as we entered, the chief organiser of the event met me at the door of the hall and requested me to take the seat reserved for me at the VIP table up

front near the stage. My friends had seats with the group of other Indian participants. I felt awkward going to a VIP seat and requested that I remain with the other participants from India. Some of them smiled and whispered, "She does not know." I paid no attention and took my seat among them. They were enjoying the food and drink spread out on the tables.

Sharp at nine o'clock the stage lights went up. It was time to announce the awards for "special book display" won by various stalls. All eyes were diverted to the stage. They began with many formal thank yous to the participants who had come from more than 150 countries and an announcement of the venue for the next International Book Fair.

When they finally announced the awards, the first prize for special book display went to Germany. Theirs had been a huge stall with a really good display. Then time stood still for me: "Second prize to SABDA in the Indian pavilion for a beautiful display!" Someone touched my arm and whispered, "Mrs. Poddar, go." I stood up, climbed the four steps to the stage, all the time with the words "Sri Aurobindo Books" reverberating from every side of the huge hall. I was congratulated for the award and handed a cheque. I must have thanked them...

All the way up to the stage, while receiving the award, while coming back down and taking my seat, people were applauding, but all I heard were the words "Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo"—from the people around me, from the flower arrangements on the tables, from the shimmering lights of the thousands of bulbs in the crystal chandeliers. From every side, from everywhere, the words surrounded me.

Congratulations poured from all sides of the Indian-occupied table. It was a surprise for all of us. It was the very first award for SABDA at an International Book Fair. ❧

A ROSE-BUD'S SONG

by Prithwindra Mukherjee '58

Break the spider-veil around my being,
Alone beneath nocturnal frost I moan,
A deathless flame amid this agony
Invokes your pearly kiss, O Mother Dawn!

My waking soul athirst for your ecstasy
Desires to feel your fervent love supreme,
My frozen calix clasps me ever close:
In chill I shiver, but my cherished dream

Awaits to blossom in your sweetness' law,
My petals sing the coming of that hour
When in the sky shall smile your truth-vast face
And here on earth your love-lit crimson flower!



LOVE-PLANT

by Prithwindra Mukherjee '58

Love that grows in sky, and love
Growing in a rose
Gathers in my being's depth
Where a love-plant grows:

Branches weave in rapture green
Nest for a wingèd fire,
Roots of moon-dream chant a hymn,
A symphony sapphire.

Purple clouds and orange rain,
Breeze from solitude
Glide across my patient hours,
Thrill my autumn mood.

Grey in clod and darkness-moss
Tremble when from far
Ring the footfalls of my Love
Kissing every star.

Silver torrents burst from rocks,
Gazelles of gold-flame flee—
Rose and sky and my love-plant
Blaze in ecstasy.



LIGHT AND DARK

by Anurag Prasad '10

Leave me alone, be gone
Our journey together is done
Hide in your little dark corner
While I burn brighter than the sun!

You said it was the Light
That pulled you, drew you near
But now that same Light
You have grown to fear.

It was too much for you
O creature of despair
You could not face the Truth
You could not stand the glare.

You tried to turn me into
Something not so bright
So that we could be together
Children of the night.

But you could not lure me in
With your cigarettes and your beer
Because I was already high
And held my life too dear.

So then you tried to leave
A little darkness in my soul
But how could it survive
In someone strong and whole?

I now reject your lies
Your hollow laughter shun
Look into my eyes
I burn brighter than the sun!



A SONG FOR ALL SEASONS!

by Anjan Sengupta '78H

Spring a surprise on us in March
A fountain's spout to quench April's parch
May rains sing a mountain-tune
Interlude moderating a mercurial June!

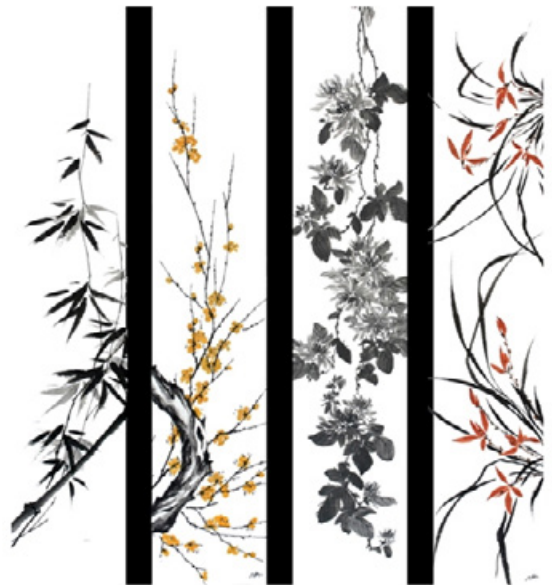
Rewriting lyrics in July and August
Come September to autumn's trust,
October there looks ever so coy
Eying dimpled smile of a birthday boy!

....And seasons whizzed past in motion
Like galloping trains rolling out of a station!
Seasons that came by and those still due
Changing moods in brighter hue!

Raindrops on my head in coastal south
Early November or thereabout;
Blessed showers from heaven
Invoked December to get even!

A nip in the air renewing January
Extended its freshness up to February,
The wind was on song with valid reason
Humming an anthem for every season!

Written while travelling from Pondy to Kolkata on 10.02.2017



UNFORGETTABLE TEACHER

At SAICE we shared a special relationship with our teachers and captains. Our interactions with them were informal, often friendly, and we felt we were all part of a larger Ashram family. A lot of the deeper and subtler values of the Ashram way of life were imbibed by the us through the example and influence of our sadhak-teachers. Some teachers and captains have even had a lasting impact on us. We asked some former students to share their memories of one such person. We would like to make this a regular column, at least during this 75th anniversary year of SAICE, and invite all of you to contribute your memories.

REMEMBERING YATANTI DI, WHO TAUGHT ME MORE THAN FRENCH

Soma Daly '94

A teacher always looks back on people who inspired his or her journey into the vocation. I feel privileged to have had a gamut of inspirational teachers

in SAICE whose work has been a constant influence in my own practice of teaching. One such stalwart was my French teacher in Knowledge – Yatanti-di. She lived a stoic and simple life, she used to wear shapeless, cotton tunic dresses which she perhaps made herself; she used to walk to Dining Room every day even in the sweltering heat to get her own food, and she worked as a teacher right upto the end. She was French, she was a brilliant teacher of literature but the most unassuming person, and to me she was one of the karma yogis in our Ashram.

Yatanti-di lived behind Lakshmi House in an old asbestos-covered shed. Her room was stark but impeccably kept. All I remember is books, a table and a chair, more books, an old, well-loved and well-used armchair, and even more books.

If I am not mistaken, one of her 'luxuries' comprised of a small table fan because I have a vague recollection of gently swaying curtains that divided the shed / house into her sitting room/ study

where we sat for lessons, and her bedroom / kitchen. She was good at keeping her personal life discreetly tucked away behind those old cotton curtains, and although we speculated a lot we never ever got a glimpse of what her real life was like.

During lessons she dominated our intellectual development and nothing else mattered. In that dark and dingy little room she taught us to lift our eyes to Du Bellay's ideal world, to respond to Baudelaire's '*Invitation au voyage*', to

explore Plato's notion of Truth and Beauty. She disclosed the ephemeral qualities of life and love in Ronsard's 'plea of *'carpe diem*' on looking at a fading rose, in Lamartine's lyrical anguish by a lake, and in Rimbaud's existential dilemmas in navigating through the sea of life. She showed us how to identify the main ideas of a work, evaluate



their links and relevance, analyse the structure and cadence, and provide a critical perspective. But most importantly, she taught us to respect our own ideas, reflect on them, and to work hard to put them clearly onto paper.

Lessons were always one to one by appointment and she expected quality work from us every time. Learning was our responsibility. Therefore there was no way we could get away with a *chalta hai* attitude regarding any reading or homework we were assigned. She was fierce if she thought we were not putting in the effort she expected from us. Her laser sharp eyes could see right through the most detailed excuses. She used to correct our books very meticulously, and that implicitly set the standards of her high expectations because we knew that her hard work demanded that we put in that little bit extra effort into our own work. When she saw good work she used to be so proud and pleased that we felt we were on top of the world.

She was passionate about French literature and her enthusiasm sparked my own interest in the subject. Almost twenty five years later, her lessons are still etched vividly in my mind, although the setting and the details have faded into background memory. I still remember her pointing at her rickety chair and ardently explaining that in du Bellay's world of *Idea* that chair exists as a perfect image. Years later, while studying sign, simulation and spectacle in far away Perpignan University, we were discussing Plato's cave and I remembered Yatanti-di's shining eyes as she expounded on the topic. I remember thinking at the time that she must be in that world of *Idea* right now, sitting on that perfect chair and smiling radiantly.

It was in my first year of teaching French that I heard she had passed away. Her loss made me realise what a difference she had made to me in and outside the class. I realised that I was trying to be the teacher to my students that she had been to me. And the more I reflected the more I realised that Yatanti-di was still teaching because she was present in my classroom. She was there whenever I supported a student in exceeding his/ her own expectations. Through me she was telling them

TEACHER NEEDS TO BE A YOGI

Teachers who are not perfectly calm, who do not have an endurance that never fails, and a quietude which nothing can disturb, who have no self-respect — those who are like that will get nowhere. One must be a saint and a hero to be a good teacher. One must be a great yogi to be a good teacher. One must have a perfect attitude to be able to exact a perfect attitude from the students. You cannot ask anyone to do what you don't do yourself. That is a rule.[...]

Those who succeed as teachers here — I don't mean an outer, artificial and superficial success, but becoming truly good teachers — this means that they are capable of making an inner progress of impersonalisation, of eliminating their egoism, controlling their movements, capable of a clear-sightedness, an understanding of others and a never-failing patience.

The Mother (CWM, 8: 353-354)

ATTITUDE TOWARDS A TEACHER

Sweet Mother,

What should our attitude be towards the captains and teachers here?

An obedient, willing and affectionate attitude. They are your elder brothers and sisters who take a lot of trouble to help you.

Blessings.

The Mother (CWM, 16: 405-406)

to do the best they can every time they submit a piece of work. I realised that my learning process as a teacher actually feels a lot like learning with Yatanti-di: to reflect critically on ideas and activities I put into the lessons, and to try and make the classroom that magical space where learning could be made vivid while everything else fades into the background. Like all teachers, I am still defining and refining my practice. I am grateful to have such a fine blueprint that has continued to influence me over the years. *Merci beaucoup, Yatanti-di!* ☿

A BRILLIANT TEACHER

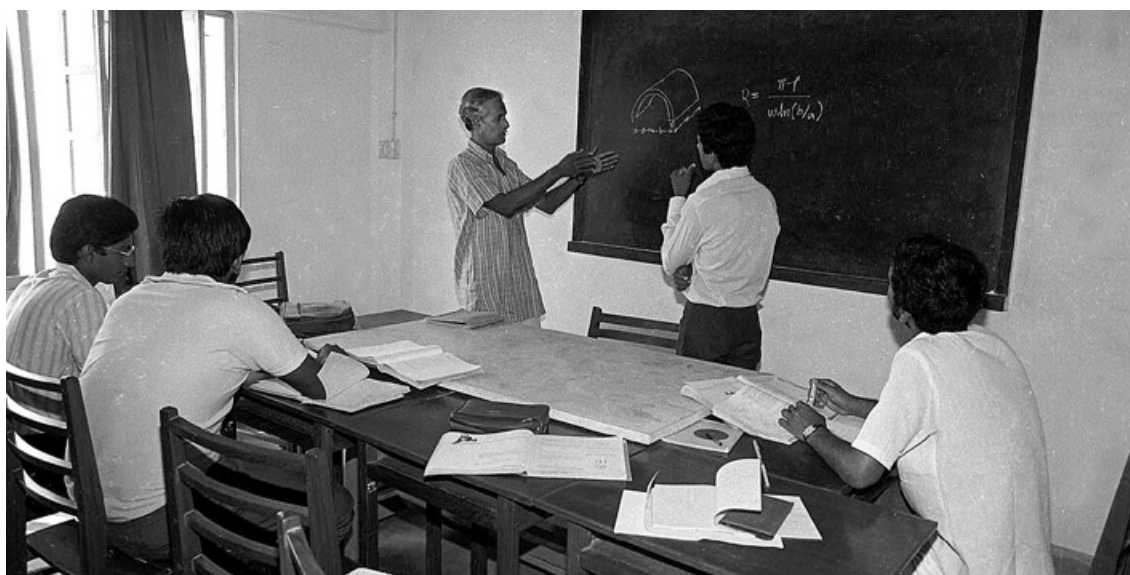
Shubha Tewari '84

There were so many memorable teachers in the Ashram who had such an important influence on me. But if I had to single out one, it would be Manoj-da, Manoj Das Gupta. He taught me maths and physics, and as I have often told others, he is the reason I am a physicist and physics professor today.

The first class I took with Manoj-da in school was geometry. The beautiful thing about Euclidean geometry (and which applies to mathematics in general), is that the edifice of this incredible theory is built on a few axioms. Manoj-da did not content himself with gradually revealing the structure to us, which is how mathematics is often taught — rather, he gave us the building blocks and asked us to build it ourselves. And so we proceeded to derive and prove theorems — discovering how things were linked, how a theorem could lead to a lemma and a corollary which further illuminated the hidden structure, asking ourselves, as mathematicians before us had done, what the next logical step would be. I remember struggling over a difficult proof and after finding inspiration later in the day, asking Manoj-da after group. That accessibility to our

teachers, and the ability to debate and exchange ideas with them was the amazing thing about my Ashram education.

After that first geometry course, I went on to do more maths and a year of physics in Knowledge with Manoj-da. The brilliance of his teaching style was that he always gave you a glimpse of the as-yet-undiscovered-by-us beauty that lay just beyond our current understanding, and made us appreciate why in Science we return again to the same ideas, those which we know, but with a more profound understanding, and this in turn allows us to forge ahead to what is not yet known. As a scientific researcher and teacher I have never forgotten this. But lest I give the impression that science and maths was all I got from him, I also remember that one of the most enjoyable things about being in his class was that on birthdays, he would read us stories from the giants of Bengali literature. So we heard “Durgesh Nandini” by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and “Balgupurur Roop Katha” by Badal Sarkar. Manoj-da showed me that it was possible to be all things at once — a lover of science and mathematics and theatre and literature and art. ❧



LEARNING NEVER TO GIVE UP

Auro Rekha Bhagavatula '10

Everyone has that one person who has made a huge impact in their life. I was lucky enough to have come across Parul-di.

I was as scared of her as anyone else would be when you first meet her because she is so honest that it is scary to be around her. Never would I have imagined that she would be my greatest inspiration.

I lived in Dortoir for the first 2 years of my school life and learnt a lot thanks to her and Koki-di. But the real story began once I joined B2 and Parul-di became my group captain. I was never very skilled at physical activities so being in B2 proved quite challenging. I was terrible at handstands, push-throughs, skipping, hurdles, rope-climbing and all the rest.

The first time we had gymnastics after I joined B2 was most memorable. She had my group for exercises after gymnastics (I was obviously in the last group!). When the time came to do push-throughs (which I was dreading), Parul-di began to count and started doing push-throughs with us: perfect posture and form, without breaking into a sweat in her neatly ironed captain clothes and her well-fit net. I had only heard these stories, but never had I seen her in action. I was awestruck. In that moment I knew she was exactly the woman I wanted to be.

As the first week progressed, I had to face my greatest hurdle..., hurdles. Parul-di asked me to jump over hurdles.

I said, "No, I can't. I have a fear of heights and I can't do it."

She then asked me, "Oh, so have you done this a 100 times?"

I said "No! Because I am scared of hurdles and heights, I always just walk through."

Then she sternly said "Do this a 100 times for a week, then tell me you can't. I will believe you then." I was speechless.

So I said, "all right" thinking that it was only one day in the week that I would have to, so no big deal. But I was wrong. She made sure I practised hurdles every day of the week till I could cross them. If we had swimming or games and were in Sportsground I was made to do hurdles. In the Playground she made a little something which was safe, had the height of hurdles and made me jump over it. She never left me alone and was there with me at every moment, cheering me on! At the end of the week I managed to jump. It was not great, but I jumped over the hurdles, and

did not walk over them. She called everyone to see me jump, people were there encouraging me, and I will never forget that experience. I may have dreaded it at that moment but the lesson I learnt was to never give up. And I try to follow it till date.

After that I wanted to overcome my fear of rope-climbing. I went every day after group for practice and she would come along to spot for me till 7:30pm! One after another, I ticked all the boxes of all that I couldn't do, and Parul-di was with me through it all. She was there to make sure that I learnt all the skills. I knew it was all worth it when she praised me for my determination. But now, when I think about it, it was not really my determination, but her belief in me and, in all honesty, her determination.

Parul-di has a special place in my heart. I cannot thank her enough but I would still want to thank her for everything she taught me. These are the lessons which are still carrying me through my day-to-day life. ☼



SUSTAINING THE SOLAR INITIATIVE

AN UPDATE ON THE ASHRAM'S QUEST FOR ENERGY SUSTAINABILITY

*In August 2012, Vikas '02 and Tejas '01 had shared with us a pilot initiative at the SAICE to achieve electricity self-sufficiency through energy efficiency and solar energy. Following the positive outcome of the pilot phase which was carried out from 2012 to 2014, a decision was taken by the Ashram in 2015 to replicate the learning from the pilot so that more Ashram buildings could shift from fossil-based electricity to cleaner alternatives. In May 2015, **Brahmanand '79** had reported in The Golden Chain about the pioneering research work being done in the Ashram with the setting up of grid-interactive rooftop solar power plants and group net-metering. Three years later, Brahmanand provides us another update on the continued efforts by the Ashram to sustain the initiative.*

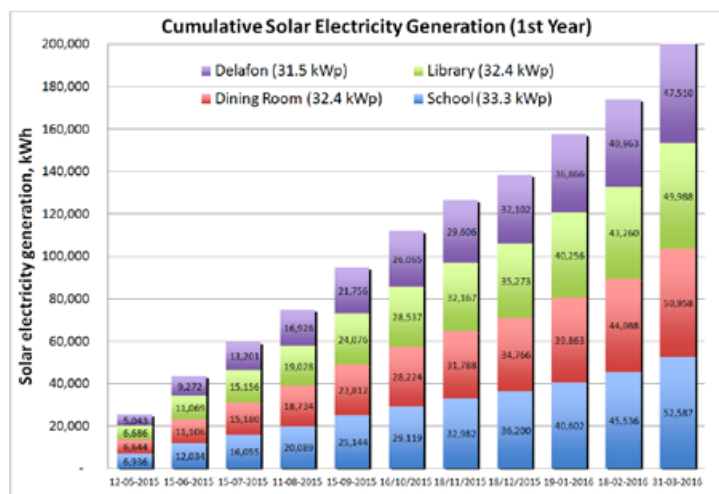
Grid-interactive solar power plants were commissioned on the rooftop of 4 Ashram buildings on 31st March 2015 (SAICE, Salle d'Art, Library and the

basis to assess their performance during the first year of operation. The solar electricity generation of the School, Library and Salle d'Art was roughly 3, 6 and 2 times their consumption, respective-

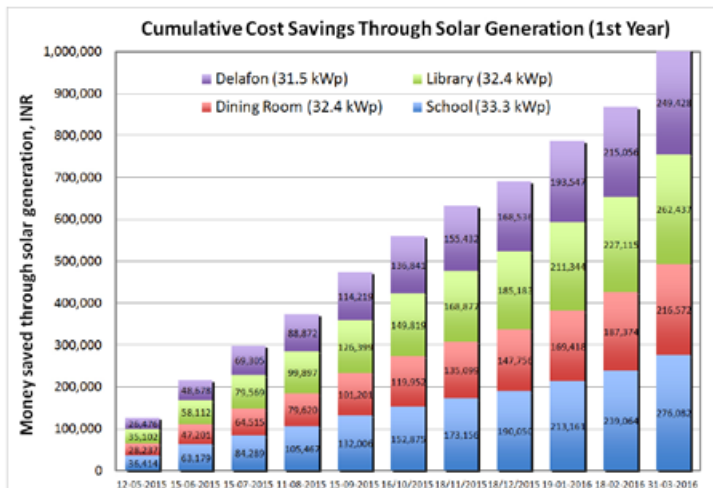
ly. The excess electricity generated from these buildings is helping to offset the electricity consumption of other Ashram buildings, such as the Nursing Home, Laundry, Gymnasium and the Archives. The energy and economic benefits are presented in graphical form.

A total of 207 MWh was produced in the first year, exceeding the initial target of 200 MWh. This solar generation is adequate to electrify 180 Indian homes. Based on the prevailing commercial electricity tariff of INR 5.25 per kWh, the Ashram was able to save over INR 1 million (10 lakhs) in electricity bills during the first year of operation.

The electricity tariff is being revised upwards every year; for example, the commercial tariff has been raised by 30% over the last 3 years (from INR 5.25 to INR 6.85 per kWh). Hence, the capital investment made on the solar plants in 2015 would be recovered well within 8 years whereas



Dining Hall) with a cumulative solar capacity of 130 kWp. As 20 kWp of solar power plants had been commissioned by the SAICE during 2012-14, the overall installed capacity stood at 150 kWp by April 2015. The energy performance of the 4 buildings was monitored on a continuous

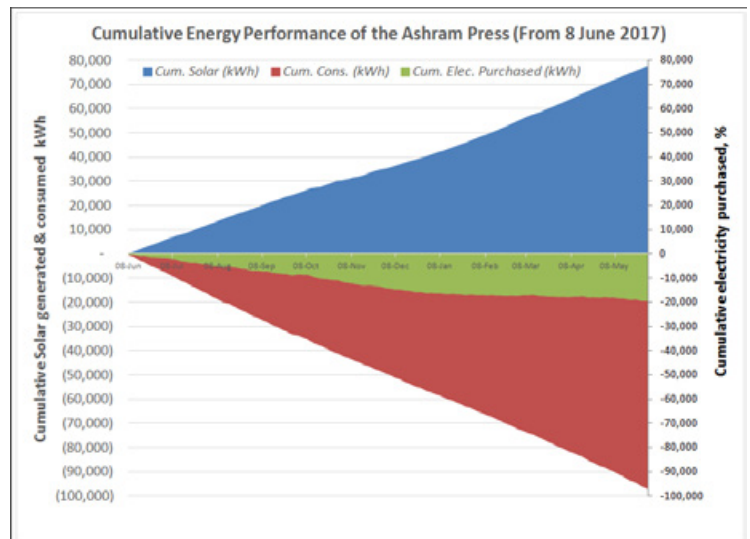


The data tracked over the first year of solar system operation show that while the PGH had consumed over 85 MWh of electricity, 68% of this demand was met by the rooftop solar plant (58 MWh), only 32% or 27 MWh being purchased from Puducherry Electricity Department (PED). In the case of SAAP, nearly 80% of the electricity consumption amounting to 97 MWh was produced by the rooftop solar power plant (79 MWh), helping the Press to avoid the payment of INR 0.43 million (4.3 lakhs) in electricity bills.

the solar systems are expected to function for at least 2 decades.

Encouraged by these results, it was decided to choose more buildings for replicating the experience. Energy audits were carried out in the Park Guest House (PGH) and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press (SAAP) in 2016 to assess the base line performances and identify the scope for reducing the electricity demand before going for solar. In both these buildings, inefficient lamps and air conditioners were replaced by state-of-the-art alternatives available in the market, reducing the electricity consumption by 25-30%. Fresh bids were invited early in 2017 for installing rooftop solar power plants on these two buildings. The Indian Government's commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement in December 2015 has had a very positive impact on solar power development in India, which is reflected by the downward trend in the capital investment required for solar systems. The rooftop solar power plants installed at the PGH (37.6 kWp) and the SAAP (50.2 kWp) were acquired almost at 20% lower cost than those purchased two years back. This time, it was decided to monitor both the real-time solar production and the electricity consumption of the two buildings, and the results are presented here.

To encourage domestic and non-profit entities to invest in rooftop solar systems, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has initiated a subsidy scheme which is channelized through the State Energy Nodal Agencies. The PGH was able to



avail this benefit through the Renewable Energy Agency of Puducherry (REAP), helping to lower the capital investment from INR 2.27 million to INR 1.63 million. This is reflected in the Return on Investment (ROI) for the solar power plant, as shown in the accompanying figure.

As expected, the ROI has been low during the cloudy and rainy periods of October to Decem-

ber, and exceptionally high during the sunny and clear-sky months of March and April. The average ROI for the first year was close to 23%, which is 3 times higher than the annual interest rate that one can expect from fixed deposits in a commercial bank in India.

Encouraged by the very positive outcomes in the case of PGH, it was decided to install solar power plants at other big Ashram guest houses. Accordingly, two new solar power plants were approved for the New Guest House (NGH) and the Cottage Guest House (CGH) in July 2018. While the 33.7 kWp rooftop solar power plant was commissioned at the NGH in September 2017, the installation of the 35.5 kWp solar plant at the CGH has been delayed because the actual power load was found to be much higher than that sanctioned by the Puducherry Electricity Department (PED). Measures have been taken to reduce the load to the



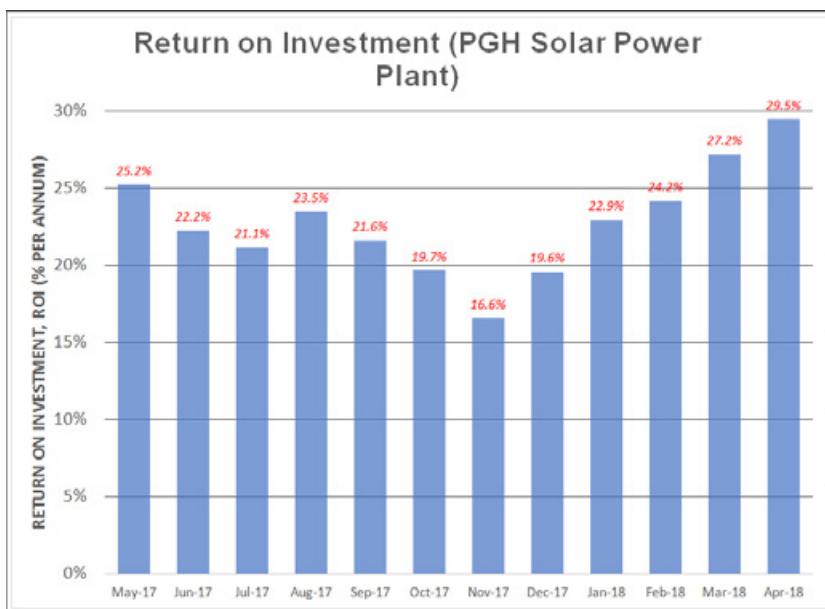
most of the electric geysers by an efficient and centralized heat pump to supply hot water in the guest rooms. After rationalizing the load, request has been made for getting PED approval before the commissioning of the solar power plant.

Following the completion of the construction work in the Ashram Dining Room, it was decided to enhance the rooftop solar installation there

so that all the electricity of the Dining Room could be met by solar power. A 35.5 kWp solar power plant was commissioned in January 2018, raising the total solar capacity at the Dining Room to 68 kWp. Similarly, a 30.6 kWp solar power plant was added to the rooftop of PGH at the beginning of April 2018 to enhance the total installed capacity to 68 kWp. As a result, 5 buildings of the Ashram have now become energy-positive, producing enough electricity not only to meet their own energy needs but also to export excess electricity

extent possible by replacing the inefficient lamps by energy-efficient alternatives and replacing

to the grid and offset the electricity bills of other Ashram buildings that do not have the necessary



shadow-free rooftop space to commission solar power plants.

The Mother had told Udar-da that fossil fuels represented our dead past and our future lies with the energy from the sun, which is the physical symbol of the Supramental. Keeping these words in mind and as a symbolic gesture, there was a proposal to set up a rooftop solar power plant for the main Ashram complex in 2016. Prior to the commissioning of the solar plant, a survey was done to assess the potential for reducing the electricity demand by replacing old and inefficient electrical appliances by more energy-efficient alternatives. It was then realized that the existing internal electrical network was not safe and



there was an urgent need to replace it in order to avoid any fire hazards. Almost 1.5 years were needed to plan, design and replace the old electrical network by a very efficient and well-protected system while ensuring that this did not affect the regular activities inside the Ashram. A 28 kWp



An aerial view of the solar panels on the Park GH rooftop.

solar power plant has been finally commissioned at the end of June on the rooftop of the buildings that are facing the Atelier.

So, the Ashram has successfully added another 250 kWp over the last 3 years to take the total installed capacity to 400 kWp. These solar plants will continue to silently produce over 620 MWh per year without polluting the environment and avoiding the combustion of 10,000 tons of polluting coal over the next 2 decades. While the Ashram continues its journey of energy sustainability by adopting more such measures in its buildings, an excellent example has been set for others to emulate in the State of Pondicherry and the rest of India. ❧

TWO ATMOSPHERES IN THE ASHRAM

There are two atmospheres in the Ashram, ours and that of the Sadhaks. When people with a little perceptiveness come from outside, they are struck by the deep calm and peace in the atmosphere and it is only when they mix much with the Sadhaks that this perception and influence fade away. The other atmosphere of dullness and unrest is created by the Sadhaks themselves — if they were open to the Mother as they should be, they would live in the calm and peace and not in unrest and dullness.

Sri Aurobindo, 15th March 1937 (SABCL, 26: 480)

AN OFFERING OF SRI AUROBINDO'S SONNETS

A report on the first cultural programme of the year celebrating SAICE's 75th anniversary

Many cultural programmes have already been presented for the 75th anniversary of SAICE but the first one was held on the morning of 6th January 2018 in the Hall of Harmony. As we all know it was on 6th January 1952 that the

for this occasion. So, to solve this problem usually the same programme which has been presented on 11th November, which is the Sanskrit Day, is put up once again on 6th January. As the Sanskrit Day is celebrated during the school holidays very few students get to see the programme.

However, this year being the 75th anniversary year, there was something special for the 6th January celebrations. A group of former students, directed by Sunayana Panda, presented a few sonnets of Sri Aurobindo, some of which were accompanied with dance movements. The recitation of the sonnets was intercut with music played by Bryce. The participants were Savita Srivastava, Bitasta Samant-ray, Vibha Shah, Arati



school, which from 1943 till then was inside the Playground, was relocated to its present premises. Giving it a new name "Sri Aurobindo International University Centre", the Mother inaugurated it by cutting a ribbon. Of course, some years later the name was changed to Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education.

Since then this anniversary of the school has been observed every year. For many years there has been a special programme in the 1st period of the day in the Hall of Harmony, in the way it is done on the day before certain Darshan days. But as 6th January falls just three weeks after the re-opening of the school after the annual holidays it is difficult to prepare any special programme

Mohanty, Anurekha Jhunjhunwalla, Anshul Sinha, Vignesh Krishnan and Vigneshwar Dundur.

There was a very fine atmosphere evoked by the poems and the music. The teachers and students who were present in the audience deeply appreciated the programme. Later Manoj-da said, "What a wonderful birthday present it was for the School!" ❧



A KATHAK PERFORMANCE FOR THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY

Debaleena Bhattacharjee '13

In a joyous celebration of the 75th year of S.A.I.C.E, students across sections, ranging from P1 to K3, collaborated with a few former students to stage a soirée of Kathak, the Indian classical dance, on March 16th 2018 in the School Courtyard.

At the very outset, Ila-di impressed upon us that the aim of the programme was to consecrate and offer our efforts to the Mother. Through our offering we would try to capture the spirit of Kathak — unfolding the various cadences, the subtle nuances, and the poetic pauses that come to life by the dancing feet adorned with tiny bells or *ghungrus*.

The word “Kathak” originates from the word “*Katha*” (story) and the dance form has been derived from the stories of *Kathakars* or story-tellers narrating episodes from Hindu epics, myths and legends. Most people typically ignore the spiritual roots of Kathak which date back to ancient India, long before the Muslim invasion period.

THE LESS-TRODDEN PATH

The field of dance, especially Indian classical dance, is generally perceived as a feminine activity, despite legendary dancers including Pandit Birju Maharaj (*Kathak Lucknow Gharana*) and Ila-di's guru, Pandit Sunderlal Gangani (*Kathak Jaipur Gharana*) and others proving it can be otherwise.

Similarly, in our institution, the number of boys joining Kathak is negligible in comparison to the number of girls. Ila-di was happy to make an exception to the norm and the programme began with a *Guru Vandana* performed only by boys – Samarpan Mondal '14, Utsarg Mondal '17 and Arpit Senapati '99.

INNOCENCE & EXPERIMENTS

This was followed by the young students – Sahana (P1), Shaznin (P1), Shreeya (P1), Anaya (P1), and Isha (P1), who have just begun their journey into Kathak – welcoming the audience by invoking Lord Krishna.





The children were natural in their portrayal of the naughty Krishna, and their immediate seniors, Asmi (E3), Anoushka (E5), Shinjini (E3), and Ritwika (K1) portraying *Yashodha* were also cutely convincing.

Mastery over technique allows the dancer to increase the degree of difficulty and a bold attempt was

made by Sukshma Poddar '06 who presented a *nritya* item on a plate or *thaali*.

ABHINAYA

It is said that “Through dancing you become a part of that One Great Harmony, the anklets quiver in joy dancing to His melody, if you are dancing for the Divine’s sake.”

Indian classical dances have two aspects – *Nritya* (the technique) and *Nritya* (the expression or *abhinaya*). In Kathak, the rendering of an *abhinaya* act emphasizes subtlety, spontaneity and naturalness to create the mood.

While portraying this aspect of Kathak through a tale of Radha and Krishna – the duo symbolizing the eternal bond between our souls and the Lord – I learned to synthesize grace, poise and speed in my movements.

My other act on the powerful Lord Shiva playing on his *damaru*, the creative source of sound and rhythm, was in stark contrast to the playful sweetness of Krishna; as a result, it instilled swiftness into my limbs.

Shiva is not complete without Shakti and a tribute to Goddess Durga was presented by Sanchari (K3) through a fusion rendering influenced by Bharatnatyam and Odissi while retaining the characteristics of Kathak.

THE BEGINNING

The concept of the programme, Singing Bells, stemmed from a bunch of present students wanting to perform “pure” kathak dance, something that has been a rarity in recent years. The aim was to demonstrate the unique and harmonious synthesis of the Hindu and the Muslim cultures which Kathak epitomises through graceful subtlety while retaining its emphasis on *Taal*.

The title of the programme was aptly chosen by Ila-di since Kathak and *ghungrus* share a special bond and are inseparable. Given the binding nature of *Taal*, Kathak also serves as a great teacher of mathematics since the dancer has to train and experiment on a large canvas of tempo ranging from the slowest of the slow (*ati vilambit*) to the fastest of speeds (*ati drut*).

ON A RHYTHMIC JOURNEY

Exploring this rhythmic versatility, Sukshma Poddar '06 and Ayushi Sharma '13 established the atmosphere with *Thaat* or *Amad*, (the Persian word for entry or coming), which corresponds somewhat to the *alaap* in Hindustani music. In slow tempo, the dancers glided gracefully and marked the *sams* by sharp turns of the head. The illusive nature of *Thaat* makes it look easy; in reality, it is one of the most difficult tempos to maintain.

Journeying through the canvas of tempo, Sanchari (K3), Priti (K2), Debaleena Bagchi (K2), Samanvita (K2), Ritwika (K1), Samarpan Mondal '14, Utsarg Mondal '17 and



Lucile (a current teacher of S.A.I.C.E) then presented group compositions stringing together various *todas* and *taranas* in *Madhyalaya* or medium speed; sharing a stage they learned to share a special synergy which fostered compassion, coordination and collaboration.

The hallmark of Kathak is its closeness to real life, which is reflected in the positioning of the body or even in the costumes. Despite the intricacy of footwork in breathtaking speed, the dancer has to maintain composure and grace.

The show reached its climax with a presentation on *Drutlaya*, wherein pirouettes (*chakkars* or *bhramaris*) and footwork (*tatkar*) were performed at a great tempo by most of the senior participants.

AN IMMERSIVE ECSTASY

The participants, of varied age groups, shared and collaborated in a rich journey; through trials, errors, and strong headwinds, many of them rose to the challenge and some even picked up an entire item in a very short span of time.

The children were a powerhouse of energy; they were always ready to dance on the stage each time they were called on to do so. During combined practices, they would be the first ones to take up their positions, ever ready for the cue music.

The dancers took up the challenge of maintaining the essential rapport between the *ghunghrus* and *taal* without a single lapse. The audience and the participants got to experience an immersive aesthetic enjoyment of rhythm. The programme received abundant appreciation, while there is always room for improvement.

The challenge lay in bringing out every fraction of the beat separately and clearly on the *ghunghrus* even during the fastest of speeds. The suspense was built up with each successive variation and escalating speed and was released in an ecstatic catharsis with the perfect arrival at the final pose.

We concluded the programme with the Mother's "Radha's Prayer" with all the participants bowing in a combined prayer – may our art find its completeness as a perfect Divine medium. ❧



ROG BILASHI

A Bengali adaptation of Molière's Le Malade Imaginaire was performed on 22nd January 2018 at the Theatre Hall by a group of theatre enthusiasts made up of former students, Ashramites, devotees, a student and a parent of students. The Bengali translation of the famous French play was done by Babu-da. Sunayana '79, who was one of the organisers and part of the cast, tells us about the experience.

How did you get the idea of staging an adaptation of Le Malade Imaginaire?

Some years ago Gautam Mitra, Subir (also known as Bablu) and I had acted in a Bengali adaptation of Chekhov's *The Bear*. The Bengali translation was done by Debranjan-da. That play was very much appreciated but it was just half an hour long. So I thought that an adaptation of a full length French play would be interesting. I asked Babu-da if he could translate the play and he agreed.



How long did you work on this play before the performance?

We must have worked for at least 5 months. We started rehearsing even before I received the whole text. Babu-da started translating the play but as he was busy with his classes and also not keeping very well, we got the first act in August, the next act in September and the last act in the

middle of November. So we started rehearsing Act 1 without the rest of the play in hand. Of course, I narrated the story to the whole cast so that everyone had an overall idea of what was going to happen.

What were your main difficulties?

The only difficulty was that we could not have a smooth time schedule for practice as all the actors were not always available. In November most of the cast was out of Pondicherry for the school holidays. Then Anjan had to leave Pondicherry for 3 weeks. Then when everyone was back we had exactly 3 weeks. Also, three of the actors were “non-Bengalis” so we had to practise a lot to get the diction right. I know from experience that if you wait for all the conditions to be right then you will never get anything done.

The play was very much appreciated. What were the elements that made this performance such a success?

There were many. Firstly, by Mother's Grace, we had a fantastic cast. Each actor was perfectly suited for the role he or she was playing. No one could have played the role of the “Malade” as well as Gautam Mitra did.

Monimala Bhattacharjee was perfect as Tuni (Toinette), Anjan was practically playing himself as the brother who gives good advice and represents the voice of reason. I had always wanted to play an evil woman on stage so I really enjoyed playing Beline who in the Bengali version was called Bilashini. Aravinda Pentela fitted the description of the character he was playing as if the role was written

for him. In this way each and every actor was just right. Apart from the casting we had the cordless collar microphones and this made every word of the play audible to the audience. The actors articulated their lines well so the dialogues were very clear. And this is essential for a comedy. The costumes and accessories were beautiful. The set had an aesthetic appeal. Actually, the play itself is a classic and the structure is so perfect that the attention of the audience is always engaged.

What was the most satisfying part of the experience?

The whole experience was very enjoyable because we all got along well. Gautam Mitra and I have worked together in many plays and we are on the same wave length, we have the same passion and the same point of view on many aspects of the work.

So we can work in harmony. And as he was there from the beginning to the end of the play this was very important. What was so wonderful was that we were all putting in our best effort. Two of the actors were coming on the stage for the first time, but they put in so much hard work that no one could guess they had never acted before.

There was something else that was really satisfying. When I had the idea of adapting Molière's play I wasn't sure that it would work in Bengali. But strangely enough the Bengali version seemed as if it was an original work. What I mean is that the story is so Indian, with the question of the arranged marriage, the music teacher coming to the house, the brother coming in to give sound advice and the maid who is almost a part of the family. And, of course, the Bengalis do always talk about their health problems, so the dialogue sounded so natural in Bengali!

Why did you want to make an adaptation in

Bengali and not in any other language?

Firstly, Bengali lends itself wonderfully to comedy. Bengali was the language in which everyone used to communicate in the Ashram in the 1950s and right upto the 1980s. Everyone understood Bengali even if they did not speak the



language. I am myself fluent in the Bengali language. So I thought that this will be understood by a large number of people in the Ashram. To my surprise I realized that Bengali isn't any more understood by many. Many didn't come to see the play because they thought they would not be able to follow the dialogues.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Yes. This play was special in many ways. I can't remember a Bengali play being performed at the Theatre in the last 20 years. I also can't remember when I last saw a Bengali comedy in the Ashram. This was a first in many respects. The cast was made up of former students, Ashramites, devotees, a parent of current students and a student. This kind of mixture is also rare in a play. For the first time in 25 years I saw children sitting in the front row and laughing. The importance of the fact that students, teachers, Ashramites, workers giving voluntary service and former students



all sat together and enjoyed a play, has not been properly understood. It looks as if some people sat in the Theatre and were entertained by a play. But what I saw was a gathering of all the various groups connected with the Ashram assembled in one place at the end of the day and participating in a common experience. A family that laughs together stays together. The other point I would like to add is that we who grew up in the Ashram and were students, were exposed to world culture and world literature. I feel we should share this knowledge with others who have not had this privilege.

There is another thing that must be mentioned. When we staged the play, by a coincidence it was just the period when the Bonjour India festival to promote French culture was starting and people were getting ready for the French President's visit. I was very happy that the members of the French community in Pondicherry who came to see the play realized that the Ashram still has a strong connection with French culture. This is a very important point. The public should know that we are a community that has an intellectual life. ❧

RELIGION OF HUMANITY

Yet is brotherhood the real key to the triple gospel of the idea of humanity. The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood and it cannot be founded on anything else. But brotherhood exists only in the soul and by the soul; it can exist by nothing else. For this brotherhood is not a matter either of physical kinship or of vital association or of intellectual agreement. When the soul claims freedom, it is the freedom of its self-development, the self-development of the divine in man in all his being. When it claims equality, what it is claiming is that freedom equally for all and the recognition of the same soul, the same godhead in all human beings. When it strives for brotherhood, it is founding that equal freedom of self-development on a common aim, a common life, a unity of mind and feeling founded upon the recognition of this inner spiritual unity. These three things are in fact the nature of the soul; for freedom, equality, unity are the eternal attributes of the Spirit. It is the practical recognition of this truth, it is the awakening of the soul in man and the attempt to get him to live from his soul and not from his ego which is the inner meaning of religion, and it is that to which the religion of humanity also must arrive before it can fulfil itself in the life of the race.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 15: 546-547)

RELIVING A GOLDEN PERIOD

Sammita Mohanty '75 reviews Chitra Sen's book: The Mother and Women's Physical Education in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1946-1958.

This book throws light on women's physical education as started and directed by the Mother, in the Ashram, from 1946 to 1958.

Chitra-di, who, in 1948, was made Captain-in-charge of the three ladies' groups by the Mother, is perfectly placed to present the subject. She has also conducted extensive research in this field with the help of the Physical Education Department (PED) and based on books written by sadhaks of the Ashram. She has left no stone unturned in her narrative about the departments and activities related to physical education and the events conducted by the PED. This book is a comprehensive account of how the Divine Mother planned a physical education programme to help women build a strong, healthy and harmonious body, something which was far ahead of its times.

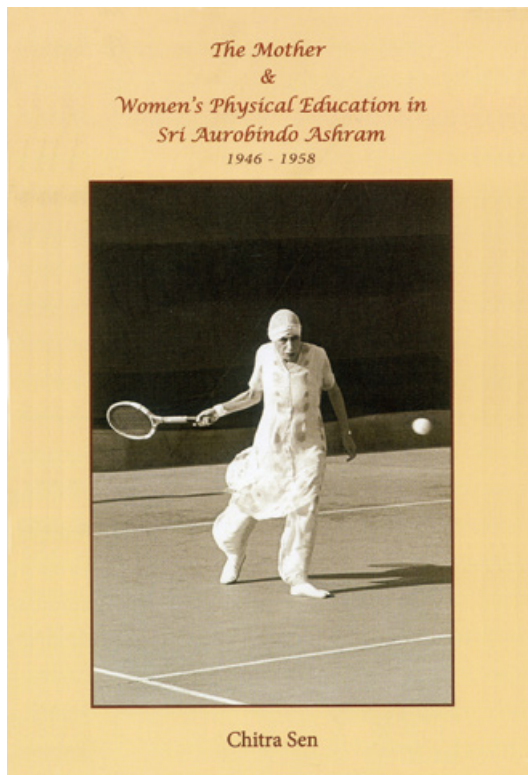
The first hurdle was to abolish gender discrimination and shed inhibitions. With traditional barriers and dogmas planted deeply in the minds of the people, it was a formidable task to convince women in the Ashram to come out of

their shell. But the Mother was determined to bring about the change, to give women their individuality. Her immense love, encouragement and guidance swept away all misgivings and the physical education programme for women was realized. "All can be done if the God-touch is there," as Sri Aurobindo says.

A sea-change took place in the Ashram women's activities. Women participated in games, in the March Past and in exercises. Some anecdotes show how they were energised to take up challenges and give their best. Since the Mother was always present in the Playground, nobody wanted to miss out on the opportunity of being close to Her.

A number of vivid anecdotes dot the narrative. Chitra-di writes that once the Mother put her arm around her shoulder, just like a friend and Robi-da remembers that the Mother had slapped him for

his rowdy behaviour in the Tennis Ground. Her constant effort to make us rise above ourselves is evident in Her careful and studious planning of the clothing to be worn while carrying out physical activities, the games suitable for each age



EXTRACTS FROM THE BOOK

(1)

On another occasion the Mother wanted some Rassogollas to be prepared for her that very evening. It seemed rather strange to Gauri-di as there was hardly any sweet dish in her regular diet. That very evening, the Mother sat there surrounded by the few lady inmates who would be present near her during the Play-ground hours. She cut a piece of the sweet with a spoon and put it her mouth. Then she used the same spoon and cut a new piece from the sweet and put in the mouth of one of her attendants. She repeated the gesture for each one of them: Priti, Violette, Gauri, Millie and Minnie. After she had fed all of them she cut out a piece of the sweet again with the same spoon and put it in her mouth. Gauri-di says: "In this way she was showing the greatness of her divinity, she was as if telling us that she was one of us!"

At that moment Pavitra-da had entered the room for some work. The Mother called out to him: "Pavitra would you like to have some sweet?" Then she added further, "He is a mental being, will he eat?" "No Mother!" was his answer and he went for his work. The Mother, looked at the ladies with a mischievous smile and all of them laughed loud, enjoying the Mother's gesture and comment!

Pages 162-163

(2)

Pushpa also recollects:

Once the Mother had said very strongly to us, "Do you think it looks very nice, hanging your kitty cap in your hand or putting it around your neck?"

The Mother was very particular about tying the kitty cap properly. It had to be tied a little over the brow so that no strand of hair would be seen from outside. She was particular in maintaining the discipline regarding our uniforms. I remember that as the captain of the girls' group, I was pulled up for not noticing that an American lady visitor who was allowed to participate in our group activities during her stay here, had tied her kitty cap in such a way that a little of the hair was exposed at the centre of her forehead. She was also wearing strapped sandals instead of the usual canvas shoes; (marching barefoot as some of us did was also fine!) The Mother had immediately noticed this! Some of the girls after their group activities were over, would remove their kitty caps, and let their plaits hang when they were going back from the grounds. The Mother did not approve of this either. We were told to come out of the house in our full uniform which was to be removed only after reaching home.

Pages 71-72

group and the spirit to be maintained throughout the physical education programme.

Reading this book is like sailing in a 'dream-boat' through Paradise. For those who were present during this period, it is like revisiting what is embedded in their hearts. For others it is a glimpse of an ideal life, where the Divine Mother planned, guided and showed the way to

a more conscious, a more divine living. What else can one want when the Mother takes the whole responsibility to ensure a better existence for us?

The book is a must read for all who wish to reconnect to the spirit that imbued the Ashram's early years and to reignite their own higher aspiration. ❧

All education of the body should begin at birth and continue throughout life. It is never too soon to begin nor too late to continue.

The Mother (CWM, 12: 12)

S A M Ã



F.A.R.M.S

“For Beauty is the worship that Nature offers to the supreme Master of the Universe ; Beauty is the Divine language in form”

-The Mother



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PERSONALITY TRAITS OF A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

(These comments were written by the Mother after she was shown a questionnaire on the subject which had been submitted to the Centre of Education by a training college for teachers.)

Complete self-control not only to the extent of not showing any anger, but remaining absolutely quiet and undisturbed under all circumstances.

In the matter of self-confidence, must also have a sense of the relativity of his importance. Above all, must have the knowledge that the teacher himself must always progress if he wants his students to progress, must not remain satisfied either with what he is or with what he knows.

Must not have any sense of essential superiority over his students nor preference or attachment whatsoever for one or another.

Must know that all are equal spiritually and instead of mere tolerance must have a global comprehension or understanding.

"The business of both parent and teacher is to enable and to help the child to educate himself, to develop his own intellectual, moral, aesthetic and practical capacities and to grow freely as an organic being, not to be kneaded and pressured into form like an inert plastic material."
(Sri Aurobindo, The Human Cycle)

The Mother (CWM 12:167)